



LUMINOUS  
ECHO

The World Compendium



The page features a decorative border with intricate, light-colored floral and scrollwork patterns. A large, soft purple and grey wash is applied to the upper right portion of the page, creating a misty, atmospheric effect.

LUMINOUS  
ECHO



We do not kill

We corrupt

You know this

You've been interested in us for a long time

And we're interested in you

Your blood is warm

and your mind is sharp

Your ambition burns into us

you're restless

You have no desire to hide under the trees

and call out to impotent gods while the world around you changes

You want knowledge

You want power

you will never feel fear or helplessness again

Only power

Only ambition







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## LUMINOUS ECHO: THE WORLD COMPENDIUM

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To our families, who have always been our inspiration and motivation; to our friends who have always helped with encouragements and discussions, and to our supporters on the kickstarter platform whose contributions made this book a printed reality.



## Greg Mayfield

Crows feasted on the fallen, heedless of the burning midday sun which baked the blood soaked earth and scorched the flesh of the countless dead knights all around them.

A raven, presiding over its smaller brethren like a king, plucked a juicy eyeball from the socket of a knight whose head had been half crushed by a brutal blow from a war hammer. It gulped the putrefying flesh down greedily then wheeled and pecked at a small, discolored crow who had the audacity to approach it while it feasted.

The small crow cawed in complaint, hopping down the pile of corpses as quick as its deft feet could carry it, hiding in the shade of a half smashed catapult.

It eyed the raven warily as if it might lower itself to follow the small irritant. Turning its attention to the slimmer pickings away from the largest pile of corpses, it took notice of a brilliant flash of light from another pile of bodies in the shade nearby.

Hopping closer, it cocked its eye, spying a silver ring on the index finger of a pale, bloodied hand jutting from beneath the pile at an odd angle. The crow leaned in, and pecked at the ring, making the hand jiggle slightly, but showing no other signs of life. Emboldened, the crow bit the ring, tugging on it and emitting a frustrated cry as it did so.

Abruptly, the hand snatched the crow up by its scrawny neck, eliciting a blood-curdling scream which sent all other members of the flock in ear shot flying away in a hail of discarded black feathers and uneaten meaty tidbits.

The crow struggled and let out strangled caws of terror as it desperately flailed against the iron grip that held it. It watched in horror as the hand jerked and moved forward, becoming an arm, and eventually a head and shoulders as the creature fought itself free of the mound of dead men and women that had been its tomb.

Clutching the raven that had woken him like a talisman, Greg pulled free of the claustrophobic mound of armor and flesh, tumbling to the bloody earth with a clatter and gasping at the unexpected force of impact.

Greg's eyes were screwed almost as tightly as his bared teeth. With his free hand, his fingers clawed at the ground, frantically searching for a sword that wasn't there. "Sir..." He all but gasped, "They're behind us... They're not..." He squeezed the crow tightly, triggering a mewling caw that jarred him into wakefulness.

Greg stared in unseeing terror at the grisly battlefield scene laid out before him like one of his girlfriend's father's hideous library paintings. He saw it, but he didn't truly see it. It wasn't real to him in his current state of numb confusion.

"Bartras?" He whispered in inquiry.

"Lucielle?"

Greg stood up, clutching the terrified crow to his chest as tears streaked down his face. He took a stumbling step forward, blinking into the light as he ambled almost senselessly. After his brief moment of panic, Greg's training kicked in though, and his eyes came to focus.

What he found was that he was surrounded by mountains of the dead, not just the undead they'd been slaying the night before, but scores of his comrades as well. Greg removed one hand from his death grip on the bird and reached for his sword. Finding it gone, he slowly drew the small hidden knife in his belt as his gaze took in the gruesome scene before him.

He brandished his dagger, and turned slowly in place, tracing his short path back to the heap of corpses he had emerged from moments before. He paused as the bird struggled in his grip, glanced at it as if only then really realizing he'd been near to strangling it for the better part of a minute. Forcing his hand to relax, he turned it loose with a flick of his wrist.





It flew away with a long, cacophonous wail of relief, making for the nearest of the repulsive skeletal trees.

Ordinarily, that might have been a mistake, had there been the chance the enemy remained near, but whatever had slaughtered an entire Dark Knight platoon - the kingdom's elite - had already long since departed.

Greg was alone, but still, he knew his duty. First, he undertook the grim task of searching through his comrades for the supplies he would need to stay alive. Digging through the battered and bloody remains of his friends, he did his best to separate their noble bodies from that of the vile undead.

By dusk, he stood nearly weak as a kitten, his battered muscles sore, body caked in blood and worse. But despite his fatigue and the horrible burning he felt on his exposed skin, he was unbroken. "Brothers," He said, addressing the makeshift funeral pyre he'd made by stacking the bodies of his platoon around one another like a mandala. "Sisters." He uncorked a flask of the pyre oil he'd already used to soak the undead. "I give my thanks, to those whose actions spared my life, and laid ruin to so many enemies of man."

He trickled the oil over their bodies, reciting each knight's name as he continued his ceremony. He then brandished the torch he had assembled earlier, lit by his looted flint and steel, and tossed the blazing brand upon the remains of his comrades. The oil was slow to catch at first, but once it did, the twenty knights became a roaring bonfire that lit up the darkened clearing amidst the hellish woods like the sun itself.

"Though we strike from darkness," Greg said, clutching his sword by the hilt and placing it against his breast. "Our deeds stand for all to see in the light of day."

Whatever else Greg might be, he was not a pathfinder. He had attempted to scout out a return path to the game trail they had taken from Emperors Road. Unfortunately, though, they had been forced to tarry too far from the known paths for his small, inadequately detailed map to be of any practical use to him. Aside from his sword and torch, he was alone and defenseless amidst the horrible, whispering trees of the Dead Woods.

Normally, their pathfinder would have had a larger map, but their horses had long since gone by the time he'd crawled from his makeshift tomb, and many of his friend's bodies had been looted of weapons and other valuables. Only a few scattered trails of hoof prints remained and Greg was barely able to follow them by torchlight. At least the damn burning in his skin that had grown so intolerable for a while, had disappeared.

What has become of Grayveil? He wondered as he navigated the tangle of roots, mud holes, dead leaves, and rocks that made up the treacherous floor of the Dead Woods.

His mare was a difficult animal, prone to biting even her

master, (as attested to by the scars on his shoulder where she'd taken him with her teeth and shook him like a rag doll) but she was also one of the finest specimens he'd ever seen besides Mandi's mild mannered Whidrey.

Greg paused his stride as a small cluster of squirming, shapeless creatures tittered and roiled before him. His hand flashed to his recovered sword in disgust, but the dinner plate sized mound of maggot-like rodents continued on and dispersed into the ghoulish night.

He rammed his sword, drawn only a few inches, back to its home in his sheath and snorted in disgust. "If the trees of this forest had nymphs, they'd be lepers." He craned his head, following the path of the hoofprints with his eyes. Grayveil was a large mare, as big as some stallions, the chances he was on the right trail were somewhat slim. Hope springs eternal-

Greg's mantra was interrupted by an otherworldly screech that set him spinning and drawing fully his steel this time. What he found himself staring down then, was an owl of truly monstrous proportions.

The creature had to be the size of a five-year-old, all grays, whites, and blacks like a dead tree trunk. It perched on the limb of a disturbingly hand-like skeletal tree, glowering down at him with green eyes the size of a giant shooter's marble. The enormous pupils dilated to the width of a pin as it honed in on him like a bowman.

Though he knew not why, this massive beast filled him with dread. His sword was still held aloft, tip poised at the devilish specter before him. "What do you want?" He growled. "A Dark Knight has no time for this sort of foolishness. Away with you! Or I'll roast you over a fire!" The owl was unmoved by his threat. That's right. He thought. No time for foolishness, like talking to animals.

Sheepishly he slowly returned his sword to its sheath. "Pray forgive, Lord Owl." He said with a sigh. "I forget that I am the guest in your forest, humble though it may be." His friends and comrades always found it silly that he talked to wild animals like this, but it felt as though by doing so, he was reaching a gentleman's agreement with an otherwise unknowable creature. And after the utterly hellish day he'd just endured, it also somehow calmed his nerves.

The owl luckily disregarded Greg and began to preen itself. Greg was about to bid it farewell when his train of thought was once more interrupted by a different loud cry, though this one was more distant. The squeal of a terrified mare.

Greg wasted no more time on pleasantries. Instead, he whirled in the direction of the scream and set off at a run without a moment's hesitation.

After scarcely a minute's sprinting, Greg broke into a clearing lit by sickly green torches. He pulled short and drew his sword once more, taking in the scene.

Grayveil and two other horses heavily laden with treasure plundered from his comrades, were being escorted through the muddy clearing by six Gokibito. The disgusting bug men had first appeared generations ago when driven from the eastern kingdoms and then had taken root in these blighted



woods.

The Gokibito turned at once on Greg. They chattered back and forth in a series of clicks and whistles, turning this way and that which set the dirty, multi-colored rags that made up their cloaks swaying.

Greg Took the scene in before him, including the six corpses strapped to one of the horse's backs, no doubt intended to feed the squirming brood of larva he'd nearly tripped over. Greg's blood boiled, seething in his veins, at the thought of his comrades as food for maggots.

"You..." His eyes narrowed in a squinting glare as he searched for a word which described his rage. "Maggot feeding bastards!" He bellowed, lifting his sword even as he swung his legs into a Swordsman's charge, dashing forward and beheading the first Goki with a single wild swing, sending its head tumbling through the air rather spectacularly.

The disgusting bug men froze in place, bathed in a sickly purple glow. Greg readied his sword for another strike, wary of a counter attack, but also found himself frozen in place. The glow was emanating from his sword.

The length of his blade abruptly began to flow like purple wax, stretching and widening. A stream of similarly colored energy shot up his arm and stabbed into his chest like a bolt of lightning. Greg screamed like a banshee, the purple light exploding from his eyes and mouth like a fountain.

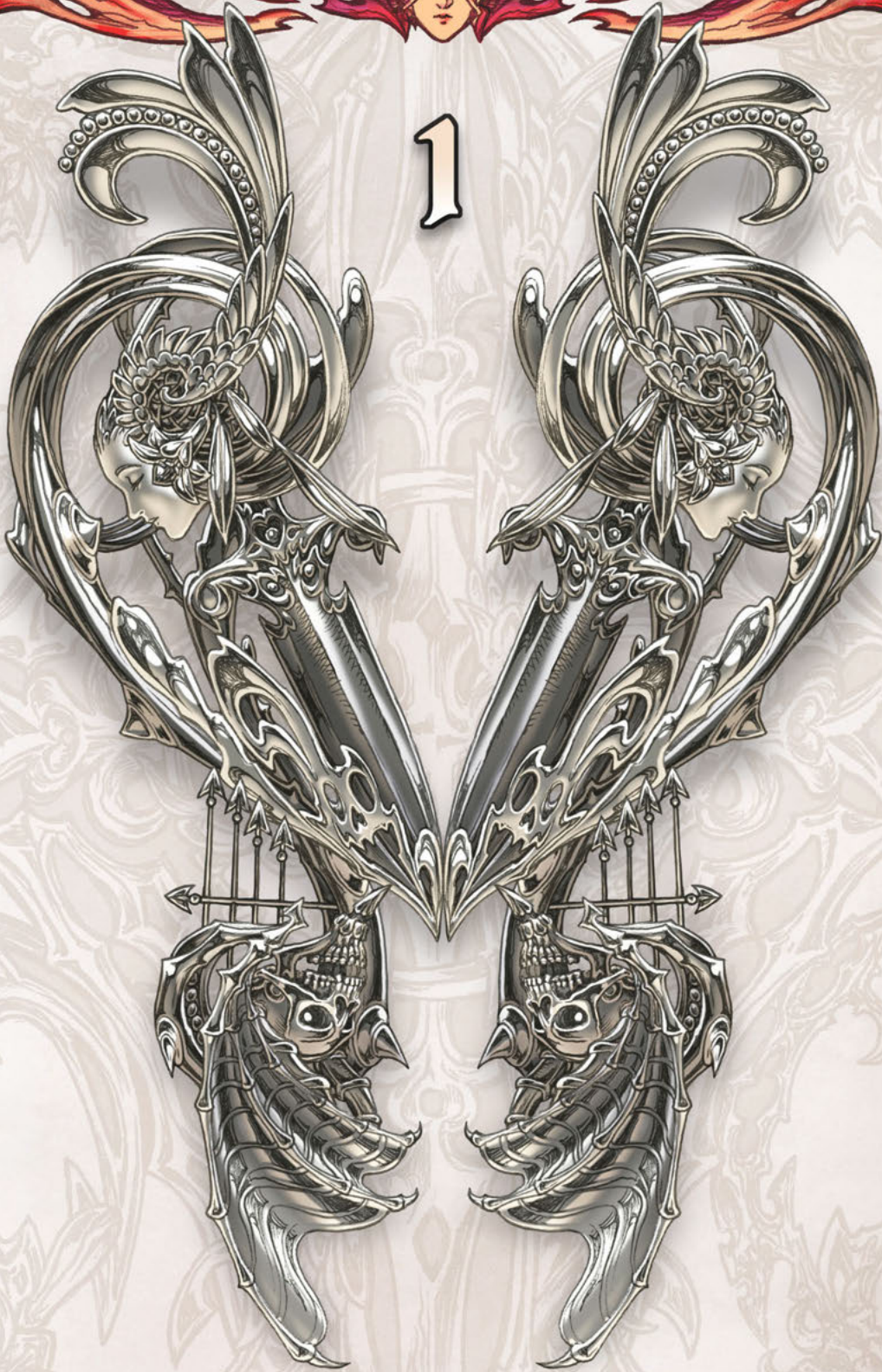
The Gokibito replied with their own shrieks, turning tail and running like the hounds of hell were at their heels.

The memories of being a squirming maggot assaulted Greg's senses, then being hunted in the woods surrounded by Gokibito, along with the sickly smell of carrion. Greg fell to his knees, becoming violently ill. As the horrible memories of the life of the Gokibito he'd slain violated his mind, Greg realized somehow, that he and his sword had been changed by their near death at the hands of the undead. Now, in some fashion, he was one of them.





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# Locations & Characters



# Belmonde



Art: Nele Diehl

## History

Seventy-seven years ago, the town of Belmonde was once merely a minor crossroad. However, it became a bustling hub of commerce when the western War of Unification erupted onto the stage of history.

Once simply a sleepy riverside town smelling of fish, the enormous traffic of soldiers from Lorvena began pushing the local blacksmiths to their limits with their need for repairs.

The cleverest among them began recruiting soldiers who were too maimed for the battlefield, but still possessing two good hands as apprentices.

With the discovery of extensive amounts of good ore in the local Drakepina mountains, the people of Belmonde agreed to pay a thirty percent of the precious metal mined to the ancient dragon who dwelled there. Once that was settled, the local smiths began to turn from repairs to production. The Dragon who was the self proclaimed Lord Ponderosa, only makes an appearance when he flies from the mountain peaks to a designated plateau fifteen miles north of the town.

The King rewarded the town for its artistic self-reinvention and invested heavily in the local infrastructure, creating The King's Bridges which opened both banks of the local river to expansion. High walls far beyond the current boundaries of the city on either side were built as the locals all too happily obeyed their king's order to continue spreading.

## Government

When the time came for a noble to take up local governorship, King Lorvena sent a trusted Knight that had served him well in the Unification War, Sir Valonso the Open Armed.

Arriving with his lady wife and the eldest of his four knighted children, he vowed to take the city's spirit of industriousness and bring them to a fever pitch.

Sir Valonso set about creating modest local taxes, imposing them uniformly on the growing upper class and commoners alike. Those attempting to bribe him, or the men immediately under him very often found that the hand offering said bribe was liable to be lopped off.

His eldest son, Sir Guarin Valonso, recruited the most promising young men from the local population and abroad to create The Vanguard Knights. They were a mixed company of both noble and commoners, each tasked with the job of policing the growing streets.

Lady Valonso set about bringing the finer things to the city, including some up and coming chefs and tailors from the capital. She also bid her husband to acquire places of business for to be paid back at a fixed rate to foster the development of an upper crust in Belmonde.

Though the Valonso rule fairly, there is some resentment among the locals that one of the town's native merchants wasn't raised to the title. As a consequence of these rumblings, a small group called The True Sons of Belmonde has been growing in the weeds, with the stated intent of ousting the Pretender Lord and installing one of their own number in his place.

## Culture

It is a very lively town with a down to earth, friendly, honest, and polite populace.

As the decades have worn on, and second generation wealth has begun to form, many disaffected youths are disheartened in the downturn in business caused by peace. A nameless cabal has begun to blame King Lorvena for pacifying his enemies too quickly and thoroughly, and thus these youths foolishly advocate for renewed hostilities with the east.



In the decades since Valonso took governorship of Belmonde, it has developed many lively traditions.

Once every year, a grand tourney is held for both the local Vanguard Knights and other Knightly Orders throughout the land, even attracting the occasional eastern swordsman.

Two of the city's bridges are closed to traffic and lined with makeshift bleachers as they host jousting, fencing, and the grand meleé. The winners are gifted with gold of the realm, and their pick of the masterworks of the blacksmiths.

Initially aimed at the blacksmiths, the tradesman festival known as the Ringing Iron Nights is a five-day celebration of the town's ever growing tradition of industry.

The top rated blacksmiths from around the world compete to create the finest weapons in a five-day span, using only the provided materials. Presented to Lord Valonso, the pieces are placed into his collection and the winners are gifted both with a one pound ingot of gold marked with a hammer. For the supreme victor, a far more valuable ingot of aurora steel is bestowed.

A weapon made of the glowing rainbow colored metal will command a price of as much as 75,000 pieces of gold.

Though less glamorous than the Blacksmith's main competition and many side contests, the town's money changers compete to see who can count and properly value large sums of mixed currency and identify old obscure coins in the fastest time possible.

## Daily Life

Those in Belmonde with their own homes, often start the day by taking breakfast on the town's traditional flat rooftops, weather permitting.

Not long after, the local washer women will take to the downstream end of the river and begin the day's work.

Few, if any, steel workers return home for meals, as they are fed by industrious food runners who buy bread, meats, and cheese in bulk and hawk them from baskets outside of the smithies.

Returning home for a rooftop dinner, if possible, they settle down for the night. Meanwhile, the evening shift begins its ritual of stoking the fires to keep the forges hot and the rote hammering tasks are taken care of while the masters sleep.







## Honest Blacksmith

The product of generations of hardworking craftsman, almost every town large enough to need hoes and plows will have one like him. While they may not be the most creative of smiths, they are dependable creators of durable goods.

The trusty village blacksmith is usually more than happy to greet visitors and offer counsel on any subject they might have knowledge of. Their prices will be fair, unless their village is in dire straits.



## Vainglorious Sword Hunters

Everyone has met one, the jumped up son of a local who has enough skill with a sword that he's come into a little money. They are prideful, boasting, and masters of the blade only in their own mind.

As often as not, they will talk down to any fellow swordsman, scorn the quality work of their local smiths as if it was beneath them, and in general act as if their leavings smelled of rose petals and freshly baked cookies. The only thing that will change this is a harsh lesson in reality in the form of a thrashing.

## Ill-Mannered Old Money

They were born into money, and quite likely never worked a day in their lives. They live off of their families wealth like a bloated tick gorging on an animal too large to notice their presence.

Somehow convinced that their families wealth makes them important, their grandiose boasts and backwards, often uneducated, notions are usually only backed by cheap thugs and empty words. Unaware that their wealth is only relative to the size of their town, they have little idea they're merely fools who run their mouths.



## Boastful Blacksmith

For every honest blacksmith, there is the snake oil salesman who will sell you his genuine Gegnarok Steel Broadsword for only fifty extra pieces of gold over their rival's wares. Look, do you see how fine the grain of the steel is, and how many times it was folded? You say Gegnarok don't make steel? You must be misinformed.

They may have some actual substantial talent, but they are so determined to build their wealth by impressing you, that they're willing to tell you anything to convince you that their creations are the stuff of legends. If their hot air can be seen through, their wares are as good as any other blacksmith.





Oro'diro was considered the most talented and most promising Gegnarok stoneshaper of his generation. He was even expected to become a master stoneshaper at the unprecedented age of fifty. But instead, he became bored and wandered away one day, apparently to see the world.

Traveling with only his ax, he moved about the continent, tracking and slaying beasts for his supper. Everything else was taken care of with the tools he created using his bare hands as he went.

Eventually he passed through the human kingdoms, arriving at Belmonde. There he observed human's blacksmithing in action. He'd seen the products before and been unimpressed. In the hands of a Gegnarok, shaped stone never broke, and took years to wear down after all.

Watching the master blacksmith Osric Goodall, he was hardly amused with the crude way in which metal had to be folded, cut, and hammered, and all the while not being able to touch it or feel it.

Scoffing, Oro'Diro stepped in. The Smith and his apprentices were quickly rendered speechless by the leather wearing savage mocking their craft. For as he picked up a piece of stone, he began to mold it like firm clay, squeezing out the impurities in the form of sand. All without any hint of trouble.

Osric Goodall was left gobbling air while he watched the Geg knead a stone like dough before shaping it into a crude approximation of his slack-jawed face and slapped it down on his anvil. It sat there as hard as a rock should be, without trace of softness despite what he had just seen done with it. Famously, Oro' Diro's words were "How's that for a savage, you tall draught of piss-water?"

Apologizing to the Gegnarok, he explained that humans didn't have the means to remove impurities from metal the way Gegnarok could. Humans, and others, had to heat their materials until it was soft, then repeatedly beat it to force out contaminants as it was folded for strength.

The Gegnarok picked up one of the Blacksmith's tools and attempted to mold it, able to embed a thumbprint in it, but nothing else. He commented that stones are the Earth Father's flesh, and it was no wonder that metal, his bones, would not yield so easily.

Then, to their shock, he picked up a red-hot ingot of steel with his still bare hands but remained unburnt. He began to knead it too, releasing crumbly bits of carbon. Seeming delighted with how it felt in his hands, he asked how long it had been boiled to grow so soft.

Buying the Gegnarok a beer, Osric and Oro'Diro discussed a great many things important to them both; Blonde women with large breasts, the alcohol of the world, the many exotic new alloys they might craft together, and how they might marry stone craft with blacksmithing. But given the number of beers consumed, eventually, it was mostly breasts they discussed.

Together, they created many of the special, expensive alloys that Belmonde has become famous for. Oro'Diro created a massive cache of raw ingots before he ran out of women to romance with his talented hands, then departing for parts unknown.





# Weapons

The master weaponsmiths of Belmonde are the finest craftsman this side of the border with the Eastern Empire, and many young warriors of all stripes will seek out a piece forged in the city of ringing anvils.

The weapons produced in the area are all of the highest quality and as such command a premium. There are also many different levels of quality, and ornateness available for the discerning shopper.

Little if any enchanted weaponry is available outside of the work of Agnes Giltless, but there are some students of the arcane who can take the work of the masters and bring it to another level for a nominal fee.









# Food & Lodging

Run by the former slave of the previous owner, The Golden Horn is a bar that serves the rowdier side of Belmonde: not the thugs, but the gangsters, smugglers, and thieves who make up the aristocracy of Belmonde's underworld.

The below ground bar is lit only by lanterns, the wood having long since begun to go gray. Despite that though, it is still kept clean, well maintained, and filled with buxom serving women so the customers have little to complain about.

Visitors can feast on large pork pies, sausages, cuts of lamb or beef, hearty local ale, and also fine wines from the local countryside. Charene's smuggler patrons make sure the best is available to her, so it is in turn available to them.



## Charene

"Well, gentlemen." Charene, the barkeep, intoned as she strode into the darkest corner of the bar, heading to a table packed with traveling merchants who all eagerly devoured their sausages, cheese and bread with gusto. "I believe these," she said whilst hoisting six tankards of the local lager, three to a hand, "Are yours." Leaning low, she let them clunk to the wooden table.

A cheer went up, half for the beer, and half for the modest peak at her less than modest bosom they had just been afforded. Normally she would have waited for the server to bring them their lager, but they were a table spending money rather freely tonight. So while she tended to them personally, it allowed the usual server time to slice up the roast beef sandwiches in the kitchen for the pair of Gegn-arok hunters passing through to hunt wild boar in Falomere.

As she turned to leave, the most well dressed, fat, and slovenly of the merchants grabbed her wrist. She knitted her fair brow "May I... Help you sir?" She asked icily, not liking to be touched.

"I do believe so." He said drunkenly. "If you want to make three times what we're paying for our meal, why don't you drop by my room at the Oaken Staff in an hour." He said grinning, his disgusting teeth yellowed and eyes piggy.

"Sir." She said tensing her wrist. "I am a lady, as well as your host."

"All women are whores for the right price." He informed her, his speech slightly slurred as he reached up and unceremoniously pulled her top down, groping her left breast. "What's your price?"

A fiery red rage bloomed in her chest where the filthy man's hands touched her. But she managed to do something her younger self hadn't been able to do. The last man who had touched her with sort of impudence had resulted in the stabbing of the former bar owner. He was scum, and the guard didn't pay any mind to his dead body showing up in the gutter, or her claiming the bar for unpaid wages.

Her eyes met the white haired bard at the counter who had been plucking away a wordless spring ballad. Lucent, his name was, dropped by whenever he was passing through. She saw him place a hand over his hip, near his dagger, and raise one eyebrow in question. She shook her head emphatically, the day she needed a man, however handsome, to rescue her was the day she hung up her hat.

She briefly entertained the notion of stabbing the pig where he sat with one of her own daggers, but immediately decided prudence would be the better course of action. She forced her mouth into a smile as she readjusted her top once freeing herself from his grasp. "Forty gold pieces, and you'll never have another night like it so long as you live." She purred.

"Thirty." He countered. "One hour, the Oaken Staff, the room on the bottom floor."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." She said, baring her teeth in a smile.

\* \* \*

Augustin Haillet could not believe his good fortune. Not only had he managed to recover financially from the devastating blow dealt by the fall of Argela, but he had money to spare to bed whatever woman he wanted while on the road.

Placing his cloak, boots, and money pouch in the strongbox outside his room, he locked them away safely with his key to insure his prize possessions did not go walking off on their own outside and off his sight.

He unlocked his door, whose window he'd left open for this occasion, and peered within. There, the lovely bartender waited, visibly only by the wan moonlight. Her luscious form was framed by light and shadow as she crawled towards his end of the bed on all fours.

Augustin entered quickly, locking the door behind him. He quickly began to remove his trousers and shirt. "You won't regret this my dear." He cooed as she swayed her hind quarters seductively. "I'll expect a returning customer discount next time, but this could become a regular thing." To which she said nothing in response.



Climbing atop the bed, he crawled upon her from behind and spared no thought to romance as he began to use her for what he knew all women were truly meant for, servicing their male masters, and she did so wonderfully.

When he was nearly out of breath, his heart sunk to hear a key turning in the lock of his door, but he could scarce stop himself. However he completely froze when the door swung open, bathing him and his lover in lantern light. To his surprise, there stood not only the innkeeper, but the barmaid and a town guard.

"There he is!" Charene snarled angrily, pointing at Augustin. "He's the one stole my pig, and look what he's doing to it!"

Augustin stared in bafflement, then turned his gaze downwards and found himself astride a fat, grunting sow. Wailing in horror, he threw himself off the animal as fast as any human has ever dismounted a female.

"I'll not have this debase villainy in my inn!" Shouted the innkeeper.

"It wasn't a pig a moment ago!" He shrieked, his eyes darting this way and that as he desperately attempted to cover his shame. "It was that woman, she tricked me!"

"I tricked you into rutting with my sow?!" She bellowed. "Guard, this man is out of his mind, and he's soiled my pig! I'll never be able to sell this animal now!"

"No, it's the truth!" He frantically crawled towards his trousers, only to have his hair rudely pulled by the guard.

"I've seen enough." The armored man growled, hauling him to his feet violently. "It's the stocks for you, you disgusting lecher." He spat in Augustin's face, dragging the naked, howling man up the hall and past his shocked fellow travelers who had come to see what the commotion was about. They could only look from him, to the pig in horror.

"Take what the bastard had in his trunk as repayment for your swine." The innkeeper said, averting his gaze, and handing her his skeleton key for the trunks. "That should more than cover it."

"Thank you." She said, effecting the air of one deeply relieved. "I may never be the same after witnessing what I just saw."

\* \* \*

Lucent looked from Charene, to the plump bag of coins, and back to Charene. "That's complete bull." He blurted. "You don't even own a pig!"

"Oh, it's the truth!" She protested. "But I never said it was my pig."

Lucent set his hand harp on the bar. "Let me get this straight. You stole a pig, enchanted it to be both docile and look like you, allowed the merchant to bed it, then claimed reparations for the pig?!" He asked in astonishment.

"That I did. I took his dignity, and his money all at once." She said with the most evil little smile he had ever seen.

Lucent paled. "Remind me never to make you angry with me." He muttered.

"You seem like a smart boy." She said. "As long as you don't try to haggle me down, I won't have to introduce you to the innkeeper's goat." She said, winking.









Tserlith woke up with the Voice of the Forest reverberating in her heart and soul. It sang praise for Nature, for Life, for the Seasons, and for the White Prince who watched over Tserlith and her Ygrolith kin.

Same as always.

Tserlith grunted and shook her head; she had a hard time finding pleasure in the Voice these days. It prevented her from thinking too long or too deeply, about goings-on outside the forest.

She had to think. She had to focus. Her Auntie's life depended on it.

Thankfully, it was winter. The Voice was quieter during the cold months, though it made a damned racket in the spring and summer. Tserlith rubbed the sleep from her eyes and wondered if the Voice would even crescendo when the warm weather arrived this year. The black tendrils of the Blight were reaching further and further into the forest, and she feared it would gradually choke the life and song out of everything that lived under the Upperlands Canopy.

The Blight was already trying to steal her Auntie away. Tserlith could smell the sickness' oily aura surrounding her mother's ailing sister, even if no one else would acknowledge its existence. The Ygrolith medicine-does told Tserlith her aunt was merely exhausted from giving birth to twin fawns last summer. "They were born late," they said, "and it drained her. That's all. She'll heal with rest."

Tserlith knew better. Her elders could deny everything until the bitter end, but she knew better.

The young Ygrolith unfolded from her nest of clean leaves and bird-down, and shook the loose bits of bedding off her back. Her mother watched her from atop her own nest-bed while she nursed one of Auntie's fawns. The other fawn was tucked into a small ball against Auntie, who covered him with a limp arm.

"Has Auntie moved at all today?" Tserlith asked, combing her fingers through her autumn-coloured hair.

"Not much," her mother said. She shifted so the nursing fawn could get a better grip. "You slept in, Tser. The sun's almost down."

"The winter days are short. It's easy to oversleep."

"No, you've been slipping out of the forest to mingle with humans," her mother said with an unexpected iciness that made Tserlith's heart skip like a yearling. "My horns didn't come in yesterday, Tserlith. I know what you've been up to since the half-moon."

Tserlith's mother plucked Auntie's fawn from her lap and put him on the ground. He looked at her for a second, clearly unsated.

"That's all I have for you, darling," Tserlith's mother said. The fawn turned away, wobbled past Tserlith, and sank into the empty nest-bed.

Tserlith watched her still-hungry nephew burrow into the leaves and feathers. "I won't waste more energy lying to you," she told her mother, "because I don't have much to spare. I have been leaving the forest to talk to humans. A nomad tribe is wintering near us, and they've been telling me what they know about the Blight that's making Auntie sick."

"It's high time you dropped this 'Blight' dung," Tserlith's mother said sharply as she pulled herself to her feet. "It's not a problem that concerns anyone under the Canopy. By the grace of the White Prince, evil has no domain here. It's a man-problem."

Tserlith resisted the immediate urge to cringe before her mother. "Auntie would say differently if she could talk to us," she fired back.

"Go, then," Tserlith's mother snarled, stamping her foot. "Run to the humans, since they know better than your mother and your gods. By the Prince's hooves, if I'd have known there were men so close by, I would never have built our winter den by the edge of the Canopy. Now I'll pay for my carelessness with my daughter's blood."

Tserlith tried to stand as stone before her mother's outburst, but she could feel the tips of her long ears tremble. "I won't get hurt," she said, but she couldn't summon any energy into her words.

"You are going to die out there, amongst men," Tserlith's mother said, turning away, "but let it never be said the forest holds her children as prisoners. Go."

Tserlith swallowed around the hard lump in her throat. She looked around the little den she shared with her mother, her aunt, and the two fawns. The walls of hardened mud and woven grass kept the chill of the outside world from invading. The small clay fire-pit had a pot balanced over its smouldering embers; the water within was already rolling, ready to serve to any Ygrolith stags who might visit for tea and gossip. It was common for the males of Tserlith's extended family to drop in once the winter weather cooled the stags' rut-frenzy. When spring swung back again, they'd all drift apart as usual, and Tserlith would have to wait another year to hear her cousins' voices.

She turned her back. "I'll return as soon as I can. Goodbye until then, mother."

Tserlith's mother responded, but Tserlith bolted too quickly for the words to catch up to her. She reveled in the energy that flowed into her long legs as she ran away from her home in bounding steps, faster, faster. Her only accompaniments were the sound of the snow crunching underfoot and the wind crying gently through the naked trees.

In a short time, the Canopy thinned. Tserlith stopped and stood on the edge of her territory, trembling. Her breath rasped in and out of her chest as she pricked up her ears and looked around.

Open fields rolled for miles in front of her, all sleeping under a thick crust of white. Tserlith sniffed the air cautiously. For all her mother's fears about the world apart from them, she could smell no trace of the nomads, or of any other men for that matter. No scents of cooking, no lingering



smells of blacksmithing -- not even a whiff of horses.

This isn't right.

True, she was some distance from the camp, but their spoor had been thick around the edge of the forest just the other day. Could they have gone? No, the tribe's medicine people, all selfless Clerics of Lazara, had told her to return today so they could talk some more about the Blight ravaging the land--

The Blight.

The Blight.

An evil smell suddenly wafted over Tserlith, mixed with a stink she detested more than anything in the world; the smell of dogs.

Her mouth flooded with sour saliva. The nomads kept numerous dogs, though they kindly tied them up far away from Tserlith when they noticed how nervous the beasts made her. It was an automatic reaction; it made her ill to see wolves stunted by domestication. Especially since these dogs' dulled minds took far too much interest in Tserlith's quick movements. Wolves planned and schemed only when they were hungry, whereas dogs were trained to blindly chase and kill prey whenever the opportunity arose.

But the unseen dogs downwind of Tserlith smelled even worse than the usual blank-minded animals humans were so fond of. The putrid, wet scent carried a typical dog's senseless drive to kill, but there was something worse underneath. Something so much worse.

Tserlith saw them at last. They came pouring over a gentle swell of land like a stinking black wave. There was no usual din of barking, baying, or howling; just a terribly silent, inexorable charge towards the lip of the forest - and towards Tserlith.

Tserlith's instincts shrieked at her, but their furious orders seemed to knot up her muscles. She couldn't move. A terrible compulsion seized her as she tried to make sense of the abomination tearing towards her. Was it a pack of dogs corrupted beyond the boundaries of the natural world? Or was it a single, sprawling shadow bearing a coat of maggots and peppered with dozens of eyes that glowed like hellish bits of coal?

Tserlith was helpless in untangling the true nature of the umbra-dog before it (they?) smashed into her. Her breath was ripped from her body, her flesh peeled from her bones. Yet she felt no pain until a pair of jaws grabbed her right horn and tore it from her as effortlessly as a fox snapping through a hen's neck. The Voice of the Forest, the song that accom-

panied her since the day of her birth, built up to an insane shriek.

Tserlith screamed in turn. She screamed and screamed, but the dogs smothered her, stole her breath, distorted her voice.

Then there was no sound. Just alien heat, crushing pressure, and utter blindness.

\* \* \*

Darkness pressed against Tserlith's eyeballs like blocks of black stone. There was nothing to touch, nothing to smell. There was nothing to hear, except the distorted Voice that gibbered in her head.

And yet she felt no fear. There was no malice in the dark; just a hesitation born of curiosity, like an ancient animal stopping in its tracks to sniff at a sudden and rare disruption in its daily habits.

A vision bloomed in red against the blackness behind Tserlith's eyes. The dogs who'd ripped at her moments ago now lay at her feet, whimpering at her towering presence.

"Why don't you speak to me," Tserlith murmured, but she instantly knew her words would never reach the ears of any creature belonging to the natural world. She was being studied by It. The Blight itself.

Why?

Tserlith received an answer, though not through words or sound. Rather, the Blight's true name and purpose entered every pore of her body, every cell of her bloodstream.

We are the Aria of Ruin. And we require windows into this world.

"Let me go. If you're going to kill me, set me loose to run with my ancestors."

We do not kill. We corrupt. You know this. You've been interested in us for a long time, young deerling. And we're interested in you.

"You drove off the nomads and twisted their dogs," Tserlith said. "You're stealing the life from my aunt. I'm nothing before you."

Your blood is warm, the Aria of Ruin whispered into her deepest veins, and your mind is sharp. Your ambition burns into us. That's enough. Your Ygtolith kin are powerful, forest-child, but shyness and superstition hobble them.



Tserlith searched for words to defend her mother, her uncles, and her cousins. In her mind's eye, she saw them all huddled in the den at the edge of the Great Canopy, drinking tea and stealing uneasy glances at Tserlith's aunt as she wasted away in the grips of her unnatural illness.

But you, deerling, the black whisper continued, you're restless. You have no desire to hide under the trees and call out to impotent gods while the world around you changes. You want knowledge. You want power. You want your weaknesses and fears to shiver and fade.

For the first time since entering the Blight's company, Tserlith felt fear. It wasn't fear of her host, however: It was the very same fear she felt in the presence of the nomad's dogs. It rose from her depths like a badly-digested meal and set her limbs trembling. Tserlith tried to pull into herself, but she couldn't move.

Let's make a pact, forest-child. You will help us do what we must

- what we've done since time began -

and you will never feel fear or helplessness again. Only power. Only ambition. You will know the answer to every question that's ever gnawed at you.

"And - and my aunt? Will you save her?"

You will direct our movements like a dam-builder directs water.

"I accept," Tserlith said instantly.

Then sleep, and heal. When you awaken, we'll belong to each other.

Blind though she was, Tserlith closed her eyes as ordered. The distorted Voice continued to circle inside her head, darting and squealing like a frenzied weasel. She embraced it as a lullaby.

Just as Tserlith felt herself start to plunge over the lip of oblivion, she was whisked into a dream. She was back under the Upperlands Canopy, and she could smell the tender awakening of spring. She caught a flash of white out of the corner of her eye, but when she glanced in the direction of the movement, she spotted the tip of her broken horn.

Even though it was early spring, summer-green plants and small vines wrapped around the slender chunk of ruddy ivory. Tserlith could feel patience and serenity peel off the horn in waves; it hadn't moved in many, many years, and it would continue to sleep undisturbed for many more.

The smell of the forest and the sound of the birds was torn from Tserlith, as if by a single swipe from a monstrous paw. She settled at the bottom of the void the Aria of Ruin had prepared for her, and there she stayed.





## Beasts of Belmonde

The region of Belmonde is largely tamed and very seldom do wild creatures pose any significant threat to civilization.

Where danger comes into the lives of the residents of Belmonde, it is generally because of the Ordo Obscurum. The destructive, secretive cult often makes use of the readily available resources in Belmonde to create their profane artifacts, even including human sacrifice.

Many of the Ordo's leftovers, corrupted by their rituals, simply get up from where the cultists dump them unceremoniously to mindlessly stumble about as a zombie until they're slain. Sometimes small groups can rise together, generally creating a small emergency.

Also, a small band called The True sons of Belmonde have been known to attack city guards at random intervals, often attempting to draw bystanders into a riot.

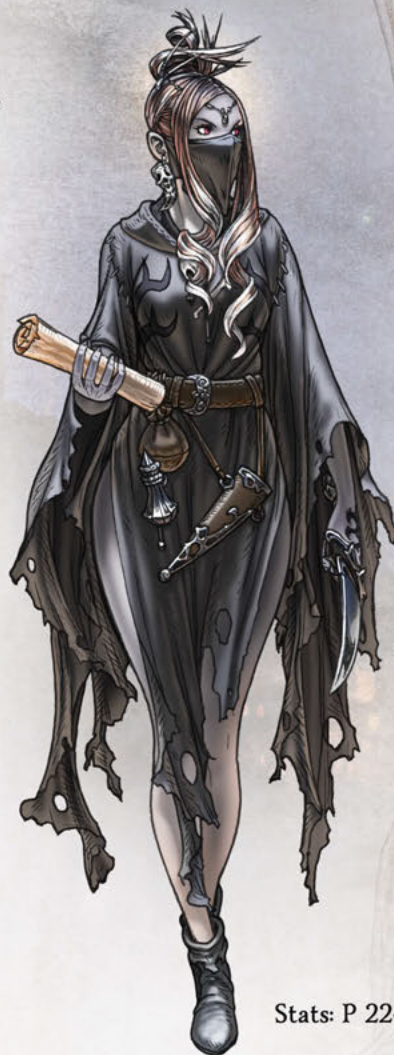
## Volume Keepers

Intellectually frustrated women can come from all walks of life, and the insidious voice of the Ordo Obscurum can reach the ears of them all. Whispering to them about ancient forgotten knowledge and the possibility to turn back the clock to begin the world again in their own image, it's more than a tease.

Whether they're seduced by power or wisdom, the Volume keepers are tasked with ruthlessly devouring and testing any ancient or forbidden magic they can lay their hands on. Once done, they send copies of their research to their sisters around the kingdom of Lorvena, and beyond.

To perform their experiments and confirm the potency of rediscovered forbidden magics, their brothers provide them a steady stream of human guinea pigs, which often end up as components for their craft as well.

In secret, they create the weapons of their order; flasks of virulent diseases, violent poisons, and weapons imbued with traits of their concoctions, all to arm the brothers of the order.



Stats: P 224



## Hidden Hands

Unlike the women who are courted and seduced into membership, the main body of the Ordo Obscurum is primarily composed of more easily corrupted men.

Offered a sack of gold and the strength of five men, the initiates take the 'Draught of the Unseen' and are transformed. No longer mere men, they figuratively have one foot in the grave. Having died and been reborn, they are tempered against the icy grip of death as well as becoming immune to poison.

Able to see otherwise invisible spirits and literally smell the presence of undeath, they serve as shepherds for the dark creations of their Volume Keeper sisters. Although pale, they are almost indistinguishable from ordinary humans, and often blend into society as low-level socialites, bookkeepers, innkeepers, even blending in with street gangs. Only under the light of a full moon do their glowing eyes give them away.

They cull societies' unwanted drunks, bums, prostitutes, and orphans, using them to feed their sisters ever ongoing experiments and to keep a small stable of undead available to sow confusion and terror.



## Eques Obscurum



Stats: P 220

The most impressive of the undead crafted by the Ordo Obscurum to date, are the Eques Obscurum. While it's possible to mass produce enchanted weapons and arm regular zombies or Moon Thralls with them, the result is often sub-optimal as zombies have very little sense of weapons, preferring to rip and tear with fingers and teeth.

By removing the soul of a living human and placing it in a weapon, the zombie created from the soul's former body is much more capable of wielding the weapon like a high-class undead would. This somewhat bridged the gap between the capabilities of the Ordos zombies and that of the undead spontaneously created by the Aria of Ruin, producing a highly effective combatant.

The Eques Obscurum has virtually no will of its own, but it is capable of following complex orders and wearing protective armor. Coupled with their enhanced durability as an undead being, this makes them a fearsome example of the growing capabilities of the Ordo Obscurum.

## Moon Thralls

While the Volume Keepers have created many standard forms of zombies to supplement the ranks of the Ordo Obscurum, they have created a number of interesting variations on the old chestnut of mindless undead slaves.

The Moon Thralls are smarter than a normal zombie, being less like a mindless husk and more like a tenacious hunter. When fed a sample of a victim's essence, blood, saliva, hair, or anything else of the sort, they will relentlessly home in on the target and destroy it.

A Moon Thrall is so named because their animation only lasts for one cycle of the moon. During its one cycle half-life, a Moon Thrall can heal itself back to the state it was reanimated within a matter of a single night. It will often retreat to hide and recover if it doesn't believe it can kill its target.

As time runs out, the Moon Thrall can become more and more desperate, even willing to damage its body by smashing its way through barriers to reach and kill its target in a suicide attack.





# Cortar & Aplastor

Ever since they had been young, Cortar and Aplastor had fought next to one another, sharing everything as they grew up. From food to money, and from the happiness of victory to the scars of hard times, they shared without thought. Until, that is, they met Cielo Corazon. It was as if a goddess had descended from the heavens themselves, and they both fell hopelessly in love.

The two had just finished a seemingly impossible battle. It had been eleven bandits against the two, and they had thought that surely they would die. As they sat in the perfect silence after, they had to wonder if they hadn't after all. Both were in bad shape, though as they passed a single water bottle between the two of them, they had to chuckle a bit. No, they were alive! After catching their breath once more, they began to take stock of their numerous injuries. Certainly they would need a healer.

However, before they could gather themselves and decide where to head, a curious ship suspended by a huge balloon descended in the field ahead of them. Cielo herself disembarked, conversing with the men for a short time. She asked about the obvious fight that had taken place and praised their skills. Then, before returning, left them with a few healing medicines and good wishes.

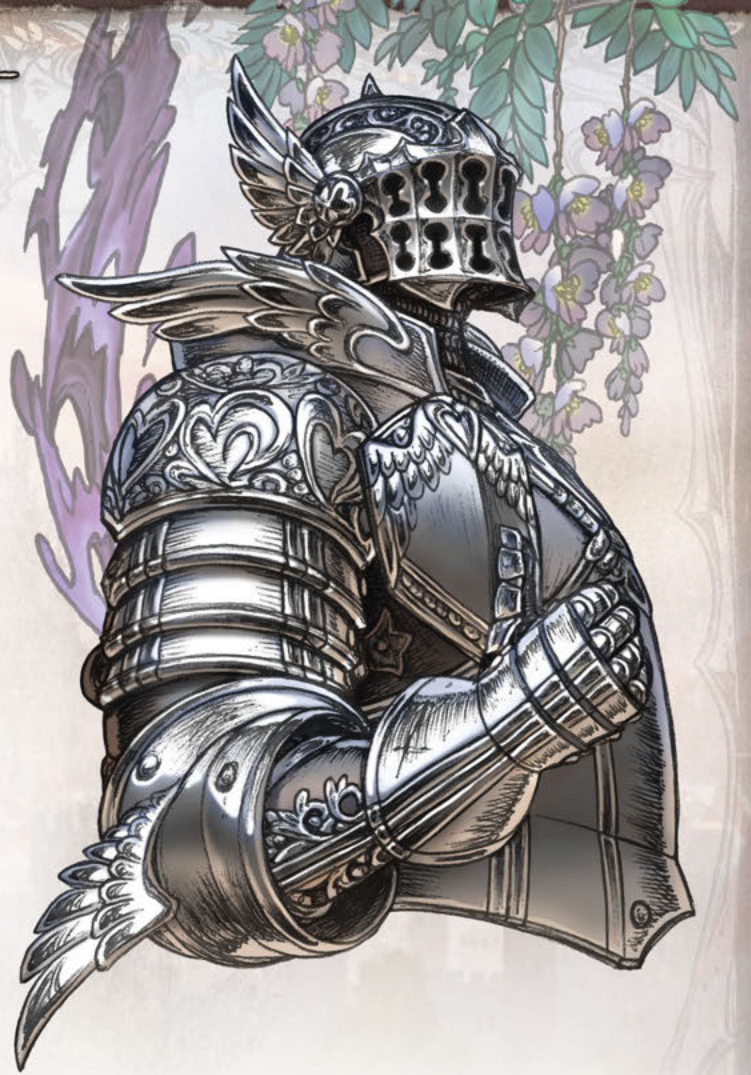
As they watched the ship take off once more, they had to admit that the woman's beauty and praise had felt even better than the medicines she had given them. It seemed though, as she left, she also took the harmony that had existed for so long between them.

Up until that moment, they had been as if brothers. Now, almost immediately they began to fight over the woman. At first it was just over which she had payed more attention to, but it quickly escalated into who they thought she actually fancied.

The problem was that Cielo didn't have an actual address as she lived a wandering, nomadic lifestyle thanks to her flying ship. Left with nothing but an overly enamored description of the woman herself and the ship, the two did the only thing they could. Traveling about, they asked almost obsessively if anyone had seen it, or their goddess.

Each guarded their own gathered information jealously, not wanting to share it with the other for fear of losing out somehow. This became particularly apparent when they both ended up in a certain area that they both had been told was secret. Finding the other there despite not sharing exposed both of their selfishness. Angered and perhaps a bit embarrassed, they attacked one another viciously, declaring that the winner in this would be the winner of Cielo herself.

The fight lasted so long it became ridiculous. However the two men did not see it this way. When they collapsed for a rest now and then, they instead would hurl stinging insults and rough curses the others way until they staggered back to their feet to continue going. For half a day, this went on, until finally it all came to tense close with Cortar holding his blade over Aplastor's throat. Luckily, when faced with the reality of their fight, Cortar found he could not kill his brother, over this or anything else.



In the end, all they could really do was laugh at their foolishness. After falling back exhausted, they both vowed to never let anything come between them like this again.

Having that chip off their shoulders and finally able to think clearly again, they continued to do what they did best; serve their king and win glories in any land they were sent. Unfortunately their renewed focus seemed to bring out dark jealousy in others, namely their captain. His scathing side glares didn't phase them any though, and they continued on as strongly as ever.

One day, they were sent to deal with yet another bandit problem on the outskirts of Fiana. As before, they once again found themselves surrounded, though this time in even less favorable odds. Where there had been eleven before, there were now thirty as the rest of the bandit clan seemed to have showed up all at once. The brothers shared a knowing smile as they were surrounded. They wouldn't make it out of -this- one alive, surely. They would fight together though, back to back, knowing their friendship was still intact despite previous hardships.

With that knowledge they fought heroically, standing much longer than any of the bandits had expected. Unfortunately though, for every bandit they killed, they took a wound. For a while they fought on well enough, but it eventually began to take its toll. Their movements slowed, reactions dulled, and the cuts, stabs, and bashes they received in return intensified. This was it... their last stand.





Just as the two turned to face the rest of the bandits that still stood, a large shadow glided over the battlefield, blocking out the sun for a moment. Everyone glanced up to see none other than Cielo's flying ship!

It landed quickly and Cielo herself came down to meet the others, not seeming worried that she was walking right into a group of bloodied up and fight hungry bandits. Said men smiled with a wicked gleam in their eyes, jeering and shouting at the beautiful woman that they would take her for their own prize. Yet Cielo was still unfazed. For even as they moved to capture her, the ground below them erupted with skeletal arms, clawing and grasping at their legs.

Smiling angelically, Cielo stepped towards the brothers even as the bandits were pulled to the ground and taken apart by the unyielding grasp of the undead. She told them that she had heard of their conquests, as well as how they had asked around for her. Enjoying such dedication and skill, she then asked them if they would like to become her personal body guards. Her only condition though, was that they never again would fight over her attention.

Even as the last screams of the thieves died out behind them, the brothers shared a meaningful glance and answered that they would never. Pleased, Cielo clapped her hands once and smiled, then motioning them to follow her back to her ship so they could be on their way.

As Cortar took his first step though, he suddenly felt something hot and wet gush down over his mouth, his head spinning. Looking over to Aplastor, he saw the same happening, his brother staggering as it hit him as well. For a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity even as his sight darkened,

Cortar had to wonder what was even happening. they had won! Then two words came from Aplastor that caused everything to click into place...

The Captain.

He had come to their table that morning, hearing them receive the orders for today's mission. Seeming to make a point of approaching in order to throw some sharp and snide remarks, he had lingered oddly before leaving. Afterward, they both had commented on how the mead had gone downhill in quality lately, tasting bitter... It had not been the mead itself though. It had been the poison the captain had slipped in there while distracting them with his rude behavior.

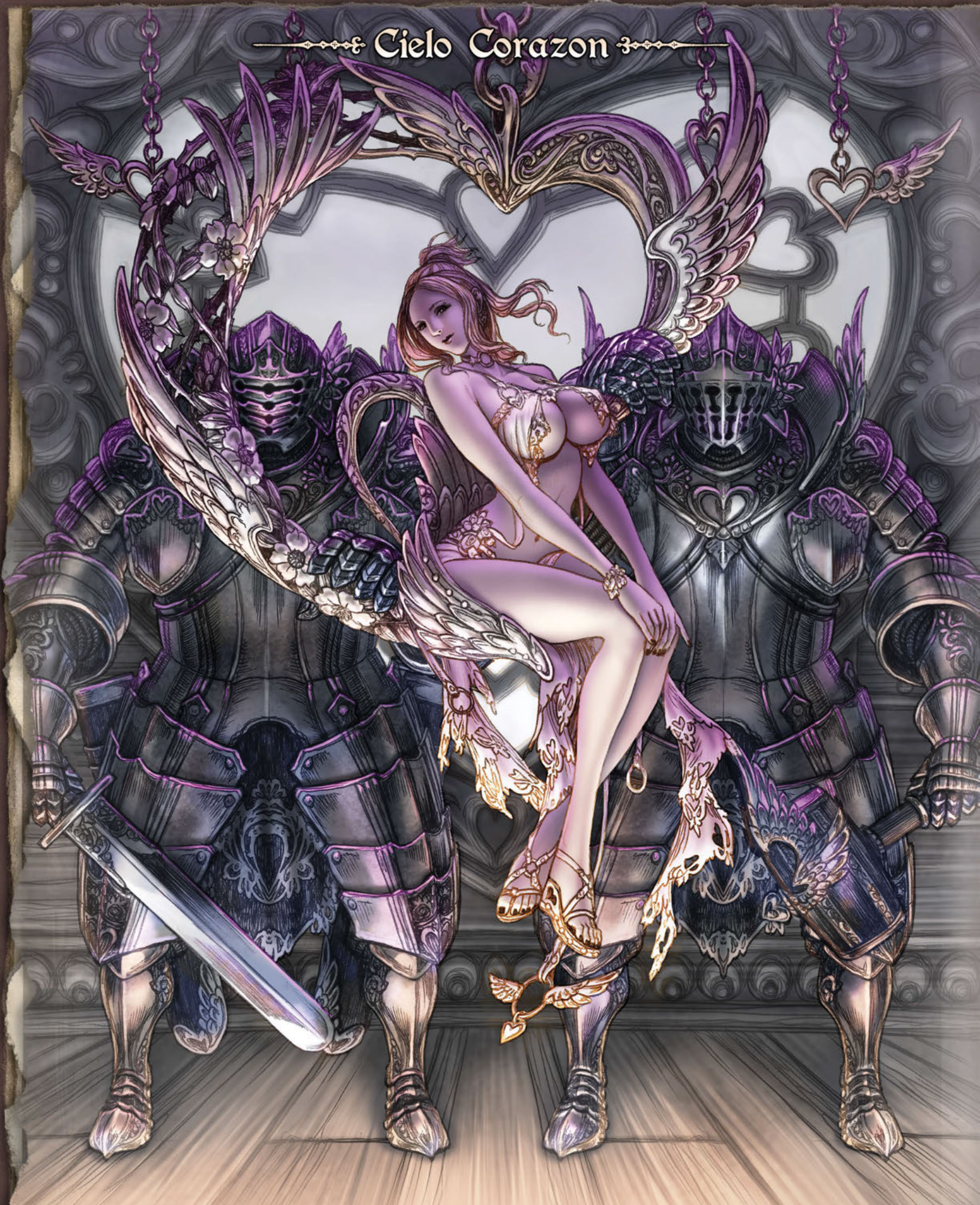
The last thing they heard as they fell to the ground, their bodies growing numb, was Cielo's cries. Their goddess wept for them. The two found themselves smiling with that knowledge as they faded into the darkness of the afterlife.

However that was not the end of their journey it would seem, as they awoke the very next morning to find themselves aboard none other than Cielo's heavenly ship.

With warm and unapologetic smiles, the woman explained to them that they would have surely passed on. However thanks to her particular powers, she had been able to leash their souls to their armors. They would be able to continue existing like this, as if alive, staying by her side for the rest of her time.



— Cielo Corazon —





"Keep an eye on that one, Cortar," Cielo murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

The hulking knight flanking his red-haired mistress didn't need elaboration. Though no part of his cinder-black armour twitched, Cielo knew they were both tuned in on the same scene: A scraggly little girl talking to a well-dressed gentleman at the table off to their right. The tavern rattled with the usual noise of evening drinks and meals being served and lustily consumed, but neither had trouble picking up the most important crumbs of the conversation.

"You want to help your mother, don't you, young miss?" The gentleman swept off his violet top hat and placed it on the table; his long mustache lifted in a smile. "I can give you the money you need, but you have to earn it. Nothing in this life is free, no ma'am."

The girl looked down at the table top and scratched a trail into the greasy surface with a fingernail. "I dunno," she said. "Mama needs me to help her. And the there's my school-ing—"

"The best schooling happens on the streets, my dear. You learn how to move lightly, swiftly, and vanish faster than the eye can trace." He put his forearm on the table and leaned in closer. "How well can you see in the dark?"

"This stops now," Cielo said in a low voice, and Cortar rumbled his approval. They made a silent check of their weapons with their fingertips and nodded over to Aplastor, the second black knight flanking Cielo.

"Windsor, you purple rat. Leave that kid alone."

Cielo jerked her head back to the table beside her. A third person had joined the girl and the behatted "gentleman." A tall middle-aged man with thinning blonde hair and a slightly blotchy, sun-scarred face.

Cielo raised her hand slightly at Cortar and Aplastor and pointed at the scene with her eyes. The purple man's smile immediately stiffened into a sneer when he looked up at the blonde newcomer. "Alister. I believe it doesn't cost a single coin to mind your own damn business."

"Good thing I carry coin for days when I have to stick my nose everywhere," the blonde man—Alister—said. He smiled, and there was a jangle as a small shower of coins hit the tabletop. "There you go, Windsor. That should be enough to deter you from recruiting this one."

Windsor's sneer didn't soften, but he pushed the coins around the table, clearly taking count. "It's enough this time, Alister," he said, "but next time—"

"That sum should also be enough to shut you up for the

rest of the day, Windsor. Shove off."

Windsor slit his eyes at Alister, swept up the coins, and slipped out the door in one motion.

The little girl looked dismayed. "He was gonna help my mother," she said through budding tears. Alister put his hand on her head. "Easy, little one. I'll help you out. Let's get you some food; you look like you need a hot dinner."

"Come sit here with us, sir," Cielo called out.

Alister looked up in surprise. Then his eyes widened as he saw the two black knights on either side of Cielo. Cielo smiled. "They won't hurt you or the girl, I swear. Come."

Alister hesitated, but the little girl grabbed his hand and made a beeline for Cielo's table. She scurried up onto the stool across from Cielo. Alister sat beside his charge. The blotches on his face flushed a deeper red when his eyes fell on Cielo. She was wearing a cloak, but even the loose, plain cloth couldn't stifle her shapeliness.

Cielo's smile lifted a little higher. "Don't be shy. You did a kind thing back there."

"Ah, well—" Alister scratched the back of his neck and looked at the tabletop. "I just try to do the decent thing when I can. I'm glad it didn't come to blows." He patted the left side of his chest and Cielo saw a faint bulge in his cloak—the outline of a dagger sheath. "Begging your pardon, but do you mind if I order some food for the girl?"

"Please, go ahead," Cielo said.

"Can I get you or your friends anything, miss?"

"I've never turned down free ale," Cielo said, "and I'm not about to start now." Alister looked up at the knights and paled a little, but he managed to ask "How about you gentlemen? What can I buy you?"

"Nothing." Cortar's voice reverberated like an echo in a cave. "Thank you, but no." Aplastor's voice had a little more body and sounded a little gentler. "We have ... very picky appetites."

"Fair enough."

Cielo made a quick study of Alister while he called for ale, bread, and lamb stew. He seemed decent, but even the trickster gods who shared immortality with Cielo looked like amateurs next to the average mortal male.

Cielo quickly lost her appetite as she recalled the mermaid's heart her lover had fed to her long ago, so long ago. Whenever she thought about it, she still felt its ghost slide down her throat, bitter, cold, and salty as tears. Cielo felt her stomach constrict.



"You needn't remember him, or the heart." Aplastor's words to his mistress were so soft, they were barely a whisper. "Both are events in the past. The cur and his actions are not worth reflecting over."

"It's not easy to forget the people and events surrounding your ascent to immortality, Aplastor," Cielo murmured back, "but I suppose you know that as well as anyone."

"No other honor in my life has matched becoming immortal by your hand, my lady," Aplastor said immediately. "Even when the chill of the grave makes my bones ache with despair, I need only think of your warmth, and the husk that was my heart fills with joy and song—"

"That's enough, Ap."

"Yes, my lady."

Cielo put her chin on her hand and continued her study of Alister. He was talking to the girl he'd pulled away from Windsor while counting a palmful of coins and telling her which nearby clerics and herbalists would heal her ill mother for a fair price.

Cielo narrowed her eyes at the scene. Her lover—the man who'd fed her the mermaid's heart in hopes of sealing her beauty away from age and decay—had put on a good show around children and animals. He claimed to love them, and they loved him. His handsome features and wolflike smile were certainly sufficient for deflecting anyone who attempted a close analysis of his maggoty heart and wormy soul. He had never been without admirers, but his "gift" with people also caused him to tire of them quickly. Shortly after he'd gone to the trouble of bottling away Cielo's youth, he'd left her.

His reasons still echoed in her memory. "You're dull, my darling. Empty-headed. A decent lover, I suppose, but that means nothing when you can't hold a decent conversation with an inbred goblin".

It had all happened ages ago, but Cielo was incapable of halting the recollection whenever it played back in her head. She clicked the nail of her forefinger on the table over and over as the final barb of the memory needled into her heart.

"I have standards, Cielo. You've been a waste of my time and effort. I should have saved that heart for a woman who's worth it".

"If you pardon me for saying so, ma'am," Alister said suddenly, "the look on your face right now tells me you really need that ale."

Cielo blinked at Alister. Then she smiled. Then she laughed. "Just thinking back on old times, friend. Don't worry yourself. Are you certain you have enough money to cover all our appetites?"

"More than certain," Alister said. "My wife and I started a horse-breeding stable when we first got married, and it's still fruitful. Excuse the wordplay."

"And your wife didn't accompany you today? Not that a tavern is a place for a decent woman." Cielo held her open palm under her own face. "For example."

Alister's face fell. "She died a year ago," he said quietly, looking away and pretending to re-count the coins he was giving to the girl beside him. "I run the business myself, with a handful of assistants."

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss, Alister," Cielo said. Her voice was sincere, but she poured her energies into reading Alister's voice and body language. She'd met more than a few men who tried to cajole her into bed with weepy stories about dead wives. Her knights served as a good deterrent to the weak, the gutless, and those who had no stomach for pursuit. Not that brainlessness masquerading as persistence and bravery impressed Cielo, either. She had no patience for conmen and liars.

But there was no whiff of deception in Alister's voice. Quite the opposite: There was hurt and longing, deep and black. Something about the way Alister spoke of his dead wife made Cielo feel as if she was standing in a bitter wind and looking out over a churning winter ocean.

"You're in a lot of pain," Cielo said softly. "I apologize for bringing this up."

Alister's smile surfaced again, and he waved his hand. He looked a little embarrassed. "Don't feel bad, please. We're all mortal. Some of us just have to learn that the hard way."

A tavern maid arrived and set down ale in front of Cielo and Alister. A mug of goat's milk also appeared for the girl, who quaffed half of it in one gulp.

"I don't think very often about my own mortality," Cielo said. She took a mouthful of the ale and soaked in the warmth that spread through her limbs. She sighed appreciatively. "How should I put this—I age very well. My boys and I, we mostly sit and watch the world go by. There was a time when I had little appreciation for other people's mortality. People like you have taught me important lessons, Alister."

Alister raised his eyebrows over the rim of his own tankard. He set it down and said, "You're a clever wit, you have friends who'd clearly die for you, and if I may be forward, you're beautiful. What in the world can I teach you?"

Cielo lightly put her finger under his chin and lifted his eyes to hers. "I need occasional reminders that good, pure things exist in this world," she said. "People willing to stand up for the helpless. People willing to make even small gestures that mean big things to someone who's needy and sick. People who love others with every drop of their blood, every



# The Mermaid's Heart

fibre of their heart and soul."

"Oh!" Alister's blush blossomed again. "I've nothing to do with all that. I just have a little more than some folks, so I help them however I can."

"And by doing so, you've demonstrated more power than a thousand dragon slayers."

"I wouldn't go that far, but thank you."

Cielo grew silent, considered, then said, "I could never replace your wife, and I've no desire to. But if you need someone to keep you company for a little while, I'd be happy to spend time with you."

Alister's blush deepened. "T-thanks," he said, "but I'm very happy with being your friend for now."

Cielo smiled. "It's my honour. And my offer is always open to you whenever I visit town. As a friend."

"As a friend," Alister parroted with a shy smile of his own. "I suppose we'll see. The nights aren't getting any warmer. For now, will you accompany me while I get some medicine for this young lady's mother?"

"After we finish our food and drinks," Cielo said, picking up her tankard again. "I've never left free ale orphaned, and I'm not about to start now."



Few people in Mhodica are subject to more rumors than Lady Cielo. Her fabulous beauty, copious quantities of sequential lovers, and wealth are all speculated upon. But few things about Lady Cielo are more storied and rumored than her alleged immortality.

Some even question whether there is any truth to the story of her eternal life at all. Some claim she's not one woman, but a succession of similar women, records and portraits precisely matching her personality and appearance stretch back three hundred years, and this is a thing which has led to many flights of fancy on the part of historians and story tellers alike. But, the one thing the most credible stories all have in common is that of "The Mermaids Heart."

A name which appears many places in both history and myth. Those that study the lore of ancient myths believe that The Mermaids heart is a literal phrase, and that Cielo herself is part of an old myth.

"In the days following the fall of The Darkness Profound and the many shadows it cast upon Mhodica, the four remaining sorceresses who survived the outpouring of their own life energy in final battle sought to preserve their wisdom by partaking of an ancient ritual to refill themselves with life. However, only one could be found, and three set to fighting each other over it.

Cielo's lover, a name lost to history, could not bear the thought of Cielo passing away, and replaced the Mermaids Tear flower with an elaborate fake. While the remaining sorceresses battled to the death, Cielo unknowingly partook of the flower in a meal prepared for her. Now filled to overflowing with life, Cielo was condemned to an eternal life, watching the love of her life grow older and older until he eventually passed away, leaving her to wander the ages alone, except for the occasional brief dalliance to soothe her empty heart."

However, bards tell a different story. That Cielo was once a noble woman, the lover of a great Admiral whose name has also been lost to time.

"Her Admiral, a man who had been well versed in the lore of the Supernatural as a matter of self-preservation in the days following the Fall of the Darkness Profound, knew that many of the Shadowy Kith were said to have obtained their former everlasting life by consuming the hearts of the now extinct Mermaids.

Following rumor for many months, he found what may have been the last mermaid. Bringing the captive to his home port, he and his lover shared a grisly meal over its still warm corpse, as they finalized the arrangements for their marriage.

However, over the course of fifty years, the two eventually drifted apart. Cielo became the woman we know today, and her Admiral took his crew to sea and was never seen or heard from again."

But in the end, what, or even if, The Mermaids Heart exists, is a secret known only to Cielo herself.



## Dawn's Farewell

Dawn's Farewell was created with the unshakeable belief that even the undead could one day be granted salvation. Teneb, the founder of the order of the Dark Knights lost the fellowship of his life long friend Lux to the scourge of the Undead, his core being turned into that of a horrible Dullahan.

Though he despaired for many a year as the Dullahan was unleashed on the innocent, he knew deep inside, his friend was suffering. He was as much a victim as any of the Dullahan's victims. Using his own fortune, he acquired a variety of both cursed and blessed materials before humbly begging the famed Blacksmith Agnes for help, going to her hands and knees in desperation.

Agnes took pity, and told him she'd need something much more precious than the rare stones and metal he'd brought. She'd need his hand in order to make a connection to the spirit of his friend, and create a blade which could set him free.

The blade she created was strong enough it could slice the air itself. The blade could slash striking targets yards out of its reach, or dispel fog or smoke with a deft wave. He was told that he merely need place it in the Dullahan's hand to awaken the man inside.

Kissing his wife Lana, and his son, Lux the Younger farewell, he left on what would turn out to be the final mission of his life.





# Mandi Schilder

A birthday for a member of the Schilder family was a time to be remembered. A time to be attended by dignitaries, family members, friends, potential suitors and servants alike. A time for the seasons under their belt to be examined, and their promising futures to be speculated upon.

It was an enchanted evening to be spent in the family's gilded ballroom, serenaded by their preferred song, plied with their most coveted drinks, and fed their favorite foods.

Provided it was not for the youngest, most often overlooked, and sometimes entirely forgotten of the four Schilder heirs. Phyllis, Faye, and Genique were all soldiers, the apples of their father's eye. But Mandi?...

"A commander of five-hundred men." Their father said. "I still like the sound of that." He put his arm around Phyllis, his oldest. "Now if only we could talk some sense into your youngest sister..." He said, grinning. The bitter sweet tune of "The Shepard's Folly" being belted out by the local minstrels in the background.

"Father." Phyllis said reproachfully, supporting the weight of the old soldier. "You mustn't be hard on her. She's trying her best, in her own way."

"Hmm." Genique said, examining her flute of sharp Iridil wine, it being her own personal favorite. Mandi's peach beer was of course nowhere to be seen. "Not everyone is cut out to be a soldier." she said as they turned to her.

"Yes, well..." Their father sighed.

"Our sister is a scholar, father. Her mind is her weapon, not her body." Faye added, glancing towards the throng which surrounded the dining tables, stocked not with Mandi's preferred dish of chestnut stuffed pheasant but the eldest sister's braised boar.

"A scholar in..." His face soured. "Magic." He removed his arm from Phyllis and waved over a servant. "Have the musicians play something a little more upbeat."

Phyllis cocked her head. "Is not that the guest of honor's favorite, playing? Perhaps let them at least finish?" She said, nudging her father, suggestively.

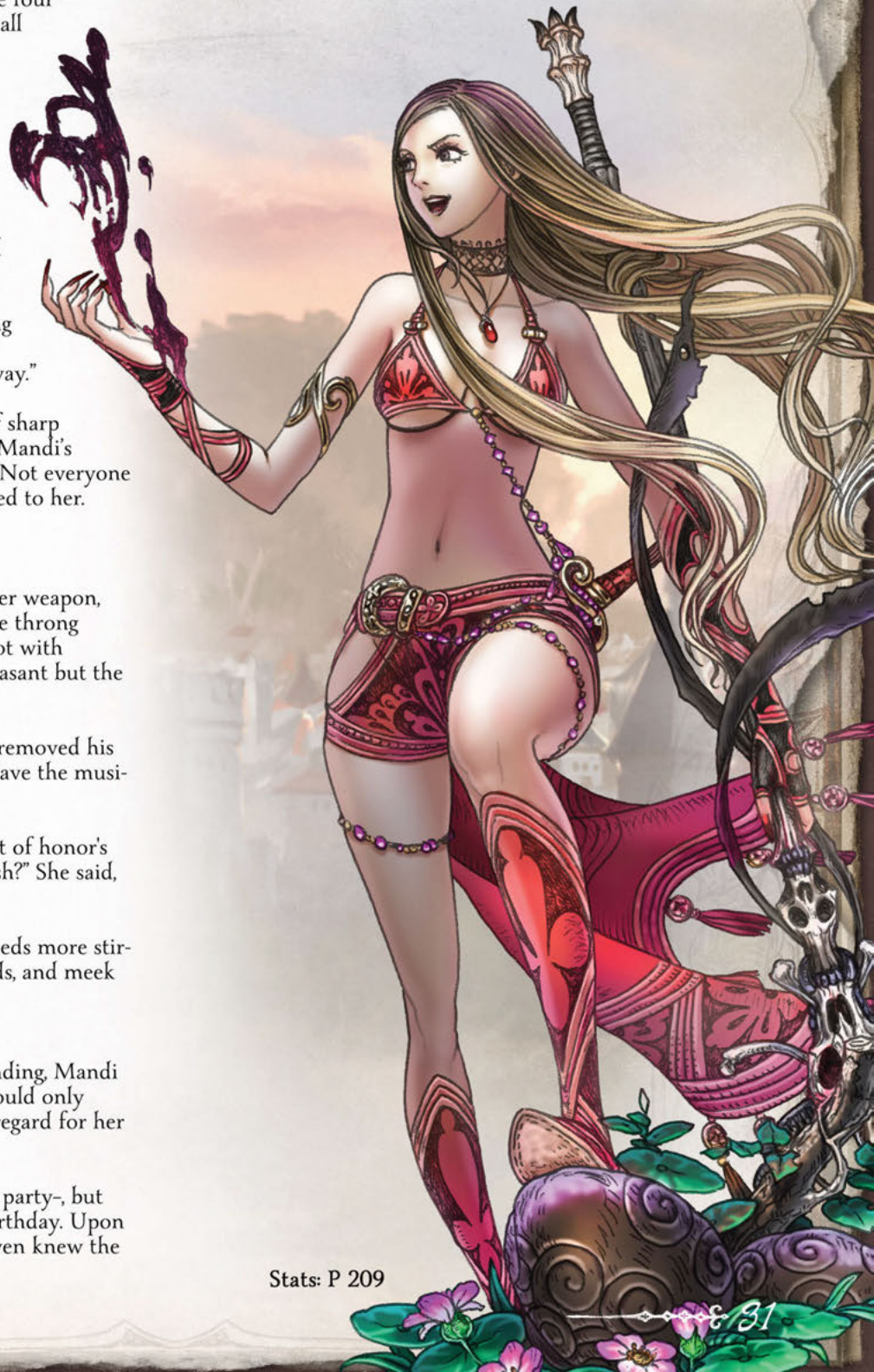
He pricked at the suggestion. "Your sister needs more stirring inspiration. That's music for sour old maids, and meek mice. Not a lion of Schilder."

Standing above them on the second floor landing, Mandi had heard it all. She'd heard every word, and could only scowl through the lot of her father's casual disregard for her accomplishments.

She'd tried to mingle through the party, -her party-, but nobody had so much as wished her a happy birthday. Upon closer conversation, she realized that no one even knew the occasion for which they'd been invited.

"Has our Phyllis been promoted again?" Her poor, addled mother had actually asked her.

Gazing down at her sanctimonious, self righteous father, her scowl turned into a snarl. She ripped the corsage from her dress, tearing away a patch of silk in the process and cast it away to land in a punch bowl, startling some minor lord with it's soft splash.





Having come far from her ancestral home, Mandi resolved to show her father once and for all what a scholar of magic was good for. She'd helped identify a potent combination of healing herbs that had saved over a thousand of the king's subjects, but apparently unless she could command or kill that number, it all meant nothing to him.

In the drafty and darkened *Laboratorium Invisorum*, Mandi stood before the exhibits of uncategorized magical relics she and her colleagues had been working on. She waved her oil lantern back and forth. The massive, yellowed skeleton of a troll loomed over the collection of terrible artifacts, the shadow of its hands seeming to clutch at them greedily.

"Maybe that idiot will learn to respect me if I master one of these?" She muttered to herself, her face tight in anger as she ran her fingers over a case containing a gold trimmed, swept hilt rapier made of the horn of unicorn, the unicorn's beard used as a tassel. The former property of a Sirilton noble, the unicorn had allegedly died to save their small dukedom from a demon of ash, and blessed them with its remains.

"Or maybe you?" She said almost accusingly as she turned to a golden apple kept behind six separate key locks and six layers of leaded glass. The infernal, golden clockwork device quietly ticked and stocked, its invisible inner workings hidden behind its ruby studded golden shell. "Maybe if I could figure out how you killed an entire town, that'd be enough."

"Such anger." A voice murmured like smoke and silk caressing her ears, making Mandi's skin crawl and the fine golden hairs along her spine stand on end. "Who said that?" Mandi demanded, turning swiftly, though she only found herself alone in the cold marble lab.

"You know he doesn't even believe in magic. He doesn't even want to believe." Mandi's eyes turned to face the troll, taking a pace back though still not being able to identify the source of the voice. "The only way to change his mind... Is to show him the error of his ways first hand."

Mandi, now all but certain she was being spoken to by an artifact, turned to face the largest of the locked oak cases. Behind the glass and wards stood the hideous staff that they called *The Hand of Doom*. A five foot long implement laid out in a dragons thigh bone, decorated with a blighted, strange sickly steel and the skulls of unknown devils. "Yes." It said, as if answering her gaze.

"So." Mandi said, doing her best to keep the small quaver in her voice from being too noticeable. "You're more than just a staff after all." She reached out, slowly, but then hesitated. "What are you?" She demanded, not trusting the artifact for an instant. "The opening strains of the greatest song ever sung." It said. A faint glow of an indeterminate color manifested in its eyes. "The beginning of *The Aria*. But to you? A path to power."

"At what price?" She asked, eyeing it. "My servitude? My Life?" She scowled, knowing deals like this were never benign. "My soul? What do you take me for, a fool?"

"No price." The voice said. "Save that you use me well."

Mandi's eyes darted this way and that across the surface of the staff, obviously skeptical. "There is always a price to pay for power."

"The power is not mine to give you. I offer you not the power, but the opportunity to command it. If you direct it poorly, it will no longer be yours to command." The voice had a very faint feminine quality to it, she had decided.

If there was any quality the *Schilder* heirs all had in common, it was decisiveness. "Very well." She raised her chin, as if speaking to a servant. "How do we start?"

