

# The Shadow Of Yesterday

a fantasy role-playing game  
by Clinton R. Nixon

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The Shadow Of Yesterday

# Rulebook

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# 1 Introduction

**W**elcome to The Shadow of Yesterday! This is a fantasy role-playing game set in a world broken and reborn, a world that you, the players, get to shape.

If you're not familiar with role-playing games, they're a form of play where you and your friends make up stories. The rules of the game are there to give the story structure. You could call it a "story construction kit."

Stories with this game will be set in a world called Near. Before we learn how to use the kit, let's learn about the world and the type of stories that take place in it.

## 1.1 The world of Near

One hundred years ago, Near had a terrible calamity, an event its occupants call the "Sky Fire." This was most likely a giant asteroid that struck the world. At this time, a large part of Near was united in an empire called Maldor. They spoke one language and had a big multi-cultural society. When the Sky Fire struck, it shattered the world. A portion of the planet opposite from Maldor broke away and became a moon, something the people of Near had never seen before. Between the winter that came from all the dust that clouded the sky and the superstitions aggravated from this new celestial body, the empire of Maldor fell and the world was depopulated from hunger and cold. Near only has ten percent of the population it once did. Their universal language, a magical tongue that allowed anyone who heard it to speak it, was lost.

This game is set one hundred years after the Sky Fire. Society is just beginning to re-form, and your stories will be set in this rebuilding.

The rules of this game are meant to enable a type of fantasy where things don't necessarily make common sense, but are always full of style, a bit creepy, a bit comedic, a bit dark and violent, and definitely romantic. You'll notice there's quite a few rules in here that have to do with love and sex. The game's setting is intentionally a sketch. It is there for you to fill in with your players and, hopefully, this game gives you a good set of tools

to do so. The fundamental tenets of Near can be summed up as:

- No gods.
- No monsters.
- Just people.

## 1.2 What do we do?

You'll make up characters and explore this crazy world. Together you'll fill in the setting with ideas that jazz you and make up stories that'll make you laugh and maybe, I don't know, move you a little.

Most of you will make up one character and play the role of that character until his or her story is done. One of you will have to be the Story Guide, who plays everyone else in the fictional world. The story will be heavily tilted toward the main characters (player characters or PCs), so you should all have about the same power to affect the story. The Story Guide's job is to just keep that story on track, using all the other characters in the world (Story Guide characters or SGCs) to press on the sides of that hot story iron and mold it.

Your player characters in this game will be heroes, most likely heroes with problems. Like the world of Near, your character will be full of possibility, both for good and bad. You'll explore the world, meet interesting people, and either solve their problems or give them new ones.

## 1.3 Credits, thanks, and influences

All the contributors to the The Shadow of Yesterday wiki influenced me with this revision. Fred Hicks of Evil Hat Productions inspired me incredibly with his melding of the original version of this game's "Bringing Down the Pain" with his own game Fate, which I can't say enough nice things about. James Nostack and Brennan Taylor both contributed Keys from the wiki.

A big and hearty thanks to my personal playtesters: Mischa Krilov and Judson Lester.

1 Andy Kitkowski is a very good man. He worked this text like a ball of sourdough. Keith Senkowski and Ben Lehman also provided invaluable feedback.

Vincent Baker, creator of awesome games like *Dogs in the Vineyard*, helped more than he knows with his excellent weblog/discussion website called “anyway.”

Lastly, as always, the good souls at The Forge outdid themselves with helpful suggestions and insight.

This game was influenced by many media, some of which you’ll see below.

### RPGs

The *Riddle of Steel* by Jake Norwood (Driftwood Publishing) and *Sorcerer* by Ron Edwards (Adept Press). Two of the best role-playing games out there, they came at the idea that the players set the goals they are rewarded for from different angles. “Keys” in this game are their progeny.

*Fudge* by Steffan O’Sullivan (Grey Ghost Press). Like you couldn’t tell.

*Over the Edge* by Jonathan Tweet with Robin Laws (Atlas Games): The bonus and penalty dice mechanic.

*Dying Earth* by Robin Laws (Pelgrane Press) and

*Shadowrun* by FanPro: Attributes as resource pools (from both) and refreshment of these pools (*Dying Earth*).

*Schism* by Jared Sorensen (Memento-Mori Theatrics): The idea of character “transcendence.”

### Books and authors

I was sort of a late-comer to weird fantasy, but once I started, I couldn’t put it down. The two writers who most influenced this game are Fritz Leiber and Robert E. Howard. Both of these authors took a different direction from the high fantasy written before them: dark, gritty fantasy where people, not gods, made a difference. In addition, they were much less derivative of European myth than their predecessors. Leiber especially gets recognition: the way he painted the world of Lankhmar was amazing and has informed every session of this game that I’ve run. The decline of civilizations, great empty walled cities, and black forests of Near are all Howard. “Red Nails” and “Beyond the Black River” were the two stories that had the most direct influence over this game. An article in the February 2003 *Discover* magazine, “How Was the Moon Formed?” was also a huge inspiration.

To see photographs of the World of Near, I recommend a book called *Secret Corners of the World*, produced by the National Geographic Society. The images of places and people in this book were instrumental in painting a picture of Near.

## 2 Characters

**C**haracters represent all sentient beings in your game. While not every stranger met by the players' characters may be fully fleshed out in terms of mechanics, all characters that could be created in the game should be able to be created with these rules. In order to define who a character is and what that character can do, there are four mechanical pieces: Pools, Abilities, Secrets, and Keys.

### 2.1 Pools

Pools are resources the player can spend during the game in order for their character to push harder, do more, and perform amazing feats. There are three pools: Vigor, Instinct, and Reason.

Vigor represents the character's reserves of physical power, wherewithal, and mental toughness. Characters with high Vigor are often known for bulging muscles, scarred faces, calloused hands, the "thousand-yard stare," and crushing strength.

Instinct represents the character's reserves of animal-like reactions, both physical and social. This ranges from cat-like reflexes in combat to pheromone-like sexual attraction. Characters with high Instinct are often known for their graceful motion, penetrating eyes, amazing hearing, stunning appearance, or sexual prowess.

Reason represents the character's intelligence and mental power. This could range from book knowledge to an uneducated, but highly practical mind. Characters with high Reason are often known for their vocabulary, ability to identify plants and animals, skill at games of chance, or power over others.

Pools are measured in points, and each pool ranges from one to infinite points, although a pool of more than 10 points is highly unusual. During the game, these points are spent to do better than normal or perform unusual feats, but are not permanently gone. Think of each one as a container of reserves: these reserves can be spent, but you can refill the container.

The scores on each player's character sheet represent the maximum points in each pool – the size of the container – and players will get a chance to refresh their characters' pools to their maximum.

### 2.2 Pool refreshment

Whenever a pool is not at its full level, it can be refreshed, restoring it to its full level by the character performing an in-game action.

Vigor is refreshed whenever your character engages in an act of physical exertion (including physical abuse, such as drugs, drinking, staying out all night) with another character, specifically for the intent of enjoying yourself.

Instinct is refreshed whenever your character engages in an act of social pleasure (examples: a date, going to a party, playing a game of chance) with another character.

Reason is refreshed whenever your character engages in an act of intellectual stimulation (examples: a night at the opera, a philosophical debate, playing a game of skill) with another another.

### 2.3 Abilities

Abilities are representations of a character's skills both learned and innate. Some examples of abilities are Sailing, Tracking, Sword-fighting, and Oratory.

Abilities are always associated with a pool. This is shown by writing the name of the pool – or an abbreviation – after the ability name, like this: "Stealth (Instinct)" or just "Stealth (I)." This pool is the resource from which characters draw their strength with that ability. This pool can be used to increase one's chances with an ability. Some game effects apply to all abilities that are associated with a specific pool.

There are three abilities common to every character. These are called innate abilities. They are purely reactive, and cannot be used to initiate action. They are only used to protect your character. They are:

- **Endure (Vigor)**  
This is your character's ability to push on and persevere through pain and fatigue. It is used to test the limits of a character's physicality and fitness.
- **React (Instinct)**  
This measures the quickness of a character's body and mind. It is as much "how quick the character notices something" as "how quick the character moves."
- **Resist (Reason)**  
**Resist** is the strength of a character's will, and is used to prevent compulsion of a natural or supernatural type. This includes physical compulsion: "Resist" would be used for a character to keep her cool under torture, for example, while "Endure" would be used to see how long she could stay conscious under the same torture.

All other abilities are chosen and are actively used by characters. Most abilities will be considered open abilities, which means any character can use them, even with no skill. Some, however, will be closed abilities, which depend on a prerequisite. This prerequisite is usually the species a character is or a culture the character has been exposed to.

Abilities are ranked with adjectives. An ability can have the following ranks: Unskilled, Competent, Adept, Master, and Grand Master. These adjectives do match up with a number, which is used in resolution.

The resolution system will be explained in further detail later, but here's what you need to know:

Being Unskilled in an ability, you can try to perform tasks that fall under that ability, but you'll usually fail. You'll succeed at about two out of every five tries.

When you get to be Competent, you're now ready to really use your skills. You'll succeed over half the time; in fact, you'll succeed at more than three out of every five tries.

As an Adept, you'll almost always succeed – 85 percent of the time, at least.

As a Master, it takes a freak chance for you to fail.

Grand Masters literally cannot ever fail.

It's important to note, though, that even someone with no ability can beat a Grand Master. The odds are far against them, but they could give it a try.

## 2.4 Secrets

Secrets are special abilities a character can learn that augment abilities. These are often preternatural, sometimes magical, and always better than normal. In order to use Secrets, points from a pool are normally spent, meaning that Secrets can be used a limited number of times before that pool is refreshed.

Secrets can be better explained with an example:

- **Secret of the Hidden Pocket**  
This character is adept at hiding objects on her person. No matter how carefully searched the character has been, she may pull an inexpensive, small (hand-sized) item off her person with a successful Stealth ability check. There is no need for the player to have written this item on the character sheet previously. Cost: 1 Instinct.

Like with abilities, there are open Secrets and closed Secrets.

## 2.5 Keys

Keys are the primary method of increasing a character's abilities. These are goals, emotional ties, or vows a character has. By bringing these into the story, the player gains experience points (XP) she can use to advance the character, increasing pools and abilities, or learning new Secrets and Keys.

Again, an example will illustrate this better:

- **Key of Conscience**  
Your character has a soft spot for those weaker than their opponents. Gain 1 XP every time your character helps someone who cannot help themselves. Gain 2 XP every time your character defends someone with might who is in danger and cannot save themselves. Gain 5 XP every time your character takes someone in an unfortunate situation and changes their life to where they can help themselves. Buyoff: Ignore a request for help.

The buyoff shown above is a special bit about

Keys. Whenever a player has a character perform the action shown in one of the buyoffs, the player can (this is not mandatory) erase the Key and gain 10 XP. Once bought off, a character can never have the same Key again.

Unlike abilities and Secrets, the number of Keys a character can have is limited. A character can have no more than five Keys at one time.



## 3 Creating a beginning character

**M**aking your character is the one of the most important parts of playing a role-playing game. In doing so, you not only define the person you want to play, but you determine what that play will be about. Through a combination of character concepts, species, cultures, and Keys, every player gets to contribute to the content of the story.

### 3.1 Concept

In order to start creating a character, a concept needs to be built. The character concept cannot be generated in a vacuum, however; characters must fit together with a certain zest that makes them click, little motors ready to feed off each other. This isn't to say that all characters need to be alike, of the same species and culture, or even from the same place.

There's not a set process for how concept generation works, but it should be done as a group, in a relaxed atmosphere, preferably with whatever gets your imagination flowing, whether that be coffee, beer, music, or whatever else. Talk amongst each other, and don't think of your idea as sacrosanct: take suggestions from other players and give them back. Remember that in creating these characters, you create the landscape in which you will play.

At the end of generating character concepts, you should have a few things:

- An idea of where your character is from and what species she is.
- A few sentences about who your character is and what she cares about.
- A description of your character's appearance, also short.
- A name. This is totally not optional. Pick a name before you go any farther.

Many role-playing game texts will tell you to have a nearly complete idea of who your character is before play. I don't think that's necessary, though. You and your friends will get to know

your character during play. What that character did before-hand is of some interest, but even those details will emerge during play easier than before play. If you were reading a book, would the author expect you to know the main character before-hand?

What you do need to know is this: what species this character is, where she's from, what she's good at, and what might be important to her.

### 3.2 Species

There are four sentient species in the world of Near. (That is, according to the published setting. Maybe you have more in your game.) In choosing a species for your character, you have the following questions to ask yourself:

- What nifty abilities and Secrets can I get because of this species?
- How does this species fit into the culture we're playing in?
- How does this species interact with the other characters' species?
- What does this species represent to me? Why would I want to play this sort of character?

The species to choose from, like all character details, are found in the setting section of this rulebook.

### 3.3 Culture

You will have to decide on a culture that your character is from. You and your friends have probably decided on an area in which the game will start before play, and your characters will likely come from that area and its surrounding cultures. Playing a stranger to the culture you begin play in can be fun, too. Your group will have a lot more information with your setting.

### 3.4 Pools

Once past the heavy-thought areas of concept, species, and culture, the fun number action be-

gins. First up is your character's pools.

Divide 11 points among your character's pools, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 7 in each. (Note: this maximum is just for character creation; your character may end up with a pool later much higher than 7.)

### 3.5 Abilities

All characters start with the three innate abilities. Set one at Adept level, one at Competent, and one at Unskilled.

Then, choose from your setting material more abilities that are available to your character. You should choose one at Adept level and three at Competent. This is just for a starting character, fresh out in the world. If you are playing more experienced characters, you'll get the chance to add more abilities or increase the ones you have later.

Note that you can use any open abilities or any closed abilities from your home culture at Unskilled. You can feel free to write down ones you expect to use. You cannot use abilities from other cultures unless trained in them by someone else.

### 3.6 Secrets and Keys

Before play, players can choose one Secret and

one Key for their characters.

### 3.7 Further Advances

Lastly, players start with a number of advances (chances to improve) for their characters. This is determined by the group before play, depending on how powerful characters are to be at the beginning of the game. The standard number is five. To figure out how to spend them, read below.

### 3.8 Character advancement

During the game, each player character will get experience points (XP) for meeting the player's goals for that character's story and the Story Guide's goals for the overall story. These experience points are converted to advances, usually at a rate of five XP to one advance. Each advance that you get can be banked toward improving your character's pools, abilities, Secrets, and Keys. The costs are found in the table below.

You can never increase the same thing twice in a row. That is, you cannot increase the same ability or pool twice in a row. You need to increase something else in between. In addition, you cannot buy two Secrets or two Keys in a row.

## 4 Resolution

**I**n role-playing games, when a player wants their character to perform an action with an uncertain outcome, we have to resolve that action. In *The Shadow of Yesterday*, almost all resolution is what we call conflict resolution. It's a bit of a confusing term: don't all role-playing games have rules for resolving conflicts?

That's true, but many resolve conflicts piece by little piece. If your character's fighting someone, for example, each hit might be a separate task that gets resolved in some games. Using this game, the entire fight is resolved at once, and then we describe how it went down. Those ups and downs may still be described, but the outcome of the entire conflict is what the system determines.

### 4.1 The ability check

The way we determine outcomes is called an ability check. When performing an uncertain action, the player needs to state her basic intention for the character and the ability they are using. (They don't have to have this ability on their character sheet, but, as you'll see, it helps.) This is not a full description of the action, as the dice provide a randomizer that let the player know how well this action happened. After stating the character's intention, deciding on stakes, and choosing the relevant ability, the ability check is made.

The ability check involves a dice roll. This roll uses special dice you can find at hobby stores or online called "Fudge dice." They were originally invented for a neat little role-playing game called *Fudge*. They are six-sided dice; two sides of them have plus signs on them, two sides are blank, and two sides have minus signs. If you don't have any, you can make your own really easily. Get a red and a green marker and some white dice. Color two sides red and two sides green, and you've got Fudge dice. The plus sides are +1, the blank sides are 0, and the minus sides are -1, in case you didn't know. An even better way to make your own Fudge dice from ordinary six-sided dice can be found in Jonathan Walton's article "Baby's First Fudge Dice" in the online magazine *Fudge Factor*.

After you've got weird dice, the process is pretty simple: roll three dice and add them to your character's rank in the ability being used. As you probably remember, each ability rank has a number associated with it. That's what you use here. So, a character who is a Competent (1) in Scrapping that rolls two pluses and a minus on the dice has a total of 2. That's your success level (SL). There's only one trick to this: you can't get lower than zero. It's a hard bottom number, and if you end up with -1 or something, it's just zero.

Just like every ability rank has an associated number, each success level has an associated name.

That name is just there to help you describe the outcome. It doesn't have a mechanical effect. A Marginal success is all that is needed to succeed at any task in the game.

– 0	<b>Failure</b>
– 1	<b>Marginal</b>
– 2	<b>Good</b>
– 3	<b>Great</b>
– 4	<b>Amazing</b>
– 5	<b>Legendary</b>
– 6	<b>Ultimate</b>
– 7	<b>Transcendent</b>

### 4.2 Bonus and penalty dice

While a ability score determines the range of your character's ability, bonus and penalty dice are a mechanic to skew your results toward one end of that range. When making a ability check, bonus dice add to the number of dice rolled, as do penalty dice. Roll three Fudge dice, plus a number of Fudge dice equal to all your bonus and penalty dice. Whenever possible, bonus and penalty dice cancel each other out, so if you have two bonus dice and a penalty die before your roll, you end up with only one bonus die.

After you roll, remove a number of your dice equal to your penalty dice, starting with pluses. If you run out of pluses, remove blanks, and then minuses. Bonus dice work the opposite way: you remove minuses first, then blanks, then pluses. More simply, penalty dice take away your highest

rolls. Bonus dice take away your lowest rolls.

Players can always spend one point from the ability's associated pool to get one bonus die on a ability check. This is limited to one bonus die per ability check.

### 4.3 The Gift of Dice

At the beginning of each session of the game, every player including the Story Guide receives a number of gift dice equal to the number of players at the table. At any point during the game, any of these dice can be given to another player to be added as bonus dice to that player's current ability check. This is most often used when a player's character is attempting something especially dangerous, or the player describes her character's intention in a cool way.

These gift dice are an important part of play and should not be forgotten. They encourage cooperation among the players as much as among the characters.

### 4.4 Expanding the ability check

The ability check is the core of this system and all other mechanics derive from it, this injection of fortune, that serves as resolution for both instant actions and entire scenes. Here we break down the ways the mechanics grow from the ability check.

### 4.5 Ability check range

Every ability check in this game can be described in terms of range. The term range refers to all the possible outcomes of an ability check. As the player rolls three Fudge dice, results from -3 to +3 plus a character's pertinent ability are always the range of a check. Note that a unskilled character (0) has a range with no result better than Great (3), and a character with a Grand Master (4) ability cannot fail. Related to this is the idea of an average outcome, the outcome most expected with any level of ability. Since zero is the most likely outcome on any roll of three Fudge dice, unskilled characters can be expected to fail the majority of the time. Characters do not succeed on average until they have a Competent ability (1).

Range seems like a simple concept, and it is. It's also very important, though: notice that a char-

acter with even no ability always has a chance of beating a character with a Grand Master, albeit small. This is entirely on purpose: with this system, your character has a limit to how good she might do at a task, but it always might be good enough to beat the other guy.

### 4.6 Intention, Initiation, Execution, and Effect

Although the ability check seems very simple, there's more involved than it seems at first glance. Every time your character takes an action, there are four steps involved: Intention, Initiation, Execution, and Effect. Here's how these break down:

- **Intention**  
The player announces the intended action for the character. No movement or action has happened yet, though. The intention and its consequences may be discussed among the Story Guide and players and changed. Stakes must be stated for the check: what stands to be lost and gained?
- **Initiation**  
The player has committed her character to the task, and no changes can be made now. The dice hit the table.
- **Execution**  
The character completes her action. The player adds the dice to the character's ability to figure out the success level.
- **Effect**  
The players and Story Guide decide what the effect of the task is, whether successfully completed or not.

Now, that sounds like a lot to go through every time you roll the dice. Normally, this all happens without thinking too much about it, making it quick. A player states, "My character's going to do something," she rolls dice, everyone looks to see how the character did, and a decision about what happened occurs.

The reason I bring up the four steps is because if you never think about them, you can cause tension among the players and Story Guide. Imagine a player, Joe, stating, "Jack, my character, hits the priest right in the chest with a sword blow." Now, following the four steps, you realize this has not happened in the game, but is just Joe stating her intention. (While his statement was technically incorrect, in that she stated it happened, and it was an intention, this is a common way of stating

intention in role-playing games.)

Carrying on with this example, though, what if the Story Guide is confused about the four steps? She may take this as initiation, for example, and when she says, “The priest grabs her black mace,” Joe might want her character Jack to back off. If the Story Guide thinks the above statement was initiation, though, Joe can’t do this, and may get angry at the Story Guide for withholding the information that the priest had this mace.

And in the end, what if the group is confused about effect? If Joe’s roll is successful, a confused group might think that Joe’s stated intention for Jack is exactly what happens. This is not necessarily so: the outcome of the dice and disposition of the players might determine a different effect.

The point is this: take your time to make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to a character performing a task. While the first game or two might run a bit slower than normal because steps are being heavily delineated, the speed will pick up as everyone gets used to following them.

#### 4.7 Types of ability checks and how they work

While the ability check is the core mechanic that ties this entire game together, it actually comes in several forms, each of which add on a layer of complexity.

The first and most simple type is the unopposed ability check. This is used when a player wants her character to try a task in which no other character is attempting any action which would stop her. There are three steps to the unopposed ability check, and all other types of ability checks.

First, the player states the character’s intention and the Story Guide sets the stakes. This should be easy: “Pieter is going to try to climb that boulder” is a good example. The Story Guide could reply “If you succeed, Pieter’s over the rock,” but that’s pretty implicit. Usually, the results of success are easily taken from the what the player said. The results of failure are determined by the Story Guide and players. In this case, failure could mean Pieter’s not over the rock or it could mean something worse. The Story Guide has free reign here to say, “That’s a giant boulder. If you fail, Pieter falls and will break a bone.” What’s important is that these stakes are stated

up front.

The second step is determining circumstances. This is where bonus and penalty dice come into play. Characters may often have either bonus or penalty dice because of Secrets activated, pools spent, harm taken, or The Gift of Dice, as shown below. In addition to any bonus or penalty dice outlined elsewhere in these rules, the Story Guide may assign one or two penalty dice to any ability check. One penalty die may be assigned if circumstances render a task especially difficult or if the character is ill-equipped. If trying to climb a wall, a character would not be assigned a penalty die if it were drizzling, or dark, or a bit chilly, but one could be assigned if there was an icy wind and hard rain coming down at night. If the climber was trying to go up a cliff face, which normally required some pitons and crampons and the like, and she didn’t have any, she could receive a penalty die. Two penalty dice can be assigned in the very worst of circumstances. A good measure of whether to assign two penalty dice is if the description of the circumstances elicits a stream of profanity from a player. We’re talking about seriously nasty conditions here – hail coming down in the midst of an icy rain while gale-force winds tear at our poor climber in the pitch dark.

The third and final step is actually rolling the dice. If the success level is equal or better than the difficulty, the character has succeeded. The Story Guide and players should use the success level to describe how the character performed at the stated intention.

