Sarenteth

Song of Sareth

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Chapter 1

Welcome to Sareth

Introduction

The setting which would eventually come to be known as Sareth first came about as a thought experiment: *what would a world look like which shared the same fairy-tales as ours, in which they had the same plausibility as our urban legends?* Though it's grown a lot since then, that seed of an idea is still at the heart of things. Anyone in Sareth, from the farmer's son on up to the princess in her high tower, knows about Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, The Singing Bone, and many, many more.

But the idea of Sareth has expanded beyond the realm of fairy-tale. It encompasses myth and legend too, specifically those myths and legends told by the ancient Celtic and Germanic people, and those of the medieval societies that came after them. Those same farmer's sons and princesses likely know of Cu Chulainn, Pywll, Bodvar Bjarki, and Taliesin, to name only a few. The stories they recite may have different place-names (Sareth is *not* earth, and never was, and never will be) and a few minor differences, but these are the kinds of changes that happen to tales as they're retold.

Sarenteth is a game all about exploring this world, and the people in it.

Media

The world of Sareth is nothing without its inspirations, and diving into those is still the best way to get a feel for it, short of diving into the game.

Recommended Reading

- ⋆ *The Tombs of Attuan* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- ⋆ *The Dark Is Rising* by Susan Cooper
- ⋆ *The Black Company* by Glen Cook
- ⋆ *Blackdog* by K.V. Johansen
- ⋆ *The Pagan Night* by Tim Akers
- ⋆ *Half A King* by Joe Abercrombie
- ⋆ *War of the Gods* by Poul Anderson
- ⋆ *The Dreaming Tree* by C. J. Cherryh
- ⋆ *Taliesin* by Stephen R. Lawhead
- ⋆ *Lords and Ladies* by Terry Pratchett
- ⋆ *Harvest* by Jim Crace
- ⋆ *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien
- ⋆ Fairy Tales, Folklore, & Mythology...
  - ∗ Tam Lin
  - ∗ The Mabinogion
  - ∗ The Death of Cu Chulainn
  - ∗ Preiddeu Annwn
  - ∗ The Children of Lir
  - ∗ Tale of Taliesin
  - ∗ The Cattle-Raid of Cooley
  - ∗ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
  - ∗ The Giant Who Had No Heart In His Body
  - ∗ The Sick-Bed of Cu Chulainn
  - ∗ The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn
  - ∗ The History of the Kings of Britain
  - ∗ Le Morte Darthur
  - ∗ The Wooing of Emer
  - ∗ Saga of King Hrolf Kraki
  - ∗ Voyage of Maldun
  - ∗ Saga of the People of Laxardal
  - ∗ Beowulf
  - ∗ Song of Roland
  - ∗ Saga of the Volsungs

Recommended Viewing

- ⋆ **The Secret of Kells (2009)**
- ⋆ **Centurion (2009)**
- ⋆ **Song of the Sea (2014)**
- ⋆ **The 13th Warrior (1999)**
- ⋆ **Pan's Labyrinth (2006)**
- ⋆ **The Name of the Rose (1986)**
- ⋆ **The Eagle (2011)**
- ⋆ **Excalibur (1981)**
- ⋆ **Valhalla Rising (2009)**

Recommended Listening

- ⋆ **Corvus Corax**
- ⋆ **Adrian Von Ziegler**
- ⋆ **Forndom**
- ⋆ **Damh the Bard**
- ⋆ **Faun**
- ⋆ **Tartalo Music**
- ⋆ **Wardruna**
- ⋆ **Danheim**
- ⋆ **Heilung**
- ⋆ **Awen**
- ⋆ **Wagner**
- ⋆ **Camille Saint-Saens**
- ⋆ **Markus Junnikkala**
- ⋆ **Beltaine**
- ⋆ **Faith and the Muse**
- ⋆ **Elvenking**
- ⋆ **Eluveitie**
- ⋆ **Cruachan**
- ⋆ **Korpiklaani**
- ⋆ **Falconer**

Chapter 2

Core Mechanics

Sarenteth is a game about narrating the story which unfolds around the player's characters. All of the game's mechanics are designed to give players different ways of taking narrative control.

In its simplest form, the flow of the game is this:

1. **GM narrates**. This includes description of the setting, what's happening around the player's characters, and the actions of non-player characters.
2. **Player narrates**. They describe the thoughts and actions of their character.
3. **Return to step 1.** This time, the GM's narration will focus on the consequences of the player character's actions; both how the environment changes and how non-player characters react.

The rest of the game is designed to support that flow and to provide a way of resolving things when the GM is uncertain how something should go. This could come in the form of a player's character doing something which may or may not be possible, or in determining how a non-player character will react. But the game system never actually says how things are resolved: it outlines the rough shape of what the narration should look like, and determines who gets to flesh that out into a new part of the story by narrating it.

Narration is the end-goal of *Sarenteth*'s mechanics. Every roll will have a victor, and that victor will narrate the roll's result. Whatever it was about the story which was uncertain enough for the GM to call for a roll, they are expected to narrate how that uncertainty is resolved. Most of the time this narration isn't going to be very cut-and-dry: even if the uncertainty was as simple as *"will Androlphus manage to behead the brigand before he gets stabbed?"* the result, in most cases, won't be a sim-ple yes or no. Successful rolls bring a character closer to their goal and failures hold them back,[1] but that may not be the end of things. Only in the most extreme situations–when a character is taken out (3.1.2.1) entirely–does the narrator get near-total freedom over what happens.

While narrating in *Sarenteth* often gives players more freedom in moving the story forward than they might experience in other games, it does come with a number of important limitations. The obvious limit is the result which gave them narrative control in the first place: successes have to lead to narration in which the character draws closer to their goal, and failures have to lead to narration in which those goals get further away. Narrating is about extrapolating out from the results. It's about finding the story to back up the dice rolls.

But the most important limitation, the one which is always in effect, is this: **narration can never take away another character's choice**. Every character in the game is controlled by one person at the table (the players each control their own character, and the GM controls the rest) and that is the only person who is *ever* allowed to narrate that character making a choice. Other narrators can describe things which happen to that character, up to and including how those things might affect them physically, mentally, or emotionally. But a character's choices are entirely given over to one player, who is expected to narrate the choices which are most appropriate for that character in that situation. Other players can lead a character to water, but only one can make them drink.

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[1] On a success Androlphus might tire his opponent or knock off a metal collar designed to stop blows to the neck. On a failure *he* might start to tire, or even get a nasty cut.

> **Influencing Characters**
>
> If it seems like *Sarenteth* makes it abnormally difficult to persuade someone else's character to do what you want, you're partially right. Convincing another character of something isn't as simple as rolling for it. Your roll can never take control away from someone else's character but it *can* influence them by creating a situation where the choice you want them to make seems to be the best option. The dice can cause another character to feel anger or fear or compassion, or inflict injury, or make a lie seem plausible. Make the character think your choice is best, and the player controlling them should generally go with it..

2.1 Rolling the Dice

2.1.1 The Basics

The dice only get involved when a character does something interesting and which also has a chance of failure. When that happens the GM will call for that character's player to roll. The player selects one approach (3.1) to use, determines the difficulty, and then rolls.

Sarenteth uses percentile (d%) dice. It's recommended that each player (as well as the GM) have a set of two ten-sided dice which can be easily distinguished from one another. When you're asked to roll, designate one die as the "10s" die and the other as the "1s" die, then roll them both. To get your result put the result from the first die into the 10s place and the result of the other into the 1s place (e.g. rolling a 7 on the 10s die and a 2 on the 1s die means you roll a 72). Rolling this way generates a number between 1 and 100.

Every roll is either a success or a failure. You succeed if you roll equal to or under your approach, but *not* equal to or under the difficulty. For example, when rolling with an approach score of 70 and a difficulty of 20, a roll of 21-70 will be a success. Anything else is a failure.

2.1.1.1 Difficulty

Every action that requires a roll should have some inherent chance of failing, or some risk that the player is taking in asking for the roll.

The player who makes the roll determines the difficulty (2.2). But having a low difficulty isn't always good, and having a high difficulty isn't always

bad: the higher the difficulty, the more effective the result will be!

2.1.1.2 Damage

The effectiveness of a roll is called *damage*, though it can mean much more than just physical harm. Any roll worth making will have some kind of obstacle (a person, a natural feature, a spell, etc) and that obstacle will have a score of its own to represent how hard it is to surmount. Successful rolls deal damage to that opposing score; when it is brought to 0, the challenge is overcome!

2.1.2 Success & Failure

The most common outcomes for a roll are a "simple" success or failure, but different elements of the game can turn change these into something more or less powerful. In total, there are five possible outcomes of a single die roll. Successes can be *simple*, *critical* (stronger and more pronounced), or *partial* (weaker and less advantageous) while failures can be *simple* or *critical* (which will severely set you back).

Each of the five possible results leads to a different outcome:

⋆ A **simple success** means you have accomplished what you set out to do, or at least made noticeable progress toward it. You choose whether to deal damage equal to the roll's difficulty or introduce a temporary circumstance (2.1.6).

⋆ A **critical success** means you have gone above and beyond what you were originally aiming to do. These can happen because of good luck, personal skill, or some other fortunate situation. You choose whether to deal damage equal to the roll result or introduce a persistent circumstance (2.1.6).

⋆ A **partial success** means you take a step in the right direction, but not a big one. These might be caused by adverse conditions or unfortunate circumstances holding you back. The roll deals an amount of damage equal to *half* the difficulty (rounded down).

⋆ A **simple failure** means the task at hand proved too difficult for you, and as a result you have started to lose ground. Your opponent gains one momentum (2.1.5).

⋆ A **critical failure** means adverse conditions or terrible luck are working to drag you down. Your opponent gains three momentum (2.1.5).

2.1.3 Rolling Doubles

Rolls in which both dice match are special. Doubles change simple outcomes into criticals, making successes even better and failures even more harmful.

It's worth noting that flipping (2.3.2) doubles does nothing.

2.1.4 Advantage & Disadvantage

Rolls can be made "with advantage" or "with disadvantage," which can both drastically change the outcome.

A roll can only have one instance of advantage or one instance of disadvantage at a time. Applying advantage or disadvantage to a roll which already has it does nothing; and applying it to a roll with the opposite cancels them both out and returns the roll to normal.

Before a player rolls with advantage or disadvantage they choose what effect it gives them from the lists below. Advantage has effects which can increase your chances of success or provide extra benefits on your roll, while disadvantage has effects which limit your ability to succeed or make an already bad situation worse.

When you roll with advantage, choose one of the following, plus one for every saga (3.7) you have (you may choose the same option multiple times):
⋆ Raise your simple success to a critical success.
⋆ Roll an extra d10 on the side. You may substitute it for one of the other dice you rolled.
⋆ You gain two momentum (2.1.5).
⋆ If your opponent has disadvantage, select one of their options to block. They may not choose it for this roll.

When you roll with disadvantage, choose one of the following:
⋆ Lower your simple success to a partial success.
⋆ Lower your simple failure to a critical failure.
⋆ Double the roll's difficulty (for your roll only).
⋆ Give your opponent 1 wyrd (2.3). You may only choose this option if you have a wyrd to give.

If both sides of a roll must choose these effects, players with advantage choose before players with disadvantage. Players choosing from the same list alternate, starting with whoever initiated the action that led to the roll.

2.1.5 Momentum

While advantage and disadvantage are used to represent things which heavily influence a roll towards the best- or worst-possible outcomes, momentum is used to represent the smaller, subtler influences on a roll. Momentum won't change a roll result but it can make a success more effective or a failure less harmful.

Sometimes a character will *gain momentum* on a roll, often from invoking a circumstance (2.1.6) or rolling with advantage. Each time they do, they add one point to their personal momentum pool. A roll can also have its own communal momentum pool, which gets added to by escalating during a contest (2.2.4).

After the dice are rolled the victor gains everything in the communal pool and then each side spends what they have. Each point of momentum can be spent individually to deal[2] or prevent 10 damage. Alternatively, if you have at least two momentum available you can spend it all to introduce a temporary circumstance (2.1.6) or inflict a scar (3.3).

All momentum pools are set before the dice are rolled and emptied after both players have had a chance to spend them.

2.1.5.1 Tracking Momentum

Momentum can be tracked with glass beads, spare change, poker chips, or anything similar. As long as it's easy to see, at a glance, both how much momentum is in a pool and to whom the pool belongs.

However you track momentum, make sure it's easy to distinguish between it and wyrd (2.3.0.1). Think about using a different color of beads, a different denomination of coin, or only allowing momentum pools to be tracked in a certain, centralized area.

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[2]Treat dealing damage as increasing the damage dealt by the roll itself, except you can deal damage via momentum even if the roll itself doesn't deal any.

2.1.6 Circumstances

Circumstances are anything outside of a character's edges (3.2) and scars (3.3) which could have a noticeable impact on a scene. For example, a circumstance might reflect having the high ground during a fight and pressing that advantage, or the peculiar difficulties a human might experience when trying to negotiate with the fairies.

Before a roll, each player may invoke any number of circumstances which give them a clear and decisive advantage over their opponent. For each circumstance invoked this way, they gain one momentum (2.1.5) on the roll. Alternatively, they can spend 1 wyrd (2.3) when they invoke it and set advantage or disadvantage (as appropriate) instead.

2.1.6.1 Types of Circumstances

Circumstances can be *persistent* or *temporary*.

A persistent circumstance lasts until it makes narrative sense for it to go away (such as "Cold & Rainy" lasting as long as a storm continues) or after a handful of scenes have elapsed. In either case, the GM should try to give a little advance warning before removing one.

Temporary circumstances only last until they are used. As soon as they are invoked, in any way, they are immediately removed. Discarding a temporary circumstance doesn't necessarily mean the narrative behind that circumstance is gone, but it means it won't become significant to the story again unless it is re-introduced.

2.1.6.2 Tracking Circumstances

Circumstances need to be easily visible by everyone at the table at all times with a clear distinction between temporary and persistent. Index cards, either laid flat on the table or "tented" for a better viewing angle, are ideal for this: write the name of the circumstance in large letters along the face. If the circumstance is most likely to only affect one or two characters, position it nearer to them so the connection is obvious. For games which can utilize an erasable central area (like a virtual tabletop or whiteboard) think about dedicating a small section of that area to nothing but a list of the current circumstances.

2.2 Resolving Actions

The flow of action and resolution in a game of *Sarenteth* is usually pretty straightforward: the GM sets the stage with the initial situation, the players describe how they act, and the GM describes how those actions change things. That, in a nutshell, is how a roleplaying game works.

Some of the actions a character takes will be simple: routine things that they would be expected to do every day, or actions that don't really have a meaningful impact on the story. These can be glossed over, with the player or the GM narrating the results of the action. Action and resolution flow seamlessly into one another.

Other actions aren't as straightforward. These actions involve a significant chance that the character fails to accomplish whatever it is they set out to do, and will have an interesting outcome either way. These are the *only* types of actions which require dice to decide.

2.2.1 Opposition

No roll in *Sarenteth* is made in a vacuum. Anytime the GM calls for a roll, they should also explain who or what is opposing that roll. This might be another character, but could just as easily be an animal, supernatural entity, or a more abstract representation of just how much effort it takes to get things done.

Once opposition has been determined both characters start a roll by announcing what approach (3.1) they will be using. Then each side may set advantage (through edges/obsessions), set disadvantage (through scars/obsessions), and gain momentum (through circumstances).

Once both sides are happy dice are finally rolled against the shared difficulty. How all of these things are actually determined depends on whether the roll is part of a single roll, an extended roll, or a contest, which are all explained later in this section.

The fact that all rolls are opposed also means that no action will result in just a success or failure. Both sides could succeed, or just one, or both could fail. The victor is the side which *succeeded*

and *rolled the highest.* They are awarded the ability to narrate the results. The victor isn't immune to the damage that might be inflicted by the opposing side's success, however. Pyrrhic victories are entirely possible.

If both sides fail, the GM narrates how the situation becomes more difficult for everyone involved.

If both sides succeed and tie, both sides bid for how many momentum they're willing to give their opponent in order to be considered the victor. The GM has the ultimate say if there's still confusion.

2.2.1.1 The Environment Score

Determining an opponent for a roll is easy when two characters are working against one another, but sometimes there isn't another active presence involved. Solitary actions like trying to navigate the woods, climb a cliff, or craft an item of power all require an opposing roll despite there being no one else involved. This is where the *environment score* comes in.

At its simplest, the environment score represents how easily something can go wrong, or how taxing it would be to accomplish a task. The higher it is, the greater the chance that a character will be worn down by their action, and the longer it may take for them to succeed. And unlike most approaches, there's nothing stopping the environment score from going above 100.

If the environment score succeeds, something has gone awry for the character. It could be simple damage (wounded pride, a stained reputation, scrapes and bruises) or it could mean the introduction of new scars or circumstances. In any case, it represents that character being drained *somehow.* On the other hand, if the environment score fails then things seem to align for that character a little more than they might have expected. Something, no matter how minor, just happened to work out.

The GM may sometimes treat the environment score as though it were a character in its own right, up to and including giving it edges 3.2 and scars 3.3. This should be done sparingly.

For more on how these scores are determined by the GM, see 7.2.2.
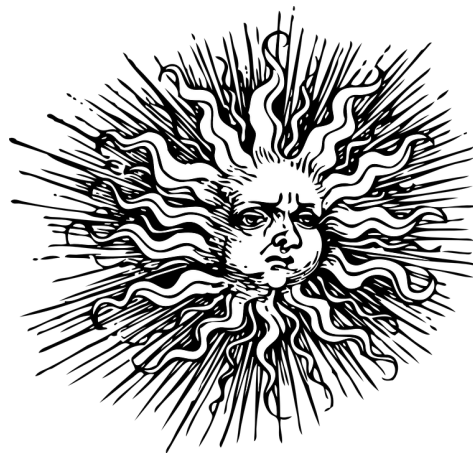
2.2.1.2 A Living World

There's another way to think about the environment score.

Everything possesses a spirit: a conscious (but not necessarily self-aware) force that guides it and embodies it.

A leaf has a very small spirit that awakes from its nap preiodically to stir the air and perhaps guide a bit of sunlight into itself. The branch upon which the leaf grows has a larger spirit (in fact, the leaf spirit is a *part* of the branch spirit) that's a little sleepier, but also a little more powerful. It can bend and twist and rattle. The tree from which the branch stems is larger still, sleeper; this one is intelligent enough to see its surroundings and understand (in a limited, tree-ish sort of way) what is going on. It is also powerful enough to provide shelter against enemies. The forest in which the tree grows is a huge spirit, one which rouses itself from slumber only every thousand years or so... Yet even during its long sleep, its power will seep into the whole area and bend reality to better suit its wishes. And so it goes: the land on which the forest grows is a spirit, and the continent on which rests the land, and the sea in which floats the continent, and the whole world which encompasses the sea.

The environment score may not represent an active opponent, but it could represent an entity nonetheless. Perhaps that forest does not wish to be navigated, or that cliff does not wish to be climbed.

2.2.2 Single Rolls

A single roll is used for simple, open-and-shut actions that don't take very long to finish.

Both sides roll with an appropriate score, then the victor narrates the results. Typically the damage dealt has little meaning (other than perhaps influencing future rolls) in these cases. Characters have advantage if they have any edges (3.2) which help them. They have disadvantage if they have any scars (3.3) which hinder them.

2.2.3 Extended Rolls

An extended roll is used for actions that rely on a character's stamina or reliability, or which can go back and forth over a prolonged period of time.

First the difficulty of the extended roll is chosen, and then the stakes need to be set: it should be clear what a victory or a defeat will look like at the end. Then each side chooses a single score, which they will use from start to finish (they cannot change scores part-way through). This score is both what they will be rolling and what will be taking damage. Advantage and disadvantage are determined just as in a single roll.

Once everything is established, the extended roll becomes a series of single rolls, one after another. The difficulty and the scores used never change, though the scores will take damage as the opposing side succeeds (meaning that the margin of success will dimish as time goes on). The roll is finished when one side's score drops below the difficulty, which leaves the other side the victor.

Circumstances and scars (3.3) can appear in the middle of an extended roll because of failed or critically successful rolls. When one of these is introduced, it can change the advantage or disadvantage of one or more of the roll's participants.

2.2.4 Contests

A contest is used anytime two sides are actively and continuously opposing one another, in such a way that they can change their behavior. Unlike single rolls, in which the opposition is brief, a contest has the potential to drag on; unlike extended rolls, in which each side is doing *one thing* until someone gives, contests allow characters to change their strategies part-way through. Since that can be used

to describe everything from a physical fight to an argument to a chase (and plenty of others), contests will likely feature in a game more than single or extended rolls.

Contests are all about action and reaction. It starts when one side (the *actor*) attempts an action and another side (the *opponent*) tries to stop them. The actor describes what action they are trying to take, and the opponent explains what they do to stop the actor, and then the real contest begins:

1. The opponent *bids difficulty* and *declares their approach.*

   Bid Difficulty: The player gives a number, which must be higher than the roll's current difficulty (2.1.1.1) if it has one. That becomes the roll's new difficulty. the roll's difficulty.

   Declare Approach: The player says which of their approaches they'll be using for the roll. The choice has to be in-line with what the description of the character's actions.

2. The opponent may *set advantage.*

   Set Advantage: The player invokes one of their edges (3.2) or one of the actor's scars (3.3) to give that character advantage or disadvantage (respectively). Obsessions (3.4) can be invoked in place of either an edge or a scar, as appropriate, as can circumstances (2.1.6) if the player is willing to spend wyrd (2.3). Wyrd can also be spent to set advantage a second time (but not a third, fourth, etc).

3. One momentum is added to the communal pool (2.1.5).

4. The actor is then given a choice: *escalate, surrender, or challenge.*

   Escalate: The actor and opponent switch roles and return to step #1 of the contest. The actor (now the opponent) describes how they react now that someone is trying to stop them and goes through all the steps, before the opponent (now the actor) will be given the same choice between escalating, surrendering, or challenging. Escalation is what keeps a contest going, each character reacting to the other's moves, while the roll's difficulty

and momentum pool steadily grows. The point of escalation is one of constantly rising stakes, with each character investing more of their effort and determination into finally ending it in their favor.

Surrender: The actor says they give up. The contest immediately ends, all momentum is discarded, and the opponent is the victor. They may either deal damage equal to the difficulty (the last bid) to the actor, or inflict a scar on them. It's the *actor*, however, who gets to narrate despite the opponent being the victor.

Why Surrender?

Sarenteth is not an aggressor's game. If you run headlong into every conflict, you're going to wind up dead. Surrendering is a great way to get out of a tough (or lethal) spot, even if it only delays the inevitable.

Challenge: The actor picks up their dice and the contest turns into a single roll. Each side uses whichever approach they last declared (if one side didn't get a chance to declare, they choose one at this point). The roll's difficulty is equal to the last bid.

After the roll is concluded and the results are narrated, the contest is over. If the situation would allow for it, there is nothing stopping one or both sides from launching right back into another one.

Contests in Three Steps

1. Actor describes an action.
2. Opponent describes their opposition. They bid difficulty, declare their approach, add momentum, and set advantage.
3. Actor can escalate, surrender, or challenge.

   Escalate: Actor and opponent switch sides and return to step above.

   Surrender: Opponent is the victor, but actor narrates.

   Challenge: Contest becomes a single roll.

2.2.5 Working Together

A roll only consists of two opposing sides but plenty of situations in the game will call for something more complex, with multiple characters and/or environment scores working together against others. In these cases the GM has a number of ways they can break things down. The first and often easiest option, when a group is working towards some shared goal, is to simply create a large opposing score and have everyone involved roll against that score one after another. This lets everyone's individual success or failures potentially affect those that come after, but is only really suitable for cases where the task at hand would be extremely difficult or time-consuming without a group effort.

If collectively rolling against a single score doesn't suit, there are two other ways characters can work together:

⋆ Everyone working together makes their own roll and determines their success or failure individually, then the group collectively chooses one result to use against the opposition and discards the rest. This option works best in cases where working together leads to consistent (but not necessarily amazing) progress and shields the less-capable members of the group from potential consequences.

⋆ The group chooses one character to lead the effort while they support. The leader is the only one to roll, but before they do each supporting character can lend a hand by declaring advantage or disadvantage on their behalf (exactly as though they themselves were the one rolling) or by giving the leader a momentum to add to their personal pool. This option works better for cases where teamwork could potentially lead to amazing or otherwise impossible results, or for efforts where leadership and organization shine above individual skill.

The latter two approaches both raise another consideration which the GM will need to rule on in whatever way makes the most sense for the situation at hand. After the roll is made, if the opposing score deals damage to the team, who takes it? The damage could be divided among the group (equally or as the GM or group sees fit), or it could all be dealt to the score which was actually rolled. If the opposition spends momentum to deal damage, it could be dealt in the same manner as the roll's damage or it could be used to "target" a particular member of the group, if it would make sense for them to have been singled out in some way.

2.3 Wyrd

Games of *Sarenteth* are typically a little more down-to-earth than other roleplaying games in the same genre, with less of a focus on heroic adventure or powerful people doing powerful things. But with that said, the protagonists of the game do still have a slight edge over the others: greater access to wyrd. These are points possessed by the players at the table, which the player spends to help their own character along or hinder the characters of others.

The GM is a player too, and can spend their own wyrd to help those characters that no one else is controlling. The protagonists enjoy greater dividends from wyrd only because those characters have a player who will be spending wyrd almost solely on them, while the GM will be dividing the points they have among many.

2.3.0.1 Tracking Wyrd

Wyrd can be tracked with glass beads, spare change, poker chips, or anything similar. As long as it's obvious how much each player has at a glance.

However you track wyrd, make sure it's easy to distinguish between it and momentum (2.1.5.1).

2.3.0.2 What Does It Mean?

Wyrd means different things to different people in the world of Sareth. Some claim it's a type of mana which "leaks" into the physical realm. Fairies say it's the building block of reality, the thing humans used to create Foundation. Both of these are true, but wyrd is also destiny, fate, the will of the gods, the stirring of the collective unconscious, and sheer blind luck.

When a player spends a wyrd to nudge things in their character's favor, that character might claim to have fortune or the divine on their side, or maybe they'll believe that everything is happening according to their doom. When a player accepts wyrd in exchange for allowing an obsessino to override a character's better judgement, the character may blame their evil fate, a curse, the tests of the gods, or just their own personal failings.

Everything has an effect on everything else. All reality is interconnected. Wyrd is the mechanism by which Sarenteth expresses the union between all things.

2.3.1 The Wyrd Economy

Luck turns. Fate changes. When a player spends their wyrd the points don't go away, they go to the player of whichever characters suffers the most (or gains the least) through that expenditure. If the wyrd is spent during a roll, then that probably means it should go to whoever is rolling against that player; in other situations, it's more open to interpretation. The ways wyrd can be spent lend themselves to somewhat "adversarial" use, so it should still be clear most of the time. If a good candidate can't be determined, the wyrd should go to the GM (unless the GM is the one who spent the wyrd, in which case it should go to a player who recently had a clever plan or showed off some good roleplaying).

Aside from being spent, wyrd can also be *burned.* When a player burns a wyrd, it is removed from the game.

2.3.2 Flipping the Dice

After a player rolls but before the results of that roll are determined, they may spend 1 wyrd to flip their dice. This swaps the 10s die and the 1s die (e.g. a roll of 72 becomes a 27, a roll of 50 becomes a 5). This is one of the few ways in the game to turn a failure into a success.

It's worth noting that flipping doubles (2.1.3) does nothing.

2.3.3 Defying Death

Spending wyrd to defy death allows characters to survive scrapes they have no business surviving, often through means that in the world of the game will seem miraculous or insanely lucky. Anytime a character's approach (3.1)dropping to 0 would result in them being killed (or otherwise rendered permanently unplayable), the player may burn a wyrd to get one last chance at preventing it. They make a single roll using their Destiny (3.1.1.5). The roll is made against an environment score equal to the damage which caused the character's approach to drop to 0 in the first place.

If the player succeeds on their defy death roll, they narrate how their character barely manages to get out of the situation. They are not taken out (3.1.2.1) but their approach is still 0, meaning they

are still vulnerable. If the environment succeeds, something awful happens. This might include horrible scars (if the character lived) or some terrible event takes place because of the character's fall that makes the situation even worse for all those still around.

Some characters, like fairies (5.1) and wizards(4.2.4.5), don't have a Destiny attribute. These characters can't make a defy death roll at all; such is the price of magic.

2.3.4 Fulfilling Destiny

Destiny is not just a fortune-teller's trick in *Sarenteth*, but neither it is an iron-clad rule of what will happen. Fate pushes hard to make certain events come to pass, but force of personality and strength of conviction–as well as a little wyrd–can prevent it. The world of Sareth contains many possible futures, all fated in some way, and only one can come to pass.

Important characters (including protagonists), places, objects, and events can all possess a destiny. These are short phrases, typically only a sentence or two, which vaguely allude to a series of events which is fated to happen. All destinies are public knowledge to all players (though not to their characters).

For example, *"when the crown falls, the realm will rise"* would make for a good destiny: exactly what the "crown" and the "realm" are is ambiguous, and could just as easily be taken figuratively as literally. A character might have a particularly heroic destiny like *"I will save my people from the dragon,"* which is still easily open to interpretation: it could mean the character will actually kill a dragon, or it could mean they will defeat another sort of monster, or perhaps it means they will lead their people's retreat from some kind of overwhelming threat. There is a balance to be struck with destinies. They must be open enough that it could be applied to many different (albeit similar) situations, but not so open that it can be applied to *anything*.

Anyone at the table can make a destiny come true by burn a wyrd and explaining how the current situation lines up with a particular destiny. Assuming no one objects, the player can then narrate how that destiny plays out. This narration is much more "powerful" than normal and goes on for as long as is appropriate to finish the events described by the destiny. Once the player is finished, that's it for the destiny. It can never be used again.

2.3.4.1 Narrating Destiny

Normally, players who are given the opportunity to narrate the story must abide by some important restrictions regarding what they're allowed or not allowed to narrate (2). These keep one player from monopolizing the game or trivializing other players' involvement in the ongoing story. But when a destiny is fulfilled, things change: the player (not the character) who fulfills the destiny should be given significantly more leeway than they would normally be allowed when narrating. They still can't make decisions for other characters, but they can narrate the results of decisions even if normally a roll would be called for; in effect, making decisions for characters other than their own is the *only* thing they can't do.

2.3.4.2 Stopping Destiny

Destiny gives players the greatest possible degree of freedom in their narration, but that freedom can be taken away. If someone wishes to stop or contest the narration of a destiny they may make a single roll using their Choice against the destined character's Fate (3.1.1.5). For characters that don't

possess a Fate score, or for destinies that aren't tied to a character, use an environment score between 20 and 80 instead.

2.3.5 Bribery

The simplest way to use wyrd will often be the most effective: any player can offer someone else at the table one or more wyrd, if they will do something in return. This is a nice way of getting out of contests or painful rolls (or even changing how a player narrates a destiny!) without too much risk, and without having to resort to the dice.

The GM should always be looking for reasons to accept bribes.

Using Wyrd

★ **Flip the Dice [1 wyrd]:** Flip the 10s and 1s position of your roll. (2.3.2)

★ **Invoke Trait [1 wyrd]:** Give advantage or disadvantage using an edge, scar, obsession, or circumstance (2.1.6), even if you've already set advantage (2.2.4).

★ **Defy Death [1 wyrd, burned]:** Make a Destiny roll to avoid losing a character. (2.3.3)

★ **Fulfill Destiny [1 wyrd, burned]:** Describe how the situation fits with a destiny, and narrate the destiny's conclusion. (2.3.4)

★ **Produce Prop [1 wyrd]:** Describe how a character produces an item which relates to their edge. (3.2.2)

★ **Push Obsession [1 wyrd]:** Set approach equal to the result on the dice. (3.4.1)

★ **Compel Obsession [1+ wyrd]:** Offer at least one wyrd and a course of action. If rejected, they pay that many wyrd. If accepted, they follow through. (3.4.2)

★ **Bribery:** Make an offer.

Chapter 3

Characters

3.1 Attributes & Approaches

Every character has five *attributes*, which consist of a pair of linked *approaches*. An approach is a score between 0 and 100 which describes something about that character's personality and how they tend to get things done. These are the scores that players try to roll under 2.1.1, so higher scores make for a better chance of success. Naturally, players will want to lean on the things which make their character more likely to succeed, so higher scores mean the character is more likely to try to solve their problems in a way befitting that approach.

All approaches are grouped into pairs called attributes. An attribute doesn't do anything by itself except serve as a way to refer to the relationship between its two approaches. This relationship is a key part of *Sarenteth*. While an approach can have any score between 0 and 100, an attribute must be balanced: its two approaches must *always* total up to 100. For example, if one approach has a score of 75 then its pair must be 25, and if the first score takes damage and drops to 40 its pair is immediately raised to 60.

What Approaches Aren't

Many roleplaying games use scores like "Strength," "Agility," or "Wisdom" to track a character's basic aptitudes. It's easy to think of *Sarenteth*'s approaches in the same way, but this would be a serious misunderstanding. Approaches reflect how capable a character is at actively, consciously, *approaching* a problem. They don't at all reflect a character's more passive qualities like how strong, fast, or clever they are. Those things are handled by edges (3.2) and scars (3.3).

3.1.1 List of Scores

All humans possess the same five attributes and the same ten approaches. Stranger creatures, like wizards and the fair folk (5.1), have their own attributes and approaches which may or may not overlap with the those listed below.

3.1.1.1 Action: Vigor & Meditation

Action is all about movement, activity, and exertion. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to do something active, deliberate, and forceful; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in whether to act at once and seize the advantage, or to act only when the whole situation is understood.

Vigor is used for acting with strength, speed, and initiative. This is the measure of a character's tendency to leap into things without a plan.

Meditation is used for acting with cunning, caution, and forethought. This is the measure of a character's ability to concoct a scheme and patiently execute it.

3.1.1.2 Emotion: Passion & Serenity

Emotion is all about why a character acts, and how that colors every decision they make. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to have a deep understanding of the reasons behind their own behavior and how to turn a situation to their advantage using it; the fundamental conflict of the attribute is whether a character lets their emotions run free or keeps them tightly controlled.

Passion is rage, righteousness, despair, joy, and everything in between. This is how likely a charac-

ter is to let their heart decide things for them, for good or ill.

Serenity is peace, discipline, and calm. This is how likely a character is to divorce their feelings from the situation at hand and act in a deliberate, rational way.

3.1.1.3 Insight: Will & Empathy

Insight is all about understanding people: how someone thinks, how they operate, what they're going to do next and how that can best be used. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to use their knowledge of human nature to influence events; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in whether this knowledge is mostly focused on others, or on themselves.

Empathy is a character's understanding people around them. This is the measure of a character's tendency to see outside themselves and make it about someone else.

Will is a character's understanding of their own inner workings. This is the measure of a character's independence, willpower, and self-assurance (misplaced or not).

3.1.1.4 Outlook: Hope & Verity

Outlook is all about how a character views the world. It decides (at its most basic) whether a character is an optimist or a pessimist, and how they react to particularly good or bad circumstances. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who act based on these deeply-held convictions; the fundamental conflict of the attribute is in whether the world is fundamentally good or bad.

Hope is used by characters who believe there is potential for good in everyone and everything. This is the measure of a character's natural trust and their ability to overcome despair.

Verity is used by characters who believe there is nothing but selfishness and apathy, that things may not get better. This is the measure of a character's skepticism and ability to shoulder despair.

3.1.1.5 Destiny: Fate & Choice

Destiny is all about how a character's fate drives them. Unlike other attributes, this is only rarely used and isn't used by certain types of people more than others; it is pulled out only in matters of great import, life-changing moments (or life-ending) moments when nothing else will do.

Fate is used by characters who stick to the plan laid out for them. It is used to accomplish one's destiny, or to survive when only that destiny is yet left unfulfilled.

Choice is used by characters who defy their destiny. It is used to avoid or subvert the tendrils of fate and instead forge a new path.

3.1.2 Damaged Scores

When a character takes damage, the score of the damaged approach is reduced by that amount (and its opposite approach is raised to keep the attribute balanced).

