

In the end...

It wasn't the end we all envisioned. There were no nuclear blasts, endless streams of enemy troops, zombies on the prowl for human brains, comets plunging into the earth, or even aliens with superior technology. There was no global warming flooding us all or erupting super volcanoes. No, in the end it was simple mundane archaeology that doomed society as we knew it. In April of 2016, the President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, gave special permission to a group known as the Savants of the Mind, to excavate the largest *Moai* statue found on Easter Island. Using sonic technologies, they had discovered that underneath the volcanic waste that the statue sat upon, there seemed to be a full body that appeared to be attached to the Moai statue's head. The entire event was televised with a live feed, and the world watched for six months as they carefully and painstakingly dug through centuries of volcanic rock.

On September 23rd, 2016, they made contact. Having dug out to the waist of the Moai, they realized it was holding something oval-shaped, encased in an as of yet undiscovered element. It resisted all attempts to penetrate it. Cutting and drilling only dulled the bits and blades of the tool that was used. Using a blowtorch only wasted the fuel of the torch because the metal did not heat. In the end, they were forced to tie it off to an Erickson Air-crane Helicopter, which almost overheated trying to lift the metal off. The case was held together with some primitive metal hinges and the top of the case eventually broke loose releasing a red shockwave that flattened everything for 300 miles. Though the camera had fallen and lay on its side, the world still watched in awe as the brightly glowing red stone hovered above the outstretched hands of the Moai.

Shortly after the stone is revealed, Katherine Hale, the leader of the Savants of the Mind is seen walking up to it and placing her hands upon it. There is another rush of power, and she screams and turns towards the camera, her eyes noticeably glowing an ominous red as the camera and all the electricity in the world immediately dies. This is the day we call The Transition. Cars ceased to function, planes fell from the skies, and cities were leveled as nuclear plants melted down. Panic gripped populaces everywhere and people turned against their governments and each other as food and water hit critical levels. It is estimated that six and a half billion people died within the first two years to exposure, starvation, dehydration, and disease. The cruelest, heartiest, and the best prepared, survived and soon began banding together with other survivors, forming new communities with varying ideals.

July 08th, 05 AT

The next few years are a time of chaos and death as warlords and religious cults turn on each other to acquire land and people. The losers are quickly slain or enslaved and forced to serve in the militias or are bonded to favored supporters of the movement in question. On July 08th, 05 AT, Gemlord Dekker appears and single-handedly destroys multiple armies with waves of earth that swallows battalions and waves of fire that incinerate all who oppose him. Within a single year, he conquers the territory that was formerly the United States of America, giving birth to Acarea, Nation of Earth and Fire and sets himself up as High Emperor Dekker.

June 17th, 08 AT

Gemlord Dekker enslaves the minds of his people and drives them to begin building cities and infrastructure. People are forced to work around the clock and a great many die from the labor. Unconcerned, he begins a breeding program to produce additional Gemlords that he can enslave and control. His program is unrealized by him, as he finds himself confronted by Gemlord Hale. She and her army arrived floating above the land and water on vast Galleons, land on the Eastern Acaean shore and begin liberating small towns and villages.

April 30th, 09 AT

Gemlord Hale has liberated the Eastern half of Acaea and is steadily advancing West when Gemlord Dekker carries out a devastating attack that ends in Dekker forcing a high yield nuclear weapon to detonate. Unaware of the devastating power of the weapon or overconfident in his own shielding abilities, he is obliterated along with Gemlord Hale and her invasion force. All that is left is torn and twisted hulls of ships, scattered like children's toys. This begins the Age of Turbulence.

The Age of Turbulence

Over 200 Years have passed since the destruction of Gemlords Dekker and Hale. The world has been at peace and has slowly been rebuilding. Gemlords have become stories to threaten naughty children with, boogeymen crawling the night in search of human blood. Theories abound of poisonous gasses causing mass delusions which account for that time, but none can deny the crater and the toxic land that is the Festerlands. Nor can they deny the strange storm that has enshrouded the Festerlands for over two hundred years or the lethal twisted creatures that emerge from there.

Children have begun to be born with odd reflective eyes much like a cat's. Some have been said to perform small miracles like lighting fires with their minds or causing water to float in the air in whatever shapes the child wished. Many of these children are killed immediately by those fearing a return of the Gemlords. Others still, are taught ways of hiding their eyes by protective parents and may reach adulthood, though if they are ever discovered, they are hunted and killed. A small handful, are enrolled in the school of a mysterious man who claims to have been the servant of a Gemlord. The results of the training of these children have yet to be felt by the world.

Life in Acaerea

Acaerea has become a dangerous place filled with the 'Beyond'. The Beyond is the term that people use to refer to all the space beyond the town walls and fences. It is a name, a concept, and a threat all rolled up together. To go into the beyond for the people who live behind walls is a daunting and terrifying prospect for them. It means to leave the relative safety and security of what is known and enter a land fraught with dangerous people, dangerous land, and worse. To the people that live outside the wall, it is a fact of life and they struggle to brave all the myriad of dangers it brings by setting up makeshift housing, makeshift traps and defenses that are easy to move, and tend to exist in roaming communities never staying in one place too long lest they attract dangerous creatures looking for easy meals. And to a very select few, it is an opportunity, a chance to better themselves with fame and fortune, and maybe a safe place to belong or perhaps, rule.

People live in many different kinds of settlements, the grunge, the compound, Enlightened Zones, homesteadings, the lands of the Trinity, the Sisterhood of Freedom, the odd land of the Southwatch, and the Hidden Land.

Holly Mae slowly made her way through the dark and narrow passages within the Grunge. She was late. A large discovery of jewelry in an old building demanded her attention and it had taken her the better part of the day to get into the building and then even longer to get into the places where they were stored. She flitted from shadow to shadow, feeling exposed and afraid. The Grunge, in the dark, could be home to a myriad of threats. First and foremost was the diggers. A four footed large rodent, with claws as tough and sharp as steel knives. Its attitude as foul and twisted as one could get and a hunger for anything above ground that it could catch. Holly Mae has lost her little brother to a digger and she understood just what a digger could do to her. She reached another shadow and made the sharp turn towards her home, sliding underneath the fence leading to her meager home where her aging

Mother and Father awaited her. She had acquired enough this trip to buy them the supplies to either homestead or maybe to finally buy passage into the Trinity. Ducking the last spike trap, carefully avoiding the wire that would set it off, she stalked quietly up to the door, turning the hidden lock and swinging it open to a scene of horror.

