



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE

BY ALLEN STROUD & JULIAN GOLLOP

SNAPSHOT
GAMES



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE



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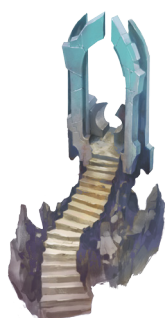
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Introduction

*Once there was the moon,
the sun,
the stars,
All gone.
Magic caused this.
Magic and wizards.
Our world cracked as we warred deep within its heart.
and awoke monsters.
The sun burned out,
The moon shattered,
Yet still we fought,
Blinded by greed,
We sought the power of gods.
and broke that which was made for us.
Now at heart of the vortex
Only Limbo remains
A last refuge for those who are not saved, but did not sin.
You are trained
And unleashed
To wield magic
To build realms
To command creatures
To battle with wizards
And plunder the realm
To save the last of us.
To rule
To become gods.
Once did order Rule,
Now Chaos Reborn!*

In these dark and fractious times, it can be difficult to find reliable sources of information about our past, our present and our future. The brethren of Stormsheim have taken great pains to prepare this document – a collection of fragmentary writing and research that holds all we can precisely verify about all such aspects of the Reborn existence we find ourselves in.

As with all things of Limbo, we offer this in trade to you exalted wizard. Our meagre existence in this place requires that we do so, for whilst we would wish all knowledge to be free, there is little else we can barter with you in exchange for our survival.

There are many voices here. Some are contradictory, with allegiances and loyalties that conflict and crackle upon the page. You must take what knowledge you can from these voices and accept that the writers might be your friend or foe. We do not presume to offer judgement upon these views, but include the insight for your learning. In time perhaps these ideologies will reconcile and our we will have peace, but that will never be achieved without understanding.

We hope you may gain understanding from what we give you.

All things exist in balance.

Stone is law and substance.

Song is life and change.

But there is a third knowledge,

A mystery known to creators.

Learned only through pain.





History

Our Earth existed alone in the void. The stars are the dust discarded throughout time, fading away into the deep.

In the first days, the world teemed with life. All manner of creatures living across land and sea.

Then came the gifted - powerful wielders of magic from all across the world, first as teachers and counsellors, then as warlords and chieftains. They called themselves Eggoroi, Tengu, Teotl, and many other things.

The First Chaos War

Amongst humanity the gifted found their muse. Men and women worshipped them and gave them new power. They used this to explore their talent, devising spells, rituals and wards to serve themselves and those loyal to them. They learned to summon and dominate all manner of strange beasts and monsters, fighting wars that threatened the existence of all things.

Within this chaos, the strongest tyrants rose to the surface and warred with one another. The world teetered on the edge of destruction. A council came together, representing powerful factions across the different lands, defeating those who opposed them. To save the world, they sealed its cracks with power, using the magic granted to them by their worshippers.

But some creatures could not forgive the gifted for their crimes and others proved too powerful to be left to roam the world. The last of these beings were locked away beneath the earth, some to sleep and others to live out their days never seeing sunlight again.

The Peace and Time of Order

In the first days after, there were fewer wars, plagues, floods and natural disasters. The gifted ruled with wisdom and justice; the greatest of them ascending to become gods. They interbred with humanity and forgot much of their past. Alchemists - humans with a sensitivity to magic - rose to prominence, refining the means of making portals and enchanted items to empower the wizards loyal to their orders.

The wars of the oldest days were forgotten and the chaos of the first times remembered only in legends and stories.

The Rise of Gods

Over time, the Gifted learned ways to transcend their mortal state and become immortal beings of pure magic. Gathering enough power to initiate this process was difficult, but the alchemists discovered an innate affinity to magic amongst humans. Powerful emotions granted slivers of magic to the Eggoroi they were directed at, so feared and loved wizards become more powerful.

The rise of religious orders across the world were the product of this discovery, as the council sought to control the means of transcendence and promote the most trusted and wise amongst them to this new enlightened state. These new beings were seen as Gods by some, or as the messengers of Gods by others. However, as the centuries passed, not all were content with these hierarchies. Young wizards, doomed to follow the rigid rules of their elders, rebelled and began to seek their own paths to enlightenment. Some succeeded, some did not.

The Schism

In the last century of the old times, a misguided ritual in Avignon broke the first of the seals on the world. Wizards rallied and strove to contain what they had done, burying the rift behind powerful wards of magic, but it was too late. A second seal broke open in the buried city of Isoloha and a third on an island in the southern ocean.



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Magic could no longer be contained by the wizards. Unwanted distortions created deformations in nature. Vicious beasts roamed the plains and unusual growths and swamps developed. The dead came back to haunt the living.

The Horsemen

Strife broke out everywhere, a second chaos war, led by rebel wizards, intent on destabilising the religious orders that had come to dominate the lands and seeking to free the creatures imprisoned in vast caverns beneath the world. War, Plague, Famine and Death, the four horseman, ravaged the lands, empowering armies intent on the end of all things.

It is said these four were talented apprentices from different orders of the world, who came together when pitted against one another in the secret schemes of gods. Each rejected their masters, opting instead to ally with the nightmares of the world.

Others tell this tale differently, and see the individuals as iconic liberators of the Earth from its oppressive masters.

A World Destroyed

The ancient council, riven with paranoia, was slow to act in response. A great purge followed; trials, inquisitions and executions. Law became unyielding judgement and chaos, an unknown freedom of contagious revolution. As nations fell and people lost hope, the magic binding the world faltered. The lands began to suffer from violent earthquakes. Suddenly it shattered, splitting into many fragments. In an instant, millions of people dead; only those protected by magic survived, cast into the void on the remnants and reliant on whatever spells had saved them.

Gradually, using the lore of portal making, the gifted were able to reunite. They found the remains of the old world, transformed into a swirling vortex. Deep within its core there lay a ruined fragment, a realm intact and undisturbed by the destructive storms that raged around it. Spells were ineffective, the magic simply sucked into the storms. The wizards named this place Limbo and from it they ventured to the fragmented realms through the portals they had built. There was no more war, but there was no peace either.



Chaos reigned above all else. Unimaginable places were filled with strange, magical creatures, released from their dungeons. Wizards fought with each other in their quest for power. They knew without power they could not survive.

Slowly the old societies reasserted themselves; the ancient orders of alchemists, who had remained loyal to the wizards during the worst of times, reformed and rebuilt parts of the ruined cities. Survivors were found in many of the fragment worlds and brought back to the new settlements.

However, they were not the only things discovered.

In the myriad of realms spiralling out beyond the vortex, all manner of creatures were found - vampires, elves, dwarves and dragons, to name but a few. All forms out of fairy tale and myth. The origins of these are uncertain; some could be the corrupted forms of mortals from the past, some imprisoned beneath the world and some created from pure magic.

Over time, wizards banded together. Temporal alliances became cabals, cabals become orders; each seeking power to shape Limbo and tame the fragmented worlds according to their own image. Each seeking the power to follow the first of their kind and become Gods.



Those Who Judge

The following testimony is an extract from the journal of an papal enforcer, tasked to track down undesirable strangers in the far reaches of the Holy Empire.

We are filled with stories of good and evil. Through example, we are taught right from wrong, punished for our sins and urged to live a righteous life that we might at its end, pass through the gates to paradise.

But the world is rarely so clear. We make choices and decide alone what makes an honest woman or an honest man. We are tested to prove our worth. We judge ourselves and always find fault.

In time, some of us are cursed to judge others.

I walked into the common room of the tavern, instinctively relaxing my guard a little, welcoming the warmth and shelter from the driving snow outside.

Heads turned towards me, appraising the stranger; taking in my worn fur cloak and the sword strapped to my right thigh. I returned each stare in turn; wrinkled and thin faces for the most part, my equal in years, but in no other way. Farmers gathered in together against the harsh winter, living off their summer gains, here and there a younger face amongst them, but no women, making me the exception.

The first approach came as I settled into an empty seat. "Don't seem right you being out here alone," said a man, speaking rough Ruthenian.

I eyed the speaker as I undid my cloak, letting him get a good look at the ringmail underneath. He had a jowly face, skin weathered by years outdoors and his back bent from the work. The last wisps of grey hair around his ears a hint of the man he might have been. I started undoing the strapped scabbard, placing it on the table. "How so, friend?" I asked in the same language.

"Well you bein'..." He stumbled over the obvious, plainly starting to realise his mistake. I held his gaze and favoured him with a thin smile.

"I like being alone."

"Right."

After that, they let me be for the most part. The tavernkeep asked my business. I gave him enough coin for bread, cheese, hot soup and a room. I kept my eyes on the food, eating to banish chill and hunger. I was half done when the door creaked and I got another reminder of cold. A man in a woollen robe stepped past me and settled onto the chair opposite. "You're not one of us," he said.

"No," I replied as I attacked the cheese with my rune etched knife.

"What brings you this far north?"

I looked at him, noting his tonsured temple and smiled. "The same that brings you, father."

Recognition lit his face, but he quickly frowned to conceal it. "When I wrote to his holiness I asked for the papal militia."

I nodded. "You did, but they sent me."

"Why? You don't look like—"

I held up a hand to interrupt him before he something he would regret. Slowly, I rolled up my sleeve, revealing the caduceus brand on my wrist; the staff and two intertwined snakes. "They sent me because my blood is more potent than yours."

After that he stayed silent and let me finish my food.

The room smelled of mould. Father Yentov sat on the bed facing away while I stripped off my armour and donned a simple shift. I could feel his discomfort and disapproval at being so close to a woman undressing, but that was the least of my worries.

"Tell me more of this God."

He cleared his throat and tried to settle himself. "It calls itself Mansa and came to us on the Sabbath from the east as the wind turned west. There is much superstition still in remote villages like this, especially in winter when the roads become arduous, so the folk here listened and believed the lies."

"How did it come here?" I asked.

"In the shape of a man of the heathen lands, dark of skin and leaning upon a great staff. The earth shook as it



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walked. I have never seen the like.”

I smiled at the submission in his voice. The damp wooden floorboards felt good under the soles of my bare feet. “What were Mansa’s demands?”

“He claimed to have stolen the Sun and would only return it if the villagers prayed to him.”

I pulled out some loose fitting leggings, slipped them on and turned to face Yentov. “And you didn’t challenge him?”

The priest flinched from my gaze. “I am but flesh and bone. How could I stand against such power?”

“You are afraid then?”

Yentov’s eyes remained on the fraying blanket. “All folk live in healthy fear of the almighty,” he said slowly. “My duty is to the flock. I prayed for aid and you came.” He looked up at me. “It is not within me to defeat demons.”

I shrugged. “Farmers huddle here in the snow. You think the words of this Mansa will take root?”

“I wouldn’t have sent a message if I didn’t.”

I leaned in close to him, holding his eye, conscious of the thin cloth between us. “Are you always a good shepherd?” I asked softly. “Keep all your vows?”

“I—I try.”

His hesitation gave him away. My old body did not stir him much, but it did stir him. A life in isolation brought with it temptation to mingle what gift he had with the ignorant blood of his charges. After all, who would know? The little miracles a priest might conjure would impress small minds. Rejection could be claimed as sin. Oaths of abstinence had less force once broken and flesh clearly tempted this man. No doubt the sons and daughters of the mud looked to Yentov. Such a learned man, odious and plainly corrupt, but without him...

“I am here only for the task,” I said. “Once it is done, I am gone. If I go find this God, there’ll be blood and you might be the only one who will come after me.”

“I understand.”

“If you leave me there and I live, things will go badly for you.”

Yentov swallowed, looking more ashamed with every moment. “Very well,” he said.

“Where can I find him?”

“The hillside woods to the north, an abandoned lodge just before the cliffs. No folk dare venture there, but they see tracks...”

Yentov left after that, wanting nothing more to do with me. I knew where he was going. I’ve met his type before. He would seek solace in his church and his sins and try to forget I existed, hoping he would never see me again, but knowing if I did not return, he would be alone against the strange god.

The shadows lengthened; the feeble winter sun unable to resist the gathering dark. A solitary candle illuminated the little room as I sent prayers to the heavens, renewing my place in the hierarchy through communion. I could feel the song of our church, a low heady thrum that echoed across land and sea; thousands upon thousands at prayer, their devotions thrilling the blood in my veins. Such power! A living, breathing thing given form by our faith.

A soft knock at the door disturbed my meditation. I glanced around, hearing a whispered voice speaking urgent unintelligible words. I rose then and lifted the latch. Outside I found a woman of twenty summers or so with a young girl at her side. Two work stained faces looking at me.

“Your pardon, may we come in?”

I nodded and stepped aside. The woman entered, ushering the child before her. Both wore tattered clothes, evidence of their tattered lives. “How can I assist you?” I asked.

“Not for me, for my daughter,” the woman said. “Will you take her?”

I stared at the little girl. Her eyes stayed on the floor, avoiding mine and her mother’s. “What are you names?” I asked.

“I am Matta,” said the woman. “This is Jina, she has the gift. Our ancestors came here from lands far to the south. I’ve hid what she can do, but there is talk and it will worsen as she grows.”

I held her eye. “I did not come here for this,” I said.

“The lord sent you,” Matta urged. “The lord sent you for her.”

“The lord sent me for other work, not to rescue children.”

She glanced away then, bunching her fists into her eyes, wiping away tears. “You cannot leave her,” she said. “If you do, she’ll be stuck here and never amount to anything.”

“Stuck here... with her mother.”

Matta sank to her knees, taking Jina’s face in her hands, lifting her gaze from the floor. “I accept this,” Matta



said. "My life is what it is. You must grant her something better."

I gazed at them both in turn, remembering a similar tearful farewell nearly fifty years before. "Hold out your hand, girl," I said.

Silently, Jina did as I asked. I picked up the candle from where I'd left it on the table. "This may hurt," I told her. It had hurt me when I'd been tested.

Jina didn't reply, but she did not withdraw her hand.

I brought the flame to her fingers and listened to her scream.

Next morning the wind had blown right through leaving a still cold quiet. I woke early and knelt to say my devotions then took up my armour and sword. The etched writing along the blade promised much, but would it be enough?

Hours before sun up and I was walking through deep snow to the woodland, following the path Yentov had sketched for me on a tattered parchment scrap.

The quiet half-light made the world seem expectant, as if it were holding its breath, an audience to my fate perhaps?

I'd drawn my weapon and held it loosely in my hand, a clear sign to any farmer folk who might be out at this hour. It would be good to be seen, to invoke their whispers, but the message needed to be right, so it would spread and be embellished as they murmured together in their mouldering tavern. *A demon came to us, the priest prayed and the lord sent forth an angel with a bright sword...* They would not mention a grey haired woman of advancing years stumbling in the cold.

This was my task. Yentov's message had gone out to the wider church. The Patriarch had consulted with his advisors and word had been passed to the caduceus monks. They in turn contacted me, Grażyna of Gdansk, a fisherman's daughter who no-one would remember, but whose blood remains potent enough to wield the faith against a stranger from the south.

Walking in the snow was hard, each step making a large hole as I picked my way through the fall. As I left the village behind, the going got harder, the deep drifts like a white marsh to wade through, but the incline of the hill helped and the thick fall gradually receded, leaving me tired, wet and cold as I stumbled on.

Halfway to the wood I found huge dead tree. It stood alone, its branches hacked away. Writing had been scratched into the black bark, whorls of different script that ran around, spiralling upwards, all over its severed limbs. The cuts were fresh; some of the words and symbols were familiar to me, others were not, but each phrase I understood spoke of power and sacrifice.

Like any god might.

The tree was a statement of intent. I knew what the villagers would make of it. Here stood a symbol marking the border between their lands and their new lord. They would bring offerings here and leave them, sharing their stories of what came in response only when they were safe and warm by their fires. If I achieved my task and bested the stranger, the tree would have to be cut and burned else they would never believe him gone.

If Mansa was truly a god then I was overmatched. Those of the blood who transcended the mortal form could appear as they wished as any creature or even watch events as an apparition. Above them lay the world's masters and further back, its creator who existed in perpetual paradise beyond our reach. The church embraced them all as saints, prophets, saviours and angels, celebrating and honouring their whims and wishes in scripture and verse. In some lands, the paths to such power were different, but here they were fixed and enforced by caduceus like me, who stood against the heathen alternatives.

As I examined the trunk, a figure emerged from the woods beyond, walking towards me. He carried a long staff, seven feet or more, but moved smoothly without its aid. I guessed this was Mansa. How could it not be? He was bare of foot and bald of head, his smooth dark skin out of place in the white cold. He wore a loose fabric shift, uncollared in the style favoured by others like him I had seen. His ochre robes were covered in Nsibidi script like the bark, but written so tight they might be just a pattern to the untrained eye. I knew better. It would be the story of his life. He stopped ten feet away. The face that regarded mine was old, winkled and solemn, not the incarnation of evil you might hear of in song.

"You are a stranger to this place," he said in halting Greek.

"As are you, Mansa," I replied in the same tongue.

He smiled at that, displaying uneven white teeth. "The people here do not seem strange to me. They fear the night and monsters as others do."

"They are not your people," I told him. "You should not be here."

His smile did not waver. "Why? This land is colder than where I have lived, but beneath the snow and ice is mud



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and rock like the lands I have known. Before I came, these people prayed to a far-away God they could not see or touch. Now they turn to me and see their reward. Which is better for them?"

"It is not for you to judge," I said.

He grunted. "I speak as I find. Ways that work are best. Long ago I taught the folk the star names to guide their way at night, to use mould for infection, to chew bark to numb pain and fever. These people fear the dark sky and burn both rot and wood. They will gain much by praying to me."

I shrugged and stepped forwards letting him know his words made no difference. "These are not your people," I repeated. "This is not your place. Their faith belongs to us."

Mansa nodded. "Ah yes, I forget your shackles and your tower to heaven. The least are told they are worthless so they might give their only gift in ignorance. Your thin priests guide them, so the fat priests may feast as they wish on their way to paradise," he snorted, "but in your tower, you are not free. The higher you climb the further you fall."

I raised my sword, so he could see the rune etched blade; symbols of faith and power to rival the story map of his life. "Go back through the portal you found," I said. "I will not ask again."

"You will follow me?"

"Of course. We want no more visitors."

He cocked his head to one side. "To go back for me is death."

"You will get no better fate here."

A flicker of his brown eyes gave away the ambush. I turned and ducked as something swished passed my ear. An arrow hit the snow, kicking up a spray of white. I murmured strange and familiar words, feeling my damp clothes and ringmail tighten with magic and closed the distance to Mansa, but he was already deep in his own chant, his staff planted. I heard the growl of something summoned and a cat twice the size of the largest dog I'd ever seen appeared in front of me, halting my advance.

I studied the animal as it studied me. Its thick shaggy mane and regal bearing came straight from heraldry. I'd never seen a lion in real life, finding them evasive when I'd visited the southern lands. This one crouched and bared its teeth, ready to spring at me if I moved further.

Such a waste.

I took a step towards it and it sprang. I dodged to the right, bringing my sword up and down, scoring a deep cut along its neck and flank. I lost my footing and fell backwards. Blood stained the snow and the lion whined in pain, its eyes large as they glared at me. I felt shame at wounding it, but then if I had not...

Stirring guttural words reminded me of the present danger. The ground stirred and I rolled quickly as dark spiky branches ripped their way out of the earth, reaching for me. This was not the old wood of the carved tree, these were magic formed, screaming the agony of growth beyond nature, compelled by their master.

Mansa.

Spiked thorns caught my ankle, dragging me back into a deadly embrace. I hefted the sword again, but it fell from my numb fingers before I could bring to bear on the bark. Limbs grew and wrapped themselves around me, pinning my arms to my sides and pulling me upright to stand before my foe.

Mansa smiled at me again, but this time the expression was strained. A dark skinned hand stroked my cheek. "So a man comes to your lands bearing gifts and you turn him away knowing his aid will bring strength and wealth to your people?"

I struggled with the living bonds, but they only tightened. I forced myself to relax, to think my way out. "Do not claim some higher purpose. You are here for your own ends." I nodded towards the animal dying in the cold. "You care nothing for your slaves, leaving them to die so far from home."

"You made this happen, not I. You held the weapon."

"Only in defence of my life."

Mansa's smile faded. "Your priest treats these people like cattle. He uses the girls as he wishes, speaking songs of guilt, faith and shame so that he might enjoy their virgin flesh."

"That is not your crime to punish," I replied.

"So you permit it then?"

"What I do about his sin is no concern of yours."

I moved my right arm behind my back to my waist, straining against the hardening tree limbs that coiled around my wrist. Brambles dug into soft flesh, but my fingers grasped the hilt of the knife at my belt and eased it from its sheath.

Mansa stared at me silently for long moments then he spoke. "It would be a waste to murder you here, but there would be benefit. The village folk would see it as a sign to turn from your church and cross."

"Others will come."

"I welcome them," Mansa pointed at the wounded lion, his eyes not leaving mine. He moved towards me until



our faces were an inch apart. "The strong survive, the weak do not."

I went for him then, my knife hand slick with blood slipping through the grip of branch and vine. The rune etched blade caught him under the ribs, its magic defeating the wards of his clothes, thrusting into his flesh, scratching his heart.

He coughed once, sank to his knees and died.

The tree that held me relaxed, turning to ash as its master faded from the world, but the lion remained, huddled around itself on the stained snow. I walked towards it, conscious of the unseen archer, but no further arrows came to trouble me. I knelt and lay a hand on the animal's broad flank, calling up the healing words I had been taught by the monks many years ago. They had saved me in the past when I'd been cold and alone, but they were not enough for this creature. I cradled its head and gazed into its eyes as it passed into another world.

Afterwards I took out flint and steel and set fire to the symbol carved tree. The damp wood needed help to burn, but eventually, burn it did. Then I dragged the corpses of the wizard and his beast to the pyre and watched the flames consume them. The stench of human flesh roasted and charred was a fitting penance to bear. My clothes dried and I brought magic to my wounds, staunching and closing the torn skin on my arms and legs.

What story would they tell of this night? I have seen tapestry and hear songs where crusaders defeat the enemies of God. The tales are told by those who survive the horrors of war and passed on from father to heir. Gradually the blood and gore fades as the foes increase in number and power. The ill of the enemy's intention grows so our deliverance by heroes of heaven and earth might echo loud through the ages. Who needs truth, when such potent stories remain? This would be a struggle of good against evil, where the sinners and heathens are punished by the righteous sword of faith.

No thought spared for a hero left with memories of pain.

By nightfall, the fire faded, leaving a black scar on the white blanket. It began to snow again; large white flakes weeping from the heavens to conceal Mansa's violent end.

I got up, retrieved my sword and made my way back to the village. I went first to the small church, a towering shadow against the darkening sky. Inside I found Yentov lighting the candles. He turned as I approached. His mouth set in a grimace then he bowed his head in shame.

"Do I need to find the bow and quiver?" I asked him.

"No," he replied softly.

I grabbed him by the hair and dragged him across the nave, into the preparation chambers and down through a wooden door into the vaults. I bid him light a candle with shaking fingers and pushed him to the floor. He went to kneel before me, but I shook my head. "No, you don't deserve a penitent's death. On your hands and knees."

He did as he was told and wept onto the stones. I drew my sword once more, raised it and brought it down upon his neck, the blade cutting flesh and bone. He screamed and gurgled his agony, but after three blows it was over.

I blew out the candle, went back up the steps and locked the door.

Silent stares greeted me at the tavern. I ignored them, went to my room, retrieved my things and headed back out into the cold.

At the door, I found Matta, the woman from before, her daughter Jina beside her with a bandaged hand. "Please," the woman begged. "You promised."

I stared at her and then at Jina. I knelt down to the child and leaned in close. "The strong survive, the weak do not," I said. Then stood up and turned away, walking alone southwards into the night.





The Current Reality

The worlds of Chaos Reborn are a shattered relic of what came before. The fragments of Earth float in the void, drawn to spin around the Vortex. Countless realms, preserved by the spewing magic, bathing each with power and causing all sorts of strange and wondrous reactions.

The Vortex

This is a spinning mana storm, flinging tendrils of power out into the ether. The temperament of the vortex is keyed to the uses of magic by wizards; a predominant use of any particular type of spell causes a reaction. On a large scale, law increases chaos and vice versa, whereas on a small scale it works the opposite way. This continual flux ensures the perpetuation of the storm.

It is the vortex which provides light in the skies of the Fractured Worlds and which surrounds Limbo, holding it apart from all things.

Many wizards quest to find access to the Vortex from outside. It is believed a wizard of sufficient skill and power could touch the vortex from the nearest fragment worlds and harness its power, raising themselves above all others.

The Fractured Worlds are in continual fluctuation between expressions of power and constructions of power. Studies show this flux affects the vortex, drawing reaction and surging from the depths of its swirling magic. If wizards were not at war, the vortex might become static and the realms become barren.

Rifts and Portals

In the first times, strange magical gateways manifested wherever they wished. These were known as rifts and were temporary in nature, providing quick travel to places unknown. The ancients found ways to encourage and 'trap' rifts within their stone arches. The first were made to expand the influence of the gifted across the known world. These served as a means of transport to co-ordinate the council's efforts during the First Chaos War.

It is claimed the manufacture of portals came directly from the work of the Philosopher and his Lycaum. The colonies and city states were interlinked with these magical gateways, but each required vast amounts of magical energy to be used. These early journeys took them into new lands and brought encounters with other gifted, resulting in conflict. Many of the new wizards saw the alchemist Nephilim as abominations and vowed to destroy them.

The division and fall of the Greek Empire after Alexander led to a loss of much knowledge. The great library of Alexandria contained a portion of the acquired lore of the Lycaum and the previous writings of the ancients, but it was not everything. The later conquest of Greece and the Mediterranean by the Romans restored order under new masters and this period was an opportunity to consolidate much of what was known. However, the great map of portals was lost and subsequent generations of alchemists struggled to record the locations of the ones they knew. In other parts of the world, other Nephilim, un beholden to the teachings of the Philosopher discovered these devices and learned their secrets for themselves. Gradually, inquiring minds refined their magical devices and used them to seek out more of the world. The last great journey of Marco Polo signified the completion of a portal web, linking all of the major orders of wizards across the globe.

Prior to the schism, both portals and rifts existed. The former are constructed passageways, the latter of unknown origin.

We know now that portals and rifts transport wizards through both space and time. Explorers journeying through such ways can find themselves replaying the same events, arriving in a realm at a particular time that might be the same time as another arrives in an alternate reality.



Cosmology

Our world has always been at the centre of the void.

From old Earth you might look into the sky. The site you would see during daytime and night time would be very different to that which we see now.

It is said that in those times a great ball of fire bestrode the heavens, bathing the lands in light. Only when this great fiery behemoth descended behind mountains did we truly see the empyrean.

In the darkness our ancestors gazed out upon the scattered dust of our world. They saw the great fragment of Luna, the distant remnants of the first war and others, countless crumbs, broken away from their mother Gaia, to fade away into the great deep.

It is said our world was made by the first gods. They were greater than those who came after and fashioned a shining bauble in the darkness. They took the younger brother of the great sun god and encased him in rock and mud, binding this prison tight with wards and sigils written into sand, water fire and air. It was their magic that prevented the unstable land from flying apart and gave the universe a special place on which life could grow.

Over time, the bindings grew weaker as the material of our world sought to fulfil its natural inclination.

The descendants of the first gods put aside their wars and used their magic to reinforce what had been made, preserving their home for a time. But their efforts were proved imperfect. Many stories tell of how they failed, blaming different orders and individuals or the heresies of horsemen.

The New Wars

The destruction of old Earth left few survivors. For years after the tumult, the vast scattering of debris amidst the magical vortex continued to annihilate anything that remained, until only the strongest wards were left.

When oblivion calmed, the boldest explorers ventured from safety in to the new worlds. Conflict erupted once more as the remnants of the old religions fought against rebels and lone adventurers, striving to rebuild their dominance.

To the gifted, this tumbling mass of fragments are rich pickings. Freed of restriction, they roam the splintered realities, forging realms for themselves by harvesting and controlling magical energies. There is an eternal war between champions of order, as they seek to restore the world to what it was, and those the enlightened who embrace change. Between both lie many fractured ideologies as wizards war for selfish and selfless gain. Indeed for all the espoused platitudes, some places are often little more than carrion and sporting grounds of wizard vultures. Preying upon the feeble patterns of the weak.

The New Skies

Gazing into the heavens from Limbo is to gaze at the seething clouds of the Vortex. As Limbo lies in the eye of this vast magical storm, it remains calm, its energies often sucked away into the boiling clouds.

This pulsing sky provides illumination for the peoples living on this remnant of old Earth. The hues are a reflection of the manipulations of magical energies both outside and inside the continuous storms. Colours bleed and swirl into one another, an evolving, eternal and deadly mosaic, holding Limbo in its centre. There is no true day or night in Limbo. Light and dark are part of the process. Illumination waxes and wanes with no apparent motivation.

On rare days the sky clears. Then the lorewise are to be found aiming their great glasses into the heavens, to map the position of Fractured Worlds around us. The monks of Stormsheim and the sages of Koryo have constructed vast maps of the sky and in these moments, much arguing ensues as they strive to update the true positions of the realms in the empyrean.



The Cabalist's Journal

You believe we are evil?

How can you who claim to be so pure know what evil is?

Let me describe to you how truly evil we have become.

The fight for the city in the north of the realm was fierce and intense. Initially we were outnumbered. Yet the power that we had summoned forth from the citadel was at our backs, and the combined might of the Conclave could not stand against us.

We were subtle at first. Agents of our darkness, vampires and mortals infiltrated the populace. They made contact with sympathisers who remained. With whispered promises of power, and rites of initiation, they turned these fools to our cause.

Once our ground was sure within, we began the assault without.

Under the cover of the night, darkness, the true light of our kind, we marched. We paid some caution in our travels, yet in reality we guessed the more adept of the gifted, our former brethren would sense our arrival, much as they had sensed the breaching of the barrier some weeks earlier.

Finally we arrived to finish what we had begun.

The next morning the evidence of our intent appeared in the sky as a sign of doom. For the first day of many to come, the vortex churned in response to the magic we brought to bear. As our enemy stepped forth, so they despaired at the extent of our power.

All through that day we waited.

At nightfall, we began. The velvet cloak became a breeding ground for our hatred and resentment. In that night passion and corruption found voice in slaughter. Our army was small, yet with every foe falling from their walls so, our numbers multiplied.

Such is the art of necromancy and raising the dead.

In the deepest black, I strode amongst our newly raised corpses, along with two of the vampires of our dark host held in check only by the chains of my will. They dragged a soldier who we had captured, and now guided us to the location that would seal our victory over this entire realm.

The graveyard.

I cannot describe my anticipation at the chance to use my magic. We crossed street after burning street, the night lit by sheets of flame, and disturbed by the screams of the desperate and dying.

Sweet music.

Yet our darkness remained impenetrable, opaque blackness. I guided my lumbering horde of the dead into the resting-place of others, my intentions were to defile, and I did not intent to be disappointed.

In a short time we arrived at the entrance to the burial chambers. The wards of sealing were potent, yet old, and easily passed; our entry way to the tombs was quickly cleared.

We descended.

Below ground, the sounds of the massacre above seemed muted and distant. I sensed the ancient magic that slumbered here, old and ineffective to my passage. They screamed at the aberration of my very existence and at the circle of power I brought with me.

Death.

At the centre of the chamber, the vampires who accompanied me dragged our prisoner onto a pure alabaster marble slab that might have been fashioned for the purpose it would now serve. As I crossed to join them I sent a crowd of the dead to several diverse tombs around the walls. My new servants might require assistance after I disturbed their sleep.

I drew my long ceremonial knife.

One swift stroke of precision from me, and a wide swathe of blood burst forth from the neck of our pitiful captive, poor fool. It spattered upon the marble, red staining white, staining purity.

I watched the face of my victim, witnessed his eyes dull into senselessness. Gouts of life welled from his jugular vein, to be greedily drunk by my vampire servants. The image was obscured from me as the drinkers descended to feed, but it was enough, I felt the ebbing force of his life fade amid a cacophony of pain,



fading in focus, becoming a smear of anguish as the numbness of oblivion severed the ties of his spirit.

I began my magic.

The chant was tremulous and slow, fragile. It served merely as a vehicle for the power I sought. With its first tendrils, I seized hold of the tattered fleeing fragments of his soul and bent them to my will. Even in death, this fool would not escape my demands, he would serve me as my messenger to the new servants I would raise. Saturated in magic, his immortal soul no longer mattered, chained in the fetters of my spell.

Satisfied, I sent him to do my bidding.

Yet we were disturbed. I sensed the desperate attempts of the intruders to thwart us. Amongst them, a wizard. The fire of his gift attempting to rouse answer from the latent energies within the burial chambers. Around him, soldiers from the garrison bristled to ward him, and prevent assault.

They had no concept of how complete my mastery of this place. With a flick of my will, the cadavers shambled to attack. They outnumbered the enemy three to one, but mindless dead faced professionals. At my whispered command, the vampires abandoned their feeding and joined them. Their blood-enhanced frenzy broke down the concerted defence and forced the soldiers to fight simply for their lives.

I caught a glimpse of my servant; the inky black stain of power speeding to the nearest resting place and spreading its shadow across the purity of the biers. In a blink of an eye the creation enveloped its victim, dark ichor seeped between minute cracks in the marble, absorbed within, then spewed forth crossing the room to a second tomb, beginning the process again. The first seemed somehow subdued, pure white had become grey and dull, strength in light, now seemed brittle by wear and dulled reflection.

Upon the stair entrance to the chambers, the wizard prepared to defend himself. Gouts of magical flame sprang from his fingertips to immolate the first, but the spell drained him, and it was all he could do to ward off the rabid charge of the second. In front, the remaining soldiers struggled to hold their position on the stairs, cutting down their mindless foes. The fools gained ground upon me and their wizard sensed the danger of mounting power.

The shadow spread to a third tomb, then a fourth, creeping about the entire hall. I felt the growing restlessness of the dead, as my creature disturbed their rest. Tomb after tomb he visited, pulling at the invisible chains that bound their souls to their bodies, weaving them into the fetters I had leashed about his own soul, creating a tangible web of magic.

The second vampire turned his attention to the soldiers; such valiant defence would not stand against the blood frenzy. Swords, cut and stabbed, yet still he bit, clawed and maimed. Ahead, the other vampire consumed by flames fought as well, and the wizard was forced to burn him to ash. Such an expenditure of power cost him, in terms of both physical strength and self-recrimination and made me smile. I have long since stopped caring for my creatures.

I concentrated and sent a clarion call to the seething sky. My magic, paled in comparison to the vortex. A part of myself sped as an arrow towards it, and sensed it answer.

With power of its own.

I became a conduit - a vessel channelling the darkness. Hungry magic coursed through me. Its power seared and unmade my flesh. There was pain, and the seductive call of death, yet to accept rest would deny the completion of my task and my will held me to my purpose, as did the will of he who would wish it.

My master.

Black fire shaped into a tight cylindrical vortex. In its hunger it shattered the stone roof. I gestured and it spewed forth to each tomb and the dead answered, screaming. From the crypts about me, they stirred. The commands placed upon them were irresistible. The tombs shook, the marble cracked and they rose in the remembered pain of every individual death. To enter undeath, they must be born again through the last agony of dying.

Bereft of support, the chamber began to collapse. At the stair the great stones that framed the archway crashed to the floor. Any pretence at stopping me now was abandoned, as the feeble wizard fled for his life, with three of his soldiers, my minions at their heels, chasing them as best they could.

I was beyond such concerns. My new servants rose from their rest. One, two, ten and twenty, then more. Decomposed hands, filled with unnatural strength shattered and defiled their marble prisons. Rotten flesh emerged, corrupted slaves to the purpose I represent.

