



Dark Prologue

An Adventure of Long Long Ago
Luka Rejec

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By Luka Rejec

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WizardThiefFighter Studio

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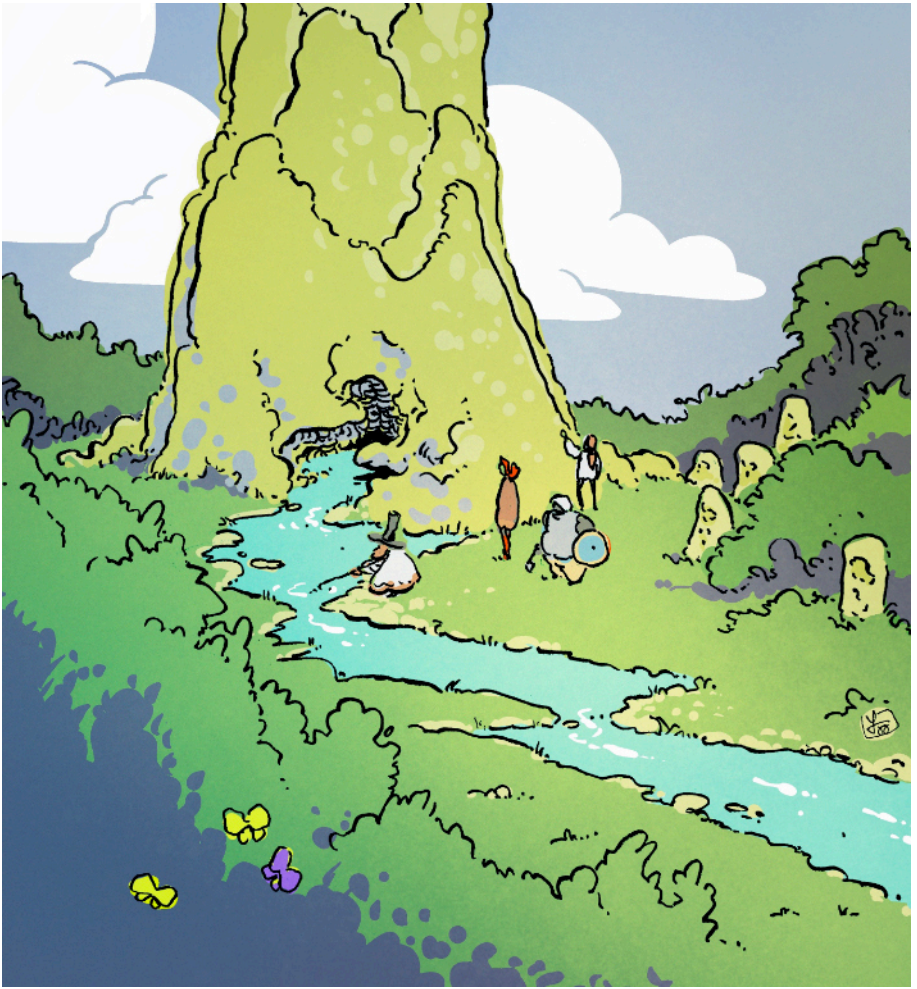
Spark

The coals burned low in the dark and no more smoke rose from the ancient ceramic crucible. The old woman watched a while, nodded to herself and went back to work on the skybringer stone, scraping it with a rough brush to remove lichen and old paint. She worked by touch in the dark, each of her long, steady strokes a prayer to the ancestor spirits.

When a pale green flicker marked skybringer ascending on their solar chariot she stopped scrubbing and took tongs to open the crucible. One by one she removed the charcoaled bones and dropped them into a heavy porphyry mortar. With blackened oak pestle she crushed them dust fine. Then she took a silver spoon and scooped three spoonfuls into a small bronze bowl, fat-bellied as the eater of worlds. One scoop for the giver, another for the keeper, a last for the taker. Finally she mixed in bone marrow for the ox lord to bind the pitch black powder and make it ready for painting.