She screamed as the creature slowly slid her mother's squirming body into its gaping maw. Blood dripping from the makeshift ceiling like demented rain. Glancing around in horror, her eyes locked onto her father's torso lying just below her favorite chair. A tentacle slowly writhing across the floor to latch onto it and slowly pulling it towards the creature's waiting mouth. Retching and falling to her knees, eyes pouring tears of profound sorrow, she curls up into a ball and rocks. Torchlight spills in from outside, followed by angry men with makeshift weapons. The night is filled with sickening thuds as the men make short work of the creature. They take the corpse away to burn, as a horde of women swarm in to clean the room and comfort the sole survivor of the attack. Just another day in the life of a Grunger...

People that live within the grunge are people that don't tend to fit in anywhere else, outcasts, or have been banished to live within the Beyond as a form of punishment. As the Grunge is on the outskirts of the civilized areas in the Beyond, they tend to be dirty, vulgar, borderline insane, and incredibly loyal and brave. Most scavenge jewelry and metals from the world that was, to trade with the Trinity and the Enlightened in the form of blankets, food, medicines, weapons, and the like to survive in the Beyond. As a result, they tend to be a very hardy and crafty people.



Slash grinned as he watched the Grunger girl disappear into the ruin. He appreciated days like this when they came to him and he didn't have to ambush them near the Grunge. He carefully slipped into the building just behind her, avoiding piles of loose rock and debris. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a handful of sleep root, and slowly stalked up behind the Grunger. His hand shot out as she sensed his presence behind her, but it was too late. The hand with the sleep root smeared it into her face as he wrapped his other arm around her to keep her body from collapsing. Holding her in his arms, he appreciated her physique and smiled. She would bring a lot of chits at the market. Slash tied her wrists and legs together, and threw her over his shoulder and exited the building.

He made his way back to the compound, carefully avoiding the hidden traps that was set by the morning watch. He barked out the passcode as he was challenged and the gates opened. Envious eyes followed him in from the random passersby walking by the gate. "Got yourself a real beauty thur!", Ed the gate guard said. "I'll give you one hinder'd chits fer it." Slash scoffed, "This one is easily worth a thousand! Come bid for her at the market." The guard eyed her up and down and nodded as Slash turned and continued down the road toward the slaver's market. He passed the homes of many well-to-do citizens, his eyes scanning their slaves, naked and working in the yards. His slave was worth at least ten of the ones he was looking at. "yesiree, I's gonna be rich!", as he chuckled to himself and moved onward towards his fortune.

Compounders as people have taken to calling them, are the people that inhabit the compounds. The concept of compounds were taken from the before times when people of a like idea banded together to make their own kind of life. They come in many different types of people and raiders and slavers commonly are associated with this type of life. Compounders are typically avoided as much as possible and only approached in times of desperate need. Compounders tend to be cunning and vicious with sociopathic traits.



Alana was elated! Her request for a mission has been granted by the Priestess Mother and she was leaving today! She strapped on the immaculately crafted armor of the faith, with the emblazoned folded hands of the Goddess. Lacing her belt that bore the sheath of the sword of the righteous with its silver-laced edge as she flew out the door. People dove out of the way as she charged through the narrow hall leading to the antechamber where she was to meet the Priestess Mother. Visions of being sent to the Trinity lands or maybe to some isolated village beyond the Festerlands to bring word of the God and the Goddess to the unsaved that lived there. Rounding the corner near her destination, she took a moment to arrange her armor and hair, before serenely entering the chamber.

"I hope the Goddess finds you well this morning, Acolyte Alana." The Priestess Mother's voice rang out across the chamber with clarity and no hint of the frailty her body displayed so prominently.

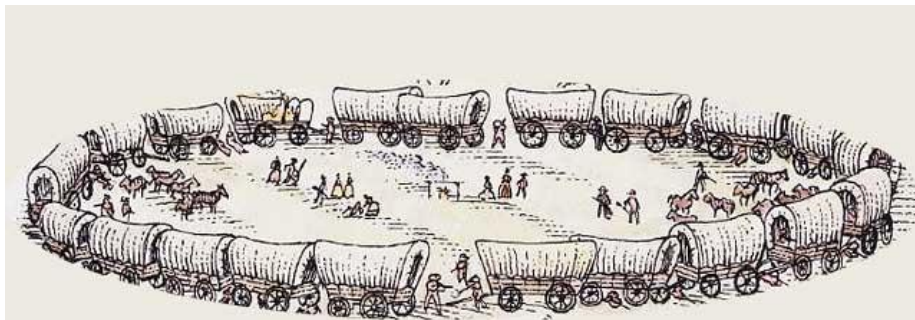


"Blessing to you, Mother. I am well and you look radiant this morning.", Alana replied. The elder smirked, knowing that the young Acolyte was trying to butter her up to get what she viewed as a 'better mission'. "I take it you are here to receive your mission?" Alana nodded, maybe a little too eagerly. "You will be going to the Grunge near the Trinity. It is a long and perilous journey but I am confident you have the skills to make it there. May the Goddess watch over you." She noted the way the young Acolyte's face fell when she said the Grunge and gave the young Acolyte a stern look. "You realize the people living and fighting for their lives in the Grunge deserve to be saved every bit as much as those in other areas." Alana sighed, smiled a reply, "Yes, Mother. I will do my best." She quickly exited looking chastised but excited none the less.

The Enlightened are the evolution of a religion that existed in the before times known as Christianity. Though they now recognize a wife figure known as Lady Magdalena. They claim that mistakes in the prior translations of ancient texts claimed that Magdalena was a whore Jesus laid with, but in reality it meant wife. Also, it proved that Jesus was actually the true God and that made Magdalena a Goddess. There are now more shrines and temples to Magdalena than Jesus. The culture in general tends to be calm, collected, and kind, but have been known to burn compounds to the ground and burn anyone who disagrees with their belief system as heretics. They tend to be fanatical and wiser than most, but are dangerous when not dealt with seriously.