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Power poured forth through me filling them, corrupting us both. The cords of my life wavered and strained, close to breaking. My intoxicated senses burned. More awakened; forty, hundred, hundreds; the numbers went on and the desecration grew, as the magic brought answer from the lowest levels. The old dead of ancient wars arose. The ground heaved, and stone shattered. I gave myself over completely to the weave. My mind fled upon the black ebony river that drove inexorably onward.

Finally when all was complete, the flow began to ebb and my consciousness returned. I became aware of my body once more. Pain brought me back. I lay buried within the ruins. Rubble clouded my vision completely. I breathed air laden with dust and the musk of the disturbed grave. I was trapped beneath remains of the chambers I had defiled, doomed to die a slow death.

A fitting end perhaps?

Yet even as I consigned myself to this, so my master remembered me and gave me another chance to serve him. I made out sounds of movement. Broken stones shifted and a faint light shone from above. I sensed magic at work, a strong spell of the earth. I heard fractions of voices chanting.

They tell me that I was unconscious when I was found, my mortal form so badly rent, they thought I might not live, though this gave them little concern. Rest and spellcraft renewed me, and rebuilt what there was left. I was borne away to be tended to and missed the end.

I am told the battle was a slaughter. A few of the people escaped to the harbour and the coastline, but they would be hunted down. Of the wizard I saw, nothing was known.

As for me, it was said that the citadel knew of my work and approved.

Despite my explanations you still will not accept us? You who claim righteousness cannot contemplate pure intoxication. There is no understanding until you have been amongst us, and tasted the darkness we offer. I am greater now, stronger than even then, for I have learnt from such power's use.

The only means by which you can learn is to do so as well.





Theology

The powers of faith and religion have in their time served to shackle, bind and constrict the possibilities of power as much as the ideologies of order have done. These believers hold such a blinkered and blind truth in their ideals, that they serve to make them possible. Each harkens back to one amongst their number who has passed into death, yet served to life and die by the ideals they follow. When expressing their power, these believers often shout the name of the one they choose to follow, naming it a God.

The belief and number of followers limit the powers of such gods. The mortals worship in ignorance and the filtered strands of power pass upwards from devotee to deity. This shared faith serves to shape and sustain all those in its hierarchy; priests, bishops, cardinals and more. The greater the magnitude of such faith, the stronger this relationship might be.

Other ways existed too. Belief through fear and myth can be just as evocative as regular ritual devotion. To become a whispered tale told to frightened children has in itself a power that can empower a wizard. This raw power is a source of harsher sustenance, as the wizard becomes influenced by the image of the ignorant.

The expressions of power gained by gifted believers depend upon their inclination and knowledge. In the days before the world's destruction, indoctrination to these hierarchies became systematic. The end for them, proved catastrophic as the old way of worship pales in comparison to the sustenance offered through manipulation of vortex energies amidst the fractured worlds.

Now those who cling to the archaic ways are left behind as we accept our new reality and explore the countless kingdoms that litter the void.

Since the earliest days when wizards discovered the empowerment of the faith of humanity they have encouraged mortals to worship them. This process has been refined over time, giving rise to the major religions of the old world.

The First Gods

A long time ago, the sky fell and the earth shook

Only Nüwa and her brother Fuxi survived.

They bit their fingers and mixed their blood with mud from the Yellow River.

And so the first mortals were made.

Some claim the world was made by one great creator who laboured day and night to build a home for her children. Others speak of the world being born from the body of a dying magus. These are but two stories. Walk amidst people in the settlements and you will find a hundred other legends about the making of old Earth.

Little lore remains about those who lived in the first time when the world was made. Many religions claim their deities as these architects, but such writing is partisan and dictated long after the facts.

If the creators exist, they are either far away or hidden amongst us, grieving for change wrought upon their world.

The Later Gods

During and after the first Chaos War, a new cadre of gifted wizards transcended their mortal forms. Over time, this practise became processional as humanity learned to worship the magical mortals who lived amongst them. These organised religions spread from nation to nation and kingdom to kingdom. Wizards who did not join the orders became its enemies.

The New Gods

After the destruction of our world, the wizards went to war over what remained. Cabalists and acolytes of the Horsemen fought the remnants of the great Conclave for control of the realms. Amidst a thousand

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conflicts, the Gods laboured. Some were ancient masters from the oldest times, returning to play their part in remaking the world, others were transcended wizards of the last days. With the change that has come to the world, all see a chance to remake reality as they wish it to be.

The Reverie

The dreams of gods, their prophecies or their visitations to the heavenly realms, the reverie has long been an acknowledged state of slumber that old and powerful wizards slip into for long periods of time.

In the great citadels of ancient cities, hundreds of wizard priests lay sleeping, to awaken with messages and portents from the eternal realm. Their descendants were bound to accept their words as truth and the fortunes of many religions waxed and waned on the word brought back from reverie.

Some believe that wizards in this slumber become incorporeal souls, journeying to the outermost realms to consult with the first Gods. Others name the reverie a delusion and disease that afflicts the weak.

Whichever explanation is true, those who return from the reverie are changed by its experience and can know things that defy explanation by any other means.





The Testimonies

The Testimony of Chaos

They call us anarchists, terrorists, wreckers and worse. Those who do cannot understand why we are what we are, how we have been forged and made through the iron fist of the privileged and slow entropic decay of all that would stifle the lives of the poorest and most unfortunate.

We followed the Horsemen and Chaos is the word given to our cause. It is not our word, it is born from fear and what we bring – a question to order and hierarchy, a question to fixed purpose, tradition and ritual. Why must things be done as they are done? What right do others have over us? Why must we accept their rule?

Throughout history we have been conditioned to submit to the dominion of others. The stories told to children praise knights, princes and kings, while casting out those who dare to question their right to lead.

With power comes responsibility. Not just the responsibility of use, but the responsibility of choice. We must be clear in how we act. For most, this means revealing the lies we tell ourselves about kindness and righteousness. The true motivation for most is their own betterment and our honesty in accepting this is another freedom, from flawed codes of ethics and morality.

Now, thanks to us, the world has changed and from this change may come a new society. Those of the blood and those beneath them are empowered to choose. We discover and explore the realms as we wish, trade, fight, take and give as we want, irrespective of obligation or prior claim.

We are as we are made and seek as we wish.

The Testimony of Nature

Without life, the universe would be an empty void. The dust of existence is potential. As it interacts with other dust, it sparks, producing the energy we call magic.

Our ancestors understood this best and, in a momentous act, forged a world from this dust. Such a place granted life the potential to grow and evolve, resulting in the miracle of Gaia that generations of us became a part of. We lived and walked amongst those made by the creation engine of our betters and intermingled with them, becoming both greater and lesser beings as we did so.

In time there were wars. As the world approached destruction, some of our kind acted to preserve it. Their artifice became known as the dooms – vast caverns beneath the land where the most dangerous expressions of magic were entombed.

This solution violated the original design of our ancestors and over time, Gaia began to collapse. The end when it came, was brought about by imbalance and constraint. Like a volcano our world erupted and boiled itself into remnants.

But from these remains comes new purpose. Gaia is not destroyed, only changed. We must adapt our ideas to her new state. The Fractured Worlds offer us the chance to remake the gardens of the past in vast multiplicity and variation. We shall bring harmony to these fragments, balancing the random spark with gentle shaping and beautiful life will return, grow and evolve once more.

The Testimony of Order

Without a grand plan everything we have been will be destroyed.

All things of worth came about through artifice. The creation of the world and the preservation of its remains were both acts of strategy and planning. There is an eternal need for order amidst the essential randomness of life, the taming and harnessing of this produces cohesion, purpose and productivity.

Without design, magic would not be our tool. It is the framework of spells, rituals and rites, the construction of items, weapons and portals that brings shape to this essential energy. Without this, the potential of existence would be wasted.

Lore finds its root in a selfless Apollonian ideal. We have always sought to understand and record our findings so that others might build upon our advances. Order and organisation brings us towards truth and the

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necessary knowledge that will make us masters of all we survey.

Order brings peace. When all know their place and function in society, what need is there to question and chafe? Contribution brings reward in all tiers of life. Hierarchies exist to control and manage such contribution, reward and productivity, yet nothing is perfect. Only through perfecting our systemisation of role and best defining the purpose of each individual, can we achieve a nirvana of civilisation.

It is such a goal that the Grand Conclave of Orders sought to bring about. It was formed to manage the imperfections of the world left to us. To bring about a deliverance for all with the blood of the gifted and indeed, all of humanity beneath us. This deliverance to a new god led society where the world's bounty would provide for all as each provided to the world, was our ideal and dream.

Now in these shattered ruins we must begin our work again. The stakes are too high to give up. The existence of life itself is dependent on us prevailing against the deluded and disorderous. We cannot allow them to distract us from forging a new purpose amidst the remnants of the old.





Word of the Gods



Arenji

"Mortal, whom do you seek?

I am Arenji. I am the wild magic that refuses to be constrained. I am free.

I am anger against tyranny; I bring life to those declared dead.

If you seek wisdom, hear me!

Before the world was broken I remade myself. A girl I was then, gifted but untaught, until T'ang Kuang-Chen taught me her path. Together we sat on high mountains and watched, and learned to let go of earthly forms. Taoism, she called it, but such archaic distinctions are long forgotten now.

There was a battle. One dynasty fought to overthrow another. It is always the way with humans, even among those who once were and now are... something else.

My father died protecting my mother. And then my mother also fell asleep. Does it shock you to hear

me speak so, of parents? Sometimes I speak these words aloud – mother, father – to see if they still have any meaning. In the dark corner of my existence I still sense them in faint hints of tender memory.

Kuang-Chen said to let them go, but I refused. What is wisdom... what is power if you cannot save those whom you love? Mortal, here is the key: the fearful will make rules to bind you, but the universe glories in the passion of the free! I saved my mother. She breathed again!

I gave everything of myself to do it. I slaughtered a thousand warriors of the Song empire. I even fought my mentor though she broke our bond. Do you yet realise the sacrifice you must make if you seek my path? Truly, you must die to be reborn! I gave all my humanity to save one life. Though the worlds are shattered now, such sacrifice still repays a thousand-fold! Are you willing? Are you ready?

I cannot tell you how to ascend to immortality. Ah, your frustration is plain, I see it. Yet, I do not know how it happened even for me. I died and was not, and then I was again, but changed, and yet was still the same.

Do you think I speak in riddles? Very well, I will speak plain. Stay here if you will and learn from me. Or leave and seek your own path. It matters not. Only do not fall prey to those who speak of light and order and beauty as if these things are theirs alone to grant, if only you crush yourself into their service! Rather, give yourself completely to your passion, your fierce love, your mad dreams, and know that there is nothing more beautiful or glorious than becoming entirely free!

I am the wild magic. I hold the keys to fearless life. I am Arenji."

Kahangriel

Harken well, mortal. For when Kahangriel the Icelord speaks, 'tis only for such as thee to tremble... or perish. Nor care I overmuch which it be.

It has been one hundred years since the other so-called gods have lain waste to this world. They quarrel as children would, each one seeking to mould existence to better suit their own ridiculous ambitions. Fools, all of them! Whatever power they wield, they have not earned it. Either they were born into it or had it fall into their laps. Never have they waded through the blood of their enemies as I have and will again.





Those weaklings know naught of what it takes to start from nothing and become the strongest of all Gods. All that I have won, I earned it with sweat and blood. For scores of years, I have raised myself over those who would lord over me. I have witnessed much folly whilst awaiting the proper moment to strike. But as surely as they refuse do my bidding then, so now shall they taste my wrath.

The time has now come to undo the devastation. The godlings must be toppled, so that a new empire of peace and prosperity is born. Since they dare challenge me, there will be but one reality: war. I will permit no heavenly despot to look down on anyone. Kahangriel alone will rule supreme over all there is.

Still, there is need for caution and strategy. Whilst others cannot match me in power, much less in wit, they do have strength in numbers. It is necessary to sap that strength ere I deal the final blow, and that requires an army of mages, or at least, a raggle-taggle assortment of mewling wizards.

For years I have been gathering weak, inept minions from all over the world. These I send into battle against the false Gods, willing fools marching to their deaths, so as to force the Gods to spend their magic energy. And for each of my lackeys that meets their doom, so does the power of my enemies dim, albeit not too much. I have been told that the last batch I sent had their heads put on spikes and that the dogs ate their headless bodies in the marketplace. But what of it? It was all those peasants were good for anyway.

You now replace those wizards, whose names I have already forgotten. Like waves crashing into rocks, you will play your own insignificant part in whittling away the enemy, until you fall and are yourself replaced. This means that although you perish, Kahangriel's ultimate victory is all but assured.

Go now. Ready your staff, prepare your spells and march against those tyrant godlings who would seek to undermine my power. Drown them in your blood!



Piali Alice

Why would you listen?

You know that I am Piali Alice, the Trickster, the Mischievous, and I carry blames by the score. A twisted immortal who takes the form of a child. Why would you trust a word I say? Yet, here you stand, and I can make only one answer: that where you see me, I once stood too.

I lived among humans for as long as nature allowed me. At first I tricked them freely, I played with them for sport. They learned, they responded, they withdrew, they ground me into a dust of doubt and nightmare and danced rituals to brush me away. They thought me only a creature distant from themselves, for there would be no human desire or joy in becoming such a thing; they could not consider that I might be one of them, trapped in the cycle I created.

Yet I did escape, for I learned of them also. Those who serve order say that all which is worthwhile comes from planning and understanding; and for all their faults, they are mostly correct. Remove these and mistrust, hate, and suffering alone remain.

Yet lovers of order will not face their truth. Plans must end and life does not. Even an immortal could not create a stratagem to last forever and live to see its course. All those who scheme, scheme for success and so beyond that end lies only failure.

Order dreams of changing the world, so that it may be wonderful once changed. But the hardest truth of all is this - when change stops, everything decays. People lose their purpose, fall to boredom and corruption and random sin. Their dream is nothing but a dream, yet it is valuable; seeking it drives them forward, creates the things they desire. When they learn their dream is a fantastic journey to emptiness they do not embrace the journey, they jump into the emptiness. For their sake, the lie must stand, but it remains a lie. And all progress, all their order, all their desire, is due to them being tricked.

And so I persist. I escaped the nightmares when I saw the truth in such dreams. A knife in the dark, a slip in the rain, a deal gone wrong; yes, I am still there, but also in a treasure discovered, a miraculous cure, a chime of joyous news. Do not confuse me with others - my acts are purposeful, not wild. Of knowledge unbal-



anced rather than absence.

Join me, for I am all that may persist. While I oppose frozen sterility, I do not favour dark death in Chaos. Distrust me if you will, for action amidst distrust is my path; or take me for truth and be enlightened. The time has now come to undo the devastation. The godlings must be toppled, so that a new world of peace and prosperity is born. Since they dare challenge me, there will be but one reality: war. No matter the cost, I will create a world where no heavenly despot looks down on anyone; a world where Kahangriel alone rules supreme over all there is.



Ariianrhod

A crowd gathered, newly arrived from Limbo. In a clearing at the edge of a lake they gathered, to hear the words of a God. Though it was night, a full moon shone brightly above them and drove the shadows away. Silvery threads glinted off the water of the lake. The water was still. Everything was still. No breeze, no sound other than the vague murmurings of the people gathered.

Priests standing before the crowd began to chant a prayer in unison: "Ariia the Foundation, shelter us from the maelstrom of Chaos. Be the bedrock of order upon which we may stand without fear, to build a better tomorrow. Ariia Shadowkiller, drive the darkness away with your perfect light. Give us the strength to seek truth, to better understand our universe and ourselves, to protect the bastions of Law that float in a

sea of madness. Ariianrhod, Our Lady of Light, Moonmaiden, dwell within us now and forever."

A figure appeared, clothed in a cloak of pure light. The moon grew brighter as she approached, and a great sense of calm silenced every mouth. No crickets chirped. No wolves howled. It seemed as though the world itself hushed itself in deference to this God.

The figure raised her hand in a gesture of benediction and spoke with her eyes closed. "Welcome, my friends. Welcome to this island of Law. My worshipers and I have labored here tirelessly since the Schism that destroyed Earth, preserving the power of order, impeding Chaos, and reaping the benefits of peace and stability."

"Many of you are humans without magical ability. If you choose to join with me, then know that your person and property will be protected by my laws. You need have no fear of thugs who come to rob your family or burn your homes."

"Some of you have great magical talents. I urge you to join the Shadowkillers of Luna, an ancient order that I revived after the Schism. The foot soldiers of Chaos always seek to impinge upon our righteous pursuits. You wizards hold the power to drive them back, expand our holdings, and restore crystalline perfection to the frenzied ether that surrounds us."

The glowing figure paused for a moment, dropping her hands to her sides. "Some of you may have already experienced the depredations of those who call themselves gods but seek only to prey upon your fears for their own gain. Know that I existed long before wizards began to use religion as a means to an end. I ascended to immortality more than four thousand years ago. I have perspective that the younger gods lack. I have never seen those who worship me as a means to gain power. Rather, I see the religion that surrounds me as my worshipers' route to transcendence."

The divine figure held her hands in the air, palms turned upward toward the heavens. "I am Ariianrhod, called Ariia Shadowkiller, and I ask for your help in re-forming our world."



Baldr

Massive, obsidian walls surround a shrine. From within come wails of the dying and groans of the dead. Armed and prayerful, a small army of the living approach to bring ruin to the damned.

Too soon and too many, a shambling horde spews through a gap in the shrine's walls. The living, however, do not retreat. Forming a phalanx of shields and setting their staves, they cry out their hope, "BALDRLUX! BALDRLUX! BALDRLUX!" And so, she comes.

A thunderous roar announces an immense, golden dragon. She swoops over the lands before them. Her breath brings a bright, burning fire which cleanses the field of undead. The soldiers cheer.

A figure flies from the shrine and lands before the dragon. Though bearing robes and staff of a wizard, spectral tentacles wafting from its head herald a god.

Without ado, this divinity of death raises its staff and strikes the dragon with a dark bolt of magic. Thus dies Baldrlux, ancient avatar of the elder god of wonder and progress.

A sneer on the dragon slayer's face quickly turns to terror as infernal heat and blinding light explodes from Baldrlux's corpse. When the living see again, only scorched earth remains. Stunned silence prevails.

Another figure descends from the clouds to the newly barren ground. He seems a man, a wizard and a god. He faces the living and says, "I am Baldr." The living fall to one knee.

Baldr commands, "Rise. Do not kneel to any god, including me."

Some express confusion.

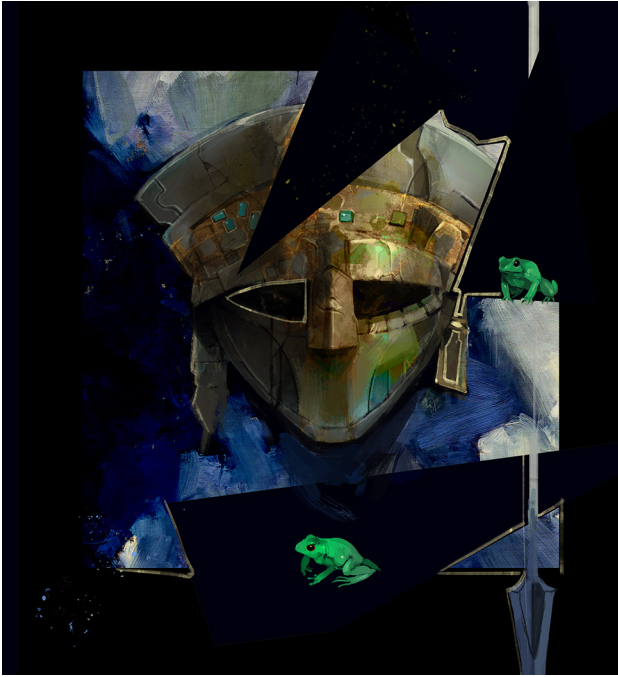
Baldr explains, "I walked the Old World before men built their first cities. Under many different names, I ruled tribes, kingdoms, and then empires. Millennia of peoples worshipped at my shrines. Legions prayed for my justice. But I was a horrible magistrate, for no mere man could gainsay my will when... not if... I acted unjustly."

Baldr holds the gaze of those who look. "Mortals are the best judges of other mortals. For death ends all of you eventually. Yes, men will make fools of themselves. But mortality tempers their judgments. There is no such temperance for the tyranny of immortal gods."

"Baldrlux sacrificed herself to help you destroy the stronghold of an immortal who sought to rule you. Do not let her death be vain. Honor her purpose. Master the arts of magic and steel that will empower you to forge new worlds. Humanity is capable of so much wonder and progress." The clouds part and reveal the Vortex. Baldr glances at it briefly. "I have seen it."

"I rose from a long sleep to find that fool gods and their chattels broke the Old World. Now, only you can right this wrong. I may teach. I may suggest. I shall not rule. Rule yourselves. And if you will it, help me destroy the gods who would replace your futures with their own."

Cheering acclaim, wizards and their vassals rise, charge past Baldr, and ransack the shrine. From this carnage, the Order of Baldrlux is born.



Stubla

Quick! Quickly!

Clarity consumes me and it is oh so rare these days. I am Stubla. Since my ascendancy, the world has become my trap; I sit within its walls, somewhere within its great maze. I am a God. I may have become so yesterday or a thousand years ago, I know not.

A million visions of what is and what could be assault my mind, appearing to me at once, screaming the truth of things in grey shadow and vivid colour alike. The future, the past, every event that did and did not happen flow through me like a stream. I am shown the correct path to take, to save myself and my followers and it is bloody.

To others I must appear as meek, a madman in a mask, afflicted with mind-altering potions. I may look chaotic to the onlooker, but there is a greater plan, if only I can explain everything to you in this precious moment.

I am Mapechu. Called to godhood in the old world

whilst in ecstatic dance, attempting to summon rain that had become a stranger to my land. At that moment, the spirit bonded with me, raising me and trapping me in eternal euphoria and gifting me with knowledge without boundary. I am doomed to know all, but I am unable to detail this knowledge to mortal or God alike.

I am not alone in my journey. My shamanistic mask became living at my ascension. An onlooker's gaze will trap its mood, freezing its features like the stone it is made of. People hear its voice in their mind, a sound like granite chipping away at flint. It understands and communicates my needs to those around me, but my prescience remains apart from it.

At some point the world burned around me and I barely noticed. The skies shattered and the earth became dust. It was a brighter future than many I have seen. I welcomed its coming and rode its inevitability like a bird rides the wind.

My followers that survive indulge in all manner of poisons in honour of my enlightened state of mind. In this way they fight my enemies and aid me in invading the realms of others, with the intent of stealing the gifted for ourselves so to swell our numbers further.

It begins to cloud again, I see what is and what could have been. Through induced enlightenment you too will see the truth of things.

Join me.



Tyrynt

Death. Our one great enemy. Make no mistake: It is not the soldier that takes the life of your comrade. It is not the disease that strikes down those you love. It is death, my friend. That ugly tradesman of souls. For without death, there exists only life and victory!

Many ages ago, to protect my people, to be the great king they deserved, I set in motion a plan to defeat that one true enemy.

Like the flower that draws the bee, the ravages of battle always brought that creature. Upon a hill overlooking a great battle, the creature sat upon his beast, waiting for his moment to collect the souls of those who had fallen. But that day, he would not live to see his due. That day, it was I who collected that creature's life.

The spoils of victory were great. His armour unlike any-



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thing made by man. A metal strong, bright, and flowing with a power beyond even the knowledge of my most gifted advisors. I ordered the armor melted and forged into new weapons. The greatest I kept for myself. The others I bestowed as gifts upon my faithful.

Through the ages we wielded the creature's power for ourselves. My kingdom grew. My people flourished. We knew no death. Only life. Only victory.

Then came the rift. The destruction of the world brought down all we had built and known. Many were lost along with the old world. Those who were not, I lead to a new home in this strange, fractured world. A home in which the power we harnessed so long ago, grew, drawing a new power from the Vortex.

As our power grew, so did our numbers. Those seeking to lord over death, rule over life, and dominate in the field of battle, found a new home among us.

Death is the great enemy, my friend. But we have defeated that enemy. My followers wield its power while others still fear it. Victory belongs to those with the power over death!



Voltalis

Denizens of Limbo, hear my words. For too long did I stand by and watch idly as those who claimed to be superior wrestled for power. Those who would claim their knowledge and judgement to be absolute as they bent and twisted the forces of chaotic and lawful magic, shaping each to their own will. It was their blind and uncontrolled greed that tipped the balance of our world. Destroying the careful balance of our home and causing it to be torn asunder. The Great Schism that ultimately ended the life you knew was the final and most heinous crime.

I say to you, join me! Have you not suffered for long enough? Do you not tire of your fate being in the hands of those who are blinded by their own self-obsession for power? It is time to rise. No longer will

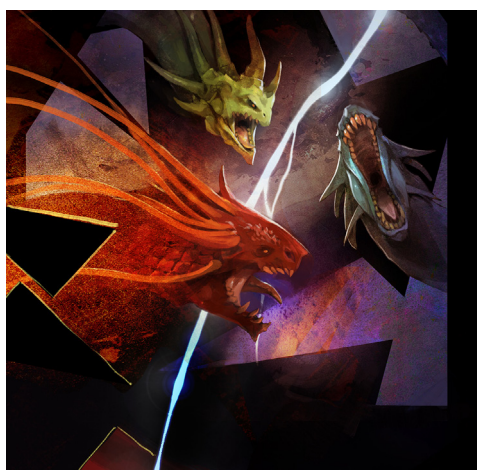
you be treated as pieces on a board, manipulated and sacrificed for the gain and amusement of others. Those who choose to stand with me do so at my side and not in my shadow.

Our old world and way of life is behind us, but let us be sure to shape a future that we control. Unite with me, Voltalis, and together we will fight to restore balance. Let us oppose all those who would seek to gain total domination. Once I was content to live amongst you as equals. I shared in your lives, your cultures; observing, learning. Now, I no longer hide in the shadows. I reveal my true form, my true power – as a God of the first times.

Just as I was once accepted as an equal of man, you shall be accepted as an equal of me. With my guidance, you will transcend, become as great as you can be.

It is time to step forward and become all that you can. It will not be an easy task. The path ahead of you is fraught with dangers and temptations. With my guiding hand and with our collective determination, we will have the power to control our own fate, our own future. To rebuild the life we once had.

I say again, join with me, Voltalis. Together we will achieve peace and serenity.



The Three

We who come before you are to be known as Three. I am the speaker known as Green. We were of the first Gods. Once we were each separate beautiful Dragons who soared above the heavens ruling in regal might. One night a still unknown entity, obscured by arcane means, procured a meeting with all of us. In that meeting we were assailed by foul magic that transformed us into this cursed visage before you.

Now we are chained, forced to share this body and take turns in its existence a mere fraction of the power we once had individually. Though we are united in finding information about our assailant and bringing them to justice.



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We come to you with a contest. My brothers and myself will compete with each other with your help in finding our weapons of power - the Sword the Bow and the Shield. They were taken from us that night we were changed. We believe finding them again would break our immortal chains and free us to once again rule the stars. If you chose to help us whatever faction that unites the three devices would be granted great power. If you chose to serve us all you would need to do is pray and say aloud, "I serve The Black." or "I serve The Green." Or, lastly "I serve The White".

Once you have chosen then you shall be contacted and enlightened.



Beamster

The skies of Limbo pulsate and swirl above the assembled crowd, as if judging the people below. The wise learned long ago to avert their glaze from the seething heavens.

A tall figure stands in front of the multitude, wearing golden armour with a sun emblem on his breastplate and a raised lion helmet on his head.

"I welcome you, wizards, wanderers and pilgrims", the man says. He glances across the crowd from left to right and I feel the warmth of his stare. "Long ago, when the natural world was still whole and alive, I travelled the across the land, acting as a guide, helping to bring order and harmony."

"But then, after the dire meddling of wizards, the great schism tore the world apart and all was lost. All that remains is eternal strife and chaos."

"Looking for answers, I sought knowledge in the great citadels of the ancient cities, where I dreamed of the old world. My soul wandered across lands of idyllic meadows and clear blue skies. I found peace and felt renewed."

"Countless years passed and I forget myself, free from disharmony behind walls of stone and iron, until one day, I had an enlightening visitation. Before me stood a majestic lion with a fiery mane. It opened its mouth and spoke thusly."

"Arise from your slumber. Your people need you. Your world needs you. Use magic unbinds magic. Reach for the vortex and the world will be renewed. The sun will be shine once more!"

The man falls silent and gazes out across the gathered crowd. Slowly he raises his hands into the air. His armour radiates with a golden glow, surround him in a haze, the sky above fades from relentless chaotic swirls into peaceful azure blue.

"I implore you all, we must stand together against the ever present corruptions of chaos and the rigid judgements of law. We must combine our might and magic in order to seek and capture the mana flux machines across the shattered realms. It is essential that we meld together this mana flux energy with our own. Only when this is done, shall we be able to access the vortex from the outside and harness its power. Then we can reverse the damage caused by the schism and repair the world, making it whole again."

"Join me, Beamster, in my crusade to restore our past, to bring back the beautiful lands and kingdoms of our ancestors, free from law and chaos, free from magic. So shall it be!"



Magic

To you the eternal judge, I commend my scribbles, whilst enduring the torture that you have condemned me to share with the lowest forms of existence. Like a Phoenix, I yearn to fly once more, and to regain the truth of my eternal birth, and yet as languish within this fragile and foolish mortal form I know I am cursed to live within its confines and limits of endurance.

From all of my investigations, I have been able to ascertain much about the inalienable truths of this world that I am condemned, and shackled to exist within.

Within this land, there is a flame that burns brighter than any mortal might see or comprehend. It burns so bright, it is black, burns so hot it is cold, and feeds from all that it touches.

That flame is the magic.

In this land there are creatures known as moths, drawn to seductive light of a candle. In many ways, I am but a moth to the magic. I am not alone in being able to see its shimmering light, yet I am alone in understanding truly what it means.

The magic burns brightly in this new reality. Not as brightly as it once did, yet bright enough to suit my purpose. Once in years long past it was much brighter, those were the days of the Elder, when the gifted understood that power was a part of them, as much a part of nature as their right to live and breathe. Yet in their marvelling of their existence, they lost sight of the possibility of their birthright and so lost much of the magic they once had.

The magic remains writhing and howling around us, yet many cannot hear its sweet screams. It is an unpredictable beast, untameable, and uncontrollable at times, yet docile and servile in others. The magic has no purpose but its own, and will accept no master, but one who would choose to share its truth, and its quest. The weaving strands twist and turn throughout existence, trailing far away into the void and beyond.

Only the gifted may wield magic. These are expressions of our purpose made form by will and gift.

Magic is everywhere. Those of the oldest blood can sense it and manipulate it. The strongest are the wielders of spells, the weakest, crafters of items and wardings. All substance contains something of this essential energy, which we call mana.

The presence of mana in all things is a cause for hope. A wizard with great knowledge and ability can manipulate and change the very fabric of existence. Wizards acquire mana naturally and can manipulate it through a variety of expressions. Such actions are exertion and equivalent to both physical and mental exercise at the same time.

Overuse of magic can drive a wizard to exhaustion. To offset this, initiates practice repeated gestures and forms, training the mind and body into patterns of expression. Artificers and alchemists forge items that can absorb mana and support the wizard in its use.

The long term effect of casting magic can vary. The sensation is ecstatic for some and the aftermath, a despair. Many powerful wizards have lost themselves in amidst this exertion, becoming hooked on the euphoria it generates. However, others exercise control and retain a sense of themselves.

Each wizard's method of using magic is different. However, there are some broad categories of expression. The most well-known are rites, spells, rituals, wards.

Rites

These are minor expressions of magic learned by repetition and used to help those with talent, but no understanding explore their gift with magic safely. Rites can do little harm.

Making a flower bloom out of season, heating water, starting a fire, all these things are ways in which a child can practice and train their mind to control the power surging through their blood. Such expressions give the young wizard a role within a family, clan or tribe.



Spells

The most common expression of magic, these frames are well known to the different scholars. In the old world, sanctioned colleges of wizards would teach these as basic principles to young initiates. Now, such things are picked up and learned where possible. Throughout time, the frames have been adapted to suit the individual, rather than trying to perfectly replicate the instruction, this is an essential interpretation for any wizard trying to master their gift.

Much lore is retained in Limbo, but only the theoretical principles can be taught owing to the proximity of the vortex and its tendency to draw away magical energy the moment it is expressed.

Many spells are learned in duels and war. One might note the way another summons a rare creature or manipulates energy and replicate such an action, tuning it to fit with a different gift.

Rituals

Elaborate ceremonies of magic that involve collaboration between wizards form the basis of a ritual. The sharing of power is the essential component.

Some mistake the planning and structure of such magic for being a restriction or a skew towards order and away from chaos. However, whilst rituals have a basic requirement of sharing power, there can be spontaneity into the ways in which they are performed.

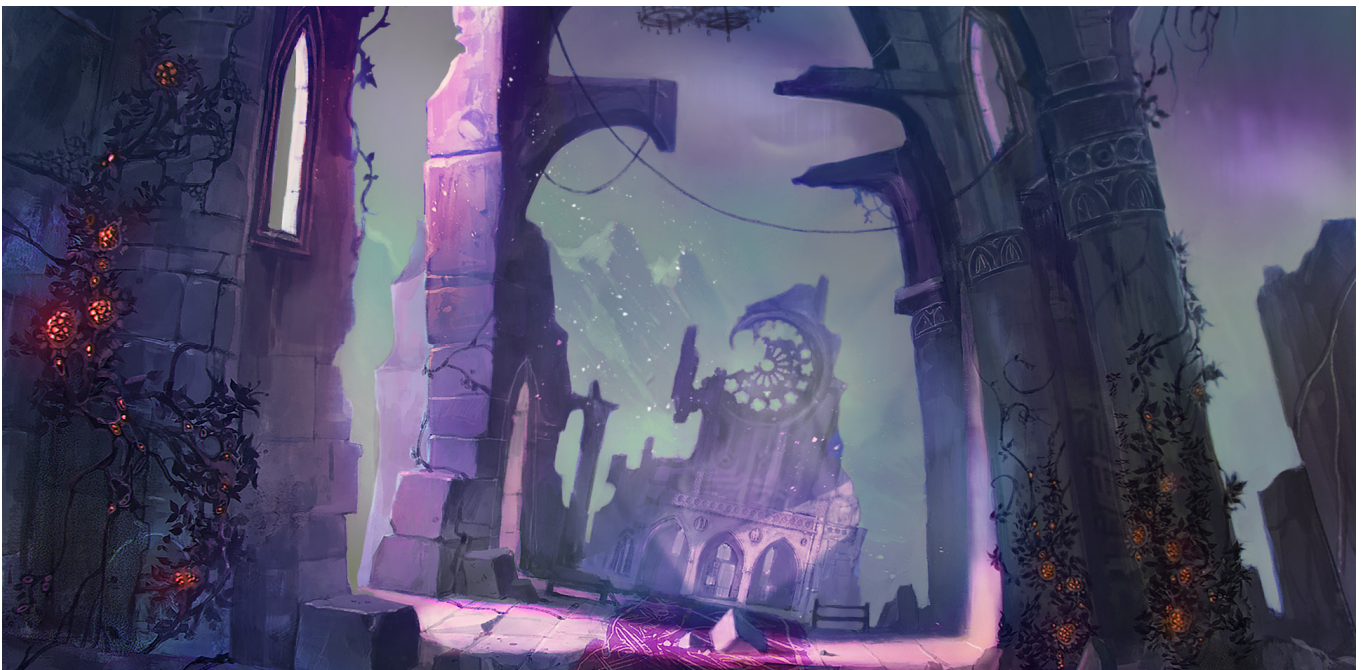
Many darker rituals involve sacrifice and torture. Emotion, faith and imagination are all expressions of magic used by the orders in the old world to empower their wizards. These themes of the past are pale shades to the seething power of the vortex, but they can be conduits to enhance the magic a wizard might invoke.

