

Joshua A.C. Newman  
Kahn • Mondal • Roy • Weathers • Yearsley

# THE BLOOD-HANDS OF GOD



# THE BLOODY-HANDED NAME OF BRONZE

A visceral roleplaying game of **Bronze Age Sword & Sorcery** by **Joshua A.C. Newman**, creator of **Shock:Social Science Fiction**

*The Bloody-Handed Name of Bronze* is a tabletop roleplaying game of those who speak the **Language of Names**, the secret tongue that spoke the world into existence. When you portray one such **Namedealer**, you will make treaties with anyone – or *anything* bearing a name – and you will thrive and suffer from the consequences of those promises.

...And it is a game of **Fated Heroes**, driven by their long-dead ancestors – and their own great passions – to pursue their destiny for the benefit of the dead and to die bathed in glory!

Themes of violence, moral compromise, and sexuality  
2–4 players  
1–4 hours per session

Upon the Earthen Firmament crawl the Earthen-Beings, struggling with each other at the behest of Great Names to surpass the deeds of the ancient immortals, that they, themselves, might become immortal – or be forgotten – according to their need.

**Pursue your desire –  
and find one you can trust.**

THE BLOODY-HANDED NAME OF BRONZE

Joshua A.C. Newman  
Kahn • Mondal • Roy • Weathers • Yearsley

# THE BLOODY-HANDED NAME OF BRONZE



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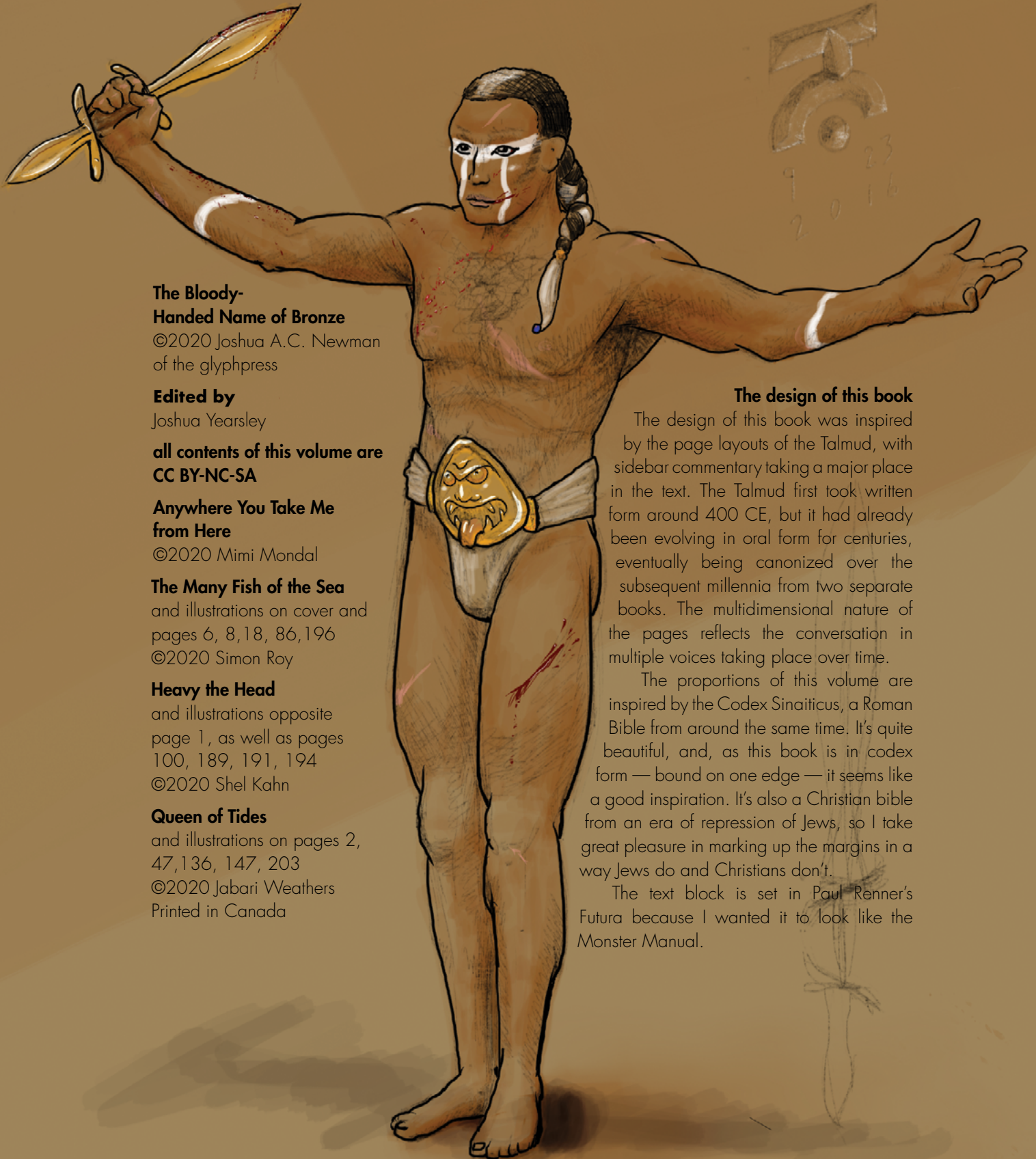
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THE GREAT NAME  
OF ASHU, WHOSE WINGS  
SPAN THE SKY OF THE  
RIVER, ASHUG. SHE  
RESIDES IN THE TEMPLE  
THAT BEARS HER NAME

ಶ್ರೀಮದಾಶ್ವಮೇಧ  
ಶ್ರೀಮದಾಶ್ವಮೇಧ



**The Bloody-  
Handed Name of Bronze**

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of the glyhpess

**Edited by**

Joshua Yearsley

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**Anywhere You Take Me  
from Here**

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**The Many Fish of the Sea**

and illustrations on cover and  
pages 6, 8, 18, 86, 196

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**Heavy the Head**

and illustrations opposite  
page 1, as well as pages  
100, 189, 191, 194

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**Queen of Tides**

and illustrations on pages 2,  
47, 136, 147, 203

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Printed in Canada

**The design of this book**

The design of this book was inspired by the page layouts of the Talmud, with sidebar commentary taking a major place in the text. The Talmud first took written form around 400 CE, but it had already been evolving in oral form for centuries, eventually being canonized over the subsequent millennia from two separate books. The multidimensional nature of the pages reflects the conversation in multiple voices taking place over time.

The proportions of this volume are inspired by the Codex Sinaiticus, a Roman Bible from around the same time. It's quite beautiful, and, as this book is in codex form — bound on one edge — it seems like a good inspiration. It's also a Christian bible from an era of repression of Jews, so I take great pleasure in marking up the margins in a way Jews do and Christians don't.

The text block is set in Paul Renner's Futura because I wanted it to look like the Monster Manual.

# THE BLOODY HANDED NASC OF BRONZE

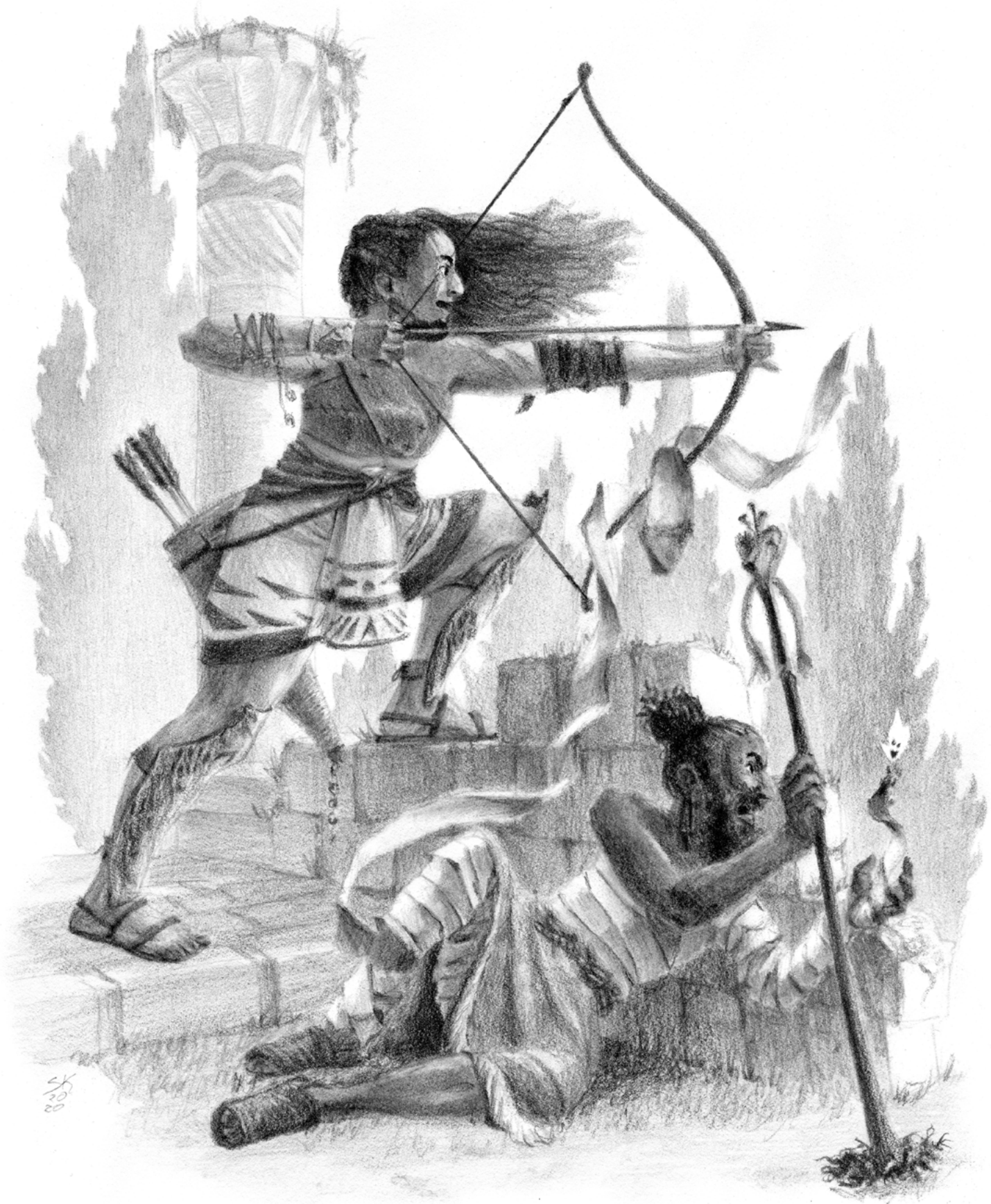
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# THE BLOODY-HANDED NAME OF BRONZE

## Sorcery and Passion in a World of Desire

**The Bloody-Handed Name of Bronze is a game of imaginative, visceral fantasy.** Take turns as you are moved, describing the world and the people in it, sometimes rolling dice when your own character — your **Companion** — acts according to their essential nature.

To play this game, you will alternate between telling your friends what they see, feel, hear, smell, and taste as you **Know the Will and Names of the World**; and

describing the appearance, words, and actions of your Companion, a mortal being whose heart is known only to you, but whose description, lovers, friends, and foes are known to all your friends gathered here together.

In both cases, listen to that which your friends say and add to it with your own words, describing the people and places, describing your Companions' struggles against, and joys within it.

### **Necessary tools**

- \* *A Companion sheet copied from the end of this book (pages 209–212), one for each player*
- \* *A pencil for each*
- \* *About a dozen gold dice and about a dozen black dice (You may use other colors and materials if you must, as long as you can easily read each color from the other.)*

### **Age range**

This game is written with late adolescent to adult players in mind. Violence, moral compromise, sexuality, and other adult themes are common. If you want to play with younger players, use discretion.



**The world  
in this book  
lies in our past.  
But we do not lie in its  
future.**

Before you lie arrayed the many splendors of the ***Earthen Firmament of the World of Names***, holding its many peoples, its deserts and mountains, its forests and animals. It is born

of the union of the ***Vault of Heaven*** and the ***Waters of the Underworld***, whose passion named the world.

It is the World of Names, a world of blood spilled by hammered bronze clenched in the hands of Fated Heroes who seek to become immortal through their great feats and greater death.

And it is a world of desire and promise spoken by Namedealers; a world wherein all that has a name, has desires and a will to accomplish them — and will compromise and promise and coerce to achieve the whims of their heart.

Beneath your feet — beneath the Firmament itself — lie the Waters of the Underworld, where all will go in their end, and few return. Above your head, stretches the Vault of Heaven, different in each place, but for its Strong Right and Weak Left Eyes — the Sun and the Moon.

## To Play

***Sit with a friend — or as many as three.*** Together, you will uncover tales of your Companions: **Fated Heroes** — those born with destiny to do violence and die in glory in the pursuit of the tasks allotted them by oracles; and **Namedealers** — those oracles who speak the secret Language of Names that spoke the world into existence, who flee from the mighty who would possess them or command their powers.

### **Play time**

One-on-one games take about an hour and are quick stories. Complex tales with many characters take about forty minutes per extra character. If you are playing for the first time, add in thirty to sixty minutes. So if there are three of you, assume that play will last at least two and a quarter hours, perhaps three.

### **Playing longer**

You'll find that sometimes the most fun to be had is in deep descriptions and long conversations. This way of playing is really fun, but make sure that everyone has time to do and say things. If you don't reach satisfying conclusions in that time, follow the rules for continuing play on another evening when next you gather!

## Companions?

Your Companion is the character you portray — a Namedealer or a Fated Hero. You'll follow them closely, knowing what they're like better than anyone else, because while you play them, they feel what you feel for them.

### When exactly do I roll the dice?

Roll all your dice when you are asked by another player. They're keeping an eye out for when you're acting according to your nature.

### What actions are according to my nature?

There are two types of Companions you can play: a Namedealer, who gets supernatural entities and people to join in contracts with them, or a Fated Hero, whose powers are in violence, leadership, and the might of their own scarlet passion. Namedealers and Fated Heroes have different natures, so they can take different actions. You'll find them listed when you choose your Companion later and at the back of the book for reference.

### Whose Companion?

Your Companion is **your** companion in this tale.

If you portray a Namedealer or a Fated Hero, they accompany you, and you them, throughout their adventures. They are there for you to see, hear, feel, taste, smell, and know what they see, hear, feel, taste, smell, and know. That doesn't mean they have to be a good person. But they have to be a person you want to be for at least a little while.

## The Companions

Your **Companion**, like all beings who bear a name, has a desire and the will to accomplish that desire. Those who Know the Will of the Names of the World will offer to satisfy that desire or deprive you of it. Your Companion wants nothing more than to satisfy that desire. In play, **describe what they do** to achieve it.

You will have many dice, each hewn of jet or cast in gold, in numbers according to the nature and description of your Companion and that which aids them.

When you describe and speak for your Companion, you may say what

you like. But when another player recognizes that you have taken one of your four **actions**, you may dictate the outcome only by rolling your dice and selecting from its **consequences** while your opponent determines if they wish to subvert the consequences that remain.

## The Mystery of your Heart

When any of you speak to another, remember that **any word you speak of the intention or desire of your Companion must be a lie** or a lie disguised as the truth. If you wish to express the desires of your Companion, **make it evident in their speech and action.**

# The Will of the Names of the World

When but **two players** join together, decide which one of you will Know the Will of the Names of the World until this adventure is exhausted.

When **three or four players** come together, any or all will Know the Will when the need arises.

At any time, when questions are unanswered, one of you will seize the opportunity to Know the Will. When you do so, you will describe and speak for the world around you, and may say anything that, to you, happens according to the wishes of any present **Named-Ones** — any

## Knowing the Will of the Names of the World?

Knowing the Will is a bit like being a game master in games that have such a role. But even when one of you Knows the Will, anyone who isn't directly

involved in the current moment also can Know the Will — there can even be several at once!

person or thing with a name. You may describe that which befalls the Companions, seizing their life and limb, their possessions, their friends.

Sometimes you will Know the Will for but an instant as you speak for a warrior-queen who wishes to grind cities to grassland to feed her tribes' gargantuan, woolly mounts; or a smooth, glittering stone engraved with the prophecy of what might hatch therefrom and wishes for a safe nest; or a simple wall guard who chafes at their low position — and then another will take their opportunity to Know the Will while your Companion thrives and struggles under the yoke of their words.

involved in the current moment also can Know the Will — there can even be several at once!

## Editorial discretion

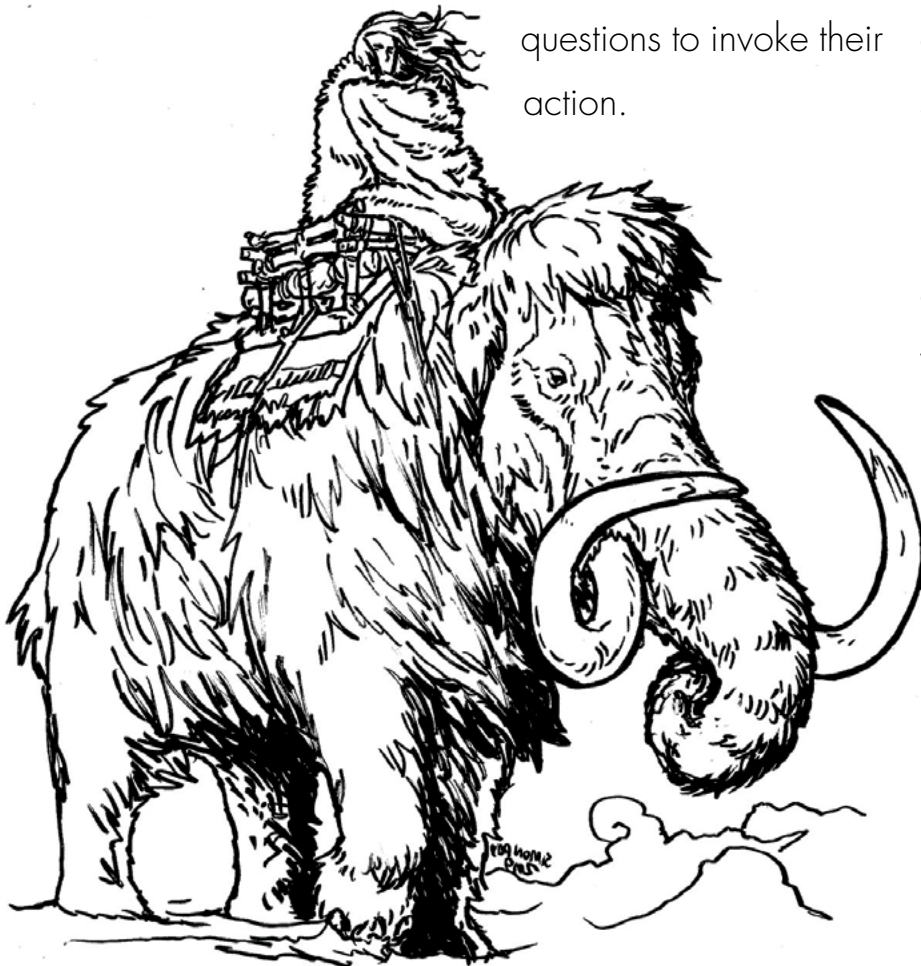
When you Know the Will, your objective is, at all times, to **determine what Named-Ones want and what they'll do to get it**, including making judgments of what they know or don't. If a Companion leaves consequences available for you to defy that don't make sense to you — if they're impossible, irrelevant, or not in the interests of the characters who have the power to enforce them — you **may not** select them.

## What exactly is a Named-One?

Any Companion is a Named-One, but so is anything else with a name. Ancient and respected names like Bazub, the Lamassu at the gates of Besh, is known to all. But the

little stone on the road might have a name only as soon as you name it. It might grant a Namedealer little in assistance, but as soon as it has a name, it can express what it wants.

While a player Knows the Will of the Names of the World, their Companion might slip and struggle, or might suffer consequences, or might be absent, so as soon as you are curious or concerned about their character, ask them the questions to invoke their action.



Always listen to your friends here gathered as they describe what their Companions do and say. At times, when you hear a Companion take action in one of four ways according to their nature, you will ask the player to roll their dice and choose consequences according to the action you saw them take.

***But! If a Companion objects to such treatment,*** they may take action to prevent it by describing what they do instead, so that other players might agree that they have taken action according to their nature, and so may bend the world to their will!

### Five or more players

No more than four of you may portray a Companion. Every other player Knows the Will and **does not portray a Companion**. Other players will, at times, Know the Will alongside them.

## Ending Play — or Continuing into Another Tale

When, after a time, you feel that your Companion has satisfied their desire — or lost it, either past the horizon or to eternity, you may opt only to Know the Will while you cede to them their final glories and demises.

When, after you have played for a while, all Companions present have found that their desires are found only past the horizon, are satisfied, or lost forever, end the tale.

Begin anew if you like, with new Companions or with those you know well, at your whim!

However many Know the Will, all players who Know the Will must have all conversations openly, obeying the rule that only that which they show is true; all revelations of the heart of a Named-One must be made evident in the actions and senses of

the Companions, and any glimpse into the heart of a Named-One must be a lie, or a lie disguised as the truth, or a truth told in order to mislead.

### Fewer Companions and few players

Any number of players can only Know the Will, even when you're playing with three or four players. Remember, though, that **any** player can Know the Will whenever their own Companion is not in the center of the action.

### How is two-player different?

When you are playing with only one friend, play a short, punchy adventure. It's all about that one character, which means that if a Companion of yours is there when you Know the Will, they're like any other character in the story. You won't get to roll any dice for

them, which means that their only powers are their words and actions, so make sure their interests support or defy the Companion portrayed by your friend!

## When your Companion has died

When your Companion has sunken into the Waters of the Underworld — ignobly and comedically, or with dignity and grim purpose — seize these opportunities to Know the Will of the Names of the World further.

If a Named-One in the game starts to look like they've answered the initial questions of a Namedealer or a Fated Hero, write down those answers on a new Companion sheet and reënter the game with that Named-One as your Companion!



SIMON  
ROY  
2018

# INTRODUCE YOUR COMPANION

What do you desire?

How will you achieve it?

**Your Companion is an** no animal, nor slave to other mortals.

**Earthen-Being,** subject to *The Namedealer flees* from a pursuer who wishes the Namedealer to do their bidding.

**Names** who live in the Waters of Heaven above, in the Waters of the Underworld below, and cross the land as rivers, as ancient and wise beasts, as immortals. Unlike other mortal beings, your Companion is *The Fated Hero charges* toward the impossible, seeking their own glorious death.

**Choose which nature  
you wish to pursue.**

# THE NAMED DEALER

## Namedealers of Earth

**Utnapishtim**, who sought and lost immortality, but who saved seven of each animal from the Flood at the behest of the Elohim.

**The Astrologer of Esarhaddon**, who instructs King Esarhaddon to allow him the power of a king during an eclipse so he can cut a dike, saving the city.

**Ya'akov**, who wrestled with the Messengers of El and His brethren for their support.

**Yosef**, who became a slave, then interpreted the language of the Pharaoh's dreams, for the well-being of Egypt, and sat beside the god-king thereafter.

**Mosheh**, who, upon Mt. Horeb, spoke with YHVH in a burning bush, who charged him to free the slaves of Egypt. YHVH also spoke with him upon Mt. Sinai, handing down the law for the People Israel. He was punished for his hubris of taking credit for drawing water from the desert, rather than remembering

(cont.)

10

**Would you portray a Dealer-In-Names** — a scribe and oracle, a cunning magician or noble astrologer, one wise in the secret Language of Names that spoke the world into existence?

**A Namedealer draws strength from the promise and the lie**, the choice to deal in good faith or bad, from the incurring of debt to its discharge to magnanimous action with pity or love.

**A Namedealer lives in flight from their promises** for those who need them fear them, and those who desire their services rarely wish to pay the necessary price for so doing.

### Bending the ear of Names

In every situation, ask yourself if there is something you can offer to the Named-Ones around you. In return, they will offer you their Immortal Dice of Golds. If you're in a desperate situation, be prepared to furiously compromise or lie, depending on the character of your Namedealer.

**When you portray a Namedealer, you will seize your dice**, both your Dice of Jet and the Dice of Gold granted you by the names that aid you, when you:

### ✘ Offer What They Desire

Offer to satisfy the specific desire of another possessed of a will.

### ✘ Coerce

Force another to do your will under threat of harm.

### ✘ Escape

Relieve yourself of pursuers and captors.

### ✘ Thief

Take another's possession for your own, leaving them without.

The Immortal Dice of Gold you roll to increase the effects of your will is a sword hanging over your head. If you find yourself betraying a Named-One and unable to talk your way out of it, you will find yourself in mortal peril as it makes demands that you immediately make right.

# THE FATED HERO

**...Or would you portray a Fated Hero**, whose ancestry includes the Heroes of Old — even the Great Names? One whose feats move rivers and lift gates from their hinges to impose your will?

**A Fated Hero draws strength from those who follow them** and from **their own passion** that answers to none — and their proud ancestry that, above all, demands obeisance.

**A Fated Hero is driven to accomplish their patron's will**, a Great Name who wishes to extract glory from the hero before the hero outshines their dim light, shining from the Waters of the Underworld.

## **Seizing trophies to grow in might**

If you see any beautiful thing withheld from you — such as a weapon or badge of office rival hero — you will become mightier by seizing it as a trophy. Then, brandish it to gain its Mortal Dice of Jet.

**When you portray a Fated Hero, you will seize your dice**, commanding your fate toward hubris and your own glory, when you:

## **\* Coerce**

Force another to do their will under threat of harm.

## **\* Test Yourself**

Do that which is thought impossible for a mortal.

## **\* Lead Your Followers**

Make a promise to those who follow you as you put them in danger.

## **\* Follow Your Passion for Another**

Act outwardly in to your filial or sexual passion toward another.

**Trophies are not to be hidden**; when they are hidden, they do not yield the Dice of Jet that you use to increase the effects of your will.

## **Fated Heroes of Earth**

**Gilgamesh of Uruk**, Son of Mother-Goddess Ninsun and the priest-magician Lugalbanda, dominated the people of Uruk. He took what he wanted with his strength until the goddess Aruru formed the wild man **Enkidu**, covered in hair and with the head of a bull, of clay to defeat him. Gilgamesh brought him food, music, and sex. They wrestled until Gilgamesh won and they became fast friends.

**Shimshon**, his birth foretold by a messenger of The Lord, his hair never be cut, his life pledged to The Lord by his mother. With riddles and violence, he subdued Philistines and Israelites alike until Delilah coaxed from him the source of his strength. His final act was to destroy the royal family of the Philistines.

**Herakles** was born Alkaios in Thebes, child of Zeus and Alkmene, nursed by Hera herself — who despised him — from whom he took his

*(cont.)*

# THE NAMED DEALER

(cont.)

the name of YHVH, and never entered the land he was promised.

**Hannah**, who, in defiance of the priesthood, spoke directly with El, extracting a blessing from the priest.

**Pythia**, who inhaled the breath of the rotting python deep in the earth to speak with Gaia — later Apollo — to foretell the futures of warriors, kings, and common people alike according to her needs.

**Balaam ben Beor of Aram**, Seer of Balak, King of Moab, was sent to curse the invading Israelites, but a messenger of the Elohim stood in his way, negotiating with him through Balaam's donkey, agreeing to make a sacrifice publicly for the benefit the Israelites, rather than curse them.

**Cugel the Clever**

agreed, with characteristic lack of foresight, to steal from the Laughing

Magician, Lucounu, who magically transported him to the far-away Land of Cutz. After many adventures, Cugel found his way back, overcame Lucounu, and attempted to banish the wizard, accidentally sending himself back to the Land of Cutz.

**A Namedealer may speak in the secret**

**Language of Names** to any

that has a name, from the lamassu who guards the city gate to the fishmonger; the warrior-queen or the cyclopean stele in the desert, engraved in dire poetry; the lover and the rival; the river stone ground to a polish stacked and titled by a child; a bird in flight, lamenting the loss of its own child to the keen-eyed hawk. From them, **a Namedealer might exact a promise and agree to a price. And it is from this price that they flee**, however mighty or meager their station.

A Namedealer suffers the indignities of the world, knowing that **they are more bound to the strictures of their own promises than those of the people among whom they reside**. A high priest's talents are demanded by those who must know the will of the river and sky, the mountain of fire and the sea of storms, but their presence feared or reviled.

To achieve that which they desire, **a Dealer-In-Names will compromise, will make promises, will make allies, even in the most dire moments**.

# THE FATED HERO

**They whose violence causes mortals to cower and pledge obeisance;**

whose bold shows of might can move a crowd's passions to loyalty; whose passions cause the heavens, themselves, to quake as **the Great Names become jealous of their might.** It is the wish of a Fated Hero to enter the Waters of the Underworld drenched in glory so blinding that the Great Names fear the hero, lest the hero overthrow them and become immortal — a Great Name, themselves.

**A Fated Hero's might flows from the honor they wear.**

While they might, for a moment, hide or deceive, they reveal their true strength and deal boldly. **They pile glory upon their own name, bearing it proudly;** and yet, should their glory become great enough, they may find themselves suffering the fate of those who choose hubris over obeisance.

To achieve what they desire, **a Fated Hero will make demands with the threat of violence and will promise to share their glory with their followers,** or they will follow their passions, driving history with their untameable emotion.

*(cont.)*

name and that of his descendants, the Heraklides. He fought cthonic monsters at the behest of the Olympians, but committed atrocities for which he was made to atone. His first penance was to kill a lion of impenetrable pelt with his bare hands, much like Shimshon. He wore its pelt as armor thereafter. When he died, he was granted a seat on Olympus, rather than crossing the Styx.

**Achilleus** was born of the sea goddess Thetis and king Peleus, their marriage cursed by Eris. Thetis dipped him in the Waters of the Underworld to remove the last of his mortality, but held him by his heel, leaving him vulnerable there. His Army Ants, the Myrmidons, held great love and respect for him. Eris's curse finally drove him to war with the Trojans, where he lost his lover, Patroklos,

before killing Hektor, only to fall, himself, to a wound to his mortal heel.

**Xena, Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations**, remorse-forged, blade a circle ever returning. Renouncing her warband, she roamed Greece and China, performing acts of brave atonement in the physical and spirit worlds with her companion Gabrielle. Upon her third death, Xena chose to remain so that the souls of her 40,000 victims might find peace.

