



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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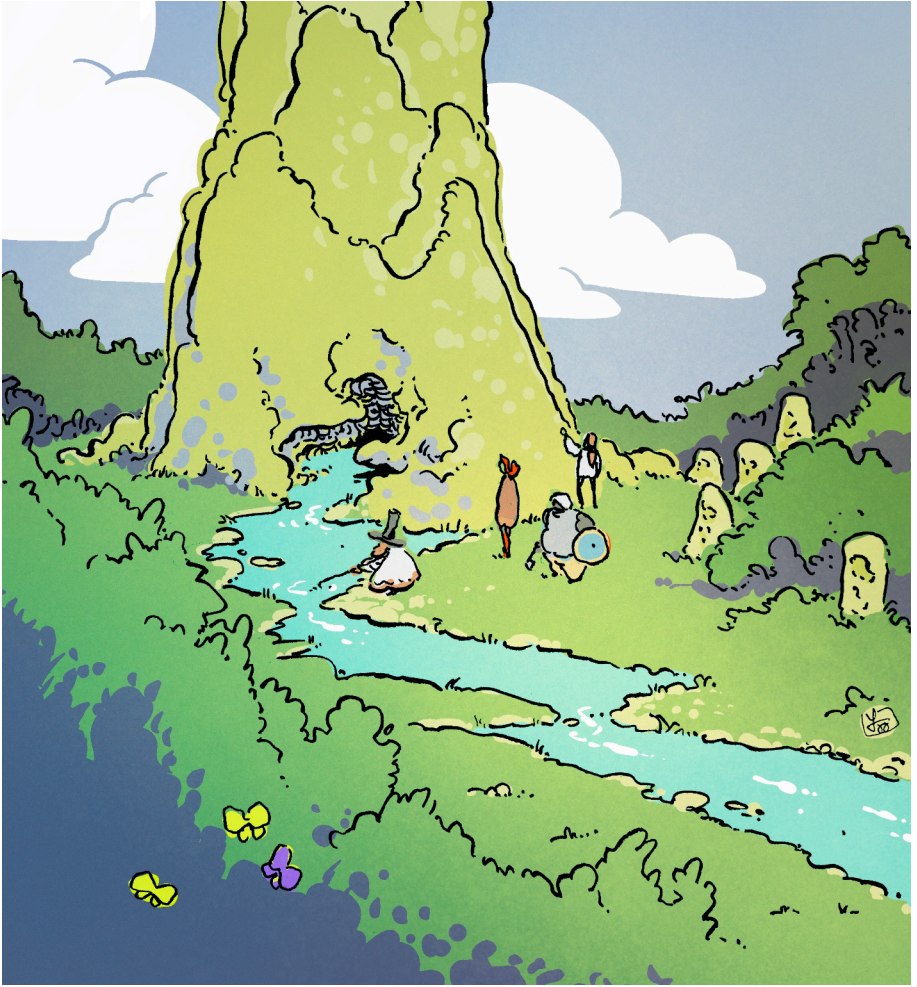
Spark

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.

The text assumes the players are using this game with a traditional rpg system that involves a referee, so 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 meeple, 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 (indeed, this might be fun).

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. It is helpful if someone notes down their decisions to make it easier to 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. The note taker need not be the referee.

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.