Wards

Written protections and empowerments etched onto objects, skin, stone and more, wards are usually defensive or triggered expressions, let loose by a predefined action.

The first gods understood wards best and wrote magic into the substance of the world itself. After them, the ancients used it to construct the dooms that imprisoned creatures in the days after the first chaos war. Gradually, the knowledge of ward working was lost and became less powerful until the world's destruction and the vortex appeared. Now wards lie at the heart of the great machines created to enhance and focus magic on the Fractured Worlds.

Artificers are skilled in the construction of wards. They make use of runes, sigils and other inscriptions to codify magic into prepared forms. Most are part of one of the orders of Limbo, or given patronage by a powerful wizard to work on items and armour for their personal use.





The Journal of the Gifted One



Entry 1: Memories

As I watched the light fade from my mother's eyes a rough calloused hand gripped my shoulder.

"Let her go my friend," said a voice I'd known all my life, but one that had never spoken to me. I looked up into an ancient face, one that had seen the world before Limbo, the world of our long past.

"Come," said Vyasa. I nodded, stood up and followed him through the door of our dwelling; a broken ruin of wood and stone patched together by four generations of my family. "When you rejected us, I believed it would not be the end of the story," he added. "You were destined to return, eventually."

We passed through the catacombs towards the great tower. Vyasa led, his long staff clicking as he walked, thin white robes a contrast to his leathery dark skin. As I followed, I could feel the stares from the darkness all around us, grudging respect, jealousy, murderous intent, all of these and more from the clans that survived in the remains of the old city. All they understood was selection, favouritism for our family. None of them believed I was the last.

The last of my line.

I knew what he was, what he is. Others saw only what he represented; a wizard trained in the arts of magic descending from on high to bestow its blessing on those left behind. They didn't understand how these things worked. How the gift chose its hosts, how

it chose me.

We climbed higher, away from the remnants of humanity, towards its masters and mistresses; the wizards. Vyasa moved over the broken rocks like water, his movements showing no sign of his age or weakness. "When you were branded, we claimed you," he said as he forged away. "Yours is not the fate of the weak. The caduceus claims you as one of us."

"What will happen now?" I asked.

Vyasa stopped, turned towards me and smiled, displaying gums and ruined teeth. "You will be tested," he said, "if you pass, you will be trained, then you will truly be one of us and ready to serve humanity."

I frowned. The words did not sound like they were for me. "How can we help those we leave behind?" I asked.

"By granting them a better future," Vyasa said.

I glanced back at where we'd walked from; the wreckage of the old world strewn across the land under the dark and seething broken sky of the vortex. Thousands of people existed down there, struggling to live moment to moment. "They deserve a better future," I said softly.

"Yes," said Vyasa, "and together, we will help them."



Entry 2: The Next Morning

Shadows and shapes flickered on the other side of my eyelids. I knew they were waiting for me to awaken, but I ignored the temptation, luxuriating in the soft bed given to me on my arrival, the last rebellion of humanity among its rulers.

A hand touched my shoulder, gently but firmly. Still I resisted. "You can lay here no longer," said a testy voice. Finally I opened my eyes.

The thin face that leaned over me was solemn, I found myself staring into an elderly man's grey eyes, his skin pasty white, a contrast to mine. A trembling hand seized my wrist from under the covers and turning it to reveal the caduceus brand. On seeing it, he grunted in acknowledgement. "Prepare yourself. The mistress is waiting." With that, he let me go, turned away and left me be, closing the door behind him.

The room was no brighter than it had been when I'd been brought here and told to rest. The lambent glow of the vortex from the window barely lit the stone walls and wooden floor. Candles burning in brackets at intervals and a large pile of blue rocks glowed at the end of the bed. A steaming cauldron of water and fresh clothes were left for me on the back of a chair. A plain white robe, spun from thick cloth. I picked it up, trying to feel its origin, but couldn't place it.

I stripped off my worn garments and climbed into the cauldron. Magic warmed the water; it came from etched symbols carved into the iron. I could see them all the way to the bottom, lining the whole interior of the vessel. Water this pure outside of the domain of wizards did not exist. But it was not unfamiliar to me. I remembered the experience from my first visit to a tower, more than ten turns ago.

I thought about the words spoken to me on waking. Who was the mistress? Where was Vyasa – the old mystic who'd brought me here?

I bathed slowly, enjoying the sensation as I scraped away the grime of the world below, the dirt of Limbo's tunnels and passages; all I'd ever known apart from that one brief moment when I'd been plucked away as a child, tested and given the mark. This time I would not be hurried, no matter who waited the other side of the door.

As I dressed, I looked around again, trying to memorise the details of the room, comparing it with my memory. A single tapestry hung beside the bed. The faded colours made it hard to recognise everything, but I could make out castle walls and misshapen figures climbing them from outside while soldiers fought in defence with bows, arrows, axes and swords. Above them stood a figure holding a staff, the flames from its tip, still visible.

The door creaked open again. The man peered around the door, his face set in a stern expression. "Hurry now," he said. I considered asking him about Vyasa, but held my tongue. His answers would not satisfy me. He bore no caduceus. Instead, I nodded and moved to the door. He grunted in approval and walked on.

I followed him noting the etched icon on the wall in the corridor; a strange white star on red. We turned right and went up some steps before coming to a set of doors, both engraved with the same symbol and illuminated by beds of blue glowing rock. The old man produced a key, opened a door and gestured for me to go inside.

I did.

Entry 3: The Meeting

I walked past the man, through the doors into a grand hall, the like of which I'd never seen before. Even my memories of the test did not feature a place such as this, a vast chamber, its roof vaulted and so high above me that six men might walk in this room stood on one another's shoulders. At the far end, I glimpsed another set of doors.

I gaped, my eyes roaming the expanse, trying to take it all in. Tapestries and strange symbols covered the walls and floor. Huge transparent cases lined up to my right. At first I thought they contained hulking



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guardians, but as I moved towards them, I saw the figures were statues, wearing clothes and armour, the sort worn by the people in the tapestry, but with long tubes attached to a backpack and the white star on red painted on their shoulders. Each bore signs of damage, great cracks and scars in the armoured plates. One of the helms had been smashed in half.

"My time is not infinite."

I turned towards the voice. A woman with short spiky white hair sat in the centre of the room crouched over a small square table. A second seat was empty in front of her. She gestured to it with her right hand; her left was a shrivelled misshapen thing resting on the arm of her chair. She caught me looking and smiled. "There are many dangers to leaving Limbo. If you survive long enough, you may experience them for yourself."

I sat down. Her words were strangely spoken with a flavour I had never heard before. "You've journeyed away from Limbo?"

"Of course, most wizards do." Her smile became strained, slipping into disapproval, "unless they can no longer master the portal."

I took in more of her appearance. She seemed younger than both Vyasa and the servant I'd met, but her eyes were old. Scars puckered the side of her bare neck, disappearing under an ornate blue tunic covered in writing I didn't understand. Her left leg also appeared twisted and weak. "You don't travel anymore," I said.

A thin trace of the smile returned, but no warmth came from it. "You're old for an acolyte, which is why I tolerate the impertinence."

"I apologise," I said, because it seemed the right thing to say.

She shrugged. "Why are you so old to come here? Melmoth said you already wear the brand."

"I do."

"Show it to me."

I pulled up my sleeve and did so; she glanced in its direction briefly then gestured at the table between us. "Do you play?"

I looked down, noting the different coloured squares on the table surface for the first time. As I stared, small counters appeared on the darker hatching. "What game is this?" I asked.

"It's called *Spires*," the woman said. "We teach it to new students so they might learn a valuable lesson."

"And what is that?"

"That life isn't always what it seems."

I frowned at the counters, trying to see what she meant. "I suppose you must play to understand," I said.

"Yes," the woman replied. "But you already understand life - you have lived - others have not," She leaned forwards. "Besides we're playing a different game."

"Are we?"

"Yes, there are questions you wish to ask me and in turn, I am curious about you; far more interesting than pieces on a table." She waved her hand and the counters vanished. "Ask of me then."

I chewed my lip thoughtfully. "Where is the man who brought me here?"

She smiled again. "You know his name?"

"Do you?"

"Everyone knows of Vyasa," she replied. "He wanders as he wishes, no ward or wall may contain him. His purpose was to seek you out and bring you here, so I might find potential in you. After that, he travels on, the next waif or stray to find and drag to the tower and door."

"What do you want with me then?" I asked.

The woman shook her head. "Our game has turns and it isn't yours. Why did you leave after they branded you?"

I shrugged; answering that meant little to me. "My family couldn't cope without me. I went back to them. When my mother died, I came here."

The woman nodded slowly as if I'd given her some precious lore. "I want your gift and your power," she said. "I will free the chains that bind your true nature and by doing so, make you strong. If you stumble though, I will claim you and renew myself."



"I remember stories like that," I said. "My mother once told me wizards eat the children who're brought here.."

"Perhaps some do," she replied. "Your turn now to ask a question."

I thought for a few moments, but the next inquiry was obvious. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Out there," I waved my hands. "Beyond Limbo."

"Limbo is existence waiting for something better. Some, like your mother, cannot wait long enough. Beyond are countless worlds to be discovered," the woman's eyes grew distant. "They are as different as rock and tree, but out there people don't just exist, they live." Her gaze returned to mine and she tapped the table with the index finger of her good hand. "For turns and turns, the gifted are tested and trained in the towers to be sent out through the portals into the Fractured Worlds. They discover new realms where the poor remnants of humanity might thrive. These gifted as lords return to lead others with them into new kingdoms. Each follower owes all to their wizard lord. Sometimes the price of a new life is too high."

I frowned. "Surely anything is better than being here?"

"Really?" the woman scowled at me. "People starve on the broken stones, but at least they starve free."

Would you give up that freedom for the whim of a tyrant to sate your aching belly?" She sat back. "Some would, some would not. Each of us has lines we will not cross. That is why you went back to your family, wasn't it?"

I flinched from her stare but nodded. "Yes I suppose it was."

"Good," the woman said. "Then I learn your limits." Her right hand reached out and a long stick faded in to existence in her grip. She leaned on it and hauled herself up from her seat. "Now we shall train you and see your strengths."

I rose from my chair as well. "I'm ready," I said.

The woman laughed. "I doubt it," she replied and turned away.

Entry 4: The Way of Awakening

I wake up as the bell sounds. In the first days, I could not hear its chime. I still bear the whip scars from Melmoth rousing me and doling out my punishment. Gradually though, I have learned its sound; more of a feeling than something you consciously think of. The bell stirs your blood for the day to come.

I wash in the stone bowl and dress in the robe of the acolyte. Over time, the plain white adorned with symbols that mark my progress, each confirming an achievement under the eye of the elders, each a step towards becoming one of them. But I will never truly be their equal. Always someone will know more; always something to learn.

I leave my chamber, turn left and head into the tunnels, descending into the warm depths of our domain. Humanity only sees the tower standing over them, confirming the rule of the wizards. They do not know of the vast caverns beneath the surface of Limbo that burrow into its core. Tunnels and pipes channel the heat upwards distributing it to the region around us. Without this, most of the people surviving amidst the ruins would surely die.

In times past they say that the sun warmed the lands, but between it and us lies the vortex; its seething, undulating clouds a blessing and a curse to all those born with the magic. Herein is the source of our power, but it is also the walls of our prison. Only the great door; a portal in the highest room offers a chance of escape and only those strong and learned enough in the magical arts can invoke it.

I walk further into the depths, the glowing blue rock light and memory my only guides. There are others here, as driven as I to their tasks. White robes bustle past, no-one looking or pausing. Each man and woman focused only on what they must do and where they must go.

Such is the path of the acolyte; to learn enough of magic that I might rise to the peak of this place, to face the door and escape the prison of this world.

But to reach the top, you must start from the bottom.



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I can taste the heat in the air. No human could stand these temperatures. It is in this cauldron the gift of our blood is unlocked. Here, near to the centre, where the last strains of power exist, here at the heart of Limbo.

The tunnel opens out into a cavern, the ceiling so low that I must crouch to enter. The world throbs now, pulsing in my head, hands and feet as I move. My throat is dry and the sharp stone abrades my skin as I brush against it, but this is small discomfort compared to what is to come.

Further into the shadows, crawling on my belly into the depths. Ahead I see what I seek, liquid rock; a molten flowing river, scabbed with cooling stones. I thrust my hands inside and grit my teeth against the pain.

Every day I do this, since the first day I came here, welcoming agony as I have been taught, channelling it to rouse the power in my blood. I sense it stir; a retaliatory warmth from my chest answering the challenge of the lava on my fingers.

The elders tell us this has been the way of awakening from the beginning, when the gifted walked amongst the mundane in ignorance and only learned of their power through chance. In time, those first ones found the means for others to transcend their mortality. We are taught that life as a wizard is always this; a path of transcendent change through magic, from one form, to the next, to the next and so on.

I withdraw my hands and climb out. I walk back along the passageway, retracing my steps towards my room. Once inside I undress and bathe then don fresh robes.

A second bell sounds. I leave again and turn right. This time, heading up the stairs.

Entry 5: The Library

"How did we come to live like this?"

Melmoth raised his head at my question. The old servant wore a habitually weary expression, suggesting anything I had to ask had been asked before. He was at home here amongst the tower's repository of writings. "Such an answer is not best earned through storytelling," he said. "You still have much to read."

I raised my eyes to our audience; shelf upon shelf of books, ascending far into the darkness above. Lanterns and glowstones were spread around at intervals, providing enough light to study without unintended distraction. "If I am to go through all this before I find answers, I fear I will die in here," I said.

"Some folk would consider that a privilege."

"Perhaps, but I do not think the elders brought me here for that reason."

Melmoth sighed and managed to look older, if that were possible. "There are some who say knowledge is power. They are wrong. For forty years I have come to this library every day and read its contents. In the first days, there was but one row of documents, now hundreds line these walls, but only a small number exist from before Limbo and the end of the world. I know more than you, yet you will be the one empowered to make change."

I pushed away the book I'd been reading, an account of a wizard named Torquemada on his first expedition through the portal. "My grandfather was a child before the tumult," I said. "He only spoke of his memories to help us sleep."

Melmoth smiled. "Of golden fields and sunsets no doubt? Indeed, the days before had those, but it also had war, disease, famine and death in abundance. The harsh land of Limbo has taught us the wasteful way in which we once lived. No-one wastes their lives here in strife with their peers. There is too little left to fight over and too little left to fight with."

"Do you remember it then?" I prodded gently. "Did you live in those times?"

"Does it matter?" Melmoth sniffed. "Dreams of the past are of use only when they may shape the present.

Wizards come and go from this place, learning the ways of the elders until they are ready for the door.

What knowledge they take with them to the other side determines their actions. Some return having found new worlds and seek to liberate their families and friends. Others do not return at all. Perhaps they are dead? Perhaps they do not care. What you learn in this library shapes you. You may wish to bring



back a land you know only from story and song, but it will never truly be that place, it will be of itself," he gestured at the shelves. "What you read here will mean more in that moment, when you need to make a choice."

I thought about his words for a long time after that.

Entry 6: The Feast

There are few occasions when acolytes speak to one another. We have no bond as each seeks their own path towards the great door. The elders' favour us in turn with their time and teachings, the game is deadly and punishment severe.

No acolyte may harm another or steal from another, but we are encouraged to scheme and plot. Competition is fierce, but the reward, incredible.

It is a lonely life here compared to my time with a family. Love and trust softened the hunger and tears. In the tower we wait for nothing, save companionship and kindness. These are the scraps to hunt down amidst the trials and learning.

I learned of the coming of the strangers sometime after they actually arrived. Acolytes were summoned in rotation to serve the table of the elders and after three days, I was ordered to attend.

There were four of us, stood in the corners of the dining hall dressed in our white garb. A long table lay before us, the smell of rich food, exotic and flavoursome a maddening temptation to our empty stomachs. We were left to wait for a time. Not a word was spoken between us, but we all eyed and measured each other. I had not spent so long in a room with peers and knew I was considered least amongst them, being oldest, but also the newest arrival.

I stared across from me at a girl, younger than I by some years. Our blood grants us an ageless quality in our maturity by comparison to others without gift, but she had yet to reach ripeness, being of fifteen turns or so. When I lingered too long, she returned my gaze with a spirited glare of her own and it was I who was forced to look away.

At that moment, the doors opened and laughter spilled into the hall from the corridor beyond. Two men in long ornate robes of blue and gold ambled into the room. One was blonde haired and with eyes like old sky, wearing an armoured breastplate and pauldrons similar to those I'd seen on the statues in Mistress Abraxia's private study the first time I'd met her, the other, dark of eye and bald, was slight and less martial in the way he carried himself.

"You cannot truly believe these things, Talien," the bald man scoffed. "How could such creatures survive the Schism?"

"They did and now they thrive," the wizard named Talien replied. "Wait until you taste them."

"So good of you to bring an example for us, my lord," Mistress Abraxia said as she entered after them, her limp a distinct contrast to their easy manner.

"No less worthy than my offering of Giantflesh," the bald man said.

"No indeed, Lord Sallis," Mistress Abraxia replied. She made straight for her chair, clearly pained by the effort of the stairs outside. A flick of her finger brought me out from the wall to ease it out and help her sit. As she settled, her own fingertips brushed my hand in a discreet gesture of thanks.

The two guests also took seats, leaving a fourth unoccupied. "Where is Master Kanatan?" Sallis inquired. "I had hoped to speak with him this evening."

Mistress Abraxia gave him a measuring stare. "I am as disappointed as you," she said coolly. "I doubt he would wish to miss such a meal and good company, but he has been tired of late."

Lord Sallis nodded. "I will take no offense then," he said.

"We cannot dine as only three," Talien said. His gaze strayed to the girl opposite me and his lips quirked into a leer. "Perhaps one of your attending decorations can take his place?"

Mistress Abraxia turned her quelling stare to her second guest, but Talien laughed at her. "Come, surely you cannot approve of this banquet going to waste?"

"They are not ready for the honour," Mistress Abraxia replied.



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"When we are the providers, we should judge who partakes of the feast," Talien said. He stood suddenly, his chair scraping the floor. Before anyone could stop him, he crossed the room and seized the girl's wrist. "What is your name, little flower?" he asked. "Your betters command that you answer them."

"Meris, sir."

"I am a lord. You will address me as such."

"Yes... lord."

Talien yanked her arm, dragging her towards the empty chair. My nails dug into my palms, but I dared not move. Mistress Abraxia was ignoring the spectacle, but her fingers were white as they gripped the metal goblet in front of her.

Lord Sallis was the only person to react. He also stood. "Talien you are being tiresome," he said. "What are you trying to prove?"

"Prove?" Talien released the girl who dropped into the seat. "I need prove nothing! The towers of Limbo no longer bind and shackle me. We have been here four days. I would see our visit ended and such foolish rituals cast aside." He leaned over the table and glared at Mistress Abraxia. "Your time is past and your end long overdue. Soon we will come and take what we want, whenever we want it!"

"And yet you are here and came to this table," Lord Sallis said drily. "Without the skill of the artificer from the Tower of Stars, you may be forced to remain here for many days more. Without your armour repaired you will be easy prey for any wizard you might find."

"Lord Talien," Mistress Abraxia said. "We will honour our ancient obligations to you as we have done for all wizards who come to us. You have brought us an offering and tithe. We will mend your garments and restore you to continue your journeys amidst the Fractured Worlds."

Talien scowled, but he returned to his chair. "See that you do," he said and turned his attention to the food in front of him. He picked up a long serrated knife. "Now, we are four and each of you is settled. We must begin with the offerings." He positioned the blade against a large browned animal carcass. "Lord Sallis brings Giantflesh, but I hunted something rare and ancient from the times before the schism. A lighter meat, cooked as befits its status. This creature was once a king of the skies, before dragons reclaimed their place." He flourished the knife. "I bring you an eagle!"

As he began to cut slivers from the carcass I was struck by the size of the bird; large to be sure, but one that was no comparison to defeating a giant - a creature that stomped through the pages of journals and logbooks kept on the spiralling library shelves. Yet Lord Sallis seemed to bear the gloating in good part. "The eagle is bigger than those I remember," Mistress Abraxia remarked. "Perhaps the magic has affected them? Where did you find it?"

"On a mountainous realm, close to the vortex," Talien replied. "I named it Eyrie. Others refused to travel to there, claiming it too dangerous a place."

"And was this where you suffered injury?" Sallis asked.

"Indeed it was," Talien said. "A whole flock of the creatures descended upon me and my companions, but we were potent enough to best them and bring back several delicious examples for this dinner table!"

I watched Sallis. Outwardly he seemed calm, but his manner was as coolly polite as Mistress Abraxia's. Both were nibbling at their food as they spoke, while Meris sat mute, her head bowed, staring at her empty plate. Eventually Talien noticed and sliced a chunk from the wing and dropping it in front of her with a flourish. "Come, little one. You should make the most of this rare privilege to be placed in such company!" Meris' took up the thin two-pronged fork. Her hands were shaking, but under the leering gaze of Talien she had no choice but to eat, which she did, slowly and with no pleasure. I pitied her, but could do nothing in the presence of my betters.

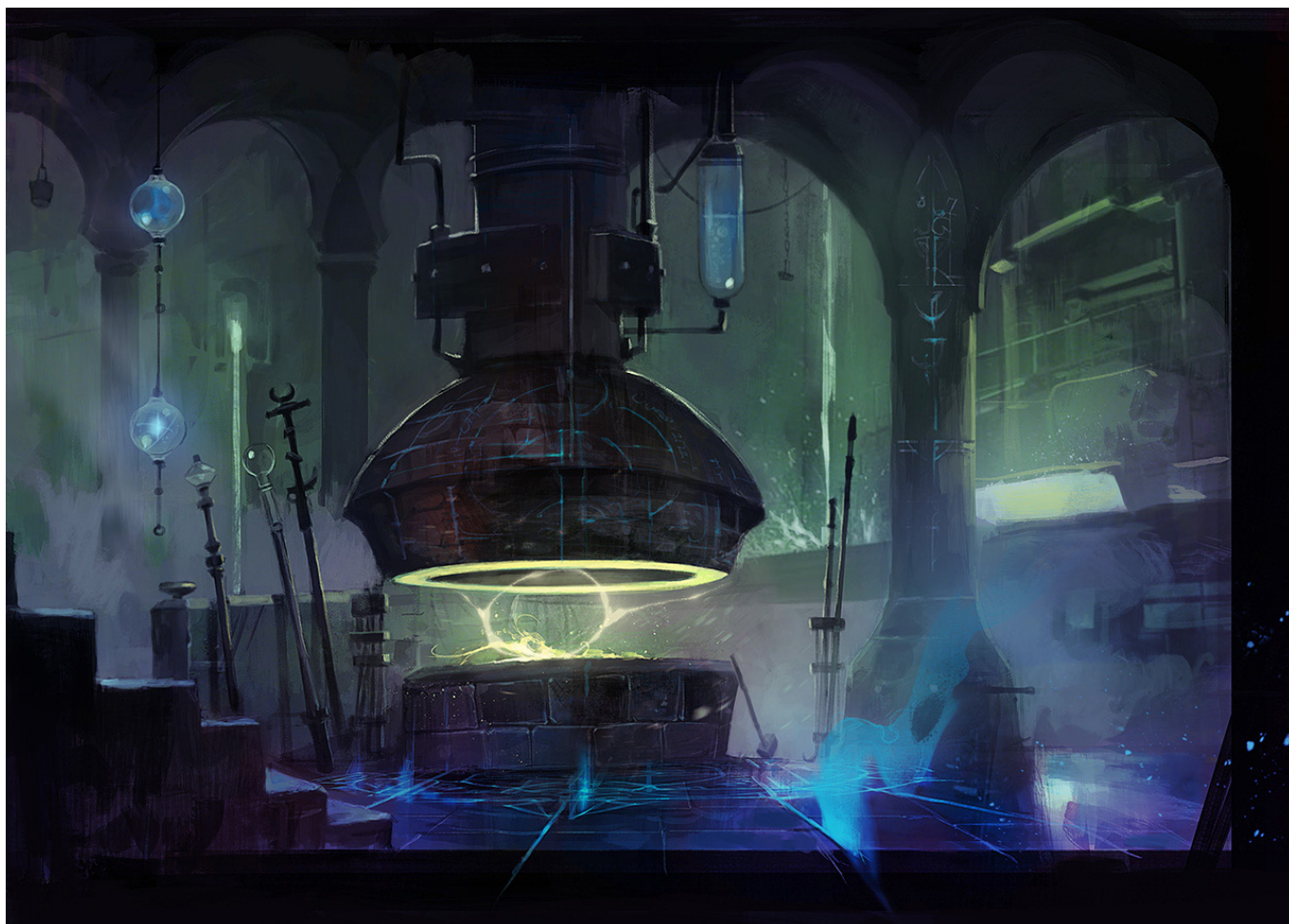
The four feasted long into the night. Prodded with questions in turn by my mistress and Sallis, Talien regaled the company with his adventures. His wine goblet remained full throughout the evening until eventually he could talk no more. I was summoned with another acolyte to help him on the stairs. My last memory of the feast was of Sallis. The bald wizard stared after us as we left. It occurred to me then not once had he mentioned how he came to bring a giant to the table.



Entry 7: The Artificer

Two days later, I went back into the tunnels beneath the tower; this time in a different direction, seeking, Ellis the artificer.

The tools of wizards are born in the dreams of craftsmen. Life on Limbo would not exist without heat ex-



change from our world's fading core, water pumped from underground streams and the machines maintaining spells that conjure food from dead soil. The artificer leads an army of apprentices, charged with the continuing function of our tower and the lands around it.

But this is not why I was sent to her workshop.

The heat in this chamber made the air thick. Broken gears and wheels line the walls, many rusted into their frames. I saw a large muscular man carrying crates; he was stripped to the waist, his bare chest and bald head gleaming through the haze.

I ignored him and pressed on. She lurked at the back of the room, head bowed, crouched over a stone table. Bright sparks illuminate her work, strong arms hammering armour back into shape.

She glanced up and frowned at me as I walked towards her. She might have been pretty once, beautiful even, but the scars, burns and callouses of her craft had tempered her. A thick mop of short lank hair covered only one side of her head, the puckered skin of the other was a barren field. "Why does Abraxia send her minion here?" she asked.

I stopped. The question might provoke another acolyte, but I understood it for what it was. "The mistress asks when the armour will be ready," I said.

Ellis grunted. "Lord Talien outstayed his welcome already?"

I shrugged. "I am only given the message."

Ellis laughed. "Of course! And what would you gain from sharing an opinion with me?" She moved away from the table and towards me. "You see the state of Talien's gift to me. His foolishness will take much work to rectify. My apprentices cannot repair damage to mana filters and inductors; they cannot rebuild power analysers and restore portal seals."



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"Yet I find you working on dents in a breastplate?"

Ellis smile disappear and she snorted. "You and your gifted peers require my people stir the fading heat of the core so you can play with your gifts. The sooner you master the magic, the sooner you can leave."

"There will always be wizards. You need us."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Ellis wiped sweat from her brow. "If you learn anything here, know it is unwise to cross those who you may one day rely on. Accept your place and your time. Those who exceed their position, always face consequences. Lord Talien's armour will be restored three days from now. No more, no less."

"Mistress Abraxia will be pleased."

"Yes she will, but I hear the realms will not. It is said our dented friend is quite the brigand. The rents in his backplate tell me he has few friends."

I remembered the look Sallis had given Talien as I'd helped him from the table. The artificer was still staring at me with a hungry expression, still hoping for some morsel to add to her gossip. I gathered myself and swallowed an indelicate reply. "I'm sure a wizard knows how to protect themselves," I said.

Ellis' smile returned. "Not always, or from everything," she said and turned away.

Entry 8: Broken Dreams

Artificer Ellis was true to her word. In three days, the armour was fixed and Lord Tallien departed.

Two days after his leaving, I found Meris lying at the bottom of a staircase in one of the tower's minarets. Her arms and legs were twisted at awkward angles and her head lay in a stain of clotted blood.

I wasn't sure how long she'd been there. The minarets are not often used. They branch from the highest reaches of the tower, far above the clouds and observation of the populace. They contain some of the order's more rarefied objects and are connected to the main building by walkways at the top and angled stairs at their base. At times, Melmoth or one of the other alchemists would lock themselves away in the minaret rooms to conduct experiments that might endanger us, if they were attempted in the laboratories. Poor Meris would have no reason to be in such a place unless sent on an errand, like me. She wore her acolyte robe, adorned with more runes and symbols than mine, testimony to her hard work and diligence. Around her I noticed broken glass and a dark powder; evidence of her given task, or something she chose to steal?

From my vantage point I could not see her expression. Her hair had come undone from its knot and obscured her face. I crept closer, until I crouched on the stair above. My hand reached out and touched hers; cold and dry, like my mother's on the last day, after...

No, don't think about that!

A spell came to my lips instinctively, before I considered using it. Up here, far from the land below, the magic seems easier, more natural and dangerous. What I would attempt I had not attempted before, but I knew how it should work.

I spoke the words and Meris' head jerked and turned towards me. Her eyes caught mine in a lifeless stare.

"What do you want of me?" she rasped in a terrifying whisper.

I clasped onto her fingers, knowing the casting needed us to remain in contact. "How did you die?" I asked.

"I fell."

"Did someone push you?"

"Yes. There were... hands..."

"Did you see who?"

"No."

I could feel the spell draining the breath from me. The strain of performing magic in Limbo is great. The vortex sucks the power from our weavings as soon as we cast them. I have read stories of wizard necromancers out in the Fractured Worlds, who force the souls of the dead back into their bodies, making them into powerful servants, but I was only an acolyte, practicing my art from within, not without. Whatever



questions I wanted to ask, would need to be asked quickly.

"Who sent you up here?"

"Mel... Melmoth."

"What were you asked to retrieve?"

Dead Meris did not answer me with words; instead a deep groan escaped her lips, her body convulsed then lay still. My heart thumped hard and my chest heaved. My gift had failed me.

I knelt over the body for some time after that, staring and thinking. This lonely fate could be what awaited me; no living creature cared if I lived or died in this grim place. All that remained was the magic and our quest to face the door.

I thought over what I'd learned in the days of study, training and obedience. The gift came easily now, but still abandoned me when I needed it. Nothing in all my acquired experience and knowledge hinted at what I should do were I to be sent to that room and be given my chance, almost as if the elders did not want to prepare me, to prepare anyone.

Those who exceed their position, always face consequences, Ellis had said.

I bent down to Meris' body once more and brushed my hand over the shards of glass, retrieving a pinch of the dark powder which I dropped into a pouch at my waist. Next I dipped a finger into the congealed blood, wiping it on a cloth which I also stored.

After that I retraced my steps and went to raise the alarm.

Entry 9: The Alchemist

Melmoth's chambers were in the main tower, three floors below the dorm cells of the acolytes. I never had reason to visit them before, but we all knew where they were.

It took me ten minutes to get there. I saw no-one on my way. When I got to the door, I knocked and heard a muffled response. I went in.

I found myself in a wide hall, different to Mistress Abraxia's rooms by the notable absence of décor; stone walls and candle brackets rather than tapestries and glowing rock. There was writing on the stonework, running in a horizontal line at shoulder height; a symbol language of shapes and cut out triangles that seemed vaguely familiar.

Through an archway in a second room Melmoth crouched over a vast wooden desk, staring at a stained parchment. The rest of the surface held the various accoutrements of his work; books, potion bottles, demijohns and a large hourglass perched at one end. His head came up and he stared at me as I approached, an eyebrow raised in silent enquiry as to my presence. He looked tired and old, a contrast to his schooled appearance when I'd first arrived.

I kept walking until I was three feet from him then stopped and spoke my news.

"I found Meris, dead."

There was silence between us. Eventually, Melmoth nodded, as if the information had taken time to register. "We should ask Master Ellis' apprentices to retrieve the body and dispose of it."

"You seem unsurprised?"

Melmoth shrugged. "I have been in this tower for decades and seen many acolytes leave through success and failure. You know the rules and the ways around them. Meris is dead, because she was shown favour by Lord Tallien and one of your kind could not accept that."

I bit my lip to prevent myself blurting out what I knew, but didn't move or look away. Melmoth returned his attention to his parchment.

"You may leave the matter with me acolyte, I will attend to the details."

I resisted the instinct to walk away and waited. After a few more moments, Melmoth raised his head again.

"Was there something else?"

I nodded. "You aren't training us."

He frowned. "Pardon?"



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"The time I have spent here, reading, listening, being told of the past and the way things are, they aren't part of a scheme to make me a wizard."

Melmoth's frown deepened. "How did you come to this conclusion?" he asked.

"If you were training us you would be focusing on the matters at hand," I explained, "teaching us about the great door, giving us experiences beyond this tower in the fractured worlds, letting us cast magic outside the pull of the vortex. This isn't a school it's another prison, like the land below us."

Melmoth leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine, nor seeming to blink. When he spoke it was with a soft voice, barely above a whisper. "In all the days of this world and the world before it, every kingdom, nation and society has been in constant threat from people like you; people with the gift; people who learned just how superior they were to those without it." He waved a hand and his voice strengthened. "We half breeds empower you, but we also remind you of what you should be. Our task is to limit you, to make you think of the cost to those who cannot do what you do."

"The first alchemists offered wizards understanding of what they are. The next offered ways to refine magic through use of devices and study. We worked with those who understood their responsibility to the rest of humanity, but we were betrayed, and... well... you know what happened."

"The schism."

"Yes, the schism and the end of days." Melmoth sat forward. "Your kind caused it and now they roam free amidst the stars while anyone else that survived is left here in the ruin of the world—" he checked himself, "well... most of those who survived... some are allowed to leave to serve their new gods and others... found a different path..."

I stepped forwards, put my hand on the desk so my face was inches from his. "What you say makes no sense. If you are keeping us here because of some ancient crime you would be ruling this tower and the elders would be your prisoners as well."

Melmoth smiled in response. "In this place we have an... accommodation. You learned that when you spoke with Ellis. Wizards need us. The elders are only here to judge your worth. When the time is right, one of you is nominated to leave; one way or the other." He picked up the piece of parchment and held it between us. "Congratulations. You have been selected for the test of the door."

I flinched and stepped back. "The door? But I know nothing—"

"As you said, we are not here to teach you. Perhaps you will succeed and next time we meet, you will be here for a harrowing." Melmoth reached across his desk for the hourglass, picked it up and turned it on its head. "When the sand runs out, your time with us is over. I suggest you ready yourself." I heard heavy footsteps and a hand grasped my shoulder. "Cross, escort the acolyte to his quarters. He has much to prepare for his imminent test. See that he is given everything he needs."

"Yes, Melmoth," said the man behind me. I turned to face the speaker. It was the artificer's apprentice who I'd seen before. Silently, I let him guide me from the room.

Entry 10: The Great Door

I sat on the bed in my cell, trying to digest what I had learned and what I had been told. In Melmoth's office, the sand would be running through the hourglass, counting down my last minutes in the tower. Whether that led to my death or not, would depend on my next few choices.

My gaze wandered the room, pausing a moment with the few possessions I'd acquired over my time. I thought about packing them up and taking them with me, but as I looked at each in turn, I realised I wouldn't miss them. Every one held a temporal value, tying me to this life, this place and these rules. It had been days since I renewed my powers. If I were to attempt the door, I might have to revisit the deep caverns and the molten rock, but the spell came to me when I discovered Meris. Was I strong enough without the ritual?