The staff simply disappeared from within its sealed, locked and warded case, appearing before Mandi and glowing with a sickly blue light. Mandi for her part, did not flinch. She simply snatched the staff out of the air, grasping the shaft of it half a foot from the lower of the two skulls embedded in it.

"And it begins." The staff said, its voice trailing off into a contented hiss.

As the staff whispered into her mind, Mandi closed her eyes, simply trying to process the immense series of spells it contained. Her eyes moved beneath her eyelids, a frown creasing her face. After a moment, her eyes opened, turning a very distinct nauseating shade of blue that matched the staff.

"Per mandatum..." She said, turning to face the skeleton of the troll. "Et mortui resurgent." She lifted her chin, and slammed the staff to the floor. A curling wisp of smoke formed around its base, after gathering itself up it darted forward like a snake to wrap itself around the skeleton, sinking in after a few moments like fog evaporating in the sun.

With a sudden creak, the fingers of one of the trolls hands coiled into a fist. Its eyes filled with the same foul blue light as it lurched to life, staggering off its platform.

"Now, do my bidding." She said, gesturing. "Follow me to the *Schilder* Manor. Let's show my father what real power looks like."

The Troll seemed to stare her down for a moment, then it turned, lashing out at the nearest artifact case and smashing it, sending shards of glass and wood flying in all directions.

"No!" She cried. "Obey me!"

"With the spell you cast, I'm afraid you will never command a creature that size." The staff informed her with a hint of mirth. "I'm afraid you might have been a little... Hasty in your command spell."

Mandi observed the Troll laying waste to the *Laboratorium Invisorum*, smashing everything she and her colleagues had toiled over. An odd smile crept to her lips nonetheless.

"This will do."







## History

When the kingdoms of man seemed doomed to fall before the Tide of the savage crab men known as the Vagragora, their salvation came from one of the most unlikely of places; The Haunted Forest of Fiana.

As the Crabs worked their way inland towards the heart of the Human Lands, they began to encroach upon the so-called Haunted Forest. A mysterious young woman named Lazara walked from the trees and presented herself before King Lorvena. She told him that while she could not fight his war, with her aid, he could slow the crabs advance.

With the aid of all the king's alchemists, they were able to gather enough herbs from the forest to create a powerful oil. While it was harmless to river animals, it in turn resulted in temporary blindness and horrible stinging pain to the Vagragora.

They were able to force back the Crabs to the coast, and the Forest rewarded Lorvena with sacred land from deep within, permitting the removal of part of the trees in a massive glade.

After laying down modest roads, Lorvena's people respectfully harvested the trees and stones necessary to lay out the skeleton of their city, and with the aid of the forest spirits began to rebuild their lost kingdom as something entirely new.

## Government

King Lorvena VI's reign isn't the same as his illustrious ancestor's, having no great enemy to cement his place in history as a warrior king. Instead, he has begun to leave his mark by improving the military, trade, and diplomatic ties that bind Fiana to its counterparts, as well as encouraging the study of the natural world.

As the sole male heir, Prince Ferris Lorvena has devoted much of his time to his knightly training, and while still young, made quite a name for himself in many melees

competitions across the western kingdoms. Rumor has it that he is smitten with the daughter of the Tsukisa ambassador, a young swordswoman named Akari Junko, who continually defeats him in duels.

Princess Azalea has completely devoted herself to the study of Lazara's principles of natural magic and healing, becoming one of the youngest priestesses currently operating in the Western Kingdoms and often travels to the hinterlands to spread the good word.

The day-to-day city affairs are run by Jeffery Chanterina and Timothy Collins. Both are skilled Knights and politicians who have served the royal family for generations, though they are hard pressed with the appearance of the Aria of Ruin coming to prominence, and the emergence of a small vocal minority who believes the forest is a resource that should be exploited; the so-called Hands of Commerce.

## Culture

Located in the middle of deep, wild forest, the people of Fiana are unusually rustic in the way they go about their lives, with many of the residents being grounded in a more rural upbringing.

Due to the history of its founding, most have a deep reverence for the forest around them and spend much of their youth playing in it, cementing an intangible bond between themselves and the trees.

Each spring, the Festival of Dead Trees is observed, and those trees which did not survive the cold of winter are chopped down and added to the resources of the city, with a new tree planted in its place. The passing of the old and the birth of the new is celebrated by Fiana's inhabitants with a variety of local savory crepes flavored with the fresh spring herbs.

The High Hallow is a celebration of the day that Lazara and Lorvena drove the crabs from the inland region, celebrated by street dancing, music, and a feast of crawfish from the rivers in the symbolism of the defeat of the Vagragora.



The Order of Lazara holds the Priestly Trials at the beginning of fall. From its participants, a handful of initiates are selected who will undertake the training to become Priests of the Forest.

Scattered through the city is a small number of trees which appear to be dead most of the year. Called the Trees of the White Bird, they only grow leaves from their topmost branches and only during spring. Their flowers sprout from the root structure during this time as well.

These Trees only appeared after King Lorvena I was saved from his deathbed by the appearance of a white bird spirit, which cleansed his body of the poison that afflicted him, showing all the kingdom that the forest was an ally.

## Daily Life

The city is never genuinely awake until the smell of countless different kinds of breakfast cooking perfume the air.

As the local washerwomen head downstream to wash clothes, the sounds of sword practice begin, and the hammers of blacksmiths and carpenters add to the chorus of the city.

The strange sounds and smells of the magical school, The Laboratorium Invisorum, and the Priestly halls of the Cathedral of the Forest Saint often puzzle both visitors and residents alike and are a thing best ignored, except for the town's gorgeous temple choirs.

The town breaks for its lunches and dinners in fits and starts as the different professions find the time to pause from their work for a meal, often absenting themselves from the town walls to visit the fields and trees to refresh their mind and watch the children play amongst them.

The night brings with it blessed quiet and calm, save for the Hand of Commerce sneaking about and defacing the town's trees, as well as the vicious spirits of the night of the forest.







## City Guard

The city is guarded by the most able men of all the kingdom. They are not only strong but also friendly to all who conducts themselves with respect. These guys are never hesitant to helping out anyone in need.

If we were to press for any flaws, most of these guys are suckers to a good cup of wine, or a few for that matter; so drunken guards are also rather common at night.

## Wealthy Lady

The streets of Fiana are littered with these wealthy ladies, their attitudes vary greatly from one to another but they are overall rather smug.

Probably born native to the city and never knew any hardship all their lives, these ladies take the good life for granted.



## Messenger

Fiana is a large city with information travelling every hour of the day. These hasty messengers literally "run" the city day and night. Messengers run on a great variety of prices, but the faster you want a message delivered the pricier, rather straight forward system.

However you also need to be aware that there are many impostors who will take your money and disappear.



## Farmer

Fiana has a huge population that needs food, so these farmers come here everyday to sell their produce. Produce like all other things in the city, due to their selection and demand, vary greatly in prices.





The Crown City is home to some of the finest smithies in the world, shops which ring with the nearly ceaseless hammering of apprentices and the barking of their master's instructions. However, the true connoisseurs of fine craftsmanship know the best shop is in an alley off of Bakers Way: The Anvil of Envy.

The smith in residence, Agnes Giltless, is an outsider to The Crown City. She arrived one day, set up shop with the barest necessities for a smithy, purchased basic materials, and began to create her own tools one by one.

Over a more than a month later, she opened for business, showcasing a number of impressive weapons she created for exhibition to entice commissioners to her shop. To the surprise of her first patron, her price in gold was extremely modest, though she also required the teeth from a possessed Crocoderm, and the arm of a Cranfear, more commonly known as a tree wraith.

When the puzzled man returned, she crafted him a spiked club of exceptional quality, both functional and beautiful. When swung repeatedly, the crocderm tooth spikes heated to a scalding temperature, adding burns to bruises. The shaft of the weapon also healed any cracks which formed in a matter of hours. The Burning Breath, she called it.

Her creations since then have only become more and more daring. Never impractical in function, but always ornate in form, everything she crafted was of a quality seldom seen in this current age of peace and prosperity. Those seeking ordinary weapons, however, are turned away politely and referred to any number of other mundane smiths around the city.

When rarely spotted outside of the Anvil of Envy, whose back rooms double as her home, she is seen to be eating at the local restaurants and drinking flagons of an especially poor mead served only at the worst of the town's bars. She also often enjoys reading Eastern Romance novels. When it comes to suitors, she shuns each and every one, accepting company only of those willing to talk anything but shop.

Rumor has it, however, that Agnes came from a small town where she was the daughter of the local Smith. That, while talented, her father passed her over for his successor and instead wed her to a man he hoped would keep his shop in order.

All to please her father, she stayed with him, even suffering years of abuse from the man as he resented her for her superior knowledge. Eventually though, her father was taken by illness. It was then said that, without him around for her to worry about pleasing, Agnes took her hammer to her husband's head in order to fix whatever was broken inside of him. There was a bit of a scuffle of course, and Agnes lost her eye in the process, but in the end, won her freedom.

Forced to flee her village as it was still a murder despite the circumstances, many say she was rescued from pursuit of local authorities by a woman who descended from the sky; the legendary Cielo Corazon. Taking her hand, she told Agnes that she had made a great sacrifice for her one true love, a thing she admired in all men and women. Her one true love, of course, was her smithing. And Cielo promised to take her away to a place where her love was all that would matter.





# Weapons

Weapons made for the Kingdom of Fiana, whether official or not, are decorated with the image of the two white birds, which is a sacred symbol to the kingdom. Some jewelers make a direct copy of the heraldry, some also take liberty and only use a pair of wings in a less direct homage to the white birds.

In General, the weapons and armors of the capital city are of a bright hue, silvery and luminous to the eye. Blue and green accented tabards with a feather underlining family crests are common.

Due to the presence of a large number of magicians in the city, almost all weapons and armors are enchanted to enhance their effectiveness and overall performance. The most common enchantments are simple protective shields, or the ability to deliver stronger strikes.

While the capital does not lack for talented blacksmiths and jewelers, the wares of Agnes Giltless have become the most sought after in recent years due to her eccentric payment methods, her very low rate of commission acceptance, and the rapidly growing legend of her astounding creations.









# Food & Lodging



*Salty Smithy's*

As one would expect of the imperial capital, the best food, wine, and spirits are to be had in great abundance, as provided by the sacred forest around it.

The crown city is known for its rotisserie boar served with savory Giant's Shelf mushrooms, the roasted pheasant with honey glaze and shallots, pots of seasoned boiled crawfish with vegetables, fresh bread light as a cloud, and exquisite dry white wines.

Virtually all of the towns small woodsy taverns offer reasonable lodging as well as food; The Salty Smithy stands out for the unusually spicy fare (for the region) favored by its owner, Miles Smithy.





"Mayla! Mayla, darlin!"

Mayla turned towards the hail swiftly and smoothly, barely jostling the empty ale mugs she carried on her tray. End-of-day aches bit into her ankles and shoulders like gremlins, but she grinned widely for the stout black-haired man waving at her from across the tavern.

"Mason! What'cha got for me today?"

Mason swam through the crowd, pulling and pushing his way around patrons polishing off the food and drink they'd ordered for last call. When he reached Mayla, he exhaled with exaggerated exhaustion and smiled up at her. Then he reached into the satchel hanging beside him and pulled out a wrapped package about the size of a plate. Mayla put her tray forward and Mason obligingly dropped the package on it.

"What's this, Mace?"

"Got it at market today. A loaf of fruit bread, all slathered nice with honey. I thought our mutual friend would like it." "You're barking up the right tree. He'll love it." Mayla planted a small kiss on top of Mason's head. "You're a honey yourself. Meet me outside in an hour. We'll go for a walk. Sound good?"

"Rabid dragons couldn't keep me away, darlin'."

"I don't reckon dragons can go rabid. See you soon."

Mason left, and Mayla cleaned up as the rest of the patrons dribbled out onto the street. She wiped off the last of the glasses, drew her straw broom across the floor, and blew out the lanterns—save one, which she took in her hand along with Mason's gift.

The tavern's cellar stairs creaked and the lantern flame flickered as Mayla descended slowly. A happy rumble emanated from the earth-smelling black depths and travelled up the stairs.

"Candy! Candy sweetie, Mason got you a gift!"

For a second, the darkness at the bottom of the stairs appeared to slide towards Mayla in defiance of the lantern's halo of light. Then the glow caught on ridges of red teeth, and claws. The light scattered to bless the natural weapons with the translucent, candy-like appearance that gave Mayla's pet Gem Guardian his name.

"Get back, Mister Greedy Guts," Mayla laughed when Candy nudged his blunt, oil-black snout at the package under her arm. She hung the lantern on a hook near Candy's bed-nest of uncollected clothes from the tavern's Lost and Found. Then Mayla settled onto the bed herself and unwrapped the package in her lap while Candy wrapped himself around her and touched her reassuringly with one of his stubby wings.

"It's your favorite, sweetpea. Remember to thank Mason later."



—◆◆◆ Durand ◆◆◆—



Stats: P 205



Nicodemus Aurelius Borges was born to the esteemed Cassius Janus Borges and Anemone Larissa Borges, along with his twin brother Drucilla Minerva Borges. However, Nicodemus was the second to be born, so his brother was considered the 'oldest' and thus would be granted more standing and land. This didn't bother Nicodemus though. Even a smaller estate in Lorvena was still finer than anything from most of the other, larger lands. And fewer responsibilities meant he was more free to choose how to pass the time.

As his father's homeland was that of Fiana, and his mother was of the land of Belmonde, Nicodemus spent much of his time traveling between the two and staying with other family members while their parents traveled on official Imperial business. Nonetheless, it was still a happy childhood for the twins.

Early on, those around him easily noted the boy's commanding presence both in physicality and personality. At the age of twelve, Nicodemus already stood at the height of five-foot eight-inches and his temperament was also rather developed for such a young man. He could easily inspire discipline among the staff and retainers, giving commands without worry and having them carried out. He also knew when to be stern or encouraging, depending on the circumstance, and the staff respected their young master in all ways.

Thanks to his stature, traveling alone was easy and Nicodemus took advantage of that quite often. He was curious about the world and was always eager to explore as much as he could of it. Upon returning, he generally was chastised by his family though, as he -was- still a child. His retainers were luckily more supporting, which enabled him to continue doing as he wished without much resistance. Besides, he had learned to master the rapier at a similarly young age, and was easily able to defend himself on such trips.

When Nicodemus neared the age of sixteen and had grown a solid six more inches, his family laid down an ultimatum. He had the next two years to get the wanderlust out of his system as he would then be inducted into the Palace Knights of King Lorvena. He wasn't opposed to this in the slightest and eagerly planned to use his remaining two years to strengthen his resolve.

Starting off exactly the day after that talk, Nicodemus truly began to travel and explore as much as he could. Along the way, he came to help right many wrongs as such deeds simply came naturally to him. One of the more early and noteworthy exploits was when he single handedly thwarted a Belmonde noble who sought to acquire slaves from the realm of Fallomere by way of criminal means. This particular instance started what would become a healthy renown, garnering attention from the good and ill types from all over.

During his time in Fallomere, Nicodemus came to meet a woman he found most fascinating. She went by the name

Manah and was quite beautiful with her golden eyes and ashen hair. They easily got along well and literally talked for days about all manner of subjects, but mostly philosophy. Manah maintained that fear could and should be used to control others, while Nicodemus himself argued that all it took was well maintained respect along with necessary disciplines.

Eventually they simply were forced to agree to disagree and parted ways a few days later. Nicodemus had felt a deep connection to the woman and lamented their shared intimacy was still not enough to sway her views.

After, he continued his travels, going as far West as Teia's chain. There, he ran across an emissary from the far land of Tsukisa whom he saved from a group of wild Gegnaroks warriors. As a reward of thanks, the man offered to Nicodemus a sword of eastern design which he accepted gratefully.

Unfortunately, after this particular event, his family would find that the frequent letters and gifts that Nicodemus sent them suddenly came to a halt. He had disappeared without a trace. His family could find no traces of him other than the fact that the last time he had been seen, was in the company of a particularly beautiful woman. A woman with golden eyes and Ashen hair.

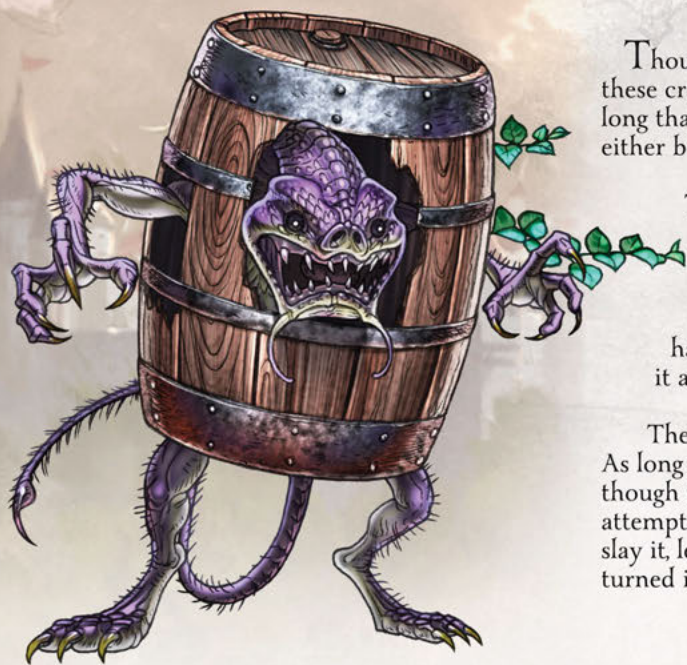
Nicodemus had frustrated her in how adamant he had been in his views, and had eventually pursued him once more. After seeing her again, however, Nicodemus would find that any previous memory of his life was suddenly and simply gone. All he knew was the woman, his feelings for her, and his sense of justice driving him to defeat all evils. The woman re-named him Maximilian and he took the last name Durand which he found on his clothing, assuming it to be his own. The woman didn't contest that, though Durand would later find that the name had actually belonged to a former Dread Pirate Durand.

Under his new name and new life, Durand went forth to adventure. It is said by some that a man who does not know the past will forever remain a child, but Durand intends to prove this wrong even though he is unsure as to his own motivations.





## Tsukumogami



Though none have ever been taken alive for study, people believe these creatures are tools, and furnishings that have been in use so long that they have developed a soul of their own, which can be either benign or benevolent.

The first known case was a barrel of whiskey in the village of Sakura Springs. A young man had been sneaking out to the shed to sample his Father's distillations. The barrel came to life, and demanded to be fed a meal. The stunned child refused, and threatened to smash the barrel with his father's hammer if it didn't let him free. So, like any sensible monster, it ate him.

The parents discovered the creature, and placated it out of fear. As long as they kept it placated, it continued dispensing whiskey, though they were justifiably afraid to drink it. When adventurers attempted to capture the creature, it gave them no choice but to slay it, leaving no trace of the dead sons remains, or what had turned it from a barrel into a beast.

## Knight of the Fallen Tower

Once, among the finest knights in the land, the Knights of Riemos were well paid to guard the Lorvenan Reserve, a tower holding the lion's share of the kingdoms war reserves in gold bars and coins.

However, when it was discovered that the Knights had grown greedy, and were actually smuggling out the gold they were tasked to guard by the handful, Lord Fidelius sought out the most wicked spell caster in the land to lay a curse upon the traitorous knights.

With their mortality stripped from them, their skin stained purple, and all of their senses were diminished except for their sense of taste, the only thing they could taste was gold. But too much gold sickened them. However, the devil of the curse was in the details, as gold was also the only substance that could nourish them any more.

Now immortal and forced to live as sellswords at the far fringes of society, they have no choice but to earn gold by working as mercenaries, and hoard the substance that is both their only sustenance as well as a sickening poison in too large a quantity. This had done little to diminish their arrogance and greed, however. It has simply made them bitter that they have lost all the pleasures of the flesh but battle.

Slaying one of these Knights and cracking open its guts will usually reveal a small fortune in gold, but their strength is positively tremendous. They're best simply bribed, or avoided.





## Frog Knight

Any gentleman who boasts skill with his blade can find themselves confronted in their inner most sanctum by this strutting frog, taunted by his croaking laugh, his cruel barbs against their person, and mocked by his antics as he acrobatically leaps about turning an ordinary fight into a frantic fight for survival against a profoundly unorthodox fighter.

When he defeats his opponent, he leaves a pair of Argelan ducat coins on his opponent's eyes, saying a gentleman always pays for the grim reaper's toll up front. Then with a bellowed cry of 'Ohhoho, leap!' He bounds away into the night.

The frog adorned Argelan ducats come from a kingdom that reportedly betrayed Lorvena forty years earlier, and was conquered for its disloyalty. But rumors persist that the charges were trumped up, and that a great many of the noble families who financed the invasion were placed in positions to personally benefit from it.

The frog motif which was favored among the Argelan royals, and his Argelan accent are the only clue to his identity. Leading some to speculate he's a powerful demon summoned by the few remaining Argelan nobleman to achieve their revenge. But a few speak of a missing heir to the Argelan king, who has returned as a grown man to bring ruin to the enemies of his family.



## Ruby Guardian

The Red Frenzy, real name unknown, was a wizard who was obsessed with the color red. He wore red silk, decorated his sanctum in red carpets, burned red candles, and hoarded red gems: Alamandine, Bloodstone, Jasper, Morganite, Pyrope, Rhodonite, Sard, Spessartine, Spinel... But most especially Rubies.

As time passed, and the wizard grew old and infirm, he feared his apprentices would steal his treasures, so he conspired a way to keep the gems out of their hands. Commissioning large clay sculpture of a monster of his own design, he then embedded a number of his largest gems into the creature, and imbued the entire creation with as much magic as he could gather, giving it a life of its own.

The creature would silently guard the gems in his vault, allowing others to enter, examine, handle, and even wear them. However if anyone were to attempt to remove them, even concealed, it would know and pursue them with a relentless fury and return the gem.

His success encouraged a number of other practitioners of the occult to create their own similar guardians. Though their appearances and abilities can vary, they were all imbued with the very precious materials they were meant to protect.



Stats: P 222



"I won't lie to you, Lady. For all my combat prowess, my best tales come from the bedroom." Wayne said, stroking the rosy red cheek of the recently widowed Lady Sybil Crimini. "I was blind drunk when the door opened and the Princess found me in her bed with one of the chamber maids."

"The chamber maid?" Sybil said, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't you set your sights a trifle low?"

"Oh, I often aim... Higher." Wayne placed his hand on her thigh, lightly brushing the upper hem of her skirt aside. "And there I was, completely naked in her bed with her own chambermaid. And she says 'Wayne Wagner! You cover that thing up right now!' She didn't seem amused in the slightest when I threw a blanket over the maid."

Sybil simply giggled, her smile reaching her eyes in a way rarely seen among noble women, who often cultivate a disdain for everything possible.

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" She said. "For gods sake, have a quick wash, and come to my fathers quarters!" She turned to leave, trying to pretend she wasn't amused I'd ended up in the wrong bedroom again. "And don't forget your armor, you great fool!" Wayne cackled at the memory, running his hands across his stubble, then seized his tankard and drank a large swallow of a horrible Midland ale he was fond of.

"Did the princess often stumble in on your... Dalliances?" Sybil asked, dabbing some foam off the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

"Oh, more than once." Wayne admitted. "But this would be the last time." He set down his mug. "You see, the King was waiting for me, with Lord Bafard." He tilted his head. "The one even the King called 'Lord Bastard' whenever he's not around."

"I know the man." Lady Sybil said, scowling. "He calls himself lord." She screwed her face up as if tasting a lemon. "He's just an influential merchant."

"Yeah, pretentious prick took issue with how I mentioned his trading empire started with collecting shit buckets from the Hill District and making fertilizer." Wayne said with a hint of amusement in his voice. "He didn't like how I mentioned his old trade name, Shit-Handler Herman, in front of the Ambassador from Carnia." He draw his finger along Sybils jaw line. "I told him how odd that was, since his wife loves my... Conversation."

Accepting a fresh tankard from the barman he continued "The King cut off his howls demanding for blood, and told me he had no choice but to release me from service, with a generous stipend. Frankly, I was relieved. I was starting to get a little tired of being some sort of symbol."

"Well, that would certainly explain why every heroic deed was followed by sleeping with someone's wife, or public urination in the case of the dragon you slew." She said, smirking. Wayne laughed, leaning forward and grinning broadly. "Oh, you've heard that story, have you?"

"Everyones heard the story." A snide young man said, stepping forward to stand before Wayne and Sybil. He bore a strong resemblance to Sybil, he looked to be around seventeen. "Mother." He said to Sybil, with a touch of disgust.

"Hello, Samuel." She said, acidly. "How much of my money did you waste to bribe your way inside here?" She reached for a glass of red wine she'd hardly touched.

Samuel literally slapped it out of her hand, sending it crashing to the floor. "I've had enough of your lip, mother!" "Your days of dragging the family name through the mud by spending evenings with disreputable filth are over." He snarled, darting his hand out for his mothers wrist.

If Samuel was fast, Wayne, even half drunk was like a cobra. "Awfully lippy for a young man, isn't he?" Wayne said to Sybil as she slipped aside. "Does the wee lad need to be taught a gentle lesson in respect for his elders?"

"Like a washed up little runt like you could." Samuel sneered.

Without waiting for Sybils consent, Wayne stood up, six inches short of Samuel. "Alright, now listen to me, you piss-poor excuse for a lord-puppy." He snarled prodding Samuel in the chest. "If you don't turn around and walk out of this bar like a good boy, I'm going to take you over my knee and blister your hairless, pink ass like you were five year old." Then he jabbed his finger into Samuels chest. "And if that doesn't do the trick, I'll put my boot so far up your ass, your breath will stink of shoe polish."

Samuel backed up for a moment, gobbling air, unaccustomed to being told any variation of the word 'no' to his wished. But then his soft jaw set. "You think you can insult me? A high Lord?" Confidence began creeping back. "You'll be lucky if I don't call and have my man beat you soundly for this out-"

Wayne, tired of the young mans lip, drew back a fist and briefly relished the look of shock on Samuels face before punching him square in the jaw with the sound like a blacksmiths hammer hitting a steak. Samuel sprawled to the floor in an unconscious heap. "Tell me he takes after his father, please."

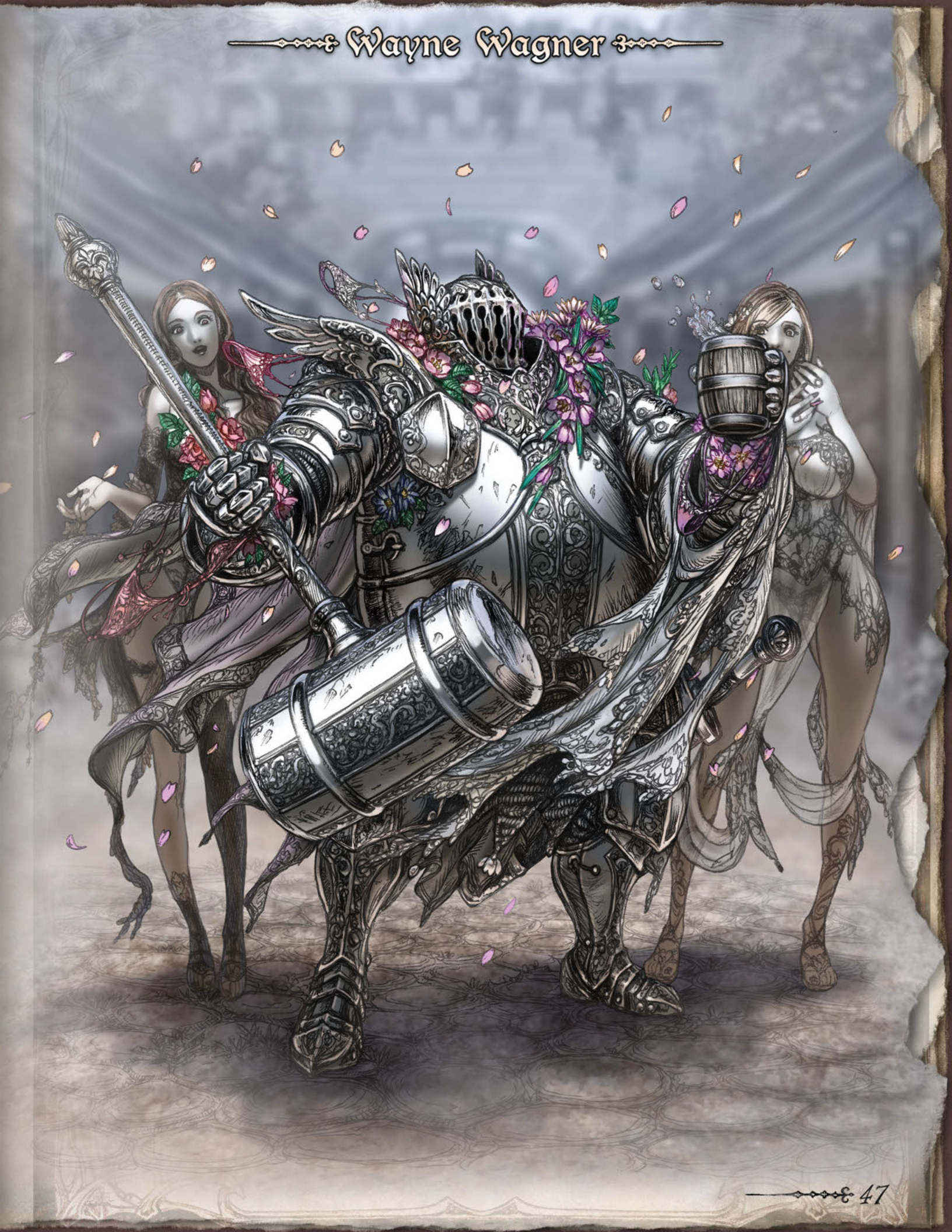
"Most definitely." Sybil said, sliding a small knife barely visible in her gloved palm back beneath her bracelet. "I came from the enforcement side of the mob, he came from the accounting side."

"Well," said Wayne, examining her unconscious son. "What do we do now, Lady Sybil?"

"Well," she echoed. "As per your usual pattern, now that you've done a good deed... you may have to sleep with me to balance out your Karma." She patted her hip. "Come, Sir Knight, your service is needed."

"The things a Knight must do for the people." Wayne said with a mock sigh.







Simone Ortegan





When Dirk Handler returned to his home town of Brillby Bay to straighten out the handling of his families local store, he decided he would require a second wife on the sly if he was going to stomach the small town life. Hearing word the awkward giantess he'd tormented as a youth was still unwed, he was sure it'd be a simple matter to woo her with a ring and a few blandishments.

Though shocked to find her sitting on her stoop sharpening a dagger, but he was pleased to see she'd flowered into an attractive wench. "Well, if it isn't... Little Simone, I see you've grown into a fine flower of womanhood!"

"Hello, Dirk." She replied in a friendly manner. She knew Dirk was rather petty when they were children, but that was after all something almost all children excelled at.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, looking so-" Dirk looked her over, noticing her manish garb, the dirt underneath her finger nails, and her lack of any perfume or makeup "Healthy." He recovered.

"I see you've put on a few stones." She said, slightly peeved. She glanced at his belly pointedly and applied a whetstone to the dagger.

Slightly shocked to be talked to in such a familiar manner by a woman, Dirk blinked. He quickly resumed his plan of attack, undaunted by this tough sell. "I must say, though. It does pain me to see you living alone, with no one to care for you."

Simone scowled, her expression turning wooden. "Oh, it pains you, does it?" She asked. "As much as it did when we were children, and you said my father left me and my mother alone to fend for ourselves because he was disgusted his wife had slept with an Ogre?"

Dirk, like many wealthy, well-schooled individuals had a remarkable talent for disregarding those portions of reality that did not suit his personal vision.

"Yes, well, with your mother gone, I feel it is up to me to take you away from..." He gestured around her modest holdings. "All of this."

Simone stared at him, her mouth agape, shocked at the audacity of the little man.

Mistaking her expression for one of maidenly surprise, Dirk withdrew a silver ring from his breast pocket, and offered it to Simone. "Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife, Simone?" He asked, smiling like a longshoreman anticipating a plate of bacon. "I'll see you never need, or want e--"

She silenced him by plucking the ring from his fingers. She examined it carefully. "Midland silver." She said in a flat disappointed tone. "This is more steel, than silver. I've seen finer metal in a tavern fork."

Dirk sputtered again, and tried to reach for the ring, realizing he may have made a grave tactical error.

She pulled it away. "What's more, this isn't even a proper Amethyst. It's far more gray than purple" She wagged it in his general direction.

"Did you honestly expect to swagger in to my home, and sweep me off of my feet after the way you and your wretched friends treated me when we were children?" She stood, drawing up to every inch of her full height, her face growing dark with anger.

"And what's more, did you expect to do it with a cheap piece of trash a fisherman would be embarrassed to give his wife?" She snatched his hand up, examining the fine, but worn golden wedding ring he already wore. "With your own wedding ring still on your finger?!"

"I-L.. I believe a mistake has been made!" Dirk squeaked, desperately trying to free his hand from her iron grip.

"K-keep the ring as a gift, and lets simply forget this ever happened!"

"Oh, there's been a mistake made, alright." Simone hissed, picking up the freshly sharpened dagger.

Dirk squealed like a pig, flinching away as the dagger flashed forward, slashing open the front of his trousers, dropping them to the ground at his feet.

"Thinking a few years in the city would teach a spoiled child like you even the barest hint of human decency was my mistake." She pointed her dagger at his face as he stumbled, reaching for the hem of his trousers. "Oh no, not yet, Little Dirk. Leave them there" She said. "We're going for a little walk."

Already pale, Dirk turned almost see through as he was forced at knife point to walk several blocks through the town as the citizens stopped their daily activities to point and laugh at his plight.

He bleated in terror as he realized he was being herded towards a wharf, and tried to pull up short, he desperately reached for his trousers. He started forward with a squawk as Simone nicked his ear. "No, Simone, stop!" He begged. "This was all a huge misunderstanding!"

"Indeed, you misunderstood your place in the world, condescending to a Knight." She said through clenched teeth. "But I've decided to take pity on you."

Clutching his ear, Dirk calmed visibly. "Thank goodness, I knew you'd come to your senses!"

"I'll help you find a mistress." She took two swift steps forward, bracing her leg. "I'm sure the toads and leeches will be quite taken with your handsome face!" Kicking him square in the belly, she sent him sprawling off the side of the wharf to land among the weeds and mud to the thunder of applause.

She cupped her hands together. "Your cheap ring is hardly payment for the amount of my time you've wasted, you fat slug! If you ever darken my doorstep again, I'll take your head for my mantelpiece!"



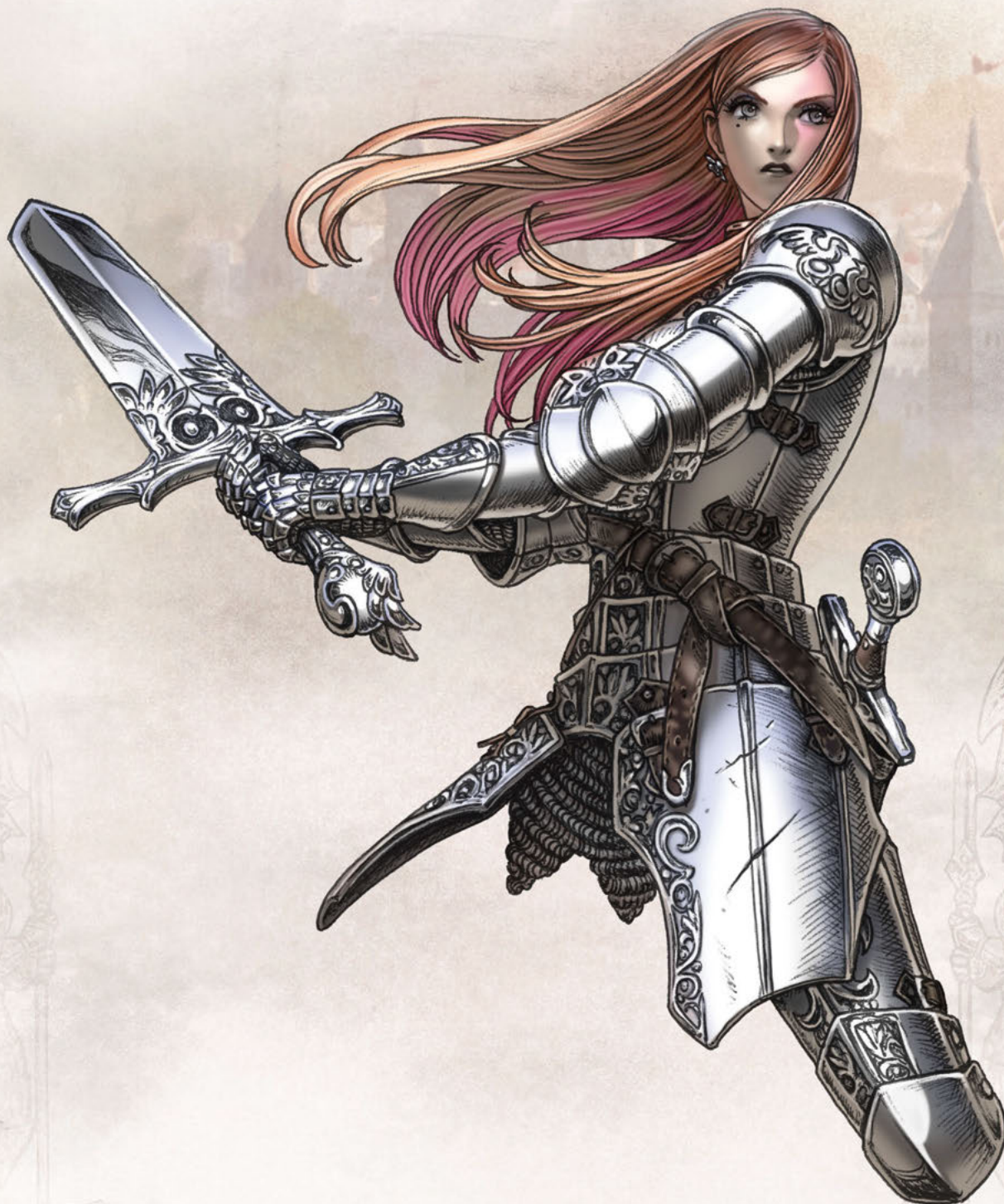
Some time later, after cooling down, she arrived at the town blacksmith. The older, balding, but still handsome man looked up from his steaming quench tank. "Well, if it isn't the Plum Knight, fresh from successfully repulsing an enemy advance."

Simone snorted. "Word travels fast. His advance was indeed quite repulsive." Simone fished the ring out of her pocket, and tossed it to land in his waiting palm. "Dirk may be a fool, but he was right. I do need someone to take care of me." "Hugo Willelmus Smith, will you marry me, and be my wife to look after my home when I'm away?" Simone asked, clasping her hands before her.

Hugo laughed heartily as he examined the ring. "And a beautiful bride I'd be, if it were twenty years ago!" His smile reaches his eyes. "But alas no, I'm resigned to be an old maid."

"Just as well, you seem the sort that needs much minding," Simone conceded.

"But with the other four silver engagement rings, this should be enough to complete your new gauntlet." He waggled it. "Perhaps now young men will know your sword is your husband."





## Perpetual Pinions

Perpetual Pinions is a weapon most often treasured not for its power on the battlefield, but for its amazing ability to forestall death by old age to an indefinite degree.

All who slay an enemy with the bow have the wrist of their draw hand marked with the image of a phoenixes tail feather. Only three individuals with the tail feather brand can live at the same time. Whenever a new maste takes up the bow, the first of the three alive at the time will burst into flames and burn until there is only ashes, from which rises a quickly vanishing ethereal phoenix.

Often used merely once, the bow is then usually locked away in the home of its most recent owner in order to protect their new immortality. An absolute waste of a truly amazing battlefield tool.

One of the few owners who used the bow to its true potential was Uematsu Keita. Wielding it in the decisive battle to end the war with the Vagragora, he single handedly slew five score of the most savage defenders the crab folk had to offer.

Since his heroic example, there has been increasing pressure for those that possess the bow to use it, or stand aside in favor of those who will, but this has only been done three times in the last three hundred years.

In battle, the bow turns all arrows fired from it into flaming bolts which burn hellishly hot for ten minutes, even when doused with water or sand.

When it strikes anything but the intended target, the arrow explodes into a seven-foot ball of phantasmal flame, burning only entities which are hostile to the bows wielder.

Stats: P 222



"Lazara. Lazara."

Lazara eased her eyes open. The voice calling her name was softer than carded wool, but its pull was irresistible.

"Lazara, child. Come out and talk to me.

Lazara blinked hard to try and scrub the sleep from her mind, but she quickly suspected she wasn't dreaming. Dream or not, she instinctively knew she couldn't disobey the voice any more than she could disobey her own mother's call to dinner.

Lazara threw back her quilt and braced herself for the early spring chill to nip through her worn bedclothes. The sting never arrived; she felt enveloped by a safe warmth she couldn't name.

"Lazara."

Lazara looked at the door to the small, squat cottage she shared with her parents. Rain swished against the thick oak planks that kept her indoors, safe from the elements, safe from marauding wolves and wildcats.

And at that precise moment, she wanted nothing to do with doors, or safety, or any of it. It was a wild thought -- not the kind she was accustomed to. A small thrill trembled up through the balls of her feet and seemed to make her legs move without her brain giving the say-so.

Lazara spared one glance at the deerskin partition her parents slept behind. She could hear her father's rattling snores, which were practically her lullaby since babyhood. She couldn't hear her mother sleeping, but somehow Lazara knew she was frozen fast in slumber; this was a special night, and everyone's sleep was doubtlessly thick with dreams.

Everyone who was asleep, of course. Lazara looked from her parents' partition back to the front door of the cottage. The family's tortoiseshell cat crouched beside the entrance and beat a steady rhythm on the damp wooden floor with her tail. Something unseen but irresistible commanded her attention. Lazara could relate.

"Come watch the world wake up, Lazara."

Lazara pushed against the door with her shoulder; predictably, it opened with a sticky squeak that was typical of a wet day. She stepped outdoors and reveled in the feeling of the mud sliding in to claim her bare feet. The cat darted out ahead of her, despite the rain.

Lazara followed the path to the creek that ran beside her family's cottage. The water was usually docile, but she could hear it roar and tumble like the ocean in a storm. The rain soaked her through. Huge droplets trembled at the ends of the forest trees' leaves before splashing on top of her head, though she dimly remembered it was early spring and the trees had no business being in blossom, let alone in raiment reserved for midsummer.

A stew of mud and dead foliage sloped up over Lazara's

feet and around her ankles, but she felt no cold or discomfort. She would have believed she was walking in a dream if not for the vivid smells around her.

At some point during Lazara's walk, the owner of the voice that had called out to her stole up and glided in time with her steps. The same background instinct that warned Lazara against looking at the sun advised her not to stare too hard at her guide. From the corner of her eye, she could make out a translucent, turquoise light that never rested upon a single shape too long. No sooner would Lazara think "Oh, it's a deer," or "Oh, it's a bear" than the entity would stretch or shrink and assume another shape.

"Hello," Lazara said, figuring that no human, god, or mysterious force could be offended by a simple greeting. "Here I am." She kept walking and continued to regard the force-spirit with a careful side-glance.

The entity didn't respond, but Lazara could feel a warmth emanating from it -- a fondness, even, like a master for his dog. For the first time, the dreamlike quality of Lazara's walk hitched over a bump, and she started to feel the chill around her.

"Please tell me why I'm here. Why did you call me?"

"Be calm," it whispered into her heart. "Look around you." Lazara stopped and did as she was told. Somehow she'd wandered into town alongside the spirit, though she'd never explicitly instructed her body to travel there.

The town, represented on most maps as a dot with "White Stag Creek" penned half-heartedly next to it, was unremarkable. It was barely a collection of cottages and stables, all loosely connected by a hard dirt road that was now slimy with mud -- but White Stag Creek and its people were Lazara's world.

Lazara glanced at the cottage closest to her. It was shuttered, dozing through whatever event she was sleepwalking through. But Lazara knew if she visited in the morning, she'd see five-year-old Canaan Sutter bolting from hill-top to tree-stump, laughing and shouting with his friends. She allowed herself to smile. At the start of autumn, healers from cities of prestige had thrown up their hands helplessly at the illness that gnawed at Canaan's body like a feral dog, but Lazara gently wrested the boy from Death with her own medicine. She hadn't done anything too spectacular, really; she'd just needed the right combination of herbs. Lazara was happy to show the city-healers a few tricks that they took in with wide eyes. The people of White Stag Creek smiled privately at the healers' astonishment; several of their youngsters already tutored under Lazara.

The spirit broke into Lazara's thoughts. "You have done a great deal for the people here," it said without speaking. Lazara still regarded her company with the corner of her eye, but she thought she glimpsed a definite, solid outline to the mass of summer-colored energy beside her. "I've only taught them what I know," she said. "They're clever and they work hard, but they can't cure any disease stronger than a cough. I'm afraid I'm a bad teacher."

"The art of herbs is delicate. Mortals are not meant to





SHIRO



snatch away Death's rightful quarry. But it's their birthright to try."

Lazara forgot caution and whipped her head around to look at the spirit. She gasped; though its form trembled around its edges, the white stag standing in front of her was indistinguishable from any of its corporal kin.

The stag lowered its head. Trembling, Lazara touched its nose with her palm. It was dry and velvety despite the rain, and its breath was heavy and warm on her fingers.

"You are a fine teacher," the stag said, "and you will continue to be one. The traces of magic in your blood make the art of medicine as effortless to you as breathing and sleeping."

Lazara jerked her hand back. "Magic? But magic isn't -- hasn't been--"

"Isn't real? Isn't part of nature?" the stag finished for her with gentle amusement. "Is that what you want to say?"

Lazara was struck mute. She nodded feebly.

"The seasons chase each other, Lazara. The sun strengthens and fades, day by day. The moon waxes and wanes, month by month. What's unbelievable about magic lying dormant and then re-awakening century by century? Or millennia by millennia?"

"I don't know," Lazara whispered. She looked down at the tattered hem of her sleeping gown and her mud-streaked feet. Tears of confusion mingled with the rainwater on her cheeks.

The stag nuzzled her shoulder. "Don't be ashamed. Don't be scared," it said. "Magic has returned to the world, and the yoke of your mortality has shattered. We have time enough to talk, to teach. I'll be here for you."

"Yoke of my mortality?" Lazara echoed.

"With magic in full bloom, the power in your blood will grow. Your soul will forever be hot and pure." The stag exhaled softly. "You will grow to adulthood, and not far beyond."

"I don't know if I understand," Lazara said quietly. Though she was hundreds of years old in her knowledge of herbs and plants, she still felt like adulthood was innumerable seasons out of reach. Lazara liked running foot-races, digging for bugs, and climbing trees - games that adults were averse to, if her mother's lamentations over Lazara's torn dresses and lost ribbons were any indication.

Adulthood was for the men who haggled prices in town, and for the women who traded bits of news in between sighing about their unruly children and sore bodies. Adulthood had nothing to do with Lazara.

"That's because you're young," the stag said, "and you'll stay that way for a time. A long time." It pawed the ground.

"What's important is that you'll be able to help people

across countless generations. They will revere you, and call upon you when they're in need. They will know your name, Lazara. As will their children. And their children."

Lazara smiled. She felt numb and tired, but not wholly unhappy - though she was helpless to untangle what the stag was saying to her. "I think I should go home," she said. "I'm sorry. I've enjoyed our walk, but I'm sleepy. Will you come back tomorrow and talk to me again?"

"Yes, Lazara. Of course. Let's go home."

They walked shoulder-to-shoulder, under trees dripping with rain, blossoms, and fruit. Small animals stopped to watch their passage, then stood still a little longer and listened as magic threaded its voice through nature's quiet symphony.





The air of the Dullahans Tomb was cold and damp on Gregs hot skin. He didn't speak of it to anyone, but the fact that he could tell hot from cold was one of the few things that convinced him he was still alive. Everything else, touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. They had all lost their intensity, and gave him little pleasure.

Greg raised his sword aloft and held his torch in the opposite hand to illuminate the macabre charnel house that the Dullahan called home, he slowly rounded the final corner. Countless tiny shards of bones crunching beneath his feet as a mausoleum opened up before him.

The room was cavernous, and carved to resemble a cathedral, with ghoulish stained glass portraits of skeletons, zombies and stitched together nightmares set into the walls and lit from behind with flickering candles. The Dullahan sat upon a massive throne, and before it stood a sarcophagus, atop which sat Dawn's Farewell, the sword which Arnadt Twispin had told him would help him reconnect the broken strands of his soul to his body.

The entire gruesome tableau, the sword made of a mans arm and hand, the suit of armor filled with chattering skulls, the sarcophagus, were all lit by a cold, angry blue light. Greg had faced many challenges both as a man, and as this hideous parody of life he had become, but this Dullahan was the product of several dozen men's deaths. This might very well be the day that his journey came to an end, just another nameless decomposing body.

"Lux!" Greg cried out, steeling himself for the fight of his life. "I've come to put an end to you, and take Dawn's Farewell to where it can serve its purpose!" The Dullahan made no reply, except for the cessation of the chattering skulls within its armored frame.

Greg sensed he had its attention. "I am the Dark Knight, Greg of Lorvenal! And on my word as a Knight, I wi-" "If only you had come ten years sooner." The creature rumbled, its voice like an avalanche of teeth. "You might have saved me a lifetime of torment, and saved the founder of your order."

Stunned, Greg opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I'm not here to offer you comfort! You killed hundreds of innocent men, women, and children!"

"If you wish me to suffer, then simply turn around and leave." It sighed. "And leave me for the next fool who comes along thinking Dawn's Farewell is a blessing instead of the curse it truly is."

Greg paused, unused to undead trying to confuse him, or get under his own skin. "Dawn's Farewell is no curse, monster, you'll not fool me! It can reawaken the soul of any undead who possess it!"

"That is curse enough, boy!" It bellowed loudly "To give an immortal being a soul so that it might know the debased nature of its very existence, and feel the weight of its crimes into eternity? There can be no greater curse, no greater torture than that."

Greg's face dropped from a false, confident smile melting away as the agony in its voice sunk in. "By all the Etterione." He whispered. "The sword, it really does work. Arnadt was right, Agnes the Blacksmith really did it."

"Yes." It growled. "And now I am the soul of Lux the White Knight, trapped forever within a vessel composed of darkness. A guttering candle flame bound by dark magic to perform deeds which will stain my soul forever."

Greg's heart dropped. He had supposed the Dullahan would simply be another monster to challenge. Maybe the one that finally ended his journey, but not a soul as tortured as he was. After a moment's hesitation, he sheathed his sword. "Tell me." He insisted.

"And what." Lux spat. "Is it that you want me to tell you, Dark Knight?"

"Everything." \* \* \*

Born on the same day from two of their lords Handmaidens, Lux and Teneb were polar opposites. Teneb was a dark skinned, fine featured young man with a steadfast determination, and a singular wit. Lux was a pale skinned ogre of a man, with a kind heart and an unshakeable belief in what was right. The two were as close as any two who were not born brother could be. Like brothers, they both praised each other and cursed in equal measure as they competed for everything, to squire under the King's finest, for the first knighthood, and most of all for the love of the Lady Lana.

The years spent pursuing her bore fruit, as she was herself a rather rowdy young woman, with unruly red hair, and a mouth like a sailor out of earshot of her father. The three hashed out the conclusion to their long standing triangle beneath the ancient willow in the castle courtyard. "My lady, if you seek an ugly husband who is as poor in bed as he is at swimming, than look no further than my brother." Teneb praised his brother. "Even if he's the dumb one."

"No no, my lady." Lux insisted. "What you want is a man so handsome he'll spend more time looking at his face in the mirror than he will looking at you. Also, his small cock will also mean that you need not suffer needlessly for the five minutes spent alone with him each night. Also, he is clearly the dumb one."

"Oh my." Lady Lana said, polishing her rapier, as she was a woman of the sword. "You both make compelling cases." "Well, yes." Teneb admitted. "I am rather handsome. But what you need is an ugly husband, so you won't have to worry about your handmaids wandering eyes."

"More like a wandering cock." Lux snorted, triggering a bout of laughter from all three of them. None of them were strangers to the opposite sex, but the time was fast approaching for them to settle down.

"I love both of you idiots." She had told them. "Tiny manhood, and a puss that could curdle milk notwithstanding. But unfortunately we all know a final decision must be made soon."

Lux and Teneb were silent, they were both well aware her



father would demand an heir rather soon, as his health was beginning to decline.

"You are both accomplished Knights, and the New Order you are raising by order of my Uncle the King are promising." She explained. "I know soon, your new weapons and techniques will be put to the test to determine which order will be the special forces, and which will be the front line." Lux and Teneb shared a nervous glance with one another. How the King's niece could know this was beyond them. But then, women had many mysterious powers that men did not.

"I cannot choose between you rationally, so whichever of you is deemed the Special Forces Captain will have my hand." She stated flatly, leaving no room for discussion. "And to put a little extra incentive to fight hard, the loser will be required to marry my Sister, Aurora. My sister wants to marry an out and out scoundrel. An Argelan mercenary who is more interested in getting in her purse than he is in getting into her pants. That simply will not do."

"Ahh." Lux murmured, giving thought to the well groomed, but childish younger sister of their love. "Well, your sister does have points in her favor." He admitted. "Indeed." Teneb hazarded. "She has very large—" He paused as a dagger landed in the ground, between his parted legs. "Dowry payments." He finished.

"Exactly what I meant as well." Lux assured his love.

\* \* \*

"You mean to tell me all three of you staked your futures on the results of a bet?" Greg asked, astonished. He had cleared an altar, and was currently perched atop it. "I do not believe there is a single man alive who hasn't." Lux growled.

Greg remembered fondly the first time Mandi had very briefly and impishly bared her leg to the upper thigh for him to see, promising him that if he did well in his training that perhaps there would be more interesting things to see in the future, and that if he failed he would have no choice but to marry the village wet nurse. It definitely gave him incentive for victory. The fact she had been missing from her home for months stung his heart in a dull throbbing ache.

"Perhaps not." He admitted. "What happened on your mission?" Greg implored.

"I was well on my way to cleaning out a nest of dark witches who had been spreading the Aria of Ruin with a cursed cauldron. But before I could finish the horrible stitched together monster, that Argelan son-of-a-bitch that had been sniffing around Lady Aurora shot me in the back with a poisoned arrow." Lux gripped the throne so tightly a small piece fell away.

"Weakened, they brought me down, slew me, and took my head as a trophy, their master turning me into this wretched thing you see before you instead of letting me die. And in doing so, doomed my brother in arms as well."

"Lord Garland Dubois. I never heard he had any involvement at all." Greg interjected. The loss of the White Knights was an integral part of their training, and this didn't track. "If he'd been involved, Sir Teneb would have killed his brother in law."

"He didn't know." Lux said dismissively. "The fool only found out when he left his family behind with this cursed sword to try and set me free. The bastard brought my headless body back, saying he'd followed me to make sure I returned home." Greg shook his head in dismay. Much and more of what he'd been taught growing up had been a lie. "What happened to Lord Teneb?"

"When he arrived with the sword, I was a mindless husk. But I was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. The moment I took it from him, my being came rushing back to this form, all memories of what lay beyond stolen away from me." "Then why didn't you and Lord Teneb depart together?" Greg inquired.

"Because, even with my soul my will was not my own. My Mistress Beithah observed his arrival. Watching, she was furious that Teneb had found a way to interfere with her workings. She ordered me to kill him." Lux grew silent for a time. "And I did. I had just come back to the mortal plane, and I was immediately forced to kill my brother, the father of a child bearing my own name, and husband to the woman we both loved." Greg said nothing. There was no comfort he could offer a man so horrible wronged.

"Afterwards, she made the effects of the Dawn's Farewell upon me permanent, by stitching my soul into this body along with my skull. And she set me here to guard the blade for eternity, never to see the light of day or to atone for my crimes."

The Two were quiet for a time. But Greg remembered something one of his teachers had said. "All orders are subject to interpretation" Lady Elizabeth had told him. "What were her exact orders?" Greg asked, curiously.

"Guard Dawn's Farewell until world's end, and let no one else take the blade from here. Kill anyone who attempts to do so. Fulfill no other order before this one."

Greg brightened. "My friend, I think your... Mistress has made a mistake."

"What?" Lux started.

"She never said where you were to guard it, and only commanded that no other should take it." Greg explained. "I don't see why you can't take the blade with you, and leave any time you want."

Lux seemed to ponder for a moment, and just when Greg thought he might be on the verge of a profound statement he muttered "Son of a bitch. Teneb really was the smart one."









## History

Centuries ago, a clan of horseman known as the Urugen, which translated as 'the people of Ur', was forced by a larger and more aggressive clan out of their territory. From their homes of the open plains of Uru, they moved into what is now known as the Eastern Kingdoms.

Weakened by the losses at the hands of their enemies, they were forced to swallow their pride and beg for sanctuary in the foothills of the Red Faced Men which was a group of isolationist warriors known as the Rah-gahn.

The Rah-gahn were always few in number, as well as perpetually strapped for resources. The Urugens who showed up at their door presented the dying race with a unique opportunity. They offered their Urugen supplicants the chance to join them as their vassals. While the Urugens were afraid this would effectively turn into slavery, they had no choice but to accept.

After adopting the Urugen into their own families, the Red Faced Men helped the former raiders become the ideal guards for the caravans bringing their legendary steel to the outside world. After years of being bandits themselves, the cunning men knew how to smell a highwayman's trap, and could easily turn it on the would-be thieves.

Over generations, the Urugen became full partners to their increasingly rare Red Faced Men patrons, learning their warrior's ways and their craftsmanship. In recent days, they've even taken over day-to-day governing so those remaining can focus on making sure that they survive for generations to come.

They started as strangers, one group fearing outsiders and the other fearing enslavement. In the end though, they became a family.

## Government

The Urugen King, Tai Sheng II is a reclusive leader. He often joins his enlightened Rah-gahn friends on spiritual journeys, leaving the daily functions to his advisors from the Six Families, and personally overseeing only on matters of great importance.

The Six Families are Aoki, Takehara, Tsukikasa, Wu, Qin, and Zhao. They are charged with managing the usual mundane affairs of state so the King can focus on audiences with his people, foreign affairs, and the rituals of the crown.

The military of Ravetta is composed of both the Lantern Guard and the Crimson Chargers.

The Lantern Guard watch the walls and streets of Ravetta, armed with their tonfa and crossbows they seek out those who would violate the laws of the family or bring harm to their people. The Lanternsmen, as they are so called, is primarily composed of Urugens.

A few older Red Faced Men remain in the upper echelons, though their leader is a Human named Ixvil, a dark-skinned man who arrived as a naked child, lost and wandering the hills. He was adopted into the Royal Family due to his unusual arrival and decided to repay their kindness by keeping order on the streets.

The Crimson Chargers are the standing army of Ravetta. They also are primarily composed of Urugen, but with many older and more hardened veteran Red Faced Men warriors acting as sergeants, instilling the ancestral fortitude of their people into their Urugen kin.

There is a small, but vocal minority among the Red Faced Men that believe that their fertility problems are caused by mixing blood with outsiders. Due to this, they strongly believe in separating themselves from the Urugen 'commoners' who they no longer consider family.



## Culture

For all their initial differences, the Red Faced men and the Urugen both treasure family above all else, but also share a fascination with the passing of the seasons.

The Spring Festival brings with it the casting off of old worn garments and the crafting and purchasing of new ones. Citizens decorate with fresh blossoms and the people partake of rice flour balls to symbolize family, as well as noodles in cane sugar broth symbolize longevity.

The summer is heralded by natives with a Poetry Festival, which promotes literacy and creative thought. Many fresh summer vegetable dishes are consumed along with a tart, refreshing dark green jelly made from a native grass. The clean taste and cool green color are intended to chill the fires within and without.

Fall and the harvest are perhaps the most revered of the seasons. Citizens come from far and wide to visit their family in the City, gathering to feast on the harvest vegetables, succulent roast pigs, crispy pan-fried beef buns, preserved eggs, and fish cakes that they have their family to thank for.

## Daily Life

Mornings come early to those in Ravetta, with cooking beginning as early as 3 am in some households and restaurants. As soon as the working men and women arise, crispy and steaming hot meat dumplings are served, giving the town a very distinctive morning aroma found nowhere else.

The dawn also comes with the loud clamor of the city markets which are located every five miles at, and between, the four cardinal directions for a total of eight bustling markets.

By Lunch, the eccentric Luck dancers have woken up, and begin panhandling strangers for spare change or food. Or they find their favorite noodle carts for their afternoon meal, offering a pinch to a sacrificial flame to thank their ancestors for the foundation of their lives.

Though the night is quiet, it is far from peaceful. Many restless spirits like the Terror dancer roam the streets, and the various families of bandits hunt for easy marks.

The first thing most visitors will find is the outermost of the cities two walls; A wall of merchants selling 'genuine' ancient weapons blessed by the ancestors of one of the families, dried scorpions for virility, pickled newt for stamina, and steamed buns.







## Bun Peddler Lady

You can't ignore the cheerfulness from such a lady. Their husband is likely in the city guards, but they are here to sell buns for additional income and thanks to the soldiers here, their business is steady and good.

If you put up a good talk, you can likely get away with free food, but would you do that to such a cheerful smile?

## Off Duty Soldier

This soldier has the smile of one going home after a long day of standing guard. He is likely to be off duty for a few weeks as well.

He will gladly give you information regarding the city, so as long as it is not anything of military importance. Do not try to bribe information out of him, you are likely to get into a lengthy legal trouble, as he is honest and loyal to his Kingdom.



## Educated Old Man

If you happen to enter a tea house, you may encounter a few of these wise folks.

They differentiate themselves from those chatty old men who won't stop talking about random things that don't interest you by carrying out a conversation you actually wish to initiate. Whether it is politics or the way to be enlightened, you will be surprised by just how much they know.



## Disgraceful Inheritor

If it wasn't for these guys, you will take the city for a Utopia of some description. The mere sight of these pompous men makes you feel unpleasant.

Expensive clothing hangs ugly on their overweight bodies, their stare does its best to make you feel inferior and their speech will surely infuriate you.

They will insult you, and insult you further by throwing money at you to try and dismiss the matter, because money has solved everything for them so far.





## He Yan

From whence he came, no one in The Village of the Gray Lotus knows, but He-Yen arrived. He built a home in the forest and promptly began swearing at the children of the town to stay out of his garden like any proper crotchety old man.

The scarred giant of a man was clearly a former soldier, and while he was easily irritated and reclusive, he seemed to have a soft spot for visitors who brought him tea. Though even with such a gift, none could prise his secrets from him even if they had wanted to try. His home was filled with an odd collection of unrecognizable half-carved bones, and his wall adorned by a sword that had been battered and sharpened so many times that it was no longer functional. All of which seemed to hint at a rather interesting background.

One day, he went to the village and noticed a sword that the blacksmith had created, taking quite a fancy to it. However, the price that the Blacksmith asked sent him into a raging fury.

Claiming he could eat pig-iron and shit a better sword, He-Yen departed angrily, leaving the village. Without much of an announcement, he returned after a week, bringing with him the provisions for creating his own forge. He spent the next six years churning out mediocre tools and knives, until one day he produced a plain, but perfectly serviceable blade that he sold to the innkeeper's son for two pounds of his favorite tea.

Much to the horror of the local blacksmith, the old man began to undercut him on the cost of weapons. On top of that, what really galled him was the fact that his new rival's weapons also surpassed the quality of his own, even if they were quite drab and plain in appearance, being only decorated with carved bone handles.

He-Yan has a very interesting habit of refusing commissions from those who are impolite or deceptive as to why they want a weapon, even if they offer him increasing amounts as bribery. Especially then. If this does happen, he immediately just sends them to the village's flamboyant peacock of blacksmith out of spite.

Rumor also has it that a number of monsters as of late have been found slain, sometimes crude iron weapons resembling his works were discovered, being inlaid with unknown sutras on their bone handles.





# Weapons

Though the smiths of Ravetta are not as prolific as those of Belmonde, their artistry fueled by a thousand years of their reclusive Red Faced Men ancestors is second to none. Their weapons are extremely durable despite the amazing ornamentation that master craftsman bestows upon their finished works. Their fixtures are usually done in red and black, leaving the blades as naked, glittering steel.

Ravetta's love of nature is reflected in their craftsmanship with frequent use of fearsome and noble beasts in their heraldry and weapons. While lions, tigers, and dragons are the most common theme, butterflies and other insects are also not unheard of. Enchanted weapons tend to be uncommon, but most weapons have many charms laid into their structure by shamans during their assembly. Tucked away safely beneath leather wrappings, these charms bring good fortune to their owners, and lend them the ferocity of the beasts they resemble.









## Food & Lodging

Ravetta is the city of a thousand sauces. Soy, teriyaki, tandoori, black bean, oyster, plum, fish, hoisin, kappisano wine sauce, and any other sauce they can import from the north, south, east, and west. Even if it comes from the Kingdom of Lorvena, and beyond.

It is nearly impossible to travel further than a handful of city blocks without tripping over a local with a fresh bamboo basket full of pork buns, a noodle stall, or an open fire pit covered in roasting meat. Amusingly enough, each one of the men or women there has 'the only proper version' of the correct sauce for whatever they serve.

Every restaurant and food stall has their own variation of the towns fragrant teas as well. Some of their blends are a family recipe dating back centuries, and some even fetch as much as a thousand gold coins.



## Goh Yu

Though most people wouldn't dream of waking up before dawn unless their houses were on fire, the hazy, muted hour before sunrise was Goh-yu's favorite time of the day. The portly bun-seller never got tired of breathing in the humid chill that seized the bamboo forest before sunrise.

"Catch up, Hu," Goh-yu called out. He didn't need to turn around to know his brother was straggling and probably groaning exaggeratedly as he pulled their cart towards their market stall. Like the big cat he was named for, Hu preferred to relax and wait for easy prey. He liked quick, easy answers with fat payouts, not hauling bun-laden carts across uneven forest floors day after day in hopes of turning a small but steady profit. Unlike the cat he was named for, however, Hu was not clever, strong, or lucky. Goh-yu's luck had to stretch to cover them both, and their mother.

As usual, Goh-yu's thoughts about luck caused him to automatically touch the koi-shaped scar on his cheek, where it was locked in a silent leap. He allowed himself a quick glance around the forest, and Hu recognized his brother's intentions.

"Looking for your friend again, Goh-yu?" "Just a quick peek, Hu. I never told her 'thank you.'"

"You said she was a spirit, a ghost. A monster, maybe. How do you know she didn't steal your soul when she gave you that scar?"

"Having to go through the effort of waking you up every day makes me want to throw myself off a cliff," Goh-yu said cheerfully, "so I think some of my soul is still left." He stopped walking and slid his bag off his shoulder. "Let's take a break. We're ahead of schedule."

"Gladly," Hu said. He let go of the cart, dropped into a squat, and started smoking his pipe. It all happened in a single motion, as gracefully as a falcon dropping out of the sky and onto a rabbit.

Goh-yu nodded in approval and pulled a large bun out of his pack. It was wrapped in bamboo leaves. Hu raised an eyebrow in between pulls on his pipe. "Breakfast?"

"Not for us." Goh-yu looked around one more time and placed the bun at the base of a tightly-packed cluster of bamboo clumps near the path. "This one's filled with pork. Do you think she'll like it? I was thinking of filling it with ground carp, but she was surrounded by ghost-fish when I saw her. Fish must be her friends. I don't want to offend her."

"This ghost ... this woman slapped you hard enough to leave a scar," Hu said, "and you're worried about offending her?"

"I already told you, she did it as a joke. And somehow the blow gave us enough luck to get you out of trouble with those debt collectors. I would have let myself be slapped a hundred times. A thousand."

"You probably would have," Hu grumbled, but his face blushed and betrayed his appreciation. "I'll say it before you do: Let's get going. Let me put out my pipe."

"Don't leave the tobacco on the forest floor. You might make her angry."

The brothers resumed their trip just as the sun's first light broke through the bamboo and scattered carelessly around the forest.





The "waking dream" is a rare state of mind every mortal experiences at least once in their life. As its name suggests, the dreamer is pinned between the realms of sleep and consciousness, and is besieged by dream-images that waver and dance in front of their wide-open eyes.

This pre-dawn purgatory is the playground of ghosts and demons who prefer to torment mortals without going through the trouble of conjuring a corporeal form for themselves. Of course, that's not to say the grey-black realm behind the dreamer's eyelid isn't also home to creatures that enjoy sliding into the sunshine from time to time.

Like the rest of her Eterrione kin, Down-Xin was an expert at riding the currents that divide mortals' states of consciousness. Unlike other Eterrione, however, Down-Xin reached for mortals' dreams with her thin, barbed fingers in hopes of snatching up the kind of things her people typically didn't bother with, like a problem she could solve, or a noble wish she could fulfill.

Down-Xin wanted to hook a mortal, land it, make it happy, and turn it into a pet.

A "friend," Down-Xin, she reminded herself firmly. The term is 'friend'.

Few of Down-Xin's attempts to make a pet—a friend—had gone well in her timeless existence. Mortals were smart enough to know that absolute power corrupts, but they were utter dunces at learning from their own histories and mistakes. Down-Xin grew up around easily-bored creatures that used their power for mischief and suffering. Watching them weave their predictable webs of torment was duller than watching a mortal dream about mending underclothes. Down-Xin wanted the company of someone whose desires were good. Pure. Or at least different.

So far, not so good. Even when she drifted to a mortal's side over its pleas of healing a sick child or saving an ailing parent, their true desires inevitably unraveled and they asked Down-Xin to deliver gold, jewels, and assorted riches. Many demanded ideal mates, and while their tastes were initially entertaining to fulfill for a time (one gentlemen who was surely destined for a special kind of hell asked for a voluptuous woman with a horse's head), even that pastime became stale within a few hundred years.

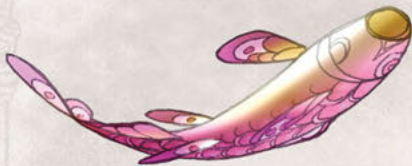
And Down-Xin's latest attempt to groom a mortal into an eternal friend wasn't doing much for her, either.

Down-Xin first took an interest in Easog when she sensed his fears and loneliness within his restless dreams. She quickly learned he was a bandit, but that held no bearing on her decision to get closer to him; imperfect people proved more fun to work with for an extended period after all. For Down-Xin, heroes, nobles, and other individuals already full of their own ideals were a great big bore. Though teaching them manners when their true natures inevitably seeped through the cracks in their facades, was always a fun way to pass an afternoon.

Or a few years.



## Down Xin



But when Down-Xin met Easog, she felt almost protective of the hunched, stoat-like bandit. He didn't run at the sight of her, which was impressive; the white-faced dream-fisher was under no illusions that she or any other Eterrione were calming to look at. When Down-Xin assured Easog she meant no harm, conjuring up a fluffy pink rabbit to prove it, Easog unfurled from the mossy log he was sleeping beside and blinked at her with wonder.

The pair formed a pact, and it started unraveling almost immediately.

"I have big aspirations," Easog called back to Down-Xin as he walked briskly along the forest path with the Eterrione in tow. It hadn't quite been a full day since they made their alliance. "You're certain your magic is sufficient to help me achieve my expectations?"

Down-Xin narrowed her eyes ever-so-slightly at the bandit's bowed, knobby back. Like every mortal with something to prove, he used too many syllables. "I command powerful illusions, Easog."

"And they will serve my purpose?"

"Let's just get to where we're going. Then you'll see for yourself."

The pair was en route to a small tavern at the forest's edge. It was too isolated to serve any specific town, but its proximity to a well-travelled dirt road made it a popular stop for transients who generally weren't up to any good.

Easog stepped over a fallen log and picked his way through some low-hanging branches. "The people whom I talk to in this establishment—will they be able to see you?"

"No, Easog," Down-Xin said. "They'll only see the illusion I throw over you. It'll look very solid, very real."

"Good. My recruits need to exclusively pay attention to me. I don't need to divide their attentions with a ... ghost."

Down-Xin narrowed her eyes just a little more.

"This will be outstanding, excellent," Easog said as he kicked away some vegetation looped around his ankle. "When I was a child, nobody paid me any mind because of my diminutive size. Once people see what I've become, they'll follow me anywhere."

"You won't necessarily 'become' anything," Down-Xin called forward to her companion. "Remember. It's an illusion. You'll still ... be you."

"Unimportant. What matters is I'll take what I want. I'll do what I want."

Down-Xin sighed inwardly. When Easog next blinked, she positioned herself in front of the loner. "Endless power isn't everything," she said. "Take it from someone who knows."

"Nonsense," Easog barked. "I know what you immortals are like. You think you're the first one to approach me with gifts and temptations? There's always a caveat, always a catch." He spat on the side of the trail. "I'm wise to you. I'll accept what



ever you can give me, but you'll never outsmart me."

"I'm not trying to outsmart you, Easog," Down-Xin said. "I just want to be your friend and enjoy your company."

"You lie like an ape," Easog returned instantly. "Get back behind me and let's get to the tavern."

"Think about this one more time. Wouldn't you rather have command of, say, a herd of fire-breathing horses that run upside-down? That'd be a lot more fun, right?"

"Talk sense, demon, or I'll have a cleric bottle you back up in whatever void you slithered out of."

Down-Xin's smile almost touched her ears. "All right, Easog," she said. "I apologize for not knowing my place before a wise mortal like yourself. When we get to the tavern, I promise you'll have the rapt attention of men, women—anyone you want."

Easog looked uneasy for the first time since he'd started traveling with Down-Xin. He side-eyed the Eterrione's bright, wide smile. "Do you swear on your home realm, your family, and whatever passes as your soul?"

"You have my word."

The pair broke through the trees and the tavern immediately came into clear view. It was close enough that Down-Xin could already smell the urine-soaked dirt around its stoop. She heard something shattering, followed by roars of approval.

"This seems a rowdy place, Easog," she said.

"Good. I want to command strong men, not wimps and mama's boys." Easog paused and looked back at Down-Xin. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Perform your magic." Easog wiggled his fingers exaggeratedly in the air. "Transform me into a powerful warrior."

"It's an illusion," Down-Xin reminded him yet again, "and I've already thrown it over you. I had to occupy myself somehow while following you. It's better than staring at your skinny backside."

"You can't talk to me like that, demon," Easog said automatically, but his attention was focused primarily on himself. He ran his fingers over his chest and arms. "I don't feel any different."

"You look wonderful," Down-Xin said. "See for yourself." She conjured a silver mirror with a single thought and propped one end in the scummy muck at the side of the road.

Easog blinked in surprise at the bronzed, wide-shouldered warrior staring back at him. He was fitted with steel cuirass that was scuffed just enough to indicate its wearer had come out on the winning end of many battles, but not so worn that it was without a shine. A fine broadsword was sheathed on his back, and as a final touch, shoulder-length locks of

spun gold fluttered gently in the sour-smelling air. There wasn't actually enough wind to make Easog's new hair flutter so, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Perfect!" he shriek-cackled. "You've finally done something to prove your worth, dream-fiend. Once my band is together, you'll be my second-hand. At a proper distance, of course."

"Of course," Down-Xin echoed. Her smile widened. "I'm happy you're happy. Let's go. Lady Fate gets restless when she senses someone is turning off the road she's built for them."

The tavern's door was already open to the warm night, and Down-Xin could sense Easog's disappointment; she knew he badly wanted to push his way into the establishment with great ceremony, and stepping through an open door was never as dramatic as pushing one aside. Nevertheless, Easog did his best. Unseen by the other patrons, Down-Xin watched her charge with serene anticipation.

For a full thirty seconds which Down-Xin counted silently, the tavern carried on with no care about its new arrival. Men wrestled, drunks roared, and maids dutifully wove in and around the bedlam as they kept customers fueled with food and drink.

Then one patron happened to notice Easog standing in the doorway, his hands on his hips. He snapped his mouth shut, biting off the last verse of his drinking song. His eyes grew wide. Then, as if reacting to an invisible signal, the rest of the establishment followed the first patron's gaze to the doorway and rested their eyes on Easog.

Complete silence enveloped the tavern.

Easog lifted his palms up to the crowd and asked, "Who will follow me to riches, fame, and glory?"

A stout, grey-haired tavern maid whisked a tray of empty mugs from the table beside her before saying, "If we're talking about riches as mediocre as what you keep in your breeches, I'm content to stay right where I am, dear."

The tavern erupted.

The ocean-roar of mirth followed Down-Xin down the road while she serenely juggled Easog's stripped clothing without using her hands.

She'd promised Easog would have the attention of everyone in the tavern. She'd kept her word.

"He's a clever mortal," Down-Xin said to herself. "Cleverer than most. He may attract some followers without my help."

Down-Xin resolved to keep her ears open for news about a band of bandits led by a naked weasel. She chuckled, throwing Easog's clothes into the boughs of a nearby tree, and slipping back into the limbo between dreams and lucid thought.



# Beastuary

Aside from Wild Beasts, before the Urugen came, few monsters dared to intrude upon the land of the Red Faced Men, and they only shared their hills with the friendly Luck Dancers.

However with the coming of the Urugen, also came the uncertainty of man. While The Red Faced Men knew that the Luck dancers were benign, some of the newcomers were fearful and spurned their attention, turning the otherwise harmless creatures to twisted madness as Terror Dancers.

Previously unknown in the region, the nearly extinct Ga-Onna moth witches came to prey upon the men of the newcomers in order to reproduce themselves though at the cost of the human's life.

Also, with the spread of the Aria of Ruin, many otherwise harmless spirits, and even the animated clay golems used to guard the palace have come to be erratic, and even violent.



Luck Dancer

If even the Luck Dancers know where they came from, the reclusive creatures aren't telling anyone. Though for as long as anyone in the eastern Kingdom can remember, their appearance has heralded a turn in fortune for whomever they present themselves do.