The next type of ability check is the competitive ability check. This occurs when two or more characters are attempting the same task, but each wants to do it better or faster. All rules for the standard ability check apply, and in addition, the conditions of victory are set before the ability check: if the check is over a foot-race, the victor went the fastest; if it’s composing a song, the victor made a better piece of work. This should be fairly obvious, but the Story Guide and players can decide together what the conditions of victory are if there’s any question.

All players with competing characters make ability checks. After ability checks are made, any character who succeeded actually completed the task with some proficiency and the player can use the success level to compute any relevant outcomes. The character of the player with the

highest total score, however, completed the task better or faster, and the other characters are ranked in the order of their players' rolls. In the case of a tie, the characters' feats are so close in speed and quality that a winner cannot be determined between them. They can either tie, or if the players and Story Guide want to, those players can roll again to see which is the victor.

The last type of ability check is the resisted ability check. This check, most common in role-playing games, occurs when two characters attempt tasks that would cancel out each other. Examples include:

- One character swinging a sword at another character dodging.
- One character trying to get information by twisting another character's arm, who is attempting to suffer through the pain and keep quiet.
- One character sneaking up on a character who is keeping watch.
- One character offering a romp in bed to a character who is trying to deny the pleasures of the flesh.

All normal ability check rules apply to resisted checks. The two players involved make their ability checks and then compare their scores. The higher of the two wins: in the case of a tie, the instigator of the action loses.

When narrating a resisted ability check, both players' success levels come into account. For purposes of computing results, the winner's success level is used, but the loser's efforts are still significant. An example:

The character Violet, played by Kim, is attempting to drive the character Lore, played by Wilhelm, to his knees with a savage sword attack. Upon rolling, Kim ends up with an Amazing (4) success level, and Wilhelm ends up with a Great (3) success level. Kim's roll wins, but Lore still made a great block. The action is narrated as, "Violet brings up her sword and makes a vicious stroke down, aiming for the lower leg. Lore, anticipating the swing, throws his shield in the way, but the sword crashes down it, the force driving the shield itself back into Lore's shins as he falls."

The losing player must abide by the winner's

stated intention for the ability check, even if it was "I kill that sorry character." That's not entirely true, though: what sort of game would this be if your character could die from one roll of the dice? To see how to extract your character from any sticky situation you don't like, see "Bringing Down the Pain" below.

## 4.8 Using abilities together

If you want your character to perform a complex action that uses two abilities together, decide with the Story Guide which ability is most appropriate to the action and which is secondary. The secondary ability is used first and the success levels are used as bonus dice on the second ability check. The Story Guide and player will have to decide what happens if the first ability check is failed: in some situations, the second ability check can still be attempted without harm; in others, the ability check can be attempted with a penalty die; and in others still, the second ability check cannot be attempted.

A character is trying to cut a thong from a guard's belt and snatch his keys, using Bladework to chop the thong, and Stealth to grab the keys without being seen. While she is using Bladework to actually get the keys free, the Stealth part of the action is most important. The player makes a Bladework ability check. If successful, the success levels are converted to bonus dice on the Stealth ability check. If unsuccessful, however, the keys are still on the guard's belt, so the Stealth ability check cannot be attempted.

Another character wants to approach a wild bear without getting attacked using Animal Ken. In order to help with this, she's going to attempt to remember what bears like to eat and see if she can find some, using Woodcraft. The Woodcraft ability check is secondary, and if successful, will add bonus dice to the Animal Ken ability check. If unsuccessful, there is no complication; the character just must approach the bear with no food gift.

## 4.9 Bringing Down the Pain

Simple ability checks are well and good, and make resolution a quick and painless matter. Sometimes, though, for that dramatic punch, you need something a bit more gritty and focused. In

this game, that is an expanded resolution system called Bringing Down the Pain. Bringing Down the Pain is a unique option for players to allow them to not only get out of sticky situations, but focus the story where they want it.

Any player involved in a conflict can Bring Down the Pain after a resisted ability check. Normally, a player has to abide by the results of this check. However, when a character belonging to a player – a player that is not the Story Guide – loses at a resisted ability check, that player does not have to accept the outcome. Instead, she can ask that the Pain be Brought Down. On the flip side, a player can demand this even when she succeeds at a resisted ability check. This not only allows her to zoom in the imagined camera on this conflict, but is the only way to permanently injure or get rid of a major named character controlled by the Story Guide.

The Story Guide cannot Bring Down the Pain. She can request it, but another player involved in the conflict must actually declare it.

When a player declares they are Bringing Down the Pain, action breaks down into a blow-by-blow, gritty basis instead of overall conflict resolution. This can be called task resolution. Both sides of the conflict must make certain their intention – their goal – is clarified and well-stated, for it is very important here. This intention must be clear, but can allow room for differing actions to achieve the goal: “drive away these opponents in battle,” “embarrass the noble in front of his peers,” or “out-perform this guy on the guitar” are all fine intentions.

After intentions are stated, everyone who has a character involved in the conflict should state what their one action for this volley will be. Actions can be changed during this stage, where everything, even actions hidden to the characters, is discussed in the open. (In Ron Edwards’ Trollbabe, this is called the free-and-clear stage and I’ll use that term here.) Whose actions affect who is important to establish here. Actions can be visualized as perpendicular or parallel actions. What I mean this is:

Perpendicular actions get in the way of each other. If Violet’s action is to stab Lore with a spear and Lore’s action is to kick out Violet’s legs from under her, these actions are perpendicular. They’re fighting each other, and part of that is keeping advantage.

Parallel actions do not necessarily get in the way of each other. Let’s say Violet is trying to convince Lore to join her ragtag group of misfits. Lore would rather her shut up and is cooking her dinner, hoping the smell of his righteous cooking distracts her. Both of these people can do this at the same time, and the winner will definitely have an effect on the loser, but as far as actions go, they don’t get in the way of each other.

There is one other type of action, the defensive action. You can use a relevant innate ability (Endure, React, Resist) to resist what’s happening to your character. You cannot deal harm this way, but otherwise it counts as a perpendicular action.

It is highly important to distinguish whether actions are perpendicular or parallel ahead of time and be very clear about it. The first time you use Bringing Down the Pain, it could be confusing. You see, with a normal ability check, you really can resist someone attacking your character by talking them out of it. That’s because the entire conflict is at stake. In Bringing Down the Pain, the only things that can resist someone attacking your character are attacking them back or blocking their blow. That’s because that roll’s stakes are that one task.

If the two sides of a conflict cannot decide on actions – if one keeps changing theirs depending on the other – it is up to the Story Guide to resolve this. Hopefully, it can be resolved through player negotiation. If not, the side who wants a perpendicular action must take a defensive action.

After the free-and-clear stage, everyone rolls ability checks for their action. If this is the first action in Bringing Down the Pain, the winner at the roll that initiated Bringing Down the Pain gets bonus dice to her first action equal to the difference between her and her opponent’s success levels. If two characters are taking action against each other (perpendicular actions), the check is a resisted ability check. The loser at this check takes harm equal to the difference between the success levels, possibly modified by Secrets and weapons. If the actions are parallel, both sides take harm equal to their attacker’s success level. If one action is defensive, and that player wins, she gets bonus dice to her next action equal to the difference between the success levels.

When all rolls are resolved, another free-and-

clear stage begins. This continues until one side of the conflict gives up, at which time the winners' intentions happen. The trick to Bringing Down the Pain lies in this rule: in any free-and-clear stage, a player can announce that she is changing his character's intention completely. This could change from "sneak up on my enemy" to "kill my enemy," "best the queen in a war of words" to "seduce the queen," or even "out-play this guy on the guitar" to "magically put this guy to sleep." She does not have to state the new intention until the next free-and-clear stage. During this volley of rolls, she may only make a defensive action.

There is one exception to the idea that it takes a round to change your intention. If you and an opponent find yourself at a stalemate - you have perpendicular actions and roll the same success level - you can both immediately change intentions.

#### 4.10 Using more than one ability

Each use of an ability in Bringing Down the Pain is an action. To use one to get bonus dice for another, it cannot deal any harm or absorb any harm; it is a perpendicular action with no effect. This is exceedingly dangerous to try unless you have someone to cover your back.

This in no way supersedes using a defensive action to get bonus dice for your next action.

#### 4.11 Surprise

Surprise is not part of the Bringing Down the Pain system. Instead, it takes place before-hand. If a character acts against another, and the latter has no clue what's going on, the player will not be able to make an ability check to resist. This still counts as a resisted ability check, and the player can announce that he'd like to Bring Down the Pain.

As stated before, the winner at the check that initiated Bringing Down the Pain gets bonus dice to her first action equal to the difference between her and her opponent's success levels. This is an indicator of her opening advantage.

#### 4.12 Harm and defeat

**Harm** in this game does not necessarily refer to physical, blood-and-guts rending of flesh and

bone. Instead, it is a quality of both the character in the context of the game world and the character in context of the real world. Harm is a count-down of when a player loses control over his character, and can be expressed as any of these things in-game:

- Cuts and bruises
- Fatigue and weariness
- Embarrassment and crushed esteem
- Loss of concentration and will

Whenever a successful ability check is made against a character while Bringing Down the Pain, that character takes harm. The base harm is equal to the success level of the acting player's roll, which can be modified by Secrets or weapons. Again, the type of action being done against the character does not matter - you can take harm from seduction as easily as you can from a sword.

Take that success level and check off the corresponding box on the harm tracker on your character sheet. If that checkbox is already filled, check the next highest unchecked one. Write down beside the checkbox either "Vigor," "Instinct," or "Reason," depending on the type of harm you took. This is usually determined by the associated pool from the ability used to harm you, but might be different if everyone involved agrees.

You'll see that one to three harm is bruised. This means on your very next ability check, you'll have a penalty die. These add up - if you get bruised twice in a round of Bringing Down the Pain, you'll have two penalty dice. Level four and five harm means your character is bloodied. All your abilities that are associated with the pool that you took the harm from now take a penalty die. If you are bloodied twice in the same pool, you still only take one penalty die. These do not stack. Level six harm means your character is broken. If broken, in order for your character to perform any action, even defense, you must spend a point from the ability's associated pool, and you still receive one penalty die to this action.

Harm past broken results in the attacker's intention immediately happening.

At any point during Bringing Down the Pain, a player may decide that the harm taken is enough for this conflict and give up. Before a free-and-

clear stage, the player gives up the conflict, and his opponent's intention occurs. It is often a good idea to give up before your opponent changes to a more deadly intention.

After Bringing Down the Pain, harm shakes out. That means that all damage collapses into the low end of the harm tracker. As an example, if you had checks at 2, 3, and 6 on the harm tracker, they'd collapse to 1, 2, and 3 after Bringing Down the Pain. This applies even to harm from before Bringing Down the Pain, so feel free to get in a nasty scrape if you're hurt.

Healing works exactly opposite of harm: if someone rolls an ability check to get rid of your harm (First Aid and Counsel could do this, for example), it removes the harm you have corresponding to their success level, or the highest harm you have if their success level is higher. If all your harm is of a higher level than their success level, nothing is healed. The harm does not shake out afterwards and one character can only attempt to heal your character once in a scene.

There is another method to heal your character: self-healing. By spending a number of pool points equal to the level of a harm your character has taken, you can remove that harm from the character. The points must be spent from the pool associated with that particular harm. If the harm level is higher than your maximum pool, you can spend some points, refresh your pool, and then spend more later.

### 4.13 An example of Bringing Down the Pain and harm

In this example, there are two players, Matt and Emily. The pertinent parts of their two characters are:

Emily's character: Tela, a Zaru assassin. Her pools are currently at Vigor 2, Instinct 3, and Reason 1. Her pertinent abilities are React: Master, Sneak: Master, Deceit: Competent, and Knife Fighting: Adept.

Matt's character: Gael, a noble from Ammeni. His pools are currently at Vigor 5, Instinct 2, and Reason 3. His pertinent abilities are React: Adept, Sense Danger: Adept, Dash: Competent, and Viper-Blade: Grand Master.

Gael is traveling down an alley-way when Tela sights him, and slides into the shadows to follow

him. Emily states, "I want Tela to sneak up on this guy." She makes a resisted ability check of Sneak versus Gael's Sense Danger and rolls a -1 versus his 0, for a total of SL 2 versus SL 2. "Screw that," she says, and spends a point of Instinct to roll a bonus die. Matt has the same opportunity, but wants to conserve his Instinct pool, since it's low. She ends up with a roll of 0, for a total of SL 3 - a Great success!

Up until this point, the action has been taken care of by a simple ability check. According to the check, Emily wins, and Tela will sneak up on Gael, giving Emily three bonus dice to perform an action that uses that advantage. Matt's not having it, though: he wants his character out of here, and away from Tela. He says, "No way. I'm not accepting that outcome. It's time to Bring Down the Pain. My goal is for Gael to notice Tela, and get away from her." Emily decides to keep her intention of sneaking up on Gael.

During the free-and-clear phase, Matt says, "Ok, Gael stops for a moment and scans the area as the hair on the back of his neck stands up." Notice that Gael knows something's wrong: that's because Matt refused the outcome of the simple ability check. Also notice that Matt can narrate whatever he wants for Gael's action, as long as it stays within his overall intention. Emily, confident in her character's abilities, says "I'm going to creep along the wall slowly towards him, staying in the shadows." Another roll is made of Gael's Sense Danger versus Tela's Sneak, and Matt wins this check, with SL 3 (Great) versus SL 2 (Good). Tela takes a harm at level 1 - she's bruised.

Matt says, "A-ha! Gael sees a glimmer in the shadows behind him, and starts to move quickly away from it." Emily asks the Story Guide, "If I throw some rocks to make noise ahead of Gael, can I count them as a weapon, +1 harm to deceive him about my location?" The Guide agrees that the idea's sound, and Emily says, "Tela scoops up some pebbles and throws them ahead of Gael, trying to confuse him as to her location." Her Deceit's pretty low, so she spends her one point of Reason for a bonus die, canceling out her penalty die from being bruised, and nails it, beating Matt's Sense Danger ability check, scoring SL 4 (Amazing) versus his SL 2 (Good). With the +1 weapon, that's harm level 3 to Gael.

Matt's in trouble now. He says, "As Gael takes off forward, a sound rattles him, and he spins, look-

ing confused, but shakes it off.” Emily says gleefully, “Seeing the Ammenite’s confusion, Tela dives and rolls across the alley to get behind him.” Matt’s worried, but thinks the dice have got to go his way. He says, “Gael spins around, scanning the area for the unseen intruder.” Just to be careful, he spends a point from his Instinct pool for a bonus die. They roll, and he gets a SL 3 (Good). Unfortunately, the dice are hot for Emily, and she rolls +3; she’s got a grand total of SL 6 – an Ultimate success! That’s harm level 3 for Gael, but he’s already taken harm level 3, so that’s level 4. Gael is now bloodied in Instinct, and has a penalty die to all actions that use it, including Sense Danger. “Crap,” he mutters. “I’m changing my intention. Gael’s just going to high-tail it, trying to avoid danger.”

Emily’s grinning from ear to ear. “As Gael runs, Tela’s going to flit from shadow to shadow, staying right behind him.” They roll, his Dash now versus her Sneak. Dash uses Vigor for its pool, so Matt doesn’t have a penalty die from being bloodied in Instinct. Again, Emily wins: her roll comes up as a Good success versus his Marginal and Gael takes harm level 1. Emily narrates, “Tela moves so quickly, she gets in front of Gael before he can notice. As he runs, he comes face to face with the assassin.”

It’s Matt’s turn, but Gael’s got a penalty die. If he gives up, though, Tela will have cornered him, which he doesn’t want, especially not this damaged. He glowers, “Gael’s running as fast as he can.” Emily smiles, “I’m changing intention if he’s going to run.” Matt figures that he can beat her in a foot-race, so he goes ahead and rolls Dash, with a penalty die, versus Tela’s React: she could not sneak, but only defend this turn. With a low roll from Emily, he wins, scoring a mere Good success level versus her Marginal. She takes harm level 1, but that’s already happened, so harm level 2 – a bruise.

In the next free-and-clear phase, Emily says, “Screw this. Want to know my intention? I’m killing this Ammenite.”

Matt’s in a real sticky situation now. He’s got a plan, though: he can change his intention, and spend his last point of Instinct to defend when Tela attacks Gael this turn, which he knows she will. His Viper-Blade is awesome, and his weapon’s +2 versus Zaru. It’s risky, but if he gives up this turn, Gael’s dead, and he thinks he can scare Emily by dealing some serious damage

next turn. He says, “Gael falls back, baffled and frightened by the sudden raise of a dagger. I’m changing intention.” Emily says, “I spend a Vigor point. Tela brings the dagger in, stabbing at Gael.” The roll is tense, SL 5 to SL 1, with Matt losing. That would be harm level 4, but that’s already taken, so harm level 5 to Gael. He’s now bloodied in both Instinct and Vigor, and is going to have a hard time getting out of this one.

Short of breath, Matt says, “My intention: teach a slave girl her place.” Emily and the Story Guide look at each other as if to say, “What’s up with all the repression?” Matt says, “What? What’s Tela up to?” Emily grins, “Time to die.” Matt’s out of Instinct points and that’s what he needs for Viper-Blade. He hopes against hope and they throw down the dice. Even with a penalty die for being bloodied, Matt rolls +2 for a total of Ultimate (6). Emily rolls a 0 and gets a Good (2) success. That would be harm level 4, but Matt’s weapon is +2 versus Zaru: harm level 6, and Tela’s broken.

Without hesitation, Emily says, “I give. I’d rather have this jerk teach me a lesson rather than die.”

#### 4.14 When to Bring Down the Pain

Every time something doesn’t go your way, you might be tempted to Bring Down the Pain. It’s not necessarily a good idea to do so. You really have to examine the conflict and your strategy for it.

If someone beat you in an ability check even though the odds were against them, then go for it. Over many rolls, their luck will run out. The same thing applies if they got in a good roll because of several bonus dice: they won’t have those dice in Bringing Down the Pain.

If someone beat you by using an ability very different from yours, Bringing Down the Pain might be a good idea. If they keep that up in Bringing Down the Pain, it’ll be a parallel action, and you’ll both take damage. If you can deal it out faster than they can, Bringing Down the Pain’s a good idea.

Taking on someone in Bringing Down the Pain that’s just plain better than you in the ability you plan to use is a bad idea. A Master in Sway will crush a Adept in Sway in an argument drawn out into Bringing Down the Pain.

If it appears that you have the advantage in Bringing Down the Pain, go for perpendicular actions. You'll hurt your opponent and stay unharmed yourself. Likewise, if it's unclear, parallel actions guarantee that your opponent will suffer and perhaps give.

And while we're on this topic, if you get into Bringing Down the Pain and it's obvious you'll lose over the long run, quit. Give up. Some players want to keep going until their character's taken all the harm they can, but you set yourself up to be quite weakened in the next scene, where you'll want your character to get her revenge or make her great escape. Don't fall into this trap.

#### 4.15 Multiple characters in a conflict

For simple ability checks, having multiple characters involved is easy to handle. If the characters are using varying abilities, each building to help another one, it's handled like one character using abilities together. Decide the order the checks have to be performed in, and have each player roll, with success levels being added as bonus dice to the next player's roll. As with one character, failure at an ability check may mean that the overall action cannot continue, that the next player must roll a penalty die on her ability check, or that the checks may continue, with no penalty dice.

If multiple characters are using the same, or fairly equivalent, abilities to perform a task together, use the method above, with the following caveats:

Failure always means the next player adds a penalty die to her roll.

Always roll from the character with the highest ability to the character with the least ability.

If a penalty die is given from the Story Guide because of difficulty, it applies to all rolls.

This does mean that having a character helping who is weak with the ability may hinder the task.

Mike, Wil, and Susan are going to have their characters Miska, Wolf-Snarl, and Skala try to open a stuck door together. All of them are using Athletics to do this, pushing against the door with their shoulders. Their scores are Wolf-Snarl, Adept; Skala, Competent; Miska, Unskilled.

Wil rolls success level 2. With two bonus dice, Susan rolls success level 3. Finally, with three bonus dice, Mike rolls a 0, with a 0 for Miska's lack of Athletics, for success level 0 – a Failure.

Wil has Wolf-Snarl growl, "Out of my way, weakling," and grab the door alone. Even with a roll of -1, Wolf-Snarl scores success level 1 and yanks the door open.

If Bringing Down the Pain is the ultimate way to test two differing wills, how do you manage it when more people want to get in on the fun? The standard way is easy: whenever one player declares that she wants to Bring Down the Pain, any character around can get involved. Part of the declaration of intention is who you're planning to affect: your character can only harm that character until you change intention. The Bringing Down of the Pain does not end until only one character is left standing, or all the other players have given up.

The gestalt method of group Pain-Bringing may be an easier and more fun way to arbitrate these situations. If everyone on one side of a conflict has a similar intention towards the other side, you can use the above rules for a group ability check when everyone is using similar abilities. In the gestalt mode, anyone can spend from their pools to help anyone else. Harm taken is distributed by the winning side to one or more of the losers. (A singular harm can be split up; for example, level 4 harm could be level 2 to one loser and level 1 to two other losers.) Whenever a character is broken, her player falls out of the group Pain-Bringing.

#### 4.16 Weapons and armor

Ah, weapons and armor – the love of any player, and an oft-fetishized part of any role-playing game. In this game, harm is, as shown above, an erosion of a character's ability to get her way, instead of always being physical pain and suffering. Therefore, weapons aren't just swords, knives, clubs, and the like, and armor isn't just padding a character wears on her body. Anything can be a weapon – but only in certain situations.

When using a weapon, if your character is successful in an action, you can add the weapon's rating to your success level. If you are unsuccessful, the weapon does nothing. Your success level cannot go above Ultimate (6) because of

a weapon. Armor subtracts from the success level of actions taken against you. Armor cannot lower a success level past Marginal (1). In both cases, the items can have +1, +2, or +3 ratings. The level of the rating is determined by the specificity of the harm or protection.

Weapons and armor with a +1 rating work in specific situations determined by action taken, and often ability used. Examples include:

- A sword that gives +1 harm in combat.
- A royal crest that provides +1 protection when involved in diplomacy.
- A lute that deals +1 harm in attempts to win a crowd while playing it.

Weapons and armor with a +2 rating work in situations with a specific type of people, environment, or other restrictions. Examples include:

- A mace that gives +2 harm against “hard” armors, like plate or chain.
- The Seal of Maldor, which provides +2 protection against the law in Maldor.
- A set of snowshoes, which deal +2 harm in attempts to race across snowy areas.

Weapons and armor with a +3 rating work in rare situations or against particular persons. Examples include:

- A dagger forged to kill the Potentate of Ammeni, which deals +3 harm in attempts to kill her.
- A writ of birthday immunity, which gives +3 protection against any attempt to prosecute a person for crimes committed on their birthday.
- A set of goggles which give +3 harm while trying to see motion during an eclipse.

An item can have more than one rating – it can have up to three +1, two +2, and one +3 ratings.

Weapons and armor can occur in the game in two ways. The Story Guide can declare any item in the game to give +1 harm or protection in a particular situation. For example, someone using a sword to fight an unarmed person could be given +1 harm to all her attacks, or someone with a sack of gold could be given +1 harm to influence someone else. Alternatively, any player can declare her character’s equipment to have a bonus with the Secret of Imbuement. This purchase is subject to Story Guide approval.