Dare I risk it?

Eventually, I found myself staring at Apprentice Cross. He had accompanied me here and now stood in the open doorway. He studiously avoided looking at me and waited in silence, leaning against the wall.



"Why are you still here?" I asked.

Cross glanced at me. "Melmoth told me to ensure you were prepared," he said. "If you choose not to face the door that means escorting you back to where you came from."

"Or pitching me out of a window?"

"If it comes to that."

I nodded and let the matter drop. My gaze went back to the faded tapestry on my wall. I stood up and reached out, moving it aside. Underneath were a set of symbols like the ones in Melmoth's chambers.

Curious.

I replaced the cloth and stared at the scene; my eyes drawn to the figure on at the top, holding the staff.

A staff?

All wizards had staffs. Yet we had never been permitted to practice with one or seen their use. *Where does a wizard get a staff from?*

I turned from the tapestry and without saying another word to Cross, walked from the room.

As I began the ascent, I saw people. Apprentices and acolytes waited at their doors, while other servants of the tower stood in hallways and passages. When people blocked my way, Cross yelled from behind me "Make way for the penitent!" and people stepped aside, bowing their heads, as if I were diseased or ennobled, I'm not sure which.

I met the eye of many acolytes who I had seen during my time. Some glared, but others nodded to me as a comrade. All refrained from touching me. This came from a superstition I read about; the purity of the ascendant. They didn't wish to risk sullyng my soul with theirs and thwart my chance with the door.

If only they knew.

I passed Mistress Abraxia's rooms. She was not outside them and the door remained shut.

Higher and higher we went, beyond familiar places into old and dusty spaces. Bereft of light, we took candles. The air grew thin, making me pant as I walked. The decoration of these chambers was sporadic and neglected. Some doors were locked, but Cross had keys and opened them for me each time, until we came to a black arch at the top of a steep set of stairs.

"This is the last passage," he told me. "I am permitted to go no further."

I turned and stared at him for long moments. "Thank you," I said at last. "Will you wait for me here?"

"There is no need," he said. "If you pass, you will not return without warning. If you fail, there will be nothing of you left to come back."

And with that he walked away down the stairs.

The final steps were difficult to manage. I knew my choice was made and my fate awaited, but that did not make the ascent easier.

On the arch, I found more of the strange symbols I had seen in Melmoth's room. They were clustered in groups with spaces between them. Occasionally, some would repeat; a written script then, something forgotten with important counsel for me, no doubt.

Something I couldn't read.

The blackened stones were wet. As I drew closer I could see they had also been scorched by fire. I reached out to touch them.

"You are wasting time."

I twitched my hand away and glanced around. Lord Sallis stood at the far end of a circular room. He wore his blue robes, armour and other devices, making him appear much larger than the person I remembered at dinner that night. In his left hand he clutched a helm with strange pipes attached to it that ran into a backpack. In his right, he held an ornately carved staff.

I bowed. "My Lord, I thought you had departed."

"Most people think that," Sallis replied and smiled. "I am content to leave them doing so." He nodded



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towards the arch. "Many acolytes have come here and tried to learn something from the writing. To my knowledge, none have deciphered its meaning. It is said no wizard, half-breed or human inscribed those symbols."

"Then who made them?" I asked.

Lord Sallis appeared to shrug inside his armour. "No one knows," he said. "But if you linger to work on them you will miss your opportunity. The paths of the great door are affected by the vortex and the worlds beyond it. Sometimes it is hard to open, sometimes easy. You will learn to sense the change. Right now, you have a good chance, but it lessens with each moment you waste."

I gazed around the room. "But I see no door."

"The arch is the door," Lord Sallis said. "Can you not feel its magic?"

I closed my eyes for a moment and reached out with my senses as I had been taught in the earliest lessons. The faint tingling sensation that came from the blackened stones confirmed the presence of an enchantment. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked Sallis.

"I cannot tell you," he replied.

I opened my eyes and stared at him. "Why are you here then?"

"To ensure the debt I owed is fulfilled."

I considered his words as they settled on top of everything else I had been told. My thoughts went back to that first day, the day of my mother's death when a hand grasped my shoulder. "Vyasa sent you," I realised aloud.

"Yes," Lord Sallis admitted.

"You killed Meris."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because she was in your way," Lord Sallis smiled. "Granted, Tallien made matters easier for me with his performance, flouting the rituals so all manner of motives might be read into the act. If the girl had not died, she would be standing here now. We could not take the risk."

I felt unclean and ashamed. I leaned against the blackened arch to steady myself and without warning the magic welled up inside me. My hand and the stone it touched began to glow then lines of light spread in a web across the empty space, gradually filling it with a rippling sheen of power.

The portal!

I shrank away from the glowing gate. "I—I didn't do that!" I gasped.

"You did," Lord Sallis' eyes glittered, "and you will be doing it a lot more." He stepped towards me and then to the arch, examining the distortion. "Yes, it seems complete to me. I'll go first and then you follow. There are a few things awaiting you on the other side."

"Like what?"

"Like your staff, wizard, and some other items to help you on your way." With that, he walked into the light and vanished.

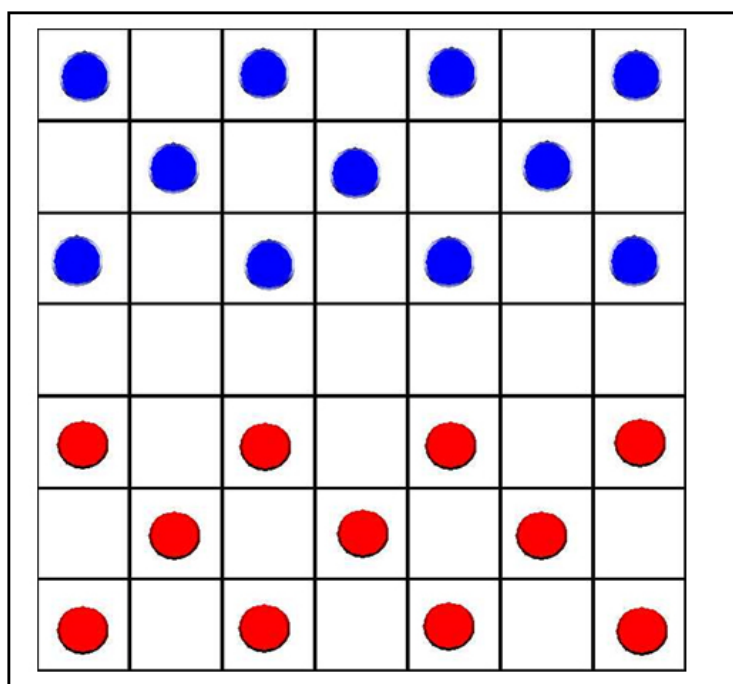
I was alone and hesitant. Lord Sallis murdered Meris. I could run back down the stairs, tell Melmoth, Ellis and Abraxia, but to what end? If everything I'd been told was true, there would be no justice, only a quick death awaiting me as well. The alternative lay in trusting a confessed murderer at his word, accepting his bloodied hand of friendship knowing I could be betrayed at any moment.

I gritted my teeth and followed Lord Sallis, into the unknown.





Games: Spires



This is an ancient game of strategy. The board is set up like drafts but with eleven pieces not ten. Initially all pieces can only move and take forwards in straight lines. Pieces may not take more than one opposing piece in a move. When taken, a piece is not removed from the board but is placed under the taking piece to form a “tower”. The colour of the top piece denotes the ownership of the tower.

When a piece singly, or as a tower reached the other side of the board it is turned over and becomes a Wizard as shown by the symbol on its reverse. Wizards may move horizontally and vertically in any direction and take in the same way.

When all of your pieces have become Wizards, the largest tower is transformed into a Lord. Replace the top piece with the Lord counter. In addition to the abilities of a Wizard, the Lord

may move and take diagonally as well. However, should you lose your Lord, you immediately lose the game.

The game is won when a Lord is taken, or one side cannot move. In the latter case, the last person to move wins.



Limbo

The ruins of civilisations were sucked into the centre of the vortex to form Limbo.

This wrecked echo of old Earth is named after the outer hell of Algheri's journal.

The remnants of our ancient world. Buildings, piled on top of buildings, with people living in the spaces in between. Limbo contains the collected lore of the past and the largest gathering of its populace. For some, it is a place of hope, from where civilisation can be rebuilt, for others, a place of despair and desolation.

The sky above is the vortex, hidden behind layer upon layer of dust, that batters the world below. There are few days without wind and storm as the lands are wracked with the depredations of its seething sky. Some places remain intact, defended and protected by gathered power, but the price is high, the cost of magic inside the vortex far higher than out in the fragmented world beyond.

Limbo is home to the last of humanity. People survive, but do not live. Mortals huddle beneath the wizard towers, eking out a meagre existence as they wait for deliverance. They wait for the Harrower, who comes to some in the form of a wizard, but as with all things, freedom can come at a price.

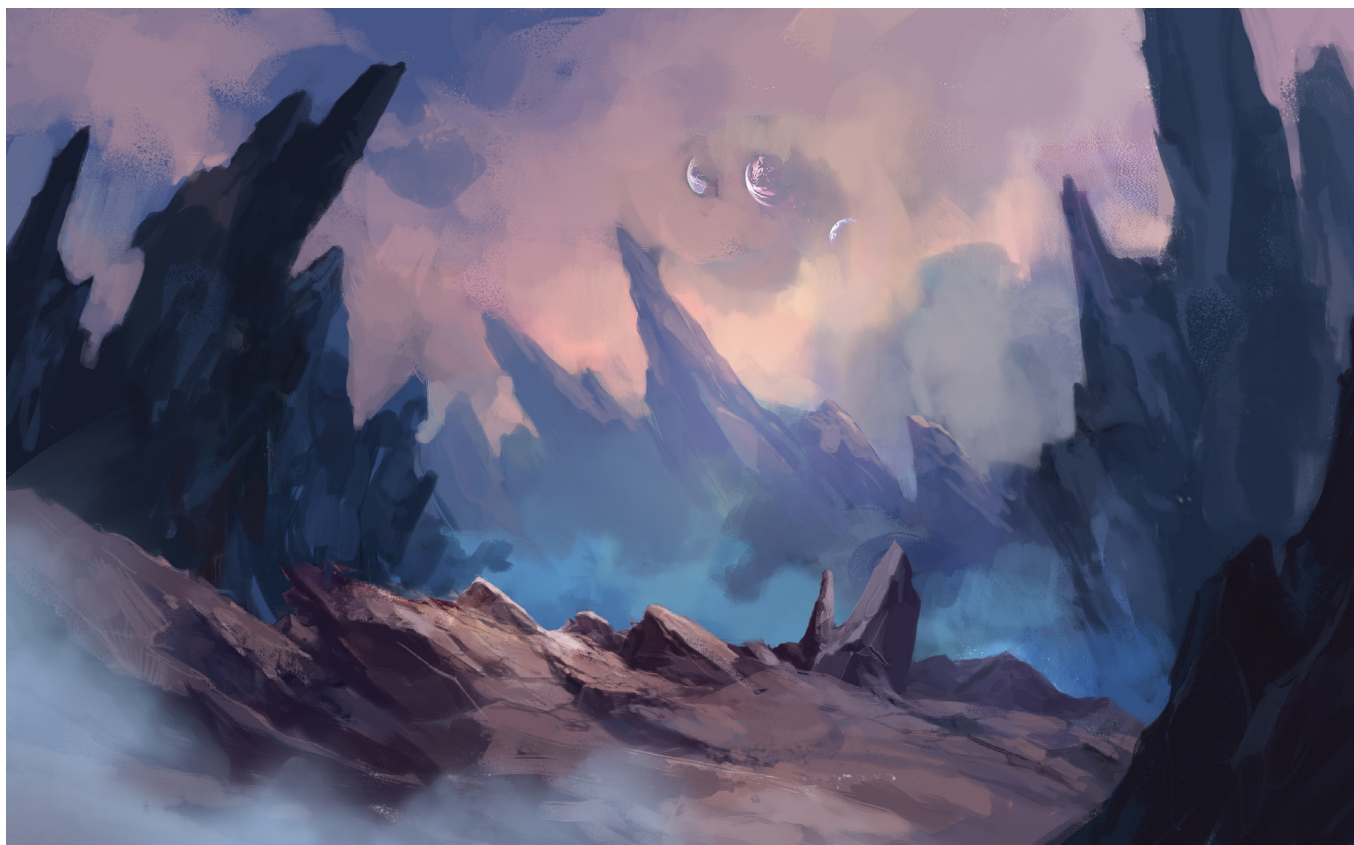
Humanity on Limbo has no means of contacting those who have left unless it is through wizards. Only wizards can activate the portals and they only return to serve their own agendas.

The wizard towers compete to find those who are born with the gift, stealing them from their families to be trained as wizards and sent out into the Fractured Worlds.

Of all places that exist, only Limbo is constant and moves forward through time as one place. Wizards who arrive and meet others find they have similar adventures and experiences in the Fractured Worlds, but moved through these events in parallel, with differing outcomes for each.

Some wizards return to Limbo when defeated owing to the defensive wards woven into their armour and robes. Others have different sanctuaries, but Limbo is often used as the artificers and alchemists there are able to repair equipment without danger, taking advantage of the limitations of magic whilst there. This restriction also ensures Limbo remains neutral territory.

Most wizards do not like being in Limbo. Their magic does not work well inside the vortex. They want to explore the fractured realms and shape them as their own domains.





Known Settlements of Limbo

Few explorers have undertaken to map the realms of this ruined world. Yet there are some locations that are well known and spoken about. There are places where humanity congregates and the gifted do what they can to help those around them.

Tenok

The city of Tenok is a vast network of collapsed caverns and ruins. Legend has it that Ancient Red, the greatest of the dragons, sprang from the doom beneath the great temple after the people performed countless rituals their anointing their warriors in the blood of their enemies and making the magical barrier weak.

The old city collapsed upon itself and as the vortex ravaged the rest of the world, more and more broken remnants of settlements and civilisations piled on top of the rest, burying the beautiful temple and palaces deep underground. The result is a network of tunnels and chambers both above and below the surface.

The people of Tenok are descended from those who survived the end of the old world. In recent times, they have been joined by others from many of the old kingdoms, making the city a sprawling mix of cultures and creeds divided into gangs, clans, tribes and more.

The Tower of the Star

In the aftermath of destruction, magi gathered in the ruins of Rome. The Tower of Stars rose out of the broken remains of Latium. In its highest chamber lies an ancient portal, repaired and rebuilt by the surviving alchemists and artificers.

Now those decisive early days are gone and the majority of the skilled and gifted have departed to the realms in search of better lives. What remains in the tower and beneath it are its last guardians – maimed wizards and untrustworthy scribes who have been forsaken by most who have long since left.

The tower remains in good order, its guardians understand their purpose and skill recruit those gifted with power from amongst the poor slums beneath, but there is little hope of the salvation once preached to their dying populace. The tower masters know they remain a necessary presence and will not be released from their obligations unless others are found to replace them.

The City of Barzakh

Known as the singing city, Barzakh is a paradise to the eyes of a weary traveller, but its curse is complex and often misunderstood, particularly by those who live there.

No-one knows who wove the enchantment around the city, but it is so complete and pervasive, none escape its clutches. The non-magical nature of Limbo is subverted by the subtlety of the Barzakh curse as it draws from the very essence of its residence to empower its portal, hidden within the city.

Each time the portal is invoked, the curse is drained and begins again, but like a living thing, it changes, its resolution becoming something different. Wizards trapped in its clutches find themselves in a race against time as their wits and memories unravel while they struggle to find the portal.

The Eldritch Plains

A land where nothing grows or lives, a great heat emanates from this vast desert, as if the depths of the world were boiling. Travellers risk the plains only if they must and travel from stone plateau to stone plateau.

The Eldritch plains are so named for their strangeness. The emptiness of the place plays tricks on the mind, making people believe they are not alone.

Stormsheim Monastery

A great repository of lore and knowledge, the monastery is a mass of interconnected caves within Mount



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Aurora, the highest peak of Limbo.

It is said the first chambers of the monastery were the living quarters of an ancient harpy of the earliest days. According to the scripture of the monks the woman was a prophetess. After magical wards were broken parchments were found that foretold many of the events that later came to pass.

Since these times, the first chambers have been expanded and reinforced. Refugees are welcomed, but put to work to hack at the rock so they might make homes for themselves.

Sanctum

Ruled by King Theias, the city of Sanctum is a walled refuge where people survive on what they can barter. The harsh rules of the differing district lords ensure everyone contributes to the needs of the populace as a whole. Those who have nothing work in the water mines and dig into the bowels of Limbo to bring forth heat.

King Theias himself is Nephilim, part gifted and part mortal. His three wives are of the same blood and their two children, Kith and Lerisana, both Egregoroi. Neither is allowed far from the King's residence. At the centre of Sanctum is the doorway. Much like the portal in other settlements, access to this chamber is controlled, but unlike others, Theias jealously guards trade and relations with those beyond his realm. All provided by those who visit Sanctum is provided to the King who chooses what shall be shared amongst his people. Would be travellers must curry his favour to gain access to the Fractured Worlds.

Wandu

Capital of the ancient Koguryo kingdom. In the majority, Wandu is a series of squat mound like buildings, which served its people well in surviving the storms. Such places have become an architectural model in many unstable Fractured Realms and are commonly known as wayhomes.

Originally built in the mountains of the old world, the region around Wandu is no longer mountainous. Instead, travellers who approach might be forgiven for believing it to be a huge field of eggs, some of which are cracked and broken.

Each intact building has been improved into a circular stone structure, half buried beneath the ground.

Inside, Koryo artificers and wizards strengthen them with warding, returning at intervals to renew these bindings. How well they work in the difficult magical environment of Limbo is anyone's guess.

Each 'egg' is home to a large extended family. The larger ones are interconnected and form the central part of the settlement. Whether this was the architectural intention or shape of the city prior to the end of the world is unknown, as Wandu has been rebuilt and rebuilt so many times.

Kinkaku-ji

The rebuilt citadel of the Ashikaga, Kinkaku-ji stands fourteen storeys high above the ruins of Kyoto, but the building also extends deep into the ground. Each level is given status and access to each level affords individuals respect. Much like the Tower of the Star, the upper level is said to contain the Ashikaga portal, but it is also a place where, at opportune times, magic is practiced in a limited way, so as to familiarise young initiates with their abilities.

It is said the Askikaga portal room also contains a fragment of the ancient doorway map once held in trust by the Great Conclave. Whilst the destinations of such places are no longer the same, the rune cyphers for each remain the same and by visiting them, a new catalogue of realms can be established. Each order of Limbo maintains such lists, but the Ashikaga index is known to be the largest.

Angkor

These strange temples from old Earth survived almost completely intact and are spread across a wide territory. The settlements are divided into regions – Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom.

The Khmer Empire held sway over a vast region for almost four hundred years. The two cities were once the palaces and capitals of powerful emperor wizards who ruled with the backing of strong orders of alchemists, artificers and archivists.

The emperors of Khmer were gods to their people and these beautiful structures were a testimony to wor-



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ship, loyalty, obedience and strength.

In the last decades, the Horsemen's armies came to Khmer and annihilated its people. The enchantments woven into the temples preserved them during the days of destruction, but afterwards the magic unravelled. Now they are silent husks that provide shelter for wayward travellers.





Orders of Limbo

Contained herein is a list of the known orders of Limbo. These settlements and entities operate across the lands, offering shelter for those who survived the world's destruction.

The Stormsheim

The monks of Stormsheim live in a monastery deep within the Mount Aurora, the tallest peak on Limbo. Drawn from the remnants of monastic orders of the ancient world, they are unified in a pursuit of collecting and archiving what knowledge remains from the past.

The monks hold themselves as neutral in the conflicts that rage in the Fractured Worlds. Stormsheim missionaries wander the lands of Limbo seeking out obscure relics and writings wherever they can and the order employs wizards to do the same.

The favour of Stormsheim is a significant thing. The right to study in the differing circles of the monastery library is granted to wizards who aid in their quest to recover the lore of the ancient world.

Order of the Star

In the days before the end of the world, a group of French knights gathered together at a place known as Saint-Ouen to reject the tournament culture of the time and to profess their bravery in battle. These knights were mortal men, wizards and paladins, all seeking to perfect their ability in combat.

After the schism and the formation of Limbo, the Order of the Star acted swiftly to martial and organise the scattered survivors wherever they found them. It was these efforts that re-established a settlement in the wasteland which over time, came to house the Tower of the Star and its surround slum district.

The badge of the order is a collar with a white star on red enamel.

Order of the Dragon (Draconists)

Janos of Sredets is remembered as being the first half breed Nephilim to be given the blood drinker curse. The powers granted to Janos were fearsome indeed, but they changed him physically as well and he soon grew sensitive to light and the prying eyes of the ignorant.

In the last days, many scions of Janos rose up across the slums of Europe infecting all they could find and creating cults that would destabilise cities and kingdoms. In the days after, many of these hardy monsters survived and gathered others to them, spreading their depravations amidst the gifted and mortals alike. The Order of the Dragon is a powerful horsemen cabal the dwells in the curved Tower of Unguis. In some ways, they have lost the way of their founders and been forced to adopt codes and laws of behaviour else the blood curse would have wiped them out long ago.

The Ashikaga

Few Eastern wizards and mystics survived the end of days. Those that did were of the northern court of Japan who followed their late shogun, Lord Ashikaga Takauji.

This militant order of gifted have rebuilt a portion of Kyoto, renaming it Kinkaku-ji and maintain an order amidst the rest of the broken city. The noble houses of the past remain dominant, while those survivors loyal to the southern court are exiles and scattered to the winds.

The rules of the northern court are enforced by the Ashikaga, who bear the name of their late ruler. Lord Ashikaga was killed during the great betrayal in the last days of the old world and his enemies are still hunted by the descendants of his loyal followers.

The Tepanec

The wizards of Tenok are proud servants of the Horsemen, believing the new world is a place of deliverance from the old. Despite this, the vast sprawling ruins they make their home in are always in conflict as different warlords claim to be the inheritors of Famine, Pestilence, War and Death.



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The Tepanec keep order throughout the vast city of Tenok, constantly journeying between factions to arbitrate and judge disputes. Justice in these times can be harsh and they are not always merciful, yet the authority of their symbol is rarely questioned.

While patrolling these territories, the Tepanec seek out newly gifted children. They administer crude tests and tortures to determine the power of those believed worthy and steal them away to the centre of Tenok, never to be seen again.

The Koryo

Lord Yi Dan rules the Koryo, a wizard dynasty of five generations. Unlike other orders of Limbo, the Koryo see their continual presence on Limbo as a duty and members of the royal house maintain a connected present between their realms in the empyrean and Wandu, their home inside the Vortex.

Yi Dan's belief in a path towards restoring life to the lands he rules is part of the mission of his people. His three daughters each maintain realms close to the edge of the Vortex and return to Limbo frequently to sit in counsel with him.

The sages of Koryo are renowned for their collection and application of old world knowledge and lore. Unlike the monks of Stormsheim, they guard their archives careful and permit only those loyal to Lord Yi Dan.





Journal Of The Eldritch Plains

Entry 1: Abandoned

After murdering everyone else, they left me alive.

In some ways, living is a greater torture than death. When your body is in constant rebellion, fighting your every movement and gesture, you wonder if a better world exists after you die.

The door of my carriage creaks in the arid breeze, Inside, I lie sweating on the hammock bed, as I have for days. In the past, my only respite was the shame-filled moments where they carried me out into the sand to piss and shit in a freshly dug hole. Precious water is wasted cleaning my unwilling body, wiping puss from the sores on my back and arse, but it must be done, father and mother decree so.

Those rare treats are lost to me now, with everyone dead.

My family are unscrupulous in their caring, providing for my every need, but they do not love me, I know that. Were it not for the gift in my blood, I would have been strangled at birth.

To them, I was an obligation, a burden to be endured. When a place was offered for me to study amongst the monks of Stormsheim, they could be rid of me. I was packed into a cart along with my possessions, placed in this torture for the journey across the Eldritch plains - a vast desert, the land boiling from some hidden heat beneath.

Days passed without event or change. Lepi, the old servant read to me just as he did in the tower, his quavering voice irritating as he stumbled over the words. Yet without him, I would remain ignorant. The books legible, but far from my reach on a shelf, the turning of pages, beyond the ability of my quivering hands. I learned to make do with Lepi's broken chant.

At times, he drew the curtain back and let me look out over the vast empty expanse. Nothing lives here, nothing can.

Today was one of those days.

I saw riders in the distance, their dark silhouettes shimmering in the heat haze. I cried a warning, but the servants did not understand and strapped me down as they do when I thrash my limbs and try to speak. Lepi twitched the curtain closed and stroked my head until I calmed and gave up.

The riders attacked. I heard the clash of steel, the screams and gurgles of the dying. Lepi went out. Later when the noise faded, booted feet climbed the carriage steps and the door opened. It was not Lepi, instead a man entered, holding a bloodstained knife. He stared at me for long moments, his cloth shrouded face hiding everything but his dark desert eyes. I willed him to step forward and make use of his blade. To grant me the oblivion my shaking hands could never deliver, but he remained at the door, revealing nothing of his intention before returning to the sand.

Now, no-one comes. All that is left is the aftermath.

My father told me I could walk once, though I do not remember it. As a baby, my legs shook with each step, but held me up as I tottered into my mother's arms. Only later did my body's revolution set in. Other children grew strong, I grew weak. My limbs turned uncoordinated and awkward. I learned to speak, but as my muscle control waned, so the chance of me being understood diminished. Servants and slaves wiped away drool and ignored my frustrated whispers. I became a prisoner in my own flesh with a mind that grew sharper every day.

I push against the bindings, but they are secured against my efforts. The day I first tried to exercise, my mother believed I was having a fit and ordered me tied down. From that day I knew not to trust those who were closest to me.

My fingers fumble with the straps. I cannot grip them, let alone work at the knots.

I will die of thirst; a long slow lingering death, unless I find help.

The magic came early and easily to me as a child. Some boys and girls find theirs as they change into men and women. Few show signs before that. It is said the twins of the doom practised the arts from birth. The gift marks us. There is little we can do in Limbo, but my father rules Sanctum and owns the great door in its highest room. Every year someone is chosen to walk through and into the Fractured



Worlds.

I will never pass through that door. The power in my veins is greater than anyone honoured by my father, but the physical challenge would be too much.

It is said wizards fight to rule the heavens; that they summon creatures out of the story books read to me by Lepi. The blood in me burns to be one of them.

But I remain a prisoner.

Outside there is nothing but the breeze. The moans of the dying fade, as those that live out their last learn to accept fate.

I hear footsteps. Has the man returned?

The door opens...

Entry 2: The Stranger and the Stave

An old man stands at the carriage entrance. He wears a simple shift, has a long white beard and a necklace of beads. He looks at me, his smile kind but not condescending. "At last I find you." He moves towards me. His fingers work at the knots that secure me to the hammock, releasing the straps. Then he steps back. "I am here to aid you, but only so much as you need," he says.

I try to answer, but speech does not come. My mouth is dry and my lips refuse the words. I shake and thrash, trying to force unwilling limbs to obey, but they will not. All the while the old man watches, his expression unreadable. After some moments he moves forward again, holding a short stick, around two feet in length.

"This is my gift to you. Its touch will cause you great pain, but it will aid movement for a time. This is no solution, but a tool to help you achieve your wishes. I will wait for you outside."

Gently, he throws the item to me. It lands across my legs and they catch fire. Invisible burning lashes the flesh of my calves, I cry out and jerk away, but the stave rolls onto my chest and then brushes my left hand. Each touch brings agony, my fingers twitch and close over the pulsing wood, making a fist. My hand throbs, but does precisely as I wish.

I feel the link along my arm, a burning rope within my body that howls at me to drop this cursed gift, but grants me control of the limb in a way I have never known.

I bend my elbow and lift my hand so I can examine the object. Dark timber, roughly hewn, but straight and true. I sense power here, responding to my own. It is nothing like the staffs given to initiates of Sanctum, or the other rune carved artefacts of the lore wardens. It is natural, latent and of itself. I have never—

"Let me know when you're ready."

The man's voice, a touch of impatience to his tone. I am unused to this, to people demanding things of me, no matter how courteous and polite. His gift responds to my anger and the pain intensifies. I take a rattling breath and seek calm, finding it in the swaying curtain by my side. With the end of the stave I reach out and draw it back, revealing a rare sky of deep green.

I stare for many moments. In the time before Limbo it is said a ball of fire raged in the heavens amidst a serene sea of blue. Our skies are not like this, the vortex seethes and swirls, but today, out there, I see calm. Worlds exist up there, beyond the reach of us left. Beyond my reach.

For now...

I let go of the curtain and rest the stave on my stomach. Pain kindles there, but muscles obey and awkwardly I sit up. I move the touch to my knee and my leg responds as I wish, my foot dropping from the bed to the floor and the same with the other. Such obedience is astonishing. Unstimulated, my limbs remain rebellious, but when charged they act how I want them to.

The journey from the hammock to the door takes a long time. I knew moments of despair, thinking of the days at Sanctum when I called but no servant came and I was left to soil myself and my bed. Father would have them whipped. Once I recall trying to manage on my own and being found exhausted with bloodied knees and elbows, laying on the stone floor. I had given up that day, letting dark thoughts take me.

But this was different. I fell, stumbled and crawled my way across the room, every movement closer a



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triumph and new experience as I learned how best to make use of the old man's gift. I hear nothing of him outside. Either he sits patiently or has given up and wandered away.

My curiosity to learn if he waits as he said burns brighter than the fire provoked by his gift. My limbs tremble now with the unfamiliar effort, but I force them to obey. I reach the door, the steps, the ground. Breath leaves me as I fall and lie in the dirt, looking up into an emerald sky.

I smell burning flesh. It is not mine. The old man appears, he crouches down. "Well done," he says. "Your strength of will is what defines you. I am humbled." He picks up the stave from where I dropped it. "Come, use this once more and sit with me. There is much to discuss."

I grit my teeth against pain as my fingers close around the wood. Carefully, I calm my body and move into a sitting position. I see a smouldering pile of corpses and a small campfire. Beside the latter is a collection of broken planks and beams, fashioned into a chair the shape of one my father uses to mete out judgement to his subjects. I crawl over, settle myself and touch the stave to my jaw.

"W-Who are you?" I manage to ask.

"I am called Vyasa," he replies.

Entry 3: A Rare Sky

Vyasa.

I recognise the name. The stories in books read to me by old Lepi mention a man of the east, who brought peace to wars and enlightenment to the ignorant. Now a man claiming to be him sits cross legged on the ground in front of me, his long staff jabbed into the dirt and the flames casting shadows over his wizened face.

"I am sorry for your friends," he says. "They deserve better than a funeral pyre, but if left here, the bodies will rot away without serving carrion. A fire at least gives them an end. I wish I could do more..."

I stare at him, the words barely registering. There is one story about him I remember best.

"Y-You fought the dragon?" I ask.

Vyasa sighs. "That's a tale I've not heard in a long time. The Sage and Ancient Red, yes? That little verse is remembered by more folk than any other."

"But is it you?"

"Yes, though I cannot claim events went as the story masters tell it."

"How are you still alive?"

Vyasa frowns. "You've learned much from those who know little. Limbo has its own rules. We lie in the eye of the vortex, magic is drained from this world moments from being cast, but we find ways around such things."

"You lived before the apocalypse?"

"And long before that," the old man leans forward. "Your name is Kith," he says.

"How do you—"

"Because you scream it in your mind. Others may not hear, but I do. Your mind's voice led me here. I am glad I found you."

"Why?"

"Because, in the same way I help everyone, I can help you, but only if you are prepared for what comes."

"And what is to come?"

"Change."

I look around. Little of my life remains. If I could return to Sanctum I might regain what I had before, but I hated everything about living—no—existing there. "What... change?" I ask.

Vyasa shades his eyes and he stares past me, his gaze distant. "A settled sky. Days like this are rare. When they happen you can peer far into the empyrean." He points at something above us. "You see that? That is Toran - the nearest of the Fractured Worlds."

I turn my head, but it is hard to hold the right position. For a moment, I glimpse it - an object, a motionless rock, hanging, as if suspended. "Another world?"



"Yes, another world. Where you should be."

I let me head drop and shake. My eyes are wet, from the effort or emotion, I am not sure. "I'm not strong enough."

"You have the gift and the strongest will I've ever known."

"My body..."

He moves from his seat and approaches. He has a cup and jug in his hands. He pours water and helps me drink it. The cool cascade in my throat is welcome relief. Afterwards, he takes my hand in his. His palms and fingers are rough and thin. "Do not compare yourself to others. Each of us is shaped by what we are given and how we challenge our limitations. I touched your mind and I see what power you have. Your body defines you, makes you as you are. Without it you would not be capable of what I propose."

"And what is that?"

"That you summon a dragon."

Entry 4: Dragon

The sound that comes from my mouth is supposed to be laughter. My throat convulses and I shake with the unfamiliar effort. Such things were beyond me less than an hour ago.

"D-Dragon?"

"Yes," Vyasa says. "She already seeks you out. She heard you as I did."

"H-How can a dragon come here?"

"I have said, Limbo is a strange place. When the skies clear, the grip of the vortex weakens. Up in the empyrean, the dragons of Toran stir. Their world is close to this one and a powerful wizard might be able to call one here."

Vyasa gets up. He jabs at the fire between us, stirring the flames. "Limbo smoulders. The ground acts to ward much of what remained from the old world. She is hotter under the surface, more magical. Anything that stirs her releases heat and power to the vortex. Those of us with the gift can do this and on a clear day... well... anything might happen."

I stare at him. "Why don't you perform the summoning?" I ask.

Vyasa shrugs. "Many reasons for that. The two most important are plain. I lack the strength and I lack the need. You however..."

I swallow, trying to suppress my excitement at the thought and stick to reason. "Why should I do this?"

"Look around, your life here is over. Even if you were saved, you would return to a wasted existence. For you, Sanctum is a prison and the monastery will be a tomb. You have outgrown this world, it is time for you to leave, but the portal is not your path. On this day you can make your own story. Summon a dragon and fly away."

"How?"

"Try."

I turn away from him and gaze into the sky, to focus on the green expanse. It is difficult to concentrate. The pain from holding the stave is a distraction. I drop it. My body sags and my head lolls as before. I hear Vyasa's sharp intake of breath and his approach. I wave him back with a flailing hand. *I know what I'm doing.*

Like this I can't look up, but perhaps I don't need to. I didn't meet Vyasa, but he heard the shouting voice of my mind.

I picture the sky and the strange rock suspended above us. I imagine floating, rising up in the air. It becomes clearer than when I beheld it with my eyes. There are trees, rivers and mountains, just like the storybooks, but real.

The whole place is *alive*, throbbing with living plants and creatures, their calls, their movement, the beating of hearts, *everything*.

Then I find her and all other things fade. Her mind envelops mine, a huge, predatory intelligence suddenly aware of me, devouring me into itself. I feel hunger and joy. I am flying above land and sea. I am hunting, to eat, to feast.



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Below, the ground seethes. Animals, hundreds of them, running in fear. The part of me that remains Kith recognises them, but the dragon doesn't care, it sees only food.

Our wings furl and we dive, down, down, down. Our jaws open and the flames pour forth, creatures stumble and we reach for them.

NO!

The voice is loud, it is mine, drawing us from the prey and back into the sky. We soar away above, above, beyond and more. The air is gone, there is cold and dark and nothing, only black and dust and stars...

...and green!

Green sky, lower and lower and lower. I see myself, the fire, the burning corpses and Vyasa.

We land and gaze at the body in the chair - my body. I am Kith, but I am also the dragon. I stare through the eyes of both, lost in reflection. My soul in each mind, each body, each place.