Dust motes lazily drifted through the early morning light as it splashed upon the faces of the couple sleeping within the wagon. Arbon pulled the cover over his head to escape back into blessed sleep, but upon doing so, covered Molly's head and she grumpily threw the blanket off and made her way outside to relieve herself. Completely uncovered and cold, Arbon yawned and followed suit. The breakfast bell was going off in the distance and his stomach grumbled. By the time he made it back to the wagon, Molly had composed herself and had trousers and a linen tunic ready for him. "Hurry up! I don't want to be late for breakfast again! I missed out on the game hens last time and this time I hear they slaughtered a pig!", she said and scowled which caused her pert little nose to crinkle and he chuckled. "What's so funny?", she asked looking hurt. "Nothing. You just look cute when you are angry with me.", he said with absolute sincerity. Thinking back, he still couldn't believe this beautiful woman had actually said yes to his idea. They had escaped the Enlightened together by selling everything they both had and bought this worn down wagon then headed out that same day. Luck had favored them later that night and they had run into a wagon train going to the East. She smiled and playfully punched him in the arm. "Smooth. Lets go eat!", she pulled at his arm and headed off towards the food wagon.

Homesteaders are people who are tired of being under the yoke of someone else and who brave the Beyond to find their own way. Like the settlers in the before times, they travel through the land in wagons and when they find a spot of land that appeals to them, they begin settling the area. A small amount of these people even succeed, thus starting new townships, but as a general rule, they typically fall prey to the creatures that have emerged from the Festerlands. Homesteaders often hire bounty hunters to slay creatures that threaten their crops or livestock and tend to build small bounty shacks that they keep stocked with food, blankets, and firewood to encourage bounty hunters to stay near or visit often. Most homesteaders tend to excel at a specific ability, whether it be farming, ranching, archery, or any other myriad skills but tend to be average in all others.





Tamosyn, walked the deserted streets with her hand on her ancient katana, ‘Hōritsu o mamoru’, or ‘Bringer of Law’. Its blade was said to have been treated in some way by Gemlord Hale herself. She had never had to draw it to defend herself but there was an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach that she couldn’t shake. Something was different today, something she just couldn’t quite put her finger on. A soft breeze carrying the scent of rain began to stroke her cheek and she flinched as a raindrop struck her forehead, followed by several more. Berating herself for being so tense, she forced herself to relax and continued walking down the cobblestone street. The attack came so quickly she didn’t even realize it had happened until sparks flew off her blade as she instinctively blocked the claw that was as long and hard as a scythe. The skullslasher leaped backwards as Tamosyn started a counter attack, observing her intently from the side of a nearby building. She observed the distinct skull markings on the abdomen which gave the creature part of its name, its arms much like a praying mantis that had scythes for arms giving it the latter half of its name. The skull was fully developed which meant this one was poisonous as well. A baby’s cry rang out from a nearby orphanage, and drew the attention of both combatants. A young girl with a swaddled baby was standing in the doorway of the building, frozen in fear as she fearfully clutched the baby a little too hard to her chest. Its screams of protest echoing into the rapidly descending night.

In a blur, the creature flew towards the young woman and the baby seeking a quick meal with little danger, but Tamosyn was already moving, her blade engulfed in a shimmering cushion of air...

The trinity is the law of Southwestern Acorea. It is an alliance of three warlords that have come to a mutual understanding and are greatly benefitting from trade agreements set between the three. They trade in textiles, livestock, jewelry, and gold. The people in the beyond come to their gates and trade all of these for food, blankets, medicines, and other not necessarily legal things. Rumors abound of the Trinity trading in slaves, but as of yet these rumors are quickly and quietly put down by the

Trinity's private guard force. The Trinity is the only settlement with a standing army. All others only have small militias. People from the Trinity tend to be oriental in origins, but there is a healthy mix of other ethnicities as well. All people in the trinity are trained from birth in obedience to the Trinity and a chosen weapon that they typically master by adulthood. Most people of the trinity come across as arrogant and unconcerned with all other people.

"Melani, keep your guard up!", the Armsmaster barked. "I'm doing my best! You've given me too large a sword!", Melani glared at the overbearing woman. Though she was slight of frame, Juliany the Armsmaster knew her art better than most people knew how to walk. "Quit whining! You need to build muscle and that little threading needle you call a sword isn't going to do that for you.", Juliany growled. Melani felt the anger rush through her body as the lithe, dark-skinned woman insulted her mother's blade. Without thinking, she made a wild, uncontrolled cut at her opponent. Juliany easily parried the haphazard attack and swept Melani's feet out from under her. The contact her butt made as she impacted the hard cement floor cooled Melani's anger immediately. The Armsmaster offered her a hand up as she lectured, "You shouldn't let your emotions control you. If I had been a true opponent, you would have worse than a bruised rump. You would be dead, or worse..."



Meekly, Melani bowed her head. "If my mother would have had more muscle, do you think she would have survived?" a single tear splashed down on the ground at her feet. Juliany sighed at the broken young woman before her. "It certainly wouldn't have hurt but we both know no one could have survived that raid. It was well planned and even better executed. Somehow they knew where that patrol would be and when." Melani nodded and quietly said, "May I be excused Armsmaster?" Juliany nodded and Melani turned and headed out the door feeling the other woman's stare on her back all the way out. In her mind she still berated herself for not being at her mother's side when she needed her most. That patrol was to have been her first and the night before she had fallen ill with debilitating nausea and stomach cramps. The next morning, her mother led the patrol out and was not heard from again. It took over a week until another patrol had found a couple corpses of the missing patrol and a few swords hidden under an ancient piece of metal. Her mother's sword had been among them. Her mother's body was not recovered but the area had been picked over by scavenging wild life and creatures, so she was presumed dead. The Sisterhood inquisitors had reconstructed the attack using footprints and tracking and determined it had been a well-planned ambush.

As she entered her quarters, she went to her wash basin and splashed cold water on her face. Toweling off her face, she looked into the faded mirror at the red haired young woman standing before her. The five foot six inch woman didn't look particularly intimidating, but the steel blue eyes held a certain fire and steel in them. Nodding, she determined she would become stronger and avenge her

mother, however long it would it take. With that, she turned and her reflection in the mirror trained with her long into the night.