## 4.17 Character Transcendence

Transcendence is the result of a Transcendent (7) success level on an ability check. It signals the end of a character’s story, and is a special occasion for that character’s player. With this result, the player should feel free to narrate the outcome of her roll herself, with any help she likes from the other players and Story Guide. If the roll comes during Bringing Down the Pain, that ends immediately. If the scene is taking place during the day, the sun is eclipsed by the moon within the hour; if during the night, the moon is eclipsed by the sun.

The story should immediately focus upon the transcendent character. She has just accomplished a feat that will be spoke of by her companions forever, and the day is her. Within 24 game-hours of the moment she became transcendent, her story will be over. The character may die; she may retire for a quiet life; she may disappear over the hills; or she may become something else entirely. Her story will end and she will be retired from play.

This does not mean the campaign is over. The player may bring a new character into play after her current character leaves. This character may well be established during the day of transcendence, and carry on the legends of a character who has just had her most glorious moment./

# 5 Crunchy Bits

## 5.1 Abilities

Each ability in *The Shadow of Yesterday* has an associated pool, a pool which can be drawn on in order to give a bonus die to use of the ability. This is noted when naming abilities like this: Ability Name (Pool).

### Innate Abilities

Every character in this game has three innate abilities: natural reactions and quantifications of the character's physical and mental stability.

- **Endure (Vigor)**  
This is your character's ability to push on and persevere through pain and fatigue. It is used to test the limits of a character's physicality and fitness.
- **React (Instinct)**  
This measures the quickness of a character's body and mind. It is as much "how quick the character notices something" as "how quick the character moves."
- **Resist (Reason)**  
**Resist** is the strength of a character's will, and is used to prevent compulsion of a natural or supernatural type. This includes physical compulsion: "Resist" would be used for a character to keep her cool under torture, for example, while "Endure" would be used to see how long she could stay conscious under the same torture.

### Other Abilities

While *The Shadow of Yesterday* has a full setting, and plenty of pre-made abilities and rules that go with that, you should never forget that it's your setting. Story Guides and players are encouraged to make up their own abilities, Secrets, and Keys.

Open abilities follow a few guidelines:

They are either innate abilities to a person (Athletics) or things that can be easily learned. Usually, they're both, as in the aforementioned case of Athletics, or Scrapping.

They are rather wide in scope, encompassing

a field of actions, without being overly broad. Movement is too broad; Climbing Fences is too narrow. Fighting is too broad; Broad-sword Usage is too narrow.

They are not specialized knowledge that applies only to a certain people or culture. These are the Species and Cultural Abilities, which are much more narrow in scope.

They often overlap with other abilities, which is great. Two abilities may describe different styles of performing similar tasks.

The pre-made open abilities are below. Examine them to get ideas for your own. They've been organized by category. Any character can take abilities from any category, but it may be easier to choose a category or two that define your character and take most of the abilities from them.

### Artistic Abilities

- **Freeload (Instinct)**  
Freeload is used to get free meals and shelter. Your character can't really get wealthy using Freeload, but you can manage to survive even if broke, which isn't bad.
- **Create (Instinct)**  
Create is used for painting, sculpting, and other arts where a concrete item is created.
- **Story-tell (Reason)**  
Story-tell is used for creating or telling stories, including ballads.
- **Music (Instinct)**  
Music is used for singing and playing instruments, and represents musical talent, not lyrical talent. Music and Story-tell are often used together to make an effective song.

### Craftsman Abilities

- **Haggling (Instinct)**  
Haggling is used to get the best price for goods. In the world of *Near*, coinage doesn't really exist, and this is used to make sure you get a fair trade in barter, which means it can be used to evaluate the quality and worth of goods as well.

- **Fine Crafts (Reason)**  
Fine Crafts is used for leatherworking, wood-working, and other crafts that require fine manipulation.
- **Rough Crafts (Vigor)**  
Rough Crafts is used for stonecutting, forging, and other crafts that require a great deal of strength.
- **Complex Crafts (Reason)**  
Complex Crafts is used for any task that requires a great deal of steps or mixing of different materials, ranging from building clocks and locks to cooking.

### Warrior Abilities

- **First Aid (Reason)**  
First Aid is simple medicine: bandaging cuts, binding broken bones, and washing out wounds. If someone's been physically hurt, this can be used to heal them.
- **Scrapping (Vigor)**  
Untrained fighting is the center of this ability. Fists, feet, daggers, kitchen knives, table legs, and all sorts of clubbery are usually used in Scrapping.
- **Sense Danger (Instinct)**  
This ability is used to perceive anything that might physically harm your character. It is not a "sixth sense": the danger must be somehow perceivable, if only barely. Here's where you get those cat-like reflexes.
- **Battle (Reason)**  
Battle is the basic skills and tactics known by any military commander. It is used for giving orders in combat and planning attacks, including ambushes.

### Illicit Abilities

- **Stealth (Instinct)**  
Stealth is used to sneak up on people, hide from other characters, and conceal objects on your character's body.
- **Theft (Instinct)**  
Theft is used for picking pockets, cutting purses, lockpicking, breaking and entering without being noticed, and safecracking, as well as any other theft-related activity.
- **Deceit (Reason)**  
Deceit is used to fool other characters, including pretending to be someone else, forge a document, or straight-out lie well.
- **Streetwise (Reason)**  
Streetwise is used to know information about the illegal underground, including where to

buy illegal things, sell stolen goods, or know who controls organized crime.

### Outdoor Abilities

- **Athletics (Vigor)**  
This is a measure of raw physicality and fitness. It is used for running, jumping, swimming, climbing, or any other strength-based task not listed as a separate ability.
- **Aim (Vigor)**  
Aim is used for shooting bows and crossbows and throwing objects.
- **Woodcraft (Reason)**  
Woodcraft is used to track people or animals, know what sorts of plants and animals are present in an area and their properties, as well as set traps.
- **Animal Ken (Instinct)**  
Animal Ken is the social skill for dealing with animals, and is used to deal with domesticated animals or wild ones. Domesticated animals are much easier to control, of course, and this may be used to give them commands. For wild animals, on the other hand, this works about as far as scaring them off, or convincing them not to eat you.

### Priestly Abilities

- **Pray (Vigor)**  
Pray is used for meditation, blessing actions, and performing religious rituals. It involves the character's belief that she is connected to something better than her.
- **Counsel (Reason)**  
Counsel is used to bring peace to someone via private conversation, not unlike mental health counseling. It is the spiritual equivalent of First Aid.
- **Discern Truth (Instinct)**  
Discern Truth is used to tell if someone is being honest, or read a person's intentions.
- **Orate (Reason)**  
Orate is used to sway opinion with speech or demagoguery, and is generally used with crowds.

### Social Abilities

- **Sway (Instinct)**  
Sway is used to affect individuals through conversation. Unlike Orate, this works better one-on-one, and the character being swayed may not even realize your character's intentions.

- **Savoir-Faire (Instinct)**  
Savoir-Faire is used to act smooth, dance, get a kiss from a lady, and get another character into your character's bedchambers.
- **Etiquette (Reason)**  
Etiquette is used to know your way around a society, including knowing who is important and where to get favors. It is the non-illegal society equivalent of Streetwise.
- **Dueling (Vigor)**  
Dueling is the art of honorable one-on-one battle. Almost every culture has its rituals for physically solving problems, which usually involve a sword.

### Ability breadth

If you've ever played another RPG, you might look at Complex Crafts and think, "Why can my master chef character fix clocks?" It's a good question, but the answer is simple: "She can't unless you decide she can." You decide what your character is good at with craft and artistic skills, and if she picks something up later, that's great. You don't have to quantify this: you don't have to write down "cooking" when you take Complex Crafts. Just play your character as you envision her, and if it's thematically interesting for your chef character to fix a clock, go for it.

## 5.2 Secrets

Secrets are special qualities your character has that let her do extraordinary things. They generally work in the following ways:

- Permanently get a bonus die to a specific use of an ability.
- Permanently get +1 damage or protection with an ability.
- Permanently get a minor unusual ability. This ability may require a skill use.
- Spend one die from a pool to use an ability in an unusual way.
- Spend two or three dice from a pool to use an ability in a supernatural or powerful unusual way.
- Spend as many dice from a pool for a scalable effect. If this effect is especially powerful or unusual, it may carry a cost of extra dice.

Most of the Secrets pre-made for *The Shadow of Yesterday* follow the above guidelines, but not all. Look at the ones below, and examine them for ideas for your own.

- **Secret of Animal Speech**  
Your character can speak to an animal and understand its signals. In order to get the animal to cooperate or not try to eat you, you might need a successful Animal Ken ability check. Even if you fail this check, you'll understand that it wants to eat you loud and clear. Cost: 2 Instinct.
- **Secret of Blessing**  
With a successful Pray ability check, your character may bless the actions of a group. You must state a specific goal for them to accomplish. Your success level with this ability check is a pool of bonus dice any member of this group can use in accomplishing this task. Cost: 1 Vigor.
- **Secret of the Bodhisavatta**  
You must have at least one ability ranked at Grand Master to take this Secret. When you roll a Transcendent success level, you do not have to have your character transcend. Your character can deny herself of perfection and will stay chained to this life. Roll a penalty die immediately. You can keep rolling penalty dice until you are no longer Transcendent. Cost: Take a level one harm associated with the ability per penalty die.
- **Secret of Contacts**  
Your character knows all sorts of people in all sorts of places. You can use this Secret for your character to automatically have a past relationship with any Story Guide character in the adventure. You may describe the relationship in a short phrase, such as "old enemy," "wartime buddy," "ex-lover," but the Story Guide gets to decide the history and current disposition of the relationship. Cost: 3 points from a pool determined by the Story Guide. Vigor would fit for a wartime buddy, Instinct for an ex-lover, and Reason for a former colleague in your character's field of study.
- **Secret of Disarm**  
Your character can disarm an opponent, without changing intentions, with a successful ability check using a weapon in *Bringing Down the Pain*. Because weapons can be all sorts of things in this game, "disarm" just means that the weapon's been rendered ineffective for the duration of *Bringing Down the Pain*. Cost: 1 Vigor.
- **Secret of Enhancement (Ability)**  
You must select an ability when you take this Secret. You may spend as many points out of the associated pool to give bonus dice to the ability as you like.

- **Secret of Evaluate**  
Your character's battle experience has given her the ability to read an opponent well. Evaluate your character's opponent not in descriptive terms, but in game mechanics, on a successful Battle ability check. You can ask for any of the following information, one bit per success level: Vigor score, Instinct score, best combat ability and score, specific ability score. Cost: 1 Reason.
- **Secret of Flying Leap**  
Your character can make amazing leaps. Using this Secret, she can jump much further or higher than normal. For each Vigor point you spend, up to three, you can jump another multiple of normal human ability for one leap.
- **Secret of Herbal Health**  
Your character can always find an herb that is an effective healing agent with a successful Woodcraft ability check in the outdoors. The herb lets you use your Woodcraft Ability to act like First Aid and heal others. Cost: 1 Reason.
- **Secret of the Hidden Pocket**  
Your character is adept at hiding objects on her person. No matter how carefully searched the character has been, she may pull an inexpensive, small (hand-sized) item off her person with a successful Stealth ability check. Cost: 2 Instinct.
- **Secret of Imbuement**  
Turn an item into a weapon or armor, using the rules found in the Resolution chapter. You can add one weapon or armor rating to the item each time you take this Secret. In addition, you can use this Secret to imbue the item with the power of another Secret. That Secret will have its costs lowered by one pool point. The item can be taken away from you, but you must be given a chance to get it back, or you can roll your advances spent on this Secret into a new item. You can take away someone else's Imbued item, but you'll have to pay the original cost to keep it.
- **Secret of Inner Meaning**  
Your character's art carries a meaning beyond the surface. Use any non-physical Instinct-based ability at a distance via a piece of your character's art. Cost: 2 Reason.
- **Secret of Knock-back**  
Your character's blows send people flying. Knock back a stricken character one yard per success level. This immediately ends Bringing Down the Pain if you're involved in that, with no resolution as to intentions. Cost: 2 Vigor.
- **Secret of Languages (Specific language)**  
Your character knows a language outside her homeland's.
- **Secret of Mighty Blow**  
Your character can strike with extreme might. Spend as many dice of Vigor as you like to increase the harm of a successful blow in combat.
- **Secret of Quality Construction (Craft Ability)**  
You must choose a specific Craft Ability when you take this Secret. Your character can craft items of excellent quality. Any item your character creates using this Secret gives one bonus die to a particular ability when using the item, permanently. Cost: 5 Reason.
- **Secret of Scribing**  
Your character can read and write any language she knows.
- **Secret of Shattering**  
The weight of your weapon can be used to destroy other weapons and armor in combat. With a successful attack, your success level (not including any damage bonuses) is removed from the damage bonuses of weapons or damage reductions of armor. If reduced to 0, the item is destroyed. Cost: 2 Vigor. (Note: if used against player characters' weapons or armor bought with the Secret of Imbuement, they may repair the item or have it become something new after the scene.)
- **Secret of the Signature Weapon**  
Your character has one weapon with which she is bonded. You gain a bonus die to any action taken with that weapon and any other character else attempting to use the weapon receives a penalty die. (Note: to change this weapon, this Secret must be taken again.)
- **Secret of Speciality (Skill)**  
You must select an ability when you take this Secret. Choose a speciality your character has within that ability – for example, cooking pastries for the Complex Crafts skill. You always have a bonus die when your character attempts an action that falls within that speciality.
- **Secret of Synergy**  
You can chain multiple abilities together in Bringing Down the Pain as you would in a normal ability check; that is, you can roll multiple ability checks in one action to add bonus dice to the final check. Cost: 1 associated pool point for each extra ability you roll.

- **Secret of the Sudden Knife**  
Your character is a master of the assassin's art. In a surprise attack, the victim automatically takes harm level 4 (bloodied) if your character successfully hits. She should make an Endure ability check resisting your roll. If she fails, she automatically takes harm level 6. This is irrespective of being in a Bringing Down the Pain situation. Cost: 3 points from whatever pool is associated with the ability you're using, plus 1 from each of the other pools.
- **Secret of Throwing**  
Anything is a dangerous missile in your character's hands. She can throw anything fist-sized to greatsword-sized as an attack, using the Aim ability, and the object counts as a +1 weapon. Cost: 1 Vigor.
- **Secret of the Unwalked Path**  
Your character's footfalls leave little trace for others to follow. You can use your character's Woodcraft ability in resistance to anyone trying to track her. Cost: 1 Instinct.

### 5.3 Keys

Keys are the motivations, problems, connections, duties, and loyalties that pull on your character. To the player, they're highly important because they generate experience points. Creating new Keys may be easier than new Abilities or Secrets – they follow very simple rules.

A Key must involve a motivation, problem, connection, duty, or loyalty.

Keys come in two types:

- Motivations. When the motivation is fulfilled in play, gain an experience point. When the motivation is fulfilled against good odds, gain three experience points.
- Everything else. When the Key comes up in play, gain an experience point. (You can use this three times per session. This applies to all Keys below.) When the Key presents a minor problem, gain two experience points. When it presents a major problem, gain five experience points.

All Keys have a Buyoff, which is a reversal from the Key by the character. All Buyoffs give the character 10 experience points. This Buyoff occurs only when you, the player, wants it to happen: you can lose a battle with the Secret of Bloodlust and still keep the Secret. If you want

your character to undergo a change in her personality, though, adding to the story, you can take this Buyoff by fulfilling it. If you do take the Buyoff, you can never take this Key again.

As always, see the pre-made Keys to get a feel for creating your own.

- **Key of Bloodlust**  
Your character enjoys overpowering others in combat. Gain 1 XP every time your character defeats someone in battle. Gain 3 XP for defeating someone equal to or more powerful than your character (equal or higher combat skill.) Buyoff: Be defeated in battle.
- **Key of Conscience**  
Your character has a soft spot for those weaker than their opponents. Gain 1 XP every time your character helps someone who cannot help themselves. Gain 2 XP every time your character defends someone with might who is in danger and cannot save themselves. Gain 5 XP every time your character takes someone in an unfortunate situation and changes their life to where they can help themselves. Buyoff: Ignore a request for help.
- **Key of the Coward**  
Your character avoids combat like the plague. Gain 1 XP every time your character avoids a potentially dangerous situation. Gain 3 XP every time your character stops a combat using other means besides violence. Buyoff: Leap into combat with no hesitation.
- **Key of Faith**  
Your character has a strong religious belief that guides her. Gain 1 XP every time she defends her faith to others. Gain 2 XP whenever this character converts someone to her faith. Gain 5 XP whenever this character defends her faith even though it brings her great harm. Buyoff: Your character renounces her beliefs.
- **Key of Fraternity**  
Your character has someone she is sworn to, a friend who is more important than anyone else. Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character (maximum 3 per adventure). Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character defends them by putting herself at risk. Buyoff: Sever the relationship with this person.
- **Key of Glittering Gold**  
Your character loves wealth. Gain 1 XP every

time you make a deal that favors you in wealth. Gain 3 XP every time you double your wealth. Buyoff: Give away everything you own except what you can carry lightly.

- **Key of the Guardian**  
Your character has a ward, someone who depends on her for security and protection. Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character. Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character rescues them from harm. Buyoff: Sever the relationship with this person.
- **Key of the Impostor**  
Sometimes your entire life is a lie. You gain 1 XP whenever you pass yourself off as someone/something you're not. You gain 2 XP whenever you convince others in spite of serious skepticism. You gain 5 XP whenever your story survives a deliberate, focused, "Hey everybody, look!" attempt to reveal your identity. Buyoff: Confess your imposture to those duped.
- **Key of the Masochist**  
Your character thrives on personal pain and suffering. Gain 1 XP every time she is bloodied and 3 XP every time she is broken. Buyoff: Flee a source of physical or psychic damage.
- **Key of the Mission**  
Your character has a personal mission that she must complete. Gain 1 XP every time she takes action to complete this mission (2 XP if this action is successful.) Gain 5 XP every time she takes action that completes a major part of this mission. Buyoff: Abandon this mission.
- **Key of the Outcast**  
Your character has lost fellowship or membership in an organization - which could just be a culture, or a specific cross-cultural group. This separation defines your character as much as membership in the organization defines its members. Gain 1 XP every time her status with this organization comes up. Gain 2 XP every time her disassociation brings her harm. Gain 5 XP every time the separation brings your character great pain and suffering. Buyoff: Regain membership in the organization.
- **Key of Renown**  
"You must be the worst assassin I've ever

heard of." "But you have heard of me." You gain 1 XP whenever you see to it that your name and deeds are known, by bragging about them or making sure there are witnesses. You gain 2 XP whenever you put yourself at risk to do something unnecessary or foolish that will add to your reputation. You gain 5 XP whenever you risk your life to take credit for your actions (bragging that you were the one who killed the Duke's son, for example.). Buyoff: Give someone else credit for an action that would increase your renown.

- **Key of Power**  
You don't even care what you do with it, you just want it. You gain 1 XP whenever you earn a boon from someone important, earn a slight gain in prestige, or make a rival look bad. You gain 3 XP whenever you ruin, kill, or otherwise eliminate a rival, and improve your own position because of it. Buyoff: Relinquish your power and position.
- **Key of Vengeance**  
Your character has a hatred for a particular organization, person, or even species or culture. Gain 1 XP every time your character hurts a member of that group or a lackey of that person. Gain 2 XP every time your character strikes a minor blow at that group or person (killing a member of the organization or one of the person's lackeys, disrupting their life, destroying their property). Gain 5 XP every time your character strikes a major blow at that group or person. Buyoff: Let your enemy go.
- **Key of the Vow**  
Your character has a vow of personal behavior that she has sworn not to break. This could be a dietary restriction, a requirement to pray at sunbreak every morning, or something else like that. Gain 1 XP for every adventure in which your character does not break this vow. Gain 2 XP every time your character does not break this vow even though it causes her minor harm or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time your character does not break this vow even though it causes her great harm. Buyoff: Break this vow.

# 6 The Story Guide

## 6.1 Designing an adventure

Adventure design is not a hard process. No one should ever be afraid of being the Story Guide. You are not responsible for telling the entire story or anything, so don't worry about that. Imagine being the Story Guide, and designing an adventure like this. You meet up with your players and get to know their characters. You find out what they're all about and what makes them tick. Then you sit down and say, "I'd like to see an adventure about these people and their issues, and I'd like to see a few things in it: an evil sorcerer, a misguided maiden, and a knife fight under a waterfall. Go!"

### Know your characters

The most important part of adventure design is knowing the characters. The adventure will, of course, be about them. Keys, Secrets, and abilities are chosen by the players so they can find their characters in scenes where these things are useful. Read the character sheets. Better yet, keep a copy of them so you can use them during game preparation. Organize the characters somehow. I take out a sheet of paper and write down the character's names on it, each in a separate corner. I write down all their Keys around them, and the Secrets they use the most and their best abilities.

Then take these notes and think of how this bit of character can work into an adventure. You don't have to hit everything, but hit at least one Key and one other thing per character. Make up some non-player characters that hit these things. Your adventure is pretty much written at this point.

### Know your players

These people are probably your friends. If not, you're in trouble.

What do your friends like? Does one of them prefer stories with bloody combat, guts a-spraying everywhere? Maybe you should throw some of that in. Does one like reversing gender roles? Put in a prince in distress.

Here's something I like to do, but it's touchy. Think about what your friends are currently going through. People dig stories they can identify with. Is one of them going through a break-up? Have the status of her character's love interest change, or if she doesn't have one, introduce one. It doesn't matter whether the change is for good or bad - he'll grab on and take care of that. Does another have issues with her boss? Introduce an authoritative non-player character. That player will take care of how her character reacts. In all these reflections of real life, do not plan a resolution. That is totally and completely not the job of the Story Guide. The players will find a resolution. Your job is to insert conflict that they can identify with.

### Know thyself

What do you like in a story? Put some in. You're the Story Guide, after all.

### Key Scenes

Now you get to apply all that work above to the game. Take your big list of ideas, and turn them into Key Scenes.

The main experience engines in *The Shadow of Yesterday* are Keys, allowing players to decide exactly what sort of experiences in play they are most interested in. The Story Guide is just as much of a player, though, and so she controls a secondary experience engine: Key Scenes. Key Scenes are similar to some fantasy RPG experience systems in that they are particular junctures in the play session that the Story Guide has decided beforehand are worth experience to the characters: *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* is one game that uses this. These are not particular outcomes, though. "Saving the princess," "killing or thwarting the evil overlord," and "taming the wild beast" are not good examples of Key Scenes. Key Scenes should be tense, have multiple outcomes, and force players to make a decision for their characters. (In this, they are like Bangs from Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer*.)

"Discovering the princess is trapped in a high tower," "meeting the overlord," and "con-

fronting the wild beast” are good Key Scenes, as each can result in multiple outcomes and do not put restrictions on what the player decision is for her character. Key Scenes do not have to tie into any particular overarching plot or storyline; they can be light and humorous, or grim and serious.

Whenever a character is present in a Key Scene, she earns one to three experience points, as determined beforehand by the Story Guide. These experience points are given as soon as the scene is over.