Lost...

Entry 5: Help When Required

A void, a chasm within parts of my mind. A danger I had not anticipated, been warned of or planned for. I stare at myself and stare back and stare back and—

A shadow falls between us and the link is severed. Something of me is broken off and remains within the dragon, but at least I can move and remember who I am, remember the difference.

“Well done Kith! I wasn't sure... but...”

My fingers touch the stave. The pain brings focus. I clutch the object tight and bring it to my neck. The muscles respond as before and I gaze at Vyasa. He stands between me and the dragon, his eyes wide.

I sense irritation in her. This world is anathema. The sky is calm for now, but the magic sustaining her unravels with each moment. She turns towards the smouldering pyre of corpses. I feel the hunger well up and she rises from her haunches, moving...

“N-No...”

Vyasa touches my shoulder. “Be at ease. Let your new friend feast. What other purpose might the dead serve?”

“You knew?”

“I considered the possibility,” he admits. “Whilst the dragon sates itself, we can plan,” he kneels in front of me. “You must ride the creature.”

“How?”

“In a way unlike any other person. Wait here.” Vyasa walks to my carriage and goes inside. After some minutes, he returns with the hammock and an assortment of ropes. “Your command of her is not dependent on physical control or guidance. That means you are not restricted in how she carries you. We must make a pouch large enough to fit.”

He busies himself with the work, the plan it seems to strap me to the belly of the beast. I gaze at her as she gorges on the charred dead that were once my father's servants - old Lepi and the others. My guts heave at the thought, but I make myself watch. She is joined to me now. I must accept that. I must understand her nature and modify my own. Such a creature cannot be expected to care for my dead, to revere the memories of shared lifetimes she played no part in. The corpses serve no purpose now. By consuming them the dragon gives them purpose.

Her scaly skin ripples as she moves, stripping flesh from limbs, working methodically for her meal. The process is noisy. Sometimes she becomes impatient, pulverising bones in her huge mouth, the sound a wincing cacophony that encourages my stomach to rebel.

As she feeds, Vyasa approaches. She stirs but he croons soothing words. “You remember me, little one. I spoke with your great sire a long time ago. We flew together for ten glorious days in the old world. No-one remembers that story. Only how we quarrelled and fought one another.”

Carefully, he slips the ropes around the dragon's limbs and secures them. I sense the creature's irritation and concentrate to suppress it. She turns back to the corpses, dragging out a blackened body, pinning it



with her forelimbs and tearing it in half.

Vyasa continues his work, tying lines across the creatures back legs and wing joints. Beneath her belly I see my hammock prison from before, lined now with a thick fur cloak. "Will it hold?" I ask.

"Fate grants us no opportunity to determine an answer," Vyasa replies, but gentle laughter softens his tone. "You must risk this, or die here in your chair."

I nod and swallow past the lump in my throat. My life to this point has not been about taking risks. My parents always tried to limit chance and by doing so, limit opportunity. I see how this made me angry - a raging ignorant fool, not truly accepting how their care protected and stifled in equal measure.

Let me fail! Let me struggle, let me try and then I'll know my limitations!

Now liberty is in front of me and I hesitate. *Why? Isn't this what you've always wanted?*

"What will become of me?" I ask Vyasa.

"You will join minds with her and fly far from here to the worlds above."

"Afterwards though, when I am hungry, sick, or need to get down?"

Vyasa shrugs. "When I sleep, I cannot be sure what will happen. I must rest and trust my preparation is enough, or that I will be a match for any surprise. Your life is different to mine, the challenge greater, but not different. You will find a way."

"I wish I believed that."

"The first step to doing so is to make the attempt. What else can you do?"

I think about that for a long time. The dragon continues to eat, leaving little more than a black stain of charred ash on the ground.

"Very well," I say at last. "Help me to fly."

Entry 6: To Fly and to Fall

Vyasa's hands are strong and sure. He drags me from the chair to the dragon - quite a feat for one man - and lets me rest beside her.

I lie on the ground looking at him. A thin man in simple clothes, older than this world, ancient in the world before. I sense an unfathomable strength within him, physical, mental and magical, yet he says I am stronger, that I can do things he cannot.

I summoned a dragon!

The realisation is only just beginning to sink in. I gaze at the creature. She has finished eating and crouches, eyeing the bone fragments and scraps of cloth that remain. Part of me remains with her, feeling hunger sated, but not gone. Her scaly skin ripples as she moves, her great wings are furled and idle. Her claws are bigger than my hands, her teeth bigger than my fingers. *I summoned a—*

"You must command her to sit up, so I can get to the belly and strap you in."

The words bring me back. I nod loosely and struggle to master myself first. The buzzing pain of the stave is a distraction, so I let it fall. The dragon is here, in front of me. The link between us palpable. I ask her to move and she snorts. A flicker of flame emanating from her nostrils, making Vyasa gasp.

"Apologies, this isn't easy."

"Take your time."

I try again, exploring the connection, revisiting the fragment of myself that stayed in her mind. Her body is like mine, her limbs move in the same way - only by consensus. For a moment she resists me, but then acquiesces. She knows me as I know her. There is no harm in my intention.

I see with her as we raise our self onto hind legs. Vyasa's arms are around me. My body presses against our body. The touch is strange; another link that makes our connection easier and more difficult.

"We're done. You're ready."

I gaze at Vyasa through two sets of eyes. My mind, adapting to the different perspectives - from above and in front. "M-my..."

"The stave is tied on beside your right hand. You need only flex your fingers. Let me step back then try reaching for it."

He moves away. We watch him. I move my hand and a jolt of pain confirms the stave's presence, its magic separating me from her. I explore and find it attached with flexible cord. I can move it to my arm,

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my neck and my chest without effort. When I let go, it returns to its place.

I stretch again, clasp the stave and touch it to my jaw. "How can I thank—"

With a cry, the dragon unfurls her wings, gathers herself and leaps. We are airborne, flying away from the wasteland, up, up and into the sky. I glimpse Vyasa waving as he grows smaller and smaller. I wish I'd had time to express my gratitude and say goodbye.

He understands. You don't need to torture yourself.

I release the stave and reach for her. Our minds join again and her visceral joy at flying overwhelms me. This is her realm, where she transcends beauty and grace, her world that she permits me to share.

Her gaze shifts to the strange rock. A beat of wings propels us towards it. Another and another. The air is thin. I hear the wheezing breaths of my fragile body. From her memory I learn it will worsen as we climb, until there is nothing to breathe. I am frightened. *Can I survive such a place?*

We rise into the green sky, the light fades. I witness memories of her home and share her yearning to return. I shut my eyes and drift, immersing myself in her past.

One last look.

The green is gone now, leaving unending black. I see land! Trees! Mountains!

I take my last rattling breath and together, we fall...





The Sage and Ancient Red

*It flew over boiling land and sky,
Free at last as all things die.
Red brought flame to their screaming plight.
The people fled no-one would fight.*

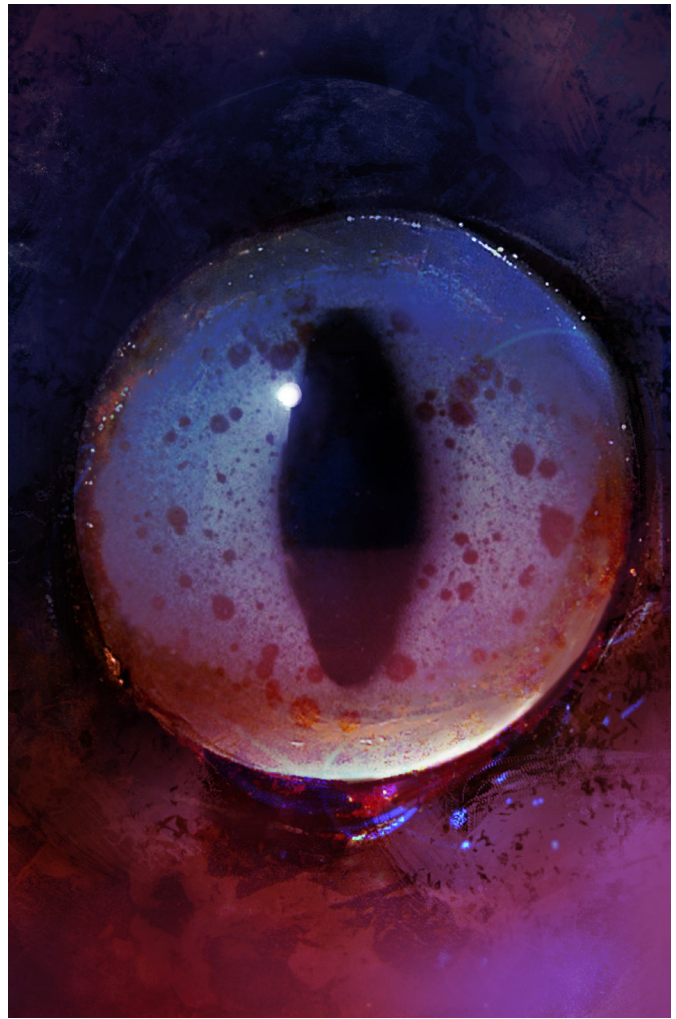
*Upon the mountain, stood the Sage.
His back to stone confronting phage.
"Wyrn I see thee for what thou art."
By my hand, I bid thee depart.*

*Ancient Red smiled displaying teeth.
"I will not go, I will not leave!
I shall burn and break your kind,
Revenge I seek, it will be mine!"*

*The Sage muttered spells and thrust out his staff.
The Dragon stared and began to laugh.
"In oldest times you tried that trick,
I'll not fall again, I'll burn you quick!"*

*Flame came then and Sage caught fire.
But he sprang from mountain into the air.
Onto the dragon's back he fell,
And dragged the beast away to hell.*

*The people know Sage for what he did,
They tell his tale to girl and boy.
He and Red, still strive and war.
Far from our world for ever more.*



Journal of the Witness

I watch him enter, condemned wizard of the Horsemen's cabal, his power shackled by Limbo. Grey hair spills down over his shoulders and thread bare vestment - a weak and vulnerable man, much less than the armoured God who murdered our kind. His eyes were dark and shot venomous looks around all those upon the benches. He regards us as nothing, but memorises each face in turn. I sense he will remember us, even in death.

The wizard is brought to the centre and King Theias stands in front of him. He carries the axe, kept only for these rare moments. "You are condemned for your crimes," he says. "What have you to say?"

He smiles at the King then turns and smiles at me. "When I have finished my speech, you will put me to death. All that I am in this life will end. If you believe in an eternal soul then perhaps what you do will set me free? You do this deed and commit this act because you believe me guilty, when in truth all I am guilty of is living a life with different values to yours. You name me a murderer, but accept nothing of the blood on your own hands, the lives broken in your drive towards understanding.

"On matter of consorting with demons and heeding the whispers of the underworld, I am innocent. It is easy for the ignorant to name that which it does not understand as a monster. There are things I have knowledge of that you do not. What astonishes me is your unwillingness to learn. You claim to be guardians of lore, hoarders of it indeed, but you refuse to accept the enlightenment I bring you, recording only these last moments and nothing of the skill and art I offer."

The words stirs the gathering. I catch a murmur of conversation from two women. "Why is he still alive?" she asks.

"Would you be here, if he wasn't permitted his speech?"

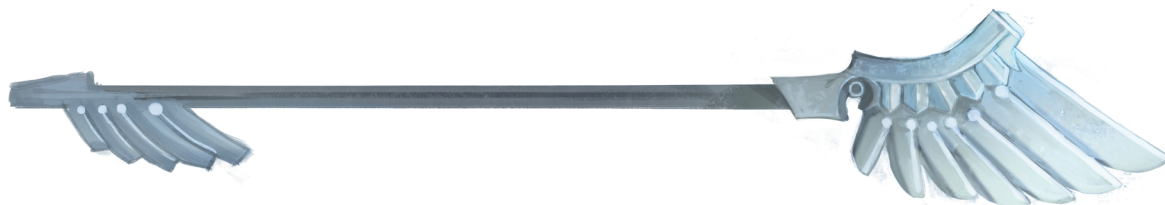
The wizard raises his hands and the crowd quiets. "I need not see the anger in your eyes, nor hear your insults and blame. I have been free and understand what freedom means. You do not.

"Many of you wish for the old world. Know this, there is no return to that place. You must plan for what is, not what was. Life in its multiplicity will thrive if it let loose upon what remains. You must feast, let it nurture you and in turn you will nurture the worlds."

The guard pushes the wizard forward. He falls to his knees and King Theias raises the axe.

"If you wish to know then my people are out there, beyond the Eldritch plains. In time beyond my time, you may learn to trust each other. Perhaps then you can remake the worlds."

The axe falls.





The Fractured Worlds

The Fractured Worlds are outside of the vortex and are bathed in its energies. They are the cast off remains of the old world, sustained by magic. The near realms are perilous places, bathed constantly in the fluxing energies. Yet as you travel further, the distortions settle. Some places are the homes of particular creatures, others have become kingdoms ruled over by powerful wizards.

Each realm may contain fragments of the old world surviving relatively intact - artefacts, ruined cities - relics which may be treasured and potentially contain great knowledge and power. Perhaps the story of what happened in the long past is contained in scattered fragments spread throughout the void.

Wizards who master the flows of mana learn to manipulate and shape the realms themselves. They return to Limbo as saviours, bringing a chosen few with them into their kingdoms. This deliverance has a price and many find themselves working for their new masters as little more than slaves.



Time Beyond The Vortex

Time is often perceived by us as a branching tree. We travel from its trunk into the branches which represent possible futures as each decision presents a set of new realities. A yes/no decision means reality has duplicated, a yes/no/maybe triplicated and so on.

However, if you perceive the past as a series of branches as well, with the only constant point being the here and now, this explains why we can all experience similar stories and realities, but end up in the same place and meet in a given moment.

The energies unleashed during the schism have affected both time and space. Wizards often meet to find they have experienced similar adventures on the countless worlds that surround Limbo.

Outside of Limbo, time can be measured in many ways depending on the location of the vortex and the realm's rotation in relation with this. In previous days, the passage of sun and moon divided day and night, now such contrivances might exist through a wizard's artifice or the kingdom's passage around the vortex. A realm's people may measure time in ways local to them, or in the ways they remember from their past.



The Wanderer

Marit approached the fire with trepidation. It was not often in these dark days that strangers came to the lands of the Nine Tribes and the Proud Eagle folk.

The man sat in front of his fire, seemingly unaware of his watcher. He wore a long patchwork cloak and many trophies. His eyes caught the flickering light and scars gleamed on his forearms. Little unusual about that, but his direction of travel provoked curiosity.

He walked from the west. There was nothing to the west.

Marit's duty was to alert her people of any visitor. A confrontation might prevent this, so she kept to the shadows outside the light. The stranger had set snares, which she'd carefully avoided, before crawling forward on her belly to wait.

In times past, there were many enemies to threaten the tribe. The old tellers spoke of the long past when the restless dead came down from the mountains that divided tribe lands from the eastern forests. There tales of feral men who preyed upon the flesh of others. Though visits were fewer now, these remained dangerous days.

Yet, this stranger seemed little threat. He bore marks of a warrior, but bore no blade, instead carrying a staff with a curved end. His faded raiment showed good skills in weave and his tools showed use. He displayed no pelt of tribe or run. He was alone; little threat to the Proud Eagle.

"I know you're out there."

The stranger's words startled Marit, she'd been careful. What gave her away? Instinct took over, she sprang to her feet, drew two stone knives from her belt and called out into the darkness before running into the light.

The man stood slowly to meet her, staff gripped with both hands. His eyes caught hers and she stopped.

"I have no wish to fight you."

Marit stared. The face that stared back was worn and stained by battle and travel. Yet the eyes gleamed with vigour and she thought, amusement. A glistening onyx trail of thick hair adorned the gnarled brow and thick black eyebrows.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"You know where," the stranger replied and inclined his head. "From that direction."

"There is nothing out there but ruins and Realm's End Ridge," Marit said. "You are lying."

"I am not."

"What is your business in the land of my people?"

The questions seemed not to surprise the stranger. He sighed and sat back upon a protrusion of rock, adjusting his burdens to gain some form of comfort. "Your questions assume I have walked here or that I have any business in this place."

"Everyone has purpose."

"My choice to walk through your land is no indication I have business with your people, I do not."

"You lie. Who else would you be here to meet?"

"Perhaps no-one."

Marit inched closer, raising her weapons, but the stranger did not get up. "I wish to pass unhindered through your land," he said. "What payment do you require that I might do so?"

Marit frowned. *Payment?* Everything she owned had been made by her own hand or given to her as trophies. No-one had offered her payment before. "What do you ask?" she said.

"Let me walk on, I will be far from your lands by the day after tomorrow. Watch me as you wish and keep your weapons at your belt, but leave me be. For this I offer a gift."

"I am tasked to alert the tribe."

"If you give no sign and I give no trouble, who will ever know?"

Marit didn't answer, but stared at him for a time. When he did not speak, she stepped backwards, her gaze upon him still, waiting for his move as she gradually retreating into the shadows and to where she came.



But the stranger did not move, not for a long time. The ground beneath Marit's belly was warm with a trace of the day's heat. The fire warmed her too, though its light did not reach as far. Slowly she drifted off to sleep.

The sun was high in the sky when she awoke and the man was gone.

Marit leapt up and ran eastwards. She soon noticed the tracks and followed them as fast as she could. She climbed a steep hill and caught sight of him in the distance, walking just as he said he would, towards the forest lands.

She followed at a distance. When he stopped, so did she. At night she watched again from the edge of the firelight behind a stone. She saw him place a great pot over the fire and her belly rumbled at the smell that came from it, but she stayed where she was until he dowsed the fire and went to sleep.

In the grey before dawn she crept over the ground between them and went to his fire. The broth in was still warm and she scooped out what she could with her hands.

When the pot was empty, she stole back to her hiding place. When he awoke and left, she waited a time and followed after.

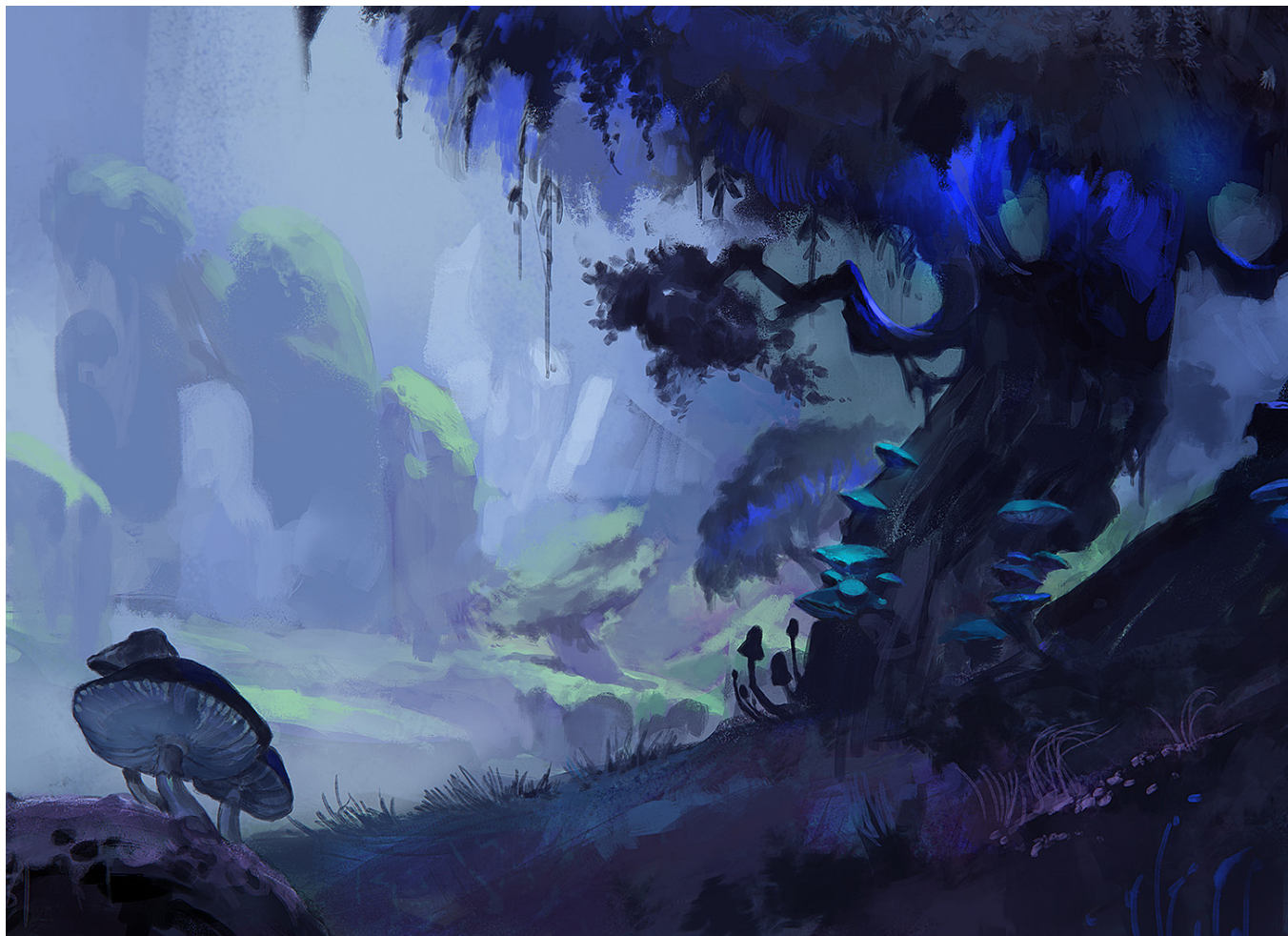
The land changed. Patches of green appeared amidst the dirt and stone, the gnarled trees of her homeland transformed into straight sentinels and became numerous. She could smell the bubbling waters that ran along the edge of the tribelands, a border she dared not cross. The stories of what lay beyond in the mountains and forests were enough to keep her back, but also there was her duty to watch and ward. To cross the river meant abandoning all she had been given to do.

The stranger forded the river, his long cloak dragging out behind him. When he reached the other side he sat down.

Slowly Marit approached. When she reached the water's edge, she saw something shining amidst the stones, she reached down and picked it up. It was a knife like hers, but made from gleaming metal, carved into a blade. Her own face stared back at her as she looked at it.

"You earned it," said the stranger from across the shore.

Marit waved at him. He waved back, then turned away, disappearing into the woodland.



Realms Beyond

There are countless fragments of the old world drifting out beyond the vortex. These have become kingdoms and empires of wizards who pledge their allegiance to one god or another.

Some realms are known to many travellers and stories of them become legend in the libraries of Limbo.

Toran

A world of legend, some say the nearest to the magic. It is here, upon the Great Howe, overlooking the darkness an Egregoroi one may bridge the gap and touch the Vortex from without.

Toran does not appear to all travellers. At times it remained submerged in the magic storms. Distorted powers rage across its surface, making any journey fraught with danger. Only the bravest wizard might venture here on their quest for power as to do so may leave them trapped as the Vortex closes around them.

The danger to wizards journeying here means the world of Toran is as yet an unclaimed domain.

Erebus

A world of caverns and perpetual night. In the depths of this realm live creatures who remember the old world. Their clans fear no Wizard or Alchemist and their leaders have learned magic for themselves. This is a realm of vampires and their minions. The living are taken from many worlds and brought to this place to sate the blood hunger of these ancient dead. The least fortunate, turned and made vassals to the eternal thirst.

Temesne

Jadvar was once an initiate of the Tower of the Star. After leaving Limbo, he ventured to the allied realm of Temesne and became an apprentice wizard at court. No-one can say for sure what happened to Queen Bellisana, the realm's ruler, but the next emissary from the Tower received a frosty greeting from Jadvar's soldiers and left quickly, declaring the realm overthrown.

Rumours circulate about the circumstances of Jadvar's rise. Many alchemists and artificers live in Temesne and all seem changed, altered it is said by a dark ritual that bound all with the gifted blood to Jadvar's will.





The Many Promised Land

The thrill of portal magic fades, despite my effort to hold on. In its depths I glimpse an eye, searching and seeking, but it does not find me as I leave its domain to arrive...

In someone's home.

Darkness. I smell decay. Shelves lined with jars and pots, the contents tinged with mould; a broken pallet bed, a discarded stool. The stone floor strewn with the remains of a life; in the corner, an old key, discarded by the occupants. A touch to my hat and a gesture brings light to the room, candles in each lit by my will. I lean on my staff and pick it up, brushing away the dust.

A one room cruck house with four doors and no windows, long since abandoned. The walls are stone, the floor painted with an arcane symbol that draws an echo from my heart. A wizard has been here, recently. The lingering trace of power is not old it is... subtle... a warning against intruders.

My presence is known.

I must prepare quickly. This world is unknown – unknown to anyone from the council. I grasp my staff in both hands and extend my senses into the realm beyond. Once again I feel the eye, but I ignore it, concentrating on my task.

The air ripples and a figure steps through - a small mischievous face with a smile of remembered pain. I remember this creature from another time, but never asked his name.

"You summoned me, master?"

I hear the repressed anger in his voice, but I have no time to discuss his right to freedom. I hand him the key. "Outside. Find what this is for," I tell him, "and stay hidden."

He bows and scampers to the door. Such sprites have their use, when information is required. There are few creatures better at finding what you need. In my mind, I see the world through his eyes. The outside is a mass of greenery, like an unchecked garden, the fresh air a welcome relief. For a moment I am reminded of the old world I have seen in the paintings, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's scenes made real. Can it be I have found an idyll? A new place large enough that we might rebuild what we once—

"Master!"

A flicker of movement in the trees. I move to the door and shut it. A sharpened thumbnail slices open a scar on my palm and blood drips into the symbol on the floor, improving the chance of my spell succeeding. I grip my staff with bloodstained fingers and reach out once more, finding an answer closer at hand than I'd thought.

An apparition walks through the wall – a woman, her face lined with grief. I have used magic to bring her back. She cannot speak, but I can tell she feels violated by my action. In times past we left the dead to their rest, we venerated their passing, but now the need of the living outweighs such concerns.

I gesture to the door, she moves that way and passes through the wooden panels – a silent guardian sent to keep watch. A wizard lives here and could be friend or foe. I sense she would know the answer if she could speak, but I cannot spare the time for the questions.

A muffled shout and I glance at the walls. Thick coloured ooze is seeping through the cracks in the wall to pool on the floor. This time, I do not need the shiver to recognise magic or the spell. I make for the opposite side of the room, kick the door aside and run.

A flash, an explosion and I am in the air, the defensive magic of my robes is triggered, they harden. I hit the ground, the impact, enough to take my breath.

I am surrounded by unfamiliar plants and grass, a riot of colour in bloom. There is no time to linger and marvel, I rise quickly, gesture and extend my will; a winged horse, straight from Bellerophon's tale appears at my side. Quickly I am on its back and the land falls away beneath us.

Through the eyes of my creature I see a figure approach the house. He is dressed like me, the style giving away his heritage. Robes of a Dominican monk, interlaced with symbols of enchantment, a survivor from the old times then.

I locate him from above. He points at me with his staff, a young face, barely older than mine. To the right I see the spectral form of my minion wrestling with two figures. Her touch is death, but they with-



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stand it.

Above in the sky, I see more fragmented worlds and the lambent glow of the seething vortex – the remains of the world that was. Contained in its centre, the survivors from the time before, shielded by the magic of the ancient orders. Thousands wait there in Limbo for people like me, explorers, sent to find the remnants of lost lore and places where we can begin again. They have waited since the days of my childhood and they will wait longer still.

From the back of my steed it is clear this world is not enough for our needs. Thirty or forty could live here in comfort, but no more. This is no home for the desperate numbers clinging to life in ruins.

A scream draws me back to the present. Giant spiders burst from the forest forcing my minion to run. I command him towards a second cruck house. He runs inside, the spectre following close behind. The Pegasus descends on the far side and I run in to join them.

I shut the door and the spectre stands against it. “We have scant moments,” I say to my minions. The sprite nods and pulls an apple from the ragged pocket of his treads. I take it and eat. The magic of this world flows through the fruit, restoring my power and strength.

I look around the room. There is a chest in the corner and a broken mirror on the wall. I can see a face in the cracked slivers. A thin and haggard man, with sunken eyes and nervous expression stares back. Dark hair, streaked with white, all these marks belie my age, less than twenty turns in total from before and after the Schism. I have not seen this face – the face others see of me – in some time. There is a dangerous power in reflections. I look away and turn to the spectre and add power to her summoning. “Tell me of your past,” I say. Her pained expression tightens.

The spectre’s voice feels otherworldly and strange as she speaks. “We survived the end. My grandmother was like you, skilled in the arts. But then he came here, claiming we abandoned the ways of faith!” The words are in the Slavic tongue, the vehemence, passionate and living, in contrast to her dead state. “He brought judgment, my grandmother could not withstand him and he burned her alive. For my crimes I was permitted death, but my brother and my father...”

“They are the living dead,” I finish the sentence for her and swallow hard. “I sent you to fight them.”

Her transparent lips thin and she stares at me. “There is great pain in what you made me, but your magic gives me power to end their suffering.”

I nod. “The wizard, does he have a name?”

“Torquemada.”

I recognise this. A fellow explorer sent to find refuge for our people, but presumed lost. Spanish by birth and a member of the old church, he had been fervent and powerful, a prime candidate to lose his way. “He killed everyone?”

The dead woman nods. “Only the great spiders remain in the woodland.”

“Begging your pardon, master.” The sprite inquires. “Oughtn’t we to keep moving?”

I need no reminder. I hold out a hand, “Key.” The creature flinches and produces what I gave him. I walk to the chest, kneel down and open it. Inside are a sword, some gemstones and a piece of paper. I pocket the stones and the paper and pick up the sword, running my hand along the blade. It glows blue in response. I pass it to the sprite. “Make yourself useful.”

He takes the weapon nervously. “I have no training—”

“Stab them until they stop moving.”

“Will it hurt the dead?”

“It will now.”

The door on the far side of the room shatters. Clawed hands reach out and dead eyes capture mine in a hungry stare. I back away, clutching my staff and speak the words of magic. A ball of energy coalesces in the air, flying through the broken door. The screams from those outside are chilling.

Vines appear around the shattered arch, growing at an impossible speed. I gesture to the sprite, who steps forward, hacking and slashing at the barbed plants, but for every cut, two more growths spring into life, quickly wrapping themselves around him.

“Run!” he gasps as the tendrils reach his neck. I turn and make for the other door, the spectre in front of me melting through the wall.

Outside again, I can hear the muffled chanting of Torquemada. I turn the corner and watch as the spec-



tre erupts from the wall, her form solidifying to grab her dead brother by the throat, dragging him away from the building. I point my staff at her father and release the words. There is a splintering crack and a forked bolt of lightning passes between us, leaving him a smoking ruin on the ground.

The wizard charges towards me. His face is burned and raw. I grab his wrist and turn him, driving him to the ground. "Heathen!" he gasps under my weight. "Blasphemer!"

"Lay your accusations on yourself," I growl. "It is you who have become Judas, abandoning the people you swore to protect."

"I made no oath to help unbelievers!" He spits in my face.

I wipe the drool away whilst holding him down. He is weak, drained by his injuries and exertions. "It is not too late for you," I tell him. "Return with me through the portal. The orders will listen if you accept their judgment."

"I accept nothing from half breeds!"

In that moment I know what must be done. As I hold him, I reach into myself for the magic and my heart becomes stone. I speak the words and touch his chest, watching and feeling him wither beneath my fingers. When it ends and I stand up, only a dry husk remains.

A head nudges my hand. I turn to the Pegasus. "You served me well," I say and stroke her head. I let go of the spell and she fades, returning from whence she came.

At the door of the house I find the spectre, standing over her dead brothers. "Thank you," she says. "They are at peace now."

I nod, kneel in the dirt and begin to dig. After a time, I have two shallow graves, large enough for them. I drag the bodies over and drop them with as much grace as I can manage then replace the earth. All the while, the spectre stands over me, in silent approval.

When it is done I face her again. "I can release you now," I say.

"Your spell will end when you leave, wizard," she replies and points. The portal has returned, in my efforts I hadn't felt it arrive. "You must go."

"Others will come here," I tell her. "I will ask them to leave you be."

"That would be best," she replies.

"I walk to the shimmering door and pass through. Once more I feel the eye searching, but still it does not find me. Perhaps one day I will linger too long and it will.





Herbology and Alchemy

Alchemy is both an art and a science. Its original premise was in the transformation of base metals into rare and precious ones, but with the writings and work of the Nephilim, these principles expanded. The prima materia of all things, comprising of earth, air, fire and water, suggested boundless potential properties of transformation with the right catalyst.

Some Nephilim themselves are naturally attuned to this task; they are a blended people, each being the descendant of Egregoroi and mortal parents or grandparents.

The mix of magically attuned blood and the restless mortal mind is ideal to the further exploration of inert transformation. Their sensitivity to magic is an essential part of this process, as is their lack of personal power; else the subtleties of such constructions would be missed.

Throughout the Fractured Realms there are thousands of different plants, some are variations and memories of old Earth, but others are new and unknown to any book or catalogue.

At times, wizards have found the ingestion of herbs to enhance their magic, but such experimentation is chancy at best and many have died trying to find rumoured plants that might aid them.

Alchemists are much better at assessing the affinity and relationship of flora to the magical arts. In the monastery of the Stormsheim monks there are vast indexes of drawings and copious notes detailing the experiments with each plant found, preserved and returned.

It is known that certain roots, flowers, powders and leaves can be combined with magic to produce potions. Others can be used in rituals to summon rare creatures and others ingested to create strange magical effects, but only an alchemist has the ability and lore to determine what any discovered plant may do.

Brandenwurt

A strange flowerless plant that grows in clumps in the higher climes of the realms. When eaten, brandenwurt can make you drowsy. Infusions in boiled water helps rest and sleep.

Kalliphan

A strange red powder found between rocks and near riverbeds. Kaliphan must be filtered and purified to become potent. It is known to banish the requirement for sleep, but not indefinitely. Those who use it are warned that eventually they will need rest.

Derrioc

This yellow flowered plant can be found in many places, but becomes numerous in woodland. Many healers use it to dull the pain of wounds and the bite of insects.

Velder Root

A brown or red root found in woodland, this part of the velder plant can cause hallucinations when consumed.

Queen's Sting

A furred plant. Queen's sting irritates the skin. It can be used in brewing to add a bitter taste to drinks.

Barl Berry

A delicious red berry fruit, barl berry can be dangerous as it offers little sustenance, but has a subtle taste that can make eaters want more and more.

Dead Man's Breath

A distinctive brown plant with an oval shaped green leaf. A boiled drink infused with this, will slow the



beating heart of any living thing.

Greel

Greel plants are poisonous to eat. However, their small white seed are less potent and can be consumed. They will cause mild dizziness.

Monolite Powder

A grey powder found amidst the ruins of old stone buildings, monolite can be used to induce vomiting.



Journal of the Aelfen

They must be warned...

The forest has always been under our care. We patrol the woodland as we were ordered by the magi a hundred turns ago. This has been our bond, to wander amidst leaf and tree, living in the embrace of this silent army.

The agreement is binding. We know what they are capable of if we disobey. The stories of our past are told from mother to daughter, generation after generation remember the twilight in the caverns of our prison. We do as we are bid, shepherding tree and bush and seeking the small plants that the magi want. Finding such herbs and roots always brings reward.

Amongst our people, Rangers are respected. It has always been considered honourable for the young of the villages. To learn the ways of the land to aid us later when we return to our farms and to the hills.

One such volunteer am I, along with five others from Mossfen. My parents hoped this work would teach me respect. Perhaps they knew I cared for Braneli and sought to leave so we might be alone together against their wishes.