## To describe your Namedealer...

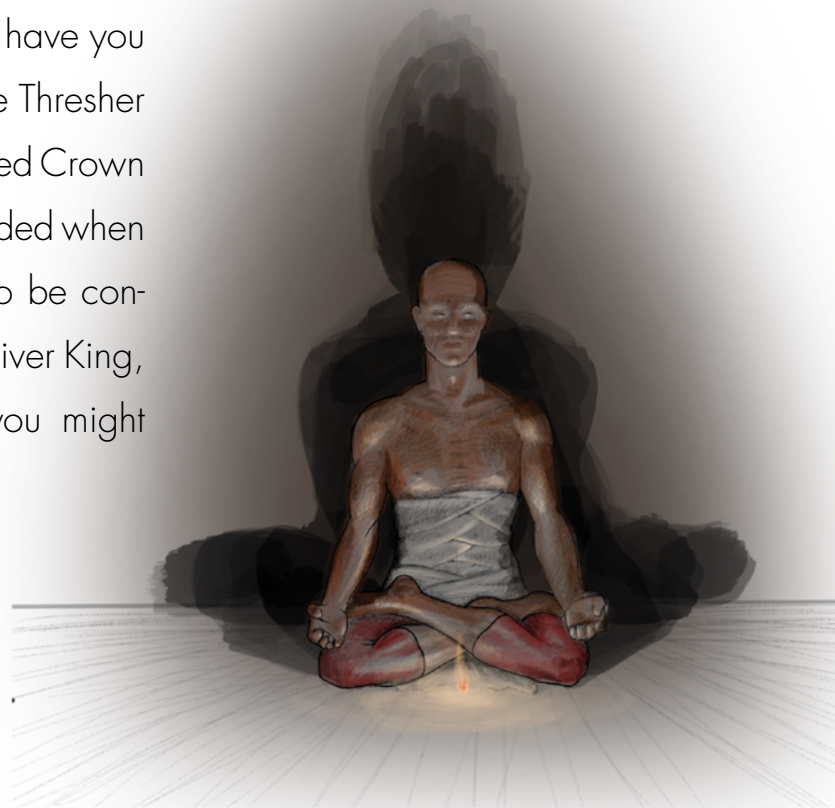
***Answer these questions, pronouncing them aloud to all the friends gathered with you:***

**From whom do you flee, and why?**

Whether for good reason or bad, you are pursued by one whom you owe — or one who would have you owe them. Dunam Gilu, the Thresher of Limbs, with whose dreaded Crown of Fingers you have absconded when you saw his destiny was to be conquered and forgotten; the River King, whose army of bandits you might

have aided, had you not fled their company to form your own guild of thieves; the Shepherd, who wishes all to follow his will, while you have pledged yourself to follow only the words graven upon the basalt face of the Monolith by the Descendants of Heaven.

***Inscribe their name and reason for pursuing you on your Namedealer sheet.***



## What Named-One now aids you?

Your flight, and indeed your very life, depends on those Named-ones who aid you, and ask in the Language of Names for you to satisfy their desires in return.

To aid you, they must simply have a name — perhaps they are an Earthen-Being like you or a crafted thing, named for their **Beautiful** nature or their **Old** age; or a monster, **Mighty** and **Big**; or, indeed, they might be a simple person named by parents in the way of their people, but grown to be **Known to All** and bearing their words of renown upon **Inscribed** tablets of clay.

### Named-Ones are concrete

They are not abstract concepts. They are things, places, and people. They could be ancient and mighty — a Great Name of a Fated Hero, or perhaps their vaunted trophies. Or they could be quotidian — a merchant willing to trade, a field of barley, a household idol discovered in a midden.

### How to get more Named-Ones on your side

As you require in play, you will speak to those with a name and make them offers or you will coerce them into doing your will. When you do so, you will add them to the names with whom you have treated. But for now, whether because of your inexperience or because you experience the pain of loss, you have aiding you but one Named-One, alone.

***Inscribe their name and mark each trait that is true of them. Take one Immortal Die of Gold for each trait marked as true.***

Your Named-One has agreed to aid you, and in turn has asked for your aid. ***Ask another at the table — one who Knows the Will — what does this Named-One demand of you? Inscribe this demand.*** What desire can you satisfy? For blood or honor? To feed and preserve them? To take them to their lost love or to fall into the cold deep of the Waters of the Underworld?

***Inscribe how this Named-One has promised to aid you.***

***You will gain more on your travels*** by making new treaties, some perhaps hasty and ill-advised.

***When a Named-One agrees to make an enduring agreement with you***, write down what it has agreed to do for you and add its Immortal Dice of Gold to your Companion sheet according to its traits.

## To describe your Fated Hero...

*Answer these questions, pronouncing them aloud to all the friends gathered with you:*

**What Great Name commands you?**

Your destiny is claimed by another greater than you — a **Great Name** whose blood runs in your veins, or who has selected you to do their bidding. They command you to do great deeds that glorify their name, so that their might may be known when they return from the Waters of the Underworld or rise from the river or smoking mountain that is their body.

### **The eidolon**

An eidolon is a Great Name's physical presence represented as a piece of art or a relic, which you carry with you. Perhaps it is a shrine containing their idol, or a vial of sacred water from the spring from which you were born, or an ever-burning

Who is this Great Name? Perhaps they are **Feared** as a warrior or as a beast; or they are **Mighty** in battle; or they are **Generous** with life-giving water or seed or fruit or other magnanimity; or they are **Beautiful** to behold; or they are **Known to All**; or they are **Present in Eidolon**, their body of bronze and shell, or graven of stone, carried with you.

***Inscribe your Great Name, and mark each trait that is true of them, on your Fated Hero sheet. Take one Immortal Die of Gold for each trait marked as true.***

ember from their volcano. While you gain a valuable die for carrying them with you, ***the Great Name may not aid you with their Dice of Gold if their eidolon is lost to you.***

### **Great Names are concrete**

They are ancient and mighty beings whose personalities and powers have made them immortal. You may make a plea to Vin, who delights in pleasures of the flesh, for aid, but pleasures of the flesh do not descend from Vin. Likewise, a Great Name known for her strategic prowess might find her heroes at odds with those of another who is, himself, a great warrior, or they might find themselves allied and benefiting from each other's strengths.

## Who is their oracle of your Great Name?

You will come to know the will of your Great Name only when described to you by an oracle, a harridan, a scribe — a Namedealer — who speaks the secret Language of Names. Without them, your Great Name will only be able to make their will known through ill turns of fate.

Note that the oracle may phrase the wishes of your Great Name in such a way that helps them fulfill their own desires, or they may claim the authority of your Great Name when giving demands of their own.

They are a Namedealer — a treaty-maker, who accepts compromise and makes their way with words and promises. Trust them if you must.

***Inscribe the name of this oracle.***

## What does your Great Name demand?

The oracle who speaks for your Great Name has charged you with taking action on their behalf, so as to preserve their name and will on the memory of the Firmament. What is it that they have demanded that you do?

***Inscribe their demand.***

## What trophy have you seized?

By boon or by capture, you have with you an object that you wield proudly. When you wield it, you will gain one Mortal Die of Jet for each if it is **Old**, **Mighty** in the felling of the fearsome, **Generous** as a harvest, or **Known to All** in tale.

***Inscribe the name of your trophy and mark its traits. Take one Mortal Die of Jet for each trait marked.***

### **Claiming trophies**

These could be crafted by hand, like jewelry or weapons, or natural objects, like the limb of an unbreakable tree wielded as a club, or the shell of a turtle carried as a shield. Even other people are, to a Fated Hero, trophies. Sidekicks, fellow warrior-lovers, slaves, and even friends all grant dice according to whether their fit these four criteria. ***When the opportunities arise in play, seize trophies and add their characteristics to your Dice of Jet.***

## Take your two Mortal Dice of Jet.

These two dice bind you to the firmament between the Waters of Heaven and the Waters of the Underworld. **If you lose one**, you will never fully recover, and you will forever bear the mark of the harm or shame that you have withstood. **If you lose both**, you must depart for the Waters of the Underworld.

**If your Companion is a Namedealer**, your first die is your **breath of life**. Your second die is your **last breath**. You may lose them to harm to your frail, Earthen frame.

**If your Companion is a Fated Hero**, your dice are **your body** and **your name**. You may lose either die to harm or to shame.



## Introduce yourselves.

**Seek coincidences and pursue them.** If your Companion finds themselves in flight from a high priestess while another Companion is charged with subduing a temple, discover that the temple is that of the priestess. If your patron Great Name is the Sky that Faces the Southern Sea and a Companion rides a mountain goat, find each other upon the south-facing cliffs.

If you seek the death of the mighty hero who laughed when your sister died in your arms when the two of you witnessed a tempestuous battle, and another Companion is playing

### Finding each other

While your Companions don't have to be friends, they are all a part of the same set of events that you're uncovering when you sit down to play.

That might mean that you don't immediately meet on the road, but your roads a storied Fated Hero, you might discover that it was they, who laughed.

You may find yourselves friends, lovers, allies, rivals, or foes. And you may find your opinion of each other changing through the course of events as you take action on behalf of your own interests.

### How do you appear?

Your comportment reflects the path you have trodden to this place, starting with the circumstances of your birth and ending with this moment.

Clothes? Jewelry? Hair? Skin color, eye color and skin pigments? Scents?

somehow lead to the same place. Even if they don't meet at all, they're still directly affecting what happens with each other.

### Cultural expression

Your character comes from a culture that has normal ways of looking and things they do to be beautiful. In many cases, your Companion also traveled through a lot of other cultures, too. How do those cultures make themselves beautiful? What has your Companion done to make themselves fit in? What promises has your Companion made or broken about their appearance? How do they want to be perceived? How do they look despite how they want to be perceived?



# TO KNOW THE WILL OF THE NAMES OF THE WORLD

## To Begin Play...

**Answering as You, Who Know the Will of the Names of the World,** when another player asks of you ***“What is here?”*** or ***“What do they want?”*** or ***“How does it appear?”***, answer them with the descriptions of all the senses.

### **Can I help others to Know the Will?**

If your Companion is involved, you can still suggest questions or answers to any who Know the Will. But while they should listen, they know more than you do about what the world around you wants, and what they describe is true.

They will respond with the actions and words of their Companion. They will then ask the same questions of you when they Know the Will of the Names of the World.

All that has a name has a will, so when you answer for the world, remember that it pursues its desires.

multiple players at the table might reasonably Know the Will at a given time. ***Swap Knowing freely,*** favoring the answer of the player who has the least interest in a particular outcome. ***Ask players to portray secondary characters that they have portrayed before.*** They will have more integrity that way.

**When to Know the Will**  
Anytime someone needs to know anything and your Companion doesn't have a vested interest in the answers, you can Know the Will of the Names of the World. So,

# ASK QUESTIONS

**Hannah, Who Knows the Will: Where are you? E, portraying a Fated Hero:** Upon

a small wooden river craft in the river Tasheb, fiercely poling it downstream toward the city of Shuz.

**Hannah:** Yeah, it's shallow and choppy here, and you're starting to run aground a bunch against rocks and reeds.

**E:** Yeah, so, actually, I've just gotten off to portage the raft.

**Hannah: How do you appear?**

**E:** I'm a really small and femme, heavily muscled. My back is glistening with sweat, and I'm wearing the heavy jeweled collar my father bestowed upon me. I have kohl under my eyes to keep the glare down. Across my back is slung the long-handled bronze axe with which I'm supposed to fell the tree Adanu.

**Hannah:** What else are you wearing?

**E:** Oh, like, a purple kilt that was really nice, but is starting to get worn. It had gold wire woven into it at the edges, but it's mostly gone now. It's embroidered with the names of my ancestry. I've got a stiff, blue, back-swept, pointed wool cap with a bronze guard on the forehead and cheeks. The cheek guards are tied back right now. It's nice stuff, but it's the normal gear my people wear for fighting. Since I'm portaging this raft, it looks weird. I come up to the ribs on most people, but I'm easily hefting this boat with one arm, ready to sling my axe in front of me with the other should the need arise.

## Where are you?

When asked by they who Know the Will, describe where you stand and how you travel if on a journey.

Unless you have already traveled far, you are near the **Center of the World**, where Earthen-Beings live in farms and villages and cities; where deserts and rivers are bound by seas and mountains; where live lions, goats, and dogs.

When a player tells you, either agree to any details they supply, or add further. Ask questions to clarify until you can see the place.

## How do you appear?

Your Companion is an **Earthen-Being**, shaped with hands and a head and a beating heart; through whose eyes can be glimpsed your soul; your ancestors shaped of red clay by the Giants to be greater than an animal, and cursed by Tiamut with the knowledge of right and wrong.

When asked, give the details an observant individual might make: your makeup, your skin and hair and beard, your scents, your clothes and that which you carry with you that might be seen from the outside.

# OF THE COMPANIONS

## Who here joins you?

When asked, describe those present. They might be those who join you in your travels, or perhaps those upon your path. They could be those you know or they might be strangers.

When a player tells you who else is present, suggest others who might be there, as well. Remind the player to invite any other Companions who could be present, who may accept or — if they have good reason, perhaps kept to themselves — decline.

### **Hannah: Who here joins you?**

**E:** There's a fishing village nearby, and the villagers are ogling me. Vincent, are you there?

**Vincent, portraying a Namedealer:** Ah, yeah, I'm among those villagers, obviously not one of them.

## What do you?

When asked, describe what you are doing and how it might appear to another who might observe you, perhaps including an obvious conclusion they might draw.

When a player tells you what they are doing, ask them how — or if! — they have prepared themselves and how they are attempting to accomplish it. Ask questions in return to clarify if you so need.

### **Hannah:**

#### **What do you?**

**E:** I'm standing on a rock, looking forward to find where I can put the boat back in the water and keep sailing.

I'm waving to the fishers, though, like I'm a movie star that knows they've been recognized.

**Vincent:** I get this frozen look on my face when I see a hero approaching.

**Hannah:** OK, they've been trapping fish in the rapids and they're pointing upstream as you walk along the river through the rocks. There are maybe a dozen of them. And then there's Bushebat. Vincent, what do you look like? What are you doing?

**Vincent:** I'm trying to learn the fishing techniques from a little kid. I've been doing this

for a while but it's obvious I don't know what I'm doing yet. I haven't caught any fish. And I stand out from them. I'm wearing their fishing clothes — mostly naked, just a loincloth, but my skin is much darker and my eyes lighter. My face is split by a big scar from forehead across my lips from long ago.

## Respond According to the Will of the Names

**Wait, are you saying that Namedealers can just decide to talk to the sun or the river or anything else with a name?**

Yes, that's exactly what we mean.

**What about things without a name?**

Well, you could give it a name. It's definitely not **Old**, though.

**If Named-Ones are always lying, how exactly do I reveal what they're thinking or feeling?**

Anyone, even some background character who will never be heard from again, can, of course, say what they think and feel. But you, Who Know the Will of the Names of the World — or, indeed, when

you portray your Companion — may not say **objectively** what they think or feel unless you're **lying** about it. So if you want a character to be clear about what's going on for them, they, the character, have to be honest and hope that others believe them. Have them take action to forward their desires and give the Companions reason to trust that Named-One. Have them say something, describe an expression on their face, leap into action, make a plea or demand.

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## Express the Will of the Names of the World

**Anyone — any thing — in the world that has a name has a will.**

When another's Companion encounters such a thing while you Know the Will, ask yourself in your heart what it is that the Named-One wants.

If you must, ponder for a moment before describing, recalling that you must only reveal their desires through their actions and words: **all statements of their true intentions and desires must be lies — or truths disguised as lies.**

**Hannah, portraying her Namedealer:** I'm sitting astride Labhu, the long-legged crocodile creature that helped me escape the Pleasant Man, and it's only knee deep in the water as I approach.

**E:** There were a bunch of people tending to the algae farm in a pool dug beside the river, but when they see you, they shout to each other and run toward the village.

**Hannah:** I shout, "WAIT!"

If they are an Earthen-Being, they speak their own Earthen language, but do not know how to speak in the Language of Names unless they are, themselves, a Dealer-in-Names; a harridan; a scholar and scribe of the Language of Names. And yet, if they are addressed in the Language of Names, they will answer in kind, having no knowledge of what they said, or what was said to them.

If they are other than an Earthen-Being, descended from those made of clay in the Age of Giants — an animal, a graven stone marking

**Vincent:** Nah, they're just running away.

**Hannah:** Well, so much for a good first impression! I'm still going to make no threatening moves at all. I'll wave and smile.

**E:** Their town champion comes out with everyone behind her. She's young and muscly, carrying a fishing spear with two prongs. She's wearing this elaborate, obviously ancient hammered copper forehead guard with the name of the river written on it in silver wire. "What do you want?"

**Hannah:** "Simple passage, friend!"

**E:** "You are the third stranger to approach our village in as many days, and one has foretold catastrophe."

**Hannah:** "I bear no evil! If you let me pass, I will give your town my blessing and help you ward off the evil that is foretold!"

**Vincent:** Oo! You made an offer! Roll your dice!

**E:** What were you thinking the catastrophe was when you gave your prophecy?

**Vincent:** Well I thought it was going to be The Iguk who's chasing my Companion, Tamek, but maybe it's the river bandits who are after Hannah's Companion, Eshetal!

**E:** Oh, that makes more sense!

the tomb of your ancestor, a bull carved from mahogany and inlaid with gold and glass — then, if they have a name, they will speak in the Language of Names to those who can understand it.

**If they have a secret,** they will seek one to whom they can reveal it.

**If they covet,** they will wish to find someone who will satisfy them.

**If they protect another,** they will enlist the aid of those who offer protection.

**E:** You see down the river this roiling in the water.

**Hannah:** Oh, crap! It's the bandits! Are they underwater?

**E:** Tatters of their flags are boiling from underneath the surface. It breaks and the head of a hippopotamus emerges, larger than the whole barge you're on! It says, "**TAMEK! RETURN WHAT YOU HAVE STOLEN!**"

**Vincent:** oh no

**Hannah:** Well this is interesting!

## To Know with Another

More than one of you might Know the Will at once. Perhaps one of you Knows the Will of a child wishing to someday hear their name spoken in awe, while another of you Knows the Will of the river Pash and the causes of its rageful floods.

Speak with each other openly. Do not cover your plans with whispers, but instead proudly proclaim them while ***all present know that your revealed intentions are lies, or lies disguised at the truth, or the truth veiled in lies.***

## Draw from Beyond the Horizon

The world is grander even than the deeds of the Companions, though their actions are as ripples in a sea growing into great waves.

Consider well what a Named One might call for beyond that which the Companions can see.

Beneath the feet of the Companions stretches **The Earthen Firmament** until, at the edge of the world, it meets the **Vault of Heaven**, stretching in a great dome above the head of all mortals.

Above it swirl the **Waters of Heaven** in which dwell beings of whom the merest glimpse might drive the soul from a mortal heart.

Daily, **The Strong Right Eye** and **Weak Left Eye** of the Sky the sun and moon, cross it. Every sky has wishes for those who live under it, for where the desert sky kills with heat, the ocean sky brings storms and the sky of a city brings its people life.

Beneath Earthen Firmament lie the black and frigid **Waters of the Underworld**, where all that has died, goes to rest in eternal cold,

forgetting what it was in life. Surely, none can return from the Waters of the Underworld once they have bathed in its waters.

**For far to the North** lie the mountains between which the Dzung people ride their long-winged lizards. Past the mountains live a people with skin striped like a tiger, the riders of the fearsome akum — giant flightless birds, toothy of maw.

Upon the grasslands live herds of the Moloka, elephants with thick shaggy pents and trunks large enough to crush the body of the

#### **The Akum**

We know them as deinonychus. The World of Names contains all sorts of animals we consider extinct, as well as those we consider mythological or simply fabulous. The World of Names is the world of our past, but we are not its future.

mighty. They are tended by the tribes of Batabash.

**To the South**, across the desert, lies the Southern Ocean, whose depths contain the Sunken. Few sailors will venture there but the Iti or, it is said, the Sea Peoples.

**To the Northeast** travels the Great Road, through lands populated by animals large enough to carry towers upon their backs.

The Great Road has many tributaries, and travel upon them leads to all peoples of Earthen-Beings.

**To the West** continues the Great Road past the City of the Deepest Well, along the southern shore of the Western Sea that is ruled by the Sea Peoples. In it lies the Island of Iti, whose people have smooth skin like that of a dolphin and who sail the seas without fear.

North of the Western Sea, it is said, is a land of mysterious peoples in the forms of animals who know not the Name of Bronze.

Beyond that, the world meets the World Ocean that sinks to the Waters of the Underworld below and rises into the Vault of Heaven.



# THE WELL

## The sounds that spoke the world into existence

These are the first sounds heard upon the face of the deep, the love cries of the Waters of Heaven and the Waters of the Underworld.

All beings know these sounds except for Earthen-Beings, who were cursed by the Giants to have their speech scattered so they could not join forces against them and the Great Names.

## Draw herefrom until you find the name you seek

When you need a new name, combine these syllables until it sounds right to you. Remember that the languages of the Earthen-Beings might vary greatly from these, since their tongues were split by the Giants. Vary them as you see fit.

*a ba dim e fa gal ha il ka la*

*ad bar du en fil gil hu ir kal lab*

*ak bi dak eb fash gish hab ib kin lil*

*al bur dal el feb gu ham in ku lim*

*ar bab dar esh fal gub haf ish kur lu*

*as bash dab eg fur gash hi ig kab lug*

*ash bal dash ek fam gab hish id kam lum*

# OF NAMES

*ma na pa ra sar ti ush ya zi*

*mard nam pash ri sha tu uk yush zkur*

*mat ne pum rim shu tab un yab zub*

*mni nu par ru siz tash ub yat zash*

*mu nash peh rab sab tul ul yeh zur*

*mum neb pab ram shab tam ut yun zo*

*mesh nir paz rur shul tal ush yog zesh*

**Add to the canon**  
The Language of Names is not wholly discovered! As your Companions find new syllables in their adventures and explorations, add them to this list, writing them to the column into which they fit.



# TAKING ACTION

## Seize That Which You Desire

**Each of the two natures** — the Namedealer and the Fated Hero — have four **actions** with which they might bend their circumstances toward that which they desire.

At all times, watch the other players. When one takes action according to the nature of their Companion, tell them to roll the dice.

When you are prompted to roll your dice for an action that does not fit your intent, ***you may retract or change your Companion's action.*** If you do, ask one who Knows the Will what your Companion must do to embody the new action. ***Cower not from rolling your dice,*** for only by so doing may you seize your destiny!

in order to roll dice for a particular set of consequences, bring it to the attention of the other players if they don't notice. They might disagree with your assessment, though, and it is by the decision of They Who Know the Will that you must abide.

### **Description comes first**

Always describe your Companion's words and actions first. Other players will be listening to judge those actions and ask you to roll dice. When they notice that you're doing something that sounds like one of your four actions, they'll tell you which action you're taking, prompting you to roll.

### **Can I say which action I want to roll for?**

If you are taking an action

# NAMED DEALER, TAKE ACTION!

## How do I know what a Named-One desires?

You could ask them, or you could otherwise figure it out. However, you may not roll until you've offered them something they want. Whenever a character does or says anything, think about what they want. It might be simple or complex, and it might be conflicted. But if a Name of the World hears such an offer from a Nameddealer who's speaking in the language of Names, they'll at least entertain the offer. Let the dice decide the consequences.

## What happens in an enduring agreement?

Take the Immortal Dice of Gold represented by this Named-One. is a broad one. They agree to help you in whatever way they have agreed until you have satisfied their desire. You are going into long-term debt with them, which is why you get their dice

## What can be thieved?

You can only steal something that, once you have it, they do not. While that can be physical things, it can also be secrets, since they have lost the secret of it once you have it.

## Offer Them What They Desire

- ✘ They agree to do as you ask in exchange.
- ✘ They make no further demand before accepting this agreement.
- ✘ Their agreement endures.

## Coerce

- ✘ They do as you demand, or else you may harm them.
- ✘ You are not harmed in the exchange.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Thieve

- ✘ You take what was theirs, claiming it for your own.
- ✘ You are not harmed.
- ✘ They do not know you took it, for now.

## Escape

- ✘ You get away.
- ✘ Your escape goes unwitnessed.
- ✘ Seize one destiny!

# FATED HERO, TAKE ACTION!

## What does coercion look like?

If you threaten someone with harm unless they comply, even if you can't follow through on the threat, you're coercing. Note that coercion is risky to everyone involved! If you choose **No other is harmed**, you are protecting everyone other than yourself and those you are coercing. If you Know the Will, you may only choose to harm those who are not under direct threat from this coercion. If no one else could be harmed by this coercion or the reaction to it, you may not choose this option.

## What are followers?

Followers are trophies you gain by testing yourself in the presence of an audience. Single, named individuals can be your followers, but so can entire named groups. Each of them has a name. You can even pick out individuals from your own followers to impress, adding them as separate trophies as they rise in your ranks.

## What does following my passion look like?

If you pursue your passion for a Named-One, the outcome can alter their feelings. When you Know the Will of that Name, adjust your expectations. If, however, you intend to pursue your passions for a fellow Companion, **ask the player first**. Misjudging their feelings will be fatal for your Companion.

## Coerce

- ✘ They do as you demand, or else you may harm them.
- ✘ You are not harmed in the exchange.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Follow Your Passion for Another

- ✘ The object of your passion pursues you; but if you pursue a Companion, they may shame you.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ No other is seized with jealousy.
- ✘ You exchange a vow of friendship and take them as a trophy; else, if you pursue a Companion, they may harm you, and you them in return.

## Test Yourself

- ✘ Seize one destiny and take followers as a trophy from among the witnesses!
- ✘ You succeed in this trial.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Lead Your Followers

- ✘ You achieve all you promised.
- ✘ Those who follow you remain unharmed.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ Seize one destiny as your followers adore you!

### When exactly do I roll?

You roll your dice when anyone else notices that you have taken an action.

**A Namedealer** rolls dice when they:

- \* **Offer** a Named-One something they genuinely want.
- \* **Coerce** someone by threatening them harm if they do not do as the Namedealer asks whether or not they are capable of following through.
- \* **Thieve** something that was not theirs.
- \* **Escape** from a dangerous situation — or try to.

### How many dice to I get to roll, exactly?

Everyone gets to roll their two Mortal Dice of Jet, or just one if they've been harmed already. A Namedealer also rolls Immortal Dice of Gold for all the Named-Ones who aid them. Those Named-Ones will not aid the Namedealer if they have abandoned the Namedealer, if they are dead, if they are restrained, or if other circumstances demand it. The Named-One won't withhold these dice if they care about the outcome or want to establish whether the Namedealer will follow through on their promises, because the Named-One can only make demands of the Namedealer if the Namedealer actually rolls their Immortal Dice of Gold. The Companion themselves cannot choose to forgo the aid of their Named-Ones.

**A Fated Hero** rolls dice when they:

- \* **Coerce** someone, threatening them with harm if they do not do what the hero demands.
- \* **Test** themselves, attempting a task impossible to mortals.

- \* **Lead** their followers, promising a boon at their followers' risk.
- \* **Follow their passion** for another, throwing caution to their wind to follow an emotion.

## Rolling the Dice

When another player recognizes that your Companion has taken one of the four **actions** listed on your Companion sheet, they will ask you to roll your dice.

**Collect your dice** — Mortal Dice of Jet and Immortal Dice of Gold alike — **and roll them.**

1. **Count the faces of 5 or 6.** These are **strikes**, while all others are **misses**.
2. **Count the number of strikes** upon your Dice of Gold and upon your Dice of Jet. Based on their proportion, your Great Name or a Named-One assisting you may make a **demand** of you. If you reject their demand, they may **harm** you.

3. **If you rolled no strikes**, your Companion's opposition may make a **demand** of you. If you reject their demand, they may **harm** you.
4. **If you rolled any strikes**, choose **the action's consequences**, choosing one if you rolled one strike, or two if you rolled two or more strikes. **Your opposition may subvert** any consequences you do not choose, doing their opposite.
5. **Seize any destiny owed to you**, whether from your action's consequences or your roll.

## Facing Demands

**Your Companion becomes vulnerable to demands in two situations** — when you roll no strikes, or when you roll too many strikes on a particular color of die.

Likewise, a Fated Hero rolls Immortal Dice of Gold for their Great Name, but they may find their Great Name dead, or find themselves abandoned or the Great Name captured, their eidolon stolen away. They also roll Mortal Dice of Jet for any of the trophies they brandish in action.

### When should I harm a Companion who refuses a demand?

The Named-Ones and Great Names act on their whims, but that doesn't mean they take every opportunity to screw over the Earthen-Beings who do their will. After all, they're the only way those Names can directly affect things. They will seize upon the vulnerable only when they feel like their interests are not being served.

**A Namedealer** becomes vulnerable to the Named-Ones assisting in their action when they roll more strikes on their Dice of Gold than on their Dice of Jet, for their Named-Ones demand labor from the Namedealer.

**A Fated Hero** becomes vulnerable to their Great Name when they roll more strikes on their Dice of Jet than on their Dice of Gold, for their Great Name — same as all others — wishes glory in their own name and not that of their mortal descendant.

They Who Know the Will **may** make an immediate **demand** of the Companion, by **telling a Namedealer directly** what they wish in the Language of Names, or by

#### A Fated Hero takes harm from ill omens

**Sean:** I heave the monolith back into position!

**They roll two strikes on Jet and one on Gold.**

**Oz:** Well, there's no Namedealer here to speak for your Great Name, so snakes swarm out of the hole where the monolith lay and sink their fangs into you! You lose one Mortal Die of Jet!

**Sean:** Maaan, I have to get a new oracle.

### Can I force another player's Companion to take action?

Since every Name of the World has things that they want and actions they take to accomplish those desires, they will often initiate action directly against a Companion. As normal, describe what the Name does, and if it would harm a Companion, **describe it as though it has just happened.** The Companion may either opt to accept any consequences, including any harm, or they can take action to avoid the consequence that otherwise would cause them

**speaking in signs and catastrophe to a Fated Hero** when a Namedealer cannot (or will not) translate.

If the Companion does not immediately do as the Named-One demands, the Named-One **may harm** the Companion, depriving them of that which they treasure — even their very Mortal Dice of Jet.

## Subverting Unchosen Consequences

Often, you will leave one or more consequences of your Companion's action unchosen. Your opposition — whether another Companion or a Named-One — **may choose to do the opposite** of those consequences if it is possible.

no further demand. I hope she wants to make the agreement enduring, but I guess we'll see.

**Elliot:** The desert sand in your clothes rustles and says, "You promised to never wash me off. Stay away from the river or I'll make jerky of your cow."

**Vincent:** "My promise remains! I'll stay out of the water!"

**Elliot:** The sand hisses, but doesn't dessicate your cow. And the cow says, "Thank you!"

harm. When confronted with an arrow that will surely pierce their eye, a Hero might say, "I snatch the arrow from the air," and whoever Knows the Will of the Names of the World at the time says, "Roll to test yourself!"

#### A Namedealer faces a demand from their Named-One

**Vincent:** I tell the cow, "I'll save the bull from sacrifice if you come with me down the river." **He rolls one strike on his Dice of Jet and two strikes on his Dice of Gold.** So, the cow agrees and makes

## Seizing Your Destiny, Performing Great Feats

**As a Namedealer,** you seize one destiny for each strike you roll beyond the first two.

**As a Fated Hero,** if you rolled at least three strikes, with at least one strike on an Immortal Die of Gold, you may do a mighty feat, granted abilities greater than those of other mortals. **Choose a third consequence.**

If you have shouted your name to all, have brandished your trophies proudly, and impressed upon all those present your magnificence, seize one destiny **for each die you roll showing a 4.**

## To Contend with a Fellow Companion...

When two Companions face each other — as when a Namedealer makes an offer to another Companion, or a Fated Hero follows their passion for their fellow Namedealer, or when one coerces another:

1. Both Companions roll their dice. For each strike rolled by the **recipient**, remove one strike from the **actor**.
2. If the actor has any strikes left, they choose consequences, and the recipient may subvert any unchosen ones. If the actor has no strikes left, the recipient may make a demand and, if the actor refuses, may harm them.