## 6.2 Designing SGCs

Interesting Story Guide characters (SGCs) are the cornerstone of a good adventure. In their interactions with the players’ characters, they provide a mirror to reflect action and values. Before figuring out their mechanics, you should figure out their motivations and general reactions. This is easier than you might think: depending on the importance of their character to the story, you should be able to sum this up in one to three sentences.

Of extreme importance is a name for the character: first impressions are, as it’s said, lasting. I recommend making a list of common and uncommon names for the culture that your game is currently set in and having that by your side as a Story Guide. Pick names for your most important SGCs ahead of time; throwaway SGCs can have a name picked on the fly from the list.

### Beasts

Beasts are the easiest SGCs of all to write up. Instead of having the normal gamut of abilities, they should have just these few.

- **Power (Vigor)**  
This is the animal’s strength and ferocity. Even animals, such as a tame buffalo, that do not normally attack people may have a high Prowess, as they’d whip some tail if provoked. This is used to attack other characters and smash things.
- **Prowess (Instinct)**  
This is the animal’s quickness and control. It is used to dodge blows, run away, and be fast like a rabbit.
- **Senses (Instinct)**  
This is self-explanatory: it is the animal’s ability to notice its surroundings.

- **Brain (Reason)**

This is a measure of the animal’s intelligence and will, and is used like Reason. While it may be a hinderance to domestication, it is also used for a domesticated animal to understand commands.

Beasts should have few, if any, points in their pools. One or two points in Instinct makes them a much more formidable foe, and one or two points in Vigor makes them devastating. No points should be in Reason unless the animal has very special properties. An animal may have one or two Secrets to represent special abilities that it has, such as goading horns, or a prehensile tail. You can remove the cost from these Secrets if the ability is built in to the animal.

### Punks, pogues, and peeps

With people, abilities can be built as you need them. If this SGC has any real importance to the story, you’ll need a name. After that, just assign abilities as you need them. With a small scale, it should be easy to decide if someone’s a Unskilled or a Master or anything in between. Write down the ability and rank and make sure to keep that consistent. If you’re making up someone on the fly, they have no pools. If you decide to give them a Secret, they can only use it once in a scene.

If you have a major SGC that you’re building before play, design that character as normal. However, their pools should be halved, as they do not have the chances to spend them that the players’ characters do.

## 6.3 Running an adventure

Running an adventure in *The Shadow of Yesterday* is, more than anything, about timing. Your first adventure with a group of characters will be a lot of you injecting content: you’ll definitely have to start the first scene. Do like I said above: take a look at these characters, especially their Keys. Where would they be? Make up a few options and give them to the player: “So, where do you think Mr. Senkowski would be on an average morning? At the bar, or maybe a cathouse?”

Once the ball’s rolling, you need to sit back and watch. Wait for pauses in the game, moments where the players don’t really know where to take things. Then make something exciting happen to one of their characters. They’ll react, and you can sit back again.

If the players take stuff in a direction you didn't expect, be agile. Rewrite your concepts on the fly to fit in the direction the game's moving. Remember this: nothing in the game exists until a player character interacts with it. It's easy to fall into the trap that you've made up this great location and, by gum, it's part of the game. Don't do that: the only things that exist in the game are the ones that come up in play. Until then, everything and everyone else is in a state of possibility.

## 6.4 Giving out experience points

As a Story Guide, you are responsible for binding the game together into an enjoyable narrative. You may be considered responsible by the players for their experience points and advancement. They are, of course, as wrong as they can be. When you see a player have her character act in a way that should earn her experience from a Key, feel free to announce that out loud. Feel just as free not to: that character is that player's creation, and she should well be playing attention to what's going on, and be invested in her character's advancement.

With the exception of Key Scenes, which you are responsible for, an ideal flow of experience point giving should go like this:

“Jack, a player: My character, Willis, leaps

forward, his ratkin legs kicking to land in front of the sword-blow coming down on Jeph. (rolls) Success! Hey, that hits one of my Keys. 2 experience, right?

Jennifer, the Story Guide: A-yup.”

## 6.5 The Standard Advance

Before a campaign begins, the Story Guide and players need to decide how long they want the game to be, and how fast they want characters to advance. Each group, and each story, can work differently in these respects, and so *The Shadow of Yesterday* can be easily changed to accommodate this.

The standard advance, how many experience points it costs to buy an advance for a character, is normally set at 5 XP. This will accommodate a style of play where your character will gain one to three advances at every session, normally, which is pretty quick compared to most RPGs. If this is too fast for you, I suggest moving this standard advance up in increments of 5 XP to change play speed. Set at 10 XP, characters will earn an advance every session or two; set at 15 XP, characters will earn, on average, an advance over two to three sessions; and set at 20 XP, characters will earn an advance every three or four sessions. It is not recommended to set the standard advance higher than 20 XP./



# 7 Tips and Tricks

## 7.1 For the player

Using two abilities is usually better than using one. If both of them are Competent or better, you'll get bonus dice and really shine.

When Bringing Down the Pain, give up. Do it often. In other games, each combat you were in might have been to the death. That's been my experience, at least. If you try that here, it will drag out. Every round, you should think "is losing so bad? Can I deal with a broken arm, or sullied reputation, or whatever?" Chances are, if you're losing, that you'll lose a lot more by staying in.

When you're physically tore up, get in an argument and Bring Down the Pain. If you've been socially massacred, get in a fight and Bring Down the Pain. Harm shakes out afterwards. A tussle's good for the soul.

Don't forget about gift dice. Use them and ask others for them.

Bring up your Keys whenever you use them.

Picking two Keys that are at odds with each other (the classic example is the Key of Conscience and the Key of Bloodlust) means you can get experience points for whatever decision you make in an applicable conflict. And it makes your character more interesting.

If you're losing in Bringing Down the Pain, you can spend advances to raise the ability you're using right then and right there. Don't forget that.

When you're in real trouble, buy off a Key. Sure, it changes your character permanently, but that can be a lot of fun.

Use pool refreshment like a rock star. You are more than allowed to refresh more than one pool at once. Get a sexy man or lady to pour wine down your throat, oil you down and get with the friction, and then make with the bedtime reading. You'll be all refreshed and have a great scene.

## 7.2 For the Story Guide

This game doesn't have a lot of perception-based abilities. Sense Danger's the only one and it's used for active physical danger. That's on purpose. If it is interesting for a character to see or hear something, like a clue, they do. The exception is when one character actively tries to fool another. When that happens, a player can roll React – or Resist, if more applicable – in a resisted ability check against whatever the other character is using.

Hey, Story Guide! Don't hold back. Seriously. It's no fun. To be more explicit, you might in some other role-playing game had this whole campaign where you were trying to find clues leading to something big. Don't do that in this game. If, for example, one of the most powerful people in the world, who gains her feral strength and near-immortality through drinking foul poisons and eating human flesh is going to be part of your campaign, have her show up early. One of your players might do something crazy like say, "Ooh! I take the Key of Unrequited Love with her right now." That is fun.

Don't you dare play your SGCs like complete fatalists. You need to give up Bringing Down the Pain, too.

Feel free to set nasty stakes for crazy attempts your players will want to make. There's nothing wrong with saying "If you lose this ability check writing a song for the duke, you'll take level 5 harm in Instinct, and be banned from the kingdom."

If your players don't Bring Down the Pain against one of your SGCs, and wipe them out with a regular ability check, bring that bad guy back in two or three sessions. Recurring enemies are awesome.

Use pool refreshment like a rock star. Your best chance to introduce some new characters in the game is by making player characters meet them in order to refresh a pool. If a player says, "I need to refresh Reason," and doesn't say how, she's begging to be clubbed with your imagination.

Seriously, this happened to me and I got to play | a dead guy with a theremin.

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The Shadow Of Yesterday  
**Sourcebook**

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## 8 The World of Near

**I**n days long gone by, Maldor was an empire, stretching from ocean to mountain, uniting the people of the world under one rule. Empowered by a common language and efficient trade, this cornucopia of cultures melded into an economic powerhouse where few were hungry and most were happy.

This empire fell, not to opposing armies, but doom from the heavens. A fiery dot appeared in the sky, bright enough to be seen in midday. The people, well-off but superstitious, grew restless, worried at what this apparition might bring. Absolon, Emperor-General of Maldor, gathered his astronomers and they examined the fire on the edge of existence.

Their counsel was dark. This dot seemed to grow larger by day, as if the sky itself was beginning to burn away. Within three months, this dot grew as large as the sun, and shone bright by night, causing fear and panic in Absolon's kingdom. Mothers held their crying children to their breasts, trying to block the fell rays of this celestial re from their babies' eyes; peasants grew fearful as their beasts moaned in confusion at night; priests proclaimed the end of the world was coming.

And all looked to their Emperor, Absolon, for guidance, but Absolon had none. A foreign magician, Hanish, came before Absolon, hundreds of miles of dirt caked on his body from running. He swore that the rituals conducted by Absolon's sorcerers had unleashed this terror, and it must be revoked, else the world would be destroyed.

The court sorcerers heard this and were none too pleased. They had Hanish imprisoned and tried to turn Absolon's ear away from his ravings. The words bothered Absolon greatly, though, and he went to Hanish's cell on a dark night, when the clouds obscured the burning among the stars.

Absolon threatened Hanish with death if this curse was not removed from the world. Hanish lay himself before Absolon's sword. Moved by Hanish's bravery and defiance, Absolon took him to his side as his highest advisor and they spent many hours talking alone. Rumors and

rebellions ripped Maldor apart. The people said their Emperor spent all his days privately conversing with the man who would destroy the world. Within another three months, this fiery orb illuminated everything in burnt red. The sun could not even be seen.

In the midst of open revolt, chaos, madness, prophets proclaiming the death of all life, assassinations, and depravity, Absolon and Hanish emerged from the Emperor's quarters. The Sky Fire had grown no bigger than half the sky, but its heat was now intolerable and the entire sky was painted in eternal sunset as the globe burned away the air.

Absolon and Hanish stood on the steps of the Emperors Palace, hand in hand, and began a weird chant, intoning ancient syllables which spread throughout the angry crowds outside, calming them. This chant lasted for three days, and it is said that by the end of those three days, the entire Empire had taken up its rhythmic syllables. The Fire moved slowly across the sky, though, and at the end of the three days, crossed the western horizon and night fell again. Absolon and Hanish collapsed on the stairs where they chanted, their spirits gone and bodies broken.

Then, the world halted.

In the midst of night, the world shook with such a rumble that buildings fell, cracks opened spewing lava, and mountains formed out of plainsland. Men wept and tore their clothes, animals stampeded, and the elderly died of shock. A red glow came from every horizon, with black smoky clouds billowing. The clouds grew and grew as the earth continued to shake for days on end, the sun barely visible, and nally even blotted out that orb of life-giving light.

For a year, the earth quivered and the sun rose no more, with only black clouds looking down on humanity. The earth froze. For one year, through the harshest of winters, people died of plague, starvation, and madness. By the end of that year, the population of the known world was a tenth of what it had been.

One year after its disappearance, the sun rose weakly in the sky, barely shining through the breaking clouds. People driven to primitivism stuck their heads out of their caves, hovels, and homes to see the beloved sun as it rose to the middle of the sky and the foul darkness broke around it. When it set, though, living persons everywhere shook with horror.

A moon rose in the sky. Never had a moon been seen in the world. The only object ever seen in the night sky was the dread Sky Fire, which this bore too much a resemblance to. Its pale light threw dark shadows onto the land. Worse, when the sun rose the next day, this moon – three times as large as the sun – eclipsed the sun, a black Shadow Moon rimmed in fire.

Three hundred years have passed. Every night, the moon still rises, a terrible eye over the world. Some people quiver in abject fear. And some heroes fight the Shadow, in the darkest caves, the most decayed of civilizations, and the blackest hearts.

## 8.1 About the setting

The world presented within these pages is a sliver of the entire world in this game. Detailed here is the part known as Near, a section of the world geographically locked-in and saved from total destruction by the Sky Fire. It is also the tipping point for the rise and decline of the Empire of Maldor.

Looking at the map, you will note no clear political boundaries. There are not any. Every border in Near that doesn't have a huge piece of geography supporting it is contested. Some are more contested than others: the Khale-Ammeni border is the most fought over.

Reading the write-ups of the cultures, you will find many references that are not fully explained. There are ideas like The First Man, the Revenant Cult, and a far-north land where elves are kept as slaves. These are not explained on purpose, because ...

## 8.2 Near is yours to discover

That's right. I do not explain every detail of every culture because it should, and will, vary in your game from what I might have in my head. You do not need the author's permission to think up neat things about the setting, but I'm giving it

anyway.

Within each culture, I've tried to put in many interesting ideas that you can build upon to flesh them out. This is not a job just for the Story Guide, either. Players should always feel free to recommend answers to questions brought up in play. I have left out what is not important to me and should be determined by your group. If, for example, I do not mention what sort of weapons a culture uses, then feel free to give them anything from swords to bizarre two-ended resin-coated blade-hammers.

In addition, make up your own rules. I've provided guidelines for creating abilities, Secrets and Keys: use them to bring more detail to the cultures I've provided.

And over those hills: who knows what lurks? What sort of mad culture could enslave elves? Who, if anyone, could live in the southern frozen wastes? Does another world lie over the eastern seas? Why has no one returned from expeditions over the western mountains?

If you can believe it, when I originally planned *The Shadow of Yesterday*, I answered a lot of those questions. In writing the game, it seemed like a stretch, like me trying to make an impressive display of my creative skills instead of helping you use your own creative skills. You will be pleased to know I still have the notes. Nothing should stop you from finding out for yourself what lies over those hills before I get around to telling you what I found, though.

## 8.3 The real deal

I really want you and your group to take this world and run with it. Whatever you decide is up is great. I did invent Neararound a few assumptions, though. Here's what they are.

*There aren't any monsters.* Sure, throw in killer wolves. I like to use crocodiles, personally. And I could easily see dinosaurs. These are beasts, though. All true antagonists in the game should be living, thinking creatures that have a viewpoint that can be understood, no matter how warped.

*There aren't any gods.* Mankind and, well, ratkind are alone in shaping their world. That doesn't mean faith in something great isn't powerful, by the way. True belief gives you power,

and in this game, sometimes you do get a supernatural benefit for that. That's a little fantasy nod to the power of the mind.

*There's just people.* Good and evil happen for a reason. And that reason is some guy's making it happen.



# 9 The Species Of Near

## 9.1 The Old Species

**T**he “Old Species” are those which have been around and well-known in Near since before the coming of the Shadow, which are humans, goblins, and elves. The Old Species seem closely linked, for this reason: they are all in some way human. While the lines between humans, elves, and goblins are clear, individuals can move in between them. This is not necessarily common knowledge: no goblin would believe this, only the most astute human scholar have observed the phenomenon, and elves don’t particularly like to talk about it.

## 9.2 Masters of War: Humans

Humans have the most variation of any species on Near, and as such, will be more detailed in the culture write-ups. There are some species-wide qualities worth noting, though.

### Appearance and Personality

Humans come in every variety of color and appearance as they do on Earth. The humans of Near, however, tend towards darker skin tones: the lightest skin tone is a light olive, and blonde hair is rare. Exceptionally light-skinned people or blondes are regarded with some suspicion, as these qualities are normally associated with elves. Skin tone varies within nations and cultures, but as a rule, skin tones deepen as one travels north in the world of Near.

Human personalities are very tempered by culture. They are the most aggressive of all the species, though, even the beast-like ratkin. Their superior numbers and role as the primary mover in Near history have much to do with this, as does a natural-born hubris. Coupled with their aggressiveness is a dangerous catalyst: fear. The Shadow has brought out the worst fears in humanity, and purges against other species, pogroms against their own kind, witch-hunts for “Shadow-touched” and other atrocities have been even more common.

Balancing human aggression is human passion.

Humans have love – as we know it, at least – which is unique to their kind. It is, in fact, what makes humans human, and if a goblin or elf finds themselves in this state, they are on the fast track to finding out just how malleable their species identity is.

### Religion and Magic

All human religions have some explanation of the Sky-Fire and the Shadow Moon. Most are not favorably inclined to it, and have become dualist good-versus-evil pantheons. The definition of evil is a primary impetus in many of the atrocities described above.

### Crunchy Bits

See Human Species Keys 9.1 page 46

## 9.3 Monsters of Heaven: Elves

Elves are mysterious, aloof human-like creatures. They claim immortality, and possess fearsome magic, allowing them to project their ego. Usually untrusted or revered, or both, they wander Near looking for an answer.

### Appearance and Personality

For the most part, elves appear human-like. They create their own bodies from the power of their own self-image, so they can have any appearance they want at creation, but most stick with a similar appearance in each incarnation. Their skin tone, however, is always pale, ranging from bone-white to a very light olive, and their hair is light, ranging from blonde to a sandy brown or golden red. All elves have an aura, a small nimbus of light that shines around them. This aura is slight enough that it only shouts their presence under a pitch-black sky. It is noticeable enough, though, that anyone that does see an elf knows what it is.

Elves tend to be solitary creatures without roots. This is not to say that they are not social; they can be incredibly magnetic. They do not, however, usually settle down in one place and form lasting relationships. It is said that one cannot trust an

Key Name	Key Summary	XP	Buyoff
Key of Love	Your character has a deep love, whether friendly, erotic, or familial, for someone else.	Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character. Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character puts himself in harm's way or makes a sacrifice for them.	Sever the relationship with this person.
Key of Unrequited Love	Your character has a love for someone who does not return this love.	Gain 1 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 2 XP every time your character attempts to win their affection. Gain 5 XP every time your character puts himself in harm's way or makes a sacrifice for them.	Abandon your pursuit of this person or win their love.

**Table 9.1** Human Species Keys

elf for “whatever good he does, he does for his own purposes.”

**The Cycle of the Elf**

Elves are people who have looked deep within and found only one thing there: the self. Dedicated like a Zen master, they have realized the world is illusory and the only truth is what one thinks of one's self. Upon the death of the body, these souls do not pass on, but return again and again, as a more perfect form.

This sort of worldview kind of shuts the door on most religion. The elf recognizes no god or greater power, only more powerful souls. Strangely, this sort of self-absorption doesn't always lead to evil: many elves roam the world doing good to either appease something inside them or perhaps for amusement. Others strike down anything in their path, realizing the insignificance of others that have not achieved their enlightenment. Whatever the attitude, an elf lives on, seeking to know itself deeper.

Sometimes, an elf strays from this path. They were once human, after all, although it's not too wise to mention that. Any time an elf recognizes another life as greater than his own, he falls from elfhood. If an elf either saves the life of another, dying or becoming mortally wounded in the process, or creates life – elves function sexually as humans – they become somewhat

human. (If the elf died for another, he is reborn a last time.) Their aura dims and becomes grey, and they begin to get older like a human: they have entered the Grey Age. Other elves usually despise a Grey One for his weakness.

**Elven Magic**

The most powerful magic of the elf is the fact that it's immortal. Elves come into this world at maturity, and do not age unless they want to. Most do, over their many incarnations, as their self-image becomes more wizened. They do not catch diseases, although they can be poisoned. Their body is only a shell they have created, and even if struck down, they return to the world of Near.

An elf, if feeling introspective – and when aren't they? – may speak of Heaven. This may be the only religious belief elves have: that when they achieve perfect enlightenment, they will leave Near and enter perfect one-ness, when the illusion of Near disappears for them, and they see it for what it is, their own dream. This Heaven is as horrific of an idea to a human as it sounds – the elf sees himself as the dreamer of everything and everyone else, and he will take his true place in Heaven.

Elven magic manifests itself in other minor forms, however. Elven auras are very powerful and have many special abilities that protect

the elf and project its will on others. The long age of an elf seems like magic to other peoples, as well: elves can draw on their many experiences to perform nearly any feat.

### The Shadow Moon and the Elf

When the Sky Fire fell to Near, all elves disappeared. Not a single one was seen for over two hundred years. As to where they went, no one knows, not even the elves. Elves' stories are varied: most purport that they were always here and have no memory of leaving or those two hundred years, while others speak of Far, another world they are able to visit.

Whatever happened, elves are loathe to speak of it. Since they have returned, though, it is obvious the Shadow Moon has had an effect on them. Once elves were friendly towards each other, greeting other ones on the path to enlightenment. Once, when an elf was asked about the logical fallacy in two elves both thinking the universe is their dream, he said, "It is not known whether I am dreaming him dreaming the world, or he is dreaming me dreaming the world. Either way, we'd better get along." Now, though, elven friendliness is rare, and most elves despise the sight of another one. The power struggle to see who is truly the master of the dream has become intense. Some old elves blame the younger ones for the Sky Fire and Shadow Moon, claiming too many competing for the dream have threatened to tear it apart.

### Crunchy Bits

#### Elven Species Abilities

- **Past Lives (Reason) –**  
*Innate Ability* This is the elven ability to remember many abilities and bits of knowledge from the past. It can be used to remember facts about any ancient landmark or piece of history.

#### Elven Species Secrets

- **Secret of Immortality(Skill)**  
When an elf character dies, it returns to Near within 28 days. The Story Guide and the character's player should decide together when the most appropriate and enjoyable time for the character to come back would be. No one has actually ever seen an elf return: it happens out of the sight of other people. The

character loses a point from each pool. Three abilities are lowered by one rank as well; the process of reincarnation is not perfect and the elf's spirit must adjust to a new form. The player can choose to have his character not return from death. Whether this means the character has ascended to Heaven, or something else has happened, is completely up to that player and the Story Guide. **This secret is mandatory for elven characters.**

- **Secret of the Polymath**  
In an elf's life, many abilities have waxed and waned. Using this secret, the elf may use its Past Lives ability as any other ability for an entire scene. *Cost:* 2 Reason. In addition, the very next available advance the player spends must be used to improve this ability.
- **Secret of Fading the Illusion**  
An elf with this secret can, through force of will, make the illusion of the world temporarily grow dim and ghostly around him. To everyone else, it appears the elf has become translucent and incorporeal. This secret lasts for one scene. *Cost:* 2 Vigor. (To note, your character can slip through cracks and cannot be physically harmed. She just has an interesting way of looking at this.)
- **Secret of the Iron Mind**  
Your character can refresh Reason whenever she defeats someone else in a one-on-one personal contest of any type, as long as it has been established as a contest between the two.
- **Aura of Protection**  
Your character's aura is palpable, bringing a strange thickness to the air. When physically attacked, you can spend from your Reason pool to lower damage on a one-for-one basis.
- **Aura of the Emperor**  
Your character's aura waxes as he enforces his will, making him appear taller and more threatening. On any attempt to intimidate someone or convince them of your character's opinion, you may add a bonus die.
- **Aura of Sight**  
Your character's aura is brighter than normal when close up, but no brighter when far away. This allows you and your friends to see fine at night, and eliminates any sight-based difficulties within 10 yards.
- **Aura of the Tower**  
Your character's aura is polarized, giving it a weird light-and-dark flavor. Both Reason and Vigor are now associated with Resist, and you can spend from both of them for ability checks.

## Elven Species Keys

See Elven Species Keys 9.2 page 49

### 9.4 Beasts of Hunger: Goblins

Most would call goblins debased: sick, twisted, addicted things with little morality. Goblins call this fun. Pure hedonists, goblins hunger for pleasure, trouble, and excitement.