Now indeed we will. Our last living days spent with one another. The bitter irony would be lost on poor mother if she still lives.

I am alone in the lodge, I hear them enter the clearing, I hear their foul breath, memory of breathing, they are the new dead whose lives fade in the fresh stink of magic that raised them. They were my friends, the five from Mossfen. I grieve for the life we shared, the life that remains in my beating heart, but not in theirs. Their new master intends me to join them and I welcome it. There is no escape, only the waiting.

Even now I hear Braneli call, though she makes no sound. I ready myself to go to her and face my fate and the end of my freedom. I glimpse the black robed figure who accompanies my shambling friends, and realise that only one reason holds me back from accepting my fate.

If ever anyone is to read this, know now. The forest has been lost and the dead walk once more. A wizard is abroad in the land and we shall know war.





Physiologies

The Wizards (Egregoroi)

Humankind has never been alone. Hidden amongst the multitude of societies and civilisations since the first days of fire and writing are the Egregoroi; similar but different to us. Some say they are the chosen of the Creator, others that they themselves were creators of our world and the worlds beyond.

In ancient writings the Egregoroi have many names; Immortal, Elohim, demigod and more. To some they are prophets, guardians harbingers, seers and oracles; to others, totems of punishment, vengeance and death.

The Egregoroi are vastly knowledgeable, with lifespans far longer than any human. Their origin is wrapped up in countless mythologies and religions. Their nature is as changeable as mortals, but their outlook on life differs, owing to their continuation.

The Egregoroi are hardy individuals, capable of surviving exposure and temperature extremes beyond that of mortals, but this physical fortitude is still limited and not excessive by comparison.

The chief strength of the Egregoroi lies in their affinity with magic. They are capable of manipulating the basic material of reality in a vast number of ways. Over time, these manipulations have become taught rituals, rites and spells passed on from elder to novice.

Gradually, most Egregoroi develop an affinity with a particular aspect of magic - law, nature/neutrality or chaos. This is often shaped by their outlook on life.

Egregoroi do age and share many vulnerabilities with humans. The oldest Egregoroi might live to three hundred years. However, they have found a way to transcend their mortal form and become Gods, a transformation which makes them immortal.

Transcendence

A life changing event for any Egregoroi, the moment of transcendence is different for each individual. In the pre-schism world, this process remained elusive, took decades and centuries and for the most part, remained part of the hierarchies of faith. In the post-schism world, with the Gifted exposed to the energies of the Vortex, the time needed is much less, and with wizards travelling amongst countless realms, they gradually accrue the knowledge and experience to shed their mortal form and become conscious magic. At this point, as the individual's mortal form dissipates, so their magical affinity solidifies, meaning they become attuned to the particular aspect of magic which has been predominant in their lives.

Duelling

In the days before the edicts the ancients duelled through storms and rain, wind and sun. They boiled stone and summoned tornados as they strove against one another. Their wars formed and froze the seas, bringing about ages of ice and fire. Many times whole civilisations were wiped out by the battles of these gods.

In those early times, such battles had no rules. Only when the elders saw the ruin they were making of the world they had made did they agree to limit themselves. There were many ways that wizards elect to settle disputes. Contests became a challenge of might or skill, of chance, knowledge and wisdom, their variety made manifest by the earliest established rule; that one wizard issued the challenge and the other decided terms.

After the first Chaos War, when the first council of orders considered the question of how they might solve disputes, the matter was debated at length and many ritualised forms of combat were considered. In the end, a set of simple courtesies were agreed. Two wizards would fight with an agreed number of resources that were to hand. The challenger would approach first, but the challenged would choose the ground.

In the Fractured Worlds, most recognise that a costly duel to the death might last hours or days, owing to the preparations and wards each has cast and constructed around them. Long-time companions of



wizards are known to respect the agreed terms of a duel. It is unlikely an alchemist or an artificer would involve themselves in such a contest. Such individuals know their worth and see no benefit in the risk. Creatures coerced by the wizard, or summoned by spells at hand would participate.

The wards placed in the vestments of wizards prevent the true death and so the majority of ritualised conflicts are not fatal. However, they will remove the loser from the immediate location, often returning them to Limbo where they can meditate upon their defeat.

It is also worth remembering that not all wizards adhere to such courtesy.

The Nephilim

Throughout time, the Nephilim have existed. The first of them, wrote extensively about the world's workings, defining its transformational properties and relationships. His followers, other mortals with the blood of the Egregoroi, refined his work through the centuries.

The world remained ignorant of the truth; that magic exists and is the true catalyst of reality. Behind a veil of religion, prophecy and politics, Nephilim and Egregoroi have guided societies and nations, shepherding them towards enlightenment.

After the schism, the Nephilim are more known for the part they play in selecting, training and assisting wizards. They are known as alchemists, artificers, archivists, door wardens and more. Most live in the great towers on Limbo where they maintain a place of truce and parley for wizards to visit. These towers trade with their guests, who bring offerings in exchange for repairs to their equipment and wise counsel. Physically half breeds are amongst the weakest of our kind. Bound by their patterns as they are to the existence, so they like humanity are doomed to suffer its sickness and eventual destruction.

Humans (Mortals)

In the days of the old world they numbered countless thousands. Nations and kingdoms warred across sea and earth. Always hidden amongst them were the gifted, labouring in secret towards betterment for all. In the days after the shattering, most of humanity perished. Death by fire, preferable to starvation or the slow asphyxiation of the void. Only those protected by their secret masters or by chance survived.

Now these remnants wander the ruins of Limbo, waiting for deliverance into the realms of the wizard kings. Their physiology makes them inherently non-magical. Spells may be cast upon them, but they cannot be summoned or wield magical power themselves, without having something of the blood.

Life for humans in the Fractured Worlds is much better, but the price of passage is always steep. A wizard seeking a populace for a magical kingdom can afford to be selective and choosy. Those who skill, beauty or a proven work ethic are chosen, leaving behind the most wretched to a cursed existence in the ruins of a broken land.

A wandering wizard may find humans who will accompany them on their travels, but these are rare folk.





Journal of the Singing City

Entry 1: The Bounteous Place

We came from everywhere else, all across the ruins and wasteland to here, this city, the last city of Limbo. Beneath a purple sky it shines. Marbled walkways edged with gold and silver gilt. Clean white flagstones, minarets and domes of the ancient east. A miracle that it survived, some God must have held tight to this place whilst all else shattered.

Water pours from sculpted fountains, trees thrive and birds fly above. People walk the streets barefoot, the only clue of malcontent, the pained expression they share.

No-one goes hungry here, no-one thirsts, no-one dies. That would be release.

There is a noise; an eternal scream that comes from the city. Wherever I go the noise is with me, crouched in the back of my head, always the same in volume and pitch, to plague both my sleep and waking. The stones thrum at my touch, the air tastes thick and tense.

I find no rest here. The scream fades only when you leave. Those who try always return and are welcomed back by its curse.

An old man floats in the fountain pool. He is naked, blind and deaf. He never leaves the water, but smiles and laughs when people throw him scraps of food, mouldy bread and fruit. He shouts of *Vilon Paradis* and rambles of deliverance, *asura* and *shamayim*. In all the time I lingered, he speaks no evil.

We cannot ignore the city scream, yet we act as if we do. We clench ourselves tight whilst our souls writhe.

We are trapped in an echo of salvation, while the old man laughs at what he does not see or hear.

Above the fountain stands the tower; a hooked finger stretching into the sky. Its gleaming golden doors shine even on the darkest days. Shapes adorn them and their arch, but no wizard or servant ever comes out. Only once did I witness a door open. A girl child went inside, never to be seen again.

One day the way will open for all, when the Harrower is to appear with his pipe and bells, to lead us from this place to another.

As we wait for that day, so too does the city. Perhaps the Harrower will end its pain?

All the world is a memory; the stage is empty, the performers long dead and gone. This place was their place and we are but strangers who cannot bring ease. The city finds no comfort in us, we are loath to suckle, but we have no other milk and so we sup as it screams; eat as it howls; drink as it gibbers, cries and begs.

One day I will leave this city, never to return, but for now...

Entry 2: The Choosing

I sit up in the wet grass. I have not slept, but lain for hours between wake and sleep, the song of the city scratching at the back of my eyes.

Time is difficult to judge in this place, but there are periods of dimness which we call night, borrowing the word from our ancestors.

I am hungry. I reach out to the tree and pick fruit from its lowest branches. The apple is a gorgeous shiny red. I bite down and taste the mould I always taste here. The promise given to my eyes is betrayed as know it will be, but that does not stop me hoping each time. Such beauty cannot all be tainted, can it? Is everything promised to us corrupted with blood and ash?

I stand up. Other people are lying on the stones, inside doorways, anywhere they chose to be, but it isn't really resting. There is no rest to be found here, nothing more than existing, but the alternative is a risk. At least here we survive.

I brush mud from my robe and walk down a white stone street. The lush greenery of trees and plants stir in the gentle breeze, such a perfect image of nature, under the purple sky.

The old stories tell it best. How survivors followed the star of a true god to here; how the Elohim rewarded



faith with bliss, guiding us, protecting us as all else perished. Only this place remained untouched by the tumultuous earth, resting in the palm of its lord, defended by his minions. The people who lived here before are long gone, never to return.

In the first days we called it *The Singing City*. The noise was distant and unsettling, not as it is now, a constant torturer of mind and soul.

Over time, the lies revealed themselves and the bliss faded. The song grew louder and we learned its pain. Now it will not let us from its grip.

I turn left on the street and come to a house with a closed wooden door. Small paintings and symbols adorn the archway. The people from before were like us; dark of skin and hair, but they wore strange clothes and in the pictures, practice rituals I do not understand. I remember my father saying we came from the sand and that we were a chosen people, the towns and cities were for fools. Perhaps that's why he left us in the end.

I knock softly at the door, but no-one answers. I go inside. I know where she will be; curled in the corner of the room, her whole body clenched upon itself.

"A'idah, it is time."

She raises her head. Tears and mud stain her face, but she nods and smiles. It is a smile full of pain, but still a precious gift. She trusts me; she trusts what I will do. A moment after father disappeared she gave me the same look; one moment of indecision before she transferred her dependence to me.

"We must go."

Slowly my sister uncoils, standing on shaking legs. I hold out my hand and she takes it, leaning on me for support. "Have you eaten?" I ask. She shakes her head.

I take her outside. We stop by a tree and she picks two small apples, hardly grown or ready to eat. She forces herself to bite and swallow, her jaw set firm against the retching.

I lead her down the street, towards the fountain and the tower. A line of people are there, heads bowed, waiting as we will wait. I recognise several, but others are newcomers. All sorts are here, even pale folk from far away. Somehow we all know the time to rise from our restless rest and make our way here. Even the old man sits up in the pool, his ramblings quiet and his sightless eyes upon us in expectation.

As we near the line, no-one greets us. We take our place at the end. A'idah clings on to my hand tightly and also bows her head. I do not and choose to gaze about the place, searching for a sign of what is to come, but as with every time before, I fail.

The wizard appears twenty steps from me as if he has always been there and I didn't notice. He smiles in response to my scowl, revealing his ruined teeth and walks towards us, his long staff clicking on stone. His robe is plain white like mine, but unstained and without blemish, his face is ancient, a mess of lines and scars. He is older than anyone I have ever seen, older even than the blind old man.

He continues on, gazing at each person in turn then walks back up. His eyes alight upon my sister. "Today is a fortunate day," he says and bends down, lifting her chin with his hand. "I am called Vyasa. You are A'idah, come with me."

A'idah squeezes my hand, hard. She stares into Vyasa's eyes and shakes her head.

Vyasa's face contorts into a frown. "I will not be denied," he says. He moves fast, his shoulder into my sister's stomach, scooping her up and tearing her hand from my grasp.

"No!" I scream, but it is too late. Vyasa is walking quickly towards the golden doors. I stumble after him, breaking into a run. Others from the line shout at me. People block my way, other hands grab mine. I'm surrounded and my sister disappears from view. I hear the old man in the pool laughing and see the way open ahead. "No!" I say again, "No! No!"

I tear myself free from the crowd's grip and charge towards Vyasa and A'idah. As they reach the entrance, I crash into them, sending them flying.

The doors slam shut. We are left in darkness.

The city's scream is gone.



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Entry 3: Dark Scrutiny

Blackness. Silence. Everything gone. I am alone.

I know I am alone, because I feel it; that sense you get when there is no-one nearby, the stillness, emptiness, nothingness. It is a deeper impression now, as the two things in my life that are reliable sticks are gone.

My sister and the noise.

I almost miss the city's song; almost, but not quite. She has not ceased speaking, but the stones of this place protect me. Something of them shields those within, something dead.

Slowly, I raise myself from the floor. With curious fingers, I touch the smooth and dusty surface. A vast flat rock, bigger than any I have ever seen. I crawl around the space, wincing at the pain in my legs. I scraped the skin from my shins getting here as the doors closed.

There are no doors.

My mind refuses to accept this the first time. I fumble about the room again, searching the grooved indentations in the walls, all the time expecting the touch of cold metal alongside daubed stone, but I find no metal. The entrance I came through is no longer there.

I am not alone. I stand up. I sense this, a moment before light appears high above, revealing my gaol - a circular space of grey, all around me writing in strange symbols I do not recognise, no roof, but the illumination is blindingly bright, to hide those who command it.

"You were not invited," a woman's voice calls out.

I swallow and shade my eyes. If they wanted rid of me, they would not be talking. "Where is my sister?" I shout.

"In her rightful place, with us," the woman replies.

"I came here for her," I say. "She is too young to be on her own."

"We will decide that. You cannot be with her. You are not gifted, like her."

"How can you tell?"

"We tested your blood."

I close my eyes against their light, but continue to look up. I am dizzy. "I see things, as she does, I knew you were here before you came, I understand the magic of these stones, the pain and purpose behind the city's song."

There is silence - a deliberation; more than one of them then. The quiet discussion goes on a long time and I back away to the wall, leaning for a while then slipping down to sit and rest. My stomach throbs, a murmur of rebellion against my mouldy meal. I clench myself around it, determined not to give way and decorate this space while my fate is decided.

I expect an answer, but nothing comes. Their scrutiny weighs on me, their eyes, evaluating my worth and use to their hidden plan.

Time goes by. I wait, wait and wait. Eventually, the lights fade. The voice and her companions are gone and I am alone again.

I close my eyes. If I am to leave, they will wake me when they come to drag me out.

Entry 4: Enlightening

I thought they would wake me with rough hands. I was wrong. The city's noise had banished sleep from me for too long and its return renders me senseless when they come. I remember nothing of being moved or manhandled and nothing of the transport. My ignorance preserves their secret ways.

I open my eyes to a light different to all I have known; calm and constant, not the seething half-illumination of the vortex, but clean and healing brightness.

I am lying down. A hand caresses my cheek. Above me a woman's face, she smiles and speaks to me in a whisper. "You mourn for the loss of those you love. They are gone. I cannot recall them to you."

I raise myself to my elbows and her hand withdraws. "Where am I?" I ask.

"In a place between places," she replies, "no Elysian field, but there is time for us all to be delivered. You



are still in the city of Barzakh as you were, but those who come here are afforded more comfort. You are fortunate to be accepted."

I look around. The room is white stone, the walls polished smooth and shining. I gaze at my host. Her perfect teeth and beautiful oval face an antidote to her words. "I only seek my sister," I say. "Is she harmed?"

"No, but you will not see her again. That is the price of you being here."

My mood darkens. "Why be so cruel?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "This is not cruelty, only truth. You are not worthy of her. You are permitted to remain so you may serve as others of our station serve. You will join us and trust your work will help all those gifted like your sister and capable of delivering us from torment."

The words are barbs to my heart. I try not to react, but it is hard when all you value is taken. I stare at the woman and breathe. Anger will not avail me. She is dressed in a similar white robe to mine, but hers is covered in symbols, smudged letters that I cannot make out. These marks, her face, hair and hands a dark contrast to all that surrounds us. "Who are you?" I ask.

Her eyes stray to her sleeve and flick from left to right as they read. "My name is Fakhr," she says. "I am of the Hadith - the truthseekers. I serve the sihr. If you grant us what you claimed, you will do also." She stands up and offers me her hand. I take it and stand with her. The pain in my legs is gone. I glance down; the wounds from before are puckered scars.

"What do you want from me?" I ask.

"You claim to understand the purpose of the city's song," Fakhr says. "What is it?"

I flinch and avoid the question, staring at the wall. "I am hungry and thirsty. Is this how your people treat guests?"

"We do not permit guests," Fakhr replies.

Again, I see no door in this room. I touch the stone with my fingers and feel the same deadening as before. I turn to Fakhr. "How long have you been here?"

She frowns. "I arrived only moments before you awoke."

"No, I mean since you came through the door?"

Fakhr shrugs. "I was a little girl then, clinging to the arm of my father before they took me from him, but this is the way of things. There is no way to tell how long ago that was. I found my place here."

I swallow my instinctive reply and continue my questioning. "Do you remember the city's song?"

"Of course," she says, but I sense a confusion about her. "Did you truly learn its secret?"

"What happens if I say no?"

"They will not let you stay."

"Then I know its purpose."

Fakhr stares at me and this time I hold her gaze without flinching. "I said, I am hungry and thirsty. I have eaten beautiful corruption for weeks. If you can block out the song from here, there must be decent food."

Fakhr nods. "I will get you some."

"That would be appreciated."

Entry 5: Sustenance

She takes my hands and we move toward the wall without hesitation. I flinch as we walk into it, but there is only the slightest sensation, a tingling in my arms and legs.

In the room beyond, the light is subdued. I see written marks on the hewn stone as before and turn to my guide. "Were those walls real?" I ask.

"As real as required," she says and smiles. "You would not have left without my hand in yours."

"Then I am your prisoner?"

"That is yet to be determined."

We walk along passageways, up uneven steps, further and further from the outside. I think back on it, the faces of people in the line are fading away, the tree and the old man too, all becoming dim.

We come to a door. Fakhr stares at it. Her face contorts and becomes strained. Slowly, she reaches out



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a hand and grasps the handle as if discovering it for the first time. The door is unlocked and the hinges creak as she opens it.

We walk through into a wide cavernous room lit with torches. I see figures clad like us in robes huddled around a long table, on its surface, a box containing sickly green plants. They shuffled around, taking turns to pluck from the growth and eat. I move closer, my belly rumbles. A man turns and glares at me. His robes are grey and unwashed. Writing covers his arms and legs too, but my gaze is drawn to his fingers, cut and bloodied, leaves in his hands, sharp leaves like knives. He smiles at me, displaying broken teeth and jams the leaves into his mouth, grimacing as he chews and swallows. Blood and drool run from his lip to the floor.

"Dhari leaves will sustain you," Fakhr says as if recalling by rote. "They are bitter but not corrupt."

"The taste of penance," I reply.

The pinched look returns to her face; confusion as if she knows she should understand me, but does not.

"What is the secret of the city's song?" she asks again.

I reach for the plants and pluck several leaves from the nearest. Carefully I roll them with my fingers and place them in my mouth, chewing gently. The taste is bitter, but clear and clean. The fog rolls from my mind. "There is no bliss to be found in Barzakh," I tell her.

She nods slowly. "That sounds like something I would say."

I grab the man with broken teeth and drag him from the table. "What is your name?" I demand.

"I—I do not..."

"You do not know?"

"I cannot... remember..."

I let him go. He slips back to the table and the leaves. I turn to Fakhr. "The song of the city its curse, the flaw in perfection. Without it, there is heaven for a time, out there on the white stone streets, amidst the grass and trees and crystal clear fountains. Only hunger holds us to mortality and the taste of corruption, banishes bliss once more. The old man of the pool who is blind and deaf knows heaven until his belly rumbles, but only he is so gifted."

Fakhr stares at me. "Why would the ancients of this place be so cruel?" she asks.

"The city's song is magic made to keep its dwellers on the ground and their keepers in the sky," I explain.

"I know why it is made and how it can be stopped."

"Tell me."

"I will see my sister first."

She hesitates. Her eyes drop from mine and stray to the others in the room; the bloody fingers and filthy robes. "It is forbidden," she murmurs.

I take her hand and draw her close. I nod at the shuffling figures. "Do you wish to become like them? You know in your heart that soon you will be the same, unable to leave this room, your name lost to the stillness. Let me see A'idah one last time, let me speak with the elders and all things may change for you and for all of these people."

"You are not permitted."

"Do you know why?"

Her confusion returns. "I used to know," she says.

I take her other hand in mine. "Then let me help you," I say.

Slowly, her face relaxes and she nods.

I smile.

Entry 6: The Warden

We walk through an archway to a spiral staircase. As we leave the hall, I feel the disapproval of those behind us. I stop for a moment, turn around and meet the stares, the smudged faces of men, women and children. This is transgression. We are breaking the laws they have lived by for as long as they remember, but these are memories and fragments. They cannot recall why the arch and stairway is forbidden.



I smile and shrug in apology then turn and begin the climb.

Fahkr leads. Her hand in mine is warm and her grip firm. I trace my index finger along the cut scar on her wrist, deciphering its shape. She stops on the stairs, turns and lets go, glaring at me. "What are you doing?"

"Learning your past," I reply. I grab her hand again and turn it palm upwards, revealing the scars on her arm. "You did this," I say, "so you could remember your name."

Tears fill her eyes, "Let go of me," she says.

I release her and we climb in awkward silence. I did not tell her the whole truth. Already I sense the same magic at work upon me. I cannot recall my father's name, the faces of our tribe grow dim. The bitter dhari leaf helps and as I chew it, memories become vivid once more, but I know those that are lost are gone, never to return.

The steps bring us to a new hallway. There is a large man in front of a wooden door sat on a chair. He is bald, his robes and dark skin daubed with paint and ink; word upon word upon word. The walls either side of him are covered in scratched writing, the stench and stain on the floor under his seat tells me he does not moved to tend to any mortal need. In one hand he clutches a long spear, the other is bloody and holds a handful of leaves.

I walk up to him and meet his vacant gaze. He blinks once, deliberately and his eyes focus on mine. "Who are you?" I ask.

He breaks our stare and reads the words from the wall. "I am the Warden," he says.

I shake my head. "They told you that," I tell him. "It isn't true. You must let us pass."

His bald brow creases in confusion. "I am the Warden," he repeats. "No-one shall go through the door and disturb the masters. Anyone who tries is turned away."

I appraise him. His scarred arms are the size of my legs. The spear is held in stiff, thick fingers. He has fought many times, defending the door from those who tried to force their way past him. Violence isn't the way. Slowly, I reach out my hand and close it over his. "Let go of your burden," I say. "Rest, you earned it."

He stands up, looming over me. I smell sweat, piss and shit. For a moment, I think he is going to lay hands on me, but then his gaze moves on down the hall and he walks away, leaving behind his spear and the stink of his purpose.

"How did you... do that?" Fahkr asks in wonder.

"I told him the truth," I say.

I grab the chair and drag it aside, smearing filth across the floor. Then I grasp the door handle and it turns.

Entry 7: The Sihr

I open the door. There is a noise - a sustained keening, like a memory from within and without. People in the room are singing this note, it rises and falls as each exhausts their breath and re-joins afresh. I recognise the song, it is the city's voice I have been free of since I passed through the entrance to this place. This room is its source. These people, the sihr, are its choir.

I step into the darkened room with the false warden's spear in my hand. All around I sense stone and people. The light of the hallway falls upon their bodies as they sing, lying, writhing, moving on the floor. Fakhr is at my shoulder. She gasps and clutches my arm. A head turns towards her, but the eyes of the woman who stares look through us both. "You should not be here," she slurs before returning to the keen - the same voice from before, when I first followed my sister through the door.

I am reminded of my purpose. "A'idah!" I shout. "Are you here?"

My cries attract more attention, but no direct reply. The people sing as before, reflexively joining and re-joining. Gleaming eyes peering at us from the undulating shadows. The air of this place is thick and cloying, something you can taste. The spear responds, tingling my fingers.

"The woman is right, we should not be here," Fakhr says, her voice shaking. "We are not sihr!"

"Neither are they, anymore," I reply and step forward, picking my way through the tangle of people. The



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spell holds them all in thrall. Perhaps they began long ago, but the magic has run away and become a living thing. A carpet of flesh and noise, that moves around my feet and brushes my legs. The people are filthy, entwined as snakes or lovers might be, but with no urgency to their languid embraces, only sightless struggle and sound to fulfil a need which has no name.

My eyes adjust and I see an archway in the centre of the room. I reach out and grasp it to steady myself. It is made of polished wood and unlike most things here, remains plain. I sense no magic in it.

"The passageway!" Fakhr gasps. "The gate to deliverance!"

I shake my head. "There is no power in this artifice. It is carved, meticulously made, but not enchanted. It is a false idol." I turn slowly, the spear in my hands is glowing, revealing the room and more writhing bodies. "Maybe they believe they are making a portal here, but they are not. This is the song, taken from this room into the walls and then out into the city. This unending noise is what keeps people awake at night." "You said you knew its purpose," Fakhr says and points at the arch. "If not to deliver us through gateway, then for what?"

I ignore her question, instead, I stare around the brightening room. In the furthest corner, I find what I am seeking - A'idah curled up as she was when I found her, before she was taken. I see fear in her eyes, banished by hope when she notices me.

I hurry to her side, stumbling over twisted bodies and worse. She is in my arms, face wet with tears. I head back toward the door, but hear a bell ringing on the other side of the room. Immediately, several other figures rise from the floor and also make their way to the exit.

"What is happening?" I ask Fakhr.

"It is the sign that the sihr must answer," she explains.

"What sign?"

"The golden doors open. Another will be entering the tower."

I carry A'idah from the room. Four of the singers are ahead of us in the hallway, numbly making for the stairs. "This is our chance," I breathe.

"Our chance for what?" Fakhr asks.

"To escape."

Entry 8: Leaving the Tower

We descend the stairs, I lead with the spear in my right hand, A'idiah clutching my sleeve. Fakhr follows us both, her face pinched with confusion. She wants to be free, but everything she remembers is being transgressed.

"We should not—"

I face her. "You asked me the purpose of the city's song? You cannot recall your past without looking at your wrist and your clothes. Your masters sent you to me to find it out, but when we left that room they did not stop us or ask again. The man who claimed to be the warden could not remember what he was supposed to ward. You saw what became of your sihr with their mindless writhing. Even these people we follow now, only reply to their bell out of fading instinct."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means that the song is magic, drawing from the soul of each man, woman and child in this tower.

Thieving what defines you to perpetuate itself, stealing your memories Fakhr, leaving you so broken that you do not know your own name!"

I turn away from her, not caring if she follows or not. A'idiah is by my side now, the sole reason for my coming here, returned to me. Fakhr can escape with us, or stay in the fugue. She has most of the truth she asked of me, only one question remains.

What is the song's purpose?

The sihr from the room have disappeared down the winding stairwell. I hurry after them, A'idiah right behind me, her hand squeezes my fingers. As we descend, the light disappears. The glow from the spear is gone, but moving shadows and pale white robes stand out in the gloom. A door opens to our left and new illumination reveals a gantry across a hole. I recognise this place, not from memory, but from being below. The sihr shuffle along the gantry. A'idiah goes to follow them but I hold her back. "No, that is not for us," I



say.

"Then where do we go?"

"This way."

I lead her on down the stairs and into the darkness. The steps become thin and wet, the walls too are slick with moisture. Behind us I hear Fakhr hiss as she slips on the stone. I ignore her and press on.

Down, down, down, into the dark where hands and feet disappear. We are swallowed by cloying air and hack up our fetid breaths in echoing coughs. There is something dead and decayed in this darkness and something else that lurks and watches.

I stop and look back. I cannot see Ai'diah, but I her hand is still mine. Another presence joins us. "The doors are below," Fakhr says.

"Will we be barred?" I ask.

"I do not know. I have no memory of this place."

I continue the descent, my hand on the damp wall. I sense each step brings us closer to the lurker. My legs tremble and soon I halt again. I feel the mighty stench of judgement staring out of the shadows, weighing the moments of my life with lidless eyes.

Then Ai'diah takes the spear from my hand and light wells from it once more. The fear is banished and the unseen lurker slithers away into its darkness.

Ai'diah turns and smiles at me. For the first time, there is no pain in her eyes, only strength.

"Courage," she says and tugs at my arm.

I follow her down the last few steps. The small room is just as I remember it, a circular stone space with no door. A small ragged figure lies huddled in the centre shivering.

Ai'diah walks to the wall and places the spear against it. The stone fades and the doors appear. "We must leave," she says.

I nod and she pushes the doors wide.

Entry 9: The Old Man

The doors open, light embraces us and the song of the city returns like an old and bitter friend.

I shade my eyes. Before us lies the square, empty now unlike the last time we were here. Trees and flowers sway in a gentle breeze, the white stone of walls and floor gleams. I am seduced by this. The dirt, smell and taste of the tower is washed away by the sight. I hear the sound of splashing and smile.

I take the spear from Ai'diah's hand and stride forwards towards the pool. The old man is there as he was before. He floats in the water, a beatific grin upon his face. He does not note our approach, but as my shadow falls across his face, his expression changes.

"Why did you come?" he asks.

"You know why," I tell him.

A feeble hand reaches out and grabs my wrist. The old man frowns. "Your gift does not suffice."

"The path is not for me."

"Then bring forth the one who is to pass."

I turn to my sister and smile sadly. She nods and grasps the spindly arm. The old man smiles.

"This one may take the journey," he says. "Come." He draws her to him.

"Wait!" I say, holding her for a moment. I let go and hold the spear in both hands. With little effort, I snap the blade from its shaft and hand the wood to her. "A wizard should carry a staff."

"Is that what I am?" she asks.

"It is what you were, are and will become," says the old man. He pulls her towards him and backs away, leaving her in the centre. "Dive down," he says.

Ai'diah's gazes at me. She touches a finger to her lips, breathes deeply and drops beneath the surface.

The song swells within me and without. All around becomes harmonious affirmation. The bass thrills, the soprano soars and all notes sustain. There is magic in the melody, an ancient purpose encrypted by us that we have forgotten as it carried away our souls. We have sung and lost ourselves, the tower dwellers

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more than anyone. What remains are spent shells, renewed only by the fulfilment of purpose, of that one full chord, all octave affirmation that swells...

Then falls.

I gaze into the rippling waters. Ai'diah is gone.

I turn to Fakhr. She is on her knees crying and staring at her scarred arms and legs. "Now you know the purpose of the singing."

"I remember now," she wails. "I remember everything of who I was!"

I help her to her feet. "Who you are," I tell her. "Who you will be again."

The song is far from my mind now - a lingering echo of before. The city has been sated, a wizard has left us and be sent to where she belongs. Legends say there will be a time when one returns and opens the way for us all.

All the world *is* a memory; the stage *is* empty, but the performers are no longer absent. The dead are raised and purpose returns. The memory of generations is upon me. I know why we and they built this place, why we are here as others are here. To deliver a voyager to the empyrean, a voyager to the worlds beyond. I walk from the pool and the old man to the spot under the tree where I awoke. With Fakhr beside me, I lay down, close my eyes and sleep.







Artefacts

Nephilim skilled in the arts of forging and construction are trained as artificers. These lorewise folk are capable of making all manner of devices and items imbued with magic. Some are gifted with a natural affinity for the seeing the gift in objects and can simply craft them in such a way as to let this potential speak. Others require glyphs and runes to imbue an item with power taken from elsewhere. Generally, items made with the former ability are less powerful, although some of the greatest works of the ancient past were made by these means and it is these that are spoken of in legend and song.

Armour

Artificers are half-blooded mortals whose gifts give them extraordinary insight into the workings of magic. Given time, their elaborate wards can be made to perform almost any task, enhancing the nature of any substance.

The armour of wizards is crafted with enchantments. The magical workings empower the natural properties of metal, leather and other resistant forgings to make protections tougher than anything that might be crafted without such work.

Upon this, sigils are woven into the surface of a wizard's garb. These devices are conditional protections, designed to activate against specific threat. The most common is the warding that will transport a wizard from a realm into a predetermined safe place when their life is threatened. The activation of this ward occurs when immersed in virulent magic or the material of the armour itself has been broken. Either should happen instantaneously.

Staffs

A staff is the most common permanent construction carried by wizards. In times past, the attainment of a staff was a rite of passage for those trained in the use of their gift.

The staff of a wizard amplifies the magic of its owner. Most are used to assist in the casting of spells, having been previously attuned to the wizard's power. A staff makes the invocations easier and more focused, preventing exhaustion in the rigours of combat or other desperate circumstances.

Some staffs are also imbued with spells of their own. These require charging through a continual invoked connection with the vortex. A portion of the wizard's gift and the residual vortex energy around castings are absorbed into the wards placed on a correctly enchanted staff and further casting will then unlock a more powerful expression of magic.

Talismans

These are enhancements designed by artificers to resonate with the magic of the wizard. The choice of talismans is another way in which spells and physical prowess can be improved, manipulated and empowered.

Talismans can be grouped into seven types based mostly around the ways in which they are activated and used, but all affect physicality or magical power. The different ways in which they do this and in which they are constructed determine their categorisation.

Other Items

The vast magical machines used by Wizard Kings to refine and shape their realms are the product of much more complex artifice. These can be used to remake the land itself should it be required.

Temporary weapons are also made by wizards to be used by their creatures. On occasion, these can be made more permanent.

It is rare for an artificer or wizard skilled in crafting to make items that do not fulfil the purposes mentioned above. However, such things are made and can be found throughout the Fractured Realms. They might be small charms of warding, finding, scrying or otherwise, manufactured for specific purpose or as



a gift for a mortal.

Legendary Items

In the oldest days, items were forged that transcend the limitations of imbuelement and ritual. Hints of these periapts appear in stories told to children. They have many names, appearing and disappearing throughout history in moments of crisis.

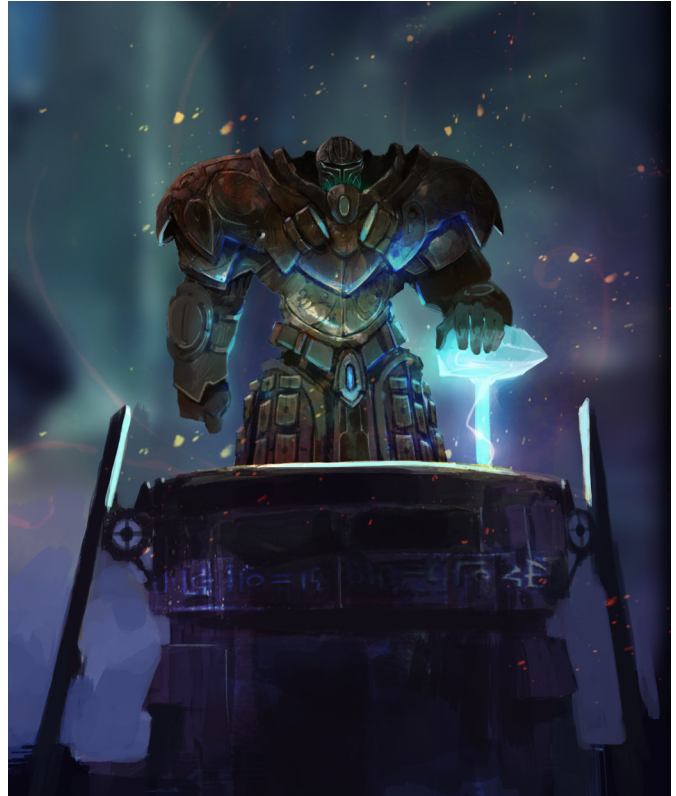
The Slayer Sword

Forged in the earliest of times by an unknown master of the art, the Slayer sword is unadorned by runes or symbols. To all intents and purposes it is a beautifully crafted and polished weapon with a curved blade that remains sharp without need of care. In the hands of the gifted it changes, becoming a conduit for the wielder's power. Nephilim have wielded the sword and become heroes of myth. Wizards become killers of gods.