The Sisterhood of Freedom inhabits the place in the old world they called Manhattan. A giant woman standing with the hilt of a broken sword held aloft to the heavens stands up to her waist in deep waters. Many women were displaced during the Dekker-Hale War and several of them banded together to form the Sisterhood of Freedom. They follow two simple precepts. First, women were always meant to be free by any means necessary which meant forming a corps of warrior women. This would later be known as the Freedom Guard. Second, women were the supreme beings as indicated by Gemlord Hale. Gemlord Dekker was weak and lost to Hale because of it. Then had the audacity to suicide taking them both with him. They vowed men would never hold that power in their lands ever again. As a result, men are cherished in their lands, but are not allowed to be warriors, are not allowed to own property, they are not entitled to a vote, and they are not educated beyond culinary arts, baby rearing, and gardening. Outside men, are either killed or captured and rehabilitated. All women must swear the Oath of Freedom when they reach the age of majority. This oath means that the woman swearing the oath agrees with their way of life and will always fight to defend it until death. Those that refuse are given a week's worth of food and water, and are escorted to the gates of the city which are forever closed to them when they leave. Women that leave the Sisterhood of Freedom lands are either criminals being banned, on a mission for the Sisterhood, or escapees who disagree with the ideals of the Sisterhood. The latter are often hunted across the land. Sisterhood women are typically lightly trained in swords and are educated.

Vandy stood on the overlook gazing at the waves travelling inward towards the shore. The sun had just risen a moment before to bathe the white sands, palm trees, and the ruined city beyond in its golden light. His eyes were not focused on the beatific scene before him though. A scene quite different was playing out in his mind's eye. Two hundred foot waves rapidly approaching the land, prepared to flatten everything before them and well beyond. Vast networks of lightning filled the sky, illuminating the roiling angry black clouds that they emanated from. As terrifying as the scene he beheld was to him personally, he instinctively knew that the real threat lay just behind those waves and it was rapidly approaching as well. Vandy had no idea what the threat was, but the anger, the malice, and the absolute loathing were palpable in the very air about him. His feet involuntarily stepped forward, closer to the sheer drop that promised a quick ending, free of suffering. A second step and he felt his troubles drifting away into the dark wind.

The light was blinding, he squinted to see and realized he was staring up at the terrified face of his grandson Gillis. Up? Oh. He was laying on his back. This was a curious development. "Papa! You almost stepped off the edge but I saved you!", the over eager voice exclaimed. The inner monologue continued. Well, that certainly explained why he was laying on his back. Then it hit him. He had almost been coaxed off the cliff by the very thing he had been watching for. It was much closer than he had originally assumed, or more powerful. His senses returned all at once and the world sharpened around him. He was being hugged by a crying Gillis. "Why did you want to step off the ledge, Papa? Did I do something wrong?" Vandy cleared his throat, and attempted speech for, what felt like the first time in years. "I'm alright. The birthright overwhelmed me is all." The twelve year old sniffled a bit more but

stood up, wiped away a few more tears, and offered to help the older man up. He reached for the boys hand and caught sight of the birthmark on his eyes that resembled a single eye framed by eyelashes.

-JUMP-

The thought penetrated his mind like a sword thrust. It pulled him to his feet faster than he thought was possible. His grandson was looking at him oddly, weighing if he was needing help again.

-JUMP-

He spun around and flung himself off the ledge with everything he had. Gillis lunged for him, but he wasn't fast enough and he had to grab a small tree growing out the side of the cliff to save himself. Vandye fell calmly, looking upwards at his dangling grandson. He felt detached from the world. He wondered if Gillis would be ok. He thought back to his vision and wondered if everyone would be ok. Then he hit the rocks and thought no more.

Gillis saw his grandpa hit the rocks and at that moment, felt like he was struck by lightning. He kept his grip on the branch and slowly pulled himself up. He lay on the hard rocky ledge trying to make sense of a world that his grandpa would inexplicably throw himself off a cliff for absolutely no reason. After a while, he began to feel numb and began to pull himself to his feet. That's when he saw the birthmark, in the shape of an eye...



The Southwatch is located just North of what was New Orleans in the before times. It is populated by an odd people that believes the next threat to Acaerea will come from the South. Their leaders are said to be powerful seers, marked as such by an odd birthmark on their forearm in the shape of an eye framed by eyelashes. They welcome all who are in need but do not allow any to settle without participating in a ritual of rebirth. The ritual is designed to help the newcomers to shed their past and begin their life in the Southwatch anew. After the ritual, criminals are at peace with their pasts, wanderers are at peace with their new surroundings, and even insane people are strangely sober and ready to begin again. Little is known about their society beyond what an outsider sees. They tend to be peaceful and maybe a little too laid back and easy going. Southwatchers tend to have an uncanny sense when danger is near.

Sarah concentrated intently on the pure white gem glowing with a faint luminescence before her as if it gently floated in the air as if on a light breeze. Gathering her thoughts, she envisioned a room full of light and mentally reached for the gem, as her mental hand came into contact with the gem, she felt the power flow into her and contact the mental image she had built. The room flared with an incandescent light for a brief moment. She felt the power twist and jerk in her hands like a great serpent attempting to devour her. Sarah's concentration wavered and she lost the mental image. No longer having an outlet, the power lashed out and she found herself thrown back, her mental grip on the gem releasing as she hit the floor painfully. "Well done, Sarah. You have taken the first step of a grand journey." Alesandur's mouth twisted into a wide smile.

Reaching her feet, she rubbed her backside and grinned sheepishly. "Yes, but I couldn't hold it so I failed," her crystal clear soprano voice filled the small chamber. "With each failure, comes a success because you tried. This time, you were able to touch the power and that is amazing in itself, as you are the first student in this school to do so!" He exclaimed proudly. Sarah's eyes lit up at this revelation, a smile dancing on her lips, "Really?!" Alesandur nodded excitedly, "yes!" He laughed as she danced around the room in an impromptu victory dance. The dance came to an abrupt stop as she whirled on him, suddenly serious. "What's next?" the hunger for knowledge blazing bright in her eyes.