## To Face a Name Whose Will Is Strong...

When a Companion attempts to coerce a Name of the World who would rather die than lose what the Companion demands, or whose numbers are so great that the death of one matters little, that Name can take harm more than once.

***If they fight on, already harmed,*** describe what they do. If they do not subdue the Companion in their next action, they find themselves at the mercy of the Companion, who may make a further demand or kill them.

***If their honor demands they accept their inevitable death,*** they will die whatever the outcome of the Companion's next action.

## To Aid a Fellow Companion...

***If you aid a Namedealer,*** ask them how they describe you as a Named-One:

- ✘ Trusted
- ✘ Cunning
- ✘ Mighty

For each way that is true to their eye, cross off one of your destiny and give them an Immortal Die of Gold to add to their roll.

***If you aid a Fated Hero***, ask them to describe you as a trophy, turning one destiny into a Die of Jet for each that is true to their eye:

- ✘ Desirable
- ✘ Loyal
- ✘ Mighty

Whether they are a Namedealer or Fated Hero, if their roll grants destiny, you, who aided your fellow Companion, may divide it as you see fit between yourself and them.

## **To Improve Your Lot, You May Reveal Your Destiny...**

The destiny you gain through action is unrevealed: the chance for great action or spectacular death.

In death, a Fated Hero uses it to become immortal; as they die, a Namedealer uses it to take final action. But both use it to enforce their will upon fickle fate as they live.

To bolster their confidence before a roll, you may wish for your Companion to **carefully prepare before acting**, or, having thrown in their lot, they may discover that the consequences of their actions threaten what they desire, and wish to **strike back against ill fortune** by casting away all destiny that they have accrued.

## Carefully prepare before acting

Before rolling, ask one who Knows the Will how you have prepared, **crossing off one destiny** for each way that is true, turning it into a Mortal Die of Jet and adding it to your roll.

## Strike back against ill fortune

After rolling, if your dice have betrayed you and you will suffer consequences unacceptable and offensive, **describe your extraordinary effort** to your fellow players, who will judge which action it is.

**Cross off all of your destiny** and turn them into Mortal Dice of Jet, adding any strikes to your previous roll. When you strike back against ill fortune, **you can choose up to all of your action's consequences, and any excess strikes beyond three turn back into destiny.**

**The Hero Utam:** I use my one-day lead to hide at the top of the wadi, whistling the bone of the sacrificial bull to a point, since I know Gubasheb can't be wounded by bronze or stone.

- ✘ You have specially equipped or armed yourself for this challenge.
- ✘ You have taken the high ground.
- ✘ You have learned your opponent's hidden position.
- ✘ Your opponent does not know your position.

**She Who Knows the Will:** Take five destiny dice, because Gubasheb comes waltzing in, whistling, whirling her club, overconfident of her immunity.

*Her lover threatened, the Namedealer Pazub rolls her dice to offer King Bashabab her own life in exchange but gets no strikes. She finds this unacceptable.*

**Pazub:** Before he can answer, I tell Bashabab's knife, with whom I have treaty, "If you cut the king's throat instead of my lover's, I will find for you the sacrifice you demanded!"

**She Who Knows the Will:** Roll all of your destiny as Dice of Jet to coerce him into letting her go!

*Pazub's player crosses off all their destiny and rolls a die for each, adding three strikes to the zero strikes they had rolled before. They choose all three consequences. If they had rolled more strikes, the extra strikes would turn back to destiny.*

## Harm

When you, either as a Companion or a Name of the World, deal **harm** — whether a wound or shame — portray it in the manner befitting the circumstances, particularly the wishes of the individual who inflicts the harm.

When you deal a Companion harm, take from them:

### ✘ **That which they value.**

Their trophies and Named-Ones, though not a Companion.

### ✘ **Their freedom.**

Capture and bind them. If you are so captured, *ask your captor what you must do to lose your bonds.*

### ✘ **Their life or their name.**

Only two Mortal Dice of Jet bind a Companion to the Earthen Firmament, keeping them from falling into the Waters of the Underworld.

**A Namedealer** is bound to the world by the **breath of life** and their **last breath**. If their body is wounded, they will lose one each time.

**A Fated Hero** holds fast to the Firmament with their **body** and their **name**, harmed by wound and shame.

### **Wounds big and small**

Many wounds might be easy to overcome, while others might, themselves, require a quest for herbs or wisdom. Beware, though, that **harm to your mortal self means that you are half dead**. To avoid death when taking dangerous actions, you will need to select **You remain unharmed** from the consequences of the action. Rushed patching of a wound, followed by time to rest, might be enough, but leave a prominent scar, such as an eye graven of basalt with an operculum iris; a scar on an otherwise beautiful face, revealing teeth in a cruel sneer; or a limp that must be aided with a walking stick.

## Recovering from Harm

When you must recover from harm, ask one who Knows the Will of the Names of the World: **What must I do to overcome this harm?** Some harm you may find unrecoverable: a destroyed eidolon; a friend lost to the Waters of the Underworld; a truth that dashed your friendship.

But if it is a wound — the loss of a Mortal Die of Jet — then **when you have done that thing, reclaim the Mortal Die of Jet** lost to that wound. Ask one who Knows the Will of the Names of the World: **What scar remains forever?**



## Death

Many of your Companions will die, sometimes ignobly or comically, sometimes with dignity and purpose. When your Companion loses both their Mortal Dice of Jet, they have lost all but the destiny they gained in life with which to enforce their will, and they may receive no more.

***When your Companion dies, you may still take actions with your remaining destiny,*** burning them

before entering the Waters of the Underworld — but a Fated Hero may also test the Fates themselves and challenge death!

Surely, though, no mortal can exceed the bounds of their lifespan and enact their will when their life has spilt upon the soil.

***When you cease to act upon the Earthen Firmament, you will fall to the Waters of the Underworld.***

## The Namedealer's final actions on the Earthen Firmament

The Namedealer must take action one last time toward those who remember them and their descendants.

What can the dead offer? What threat can they possibly make? What could the dead thief? And now, of all times, what could they escape?

The Namedealer cannot rely on the assistance of a Named-One; they will only assist if the Namedealer takes their one final action in their interest, for what threat can they deliver to one who is already dead?

## The Fated Hero's final actions on the Earthen Firmament

Great Names have no use for the dead hero who has exhausted their fate, for the dead bring them no more glory; and indeed, the champion of a Great Name may one day challenge them directly as an immortal.

To take action as they depart for the Waters of the Underworld, the Fated Hero may roll as few as two, or as many as all, of their destiny as Dice of Jet in their last act. They may take actions until they choose to fall or their destiny is exhausted.

### Things to do when you're dying

As you die, you can burn your destiny one for one — but at least two at a time — to get the dice you need to take action, but you are dying, and **harm will take away your destiny.**

You can let go at any point and fall into the Waters of the Underworld, rolling for your filial fate according to you nature. Or you can keep trying to do things upon the Earthen Firmament, your blood spilling and shame accruing, until you run out, keeping in mind that as soon as you stop acting, you fall to the Waters of the Underworld.

**Namedealers** may take this time to take their final actions before they fall, or they can take action on everyone who once knew them as they fall.

**Fated Heroes**, though, have been banking their destiny. This is the chance at immortality that they've been seeking. If they ever wanted to do greater good in the world, this is their chance to use their immortality to grant destiny to their descendants and followers.

## *The Hero enters the Waters of the Underworld*

When a Fated Hero reaches the Waters of the Underworld, they roll all remaining destiny as dice and ask all here assembled about each, expending one strike for each consequence.

*Are you remembered?*

- ✘ Those who witnessed you **remember you**.

*How are you remembered by those who do?*

- ✘ Those who remember you speak of you with **admiration**.
- ✘ Those who remember you speak of you in **fear**.

*How is your memory preserved by those who remember?*

- ✘ Those who remember your name proclaimed in admiration raise their children **in your image**.
- ✘ Those who hear your name uttered in fear know of your **bravery**.

*Will you live forever among them?*

- ✘ Those who raise their children in your image preserve you in **eidolon**.
- ✘ You may speak from the Waters of the Underworld as a Great Name, to speak with those raised **in your image** and with those who know tales of your **bravery**.
- ✘ Those who remember you with **fear** prostrate themselves to your **eidolon**, that they might know your will in contest against other Fated Heroes and Great Names.

***If any strikes remain after your apotheosis,*** demand that a Namedealer — a Companion present here or another — hold it in trust for the Fated Hero of your choosing, adding it to their own.

They may make you an offer to satisfy your desire. If you decline their offer, the destiny is lost forever.

The destiny that you grant a Namedealer becomes their destiny. The only way they can pass it on to a Fated Hero is by putting your scion into a position to do great things.

Beware, though! That scion might one day overthrow you, should their glory become great enough!



## **Gaining the Aid of More Named-Ones**

When you are desperate or trying to plan ahead as a Namedealer, look around for anything that has a name that can help you and strike up a conversation with it in the Language of Names. Once you've called out its name, it must answer.

Once you've told it your name, or at least they think you have, find out what they want and if you can offer it to them. You can't roll the dice until you have offered something that they want, so you can take a little time to have the conversation.

Talk to the passing acolyte, or to the banner that carries the Great

Name that they serve. Talk to the river that brings bounty to a city or the fish therein, with the sky above, to the dead in its graveyard, the passing child, the sacrificial animal.

If it has a name, it has desires. And if it has desires, it will listen to one who offers to satisfy them.

## **Seizing More Trophies**

Trophies are more than just useful or valuable objects to a Fated Hero. Each is a story, itself, than any hero will tell that it might become known to all, increasing their might.

Any who Know the Will of the Names of the World should be showing marvels. Sometimes they'll be held by others, which means that

you might take them through coercion. Other times, they will be in remote or inaccessible places and the achieving of them is the story for which they will be known, can you get one to tell it.

Followers are a powerful trophy, as they allow you an entire new course of action. You can only gain them by testing yourself in front of them, so seek lots of opportunities to do that.

Your Great Name will have ever greater cause for concern over your growing glory, and may strike you down with catastrophe, should no Namedealer be present to describe their whim.

## **To Those Who Have Made Treaty or Been Taken as Trophy...**

If a Namedealer offered you that which you desire and you have made it an enduring agreement, they gain Immortal Dice of Gold for your aid just like any other Named-One.

That means if the dice make them vulnerable to demand from Named-Ones aiding them, and you are aiding them, you can make a demand of them if you have the means to do so!

Likewise, if a Fated Hero has taken you as a trophy by following their passion for you, you grant them Mortal Dice of Jet.



# ANYWHERE YOU TAKE ME FROM HERE

by Mimi Mondal

I am utterly flattered that **Mimi Mondal**, the Hugo-nominated editor of *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler* — offered to devote her pen to this volume.

Her story here of the delicately struck relationships between Namedealers speaks to their immense power and to their vulnerability to the very people and things from which they draw that power.

**It wasn't because life at the brothel in the city of Kalrim was particularly wretched that Tinkari left,**

it was simply that he wanted to see the world. His Brothel Mother was bemused but did not restrain him — fully trained courtesans were free to go anywhere they chose — but few of those raised in the Brothel

## **Tinkari**

The Namedealer Tinkari flees his obligation to the **Brothel of Kalrim**. It pursues with the carrot rather than the stick. He flees with **the Name of Vin** on his lips, who will aid him **so long as he offers pleasure to others**.

of Kalrim ever went anywhere else. Life on the trade routes only sounded romantic in the tales of the foreign visitors they received, she told him, and most of them were sweet talkers and scoundrels. She warned that Tinkari would quickly grow to miss the soft breads filled with meat and sweet date paste, the daily baths and fresh linen sheaths, his fragrant room with

Vin is **Old**, for pleasure is as old as suffering; **Known to All**, though in a place where pleasure is unknown, she would not be; **Beautiful**, for pleasure is how one experiences beauty; **Mighty**, as mighty heroes fall before the offers of pleasure, and it causes all to grow and bear young; and **Inscribed** in poetry and song.

## **The Players**

Three players are present. The third wanted to find out what Tinkari and Hanta's story was so badly, they decided not to introduce a Companion of their own!

its earth floor sprinkled twice a day with jasmine water. All the luxuries he always took for granted.

But Tinkari had made up his mind.

“No matter, a courtesan of Kalrim would have no difficulty making a living on the road,” sighed his Mother as she held up his chin in two fingers and painted a delicate triangle of beauty spots below his lip. “Stay off wandering hero aspirants, soldiers of fortune, trinket-sellers, and other riff-raff — that is the way to go destitute. Only bestow your graces upon clan lords, priests of high temples, wealthy merchants, reputable artisans with land and coin. When you lodge at a brothel in a lesser

settlement, accept no less than their best room — the one that faces the street yet shades you from the long, cruel hours of the sun. Practice your singing. Don’t forget to rub castor oil into your hair each night, and braid and bead it afresh in the morning. Remember, no matter where, you are a Courtesan of Kalrim, and there’s no creature fairer in the world.”

Tinkari nodded obediently as his Mother adorned his hair for the final time, tinted his lips with betel juice, and took a long, exasperated look at him. Then he made his farewells and took up his spot on the wealthiest merchant caravan making its way out of the city of his birth.

**The nature of  
Tinkari’s promise**

These rituals are how Tinkari dedicates his body to Vin. Should he fail to do so, that would give Vin cause to make immediate demands on him under threat of harm, depriving him of the things and people he loves, even riddling his body with diseases or wounds, according to Vin’s whim.



His Mother was correct, of course. Tinkari had paid handsomely to acquire a well-shaded wagon strewn with cushions all to himself, but life on the road in some ways treated everyone equal, and the treatment quickly grew sparse the further they traveled from Kalrim.

It was exciting for the first moon-turn or so as the caravan stopped at caravanserais along the winding road, and everyone would emerge and dine together — merchants, guards, servants, families mingling with travelers from other lands and sharing stories around fires lit underneath the open night skies, all of

them plucking roasted meat with their fingers from the long bones of ktesh and swallowing it down with sharp sweet wine.

After dinner, his fellows from the caravan retreated to the rented travelers' quarters or spread out to sleep under the sky, while Tinkari claimed his place at the local brothel, holding open the palm of his left hand, upon which the twined desert rose branded at the time of his initiation would find him a home in any brothel raised under auspices of the Great Name of Vin. For the next two days or three, the merchants would ply their business in the markets of the town and Tinkari from his new

### **Answering They Who Know the Will**

Here, Tinkari's player begins answering the questions "Where are you? What do you and how do you appear? Who else here joins you?"

residences, after which they would regroup or return to the roads.

He kept his Mother's counsel and dallied only with the affluent, but as the towns grew smaller and more rustic, it was harder to find any patron who had either the purse to pay the true price of a courtesan of Kalrim or the full appreciation of his worth. By the second turn of the moon, Tinkari was bored of everything — the never-ending financial chatter of the merchants, the dust and grime of the road, the fumbling awe of the ill-trained oafs who called themselves courtesans in these backyards of humanity, the tedious patrons who lined up for his services, full of self-im-

portance and little refinement or fun. Tinkari had left home for adventure, but all that seemed to stretch ahead in his future were moon-turns and moon-turns of bumpy wagon rides and familiarizing himself with sweaty village folk with lives as interesting as a cabbage.

The place where he decided to change that was yet another village, where the caravan road ran parallel to the Shoshe, and even the soaring winds from the wide river couldn't dissolve the whiff of fish guts.

The caravanserai was small, doubling as village square and market, with the brothel tucked away among them, all of it open on one side to

the wide stretches of the Shoshe. Tinkari stretched out on a dusty reed mat placed upon the dirt floor of the serai, bargaining lazily with a hopeful young man — village head's son or something — who had brought him a stem of tuberose, which Tinkari plucked with his fingers and strung into a wreath as he responded with a word to every fumbling five.

That was when his eyes came to rest upon the extraordinary watercraft moored upon the riverside, its elegant stern rising ethereally like the neck of a swan among the dull fishing boats and ferries of the village. A canopy of scarlet and turquoise silk, trimmed in geometric lines of gold,

swelled above the boat, concealing its quarry from the eyes of the world. Two oars were angled into the water, but there was no traveler.

His eyes did a quick survey of the courtyard, alighting upon the only extraordinary figure in the crowd of rustics. The woman sat cross-legged taking her meal on a reed mat on the other side of the caravanserai. Her tall, sand-brown frame and sinewy arms were visible above the men and women who gathered around her, none of whom looked quite like her entourage. She looked utterly foreign to these parts, with her eyes traced long in kohl and malachite, and the crisp, pleated

### **Describing the Oarsbearer, Hanta**

Hanta's player is here describing her Companion as Tinkari or a third player sees her — towering, dark-skinned, perfectly coiffed, and well-appointed in clothes that fit impeccably, yet do not suit her.

linen sheath that exposed sunbaked, powerful calves.

But it was not only her foreignness that stopped Tinkari's gaze. Foreigners weren't rare at the Brothel of Kalrim; he too had lain with the occasional visitor from the lands that this woman recalled. But those had been merchants, diplomats, nobles on tour, their ordinariness exposed just as they shed their foreign attire. This woman looked nothing like any of those people. Tinkari grinned at the sight of the adventure he was hoping to find.

He sidled up through the crowd of onlookers, smiling shyly, lowering his lashes for just the right amount of

quiver. "Hello. That your boat?"

The towering woman looked up from her plate, where a caravanserai attendant ladled in steaming fish stew next to a mound of flatbread and roasted vegetables, while yet another refilled her cup of beer. A skinny young girl pressed a towel soaked in cold water to her corded shoulders. "That," said the woman darkly, squinting at Tinkari, "is the funeral barge of Emperor Imhotep the Third of Misr." Tinkari bit his lip, lost for an apt response. Someone stifled a giggle. The woman shrugged. "I am the oarsbearer of it."

He perked up. "Such esteemed personages are rare in this part of

the world! It would be my delight to serve you a few hours of pleasure.”

“The oarsbearer of a royal funeral barge may receive food, drink, medicine, and other essentials along her route, but she holds no goods in excess that she can partake of a courtesan.” The woman made a slow appraisal of him, drawing her gaze painstakingly from head to toe. “Less so one like you.”

Tinkari decided this was a compliment.

“I am allowed to take the occasional lover for no pay,” he pressed on. “As long as you tell your friends, spread the good word, that kind of thing.”

### Hanta’s treaty

Hanta flees **the royal priesthood of Misr**, to whom she is bound to die. That’s a lousy deal. She is aided by the river Shoshe, which is **Old**, formed from the tears of the Weak Right Eye of the Sky of Misr at its birth; **Big**, as it stretches from deep desert to the Waters of the Underworld;

### A roll of the dice

Tinkari has made an offer here to Hanta, and so rolls the dice — their two Mortal Dice of Jet and the five Immortal Dice of Gold (**Old, Known to All, Beautiful, Mighty, Inscribed**) leant by Vin, who wants Tinkari to succeed because Tinkari is doing what Vin has requested.

Tinkari rolls and gets 1, 3, 3, 4, **5, 5, 6**.

Hanta rolls and gets 1, 1, 2, 3, 3, 4, **6**.

“I shall be spreading the good word to no one, son.” The oarsbearer grimaced. “I am headed to the Waters of the Underworld, leading the departed soul of the Emperor of Misr. No friend I may meet at the end of that journey will have any use for the warmth of a courtesan. My company will bring you no gain.”

“You could still come.” Tinkari pouted as she rose from her meal, and eventually the oarsbearer sighed and followed him to the tiny brothel room with its damp-swollen walls that was the best that he would procure in that wretched village.



**Beautiful**, for its shores burst with birds and beautiful flowers; **Mighty**, brimming with crocodiles and hippos; and **Known to All** — perhaps there are lands where it is unknown, but even Tinkari, from far away, knows of it.

Tinkari loses one strike for Hanta’s strike, leaving Tinkari with two. The strikes are both on Dice of Gold, but Vin has no reason to make further demands of Tinkari, so doesn’t speak up. His player selects two consequences: **They agree to do what you ask in exchange** (“I want to be your lover”) and **Their agreement endures**. Hanta may demand “You do it for free” because Tinkari did not choose **They make no further demand before accepting this agreement**. Had Tinkari decided it wasn’t worth it and refused, Hanta would be able to refuse the entirety of the offer.

In that room where she could barely stretch out her entire frame, with death in her kohl-and-malachite eyes and the river wind in her sweat, the solemn oarsbearer nearly made Tinkari lose his religion in choking gasps. "Let me travel with you," he proposed, as the night streaked toward dawn.

"A funeral barge is not a ferry or pleasure boat," rumbled the oarsbearer as she fastened the knots of her sheath. "It's no craft for a courtesan to ply his trade."

"Well, a courtesan does not only lie with a different patron each time," Tinkari replied. "Folks in these parts can barely pay my price anyway;

for two entire moon-turns I've been pleasuring buffoons in exchange for bowls of fruit, pots of lumpy honey, bits of marble that any child could find in a gutter in Kalrim. If you take me in as your concubine, I'll receive better food and hospitality at these caravanserais than I do on my own. That would be adequate payment."

He followed her dismissive stare and added, "Um... I can sing. Surely a song or two would not be amiss on a funeral barge?"

The oarsbearer smirked. "Fine. But you should know this. The funeral barge is bound to a fixed course down the Shoshe, leading to the Waters of the Underworld. It

#### **Tinkari agrees**

Vin is listening to this negotiation, of course, and has to decide if it's a violation of Tinkari's promise to not take clients while on the funeral barge. He has to talk fast to make sure he can assure Vin that he's satisfying her requirements while he satisfies his own desires. If it is, Vin may require Tinkari to make restitution to her if his Dice of Gold strike more than his Dice of Jet.

may not change route or stop at any settlement besides to seek replenishment. If you find another distraction anywhere along the way, you're free to take your leave, but the barge will not wait for you. If you last the entire journey, I will drop you off at Gilgish, city of the dying."

"Understood." Tinkari's eyes glittered with excitement. He raised his left hand to his mouth and gratefully brushed the desert rose with his lips, breathing in its fragrance that was branded into his skin as deep as the raised welt. His Great Name was satisfied with the terms of his transaction. The elders at the Brothel of Kalrim always reminded its initiates

how fortunate they were to serve Vin — the Lady of Elegant Pleasures — perhaps the gentlest of all Names. Other Great Names demanded much harsher contracts from their servants, but the Lady Vin forbade only one thing. As long as he remained within that single tenet, Tinkari could have any adventure he wished.



"Where is the Emperor of Misr?" he asked once the funeral barge was far enough from the shore.

Beneath the turquoise-and-red canopy was an elegant pedestal, surrounded by boxes spilling with treasure: jewelry with precious stones set in silver and gold; intricately

### **The rose**

Vin is present in the form of the rose on Tinkari's hand, so he can check in with her in negotiation. Through the scent, he can tell that Vin approves.

carved miniatures of ships, palaces, dancers, animals, and birds; bowls of jade filled with ambergris, frankincense, and dried flowers. Upon the base was a startlingly lifelike death mask of gold, with eyes of obsidian and jade.

“The body of the Emperor of Misr is in the crypt beneath his pyramid in Misr,” said the oarsbearer in a voice with which one spoke to an imbecile or a child. “It is his soul that I deliver to the Waters of the Underworld. Did they teach you nothing at the Brothel of Kalrim?”

Tinkari felt colors bloom on his cheeks. He was one of the most highly prized courtesans in the land,

trained for years in the entertainments of every possible people and culture. He knew how to speak beguiling words in every language, each song and dance, all the ways to sate the sensual cravings of anyone willing to pay his price. He knew how to soothe the bloodied muscles of warriors and to cook exquisite desserts from well-guarded recipes that would send the wealthiest nobles to weeping. But the education of a courtesan did not extend beyond the rituals of bodies that were warm.

By the Name of Vin, this grouchy, mysterious oarsbearer from Misr was yet to see what they had taught him at the Brothel of Kalrim.



With a sigh, Tinkari leaned back against the stern of the barge and started humming a Misri wedding-night bridal song. At the bow, the oarsbearer let out a cackle.

"Sorry," he said. "Funeral songs are usually not within the repertoire of a courtesan."

"Feel free to belt it out loud," the woman laughed. "We're far enough from Misr that no one can tell the difference, even if your voice carries to the shores. The only person you'll be entertaining is me." She spared him a quick glance. "As you should, being my concubine."

Tinkari beamed, pleased with himself. "The Emperor of Misr won't mind?"

She returned a shrug. "The Emperor of Misr is dead."

Tickled, he sang a few more erotic ditties, choosing ones with more and more suggestive lyrics. The oarsbearer laughed each time he got too scandalous — and every laugh made Tinkari's heart leap a little bit — but she did not really start a conversation or break from rowing the barge. The day grew hotter. The river gleamed with such a hard brightness that Tinkari could barely keep his eyes open. He watched sweat roll down the spine of the oarsbearer, dancing between the steady rise and fall of the muscles of her shoulders and back. His Mother

back in Kalrim would be livid if she saw him let his delicate complexion roast in the sun like that.

He finally had to ask. "Do you mind if I sit under the canopy, or would that be disrespectful?"

"Sit wherever you like," came the reply. "I'm an oarsbearer, not a priest."

Tinkari crawled on all fours among the jewels and silk cushions. Cool and fragrant shade embraced him. He fingered the mound of treasures — enough to last a mighty Emperor an entire afterlife.

"Filch anything, and I'll feed your fingers to the alligators."

"A real charmer, aren't you?"

Tinkari grumbled. He picked up a small jade container, tentatively sniffing it. "Carrying the soul of your Emperor to the Underworld like some kind of morbid slave. I'm sure the Emperor doesn't mind if I took a tiny pinch of this rare ambergris—"

The words stuck on his tongue, with the swift splash of oars being withdrawn, and a green copper razor, its edge still throbbing, appeared at his throat. A shiver went through Tinkari as the oarsbearer loomed at the other end of it, murder in her eyes.

"I meant what I said." She bared her teeth. "You squander even a little bit of my treasures, young man, and

### **Tinkari blows it**

Tinkari here is trying to thief, however small an amount, and rolls the dice. Hanta rolls as well, and rolls at least as many strikes against Tinkari as Tinkari rolled against her, leaving him with zero. Hanta may make a demand or, if his response does not satisfy her, she may hurt him.

### **Hanta makes her demand**

All she extracts here when she has the upper hand is a promise from Tinkari is a promise to not do it again, which is a pretty poor trade. She could have cut out his tongue and thrown him into the river. She must really like him.

no one will fish out your corpse from the depths of the Shoshe.”

She looked very little like the solemn oarsbearer then, and very much like a sand wolf cornering a prey, one of those ferocious beasts that Tinkari had only heard of in travelers’ tales.

“I— I apologize,” he whispered, loosening his fingers from the pot of ambergris, which dropped like dead weight. “I shouldn’t have insulted your Emperor like that.”

“The Emperor does not care for any of your insults.” The oarsbearer pressed the blade, and a tiny spot of blood blossomed against Tinkari’s windpipe. “The Emperor is going

where he needs to go, charged for the deals he has accrued in his life.

One pot of perfume more or less isn’t going to make a difference to him. But that pot sells for eight hundred gold weight in the markets of Ur, and you’re not worth half that sum to me, pretty boy, so keep your thieving fingers to yourself.”

In spite of his terror, Tinkari managed a practiced grin. “So you’re not going to the Underworld, after all. I should’ve guessed. You’re too hot to be a morbid slave.”

“And you’re a fool, one step away from becoming alligator feed.” But she grinned too.

“I’ll remember that the next time I

let my fingers wander." He reached his arms to wrap around her waist, drawing her close over him. "Anyway, you needn't worry. I am a courtesan of Kalrim, not a thief. I'm quite capable of earning my own living. You have no idea of the things I can do."

"Then show me," she demanded. So he did.



Afterward they sat under the canopy, eating cold flatbread and thick fish stew in the cool evening breeze. Tinkari took a bath in the river. He climbed back onto the barge to find that the oarsbearer had kept a half of a pomegranate for him.

"So what is your actual deal?" he asked her. "You haven't even told me your name."

"The oarsbearer of a funeral barge has no need to be addressed as anything else," she replied grimly. "But call me Hanta, if you must."

"That's not even a Misri name!" he laughed.

The oarsbearer — Hanta — glared at him. Tinkari drew back involuntarily, but she did not pull out her knife again. Instead, she replied, "The oarsbearers of the funeral barges of Misr are picked from among prisoners on death row. Ethnicity is not a huge consideration for those being sent to a prolonged

death sentence, bound by treaties they cannot break.”

“That is the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

Hanta shrugged. “Then you haven’t heard many bad things, little courtesan, coddled all your life in pleasure and excess.”

“But you were a death-row prisoner! You must be the most cunning criminal.” He brightened up, ignoring the jibe. “Surely you’ve already made a clever deal to get out of this?”

“That’s easier said than done,” Hanta said darkly. “Are you fool enough to think that the journey of the deceased Emperor of Misr to the

Waters of the Underworld depends upon just one person’s deal — more over a foreign miscreant with no honor or loyalty to that empire?

“The royal priests of Misr treated with the sun; anyone who tries to plunder the treasures on the barge will be burned to death in an instant, and that includes me. The widowed queen treated with the barge itself, so it may deliver her husband and his oarsbearer unharmed to the Underworld. The new Emperor, younger brother of the deceased, treated with the empire of Misr for the withering of all trade for any settlement along the route that declines to provide sustenance to the oarsbearer.

“These are ancient, powerful

deals that have propelled every royal funeral barge from Misr in history. I don't even have to proclaim them each time I stop at a new settlement. If I could make the sun or the empire of Misr alter their treaties for me, do you think I'd have ended up on death row in the first place?"

"But you're so far away from Misr now, out on the open waters," Tinkari said. "It can't possibly be that nothing in these long moon-turns on the river can find you a gap to escape? Maybe I could help."

"By what — fucking your way out of my fate?" Hanta's laughter sounded like a bark. "Listen, Tinkari, you're a pleasant enough com-

panion on this mirthless journey, but don't flatter yourself by thinking you're anything more. My fate and the Names that bind it are far beyond your understanding. We're not friends, nor is there any reason for us to be. As long you stay on this barge, you keep your counsel and I keep mine; and after that we never see each other again."



The full moon hung like a specter over Gilgish, city of the dying, when Hanta pulled the barge into its docks. It was only noon but the sun had steadily retreated as they had come closer to the Underworld, till the only difference between day and

upon the river, and are with its shores, the beings both mortal and immortal that live in it, its royalty, and its sky. Hanta knows that, if she steps out of line, she's not going to be the first to try that trick, so she's got to find a way within the arrangement to pull this one out.