*With a calm voice she began to chant as she painted wheel and wing, cross and beam, pinnacle and pit on the skybringer stone,
“When the world was young,
giving gods dividing,
world and selves and time,
each allotted space,
each sacrifice ...”*

Then the sky exploded.



Introduction

D*ark Prologue* is a four-player one-shot adventure for analog tabletop roleplaying games. It uses special characters and works as a flashback that sets up a ruined location for later regular play.

If the players are using this game with a traditional rpg that involves a referee or game master only the referee should read beyond Chapter 1: The Exploded Sky. All of the art is laid out with full-page pieces to make it easier for the referee to share it with the players.

Dark Prologue is written as far as possible using natural language. Obstacles facing the heroes are described with words. For example, a turbulent river might be described thus: “crossing the river is a difficult test. If the heroes fail, they are swept away, losing time and an item.”

Hopefully, players will find it easy to adapt *Dark Prologue* to their preferred system in play.

DECISION TOKENS

Dark Prologue introduces a narrative overlay that bypasses the regular rules of any rpg system the players are using.

The text often requires a player to make a **decision**, which modifies the setting, creating the history of the ruin the group may return to with their usual characters.

0.0: “Decisions are presented like this.”

>> Arrows mark instructions.

Each player begins with a single **decision token**. This should be one small but memorable object for each player, perhaps a meeples, a large die, or a polished stone.

When a player takes their turn making a decision, the player declares their choice and places their decision token in the centre of the table. Players also spend decision tokens to undertake heroic deeds and in a few other more specific situations.

When all the players have spent their decision tokens, they collect their tokens and the circle resumes.

The purpose of decision tokens is to ensure players take turns undertaking heroic deeds and making the fateful decisions required by *Dark Prologue*.

MARKS OF DESTINY AND HEROIC DEEDS

Each player also begins *Dark Prologue* with a narrative currency in the form of **marks** of destiny (or simply marks). The marks come in four suits: **batons**, **coins**, **cups**, and **swords**. Players may represent their marks with chits, tokens, or cards—the suits are from Italian playing cards. Each hero comes with a different set of marks.

These marks can be spent on some of the fateful decisions. They can also be used to perform heroic deeds. Players can gain additional marks from some decisions or by making hero- or item-specific **sacrifices**.

Each hero in *Dark Prologue* has a specific list of **heroic deeds**. These are special actions that they can take once during play. After a heroic deed is performed, it is crossed off the list. Players may choose to keep their list of deeds secret from one another.

Players can have their heroes perform a deed at any time, so long as they have a decision token available. Some locations or events require a player with an available decision token to perform a deed and spend a token.

THE CLOCK

Dark Prologue runs on a clock. Every time the heroes travel from one region to another, the bell of doom tolls and the clock advances. Some events and choices will also advance the clock. Unless otherwise specified, spending a decision token. These are marked, like so:

■ 0.1: >> Advance the clock one toll.

This was an instruction. The clock is at the end of the document and it has advanced one toll. The players or the referee should read what has happened as a result. Players are encouraged not to read ahead through the clock.

NOTE TAKER

Over the course of *Dark Prologue* the players' decisions set up a ruin for play with their regular characters in later sessions. Whether they are playing with a game master or without, it is helpful if someone notes down decisions made to help assemble the ruin and its background. An easy way is to simply mark the decisions in this document itself. All the decisions and instructions are also labelled (e.g. 0.0., 0.1., 0.2.), which may be useful if the notetaker is using a separate notebook.

Sometimes the players will be directed to make specific notes. For example:

0.2: >>Invent a symbol for the settlement the heroes' tribe, the Ours, calls Home using three circles and five lines.

>> Player gains a mark of batons.

That was an instruction. A player should now spend a decision token and invent a symbol for their tribe's home settlement. In return, they gain a mark of batons (they'll mark that on their hero's sheet in a moment).

EPILOGUE

If the players intend to use *Dark Prologue* as a basis for a later adventure, they should leave the epilogue to the game master or referee player alone. On the other hand, if they are playing a collaborative game or simply want to find out the consequences of their game, they can go through the epilogue together, step by step.