No one knows exactly where the Hidden Land is located. Rumors abound that it is nowhere on a physical map, though people that have been there swear that they walked or rode to it. The children speak of a bridge of stars they had to traverse to get to it, but these accounts are discounted as a child's whimsy. No matter its location and no matter how you get to it, one fact remains; it is where the school is located. The school is run by a man claiming to have been the servant of a Gemlord, though he never mentions which one. He goes by the name 'Alesandur' and the physical accounts of him differ immensely. Some say he is an ancient, withered man with a tired gravelly voice, others say he is a young man in the full bloom of life, with a tenor voice and an easy laugh, still others claim he is a man who's skin is black as night and speaks with the wisdom of the ages. All accounts agree in one common fact. He is the man solely responsible for

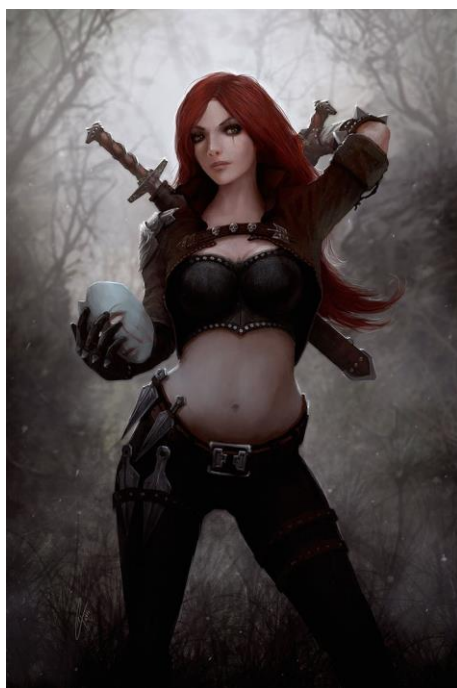


abducting the children born with the curse that is marked with the reflective eyes. The mark of the Gemlord.

Finding a path

Holly Mae trudged through the narrow paths in the grunge, eyes downcast. Every so often a hawker would attempt to sell her a trinket or a potion to ward away the flux or to cure whatever ailed her. An empty eyed gaze is all they received for their trouble as she trudged on. The cheers of an excited crowd ignited her curiosity and she veered in the direction the noise was coming from. Peering out into a crowd from a lone passage, she observed the scene. A large man holding aloft the head of some foul, misshapen beast stood in the center of the crowd. She noted the crossbow strapped to his back and the longsword in an ornately decorated holster hanging from his hip. A snort and a stomp from the edge of the crowd drew her eyes to a large white horse. No, not a horse a cornutum. Tales were told over fires of great herds of horses with large ram-like horns on their head that roamed the Northwestern Mountains of Acorea, but she had thought they were just myths. This one stood at least 17 hands tall and had a fierce intelligence in his bright emerald green eyes. She noted the silver tipped spear attached to the black silver tooled saddle strapped to the cornutum's back.

The crowd dispersed as the man disappeared into the Elder's house. As area fell into shadow, a slight muscle cramp reminded her she had been hiding here staring at the cornutum for a while. She quickly scurried back to her home, eating some bread and holed-cheese, and quickly readying herself for sleep. Plans of following the Bounty Hunter and learning from him filled her mind. Unbridled anger flowed through her, infusing her very being. Death would come to all the creatures at the business end of her weapons. Her parents would be avenged.



Upon signing the contract binding a tenth of the character's income to the Bounty Hunter Chapter that they are choosing to train from, a rigorous training program begins that will consume two years of their life. If they fail twice at any of the tests during training, they will find themselves apprenticed to another profession with a small amount of chits to see them to that profession's trainer. Training is hard and grueling and few that participate in it would choose to do it a second time if they had it to do over again. Those that succeed are assured a life without many wants, as they will find a warm bed and a meal in most places they travel, provided they keep a good reputation and continue hunting the beasts that prey on the people living in the beyond. The Trinity and the lands of the Sisterhood of Freedom are the exception. The Trinity has a large army and many hired mercenaries that they may call upon that handle the security of the Trinity lands. They do have a healthy respect for Bounty Hunters and occasionally hire on Bounty Hunters as

creature slaying consultants for short periods of time. The Sisterhood welcomes female Bounty Hunters, but will refuse entry or solace to male Bounty Hunters. Captured male Bounty Hunters who are able to show their chapter's mark to the Sisterhood will be allowed to leave, unlike any other men travelling with them.

The entire first year teaches new recruits to fight. They choose a weapon and then are assigned a weaponsmaster to learn from. The weaponsmaster and student are inseparable during this time, constant drills and lessons coming at seemingly every moment of the day. At the end of the year, they must face off against another student. This is not a win or lose battle, as that would be counter-productive. The battle is judged by ten weaponsmasters that assign points to the bout. If the student earns at least one point per judge, they will pass. If not, they begin the year over with another weaponsmaster. The final year is spent out in the field, tracking and observing the creatures, learning the weaknesses unique to each general type. Upon completion of the year, they are sent on a three month mission to find and kill an undocumented creature near the Festerlands. If they succeed, the knowledge of the beast is added to that chapter's books and sold to other chapters at a premium. If they fail, they are given a letter of recommendation and sent to the Trinity lands as a mercenary if the former bounty hunter trainee wishes it. Otherwise, the letter of recommendation will serve as proof of their weapon skill and get them hired just about anywhere as long as they maintain at least a neutral reputation.

A bounty hunter trainee that graduates is provided a basic weapon and basic armor stamped with the seal of their chapter, and provided basic gear to get them started in their new profession. They are then partnered with another bounty hunter for an additional two years to gain experience both in the beyond, and within the myriad of towns, settlements, cities, and local governments. After this time is complete, they are given the title of bounty hunter journeyman and are sent into the world on their own. A bounty hunter journeyman is also awarded a new weapon of their skillset that has been silvered. No one remembers when the tradition of using silver to kill creatures came from, but it has proven effective more often than naught.

Slash glowered in the dark at the slaves sleeping in the cages around him. The familiar face of the captured girl peering at him with hate from beyond the bars of the cage directly in front of him. Pain flared through his wrists when he tried to adjust his position, as the bindings tying him to the slave pole dug in deeper into his flesh. If he had taken the time to examine his catch before he tried to sell it, the slaver mark displayed prominently on the back of its shoulder would have identified it as owned property. As a result, he was now being executed for theft of a slave, a cardinal sin in Aaronsdale, the compound he was raised in. Angry at his own stupidity, he jerked against the bindings holding him to the post. Another sharp spike of pain slammed through his wrists and he grunted involuntarily, and he had to breathe deeply before he could see again, but something was different. The bindings felt looser than before. Gingerly, he flattened his wrists against the post and slowly slid them upwards. The bindings held for a moment and then fell loosely to the ground.