#### Appearance and personality

Goblins are infinitely adaptable beings; their “natural” bodies, if you can call them that, manage to resemble demons, dogs, and men at the same time. They are mottled brown, black, green, and grey, and their hair grows randomly, in shape and color. Their bodies have an ability that cannot be explained by many: they evolve to match their environment even as they continue to age, and their offspring carry these same characteristic. Even strong magic and torture can warp their bodies, as many evil wizards have found, creating the dread ur-goblins, bugbears, and Violators from goblin stock. Most goblins are smaller and stouter than humans, although they can come in just about any size.

Goblins’ curiosity drives them into all the forgotten places of the earth, and makes them decent apprentices for just about any job: they catch on quickly, but tend to cause as many accidents as they do help. They’re easy to keep loyal, though: all goblins have an addiction, which if fed regularly, will make one your best friend. This addiction need not be to a drug: they can be addicted to a certain act, food, drink, or, well, drug. (A tale has been told of goblin divers on the shores of Maldor. These beasts were amazing pearl-finders, and were addicted to the rush of adrenaline they got when their human handler threw them off the cliff-side.)

#### Goblin society, family, and morality

Left alone, goblin societies resemble anarchy to any outsider, although they tend to grow an alpha goblin among any tribe. Any goblin tribe of more than about two dozen of the animals tends to fall apart without an outside master, usually human. Goblins are actually rather good at organizing to make sure everyone’s needs get met, but when they start to threaten each other’s resources, tribes quickly split into rivals.

Goblin families are very loose-knit. All goblins are poly-sexual, and any mating between them, whether male-male, male-female, or female-female, can generate offspring. With a month-long gestation period, this doesn’t really get in the way of their curious relations. The offspring are born as small, but capable goblins, emerging as little flesh-balls about a foot in diameter. Within an hour of their birth, they grow feet, hands, eyes, and a mouth. Young goblins pick another goblin in the tribe as their parent, randomly, and if that goblin doesn’t push them away, they usually learn the same addictions and behaviors.

Goblins do not understand the human concept of love. It’s an alien concept to them. They do understand mutual pleasure, of both the sexual and non-sexual form, and do actively work with each other. The greatest sins in goblin society are not wanting to trade – one goblin’s poison is another’s pudding – and betraying someone you’re working with.

A few goblins have been observed in a bizarre state that resembles love, however. When a goblin is struck with this, known only as “the Affliction” in their rough language, they leave their tribe and travel, their only goals to prove their love or die. (They seem confused by their own emotions, and usually cannot express clearly what they are doing.) A goblin has never been observed in love with another goblin, however; they always choose a member of another species as their object of affection.

#### Crunchy Bits

##### Goblin Species Abilities

- **Adaptability (Vigor) innate ability** The goblin can change its body structure and even mental capabilities on a fairly frequent basis. This ability can stand in for any other ability on the goblin’s character sheet, under the circumstances described in the Secret of Adaptability.

##### Goblin Species Secrets

- **Secret of Addiction** Your character is addicted to a substance or behavior. You cannot refresh any pools if it has been longer than a day since your character took part in this addiction. In addition, your character can never refresh Vigor

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Bloodline	No elf existing in Near today has humans that still remember his humanity. Some elves remember where they came from, though, and show their weakness through secretly shepherding their bloodline.	Gain 1 XP every time your character is in a scene with one of his bloodline. Gain 2 XP every time he secretly manipulates a situation in their favor. Gain 5 XP every time he puts himself at risk to do so.	Reveal who you are to your family.
Key of the Eternal Question	There is a reason for the illusion of Near, a purpose behind its entrapment of your character. Only when she answers this question will she be ready to be the master of all she dreams. Pick a philosophical question for your character. "What is the measure of a hero?" or "Can one know himself better through fulfillment or denial?" are good examples.	Gain 1 XP every time you can apply this question to the situation your character's in. Gain 3 XP every time your character risks harm in pursuit of the answer.	Answer the question.
Key of the Self	Your character is an elf, immortal and dedicated to the self.	Gain 1 XP every time he ignores the request of another in order to fulfill his own goals. Gain 3 XP every time he ignores someone in need for himself.	Become human. By either dying to save the life of another, or creating life, your character enters the Grey Age. All Elven Species Secrets and Keys, except Secret of the Polymath, are unusable.

**Table 9.2** Elven Species Keys

normally: instead, he only refreshes Vigor through taking part in this addiction. This refreshment can only happen once per day, but there is a boon. Your character can take part in the addiction, however, as often you like, and one point of Vigor is returned each time after the first refreshment of the day. You can break this addiction if you have the Key of the Affliction. The character must abstain from the substance or behavior. At the end of each day doing so, make a Resist roll. If the roll is successful for five straight days, the addiction is broken and you can refresh Vigor normally. If any roll is failed, start over. The secret is kept and if the character ever takes part in the addiction again, it returns. **This secret is mandatory for goblin characters.**

- **Secret of Adaptability**  
Whenever Vigor is refreshed, instead of actually refreshing the pool, the player can switch his character's Adaptability rank with

the rank for a different ability. This is a permanent switch.

- **Secret of Body Weaponry**  
Your goblin has innate weapons and armor. This Secret works like the Secret of Imbue-ment and may be taken multiple times in order to gain more potent or extra weapons and armor. If you have the Secret of Adaptability, these weapons and armor can be changed under the same circumstances: when Vigor is refreshed, but no pool refreshment is taken.
- **Secret of the Chameleon**  
Your character's skin can change color, and instinctively does. You always have a bonus die to hide against brown, black, grey, or dark green: basically, natural colors and rough stone.

**Goblin Species Keys**

See Goblin Species Keys 9.3 page 50

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Affliction	Your goblin has succumbed to the Affliction – he has learned to love. This means he is becoming human. With this Key, a goblin character may also take the human Species Key, Key of Unrequited Love.	Gain 1 XP every time your character is insulted or ostracized by other goblins for the Affliction. Gain 3 XP every time this reaction causes great difficulty for your character.	Become fully human. To do this, the character must have the Key of Unrequited Love. If your character either breaks his addiction or wins the love of his target, he becomes human. All goblin Species Secrets except Secret of the Addiction are lost, as is the Adaptability ability.

Table 9.3 Goblin Species Keys

## 9.5 Tooth and Teat: Ratkin

Ratkin are the newest sentient species in Near, and have just started to emerge from their animal past. They are generally untrusted by all other species except goblins, and known as dirty thieves. In reality, they are loyal allies, but have a hard time adjusting to the idea of owning something.

Ratkin are most often found in dead cities, especially the crumbling walled fortresses of Maldor, and live there in enormous litters, near-feral.

### Appearance and Personality

Ratkin resemble nutria, enormous rodents, standing on their hind legs with prehensile thumbs. About three to four feet tall, they have pointed button noses, whiskers, and are covered in either grey, brown, or black fur, with the occasional albino all-white ratkin. Many ratkin are not completely used to bipedal movement, and drop to all fours to run, looking like nothing but a huge rat-dog.

A wandering ratkin will bond with his companions quickly, and is usually quite uncomfortable alone. Their tendency to take the possessions of their friends is well documented, though: they have little comprehension of the idea that you can own anything, except through guarding it. In the same way, they will quarrel with their friends quicker than a human would, but quarrels are forgiven as soon as they end.

### One of the Litter

The basic unit of ratkin society is the *litter*, being the large group the ratkin is born with. Unlike other species, not everything born to a ratkin mother is a ratkin; a typical litter is three or

four ratkin and ten to twenty normal rats. At birth, the ratkin are distinguishable only by their forepaws and their size, about one-and-a-half to twice the size of the rats.

Among a litter, you own only what you can fight for: any scrap of food or shiny object quickly results in a scratching, biting ball of chaos as rat and ratkin alike pile on. This is true from birth; the first act of a ratkin's life is to claw a sibling off a teat so it can have a drink. An outsider would wonder how many make it out alive, as sibling altercations are frequent and incredibly violent. Ratkin instinctually know how to hurt their brethren without seriously damaging them, though.

Any outside threat to a member of the litter is met with real violence, though. A predator attacking a lone rat or ratkin will quickly find himself prey to a snarling, vicious wave of fur, tooth, and claw, seemingly coming from nowhere. To a ratkin, an attack on any member of his litter is even worse than a personal attack on him, and requires retribution. Although the bond is not as powerful, this is also true about the *horde*, the larger family a litter is born into, which can number dozens or hundreds of ratkin, and thousands of rats. For this reason, a ratkin-infested ancient city is a very dangerous place to bring hostilities.

Ratkin do leave their original litter to wander the world of Near, though. The reasons are varied. Some ratkin lose their litter to explorers; some meet outsiders and see a way of life where they do not have to fight for every meal. They do not, though, lose the concept of the litter, and usually find a group of companions to bond with, becoming their new litter.

## Crunchy Bits

### Ratkin Species Abilities

- **Litter Bond (Instinct) Innate Ability**  
This is the ratkin ability to move as part of a group and automatically foresee the actions of its brethren. It can be used to defend anyone in the character's litter from danger, but another ability check (modified by this one) is needed to actually stop the danger.

### Other Uses for Abilities

Ratkin use the Scrapping ability to fight with their teeth and claws. Their thick coat and sharp natural weapons give them no disadvantage against an opponent armed with normal-size weapons. In addition, they will often charge an opponent on all fours, achieving a great speed before leaping to savagely gouge the opponent. This is done in-game with an Athletics check, with the Success Levels becoming bonus dice for a Scrapping check.

### Ratkin Species Secrets

- **Secret of Rat Familiarity**  
You gain a bonus die on all Animal Ken Ability Checks involving rodents. In addition, your character can speak to rodents in their own language. **This secret is mandatory for Ratkin characters.**
- **Secret of Rat Companions**  
Your character always has two to four rats around him, living in his pockets, scurrying

on the floor, or the like. As a whole, they have the following abilities:

- Endure: Unskilled
- React: Adept
- Resist: Unskilled
- Scrapping: Unskilled
- Stealth: Competent

They scatter immediately if hit, even in Bringing Down the Pain, and do not return until the next scene.

- **Secret of Rat Size**  
Being a Ratkin, your character is smaller than most people in the world, and can use that to his advantage in combat. Gain a bonus die any time your character is avoiding an attack from someone larger than him or any other situation in which his reduced size may help (i.e. an Athletics ability check to wriggle through a pipe.)
- **Secret of Rat Vision**  
Your character is gifted with excellent night vision. You can never receive any penalties for low-light conditions and can see under the moon as if it were daylight.
- **Secret of Sibling Rivalry**  
You can refresh your character's Instinct pool whenever he gets in a knock-down, drag-out fight with a member of his litter. In addition, you can immediately roll your Litter Bond ability after the fight and add those bonus dice to your litter-mate's Healing Check.

### Ratkin Species Keys

See Ratkin Species Keys 9.4 page 52

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Litter	Your character has a litter he was either born into or adopted.	Gain 1 XP every time he defends a litter-mate from harm. Gain 3 XP every time he defends a litter-mate at great danger to himself.	Leave your litter to strike out on your own. (Note: You may choose to adopt a different litter at any time, but must buyoff this key and buy it again for your character to bond with the new litter. Your character may not have more than one litter at a time.)
Key of the Precious	Your character jealously guards his possessions, afraid that someone will try to take them at first opportunity.	Gain 1 XP every time your character gains a new possession by his skills - not when one is given to him or bought. Gain 2 XP every time your character gains a new possession by fighting for it. Gain 5 XP whenever your character successfully defends his possessions against theft.	Give away your possessions permanently.

**Table 9.4** Ratkin Species Key

# 10 Maldor, Seat Of Destruction

## 10.1 Introduction

*“This package – bomb, you call it – will unseat the tyrant?” the farmer asked, his hands dirtying the paper as he carefully handled it.*

*The voice from the shadow chuckled. “It will knock him right out of his seat. If my calculations are correct, it will kill him as well. Just remember the phrase.”*

*“On Tax-Day, another great gift I have brought my...”*

*“Don’t finish that sentence. It shouldn’t work, but let’s not take any chances. It will go off as soon as you say that in the presence of our great liege.” An odd squeak came from the darkened corner at the word.*

*“And I?”*

*“You will die.”*

*The farmer sighed, wet and heavy in his lungs. “And my family?”*

*“They will disappear from the land. They will be taken care of well. They are part of our... tribe now.”*

*Filthy hands pushed the package into a knapsack, and the freedom fighter turned away, resigned.*

*The shadow grew larger and fell across the farmer. “Man, you do good work for the people.”*

*His face away from the shadow, the man of the dirt nodded slowly. “Freedom is the people’s work,” he replied as a white furred hand, fingers ending in claws, squeezed his shoulder.*

## 10.2 An Empire Fallen

**A**cross the deep waters of Absolon’s Way lie the ruins of Maldor, once the grandest empire Near has ever known. Before the Shadow Moon came, Maldor ruled the world, its empire spreading from the Eastern Sea to the frozen waters of the South and the Hungry River of the north. Maldor’s most distinctive feature was its tremendous walled cities, giant sealed engines of industry and culture. As the empire fell and shrunk back to the center of Near, many of its cities were ruined as terror and plague eradicated their denizens. These cities, filled

with secrets and danger, are a destination for especially foolish or brave adventurers.

Maldor is made up of a variety of geography, from rolling plains stretching to the ocean in the east to forest-covered hills in the west. It once was beautiful. It now looks like someone dropped a bomb on the cover of a sad-eyed-wizard fantasy novel.

## 10.3 A Land of Lieges

When the Sky Fire fell, Emperor Absolon passed on and Maldor passed into darkness. As people

took to the land again, the country found itself shattered with local lords claiming royal blood dividing the land up like lions with a carcass: unfair and bloody. The disparity between the wealthy and poor is immense; only those families with great stone fortresses and great stores were able to emerge as anything but destitute. The lords of the land press commoners into service as infantry, farmers, smiths, or whatever suits their whims. Outright war between these lords is not uncommon as they attempt to gain dominance over each other. None have achieved their goal, however, and the country remains divided.

The Maldorites are shell-shocked, blindly attempting to follow their old ways of life in a ruined empire. The people are a mix of ethnicities, although the noble lines are all Caucasian in appearance. While family is important – the nobility treasures their blood and the peasants huddle together – they are often separated by war, hunger, and wanderlust. Filthy children run rampant; with nothing to own, people make much of their only resource.

#### 10.4 The Remnants of Culture

Maldor is in its dark ages; art and culture take second-place to survival. Among the noble classes, art still exists in collections from before the Shadow Moon came. Tapestries, painting, and sculpture are most prized. Artists are employed by lords, but innovation is rare: the artists are called on to make knock-offs of pre-Shadow art more than anything else. Musicians and actors do well if they can find a liege, as owning the better court entertainment is a major point of pride for these cardboard nobles playing at being kings.

Other troubadours wonder the countryside, going from inn to inn to make a few pieces of gold. It is said that one enterprising merchant hired a gang of mercenaries to pillage a fallen city and is now printing books using a press they managed to liberate. From the borderlands, there are stories of commoners banding together to rebuild villages; these communes are said to sponsor community theatres of dubious quality, but high humor.

The food of Maldor is considered bland by the rest of the world, but is hearty and filling. Potatoes are served at every meal, from a commoner's feast to a noble's snack. On the other hand, Maldor's beer is the best in the world.

#### 10.5 Let Them Eat War

The Maldor economy can be described as an ever-hungry violent monster, constantly devouring itself to live. Farmers grow grain, corn, potatoes, and other root vegetables and raise goats, sheep, and cattle for milk and food, but it never seems to be enough, especially as the lords take an obscene amount of crops and livestock in land taxes to pay for their wars. Beer and distilled potato liquor make up a large amount of their exports, especially to Goren, a frozen land to the south. Metal is found in the western hills, and what doesn't become an axe or breastplate gets sold to the iron-poor north. Most families have to supplement their income by taking up the sword. The nobles promise good pay in their armies, although plenty of idiot young people end up dying on the end of a sword before payday.

Individual lords in Maldor supplement their coffers by trading priceless artifacts and antiquities to foreigners. The Ammenite Houses are the major buyers of these objects. There is good pay in Maldor for a seasoned explorer; the ruins of many great cities are filled with arms and art, as well as fierce ratkin unlikely to appreciate pillagers.

#### 10.6 Messiahs and Magicians

The lords of Maldor are monotheistic. Their religion centers around a variation of ancient sun god worship: they have melded the figure of the sun god and Absolon, saying that the Year of Shadow was Absolon's sacrifice as he descended into the underworld, then rose against, undefeated by Shadow. Their priests prophesy his return to Near as a king that will re-unite Maldor and make it strong again. Some philosophers might debate about when Absolon will come again, but the lords do not: there's not a one of them without the hubris to think that he is Absolon-Come-again, and that all will bow down to her. This messiah complex makes their wars all the more bloody, of course.

This monotheism trickles down to the peasants, who tend to worship the sun god in its more pagan aspect, as a giver of life and blessing. Unlike the lords, the peasants definitely argue about when Absolon will return: their dream of a better day is well-deserved, but pathetic. As Maldor was once a great multicultural cornucopia, though, religion varies widely among its lower classes, who practice animism, ancestor worship, or any

variety of other religious practices in addition to sun-worship.

Rumors of a Shadow Cult abound, evildoers who would try to throw down the sun and replace it with their dark Queen of Shadow. Who exactly the Shadow Cult is is unknown. Earls and dukes tell their people that the Shadow Cult are the followers of other earls and dukes; advisors tell their lords that the Shadow Cult grows among their own people; commoners believe the Shadow Cult are the ratkin, or nasty elves, or their next-door neighbors, depending on what day of the week it is. Some elements have been assassinating self-proclaimed messiahs and blowing up castle walls without getting caught, but leave no clue as to who they are.

## 10.7 The Three-Corner Academy

When Maldor reigned supreme, Emperor Absolon sponsored a great academy of magic, built as a giant triangle-shaped fortress hidden in the western hills, drawing his advisors from the best of their ranks. Strangely, no one knows exactly where the academy is today: many adventurers claim to have seen it, but all directions given to it end up nowhere. Most reports of it say that strange white ratkin swarm its halls.

In its zenith, the Three-Corner Academy pressed its own philosophy of magic, based off two interlocking triangles, the Day Triangle and Night Triangle. It trained students from all over Near within its walls, and the remnants of its learning can still be found in pockets spread over the world.

In this time, Three-Corner magic is more common in Maldor than anywhere else in Near, but any sort of magic is feared. Many nobles have court magicians that act as diviners and advisors. The combination of these powerful rulers and rumors of the Shadow Cult put fear in the hearts of superstitious commoners, who often flee from a magician's path, or in large numbers, burn the witch.

## 10.8 Other Species in Maldor

Maldor is a rather xenophobic land; other species do not generally find it a welcoming place. Elves are distrusted, as they disappeared during the Year of Shadow. Still, they are sometimes found in the royal courts, which does not add to their

reputation among the common folk at all.

Ratkin are the least liked and most numerous. Ratkin infest the old ruined cities of Maldor, and are often the only residents there. Most lords in Maldor offer rewards for ratkin heads, and serfs desperate for money will band together into hunting parties for the sentient rodents.

Goblins get the most mixed reaction. Most are harmless, and can be found all over, from court jesters to household pets to wizards' apprentices to great warrens of them holed up in hill caves. Some of the most vile goblin experiments come from Night magicians of the Three-Corner School, however, and mothers scare their children from a young age with tales of the Hungry Ones and the Violators.

## 10.9 Three-Corner Magic

### Philosophy of Three-Corner Magic

Like many mystic philosophies, Three-Corner Magic revolves around the connection between body, spirit, and mind, or Vigor, Instinct, and Reason. For each of these, there is one Day focus and one Night focus, with the Day focus being considered more benign. Students were generally not taught the Night focus until their masters thought they had become adept with the Day focus. Now, with the school scattered and third-generation knowledge being passed down, training has lost a lot of structure. The Night foci are more widely taught; they also are believed to be evil by many, instead of being capable of being used for evil, a distinction held in the old days.

*Creation* and *Destruction* are the simplest foci, being merely making physical constructs or tearing them down. *Enhancement* is making something even more itself than it already is; *Transformation* focuses on making it different, changing its identity. *Divination* is seeing the truth; *Entrallment* clouds the minds of others and hides the truth.

### The Laws of Three-Corner Magic

There are a few laws that are always in place, unless a Secret alters them, when using Three-Corner magic.

- The target of a magical effect must either be the caster, or something or someone the caster is touching.

	Day	Night
<b>Vigor</b>	Creation	Destruction
<b>Instinct</b>	Enhancement	Transformation
<b>Reason</b>	Divination	Enthrallment

**Table 10.1** Three-Corner Foci

- Only one target can be affected with a magical effect.
- A magical effect, except Destruction, is either instantaneous or lasts one hour. (Destruction is instantaneous, but the damage remains.)
- Every magical effect done to a target can be resisted, if the target desires. Usually, a Resist ability check is done by the target opposing the player's ability check with her character's magical ability.

### Three-Corner Magic Abilities

- **Creation (Vigor)**  
The character can create a small amount – a handful – of one of the basic elements (fire, air, earth, water) from nothing.
- **Destruction (Vigor)**  
The character can hurt a target with damage equal to her success level. The description of this damage is done by the player, and could be anything from telekinetic tearing of the target's body to a ghostly, arcane flame, but is definitely unnatural.
- **Transformation (Instinct)**  
The character can transfer the target's pool points from one pool to another equal to her success level.
- **Enhancement (Instinct)**  
The character can give bonus dice to any other character's ability check. You must make a resisted ability check against the other character's ability. If you are successful, your success levels are used as bonus dice on the check; if not, they receive a penalty die.
- **Divination (Reason)**  
The character can sense magic auras on an object or person she touches, and can sense the general disposition of people and animals.
- **Enthrallment (Reason)**  
The character can force her will on a target, who is well aware what is happening.

**Creation and Destruction** I've been asked, why couldn't a character create a big chunk of rock over an enemy's head to kill her, instead of us-

ing Destruction? The answer is, of course she can. There are limits, though. First, the opponent gets to make a React ability check (if she's aware of the magic), which she may be better at than Resist. Second, damage is figured out by using the caster's success level with the magic, multiplied by the number of Force spent if using Create Volume. Without Create Volume, the amount of mass created usually isn't enough to hurt anyone.

### Three-Corner Magic Secrets

- **Secret of the Invisible Hand**  
Normally, your character must touch a target to affect it with magic. With this Secret, she can affect any target she can see or have the effects of her magic occur anywhere she can see. *Cost:* 1 point from the associated pool.
- **Secret of the Invisible Arm**  
Your character can physically manipulate objects through telekinesis. This power is not as strong or coordinated as her normal body: all actions take a penalty die, although pools can be spent as normal to alleviate this. *Cost:* 1 Vigor. *Prerequisite:* Secret of the Invisible Hand.
- **Secret of Magical Contagion**  
Normally, your character's magic affects one target. You can spread her magic over a group of targets by spending points from the associated pool. *Cost:*
  - A small group of targets (around 5) can be affected for 1 point.
  - A large group of targets (25 or less) can be affected for 3 points.
  - A crowd of targets (100 or less) can be affected for 6 points.
  - A horde of targets (all that the caster can see) can be affected for 10 points.
- **Secret of Magical Persistence**  
Normally, your character's magic can last for a maximum of one hour. With this Secret, you can extend the duration by spending from the associated pool. *Cost:*
  - For 1 point, you can extend until sundown (or sunrise if used at night.)
  - For 3 points, you can extend until the end

- of one moon phase (end of the week).
- For 6 points, you can extend until the next eclipse (end of the month).
- For 10 points, you can extend until one complete sun cycle (either solstice).
- **Secret of Magical Effect**  
You can increase the success level of a successful Three-Corner Magic ability check by 1. *Cost:* 1 associated pool point.
- **Secret of Sympathetic Magic**  
If your character has an item of the target she is attempting to affect with magic, you gain a bonus die on your ability check.