This can drastically change how effective certain courses of action are, and might even lead the character to make decisions they wouldn't make normally; this is how it's supposed to work. For example, a character with a high Passion score would be likely to try and solve their problems by letting their emotions take over; after an altercation in which an outburst is rebuffed, the character's Passion will have taken damage. The score has taken damage, and success with that strategy is now even less likely... If the score has taken enough damage, it might make that character's Serenity a better option. That can also be seen, in the world of the game, as the character being (perhaps forcefully) calmed down. If they then try to use their Serenity on another roll, it's the character taking a deep breath and proceeding with uncharacteristic calm.

3.1.2.1 Taken Out

If damage ever reduces a character's approach to 0 or below, that character is taken out. This means they can no longer act in the present conflict and, depending on the situation, may not be able to take any actions for the next handful of scenes or ever again. The narrator describes what happens to the character who was taken out and has very few limits to the sort of consequences they can describe. A character who is taken out could be permanently changed by the experience and could even die or otherwise be removed from the game. It's all up to

what the narrator wants and what makes sense for the situation.[1]

If an environment score is taken out, that facet of the environment is no longer an issue and won't be for quite a while.

3.1.2.2 Healing Damage

Damage to approaches typically represents a short-term battering or the onset of fatigue; characters having the breath knocked out of them, being disheartened, or losing sight of their morals in a moment of passion. As such, damage to approaches almost never lasts more than a day.

Each time a character is given a stress-free chance to rest and recuperate (in the case of physical damage) or pause and reflect (for mental/emotional damage), they have the opportunity to heal. They can either reset their damaged scores back to their usual values, or they may "grow" from their experience and make their current damaged values their new normal. This decision can be made for each attribute individually.

3.2 Edges

Edges are core traits that make a character unique. They are short phrases that describe something a character is good at, something that makes them special. The only real limitation is that this edge has to describe something positive, because the main purpose for an edge is to give one character a leg-up over another.

Edges can be literally *anything* about a character, as long as it is beneficial to them. Occupations like "Village Blacksmith," "Cunning Woman," "Court Magus," "Knight of the Realm," are a good starting point. Some characters might have edges to do with their physical capabilities ("Strong as

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[1] If the narration would kill or permanently remove a character, that character is given an opportunity to defy death (2.3.3). This should interrupt the narration as little as possible: the best cases of defying death are when a character appears to have suffered all the consequences heaped upon them, only to reveal that they survived it by the skin of their teeth.

an Ox"), or they may be more intellectually inclined ("Knows Seven Languages," "Plays Lyre"). Still other characters will tend toward more social or financial edges like "Silver-Tongued," "Born Aristocrat," or even just "Rich."

An edge represents not just a character's ability to adapt to new situations or gain a statistical advantage on rolls, it can represent a character's knowledge, skills, appearance, and social circles. A relevant edge will open all sorts of doors that otherwise would be shut to a character, or give them special information. Anytime an edge seems like it might be useful to the current situation, the player can ask the GM how their edge helps them. More often than not, the GM should try to give the character *something* helpful, even if it's only a hint, suggestion, or piece of information that might prove useful.

3.2.1 Rolling with Advantage

The simplest way to use an edge is to use it to gain advantage (2.1.4). For single (2.2.2) and extended (2.2.3), the presence of an applicable edge is all that's required to gain the advantage; the player only needs to point it out to the GM. Contests (2.2.4) have their own mechanic for using edges in this way.

There is one restriction when using edges in this manner: the edge can't be simply *helpful* in the situation, it must give a *clear* and *immediate* advantage. This means that it takes more than relevancy for an edge to work, the character must be actively using the edge to its fullest. It also means that two characters who possess similar edges may not both be able to use them. If one character has an

edge which in the present situation is superior to the other's (e.g. in a debate, one character having the "Seasoned Beaurocrat" edge while another has only "Glib Tongue") then the inferior edge cannot be used at all; the inferior edge may be helpful, but it doesn't provide an advantage over an opponent even more suited to the challenge.

> ### Ranking Edges?
>
> An edge is something more important than a rank, and to reduce it to that would rob the game (and the character) of a great deal of complexity. One edge is never better than another, it is only more or less advantageous than another *in the present situation*.
>
> Comparing edges must always be done on a case by case basis. If it is ever unclear, the GM should either give advantage to both sides, or to neither.

3.2.2 Props

Edges give you another way to use your wyrd (2.3), allowing a character to almost always have *something* useful on hand to get them out of a tight spot. By spending one wyrd, a player can have their character produce a prop, an item which they "just so happen" to have had on their person all along. This item has to be relevant to one of that character's edges and it has to make some amount of sense how they could have had the item with them all along, but the GM should give the player the benefit of the doubt most of the time. No matter how well the town guards search the thief, he always manages to hide a knife just big enough for sawing through bindings; lost in a strange land, the young nobleman seems to have an infinite supply of petty coin; though the wight bats away the priest's holy symbol, he keeps another next to his breast for just such an occasion.

Props count as possessions (3.5), except they go away at the end of the scene.

3.2.2.1 Magical Benefits

Some edges give much more than the usual little pushes; some give a character access to otherworldly or supernatural abilities. While most edges are completely freeform and up to the player to de-termine, these are typically a little more strict in what they are called and what they represent.

* Edges that refer to a character being a **druid** or having the **wild-tongue** allow a character to speak the language of animals and trees.
* Edges that refer to a character being a **bard**, **poet**, or **storyteller** allow a character to use their awen (4.2.1).
* Edges that refer to a character being a **summoner**, **necromancer**, or **cunning man**/**woman** allow a character to use grammarye (4.2.2).
* Edges that refer to a character being a **shaman**, or having the **second sight**, allow a character to use the second sight (4.2.3).
* Edges that refer to a character being a **wizard**, **witch**, or **mage** allow a character to use both the second sight (4.2.3) and the commanding voice (4.2.4). These edges can only be taken by characters who have a geas (4.3).

3.3 Scars

A scar is very much like an edge, except that it hinders a character instead of helping them. They are still a core trait of the character, represented by a word or short phrase, but they describe something that is burdensome or otherwise has the potential to get a character into trouble.

Scars can be anything, so long as it's sufficiently interesting and tends to be negative when it comes up. Physical (literal) scars are fairly common, as are those related to diseases. Some characters (particularly those of wizards or others who have been exposed to the supernatural) might have scars related to madness or a warped view of reality, while characters of a more social bent might have scars that deal with stains on their reputation or poor societal standing. For older characters, the ravages of age can provide a wealth of possibilities.

Turning Edges & Scars Around

Edges are meant to be positive and helpful, while scars are meant to be negative and hurtful. But some characters may find ways to make their hindrance work to their advantage, or they could use an opponent's strength against them.

This is why edges and scars are so similar in how they are structured and how they are applied: it makes it much easier to pretend, for a moment, that a scar is an edge or vice versa. The line between one and the other is fuzzy at best, and should be treated more as a guideline than a hard-and-fast rule. Use the rules for edges for anything that makes things easier for a character, and the rules for scars for anything that makes things harder.

3.3.1 Rolling with Disadvantage

In single (2.2.2) and extended (2.2.3), the presence of an applicable scar is all that's needed for a character to be forced to roll with disadvantage (2.1.4).

Contests (2.2.4) have their own rules for using scars, which involves the character's opponent calling out the scar in order to use it.

3.3.2 Healing Scars

Most scars should be given a chance at healing after sufficient time has passed, and if given proper care. Exactly what constitutes sufficient time and care is dependant on the scar itself, and some scars can never be healed (without invoking supernatural forces). Even if the GM determines that a scar can be healed, the degree of healing still must be decided: a relatively "minor" scar can be removed from the character and forgotten about, but more impactful scars might only be changed to something less harmful when healed (e.g. "Broken Leg" becoming "Permanent Limp").

Non-physical scars can be healed as well, with the only difference being what sort of care might be needed. The sorts of mental scars wizards tend to accrue may require nothing more than steady meditation, or it could take another mage to dive into their dreams (4.2.3) and cut something out of them. Social scars like having one's reputation stained in the eyes of a king might only take time away from court (for a particularly forgetful monarch) or might require the skills of a bard willing to sew the courtiers with tales of good deeds to outweigh those of the past. If a player is interested in seeing a scar healed, the GM doesn't need to tell them exactly what is required, but should be willing to give some possible ideas, and should always be open to new ideas from the player.

3.4 Obsessions

An obsession is something which drives a character to act, sometimes against their better judgement or otherwise to their detriment. It isn't simply a motivation, it's something a character is almost (or actually) compelled to do, something for which they would be willing to sacrifice, maybe even to violate their own personal values and beliefs. They can be physical addictions like alcoholism or they can be

more psychological in nature, like a compulsive disorder or an overriding, obsessive desire for revenge.

Just like edges and scars, obsessions are recorded as single words or short phrases. Unlike edges (which are positive traits) and scars (which are negative traits), obsessions are both good and bad: they drive a character to action and allow them to plumb hidden depths to accomplish their goals, but they also can force the character into difficult or even deadly situations.

Obsessions are Active

Coming up with a character's obsession needs to be done with care. Unlike edges and scars, which are merely passive records of something which might help or hinder, an obsession needs to describe something which *motivates a character to action.*

It's not good enough that a character thinks about something obsessively, they must act obsessively, compulsively, recklessly, because of it.

3.4.1 Pushing Obsessions

When a character acts in line with an obsession, they can go to lengths that they would normally never be capable of. This is called pushing the obsession.

After players roll but before that roll is narrated, both sides have the opportunity to push their obsessions. This costs one wyrd, and changes the approach score that character just used to the die result just rolled. This means pushing an obsession will turn *any* roll over the difficulty into a success. An obsession can only be pushed if it is directly and immediately relevant to the roll at hand; the possibility that failing a roll would hinder the obsession isn't good enough, nor is an indirect sequence of events. The obsession should be at the forefront of the character's mind, and they should be trying to achieve it at that very moment.

Just as with any time an approach score changes, changing one approach by pushing an obsession will change its pair in order to keep the attribute balanced. A character can have a score drop to 0 this way (by pushing their obsession after rolling a 100), and if that happens they will be taken out as normal.

3.4.2 Compelling Obsessions

Although obsessions can let a character push themselves beyond their normal limits, they can also force a character to make decisions they otherwise would never make. Any player at the table can compel any character: to do so, they offer that character's player as many wyrd as they like and suggest a decision or course of action the character could take, which is in-line with one of their obsessions. The other player then has to choose whether to accept or refuse the compel. If they refuse it, they have to give the player compeling them as many wyrd as they were offered (and if they don't have that many, they can't refuse); if they accept, they take the offer and must go along with that decision/course of action.

There is nothing stopping a player from compeling a character to do something that would be disastrous, or even downright suicidal. Obsessions are not to be taken lightly, because they represent a desire or compulsion so deeply ingrained in a character that they would, under the right circumstances, be willing to lose everything in order to satisfy it.

Potential for Abuse

There's a lot of potential for abuse in the way characters can be compelled. It wouldn't be very hard for some players to constantly focus their compels on one other person at the table, maybe forcing them to lose their character over and over again, or to constantly put them in humiliating or unfun positions.

Those situations can't be effectively stopped by the rules because any attempt to address them "officially" would only make a loophole appear legitimate. Instead, here are some guidelines: no player should regularly have to deal with more than one or two compels in a session, and while the compels can still be dangerous or suicidal, they must still result in the character taking a reasonable course of action given that character's values and beliefs. The GM (or even other players) should veto any compel which would be absurd or out of line.

Repeated abuse should lead to one warning, one frank discussion after the session, and then removal of that player from the campaign. If that player was the GM, find a new one.
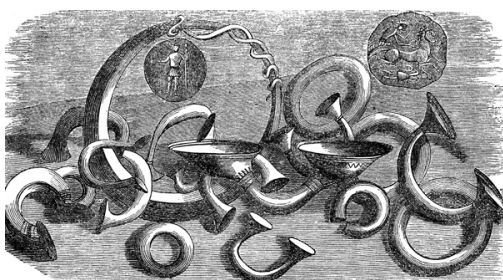

3.5 Possessions

The most important aspects of a character in the game are immaterial: the edges, scars, and obsessions which make them unique, and the approaches which show how they think and act. But sometimes the only thing that may matter is that one person has a sword and another doesn't.

Every character has a list of possessions. This list reflects not just the things they have on hand but also abstract or faraway possessions such as holdings, titles, estates, etc.

In most cases a character's possessions will only help them by allowing them to do more (it's hard to traverse the sea without a boat) or by affecting how characters are treated (someone dressed as a beggar will likely be treated as one).

But during a roll they have another use: they are used as circumstances (2.1.6).

There are some restrictions on this. The possession must be relevant to the situation at hand, and if used as part of a contest (2.2.4), it must be relevant to the very last action taken. It also must give a clear, immediate advantage over the opponent, just like with edges (3.2). In many cases where both sides are using possessions one or both will be rendered unusable (especially in combat, where e.g. a sword gives no advantage against plate armor, but a warhammer might).

3.5.1 Gaining & Losing Possessions

Possessions can be gained or purchased by characters whenever and wherever it would make sense, but these possessions can be lost through use or adverse circumstances (like an opponent's narration) just as easily.

Characters can also get special possessions by mentioning them in one of their edges, like a knight with the edge "I Wield My Father's Blade." These possessions can only be taken away in the most extreme situations. Other possessions can be gained *through* an edge without being as directly tied to them, by spending a wyrd to create a prop (3.2.2). Props are short-lived but sometimes you only need that extra cloak long enough to sneak out postern door.

3.6 Allies

If it's not what you have it's who you know. Allies are friends, family members, business partners, familiars, vassals, debtors, fairy godmothers, anyone who might be willing to help a character out in a time of need.

As is often the case, the simplest way a character can make use of their allies is simply by incorporating them into the story. Being on good terms with the local cunning woman means supernatural aid at a discount; having a knight for a friend means always having some muscle (political or physical) willing to lend a hand. Having trustworthy people by one's side is always a good thing.

Otherwise, allies work essentially the same as possessions (3.5). They can be used as a circumstance (2.1.6) during a roll as long as their friendship is relevant and gives a clear leg-up over the opponent. Of course, what exactly counts as "relevant" can be a little harder to gauge. If there's ever a doubt about it, the player should come up with a quick story explaining a time in the past when their character learned something from their ally which is now coming up again in the present context. Maybe they used to spar with their mercenary friend and picked up some underhanded tactics, or they were around a bard so long they couldn't help but memorize a few entertaining songs.

3.7 Sagas

There are legends who walk among men. They may have performed incredible feats of bravery,

or skill, or cunning. They may have led a host through a hopeless situation or comported themselves with honor and grace in an awful time. Perhaps they traded wits with one of the First Fae out of myth and fable and walked away mostly unscathed. Whatever they did, it was worthy of the bard's tales. In later years it will be a chapter in the tale of their life: it will be a part of their saga.

Whenever a character does something about which the bards will sing in later years and distant lands, they gain a saga. This is a special trait not tied to any attribute or approach. It is not used to represent the character's growth, exactly, but rather the cementing of their place in history. Their story may not be remembered as it happened, but it *will* be remembered.

There isn't a hard-and-fast rule about when characters gain sagas because each case should be handled individually. Players who want to ensure they earn sagas should work out with the GM what sort of undertakings would be worth a saga and then the character will need to work toward that goal. Alternatively, during play the GM might decide that what a character just did was worth a future bard's tale, rewarding a saga immediately.

Asymmetric Advancement

Tying the earning of sagas to renown and the bardic tradition gives a degree of leeway to the timing on when a character earns a saga, and it also means not all characters need earn sagas at the same time. Even if a group of people work together for a common goal, it may be that only one or two performed the sorts of feats which will later find their way into song.

Some characters may have more sagas than others, even within the same group of player characters. Those with fewer sagas can make an active effort to win some renown, maybe even helped by their association with someone who's already gained it, but they can also try and make up for it in other ways. Edges, geasa, and any number of other benefits can be just as meaningful.

For more on character advancement and sagas, see 7.1.2.1.

Sagas don't provide any new abilities, but they can provide an extra degree of success or safety to existing rolls: when picking options during a roll with advantage (3.2.1) a character gets an extra pick for every saga they possess. The extra options could be used to double-down on the same choice in some cases (e.g. choosing to gain momentum

multiple times, or choosing to gain more than one extra d10) or they could be used to "spread out" and cover one's bases.

Generally sagas will make a character more consistent and effective in play without really changing anything fundamental. They allow a character to act more daring and take greater risks.

3.8 Starting Out

Before starting a game of *Sarenteth* everyone at the table should have a good idea of the game they'll be playing. This doesn't stop at just a basic rules understanding but also involves setting expectations for what sort of game it is, what it will look like, what the characters will be expected to do, etc.

With that out of the way everyone but the GM will need a character concept. These concepts should be discussed with the others. Once everyone understands what's expected and has an idea or two for what character they want to play, the GM will determine what the starting character sheet looks like.

Below are three different tiers for starting characters. These aren't hard-and-fast rules to be followed, but rather guidelines for what a character sheet might look like and how they can be adjusted. Which one to use will depend on the sort of game that's going to be run and where in the story that game starts. *Sarenteth* isn't a game about characters advancing through their character sheets and doesn't put much emphasis on it, so it shouldn't be assumed that the characters will start out with little power and then grow as the story progresses. If the game demands characters who are more skilled or better known, start them out with what they need to dive into things. Don't wait.

⋆ **Humble** characters aren't well-known, either because they're still at the beginning of their story or they're simply not likely to do anything remarkable enough to be immortalized in song. These characters will probably have narrow skillsets and not be too knowledgeable or well-traveled, but they will have ample room for growth. Use this tier for stories which deal mostly with the difficulties of everyday life and ordinary folk, for child characters, and for tales which start from humble beginnings.

  ∗ Three edges. One should relate to a profession

(for adults) or a special skill or interest (for children).

* One optional scar. If taken, gain an extra ally.
* One obsession.
* Two allies. At least one should be a family member or mentor.

★ **Known** characters have made a modest name for themselves, though they are far from any sort of legend. They probably have a handful of useful skills or are otherwise educated, and they might even have some knowledge of the wider world. Known characters have all they need to work towards fame but they will have a long way yet to go. Use this tier for stories which focus on groups of skilled professionals and characters with plenty of experience behind them.

* Three edges. One should relate to either a profession or to a title the character has earned.
* One or two scars. If a second scar is taken, gain an extra edge.
* One obsession.
* Three allies. At least one should be a respected peer, someone with a similar background or skillset.

★ **Famed** characters are already well-known, at least in the broader region where they live and operate. Though they still have plenty of room to deepen their legend, there's a good chance that famed characters are already set to gain a position in local folk-tales. Use this tier for epic stories about the sorts of people who shape history, and for characters with depths of hard-fought and well-earned experience.

* Four edges. One should relate to a highly-trained profession or a mastered skill. Another should relate to a title the character has earned.
* One or two scars. If a second scar is taken, gain an extra edge.
* One or two obsessions. If a second obsession is taken, gain an extra edge.
* Five allies. At least one should be a respected peer with a similar skillset. Another should be a famous figure.
* One saga.

Each player makes their character's traits [2] and sets their approach scores themselves. Character traits and scores can be determined in any order.

Nonhuman characters and those with access to magic have some extra considerations when starting out. Many of them will have different attributes than those previously mentioned and all of them will have at least one trait which is decided for them. For more on attributes and predetermined traits for nonhuman characters, see the appropriate section in Chapter 5. Predetermined traits for supernatural characters are listed in 3.2.2.1 and some are also covered in the sections on that type of magic (4.2.1.1, 4.2.2.2, 4.2.3.2).

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[2]Or players can select from the list of examples (7.6.1).

Chapter 4

Magic

4.1 The Basics

There is no hard-and-fast rule about what is or is not magic in Sareth, because every culture tends to develop its own ideas about these things.

Some people claim that the bard's ability to allude to the future in their songs is magical, but the shaman's ability to create a sending is simply the result of spiritual discipline. Some consider the poet's words to hold a kind of magic, or the smith's ability to turn base substances from the ground into shining, worked creations. In some places it is believed that every summoner must have a spark of magic within their soul, while in others it is said that anyone can call out to the powers.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the ones called wizards , whose every speech and deed and thought is laced with power, are magical. The debate with their kind is whether or not they can be called human.[1]

But the disagreements of the setting don't translate well into the rules. So while within a game the definition of "magic" should be a fluid thing, for the purposes of this chapter *magic* is anything that relies on mana to affect the world.

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[1] All fairies are by their nature wizards (at least as far as humans use the term). Human wizards, then, are closer to the fae than ordinary folk. But this isn't without tremendous cost. In gaining "fairy magic," they forever lose access to a magic inborn into every human: a type of magic which is orders of magnitude more powerful than even the greatest of the First Fae, but so mundane that humans simply don't notice its effects.

The fae are much the same with their own magic: never noticing the spells they cast, but in awe of human abilities they could never hope to emulate.

4.1.1 Mana

Magic is change, and the degree and power of that change is represented as mana. It isn't quite a substance or an energy, it's a confluence. Mana exists wherever and whenever the gap between the mortal world and the Between (6.2.1) wears thin.

Magic is the act of purposefully shortening that gap, seizing that mana, and then channeling it to enact change. This is called casting a spell (4.1.2).

Points of mana behave very similarly to momentum (2.1.5) and can be tracked in largely the same way, as long as it's easy to distinguish between the two (e.g. use beads of different colors or different types of coins). Mana is also added to the same communal/personal pools as momentum; a character can even have momentum and mana sharing a pool during a roll.

Where mana and momentum differ is in how they're gained and what effect they have when spent.

4.1.1.1 Rituals

The most straightforward way to add mana to a spell is by enacting rituals. These are actions a character takes which, because of the character's belief in them, draw the Between closer. There isn't a hard and fast list of what these actions are because how any character goes about their magic should be personal and unique. As long as it seems suitably ritualistic or magical, as long as the character believes in what they're doing, it can be a ritual. It could be as simple as singing a rhyme or making some hand-gestures, as elaborate as drawing intricate geometric patterns with a consecrated athame or cutting the throat of a sacrifice upon an

altar.

Rituals are tied to a particular spell that the caster is planning to enact. Every ritual performed for that spell adds one mana to the spell's communal pool.

Multiple rituals can be performed to bolster a spell further. There's no real limit to how many rituals can be performed ahead of a spell, but in practice there comes a point where a stopping-point is reached. Think of rituals as having three categories or facets: long, complex, and involved. Each successive ritual has to outdo its predecessor in every way. So the second ritual has to be longer, more complex, and more involved than the first; the third ritual has to be even longer, more complex, and more involved than the second.

Because rituals take more time and dedication to perform, the greatest spells might involve rituals which take days, months, even *years* to fully enact. The mana these rituals add sit in the communal pool until used, and there's nothing stopping the caster from performing other rituals for other spells in between. The only downside to "putting rituals on hold" like this is that the latent mana can be felt by anyone sensitive enough. Keep a ritual going for too long, and the caster might attract attention from entities best left undisturbed.

Adding Mana

Add one mana to the communal pool...
... for each ritual performed (4.1.1.1).

... if casting the spell on the night of the new moon (4.4.4).

... for each irrelevant geas when putting power behind the roll (4.3).

Add one mana to your personal pool...

... if using a sympathy linked to the target (4.4.1).

... if using a contagious link to the target (4.4.2).

... if using the target's true name (4.5).

... for each relevant geas when putting power behind the roll (4.3).

4.1.1.2 Changing the World

Mana is spent out of pools just like momentum is, but its effects are typically much more powerful. Where momentum is used to express the little things stacking up to allow a character to get a more favorable outcome, mana is the changing of reality to suit someone's (or *something's*) will.

Each point of mana can be spent individually to deal or prevent an amount of damage equal to the roll's difficulty.

Mana does *not* empty out of pools when the roll is over like momentum does. It can continue to be spent after the roll as the spell continues to take effect. Mana spent at this stage can still be used as above, but it may also take on new uses, depending on the type of magic involved (4.2).

4.1.2 Spells

A spell is a directed use of magic. Anytime mana gets involved in a roll, that roll is now a spell being cast. A casting roll has one of two possible outcomes: either the magic has an effect on the world (maybe even an ongoing effect) or it *appears* to have had an effect but really hasn't. The deciding factor for these outcomes, and for things like the manner and strength of the effects, all comes down to the scores involved and how damage is dealt.

Each side in a casting roll wants the magic to go a certain way, to have a certain effect (even if that effect is simply "nothing"). Each of these effects has one of three possible outcomes: it doesn't ma-

terialize at all, it appears to have materialized but really hasn't, or the effect actually happens. The deciding factor for these outcomes, and for things like the manner and strength of the effects, comes down not just to the result of the dice but also to the scores involved and how damage is dealt.

- ⋆ If one side of a casting roll fails, their desired effect never happens.
- ⋆ If one side of a casting roll succeeds, their desired effect will either appear as an illusion or materialize in full.

On a success, the magic will at least *seem* to happen. But the default outcome for magic is illusion. Under normal circumstances, with both sides of the roll dealing damage to the other but not giving way, magic is nothing more than an elaborate trick. The victor of the roll is still allowed to narrate the apparent effects of the spell, but with the understanding that no damage is really being dealt, no characters are being helped or harmed, and nothing is really changing. As soon as the spell's effect is "challenged" in some way, it fades.

It's an illusion... Now what?

At first glance, an illusion seems like a pretty bad trade for winning at a roll that probably carried more risks than most others in the game. And in some situations that's exactly what it is, because most illusions are the result of not adding *enough* mana to a roll, which means not taking *enough* risk. The greatest magical rewards require the greatest risks.

But that's not to say illusions can't be useful. If people are involved it might be more important that they perceive something instead of it being real... After all, the only thing any of us can act on is our perceptions of reality. And illusions aren't just holographic projections or phantom sounds, either: they can include the full sensory experience. Just because it's not real doesn't mean it can't feel solid or even cause pain.

The only way for a spell to actually take effect is for one (or both) scores involved to be taken out (3.1.2.1). If one side can bring the other to zero, that side's effect materializes in full and any unspent mana that side has is now left to linger. This mana lets the spell hang around, continuing to change things by spending its remaining mana (4.2.4.1), until all of it's used up and the spell finally ends.

If both sides of the casting roll were taken out,

both effects happen. The victor takes the communal pool.

4.1.2.1   Lingering Spells

When a spell materializes, if there's any excess mana in the pool then make a note of the spell's effect, the difficulty of the casting roll, and how much mana it has. The player who rolled for that effect can spend mana as they like out of the pool to continue to have an effect; mana has to be spent *every time* the spell does something.

Magic is change, it can't stand still. While it has the ability to permanently change the world, spells themselves are transient. There's no way to "refill" a spell or prevent it from losing mana. And there are other things that will cause a spell to naturally lose mana over time: whenever it comes near[2] or interacts with one of magic's banes (4.4.4) it loses a mana, and if it comes into direct contact with a bane the spell ends immediately.

When a spell runs out of mana, it ends.

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[2]The full moon is a bane, and its presence in the night sky counts as it "coming near" a spell. So in practice a dormant spell can, at most, last for one month per point of mana.

Casting A Spell

1. Perform rituals *(optional)*.

   ... Add one mana to the communal pool for each.

2. Put power behind the roll *(optional)*.

   ... Add one mana to your personal pool for each relevant geas.

   ... Add one mana to the communal pool for each irrelevant geas.

3. Check the Laws.

   ... Add one mana to your personal pool if using a sympathetic link.

   ... Add one mana to your personal pool if using a contagious link.

   ... Add one mana to your personal pool if using a true name.

   ... Remove one mana from the communal (or personal, if empty) pool for each bane present.

4. Roll your approach. Communal mana is awarded to the victor.

   ... If the opposition is taken out, your spell effects are real.

   ... If the opposition is *not* taken out, your spell effects are illusory.

   ... Leftover mana allows the spell to linger.

4.1.2.2 Opposing Spells

Casting a spell is a fundamental break from the natural order, a sort of cosmic petulance, and it tends to draw attention. Sometimes this attention comes from immortals or even particularly skilled mortals, but most often it comes from the world itself. Spells have a way of stirring spirits to wakefulness and they have their own ends (2.2.1.2), however inscrutable or downright nonsensical those ends may be.

If the opposition for a spell isn't clear, the GM should first give it to any wizards or skilled magical beings which have recently taken an interest in the character, or (failing that) any in the area. If there are none, it should go to a local spirit or passing demon (5.4.6).

4.2 Types of Magic

There are several types of magic, each with their own distinct requirements and abilities. Most of them have certain traditions associated with them that inform the sort of people who use them, what rituals they perform, and how it's believed the magic works, but these aren't hard and fast rules by any means.

While the effects of magic are somewhat freeform, they *do* typically have restrictions. The only type of magic which can be used to truly accomplish anything is the Commanding Voice

4.2.1 Awen

Awen is divine inspiration. It comes to storytellers, poets, and above all, bards. This inspiration can come from many sources: dreams, nightmares, religious experiences, the witnessing of great or terrible deeds, duress, fear, the Mead of Poetry, the Salmon of Knowledge. Some, the truly skilled, can even draw from their own performances. The poet's magic is a subtle one, more profound and more far-reaching than any other form. It is the most powerful form of magic because it can bend the very strands of destiny.

When awen is cast the spell lays out some kind of prediction, typically in the form of a song or other poem. These should follow the same guidelines as destinies (2.3.4), in that they should lean heavily towards metaphor and away from specificity.

The effects of awen are never obvious. An illusion of awen might be nothing more than a sense of hope, or a feeling that the caster is somehow onto something. When awen materializes it isn't clear that magic is involved at all, except maybe in hindsight.

⋆ The caster can spend mana from a lingering awen spell to deal or prevent damage to scores in any way that a song, speech, or the like would be able to do. They can also spend mana (individually) to introduce temporary circumstances or to give a character a new relevant obsession or saga. Circumstances, obsessions, and sagas made through awen can only be used in ways befitting the prediction and disappear after a single use.

⋆ The caster can also end their spell–emptying it of any lingering mana–to let the spell act as a

destiny. Just like a destiny, however, it would still need to be fulfilled (2.3.4) to be of use.

4.2.1.1 Requirements

Only those with a gift for language can use awen. Most of them are bards or poets or storytellers, but singers, orators, and monarchs will sometimes have it as well. Characters without a relevant edge (3.2.2.1) cannot use awen.

4.2.1.2 Rituals

The rituals of awen most often involve oratory or the invocation of powers for inspiration. It could involve telling legendary stories, recounting past deeds, explaining a dream or vision, or leading a prayer for guidance.

4.2.2 Grammarye

Grammarye is the ability to call upon the powers, and to bid them act in one's name. Through grammarye a character can summon up the spirits of the earth or powerful entities like fairies, demons, angels, avatars of death, or even (some say) mortal archmages like Dain the Deathless. Grammarye gives a character the opportunity to strike bargains or form pacts with these entities while remaining relatively safe from their terrible power. Practitioners of grammarye are typically called summoners or necromancers. The summoner's magic can lead to things which not even the mightiest wizard could hope to achieve. It is the most powerful form of magic because it can unlock the full power of an immortal.

Casting a grammarye spell is really just putting out a call for something and binding it in place for a time. These spells require a summoning circle and, if looking to contact a specific entity, part of that entity's true name. Illusory summons can still get the attention of whatever being the caster is trying to contact, but offer no protection and can't be used to bind. A fully materialized spell keeps the entity bound inside the summoning circle for as long as the spell lingers, and allows for mana to be spent in any of the following ways:

★ Deal damage to the entity unless it agrees to comply with the summoner's demands.
★ Prevent damage the entity would deal across the summoning circle.
★ Give the entity an obsession that lasts until the summoner's demands are met.

4.2.2.1 Charms

Some summoners will establish long-lasting pacts in which an entity will perform a minor service for them over and over again without having to constantly be summoned for the same old thing. These are called charms, small repeatable actions which will continue to have the same effect as long as the entity powering them remains willing and able.

A charm's strength is also its weakness: the entity need not be there to use its power. Though the summoner doesn't need to go through all the trouble of summoning and bargaining each time, they must perform some other ritualized action in order to get the entity's attention. Additionally, the effect of the charm must be small and localized enough that the entity is capable of performing it (at a distance) without much thought on its part.

Most summoners will know a handful of charms, which they have forged with various benevolent and/or minor entities over the years.

4.2.2.2 Requirements

Unlike most other types of magic in this chapter, grammarye is simply a learned skill that anyone can do. All it takes is for the character to have been

educated in how it works, which should be reflected in one of their edges (3.2.2.1).

Most cunning folk, wizards, and shamans will know grammarye. Anyone who has access to the proper tomes (and is literate) or who is taught as part of a folk-tradition could potentially learn.

4.2.2.3 Rituals

Grammarye tends toward rituals which are highly structured and involved. Many spells involve more than just the one summoning circle required and other embellishments and designs surrounding it. Some practitioners might also perform rituals involving the wearing of costly or strange clothing or the invocation of names and powers beyond the one they're trying to summon.

4.2.3 The Second Sight & Ecstatic Trance

Second sight is the ability to perceive and even act beyond the mortal shell. It allows fleeting access to a world beyond the physical, a place of spirits and stranger things called the Between (6.2.1). It is the most powerful form of magic because it can reach to the most distant corners of the world, and it gives its practitioners incredible insight.

Unlike many other types of magic, the second sight is as much about perception as action. A character possessing this ability will find one of their other senses dulled, partially in this world and partially in the other, perceiving both at once. For every person who can *see* into the Between (as the name "second sight" implies) there are others who hear, smell, or taste it. The sheer strangeness of that place means no one faculty is better suited to perceiving it than any other, although some senses may be a little easier to interpret than others.

Active use of the second sight (casting a spell) is called *seidr* or *ecstatic trance*. Illusory trances do little but give a character a more centered, focused window in which to perceive things. When the spell works in full, however, the caster's soul untethers itself from the body and flits from the physical world to the Between and back as it will. This soul, called a sending, is essentially a magical

ghost which can interact with the physical world or plumb the Between for insight. The caster persists as a sending until the spell fades or the sending re-enters its body.

⋆ Sendings can only interact with the physical world by spending mana to deal or prevent damage. This causes the sending to manifest in a shape of the caster's choice. Even after interacting with the physical world, the sending itself remains immaterial and can't be affected in turn.

⋆ Sendings can move at great speed and across vast gulfs faster than the winds themselves. For every point of mana spent, the sending can fly in the span of an hour what would normally take three months' steady travel. Obstacles and winds hold no sway over a sending's flight, but water which is open to the sky is impenetrable; to cross the sending will have to find a bridge (or make one, at the cost of more mana).

⋆ Sendings can also interact with the minds of others, reading and perhaps even manipulating their thoughts. In this case the sending can be attacked by the mind it's occupying[3] and any damage not prevented forces the sending to attempt to return to its body. While the sending is inside someone's mind, mana can be spent to damage its scores or to add or remove some edges, scars, obsessions, and even allies. Temporary changes cost one mana each, while permanent changes cost the entire mana pool and the GM may give the victim a chance to resist or undo the effects.

⋆ By peering into the Between a caster can garner more insight than what they would be able to garner passively. For each mana spent in this way, ask the GM a question. The caster receives a vision which points to the answer or is otherwise relevant, but it need not be clear. The Between is steeped in metaphor and vague allusion.

4.2.3.1 Untethered

When a caster enters into the ecstatic trance, their soul leaves its body and becomes a sending. This leaves the body exposed; an empty vessel waiting to be filled. Many creatures from the Between would

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[3]This should almost always use the victim's Will score.

be more than happy to take on a physical body, as would certain immortals or unscrupulous wizards. These bodies, once inhabited, can be puppeteered almost as easily as though the soul inhabiting it was the native owner.

When a sending returns to its body (whether by choice or because it was forced to) it can reassume control in an instant... But the sending must be able to *find* the body. There's no special connection to guide the sending to where it is, so if it's been moved or possessed it will first need to be found.

An unanchored sending can't stand the Between for very long. If it can't find a suitable host in a matter of days, it will go mad and become something terrible.

