



# Bleak Spirit

A roleplaying game of a lone wanderer  
in a strange, melancholy place.



# Bleak Spirit

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# Introduction

The world of *Bleak Spirit* is one of majesty and mystery, where the landscape looms vast and conceals manifold cryptic secrets. The twisted descendants of ancient civilisations live among the faded glories of their forebears, pursuing arcane agendas indecipherable to outsiders. And in primordial woods and swamps, fabled treasures and long-forgotten sorceries lie guarded by deadly monsters both fearsome and noble.

This world is gloomy, desolate, lonely – but also beautiful. Long-abandoned fortress ruins still stand as awe-inspiring testament to the might and vision of their creators. Beside the hungry beasts that prowl the forests, flowers grow, picked out by rays of sunlight glancing through the leaves.

Into this world comes a wanderer, a lone traveller from somewhere else who bears a heavy destiny.

*Bleak Spirit* is their story.



# What This Is

*Bleak Spirit* is a storytelling game where you and your friends create a brooding, cryptic tale about a stranger in a strange land. Everything is falling apart, crumbling, corrupted, and the wanderer carries the potential for a return to past glories – or the power to sweep away all that remains.

Everyone contributes to the tale, sharing the sense of mystery that comes from no-one knowing the entire truth of what's going on. Everyone takes turns being the **world** for a scene, introducing **lore** which hints at the history of the setting. After every scene everyone **leaps to conclusions** based on the lore which has been revealed – and these conclusions affect the sorts of lore they will introduce when it's their turn to be the world.

Of course, everyone is going to interpret the lore in their own way, and introduce their own variations. You'll have to adjust your conclusions based on their input, they'll adjust theirs based on yours, and the story that results will be truly the creation of the whole group.

You will all also take turns playing the **wanderer** – the destiny-wreathed individual who is going to bring change to the world, one way or another. The wanderer is the one who faces the dangers of the world, who discovers the lore, and who will ultimately leave things different to how they found them.

At the end of the story the wanderer will enter a proving ground where they will confront an **adversary**. Everyone will have contributed their own lore to the tale but only one of you will determine who or what the true enemy is, and what sort of future the wanderer will usher in.

Finally, anyone who is not currently playing the wanderer or the world will join the **chorus**. Their role is to elaborate on details introduced by the other players, drenching the world in both grandeur and decay.

# You Will Need

- These rules.
- Index cards.
- Scratch paper and things to write with.

Also useful:

- A printed copy of the teaching guide. (See page 99.)
- A set of **special cards**. (See page 57.)





# The Teaching Guide

Learning a game for the first time can be intimidating. At least one person is going to have to read this rulebook cover to cover – and since you're reading this, it's probably going to be you – and act as **facilitator** (see below) for everyone else. But to avoid one person explaining all the rules and pushing the game along, there is a **teaching guide** at the end of this book (starting on page 99). The guide comes with instructions on when to read from it, and who should do the reading. Use the teaching guide whenever someone new is playing the game, or just when you want a refresher.



## Facilitator

The facilitator is the person whose role it is to know the rules of the game, make sure they're being followed, and help the other players participate. The facilitator usually plays the game too! It's prudent for them to arrange things so that they are the last player to get a turn as the world or wanderer, although if everyone else is hesitant to get the ball rolling the facilitator can step in to be the world in the first scene and demonstrate how it's done.

As facilitator your responsibilities are:

- Keeping track of the reading of the teaching guide, making sure the right text is read by the right person at the right time.
- Answering any rules questions that arise.
- Reminding the world of what the scene requirements are at the start of each scene.
- Prompting the world, the wanderer, and the chorus to speak their actions and elaborations.

# The Role Cards

The **role cards** are an optional accessory but can be useful; each one provides quick reference material for each role in the game – wanderer, world, and chorus – and can act as a handy marker for who is currently playing what.

## INFLUENCES

The strongest influences on the development of *Bleak Spirit* are the video games *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls 1-3*. You might also see hints of *Dead Cells* and *Hollow Knight* around the edges, or *The Surge* for scifi elements. *Bleak Spirit* can't duplicate the combat of those games – measured in some and fast-paced in others – or the growing mastery gained by playing the same area over and over, but instead seeks the *atmosphere* those games have in common: that of a strange world and a silent protagonist, where there's a sense that the player is walking in at the very end of some huge, mythic tale.

This is where the framework of *Lovecraftesque* comes in. *Lovecraftesque* is a game meant to let a group tell Lovecraftian stories of creeping horror, but at its core is an engine for generating mysteries. Becky and Josh graciously allowed me to steal it wholesale and adapt it to generate *Dark Souls* like mysteries instead of Lovecraftian ones.





# Rules of Play



## Principles

**Discuss nothing.** You are free to discuss the game during the setup phase, and when it is finished – but in between, during play, you should never discuss your ideas and theories. You have to express them through the actions of the wanderer and the lore found in the world.

**The world is a grey fog.** There is no 'canonical' world of *Bleak Spirit*. The game has a tone (gloomy, cryptic) and perhaps even an aesthetic (faded grandeur) but the exact particulars of the world are only those your group comes up with. See *Creating a World* (starting on page 41) for more about this.

**Play safe.** *Bleak Spirit* is only a game, and thus considerably less important than the wellbeing of the players. There is more on this on pages 12-13, but in short: if someone objects to the events being portrayed, stop portraying them; if someone seems to be withdrawing, reach out and check they're okay. No story of mysterious wanderers is worth actual harm to the human beings playing the game.



# Overview

Before a game of *Bleak Spirit* begins, you will need to spend time doing some setup. This is detailed on page 10.

Once play starts, a game of *Bleak Spirit* is divided into **scenes**. For the most part, each scene will focus on the discovery of some bit of lore. Lore sheds new light on the **adversary** – the powerful enemy who dominates this part of the world – or the world in general. After each scene, everybody privately **leaps to conclusions**, creating private theories about the wanderer and the adversary based on the lore that has been revealed.

Eventually, the wanderer and adversary will be drawn into a **final confrontation** during which the true nature of the adversary, and the price the wanderer must pay for victory, will be revealed.

## The Structure of the Game

The game is divided into three **parts**:

- **Part One** consists of five scenes exploring the world, confronting dangers, and discovering lore. One piece of lore is introduced in every scene.
- **Part Two** consists of up to three more scenes in a similar vein, the environment growing darker and more dangerous with each addition.
- **Part Three** triggers the final confrontation between the wanderer and the adversary. Then an epilogue wraps things up.

## The Three Types of Scene

Whenever a scene starts the world decides if it is a **danger** scene, an **interaction** scene, or a **feature** scene. Danger scenes illustrate the perils of the world and the way the wanderer handles them. Interaction scenes offer the chance to speak to one of the few other inhabitants of the world and see what they

know. Feature scenes offer a rare moment of quiet and a chance for the wanderer to show what sort of person they are. The world must stage at least three danger scenes during the game – two in part one and one in part two. The different kinds of scene are described in more detail starting on page 28, and the structure of the game is laid out starting on page 23.

## The Three Roles

In every scene one player takes on the role of the wanderer, deciding their speech and actions, one player takes on the role of the world, deciding the activities of everything the wanderer encounters, and every other player becomes part of the chorus, who support the world by adding depth and texture to their descriptions. If there are only two players, there is no chorus.

The roles are described in more detail starting on page 20.

## Stranger in a Strange Land

During the game, the following rules apply regarding a few things which do not or cannot happen:

- *We do not describe the wanderer's internal monologue.* They speak, they act, but is that their true self? If we are to know what sort of person they are we must deduce it from that speech and those actions, not from privileged access to their inner state.
- *No explanations, only lore.* The truth of things is not going to be found in a discarded journal, or heard from a helpful passer-by. We may *never* know The Truth, and will have to settle for truths of our own.
- *To each, a world entire.* The other characters the wanderer meets will never seem quite 'right'. Cryptic, preoccupied with their own concerns, perhaps only visitors to this place. Not a one will give a direct answer to a direct question.

Special cards (see page 53) allow these rules to be broken.



# Setup

Before you begin playing you all need to agree on some basic things about the story you're going to tell. Once this stage is over, out-of-character conversation is forbidden in favour of ploughing forward without pause for consultation or discussion – so talk now!

## Tone

The first thing you should do is agree on the broad tone of the game. *Bleak Spirit* is, by default, a cryptic and downbeat game where morality never gets lighter than pale grey, and altruism is rewarded with exploitation or doom. The wanderer is an unstoppable juggernaut, capable of bypassing any obstacle between them and their goal; what they seek may be heroic or disastrous or both, and they may never understand *why* they seek it. But they *will* get there, and things *will* change.

That said, any part of the above description can be amended!

- *Making things clearer.* Although the rules enforce a certain level of obfuscation, you could agree that rather than it being a fundamental principle of the world that no-one will tell you what's going on, nobody tells you anything because *they don't know*. This makes for a more upbeat sort of story which says something more positive about human nature.
- *Heroism.* If you want, you can make the wanderer's goal or methods unambiguously heroic. Maybe the adversary is a terrible blight on the world which needs slaying. Maybe this world contains genuine innocents, or altruism is an effective method for making it a better place. Making any of these changes will make the story more hopeful and less mysterious, and sometimes that's exactly what you want.
- *A fallible wanderer.* The wanderer *must* reach the end of the story, but they need not get there intact. They might be captured, or have to give up something unbearably

precious, or simply drag themselves forward through a haze of suffering and accumulating wounds. By making this change, your story will inevitably ask the question 'was it worth it?' when everything is wrapped up. Answering that question will be an important part of the epilogue.

- *Levity.* By default, *Bleak Spirit* has almost no jokes in it. Maybe a trace of black humour here or there, a touch of lightness or eccentricity in the characters the wanderer meets, but nothing so blatant as comedy. But if you want to dramatically change the tone of the game, go ahead and make it funny. Mock the tropes it draws on, and describe the wanderer succeeding more through luck than skill. Sometimes we all need a good laugh.

It's important that everyone knows what you're going for in terms of tone before the game starts, or you're going to be deeply disappointed in each others' contributions.

While discussing tone, you should also consider if there are any elements you want to ban from the game. (This is called the **ban list**.) Write these down on an index card and put it somewhere everyone can see. Examples to consider include:

- Overt or allegorical racism, sexism, ableism, or other prejudices.
- Characters who are 'mad'.
- Specific elements that one or more of you find distasteful or triggering, e.g. torture.
- Specific elements that one or more of you consider played out and boring, e.g. demons.

If one player wants something banned, then out it goes – don't try to argue for its inclusion. Ensuring everyone at the table is comfortable is far more important than having something that bothers them in your game.

Besides, restrictions are good for the imagination.

# Safety

Roleplaying games are, by their nature, unpredictable beasts; you never know what twists or turns are likely to come up next, what ills might befall the characters, or how they might react. On the one hand, that's part of the fun! On the other hand, it means that you never know when sensitive material might come up or how it's going to be handled – and that can have serious effects on players with similar real-life experiences and/or psychological triggers.

We want to minimise the likelihood that someone is accidentally going to get messed up while playing this game. The ban list is part of that, but also during setup make sure everyone knows the following:

Find an index card and write a large, obvious X on it. This is 'the X Card' and should be placed where everyone can reach it. (Or make several, if you're spread out.) The X Card is the equivalent of emergency brakes for the story – if it looks like the story's going to go somewhere you really don't want it to, tap the X Card, or wave it around, or say 'X Card' or otherwise bring it up. When this happens, everything stops. Don't question why someone X-carded or try to get around it, just *stop*.

After every scene, check in with everyone at the table and make sure they're feeling alright. This doesn't have to be a detailed breakdown, just a simple "are you ok?" directed to everyone present. It may be that something came up in the previous scene that shook them, and they may have been unwilling or unable to speak up at the time. So make sure everyone's still good to go on a regular basis.

At the same time, take a look at the ban list you made while discussing tone and refresh your memory of what's on it. You don't want to accidentally cross one of those lines while you play, and that's easiest if they're near the front of your mind at all times.

When someone uses the X Card, or is not okay during your post-scene check-in, the game stops. Your immediate priority is the well-being of the person who is not okay – and that might be as simple as avoiding a particular topic while the scene continues, or as complex as canning the game for this session and spending some time on serious care. Different people handle these things in different ways, but *whatever they need, you do*. The welfare of the players of this game is infinitely more important than the playing of the game itself.

### MORE ON SAFETY TOOLS

The ultimate safety tool is to play this game with a group of friends you trust to handle any issues that come up in a compassionate and caring manner – but methods for acquiring such a group are beyond the scope of this document. Instead, if you want to know more about safety and support tools for roleplaying games, consider the following links:

[The X Card](#) contains much more detailed instructions on the X Card, how to introduce it, how to use it, and other material related to it.

[Script Change](#) is a more extensive set of tools that give finer control over content. If the X Card is emergency brakes, this is a full gearbox, allowing more control over the speed of the game.

[The Support Tool Compilation](#) is a comprehensive overview of the ethos behind support tools in RPGs and the variety which are available. Continuing the automotive analogy, this is a full set of gears, gearboxes, brakes, and other engine parts – detailed and maybe a little overwhelming at first, but giving you everything you need to tune the game to suit your own personal needs.

## Duration, Continuity, and Stakes

Each session of *Bleak Spirit* is intended to be a self-contained narrative in which the wanderer explores a part of the world, learns about, and finally confronts an adversary. It's worth considering whether you mean this story to be a chapter in the wanderer's tale or the climax of that tale; and whether this is the chapter upon which the fate of the world hinges, or just a story from one of it's corners. You've got four basic options:

- *Passing through.* The wanderer will survive, and while there will definitely be changes in the setting as a result of the storyline, those changes will be localised or minor.
- *Doomed pilgrim.* This is the climax of the wanderer's story; they may not survive, or if they do they will be forever transformed by their experiences. But, local changes notwithstanding, the world will go on much as it always has.
- *Traveller in black.* The wanderer is only here for a short time and will lose little, but the world will forever be altered by their passage.
- *Ultimate finale.* The wanderer has reached the end of their story and the fate of the world hinges on their choices. Everything can change, nothing is safe.

Two more things to consider, if you're playing *Bleak Spirit* for the second or subsequent time, is if the story you're about to tell is set in the same world as the previous one(s), and if the wanderer is the same person as well. Of course, depending on how the previous tale ended this decision may be made for you – if the wanderer is dead and/or the world destroyed, you're going to struggle to feature them in a sequel.

The default assumption, if your group doesn't have any strong opinions about the structure of the game, is that *Bleak Spirit* will be played over several sessions. All sessions will be set in the same world and feature the same wanderer, incorporating mostly *passing through* style stories to establish the world but culminating in an *ultimate finale* in the last session.