These luminous, golden, lion-like beings appear seemingly out of nowhere and perform a beautiful, if somewhat comical sword dance for a person they believe is due a change in fortune. The recipient of the dance then leaves an offering of leafy green vegetables, preferably kale or widows ear, and the ritual is complete.

Strong believers in justice and peace, they have been known to appear to adventurers with good intentions and warn them of imminent danger, or actively intervene against adventurers with malign intent.



Stats: P 221

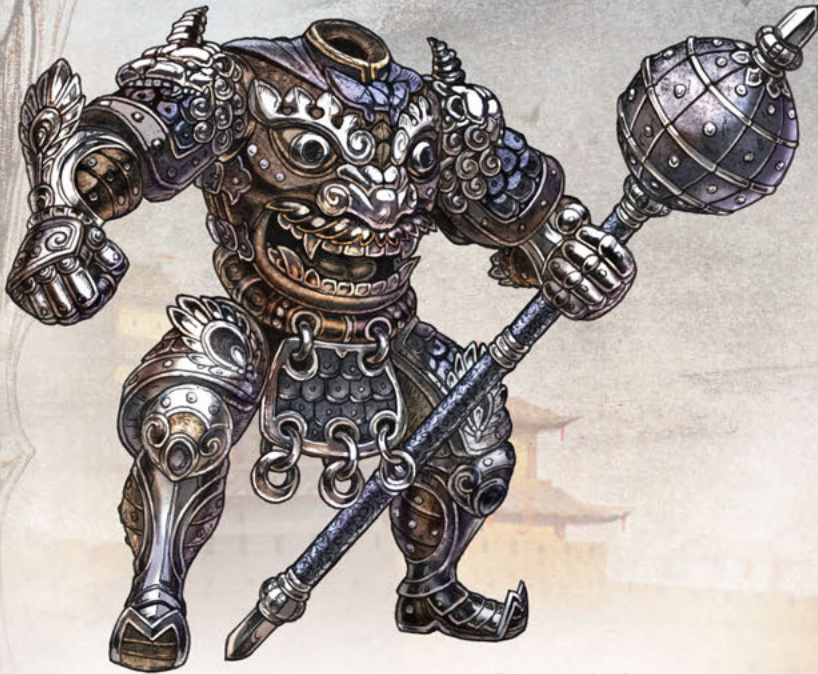
Ga-Onna

As long as there have been men, there have been temptresses, both human and otherwise. The Ga-Onna are the only beings who exist exclusively as temptresses. It is said that once, long ago, these beautiful moth women actually had men of their own, but they befell a horrible curse.

The only way for them to have children now, is to mate with a human male or related species such as Ygtolith or Gagnarok. They must mate with a male under the veil of their illusion, conceive, and allow their larva to devour the male in order for them to receive the physical and spiritual nourishment necessary to grow.

As gruesome as their methods seems, most are by nature normally quite tender, caring beings who live in human society hidden by illusion. They lead humble lives, often practicing medicine or acting as midwives for human women to help stave off the ache for children in their own hearts. But if uncovered, a Ga-Onna will protect themselves violently with both claws and a variety of illusion magic. One possessing children will protect them with incredible ferocity.





Guardian Golem

When a Royal Guardsman falls in the line of duty, a Golem is raised in his honor. Constructed with sanctified stone and metal braces, each golem is created with the highly stylized likeness of the guardsman who has fallen emblazoned on their chest.

Crafted and brought to life by a stone mason, these imposing immortal servitors obey only three people; their creators, those their creators deem their commander, and the King they serve himself.

These Golems can only be produced in a limited amount due the rare elements needed to alchemize the clay they are sculpted from into true stone. As such, these rare guardians are often used as replacements for a dozen or more ordinary guards in the most important of the kings holdings.

Every so often, however, these ceaseless and tireless guardians will simply walk away from their post and find the home of the men and women whose likeness they were built in and begin to perform mundane tasks much to the puzzlement of the deceased's family. Only those with the power of command over them can make them return them to their posts.

Terror Dancer



When a Luck Dancer is repeatedly spurned by those it seeks to offer good fortune to, all the karmic luck kept within the kind beautiful creature begins to turn into a poisonous hatred for those who turned away its generosity.

Their skin turns black and new eyes open, greedily darting this way and that, searching for those who have wronged it. It confronts them and performs a horrible dance which places a curse on its victim. Unless it is appeased daily with an offering of vegetables and a glass of their own blood, its victim will suffer terrifying visions which will eventually drive them to madness, and death.

The creature will often lair as near to its victims as possible without being observable to prying eyes. Their end will only come when another Luck Dancer approaches adventurers to humbly beg them to help end the suffering of their brother or sister.



Day 1: "I've left home behind, bringing with me only my most essential tools. Arnadt Twispin's books have been helpful, but I can only accomplish so much without doing my own fields research."

Day 2: "I should have packed better shoes when I left."

Day 7: "Much to my surprise, the resting place of the sword 'Dawn's Farewell' is empty, and no sign of the fearsome Guardian that was supposed to be standing watch! Arnadt Twispin's latest scrolls are just as out of date as that fat old fool himself is."

Day 32: "Dropped my second and third scrolls into a damn river while I was crossing the bridge! Of course I considered retrieving them, but the twenty-foot crocodiles dissuaded me. I was tempted to use the new concoction I made from a resist lightning potion and an accelerant of gegnarok heart-stone shavings. However, the last time I used it, the crater was fourteen feet wide."

Day 34: "I've caught up to the Dullahan who carries Dawn's Farewell. The stories I've heard on the road are true; he somehow retains the soul he had in life. He was completely immune to the accelerated-holy-water spray device I created. Even more fascinating, he called me 'an irritating sow' and told me to go away. I must follow him for a time."

Day 35: "I have learned the Dullahan has a name, Charles. He is currently traveling with a curious, and handsome young Dark Knight who carries a sword every bit as fascinating as his dullahan companion's own. It seems to somehow feed off of blood. He won't allow me to examine it though."

He saw me reanimate a dead cat in the village using my Wand of Bone Speaking; The town had a substantial rat infestation and I was just trying to wipe the vermin out. He said I'm a necromancer and wants nothing to do with me, and told me to go away. But I shall continue to follow and study this unusual pair, for science."

Day 37: "Greg, as he's named, doesn't seem to realize that he's dead, and has been for quite some time. He appears to be hanging onto a portion of his soul, seemingly enough for him to have avoided the megalomania most sentient undead develop. I don't think I'll tell him; it would only make him angry."

Day 39: "Success! Charles has let me examine Dawn's Farewell, though only in exchange for my not speaking for an entire day. I was able to determine that my original surmise was correct!"

With the aid of a proper accelerant and use of the ichors of undeath, it's possible to pervert the normal function of a form of magic. One can change an augmentation to an absorption, or an intake of an explosive form of the magic it was meant to defend against!

Not just in the shape of my potions or pills, but in a permanent form. With the study of this sword, it will be possible to repurpose countless malignant artifacts into productive objects!"

Day 40: "Forgive my less than ladylike language, but holy shit the ale in this port is strong. These Vagragora Crab Men don't take any prisoners. Three mugs and I was drunk. Not falling down drunk, but I'm pretty sure I was trying to climb the walls. I may also have actually howled at the moon, and I still can't find my boots."

Day 41: "Hungover. Throwing up by the side of the road. Want to die now. Invent hangover cure soonest."

Day 42: "Greg has left to seek his destiny, that poor boy is going to have a rough time of it. Charles was sad to see him go but seemed more sad that I didn't go with him. I'm not sure if he was trying to play matchmaker, or just get rid of me. I should be insulted, but I've been granted additional time to study the sword, so I'll let it slide."

Day 45: "We were ambushed by a patrol of skeletons this morning! Charles was overtaken by their sheer numbers and disarmed."

I took the Dawn's Farewell and used the reach its power gave me to strike down half a dozen of them with the blades of wind it can generate. They had no idea what was happening to them, and Charles smashed the rest of them with his fists like an angry drunk. I think Charles respects me a little more because he said I could carry the sword as long as I never leave his sight with it."

Day 46: I somehow managed to extract part of the essence of Dawn's Farewell, namely its wind powers. I now have a small friend who appears to be some sort of Wind Eterrione, and the sword itself is now... Smaller. Charles says he should leave me in a ditch, but I think he likes New Friend as well."

Day 47: "More undead this morning! I was nearly eaten by a giant frog covered in spikes and skulls, and the whole damn thing was full of corpses!"

Fortunately, my New Friend took a firebomb made from a transmuted potion of fire retardation and took care of it rather quickly. The dumb thing swallowed it, and New Friend too. New Friend wasn't singed even a little though, and sang a funny little song about frogs and stew."

Day 53: "I have successfully taken one of the Ordo Obscurum's cursed poison knives, and turned it into an anti-septic blade! This knife will be a fantastic tool in the hands of the healers of this place. At least it will if the fatheads who rule the town can get over that thrice-damned undead cat incident I may have accidentally caused."

Only one of the cats tried to eat anyone. All the rest were just concerned with the mice. Use necromancy once, and everyone thinks you're a necromancer. Some people can never let go of some things."

Day 55: "Charles has told me his name is Lux the Fallen. I've told him I'm just going to call him Lux." I told him he was my friend. He said he hates me somewhat less than others. I'm making progress."



◆◆◆ Justine ◆◆◆



Stats: P 207



Kondile didn't make friends easily as a youth, especially with other dragons. And whenever he did befriend another dragon, he invariably asked the one question that led his kin to back away from him with a blank stare:

"How were you born?"

It was a supremely stupid query, and it had a life of its own during Kondile's formative decades. It always leapt out at his guests - when he still entertained guests - no matter how hard he tried to keep it locked in his gizzard. So Kondile begrudgingly understood why most dragons' flight paths gradually cut a wide arc around his territory.

Through every growth spurt, every molt, Kondile never stopped wondering where he came from. Sometimes if he stayed very still and cleared his mind, he could remember the feeling of dead leaves scraping his mushy belly as he scampered across the forest floor. With an especially heroic effort, he could call up the faintest memory of a time when he was spurred forward only by the perpetual terror and hunger that powers all tiny living things.

Sitting still and clearing his mind was a pastime Kondile didn't get to partake in much these days though. His memories of his origins would never be whole; like the lizard-egg he'd clawed out of centuries ago, not even the purest magic could ever seal the crumbled fragments back together.

Kondile knew only two things for certain. First, dragons were born of other dragons, and he was not. Ages ago, when he asked a mottled grey she-wyrm about her origins, the matron gently put a claw on his snout and explained mating in terms so basic, so plain, that Kondile could only blush inwardly until she was done. Kondile never again doubted his birth was not typical of his kind.

Second, Kondile was certain his first evolution had something to do with her. The sun-haired girl. After all, she had everything to do with his second, perverted evolution.

Though he remembered little of his initial genesis, Kondile could still recall every sound, every smell that accompanied his first meeting with the woman who altered him, stripped him down, and now led him like a dog. He still chewed on the words "What If" every single day, for all the good it did him.

The sun-haired girl had visited him at a vulnerable time. He was lanky, awkward, unused to his body, and bristling with pent-up aggression. He was deep into the draconic equivalent of what humans called 'the teenage years', he supposed, and now he understood why a palatable shudder ran through those words whenever human parents said them.

But the day the sun-haired girl arrived was particularly bad. Aside from Kondile's usual restless mood and the ache

of the newly-erupted, damnably clumsy wings that currently hung off his shoulders like useless scraps of parchment, he suffered deep, throbbing furrows that crisscrossed his pliable scales. He was millennia away from developing the callouses that would've been very handy in his recent fight with a male tiger who'd tried to evict him from his jungle lair. The tiger had been the one to limp away after that short, sharp scuffle, but oh, he left marks.

"Damned lizard," the tiger had hissed over his shoulder, which carried a deep puncture wound, Kondile noted with satisfaction. "You're strong, and you'll grow stronger, but in the end, you'll die. Like myself, like every bird chattering around us, like every bug crawling around us. Time will end you. Don't ever forget that."

Kondile didn't forget.

He couldn't forget.

Like a rock falling onto his head, the thought of death poisoned the pride he took in rising above his humble beginnings as a lizard. Everything he'd taught himself - hunting, fighting, surviving, even the basics of magic - what was it worth? What was the point of being a member of the gods' chosen race if his fate was still to die on some filthy jungle floor someday?

When the Sun-haired girl had glided through the shimmering jungle heat to visit Kondile, the dragon was not in the mood for visitors. Aggression still boiled in his blood; though he was wounded, the tiger hadn't drained all the fight from him. Kondile unfolded himself - he tried not to stagger, with limited success - and drew himself to his full height.

"Turn around and leave, two-legs," the dragon said. "Unless you have an offering of gold and jewels. But you barely have a stitch of clothing on you, so I don't know where you'd be hiding them."

The woman stopped, but she didn't drop her eyes at his display. Indeed, her slender, doe-like body was barely covered, but her skin looked untouched by the jungle's thorns and insects, some of which had mandibles like dwarf-tongs as Kondile discovered himself across many miserable summer nights.

"Be at peace," the Sun-haired girl said in a voice that matched the color of her hair. "I only wish to talk to you, my Lord."

My Lord? Kondile felt his lips draw back from his teeth. Was she mocking him? His bashed-up body? His withered, awkward wings? His patchy scales, each one still as soft as a pat of butter? His tired brain attempted to brew up a rebuttal worthy of his kind, but all that emerged from his throat was a roar, which powered his leap towards the intruder.



But there was no soft, feeble resistance of flesh, no snap of bones caving under his weight. Kondile whipped his head to the right and saw the girl standing there somehow, her hands behind her back, an unreadable expression on her face.

Kondile wasn't yet proficient at breathing fire, but he was damned ready to try. He inflated his belly, sparked his throat, and blew a torrent of flame that, he noted with subliminal satisfaction, would intimidate a drake centuries older than himself. The girl stood in the inferno, hands still behind her back. Her gold-spun hair trailed out behind her, unburnt, even as the foliage around her blackened and withered. There was a faint look of rapture on her face, like she was enjoying the feeling of a rainstorm on her skin after a humid afternoon.

Kondile drained the last of his fires and panted, tongue lolling through his teeth. Primal instincts that had lain dormant since his lizard days now screamed through his blood. He turned tail and gathered his hindquarters in preparation for a leap of escape.

"My Lord," the girl said again. "Please don't run away."

Kondile spared her a glance over his shoulder. "I don't talk to ... things that are able to cheat death. Nothing good can come of it."

"It's death you fear, not the immortal."

The urgency seeped from Kondile's planned escape as he looked at the girl. "You stood in a firestorm and weren't the least bit inconvenienced. What do you know about fearing death?"

As the sun-haired girl approached him; Kondile saw her eyes were the color of ancient honey. He looked into them too long and felt no compulsion to jerk his head back when the girl ran her palm around the base of his new horns; her skin was as smooth as new cream.

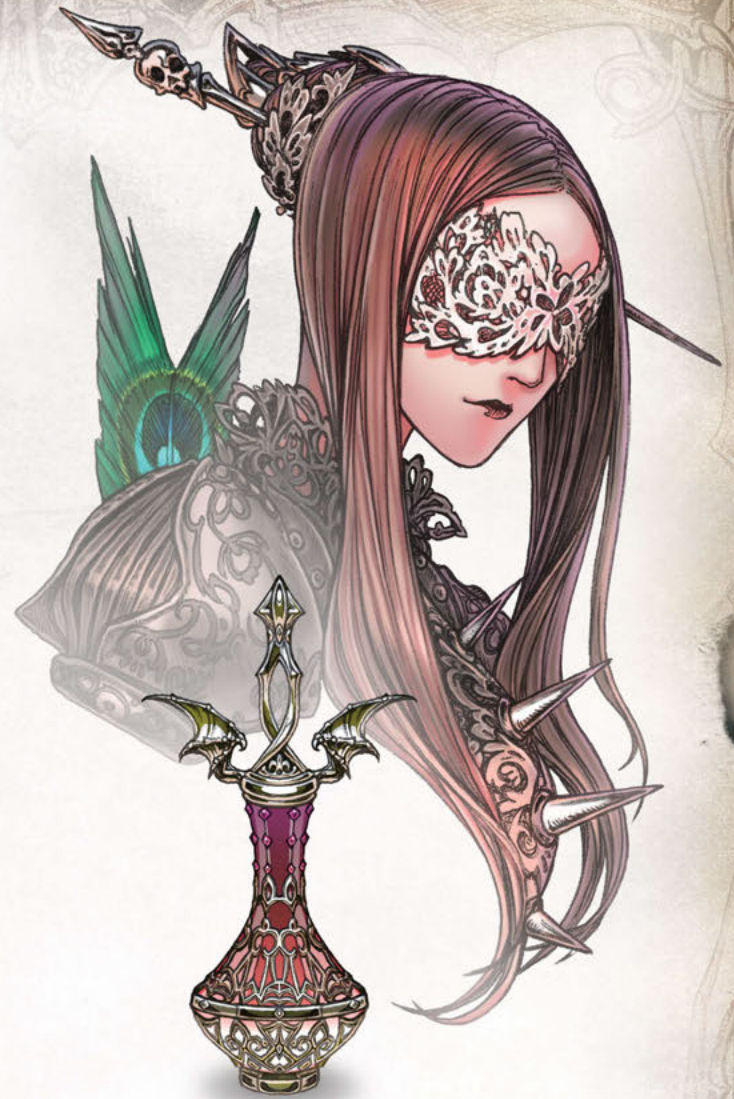
"I know a creature like yourself is above the struggle for survival. I like you, Kondile. I've been watching you for a long time. And I'd like to make you an offer."

Kondile unconsciously leaned into her caress. His attempt at a scathing rejection emerged as a jumbled mutter.

"Trust in me," the girl said, "and you'll never be tortured by thoughts of death ever again. No dragon will match you for power, and certainly no cat will get the best of you again."

Kondile let a growl escape at the mention of the tiger who had left him with the scars on his soul that would never heal. He was ashamed the sun-haired girl knew of that encounter, and bizarrely, he felt as if taking up her offer was the only path to redeeming his spirit.

"What do you want me to do?"



The girl withdrew her hand which made Kondile sigh a little. She then produced a thin, finger-length flask from the-gods-knew-where. "Drink this," she said, "and you'll never again have to worry about the mundanities of the flesh."

Kondile looked at the flask. He flicked his eyes up at the girl, then flicked them back down at the tiny glass object.

The girl read the gesture and smiled. "I'll help. Come closer. Open up."

Kondile's lizard-instincts shouted that he was on the precipice of disaster. He tamped down the voice though, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth.

Though he was a creature of fire, Kondile couldn't describe the agony of the invisible flames that scoured his soul when the potion hit his tongue. His veins shriveled. His skin bubbled and sloughed off him like beef from a bone; at one point during his insane thrashings, he spied the sloppy remnants of his wing-membranes pooled on the ground amongst the jungle litter. He unhinged his mouth to scream, but there was nothing left to carry the sound.

But Kondile screamed anyway.





And when the opaque blackness of death stole up on him, he welcomed it as a friend.

But Kondile didn't die. As the sun-haired girl had promised, he had risen above death.

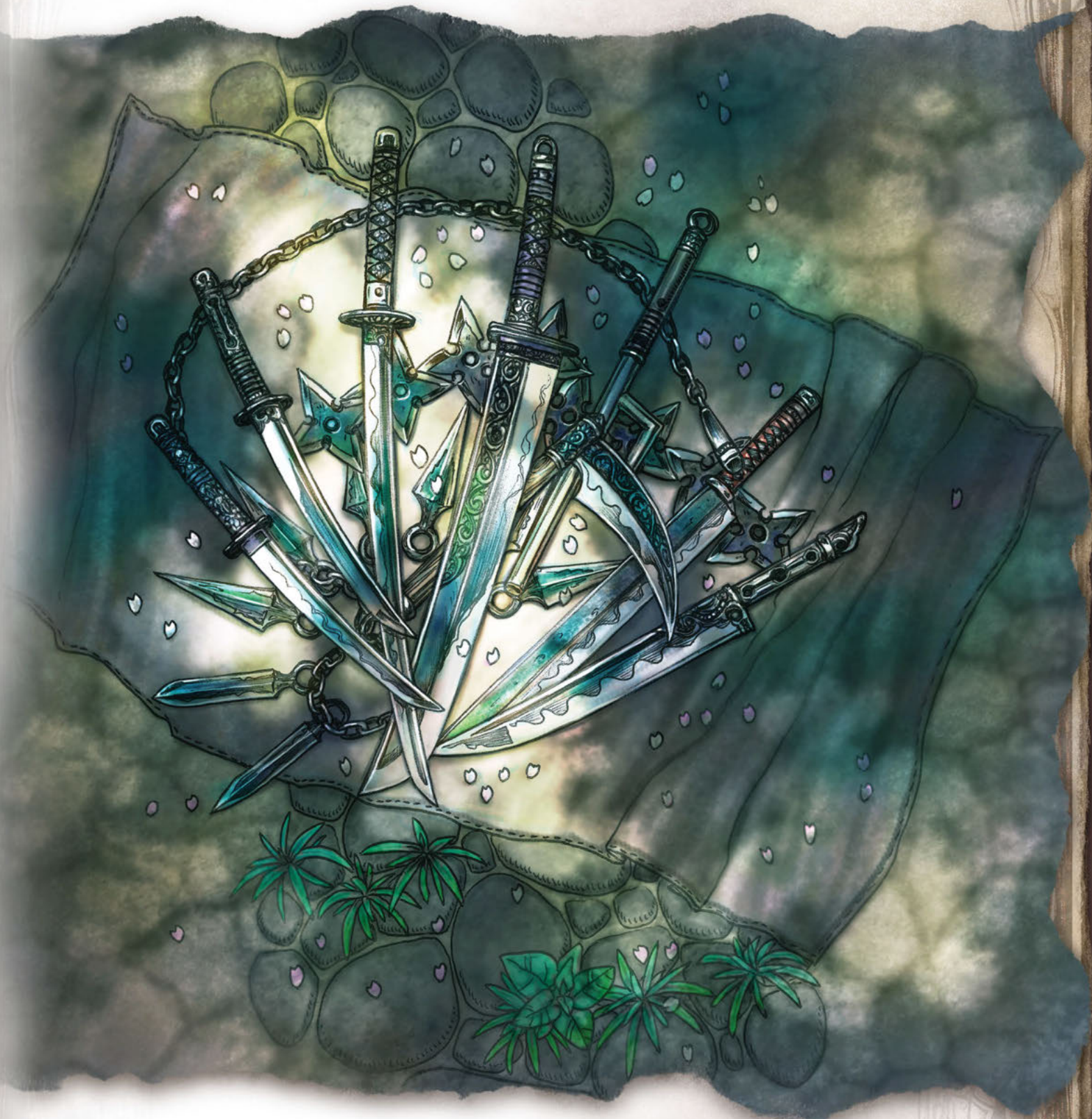
Or scuttled below it, even. He was of the undead now. Bones, and a few lingering scraps of fossilized tissue.

She had been there when he'd woken. The hate that ripped through him in that instant should have been impossible for a creature that no longer had the blood or bile necessary to carry it, but it meant nothing anyway. He was bound to her now. He lacked the mind to form a clear decision; she would think for him. He lacked the curiosity to move and explore; she would tell him what to do.

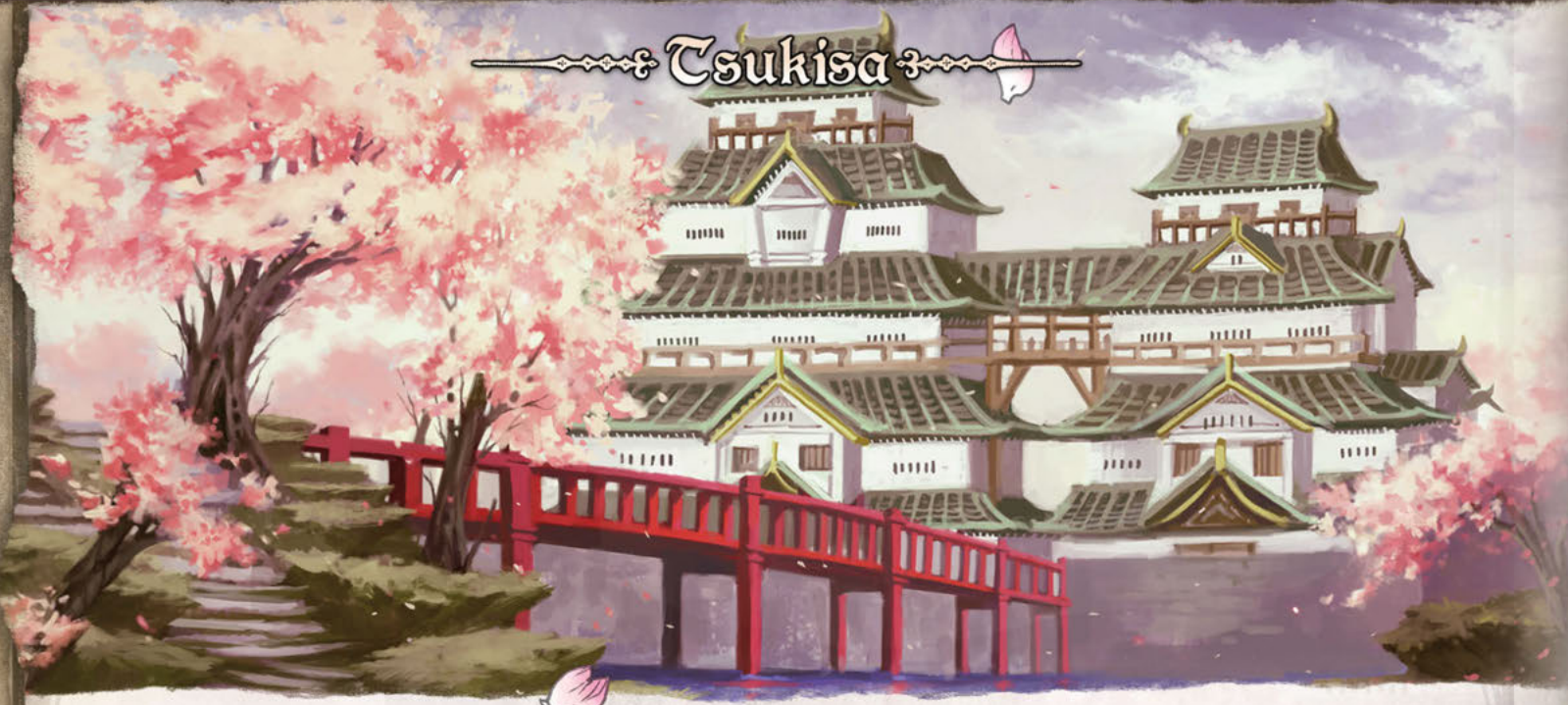
The sun-haired girl smiled at Kondile whenever she approached him with commands. Everything Kondile beheld with his new eyes was grey and flaccid with decay, but her hair shone as brilliantly as ever. When she was in a good humor, she rubbed the base of his horns when she spoke to him.

"Oh, my magnificent Lord Kondile. If only that tiger could see you now."









Art: Nele Diel

## History

When the people of Ur were scattered, they were split into two main groups the larger of which went on to seek refuge with the Red Faced Men and found Ravetta.

The smaller tribe did not have an easy time either. With little food and many of their horses dying from the long, strenuous trip, they eventually gave up on reuniting with their kin and came to focus on finding a land they could settle as their own instead. They were rewarded for their hard efforts when they discovered a paradise like open plain from which the moon appeared blue, and the water ran fresh, clean, and sweet.

Being on their own with no enemies to fight or raid, the Tsukisians became a very spiritual group. They came to dedicate a big part of their daily lives to the search for enlightenment.

After they were well established and had come to pride themselves on their self-reliance, their distant kin from Ravetta stumbled across them when building new trade routes. The Tsukisians would have gladly reunited with their kin entirely, but in the centuries apart, their Ravetta kin had grown to be merchants, and they coveted the Tsukisian's gold a little too much.

There would have been a war over the many devious business arrangements that Ravetta made with the Tsukisians, taking advantage of their naivete, but the Emperor of the Tsukisians adopted a disenfranchised Ravetta noble's Daughter, Yuki Ito. He made her the first Tsukisian minister of finance, and she was in charge of overseeing all negotiations, turning the table on their kin many times before they realized that they no longer had free reign over their cousin's purses.

However, the root of suspicion had already been planted in the hearts of the Tsukisian, who would now view any and all actions taken by their kin as an attempt to take advantage of them.

## Government

All of Tsukisa bows to the Emperor of Tai Sheng, as his is the duty of protecting all the lives which dwell beneath the Blue Moon. At the beginning of the kingdom, as Cheiftains theirs was the task of executing criminals and exiling those into the wilderness who jeopardized their survival. But now he serves as their absolute rulers.

Lord Kaya is the 5th generation ruler of the house of Tsukisa. A man possessed of great charisma, his name summons great warriors from all corners of the kingdom to serve the throne. He, in turn, rewards them justly for their deeds and valor.

Three great families support Lord Kaya under his rule, the Kotsuki with their brave infantries, the Takehara and their intrepid horsemen, and the Aoki and their lethal archers. While the Kotsuki and Aoki are unquestionably loyal, Takehara has recently been observed to be increasing the size of their forces.

## Culture

As a very spiritual group, the Tsukisians make a habit of praying to their ancestors for enlightenment. They also give thanks at least three times a day; morning, noon and night, and the length of these prayers vary depending on the individual. Some feel it is enough to say a short prayer in a matter of seconds while others insist on praying for up to one hour for every interval.

The Tsukisian festivals revolve around their spiritual practices. In the spring they will host a great feast to thank their ancestors, visiting their graves and singing or reciting their favorite poems as written in the scrolls of their lineage. Lanterns are also lit and float to the sky with their prayers for a good year.



The Tsukisian are frequent visitors to their many shrines and temples, donating coins for the maintenance of each. Monks, especially the most learned ones, hold very prestigious places in society as teachers of both secular and nonsecular matters.

Many children will be sent to live in one of the temples or monasteries for one to two years to aid in their spiritual and cultural development, many learning martial arts in addition to prayers.

## Daily life

The people of Tsukisa wake up to the bells of the Temples. While a tired foreigner thinks it's a cacophonous racket, the locals take great joy in their deep ringing that awakens them, as they consider sleep to be an unavoidable weakness of the flesh and not a thing to be enjoyed.

The Tsukisians typically take their food which consists of simple congee sprinkled with sausages, fish, or vegetables, after their morning prayers.

The Tsukisians are hard workers. Often working fourteen to sixteen hours a day in contrast to their Kin, the Ravettans who work around ten hours a day. Both are considered madmen by visitors from Fiana.

Tsukisians also value quality much more than most of their Ravettan counterparts, so lengthy meetings between coworkers are often conducted between equals. This ensures the increase in productivity and quality that they have come to expect.

The Tsukisians eat a small breakfast, a big lunch and a small dinner accompanied by fine rice wine.

The day is guided by the bells ringing from temples throughout the city, and it reflects how well disciplined the Tsukisians are, as they all adhere to a similar schedule.

Because of this though, a small cult exists who believe the bells are a tool used to keep the people of Tsukisa slaves to a life of enforced servitude to the engine of the marketplace. They have begun to actively attempt to destroy the bells in order to 'set the people free.'







## Friendly Lady

Encountering one of these ladies is highly likely. They love giving tours around town while showing you the delicious dining and amusing entertainment of the city.

Well mannered and always friendly, you can't help but feel as if they are getting paid to do a job. Many romantic tales are told about these ladies but often with unexpected details...

If you dine around town, you are likely to encounter a swordsman like this one.

Gazing upon his face speaks volumes about his skills. Ronin always exhibit exceptional manners. They may display their skills if you can manage to talk them into it. Do not mistake them for mercenaries as they would rather starve than to swing their swords for money.

## Ronin



## Wealthy Official

Often frequenting the finer parts of town and always surrounded by highly skilled bodyguards, flattery will get you everywhere. If you manage to get on their good side, they will treat you like kings. Of course if your silver tongue fails, you can find yourself easily on the bad side of their bodyguards.



You may find these gentlemen enjoying the local tea houses. Humble in appearance, they always enjoy engaging conversation about their many experiences. You can learn a lot from these wise individuals if you can sit through their long winded stories.

## Sensei





# Masataka

Tsukisian blades are prized for their edge retention and resiliency, and the finest have an edge so sharp they are reputed to be able to cut down even a ghost. These fierce swords can ward off evil spirits and demand respect even from the Eterriene.

If you were to ask a swordsmith who is the finest, they would of course reply that they are. However, if asked who is the second best, only one name is spoken, Yamato Masataka, the somewhat reclusive swordsmith hailing from the mountainous west of Tsukisa city.

Smoke is always rising from Masataka's forge. However, his collection is for himself alone. Only two of his swords have been known to be made for others.

The first sword, the Tsugumitsu, belonged to Tsukisa Akihiro who is the Father of current lord Tsukisa Kaya. Lord Akihiro led his men to confront a rebellious group of bandits from Ravetta who came demanding rice and gold from the farmers. They claimed if they failed to offer such, they will lay waste to the city of Tsukisa.

Lord Akihiro did not frown when his words failed him, and the bandit-army threatened him with violence. In response, he drew his sword whose sharpness and power were enough that it broke the blades of ten men in a single quickdrawn arc. It is said that the bandits soiled their pants and with their broken swords, ran with their tails between their legs.

The tale of the shocking blade made Masataka a celebrity overnight. And there was nothing he hated in life more than this fame as it inevitably caused a constant clamoring for his blades. He packed up right away and moved to the mountains, where he hoped no one would ever find him.

For the next decade, Masataka found he had to continue to move around to avoid outsiders, even his own estranged family. Even if anyone was able to find him, and they always did somehow, they were unable to convince him to make another sword despite any amount of gold.

Masataka's second sword was made for his Granddaughter Ayana. Ayana's father, the son of Masataka, was unlike him in many ways. His son had detested the solitude of living with his father and moved with his wife to the city.

While his relationship with his son was weak, when his granddaughter came of age she often visited him at his forge. She was stubborn as an ox, intractable in her opinions, and her cooking was atrocious. Masataka grew very fond of the girl who was so very much like himself.

When Ayana said she wished to travel the land and see the world, Masataka forged her a nameless sword equaled only by the one given to Lord Akihiro. Masataka simply had one request for his brave granddaughter, that she must write to him on a regular basis so that he could see the world through her eyes.





# Weapons

Tsukisians are spiritual people and everything they create tends to reflect that, weapons and armor included. A wide range of symbolism can be seen in their craftsmanship. Some choose to express their respect by using colors that represent their deity, some use holy symbols, and still others decide to use depictions of their deity's likeness in full color.

Tsukisians have two primary deities they worship. Getsuga, the moon goddess, and Hou-you of the sun. Getsuga is known for her protection, fertility of land and family, and serenity, while Hou-you is known for its fury, his power in war, and the bright light of ingenuity.

In weapons and armor, Getsuga is represented in blue, purple, or white. She usually is depicted as a full moon or a wedge-crescent with clouds.

Hou-you is represented in gold, yellow or red. And usually is depicted as a flaming sphere or a burning red halo.

Weapons and armors are sometimes decorated in family emblems or motif as well, which are far too numerous to list. Many of them will use local vegetations that represent their territory, while others use birds or wild animals that are unique to their land.









## Food & Lodging

With their origins in years of lean times following a diaspora, the Tsukisians see food as a precious commodity to be treasured, and lavishly gifted out only as a sign of love.

The people of Tsukisa frown on those who do not finish their meals, believing it to be an insult to both the one who cooked it and those who labored to create it. Each meal created by locals is regarded to be as much of a labor of love as all crafts of value.

A meal which isn't quite right will often be disposed of and fed to the family hogs. This practice is considered to be part of the reason for the unusual size and fatness of Tsukisan pigs.

In addition to wild deer, pork, and chicken, they also are near enough to the ocean to reap the wealth of its bounty. In addition to their many forms of seafood, they are well known for a delectable dried, salted eel.

They are also quite proud of their Rice Wine and take great pains to incorporate a small cup into every meal they partake of, though seldom drinking to excess. Drunks are often punished by being rolled into the rice paddies at the edge of town.



## Goya

Goya enjoyed the subtle scent of the cherry blossoms which wafted into his establishment. As he did so, he also vigorously polished his counter with his good right hand, listening amusedly to the half-drunken rambling of Tosa Inu, his village's pet Gaijin. He had turned up four years ago, claiming to be a ronin, and had been wearing a mismatched set of clothing as well as being very obviously emblazoned with the kanji for the word 'rice'.

"So then he says..." The scruffy red-headed immigrant from Fallomere paused to grin. "That's not a Gegnarok, that's my mother in law!"

Goya paused, shocked, then bellowed with good natured laughter. This far into the Eastern Kingdoms, outsiders were extremely uncommon and they brought with them humor often not heard before. The other patrons around his establishment also had a few chuckles for that.

Tosa Inu, as he came to be known to locals, scratched his scruffy chin then threw back the rest of his sake like it was water. Glancing up from the polished paulownia wood counter, he took a moment to listen to the yelling from the dueling ring not too far away. Judging by the angry screaming, someone clearly disagreed with the way a match had turned out. "Well, it sounds like our Danny boy has forgotten his footwork again."

Goya shook his head and sighed. He made good money from the proving ground he hosted, which was an open secret in his town. While it was technically against the law, too many local lords found it advantageous to pit ronin

against one another, determining whether their skills were worth the coin they demanded. Goya himself made even more money when the losers inevitably came to drink away their sorrows.

Danbaro, or Danny as Tosa had just called him, was a particularly ill-tempered ronin, seeing any loss as a personal affront. As he'd already been defeated by an opponent, he'd often look for someone else to blame his frustrations on regardless of whether they could even possibly have anything to do with it.

Right on cue, the brash young ronin exploded through the back room curtains. He was wearing a brand new black cotton gi decorated with red silk triangles, though it was now cut and ripped from what looked like a thorough thrashing.

Goya scowled intensely at the man, obviously warning to not abuse the other clients. He then glanced to Tosa Inu as he gestured for another round of sake.

Danbaro locked eyes with his host, his lip curling in a silent snarl. "Your establishment is cursed!" He bellowed.

Goya did not rise to the bait and shout back. The damn fool was looking for trouble that he refused to give to him. "Is that so?" He asked evenly. "Perhaps you brought it with you, then." He poured Tosa Inu his sake with a slow steady hand.

"I did not bring it with me." He growled through gritted teeth while storming across the bar to backhanded Tosa Inu's drink off the table. "This freak has no soul, even the people of his own land know that!"



Tosa Inu didn't move except to glance at his host, who scowled back in turn. He rolled his eyes and turned the other cheek.

Danbaro witnessed this and drew the wakizashi from his sash with murder in his eyes. But Tosa Inu still did not seem concerned.

"Tell me a joke." Goya said to Danbaro.

"What?" Danbaro asked in surprise, his fury diverted for a short moment.

"Tell me a joke." Goya insisted. "If I like it, I'll just throw you out of my bar. If I don't, I'll give you a good scar to remember what a disrespectful little shit you're being in my establishment."

Unable to read the room and oblivious to the stares from angry ronin attempting to relax and drink their sake, Danbaro persisted. His lip twitched at the current target of his scorn. "What do you call one dead red head?" He asked, his voice dripping with venom.

Goya narrowed his eyes, as if daring him to finish.

"A start." Danbaro snarled, burying his wakizashi in the counter between Tosa Inu's outstretched fingers. To his credit, the mangy foreigner who played at being a ronin didn't flinch.

"I've had about enough of you." Goya spoke in a deadly serious tone. His ruined left arm twitched, then shot out from beneath his tattered sleeve. The iron claws normally folded back against his forearm snapped out and raked three bloody furrows across the offending man's face.

Howling in pain, the incompetent Ronin reeled, clutching the torn side of his face and growling as he reached for his katana. However, the ring of steel from a half dozen other ronin drawing their own swords halted him.

"Get out of my bar." Goya spat. "And stay out."

Danbaro stammered something incoherent, the blood freely flowing down his face and staining his gi dark, only able to walk out like a man in shock at that point.

Goya turned to the wakizashi, pried it from his counter, and deposited it under the bar surface in a pile of similar weapons with a clatter.

"So." Tosa Inu said. "Have I told you the one about the nun and the donkey?" He asked with a shit eating grin.





# Yuki no Saru

Even in the flurry of snow, Thirty Graves Bluff still had a commanding view of the distant lights of Tsukisa. The blizzard also did little to obscure the Swordsman, who presided over this lonely corner of the mountains, and those who confronted him.

The Swordsman examined the fifteen men arrayed before him impassively. They were all young, to his eyes, the oldest perhaps twenty-eight. And they all carried Ravettan swords, the cheap sort used by peasants to scare off burglars.

"Go home." The Rah-gahn, or Red Faced Man as they are known to outsiders, sighed. Stroking his beard, he glared at the children in disdain.

"I see you know what stands before you. And you fear it," The oldest said, taking three steps forward, his feet crunching in the snow. "The slayer of a hundred men, Black Dog o—"

"Be silent." The Swordsman snapped. "You're no one. A child who has learned to swing a sword, and has managed to kill a few men in the process."

Black Dog's face turned red in anger. "You foolish old man!" He snarled, "We've come to give an aging swordsman an honorable de—"

"I came here to honor the dead, not play with children." He gestured to the thirty graves arrayed all around the bluff. "These were once master swordsmen, many who have died by my hand."

"And for your insolence," Black Dog hissed, "you will join them." He motioned forward, and two of his swordsmen advanced, hands on their swords hilts."

The Swordsman raised his hand. "Allow me to give you a lesson; a parting gift from an old master to a group of young fools."

Black Dog gave a sharp whistle to halt his men. His pride was stung, but a lesson from a master of this caliber was not to be passed up. "Very well, Yuki-no-Saru." He said, citing the Swordsman's most commonly known name, The Snow Monkey.

Yuki-No-Saru drew a long-stemmed smoking pipe from his belt with the same grace as if it was a sword. "This is not the wisdom of my master, but my own."

He drew a match, striking it on a metal stud in his armor, lighting the already packed tobacco. He raised it to his lips and took a puff. "Do you know the reason why it is that steel is the perfect killing tool?"

"Everyone knows that," Black Dog sneered dismissively, "It holds its edge better than other metals, and doesn't bend."

Yuki-no-Saru smiled, his blood red lips parting to reveal his shark-like teeth. "And everyone is wrong." He took another puff, inclining his head, the wind picking up and whipping his long hair and beard like the spirit pennants that lined the trail leading to the bluff.

"A man's blood is made of iron, and so is steel. Each is made of crude matter, and forged, folded over and over in a crucible both literal and figurative. Our swords are steel, and so are we. A Swordsman and his sword are one and the same."

"That is your wisdom?" Black dog asked incredulously, wiping the snow from his fledgling beard. It was little longer than the width of a finger. "That's a load of nonsense! Kill the old fool."

The two lead swordsmen, both Tsukisan from the look of them, advanced and drew their blades clumsily. They were made of poor steel, as unrefined as their own bodies.

"I am a swordsman of The Rah-gahn," Yuki-no-Saru intoned. "The Worthy." He flicked his pipe into the air and seemed to vanish into the cold wind. He came to rest beyond the two lead men, both swords drawn. "And you, are foolish, dead children."

The lead swordsmen's heads fell from their bodies after a brief delay, each stump spraying a fountain of blood into the air, the wind whipping them into an almost wing-like shape.

What followed was merciless, any man or woman who dared to show naked steel was cut down like grass in a matter of seconds, their swords sent flying from their grasp as they died.

Yuki-no-Saru came to rest six feet before Black Dog as his men fell lifelessly to the ground around him, staining the snow with the spray of blood. He sheathed his swords in a single fluid motion. "Unworthy." He judged them, as he caught his pipe with the index and middle finger of his left hand.

Black Dog's hand hovered over the hilt of his sword, shaking like a leaf.

Yuki-no-Saru turned his steely eyes upon Black Dog as the howling of the wind grew stronger. He stood among a garden composed of the discarded swords of Black Dog's men. "But at least they dared to draw steel."

Black Dog took one step back, his hand darting away from his sword. "My master will hear of this." He cried, his voice almost lost in the wind.

"I look forward to facing him, if he is indeed a master." Yuki-no-Saru turned his back on Black Dog, "though he will likely kill you for besmirching his name with such an ill-conceived spectacle as this." He tapped the side of his nose. "Now are you going to bark all day, little doggy, or are you going to bite?"

Black Dog was already running.







Local scholars of Tsukisa believe that most of the darker, monstrous creatures which inhabit their land are creations of the inner insecurities and evils of the people of Tsukisa itself. They point to the entities growing number and variety as confirmation in and of itself.

The creatures which now plague the land are primarily spiritual beings in nature, of which many were once benign, or even helpful to the peoples of Tsukisa. But in recent decades they have come to grow more malicious. Many of the more pious citizens believe it began when they embraced their Ravettan cousins, and only grew worse when visitors from Fiana were allowed into their ports.

They also seem to be suffering an infestation of an especially barbarous tribe of Vagragora named The Dune Devil Tribe, which harasses coastal villages, and practices vile cannibalism upon those who resist their raids.



## Kowazu

Hard work in the pursuit of the arts can be as powerful a form of creation as the conception of life itself. So it shouldn't be too surprising to those who understand such things that the blood sweat and tears of a Kabuki actor can literally give birth to a being that embodies both their labors and their performances.

These ugly floating heads are very seldom loved by their erstwhile creators and often forced out of whatever theatre or royal court they are born of to fend for themselves in the wild or on the streets, seeking each other out for comfort, and to cry giant tears at their misfortune to exist as such ugly creatures.

Though they aren't especially tough, if attacked they will fight back with a very powerful bite. If they escape from an attempt on their lives they will often spend days, or weeks performing tricks on their attackers. Casting curses to curdle milk, sour beer, or causing impotence.

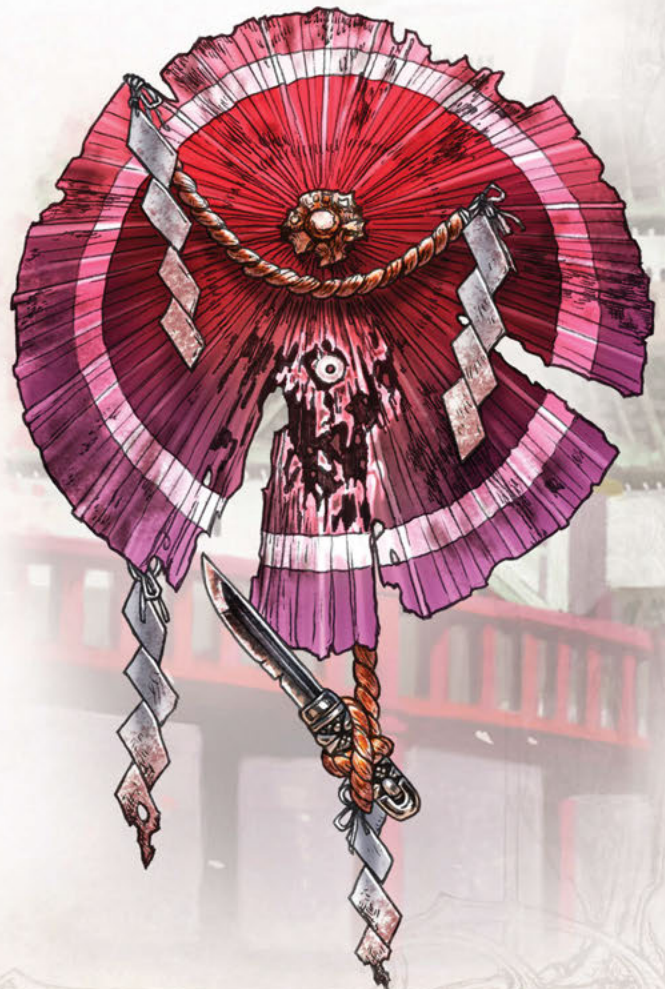
## Hone Kasa

For thousands of years, man has used the humble umbrella to hide themselves. From the rain, from the sun, from prying eyes. But over time certain things other than man have discovered a use for the umbrellas shade.

Many more vengeful spirits are given rise to by unjust deeds than most would guess. Demoralized beings, like the victims of unanticipated murders, rapes, and the outcast who die in exile. Precious few have the strength to even persevere through a single day, let alone seek revenge.

But a precious few, grasping at straws, manage to possess finely made umbrellas which literally and metaphorically protect them from the harsh light of the sun that would otherwise burn them away like a morning mist. The umbrella develops a hideous red pupiled eye hidden on either the handle or amidst the canopy with which to spy on the living, and their handle becoming bone.

Biding their time in their sanctuary and gathering their power to strike, most Hone-Kasa are so far gone from their human lives that they barely remember the target of their wrath, and will often seek to slaughter anyone who reminds them of their killer. Simple things like haircuts, scars, a favorite drink, or even the family they were a member of.





## Moonwine Kappa

Once the guardians of the rivers, streams, and lakes of the Eastern Kingdoms, the Kappa have come under hard times as their numbers have been sorely thinned as the Vraggora crab-men have gradually worked their way inland, undeterred by fresh water.

Though surprisingly fierce fighters, the Kappa have precious little skill in creating the weapons they need to fight off their monstrous new enemies, and keep the waterways pure and clean. To that end they have begun to brew an incredibly powerful dark purple colored sake with forbidden rice, and the root of the moon lotus to use as a trade good.

Formerly only brewed in small quantities for their personal use, this Sake is not only highly intoxicating as well as delicious, but causes only a mild hangover. As such the Kappa can sell each watermelon sized jar of their prized brew for one fine weapon and two bushels of much prized cucumbers.



## Kuchinawa Bandits

It's not uncommon for more successful bandit clans to grow somewhat decadent, but the Kuchinawa family takes it to extremes. They dress lavishly in expensive tailor made red and white clothing, cover their bodies in tattoos of venomous snakes, and keep slaves for the sole purpose of tending to their elaborate hair.

They strut around whatever town they visit like they own it, guzzling sake like pathetic drunks, picking fights, and eating like hogs at the trough on the cheapest ramen and dumplings. Easily dismissed as mere punks and hooligans who have managed to strike it lucky more than most, this family hides a dark secret.

Within the large earthenware pots they carry at their waist is the secret of their success. A serpent, deadly to those not initiated, whose bite activates the blessing of the Serpent Kami. Once bitten, the Kuchinawas skin turns green, they grow massive fangs, their pupils turn to slits, and their movements become as quick as lightning.

Those who have witnessed their deadly power in action during their caravan raids have nearly all paid the price for this secret with their lives. Those few who have escaped are too afraid of the families wrath to speak up about the dark cult that hides behind Sake guzzling facade of a gang of street punks. But what they fear more than their own death, is fear for the fate of their comrades who were drug away alive, never to be seen again.









While her true name is unknown, the bounty hunter most commonly known as Elissa has a reputation for both cunning and skill with a blade. Her origin, much like her name, is shrouded in mystery; however, some particular accounts that have made the rounds has the ring of truth.

At a young age, the girl who would become Elissa arrived from parts unknown using the name Erina. Bewitched by her exotic complexion, Lord Takehara employed her as an attendant with the duty of guarding his most priceless treasures; The twin swords Seisen and Konton were reputed to be products of a devil's forge. The swords possessed a supernatural nature and they whispered sweet words into Erina's ears, promising her power. She guarded them as directed, until one day she made a decision, took them, and ran.

Lord Takehara was furious and sent hired killers after her. To avoid being tracked, Erina cut her hair, changed her clothes, and adopted the name Yuriko. All the while, the swords themselves were teaching her to defend herself, urging her to make a pact with them.

Despite all the work she put into disguising herself, the assassins eventually managed to find and corner her. The fight quickly turned against her though, and she blacked out. Yuriko woke up to the gruesomely mutilated dead bodies of all four assassins, swords in both her bloodied hands. The shocking scene made her realized that the swords were turning her into something inhuman. Though she wished to be rid of them after this, try as she might, they would always reappear by her side each morning.

Recalling all the conversations of a previous lord she served under a different name, she remembered the stories of a mystical tattoo artist in Tsukisa. It was said he could use a Celestial ink made from stone that fell from the moon to protect against curses or give blessings. Having no other leads or options at this point, she began the search for the tattooist.

She took on the name of Ayaka and came to the establishment of the tattoo artist Kousuke. The old artist also couldn't help but marveled at the beautiful skin of the young girl. It is said that Kousuke demanded something Ayaka hesitated to give, giving rise to fierce speculation, but eventually he managed to protect her soul for a time.

Kousuke bestowed two dragon tattoos upon Ayaka, one for each arm. The dragons suppressed the evil spirits in the swords and finally allowed her some peace. However, Ayaka was told she must find the swordsmith Oboro to banish the sword spirits for good, and that the Dragons would only weaken them.

Ayaka found the hermit blacksmith Oboro on the mountainside. He tasked her with a mission in exchange for his help; she was sent to kill two demons living behind his establishment.

Ayaka, left with little choice, ventured to the extensive mountainside bamboo forest and killed the two demons

with the help of her dragon spirits. The battle was fierce and she was forced to improvise in ways she had never considered before, using terrain to her advantage to escape her tenacious foes.

Upon her return, Oboro was impressed and admitted to her that the two demons she had just vanquished, were actually the demons that had been inside her swords. He had forced them out of the swords before her fight so she could face them, though declined to say how he had gone about it.

Oboro linked the dragons to the swords, filling the void left by the demons and strengthening them both. The dragons now possessed fangs and claws as sharp as the swords themselves, and the swords relied on the dragons for their supernatural strength.

Ayaka likely wished she could have stayed with the man, who doubtless gave her a sense of kinship for the short time she was with him. However, she knew her presence would only make him a target for her enemies.

Ayaka left Oboro, continuing to run from her pursuers, traveling around the continent by boat, and coming to the western lands to make her way to the city of Belmonde. It was there that she found people whose appearance was more like her own; their eyes, skin, hair and even stature were more like her own than the people she was accustomed to.

To blend in, she took on the name of Erica. To survive she took on the profession of a bounty hunter, though only killing those who she thought actually deserved death. Over the many battles, Erica took spoils for herself, acquiring and mastering the use of a dagger and a matchlock pistol.

In one faithful assignment, she was sent to kill a woman described as a heartless witch by the name of Velmene. She traveled to Falomere, where the two met in battle. Erica unleashed the two dragons, and they were met by Velmene's two giant Centipedes. Though they fought briefly, their similar powers and growing reluctance to fight one another derailed battle. Upon talking, they realized their fight was not beneficial to either of them. Lowering their weapons, they instead conspired together.

Erica stayed a few days and the two became fast friends, the more they talked, the more they realized how similar their lives were. Both had come across their unusual powers while attempting to destroy evil magic, and both had similarly tragic histories.

Finally, as a departure gift, Velmene worked magic into Erica's swords, allowing her dragons the ability to come to her aid even if she were rendered unconscious.

To avoid her previous clients who are now quite likely upset that she failed to kill Velmene, Erica changed her name yet again, now being known as Elissa. Defeating those that are sent after her, she continues to travel and train. Her one goal is to eventually confront and defeat Lord Takehara so she can someday find respite.





Stats: P213

Stats: P212

Masataka didn't often allow himself afternoon naps when he was smothered with orders for his swords, so he frowned in his sleep when his little spaniel started yipping at the door. But when Masataka's shaggy mastiff hauled itself to its bear-sized paws, the blacksmith was up and armed with a dagger in a heartbeat. His life was not as private as it'd once been, and he'd already sent more than one would-be thief limping home with a little less blood in their veins.

But when Masataka heard a young voice call out the dogs' names, he put aside his weapon and smiled. "Saydee!" he said as he stepped out the close, forge-warmed heat of his den and out into the soft spring morning. He squinted down at his former apprentice, who knelt on the short, scrubby grass with her arms buried in the mastiff's mane. "How have you been, child?"

Saydee stood up quickly and smiled at him. She was taller now, and more solid, but she still radiated the confidence and energy that sparked their friendship when she was smaller and softer. Then Masataka saw Saydee wasn't alone. Another girl was crouched behind her, gingerly petting the blacksmith's spaniel.

Saydee noticed her former master was looking beyond her. "This is Shelby," Saydee said. She gestured for the girl to stand, and she pulled herself up to her feet carefully. "She's my little sister."

Shelby bowed her head at Masataka. "It's a pleasure to meet you," she said.

"Indeed," Masataka returned. He squinted at her thoughtfully. "Your sister's a remarkable girl, though I don't sense much of her energy in you."

"See? I told you he's a little blunt," Saydee said to Shelby. Shelby smiled as her sister slipped an arm around her shoulders.

"Pardon. I don't mean to imply you aren't as clever as Saydee," Masataka told Shelby. He turned and waved a hand over his shoulder to indicate the girls should follow him back to his workshop. The dogs bounded ahead of them as they walked.

"Saydee just so happened to confront and imprison a dream-demon with that sword she's carrying with her. She chased the demon night after night, returning every morning to tell me what she learned about it until I made a weapon capable of cutting through her dreams." Masataka opened his door and looked back at the girls. "I'm just saying that's a lot to live up to."

"I know," Shelby said. Her voice was softer than Saydee's, but now that introductions were done, Masataka began to sense the young lady's words had at least a touch of her sister's confidence and resolve. "I've no intention of trying to be anyone but myself. That's why I asked to visit you, sir. I was hoping I might commission you for a weapon of my own."

"Another sword that snags dream-demons? I owe a debt to your sister for helping me perfect my craft, but I've since learned the value of spare time and afternoon naps."

"I'd like an axe," Shelby said automatically, her eyes suddenly alight. "A normal axe. A nice axe."

Masataka stared at her a moment. "I was wrong," he said gruffly. "You're every bit as quick as your sister. You just keep everything to yourself until it's time to strike. Come inside, little viper. You too, Saydee. We'll have tea and talk about this axe of yours."



## — Mandi & Kondile —

Mandi wrapped her dun-coloured robe around herself as she stepped into the chill night. She stifled a yawn and blinked rapidly. It was the loneliest hour of the night: That long, black limbo when the sun felt like a far-away fairy tale and the night creatures held still and silent.

Mandi generally loved the night, but even she wanted nothing more than to retreat to her bed and burrow under the pile of furs and skins she'd built up for winter. It wasn't winter yet, but the autumn afternoons were feebly-lit, and the air nipped with frosty fangs as soon as the sun went down.

"It's late, I know," Beitah called from behind her. Then she chuckled. "Actually, it's damned early. He doesn't like to be in the sun though, so as far as your first meeting is concerned, it's now or never."

Mandi started and clutched her robe tighter; Beitah had taken point on their trip to the dragon's lair, and Mandi had no idea when she became leader.

"The woods get pretty thick up ahead," Beitah said. She still stayed anchored in place behind Mandi. "There's a pretty clear path, though."

You shouldn't have trouble following it, even in this light. Send the beast my regards." Then she was gone. No sound, no shadow, no trace.

Mandi set her mouth in a tight, thin line. She wrapped her fingers around the Hand of Doom and thumped its bone-and-wood base on the ground to remind herself who she was. An owl made an inquiry somewhere far above her, and she walked down the path as quickly as the thick, slippery forest floor would allow her.





Mandi heard Kondile a few moments before she saw him. As she got closer to him, the slop-slop of her feet swishing through the soggy leaves spun together with the reedy cry of air pushing through many narrow openings. Mandi shuddered a little; the sound made her think of wraiths finding whatever merriment they could by playing some perversion of the living's music.

A few more moments and Mandi came across the source of the sound. She swallowed hard but refused to look away.

Beitah had never made a secret of the fact Kondile wasn't a normal dragon - as if "normal" was a suitable adjective for any dragon - but Mandi supposed there was no proper way to steel yourself against the sight of a dragon without flesh.

Kondile was packed tightly into his lair, which was formed out of generations of entwined branches and roofed with unidentifiable glops of green-grey detritus. Other than his long, narrow skull, which was pointed at Mandi like a bony dagger, Kondile looked like a formless heap of bones piled in a mass grave.

And the haunted sound of the wind whistling through those bones was almost deafening at this distance.

Mandi tried to say something, but she was hopeless to form words. Kondile's eyes, two malevolent sparks glittering in deep black sockets, fixed on her.

"What can I help you with, two-legs?" he asked.

Mandi nearly collapsed into giggles of relief and amusement. The hell-dragon's voice was death, it was the creak of an opening coffin, it was the thud of plague-ridden bodies hitting the floor of an undertaker's wagon, but he offered his help to her as mellowly as a shopkeeper.

"Are you Kondile, sir? I'm Mandi. Beitah sent me here to ask for your help with a task. She sends her regards."

"Mmm," Kondile rumbled. "I'm sure she does. Are you her new plaything?"

Mandi leaned on her staff a bit. "I don't understand what you mean, sir. She's teaching me what she knows. I perform occasional chores for her as part of my studies. We're stocking the larders for winter, and we need as much fat meat as possible. That's where your help comes in. Or so I'm told."

Kondile turned his eye towards the Hand of Doom. His pupil glittered like a winter star, then faded. "Just when I believe I can't fall any lower in that woman's ranks, she demotes me to a hunting hound." The dragon sighed, a sound like a death-rattle. "All right. Not like I have much else to do. Stand back, small one. Give me room."

Mandi obeyed. She watched with horrid fascination as Kondile squirmed out of his lair and unfolded himself until every loose, limp joint was taut. She could feel a faint thrum vibrate through the dragon; she assumed he was literally being held together by magic.

Powerful magic, the Hand of Doom assured her.

"I'll take the lead," Kondile said. "The deer can't smell me coming, and I know where they like to gather." He started to walk back up the path Mandi had travelled down a short time ago, and his movements were surprisingly fast and liquid for an undead thing.

Mandi had to half-run to stay by Kondile's flank across the uneven terrain, leaving her little breath to make small talk-with. Not that she knew what kind of subjects a dragon enjoyed chattering about. Instead, she stayed silent and turned Kondile's words about Beitah over in her head like mulch.

Plaything. Hunting hound.

Mandi was an intuitive person, and she'd instantly felt a warm connection with the fiery-haired woman who'd taken her in and shared her art. True, sometimes Beitah's eyes lingered a little too long on the Hand of Doom when the two talked, but Mandi secretly cherished their warm, open talks at night over strong tea-

"Thinking hard thoughts, small one?" Kondile asked.

Mandi's breath hissed as she took in a lungful suddenly. "Gods! You - you can read thoughts?"

"If I could read people's intentions, I'd be a free, unbound dragon with all my flesh still intact. Let's just say I'm very sensitive to living things' emotions. They scald me when they spill over."

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"No worries."

"I'll stop thinking."

Kondile made a sound that Mandi guessed was a substitute for a chuckle. "Don't, not on my account. From what I can surmise about you, you're interesting company. That's in short supply these days. Bucks and does are lousy conversationalists. That's why I'm fine with helping you slaughter a few."

Mandi hesitated for only a second before she reached up and placed her hand up behind Kondile's hind leg, where his sacrum began to narrow to his tail. His vertebrae felt cool and smooth, like water-worn rock. She'd half-expected it to burn her. "Thank you," she said.

"Let me tell you this much, small one. Another person's fascination can easily be mistaken for kindness, but fascination dulls quickly, and the false kindness snuffs out shortly thereafter. Do you understand?"

"Beitah's not going to 'lose interest' in me, Kondile. She's my friend."

"And I was her champion," he said, "but I see some of the gods' creatures can only learn their lessons the hard way. It doesn't matter. Let's kill some deer."

And they did.







# Teia's Chain



Art: Nele Diehl

## History

The westernmost group of Islands off the coast of Mhodica boast an ancient and poorly understood history. Before the coming of Teia, it once hosted a great civilization that has long since crumbled into ruins.

After being defeated by Umbria, Lady Teia wandered the land lost and inconsolable. Attempting to travel south on the able ship *Goodfoot*, she was lost in a storm and the crew of the ship was mostly killed when they wrecked upon the coral reefs surrounding the islands.

While she tried to save the remaining crews' lives, they were too far gone for even her powers. So with the aid of her shadow Dragons, she came to the shore of the nearest island.

After a few days of foraging, with only her small dragons for company, she discovered the island's only other inhabitants. The Ahumers were a race of unusual but friendly four-legged sentient creatures.

Using her dragons to return to the mainland for supplies, word began to spread of the conflict-free island, and how it was ruled by a kind and gentle soul who did not tolerate prejudices against dragons. This unique property has attracted Gokibito corpse eaters, Gegnarok stone folk, the Ygtolith forest dwellers, and other even stranger creatures from the far corners of the world.

## Government

From the cleared ruins, Teia loosely reigns over the islands. Her rules are very simple, respect one another, do not steal, and do no harm except in self-defense.

The rules are enforced by her four totem chiefs: Eastern Snake Totem Chief Sepbraha, Northern Wolf Totem Chief Balufra, Western Boar Chief Ahume-malek, and Southern Sword Totem Chief Remorser.

While her Chieftains provide what little policing is necessary for her own people, her Shadow Dragons patrol the lands for any sign of threats to their home as a whole, be it pirate raiders, beasts from the jungles, or even invading armies should it ever come to that.

Teia also employs the service of the more astute male Ygtolith for scribes and their women for forest rangers to patrol the jungles and protect the Gegnarok farmers. The Gokibitos, being carrion beetles, dispose of the unwanted carcasses of beasts, fish and fowl alike, their rich dung, in turn, fertilizing the farmland.

## Culture

Teia's chain is an extraordinarily informal and laid back place, with most residents either living on the beach in crude huts, or dwellings made from the island's many ruins. Many folks live a simple hunter-gatherer lifestyle, taking advantage of the year-round tropical weather and ample space to grow vegetables.

In early March, locals have taken to celebrating the end of the rainy season with a harvest of the first spring fruits; yellow guava, nim fruit, and salicha berries. The fruits are used to make marinades for meat, baked into pastries, or turned into preserves to be used throughout the year.

In May, they celebrate the onset of summer blossoms and the arrival of the Spectral Cormorants, which are a species of glossy black birds whose feathers have a rainbow like sheen to them. They celebrate by festooning their homes and public places with garlands of flowers, and colorful inedible berries, and also placing wreaths in the ancient temples they have designated as places to show thanks for the season's bounties.

Many make pilgrimages around the periphery of the island chain's jungles to various totems that have been made by the new inhabitants which mark sites of importance to them at this time.



At the height of summer, the Vraggora celebrate The Ocean's Bounty as they do elsewhere by seeking out sea glass, rare agates, or other precious stones of the sea. Many of the locals even join them in their dives, also feasting upon the shellfish they catch.

At the beginning of their traditional harvest season, the Gags celebrate with delicious cornbread and stews made from their ancestral crops of beans, squash, and any four-legged animals too slow to escape their hunters. They then raise stone monuments around the island to remember their desert homeland.

## Daily life

Morning usually begins when the early rising Gags greet the day by ringing their carved stone gongs to praise their god, Wiudan, and call their brothers to the field, fasting for the first hour of work. The wives and husbands who stay at home prepare their breakfast of sweetened corn mash, roasted cactus leaves, and barbecued tubers while their industrious chefs prepare restaurants for their fellow denizens.

After feasting on the barbecued tubers and the dressed greens prepared by the Gag, the Ygtolith rangers prepare rations for the day and depart into the woodlands to map more and more of the island. Others remain closer to home keep the dangerous jungle creatures away from the fields. The Gags are more than capable of defending themselves, but it's hard to farm when a giant bird is trying to eat you.

Before the Gokibito retreat to their burrows, having spent the night scouring the beaches of any carrion that has washed ashore, they leave any unusual flotsam and jetsam for the older Ygtolith to go over and determine if it possesses any value.

The markets begin to come alive as the Ygtolith and Vraggora pedal the wares acquired from the farmers, fishers, and foragers. Though much smaller than their female counterparts, the male Vraggora are fierce negotiators, and the Ygtolith scribes have an incredible, even if somewhat abstract sense of numbers which makes their record keeping extremely precise.

At noon the Vraggora bring in hauls of fresh fish that the Gags, who are still new to the concept of seafood, tear apart with great relish to produce a spicy stew heavily laden with corn, potatoes, and peppers. The smell is usually enough to bring the workers in from the field.

The providers of all races will come to buy the meat and vegetables for their dinner at this point, often squabbling over the best cuts brought back by the hunters so they can prepare the best meal possible for themselves and their families.

Entering dusk, the Vraggora retreat to their seaside labyrinth of tunnels, the Gagnarok and Ygtolith take to their huts, and the Gokibito and other nocturnal denizens wake up and begin their nights. They guard the perimeter of their shared home and foraging for mushrooms, and various creatures of the night while the others sleep.







## Gegnarok Male

This happy Gegnarok is either a farmer or a fisherman. His days of raiding innocent caravans had long ended since he came to Teia's Island.

He welcomes you to the Island where he considers paradise, and easily will offer water or food if one is in need. If asked why he is so generous, he will proudly show you his Teia pendant and will tell you because Teia did the same for him.

## Ygtolith Ranger

If you wish to enter a large forest you are likely to be greeted by one of these horned rangers. They will warn you about the danger zones of the forest and give you good advice on what to do if you encounter any hostile creatures.

You may also hire her or one of her comrades as a guide into the forest. All Rangers must report back to camp in the evening or they must inform their commanders prior to any longer trips.



## Ygtolith Scribe

If you go into a village or one of the many temples, you will encounter an Ygtolith scribe like this one.

These skilled writers record what has happened on the island and dutifully keeps track of any newcomers. They will gladly give you information if you ask politely. You may carry out a longer conversation if you gift a book to him.



## Gokibito Cleaner

On rare occasions, you will encounter one of these little guys. Standing not much more than 3 feet, they are quiet cleaners of various locations on the Island.

They can not speak the common tongue but understand and write it so communication is still possible.





# Thana

"Oh, excuse me? Are you closing up?"

A young woman and her son watched Thana as she packed up ahead of the storm. Their sand-colored hair, common amongst people living on the Teia's Chain archipelago, blew across their faces in fine wisps.

The Ygtolith straightened up and smiled at them. "I didn't expect to make any sales with the bad weather moving in. Can I help you?"

The woman smiled shyly in turn. She was wearing a shark-tooth necklace that swung and darted in the wind. Absently, she wrapped her fingers around the bauble to still it before replying, "I've seen you here before. You make and sell totems and talismans, yes?"

"By the grace of the White Prince, I do." Thana retrieved one of her sheepskin pouches and plunked it on the counter of her half-disassembled booth. "My name is Thana. Are there any particular gods whose favor you'd like to court? Do you know the names of any evil spirits troubling you? I'm happy to help."

The little boy beside the woman pulled his sand-cruled fingers out of his mouth and stared at Thana with eyes as wide as a deep-sea squid's. "Why do you look like an animal?" he blurted.

"Theo!" His mother half-gasped, half-scolded. Thana knelt to the boy's height, quite a distance for her tall frame, and brushed a finger under his chin. "I'm a Ygtolith, child. I wear my devotion to my god, the White Stag, on my face. That's why my totems are so helpful to people who need them. Speaking of--" Thana glanced back up expectantly at the boy's mother.

The woman shook her head. "I'm sorry. That was rude of him. I still hope you'll sell me a talisman to protect us from this bad weather."

"Of course. Of course." Thana straightened up and started digging through her bag again. She quickly lined up a small platoon of medallions and delicate animal sculptures. They were all carved out of light wood and yet none of them budged an inch in the wind even though was now strong enough to make the surf roar. "If you forgive me for being presumptuous, my lady, I assume your mate fishes off-shore every day, like the other men in this village? I'd like to sell you a charm that will double as protection on his trips. No additional charge."

"Oh, you don't have to--"

"I'd rather," Thana said. She pressed a finger on a fist-sized medallion engraved with the looping coils of a sea-serpent. "The Tide-Mother seems to favor sailors who carry items in her image. She's a little vain. With the seas getting more restless year over year, I think your family will benefit from her protection."

The woman picked up the medallion. "Did you carve this yourself?"







"Same as all my wares," Thana said as she started to pack up again.

"It's lovely. How much?"

"Oh, three coin, maybe?"

The woman pulled her head back. "Really?"

"Is that too much? If it's too much, please pay me whatever you can manage."

"No, no, your price is more than fair." The woman let go of her son's hand and loosened the drawstrings of a small sharkskin money pouch hanging from her left wrist. She put the coins on the table of the half-disassembled booth before carefully storing the medallion in the emptied money pouch. "Thank you so much."

Thana palmed the coins. "May the Tide-Mother keep you and yours safe," she said, "and, if you don't mind an extra blessing, may the White Prince pick up the slack. Please tell me how you fared when the market opens again."

The woman scooped up her son's hand again just as he was about to resume chewing his fingers. "Do you have shelter? We've battened ourselves down. You're welcome to keep us company."

Thana smiled. "Thank you, my lady, but I'll be sheltering in the forest." The Ygtolith held up a hand as soon as she saw the woman open her mouth again. "I know it's low ground, but I'm safest in the woods. The White Prince won't let me come to harm."

The woman shrugged weakly. "If that's where you feel most comfortable."

"I most assuredly do," Thana said as she folded up and stowed away more of the bamboo, canvas, bits, and bobs that made up her booth. Lashing a bundle together, she added. "You'd best get to safety yourself, my lady. May the Forest keep you."



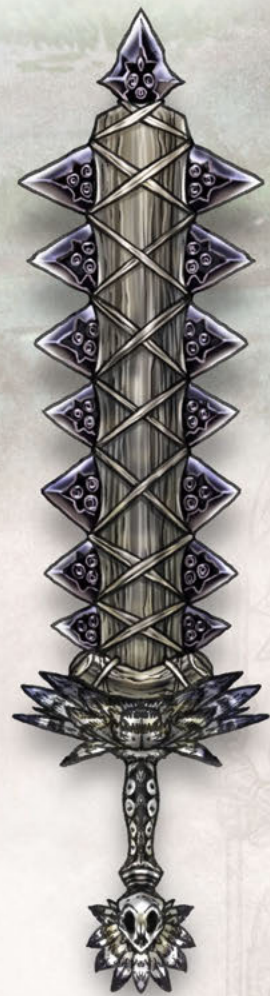


Being inhabited primarily by non-humans, Teias chain is home to many different unusual ideas of what qualifies as a weapon. The Geg, Vraggora and Ygtolith all favor crafting their weapons from natural materials; stone, bone, wood and gem spittle.

With their uncanny ability to work stone, the Gegnarok can form the island's volcanic obsidian in ways never seen before, creating blades of uniquely razor-sharp nature. And while ordinarily fragile, they can smooth away chips that develop and even add more mass to them like clay.

Combined with the Ygtolith's masterful woodworking and their ability to infuse both timber, bone, and feathers with many varieties of charm, they're able to create sharp and durable weapons which rival the metal smiths of both the Western and Eastern Kingdoms.

The denizens of the isles are races which are often much closer to nature in their production methods, and as such prefer the use of leather when constructing their armor. Despite all this, they are spoiled enough by human innovation that they generally use human-made metal grommets to keep their knot-work from tearing the leather apart.





# Food & Lodging

The more feral demi-humans of Teia's chain will often forage the jungle, plains, and shore for food much as their wild relatives would.

The Ygtolith settlers mainly dine on a wide variety of edible greens, fungi, nuts, and corn they receive in trade for excess mushrooms which are almost narcotic to them in their stone soups. They will supplement their diets with wild fish and game birds, the excess of which they trade for white bread from the Human bakers with great enthusiasm.

Gegnaroks favor roasts, a newfound love of grilled seafood, stews, and corn tortillas and bread, and also create the bulk of the islands liquor, and beer as well, trading for any food they want for corn or libations.

Vagragoras scour the nearby reefs for all manner of seafood dwelling within, especially prizing cuttlefish.

Humans who live on the island add to the already eclectic variety of cooking styles with a healthy dose of red wine imported from Sirilton, via fiana.

Villages of Teia's chain have no inns or other proper forms of lodging as most outsiders would consider it, but most communities in the chain have a practice of creating two additional tents or huts or an extra longhouse in each village to facilitate expansion. They have been known to loan them to the adventurers in exchange for small favors.

Almost all villages will have a cookhouse where villagers can exchange goods or currency for hot meals, usually hot Gegnarok stews and roasted Ygtolith sweet potatoes, but also bread and roasted fish.



## Amma'rin

Amma'rim doused the hearth fire of her small restaurant with a mug of unfinished ale. The stout but beautiful Gegnarok woman had spent the last three months with her husband's brother, Pablo'din, preparing their new lives on the isles known as Teias Chain. Here, her husband suspected, were secrets of the Earth not yet known by any other Gegnarok. Before he'd entered six months of stone sleep to prepare himself, he'd tasked his dearest wife and brother with paving the way

As she used a rag to wipe down her counter, she mused on the hardships they'd faced already. Raised in a desert, she'd never seen an ocean before. In fact, the first time they'd seen a lake, she had been convinced that it was more water than existed in any other part of the world.

Collecting the last bowl of the stew she'd made with a local meat from a thing they called 'fish,' she blew out the last candles on her window sills and stepped out onto the sandy beach in front of her restaurant. Peering down at Pablo'din where he lay on his back in the sand, she smiled some.

Pablo'din was an especially large and burly Gegnarok, being five feet two inches, and weighing three hundred pounds which was all pure muscle, gristle, and beard. Like it should be. He was absolutely drenched with sweat at the moment though, so much so that his bristly, wire like hair was actually drooping slightly. "Amma..." He whined. "Why is it so awful here? Even home didn't get this hot."

Amma'rin kicked him in the ribs with a loud meaty thump, drawing a cough from her brother-in-law. "Get up, you lazy sod. It's hotter in my kitchen. And it's not just the heat, it's this terrible thing called 'humid-titty.' It's how much water is in the air, it makes you sticky. Apparently there's a lot of it here."

Pablo'din groaned. "Water in the air? Father always said it'd be titty that did me in, he must have known." He grumbled and stood up, staggering a bit. "Is my bother waking up tomorrow?"