4.2.3.2 Requirements

Only those with a geas (4.3), or who were born under some auspicious sign, can gain the second sight. Characters born with a caul over their head, or under fated stars, or to someone who already possesses it may all be eligible.

4.2.3.3 Rituals

Sometimes a shaman might make use of minor rituals like lighting candles or chanting a mantra to deepen their ability to see into the Between. In most cases the ritual is tied to preparing the area where the body will stay, which may also allow the caster to protect themselves from coming unanchored.

4.2.4 The Commanding Voice

Words have power, and those spoken by a wizard carry a special weight. The voice of command cannot be ignored even by the spirits of the world, who wake and endeavor to make those words true, for they cannot know falsehood. The commanding voice is the most powerful form of magic because it rewrites reality to suit the beliefs of the user; but it is also the most dangerous, for the same reason.

The commanding voice is the least restricted of all the types of magic. It can do anything that can be phrased as a command or a statement of fact; a wizard can summon up lightning by bidding

the sky open, beckon fire to their hand like calling a dog to heel, demand a locked gate to open, even tell the hidden places of the Between to reveal their secrets. Mana from lingering spells can be spent to do any of the items below. Temporary effects cost one mana each, while permanent/persistent effects require that the entire mana pool[4] be spent, ending the spell. The GM may also rule that permanent changes to characters can be resisted (perhaps with rolls of their own against the spell or the caster) or later reversed (by finding a way to counter the "curse").

★ Deal or prevent damage to any score.
★ Add or remove edges, scars, obsessions, or allies.
★ Create temporary or persistent circumstances.
★ Anything else the caster can voice, even if it doesn't fit into the mechanics above: provide insight by looking across distances or peering into the Between, create or destroy objects or beings, change a thing's shape (granting it all the appropriate abilities), etc.

The only practical limit is in how much power a spell requires. The greater and more obviously magical the effect the higher the opposing score. All else being equal, the GM can use a simple rule to determine the *minimum* environment score for a spell: decide, on a scale of 1-100, how *unlikely* it would be for that effect to happen naturally, and then multiply that value by 3 (for epic, grandiose spells), 2 (for most spells), or 1 (for subtle, quiet spells).

4.2.4.1 Warping Reality

A wizard's power goes beyond their words, even if speech is where it finds its greatest application. Whatever it is that makes spirits heed a wizard's beck and call, it permeates their every deed and thought. There's no such thing as stability around a wizard, only a creeping, subtle shifting as the world is made to fall in line with the wizard's beliefs.

When a wizard rolls, they have the option of putting their power behind the roll. This doesn't make it a full spell, but it allows the wizard to try and push things in their favor using their mana. The effects of the roll, should they succeed, might

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[4]This is the entire mana pool from the point that the spell materialized, not just whatever's left after spending some mana already.

be subtly magical but might appear to just be "lucky" instead.

This ability doesn't just allow a wizard to bolster otherwise non-magical rolls, either. A wizard can use this even on rolls to cast spells, whether through the commanding voice or one of the other types of magic.

Putting power behind a roll adds mana to that roll's pool(s). For every geas (4.3) the wizard possesses, they gain that mana (to their personal pool) if the geas is relevant to the roll at hand, or add that mana to the communal pool if not. A wizard's power is all or nothing: they can't allow some of their geasa to manifest while suppressing others. This also restricts what the wizard is allowed to roll with: if they've added power to a roll, they roll with their Command score (4.2.4.5). Even in cases where the wizard would normally have the opportunity to switch their approach (such as escalating after using their power in a contest), they have to continue to use Command.

Aside from the potential risks involved with introducing mana into a communal pool, using power so "loosely" tends to make one's power more liable to act in unexpected ways in the future. The GM should keep track of every time a wizard character uses their power this way and, sometime later, cause something strange to happen to or around the wizard. This might include (but is hardly limited to):

⋆ One of the wizard's nightmares or fears manifests itself physically (4.2.4.2).

⋆ The wizard gains the "Magic" obsession, the first step to becoming Hollow (5.4.4).

⋆ A demon or entity out of the Between begins to follow the wizard. It is hunting.

⋆ One of the wizard's edges or obsessions changes in a subtle but meaningful way.

4.2.4.2   Unconscious Magic

The commanding voice can't be set aside. Characters who possess it are always disturbing the slumber of the spirits around them, and those spirits are always seeking to change things.

Most of the time these changes are so subtle as to not be noticeable. If a wizard doesn't take the time to notice a breeze, the wind may die down unexpectedly; if they comment on how hot it is (forgetting their heavy cloak), everyone nearby will begin to feel the same; if they think to themselves that someone appears to be in a bad mood, that person's mood will darken ever so slightly. These little shifts are too subtle for the mechanics of the game to capture, though from time to time the GM might work something into their narrations or descriptions.

But sometimes a wizard will accidentally wake something a little more powerful. These things will commonly be malevolent or indifferent towards the wizard and almost always inscrutable. They may not appear physically or manifest as a mortal danger, but *something* will happen, something out of the ordinary which has to be dealt with.

Alternatively, the wizard might wake something from their own mind. A memory, a dream, a long-held fear, even an off-handed comment can become real without their knowledge or intent. This could create a new entity (which will often be antagonistic to the wizard) at an inconvenient time, or it could alter the wizard or someone close to them in unexpected and terrible ways.

How Much Is Too Much?

It might seem like wizard characters are almost more trouble than they are worth, carrying as they do all the normal risks when they use their magic *and* putting those near them in danger. And for the most part, that sentiment is right.

The presence of a wizard shouldn't derail the game's story but it should introduce some massive hurdles. These characters are touching a near-limitless power with few actual restrictions. The price of that power is madness, ostracism, and *constant* hardship.

A wizard could go years without ever noticing that they woke something they shouldn't have, or they might do it every few days. The GM should think of introducing an incident of unconscious magic anytime a wizard enters a place of power or legendary fame, anytime they are driven to the heights of emotion, anytime they pour their power into their actions (4.2.4.1), or anytime their mental discipline lapses (a wizard prone to drinking is a dangerous thing indeed). This becomes even more of a problem if the wizard is out in the wilderness, where spirits sleep more fitfully.

4.2.4.3   Requirements

The commanding voice is the ability which makes someone a wizard. Only wizards–characters with a

geas–can make use of it.

4.2.4.4 Rituals

Nearly anything can be a ritual for a wizard, and their skills and beliefs are diverse enough that there aren't many commonalities. Many rituals will have a semi-religious aspect to them, especially the complicated or costly ones. The simplest rituals might only involve waving one's hands or chanting a poem the wizard believes to be appropriate.

Some wizards do not consciously perform magic (4.2.4.2) and may be entirely unaware of their abilities. These characters almost never use rituals, or will only use the a particular ritual with a particular kind of spell (believing that the action they take has some non-magical reason to cause the outcome).

4.2.4.5 Communion

Wizards have a different relationship to the spirits of the world than most, and this difference runs so deep it even changes what attributes and approaches they have.

Any character capable of the commanding voice replaces their Destiny attribute (3.1.1.5) with Communion. This is used whenever the character wishes to converse with the spirits around them; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in whether the character is more apt to dominate the conversation, or merely listen.

Command is used for ordering spirits according to one's own will. This is the measure of a character's raw magical power.

Harmony is used for acting in accord with the magic all around oneself. This is the measure of a character's ability to perceive, understand, and translate the supernatural.

4.3 Geasa

A geas[5] is a pathway to many things some might consider unnatural: not just the commanding voice (4.2.4) but other powers as well. Sometimes they

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[5] *Geis* ("gesh"), pl. *geasa* ("gya-sa")

are called mysterious bans, solemn oaths, or divine covenants, but no matter the name for them, they all come down to the same thing: they are a sacrifice of choice in exchange for magic. A pact, in other words. Wizards, fairies, immortals, and every other supernatural force boasts one or more of these, and it is from them that they draw their power.

Most geasa are consciously made with spirits, who grant the mage a measure of their own abilities in exchange for the mortal agreeing to do something which helps their cause (or to never do something which hurts it). Other geasa could be made with a character's god, or with a demon or angel. Still others (including all the fair folk) seem to be born with geasa; the very nature of their existence, and the circumstances of their birth, are defined by a covenant with a spirit.

All geasa can be broken up into two parts: a boon and a taboo.

4.3.1 The Boon

The most obvious benefits to receiving a geas is the ability to use the commanding voice and to be able to add mana to rolls (4.2.4.1). But every geas has a little something extra to add to the deal. In a way, it can be thought of that a character's spells really come from the entity with whom they have made their geas, and each geas gives a character a particular kind of magic that is so easily supplied by the entity that it may as well be second nature.

A geas' boon is a supernatural ability or quality that the wizard always possesses, and can make use of without the need to roll. The boon will always have something to do with the entity who bestowed it; a spirit of fire might, for instance, make a mage impervious to burns or able to breath a gout of flame; a demon might teach a mage to see into the hearts of men; a sylph might show them how to turn to mist.

Boons can be as powerful or as weak as a player wants. But the stronger the boon, the stronger the taboo associated with it.

4.3.2 The Taboo

When a wizard enters into a geas, they agree to always mind a particular course of action, either to go and do it or to avoid it at all costs. This isn't

a one-time deal but a constant behavior they will have to observe for the rest of their life.

The exact nature of the taboo depends on the entity giving the geas and on how powerful a boon they are granting. Minor boons may only serve to inconvenience a wizard: they must always sit facing east while eating, or must never extinguish a flame. Powerful boons, however, lead to life-changing taboos: they can never again breathe fresh air, or must kill someone every night the full moon is in the sky.

Breaking a taboo is, at best, a death sentence. To violate the strictures of a geas is to violate the trust of some fundamental part of reality; it is not done lightly, nor without repercussion. From that moment on, the wizard will be stripped of all their powers and nothing will ever go well for them. Any errant sword-stroke will inevitably find them, every mishap imaginable will befall them, thieves will steal from them, friends will abandon them, enemies will find new ways to torment them. Their life will be filled with nothing but sorrow and disappointment. They automatically fail every roll they make and cannot refuse compels on their obsessions (3.4.2).

Wizards have an intrinsic understanding of their geasa: they know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if a particular course of action will cause them to break their taboo. Of course, that doesn't mean they can't be forced to do it or put into situations where it's impossible *not* to break it (one of the many dangers of having more than one geasa is finding yourself in a situation where to preserve one taboo you must break another).

4.3.3   Gaining Geasa

Characters can take on a geas by simply making a deal with a being powerful enough to bestow one. Spirits are the most common, but immortals like dragons, Guides, the Illuminated, or the Lightless may all likewise be willing to give out a geas that somehow helps their own interests.

Of course, anything capable of giving out a geas is only able to give one which pertains to their own abilities.

Geasa can also be taken without a character's knowledge. Wizards who worship a deity sometimes develop additional geasa related to their faith after religious revelations. Other rapturous or life-changing events can lead to the creation of a new geas. This "subconscious" acquisition should be discussed between the player and the GM ahead of time.

4.3.4   Death-Geasa

The death-geas is a special type of geas, one which is rarely ever taken. The boon is one of near-total invulnerability: the wizard *cannot die* except under certain, very specific conditions. Of course, the taboo is just as powerful: the wizard will die the moment those conditions are met, and the world will actively conspire to make those conditions a reality. Death cannot be denied forever.

For example, a character might have a death-geas which says they won't die during the day or the night, indoors or outdoors, riding or walking, clothed or naked, or by any weapon lawfully made. This death is so bizarre that it could be avoided for many, many years... But eventually the character will be caught at dusk, wrapped in a net, with one foot in a cauldron and one on a goat, and their wife's lover will choose that moment to attack them with a spear forged during the hours when all honest folk are worshipping.

4.4   Laws

The Laws of Magic are not dictated nor set in stone. There is no higher power which enforces them or consequence for breaking them. The Laws are merely observations, apparent limitations or shortcuts in the workings of spells.

They are also not unbreakable. Every one of them has exceptions, but those are few and far between.

4.4.1   The Law of Sympathy

Like produces like. Relating two things creates a very real link, a channel which allows changes made to one end of the link to magically affect the other. Shamans wear bearskin cloaks before casting forth their sending (4.2.3) in the shape of a bear. Wizards create a likeness of their target and then, casting that likeness into a fire, cause burns to appear.

When a caster takes advantage of a sympathetic link they gain a mana.

4.4.2 The Law of Contagion

Once together, never apart. After a bond has formed between two people or things, it can never be entirely severed. Magic can travel through that bond exactly as though it were a sympathy. This is why the enemies of wizards fear to leave even a single strand of hair or drop of blood behind, and why long-kept clothing or possessesions should be burned after wearing out.

When a caster takes advantage of a contagious link they gain a mana.

4.4.3 The Law of Sanctity

The body is a temple. No spell can touch the inner workings of a mind or body, unless an opening can be made. There are three ways one can be opened to a spell: through giving verbal permission, through bearing open and uncovered wounds, and through eye contact with the spellcaster. This is why people avoid looking known wizards in the eyes.

Without an opening, spells can't dig deeper than the skin. Of course, if a spell were to *cause* an opening...

4.4.4 The Law of Banes

Beware the banes. There are parts of the natural world which are antithetical to magic, and in their presence even the greatest spells grow dim or fade away. These banes are fire, water, silver, and the light of the full moon.[6]

The mere presence of a bane causes spells to lose a point of mana (first from the communal pool, then from personal pools). Contact with a bane empties all mana pools and makes casting new spells impossible.

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[6]In truth, there's nothing special about the full moon. The moon itself is a bane, but only when it waxes full is its presence felt. By contrast, on the night of the new moon its power recedes entirely and all spells add an extra point of mana to the communal pool.

4.4.5 The Law of Names

The name's the thing. There is a connection between a thing and its true name (4.5) which can span any distance. This is why many people go by "common names" or hold one of their birth names back as a secret.

By speaking a target's true name, the caster gains a mana.

4.4.6 The Law of the Senses

Spirits see through your eyes. A spell cannot be cast on someone (or something) in the abstract; the caster must be able to perceive see, touch, hear, taste, or smell it. This is why wizards, when captured, are kept blindfolded and isolated. Even the briefest touch, whispered word, or passing stench could be enough.

Spellcasters have other avenues by which they can circumvent this law: the links forged by sympathies, contagions, and true-names may serve in the true target's stead.

4.5 True Names

Every living thing has a true name, and knowledge of it grants great power. A true name is actually three names; specifically, the first three names used to refer to something after the time of its birth.

Obscuring a newborn's true name is paramount to ensure its safety. Most cultures have a tradition of giving their children "common names" which have no resemblance to their true name, or else keeping one or two of the three back as "secret" names shared only with close family. Wizards and others wise in the ways of magic often go a step further, taking on a new (and often fantastic-sounding) name and purging all records of the old.

Discovering a person's true name is one of the most dire ways to gain control over them. The mere act of inquiring about a true name is liable to cast suspicion and, in many cultures, is seen as tantamount to physical assault. In many cases a true name is simply not known, with no records having ever been kept and all those who would remember the names having died or forgotten. Still,

those with access to magic can find ways to discover these things; but it is never easy. Anyone in a position of power will be careful to hide their true name and prevent others from looking into it. The act of discovering a true name could take years of diligent work.

Spirits and immortals also have true names, but theirs are even more difficult to determine. Though they were once created and have since been named, it could have happened millenia ago. Record and memory may simply not stretch back far enough for the name to be discovered. But spirits and immortals will likely know their own true name, and may even be persuaded to offer a part of it as part of a bargain. Of course, they won't reveal all three names, but gaining even a fraction of a true name can drastically reduce the effort of finding the rest.

4.5.1 Using True Names

In addition to using true names as described in the previous section (4.5), they hold a special power over wizards: a true name can be used to break their power.

All it takes is a declaration that the wizard's power is gone, said in the wizard's presence after invoking their true name. The named wizard immediately loses all their geasa (4.3) and can never again gain more. Of course, the loss of geasa doesn't prevent the use of other forms of magic, but it does permanently remove the ability to cast spells with the Commanding Voice (4.2.4). And if the wizard in question was human, it doesn't restore their Destiny attribute (3.1.1.5). A wizard whose power is broken is forever crippled.

4.6 Tools & Enchantments

Magic is a thing of people and the living world. Mere possessions and unnatural objects have no part in the magical world and so have little use. But that isn't to say they have *no* use.

Some spellcasters like to make use of tools during their rituals. Bards accompany their voice with music from a harp or gurdy. Magicians carve delicate designs with a consecrated athame. Shamans light special candles before entering their trances. Wizards direct their magic with gestures from a wand or the raising of a staff. None of these items give a direct benefit to the spells being cast, but they can help bolster a ritual action by making it more complex, involved, or relevant (4.1.1.1).

4.6.1 Wards

Many cultures and professions which deal with the supernatural have a way of creating an area protected from malign influences. These defenses are called wards, and also encapsulate things like summoning circles, holy places, and seidr platforms. There is no particularly correct way of making a ward, except that the one making it must wholeheartedly believe that it will work; so while wards are typically only made by people somehow "learned" in the ways of magic, in practice the only thing their learning does is given them the confidence needed. For others, a belief in local folklore about ways to keep out evil may be enough to create their own.

A ward is simply a barrier which cannot be easily crossed by magic. Entities out of the Between (including spirits) can't pass through a ward at all, and spells or sendings must first take out an environment score (costing them mana). The more confident the creator of the ward was in their handiwork, the larger the score; typically no less than 20 and no more than 150.

Just as wards are made by confidence, doubt can destroy them. Anything which might instill doubt or fear about the ward's strength, such as an evil man stepping on consecrated ground or something falling across a summoning circle–instantly renders the ward useless.

4.6.2 Enchanted Items

Spells are occasionally cast into objects, but that sort of magic is temporary. Enchantment is a permanent process which fundamentally changes the object and instills in it a magic which never wears out and is nearly impossible to break. Enchanted items carry within them a spirit which is kept partially awake, and this spirit's power and attention is what creates the enchantment.

Since all enchantment works by calling on spirits, enchantment requires either knowledge of gramma-

rye (4.2.2) or use of the commanding voice (4.2.4). Once the spirit is awakened and made amicable to the enchanter's request the process is the same, but different characters may have different means of reaching that stage. A spirit won't submit to confining itself inside an object, or foregoing its long sleep, without a suitable reward. The more powerful the enchantment sought, the greater a reward the spirit will seek. Even when the bargain is struck and the reward given, the spirit will still impose additional restrictions that forbid the enchanted item to be used in a way which would run counter to the spirit's nature.

There are no particular limits to what an enchantment can or can't do. The trick is simply in finding a willing spirit powerful enough to do it. In most ways an enchanted item can be thought of as a wizard's geas (4.3) transferred into an item: the enchantment's effect functions like a geas' boon, and the limitations on how the item may be used work similarly to a geas' taboo. Unlike a geas, however, an enchantment isn't enough to automatically add mana to its owner's spells and the penalties for violating a limitation probably end with the spirit leaving the item (and maybe breaking it on its way out).

4.6.2.1 Spontaneous Enchantment

Sometimes an object is used to perform a feat which, in later years, will become the stuff of legend.[7] When this happens there is a chance–if the situation is emotionally charged, if the stars have aligned, if destiny is intruding upon the world–that a spirit comes to the object and enchants it of its own free will. This functions exactly like any other enchantment, except no bargain has been struck and no character has input on what the spirit is to do. The enchantment is created willingly and operates as the spirit wishes.

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[7]This need not happen only for famous items and famous deeds; infamous acts are just as likely to attract the attention of the spirits. Perhaps the most well-known example of spontaneous enchantment is the Sword of Landes, wielded by the first king of Belan. It is said Landes struck down an elf-lord for refusing to offer his daughter's hand in marriage, and the sword he used to strike the death-blow carried a doom with it ever after. While Landes used it to do many great and terrible things, in the end the blade claimed his life; and so it has done for every one of its wielders.

Chapter 5

Other Kinds

5.1 The Fair Folk

The fae are somewhere between mortal and spirit, a twilight race that exists with the powers of the Between on one side and the freedom of the earth on the other, never settled in either. They are the emissaries and children of their five great Patron Spirits: Tree, Stone, Deep, Sun, and Shadow. Their forms are the same as those of their patron, but wrapped up in an glamor which makes them look (almost, or somewhat, or distantly) human.

Their ways are those of spirits: they do not lie, they always meet a favor with a favor, and the goals they pursue lie somewhere between needlessly opaque and downright idiotic.

Fairies do not act like humans or, when they do, it is merely that: an act. They are at once greater and more frail than any human could ever dream. They possess all the powers of a human wizard (4.2.4), sums of knowledge which can only be gained from an ancestral memory reaching back to the dawn of time, and freedom from the normal limits of mortal beings (they need only eat, breath, drink, sleep, or rest if it pleases them). On the other hand, they must constantly seek out novelty, stay on the right side of their bans, never lie, and avoid the bite of iron at all costs.

5.1.1 Fueled By Fire

The Fair Folk are hard to classify. In the great chain of being they are above humanity, and yet they share much in common with the stones and objects which are below even beasts. There are some who would say fairies are not even *alive*, in the traditional sense; after all, what living thing can live for eternity with no food or drink, sunlight or rest? What living thing possesses a body both cold and hollow, crafted out of inanimate material instead of birthed from living flesh?

But living or not, the fae *do* require a kind of nourishment. They feed on novelty: creative thoughts, unplumbed emotions, new experiences. To be bored is to be starved, and just as is always the case, to be starved for too long must prove fatal. Their internal fire hungers always, and without new fuel it will burn itself to ashes. But just as with any fire, it can be crushed under the weight of its food, so the fae must take care not to overwhelm themselves.[1]

There are different thoughts on how best to stave off the dimming of the flame. Some think it best to experience life to the fullest, to pile more and more fuel onto their fires until the whole of it collapses under its own weight and they die in one last, grand spectacle. These tend to live shorter lives than humans, and never more than a century or two. Others think it best to ration their novelties, allowing themselves to grow thin and dim with boredom before diving into the next thing, rejuvenating, then fading once again. Their lives are less fulfilling, but much longer: many centuries, maybe even millennia.

A handful possess memories which stretch back before Foundation, when there were such wonders that even their recollection can fuel one's flame for untold eons. Not a one of these has ever died, except that they were killed, or they chose to give those memories to a child. The First Fae, and those few blessed by their memory, do not starve.

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[1] Sorrow is the emotion most apt to cause an early death.

5.1.2 Born of Others

The fair folk are not creatures of the material world and so were never meant to bear children. For that they rely on the actions of others, willing or no. They are mockingbirds raiding alien nests in order to further their own lines. They are parasites breeding wherever and however they may.

The germ of any fae is a bundle of thoughts–emotions, memories, ideas, ambitions–carved from the mind of its parents. The Patron spirit takes this offering and creates a place within itself for it to dwell; there the germ matures, under the tutelage of the Patron, eventually growing strong enough to seize control of its dwelling-place. This becomes its shell, its body. The last step is the separation, when the newborn fairy breaks free of its adoptive parent and enters the world.

This procedure is usually enacted with ritual and solemnity, for the parents give up much of their own being in the process. They choose only those thoughts they feel appropriate for their offspring, and carefully select the place which will eventually become the body of their child: the Si look for the perfect tree, the Merrow for the perfect fish, etc. The Dwer painstakingly carve the stone into the appearance they desire for their future child.[2] When the newborn emerges, there is always great celebration.

Shadow, adoptive parent of the Hob, doesn't wait for its children to get involved before creating new generations. It ties together the wild imaginations and fears of human children and places them in the cast-off clutter which so often accompanies them. In this way the child's imagined bogeyman becomes a real Hob.

Fairies can also be created outright from human children. Doing so is quite easy. Whenever a fairy creates something, they put a little of themselves–their thoughts, emotions, memories, ambitions–into that thing, and this goes for food as well. If a human child eats food made by a fairy, that tiny fae germ ingested will find an ample place to take hold in its host's mutable and wonder-filled mind. The child gradually changes, new thoughts melding with the originals, until the soul separates:

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[2]All Dwer look identical, because all Dwer wish to look like the first of their kind, Kingly Motsognir. They still view the carving of the next generation's appearance as a deeply personal and creative act.

a fairy in all ways, but with a shell made of living flesh instead of inanimate material.

5.1.3 The Families

5.1.3.1 Si

Children of Tree, one of the largest and most divided of all the families. Their adoptive parent teaches them all the ways of growing things, the tongue of beasts and birds, and all the joys of open sky, of shining sun, of soft loam. In return, Tree asks only that they protect its firstborn.

Trees create connections. They are the crossroads of countless little lives–gnawing insects, chattering squirrels, singing birds, rambling bears, others besides–and countless distant places–the sky above, neighboring branches, the soil below, deep caverns, rivers and streams–and this gives them a deep understanding of the roles into which all natural things must fall. The Si are raised to fill roles of their own, but being something beyond "natural" their roles are their own to find.

Once there were three clans of Si, though now only two remain. The first among their family is the Vaeansi (called "silver elves" by humans), who live the lives of aescetics in their high-walled silver city of Vaeandor. Their lives are long and their understanding great. Next came the Heransi, wood elves, who live wherever they please and organize themselves into self-governed courts. They are wild and emotional, short-lived, independent. Finally, there was once a clan called the Droansi, but they were slain to the last and are not missed.

All Si possess the following:

* Either the **High Si** or **Low Si** edge. The glamor of the High Si tends to favor a cold and austere beauty, tall and elegant, pallid, unnaturally thin. The glamor of the Low Si tends to favor something more natural in appearance, even bestial, small, with elements like antlers and claws.
* An obsession related to a role they see themselves as trying to fulfill. As they shape themselves to better fit into their role, their self-image and glamor will change to match, further reinforcing the role.
* The **Tree's Ban** geas. This grants the ability to speak the wild-tongue, and in return they must never allow a tree to be harmed.

5.1.3.2 Dwer

Children of Stone, as solid and stubborn as their adoptive parent, and mostly removed from the cares of the world. Stone teaches them the ways of digging and delving, mining, resounding strength, and the long wisdom which comes only through changeless ages. Their ban holds them to keep Stone company, so that when they do occasionally venture into the daylit world they rarely stay for long.

In their deep halls the Dwer practice craft. Many of them gravitate toward stonecraft of some form– it brings them closer to their patron, after all–but a great number of them take up others. The only common thing they share is the love of making: some are woodworkers, some jewelers, some smiths, some musicians. As all stones are an extension of Stone, so the creations of the Dwer become extensions of themselves, taking on the glamor they otherwise give up. There is not a craftsman in Sareth, no matter how many long years they slaved away at their work, who could ever match the makings of a Dwer in function and beauty.

All Dwer possess the following:

* Either the **High Dwer** or **Low Dwer** edge. There is no difference in appearance between the High and Low Dwer, but there is a vast difference in how they comport themselves: the High Dwer strive for nobility and honesty in their dealings, and pursue artistry in their craftsmanship. The Low Dwer seek to make, always, at all costs, and with no special care taken for how they acquired their materials or what it eventually comes to.
* An obsession related to their chosen craft.

* The **Stone's Ban** geas. This grants the ability to take almost anything they can find (a cat's footfalls, starlight, etc) and incorporate it into the work of their hands. In return they must always keep Stone company.

5.1.3.3 Hob

Children of Shadow, who teaches them the ways through the cracks in the world, the beauty of silent dark places, the power of fear and disgust. Their ban holds them to value the worthless and to mock the worthy. They are the stuff of nightmares. They are the things which go bump in the night realized by the caprice of their adoptive parent because their progenitor, the only First Hob, gave no thought to enlarging his "family."

Moreso than most of the fae families, the Hob are divided into Low and High. The Low Hob follow Shadow's example and find balance in their ban. They are typically not so much cruel as simply uncaring. They enjoy themselves and whatever castoff thing they find most appealing, they take what opportunities arise to bring down the things others might find valuable, and that is their world. The High Hob tend to follow the example of the family's First, Amadan Dubh. They care for worthless things only as much as their ban requires, and live for mockery. They tend to be cruel for cruelty's sake. The least threatening of them are violent, and their victims quickly find themselves maimed or killed; the most threatening are those who have truly devoted themselves to following in the First Hob's footsteps and embraced his edict of pacifism.

All Hob possess the following:

* Either the **High Hob** or **Low Hob** edge.
* An obsession related to one worthless thing they value over all others.[3]
* The **Shadow's Ban** geas. This grants the ability to change both their glamor and their true body at will, to any shape, from as small as a puppy to as big as a horse. In return they must value the worthless and mock the worthy.

5.1.3.4 Merrow

Children of Deep, who teaches them the peace found in waters where light dares not stray, the

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[3]The most infamous, and in some places most common, Hob fixation is human teeth.

thrum of abyssal oceans, and all the many hidden things it has collected in those unexplored places. Their primary ban holds them to safeguard the same secrets as their adoptive parent.

The Merrow, unique among the fae, possess two shapes and two bans from their patron. Their first shape is very much like a Nerim human, with the same dark skin and thick hair. In fact, they look so alike that foreigners often find them impossible to distinguish; they don't know that blue or green eyes don't run in Nerim blood, or that a Merrow's hair contains the slightest tinge of green. The only way for a stranger to identify a Merrow in their first shape is to see their teeth, which are pointed and terrible to behold. The Merrow's second shape is a gift from Deep, who gave it to them as part of a ban. This shape is tied to an article of clothing–a cloak or cape, sometimes a hat, often brightly colored–which they carry with them. When it is donned, and the magic words spoken, the Merrow becomes a thing more suited to the ocean, like a cross between a fish and a human.

The sea is a greedy thing, and no part of it is more eager to consume than the abyss. Deep passes that greed onto the Merrow, who are each of them as obsessed with hoarding as any dragon.[4] They find some comaraderie with the Hob in this respect, though for the most part both regard the hoards of

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[4]It is said the first Knuckers were once Merrow who hoarded gold. It may even be that Knuckers still come from the Merrow today... But if asked, they will say only that it is a secret.

the other as worthless (or deserving of mockery).

All Merrow possess the following:
* Either the **High Merrow** or **Low Merrow** edge.
* An obsession with the subject of their hoard.
* The **Deep's First Ban** geas, which grants the ability to allow their expression–magic–to go unaffected by even the deepest and swiftest water. In return they must guard Deep's secrets, never allowing another to gain or to keep them.
* The **Deep's Second Ban** geas, which grants them a shroud, cape, or hat that lets the wearer change shape into something more suited for the water. In return they can never venture into the sea or the deep places without it.

5.1.3.5 Trow

Rejected children of Sun. Their adoptive parent once taught their ancestors the joys of light, of illuminating those less than oneself, of watching other's grow by one's radiance. But those days are gone. Now they are twisted and fearful things, held by no ban, unable to reproduce except by creating halflings out of human children.

Their lives are short, and they have but two joys: music (which calms the roaring of the sun in their ears) and bloodshed (which lets them think themselves strong).

They are cursed. Their race is dying.

No one will mourn them when they pass.

All Trow possess the following:
* The **Low Trow** edge.
* The **Music** and **Bloodshed** obsessions.

5.1.4 First Fae

Never born, the progenitors of the fairy families, the First are a kind all their own. In a time before time they were beyond number, but with the laying of Foundation all but ninety-nine of them died. These were the fae who went to the Patron spirits and bargained for their lives, accepted them as adoptive parents, began the generations which came after.

While their descendants tend meager fires, their own flames burn like the sun. They are ageless.

Their understanding stretches to a world which is no longer. They possess magic which cannot be

duplicated.

This place will always be alien to them. They grieve for the times before.

All First Fae possess either the **First Si**, **First Dwer**, **First Merrow**, or **First Hob** edge. This replaces the High or Low edge normally associated with their family.

For purposes of gameplay, treat First Fae as a set of environment scores. Their power is too great to be restricted by a normal character sheet.

5.1.5 Fairy Attributes & Approaches

Despite some vague physical resemblances, fairies and humans have almost nothing in common. This includes having their own attributes and approaches (3.1).

The only exception is the Communion attribute (4.2.4.5), which they share with wizards.

5.1.5.1 Exchange: Give & Take

Exchange is all about the way fairies frame everything through the lense of trade. Everything is a gift which, in a perfect world, will be reciprocated. A favor for a favor. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to act with these ideals at the forefront of their mind; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in where they tend to fall in these exchanges.

Give is used for acting in the interest of others, or with their needs in mind. This is the measure of a character's selflessness.

Take is used for acting in one's own best interest, or without regard for others. This is the measure of a character's selfishness.

5.1.5.2 Soul: Salt & Fire

Soul is all about a fairy's relationship with their body, how much they are separated from or attached to the physical shell their Patron gave them. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to enact their will on the world around them; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in whether the source of this change is physical or spiritual.

Salt is a deep connection to and understanding of the physical world. This is the measure of how

tied a character is to their shell.

Fire is a distancing from the material in favor of the ephemeral. This is the measure of how tied a character is to their spiritual being.

5.1.5.3 Glamor: Bulk & Wisp

Glamor is all about the expression of a character's inner being upon the world around them. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who wish to use that illusory expression as though it were real; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in whether to hold the glamor solidly or render it liquid.

Bulk is the unyielding, physical truth of the glamor. This is the measure of a character's strength, speed, and endurance.

Wisp is the mercurial, shifting nature of the glamor. This is the measure of a character's ability to change their form (or at least, it's appearance).

5.1.5.4 Song: Joy & Sorrow

Song is all about the thing which best feeds a character's hungering fire. Approaches from this attribute are used by characters who have consumed an emotion, allowed it to burn, and are now releasing it back into the world; the fundamental conflict of the attribute lies in what their fire finds to be better nourishment.

Joy is a celebration of life and everything and everyone in all creation. This is the measure of a character's happiness, laughter, inspiration, kindness, and hope.

Sorrow is a celebration of entropy, decay, and in inevitable end. This is the measure of a character's sadness, rage, envy, despair, and spite.

5.1.6 Ironbane

When Nuada made his pact with Iron he put up the whole of his kind in the bargain. When Naolin Oathbreaker and Tarvos refused to honor it, Iron declared undying enmity against all the fair folk from that moment on.

All fairies possess the **Ironbane** scar. It cannot be removed or changed.

Iron is not all powerful, but for the most part the distinction is meaningless. A fairy who comes into contact with iron–even briefly, even in the form of

an alloy like steel–is at once assaulted by the full force of the great spirit's ire. And Iron, being a tool of war, is a spirit which has grown very skilled at dealing out death.

The touch of iron burns, and anything more than fleeting contact is a death sentence to all but the most powerful of the fae (who may only resist a moment longer, if at all). Even the presence of iron is enough to cause supreme discomfort; to the fae it is as though the hateful metal radiates heat, and sometimes, it *screams*. Even their magic is not safe from it. To the fae, Iron functions as yet another magical bane (4.4.4), the same as silver.

5.1.7 Fairy's Ban

The joining of a whole species to patron spirits is not a common thing. Before the desperate and dying First Fae were even allowed to plead for aid and the ability to multiply they were made to enter into another geas, one which bound *all* the families.

All fairies possess the **Fairy's Ban** geas. This allows them to use debts of any kind as sympathetic links 4.4.1, but forbids them from ever knowingly telling a falsehood or breaking an oath.

5.2 Fetches

There are rumors of a kindred who dwell in shadowy corners of the world. Maybe they only seek to live their lives in peace and quiet, or maybe they influence events from their recesses, driving the world towards some inscrutiable goal.

Almost nothing is known of them, and that is their greatest strength. They can mimic the appearance of others with perfect accuracy. All trace of them is lost to time: memory fades, writings are destroyed, rumors grow so wild as to be obviously untrue. Their stories cannot be properly told.

They are ghosts passing through the years. What impact they may have had on history is entirely unknown.
All fetches possess either the **Fetch**, **Fog-Walker**, or **Doppelganger** edge.

5.2.1 Masks

A fetch is capable of perfectly mimicking the appearance of another at only a moment's notice, even from memory. This doesn't change anything substantial about their physical abilities–it can't be used to grow stronger or swifter–but it is deeper than mere illusion. Even the Second Sight (4.2.3) can't detect it.

Some fetches embrace their "masks," stolen identities they have curated for themselves over the years. These become like second personalities to them, sometimes more important (and more frequently inhabited) than their natural shape. Others keep no masks at all, choosing to live the majority of their lives as someone who appears so perfectly average that their features slide from one's thoughts as soon as they enter them.