## The World

The assumed setting for *Bleak Spirit* is a fairly typical 'fantasy world', albeit one which is in severe decline. A relatively small number of knights, rogues, priests and sorcerers all cross paths amid the fallen glories of a bygone age, pursuing their own personal agendas or looting what they can from the ruins. Gunpowder is rare or nonexistent. Magic, common. It's a lonely sort of place as well: most entities the wanderer meets will be hostile for one reason or another, leaving friendly – or at least non-violent – encounters few and far between, and often in strange locations.

That said, the details of the setting can be freely adjusted or invented to suit your group – and in fact must be, since no details are provided here. Whenever a question comes up regarding the setting – Does this world have elves? How did the war end? – the player currently occupying the role of the world will answer it. Write this answer down, since it is now true. This might count as the scene's bit of lore or might not, depending on whether the world player considers it an important fact *relative to the current story*.

There are just a few constants which the rules of the game will enforce:

- *Dangerous*. The world of *Bleak Spirit* will always be dangerous. Whatever setting you come up with will be full of physical threats that the wanderer must face.
- *Lonely*. Because of the way interaction scenes work, characters the wanderer can actually *talk* to will be rare. Even if you create a setting filled with crowds, the wanderer will find themselves metaphorically alone instead of physically alone. The feeling of isolation will persist.
- *Laden with history*. You don't necessarily need to set your game in the ruins of an ancient civilisation, but you do need to set it somewhere haunted by the past. There must be *history* present for the wanderer to encounter, whether in terms of the environment, the people, or the creatures which live there.

Once you have an idea of the broad setting, as rough or as detailed as you feel comfortable with, you need to come up with an **area**; a 'zoomed-in' place where this tale will unfold. The area should be fairly large – a vast and sprawling manor house, an ancient city, a forest or swamp or particular swathe of wilderness – and there needs to be some reason why the wanderer cannot leave. They may be trapped there by the terrain, by sorcery, by their own refusal to leave, or by some other method, but there needs to be an answer to the question 'Why not just go somewhere else?'

The area should be strongly but broadly themed, such that you can summarise it in a few words or a short sentence. For example:

- The Secluded Laboratory, where abandoned experiments now rule.
- The Labyrinth of Becoming, where things from elsewhere come to make humans from raw materials.
- The Sacrificial Woods, where animals become like humans and humans become like animals.

Write this, and any further details you invent about the area, down on an index card.

Once the area is settled on, every player should come up with a **location** that sits within the area. For example, The Secluded Laboratory might contain:

- The beast pens.
- The leaning tower.
- The guest wing, long burned-out and abandoned.
- The experiment chamber, and the labs and seminar rooms which surround it.

A single room, even an evocative one like 'the experiment chamber', is too small to be a location, but if you include tangentially-related rooms like the turret, the chemistry lab, the bloodstained seminar room, and so on you're good to go.

Write these on the same index card. When you're done, that card is going to be a handy summary of everything you need to know about the area.

You'll almost certainly create more locations as you play – at most one per scene – but having a selection written up at the opening of the game gives you a handful of jumping-off points to get the game started.

## The Wanderer

The wanderer is something of a cipher – remember we do not describe their internal monologue – but you as a group need to have something to hang their characterisation on, so use the following checklist:

- *Name.* The wanderer needs a name. Anything the group can agree on is good.
- *Style.* The wanderer's aesthetic is important. How do they dress? What weapons or sorcery do they wield?
- *Background.* The wanderer is not from here. Come up with a brief description of their place of origin.
- *Trinket.* The wanderer has brought a trinket from their homeland. What is it? (Note that we don't know their internal monologue, so *why* they have this thing is likely to remain a mystery.)
- *Behaviour.* Decide on a particular behaviour the wanderer exhibits as an anchor for collectively playing the character, such as 'inquisitive', 'cautious', 'impatient', and so on. Because we don't hear the wanderer's internal monologue this has to be an observable behaviour rather than a personality trait.
- *Power.* The wanderer is a potent individual, equal to almost any challenge – what is the source of their strength?

Write all of these down on an index card, so you have a record of the wanderer that everyone can see.

## Special Cards

If you're playing with special cards (page 53) then now is the time to deal them out. Every player gets one, or two if you're playing with only two players.

### FAMILIAR PLACES...

If you're playing an ongoing game, feel free to re-use areas you've previously created. We would *recommend* using a new place each time, but if you feel there are more stories to be told in a particular place then there are no rules saying you can't just go back there.

### FAMILIAR FACES...

If you're re-using a wanderer from a previous game, at least some of these questions are going to already have answers. *Style* and *trinket* are the most likely to change between 'chapters' of a longer adventure, but the wanderer's *behaviour* might shift over time and even the other elements could change depending on previous events.

In the event that the wanderer has a long list of behaviour traits from a previous game, consider paring them back down to two or three for this tale. This gives them a chance to grow and develop as a character. If you don't strip back these behaviours then while you will have a strong and consistent model for people playing them, you'll find they have less room to change in response to the events of the story – which might be fine! But if in doubt we recommend getting back to basics and seeing what develops.

## And Begin

The last step before you start playing is for someone to decide on a situation and starting piece of lore for the opening scene. This is *not* something for group discussion – whoever has a strong idea should volunteer to be the world in the first scene. Give them the world role card, give the wanderer role card to the player on their left, and everyone else gets chorus role cards.

If no-one has a strong idea, someone should volunteer to be the world anyway and use the examples and inspiration starting on page 65 to get themselves started. If you're the facilitator then this duty will probably fall to you. You know the game already, so you're best-placed to set the ball rolling.



# The Three Roles in Detail

## The World

In each scene, one person plays the world. The world will do most of the creative work leading the scene, and has a number of responsibilities.

- Before the scene starts, decide whether it's a danger, feature, or interaction scene. You have to have at least two danger scenes in part one and one danger scene in part two. If you want to you can change your mind about the nature of the scene as it unfolds, but you have to have some sort of idea at the very start.
- Introduce the scene. Choose a location and time of day for it to happen, describe the surroundings, who or what else is there, and what is going on at the start.
- You need to know what lore the scene contains, and have at least some idea of how the wanderer might find it. It's fine if these ideas change as the scene progresses.
- Describe the environment and (in interaction scenes) play the other characters.
- Make sure to invoke the *Bleak Spirit* tone wherever possible: melancholy, mystery, and faded glory.
- Make space for the chorus to contribute.
- Whenever the wanderer does something challenging, or engages a threat in a danger scene, the world sets one of the prices and determines the outcome once the price has been chosen. See Danger Scenes (page 28) for more on this.
- Declare the end of the scene, when the lore has been revealed and any threats defeated or escaped from.

As the world, you'll need to be attentive to the chorus – they'll be trying to elaborate on your narration, and you need to make space to let them do that. You should feel free to build on the details they provide, too; if one of the chorus adds a detail you love, take it and run with it.

The chorus is your primary source of help when it comes to ideas; if you run out of inspiration at a critical juncture, go ahead and ask the chorus for help. Direct questions are best, the more specific the better: "What sort of trophies are on the walls of the hunting lodge?" is better than "How do we know this is a hunting lodge?" is better than "What sort of place is this?"

You can also ask members of the chorus to play additional characters in scenes where you're already playing a character, in order to avoid weird moments where you're mostly talking to yourself.

However, although the chorus is available to help you, it is your responsibility to lead the scene, your responsibility to come up with and introduce the lore, and your responsibility to meet the scene requirements. You can certainly *use* the contributions of the chorus – if they throw in a detail that makes you think "yes, that's the lore for this scene" then go ahead and use it – but you shouldn't *rely* on them to fulfil your responsibilities for you.

## The Wanderer

The person to the world's left plays the wanderer. They describe the wanderer's actions, speak their words, and ask questions to elicit more detail from the world and the chorus. What they never do is speak aloud the wanderer's thoughts or feelings – those are only ever expressed through their actions.

While playing the wanderer, it's natural to 'get into character' and try to understand their mindset – and this is fine. For example, if while exploring the scene you come across something that you think would make the wanderer angry, then they are angry. You describe her frown, her flaring nostrils, the light in her eyes as she grips her hammer in both hands and batters the skeletal monstrosity into dust. It's plain to the other players that she's angry, and that's okay because as human beings sometimes we wear our hearts on our sleeves. Sometimes it's just obvious how we're feeling.

But what you don't do is say 'the wanderer is angry'. And you don't explain *why* she's angry. *You* know why: one of the chorus described distinctive markings on the bones of the skeletal monstrosity, and based on previous lore you know the twisted necromancer who created it is needling the wanderer, specifically; you're pretty certain this means the bones belonged to someone close to her – the markings are there to *make sure* she knows who it was – and she's run out of patience. Hence, angry.

But you don't say that. The other players will have to piece it together based on the same clues that you had, the anger you have the wanderer display, and their own theories about what's going on (see *Leaping to Conclusions*, on page 39).

At the end of each scene, anyone can nominate a new behaviour that the wanderer seems to be consistently exhibiting. If the group agrees, add it to the wanderer's index card.

## The Chorus

Everyone not currently playing the wanderer or the world becomes part of the chorus. The role of the chorus is to add further detail and elaboration to the descriptions the world player makes, reinforcing the tone of the game and the texture of the scene.

What the chorus does *not* do is add new story elements. The world is the one steering the scene, the chorus is just there to add colour. Of course, if the colour you add sparks something in the world's imagination then they might run with it, or upgrade it to the status of lore, but that's not something to depend on.

From time to time the world may ask you a question directly – don't take too long thinking about it, and just answer with whatever seems right. Similarly, you may be asked to play a

character based on a brief description from the world; your goal is to make that character vivid and interesting, and play them according to the initial instruction from the world. Don't use them to steer the scene or introduce new plot elements.

As a final duty, the chorus will be asked to come up with alternate prices during danger scenes (see page 28). When doing this, the same principles apply as when the world asks you a question: go for whatever pops into your head first, so long as it seems right.

## The Structure of the Game

### Part One

Part one consists of exactly five scenes, during which things are relatively peaceful. The wanderer has this chance to explore the area and discover lore – one element of lore per scene.

- During danger scenes the threats are weak, passive, or both. The prices the wanderer must pay to defeat them are minimal.
- During interaction scenes other characters are cryptic, evasive, and eccentric, but not hostile. Their basic purpose in the area can usually be discovered.
- During feature scenes the wanderer notes sites of natural beauty, historic locations, or places of peace and reflection.

After five scenes, things accelerate and darken. The wanderer's journey takes them into more dangerous places, or transforms previously safe places into warped versions of themselves.

## Part Two

Part two consists of up to three scenes, wherein things get darker and more violent. Plots come to fruition, people die, and the wanderer's inevitable collision with the adversary draws closer. Each scene still provides one piece of lore.

- During danger scenes the threats are more powerful, more aggressive, or uniquely unpleasant. The prices the wanderer must pay for victory are more significant.
- During interaction scenes other characters' schemes reach their culmination; depending on the wanderer's actions these characters may reward them with gifts, attempt to kill them, or anything in between.
- During feature scenes the wanderer comes across evidence of violence or trauma, gloomy locations full of dread, or places which are just hostile or unpleasant by their nature.

At the end of any scene during part two, the wanderer can choose to initiate the final confrontation. Part two ends immediately and part three begins. If this does not happen then after three scenes the final confrontation will happen anyway - either the wanderer resolves to confront the adversary and moves to do so, or the adversary comes to them.

## Part Three

Part three is the final confrontation, where the wanderer and the adversary clash. It is divided into exactly three scenes:

- **The revelation**, where the adversary's true nature is made apparent.
- **The clash**, where the wanderer and adversary fight each other directly.
- **The epilogue**, where we discover how things have changed as a result of the wanderer's journey.

Each of these scenes have their own rules, which are detailed starting on page 27.



# Lore

Lore in *Bleak Spirit* is a clue which reveals new information about, or sheds more light on, the nature of either the area or the adversary. During parts one and two of the game, every scene contains one piece of lore which the wanderer will uncover as part of their activities – knowing what that lore *is*, is a key part of framing the scene in the first place. The world is responsible for deciding what the lore is, placing it, and ensuring that the wanderer finds it – but if, during the course of the scene, they suddenly have a better idea for lore, or want to co-opt something the chorus has come up with, changing their mind mid-scene is fine too.

Lore can come in many forms, including but not limited to:

- Trinkets and objects, the history of which is known to the wanderer.
- Corpses of strange aspect, or in unusual locations.
- The observations of a hunter: tracks, spoor, and so on.
- Tales told by other characters.
- Written information on scraps of paper, on mouldering scrolls, or engraved into the scenery.
- Forensic traces: gouge marks in the walls, blood stains, fires burning out of control.
- Eldritch manifestations: flames burning in strange colours, weird smells, distant echoing sounds.
- Cryptic visions.
- The world not being as it should: excessive growth in plants or animals, terrain folding into unnatural shapes, ordinary things present with strange qualities or in excessive quantity.

When lore is introduced, write it down where everyone can see it, perhaps on an index card.

Once lore has been introduced it can be endlessly reused without it counting as new lore. If in the first scene the wanderer encounters petrified bodies, twisted into strange shapes and turned to stone, then finding more of these bodies in other places does not count as new lore. Similarly you can add extra sensory details – maybe the statues are all hollow, or flowers are growing around their feet – without it counting as new lore. You should, however, make a note of the new occurrence or detail on the lore's index card.

However, when new information is revealed or new light is shed, that's new lore even if it reuses previous lore in its presentation. If the wanderer finds a room full of these petrified bodies, one of them smashed to pieces, and a ring on the ruined one's detached finger identifying it as a long-lost princess – that's new information. Get it on a new index card.

What makes lore special is that it tells us something about either the area, the adversary, or the link between the two. At the end of the game, someone is going to have to weave all the revealed lore into a meaningful adversary – if some other detail seems like it would be important, but isn't written on an index card, then there's no requirement to include it. It might be important, or it might be a total coincidence!

Every piece of lore should ask a question. Specifically the question "What does this mean?" What does it mean that all these corpses are petrified? What does it mean that flowers grow at their feet? What does it mean that one was the crown princess? What does it mean that the executioner's mask was sitting on the throne?

Don't worry about answering these as you play – you're going to answer them when you leap to conclusions after every scene – but it's okay if intermediate explanations appear in the course of play. Perhaps the wanderer encounters a woman half-petrified, mumbling about the stone curse which overran the realm. This explains why everyone seems to have turned to stone, but poses more questions: Who cursed the realm, and why?