"Or even tonight, maybe. I've left him a slate, a straw mat, and hung out some sausages if he wakes up while we're asleep." She shoved the bowl into Pablo'din's mitts. "Let's go sleep, you useless lump."

The two departed, unaware they were being eavesdropped upon.

\* \* \*

Klork waited until well after midnight before he scurried like the rat he was into the open restaurant. These short, round strangers who had come were strong, but foolish. They had no doors or closing windows, leaving their possessions ripe for the taking.

Baring his rat like teeth, he sniffed the air greedily, easily smelling the sausages that the oblivious woman had left behind, all hung from the rafters near the statue where a single lantern burned. He took a few more steps forward, eyeing the statue which looked like the male stranger in proportion. Ignoring it rather quickly then, he snatched a rope of sausages down from the rafters with an audible snap. He paused, rattled, glancing this way and that. The only sound that met his ear though, was the distant surf, and the sounds of even more distant jungle beasts.

He looked at the statue again for a moment, its hard visage flickering in the lantern light. It's resemblance to the outsiders was uncanny... He gnawed on the sausages and squinted closer, noting that it must not have traveled well, because there were a few cracks around the elbow and neck.

After a while of staring, he then turned his attention back to the sausage. A pause later, there suddenly came a small cracking sound which caught his attention immediately. Glancing up, he was just in time to see the statue explode.

\* \* \*

Amma'rin yawned loudly the next morning as she ducked into her restaurant, pausing to take in the scene before her. Her husband Hugo'zaki in his humble loin cloth, was awake and freed from his stone sleep. He currently sat upon the local thief Klork, munching a sausage. The sight of his long, dignified beard had sculpted into two perfect spirals, and his bald head made her heart flutter.

"Woman!" He growled warmly around his meal. "Did you know the rats here got this big? This is clearly a place of wonders!" He gestured towards his comatose seat. "Though why is it so father-damned hot here?" He asked.

Amma glowered at Klork for a moment even though he was unconscious. "Glad you're awake, man of mine." She said then, clapped her hands together and curtsied politely to her husband. "I'm going to have to teach you about this thing they have called humid-titty."

"I enjoy titty as much as the next man." He said, hesitating. "But I don't think I'll enjoy this sort."





— Balufra —





A century ago, the vicious warrior named Kusarehone The Cobra, made a name for himself by his ruthless oppression of the people in the slums of the city.

Every family in the lean-to shelters outside the town walls owned a dog to keep the rats out of their food and keep the snakes away from their sleeping babies. The Vile gangster made a practice of catching these dogs with his bare hands and strangling them before the eyes of any family that refuses to pay him protection money. He would then take the dogs and cook them, making the family eat the soup.

He pile the bones inside a giant white marble egg in his hideout deep within the catacombs of the city. To prove themselves worthy of the Kusarehone legacy, all those who would join his family were required to bring the bones of a dog to add to the pile in their stretch of the catacombs.

It seemed like the ritual would continue as long as the family existed, but one day an initiate named Arkhan attempted to impress his future brothers by bringing not only the bones of his first kill but also its two puppies to strangle on the altar alive.

As he wrung their necks, the spirits of the countless tortured, murdered dogs came to a furious boil over this final betrayal of their unconditional love of man. The egg burst open, giving birth to an angry new soul, sure only of one thing, that man wanted to hurt it.

The furious beast slew the unsuspecting members of the Kusarehone Family with unthinking savagery before stumbling away. Escaping from the catacombs and into the countryside, the white beast disappeared into the forests.

Coming across his first town, the beast attempted to wreak havoc upon its inhabitants. However, its vengeful mission was cut short by the local blacksmith that went by the name of He-Yen. The mountain of a man cursed at him, calling him a ball of frost before sending him running from the village, tail between his legs.

After spending a sleepless night huddled in his cave, his rage became tempered by fear and respect. He spent years living on the edge of human towns, not understanding why he was both drawn to, and simultaneously repulsed by them.

Eventually, after spying on them long enough, he identified the feeling inside of him. It was loneliness.

He'd attempted to commune with the Luck Dancers, wolves, wild dogs, and even a Terror Dancer he was forced to kill in self-defense, but none of them recognized him as a dog, only as a monster that had learned to babble human language.

When he'd all but given up, consumed with anguish and rage, he heard a distant call. It spoke to him not in words, but in a language of emotions. The voice called him to it, and without any hesitation, he went.

Balufra endured countless trials. He crossed forests, plains, deserts. He saw human, ygtolith, gegnarok, vagradora and gokibito. He was shunned, reviled, chased away, and hunted.

Eventually though, he reached the ocean. There, he was forced to stretch the limits of his mind and steal food and a boat to set out. Finally after weeks at sea, long since having run out of food and water, he arrived on the distant shores of one of the islands of Teia's Chain.

Slinking into the jungle, he immediately took to hunting down a large, ferocious jungle bird just to fill his aching stomach. It wasn't quite enough though, so he continued to spend days killing and gorging until he felt strong enough to continue his journey.

Skirting around the settlements of all manner of creatures living together, he at last found the source of the voice. He was more than upset to discover it was a human woman that had called him this far and subjected him to such misery. Overcome by despair and rage, and he leaped to attack.

However, the woman spoke a word that he knew in his bones. A word that he instinctively obeyed without thinking. The word was "sit."

"I know what you are." She told the conflicting mass of emotions. "You were born of anger, betrayal, and sorrow. But that's not all you are." She might have lost him and sent him running then, but she spoke the words any dog longs to hear. "Though you don't know how to be one yet, you are a good boy."

She asked him his name, but though he understood the words of human languages, he'd never coherently spoken them before. The only name he'd been given was the shout from the person who had driven him from a village. He tried to speak, but Ball of Frost came out as Balufra.

That day, he learned what a human's love was, what a human's gentle touch was, and he learned what it was to cry like a human.

On Teia's chain, he was afforded the company of others, learned to fully speak, and came to understand that not all men were evil. Under Teia's tutelage, he trained to project himself in a way that any dog, or those who love dogs would recognize him for what he was.

The fury that lived within was turned from unthinking savagery to a force for good. He would hunt and kill only men with evil in their hearts, and to protect the new family that he'd found himself a part of.





## Dread touched Gegnarok

When the Gegnarok first came to Teias Chain, they were nearly as baffled by the jungle as they had been by the ocean. However, they knew if they were to thrive, they'd need to not only learn to tolerate the jungle, but to master it. In their expeditions, they came across a strange mural that spoke to them. It managed to enthralled nearly all the Geg present with a twisted voice wrought of fear, whispering to them of the power that lay hidden within the emotion. Eventually, in the mindless terror it filled them with, it transformed them into loyal thralls of the Loa of Dread.

Those few that escaped were hunted and killed by the now roving bands of Dread Touched, dragging every living man, woman, and child back to their new god as either willing converts or unwilling sacrifices.

In addition to their own formidable natural powers, their masks also project mind altering illusions of their victims own worst fears, making it just that much easier for them to capture their victims and bring them before The Loa.

The jungles of Teia's chain are home to all manner of expected jungle beasts, such as crocodiles, tigers, and piranha, but some strange supernatural threats as well.

The Dread Fowl and the Dread Touched Gegnaroks are a constant threat to the villages. The terrifying green jungle birds and their transformed masters carrying them away to unknown fates in the jungle never to be seen again, sacrificing them to the Loa of Dread, to sate its eternal hunger.

Occasionally, The Dread Touched Gegnaroks will employ a strange potion which looks like bubbling blood. When fed to the already deadly jungle beasts, the animals will grow dramatically in size and begin to display a terrible blood-thirst which draws them towards the villages.

Three hundred years have passed and the majority of Vagragora clans have been able to work with Humans, Ygtolith and Gegnarok, but some of them have been making their way inland and adapting to the fresh-water. Seeking lakes, rivers and streams to create hidden villages, they plotted to one day strike out and overthrow the land dweller. While they wait, they bide their time, raiding caravans, small towns and taking land dweller slaves.

## Vagragora Raider





## Dread Fowl

Stalking the jungles of Teias chain is an unlikely predator. The most aggressive flightless birds known to live on Mhodica, these creatures are known as the Dread Fowl. These massive green birds stand four foot tall at the shoulder and expand their size to nearly seven when presenting the fearsome, hypnotic image of a monster's gaping maw on their peacock like tails.

Dread Fowl are unusually belligerent birds. They will attack or attempt to intimidate any enemy which comes into their territory, or even simply happen to cross paths with while they're hunting. Charging from the jungle undergrowth, they attempt to startle their prey or enemies with their plumage, before unleashing a flurry of ferocious claw strikes and bites which can shred leather or chain mail with ease. A group can even tear a plate mail clad individual to the bones in a matter of minutes.

If a single Dread Fowl is insufficient to subdue its prey, or drive off enemies, it will rip off a ferocious cackle audible for miles. This horrid sound calls its mate to it along with any young offspring, to overwhelm the prey by sheer numbers.



While most Ygtolith are content to live in the forested hills of their homeland along the borders between the eastern and western empires, as well as along the coast of the inland seas, C'lovir was obsessed with all the plants of Mhodica; her travels leading her to the darkest corners of the world.

In a desolate, forgotten crag, she came to discover the last specimen of the Necrosme plant. This vile, demonic, and carnivorous plant had been all but rooted out centuries earlier. Long dormant due to near starvation, the plant sprang immediately to life, violently consuming her and leaving nothing behind in its desperation to live.

Unable to fully regenerate its partially rotten form, it took much of her being into itself, and in the end was transformed into something new. The Demongenga was both animal and plant, able to uproot and drag itself down from the mountain to the forests below.

Using the voice of C'lovir, it called out to any man, woman, or child it could find, devouring them savagely as soon as it was able. It grew more and more devious over time, uprooting itself frequently to evade possible pursuers and mimicking the voices of humans who pass to set traps. After nearly a year, it managed to eat over thirty people before it was cornered, hacked to pieces, and burned.

The true horror would come in spring when the dozens of seeds it had cast to the wind took root, and its babies took their first victims in the guise of children. This new generation was gifted with hallucinogenic spores that made them harder to resist, using its powers to call for human children to come and play with them.



Demongenga

Stats: P219



Alitheia



Stats: P 200



Alitheia Lynn knew she was getting closer to Tserlith's territory when she stumbled on a dead fawn.

Though the Ygtolith was, like most of her kind, very sensitive to the breath of the forest and the movements of its animals, the fawn's emaciated husk was well-hidden in a tangle of grey roots and dry vines, and Alitheia nearly stepped on the poor thing. She breathed a prayer of thanks to the White Prince for setting her footing right just in time; the poor thing was nothing but a bit of fur-fuzzed hide stretched taut over bones, like a ghastly ceremonial drum. If Alitheia had stepped on it, it would have utterly shattered.

"Sleep well," Alitheia said. She knelt with the intention of moving the fawn to a more dignified resting spot—and promptly did credit to her own deer heritage by performing a neat little jump when the tiny thing kicked its twig-legs and gasped.

"Oh!" Alitheia clutched her chest, felt her heart drum against her palm. She exhaled slowly, then laughed a little. "You're still fighting! And against a very powerful enemy, no less. Here, let me help you."

Alitheia pressed a finger to the faun's head. It fixed one milky, filmy eye on her movements, and kicked again when a green tendril bearing tiny cabbage-green leaves slithered from her finger tip. "Easy, easy. It just looks scary."

Indeed, unfortunate as the dying fawn was, it was lucky to only witness the physical manifestations of Alitheia's power. It couldn't see or hear the ancient voice of decay and ruin that growled inside Alitheia's head.

"What gives you the right to restore life to this creature" it asked. "What gave you the right to try and take it in the first place?" Alitheia returned. She set her teeth together as she wrung droplets of power from the Aria of Ruin occupying her blood, bones, and soul. As usual, the Aria didn't surrender its essence to her easily, but she prevailed. A sweet-smelling sap emanated from the vine rooted to her finger-tip, and it seeped quickly into the fawn's brow. Its thin, stone-grey fur immediately flushed to a healthy chestnut color, and its eyes regained some of its light.

Alitheia recalled her life-giving tendril back into herself and straightened up. She sighed, popped her back, and watched the fawn stagger back onto its twiggy legs. The little thing was still thin and unsteady, but it looked up at her with eyes that were blessedly bright with curiosity again. Then its leaf-shaped ears caught the sound of a bird's wings clapping as it launched itself from a nearby branch, and it twisted its whole body towards the sudden din.

"Ah, so you're male," Alitheia said, observing. "I'm afraid your mother is dead, young laird. I'm on my way to have a chat with the one who stole her, and nearly stole you in the bargain."

The fawn looked at her again, its wet nose twitching, its coat shining with health in the muted green light that filtered through the forest canopy.

"You can join me, or you can go on your way," she said. "All the Prince's children are free." Alitheia walked away, but she could sense the fawn immediately begin to lope behind her, following as quickly as his awkward legs allowed. Alitheia purposefully slowed down a little; she was glad for the fawn's company, and even though it was a little selfish to admit, she thought maybe the newborn would thaw Tserlith's heart just enough to let her consider reason.

Alitheia smiled wryly at the idea of Tserlith getting mushy over a fawn. Not that she was cold. Rather, she was harder than most of her Ygtolith kin. More impulsive and calculating. More likely to make bad choices.

As Alitheia drew closer to her quarry, she took note of the Aria of Ruin's influence on the forest around her. Some aspects of the sickness were easily observable: The sight of dead, naked trees that should have been in their prime, the crunch of once-fertile soil gone grey with salt and ash, and the smell of mange-stricken animals made weary by hunger and disease. But beneath the obvious problems pulsed the cause of them: The Aria was corrupting the song of the forest, the melody that grew and governed life. The perversion made Alitheia's stomach twist, and the fawn hobbling behind her made an occasional bleat of tired fear. "I agree with you, young laird," Alitheia said, "but I'm pressing on. You do what you need to do."

The fawn cast one more glance at the trees, but then it fixed its eyes on the path ahead. Alitheia let the fawn's courage steady her heart as she plunged deeper into the corrupted forest and closer to Tserlith. The smell of the rogue Ygtolith was everywhere, but she was nowhere to be seen—

"Been a Prince's age since I've seen you, Alitheia." Tserlith appeared before Alitheia between blinks. The Ygtolith was wrapped in the Aria; it shifted around her like a garment made of oily smoke, and wisps occasionally slithered from the hollow tip of her shattered horn. The smell of corruption punched Alitheia's senses, and she struggled not to gag.

Tserlith grinned, showing sharp fangs. "Thanks for visiting. How's your mother?"

Alitheia stood up straight. "You know perfectly well how all our people are doing, Tserlith."

"Please don't get the wrong idea, Ali," Tserlith said. "I am happy to see you again. Stay a while. Let's catch up on old times."

The fawn pushed up against Alitheia's lower leg; she stooped and picked him up without taking her eyes off Tserlith.

"There's nothing to catch up on, dearest, except to discuss what you've been doing to the forest and to creation itself. You've become the puppet of something unspeakable, Tser. But you're worth saving, and in the name of the White Prince, I will try."

Tserlith raised an eyebrow. She started to speak, but the twisted scream of some unrecognizable bird of prey caused them both to flinch simultaneously and glance at the trees. When the danger passed, they looked at each other again.



"I don't know what that was," Alithea said in a low voice. The fawn she was holding kicked in fear, and she put it down. "I just know it doesn't belong here, and you're responsible for it. Just as you're responsible for the death and decay I saw while I travelled to find you."

"I'm not responsible for that, Alithea." Tserlith broke their stare and looked at the ground. "Not directly."

Alithea's hand shot out and grabbed Tserlith by the chin. She pulled the other Ygtolith's eyes back to her own. "I don't know where you got the idea you can control the Aria, Tserlith," she said, "but you need to come back with me, back to the Prince. Stop being a damned fool."

Tserlith smacked Alithea's hand away while the Aria flared up in her like a black fire fed a handful of kindling. "And you can? I can feel the Aria writhing inside you, Ali. It's how I found you. The Aria inside me— it's telling me to end you, turn you inside-out. But I'm not. I won't. I'm in control, Alithea. Everything is going the way it's supposed to."

"No, Tserlith," Alithea said softly. "Your intentions are good, but your contract with the Aria is taking everything from you. From your people."

"I know things now, Ali! I know how to save my aunt, my mother, my nieces and my nephews from death."

"You know how to twist the natural order of things," Alithea barked, "and not a whole lot else! Do you understand, Tserlith? I wrestle with the Aria inside me every single day. It tries to stop me from moving, from breathing, and the Good Prince knows it doesn't want me using its powers for the benefit of the forest! You, however—" Alithea gestured towards Tserlith. "—You tell yourself the Aria is a partner, a mate, and try not to think about what you really are: A slave. And as soon as you're no longer useful to the thing inside you, you'll be a hollowed-out shell."

Tserlith's eyes narrowed. The Aria writhed around her, sleek and silent as the black snakes that sometimes devoured Ygtolith fawns while they slept beside their mothers. "I told the Aria I don't want to kill you, Alithea," she said, "but I think I'm beginning to see the appeal of getting rid of you and enjoying a quiet afternoon."

Alithea steadied herself and raised her palms at Tserlith. "The White Prince can still save you."

"The White Prince can fling himself off a cliff and break his legs."

A chorus of unholy roaring shook that wasted corner of the woods as the Ygtolith collided. The fawn who'd travelled with Alithea finally lost its resolve and bolted into the forest that no longer belonged to its kind.





## — Sir Gerot Dragonfly —

Mandi trusted Kondile with her life, but she never failed to gasp in fear when the dragon reared back in a threat display. Though his wings—and the rest of him—were as bare and bony as a tree in winter, witnessing aggression from an undead dragon was even more frightening than seeing the same performance from a flesh-and-blood specimen.

Beitah! Stay back! You know what I'm capable of," Kondile called to the woman before them. He was using what Mandi privately thought of as his "death voice," a reverberating snarl that invariably made Mandi think of dead sounds: the patter of loose dirt hitting coffin-lids, the death-rattles of stricken infants, the shivering sweep of Death's own horse stalking mortals at the still, silent hour before dawn.

Beitah was unfazed. Though dwarfed by the dragon before her and the silent ruins behind her, her crossed arms and set-apart legs indicated she wasn't impressed by any of it. She looked up at Kondile with the stone face of a mother waiting for her tantrum-throwing child to tire himself out.

Above all else, Beitah looked bored. And that was dangerous.

Mandi touched one of the vertebrae on Kondile's tail, desperately trying to indicate without words that they needed to run. Kondile fell back on all fours with a boom and a rattle, but his hollow sockets continued to hold Beitah's eyes. He pay had no interest in running.

Beitah held up a hand, and Mandi unconsciously caught her breath as a suggestion of magic shivered through the air and pressed on her skin like rays from the summer sun.

"Of course I know what you're capable of, child," Beitah said. "I made you. And I think it's time for you and the girl to come back with me."

Mandi swallowed and wrung her staff hard enough to blister her palms, but she held her voice steady. "We're fine on our own, Beitah."

Beitah looked at her with pity, and whatever confidence Mandi had left in herself fled. Suddenly, she felt very unsure. Very inexperienced. Very young.

"I'm not angry with you, Mandi," Beitah said in a gentle voice, "but you owe me a debt that you haven't even begun to pay off. What do you expect to accomplish running around like a wild thing? You'll just get hurt. Maybe worse. You're safe with me."





Kondile jerked his head closer to the ground, but it was an aggressive gesture, not a submissive one. "Mandi is capable of more, far more, than you'll ever be, witch," he seethed. The fog cleared from Mandi's heart and she sidled up closer to the dragon.

Beitah's face turned cold and hard with the sudden speed of a falling hailstone. Wordlessly, she made a gesture with her hand that was suited for a milkmaid swatting away a fly, but the searing force of the magic that hit Mandi square in her chest was enough to take her breath away and knock her flat on her back.

Mandi thought she heard Kondile call her name, but her brain felt soggy; she couldn't process what he was saying, or what was happening. Even the air around her was stifling and grey—until another bolt of magic zipped out of nowhere and impaled her vision with crackling blue electricity.

Mandi screamed and clawed desperately at the air, and at her own face. She had just enough time to feel dully surprised at how the skin around her eyes still felt smooth and unmarked before she blacked out.

"—up, Mandi. Wake up."

Beitah's voice literally called Mandi back into consciousness; there was a crisp, urgent magic behind it that was impossible to resist. Mandi eased her eyes open and found herself lying on her side, staring deeply into the embers of a campfire. For an unsettling moment, Mandi thought she was looking at a model of Hell's own burning cellar.

She tried to move, but each individual muscle in her body felt like it'd received special attention from a meat-tenderizing mallet.

"Please don't move, Mandi." Mandi recognized Kondile's voice. She clenched her teeth and ignored the searing ache of her body long enough to lift her head and look at her companion.

Kondile lay directly across from her. The firelight jittered across his bones and spilled onto Beitah, who sat beside him. She leaned casually against the dragon's clavicle.

"Good to see you're awake, Mandi," Beitah said. "I'm sure you're sore, but once you rest up, you'll find there's no long-term damage. Kondile asked me to go easy on you, so I did. Of course, you know as well as anyone that I don't grant favours without getting something in return."

"Kondile?" Mandi said weakly. "What have you—"

Kondile refused to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry, small one. I'm going back with Beitah."

"Kondile—!"

"It was the only way she'd spare you."

"And now that you're awake, Mandi, I think it's time Kondile and I left." Beitah stood up, brushed the seat of her pants, and stretched luxuriously. "Get a good night's sleep. A meal, if you can manage it. I put a protective ward over you; it should last the night and keep curious monsters at bay. I don't know if it works against plain old wildlife, though. A bear might mistake you for a honeypot."

Kondile made a rumbling sound.

Beitah smacked the dragon light-heartedly on his humerus. "I'm joking, you grouch. She'll be fine."

"No! Kondile—" Mandi struggled to sit up without much success. "You're leaving me here?"

"It's all I can do, Mandi." Kondile said miserably. "You know her magic as well as I do."

"Oh Mandi, darling," Beitah said gently. She left Kondile's side, knelt to Mandi's level, and drew one of her spidery hands down the girl's hair. "You're welcome back into my service anytime. In fact, I expect you'll be back at my side within the week. You just seem determined to learn for yourself how cruel the world can be to talented magic-users like you and I."

Beitah stood up and threw one more look down at Mandi. "Go to it, then. Fend for yourself. You'll be glad for my protection soon enough."

Beitah walked back to Kondile and beckoned for him to follow. Kondile didn't look back at Mandi, but he vented a sigh that rattled every bone in his ribcage.

\* \* \*

Kondile. Kondile. Have to save—

Mandi staggered through the forest. Emotion chased away every rational thought that tried to enter her head. She knew she was in no condition to track down Beitah; she could barely stand.

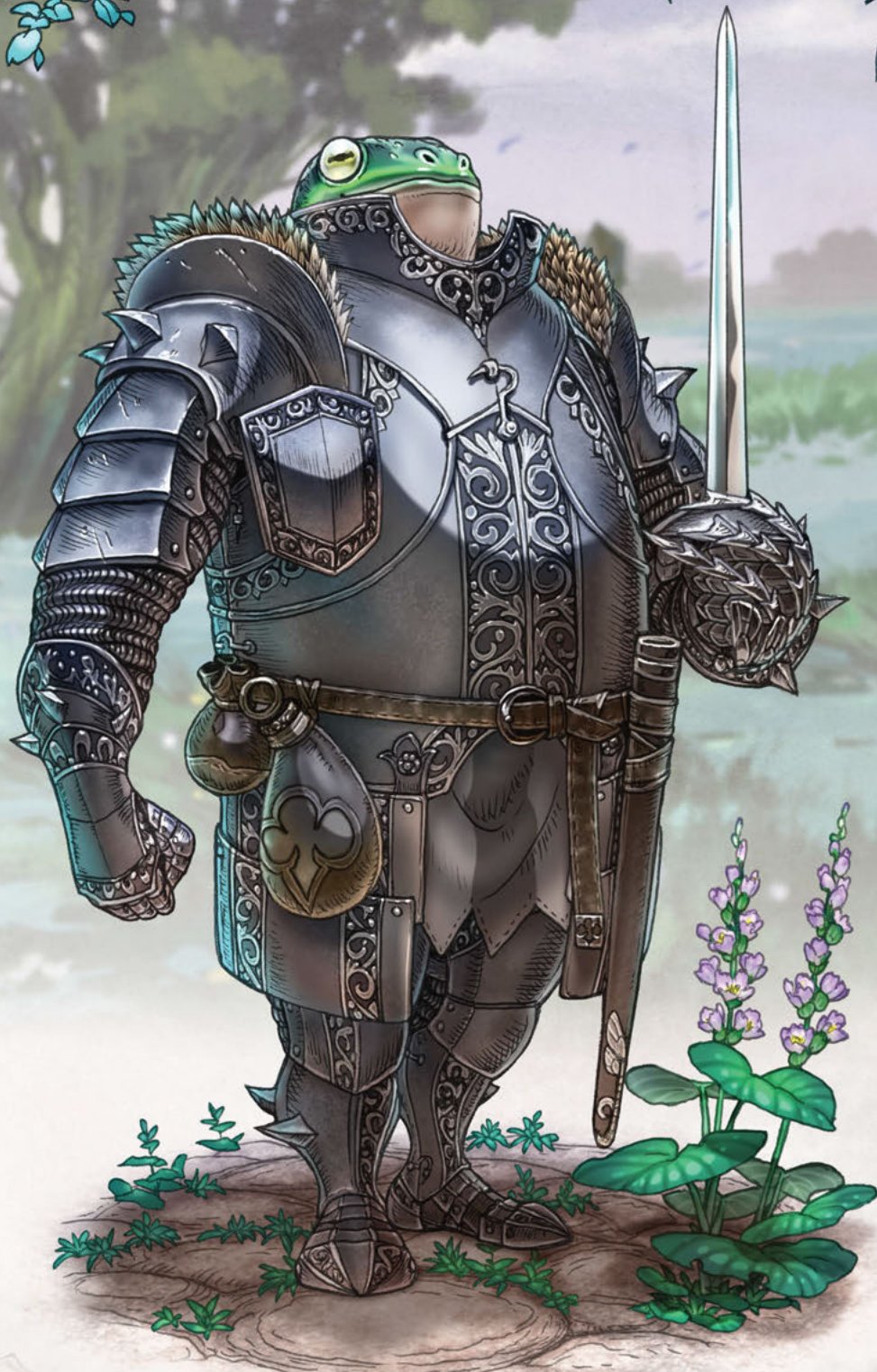
I have to try.

Ridiculous, of course. She had nothing. No strength, no power. Even the Hand of Doom had ceased whispering in her head. The staff tended to fall silent whenever Mandi's thoughts became jumbled. It was also probably irritated at being used to whack away weeds and tall grasses as Mandi plunged deeper into the woods in her aimless attempt to track Beitah and Kondile.

Icy, algae-slimed bog water slopped over the top of Mandi's shoe, and she emerged from her frenzy with a small scream. The shock was like a slap, and suddenly, everything was as clear as glass. Mandi blinked. She was in a wide clearing.



Sir Gerot Dragonfly





The bloated moon cut a silver path through the black water and added icy-white edges to nearby marsh grasses and plants. The water was as still as a mirror, but the trill of insects and the bellow of bullfrogs indicated the marsh teemed with life.

The water came up to Mandi's knees, and rose rapidly as her feet sank into the bog's mucky bottom. The hem of her robe lifted until it billowed around her hips like a cloud. Weariness hit her like a cudgel. Finally, she realized there was no negotiation: She had to find a place to rest for the night - and hopefully dry out.

May as well keep moving forward...

Mandi followed the moon-path for a few minutes. She used the Hand of Doom to help her stay buoyant as she sloshed through the water. Now I'm sure I've pissed it off, she thought with grim amusement.

The moon illuminated a small slice of the shoreline, and Mandi heaved a sigh of relief. Her spirits lifted even higher when she noticed an orange spark dancing not too far from the water. Someone else was in this godsforsaken place, and they had a campfire going. Where there was fire, there was probably food and shelter. At the very least, there was warmth.

Of course, there was the potential for danger, too. Brigands were big fans of wild woods and marshes and other places where decent folk were hesitant to set down roots. But Mandi was too miserably exhausted to be wary. So much had happened to her already; she was willing to gamble. Maybe the Fates would take pity on her and throw her a bone.

She hoped that bone had meat on it.

Mandi sloshed ashore, and the immediate scene that met her was encouraging. The firelight flickered across the faces of a man, a woman, two children, and even a dog. Mandi could make out a bulky shack-shaped shadow behind them. They were a family, not bandits. Surely, they'd help her.

"Hello," Mandi called. "I'm lost. Can you—"

The adults and their children turned their heads slowly, very slowly. The dog lifted his own head with the same lack of urgency. Then Mandi realized with heart-freezing swiftness that something was terribly wrong with the scene in front of her.

The man and woman's faces were gaunt and pale. Their eyes were fathomless umbras that gobbled up the firelight. The children, a boy and a girl, made no sounds of surprise or curiosity. One of the dog's eyes was a semi-solid mass that dribbled across its blunt snout and trembled at the edge of its lipless maw.

The shadow of the family's shack was jagged and splintered; its roof was caved-in. It had probably collapsed years ago.

"Oh gods," Mandi gasped. She tried to take a step back, but nearly tripped and fell into the water.

"No gods here."

The mournful voice of the undead patriarch reverberated in her head just as the Hand of Doom glowed with faint heat, and Mandi felt the blood rush to her feet when she realized the zombie was "talking" to her through her staff.

"We have a fire, but it gives no heat. Please stay. Show us how to be warm again."

"I'm hungry" wailed the undead girl in a dark pitch that didn't vary from her father's.

"Please stay. Feed us. Please."

Mandi struggled to tamp down her gorge as the family advanced and the stink of the undead wafted over her. They'd all been sitting too close to the fire in their vain attempt to warm up, and their singed flesh produced a uniquely sickening stench. Mandi had never smelled a half-cooked zombie, and by her father's cursed name, she never hoped to again.

"Stay back," Mandi said through clenched teeth. She held out the Hand of Doom like a ward, though she could sense the damned thing currently wasn't interested in protecting her. "You can't hurt me, even if I let you try. I have powerful magic protecting me."

Even in her dangerous situation, Mandi couldn't help but heave an inward sigh. She was in Beitah's debt once again.

"We know, child" said the female zombie in tones that contained eerie whiffs of her former humanity. "We also know that magic doesn't belong to you, and it won't last much longer. You are tired. We are not. You can run as far as you like. We will follow. We've waited years for a meal. We can wait a little longer."

"The sun will rise eventually." Mandi couldn't keep her voice from cracking.

"That changes nothing"

The family had no more words to offer. They stared at Mandi, each one as still as a dead tree on a windless night. When Mandi's nerve broke and she plunged back into the woods, the heavy, careless sound of the zombies' slow pursuit rose above the relentless screaming of the marsh's insects.

\* \* \*



If Gerot had dreamed anyone would pay him a visit in the dead of night -- to say nothing of a woman as stunning as Mandi -- he never would've lounged on his oak-stump "porch" with his face and head wholly exposed to the open world. His squat, amphibious visage had a way of causing potential friends to suddenly find business elsewhere. Usually somewhere far away from his boggy home.

Gerot's face was naked as a tadpole on the day Mandi stumbled into his company, though. It couldn't be helped; his eyes felt more oily than usual, and he hoped the air would harden the thin sheen of slime back into the crust he depended on to protect him from the worst of the sun's glare.

He had nothing better to do than air himself out, anyway. His fighter's instincts were nagging at him deep in his gizzard. Something or someone had been telling him to "be prepared" all day, and that voice was still needling his brain. That's why he'd kept his armor on even as night fell. Well, not that it was unusual for him to avoid getting undressed at the end of the day. Warriors didn't take time off. Warriors were prepared. Always.

Warriors also seemingly spent a lot of time waiting around for something to happen. Gerot sighed deeply and sprawled out onto his oak-stump. He blinked slowly at the stars, drummed his fingers against the algae-slimed armor that covered his bulbous belly, and belched. He frowned, disappointed that nobody else was around to appreciate the rasping echo except the marsh's bullfrogs, who fell into silent reverence.

The night chorus' brief reprieve allowed an unusual sound to reach Gerot: The clumsy splashing of human feet cutting through the thick water. Behind that rhythmless din, there were more footsteps: The slow, purposeful sloshing of tireless hunters pursuing frenzied prey.

Gerot's slick blood ran colder than usual for a second. You didn't live in this part of the world without becoming familiar with the feeding habits of the undead. He hefted himself into a sitting position and peered hard in the direction of the splashing. Gerot hadn't heard a peep from the undead in quite some time; they usually didn't move around much unless they latched their sights onto a meal worth running down.

What -- or whom -- are they chasing?

Gerot slowly reached for his sword, Dragonfly, which stuck out of the water hilt-first. She was a light but powerful blade custom-forged for his stubby fingers and his wet surroundings. No matter how stagnant, slimy, and insect-filled the swamp became on the hottest summer days, Dragonfly never lost her edge or wicked shine. She hadn't been cheap to commission, but she'd been worth every gold piece

--and Gerot never had a problem procuring money, anyway. He was a capable bodyguard and a frugal spender. No sooner did Gerot wrap his fingers around Dragonfly's hilt than his first visitor exploded from the tangle of foliage that ringed his property.

It was a woman. Her robes were caked in mud from her hips down, and a crazy pattern of large spatters decorated her elsewhere. She half-ran, half-waded towards Gerot's stump with a look of frightened determination in her eyes that was usually reserved for game-foxes on the verge of wheeling around and fighting the hunter's hounds to the death.

The hood of the woman's robe had fallen away, and though her hair was matted with water plants and swamp-filth, her roots were clearly blood-red, like the scales of the vipers that nested in the shallow parts of the marsh.

Gerot gasped and slammed his free fist into his heart to start it ticking again. Then he gave his head a shake and readied himself. He knew better than to run at the maiden or call out: In her frenzied state, there was a chance she might keel over from the fright.

The undead then ambled into view, and Gerot made a distressed rumbling sound in his throat. It was a family: A mother, a father, and two children, all in varying states of decomposition. There was a once time when Gerot rarely saw sights as sad as small ones condemned to roam the earth driven by the insatiable hunger of the damned, but times were changing.

Dragonfly went splish as Gerot pulled her out of the water. He ran a wide arc around Mandi and breathed a few words of reassurance in her direction, but he wasn't sure she could hear him. He didn't wait to find out. He tensed, leaped, and flashed his blade just shy of the zombie patriarch's nose.

"Back, demon!" Gerot roared. "If given the choice, I'll not leave your gods-forsaken children fatherless, or give your worm-eaten wife further reason to mourn her fate -- but neither will I hesitate to cut you open and slop your stinking guts into the marsh if you don't leave my territory this instant."

The male zombie looked at Gerot with a trembling flicker of emotion in his opaque eyes. For a second, he seemed to remember fear, or at least he could recall its pale shadow. In any case, the sudden, unexpected arrival of Gerot was enough to make him spin on his heel (his limbs flapping bonelessly around him as he did so) and weave off in the opposite direction without so much as a sound of protest over his lost meal.

His family followed him with an automatic mindlessness that could be eerily mistaken for serenity. They were all gulped back up by the forest in a few moments.



"By all the wounds of the gods," Gerot exhaled. He plucked a large leaf from the water and dabbed at the sweat-slime trickling down his forehead. He turned to check on the woman, then croaked and reared backwards in surprise when he discovered himself looking eye-to-eye with her.

She dropped into a curtsy, and though she was covered in grime -- and holding an imposing staff in one hand -- the gesture was delicate, noble, and thoroughly thankful.

"Sir," she said, "I owe you my life."

"My -- my lady," Gerot stammered. "It was my duty, and my absolute pleasure. But forgive me for showing you this twisted face of mine. Under normal circumstances, I never reveal it to strangers, let alone the fairer sex."

The woman grinned, and Gerot caught a whiff of defiance and hardness that betrayed the noble roots he'd guessed at only seconds earlier. "I've been called many things since I struck out on my own," she said, "and 'fair' isn't one of them.

Your face and my soul are a good match, Sir--"

"G-Gerot. Please just call me Gerot, my lady."

"Only if you promise to call me 'Mandi,' Gerot."

The moonlight tumbled over her hair and, at least in Gerot's mind, seemed to erase the blemishes from her skin and clothes. "Yes, my lady Mandi. Always."

"Thanks." Mandi breathed a sigh and leaned heavily on her staff. "I'll do a better job of introducing myself later, but by all the gods that ever were and ever will be, I am tired. Gerot, could you escort me somewhere warm and dry? I know we're in the middle of nowhere, but there must be something nearby. I need to soak in a bath until the next harvest season, then sleep until the next one."

"Yes, of course," Gerot said instantly. "You will be safe with me."

"I, er," Mandi looked away. "I despise being indebted to anyone, but I've lost my money. I've lost a lot, to be honest. I'm searching for a friend, but I'm at a low point in my journey."

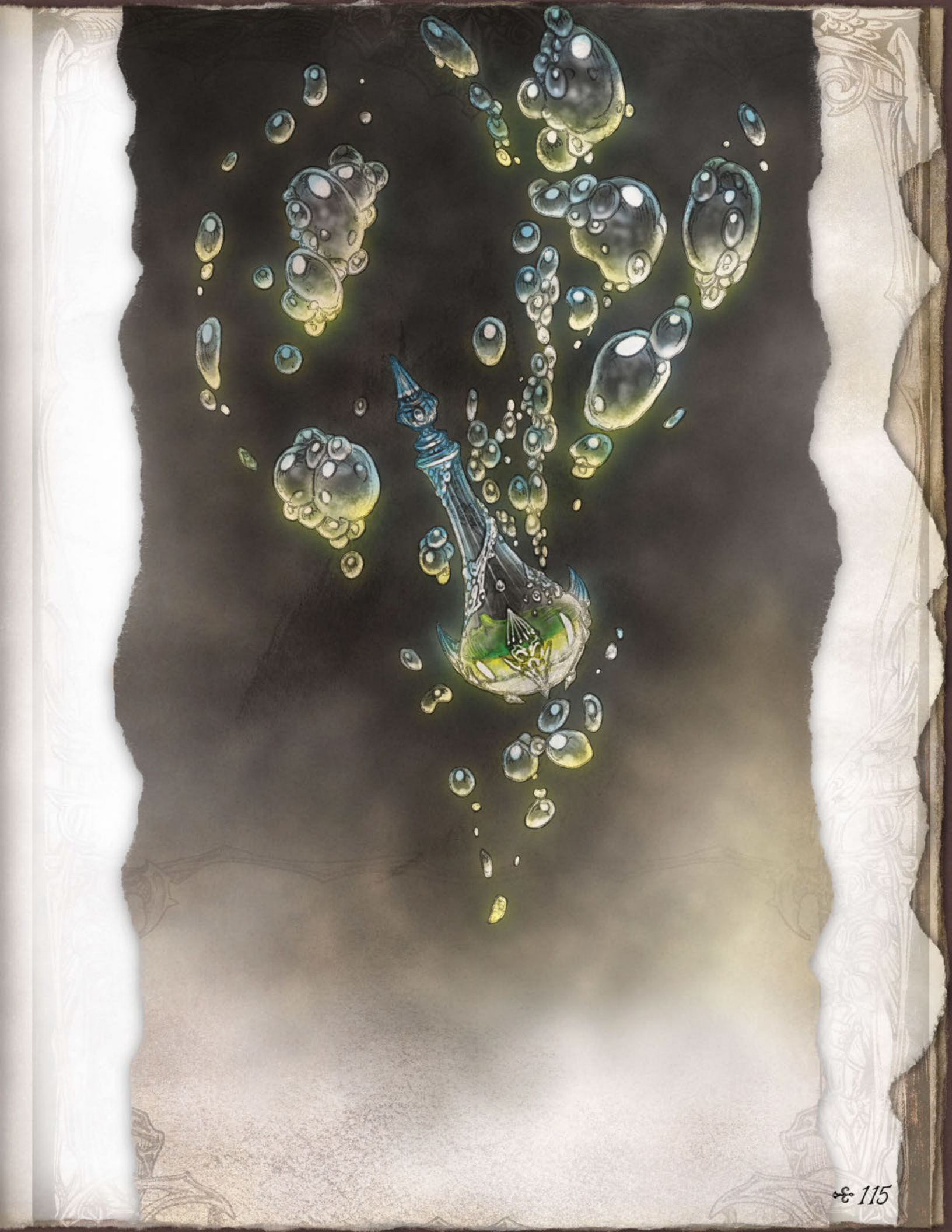
"I'll hear nothing about payment," Gerot said, sheathing Dragonfly to punctuate his firm statement. "You are my guest for as long as you allow me to stay in your radiant company, and money shall be the least of your problems."

Mandi nodded. "Then I'd be proud to journey with you for a time, Gerot. Please lead the way to dryer, happier lands. After the night I've had, I have to admit the swamp doesn't agree with me."

Gerot chuckled and beckoned gently for Mandi to follow. "It's not pretty," he admitted, "but it's home. Allow me to procure my helmet before we depart. Not everyone is as open-minded as my lady Mandi."









# Dephena's Castle



## History

Two generations ago the ruler of the kingdom of Adrigol, Count Delvindorf, turned his tiny nation into a major player in the mountain kingdoms that lay along the edge of the Lorvena empire. His tactics against those who opposed him were of grotesque cruelty, often performing public beheadings or even impalings. However, he continued to successfully and forcibly expand their influence using these and other methods.

With his passing and his general's retirement, his son's comparative weakness caused their influence shrink. When the rule of Malvinius Delvidorf II ended with his poisoning, it seemed like his son Depher the Mad; a twisted man with a mind for blood would inherit the throne next.

Coveting the wealth of their prosperous neighbor, Hydracast, Depher didn't hesitate to plan a ruthless attack. It involved bribes to minor officials in the border towns of Hydracast, and offers of lordship to bandit tribes which plagued its trade roads.

Strangling the Hydracast roadways with bandit attacks and other sabotage prevented the Phalanx from defending the castle and Depher's invading forces slaughtered countless loyal retainers of the Hydracast household.

Before Depher and his raiders could loot the coffers of the royal family, the princess Umbria made a desperate ploy to drive away the invaders by releasing an ancient evil sealed away in the depths of their home. The sleeping fury that Umbria had awoken utterly destroyed all those that sought the wealth of her home.

Learning the fate of her brother, Princess Dephena swore a furious oath to whatever power might be listening, that she would build an army that would burn Hydracast to the ground. Unfortunately for the fate of all, Dephena's sorrow and rage were such that she caught the attention of the unleashed darkness, and it took her. It filled her like a water pitcher, full to the brim with unthinking malice and hatred.

There are many accounts of how the war between Adrigol and Hydracast ended. Most speak of a duel of magics between Umbria and Dephena. Some say Dephena was forced by Umbria to retreat; others tell that Umbria was defeated and pushed into the deep sleep she is now believed to lay in.

But the one thing all the stories share is the absolute destruction wrought in their battle. While Dephena possessed the incredible powers of the entity that dwelled within her, Umbria was able to force Dephena back, destroying her army with a wave of magically infused vines and littering the battlefield with the corpses of Hydracast's enemies.

Dephena was bound to her throne for countless years; so long that the world around them no longer numbered their years in the way she once knew. The evil within her had long since vanished but had left her with the mixed blessing of immortality.

She was only awakened from her slumber when the ruins of Castle Adrigol were invaded by a graverobber named Nepht. He had come seeking the history of the creature that had awakened here, though he would not say why. He disturbed her when he tried to prise her signet ring from her hand and she easily seized his hand, preventing his escape.

Despite him being an invader, she was so desperately happy to see another human being after so many lifetimes of nightmares that she nearly wept for joy. In exchange for small trinkets and any history related to the sleeping darkness, Nepht was taken in by Dephena's tales of the wealth of the now desolate Hydracast Kingdom.

Knowing that her final curse would have placed Umbria in sleep and sealed her castle, Dephena believed the time for her final revenge. With her father's enchanted sword gifted to her new companion, they attempted to infiltrate Umbria's sleeping chamber.

When they found her lying in stasis, still alive, they attempted to assassinate her. Before they could strike, an



invisible being struck Nepht down and unceremoniously ejected Dephena from the castle like she was little more than an insect.

Left with nothing once more, her hatred for the sleeping Umbria only grew as she retreated to her castle. She then drew upon all the remaining resources she could find to start again, and built a new army with which to destroy her hated enemy.

## Government

Dephena reigns over her broken land, broken castle, and her broken people from a throne constructed of the skulls of her enemies which were pilfered from their tombs around Umbria's kingdom. The entire land is shrouded in perpetual overcast by the Eternal Storm which rages over the castle.

In recent years the Dark Kingdom, as it has come to be called by outsiders, has been inhabited by a strange woman named Beitah. She arrived out of a storm and offered Dephena her services as a court Necromancer. She also offered Dephena an army, if she would only give her the resources to do so. It was an agreement that Dephena was only too happy to make.

## Culture

Castle Adrigol was never repaired, and as such, it has only a few portions with an intact roof and the moat has long since flooded, now only circling it with a stagnant lake.

The land surrounding Castle Adrigol was rendered barren for nearly fifty miles in all direction after Dephena was forced to slumber. It is impossible to grow crops and the only things that can even barely manage to survive are a few of the hardier, wild plants.

Resilient wild animals such as boar, black bears, and wolves still roam the landscape, making life difficult for the few humans who willingly call the cursed land home.

One of the few natural resources remaining to Adrigol is the healthy supply of iron remaining in its mines. The iron has been touched by a strange blight which has darkened and imbued it with unnatural properties, allowing them to poison those they wound.

## Daily life

Castle Adrigol and the broken shambles of the villages which surround it are quiet as a tomb, disturbed only by the occasional sounds of wild animals and the moans of Beitah's undead as they walk the halls of her castle.

The occasional hushed whispers of The Stitched and the constant ringing of the castle blacksmiths hammer are the only signs of intelligent life that outsiders will hear upon entering the castle.

Oddly enough, despite all its foreboding nature, Dephena makes little to no effort to dissuade any visitors from her domain. Almost as if she is so lonely, that perhaps any company will do.







## The Diminutive

Those who arrive at The Castle by morning are often greeted by this leering, ominous dwarf. Or more precisely by a series of near misses from his bow and arrow, along with his mocking laughter.

Those who wish to speak to Dephena will need to either endure the well placed mockery and scorn off the foul tempered gnome of a Stitched, or manage to capture him and beat him within an inch of his undead existence in order to force his hand. In either case, once won over, he will take you through a dangerous path that winds through the castle.

The afternoon guard is an enormous gourmand, often found eating some poor hapless animal, either raw, or cooking over a spit if he felt particularly posh that day. He always ignores any entreaties of his Mistress' whereabouts, replying with scarcely more than a grunt or raucous belch.

To acquire entry, a sufficient bribe of meat is required. If that fails, administering a prodigious thrashing to him will allow one passage. Both outcomes will coerce him into escorting one along the most direct route.

## The Vast



## The Lanky

Those who arrive in the evening will encounter the ghoulish, thousand yard stare of The Lanky. While towering a menacing eight feet tall, he is easy to deal with if one can keep their cool under his terrifying glare.

Those who are underneath his glower often suffer from strange feelings of distress, even fits of terror. However those who can withstand the stare of the large Stitched, will be granted passage via the safest route. If he sees weakness though, he will attack.



## The Gargoyle

Those who arrive during the night are introduced to the ominous, low, growling voice of The Gargoyle. Though massive and intimidating, all one has to do is convince the creature of their reasons for seeking Dephena.

Those who fail to do so will be in for the fight of their lives. Either from the Gargoyle himself, or an ambush he will lead them into.





In life, Holden was a blacksmith of great talent and tireless work ethic. He was the first recorded western blacksmith to determine the proper stacking of different layers of steel and suitable fluxes necessary to create blades of the wavy patterned water steel used by the royalty of the east.

But a petty noble named Amano Yoshi saw him as a filthy outlander who dared to steal secrets the gods had reserved for the hands of the nobility; as proof of their divine right of rule.

But, he knew even if he killed Holden, eventually, someone else would discover the secret so he chose torture instead, hoping to leave a warning to others who would attempt to follow his footsteps.

He hired a gang of bandits to kill every last man, woman, and child in the village. Burning their homes, their crops, and toppling his forge. Then they raped his wife, his daughter, castrated his son and forced him to watch as they finished it all by beheading them. Then they left him to suffer, with not even a blade to take his own life.

Attempting to go on, he was only ever able to escape the torment that constantly plagued his thoughts when he could work at the forges in towns he wandered. Only able to do menial work in his state of mind, he was unable to concentrate on anything as complex as his water steel.

Eventually, unable to function, he stood on a bridge and beseeched any power that could hear him that if they could free him of his misery, he would belong to them, mind body and soul. But as fate would have it, it was not the gods who answered, but a devil.

Beitah arrived, and stilled his beating heart, and whisked him away to the citadel of Dephena. She had his few physical weaknesses excised, and replaced with parts from even stronger men, raising him as one of The Stitched, replacing his spine with that of an elephant to allow him an inhuman degree of leverage.

Freed from his human heart, the only beating he heeded was the rhythm of his hammer. Using otherworldly materials provided by Beitah, he arms Dephena's chosen commanders and her champions with black and green star patterned weapons which infect those not slain outright by them with a sickening plague that leaves those infected weak as a newborn babe for days.

But increasingly, the stitched named Holden is becoming troubled by nagging memories of his family dying in the plague, rather than being tortured and murdered.

While the Stitched do not have the same sort of dreams as humans, typically, but when he winds down, he also suffers visions of his entire town filled with piles of dead being purged by fire.



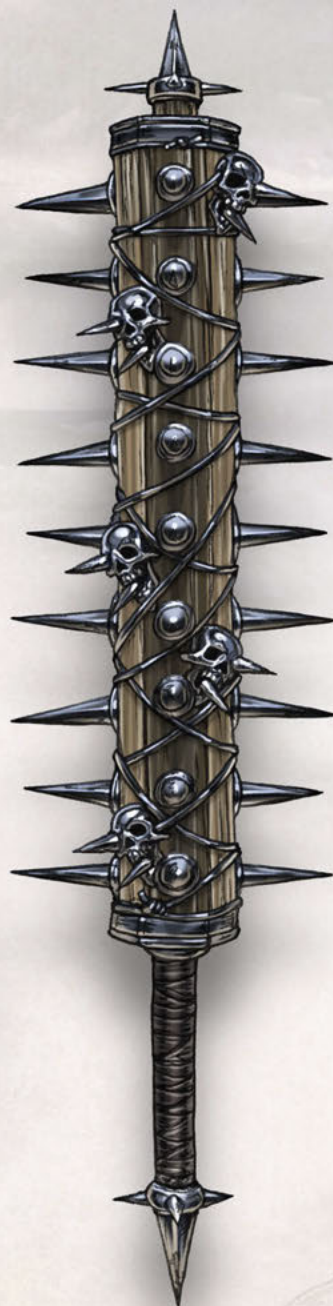
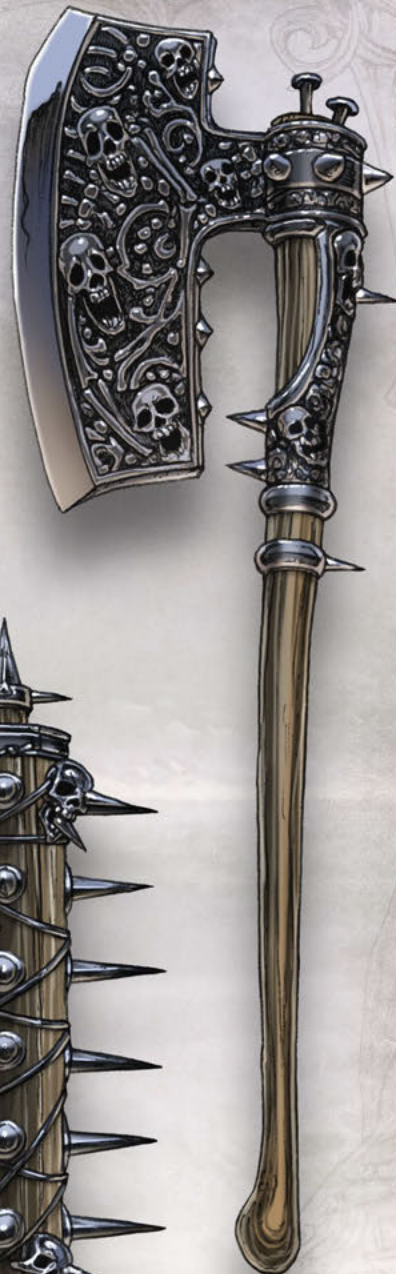


# Weapons

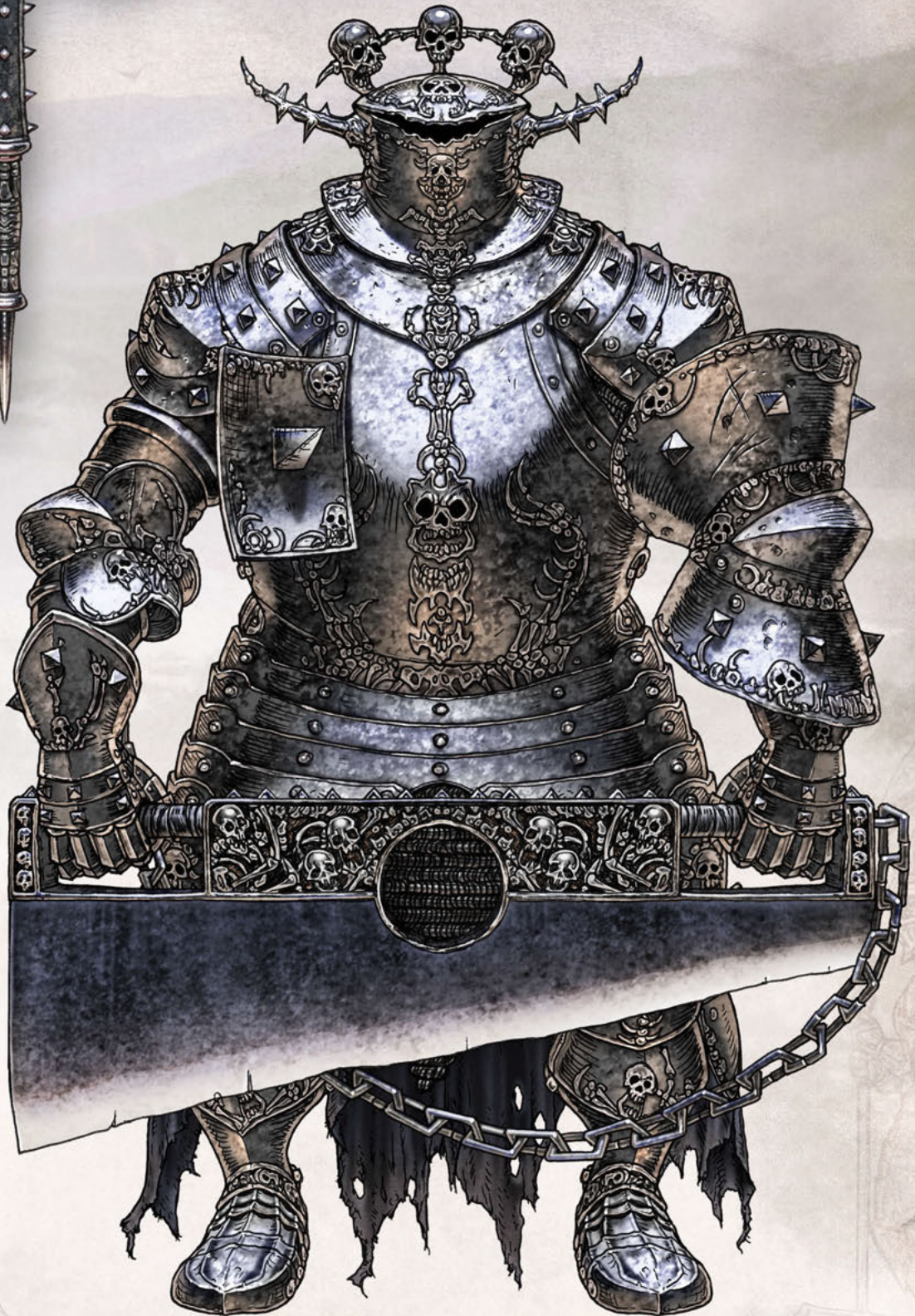
After her brother's death, Dephena very thoroughly interrogated her brother's advisors as to why they failed to foresee the outcome of his invasion or to prevent his death. Finding their answers wanting, she had them killed and their heads mounted on the spikes of her castles battlements. A symbol which would one day become her flag.

The rank of her servants is readily determined by onlookers by the number of skulls they possess as adornments, seven being possessed only by her undead or Stitched generals, one or none by the lowliest of cannon fodder.

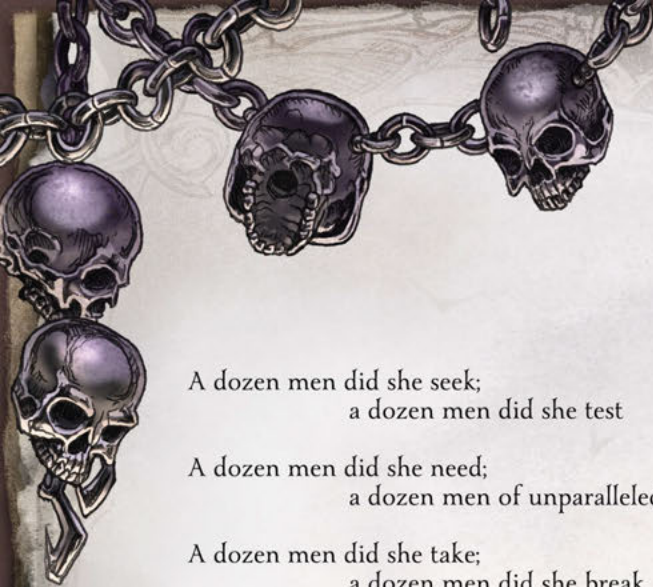
Her blacksmiths produce executioners style weapons, often with skeletal reliefs as decorations, each made of the dark tainted iron of the blighted land she rules from.











A dozen men did she seek;  
a dozen men did she test  
A dozen men did she need;  
a dozen men of unparalleled deed  
A dozen men did she take;  
a dozen men did she break  
A dozen stitched as one;  
a dozen men and the deed was done

~ Lucent Lazara,  
the dirge of Hvaculous

"I don't need your help, you drunken fool." Lady Violet said in exasperation as she knelt and peered around the corner, checking up the market street of this besieged town. They'd been under attack by the undead for over three months with the situation becoming more and more desperate, and the only other experienced fighter left now that Sir Roderick was dead was of great annoyance.

"Of course not." Sir Grey said, shamelessly admiring her backside for a moment as she leaned around the corner. He stroked his beard. "But your father would be distraught with this old man if you got eaten by the zombies."

Lady Violet counted six undead and skeletons, luckily only one with a bow. She turned to face Sir Grey, looking the short fat man up and down, from the bottom of his boots to the crown of his bald head. "I'm going, you stay here, old man." She stood, drawing her bastard sword from across her back and pulling a throwing ax from her belt.

"You don't have to worry about my fat ass," Sir Grey sniffed. "I've been hauling it around since your father was still shitting in his pants."

"With as much as he drinks, that probably wasn't all that long ago." She retorted, not having a high opinion of her gambling drunk of a father, let alone any of his friends. "Just... Just stay out of my way. We need to clear this path, and I won't have you slowing me down!" Lady Violet stood at that and darted swiftly from the alley into the empty street market.

Sir Grey sighed, standing up his war hammer. "Oh, to be young, beautiful, and stupid again." A broad grin spread across his face then, and he charged right after her.

Not letting the Skeleton archer get a shot, Lady Violet quickly smashed its skull with her thrown ax. After that, between the two of them, they made short work of the others, smashing through them rather quickly.

"See?" Lady Violet huffed. "I didn't need you at all." Taking the sleeve of her jacket, she wiped the bone dust from her sword.

Sir Grey didn't respond immediately; he was too busy craning his neck up to look at the large silhouette occupying the rooftop of the building they were standing beneath. "I think we have bigger problems than the skeletons, my dear."

The form leapt from the roof and landed before them with an enormous boom, smashing the cobblestones beneath its feet. It rose to its full height as they danced back away from it, bringing their weapons to bear.

The giant that stood before them was a jigsaw puzzle of mismatched flesh, studded with rivets and spikes. Its head, hand, and lower body were all almost entirely encased in a hideous dark metal. Craning its horned head towards Violet, it spoke. "It seems you've lost a step or two since I've seen you last." It said, issuing forth the voice of Sir Roderick from its lipless mouth.

Violet froze. "S-sir Roderick?! What have they done to you?!" She almost let her guard down from sheer surprise.

It laughed in a mingle of at least twelve different voices. "She. Us." It now corrected in the voice of The Lamprey, the pirate that had pillaged their coastline for the last fifteen years. "Our lady took us apart, and kept only the best pieces for her chorus."

"I'll not see you live through the day and soil my teacher's name!" Violet snarled, drawing her sword and leaping forward. Her sword was true and came to impale the creature cleanly through the middle.

"Violet, no!" Sir Grey bellowed.

"Even those of us who don't know you are disappointed. You fell for a clear opening, and now you've disarmed yourself." It didn't even seem to notice the bastard sword that jutted from its mid section as it spoke in the voice of an Easterner. "And now, we rip, we tear." It said in a shifting, ragged, high and reedy voice.

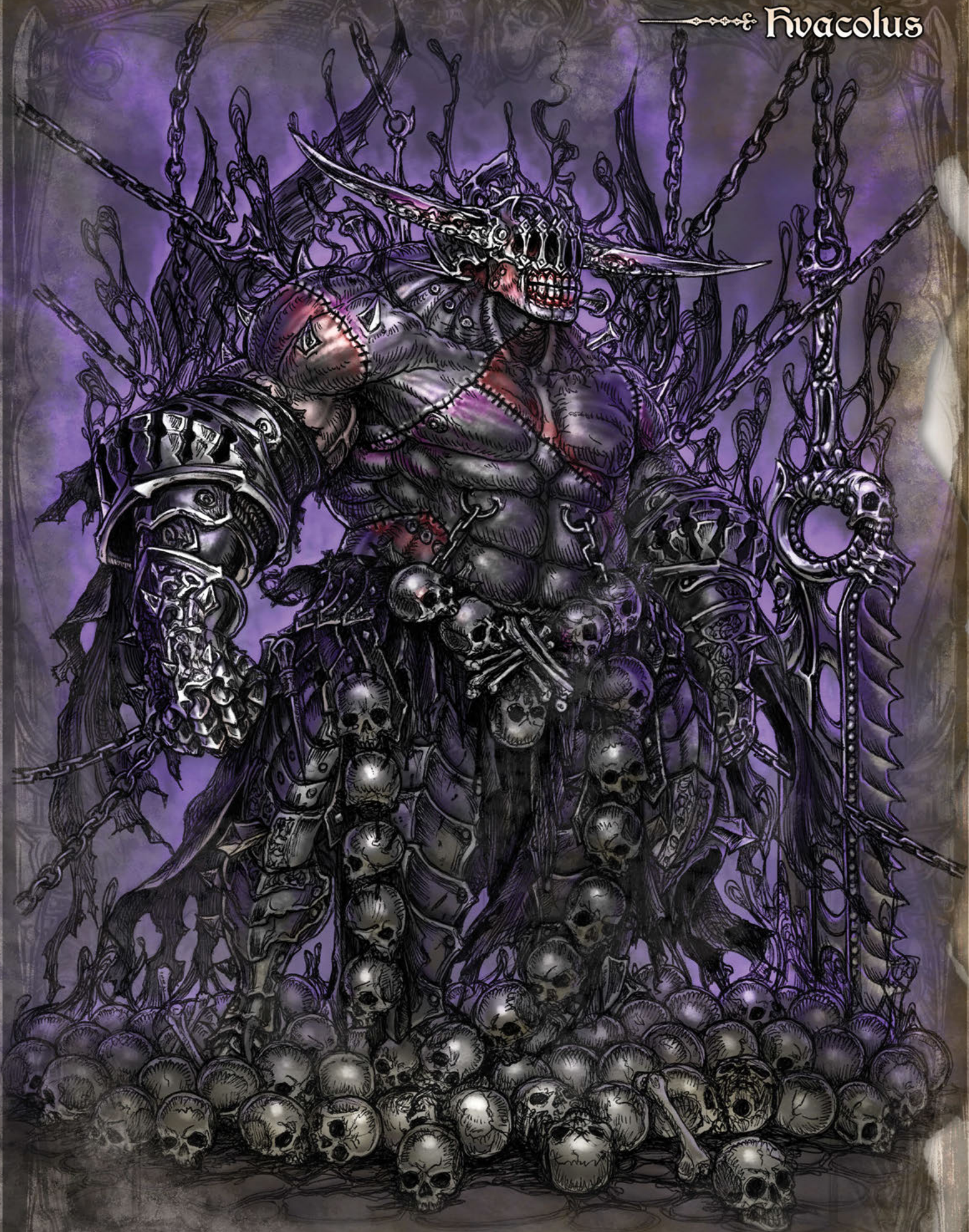
All in the space of two seconds, it raised its own massive sword overhead, Sir Grey body checked Lady Violet aside, and the sword came down like the wrath of a god, crushing Sir Grey like a cockroach. The impact itself sent a sizeable wave of blood and entrails flying to either side of the impact.

Lady Violet lay on the ground, covered in the remains of her self-proclaimed guardian. She could only gape in horror at what she beheld, unable to move. Any attempts at speech came out only as babble.

"Such a disappointment. We had hoped you might be useful for constructing our consort." Sir Roderick's voice clucked in disappointment while it plucked Violet's own sword from its breast like a pin.

Lady Violet's scream was cut off by the sudden violent sword impact that collapsed the entire corner of the street into the basement beneath. "Pity." The twelve voices sighed.









## Stinger

Stinger arrives without warning, dropping from behind his victims and stabbing them through the back of their necks. After a terrifying screech which causes a brief paralysis in the creatures around him he takes to the skies, dragging his victims with the power of his impressively strong vulture's wings.

Dropping the corpses on rooftops beyond the safe reach of the undead advances enemies, he leaves them to rot, diving in to snatch them away again if their allies can get close enough to try and retrieve them. He then often pelts them with pieces ripped from their dead to demoralize them.

His assassinations will continue unabated, and as a corpse's reaches its most sickening he returns them by dropping them piece by piece into the enemy's fresh water, food, and medical tents in order to spread disease and despair among the enemy.

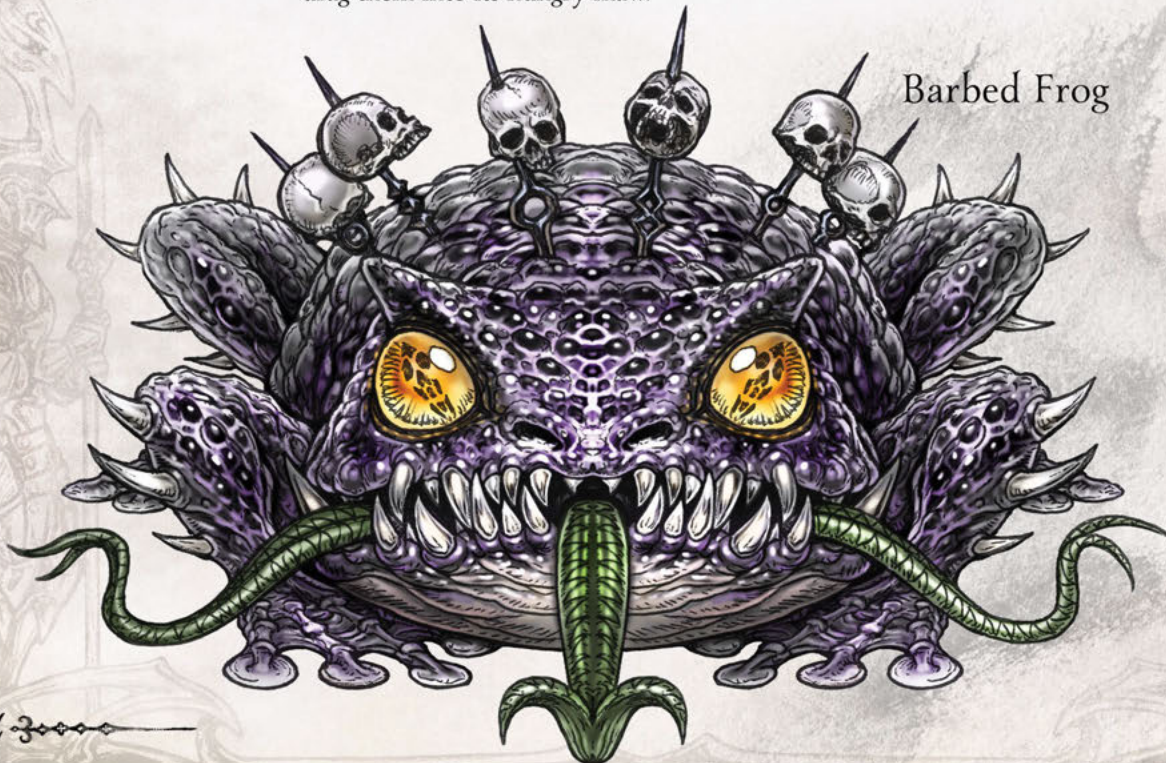


The hideous undead monstrosity called a Barbed Frog was created by infusing the already enormous river frogs of the western kingdom with the Aria of Ruin. Swelling them up to a truly monstrous size, they become large enough to eat an entire squad of men.

The creatures will often lay in wait below the surface of small bodies of water such as rivers, lakes or ponds, ambushing passers in order to kill and devour them. Once they have devoured a half dozen or so, they often disappear for several days before returning to hunt again.

The scholar Arnadt Twispin noted that whenever a specimen returns, its guts are empty. The undead don't digest their food, so it's almost as if they were transferring the bodies somewhere else. Obeying only powerful sentient undead, the well-preserved creature uses its large mass to body-block foes, it's powerful jaws to crush them, and it's three wicked tentacle-like tongues to drag them into its hungry maw.

## Barbed Frog





## Gibbering Maws

The most pervasive and diabolical of all the monstrosities created in the new renaissance of the undead, are the vermin known as Gibbering Maws. They are hideously stitched together from the corpses of rats, piranha, and frogs.

These swift creatures are capable of burrowing, gnawing, or climbing their way into almost any structure and swarming the living within, stripping the flesh from their bones.

While a minor threat as an individual, it's when they swarm by the dozen that they can skeletonize a man in moments or undermine the structures of a building within hours.

These creatures are often smuggled into a village in barrels or sacks of grain, only to burst free at night and begin to undermine a fortress or village in order to soften it up for invasion. If they are discovered before it is time, the unfortunate soul that stumbled across them was usually dragged from view and reduced to little more than dust.

Sewn together from the corpses of a dozen men, Handiak the Huge is less a member of The Stitched and more an unthinking force of nature. Unleashed only when the time has come to completely crush an enemy's morale, the mere sight of him is often enough to send even seasoned fighting men and woman running.

His body is filled with countless extra bones harvested from rib cages and the skin of an elephant to brace him against blunt impacts, preventing blades from cutting too deeply. Additionally, every inch of his massive frame is covered in mail and plate, making it even harder to even land a blow on his nigh impregnable flesh.

He enters the battlefield swinging his cleavers left and right, heedless of what stands before him. Crushing friends, foes, and even buildings under a nearly endless torrent of blows, he laughs all the while. Only the commands of a high ranking undead will attract his attention. Otherwise he is completely deaf to the voice of all others. Sometimes when ordered to cease rampaging, the simpleton will throw a tantrum like a child before ultimately submitting to his leader.

If his foes manage to outrun him or surround him with ranged fire, Handiak will giggle almost innocently and scoop huge chunks of dirt, heavy stones, pieces of nearby buildings, and even corpses, flinging them about with wild glee.

Handiak





Beitah





Grigori took the proffered tankard of sweet smelling mead, and drained it to the dregs, as the hooded woman watched in bemusement. The Wet Hen was a loud bar, but the sounds were the farthest things from his mind. He replaced the tankard, his hand shaking.

"I'm the only one who made it back." He said in a shaky breath. He almost shrank even further back into the dark corner booth. But thinking the better of it he opened the booths green curtain, and waved the tankard to the bar wench, a Gegnarok warrior woman with an eye patch, and rather impressive scars. She nodded, and grunted, clearly approving of his thirst. Misreading his nervousness as manly thirst.

"So, you failed your mission?" The robed woman asked, a slender hand reaching out to take up an ornate stone goblet, inlaid with grapes, and filled with an incredibly fragrant Gegnarok wine known for both its spiciness and potency.

"No!" He said, whipping his head up. "The Dark Knight got us to the bridge, and helped us keep the Banshee at bay. The undead in the cemetery didn't even look at us. We were able to enter the castle, and draw all the maps Ravimir wanted." He turned his head.

The goblet paused halfway to Ravimir's agent's lips. "But?..."

"It's not going to work." He said, going quiet as the Geg wench brought him his mead, nodding absently and politely.

"Walk me through it, as they would say." She said, the goblet rising to her lips.

"Ravimir isn't going to be able to use the castle to hide the Xinyin." He stared at his tankard. "We thought the only thing there were ghosts. But there was something... Else. We couldn't even look at them, it just... Hurt to look at. The others were cut down, and I barely retrieved the map. There's no way our men are going to be able to fight these things! I saw one step through the damn portcullis like it wasn't even there!"

"I believe you." She said, her voice like honey. He hadn't noticed that quality.

"I'm... Sorry?" He asked, expecting to hear something entirely different from one of Ravimir's messengers. He'd personally seen one of his lieutenants gut a man like a fish with some sort of garden tool for mispronouncing his boss's name.

"I said, I believe you." She placed her hand on top of his. "Come, let us away to somewhere more pleasant to discuss the details.

"You showed me quite a night." She whispered, caressing her lover's cheek. "I've never had anything quite like it before. I didn't know men could go more than once. Certainly I did not expect thrice."

She struck a match and lit a series, silhouetting her almost impossibly slender body and filling the room with the soft scent of rosebuds. "I never told you my real name, did I?" She asked, rhetorically. Her newest beau was too tired to answer her. "I had another one once, a long time ago." She admitted, extinguishing the match between her thumb and forefinger.

"But I was very different, then. I dare say I was a very simple creature." She donned a sheer robe over her wispy frame, casting a gauzy haze over her own shadow.

"I was only interested in destruction. I threw away countless lives so readily..." She placed a small box before her, opening it to reveal an extensive sewing kit. "When now, I can find so many more creative uses for them."

She threaded a large hooked needle with thick, stiff thread, drawing the knot tight with her delicate fingers. "Take you, for instance." She buried her needle in her material, and began to stitch the two pieces together. The material resisted with a soft pop as it passed through.

"After a night like that, most men wouldn't have anything left to give. Especially after a performance like that..." She continued stitching by eye, cocking her head to the side. "But even now, just laying there, you are a true inspiration to me."

"Before I came to know humans, I barely understood the difference between a living thing and a stone." Her stitching continued, her shoulders working as her fingers moved at a feverish pace. "I knew one moved, and the other did not... But I literally had no concept of life."

She slashed with a pair of scissors, severing her thread from the finished stitchwork with a loud snip. "But now I understand. Life is the fragile state in which free will remains securely fixed to an object." She lifted her candle and illuminated the patchwork corpse before her. Her eyes remained closed, but somehow she still saw her creation.

"When next you wake, my precious, you will be alive forevermore. Free from aging, disease and even death." She brushed her fingertips across his shoulder, which spread into arms from a young dragon, scaled to his. "As strong as your old body was, this new one will be stronger. Befitting your spirit."

"Many more will die." She said, donning a delicate lace mask. "Many dreams will end," spikes erupted from her skin, bloodlessly. "But as one of my Stitched, yours will live on with a dozen others in one strong body."



# Graveyard Sky



Composed of onyx, bone, and a blackened iron which refuses to take a polish, Graveyard Sky is a weapon which doesn't even attempt to hide its nature. It is an endless font of villainous intentions which can corrupt even the purest of hearts. In fact, that seems to be the sole purpose of its existence, the act of corruption itself.

Quite possibly a thinking being, it goes about its work by drawing in those who are virtuous by nature, offering them the power to bring their dreams to fruition. Oddly enough though, it slips through the fingers of those already tainted by evil intentions.

Starting, the sword may allow them to raise a lost loved, then progress to imbuing its wielder with increasingly greater power for each evil act they perform to reach their goal. Until, they finally commit the irredeemable act of murdering an innocent.

Their victim rises as a mindless zombie thrall, and Graveyard Sky feeds the wielder potent necromantic energies, its own power increasing as the corruption spreads. Eventually the sword finishes its work and abandons its former master to die at the hands of their enemies, disappearing for a time, to sleep until the next perfect victim stumbles across it.

Rumors of a counterpart, the Gallows Mercy, persist. A weapon which seeks only the evil of heart, and redeems them by encouraging them to use their strength for good. But if it exists, it has been lost for so long, or is so plain a weapon that it has never come to notice.

In battle the Graveyard Sky is fiendishly sharp, able to penetrate even magically fortified defenses, and as the wielder commits more and more evil acts it begins to glow with a necromantic purple aura which causes advanced decay to quickly set into wounds it has inflicted.

Stats: P223



# Berserkers

Berserkers are not new to Mhodica which is a world that has seen its fair share of war and strife, along with the unending rage that it can create in mankind. Despite that, Dephena's servant, Beitah, was not content with merely waiting for the potential to emerge. Instead she sought to cultivate it as one would any other crop.