How closely a fetch ties their appearance to their core identity is deeply personal. Those who embrace their many masks and many identities should replace their **Fetch** edge with **Doppelganger**, and those who try to eschew masks entirely should replace it with **Fog-Walker**.

5.2.2 Obscurity

No matter what a fetch does, it will be forgotten. They could write a treatise explaining all there was to know on their kind, and it would inevitably be destroyed; all copies lost, all memory of its passages forgotten from all non-fetch minds. There is nothing that can be done to stop this. A fetch is doomed to live a life of absolute obscurity, his or her achievements written off as the work of others, of random chance, or as totally false.

5.2.3 Fetch Attributes & Approaches

With the exception of their strange condition, a fetch is essentially human and so has all the same attributes and approaches a human would.

5.3 The Dead

Normally the dead are content to stay in their graves as their souls make the long trek to the hereafter, but there are always those who must cause trouble. Some return to the land of the living to right an offense too grave for them to let go, or to fulfill a purpose too important to be left unfinished by such a paltry thing as their demise. Others return because they have been affected by powerful magics–wizards are known to animate more often than regular folk–or, sometimes, for no reason other than mere bad luck.

The souls of the dead prefer to inhabit their old bodies, which they re-enter through the mouth.[5] If they can find a suitable body they will animate it, and the resulting lich will possess an incredible strength and sometimes many other powers as well. Souls which cannot find a body will wander the earth as incorporeal wraiths.

All the dead possess either the **Lich** or **Wraith** edges. If they have returned for a purpose, they also possess at least one obsession related to it.

Returning to the grave those who have once escaped is rarely an easy thing. Sometimes it can be accomplished simply by achieving the goal which drove them to return in the first place (fulfilling their purpose or righting the offense), but often in that time they will have developed a scorn of the living, a desire to spread the terrible experience of death. Other times, that goal will simply be impossible to achieve. Destruction of a lich's body does nothing but delay them or force them to become a wraith. Priests can sometimes drive the dead away or forcefully consign them to the afterlife, if their god favors them. Cleansing the dead with fire often works. But the dead are as varied as the living, and a great deal more powerful, so there is no single solution to which one might turn.

5.3.1 Dead Attributes & Approaches

Whatever they had in life, the dead possess only two attributes: drive and form. As creatures which are no longer mortal, their attributes can be balanced against numbers higher than 100; the number they use increases as they age.

A wizard who returns from death still retains their Communion attribute (4.2.4.5).[6]

5.3.1.1 Drive: Rage & Purpose

Drive is the thing which keeps the dead animated. Without it, they would consign themselves once again to the hereafter.

Rage is for righting the inequity that the living have not (yet) experienced the suffering of death.

Purpose is for the singular goal so important that death cannot be allowed to end it.

5.3.1.2 Form: Lich & Wraith

Form is the thing which gives the dead strength enough to affect the world.

Lich is for inhabiting a corpse and infusing it with power, strength, and speed.

Wraith is for affecting the world in more unusual ways, as a ghostly force.

5.4 Monsters & Immortals

There are stronger, and stranger, things in the world than humans, fairies, even the dead.

5.4.1 Bzou

Some people are born natural predators, driven by nothing so much as a yearning hunger and a taste for the hunt. These make the fiercest warriors, the most ambitious kings, the most dangerous wizards. Some of them never become anything so grand. They stay lowly, full of potential, waiting for some reason to snap, and most of them remain that way their whole lives; ordinary people in all respects, except perhaps for an unusually intense and off-putting personality.

A few of these people let their hungers get the best of them. They give into it. They become predators, beasts.

A bzou is a wolf wearing the skin of a man.

Most often they appear perfectly ordinary, indistinguishable from any human. But when the

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[5]This is why it's customary to place a stone in the mouth of a body before burying it.

[6]And the geasa (4.3) to go with it.

hunger comes upon them they change. Their flesh turns inside-out, revealing on the reverse side a mat of mangy fur, a pointed snout filled with long teeth, powerful canine legs terminating in dexterous claws. They possess the low cunning of a wolf and the high intellect of a man, all wrapped in a body halfway between the two.

All bzou possess the **Bzou** edge, and an obsession related to their particular hunger.

They have the same attributes and approaches as a human. When they change into their true shape their Passion becomes 100, and they cannot return to their human shape until it reaches 0.

5.4.2 Dragon

Greed incarnate, dragons are immortal serpents whose ire and cunning are only outmatched by their obsessive need to hoard. They are titanic creatures, half a mile or more from snout to tail.[7] Their size alone–notwithstanding their intelligence, fiery breath, and flight–make them nearly invincible: their scales are not only tough but nearly a handsbreadth thick, and their claws are longer than a castle wall is tall. They possess two hind-limbs which end in claws and two wings, nearly as wide across as their body is long, which terminate in two more claws. On the ground they scrabble and lope like a bat.

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[7]The largest known dragon, Timax, was seven miles long.

How Big?!

These are not the creatures of dragonrider stories, and any knight who managed to kill such a beast must have truly had divine intervention on their side.

Imagine finding a sleeping dragon out in the wilderness. You stumble across a tail which, at its thinnest point, is as big around as a tree trunk. You see the tail laid out away from you, growing thicker, until it disappears behind the next hill. As you walk towards the snout you realize some of those hills aren't hills at all, but hind legs. If you walk somewhat quickly and the terrain is good, it will take you at least twenty minutes to be able to look the dragon in the eyes, and that's if it's a small one; if you've found an elder it could take more than two *hours* of hiking.

Dragons shouldn't come up much, if at all, in a typical game. They're rare. But the introduction of a dragon is also the introduction of an entity with goals which almost certainly don't line up with those of the characters, and with a capability for physical violence that is entirely unmatched. Other beings in this book are sometimes referred to as being something like physical gods, but dragons hold a special place in that regard.

Dragons make their lairs in remote places from which they will rarely venture. Once a dragon has established a suitable hoard for itself it will typically remain slumbering atop its wealth through the long centuries. It will only be roused to action when it hears of an opportunity to greatly expand its possessions or if someone is foolish enough to try to steal from it. Outside of these circumstances, the dragon will likely spend its time sleeping, counting its hoard, and perhaps sending out less-conspicuous emissaries[8] to acquire news of the outside world.

They do not typically involve themselves in the affairs of mortals. Their thoughts are too reptilian; they care only for their own comfort, which they find in a quiet lair filled to brimming with their hoard. They have no other needs and few other wants. When they *do* get involved it is almost exclusively to defend or add to their wealth. When they choose to interact peacefully they are vain, petty, deceitful, and slow to anger. Often they will be willing to work things out peacefully for no other reason than they typically find leaving their lair too

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[8]Where ambition, greed, and foolhardiness mix with the desire to be a part of something powerful, dragon-cults form. Over the generations they have come to worship the serpents as gods, and would die for even a kind word from their master. They are shunned by all society as dangerous and insane.

much of a bother. Cases of theft are the exception. Those bring out their full wrath at once.

5.4.2.1 Knuckers

Knuckers are water serpents which lack the limbs and fiery breath of their (much) larger cousins. They dwell in knucker-holes, perfectly circular pools of water with sheer sides that appear to have no bottom; the knucker is capable of moving its hole at will, or even creating a "second end" somewhere else in the world, which allows it to travel vast distances with the flick of a tail. The knucker keeps its hoard in its pool, pressing its valuables up against the sides until it becomes lodged there; most knucker-holes appear to be plated in gold, silver, and gemstones.

5.4.2.2 Dragons in the Game

Dragons are too powerful to be entirely reflected by in-game mechanics, so no approaches are given for them. The GM should treat them as part of the environment, with individual scores representing specific obstacles they introduce to the story.

A dragon's influence tends to be local to the area immediately surrounding its lair, but incredibly strong. They've had centuries to weave spells over their territory and the vast majority of those will have been intended to safeguard their treasure. Dragons aren't known for their creativity and this magic, while incredibly effective, will rarely be subtle: cracks opening up in the earth to swallow travelers, illusory roars which inspire terror in the hearts of even the bravest adventurers, magical fires, enchantments which cause trespassers to forget where they are or what they wanted, and so on.

Any well-established dragon will likely have dozens of these defenses at the ready and most should be represented by an environment score of 100-500.

Beyond the spells around its lair, a dragon will have plenty of other ways it might exert its influence in a game. A dragon's cult might have its own ways of controlling nearby towns and political figures, with scores representing the threats they've made should anyone disclose the lair's location to outsiders or offer aid to would-be thieves. Some cults might have informants who report on anyone

foolish enough to announce their intentions to seek out the dragon. Others might actively *encourage* trespassers, pretending to help travelers on their expedition but fully intending to alert their master at the last second, as a sort of sacrifice.

The fact that dragons are so loathe to act presents another possibility: an environment score to represent the dragon's lethargy. Until the score is brought to zero, the dragon will refuse to leave its hoard or do much of anything except talk. The only exception, of course, being if something is stolen. In those cases the score should immediately be taken out, and maybe replaced with a new score representing the dragon's rage: until the thief is killed, the stolen item(s) returned, *and* its rage quelled, the dragon will ravage the countryside.

Finally, some games will open up the possibility of actually *killing* a dragon. This is a legendary challenge and it cannot be achieved just by bringing a score to zero. Fighting a dragon is less like fighting a person or beast and more like hacking away with a sword at the walls of a fully garrisoned castle.[9] Even breaking a single scale from its hide should involve an environment score of 100 or more, and the flesh beneath is hardly weak. The slaying of a dragon is the sort of event that might take an entire campaign to bring about.

5.4.3 Heartless

There are many avenues to immortality, all of them awful, but perhaps the least of these evils is the rite by which an exceptionally knowledgeable and foolish mortal becomes Heartless.

While the exact techniques employed are known only to a handful (all of whom are reticent to part with such secrets), the basic method of the rite is simple: carve out your still-beating heart and place it inside an unbroken, empty chicken's egg. The difficulty comes in finding ways to hollow out the egg without breaking its shell, and in removing your heart without dying.

They can be identified by their open, hollow ribcage (and whatever other physical trauma they inflicted upon themselves during the rite).

Heartless are immortal, ageless, and untouchable in all meaningful ways. Sickness, pain, and injury

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[9] A castle which also happens to be able to fly, burn the countryside to ash, cast spells, and maybe call on a personal cult of zealots eager to die in its name.

do nothing to them. They are neither alive nor dead. If their body would be harmed, scattered, or otherwise destroyed it simply... is not. There is no way to reverse the rite, or supercede it, or nullify it. This peculiarity of the Heartless isn't magical in any known sense of the word, so none of the usual means of countering wizardry are effective.

The only vulnerability left to them is the egg in which their heart is kept. Anything done to their egg is done to them as well, so killing one is as simple as breaking the shell. Even the smallest crack will do.

All Heartless possess the **Heartless** edge.

As creatures which are no longer mortal, their attributes can be balanced against numbers higher than 100; the number they use increases as they age.

5.4.4 Hollow

Magic, as wizards understand it, is not some dispassionate and impersonal force. It is a living, breathing thing with its own wants and desires, its own ambitions. It *wants* to be used. And it has a long memory. Most magic is far enough removed to pose no threat, but not so with the Commanding Voice (4.2.4). Use it only once, and forever after a voice will whisper in your ear: "You can solve this. You can have anything you want. Just say the word, and it will be done."

Hollow are the result of listening to that voice. The wizards trap themselves in a cycle, using the voice to gratify themselves, basking in the glow until it fades, leaving their lives duller than before. In time, the whole world turns grey. They dry up, become shells of their former selves. Their skin withers and shrinks as though mummified, their eyes rot and run in the sockets. The gaps in their body become filled with salt and dust, two things for which they gain a great affinity. The transformation can be gradual, but most often it is sudden.

They are not dead, though they could be mistaken for it. Though every organ shrivels to nothing, they still somehow live, ageless. Their memories remain intact, and a shadow of their personality, but they are consumed with only one desire: to spread their affliction.

Dust and salt hold special importance to the hollow. If they can get enough of it into the body of another wizard–through wounds or through the mouth–their victim will become Hollow just like them.

All hollow possess the **Hollow** edge and the **Spread the Affliction** obsession. They keep the same attributes and approaches as they had before turning.

5.4.4.1 Hollow Hounds

Only wizards can become true hollow. Anyone else who takes in enough of the salt or dust to transform becomes something called a hollow hound instead. Their bodies change in the same way–organs shriveling, skin mummifying, yet somehow not dying–but they undergo an additional change. Their bones break and reform into something which more closely resembles a canine's skeleton. They even gain an extended snout, the front of the skull fracturing to pieces and the flesh distending outwards.

Hounds are nearly-mindless servitors of the hollow who created them. They are terribly fast and strong, and incapable of feeling pain. They can spread the affliction in the same manner as their masters, vomiting dust and salt into the wounds of anyone unlucky enough to be bitten by them.

All hollow hounds possess the **Hollow Hound** edge and the **Obey Master** obsession, and no others. They lose all their former attributes except Action (3.1.1.1). Their Vigor starts at 90.

5.4.5 Illuminated (Angel)

It is said the Illuminated are tall beings, human-like in shape and general appearance but far finer and more elegant, taller, with olive skin and dark hair. Their eyes are said to glow like the sun, and so too do their mouths when they open them to speak their honeyed words. But this is all myth. The Illuminatedangelshave not left their dwelling place for untold ages. There are none alive now who have ever laid eyes upon one.

Mystics sometimes claim to hear the voices of the Illuminated in their dreams or echoing through the spiritual places of the world. A few have managed to converse with them. From these accounts, it seems the Illuminated pity others for their indecency and terrible lives, but those same qualities are so repugnant to their own holy nature that they cannot bring themselves to draw close enough

to help. Sometimes they will offer advice, but its good intentions are stained with judgement, and so their words most often go unheeded.

Perhaps the Illuminated influence the world in other ways, using methods indirect enough to not upset their sensibilities. But if they do, they are also indirect enough to obscure their involvement. Who can say?

5.4.5.1 Illuminated in the Game

The Illuminated are too powerful to be entirely reflected by in-game mechanisms, so no approaches are given for them. The GM should treat them as part of the environment, with individual scores representing specific obstacles they introduce to the story.

5.4.6 Lightless (Demon)

The Lightless are always watching. From their not-so-distant world they gaze upon the Realm of Mortals and wait for any opportunity to cross the divide. Whether it come as a summoner calling their name, a wizard not yet aware of the magnetic power their ability has on the supernatural, or merely a potent expression of their own core sin, a demon will never forego a chance to make its entrance.

Most demons are loathe to show their true shape to mortals. They are horrible things, beasts of twisted flesh and bone, fur and chitin, scales and slime. No two are exactly alike. Most have at least some humanoid qualities: arms or legs, perhaps a face, maybe a set of shoulders and a torso which might be mistaken for normal. But those qualities are always overshadowed by their more terrible aspects. Tails with barbs or stingers are common, as are pincers and mandibles and secondary (or tertiary, or multitudinous) mouths. Some have the upper or lower body of a beast, or even a vast insect. Many have six, eight, or thirteen limbs. If they have eyes at all they tend to be small and beady, all one color or glowing with shimmering light; their eyes could never be mistaken for a human's.

For a demon to appear more acceptable to the sensibilities of the Realm of Mortals, they almost never *truly* enter the realm. Instead they enter as a sending (**??**). Along with the advantage of keeping their body safe, this allows them to mold their appearance as they see fit. Most elect for something which looks human, or mostly human, but this is far from universal. Ultimately they will take on whatever shape best serves their purpose.

5.4.6.1 Ever Seeking, Ever Sinning

The Lightless have only one desire: feed.

Every demon is born of some sin (most often envy, lust, wrath, pride, gluttony, sloth, or avarice) which makes up the core of who and what they are. This sin fuels them. They suffer from it and express it in everything they do. Without finding expressions of it beyond their own kind, they will die.

So in their interactions with mortals the Lightless seek to encourage their own sin like a gardener encouraging its plants to grow. They will take any course of action so long as it creates an opportunity to feed. A demon of rage might taunt and belittle its summoner or, unseen, twist the words of loved ones to start arguments. A demon of envy might shower a summoner with everything their heart desires, but all the while ensure the summoner's rival always, somehow, gets just a *little* more. Demons of pride tend to be supportive and motivating, always happy to point out one's positive traits and quick to cover over the negatives.

In general, a Lightless which is summoned and brought into a pact will have no desire to twist the words of its summoner. In fact, it may even go above and beyond what was expected of it. After all, what good would it do for the Lightless to gain a reputation for being difficult to work with? Summoners would stop seeking their aid, giving them fewer opportunities to feed. No, the Lightless are *more* than happy to help. And the price always seems reasonable.

5.4.6.2 Lightless in the Game

The Lightless are too powerful to be entirely reflected by in-game mechanisms, so no approaches are given for them. The GM should treat them as part of the environment, with individual scores representing specific obstacles they introduce to the story.

5.4.7 Spirit

5.4.7.1 Spirits in the Game

Spirits, being the embodiment of an aspect of the world, are represented by a single environment score. If the GM feels the spirit deserves an edge, scar, or obsession, they should instead introduce a persistent circumstance–because any spirit that powerful will have an effect on anything and anyone nearby–to reflect that trait.

If a spirit's score is brought to 0, its physical body disintegrates. The spirit is not harmed by this in any way, it simply must recuperate before intruding upon the physical world again.

5.4.8 Wood-Wose

The wild man of the woods, a wose is a man who has chosen to live like a beast and, in doing so, become one. They grow a shaggy fur coat over much of their body and their fingernails become something more clawlike, but the most notable change is in their strength: even the weakest and most infirm man, should he become a wood-wose, would find himself able to easily wield a grown tree as a club. Someone already hale and healthy who undergoes the transformation would have no trouble uprooting the tree beforehand.

The transformation takes from the individual most of their higher-order thought. In effect they become a beast, with only enough intellect to do what is necessary to survive another day in the wilds. They no longer recognize those they may once have been close to. They have no more regard for anything but safety, food, water, and shelter.

All woses possess the **Wood-Wose** edge. They retain all their former attributes except Action (3.1.1.1), which changes so their Vigor becomes 100.

Becoming a wose is not something which can be done by wishing. It only happens after experiencing a distress so great that it causes a person to lose their minds and flee into the wilderness. Only then, over a period of some weeks, will they become a wose. Reversing the transformation requires healing and tender care as potent as the distress which caused it in the first place.

Chapter 6

The World

6.1 The Known World

6.1.1 A History

Before the world, there was... something. That much is largely agreed upon. Whether it was danced into being from dust, or named and ordered by evil human magic, or molded by the contrasting wills of the gods, or forged from the stuff of stars, is less certain.

There are some beings who claim to possess memories reaching back to the dawn of time. Many immortals, of course, but also members of the fair folk and things harder to define. None of them are lying. No fault can be found in their recollections. Yet they contradict one another, each and every one.

Only the spirits know the truth, and they are bound. They cannot pass it on. There are questions which cannot, by their nature, be answered.

6.1.1.1 The Beginning Years

At some point, fairies emerged. They came from a cataclysm–one which they would eventually blame humanity for–and entered into a world poisonous to their nature. Only ninety-nine lived long enough to find a way to survive; they found foster parents in five of the great spirits of the world. These spirits took them in, provided them bodies suitable to this new land, promised to help their numbers grow once again, and in return asked for unyielding devotion. The first geasa were formed.

Sixty-six of the First Fae became the children of Tree. They called themselves the Si, whom the humans call elves.

Eighteen of the First Fae became the children of Stone. They called themselves the Dwer, whom the humans call dwarves.

Nine of the First Fae became the children of Sun. They called themselves the Trow, whom the humans call trolls.

Five of the First Fae became the children of Deep. They called themselves the Merrow, whom the humans call merfolk.

One of the First Fae was forgotten by all but Shadow. He was the first of the Hob, whom the humans call goblins.

While humanity was yet new in the south, the fairies built an empire. The Trow ruled them, and their first emperor, Cichol the Withered, was amicable enough. His successor Balor was not, and gradually the "lesser children" became nothing more than slaves. Nuada, one of the Si, fomented a rebellion that cost Balor his life. After Balor came Bres.

No one knows how long the war continued. Nuada, desperate to claim a final victory, summoned another of the great spirits of the world: Iron. A new pact was struck. Iron would give its aid to their cause, and in return every fairy would give it their next-born child.

The war turned against the Trow. In his rage, Bres cursed the other fae and ordered that they be slaughtered, to a one. Sun, their foster parent, was outraged: its geas demanded they care for their kind, and watch over them as a parent might. The sun turned the Trow to stone, all but a few who managed to escape, twisted and stunted. They still live, growing their numbers with vile half-breeds and venturing out only at night.

Nuada forged a new empire. He was crowned the First Mageking, Emperor of the Four Kingdoms, by

his lover Nodens.

All was peace and prosperity until Naolin and Tarvos bore their first child. They could not bear to let it die, so they named it Anton (which means *"the son of none"*) and crafted a cunning facsimile to offer up in his stead. The deception was detected at once, of course. Iron swore it would hate them forever, and bite at fairy-flesh as once it had bitten the Trow. Nuada, and all those fae who wore iron at that time, were killed.

Naolin was named Oathbreaker, and lived only a little while thereafter. Tarvos commanded such loyalty she became a powerful leader and ruled for many years, but one day Nodens appeared before her and she fled. Her fate is a mystery.

6.1.1.2   The First Age

After Nuada came Mageking Ategnios. He devised a new means of counting the years, and so he set the day of his coronation to be the first day of the First Age.

The empire enjoyed peace and prosperity once again, while in the southern reaches of the world the human tribes spread across the continent. They looked across the narrow waters to the northern shore, but did not cross it, for by that time they had all been visited by the hunters out of the north. The Wild Hunt, they called it, when those strange beings flew through the skies and killed all who stood before them, laughing and making merry as they did. The humans feared them, but during this time they also learned that the hunters feared iron.

The Droansi–a clan of Si–was visited by a great and powerful being, the hunger spirit Kol Em, who smote their idols and demanded sacrifice. They worshipped it, and in return it gave them much. Though urged toward action by others, Ategnios did nothing so long as the Droansi fed their god only with humans. Even when the Droansi abducted a member of another clan to feed to Kol Em, he only demanded they send an emissary to explain themselves. The emissary never arrived, killed within sight of the emperor's city by an unknown assassin. So began the Si War.

The bloodshed lasted for many, many years. The fair folk are long-lived but slow to sire children, of whom they have only a few, so the consequences of open warfare among their kind ripples down through millennia.

After a time they took to fighting, as much as they could, by proxy: abducting humans from the southern lands, giving them new places to live and promising to bestow upon them marvels of technology, magic, and culture they had never before dreamed, if only they would fight. Hateful iron was wielded by one fairy against another once again, but this time indirectly. Humanity grew in cunning and in the ways of war, learning to fight creatures of magic and terrible power.

Dread Cuchtlan, High Priest of Kol Em and the leader of the Droansi, was killed by a human warrior. His tree was planted in the Temple of Kol Em. Mageking Ategnios enjoyed the victory for only a few short years before he too was killed in battle.

A new Mageking was crowned: Anton, the son of Tarvos and Naolin Oathbreaker. He did not care for peace as Ategnios had, and after many more long years of warfare, drove the Droansi to extinction. Their trees were burned, their temples broken so that not one stone was left laying on another. Since that time their homeland has been peopled by no one but vengeful shades and the mournful ghosts of the past.

With the close of the Si War came the close of the First Age.

6.1.1.3   The Second Age

Centuries of warfare had left the fae crippled. Anton saw their numbers, already dangerously low, dwindling as the grief and weariness of centuries

of warfare came crashing over them at long last. Meanwhile he saw his human subjects–now bereft of purpose, taken from their natural place half a millennia ago–flourish. They built towns and even cities of their own, though all of them crude and simple compared to the mastery of the fair folk. Yet the humans were swift to learn and to spread.

In humanity, Anton found his solution.

The Mageking's edict was simple: every third year, every tenth human child to be born would be given to the fair folk. This would be payment for the continued learning and grace afforded to the empire's new, "adopted" subjects. The children would be cared for and nurtured and, in the due course of time, would be given food prepared by fairy hands. They would be made fairies (if only halflings) themselves.

A few human tribes agreed. They had only known the empire as something benevolent, having long ago shed their ancient roots, and they saw the coming immortality of their offered children to be an honor. Long after they died their lines would live on, intermingled with the blood of a fairer, wiser, and vastly ancient stock. But these few tribes found little friendship in their neighbors.

There was no singular rebellion this time. Humanity did not come together against a shared foe, or storm the gates of the city from which Anton ruled. But they refused the edict. Some cut ties with the fae entirely, others merely ignored it and tried to keep about their lives as best they could. Anton responded where he could, sometimes with honeyed words and sometimes with spell and blade. In the end, it always turned to war.

The bloodshed lasted for many, many years. The fair folk are long-lived but slow to sire children, of whom they have only a few, so the consequences of open warfare among their kind ripples down through millennia.

Humanity swelled even as the fair folk waned, in what eventually came to be called the Aldynian Wars. They grew deeper in knowledge and skill, spread their territories wider, took every foot of ground yielded by their foes. Many died–whole tribes wiped from the earth, terrible curses borne down through the generations–but if one fairy lost its life for every hundred humans, it was still a kind of victory. One by one the Ten Cities, the jewels of the empire, fell into human hands. The tribes swelled so large they had to change, becoming states. All people of a common blood coming together, uniting under a singular ruler.

Iron turned to crude steel, stronger and lighter and just as hateful.

Some of the First Fae could have ended it. They could have erased mankind. But they held no love for the Mageking, whose survival had broken the old pact with Iron and killed so many of them. They cared not at all for this new age, nor for this world whose original foundation they remembered.

Anton fought alongside his subjects, and in the wood of Broceliande he was wounded terribly by a woman wielding a steel sword. Yet so great was his strength that even Iron, slavering as it was for the sacrifice promised it so long ago, could not best him. Anton fled, terribly wounded but alive. He knew that when next he faced iron in

battle, he would surely fall. So he devised a new plan, something to keep his people safe. He gathered all of the most powerful fae he could–even some of the First, who were made to take pity on the younger generations–and together they brought forth a spell. Guided by Anton, they wove together a barrier of leaves and thorns all around the lands yet held by the empire, and into it they conjured a spirit of incredible power.

The Hedge, the border to the land called Faery, was born. Any human who crosses through it without permission, or with iron in their hand, or evil in their hearts, is never heard from again. Many parties of raiders tested themselves against it before they were assured of its strength. It is said those first raiders still wander in some twilit realm, cursed to run without ceasing for the rest of eternity.

But the spell was not without its consequences. A great many of its casters had perished and those who survived were weakened terribly. Anton, already wounded, was dangerously close to death. So he called on his most loyal friends and they sojourned into the mountains. There they found a deep cave in which they could rest. The mageking decreed that he would one day return, when all the iron in the world had rusted away to nothing, to lead the Last Crusade that would purge humanity from the earth. Then he shut himself away and none have heard more than a faint stirring from the King Beneath the Mountain since. The empire was left leaderless. It fades even as the fair folk fade.

So at last the Aldynian Wars came to an end, and humans controlled all save the one land they called Faery, which they shunned and feared ever after.

Three great powers arose out of the west in those early years: the Baidi people in the land called Belan, a place of sapphire waters and peerless warriors; Maer, the fertile and swampy home of the death-worshipping Mairish; and the Tors, once held in highest esteem by the fae, who now called their home Levria after their ruling clan. In the far east ruled the Azili, little-seen, but just as wealthy and as powerful as their distant rivals.

Other tribes also came together, or fought amongst themselves, until the whole land was a patchwork.

The world went on. The northern humans grew still greater in size and in knowledge. In time they reconnected with their long-lost cousins across the southern waters, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. They were no longer the same people.

The old faiths from out of the south had faded over the years, until only a few still worshipped the Petty Gods. New gods took hold: the Many. Their spread was slow but sure, having long ago taken root among the Tors and Baidi. From these places it passed to the smaller tribal holdings, and even sometimes across the waters where the Petty were still held in highest esteem. But their message was not united, and other faiths spread alongside them. Too many to count.

New wars were fought. None so large as those which had come before–no, never again–but these saw man fighting man for something other than land, or wealth, or survival. Out of the blood came temples which stood only a moment before being swept away in the latest crusade.

Belan and Levria fought bitterly over that middle expanse which separated them. They held the same gods, but in different ways, and that was enough. Occasional peace led to mingling of family lines, more as an assurance that the wars had finally ended than due to any friendship or ambition. Then the wars began again anyway, sometimes on the back of a matter of faith and sometimes stemming from familial disputes. In the end, Belan was the first to break.

In the wake of the royal line's destruction, more conflict. Levria sent its forces to add the conquered lands to its own, but that distant capitol was too far away to maintain its holdings long. Nearer warlords vied against one another to take hold of the wreckage.

Landes, a Belanish knight, rallied his fellows. He carried at his side a sword of power, for he had used it to kill an elvish lord when that lord refused to give Landes his daughter's hand. The blade held a doom: it would perform many great and terrible wonders for its wielder, but in the end it would take their life.

Yet more important than Landes' cursed sword and grim purpose was his speech, always sweet and honest. As his doom and his renown kept the exiled knights under his control, his words brought disparate forces together. After ten long years of sojourn and holy trial, the High Priest in Levria recognized his quest as divine. More soon followed. Landes' mission was changed in the eyes of the peo-

ple, from one of conquest or reclamation to one of unity. A temple would be built on a hill, and in this temple the Many Gods would be honored as nowhere else in the world, and any who gave their praise to the Many would be welcome. The war, now, was only against those pagans who had crept snake-like into the wreckage left behind by Belan's collapse.

This crusade lasted another eight years. The Maers and their crow-god were driven back into the south. The Zheuli moon-goddess was exiled to the cold north. Landes raised a city, New Belan, and set about plans to build his Grand Temple. In his heart bloomed the fire of ambition: the old ways, of a people ruling themselves, had failed the Baidi people. So now they would try something different. The world would see its first true kingdom, the Kingdom of Belan, and he would be crowned its king.

It took another six years before the first section of the Grand Temple was built and dedicated to Senill, god of life. Though it would take another sixty years before the structure was complete, King Landes seized the moment and was coronated before the high altar.

From shore to shore, the priests of the Many Gods called for celebration. So the Second Age came to a close.

6.1.1.4   The Third Age

There were few things which could stop Belan in those early years of the Third Age. Under the command of King Landes I, and then under his descendants, Belan swept along the coast of Aldyn, conquering. But they carried a new message with them wherever they went, presented to every warlord, chieftain, and landholder: bend the knee and live happily, or raise arms and suffer. So the kingdom grew in power and prestige and honor. Its numbers swelled not merely with slaves but with willing citizens. They shared no common ancestor, no history, no culture, but they all came together to vow allegiance to their king.

Spreading even further and faster than the Kingdom of Belan was the disquiet of its new neighbors. In the north the Taig people withdrew into their mountains, while the Rautians–who shared more than passing kinship with the Baidi–made ready for war with high stone walls and cunning defenses. In

the south the Maers slaked their thirst for blood on the forces of Belan time and again. So the boundaries of the first kingdom were set (for a time) in the west of Aldyn, while in the east and in the waters of the channel the Levral and Azili people strove against one another.

In the third century of the age sails appeared on the western horizon and landed in New Belan. The sailors who disembarked introduced themselves as envoys of the Nerim people, who lived on islands far to the west. Many sailors from Aldyn and Shenr had tried to explore those waters, and some had even seen the islands themselves, but they had been driven away by fierce storms before they could ever draw close enough to land; so that region had become known as a place of great danger, and its lands and the people who lived there had faded into myth.

But now the islanders had come to Aldyn of their own will; the sailors explained that before their people had always been wont to shun visitors, but their newest king had decided to at long last reach out to the strangers with a hand of friendship. In time more of the Nerim came, and Belanish ambassadors were brought west to visit the Bridged Islands.[1] The two peoples became friends. But the Belanish warned their newest allies that the rest of the "people of the east" were not to be trusted, and this the Nerim king took to heart.

The Nerim traded their vast treasures only with Belan, which was greatly enriched for it.

For many years the kingdoms of Aldyn did little to bother one another, but waged their own wars on smaller prey, eating up all the land they could. The hillfolk of central Aldyn, the Knet, were first conquered by Levria and then by a conglomeration of Irdanic tribes which eventually united under the banner of Alredd Fairhair, First King of Gernway. The Maers stalked the length of the southern fens, and all their people were at last brought to heel. Belan pushed north and was rebuffed yet again by Rautia, and pushed east until the great distance and the ferocity of Gernway ground their expansion to a halt.

Western Aldyn was, at last, locked in a standstill. Belan had taken the west, Rautia the north,

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[1]So named for the way the islands would be connected by walkable sandbars during low tide. It was commonly said that, with proper timing, one could walk from one end of the archipelago to the other without getting one's feet wet.

and Levria the east. Between these lay Gernway and Maer. Only two of the smaller kingdoms survived: Tajen, home of the dancers, its people hidden away in mountains only they knew; and forgotten Zheul, on its icy island in the north-west, too cold, too small, too inconsequential for conquest. In the east Levria still warred with Azeihl and Sallem, but those barren hills and silent forests held things which tested the resolve of even the mightiest hero. They gained land but slowly, and their wars held only infrequent battles.

It was a border conflict between Belan and Maer which at last broke the tenuous peace. The Crowmark–the marches between the two kingdoms, claimed by both but just large enough that each could pretend they didn't notice the other's fortifications on the horizon–erupted in bloodshed after a wave of raids turned to slaughter. Raiding and pillaging was a normal part of life in the marches, but the locals predominantly survived the encounters; when first a Maerish and then, in reprisal, a Belanish village were killed to a man, warriors from each kingdom descended on the area to make good their revenge. For every combatant who fell two more were sent. When the swamps of the Crowmark next flooded, it's said the channel was stained red all the way to the Sisters.

The violence was too much for either king to ignore, lest he be seen as weak. War was declared the next spring and the bannermen and levies of Belan and Maer were raised at last.

But the unity which once had allowed the kingdoms to expand had begun to dissolve in the intervening years. As feudal ideas had taken root, the most important thing for the head of a noble house shifted from their loyalty to the king to their power to control their demesne. When the musters began, some lords distanced themselves from their monarchs. They fought hard to delay their aid, or find an excuse to not send any at all.

Still fearful of a display of weakness, the rebellious lords were not put down immediately. The border war was more important.

The kings of Levria and Gernway traded secret communications, then moved as one to seize upon the opportunity. Promises of aid flowed into the region, swiftly followed by silver and soldiers masking their true allegiances under the guise of simple mercenaries. They targeted the lords most reticent to aid their king, those most fearful of losing their land to a neighbor's schemes. True rebellions blossomed across eastern Belan and northern Maer in what would be called the Traitor's Pacts. By the time Belanish or Maerish forces received word and pulled out of the Crowmark it was too late to prevent what came next.

Over the next few decades the traitors were confronted. Most were put down, entire generations of noble families culled for their treachery. Their deaths weakened the ruling classes severely, and any traitor's sons or daughters who managed to escape the purges found welcome arms and ample opportunity to foment their own retaliatory rebellions. The ruling families became more careful around their vassals, less willing to trust in them, more eager to punish dissent or contradiction. Those under the rulers had now seen that the a kingdom could only grow so large, and that every new conquest would strain the monarch all the more.

The rebellions which did work played out their own versions of the same history: a new kingdom led by a radiant monarch, expanding out against all odds, growing too large, learning its limits, shrinking back. Many died out or were consumed by their neighbors, but some *did* take lasting hold. In west-central Aldyn, the furthest region from the seats of Belanish or Maerish power, the kingdoms of Jalinia and Enmelysia thrived. Though they neighbored enemies who slavered for their blood, they found common alliance with one another and, of course, with the kings of Levria and Gernway, to whom they already owed a great debt. Rautia had eaten up most of the northwest but now Enmelysia contested them for the land around the northern mountains, where the people of Tajen still dwellt in their mountain fastnesses.