## WE FORGOT ABOUT THE ADVERSARY!

What if all the lore you reveal in parts one and two covers the area but not the adversary? Well, then when the adversary does appear it's going to come completely as a surprise – but not to the person who invented it. Remember, you've all been leaping to conclusions as you've been playing the game, so the adversary is going to *fit*, just perhaps not as anyone else might expect.

## Scenes



*Bleak Spirit* is split into between eight and ten scenes per tale, depending on how soon the wanderer chooses to confront the adversary in part two. A scene is simply a discrete 'piece' of the narrative – a single exploration, or narrative, or interaction. Scenes are often bounded by the physical location they take place in – the scene opens with the wanderer present or arriving, and closes when they leave – but this is not a hard-and-fast rule.

## How To Frame A Scene

The term **framing the scene** just means 'choosing how the scene begins and ends', and when you're the world this is going to be your job. Opening the scene is relatively simple: choose a location and place the wanderer there. Sometimes the way the wanderer left the previous scene dictates the next location – if they pay a ferryman to cross a bleak river, then the next scene should really start on the other shore – and that's fine.

This is also the point where you invent new locations if a new location is necessary. Generally speaking you should re-use an existing location if you *can* but sometimes the story calls for a new location – the far shore of that bleak river, for example – and you should just follow that lead and invent a new location.

Closing the scene is also simple: once the lore has been found, the scene is over. It's okay to let things play out a bit, to allow characters to have reactions, events to move on, and otherwise smooth the narrative exit, but you should cut things soon after the lore has emerged.

## After The Scene

There are a handful of things the group needs to do after every scene:

- Leap to conclusions. (See page 39.)
- Optionally, give the wanderer another behaviour (see page 17) if they seem to be behaving in a consistent manner.
- Adjust area and/or location notes to reflect any changes, including writing down a new location if one was invented for this scene.
- Check in to make sure all players are still feeling good and happy to continue. (See page 12.)
- Review the list of bans to make sure you know what they are. (See page 11.)
- Pass all roles to the left.

Once you've done that, give the new world a little thinking time if they need it, then jump right into the next scene.

## Danger Scenes

A danger scene is one where the wanderer is confronted by one or more threats. These usually take the form of beasts or enemies, although it is possible for the threat to be a leap over a yawning chasm, a dash through a burning building, or some other physical feat that threatens injury on a failure. Danger scenes can take the form of a single climactic encounter, a tense exploration that whittles the wanderer's resources down little by little, or a combination of the two.

To open a danger scene you need to know:

- Which location the scene takes place in (which can be an existing one or one created specifically for this scene).
- What threat the wanderer will confront.
- What lore the wanderer will find.

Lore in a danger scene is typically related to the adversary, and usually is either an item guarded by the threat, or knowledge of some kind that can be extracted from the threat once it is defeated or bypassed.

The wanderer *will* overcome the threat presented, but in order to do so they must pay a price – something which is lost or damaged in the process of overcoming the threat. When the wanderer describes their attempt to engage the threat, the world will suggest something that is lost in the attempt and the chorus (as a group) will suggest something else that is lost. The wanderer chooses which of those is true.

If you are playing with only two players, the world simply offers the wanderer a choice of two things they might lose.

Danger scenes are best handled as a back-and-forth, with the world presenting challenges and the wanderer describing how they overcome them. The price may become apparent as the scene unfolds, or may only become clear when the scene reaches its climax.

**In part one** danger scenes are usually fairly tame. Enemies do not attack the wanderer unless provoked, or if they *are* aggressive they are weak, or easily fooled. Obstacles are mundane or easily bypassed. Prices the wanderer must pay are loss of equipment, cosmetic or easily-healed injuries, time, reputation with one or more other characters, or things of similar severity.

## PRICES

At their core, prices the wanderer pays are *removals of capability*. When you're thinking about what an event might cost the wanderer, think in terms of what that price paid will prevent them from doing in future. For example, a wanderer who uses their rope to descend a cliff face no longer has a rope, and cannot do things that might require rope in future.

In part one prices are relatively minor obstacles, and may in fact be entirely cosmetic. You will often invent equipment in the same breath you take it away, or inflict scratches and bumps which have no concrete effect on the wanderer's performance, or create setbacks which can be easily overcome in later scenes. And that's all fine.

Prices in part one of *Bleak Spirit* serve two purposes: first, as practice for setting the more dramatic prices in part two; second, as a way of assigning value to incidental details. When the wanderer in the above example went to descend the cliff they were offered *two* prices: the loss of their rope; or to fall the last ten feet or so in an undignified manner, right where another character can see.

Whichever they choose to give up – their rope or their dignity – not only tells us something about the wanderer but also makes the other option important. They paid a price for it. Now it has value.

In part two and later the gloves come off. Part two is short, the stakes are high, and since the end of the story is looming you don't need to worry so much about keeping the wanderer intact. A price in part two removes capability from the wanderer for the rest of the tale: broken limbs, loss of weapons or important gear, crushing curses, and so on.

**In part two** the stakes are raised. Enemies are aggressive, powerful, tricky, or otherwise bear some quality that makes them difficult to fight. Obstacles are enchanted, extremely dangerous, or distinctly malevolent in nature. The prices the wanderer must pay to overcome them are significant: unique items gone forever, grievous wounds, the death of some other character, and similar things. As before, prices paid are permanently lost – and this time their loss should mean something.

## Interaction Scenes

An interaction scene is one where the wanderer encounters one of the few people in this world willing to talk to them. These characters are usually strange, somewhat otherworldly, and often single-mindedly preoccupied with their own affairs. Each of them sees the wanderer as a significant opportunity or rival.

To open an interaction scene you need to know:

- Which location the scene takes place in (which can be an existing one or one created specifically for this scene).
- Which character is going to appear there. They can be newly created for this scene or you can use someone already established.
- What that character wants from the wanderer. If this character was previously established by you, you should know this already. If not, you'll just have to go with your best guess.
- What lore the wanderer will find.

Lore in an interaction scene is usually bestowed by the character in the scene. Sometimes it's to do with who (or what) they are, or what it means for them to be found *here*, but most often it's just something they say. This lore could be about anything: the adversary, the setting, or even the wanderer themselves.

Introducing a new character doesn't just introduce a new character, it also introduces their B-plot – what they want, why they want it, and what will happen when they get it. If you invented this character then note these things down on the same piece of paper you use for leaping to conclusions (see page 39); it'll help you keep the character straight when you play them again. The first of these elements is likely to come out during the scene when they ask the wanderer to help them. The second *might* come out, or they may lie through their teeth about it. The final element is secret, at least until the B-plot resolves.

When the world is staging an interaction scene with a character who already exists, they have two choices. They can come up with their own B-plot for them and play to that (although it has to align with the details already provided), or they can invite the player who invented the character to play them, if that player is currently part of the chorus.

Once a character has been created, they are always present at that location. Note their name and any known details on an index card and place it next to the index card for the location. Any future scenes set at that location can bring them in for a little more interaction, some assistance with a threat, to resolve their B-plot, or any other reason you can think to include them. If for some reason the character becomes hostile, they also become a threat in their own right; turning an interaction or feature scene into a danger scene, or adding a second threat to a pre-existing danger scene.

If the wanderer doesn't complete a B-plot – and there's no guarantee they'll complete any of them – then *we never learn how it ends*. It might be possible to work out what happens to the character based on the events of the epilogue, such as if the whole place is swallowed by a volcano they're probably unceremoniously dead, but we'll never see the details. Sometimes loose ends just... end.

There are no explicit rewards for resolving a B-plot. Maybe the character gifts the wanderer with something special or some piece of vital lore... or maybe the only compensation is the satisfaction of knowing how their story ends.

## CRYPTIC, EVASIVE, AND ECCENTRIC

The characters the wanderer encounters in *Bleak Spirit* are always a little bit... off. Each of them seems to have their own particular issue, which forms a lens through which they see the entire world. Knights on a quest talk of little else. Crestfallen soldiers laugh bitterly at any suggestion the world might be improved. Fey priests see everything as a twisted joke made by their god.

Further, each of these characters sees the wanderer as both a tool in whatever scheme they have going on, *and* as an embodiment of – or repudiation of – their philosophy. This latter condition is a wildly unreasonable thing for one human to put on another, and is the principle reason these people behave so strangely and might turn on the wanderer for what seem like trivial reasons. In the mind of the character, the wanderer has not just 'done something wrong', they've launched an attack on the character's values and identity.

For example, the questing knight will see the wanderer as either a fellow knight on the same quest, as a beast they must slay as part of that quest, a test of faith, or some other element which fits into the story they're already telling themselves. Should the wanderer support that interpretation, the knight will treat them well. Should they defy the expectations the knight has of them, the knight will see this as a terrible betrayal.

As a final note, remember that the principle purpose of an interaction scene is to pass on a piece of lore. The characters the wanderer meets may be unhelpful, or obstructive, or may couch their advice in riddles or strange references, but they *will* tell the wanderer something interesting and that's all they need to do. The story will continue regardless.

**In part one** characters in interaction scenes are strange, eccentric, sometimes manipulative, but not hostile without provocation. They're usually happy to talk to the wanderer, or at the very least unhappy-but-willing.

**In part two** characters in interaction scenes make snap judgements, make demands, and react to the wanderer's actions without pause for discussion or explanation. This is the time for sudden betrayals, vengeful attacks, bleak revelations, and perhaps even rewards if the character is the type to honour their bargains.

## Feature Scenes

A feature scene is one where the wanderer is able to examine their environment in relative peace. These scenes offer the wanderer a break from the action, and the world a chance to elaborate on the peculiarities of the area.

To open a feature scene you need to know:

- Which location the scene takes place in (which can be an existing one or one created specifically for this scene).
- What lore the wanderer will find.
- How that lore is concealed in the location.

Lore in a feature scene is typically related to the world, although that's more of a guideline than a strict requirement. This lore usually takes the form of several clues scattered throughout the area, which the wanderer will discover and piece together as they explore.

Playing the wanderer in a feature scene can be a little challenging; with no enemies to fight or characters to interact with, establishing the wanderer's personality is tricky. Instead, focus on *how* they explore their surroundings. Do they plough through with little regard for the things they damage? Do they touch nothing? Do they make sure to replace everything exactly as it was? The way in which someone treats a place, when they have time and no company, can tell us a lot about who they are.

The world and chorus, on the other hand, get to wax lyrical in feature scenes: this is their time to shine. Get flowery and elaborate with the descriptions of things which the wanderer wouldn't otherwise have the time to examine in detail.

**In part one** feature scenes will typically be rays of sunlight in the otherwise melancholy world of *Bleak Spirit*, or at the very least neutral in tone. In a world of faded grandeur, these are the places that embody or remind people of the 'grandeur' part. Faded or not, these show the heights that the world once reached and to which it might aspire again.

**In part two** feature scenes focus on places of less savoury aspect. Rather than providing reminders of what has been lost and what might be again, these places show the depths to which the world can sink. Here lie torture chambers, temples to warped and twisted gods, smoking ruins overrun by demons inimical to life, blank voids inhabited only by hateful spectres, and similar locales.

## The Revelation

Part three always begins with the revelation, where the adversary is revealed in all their terrible glory. At the start of this scene the role of the world will be taken by whoever has a good idea for the nature of the adversary. People shouldn't 'pitch' their ideas for the adversary – if you've got a good idea, just say so. If more than one person volunteers to be the world, priority goes to whoever played the wanderer in the previous scene, then the person to their right, then anticlockwise around the table.

If nobody feels they have a good idea, then lower the bar for participation: people should put themselves forward if they have a half-formed idea and look to the rest of the group for help fleshing it out. If still nobody volunteers, it falls to the facilitator (see page 4) to take the role. Once this is settled, the player to the world's left becomes the wanderer and everyone else becomes the chorus as normal.

Then the world describes the adversary's lair, if the wanderer has gone to them, or how the adversary's arrival impacts the environment, if they have had to come to the wanderer. Either during this or afterward, they fill in the details of the adversary's nature and appearance. The chorus can step in during this process to elaborate on the details as usual.

## The Clash

Once the adversary has been revealed, they and the wanderer clash in a fearsome fight to the death. Only one – and perhaps neither of them – will survive. Roles do not change from the previous scene: whoever put forward their adversary gets to play them during this final battle.

Events then proceed like a danger scene: the wanderer describes their actions in the face of the adversary, the world responds, two prices are suggested, and one is paid.

The difference is that once the first price is paid the adversary is merely wounded, not defeated. They transform in some way – perhaps something as minor as changing their weapon stance, perhaps changing their form completely – and redouble their assault.

To fully defeat the adversary the wanderer must engage them a second time, and pay a second price. This is done the same way as before, and once the second price is paid the adversary is finally defeated.

When the adversary is intelligent, they will often talk to the wanderer as they fight. This should be embraced, as it provides extra opportunity to characterise wanderer and adversary alike.

The prices that the wanderer must pay to beat the adversary can be fearsome, up to and including their own life (if you agreed to that during setup; see page 14). This is the time for

the world and the chorus to put significant things on the line – important to the wanderer, if you know what they consider important, and important to the world at large.

## The Epilogue

In the epilogue we see what effect the wanderer's actions have had on the world. If the wanderer or the adversary survived their clash, we may also gain an insight into what happens to them.

First of all, in a game with three or more players, the role of the world passes left until it reaches someone who was part of the chorus in the revelation and clash scenes. The person to their left will take on the role of wanderer. In a game with two players you don't have a chorus, so the wanderer and the world simply switch roles. Everyone else takes chorus roles as usual.

Next, if they're still alive, the wanderer has a choice. They can **replace** the adversary – either personally, if they want the job, or with a hand-picked successor, or with some sort of cunning machine, or by whatever other means the word 'replace' suggests – or they can **abandon** the area and move on. If the wanderer is dead, they have no choice but to abandon the area.

If the wanderer chooses to replace the adversary then they describe the manner in which they do so. Then they describe one thing that the replacement does differently from the adversary, and one thing the replacement does in the same way. 'One thing' here can be stretched somewhat depending on context – if the adversary was a giant which controlled a trap-filled labyrinth and the wanderer replaces it with a device, then it's perfectly acceptable for one thing it does the same is 'operate the traps' and one thing it does differently to be 'everything else'. This step is meant to provide the world with grist for further narration, not as an exhaustive list of things that change and things that don't.

Then the world narrates how the area changes as a result of the wanderer's actions:

- If the wanderer replaced the adversary, then focus on the things the replacement does which are unlike the adversary's methods.
- If the wanderer slew the adversary then abandoned the area, what effects does the adversary's death or absence have on the local environs? Are things better with their tyrannous rulership removed? Does their corpse exude some literal or metaphorical poison? Does their death open the path to a new realm? Were they holding back some greater evil?
- If the wanderer died but the adversary lived, what meaning does the wanderer's death have? How does the adversary react to this potent challenge? Do people find the wanderer's tale inspiring or demoralising? What effects have the other steps of the wanderer's journey had on the area?