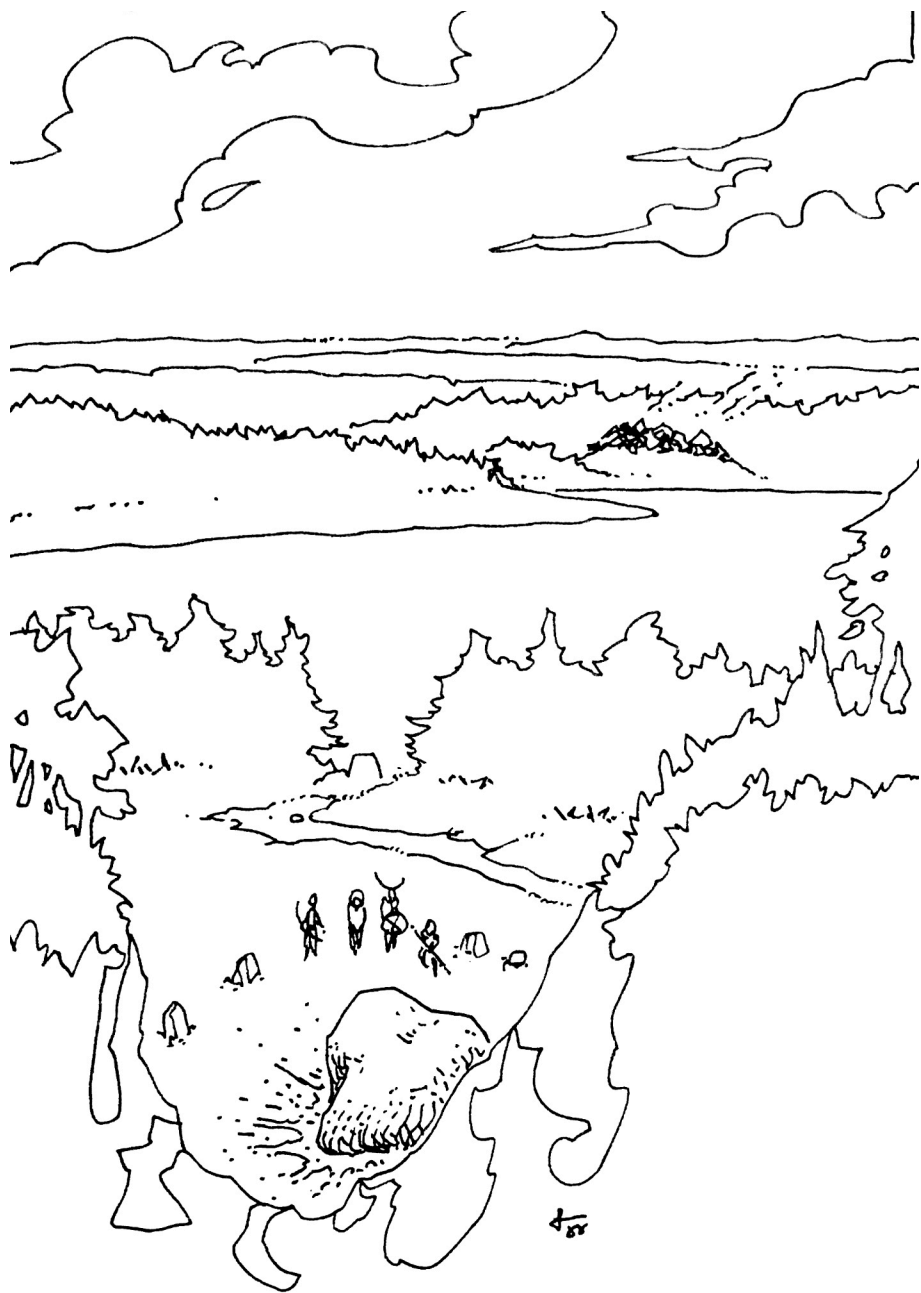
0.3: “What are we doing here?”

>> 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.