It was the Kingdom of Sallem in the far east which first built a Grand Temple to rival the one constructed in Belan. This too was called the Grand Temple of Senill, and the High Priest who oversaw it declared that Senill's glory deserved to stretch from the westernmost to the easternmost of the world. Immediately it was condemned by its Belanish counterpart, but the influx of pilgrims and status it created gave the other kingdoms pause in their own condemnations. Over the next century the Grand Temple of Naroth was built in Maer, the Grand Temple of Vaer rose in Levria, and both Gernway and Rautia built Grand Temples of Dorn.

Even Azeihl, where worship of the Many was less common, eventually raised a Grand Temple of their own, dedicated both to Vaer and to Myrr.

Each of the Grand Temples claimed a special place within the hierarchy of the faith. Each of the High Priests claimed supremacy. Each conveniently taught a view of the world which put forward their own native country as the one most right with the gods. Through all of this the faithful reiterated that it was one entity, united under their Many Gods. But it was plain for all to see that the church, brought together by Landes I at the dawn of the Third Age, had fractured. It would not unite again for many long centuries, and then only under the banner of empire.

It was this religious schism which gave the Rautian king the courage to act, believing that Belan's power lay primarily in its strangehold over the faith. In what came to be called the War of Waves[2] the Rautian standing army–one of the first such armies in the world–swept south along the Belanish coast. They stole all they could from the fishing villages they came across but otherwise were merciful to the folk they met, saving their violence only for the armies of Belan. In the end the Rautian march was only stopped by the Elfinmere, which was said to be haunted by a Merrow who called himself the Pallid King. Belanish forces posted all around the southern borders of the marsh and merely rebuffed whatever Rautians happened to come their way, trusting to the supernatural forces of the marsh to do the killing for them. Rautia withdrew, but much to the shame of Belan, it had taken a great deal of land in the process. That shame turned to further disgrace when the weakened Belanish were hit by a series of opportunistic rebellions; these were mostly stopped in time, but further demonstrated the king's tenuous hold.

Perhaps inspired by the rebellions to the south, another group of rebels began a civil war in the northern branch of Gernway. Over the previous centuries the Gernish–who mostly came of Knet and Tor stock, and were faithful worshipers of the Many Gods-had conquered lands belonging to the Boar-worshiping Irdans who lived in the southern foothills of the mountains. Now the priests of Boar,

having laid secret plans for their liberation, loudly declared independence and marched against their foreign masters. The war was hard-fought, but after ten long years the King of Gernway angrily declared that he would no longer fight for so cold and barren a land and withdrew his subjects. The Irdans, having seen the price of unity in all their neighbor's war-torn histories, came together only to form a coalition of loose states, each self-governing but united by blood and Boar, which came to be called The Irdanies.

After those wars, it seemed for a time that the age of revolution which had swept Aldyn had finally come to an end. Now in the west what had been only a handful of massive kingdoms was now a patchwork of smaller entities, with the former titans reduced merely to giants on the periphary. And so things continued for nearly fifty years, until the Archmages of the League of the Arcane began appearing before the courts of Aldyn's kings with dire news.

The League, an ancient institution from the early years of the Second Age, had long kept itself apart from mortal affairs. It was said to be headed by a legendary figure named Dain the Deathless, so named because he was nearly as old as the League itself.[3] The League was entirely populated by wizards, and the threat such an organization posed was only offset by the fact that until that point it had kept a policy against any organized interference with the goings-on of other kingdoms. The breaking of this stricture came about for no less a purpose than to warn every nation of a coming apocalypse.

Archmage Daerin, the wisest and most skilled seer to ever live, had foreseen the seemingly endless multitude of futures crash together in one event; a god would walk the earth, and everyone and everything upon it would die. He called this god the White Shade, a mysterious figure which had been seen by other seers and visionaries for as long as anyone could remember, but it was Daerin who had at last followed the sightings of the White Shade to their end: the end of all life. So the Archmages broke their long-held silence and went to ev-

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[2]The majority of battles in the two years of war took place on or near the beaches of Kelpie Bay, sometimes during periods of heavy storm. More than one such battle was decided not by strength of arms, but by the incoming tide.

[3]Archmage Dain was only the second person to ever head the League. The first was Dain's teacher, Archmage Tsoman, who enjoyed the position for only fifteen years. By the time of the League's sudden intrusion into worldly affairs here, Dain had already seen a millennia pass by.

ery kingdom and nation they could to explain what had been seen and beg for aid; for there were some among their number who believed it was possible to stop the future which had been foretold.

Over the next five years first one king, then another, then another, pledged banners to the cause. Even the fair folk, still waiting behind the Hedge for the return of their king, agreed to lend their support; the first time humans and fairies had fought united against a common threat since the end of the First Age. The League and its representatives scoured the earth far and wide for items of legendary significance. They called on the ancient powers of the world and bound them to help. They ventured to other realms and begged aid. They sought for anything and everything which could be brought to bear against the oncoming threat.

The unity of purpose–humans of Aldyn, Shenr, and the Bridged Islands, the Fair Folk, even the Cyren of the Crossroads, all coming together–had never been seen before and would not be seen again. But the unity was not total: in the east, neither Sallem nor Azeihl gave their aid. The cult of the Forgiven had worked its way into the heart of the church in Sallem, and the High Priest of Vaer was killed. In the ensuing riots the Crown Prince of Sallem was likewise assassinated, throwing the country into disarray. Several factions formed with the aim of taking the crown, and Azeihl chose to seize on the chaos and invade its northerly neighbor. By the time word of the League's pleas reached them Sallem had no ruler and the King of Azeihl turned the envoys away, claiming he was too engaged with his new conquests and had nothing to spare.

Daerin predicted the White Shade would enter the world in a remote plain in Enmelysia, so on a bright summer day that is where the forces of Sareth arrayed themselves. Last to come were the druids, who came with the Wintersoul, a god summoned into the flesh of a man.

The White Shade appeared just as had been foretold, but it stepped into a great protective circle of silver and salt placed by the Archmages beforehand. Even with its power temporarily contained, so terrible was its appearance that fully a third of those who gazed upon it were struck dead on the spot. With the Shade's appearance the cult of the Forgiven showed their true colors, and fought for the death of everything, but they found themselves matched and outmatched. Armies marched where they could and cut down anything that looked an enemy. The fae took to the skies, swooping down to kill. The Wintersoul killed indiscriminately. Inside the circle the Archmages contended directly with the White Shade, pouring forth all of their magic, one even wrestling it in the shape of a great dragon.

In the end the White Shade was defeated, and the Forgiven were slaughtered to a one. But the losses were heavy: no faction of any size came away from the battle with more than a quarter of the power it had arrayed. Only a three Archmages– including Dain, but not Daerin–had survived the battle. None who saw the end of that terrible conflict were ever the same, and only a few of them managed to continue to the end of their natural lives, rather than ending it prematurely.

Few places were left untouched by the event, which came to be called the Death of Faith. But over the following decades whatever sense of camaraderie grew from the shared purpose faded. As those who had seen the battle–the god–firsthand died, its story faded. Like all things it passed into legend, though perhaps it did so faster than is usual. In the end there were only a few lasting monuments to what had happened: a shadow war which rent the League asunder over feelings that one of the Archmages, Llor Naolin,[4] had betrayed his fellows; the haunting of the battlefield, which came to be called the Plain of Stone Spiders and was ever after avoided by all but the mad and foolhardy; and the druids who made pilgrimage to the Plain, where their god Winter took to flesh and enacted a divine will.

The Death of Faith also opened up a new period of instability in Aldyn. The new king of Maer was killed mere months after his coronation and, after a brief civil war, a nameless priest of King Crow announced that there was none suitable to sit the throne but his god. The Grand Temple of Naroth was razed and left as it was, a monument to the

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[4]Archmage Llor *did* kill several of his peers, including Archmage Daerin, during the conflict. He claimed that he did so as a way to fuel his own spells, and that only by their deaths was the battle won at all. His claims were further helped by the fact that Llor was a Si, and their ban on the speaking of lies was well known by the League mages. Dain further protected Llor from punishment, possibly because of a friendship between the two or because he feared the consequences of an open conflict. It was Dain's decision which drove the third Archmage away and sparked the war.

way King Crow presided over the deaths of men and gods alike. Of course the power of this new priest-king, styling himself "Speaker", was shortly put to the test by Belan, Enmelysia, and Levria. The Maers lost ground on all fronts, but ultimately could not be put down. The line of Maerish kings had ended and the title of Speaker was passed from one priest to the next. On their ascension all record of their former name would be erased, so that they might only be known as King Crow's mouthpiece.

A similar story played out in the Irdanies: a young king took the throne, but a rebel priest of the Petty Gods (this time a priest of Boar, not Crow) plunged the nation into civil war. But unlike his southern peer, the Irdanic king marshalled an army and won his capitol back. Taking advantage of an ancient (and long-forgotten) pact his dynasty had made with one of the First Si, Nodens, he united the Irdanies into a single Irdanic kingdom under his name.

Rautia continued to grow. Soon it had too many soldiers and nobles and too few farmers, not enough land. It could not help but expand outwards. Belan and the newly-formed Kingdom of Irdany fought as best they could but both lost sizeable territories. The region came to be called the Rautian Marches, and it was said that the great quantity of blood which seeped into the soil made it especially fertile for whichever king had most recently laid claim to it.

Many years later the Rautian king died a sudden death, with no children to speak of. Legend says his wife, Queen Senche, was not there at the time of her husband's death because she had already left the palace for her morning prayers at the Grand Temple of Dorn. There she encountered the High Priest, who related to her a vision he had been sent by the Gods: he saw her standing above all the world, and about her were wrapped robes named empire. Senche graciously said it should be the king who would take up such an honor, but when she was told of her husband's death she accepted the will of the Many Gods. She was crowned Empress Senche I that very day, though at the time she ruled no kingdom save her own.

The new Rautian Empire pushed south and east, backed not just by their own standing army but by mercenaries out of Shenr and Maer. The western flank of Irdany was seized in only a matter of three years before Irdany and Tajen formed a peace borne

out of fear of their neighbor, and their combined strength was enough to give the Empress pause, for a time. As part of the peace agreement Irdany and Tajen both sent a portion of their own forces south to aid in the empire's continued war with Belan. This conflict lasted seventeen years. Senche is said to have died the very day that news reached her of the conquest of the Elfinmere and all the lands north and east of it. Belan had, at last, been driven out of the north.

Senche I was succeeded by her daughter, Melisende. She redoubled her mother's efforts to push the empire south, but was also quick to delegate and to find allies. She released the Belanish duke whose territory had been conquered and made him a man of Rautia, and likewise found worthy Irdans to rule their homelands in her stead. She also sent ships west to the fabled islands of the Nerim. After many years her envoys convinced the Nerim Emperor to forego his ancestor's agreements and to trade with kingdoms other than Belan; in time the rulers became close friends. Eventually their bond was strengthened even further when the Nerim Emperor wed several of his distant relatives to several of Melisende's cousins.

Next Rautia took to the sea, sailing ships (some of them crewed by Nerim storm-wizards) past Belan, all the way to Shenr. There the Rautians paid guides to lead them to the Shenrish holy places, where they built strong fortifications. Any tribe

coming to make worship to their gods found it hidden behind a pallisade and guarded by men and women in shining mail. They laid claim to the land by right of conquest, and offered the tribes the right to kneel before their god only if they first knelt to Empress Melisende. The tribes rejected the offer, of course, but were loathe to leave their sacred lands under barbarian rule. Sister-tribes came together to storm the fortresses, but usually it took so long to gather for the assault that the Rautians were able to prepare. Most of the fortifications held, sometimes through months of prolonged attack. Once the Shenrish had spent their strength the Aldynians took the field and crushed whatever resistance was left.

The Shenrish conquest didn't go unnoticed in Aldyn. Belan sought to push northwards and reclaim the territory it had lost to Empress Senche, but the Rautians used the same tactic used against them during the War of Waves: they fell back to the far edge of the Elfinmere and allowed the haunted swamp and its Pallid King to defend the border for them. In time the Belanish may have had time to sweep in from the east and let the war recommence, but the northern armies were pulled away when Maer launched an invasion of their own along the southern border. Several years later Levria also attempted to halt Rautia's conquest by supplying the tribes still opposing Rautia. But this too was brought to a sudden end when Irdans out of the east–likely paid by Rautia–began raiding close to the capitol city of Hightor. By the time the attacks had ceased most of the tribes which had previously accepted Levrian aid had fallen.

Over some seventy years, the tribes and petty kingdoms of Shenr fell in line. Most of those that did not kneel were simply erased, either by Rautian armies given orders to exterminate the rebels or, more often, by other tribes who were paid handsomely for "aiding the Empire." While the west fell quickly, the east proved difficult: the tribes of Eagle hid in their mountain fastnesses and harried the edges of Rautian territory with raids. They were only put to the sword when armies managed to catch them during one of their annual migrations to the coast for fishing. The tribes of Lion proved even more difficult, retreating to their own defensive positions in the desert. The leader of the tribes, called Father Bole, eventually agreed to parlay and

was taken by ship[5] to meet Emperor Tancred II. When the two met they did so as equals, and after many long days they came to an agreement of peace between their peoples. From that day on the Rautian Emperor was no longer styled as "Ruler of Shenr," but instead "Ruler of the Westerlands and Brother of the Lion."

History began to repeat itself: the northern empire took warriors from the south to fight, and with their forces combined they began a steady war to grind away all opposition. But now it was the line of Emperors of Rautia instead of the Mageking, and they fought many foes.

Belan was the next to fall. The Nerim, in respect of their ancient friendship, disavowed all aid to either side in that war, but even still Rautian warships landed near New Belan en masse. The Knights of Belan fought bravely, and won eternal glory: by the end of three years of siege the city had withstood trebuchets, sappers, plague, starvation, and fierce bloodshed, and through it all they paid back every Belanish death with three Rautians. Both sides were near to the breaking point, and the Emperor's vassals dangerously close to open rebellion, when a message came out of the besieged city written by King Ermenata VII's own hand. He challenged the Rautian Emperor, the ailing Aildys II, to single combat after the fashion of his people. Aildys refused, and when word reached New Belan, the gates were opened. Soldiers and commoners alike cheered and threw down their weapons, believing that at last the stubborn king had surrendered. But Ermenata the Bloody lead his knights out of the city not under the white banner of truth, but under a crowned sun on a blue field, the symbol of his house since ancient times. Rautian cheering turned to screams as the "Last True King of Belan" led a final charge through the ranks of his enemies. It is said he cut a swathe all the way through the host, killing the enemy commander, and it was only as he wheeled for another charge that he fell with an arrow in his side. Emperor Aildys ordered half the population of New Belan be massacred in reprisal, though ever afterwards he was called Aildys the

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[5]Father Bole was well-aware of the danger of leaving his people and sailing into the heart of his enemy's territory. Before he ever agreed to such a thing he demanded no less than thirteen hostages ("one for each of their arrogant gods," he said) from the Emperor's own family. It was only when those hostages were delivered that he set out.

Blooded, in reference to the shame dealt to him that day.

The next year Emperor Aildys made a visit to New Belan to personally crown Rorin I, a cousin of Ermenata's who had survived the massacre and agreed to swear fealty to the emperor in exchange for the kingdom. Aildys also appeared before the Grand Temple of Senill and there made the proper obeisances. On the steps of the temple he declared that the Rautian Empire was on a holy mission to unite the world under the Many Gods.

Under the name of holy crusade, Rautia took Jalinia and then swept northwards to complete a conquest begun by the first Empress: that of Irdany. Despite the Empire's soldiers amassed on the border the Irdans stretched a tenuous peace out over the course of two years: the Irdanic king claimed to still be favored by Nodens, and Rautia was loathe to invite a war involving one of the First. It was only after a spy informed the emperor that the invocation of Nodens was a bluff that the invasion was ordered. The king surrendered only four months after, and though he was beheaded for his treachery, his people were allowed to otherwise enter into the empire peacefully.

On the southern border of the empire the fighting continued, off and on, for decades. Enmelysia fell in fits and starts, with Rautia taking the western half and, after a failed campaign to reclaim the lost territory, a coup removing the king from power. In the disarray that followed most of the territory was swallowed by the empire, and the rest was taken by Maer and Levria.

With that, Maer found itself surrounded: Rautia to the north and south, Levria to the east, and ocean to the west. It was twenty years before the empire took advantage of the situation, but when it did the war was swift and brutal: Maer lost a third of its territory in the first year alone, and a further third over the eight to follow. In the end the Speaker of King Crow agreed to a surrender, with some conditions. It was reasoned that King Crow had "sat the throne of Maer" ever since the death of the last human king, and so it would not be so bad a thing for King Crow to now give it up and return entirely to his divine duties. But in exchange for surrender, the emperor would allow the worship of King Crow–and the rule of the line of Speakers over the Maerish people–to continue, and would not claim to be superior to their god. Despite her ancestors' claim that conquest was fundamentally a holy crusade, Empress Amee agreed.

As the war for Maer began to wind toward its conclusion, the war for the east of Aldyn began. Empress Amee gave the command to Father Ghan of the Lion tribes, who organized a fleet of ships from across the empire to amass on the Aldysh Channel just on the northern edge of the desert. When all had been made ready they launched across the channel to the southern coast of Azeihl; it is said that so thick was the fleet in the water that the Azili warships which came out to meet them were simply ground underneath their keels and sunk. The Lion tribes were the first of the invaders to set foot on Azili soil, just west of the capitol. The city was caught completely off guard, and days afterward a fire spread behind the walls, destroying most of the granaries and food stores. The Rautians immediately put all the fields for twenty miles to the torch. By midwinter the only food in the city was kept in the royal keep. A mob of commoners eventually tried to overpower the guards at one of the gates and, though they were unable to do so, they provided enough of a distraction that the invaders were able to scale the walls and open it themselves.

Father Ghan ordered that the people of Azeihl were to be treated with kindness and fed with the bounty of the empire, just as one might feed a brother. The only exceptions made were those who still hid inside the royal palace: this he put to siege once again. In the end the royal family of Azeihl preferred death over defeat, and when the keep was

scaled everyone inside was found to be dead. So Empress Amee came to hold the title of Queen of Azeihl.

At long last ony one foe still stood against the Rautian Empire: Levria. At the time it was ruled by King Adalhard, who was known for being a cunning and intelligent man, but not a courageous one. Knowing this, Empress Amee began at once to make overtures of peace with him. By the end of the year it was said messengers and diplomats passed between the two rulers almost daily, and by the next summer each had visited the court and palace of the other.

The three years that followed were sometimes called the "Wooing of the Levrals." It came to an end when King Adalhard's marriage was annulled by the High Priest of Vaer in Hightor, on the grounds that the queen had once been known to consort with fairies. Within a fortnight of the annullment King Adalhard and Empress Amee announced their intention to wed. In order to assuage the fears of the empress' other vassals– particularly those from Azeihl and Maer, Levria's ancient enemies–it was decided to split the dynasty of their children: their daughters would continue the royal name of their mother, and their sons would continue the royal name of their father. In this way none could ever say that it was Adalhard who bested Amee; the marriage was still a surrender, and the king was still to bow to his superior.

Never was there a more joyous union than that which brought such absolute unity. They were married in the Grand Temple of Dorn; so it was that, in the very same building where the first Rautian Empress resolved to begin the conquest with war, the conquest came to a close with a wedding. As Adalhard knelt before Amee to swear fealty, it was declared from the eastern shore to the western, in Aldyn and in Shenr, that the Third Age had come to a close.

6.1.1.5 The Fourth Age

The empress and her consort ruled together for twenty-six more years before passing within a season of each other. In that time they had three daughters and one son together. The title of empress passed to their second daughter, Senche II, who at the time was nineteen years of age. Before
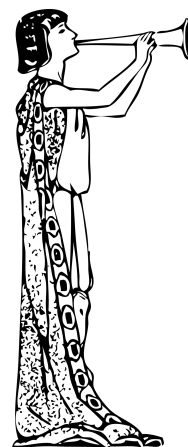
the kingship could pass to their son, however, he was killed by an assassin's poison[6] and so it went instead to Adalhard's son by his first marriage, Alstan the Dour.

Senche the Wise, as she came to be known, was a just and a fair ruler. But she always held a special fear that the work of her family line–all the way back to her namesake–could be undone in the matter of only one or two generations. To combat this she set down a new code of laws of inheritance, both for the title of Empress and for all her vassals. According to this law the empress would elect a female successor, who need not be related by blood. Should an empress die without choosing a successor, a council would be assembled of the empress' family and all the kings under her, and together they would elect a woman from the ruling family to take her place; if none were to be found, the council and family would look to the family of the previous empress, and so on, until a candidate was uncovered. At the same time she set down a new law of inheritance for all her vassals: they could determine their heirs in whatever fashion pleased them, save only that the heir *must* be male. In this way she hoped to frustrate the attempts of a king to seize the empire, by ensuring none of the empress' vassals could themselves assume her title.

Whether Senche the Wise's safeguards were truly wise was never put to the test. After her own death

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[6]It is believed that he was killed by his half-brother Alstan, who had grown to resent his father for casting aside his mother. If he was indeed the culprit, he had very little time to enjoy his ill-gotten title; he was already past fiftieth year when he was given the crown, and lived only four more before dying of a calamity of the brain during a winter feast.

thirty years later she was succeeded by a daughter who also ruled for thirty years, and after that by a grand-niece. In all this time there was peace and prosperity.

In the eighth year of the new empress' reign, the ninety-fourth year since the dawn of the Fourth Age, Dain the Deathless stepped out of ancient history to tell the world of an impending disaster. Scholars of ancient lore believed that the last time the Archmage Eternal had so appeared, it had been as a harbinger to the Death of Faith; but unlike the last time, he found few who would heed him in the court of the empress.

Dain spent the spring and summer gathering all he could to him. As the leaves began to turn, he tore open the world and made a gateway to the one place he believed humanity might survive: the Crossroads. Not two days after, and otherwise unannounced by even the wisest seers, the gods themselves stepped into the world to complete a war so ancient even they could not remember its beginning.

And so the world ended, after a fashion.

6.1.2 Society, Civilization, & The Everyday

6.1.2.1 Different Peoples

Sareth is peopled by a multitude of cultures which shift, combine, and break apart over the course of the world's history. This makes definitively categorizing them nearly impossible, but they can be painted with broad strokes to give an overall impression.

In all but one case, human cultures stem from the continent of Shenr in the south. The people of Shenr divide themselves along ethnic boundaries; each group shares an ancestral god[7], a way of life largely inspired by that god, and a language. Though most of them further divide their ethnic group into various tribes, members of other tribes still tend to see themselves as part of a larger people.

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[7]These ancestral gods, when referred to as a group, are called the Petty Gods.

* The **Azein** live in the central stripe of the continent, from the northern coasts of the Aldysh Channel to the beaches along the Southern Waters. They worship Salmon. They only settle near water (the inland tribes stay close to large rivers and lakes) and live primarily from fishing, hunting, and raiding. Even into the Third Age some Azein tribes have been known to venture far up the rivers of Aldyn and raid the villages of the Maerish and (their distant cousins) the Tors.

* The **Baidi** live in the Shenrish desert in the south-east, mostly along the coast of the Emerald Sea. They worship Lion and organize their tribe as though it were nothing more than a family unit made large; the head of the tribe is called Father, and everyone has duties to their tribe which mirror those of familial roles. They are known for being highly organized and disciplined, even humorless, as well as being incredibly skilled with boats.

* The **Haelish** live in the Great Open in the northeast. Theirs is a nomadic lifestyle, as taught to them by their god Horse. Each tribe tends to a great many "homes"[8] and most of their time is spent traveling between them. They form great trains on their journeys and simply scatter if attacked, breaking apart into small groups which can easily outrun or turn upon any pursuers unwise enough to split up and give chase.

* The **Irdans** live in nothwestern Shenr, mostly in the grasslands and along the coast of the Mouth. Individual tribes rarely move or spread their population far, but instead consolidate around ring-forts and (in the Third Age) sprawling motte-and-bailey castles. This relatively stationary way of life means Irdans are more likely than most other Shenrish tribes to worship the Still Gods in addition to their tribal patron, Boar.

* The **Knet** live in the mountains of southern Shenr and along Traitor's Bay. They worship Eagle. Living in the mountains is a harsh business and so Knet tribes tend to be a harsh people

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[8]Many of the tribe's homes will have fields which they will plant before moving on, returning periodically to care for the crops as they grow. When outsiders attempted to tell them how much more fertile a field can be if left fallow for a time they were confused that this was presented as a revelation, because the wanderings of Horse had dictated those very circumstances (albeit indirectly) to them since ancient times.

as a result, with the tribes rarely venturing out beyond their normal ranges except to raid "lowlanders" spotted from the heights. They organize their year into two seasons, a season of war (when they live on the mountains) and a season of peace (when they descend to the southern shores to fish andsometimestrade). Next to the Irdans the Knet are the most given to worship of Still Gods, which they revere in hidden temples carved into the mountain-sides.

⋆ The **Mairs** live in the west, mostly along the coast of the Sunset Sea or deep in the forests and the foothills of the mountains. They are a semi-nomadic people whose migrations are determined through ritual auguries; when the shaman divines that their current settlement is no longer amicable to their presence, the tribe leaves and settles elsewhere. Typically these migrations happen only every five to ten years, but sometimes a period of settlement can last as little as a few months or as long as a few generations. The Mairs worship Crow, and for this reason they often invite conflict with their neighbors (Mair or otherwise) when they find them.

⋆ The **Setten** live in the east, along the edges of the desert and the Great Open east of the mountains. They worship Elephant.

During the First Age tribes of Shenrish humans were abducted by the Fair Folk and taken across the channel to Aldyn to fight in their war. The fae ranged across the continent, though for convenience's sake they focused mainly on those tribes nearest them, in the north. They had no other regard for whom they took, or where they left the tribe; often two displaced tribes who had never before interacted would suddenly find themselves neighbors. In more than a few cases the fae placed bitter enemies next to one another. Though the human tribes typically did their best to keep with their old way of life, in the end the dangers of this "new world" and the long span of years caused the tribes to merge and form new cultures entirely. These became the seed-germs for the Aldynian peoples.

⋆ The **Azili** live along the coast of the Emerald Sea in the east. Skilled sailors and fierce negotiators, Azili traders regularly sail to the other end of the world[9] for business. Those traders and sailors are often the only Azili the rest of the world ever sees. They are a closed-off people, given to strict class systems and the devout following of the Leyrinist faith, and plagued by frequent and bloody conflicts within their own societies. Their ancestors were a number of Azein families taken by the Heransi in the First Age, and given territory next to tribes who would later become the Visson-Pic people. The tribes all combined for a time, being of shared Azein blood, and together they refused to participate in the Si War. During the Third Age the Azein nation became the Kingdom of Azeihl, which then split into the Kingdom of Gelovia, and finally split again when the Visson-Pic minority converted to the faith of the Many Gods and established the Kingdom of Sallem.

⋆ The **Belanish** live in the west, mainly on the islands of Kelpie Bay and the coasts of the mainland. They are descended from the Baidi people of Shenr and happily took to their role as soldiers under the Mageking Dynasty. In later years they developed a culture built upon principles of honor and prowess fueled by a system of legal duelling which allowed the most skilled warriors to reach the highest eschelons of society. Theirs was the first true human empire, conquering nearly a quarter of the continent of Aldyn at the peak of the Kingdom of Belan.

⋆ The **Irdans** of Aldyn once lived throughout most of the western part of the continent, but they were a fractious people driven ever northwards until they were rarely seen south of the foothills below the Blind Man's Mountains. Despite their frequent defeats they are renowned for their great strength, size, and hardiness, as suitable for a people who worshiped Boar. This has also helped them thrive in the cold conditions of the north, and in time they even united into a federation of states and then the Kingdom of Irdany.

⋆ The **Knet** of Aldyn live in the near west, in the hills south of Faery and northwest of Sapphire Lake. For many years they were known far and wide as raiders who would dissolve back into the hills where they dwelled, but as the Second Age wore on and their neighbors grew they

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[9]Typically sailing south around Shenr to reach the west of Aldyn, then sailing east down the Aldysh Channel to return home.

found themselves outnumbered and friendless; all but the most remote, cautious, or mystically-protected of their people were either killed or conquered by the Belanish, Irdanic, and Tor peoples. The surviving Knet were known as deadly and cunning warriors, but their culture has only managed to survive through the centuries, never to grow.

⋆ The **Maers** live in the swamps and deltas of south-western Aldyn. They were some of the first to be taken by the Si during the First Age and received very little in the way of aid; but being fearless warriors and worshippers of the death god Crow, this bothered them little. As time has passed their culture has changed little, and they are still known as a dour and self-sufficient race who are happy to make war on their neighbors. Except for a brief time when their kingdom recognized the Many Gods as the true faith, they have remained always faithful to King Crow, and are often referred to as "Crows" by foreigners.

⋆ The **Midlanders** (later called the **Gernish**) live in central Aldyn, as far east as Sapphire Lake and as far north as the Bay of the Sidhe. They are a mix of many peoples and tribes, but most of their blood runs back to the Irdans and Knets. They became a culture only slowly, by the long process of many people coming together in a shared place. To the rest of the world they are known as little better than thieves, highwaymen, and rebels who broke off to form the kingdom of Gernway; an unusually egalitarian society and eventually the favored haven of the growing merchant class.

⋆ The **Rhan** live along the northern coast of the Sea of Dreams and the area east of it, north of the Blind Man's Mountains. They are of Baidi stock, much like their southern cousins the Belanish, but an ancient blood feud prevented their ancestral tribes from coming together even when they were both swept to the new continent by the Si. The Rhan became a people known for strict discipline of mind as well as body, and their armies are among the best-trained warriors ever seen. This expertise eventually led to the nation of Rautia, and then to an empire which spanned almost all the known world.

⋆ The **Tajeni** are seldom seen but widely known. They live only on the heights of the Blind Man's

Mountains where others dare not dwell, having been placed their in the First Age by the Redcap Court. The Tajeni were some of the last humans to reject the fae, having been taught much by their friends the redcaps. In later years those teachings became a religious and meditative discipline practiced by the Battle-Dancers who lived in temples dotting the mountains' peaks. These "Tajeni Knights" sometimes venture out to serve as blades for hire, and those who witness the mercenaries at work wonder if the Tajeni have not incorporated elven magic into their bloody dances.

⋆ The **Tors** live in central Aldyn, south of Faery and west of Sapphire Lake. The Azein and Baidi tribes from which they primarily descend were some of the last to be taken by the Si, and were given places near the heartland of the Mageking Dynasty. They became the "favored children" of the fae, and after their rebellion they used their technological advantage to ruthlessly expand into Knet territory. Their bloodlines became mixed, and over time the Tors of Levria became known for their great cunning in both trade and war, and perhaps for an unusual affinity of (or tolerance for) wizards and other magic.

⋆ The **Visson-Pics** live in the plains south of the Lonely Plateau, in the far east. They come from the same Azein stock as the Azili and were once considered the same people, their tribes having come together shortly after being taken to Aldyn. But in time the old tribal differences resurfaced and the Visson-Pic culture (so named to claim descent from the ancient Visson and Picar tribes) broke away in order to worship the Many Gods as the Kingdom of Sallem. They are regarded as more open to trade and foreign relations than their southern neighbors, but are also intensely superstitious and gods-fearing.

⋆ The **Zheuli** live on the island from which they take their name, Zheul, just where the Sea of Dreams becomes the Enchanted Sea northwest of Aldyn. They are said to be of ancient Azein stock, and largely untouched by the vagaries of the continent. It is said that they were even forgotten by the Si in the First Age. Still, they are known across the world for their traveling bards and rich poetic traditions. The Zheuli are equally known for possessing a grim and fatalistic outlook, perhaps resulting from their worship

of the moon goddess Ela.

The vast majority of humanity has its roots in Shenr, and most cultures either still live on that continent or have dimly-remembered legends telling of when they went across the channel and came into Aldyn. There are two cultures, however, with different stories.

* The **Eshmaali** are a fabled race of humans. It is said they were taken by the Droansi and planted in the heart of their territory, in the dark fastnesses of the isle of Eshmaal, shortly before the Dro were wiped out. Yet during the purge few humans were found. No Eshmaali has ever stepped out of those deep jungles into the light of day to declare their people, but rumors persist from sailors who come near the island that eyes–human eyes–watch from hidden places along the shore. None who have gone into that place to look for the Eshmaali have ever returned.

* The **Nerim** are a branch of humanity which claims no connection at all to Shenr. They live in the Bridged Islands to the west of Aldyn, and largely kept to themselves until the Third Age. Known for being an insular but peaceful people, they possess riches and technologies unheard of elsewhere in the world because of their friendship with the Merrow fae, who may walk freely through their lands. Similarly, they are perhaps more accepting of wizardry than other human cultures, and their storm-mages are legendary. They follow the Way of Inhem.

6.1.2.2 Average Lives

Although the stories told through a game of *Sarenteth* will likely focus on heroes, villains, and other extraordinary characters, it's important to keep in mind that most of the people those characters might encounter will be perfectly ordinary. Sareth is not a place of grand adventure, high intrigue, or magical happenings. Those things exist, of course, but they are always the exception.

The overwhelming majority are farmers and tradespeople. The exact manner of their lives depends on the year and the culture, but there are broad strokes that tend to be true: they live in tight-knit, rural communities which are at least half a day's walk from the nearest neighboring settlement. Most of them live in a homestead or small complex with their extended family, break-

ing off only when personal quarrels or significant luck mandates it. They spend the majority of their time tending to crops and animals, always with a mind for the lean months of winter. Good years lead to surpluses which can be stockpiled against future misfortunes or traded for some humble luxuries like imported wine and pottery. Bad years lead to a lack of food which in turn leads to debt, serfdom, banditry, or (in the most desperate cases) outright starvation.

Outside of farming and tending to animals, it isn't uncommon for people to occupy their time brewing ale[10] for the household or practicing a craft like tanning, carving, trapping, or smithing. They also frequently visit family in surrounding communities, especially on market days when people will come from all over to buy, to sell, and to trade gossip. In addition to market days there are also frequent festivals and holidays in which even the lowest serfs can put aside their work for a time to eat, drink, and generally be merry. Everything which might be celebrated or even simply recognizes is given a day or two: important religious figures and their famous deeds, harvests, equinoxes, solstices, births and deaths, good news from the king and the lord, the end of a harvest, the beginning of a harvest, the end of winter, the beginning of spring, the first foal born in the year, the first babe born in the year, the last babe born in the year. Most people live from one celebration to the next, with back-breaking labor in between.

Though markets and holidays and extended families all give reason for the average person to move around, most people still rarely know much about the "outside world." They are especially wary of things which might come from elsewhere and disrupt their way of life: foreigners, famines, plagues, wizards, druids, and fairies. Sometimes the community will have a cunning person–also called a white witch–who serves as healer and midwife and supernatural protector[11] against all such things.

The inhabitants of towns and larger settlements

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[10]It's rare to drink water except in times of desperation. Ale and wine are much healthier. In some parts of the world, especially in the north, tea is another favorite.

[11]Most cunning folk will at least know a little of herb-lore and have an idea of things like iron warding away fairies and fire being good against spells. But many of their cures will be marginally effective at best; few of them have anything like real supernatural power or knowledge.

tend to be slightly less fearful of the outside world than their more rural peers, but only just. Their population consists of fewer farmers and more tradesfolk, who not only supply their own communities with goods but also regularly trade those goods to the people of the outlying settlements. Their access to technology and luxury is significantly better: imported wine, jewelry, and tools are not an uncommon sight during market days thanks to the tinkers and other travelers who pass by. Most townsfolk are also gifted with the security of a wall, which provides ample defense against the all-too-common highwaymen, outlaws, and raiders. If a town doesn't have a temple or similar there will likely be plans to build one in the near future, and in the meantime some sort of holy man will have found a way to see to the community's spiritual needs.