Both Human and Stitched are fed a potion called the Blood Brew whose contents are known only to Beitah. Over the span of a week as they are force-fed the potion, while being told it was a special honor, their view of the world becomes distorted and hazy. Everything becomes red to them, and their eyes begin to sting. Eventually, the only thoughts they can entertain are unthinking violence and the primitive urge to kill anything that crossed their path.

The Berserkers are kept in a state of perpetual sleep by the Enchantresses that Dephena's Stitched have produced. Using their magic, they keep the berserkers fed a steady diet of docile dreams laced with the Enchantresses' voices until they practically fall in love. After which, they come to follow orders with perfect obedience.

The love, of course, is entirely one-sided, and each Enchantress can have as many as a dozen berserkers in their charge, ready to be unleashed on the battlefield at any given moment.

Even stranger, some men come and volunteer to become Bloodbrew Berserkers, rather than being forced. These men are either fleeing memories too terrible to bear or foolishly believe they can attain the power of a Berserker without losing themselves.

Regardless of whether they are foolish enough to believe the power comes without a price, they all fight without fear of death. Often they are capable of smashing through otherwise entirely intractable enemy positions, creating breaches that the undead can slip through as the Berserkers continue to clear a path into the heart of the enemy like battering rams.





A shaggy red headed giant of a man perused the wanted posters on Púca-abhainn. His eyes moved back and forth between a few that would make good candidates for a good beating. Though his stomach rumbled loudly a second later, and his nostrils flared at the smell of the freshly baked bread. If he wanted to put some food and mead in his belly, he was going to have to find a local prospect.

After greasing a few palms with gold, he had uncovered shocking information that he himself had been delivered to the orphanage where he had been raised, by a man named O'Connell. He had been accompanied by another son apparently, just old enough to walk, and both hailing from a village in Púca-abhainn. So of course he had come to see things with his own eyes. However, he had underestimated the amount of bribery it would take to get said information, and he now found he had rather less than two copper pieces to rub together.

Skimming past the mugs of the wanted, he found one that offered a reward of three hundred pieces of gold for a 'Foul Smelling Red Headed Ogre who swept down from Shivering Hills to the Freehold of Radgahamin and ravished the chieftain's daughter, Kyra Fehrin.' Knitting his brows, he glanced up at the hideous mugshot they'd drawn of him. "Well, it seems her uncle's tribe still disapproves of me..."

After a moment, he sputtered "I am not a foul-smelling ogre!"

"Oh, aye." A voice from behind him practically purred, and he heard the sound of steel being drawn, much steel. "You smell like lavender and a young maiden's hair. Now, turn around, monster. We'll not stab even a beast such as you in the back!"

Gearoid turned about, his boots grinding in the mud, as he beheld four bedraggled youths with crude, tarnished blades drawn upon him. He towered over all of them like they were but young children. The oldest, a buck toothed, toe headed inbred, couldn't have been older than seventeen. "Are you boys having a giggle?" He rumbled. "Trying to take the piss out of me?"

"Shut up, monster, we're not afraid of you, or your steel!" The smallest, maybe thirteen, snarled. What he held was little more than a dagger, which shook slightly in his hand.

"I'm not a monster, you little shits." He spat. "I'm just more man than all four of you salty pickles rolled together, I wouldn't even need my sword to deal with you lot, now piss off before I get angry." He eyed the largest boy hard. He was about the same age as he himself had been when he ran away and became a petty thug.

"Enough talk, get him!" The youngest shouted, raising his sword, and lunging.

Cocking a fist the size of a baked ham, Gearoid lashed out like a viper, striking him square in the nose and knocked him off his feet. He felt ass over elbows, into the mud and cobblestones with a splat. The other three stared and horror at the speed of their quarry.

"Hey!" A voice bellowed from across the street. "What are you disobedient little shits doing?!" A brown-haired man wearing a wreath of seeds around his neck shouted.

"We're going to slay the ogre!" The oldest said, still taking a step back.

"He's not an ogre, you ignorant whelp!" The man said in exasperation, then turning to the large traveler. "You may need to give them one more example. Try not to kill any of them."

"Father O'Connell!" The scrawniest one said, going white.

"No promises," Gearoid said, starting momentarily at the mention of the name but turning to take ahold of the face of the largest with his giant right hand. It wrapped almost halfway around his head. He then proceeded to chuck the child underhanded, fifteen feet into the nearest waters of the bog with a loud splash, his dagger clattering to the cobblestones.

"Mighty fine work, stranger," the man whom the children called O'Connell said, observing the boys retreat. "That'll keep the brats off the street after nightfall."

"Thank you," Gearoid said, nodding his head, and kicking the downed boy in the side, urging him to depart. "Did I hear them call you O'Connell?"

"Aye," O'Connell said, nodding. "And who might you be?"

"My name is Gearoid." He slapped his broad chest and his Old Tree tabard. "I came to this town looking for a man by the name of O'Connell. He and an older boy dropped me off at an orphanage when I was a wee baby." He made a gesture which indicated what, in his mind, a small baby was like. "I reckon that older man was me father, and I reckon that would make you... Me brother."

O'Connell blinked. "Aye, I can see how you might think that... As we are both such handsome men," he suggested, "But I'm afraid I've only lived here for four years. My father and I came from the other side of Fallomere." He nodded up the hill. "I reckon I've seen the man you were looking for in the cemetery. Brayden, and Nolan O'Connell. Slain by a Cranfear twenty years ago."

"Then I came here for nothing," Gearoid said, lowering his head, and sighing loudly.

"Not nothing, my new friend," O'Connell said, crossing the street and clapping a hand on the taller man's shoulder. "You know where you came from, which is a start. Come, let's go to the bar, and I'll buy you an ale. The owner is selling soon, so we may as well drink him dry."

Looking up from his new friend, he observed the bar's sign. Though long in need of painting, it could be read as 'Skjaldmær', or Shield Maiden. "I've always wanted a bar of my own," he mused.

"Aye?" O'Connell asked.

"I have a wealthy friend indebted to me, and a shield maiden of my own that might just approve of this place."



—◆◆◆ Gearoid ◆◆◆—



Stats: P 202





## History

Though history seldom remembers, the fact is that Fallomere is the oldest continuously populated region of Mhodica. Though there were some older valley civilizations discovered by explorers in the mountains between the eastern and western regions, most of these ruins had been completely abandoned for many centuries.

Fallomere itself isn't unusually fertile, though in spite of that, its dominant feature is something that the locals have always called The Old Tree, or in some cases, Father Tree. This giant acorn tree was seemingly eternal, nothing that man or nature could do ever causing harm to its colossal form.

In the early days, the indigenous people known as the Fallomiri, erected a series of small shrines around the tree which allowed the locals to be closer to their god. Over time the Shamans came together into one group which they called the Order of the Old Tree.

Eventually, the needs of the druids became large enough that an arc of land was allotted for the peasantry to dwell, a small castle in the center which was always directly in the shade of the tree by noon. As time gradually sunk the many buildings down into the swampy ground, new levels were built on top of the old. This process created an odd array of inter-connected tunnels, though only the top few were ever usable. The lower, more unstable and uninhabitable layers were said to connect the entire city at this point though.

## Government

While Sorrogol, and by extension all of Fallomere, is ostensibly ruled by The Silent King; the day to day reality of those living in Fallomere is quite different.

The Order of the Old Tree and its Druid Priests enforce the laws as given to them by the Silent King. They, or the corrupt Knights of the Branch who are used as the city guard, exact taxes, claim tribute maidens for their order and punish anything perceived as heresy.

The occasional petition to the Silent King is granted, but his silence is interpreted by the Priestly attendants who surround him at all times in his courtroom.

Over time, the Priesthood has become more depraved with their countless failed experiments of imbuing the light of The Old Tree into humans or new saplings, producing horrific monsters known as The Misbegotten. Because of this, while once their rule was entirely unchallenged, they have now begun to sew the seeds of rebellion instead of ascension.

The Renaitre Clan, led by Morene Renaitre, and a core band of other aggrieved individuals, have been using necromancy to experiment upon the undead and raise an army of highly specialized undead to Challenge the Order of the Old Tree.

While many are as afraid of her as they are of the order, and with good reason, a few have begun to rally to her banner. Additionally, the man the public has marked as the last true Druid of the Old Tree, O'connell, makes appearances when he can escape from the bar he runs to attempt to appease or destroy The Misbegotten where they are bold enough to enter the town.

## Culture

In the spring, they fill the trees with small cages made of rolled brambles which attract and ensnare small will 'o the wisps which they use to light their trees for their only joyous festival. They enjoy fried honey bread, mead, and meat while the Order of the Old Tree fasts beneath their god.

At dawn each day, the citizens turn to face the old tree and recite The Prayer of the Shaded Bough: "We thank thee, great sire of the forest for the protection of thy shade. We thank thee for the nourishment you grant, and in death, we shall return this nourishment to you." The ritual is repeated at noon and sundown, and only visiting foreigners will escape caning by the priesthood if they're caught not performing.



At lunch, a small morsel of their meal is pinched off and sprinkled upon the soil as an offering to the land.

Once a year, five tribute maidens, ages twelve to sixteen, are given to the Order of the Old Tree supposedly to be trained as oracles. But only The Order itself ever interacts with them, meaning those taken are as good as dead to their loved ones. Only the richest families can buy off The Order to spare their daughters of this fate.

Their farming and crafting are often very simple, their lack of any mineral resources means quality steel commands a near king's ransom in their soggy lands. As such, their blacksmiths often turn out rough quality work. Anything ornate needed to be brought in from the outside. They take pride in the simpleness of their products, be it food, clothing, weapons, or even the rare rough cut amber gemstones harvested from the swamp.

With the advent of the Misbegotten, the locals began to line their windowsills and doorways with salt. This is an expensive but necessary habit in their eyes, as the salt keeps away the horrible monstrosities as well as other lesser forms of undead.

In Fall, the leaves of The Old Tree are collected and used as a prime ingredient to brew the ceremonial tea that the locals drink breakfast, noon, and night to ensure they remain healthy.

## Daily Life

Rising well before Dawn, the farmers and tradesman get to work on their fields or preparing their shops, stopping only to perform morning worship and take breakfast. This meal is usually brought by wives or boy children, to avoid the priesthood getting too good a look at their daughters.

They return to their homes between nine and noon to avoid the priesthood as the Order make their daily pilgrimage to the trees. Its quite common for the work folk to take a brief nap before the noon meal, though returning to work right after.

Business is conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible until sundown, after which they return to their homes or businesses and do their best to continue avoiding the priests.

After dinner, they lock their homes as tightly as possible to protect themselves from the monsters, as The Order of the Old Tree has almost no interest in saving the peasants from such perils.

However, despite the danger, the night is the only safe time for lovers to rendezvous, young women often try and escape the land and flee the fate of an oracle, or even simply let money change hands.

The Misbegotten are not the only things to stalk the night, though. The Renaitre come out after dark to invade the priests home, leaving them beaten, bloodied, murdered, and robbed. The Knights of the Branch often clash with Morene's forces in the street, occasionally hiding among the commoners as moles.







## Knights of the Branch

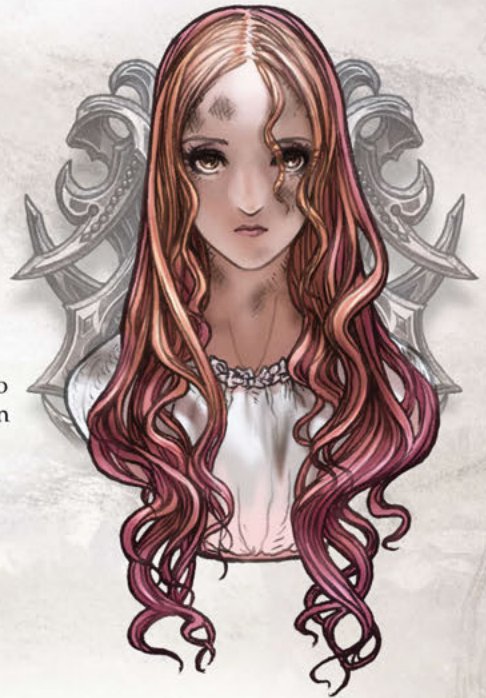
Less of a policing force, and more of an officially endorsed gang of thugs. The Knights of the Branch administer harsh justice to anyone they claim to be violating the laws of Fal omere unless they can provide a sufficient bribe.

While they do fulfill their purpose of upholding the law and protecting the citizens from bandits or The Misbegotten, they usually do so begrudgingly at best, and will even extort the citizens for their protection.

## Children of the Hidden Leaf

Young boys and girls that catch the eyes of The Order are ripped away from the arms of their parents either as small boys or nubile maidens.

The boys are taken to be conditioned to be new priests, and the women to be the unseen 'oracles' who speak the wisdom of the tree. It's not uncommon for these children to be on the run.



## Leaf Keepers

Those women who weren't attractive enough to become 'oracles' or managed to hide their beauty lived long enough to see dozens of children 'harvested' by the Order.

Rightly believing the Order has long since lost its way, these women are often the keepers of many child runaways, smuggling them from house to house to avoid suspicion until they are past an age where they will be hunted.

## Priests of the old tree

Taken from a young age, and trained in the ways of their order, the priests are conditioned to a life of false humility, gluttony, and ruthless domination.

They are made to believe that they are gardeners and that the people of Fallomere are either their crops or weeds to be pulled. If they obey without question, they are the crop, if they impede their hedonistic lifestyle and foolish pursuit to take the power of the Old Tree for themselves, than they are weeds to be pulled.





## Velmene

In a piss reeking dark alley in Fallomere's largest city, Sorrogol, a young woman marveled at the situation. Velmene's eyes darted up and down her wanted poster. She had to admit, they portrayed her surprisingly well in this one. Even though she went out of her way to constantly change her looks with magic, this particular rendition was oddly close to her real self. The slender woman thoughtfully ran a finger over one of the inky centipede marks on her skin before flicking a lock of her dark red hair impatiently.

"It's a pretty good likeness, don't you think?" A bourbon smooth male voice purred from not too far behind her.

A smirk rose to her lips. "I've never met the woman, but I must say she's a striking young lady. You're the one who's been following me all afternoon, yes?" The man behind her couldn't see it, but her tattoos seemed to wheel about in place then retreat below her neckline and out of sight.

"How about you turn around and face me, love?" The voice suggested. "There's no need to make this difficult."

Velmene turned, presenting a face identical to the wanted poster to her stalker. The bounty hunter was a man from the Order of the Old Tree. He wore a modest crown of branches around his head and had a deeply lined face crisscrossed with scars. He seemed confused though. His striking hazel eyes roamed over her face in confusion. Her clothes differed entirely from that sketched on the wanted poster. She had also used a bit of illusion magic while turning, changing her features just enough to become less of a match.

"But I thought..."

"That I was the dangerous witch from Ordo Obscurum who was passing out evil relics, corrupting women, and scribing secret magical messages hidden all over Fallomere?" She inquired sweetly, primly placing a hand over her bosom. "I'm afraid it's a case of mistaken identity, good sir. I'm just a humble maiden out for a stroll." His lip curled after a moment. "No, you'll not fool me with your witchcraft. The Old Tree shelters me from your evil as it shelters me from the sun."

"Woe is me!" Velmene cried out, clutching her chest. "You've seen through my clever disguise! My 'evil' is undone!"

"Talk smart while you still have a tongue girl, you're going to swing from the tree by your guts soon." He poised his hand for a strike with the knife he held.

"The only reliable thing about cults... Is that they're all run by dumb assholes. Makes it easier to keep Rodríguez and Fernández fed." She sighed in amusement as a pair of shadows rose up over her accuser. The hunter didn't even get a word out in reply as a duo of twenty foot long centipedes descended upon him in an avalanche of claws and mandibles, creating a small eruption of blood and screams.

She leaned down, waiting for her pets to give her an opening then snagged his coin purse. "The best thing about your cult is I'll never run out of money as long as you idiots pursue me." Velmene winced away from the blood spatter and wiped a bit of arterial spray from her cheek.

"Even if you're all hell on my wardrobe."





Most weapons made in Fallomere are dull, sturdy fare. The ordinary nature of their design has much to do with the belief that humility is an important virtue.

The arrival of a third party in the cold war between The Renaitre and the Order, the young anarchist and craftswoman Velmene, harkened a change to some of these weapons though. Using her knowledge of necromancy, she can and does lend them powerful augmentation.

Many once common weapons have been modified and enhanced by Velmene to be truly lethal instruments, rather than merely serviceable.

Such weapons changed at her hands can do wondrous things like inflicting poison, diseases, or cause difficult to stitch rips in the skin. Many of the peasants are terrified by the weapons, and are often more than willing to sell them to anyone willing to take them off of their hands.









# Food & Lodging

In Falomere, the food, like anything else, is often prone to confiscation by The Order of the Old Tree. At best the items can be described as decadent and modest. Of course, instead of being destroyed, it's common for the Order members to greedily consume it themselves.

For this reason, the food crafted by locals is often treated much like their daughters who are all raised and dressed to appear as plain as possible. The more dull and unappetizing the food is made to seem, the less chance they have of being taken.

While their dietary staples include easily preserved items such as salt pork, pickled vegetables, hams, and bog butter, they will also occasionally have fresh meat brought by traders, or available when an animal is freshly slaughtered.

One of the few things that even the Order of the Old Tree turns a blind eye to regarding decadence is the local beer. The brewers of Fallomere are labeled geniuses who have turned every ingredient imaginable to extremely potent and flavorful beers and meads of every description.



## O'Connell

The town of Púca-abhainn was always a place of troubles. As long as it had existed, its ample clear but infertile land had made it the ideal site for burying dead as the northern areas were simply too swampy or rocky.

Also, they served as the pauper's graveyard for any foreigners who traveled through the land. Meaning that many of those passing through that perished in the town, often never left it. Any village filled with the graves of so many mixed foreigners is bound to stir up a great number of resentful spirits. However, unlike anywhere else is Fallomere, it was not to The Order of the Old Tree that locals turned when the dead rose from their graves, but to the town tavern.

That is why tonight the barkeep, known only as O'Connell, sat alone in the center of his town's muddy avenue, sipping from a tankard of ale in the light of the full moon. As he waited patiently, perched on the lip of the town fountain, he sniffed the air and found the stench of death was growing stronger.

He didn't have long to wait. Eventually, the shaggy, scarred giant of a man lifted his head as the sound of heavy, wet steps met his ears. Approaching from the graveyard which lay beyond the row of houses lining the town's main street, they grew closer. Grunting, set down his tankard and tied his hair into a tight bun. Wiping the suds from his warm, brown ale, he stood up and dusted off his apron.

"Well, beast." He said, his lilting yet leathery tone softer than one might expect. "I have t'be up to make the morrows pies at sun up. So do show yourself sooner rather than later, if it pleases 'ye."

From the alley, a massive ten-foot tall conglomeration of gnarled tree roots, branches, corpses, and mud slowly but

inexorably drew itself from the alley and stomped towards him, emitting a burbling moan from what passed for its throat.

Seemingly in response, it balled up a fist and smashed the corner of a cobblestone house as if it was made of parchment; the crash echoing through the alley behind it. A Blight Bogle. One of the worst possible guests. O'Connell only had one trick up his sleeve that might save his skin against such a foe.

"An unhappy lot you be." He observed, pitching the ale from his mug and wiping the earthenware vessel with a rag. "Never shoulda buried Geg together with regular men, you poor souls had no idea which way they were to go." He then bent over and scooped up some of the water from the fountain in his mug.

The creature rounded on him, threw back its arms, and filled the night with a bellow that shook the shutters on all the hovels on the block before beginning to stomp towards him. Each thunderous step of its heavy elephant like feet smashed cobblestones and spread muck back and forth, making a complete mess.

"One 'o us ain't leaving here tonight." O'Connell proclaimed, drawing a seed from a pouch which hung around his neck. "And I can't trust 'ye to make the pies, so it's gonna have to be me. Even if I have to use the last seed given to me."

He dropped it into his mug of water, triggering a flash of bright pink light.

The creature pulled short, recoiling from the light, then angrily opened its gaping maw and vomited forth a torrent of disgusting slime filled with all manner of decaying flesh and refuse.



O'Connell sidestepped quickly, dodging the vomit. As he did so, he caught a glance at the fountain behind him which had been thoroughly befouled. Briefly, he was glad cleaning up after this thing was not a job he'd agreed to. "It's okay; I forgive you, you're just confused." He pitched his mug forward, splashing it with the luminous pink water.

The creature howled in despair as the water sank into its muddy frame and suffused it with the glow of a thousand cherry blossoms in spring. It began to flail about, stumbling towards O'Connell frantically.

Swiftly back pedaling, O'Connell drew a pair of knives from beneath his apron and flicking them casually, came to put out the creature's festering eyes cleanly. "It'll be over soon, lost one." His scars seemed to reflect the light as he dogged another blow.

The creature howled again, and rounded once more, striking downwards with all its might, sundering the fountain into a massive hail of stone chips and polluted water.

O'Connell shielded himself as best he was able, throwing his arms up to block the shrapnel. Unfortunately, he still took a blow to the head from a piece of stone the size of an apple and crumpled to the ground like a felled tree.

O'Connell lay helpless as the creature stumbled in his direction, somehow still sensing his presence. He lifted his head in time to see the monstrosity raise both of its arms high into the air, ready to turn him into a sticky paste with a blow that could flatten a house.

But there the creature stopped, the sickly light in the many skulls dotting its muddy body went out one by one, and the surface of the creature began to dry out and crack.

O'Connell pulled himself together and stood, legs shaking and the rest of his body trembling. "This land is not what it once was." He told the creature. "Stay not here, but go and be free." In a sharp flash, the entire creature crumbled into dust, releasing a cloud of dazzling colored lights which sped away into the sky, leaving behind a pile of ash and a pale glowing sapling.

"You're welcome." He said to the departing spirits. "In the next world, buy me an ale and show me around and we'll call it even."







## Mother Bough

For as long as recorded history, Fallomere's swamps and rocky fields have been home to Bears, Boars, and Wolves of unusual size and savagery. Unfortunately, many minor forms of undead also roam about such as Draugr, which are zombies bent on taking revenge on their murderers, and mindless skeletons.

However, when the Order of the Old Tree began its experiments to try and reproduce the Old Tree or even to transfer its power to another living thing, that was the beginning of the truly dark times that Fallomere faces.

Attempts to sprout seeds using the bodies of humans and other beings only created nightmarish abominations touched not by the Trees grace and fertility, but twisted by the unnatural birth the reckless Order have thrust upon them.

Collectively called The Misbegotten, these abhorrent creatures and bizarre undead hunt the local peasants, as well as their livestock.

When a Blood Leaf Banshee is laid to rest by force without its murder being solved, it will often simply return to life within a fortnight. The only way to silence its pitiful wails is to bury it on holy ground. Unfortunately even then, it is replaced with an even greater terror.

Though smothered, the Banshee's anguish calls out to all the spirits for scores of miles around, drawing them to it even through consecrated ground. Other banshee might even head the call.

Growing stronger as it gathers the other spirits to itself, vines begin to sprout out of its burial place. Clawing free of its coffin, the banshee's new tendrils pull in corpses, bones, and the roots of trees to itself until it has the strength to burst from the ground.

Defiling the soil for nearly a mile in all directions as it emerges, the Mother Bough is a husk of its former self, more tree than creature. Its harvested skulls chatter, and branches groan as it indiscriminately seeks out any creature that moves. Though what it truly seeks, is those that wronged it. When found, the Mother Bough brutally kills and then buries its prey to rot in a cold grave. It cares not who might get in its way, and calls to its aid any undead horror in the surrounding lands to itself.

Nothing short of being chopped to pieces, burying its still beating heart in a phylactery of holy water, and every last bit of its body being burned to ash will stop the creature. All of which is easier said than done as its form is as hard as bone and home to all manner of repulsive undead, a sweep of its branches able to smash wagons or building fronts like a runaway boulder.





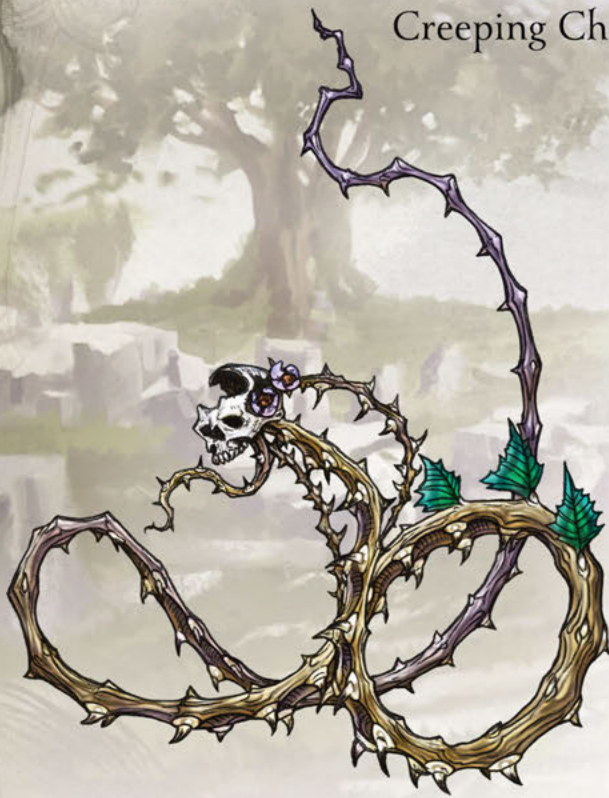


## Creeping Charnel Vipers

If a thorned vine is exposed to cursed blood, or the living red leaf vines shed from Blood Leaf Banshee, they can become a malevolent, serpent like entity that seeks out catacombs and other charnel sites like mass graves to make their lairs.

It seeks a human skull in particular, which it uses to protect the delicate blossom that is the core of their being. After which, they then begin to hunt human prey to slay with their deadly venomous thorns. Their thorns snap off in the skin of the victim and wiggle their way down to the bone, sending tendrils shooting up to the dying victims brain and coercing them into the wild towards its parent's nest to die. The thorns then emerge from the dead body as full grown Charnel Vipers, bringing their hosts skull with them.

The parent and its offspring reap the rewards of the blood fertilized soil, and seek to poison as many humans as possible, favoring those who are kin to those it's already stung. They may also share nesting sites with Cranfear, or other undead.

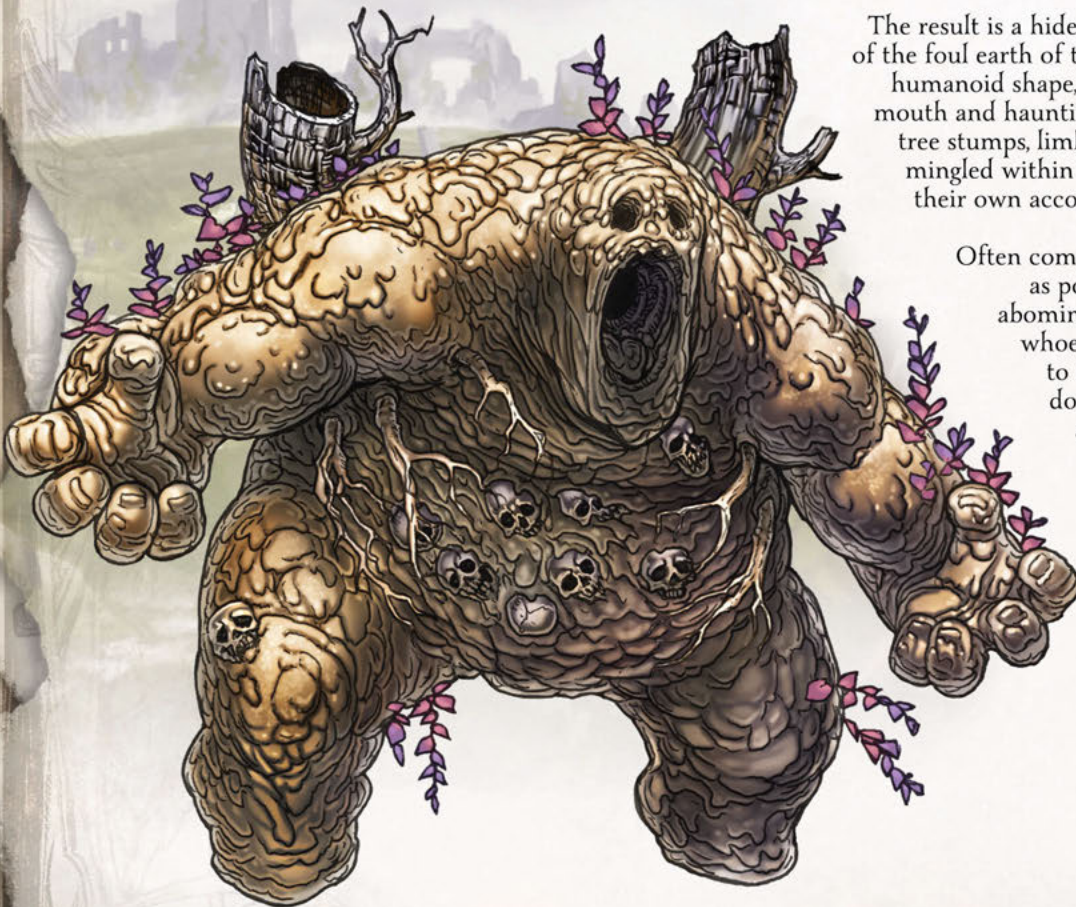


## Loam Bogle

When the Aria of Ruins cursed energy seeps into old mass graves, a curious thing happens. As opposed to raising zombies or skeletons immediately, it spends weeks or months reanimating an entire, coagulated mess of decayed bodies as well as the mud and trees they've been absorbed into.

The result is a hideous, oozing monstrosity. Composed of the foul earth of the grave which is held in a vaguely humanoid shape, it ambles about with a vast gaping mouth and haunting empty eye sockets. Creeper vines, tree stumps, limbs, skeletons and rotting corpses are mingled within the body and occasionally move on their own accord.

Often commanded by more intelligent undead as powerful living battering rams, these abominations often seek to take revenge on whoever buried them in their mass grave to add their bones to its mass. It brings down its foes with massive heavy fists, and expels vile clouds of nauseating sludge from their mouth that can grip those struck by it with such a powerful vomit reflex they're staggered.





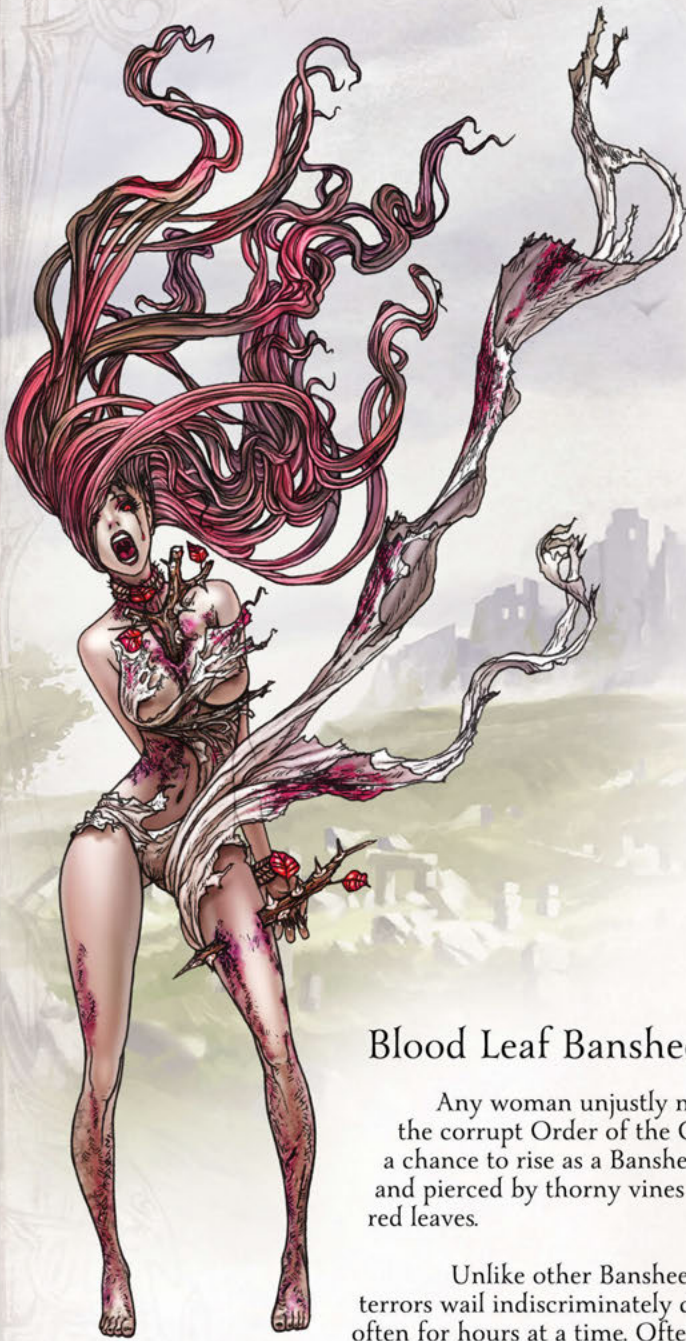
In their mad experiments to try and gestate the seeds of the Old Tree into a mirror of their mother, many abominations have been wrought by the Order of the Old Tree. Few of their experiments were so traitorous as that performed on the dead of the Gegnarok.

Knowing that the Gegnarok had an unusual affinity for the earth itself, they reasoned that if they were to plant a seed within one of their bodies, the results would be more pure than the results which produced the Cranfear. However, instead of a proper sapling, what grew from the corpses of the Gegnarok were horrifying chimera like beast. The sturdy legs of a Gegnarok, talon like hands, whipping thorny tendrils from his back, and a hideous grinning mouth.

When they burst from the ground they were planted in, these grinning ghouls were set with a hunger for chaos. Posing as ordinary bushes by night, they emerge into broad daylight and call out with the voices of women and children. Luring people out of the safety of villages then falling on them like wolves, devouring them completely.

They capture and strangle small animals, waiting for them to putrefy, and then use them to poison the town wells. When villagers inevitably scatter, the creatures harry them, taking the adult women so they can devour them, needing their flesh as sustenance so they can lay their vile eggs and increase the size of their flock before moving on to the next village.

## Fachen



### Blood Leaf Banshee

Any woman unjustly murdered by the corrupt Order of the Old Tree has a chance to rise as a Banshee, wretched and pierced by thorny vines with blood red leaves.

Unlike other Banshees, these pale terrors wail indiscriminately day or night, often for hours at a time. Often its wailing is a direct appeal to its own loved ones for aid. Often prostrating themselves and begging, but if unanswered too long, their torment grows too great to bear. Beginning to shed their constantly growing vines, they twist into the shape of venomous snakes and attack indiscriminately, inflicting a powerful plant toxin with their thorny bite.

Those who are subjected to their wailing will slowly lose their mind, and can only recover if the Banshee is appeased and then slain. If it goes too long without its murder being avenged it can turn violent, and is utterly immune to any weapon which is not magical in nature.

The most common way known to appease a Banshee is to identify its murderer, bring them justice by slaying them, then lay the Banshee to rest by stabbing it through its heart with a wooden stake drenched in its murderers blood.



Stats: P 221



—◆◆◆& Morene Renaitre ◆◆◆—





Lady Morene stood back-lit by the eternally guttering flames that emanated from the lanterns fueled by her blue magic of necromancy. At the moment, she leaned over the outside balcony railing of the half rotten manor house she had come to call home.

At her side were her sister, her knight, and her mentor. Her pet killer had left her, but given how she had come by her it was to be expected.

Beneath their watchful eyes, the new family that they'd created converged in a vast throng from the surrounding swamp, coming up to the the manor yards like a rising tide.

"Begin." Encablossa the Lich urged, placing a bony hand on her shoulder. "Seize the initiative and do not relent. Command them."

As the undead spoke, Morene's perfectly preserved flesh-golem sister Malachai, almost covered before the sight of the assembled masses before them. She clung to the firm arm of her lover, Volkenstrun for comfort.

"Be strong my dearest," the laconic knight urged. Volkenstrun then gently stroked Malachai's shoulder before murmuring a wordless encouragement to Morene.

"The time has come at last!" She shouted into surrounding swamps, leaning forward. "My children, for too long have we suffered under the yoke of the Order of the Old Tree."

She did her best to make eye contact with as many of her followers as she could. "They burn us for any perceived slight against their god's damned tree, they hang us from its branches, they fertilize it with our dead and bury our bones in shallow graves!"

After pausing for effect, she continued "They do it all with a clear conscience like there is nothing insane with a giant weed being treated with more reverence than the people of Fallomere!"

She pounded her fist on the railing, breaking the half rotten wood like a twig. "No more! The time has come for Fallomere to rise-up! Rise and rip down their wicked tree!"

She threw her hand out, pointing at the heart of her new family, her Renaitre Clan. "I say we shall no longer be the victims; we shall be the victors! We will burn them, and fertilize our neglected fields with their bones!" Cheers followed her.

"Who is with me?!" She demanded, even louder, as she spread her arms wide in the air.

In response, the army of undead gathered before her. Drawn from the disenfranchised, the excommunicated, and the exiled, they all roared loudly in adulation for their master.

Morene may not have created the curse of undeath, but she had turned it into a weapon. A weapon she intended to bury deep in the heart of those who had wronged her and her family.





Encablossa





Before his dark legend began, Encablossa was an explorer, perhaps even one of the greatest who had ever lived. Traversing the Crater of Imperium's mirror, he even discovered the Gokibito's legendary 'first hive' which lay in the farthest reaches of the East. However, that all ended when he decided to undertake an exploration of the treacherous and deadly Wither.

He and his entire entourage disappeared into the dark and unforgiving realm for years, only to return changed into horrifying undead. Claiming they were transformed 'By the sight of Her face' they didn't elaborate as they began to carve a path of ruin through the western kingdom, not only raising skeletons and zombies, but also creating odd new creatures as they went.

It was only the result of a massive inquisitorial manhunt that they were rooted out of their lair. Encablossa's minions were slain and his phylactery taken to be sealed away in the order of the now defunct Witch Hunters sisterhood.

For decades he was bound in an eternal sleep, until the existence of his remains was cataloged by Arnadt Twispin in one of his volumes of Dark Sorcery. Few gave any credence to the notion he remained alive until the fledgling dark disciple named Morene stole his phylactery.

\* \* \*

Morene worked slowly beneath her master's shadow, though also within the glowing light of the infernal relic that was both said master's prison and immortality. Around them, the cold damp air seemed to form dew on the walls and ceiling that belonged to Morene's family basement, serving to add to the odd, tense atmosphere. "This had best not be a trick." She said. "Elsewise, I'll put you back where I found you."

For his part, the ancient monster ignored her threat. "Slowly..." The Lich said, his hands hovering over his apprentice's bare skin where it showed from the back of her dress. "Very slowly... More than the barest drop of my phylactery's essence will have... Unintended side effects." Encablossa's voice was strong and deep, but also somehow rotted from within.

Morene knitted her delicate brows, and hunched further over the open vessel of her teacher's essence. She felt the cold horrid air off his fingers, and this spurred her on. She plunged her eye dropper in and took the tiniest amount she could with the most careful pinch of the caps bulb.

Once sure, she quickly withdrew her hands from the stinging, freezing green mist. "Yes, that's the way." Encablossa purred.

Morene turned her eyes towards the grubby workman's hand she had purchased from the grave digger. Upon it already lay a drop of blood, drawn from her own forefinger.

"In the palm, with your blood."

Exceedingly careful, she poised the dropper over the severed hand's palm, and squeezed the liquid free of it carefully. The drop of sickly green fluid landed atop and immediately began causing a disturbance along with the blood. In a split second though, both the blood and the ichor were absorbed through the skin and disappeared into the hand.

Morene frowned a bit as she leaned back, Encablossa seeming to float back as she did so. "It was faster than I expected. Did... It work?" Her eyebrows shot up inquisitively.

"It is now bound to your blood." The Lich said, gesturing to the hand. "It only awaits you to tell it to move."

"Stand up." She said, raising her chin. As she did so, the hand sprung to life. It flipped over and landed on its finger tips with a soft thunk, seeming to stand waiting for the next command. Morene started, but after a moment, she laughed softly. "So it does... With this little friend to open doors for us, it'll be much easier to come and go. It'll not be long before my sister..." She trailed off in thought, the possibilities she longed for seeming far more obtainable now.

"Indeed, my apprentice."

The purple glow in the Lich's eyes flared slightly. Now that this path had been embarked upon, sooner or later she would bring a human back to life. Once that had happened, there would be no turning back for her, and his legacy would be assured.

"Indeed..."









Though once an intrepid guardian of his home town, Volkenstrun was the absolute bane of the small raiding parties that harried the local caravans. The thought of his childhood beloved, Malachai, waiting at home for him was all he needed to push the limits of his body and skills to ever greater heights.

Thus it was until the Renaitre clan, long suspected of dark sorcery, was almost completely wiped out by an inquisitor who had discovered Morene's dabblings and extensive collection of tomes. As punishment, they had all been burnt at the stake as witches. Though somehow, his beloved's sister Morene was the lone survivor.

Even though he discovered Morene was the one who had brought the wrath of The Order of the Old Tree upon her family with her study of Dark Magic, he knew as well as anyone that The Order and its Inquisitors were rotten to their roots. Not only had Malachai covered for her, but he couldn't bring himself to blame her either, and joined her in mourning.

After burying their dead, Morene revealed that she had been ready to retrieve an artifact said to hold the secrets of life and death. It was currently being kept in the Inquisitor's now abandoned Witch Hunters' mansion. Despite the dark implications, Volkenstrun knew that this could mean he might one day hear Malachai singing once more.

Little did Morene know, but that what they were holding was actually the Phylactery of an ancient Lich.

\* \* \*

Morene cautiously pushed her way into the Witch Hunters' former mansion. As the door screeched open, moonlight entered the long abandoned room to illuminate the dirty furnishings, rugs, chairs, and the grand staircase. Her eyes were drawn towards the left of the stairs, which seemed to angle down towards what she hoped was the basement. With only a moment's hesitation she strode towards the cellar ingress.

"You were a fool to come here." Inquisitor Bentbough said, stepping from behind the musty mansion's front door. The rotund man wore the crown of branches that was traditional of their order, his robes hanging tightly on his overweight frame.

Morene whirled to confront him, her skirts swishing around her legs as she did so. She seemed unsurprised, however. "Bartholomew." She hissed through clenched teeth.

"First names, is it?" The inquisitor asked. "I remember when you sat on my knee and called me Uncle." He smiled warmly.

"That." She said, drawing a dagger from her bosom. "Was before you murdered my family."

He laughed, throwing his head back. "That was your fault, not mine." He shook his finger in a scolding manner.

"They were a good family, loyal to the Old Tree, they made their sacrifices, did not question the Order."

"But you killed them anyhow!" She screamed, crouching low, backing her way through the grand entryway, dust rising from the ancient red carpets.

"Of course I killed them." He said with a sneer.

"Just killing your sister would have never been enough. So they had to die, and the more spectacle the better." He took a step forward, drawing his short sword.

"That's not to say I didn't enjoy it, mind you. Especially the way your sister screamed." He reached for a weapon on his waist, stopping as a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

"That's all I needed to hear." Volkenstrun said calmly, squeezing down hard on the overweight inquisitor's shoulder.

"Volkenstrun..." The Inquisitor said, inhaling sharply. "Think about what you're doing. I'll overlook your affront on my person, just let me do what needs to be—" He made to turn, drawing his knife and slashing out wildly. "DONE!" He bellowed defiantly.

Volkenstrun reeled, blood streaming down the bridge of the nose from the flesh wound on his forehead. Without even acknowledging the wound further, he drew his long blackened blade with a rasp, and cocked his head to the side, his face half in shadow, half in moonlight from the doorway.

"Morene, go find your old ghost." He said tossing his head slightly.

"The Inquisitor and I need to have a conversation... About your sister."

As Morene practically scampered towards the basement, her guardian easily blocked the second strike from his murderous opponent.

Volkenstrun then grabbed the other man's wrist right out of his clumsy swing and twisting until the dagger fell to the wooden floor with a clatter and puff of dust.

"Now, uncle." He said, baring his teeth.

"Why don't you demonstrate the type of screaming you claim to love so much."


He stabbed his blade into the man's shoulder, eliciting a shrieking cry of terror.



Scarlet







Born and raised in a border town of the Sorrogol, Scarlet was the youngest of a small family of hunters, all of who secretly crossed the border to keep an eye on their western neighbors. She was only twelve though when her town was ravaged by a horde of undead fire breathing wolves and a vanguard of bizarre two headed zombies.

She had thought she would certainly die after her dagger broke off in the ribs of one monster, rendering herself without weapon. However, at the last moment a mysterious woman arrived and literally took the zombies apart with little more than a wave of her hands accompanied by incantations that young Scarlet did not understand. Though she had clearly not intended to take survivors with her, the woman was unable to resist the cries for help of a girl so small. She swept her up and left the burning village far behind.

\* \* \*

Scarlet had honed her understanding of necromancy over the years, though not to the degree of her mistress just yet. Her talents were weighted more heavily towards stealthiness and assassination, hoping to use those skills on who had ruined her family.

She had just returned from one of Morene's missions to the deep east. She had been instructed to acquire records of the Gokibito, for her mistress much desired to understand the magics and alchemy that had gone into their creation. She believed if she could find a potent enough mutagen, she might be able to stabilize some of her own undead creations. Her end goal being to hopefully help prevent carnage like what had overtaken Scarlet's own village.

The Undead were rapidly becoming a fact of life, and a horrible one at that. But Morene believed with proper understanding the undead could be brought to heel and harnessed. Scarlet left her things with Malachai, who after a trying day was little more than her empty vessel self. Trusting the golem girl to store her scythe, she noticed a skeleton standing aimlessly off to the side, one arm hanging oddly at its side due to damage. Sighing, she motioned for it to follow her up to the laboratory.

The lab its self reeked of every chemical, fluid, and nauseating substance imaginable. The dark wood of the walls appeared perpetually damp despite how incredibly dry the air truly was. Scarlet side eyed a large jar filled with a particularly vile looking chemical in which several human brains along with their eyes were suspended. She could swear that the eyes had swiveled to watch her enter...

Steeling herself against the remains of the zombies brains, she glanced about the lab finding no trace of her mistress. The skeleton finally caught up, walking in behind her and waiting numbly. Scarlet frowned then snorted a bit, the smell of the lab stinging her nose as always. Hesitantly she decided it would behoove her to perform the basic magic to repair the skeletons limp, immobile arm. Normally she would have to ask her mistress which incantations to use, but it seemed Morene had left her grimoire unlocked.

Though not expressly forbidden from reading her mistress's personal book of spells, Morene had never really volunteered to let Scarlet read it either. Taking a seat at the desk, she opened the book, flipping through a few pages. As she did so, she couldn't help but frown. Her mistresses' notes were more difficult to navigate through then the most complex assassination plan.

After nearly forty minutes, she finally found a page of sketches and notes detailing the fire breathing undead wolves that had burned her village. The notes described not just how to undo them, but to her horror, also how to create them.

The hand written notes in the margin read "Tests on Sorrogol village conclusively prove these two strains of undead to be completely unviable. While they slew the entire village, they burnt it to the ground in the process instead of bringing me the villagers alive. Only one small girl was salvaged. Perhaps she will be my next specimen?"

This was not what she had been looking for but it was suddenly far more important. After a moment of disbelief, Scarlet saw only red. She had been lied to for all these years, prostrating herself before the very monster who had slaughtered her village down to every last man woman and child except herself.

She stood silently and closed the grimoire. Raking her fingernails across the cover, she clenched her teeth so tightly she felt a tooth crack. Grabbing the book, she flung it against the wall, then turning to the skeleton, she commanded. "Wait ten minutes, then smash a lantern onto this desk." Her words were hissed through clenched teeth but still audible. Standing then, and stalked out of the room.

"This..."

She said speaking only to herself as she stormed from the building.

"This means war, Morene."





While her sister had always excelled at her learning, Malachai had always been a child of music and dance, which was a constant delight to their town in the desolate stretch of land known as Fallomere. Farming the stony fields or even making roads was difficult, and the local religion, the Order of the Old Tree was stifling. But Malachai herself was a ray of light in a truly gloomy region.

In a land where criminals, or those who studied magic, were hung from the boughs of the Old Tree with alarming regularity, she kept her family in good cheer. She and other young women from the town sang and danced in public squares, bringing such cheer that even the Inquisitors and Priests of The Order could not argue with such a sunny disposition.

When she discovered her sister's predilection for studying dark magic, she read the books and thought of them and their stories of wicked monsters and sorcery as some sort of entertainment, rather than heresy. As with anything else, she used the stories to entertain her family.

Unfortunately, that fact was why she hadn't been shy to read one of her sisters books in the presence of thier Uncle. However, when confronted by him and his men from The Order, she realized she had made a mistake. When asked whose book it was, she claimed to be the witch. Her hope had been to save her sister and the rest of her family, but all her altruism awarded her was watching her family hang from the Old Tree, and then to be burnt at the stake.

\* \* \*

The man blocked Malachai's passage out of the alley. The filthy, unshaven pig grinned as he brandished his knife. "Well, hello miss." He said, tipping an imaginary hat. "My partner and I have been waiting for you to ditch your friend in the guard's armor all day."

Malachai winced, and clutched her leather wrapped folio of Lady Oxford's short stories to her chest, taking a step backwards into the dirty, damp smelling alley between the bakery and the vacant couriers office. A hand fell on her shoulder. "That's far enough miss." A husky woman's voice said into her ear. "We've been watching you read that fancy book of yours. Looks mighty valuable, to us."

Malachai tensed up. "No!" She said clutching it tighter. "It's one of the only things I have to remember my family by!" She stepped forward, half turning to look at the scarred middle aged woman with greasy black hair behind her.

"Oh, we'll be having that book." The man insisted, stepping forward and slamming his open palm into the wall.

"It's my birthday. You've got to give a lady a present for her birthday." The ugly woman insisted, stepping forward as well, slamming her hand to the wall opposite of her partner.

Malachai huddled against the wall, shivering slightly. Ever since her sister had brought her back, stressful times like these had been hard. "I-I'd be happy to lend you the boo-"

"No." The man said, cutting her off. "Me lady is a rather particular sort, and only a present will do." He viciously pried the book from her delicate fingers eliciting a whimper.

"Thank you." The woman breathed. "Let me give you a goodbye present, love." She said, leaning in close, her body stinking of sweat and her breath reeking of beer.

She planted a kiss on Malachai mouth, eliciting a muffled squeal of outrage which faded into nothing.

"I think she liked it." The man scoffed. His laugh broke off as a resounding slap struck his face so hard he was sent staggering back from the wall spiting his teeth out in a spray of blood, dropping the book to the ground.

The woman gurgled weakly as another pale, slender hand wrapped around her throat and drug her away from Malachai's face. Only it wasn't Malachai anymore. She had retreated, unknowingly leaving the vessel her sister had crafted for her soul, to its own devices.

The vessel crushed the woman's windpipe, and kept squeezing until her neck burst like a boiled sausage, spraying blood across the alley like a splash of grease.

"What the hell?!" The man bellowed in horror, looking at the vessel between his fingers. He watched numbly as his partner's lifeless body splattered to the ground like a side of beef, the vessel then bending to pick up the leather bundle containing the book.

The last thing he ever saw was the wrapped package as it smashed into his face like a sledgehammer, his sight going red for a split second and then all was black.







Stats: P 208



# Ardent Catalyst

The peculiar mastercraft halberd known as the Ardent Catalyst has passed hands between heroes and villains so many times in its short life that it almost has a life of its own. If one looks past the stories second rate bards tell of it. However, the true origins of this bipolar weapon are grim enough for even the darkest tavern corner.

Now of course well known, the master craftsman Velmene was once just another talented unknown, toiling in obscurity. It was only after she became the target of a bandit and rapist of opportunity, that her outlook on the world changed in such a way to cause her to become the macabre master of the art that she is known to be today.

A common thief infiltrated her workshop late at night, heedless of the forge still burning as he came seeking to rob the supplies of any gold or silver. When he discovered the young artisan still at work, he cut her face to make sure she knew he was serious, and began to rip her clothes off.

Though she would have been able to fend him off on her own once he was distracted enough for her to reach her weapon, her well meaning oaf of an assistant managed to interpose himself, only to get both himself and the bandit killed in the process.

The unalloyed evil of the careless thief and rapist, and the unrequited love and selflessness of her idiotic assistant inspired her to incorporate both of their aspects into her current work. She used both of their ashes as a flux with which to forge her first masterpiece, creating a seemingly ordinary weapon that secretly enhanced the dominant tendencies in its wielder, either good, or evil.

In the hands of a villainous individual, it is capable of causing savage injuries which leave hideous scars upon the survivor that no amount of treatment will fade.

In the hands of a heroic individual, it slices deep and clean, and almost leaps to parry incoming blows against any friend nearby.



Stats: P224







# Hydracast



Art: Nele Diehl

## History

Hydracast was one of the most wealthy kingdoms of olden times, envied among all of their peers. Prosperous and sophisticated, it all changed when the kingdom was invaded by the greedy warlords led by Depher, a covetous young king from the northern kingdom of Agrigol.

The invasion was only successful because they had the insider help of troops that Depher had long bribed to infiltrate the castle walls, as well as bandit chieftains who were easily attached to his coffers like a baby at its mother's tit.

Soldiers and generals fought bravely, but the castle was lost and Umbria was chased into the underground treasure hold. There the event took a deadly turn. By some twisted fate, the young princess Umbria used the power passed down through her lineage to open the ancient prison that belonged to an even older evil. It had been imprisoned beneath the earth long before her ancestors came to the land, and had slumbered there ever since.

In an instant almost all lives perished; the invaders, the defenders, there was no one spared. They all died as the ancient evil flew past and through them. Only Umbria was left, much to her heartache.

After a day of oppressive loneliness amid the dead, Umbria was visited by a mysterious man and woman. They comforted her like they were her birth parents and put her to sleep, giving her a vivid dream about a silver-haired boy who would grow up with her in her dreams.

Though in recent years, a new rumor began to spread, started by a fortune telling woman named Luminitsa Fellows. After an intense vision, she believed that if one was to seek the truth of oneself, and of the world, it would all be hidden with the ruins of the Castle.

## Government

There isn't any sort of civilization still present in Hydracast. Umbria sleeps in her room, preserved by an unseen magical power, and the same magic energy keeps the undead outside the castle.

Whatever the source of this magic, it seems to be exerting force to keep a sort of order in the remains of the kingdom of Hydracast, though for what end is not known.

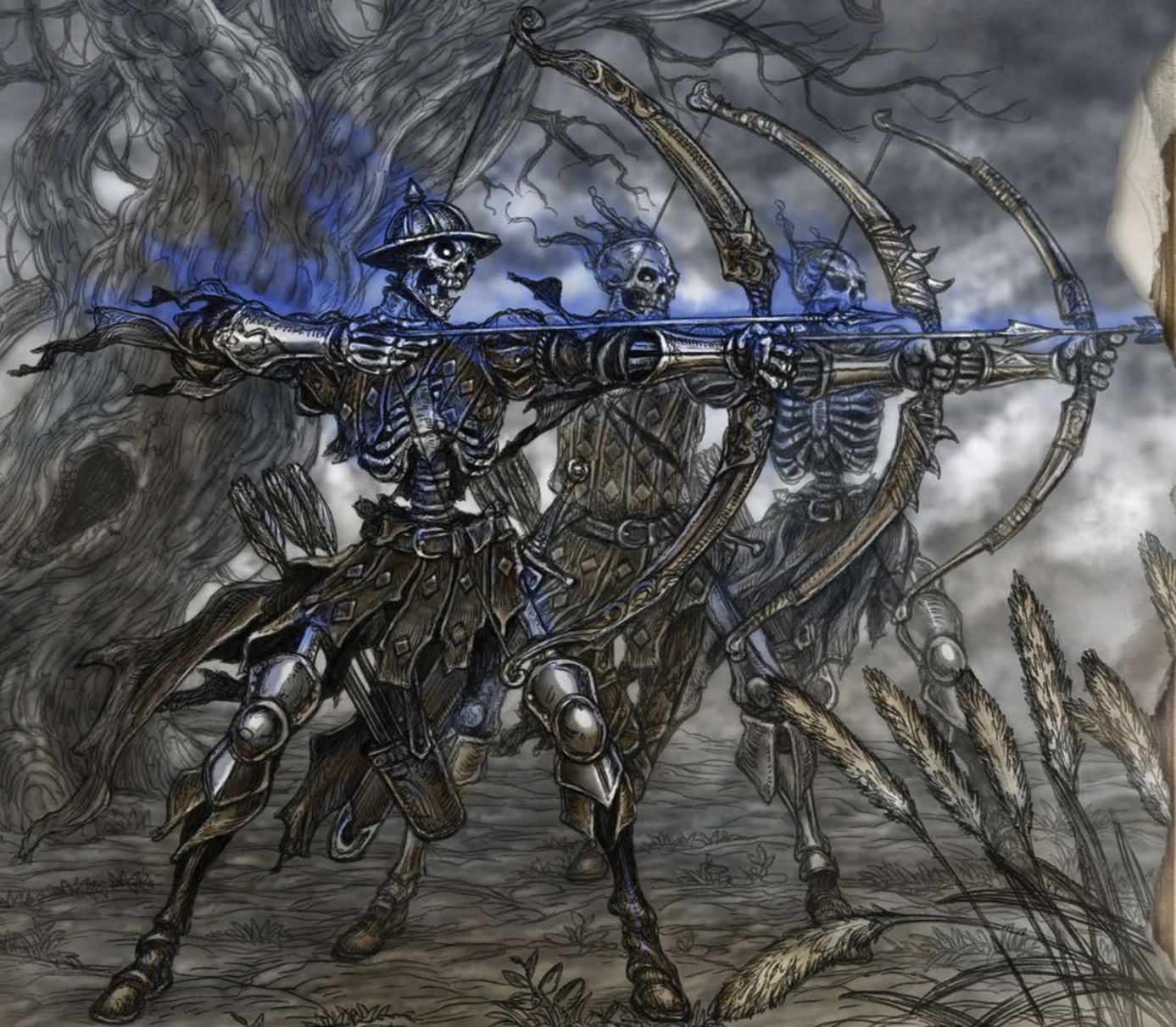
## Culture and daily life

While no living being still inhabits Hydracast, the days pass by almost on a schedule, as if the animals and plants all were born, grew, lived, and died according to a calendar arranged by unseen powers.

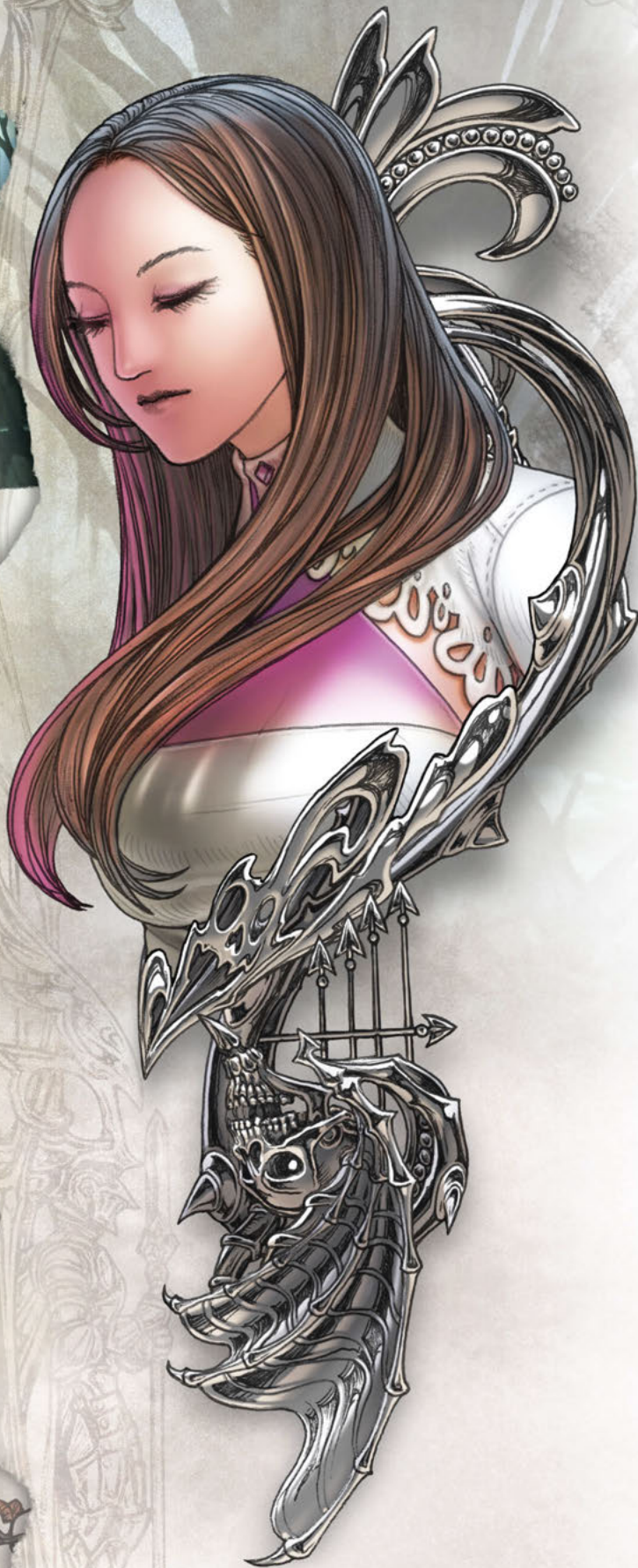




Undead Archers







A maiden princess, asleep forever more  
A maiden princess, from the farthest shore  
Heir to a great, skin as fair as the freshly fallen snow  
Wise like the great kings of old, from her the people's  
courage did

Since a curse she was given, the world has turned  
It is said she was cruelly shriven, and her kingdom did  
burn

An ancient power does sleep, burning deep within  
Waiting for a sign that her trial has arrived, that the Dark  
War will begin

Age upon age, asleep on the stone  
A mage among mage, sought to her make her their own  
Scarcely wake her they did, when her wrath instead they  
faced

Their great armies laid low, and from her sight they were  
chased

Now her true awakening is in sight, and for the right one  
she awaits

For they say a handsome bard's life is intertwined with  
her fate

Lucent finished the plucking of his notes and turned to  
the filthy backwater bar's current sole patron, a beatific  
smile on his face. "Well, what did you think?"

"Hmm." Greg said, rubbing his chin and doing his best to  
ignore the tap-tap-tapping at the window that was the white  
crow he had adopted weeks ago. It was very likely he should  
stop feeding it... "It's pretty, but do you suppose any of it is  
true?"

Lucent hesitated. "Some people believe it, and that's  
enough for me."

"But?..." Greg asked, sliding over the mead he'd offered for  
a song.

"As much as I'd like to think there's a gorgeous princess  
waiting for me out there, it all strikes me as huge pile of  
Gegnarok dung." He plucked a string discordantly, then  
snatched up his mead.

Greg sighed, and shook his head. "This is why I bought you  
the cheap mead." He grumbled.



## Lucent Lazara

Of all the bards in Mhodica, few are as celebrated, or as speculated upon, as Lucent Lazara. Something of a mystery, even to himself, his name is scattered all across the world.

He was first discovered as a baby by the servants of Teia on the outskirts of her island refuge. Once notified, she had the screaming infant brought to her immediately. While considered a reclusive hermit by many, she took the child in and gave him unconditional love, perhaps sensing that he, like her, was cast out of the wider world.

Until the age of thirteen, young Lucent was raised with tenderness and love by his adopted mother, the beast men, and all the other diverse outcasts who lived around him. He learned much about the culture of the beast men, from the Ygtolith Herdsman, to the Gegnarok Wanderers, the Gokibito scavengers, and even the Vragagora Marauders. He also became quite adept at playing the lute, as well as the harp.

Surrounded by different sights, sounds, and smells as compared to most other young boys, he grew up to see the world in different ways. Especially in that everyone had their own stories, even the most misunderstood, and he took it upon himself to tell these stories he learned to anyone who would listen.

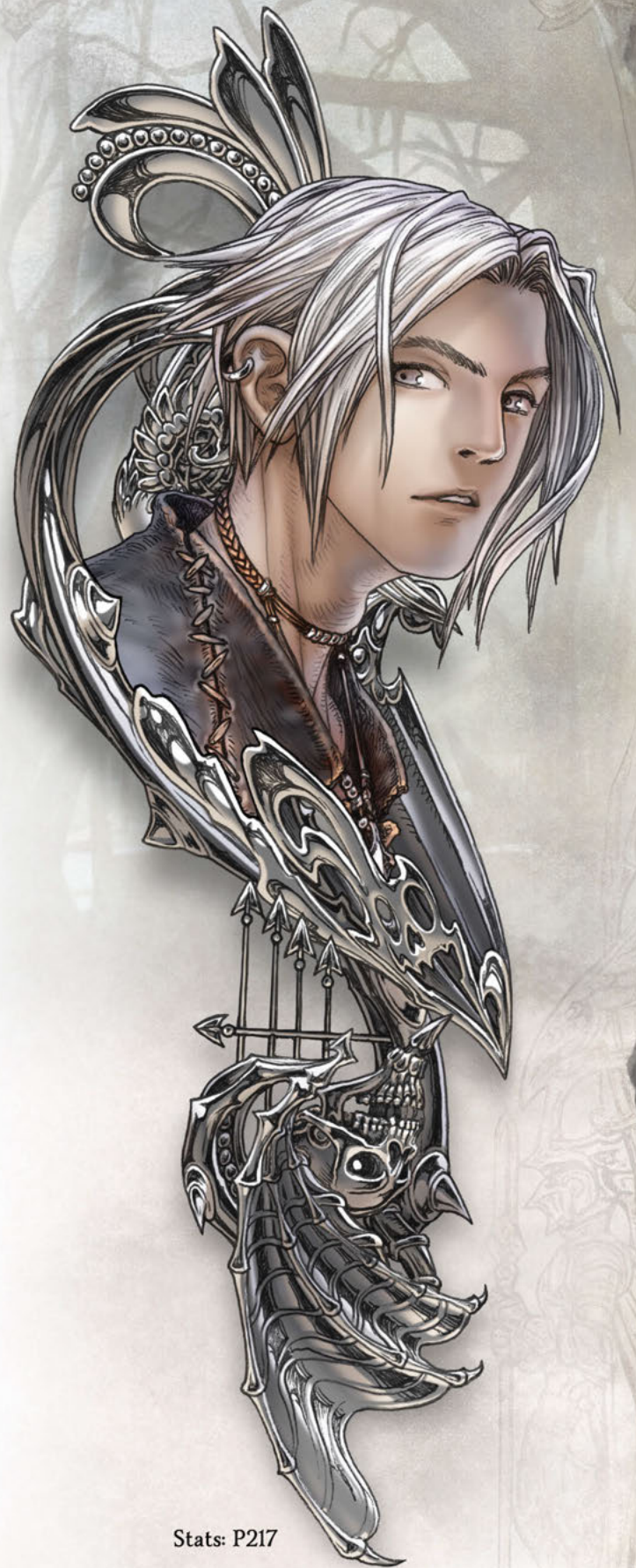
At 14 Teia arranged for him to study abroad with Lady Lazara who was the foremost mistress of the healing arts. While at first his ability to talk to anyone as equals made his fellow students despise him as they could only think of him as a spoiled noble's child, eventually they all discovered him for the genuine, open, friendly soul he truly was.

Lady Lazara was so taken with him, his progress in the healing arts, and his insistence on helping struggling students, that she gave him her own surname and adopted him as a second, albeit not legally binding mother.

Instead of returning to Teia's Chain, he took his lute and harp and began to travel the world. With only his gifted dagger and his instruments, he began to finally share his stories and songs with those he came upon and were kind enough to lend an ear. In the course of his solo travels, he managed to absorb all the folklore and rampant rumors from around the world like a sponge so it wasn't hard to gather attention quickly.

As his fame grew, so did the those rumors surrounding him. Some noted that around the time of his birth, Dephena, the Mistress of the Undead, had a son. This son had been disposed of due to a Luck Dancer prophesying that he would awaken a sleeping princess who would then herald in the end of the plague of undeath sweeping the land.

Fantasizing over the idea he was some sort of lost heir destined to awake a princess with a prince's kiss, Lucent was inspired to write a song about it which he called "The Gossip's Folly". In it, a parody of himself tries to awaken the princess, only to discover she was simply napping. When rudely awakened, she promptly throws him into the dungeon.



Stats: P217



No other human except the sleeping Umbria reside within the castle, but in the main knight's hall, many of the weapons and armor of her knights remain. Additionally, many other weapons from kingdoms and times both known and unknown have found their way into its vault somehow.

The contents of this armory are kept clean by the same mysterious force that seems to influence everything else in the area. They are placed majestically around the central statue of the former King and underneath, a set of centurion's armor is placed, shining on top of a marble pedestal. The effect is almost like a king holding court surrounded by soldiers from throughout the world and it's history.

In the Throne room, things are perfectly preserved as they were when the king was alive; no dust on the furniture, plants are inexplicably healthy despite no human watering them for centuries.

There are, however, four strange mirrors on the wall behind the throne. Each mirror has a different shape. One was tall, and decorated like a clock, one large and round decorated with a floral design, one small and round with a wing border, and lastly a femininely curved mirror draped with violin-like strings.

It is rumored that these mirrors are the very thing which Luminita Fellows' vision said can reveal one's destiny.









In all his years beyond counting, Mavin had found, studied, and finally mastered ten schools of magic. The only magic he refused to abide was vile necromancy. But he had felt something new moving in the world, and try as he might, he could not discern its source or nature.

To that end, he had come once again to the nearly forgotten land of Hydracast. A great evil had been done here once, to the point that anyone who had ever ventured here could only be certain of its catastrophe. It was something one could simply feel in their bones.

The island was large, temperate, well forested, and quite frankly beautiful. Even with the innermost regions patrolled by unusually itinerant skeletons, it should be teeming with settlers at the outskirts, but not even carrion-eating Gokibito would set foot here. This place was just -wrong- somehow. It was a mystery of importance secondary to only his current query.

The dilapidated castle was crawling with all manner of magical energies, especially where he was within the armory and mirror chamber. From beneath his hood, he examined the tall grandfather clock shaped mirror. It was the most intriguing of the four mirrors to him, as always. He'd investigated them all in his previous two expeditions, but somehow this one always seemed to have the most pull on him.

It was said by a wise fortune teller that they could provide a glimpse into one's future, or even reveal that which was hidden from sight from even great magic users. He'd tried everything he could imagine to attract the attention of the beings within, so Mavin was left with only one option.

He called forth all of his ten blades which hung in the air around him like a vast sunburst. They were the greatest of all his crafts, each hilt he'd crafted accompanied by a blade of condensed magic which corresponded to one of the ten schools he had mastered.

"I have come seeking wisdom." He announced, pulling his hood back, and addressing the mirror directly. "I do not know what dwells within. But be you gods, or devils, I beseech thee to answer me; what new magic is at work in the world? If you do not answer me this time, I will be forced to break you, one by one until I have what I came for." Honestly, he had no desire to do so, but it was the only leverage he had at his disposal.

In all the years he had attempted to contact the beings behind the mirror, he'd had no results of any sort beyond his usual reflection. But today, everything changed.

His reflection's face drew into a scowl, and the off-kilter cruciform scar on his forehead stood out in a vivid red. The blades in his reflections fell away, vanishing into dust.

"And just who do you think you are," His reflection demanded. "To threaten me that way?"

"I am a man who has been trying to get your attention for some time." He replied humbly, as if to a revered teacher.

"Nothing more. There is a mystery before me, and I seek the answers behind it. To that end I, have done all that was required to-

"The answers are not for you." His double spat, turning as if to leave, his tattered robe whipping audibly. "You ask the wrong questions."

"I... Beg your pardon?" Mavin all but stammered, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Answers belong to all seekers of knowledge. If there is a price I must pay, I will gladly pay it."

"Oh, will you?" The voice cracked in irritation, as if speaking to a foolish child. His double whirled about to face him, swiftly walking to the mirrors edge.

Mavin took two steps back in surprise. "If you mean to try and harm me," he cautioned "I am more than prepared to defend myself." He drew his swords before him, like a protective wall.

"Then prepare to defend yourself against your incalculable ignorance." His double drew its hand back, then slashed it forward. Imperium swords with hilts matching Mavin's own design but with blades possessing mystic qualities he had never seen before, were drawn forth from the aether and stood poised to strike.

"Blood Magic!" His reflection howled, sending forth a blade which seemed to be made of liquid scarlet. It slammed into the ground before Mavin, shaking the castle with its unbelievable weight. From the point at which it struck, the stone then throbbed as if it had a heartbeat.

"Chaos magic!" A blade whose form was so indistinct that Mavin could scarcely bare to look at it, followed. Where it struck, the stone seemed to be shifting from one type to another, as if uncertain of itself.

As new swords were hurled at his feet, Mavin could only stare, a look of naked astonishment covering his face as his accomplishments were rendered trivial before the rising tide of his ignorance.

"If you are Mavin of the Ten then to you, I shall be known as Stewart of the One Hundred and Eight." The figure in the mirror said, his chin raised. "Until you are Mavin of the Seventeen, I fear understanding the current situation will be beyond your abilities, mortal."

Mavin simply let his swords evaporate, and he stood helpless before a being to whom his power was doubtless a candle in a hurricane. It was a feeling he had not felt in over a decade.

Mavin spread his arms. "Where do I start?" He implored, filled with a newfound sense of excitement.

"Now that, is the right question." His reflection said, a broad smile covering its face.



—◆◆◆ Mavin Of the Ten



Stats: P210



Hundreds of years passed, and the castle became ruins. Nature was taking back that which was once its own, but one could still see the traces of its magnificence from a distance.

Countless undead, the animated bodies of those killed by the ancient evil, roam the land surrounding the castle. They are the stuff of fairy tales that kept many curious adventurers out, and are an army loyal to their princess, even as she sleeps eternally.

## Red Hive Gokibito

Essential for keeping disease down after battles and keeping back plague, as well as preparing the bones of the dead for burial or cremation... As much as most people hate to admit, the little carrion eaters are considered necessary.

However, that can only be said for the Green Hive and not The Red Hive. The Red Hive doesn't wait around for meals, they ambush and make their own corpses to feed on.



Stats: P225

## Abyssal Lord

What sets the undead possessed by the Aria of Ruin apart from other undead is the presence of a hierarchy which binds many forms of undead together into a cohesive form that is not seen anywhere else in the history of Mhodica.

Near the head of their hierarchy are the Abyss Lords, the generals of the undead armies which are growing like a cancer within the body of Mhodica.

In life, they were great generals of human armies; in death their eternal rest is interrupted as the whispers of the Aria seep into their graves like a siren's song, urging them to rise, that their soldiers still have need of them. And all but the most adamant answer the call.

As they rise, they are clad by Dephena's smith in armor and weapons of profane black metal, protecting them from ordinary steel, and making it possible to break their opponent's own armor like pot steel.

The Aria is so strong that it can be seen rising from them like a hazy purple and red fire, and the appearance of the revered generals of the past on a battlefield in the black armor of the damned has been enough to turn the tide of more than one battle against the living.

When engaged in combat, despite their decomposed state they retain all their mortal prowess and agility, with strength several times that of a mere mortal.



Stats: P218





## Aria Skeletons

Most Skeletons are a form of undead that has been raised for a particular task that may require years or even decades of constant vigilance. They are used primarily as guards but sometimes given chores to repeat at regular intervals.

Ordinary skeletons are only ever dangerous if whatever they are tasked with defending is threatened, or their chores are interfered with.

But when Skeletons are exposed to the Aria of Ruin, all previous instructions are completely wiped from their memory, and they resume a semblance of their original volition and personality but twisted by years, decades, or even centuries of involuntary servitude.

Often seeking those who reanimated them - or those who interfered with them in their undead existence - for revenge. They care little if innocents get in their way, and some even seem to take a sadistic glee in collateral damage.

Once their task is complete, almost as if answering a call they home in on the most powerful Aria Undead and supplicate themselves to it, following it towards the greater goal of the Aria.

## Gokibito Hulks

Gokibito exposed to the Aria of Ruin die almost immediately. As a quirk of their unnatural origins, when they rise from the dead they grow to grotesque size and proportion. Those inside the Red Hive who are in disfavor within the red hive will often find themselves turned into Hulks as a punishment for their transgressions and become a slave of the hive. If one of the Blue Hive becomes infected, their brethren usually put them out of their misery.