And that's the end. Any loose ends unresolved remain unresolved. Any questions unanswered remain unanswered. Whatever meaning each of you takes from the story is up to the individual concerned.

At least... that's if you want to remain *exactly* accurate to *Bleak Spirit's* inspirations. It's more likely that you want to sit around and discuss lore, compare leaped-to conclusions, talk over explanations for plot points, chat about what the wanderer was thinking and what sort of person they are or were, consider likely epilogues for characters other than the wanderer, and so on. And that's *fine*. Roleplaying is an inherently social activity, and conducting a good post-mortem of a game with your friends is a great way to round out a session.



# Leaping to Conclusions

After every scene, everyone should pause and consider the lore that has been put forward so far. Then, on a sheet of paper, they should write down answers to the following questions:

- What was the area at its height?
- How did it fall from that, to this?
- What is the nature of the adversary?
- How is the adversary linked to the fall of the area?

As a bonus question, if you feel like it:

- Who is the wanderer, and what are they doing here?

You almost certainly won't know enough to construct meaningful answers at the start of the game, but that's fine. Just leap to a conclusion based on what you *do* know combined with your own imagination. Make educated guesses. As new lore is revealed, you can amend your answers to incorporate it, scrap the lot and start over each time, or something in between.

Don't show anyone else what you wrote down, or discuss it.

As a side note, when leaping to conclusions you're not trying to guess what the other players are thinking or what they 'really' meant when they introduced their clues – think only of your own theories, and work in the other players' contributions as you see fit.

When you're playing as the world, use your conclusions to inform your contributions to the game. Create lore that is compatible with – or, better, builds upon – your speculation. If it's your turn to be the world and you're stuck for ideas for scenes, look at your conclusions and create a scene which lets you illustrate them. When the end of the game looms nigh, your conclusions will form the bedrock of your compelling climax.





# Creating a World

There are several times in *Bleak Spirit* where the players are expected to create details about the world from nowhere – most notably during the setup portion of the game when creating the setting, the area, and the locations. If you feel like you know how to do this – if you're an experienced roleplayer, improviser, storyteller, or maybe just confident in your creativity – then go ahead and create. If you're less sure, then this section offers some guidance in how to create a setting from scratch, and some examples and inspiration tables appear starting on page 65.

Probably the best piece of guidance we can give you – here, up-front – is that **it's far better to paint in broad strokes early on and drill down into the details as you play the game**. This lets you get started playing much faster and makes the job of the world and the chorus much easier, since they don't need to worry about contravening various fiddly details while they're making up the details of the scene.

# The Setting

The setting of your game, the 'world' that forms the large-scale backdrop of the story, only needs to be filled in with the broadest of strokes. Technically it doesn't *need* to be filled in at all – you can just start the game with nothing and define the larger setting as you go – but it often helps to have a few points of common understanding upon which to rest everything else.

When putting the world together at the start of play, it might help to consider the following questions. You don't have to answer all of them, or even any of them, but using them as prompts for discussion can give you a solid shared understanding of the world.

## What are our cultural touchstones?

Because *Bleak Spirit* emphasizes a show-don't-tell approach once play begins, it's best to err on the side of discussing too much during setup – especially when it comes to your world's cultural touchstones. Cultural touchstones are expressions which point to real-world people and places. Because we're all human then no matter how fantastical the game, cultural touchstones will manifest in forms such as:

- What people look like
- Material culture: clothing, armor, weapons
- Foodstuffs
- Architecture
- Terrain, vegetation, and wildlife
- Monsters and mythological creatures

Your group should explicitly discuss from what cultures your world draws. If you leave it at 'generic medieval fantasy', your unspoken default will tend towards western Europe like most fantasy or medieval role-playing games. But it's better to push against that default. If you want a European setting, that's fine, but decide that actively and out loud instead of sleepwalking into it because it's the default.

## OTHER OPTIONS

If there's a pre-existing setting you want to set your game in, go ahead and steal it. The same goes for re-using a setting you created for a previous game of *Bleak Spirit*. If you think it's got more stories in it, go ahead and tell them.

Or if you've got a good idea for something that really jumps the rails – a setting where the wanderer and all the important characters are giants, ignoring the tiny people around their ankles, or a setting where everyone is insects, or something like that – go ahead and use that to spark people's imaginations. *Bleak Spirit* is a pretty robust game when it comes to setting.

If everyone draws from the same culture, you can easily create a consistent and unified atmosphere, but your world may lack the interesting diversity which would follow from each player choosing a different source culture. For a reliable middle ground, source the game from a real-world conflux of multiple cultures: North Africa, Spain, the Himalayas, the Caribbean, or maritime Southeast Asia, for instance. You needn't do research to make this happen – or, if you do, we're talking five or ten minutes of Google Image Search to find out how the region's knights, castles, and ruins look. Avoid ethnic stereotypes and accents and you should be set.

That five or ten minutes of Internet searches (or longer, if you started having fun) should inspire some visuals or moments you can look forward to in your game. Tuareg material culture might plant an image in your head of a traveler bundled in blue cloth trudging through a sandstorm toward the gates of a great fortress. Khmer architecture might inspire a massive, abandoned temple rising high above a rainforest canopy. Mexican mythology might populate your setting's waterways with predators half-canine and half-reptile, calling for help with lost children's voices. But don't harp on exoticism, barbarism, or savagery; besides being racist, they're not what *Bleak Spirit* is about.

## What sort of technology level does the world have?

There are many, many books written about the evolution of technology over time, but for the purposes of *Bleak Spirit* you can keep your assessment down to the basics: weapons, travel, and communication.

Since the wanderer spends a lot of time dealing with violence, weapons and armour are going to feature heavily. The big question is: guns or no guns? Effective personal firearms change the nature of combat: mobility becomes more important than armour, at least until armour technology catches up, and superior equipment begins to make up for superior training. Of course, in the world of *Bleak Spirit* whatever power source the wanderer possesses can go a long way towards evening the playing field; guns are as much a stylistic choice as a pragmatic one.

Travel technology may come into play directly in *Bleak Spirit* if the wanderer finds themselves on a ship or a train, but mostly it serves to inform the world around them. Where travel is difficult or dangerous, communities become insular. Styles of architecture and clothing tend to cluster around a few familiar forms. In terms of your game this provides strong visual themes and a good reason why the wanderer can't simply walk away. But as travel becomes easier – first with effective mass transit, then with affordable personal transport like cars – travellers become more common, and with the travellers come outside ideas. Communities become less tight-knit and display a wider variety of cultural influences; your game's visual iconography will be diluted, but opportunities to introduce strange new things from outside will increase.

This can be seen even in ruins: Architecture is one of the most durable works of cultural creation, so even if your world is the crumbling remains of a fallen civilisation you can see evidence of cultural exchange.

Finally, communication is one of the most important technological benchmarks. Being able to talk to someone without being in the same room as them has profound effects on the way society develops. The more accessible communication is,

the more a society changes. Mind you, from the point of view of *Bleak Spirit* it doesn't matter if an interaction scene happens face-to-face or by video chat – it's still an interaction scene and unfolds in the usual manner. The biggest change as far as the game is concerned is that the wanderer might be able to have conversations during other types of scenes if they can just call someone up on their mobile phone. This blurs the lines between scene types a little, but the core idea remains that the type of scene determines where the lore comes from.

## What does magic look like?

Fantasy authors often spend a disproportionate amount of time working out the details of their 'magic system', but don't feel like you have to match their dedication when playing *Bleak Spirit*. For starters, the wanderer *will* overcome all threats, so giving them sorcery that allows them to do that isn't such a problem as it is in fantasy fiction writing or even other roleplaying games.

If you do want to put some thought into it, probably the best thing to do is come up with limitations. What can magic *not* do? What price does it ask of its practitioners? What drawbacks prevent a sufficiently motivated spellcaster from establishing themselves as ruler of the world? Once you know that you'll have a better sense of what magic is in your setting.

Another question worth asking is 'are there different *types* of magic?' And if there are, are they mutually exclusive? What differentiates them?

However, resist the urge to go into a great deal of detail. It's both easy and tempting to get into the weeds when designing magic systems, and that's not necessary. Fill in the broad strokes and, if a question about the details comes up later, let the player currently occupying the role of the world create a definitive answer.

As a final note, you could run a game of *Bleak Spirit* with no magic at all. Just the wanderer, and their enemies, and fearsome physical struggle.

## Will there be superhuman physical feats?

Characters in myth and fiction are often capable of superhuman feats, and it's worth considering how close to reality you want your setting to hew. Generally speaking, a dose of 'action movie physics' is recommended – the wanderer is broadly competent at physical activity like jumping and climbing and stabbing people, and can absorb two or three injuries that would incapacitate any normal person.

Alternatively you could try to stick to strict realism as far the wanderer's physicality is concerned. You'll find that this puts more constraints on danger scenes – injuries are relatively simple prices to come up with, so a wanderer who can't withstand them will test your creativity a bit – and will give you a protagonist who is either resourceful or lucky rather than tough.

Or you can go to the other extreme and draw from more mythological sources: stories like the *Iliad* or *Mahabharata* feature warriors capable of slaying 10,000 enemies a day in open warfare. If the wanderer is on this order of physical deadliness then their enemies need to be able to keep up, which means they either share the same source of power – in the above-mentioned stories it's divine might in one form or another – or some different but equally mighty source.

Or if you want to really stretch *Bleak Spirit's* envelope, you could include straight-out-of-the-comic-books superpowers in your setting; the game should accommodate almost any power you can imagine. We haven't tested *Bleak Spirit* for creating modern superhero stories, but in theory it could work!



## What religions exist?

Fantasy stories often include the divine one way or another, so when you're creating a setting it's often worth thinking about the role that the gods and religion play in that setting. As a default setting assumption the gods are distant and cryptic, but grant divine magic to their chosen priests. Those priests do not necessarily always follow the dictates of their god; when encountered in interaction scene they're just as self-absorbed and off-kilter as anyone else.

As an alternative, perhaps consider that the gods directly involve themselves in mortal affairs – perhaps by possessing people or things, perhaps by creating divine avatars, perhaps by physically manifesting. If this is the case, then you should also be prepared for what happens if a god gets killed: Does their divine energy simply return to the heavens, or get transferred to a new form? Or are they just mortal creatures of great power, as vulnerable to being slain as any other living creature?

Another option is to posit that there are no gods. There are almost certainly still religions – since human beings are inclined to create belief systems and power structures supported by those belief systems – but without magical miracles or other obvious proof of the existence of the divine the way priests and churches exist in the setting will be different.

## Are there other species?

The worlds of fantasy fiction typically contain myriad intelligent species: humans, elves, dwarves, orcs, and so on. In contrast, the video games which form the primary inspiration for *Bleak Spirit* tend to include humans and nothing else – and this is the approach that we recommend, for a variety of reasons. We're all humans playing this game, and we all know what humans are like. The human experience can accommodate more than enough tales to keep you playing this game until the heat-death of the universe.

That said, if you want to include other species make sure to choose your fantasy races' cultural signifiers as deliberately as any other cultural choices and signifiers you include in your *Bleak Spirit* game; if they line up with a real-world demographic's signifiers, take care to avoid the stereotypes and harmful rhetoric which point to their analogue.

Since *Bleak Spirit* has no 'statistics' for different races or species, there's no particular reason to make some fantasy races stronger, smarter, or more likeable than others. You could do it, but because of how adversity and challenge work in the game, 'this particular elf is very strong' is functionally equivalent to 'elves as a rule are stronger than humans'. *Cultural* differences – as the product of environmental, social, or physical factors, rather than as inherent and immutable qualities or the result of some kind of widespread victimisation – will get you farther.

## Do magical creatures exist?

Fantasy worlds typically contain at least some creatures with no real-world analogue: basilisks, dragons, demons, walking corpses, and the like. Generally speaking, when you create your setting you don't need to specify every kind of magical creature that lives there – leave the options open for people to fill in as you play – but if there are any kinds of magical creature people *don't* want included, setup is the time to mention that. As with anything else people don't want included in the game (see page 11) just rule them out and move on.

When you *do* include magical creatures, it can be tempting to fall back on the usual staples you're already familiar with. This isn't a bad thing, but sometimes you want to add a personal spin to the creatures in your setting. A quick and easy way to do that is to take a normal example of the kind ("a dragon..."), make a single change to it ("...from the moon..."), then think through some good-sounding consequences of the change ("...that emits warping moon radiation").

A decorative flourish consisting of a light-colored, wavy, ribbon-like shape that starts on the left and tapers to the right, framing the title.

# The Area

Coming up with an area for your story to focus on is a matter of keeping it large, but also bounded. It needs to be big enough to contain several distinct locations – at least one per player, and probably a few more – but also small enough that the wanderer can move around relatively easily, and focused enough that everything within it can be captured by a single theme or concept.

If you're stuck for ideas it's probably easiest to come up with that concept first, and don't worry about making it super-basic – 'the fire zone', 'a big castle', 'a flooded village' – because the game will guide you into adding meaningful detail as you go. You just need a big idea to hang the smaller ideas off.

Once you've got that, you just need to make sure that the area's big enough to hold multiple locations. Feel free to expand the basic area idea if you need to – 'a big castle' could easily become 'a big castle and gardens' if someone wants to create a location completely distinct from the stonework corridors the castle suggests.

Although the area is dangerous by definition – everywhere in a *Bleak Spirit* game is dangerous – you don't need to pin down exactly what makes it dangerous as it's created, and shouldn't try too hard to do so. It's fine if the nature of the place suggests some sort of danger, or if the group agrees among themselves that *of course* the creepy mansion is full of terrible experiments come to life and it would be a travesty not to encounter them at some point (or something similar) but don't get too specific.



# Locations

Inventing a location is a lot like inventing an area, except smaller and less detailed, and you have to do it by yourself.

All you need to do to create a location is think of a place within the area. Ideally it would be somewhere you find interesting, for whatever reason, but it doesn't even have to be that – the absolute minimum requirement is that it plausibly exists as a sub-section of the area.

As with the area, you don't need to and shouldn't try to get too detailed when coming up with locations. On the one hand it's good if you have an idea or two for what lore or dangers might be found there, since when it's your turn to be the world that gives you a good start for framing scenes there. On the other hand you don't want to cling too tightly to those ideas in case someone else in the world role sets a scene in that location and comes up with something completely different.





# Special Cards

*Bleak Spirit* makes use of special cards – one-use cards which change the rules or setting of the game – to move the story in unexpected directions. You don't *have* to use special cards, and if this is the first game for the majority of people at the table we recommend you don't, but adding them creates a little extra spice when the formula is starting to feel stale.