Cities are rare, owing to the enormous requirements held by any population more than a few thousand. Those needs are met only with significant trade coming to and from the community along the many highways (or better, waterways) which must pass nearby. That same trade also brings even easier access to imported goods, technology, and news of the wider world. It is nearly unheard of for a city not to possess a large temple–sometimes multiple–and some even possess schools and universities where scholars live and learn. Even more rare, but still not unheard of, are League buildings: wizard envoys sent by the League of the Arcane to places the Archmages have deemed significant.[12]

Despite the differences brought about by station or dwelling place, the majority of people in Sareth fare roughly the same. Living to see the next year is a struggle; not an impossible one, but one which will consume the average person's attention for most of the day. Families often welcome a new member every year or two, but they may lose members just as quickly. It's especially common for mothers and newborns to pass unexpectedly. The world is understood to be a harsh place, even a cruel one, and that is reflected in society's values: slavery is common wherever economically viable and bloodsport is one of the most common forms of entertainment. Violence is not merely an accepted part of life, it is an everyday occurrence. People live through it all. They find what happy moments they can. Things continue on as they always have. As they always will.

Meanwhile the adventurers and outcasts, kings and princes, wizards and bards, go about their fantastical journeys. But from the perspective of the common man those journeys may as well be taking place in another world.

6.1.2.3 The Three Estates

A common way of thinking of society is to categorize all its members into three groups, or *estates:* they are Those Who Fight (first), Those Who Pray (second), and Those Who Work (third). Each of the estates is a fundamental building block, without which any large group of people couldn't function together as a nation. Not all of Sareth's cultures think of things in exactly this way–and even fewer use these exact terms for the idea–but they are all near enough in thought for this model to be a useful tool.

⋆ **Those Who Fight:** The first estate is made up of the warriors and those who command them. They provide protection from external threats and keep the peace internally by enforcing the laws of the land. Without the first estate, the

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[12]Most of the time a city's "League presence" will actually be a liar pretending at wizardry; if they can play the part well, they stand to gain a great deal of respect or fear from the populace and might even make a living serving as an adviser to the local ruler. The few true League buildings are mostly kept in a state of disrepair, as the envoy will be (almost by definition, as a wizard) quite mad. It would be easy to mistake a true League building for an abandoned shack, and its representative for a beggar who happens to squat there.

other two would be vulnerable to attacks from their enemies or fall into anarchy.

⋆ **Those Who Pray:** The second estate is made up of the priests and scholars. They provide guidance and serve as a repository for knowledge to allow others to make better decisions. Without the second estate, the other two would be damned by the gods and doomed to repeat history.

⋆ **Those Who Work:** The third estate is made up of everyone else, at least in theory. It is the estate of peasants and tradesfolk. They provide goods (mostly food) and services, not just for themselves but for everyone. Without the third estate, the other two would starve.

In theory the three estates work together in harmony, with each one able to operate mostly independent of the others and all of them working for the betterment of society as a whole. But this is never how things work out: one estate will always find a way to dominate the others, or two of them will join themselves together and dominate the third.

Typically the first estate is the one to gain supremacy by simply witholding their protection from anyone who doesn't fall in line or outright attacking their naysayers. When the first estate dominates the warriors become nobility, and they draw their right to rule from their ability to kill anyone who would seize power.

If the second estate is the one to hold the power it is most often through fear, proclaiming that anyone who does not follow their law will be cursed in the eyes of their god(s). When the second estate dominates the priests become the law-makers, and they draw their right to rule from divine ordinance.

Often the first and second estates will collaborate to some extent, mingling and drawing power from one another.

The third estate very rarely dominates; though they are necessary for society to function, farmers tend to have little leverage. When the third estate does come out on top it only lasts as long as it takes some neighboring group to scent weakness and make ready their assault.

Another problem which further imbalances the model of the three estates is that of merchants and other wealthy "commoners" who don't easily fit into it. These individuals don't provide protection, divine aid, or material; they mostly benefit individ-

uals. By the middle of the Third Age some kingdoms see merchants grow rich enough to rival the treasuries of kings, and with like wealth comes like power. In many cases this leads to hostility from members of the most powerful estates, who rightly feel their supremacy being threatened.

Despite its problems, the thinking behind the three estates or a similar theory is ingrained into nearly every culture in Sareth. The first lense through which any character will view another is that of class: *are they a member of the same estate, or are they higher or lower than I? What am I to expect of them, and what are they to expect of me?*

There are few things more valuable to the average person than the ability to understand one's place and act accordingly. To deviate from the norm is to invite all manner of ills.

6.1.2.4 Magic Intrudes

The natural and supernatural worlds are entwined. Whatever happens in one causes a ripple in the other, like a sheet of oil floating atop a sheet of water. Everything from the most mundane actions ever taken to the most fantastic spells ever cast holds a spark of something *beyond* in it. All those creatures that live outside the known world still harbor a piece of it within themselves. Everything is connected.

This makes the word "magic" somewhat misleading. The word changes its meaning to suit the speaker.

From the normal human point of view, magic describes those things which cannot be explained by one's understanding of the natural world or duplicated with the work of skilled human hands. Plagues and spells, the uncanny connections in the poet's verse, fairies and wizards, these are all magical; they exist in the supernatural world and only rarely touch the natural. Life and death (and sometimes life again), the craftsman's trade, kings and priests, these are mundane things, rooted in the natural world.

Or so it is commonly believed.

The vast majority of people in Sareth will never see even the faintest glimpse of true magic, and most of those who *do* see it won't recognize it for what it is. This doesn't stop them from blaming everything–ill luck, poor harvests, bad relationships, disease, war, jealousy, loss–on fairies and demons and witches. Magic is the heart of everything that goes bump in the night. It is an agent of chaos and degradation, and its presence can bring only change and madness. When a wizard appears in a story, it is a signal to the audience that the hero is about to face a challenge darker and more terrible than any they have yet encountered.

Not only is true magic rare, not only is it nearly impossible to recognize, but almost none of it is bound to humanity.[13] When the supernatural world breaches the natural one it is almost always in the shape of a spirit or beast or strange event: rain that pours fish from the clouds, a night that seems to stretch on forever, trees that you swear whispered in your mother's voice, a shambling thing made of soil and roots and hate, a wolf so desperate for food the ribs which stand out against its fur writhe and grasp like fingers.

When magic *is* tied to humanity it most often manifests as someone or something taking on a supernatural property. This is especially common, it seems, when the person or thing in question is tied to a period of high (mostly negative) emotion:

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[13]The height of human magic was during the Third Age, just before the Death of Faith. At that time there were some ten thousand wizards (not all of whom were aware of their affliction) across the world, out of a total population of over one hundred million.

a weapon used against a parent will forever after turn against its wielder, a hut once inhabited by a lonely outcast drives away anyone who would live nearby, a man becomes so consumed by greed he becomes a dragon.

Only very rarely does this magic find its way to a human and manifest in the voice. At first they will seem no different than their fellows, except perhaps for being a little more knowledgeable or confident. Many never leave this stage, the mage unaware, blissfully ignorant but still able to take unconscious advantage of their powers. But for others it eventually becomes clear that they are different. When they speak, their words are true; not because they *were* true, but because they *now are*. They are a wizard, one who burdens all those around them with a reality of their own making. Most wizards don't survive long. They draw the attention of other supernatural entities–older, wiser, more cunning–as moths to a flame. They are sources of fuel, or amusing distractions. Wizards who avoid the interest of higher powers still must contend with the consequences of their ability; when your speech and your beliefs are made manifest, every one of your fears and insecurities is a threat. Too much confidence and forces beyond the wizard's comprehension descend on them. Too little confidence and the wizard is consumed by the darker parts of their own mind, a sort of protracted and indirect suicide. Only those who walk the knife's edge between the two extremes have any chance at all of surviving... And most of them will kill themselves in more conventional ways, having finally come to the conclusion that such a life is not worth living.

If there is rhyme or reason to magic, it is not understood. It sometimes seems there is a will to it. If there is then nothing is known about it, except that it is cruel.

When magic intrudes into the lives of normal folk, it is almost always for the worse.

But magic isn't something which must be passively accepted. There are defenses, people who prepare themselves and their fellows against the supernatural. The most common of these are the cunning folk. They mostly serve as healers and midwives, everyday helpers, but much of their training is concerned with memorizing the old traditional defenses against the magical forces of the world. They know the banes of magic, the ways to identify a wizard in disguise, charms against fairies and spirits and werewolves, and a hundred other things. They are not united, having no central guild or creed. Nearly every settlement–from the smallest village to the largest city–which has survived more than a generation or two boasts the presence of a cunning man or woman. The occupation is a dangerous one, but vitally important, and well-respected. A cunning man or woman need have no other occupation, for their neighbors will be more than happy to support them.

No less important than cunning folk are blacksmiths. Already respected for their ability to turn the base metals of the earth into useful tools,[14] blacksmiths are also the defenders of human society against the fair folk, who hate iron above all things. When a blacksmith takes an apprentice they teach them not only the smith's craft, but everything they know about the fae. They know their different kinds, how likely each is to be peaceful, and the best ways to fight them. The role of the blacksmith is an almost sacred one. They are expected to serve their community by ensuring there is always enough iron to defend against the fair folk, and by serving as the champion in the fight, should the need arise.

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[14]A skill, some believe, which is itself supernatural. They are not necessarily wrong.

6.1.3 Matters of Faith

6.1.3.1 The Many Gods

Worship of the Many Gods first grew among the human societies taken to Aldyn by the fair folk during the First Age. It involves the belief in a pantheon of twelve or fourteen[15] deities who not only created the world, but continue to take an active part in it; worshippers believe that by supplicating themselves and offering up sacrifices to the higher powers, they can gain blessings or avert holy ire.

Divine beings are separated into three categories according to the faith of the Many Gods, with each category being more powerful (and therefore more deserving of worship) than the one before. The first and lowest of all divine beings are demigods, servants and avatars of those more powerful. Next come the majority of the gods, and finally come the three "Primary Gods" who are considered more powerful than all the rest. Often a culture will divide the gods even further, with one of the Primary being considered the ultimate ruler ("First Among Many") over the others. Which deity deserves this rank is a subject of constant argument and, not infrequently, war.

During the First and Second Ages it was common for only priests to commune with the Many; other members of society would bring their sacrifices and prayers to a priest, who would then bring them to the appropriate god on their behalf. During this time it was also believed that the Many were jealous of one another and would punish anyone who communed with them after having done so with another god, unless the mortal had first ritually cleansed themselves according to that god's preference. This belief gradually faded away during the latter half of the Second Age until priests and even laypeople were allowed to offer prayers and sacrifices to the gods as they wished, though such practices were still often limited to temples and hallowed places.

The Many Gods consist of:

⋆ **Senill**, God of Life, Nature, and Growth. One of the Primary Gods. All life in the world stems from Senill. It is he who breathes the first breath of life into a newborn babe, and it is to him

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[15]The deities themselves are mostly agreed upon. The disagreement comes from whether the Trine–the goddesses of the past, present, and future–are considered individual goddesses or a single, collective being.

that the final dying breath unerringly travels. Depicted as a young man in his prime wearing simple clothes and carrying a farming implement or bag of grain.

⋆ **Naroth**, God of Death, Change, and Balance. One of the Primary Gods. It is Naroth's duty to retrieve the souls of the dead and house them in his Great Halls beyond the world. He oversees all things and strives to maintain a balance; as soon as he inters a newly-dead soul in his Hall, he immediately goes to his brother Senill and informs him of the need for a new life. All men, from kings to slaves, are equal in Naroth's eyes. Depicted as a death's head in a black robe, holding his right hand out in a sign of peace and holding a silver bell in his left.

⋆ **Vaer**, God of Knowledge and Wisdom. One of the Primary Gods. Unlike most of the Many, Vaer remains aloof from the world, dealing with it only indirectly when he serves as an adviser to worshippers and to his sibling deities. Depicted as an old man with a long white beard carrying a lamp in his right hand and a scroll in his left.

⋆ **Lugeln**, God of Trade, Craft, and sometimes Travel (a domain sometimes given instead to Folimen). He blesses the work of craftsmen and merchants and is associated with creative works, which stem from a combination of Jeim's passion and his skill. He is possessed of more earthly cunning than any of the other Many, and has knowledge of every form of craft. He is the husband of Meliki. Depicted bent over a work or presenting goods and coin with widespread arms.

⋆ **Meliki**, Goddess of Music and the Home. She

bestows solace and rest on the weary, and provides comfort to those who need it through music. She is the patron of minstrels and wives, and the guardian of the home. Anyone who breaks the Laws of Hospitality will surely face her wrath. She is the wife of Lugeln. Depicted as a beautiful woman of some years with a lyre in one hand and a piece of salt-bread in the other.

⋆ **Dorn**, God of Valor, Battle, and Fire. Dorn oversees war and conflict, and is the patron of soldiers and kings. He is as concerned with honor as he is with battle-prowess, and teaches that there cannot be one without the other. Despite this, he is the husband of Myrr. Depicted as a strong man in armor common to the region, carrying a hammer in his right hand and a spear or shield in his left.

⋆ **Myrr**, Goddess of Deception, Darkness, and the Unknown. She is constantly at odds with Vaer, for where he seeks to uncover truth and shine a light on ignorance, she wishes to pervert the truth and cast a shadow over knowledge. She comes to represent fear in many traditions, and certain practices see her as a force at least as evil as Lecna. Despite this, she is the wife of Dorn, who values valor and honest. Depicted as a young woman in a large cloak, her portrayals are often intentionally difficult to make out or otherwise hidden inside other works.

⋆ **Jeim**, God of Wine, Revelry, and Joy. Jeim inspires passion in all forms, and is sometimes (along with Lugeln) linked to creativity. He protects those who are too far gone to protect themselves, and encourages any and all forms of earthly delight. Most traditions depict him as one of the least violent of the Many, along with his wife Mele. He is crafty and mischevious, though not as much as his brother Folimen. Depicted as either a young man or an old lecher, always carrying a wineskin or other vessel.

⋆ **Mele**, Goddess of Fertility and Agriculture. She is the patron of midwives, mothers (or mothers to be), and farmers. While Senill instills life in the lifeless and causes things to grow, Mele is the nurturing force that sees the new growths come to fruition. She is the wife of Jeim, whose domains are connected to hers: agriculture begets wine, and revelry begets fertility. Depicted as an old or homely woman who stands welcoming her children with open, empty arms.

⋆ **Lecna**, Deity of Magic, Fairies, and Manipulation. Lecna the hermaphrodite is the patron of wizards and other evil things. It is often somewhat reviled even by the followers of the Many, who view it as a force of chaos, if not outright evil. It is blamed for the day-to-day misfortunes of worshipers almost as often as Folimen, and receives far fewer prayers. Depicted as a skeleton or a silhouette with eyes in the shape of stars, holding a staff or scroll.

⋆ **Folimen,** God of Luck, and sometimes Roads or Travel. He is the chief god of mischief and the weaver of coincidences. Typically, Folimen receives more prayers than any of his siblings. Depictions can range from a small child with grasping fingers to a cutpurse or nobleman with open arms. All his images include a coin, white on one side and black on the other, to represent good and bad luck. It is said that whenever a new venture is undertaken Folimen flips his coin to see how he will make it go.

⋆ **The Trine**, the Three In One Goddess: Iro the Maiden, Ili the Mother, and Yeli the Crone. In some traditions they are considered three separate but closely-linked beings, and in others they are a single entity which either has a changeable form or which possesses six arms, six legs, and three faces. Iro is the patron of the past, and knows everything that has ever happened. Ili is the patron of the present, and knows everything that is happening. Yeli is the patron of the future, and knows everything that ever will happen. They are always depicted together, most often standing above a cauldron or sitting, weaving together the fates of men into a long tapestry.

Within the Church of the Many Gods there is also the heresy surrounding Rhanill. Most traditions teach of Rhanill the Traitor, a servant of either Senill or Naroth who rebeled and was therefore cast from the presence of the gods and destroyed. A heretical group called the Church of the Gatekeeper teach that instead of being destroyed, Rhanill grew in power and became God Above Gods.

6.1.3.2 The Petty Gods

One of the oldest human faiths, the Petty Gods[16] have been worshipped for as long as humans have lived in Shenr. When many of those tribes were taken to Aldyn during the First Age they took their faith with them, but the majority eventually came to convert to beliefs.

The Petty Gods take the shape of animals and, just like the world itself, have been around for all time. They do not teach of a beginning or an end; there simply is, as it has always been. The stories of the Petty Gods and their deeds are unconcerned with the systems of the world–the underpinnings, the deep reasons why things must be as they are– and instead deal with the ways a person who holds to their god should live. The first tenet, the thing which is shared by all who follow the old ways, is to accept what is. In all other things the gods may differ; and there is not one sole god who is right, but each is right for their people, and for no other. The gods are jealous of their own and apathetic towards outsiders, and so likewise their worshippers care only for their own god.

The Petty Gods consist of:

⋆ **Boar:** The god of the Irdanic people, who live in north-western Shenr and northern Aldyn. Boar is the great enduring god, the beast of many wounds. Boar is a less demanding god than most, and its teachings are purely practical. It holds up patience–both mental fortitude and the ability to endure hardship uncomplaining–as the greatest virtue of all. To Boar there is no suffering so great that it cannot be outlasted, and no obstacle so insurmountable that the process of long years and persistent progress cannot master it.

⋆ **Crow:** The god of the Mairish people, who live in western Shenr and south-western Aldyn. Crow is the surveyor of the dying, who picks over the dead and alone knows the secrets which wait beyond the twilight door. Crow's people know that life in this world is a temporary thing: only a test of mettle, a proving-ground to separate the wheat from the chaff for the next life. Their god teaches them to hold ferocity, cunning, and skill

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[16]Named derisively by worshipers of the Many, who see the incomplete and fragmented "pantheon" as being too small and weak to be of consequence. Those who worship the Petty Gods have no unified name for their faith.

as virtues and to not mourn death as the loss of life but rather to celebrate it as the acquisition of final, eternal knowledge.

★ **Eagle:** The god of the Knet people, who live in southern Shenr and western Aldyn. Eagle is a warlike god, who teaches the virtue of raiding, fighting, and testing one's mettle. It teaches its people to live in the high places–the mountains of Shenr, the hills of Aldyn–where they can be safe, and descend on their neighbors to take what they can. In Shenr they honor Eagle with a tradition in which they descend from the mountains to fish, nonstop, for several weeks at a time before returning to their "roosts" in the peaks above.

★ **Elephant:** The god of the Setten people, who live in the desert of eastern Shenr and who claim the people of Levria as descendants. They are taught to honor wisdom and strength by Elephant, who has suffered much and grown with every passing hardship. Elephant is slow to anger and never rash, unless his people are under threat; so much so that only a single tribe of his was ever taken when the fairies crossed the waters to find humans for their war.

★ **Horse:** The god of the Haelish people, who live in northeastern Shenr. It is a utilitarian god which teaches its people to always be prepared for the future and grateful for the present. Horse also values a semi-nomadic lifestyle in which the whole tribe is always on the move from one home to another. To honor the virtue of preparedness, each of the homes is readied so that it will be waiting when the tribe returns to it, and the fields will have regained their old bounty.

★ **Lion:** The god of the Baidi people, who live in the deserts of eastern Shenr and along the western coast of Aldyn. Lion teaches the pursuit of prowess in all things, the proper ordering of people, and the importance of both societal honor and personal nobility. Worshipers of Lion order themselves into closely-knit family units and follow complicated laws of personal dependence and responsibility; larger tribes are then organized as an extension of this, with the tribe as a whole regarded as a family, and each distinct family as a single member of it.

★ **Salmon:** The god of the Azein people, who live in central Shenr and along the coasts of Aldyn. Mover and watcher, Salmon journeys tirelessly

from one place to another and learns from everything it observes. It places great value on wisdom–understanding the cycles of the world by looking at the past and predicting the future–as well as enough humility and empathy to learn from one's ancestors and do what is best for one's descendants.

6.1.3.3 The Still Gods

While the old ancestral gods of Shenr are the most often-revered, they are not the only gods of that land. There are also the Still Gods, who observe no particular people and follow no roving tribe. They are rooted to their sacred place and welcome the worship of all who draw near. In Shenr, the land of nomads, the Still Gods enjoy many devotees-in-passing but few disciples are faithful enough to settle down (perhaps abandoning their tribe, their family, all they have ever known).

There are many thousands of Still Gods. Some are larger or more influential, some are favored by certain tribes or peoples. Some are visited even by the cousins of the Shenrish, the Aldynian humans across the northern waters. The Still Gods are a multitude, their teachings are a multitude, their attitudes are a multitude.

Some of the more well-known are:

★ **The Gnawing Serpent:** A creature of ancient and primordial power, the Gnawing Serpent is named god not for divinity or grace but for power. It lives in caves deep in the heart of the southern mountains where it gnaws and worries at the mountains' roots. It can be seen by any who venture far enough into the subterranean tunnels, but few will see more than a dead-end blocked by impenetrable scales. Once every century or so the serpent shifts such that one of its great eyes may be seen, and then it may sometimes impart wisdom. The Gnawing Serpent has many disciples: some of them seek knowledge which lies only in the deepest pits; some seek nearness to something powerful; and some merely seek to placate it, that in its gnawing it might no longer shake the whole land with earthquakes.

★ **Urhast of the Waters:** One of the minor Still Gods, yet one who is often sought out. Urhast's domain is exceptionally small, encompassing only a little woodland glen where a

stream runs over a rocky hill and forms a waterfall. The fall and the pool it feeds are Urhast's entire demesne. The Still God has grown famous for the beauty of its pool and its falls, and is often itself seen admiring them in the shape of a man clad in yellow robes and a pallid mask. Yet there are those who say Urhast, or its pool, is cursed. Once Urhast's lands were a place for livestock, but now none will draw near. Some ancient elders claim the pool is growing at an alarming pace.

⋆ **The Living Head:** The severed head of a man which miraculously continues to speak. The head is given to prophecy and is able to see far beyond the borders of its territory. Disciples of the Cult of the Living Head commune with their god in order to divine the future and offer insight to outsiders. The Living Head lies inside a temple on a rocky outcrop called the Wailing Hill, whose sides have been bored to form tubes which allow the Head's voice to echo into the surrounding valley. The Living Head has few adherents, many of whom are said to go mad or undergo terrifying changes after staying in the temple too long.

6.1.3.4 The Dance

The Dance of the Seasons is one of the only faiths shared by both humans and fairies. Worshipers honor a pantheon of four siblings, two gods and two goddesses:

⋆ **Lady Spring:** The patron of growth, life, and rebirth, and also the youngest of the seasons. She is depicted as a young woman with a slight build and blonde hair, wearing a short green dress made of leaves. Her words are *Spread Your Seeds.*

⋆ **Lady Summer:** The patron of war and speech. She is depicted as a mature woman of great stature, with dark hair and a yellow dress. Her words are *Go Out, Go Forth.*

⋆ **Lord Autumn:** The patron of harvests and returns. He is depicted as a clean-shaven man with red hair, dressed in lordly clothes of red, yellow, green, and brown. His words are *Reap What You Sow.*

⋆ **Lord Winter:** The patron of death and resilience, the oldest of the seasons. He is depicted as an elderly man with black and white

hair dressed in a ragged grey robe. His words are *This Too Shall Pass.*

Worshipers believe that the four Seasons danced the world into being at the beginning of time, and that they now take turns leading it: at the beginning of the year Lady Spring steps forward to cause things to grow and be born, Lady Summer takes the lead to make living things conmingle, Lord Autumn guides the harvests and the preparations for what comes next, and Lord Winter closes out the year and the lives of anything not strong enough to continue. The seasons, as they are observed over the course of the year, are just a reflection of the deity after whom they are named taking the lead position in the dance.

Followers of the Dance are few and far between, and their faith does little to affect their day to day lives. They practice sacred dances on holy days, and ask for blessings at appropriate times (such as asking for Lady Spring's aid when giving birth, or asking Lord Winter to ease someone's passing). Such worshipers are called dancers, or singers.
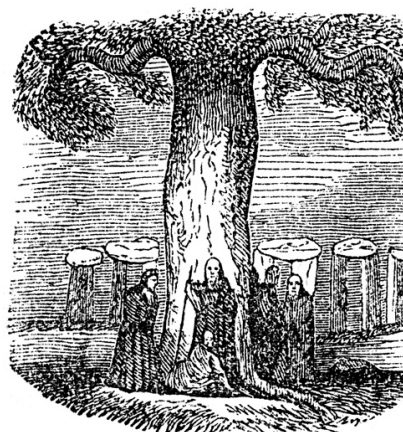
The Dance has a darker side, however. It is most commonly known for its priestly caste, who are called druids. Druids seek a closer connection to one Season by modeling themselves after its teachings. They also seek a closer connection to the natural world–the original Dance–which they do by accepting a place beside beasts in the natural order of things. It is said they take this devotion even to the point of hunting, killing, and eating their own kind. The druids are known for their great wisdom, even by those who don't follow their faith, but they also live almost exclusively as outcasts on

the fringes of civilization. At times it becomes popular among lords, monarchs, and tribal authorities to have a "court druid" to hand as a trusted adviser, but more than once the practice has ended with the court druid eating a courtier.

6.1.3.5 The Way of Inhem

The Islanders of the far west have carried their faith with them down through the centuries, more constant even than their lines of kings. To the Nerim people there is only Inhem, the One True God.

They say that time began when Inhem first drew breath and the world was created when Inhem poured a little bit of himself into the void. But the void stained the world and made it impure, so Inhem took the form of the sun and shone down upon it in order to purify it again. Now every day the void, embodied as strife and woe and despair, battles against Inhem, who is in all life and every good thing. When something dies it goes away into the sun to be tested against Inhem's fiery gaze. If found wanting, it is cast back to earth as a falling star to be further purified. If not, Inhem draws the new purity into himself and becomes greater for it, as a metal becomes greater when alloyed.

According to the Nerim, they themselves are the closest people to Inhem. As foreigners die they will eventually be pure enough to be reborn as Nerim, and then their time within the bounds of creation will be nearly at its end.

Inhem demands few sacrifices but urges many festivals and religious observations. Merry feasts and dances are held to celebrate all good things–all signs of the world's purification–and the devout run across coals or test themselves against all manner of heats in order to demonstrate their readiness for another visit to Inhem's fiery furnace in the sky. At the same time, followers of Inhem must meet the forces of the void with steel in their hearts and be unwavering in their resolve and their faith. Contact with people and things deemed impure must be avoided.

Priests of Inhem make solemn vows to never be caught under a roof or in the shade while the sun shines in the sky. This way they will never fail to witness any lesson Inhem would reveal to them.

6.1.3.6 Leyrinism

The core of Leyrinism is certainly one of the oldest systems of belief ever held by humans, though the name given to it only came about in the Second Age.

Unlike other faiths Leyrinism holds no claim to serving any sort of all-powerful deity or deities. The doctrine is a simple one: all spirits are deities, and all of them are deserving of worship. Every blade of grass, every tree, every cobblestone, *everything* holds something of the divine in it. Divinity is not more in one practice than another.[17] It is not more in the natural world or the artificial. Divinity is harmony with the rest of the world, and the best practice is to live in harmony with the world.

The singular mandate of the faith, then, is this: the worshiper must find what gods they wish and give them the reverence they are due. What this means, and how it is to be enacted, are deeply personal decisions which vary from one individual to the next. Some Leyrinists worship a god they see as being especially powerful, but most choose to devote their time to gods they see as being especially moral, beautiful, or personally relevant.

Leyrinism has no priesthood, at least not in any official capacity. It is typically too personal of a religion to be truly organized.

6.1.3.7 The Forgiven

The Forgiven were a tiny but extremely dangerous cult which grew and spread across Aldyn like a cancer during the first part of the Third Age. They were largely unknown until the Death of Faith, when they showed their true colors. Luckily, none survived.

According to the Forgiven, there is a singular deity which created all things, but it is no longer in power. They called this being the Chained God. They said the first children of the Chained God were the spirits of the world, and the first act of those spirits was to rebel against their creator. The spirits won and, with their divine parent imprisoned beyond space and time, they began to craft the world after their own desires. It was during this time that humans and all other living things

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[17]Leyrinism also tends to be fairly accepting of other faiths because it accepts those gods as true deities, but simply asserts that they are not the *only* true deities.

were made; and the "gods" which made them were truly nothing more than deceitful (if powerful) spirits masquerading as the divine in order to draw attention and power away from the true source of all things.

The ultimate goal of the Forgiven was to right the wrong caused by that first rebellion. They believed the best way to do this was to kill as many people as they could: the souls of the dead would inevitably find their ways back to the true source of creation, the Chained God, thereby strengthening it and denying the accursed spirits a follower. They did consider murder a heinous thing, but this was tempered by a belief that once the Chained God was freed there would come a second, better creation. In that new world the souls of all those who had been killed would be blessed, and the souls of their killers would be forgiven their crimes; it is from this that they took their name.

6.1.3.8 Other Faiths

Faith, in one form or another, is integral to all society. The larger faiths described above are only the broad strokes; Sareth is riddled with too many little religions, cults, and heresies to detail them all here.

Here are a handful of them:

* **Dragon Cults:** There is perhaps no other creature which is as physically imposing, even god-like, as a dragon. For this reason, to say nothing of their great intelligence, wealth, power, and narcissism, dragons often find themselves surrounded by people willing to worship them. Some of these cults truly believe the object of their worship is some sort of god-made-flesh, while others merely hold onto the idea that a day will come when the dragons collectively destroy the world, sparing only those who have previously shown them due reverence.
* **Godling Paths:** While the fae might not have as much interest in creator-deities as humans, that doesn't preclude religion. Many of them idolize and even worship one of their own kind, a fairy whom they believe has tapped into some form of philosophy, lifestyle, or natural role which is so perfect as to be divine. The divinity is called a Godling, the embodiment of that divinity its Aspect, and the followers of that Aspect are the Path. The largest and most common Paths are typically those devoted to The Dark Fool (whose Aspect is Amadan Dubh) and the Clock of Ruin (whose aspect is Mageking Anton).
* **Moon Cults:** The worship of the moon is a common enough practice in Sareth that it not only appears as its own distinctive faith but also, from time to time, as a heresy or splinter-cult branching off from one of the other major religions. Most of these faiths believe the moon is the embodiment or symbol of some sort of protector deity, one who shields the world from wickedness and evil (especially that of wizards, demons, and magic). The most prominent of these is the worship of the moon goddess Ela, a faith found almost exclusively among the Zheuli people of northwestern Aldyn; at various times Ela is considered to be an entirely separate deity or one of the Many.
* **Path of Ashnen:** Originally a sect within Leyrinism, the Path of Ashnen is sometimes considered a faith in its own right, albeit not one well-known outside Azeihl. While the core beliefs of the Path are the same as those for Leyrinism, there is one key addition: that the human soul is itself a type of spirit, and one which is uniquely divine. Followers of the Path therefore revere humanity above all other expressions of the world, and often revere wizards most of all for being a soul which has (to a small extent) managed to "break out" of its shell and interact directly with other spirits. The name of the faith came from its founder, who was an Azili wizard.

6.2 The Unknown World

There are places beyond common perception. Some of them are thought to be regions outside the physical bounds of this world. Some could be entire worlds in their own right, entirely separate but with some form of connection to this one. Others are closer to the "normal" world, or even inside it, and yet at the same time kept apart.

In truth, there is only one world. It is perception and intention that change. Much of what *is* is hidden, and that is as it should be.

There is no travel between other places because there are no other places. But there is a shift in the senses, sometimes gradual and sometimes sudden, by which one might see and be seen in a place which seems wholly unfamiliar.

6.2.1 The Between

The Between is everything. It is the lifeblood of reality, the world of dreams, the last safe harbor of spirits, the final resting place of both sanity and madness.

Physical dimension has no meaning in the Between, nor do many other laws mortals cling to for security. It is a soup of ideas and concepts flowing one into another at all times. Sometimes the shifts come in response to the happenings in other places, or to the thoughts and feelings of nearby minds. Sometimes the shifts merely happen. The Between has a kind of will all its own. But there is nothing random about the Between, nothing meaningless, though it often seems so. Every facet of the Between is rife with layer upon layer of meaning, all so wrapped up in metaphor and association as to be nearly indecipherable.

Most of the Between's denizens are spirits. They are some of the only things which might be said to be at-ease there. Their forms flow and shift with the tides of change all around them and they reform somewhere else. They flit from like-thought to like-thought, or brood in place, casting out their influence over the other realms in the form of unlooked-for moods and ideas. Other creatures call the Between home as well, but they are fewer and harder to categorize: ghosts of dead futures, immortal thought-forms which crept out of the minds of slumbering First Fae, terrible shades of twisted magic, the dream-sendings of dragons, countless others.

There is no geography to describe. There are no landmarks. Every foray into the Between is different.

This is not a region which can be easily found. The only means of approach is through the Second Sight. In fact, that's all the Second Sight is: the ability to perceive the Between. But those with the ability to draw near it are still loathe to do so, except at great need. The Between is dangerous to both the mind and the soul, it wears away at them. Many of the things which lurk in the darkest

corners of the Between were once human, but they stayed too long and lost their way back.

6.2.2 Faery

The raising of the Hedge was a greater working than the mere act of creating a boundary between humanity and what was left of the fair folk. It ripped at the fabric of the world, tearing those lands still claimed by Mageking Anton away from all the rest. Though even that spell wasn't strong enough to finish the job, Faery is a place adrift, only connected to the rest of the "mortal world" by thin and fraying strands. Anyone can stumble into Faery, if they are unfortunate. Doing so always puts them a little out of place, or even out of time. More than one unlucky soul has returned to their home and found it (or themselves) greatly changed.

And perhaps more strangely, Faery is growing.

The general look and feel of Faery isn't so different from how it was when the worlds were whole. At first glance it would almost be indistinguishable, but close inspection reveals many alterations. The sun is a little smaller and of a darker, angrier shade, while the moon is nearly twice as large and limned with an opalescent ring. Both sun and moon seem to hang longer in the sky, long enough that twilight lasts longer than either night or day. Colors seem a little deeper and more vibrant. The air always smells fresh. The wind is rarely still, but also rarely keeps to one direction for very long. The nights seem much colder than they are. Each morning brings mist and dew hardy enough to last until almost midday.

The western half of Faery is almost entirely covered in forests dotted here and there with lakes and threaded with rivers. As the trees march north they gradually give way to jagged hills, and then to a range of mountains that spans the breadth of the realm. Nearer the center of Faery the hilly woodlands soften and become rolling green hills laced with swift-flowing streams.

Vaeandor, the city of the silver elves, stands like a jewel in the midst of the grassy plains. There the line of Tarvos and Naolin Oathbreaker still rules as Great House Naolin until such a time as the empty throne of the Mageking is filled once more. All roads in Faery lead to Vaeandor. They expand out from it like spokes on a wheel, some dusty and earthen, some paved with gold and precious gems.

The northern paths lead to tunnels of the dwarves in the mountains. Eastwards they lead to great white spires which dot the lowlands, built for stargazing and contemplating the sky and entering ecstatic trance. To the west they venture under the trees where the Heransi and Hob (to say nothing of nixies and pixies, nyads and drayads, kelpies, Cu Si, and others) make their homes.

The Dwer have riddled the northern hills and peaks with tunnels. Long labor has given way to long roads which rarely see the light of day. These lead all the way down, down to a great unnamed city[18] at the mountain's root. In the city's heart there is a great pit of untold depths, the place from which Stone's voice first rose up to the Dwer.

But the underworld holds more. Some of the twisted tunnels are shadowed and dark, having never seen light of any kind, and in these places warrens of kobolds and Hob thrive. Also there is another tunnel, brightly lit and inlaid with stones that shine like stars, which leads to a cavern of even greater beauty. That cavern is sealed away because within it sits Mageking Anton, the King under the Mountain, waiting for his Last Crusade.

In the center of Faery there is a mound of purest black. Once it was only another flat piece of turf but it was turned inside out when the Hedge was cast, for that was the very spot on which Anton stood during that working. None dare come too close now. It seems to draw all light, all sound, all thought, into itself. All those who have ventured near it have died.

6.2.3 The Realms

There are six cardinal directions. The directions of the Compass Winds are North, South, East, and West; and then the two directions of the Mage's Winds are Widdershins and Death-Wise. Common folk know only the Compass Winds, but wizard and fairies and the like know all of them. Even without knowledge any wanderer (especially one who is tired, or who travels at dusk or dawn, or on certain holy days) may find themselves stumbling along a path which follows one of the more mysterious ways.