The sword is potent against gifted foes and can enable its wielder to kill those who wield the magic.

An attack from the sword unbinds all magical defence. No wizard, demigod or god is known to have survived the touch of the blade.

The Slayer sword cannot be transported through portals. To be moved, it must be carried to a different location.



The Seer Stone

An ancient blue gemstone the size of a large egg, this stone has known many names. In truth it is no gem, but a plane stone, polished by its maker so finely that its surface hardened and became like brittle diamond.

The stone grants visions to those who stare into its depths. Its power is not restricted to the gifted. Mortals have been known to make use of it and there are stories of its origin amidst the oldest Dwarven tellers. Over time it is said to drive its keeper's mad as they try to interpret the strange glimpses of fate that it grants.

The Box of Secrets

Throughout history, there have been legends of the box that contains forbidden spirits and power trapped within its depths by the Creator God. Curiosity is a powerful temptation to some and the story of the box is told in many forms so the young might be cautious when finding something strange, magical and dangerous.

There is little retained lore about the box itself. Some claim it to be a fiendishly complex mechanism that traps spirits and power in each layer its design. This story is preserved to us in the game children play when unwrapping the layers of a gift. Others claim it is simple and unadorned with a catch and lock that defies the will of the strongest and deftest of keepers.

What the box contains, who can know?

The Hammer of Storms

In many religions of the old world there are Gods of the wind and rain. Some war in the heavens, others wreak their moods upon the earth through by shaping the sky to their ends.

The Hammer of Storms grants a wielder the ability to shape and command violence from the elements of air and water. It is said an elemental of each aspect is contained within the hammer itself and that these

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poor creatures call to their brethren, stirring them to violence as they strive to free their kin. In the legends, many wielders of the hammer become lost in the storms they summon and are never heard of again.

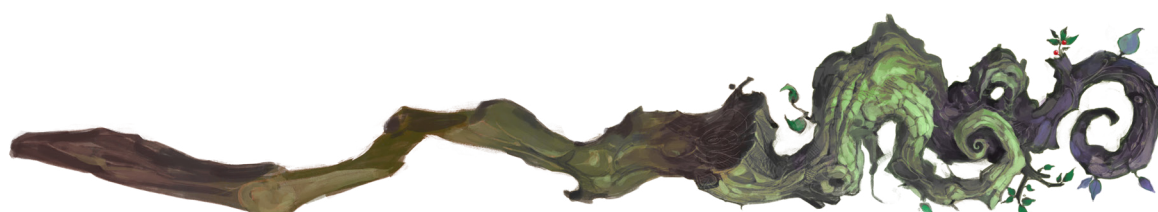
Runic Language

The construction of portals and encoding of runes is a complex art. Alchemists of the various orders of Limbo have managed to recover much of the lost lore, recreating and replicating some of the devices produced by the ancient masters. However, much still eludes them.

In many locations, the old runes and writings of

What they have managed to translate is the basic elements of the symbol language of ancient engineers.

Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter
	A		H		O		V
	B		I		P		W
	C		J		Q		Y
	D		K		R		Z
	E		L		S		
	F		M		T		
	G		N		U		





Meeting the Cursed Ones

I stood in the antechamber next to the wizard as they entered. I had been warned by my master what to expect, but was unable to resist surprise.

The room, lit dimly with candles as they filed into the hall, seemed to darken as they approached. There were eight of them, all pale of complexion, despite their heritage. I could feel the wizard's fear, palpable, and radiating across the room. I studied him, no outward sign betrayed his emotions, but they already sensed it and knew.

They arranged themselves in a semi-circle, facing him. Not too close as to tempt effrontery, but near enough to perpetuate the trepidation and fear that clutched at us. Of me, they took little notice, numbering my presence amongst the undead who watched over us all in irresistible vigilance.

Vampires they call themselves, so named by the power they found. The ancient texts name the rituals as power of long past, and ancient history, re-awoken in the last days of the old world.

The Conclave named them *drinkers of blood and eaters of flesh*, warning of the curse they would spread. The Horsemen made them, it is said. A ritual that corrupted half-blood folk like myself into mortals who fear the light.

After a pause, long enough to appraise and also to unsettle, their leader stepped forward, a half smile about his lips. He sketched a bow, both perfunctory and mocking.

"My Lord."

His whisper carried his words throughout the hall just as his posture conveyed his patronising acknowledgement of a superior.

The wizard waited as he had been instructed, he had lost the initiative and used the silence to try to grasp it back, falling utterly. The enforced pause served only to increase the tension.

"I have been given a task for you."

As he spoke, his voice betrayed his nerves. The man smiled further.

"We exist to serve our... masters." *But not you.* The implication of the words was not lost to me or the wizard.

"You are to begin working upon the general populace, to increase dissension and chaos amongst the people. Only then will our legion march upon the cities."

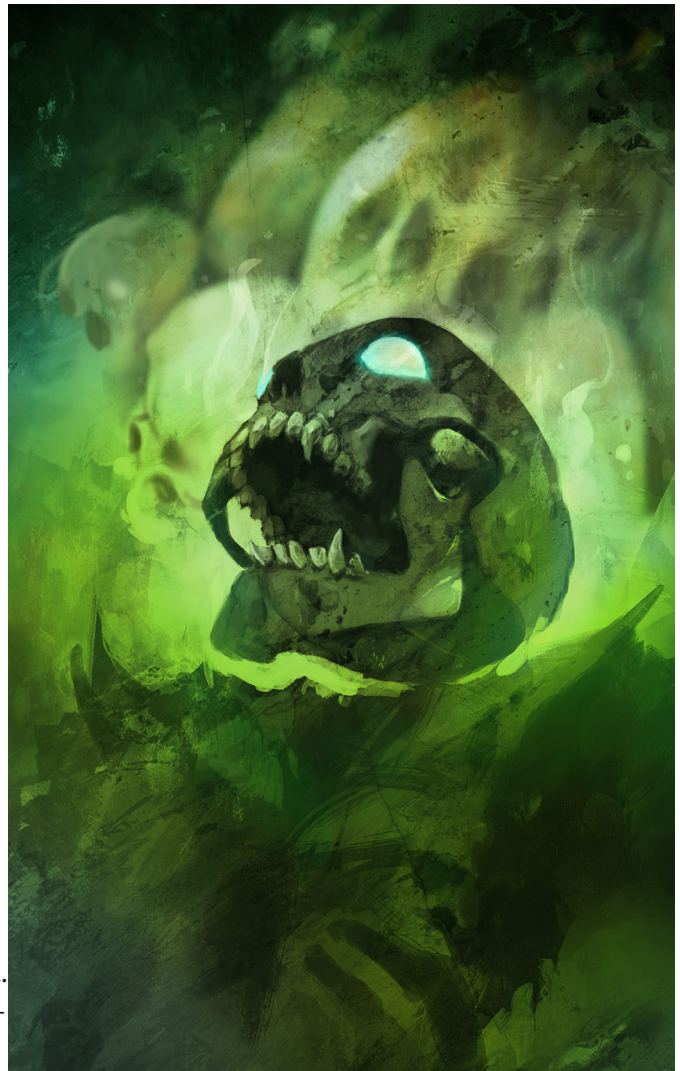
"It will be done."

Once again the wizard paused, He had completed his instructions and yet I sensed that he wished to say more, to take back the authority he felt was his due, the fear and revulsion was rapidly being replaced by frustration and anger.

As he opened his mouth to speak, the strangers turned their backs and left the room.

I felt some grim amusement at their bravado and struggled to keep the smile from my face. The wizard could perhaps face down any three of them, but all eight? Even with his undying guards, they knew they outmatched him. Yet, they respected him well enough to be subtle and wary. The insult might be explained away as ignorance should he prove a worthy foe.

A high compliment and, once his anger cools, he might come to understand it.





The Bestiary

Since the early days of the world, legends have existed about monsters wandering the lands and living in strange hidden kingdoms. These have taken many forms, reflecting the myths and legends built up around their existence.

The Dooms

After the first wars between wizards, creatures that could not be accepted were imprisoned in vast caverns beneath the world. In the lead up to and the aftermath of apocalypse, these creatures were set free. Most to perish along with entire nations of humanity, but some survived and came to prosper in the Fractured Worlds.

There are two origins of creatures. One is the conjured origin, where they appear as summoned immediately with no knowledge of any past, are suddenly self-aware and immediately slaved to the command of the wizard. In some ways this is little more than an extension of illusory magic.

The second is the hidden origin, where they retain memories of a life they have been stolen from to answer the magical call of their summoner; yanked from home and compelled to serve.

Magic is intrinsic to these creations, but unlike humans, they do not radiate it in ways that can sustain a wizard, instead it is part of what they are. This makes them susceptible to a wizard's spells. In the first Chaos War, vast armies of creatures were forced to fight one another at the behest of their wizard masters. The time of peace afterwards occurred when these creatures disappeared. Some say they were hunted down, others that they were imprisoned in vast dooms beneath the world.

After the Schism, the release of magical energy changed the nature of reality. The Rephaim are no longer hidden and live upon many of the fragmented worlds. The magic of wizards is stronger since the change and the connection between these creatures and the Egregoroi much more pronounced, making the summoning spells of wizards easier to cast and succeed.

Amidst the myriad of Fractured Worlds, all manner of beings can exist. The dreams and nightmares of the gifted are made flesh and the summoning magic of wizards calls to the stuff of creation. The summoned creature can be one called from family and kin on a far flung world to serve a new master, or it might be newly made there and then out of the conscious desire of the wizard. All summoned creatures share common traits. They are subservient to the will of the wizard and they are aware of their plight. Some are intelligent, others are not.

Summoning Creatures

The use of such beings for personal gain is an undertaking that should be approached with great deal of caution and only when one has made sufficient researches into the nature of the creature one intends to contact.

Many think of summoned as universally evil, this is simply not the case. While many are self-serving at best, if not downright dedicated to the active pursuit of evil for its own sake, an equal number are quite the opposite. Only diligent research will allow the summoner to comprehend the nature of that which is being summoned.

In the days of old Earth, books littered libraries full of stories of creatures, their predilections, weaknesses and strengths. Now we must rely on what lore we can scrape together before chancing the magic.

That said, with the vortex released and bathing worlds in magical energy, our invocations are answered much more readily and easily, although some still fail.

Spells by rote are the most common forms of summoning. These bring forth common allies known to most wizards. Hosts of such creatures are also available through the enhancements made to staves by the artificers of Limbo. Both methods are quick and dirty expressions of magic that can be called upon in battle.

Beyond this, there are rarer creatures, whose calling is treacherous, requiring preparation and ritual.



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Air Elementals

The sand swirled and for a moment, I thought I saw the figure of a man within the whirlwind, his hand reaching out to me.

The air made into purpose and form, these elementals might be the echoing ghosts of dead spirits or sentience born into the wind itself. No wizard knows as none have ever spoken with these silent storms.



Dwarves (Dweorg, Juje)

"Are you a..."

Galina fell silent, staring, afraid to ask her question. The short bearded man held her gaze, his eyes like chips of stone and his thick fingers curled tight around a hammer that was taller than him. Then, abruptly, he burst out laughing, a low barking growl which didn't little to ease her caution.

"Aye, I'm of the old folk, girl. The dvergr as we were known to your kind, the stone dwellers of the deep."

Determined and unyielding, Dwarves live in a multitude of cavernous realms. To some they have minds like the stone they live within, to others they are fast friends and loyal companions. Dwarven society is ordered and has a strict hierarchy. They view a summoning by wizards as an opportunity to prospect new realms.

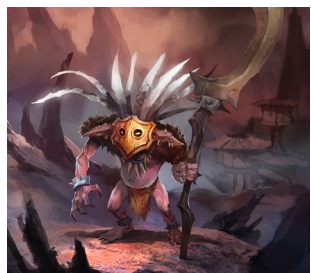


Elves (Aelfen)

The strangers were thin and tall, with long hair, angular faces and almond shaped eyes. The rocklight cast shadows on their faces, lighting them from below, making them seem severe and judgemental.

Ten of them, dressed in loose fitting robes. They carried bows and long hunting knives. Their leader wore a circlet of dark leaves, his open hand keeping the arrows at bay. Behind them, a vast city on a midnight lake, curved towers and houses surrounded by an obsidian wall.

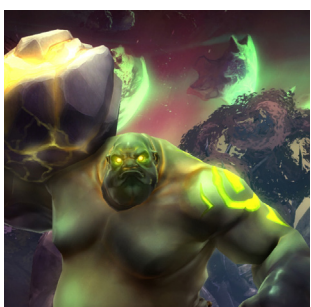
Almost human in appearance, but gifted with greater sight and agility, Elves live in many of the outer worlds where the semblance of old nature asserts itself best. Woodland realms suit them, allowing most use of their affinity for all growing things.



Goblin (Gobelin)

Piers had seen such a creature before, but only in a book as a child while being instructed in Avignon. A gobelin – one of the world's ancient monsters, summoned by the earliest wizards to bring mischief to their enemies.

When first discovered, these creatures were regarded as an infestation. Goblins breed quickly and their colonies quickly overpower the realms they inhabit. They are a useful asset in exploring new realms and assisting wizards owing to their quick strength and energy, but they are ultimately self-serving and cowardly in nature.



Giant (Ispolin, Jotun)

He could sense the magic of the creature; a vague wrongness about it. It was three or four times the size of a man, its body covered in sharp spiky fur, now matted with blood around its strangely shaped mouth. It stared back, all four of its eyes focused on him as he struggled to inch back up the slope.

A regressive throwback in human form, Giants exhibit the intelligence of the earliest people. They are difficult to manage, but useful in terms of their

strength and height. Many wizards summon them to assist in building lairs and other structures in the fragmented worlds. They have a placid nature which is slow to anger.



Hydra

She marvelled at the creature, staring in horrid fascination as the multiple heads nipped and snarled at each other until they found agreement and resumed their lumbering walk through the ruined city walls.

Serpentile creatures found in marshes, swamps, tunnels and caves, they are awkward creatures, often divided in purpose by the disagreements of each snakelike head. However, when threatened, the Hydrae will unite in aggression and action. The spell to master such a creature is arduous and complicated as each head must be seduced and controlled. They are deadly dangerous to foes.



Manticore

"It is a corruption - a hell beast."

Katya knelt down to examine the strange corpse. Leathery wings attached to a powerful feline body, but the dead eyes that stared up at her were human.

A strange hybrid creature born from the fusion of others, Manticores are rumoured to be the byproduct of experimentation by the rebellious Iconics known as the Four Horsemen in the aftermath of the Schism.

However they came about, the creatures are wild, vicious and unpredictable. Only the strongest wizards can master them.

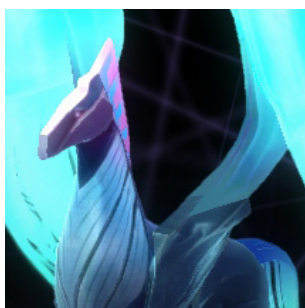


Paladin (Palatin)

"What are you?" Katya asked.

"I don't know," Brynfrid said, lowering her weapon. "But whatever I am, I swear, by Odin, I'll protect you."

Paladins are transformed mortals, forged into enchanted suits of armour. The purity of their faith and commitment blends with the magic ritual to make them hardy and immortal, living until their armour rusts and dissolves around them.



Pegasus

She crouched low on the creatures back and felt the wind in her hair. The winged horse galloped through the sky, its movements strained and ungainly compared to the soaring birds, but with a beauty and grace all of its own.

Magical horses trapped for centuries beneath the earth, the Pegasi are free once more to roam skies and plains. Loyal and lawful creatures whose intellect rivals that of humans, Pegasi have not forgotten their imprisonment and remain wary of wizards in the wild.



Unicorn

A flicker of movement drew Galina's attention, a horse walking across open ground, stark white in colour with a horn between its ears. On its back, a woman, her hair long and raven dark across its back. She regarded Galina and Hino with a solemn expression, but did not speak.

A strange creature of legend, as intelligent as a man, but with the body of a horse and a great horn that is sharp enough to cut steel, Unicorns (also known as Re'em) are solitary and lonely creatures. Since the Schism, they have become more numerous, but remain distrustful of each other.



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Sapphire Dragon

Dragons. The oldest stories he remembered being told as a child. The great Ryūjin father of the first Emperor Jimmu and Yamata no Orochi the eight-headed serpent. The creature he saw was neither of these, nor a Nāga of the Buddhists, but he recognised it for being kin of those ancient legends.

Creatures of myth in ancient times, some say they were made real by the change, others that they had always been real, just remaining on the fringe of the world, to be found by sailors and explorers into its farthest reaches.

Now, they live in their own realms, drawn by the currents of magic across the void. Dragons are the most powerful of beasts a wizard might summon, difficult to control, but once mastered they are powerful minions, capable of defeating the strongest of wizards.



Eagle

He heard a noise from above, the sound of wings - large wings. Instinctively he ducked as something swooped overhead. The faint trace of a spell in the air and the shadow of a bird above, larger than anything he'd ever seen. It wheeled quickly, screamed and dived at him again. The snap of claws and beak, close to his ear and then the creature was on him, its weight and strength pinning him to the ground.

An ancient and majestic bird of the old world, eagles are difficult to tame, but loyal and fierce fighting companions. Eagles are found in realms like the lands of before. They normally build eyries in tall trees or on high cliffs. Many lay two eggs, but the older, larger chick frequently kills its younger sibling once it has hatched. The dominant chick tends to be a female, as they are bigger than males.



Elephant

They came thundering across the open ground, maddened by whips and a wizard's compulsion. On the walls, soldiers screamed; they had never seen anything like these huge behemoths of the east.

Monsters of the ancient world that rampaged through battle lines of friend and foe alike, the elephant is a sturdy, biddable and protective mount for wizards. Herds roam the wide plains and savannahs of the largest realms, as they once did centuries ago.



Giant Spider

Before she got two steps, the spider swept her up into its jaws and began to eat her alive.

Gargantuan creatures, enhanced by the magic of wizards to grow to a frightening size, Giant spiders live in deep caves and burrow into the earth to lay eggs and ambush their prey.



Lion

Claws, fur and teeth, barrelling towards the woman, a lion, straight from the African delta, now here and at Rani's command. She watched as the woman struggled to avoid it, falling to the ground as she twisted aside.

The king predator of jungle and plains in the old world, there is much that outmatches the lion in the Fractured Realms, yet the creatures do not lack for courage and see all enemies as prey. They do not make good long term companions and resent a wizard's magic being used to control them.



Rats

Small beady eyes appeared in the darkness, focused on him, their intention murderous and predatory. Piers backed away.

Even the smallest creatures can serve the purpose of a shrewd wizard. Rodents are used as carriers of plague and poison to kill enemies in their sleep or during their meals. They are easy to master and control, but can easily slip the leash if forgotten.

The Undead

Undead have existed throughout history. The ways in which individuals can return from death are varied, but intrinsically magical. To maintain the memories and sentience of the returner, some portion of their being must be sacrificed in this process.

Some Nephilim and Egregoroi have made use of these rites and rituals to survive when all other possible hope has been lost. There are many spells that will only work on them, as opposed to humans.

The choice of undeath is a sacrifice. Many forms are unstable and not suited to continual existence. For some, the material concerns of the flesh are lost as their physical forms rot and decay, being stretched beyond their means to preserve the consciousness within. Others who are enslaved into the lowest forms lose much of their previous awareness and understanding of the world. A remnant of a mind remains to serve the will of the wizard who has rendered them to this state.

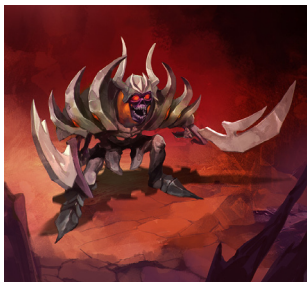
The benefit of undeath is a state of decaying immortality. Some forms are hardy, others not so, but the preservation of sentience in a moment of crisis can be essential for those who feel their work in this world is not yet done.



The Walking Dead (Zombies)

The corpse stirred and twitched. With a groan it sat up, eyes slack and vacant. A corruption of the life that once ran through its veins.

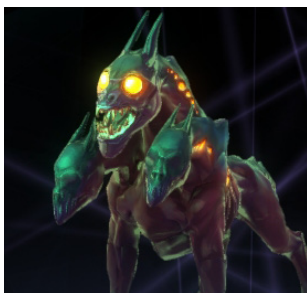
The remains of humans, brought back by the magic of wizards. There is no mind in the animated form, only an articulated body, forced to obey the will of its master.



Skeleton

Motionless figures stood around the excavation, each bearing a weapon and wearing armour. They too stank of magic, spells dark and twisted to Piers' heightened senses. They too were dead.

Animated warriors, brought back to fight for their new master; Skeletons are dead soldiers who remember little more than their training and martial skills. Any remnant of their past lives remains vague and they are incapable of communication with the living, unless a specific spell is cast to allow this.



Hellhound (Barghest)

A three-headed dog, larger than any Katya had ever seen. It was furless, instead scales covered its body, rippling as it moved, stirred from rest by her attention. One head's attention remained fixed on Brynfrid, but the other two turned to her, the eyes of each glowing like hot coals.

Beasts of legend in many civilisations, Hellhounds were used by wizards as enforcers and guards, their loyalty to their wizard summoner is generally strong, despite their chaotic nature and this made them a preferential creature to use as close bodyguards, particularly as their paralysing stare would enable the capture of would be assassins.



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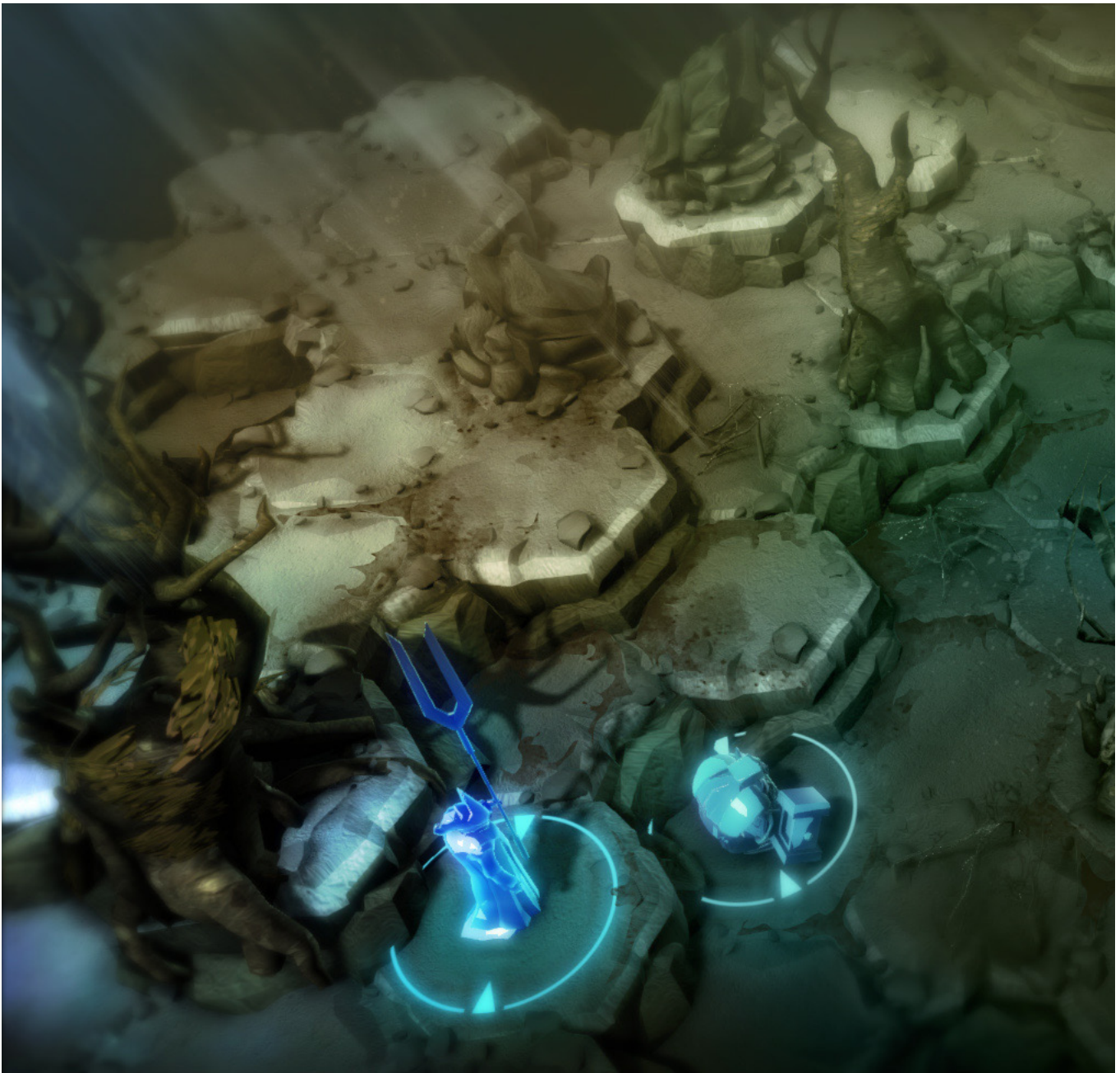
The Living Dead (Vampires)

Something rushed across the room. Hands grappled his, nails dug into his wrists and savage strength drove him into the wall. He thrashed against the sinewy grasp, but couldn't break it. Impossible! No-one mortal could—

It is believed that the first of these creatures have existed from before the change, that they roamed the old world as enemies and rivals to the Egregoroi and the Nephilim. Such creatures are ancient by now and long since grown resistant to the summoning of wizards. But each time the magic is invoked, they hear the call and remember.

The lore and knowledge of the living dead is a well-guarded secret. Some wizards make alliances with these creatures, but should never trust them entirely. It is said the most powerful elders have also learned how to construct portals and journey between worlds. This suggests the first of these creatures may have been empowered by the blood of the Egregoroi.

Lesser minions roam the realms seeking our new prey for their brethren. They find the living, defeat them and drag them back to their nest worlds as food for their kin.







On Automata and Other Matters

For a time, during the years before the end of times, it is said that alchemists rediscovered the ancient lore of how to create automata.

The first golems were created back in the ancient days of the first war and served the decadent wizards who led its ruling council. Vanguard of vast wizard armies were led by silent stone warriors, animated and compelled to march and destroy.

In latter days, the Conclave's reliance on such constructs to perform its will proved to be its undoing. Some imperfection or perfection in the workings of the wizards allowed the creatures to develop an intelligence of their own. As the Mages relaxed their guard, so the Gargoyles were less controlled. Eventually it is said that many of the Earth Colleges fell owing to the neglect of their members, as other mages were able to simply trap and subvert such creatures.

The key with Gargoyles lies in their name. This remains true today as it was then. Anyone who knows the true name of a Gargoyle may command its absolute obedience. The Gargoyle will obey them to the letter and without question.

The weakness of such creature lies when they are kept in groups. If the name of one Gargoyle is known, it is easy to swiftly obtain the others, if one is clever. It requires the slip of only one stone tongue to gain the obedience of many.

However the profit of commanding such creatures is limited. Gargoyles are not highly intelligent creatures, and prove an ineffectual army. They best serve as messengers or wardens, using their abilities to brave moderate dangers to achieve the aims of their master.

The construction of a Golem is somewhat different. For the most part these creatures are less intelligent and more open to command. However, the lore of their construction, and of commanding them has been lost to us. However, should one be obtained it is possible for to cause substantial damage with such creatures. All but impervious to the effects of non-magical attack, one of such creatures is enough to defeat entire armies.

Golems are typically made of base elements. However, the variety of there construction is usually quite considerable in comparison to Gargoyles, who are only made from stone. It is plain that the arts of magic used in these efforts were refined considerably in later years.

Nevertheless neither type of creature appeals to me as useful. Such minions have already proven to be unreliable unless given constant attention, and remain limited in their interpretations of orders.

More recently, alchemists and wizards have devised a semi-sentient engine of war. Working from these base principles, the Icarus Tower is the first well used spell that attempts to bind a remnant of intelligence into a physical object.

Complex Summoning

The actual process of a summoning ritual can be approached in two ways: *Binding* and *Bargaining*.

Binding is the most dangerous of the two but can be the more profitable in terms of power gained. By use of might and power, a strong wizard can force a weak spirit to absolute obedience.

Clearly most creatures will attempt to resist this form of magical enslavement and the penalties for failure in even the smallest respect are high. Most gruesome tales of summonings gone wrong stem from a failed attempt to bind the subject. For as long as one holds the means of controlling a demon, it is bound absolutely to one's service. In theory this servitude can extend indefinitely, in practice it tends not to.

Bargaining, on the other hand, is a relatively straightforward process that carries only minimal risk so long as one's research is accurate and diligently undertaken. In this ritual, one simply needs to create safeguards against the spirit's refusal and offer the correct inducement in return for a service performed. Although the results of this tend to be of shorter duration than a binding, this is offset by the advantage of being relatively safe and simple to perform. In addition, it is also far less likely to awake the enmity of an entire people in future, a fate to be studiously avoided.

Of what may be requested, there are but three forms: possession either of a being or an item, imbuing of

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power or a service.

To permit a spirit, whether bound or bargained to possess oneself is the height of foolishness and will inevitably end badly for the poor fool who allows such a thing to come to pass. However, this is a most potent means for power and if the consequences are of little matter to the subject, such a ritual may be worth performing. It is far safer, although less powerful to have the creature possess an item, although few will willingly accede to this form of servitude without significant inducement and a finite duration. A spirit bound into a non-living object will be contained for a shorter period than one bound into a living being. The imbuing of power is a simple transference of an ability from one being to another. This can be straightforward but equally, if one demands a power precious to the spirit, this can be difficult to achieve without a great deal of risk or expense since, for the duration of the bargain or binding, the spirit loses the power given to the subject.

Of the three requests, service is probably the most equitable to both summoned and summoner. The exact nature of the servitude must be specified with great care though, since should a demon decide it no longer wishes to carry out the service it will often attempt to twist the intent within the letter of the command, and thus escape its obligations.

Demons

Wizards who seek the rare and potent darkness turn their ear to the whispers of the unnamed. The promise of great power and dominion over others is tempting and to some it becomes too much to resist. Such rituals require blood and rare ingredients that are difficult to find amidst the void.

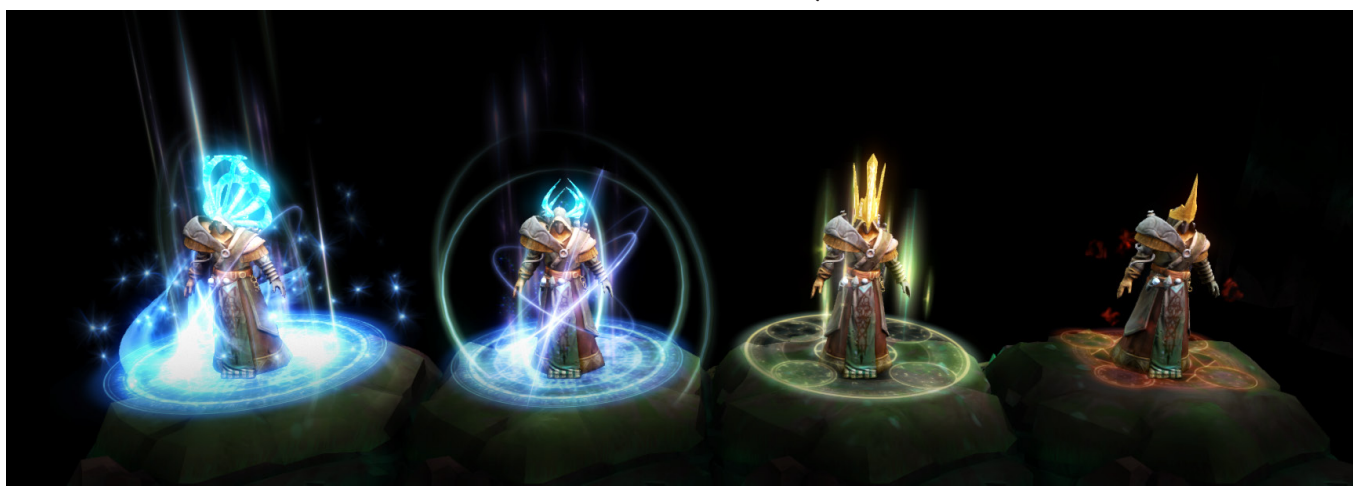
In the depths of such power, the gifted lose their way and identity, lapsing to become the minions of the fell spirits they have summoned where they once were masters.

Once beginning on the darkest of paths, few can navigate in any other direction. Yet, some still make the attempt and the advice below might save a life from damnation.

Whether bargaining or binding a demon, there are three things that a wizard must first obtain. The creature's name (note that this does not need to be its True Name, the name that it commonly uses should be sufficient), a weapon to coerce it or payment that the demon will find apt. This is the most skilful part of the ritual, since weapon or payment must be tailored very specifically or it will fail. Often the True Name of the demon is sufficient to bind it in servitude for a year, but only the very foolish will rely upon only this as an inducement. Demons will not suffer one who knows their true name to live long. Lastly the Ritualist will need a defence should anything go awry. Again this should be carefully considered, although defences need to be of a more general nature than the inducement, in the event that something other than that which was intended is summoned.

Once a demon has acquiesced to the ministrations of the summoner, it should be stated that the contest of wills is not over. Many creatures will look to find a loophole or missed phrase within a bargain, whilst those bound, will always seek to exploit the weaknesses of their new masters.

However, the profit of such a servant can be immense. The properties of creatures from the darkness and even of those who have great power can be varied and vast. Often they can perform the most difficult of tasks with relative ease and can become far more useful than any other minion.





A Realm Divided

Step followed step, followed step.

A road beaten to dust by many feet over years, a haze in the air as three quiet stars beat down on weary travellers, backs bent with burdens.

Dee sighed as she shouldered her pack. She moved to the side, climbed the verge, pulled a battered leather gourd from her belt and emptied the last water into her mouth.

She felt a soft touch on the shoulder and turned. "Something wrong?" Teb asked, lifting the wide brim of his hat to reveal a lined face and kindly brown eyes.

"No Uncle," Dee replied. "Just tired."

"Aren't we all?"

"I suppose."

Ahead, folk moved north, a long undulating worm across the land, a pilgrimage to the same place, with the same goal.

Speaker's hill and the meeting of tribes.

Plants and twisted trees patrolled the edge of the road, a verdant mass of differing shades beneath the star haze. The border of Dark Wood; a teeming chaotic horde of life, threatening to engulf struggling travellers who strayed. There were eyes in that woodland, watching. No place for clan folk from the far shores, like she and Teb, but the meeting called them.

Dee gazed up into the sky at the two stars - the Emerald and above it the Great Star. More shone from the heavens, but these three were brightest. Each day they moved apart more and more from their alignment in the child time of grandfathers. *Strange times indeed.*

Teb prodded her in the ribs with his stick. "Quit gawping. We don't want to be last," he said. "I've old knees and no wish to stand whilst folk talk."

Dee shrugged and glanced back. The line of walking figures stretched away far into the distance. "Some of these people have come further than us," he said. "They must have walked for weeks."

Teb grunted. "Months perhaps from the furthest south?" he smiled. "Means a lot to represent your village an' more to speak for the clan."

"Will they wait for everyone?"

"For some things, but others begin when they need. Best to be early and miss nothing. We go to listen and take back what we learn."