At the start of the game, shuffle the special cards and deal one to every player (or two to each player, if you're playing a two-player game). You can look at your cards immediately, but don't show them to the other players.

Each card will tell you when to play it and what special effect it has. You don't have to play them if you don't want to, or if a chance to do so never comes up, but keep an eye out for golden opportunities to use them to enhance the building narrative.

Special cards are all light on details, to allow them to apply to any game that might be played using these rules. When you play a special card, you are responsible for describing exactly what happens in the world, although everyone else is free to

act as temporary chorus and elaborate on your details. In case you need an idea, or something to kickstart your imagination, all the special cards have suggestions of what might happen written on them – these are only *suggestions*, mind you, so if you have an idea of your own absolutely run with that instead.

If you haven't picked up a deck of special cards, the text is reproduced starting on the opposite page.

## Bonus Scenes

A decorative flourish consisting of a stylized, flowing ribbon or scroll that starts under the word 'Bonus' and extends to the right, ending under the word 'Scenes'.

Some special cards create **bonus scenes** that slot in after other scenes. When this happens, the player of the card becomes the world and the person to their left becomes the wanderer for the duration of the bonus scene; when the scene is over the turn order 'snaps' back to wherever it was before you played a special card – the person who was about to become the world before you played your card takes up the role, the person to their left becomes the wanderer, and things carry on as normal.

Bonus scenes don't count towards the scene counts for parts one or two. If they're danger, interaction, or feature scenes then they contain lore as normal.



# Special Card Text

## 1. Even In Death

*pointing; reaching*  
*meaningful wounds*  
*in pieces*

Play when the wanderer finds a dead body.

Something about the dead body constitutes a bonus piece of lore in this scene (determined by you). Briefly take over the role of world and tell everyone about the corpse and what it means.

## 2. Unexpected Company

*pursuing their own agenda*  
*pursuing the adversary*  
*pursuing the wanderer*

BONUS SCENE

Play at the start of any scene.

A character who is not normally present in this location is here, now, and will remain here after. If the world now wishes to make this an interaction scene instead of whatever they had planned, they can do so.

## 3. Their Own Agenda

*not where they were before*  
*not who they were before*

Play at the start of any scene set in a location where another character has been seen.

The character who was here before is now engaged in something dramatically different, although they are still here in this location. Tell everyone what they are doing now.

## 4. A Glimpse Within

*a diary, read*  
*a manifesto, written*  
*a statement, heard*

Play during any scene when you are the wanderer.

During this scene, we gain a glimpse into the inner life of the wanderer. You can describe the thought processes behind their actions, or reveal emotional states that have so far remained hidden.

At the end of the scene, instead of a *behaviour* the wanderer can gain a *trait* – a quality of their personality which remains constant, even if their behaviour suggests something else.

## 5. Praise The Sun

*a genuine hero*  
*earnest but unprepared*  
*our interests align... for now*

Play when a character is revealed in an interaction scene.

Unlike other characters in *Bleak Spirit*, this one is open and helpful. They can be counted on in a pinch, and will not betray the wanderer unless manipulated by some external force.



## 6. A Bleak Mirror

*dark and haunted*  
*oversaturated and dreamlike*  
*twisted into a spiral*

### BONUS SCENE

Play after a scene in part one or two where the wanderer enters a new and unknown area.

Frame a bonus scene of any type in a new location. This location is similar-but-different to an existing location the wanderer has visited, and holds warped versions of the same characters and threats.

Lore discovered here might suggest how such a mirror-place came to be.

This location now exists as a location other players can use when they are the world.

## 7. Trapdoor

*a hidden trapdoor*  
*a giant crow*  
*a localised wormhole*

Play during any scene in part one or two, after the lore has been revealed but before the scene ends.

### PART ONE

Some sudden and inescapable method moves the wanderer to a new location of your own creation. The next scene must be set there before the wanderer can escape.

### PART TWO

As part one, except there is no way back to the locations already discovered. Any further change of location must be to an entirely new one.

## 8. Rich History

*a hidden clue*  
*a talkative person*  
*faded graffiti*

Play when the wanderer examines something or enters a new place where lore might be found.

Play only while you are not the world.

Reveal an additional piece of lore in this scene. You get to choose what that lore is and describe it yourself, then control of the scene returns to the world.

## 9. Flashback

*something familiar dredges up old memories*

BONUS SCENE

Play after any scene in part one or two.

Frame a bonus scene set somewhere in the wanderer's past. This scene can be of any type; if it's a danger scene then any prices paid will be reflected by old wounds – physical or psychological – on the present-day wanderer.

## 10. Reprisals

*you've made someone angry*  
*demons from your past*

BONUS SCENE

Play after any scene in part one or two.

Frame a bonus danger scene in the current location. The threat is a group or individual who have sought out the wanderer for past wrongs committed against them. Whatever lore is discovered in this scene is rooted in the wanderer's personal history.

## 11. The Beast Inside

*lycanthropy*  
*a mysterious tincture*  
*they were never human*

Play during any interaction scene.

### PART ONE

The character the wanderer is talking to transforms into some sort of monster and flees the location. If they are encountered again, it will be as a monster in a danger scene. If the lore has not yet been discovered, this scene becomes a feature scene instead.

### PART TWO

As part one, except instead of fleeing the monster leaps to the attack. The scene becomes a danger scene instead.

## 12. A Covenant

*a new family*  
*a fallen order*  
*a sinister conspiracy*

Play during any interaction scene.

The character in the interaction scene will offer the wanderer membership in some group or organisation, as determined by the world player.

If the wanderer accepts, leave this card on the table. The wanderer may play it once in a future scene for assistance from the group they have joined.

## 13. To Each, A World Entire

*mirror magic*  
*time travel*

Play during any scene.

A duplicate of the wanderer arrives in the scene. Describe the one way in which they are unlike the wanderer, and the action they take as they enter. Then control of the scene returns to the world.

## 14. Visions

*ghosts of the past*  
*hallucinogenic poison*  
*psychic attack*

BONUS SCENE

Play after any scene in part one or two.

PART ONE

Frame a bonus interaction or feature scene, set entirely inside an unreal vision.

PART TWO

As part one, except you can also frame a danger scene. Prices paid in this scene usually take the form of self-doubt, loss of identity, lingering visions, or warped perceptions.

## 15. Consequences

*everything falls apart*  
*something new manifests*

Play when the wanderer does something that feels momentous, dread, or important.

### PART ONE

The whole area changes, immediately and irrevocably, as a result of the wanderer's action.

### PART TWO

As the part one effect, plus someone or something is immediately killed or destroyed. Parts of that person or thing will reappear incorporated into the adversary or the adversary's lair during the final confrontation.

## 16. Co-Operation

*an ally arrives*  
*an assistant is summoned*  
*a fiend is bound to service*

Play during any danger scene, including the clash.

Another character enters the scene to help the wanderer.

At the wanderer's option, they can foist the price of the danger scene onto their ally. (Just one price if this happens during the clash.) If the ally survives, they react as their character would suggest – but they are unable or unwilling to harm the wanderer for the remainder of the scene.

## 17. Transformation

*something transforms the wanderer:*

*inner strength*

*an external curse*

*an adaptation to the world*

ONGOING

Play at any time.

The wanderer undergoes a physical transformation into a new form, possibly with accompanying emotional or intellectual changes.

This new form has to be one that can continue their journey.

## 18. A Powerful Foe

*a mighty warrior*

*a huge beast*

*a dark mirror of the wanderer*

BONUS SCENE

Play during the final (fifth) scene of part one.

Immediately play a revelation and clash with a terrible enemy. Something about this enemy constitutes an extra piece of lore, as created by you.

## 19. Asepsis

*someone or somewhere...*

*clean*

*innocent*

*unfaded or uncorrupted by time*

### BONUS SCENE

Play after any scene in part one or two.

Frame a bonus feature scene. This scene takes place in either an existing location somehow restored to grandeur, or a new location of singular beauty or glorious purpose.

## 20. Time Passes

*day turns to night*

*an alien moon rises*

Play this card after any scene. You may move any existing characters to new locations, and all established dangers escalate in some way.

You may choose one danger to escalate immediately, and describe how it does so. All others will be escalated when a new scene is set in that location, by whoever is the world at that time.





# Examples and Inspiration

If you're not used to improvisation or playing a game of this sort, it can sometimes be tricky to come up with things on the fly. At any point, if you're on the spot and find yourself coming up with nothing, have a skim through these lists and grab the first thing that sounds good. Because these examples and inspirations are vague archetypes you'll need to do a bit of work to fit them into your particular narrative.



## Areas and Locations

**The castle** is a large, fortified area often defended by armoured enemies. It could also be some kind of inner sanctum, central server bank, or financial institution. At the heart of the castle rests something precious or something terrible, and its influence colours everything found within the area.

- Well-Appointed Chambers
- Gardens Long-Overgrown
- Collapsing Throne Room
- The Hidden Heart of Power

**The poison swamp** is an area which is inherently dangerous to exist in – a toxic marsh, a lava cave, hard vacuum, somewhere highly radioactive, infused with arcane energies, or similar. Safe paths exist through the area, but most of the interesting locations require traversing the hazard somehow.

- Twisted Spire
- A New Settlement
- Ruins Overtaken By Entropy
- Distant Corners, Forgotten Treasures

**The snowy mountainside** is rough and rugged terrain, difficult to traverse and offering plentiful opportunities to get hurt in accidents or through exposure. Anywhere safe from the elements is guaranteed to already have an occupant, and they don't usually appreciate company.

- Snow-Choked Woods
- A Maze Of Icy Spears
- Behind The Frozen Waterfall
- Deep Under The Mountain

**The forest** is a seemingly approachable natural environment which hides its dangers, its treasures, and its secrets behind wild overgrowth and cunning camouflage. Here keen senses and sharp instincts will do more to keep you safe than armour and weapons.

- An Overgrown Tower
- The Still Pool
- Inside The Axis Tree
- The Blighted Tangle



**The abandoned habitation** is a place where people used to live – and not wealthy people, either, but the poor and destitute. It might have been a village, or a shanty town, or a hab complex, or the cramped living quarters of a spacecraft, but now it's a haunted shell of its former self. The question is, haunted by *what*?

- The Town Square
- Cramped Row Houses
- The Leaning Clocktower
- A Lonely Farmstead

**The flooded tunnels** might be natural or of artificial construction, underground or on the surface, but they are a sealed and claustrophobic environment – and they're in poor enough repair that they've flooded to a depth of about a foot. Strange sounds echo over long distances here, and the water conceals many hazards.

- The Source Of The Leak
- Machinery, Now Still
- Among The Nesting Spheres
- Completely Submerged

**The bleak temple** might have been a normal place of worship once, or it may always have been this way, but now it is dedicated to an alien and terrible presence. This thing – evil god, rogue AI, literal alien – has surrounded itself with its worshippers and its creations, but it holds great knowledge for the dedicated questor.

- The Grand Cathedral
- Bleak And Corrupted Catacombs
- A Library Of Forbidden Knowledge
- It Is Here

**The twisted oubliette** is a place where time and space are starting to twist into new configurations. It can be dreamlike or nightmarish, and often resembles other places in the same world (areas from previous game sessions) as seen through a distorted lens. This place is often the wanderer's final destination, but doesn't have to be – it might be a detour on their quest, a prison they must escape from, or a dangerous passage to another place or era.

- Vistas Of Time And Space
- History Through A Twisted Lens
- Everyone Winds Up Here, In The End
- The Wanderer's Own Heart

A decorative flourish consisting of a light grey, sketchy, wavy line that starts on the left and tapers off to the right, framing the word 'People' which is written in a serif font.

# People

**The knight** is an armoured warrior on a quest of some sort. They are friendly and helpful, but if their world view is challenged or if their morale fails they will become an implacable enemy.

**The rogue** is a charismatic individual who is obviously chasing an angle of their own. They offer useful aid, but cannot be trusted.

**The villain** is an obvious villain up to no good. They're happy to co-exist with the wanderer, and maybe even work alongside them if their interests align, but their ultimate aim is malevolent.

**The seemingly virtuous** appears to be an upright individual, but hides a dark secret. The secret may be wicked or tragic, and they may be struggling against it or seeking to indulge it, but it drives the character's every action.

**The misguided quester** has a mission – an obviously disastrous or foolhardy one. They won't brook any opposition to their plan, and aiding it only accelerates their inevitable doom; saving them, if the wanderer is so inclined, will be an overwhelming challenge.

**The weary** is *done*. They often have a wealth of knowledge relevant to the wanderer's quest, but lack the will to act on it themselves. The wanderer may be able to remotivate them, but that typically doesn't end well.

**The fated one** is a vehicle for destiny, usually a destiny which is going to end with their sacrifice – perhaps willing, perhaps not. The wanderer might find themselves furthering or fighting this destiny, or maybe just standing on the sidelines and watching it happens.

**The scholar** is here to study and research, and is usually willing to go to extreme lengths to get the knowledge they seek. It's only a matter of time until they uncover some terrible secret which spells out their own doom.

# Things



These could be lore, trinkets, important artefacts, or just set dressing. Not all of them are suitable for all settings, but you can probably draw inspiration from them even if you can't lift them directly.

- A one-person boat, made principally of bone
- A golden ring, encrusted with black gunk
- A tablet computer, most apps corrupted by an unknown virus or error
- A door, scarred by axe-blows
- A device containing a memory from someone else
- Animal-skin clothing, in some sense still alive
- A skull engraved with alchemical symbols
- A small clay tablet covered in cramped writing
- A weapon, covered with teeth marks
- A photograph of someone close to the wanderer
- A bag of seemingly-infinite capacity
- A clock or watch which winds backwards at occasional intervals
- An ice sculpture of something profoundly inhuman
- Several lenses, each changing perceptions in a different way
- A sample of a terrible disease
- A playing piece for a board game, decorated or customised
- A medallion made from a polished shell
- A portrait which exudes a subtle menace
- A crate of self-heating food and drink
- A finger-sized glass vial holding the blood of a holy figure



# Prices

When you're the world or chorus, you'll need to come up with prices for danger scenes. These are meant as suggestions and examples of the sort of thing that might befall the wanderer; a price you've come up with to suit the action at your table specifically is always going to be better.