Going in the direction of the Mage's Winds brings the traveler out of their realm and into a new place. Or perhaps it only alters their perception and lets them pass from the known part of the world to a stranger corner.

6.2.3.1 The Realm of the Lightless

The realm of the Lightless is known by many names. It is the Pit, the Abyss, the Seething Place. Sometimes it is mistaken for the Underworld, or the Otherworld. It is Hell (but it is not Hel).

It is the land of demons.

This realm is filled with riotous life, overgrown. It is full to bursting, past its capacity to sustain anything even approaching greenery or comfort or safety. In the Realm of the Lightless there are no plants and few hard stones, for every inch of earth has been trampled to dust and mud. The hills and even the mountains have been worn smooth by the passage of billions. Here and there water can still be found in meager pools filled to brimming with waste and offal.

The earth is pockmarked with tunnels and caves and crude dwellings. There the demons live, curled inside cells of their own making or crawling from one to another, gnawing at the earth and at their fellows. They are like maggots infesting a corpse. Infernal magic has allowed some of the greater demons to lift huge sections of the earth into the sky, forming floating island-states likewise riddled with holes and populated beyond reason; in those places the demon lords rule their own petty little kingdoms, though it does nothing to alleviate their suffering.

Wanderers may find the realm of the Lightless death-wise of the realm of mortals and widdershins of the realm of the dead.

6.2.3.2 The Realm of the Dead

The realm of the dead is often spoken of, often peered into, but rarely visited. When the dead leave their mortal coils behind at last they seem (most of them) to find their way death-wise to the furthest reaches of the world. There they find the realm of the dead.

It is a mist-shrouded world, but otherwise looks much like the realm of mortals. However it is a deadlier place, and antithetical to life.

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[18]Dwer refer to it merely as "The City" and outsiders often call it "The City of the Dwer" or mistakenly believe it to be named "Ymir" after a giant supposedly buried underneath the city's deepest foundations.

Life is motion. Life is spontaneity and animation and consequence. Life is the unfolding of decisions not yet seen or dreamed or considered. There is none of that in the realm of the dead. There is nothing new in this world.

Nothing ever happens.

The dead go about their business, doing just as they had most often done in life. Nothing more. The man who devoted himself to hawking his wares at market still calls out his sales, but now he has only two or three such, and he repeats them *ad infinitum*. He never sells anything. Likewise the scholar who was wont in life to find secluded places to read now finds he does nothing else. He has been reading the same scroll–the same word–for millennia, and he will not stop until all the worlds crumble and there is no longer time or place or anything. The dead may sometimes break from their reveries for a time, but never for long. The living find their situation little better; habits become obsessions, repetition comes naturally, automatically. No mortal can survive the pull for long and none thus trapped escape.

Even the dancing dead are trapped. For what is merriment, if there is no variation, no stopping, nothing to celebrate?

The realm of the dead has only one native inhabitant, the only known creature inured against the effects of that place. The thing is a giant, thrice the height of a man or more, with jet-black skin and clothes. Below a wide-brimmed hat sprouts a fierce beak, above which is set the only thing in all its form which can be discerned as more than a silhouette: two enormous eyes, pure white and shining like lanterns. This creature–or creatures, it is uncertain–is sometimes called a Guide, but sometimes it is known instead as an emissary or avatar of King Crow himself. It is a shepherd of the lost,

and the dead are its flock; it defends them from interlopers and pursues those who get out. When roused it wields an enormous sword in one hand and unfurls six great wings from about its body. It cannot be bested, cannot be slain. Even escape can be only temporary, for all things must one day die.

6.2.3.3 The Crossroads

Snow, stone, and cold grey skies. These are the only things one is liable to find in the Crossroads. There are few places as barren or as featureless.

But the Crossroads does serve a use: it possesses a strange property by which certain locations in that realm seem to adjoin certain places in other realms, and the crossing from one to the other is exceptionally easy. Sometimes the distance between two spots in the mortal realm may be greater than the distance between the two "linked" spots in the Crossroads, and so traveling through the grey expanse effectively lessens the distance which must be crossed. This property is used sometimes by wizards and fairies who need to get from place to place quickly or without being seen; to help with these endeavors ancient roads have been carved into the landscape and great rune-covered menhirs (one in the Crossroads and its twin in the adjoining realm) have been constructed to serve as markers... Though the connections drift over time, and many of them are no longer accurate.
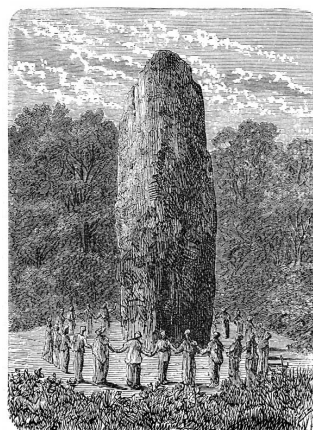
It's no surprise that color stands out sharply against the dull scenery of the realm, but beyond that colors have strange effects within the Crossroads. Red gives off warmth, dull and gentle for

darker hues and bright and painful for lighter ones. Anything colored green moves more swiftly than it otherwise would. Merely looking at the color blue brings insight and sharpens the senses.

For all that the Crossroads often seems a lifeless realm, there *are* beings which call it their home. The only native beasts are finrunners, bipedal monsters not unlike birds in shape, but lacking feathers and wings. Their head terminates in a terrifying maw: three fleshy protruberances extend outwards like an insect's mandibles, with fine skin stretched between them, and where the bases of the three meet there is a mouth lined with fangs. The creatures sport a row of fins along their back which they can set against their skin (nearly hiding them from view) or raise to a height of one or two handspans. When raised the fins reveal their inner lining, which is bright red and therefore very hot. Finrunners have no eyes, yet they see.

Aside from those monsters, the Crossroads is also the home of the enigmantic Cyren race. They are reptilian things with the upper bodies of old men and the lower limbs of a sea monster. They have heads like an eyeless lizard. By some unknown spell, each Cyren possesses an ethereal, flaming eye which floats above them and through which they see. Little is known of their language or culture save that they eat the bodies of their dead and use the bones to craft arms and armor.

The Crossroads is widdershins of the realm of mortals, and deathwise of the realm of the Illuminated.

6.2.3.4 The Realm of the Illuminated

Little can be said of the realm of the Illuminated. It is a lonely place.

There is only a single plain which extends in all directions. It is covered all over with a soft blue-green grass, and above the sky is always a dappled grey. Pleasant dew coats the ground, and a warm breeze can often be felt blowing steadily and without variation. If it did not feel so empty and solemn, it would be quite comfortable.

It is said that somewhere on that plain there can be found a city. According to legend the city has high marble walls, above which no buildings can be seen. Set into the wall are set seven lights, great torches which blaze unendingly with fires hotter and brighter than the noonday sun. Inside the city live the Illuminated.

The realm's sole inhabitants do not leave their walls anymore. It is said they tried to save the world, long ago, but they found it wanting. Now they entertain themselves in their own ways, or maybe they merely wait for some sign, or maybe they are dead and the only things left are ghosts. Whatever the case, the walls of their city have been shut for centuries. They take no counsel from mortals. They have left the world to its fate.

The Realm of the Illuminated is widdershins of the Crossroads.

6.2.4 Other Places

There are other regions further afield or closer to hand than those above. They tend to be smaller, or often overlooked, or more difficult to stumble upon. Yet they exist.

There is a demesne where shadows live when they are not to be found elsewhere.

There is a city which lies along the marches of the Between. It harbors all the dreams which have ever been or will ever be.

There is an ocean unanchored from the other realms, dotted with islands which contain all manner of wondrous and terrifying things. It can only be found by those who do not seek it, but should.

There is an unending world of crushing dirt which is to be found inside a certain coffin.[19]

There is an almost-perfect duplicate of the realm of mortals just on the other side of every reflection. Its few imperfections are often disturbing and always hostile.

There are others.

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[19]Little is known of that coffin and it has, for good or ill, been lost.

Chapter 7

Running the Game

7.1 Telling The Story

Telling a good story in an RPG isn't much like telling a good story in other mediums. It's less telling *one* story and more telling *a series* of interconnected stories; if not handled well it forms a sort of tangled mess of plots which is (hopefully) at least amusing to explore, and if done particularly well it forms a series of interwoven arcs which come together to form a narrative plot or, at least, a sort of emotional/thematic plot.

7.1.1 Player Focus

RPGs involve multiple people coming together to play, but it's real hard to get anything done unless everyone takes turns speaking. The GM needs to be conscious of where they're putting the focus at all times: they could be focusing on a player character, on the environment, or on a nonplayer character. And in general the GM should be focusing on things in about that order... PCs get the most focus, followed by the environment, followed by NPCs.

PCs get the most focus because they're real people sitting around the table with you and so they deserve it. If you don't want to focus mostly on the PCs, then instead of tying the other people down, just tell them to go play a boardgame while you write your novel.

The environment should get the most focus after the players because the environment is what sets the players up and allows them to act. The environment isn't just scenery, either. It's the narration, it's ongoing events and the consequences of character actions. It's new things happening and old things coming back.

NPCs get the least attention because focusing on them gets masturbatory, especially when two NPCs need to talk to one another. Make no mistake, NPCs are vitally important for most games and should play a large role in things, but the GM shouldn't spend large chunks of time "zoomed in" on NPCs. When NPCs act or do things which the players need to know about, frame the focus differently: if the NPCs are doing something that directly and immediately affects the PCs, frame it as focusing on the PCs ("The king announces he has information that someone in his court is a traitor... *What are your characters doing?*") or as focusing on the larger narrative/environment ("The king announces he has information that someone in his court is a traitor... *The assemblage comes to life at once, everyone stamping their feet and proclaiming their innocence, whispers slither through the talk about who it may be. As these whispers grow to insults and are heard, more than one person stands and challenges any who would besmirch their name to prove their righteousness with steel. Things are getting out of hand, and quickly.*").

Every scene is going to require PC focus, most will also require environment focus, and NPC focus comes only as is necessary. Switching focus can be difficult. In general, use environment focus to establish the scene (if it wasn't already previously established) and then let the characters take over. After characters have had a chance to act in whatever way they feel appropriate, switch to character and/or NPC focus to show the consequences of those actions (or inactions) and then throw it back to the characters for more.

7.1.1.1 Shifting the Spotlight

Something which makes focus even more complicated is the fact that there are generally multiple players who aren't acting in lock-step. In fact, their characters might be actively working against each other or in completely different places.

The easy solution is to decide how much time the players will collectively have for a session and then divide it up evenly among those at the table. This is easy because it seems to be "fair" and it just means the GM has to keep track of some "mental stop-watches" to count down until someone's had enough time for the session. But trying to keep things even like that makes trying for anything like good pacing *enormously* difficult, it discounts the fact that different players enjoy the game in different ways, and it has the potential to shred even the best, most well-laid stories.

The better thing to do is to allow characters to take and hold the spotlight for as long as necessary and *absolutely no longer*. Let someone hold the spotlight long enough for you to set the scene, for them to play out their character's actions, and then for you to establish the consequences (you can skip that last one if you want to add tension, introducing a mini cliffhanger). As soon as the last part of that is done, shift the

spotlight. Start with the characters who've had the spotlight the least that session or who you haven't heard from in a while. Shine it on them; if you need to re-establish the scene, do so. See what they're doing. If they're doing something important, great! Let them play out their character's actions, establish consequences or don't, and move on. If they're not doing something important... Let them. Shift the spotlight again (if possible, it's best to shift the spotlight from a less-active character to a character who is nearby or somehow related to that character, both so you can skip some of the scene-establishment and so the less-active character is already in everybody's heads, which may encourage the more-active ones to rope the others in if it seems appropriate).

Keep doing the above ad nauseum until it's time to stop.

If groups of characters are working together (which will hopefully be most of the time) you can also treat the spotlight as shining on a group instead of an individual. The general how-to is still the same: establish the scene for all of the characters in the same location and/or working on the same thing. Allow everyone in turn to play out their character's actions in turn. If some of those characters want to amend what they do or add onto things based on what their peers are doing, great. Once that's all done establish the consequences or don't. Shift the spotlight to another group.

Doesn't this have the potential for some people to feel left out? Oh yes. It's very easy for players to feel like they don't do anything because other people at the table are hogging the GM's attention. But as long as the GM keeps shifting the spotlight so that everyone frequently has the *option* of action, the players become responsible for their own fun. If they want to have more time in the spotlight they need to be taking more actions, and actions with larger/grander consequences, more frequently.

7.1.2 The Characters' Story

7.1.2.1 Story Through Sagas

7.1.3 The World's Story

While the PCs are obviously the main characters of the story, they're still terribly small compared to events at large. This is an important facet of the setting, and the genre, that *Sarenteth* aims to capture: your story is only one in a sea of them. The lowliest villein and the greatest First Fae are equally powerless against the courses of the world. It is only in seeing how they react to those courses, and how they attempt to shape their little corner of them, that we see their story.

Instead of just relying on the idea of this theme, you can model it using environment scores (2.2.1.1). And it even simplifies your job as the GM.

One of the strengths of *Sarenteth*'s environment scores is in being able to easily represent obstacles in a neutral way, allowing characters to attack them from any angle. But you can unlock even more usefulness out of environment scores by treating them as "tracks" for background and NPC-led events. Background tracks let you administrate what happens out of sight of the PCs in a way that minimizes prep time and book-keeping. There are also any number of ways you can have PCs interact with your tracks, which gives you the flexibility to make tracks for anything going on in the game without it turning into fiat.

The basic make-up of a background track is:

* **Score:** This is just like any other environment score. There's no upper limit and nothing to balance it against.
* **List of Triggers:** Triggers are the bread and butter of tracks. A trigger is a future event you could imagine happening in the game and a value (called the trigger point) that tells you when or if the event happens. Theoretically you could have a track with only one trigger, but in practice you might not find it worth the effort unless the track has at least two or three.
* **Description (Optional):** Sometimes it's useful to jot down a couple of brief sentences about exactly what it is the track's supposed to represent. Try to use a format that doesn't just describe it in the abstract but specifically calls out what a change in the track score means.
* **Upkeep Rules (Optional):** Some tracks will

just change over time, allowing events to take their course in a random fashion and at random intervals. If you want a track that's a little more structured or has an inexorable quality to it (inexorable unless the PCs do something about it, that is) you can use upkeep rules to define how that looks.

Once you have what you need from the list, you're ready to put your tracks into action.

Example Track: The Duke's Paranoia

It might be useful to have an example of a track to keep in mind while reading this section. Here's a mockup of a track that could be used in a political game in which the PCs are trying to navigate courtly life and maybe get up to some underhanded dealings. Aside from the duke, this example track assumes there's also a vizier character who is up to no good and an honest but ill-mannered knight, both with the duke's ear.

★ **Score:** 100 (starting value)
★ **Triggers:**
  * **0:** The duke is "cured" of his malady. He makes the next feast an extra lavish one, and in a fit of good cheer orders his usual food taster to go home for the day. If the *Vizier's Plot* track is 100+, the food will be poisoned and the duke will die later that night.
  * **25:** The duke tells both the vizier and the knight that he is beginning to feel better, and wishes to begin taking a little milk of the poppy each night to ease his dreams. The knight will freely share with the people of the court that their old friend the duke is coming back. New upkeep rule, -1d10 per day. +3d6 *Vizier's Plot*.
  * **150:** Constant nightmares make it hard for the duke to focus. He will be angry and short with anyone who approaches him, and anyone asking for favors or money will be accused of treachery, theft, etc. If the *Vizier's Plot* track is less than 75, set it to 0 as the duke makes a grand show of kicking the vizier out of court, yelling profanities and physically driving him out the gates.
  * **175:** The duke's paranoia has gotten the best of him at last. During a particularly heated debate between some petitioners the knight will whisper a joke to someone nearby, and the duke will explode in a fit of rage. After a tirade of nonsensical threats and accusations, the duke calls for his other guards to throw the knight in the oubliette. When the knight resists one of the guards will strike him a blow to the head, which some days later will kill him. +3d6+20 *Vizier's Plot.*
★ **Description:** This track represents the duke's mental state in regards to how he copes with his nightmares (most of which center around betrayal) and how much he trusts those around him. Positive change represents his paranoia growing and his stability likewise decreasing. Negative change represents his coming to trust people again and the cessation of the nightmares.
★ **Upkeep Rules:**
  * The vizier, pretending to be concerned for the duke's wellbeing, is always trying to ease his mind. -2d6 per day.
  * The knight tries to urge trust without foregoing caution, and muddles his point in the process. +1d6-3 per day.

7.1.3.1 Changing Scores

A track's score can change on its own through both simple variations over time and upkeep rules, or it can be acted on by something external. The external actions are the easiest to account for: if a character rolls against a track, use the damage they deal as a guide. That damage can add or subtract, as is appropriate for their action. If you feel the track is particularly "resilient" feel free to set a limit on how much the track can change per roll.

The "built in" changes are fairly simple. Upkeep rules should be written so that the frequency and amount of change are both clear, they just need followed.

You can also create mostly-random variations to account for all the little things that might crop up in a "real" setting by occasionally rolling a handful of dice and making a change based on those. These work best if they have the chance to add *or* subtract, maybe with a lean towards one or the other to prevent the track from only ever going back and forth. You can do this by subtracting a value from the die roll (e.g. 3d6-6 gives a result between 12 and -3) or by selecting some dice to add positive values and others negative values before rolling (e.g. all d8s or all even values are negative).

The only trick to changing a track's score is remembering to do it. When the track is being acted on by something else it only takes a moment make the adjustment, but for everything else you have to remember to make the changes. This can be a problem. It can be helpful to make sure your tracks all change at once – writing all your upkeep rules to happen with the same frequency – and to only make other variations during that time. You could do this in between every session, or every other, or you might tie it to an in-game timeframe like once a week or every full moon. The specific frequency you choose doesn't matter as much as your ability to stick to it.

7.1.3.2 Triggered Events

Anytime a track's score changes, for any reason, it has the chance of triggering events. The idea is simple: anytime the score *passes* a trigger's value the event tied to that value occurs in the game and then the trigger is erased.

What exactly an event looks like is going to de-

pend on the circumstances of the game and the event in question. In theory it should happen immediately, but you might decide to put the trigger off until the end of an action-packed scene or session.

The easiest are those which happen out of sight of the PCs: your event should describe them in enough detail for you to know the basics of what happened... If the PCs hear a rumor of what's happened later you might even be able to just read them your event description verbatim, or close to it.

It also helps when the triggers include actual mechanics as well as "flavor text." These mechanics might be things like...

* Add or subtract a value (static or rolled) from a different track.
* Introduce a new circumstance.
* An NPC gains or loses an edge, scar, or obsession.
* Create a new track to record a "side effect" of this track's fallout.

The most powerful thing a track can do from a storytelling standpoint, and therefore the thing you should try to utilize the most when creating them, is change the scores of *other* tracks. This is what makes tracks work as something more than an overwrought way of campaign plotting: a PC can affect one track and set off a cascade of consequences which they might never have foreseen, and all without you having to pause the game so you can think through it all there at the table. You've already done all the thinking, now follow it to see where the story goes.

7.1.4 Peopling the World

One of the main tasks of the GM is playing everyone the PCs might interact with over the course of the game. Not all of these characters have to be fully fleshed out in their own right, but a good GM is at least going to make them feel believable and will probably give some way that the character *could* become relevant to the scene, session, or campaign at large.

7.1.4.1 Generating NPCs

In theory you could generate an entire set of approaches and traits for everyone the PCs interact with, but that will quickly lead to a mountain of wasted effort. The vast majority of NPCs likely won't need stats at all, and those that do probably won't need all of them.

Most of the time when generating NPC stats you will have already thought up or played the NPC – maybe you're right in the middle of doing so! – and you now find yourself in need of mechanics to back it up. Sometimes, though, it can be fun to generate the stats first and then allow them to dictate the way you play the character; rolling an unusually high Passion might make you play the NPC as more emotional than you otherwise would have, for instance.

When you know your NPC needs at least *some* mechanics to back it up, start by just assigning two approaches. Pick ones that you think will be the most relevant or the most fun to play and then either choose the approach scores or roll for them. If a roll comes up and your description of the NPC up to this point implies they would be good at the subject of the roll, come up with an edge on the fly and use it. If the players point out that something about the NPC implies they would be bad at it, come up with a scar on the fly and congratulate them for having noticed it.

To roll for an attribute, consider what sort of NPC it is. Make the roll indicated below and assign that to one side of the attribute (either the first approach score or the one you think most relevant). Then balance give the other whatever score is needed to balance it out.

* **Simple & Uninteresting:** 1d20+40
* **Hidden Depths:** 3d20+20
* **Wild-Card:** 1d100

If you know you'll need an NPC ahead of time for a roll-heavy scene, generate all their approaches and at least some of their traits ahead of time. Decide on one or two prominent things about the character, the sort of thing that you would want to naturally convey when you describe the character or in the first conversation the PCs would have with them. Once you have those ideas, convert them into edges, scars, or obsessions as appropriate. Then fill in other traits so that they have two edges, one scar, and one obsession. If something comes up during play that makes you think the NPC deserves another trait, give it to them and work a description of their "new" trait into the narrative at your earliest opportunity; you can do this as much as you

like, but try to limit it so that no NPC winds up with more edges, scars, or obsessions than any of the PCs this way.

For particularly powerful or noteworthy NPCs, follow everything outlined above except allow them to have up to two more edges, two more scars, and one more obsession than the PCs do. If the PCs don't all have the same number of traits, choose the *highest* number for each category and use that plus two as the limit.

Don't bother giving NPCs destinies, allies, or the like unless you plan on that NPC being vitally important to the campaign, and even then consider if it's worth the effort. The villain of a campaign might have those on their character sheet, but unless the NPC is truly central to the entire game, leave them blank.

7.1.4.2   Protecting NPCs

Sarenteth is a fairly "swingy" game, meaning one (un)lucky roll of the dice has the potential to drastically turn the tides for or against a character. With the PCs this isn't a problem: as the protagonists of the story, any rolls they get into should be ones that are a consequence of their own actions, and most characters will also have a destiny to fall back on as an absolute last resort. NPCs don't have those same considerations and, by and large, that's perfectly acceptable.

But some NPCs are important enough to the story to warrant some kind of allowance. They shouldn't be shielded from *all* of the system's dangers – if an NPC is ever "too important" to be vulnerable to a roll, they shouldn't have stats and probably shouldn't be in the game at all – but they should be given more leeway to survive the occasional bit of random chance.

7.1.4.3   Interactions with the Other

How should interacting with non-human
entities feel? Certainly different
than human entities. If codifying an
interaction this is going to come from
taking at least one of the three major
facets (goal, obstacle, background) and
making it decidedly inhuman. How it's
inhuman depends on a lot of factors, but
in general it'll probably either come from

something human which has been grossly
exaggerated or something which just seems
absurd or stupid from a human frame of
reference. The former is easier (dragons
are greedy, angels are contemptuous,
demons are desirous, Amadan Dubh is
patient & sadistic) and is probably the
one to be used most often. The latter is
more difficult because it involves trying
to act as a character who, you know,
has some kind of logical/causal break in
their thinking. Come up with that break,
pretend it's true and makes obvious sense,
and then play the rest of the character
as though it were an otherwise logical
& reasoning (as appropriate) being.
This one should probably be used a tad
sparingly, either for moments when you
want to inject some whimsy into the games
or when dealing with particularly strange
entities like spirits.

Nonhuman NPCs will probably also have
some quirks based on what they are. These
are things that are common enough for this
type of entity that not having them in
the interaction might be a tip-off to the
players that something's up. Things like:

⋆ Spirits are not conscious beings,
  they have no free will, they have
  no personal identities or thoughts
  of their own. They aren't even
  actually intelligent. They're all
  just facets of a larger thing, a
  reflection of the world and its myriad
  laws and forces, given a form which
  appears to be an individual entity.
  They're AI blackboxes. Most of the
  time this won't matter, but it does
  manifest itself in conversation a few
  ways: spirits don't use first-person
  pronouns because that's not how they
  ''perceive'' the world and they don't
  really consider their interactions with
  other spirits to even *be* interactions,
  they're simply an unalterable and
  unremarkable cause-and-effect. The
  more powerful spirits tend to be better
  at mimicking individuality, with the
  most powerful ones even having a bit
  of a grasp of the whole first-person

thing.

* Fairies tend to view absolutely
  everything as an exchange. For some
  of them (it's not universal -- it's
  actually cultural, tending to appear
  more in older individuals like First
  Fae, in the followers of such, and in
  the more ''refined bloodlines'' like
  inhabitants of the great Dwer city
  or Vaeandor) the idea of exchange
  extends even into conversation.
  This is why you don't tell a fairy
  ''thank you,'' because it can be seen
  as trying to give something worthless
  in exchange for something else. After
  all, what's a ''thank you'' good for?
  Note that even with fairies who don't
  follow the cultural idea of making
  every conversation an exchange, they
  still tend to view ''thank you'' as
  an *incredibly* insulting phrase.
  Even without the origins behind the
  thinking, that's simply not something
  you say.
* Fetches don't necessarily have any
  overarching guidelines for how they
  interact with people because they
  don't have anything like a culture
  and are nearly identical to humans in
  most respects. It's mostly just in
  what they think of their gifts: those
  that love the anonymity will probably
  be freaked out if someone discovers
  their secret (even temporarily), while
  others will revel and gloat because
  they know it'll all be forgotten. Some
  are dead-set on having a particular
  identity and sticking to it, even
  pretending they aren't fetches at all,
  while others will shift mid-sentence
  just to get a reaction. Also something
  to be said for how fetches ought to
  be handled given that the PCs aren't
  immune to the forgetfulness.
* Wizards are almost perpetually
  distracted, probably have something
  better to do right now, and generally
  walk the line between ''entirely too
  self-assured'' and ''raving narcissist.''
  And the latter is pretty much

untreatable because... well, as far
as their perceptions reach (which is
conveniently also as far as their magic
reaches) they're *right* about all this
stuff other people call crazy. And
they can see it. They have physical
evidence.

* The dead are driven by purpose, either
  emotional or of a higher-order. They
  aren't the people they use to be,
  though much like spirits, it might
  seem like they are in just about every
  respect. But no, they only have a
  goal. And they just want it done.
  They also tend to be afraid of the
  Guides, and are unable to speak about a
  lot of stuff.
* Lightless have two goals and two
  goals only: multiplication and
  self-satisfaction. These are the
  only two things which ever will or ever
  could matter in their eyes. Everything
  else is immaterial unless it furthers
  or hinders one of those. They are
  willing to do basically anything in
  order to meet those goals or even to
  draw closer, which makes them very
  convenient for people in need of a
  quick burst of immortal power. Which
  is the idea. One thing to note: most
  (emphasis on *most*) demons have a
  compunction about breaking their word,
  even idly. There's nothing stopping
  them from doing so, but if demons
  develop too much of a reputation for
  swindling and trickery, who will summon
  them and make pacts with them? No,
  they actually try to play above-board
  more often than not simply because
  they don't have sufficient reason to
  be underhanded. Of course, if they
  find a reason...
* Illuminated are nearly impossible
  to contact, and even if contact is
  established, it will probably be
  cut off at once. They simply aren't
  interested in talking to people or
  getting involved in their problems.
  To them, everything else in the world
  is a maggot-ridden piece of filth

that deserves not one jot of their attention.

* Dragons are reptiles, and they act like it. Draconic thought-processes are incredibly simple and straightforward: they want what they want and they want to expend as few of their resources as possible. Everything is a cost-benefit analysis. Everything. That includes moving to get comfortable, waking up, torching people, and devastating the countryside. When they make a decision they make the smallest action they can to get closer to that goal, then reevaluate. Repeat until they give up or achieve what they were after. If something doesn't fit inside their very narrow window of interest, they immediately discard and ignore it. They have no problem whatever with remaining utterly still and utterly silent down the long centuries. One might even say they prefer it, but ''prefer'' is probably too strong a term.

7.1.5 The Unknown

There should be stuff which is unexplainable, ineffable, and unknown. There should be stuff which violates everything else written in this book. There is no such thing as an accurate taxonomy in Sareth, no such thing as a fundamental biological model for the inhabitants of this setting. There are always exceptions, there are always contradictions, there are always things which *should not work and yet do*.

The Dead are prevented from returning by the Guide(s). Yet they return frequently.

Many creation stories contradict one another. Yet they are all, apparently, correct.

Creatures of the scale of dragons should not be able to live, let alone fly. Yet they do.

Spirits cannot be killed. Yet Rhanill was killed.

In addition to this, there are a thousand thousand unique beings. Most

of the time they aren't noticed at all, or if they are, they're mistaken for something more normal. Dogs with human hands. Elk where elk should not be able to live. Things that look human, act human, but very much are not. These unique things, when they *are* noticed, generally get labeled ''monsters'' and driven out, attacked, or (in only the most desperate circumstances) fled from. All of these monsters have their own causes, their own reasons for doing what they're doing, even if they only have animal-level intelligence or, like spirits, no intelligence at all. There is something driving them. Often, for monsters, it's simply a matter of survival and/or desperation.

The Unknown is terrifying and it cannot be categorized or illumined, not totally. But it isn't evil. Everything and everyone acts with a purpose. Most of the time those purposes are selfish. Sometimes that means some purposes run counter to others, and sometimes things won't compromise. That's it.

7.2 Handling Rolls

Rolls in *Sarenteth* often have only a middling chance of success (at best) and carry with them the potential for serious misfortune. While that is all by design, it does mean the GM needs to be careful with how frequently they call for rolls and how they adjudicate the results.

Rolls should only be called for under very specific circumstances:

* At least one character is taking decisive action. Passive characters don't roll, they just allow narration to happen to them.
* The action being taken has an uncertain outcome. It could plausibly succeed or fail.
* If the action succeeds, it will lead to something interesting.
* If the action fails, it will lead to something interesting.

Unless all four of those criteria are met, the GM should find some other way to handle the situation. Everyone narrates what actions their character takes (if any) and the GM simply adjudicates what happens as a result through their own narration; choosing the most plausible and interesting options they can. Rolls are only called for when it becomes difficult to determine exactly what those results are and when, no matter what happens, things will go in a fun and engaging direction.

But *why* should rolls be so rare? Because every roll has real potential to damage a character.

Frequent rolls tend to quickly wear characters down unless they can adapt their strategies to take advantage of their changing approaches. As their larger score takes damage and begins to balance out, characters become more resilient and adaptable but *less* effective, and the only way to regain their efficacy is to heal (requiring rest, often not an option in tense situations) or risk taking damage to one score in order to bolster its opposite.

But even one roll against an entirely undamaged character still has the potential of taking them out due to large momentum pools and/or critical successes. Even without advantage or momentum, an environment score of 100+ could result in 88, 99, even 100 damage simply because the GM happened to roll doubles.

The GM needs to always keep in mind just how high the stakes are when rolling in *Sarenteth*. The dice always put characters at risk. When rolls are the only way to get through an obstacle it means the characters no longer get to choose whether to take the safe path or the dangerous one. The only choice left to them is what they'll be risking, and how.

7.2.1 Consequences

Even when a character succeeds on a roll they may still suffer consequences if the opposition also succeeded or has personal momentum to spend. These consequences don't change the success at all. They only show that *something* has gone wrong.

The nature of a roll's consequences are left to the GM and other players to determine at the table through narration. Some might only last the length of a roll or two (especially temporary circumstances) while others could last for the remainder of a character's life. Even damage to approaches can

be used as a hint for how to incorporate some fleeting consequences into the game: as one approach goes down and its opposite goes up, consider having the character's mood shift to match. A normally calm and reasonable man might find themselves in a foul temper after taking damage to their Serenity, and even the most optimistic characters might wallow in a little self-pity or cynicism after losing some of their Hope.

7.2.1.1 Getting Over It

How long should the consequences of a roll last? Again, the answer is mostly left to the GM and other players. The most common consequences-damage to approach scoresshould typically be fleeting in the extreme and then forgotten. For some of the longer lasting and more impactful consequences, such as circumstances and scars, the question requires a little more thought. In general the amount of time it takes for a character to be rid of some consequence should be influenced by three things: how interesting it is, how "deserved" it was, and how realistic it is.

- ⋆ **How Interesting It Is:** Sometimes a roll doesn't go the way anyone expects it to and a character gets taken out and/or receives a scar unexpectedly. There's a consequence given, but it breaks up the flow of the game or distracts everyone from the more interesting things happening to the characters. Maybe no one can come up with a consequence that isn't something simple like a twisted ankle. In those cases, the GM should be lenient in allowing the scar or situation to resolve itself quickly and painlessly (with some mind for the other two points, below). On the other hand, some consequences lend themselves to enhancing the game for everyone. If the setbacks the characters experience create more opportunities for engaging scenes, use that. Make it challenging to be rid of the problems. Make it a journey in itself, whether for everyone at the table or even just the one character affected by it.

- ⋆ **How "Deserved" It is:** Everyone who's played roleplaying games for a while knows the dice can have a sick sense of humor. As funny as it can sometimes be to have a roll go sideways, with an expert character suddenly suffering under a major scar or other detriment, the humor of the

situation tends not to last more than a session or two (and often less for the player controlling that character). While this doesn't mean the consequences should be hand-waved away, the GM ought to consider a bit of leniency to account for simple bad luck. But the opposite is also true: a character who jumps into things recklessly *when they know better* probably deserves to be knocked down a peg, and sometimes the best way to do that is to let a consequence linger.

⋆ **How Realistic It Is:** The axiom of realism is listed third because, while it's still worth considering, it's generally the least important. The GM doesn't need to know how long broken bones would take to heal (accounting for the state of medieval medicine, malnutrition, etc) or have the sort of psychological insights necessary to gauge how someone might begin to quell a phobia. As long as the GM can come up with something that feels realistic to the people around the table it will be good enough. The key to realism in roleplaying games typically isn't to aim for *actual realism* but instead to aim for a place where no one gets any nasty surprises.[1]

7.2.1.2 Intermediary Consequences

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Basically, anything can be treated as a
track... Including environment scores
and character approaches. This shouldn't
be done for PCs, but for NPCs it's a good
way to organically allow for characters to
influence the actions of others.
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7.2.2 Scaling Scores

Another important factor for the GM's consideration is the degree of control players excercise over their rolls. Unlike in many games, in which the GM controls the difficulty of a roll in order to change how risky or challenging it is, in *Sarenteth* the difficulty is almost entirely out of their hands. The only time the GM will typically be able to set a difficulty is when an NPC escalates during a contest.

With difficulty largely off the table, how does the GM make some rolls more challenging than others? Through environment scores. Instead of changing how likely the player's character is to succeed–which is determined by the roll difficulty and the character's scores–the GM only sets up how many successes are likely required and how likely the character is to take damage in the process. Instead of creating a single point of success/failure, the environment score allows the GM to give a more generalized number for the time, effort, and risk involved with overcoming a particular obstacle.

When the player sets the difficulty they put forward how quickly or slowly, confidently or cautiously, their character comes at the problem.

One advantage to keeping track of environment scores instead of difficulties is it can allow the GM to keep a continuity between rolls, even between types of actions or attempts. If an obstacle has an environment score of 200 and a character is only able to deal 40 damage to it before they have to give up, another character may try to carry on where their comrade left off... In which case the GM can count the previous damage as still being relevant, and present a new environment score of 160. Between session the GM can keep a note of the score, tracking chunks of damage dealt over time[2] until, eventually, the characters bring it to zero and earn the reward for which they have worked so hard.

Another advantage of only modifying the scores characters face is it can allow for more creative thinking on the part of the players. While the relative cost of overcoming an obstacle might sometimes have to drastically change depending on how a character acts, in general the GM should try to provide a score which fits with the *obstacle* and not with any one character's *action*. This way, overcoming an obstacle is simply a matter of *dealing enough damage* and the way that damage is dealt is left entirely in the hands of the players; clever characters may be able to use their traits in unorthodox ways in order to deal that damage, and as long as the GM keeps the score consistent, that sort of thinking is rewarded. Players are given more opportunities to shine and use their character's skills in interesting ways instead of just relying on the usual methods.