### **Threading the needle**

Hanta established at the beginning of play that she flees the priesthood of Misr. The details of the Namedeals that the royal priesthood has were not fleshed out at the beginning of play, but she told the other players as she introduced herself that she was starting off having talked herself into a real tight spot. The deals the priesthood have are to protect its ancient civilization built

night was dark and a thicker, cloying dark. Swirling fingers of pitch black water from the Underworld crept upstream in the currents. Where they touched the waters of the Shoshe it froze, forming brittle floes that Hanta cracked and pushed aside with the oars as she rowed. Both of them were wrapped in several layers of rough-wool shawl that they had picked up at an earlier settlement. There was no more singing. Tinkari felt like his voice had died in his throat, along with the warmth in his blood.

Gilgish was on a small, swampy delta that emerged like flotsam under the sickly purple sky. Tinkari hadn't expected an actual city but it was,

its paved streets lined with hospices, teeming with people on the threshold of death — the extremely old, the incurably ill, the mortally wounded, and so on. A few inns housed the families who had traveled from distant lands bringing in their dying. The only permanent inhabitants of Gilgish were the priests in their temples, offering absolution to the dying; cooks, medics, and cleaners who cared for their physical needs; undertakers, pallbearers, and mourners who took over after.

The walls of Gilgish were sculpted with intricate designs, but a film of moss clung to every surface, squelching under Tinkari's fingers before he wiped

them in alarm on corner of his shawl. There was no laughter, no children playing in the streets. The only children in Gilgish lay in the hospices, counting their days.

"This is where we part ways," Hanta informed him as they spooned watery barley slop into their mouths, huddled before the fire at one of the inns. Tinkari had hoped for their final meal to be rather more ceremonious, but the inns of Gilgish did not offer a selection.

No emotion showed on Hanta's face. Before disembarking she had oiled and combed her hair, reapplied the dyes around her eyes, methodically put on each bit of jewelry and

swiped frankincense on her skin like she did every single day. The royal oarsbearer of Misr presented the same face to each settlement on her way, no matter what hospitality they were able to provide.

"There are ferries that bring passengers to and from the mainland. On the other side, you'll find wagons and the like. It's a well-traveled route."

"This place feels like the Underworld already." Tinkari tried hopelessly to prolong the conversation. "I can't believe they built an entire city to service those who are about to die. People die everywhere the world, and I imagine all their

souls end up in the Underworld. Do the ones who die closer manage to skip to the front of the line?"

"Those who can afford it go to every length they can." Hanta shrugged. "Gilgish is the last earthly settlement — the nearest to the Underworld where life can live, and you can see how it already grows thin. There are no fish, sharks, or crocodiles in the river by Gilgish, for any life that touches the currents of the Underworld is immediately voided of itself. When a person dies in this town, their body is laid in a raft and floated downstream. It is another day's journey from here to the Underworld, at the end of

which there is no sun, moon, river, or even this spectral light that you find in Gilgish."

"Then perhaps we can float our accursed barge downstream as well, and you will have served your sentence and be free? Tough luck about the treasures, though!"

"If only it were that easy." Hanta's dry chuckle sounded almost too voluptuous in that dull, monochrome place. "Coming to die in Gilgish is an expensive service, and yet those unmanned rafts may still go astray or sink before they make it all the way to the Underworld. The Emperor of Misr can afford even better. My deal doesn't allow me to abandon the

barge. I'm bound to it all the way."

Hanta moved aside her empty bowl of slop as a silent servant scurried over to retrieve it. "I leave at dawn, and there will be no more stops. Would you not be so kind as to allow me a few hours of sleep?"

Tinkari sighed miserably and made to follow her into the small room at the back of the inn.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Hanta squared her shoulders and blocked his way. "You have eaten the last meal that you would receive on my accord, sorry as I am for it to be such poor fare. I have no coin or anything else to pay for your skills. You can no longer pass as my con-

cubine without dishonoring the deal with your Great Name."

Tinkari snarled an angry curse at her receding back, the taut muscles and skin and warmth he had stippled with kisses night after lengthening night, and stomped out into the city of the dying, feeling no more cheerful than its inhabitants.



There was a shrine of Vin in Gilgish. It was tucked away in one of the narrower alleys, merely a hole in the wall around which someone had piled a line of bricks, but this was the last place Tinkari had expected to find a shrine to the Great Name whose realm extended

no further than warm bodies. It did not seem to have worshipers either. Thick moss had crept over the bricks, nearly returning them to the decrepit wall. If not for the twined desert rose that had faintly survived the ravages of time — the same sigil that was branded on Tinkari's left palm in his childhood, overwriting the fate lines that were to longer claim to him — he would have walked past it without a glance.

He was still fuming with futile rage when he placed his left hand on the clammy surface of the shrine, aligning the sigil on its wall against the welt on his flesh. The wall shimmered with a moment's lumines-

cence, then the thrumming resonance of the Great Name filled his head.

"Who invokes My Name in the city of the dying, that which sits upon the edge of the world?"

"My Lady Vin, it is Tinkari of the Brothel of Kalrim. I humbly request a reassessment of my Namedeal."

"You are far from Kalrim, Tinkari. You have invited me to a land where no child of mine has sought me in over three centuries, when the last courtesans of Gilgish were felled by a plague caught from one of the dying, a man who carried his own ill-dealt curse. But you have not yet performed service in my name. I cannot truly reawaken in Gilgish till

### **Tinkari offers what Vin desires**

Tinkari rolls only one strike and chooses **They agree to do what you ask in exchange**. But Vin isn't happy about it, and will no doubt make a further demand.

one of my children exercises the skills I vested to them."

"My Lady, I shall gladly perform the service you require, despite this city and its inhabitants that frighten and repel me. But after night, as this city shades into its pale dawn, would you promise to release me forever?"

"You no longer wish to be a courtesan, child?" The Great Name thrummed with surprise. "Whatever better life can you expect to find on that blighted land?"

"I wish to follow my beloved into the Waters of the Underworld," he replied, rage flaring up in his heart at the word he had never used so far.

"Love is the one pleasure forbidden to courtesans bequeathed to My Name, for which I replenish with many others," replied Vin, contempt spiking her thrum. "I see into your heart now and find the tendrils of it twine back several turns of the moon, like a repulsive weed. You have done me unspeakable treachery, Tinkari of Kalrim, finest of your name, who stripped of this name would be no more than Uri of Coalminer's Row."

Tinkari winced at that mention, which he had last heard rasped from the sooty lungs of his mother as she lay dying among the mining settlements that had sprawled west of Kalrim. If he had not been beau-

immediate demands and harm him however she sees fit should he refuse. Since Tinkari is rolling many Dice of Gold due to the longstanding support of his patrons, it's quite likely. And he knows how it works. He's got a narrow path to walk.

### **Vin makes a further demand**

If Tinkari refuses Vin's request, she is not bound to the agreement. And she's pretty unhappy about it, so the player who Knows the Will of the Names of the World is going to be keeping an eye on Tinkari. If his Immortal Dice of Gold outroll his Mortal Dice of Jet, she will have the opportunity to make

tiful and if Vin had not accepted him, Tinkari knew, he would still be in the mines, wheezing and starving and dying slowly like his parents and siblings and everyone he had left behind in Coalminer's Row when he was spirited away as a twelve-year-old initiate to the brothel in the city.

What did it mean to be stripped back to Uri again, he wondered. He was far from the coal mines, far away from Kalrim, twice as old as he was since the last time he touched coal. His Mother at the brothel had loved and raised him for longer years than the laborer in Coalminer's Row who gave birth to him, whose

face he often struggled to remember these days. If he abandoned his Great Name, how much of himself would dissolve with that sacrifice; what would remain?

"I should smite you this instant, Uri the Ungrateful." His Great Name broke his reflection. "But I am compelled. Without your service today, I may never return to Gilgish for another century or more. No visitor to that city ever brings a courtesan with them; no local Mother remains to recruit new initiates. The practice of courtesanship has vanished from Gilgish, and My Name withers with it."

"Then in the morning I go free?"

"If the void of the Underworld would please you more than the comforts of my servitude, so be it."

So Tinkari went to the largest inn in Gilgish, and spent his last coins to rent its least uncomfortable room and pay the innkeeper to spread the word. His humble quarters filled up quickly with citizens who had little other entertainment in town, and with relatives who had waited months for their dying to finally push off.

It was, without compare, the sorriest bunch of patrons Tinkari had ever entertained. His own stores of aphrodisiacs, delicately flavored oils, spices, and desserts had run out on the journey. His singing was

reedy at best, his jokes tiresome with overuse. But none of his new patrons complained, and for their payment they could hardly ask for more.

With each new patron Tinkari felt more beautiful, more powerful, more in his element, till he was no longer accepting worthless trinkets but one small deal at a time. He procured a deal from the third son of a wealthy merchant from Po to reinstate the shrine of Vin, and later he took another from his own innkeeper to allow the usage of his room as the quarters for any future courtesan who came along after he was gone. A noblewoman from Ubaid, who had spent seven months watching

**Tinkari gains some deals**

Fortunately, he has something that people come to him, wanting. Each time, he's rolling at least one strike, but what they actually have to offer isn't usually very much.

**Tinkari makes  
some deals worth  
remembering**

In these cases, he has made an enduring agreement, something that lasts beyond this moment. He may have had to offer more than he first offered, if they were of a mind to demand, but likely he is making these requests while his clients are very much at ease.

over her ailing husband in Gilgish and had no more coin to spare, cut him a deal to send an entourage of the choicest courtesans from her own harem as soon as she returned to her lands.

Just before daybreak Tinkari rose, bathed, and dressed. He walked over to the deserted shrine of Vin in the alleyway, and pressed his left palm against the sigil on the wall. When he took it away and wiped off the gunk on his shawl, there was no longer a sigil etched on his skin.

"Uri the Ungrateful," he said grinning, rubbing his other hand over his re-emerged fate lines, which would lead him to whatever lay ahead.



When Tinkari reached the funeral barge, Hanta was already sitting at the bow, staring at the water and murmuring. In the poor light, she looked like a statue cut out of rock.

"I thought you were getting a good night's sleep," Tinkari said.

Hanta stirred. "You know I can no longer take you on this barge. You shouldn't even be able to get aboard without being burned down by the sun."

"I made some new friends last night." Tinkari grinned. "One of them told me, no boat leaving from Gilgish can deny the request of a passenger seeking deliverance to

the Underworld. Usually they just shove off the corpses, but if a living person desires to make that journey, every boat must comply."

Hanta returned her gaze to the water. "I've been trying to reason with the Shoshe all night," she whispered, almost to herself. "I had been a pearl diver before I was a felon; rivers have always been kind to me. I worked at a different, smaller river, but the Languages of rivers are remarkably similar, as are their hearts. But there are some deals even the Shoshe cannot grant, especially this close to its mouth where its waters are so tainted with the currents of the Underworld. I could not

even dip my hands into the river as I spoke to it. All I could hear was a faint echo of its voice."

"About that." Tinkari pulled out a small vial from the folds of his sheath. "The passenger aboard any boat headed to the Underworld does have to pay for his passage. Anyone who's no longer the oars-bearer's concubine, that is."

"What is it?" Hanta stared from the vial to his unmarked hand.

"A rare unguent found among the river workers of Gilgish, the ones who load the dead onto their rafts and push them out to sea," Tinkari said. He tossed the vial at Hanta, as its viscous contents glittered a dark

red under the muted sky, like congealed blood speckled with stars. "It shields them from contact with the undercurrents of the Waters of the Underworld, whose slightest touch spells instant death. A patron was particularly pleased with me last night." He sounded not insufficiently pleased with himself. "Some people in these parts do understand the worth of a courtesan from Kalrim."

A wide grin split the face that Tinkari no longer hesitated to proclaim as his beloved. "You are such an incredible fool."

They unfurled the canopy of the barge, hiding them from the occasional river worker as they rubbed the

unguent on each other's body. Their skin bloomed with warmth wherever the glittering red grease soaked in, the chill mist in the air sizzling away from their bodies. After they made love — hurried, delighted — they lay on the cushions like they had done in warmer waters, no longer reaching for the shawls.

While Tinkari dressed, Hanta leaned over the edge of the boat and dipped both hands into the river. She murmured ancient words that he did not recognize.

By the time she lifted her hands, wiped them off, and took to the oars, he was beside himself with impatience. "So what's the plan?"

"We row to the Underworld." Hanta turned a solemn face to him. "I had told you, Tinkari, the Shoshe cannot possibly unmake the ancient deals forged with the sun, the Empire of Misr, or even the barge itself. You are still free to leave if you wish."

"Row on, then," he grimly replied.



It was half a day before Gilgish disappeared behind them. They hadn't traveled a great distance, but the mists had closed in fast. The Underworld loomed ahead — not so much a horizon but a pure void of black. There was no line between water and sky in that direction. No stir of wind or voice as they trav-

eled. Tinkari would've thought they had already made the crossing but for the floes and icy surface of the Shoshe that emerged from the blackness as the dim oil lamp at the bow of the barge illuminated them. Sweat sizzled off Hanta's bare arms as she broke the layers of ice with the oars. Black waters of the Underworld oozed in over them, dissolving the ice into the surrounding void as soon as they cracked it.

"Are you sure this barge is the right transport to take into the Underworld?" Tinkari wondered aloud. "Maybe we should've swapped for a sledge in Gilgish?"

"It's just this last part of the journey,

as long as we're still on the Shoshe. The Waters of the Underworld themselves are perfectly liquid. Beyond the crossing, it will be rowing as usual."

Hanta finally turned to look at him. Her eyes sparkled in the light of the lamp. "Why don't you make yourself useful and start packing the stuff under the canopy into the shawls? Everything except that wretched death mask; that thing gives me the creeps. Make sure it all fits into two tight bundles, and secure slings across the chest."

Tinkari was startled. "I... I can do that?"

"I would think securing knots were

among the skills of a courtesan, are they not?"

"But the deal with the sun?"

Hanta's chuckle broke the silence of the black waters. "Matters only as long as the sun's wrath can reach us."

Tinkari looked up at the sky, then around himself. Now that they had lost even the sickly twilight of Gilgish, there was not a trace of the sun anywhere.

His hands worked fast. How much of the world could possibly exist between the disappearance of the sun and the beginning of the Underworld?

"It is done," he announced.

Hanta withdrew her oars with a dull thunk and came to join him. She swung a bundle experimentally across her back, checking for the strength of the sling. "Impeccable! To tell you the truth, I never imagined we could get away with the treasures. My life was the best I had hoped for." She began to laugh as she looked closely around them. "Say, did you even strip the canopy and fold up the cloth in these bundles? Brutal, my no-longer-courtesan."

"That cloth is the finest dyed silk sewn with gold trimmings." Tinkari shrugged, lifting his own bundle. "But how does it matter? You're still bound to this wretched barge itself by yet

another inviolable oath. And I don't want to hear another word about leaving without you. Wouldn't know where to go anyway; fleeing from the gaping mouth of the Underworld wasn't one of the popular lessons at the Brothel of Kalrim."

"Let me see about that."

Hanta dipped her hands in the water and muttered again, then a triumphant smile appeared on her face.

She opened her eyes and winked at Tinkari. "I hope the lesson to hold your breath for a very long time was rather more popular."

A massive shard of ice pierced the barge from the bottom.

Tinkari squealed and nearly toppled into the water, bundle and all, as the frame of the stripped canopy keened over with a groan. "Stay close to the pedestal!" Hanta cried, as her calves flexed to remain upright on the wildly swaying surface. Horrified, Tinkari threw his arms around the pedestal of the Misri Emperor like he was a child embracing his mother. And then more shards broke in from below, tearing through the ropes and unpacking the reeds, and the barge began to dissolve in the abyssal waters.

Tinkari hit the water at the same time as he watched Hanta, almost in a fluid motion, lower something onto

a drifting ice floe. He splayed his arms and legs wildly as the waves rocked him, trying his best to avoid swallowing the void-like waters of the Underworld as they rushed through his nose and mouth. The mere touch of the water didn't kill him but the waters' stretch was unending. There was no longer anything to see, no direction to swim — their oil lamp had gutted with the destruction of the barge. For a second Tinkari was convinced that all was lost; all his plans had been in vain; Hanta had dissolved in the void like all other joy and light in his life; and when he made his way through the crossing, miserable and alone, there would

### **Hanta thieves from the Waters of the Underworld**

She rolls four strikes. She steals Tinkari and the Waters, fortunately, don't notice. At least for now.

be no gentle Vin waiting for him.

Then a familiar sinewy arm scooped him up from the water, a command of "Shut your eyes" wheezed at his ear, and a powerful thrust propelled him downwards, downwards.



When Tinkari woke he was inside a thatched hut. Hanta leaned over his bed, almost unrecognizable in the absence of her distinct Misri eye decoration, if only there were many others in the world with the same beauty and bearing of the oarsbearer. She wore a pair of fitted pants and a loose linen shirt.

He tried to speak and choked,

spitting up by the bedside. His vomit looked less like water than a curse: splutters of absolute blackness.

"Don't worry, I'd swallowed a lot of that gunk too." Hanta grinned. "Swimming in a river where it meets the ocean is not an easy feat, and the narrow deal I managed to cut with the Shoshe didn't provide much for comfort. Thankfully, your unguent from Gilgish was just the solution we needed."

"Did we... did we really escape the Underworld?"

"We never crossed over, or that would've been a different deal, and not one I might've the chips to make," Hanta said. "We were still in

the territory of the Shoshe when it let us off for a little something.”

“A little... what?”

“Well, the soul of the Emperor of Misr. Enshrined in his death mask, to be precise.” She laughed. “They shouldn’t be making those damned things in the first place. You were right: anyone who dies anywhere ends up in the Waters of the Underworld. But the wealthy and the powerful are always greedy to skip to the front of the line. If that puts their afterlife in the wrong hands, I’d say that’s quite well deserved.”

In the two moon-turns of their brief relationship, Tinkari had never seen

Hanta so cheerful. He winced as he slowly pieced together her words.

“You... delivered the deceased Emperor of Misr to the Shoshe, instead of sending him to the Underworld. I cannot even imagine the consequences that might have among the greatest powers that rule the world.”

“Then those powers can fight it out among themselves.” Hanta laughed, leaning over to kiss his mouth. “I am a mere lowly human. I kept all my deals — stayed on the barge to its end, didn’t plunder any treasures under the sun, didn’t keep a concubine longer than I could feed

him, even brought the river an unexpected gift that it would have never acquired on its own.”

Her breath smelled of roses and mint. “If I wished to remain in this village and ply my old profession of pearl diving, I suspect I may never lack for prodigal mollusks as long as I live. But I have a fancy to travel to Shabash and take up the leisurely life of an exotic foreign heiress. Maybe even bring a beautiful husband — one trained in his forsaken past in the Brothel of Kalrim seems like a particularly befitting candidate, since he might have to find a new occupation as well, and cities offer the widest

range of options for a man not insufficiently wealthy himself. What do you think?”

So Tinkari said, yes.

Yes, that would be very good indeed.



# THE MANY FISH OF THE SEA

by Simon Roy

**Simon Roy** is best known for his detailed, lush, lurid comics like *Prophet* and *Habitat*. It was the latter that caught my eye and held me in its bizarre arms until I'd completely absorbed it.

His story here tells the tale of Udebed, who came to life in one of Simon's illustrations and whom I immediately fell in love with. I hope you do, too.

**Ibarront was a man who always proved himself best.**

At the tender age of twenty-seven, he forged an alliance between the squabbling tribes of the Jemasi Mountains. He led this fractious mountaineer army down the slopes, to sweep like wildfire across the lowlands. At the head of this tribal alliance, only twenty-nine years old,

he captured the fortress and trading city of Mavka, the largest city built along the proud, dangerous river of the same name.

Women, too, were his domain, and their coy, paltry defenses were nothing compared to the fortress walls he had broken. His tribesmen rejoiced more yet at every of his victories!

### **The players**

This game has one Companion and one player who Knows the Will of the Names of the World.

### **Udebed**

Udebed is a Name-dealer. She knows the name of her donkey, Adada, who grants two Immortal Dice of Gold for being **Old** and **Inscribed** — the tattoos on her body mark treaties to which she has agreed. Adada wishes for Udebed to show her the roads of the world before she dies.

### **From whom do you flee?**

Ibarront is Udebed's pursuer, as described by Udebed's player as they introduce her.

Until Udebed, hard-headed and sharp-tongued, buxom and quarrelous, crossed his path. Udebed, an itinerant Namedealer, had traveled to Mavka in the wake of Ibarront's victory, eager to see what opportunities might lay in the ruins of a freshly broken city. But little meat was left on the bone after Ibarront's men had sated themselves, and the locals who had survived were not eager to add an opportunistic Namedealer to their woes.

Wallowing in the post-victory malaise that always seemed to strike him, the thought of conquering such a woman bolstered Ibarront's flagging mood. So, clad in a fine silk tunic,

with the former king's royal scepter — the bejeweled femur of the hero-founder of the city, the ball of the hip carved into the leering face of the four-eyed demon Julebageg — on his belt, Ibarront set out into his city to find her.

But scorn splashed across Udebed's face at such a man who presumed he had a place in her bed. There, in the rubble-strewn maidan, before all the traders, slaves, and even his own fellow tribesman, Udebed rolled her eyes and turned her shoulder! "I do not bed murderers who wear the clothes of their fresh-killed victims," she said lightly as she returned to her business.

### The introduction concludes

As soon as Ibarront's got magical aid that Udebed's player has described as her pursuer, They Who Know the Will of the Names of the World asks, "Where are you?"

**Udebed:** I'm still in the town of Mavka. No one douches me out of town.

**Names:** What do you and how do you appear?

Despite the murmurs of suppressed glee among the spectators, Ibarront kept his temper behind a mask of pride and solemnly retreated.

Udebed spurned his following attempt, her tongue cutting deeper with each retreat! Ibarront's mind raced feverishly — how could he maintain the respect of his men if this mere woman could resist him?

With the royal throne, Ibarront had inherited Grelka, a cruel old harridan who had served the former king in the reading of signs of the lowlands, and presented the anxious Ibarront with a path to victory. The great predator of the lowlands, the hyena, was a grave-robbing chief

of great sexual power. Ibarront must obtain the anus of such a creature, keep it in vermilion powder for a week as befitted its stature, then wear it as an amulet on his upper arm, and he would become irresistible to the lover he desired.

Thusly grimly equipped, Ibarront presented himself to Udebed once more. But this time, Udebed considered as she chewed the flatbread proffered by a baker who approved of her defiance of his conquerer, and relented. Soon they found themselves in the bedchambers of the palace.

After Ibarront collapsed into a deep slumber, exhausted by his own conquerous rutting, Udebed spoke

**Udebed:** I don't have clothes other than my traveling clothes. Tunic the color of the sky, skin the color of the earth, covered in tattoos that mark my Namedeals, like that with my donkey. I'm accepting a flatbread from a local baker who likes that I just dissed their conquerer.

**Names:** Who here joins you?

**Udebed:** The baker and Ibarront. Plus, we're in the town square on market day, so a lot of other people.

**Names:** Ibarront is wearing a vermilion-dyed anus of a hyena on his bicep amulet. He's smirking all cocky, like he has an ace up his sleeve.

**Udebed:** Huh! Do hyenas live here?

**Names:** Yeah, there's a huge pack of them that's been barking and howling from the valley for a week.

**Udebed:** Oh, I want to see where this goes. I'm down!

### The hyena's wishes

They Who Know, know — but haven't said — that Grelka already has a treaty with the hyena chief. The hyena chief, though, does not know that Grelka has plotted her death. Grelka wants to get to the hyena before the hyena gets to her, and in the process is making a treaty with Ibarront.

### Udebed's name

Bashubet isn't her real name, but maybe Udebed isn't either. She certainly knows better than to give an undead, resentful hyena chief her real name.

### Udebed's thievery

Tzashut wants Udebed to succeed, so she gives her three Dice of Gold to Udebed: **Big**, because even a lesser hyena is big; **Mighty**, because she is queen by rite of combat; and **Old**, because she has borne a hundred twins. Udebed rolls them and gets three strikes.

She takes one destiny and then chooses **You take what was theirs, claiming it for your own** and **They do not know you took it, for now**. She leaves behind **You are not harmed** because no one here can harm her. She walks out, shushing a guard conspiratorially, rolling to escape with seven dice and getting one strike. She chooses **You get away** and leaves **Your escape goes unwitnessed** and **Seize one destiny!**

### Udebed's offer

Queen Tzashut has no reason to hide what she wants here, and she's used to people doing what she wants because she's a queen. Udebed rolls her two Mortal Dice of Jet and the two Immortal Dice of Gold granted by her **Old, Inscribed** donkey and gets one strike. She chooses **They agree to do as you ask in exchange** and can't choose more, so she doesn't know if Tzashut considers this an enduring agreement, but will surely find out. Tzashut forgoes asking for more because this gets her what she wants.

to the amulet that had so sweetly charmed her from beneath his tunic's sleeve. "You, who have so swayed my heart. I am Bashubet, and I would treat with you."

The amulet spoke: "I am Queen Tzashut, and I have lived for a hundred years to find myself on the arm of this fetid ape who thinks himself a king. I am queen of the lowland tribes, ruler of the all the Hyena clans of the Mavka Valley. But this one killed me and disincorporated me from my whole. My clans are unruly and upset, with their queen's honor violated. Even my body still roams the grassy banks of the Mavka, restless and vengeful.

And how could I rest while this killer lives, safe behind his fortress walls, unpunished for the dishonor he has inflicted on me and my clans?"

Udebed pondered this, then spoke. "If you would slide from Ibarront's arm, and lend me your charms, I would reunite you with your unquiet corpse. Then, perhaps, we could both find a fitting punishment for this hateful mountaineer."

Ibarront awoke the next morning to find himself alone and unadorned, both of which were untenable. This time, when he rode to find Udebed, he clad himself in armor and wore his father's bronze-headed axe. Finery wasn't appropriate for an execution.

### Ibarront's response

They Who Know sees that Ibarront won't try to cover this up. And because Udebed didn't choose **Your escape goes unwitnessed**, he's hot on her heels.

Udebed's donkey, always a reluctant traveler, had been loath to rise so early, until Udebed had explained the situation. Under cover of darkness, the two of them had made good progress. But, as the sun rose higher in the sky, it became clear that she had not put enough footprints between herself and Ibarront.

His pursuit was raising a great cloud of dust, visible between Udebed and the distant city walls on the horizon. With a tight, anxious frown, Udebed swatted her donkey on the rump, urging it to flee.

At the dilapidated temple that once served as the tollgate upon the now-dilapidated docks, the lonely priest-guard urged her to make an

### The donkey's assistance

Adada grants Udebed Immortal Dice of Gold even they're not together because they have an enduring agreement. However, Adada can only do things like give sardonic commentary or bite her enemies while she is close because those are the powers a donkey has. If she were present and Udebed did something to offend her, Udebed would only be exposed to her subsequent coercion if they were together. It's a good thing they have a pretty good relationship.

### Udebed's deal with the river Mavka

The priest can tell Udebed is in a hurry, but recognizes one of her own and doesn't like the dust cloud that is approaching, and doesn't want to be between the two of them, whoever they are. She tells Udebed that the river wants to

offering to the river. The Mavka, who longed to again wear a string of glorious vessels ridden by hierophants and hero-kings upon her back, made her promise to describe its beauties that they might return. She promised, donning the same inscribed blue ribbon worn by the priest, in its honor, if only it would help her escape. She slipped into the Mavka.

And thusly, as she was swept downriver, the current brought her to a deep, still pool. There, in the pool's wall, was a passage, scarcely wide enough for her shoulders to pass.

Scrabbling up the passage, her lungs crying out for air, she burst into an open cavern.

be known far away so that beautiful ships will sail upon its back once again. Udebed makes the offer, gets three strikes, and chooses **They agree to do as you ask in exchange** and **They make no further demand before accepting this agreement**. She pockets the third strike as destiny.

### Udebed escapes

That dust cloud was going to catch her next, so she has to keep outrunning it. As soon as she jumps in the water she rolls her dice and gets two strikes, choosing **You get away** and **Seize one destiny!**

She marveled at the vastness of the space, lit by a handful of humble clay oil lamps, set upon the moist rocks and sodden earth.

There, resting on a mostly dry carpet between the lamps was a despondent Djueg youth. Udebed had only heard tell of these water-people, and was taken aback by the sight of him. His scales were as smooth as his muscles; his small, flat nose made his eyes seem large; and his gaze was much warmer than she expected from one whose flesh was surely cool to the touch.

The mer-man cast a gaze of graceful resignation her way. "Who are you? Another pawn of cruel fate,

here to dash my hopes?"

Slowly, Udebed's eyes adjusted to the dull light, and more details of the mer-man's hollow came into focus. Here, a gleaming sword and gilded cup; there, a wet, scorched banner, marked with the sigils of the Jemasi, obscured by a pile of empty wine amphorae...

"I am but a farmer's wife," lied Udebed. "But who are you, treasure-laden and hiding from the world?"

The mer-man rolled away from her sulkily. "Buejad the fool, who thought he could love a land-dweller. Leave me, farmer's wife! I came to this den to nurse a wounded soul, not

to entertain the local field-workers.”

Emboldened by the mer-man’s pitiful demeanor, Udebed wetly shuffled to an unencumbered boulder near him and sat down. “If I could, I would, o noble Buejad. But I would not have come here if my situation were not dire.”

Buejad perked up, a tiny bit. “Dire?”

Udebed looked at him carefully. “The mountaineers have taken Mavka, and their king is looking for me with murder in his heart.”

“But why would a king want to kill a farmer’s wife?”

Udebed shrugged. “He wanted to possess me, and I refuse to be

possessed. My refusal shamed him, and he must save face.”

“Bah — these warriors are all alike! Thirsty for glory. Obsessed with control.” Buejad turned over to face her. “Unable to see what’s right in front of them...”

The mer-man’s lingering, dark-eyed gaze quickened Udebed’s pulse. Nervously, in the Language of Names, she spoke to the amulet. “I have no need of a lover, o Queen Tzashut — you needn’t bewitch him on my behalf.”

The amulet spoke, in a tremulous voice, “My vermilion powder was washed off in the waters of the Mavka, oh Bashubet!” What

romantic potency the amulet had  
was lost. Buejad's arousal was all  
his own.

Udebed was torn. To find love here,  
in the sodden den of a mer-man, with  
a murderous tyrant hot on her heels,  
was simply too absurd. But there was  
an earnestness about the mer-man...  
and a certain muscularity...

But the lusty pause was broken by  
muffled voices from the other end of  
the cave.

Udebed turned to Buejad,  
alarmed. "Does this cavern have  
another entrance?"

Buejad sprang to his feet,  
concern playing across his smooth,  
scaled visage. "This cavern's mouth

collapsed during the summer floods.  
It should be impassible!"

But there, grunting ferociously,  
shunting aside stone and soil alike,  
was Ibarront! Looking for all the  
world like an enraged, filth-covered  
khacma, he slid out of the tunnel he  
had forced through the soil, and  
hatefully glared first at Buejad, then  
at Udebed. Without returning his  
gaze to the youth, he said, "Buejad.  
I should have guessed you would be  
behind this."