## Part One

- Torn clothing
- Scrapes and bruises
- Winded
- Slow poisoning
- That was the last of the batteries
- A promise you intend to keep
- An ally or friend gets hurt
- Distracting visions
- A curse of ill luck
- A strange compulsion
- A minor infection or allergic reaction
- Your self-image; you didn't think you were capable of that

## Part Two

- Your protective gear is destroyed
- Lacerations, heavy bleeding, broken bones
- Exhausted in body and mind
- Poison courses through your body
- You have to leave all of it behind
- A promise you don't want to keep, somehow enforced
- An ally or friend is killed
- Reality and fantasy blend together
- A doom which will haunt you forever
- A violent or dangerous compulsion
- You are transforming into something else
- Your identity; you aren't the person you thought you were





# Scenarios

A **scenario** for *Bleak Spirit* is a predetermined wanderer, area, and vague setting, accompanied by a selection of characters, locations, and possible lore options. Scenarios are meant to let you jump right into the game with a minimum of preamble – have everyone read the whole scenario so you're all on the same page, then have someone volunteer to be the first world player as normal.

Any of these scenarios could be used with any of the usual duration and stakes options seen on page 14.



# Caer Brys

By Chris Longhurst

## Area and Setting

The sunken city of Caer Brys is a place where dead gods of the deep rest uneasy. Water flows through its abandoned streets and pools in its sunken cellars, and things lurk in the depths sustained by their proximity to crumbling divinity.

## Locations

*The Clocktower* at the centre of the city is a landmark visible from almost everywhere within the Caer, a needle of gold and glass at odds with the rest of the city's crumbling stone construction. The hands of the clock still move, but they count unknown hours.

*Mortician's Row* is a cramped and claustrophobic tangle of streets and shopfronts where undertakers and embalmers used to promote their services. Now only the dead occupy this place, lurching and shambling after the warmth of living visitors.

*The Rooftops* offer some peace and quiet, and relatively simple transit around the flooded city. But they are not *safe* – something lurks even here, never quite in plain view, and all it takes is a single distracted mis-step to send you plummeting to the street below.

*A Shattered Tomb* used to be just another resting place for a leviathan god, but some geological force has cracked it open. Undying cultists and fiendish traps protect enchanted treasures within – and beyond them, the tomb itself, out of which constantly seeps a corrupting miasma.

## Wanderer

*Opal* is a sorcerer-assassin of the Silver Hand, come to Caer Brys from the sun-baked lands of the surface. Her style is *practical*: grey and brown clothes with plentiful pockets and pouches, two knives for murder, and sorcery of shadow and moonlight. Her trinket is *a plain gold ring* on a chain around her neck. Her behaviour is *professional*, and she derives her power from her *extensive training*.

## Other Characters

*Ignatia* is an ex-priestess who has come here to gloat over the corpses of those who once were gods. Her healing magic is potent but she has no time for glory-seekers or those who seek the secrets locked in the divine tombs.

*Josef* is a swashbuckling monster hunter from far Lenoa who has come to Caer Brys to slay some unspecified prey. Despite his easygoing demeanour, he holds others to exacting standards: it's remarkably easy to find oneself deemed a 'monster' who Josef will hunt.

*Wormheart* is one of the undead, although somehow still in possession of its full faculties. It scavenges the ruins and will trade what it finds for items which you have no use for – but can you trust it?

*Siento* is never seen, only ever speaking from the other side of a wall or hidden in the shadows. He offers secrets and guidance, but seems prone to strange seizures and spasms. Who is this mysterious assistant? *What* is he? And why is he helping you?

## Special Cards

1. Even In Death
2. Unexpected Company
3. Their Own Agenda
6. A Bleak Mirror
19. Asepsis

# Lore

- The base of the clocktower is struck through by a gargantuan arrow.
- A painting of the Caer Brys skyline, backed by an actual blue sky.
- Someone has attempted to make (succeeded in making?) fish-human hybrids.
- Something oily grows in the bodies of the dead.
- All of the older tombs are cracked open from the inside.
- The hands of the clock are slowing. The tower is winding down.
- A pool of water, clear and still as a mirror.
- A chamber of stone figures, of roughly human size and aspect, posed as if in the middle of an argument.
- A complex water clock that keeps the same time as the clocktower.
- An invitation to someone or something which should not be here.
- A complex orrery reflecting the movements of planets both known and unknown.
- Notes on the transformative potential of the flesh of the divine.



# The Forgotten Garden

By Kienna Shaw

## Area and Setting

The Forgotten Garden is an immense and isolated bioshelter on the surface of Mars. The shell is clouded with red dust and rusted metal, hiding an interior of lush and overgrown greenery. The air is humid and thick with the cloying smell of bloom and decay, and the hum of the artificial daylights is cut with the sounds of rustling and skittering between foliage.

This scenario takes place in the year 2150, where space exploration and bioengineering has advanced enough that humans have landed on other planets and created bioshelters, greenhouses that contain entire self-sustaining ecosystems.

## Locations

*The Grove* is populated with a variety of trees with purple leaves and black branches that entwine to create a dark canopy. The fruits smell enticingly sweet as they ferment, and living creatures are drawn to feast on them.

*The Pool* is the sole running water source of The Forgotten Garden, filled with kelp-like plants that barely graze the surface. Peering down into the waters, it's impossible to see the bottom, though something lurks in the depths.

*The Hedge Maze* is made of now-overgrown shrubs that tower overhead, all blooming with white fragrant flowers. Soft flickering lights either guide the way through pathways that twist in on themselves, or they lead travellers down a spiral into darkness.

*The Surveillance Tower* at the centre of The Forgotten Garden, the one truly artificial structure in The Forgotten Garden. Made entirely of mirrored glass, at certain angles it seems to disappear into the greenery, though none of the vines or grass dares to touch the building.

## Wanderer

*Morgan* is a planetary settlement inspector, sent from Earth to investigate old colonies on Mars. Her style is *utilitarian*, with a standard-issue exploration suit and helmet, a sturdy datapad for notes, and a pack with vacuum-sealed rations and one extra oxygen provision unit. Her trinket is *an unwound watch* in the pocket of her suit. Morgan is *curious* about everything, and her source of power comes from *her scientific gear*.

## Other Characters

*The Groundskeeper* is a robot, created to maintain the Forgotten Garden. Their prime directive is to maintain and repair everything using mechanical parts. Though programmed to be neutral and logical, strange glitches makes it fervent in its desire to fix everything... no matter the cost.

*The Manager* is the being in charge of The Forgotten Garden. Perhaps human at one point in her life, she views everything through cold and scientific eyes, and has little interest or time for anything she considers inefficient or unsightly.

*The Survivor* surrounds himself with dangerous traps that keeps the outside world away from his hiding place. Volatile and skittish, something has driven him to a paranoid madness, where everything and anything could be friend... or foe.

*The Deer* is a pure white stag that wanders amongst the foliage in the dead of night. Following it leads you to different locations and useful items around The Forgotten Garden. It seems to want something, but only communicates that want through the burning fire in its eyes.

## Special Cards

- 2. Unexpected Company
- 4. A Glimpse Within
- 8. Rich History
- 12. A Covenant
- 13. To Each, A World Entire

## ONLY HUMAN

Although the standard 'mode' of *Bleak Spirit* is a potent warrior who faces danger at every turn, it is possible to play the game in a more investigative manner with a wanderer who is no more used to violence than anyone else. Morgan and the Forgotten Garden make an excellent scenario to try this out, if you're looking for a change of pace.

To make this change, remove the mandatory danger scenes and replace them with mandatory feature scenes: two in part one and one in part two, as normal. When danger *does* rear its head, the wanderer will probably spend more time running away than fighting, and will likely overcome their foes using previously-gained knowledge rather than brute force.

Also remember that the prices you choose to exact during danger scenes set the toughness of the wanderer. A wanderer who pays the price of 'scratches, bruises, and panic' is inherently more fragile than one who pays a price of 'cracked ribs'. So keep them low key to reinforce the tone.

## Lore

- All of the animals have uncannily human-like eyes.
- Some of the living trees sound hollow when knocked on.
- Bodies and carcasses disappear overnight.
- At noon, the artificial daylight flickers everywhere except above the Surveillance Tower.
- Gears and bolts crunch underfoot alongside twigs and leaves.
- Piles of red sand collect in scattered spots across the Garden.
- Wires running across the ground have been severed.
- The waters of the pool are turning black.
- Surveillance cameras are hidden on bugs and birds.
- A disintegrating exploration suit with no helmet has been buried in an odd place.
- A cache of ID badges have been piled neatly here.



# The Shattered Pipes

By Takuma Okada

## Area and Setting

The Shattered Pipes rise above the horizon like a mountain range of stilettos. They are a mess of twisted, jagged metal, some pieces miles long. An unforgiving and alien landscape, the brave and foolish that seek to explore the shadows of the fallen pipes are desperate and dangerous.

## Locations

*Hollow City.* One pipe has miraculously remained in relatively good condition, near the center of the mass. A welcome shelter from the elements, a settlement was established there over the years; calling it a city is somewhat of an exaggeration, but several thousand people make their homes up and down the inside of the curving metal. One must remember to watch their backs and pockets here, for the kind of people who can survive the trip here are more than capable of taking your life or robbing you blind, if not both.

*The Forest.* Unusually resonant metal pipes stand much like a thicket in this area, with the property of amplifying nearby sounds. Many animals and other strange creatures have made their home amid the echoes, and the cacophony they cause when startled is intolerable to most for more than a few minutes.

*The Cathedral of Mourning.* A massive room with a vaulted ceiling deep below the ground. Tunnels can be found all through the Shattered Pipes that lead down to this chamber. Statues of crying angels, ten feet tall, can be found in rows all through the space.

## Wanderer

*Narasa Umma Kushana* is a powerfully built woman with dark hair tied back with a kerchief. Her style is that of a sailor used to long voyages, with a heavy long coat and battered leather boots. She carries a brace of pistols hidden beneath her coat, and a sabre strapped to her side. Her trinket is a spyglass made of unusually heavy dark wood. Her source of power seems to be a silver pocket watch, worn on a chain around her neck and under her shirt at all times. Her behavior is of a practiced carelessness, and she is quick to smile but it rarely reaches her eyes.

## Other Characters

*Splinter Belle.* A gaunt swordswoman with her face wrapped in bandages, she is said to carry a thousand blades, each carved from a shard of the fallen pipes. Who or what she fights is unknown to all but herself.

*Master Morrison.* A man who claims to be a composer looking for inspiration. He is never seen without his tinted glasses, and easily recognized by his long braided beard. He once killed a cutpurse by throwing a quill through the thief's heart.

*Little Ana.* She has the appearance of a young girl, but she has lived among the pipes for as long as anyone else here can remember. Her scream is said to shatter skulls, although it has not been heard in years. She mostly keeps to herself, but she appreciates a fresh loaf of bread every now and then.

*Gordon.* An automaton. He probably sang once, but those parts have long since rusted. The screeching sound he makes is supposed to be laughter, although it is very unpleasant. He is known to smash various objects against the fallen pipes for no reason.

*Tim.* A very animated timpani. They speak in a low and rumbling voice and are fond of offering platitudes to travelers who hang around the inn in Hollow City.

## Special Cards

- 7. Trapdoor
- 5. Praise The Sun
- 16. Co-Operation
- 18. A Powerful Foe
- 20. Time Passes

## Lore

- A ghost of a song that nauseates the listener.
- Clay tablets that might have notated music, once.
- Faded graffiti in a lost language, that could maybe be read as The Song of Fracture.
- A fountain still flowing from an unknown source. Coins from countless civilizations have been thrown in over time.
- A perfectly preserved fiddle, stained completely black.
- The ruins of what may have been a concert hall, decorated with friezes of screaming devils.
- A one armed statue of a woman with hair down to her feet, carrying a harp. Someone has gouged out the stone on her face, making her unrecognizable.
- A sword apparently stuck inside a scabbard, embellished with musical notes. It seems to hum with a high C.
- A large music box. The insides move, but no sound comes out.
- A fine white powder that covers the floors of certain areas, many of them places where people most likely gathered.
- In some places where the pipes touch the ground, wildflowers sprout in great clusters.
- What appears to be a large trumpet carved out of stone. It has sunken into the floor around it.

# Logos Myr

By Alastor Guzman

## Area and Setting

The town of Logos Myr was a place of alchemical experimentation, and is now dealing with its consequences. Vapours fill the air and a mist prevails loiters in the streets. Everywhere one looks are the hollow shells of better days – empty buildings and broken windows. At night, howls echo through the town. Many lives have been lost trying to plunder the alchemical treasures and formulas that still rest here.

## Locations

*The Library.* The meeting ground for all the town alchemists, a place for discussion and the meeting of great minds, now abandoned. Occult lore, alchemical knowledge and forbidden tomes rest here. Inside, the simpler books have already been plundered – but for those brave enough to enter and evade the traps, ancient and powerful tomes are ripe for taking.

*The Sewers.* All the alchemical waste collected here. The sewers are filled with mutant creatures that will attack anyone who comes close. The creatures seem bestial and unintelligent, but there are hints of something else about their tactics and patterns.

*The Underground Labs.* The hub around which alchemist society revolved. Dozens of different labs were located here, each with its own alchemical master and assistants. Projects ranged from turning common metals into gold, to finding elixirs of life, to experimenting on living beings. Escaped test subjects still haunt the ruins.

*The Tower.* The tower is separated from the rest of the town, and thus safe from the vapors that pervade the rest of Logos Myr. Constantly struck by lightning, lights can be seen on the upper floors, and sometimes screams can be heard from within.

## Wanderer

*Theos*, rogue extraordinaire, has been on the road for many years. Still enjoying the benefits of a life elixir he took years ago, he is now looking for another dose. His style is *swashbuckling*: simple pants with lots of pockets, a vest lined with leather armour, and daggers and rapiers for stylish combat. His agility and dexterity may look supernatural to some, and he has a knack for using the environment in his battles. His trinket is *an old, worn out book* which he reads only when he thinks he's alone. His behaviour is *erratic* and he derives his abilities from *a mysterious bargain*.

## Other Characters

*Victoria*. A former holy warrior who now wanders this town looking for a way to resurrect her wife. She dwells in the library where she looks for the old books. She knows how to access the secret lower levels of the library but is not too keen on sharing that knowledge.

*Leonardo*. A wizard's apprentice, he has arrived in the town trying to summon its former inhabitants as undead minions. So far everything has failed, but his activity has made the creatures in the sewers restless and more prone to surface excursions.

*Xilase*. One of the only alchemical masters left alive, she knows the true story of Logos Myr. She lives in the abandoned buildings and occasionally ventures into her lab. She will do anything possible to avoid the tower.

*Moctezzen*. A hunter to his core, he heard the stories of the sewer creatures and came running to test his might. He is open to help anyone in exchange for assistance on the hunt – but he is not above using these associates as bait.