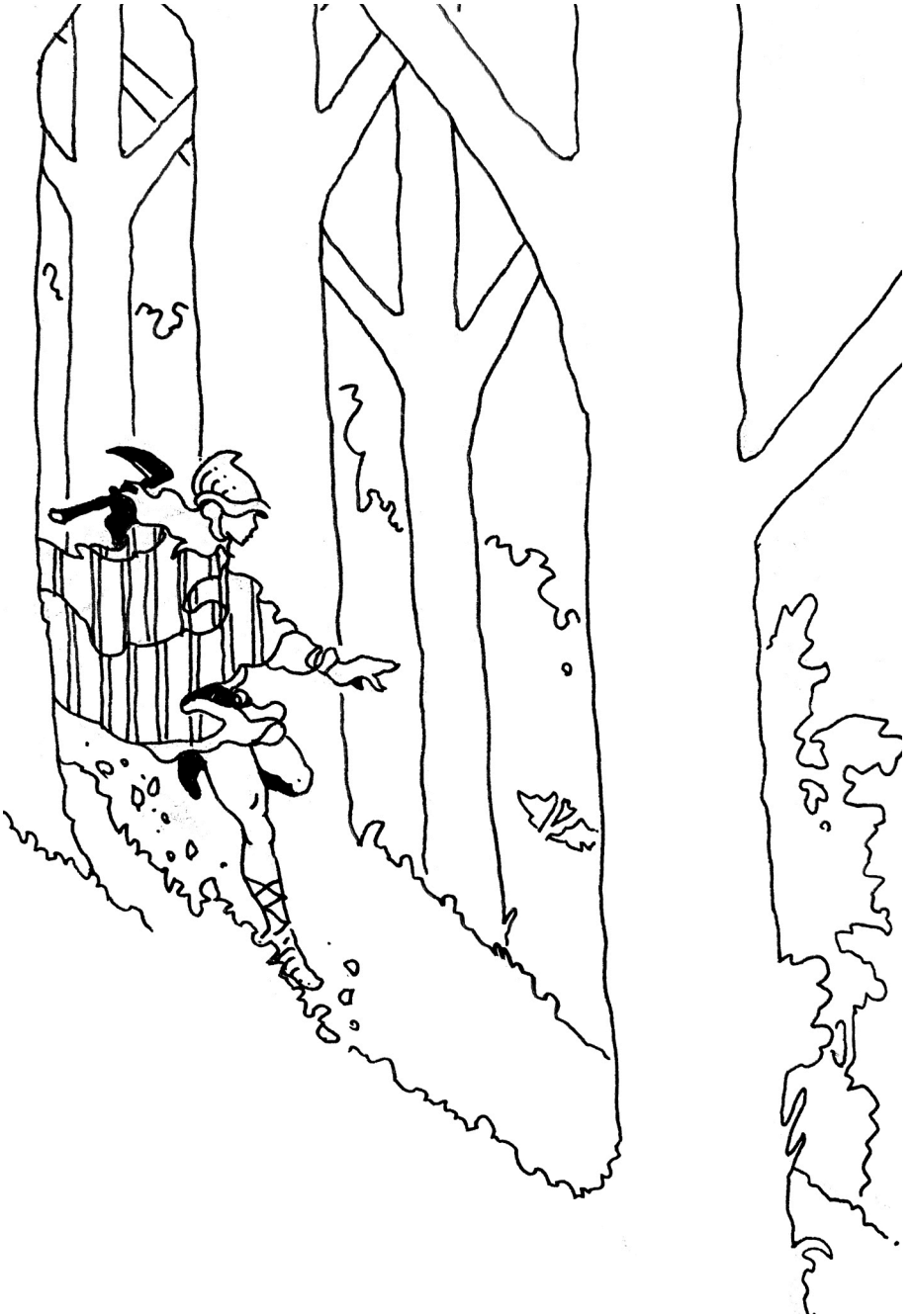
>> Heroes skip the Immediate Tragedy event.

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 firs 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 decisions to make at this point—using the decision tokens, each player announces the choices.
- >> The referee then hands out each hero's list of deeds (not written yet).



EHSI THE REAPER

They were a foundling. An orphan, half wild, mewling beneath a prickly pear cactus. Child of the wild one, the Daälgi, thus also named Dalg'da ("wild-given"). Curious, half-cursed, always so keen to learn, to prove home-worthy. Half-blessed to be bound half-free to till the crops of Home till they proved themselves. Better that than the freedom of starvation among the beasts who cannot see the stars.

Attributes

Ehsi is marked by **endurance** and **resolve**. Though others might doubt in Ehsi, they will not give up.