THE MAP

The players' decisions and travels change the map of the ruin and its surroundings. The note taker can simply build on the provided map, noting whether the heroes visit a location or not, and their decisions. The map maker can also be a different player, creating a new map from scratch.

All the labels use plain English.

The map's regions work as a pointcrawl, with travel times noted in the locations. Travel between most regions will advance the clock. The heroes decision to visit locations or avoid them will change them at the end of the game.

Places of Note

Home—where the game begins.

Our Lands—the territory of the heroes' tribe.

There—the home town of the other tribe.

Their Lands—lands of the other tribe.

The River—a great river, too wide to swim.

Ford—twin settlements where rafts cross the River.

Third—home town of the third tribe.

Ruined Land—now devastated, once the third tribe's home.

Crater—a terrifying new landmark.

Other Places

Gateway—gorges, a strategic series of rapids.

Big Grass Sea—a rich grassland, home to smallfarmers.

West Woods—a drier land, home to wild people.

South Mountains, West Mountains, North Ranges—dark-forested lands. Hard to cross. Wolves and bear people.

Big Wet—great swamp before the Great Green Sea.

Horselands—edge of a vast plain. Home to herdsfolk.





Chapter 1: The Exploded Sky

Is this a dream? A waking delusion? The radiating echo of ghosts long gone? A recording in stone and time, inscribed into the very fabric of reality? The sky seems like some other sky. The soil is flayed and torn like the hide of a gentle beast assailed by lions. Strange, foreign emotions awaken and rise like bile in the throat.

The players' regular characters find themselves almost-spectators in the lives of other persons. Perhaps no more substantial than the daemons of temptation and encouragement that whisper in men's ears on the best of days. Yet, queerly, there is no fear. No danger. The spectator knows they will survive.

>> Each player takes their decision token. The next section introduces the decision mechanic.

As One Does (decision)

Reality folds together neatly, like a well-pressed handkerchief. If this is a dream, it is shared. The characters recognize other riding spirits, sharing bodies with other people of this strange place.

The sky is aglow. Clouds like shredded banners flit. The acrid smell of fire. Soot. Ash floats gently down. Everything sounds muffled, ears ring. Leaves stripped from trees swirl in the cool air.