## Special Cards

- 9. Flashback
- 10. Reprisals
- 11. The Beast Inside
- 14. Visions
- 17. Transformation

## Lore

- Every three days lightning strikes the tower, even with no clouds in the vicinity.
- The hunting patterns of the creatures in the sewers have been altered.
- Wanderers disappear in the fog, always at night before the lightning strikes.
- Beneath the library rests the secret of life.
- The underground labs have started running experiments again.
- Oil puddles appear near the sewer entrances; the sewer creatures avoid them.
- The sewer creatures are moving toward the tower.
- The screams of the tower can be heard more frequently.
- In the library things that should be dead have started breathing again.
- The mist has a mind of its own.

# The Pale Meadow

By Chris Longhurst

## Area and Setting

The Pale Meadow is an endless, rolling plain under a moonlit sky. White asphodel flowers grow everywhere, offering an earthly counterpart to the stars above. This is where the souls of the dead come when their earthly work is done. Not the great heroes who are whisked away to Elysium, nor the terrible fiends whose crimes in life damn them to Tartarus in death, but merely the rest of humanity.

## Locations

*The thirteen pillars* sit in a loose circle. They are ancient, and only four are whole, the rest variously fallen or crumbled. As one of the few landmarks in the meadow, the dead tend to drift here – if you're looking for what passes for memory in this place, here is where you might find it.

*The frozen garden* is a patch of the meadow where the breeze doesn't move the grass, and the flowers sit eternally open. A powerful chill preserves everything here in ice, growing more intense as one approaches the centre. What lies there is unknown: even the dead can feel the cold here, and they give this place a wide berth.

Among the dead of the meadow there are those who seek damnation – who believe that they deserve worse than this – and the cramped, black *warrens* are where they dig endlessly in an attempt to reach Tartarus and their desired punishment.

*The end of forever* is a rumour among the dead. If you walk far enough through the meadow, they say, there eventually comes an end. It might be a wall, or a cliff, or a crack in the earth or a tear in space, but it offers the hope of *change*.

## Wanderer

Our wanderer does not remember her name – here in the Pale Meadow memory flows and distorts like wax – but the coin under her tongue bears the name *Zoe*, meaning 'life', and that is good enough for now. Her behaviour is *purposeful*, setting her apart from the other drifting spirits of the dead, although her *ethereal* style of dress marks her as one of them. Her trinket is a *knife*, decorated with care and attention to detail; it was not hers originally, but it is now. Zoe's source of power is that *she has forgotten her own limitations*.

## Other Characters

*Dorotheos* is a warrior denied his rightful place in Elysium, or so he claims. His shade certainly carries the physique of a soldier, and he is forthright and emotional as one would expect from a hero – and yet he is here, and not there.

The young woman *Ioanna* sits among the grasses and makes flower chains. She claims to know secrets, to have retained her memory – and the memories of others – in this place where doing so should be impossible.

*Crow* should not be here. A thing of violence and death, of rending claws and blood-drenched feasts, she should be haunting mortal battlefields with the rest of the Keres. But here she is, in the Pale Meadow, seeking answers to a mystery with the single-minded focus of a predator.

*Hades* is lord of the lands beyond life, and ruler of all who dwell there. He walks among his citizens often, tending them as they might have once tended a garden. His powers are limitless, but he would need a powerful reason to use them on behalf of a dead shade – even if such a shade could muster enough strength of self to want things in the first place.

## Special Cards

- 6. A Bleak Mirror
- 9. Flashback
- 13. To Each, A World Entire
- 14. Visions
- 19. Asepsis

## Lore

- There are fewer shades in the Pale Meadow than there used to be.
- A new flower is growing amid the asphodel.
- There is turmoil among the powers of Olympus.
- A swamp is spreading across the meadow.
- Black on black, stormclouds gather on the horizon.
- Broken pieces of fine thread float past on the breeze.
- A sickness spreads among the dead.
- Smoke on the wind. Something is burning.
- A makeshift shrine of fallen branches and woven grass, to power or powers unknown.
- Something caused these shades' flesh to melt and run like wax.
- Blood – real, human blood – stains the earth and spatters the flowers.
- The grass is dying.
- These look like asphodel flowers, but they're made of bone.



# The Place Between

## Thanks to Kickstarter backer Ido Magal

Inspired by *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg)

### Area and Setting

Rolling prairies and rocky badlands, empty but for wild animals, separate the hollow remains of towns that sprang up and faded like flowers after the desert rains. Industrial machinery sits untended, great gantries looming over tiny towns, creaking as they idly tilt back and forth in the wind.

And everywhere there are the rails, leading into the west. Steam-gouting behemoths of iron and fury thunder through now and again, carrying their obscure loads across the land. But they don't stop *here* any more.

### Locations

*Radderson Steel* was once a powerhouse of industry, but now is nothing more than a shell filled with the rusting remains of massive machines. Feral animals – and people – live between the looming cranes and the silent blast furnaces, eating what they can catch and keeping Radderson's secrets.

*The 18:12 Westbound* is one of the massive trains slicing across the landscape at a terrifying speed. Inside its windowless, steel-walled carriages? Cargo for the mysterious West. But they don't permit just anybody on these trains, and security isn't shy about ejecting unwanted passengers.

*The Hartfield* is the lap of luxury. If you can afford to stay, your every whim is catered to. Whatever you want, the staff can provide. How does it manage this, surrounded by the empty ruin of a post-industrial landscape? Well... better to relax and enjoy yourself than worry about what's outside. Outside might as well not exist, while you're staying at the Hartfield.

And sometimes we find ourselves *in the middle of nowhere*. The prairie is vast, and open, and shelter comes only in the form of a rare rock outcropping or copse of trees. But at night the vastness of the cosmos is visible overhead, and the sighing of the wind sounds almost like music, and even the longest-lapsed seeker of truth might find something they need in the emptiness.

## Wanderer

*Lex* is not of this world. They've come with technology far in advance of our own, and a suitcase of rare minerals to trade, but they're looking for something here that they cannot find back home. Their style is the *sleek* look of the city-slicker, out of place amid these run-down towns. Their trinket is a *gleaming steel communicator*, tuned to no earthly signal. Their behaviour is *eccentric*, at least by human standards – they are drawn to strange details and patterns of behaviour. Their source of power is their *collection of schematics*, although their wealth and their alien biology also offer some advantages.

## Other Characters

*Orson Cant* was a sheriff of these parts, once. Technically he still is: a sheriff of empty, rotting towns, with no-one to guard from non-existent outlaws. The duty that once drove him has mostly curdled into bitterness and resentment but there's still a core of someone, somewhere in there, who believes in justice.

*Agent O'Brien* is from the government. Her suit is grey, her tie black, her spectacles mirrored. She makes no concession to the heat of the day or the dark of the night. She is interested in the knowledge that Adam carries with him – in his schematics and in his head – but her true motivation is a mystery.

*Tom* is the town drunk. Doesn't matter which town. He's lost everything but history, and there's something haunting the past he describes – something suggested by absences and missing details, but never fully acknowledged. Ply him with whiskey and maybe you can catch a glimpse of it, in the hour between drunk enough to talk and drunk enough to forget.

*Octavia Carstairs* has too much money to be here. Sharp-witted and sharp-tongued, she's surprisingly capable for someone who grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth. Why is she here? To what purpose will she bend her considerable resources?

## Special Cards

- 8. Rich History
- 9. Flashback
- 10. Reprisals
- 12. A Covenant
- 14. Visions

## Lore

- Offerings of water and bullets left before a makeshift altar.
- Blueprints, far in advance of current technology.
- There *are* people here, you just can't find them.
- This is the only clock you've seen since you got here, and it's wrong.
- Up close, these buildings are just painted backdrops.
- This was meant to be a trap.
- The grey suits are always watching you.
- You're bleeding red. You didn't bleed red before.
- There's a filled grave here with your name on it.
- The train stopped here, and something got off.
- At night, this ancient tree shines with hundreds of tiny lights.
- From up here you can see the words written across the landscape.
- The last train is coming through, and soon.
- They made something here. Something they shouldn't have.

# The Hopeful Resistance

Thanks to Kickstarter backer Dan Andrlik

## Area and Setting

When the Hopeful Resistance was fired into the space between the stars, it was humanity's crowning achievement. Ten thousand souls and space for tens of thousands more, overseen by the most advanced artificial intelligence we had ever created – part mechanical, part biological, an immortal cybernetic organism. Its destination was around a star impossibly distant, an Earth-like planet to be colonised by the crew's great-grandchildren.

It missed.

The Hopeful Resistance whirled out into the black, on a multi-millenia orbit that will eventually fling it out of the galaxy entirely. On board, the crew turned to increasingly desperate measures to survive, advanced skills falling by the wayside in favour of anything that would enable them to live just another generation, another year, another day. The AI died, as much as such a thing can, and fungi took root in its rotting mortal parts. And this is what's left.

## Locations

*Central Core* is where the bulk of the AI's knowledge was stored, encoded into genetic strings and grown as plants. Those plants are dead now, the sun-lamps broken, irrigation pipes blocked and ruptured. Now this place belongs to the fungus: Mushrooms tower from bulbous fruiting bodies, and spores fill the still air in great clouds. Animals are not welcome here any more, unless they come to fertilise the soil.

The makers of the Hopeful Resistance wanted their passengers to feel human, and so they provided *Starwatch*. A huge viewscreen, still functional, lets visitors see the vastness of empty space outside the hull. Once-orderly relaxation

gardens have burst their banks and covered the whole area in greenery, straining for the wan starlight on the screen. An extensive ecosystem, freshly evolved within the ship, fills the place with the sounds of life.

*The Temple of Self* is a holy place to the tribes of the ship, owned by none and open to all. Youths enter when they are ready to come of age, and after surviving the trials administered by the sacred machines they emerge as adults, often changed, bearing features new to the tribe.

*The Conduits* used to be filled with the organic cabling that allowed the control AI to function – but now they're a cramped series of paths around the ship, all biomass long since repurposed by the Hopeful Resistance's other inhabitants.

## Wanderer

*Miranda* was a salvage hunter until the pirates seized her ship. She was marooned in a small shuttle, light years from anywhere, doomed to a lonely death – until by an astronomically unlikely coincidence her path intersected with that of the Hopeful Resistance. Her style is *practical*: tough overalls with a built-in vacuum seal, her trusty toolbox in a canvas rucksack, a sidearm just in case. Her trinket is a *patch*, not yet sewn onto her rucksack. Her behaviour is *desperate*. The Hopeful Resistance is a better situation than left to die in space, but it's still pretty bad. Her source of power is her *resourcefulness*. There's not much she can't do, if she turns her mind to it.

## Other Characters

*Hyeong-So* can be found wherever the mushrooms are, gas mask firmly fixed over her face. She is quick and silent, appearing and disappearing only when not observed, never speaking, communicating by gesture. She seems helpful, pointing Miranda to caches of supplies and interesting discoveries, but should you trust someone so secretive?

*Indira* is still recognisably human, although she resembles an animal in many ways. She's an explorer from the clan of Catrin, quick and strong and resilient, plumbing the depths of the ship looking for resources for her tribe. Miranda could be her path to those resources – or could be rendered into them directly, with a little work.

*Crow* is a distributed intelligence, living in a network of brains hosted by a flock of black carrion birds. It knows many secrets about the ship, but the prices it demands in exchange for knowledge suggest it's working towards a secret goal of its own.

*Control* was the AI that ran the ship, until mutations in the DNA of its information storage caused it to excise large chunks of its own memory to avoid corruption. Now the plants are all dead and its mind is filled with fungal tendrils; it still has wide-ranging control over many areas of the ship, but reasoning with it can be difficult.



## Special Cards

1. Even In Death
8. Rich History
11. The Beast Inside
14. Visions
19. Asepsis

## Lore

- Everyone here shares a sense that you don't have.
- The ship is not aimlessly tumbling through space; it's going *somewhere*.
- Some of the creatures here have DNA unknown to Earth.
- The people in this part of the ship have become something wholly new.
- The fungus can move.
- You aren't the first visitor to this place.
- There's something frozen at the heart of the water supply.
- Nobody dies here.
- The reactor ran out of fuel centuries ago, yet power still flows.
- Everyone you meet displays the same strange tic.
- The original destination of the Hopeful Resistance would have killed everyone on board.
- The spores are hallucinogenic.
- The lights are going out.
- Many of the crew simply laid down and *stopped*.

A decorative flourish consisting of a series of overlapping, wavy lines that resemble a stylized ribbon or a piece of fabric, extending from the left side of the page towards the right, framing the title.

# Dark Spring

Thanks to Kickstarter backer Tallsquall

## Area and Setting

Deep within the flooded forest, through dense tangles of ancient cypress roots, past the ring of bone charms which clink together despite the absence of a breeze, lies open water. A lake, perhaps two miles across, the water a black mirror of the moonless sky – and at its heart, Dark Spring: a collection of tumbledown buildings floating on a rough circle of rafts, anchored in place in the middle of the lake.

## Locations

A combination of roots and currents have collected a *sandy beach* here on the edge of the lake, the only dry land for miles in any direction. From out on the lake strange lights can be seen moving among the trees, accompanied by the constant chiming of bone charms, but arriving on the shore reveals only strange tracks going nowhere.

Out on the *open water* there's nowhere to hide. Just the wanderer and their boat, suspended between a black starry sky and a black starry abyss. There's a light in the depths, a blue-green glow and a huge dark shape that isn't reflected in the sky above – or is it the other way around?

*Dark Spring* itself is a mess of crumbling wooden houses, seemingly devoid of life, the whole thing floating on lashed-together rafts which creak ominously with every footstep. Light here behaves strangely, flowing like rainbow-edged syrup, reluctant to pick out colours or penetrate beneath the eaves of the gloomy dwellings.

At the centre of Dark Spring lies *the well*, a circular patch of water as still and reflective as polished silver, its depth unknown and possibly unknowable. Perhaps diving in transports one to another world – or perhaps the only thing down there is the drowned dead.

## Wanderer

*Tipene* is no stranger to the water; it's clear to him that something about this place isn't right. His style is *eclectic*, mismatched clothes taken from others and an assortment of strange weapons. His trinket is the *necklace of polished stones* he wears around his neck. His behaviour is *confident*; he has yet to meet the man or beast who can best him in combat. His source of power is *the blessings of many gods*, each won by deed or trickery.

## Other Characters

*The Sylph* is invisible and nearly immaterial, existing as a whispered voice and a gentle breeze. There's something here she wants but cannot touch, and she's willing to say whatever she thinks will bring it to her. Some of what she says might even be true.

*The Fisherman* is a wizened old man who perches day and night on a floating jetty, rod propped beside him, line in the water. Garrulous and filled with grisly tales, he's happy to talk while he waits to catch the monster that will finally end his life.