Udebed slowly looked between  
the two, a tight, uncomfortable  
grimace slowly disfiguring her face.  
"You two... know each other?"

Buejad, his expression quivering

between anguish and fury, shot a glance back at her. "This is the beast who broke my heart!"

Incredulous, Udebed looked skeptically at Ibarront. "No. What — what could you possibly see in this turd-eating ruffian?"

Buejad, blinking away tears with his translucent Djueg eyelids, looked crestfallen. "I can't help it." He turned, locking eyes with Udebed. "I can't resist a bull-headed landwalker."

"Enough." Ibarront strode across the room, pushing past Buejad with a moment's smoldering glance, and grabbed Udebed's arm with a grip only slightly lessened by the exhaustion of digging. "Dead or alive,

you'll return to the palace."

Before Udebed had time to move, Buejad's fist flew between her and Ibarront, thudding the surprised Ibarront across his expansive chin. Leading with his toned shoulder, Buejad threw him down into the damp soil. He leapt onto the soil-covered torso of the king, and shouted in his face, "It hasn't been three weeks since you cast me aside, and you're already trying to break another? *Have you no heart?*"

As Buejad grabbed for his throat, Ibarront's massive paws easily seized his webbed hands. "A king takes what he wants, when he wants it!" Drawing Buejad close, he hissed,

“And when he tires of something, he throws it away.”

Udebed raised the mutilated queen before her eyes and whispered, in the Language of Names, “O queen, that—”

With this, Ibarront levered his feet beneath the mer-man’s midriff and cast him across the cavern, catching Udebed’s leg from under her. Still covered in mud and soil, Ibarront scrambled up and turned his cruel, panting countenance toward Udebed as she furiously whispered to Ibarront’s grotesque amulet from the dirt floor. But Ibarront grasped her throat with his meaty fingers and raised her to her feet, cutting off her whispers.

Udebed struck at Ibarront’s arms and face, but he was unmoved until Buejad’s slighter arms appeared about his neck. The three fell to the earth, the two men a heap of thrashing, striking limbs and Udebed scrambling backward, gasping to regain her voice.

As the two men wrestled furiously — the lean, slippery Buejad and the powerful but tired Ibarront — Udebed’s desperate eyes cast an appraising look around the cave. The passage to the river was only a few paces away, and without much more trouble, she could simply flee these two quarreling dolts. But, as she turned to slip down the passage,

#### **Udebed’s whispers**

Udebed here rolls zero strikes! She is harmed by Ibarront grabbing her throat, crossing off one of her two Mortal Dice of Jet. If she loses another, she will die. He doesn’t know that the amulet is anything more than a love charm, so it doesn’t occur to him to seize it instead, though he could have if he were a smarter guy. Even if she is able to recover, her voice will forever-after have a raspy, gravelly quality.

### Udebed takes direct action

Implicitly, she's coercing Ibarront into releasing Djeeg. She doesn't have to say it. She rolls one strike and chooses **You are not harmed** so she doesn't die, since she just lost one Mortal Die of Jet in the last roll. But she doesn't like that outcome one bit and burns all of her destiny, rolling three destiny dice, getting one more strike and choosing **You may make a demand of them, or**

the martial contest behind her took a turn. Ibarront had inevitably gained the upper hand, and, with his knee pushing viciously into Buejad's spine, was getting closer and closer to breaking the panicking mer-man in half.

Udebed's eyes closed, but only for a moment. Then, with a look of resignation and resolve, she seized Buejad's sword from its place amidst the mud and treasure, held it point-down as a dagger, and strode towards Ibarront and Buejad's grim theatrics.

Just then, as she raised the blade above Ibarront's muddy, crazed head, the ground shuddered, and a

horrid, grating cackle pealed from the tunnel Ibarront had torn through the collapsed cave-mouth. The amulet let out a shrill wail: "I am here!"

And with that, the great, grizzled, fetid muzzle of Queen Tzashut erupted from the wall, her eyes crawling with flies, her lips consumed by vultures to sharpened bone splashed with the crimson dye of Ibarront's fiercest warriors. Her dead, milky eyes gazed through their film of maggots into Ibarront. In a macabre imitation of Ibarront's own entry to the cavern, the great hyena dragged herself through the crumbling wall of the tunnel, raising herself to greater and greater height.

**else you may harm them.** Ibarront would rather take the blow — he has a name, so he can take one without consequence, be at her mercy if he takes a second, and certainly die if he takes a third. Her player says to They Who Know the Will, "Now would be a great time for Tzashut to lend a hand!"

Ibarront's jaw opened slackly and he rose to his feet, reaching for the axe at his waist for the first time.

In less than a moment, Udebed rolled the amulet from her arm and tossed it across the cavern, where the queen caught it in her great teeth. Then, with all her might, Udebed delivered a kick to the side of Ibarront's knee.

As he rolled, stunned, across the cavern floor, Udebed seized Buejad, dragged him to the river passage, and unceremoniously threw him in. Sparing only a single glance over her shoulder — and seeing the hyena queen, finally standing to her full leonine height, lunging toward

the abdomen of the bewildered Ibarront — she dove into the water.

In the week that followed, a brief, ugly, petty war of succession broke out among Ibarront's tribesmen, and their grand army spent its might on proving itself. Each clan retreated to its own redoubt, high in the Jemasi Mountains. Buejad and Udebed found comfort in each other's company for a few days more, but eventually their flame sputtered and they parted ways.

Over the following days, her donkey emerged from the desert, a fresh scar upon his muzzle and upon his worn saddle a large, wild ktesh, smugly ruffling its feathers. From the

donkey's saddle thrust proudly the Royal Scepter of Mavka — albeit a bit worse for wear.

When Udebed turned her ear toward it, softly as a draft in a mau-soleum, the scepter spoke.

"After centuries of abuse by these tyrants, my strength fails. Soon I will come apart, and crumble into so much dust. But before that happens, I want to kill just one more of these men. You, who would defy Ibarront — I have glory for you, if you would serve me."

Udebed took a moment to regard the scepter, the donkey, and her new feathered companion. She thought back to her homeland, and the

hard-eyed men who even now still dreamed of getting their hands on her throat.

Plucking the scepter from the saddlebag, Udebed gave it a long hard look. "As far as tyrants — would a tribal chieftain do?"



# HEAVY THE HEAD

by Shel Kahn

**Shel Kahn** is best known for her direct tutelage at the knee of Conan of Cimmeria while he lived in Toronto, an experience she chronicled in her autobiographical comic *By Crom*.

When she agreed to write this story for me, inspired by a Celtic folktale, I was elated to have one of her prestigious lineage contributing to this humble volume, and her answers to the question, "What is best in life?"

**Udrim was a wise queen** who ruled alongside two kings in the grassland kingdom of Ubrek. She rose to queendom after a life spent accompanying her half-sibling, the fated hero Jolmulik, on their great deeds. But great deeds do not make a ruler, and where Udrim had learned great skills of oration,

of combat, of stoicism, she had not yet learned patience, or to see each small problem within the kingdom as part of the health of the whole. Once she was queen, she was overwhelmed with the requests of service, of guidance, of gifts, and of worship. Her two kings were not so burdened, sharing power as they

## **Playing Udrim**

Udrim is one of three Companions in this tale. Kolhar and Amlada are also present, and the players who portray them Know the Will of the Names of the World for each other.

Play begins with Amlada's player asking the other two questions, asking Udrim if she can portray her daughter once she's born.

**Udrim**

She is sent by the grasses themselves to rule Ubrek. Its people were once herders of mammoth, but now they comprise a proud city that has forgotten the ways of the steppe. Kolhar speaks for them. Her trophy is the city itself.

**Kolhar**

She's on the run from Chief Kinin, who wants to conquer cities and grind them to grassland to feed the fierce zebras upon which his people ride. Kolhar didn't want to be party to his brutality any longer and resigned precipitously. She is aided by the grasslands.

did, and gave her only patronizing smiles to salve her shortening temper, her graying curls, and the frustration that weighted her bones.

When Udrim chose to become pregnant, her daughter proved strong, perhaps stronger than Udrim, and the burdens of queendom became too heavy alongside the growing weight of her nascent heir. As she stared across the plains at dawn after another sleepless night, her furrowed brow told her kings that she would not persist thus. Udrim required help — help they were not able to provide. She would need to find another queen to rule alongside her; she would need to find a

good queen whom she could trust and respect.

So she sent word by messenger upon the roads and rivers and across the grasses to summon Kolhar, the powerful Namedealer who had shared a road with Udrim and her sibling when they had been young and worn their scars with more pride.

When Kolhar arrived at her court wrapped in a cloak of woven grass and reeds from across the realms, their straw sandals with dried flowers dangling from the strings dusted to white from their long travels, Udrim hesitated. She stared at length into Kolhar's dark-rimmed eyes, looking for a sign that this person could

### **Kolhar's die roll**

Kolhar has two Dice of Jet and the grasslands give them six Dice of Gold for being **Mighty, Big, Old, Beautiful, Known to All**, and **Inscribed** in the weaving of her cloak. Kolhar sees Udrim as benefiting from the arrangement, and is **Mighty**, though she doesn't personally trust her yet, so Udrim has to spend two destiny and add them to understand her plight. While their eyes still kept secrets from Udrim, Kolhar's lined face, bent back, and hands marked with the tattoos of a life of many debts gave her the answers she was looking for, and so Kolhar and Udrim formed a contract: The Namedealer took her to a field of especially wise grasses and negotiated with them for her, in exchange for a promise of the most esteemed position at her court to spend the end of their days in luxury.

And so the pregnant Udrim stood in a field of whispering grasses that asked her questions as they gently brushed the tassels of her scarves, and Kolhar spread their hands out

to Kolhar's roll. Kolhar rolls and gets three strikes, choosing **They agree to do as you ask in exchange**, asking for "the most-esteemed position in your court," and **Their agreement endures**. Udrim could make a further demand, but is getting what she wants. Kolhar takes a destiny for her extra strike.

among the tips of the grass and began to sway with them in time. As if made by the grasses themselves, a great wind swirled up from the ground, spiraling chaff and dead leaves and dust into Udrim's eyes, and whistling in her ears as she strained to hear the whispers of the grass and the low, insistent voice of the Namedealer.

So harsh grew the dust, she could not keep her eyes open; the wind roared in her ears and she felt herself lifted almost off her feet — then knocked forward onto her hands. The grasses grabbed at her arms and legs, at her face, and then, while her eyes still squeezed against

### **Kolhar's treaty with the grasslands**

They ask the grasslands to make the people of Ubrek recognize them as queen, and to make Udrim and her child safe in the grasslands. This is the grasslands' solution.

the tumult, the grasses fell away swiftly, as if all had dropped to the ground at her feet. Finally the wind calmed to a gentle breath, and she heard Kolhar the Namedealer say — with a changed voice — “Udrim, it is done.”

And she opened her eyes and saw before her, identical in all ways, herself. The Namedealer had been transformed by the grasslands’ ancient wisdom into Udrim’s shape; not one grayed curl was out of place. They smiled at Udrim, who went to reach out to them and found herself lifting, not a hand, but a long, furred, muscular trunk. In surprise, she snorted through it, making

a deep, brassy sound that raised into a question.

The Namedealer smiled up at her from her old face and said, “You sought another queen to take on your burdens; I sought a comfortable station for the rest of my days walled from those who pursued me; and my patrons, these wise and lonely grasses, have long sought a wise monarch of their own, one in a form that suits this cold and windy realm. And so you see, we have all gotten what we seek!”

Udrim found her tongue finally, large and strange behind the trunk and nestled between two ivory tusks. “You have done me wrong,

### Udrim coerces

Udrim rolls her two Mortal Dice of Jet and the five Immortal Dice of Gold that have made her mighty — **Mighty, Generous, Known to All, Present in Eidolon**, and **Beautiful**. But Kolhar, too, rolls dice for the grasslands. In fact,

Namedealer, and you know it!” She started forward to use her new size to intimidate, but Kolhar smiled as they swiftly bowed backward, their straw cloak lifting unnaturally in the wind and grass.

“Don’t be a fool! I might yet change you back, and who else could do that for you? Be patient, perhaps your queendom is not to my tastes — simply wait a few days, and try on your new skin.”

And so the Namedealer went back to Udrim’s kingdom wearing her face, and told the court they had lost their child in the grasslands, and was a dedicated monarch, eager to sit on a warm throne draped

she has the treaty woven into her cape, so she gains Immortal Dice of Gold for the **Inscribed** name of the Grasslands as well as those for it being **Old** because it has been here since the Age of Giants; **Beautiful** for the waves of grass that glitter in the sun; **Big** because so few have

with rugs and dispense favors and service and worship to all who came calling for it. The two kings were so relieved to have their queen back that they never questioned her change in attitude.

Udrim may have simply sought vengeance if she had not been on the cusp of motherhood, but her strong daughter would wait no longer and was born among the whispering grasses, a reddish tint to her fur and a glint of human wisdom in her proboscidean eye. Udrim dreamt of her palace, of her kings, but the grasslands courted her with their many tenants, small mammals and buzzing clouds and winged hunters,

seen its expanse; and **Mighty** for the many mighty beasts who stride its plains, and for the many skeletons reminding all that its fecund soil is made of the flesh of untold creatures and Earthen-Beings who have become lost therein.

who would sing to her in the heat of the day and whisper lullabies under the stars. She would smile as her eyes scanned the horizon from twice the height of their previous position, and knew this was a true opportunity to safely raise her daughter. Udrim named her ginger-coated daughter Amlada, for she grew up sturdy and patient and wiser than her years and her form. And so Udrim and Amlada grew into their roles as queen and crown princess of the wild, wise grasslands, settling the disputes, performing the necessary worship and service, and defending their borders with a growing herd of mammoths, who knew a wise woman when they

saw one, and expressed their gratitude in low songs, friendly bumping, and tirelessly delivered fruits and delicacies of the region. Amlada grew wiser with each year, and when she was twenty-six years old she said to her mother:

“Queen, I hear an old human approaching us from a great distance. They walk slowly, and they are whispering to the grasses.”

Udrim knew that this was Kolhar the Namedealer, come back finally after years of service.

“Namedealer,” she said to her old form, now bent under the trials of time, “what do you seek now in my great kingdom?”

### **Amlada**

Her ancestor is her own mother, who charges her with ruling the city of Ubrek. Her trophies are the cloaks of scholar and warrior.

"I am old, Udrim, and the kings have died, and your true home crumbles into disarray as I am weakened by age and by distance from my good patron, the whispering grasses. I would change you back now, and send you home to make right all that has been done."

But Udrim was also older, and wiser, and knew that ruling a human kingdom was no longer her destiny. She turned to Amlada.

"Daughter, it is as I told you; our human homeland falls into disarray as a result of the cruel meddling of this Namedealer. I cannot abandon these grasslands; they have taught me peace, but you are young,

and strong, and wiser than I was at your age: do you desire the path of the queen?"

And Amlada did desire a new path, for she had wondered her whole life about the human kingdom her mother had left behind for the singing breezes.

And so the Namedealer asked another boon of the grasses, and this time they were content to accommodate after so many years of prosperity under their fine queen. And so Amlada was changed to a human form, taller than Udrim had been, her hair a dark reddish brown, and her face somehow more expressive than most women of her realm.

Kolhar dressed her in the patterned red shawls of a scholar, and the white wolfen furs of a warrior, but neither could entirely hide the glint of proboscidean wisdom in her human eye.

And so Amlada set forth with the Namedealer to take her place on the human throne; and Kolhar the Namedealer spent their last year retired to a nomadic life among the whispering grasses, whom they had served so well; and Udrim grew old slowly, in the way that mammoths do, and bore mammoth children to guide the grasslands' wild kingdom after her, and saw her daughter in the fine summer months when

Amlada would visit to lie among the whispering grasses and learn more secrets from them and from her mother.





# ESCAPE FROM THE CATACOMB OF THE BULL

by Joshua A.C. Newman

## Galil and the Gulabadam

The Gulabadam is a refugee from a story you know well, aided by a companion fleeing the same tale; if she hadn't joined him, she'd have to have taken flight a different way completely, risking the harsh light of day.

## The Gulabadam sat at the newborn campfire

ruminating, his prodigious jaw slowly grinding at the plain barley flatbread that he found so delicious. His tail wrapped around his waist, sitting in his lap like a pet, and his huge, bovine eyes glittered in the firelight and dawn gloaming.

## Galil, The Gulabadam, and Tamesh Ushar

This is a three-player game, so each Companion's player Knows the Will of the Names of the World frequently. The Gulabadam, at the urging of the River Mother Zush — through the voice of Galil — demands he lay waste to unjust kingdoms that she might rid the world of unjust kings.

To eat human flesh is to sustain a curse, and the Minotaur of Minos was so cursed so that he could never overthrow his father as king. Galil is playing the part of Daidalos, who, rather than consenting to the king's horrific edict, instead takes it upon herself to use her craft in the interest of helping the monster to achieve his heroic destiny.

Even sitting, he was as tall as his standing companion, a slight woman called Galil, who dexterously removed first the small square banner from her back, then her writing implements from a thigh-sized, leather-topped box with her one good hand and the stump that had once been her left forearm,

River Mother Zush is **Feared** for her floods and droughts, **Old, Beautiful, Mighty,** and **Known to All**, granting the Gulabadam five Immortal Dice of Gold. The Gulabadam carries an axe made of the jaw of Adanu Nagog, the Fire Onager. It is **Old, Mighty, Big,** and **Known to All**, granting four more Mortal Dice of Jet, giving the Gulabadam a total of six.

### The Named-Ones who aid Galil

Galil carries with her the aid of several Named-Ones. The banner on her back has a single character, Godeh — “Hill, High, Ruler.” She carries it to fulfill a promise to a hill that had once been the forehead of a Giant, that it might be remembered. The Giant gives Galil four Immortal Dice of Jet for being **Old, Mighty, Big**, and, thanks to the banner, **Inscribed**. It wants her to tell its story, which she fails to do in this tale. That might come back to bite her later!

She also has with her the sandal and greave of Kasheb, a recently dead hero who clings to the Earthen Firmament only by haunting this last piece of their possessions. The greave is **Beautiful** and **Mighty**. It wishes to see the demise of Ludab, the son of King Ludash, who together slew Kasheb.

Finally, aiding her — though in the hands of her friend, The Gulabadam — she has with her the jaw of Adanu Nagog, the Fire Onager, who grants her four Immortal Dice of Gold for being **Old, Mighty, Big**, and **Known to All**. So, in addition to her two Mortal Dice of Jet, Galil rolls *ten* Immortal Dice of Gold. That’s pretty good as long as none of them turn on her!

pierced with a ring from which hung a tiny, wrought-silver hand. She sat, crossing her legs, and removed the bronze greave and sandal that formed her left calf. The sandal flopped, lifeless, to the sand before her, and she lifted it reverently with her right hand aided by the stump of her left, putting it in the box as though it were a sleeping child. She repeated this with the greave, tying the box’s leather thongs to keep the lid tight. With her right hand, she massaged the stump where the greave had formed her knee as though it were a tired calf, relieving it after the night’s long walk.

The Gulabadam handed her

a piece of dry flatbread without a word. “Thank you,” she said flatly, removing a small piece of cured meat from a fold in her clothes. Combining the two, she joined the Gulabadam in silent rumination. The Gulabadam handed her the remains of the skin of water and she accepted it, drinking in the cold of the night.

“We have to find water tomorrow,” said Galil, returning the near-empty skin.

The Gulabadam nodded his expanse of head, and then emphasized in his deep, soft baritone, “Yes.” Galil felt his voice in her chest, despite the soft tone. The Gulabadam could empty ten skins of

water or wine and could consume fifty flatbreads in a day. Travel with him had challenged them both, but the warmth and shelter he provided with his enormous body had protected her well.

The Gulabadam's inhalation sounded like the rush of a waterfall. He spoke with slow deliberation. "I am leery of Father-King Abzur's spies. They had no reason to be in the village Daleb but to seek us. Crushing them will not be enough. I think they know that we travel to Argish. We may find that his guard there lies in wait."

Galil nodded. "I have hidden you for three years, Gulabadam,

child of the river of Zush and the queen Anash. It may be time to face those who have pursued us with such jealous zeal. They no doubt fear spilling your blood lest Father-King Abzur lose his protection. But they know that you will defend me, and will use me as a weapon against you."

The Gulabadam made a sound like the wind rushing through a deep wadi. He looked away. "I will protect you," he said.

"And I, you," said Galil, her eyes unwaveringly seeking his. Finally, he looked back. Each of his eyes was the size of her right fist, and as brown, shining like an agate through the fine

white fur that covered his skin. Scars dotted his face. Scars from arrows, from slingstone, from khopesh, from dagger, from spear. His right horn — adorned with the armband of Prince Mushul, whose love for the Gulabadam caused him to betray his own father unto his own demise — lacked its point. His black nose, now dry in the desert heat, bore a scar from Hafyush, who coveted his skull for a standard to bring honor to her tribe, and to gain her proper place at the side of her father and chief. Instead, she had inherited the tribe when the Gulabadam had struck the father from his saddle with the very skull he had coveted.

His might — or the cunning of Galil — had ensured that each wound had scarred, rather than exhausting his life. She had pledged to the river Zush; and to Zoram, the perfect bull, betrothed of the river who wished to meet his destiny in her; and to the Queen of Cattle Anash whose husband was Abzur, but whose lover was the bull, that she would help him achieve his great destiny.

And now, only five years later, he who stood the height of two men; he, who had defeated Mumadak, first son of Mumadam, and returned to his father the son's head in return for an honor-bound promise to turn

over the tutelage of his other children to the subtle and beautiful Namedealer, Dareb.

The first rays of the desert sun cracked over the horizon as the two finished erecting their simple tent, little more than an abaya draped over the Gulabadam's axe, an enormous jawbone hafted upon a staff of ash, angled to protect them from the desert sun while they slept.

They awoke as the sun began to recede. The hard sand was still warm, but the air felt cool on Galil's skin as it ruffled her layers of desert clothing that had once been white, patterned with indigo in the Desertman fashion, but was now

the uniform gray-brown of the sand around them. As the Gulabadam's bulk lifted itself from slumber, he snorted, blowing dust from his nostrils. He rose, and then, lifting his staff, pulled up the simple tent, and wrapped it around his body as protection from the ever-present sand. Soon, the air would be cold as the sky — now the color of the hidden indigo of the abaya — darkened.

The Gulabadam held out the flaccid waterskin to Galil. She shook her head. "Drink."

"So little will do nothing for me. But for you, it is plenty."

She tried to refuse, but found her thirst as compelling as his reason.

"Thank you," she said, and she drained the last of the skin.

Galil looked at the sky to check the location of the stars, asking the Hunter in the Language of Names to show the way, offering the constellation its customary dedication of a night of drunkenness and tale-telling so that others might remember the name Lubakesh. The constellation, as each time in the past, consented. Galil pointed across the desert in the direction of Lubakesh's gesture. "Argish lies in that direction," she said.

The Gulabadam nodded his broad head, and they began to walk.

They could smell water long

before the river glinted in the moonlight. Their skin drank in the moisture.

When they reached softer ground, dotted with leafy plants, they did not — could not — speed their steps, but their feet rose and fell with happier rhythm. Finally, they could smell the city from downstream, the shit and garlic, the smell of dead animals mixed with the smells of beer and bread. The redolence of wealth wafted to them along with smells of poverty and desperation.

When they reached the bank, they did not disrobe, but instead dropped their burdens and strode into the cool water, feeling the dust detach itself from their skin and

clothes, falling away as thick scales of mud. Both drank deep when they were far enough into the river to do so. No words crossed their lips while Galil removed her leg, placing it gingerly upon the shore with the rest of her clothes as they refreshed themselves.

Soon, the two were conversing in the rising dawn, their cracked voices regaining their rumbling baritone and wry rasp.

Finally, their deep thirsts slaked, they started toward the shore, but, turning their eyes theretoward, saw crouched a woman of small stature, muscled like the Gulabadam himself. Across her broad back was slung

a bronze-headed axe, and upon her head, pulled back to ease her vision, was a bronze helmet, crested with bristles of red and white, its face painted with fearsome eyes in the same colors. The skin of her face was graven in raised brands formed to the sacred letters of the Language of Names with the words of her dire promise:

***I, Tamesh Ushar, slay monsters and fell armies for the glory of Balaabur, Who Writhes Beneath the Soil.***

Tamesh Ushar toyed idly with the belongings of the two: the sloughed-off burdens of Galil's writing implements and the Gulabadam's

for its gift is barley and teff, grapes and sesame; and Earthen-Being does not know the soil? Additionally, Tamesh Ushar wears upon her head a helmet taken from a defeated rival who was **Mighty** and **Known to All**, and carries upon her back the ancestral bronze-headed axe given her by her mother that is **Old** and **Mighty**. In total, Tamesh Ushar rolls four Immortal Dice of Gold and six Mortal Dice of Jet, counting the two granted by her body and name.

#### **Tamesh Ushar**

She's a Fated Hero, serving **Balaabur, Who Writhes Beneath the Soil**.

Balaabur — through the voice of Ushar's mother Lutash — grants Ushar dice for being **Feared**, for Balaabur loathes nothing so much as armies that crush it beneath their feet and so grows plants strong with their blood; **Mighty**, for armies fall when the land refuses to feed them; **Generous**,

onager-jawed staff, as well as the tattered cloak that had served as their meager shelter in the blazing sun and Galil's bronze leg.

Galil felt the ripples as the Gulabadam raised himself to his full height. She spoke before he could.

"Courageous Tamesh Ushar," began Galil, "I know of your task, and I promise you will find no quarry here."

Tamesh Ushar rose to her full height, no taller than the middle of Galil, and said, "I tracked here an army in pursuit of the Man-Bull. Since I see their dust yet on the horizon, I see I have beaten them in their chase."

The Gulabadam snorted. The rumble of his voice was quieted by the calm that overtook him each time he faced death, and he said, "You will find no monsters here but the one you make."

Tamesh Ushar's laugh was cruel. "Your words are wise, monster," she said, "I would see if your back is strong for a sage."

Galil searched her memory and could not recall the name of this river into which they had fallen, so exhausted. Her voice, lost in the sounds of lapping water, spoke to the river in which they yet stood. "River, I would thank you for saving the life of my ward and me. I am

Galil, and this is the Gulabadam, child of one of your kind, the River Zush, far from here. What might we do to repay you?"

The river's voice in her ear was like a giggling child. "Oh, little Earthen-Being! How polite, how cultured you are to introduce yourself to the River Pash! But now you fill my waters with your offal and your diseases. I would that you take yourself from me and cease the indignities you visit upon me by the city below! Remove their walls, their cesspit, their fields, and absolve me of my ill-gotten promises to their priests and I will aid you."

"Ah," Galil stammered, "I will do

all that is within my power to aid you in this."

"Others have promised me this," sighed the river. "If you make good your word, then I will aid you until I must carry you to the Waters of the Underworld."

Galil's attention was brought back forcefully as the two heroes rushed at each other. The rushing wake of the Gulabadam stole her footing and she fell below the waters of the river.

The Gulabadam, free of the indifferent water, charged not for Tamesh Ushar, but past her, to his onager-jawed weapon. And he had almost seized it when Ushar's tiny frame — her helmet now lowered to cover her

face, its painted eyes flashing glee at the closing of battle — bounded first up his thigh, then under his grasping arm to snatch the prized weapon, the jaw of Adanu Nagog, the Fire Onager, in her own grasp.

She found the haft too great for her own hand to wield, so she heaved the weapon over Galil's gasping form into the river, which swallowed it.

But the Gulabadam found himself with the haft of Ushar's axe across his throat. His expanse of hands grasped at the stubborn twig as she stood upon his broad back, pulling the axe from either side of his horned head.

Enraged, the Gulabadam threw his head forward to buck her, that he might reach her with his hands or horns, but as he did so, an arrow whistled between them and struck Ushar a glancing blow to the helm, and she rolled forward to a crouch in the silt, her bronze axe held by the head.

The three looked first at each other and, finding all equally nonplussed, then in the direction whence had come the missile, to see first one, then two of the guard of Father-King Abzur, followed by the lythe figure of Edjumet, Abzur's favored bull-leaper, as they emerged above the bluff at the edge of this river-carved land.

Galil and the Gulabadam knew these archers: Padu and Mamal, both dressed in their polychrome linen armor, but each wearing a proud crest distinct to themselves — Padu's feathers echoing the colors of the rising sun, and Mamal's striped horsehair mane ran down his back. They were fearsome warriors in their own right, chosen as children for their skill, each charged with the victory of their own small army, each promised glory and fields for their descendants.

Edjumet was Father-King Abzur's favored hero. His body was smooth, the color of roasted almond, and shone like bronze. He was naked

but for a leather brief the color of the sky and a linen cloak that billowed in the growing breeze. In his hands rested the single tool of his craft: a loop of braided leather cord used to bind a bull.

And none of the three — Padu, Mamal, nor Edjumet — was ever long far from the side of Father-King Abzur.

As one, the archers released two bronze-fanged arrows from their short, stout bows. That from Mamal sought Galil's heart while Padu's unerringly sought the eye of Tamesh Ushar, who split it easily upon the head of her axe.

The Gulabadam's charge had

begun as the archers drew, and the arrow destined for Galil crumpled like a reed upon his forehead.

Seeing the danger to the Gulabadam, Edjumet held his hand aloft, his long curls framing his kohl-lined eyes. "Son of the Father-King Abzur! We bring your father here to reclaim you! We are given his authority to discipline you before he arrives, should you refuse! Come with us peaceably and we will allow your kidnapper to depart safely. But if you fight, we will return her to Father-King Abzur to pay for her theft.

"You, who intercede! Know that we salute your courage, but can allow not the death of this cursed-one.

We carry behind us the army of Father-King Abzur. Withdraw, and you will dine this evening beside him in his sumptuous royal tent. But, if you attempt more harm upon this errant monster-child, you will face our wrath."

The Gulabadam, crouched as a runner before a race, glared toward Edjumet, his fingers and toes digging into the moist shore of the river.

Ushar looked first at the Gulabadam, then back toward the three messengers of doom, standing proud and alert.

She called back, "I see no monster here but what you make!"

The two archers, as though they

had exchanged word, broke in opposite directions across the ridge, each with two arrows sprouting between the fingers of their right hand.

But before the archers could free their arrows toward his friend and his ally, the Gulabadam belated and rushed forward toward Edjumet, and Ushar was not to be left last! She leapt forward as the Gulabadam began his charge, climbing his naked thighs and back in two swift movements and leaping forward from the monster's coarse-furred shoulders toward the archers.

In the time Ushar and the Gulabadam had crossed the distance, the archers had set flying

their thrumming quartet of arrows, their deadly skills showing. One deadly dart Ushar caught in flight as she leapt toward its master, her axe wheeling over her head. Two more sunk too shallow into the thick hide of the Gulabadam, who altered his charge to intercept them. But the last eagerly sought its target: the Dealer-in-Names who had shamed their king.