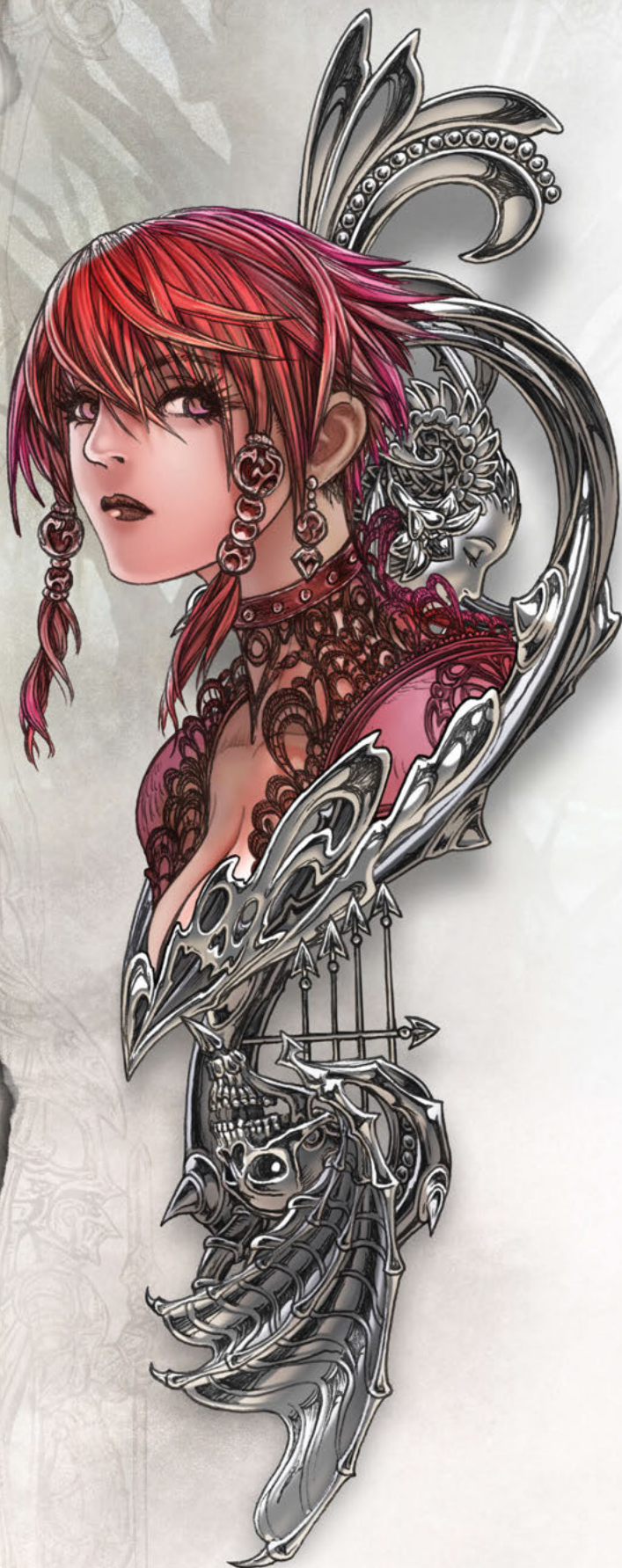
These hulking, insect titans tower over a human in stark contrast to their four and a half foot tall living brethren. These mindless brutes listen only to their brethren, and will mindlessly set upon any simple task, from performing guard duty to helping them smash down doors and carry away the bodies.



Stats: P225



# Erin Cothemia



Erin was an orphan who grew up within the house of Cielo the immortal, and even as a child, she was taught magic. Though, at first, Cielo actually hated taking care of the girl, who was more than a wild brat for most of her years. Eventually they did become much closer though. As Erin was still young, it started as more of a Mother and Daughter relation, but as Erin grew into her twenties, it shifted to become more like very close sisters.

Everything went quite well after, that is until Erin was summoned to perform her first hit mission for Dephena. Cielo worked under her and there was no choice despite the grim nature of the task. Erin failed and as punishment Dephena had her whipped. Cielo watched in pain but lacked the power to stop it. Along with her already quick temper, Erin came to hold a grudge against Cielo for not stepping in to help her.

After, Erin succeeded in killing her target, but in her still burning fury killing far more than she had been told to. This drew unwanted attention to Dephena and again Erin was punished. This time, she was imprisoned in a pit without light for three months.

When finally let out and after recovering, she would come to meet the man that would change her life. His name was Nepht, husband to Dephena. He was charm itself to Erin and she quickly found herself falling completely for him.

Since then, Erin became obviously more determined, carrying out killing missions with a newfound sense of purpose and precision. However, she wasn't aiming to please Dephena, but rather Nepht. The smile of congratulations he gave her after a successful mission was something she came to crave.

Finally, the day came when Cielo was allowed to leave Dephena's command. Of course she was going to leave, but quickly guessed Erin might have other ideas by then. When she confronted her sister to warn her of the obvious potential dangers, Cielo was only met with Erin's anger. She argued rather harshly that Cielo should keep to her own decisions as Erin herself was an adult and fully capable of making her own.

A little sadly, Cielo conceded and left Erin to her own devices. Unfortunately, as Cielo had predicted, things only went downhill from there. Nepht quickly proved to be a menace to the wellbeing of Mhodica and as a result, Umbria woke from slumber for the sole purpose of defeating him. Nepht was sealed away in an unknown place by the princess, who then returned to her slumber once more.

Erin was devastated. In her grief, she sought out Cielo with hopes of asking her for help to not only find Nepht, but to set him free. As she should have expected, she was met by another lecture from her sister about the folly of 'young love' and how she should have dropped the notion long ago. Erin only saw red, and in a rage, she left. After that meeting, the two sisters would never cross paths again.

Now, Erin travels Mhodica in search of any and all ways to possibly find Nepht and free him.











"That's why he didn't expect it." Greg said, picking her blade up, and looking over it reverently. "Have you a cloth? I think I've gotten your blade a little dirty, giving the pig a bath."

Lucielle roused herself from her reverie as, by her count, she'd finished her requisite fifty strokes with a whetstone across her blade. She looked up to see most of her men had finished their pre-battle rituals as well.

The men were uneasy in their positions around the camp. The Squires that had come were busily making sure all the Knights blackened armor was strapped and tightened properly. They didn't lack confidence, but the skeletal trees, and sparse greenery of the dead forest was enough to put even the boldest knight on edge, as the deep orange of the setting sun made it a grim tableau. Especially with the scouts having reported the presence of red hive Gokibito when they'd returned earlier.

She'd always had a remarkable disdain for the corpse-eaters. She knew they were essential for keeping disease down after battles, and during plague, also for preparing the bones of the dead for burial or cremation but they still nauseated her. The Red Hive was worse than any bowing, scurrying Blue Hive that might live in the city. They made their own corpses to feed on.

After a stifled squeal Sabrina, the voluptuous dark haired southerner only recently promoted to field duty, swatted an especially cheeky Squire named Arturo on the ass with a resounding clap. All the other knights and squires had a hearty chuckle.

"Sabrina." Lucielle said loudly enough for the camp to hear. "Don't tease the squire, and you don't get your love handles pinched." A few more chuckles, and the cross swearing of a southern lady followed.

"All is ready." Her squire, said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "The scouts are returning, and sun down approaches."

"Thank you, Ishiro." Lucielle said placing her hand on his with a pair of soft pats, glancing up towards the nearest ridge and spying their leather clad scouts making their stealthy approach. The easterner had been a staple in her life since she was a child, he'd joined her houses servant staff at a young age, and been so attentive she'd thought he'd joined to get closer to her until she found him kissing her brother under the stairs.

She'd laughed herself sick afterwards for having mooned over him for time. When her brother had passed ten years ago, she'd inherited his lover as a good friend, and later battle field partner. With a grin, remembering her foolish youth, she stood tall, the leaves crunching beneath her feet and placed her hand on her sword. "Ladies!" She said addressing the crowd of mostly men.

The knights stood at attention, and the squires, long used to the ritual began to quickly grab supplies and begin packing. As she laid her hands on the hilt of her sword, her knights followed her lead. As one, they drew the swords of their rank, and held them to their breast, tip to the sky.

"We are the king's dark blades in the night!" She shouted, and they repeated. They were the most elite force crafted in over a century, in anticipation of the end of The Long Peace.

"Though we strike in darkness," she cried, their echo following. "Our deeds stand for all to see in the light of day!" They cried together, beating their breasts with their sword once before sheathing them with the satisfying hushing sound of steel on leather.

"All knights to your steeds! For tonight we hunt the undead!" She placed a hand on her hip. "And tonight, the Dark Knights shall write our names in the history books!"

It was a rousing speech, but she was unaware that was the last speech she'd ever give.





One day, Dia simply woke.

She was not born as babies are, and the way she became conscious was quite gentle in comparison. Her eyes fluttered open and her lungs filled with fresh air. She could hear birds outside the window and feel warm sun on her skin. Sitting up, she looked around and found herself within a small house that also seemed to double as an artist's workshop. How she knew these things, she wasn't sure. Just that they were.

Getting up, Dia looked around a little more closely. The first and most obvious things were the numerous half finished statues littered about the space. They were all composed of a lovely stone that looked almost soft, and what pieces had been etched from the material were of fantastic quality. However, it was obvious that the creator had been displeased with them and apparently moved right on to the next to try again. Some were more completed than others, and after peeking a glimpse of her own reflection in a mirror, Dia couldn't shake the feeling that they resembled herself rather closely. Or perhaps she resembled them. The most unifying factor that she noted, was that they each carried a long cloth wrapped about their arms... Exactly as she did herself. It was all quite curious, but not something that she could make much sense of.

Dia continued exploring the house, eventually finding a note upon the well-carved table. Picking it up, she read it over. Later she would realize that the knowledge of reading and writing came naturally to her somehow, but for now she simply let her gaze rest upon the few scarce words before her.

"You are free, go out and live your life. Please use this house to your benefit." She had to wonder at the meaning behind it. Stating she was now free insinuated that she had been held captive? By who? As of right then, she was inside such a warm and welcoming home, which was apparently now hers, that anything as ominous as being held prisoner seemed far too insidious to be true. With that thought, she easily put it from her mind and continued the study of her environment.

Dia wasn't sure what she liked and didn't like just yet, but so far the house was proving to be something that pleased her. Luckily everything she needed to know to survive as a human also came naturally to her, so when her stomach growled a bit, she picked up an apple and found it to be quite tasty. Though as she finished, she realized that she would eventually have to leave for more supplies.

The next day, she did leave. Taking the pouch of coins that had been left to her, she wandered into the nearby city which she came to find was called Fiana. There were so many people, all so different and dazzling, that she had a hard time adjusting at first. However once she got used to the busy buzz of the city streets, she found it more than intriguing. And it wasn't just the people, but the city itself. There was always some hidden corner or back alley shop full of wonders for her to explore.

Where as she had first put the question of her origins from her mind, as she got to know more and more other people, hearing about their families and such, she began to wonder again. No clues other than the note and the house itself and been left behind, so she started with the most obvious. Asking who had previously owned the house, let alone build it, proved fruitless though. Almost right away, Dia noted that whenever she brought up the subject, the best she got was a confused look, or a shrug and a 'Dunno'. Whoever had made the house... whoever had 'set her free' had done so in such a quiet way that no one had noticed apparently. That or they had covered their tracks so well that they practically didn't exist. It was mysterious at best, and it did leave her feeling rather unsettled.

After she slowly stopped asking about the house, Dia luckily came to hear a few rumors that sparked hope inside her again. People spoke of a place where, supposedly, one could find the truth about themselves. They called it the Castle of Hydracast. She wasn't sure what it was about that place that could reveal such things, but at this point she felt it was worth trying. Her life in Fiana was simple and happy enough, but she couldn't get over the feeling of wanting to know of her past and origins. It might not mean anything in the long run, but it also might fill that gap inside her.

Starting within the city and with people she already knew, she began to ask about Hydracast. After only a little, she came into contact with a traveling minstrel by the name of Lucent.

Lucent himself took an immediate interest in the young woman who seemed to have no knowledge of her origins. He could tell it was not amnesia, but perhaps something more grand. He also found her determination to find the Castle and the secrets it might reveal, quite fascinating, so he took it upon himself to help prepare her for her journey. For where as she was rather safe in Fiana, the open road would be a completely different story.

Starting with the obvious, he taught her how to defend herself, namely with a sword. Once she had mastered the basics, he even handed over his own for her to keep, saying she would need it more than he. The other skills he taught her were just as important in their own right. He trained her in the ways of the minstrel, teaching her the lute and craft of song. As Lucent said, sometimes the best way to spread a message was through song.

Dia picked up everything Lucent taught her easily, surprising the bard with the extent of her natural prowess and quick learning capabilities despite her past. Or rather, lack of a past. It didn't seem to slow her down one single bit, and in fact perhaps drove her on to achieve even greater things.

Lucent soon declared she was ready to begin her journey and agreed to travel with her for a day or two, but eventually parted ways. Traveling on her own now, Dia continues to scour the map for hints of the Castle Hydracast. All the while she sings of what she imagines her creator to be, and her past life to hold.





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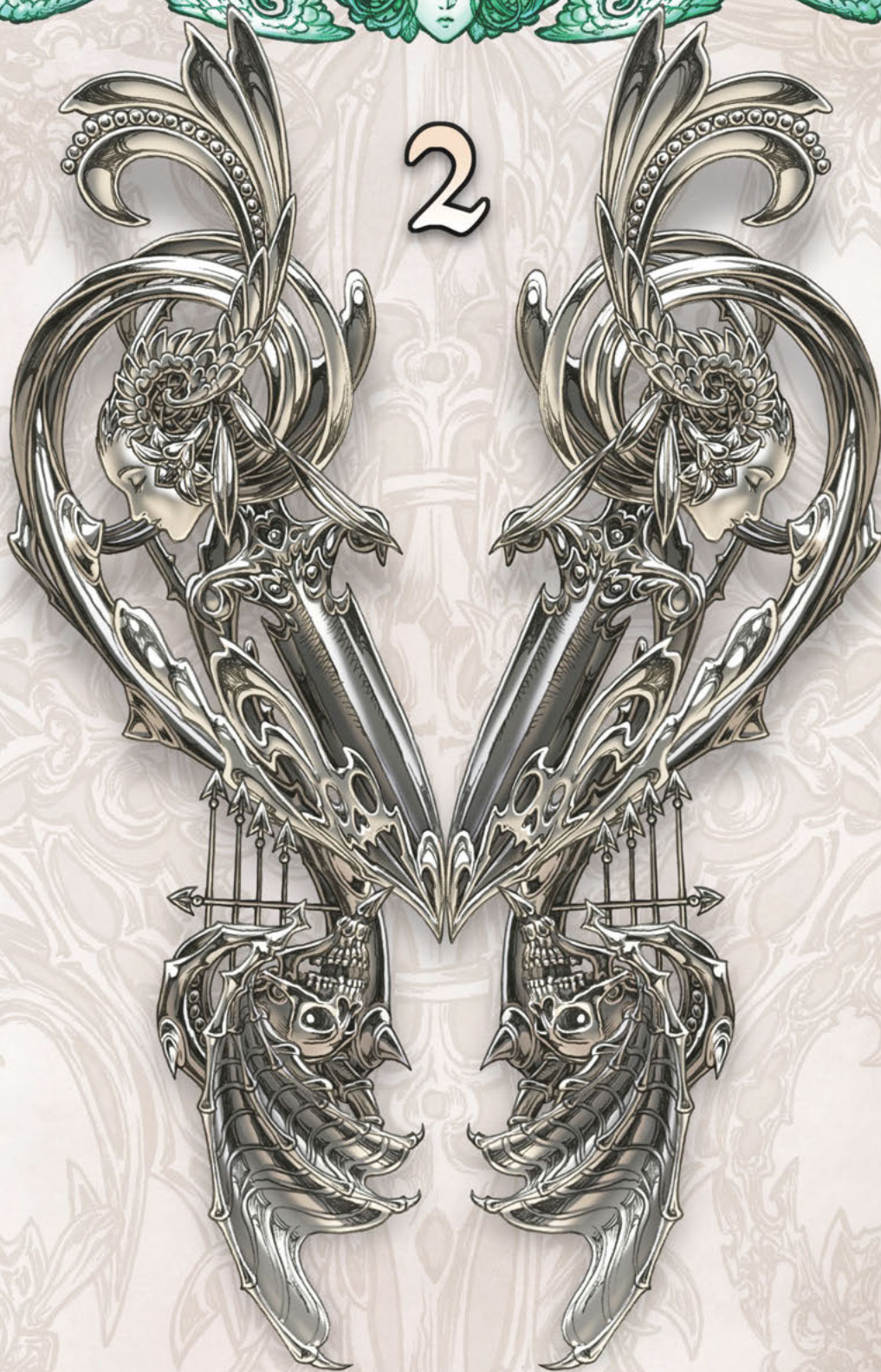








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# The Forgotten King



## — The Forgotten King —

Writing: Andrea Danielson

There once existed two Kingdoms. Despite their close proximity and very different life styles, they coexisted peacefully. Their trade was healthy, they never went to war over territory, and their Royal families even met to celebrate all sorts of occasions together.

Melia lay in the north, tucked up against the cold deep ocean and high, forested mountains. They lived in grandly carved stone and wood houses, subsisting off the forest as well as the sea. South along the same coast was the kingdom of Aspasia. Unlike their northern brethren, Aspasians lived almost solely from the sea. Their waters were shallower and far more warm, teeming with sealife which they could use for their own purposes and also export. Aspasia was still as wealthy as Melia but at the same time, their lifestyle was a little more rustic. Something they were proud of though.

First born to the King and Queen of Melia, Rhea was of course expected to inherit the kingdom when the time came. For this reason, she was brought up strictly and began schooling at a particularly young age. Even though she struggled to pick up reading at first, once she mastered it, it became nearly impossible to keep a book from her hands. Her favorite subjects were plants, animals, far away lands, astrology, and of course adventures.

From the beginning, Rhea's parents could tell she was a timid child, preferring to hide behind her father's legs when officials came to visit. Perhaps it was just a natural weariness to new things or perhaps she didn't like the look in some of their eyes. Power tempted corruption and Rhea seemed to be able to read it in someone's gaze even if their mouth was spewing pleasantries and polite smiles. She was too young to realize what that was for a while, but eventually she grew to understand, simply giving back a rather blank expression as she couldn't force herself to smile in such situations.

Luckily for her, her disposition wasn't always received as offensive. In fact it rarely was. For as long as she had been timid, she had also possessed an air about her that made others want to earn her respect and if they were blessed enough, admiration. It was a quality that would definitely aid her in ruling a kingdom, though she made sure to learn everything else in preparation as well, not wanting to simply govern by popularity.

First born to the King and Queen of the coastal kingdom of Aspasia, Kyros was sent to school along with other noble's children as well as commoner children. The lines between nobility and commoner are often more lax than most countries, and for that reason it created a far more welcoming feeling of community.

Despite that, Kyros was a prince so of course he received special treatment and attention. However, he was of a charismatic disposition that tended to bring those sorts of things naturally his way anyways. Even from a young age, he showed remarkable strength of will and determination in all things he set his mind to. Which was good, as he suffered from a condition that required him to wear leg braces for a few years as a child.

Art: Nele Diehl



However even that didn't slow him down, and once they were off, he was happy to go above and beyond as if to prove it hadn't affected him or limited his sights on the future.

Excelling in school and particularly physical training, he quickly became a top contender in the ring. Many people stepped up to challenge him and most lost. After, Kyros always encouraged them to keep training, stating he had only gotten so good by doing so himself. Though most that fought him could easily tell he had been blessed with a decent amount of natural ability to go along with that determination and drive. Some resented him for it... At first, before they were simply won over by the prince's sunny disposition and enthusiastic encouragements.

These two rather remarkable young royals never truly met until they were fourteen and sixteen respectively. At any previous family gatherings, the two had always been preoccupied handling the situation in their own way. Rhea with her books, avoiding 'small talk' conversation when she could, and Kyros immediately setting off to find ways to be outside as much as possible.

However, on Rhea's fourteenth birthday, her parents saw fit to finally introduce the two.

From the start, they were a little awkward, Rhea more so as Kyros was easily able to play most things off with a warm and charming smile. However, as their parents went back to their festivities, the two found themselves talking for the rest of the night as they strolled aimlessly through the castle gardens. Rhea found Kyros to actually be listened eagerly as she excitedly explained to him the books she loved and her hobbies. Rhea herself was also equally interested in all of the prince's wild sounding adventures along the dunes and reefs of his home.

A week later when the Aspasians were set to return to their southern home, Kyros had left a soft, innocent kiss upon the princess' lips. They had snuck off all week to continue talking, Rhea lending him books even though he did claim to not read often, or Kyros showing her some tricks he had learned in the training ring. With that final small showing of affection though, a deep bond seemed to open up and tie them together. Even after their parting, both began sending secret letters by way of sea bird to one another. It had started as a shy test on Rhea's part but quickly grew to daily letters from both to one another.

As time passed, and they were able to meet occasionally in person at more such parties, their bond growing to expand into honest love and perhaps even more. However they both knew their relation should be kept secret, as chances were very high that it would never be allowed to continue if found out. They were both royals and had duties to their kingdoms. Marrying for love was almost never in the cards for people in their positions.

However, a little after Rhea turned eighteen, a threat rose to the east that put both Melia and Aspasia in danger. The two kingdoms easily came to the conclusion that they would have to work together in order to protect their people and lands.





As the enemy loomed closer, the largest wedding in either of the two lands was held, joining Princess Rhea and Prince Kyros to be the new King and Queen of this united kingdom. The two had to do their best to hide their overwhelming joy at the arrangement, for they had kept their increasingly intimate relationship as secret as possible through the years. Now though, they could be openly together and besides the obvious threat yet to be dealt with, they couldn't have been happier.

Originally the plan had been to symbolically join the two kingdoms, and the Prince and Princess' parents would still handle the upcoming battle as their experience and wisdom was of course far greater.

However, after the two young newlyweds presented their desire to speak with the enemy leaders, it was reluctantly agreed upon. Both sets of parents wanted their children to take over and rule in a good and just manner, but they had very little faith that speaking to such an adversary would bring any solution. They agreed in the end, allowing them to at least try. Meanwhile they readied their troops.

To everyone's surprise, and perhaps to the enemy leaders most of all, the talks went astonishingly well. Both young king and queen were very well spoken and showed a degree of honest care and empathy that they couldn't help but listen. Rhea was the best at reasoning with the logistics while still keeping the -people- of all nations in mind. Kyros was the best at charming those that might try go up against him, somehow always seeming to make any option for the future sound like it was the best possible in any situation. Between the combined efforts of the two, they brokered a deal with the enemy in which all three kingdoms would benefit from lack of war. Of course it also helped that Melia and Aspasia's combined forces would prove to be more than a challenge, but it ended up being a complete victory in the eyes of their people.

From that point on, Rhea and Kyros were left to rule their homelands in much the same way. They were incorruptible, strong in their sense of justice and peace, and just as importantly, absolutely loved by their subjects.

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"Things are moving along at a steady pace," Stewart commented in a tone that said he was far from pleased with this fact. He currently stood in front of a large pane of what looked like polished glass, the image it presented though, not of his world. Rather it was Mhodicica.

"I'm fairly certain this is going to be unavoidable," Danielson nodded from off to the side. She eyed the images that Stewart was currently looking over through the portal. That was more her world than this place was, she mused. Most of her time was spent in Mhodicica as she watched how the little mortal creatures crawled about in their short life spans, creating and destroying like oblivious toddlers. "We -need- to figure out a way to combat this. Stop it all together if possible... and if not."

"If not, then at least contain it." Stewart sighed, turning away from the images to glance at Danielson then out over the landscape of the Dream World.

"I'm fairly certain we will need something that is... special," Lyre chimed in from across Danielson. "Something that does not yet actually exist. This threat is coming at us from all angles. As much as it angers me to say so, we are quite literally only one side of this coin. We need something that will be able to affect both." He had already tried creating something that would fit those requirements, but it had yet to produce a viable option.

Danielson seemed to agree. Then again, they all did on that point. It was simply the how that they were stuck on.

"I do have a suggestion," she admitted, beaded tendrils waving lazily about her as she contemplated how to express her idea. "If we find a being in Mhodicica who is already powerful there, and change them. Not fully into an Eterrione, only partially, it could place them in a position of neither world. And both."

Stewart frowned at that, not exactly convinced. "It is a possibility," he conceded after a long moment of silence. None of them were interested in creating more Elders though. However, if it was only partial it shouldn't be that much of a problem. They had many lesser Eterrione running around already. "We would need to find candidates. Ones that would not become corrupt with the power. We all know how Mhodicans can be."

Danielson's tendrils made a motion akin to a shrug. "I have a list. Though it is woefully short." She produced a small glowing disk of light upon which two human forms emerged in miniature form. Stewart's frown deepened as he examined them.

"Where are the rest?" he asked, not sure if Danielson was trying to jest at this point.

"That is it," she replied dryly.

The figures were that of a male and female human only.

"Most likely it would have to be the pair of them, as well. Mortals are frail and unsteady. These two though, have shown great promise even within their own parameters. With training and our help, they could rise to become what we need." She placed a bit more emphasis on the 'could' part, as this honestly was all conjecture. "If it doesn't work, we can just erase them," she added easily, Lyre nodding a little too enthusiastically in agreement.

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Rhea let out a loud sigh and flopped unceremoniously onto the huge bed within her and Kyros' chambers. The two had been married for a solid six years by now and had grown as leaders as well as partners. Their ruling style was known across the lands for its fairness and effectiveness, which two things that didn't always necessarily go hand in hand. Hard decisions constantly had to be made, yet somehow the two managed to always find and execute the best solutions. They always did their best to leave all sides satisfied even if things did have to be sacrificed along the way.

"You did well," Kyros said in slight amusement as he followed her into their room. "I know you don't like saying no."



"It's bound to happen more often than not," She said from the pillow, still face down. She eventually picked herself up though, coming to sit cross legged upon the plush blankets. They were in their Aspasia castle at the moment, often traveling between it and her home of Melia and back for one reason or another. After the kingdoms had merged, they had decided to keep both ruling points active, they themselves moving about in order to be the most effective. Both lands had their unique situations that could sometimes only be handled on local soil, and it tended to prove quite efficient. Except for their having to be on the move so much, as it could quickly become exhausting. "That doesn't mean it will ever become more easy though," she added, watching her husband as he took off his ceremonial half-armor.

Kyros could only nod in understanding before turning to go get washed up for the night. He actually was the more outgoing of the two, wanting to please everyone present. Rhea had great compassion for others, but at the same time she was the more logical, which meant having to draw lines and force compromises that may not always leave everyone joyous at first.

Rhea followed suit once he was done, climbing under the soft sheets with yet another sigh as she more than ready for the dark calm of sleep. Moving close to Kyros' side, she closed her eyes and drifted off, Kyros already being way ahead of her.

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Almost too easily, Rhea found herself deeply enough asleep to begin dreaming. Usually it took little while, but tonight it seemed to wash over her before her mind even had a chance to truly calm.

The first thing she noticed was that Kyros was there, off in the distance a little ahead of her. That wasn't out of place though, as the two were always together. Sometimes she had dreams of full on conversations with him that she later had to remind herself to actually have in the waking world.

The second thing she noticed was the odd terrain. Her dreams were often vivid and impactful, but this place was strangely quiet, yet at the same time filled with an eerie tension. And whereas dreams tended to begin with a story, plot, or driving factor already in place, this time there was nothing. They were just... there.

As she began to walk towards Kyros, she had to stop herself again. The colors became more and more bright around her, as if a film was slipping from her eyes. Odd, sharp scents began to assault her nostrils to the point she could almost taste the air, and the flavor was like nothing she could even begin to describe. The sounds around her also shifted, crowding her mind yet remaining soft. It wasn't the quiet lapping of waves, the wind through the branches of a tree, or even animalistic sounds that often accompanied a forest at night. It was something else, and all of those things all at once. She was left stunned and couldn't help but feel ill.

Kyros, perhaps going through the same thing, still turned to meet up with her, his handsome face set into a deep scowl. He had an expression that she knew all too well. He was on full defensive mode, which actually meant he was

ready to fight more than anything, and ready to protect her at all costs. So far though, besides the overwhelming setting, she couldn't sense any actual trouble herself.

Once they were together, they joined hands and Rhea felt a shiver run through her. It was too warm. Too solid.

"This.. isn't a dream. Is it," Kyros said quietly, tone carrying an edge of weariness.

"I don't think so. But how is that possible?" Rhea replied, not surprised that Kyros was thinking the same thing as she was. Gripping his hand even more tightly, she looked around them once more. The scenery had changed, shifting almost like an actual dream, yet it remained as solid as ever.

The rocky, desolate hills that had been around them softly shifted, a sparkling almost liquid like substance filling and flooding them like rising tide waters. Rhea took a step back as it reached for them, but there was no way to outrun it. All she could do was grit her teeth as it washed up over their shins. Quickly though, she realized It wasn't water. In fact they could barely feel it.

Exchanging even more weary glances, the two watched as it flooded the valleys around them, luminescent plants beginning to sprout out of nowhere. White barked trees elegantly unfolded from the banks, branches reaching up towards a seemingly empty and limitless sky. From their thin branches, blood red petals bloomed, dropping almost as quickly into the 'water' below to drift off down the non-existent current.

Kyros noted that the trees themselves were particularly odd, even from what they had already experienced. Along their dusty bark, pulsing tracks of light could be seen. All in various colors, they beat like a heart almost, but the designs they left behind were strangely sharp and geometric. They were not like anything that naturally grew in any realm of their world.

Rhea noticed them too, standing a bit closer to her husband. "Maybe.. We can find a way out of here," she said to him, glancing around more. "If the land keeps changing though..." Looking behind them, she noted that there also was absolutely no trace of how they had even entered.

"We'll find a way," Kyros replied in a stern, reassuring tone. Rhea wasn't so quick to feel that way though. She could tell this place was special, and not necessarily in a good way.

Adjusting their grips on one another, as if that were their literal lifeline, they began to walk through the sparkling substance towards one of the hills in hopes of getting a higher ground to look about. It didn't splash around their steps at all, but somehow there was still the tiniest bit of cool resistance against their skin. If the situation hadn't been so stressful, it might even have been refreshing.

Trudging up out of the water, Rhea could only gasp at what they saw on the other side of the mound. Kyros was stunned silent himself.

Outstretched before them was an endless expanse of land.





However, just as everything else they had seen so far, it was unlike their world in every aspect. Off in the distance loomed a collection of what they could only assume were buildings. They were taller than anything possible in Mhodi-ca though, and all seemingly perfect and smooth. Those squarish geometric designs were all along their sides as well, seeming to pulse up from the ground as if it were an energy source. Forests sprawled here and there, though they too shifted as the 'riverbed' behind them had. Clouds passed the now starry sky, twisting and turning into shapes that almost seemed to remind you of something, before it continued to change and you could only feel more lost.

The most obvious landmark they could see though, was a particular spire-like building directly ahead of them. It wasn't based upon the ground they walked though, instead being suspended from seemingly the sky itself. There was something ominous about it, more so than everything else around them.

"Look," Rhea scowled as something glinted almost right near where they were. She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. There seemed to be a sort of hanging rift in the very air. It wasn't perfectly translucent, but once in awhile she did glimpse the area behind it. Having a sneaking suspicion, she began to walk around it, Kyros following with that same expression of his.

Again Rhea gasped. For as they went around, it became apparent what they had been seeing was the side of something that hung in mid air. It was a large sheet of what looked to be glass, its edges jagged and uninviting. Though instead of reflecting them or even showing what was behind it, the image within the glass opened up into a foreign landscape.

"That's Himari," Kryos said, his tone a mix of fact and disbelief.

"What? Are.. you sure?" Rhea asked, looking back.

"Yes. I've been there. It's a waterfall not too far from the town we stayed at for a few days. How.. Are we seeing this?"

It obviously wasn't a painting, as everything move naturally. Birds flew from the tree tops and the waterfall itself crashed down powerfully as if they were right there.

"Maybe.. Its our way back?" Rhea suggested. At least it was something -familiar- and of their own world. Hesitantly, she began to reach out for the smooth surface but Kyros pulled her back.

"Don't. It could be dangerous." Though he didn't seem to disagree with her suggestion that it might be their ticket home, so he took it upon himself to try it. Slowly he extended a few strong fingers, ready to either pull back or punch the thing to shards if it made any suspicious moves. However when his skin came into contact with the 'glass', nothing happened. At most Kyros felt a slight sense of cool energy, but nothing more.

Sighing, he withdrew his hand and shook his head, already starting to look around for another option.

"Maybe those buildings have people," he wondered aloud,



looking at the tall obelisks in the distance.

"That place might too," Rhea murmured, eyeing the hanging building in the middle, though neither felt excited at the prospect. "Then again, what would 'people' even BE here? Nothing seems right." At that Kyros had to smile a bit, his imagination conjuring up all sorts of things considering what they had seen so far.

"True. But at the very least, maybe we can find some answers." And with that he began to walk down the opposite side of the hill upon which they stood, heading for the buildings mentioned.

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No matter how long they walked, those buildings in the distance never seemed to get closer. At first the two figured it was simply because they were that far away. As time stretched on, they had to start to wonder though.

As they were walking through a forest of bizarre mushrooms, it began to rain a strange, almost electrically charged water. The two decided to take refuge where they could find it and came to sit close together to wait.

"Hopefully it doesn't last too long," Kyros sighed, eyeing the rather bleak landscape before them. Rhea nodded and rested her head on his shoulder, hugging his upper arm to her chest.

"I'm tired," she admitted. "But can you dream inside a dream?" A yawn followed her musing. This place was so odd. They hadn't come into any danger other than the rain just now, but she by no means felt safe. Yet fatigue did start to wash over her heavily.

Kyros shifted where he sat, starting to feel the same though he knew for certain he shouldn't. He couldn't. He had to stay awake in case something came for them finally. However, despite his best efforts, he began to drift off again. Rhea's own eyes were already closed, breath slow. Kyros cursed and struggled, but eventually blackness enveloped his vision.

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With a start, Rhea awoke what felt like only a second later. Had she actually fallen asleep? She wondered, looking around. Or at least she tried to. The entire space in front of her was the darkest of blacks. Had she been as foolish to fall asleep in a place like this? Or perhaps, she wondered suddenly, was she finally waking up back in the real world?

To her dismay, that didn't seem to be the case. For a moment later, a few figures began to emerge from the darkness around her. As if a light was being slowly turned on from above, three long mirrors were lit up in their own circles of light. Nothing else was around but them, she noted. Not even a floor. Though she found with a testing step, she could still walk somehow. Doing so, she approached the reflective items as there simply wasn't much else to do. Her brows knit together, as once again, the mirrors of this place reflected something else other than what was in front of them. Instead of her own image or even landscapes, this time it seemed to be small little scenes.





It really was the best word she could come up with to describe what is in front of her. Each scene held its characters and only a prop or two, the rest of the area being as black as the abyss she was currently in.

The one she stepped up to first was in the middle and she had to frown at what she saw. It was Kyros and herself, both obviously older than they were now. They were both wearing opulent clothing, being surrounded by all sorts of material pleasures and benefits. However they stood apart, facing away from one another in a rather cold manner. They had the obvious connection of being wed still, but there was hardly any warmth left. If anything it seemed more like a business partnership.

It made Rhea shiver a bit.

Eyeing the scene, she stepped to the side to peer into one of the other mirrors, hoping to find something better. What was this even? Was the glass trying to show her the future? Or perhaps scare her with it..

The second mirror showed her and Kyros once more, also older. This time though, they were dressed plainly, almost to the point of being peasants. The table they sat at was worn and battered wood and the plates they ate their meager meal from were chipped and cracked. However they smiled warmly to one another, holding hands across the table. And glancing to a young child that sat next to them.

-Their- child.

Rhea's brows knit together again at the implications. What -was- this? If it was the future, did it mean they were going to lose their kingdoms? And yet, the scene was far more warm than the previous. So much so that she found herself preferring it honestly. They obviously had to face hard times, but the other was so cold..

Shivering a bit and hugging her arms to herself, she moved back past the middle mirror to the one on the far side, not sure if she would like what she saw here either.

Unfortunately it was even worse. Kyros and herself were surrounded by rather symbolic flames. They burned with a sensation she could literally feel through the glass. Hate. Resentment. She could tell that they both had somehow obtained what they secretly dreamed of. Kyros was an adventurer, simply going from place to place and fully enjoying life while having no worries in the world. Rhea was able to read and create things to her heart's content without being bothered by others or burdened with the constant choices she was faced with as Queen. They had perfect lives that each fancied fulfilling. Yet they hated one another. A few hints in the background even suggested outright war.

"This is awful." The real Rhea murmured to herself, her arms tightening around herself. What was she supposed to do? Were they all possible? Could she avoid them?

With that thought, she attempted to walk between two of the mirrors. However it was immediately obvious that wasn't an option. In a surreal manner, the mirrors slid back, always keeping a certain distance between her and themselves amidst the darkness.

She wasn't even able to see if they had back sides, let alone get between them.

Sighing in agitation, she walked back a ways to be able to look over all three mirrors. Though after a moment or two, she realized there really was only one option. Two of them were not something she would ever knowingly choose. She could see how they might come about over the years, but she honestly hoped that both she and Kyros would have enough foresight and trust in one another to be able to talk about their problems, their dreams and thoughts. To be able to avoid those outcomes. She wasn't sure what the situation was with the mirror where they were poor, but their happiness was obvious. And that was all she needed to know.

Reaching out a hand, she touched the smooth, cold surface of the mirror that held the image of the poor family.

She had braced herself for whatever was to come. However, for a long moment nothing happened. So long, in fact, that she began to feel a sense of despair wash over her. Had she misinterpreted these images? Was she stuck here?

Just before she was about to pull her hand back though, the image wavered to reveal her actual reflection finally. Not knowing what to expect now, Rhea snatched her hand back fully. Immediately she felt a cold sinking in the pit of her stomach as the image in the mirror did not. It gazed back at her with the exact same green eyes she had seen within her own reflection since as long as she could possibly remember. She looked to them a little desperately as if hoping for some hint that it was an illusion, someone pretending to be her. Yet somehow she could tell that wasn't the case. The story those eyes told was exactly the same as her own.

"Why this one?" The image asked, making Rhea jump. Her skin crawled at hearing her own voice. It wasn't the way -she- heard herself, yet she felt it was how everyone else did nonetheless.

"Wh..what? Why this one?" She glanced to the other two mirrors down the way then back, brows together. "It's rather obvious.. I thought."

The image smiled a bit at that which sent off a whole other sequence of unsettling sensations within Rhea herself. "Still though. Why? You're poor. You have to struggle to get food onto the table. Not to mention providing for a child."

"W-well," Rhea said, grasping her hands in front of herself in a tense manner. Was she really having a conversation with -herself-?

It somehow made her more nervous than having to talk to any other dignitary or person of importance. "They .. we?" She didn't get any indication of which was right from the reflection so just continued. "Are happy. Poor.. yes.. The others had things that most people want, but they were miserable in their own ways. Kyros and I. went through alot over the years in order to stay together. Because we -wanted- to be together. We wouldn't throw that away for gold or ambitions. Besides.. If we make enough to live, that's what matters. And as for the ambitions, we still are able to do some of them despite our positions. What makes any of that worthwhile though, is the fact that we do them together. Does that make sense?" She asked helplessly.



Luckily the reflection smiled rather warmly at that and nodded. "Good," She responded, the real Rhea shifting in a still uncomfortable fashion. "Now. As reward, I'll answer a question."

Rhea opened her mouth almost instantly to reply but then stopped herself. She took a moment then asked. "Is Kyros alright?"

The image blinked then laughed and nodded. "Just as you are." Rhea felt a bit uncomfortable as the image's tone hinted that she thought the question had been wasted. Hoping she wasn't being lied to, Rhea nodded, just hoping to get back to him sooner rather than later so they could continue trying to return home.

As she thought that, the image in the mirror stepped back and held a hand out as if gesturing for her to go through a doorway. After a moment of hesitation, Rhea reached out again and found the glass to be gone. Sighing in an anxious manner, she stepped through and back into absolute darkness.

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Elsewhere, Kyros himself was facing the exact same dilemma. However, he seemed to choose far more quickly, immediately reaching out to grab the mirror that reflected the image of the family. When confronted with his own image, he was asked the same question.

"Because the other two are impossible," He replied, sounding absolutely sure. "This one.. Well. we would gain back what we had lost. Together." The image smirked some at that but nodded.

"If I answered one question for you, what would it be?" The reflection asked to which Kyros immediately responded.

"Where is Rhea." Though it was more of a demand.

The image shook his head in an amused way and stepped back to show the way forward. "You'll see her soon."

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"Interesting," Steward commented as he and Danielson watched the proceedings from yet another mirror.

"Not particularly," Danielson replied, having been keeping rather tidy notes on a floating screen next to her, her whip like appendages typing faster than any hand could. "He is far more driven by passion and impulse. Feeling right from wrong. She on the other hand, observes and considers more. So far they seem to be in sync though. Both methods of action are valid."

Stewart nodded as they returned their full attention back to the images in front of them.

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Kyros stepped through the mirror only to find himself in yet another room of darkness.

"Great," he growled in irritation. If Rhea had at least been with him, then he wouldn't have to worry -as- much. But as it was, all he wanted to do was get back to her as quickly as possible. He wasn't even sure where he was, or who was doing this to him. If he found out though, they had better prepare themselves because he did -not- like being toyed with.

Again the darkness around him parted to reveal large mirrors and he had to roll his eyes some. Not very original, either, he thought to himself. Squaring his shoulders, he approached one without hesitation, ready to get this over with.

At first, he only saw himself again. Though unlike the previous images, this one did not dissolve into a scene. Instead he simply looked back at himself, a rather annoying looking smirk spreading across his face. "I do -not- look like that," he stated in annoyance, to which the reflection let out a loud laugh. The mocking sound continued even as the image suddenly reached out from the glass, large hand grasping at Kyros' throat with a deadly grip.

Eyes wide for a second, it took Kyros only a breath to respond by instinct. Grabbing the wrist and forearm with both of his own hands, he pulled and twisted, yanking his attacker's tight fingers from his own flesh and throwing him to the side. As he did so, he could see figures climbing out of the other two mirrors, all three looking to him with an unsettling gleam in their eyes.

The one that had laughed did so again as he picked himself up from the ground to face Kyros. The two that joined it were also wearing a form that was an exact copy of Kyros himself, each wearing distinctly different expressions. The one to the right, who also happened to be carrying a spear, had a cold, calculating, and condescending glare. A no-nonsense and somewhat judgemental killer, no doubt. The one to the left sported a sword and shield and seemed to barely be able to remain in place. He bounced on his heels, a sharp and hateful expression on his face.

"Looks like he wants to fight, boys~" The middle said in an overly cocky manner as he took up a hand-to-hand fighting position.

"He looks weak. I see hesitation. This will be easy," The spear wielder chimed in.

"I'll fucking tear him to shreds!" Roared the sword bearer, being the first to charge in as he simply couldn't contain his rage any longer.

The real Kyros went into a defensive posture immediately, not knowing exactly what was going on, but absolutely not going to let himself fall here. As he dodged and rolled to avoid the incoming attacks of all three now, Kyros had to wonder. What -was- this supposed to be? Rhea sometimes told him he had a bit too much of an attitude... but it wasn't this bad was it?

Even as he thought that, he imagined Rhea saying that sometimes, it could be. And he had to sigh inwardly. Whoever was in charge of this was perhaps trying to show him his undesirable qualities? If that were so, then for what purpose? Regardless of what their intent was, Kyros decided that he would win one way or another.



Taking a chance, he lunged for the one wielding the spear. Spinning, he let the blade that was thrust at him pass his hip by mere centimeters. Using his and the other's forward momentum, he danced past the spearhead range and grabbed onto the shaft of the weapon. With another spin and well placed kick to the back of his opponent's knee, he yanked the spear free and turned about to face the three again.

Seeing the smirk that had naturally come across his lips reflected in the fistfighter, he let it drop into a self-conscious scowl before continuing the fight. Though now that he was armed, the other three did not seem to stand a chance. They might be made to look like him, but they lacked his skill level and determination.

As the spear head stabbed through the chest of the fistfighter, he was treated to one last mocking laugh before the image exploded into a cloud of glass dust, fading into the blackness around them once more. The now bare handed spear bearer fell easily as well, followed by the sword user after a bit more of a scuffle.

Now that he was alone once more, the stolen weapon also dissipated and Kyros found himself presented with one last mirror. On the other side of which, he could finally see Rhea. Without a second thought, he pushed through.

"Again, she took longer," Stewart said as they watched the two finally rejoin one another. Rhea had just finished her own fight with her reflections. Her battle had been far less physical as she wasn't exactly a warrior, using spells more than anything. It helped that one of her reflections was so timid and useless it hadn't really put up a fight to begin with, which had lead to other complications with the real Rhea not wanting to finish her off until forced to.

"I still don't see why that concerns you," Danielson replied dully, putting a few more notes into their file. "As I said before, they operate best together. She gives him reason to pause and consider before rushing or reacting. He gives her more courage to go with her gut rather than over think things. Splitting them up like this wasn't the best of examples. However, I believe once you start training them together, you will see their merit."

Stewart cast Danielson a look that was hard to read before going through their mirror portal in order to address the reunited Mhodicans.

"Kyros!" Rhea called, running over to where she saw the man waiting, feeling that this wasn't an illusion almost right away. It was -her- Kyros.

"Finally," he said, hugging her tight and probably not going to let go for a while unless he had to. "What in the hells is even going on here? I would say this is the worst nightmare, but we've already decided it's not a dream."

"That is both correct and incorrect." The words resonated from a deep voice that came from the darkness above, making both humans jump.





Kyros shoved Rhea behind himself, though the woman still peered around her husband's broad shoulders to be able to see, and hopefully react if the need arose. "You are not asleep. However, you are in the Dream World."

From above, the two saw a large figure descend, obviously using magic as the motion was far too smooth. Not that it had any appendages to move itself with in the first place. Its shape was long and slender like an over sized dart, the top flaring out in a majestic manner. There was a head at least, though that was its sole humanoid feature.

"Are you the one that brought us here? Forced us through that?" Kyros demanded, an angry edge to his voice. Rhea didn't blame him either, scowling at the odd thing that came to hover in front of them.

"Indeed," it replied in a clear manner, though neither Kyros or Rhea saw a mouth move.

"What for. Did an enemy nation send you?" Kyros demanded again with the only idea he could come up with for them being targeted like this.

"Neither of you are hurt," Stewart pointed out, which was true.

"Then if this is some lame joke, come a bit closer so I can pound your face in." Kyros growled the threat, arms tensing as his hands formed fists. Even weaponless, he was hardly helpless. Rhea grasped one of his arms though, holding him back. They had no idea what they were even up against.

"A test of some sort? That's what all this has been, hasn't it," she said then. "Why though. I.. I feel that we've always conducted ourselves with honesty and.. Good intention," she continued, sounding nervous though. Then again, anyone that looked upon a creature such as Stewart should be nervous. Especially considering how completely he seemed to control what happened around them.

"Yes," Stewart replied easily, eyeing Kyros though as the man obviously still wanted to fight. "This was all a test. And you will have many more to come." He floated around them as if sizing them up. Kyros made a point of turning with him in order to keep himself between the thing and Rhea. "There is a great calamity approaching your world and ours. Something built of pure malicious intent and whose only aim is pure and complete destruction." He said this so matter of factly that the two humans found themselves unable to argue. "It cannot be spoken to or bargained with. It must be eliminated or contained."

"We.. are just humans," Kyros said after a long and weary moment of eyeing the being down. "You seem to have things more under control than we could." Despite what he had just been told, Kyros was still suspicious of this thing's motivations.

"We are masters of both worlds, this is true. We have created all of what you see here, and much of your own world at this point. However the threat that is bearing down upon us is of both worlds in a way that we can never be. In a way that you two -may- become. If you accept our training and gifts."

Stewart explained all of this as reassuringly as he could, honestly hoping it wouldn't take too much more to convince them. They were already wasting time.

"Gifts?" Rhea asked, though not in expectation. Rather, the concept of receiving anything from this being made her weary. Everything they had seen so far had been so unnatural. It made her uncomfortable to accept normal 'gifts' given with good intentions, let alone something as weighted as this. Not that they had a single reason to trust this person in the first place.

"And if your training is more of this mirror nonsense..." Kyrose followed, tone more than annoyed. Though later he would probably look back and fully appreciate the depth of which his true self had been revealed. At the moment it was simply alien and stressful to them both.

Stewart almost sighed aloud at their questions and obvious lack of trust.

"I shall show you. Then you will understand." His slim form pulsed with a soft light once before the room went pure black once more.

This time though, Rhea and Kyros couldn't see each other or even themselves. It was as if all light in the world had been swallowed up, leaving behind nothingness. The two clung to one another simply for a shred of reassurance.

Just as Kyros was about to say something, there was a sudden rushing around them. As if the darkness had suddenly gained form and mass, it pressed in around them, threatening to smother them like a rushing river of black. Above the roaring sound rose something even more awful. Thousands.. Millions of screams began to grow and coalesce. When it seemed like it could get no louder, it simply continued on. Rhea wasn't sure if she screamed as well, as it would have been swallowed up along with the others. Kyros' grip on her was painfully tight, his whole body shuddering as he attempted to fight off whatever this was, but to no effect. The sound was maddening, instilling such a primal sense of fear and helplessness that both wondered if it would ever end, and if it did, would they even be sane.

At one point, images did begin to appear, finally breaking the suffocating cacophony. Though it hardly made things easier. Faces contorted in pain, anguish, and death flew around them, melting into one another to only be replaced by more. A few flashes of color images joined amidst the madness, and unlike the little scenes they had seen in the mirrors before, these were pictures of reality. They both saw their homelands being consumed by this horrendous darkness. Everyone suffered. Everything Died.

Then in an implosion of senses, everything became still and blank. The two dropped to their knees, the remaining sensations only ones of helplessness and despair. Then even those were leached from them as the abyss opened up and swallowed them into nothingness. It was literally The End.

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With a gasp, the two were snapped out of the vision.



It felt like they were finally able to open their eyes from a nightmare despite the fact that they were fully aware they had been glued wide open the entire time. Rhea herself gasped for breath and struggled to not be sick, still on her hands and knees. Kyros was next to her but shaking violently, eyes on the ground in front of them as he tried to process what had just happened.

"What you just experienced was what will happen to both our worlds if it is not stopped. It will not be war, there will be no armies, no burned buildings or weapons of siege. It will simply be destruction in its purest definition," Stewart finally said as he watched the two as they recovered.

"What. that. How are you supposed to fight something like that?" Rhea asked, gasping and gagging a little as her senses still whirled.

"It has a form. We call it Anilaha," Stewart said evenly to which he got a glare from Kyros.

"If you can't handle it, I still don't understand what you think -we- can do." The king was a generally very optimistic person, always feeling that there was a method to any problem. This though. Was not only out of their world, but also definitely out of their influence.

"Again. We will train you. Ready you for the battle that is to come." The Eterrione floated down to be more on their level and used his influence to bring them to their feet finally.

Rhea thought for a moment to ask what would happen if they didn't try. However, she already knew the answer. What they had been shown was the fate of both worlds if it wasn't stopped. She looked to Kyros as they were placed on their feet, her brows together and eyes a little sad. He looked back with an equally concerned expression, but with more of an angry determination as he most likely had come to the same conclusion. They both worried for their kingdom, but there would be no kingdom unless they did this.

"Fine..." Kyros replied after a long moment, looking back to Stewart. "We will do your training."

Stewart nodded. "Good. Then we shall begin right away."

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Every night after that, the Eterrione would draw them to the Dream World to train. Though both Kyros and Rhea suspected that they were manipulating things so that their time in the Dream World was much longer than what had passed in Mhodica. Or at least it felt like that sometimes.

The two were put through relentless drills and tests, both physical and mental. The mind game exercises were the worst by far though, as the Eterrione were able to conjure all sorts of situations and trials through which they had to persevere. Each one felt absolutely real despite the extraordinary circumstances.

Eventually, they were taken to a special hall that was located within that odd floating building that the two had seen when first arriving.

It seemed to constantly be in the center of this world, yet never reachable no matter how one might try. Unless you were taken by an Eterrione of course.

There, they were introduced to many secrets that this world, and even theirs, kept. The biggest part being the history of Mhodica. Through a moving picture projection that Stewart showed them, the two humans were able to vibrantly see how their world had been many thousands of years ago. Humans seemed to look about the same, but their clothing styles were very different, as was their architecture and technology.

"Those designs look like the one's we've seen outside." Rhea whispered to Kyros as they were eventually shown something called a 'computer chip'. There was nothing in their world they could compare to the things these computers were capable of. Other than magic. However, even then, the implications and possibilities were mind boggling.

They watched as humanity relied more and more on these technologies, become increasingly indulgent and reckless. At one point, they were shown creating a device they called the Veleverum, which could literally make dreams manifest in their world. In the beginning, it turned out truly wonderful and fantastic creations. Though neither Kyros or Rhea were surprised, unfortunately, when horrible things began to creep out as well. It got so bad that their civilizations began falling one by one in gruesome manners.

"This is where we had to step in," Stewart said from behind them in a somber tone. "There was simply no way to stop it. So we created another dimension into which we banished the Veleverum simply in order to preserve what little was left of that world. Myself and the others stay here to watch over it and Mhodica now. There are leaks, or perhaps a secret engine we knew naught about still in Mhodica though. It is the source of your people's magic. And the creatures you call 'monsters' generally originated from this realm. Ruptures in the barrier between worlds happen sometimes."

It was a lot for the two humans to process as nothing in their history mentioned anything even remotely like this, no matter how far back one looked. If they hadn't been standing in said other realm right then, having seen proof of these technologies with their own eyes, they might have refused to believe any of it.

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After the history lesson, Kyros and Rhea were introduced to the Veleverum itself and its workings. So far, their training had been within their mortal, Mhodican, and human limits. Now though, with the help of this rather miraculous device, they began to train their minds.

"Here, and only here, you will be able to use a sort of 'magic' that will manifest your will and desire," Stewart explained to them on the first day. "For the battles to come, you will need to be in full control of yourself. You will need to be able to transcend everything that you've come to know to be true in Mhodica. You will become something else. Something more."



“So it’s will power only?” Kyros replied, arms crossed as he glanced up and down the rather bright hall.

Rhea herself looked a little nervous at that. Kyros would no doubt become an expert with ease if that were the case. She on the other hand, knew herself to be a little less tenacious.

“Yes. For the most part. Though not exclusively. All of your emotions, thoughts, and intentions will have effect. Of course the most powerful ones will be those that you project with purpose,” Stewart replied. “Physicality will come with everything else.”

Both humans nodded, having become quite dedicated to this cause so of course they were going to give it their all.

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As Rhea had expected, Kyros gained a quick grasp on the first levels of influence that the Veleverum provided, having all sorts of fun making armor and weapons for himself. He also was able to boost his body’s physical reactions to be inhumanly fast and powerful.

Rhea herself struggled in the beginning though, a few times feeling so defeated that Stewart had to pull out the image of Anilaha’s destruction to force her to finish the day’s lessons. However, when she finally managed to make something happen, she felt such a deep and intense rush of relief that after that, everything seemed much more easy. Once in awhile she would find herself overthinking things, but she did her best to hold close the sensations she had experienced when it -had- worked, and continued to push forward.

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Through all of this, the other Eterrione would come and go within the hall, checking up on them, giving advice, or more often than not, updates on Anilaha’s progress. It was plain for all to see that this monster was only becoming stronger and more frightening. However, it was not yet even fully manifest, so even if the two had been ready, there was nothing -to- fight yet.

“She’s developing more of a physical form now.” Danielson reported one night as Rhea and Kyros sparred in the background, the king dodging rains of starry light that Rhea sent sparking down from the ceiling. “I dare say, she will be somewhat sentient when her manifestation comes.”

“That will only cause more trouble,” Stewart observed as he looked over at a few charts Danielson had projected between them.

Rhea and Kyros paused, generally listening in on these reports as the information was very much relevant to them at this point.

“Sentient. As in thinking and feeling?” Kyros asked, letting his lion like grieves and claws fade. Rhea stopped the shower of magic and also turned to the Eterrione. “Maybe we can try to barter-”

“Absolutely not,” Stewart cut him off. “This -thing- is pure destruction. You’ve seen it.”





Rhea glanced to her husband wearily. "They're probably right, Kyros. Even if it can talk, and will listen... If all it cares about is destruction, why would it care what we even have to say?"

"Well, it's being born like this right? How could it know anything else? Maybe it, -she- just needs to understand," Kyros scowled. He seemed to be in a rather argumentative mood at the moment, which wasn't all that uncommon. Then again, neither of them -enjoyed- killing. "Like any kid, they need to be taught right from wrong."

Stewart looked to be on the verge of kicking them from the hall for this nonsense. "Do you seriously think the embodiment of destruction and annihilation is going to come forth into the world as an innocent babe ready to be lectured?"

Danielson watched in an unamused manner as the two argued for a little while, eventually Stewart indeed sending them back to Mhodica for the night.

"They can't do this without us," Kyros said angrily. Rhea figured he had gotten it into his head rather firmly already that just going in for the kill was not the -right- answer.

"There is still a lot we don't know," Rhea tried to soothe him. "Let's wait and see a bit more."

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For a while after that initial argument, Stewart and Kyros had numerous clashes. One of the main reasons Kyros and Rhea had been such good leaders had been their approach to hard decisions. Talking was -always- better in the long run. On top of that, Kyros put forth a rather blunt observation that the Eterriene were forced to take into consideration.

Was it even possible to kill death?

If sheer power did not work, then what? They had backed themselves into that singular corner. However, Kyros believed that if they were able to make some sort of compromise, life may just continue regardless.

In the end, they themselves came to a compromise. Kyros and Rhea would attempt to speak and work out a way that didn't end in death for anyone. If that failed, they would fight. Once having worn Anilaha down, the Eterriene would perform a sealing sequence that would render the being a meager shadow of herself. From there, Kyros still hoped that she would come to learn and understand what the world meant. What life meant. Rhea also hoped, for all of their sakes, that it would turn out that way. However, she had a somewhat more fatalistic view of it, and wouldn't be surprised if things did not go the way her husband wished.

To this end, the two were eventually taken back to Mhodica and not through their bedrooms where they were deposited every 'morning' by the Eterriene. Stewart himself escorted them back to their realm, and to an area he had barred off from the rest so they could practice without being seen or interrupted.

Before doing so though, he stopped with them in the Veleverum hall before heading to the portal.

"This is where you two need to make a final decision," he said while looking between the King and Queen. "All of your training so far has made you quite strong, and far more capable than any warrior in Mhodica as of now. However, that is only -here-. Once back there, you will not have the Veleverum to rely upon or anything else from this realm for that matter."

"You said in the beginning that we would need to become of both worlds," Rhea pointed out, having thought that was what the training so far had -been-.

"Yes. That is the decision you have to make. The augmentations and capabilities that you have here, must be able to carry over into Mhodica. For that to happen though, we will need to re-code you. You will no longer be what is known as 'human'. Though you will not be fully Eterriene of any sort either. You will become a hybrid, and once it is done and we step through that portal, it will become irreversible."

"What. will it mean for us? To become this hybrid?" Kyros asked after a long moment of silence. They both wanted to say yes, as that was the only way all of this training was going to make a difference. Though they still wondered what cost it would come at. If it was not a big deal then both doubted Stewart would have stopped them to ask such questions.

"The first and most long lasting impact will be your lifespan. You will no longer age and cannot die no matter how much time passes. It goes without saying you can still be killed, but age will not claim you." He watched the two humans carefully, knowing that this fact alone would impact many facets of their previous lives.

Kyros scowled and turned to pull Rhea back a ways to talk more privately. They hadn't even heard the rest, but as Stewart had expected that single thing was enough to get them talking. Most mortals, especially short lived humans, would jump at the chance to live forever. These two in particular though, immediately seemed to understand it was not something to be taken lightly or even with a positive outlook.

"We.. we can't keep ruling. If we'll live forever." Rhea whispered, eyes down, to which Kyros nodded. He had been thinking the same.

"Even if we did a good job, times will change and we won't. Gods.. our families.." He gulped at that, eyes looking a bit too wet at the sudden thoughts that bubbled up with all of the implications.

They both were quiet for a long while, having to deal with a sudden sense of grieving that neither had been expecting just yet. After a while they began talking together. Planning.

"Alright." Kyros said eventually in a rather stern tone, turning to Stewart along with Rhea. "We understand how important all of this is. We also believe that.. If we are to continue to be responsible to our country and families, things will need to change."

Rhea nodded, a few tears slipping down her smooth cheeks. "We want you to.. 'Re-code' our home land. So that it's not us in power. If you can.. Remake us? Or someone to fill the positions. In.. our families too." She murmured, having to fall silent as she choked up more.



Stewart's mind raced over the steps required to make what they wanted happen. "If we say no?" He asked in a testing manner, to which he got another sharp scowl from Kyros which he was all too familiar with at this point. Rhea's expression was near heartbreaking though, which Stewart found a little more unsettling to deal with.

"You asked us to do this. And we accepted knowing how important to both worlds our success will be. You have a lot of balls to be holding back on the one single thing we've asked for." The king shot back, holding Rhea's hand tightly. "If you think we are just your puppets, you had better think again. With all of this training you've given, and with what I'm capable of now, you had better believe my will and drive will be strong enough to knock you off your non-existent ass." If not more, his eyes said as they held onto the inhuman ones of the Eterrione.

Stewart held Kyros' glare for an uncomfortably long time, probably not liking being threatened. Though he hadn't expected much different of an answer really. "Lyre will most likely be able to do exactly as you request. He can create copies of you to carry out your 'lives', passing on the kingdom to those next in line."

Rhea looked gratefully to him, nodding, though still crying quietly. "Thank you." She whispered. They were losing their families and lives even if they did succeed. If they failed to beat or contain Anilaha though, they would lose them and more so the choice was obvious. It didn't soften the pain though.

Kyros seemed to relax a little himself, not going to say thank you himself, but at least not looking like he wanted to twist Stewart's long form into a pretzel knot. The king was generally jovial and light hearted. However, not in such serious times.

"That being resolved, there are a few other things you need to know about the process. Once it happens, and you step foot in Mhodica, it will become irreversible. The changes will become -you-. It will be as if you had been born that way," Stewart continued, both nodding in understanding. "And secondly, considering you will have an untold lifetime ahead of you, we will be expecting your help in a great many things."

"If we make it through," Rhea murmured to which Kyros frowned, not even considering that outcome and simply believing they would. Stewart didn't seem particularly pleased by that response either, but ignored it for now.

"Either way. Do you accept?" He asked them.

They both tightened their grips on each others hands and gave a nod of affirmation.

"Good. Then we shall continue."

As if on cue, Lyre appeared and began to do his work. A console formed in front of the Eterrione, sections lighting up and images forming in front of him that probably only he understood. Kyros and Rhea suddenly found themselves surrounded by rings of light, each seeming rather technical in look. More and more rings appeared around them, pulsing softly with the light of life.





Then they both felt their senses begin to dull, which was probably for the best as Lyre reached in with his abilities and began to change their very being.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, the Eterrione was done, making a sound of satisfaction and allowing the rings of biological code fade, the changes being installed.

Rhea shivered a bit, but looked down at herself a little wearily as she half expected to find limbs missing or perhaps too many gathered onto her body. Luckily she seemed unchanged for the most part, at least in that respect. Both she and Kyros still had the same number of appendages and everything else seemed to be in order. They noticed on one another though, that their skin had a more luminescent quality about it, as if they had been coated in an ultra fine sheen of minerals. Rhea's pale skin glimmered with many different subtle colors in a few places, reminding one of a softly colored opal. Kyros' skin had more of a golden hue that suited his already warm skin tones rather nicely. Their eyes also held a new light, to the point that they might come across a slightly unnerving to some, perhaps. Over all, the outward changes had been much less worrying than they first had assumed, which was somewhat of a relief. Despite that, they would find that the adjustments to their inner workings were far more extensive.

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Once they had the chance to adjust some, Stewart finally lead them to the portal and into Mhodica. Both Rhea and Kyros would feel a very disturbing sensation within them as they passed through. It was a shifting that was wholly unnatural and left them both feeling unsettled at best. It passed quickly through, which they both were grateful for, and soon enough they found themselves back in their homeland. Even though they had been going back every 'morning', this felt different somehow.

"What the hell!?" Kyros exclaimed, his voice coming out in a deep, powerful boom. Immediately he had noticed more obvious changes than just what Lyre had done to them. The somewhat tall human man now rose up to at least twenty feet high and was only vaguely human shaped. His head was that of a fierce lion, jaws full of strong, sharp teeth and head wreathed in a fluffy, flowing mane. He still stood on his two hind legs, but they were now mostly cat shaped and ending in absolutely huge paws. His hands were the same, but still being more dexterous than a real cat's would be. Over all he looked very savage, being clad in decorative leathers as well as various weaponries. His tail alone looked to be a weapon.

"Here, your body will now manifest your spirit's strengths. Honestly we are not surprised you came out this way," Stewart mused a little dully. They all had easily noted the ferocity Kyros fought with, as well as his loyalty, devotion, and charisma.

Rhea herself found her legs simply gone. Her form hovered above the grass below seemingly without effort. Luckily she still had her arms, which she reached up to touch her still humanoid face. Looking down and to the side then, she noted an arrangement of spiraling wing like structures, within each she could feel her own power humming softly.

"Can we change back?"

She asked a little nervously, her voice soft but echoing in a surreal manner. Stewart nodded.

"With practice no doubt. For now though, these really are more desirable for the situation, so please do not bother trying yet." He turned from them to the open field behind. A figure appeared across the way, the air shimmering about it as the imaging cloak that had been placed over it dissipated. It was a huge clockwork automaton from the other realm. With barely a nudge, it was activated and began to cloak itself with a new image, creating a somewhat dopier version of how Kyros himself looked right then.

Kyros had to laugh some, a slightly frightening sound in this form, but flexed his limbs testingly. "Let's do this~" And immediately jumped in to begin fighting the other titan.

Rhea held back at first, seeming unsure about this new form. However at Stewart's urging, she moved to also engage, mainly focusing on supporting her beloved with invigorating, protecting, and healing spells.

Kyros took a little to get used to his new form. The balance was different and especially the tail made certain moves odd. However, once he had it down, his reaction times and execution of skill became more and more formidable. Rhea made sure to keep an eye on the automaton, and erected barriers whenever a swipe looked to be getting too close for comfort. Kyros was doing quite a good job defending himself in general though, so when she found she wasn't doing much, she began to try out different boosting spells. Adding speed, strength, or balances of the two. As the exercises wore on, both king and queen began to fall back into a very tight knit rhythm of relying on one another and trusting each other to do what needed to be done in order to ensure victory.

Eventually, Stewart called for a pause in their fight, having them both come closer. "Your progress has been remarkable. Mixed with the fact that you are now half Eterrione, we believe you are almost ready for the coming battle. However," He paused and turned a bit. The air wavered next to him before two long, powerful looking spears materialized. "I have crafted these for you. Through them, your will and determination will manifest in ways that will greatly boost your abilities."

Floating the first over to Kyros, he explained. "Your deep sense of duty and frankly overpowering determination will become great physical power through this." The spear was solidly built, the long blade at the top perfect for slashing and stabbing, while the two heavy blades on either side of it created an almost axe like bearing which would allow for more barbaric and devastating moves. Kyros reached out to take the spear, a rather toothy grin coming across his cat face as he inspected it, turning it this way and that. With a happy grunt, he gave it a few test swings and found it to be perfectly balanced. Just holding it, he could feel a surge of new and exciting power. He practically bounced on his hind legs in the excitement of trying it out.

"And for you." Stewart passed over the second spear that was far more delicate in composition. "Your deep sense of empathy and understanding will be focused through this to imbue your spells if only you decide to make it so." Rhea had been the one with the most troubles during training, but everyone had noted that once she had decided something,



been convinced of it, she usually made it come to pass. Kyros of course just forged ahead with an almost relentless optimism and determination that made everything he attempted seem easy. Though with this new weapon in her possession, she immediately seemed to become more confident. The gentle light it emitted traced around her hands and up her arms, settling into the wings of this form as if giving her literal support from behind.

"Now," Stewart said, looking them over. They both looked to be beaming with energy, ready to test their new powers with a resolve he had only hoped to see so strong. The two were truly becoming the weapons they had hoped for. "Continue your training with these. I think you'll find things much easier, though quite different. It might take awhile to get used to not overdoing things on accident. Once you are sufficiently settled, then we will practice you shifting forms."

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The two trained and practiced as much as they could with their new forms and weapons, indeed finding the changes to be more than beneficial. Along with his pure raw strength and battle prowess, Kyros had discovered that he could shift his shape with enough effort. The easiest to retain was that of the lion, but he could now manage a shape with wings, one with larger jaws and rows of razor teeth, or one to protect himself with a heavy shell.

Though Kyros' shells were the least useful of them, considering Rhea was now able to deflect most blows completely before they hit Kyros. She even created a shield that would reflect a portion of physical or magical damage back onto the one attacking. Her healing spells kept him patched up perfectly and her invigorating enchantments gave him renewed energy. Not that he ever seemed to wear out at this point. She also had become very good at using her intuition and knowledge to call out tactics to Kyros, warning him of anything he might not notice while being otherwise occupied. And sometimes, she noted that giving simple words of praise or encouragement gave her husband a nice boost. With the later, she wasn't sure if she was actually imbuing the words with magic, or Kyros just enjoyed them, but they worked. Once in awhile, she did note that he would become a little too enthusiastic and his newly increased power seemed to drive him into a space of single mindedness. In times like that, Rhea would have to call out more firmly, and actually use magic to draw him out of the haze of battle.

Once they had almost fully mastered the resources they had been given, Stewart brought them back to the Hall where the other three Eterriene greeted them, a few offering praise or blunt battle statistics that the two could only assume were also meant as praise.

"Anilaha seems to have been drawn by your progress," Stewart began to explain once they were all settled back in. "Her birth will not be an accident, we always knew that. However, we were unsure as to what the catalyst would be. Now though, there is no doubt that it will be you two."

Kyros didn't seem to like that idea, his expression darkening and the previously good mood rather dimmed. "What? So you are saying that if we hadn't begun training, she wouldn't have been created?"

"Hardly." Stewart didn't sound impressed at that line of thought. "She would have eventually erupted into our worlds, but had we not prepared, we all would have been lambs to the slaughter. Perhaps it was quickened by your progress, but it is not the only reason. It was simply the most influential and likely at this point. That being said, we are only a fraction from her coming forth, and the others have narrowed down the location." He turned to a screen nearby, an image flickering to life that made Rhea now scowl along with her husband.

"That's..." Rhea exchanged a glance with Kyros. The picture was showing a location the two actually held rather dear. It had been where they had confessed their love to one another after having cultivated it from afar for a while already. Their families had taken a mutual vacation to a nearby island and the two young royals and snuck off to be alone. Finding a secluded area decorated with a waterfall and full, clear view of the starry sky, they had exchanged passionate words as well as affections. Once a year on their anniversary, they traveled there themselves as adults. "Why there?"

"All we can assume is. Because it holds such value to you. As a duet." Danielson spoke up then. "Your homelands and family are important to you, however those things are not what brought you this far. Perhaps she is hoping that in destroying such a place, it will weaken you. Distract you."

Rhea couldn't argue with that unfortunately. Just the idea caused her distress and sadness. "So... we will have to meet her there?"

"Indeed. However, you are ready," Stewart said with confidence. "We will go ahead and clear the surrounding area of any life forms. Then you will go in and wait."

Kyros nodded, looking as troubled as Rhea, though neither could do much about the situation. Even if it was rebuilt by Lyre, it wouldn't be -their- area. The -actual- place they had created these memories.

Oxford looked like she wanted to offer taking said memories from them, but then thought better of it. Such things were necessary for the two and their success, regardless of any pain it might bring later.

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In the time that the Eterriene were preparing the area for their arrival, Kyros and Rhea simply spent it together. They lamented in the possible loss of their special place, but also did their best to keep each other's spirits up. They had a daunting task ahead of them after all. One that quite literally everyone was relying on them to perform.

Eventually, they were summoned, and Stewart transported them to the location to wait.

"Now, you two need to figure out a way to gain just that last bit of power. That last bit of determination. Whatever you can muster, and it should be enough to become the catalyst. Then... I wish you good fortune." Unfortunately Stewart seemed to not be able to tell them how to gain said last bit of power, but he assured them they would figure it out. Giving them one last look, he went back through the portal to leave them to it.





"This is it then, huh..." Kyros sighed, obviously nervous.

Rhea grasped his hand in hers, trying to somehow dispel that feeling for them both, though it was more than a little difficult. Taking a deep breath, she looked around.

It was night time and they could easily see the spread of stars that they had become so fond of. The sound of the waterfall in the background was soothing, though other than that, the area was eerily quiet. Usually there were night birds calling or at the very least, the insect chorus that thrived on the wet grass surrounding the nearby pool.

"Maybe if we make this quick, we can spare this place," she murmured and Kyros nodded in agreement. He would definitely aim to complete this sooner rather than later.

"Now.. how are we supposed to get this last bit of power?" He asked in irritation. "Should we spar?" Though neither were in the mood for that.

"Everything we've done so far has been almost exclusively built around the idea of 'willpower,'" Rhea thought aloud. "We've worked more than hard to get this far. I'm not sure what could be missing that we didn't already try for."

They both stood there, staring at the landscape, hand in hand as they tried to think. Eventually Kyros gave a long, sharp sigh though.

"Determination. I don't want to do this. You don't.. but we have to," he said quietly. The looming tension was more than enough to make them weary. Turning to Rhea, he took both her hands in his and bent a bit so that their foreheads touched. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath then let it out, Rhea following his cue. "Let's do this," he said then with a tone of absolute determination. Rhea nodded, holding his hands tightly.

In that moment, the area around them seemed to implode in a rush of black. The screams of terror and death that they had heard in that first vision shown to them by Stewart tore through their senses.

Kyros thought he heard Rhea growl something like 'this is it', but it was hard to hear. Giving one last squeeze of their hands, he let go. Even as the air around them turned into a torrent of darkness, whipping their hair this way and that and threatening to blow them over where they stood, he reached out a hand to his side and summoned his spear. Rhea did the same, eyes closed tightly against the sharp winds.

In defiance towards the figure they had yet to see, Kyros let out a resounding roar as he transformed into his lion shape, readying for battle. Rhea pressed her lips together and shifted as well, her soft glow barely lighting the pocket of darkness that had engulfed them.

The chaos had obscured their vision of the waterfall area, and as it continued to linger, both felt a strange sensation that said they very well could have been transported away. In the end it didn't matter though, they had been trained for all eventualities.

After a tense moment, a pure hole of black opened up in front of them and before either could do much, tendrils of darkness began to reach out, grasping and pulling, until a



form was drug through and into this world.

With a body as bare as a baby who had just been born, Anilaha righted herself and looked to the two that stood in front of her. They were the reason she was here. She had felt a pull. A need. To kill these two as they were the first and only thing that stood in her way.

However, she simply remained where she was, staring at them for a time.

Kyros stared back, having expected an attack to come right away. The sense of dread that her mere presence brought was rather potent, causing his ethereal fur bristled uneasily. He did his best to look to her eyes, trying to sense if there was intelligence.

"Anilaha," he started by saying. The abrupt sound caused the woman in front of them to blink once. Did she even know her own name? "We need to talk. We know what you were created for, but we believe we can—" The king was cut off as Anilaha finally reacted, sending a sharp jab of energy right for his throat. There was a blinding flash as Rhea cast her shield spell within that split second, catching the bolt and sparing Kyros a gaping hole. Unlike her husband, Rhea had been on the edge, waiting for such an attack no matter what reaction Kyros' words created.

"We don't want to hurt you!" Kyros shouted immediately over the still lingering sound of the clashing spells.

"I don't think she can understand us, Kyros." Rhea said tensely, the tips of her many wings glowing more and more brightly as she readied for the fight that was sure to come.

Kyros let out a short string of curses, but readied his spear as well.

Anilaha seemed to take in every movement, every word from her opposition, head tilting slightly in a way that made Rhea's skin prickle.

"Just try to incapacitate her," Rhea urged. She was more than ready to get this over.

"Yeah..." Kyros' tone was unsatisfied, honestly having hoped to talk this out. Maybe, he mused, she would be more willing to compromise once she was shown it was the better option. With a growl, he moved in to attempt to use the broad side of his spearhead to knock her out.

Unfortunately it became immediately obvious that this was not going to be that easy either. Kyros' mighty swing was rebounded by a sudden barrier that erected around Anilaha's form, guarding her from the weapon. Rhea scowled. The imagery of the shield, a glowing half globe with a strong, solid pattern of light across it, looked exactly like her own only in different hues.

"Did.. she just copy me?" She asked herself, though aloud. If it had been a copy, then this was going to become messy quite quickly. Sending a spell of empowerment to Kyros, the queen silently urged him onto the attack.

Not holding back now, Kyros slashed and hacked at the shields that kept popping up, driving Anilaha back a step

or two in the process. Her black eyes watched his every move still, until with a rattling roar, she shifted shapes completely. Out of her previous form stepped a great twenty foot lion made of bones and black ichor. It too held a dark version of the king's spear.

"She IS copying us!" Rhea shouted in annoyance, gripping her own spear close. "Be careful!"

"She won't get far," Kyros grunted, not letting up. "There can only be one of us and if she's relying on cheap tactics like this, there's no way she'll beat me!"

Rhea believed him, yet at the same time couldn't see how this was going to be quick or painless. Continuing to channel support to her husband, she watched as the two lunged back at one another. Quite quickly it turned into a mirrored battle, each using the same moves until Kyros switched it up. Though, Anilaha was almost instant in copying those as well.

Starting to get fed up, Kyros seemed to go into a trance of simply trying to out maneuver his opponent. His moves began to take on a wild edge that worried Rhea, to the point she eventually stepped in with the few attack spells she herself knew.

The second opponent seemed to throw Anilaha enough that Kyros finally got in a few good, solid hits, sending the woman's form flying back. As she did, the darkness around them flickered until they found themselves back in the waterfall clearing. However, the water now ran black and sickly, the rocks surrounding it were torn asunder as if by a great force. The trees were broken and ashy, a few even being on fire. It seemed that their fight had been causing great damages to the 'real' world they were still adjacent to.

Kyros hadn't seem to notice yet, so Rhea didn't call out the fact, not wanting to distract him. Though she felt her own heart sink a little.

As if sensing that, Anilaha suddenly turned her attention to Rhea. Her eyes locked with the queen's in a way that Rhea found she simply couldn't look away. The destroyed landscape around her seemed to stretch on either side of her vision, elongating until each bit was just a streak of color. The only thing she could still see clearly was Anilaha's eyes themselves, which drew her deep into their darkness.

Kyros experienced the changing of their location more directly. He saw the grass under his feet curl up like a rug, rising high above him and pulling back as if threatening to yank him off his feet. The water next to them began to flow upwards and the shattered trees broke apart even further until only shards remained, floating about like feathers on a non existent breeze. The very fabric of their surroundings was being undone and manipulated.