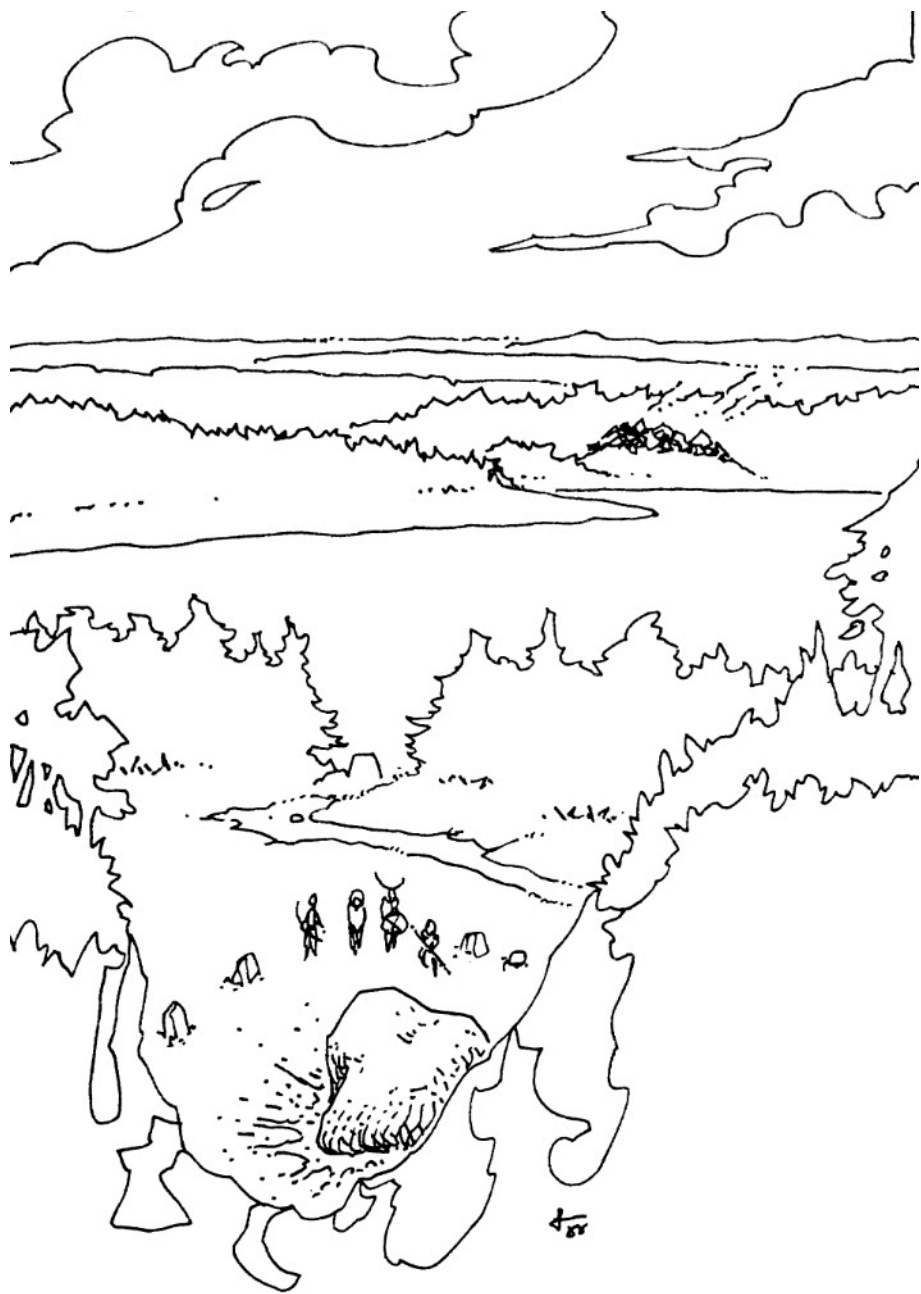
0.3: “What are we doing here?”

>> A player makes a decision:

- a) The shaman Noksaya was about to induct us into the house of the Skygiver, bringing us into the quiet circle of Our tribe.
>> Player gains a mark of swords.

- b) We belong to the Taker’s house. Too long we have submitted to the Others. We were about to smash the Skygiver stone and leave an otherstyle jade axe lodged in the heartwood of the hanging tree. Then the rest of Ours would have listened to the Taker’s house and we would have gone to war with the Others, taking their pigs and burning their granaries.
>> Hero gains the otherstyle jade axe (item).

The otherstyle jade axe is a unique item with special effects. It is detailed in Appendix I: Items. Other unique items are labelled in the same way, with “(item)”.



Meanings In The Sky (decision)

The Skygiver stone stands in a glen, in a secluded valley high above Home, the heroes' sacred central settlement. The glen seems untouched by wind or fire. All is silent. All is the same. Except the stone. The big stone.

When the sky exploded the great stone "bear's head" toppled off its perch above glen and fell onto the shaman Noksaya and the Skygiver stone, crushing them both.

0.4: "What does this mean?"

>> A player makes a decision:

a) The Skygiver is defeated! That explosion, there is a celestial battle afoot. The Ours must choose our new side carefully.

>> Player gains a mark of coins.

b) We have angered the Skygiver. This is their mark of displeasure. We must find out what the Skygiver wants so that we can appease them.

>> Hero gains the bronze bowl of the eater of worlds (item).