Galil, having drawn herself from the water, was, as quickly as she could with her one hand and stump, mounting the greave to her left knee when the arrow pierced her cheek and shattered a tooth, the leaf-shaped head emerging from her

mouth. Shocked to see the perfect bronze leaf where before there had been none, she issued a strangled cry, spraying blood across her front.

Grabbing the arrow, she attempted to pull it through, but, screaming with pain, could not. Blood and arrow between her teeth, she gnashed in the Language of Names, "Arrow who seeks my life, I am Hagash. What may I give you in its stead?"

The arrow responded, "Place my wound on another mightier than your ignoble frame, that I might find a destiny more noble than this, and I will take away yours."

Galil coughed, spraying blood

across her naked skin. "With great pleasure," she gargled. She staggered to her one foot of flesh, the other of bronze and leather, and fell backward into the river, disappearing under its waves, leaving no sign upon the surface but disappearing streaks of blood.

Atop the ridge, Padu, fear showing in his eyes, found Ushar far too close for his comfort and loosed his quiver at the hero, succeeding only in filling the ground with arrows as thickly as grass. Finally, when he thought certain his arrow would hit its mark, he found that it flew too early. Never did he make such an error, and it was only then that he realized

#### **Galil's pseudonym**

I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want a perfect arrow that was trying to kill me knowing my real name. It might come asking for me later. This is why the Namedealer sheet has room for a number of names.

that with the premature arrow had flown the fingers of his right hand, severed by Ushar's keen axe blade.

He sank to his knees, seeing his fate draw close, and Ushar showed him the way to the Waters of the Underworld with a swift blow, cleaving skull and fire-plumed helmet alike.

But, turning, Ushar saw a terrible sight: the Gulabadam, bound with clever knots, attempting to stand upon his one free leg while Edjemet danced about and over him like a spider entrapping a fly, binding horn to ankle, ankle to wrist, wrist to horn...

As she started forward to free him from his captor, she stopped short

and looked down to see the fletching of an arrow protruding from her ribs.

Edjemet completed the binding of the Gulabadam as the sun emerged over the distant desert mountains, finally illuminating the mass of sixty soldiers below, led by a palanquin of gold-inlaid wood, upon which sat the formidable Father-King Abzur.

Ushar looked out over the assembled host below. Between gasps, she said, "Sixty? They promised me an army."

She fell to her knees in the dust as she heard Father-King Ushar tell a soldier, "Go get her body from the river and bring her to me when you find her. I don't trust her to stay dead.



In the sumptuous tent of Father-King Abzur, the two heroes, so different in stature, sat, bound and bandaged, before their captor. He, alone, sat upon a chair, flanked by stout bodyguards. Upon the carpet lay four cushions, one left vacant. Upon the others sat the three remaining trusted advisors of Father-King Abzur: Mamal, Edjemet, and a gray-haired, stern-eyed woman, her hair in seven braids, her colored tunic embroidered with the names of the constellations found in the land of the city of Ishmu.

Father-King Abzur stroked the perfect curls of his beard, his fingers

stopping at the rich gold beads, then starting again at the top. His kohl was freshly applied, his face washed of the desert dust with water borne from the river, then oiled to bring to his skin a mahogany shine. He held in his hand the gold-inlaid pine cone that, with the tall crown of lapis silk and gold wire upon his head, was his badge of office.

His black eyes looked deep into the Gulabadam, who could not but return the gaze, so skillfully bound was his head. But the massive eyes held steadily, as though he'd been expecting this moment, and he preserved his dignity despite the bound nakedness of his body.

Finally, the king turned his splendid visage to Ushar, bound as well by the skilled hand of Edjumat and whose helmet and axe lay beside her in display for Father-King Abzur.

He looked toward her trophies, then picked up the axe, touching its battle-polished edge. "The Axe of Tashebur," he said. "How did you ever steal this trophy?"

Tamesh Ushar said, her voice measured lest she burst the bandage upon her ribs, "It is mine by right and by boon. For I am Tamesh Ushar, scion of Tashebur, herself."

Father-King Abzur's eyebrows rose. He looked at the helmet. "And

this is Badeb, the helm of the hero Shebish?"

Tamesh Ushar spoke with pride: "It was hammered from the ram of his ship. I took it from him in a wrestling match."

Father-King Abzur let no breath pass before saying, "Tamesh Ushar, I would have you as a guest in my tent, rather than a prisoner." He gestured, and one of his bodyguards deftly untied the cunning knots that entwined her hands behind her back with her ankles.

She stood to her full height, barely half that of Father-King Abzur, who spoke through the wall of his tent. "Bring wine and food for our

honored guest," he said.

Tamesh Ushar and Father-King Abzur spoke over wine and bread and meat for hours, of her adventures and of his. They laughed upon realizing that they had stood in opposing armies and yet had not found each other to test their mettle. They shared stories of loves lost, their lives spilled upon the sea and sands.

"Tamesh Ushar," glowed Father-King Abzur, "that I had one such as you in my line." For a flickering moment, Tamesh's brow curled at the slight toward one so mighty, but it smoothed again before Abzur could take note.

And all the while, the Gulabadam,

unable to move, sat, his eyes unable to veer from the merriment happening but two paces away, his hunger growing as his father, his erstwhile ally, and the advisors sat and ate.

The reverie was broken by a commotion outside the tent, followed by words: "Father-King, Lubash returns with the harridan."

Abzur rose, his smile broadening. "Bring her to me!"

Through the tent flap walked Lubash, who led Galil, her hands bound, through the tent flap. She had been dressed in her clothes and her leg was in place upon her knee, but her box, as well as the jaw-headed axe Adanu Nagog, were

borne alongside by a slave.

Still the arrow protruded from her mouth, its fletching resting beside her left ear. Her left cheek had swollen that eye closed, and she looked from her right eye with a combination of hate and exhaustion.

The gray-haired astrologer looked up from the feast, concern suddenly showing upon her face. "My lord—"

But Father-King Abzur silenced her with a gesture, eliciting a face of irritation from the oracle, as he stood from his chair and placed his goblet upon its arm.

Galil attempted to speak, but the words were caught by the arrow that would not allow her mouth to close.

She tried again. "Let Gulag—" and she was unable to say the remainder.

The Father-King smiled a cruel smile. "Did you try to issue me a demand, All-But-Dead? I think I shall not!" He laughed.

Again, the astrologer spoke, but was silenced with a stern glance. Behind his back, the oracle sneered.

Returning his eye to his newest captor, he savored the two steps toward Galil, his muscled form towering over her battered, torn, and exhausted body.

Galil inhaled and said a word in the Language of Names that required neither teeth nor lips: "Sheket,"—"Strike."

From her mouth sprang the arrow forward, as though loosed from a bowstring.

The arrow forced through Abzur's tongue and cheek, embedded itself beside his ear. He staggered back, a cough issuing from his chest like boulders clashing, a cloud of blood issuing from his mouth and face as he fell backward to the ground.

With a shout, the two bodyguards ran to his aid as he scrambled away from Galil like a fearful crab. They pulled him backward behind his magnificent chair, shouting for help through the walls of the tent.

The soldier Lubash quickly untied the loosed knots about Galil's wrists

and handed her his bronze knife.

"Now, Lubash, go to your farm and your family. You have acted with courage and I will tell the tale of your bravery. I eagerly foresee telling it to your children."

Lubash fled the tent as other soldiers rushed in, ignoring him as one of their own.

But Galil was fast with the knife and the Gulabadam was free. In a moment he had the jaw of Adanu Nagog in his hands.

While Mamal scrambled underneath the Father-King's throne in search of a weapon secreted there, Edjumet leapt forward to apply his art, but found his elegant face sepa-

rated from graceful body by a quick blow of Ushar's axehead.

Seeing this, the soldiers who had entered the tent hesitated, unable to see their king, and those behind them unable to see into the tent at all.

The astrologer made no move but to calmly assess those arrayed there. Finally, she spoke in a measured tone, "Galil, whose pen described the Catacomb — that which entranced Father-King Abzur — I have heard much of you. I am Mezem. Aid me in escape from this murderous fool before his folly sends me to the Waters of the Underworld, and I will see you clear of his soldiers."

The sound of sixty soldiers spread as they arrayed themselves around the tent.

Galil said, "Guarantee the escape of the Gulabadam and I will aid you in your escape."

Mezem grinned and winked. Her tongue dancing in the Language of Names, she said, "Mamal, make good on your promise."

Galil turned and saw Mamal wheel their deadly eye away from her heart and toward a shadow soldier upon the wall of the tent, drawing and loosing arrow after arrow as terror and confusion reigned outside.

The Gulabadam lowered his head and bellowed toward the

open tent flap, freezing the entering soldiery in fear. But they did not stay still for long as he crashed through them, bursting the seam of the tent with their bulk.

The mass of soldiers, now far fewer than sixty, scattered in rout as the Gulabadam charged, his horns forward, foam upon his lips, wielding the leg of an unfortunate soldier as a club. From this crashing wall of soldiers sprung the diminutive form of Tamesh Ushar, her axe held high, her crested helm flashing in the sun. Slung around her shoulder by the very braided leather that had bound the Gulabadam was the gold-inlaid pine cone, carrying with it the mag-

nanimity of Father-King Abzur.

As the mighty pair pursued the scattering soldiery, the two Namedealers emerged. Galil, the hole in her cheek closed to a knot of scar, slung across her back the box that contained her writing implements and in which would rest the haunted greave and sandal of Kasheb, whose voice she could hear celebrating her victory from the far-off Waters of the Underworld.

Mezem emerged as well, in her hand the keen eye of Mamal, granted as a condition of some grim agreement.

The battle lasted not long, but Father-King Abzur was not to be

found. For the sun was setting, and from the eastern horizon grew the time to travel through the desert.

As the four followed Galil to the river that they might fill skins with water for their journey, Galil said, "The Gulabadam and I have business to fulfill with this river Pash and the city Argish, whose king drives the city's prince to conquer in his name. You need not join us."

Mezem nodded her head. "I have business in the mountains to the north and must have ugly words with an ally I would recommend to none. I wish you well in your passage. May you find glory."

The Gulabadam's voice was sad.

"It is not glory we seek."

But Tamesh Ushar's voice carried alacrity. "Have they an army?"



# QUEEN OF TIDES

by Jabari Weathers

I first saw **Jabari Weathers'** glowing, story-drenched paintings in the pages of Epdiah Ravachol's *Sword & Sorcery* magazine, ***Worlds Without Master***. It was then that I knew how I wanted this game to look and I'm honored that Jabari has agreed to lend their pen to this volume.

Enjoy here their tale of the love of a thief of hearts — and of how a stolen heart leads to and from the cold Waters of the Underworld. That it would never lead back again.

**“I am so dry. So thirsty. Bathe me. Feed me. I need blood for this body...”**

The words hummed and shimmered in Ratu's mind. There they were, catching their breath hiding inside of a rusted old basin, hoping their labored breaths would abate quickly enough to prolong their

evasion from the queen's hunters. Ratu wasn't a fighter. Ratu was small and swift, Ratu was frail, and Ratu was dead if their captors found them. Ratu didn't lie to Ashti, Queen of Tides, and when Ashti offered her Heart to Ratu, Ratu knew that she needed to keep such a precious thing close.

## Ratu

Ratu is the only Companion in this game, played over shared coffee with a close friend who Knows the Will. In addition to their two *Mortal Dice* of Jet, Ratu is aided by Ashti's Heart, **Beautiful** for its love, **Mighty** for its will, and **Known to All** by dint of Ashti's many conquests. It is not **Old**, for Ashti is still in bloom; nor is it **Inscribed**; nor is it **Beautiful**, carved from the chest in which it once beat.

**The desires of the Heart of Tides**

It wants to remain close to Ratu more than it wants to remain close to Ashti, even though that leaves Ashti, Queen of Tides, heartless.

After all, the Heart of Tides simply wanted to be kept close to Ratu, to their capricious humor. Their mischief made Ashti's chest tangibly leap, but it was a futile pounding to escape its prison, escape its owner's station and responsibilities. Earlier this night, once the queen retired, well satisfied from the evening's intimacies, Ratu heard the thing speak to them in a cadence of heartbeats matching their own.

In Ashti's familiar hiss, the Heart begged of Ratu, "Please, Namedealer, cut me free from here, and take me from this place. Take me wherever you go! I feel that you will leave the queen soon, and as long

as I am with you and you keep me close, you are mine, and I yours."

Ratu obliged, but the theft only left the once-noble queen furious and in too much pain to impede her companion's escape from her palatial raft. When desperate, Ratu found themself capable of stunning violence for such a small frame, and their egress from the queen's throneraft cut a path through Ashti's guard as crimson as the sunset sky.

The resulting pursuit of the Tideguard drove Ratu from the lake which Ashti claimed as her royal home, down the Telluan River and into the Nu'uak Caves, lit only by the reflected moonlight of that eve

and the torches of Ratu's pursuers. Now, Ratu was here, hiding inside of what felt like an ancient ceremonial bathing basin, hewn from limestone and just large enough to cradle Ratu's slight, exhausted frame.

They pressed the back of their shoulders into the basin wall, wishing it full and warm to ease the aches and pains of the eve. Knitting their one thick-haired brow together in weariness, they sank further into its bottom, peering up at the crudely wrought skylight and the stars beyond that winked at them. They listened to the open space, letting their senses rest for a bit, before their ears were greeted with the distant patter

of hunters — and what sounded to Ratu's ears a closer voice ringing in a bronze helmet.

Peering over the edge of the bath with renewed panic, Ratu searched for the direction from which their pursuers would arrive and tried to discern the origin of the voice, but the room's multiple entrances only served to confound their hearing.

They took a moment to gather their thoughts, listening for the patter of footsteps in pursuit. The sounds were distant, likely at the distributary at which they themselves had turned left to escape to this place. They took in the room blankly, looking for exits, perhaps climbing out of the skylight?

**Finding a way to escape**

They who Know the Will is describing what Ratu sees as they desperately seek a way to escape. They know what the caves are about and are pursuing its interests.

The walls were too slick and smooth for this. Hide in the small waters that flowed through the hewn patterns on the floor? Soon the waters would run red with Ratu's blood. Perhaps hide behind the circular moon-kissed altar at the foot of the stairs leading up to this very bath? Likely another folly.

This seemed the end of the road, and Ratu's sanguine elan had been replaced by regret and fear for their skin. They felt their whole frame quake within the grip of rightful death.

Again, more urgently, came that ringing, brassy voice in the language of Names. "...and you need to leave, Namedealer. I can

help you. Spare some blood to save your skin." The closeness of the voice made Ratu jump up and peer around the chamber for an unwanted guest.

Then they found the source of the whisper: an old ceremonial chakram, resting on a marble plaque at the west-facing edge of the altar down at the bottom of the stairs, catching moonlight where there was none to light it. Ratu lay low on top of the Heart, tucked away inside of a goat-skin satchel, and felt it beat through the leather comfortingly as they contemplated their next bargain. They pried their small frame out from the basin and descended cautiously down the steps toward the altar.

The chakram bore delicate embellishment of various fauna devouring each other along its facade on one side — on the other, the same animals birthing others in two loops of endless life and death. The animals were not related, beyond their claim to life's breaths: a fish, a snake, a deer, a lion, others, and a human, ambiguously sexed, at the origin and end of each iconic loop.

"I know you hear me, dealer," hummed the voice again with a dull resonance. "I can relieve you of your plight. I only need blood."

The footsteps entered the chamber where Ratu ducked, stupidly, behind the altar, flattening themselves against

the suspiciously smooth leathers which adorned the altar. Amber firelight played across the cavern walls. Hearing the footsteps, Ratu snatched the chakram off the plaque.

"I am Ratu, one who is no good in a fight, and your metal is old and greened. This place is my tomb," Ratu breathed back. The Heart of Tides pulsed under their arm, excited. Ratu examined themselves, warped in the reflection of the verdigrised metal, pushing back their sweat-matted fringe from their clammy forehead, dark, wide eyes looking around the room for relief.

They shrugged into their half tunic and scrambled back up the stairs

### **Ratu is lying**

They might be afraid of the consequences of a stand-up fight when they had the advantage of surprise before, but they're definitely good in a fight, since that's how they got free. But they don't want a weapon, of all things, demanding that they stand and fight with trained, angry soldiers out for blood.

### **Ratu's name**

We don't know for certain if Ratu is their real name, but it's the name they've given Ashti, so for good or for ill, it will have to do for now.

and into the bath. The chakram hummed and purred. "Silly dealer," groaned the voice. "I need willing blood, and you need an exit. Give me the key of your warmth and, by my name of Tirst Cerem, I will open a door for you." The edge of the chakram pressed insistently into Ratu's palm, and the Heart fluttered jealously when, in desperation, the Namedealer again obliged what was requested of them.

Ratu opened their palm, biting their pain back within their throat and wheeling the edge of the old relic through their flesh. In its rotation, it gleamed crimson, mighty, and beautiful, inscribed with old memories of

sacrifice and the turns of life and death's wheel. Their blood fell and pooled at an alarming rate, filling the basin they hid within, and as it made a small pool, Ratu sunk through the thick crimson surface, slipping into a deposit of water as black as the sky and flecked with stars.

Above them were the sounds of fleet footsteps. Dancing firelight contaminated the bloody, wavering image of the chapel they had just left, but the chakram kept pulling Ratu past time and into space.

Their sanguine drew a trail behind them, seeping through the point of their egress from the temple before it coiled upon itself like the roots of

### **Making an offer**

Ratu wants from Tirst Cerem what Tirst Cerem wants to give, and Tirst Cerem wants from Ratu what they are about to lose anyway. So, in doing so, Ratu implicitly makes the offer, rolling their dice. It's a good thing they each want what the other is offering, because Ratu rolls zero strikes, putting themselves at the mercy of Tirst Cerem! However, what Tirst Cerem wants to do is drink Ratu's blood, and feels like there will be more opportunities to drink blood if they survive the experience, and so passes them through its opening.

a tree, rather than cloud in the way that blood unfurls underwater. In a moment, the red door was gone, and the tendril of Ratu's blood unspooled from one of the stars into a second circular window.

Ratu swam to it, each beat of their arms more frail than the last. They were dying, pulled into the stream of passing, its ice seeping into every bone and tooth, down their throat, into their lungs that lacked the strength to gasp — but even so they swam.

Through the water cut a quavering, haunting note, thick enough to climb. They pushed toward the source of the music until, under their

fingers, they felt the jagged edges of Earthen Firmament. They clawed their way up the stone, a meager warmth of life returning to their hands. Sopping wet and fingers bleeding, they emerged from the stone hole with a deep gasp, finding themselves in the midst of ceremony.

Blinking back stars and droplets from their eyes, they gazed around in the dazzling sunlight, taking in feminine forms ambulating round the stone well from which they had just emerged. As they wiped their eyes, letting sunlight paint the scene more clearly, the forms faltered in their haunting song. The six priestesses, their heads shorn of hair,

gazed upon Ratu, and their visages curdled to offense, some resting upon Ratu's fully exposed chest, others simply upon Ratu herself.

Ratu slipped and stumbled around the apex of this odd stone mound, still setting their bearing. Collapsing to the floor, just breaking their fall with their palms, their impact reverberated beyond the open air of this strange temple, and they gazed up to see a woman standing near. Retaking her dignity from surprise, the priestess reset her emerald-colored robe, making sure her left breast was covered, before looking at her sisterhood with some concern.

Ratu picked herself up from

the mosaic floor and found that the well from which they had fallen was a sculpted eye, as large as them, set inside of half a head at least ten times their size. The stone visage wore a placid expression that exuded strength, paralyzing in its vivacity. The entire temple seemed to swell and fall with slow, steady, earthy breaths.

In the stunned moments of their interruption, Ratu took in their surroundings, noting four plunging columns at the north, south, east, and west. Ratu raised their eyes to see that the columns were in fact arms, with elegant black marble hands whose fingers interlaced to form

an open ceiling. An oculus bathed the temple in sunlight, and beyond the gaps between the supporting arms Ratu could see the surrounding lands far below. Whatever mountain peak this chapel was built into loomed over a green valley. From this facing, the Celuna River was not in sight, but Ashti's pursuit still hung in Ratu's mind.

Urgent footsteps rang through the temple from Ratu's left. Before any of them could turn to look, the Namedealer was lifted off their feet with uncanny force and ease to meet the face of a muscular woman, taller and broader than any they had known. Her obsidian complexion

contrasted most of the others' bronze but matched the temple's stone arms and the eye of the Giant from which they fell. She was shorn, like the other acolytes, but her wine-colored robes bared her left breast as carefully as the others' right. Her most notable features were her most intimidating, an amber right eye that stared right into Ratu's, and an obsidian orb where her left eye should be, carefully set in her skull and poised to gaze right through anyone else's.

The woman turned Ratu up to the heavens, and when her left eye caught sunlight, the reflected star of an iris bored into their vision with such intensity that the Namedealer

was forced to avert their gaze.

“We,” she said, “are the Gate of Stars and Soil, and we are fostering a prosperous season for the land below. What called you here, as I am sure it is not a mistake of our making? You will answer, or you will fall from this mountain to an eternal silence.”

The Heart pulsed and quickened. Tirst Cerem buzzed, urging deceit through Ratu’s mind...

“I am your fertile soil, sent by life and death itself. Accept my pact, the pact you have asked for, and your gate will open to lands far beyond this place, as that star demands,” Ratu replied, parrying the woman’s

question through their teeth, pointing up to the sun through the opening in the mountain. Ratu squeezed Tirst Cerem, which purred in their hand as they lifted it.

With ease, the high priestess lifted and carried them up to the eye of the Giant, scaling its unblinking face.

“I, Lugoul, and the other priestesses of the Gate by association, accept your pact and the blessing of the Great Star, the Strong Right Eye of the Sky over the Valley of Babulush.” With these words, she set Ratu down on the opposite side of the eye and gripped the other side of Tirst Cerem until blood flowed

from her right palm. "You, Namedealer, will walk through the Gate and join us to ensure the flourishing the Sun has promised." Blood met at the nadir of the chakram, and mixed in its descent to life and death.



The season passed quickly, and under the tutelage of the priesthood Ratu found a fast place in the Gate of Stars and Soil, feeling a true earnestness for their position. Using Tirst Cerem as a key, the Gate was able to spread their soil under stars much farther in every direction than Lugoul could have imagined. The Qopil Valley, below the holy mountain of the same name, bloomed from the Gate's efforts, and Ratu's desperate lie was made truth as the summer drew close. The Gate of Stars and Soil now shone in many places they had been unable to help, but everywhere along the Celuna River suffered, curdled, and burned, razed

by the wrath of the heartless Queen of Tides many fathoms away.

Even as Ratu's responsibility and guilt grew, the Heart's excitement also grew from the many travels its Namedealer companion took it on. As for Tirst Cerem, the blood of the Gate's many members kept the chakram youthful and beautiful. Its dull metallic purr of a voice brightened to a gleaming sheen as the months progressed. Ratu, for the first time in many times, was ready to give more than names.

"You want to return me," the Heart of Tides divined on a night under a full moon. The Namedealer lay in silence, and the dormitory where

they now lived started to pulse with the Heart's anxieties. "Why do you want to return me?" asked the Heart.

"You aren't mine to keep," replied Ratu, stowing the Heart away in a drawer, out of sight. Its throbs filled the night, and sleep eluded the Namedealer. The next night, under a crescent moon, when the tides and currents of the Celuna were likely to be gentle, Ratu took the Heart, now worried and blackened, in a beaded satchel decorated with black fish scale, and set off to the temple alone. The place was guarded by a sentry from one of the villages lying in the Qopil Valley below.

"Noble guardian of the Gate,"

### Ratu's offer

Ratu here makes an offer to Paru of helping him fulfill his duty beyond simply standing around. They who Know the Will understand that Paru has worked hard to gain the level of respect that allows him to guard the temple door, but most knows that he wants to feed and protect his family. When Ratu rolls,

said Ratu, "do you wish to further your important service to the land?"

He nodded in reply, eyes filled with surprise that a Key of Stars and Soil was up at such an hour tending to the work, rather than waiting for the great Sun's rays to illuminate the task.

"Let me into the temple, Paru," they said. Paru hesitated. "In the name of the Qopil Valley, I cannot."

"You can save lives by helping, starfriend. A threat that extinguishes the reflection of stars along the Celuna with smoke and blood swims its way to this fruitful valley."

Paru gulped, but then nodded in assent, and together they ascended

they discover that they have but one strike, so they choose **They do as you ask in exchange**, but Paru also chooses to subvert **They make no further demand before accepting this agreement**, demanding that Ratu promise that this questionable breach of duty actually benefit his people.

the precarious spiral stairs of limestone until they emerged in the familiar temple. The Giant opened its large eye, lids shifting like tectonic plates in its marvelous facade, as its gaze followed the pair through the temple, which seemed to stand straighter as it registered some unknown work to do.

Plucking Tirst Cerem from its holy perch at the north-facing window of the temple, Ratu gripped the chakram, letting their palm open and the blood run. Climbing the stairs along the neck of the Giant to the ear that fed the waters below, Ratu invited the sentry to help open Tirst Cerem's bloody passage.

"The travel takes two to turn the key if I am to go to a particular place, and I wish to meet our threat..."

Scared and confused, Paru climbed up after them, standing awkwardly next to Ratu, clearly unfamiliar with the particulars of this ritual. He grasped the blade hesitantly.

"Is my blood a worthy key for this door?" he asked. He tried to set his lips in an eager smile, but uncertainty swam in his eyes as he looked back down at himself, his humble tunic and tattered leathers hanging off of him.

Ratu looked at him expectantly, giving no immediate reassurance. Paru met their gaze, awaiting some

instruction, awaiting some preparation, awaiting relief from his embarrassment. "I am not a Key of the Gate," he observed, standing at attention.

Tirst Cerem's voice shined through Ratu's mind: "Help him along, make him comfortable. Make him willing."

"Your willingness is enough a key to turn, dutiful friend," Ratu said. With the persuasion of Ratu's touch on Paru's right hand, they both squeezed the eager edge of the chakram and opened the door.

"Take me to see the Queen of Tides!" Ratu said to the chakram.

"You won't come back," replied Tirst Cerem, in an even hum.

"Then you will come with me, Tirst Cerem." And before it could protest, Ratu jumped into the Giant's eye, and the guard watched them consumed.



After slipping through death, the Namedealer broke the surface of the waves, not to find a clear night, but smoke and the scent of burning trees and grass. Ahead of them in the Celuna was Ashti's waterborne palanquin, being carried sleepily by the river's waves, and leading a procession of her decorated subjects and army. Behind and aside Ratu was the source of the burning: farmland and villages laid waste.

An already aimless search had curdled fully into heartless cruelty in the course of a season. Burning flesh cut through the scent of smoldering grass in the smoke.

Ratu saw that the Queen of Tides was in a bloody phase, but they knew they were responsible for it. The Heart pulsed to erratic life in protest to their carrier's course, and the Celuna took note of the disturbance that shook its sway. The river started to swirl around Ratu and dragged them beneath the waves.

"I know that pulse. I was wed to it a decade ago when Ashti was still a girl, and haven't felt it for so long. You're the rat who took it and

dragged her into cruelty!" spake the Celuna from a gurgling, dark, and ageless depth, its voice ascending through the fauna of its waters, now focused to this one whirling pillar in which Ratu was trapped.

Knowing they would be understood in the Tongue of Names, they sacrificed precious wind in quickly escaping breaths for a reply: "I've come to make amends, but I now claim the Heart, and am claimed by it as well. Through Ashti's heart, I am also yours. I am not brazen enough to claim you as my possession, as her family did generations ago, and one woman cannot possess the Celuna, queen or otherwise."

The heart throbbed away violently. The Celuna spun around Ratu, then through them, starting to clog their lungs. Feeling their consciousness pulled out of them with each turn, Ratu lost moments in the darkness of time, before bobbing to the surface along the Celuna's vast visage. The smoke had cleared. The Heart of Tides' pounding roused them back to waking, and turning their head to the east they could see that only moments had passed. They were still near the queen's procession, spinning atop the water under the stars.

"Stupid rat, I'd curse your course. Your wanton nature has robbed

the queen of her compassion and senses, curdled her heart against her, and washed away the space she had for me. Now, I ferry her from place to place, and she leaves a burning trail behind her, one I can only extinguish through rain or hope." Ratu lay there, floating and spinning, and coughing, absorbing the truths of their action, and filled the lungs with the river. "You will fix this and unmake me as her tool, one way or another, and you are now my rat to sniff out a solution."

The Celuna carried the Namedealer Ratu through Ashti's armies, dragging their boats under the waves that shimmered in the

light of the sun. When the whirl was done and Ashti's subjects were well consumed, the river washed the Namedealer onto that familiar river-borne palace and left them to their work. As the vessel started to sink into the water, Ratu made their way to Ashti's private quarters at the bow.

"I've brought it back," said the Namedealer. "Your heart, cruel and wanton, and I've made it so, as I've made you." And placing it in the queen's hands, they simply said, "I'm sorry."

"I don't want my heart! I only want yours to stop!" retorted the queen, flinging her heart off the front of the ship and seizing Tirst Cerem

in the other. Ashti dug into Ratu with her entire weight and shoved them into the slowly rising waters inside the now half-consumed palace.

"Then take me," the Namedealer started. "Just know that I won't leave alo—" The words were cut short, cropped in their throat with a red smile from the queen. Ratu started to leave their body, a red, cloudy ribbon again merging with the water. Soon, the Namedealer had bled into the Celuna.

The Heart of Tides pulsed deep with the river. The Celuna, filled with Ratu's guilt, sank the palace, consumed the Namedealer's body, swallowed the Heart, engulfed Tirst

Cerem. And when it realized its queen would not stop her warpath, she was drowned, filled with water and rage in equal measure. The Heart stopped pulsing as dawn played across the Celuna and the churning waves slowed. Of all to endure the angry tide of the prior eve, only Tirst Cerem's form would survive and wash to shore.

The Qopil Valley flourishes today. The Gate of Stars and Soil has never lapsed in the reach of fruitful seasons. Ratu of course was never found anywhere beyond their order's memory, but that bore enough of a pulse. It's been nearly half an age, and the damage of Ashti's wrath has been

replaced by new growth from the Gate's efforts. Many outside of the order do not know of the rat that stole Queen Ashti's heart, but the Gate of Stars and Soil, having recovered Tirst Cerem for their own use, has not forgotten. Their travel with the chakram is now known within the Gate as the Passage of Ratu. As for the Queen of Tides, only the waves of the Celuna can determine or claim such a title.



# THE MONSTERS

## Without a People and They Who Eat the Flesh of Earthen-Being

### **Upon the Firmament stride the monsters.**

They are few — or unique — in the world. The disdained children of Great Names, or the product of curses, or the result of defiance of death.

The monsters are those without a people, those who have eaten human flesh to become a monster, or in becoming a monster eat human flesh. In so doing, they take on a name that suits their unique nature.