Marks

3 batons

3 coins

Skills

Ehsi is an **adam gardner**. They plant the budding eggs of flesh (*mehyom*) in the soil and harvest them when they mewl, stopping the adams' mouths with clay to preserve them through the lean times.

- >> The tribe also knows Ehsi as (player chooses one):
 - a) a **painter**, a stealer of meanings who goes into the deep rocks to pray to Earth.
 - b) a **trap-maker**, who lays snares for rabbit and field mouse, sparrow and pigeon.

- >> Secretly, Ehsi is also (player secretly chooses one):
 - a) a nimble **thief**, stealing from the honey eater and the neighbor they envy alike.
 - b) a **cook** of dreams, mixing herbs and meats to bring sleep and waking, joy and ... sometimes ... death.

Items

knife of meteoric steel—Ehsi was found in the wilds, clutching this blade till their hands bled.

solar brooch—A gift from the old chief when Ehsi came of age and became a bondsfolk of the tribe.

pouch of adams—Three salted adams, their mouths stopped with clay, ready to emit piercing shrieks.

THE HEROIC DEEDS OF EHSI

I feel no fear—A keen mind, its contours harsh, its ideas macabre. Irshe feels no fear where others dread, among our ancestors or among the sacred places of foreign gods. Special: can perform deed three times. Price: 1 sword.

Compassion is weakness—Irshe commits sacrilege or breaks a taboo without fear and gains 2 batons or 2 swords. Price: 1 cup and Irshe becomes #monstrous.

Monstrous hubris—never to be accepted by the gods or the homfolk, nothing remains but to cross the rivers of memory and forgetting and discover the fruit of the earth in the garden of the givers.

Effect: Irshe can no longer be harmed by the ancestors (undead) or the foreign gods. Requirement: Irshe must be #monstrous. Price: 5 swords.



GYOME THE HUNTER

They are the child of a great head hunter. The shrunken heads their parent won adorned their circle house. Then their parent died in battle with the Others and their head was taken. Gyome grew up in the care of the aunts of the village, envied for their powerful ancestor, taunted with their example, tempted by their sickle blade.

Attribute

Gyome grew in the signs of **strength** and **cunning**. Where the strong thrive, there will Gyome thrive.

Marks

3 cups

3 swords

Skills

Gyome **hunts** the forest and the swamp, the savanna and the hills, bringing shaggy smallhorse and antlered deer, collared duck and gnashing turtle, river pig and savanna goat to the pots of the tribe.

- >> The tribe also knows Gyome as (player chooses one):
 - a) a **comedian**, telling jokes that makes fear lessen and laughter lighten hearts.
 - b) a **stoneshaper**, creating arrowheads and spearpoints, microliths and scrapers, from the precious work stones.

- >> Secretly, Gyome is also (player secretly chooses one):
 - a) a **killer**, who has killed humans before and not been driven mad by the vengeful spirits of taboo.
 - b) an **orange-smith**, meeting the charcoal wizard in the woods to melt ores and shape metals.

Items

shrunkn chief's head—Small as a fist, it gives courage and protection in battle.

ancestor's sickle blade—A bronze sickle, long as a forearm, on a sturdy haft. Perfect for decapitating enemies.

humorous stone—A malachite nodule of very humorous shape.

THE HEROIC DEEDS OF GYOME



LETE THE POET

Marked with a second spirit, Lete channeled the voice of sky and earth from the day their mother's brother's third-child struck them in the head with an amethyst geode. The teller of the tribe's stories, Sprega, taught Lete to channel the story-spirits and overcome the fire headaches.

Attribute

Lete is marked by **wit** and **endurance**. Where no path seems clear, Lete will find a new way.

Marks

3 batons

3 cups

Skills

Lete **memorializes** the names and deeds, debts and gifts, of the tribe, incising them on poll poles. Their songs and chants record the movements of people under the unchanging sky.