Searching the Glen (d6)

1. A heavy, depressing rain. It tastes of regret and fear. There is nothing left to find here.
2. A runty wolf cub with a lame leg. Perhaps it is an omen?
3. The shaman's walking stick. A sentimental thing, but sturdy (works as a club).
4. Four amulets of the quiet circle in a beaded bag.
5. Waxy wool cloak, neatly folded in a niche in the spring's cave. The shaman won't need it now.
6. An ancestor's skull that rolled out of the cave of the forebears. Its third eye gem has faded and cracked.

Home Truths (decision)

Down in the valley, on the shores of Our Lake is Home. The sacred settlement of the Ours. Its wooden houses stand two and three stories tall, clustering together on the mound of life. Every generation the old houses are burned together to nurture the new Homes that grow on top of the old.

0.5: “What has happened to Home?”

>> A player makes a decision:

a) It seems untouched. Some chimneys and the midsummer pole of sacrifice have toppled, but the new gods have spared Home.

>> Heroes skip the Immediate Tragedy event.

b) Home is aflame, like at the generational purification, but this is no celebration. Even from this high vantage the heroes can see their kith and kin, clan and taboo, running around like confused lice.

>> Player gains a mark of cups.

Running Home (d6)

1. The fir's whip, the flowering clematis clings and catches.
2. An uprooted tree, its rot exposed by the wind of the exploding sky. An omen?
3. The hunter Widery's trap has caught a rabbit. It has chewed through its skin trying to escape.
4. A boar's tusk, bound to a branch. A ward?
5. A beehive, tossed to ground by the wind.
6. A gully thick-drifted with leaves lets the heroes fly down the hill like loons diving at a lake.



Chapter 2: Heroes Under Heaven

As home draws closer, the heroes hearts grow heavier. There lies a fisher's boat hastily pulled ashore, catch still flopping. Here an adam gardener has left their basket of mewling fruits in the trail.

The heroes stop a moment and look at one another. Look to find a leader amongst themselves.

- >> Each player will now choose one of the following four heroes to play. Each of the heroes also has some unique decisions to make at this point—using the decision tokens, each player announces the choices their hero makes, defining Home and the Ours.
- >> The referee then hands out each hero's list of deeds.

... to add many more pages ...



Epilogue

Was it always meant to end this way? Was it the will of the gods? Was there some other way we could have come here? We stand at the end of our civilization, the doom of our people, and look back. Were we doomed from the start? Did our heroes fail us so?

... many words to add ...

Appendix C: The Clock

Before the world was as it had always been since the world was given to the people by the gods. In the morning of the year

Appendix F: Fantasy Language

To keep things simple, the map and the realms of the Dark Prologue are presented with simple English names. However, there is something to be said for fantastic names, and should the players like to travel into the realm of the River, there are some place names and given names they might enjoy. The invented names are loosely based on reconstructed proto-indo-european stems.

PRONUNCIATION RULES

All the vowels are short and simple. The trema (¨) marks a second, distinct vowel. This might occasionally glide into a diphthong. For example, “Unii¨” is pronounced with three syllables: “oo-nee-ee”. Stress and pitch are left up to the imagination of the players.

The “w” creates sounds that resemble diphthongs. For example, “wa-” sounds like “oo-ah”. The “y” works in a similar way, much as in English.

LEXICON

Agirya (“*swift messenger / angel*”)—short-lived flesh-wrapped messenger of the skybringer Dyedehar.

Aughas (“*southsun-house*”)—home of the heroes’ tribe.

Augwerhor (“*south-highlands-of*”)—pine and oak-shrouded highlands, hard to cross, home to wolves and boar-folk.

The boar-folk do not see the stars.

Bel Gelhwara (“*big green-water*”)—the sea.

Bel Volot (“*big muddiness*”)—the great swamp where the River empties into the Great Green Sea.

Bel Wedros (“*big water of*”)—the entire lower valley of the

River, home to the three tribes.

Bel Wekeros (“*big sunset of*”)—the large plain (big sky) north of the gateway gorges.

Dehar (“*giver*”)—aspect-god of the All-mother-father (Matarpatar), representing strength, generosity, humility, offering, birth, and rot.