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[1]Although if the knowledge is there, none of this is to say it shouldn't be used. If the GM knows a thing or two about the medieval period *and* has players who enjoy learning a little through the lens of a fantasy world, make the game as realistic as is fun. And remember to be thankful for having such a good group.

[2]And perhaps the characters aren't the only things working on this obstacle. NPCs and environmental effects could bolster or further reduce the score between attempts.

7.2.2.1 Setting the Score

So what score should the environment start with for a given situation? Ultimately this is going to require a gut-check on the part of the GM, and as they play *Sarenteth* more they'll gain a better sense for what feels right. There are no hard and fast rules, but below are some guidelines.

- ⋆ **How many rolls should it take?** Most players seem to find the sweetspot between a roll's risk and reward to be around difficulty 20-25. If the GM has a ballpark for how many rolls they want overcoming this obstacle to take, multiply it by 20 or 25 to get the score.
- ⋆ **Does this score also represent a character?** If one character is trying to overcome an obstacle put in place by another (e.g. attacking the magical defenses of an NPC wizard) that character's involvement should bolster the environment. Add one of that character's relevant approaches to what the environment score would otherwise be; for characters which were particularly uninterested or invested instead add half or double the approach, respectively.
- ⋆ **What are the potential consequences?** The higher the score, the greater the chance of the environment damaging the opposition. If the consequences of a roll should be minor or unlikely, the score should typically only be 20 or 30 points higher than the predicted difficulty. On the other hand, a score of 100 or more has the best chance of dealing damage back.

7.2.3 Combat

Most games will eventually lead to a situation where the only way for some characters to get what they want is to fight it out. When fists are raised or swords are drawn, the best way to resolve things is typically as a contest between two of the combatants. For a larger melee, break the action up into a series of smaller back-and-forth sequences between foes.

Who Goes First?

Since combat is best broken up into one or more contests, the same rules for determining who starts a contest should apply to "initiative" in combat: whoever takes the first action is the contest's original actor and their opponent starts the bidding when they try to stop them.

If a combat lasts longer than a single contest you can just keep having contests in sequence until it's all over. But if you want to inject a little more fun and some strategic thinking into the game, consider using *popcorn initiative*. One character (either a volunteer or whoever started the fight) takes the first turn, and then they choose which character is the next to go. Everyone chooses who goes after them, but they can only choose from those characters who haven't yet taken a turn that round. When every character has had the same number of turns, a new round begins. Popcorn initiative gets particularly interesting for the one who goes *last;* with a new round beginning after their turn, they can have anyone go next... Including themselves.

Even if a fight is only between two people, dividing it into a series of contests gives everyone involved more opportunities to make meaningful choices: after the latest exchange, do they really want to go at it again? Do they try and change their strategy? Are there other aspects of the environment they can use? Do they still think this fight is worth it?

7.2.3.1 To The Death

That last question is worth some added emphasis. Sareth is a violent place, and anyone who's survived past childhood knows all too well how brutal and short life can be. Combat tends to lead to death, and even a series of victories can turn to defeat with a single (un)lucky roll of the dice. Most characters who wind up in a fight will be doing everything in their power to end it *as quickly as possible*, and sometimes the best avenue they have is to give up or run. A common brigand doesn't think your purse is worth his life, and a seasoned soldier didn't get to be seasoned by taking unnecessary risks.

In general, the only enemies likely to try and fight to the death are...

- ⋆ Insane.
- ⋆ Trapped.
- ⋆ Immortal.
- ⋆ Too young to know better.
- ⋆ Willing to die for their cause.
- ⋆ Some combination of the above.

The GM should take that into account when handling how NPCs act during combat, and should expect the PCs to be thinking along the same lines.

7.2.3.2 Fear & Pain

Real combat is an awful and a bloody affair full of blood and sweat and desperation. Those unlucky souls who *do* find themselves in a fight for their life tend not to react well: they panic, weep, run, attack wildly, lose control. They are concerned with nothing but avoiding pain and death, and their fear clouds whatever judgement they might have had.

This is why so much fighting is left to zealots and trained killers, people whose wills have been sharpened, whose perceptions of battle have been fundamentally and horribly altered. The part of them that would panic is broken.

The optional *fear penalty* mechanic is a way to further reinforce all that. If the GM feels a character has gotten in over their head during combat they can impose a fear penalty on their rolls to represent it. This penalty is the minimum difficulty they can set, or the minimum amount by which they can escalate, for any roll in which they participate during the fight. This forces the character to risk more than they might want to–which incentivizes surrender and retreat–but still allows those risks to pay off. After all, plenty of new soldiers have accidentally landed a killing blow in their panic.

Again, the fear penalty is an entirely optional rule and should be used sparingly. If the GM decides to use it they should generally limit it to a penalty of 10 or 15 except in particularly dire circumstances, and they should only impose it on characters who are *obviously* out of their depth and in danger of panicking. If a character has an edge related to being a trained warrior they should be exempt from fear penalties in all but the most terrifying situations, e.g. trying to stand one's ground amidst a rout or being attacked by supernatural foes.

7.2.3.3 The Wages of War

Death isn't the *only* possible consequence of combat. Though it tends to be the final consequence, even the "winners" of a scrape can normally expect to suffer a bit afterwards.

Damage to approaches can be reflected by general cuts and bruises, the sort of wear-and-tear a body accumulates but doesn't fully notice until after the adrenaline fades. It can also reflect a more psychological side of things, lasting feelings of anger or fear, jitters, little things that will take a good night's sleep in a secure place to get over.

Scars inflicted during a battle are, essentially, just longer-lasting or more devestating versions of the same sorts of damage: physical scars represent lasting wounds or missing body parts, while mental scars reveal trauma that will take a good deal more than a bit of shut-eye to heal.

Some combat-related scars are, simply, permanent.

7.2.3.4 Using Approaches

A quick glance over the list of human approcahes (3.1.1) might give the impression that only a few of them are really applicable to combat. After all, if Vigor is acting with strength and speed, isn't that what you would always use for swinging a sword, raising a shield, running at (or from) an enemy?

In short: no.

No matter how rigorous the training, no two people will ever fight in precisely the same way. Everyone will think about the fight a little differently and this will color how they do things. In effect, every character will have a slightly different fighting "style" that will probably focus on their approaches with the highest scores while avoiding those with the lowest. *Every* approach has a way it can be used in combat.

⋆ **Vigor** involves strength, speed, and instinct. You see a weakness, you attack in as swift and direct a manner as you can. You see a blade coming for your head, you throw yourself to the side.

⋆ **Meditation** involves timing and careful consideration. You predict a blow and sidestep it before your opponent has even begun to swing. You lure them into a position of weakness and then exploit it.

⋆ **Passion** involves wild abandon and, more often than not, a red mist descending. You let fury or sorrow or hatred seize you and lend extra weight to your blows, even if it means you later suffer for it. Or maybe you act in defense of something (or someone) and out of love or compassion allow

yourself to come to harm instead.

⋆ **Serenity** involves cold tactics and practiced movements. You strike at an opponent exactly as you have struck at a training dummy a thousand times (thinking no more of the person on the other end of your blade than you would a piece of sackcloth). You purge fear from your mind and act as though you are only dancing,[3] not dodging blows.

⋆ **Empathy** involves turning the opponent against themselves. You notice they tend to always step a certain way before attacking and so you can raise a shield even before they swing. You know they are scared and too focused on your hands so you step inwards before moving your weapon, bringing you too close for them to stop you.

⋆ **Will** involves a thorough and frank understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses. Your leg was injured so now you fight standing still, seeking to wear down an opponent rather than risk overextending. You know you're quicker than your opponent so you allow your guard to slacken, presenting a false "opening" and then countering any attempts to exploit it.

⋆ **Hope** involves desperate tactics and unthinking abandon. You're out of ideas, so as a last resort you simply throw yourself at your opponent with weapons raised and eyes shut. You hold a shield two-handed and focus only on trying to delay, praying your companions can reach you in time.

⋆ **Verity** involves fighting when hope is lost and things like death are no longer a concern. You know you have only moments left to live so you simply allow yourself to be impaled, because it opens your foe up to one final swing. You hold the bridge not because you can escape, but because you will not let them take it while you yet stand.

⋆ **Fate** and **Choice** both involve, effectively, the same considerations in combat. If you are somehow fated to overcome this opponent, **Fate** can further that. If you are fated to be overcome, **Choice** helps instead. Of all the approaches, these two will likely come up the least.

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[3]The Battle-Dancers, otherwise known as Tajeni Knights, are famous for a fighting style which can be expressed mechanically by those characters using Serenity more than any other approaches in combat.

7.2.4 Social Conflict

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What it is, examples, note that some
political stuff could be considered
social conflict or could be some kind
of Civilization Game thing, or might tie
into a Reputation system
   Consequences
   Narration (touch on what was covered
much earlier in the book)
```

7.2.4.1 Favors

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Optional system/way of looking at things
for when the GM doesn't want to come
up with some sort of backstory for
considering how a PC's narration will
effect an NPC: if the PC loses a roll,
the NPC either refuses or will only do it
for an exorbitant price.  If the PC wins
but doesn't bring the NPC's score to 0,
the NPC will do it for a reasonable price.
If the PC wins and the NPC drops to 0,
they will do it for free (or for a reduced
price) and will even throw in a favor or
other ''bonus'' for every momentum left in
the PC's pool.
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7.3 The Civilization Game

7.3.0.1 The Gossip Game

The Gossip Game is a slightly modified version of the Campfire Game (7.4.1), best played in settings where the characters have known one another (but not well) for a long time. It's especially effective if the characters have all lived in the same small community–the sort of place where gossip travels fast–for many years. The game simulates all the rumors about people that float around those sorts of places and lets both players and characters learn more about the others, though only some of what they learn will be true.

Playing the Gossip Game:

⋆ A character is chosen to be the center of the rumors (it doesn't matter how as long as everyone eventually gets a turn).

⋆ Every player *except* the one in charge of that character comes up with a rumor about them and presents it to the group.

⋆ The player in charge of that character selects one rumor to be true, and the player who came up with it earns a (brand new) wyrd. The other rumors still circulate and might have a grain of truth to them, but not nearly to the same extent.

  * If the player doesn't want any of the rumors to be true they should be allowed to make up their own, but no wyrd is earned for this and it shouldn't happen often.

asdf

Aside from helping to flesh out the characters, the Gossip Game also gives everyone an interesting opportunity to play characters who believe something they know to be (mostly) false. Depending on what the false rumors entail this could introduce all sorts of conflict between characters who make bad assumptions about the other or treat someone with undeserved prejudice. The GM in particular should make an effort to record *all* the rumors presented and make sure there are NPCs who believe them.

7.4 The Wilderness Game

7.4.1 The Campfire Game

The Campfire Game is a slightly modified version of the Gossip Game (7.3.0.1), best played when the characters are all traveling together over the span of several days or weeks. It simulates the conversations that happen on the road and around the campfire. By the end of the game all the characters ,and even the players, will know a little more about the rest of their group.

    Playing the Campfire Game:

⋆ A character is chosen to be the center of attention (it doesn't matter how as long as everyone eventually gets a turn). The GM presents an open-ended question to that character, either coming up with one or selecting from this list:

  * Who has had the most influence on who you are? How or why?

  * What is your fondest memory?

  * Who do you most respect, and why?

  * What is your most treasured possession?

  * If you could have been anything else, what would you have been and why didn't it happen?

  * What do you think about magic and the supernatural?

  * What do you think about their religion, or religion in general? Why?

  * What is your greatest fear?

  * What is your greatest ambition?

  * *(For a magical character)* When did you first learn of your gifts? What happened?

⋆ Every player *except* the one in charge of that character comes up with an answer to the question and presents it to the group.

⋆ The player in charge of that character selects one answer to be true, and the player who came up with it earns a (brand new) wyrd. Not only is that answer now taken as a fact, but the other characters know about it.

  * If the player doesn't like any of the answers they should be allowed to reject them all and give their own answer, but no wyrd is earned for this and it shouldn't happen often.

The Campfire Game has quite a few uses. It fleshes out the characters while also letting them organically grow closer together as a group. It creates potential story hooks for the GM (who should be recording every chosen answer to see if they can work it into the game later). And, with the framing device of the characters talking around the campfire during their travels, it gives a sense of time passing on a journey without the GM having to go into lengthy descriptions or peppering the session with meaningless "encounters" that can grind things to a halt.

7.5 Adapting The System

Everything you need to run a successful game of *Sarenteth,* and then some, has already been discussed. You can run a successful campaign with nothing but what's on the character sheets and an understanding of environment scores and of the different types of rolls.

This section is about expanding on what you al-

ready know. You don't have to do any of it, and all the rules discussed are entirely optional. If you want to put a real focus on one particular theme, or really sell how important a certain action or behavior is, consider taking one of the example systems below or, better yet, making your own.

7.5.1 Optional Subsystems

7.5.1.1 Reputation

7.5.1.2 Warfare

7.5.1.3 Resources

Every character or group possesses a Resources score which tracks the things they can trade away: not just their money (though this may be most of it) but also goods that can be bartered, favors that can be called in, services that can be rendered. Though it might be tied to a character, Resources isn't an approach. It's an independent value with no maximum, much like an Environment score. Gains and losses to a character's Resources persist; there is no "healing" one's Resources except by going out and doing something to earn more.

The Resources score isn't used to keep track of pedestrian expenses or general upkeep. In most games those aren't a concern and, if they are, the Resources system isn't realistic or granular enough to make it interesting.

Whenever a character wants to trade for something significant or out of the ordinary, they make a Resources roll to see how it goes. This could be a single roll (2.2.2) or contest (2.2.4) depending on the character's preference for "window shopping" or active bartering, respectively.

The higher the player sets the difficulty, the more likely the character is to reject a deal for not being good enough... And therefore the less likely they are to find something to their liking.

A Resource roll is opposed by an Environment score which represents how hard it is to find someone willing to make a trade. The harder something is to get the larger the score. Typically the Environment should be between 30 and 150.

After the Environment score is decided but before the roll, the GM might add momentum to the Environment's personal pool to reflect particularly expensive trades. These ensure that some things simply *can't* be bought without losing something significant. This momentum should only be spent to deal damage if the character spends something; if they back out or can't find anything suitable, they shouldn't lose resources for it. Instead the momentum should be spent to introduce interesting circumstances or ignored.

* The Environment gains one momentum for anything above what the character would consider a "common" expense.
* The Environment gains two momentum for (roughly) every week of skilled wages it would take to afford.

Succeeding at a Resources roll means the character finds what they're looking for at an acceptable price and make the trade. If they also manage to bring the Environment score to zero they should find their trade particularly rewarding in some way. Maybe the thing they bought turns out to be of higher quality than they expected, or they make a good impression on the seller.

Failing a Resources roll means the character can't find anything. It could be because they can't find what they're looking for or because the people willing to sell it have set the price too high and won't budge.

If a character's Resources are ever brought to zero they're cleaned out. They have nothing left of any value and even things which would otherwise be trivial (like general upkeep) are now going to be a challenge. This could lead to the GM introducing adverse circumstances or even scars resulting from malnutrition, loss of status, debt, etc.

7.5.1.4 Factions

7.5.2 Making Subsystems

There aren't any hard-and-fast rules for creating a subsystem for your game, and this section won't pretend that there are. This is just a collection of guidelines to help you navigate some of the considerations and subtleties that you might want to think on during the design process.

The basics of any subsystem are largely the same: they introduce one or several scores that behave mostly like environment scores. Mostly these will have specific triggers for when they get brought into the game or specific actions players can take to involve them. All these systems assume at least some compatibility with the base mechanics of the game, to allow a character's rolls to affect things in ways that maybe even the GM didn't fully anticipate.

So instead of saying "here's an environment score to represent this thing, now roll," what do you do?

1. **Decide what your system represents.** Understand what you're trying to get across, why it's so important to the game, and whether what you're representing is internal or external (7.5.2.1).

2. **Design the system skeleton, then put meat on it.** First come up with all the scores you think might be worthwhile and then start asking yourself which are really needed (7.5.2.2). Once you have that worked out come up with at least three actions (7.5.2.3) your players can take to interact with those scores, and whether or not they can use other mechanics (7.5.2.4).

3. **Review & Iterate.** Figure out how much time you should expect this subsystem to take up at the game table (7.5.2.5). If what you come up with is acceptable, you're good. If not, go back to step 2 or even step 1 and tweak. Keep repeating until it's in a state you like.

4. **Present.** List out and describe all the scores clearly, then do the same for the actions. If your players are going to be expected to track the scores on their own make sure they have a place on their character sheet to do so.

With all that done your subsystem will be ready for the game. Don't be afraid to come back to any of the steps above if it turns out not to suit your purpose or behave the way you wanted. And if

you managed to make it general enough, once you perfect it for *this* game you should have no reason not to include it in *other* games down the line!

7.5.2.1 Internal Systems vs External Systems

The first question to ask is about what your new system represents. Is this supposed to model or throw light on something larger than the characters of your game, or is it something that's internal, maybe even personal?

External systems need to be big and obvious. Your players won't run across any mentions of this system anywhere in the book and they might not have as solid an idea of it as you do (after all, they didn't make it!). Expecting them to remember something nebulous that just floats above the action of the game is too much; you need to make sure your system, whatever it is, will meet them halfway by making its presence known. Warfare (7.5.1.2) and factions (7.5.1.4) work because it's hard not to notice the armies clashing around your characters, and if the factions are so invisible that the players don't notice them then they probably shouldn't be in the game to begin with.[4]

For an external system to work it needs to allow lots of interaction within the game mechanics. Anything a player character does that seems even remotely relevant to the system ought to come with a mechanical effect attached.

Not that you have to come up with every possible type of interaction, of course.[5] If a character acts on an external system in a way you didn't expect or codify you can just make it a roll and apply the damage where it needs to go.

Internal systems don't have all the same requirements of external ones. Anything that's personal to a character or maybe to just the PCs can fade in and out of the game more easily. Your players are already going to be thinking about their character, so it's natural that if you have a system attached to that character they should think of it when the time comes. Internal systems also don't need to offer as much interactibility; since it's only one character or a small number of them that are affected, it might

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[4]Unless it's a secret organization. Every rule has its exceptions.

[5]Although you should come up with *some* types of interactions, as discussed in 7.5.2.3

make sense that a character's ability to nudge it would be more limited. The scope of what it represents can be pretty minor, as long as it's meaningful to the story being told.

One consideration that needs special care for internal systems is this: will this system really be relevant enough, and special enough, to warrant all this effort?

That gut-check comes when designing something big and obvious for external systems, but it would be easy to create a new score for your characters and then simply never use it because it doesn't come up or feels "too gamey" in the moment. Before going through with designing an internal system, think to yourself: is there any way to use the current mechanics to cover this? Is it really so important that it needs this kind of focus, and so nuanced that it needs brand new rules?

If you're unsure, it's probably safe to find some other way of doing what you want.

7.5.2.2   Multiple Scores vs Single Scores

A system might only introduce a single score to the game or it might introduce enough to populate a whole new type of sheet. Both have advantages but both also have some serious disadvantages.

Systems with just one score are easy to track and to deal with at the table, but they give less control and can make the system feel swingy. Only having one extra number to worry about is an advantage that *cannot* be overstated, because not only does it make your life as the GM easier but it also makes it easier for the players to understand the system and track what it's doing. One score can just be a number written in the corner of a character sheet. When the system is being used players won't need to ask you for confirmation about which score they're changing, and they won't be confused about why one score gets used here but another is used there. On the other hand, having just one score means you don't have many "knobs" to tweak or to hang actions off of, and you should expect that a score could change by a large margin (50 or more) in a single roll.

Systems with multiple scores have inverse strengths and weaknesses to those with only one. They eliminate the problem with scores changing too quickly because you will likely be able to find a way to bring another score to the forefront, and

every additional score is an additional opportunity for customization and special tweaks. But every score drastically increases the effort it will take for you and the players (*especially* the players) to remember how it works, and it will slow things down when you're sitting around the table playing. The more complex the system the more you invite rules discrepancies and questions.

In general, lean towards single score systems whenever possible. It's fine to start writing up a system with multiple scores, but once you have your ideas on paper you need to start cutting. Be creative. If you can find a way to pretty much get the result you want with one fewer score, do it. If you're not absolutely sure that a score will be vital for your system, cut it. Your system isn't a full game in its own right, it's a new piece of mechanics on top of an existing game; you want it lean.

7.5.2.3   Actions

If you're going to introduce a new system that doesn't appear anywhere in the rulebook, you need to make sure your players have a good understanding of how they can interact with it. If you just rely on roleplaying or on the table (or you) figuring it out as you go, there's a risk that you put a lot of time and effort into something that goes unused.

The solution to this problem is to bake a list of possible actions into the system right from the start. You shouldn't think of the list as something exhaustive – always allow your players to come up with other ways to creatively influence what you've put together – but if a player asks "how do we do anything to these scores?" you should be able to go over each and every action in detail.

What those actions are really depends on what you're trying to represent with the system, but there are a few types of actions that tend to make for good starting points. Try to come up with at least three. For each of them: list them out, describe what they represent and what it does within the system, and think of a couple ways the players could take that action.

★ **Offense:** Influencing a score by damaging it. The easiest version is just to roll against one of the system's scores, but the amount of damage could also be based on something else, or be a set amount.

★ **Defense:** Influencing a score by increasing it.

This could be a roll against some third party (maybe an environment score) where the difficulty is added to the target, or the amount to increase could be determined some other way.

★ **Set Up:** Used when something happens that changes things favorably but without any net changes to the system's scores. This could represent doing something to allow for different actions later (e.g. moving an army into a position where it can attack the enemy), or maybe it changes scores without changing the total value by increasing one and decreasing another by the same amount.

★ **Special:** Some systems might require a type of action that uses up "time" by taking a turn, but which doesn't do anything mechanical at all. This could be anything from simply waiting to some kind of "main objective" that, if not interrupted by an outside source, will cause the story to progress a certain way after a certain number of actions are taken.

★ **End It:** Maybe there is a way to get out of whatever the system represents early. Of course, this should either require multiple "set up" or "special" actions before it can be used (if ending it is supposed to be beneficial) or involve a high degree of risk (otherwise). Maybe this action sparks one last roll of its own, or it's very damaging to a score.

If you're having trouble thinking of actions that are interesting and easily differentiated from the others, think about what sort of *restrictions* you can put on actions. Take the basic actions that seem obvious to you and add one or two conditions to their use; maybe they're only half as effective in certain conditions, or they can only be taken at certain times or in certain ways. Now add actions which give players a way to get around those restrictions. Suddenly you've introduced new choices to pose to your players, and that's where the interesting gameplay happens.

7.5.2.4 Folding In Other Mechanics

Whether or not the players should have access to things like edges, scars, circumstances, even their wyrd pool, is entirely up to you. If it wouldn't make sense for a character's traits to have an impact on the system then don't allow it, but only *after* another gut-check about whether or not this

system is really worth it. After all, the players are here for their characters. They should have the opportunity to play them and use what's on their character sheet.

You can also fold in the same mechanics used for characters but with a different scope. Give different scores their own edges, introduce obsessions that allow for compelling or pushing within the system but nowhere else. You can make use of all the familiar mechanics in new ways.

One thing which should almost always be folded in is magic. Characters capable of using magic in *Sarenteth* put themselves at incredible risk and shoulder heavy burdens for the sake of abilities which, while often unreliable, are unquestionably immense. Even if you make a system which is completely divorced from all other mechanics and character traits, you should allow spells those characters cast to still have an effect. That's the trick to magic: it can do *anything*.

7.5.2.5 Estimating Time & Difficulty

Before introducing a system into *Sarenteth* you need to have a good understanding of its range. How much of an obstacle will this system be capable of creating? How long – both in-game and at the table – will it take for an obstacle created by this system to be overcome? If you don't know what you're getting the table into, the system might wind up nothing more than a paltry distraction or it could grind your game to an utter halt.

These considerations mostly come down to doing the math. Luckily it's not that difficult.

If your system uses scores above 100 then just subtract a difficulty from 100 and you have the percent chance of success. If it uses scores lower than 100 then subtract the difficulty from the *score* to get your percent chance instead. With that information you can get an idea of roughly how many successes a player should be expected to get over some number of rolls. You can consult Table 7.1 for a basic idea or just plug what you know into the formula: *[(CHANCE * ROLLS) / 100]*.

Some systems might rely on getting a certain number of successes, but often the bigger concern is how many rolls it will likely take to bring a score to 0 or, in other words, how long a score can "survive." The math here is a little more complicated, but still doable. You're looking for the number of rolls at

Difficulty	Success %	Expected Successes (2 rolls)	Expected Successes (3 rolls)	Expected Successes (5 rolls)
20	80%	2	2	4
40	60%	1	1	3
60	40%	0	1	2
80	20%	0	0	1

Table 7.1: Expected Successes Over Time

which the number of expected successes (above) is greater than or equal to *[SCORE / DIFFICULTY]*. Or you can get an idea by looking at Table 7.2.

Notice that the table isn't exactly clean-looking and orderly, because there's a lot of variables to consider. Sometimes higher difficulties are beneficial and sometimes they aren't. This gets even further complicated because your players choose the difficulty (and they'll probably try to feel their way to the ones that are the most beneficial or the ones that seem the "safest"), scores can be damaged, and if the system has multiple scores then one could be substituted for another as the first gets too low to be of use.

It's at this point that the math becomes so complicated as to probably be more trouble than it's worth.[6] So keep everything above in mind and then try to modify what you know according to these guidelines:

★ For systems which will regularly have scores above 100...
  ∗ If you expect the scores to mostly be opposed by scores also above 100, bump your anticipated difficulty up one step (e.g. if your players normally set difficulty at 20 or 40, use the values for 40 or 60 instead).
  ∗ If you expect the scores to mostly be opposed by scores below 100, increase the number of expected "survived" rolls by 50%.
★ For systems which will regularly have scores below 100...
  ∗ If you expect the scores to mostly be opposed by scores above 100, bump your anticipated difficulty up one step.
  ∗ If you expect the scores to mostly be opposed by scores also below 100, bump your anticipated difficulty down one step.

★ If the players are able to use edges, scars, and/or circumstances, decrease the number of expected "survived" rolls by 25%.
★ If the players are able (and willing) to use obsessions and wyrd, decrease the number of expected "survived" rolls by 50%.
★ If the players are able (and willing) to use magic, decrease the number of expected "survived" rolls by 50%.
★ For each score that can be substituted in the place of one which has been damaged, increase the number of expected "survived" rolls by 75%.

With all of that information, you should have something approaching an estimate for how many rolls you would expect to see within the system. Now think of how long each roll will take (factoring in time to remind players how it works, for everyone to look up their scores, etc) and decide whether spending that much time for each and every one of those anticipated rolls is worth it.

If it is, that's great. You've got a system.

If it isn't, back to the drawing board. Look through those guidelines and find the one that had the most impact on the overall result, then see if you can change the system to eliminate it (e.g. being able to substitute a score ought to increase the number of expected rolls by about 75%, is there a way to remove a score or make it impossible to substitute?). Keep going until you think you've slimmed it down as much as you possibly can and re-evaluate the math. Repeat until it's in a state you like.[7]

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[6]Of course, if you know how to do that math, go for it! Just know that the extra level of insight your calculations give you aren't likely to be earth-shattering.

[7]If it seems like you can't get the system into a state you like no matter how much tweaking you do, you still have options! The easiest thing to do is to sleep on it for a few days, maybe you'll come up with the missing piece you needed. If you're still stuck you could always introduce it to your game anyway, and just be ready to pull the system back if it's not working. And if it doesn't work and you still can't think of any fixes, just shelve it. You can always come back to it later.

	Score	50	60	80	100	150	250	500
Difficulty								
20		4	4	5	7	9	16	32
40		4	4	4	5	7	12	20
60		3	3	5	5	8	13	23
80		5	5	5	10	10	20	35

Table 7.2: Survived Rolls By Score

7.6 Examples

The examples given in this chapter are nothing more than that: examples. They may be useful to look over if you find yourself in need of inspiration when creating a character or encounter, and they may do in a pinch if you just need to fill in one more edge for an out-of-the-way NPC. But they aren't set in stone: they can appear in other games of *Sarenteth* and work differently than how they are described here. If the GM includes one of the example characters in their game, they should adapt the stats to better suit their own game and only use those given in this book as a rough guide.

7.6.1 Character Traits

Traits like edges, scars, and obsessions should ideally be single words or short phrases that come packed with meaning and context. Those presented in this section will each include a brief description that goes over some of what the trait might imply about a character who possesses it. If writing that description onto a character sheet might help a player keep things in mind during the game, you can use the descriptions presented here as a template.

7.6.1.1 Edges

★ *Animal Lover*
  Animal husbandry is an invaluable skill for anyone living in an agrarian community, and noble families will pay large sums to anyone who can train their beasts for them.
★ *Berserker*
  Warriors who rush into battle with no thought

to their own safety strike fear into the hearts of enemies and friends alike, but those who survive win tremendous honor.
★ *Blacksmith*
  With a role equal parts ceremonial and practical, blacksmiths are not only skilled and sought-after craftsmen but elites with special insight into combat against the fae.
★ *Charming*
  Few people are ill-served by having a friendly demeanor and an easy personality. They find it easy to make connections and the favors they beg are more often granted.
★ *Connected*
  Few households are entirely self-sufficient, and for all other needs it is relationships and connections which fulfill them. Some people simply have farther reach than others.
★ *Crew of Outlaws*
  As long as a gang doesn't get too greedy or cause undue embarassment, outlaws can lead a reasonable life holding up travelers and pilgrims on the highway.
★ *Cunning Woman*
  Also called white witches, cunning folk are often a town's or village's best resource for knowledge of healing, midwifery, charms against evil, and (sometimes) grammarye.
★ *Distant Noble Blood*
  Even being too far out of the line of succession to be relevant, distant nobles often benefit from better health and more opportunities than their more common counterparts.
★ *Druid (of Spring, Summer, Fall, or Winter)*
  Priests of the Seasons know the special dances to honor their chosen god, have run naked across the wilds, and have tasted the flesh of both man and beast.
★ *Elf-Friend*
  Though often outcast or degraded by other hu-

mans, the rare humans given favor by the fair folk consider the magical boons it confers worth the price.

★ *Faithful Hound*
Dogs are bred for vitality, loyalty, and purpose. A character lucky enough to have one will find in it a companion more constant and true than any "higher" being.

★ *Farmhand*
Without farmers there would be no food. Those who work the earth are not only strong of back, they know much about the soil, the seasons, and the wild things of the region.

★ *Generous*
From highest king to lowliest serf, generosity is a virtue which reflects honor and good luck upon the giver. Those who practice it often must be blessed and well-liked indeed.

★ *Gentle*
Though sometimes seen as weakness, a gentle nature may encourage the vulnerable or suspicious who would distrust someone given to a meaner personality.

★ *Hermit*
It is said those who shun human contact find many strange and interesting beings willing to converse with them, from whom the wise hermit learns many things.

★ *Honorable*
Those who have earned a reputation for honorable comport can be expected to be treated as a treasured friend and valuable ally, and their word need never be questioned.

★ *Hunter*
Whether of the first estate (and a master of the chase) or of the third (and a master at providing food), hunters are peerless in their manner of movement, tracking, and killing.

★ *Knight of Belan*
Moreso than other knights of other kingdoms, Knights of Belan are feared. Fearsome duelists and masters of personal combat, they are the pinnacle of the warsmith's art.

★ *Knight of Tajen*
Unlike the heavily-armored knights of other realms, the Tajeni are masters of dance. They weave through whole crowds with a grace as lethal as it is serene.

★ *Lord of the Manor*
Manorial lords often aren't likely to inherit grand titles, but they possess a wealth of resources and labor (serfs) and enough noble blood to be respected in high society.

★ *Poet*
A poet need only demonstrate their skills to find someone eager to pay for room and board in exchange for more, to say nothing of their awen (4.2.1).

★ *Priest of the Many*
Priests are the connection between other mortals and the divine, so must always be respected. It also comes with education, literacy, and a privileged position.

★ *Rat-Catcher*
The life of a rat-catcher is not a lucrative one, but it provides for a meagre sort of living. It also lends itself to quick hands, quick eyes, and a knack for finding hidden things.

★ *Resourceful*
No matter one's place, being able to take goods and spread them further is always useful. Those with a knack for it rarely find themselves wanting.

★ *Soldier*
Standing armies are a rare thing, as are those who make them up. They are second only to trained knights in combat, and second to none in other arts of war.

★ *Sword of my Father*
An heirloom or precious item, even if rusted or otherwise unuseable, can still make for a powerful symbol of hope or touchstone for personal motivation.

★ *Tinker*
Towns need to disseminate their goods and outlying villages need to receive them. In steps the tinker, harbinger of the canny merchant class to come.

★ *Unflinching*
Those of a stalwart and unchanging mood are often respected for their level heads and calm under pressure, though they may also be called overly stubborn.

★ *Well-Traveled*
The common man rarely leaves a span of one hundred miles or so from his home, so those with the knowledge of far-flung places are always to be respected.

★ *Wise*
Where education depends on one's place in soci-

ety, anyone can be wise. Even the greatest leaders learn to bow to the words of their advisers; it's often what makes them great.

⋆ *Young*
The advantages of youth–energy, passion, potential–are numerous and fleeting. Those who know to take advantage of them are a force to be reckoned with.

7.6.1.2 Scars

⋆ *Bad Cough*
⋆ *Blind*
⋆ *Battle Fatigue*[8]
A warrior afflicted with battle fatigue finds themselves anxious, unable to properly rest, and prone to outbursts. They may be labeled dangerous or insane.
⋆ *Burned*
⋆ *Clubfoot*
A birth defect which will make unassisted walking agonizing or impossible. Well-off cripples may be pushed to clerical pursuits; others will lead hard lives indeed.
⋆ *Coward*
⋆ *Half-Starved*
Poor nutrition and little food is a constant in Sareth. Those especially affected are often weak of arms, easily tired, and more susceptible to other afflictions.
⋆ *Haughty*
⋆ *Hopelessly Indebted*
⋆ *Infamous*
⋆ *Jaded*
⋆ *Missing Arm*
⋆ *Naive*
⋆ *Old*
⋆ *Paranoid*

7.6.1.3 Obsessions

⋆ *Alcohol*
⋆ *Curiosity*
⋆ *Knowledge*
⋆ *Loyalty*

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[8]This is one of many phrases historically used to describe something we, today, might call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Including a condition which is still so relevant–and prevalent–today can be a powerful thing to add to a game, but careful consideration should be taken before doing so. If in doubt, ask the others at your table.

⋆ *Milk of the Poppy*
⋆ *Power*
⋆ *Revenge*
⋆ *Wealth*

7.6.1.4 Geasa

7.6.2 Characters

7.6.2.1 Humans

King Adalhard

Alredd Fairhair

Alstan the Dour

Empress Amee

Ashnen

Father Bole

Boli

Archmage Daerin

Dior I

Father Ghan

Judocus I the Wise

Landes Half-Elven

Empress Melisende I

Mug Ruith

Old Bode

Empress Senche I

Empress Senche II

Emperor Tancred II

Archmage Tsoman

7.6.2.2 Fairies

Amadan Dubh

Mageking Anton

Mageking Ategnios

Cernunnos

Feidlimid Fedlimid

Kingly Motsognir

Manannan mac Lir

Leaf

Archmage Llor Naolin

Nodens

Nuada

Tarvos

The Pallid King

7.6.2.3 Immortals

Buried Which Flourishes

Dain the Deathless

Dalamax the Black

Deep

Hedge

Shadow

Stone

Sun

Tree

Vermithrax Horn-Tail

Watcher from the Doorway

Yellow Eyes

7.6.3 Places

Broceliande

Cairnhall

The City (Ymir)

The City of Blades

The City of Bridges

The City of Clouds

The City of Dragons

The City of Dreams (Kadath)

The City of the Godbeast

The City of Mists

The City of Pillars

The City of Pools

The City of the Ten Thousand

Elfinmere

The Field of the Lightning Lord

Hightor

New Belan

The Plain of Stone Spiders

The Treeforge

Vaeandor

7.6.4 Play

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