Dee nodded and stepped back down to the road. They carried on walking, moving into the lumbering train. Most folk walked, but occasionally, a cart with a family rumbled past. Dee kept her strides short, so Uncle could keep up, his shuffling gait another sign of age. "What happened last time?" she asked.

Teb snorted. "Last time?" he pulled off his pointed hat and wiped sweat from his forehead. His dark hair remained long in and held in a loose ponytail, but there was a patch on top of his head where it thinned. "Then I was the youngster, no older than you. I did the fetch and carry while Ol' Caster talked and listened in the circles."

"I know, I remember you telling me," Dee said, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. "But what occurs? What was decided?"

"Not much," Teb said.

"Not much?"

Teb juggled his hat back into place and he fussed a little, getting the floppy brim just as he wanted. "We talked trade, shared stories, made friends and saw folk wed, but if you mean grander things - not much."

Dee frowned. "Why all the speeches back in the village?" She'd lived fifteen turns in Alder's Bay, five days walk away on Moonsea's edge, Uncle Teb more than three times that. For Dee's whole life, Speaker's Hill and the Meets had been mentioned in hushed tones. A Meet was a rare thing, called once a generation. Each settlement got places. In the Bay, an aspirant and an elder were chosen, the elder always the aspirant from the previous occasion, leaving the other space to be won by those of age when the call came. "Why all the tests and trials for a long walk?" Dee asked.



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Teb laughed and squeezed her hand. "By the stars, to be young again! I didn't say it wasn't worth the trip, only that the grand dreams of youth aren't to be found when we get there. Stone and song is what we are, hands and breath, made to live, love and learn." He wrapped an arm around Dee's shoulder and leaned in, his old eyes twinkling. "The last Meet changed me. Made me what I am, it'll be the same for you, once in a lifetime there's a chance, and fate brought that chance to you."

Dee smiled, despite her irritation. "Twice in a lifetime for you, Uncle," he said.

"Twice indeed," said Teb. "And who'd blame me for wanting to share the road with my niece?"

The eyes in the woodland followed the two as they re-joined the moving mass of folk, staying with them until they disappeared from view.

There was a preternatural quiet, born from fear. All animals long gone, leaving the eyes and their owner alone in the thick brush.

A faint breeze stirred the tree where the creature crouched. It could feel terror through the bark, the tree too would have run, if it could.

The creature preferred the ones who ran.

Long after the two figures disappeared, their scent lingered. A distinct smell, picked out from the mortal stink. For the creature, it was always like this. Once chosen, something primal kept him intent on the prey, a hunger that sustained him and gnawed at his gut; sated only by the kill, until the next scent and stare.

He wore a mismatched cloak, fashioned from previous victims, flesh, skin and bone knitted into a coverage worn as a warning to others he might meet; a record of moments and triumph. The cloak reminded him of who he was, what he'd become. The memories before then were dim and difficult to remember.

The creature smiled and began to move, slipping silently through the brush, heading north.

Elsewhere, three the stars shone down on the Castle of Glass, a huge towering structure, shaped like a forearm, thrusting out of the earth; its minarets and towers, fingers extended toward the sky.

The light reflected and refracted, finding its way inside through a myriad of paths, coalescing in each room, rendering them as bright as the day outside.

Laughter and song filled the bowels of the castle; the opulence of celebration, amidst the court of its ruler, Jadvar, Wizard King of Temesne.

Rian stood at the doors of the throne room, his eyes roamed the faces with professional interest, struggling to keep his expression in check. A soldier for ten turns, he had never been to the Castle of Glass before and found it difficult to concentrate. Around him, polished walls gleamed, mirrors shone and gold glittered amidst the red banners of each wizard. Clanfolk mingled and spoke together, the mood cordial, but cautious. In the corner, Woodlanders played their pipes and sang, but no-one paid them much regard. An opulent table of food lay in the centre of the room, but it was untouched. Trust was fragile between folk in this hall, yet the watchful eye of their hosts, quarrel and dispute remained at bay.

The Wizard Lords.

They weaved in and out amongst the guests, robed nobles in the crowd, wheeling around the room, wholly unique in their dress and manner. Some he could identify. The huge laugh of snub nosed Ubblikk. The scratch of Bebray's quill on parchment and the bellowing voice of Grashan, the Lord of Beasts, but there were more, twelve in total, about the hall. Whilst Jadvar, the Wizard King sat, watching, from his elaborately carved throne.

Rian's mind turned to thinking of home and he sighed. His mountain home was a long way from here.

"You are elsewhere."

He glanced up; eyes met his - a scarred face he had learned to respect and admire. The wide mouth set in a grim line. Lord Nwarr, military second to the Wizard King and the reason for Rian's presence. He flinched and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry my Lord," he mumbled.



A crooked finger caressed his chin, lifting his head. "Be here. Act now. See now," Lord Nwarr said. "All these things I need from you."

Rian nodded, but Lord Nwarr had already turned away. His gleaming armour, clinked as he walked. The two curved swords strapped across his back were a calculated image of power and strength, backed by reputation and resolve. Rian wore a similar, lesser vestment as befitting his place as a personal guard. The working of metal, a knowledge held by the wizards and taught to a privileged few. Rian had forged his own garment under his master's instruction. Under Nwarr leadership, soldiers had brought order to the southlands. Now, he watched his master cross the room and noted the stares drawn from each side. One was Grashan, whose loud voice fell silent. He wiped drool from his lips and stared at Nwarr as he approached the Wizard King's seat.

The room went quiet. Rian's fingers strayed to the hilt of his sword.

For a moment, Nwarr stood and held the gaze of his ruler, but then as with Rian, his eyes went to the floor. His body shrank as he sank to a knee, placing his hands, palm downwards on the patterned stone.

"Majesty," he said. "In your name we are united. We have achieved in one hundred turns what our forebears did not in thousands. By your will, this world knows peace!"

A scatter of applause and murmurs of approval ran around the room. Both mortals and wizards, nodded in affirmation to Nwarr's words, but some remained unmoved.

"Transgressors are captured and guests in your dungeon," Nwarr continued. "Allies stand here and celebrate. When morning dawns, many will leave to return to their peoples and speak of your achievements, Majesty, yet one thing remains to concern me," Nwarr raised his head. "What now?"

The silence returned, but the question hung unanswered in the air. Rian found he was holding his breath.

Slowly Jadvar rose from his chair. He spread his arms wide, casting a huge shadow into the hall and over his inquiring second. He met Nwarr's gaze and stepped forward. Eventually, Nwarr nodded and his eyes returned to the floor.

Jadvar held up a hand. "I shall consider the matter," he said. "You will have an answer."

Nwarr looked up again. "When shall we be given your wisdom?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," Jadvar replied.

The Great Star slipped below the mountain ridge, leaving the sky darkness and to Samell, Chancellor of Temesne.

He crouched on the terrace of the east watchtower, an upraised claw from the Castle of Glass. Below, the land of Temesne gradually fell into shadow. A patchwork of yellowed grass and shrubs dotted the ground about the castle's root. A waste of resources, according to Draddan, the artificer. Vast underground caverns, littered with his experiments leeches life from the earth.

The night, a time that brought weakness. The light of day nourished all living things on Temesne. The two stars, each brought their own flavour, encouraging growth and nurturing life. *But it is not enough for us*, Samell thought. *We are not of this world. We never were.*

"Lord Chancellor?"

The words were little more than a whisper from the darkness within, echoing across the chamber walls. He turned. An ancient, shrivelled figure in a tattered cloak, no bigger than a child stood by the entrance.

"Mmhm?" Samell replied in a whimsical tone, favouring the speaker with a smile it didn't deserve.

"His majesty is asking for you."

"Then I shall attend him," Samell said. He turned from the view and walked past the messenger. A flicker of movement caught his eye and he paused, turning toward his reflection.

After a hundred turns, the face looking back still seemed strange. A distended mouth and rows of fang like teeth, a curved spine and long claw like fingernails. Only the eyes remained familiar; eyes that had seen things long forgotten in memory.

Samell laboured along the passageway. The embroidered red robes he wore masked much of his body.



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They proclaimed status; Lord Chancellor of Temesne, second only to the Wizard King in matters of state and the instrument of his will. The burdens of office and the need for secrets made clothing useful. Under this lay more cloth and more before that. Gathered up to hide what he recalled of the flesh beneath.

Before this body, he remembered light, a discordant song, chanting, blood and magic all around, then awakened rage, hatred at himself and everyone else. Mirrors always reminded him of the change.

Afterwards, there was a time when he walked tall and powerful, proud of his new form, but pride offered no concealment and his private nakedness conveyed no status. His self-loathing grew with each day. The price of immortality, the blood drinker's curse.

He looked away, walking quickly to the King's apartment. Etchings and pictures throughout the castle gave hints to the time before, showing strange figures, unbowed with staves and hands raised outward. They were familiar, but distant. The more he stared, the more he hated them also; alien, yet connected. The rage never went away, but he learned to control and use it carefully.

A hundred turns ago, he and his brethren emerged, all changed from a powerful ritual. They fought under the laughing gaze of the Wizard King. Some died, but others did not and became strong.

As Samell made for the King's rooms, the walls, ceiling and floor reflected and refracted his movements. The castle had been built to contain the stars' light and channel them towards its heart. Despite nightfall outside, illumination would continue within for a while yet, preserving some vestige of strength.

"Why the delay?"

A shadow loomed over Samell, darkening the reflective floor beneath his clawed feet. He looked up. Jadvar, Wizard King of Temesne, stared down at him, teeth bared in a wide grin. Samell met his master's gaze with a submissive expression of his own.

"If it pleases your magnificence, I tarried only a moment before—"

"Then why so long?"

"Perhaps the servant was inadequate to the task?" Samell said, lowering himself further. "If you wish, I will attend—"

Powerful claws seized Samell by the throat. Jadvar leaned forwards. "There are more important matters to discuss!" he hissed. Claws dug into the fleshy skin of Samell's neck as long nailed fingers seized handfuls of his robes. He shivered in pain, but did not struggle. Jadvar turned back towards the chamber, dragging the Lord Chancellor with him.

Samell went limp, accepting his King's will. He knew to resist meant death. It had always been thus between them, since the ritual and bloodthirst. Jadvar had saved him from the others and together they had established dominance. It had been Jadvar's plan that had given them life and his power that had shaped their flesh.

The hands released him and Samell caught himself before his face hit the floor. The wet lash of his liege's tongue ran over his head and drool dripped into his eyes and mouth. He tasted blood, mixed with desiccated human flesh. Slowly, Samell pushed himself up, but stayed low, his gaze on Jadvar's feet. A hand remained concealed under his robes and strayed to the hidden knife and vial of poison in his belt. He hated, feared and loved Jadvar, hated most that he owed him a debt.

"Attend!" Jadvar ordered.

Samell got to his feet warily. Jadvar stood by a circular stone table next to his bed, on top, rested an ancient map of the realm. "We rule this world," Jadvar said. "Each of the human clans has come here and sworn fealty. The Elves of the western sea are subjugated, we have defeated the Giants, the vast lands are conquered and ours to do with as we please."

"Assuredly so, your magnificence," Samell replied, keeping his eyes low.

"Then what answer do I give to Nwarr?" Jadvar asked. "You read the hall, as I did."

"Mmmhmmm?" Samell said. "Forgive me, I don't understand."

"Apply your wits! Remember, they are what I value in you," Jadvar snarled. "Nwarr is a powerful leader of an army that spreads my will across Tesmesne, Grashen nearly as strong with his own allies and weapons. Peace breeds discontent amongst soldiers. Without lands to conquer, armies become dangerous."

"What of other worlds?" Samell suggested. "There is much lore concerning these and the alignment of stars. My people could consult the scrolls, or perhaps the alchemists—"



"I have no wish to entertain the prattle of fools," Jadvar's eyes became slits. "What do you know of other worlds?"

"Very little," Samell replied, "only that which is written by your hand."

"As it should be," Jadvar growled. He scratched at the stone table edge. "Though they smile and sing, the people of this world defy me still."

Samell gave a dissembling shrug. "How can you be sure?"

"I hear their whispers," Jadvar said. "Whether a rebellion exists or not, they look to themselves first. We are the leaders who have given them land, lore and peace, yet still they do not love us. She has not been found."

Samell knew the conversation would turn dark if his King remained focused on her. "May I suggest a strategy?"

"Proceed."

"You are undisputed as ruler. No creature would defy you. However, should we wish to conquer another world, we would require an army, powerful and strong. It would need to be an gathering of all creatures coerced to obey without question."

"Such a host must be mine and mine alone," Jadvar said. "Obedience would necessitate incredible magic. How would we unite them and make them loyal?"

Samell smiled. "Leave that to me, master."

"Welcome and take comfort pilgrims, you come for a story? What tale would you have of me?"

Night time on Temesne. Clanfolk and others gathered at the last Wayhome before Speaker's Hill. The large stone houses had been built all across the land as a refuge for weary travellers. Inside they were a warren of tiny rooms, with a circular hall in the middle. People came here to rest, sleep and socialise. Visitors followed simple rules; lights went out at a set time and quarrels got left at the door.

Dee sat with Teb leaning against her. They had arrived a little while back, eaten cheese and been grateful to find a good spot. Her Uncle's hat drooped over his eyes and he was snoring gently, Dee was tired too, but her curiosity outweighed a need for sleep.

A fire burned in the centre of the room. Benches, chairs and tables teemed with hushed and expectant faces, their attention on one figure sat in a space alone on the stone floor. A woman in robes covered in strange symbols, like nothing Dee had ever seen before.

The woman's head swayed, locking eyes with each face, but no-one answered the question. She had been motionless, bowed forwards when they arrived, only rousing as the light slipped away. A carved stick lay nearby. A whispered word came to Dee from the room, *mystic? What does that mean?* Now she leaned forward, keen to listen to the words.

The mystic wore a robe, with strange carapace plates along her back. Long hair swept the terracotta tiles as she twisted and turned to gaze thoughtfully at the hushed crowd. Brown eyes met Dee's for a moment, then glanced away and settled once more on the floor.

"I am one voice and many that speaks from the heart. A part, child and elder, I live and grow, nurtured by Temesne, though I am no scion of hers."

The head rose again and the large mouth twitched into a thin toothless smile. "The story to be told is one of the past. A tale of the world, that you might understand your place more clearly."

The mystic picked up her carved stick and pointed to a circular window in the roof. "Perhaps you have gazed out into the night sky and wondered, what is up there? Are we alone in this space?" She sighed and reached a hand beneath her robes, drawing out a handful of dust which she threw into the air.

Tiny flecks scattered and gleamed, falling, but then they stopped, hanging motionless. Dee stared at one inches from her nose.

"Behold, above you and around you, Gaze upon stars. These lights are each travellers, countless vessels, creatures and worlds, journeying in the void."

The mystic pointed upwards again with the twisted wood. Dee glanced in that direction, through the



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shining dust. The stone of the ceiling darkened into shadow; the fire guttered, leaving the glowing flakes to illuminate the room. "Gaze upon the space outside this world, the deep, beyond the firmament," the mystic said. "A place you can only glimpse in the dark. Gaze as your ancestors did in the first days; this was what they saw."

Dee stared as she was asked. The distance between the flickering specs seemed endless. If the stars were other places and people, they were a long way away. She began to imagine how far. Her eyes focused on one drifting light, moving lazily towards the rafters.

"Through the wonder of our story you watch as thousands of years pass in moments," the mystic intoned. "All of us, from here and elsewhere, children of the Leviathan."

As the words hung in the air, suddenly, the lights winked out, drawing a gasp from the gathered audience. The light of the fire grew bright once more, illuminating the mystic, who had returned her gaze to the floor.

"Perhaps today, you have learned a little of how to see..."

The last words faded away. Hushed conversations broke out. Some faces filled with wonder others with deep distrust, yet no-one approached the woman, sat motionless as before. Dee stared and waited but it didn't move, only a slight rise of the shoulders indicating breath.

She stepped forward cautiously and glanced around. No-one else seemed to notice. She took another step. As she got approached, she realised how tall the mystic was. Her head reaching up to the woman's shoulder. "Hello?" she whispered.

The mystic didn't answer. Now she was closer, Dee admired the woven detail of the robes; circles spirals, lines and other intricate symbols. The weavers in her village did good work and sold well all along the shore, but she'd never seen cloth stitched like this. On the ground, trails had been scraped into the dust on the terracotta tiles; shapes and triangles, connected by long straight lines. The mystic stared at the pattern intently. Dee reached out a hand...

The mystic raised her head and regarded her.

Dee shrank away. Her hands disappeared behind her back. "I'm sorry, I just wanted—"

"Do not apologise. To be curious is to be alive. Through questions, we learn of the world and find our path."

Dee nodded. The eyes held her and she couldn't look away. They narrowed slowly and she felt as if her mind was being searched and scoured. "Your time is coming, soon your place will be most important of all."

Dee stepped back and stumbled. She glanced around in panic, but no-one was watching. She looked at the mystic again, but she had returned to immobility, her eyes glittering slits in the firelight.

By the bench, Teb yawned and stretched "What did I miss?" he asked.

Dee stared at him. "Everything," she replied.

In the Castle of Glass, candles lined the walls of the audience chamber, their light reflected in a myriad of directions by polished mirrors. At one end on a raised dais, an impressive seat made of dark stone, from where wizard lords dispensed their king's will.

It was empty.

A clash of steel and flicker of movement. Two men, stripped to the waist, breathing heavily, circled one another. They were woodlanders, the best of their respective clans. One post in the castle guard remained vacant. The two aspirants fought, but only one would be selected. They wielded metal blades, a pair each. Wizard workmanship, superior to the wooden knives normally used.

And far more deadly.

Samell watched idly an alcove in the furthest corner of the chamber, out of sight. In attendance stood six proud soldiers, dressed in the black of the guard, all veterans, having served the castle for ten turns or more, the very reason Samell had invited them.

The knives flashed again, a grunt of effort and a shout. Samell licked his lips. The men would fight until



one was bested. Occasionally such contests brought injury, but courage would fade before lives were lost. Bright red blood ran from the shoulder of one aspirant, a male with long blonde hair. The sight excited Samell, but there was little he could do about it. There would be no death. The outcome here remained predictable and unsatisfying. The castellan of the castle would never allow murder in the name of ambition. *A shame*, Samell thought. *A little killing might harden them for what is to come.*

He emerged from behind the seat, moving swiftly towards the duel. As soon as he was seen, the contest ended and the combatants stepped back. Both bowed to him, as they should. These aspirants knew their place.

His eyes strayed to the sculpted stones of the floor, covered with symbols and grooves. They traced a path into the ritual chamber beyond, where the patterns became more intricate and diverse. The work was familiar to Samell. Long ago he'd been able to read it, but now he couldn't.

"My Lord Chancellor, will the King be joining us?"

"Mmmhmmm?" Samell turned. The words came from the eldest guard - the castellan. The last of his white hair covered the sides and back of his head like a broken crown. Tremallan was his name. Fifty turns before, he'd been presented at the gates as a boy. *They wither so easily*, Samell thought. Generations had guarded the castle since Jadvar's ascension, *but guarded it from what?* He couldn't remember. "No, his Imperial Majesty granted me dispensation to deal with matters."

Tremallan frowned, drawing more wrinkles on his forehead. "Then, why are we here, my Lord?" he asked.

Samell smiled them all, making sure he displayed all three rows of his teeth. "Because I sent for you," he replied. "The reason for that? Somewhat more complex." He turned to the two combatants. "It seems I arrived in good time, matters have changed, we will need both of you."

"For what purpose my Lord?" Tremallan asked.

"His Majesty favours me with a task," Samell said. "I am to visit your tribes. Assemble an entourage. We leave for Speaker's Hill at once."

If Tremallan's brow could have furrowed further, it would have done. "When, my Lord?"

"As soon as possible, Castellan," Samell said and turned away. He walked quickly past the raised dais and through a small arch, into the larger room beyond.

The ritual chamber.

Lines and symbols from the audience floor room wove into a more complex pattern here as they did with all rooms, tracing a torturous path to the beating heart of the keep.

The portal.

Samell's eyes strayed towards it instinctively. The rippling doorway floated in the middle of the chamber, suspended by its own gravity over a chasm that disappeared into the centre of the world. Vaguely he remembered other portals, held within stone arches, but this one was different. At times it was barely visible, but now a lambent red glow emanated from its depths.

Each morning, as the star's rays shone through a window in the roof, the wizards of Temesne would stand in the first places they remembered. Twelve to rule a vast realm, yet most remained in the castle, unable to drag themselves away from the machinations of Jadvar's court.

Samell glanced around. This place was never empty. Humans were not permitted to enter alone, by order of the King, but each wizard lord had other, more malleable spies. He would be spied upon here, no matter what he did.

Samell tried to remember back to those first days, the ritual, the agonising rebirth and anger. It had all been a grand design, the symbols and patterns on the floor, part of a plan. Some parts of the etchings were more familiar to him than others, yet he recalled nothing of what they meant. Lord Ulam, the Master of Rituals claimed knowledge of this lore, but Samell saw through his lies. Only the Jadvar had such insight and could interpret the signs. The King's word was not to be questioned.

In sending him away from the Castle of Glass, the King was excluding him from the schemes of his peers. That made Samell afraid.

"Something on your mind, Lord Chancellor?"

"Mmmmmhmmm?" Samell glanced around. Another figure, limped into the dim light at the centre



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of the room. Fremac, the Engineer Wizard, the strangest of his kin, obsessed with experimentation, the workings of strange devices. No-one trusted him, but he seemed not to care, preferring the company of artificers in the vast underground caverns beneath the castle. Samell smiled at him coldly. "Unusual that you would be here," he said.

Fremac returned the smile, an awkward gesture for his squinting face owing to the strange viewing tube perched in front of his right eye. "Not so unusual," he countered. "I often visit in the darkest hours."

Samell inclined his head dismissively. "Your movements are of no interest to me."

Fremac mimicked him. "But yours are of much interest to me," he said. He wore thin robes, with simple adornment, revealing more of his twisted body, a mess of badly stitched wounds and puffy scars. "His majesty gave you a task. Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Samell eyed him with disgust. "Why would you help me?"

Fremac edged closer. "Your needs compliment mine, his majesty sends you to the north, to speak with the clans, he will want someone to accompany you, I offer myself."

"You would abandon your research?"

"Never," Fremac replied. "But the path of my work takes me from this place." He stared, closing an eye and fixing Samell with his monocular gaze through the strange device. "You fear leaving the castle?"

"I fear nothing," Samell lied.

"Fear is necessary, it drives us to excel," Fremac said. "You fear our liege as we all do, but there is something else in your bones, a gathering dread crouching around your heart. The creatures of Temesne age, grow weak and decay. Even the drinking of blood cannot and magic of the portal can withhold death, even from us. You come here because you do not wish the same fate."

"What use are these words to me?" Samell snarled. "You lurk in your pit amidst the vermin of this world. You know nothing of my mind!"

Fremac held up a hand. "Be assured brother, you are not alone in this fear. Once I too felt this dread. My experiments led me to an answer."

An answer? Samell's eyes narrowed. He stepped towards Fremac, taking in the man's uneven stance and scarred hands, the result perhaps of dangerous experimentation? "What solution do you speak of?"

Fremac smiled. "Come with me to my laboratory and I will show you."

Darkness on Temesne. The land shrouded in shadow. A time when all things living drew themselves up to rest and wait for the rise of the stars.

Then in the furthest parts of the realm came the day. Life waxing under a twin dawn, plants grew and stretched towards the shining orbs above. In these lands, the wilderness thrived unchecked. Trees waded through steaming swamps; mushrooms unfurled their wings and gathered in flocks, all to follow the light, creeping across the sky.

In the darkened north, the creature did not rest. It suffered the same weakness as others, but learned to relish this and found an answer.

The creature, slipped through the brush soundlessly. Where he did make noise, it was far less than a living being of his size had right to. Bigger animals roamed the world than he, but none could move as he. Each thing he encountered, he judged a challenge or dismissed as weak. He thrilled at the hunt and chance to best all that might oppose him.

A hundred turns since the ritual. In that time, he ranged further and further from the castle. At first, on the order of the King, to find the former Queen who escaped, but later he abandoned such trivia for his own ambition.

The creature lived for the chase and the kill.

He pressed on, his path parallel to the road used by the clans. They gave him many names and told stories to their children of a shadow in the night. Often he lurked on the edge of their firelight, listened and smiled to himself.

It had not always been thus. In the earliest times, he visited the Woodlanders and was honoured by



their chiefs. In those days, they had requested him when monsters plagued their lands. But gradually their looks and whispers of fear became harder to ignore.

As were their weaknesses.

He took to living alone in the wild in disguise. A mask fashioned from his kills, disguising his face, so that he might still visit the camp fires when it suited. Occasionally another hunger drew him back to the castle, but each time, the hunt called him to return.

Lights flickered in the darkness, more pilgrims; some sleeping, others walking a little further before they rested. In times past the creature might have turned on the sleepers, easy prey in the night, but not this time. The scent of the two from before remained fresh - something about them, different and distinct.

Ahead, a large shape loomed out of the darkness. The creature stopped and crouched in the long grass; *a Wayhome*.

It was dark inside. Outside, guttering lanterns hung on poles at intervals around the circular stone building. The creature approached one quietly and hunkered down beneath.

Footsteps, the smell again, stronger than before; laboured breathing and a rustle of cloth, a splash of water in the dirt, the smell ripe and pungent. One of the two - the old man, outside to relieve himself, the creature smiled and inched forwards, silently, getting closer.

Samell followed Fremac, his hand running idly along the wall as they descended from the ritual chamber, to a spiral staircase leading into the pitch black catacombs, beneath the castle.

Scratched grooves, more symbols and writing, the stairs had been built long before, another part of the grand design etched into the floor and walls of the castle.

The spiral grew narrower, the faint lambent rock-light, fainter, and the steps, further and further apart. Samell's fingers brushed over a scar in the rock, marking the new excavation. From then on, the stones were pitted and scarred, but unmarked by design. No servant came here, unless trusted, or never to return.

He wondered of Fremac's purpose. The wizard had no allies amongst his kin, keeping to himself and his mechanical madness. King Jadvar tolerated his work, leaving him to scheme beneath the castle.

They came to the bottom and Fremac moved ahead into the gloom. The catacombs were kept in abject darkness. Light invoked unwanted groans of hope and despair from the cells.

"Please, I have children..."

"Just some water... anything..."

In the earliest days of Jadvar's rule, he summoned leaders of the many nations of Temesne. Samell had worked tirelessly, talking of the new age brought about by the rise of their new ruler and how the wizard lords would bring a glorious era for everyone. They walked amongst the disparate peoples, bringing peace to warring factions and healing division. The Castle of Glass had been opened, its wonders revealed. The people of Temesne accepted King Jadvar and agreed to his wish that they send the worst transgressors of their laws to the castle for incarceration.

"Do you remember the past, Lord Chancellor?" Fremac asked, his voice floating back in the darkness, "before the ritual?"

"What need do I have for such memories?" Samell scoffed. "His Majesty knows our history, his grand design succeeded. We are the embodiment of his will. I am content with that."

"I remember things," Fremac said, "fragments and flashes of the time before. A queen ruled us and I served her, right until the end." A door creaked open and a red glow filled the passageway. Samell could feel heat, emanating from the room beyond. He guessed they were close to the great vent beneath the Portal.

He followed Fremac through the doorway into a small laboratory. The light and temperature rose made Samell sweat under his robes. In the middle of the room was a wooden chair with restraints for hands and feet. There was a hole in the far wall, to the vent in the chamber above and a bottomless drop into the centre of the world. "What is your purpose in bringing me here?" Samell demanded.



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"Only this," Fremac said and picked up a vial from a cluttered shelf, the liquid within, was dark. He held it out. "Drink."

Samell took the vial and examined it. The glass was a part of a special set, reserved for state banquets. "You stole this," he said.

"I borrowed the receptacle," Fremac replied. "Suitable for an honoured guest like yourself."

"What concoction do you give me?"

Fremac smiled. "The thirst calls to all of us, each in a different way. We control our urges as we can and we know the life we suck from the veins of mortals preserves our fragile forms. Granted, they are greater than those before the ritual, but they remain a limit upon our potential. I made something better, more potent than mortal blood, drink."

Samell's stared at the glass then at him, but Fremac did not flinch from the scrutiny. "Come. If I wished to poison you, there would be easier ways. Besides, you have his Majesty's ear and his protection. Bringing you here, to my laboratories makes me the obvious suspect doesn't it?"

Samell shrugged. The words rang true, but something remained in Fremac's eyes to mistrust.

Slowly, he raised the vial to his lips...

"...I remember not, my beginning, only light and a memory of things before. Over time, I have guessed much from the dreams in my fractured mind. I came from the stars first and made a home on this world.

From the strange woman I learned to dream. Her embrace was warm and comforting. My brothers followed and I sensed them close, above me; kindred spirits on our path in the void..."

"Wake up, you are needed."

Dee blinked and found herself looking into the unfamiliar face of a man. His words blended with the voice of the mystic in her dream. She sat up, her hand reaching for the bone knife at her belt. The stranger withdrew. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Brin," the man replied. "Forgive me, but you came here with an older man?"

"Uncle Teb," Dee glanced around. The blankets next to her were empty. "Where is he?"

"Outside," Brin said. When Dee got to her feet, he put a hand on her shoulder. "I think you should prepare yourself," he warned, but Dee pulled away from his grip, running out of the stone building and into the grassland.

An early dawn, the first star, peaking over the horizon in the east, the land, chill and cold. A small crowd had gathered near a lantern pole to her left. Dee headed in that direction and people stepped back as she drew close.

"Uncle?"

What remained of Teb lay in the grass. His stared blankly into the sky and deep gouges ran across his face. A blanket had been thrown over the rest of him and already stained dark red.

Dee stood transfixed. Her hands went to her lips. She couldn't look away, but couldn't go to him either. She wanted to, but somehow, getting close would make it real.

"I'm sorry," said Brin, coming up from behind her. "I tried to tell you."

Dee opened her mouth. No words came out. She gazed at the body.

"What could have done this?" said someone.

"I don't know," said Brin.

Early morning and both stars in the sky; the ritual chamber, a vast circular space. From his position in the easternmost gallery, Rian gazed down in wonder at the room and the glowing portal in its centre.

From above, the spiral pattern etched into the floor became a maze for the eye. Any attempt to trace a path resulted in a strange multi-faceted and mesmerising journey of distraction.

Gradually the stars waxed and as they did, more of the intricacies of the stone floor were revealed;



twelve pools of light appeared around the room, eight occupied by wizards, four left empty. On the far side, Rian spotted one he hadn't seen last night. A hunched and scarred individual, dressed in a thin white robe.

Despite the disapproval of the guards, Rian had secured a good position at the front of the balcony; scant love existed between his people's clan and those who guarded the castle. His master, Nwarr stood directly below, his sheathed swords and upright stance making him an impressive figure amongst the others. Starlight reflecting from his armour scattered into the view tiers and drew disgruntled glances from those either side of his place.

A bell sounded and the doors at the end of the room swung back. King Jadvar strode purposefully into the chamber, his arms wide and eyes flashing left and right. The dark robes he wore were patterned with golden lines and symbols. The wizard lords flinched then knelt as he approached them. Samell cowered as their master chose his spot. Behind him a crowd of slave carried a tall finger-like stone, large and black it sucked up light. The servants placed the burden in one of the vacant pools, then bowed to their King and scuttled out of the room.

Another bell sounded, deep and sonorous, a hush descended on the watching crowd. Rian glanced up. The both stars shone through a triangular window in the apex of the roof. The light brightened and refracted on the portal. It shimmered and flashed. Yellow rays spat out at the robed figures and the obsidian stone. Each wizard seemed to grow, feeding from the light that bathed them, standing taller and stronger than before.

Time passed, but the people in the galleries remained motionless, staring in fascination. As the magic began to fade, Rian shielded his eyes and peered at the enchantment. He thought he could see red, mixed with the vibrant yellow, but he couldn't be sure.

A third bell sounded. The stars passed from the vent, the beams from the portal ceased and the shadows returned. Conversations began in quiet tones, but quickly ended when King Jadvar raised his hand.

"Last night I promised an answer to the words of Nwarr!" he said, his voice, easily carrying around the chamber. He pointed at the dark rock occupying one of places. "Behold, the instrument of new purpose, the sentinel stone. It will absorb the power of the ritual, collecting it for our future use," Jadvar looked up and Rian felt a chill run through him as, for a moment, he met those cold eyes.

"We rule this realm," Jadvar said. "But you are its heart and blood. In three days, your people gather. You honour us with your presence at this ceremony, so we shall send our representative to yours. We will listen to stories and songs, consult with your people at the meeting fires and decide the future of our realm."

A murmur of approval ran through gallery. *A representative?* Rian thought, his eyes, straying to his master. Nwarr, who had earned the respect of the clans through war and had raised the question first.

Who better than—

"Alchemist, rise."

The red robed figure nearest the chamber doors stood up. King Jadvar turned to him. "You will lead our delegation to speak to the people."

From a high tree above the Wayhome, the creature stared down at the humans and smiled. Something about their flesh made him feel strong and powerful. The taste lingered and the scent below kept him here, watching.

He guessed their thoughts, one death amongst hundreds on pilgrimage. There would be talk of a hunt, but no-one took such risks for strangers. They'd caution the girl and walk on, the incident lost to memory and a fireside tale to scare children.

He stared at the group, waiting. People wandered away, until only a few remained. Two figures returned carrying bundles of wood, which they stacked around the corpse.

The creature waited and watched the flames. The smell of roasting flesh filled his nostrils, making his belly rumble and filling his mouth with drool. Death came to all things; the burning ritual released the

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spirit to return to the beginning.

His lip curled into a sneer, *such foolishness*. The body marked his victory, a cremation removed the warning, but those present would remember, and the old man's finger bones, woven into his cloak at the shoulder were sign enough for others.

The fire burned down. More of the pilgrims left, returning to the road, leaving the girl, feeding the flames. The ritual required family remain, but they were far from kin, so the task became hers alone.

The shadows lengthened, the last star set in the darkening sky. The creature moved from his perch, soundlessly climbing down the tree head first, his four hands and feet finding grip and purchase where no other animal might.

When he reached the ground, he caught another scent; old and familiar. He turned around.

A large figure, similar in shape and size crouched in the undergrowth watching him. He recognised it immediately as a memory - like the person he used to be.

"Wizard!" he spat out the word.

The wizard did not move, but leaned on her staff and stared.

The creature returned the look, his hands reaching for the hooked knives strapped to his belt. He slid them out carefully, trying not to draw attention to the movement. Then, he edged forward. "Why you here, wizard?" he shouted. "Nothing for you!"

In reply, the wizard raised a hand. "The young one is protected," it said in a low voice.

"Protected?" the creature grinned, displaying long rows of bloodstained teeth. "By you?"

"By everything," the wizard intoned. "Her hour has not come."

"I am not frightened, killed wizards before!"

"I know what you have done."

Three paces between them, still the wizard had not moved. "You do not choose!" the creature hissed and leapt.

He leapt at the wizard and the knives came down, two swift lunges, slashing across face and arm but then pain!

The creature fell, hit the ground rolled and got up, weapons raised to attack. The wizard turned towards him, continuing to stare. Bright red blood welled in the two wounds and ran down her chin and stained her woven robe, but it made no move. The creature growled, his fingers probed, exploring his own injuries. He flinched and realisation dawned. *Identical! But how could that—*

"The girl is protected," the wizard repeated. "You cannot change this."

The creature limped forward again. Dark ichor dripped from his weapons. Wicked blades, made to slash, maim and incapacitate. "I will kill you," he whispered.

"If so, you end yourself and all possibility," the wizard replied and turned away, leaning heavily on her staff as she shuffled back into the wilderness.