Dehuleö (“*dusk-forest-of*”)—the thick woods of beech and oak and creeping beard-moss that choke the gently rising southwestern tributaries of the River. Home to wolves and catbird-folk.

Dehverhor (“*dusk-highlands-of*”)—the larch and beech choked western mountains, low but rough, home to wolves and fox-folk. The fox-folk do not see the stars.

Dewhasor (“*destruction-house-of*”)—the land of the Third tribe, obliterated when the sky exploded. Formerly *Dehwehas* (“*dusk-house*”) or *Treïhas* (“*three-house*”).

Dwerwedeyi (“*door-waters-to*”)—the gorges of the River that separate *Bel Wekeros* from *Bel Wedros*. Also a bit of a pun, since *Dwerwegeyi* (“*door-gates-to*”) also indicates the strategic nature of the gorge as a gateway.

Dyedehar (“*sky-giver*”)—the deity who opened the three people’s eyes and showed them the stars.

Engwië Kawos (“*hole-of-living fire / -great fire*”)—the crater where the sky exploded.

Hekworas (“*horsefolk-place*”)—the edge of a vast plain, peopled by herders of cows, horses, and sheep.

Matarpatar (“*motherer-fatherer*”)—the pan-deity representing the given world itself.

Naiï (“*us-plural*”)—the heroes’ tribe.

Na Wedor (“*land-on-the-water*”)—the floodplain of the River, common hunting grounds for the three tribes, home to few people.

Skehas (“*northwind-house*”)—the home of the Other tribe.

Skehwerhor (“*northwind-highlands-of*”)—the grimpine range, home to wolves and bear-folk. The bear-folk do not see the

stars.

Tanaï (“*the ours*”)–the heroes’ Home, sacred and first settlement of the people.

Tatritin (“*the third’s*”)–the sacred and first settlement of the destroyed third tribe.

Tayun, also *Taün* (“*the theirs*”)–exonym for There, sacred first settlement of the Other (Unii) tribe.

Taweda (“*the water*”)–the main river.

Tritoï (“*the third*”)–the third tribe, destroyed when the sky exploded.

Unii (“*those-them*”)–the Other tribe.

Usker (“*in/where-cross*”)–the main ferry / ford site on the River (Taweda).

Wegar (“*keeper*”)–aspect-god of the All-mother-father (Matarpatar), representing endurance, suffering, honesty, preservation, and stagnation.

Yamar (“*taker*”)–aspect-god of the All-mother-father (Matarpatar), representing agility, hunger, pride, destruction, and death.

Appendix I: Items and Equipment

Every unique item in Dark Prologue provides the hero who bears it a unique ability. Each item can also be sacrificed as a unique heroic deed. This destroys the item, but can be quite powerful (or interesting). Items in this appendix are marked as (item) in the text.

For the purpose of this game it is best if each hero carries no more than six items, possibly as few as three. Any more is right out.

Bronze bowl of the eater of worlds

A small fat-bellied bowl with a silver spoon, filled with a sacred pigment. It can hold enough pigment for six symbols. When found, it is half full.

Ability—Sacred pigment stored in the bowl can be used to paint the face with the symbol of the shaggy elephant heart, which makes its bearer brave against the fearsome spirits and ancestors.

Ability 2—It can also make the forebearer symbol, which makes its bearer invisible to the restless dead.

Sacrifice (bronze bowl is buried with a restless spirit)—Hero lays a restless dead to eternal sleep.

Knife of meteoric steel

Its handle waterhorse ivory, its blade so keen it parts flesh like a galley's prow parts the great green.

Ability—Advantage in close quarters combat.

Sacrifice (knife is lost)—Hero kills their opponent and gains 1 cup or 1 sword mark.

Otherstyle jade axe

A polished teardrop as long as a forearm, smooth as wax, incised with the chariots and biting northwind arrows of the Others.

Ability—Advantage when negotiating with Other ancestors or when fighting ghosts.

Sacrifice (axe is returned to the Others)—Hero gains the gratitude of the Others and gains 1 coin mark.