*The ghosts of Dark Spring* haunt the rafts and the water alike, mostly content to attend their spectral business until seen in some reflective surface – such as still water on a moonless night. Once they realise they can be seen they crowd the viewer, yearning for something that only the living can provide.

## Special Cards

- 6. A Bleak Mirror
- 8. Rich History
- 13. To Each, A World Entire
- 18. A Powerful Foe
- 20. Time Passes

## Lore

- Glimmering lights and haunting music come from the floating village.
- A sealed bottle with a wedding ring inside.
- The village is growing.
- Something is coming up from the depths.
- There are structures in the lake which are visible only in moonlight.
- A celebration feast laid out before a shrine of bone fragments and twisted wood.
- The glow in the lake offers promises of power.
- A deer, standing on the surface of still water.
- The trees bear heavy, bulging fruit.
- The villagers used to trade with merfolk, but no more.
- A method for preserving the minds of the dying.
- The fish of the lake are surprisingly carnivorous.
- A prophecy: Three spirits will awaken and bring ruin alongside.



# Teaching Guide

This guide is intended as an accessible summary of the rules. If someone new is playing, or if the group needs a refresh, read each section out loud at the relevant stage of the game. This doesn't describe every rule or procedure, and is not a substitute for at least one person reading the rules in full. The facilitator (see page 4) will sometimes need to jump in and explain a rule or make sure it's followed. As you read the guide, offer everyone opportunities to ask questions. We recommend that the guide is passed from player to player, and so it includes instructions for who reads what. Alternatively, the facilitator can read it out, following the instructions for when to read but ignoring the instructions on who should read it.



## Start Here

**Facilitator:** We're going to use this teaching guide to help us learn the game. We'll read it out section by section as we play, so that we're not trying to learn all the rules in one go. If you've got questions go ahead and ask, but don't worry if in the early scenes you aren't sure how things are going to work later – we'll get to that.

*The facilitator hands this guide to the player to their left. They continue reading.*

**Player:** This is a storytelling game to describe a lone wanderer amid a foreboding, melancholy landscape, the great destiny they bear, and how that unfolds when they confront their adversary. We're going to take turns revealing lore about the world or the adversary, and after each scene we'll *privately* leap to conclusions about what the real truth might be. We'll write down our conclusions but we won't share them – not yet. When it's your turn to reveal lore, your conclusions will steer your contributions to the story. In the end, one of us will weave everything together into a climactic finale.

*The reader hands this guide to the player to their left. They continue reading.*

**Player:** Each scene, one of us will play the wanderer, one will play the world, and the rest of us will be the chorus. The roles of world and wanderer move to a new player after each scene, so everyone will get a turn.

The wanderer is the main character, a mighty adventurer who has come to this place following a particular destiny. When we play the wanderer, we do not describe their inner thoughts and feelings – only their actions.

The world frames scenes; reveals lore; describes the people, places, and events that the wanderer encounters; and controls how they respond to the wanderer's actions.

The chorus helps the world by adding atmosphere and details, and by playing secondary characters if the world needs them to do so.

*The reader hands this guide to the player to their left. They continue reading.*

**Player:** Before we start, we should all have a clear idea of the kind of story we want to tell. The game is set in a world of swords and sorcery, amid the ruins of former greatness. There may be great civilisations elsewhere in the world – but here, where the story takes place, there is only faded grandeur and melancholy reminders of what went before, populated by dangerous creatures and xenophobic remnants of former inhabitants. The few talkative souls who come to this locale are eccentric creatures, focused on their own thoughts above all else; they may prove useful allies or bitter enemies.

*The reader hands this guide to the player to their left. They continue reading.*

**Player:** This is a world where morality is decidedly grey. The easy path is always the soft lie or the timely betrayal. Altruism is a quick route to self-destruction, or exploitation by the more cynical. There are heroes in this world yet – the wanderer may even be one – but they are a tragic breed.

This is a world where information never comes easily. Other people keep their cards close to their chests, revealing only what they want you to know. Scrawled graffiti offers clues to what happened here. Loose pages torn from ancient tomes give cryptic descriptions of the adversary's origins and nature.

And yet this is a world where beauty still lingers. Amid the ruins, the grime, and the corruption there remain places of breathtaking wonder and people who gladly take the suffering of others onto their own shoulders. These moments are all the more precious for their rarity, but we'll probably see at least one.

*The reader hands this guide back to the facilitator. They continue reading.*

**Facilitator:** Roleplaying games are, by their nature, unpredictable – and that's part of the fun! But it means that without a little care stories can go to places that we don't want, so we've got a couple of rules to help us keep a course that we all like.

First of all is the ban list: If you know up front that there are topics which you don't want to see, we're all going to take a few minutes now to write them down. These can be things which you don't want to come up because they make you uncomfortable, things which you don't want to deal with right now, or just topics and themes you're bored of.

*Take a few moments to write. The facilitator collects up the lists and if necessary collates them.*

These items are the ban list. Everyone needs to know what's on here, because as far as this game is concerned? These things will not happen. If it looks like the story's heading in the direction of one of these elements, anyone can call a halt. We'll find a new way to go from where we are, or rewind far enough that one appears.

The second rule is this. [Draw an X on an index card.] This is the X-Card. If anyone feels like the story is going somewhere they don't want it to – whether that's written on the ban list, or just something you decide in the moment as you become aware of it – then just wave this card, or tap it, or say 'X-Card', or otherwise indicate a big X. When that happens, we stop what we're doing. We might be able to steer the scene in a different direction and continue, or we might need to stop playing altogether. We'll work that out if it happens. Different people handle things in different ways, and our top priority should always be the comfort of everyone playing.

Thank you for helping me with this.

*If you are using a scenario, the facilitator reads this entry:*

**Facilitator:** We're going to start by establishing the jumping-off point for our story, which has been established in the scenario we're using. We should also agree the general tone, duration, and stakes of the game.

*As a group, agree the tone of the game, and whether or not this is going to be part of an ongoing series. If in doubt adopt the passing through mode of play (see page 14) where the wanderer is guaranteed to survive, and while the fate of the location might be at stake, the fate of the world is not.*

*Then the facilitator should read out the Wanderer, Other Characters, Area and Setting, and Locations sections of the scenario you are using.*



*If you are not using a scenario, the facilitator reads this entry:*

**Facilitator:** We're going to start by working out the tone and duration of the game, and getting down a few details about the setting and the wanderer who is going to explore it. We'll agree to things one at a time, and everyone should throw in suggestions and discuss them until we're all happy. If we get stuck, there are inspiration tables in the rulebook that we can look at for ideas.

*The things you need to decide now are:*

- *The tone.*
- *The duration and stakes of the game (if in doubt, use passing through).*
- *A few details about the setting, referring back to the ban list for things people explicitly don't want to see.*
- *The area the story will take place in.*
- *One location within the area per player, or two per player in a two-player game.*
- *The wanderer's name and look.*
- *The wanderer's background and the trinket they have brought with them.*
- *One particular behaviour the wanderer exhibits.*
- *The source of the wanderer's strength.*

*When you've finished setting up, the facilitator continues:*

**Facilitator:** We're nearly ready to begin our tale. The first scene has to contain some piece of lore which hints at the truth of the area or the powerful adversary who haunts it. If anyone has a good idea for this lore *don't say anything!* But you can play the world for the first scene. At the end of each scene we'll pass our role – world, wanderer, or chorus – to the left, so everyone will get a turn at every role.

*Once someone has volunteered to be world, pass out the role cards: the world gets theirs, the player to their left gets the wanderer, and everyone else gets the chorus. Then hand this guide to the world and they continue reading.*

**World:** The world is like the author of a book, except that they don't get to control the actions of the wanderer. The world chooses where a scene is set, who or what is present, and whether the scene focuses on *danger, interaction, or a feature* of the setting. The world describes how the other inhabitants of the setting act, and plays any talking characters like an actor in a film or play. The world should bring the chorus in by pausing often to allow them to contribute details and elaborations, asking them questions and building on the answers. Finally, the world chooses when to end the scene.

*The world hands this guide to the wanderer. They continue reading.*

**Wanderer:** The wanderer is the main character, and is in every scene. When it's your turn to play the wanderer you speak for them, again like you're playing them in a film or play, and describe their actions – but it is the world's job to tell you the results of those actions. Pay special attention to the wanderer's mannerisms and expressions, because the wanderer is a *cipher* – their history, their true nature, and their inner thoughts are unknown to us.

*If there is at least one member of the chorus, the wanderer hands this guide to the person to their left. They continue reading.*

**Chorus:** Everyone else plays the chorus. The chorus supports the world in a number of ways, primarily by adding sensory descriptions and elaborating on whatever the world describes. When you're a chorus member you don't take over the scene, introduce lore, or do anything that would change the direction of the story. Instead, try to reinforce the atmosphere which the world is creating. In addition, when the world asks questions the chorus provides answers – top-of-head answers, not considered ones. Finally, if the wanderer ends up in conversation with multiple people the chorus plays secondary characters so the world doesn't end up talking to themselves.

*Hand this guide to the world. They continue reading.*

**World:** During the first two parts of the game, scenes are focused on discovering lore. During every scene the world will reveal one piece of lore; lore is information either about the area itself, or about the adversary – the powerful threat which dominates it. Lore can be anything: scrawled graffiti, clues or theories dropped by other characters, a distinct odour, a particular symbol or manifestation, an overwhelming vision... anything that stands out as significantly strange against the backdrop of the world we create.

Something to remember when introducing lore is that in the game of *Bleak Spirit* knowledge is never straightforward. Lore does not *reveal* information, but hints at it in a cryptic and arcane manner. Also, bear in mind that we can add in bits of atmospheric detail – as the world or the chorus – without making them lore, and we can re-use old lore freely.

When lore is introduced, we write the details down on an index card. Whatever we write down on those cards will help us create the adversary at the end of the game.

*The world hands this guide to the wanderer. They continue reading.*

**Wanderer:** The last thing to cover before we start are special cards. Everyone gets one [or two, in a two-player game] and we can play them at appropriate times to change the rules of the game in ways specified on the cards. You don't have to use yours if you don't want to, but if you see the perfect moment... play it!

Now, the world will frame the first scene. They have a choice of a danger scene, an interaction scene, or a feature scene. A danger scene features some peril the wanderer will overcome, and asks us what it costs them. An interaction scene features one of the strange people who live in this world. And a feature scene is a moment of peace, wherein the wanderer can explore and examine their surroundings freely.

If the world frames a danger scene, then at the appropriate time they and the chorus will suggest two prices which the wanderer might pay to overcome the obstacle. The wanderer will choose one to pay. There have to be at least two danger scenes in part one, and at least one danger scene in part two, so the world should bear that in mind as they frame scenes.

If the world frames an interaction scene, then they will create – or later, reuse – a character for the wanderer to interact with. Depending on how the conversation goes an interaction scene may become a danger scene! But that's fine – it just plays out like a danger scene from there.

If the world frames a feature scene, that's an opportunity for them and the chorus to get stuck in to detailed description of the location.

*Hand this guide to the facilitator and commence playing the first scene. When the scene is finished, the facilitator continues reading.*

**Facilitator:** After every scene, we have a few things to do.

First of all, while the scene is still fresh in our minds, we're going to leap to conclusions. This just means writing down what you think is really going on – what the real story behind this place is, who or what the adversary might be. Most

importantly, you do this without discussing it with the other players! Everyone's ideas should come from them and them alone. At this point none of us have very much to go on, so the ideas might be pretty wild – and that's fine! You'll be able to refine them (or throw them out and start again) after every scene, and by the time the endgame rolls around you'll have a concrete idea of what's going on.

Second, if the wanderer has been behaving in a consistent manner, we can add another behaviour to their index card. We don't have to, but we can.

Third, if we've learned anything about the area or the location, we note that down on the relative index cards.

Fourth, is everyone still feeling good about the game? If not, we can stop, or make adjustments, or otherwise accommodate you. Now is also a good time to review the ban list, just to keep us all on the same page regarding things which shouldn't appear.

Finally, everyone passes their role card to the left. It is now the turn of the new world player to frame a scene.

*After you have played five scenes, and passed your role cards, hand this guide to the new world player. They continue reading.*

**World:** Part one of the game has just ended, and now we enter part two. Starting with this next scene, at the end of any scene the wanderer can choose to initiate the final confrontation with the adversary. This can happen one of three ways:

If, at the end of a scene, the wanderer decides to go somewhere where the adversary might be lurking, and if it feels like the right time, the player of the wanderer can choose to initiate the final confrontation. The next scene will be the revelation.

Alternatively, if after a part two scene the new world wants to initiate the final confrontation, they can choose to frame their next scene as the revelation. In this case, rather than the wanderer entering the adversary's lair, the adversary comes to confront the wanderer instead.

Finally, if after three scenes in part two neither of the above has happened, the next scene will be the revelation and it will take place wherever the wanderer currently is – the adversary has chosen to come to them.

*Continue playing until the revelation occurs. Before the revelation, hand this guide to the facilitator. They continue reading.*

**Facilitator:** We are in the final moments of the game. The wanderer is about to confront the adversary, and *at most* one of them will walk away. But before we can do that, someone needs to be the one to decide what the adversary is, and volunteer to take on the role of the world for this last clash.

We've all been writing our ideas down as we go – leaping to conclusions! – so this shouldn't be too difficult. The idea is to create an adversary which fits naturally with the lore which everyone has contributed to this point, and feels like a good fit for the area they dominate.

*Check if anyone has an idea for the adversary. If not, the facilitator keeps reading.*

**Facilitator:** If someone has an idea which covers *most* of the lore, we'll go with that. Otherwise I'll step in and come up with something.

*Hand this guide to whoever volunteers to be the world for the final scenes. They continue reading.*

**World:** The next two scenes are the revelation, where I tell you what the adversary is, and the clash, where the wanderer and the adversary stage their final encounter. During the revelation I will be doing most of the description but the chorus can weigh in as normal. The clash operates just like the danger scenes we've seen so far, except there will be *two* prices to pay.

*After the clash, hand this guide to the facilitator. They continue reading.*

**Facilitator:** Now everything is almost over, we move on to the epilogue. First of all, we change roles for the last time. [In a game with 3+ players, everyone passes their role to the left *twice*. In a game with only 2 players, just swap roles.] Now the wanderer must choose whether they replace the adversary, or abandon the area. [If the wanderer died, that counts as abandoning the area.] If the wanderer replaces the adversary, they describe one thing they do differently to the adversary, and one way in which they are the same.

Then the world narrates how the area changes as a result of the wanderer's decisions.

*After the epilogue, the facilitator continues reading.*

**Facilitator:** And that's all there is. Any loose ends remain loose, any unanswered questions remain unanswered, and we fade to black.



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