### Transformation Secrets

- **Craft**  
Your character can use any of her Craft or Artistic skills magically, making their action instantaneous. The Craft or Artistic skill is rolled first, with success levels acting as bonus dice on the Transformation ability check. *Cost:* 1 Instinct.
- **Living Morph**  
You can change the target's form into that of another living creature, moving around their pool points as you want at the same time. This costs a minimum of one Instinct. You can spend extra Instinct points to:
  - Double or half the target's size. If this is not done, the target becomes a creature of its same size.
  - Flip two skill scores. One of the skills does not have to be stated, if you flip for the target's best skill.
  - Add a +1 or +2 weapon or armor rating to the target. One Instinct must be spent per separate rating.
  - Add a Secret to the target.*Cost:* 1+ Instinct.

### Creation Secrets

- **Create Anything**  
Your character can create any pure material that she wants. Pure material is not as simple as any one of the real-world elements: alloys and such count. What is prohibited is creating, for example, wood and metal at the same time. Steel, an alloy, is fine. *Cost:* 1 Vigor.
- **Create Volume**  
Your character can create a mass of material. This is roughly equal to 1 foot cubed per Vigor spent, and can be in any non-complex shape, such as a sphere, wall, or cube. *Cost:* 1+ Vigor. (Note: That's 1 cubic foot for 1 Vigor, 8 cubic

feet for 2 Vigor, 27 cubic feet for 3 Vigor, and so on.)

### Destruction Secrets

- **Inner Damage**  
Your character can damage targets' pools, removing points, instead of doing physical damage. *Cost:* 1 Vigor.
- **Massive Damage**  
The damage done with Destruction is equal to your success level multiplied by the amount of Vigor spent. *Cost:* 2+ Vigor.

### Enthrallment Secrets

- **Gentle Touch**  
Your character can use Enthrallment without making her target aware that she is being manipulated. *Cost:* 1 Reason.
- **Alter Senses**  
You can alter a target's senses. *Cost:* 1 Reason per sense.

### Divination Secrets

- **Know Truth**  
Your character can know the answer to any question asked of her. The GM will determine the clarity of these answers by your success levels. *Cost:* 1 Reason.
- **Know Capabilities**  
You can learn game statistics about a target, such as a particular pool score, best skill and score, or specific skill and score. You can learn a number of bits of information equal to the number of Reason spent. *Cost:* 1+ Reason.

### Enhancement Secrets

- **Empower Others**  
Your character can spend her pools to give other characters bonus dice or power their Secrets. This follows all normal rules; for example, only one point can be spent for bonus dice per action unless the receiving character has a Secret that allows more.
- **Burst of Power**  
By focusing on another character's action, you cause all dice rolled in their ability check to have the potential for bonus dice. Every blank (0) result on a die results in a bonus die given; this continues with these bonus dice, as well. *Cost:* 1 Instinct and one point of the pool associated with the other character's action.

## Improvising New Three-Corner Magic Secrets

During the course of a game, a player or the Story Guide may want to expand what can be done with magic. As written, for example, Creation can only create inanimate objects. What if a wizard wants to temporarily create a living being, though? The Story Guide and player may work together to expand the usage of magic with new Secrets. The Story Guide needs to determine whether the usage is permissible in her campaign and how powerful it is. Using that, a new Three-Corner Secret can be co-written by the Story Guide and player to fit the new usage. An example of one that would allow for the creation of living beings:

- **Creation**

**Create Life** The caster can create a living being from thin air. This being has a number of advances equal to the number of Vigor spent minus 2 plus the success levels of the Creation ability check. *Cost:* 2+ Vigor.

In order to create a new Three-Corner Magic Secret, the character needs to either spend much time in research, or hunt down a source of learning the new Secret.

## Spells

Spells are defined usages of Three-Corner magic, crafted by players or Story Guides. When a character performs something with magic that she would like to do again in the future, she may write up exactly how the magic worked as a spell, and then take that spell as a Secret. The advantages to this are that the spell costs one less pool point than it would normally. In addition, a spell may be taken multiple times as a Secret in order to further reduce its cost.

Characters that do not have the Secrets that make up a spell can still take the spell, although they cannot make new spells that rely on Secrets they do not have. In this case, they must be taught the spell by someone else. This is a good option for a character that focuses on something besides magic, but wants to be able to use a few pre-defined magical effects. If a spell uses more than one ability, roll them from lowest to highest ranked ability. All must succeed, but earlier success levels do roll into bonus dice for later rolls.

## Sample spells

- **Instant Sword (Creation + Transformation)**

A sword made of solid steel appears in the caster's hand. The caster can make a Rough Crafts ability check, with the bonus dice adding to this spell's Skill Roll. This sword lasts for one hour. *Cost:*

- Creation: Create Anything: 1 Vigor.
- Transformation: Craft: 1 Instinct.
- Total cost: 1 Vigor + 1 Instinct - 1 = 1 Vigor or 1 Instinct.

- **Wrack (Destruction)**

The caster can decimate the pools of anyone in her sight. A number of pool points equal to twice times the caster's success levels are destroyed. *Cost:*

- Secret of the Invisible Hand: 1 Vigor.
- Destruction: Inner Damage: 1 Vigor.
- Destruction: Massive Damage: Twice the success levels = 2 Vigor.
- Total cost: 1 + 1 + 2 - 1 = 3 Vigor.

- **Be Unseen (Entrhancement)**

The target of this spell becomes not present in the eyes of those that surround her. (Dogs and other animals that track with their noses are unaffected, if a bit confused.) While this spell is negated immediately if more than 25 people are looking for the target, that shouldn't happen too much. Anyone looking for the target specifically can roll a Resist ability check versus the success level of this spell. This effect lasts an hour. *Cost:*

- Secret of Magical Contagion (large group): 2 Reason
- Gentle Touch: 1 Reason
- Alter Senses (sight): 1 Reason
- Total cost: 2 + 1 + 1 - 1 = 3 Reason.

- **Werewolf Transformation (Transformation)**

The target becomes a bipedal wolfen engine of destruction until the next eclipse. Reason is reduced to one point, with the points split between Vigor and Instinct. The target's best ability is flipped for Scrapping, and the target's second best ability is flipped for Athletics. The target's fingers become claws with +1 damage to rip soft things like flesh, clothes, and leather. You must touch the target to cast this spell. *Cost:*

- Secret of Magical Persistence: effect lasts until next eclipse = 6 Instinct.
- Transformation: Living Morph: 1 base Instinct + 2 for skill flips + 1 for the claws = 4 Instinct.

- Total cost:  $6 + 4 - 1 = 9$  Instinct.

## 10.10 Crunchy Bits

### Maldorite Cultural Abilities

- **Demolition (Reason)**  
The revolutionary elements in Maldor have re-discovered the ancient knowledge of explosives, although they haven't made the discovery of firearms yet. This ability allows one to create and detonate these implements of destruction, hopefully without losing a hand.
- **Infantry (Vigor)**  
This is the use of larger swords and axes and metal armor, as well as working as part of a fielded army.
- **Scrounging (Instinct)**  
While most Maldorites are very poor, their land is covered with the riches of times past. This ability can be used to find items or materials when they should not be commonly found.

### Maldorite Cultural Keys

See table 10.2 page 59

## 10.11 Examples

### Sample Maldorite Names

- **Males:** Carlos, Michele, Pedro, Porfirio, Victor, Francisco, Montserrat, Tamim, Alejo, Reinaldo, Saul
- **Females:** Laura, Juanita, Rosamunda, Zelda, Josefina, Cristina, Beatriz, Esther, Zoe, Ana, Isadora

### Sample Maldorite Character Ideas

- a peasant infantryman
- a Ratkin explorer of ruined cities
- a reclusive elven magician
- a knight seeking to unite the Maldor people
- a consort of lords, gaining knowledge for her own purposes

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Manipulator	Your character works behind the scenes, manipulating others in order to be a shadow ruler. Your character must work for or be an advisor of someone in a position of power.	Gain 1 XP whenever your character exerts her will over her ruler, even over minor matters – especially over minor matters. Gain 2 XP whenever the ruler accepts your character's advice over others. Gain 5 XP whenever your character's influence makes the ruler make a policy change or establish a new policy that works in your character's favor.	Accept the mantle of power for one's self.
Key of the Revolutionary	Your character is dedicated to overthrowing a ruling class, party, or government.	Gain 1 XP every time she speaks out against the rulers, or breaks a minor law. Gain 2 XP every time she acts directly against the rulers. Gain 5 XP every time she puts herself in great danger in order to damage the status quo.	Accept any favor from the rulers in order for your quietude or complicity.

**Table 10.2** Maldorite Cultural Keys



10

# 11 Zaru, Land of Creation

## 11.1 Introduction

*The jailers approached Hanish's cell, stinking with the sweat of fear. The older one drew out his keys, fumbling to try and get one in the lock.*

*"Open," Hanish said, and the lock clicked. The younger jailer's eyes drew wide as Hanish pushed the door open and walked past him.*

*Weird light streamed through the barred windows as Hanish climbed the stairs to Absolon's chamber. The air burned red from the Sky Fire, forming a feverish corona that filled half of the heavens. The language of creation should have never been loosed on mankind, he thought.*

*King Absolon pushed away his magicians and wise men, who huddled around him like children clinging for their mother's attention. "Foreigner, what would you do to stop this madness?"*

*As Absolon's charlatans drew back in horror, Hanish said simply, "I would break the world."*

## 11.2 The Fingers of Divinity

**Z**aru is a land broken and divided. Set in a delta at the eastern mouth of the Poison River, she has been conquered by Ammeni, her people enslaved. The only resistance are outcasts, people not welcome in the Zaru communities or worship halls, for they have committed the worst sin of all, the taking of human life, and discovered a dark knowledge the elders cannot bear.

Zaru was once rich. Her soil is extremely fertile and rice, swamp apples, and other crops grow bountifully. Zaru's greatest asset became her downfall, though, the language of zu, the language of creation, spread beyond her borders and infected the world. Zu is not like other languages; it is magical, and anyone hearing it can then use it themselves. Moreover, speaking it actually wills actions, circumstances, and objects into being.

Because of zu's ability to infect others' minds, the Maldorite Emperor Absolon used it to cement his empire by making it the universal language of his people. When the knowledge of zu spread, the

people of the world misused it, not understanding its power. Many people believe the use of it caused the great Sky Fire, and the subsequent destruction of the old world.

## 11.3 The Mystery of Zu

Zu is more than a language to the Zaru; it is also a religion. The beliefs of the Zaru people can best be described as "spiritual humanism." They believe zu is the language that was used to create the world by the First Man, and that all humans are his descendants, all divine. When the first murder occurred, zu was corrupted, as murder is destruction, the antithesis of what humans were born to do.

The Zaru have always seen themselves as the caretakers of zu, keeping it pure in the face of a world fallen. Hanish, the Zaru that traveled to King Absolon and helped stop the Sky Fire, changed the nature of zu with his final chant, altering the path of the Zaru forever.

## 11.4 The Language of Zu

Zu is made up of discrete syllables, each with

a generalized meaning. There are no specific words; instead, complex ideas are built from combinations. These syllables each have three meanings, based on tone:

- A noun, spoken with no tone
- A verb, spoken with a low tone
- A modifier (what we know as adjectives and adverbs), spoken with a high tone

The syllables, depending on tone, mean each of these things; thus no syllable exists in zu that cannot be used as a noun, verb, and modifier. Pronouns are implied by context and body language. Sentences, as modern-day speakers think of them, exist by combining these syllables. The last syllable used in a sentence conveys the sentence type. A sentence ending in a noun is a statement of fact, meaning “this exists” or “this is so.” A sentence ending in a verb is a command, even if it refers to the speaker: the speaker is stating her action and in essence, commanding herself. A sentence ending in a modifier is different than any modern sentence. It expresses hope or desire for change, meaning “I wish that it was like this.”

As mentioned, syllables are for general terms, not specific. There is no one syllable for “tiger,” for example. “Tiger” would be spoken as “knife-tooth-hunter-beast.” Another example would be “sword,” which is said as “killing-knife.” When designing a syllable to use in the game, try breaking down English words into their most atomic parts. If a zu speaker does not use multiple syllables to be specific, then the most appropriate meaning is assumed. For example, if a speaker says “beast” in a forest, she means “forest animal”; if she were to say the same syllable in a snake pit, she means snake. If she were to say “knife” to a farmer and a hunter, she would again mean different things – most likely a scythe and a hunting knife. Also as mentioned, each syllable has three forms.

There is one syllable in zu that is not like any other: “zu.” “Zu” is an affirmation, an agreement. Originally, there was no opposite, no “no” in zu. (True Zaru never speak in the negative: if there is nothing affirmative to say, they do not speak in zu.) With the first act of murder, however, that changed. The murderer, the destroyer, lost his ability to speak the syllable “zu.” Instead, he spoke the syllable “uz” a word of disagreement and destruction. No person can say both “zu” and “uz.”

## 11.5 The Power of Zu

Originally, anyone who spoke zu could use it as words of power. Stating that something was so made it so; commanding someone made compelled them; wishing for different circumstances brought them into being. With Hanish’s final chant, this changed. He brought all the power of zu into himself, recreating himself as the First Man. Suddenly, the Zaru lost their power, as their language became ordinary and impotent.

Hanish died that day, but the power of zu did not die with him. Instead, it changed forever. The power of a syllable could be harnessed, but only by one person at a time. Anyone who studies zu can speak it, but only those who are the master of a syllable can use it to enforce their will. Now, Zaru priests, outcasts, and foreigners vie to obtain the knowledge of these words.

In the game, words of power are used like this:

- **Nouns will things into being. These things, if animate, are not under the speaker’s control. The speaker’s player must spend a point of Reason and make an unopposed ability check using her character’s Zu ability. (If the thing summoned is unnatural for the surroundings, a penalty die should be imposed for circumstances.) If anyone else is present, they can resist, using their Resist ability. The thing will appear near the speaker, and any information about the thing not spoken as a word of power will be determined by the Story Guide.**

Dan’s character Damuzi says the syllables “stealthy-beast”. A stealthy creature will appear, but whether it is a cat, wolf, or whatever else is up to the Story Guide.

- **Verbs are commands, and impose the will of the speaker on another. The speaker’s player must spend a point of Instinct and make an opposed ability check using her character’s Zu ability versus the opponent’s Resist ability, with Instinct as the associated pool. Only animate beings can be affected, and a being cannot be compelled to do an impossible task.**

Damuzi later says “burn” to an enemy, but the enemy has no way to burn himself, and so ignores it. If Damuzi first started a fire, then his command could take affect.

- **The target being must be able to hear the speaker.**

<i>Noun</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Modifier</i>
knife	cut	sharp
tooth	eat	full
murder	kill	murderous
hunter	hunt/stalk	stealthy
hunger	starve	hungry

Table 11.1 Example Syllables

- **Modifiers change circumstances or actions. Unlike commands, modifiers can be used against animate and inanimate objects that the speaker can see. Whatever the object is, it must be performing an action, even if it is as simple as the wind blowing. The speaker spends a point of Vigor and must make an ability check using her character's Zu ability. If the target is animate and the target can hear the speaker, the ability check can be opposed by the target's Resist ability. Circumstances do apply to this ability check; the Story Guide can feel free to impose penalty dice for modifying large forces of nature and the like.**

The success level of the ability check is used to impose bonus or penalty dice, depending on how the modifier affects the action. If a messenger is running, and the speaker says "fast," then the runner gets bonus dice to run. If an enemy is holding onto a cliff edge, and the speaker says "fast" to the wind, then the wind will blow faster, and the enemy will receive penalty dice to hang on.

## 11.6 The Theft of Zu

The danger of using *zu* around other people is that they may steal the knowledge of a syllable. When a *zu* is spoken, anyone who hears it can engage the speaker in a battle of wills to own the knowledge of that word.

In game mechanics, anyone who hears the syllable, has an advance to spend, and has either the Secret of Zu or the Secret of Uz can steal the syllable. If the thief does not have either Secret, her player can immediately spend an advance to take it. In order to steal a syllable, an opposed ability check of the thief's Zu ability is made against the speaker's Zu ability. If the ability check is successful, the thief spends an advance and takes the syllable. The speaker loses the syllable, but gains an advance.

A willing gift of syllable does not require an ability check, but does require the expenditure of advances. The spending of advances to take *zu* is like buying a Secret for your character, but is not subject to the normal rules about the order of advances that can be taken.

## 11.7 Mighty and Powerless: The People of Zaru

When the Zaru lost their language, they lost the ability to defend themselves. By nature, the Zaru are pacifists, finding no need for violence with their terrible gifts. As they emerged back into the world, they found themselves overpowered by the Ammenites, who had long before envied the fertility of the Zaru delta. Zaru's people were taken as slaves and made to work in the worst sort of hot, steamy, swampy conditions.

As the world regrows, though, Zaru has found itself in an even worse position: not only are her people enslaved, but they are divided. Can the power of *zu* save them – or will it destroy them?

## 11.8 Life of the Speaking-People

As a people, the Zaru are fairly uniform in appearance. Black hair is virtually homogenous among them, and their skin is dusky, their eyes dark. If they look like a modern-day people of Earth, those people would come straight out of Southeast Asia, complete with loose-fitting clothes and large, flat hats made to keep the burning sun off them when toiling in the fields.

As a nation, Zaru does not exist as longer. Ammeni truly has dominated it, and Zaru villages exist on Ammenite plantation, under the care of foremen. Typical construction is made of bamboo, and communities exist around "speaking halls," long buildings in which the Zaru eat, cook, converse, and often sleep. Only the elders of a community and their adult children have the privilege of living in tiny huts built around the speaking hall. Older villages, pre-Shadow, do ex-

ist in Zaru, which are basically larger versions of their slave villages: large speaking halls with family houses built around the central building. These are usually constructed of hard, baked clay around a bamboo center, and are incredibly durable. As insurgency has grown in Zaru, some radical groups have fled to the old towns and formed their bases of operations there.

Families are very important in traditional Zaru culture. They are viewed as “mini-villages,” with the eldest person being the leader of that family. (Pre-Shadow Zaru houses bear this out, as they are usually built as a long room spanning the house, with small rooms for the elders built off of this.) Villages are built around the same structure, with the eldest person in village taking the role of priest and leader, as they have seen more and heard more than anyone else. The Ammenites are well aware of this, and break up families and villages by sending children inland and working the elderly to an early death. One underground movement in Zaru returns babies to their mothers in the dark night, traveling far over land to switch them back.

## 11.9 Land-Thieves, Word-Thieves, and Blood-Thieves

The zu phrase for an Ammenite is “land-thief,” an appropriate epithet for a people who have turned Zaru into their personal playground. Even more sinister are the terms “word-thief” and “blood-thief.”

“Word-thief” is a term given to a non-Zaru that uses the sacred tongue of zu, especially Ammenite sorcerers. Zaru elders are torn on how to deal with the resurgence of zu and its potent virulence. The majority of them, who grew up with stories about when zu was taken away, agree that it should not be used, thereby keeping it firmly – but uselessly – in Zaru hands. The younger generation doesn’t completely agree: there is a strong underground movement to rebel against the Ammenites using any means necessary.

There are several priestly organizations loosing forming in Zaru, all centered around proper zu usage and Zaru unity. One group believes that all zu should be kept firmly in the hands of Zaru, specifically elders, thereby keeping the unwise from using it, and denying their enemies a potent weapon. This group, the Watchers, train young rebels to work as “word-horses,” adventurers who steal zu from non-Zaru, or Zaru using it un-

wisely, and bring those zu back to their priests. This group is committed to the Zaru way of non-violence, but some fringe priesthoods have seen fit to use foreign mercenaries to carry words.

The Sons of Hanish follow a more moderate path. They seek to follow in the path of Hanish and be an active force in the world, while staying true to their beliefs. This group operates in cells, which are based on the family “mini-village” structure, and attempts to change the situation of the Zaru by subtle actions, like using zu to influence a foreman to keep a family together, or causing a crop to do poorly. They have designed a martial arts form, *Uptenbo* or “life-shield-hand,” which is non-lethal but powerful, concentrating on redirection of force and incapacitation.

The Moonmen are the most radical of the Zaru priesthoods, and are the most diverse. While the Sons of Hanish are mainly young and male, and the Watchers older, the Moonmen are made up of brash youngsters, lunatic elderly, calm mothers, and even foreigners. They advocate nothing more than a full unleashing of Zaru power. Non-violence is taken only on a personal basis among them, and they have no real structure. Instead, individual Moonmen tend to upset the cart, often putting the community in a worse situation, and spread their beliefs among those pressured enough to listen. It is said that the Moonmen count among their ranks at least one elf and several goblins. More conservative Zaru call these “blood-thieves,” both for their subversion of the normal Zaru structure, and for their willingness to kill.

## 11.10 Other Species in Zaru

The Zaru are a small, insular people whose sense of identity is culture – and language – based much more so than it is region based. Other species are not readily accepted, although that doesn’t mean that the Zaru are a bunch of speciest bastards. They’ve just got such a crummy lot in life that they don’t have a lot of time for others.

Goblins are a common sight among the Ammenites, who keep them as pets, so they draw wariness. Elves, who are much less common in general, are better respected, although their philosophical beliefs clash with the Zaru.

Strangest of all is the Zaru relationship with Ratkin. The swamp’s a fertile breeding ground for ratkin, and many live in the ruins of old Zaru.

They have become neighbors of a sort, and it's not unheard of at all for ratkin to perform tasks the Zaru can't in their struggle against Ammeni.

## 11.11 Crunchy Bits

### Zaru Cultural Abilities

- **Boating (Instinct)**  
This ability is used to craft and use small boats that could carry one to ten men. These craft are used mainly on inland waters, and are difficult, but not impossible, to use as sea vehicles.
- **Clandestinity (Reason)**  
Clandestinity is the art of quiet secrecy, and more specifically, creating, communicating with, and maintaining secret networks. It is used to create ciphers and codes, as well as decrypt them, organize secret meetings while keeping them secret, and for all other sorts of long-term sub-rosa activity.
- **Clay-moulding (Vigor)**  
With this ability, your character can build tablets, pots, buildings, tables, or anything else appropriate out of the rich clay of Zaru.
- **Farming (Reason)**  
Farming is used for the cultivation of plants. This does not include herding and management of animals, which is unknown in Zaru culture.
- **Serve (Instinct)**  
To serve is to anticipate your master's needs, to broach uncomfortable subjects while remaining servile, and to be invisible until wanted. This ability allows for performance of all the roles of a servant.
- **Survive Torture (Vigor)**  
This ability is generally used only defensively, although it could be used to make a healing check after being tortured. (This is an exception to the rule that one cannot make a check to heal one's self.) It is the ability to take large amount of cruel pain and ignore it.
- **Uptenbo (Vigor)**  
Uptenbo is the underground Zaru martial art. Because of the traditional non-violence of the Zaru, Uptenbo is purely a defensive art, and can be used to drive off, humiliate, or subdue an enemy, not to kill. It consists of strong arm grabs, throws, and sweeps, using the enemy's attacks against her.
- **Zaru Poetry (Instinct)**  
This ability is used for composing verse. Zaru poetry is most often long and non-rhyming, with strict syllabic patterns for each stanza.