Rhea suddenly found herself confronted with a vision as Anilaha attempted to worm her way into the queen's mind. No longer on the battlefield with Kyros, she was at the back of a room, watching him. The scent of perfume was heavy and so real, the lights low and sultry. She felt the brush of a silk drapey blow across her skin as a slight wind picked up through the open window to the side. She was in a rather posh brothel, which was made obvious by the scandalous sounds in the background.







Kyros himself was seated upon a large pillow, naked and decorated women all about him as they tended to every whim he could have. She was forced to watch with excruciating detail how two women ran their hands over his strong form, cooing complimentary words to him all the while. Her heart beat a little too fast in panic as things began to become more heated. What was this?? Why was he doing this? Had he been doing this the whole time before they had gotten married? She knew that everyone loved him, and it had probably been difficult to turn away the numerous advances he received, but she had always believed his pledges of loyalty to be true. Even across all of that distance. Had she been a fool?

All these thoughts were only compounded by the scene of growing intensity in front of her, to the point where she couldn't stop herself from crying any longer. The tears ran down her cheeks, hot and real, Anilaha forcing her to watch and experience this as if it were absolutely legitimate.

A small voice whispered in the back of Rhea's mind though, as if trying to shout through a thick veil. Kyros wouldn't do that. She DID believe his vows of loyalty to her, all the way from the beginning up until the present. Yes he was admired and sought after by many, even after they had been married, but he never had lead even one of them on. He was a natural flirt, but he had never once attempted to have any sort of interaction with another woman, or man, that would hurt their relationship. He loved her and only her, which she returned wholeheartedly. And a huge part of that was trust. She would -always- trust him. Everything she saw before her was lies!

Visibly and mentally, Rhea began to thrash against the bonds that kept her glued to this scene. As she struggled, the less and less real it became as her conscious was finally able to begin beating back Anilaha's powers. With a repeated no, no, no, Rhea wrested back herself from the other's grasp. With a loud shout, she sent a mental and magical shock-wave towards the source and blew back her attacker in a blast of sparkling, blinding energy.

Falling forward some, Rhea was freed as Anilaha had to retreat a little more to gather herself back up.

"R-rhea??" Kyros asked, moving closer while keeping an eye on Anilaha. "What happened? You suddenly froze and began crying. Muttering something."

"Sh-she was messing with my mind," Rhea admitted. She didn't have the heart to tell him what she had been forced to watch. Then again, she mused, it might just make him angry enough to put even more power into beating their opponent. For now she simply warned, "Be ready. She might try to do it to you. Just remember... it's not real." Rhea picked herself back up and glanced around, shuddering at the torn up and surreal landscape.

Kyros took the advice with a nod before turning back to Anilaha. Though during that short interlude where the world around them had torn and folded, Anilaha had undergone some changes of her own. She was no longer posing as a boney version of the king himself, instead having shifted back to human. At least halfway. From her bare torso down, she had become something truly monstrous. Three enormous skulls made up the base, each looking vaguely

lion-esque still, though far more hideous. Horns and sharp appendages jutted out from most surfaces, a few unnerving tentacles trailing behind her, and all the while she hovered above the ground effortlessly.

Neither king nor queen found this change a surprise necessarily, but that didn't make the image before them any less intimidating.

"We're still fine," Rhea commented, mostly to herself. "I don't even feel tired yet."

Kyros smirked a little at that, his eyes on Anilaha though as she began to glow. Rings of light began to circle parts of her form as she wove spells into her very being.

"Don't let her do anything more," Rhea cautioned, adjusting her grip on her spear before casting a series of spells in quick succession. A shield, a slowly pulsing heal, and a strong boost to Kyros' speed. Taking these blessings, Kyros charged in yet again, already planning on using his other forms to continue. Anilaha was simply too big at this point to continue with an attack as direct as before.

Luckily the fight seemed to call just for that, because as soon as Kyros leapt in with spear flashing, he was immediately met with a barrage of new magics from his opponent. Each skull seemed to have its own speciality, be it spewing flame bursts, shadow blasts, or lancing stabs of a light that looked a little too similar to Rhea's own. Kyros dodged most though, using Rhea's speed boost to his advantage as well as quick shifts of form. One moment he had wings to aid in his impressively high leaps, the next he used a heavy shell to pound down atop one skull or the other. If he was able to get close enough, his spear reached for Anilaha's center form.

The two worked flawlessly together, their training more than paying off, especially as Anilaha began to destroy their surroundings more and more. Chunks of earth floated about haphazardly, though Kyros just used those to his advantage, leaping and rebounding off them with ease. The elements seemed to mix around them as well. Light flowed like water, the air itself became solid in some places while conversely, stone rippled like liquid, threatening to suck them under should they be careless.

Once more, Anilaha found herself being shoved back despite her own evolutions in power. She still attempted to copy what either was doing, but it was obvious she would have to start learning for herself sooner rather than later, or risk losing.

At one point, Anilaha began to truly tear the space around them. Holes began to open up in what was their world. On the other side were deep, starry abysses that lead to who knew where.

Dodging one such hole that opened up right beneath him, Kyros rolled and popped to his feet, ready to continue. However, Rhea would see him freeze. He had been working himself into a bit of a frenzy already, Rhea allowing it to continue as it might just be their best bet. So when her beloved simply -stopped-, Rhea felt her heart also stall. To her it looked as if he was rooted in place, but in Kyros' eyes, everything was changing and melting together. Kyros' mind told him that he was being literally transported to another plane,







everything still feeling, sounding, and smelling absolutely real. Unlike when Anilaha had forced a vision onto Rhea, she chose this time, to keep the images in the present.

A magic circle flared up underneath Rhea in a blinding flash. Too slow to move out of it, the queen was instantly impaled by lances of light. She let out a sharp, piercing scream of pure pain. A scream that Kyros had never even heard come from Rhea's throat before. She wasn't one to scare easily and was in general very quiet. Also, of course, he had gone far, far out of his way to make sure she was always safe and never hurt. So the sound of her helpless anguish coming from his lover, sent a ice cold wave of dread washing through him. Dread, and.. Fear.

Anilaha had learned that petty fears like the ones she had tried to use against Rhea, were not enough in this case. So she had taken their last span of fight to dig more into the king. Though it was absolutely easy to find this particular worry within him as it always seemed to be at the front of his thoughts.

Rhea cried his name in a begging way as another wave of light shot through her, ethereal blood spraying everywhere.

"S-STOP!" Kyros roared, turning away from Anilaha and moving towards where Rhea was being held. He had to get her out of there!

However, with every step he took, the light became brighter and the lances more frequent. Anilaha didn't speak, as she hadn't uttered a sound herself yet, but the game was clear. The closer Kyros got, the worse it became for Rhea, who was already having her form torn to shreds.

As he stopped, the attacks stopped. Rhea crumpled to the floor looking like a bird that had fallen from the heavens, broken and bleeding. She sobbed quietly and still called his name even though her voice was as crippled as her body.

Still not speaking, Anilaha impressed an idea into Kyros' mind. Lay down your weapon. Kneel. Die.. and she will be spared. Again and again she repeated the idea, assaulting his already shaken senses.

On the outside, Rhea saw Kyros trembling. His always iron grip began to slip until his spear fell from his hands to clatter to the glasslike floor they now stood upon. The queen could tell that Anilaha was attempting to assault his mind much like she had hers.

"I told you to not believe anything!" She shouted to Kyros, moving a bit closer and glad to see Anilaha was a little occupied right then as she drove Kyros to his knees. The great lion fell to one then the other, head bowing as he clenched his paw like fists at his sides. "Wake up!" Rhea shouted again. She closed her eyes and focused, channelling magic into her voice. "WAKE UP!" As her spell and words reached Kyros' ears, Rhea was able to see a very vague image of what he was being shown right then. She saw herself on the ground. Dying. It was disturbing to see, but she ignored it, which was something Kyros was apparently unable to do. Reaching for him, Rhea found she was unable to get any closer, some invisible force keeping her from continuing. Gritting her teeth, she began to think of a way around this and eventually settled on pure force.

Closing her eyes yet again as it seemed to help sometimes, she began to expel all of her power outwards, aiming to disrupt the vision enough for Kyros to notice it wasn't real. She also continued to call his name, urging him to wake up. As it began to work, Anilaha showed the first signs of emotion, letting out an angry scream as her image wavered in an unnatural way. Kyros noticed and began to frown, slowly rising back to his feet while staring at where Rhea's image was being tortured. Pushing even harder, the real Rhea let out bursts of energy in her last attempts to break Kyros free. Luckily, as Kyros watched, ripples formed over his current reality, giving him peeks into the truth. He could see another Rhea, up and fine, but struggling to charge her magic as bright and powerful as possible.

"Wake up!" Rhea shouted yet again, to which she was answered by another sound of anger, this one coming far louder and full of honest fury. Roaring, Kyros bent to pick up his dropped spear and leapt for the false image of Rhea, shattering the image and landing him back into the real world.

Rhea swayed as she had consumed so much energy, but smiled to Kyros. "I told you to not believe anything."

"Easier said than done!" He barked back, not angry at her of course. All of this was already trying on his patience. "Let's end this." Growling, he turned back to anilaha who was recovering from her mental intrusion being broken. "No quarter." He added, resolve showing in his large eyes.

Rhea gulped and nodded. She could tell Kyros was giving up on the idea of any sort of gentler resolution. This would probably only end with one side or the other being beaten completely.

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The battle raged on for what seemed like months. Years. Weeks? It was impossible to tell as Anilaha continued to warp the space around them, using their environment as well as minds against them. However, much like their opponent, the king and queen were quickly adapting to the other's tricks. The mind games Anilaha attempted to subject them to became less and less effective. Her physical advances were powerful and ever changing, but the two had fallen into an almost trance like state, working together as if they were one entity in order to counter and overcome whatever was thrown at them. Kyros stopped hesitating when he landed blows against Anilaha, and Rhea only urged him on further until the being of destruction and chaos was reduced to a staggering, ragged form.

"It is time." Stewart's voice finally echoed into the black and starry stage they currently fought across. "We will channel to you the powers to seal her. You -must- succeed." The original idea had been for the Eterrione to step in themselves for this, but it seemed that Anilaha's manipulation of time and space had made that more difficult.

Both Kyros and Rhea felt a familiar sensation envelope them, rings of light appearing around their forms as the abilities were temporarily transferred over; Lyre's work no doubt. The two royals exchanged glances as the knowledge bloomed inside of them, giving nods of affirmation.

Taking a step back, Rhea raised her hands, her spear glow







ing like a shard of pure light as it lifted above her higher. Below Anilaha the ground also began to gleam in the same light. Luminous points flickered and grew stronger until bonds grew between them, creating a cage like pattern of triangles. They grew and folded over their opponent's form until she was completely encompassed. Raising her hands higher, Rhea's spear spun once before jabbing down into the floor, an explosion of magic causing the wire cage of light to solidify and resemble glass, though it wavered and shimmered.

Kyros then took his own spear, grasping it tightly the way a fisherman might ready themselves when hunting a whale. It began to seethe with its own light and power, the tip sparking with a determined flame. Once he had acquired his target perfectly, Kyros let out one last roar and hurled it towards the glass enclosure. It impacted Rhea's shell, sending shockwaves back against the two. Kyros leapt forward despite it though, to land on the side of the cage. Grasping his spear that was firmly set into Rhea's magic, he gave it a mighty twist then wrested the blade free before jumping back. There was a sound much like that of a lock closing, and Rhea's magic settled, the glass becoming thick and truly solid. Anilaha, behind it, tried to struggle one last time but was overcome with the binding magic until she was left to simply hang there, suspended in the middle.

Rhea and Kyros shuddered as they felt the sealing magic fade from their bodies as Lyre reclaimed it, and they had to glance at one another... Was it truly over? As tired as they were by then, all they could do was hope though.

After a while longer, the prison in front of them began to fade from their view, being transported to another, safer location no doubt. And once it was completely gone, their surroundings also shifted until they found themselves back where they had started. Or what was left of it at least. The waterfall area had been completely destroyed. The magical disturbances and the fight itself had rendered the area completely changed. Now mostly flat, a few rocks jutted up here and there haphazardly but that was about it. The water was gone, the grass and trees gone.

"Maybe. They can fix it," Rhea whispered as she slowly shifted back to her human form and went over to take Kyros' hand in hers as he did the same. "They should be able to after all..."

"Everything will be set back to how it was." Stewart's voice came from behind them as the Eterrione appeared to them finally. "It will be made fresh. No one will ever know anything out of the ordinary occurred." He glanced around at the devastation, seeming unworried. "You two played your part perfectly, and we believe we have figured out a sort of... Reward that you two might find welcoming. We will discuss it back in the Hall once things are fully settled." Without a single look more, he took all three of them back to the Dream World, leaving behind the scar that mangled their home world for now.

Rhea and Kyros were told that Anilaha was properly stored away, hopefully to remain thus for a very, very long time. They hypothesised that she indeed could not be fully destroyed, so this was the best option in the end.

They were then informed that the four Eterrione had each done their part in setting up a sort of 'continuation' of their old life for them to live out. They could not and would never be able to return to it as they now were, but with the Eterrione's powers, they would be able to inhabit a sort of automaton illusioned to look exactly like them. Like this, they could finish out their lives with their friends and family before a sort of end would be orchestrated. By then, the two hoped they would be able to have named a worthy successor to the throne and their kingdoms would continue to live on as peacefully as they always had.

As they re-entered their old life in this manner, they found it a bit difficult at first. They had spent so much time focusing on their training that their 'normal' lives were almost too mundane at this point. On top of which they were living as normal humans once more. The skills they had made second nature thanks to the Veleverum, were no longer at their disposal as they were simply projecting themselves onto automaton.

They quickly decided on a few excuses as to why they wouldn't ever be able to have children of their own, then set about the task of indeed finding a suitable successor. Though as the process wore on, the King and Queen did start to talk about possibly starting a family of their own once this 'life' of theirs was over.

Time passed, and they saw their families grow old before their eyes. Of course most children live to see their parents fade away eventually, but for Rhea and Kyros it was different. This would not be the first time they would be the ones to continue on. It served as a grim reminder that they were now eternal while the world, and those in it, would change. Wither. And eventually die. However, despite that, they did decide eventually that they wished to start a family of their own once everything was completed here. The image in the mirror test, which seemed life-times ago already, still remained in both of their memories. They would effectively lose their kingdom and all of their riches, but they would not be poor. Not when they had each other. So once everything was settled and their automatons were buried as was right for their rank, they returned to their real bodies and set out to find a quiet town in which to start their true new lives.

The child that came of their union was not human, as they themselves were not entirely anymore either. It grew slowly, and Stewart informed them that the child was not eternal as they were, but it would not begin to show signs of age for a very long time. They vowed to not think too much on that until the time came, and all three lived a very happy life.

When their child was of an age to make their own life, Rhea and Kyros set out on their own adventures. Kyros had always wanted to see more of the world, and now he would most certainly have the chance to. Rhea herself enjoyed the idea of reading books from every corner of the map, and even started a small collection of treasures they found along the way. To pay their way, they often set up in inns or pubs, Kyros telling animated tales that he either made up or simply recounted from their experiences. Rhea accompanied him with a small harp she had learned to play, and perhaps if she felt particularly bold, a soft song or two. All the while, of course, they still upheld their original promise to the Eterrione and helped them in anything that might require their powers.



Once in awhile, they returned to their home kingdom to check in and make sure that things were still acceptable. Though rather quickly, they noticed that their names were already being forgotten. Despite their great deeds, their legacy was fading from their people's memories. It was almost too fast to be natural, and when asked about it, the Eterrione made a somewhat troublesome observation. There seemed to be bits of lingering energy from Anilaha clinging to the couple. Almost like a curse, it had infected their homeland during their time living through the automatons, and despite Oxford trying to correct it, the memories continuously eroded from the people's minds until nothing was left.

Despite the changes and impact they had made on their people's history, they would never be remembered for it.

They were now, and forever after, Forgotten.







3



# Stats & Special Thanks





Medium fey (ygtolith), neutral good

**Armor Class:** 18 (natural armor)  
HP: 156 (24d8 + 48) Spd: 30 ft.

Str 12 (+1), Dex 16 (+3), Con 14 (+2),  
Int 16 (+3), Wis 20 (+5), Cha 15 (+2)

**Saving Throws:** Int +9, Wis +11

**Skills:** Animal Handling +11, History +9,  
Insight +11, Nature +9

**Damage Resistances:** necrotic, radiant  
**Senses:** passive Perception 15  
**Languages:** Common, Sylvan  
**Challenge:** 17 (18000 XP)

#### Aura Of Life.

Radiates an aura that sustains and protects life. Any allied creature within 20 feet of her, which is not an undead or construct, regains 13 (3d8) hit points at the start of its turn, and cannot be turned into undead. Any undead creature which starts its turn within 20 feet of Alitheia takes 13 (2d8) radiant damage, and must succeed on a DC 19 Wisdom save or become Frightened.

#### Speak With Beasts And Plants:

Communicate with beasts and plants as if they shared a language.

**Spellcasting:** A 20th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 19, +11 to hit with spell attacks).

#### The following druid spells are prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *Druidcraft*, *Guidance*, *Produce Flame*, *Thorn Whip*

**1st level** (4 slots): *Entangle*, *Fog Cloud*, *Goodberry*, *Purify Food and Drink*

**2nd level** (3 slots): *Hold Person*, *Lesser Restoration*, *Moonbeam*

**3rd level** (3 slots): *Daylight*, *Plant Growth*, *Wind Wall*

**4th level** (3 slots): *Confusion*, *Grasping Vine*, *Polymorph*

**5th level** (3 slots): *Greater Restoration*, *Mass Cure Wounds*, *Tree Stride*

**6th level** (2 slots): *Heal*, *Wall of Thorns*

**7th level** (2 slots): *Mirage Arcane*, *Regenerate*

**8th level** (1 slot): *Sunburst*

**9th level** (1 slot): *True Resurrection*

#### Actions:

##### Pacifist's Touch.

Melee Spell Attack: +12 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. Hit: The target must succeed of a DC 19 Constitution saving throw or be stunned for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

#### Legendary Actions:

Can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. She regains spent legendary actions at the start of its turn.

**Cantrip:** Casts a cantrip.

**Move:** Move up to half her speed without provoking opportunity attacks.

**Pacifist's Touch** (Costs 2 Actions).  
Uses her *Pacifist's Touch*.



CR 19 XP 204,800  
Female human druid 20

NG Medium humanoid (human)  
Init +3; Senses low-light vision, Perception +5

#### DEFENSE

AC 13, Touch 13, Flat-footed 10 (+3 Dex)  
HP 150 (20d8+60)

Fort +14, Ref +9, Will +17, +4 vs. spell-like and supernatural abilities of fey and spells and effects that utilize and target plants

**Defensive Abilities** *bramble armor* (40 rounds/day), *bramble armor* (40 rounds/day)

#### OFFENSE

Speed 30 ft. Woodland Stride  
Space 5 ft. Reach 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** *spontaneous casting*, *wooden fist* (16 rounds/day), *wooden fist* (16 rounds/day)  
D Domain spell; Domains Plant

#### STATISTICS

Str 12, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 16, Wis 20, Cha 15  
Base Atk +15; CMB +16; CMD 29

**Feats** *Animal Affinity*, *Combat Casting*, *Disruptive Spell*, *Focused Spell*, *Greater Spell Penetration*, *Lingering Spell*, *Maximize Spell*, *Merciful Spell*, *Persistent Spell*, *Selective Spell*, *Spell Penetration*

#### Skills:

Handle Animal +29, Heal +18, Knowledge (Geography) +26, Knowledge (History) +23, Knowledge (Nature) +28, Knowledge (Planes) +23, Ride +5, Sense Motive +25, Spellcraft +26, Survival +7, Swim +14

**Languages:** Common, Druidic, Sylvan

#### SQ

aura of life, *bramble armor*, *plant*, *resist nature's lure*

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

##### Aura Of Life (Su)

Alitheia radiates an aura that sustains and protects life. Any allied creature within 20 feet of her, which is not an undead or construct, regains 13 (3d8) hit points at the start of its turn, and cannot be turned into undead. Any undead creature which starts its turn within 20 feet of Alitheia takes 13 (2d8) damage.

##### Bramble Armor (Su)

Alitheia can cause a host of wooden thorns to burst from her skin as a free action. While *Bramble Armor* is in effect, any foe striking her with an unarmed strike or a melee weapon without reach takes 1d6+10 points of piercing damage. She can use this ability for 40 rounds per day. These rounds do not need to be consecutive.

##### Plant

Alitheia finds solace in the green, can grow defensive thorns, and can communicate with plants.

##### Resist Nature's Lure (Ex)

You gain a +4 bonus on saving throws against the spell-like and supernatural abilities of fey. This bonus also applies to spells and effects that utilize and target plants, such as *Blight*, *Entangle*, *Spike Growth*, and *Warp Wood*.



Sex: Female Race: Human Level: 8  
Life Points: 135 Class: Wizard

STR: 6 DEX: 8 AGI: 9 CON: 7 POW: 12 (+2)  
INT: 12 (+2) WP: 9 PER: 7  
PhR: 70 MR: 95 PsR: 75 VR: 70 DR: 70

Initiative: 100

**Advantages:** *The Gift* (2), *Night Vision* (1)  
**Disadvantages:** None.

**Magic Projection:** 190  
**Magic Level:** Essence 80  
**Magic Accumulation:** 90  
**Zeon:** 1810

**Size:** 12 **Regeneration:** 1  
**Movement Value:** 9  
**Fatigue:** 7

#### Secondary Abilities:

**Athletics:**  
*Athleticism* 70  
Ride 80  
Swim 60  
Jump 30

#### Perception:

Notice 90  
Search 80  
Track 130

#### Intellectual:

Animals 120  
Herbal Lore 120  
Medicine 60  
Occult 100  
M. Appraisal 170

#### Subterfuge:

Poisons 100

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

##### Aura Of Life:

Alitheia radiates an aura that sustains and protects life. Any allied creature within 20 feet of her, which is not an undead or construct, regains 25 Life Points at the start of its turn, and cannot be turned into undead. Any undead creature which starts its turn within 20 feet of Alitheia must Roll a Magic Resistance against 160 or suffer damage equivalent to its Failure level.

##### Bramble Armor

Alitheia can cause a host of wooden thorns to burst from her skin as a free action. While *Bramble Armor* is in effect, any foe striking her with unarmed attacks or a normal size melee weapon suffers an automatic attack of a 160 Final Ability that hits on the Thrust AT with a Base Damage of 60. The *Bramble Armor's* attack takes place before the attacker rolls their own. Alitheia can use this ability for 40 rounds per day. These rounds do not need to be consecutive.

##### Plant

Alitheia finds solace in the green, can grow defensive thorns, and can communicate with plants.

##### Resist Nature's Lure

Alitheia gains a +25 bonus on Resistance Rolls against the spell-like and supernatural abilities of fey. This bonus also applies to spells and effects that utilize and target plants and creatures from the nature.





# Cielo Corazon



**Medium humanoid (human), true neutral**  
**Armor Class:** 11 (14 w/ mage armor)

**HP:** 130 (20d8 + 40)    **Speed:** 30 ft.  
**Str** 11 (+0), **Dex** 12 (+1), **Con** 15 (+2), **Int** 17 (+3),  
**Wis** 16 (+3), **Cha** 21 (+5)

**Saving Throws:** Con +8, Cha +13

**Skills:**  
 Arcana +9, Deception +11, Insight +9,  
 Persuasion +11

**Senses:** passive Perception 13

**Languages:** Common

**Challenge:** 17 (18000 XP)

### Irresistible Allure.

Cielo radiates a nearly divine beauty that dissuades her opponents from bringing her harm. Any creature who targets Cielo with an attack or harmful spell must first make a Wisdom saving throw against DC 19. On a failed save, the creature must choose a new target or lose the attack or spell. On a successful save, that creature is immune to this effect for the next 24 hours. Creatures that can't be charmed are immune to this effect.

### Spellcasting.

Cielo Corazon is a 17th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 19, +11 to hit with spell attacks).

### The following sorcerer spells are prepared:

- Cantrips (at will): Blade Ward, Frostbite, Gust, Ray of Frost
- 1st level (4 slots): Fog Cloud, Ice Knife, Mage Armor
- 2nd level (3 slots): Gust of Wind, Snifloc's Snowball Swarm
- 3rd level (3 slots): Fly, Sleet Storm
- 4th level (3 slots): Dimension Door, Ice Storm
- 5th level (2 slots): Cone of Cold, Control Winds
- 6th level (1 slot): Investiture of Ice
- 7th level (1 slot): Finger of Death
- 8th level (1 slot): Dominate Monster
- 9th level (1 slot): Time Stop

### Actions:

**Ray Of Frost.**  
 Ranged Spell Attack: +11 to hit, range 60 ft., one creature. Hit: 18 (4d8) cold damage and -10 speed until start of next turn.



**CR** 17    **XP** 102,400  
**Female**    **human**    **sorcerer 18**

**N Medium humanoid (human)**  
**Init** +9;    **Senses** Perception +3

### DEFENSE

**AC** 11, **Touch** 11,    **Flat-footed** 10 (+1 Dex)  
**HP** 117 (18d6+54)  
**Fort** +8, **Ref** +7,    **Will** +14

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.  
**Space** 5 ft.    **Reach** 5 ft.

### Known Sorcerer Spells

- (CL 18th, concentration +23):
- 9th (3/day)—time stop
  - 8th (5/day)—charm monster (mass) (DC 23), polar ray, moment of prescience
  - 7th (6/day)—control weather, finger of death (DC 22), fly, mass, vision
  - 6th (6/day)—cloak of dreams (DC 21), freezing sphere (DC 21), sirocco (DC 21), shadow walk (DC 21)
  - 5th (7/day)—cone of cold (DC 20), mind fog (DC 20), overland flight, planar adaptation, dream
  - 4th (7/day)—dimension door, ice storm, river of wind (DC 19), wall of ice (DC 19), divination
  - 3rd (7/day)—fly, sleet storm, tongues, wind wall, deep slumber (DC 18)
  - 2nd (7/day)—gust of wind (DC 17), knock, see invisibility, share language, whispering wind, augury
  - 1st (8/day)—mage armor, obscuring mist, protection from chaos, protection from evil, protection from law, sleep (DC 16)
  - 0 (at will)—arcane mark, detect magic, flare (DC 15), light, mending, message, open/close (DC 15), ray of frost, resistance

### STATISTICS

**Str** 11, **Dex** 12, **Con** 15, **Int** 17, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 21  
**Base Atk** +9; **CMB** +9; **CMD** 20

**Feats:** Arcane Shield, Bouncing Spell, Combat Casting, Dazing Spell, Deceitful, Disruptive Spell, Eschew Materials, Extend Spell, Focused Spell, Improved Initiative, Lingering Spell, Merciful Spell, Persuasive

**Skills:** Bluff +30, Diplomacy +27, Disguise +7, Handle Animal +11, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (Arcana) +24, Ride +7, Sense Motive +24, Spellcraft +24, Swim +6

**Languages** Common

**SQ** bloodline arcana, irresistible allure

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

#### Bloodline Arcana

Whenever Cielo targets a single creature with a spell, she gains an insight bonus equal to half the spell's level (minimum +1) for 1 round to her AC and saving throws against any spell or attack made by that creature.

#### Irresistible Allure

Cielo radiates a nearly divine beauty that dissuades her opponents from bringing her harm. Any creature who targets Cielo with an attack or harmful spell must first make a Will saving throw against DC 19. On a failed save, the creature must choose a new target or lose the attack or spell. On a successful save, that creature is immune to this effect for the next 24 hours. Creatures that can't be charmed are immune to this effect.

**Sex:** Female  
**Race:** Human

**Level:** 7  
**Life Points:** 145  
**Class:** Wizard

**STR:** 6    **DEX:** 7    **AGI:** 7    **CON:** 8  
**POW:** 12 (+2)    **INT:** 11 (+1)    **WP:** 9    **PER:** 8  
**PhR:** 70    **MR:** 90    **PsR:** 70    **VR:** 70    **DR:** 70

**Initiative:** 85 Natural

**Wear Armor:** 5  
**AT:** None.

**Advantages:** The Gift (1), Seducer (1).  
**Disadvantages:** None.

**Magic Projection:** 160 Offensive/200 Defensive  
**Magic Level:** Water 80 / Peace 80  
**Magic Accumulation:** 75  
**Zeon:** 1.685

**Size:** 14    **Regeneration:** 2  
**Movement Value:** 7  
**Fatigue:** 8

### Secondary Abilities:

**Athletics:**  
 Ride 40  
 Swim 20

**Perception**  
 Notice 80  
 Search 80

**Intellectual**  
 Science 40  
 Medicine 40  
 Occult 180  
 Memorize 80  
 M. Appraisal 200

**Social**  
 Style 40  
 Leadership 40  
 Persuasion 240 (Seduction)

**Subterfuge**  
 Disguise 80

### Irresistible Allure

Cielo radiates a nearly divine beauty that dissuades her opponents from bringing her harm. Any creature that targets Cielo with an attack or harmful spell must first make a Magic Resistance Check against 140. On a failed save, the creature must choose a new target or lose the attack or spell. On a successful save, that creature is immune to this effect for the next 24 hours. Creatures that can't be charmed or have physiological immunity are unaffected by this effect.





**Medium humanoid** (human),  
true neutral **Armor Class:** 15 (chain shirt)  
**HP:** 58 (9d8 + 18) **Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 10 (+0), **Dex** 14 (+2), **Con** 15 (+2), **Int** 13 (+1),  
**Wis** 10 (+0), **Cha** 16 (+3)

**Saving Throws:** Cha +5  
**Skills:** Performance +5, Persuasion +5

**Senses:** passive Perception 10  
**Languages:** Common **Challenge:** 1 (200 XP)

#### Spellcasting:

Dia is a 1st-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13, +5 to hit with spell attacks). The following bard spells are prepared:

Cantrips (at will): Blade Ward, Friends, Mending

1st level (3 slots): Charm Person, Disguise Self, Healing Word, Heroism, Silent Image

#### Actions

**Longsword.**  
Melee Weapon Attack: +2 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d8) slashing damage.



**CR** 1/2 **XP** 200 **Female human bard** 1  
N Medium humanoid (human)  
**Init** +6; **Senses** Perception +0

**DEFENSE:** AC 16, touch 12,  
flat-footed 14 (+4 armor, +2 Dex)

**HP** 11 (1d8+3) **Fort** +2, **Ref** +4, **Will** +2

**OFFENSE:** Speed 30 ft.  
Melee longsword +0 (1d8/19-20)  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** distraction, fascinate  
**Known Bard Spells** (CL 1st, concentration +4)

**STATISTICS**  
**Str** 10, **Dex** 14, **Con** 15, **Int** 13, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 16

**Base Atk** +0; **CMB** +0; **CMD** 12

**Feats** Extra Performance, Improved Initiative

**Skills:** Appraise +5, Diplomacy +7, Spellcraft +5  
Knowledge (Untrained) +2, Perform (Act) +7,  
Perform (Dance) +7, Perform (Oratory) +7,  
Perform (Sing) +7, Perform (String Instruments) +7,

**Languages** Common  
**Gear** chain shirt, longsword, outfit (entertainer's)



**Sex:** Female **Race:** Human **Level:** 1

**Life Points:** 135 Natural / 115 Long Sword  
**Class:** Freelancer

**STR:** 5 **DEX:** 8 **AGI:** 9 **CON:** 7 **POW:** 9  
**INT:** 7 **WP:** 8 **PER:** 8

**PhR:** 35 **MR:** 35 **PsR:** 40 **VR:** 35 **DR:** 35

**Initiative:** 90 Natural / 70 Long Sword  
**Attack Ability:** 80 Long Sword

**Defense Ability:** 90 Dodge  
**Damage:** 50 [Cut] Long Sword

**Advantages:** Quick Reflexes (1), Fortunate (1), Charm (1).

**Disadvantages:** None.

**Size:** 11 **Regeneration:** 1  
**Movement Value:** 9 **Fatigue:** 7

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Acrobatics 35  
Athleticism 15 Climb 15 Jump 5 Swim 15

**Perception:** Notice 25 Search 25

**Subterfuge:** Hide 25 Lock Picking 15 Stealth 25

**Creative:** Dance 60 Music 105 Sl. Of Hand 25



**Medium humanoid** (human), chaotic good  
**Armor Class:** 21 (plate, tower shield)

**HP:** 221 (26d8 + 104) **Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 20 (+5), **Dex** 10 (+0), **Con** 19 (+4), **Int** 12 (+1),  
**Wis** 14 (+2), **Cha** 11 (+0)

**Saving Throws:** Str +10, Con +9  
**Skills**  
Athletics +10, Intimidation +5, Perception +7,  
Performance +5

**Senses:** passive Perception 12  
**Languages:** Common

**Challenge:** 16 (15000 XP)

#### Indomitable (3/day).

Gearoid rerolls a failed saving throw.

#### Powerful Build.

Due to his large stature, Gearoid ignores the two-handed property of weapons meant to be wielded by Medium or smaller creatures.

#### Actions

##### Multiattack.

Gearoid makes three melee weapon attacks.

##### Vindmakin.

Melee Weapon Attack: +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 12 (2d6+5) slashing damage plus an extra 11 (3d6) slashing damage if the target is a dragon.

##### Shield Bash.

Melee Weapon Attack: +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 9 (1d8+5) bludgeoning damage and if the target is Large or smaller, it must pass a DC 18 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

**CR** 16 **XP** 76,800 **Male human fighter** 17  
CG Medium humanoid (human)  
**Init** +0; **Senses** Perception +12

**DEFENSE**  
AC 23, touch 10,  
flat-footed 23 (+9 armor, +4 shield)

**HP** 191 (17d10+85)  
**Fort** +14, **Ref** +5, **Will** +7, +4 Will vs. fear

**OFFENSE**  
Speed 30 ft.  
Melee vindmakin +31/+26/+21/+16 (2d6+16/17-20)  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

**STATISTICS**  
**Str** 20, **Dex** 10, **Con** 19, **Int** 12, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 11  
**Base Atk** +17;  
**CMB** +22 (+24 bull rush) (+26sunder);  
**CMD** 32 (34 vs. bull rush) (34 vs. sunder)

**Feats:** Cleave, Dazzling Display, Endurance, Furious Focus, Great Cleave, Greater Sunder, Greater Weapon Focus (Greatsword), Greater Weapon Specialization (Greatsword), Improved Bull Rush, Improved Critical (Greatsword), Improved Shield Bash, Improved Sunder, Intimidating Prowess, Power Attack, Run, Shatter Defenses, Tower Shield Proficiency, Weapon Focus (Greatsword), Weapon Specialization (Greatsword)

**Skills** Climb +13, Intimidate +22, Perception +12,  
Ride +1, Swim +13

**Languages** Common **SQ** armor training

**Gear** full plate, vindmakin, tower shield

**Sex:** Male **Race:** Human **Level:** 7  
**Life Points:** 400 **Class:** Weaponsmaster

**STR:** 10(+2) **DEX:** 8 **AGI:** 8 **CON:** 10(+1)  
**POW:** 6 **INT:** 7 **WP:** 8 **PER:** 7  
**PhR:** 80 **MR:** 65 **PsR:** 70 **VR:** 80 **DR:** 80

**Initiative:** 95 Natural / 15 Vindmakin and Full Shield / 55 Vindmakin / 55 Full Shield

**Attack Ability:** 175 Vindmakin (Bastard Sword +10)  
**Defense Ability:** 180 Full Shield  
**Damage:** 110 Vindmakin One-handed /  
120 Vindmakin Two-handed / 45 Full Shield

**Wear Armor:** 110 **AT:** Half Plate  
Cut 4 Imp 4 Thr 4 Heat 2 Ele 0 Cold 1 Ene 1

**Advantages:** Untiring (1), Regeneration Basic (1),  
Exceptional Physical Resistance (1).  
**Disadvantages:** None.

**Natural Abilities** Full Shield, Area Attack,  
Precision Attack, Disarming Attack.

**Size:** 20 **Regeneration:** 6

**Movement Value:** 8 / 5 **Fatigue:** 13

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Athleticism 50  
Climb 100 Ride 70 Swim 90

**Vigor:** Composure 30 Feats of Str. 80  
Withstand Pain 30

**Perception:** Notice 90 Search 80

**Social:** Intimidate 150 Leadership 80





Medium humanoid (human), true neutral  
**Armor Class:** 15 (leather armor)  
**HP:** 121 (22d8 + 22) **Speed:** 40 ft.

Str 14 (+2), Dex 18 (+4), Con 13 (+1), Int 16 (+3),  
 Wis 13 (+1), Cha 11 (+0)

**Saving Throws:** Str +6, Con +5  
**Skills:** Acrobatics +8, Athletics +6, Stealth +8

**Senses:** passive Perception 11  
**Languages:** Common **Challenge:** 10 (5900 XP)

**Dragonmark Tattoos:**  
 Elissa's arcane tattoos enhance her spellcasting, giving her +2 to hit, spell save DC, and damage with spells that deal fire or ice damage.

Additionally, when Elissa is reduced to below half of her max hit points, the tattoos summon a young red dragon and young white dragon to her side. The summoned dragons appear in unoccupied spaces within 30 feet of Elissa and act as her ally. They remain for 1 minute or until Elissa dismisses them as an action. This effect may only happen once per day.

**Spellcasting.**  
 Elissa is a 2nd-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). **The following sorcerer spells are prepared:**

Cantrips (at will): Fire Bolt, Frostbite, True Strike  
 1st level (3 slots): Burning Hands, Ice Knife

**Actions**  
**Multiattack.**  
 Elissa makes 3 melee weapon attacks or 2 ranged weapon attacks.

**Katana.**  
 Melee Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d8+2) slashing damage.

**Dagger.**  
 Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., or range 20/60 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d4+4) piercing damage.

**Pistol.**  
 Ranged Weapon Attack: +8 to hit, range 30/120ft., one target. Hit: 9 (1d10+4) piercing damage. Ammunition, loading



Elissa's Dragons: Continued

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats, Inhumanity, Sharp sense (hearing), Natural Invulnerability to one Element (Half Damage), Elemental Vulnerability: double damage.

**Powers:** Natural Weapon: Bite (Additional Attack), Claw and Tail, Special Attack: Breath (Distance 50m, Unlimited, Base Damage 100, Area 3m radius, Special Attack incremented: +20 HA, 3 Preparation Turns), Damage Energy, Natural Armor 1, Natural Flight 8, Supernatural Vision.

**Size:** 23 (Big) **Regeneration:** 4  
**Movement Value:** 6 / 8 **Fatigue:** 12

**Secondary Abilities:** Vigor Feats of Str. 40  
 Withstand. Pain 80

**Perception:** Notice 80 Search 80 Track 40  
**Intellectual:** Appraisal 40

CR 10 XP 9,600  
 Female human fighter 9 / sorcerer 2  
 N Medium humanoid (human)

Init +10; Senses Perception +1

**DEFENSE**  
 AC 18, touch 16, flat-footed 12 (+2 armor, +6 Dex)  
 HP 88 (11 HD; 9d10+2d6+20)  
 Fort +7, Ref +9, Will +7, +2 Will vs. fear

**OFFENSE**  
 Speed 30 ft.  
 Melee katana (two handed) +16/+11 (two handed)  
 1d8+7/18-20

Melee dagger +13/+8 (1d4+3/19-20)  
 Ranged dagger (thrown) +17/+12 (1d4+1/19-20)

Ranged pistol +12/+7 (1d8/x4)  
 Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

**Known Sorcerer Spells** (CL 2nd, concentration +2):  
 1st (4/day)—burning hands (DC 11), obscuring mist 0 (at will)—detect magic, mending, ray of frost, read magic, spark (DC 10)

**STATISTICS**  
 Str 14, Dex 22, Con 13, Int 16, Wis 13, Cha 11  
 Base Atk +10; CMB +12; CMD 28

**Feats**  
 Arcane Strike, Double Slice, Eschew Materials, Greater Weapon Focus (Katana), Improved Initiative, Improved Two-Weapon Fighting, Point-Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Focus (Katana), Weapon Specialization (Katana)

**Skills**  
 Acrobatics +17, Climb +16, Escape Artist +17, Spellcraft +17, Stealth +17, Swim +16

**Languages** Common

**SQ** armor training, dragonmark tattoos, fencer

**Gear** leather, katana (2), dagger, pistol

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**  
**Armor Training (Ex)** You are more maneuverable while wearing armor. Whenever you are wearing armor, you reduce the armor check penalty by 2 and increase the maximum Dexterity bonus allowed by your armor by +2

**Dragonmark Tattoos (Ex)** Elissa's arcane tattoos enhance her spellcasting, giving her +2 to hit, spell save DC, and damage with spells that deal fire or ice damage.

Additionally, when Elissa is reduced to below half of her max hit points, the tattoos summon a young red dragon and young white dragon to her side. The summoned dragons appear in unoccupied spaces within 30 feet of Elissa and act as her ally. They remain for 1 minute or until Elissa dismisses them as an action. This effect may only happen once per day.

**Fencer** You trained long hours as a youth with blades, either taking lessons in the genteel art of fencing from tutors paid for by your parents or by being taken under the wing of a disenfranchised fencer who may have turned to a life of crime. You gain a +1 trait bonus on attacks of opportunity made with daggers, swords, and similar bladed weapons.

Sex: Female Race: Human Level: 4  
 Life Points: 135 Class: Warrior Summoner

STR: 8 DEX: 10 AGI: 10 CON: 7 POW: 10 (+1)  
 INT: 10 (+1) WP: 9 PER: 7  
 PhR: 50 MR: 70 PsR: 55 VR: 50 DR: 50

**Initiative:** 100 Natural / 80 Katana / 80 Pistol / 100 Dagger  
**Attack Ability:** 120 Katana / 120 Pistol / 120 Dagger  
**Defense Ability:** 120 Dodge  
**Damage:** 80 [Cut] Katana / 80 [Thr] Pistol / 50 [Pen] [Cut] Dagger

**Wear Armor:** 10 **AT:** Armored Longcoat +5  
 Cut 3 Imp 1 Thr 3 Heat 2 Ele 3 Cold 3 Ene 0

**Advantages:** Gift (2), Opposite Magic (1).  
**Disadvantages:** None.

**Natural Abilities** Katana, Matchlock Pistol, Magic Projection as an Attack

**Magic Projection:** 100 Offensive  
**Magic Level:** Fire 25 / Water 25  
**Magic Accumulation:** 20  
 Zeon: 565 Summon: 180 MK: 80 Used: 80

**Ki Abilities:** Use of Ki, Presence Extrusion, Increase Speed, Aura Extension, Use of Necessary Energy.

**Accumulations:** STR: 1 DEX: 2 AGI: 2  
 CON: 1 POW: 2 WP: 1  
**Ki:** STR: 8 DEX: 10 AGI: 10 CON: 7 POW: 10 WP: 9

**Generic Ki:** 54 **Size:** 15 **Regeneration:** 1  
**Movement Value:** 10 **Fatigue:** 7

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Acrobatics 40  
 Athleticism 40 Swim 20 Jump 20

**Perception:** Notice 40 Search 40  
**Intellectual:** Occult 120  
 M. Appraisal 80

**Social:** Style 40  
**Subterfuge:** Hide 40 Stealth 80

**Dragonmark Tattoos**  
 Elissa's arcane tattoos enhance her spellcasting, giving her +10 to her Magic Accumulation, +10 to her Magic Projection, and +10 to her summoning skills involving Fire and Ice elements, as well as a +10 to any Resistance check related to fire and cold. Additionally, when Elissa is reduced to below half of her max hit points, the tattoos summon a young red dragon and young white dragon to her side. The summoned dragons appear in unoccupied spaces within 30 feet of Elissa and act as her allies. They remain for 1 minute or until Elissa dismisses them as an action. This effect may only happen once per day.

**Elissa's Dragons:** Red dragon / White dragon  
**Level:** 3 **Life Points:** 1160 **Class:** Weaponsmaster 3

STR: 12 DEX: 8 AGI: 8 CON: 11 POW: 8  
 INT: 9 WP: 8 PER: 8  
 PhR: 55 MR: 45 PsR: 45 VR: 55 DR: 55

**Initiative:** 65 Natural  
**Attack Ability:** 120 Bite + 90 (Claw) / 125 Tail / 140 Breath  
**Defense Ability:** Damage Resistance  
**Damage:** 80 [Thr] Bite / 80 [Cut] Claw / 80 [Imp] Tail / 100 [Cold] Breath

**AT:** Natural + Scales  
 Cut 5 Imp 5 Thr 5 Heat 5 Ele 5 Cold 5 Ene 4





Medium undead, neutral evil Speed: 30 ft.  
Armor Class: 18 (plate) HP: 123 (19d8 + 38)

Str 15 (+2), Dex 12 (+1), Con 14 (+2), Int 20 (+5),  
Wis 13 (+1), Cha 13 (+1)

Skills: Arcana +11, History +11, Insight +7,  
Intimidation +7, Perception +7

Damage Immunities: bludgeoning, piercing and  
slashing damage from nonmagical weapons, poison

Damage Resistances: cold, lightning, necrotic  
Condition Immunities: charmed, exhaustion,  
frightened, paralyzed, poisoned

Senses: truesight 120 ft. passive Perception 11  
Languages: Common Challenge: 20 (25000 XP)

#### Legendary Resistance (3/Day).

If Encablossa fails a saving throw, he can choose  
to succeed instead.

#### Rejuvenation

When Encablossa is killed, if his phylactery is  
intact, he regains a new body in 1d10 days, regaining  
all his hit points and becomes active again. His new  
body appears within 5 feet of the phylactery.

#### Turn Resistance.

Encablossa has advantage on saving throws  
against any effect that turns undead.

#### Spellcasting.

Encablossa is a 18th-level spellcaster. Its spellcast-  
ing ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 19, +11 to hit  
with spell attacks). The following wizard spells are  
prepared:

Cantrips (at will): blade ward, mage hand,  
ray of frost  
1st level (4 slots): expeditious retreat, ray of  
sickness, magic missile, shield  
2nd level (3 slots): crown of madness, misty step,  
detect thoughts, invisibility  
3rd level (3 slots): animate dead, counterspell,  
dispel magic, fireball  
4th level (3 slots): blight, dimension door  
5th level (3 slots): cone of cold, cloudkill  
6th level (1 slot): disintegrate, globe of  
vulnerability  
7th level (1 slot): prismatic spray, finger of death  
8th level (1 slot): feeblemind, power word stun  
9th level (1 slot): power word kill

#### Actions

##### Double Halberd.

Melee Weapon Attack: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft.,  
one target. Hit: 11 (2d8+2) slashing damage.

##### Paralyzing Touch.

Melee Spell Attack: +12 to hit, reach 5 ft., one  
target. Hit: 10 (3d6) cold damage. The target must  
succeed on a DC 18 Constitution saving throw or be  
paralyzed for 1 minute. The target can repeat the  
saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending  
the effect on itself on a success.

#### Legendary Actions

Encablossa can take 3 legendary actions, choosing  
from the options below. Only one legendary action  
can be used at a time and only at the end of  
another creature's turn. The encablossa regains spent  
legendary actions at the start of its turn.

##### Attack.

Encablossa attacks with his double halberd.

##### Cantrip.

Encablossa casts a cantrip.



CR 21 XP 409,600  
Male lich human (lich) necromancer 20  
NE Medium undead (human)

Senses: darkvision 60 ft., life sight, Perception +32  
Init +1; Aura: fear aura (60 ft., DC 21)

DEFENSE: AC 25, Touch 11,  
Flat-footed 24 (+9 armor, +1 Dex, +5 natural)

HP 122 (20d6+40) Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +13

#### Defensive Abilities

channel resistance +4; DR 15/bludgeoning and  
magic; Immune ability drain, cold, death effects,  
death from massive damage, disease, electricity,  
energy drain, exhaustion, fatigue, mind-affecting  
effects, nonlethal damage, paralysis, poison, sleep,  
stunning

#### OFFENSE: Speed 20 ft.

Melee axe, orc double +12/+7 (1d8+2/+1x3/3)  
Melee axe, orc double (head 1 only) (two handed)  
+12/+7 ((two handed) 1d8+3/x3)  
Melee axe, orc double (head 2 only) (two handed)  
+12/+7 ((two handed) 1d8+3/x3)  
Melee touch +12 (1d8+10)  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

Special Attacks: fear aura (60 ft., DC 21), grave touch  
paralyzing touch (DC 21),  
power over undead – command undead

#### STATISTICS

Str 15, Dex 12, Con –, Int 20, Wis 13, Cha 13  
Base Atk +10; CMB +12; CMD 23

#### Feats

Arcane Armor Mastery, Arcane Armor Training,  
Armor Proficiency, Heavy, Armor Proficiency,  
Light, Armor Proficiency, Medium, Bouncing Spell,  
Combat Casting, Command Undead, Exotic  
Weapon Proficiency (Axe (Orc Double)), Greater  
Spell Focus (Necromancy), Improved Counterspell,  
Maximize Spell, Quicken Spell, Scribe Scroll, Silent  
Spell, Spell Focus (Necromancy), Spell Mastery  
(Control Undead, Create Undead, Finger of Death,  
Globe of Invulnerability, Horrid Wilting)

#### Skills

Intimidate +24, Knowledge (Arcana) +28,  
Knowledge (Geography) +28, Knowledge (History)  
+28, Knowledge (Local) +28, Perception +32, Sense  
Motive +32, Spellcraft +28

Languages: Common SQ: life sight, rejuvenation

Gear: full plate, axe (orc double)

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Fear Aura (Su)** Creatures of less than 5 HD in a  
60-foot radius that look at the lich must succeed on a  
Will save or become frightened. Creatures with 5  
HD or more must succeed at a Will save or be  
shaken for a number of rounds equal to the lich's  
Hit Dice. A creature that successfully saves cannot  
be affected again by the same lich's aura for 24  
hours. This is a mind-affecting fear effect.

**Grave Touch (Sp)** As a standard action, you can  
make a melee touch attack that causes a living crea-  
ture to become shaken for 10 rounds. If you touch a  
shaken creature with this ability, it becomes fright-  
ened for 1 round if it has fewer than 20 Hit Dice.  
You can use this ability 8 times per day.

**Life Sight (Su)** You gain blindsight to a range of  
40 feet for 20 rounds per day. This ability only  
allows you to detect living creatures and undead  
creatures. This sight also tells you whether a crea-  
ture is living or undead. These rounds do not need  
to be consecutive.



Sex: Male Race: Human (Lich) Level: 11  
Life Points: 230 Class: Warlock

STR: 8 DEX: 8 AGI: 8 CON: 9 POW: 12 (+2)  
INT: 13 (+3) WP: 7 PER: 7  
PhR: 90 MR: 110 PsR: 85 VR: 90 DR: 90

Initiative: 110 Natural / 85 Halberd +10  
Attack Ability: 200 Halberd +10

Defense Ability: 200 Halberd +10  
Damage: 100 [Cut / Imp] Halberd +10

Wear Armor: 50 AT: Partial Plate+10  
Cut 6 Imp 5 Thr 3 Heat 5 Ele 4 Cold 4 Ene2

Advantages: The Gift (2), Gestureless Casting (1)  
Disadvantages: None.

Natural Abilities: Magic Projection as an Attack.

Magic Projection: 140 Offensive Zeon: 1355

Magic Level: Necromancy 80  
Magic Accumulation: 90

Size: 17 Regeneration: 0 Movement Value: 8  
Fatigue: Tireless Social: Intimidate 130

Secondary Abilities: Perception: Notice 110  
Search 110

Intellectual: Memorize 100 History 100  
Occult 100 M. Appraisal 170 Sciences 110

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

##### Fear Aura

Creatures in a 60-foot radius line of sight of  
the lich must succeed on Psychic Resistance  
against 120 or suffer Terror if their presence is  
lesser than 40, or Fear if their presence are greater,  
for a number of turns equivalent to their failure  
level. A creature that successfully passes the resis-  
tance cannot be affected again by the same lich's  
aura for 24 hours.

##### Grave Touch

As an attack action that uses his Attack  
Ability, Encablossa can make a touch attack that  
causes the Fear State in a living creature for 10  
Turns. If he touches a creature already in the Fear  
state, it becomes the Terror state. He can use this  
ability 8 times per day, and it can be resisted by  
passing a Magic Resistance check of 140.

##### Life Sight

Encablossa possesses blindsight with a range  
of 40 feet, but this only lasts for up to 20 turns per  
day. This ability only allows him to detect living  
creatures and undead creatures, and it additionally  
tells him whether a creature is living or undead.  
These turns do not need to be consecutive. Life  
Sight can be resisted by passing a Magic Resistance  
check of 180.

##### Paralyzing Touch

Any living creature a lich hits with physical  
attack must succeed on a Physical Resistance check  
against 100 or be permanently paralyzed. Any spell  
able to remove magic effects can be used to dispel  
this skill. Anyone paralyzed by a lich seems dead,  
though a Search check with a difficulty of 180 or a  
Medicine check with a difficulty of 120 reveal that  
the victim is still alive.

##### Power Over Undead – Command Undead

Encablossa can channel energy 8 times per  
day to command undead as an automatic skill. This  
skill allows him to command up to 18 undead of  
level 0 to 3, up to 3 of level 4 or 5, and one of level  
6 or 7. Any undead can resist this skill passing a  
Magic Resistance Check against 140.





## Encablossa

### Frightening Gaze (Costs 2 Actions)

Encablossa fixes its gaze on one creature it can see within 10 feet of it. The target must succeed on a DC 18 Wisdom saving throw against this magic or become frightened for 1 minute. The frightened target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success. If a target's saving throw is successful or the effect ends for it, the target is immune to Encablossa's gaze for the next 24 hours.

### Disrupt Life (Costs 3 Actions)

Each living creature within 20 feet of Encablossa must make a DC 18 Constitution saving throw against this magic, taking 21 (6d6) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

**Paralyzing Touch (Su)** Any living creature a lich hits with its touch attack must succeed on a Fortitude save or be permanently paralyzed.

Remove paralysis or any spell that can remove a curse can free the victim (see the bestow curse spell description, DC 21). The effect cannot be dispelled. Anyone paralyzed by a lich seems dead, though a DC 20 Perception check or a DC 15 Heal check reveals that the victim is still alive.

### Power Over Undead - Command Undead (Su)

You can channel energy 8 times per day to command undead. You can command up to 20 hit dice of undead. The will save DC of your command undead attempts is 21. Undead cannot add their channel resistance to the save against your Command Undead ability.

**Rejuvenation (Su)** See Anima to the right

### Rejuvenation (Also for Pathfinder)

When a lich is destroyed, its phylactery (which is generally hidden by the lich in a safe place far from where it chooses to dwell) immediately begins to rebuild the undead spellcaster's body nearby. This process takes 1d10 days—if the body is destroyed before that time passes, the phylactery merely starts the process anew. After this time passes, the lich awakens fully healed (albeit without any gear it left behind on its old body), usually with a burning need for revenge against those who previously destroyed it.

## Durand

Medium humanoid (human), lawful good

Armor Class: 21 (champion's plate)

HP: 306 (36d8 + 144) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 20 (+5), Dex 14 (+2), Con 18 (+4), Int 12 (+1), Wis 15 (+2), Cha 16 (+3)

Saving Throws: Str +11, Con +10

Skills: Athletics +11, Persuasion +9

Senses: passive Perception 12

Languages: Common

Challenge: 18 (20000 XP)

### Champion's Regalia:

Durand's armor and sword are highly enchanted, granting him a +3 bonus to his AC, as well as attack and damage rolls (included in the attack).

### Resilience.

Durand regains 20 hit points at the start of his turn if he has at least 1 hit point but is below his maximum hit points.

### Superior Critical.

Durand's weapon attacks score a critical hit on a roll of 18-20.

### Actions

#### Multiattack.

Durand makes 3 weapon attacks.

#### Champion's Blade.

Melee Weapon Attack: +14 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. Hit: 13 (1d10+8) slashing damage.

### Reactions

#### Expert Riposte.

When a creature misses Durand with a melee attack, he can use his reaction to make a melee weapon attack against the creature. If he hits, he adds 7 (1d12) damage to the attack.

CR 18 XP 153,600 Male humanoid fighter 19 LG Medium humanoid (human)

Init +2; Senses Perception +2

### DEFENSE

AC 26, touch 12, flat-footed 24 (+14 armor, +2 Dex)

HP 211 (19d10+104)

Fort +15, Ref +8, Will +8, +5 Will vs. fear

DR 5/-

### OFFENSE

Speed 30 ft.

Melee champion's blade +35/+30/+25/+20 (1d6+18/12-20)

Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

### STATISTICS

Str 20, Dex 14, Con 18, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 16

Base Atk +19; CMB +24; CMD 36 (46 vs. disarm) (46 vs. sunder)

### Feats

Athletic, Cleave, Crippling Critical, Critical Focus, Critical Mastery, Following Step, Great Cleave, Greater Penetrating Strike, Greater Weapon Focus (Rapier), Greater Weapon Specialization (Rapier), Improved Critical (Rapier), Penetrating Strike, Power Attack, Quick Draw, Staggering Critical, Step Up, Strike Back, Stunning Critical, Toughness, Weapon Focus (Rapier), Weapon Specialization (Rapier)

### Skills

Climb +30, Diplomacy +22, Handle Animal +16, Ride +13, Swim +30

Languages: Common

SQ: armor mastery

### Gear:

champion's plate (+5 adamantite/determination full plate), champion's blade (+5 steel/keen rapier)

Sex: Male Race: Human Level: 7 Life Points: 260 Class: Weaponsmaster

STR: 8 DEX: 13 (+3) AGI: 8 CON: 9 POW: 8 INT: 7 WP: 8 PER: 9 PHR: 70 MR: 70 PsR: 70 VR: 70 DR: 70

Initiative: 110 Natural / 90 Regalia (Long Sword+10)

Attack Ability: 220 Regalia (Long Sword+10) + 210 Regalia (Long Sword+10) + 170 Tae Kwon Do  
Defense Ability: 220 Regalia (Long Sword+10) / 210 Tae Kwon Do  
Damage: 90 [Cut] Regalia (Long Sword+10) / 30 [Imp] Tae Kwon Do

Wear Armor: 80 AT: Regalia (Half Plate+10)  
Cut 6 Imp 6 Thr 6 Heat 4 Ele 2 Cold 3 Ene 3

Advantages: Martial Mastery (I), Charm (I), Ambidextrous (I).

Disadvantages: None.

Natural Abilities: Tae Kwon Do (Base), Second Weapon: Defensive Style, Area Attack, Chained Attacks.

Special Abilities: Special Maneuver.

MK: 110 Used: 110

Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Ki Transmission, Ki Healing, Superior Healing, Presence Extrusion, Aura Extension, Use of Necessary Energy.

Accumulations: STR: 1 DEX: 3 AGI: 1 CON: 1 POW: 1 WP: 1

Ki: STR: 8 DEX: 16 AGI: 8 CON: 9 POW: 8 WP: 8  
Generic Ki: 57

Size: 17 Regeneration: 2  
Movement Value: 8 / 7 Fatigue: 9

Secondary Abilities: Athletics: Athleticism 40  
Ride 80 Climb 40 Swim 40 Jump 40

Vigor: Composure 80 Feats of Str. 80  
Withstand Pain 180

Perception: Notice 80 Search 40  
Intellectual: Tactics 80  
Social: Style 40 Leadership 40  
Intimidate 20 Persuasion 80

Creative: Sl. of Hand 120





Medium humanoid (human), neutral good  
 Armor Class: 17 (half plate)  
 HP: 187 (25d8 + 75) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 14 (+2), Dex 13 (+1), Con 17 (+3), Int 10 (+0),  
 Wis 12 (+1), Cha 15 (+2)

Saving Throws: Str +6, Con +7, Wis +4

Skills: Athletics +6, Intimidation +6

Damage Resistances: necrotic

Senses: passive Perception 11

Languages: Common

Challenge: 9 (5000 XP)

**Aria Of Ruin** (1/day).

At the start of his turn, Greg can gain advantage on all melee attack rolls until the end of that turn. In addition, a successful attack during that turn adds 21 (6d6) necrotic damage.

**Blood Augmentation.**

Greg's Dark Claymore utilizes the spilled blood of his enemies, or his own in a crisis, to enhance his attacks. Any time Greg hits with his Dark Claymore, he can spend any number of blood points, adding 3 (1d6) necrotic damage to the attack for each point spent this way.

**Actions**

**Multiattack.**

Greg makes two attacks with his Dark Claymore.

**Dark Claymore.**

Melee Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. Hit: 9 (2d6+2) slashing damage and Greg gains 1 blood point.

**Reactions**

**Empowering Wound.**

In response to taking damage, Greg draws power from his wounds, gaining 1d6 blood points.

CR 9 XP 6,400  
 Male human fighter (two-handed fighter) 10

NG Medium humanoid (human)  
 Init +1; Senses Perception +1

**DEFENSE**

AC 18, touch 10, flat-footed 18 (+8 armor)  
 HP 113 (10d10+40)  
 Fort +10, Ref +4, Will +6

**OFFENSE**

Speed 20 ft.  
 Melee dark claymore (two handed) +18/+13 (two handed) 2d6+9/19-20)  
 Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

**STATISTICS**

Str 14, Dex 13, Con 17, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 15  
 Base Atk +10; CMB +12 (+15 sunder);  
 CMD 23 (26 vs. sunder)

**Feats:** Cleave, Critical Focus, Furious Focus, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (Greatsword), Improved Iron Will, Intimidating Prowess, Iron Will, Power Attack, Vital Strike, Weapon Focus (Greatsword), Weapon Specialization (Greatsword)  
**Skills:** Climb +6, Intimidate +17, Ride +1, Swim +6

**Languages:** Common

**SQ:** backswing, bonus feat, bonus feats, overhand chop, shattering strike, skilled, weapon training  
 Gear: half-plate, dark claymore (+2 cold iron great sword)

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**

**Backswing (Ex)** When Greg makes a full attack with a two-handed weapon, he adds double his Strength bonus on damage rolls for all attacks after the first.

**Overhand Chop (Ex)** When Greg makes a single attack (with the attack action or a charge) with a two-handed weapon, he adds double his Strength bonus on damage rolls.

**Shattering Strike (Ex)** Greg gains a +3 bonus to CMB and CMD on sunder attempts and on damage rolls made against objects.

Sex: Male Race: Human Level: 6

Life Points: 200 Class: Dark Paladin

STR: 10 DEX: 13 (+3) AGI: 9 CON: 8 POW: 8  
 INT: 6 WP: 10 PER: 7  
 PhR: 65 MR: 65 PsR: 70 VR: 65 DR: 65

Initiative: 130 Natural / 100 Dark Claymore (Claymore +10)

Attack Ability: 190 Dark Claymore (Claymore +10)  
 Defense Ability: 185 Dark Claymore (Claymore +10)  
 Damage: 125 [Cut / Dark] Dark Claymore (Claymore +10)

Wear Armor: 50 AT: Partial Plate +10  
 Cut 6 Imp 5 Thr 4 Heat 5 Ele 4 Cold 4 Ene 3

Advantages: See the Supernatural (1),  
 Quick Reflexes (1), Disquieting (1).  
 Disadvantages: None.

**Natural Abilities:** Defense against Projectiles, Area Attack.

MK: 120 Used: 120

**Ki Abilities:** Use of Ki, Ki Transmission, Presence Extrusion, Aura Extension, Increased Reach, Use of Necessary Energy, Inhumanity.

**Accumulations:** STR: 2 DEX: 3 AGI: 1 CON: 1  
 POW: 1 WP: 2

**Ki:** STR: 10 DEX: 16 AGI: 9 CON: 8 POW: 8 WP: 10  
 Generic Ki: 61

Size: 18 Regeneration: 2  
 Movement Value: 9 Fatigue: 8

**Secondary Abilities:**

Athletics: Athleticism 40 Ride 40  
 Climb 40 Swim 40 Jump 40

**Vigor:** Composure 120 Feats of Str. 80  
 Withstand. Pain 140

**Perception:** Notice 80 Search 40

**Intellectual:** Occult 80

**Social:** Style 120 Intimidate 140  
 Leadership 80 Persuasion 80

**Creative:** Sl. of Hand 80

**Dark Claymore**

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a Claymore +10. It is able to damage energy.

**Blood Power:** By spending 1 Ki point per turn, the wielder can damage his foes using the unholy damage type. To use this skill the wielder must have developed Ki Transmission.

**Wound (Use Knowledge 2):** The wielder of the Dark Claymore may use 5 Ki Points to drain the damage he causes and recover up to 20 Life Points. This skill only works once per each enemy. To use this skill the wielder must have developed Ki Transmission.

**Aria of Ruin (Uses Knowledge 2):** The wielder of the Dark Claymore may use 10 Ki Points to increase the Base Damage of the weapon till the end of the turn. To use this skill, the wielder must kill some one with the weapon. To use this skill the wielder must have developed Ki Transmission.











Medium construct, true neutral  
Armor Class: 14

HP: 120 (16d8 + 48) Speed: 45 ft.

Str 13 (+2), Dex 18 (+4), Con 16 (+3), Int 5 (-3),  
Wis 4 (-3), Cha 6 (-2)

Saving Throws: Str +4, Dex +8

Skills: Acrobatics +7, Athletics +4

**Damage Resistances**  
bludgeoning, piercing and slashing damage from nonmagical weapons

**Condition Immunities**  
charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, poisoned

Senses: passive Perception 7

Languages: Common

Challenge: 8 (3900 XP)

**Enchanted Strikes.**  
Malachai's unarmed strikes count as magical for the purpose of overcoming resistance and immunity to nonmagical attacks and damage

**Magic Resistance.**  
Malachai has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

**Evasion.**  
When Malachai is subjected to an effect that allows her to make a Dexterity saving throw to take only half damage, she instead takes no damage if she succeeds on the saving throw, and only half damage if she fails.

**Actions**  
**Multiattack.**  
Malachai makes three melee weapon attacks.

**Unarmed Strike.**  
Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 7 (1d6+4) bludgeoning damage.

CR 8 XP 4,800 Female flesh golem monk 2  
N Medium construct

Init +4; Senses darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision,  
Perception -3

**DEFENSE**  
AC 27, touch 15,  
flat-footed 22 (+4 Dex, +1 dodge, +12 natural)

HP 99 (11 HD; 9d10+2d8+32)  
Fort +6, Ref +10, Will +3

**Defensive Abilities** evasion; DR 5/adamantine;  
**Immune** ability damage, ability drain, death effects, death from massive damage, disease, energy drain, exhaustion, fatigue, magic, mind-affecting effects, necromancy, nonlethal damage, paralysis, poison, sleep, stunning

**OFFENSE**  
Speed 30 ft.  
Melee slam +10/+10 (2d8+1)  
Space 10 ft.; Reach 10 ft.  
**Special Attacks** berserk, flurry of blows, stunning fist

**STATISTICS**  
Str 13, Dex 18, Con -, Int -, Wis 4, Cha 6  
Base Atk +10; CMB +12; CMD 27

**Feats** Combat Reflexes, Dodge,  
Improved Unarmed Strike, Stunning Fist,  
Weapon Focus (Unarmed Strike)

**Skills** Acrobatics +13, Climb +5, Swim +5  
SQ ac bonus, unarmed strike  
Gear slam

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**  
**Berserk (Ex)** When Malachai enters combat, there is a cumulative 1% chance each round that her trapped spirit breaks free and she goes berserk. She goes on a rampage, attacking the nearest living creature or smashing some object smaller than herself if no creature is within reach, then moving on to spread more destruction. It takes 1 minute of inactivity by Malachai to reset her berserk chance to 0%.

Sex: Female Race: Construct Level: 5

Life Points: 170 Class: Acrobatic Warrior

STR: 8 DEX: 11 (+1) AGI: 11 (+1) CON: 9  
POW: 6 INT: 10 WP: 6 PER: 7  
PhR: 60 MR: 65 PsR: 55 VR: 60 DR: 60

**Initiative:** 130 Natural / 110 Heavy Metal (Heavy Gauntlet +5) / 75 Heavy Metal (Cannon +5)  
**Attack Ability:** 160 Heavy Metal (Heavy Gauntlet +5) / 175 Heavy Metal (Cannon +5)  
**Defense Ability:** 170 Dodge  
**Damage:** 80 [Imp] Heavy Metal (Heavy Gauntlet +5) / 145 [Imp] Heavy Metal (Cannon +5)

**Wear Armor:** 10 AT: None.

**Natural Abilities:** Cannon  
**Special Abilities:** Leo; Cannon-Arm.  
**Powers:** Construct; Inhumanity, Physical Exemption, Psychological immunity, Immunity to Pain, Natural Weapons, Damage Energy, Damage Barrier 60, Increased Mystic Resistance+10.

MK: 125 Used: 125  
Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Ki Control.  
Techniques: Zero Equation, Meltdown.

**Accumulations:** STR: 1 DEX: 2 AGI: 2 CON: 1  
POW: 1 WP: 1  
Ki: STR: 8 DEX: 12 AGI: 12 CON: 9 POW: 6 WP: 6  
Generic Ki: 53

Size: 17 Regeneration: 2  
Movement Value: 11 Fatigue: Tireless

**Secondary Abilities:**  
Athletics: Acrobatics 80 Athleticism 120  
Climb 40 Swim 40 Jump 80

**Vigor:** Feats of Str. 80

**Perception:** Notice 80 Search 40 Track 20

**Intellectual:** Memorize 80 Weaponry 120

**Social:** Style 80

**Creative:** Sl. of Hand 80 Forging 200

**Enchanted Strikes.**  
Malachai's unarmed strikes are able to damage energy as if she was using the Presence Extrusion Ki ability.

**Magic Resistance.**  
Malachai has a +10 bonus on Magic Resistance Checks.

-Techniques-

-Meltdown  
Lvl: 1 / MK: 25  
Effects: Increased Breakage + 15.  
Advantages: Ki Reduction 1.  
Disadvantages: None.  
Ki Cost: STR: 2 DEX: 4 WP: 2







**Medium humanoid (human), chaotic neutral**  
**Armor Class:** 11 (14 with mage armor)

**HP:** 40 (9d8)    **Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 8 (-1), **Dex** 12 (+1), **Con** 11 (+0), **Int** 17 (+3),  
**Wis** 9 (-1), **Cha** 14 (+2)

**Saving Throws:** Con +3, Int +6, Wis +2

**Skills:** Athletics +2, Arcana +6, History +6

**Senses:** passive Perception 9

**Languages:** Common

**Challenge:** 7 (2900 XP)

**Staff Of Undead Control.**

Mandi's staff is a sentient magic item which grants her a +2 bonus to spell attack rolls. The staff holds 15 charges for the following properties.

**Spells.** While holding the staff, Mandi can use an action to expend some of its charges to cast one of the following spells from it, using her spell save DC and spellcasting ability: animate dead (3 charges) or create undead (6 charges).

**Control Undead.** Mandi can expend 1 charge from the staff and use an action to attempt to control an undead creature she can see, forcing it to make a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw. On a failed save, the targeted creature is controlled as per the dominate monster spell for the next 24 hours. If the creature's save is successful, it is immune to this effect for the next 24 hours.

**Spellcasting.**

Mandi is a 3rd-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks).

**The following wizard spells are prepared:**

Cantrips (at will): Fire Bolt, Mending, Ray of Frost

1st level (4 slots): Burning Hands, Expeditious Retreat, Mage Armor

2nd level (2 slots): Misty Step, Scorching Ray

**Actions**

**Staff Of Undead Control.**

Melee Weapon Attack: +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 5 (1d8+1) bludgeoning damage.

**Aria Of Ruin (1/day).**

Mandi's curse draws vitality from living things around her. All creatures within 30 ft of Mandi must make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw, taking 42 (8d8) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. Undead and constructs are immune to this effect.

**CR** 7    **XP** 3,200    Female human evoker 8  
**CN** Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +1; **Senses** Perception +7

**DEFENSE**

**AC** 11, **touch** 11, **flat-footed** 10 (+1 Dex)

**HP** 42 (8d6+8)

**Fort** +2, **Ref** +3, **Will** +5

**OFFENSE**

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Space** 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** elemental wall, force missile (1d4+4, 6/day), intense spells

**STATISTICS**

**Str** 8, **Dex** 12, **Con** 11, **Int** 17, **Wis** 9, **Cha** 14  
**Base Atk** +4; **CMB** +3; **CMD** 14

**Feats** Combat Casting, Empower Spell, Endurance, Run, Scribe Scroll, Spell Focus (Evocation), Spell Penetration

**Skills** Knowledge (Arcana) +14, Knowledge (History) +14, Knowledge (Local) +14  
**Perception** +7, **Spellcraft** +14, **Use Magic Device** +10

**Languages** Common

**Gear** staff of necromancy, spellbook (wizard's)

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**

**Elemental Wall (Sp)** You can create a wall of energy that lasts for 8 rounds per day. These rounds do not need to be consecutive. This wall deals acid, cold, electricity, or fire damage, determined when you create it. The elemental wall otherwise functions like Wall of Fire.

**Intense Spells (Su)** Whenever you cast an evocation spell that deals hit point damage, add +4 to the damage. This bonus only applies once to a spell, not once per missile or ray, and cannot be split between multiple missiles or rays. This bonus damage is not increased by Empower Spell or similar effects. This damage is of the same type as the spell.

**Sex:** Female    **Race:** Human    **Level:** 5 (+1)

**Life Points:** 110    **Class:** Summoner

**STR:** 5    **DEX:** 6    **AGI:** 6    **CON:** 6    **POW:** 11 (+1)  
**INT:** 10    **WP:** 11 (+1)    **PER:** 8  
**PhR:** 55    **MR:** 80    **PsR:** 70    **VR:** 55    **DR:** 55

**Wear Armor:** 0    **AT:** None.

**Advantages:** The Gift (2), Blood of the Dead (1).  
**Disadvantages:** None.

**Magic Projection:** 10 / 20 With the Undead  
Control Staff

**Magic Level:** Necromancy 50 / Sin 50

**Magic Accumulation:** 30 / 40 With the Undead  
Control Staff

**Zeon:** 900

**Summon:** 280    **Control:** 240

**Size:** 11    **Regeneration:** 1  
**Movement Value:** 6    **Fatigue:** 6

**Secondary Abilities:**  
**Athletics:**    **Ride** 40

**Vigor:** Composure 40

**Perception:** Notice 80    Search 40

**Intellectual:**  
History 40    Science 80    Occult 240  
Memorize 40    M. Appraisal 120

**Social:** Leadership 40

**Creative:** Alchemy 80

**Aria Of Ruin:**

Once per day, Mandi's curse draws vitality from living things around her. All creatures within 30 ft of Mandi must make a Physical Resistance against 160, receiving damage equal to the failure level. Undead and constructs are immune to this effect.

**Undead Control Staff**

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a +5 staff. Because of its supernatural qualities it can affect energy.

**Undead Enhancer:** Increases the Magic Accumulation of the wielder by +10, but only for spells of the Necromancy path.

**Projection of Death:** The staff increases by +10 the Magic Projection of its user, but only for spells of the path of Necromancy.

**Lich:** This skill allows to increase all the spells of the Necromancy path by one degree.

**Dead Seal:** In case of having the ability to summon, the user can increase by 20 points all her Summoning skills, but only with Undead.







Medium humanoid (human), true neutral  
Armor Class: 11 (14 with mage armor)

HP: 150 (20d8 + 60) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 11 (+0), Dex 12 (+1), Con 16 (+3), Int 19 (+4),  
Wis 12 (+1), Cha 10 (+0)

Saving Throws: Int +10, Wis +7

Skills  
Arcana +16, History +16, Insight +7,  
Investigation +10

Senses: passive Perception 11

Languages: Common

Challenge: 20 (25000 XP)

Spell Secrets (3/day)

When casting a spell using a spell slot and the spell requires a saving throw, Mavin can change the saving throw from one ability score to another of his choice.

Spellcasting

Mavin is a 20th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 18, +10 to hit with spell attacks).

The following wizard spells are prepared:

Cantrips (at will): Dancing Lights, Mage Hand, Message, Prestidigitation, Sword Burst

1st level (4 slots): Alarm, Comprehend Languages, Detect Magic, Mage Armor, Magic Missile, Sleep

2nd level (3 slots): Blur, Hold Person, Knock, See Invisibility

3rd level (3 slots): Counterspell, Dispel Magic, Haste, Slow

4th level (3 slots): Banishment, Dimension Door, Greater Invisibility, Otiluke's Resilient Sphere

5th level (3 slots): Animate Objects, Bigby's Hand, Modify Memory, Wall of Force

6th level (2 slots): Arcane Gate, Globe of Invulnerability, True Seeing

7th level (2 slots): Etherealness, Plane Shift, Teleport

8th level (1 slot): Demiplane, Feeblemind

9th level (1 slot): Gate, Time Stop

Actions

**Multiattack.**

Mavin makes five weapon attacks.