Glancing around, there was no patrol in this portion of the yards at the moment. His eyes locked onto the girl's face again. The hate was gone replaced by a look of terror as she realized he was free. Walking over to the cabinet that held all the cage keys, he punched in the code for the compound and took the key for her cage. Quietly, he approached the cage and she backed away quickly, tripping over a

sleeping woman who grunted angrily in her sleep and rolled over, once again unmoving. Slash put his finger up to his lips in a universal gesture of silence. The key slid easily into the lock and he turned it, feeling the familiar click as it released. His eyes skimmed over the myriad figures lying together in the cage as he motioned to the girl to approach the open door. It glared at him and stayed put. "I am going to release you.", he sharply whispered. It looked at him with a look of profound distrust. "Fine! Then just stay here and wait for your Master to retrieve you. I am sure he will be VERY happy to see you. You aren't too attached to your feet are you? Slaves that run have their feet broken so they can never run again. Best of luck to you.", he began to shut the cage door and turn away. The cage door stopped closing. Turning back, he saw it was holding the door, preventing it from closing. It looked pleadingly at him. He nodded and it scrambled out of the cage staying close to him. The sound of boots on hard ground sounded across the yard, signaling an approaching patrol. Quickly, he entered the cage and woke up a pair of young men, and explained the numbering system for the boxes that held the cage keys. They quickly acquired cage keys and began opening cages and waking slaves. Sensing freedom, hundreds of slaves scattered into the city, with alerted slaver patrols in hot pursuit.



Slash quickly grabbed the girl and pulled her towards the sewers. It was their only chance and the only way out that didn't include a locked gate. They skittered through shadows and avoided torchlight wherever possible. "Where you going, boy?!", a gravelly voice from the shadows ahead of him demanded. Squinting into the darkness, Slash could just make out the form of Ganjor, the leader of the compound. Feeling his heart sink deep into his chest, he gauged their chances of dodging past the massive mountain of a man and into the opening to the sewers. Electing against it, he whispered under his breath, "Play along."

"I was merely leaving with my property. No one asked me my side in all of this, and Masura owed me a ton of chits, so when I found this", he gestured at the slave, "roaming the wastes, I captured it and considered his debt paid.", Slash said angrily. Ganjor was visibly taken back by Slash's open hostility. Slash had always been a weak raider and was generally unproductive in their society, so the question of his innocence had never arose in his mind. "Why does Masura owe a miserable wretch like you? What could you have that would have been worth the obvious value of this slave?", the man demanded. "We were gambling. I was out of chits and I bet a year of my freedom against a pound of chits. He lost and refused to pay me and had me thrown out of his manor house.", Slash quickly improvised. Narrowing his brows, the larger man considered. Masura did have a gambling problem, and this story was probably not unrealistic. Without proof, however, it was Slash's word versus the word of a rich house of the compound. "Since she is

obviously my property”, Slash continued, “I propose we share it. No one ever comes back here, and that was my original intention...”, he winked. Ganjor looked the slave up and down and again reconsidered his position. It was a very attractive slave and Slash was being very generous IF he was telling the truth. His lust finally making up his mind, a lewd smile split his face and he advanced on the slave. It held its breasts out to him and as he reached for them, he felt a brief pain as the iron axe head cleaved his skull into two. Slash slid the weapon into his belt, and thanked whatever passed for gods that they were next to the woodcutters shack. He led the way and they disappeared quietly into the sewers.

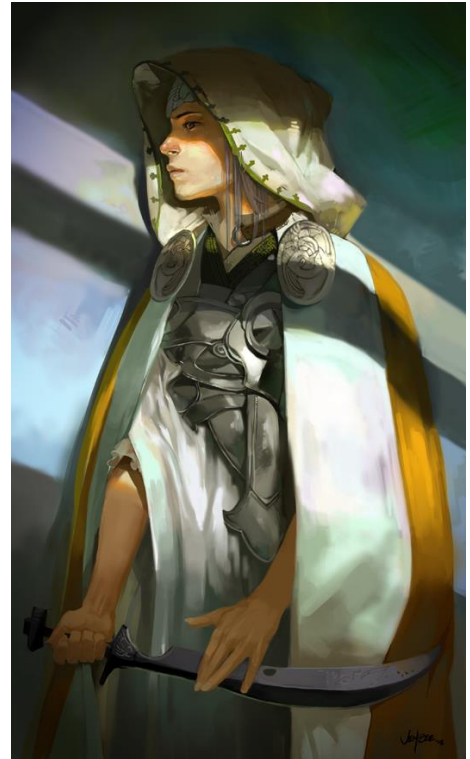
Raiders are typically lumped together into everything that is wrong with the beyond. In most cases, this is truth. However, there are many who aren't necessarily mean or cruel, they are just normal people who were born in the wrong place or ended up there and are just trying to survive in a bad situation. Raiders aren't necessarily picked for their cruelty, though it helps, but by the health and apparent loyalty to the compound. They are not required to learn any one skill, except a weapon. There are a myriad of skills available to an aspiring raider if they choose to learn. To be considered as a permanent placement in a raiding party, each member must acquire and share one thing with the compound every raid, and must fight without cowardice. Of course, the more one acquires and contributes, the more they rank with the raiding party.

Should a member of a raiding party ever choose to leave his compound and relocate, there are a few steps that must be done for this to be allowed. First, a compounder must approach the raid leader. The leader will often beat the raid member requesting to leave within an inch of his/her life. Once this has been survived, the soon to be ex-compounder must submit him/herself before the raiding party and request their permission to depart. Again, the person leaving must survive a hit from everyone in the raiding party. After this has been done, the person is granted permission to leave after the leader chooses what body part the individual will leave without as a blood price for their freedom and as a reminder of the price of turning their back on the compound. Depending on how hurt the leader is about the member leaving, most of the time this is a pinky finger or a toe. Other times, however, intimate parts are chosen. There is no backing out when it gets to this point and unless the person leaving can fight off the entire compound, it always happens and they are ejected from the compound immediately after to start their new life with a profound appreciation of their freedom.