- **Zu (Reason)**  
Zu is the magical language of the Zaru. This ability represents your character's knowledge of the language and force of using it.

### Zaru Cultural Secrets

- **Secret of Swamp Lore**  
Your character always has a bonus die on Woodcraft or other ability checks involving swamp flora and fauna, and can use her Woodcraft skill for navigation in the swamp. She also receives a bonus die to Farming checks in the swamp.
- **Secret of Kinetic Redirection**  
When your character is using Uptenbo to defend herself, you can take your success level from your defense (which still does harm) and add them as bonus dice to a followup Uptenbo attack, using the full motion of the attacker to power your move. *Cost:* 1 Instinct.
- **Secret of Constant Motion**  
Your character's body is so well-trained that she can use Uptenbo almost without thought. If attacked, your character can use Uptenbo in Bringing Down the Pain for any action without changing from her true intention.
- **Secret of Zu**  
This Secret allows your character to speak the words of *zu* in their full power, although the character does not actually know any words of power besides "zu," which simply means "yes" or agreement. Speaking "zu" allows you to add a bonus die to an action of anyone within sight. *Prerequisite:* The character cannot have taken a human life, ever. If the character takes human life, this Secret is immediately lost and the Secret of Uz is gained. In addition, the player can only take this Secret when the character is hearing someone use 'zu' as words of power. *Cost:* 1 Reason
- **Secret of Uz**  
This Secret allows your character to speak the words of *zu* in their full power, although the character does not actually know any words of power besides "uz," which simply means "no" or disagreement. Speaking "uz" allows you to add a penalty die to an action of anyone within sight. *Prerequisite:* The character must have taken a human life. In addition, the player can only take this Secret when the character is hearing someone use *zu* as words of power. *Cost:* 1 Instinct

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Collector	Your character is dedicated to obtaining as many "zu" as possible.	Gain 1 XP whenever she obtains information about the location of a "zu" word. Gain 3 XP whenever she puts herself at risk in order to obtain a "zu".	Willingly give away a "zu".
Key of the Pacifist	Your character has a personal commitment to non-violence.	Gain 1 XP for every adventure in which your character does not commit any violence. Gain 2 XP every time your character does not commit violence even though it causes her minor harm or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time your character does not commit violence even though it causes her great harm.	Purposefully harm another sentient creature.

**Table 11.2** Zaru Cultural Keys

### Zaru Cultural Keys

See table 11.2 page 66

## 11.12 Examples

### Sample Zaru Names

- *Males:* Adad, Damuzi, Enki, Nergal, Ziusudra, Shullat, Ardumanish, Thuxra, Vindarna, Kuru, Cyrus
- *Females:* Sabit, Delondra, Aruru, Lugalbanda,

Nisaba, Parmida, Yasmin, Kiana, Omid, Fiza, Houri

### Sample Zaru Character Ideas

- an underground agent hiding as a slave
- a traitor to her people, teaching others the art of zu
- a pacifist refugee in a foreign land
- a Ratkin friend of the Zaru, in debt to one of their elders

# 12 Ammeni, Flower of Hell

## 12.1 Introduction

*Phillipe, lord of the manor, stood with a grin. “Lord Fleur shows me much respect with this spread before me,” he said to the servant girl draped in silk gauze over a low-slung chaise. “These fruits and dried meats are spectacular. Nomi, do sample them.”*

*The Zaru slave nodded, his mutilated tongue ruined for speech but trained in the art of poison-finding. After tasting the many presents given to Phillipe, and washing them down with a sip of wine from Before the Shadow, he glanced at the succulent gift upon the chaise with a question in his eyes.*

*“Ah, Nomi. This delight is my own to sample,” Phillipe grinned. He placed a wedge of starfruit on his lips and swallowed it down in one overtly sexual motion. Drawing close to the girl, he began to unwrap his present. “Let us see what is ripe in this garden.” He nestled his face in her bosom, then trailed downwards, drawing the fragrant juices like fresh honeysuckle.*

*As Phillipe’s eyes rolled back, the girl kicked him backwards onto the floor, his swollen tongue lewdly protruding from his lips. “You were correct, Nomi. This one is too trusting,” she said, reaching between her legs to pull out a delicate, but deadly, blossom, and tossing it upon Phillipe’s unmoving breast.*

## 12.2 Houses of Treachery

**A**mmeni is a land of beauty and death, exotic foods and terrible poisons, incredible wealth and decimating poverty. It is geographically positioned to be a focal point for trade in northern Near, with its north coast bordering the Sea of Teeth and its eastern shore a wide delta against the ocean. The western and southern borders end at the intersection of the Belhor River and Absolon’s Way, although it controls only the eastern portion of that land well, with the west fallen into barbarism and savagery. The primary seats of power run near the River of Vipers, which cuts down from the Sea of Teeth to the Zaru Delta, which Ammeni has captured for its own.

Ammeni, being incredibly hot and wet, is extremely fertile. The majority of the Houses’ business is growing rice and fruits and farming fish and water buffalo. These staples, plus the chiles grown further in the west, provide them with an endless source of trade. Their navy is pow-

erful and is used for shipping, not only for Ammeni, but to allied merchants in Maldor, where it makes a tidy profit on the deal. Ammeni is also home to Near’s most wondrous drugs and deadliest poisons. A career in death is definitely a lucrative one here. The items Ammeni is most deficient in, yet craves, are metals and jewels. Most of their trade is for these two goods.

Power in Ammeni comes from the seven Houses, plantations which have grown into both tremendous mercantile houses and governmental entities. The “House” refers not only to the ruler of the House, or the business, but also the land that House controls. Within a House, laws are determined by the ruler of that House or his staff, and are usually capriciously enforced. Trade law is created by majority vote among the rulers of the seven Houses, the Council, which are normally embroiled in the covert sabotage and annexation of each other, forming alliances that last only weeks before backstabbing allies. These Houses are seven heads of the same hydra; before the year of Shadow, the seven Houses were seven

sons of the same ancient father, who ruled the waterways and fields of Ammeni. Those sons' descendants emerged after the Shadow to divide Ammeni, and quarrel with each other only slightly less than they subjugate the peasantry.

The one cause that has recently joined the Houses is a war on the Ammeni-Khale border. Rumors of a strange substance called "moon-metal" have emerged from Khale, and the Ammenite Houses have thrown their normal caution regarding Khale to the wind in order to control this material, rumored to have powerful properties. This has worked out poorly for both sides of the conflict: the Khaleans strike in small groups and have eradicated every excursion into their land by Ammeni military, although with high losses.

### 12.3 Sleeping Among the Snakes

Ammenites are known outside their country for their cruelty and decadence. The appearance is misleading, however: only the richest of Ammenites have the opportunity for cruelty and the ability for decadence. The rest of them are merely opportunists, making the best deals they can in a colonial society. The upper class of Ammenites, however, are decadent to an extreme, clothing themselves in the finest silk and eating bizarre delicacies grown only in the fertile delta soil. Ammenites are the descendants of Maldor, although they do not like to be reminded of this fact. Their language is much like the language of Maldor, but is filled with pops and flecks in between words to convey connotation.

A full five percent of the population of Ammeni belongs to the hyper-wealthy House families, although many of these are not related by blood. The habitual assassination of family members means that ambitious types may rise quickly. Slavery is common in Ammeni, and at least twenty-five percent of the population is made of slaves, many of them from the former nation of Zaru. The incidence of death among slaves is almost as high as that among House family members: slaves are treated with the utmost brutality by the desensitized and dazed rulers. The rest of the population are either what we would know as middle management – low-level employees assigned to control slaves and supervise menial labor – or poor freemen, who try to attract as little attention as possible, and often leave Ammeni to become wanderers or traders.

### 12.4 Hordes in the Mouth, Fires in the Belly

The Ammenites collect art of other cultures more than they create their own: the acquisition of art is a hobby for the upper classes. Native Ammenite art is bizarre, focusing on themes of oppression and the inevitability of death. The most famous Ammenite painting is of a rice patty, red with blood, with tall stalks rising to the sky; the most famous book is the story of the last 24 hours of a rich, mad man. Zaru slaves do create art as well, although mostly ritual chants made of gibberish that manage to convey emotion. Their funeral dirges are known to bring even the strongest Ammenites to tears, which brings horrible wrath upon them.

The food of Ammeni, however, is considered a delicacy. Hot and spicy, full of cream, rice, and noodles, as well as odd ingredients such as slugs, uncooked quail eggs, and fish-eyes, it evokes either love or disgust in most people. They make a rice wine that is similar: either astounding or repulsive, depending on the taster, and they take large amounts of poiture, the pollen of a gleaming white flower that grows wild in the rice fields of Ammeni. Poiture puts people into a deep relaxed state much like slumber where the sense of time becomes elongated.

The Ammenites eschew religion, worshipping only gold and riches. The Council of Houses has outlawed religious ceremonies in the land, although both the Zaru slaves and members of the Houses often participate in odd cults, especially the Revenant Cult. This cult maintains that the ancient House Father still lives, driven on by a poisonous cocktail, and its members reach for immortality by experimentation, attempting to recreate the Father's mystic brew.

### 12.5 The Roots in the Mists

From the fertile ground of Ammeni grows the world's largest supply of drugs of all types. Recreational drugs, poisons, and great healing herbs all sprout up wildly throughout Ammeni. The most common of these is a flower called poiture. White poiture is a powerful recreational drug, sending the user in a hazy dream-state where consciousness becomes very third-person and the sense of time grows elongated. Red poiture, a much rarer type, causes fevered activity, occasional rage, and a loss of concentration. Black poiture is known to give a much more po-

tent high than white poiture, and has reputed healing powers, but causes death in small quantities.

Between the cornucopia of herbs and significant studies of the inner workings of the body done by curious or disturbed Ammenites, healers are common here. Many healers find employment in Houses as personal doctors or torturers, and others become medics in the legions. Unaffiliated healers are harder to come by, and most leave Ammeni to wander, although a few stay behind to help the Zaru underground.

Freelance poisoners, on the other hand, are a dime a dozen. They might change affiliation once a week. For this reason, the hardest job interview in Ammeni is for a chef position. Chefs are known to be the best poisoners, and getting a job in a House as one means being interviewed by the ruler of that House, as well as his staff, and perhaps his torturer.

## 12.6 Other Species in Ammeni

Ammenites are not altogether comfortable with anything besides humans in their midst; those of the Houses are not truly comfortable with humans that don't have wealth, even. Still, some elves find their way into acceptance, given that they have a black enough heart.

Goblins, given their nature, are generally thought of as pets, and find themselves hooked on Ammeni's exotic foods and drugs. Many of them find themselves employed as taskmasters, thugs, or playthings.

Ratkin are not uncommon in the swamplier parts of the land, but are either hunted or pressed into labor. Their assistance to the people of Zaru brings special torture upon them when caught.

## 12.7 Crunchy Bits

### The Taste of Death

Poisons and drugs can have the following mechanical effects:

- *One penalty or bonus die to all abilities related to one pool.* This can be chosen multiple times to affect one pool more than once or different pools. It is not uncommon for a drug to affect different pools in different ways: the crimson blossoms of blood poiture increase

Vigor-based abilities while eroding Reason-based ones.

- *Harm*. All poisons and drugs do temporary harm to the character taking them, but this provides a real, physical harm. This works like the Secret of Imbuement to increase the poison's effect, and can be taken multiple times, like that Secret.
- *Unconsciousness*. Drugs and poisons often knock their recipients into a dazed or unconscious state.
- *Loss or heightening of a sense*. This is really a specialized version of penalty and bonus dice above. In this case, the bonus or penalty dice are increased by two, and all abilities that rely on that sense are affected. However, with this effect, the dice can be reversed by overstimulation. A drug which enhances touch to the point one can read print with his fingertips can result in that character having a major penalty the first time she gets hit.

There is not a definitive list of poisons and drugs in *The Shadow of Yesterday*. Instead, all can be made from the above list of effects. While some poisons and drugs have beneficial effects, they all have some negative effects, and are all known as "poisons."

Poisons can be *undistilled* or *distilled*. An undistilled poison is one found in nature as a plant, herb, or flower. To use it, you must deliver it orally. To find an undistilled poison, a successful Herb Lore check needs to be made. The found material can be used as a poison, but it can only have one beneficial effect from the above list. It *must* have one deleterious effect. The result of the Herb Lore check should be recorded as the poison's *potency*.

To increase its potency, and allow it to be used via other methods, the poison must be *distilled*. Using the Distill Herbs ability, with bonus dice from the Herb Lore check, extra effects can be added. The first extra effect is free, and others can be gained using Ammenite Secrets. When a poison or drug is distilled, it is made into an *infusion*, the essence of the poison suspended in liquid, usually grain alcohol. The infusion must be taken orally, injected, or otherwise gotten into the target's bloodstream in order to take effect. The result of the Distill Herbs check is the distilled poison's potency.

When a poison or drug is administered to someone, they must make a resisted Endure ability

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the House	Your character is a member of and dedicated to a House, one of the mercantile entities of Ammeni.	Gain 1 XP every time your character does something to benefit her House. Gain 2 XP every time she does something to benefit her house that causes her discomfort or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time she acts to benefit her House at the great risk of her body, reputation, or wealth.	Act against the interests of one's House.
Key of the Overlord	Your character owns other people or oversees the ownership of others.	Gain 1 XP every time your character makes someone else do something against her will. Gain 3 XP every time your character makes someone else do something that causes harm, pain, or despair to that person.	Free a person under your ownership or oversight.

**Table 12.1** Ammenite Cultural Keys

check. They are resisting an already rolled check – the potency.

In the case of an undistilled poison, the character comes to no harm if the Endure check is successful, and receives any beneficial effect the substance has. If unsuccessful, all the effects take place, and the character takes harm equal to the potency. The poison's negative effects last until the harm is gone; the beneficial effects last until the end of the next scene with that character.

In the case of a distilled infusion, the character receives the undistilled effects if the Endure check is successful, but takes no harm. The effect wears off in the next scene. If unsuccessful, the infusion's full effect takes place, with harm, and the negative effects do not wear off until that harm is gone. The positive effects last until the end of the next scene with that character.

### Ammenite Cultural Abilities

- **Anatomy (Reason)**  
The Ammenite knowledge of the workings of the human body is the deepest in Near. This ability can be used for all sorts of purposes, including performing major surgery on those grievously injured (helping with a Healing Check), performing cruel acts of torture while keeping a subject alive, or bizarre piercing and grafting acts.
- **Appraisal (Reason)**  
Appraisal not only grants the ability to determine what an object of art is worth, but what

it is worth to a specific person. It can be used to determine where and when a piece of art originated, and the value of the piece.

- **Assassination (Instinct)**  
The art of quick and often mysterious death is the domain of this ability. It can only be used to kill an individual who is unaware that your character is trying to do so. It should be used for all inventive method of death, such as spraying an infusion into the mucus membranes of a target.
- **Bamboo Warrior (Vigor)**  
The weaponry and armor of Ammeni are generally made of bamboo, a flexible and common material in this metal-poor land. This ability is used not only to fight with the light pole-arms of Ammeni, but to create weapons and armor from bamboo.
- **Bladework (Instinct)**  
This ability is used for all sorts of intricate knife skills, from cutting paper-thin slices of meat and vegetables, to vivisection, to cutting down your enemy with a long dagger. It can be used to perform skilled work with any well-made sharp knife.
- **Distill Herbs (Reason)**  
This ability is used to draw out the essence of plants and strengthen them for good or ill.
- **Herb Lore (Reason)**  
This ability is used to identify poisonous and altering plants, as well as properly harvest them for use.
- **Smuggling (Reason)**  
Smuggling not only involves the skill of hiding illegal or restricted items in ordinary bag-

gage, but also knowing how to find a buyer for the items in a foreign land.

- **Taste Poisons (Instinct)**  
This ability is used to detect poisons and drugs through taste and smell. Successful ability checks may be used to add bonus dice to the inevitable Endure check that will be needed to ward off the effects of tasting poison.

#### Ammenite Cultural Secrets

- **Secret of Healing Venom**  
Your character can distill infusions that have an unusual effect: they shock the body into healing. These infusions still harm the imbiber if her Endure check is unsuccessful. If successful, however, the character is healed of a harm equal to or less than the infusion's potency. *Cost:* 2 Reason.
- **Secret of Metastasis**  
Your character can increase and add to infusions' effects with great skill. As many effects as you like can be added to drugs and poisons that she distills. *Cost:* 2 Reason for each extra effect past the first.
- **Secret of the Serpent Blade**  
By boiling an infusion down to a sticky substance, it can be applied to any sharp surface, usable indefinitely, until the object actually pierces someone. *Cost:* 1 Vigor.
- **Secret of the Fire Fruit**  
Your character's skill with chiles and other fiery ingredients is so good that she can ac-

tually harm others with a successful attempt at cooking. The ability check is your cooking ability versus the eater's Endure ability.

- **Secret of the Iron Stomach**  
Your character has great ability to consume things that would otherwise harm her. Gain one bonus die to resist any poison or drug taken orally, or to resist the effects of spoiled, overly spiced, or otherwise harmful foods.

#### Ammenite Cultural Keys

See table 12.1 page 70

## 12.8 Examples

#### Sample Ammenite Names

- **Males:** Kaarlo, Philippe, Amoux, Onfroi, Cadour, Edmund, Owain, Montaigu, D'anton, Toussaint, Duval, Quennel, Dacian, Piperel
- **Females:** Helene, Galatee, Shalott, Celie, Arleta, Eugenia, Sidonie, Rohais, Ruby, Eleta, Ysabel, Zuria, Marquisa, Damia, Aveline

#### Sample Ammenite Character Ideas

- a son or daughter in a high-ranking House
- a prisoner in love with a slave
- a Ratkin "Robin Hood", stealing from the Houses and helping the Zaru
- a spy in the employ of one House – or even a double-agent



# 13 Khale, Roots of the World

## 13.1 Introduction

*Only a few tribes-people were left, their warriors decimated in a lightning strike by the vipers of Ammeni. Nevins and Violet, brother and sister, carried the mortally-wounded chief in a make-shift bundle.*

*“Nevins, take my spear,” the chieftain moaned. “You must lead the tribe now.”*

*Nevins shifted uncomfortably, his lute banging against his elbow. “Father, I am forsworn not to fight, but to tell the stories of battle.”*

*“Tighten your wrists,” growled the dying chief. “Be a man of Khale. It is your duty and destiny to protect the tribe’s women.”*

*Violet sighed. “Give me the spear already, Father. My arm is as strong as any man’s, and deadlier.”*

*“Woman, daughter – you cannot wield the sacred spear of our tribe. The wood would creak and break under your grasp. Be not jealous of your brother. It is your duty to raise the remnants of our tribe.”*

*“I cannot wield ...” Violet started, astonished at her father’s lack of wisdom. Her eyes grew tight in anger, and then tighter in concentration. Catlike, she grabbed the spear and tossed it into the brush.*

*“Fool woman! Your petty jealousy will cost us our heritage.”*

*Violet stormed away, reaching into the undergrowth. She pulled out a bloody spear and the black-clad head of an Ammenite assassin, severed with one blow. “I cannot wield the tribal spear, you said?”*

## 13.2 A Forest Aflame

**A**cross the Border Sea, the deep green peninsula of Khale is an echo of Qek’s lushness. Once a stone’s throw across the Hungry River from Qek, the earthquakes of the Time of Shadow have split it away as the river was ripped into the much larger Sea of Teeth. It is still close: the Dragon’s Mouth is a small strait between Khale and Qek, and is usually much calmer than the sea. Controlling this strait, as well as a mysterious substance called moon-metal, earns Khale the enmity of its southern neighbor, Ammeni, who has attacked the country in a war of attrition for several years.

The forests of Khale are wet and thick, but move from jungle to evergreen woodlands, dappled with sunlight. They are sacred to the people of Khale who live beneath their towering bows. Everything a tribesman could need is found under the forest-top, from fields of mushrooms and plants for medicine and food, to deer to hunt and ride, to fallen tree limbs easily sap-cured into bows and spears. Before the Time of Shadow, great webbed cities connected the forest; since then, the remnants of tribes live only off the land.

Khale is a harsh land in which to live: its many rivers flow with the blood of cousins, as the many tribes fight for control of their own land, and

Ammeni pushes its troops further north. The land rumbles as many chieftains try to unite the tribes, but so far, none have been successful.

### 13.3 The People of Khale

#### The Tribe is Family

Khaleans (ka-le-ans) are a hearty and strong people, Mediterranean in appearance, with generally black, brown, or red hair, and green or brown eyes. They claim ancient heritage with the people of Qek, although they speak different languages, and maintain good relations with the few Qek that emerge from the jungle.

Khaleans operate in tribes of two to ten dozen people and consider all tribe members to be their family, not just blood relations. In fact, blood brothers from different tribes are not considered to be related at all, except in the way that all Khaleans are related. Upon marriage, males join the tribe of their wife, becoming part of a new family. In addition, outsiders, or those with no family, can become part of the tribe through a naming ritual.

Within the tribe, status is very important. While family lines are matriarchal, positions of power are dominated by men. The tribe's chief is almost always male, the husband of the eldest woman in the tribe, and his advisors, usually a bard and his most accomplished warrior, are also men. When two tribes battle, it is Khalean law – that is, tradition as old as Khale – that only the tribe's men can fight. If a woman were found to be fighting for a tribe, it would be a horrible disgrace, and that tribe would more than likely surrender the fight.

#### Cousins at War

Each tribe governs itself in Khale, making its own laws and staking its own territory. The Year of Shadow scattered the old tribes, and since then, many of the new tribes have made war on each other over parcels of land, each claiming ancestral rights.

Ammeni, however, has declared war on Khale in the past few years. Several tribal leaders have attempted to unite the tribes in order to strike out at the foreign warriors, who are systematically destroying the forests on Khale's southern border. No true leader has emerged thus far, and Khale grows smaller and more fragile each year.

One unexpected side-effect of the war with Ammeni is that some women have taken up arms, causing tension within tribes.

### 13.4 We Are the Forest

The forests of Khale are worshiped as ancestors. Each tree in a tribe's territory is believed to be a fallen member of the tribe, born again as part of the land. (This further inflames battles between tribes over land, as each tribe believes the trees there to be their ancestors.) An ancient and legendary tree in the center of Khale is said to be the great King Khale, a ruler that united all of the peninsula and lands beyond, and the father of all modern Khaleans.

Khale has one of the most vibrant artistic cultures in Near, most probably because of their belief that creating art is a form of worship. While their painting and sculpture are beautiful, their real excellence is with their music and stories, which are intertwined. Their stories and songs are usually the tales of ancestral heroes, although they are usually embellished or even completely made up, depending on who you ask. (Khaleans insist that all their stories are true, although one of their favorite proverbs is “a story should be told the way things should have happened.”) Often, an entire tribe will dress up and act out a play depicting a story of ancient Khale, even getting other friendly tribes to participate.