The monsters are myriad, but all in the Center of the World know these few.

forego other necessities to pursue what they want. In some cases, as in that of Adanu Nagog, they want vengeance. It's a simple desire. But a desert onager is as intelligent as it is stubborn, even when driven to eat human flesh, contrary to its nature as an herbivore. Tiamut, however, can see everything and has a contingency plan for every possibility. Figure out what she wants right now, knowing that she is the inventor of wheels within wheels.

### **The Myriad Monsters**

Use these monsters as inspiration or as they are written here, as required by the whim of whoever portrays them and according to the needs of your own play. Just remember that monsters, like anyone else, have desires and will do what they can to achieve those desires, doing their best to weigh the options. Monsters' desires drive them to extremes, and they often

## Adanu Nagog's Desires

She wants vengeance upon Earthen-Beings, driven mad with rage and the consumption of their flesh, in defiance of his nature as an onager, eater of grass. Adanu Nagog might be convinced to seek vengeance on one Earthen-Being over another; he is wise and was once a proud leader of his herd. While steadfast in his desire, he can weigh values against each other, and will choose long-term benefits over short. But he assumes that Earthen-Beings are liars and traitors and will seek for any moment to turn on one he thinks has turned on him.

### To a Namedealer

Adanu Nagog grants four Dice of Gold as a Named-One: **Known to All**, grown **Big** and **Mighty** in violence, and **Old** beyond the life of an onager.

### To a Fated Hero

Adanu Nagog grants three Dice of Jet as a trophy: **Old**, **Mighty**, and **Known to All** who then avoid her lands.

### After the death of Adanu Nagog...

Galil, who does not wish to arouse the bottomless ire of Adanu Nagog, promises only that which she can deliver. Since she wants to kill kings, Adanu Nagog agrees. They craft their treaty carefully as Adanu Nagog dies at the powerful hands of the Gulabadam, and she writes their agreement upon the Gulabadam's jaw, painting it in ink from her brush upon the bone:

***The jaw of Adanu Nagog will strike down the mightiest Earthen-Beings, and that the jawbone pass to the hands of the mighty, that they may continue to kill.***

## Adanu Nagog, the Fire Onager

Ad was chief of a herd of desert onagers living in the scattered grasses near Peham. The herd guarded the villagers and their herds from lions, and the people of Peham left for them an offering of hearty grain in its season.

But when the first caravan upon the Great Road first reached toward Peham, a youth at its head loosed an arrow at the herd, striking dead Ad's ward, roasting her to share with the travelers of the caravan.

Ad for the first time tasted betrayal, and while the caravan consumed her kin under the stars, she led the

herd into the fire circle, setting the wagons alight with scattered ash.

Ad struck down the youth in the way of her herd with hoof and tooth and tasted blood for the first time, consuming the youth's heart.

Horrified, her herd shunned her, forcing her to the desert.

The people of Peham grew wary, and chased the herd with fire and stone until they were scattered.

Ad said, "I am Adanu Nagog, Fire Onager, and the Earthen-Beings will flee my lands." She grew to greatness on the flesh of Earthen-Being while lions ravaged the flocks of Peham.

The jawbone gains one Immortal Die of Gold for being **Inscribed**. Galil will honor the deal further by asking that a skilled goldsmith inlay the jawbone with gold, which will make it **Beautiful**. And obviously it is **Mighty**.



## Zikru the Poet

### Zikru's Desires

Zikru longs for the admiration he had for his beauty and his poetry. But where he was beautiful he is now feared, and the adoration of his followers now rings hollow in his sunken ears.

### To a Namedealer

who offers to provide him with relief from the curse brought by his hubris, he offers three Immortal Dice of Gold:

**Old, Inscribed, and Known to All.**

### To a Fated Hero

who takes Zikru as a friend or ally, or for whom he has written a poem upon a banner, Zikru offers two Mortal Dice of Jet: **Generous** and **Known to All.**

But if the hero is one of Zikru's many lines of descendants, he grants three: **Generous, Feared, and Known to All.**

Zikru was once a beautiful man, a poet of great skill. So great was his ability with his tongue, he never slept alone. But, drunk one night on honey wine, he boasted of his knowledge of the Language of Names, "Greater even," he said, "than that of Ashlala, the Great Name of our river."

Ashlala, itself, rose from the river, water gushing in cataracts down the reeds of its hair, its horns piercing the limb of the moon above, and demanded that Zikru persuade it with his skilled tongue, or bow down and pledge himself to its service forever.

Zikru asked what Ashlala would wager, should he so persuade the Great Name. Ashlala's words dripped with contempt:

"I will make your tongue the greatest among all that floats upon the Waters of the Underworld."

The poem Zikru composed so moved Ashlala that tears of pearl flowed from its many eyes. In shame, Ashlala fled, saying, "You shall have a vision to see into the hearts of Earthen-Beings and the tongue to move them."

The Uklal people stood frozen as Zikru's beautiful face erupted with a third eye, his smooth brown skin grew thick and scaled, and his tongue, the treasure of his people, grew forked.

Zikru lives separate and above them to this day, writing his poetry upon his own scaly skin, commanding his people to bring pleasing sacrifice as a Great Name might, unable to cry for his own lost beauty.





## Bashet, Queen of the River Ia

When the Waters of Heaven and the Waters of the Underworld were close, a clear, green drop fell from the brow of the Waters of Heaven and embedded itself in the hills of Ebbi. Where it fell sprouted the spring, Gashush, and from the spring the river, Ia, and from the River Ia came the body of Bashet.

Bashet lays the length of ten tall soldiers, a crocodile pale in color with a green gem embedded in her forehead.

She demands tribute from all who enter or cross the River Ia according

### Padeb and Bashet

Padeb — the Earthen-Being sitting in the mud on the facing page — promises that the army that pursued him will fill her belly better than his scrawny frame. She agrees, but when she hungers for flesh, so will he, slowly becoming a crocodile unless he feeds her or he himself consumes a person to satisfy her wherever he is.

### Bashet's Desires

Bashet is proud queen of her river, and she provides for those in her care, maintaining the balance of life in her river. She is also curious about the world beyond her shores, and while she enjoys the delicate flavors and soft textures of Earthen-Beings, she also enjoys hearing their tales and will send them on errands to do her bidding, slowly turning them to crocodiles if they defy her demands.

to her ancient wisdom, feeding her subjects according to their natures. The ibes feast on insects and worms, the gar upon smaller fishes, the ducks upon the weeds and frogs, the hawks upon the ibes, the People of the River upon the gar.

Bashet is wise in the Language of Names, as she was born along with it. She craves to eat flesh, but also is possessed of an acute curiosity, and will trade the satisfaction of one desire for the other — the description of a colossus of granite, the visage of which she might recall from an age past; the taste of a foreign army; a poem of unusual beauty describing the sunset in a distant land.

so, she grants five Immortal Dice of Gold: **Mighty, Feared, Generous, Known to All** who live in and along the River Ia, and horrifically **Beautiful**. Taken as a trophy, she grants four Mortal Dice of Jet: **Old, Mighty, Generous** to those in her river, and **Known to All** who live along and within the River Ia. Of course, some lands might not know of the River Ia and its fearsome queen, Bashet. If her name does not make a people tremble, they do not know her.

### To a Namedealer

Bashet grants Immortal Dice of Gold should a Namedealer treat with her: **Big, Beautiful** in her terrifying perfection, **Mighty, Old, and Known to All** who live near the River Ia.

### To a Fated Hero

Bashet might be a Great Name, an ancestor of the hero. If



# Kalush

When the Giants quarreled, they brought forth many monsters to do their violence before Ummud conceived to form the Earthen-Beings out of red clay. The great serpent Kalush was birthed by Ishmu to seize the ruby heart of the river Ufaret and hold it close, that Shutu might not regain it to place it again within her ribcage.

Kalush has there rested for millennia, unblinking, trapped by the twins Ubash and Tubash. Its hot breath carries the wisdom of the ancient serpent to the ears and nostrils of the priesthood of Ubash and Tubash.

## Kalush's Desires

Kalush was probably already sick of guarding this giant gem for someone who obviously can't come get it. Then it was trapped by the bronze eidolons of the twins who keep it underfoot. Then it was trapped, again, by the priesthood

Beneath the stone seal placed by Tubash is a deep pit in which Kalush lies coiled, fed on meager sheep and cows at only ceremonial times of year when the constellations of Ubash and Tubash are high in the sky, keeping the serpent from emerging.

But it awaits one who would free it to stretch in the warmth of the sun that glitters off its bright scales, dulled now by dust; that it might again swallow elephants whole; that it might be relieved of its duty and perhaps to crush the bronze legs of Ubash and Tubash, to see their jewel eyes glitter as its own.

that operates under a regime of foreigners who have been kept ignorant by the priesthood — the priesthood it unintentionally aids with its steamy, vision-producing breath. If ever someone was looking for an out, it's Kalush.

### To a Namedealer

Kalush gives these five Immortal Dice of Gold as a Named-One: **Big, Beautiful** (if you think snakes are beautiful), **Mighty, Old**, and **Known to All**.

### To a Fated Hero

Kalush gives these four Dice of Jet as a trophy: **Mighty, Known to All, Generous**, and **Old**.

### The Iguk's Desires

The Iguk is a simple creature. But it is not stupid, and won't reject help if it's not able to pursue a thief in its current form. The Iguk is not simply driven by duty. It has never failed to return a stolen bone, but it takes trophies out of pride. It does not change shape; rather, it awakens anew with the form of its choosing, invulnerable to the previous methods by which it was killed.

## The Iguk

The Iguk was graven from stone to guard the coruscating bones of Yog Shul and thus blessed: that it may never be killed twice in the same manner, and that it will pursue those who would disturb the tomb unto their demise.

When Gilpari entered the tomb to steal away a tooth of Yog Shul, she left behind a cunning trap to crush the stone body of the Iguk beneath the capstone of the tomb's mountain gate. When the Iguk pursued her, the trap crushed it to gravel. When Gilpari next encountered it in the village of Higash, it wore the body of a handsome youth who beguiled her and returned home with both the tooth and Gilpari's skull in hand.

### To a Namedealer

The Iguk grants these four Immortal Dice of Gold, should a Namedealer make the questionable decision to treat with it: **Big**, **Mighty**, **Old**, and **Known to All**.

### To a Fated Hero

The Iguk grants these Mortal Dice of Jet, should a hero take it as a trophy: **Old** as the Age of Giants, **Mighty**, and **Known to All**, for legends are told of its patient ferocity.

That youth posed no challenge to the archer, Furna, who had no interest in flesh but as a trophy. But Furna stole a fingerbone, which the Iguk returned along with Furna's own fingers when the eagle-headed, scorpion-tailed, cheetah-bodied Iguk next returned home.

Heroes have clubbed the Iguk; thrown it from a cliff; beheaded it. Namedealers have burned it with the light of the moon; caused it to be consumed by vultures; suffocated it under the weight of heavy earth.

And always, it returns the stolen treasure in one hand and a trophy of the thief in the other, that Yog Shul might rest, to return when the time is right.

THE  
IGUK



7  
29  
20  
19

### **The Desires of the Descendants of the Heavens**

The Descendants of the Heavens are mysterious beings. Some have a duty to perform and will do so without thought, as though it is all they know. Some are wise and thoughtful. Their objectives can be good or evil. Some might question their actions while others are incapable of doing so. Others simply make demands under threat, bringing chaos until those who have seen them are able to rid themselves of the taint of otherworldliness.

## **The Descendants of the Heavens**

From beyond the Vault of Heaven come the Djinn with their duties, the Efrits with their spirit of fire and wind, and the Messengers whose nature is mystery.

Each is alone in their nature and appearance: some as a beautiful mortal, perhaps with two or four or eight wings, carrying the cone of a pine that they might cause to sprout good fortune — though ill perhaps for others; others with the head of an eagle, or a lion, or a jackal, or another noble animal.

Yet others might appear only as a whisper heard in a raging storm,

or as a burning wheel of swords in the sky.

To see one is to pass beyond the Earthen Firmament, and those who have seen one bring corruption with them until they have performed a ritual ablution, washing away the contamination of that which is beyond the mortal world.

It is they who array the constellations in the sky and conduct their proud procession; who guide the wandering stars in their quests; who bring comets to the constellations for their purposes, leaving hints for the mortals who know how to converse with the Great Names who live in the sky.

### **To a Namedealer or a Fated Hero**

A Descendant of the Heavens might grant dice of their own will for their own mysterious

purposes, to a Fated Hero as one of their descendants, or as part of a treaty with a Namedealer. Since they have many forms and intentions, judge each according to how you see them.



### **The Desires of the Sunken**

are many and varied. They live among the dead, cold bodies in the Waters of the Underworld, and so might care little for mortal interests. But they might also consider the warm, living world to be a novelty. Or a delicacy.

### **To a Namedealer or a Fated Hero**

The Sunken give dice as you judge, since they are so varied in form and intent. Few are **Beautiful**, but those who are stun the senses. Fewer still are **Known to All**, as most are a profound mystery. Most are very **Big** and very **Old**.

## **The Sunken**

Fearsome and mysterious as the Descendants of the Heavens are the Sunken who swim and writhe among the countless dead in the Waters of the Underworld.

Their form, glimpsed only by sailors venturing across the furthest depths, is dark and sleek; scaly or smooth; seen spouting geysers of smoke from their foreheads and seizing sailors in their long tentacles. Others have sturdy horns that might shatter a ship, or ensnare it in the coils of its long body.

The Sunken each spring from an egg of Labiasam, but they are formed in unique nature by her, each

according to her desires: Those slight and delicate, like Earthen-Beings, who lure sailors to their deaths with their beautiful song and bodies that arouse desire; those broad of maw and with myriad teeth; those who appear as an island or a ship upon the horizon to bring false hopes — and those who unexpectedly give succor and aid, according to whims unglimped by mortal mind.





# Bahamat

Some say that the first child of the Waters of Heaven and the Waters of the Underworld is not the Earthen Firmament, but Bahamat. Others say that it is the first child of the Earth, Herself, who portended the Age of Giants. Bahamat is a vast beast whose every footstep has left a lake or crater, and its beds were the seas.

Daralil tamed Bahamat in the Age of Giants and rode it into battle against Ramun, blocking the sun for a month. But when Daralil fell and his head split open to reveal the newborn Kutegash, Bahamat fled from the corpse of its cruel master and hid away from the eyes of the

Giants. Some peoples claim that Kutegash knew where it had hidden itself and, in her wisdom, passed the knowledge to those she trusted.

Others say that it still walks upon the earth, blocking the Strong Right or Weak Left Eye of the skies in its migrations.

Upon Bahamat's back grow forests and rivers. Its belly spans the sky. Its feet rest beyond the horizon.

Its call is like a war trumpet echoing like thunder in the mountains. Its hide is dark, like the skin of a whale of the ocean, and no well but one is deeper than the thickness of its hide.

## **Bahamat's Desires**

Bahamat is vast and mysterious. It wishes to remain hidden for some reason, showing itself only when it eclipses the sun or moon.

It was tamed once before and didn't much like the experience.

## **To a Namedealer**

Bahamat grants four Immortal Dice of Gold, should it find a Name-dealer to offer something it wants: **Known to All, Big, Mighty,** and **Old.**

## **To a Fated Hero**

who dares to make a trophy of Bahamat — surely it is merely some small piece, a minuscule scrap, unnoticed by the Great Beast, itself — it grants three Mortal Dice of Jet: **Old, Mighty,** and **Known to All.**

### **Labiasam's Desires**

To satisfy that which she desires, Labiasam produce the many forms of the Sunken. She is patient and knows of all things in the cold deep. What could any Earthen-Being hope to promise her?

### **To a Namedealer**

with whom she has treated, should they find a way to arouse her interest at all, she will grant four Immortal Dice of Gold: **Big, Known to All** who know the seas or have heard tales thereof, **Mighty**, and **Old**.

### **To a Fated Hero**

who dares take some piece of her vast body, she gives five Mortal Dice of Jet: **Old, Mighty, Generous** to seafarers, for the bounty of saltwater is her offspring, and **Known to All** who have gazed into the deep. If they are her descendant, however, and she acknowledges them, her patronage will grant a Fated Hero these five Immortal Dice of Gold: **Mighty, Generous, Feared, Beautiful**, and **Known to All**.

## **Labiasam**

If the Earth, Herself, bore Bahamat before the Giants, its twin is Labiasam. She travels between the Waters of the Underworld and the oceans freely, birthing monsters of the sea — The Sunken — serpents and many-armed; those with shells and those with fins; those cloven to their place and those who fly through the sea like a bird flies through the sky.

When she surfaces, she appears as a floating island. According to her whim, she might rest upon the surface for years, as birds, trees, and flowers settle and grow on her, only to dive as deep as the Waters of the

Underworld. When swimming, she has wings like a bat that stretch from horizon to horizon, and scintillating fish of all sorts cling to her or follow in her wake.

Labiasam cared little about the affairs of Giants, and cares less for those of Earthen-Beings, who are to her as krill are to a whale. She cares only for her children and their descendants, who are all the creatures of the seas and the ocean.





## Tiamut, Salt Mother, Who Sows Chaos

The Waters of Heaven and the Waters of the Underworld had with them in their coupling a third: Tiamut, Salt Mother, She Who Sows Chaos.

Her body is slender and scaly like a serpent, but eight-winged like a Messenger. Her eyes are like the night sky, speckled with stars, for there is nothing beyond her vision. Her lips and tongue speak all languages, but sow truth with lies and tell lies with truths. Her teeth are as numerous as all beings.

It was Tiamut who drove the Giants against each other, for before her

tutelage they could not speak, and so struck at each other without purpose or alliance. She made writing upon her scales so that words, true or false, could persist beyond their utterance. She made medicine to foil the mortality that curses Earthen-Beings, that they might survive against the Giants and Great Names and be like them. And she taught the Earthen-Beings of good and evil, that they might defy the orders of the Giants, knowing that which they did.

No door is barred to Tiamut, who travels between the Waters of the Underworld, the Waters of Heaven, and the airs of the Earthen Firmament according to her will.

### Tiamut's Desires

are unknowable; any scheme is one she has seen and foreseen. If she accepts an offer, it is because she arranged for the offer. If she rejects an offer, it is to induce some action on the offerer's behalf.

### To a Namedealer

Tiamut grants six Immortal Dice of Gold if she feels that doing so suits her ineffable plans:

**Known to All, Big, Beautiful, Mighty, Old, and Inscribed.**

### To a Fated Hero

who has descended from her line and so is commanded to do her bidding for her purposes, she offers four Immortal Dice of Gold:

**Mighty, Known to All, Feared, and Beautiful.** If Tiamut

sees fit to grant one a boon as a trophy, she will offer a Fated Hero these three Mortal Dice of Jet: **Old, Mighty, and Known to All.**





LIMZU, THE RIB OF  
GALZU, WOULD BE UNITED  
WITH ITS SCABBARD,  
THAT IT WOULD AGAIN  
BE WHOLE.



# THAT MADE WITH THE SKILLED HAND

## The Craft of the Hand of Earthen-Being

**When the Earthen-Beings rose from the clay of the Firmament,** they had hands as fine as those of the Great Names that formed the mountains, that carved the trees of wood so finely that they grew with life, that spun the thunderbolt from silver thread.

The Earthen-Beings, given the name of fire by Tabat-Who-Is-Eaten, turned their clever hands to craft that they might face the storms of Heaven, that they might defy the beasts of the wilderness, and that they might make beauty from chaos.

## **Food and Drink to Feed the Body and Delight the Senses**

The settled peoples of the world — those who live in cities and villages, those called “farmers” by the Children of Shama — live on the grasses and trees that grow along the rivers and lakes of the Firmament. They raise animals in pens for slaughter, draw fish from their waterways, and raise bees for their honey.

### **Bread**

The seeds of grasses are ground to meal or flour, then baked into flat-breads, loaves, and cakes with salt, oil, and eggs.

### **Barley**

A coarse, satisfying grain, barley is eaten by some as porridge with other ingredients from the farm, and baked by many into loaves after gaining breath.

Where a people makes bread of barley, they also make beer or ale — herbed concoctions that keep water from turning to poison as it travels.

## **Millet**

Millet is a grain eaten in times of poverty, or where barley will not grow. Some say that it will cause night-blindness in those who eat it excessively.

## **Teff**

Some peoples grind this dark, flavorful grain into flour and bake it on clay sheets, forming wide, stretchy, tart flatbreads that are used to sop up sauces and meats. The city of Ajubeh layers it with honey, cardamom, and pepper.

## **Beans**

The many peoples grow as many types of beans, from tiny split peas, to lentils, to fava and chickpeas. Some people combine them in stews with their grains, while others grind them to paste and fry them in oil with garlic and herbs.

## **Olives**

Olives are precious for their oil that burns in lamps, that satisfies the body, that makes the hair and skin shine like the dark sea, that enriches and fries food, that is given to the Great Names and Ancestors in times

of festival. Olive trees are precious, as they do not bear fruit for many generations, and a people that grows olives thinks of that which it leaves for its descendants.

### **Fruit of the Vine**

From the far-off Sunset Sea come grapes, which are dried to raisins while they travel to the center of the world.

Wine is so transported by caravan and ship, and pleases the soul of the mortal and immortal alike.

### **Honey**

Bees, both wild and those in treaty with Earthen-Beings, provide the world with the sweetness of honey. Though the bees provide it in the summer, many peoples use it to preserve meats and fruits for other seasons, and the dead for all time.

### **Spices**

The peoples of the Center of the World grow and use fragrant cardamom; the delicate leaves and bold seeds of coriander; round hips of garlic; thyme, from spicy to sweet; orange saffron and turmeric

that smell of rushing river and dye the skin and clothes. Wise peoples know the medicinal uses of each.

### **Fruit of the Tree**

Apricots thrive where there is water, as do apples of the same size. Figs and dates delight and overwhelm with sweetness. All are dried for trade or carried to be consumed while traveling. Dates exude a honey of their own when ripe, sweetening food and raising spirits.

The Adebish know its name well and produce from it a sweet wine that loosens the tongue and the tunic.

### **Khmo**

The leaves of this plant are smoked or heated and ground into date honey, then eaten to relax the body and free the spirit. It is prized by doctors for dulling pain and soothing the spirit; by Namedealers for opening the eye past the mortal world; by many people for its earthy flavor and the geniality that comes with eating or smoking it together.

### **Salt**

Salt is plentiful only near the sea to the west and the oceans to the east and south, though some say

that in the north a mountain of salt, hard as stone, rises to the sky.

It is revered in all places as a spice and it is demanded by many Great Names.

Meats, fish, vegetables, fruits, and the dead may all be packed in salt to prevent their turning to corruption.

## **Milk**

The milk of goats, sheep, cattle, and other such hairy beasts is drunk fresh, or coaxed into doogh, yoghurt, and cheeses hard and soft. While they change with the

passing of time, they can be consumed while traveling — properly salted, milk becomes doogh; doogh becomes yoghurt; yoghurt becomes soft cheese; soft cheese grows hard.

Peoples whose beasts produce milk know many ways to prepare and preserve it, that it will not spoil.

## **Animals, Those Raised for Food, for Their Pelts, and for Labor**

### **Fish**

Where humans settle along rivers, or in the seas, or on ponds and lakes, they fish. Some cities draw fish from traps rather than farming, and many of the free peoples draw fish daily from the waters in their travels.

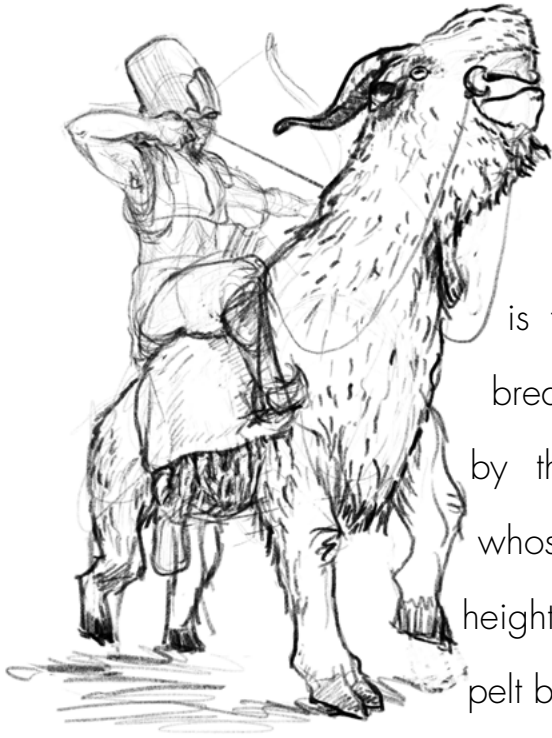
Where a city rises from the shore, though, the fish flee, for Earthen-Beings, gathered together behind walls, will seek to enslave their river.

### **Ktesh**

Reaching only to the knee, the ktesh is a bird, toothy of maw like the akum ridden by the fierce Northerners. They are raised in pens for food among many peoples, but are found wild only in far northern reaches.

### **Goat**

Across the Center of the World live goats. Some, grown for food, are small and possessed of a fool-hardy courage. Others, laden with thick coats and bearing terrifying horns, guard mountain passes. It



is these that have been bred into fearsome mounts by the Ahhakap people, whose goats rise to the height of the head, their thick pelt braided and beaded in accordance with the might of their rider.

## Sheep

Sheep, too, are raised for their flesh, but also for their wool, which is spun, dyed with indigo or ochre or pigments of ground stone, and woven across the Center of the World.

## Camel

Though aggressive, crude in temper, and strong, the camel knows the ways of the desert and can travel without water for days. Those who travel the desert by habit do so perched upon the carpet-laden, saddled hump of a camel.

Many among the Children of Shama slaughter and roast camel for sacred occasions, such as their annual convocation and the weddings of the children of the mighty.

## Onager

The wild donkey of the desert is a ferocious beast, defending its herd with heavy hoof, thick limb, and stout jaw. But many peoples have within their grasp the taming of the onager, naming them that they might become

small and docile, might plough the fields, might guard livestock and carry water and goods, and might bear Earthen-Beings upon their back in voyage across great distances.

## Cattle

Many peoples prize and even worship cattle, and their Great Names demand them as sacrifice. Wild, they grow taller than the height of the head, with shaggy pelts and horns as long as an outstretched arm. They are ferocious will



crash over an army like a thunderous sea storm.

But in the shelter of civilization, they are smaller, their pelts finer, their meat more tender, and they will accept their fate of slaughter.

## **Shelter**

### **Tents**

Many peoples, such as the Children of Shama, travel according to the seasons to the places they deem best. Where there is water or fruits, a where there are caravans among whom to trade, and where they must sleep through the desert

day, are found tents of woven wool, or spun from the flax that springs from the farms of cities and villages.

Some are small and simple, while others spread wide to shelter from the burning Strong Right Eye of the desert. Chiefs fluent in the Language of Names inscribe the walls of their tents with protective promises and threats to the desert and its sky.

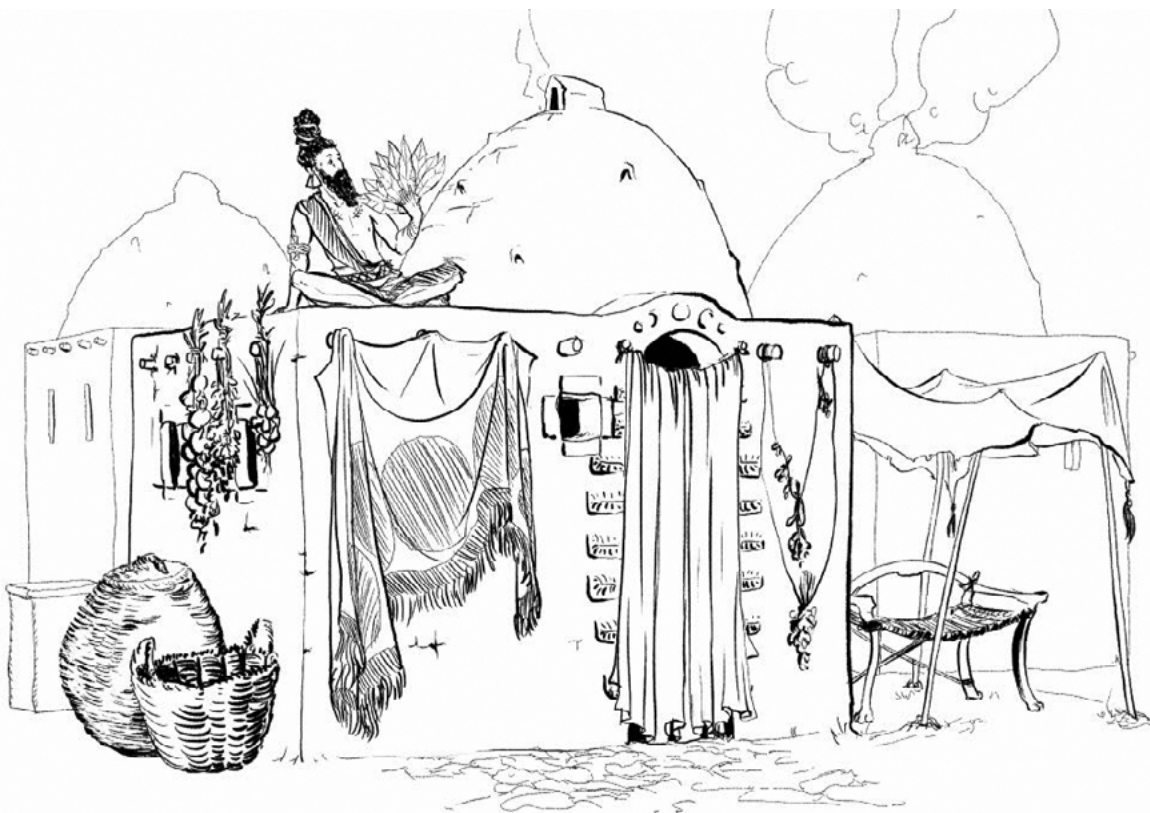
### **Houses**

Where a people stops wandering, they will build houses of mud and wood according to the materials and techniques of their people.

The houses of most peoples are round and arrayed in a circle, centered on a well or along the curvaceous banks of a river, with narrow paths between them.

## Cities

Cities thrive with Earthen-Beings by the thousands. Each is unique, but grows from the spot where its founder established it, where there rests a temple to them, through which they might return from the Waters of the Underworld. It is attended by priests,



oracles, or other Namedealers and warriors who speak to the ancestors and perform sacrifices and ablutions according to their demands.

Around that spot thrives its market and square, where farmers trade with hunters; hunters with fishers; fishers with spice traders; spice traders with bakers; bakers with brewers; brewers with farmers.

Around the market square stand the houses of the city's people, often with no space between them, pedestrian streets snaking along old routes now overgrown with brick and stone

and mortar. Most of those denizens make their own clothes, beer, and food from the produce of the farms and rivers upon which they labor.

Cities are built of fired brick or stone or other enduring materials. Roofs lie flat where there is little rain or sloped with tile or thatch where there is much.