Sinking up to her knees in the mud and the muck, Alana made her way towards the outskirts of the Grunge land that was known as Trin-grunge. Lightning flashed across the sky and a peal of thunder quickly followed suit. The rain pounded down even harder, if it could be believed. What a miserable place. Grimacing, she thought of all the hours of scrubbing she would have to do to get her armor back to the shine she was accustomed to. Another flash of lightning lit the sky. Was that a person just up ahead in the inky black that was the storm? “Please, my Goddess, share a small portion of your sight with Me.”, she prayed. The darkness lightened a bit and she was able to see a young boy stuck in the mud ahead. Leaning slightly to the side, he didn't appear to be moving. Finding it impossible to run towards him in the mud, she unsteadily made her way closer and closer to him.

Suddenly she was knocked sprawling on her back in the mud. A man with a drawn sword stood over her facing towards the boy. "Get away you fool!", he yelled. Turning his back on her, sword held overhead, he charged the figure of the boy. Alarm started to restore her mental faculties that being knocked on her back had diminished. Slowly pulling herself to her feet, she concentrated on his retreating back and began to ready a holy bolt in her mind. "Goddess, please give me the power to stop this man from committing murder-", she stopped mid-prayer as the ground around the boy erupted and he rose up from the ground on a small hill. Blinking the rain out of her eyes, she concentrated harder. Not a hill, a creature with a large gaping maw with jagged rows of razor sharp teeth. Glancing back to the boy, she realized the boy's torso was actually part of the creature's head and that the man charging the creature had just undoubtedly saved her life.

Tendrils shot out at the man and he easily severed them before they could entangle him. Slicing downward with the sword, he was rewarded with a spray of foul liquid as he cleaved a portion of the creature's maw. Before he could regain his footing from the strike, however, a second eruption next to him sent him sprawling as a second creature ascended out of the mud. Instinct kicking in where thought was failing her, she released the bolt she had been envisioning in her mind at the newly emerged creature. White, radiant light streaked out in the form of a sliver, and slammed into its open maw. Taken back, the original creature skittered backwards away from the light. In the confusion, she quickly made her way to the man, helping him to his feet and together, they retreated into the countryside.



The Warriors of the Faith are identified by the church at a young age. The local clergy often identify these young children as unusual in some way and send for an agent of the church. If the child passes all the tests of the agent, he or she is invited to join the church. Children whose parents refuse, often don't survive childhood. They just seem to fade away when they reach twelve years old and those that don't die go missing within a few weeks of turning thirteen. The church has been accused of causing the deaths and disappearances, but lack of proof and their sincerity in stating that the loss of these children to the world is staggering and that if they could prevent it, they would assuredly do so.

Children that enroll are treated with respect and deference. They are educated in their choice of sword, the crossbow, the holy word, and something called *spirituality*. Spirituality gives a Warrior of the Faith abilities directly from the God or the Goddess, allowing them to perform miracles in the field. These empowered warriors are a driving force for peace and alleviation of suffering of homesteaders, grungers, and others who are left defenseless and unprotected in the beyond. Their main mission is to protect the world from a recurrence of Gemlords. Should they suspect an individual of being a Gemlord, they are to send word to the church, and then shadow the individual until they receive orders to act.

The Warriors of the Faith are still in many aspects, children. They are not cold blooded killers, they believe in the goodness of the world that surrounds them. They also are taught that if they lose their innocence, they lose their spirituality and the ability to channel the abilities that their God or Goddess bestows upon them. Honesty, compassion, valor, justice, sacrifice, honor, piety, and humility are all the virtues that embody a Warrior of the Faith.

One look at Arbon's ashen face and solemn, almost haunted look as he returned, was all that Molly needed to be thankful she hadn't gone on the rescue. Thinking back to the events that led up to this moment, she still couldn't reconcile it all in her mind. Morning had been the usual affair of breakfast, hitching up the wagons to the horses, and then waiting for their turn to leave as the wagon train uncoiled itself from its defensive positions. A little groggy from sleep, and missing out on a share of the pheasants the hunters of the group had shot earlier because Arbon didn't want to wake up, had left her in a foul, impatient mood. The need to be on the way and moving was grating her last nerve and everyone seemed to be moving so slowly.

The wagon ahead of them was being pulled by a team of mules who had gotten it into their heads that they didn't want to leave just yet. Arbon sat quietly next to her, reins in hand and patiently waited to encourage his own team to move. "How can you be so patient?" she demanded. "This isn't the first time those beasts have delayed us. Can't you talk to the Wagonmaster and have us moved ahead of th-" Molly paled and fell silent as the wagon ahead of them slowly rose into the sky with the mules dangling by the thin straps that connected them to the wagon, braying in fear. A great black monstrosity of teeth, eyeballs, and wings carried the dilapidated wagon and its passengers away towards the horizon. She forced herself to watch until a strap holding one of the mules snapped and it plummeted to its death. The creature then dove towards the ground and disappeared in the tree line.

Soon after the Wagonmaster had come around requesting volunteers to rescue any survivors. Arbon and Molly were near the back of the train and the man had a mere two volunteers. Guilt changing her outlook on things, she immediately volunteered. Arbon objected and took her place instead. Now, hours later, she ran over to him and hugged him thankful he was safe. "It didn't want to eat them." He deadpanned. "It wanted to slowly tear their skin to hear them scream." A tear ran down Molly's cheek. "Didn't they have a small boy? Did he get away?" hope colored her voice. Arbon's face broke and tears began pouring out of him. "No, when the creature was done with the woman, it grabbed the man who was holding the boy. As he was dragged to his fate, he broke the boy's neck." He sobbed. "The creature seemed very disappointed with him and pinched off a few inches of skin every time he stopped screaming. It took 3 hours for him to die. Immediately after, it devoured the remaining mule and flew off, leaving all the pieces of people behind." He paused, "We waited an hour or so to make sure the creature wasn't coming back and we burned everything. It's the only peace we could provide to them." She nodded sadly and hugged him tightly. It was the only peace she could provide to him.

Dark fell around them as she was hugging him. "Must be a cloud blocking the sun because it's too early in the day for it to be getting dark.", she thought to herself. Breaking the hug to glance towards the sky, she saw black wings and claws descending on them. Her stomach lurched as the creature jerked them towards the sky. She began screaming, Arbon's tale fresh in her mind. Arbon seemed frozen with fear and dread. As they watched the ground speed away from them, a loud -BOOM- echoed through the air around them. Suddenly, they were falling, the green landscape rushing towards them. Together they plummeted

towards the ground holding tight to each other, knowing they were about to die. A rope hit her in the forehead and she jerked back away from it like it was a striking snake. Looking up to the source of the rope, she saw a small steam ship hovering above their falling wagon. Arbon quickly tied the rope to her and clung to it with a strong grip. They were lifted into the air as their wagon disintegrated into a million pieces on the hard ground beneath them.