- >> The tribe also knows Lete as (player chooses one):
 - a) an **orator**, painting pictures with words and moving the hearts of beast and folk alike.
 - b) a **carpenter**, singing the poles and beams into interlocking shapes to build the circle-houses of the common folk, and even the square-house-roofs of the divine folk.

- >> Secretly, Lete is also (player secretly chooses one):
 - a) gifted with the **sword**, practicing in secret with a restless spirit who gave them a long blade fished from a bog.
 - b) a **flesh-writer**, inscribing secret spells and curses into the skins of the living and the dead, creating scrolls to curse or bless.

Items

bronze bog sword—Lete accepted it from a restless spirit.

wood bone flute—A flute that shapes the growth of trees.

bundle of whittling knives—Chalcedony and obsidian and bone and bronze for shaping memories into wood.

THE HEROIC DEEDS OF LETE



VASNI THE KEEPER

The beloved child of a large brood, in a year of hunger Vasni was given to a barren couple of keepers in the outlands of the Ours. There they were taught to keep bees and sheep, carp and wolves. They were never unloved, but distance and lonely days bred bitter in their heart.

Attribute

Vasni grew in the signs of **patience** and **kindness**. Where the cycles of nature propose, Vasni disposes.

Marks

5 batons

1 cup

Skills

Vasni **keeps animals** and makes them tame, bringing wool and honey and fermented fish eggs and pups to the memorializer of debts.

>> The tribe also knows Vasni as (player chooses one):

- a) a **woundbinder**, setting bones, using poultices and bandages to stop injuries going rotten.
- b) a **lover**, charming all who behold them and bringing the brightness of the goddess of love and war to all who dare.

>> Secretly, Vasni is also (player secretly chooses one):

- a) a **blasphemer**, who has mocked the gods and no longer believes in charm or curse.
- b) **cursed by second sight**, seeing glimmers of prophecy and dreaming premonitions of dread.

Items

pet wolf—Tall, shaggy, and a little goofy. A loyal companion.

crooked spear—A stout staff with a crook on one end and a short bronze spike on the other.

wax candles—three fine-smelling wax candles.

THE HEROIC DEEDS OF VASNI

*... to add many more pages ...
-the regions + events there
-the climax at the crater
-the clock
-the epilogue
... and here I thought this was going to be super short.*



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. One day, in the morning of the year of the fox came the time remembered well, when the sky exploded and a new thing came into the world.

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.

Daälgi (“*wild [one]*”)—old-god or spirit of the wild places. Also spirit of the long time, the deep time before people saw the stars.

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 *Treihas* (“*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-way/passage-to*”) also indicates the strategic nature of the gorge for river travel.

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

Engsii (“*those-who-fire*”)—the stars that give the people souls.

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

Har (“*earth*”)—the sleeping spirit beneath the feet of the tribes.

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.

Mehyom (“*meat-egg*”)—the main crop of the three tribes, something between a gastropod and a tuber, they are

harvested when they being to make their mating call. Their clone buds look vaguely like starfish and are called *adam* (from the prayer *Yo har deham*, “I, the earth, give you”).

Naii (“*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).

Sweli (“*the wood-people / the wool-people*”)–the beast folk who have not seen the stars, perched on the sill between human and animal.

Wergar (“*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.

Pouch of adams

Three salted adams in a pouch, their mouths stopped with clay, ready to emit piercing shrieks.

Ability—the sessile gastropod emits a loud shrieking when its mouth is unstoppered.

Sacrifice (an adam is eaten)—A hero is healed or fed for a week.

Sacrifice (all three adams are given away)–The hero gains 1 cup mark and 1 coin mark.

Solar brooch

A bronze brooch, depicting the triple-sun, polished and worked until it gleams like a mirror.

Ability–Its mirrored metal surface charms the stone-using beasts of the wildlands, giving advantage to negotiations.

Sacrifice (brooch is given to beastfolk)–Hero gains the friendship of a beastfolk clan and their servitude for a day and a week. Hero also gains 1 coin mark.