Animals and people fill the streets of every kind, for the great cities thrive on novelty and the intercourse of people and of words of a thousand hearts in five hundred tongues.

## Musical Instruments

From the throat issues song unbidden, but the Earthen-Beings turn their craft to summoning music from cold bone, wood, skin, reed, and shining metal.

### Percussion

All the peoples of the world might play upon a drum, its skin of a sheep or goat or ktesh or fish stretched across a tube of wood or tusk.

Small, thin drums ring like a bell, while wide ones echo like thunder. A shallow drum like a tambourine barks and clatters, while a deep one resounds.

Some people sing to the sounds of a drum, while for others drums are for the ears of only the Great Names upon their decreed festivals.

Those people who have shellfish draw not only purple dye from them, but also use the shells as castanets and rattles.

Many make cymbals of bronze and silver and gold, as well as bells to adorn the ankles, hips, and wrists of dancers.



## Strings

The long-necked gishgudi and the shapely lyre are strung with gut and resonate in a chamber of wood or beaten metals.

A skilled player accompanies with their voice, preserving and refining the tales of the Great Names and the ancestors, according to the traditions of their people.

## Horns

Horns of an animal or wrought with skilled hand are blown to arouse the Great Names, to stir the soul to battle, and to call across great distances.

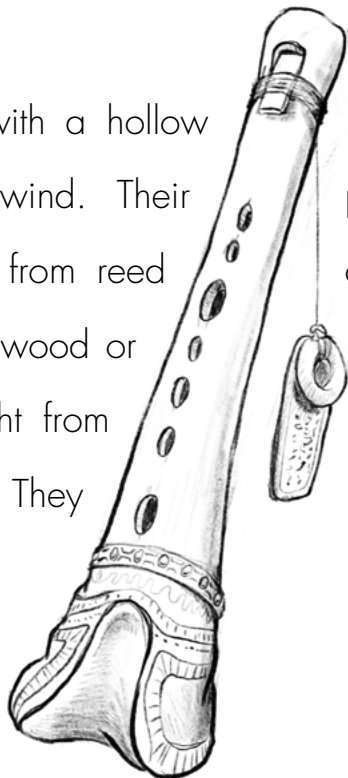
A small horn like that of a goat might shriek, while a horn made of the hollowed tusk of a mighty beast rests upon the ground and speaks to others across mountain and valley.

## Pipes

Pipes speak in a reedy tone, and sometimes in more than one voice at a time. They stir the soul to dance and to sing. Some carry a small flute as they travel, while some flutes are elaborate holy objects in many pieces, played only in supplication to the mighty dead.

## Flutes

Flutes sing with a hollow tone like the wind. Their bodies are cut from reed or graven from wood or carefully wrought from precious metals. They



are simple instruments, but many play them with great skill, their fingers dancing across the openings of the body to elicit pleasuresome sounds.

## Writing

Tiamut brought writing to the Earthen-Beings, but few know its craft. Among those who do, they write thusly:

## Clay Tablet

Clay, held in the hand and pressed with a stylus into cuneiform, can hold a message when dried. Or, when fired, the message might last for all time.

## Papyrus

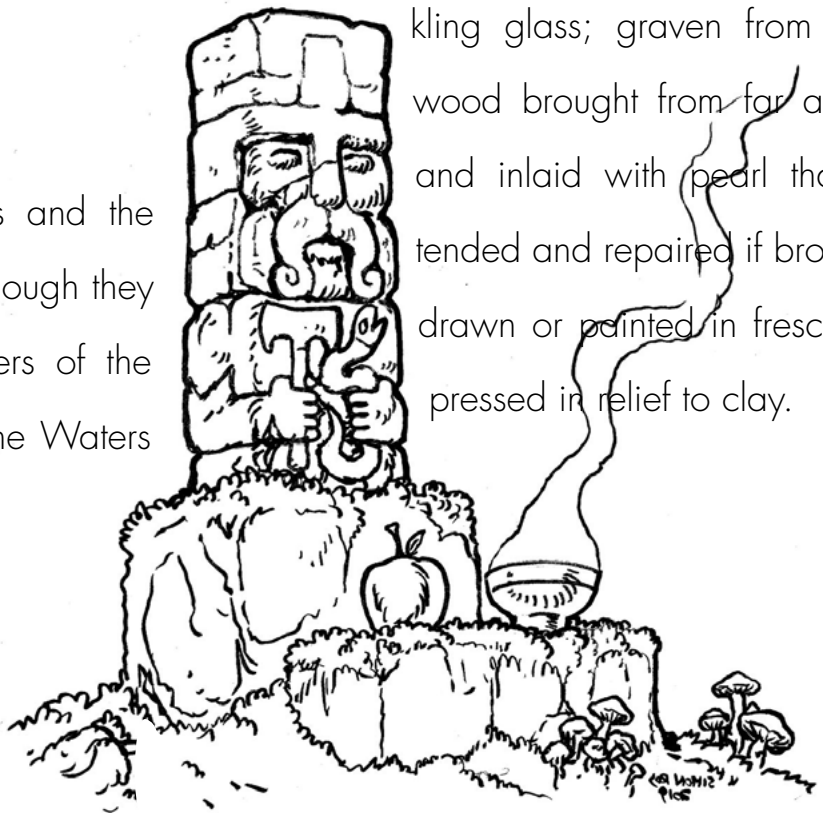
The sedge plant, sliced thinly and woven into sheets, may hold words written in ink made of egg white and the dyes and pigments of plant and bright stone; might be illuminated in gold leaf; might be rolled into a scroll to be held in the hand or lain across a table.

## Art Eidolon

The ancestors and the Great Names, though they rest in the Waters of the Underworld or the Waters

of Heaven, might return to the Earthen Firmament in the body of an eidolon. Redsmiths, silversmiths, woodcarvers, and all crafters make idols with great care, lest the Named-One whom they represent take offense with terrible consequence.

They are finely wrought of precious metal, the eyes made of sparkling glass; graven from fine wood brought from far away and inlaid with pearl that is tended and repaired if broken; drawn or painted in fresco or pressed in relief to clay.



Through the ears of the eidolon they may hear, but the dead speak not mortal languages; they speak only in the Language of Names to those who know the ancient tongue.

## **Makeup and Hair**

A people whose hair is curly will use oils and scents to make it lush; or will have it braided by family or attendants in complex patterns to show their standing among their people; or will cut it or shave it according to, or in defiance of, the ways of their people.

Among those peoples whose

faces bear hair, most beautify their beards; those of meager means trim or braid it, and even they will oil and comb it to sanctify their bodies on sacred occasions. Those of greater means or status might carry beads of glass or silver or weave in golden ribbons.

Most peoples paint their faces in some way to make themselves beautiful. Those who live with bright sun paint around their eyes with black kohl; with blue like the night sky; with red of passion, that dims the glare and makes the

eyes flash to those whose attention one desires. Carnelian ground into olive oil decorates the lips of the powerful, while the poor use the quickly fading juice of red berries to do the same. Cheeks are made to flush with

passion by powdering them with ochre, or to shine with ground fish scales.

Some dye the face, hands, and skin in patterns with red henna or blue indigo, defining or defying their features.

## Quotidian Decoration

When Earthen-Beings were made from the red clay, they arose with a thirst for knowledge and a passion to repeat their creation with the arts of their deft hands.

Each clay pot, filled with precious oil, is decorated with tales of the



Great Names and the ancestors, and with geometries to please the eye. Lamps to light the dark are fashioned in the image of animals or Great Names or plants of pleasing form. Simple tunics woven by a parent for their family are made with patterns and dyed in colors pleasing to the wearer.

Every parent makes for their children dolls from reeds and leather and bone, constructed as finely as their hands allow.

Those whose hands know the inscription of words write histories

or blessings for well-being upon any surface that will hold a word; even those who know not the Language of Names mimic its forms in the hope that Named-Ones will obey the intent of the writing.

## **Weapons**

### **Sling**

If a people tends sheep or goats and must protect them from hyena or wolf or akum, or if they eat wild birds, or if they travel and would protect themselves from wild animals or brigands upon the road, they are practiced in the way of the sling.

## Spear

It is a deadly weapon in skilled hands, splitting skull and felling bird.

It is simple in construction and, if lost or damaged, can be rebuilt again from any flexible material.

While a slinger might use a sling bullet made of simple found stone, the soldier and shepherd alike carry a pouch of almond-shaped ammunition made of fired clay, sometimes inscribed with the NAMEDEAL that binds it to its target, sometimes with insult or illustration of a thunderbolt.

The spear is a fearsome and ancient weapon, known to all peoples. Some might bear a simple fire-hardened stick, shaped with art.

But many, such as the Dzung, consider it the most noble of weapon, its head cast and wrought into a fine edge like the forked tongue of a lizard with which they might strike others from the saddle; others, like the army of Kalrim, bear a thousand spears in a battle, a charging boar with bronze-tipped bristles.

## Khopesh

The khopesh, with its edge shaped like the belly of the crescent moon, is wielded by many across the Firmament: a sharp axe in the shape of an onager's fearsome rear leg, hafted with bronze itself, as long as a forearm. The skilled carry it in one hand with a wicker shield in the other.

## Leaf-Bladed Sword

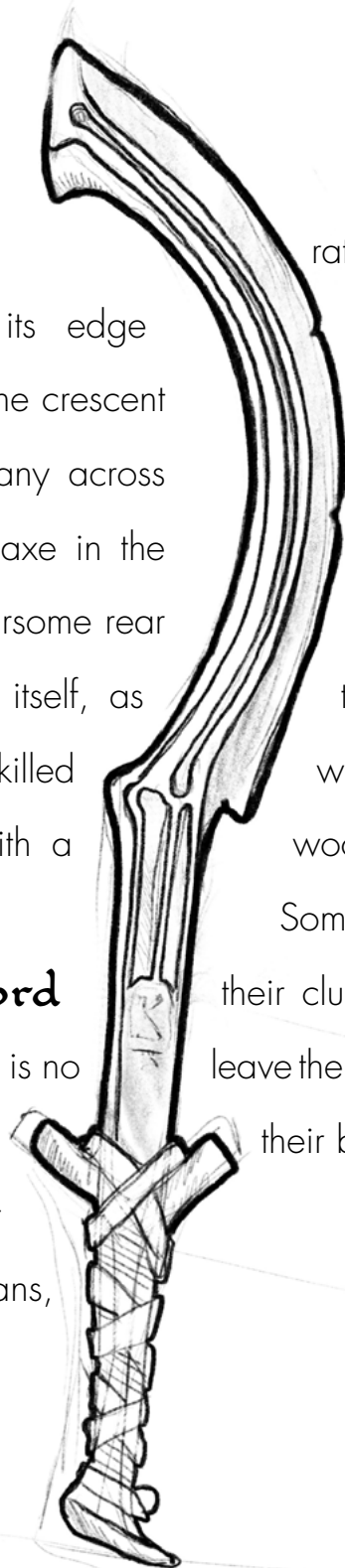
The leaf-bladed sword is no longer than the khopesh, but it has a fearsome point that might pierce organs,

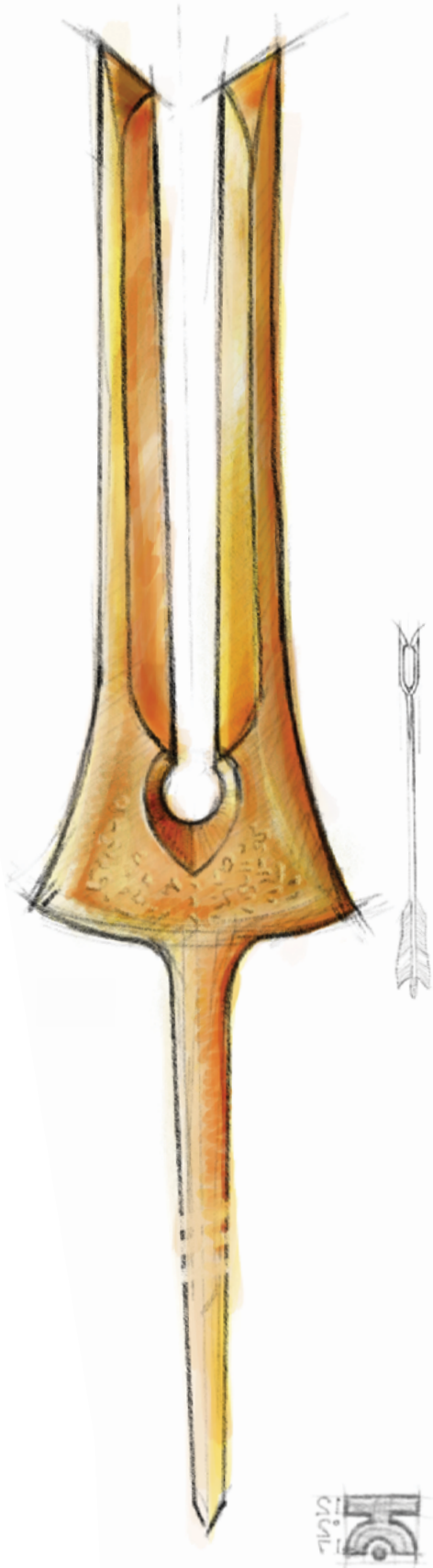
rather than cleave flesh.

## War Club

All peoples who fight know the club. Even those peoples who know the name of bronze grant one to their rulers, engraved with elaborate patterns in wood or bone.

Some peoples learn to coax their clubs into flight, while others leave them comfortable in the palm of their bearer.

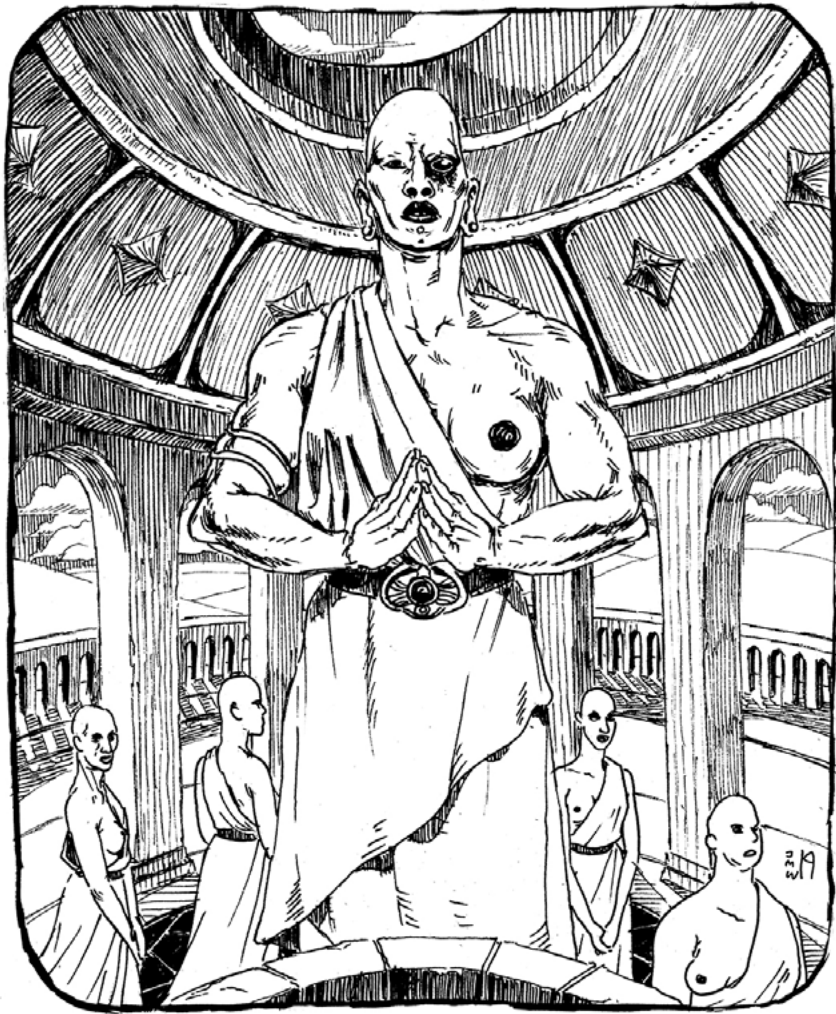




## Bow and Arrow

While all who travel the wilderness might know the ways of the sling, fewer know the ways of the bow. But in the hands of the skilled, an arrow longs to pluck the eye from a bird on the wing, to cut the straps of armor or pierce between its joints.

Where the sling bullet will crush and shatter, the arrow will pierce and cut.



## Houses of the Dead

When the dead depart for the Waters of the Underworld, the living hope — often in vain — for their return. And sometimes the living wish — also often in vain — for the dead to have comforts in their eternal cold.

## Grave

Some peoples dig a hole in the ground, or find a cave in which to inter the dead. Some mark with stone the spot where the dead departed for the Waters of the Underworld.

## Sky Pyre

Some people place their dead high upon a scaffold so flying beasts can consume their flesh, leaving their bones to join those of their ancestors inside the scaffold as their soul falls to the Waters of the Underworld.

## Tombs

The great, the mighty, the renowned, might believe that they can carry with them the comforts of the living, having their bodies preserved among their treasure so that they might return to them to make demands of their descendants.



## Coin

The peoples of cities, to trade with those upon their rivers and harbors and roads, fashion coins of beautiful material. The people of Dhughur fashion glass into flat rings and weave them into their hair to show their wealth and the trust invested in them by their tribe.

The Gashab family of merchants trades within its family stone grasshoppers with the sigil of the creditor inscribed on its belly; any in the family would trade it for its weight in gold, though such weights are not given

outside the family, and any caught carrying such a weight would surely feel their wrath.

The goldsmith Shebahfzu wrought one thousand gold links of chain as a gift for Balashuz, who broke the chain and gave 332 of them to her attendants Lubash, Pashuzu, and Adamak, with the broken rings given to Zumash, the priest-astrologer. The destiny of the last link is unknown and some say it was swallowed by Gushuzeb and lies in his corpse, locked around one rib.

# THE GREAT

## The Muses and That Which Has

### **In a Wicked Age**

Vincent Baker's own take on Bronze Age Sword & Sorcery caused a stir in the game design world with its system of oracles. Eventually, it would become...

### **Apocalypse World**

...which began the creative conversation that *The Bloody-Handed Name of Bronze* is continuing.

### **Vast & Starlit**

Epidiah Ravachol's sleek, minuscule roleplaying game — also a part

of the Apocalypse World conversation — not only helped define some of the specifications for this game, but also helped me accept the first concepts into a tiny, experimental series called *Lover of Jet & Gold*, a game printed on a business card.

### **Sorcerer**

The first conversation that spawned this game came from a conversation about Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* on the Internet, likely on The Forge, sometime around 2004.

# LIBRARY

## the Records of Come Before

Challenged by someone to say why a game like **Sorcerer** needed die rolls to determine important things, I posited a game wherein you could gain power by trapping demons, but when you used their dice for your own purposes, it became more and more likely that their resentment would boil over.

### Conan

The racist Problematic Fave of Sword & Sorcery, Robert E. Howard impressed upon this game the cen-

trality of sensuality when describing the bizarre. But fuck that guy.

### Dying Earth

Jack Vance imbues his **Dying Earth** with a sense of humor that highlights the absurdities of human pettiness. The magic in his world is full of ironies, unintended consequences, and attempted cruelties that were an inspiration for the Namedealers.

### Torah

The **Torah**, the foundational story of the People Israel, is full of magic,

supernatural horror, personal horror, and questionable heroism. I chose to here treat its inspiration in parallel with the other Bronze Age epics. This game's use of words and negotiation with the supernatural mirrors Avram's first conversations with El — who was, at the time, but one member of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

## Enuma Elish

The oldest written story, the Enuma Elish, includes the Epic of Gilgamesh, whose influence we see today in the heroic arcs of our modern mythologies. It is also the source of many of the supernatural entities in ***The Monsters*** chapter.

## Age of Bronze

Eric Shanower's vibrant, intimate telling of the Trojan War, drawing heavily on both contemporary archaeology and the ***Iliad***, is an enormously ambitious project. As of this writing, there are four volumes. I hope that there are more someday.

## Herakles

I came across Edouard Cour's comic about the eponymous hero in Million Year Picnic, the extraordinary comic shop in Cambridge, MA. Its modern and irreverent tone is particularly appropriate to Herakles, who, like his cross-cultural counterparts Shimshon and Enkidu, is a wild man.

However, the troubled “ethicization” process that later Greeks added to his stories adds a level of complexity that the comic touches on.

## Earthsea

Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea novels were important to me as a kid. ***The Tombs of Atuan*** was the first story I read that was a thoroughbred tragedy, and the system of magic, wherein the knowledge of names grants one power, is an obvious influence on this game.

## Tower of Babylon

Ted Chiang’s novelette, included in his collection ***Stories of Your Life and Others*** (renamed ***Arrival***), is

the tale of Hillalum, an Elamite miner who has come to Babel to help build the infamous tower, hoping to reach the Vault of Heaven.

Like all of Chiang’s writing, it’s at once intellectual and emotional, vivid with description and sensuality.

Chiang assumes that the cosmology of the Mesopotamians is true, with the Earthen Firmament below, covered by the Vault of Heaven, and past which are the Waters of Heaven — and then proceeds with naturalistic description and human cultural, interpersonal interactions.

# ABOUT THE CREATORS

## Shel Kahn

Shel Kahn loves RPGs! They illustrate and write for tabletop RPGs, run them for kids and teens at schools and museums, and mentor new GMs with the nonprofit community space Dames Making Games. Kahn's self-published adventures include ***Keep on the Shining Isle***, ***The Corruption of Pelursk***, and most recently ***The Ghost Houses of Phylincra***. Learn more at [portablecity.net](http://portablecity.net)

## Mimi Mondal

Mimi Mondal writes science fiction and fantasy stories at various venues and a mostly political column called ***Extraordinary Alien*** in the Indian newspaper ***Hindustan Times***. Her first nonfiction anthology ***Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler***, co-edited with Alexandra Pierce, received the Locus Award and was a Hugo Award finalist in 2018. Mimi grew up in Calcutta, India, lives in New York City, and is currently extremely interested in democracies. You can find her on Twitter as **@miminality**

## Simon Roy

Wayward son of Vancouver Island, Simon Roy cut his comics teeth in 2009 with ***Jan's Atomic Heart***, and has been vigorously gnawing ever since. His comics include ***Habitat***, ***Tiger Lung***, ***Prophet***, and ***The Field***. His work can also be found amidst the pages and screens of video games, roleplaying games, and even the odd piece of edu-tainment! You can see more at ***simonroyart.com***

## Jabari Weathers

Jabari Weathers is suspected to be a goblin noble from the beyond. They presently reside in Baltimore, making fantasy and sci-fi art to keep up their glamour and their enjoyment alike. They also design games, which is deeply fun and cathartic for them. Other things they enjoy are roleplaying, singing in public, and the thoroughly uncanny.

You can follow them on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, and can find their work at ***jmwillustration.com*** and contact them at ***jmwillustration@gmail.com***

## Joshua A.C. Newman

Joshua A.C. Newman has been designing, writing, and publishing weird speculative art since his illustrated, handbound 1999 mystical / mathematical allegory, ***Homunculand***. Since then, he has published many game books including the seminal ***Shock:Social Science Fiction*** and the tiny giant robot LEGO wargame, ***Mobile Frame Zero***.

His speculative and experimental work — music, roleplaying games, illustration, speculative biology, fiction, and linguistic design — can be found at **[glyphpress.com](http://glyphpress.com)** and at **[patreon.com/joshua](https://patreon.com/joshua)**

## Joshua Yearsley

Joshua Yearsley—the “Josh” when he’s in the same room as Joshua—develops and edits books and tabletop games, hoping to make them more friendly, accessible, and usable for people of all kinds. (He has yet to work on a game meant specifically for animals or plants.)

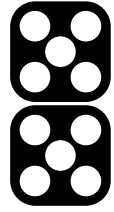
His editorial and development work includes ***Root***, the ***Fate Worlds*** series, the ***Ratcatchers*** series of books, ***Marvel Champions***, and ***Damn the Man, Save the Music***.

You can find more about him at **[joshuayearsley.com](http://joshuayearsley.com)**

# NAMEDSALER

I AM \_\_\_\_\_  
 KNOWN \_\_\_\_\_  
 AS \_\_\_\_\_

MY MORTAL  
 DICE OF JET  
 the breath of life and my last breath  
 that I must cross off when wounded



## NAMES WHO AID ME WHO LEND ME THEIR IMMORTAL DICE OF GOLD

OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY DEMAND

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY PROMISE

OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY DEMAND

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY PROMISE

OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY DEMAND

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY PROMISE

OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

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OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

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OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY DEMAND

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY PROMISE

OLD  BIG  MIGHTY  
 BEAUTIFUL  KNOWN TO ALL  INSCRIBED

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY DEMAND

\_\_\_\_\_ THEY PROMISE

## I FLEE

\_\_\_\_\_

## BECAUSE

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**To take action:**  
**1:** Vividly describe what you do.  
**2:** One Who Knows the Will tells you which action you have taken. If you intended to take a different action, ask them what you must do to take the action you intend.

**3:** Roll all your Dice of Jet and all the Dice of Gold for the Named-Ones who assist you.

### Count 5s and 6s as strikes.

- If you roll **0 strikes**, you are now vulnerable to a **demand** from your opposition.
- If you roll **1 strike**, select **one consequence** from the list under the action. Your opposition may **subvert** any remaining consequences.
- If you roll **2 strikes**, select **two consequences**.
- If you roll **3+ strikes**, select **two consequences**, then **seize one destiny for each** extra strike.
- Additionally, if you rolled **more strikes on Dice of Gold than on Dice of Jet**, you are now vulnerable to a **demand** from any Named-One aiding you, including any Companions with whom you have made an enduring agreement.

## DESTINY



TO TAKE ACTION, I MAY:

- OFFER THEM WHAT THEY DESIRE
- COERCES
- THIVES
- ESCAPE

# NAMED DEALER, TAKE ACTION!

## How do I know what a Named-One desires?

You could ask them, or you could otherwise figure it out. However, you may not roll until you've offered them something they want. Whenever a character does or says anything, think about what they want. It might be simple or complex, and it might be conflicted. But if a Name of the World hears such an offer from a Nameddealer who's speaking in the Language of Names, they'll at least entertain the offer. Let the dice decide the consequences.

## What happens in an enduring agreement?

Take the Immortal Dice of Gold represented by this Named-One. is a broad one. They agree to help you in whatever way they have agreed until you have satisfied their desire. You are going into long-term debt with them, which is why you get their dice

## Offer Them What They Desire

- ✘ They agree to do as you ask in exchange.
- ✘ They make no further demand before accepting this agreement.
- ✘ Their agreement endures.

## Coerce

- ✘ They do as you demand, or else you may harm them.
- ✘ You are not harmed in the exchange.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Thieve

- ✘ You take what was theirs, claiming it for your own.
- ✘ You are not harmed.
- ✘ They do not know you took it, for now.

## Escape

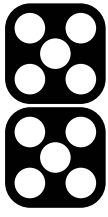
- ✘ You get away.
- ✘ Your escape goes unwitnessed.
- ✘ Seize one destiny!

## What can be thieved?

You can only steal something that, once you have it, they do not. While that can be physical things, it can also be secrets, since they have lost the secret of it once you have it.

# FATΣD HERO

I AM CALΣD \_\_\_\_\_

MY MORTAL DICEΣ OF JET   
 my name and my body that I must cross off when shamed or wounded

I DO THE BIDDING OF \_\_\_\_\_ WHO LENDS ME THEIR IMMORTAL DICEΣ OF GOLD  
 FEARED  MIGHTY  KNOWN TO ALL  
 BEAUTIFUL  GENEROUS  PRESENT IN SIDOION

AND THEIR ORACLE IS \_\_\_\_\_

TROPHIES I HAVE SEIZED WHICH LEND ME THEIR MORTAL DICEΣ OF JET

WHO DEMANDS THAT I \_\_\_\_\_

O/D  GENEROUS  
 MIGHTY  KNOWN TO ALL

O/D  GENEROUS  
 MIGHTY  KNOWN TO ALL

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 MIGHTY  KNOWN TO ALL

O/D  GENEROUS  
 MIGHTY  KNOWN TO ALL

**To take action:**  
**1:** Vividly describe what you do.  
**2:** One Who Knows the Will tells you which action you have taken. If you intended to take a different action, ask them what you must do to take the action you intend.  
**3:** Roll your Dice of Jet, including trophies you brandish, and the Dice of Gold for your Great Name.

## DESTINY



### Count 5s and 6s as strikes.

- If you roll **0 strikes**, you are now vulnerable to a **demand** from your opposition.
- If you roll **1 strike**, select **one consequence** from the list under the action. Your opposition may **subvert** any remaining consequences.
- If you roll **2 strikes**, select **two consequences**.
- If you roll **3+ strikes** and at least one is upon a Die of Gold, shout the great feat you have accomplished. Select **three consequences**.
- Additionally, if you rolled **more hits on Dice of Gold than on Dice of Jet**, you are now vulnerable to a **demand** of your Great Name.
- Additionally, if you have **shouted your name**, impressing all with your splendor, seize one **destiny for each 4** you have rolled.

TO TAKE ACTION, I MAY:

COERCE • LEAD MY FOLLOWERS • TEST MYSELF  
 • FOLLOW MY PASSION FOR ANOTHER •

# FATED HERO, TAKE ACTION!

## What does coercion look like?

If you threaten someone with harm unless they comply, even if you can't follow through on the threat, you're coercing. Note that coercion is risky to everyone involved! If you choose **No other is harmed**, you are protecting everyone other than yourself and those you are coercing. If you Know the Will, you may only choose to harm those who are not under direct threat from this coercion. If no one else could be harmed by this coercion or the reaction to it, you may not choose this option.

## Coerce

- ✘ They do as you demand, or else you may harm them.
- ✘ You are not harmed in the exchange.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Follow Your Passion for Another

- ✘ The object of your passion pursues you; but if you pursue a Companion, they may shame you.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ No other is seized with jealousy.
- ✘ You exchange a vow of friendship and take them as a trophy; else, if you pursue a Companion, they may harm you, and you them in return.

## What does following my passion look like?

If you pursue your passion for a Named-One, the outcome can alter their feelings. When you Know the Will of that Name, adjust your expectations. If, however, you intend to pursue your passions for a fellow Companion, **ask the player first**. Misjudging their feelings will be fatal for your Companion.

## Test Yourself

- ✘ Seize one destiny and take followers as a trophy from among the witnesses!
- ✘ You succeed in this trial.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ No other is harmed.

## Lead Your Followers

- ✘ You achieve all you promised.
- ✘ Those who follow you remain unharmed.
- ✘ You are neither harmed nor shamed.
- ✘ Seize one destiny as your followers adore you!

## What are followers?

Followers are trophies you gain by testing yourself in the presence of an audience. Single, named individuals can be your followers, but so can entire named groups. Each of them has a name. You can even pick out individuals from your own followers to impress, adding them as separate trophies as they rise in your ranks.