**Swords Of Essence.**

Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack: +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., or range 50 ft., one target. Hit: 8 (1d8+4) slashing damage plus 7 (2d6) damage of one of the following types (acid, cold, fire, force, lightning, necrotic, poison, psychic, radiant, or thunder)



CR 19 XP 204,800 Male human universalist 20  
N Medium humanoid (human)

Init +5; Senses Perception +21

DEFENSE: AC 11, touch 11, flat-footed 10 (+1 Dex)

HP 162 (20d6+80) Fort +9, Ref +7, Will +13

OFFENSE: Speed 30 ft. Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

Melee sword of essence +11/+6 (1d8+5/19-20)

Special Attacks metamagic mastery

STATISTICS

Str 11, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 19, Wis 12, Cha 10  
Base Atk +10; CMB +10; CMD 21

Feats Combat Casting, Empower Spell, Greater Spell Focus (Conjuration, Evocation), Greater Spell Penetration, Improved Counterspell, Improved Initiative, Magical Aptitude, Maximize Spell, Merciful Spell, Scribe Scroll, Silent Spell, Spell Focus (Conjuration, Evocation), Spell Penetration, Still Spell,

Skills Climb +10, Knowledge (Arcana) +27, Knowledge (History) +27, Perception +21, Ride +11, Sense Motive +21, Spellcraft +31, Swim +10, Use Magic Device +14

Languages: Common SQ conjured swords

Gear spellbook (wizard's)

SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Conjured Swords (Su)** As a swift action, Mavin summons 10 floating swords formed from arcane energy. Each sword is a +5 dancing longsword which returns to floating around Mavin when it finishes dancing. Each sword also possesses an additional special ability depending on its component energy: Air (wounding), Creation (merciful), Darkness (unholy), Destruction (thundering), Earth (corrosive), Essence (ghost touch), Fire (flaming), Illusion (brilliant energy), Light (holy), and Water (frost).

**Conjured Swords (Continued)**

**Elemental Essence:** As a whole these swords allow their wielder to attack any elemental Armor Type they want (even Energy) as if it was their Primary Attack type.

**Elemental Immunity:** Because of their versatile nature, the wielder of these swords is immune to 10 intensities of all elements, including Light and Darkness.

**Elemental Control:** Thanks to the elemental power that the sword generates, they can control up to 10 Elemental Intensities.

**-Techniques-  
Dimensional Door**

Lvl: 1 / MK: 50  
Effects: Automatic Transport 300 feet.  
Advantages: Ki Reduction 5.  
Disadvantages: Elemental Binding (Air).  
Ki Cost: AGI: 1 DEX: 2 POW: 2



Sex: Male Race: Human Level: 10  
Life Points: 220 Class: Warlock

STR: 8 DEX: 11 (+1) AGI: 9 CON: 9  
POW: 11 (+1) INT: 13 (+3) WP: 7 PER: 8  
PhR: 85 MR: 105 PsR: 80 VR: 85 DR: 85

Initiative: 120 Natural / 120 Essence Sword  
(Long Sword+20)

Attack Ability: 240 Essence Sword  
(Long Sword+20) x5

Defense Ability: 270 Essence Sword  
(Long Sword+20)

Damage: 110 [Variable] Essence Sword  
(Long Sword+20)

Wear Armor: 10  
AT: Archmage Tunic (Armored Longcoat +10)  
Cut 3 Imp 2 Thr 4 Heat 3 Ele 4 Cold 4 Ene 2

Advantages: The Gift (2), Gestureless Casting (1),  
Magic Nature (1).

Disadvantages: Bad Luck (1).

Natural Abilities Magic Projection as an Attack

Special Abilities: Remote Control.

Magic Projection: 200 / 220 with the Essence  
Sword

Magic Level: Destruction 90 / Time 90 /  
Metamagic 90

Magic Accumulation: 90 / 110 thru Essence Sword  
Zeon: 1335

Metamagic Advantages: Mystic Concentration,  
Increased Range, Pierce Resistances (One  
Sphere), Maximized Spells, Bind Spells, Superior  
Innate Spells, High Magic.

MK: 200 Used: 200

Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Ki Control, Presence  
Extrusion, Aura Extension, Use of Necessary  
Energy, Inhumanity.

Techniques: Dimensional Door.

Accumulations: STR: 1 DEX: 2 AGI: 1 CON: 1  
POW: 2 WP: 1

Ki: STR: 8 DEX: 12 AGI: 9 CON: 9 POW: 14 WP: 7  
Generic Ki: 59

Size: 17 Regeneration: 2  
Movement Value: 9 Fatigue: 9

Secondary Abilities: Athletics: Ride 80 Swim 80  
Vigor: Composure 80 Withstand Pain 80

Perception: Notice 120 Search 80  
Intellectual: History 80 Science 80 Occult 140  
Medicine 40 Memorize 80 M. Appraisal 140  
Social: Style 80 Intimidate 40 Persuasion 80

**Conjured Swords**

As a passive action, Mavin can summon 10 floating swords formed from arcane energy, which are called Essence Swords. They are considered an independent being linked to Mavin's essence, and he can use them to make up to 5 attacks each round.

**Essence Sword**

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a group of long swords of +20 quality, but they act as just one weapon. Because of its supernatural qualities, it affects energy.

**Mystical Essence:** In case of possessing the ability to cast magic, the wielder can apply a bonus to their Magic Accumulation and Magic Projection of +20.







Medium humanoid (human), neutral good

Armor Class: 17 (splint)

HP: 45 (10d8) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 14 (+2), Dex 13 (+1), Con 11 (+0), Int 12 (+1),  
Wis 8 (-1), Cha 10 (+0)

Saving Throws: Str +4, Con +1

Skills: Athletics +4

Condition Immunities  
charmed (while wielding greatsword)

Senses: passive Perception 9

Languages: Common

Challenge: 3 (700 XP)

**Sisterly Bond.**

While within 30 ft of Shelby, Saydee gains +2 to attack and damage rolls with melee weapons (included in attack).

**[Saydee's Greatsword Mumasatsu]**

While wielding her greatsword, Saydee cannot be charmed, has advantage on saving throws against illusion spells, and evil creatures have disadvantage on attack rolls against her. When Saydee hits with the weapon, if the target is an evil creature, the weapon deals an extra 2d8 radiant damage.

**Actions**

**Multiattack.**

Saydee makes two melee weapon attacks.

**Greatsword Mumasatsu.**

Melee Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 11 (2d6+4) slashing damage.

CR 3 XP 800  
Female human fighter (two-handed fighter) 4  
NG Medium humanoid (human)

Init +1; Senses Perception -1

**DEFENSE**

AC 17, touch 10, flat-footed 17 (+7 armor)  
HP 32 (4d10+4)  
Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +0  
Immune charmed (while wielding Mumasatsu)

**OFFENSE**

Speed 20 ft.  
Melee Mumasatsu (two handed) +10  
(two handed) 2d6+8/19-20  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

**STATISTICS**

Str 14, Dex 13, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 8, Cha 10  
Base Atk +4; CMB +6 (+7 sunder);  
CMD 17 (18 vs. sunder)

Feats Cleave, Great Cleave, Outflank, Power Attack,  
Weapon Focus (Greatsword),  
Weapon Specialization (Greatsword)

Skills Climb +2, Knowledge (Local) +5, Ride +1,  
Swim +2

Languages Common

SQ overhand chop, shattering strike

Gear splint mail, Mumasatsu

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**

**Overhand Chop (Ex)**

At 3rd level, when a two-handed fighter makes a single attack (with the attack action or a charge) with a two-handed weapon, he adds double his Strength bonus on damage rolls. This ability replaces armor training 1.

**Shattering Strike (Ex)**

At 2nd level, a two-handed fighter gains a +1 bonus to CMB and CMD on sunder attempts and on damage rolls made against objects. These bonuses increase by +1 for every four levels beyond 2nd. This ability replaces bravery.

Sex: Female Race: Human Level: 1

Life Points: 130 Class: Weaponsmaster

STR: 10 DEX: 10 AGI: 7 CON: 8 POW: 6  
INT: 7 WP: 8 PER: 8  
PhR: 40 MR: 35 PsR: 40 VR: 40 DR: 40

Initiative: 115 Natural / 65 Mumasatsu(Nodachi +5)  
Attack Ability: 105 Mumasatsu(Nodachi +5)

Defense Ability: 95 Mumasatsu(Nodachi +5)  
Damage: 120 [Cut] Mumasatsu(Nodachi +5)

Wear Armor: 70 AT: Partial Plate  
Cut 4 Imp 3 Thr 2 Heat 3 Ele 2 Cold 2 Ene 0

Advantages: Fast Reflexes (2), Free Will (1).  
Disadvantages: None.

Natural Abilities Batto Jutsu

MK: 10 Used: 0  
Ki Abilities: None.

Accumulations: STR: 2 DEX: 2 AGI: 1 CON: 1  
POW: 1 WP: 1

Ki: STR: 10 DEX: 10 AGI: 7 CON: 8 POW: 6  
WP: 8  
Generic Ki: 49

Size: 10 Regeneration: 2

Movement Value: 7 / 5

Fatigue: 8

**Secondary Abilities:**

Athletics:  
Ride 40  
Swim 20  
Jump 40

**Vigor**

Composure 20  
Feats of Str. 40  
Withstand Pain 40

**Perception**

Notice 40  
Search 20

**Social**

Style 20  
Intimidate 40

**Creative**

Sl. of Hand 20

Nodachi: Mumasatsu

Quality: The artifact is considered a Nodachi +5. Because of its supernatural qualities it is able to affect energy.

Iron Will: Increases magic resistance by +30 against Illusions and Control-type effects.

Demon Killer: Mumasatsu deals 50% more damage to demons.











Medium humanoid (human), chaotic neutral

Armor Class: 18 (plate)

HP: 67 (15d8) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 12 (+1), Dex 14 (+2), Con 10 (+0), Int 11 (+0), Wis 13 (+1), Cha 10 (+0)

Saving Throws: Dex +6, Int +4

Skills: Acrobatics +6, Stealth +6

Senses: passive Perception 11

Languages: Common

Challenge: 6 (2300 XP)

**Furious Assault.**

Scarlet's temper overwhelms her as she lashes out and attacks recklessly. She gains advantage on melee weapon attack rolls during this time, but attack rolls against her have advantage until her next turn.

**Opportunist.**

Once per turn, Scarlet can deal an extra 25 (6d6) damage to one creature she hits with an attack if she has advantage on the attack roll.

**Actions**

**Multiattack.**

Scarlet makes 2 melee weapon attacks.

**Grim Scythe.**

Melee Weapon Attack: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d10+1) slashing damage. If the target is a creature, it cannot regain hit points until the end of its next turn.



CR 6 XP 2,400 Female human rogue 7

CN Medium humanoid (human)  
Init +2; Senses Perception +1

**DEFENSE**

AC 21, touch 12, flat-footed 21 (+9 armor, +1 Dex, +1 dodge)  
HP 45 (7d8+7)  
Fort +2, Ref +7, Will +3, +2 Reflex to avoid traps  
Defensive Abilities evasion, trap sense +2, uncanny dodge;

**OFFENSE**

Speed 20 ft.  
Melee grim scythe (+2 paper cut scythe) (two handed) +9 (two handed) 2d4+3/x4  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.  
Special Attacks bleeding attack, furious assault, offensive defense, sneak attack 4d6

**STATISTICS**

Str 13, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 11, Wis 13, Cha 10  
Base Atk +5; CMB +6; CMD 19

**Feats** Armor Proficiency, Heavy,

Armor Proficiency, Light, Armor Proficiency, Medium, Dodge, Martial Weapon Proficiency (Scythe), Mobility, Power Attack, Run, Spring Attack, Weapon Focus (Scythe)

**Skills** Acrobatics +6, Acrobatics (Jump) +2, Climb +5, Disable Device +9, Disguise +10, Escape Artist +6, Sleight of Hand +6, Stealth +6, Swim +5, Use Magic Device +10

Languages Common

SQ trapfinding

Gear full plate, grim scythe (+2 paper cut scythe)

**SPECIAL ABILITIES**

**Bleeding Attack (Ex)**

You can cause living opponents to bleed when hitting them with a sneak attack. This attack causes the target to take 4 additional points of damage each round. Bleeding creatures that that amount of damage every round at the start of their turns. The bleeding can be stopped by a DC 15 Heal check or the application of any effect that heals hit point damage. Bleeding damage from this ability does not stack with itself. Bleeding damage bypasses any damage reduction the creature might possess.

**Furious Assault (Ex)**

Scarlet's temper overwhelms her as she lashes out and attacks recklessly. Until the end of her turn, she rolls twice on attack rolls and keeps the higher of the results, and attack rolls made against Scarlet gain the same benefit.

**Offensive Defense (Ex)**

When a rogue with this talent hits a creature with a melee attack that deals sneak attack damage, the rogue gains a +1 dodge bonus to AC for each sneak attack die rolled against that creature for 1 round.

**Uncanny Dodge (Ex)**

You can react to danger before your senses would normally allow you to do so. You cannot be caught flat-footed, nor do you lose your Dexterity bonus to AC if the attacker is invisible. You still lose your Dexterity bonus to AC if immobilized. You can still lose your Dexterity bonus to AC if an opponent successfully uses the feint action against you.



Sex: Female Race: Human Level: 4 (+1)  
Life Points: 150 Class: Shadow

STR: 8 DEX: 10 AGI: 11 (+1) CON: 8 POW: 6  
INT: 7 WP: 6 PER: 11 (+1)  
PhR: 55 MR: 50 PsR: 50 VR: 55 DR: 55

Initiative: 115 Natural / 100 Grim (Scythe +5) / 115 Dagger +5

Attack Ability: 150 Grim (Scythe +5) / 150 Dagger +5

Defense Ability: 150 Dodge  
Damage: 75 [Cut / Thr] Grim (Scythe +5) / 60 [Thr] / [Cut] Dagger +5

Wear Armor: 60 AT: Partial Plate +5  
Cut 5 Imp 4 Thr 3 Heat 4 Ele 3 Cold 3 Ene 0

Advantages: Eyes of the Death (2), Wear Armor (2).  
Disadvantages: Severe Addiction [Murder] (1).

Natural Abilities Dagger, Blind Fighting, Increased Critical

MK: 100 Used: 100

Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Presence Extrusion, Aura Extension, Use of Necessary Energy, Inhumanity.

Accumulations: STR: 1 DEX: 2 AGI: 2 CON: 1  
POW: 1 WP: 1

Ki: STR: 8 DEX: 10 AGI: 12 CON: 8 POW: 6 WP: 6  
Generic Ki: 50

Size: 16 Regeneration: 2  
Movement Value: 11 / 10  
Fatigue: 8

**Secondary Abilities:**

**Athletics:**  
Acrobatics 40  
Athleticism 80  
Climb 40  
Swim 40  
Jump 20

**Vigor**  
Composure 40

**Perception**  
Notice 120  
Search 120  
Track 40

**Social**  
Style 20  
Intimidate 40

**Subterfuge**  
Hide 140  
Disguise 40  
Stealth 140

**Grim Scythe**

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a Scythe +5. Because of its supernatural qualities it can affect energy.

**Vorpal:** The weapon only subtracts -10 from the wielder Attack roll when making aimed attacks to the head, also granting a +40 to its critical level.





Medium humanoid (human), true neutral

Armor Class: 20 (plate, shield)

HP: 255 (30d8 + 120) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 17 (+3), Dex 13 (+1), Con 18 (+4), Int 9 (-1), Wis 10 (+0), Cha 8 (-1)

Saving Throws: Str +8, Con +7

Skills: Athletics +8, Intimidation +4, Perception +5

Damage Resistances: cold, necrotic

Senses: passive Perception 10

Languages: Common

Challenge: 15 (13000 XP)

Indomitable (2/day): Volkenstrum rerolls a failed saving throw.

**Shield Master.**  
If Volkenstrum is subjected to an effect that allows him to make a Dexterity saving throw to take only half damage, he instead takes no damage if he succeeds on the saving throw, and only half damage if he fails.

**Survivor.**  
Volkenstrum regains 15 hit points at the start of his turn if he has at least 1 hit point but fewer hit points than half his hit point maximum.

**Actions**  
**Multiattack.**  
Volkenstrum makes three melee weapon attacks.

**Darksteel Sword.**  
Melee Weapon Attack: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 7 (1d8+3) slashing damage plus 9(2d8) necrotic damage.

**Shield Slam.**  
Melee Weapon Attack: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 7 (1d8+3) bludgeoning damage and if the target is Large or smaller, it must pass a DC 16 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

**Reactions**  
**Intercede.**  
When a creature Volkenstrum can see attacks another target that is within 5 feet of him, he can use his reaction to make himself the target of that attack, and impose disadvantage on the attack roll.

CR 15 XP 51,200  
Male human fighter (phalanx soldier) 16

N Medium humanoid (human)  
Init +1; Senses Perception +8

### DEFENSE

AC 27, touch 12,

flat-footed 25  
(+9 armor, +1 Dex, +1 dodge, +6 shield)

HP 196 (16d10+96)  
Fort +14, Ref +6, Will +5  
DR 3/-

### OFFENSE

Speed 20 ft.  
Melee darksteel sword +22/+17/+12/+7  
(1d8+8/19-20)  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

### STATISTICS

Str 23, Dex 13, Con 18, Int 9, Wis 10, Cha 8  
Base Atk +16; CMB +22; CMD 34 (38 vs. overrun)  
(38 vs. trip)

**Feats** Covering Defense, Diehard, Dodge, Endurance, Fast Healer, Greater Shield Focus, Greater Shield Specialization (Tower Shield), Greater Weapon Focus (Shieldbash), Improved Shield Bash, Mobility, Saving Shield, Shield Focus, Shield Specialization (Tower Shield), Sidestep, Strike Back, Toughness, Tower Shield Proficiency, Weapon Focus (Shieldbash)

Skills Climb +2, Intimidate +10, Perception +8, Swim +2

Languages Common

SQ shield ally

Gear full plate (adamantine), darksteel sword, tower shield

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Shield Ally (Ex)**  
When Volkenstrum is using a heavy or tower shield, he can, as a move action, provide partial cover (+2 cover bonus to AC, +1 bonus on Reflex saves) to himself and all adjacent allies until the beginning of his next turn. He can also provide cover (+4 cover bonus to AC, +2 bonus on Reflex saves) and evasion (as a rogue) to one adjacent ally until the beginning of his next turn. This cover does not allow Stealth checks.

Sex: Male Race: Human Level: 6  
Life Points: 210 Class: Warrior

STR: 10 DEX: 11 (+1) AGI: 9 CON: 9 POW: 10  
INT: 8 WP: 8 PER: 8  
PhR: 65 MR: 70 PsR: 65 VR: 65 DR: 65

Initiative: 125 Natural / 125 Katzbalger +10 / 85  
Katzbalger +10 & Full Shield +10

Attack Ability: 180 Katzbalger +10 / 180 Full Shield +10

Defense Ability: 210 Katzbalger +10 / 240 Full Shield +10

Damage: 90 [Cut] Katzbalger +10 / 70 [Imp] Full Shield +10

Wear Armor: 75 AT: Half Plate +10  
Cut 6 Imp 6 Thr 6 Heat 4 Ele 2 Cold 3 Ene 3

Advantages: Fast Reflexes (1), Touched by destiny (1), Wear Armor (1), Martial Mastery (2).

Disadvantages: None.

Natural Abilities Full Shield.  
Special Abilities Guardian.

MK: 230 Used: 230  
Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Ki Control, Presence Extrusion, Aura Extension, Use of Necessary Energy.

Techniques: Shield Wall, Shield Mastery, Shield Field, Shield Reflect.

Accumulations: STR: 3 DEX: 3 AGI: 1 CON: 1  
POW: 3 WP: 1

Ki: STR: 10 DEX: 12 AGI: 9 CON: 9 POW: 10 WP: 8  
Generic Ki: 58 Size: 19 Regeneration: 2  
Movement Value: 9/8 Fatigue: 9

Secondary Abilities: Athletics: Athleticism 40  
Ride 60 Swim 40

Vigor: Composure 40 Feats of Str. 80  
Withstand Pain 80

Perception: Notice 80 Search 40  
Intellectual: History 40 Tactics 140  
Social: Etiquette 20 Style 40 Leadership 120  
Intimidate 40 Persuasion 20

**Shield Wall:** Lvl: 1 / MK: 20  
Effects: Block Ability +50.  
Advantages: None.  
Disadvantages: Elemental Binding (Light).  
Ki Cost: DEX: 3 STR: 3 POW: 3

**Shield Mastery:** Lvl: 1 / MK: 20  
Effects: Additional Defense +4.  
Advantages: Ki Reduction 2.  
Disadvantages: Elemental Binding (Light).  
Ki Cost: AGI: 1 DEX: 3 CON: 1

**Shield Field:** Lvl: 2 / MK: 40  
Effects: Area Block 300 feet, Limited Block Ability +10.  
Advantages: Ki Reduction 3.  
Disadvantages: Elemental Binding (Light), Condition (Cover others).  
Ki Cost: DEX: 3 STR: 3 POW: 3

**Shield Reflect:** Lvl: 2 / MK: 40  
Effects: Reflect Attack (choose targets, reflect esoteric abilities).  
Advantages: Ki Reduction 2.  
Disadvantages: Elemental Binding (Light), All action penalty (-125)  
Ki Cost: DEX: 7 STR: 7 POW: 7

**Survivor:**  
Volkenstrum regains 10 Life Points at the start of his turn if he has at least 1 Life Point but fewer Life Points than half his Life Points maximum.





Medium fey, neutral evil  
Armor Class: 18 (natural armor)  
HP: 195 (30d8 + 60) Speed: 30 ft.

Str 10 (+0), Dex 17 (+3), Con 15 (+2), Int 16 (+3),  
Wis 12 (+1), Cha 22 (+6)

Saving Throws: Wis +7, Cha +12  
Skills: Arcana +9, Deception +12, History +9,  
Nature +9, Survival +7  
Damage Immunities: necrotic

Senses: passive Perception 11  
Languages: Abyssal, Common, Primordial, Sylvan  
Challenge: 20 (25000 XP)

#### Aria Of Ruin.

Tserlith is surrounded by an aura of hungering undeath to which constructs and undead are immune. At the start of each of Tserlith's turns, each creature within 10 feet of her must pass a DC 20 Constitution saving throw or take 15 (5d6) necrotic damage, and Tserlith regains hit points equal to the total damage dealt to all creatures by this ability. Any humanoid killed by this damage rises at the start of Tserlith's next turn as a zombie under her control.

#### Spellcasting.

Tserlith is a 20th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 20, +12 to hit with spell attacks). The following warlock spells are prepared:

Cantrips (at will): chill touch, eldritch blast, frostbite, prestidigitation

1st-5th level (4 slots): armor of agathys, blight, contagion, counterspell, crown of madness, darkness, dimension door, fear, hex, hold person, invisibility, ray of enfeeblement, ray of sickness, scrying, vampiric touch

#### Innate Spellcasting.

Tserlith's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 20). Tserlith can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: Bestow Curse, Detect Magic, Speak with Dead

1/day each: Create Undead, Finger of Death, Power Word Kill, Power Word Stun

#### Actions

##### Multiattack.

Tserlith makes two Scythe of Ruin attacks.

##### Scythe Of Ruin.

Melee Spell Attack: +12 to hit, reach 5 ft., or range 5 ft., one target. Hit: 19 (2d12+6) necrotic damage.

##### Pull Of The Void.

Tserlith targets up to three creatures she can see within 30 feet of her. Each target must succeed on a DC 20 Strength saving throw or be pulled 20 feet toward her.

#### Legendary Actions

Tserlith can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. Tserlith regains spent legendary actions at the start of its turn.

##### Cantrip.

Tserlith casts a cantrip.

##### Pull Of The Void.

Tserlith uses her Pull of the Void.

##### Calamity (Costs 2 Actions)

The Aria of Ruin radiates from Tserlith. Non-undead creatures within 60 feet of Tserlith, including ones behind barriers and around corners, can't regain hit points until the end of Tserlith's next turn.



CR 19 XP 204,800 Female ygtolith sorcerer 20  
NE Medium fey (ygtolith)  
Init +3; Senses low-light vision, Perception +3

#### DEFENSE

AC 14, touch 14, flat-footed 10 (+3 Dex, +1 dodge)  
HP 142 (20d6+60) Fort +8, Ref +9, Will +13  
DR 5/-, Immune cold, paralysis, sleep

#### OFFENSE:

Speed 30 ft.  
Melee grim scythe +5  
(keen/mithral/unholy)(two handed) +15/+10  
(two handed) 2d4+5/19-20/x4  
Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

#### Known Sorcerer Spells(CL 20th, concentration +26)

9th (6/day)—energy drain (DC 27), +3 more  
8th (6/day)—horrid wilting (DC 26), +3 more  
7th (6/day)—finger of death (DC 25), +3 more  
6th (7/day)—undeath to death (DC 24), +3 more  
5th (7/day)—waves of fatigue (DC), +4 more  
4th (7/day)—animate dead, +4 more  
3rd (7/day)—vampiric touch, +4 more  
2nd (8/day)—false life, +5 more  
1st (8/day)—chill touch (DC 19), +5 more

#### STATISTICS

Str 10, Dex 17, Con 15, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 22  
Base Atk +10; CMB +10; CMD 24

#### Feats Combat Casting, Dodge, Eschew Materials,

Greater Spell Focus (Necromancy), Greater Spell Penetration, Intensified Spell, Martial Weapon Proficiency (Scythe), Maximize Spell, Persistent Spell, Silent Spell, Skill Focus (Bluff), Spell Focus (Necromancy), Spell Penetration, Vital Strike

Skills Bluff +35, Knowledge (Arcana) +21,  
Knowledge (History) +18, Knowledge (Nature) +23,  
Perception +3, Spellcraft +26, Spellcraft (Identify magic item) +28, Survival +11

#### Languages Abyssal, Common, Sylvan

SQ aria of ruin, grasp of the dead, grave touch

Gear grim scythe +5 (keen/mithral/unholy)

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Aria Of Ruin (Su)** Tserlith is surrounded by an aura of hungering undeath to which constructs and undead are immune. At the start of each of Tserlith's turns, each creature within 10 feet of her must pass a DC 20 Fortitude saving throw or take 15 (5d6) damage, and Tserlith regains hit points equal to the total damage dealt to all creatures by this ability. The save is Constitution based. Any humanoid killed by this damage rises at the start of Tserlith's next turn as a zombie under her control.

**Grasp of the Dead (Su)** You can cause a swarm of skeletal arms to burst from the ground to rip and tear your foes. The skeletal arms erupt from the ground in a 20-foot-radius burst. Anyone in this area takes 20d6 points of slashing damage per caster level. Those caught in the area receive a Reflex save for half damage (DC 26). Those who fail the save are unable to move for 1 round. The skeletal arms are spectral and disappear after 1 round. The arms must burst up from a solid surface. You can use this ability 3 times per day. This power has a range of 60 feet.

**Grave Touch (Su)** You can make a melee touch attack as a standard action that causes a living creature to become shaken for 10 rounds. If you touch a shaken creature with this ability, it becomes frightened for 1 round if it has fewer Hit Dice than your sorcerer level. You can use this ability 9 times per day.



Sex: Female Race: Fey Level: 11  
Life Points: 230 Class: Warlock

STR: 10 DEX: 13 AGI: 10 CON: 9 POW: 13  
INT: 13 WP: 10 PER: 7  
PhR: 90 MR: 105 PsR: 95 VR: 90 DR: 90

Initiative: 135 Natural / 130 Ruin (Scythe +15)  
Attack Ability: 265 Ruin (Scythe +15)  
Defense Ability: 265 Ruin (Scythe +15)  
Damage: 80 [Ene] Ruin (Scythe +15)

Wear Armor: 15 AT: None.

Natural Abilities Magic Projection as Attack, Magic Projection as Defense.

Essential Abilities: The Gift, Superhuman Physical Stats, Superhuman Spiritual Stats, Physical Exemption, Inhumanity, Unspoken Casting, Gestureless Casting.

Powers: See the Supernatural Zeon: 1145  
Magic Projection: 200 Magic Accumulation: 75  
Magic Level: Darkness 90 / Essence 60 / Umbral 90 / Dreams60

MK: 220 Used: 220

Ki Abilities: Use of Ki, Ki Control.

Accumulations: STR: 2 DEX: 3 AGI: 2 CON: 1  
POW: 3 WP: 2

Ki: STR: 10 DEX: 16 AGI: 10 CON: 9 POW: 16 WP: 10  
Generic Ki: 71 Fatigue: Tireless

Size: 19 Regeneration: 2 Movement Value: 10  
Secondary Abilities: Athletics: Acrobatics 120  
Jump 120

Vigor: Composure 80 Feats of Str. 120  
Withstand Pain 120

Perception: Notice 100 Search 100

Intellectual: History 120 Occult 140

M. Appraisal 200

Social: Style 120 Intimidate 80 Persuasion 140

#### Aria Of Ruin

Tserlith is surrounded by an aura of hungering undeath to which constructs and undead are immune. At the start of each of Tserlith's turns, each creature within 10 feet of her must pass a Physical Resistance Check against 120 or receive damage equivalent to the failure level. Tserlith absorbs the damage she inflicts with Aria of Ruin and recovers an equivalent amount of Life Points. Any Humanoid killed by this damage rises at the start of Tserlith's next turn as a zombie under her control.

#### Pull Of The Void.

Tserlith targets up to three creatures she can see within 30 feet of her. Each target must succeed on a Strength Test or be pulled 20 feet toward her.

#### Scythe of Ruin (Ruin)

Quality: The artifact is considered a Scythe +15.

Essence: This Scythe allows Tserlith to attack on the Energy AT as her primary Attack Type.

Synchronization: The weapon is linked to the wielder, so she can invoke it from within whenever she want, as well as recover it with a thought if it is lost.

#### -Techniques-

##### -Calamity

Lvl: 1 / MK: 50

Effects: Long-Distance Attack 150 feet (Single),

Attack Ability +40.

Advantages: Ki Reduction 3.

Disadvantages: Complex.

Ki Cost: DEX: 3 STR: 2 POW: 3 WP: 2

##### -Aria of Death

Lvl: 2 / MK: 50

Effects: Enhance crit +40 (Automatic crit), Aim -75.

Advantages: None. Disadvantages: None.

Ki Cost: DEX: 6 STR: 4 POW: 6 WP: 4







# Abyssal Lord



Medium undead, chaotic evil  
**Armor Class:** 18 (plate)    **HP:** 152 (16d8 + 80)  
**Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 20 (+5), **Dex** 10 (+0), **Con** 20 (+5), **Int** 10 (+0),  
**Wis** 12 (+1), **Cha** 16 (+3)

**Saving Throws:** Con +10, Wis +6

**Damage Immunities:** necrotic, poison

**Damage Resistances:** bludgeoning, piercing and  
slashing damage from nonmagical weapons

**Condition Immunities:** poisoned, frightened,  
exhaustion

**Senses:** passive Perception 11

**Languages:** Common

**Challenge:** 14 (11500 XP)

### Command Undead.

As a bonus action, the abyss lord targets any number undead allies it can see within 30 feet of it, up to its Charisma modifier. If a target can see and hear the abyss lord, the target can make one weapon attack as a reaction and gains advantage on the attack roll.

### Marshall Undead.

Unless the abyss lord is incapacitated, it and undead creatures of its choice within 60 feet of it have advantage on saving throws against features that turn undead.

### Actions

#### Multiattack.

The abyss lord makes four war pick attacks.

#### War Pick.

Melee Weapon Attack: +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 9 (1d8+5) piercing damage plus 9 (2d8) necrotic damage.

**CR** 14    **XP** 38,400    **CE** Medium undead  
**Zombie human (zombie) fighter** 14  
**Init** +0; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., Perception +1

### DEFENSE

**AC** 25, **touch** 10,  
flat-footed 25 (+12 armor, +2 natural, +1 shield)  
**HP** 176 (16 HD; 2d8+14d10+78)

**Fort** +12, **Ref** +4, **Will** +8, +4 Will vs. fear

**DR** 5/slashing; 3/-; **Immune** ability drain, death effects, death from massive damage, disease, energy drain, exhaustion, fatigue, mind-affecting effects, nonlethal damage, paralysis, poison, sleep, stunning

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.  
**Melee** pick, heavy +3 (adamantine/unholy)  
+28/+23/+18 (1d6+12/x4)  
**Melee** slam +20 (1d4+9)  
**Space** 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

### STATISTICS

**Str** 20, **Dex** 10, **Con** -, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 16  
**Base Atk** +15; **CMB** +20 (+24 sunder);  
**CMD** 30 (32 vs. sunder)

### Feats

Blind-Fight, Cleave, Great Cleave, Greater Sunder, Greater Two-Weapon Fighting, Greater Weapon Focus (Pick (Heavy)), Greater Weapon Specialization (Pick (Heavy)), Improved Sunder, Improved Two-Weapon Fighting, Power Attack, Toughness, Two-Weapon Defense, Two-Weapon Fighting, Two-Weapon Rend, Weapon Focus (Pick (Heavy)), Weapon Specialization (Pick (Heavy))

**Skills** Handle Animal +10, Intimidate +22, Ride +9

**Gear** full plate +3 (adamantine), pick, heavy +3 (adamantine/unholy) (2)

**Sex:** Male    **Race:** Demon Undead

**Level:** 6    **Life Points:** 250  
**Class:** Dark Paladin

**STR:** 13    **DEX:** 13    **AGI:** 10    **CON:** 12    **POW:** 12  
**INT:** 10    **WP:** 12    **PER:** 10

**PhR:** 75    **MR:** 75    **PsR:** 75    **VR:** 75    **DR:** 75

**Initiative:** 100 Natural / 75 Halberd  
(Huge Halberd +10)

**Attack Ability:** 195 Halberd (Huge Halberd +10)

**Defense Ability:** 190 Halberd (Huge Halberd +10)

**Damage:** 160 [Cut / Imp / Dark] Halberd  
(Huge Halberd +10)

**Wear Armor:** 55

**AT:** Natural + Abyss Scales (Partial Plate+10).  
Cut 8 Imp 7 Thr 6 Heat 7 Ele 6 Cold 6 Ene 6

**Natural Abilities** Defense against Projectiles  
Area Attack

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats,  
Superhuman Spiritual Stats, Psychological  
immunity, Immune to Pain, Inhumanity,  
Physical Exemption.

**Powers:** Regeneration 8, Damage Barrier 100,  
See the Supernatural.

**Magic Accumulation:** 15

**Zeon:** 530

**Control:** 120 Others / 200 Undead

**Size:** 25 (Big)    **Regeneration:** 8

**Movement Value:** 10  
**Fatigue:** Tireless

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Ride 80

**Vigor:** Feats of Str. 120

**Perception:** Search 80

**Intellectual:** Occult 120

**Social:** Style 80    Intimidate 140  
Leadership 40    Persuasion 120  
**Creative:** Sl. of Hand 80

### Command Undead.

As a passive action, the abyss lord targets any number of undead allies it can see within 30 feet of it. If a target can see and hear the abyss lord, they obtain a +10 to All Actions Bonus.

### Marshall Undead.

Unless the abyss lord is incapacitated, it and undead creatures of its choice within 60 feet of it obtains a +20 to all their resistances.

### Halberd

#### Quality:

The artifact is considered a Halberd +10. Because of its supernatural qualities it is able to affect energy.

#### Necromancy:

Imbued with the power of death, the weapon damage is anathema to everything sacred, doing unholy damage and darkness damage.





## Demogengea



Medium monstrosity, neutral evil

Armor Class: 14

Hit Points: 22 (5d8)

Speed: 30 ft.

Str 8 (-1), Dex 12 (+1), Con 10 (+0), Int 12 (+1)

Wis 10 (+0), Cha 16 (+3)

Damage Vulnerabilities: fire

Senses: passive Perception 10

Languages: -

Challenge: 1 (200 XP)

### Mimicry.

The demogengea can mimic humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 13 Wisdom (Insight) check.

### Actions

#### Vines.

Melee Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d6+1) bludgeoning damage plus 2 (1d4) piercing damage

#### Charming Spores (3/day).

The demogengea ejects spores at one creature it can see within 5 feet of it. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be charmed for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.



CR 1 XP 400  
NE Medium Plant (Daemon)

Init +1; Senses Perception +0

### DEFENSE:

AC 13, touch 11,  
flat-footed 12 (+1 Dex, +2 natural)  
HP 6 (1d8+1) Fort +3, Ref +1, Will +0

Weaknesses Fire Vulnerability

### OFFENSE:

Speed 20 ft.  
Melee vine lash +1 (1d6+1)  
Special Attacks Charming Spores (DC 13)

### STATISTICS

Str 8, Dex 12, Con 12, Int 11, Wis 10, Cha 16  
Base Atk +0; CMB -1; CMD 10

Languages: Common SQ Mimicry

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

#### Charming Spores (3/day).

The demogengea ejects spores at one creature it can see within 5 feet of it. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Will saving throw or be charmed for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success. The save DC is charisma-based.

#### Mimicry.

The demogengea can mimic humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 13 Wisdom (Sense Motive) check.



Sex: Androgynous Race: Monster  
Level: 1 Life Points: 90 Class: Freelancer

STR: 5 DEX: 6 AGI: 6 CON: 6 POW: 5  
INT: 5 WP: 5 PER: 8  
PhR: 35 MR: 30 PsR: 30 VR: 35 DR: 35

Initiative: 55 Natural / 55 Bite  
Attack Ability: 80 Spikes  
Defense Ability: 80 Dodge  
Damage: 40 [Imp / Thr] Spikes

Essential Abilities: Superhuman Physical Stats,  
Superhuman Spiritual Stats.  
Powers: Natural Weapons, Charming Spores  
(Area Attack 10 feet, Additional Use x2,  
PhR 80 or charm) Free Movement in Nature

Size: 11 (Medium) Regeneration: 1  
Movement Value: 6 Fatigue: Tireless  
Secondary Abilities: Perception: Notice 40  
Search 40 Track 40

Subterfuge: Hide 40 Stealth 20  
Disguise 120 (Ventriloquism)

### Charming Spores.

Three times per day, the demogengea ejects spores at one creature it can see within 10 feet of it. The target must succeed on a PhR Check of 80 or be charmed immobile for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

### Mimicry.

The demogengea can mimic Humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful Notice check of 180 or a Search of 120.

## Down-Xin

Small fey, chaotic neutral  
Armor Class: 12

Hit Points: 27 (6d6 + 6)  
Speed: fly 30 ft. (hover)

Str 8 (-1), Dex 14 (+2), Con 12 (+1), Int 17 (+3),  
Wis 14 (+2), Cha 13 (+1)

Saving Throws: Wis +4  
Skills: Insight +4, Perception +4

Senses: passive Perception 12  
Languages: Common, Sylvan

Challenge: 3 (700 XP)

### Magic Resistance.

Down-Xin has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

### Innate Spellcasting.

Down-xin's spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 13). Down-xin can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: Blur, Color Spray, Dancing Lights,  
Major Image, Vicious Mockery  
1/day each: Seeming

### Actions

#### Pummel.

Melee Weapon Attack: +1 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 1 (1d4-1) bludgeoning damage.

CR 3 XP 800 CN Small Fey  
Init +2; Senses Perception +8

### DEFENSE

AC 16, touch 13,  
flat-footed 14 (+1 size, +2 Dex, +3 natural)

HP 14 (3d6+3)  
Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +5  
DR 5/Magic

### OFFENSE

Speed 20 ft., fly 40 ft.  
Melee unarmed +1 (1d2-1)

#### Spell-Like Abilities (CL 3; concentration +6)

The save DC against a Down-Xin's spells is 13+ spell level. Down-Xin's spells use Intelligence as the primary casting attribute.

At Will: Blur, Color Spray, Dancing Lights,  
Major Image  
1/day: Seeming

### STATISTICS

Str 8, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 16,  
Wis 14, Cha 12  
Base Atk +1; CMB -1; CMD 11

Feats Spell Focus  
Skills Perception +8, Sense Motive +8

Languages Common  
SQ Fey Traits

Sex: Female Race: Fey Level: 1  
Life Points: 60 Class: Wizard

STR: 4 DEX: 8 AGI: 6 CON: 4 POW: 9  
INT: 10 WP: 6 PER: 7

PhR: 25 MR: 70 PsR: 35 VR: 25 DR: 25

Initiative: 80 Natural Attack Ability: 10 Club

Defense Ability: 5 Dodge Damage: 25 [Imp] Club

Essential Abilities: The Gift, Superhuman Physical  
Stats, Superhuman Spiritual Stats,  
Unnatural Size.

Powers: Natural Weapons, Mystic Flight 6.

Magic Projection: 85  
Magic Level: Essence 20 / Knowledge 20

Magic Accumulation: 30 Zeon: 770

Size: 3 (Tiny) Regeneration: 0  
Movement Value: 2 / 6 Fatigue: 4

Secondary Abilities: Perception: Notice 20  
Search 20

Interlectual: Herbal Lore 20 Animals 20  
Occult 40 Appraisal 20 M. Appraisal 40  
Subterfuge: Hide 20 Stealth 40

### Magic Resistance.

Down-Xin has a +20 to all Magic Resistance Checks.



## — Eques Obscurum —



Medium undead, neutral evil    **Speed:** 20 ft.  
**Armor Class:** 18 (plate)    **Hit Points:** 112 (15d8 + 45)

**Str** 14 (+2), **Dex** 6 (-2), **Con** 16 (+3), **Int** 3 (-4),  
**Wis** 8 (-1), **Cha** 6 (-2)

**Damage Immunities:** poison  
**Condition Immunities:** poisoned

**Senses:** passive Perception 9  
**Languages:** understands Common but can't speak

**Challenge:** 5 (1800 XP)

### Undead Fortitude.

If damage reduces the eques obscurum to 0 hit points, it must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC of 5 + the damage taken, unless the damage is radiant or from a critical hit. On a success, the eques obscurum drops to 1 hit point instead.

### Actions

**Multiattack.**  
 The Eques Obscurum makes two melee weapon attacks.

#### Soulbound Sword.

Melee Weapon Attack: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d8+2) slashing damage plus 5 (1d10) necrotic damage.

#### Ordo Flail.

Melee Weapon Attack: +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d8+2) bludgeoning damage plus 4 (1d8) necrotic damage.



CR 5    XP 1,600    NE Medium undead  
 Zombie human (zombie) fighter 5

**Init** -2; **Senses:** darkvision 60 ft., Perception -1

### DEFENSE

**AC** 19, touch 8,  
 flat-footed 19 (+9 armor, -2 Dex, +2 natural)

**HP** 42 (7 HD; 2d8+5d10-2)  
**Fort** +2, **Ref** -1, **Will** +3, +1 Will vs. fear

**DR** 5/slashing; **Immune** ability drain, death effects, death from massive damage, disease, energy drain, exhaustion, fatigue, mind-affecting effects, nonlethal damage, paralysis, poison, sleep, stunning

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.  
**Melee** soulbound sword +9/+4 (1d8+3/19-20)

**Melee** ordo flail +9/+4 (1d8+2)  
**Melee** slam +8 (1d4+4)  
**Space** 5 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

### STATISTICS

**Str** 14, **Dex** 6, **Con** -, **Int** -, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 6  
**Base Atk** +6; **CMB** +8; **CMD** 16

**Feats** Cleave, Great Cleave, Improved Two-Weapon Fighting, Power Attack, Toughness, Two-Weapon Fighting

**Skills** Intimidate +8

**Gear** full plate, soulbound sword, ordo flail, slam



**Sex:** Male    **Race:** Undead    **Level:** 2  
**Life Points:** 1,375    **Class:** Weaponsmaster

**STR:** 9    **DEX:** 8    **AGI:** 7    **CON:** 10    **POW:** 5  
**INT:** 3    **WP:** 5    **PER:** 8  
**PHR:** 70    **MR:** 35    **PsR:** 35    **VR:** 70    **DR:** 70

**Initiative:** 65 Natural / 40 Soulbound Sword (Long Sword+5) & Ordo Flail (Mayal +5)  
**Attack Ability:** 110 Soulbound Sword (Long Sword+5) + 100 Ordo Flail (Mayal +5)  
**Defense Ability:** Damage Resistance  
**Damage:** 70 [Cut] Soulbound Sword (Long Sword+5) / 60 [Imp] Ordo Flail (Mayal +5)

**Wear Armor:** 80    **AT:** Natural + Half Plate+5  
**Cut** 6    **Imp** 6    **Thr** 6    **Heat** 4    **Ele** 2    **Cold** 3    **Ene** 3

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats, Superhuman Spiritual Stats, Ambidextrous, Physical Exemption.

**Powers:** Increased Physical Resistance +20, Night vision.

**Size:** 19 (Medium)    **Regeneration:** 0  
**Movement Value:** 7 / 5    **Fatigue:** Tireless

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Athleticism 20  
 Climb 40

**Vigor:** Composure 20    Feats of Str. 80  
 Withstand Pain 80

**Perception:** Notice 80    Search 40  
**Social:** Intimidate 40

### Undead Fortitude.

If damage reduces the Eques Obscurum to 0 hit points, it must make a Physical Resistance Check against 80 plus the damage received. On a success, the Eques Obscurum drops to 1 hit point instead.

### Soulbound Sword

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a long sword +5. Because of its supernatural qualities it is able to affect energy.

**Necromancy:** Imbued with the power of death, the sword's damage is anathema to everything sacred, and it does unholy damage.

### Ordo Flail

**Quality:** The artifact is considered a flail +5. Because of its supernatural qualities it is able to affect energy.

**Necromancy:** Imbued with the power of death, the flail's damage is anathema to everything sacred, and it does unholy damage.



## — Dawn's Farewell —

### Dawn's Farewell

Weapon (longsword), legendary  
 (requires attunement)

You gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this magic weapon. When you hit an undead with it, that creature takes an extra 1d10 radiant damage.

Additionally, the weapon is capable of creating gusts of slicing wind. You can use an action to roll a weapon attack against a target within 60 ft, dealing this weapon's damage plus 2d8 force damage on a hit.

### Dawn's Farewell (+3 longsword of undead bane)

In addition to causing further harm to undead, the weapon is capable of creating gusts of slicing wind. You can use a standard action to roll an attack against a target within 60 ft, dealing this weapon's damage plus an additional d8 damage on a hit.

### Dawn's Farewell (+10 longsword)

The weapon causes double damage against undead. In addition, the weapon is capable of creating gusts of slicing wind, allowing the wielder to use a standard attack against a target within 60 ft.





Medium undead, chaotic evil **Armor Class:** 16  
**Hit Points:** 31 (7d8) **Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 16 (+3), **Dex** 14 (+2), **Con** 10 (+0), **Int** 10 (+0),  
**Wis** 12 (+1), **Cha** 6 (-2)

**Skills:** Stealth +4

**Senses:** darkvision 60 ft. passive Perception 11

**Languages:** Common **Challenge:** 4 (1100 XP)

#### False Appearance.

While the fachen remains motionless, it is indistinguishable from a normal bush.

#### Mimicry.

The fachen can mimic the voices of humanoid women and children. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 14 Wisdom (Insight) check.

#### Actions

##### Multiattack.

The fachen makes one attack with its claws and one with its vine whip.

##### Claws.

Melee Weapon Attack: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 5 (1d4+3) slashing damage.

##### Vine Whip.

Melee Weapon Attack: +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d4+2) piercing damage and if the target is a Medium or smaller creature, it must succeed on a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone



CR 4 XP 1200 CE Medium Undead  
**Init** +2; **Senses** Darkvision 60ft; Perception +3

#### DEFENSE

**AC** 16, touch 12,  
flat-footed 14 (+2 Dex, +4 natural)  
**HP** 27 (6d8) **Fort** +0, **Ref** +4, **Will** +6

#### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.  
**Melee** 2 claws +7 (1d4+3), vine whip +2 (1d6+3)

#### STATISTICS

**Str** 16, **Dex** 14, **Con** 0, **Int** 10, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 6  
**Base Atk** +4; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 19

#### Feats Alertness

**Skills** Perception +3, Stealth +11

#### Languages Common

**SQ** Undead Traits, Hide in Plain Sight, Camouflage

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

##### Hide in Plain Sight (Ex)

A Fachen can use the Stealth skill to hide even while being observed.

##### Camouflage (Ex)

A Fachen can use the Stealth skill to hide in any of its native terrains, even if the terrain doesn't grant cover or concealment.



**Sex:** Male **Race:** Undead **Level:** 2  
**Life Points:** 115 **Class:** Shadow

**STR:** 7 **DEX:** 10 **AGI:** 10 **CON:** 7 **POW:** 5  
**INT:** 5 **WP:** 5 **PER:** 11  
**PhR:** 40 **MR:** 35 **PsR:** 35 **VR:** 40 **DR:** 40

**Initiative:** 70 Natural / 30 Spikes Whip (Whip)  
**Attack Ability:** 110 Spikes Whip (Whip) + 100 Claw

**Defense Ability:** 110 Dodge  
**Damage:** 40 [Cut / Imp] Spikes Whip (Whip) /  
45 [Cut] Claw

**Wear Armor:** 5 **AT:** Natural  
Cut 3 Imp 3 Thr 3 Heat 3 Ele 3 Cold 3 Ene 3

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats,  
Superhuman Spiritual Stats, Ambidextrous,  
Physical Exemption.

**Powers:** Natural Weapons, Full Night Vision.  
**Size:** 14 (Medium) **Regeneration:** 0

**Movement Value:** 10 **Fatigue:** Tireless  
**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Athleticism 40  
Climb 40

**Perception:** Notice 80 Search 80 Track 40  
**Subterfuge:** Hide 80 Stealth 40  
Disguise 120 / Ventriloquism 200

**False Appearance.** (See D&D)

#### Mimicry.

The Fachen can mimic the voices of Humanoid women and children. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful Notice check of 180 or a Search of 120.



Medium monstrosity (ga-onna), chaotic neutral  
**Armor Class:** 15 (natural armor)  
**Hit Points:** 27 (6d8) **Speed:** 30 ft., fly 30 ft.

**Str** 12 (+1), **Dex** 14 (+2), **Con** 10 (+0), **Int** 12 (+1),  
**Wis** 13 (+1), **Cha** 15 (+2)

**Skills:** Medicine +3

**Senses:** darkvision 60 ft. passive Perception 11  
**Languages:** Common **Challenge:** 2 (450 XP)

#### Innate Spellcasting.

The ga-onna's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 12). The ga-onna can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: charm person, minor illusion

#### Actions

##### Claws.

Melee Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., Hit: 8 (2d6+1) slashing damage.

##### Illusionary Appearance.

The ga-onna covers itself and anything it is wearing or carrying with a magical illusion that makes it look like another creature of its general size and humanoid shape. The illusion ends if the ga-onna takes a bonus action to end it or if it dies.

The changes wrought by this effect fail to hold up to physical inspection. For example, the ga-onna could appear to have smooth skin, but someone touching it would feel its chitinous flesh. Otherwise a creature must take an action to visually inspect the illusion and succeed on a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check to discern that the ga-onna is disguised.

CR 2 XP 600  
CN Medium Monstrous Humanoid

**Init** +2; **Senses** Darkvision 60ft; Perception +1

#### DEFENSE:

**AC** 14, touch 12,  
flat-footed 12 (+2 Dex, +2 natural)

**HP** 17 (3d10+0) **Fort** +1, **Ref** +5, **Will** +4

#### OFFENSE:

**Speed** 30 ft., fly 60 ft.  
**Melee** 2 claws +4 (1d4+1)

**Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 3; concentration +4)  
The save DC against a Ga-Onna's spells is 11+ spell level. A Ga-Onna's spells use Charisma as the primary casting attribute.

At will: charm person, minor illusion

#### STATISTICS

**Str** 12, **Dex** 14, **Con** 10, **Int** 12, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 13  
**Base Atk** +3; **CMB** +4; **CMD** 16

**Feats** Spell Focus (illusion)  
**Skills** Heal +4

#### Languages Common

**SQ** Monstrous Humanoid Traits

#### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Illusionary Appearance.** (See D&D)

**Sex:** Male **Race:** Ga-Onna **Level:** 1  
**Life Points:** 90 **Class:** Wizard

**STR:** 7 **DEX:** 10 **AGI:** 6 **CON:** 6 **POW:** 11  
**INT:** 10 **WP:** 10 **PER:** 7  
**PhR:** 40 **MR:** 55 **PsR:** 50 **VR:** 40 **DR:** 40

**Initiative:** 65 Natural **Attack Ability:** 15 Claw  
**Defense Ability:** 15 Claw **Damage:** 45 [Cut] Claw

**Wear Armor:** 5 **AT:** Natural  
Cut 3 Imp 3 Thr 3 Heat 3 Ele 3 Cold 3 Ene 3

**Essential Abilities:** The Gift, Superhuman Physical  
Stats, Superhuman Spiritual Stats.

**Powers:** Natural Weapons.

**Magic Projection:** 70 **Magic Accumulation:** 30

**Magic Level:** Essence 40 / Umbra 40 **Zeon:** 950

**Size:** 13 (Medium) **Regeneration:** 1  
**Movement Value:** 6 **Fatigue:** 6

**Perception:** Notice 20 Search 20

**Intellectual:** Occult 80 **M. Appraisal** 80  
**Social:** Intimidate 40

#### Illusionary Appearance. (See D&D)

~ a creature must take an action to visually inspect the illusion and succeed on a Notice check of 280 or a Search of 180 to discern that the Ga-onna is disguised. The creature can also see through the illusion with a Magic Resistance check of 280.



## Gem Guardian



**Large construct, unaligned**  
**Armor Class:** 17 (natural armor)  
**Hit Points:** 168 (16d10 + 80)    **Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 22 (+6), **Dex** 8 (-1), **Con** 20 (+5), **Int** 3 (-4),  
**Wis** 10 (+0), **Cha** 1 (-5)

**Damage Immunities:**  
 poison, psychic, bludgeoning, piercing and  
 slashing damage from nonmagical weapons

**Condition Immunities:**  
 charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed,  
 petrified, poisoned

**Senses:** truesight 90 ft. passive Perception 10  
**Languages:** understands the languages of its  
 creator but can't speak

**Challenge:** 10 (5900 XP)

### Hoard Guardian.

The gem guardian automatically passes any Perception check made to notice an attempt to steal from its designated hoard by a creature it can see.

#### Immutable Form.

The Gem Guardian is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

#### Magic Resistance.

The Gem Guardian has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

#### Magic Weapons.

The Gem Guardian's weapon attacks are magical.

### Actions

#### Multiattack.

The Gem Guardian makes two slam attacks.

#### Slam.

#### Melee

Weapon Attack: +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 19 (3d8+6) bludgeoning damage.



**CR** 10    **XP** 9600    **Unaligned Large Construct**  
**Init** -1;  
**Senses** Low-Light Vision, True Seeing; Perception +0

### DEFENSE

**AC** 22, touch 8,  
 flat-footed 22 (-1 size, -1 Dex, +14 natural)  
**HP** 113 (15d10+30)  
**Fort** +5, **Ref** +4, **Will** +5

**Immune** ability damage, ability drain, death effects, death from massive damage, disease, energy drain, exhaustion, fatigue, magic, mind-affecting effects, necromancy, nonlethal damage, paralysis, polymorph, poison, sleep, stunning

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 40 ft.  
**Melee** slam +20 (2d10+6)  
**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.

### STATISTICS

**Str** 22, **Dex** 8, **Con** 0, **Int** 0, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 1  
**Base Atk** +15; **CMB** +22; **CMD** 31

**SQ** Construct Traits, Hoard Guardian, Immutable Form, Magic Resistance, Magic Weapons

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

#### Hoard Guardian.

The gem guardian automatically passes any Perception check made to notice an attempt to steal from its designated hoard by a creature it can see.

#### Immutable Form.

The Gem Guardian is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

#### Magic Resistance.

The Gem Guardian gains a +2 bonus on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

#### Magic Weapons.

The Gem Guardian's weapon attacks are magical.



**Sex:** Male    **Race:** Construct    **Level:** 5  
**Life Points:** 4600    **Class:** Weaponsmaster

**STR:** 13    **DEX:** 9    **AGI:** 9    **CON:** 12    **POW:** 6  
**INT:** 6    **WP:** 5    **PER:** 10  
**PhR:** 70    **MR:** 75    **PsR:** 50    **VR:** 70    **DR:** 70

**Initiative:** 65 Natural    **Attack Ability:** 160 Swipe  
**Defense Ability:** Damage Resistance  
**Damage:** 125 (Imp) Swipe

**Wear Armor:** 75    **AT:** Natural  
 Cut 6 Imp 6 Thr 6 Heat 6 Ele 6 Cold 6 Ene 6

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats, Superhuman Spiritual Stats, Physical Exemption, Psychological Immunity, Immune to Pain, Danger Sense, Inhumanity.

**Powers:** Natural Weapons, Damage Energy, Damage Barrier 100, Magic Immunity 80, Increased Mystic resistance+20, Radial Vision, See the Supernatural, Eyes of Truth, Forceful Impact.

**Size:** 25 (Huge)    **Regeneration:** 0  
**Movement Value:** 10    **Fatigue:** Tireless

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Jump 80  
**Vigor:** Feats of Str. 140

**Perception:** Notice 120 Search 80 Track 80  
**Intellectual:** Memorize 80 Occult 80  
 M. Appraisal 80

### Hoard Guardian.

The Gem Guardian automatically passes any Perception check made to notice an attempt to steal from its designated hoard by a creature it can see.

#### Immutable Form.

The Gem Guardian is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

#### Magic Resistance.

The Gem Guardian has a +20 bonus to all Magic Resistance checks.

#### Magic Weapons.

The Gem Guardian's natural weapon attacks damage energy.

## Perpetual Pinions

### Perpetual Pinions

Weapon (longbow), legendary (requires attunement)

This bow can attune to up to three individuals. Any individual attuned to it has the image of a phoenix feather magically branded on their wrists, suffers no ill effects of old age, is immune to being magically aged, and cannot die of old age. If a fourth individual should attune to the weapon, the one who has been attuned the longest bursts into flames and burns to ashes, dying instantly.

You gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this magic weapon.

When you make a ranged attack roll with this weapon, you may can speak a command word to ignite the arrow. If the attack hits, it deals an extra 6d6 fire damage. Otherwise, the arrow explodes in a 10 ft sphere of phantasmal flame centered on the target's space. Each hostile creature in the area must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 3d6 fire damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one. The fire spreads around corners and ignites flammable objects in the area that aren't being worn or carried.

### Perpetual Pinions (+5 longbow)

Any individual who wields this bow has the image of a phoenix feather magically branded on their wrists, suffers no ill effects of old age, is immune to being magically aged, and cannot die of old age. However, the bow only allows for three such individuals to be alive and receive this benefit. If a fourth individual should wield this weapon, the one who wielded it longest ago bursts into flames and burns to ashes, dying instantly.

When you take an attack action with this weapon, you may can speak a command word to ignite the arrow. If the attack hits, it deals an extra 6d6 fire damage. Otherwise, the arrow explodes in a 10 ft sphere of phantasmal flame centered on the target's space. Each hostile creature in the area must make a DC 15 Reflex saving throw, taking 3d6 fire damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one. The fire spreads around corners and ignites flammable objects in the area that aren't being worn or carried.

### Perpetual Pinions (+20 longbow)

Any individual who wields this bow has the image of a phoenix feather magically branded on their wrists, suffers no ill effects of old age, is immune to being magically aged, and cannot die of old age. However, the bow only allows for three such individuals to be alive and receive this benefit. If a fourth individual should wield this weapon, the one who wielded it longest ago bursts into flames and burns to ashes, dying instantly.

When the wielder of Perpetual Pinions takes an attack action with this weapon, he may speak a command word to ignite the arrow, increasing its base damage by 30 points. The arrow can also be used to create a 10 ft sphere explosion of phantasmal flame equivalent to a base Fire Mine that only damage hostile enemies. The fire spreads around corners and ignites flammable objects in the area that aren't being worn or carried.





## Graveyard Sky

Weapon (greatsword), legendary (requires attunement by a creature of non-evil alignment)

This greatsword forged of blackened iron, onyx, and bone refuses to take a polish, and is so apparently evil in its design that its nature is no surprise.

The sword seeks out the pure-hearted, preying on their pride as it offers power to further their ambitions or a challenge to prove their goodness. No evil creature will find use out of this weapon, as it will reject them as masters. If the blade rejects you, you make ability checks, attack rolls, and saving throws at disadvantage for 24 hours.

You gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this magic weapon. It has the following additional properties.

### Promises of Power.

When you commit an evil deed that furthers your goals, Graveyard Sky grants you advantage on attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks for 24 hours as long as you keep the blade in hand.

Once the sword is awakened, as below, it will only grant this bonus once per week.

### Awakening.

When you first use it to reduce an innocent humanoid to 0 hit points, the sword raises that humanoid as a zombie, then enters its awakened state, which lasts until the weapon is no longer attuned.

While Graveyard Sky is awakened, its bonus to attack and damage rolls becomes +3, and it deals an extra 2d6 necrotic damage on a hit.

### Sentience.

Graveyard Sky is a sentient chaotic evil weapon with an Intelligence of 14, a Wisdom of 10, and a Charisma of 20. It has hearing and darkvision out to 60 feet.

The weapon can speak, read, and understand Common, and can communicate with its wielder telepathically. While you are attuned to it, Graveyard Sky also understands every language you know.

### Personality.

Graveyard Sky speaks in an enticing, goading manner, ever urging its wielder with promises that their acts will result in greatness.

The sword's purpose is to corrupt the good-hearted by preying on their ambitions, pushing its wielder to commit heinous deeds in the pursuit of their goals, while the sword itself thrives on the chaos and suffering created. Conflict arises if the wielder refuses to commit evil or chaotic acts suggested by the sword.

Eventually, once its wielder has become thoroughly corrupt, the sword abandons them, leaving them to survive against whatever enemies their ambitions have forged, while the blade seeks a new wielder to entice.

## Graveyard Sky

(+3 cold iron greatsword, intelligent)

This greatsword forged of blackened iron, onyx, and bone refuses to take a polish, and is so apparently evil in its design that its nature is no surprise.

The sword seeks out the pure-hearted, preying on their pride as it offers power to further their ambitions or a challenge to prove their goodness. No evil creature will find use out of this weapon, as it will reject them as masters. If the blade rejects you, you must reroll all ability checks, attack rolls, and saving throws and keep the lower roll for the next 24 hours.

It has the following additional properties.

### Promises of Power.

When you commit an evil deed that furthers your goals, Graveyard Sky grants you advantage on attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks for 24 hours as long as you keep the blade in hand. Once the sword is awakened, as below, it will only grant this bonus once per week.

### Awakening.

When you first use it to reduce an innocent humanoid to 0 hit points, the sword raises that humanoid as a zombie, then enters its awakened state, which lasts until the weapon abandons its wielder (see below).

While Graveyard Sky is awakened, its enhancement bonus becomes +5, and it gains the unholy ability.

### Sentience.

Graveyard Sky is a sentient chaotic evil weapon with an Intelligence of 14, a Wisdom of 10, and a Charisma of 20. It has hearing and darkvision out to 60 feet.

The weapon can speak, read, and understand Common, and can communicate with its wielder telepathically. Graveyard Sky also understands every language known by its wielder.

### Personality.

Graveyard Sky speaks in an enticing, goading manner, ever urging its wielder with promises that their acts will result in greatness.

The sword's purpose is to corrupt the good-hearted by preying on their ambitions, pushing its wielder to commit heinous deeds in the pursuit of their goals, while the sword itself thrives on the chaos and suffering created. Conflict arises if the wielder refuses to commit evil or chaotic acts suggested by the sword.

Eventually, once its wielder has become thoroughly corrupt, the sword abandons them, leaving them to survive against whatever enemies their ambitions have forged, while the blade seeks a new wielder to entice.

## Graveyard Sky (+10 cold iron greatsword)

This greatsword forged of blackened iron, onyx, and bone refuses to take a polish, and is so apparently evil in its design that its nature is no surprise.

The sword seeks out the pure-hearted, preying on their pride as it offers power to further their ambitions or a challenge to prove their goodness. No evil creature will find use out of this weapon, as it will reject them as masters. If the blade rejects a wielder, they apply a -20 to all attack and defense rolls and can not achieve open rolls when using it.

It has the following additional properties.

### Promises of Power.

When its wielder commits an evil deed that furthers their goals, Graveyard Sky grants them a +10 All Action Bonus for 24 hours as long as the blade is kept in hand.

Once the sword is awakened, as below, it will only grant this bonus once per week.

### Awakening.

When Graveyard Sky's wielder first uses it to kill an innocent humanoid, the sword raises that humanoid as a zombie, then enters its awakened state, which lasts until the weapon abandons its wielder (see below).

While Graveyard Sky is awakened, its quality bonus becomes +20, and it gains the unholy ability.

### Sentience.

Graveyard Sky is a sentient evil weapon with an Intelligence of 9. It has the equivalent of Notice 120 and darkvision out to 60 feet.

The weapon can speak, read, and understand Common, and can communicate with its wielder telepathically. Graveyard Sky also understands every language known by its wielder.

### Personality.

Graveyard Sky speaks in an enticing, goading manner, ever urging its wielder with promises that their acts will result in greatness.

The sword's purpose is to corrupt the good-hearted by preying on their ambitions, pushing its wielder to commit heinous deeds in the pursuit of their goals, while the sword itself thrives on the chaos and suffering created. Conflict arises if the wielder refuses to commit evil or chaotic acts suggested by the sword.

Eventually, once its wielder has become thoroughly corrupt, the sword abandons them, leaving them to survive against whatever enemies their ambitions have forged, while the blade seeks a new wielder to entice.









## Red Gokibito



**Small humanoid (gokibito), chaotic good (20%) or neutral evil (80%)**  
**Armor Class:** 13 (natural armor)

**Hit Points:** 9 (2d6 + 2)  
**Speed:** 30 ft.

**Str** 8 (-1), **Dex** 15 (+2), **Con** 12 (+1), **Int** 8 (-1),  
**Wis** 10 (+0), **Cha** 8 (-1)

**Skills:** Acrobatics +4

**Senses:** blindsight 30 ft. passive Perception 10

**Languages:** gokibito

**Challenge:** 1/4 (50 XP)

### Escape Expert

The gokibito can take the Disengage or Hide action as a bonus action on each of its turns.

### Pack Tactics

The gokibito has advantage on an attack roll against a creature if at least one of the gokibito's allies is within 5 feet of the creature and the ally isn't incapacitated.

### Actions

#### Shortspear.

Melee Weapon Attack: +1 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 2 (1d6-1) piercing damage.

#### Dart.

Ranged Weapon Attack: +4 to hit, range 20/60 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d4+2) piercing damage.



**CR** 1/4 **XP** 400  
 Small Monstrous Humanoid (gokibito)

**Init** +2; **Senses** Blindsight 30ft; Perception +0

### DEFENSE

**AC** 14, **touch** 13,  
**flat-footed** 12 (+1 size, +2 Dex, +1 natural)

**HP** 6 (1d10)  
**Fort** +0, **Ref** +4, **Will** +2

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee shortspear** +1 (1d4-1)

**Ranged dart** +3 (1d4+2)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 8, **Dex** 14, **Con** 10, **Int** 8, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 8  
**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** -1; **CMD** 11

**Feats** Acrobatic Steps

**Skills** Acrobatics +3

**Languages** Gokibito

**SQ** Monstrous Humanoid Traits, Blindsight 30ft



**Sex:** Male **Race:** Gokibito **Level:** 1  
**Life Points:** 120 **Class:** Acrobatic Warrior

**STR:** 6 **DEX:** 8 **AGI:** 9 **CON:** 8 **POW:** 5  
**INT:** 6 **WP:** 5 **PER:** 8

**PhR:** 40 **MR:** 30 **PsR:** 30 **VR:** 40 **DR:** 40

**Initiative:** 70 Natural / 55 Javelin / 70 Darts  
**Attack Ability:** 90 Javelin / 90 Darts

**Defense Ability:** 90 Dodge  
**Damage:** 40 [Thr] Javelin / 25 [Thr] Darts

**Wear Armor:** 5 **AT:** Natural  
 Cut 3 Imp 3 Thr 3 Heat 3 Ele 3 Cold 3 Ene 3

**Natural Abilities:** Darts, Running Shot

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats,  
 Superhuman Spiritual Stats.

**Powers:** Extrasensory Vision.

**Size:** 14 (Medium) **Regeneration:** 2

**Movement Value:** 9  
**Fatigue:** 8

**Secondary Abilities:** Athletics: Athleticism 40  
 Swim 20 Climb 20 Jump 20

**Vigor:** Feats of Str. 20

**Perception:** Notice 40 Search 20 Track 20

**Subterfuge:** Hide 20 Stealth 40

## Gokibito Hulk

**Large undead (gokibito), neutral evil**

**Armor Class:** 16 (natural armor)

**Hit Points:** 104 (11d10 + 44)

**Speed:**  
 20 ft. (40 ft. when rolling, 80 ft. rolling downhill)

**Str** 18 (+4), **Dex** 8 (-1), **Con** 18 (+4), **Int** 3 (-4),  
**Wis** 8 (-1), **Cha** 6 (-2)

**Senses:** tremorsense 60 ft. passive Perception 9

**Languages:** understands Gokibito but cannot speak  
**Challenge:** 6 (2300 XP)

### Rolling Charge.

If the gokibito hulk rolls at least 20 feet straight toward a target and then hits it with a slam attack on the same turn, the target takes an extra 11 (2d10) bludgeoning damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 15 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

### Siege Monster.

The gokibito hulk deals double damage to objects and structures.

### Actions

#### Multiattack.

The gokibito hulk makes three attacks: two with its claws and one with its mandibles.

#### Claw.

Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 8 (1d8+4) slashing damage.

#### Mandibles.

Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 13 (2d8+4) slashing damage.

#### Slam.

Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 15 (2d10+4) bludgeoning damage.

**CR** 6 **XP** 2400 **NE** Large Undead (gokibito)  
**Init** -1; **Senses** Tremorsense 60ft; Perception -1

### DEFENSE

**AC** 16, **touch** 8,  
**flat-footed** 16 (-1 size, -1 Dex, +8 natural)

**HP** 76 (11d8) **Fort** +1, **Ref** +2, **Will** +6

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft. (40 ft. when rolling, 80 ft. rolling downhill)

**Melee** 2 claws +10 (1d6+4), mandibles +5 (1d8+4),  
 slam +10 (1d10+4)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.  
**Special Attacks** Rolling Charge (slam, 2d10+8)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 18, **Dex** 8, **Con** -, **Int** -, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 6  
**Base Atk** +7; **CMB** +12; **CMD** 21

**Feats** Power Attack

**Languages** Gokibito (understands but cannot speak)

**SQ** Undead Traits

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

#### Rolling Charge (Ex)

When a Gokibito Hulk makes a charge, its slam attack deals 2d10+8 damage in addition to the normal benefits and hazards of a charge.

**Sex:** Male **Race:** Undead **Level:** 2  
**Life Points:** 1400 **Class:** Ranger

**STR:** 12 **DEX:** 8 **AGI:** 6 **CON:** 12 **POW:** 5  
**INT:** 3 **WP:** 5 **PER:** 9  
**PhR:** 55 **MR:** 35 **PsR:** 35 **VR:** 55 **DR:** 55

**Initiative:** 45 Natural  
**Attack Ability:** 105 Claw / 105 Jaws / 105 Swipe /  
 125 Rolling Charge

**Defense Ability:** Damage Resistance

**Damage:** 80 [Cut] Claw / 80 [Thr] Jaws /  
 100 [Imp] Swipe

**Wear Armor:** 20 **AT:** Natural  
 Cut 4 Imp 4 Thr 4 Heat 4 Ele 4 Cold 4 Ene 4

**Essential Abilities:** Superhuman Physical Stats,  
 Inhumanity, Physical Exemption.

**Powers:** Natural Weapons: Bite (Armor Modifier  
 AT -1), Swipe (Increased Damage +20), Claw  
 (Increase Critical +20), Superior Subterranean  
 Movement, Extrasensory Vision, Natural Charger.

**Size:** 24 (Big) **Regeneration:** 0  
**Movement Value:** 6 / 10 **Fatigue:** Tireless

**Vigor:** Feats of Str. 80 **Withstand Pain** 40  
**Perception:** Notice 140 Search 80 Track 140

### Rolling Charge.

If the gokibito hulk charges at least 20 feet straight towards a target and then hits it with a slam attack on the same turn, the creature increases its damage to 150 and creates an impact of Strength 15.



# Special Thanks

Bernard Leong Khai Hoo  
Dylan Usam 90' N' up Podcast  
Mario Meo  
Joshua Imperial  
Ian Connor  
Greg Morris  
Karamu Phoenix  
James F Briggs (Falcor)  
A D Pope  
Peter Candelario III  
Kirk Kinrade  
Tyrel Fredericks  
Joseph M. Mowrey  
Armin Kessner  
Fenric Coyne  
Sharon and Jake  
Jason Italiano  
Michael Jeremy Lee Perez  
Sylvain Bouvier  
Arganath  
Derek Morgan  
Lukas Buergi

Michael Wood  
Mario Zucco  
Michael Cavini  
Tim Crothers  
Octavio Arango  
RedFuji 6  
Dare Tomczyk  
Brent Logan Reitze  
Mike Piazza  
Bryan Reukauf  
Thomas Bagerolle  
Sal Aldana  
Maria Ariza  
Chris Kamoss  
Minh Doan  
Jenny Chen & Joe Lu  
J. Blackstock  
DKRaptor  
Bernard Gravel  
Bernd Linke  
Jason Lin  
Nathan "that Guy" Brown

Sean P Roberts  
Patricio Aguilera  
Lachlan "Raith" Conley  
Jonathan "Angelus Daera" Ambriz  
Christian John Prokop  
Yagami Chris  
Weezel  
Robert Perry  
Jonathan Chin  
Jacob "Ryoku" Walker  
Clemens  
Gilles cherrier  
Mimi Tran  
Will Halfhide  
Jean-Sébastien Tessier  
Luke "mechafox" Gieseemann  
Tyler Cail  
(0:00 konta 0:00)  
Lizne  
Kurt Blanco  
Michael Crosby  
Rhel ná DeVandé

Tyler Looney  
Joshua Hacker  
Tyler Crumline  
Andrew Jensen  
William Heyden  
Michael A H  
Matthew Ley  
Andrew McGregor  
Michael Roebing  
Jeremy Bowman  
Dan Hoffman  
Alexandra Lasne  
Delaby "Glassheart" Vincent  
J. Evans Payne  
Scott Maynard  
Paul Gibbon  
Max Mao  
Shan R Lewis  
Son Pham  
Angel "ARMR" Miranda  
Richard Skinner  
Ian M Stewart

Oliver D. Diderson III  
Fruitygum the Magnificent Witch ^^  
Louis Philippe Brito  
Lott Van Field  
David S Robinson  
Yann Larue  
Eduardo Martín Rivas  
Keith Honeyman  
Franklin Hamilton  
Dr. David Rodriguez Santiofenz o  
Michael Chessher  
Zeppo Resencruz  
Kyle Plate  
Richard Knowling  
Oli: vier Berger  
Max Alexander Standing  
Scott Mangan  
Ben Thomas  
Aclethos  
Tristan "Twitchy" Wolfe De Roches  
Nathan (Shirowolf) Grainger  
Prototype 00

Ryan S. Oshiro  
John B McCarthy  
Dominic Zucco  
Doag Barnett  
Hallows Eve (CNM)  
Rain Fraese  
Christopher R. Tannahill  
John "killedwithstyle" Andrews  
Thomas Gibbs  
Ryan Preston Fraedrich  
Christopher Mignone  
Olivier Prive  
David Colin  
Flavien Dedourge  
Preston Ward  
David Brown  
Two tails  
Neil Laird  
Nick Colombo  
Lakshman Godbole  
Michael Tataliba (Maison Otaku)  
Mike Yeh



# Special Thanks

Thomas Chi-Lun tuang  
ron beck

Frankie Mundens

Jason shuey

Mr. Dr. Str. Lt. Jr. Sn. Prof. Esq. Alan Molina III

Mow En Down

Aaron Foster

Marty chodorek

John Allen Thompson

Craig E. petko

Todd Gibal

Garin anders

James M Unick

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Frank Steenburn

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Brando Lystrup

Tyson Levi Thornton

Anthony Gascon

Elias "Hammerpriest" Perez



# Special Thanks

Jon C. Gilliam  
Paal Lukianchuk  
Lori Krell  
Jussi Myllylaoma  
Marlon Melgar  
Brian N  
Dare G.R. Lavigne  
Totenrand  
Aaron J. Schrader  
Sean Costain  
Ladtheove  
Gert-Jan van der Krogt  
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Anthony Haerermaet  
Edouard Foraz (Jean-Edou Artwork)  
Rauschmd  
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Christopher Gilbert

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Timothy Baber  
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Neil Cdes  
Steven thesen  
Stephen Kalmas  
Hélain schoongans  
David Comer  
Robert Meneal  
patrice Mermoud  
Rich Riddle



# Special Thanks

James Cross  
Vidia virtami  
Gary S Johnson  
Bend Bonds  
Yantick Widmer  
Joseph Davis  
Tyler Drenman  
Bryan Kennedy  
Thomas Pietarsky  
David Nebauer  
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Man Kit Cheung  
David Homola  
Carlos Garcia  
Robert H. Hudson Jr  
Antoine Polignone  
Slayer Requiem  
Bloody Harbinger  
Michael J



# Special Thanks

Ben Mandall  
Ian Johnston  
John Bowlin (Virtuadept)  
Andre Deffland  
Robert Baxter  
Brendon Deal  
Ftzi  
John-Michael Warkentin  
Droo Morgan  
Zylo  
Michael Arroyo  
Bryant E Stevenson  
James Alexander  
Marilyn and Adam Morgan  
Scott Godkin  
Bradley  
Jeremiah Sheret  
Mike perzel  
Vincent Quailin  
Emmanuelle Usselmann  
Jessica Jones  
George Kuwamura

Yuno  
The Gauntlet Podcast  
Chi  
Bulldozers  
Timlorde  
Noelle Pugh  
Perry Kantor  
Greg Williams  
Michael J Kruckvich  
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Leonardo Abate  
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Vincent Vanmays  
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POPOMaster  
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Anh Vu  
Masahiro Yamagishi  
Shen Hung-Yang  
Cheeko (Johnny Nguyen)  
Christopher and Megan Stoll  
Thomas Lutterman  
Aether Praecantator  
Benjamin Gardiner  
Christian Taylor





What gives you the right  
to restore life to this creature?

What gave you the right  
to try and take it in the first place?