Religion revolves around festivals, gatherings where a tribe – or many friendly tribes – will gather for a many-day-long revelry and celebration of their past. All festivals have telling of great tales done by their ancestors, done ritually around a bonfire. These rituals are competitive as tribal priests or *bards* try to outdo each other with fantastic stories. The bards, part priest and part artist, are given a special place in Khalean culture, as they are immune to normal tribal conflicts. When two tribes clash, the bards of each tribe will meet to write down the story of the conflict, narrating it as the battle flows. Killing a bard is a criminal offense, and usually results in the death of the murderer.

Magic is fully accepted in Khale, and fascinates most people. The bards of Khale, and foreign sorcerers (called *druids* by the Khaleans) are highly respected and use magic freely. It is said that each bard learns three Perfect Chords in his lifetime: one to bring tears of sorrow; one to change tears of sorrow to tears of joy; and the last to put

listeners to sleep.

### The Green World

Inside the forests of Khale, there is another world, a mystic world. This is their greatest secret, and it is forbidden to share it with those not of the tribe. Ancient trees, those with a circumference greater than two men holding hands, can be used as a gateway into the Green World. This Green World is a maze of pathways, some so small that one must crawl through them, and others large enough for five people to stand side-by-side. The walls of these caverns are growing wood, light and grainy, and glow with faint green light. When the Sky Fire came, many Khaleans moved into the Green World to escape, building cities inside its immense caverns. Those cities lie dead now, and are said to be haunted; gnarled trees grow throughout them, with human expressions twisted into their trunks.

The Green World covers all of Khale, and can be used as a passageway to anywhere else in the land, provided there is a guide. *When* one ends up is less certain: while experienced travelers have little trouble, those who get lost in the Green World may find themselves exiting into another time entirely. Bards sometime use these passages to go to earlier times and talk to ancient ancestors, although no one has ever been able to travel within one hundred years before the Time of Shadow, or one year after it.

Legends say that King Khale himself still wanders these halls, a large old man with a beard like moss, and hands like wood-knots. Supposedly, he or other great ancestors can guide you to any place and time within these halls, or grant you great boons, provided you perform a quest, usually a re-enactment of a previous adventure of the ancestor. During festivals, tribes will sometimes send their greatest bards and warriors to perform a quest and grant them success over their enemies.

As war envelops Khale from the south, some tribes have moved completely into the Green World, leaving the land of Khale behind. Their great mistake lies in the fact that the Green World does not stand alone: it is formed of the forest of Khale, and as the forest falls, it grows dimmer and smaller.

## 13.5 The Hands of the Tribe

Within tribes, farming and hunting are both respectable jobs and craftsmen and artists are well respected. The ability of Khalean craftsmen to forge sharp swords and carve strong tools and weapons from wood, curing them with sap, is legendary.

Khale trades for metal tools with Qek, and their longships sail to southern Maldor to trade spices which do not grow in that colder climate. Many young Khalean men, bereft of family, have joined crews, even becoming pirates. The Wooden Sickle is a famous ship of pirate youth that has been the scourge of the Ammeni coastline.

Khaleans have a taste for drink, and import beer from Maldor and Goren and wine from Oran in large quantities. They also are known to grow *marijuana*, a plant which is smoked for mild hallucinatory and relaxative effects. This drug is said to bring out epic tales in heroes and increase sexual desire.

- **Marijuana effects**

Undistilled drug

- One penalty die to Reason-based abilities
- Heightened tactile effects (two bonus dice to some uses of Savoir-Faire, two penalty dice to all Resist checks against Seduction or resisting physical torture)

(See the section on Ammeni for more information on game mechanics for drugs.)

## 13.6 Moon-metal

After the Year of Shadow, a group of explorers found a forest like no other in northern Khale; metal grew up from the ground, gleaming like bright silver, sprouting branches like trees. This, the only metal in Khale, is said to be a piece of the Shadow Moon fell to earth. Whatever it is, it has taken root and grows in a parody of a natural forest.

Moon-metal is easy to craft, and deadly sharp and strong. If heated over a fire, it responds to the user's wants to form itself into any metal object, which is of superior quality (an automatic +1 weapon or armor.) However, it severs the user's relationship with the Green World. If moon-metal so much as touches you, you receive one penalty die with the ability Tree-Bond. Each day that you are in contact with moon-metal,

the penalty dice grow, to a maximum of five. It takes an expenditure of five Vigor and five Instinct points to remove one penalty die. (These points need not be spent all at once if a character does not have that many.) One *cannot* enter the Green World with any moon-metal upon their person.

### 13.7 Other Species in Khale

Like their claimed brethren, the Qek, Khaleans have little problem with other species. Goblins form tribes throughout Khale, and are called *spriggans* by the locals, who find them more amusing than annoying. Elves are viewed with some pity and suspicion: they are believed to be the seeds of fallen ancestors who did not take root and now wander. The Ratkin are not numerous in Khale, preferring the cities, but there is the rumor of one Khalean tribe composed completely of Ratkin.

### 13.8 Crunchy Bits

#### Khale Cultural Abilities

- **Camouflage (Instinct)**  
This ability is used to stay hidden in plain sight by using natural patterns, covering one's self with mud or leaves, and otherwise blending in with a wooded environment.
- **Genealogy (Reason)**  
Knowledge of one's lineage is of great importance for a Khalean bard. Being able to find a common ancestor with a stranger automatically grants you kinship with her, and can turn an enemy into a stranger. This ability is used for recalling this sort of knowledge, and giving proper greetings to strangers, especially chiefs of other tribes.
- **Guerilla Warfare (Instinct)**  
Unlike Battle, which is standard military tactics knowledge, Guerilla Warfare is your character's knowledge of alternative tactics which give a smaller force a much greater advantage. It is used for coordinating quick and nasty attacks while hiding in the forest; using noise and trickery to appear to be a larger force, and eliminating your enemies one by one through ambushes.
- **Lunar Forging (Reason)**  
This ability is used to craft moon-metal by projecting one's psychic force upon it. A successful ability check is needed to craft an item. When struck by wood, moon-metal has a tendency to lose its form: this skill is also used to force the metal to keep its shape (a

resisted ability check versus the attack).

- **Spear-fighting (Vigor)**  
The most popular weapon in Khale is a long spear, formed completely from sap-hardened wood. This weapon is good for stabbing from hiding, and with an especially long head, can be grasped closer for fighting up close. This ability is used to attack with this weapon, or other polearms.
- **Tree-bond (Instinct)**  
This ability allows the user to travel in and navigate the Green World. A successful roll is necessary to enter the Green World. With another successful roll, one can navigate anywhere in Khale, or anywhere in the Green World one has already been. A third successful roll is necessary to travel to any time besides the present.

#### Khale Cultural Secrets

- **Secret of the Perfect Chord, Joy**  
With a successful Music ability check, which can be resisted with a Resist ability check, your character can evoke swellings of joy in all listeners, no matter their disposition. *Cost:* 1 Vigor.
- **Secret of the Perfect Chord, Sorrow**  
With a successful Music ability check, which can be resisted with a Resist ability check, your character can evoke tears of sorrow in all listeners. *Cost:* 1 Instinct.
- **Secret of the Perfect Chord, Sleep**  
With a successful Music ability check, which can be resisted with a Resist ability check, your character can put all listeners to sleep. *Cost:* 2 Reason.
- **Secret of the Forest's Embrace**  
Your character gains a bonus die to Stealth and Guerilla Warfare when in thick forest.
- **Secret of Forest Transport**  
Your character may bring others with her when she travels into the Green World, holding the portal open for them. The ancestors, should they live, will hold you responsible for your visitors' actions. *Cost:* 1 Vigor per person.
- **Secret of Bough's Bosom**  
While in the Green World, anyone attempting to heal your character automatically receives a bonus die.
- **Secret of the Moon Heart**  
Your character has absorbed a quantity of moon-metal, which has bonded with her flesh. You no longer need fire to mold the metal into new forms, and can spend Vigor on

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Lost Child	Your character has no tribe. They are lost to the Green World, or perhaps decimated in battle. It is her duty to carry on the tribe's name.	Gain 1 XP every time your character tells a story of her tribe. Gain 2 XP whenever your character defends her tribe's name or lands in words or in battle. Gain 5 XP whenever your character finds a new legend of her tribe.	Join another tribe.
Key of the Tribe	Your character's tribe is a great part of her identity.	Gain 1 XP whenever your character does something to help the tribe. Gain 2 XP whenever your character defends or helps the tribe even though it brings her ridicule or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP whenever your character defends the tribe in battle.	Leave the tribe.

**Table 13.1** Khale Cultural Key

a one-for-one basis for bonus dice when forcing the metal to keep its form. You cannot ever enter the Green World, however, and all attacks against you with wooden weapons do +1 harm.

**Khale Cultural Keys**

See table 13.1 page 77

**13.9 Examples**

**Sample Khalean Names**

- *Males:* Pwyll, Nevins, Bowdyn, Gwawl,

- Aonghus, Morvyn, Dwayne, Kelvin, Keaghan, Brasil, Cathair, Hueil, Donat, Eoghann, Newlyn
- *Females:* Maeveen, Isolde, Elsha, Aphria, Evelina, Moyna, Deirdre, Jennifer, Wynne, Yseult, Africa, Violet, Donella, Grania, Merna

**Sample Khalean Character Ideas**

- a shamed warrior, cast out from his tribe
- a bard full of tales and looking for more
- a lost Ratkin adopted into a tribe
- a tribe-less pirate of the high seas



13

# 14 Qek, Land of Mystery

## 14.1 Introduction

*Mutex and his father each took a swig from the jug of watered-down araka. It had been a good day fishing, and it had been a good thirteenth birthday. A new set of bone fishing arrows was an excellent gift, and it fit Mutex's new role perfectly. He was now an adult, and he would provide the family's sea-meat.*

*A kayak rose over the waves. "Laertes!" Mutex called out. The Ammenite trader had been good to his family, trading good rice and bamboo for shiny rocks and knowledge. Mutex's brother had taught him the secrets of the kayak.*

*Mutex's nose filled with a black scent, though, carried over the Sea of Teeth. He stood to see, and saw his friend was in dire trouble or mad. A dozen kayaks came behind him, each ridden by a foul shade-thing, a dead spirit trapped in a dead body, rotting flesh and hungry teeth.*

*The ocean's roar filled the air, yet Mutex's voice could be heard above it. "Drown!" he screamed, and nine kayaks dived into the rough waters. It was not enough to save his friend, though, he knew, just as he knew what to do next. Drawing out a jeweled knife, he cut his palm, and then made a slashing motion in the air with the hand, his blood spraying into a door, a door into death which his spirit stepped into.*

*His roho flew over the waters with only moments to spare, a bright form, sharp with anger, and cut each dead thing's spark from its putrid body. Exhausted, he fell to rest in his own body again.*

*His father's face was proud and stern, a weapon severing him as well as his dagger. "You will never return to your mother again. Go now."*

## 14.2 A Jungle at the Top of the World

**Q**ek is the northernmost known land in Near, and one of the most forbidding. Filled from coast to mountain with thick rain-forest and jungle, Qek is a place of mystery and legend. It is the borderlands of the world and the north coast of the Sea of Teeth.

This hot jungle-land might well be left alone, were it not for the copious amounts of jewels found in its caves. There are no cities, no centers of civilization, only the smallest of villages along the coastline.

The people of Qek live among the jungle in small family units. Short, thin, and brown, the Qek (as they call both themselves and their land) hunt wild birds, boars, and reptiles and gather wild fruits for their sustenance. The people of inner Qek are generally unknown to outsiders; the families along Qek's shores that live on fishing are the few that generally speak with non-Qek. The boats of these people are legendary – small one-man kayaks made of jungle wood that they use to surf on top of the waves of the Border Sea, easily outrunning any other ship.

## 14.3 The Family is a Breathing Thing

The only real unit of people in Qek is the family.

Families live together, carving out a small bit of land to call their own, although there's no real land ownership. Three generations usually live together: a husband and wife, some of their parents, and their children. Generally, as sons and daughters grow to maturity, they leave and form new family units; as one half of a couple dies of old age, the other will live with one of their children.

Qek has no government, but each family unit is part of a larger family unit. Within the larger family unit, families defer to the family they grew up in when they meet. In distant relations, the older family is deferred to, although they often choose another to make decisions. There is no clan-type structure in Qek: there are no clumps of unrelated people at all.

#### 14.4 Stories without Letters

The Qek have no written language, at least not since the Year of Shadow. Because of this, their art revolves around painting and oral storytelling. A great majority of their art is utilitarian in nature: ornately carved spears and staffs; beautifully crafted clay jugs; shields painted with intricate camouflaging patterns. Without cities, traditional sculpture is almost unknown, although carved frescos in rock are relatively common, used to tell ancient stories.

The music of Qek is unearthly, and most outsiders have a hard time appreciating it. Their language is made up of a multitude of hard consonants, which lends a guttural quality to it, whether spoken or sung. In addition, the music has no traditional rhythm, instead alternating between discordant rhythms frequently. While a large part of their music – all based around stories – is sung, it is sometimes accompanied by a *churang*, a guitar like instrument made of dried innards strung across a hollowed-out armadillo shell.

Qek's jungles are full of succulent fruit and spices, and are used liberally to season their food. A speciality that has reached out to be eaten elsewhere in Near is wild boar glazed with mango and *cocoa*, a plant native only to Qek. Cocoa (in the modern day, chocolate) grows in huge pods within Qek's jungles, and is used to make a hallucinatory beverage called *araka* of dried cocoa pods, fermented bananas, and hot chiles.

**Araka effects** Distilled drug

- (Undistilled effect of fermented bananas.) One penalty die to all Reason-based abilities.
- If the Endure check is unsuccessful, heightened sense of spirits: two bonus dice to all Pray, Create, Sway, or Dueling Ability checks made against spirits.

#### 14.5 All That Glitters is Trouble

The Qek do trade with the people of Khale and the wild people of Oran, the mountain country west of Ammeni, exchanging wild fruits and cocoa for tools of metal, which they do not have the craft to make themselves. In addition, Qek is known for its precious gems. The people of Qek find these stones useless except for tools (they tip their own spears with diamond, which slip through armor as if it were butter, for example) and they are often traded for goods or services. Men from other countries that do not respect the sanctity of Qek often attempt to sneak into the country and smuggle out gems and cocoa pods, although few return.

#### 14.6 Everything that Breathes Dies

The people of Qek do not speak of religion: they worship no single entity or have organized worship. They do, however, have a strong belief in the idea of spirits.

Spirits have three forms, the *roho*, the *sasha*, and the *zamani*. (In case you're curious, the plural form of these words are the same as the singular.) The *roho* are the spirits of the living, the animus that gives them individuality and vitality. These are bound within the bodies of people, animals, and plants. People and animals have the strongest *roho*, while plants have the oldest *roho*.

The *sasha* are the "half-dead." Those who have died that are personally remembered by those still alive are *sasha*. Memories from stories do not count: someone who met the person while alive must still live. These spirits have a will of their own and remember their name, and they are said to hover close to earth, watching those who knew them. Their will can be bent by changing the memories of their human tethers.

The *zamani* are the true dead, those long dead and forgotten. They do not remember their name and their own will is the longing for fi-

nal rest, in the oblivion above the earth.

## 14.7 Spirit-talkers

Some Qek, through birth or training, find themselves walking the path of the *walozi*, or sorcerer. These people can speak to the dead, get rid of evil spirits, and even bind sasha and zamani to new bodies. The Qek are no strangers to magic, and do not fear it, but *walozi* cannot be part of any family once they contact their first spirit. They are ejected to live on their own.

Conversing with roho and sasha is considered fine magic to use, and families will often consult *walozi* to contact their loved dead. Consorting with zamani, however, is dark magic, indeed, and any *walozi* known to do so is shunned. These necromancers will live deep within the jungle, performing their dark rites.

Roho can be:

- *Contacted* . The spirit of a living thing can be spoken with. The spirit knows nothing that the person or animal would not normally know, but if a person is in conflict, their spirit might just be spiteful, and give information they would not. Contacting the roho of a person or animal without their consent is difficult, and cannot be done without trapping them.
- *Severed* . To sever one's roho is to render their body will-less and barely alive. As long as the roho lives, the body will as well, but will only act on command from the *walozi* who severed the spirit. This is definitely considered a black art.
- **Playing Your Character's Roho**  
If your character's adventuring in Qek, you might find yourself in the odd position of playing your own character's spirit. Have fun with this, and do not hold back, afraid that the roho will betray your character. How often do you get to play your character's internal monologue?

Sasha can be:

- *Contacted* . A *walozi* can easily speak with the half-dead. Their answers are up to them.
- *Given form* . A *walozi* can let a sasha take spectral form and move freely. They can perform no physical act upon the tangible world, and cannot be harmed by physical means.
- *Bound* . Sasha can be bound into their original

bodies. The body must either be in good health, or ritually prepared. This same ritual is used to restore a severed roho to its body.

- *Severed* . With this ritual, one can get rid of a spectral or bound sasha.

Zamani can be:

- *Given form* . An evil *walozi* can give the zamani spectral form. They have few real features, appearing as withered, hungry ghosts.
- *Bound* . Zamani can be bound into dead bodies, either fresh dead or ritually prepared. Unlike sasha, these do not have to be their original bodies, and can even be animal bodies.
- *Controlled* . Zamani are bitter, hateful things with no want except to kill their summoner and return to death. A *walozi* can impose his will upon them with this ritual.
- *Severed* . The beloved ritual of the zamani, this returns them to their sleep.

## 14.8 Other Species in Qek

The Qek have little problem with other species in their land, being a pretty curious people themselves. Elves are known to travel through Qek on occasion; some stories say they come from the wild deserts over the northern mountains as escaped slaves. What exactly enslaves elves is unknown, which is probably for the best. Goblins infest the hills at Qek's northern borders and run free through its jungles. Ratkin are rare in Qek, and thought of as a myth.

## 14.9 Crunchy Bits

### Sasha and Zamani

When sasha or zamani come into the living world, either as a spirit or bound to a body, there are limits to their abilities.

Sasha start as they were in life, but have half of their normal pools, and their ability ranks are capped at the success level of the ability check used to summon them, minus one. The number of combined Secrets and Keys they can have are also capped at the success level. Success level 6 grants full restoration, including pools and Secrets. If bound to a dead body, they are automatically severed when broken.

- **Playing a Sasha**  
Players with dead characters should feel

Key Name	Summary	Key XP	Buyoff
Key of the Astral Traveler	Your character is dedicated to a world outside her body, taking hallucinogens in order to change her perception.	Gain 1 XP every time your character takes a drug purported to change her reality. Gain 3 XP every time your character separates her spirit from her body.	Shirk away from an opportunity to see a situation from an altered perspective.
Key of the Death-Hunter	Your character fulfills a strange role in Qek society: she consorts with the zamani in order to make sure they can find their final rest. She dabbles in forbidden knowledge solely to put that knowledge to sleep.	Gain 1 XP whenever your character is in a scene with zamani. Gain 2 XP whenever she sends zamani off to the Final Death. Gain 5 XP whenever she defeats a walozi that summons up zamani.	Summon up a zamani.

**Table 14.1** Qek Cultural Key

free to have their characters brought back through Qek sorcery. They do obey all normal rules on pool and ability caps, but can gain experience for as long as they remain in the living world. If severed, they must be re-summoned and hope again for a skilled sorcerer.

Zamani can have no Keys. They start with abilities like beasts with Unskilled rank in each ability, and have no pools. They have advances equal to three times the success level of the ability check used to summon them. Half of these advances are spent by the player, if a player's character has summoned a zamani; the other half are spent by the Story Guide. If bound to a dead body, they are automatically severed when bloodied.

### Qek Cultural Abilities

- **Gem-Cutting (Reason)**  
This is the art of cutting gems to pleasing shapes without causing flaws.
- **Kayaking (Instinct)**  
This ability is used to sail the one-man kayaks popular along the shore of Qek without smashing one's head into vicious rocks or drowning in the sudden waves of the Sea of Teeth.
- **Panther Style (Instinct)**  
Qek fighters melt in and out of the forest, stabbing their prey with a spear before they can ever be seen.

### Qek Cultural Secrets

- **Secret of the Walozi**  
Either through an unusual birth or training, your character has the power of the walozi.

She knows the rituals for contacting spirits, and can attempt this by spending one Vigor and using the Pray ability. This ritual takes about fifteen minutes to perform.

- **Ritual of Spectral Form**  
This ritual gives form to a sasha or zamani spirit upon a successful Create ability check. This ritual takes about half an hour to perform. *Cost:* 1 Vigor and 1 Instinct. *Prerequisite:* Secret of the Walozi.
- **Ritual of Binding**  
The walozi with this ritual can bind a spectral sasha or zamani spirit to a body. This requires no ability check, and costs one Vigor. However, an unwilling spirit can make a Resist ability check. If successful, the walozi must spend a number of Vigor points equal to the spirit's success level. This ritual takes at least an hour to perform. *Cost:* 1+Vigor. *Prerequisite:* Secret of the Walozi.
- **Ritual of Severance**  
Using this ritual, a walozi can sever a spirit with a successful Dueling ability check. This has no cost, but the walozi has a penalty die unless her roho is separated from her body. Speaking of that, a walozi can use this ritual to separate her roho from her body, severing herself. She can rejoin with her body simply by having her roho touch it and willing it so, but rival walozi might take advantage of this situation. Note that sasha and zamani might well have this ritual and fight back if one is spectral. This ritual takes one minute to perform if bound to one's body; if spectral, it's instantaneous as the two spirits fight. *Prerequisite:* Secret of the Walozi, or be a sasha or zamani.
- **Ritual of Zamani Control**  
This ritual allows the walozi to convince a

zamani given form to do something besides destroy blindly, given a successful Sway ability check. Their need for destruction is so great that normal social interaction will not work. This ritual requires nothing more than special intonation and a hand signal. *Prerequisite*: Secret of the Walozi.

- **Ritual of Vessel Preparation**

By removing all organs and applying powders, stuffing, and wax, one can prepare a dead body to accept a spirit with a successful Fine Crafts ability check. This not only allows a long-dead sasha to inhabit their old body, but has the added advantage of making the body much less vulnerable to physical harm. The body cannot be bloodied – all bloodied harm counts as bruised. Instead, after being broken, the spirit is automatically severed. What can make a ritually prepared vessel even more powerful is combining this ritual with the Secret of Imbuement.

### Qek Cultural Keys

See table 14.1 page 82

## 14.10 Examples

### Sample Names

- *Male*: Ahexotl, Camaxtli, Coccoza, Ecatzin, Guacra, Hobnil, Huemac, Itzcoatl, Maxtla, Mutex, Ocelopan, Rimac, Pusca, Tangaxoan, Tlaloc, Yaotl, Zoltan
- *Female*: Atzi, Centehua, Chantica, Cusi, Itzel, Ixchell, Malinche, Metztl, Nhutalu, Oclo, Quispe, Runti, Tlaco, Xoco, Ysalane, Zafrina

### Sample Qek Character Ideas

- a jungle monster-hunter
- an elven explorer
- a fierce fisherman of the untamed Border Sea
- a reclusive walozi on a quest for knowledge
- a warrior whose family has been killed by jewel thieves
- a wild monkey-like goblin