A smiling man standing next to a smoking canon was the first sight that greeted them as they pulled themselves over the edge of the ship and onto the deck. As they lay panting on the floor, grateful to be alive, the man walked over to them, peeking over the rail next to them, "I would say your tenure as a homesteader has ended tragically, yet fortuitously!" He announced. Arbon and Molly slowly pulled themselves to their feet and regarded the man with curiosity. "Fortuitously? We almost died!" Arbon began while Molly held her breath, obviously waiting for the other boot to fall on them both. The man, undeterred, continued. "Your peril was alleviated by my cannon and then you were snatched from the jaws of a sure death by my amazing skills as a Sky Captain! You may refer to me as Captain Snyder." Arbon stifled the rest of what he was obviously winding up to say and instead said, "We thank you for that. I have seen what that beast does to its prey." Captain Snyder waved a hand as if brushing aside Arbon's words. "Yes, yes. Let's talk about your repayment for me saving your life." Molly cringed as she saw Arbon's face transform into a mask of fury. "Repayment for saving out lives??! We sold everything we had to buy that rickety wagon and the horses! We have nothing to give you!" Again, the Captain went on as if Arbon was talking to himself. "I recently had some men leave my employ. Retired and now they are missed. You two look hardy, what say you learn the trade of running an airship? I will feed you, clothe you, and pay you both. All I ask is that you work hard and learn what I have to teach." The old man laughed as the couple before him looked like they'd been poleaxed. "It's a fair deal and better than trying



to piece together a shattered old wagon and pull it by yourself, considering I didn't see any extra livestock in that wagon train." Molly was the first to recover, "We'll take it!" Arbon just nodded dumbly with a childish smile on his face. A real airship...

Acarea is a large place and as such, if the people that travelled it had to do it by horse, wagon train, or just plain walking, most would probably not get too far by becoming a creature's dinner, someone's slave, or someone's victim. This would have a certain negative effect on trade and the average prosperity for everyone. 112AT, Varlan Deimos created the Deimos engine. Deimos was a swashbuckling explorer in his youth and he had made several forays into the Festerlands. One of the few men who claimed he had been near one of the fallen Gemlords, Deimos actually claimed he had found Hale's resting place. The



Deimos engine is simply a sealed cylinder with a spinning rod attached. It has the side effect of making the matter around it lighter than it naturally is. He capitalized on his discovery by attaching propellers to the rod and attaching the whole thing to a large galleon. A portion of the ship lifted lightly into the air. He quickly made a few more and place them at key points on the ship. As he placed the last one, he was airborne. Deimos was the first known Airship Captain. Gathering all the people he trusted, he taught each of them how to make the engine. All duplicated it perfectly, but few worked. He alone knew the secret why. Hiring the few that could, he founded the Deimos workshop and began manufacturing engines for Acarea. Many have tried to steal his secrets, but when they take the engine apart, which requires destroying the casing, the engine no longer works. This has maintained Deimos being the only airship engine manufacturer in the nation of Acarea and perhaps even the world.

After a number of tragic airship crashes, he began a school which teaches qualified individuals the basics of flying an airship and navigation. An advanced course teaches evasive maneuvers and ship to ship combat. The basic class is expensive, and the advanced course requires more chits than most people see in a lifetime. All airship captains that graduate are awarded a basic airship by the Deimos workshop.

The anticipation was the worst. Not knowing when the lash would lick the skin from her back yet again. Barely conscious, she still unconsciously braced for the whip just before it actually landed, in the instant after she relaxed. Pain bloomed in a diagonal line across her back an instant before she actually heard the stroke land. Screaming out a final time, Tamosyn slid into merciful darkness.

The nightmare infiltrated her mind yet again. She felt herself slam into the Skull Reaver, driving it off balance and into a wall. It quickly sprung away from her, a rear leg slamming into her face. Off balance and spinning, she fought to regain her equilibrium, preparing to fend off any additional attack. The attack was not coming, as the creature had once again dismissed her and hared off after its original quarry. Wiping away the wetness that was flowing into her eyes, not caring if it was sweat or blood, she peered down the street. The creature had the young girl pinned and the baby in its claws, pulling it towards its open maw. Again, she watched as she sent up a prayer to the Goddess and threw her sword for all she was worth. It spun slowly towards the creature, the baby slowly disappearing into the creature's maw, then there was the flash from the sword. The entire street lit up, and in the mysterious light she saw her sword shining and accelerating towards the reaver, the air around it rippling. The flash as it hit the reaver was immense, its scream blossoming into the night, rapidly extinguished. Stumbling forward into the now dark road, she surveyed the dimly lit scene. All that was left of the reaver was its lower abdomen. Everything above that was gone... even the baby. Glancing down, she saw the young girl, her head twisted at an impossible angle, sticking out from beneath the abdomen. A soft hum drew her eyes to her sword stuck in the side of a building, vibrating softly. Numbly, she retrieved and sheathed it. Turning, she came face to face with the Captain of the Guard, sword drawn, demanding her surrender.

The nightmare faded and she began drifting through darkness. At times, pain seared her body so severely, she retreated deeper into the darkness and huddled there, disconnected and numb. Unexpectedly, light exploded around her and she found herself looking into the gentle eyes of an elderly woman. "Shhh... go back to your slumber little one. All will be right again in time." The gravelly voice slid through her mind smoothly and Tamosyn drifted back into the darkness. The pain was the first to begin to fade, only echoes of its severity still caused her to tense mentally. The nightmares still took longer, though their meaning began to fade far before the images did.

A low droning began teasing her sleeping mind. Slowly it got louder. Her mind began picking out the words from the sounds and quickly sharpened as they began to make sense. "I want the child killer out of here NOW!" an unidentified male voice shouted. "Quiet down! You'll wake her!" A more subdued gravelly voice pleaded. "Besides, we both know there was no saving that child any more than there was a chance at saving your daughter, MY granddaughter!" Palpable anger and pain flowed through the man's words, "We will never see Latisha again because that woman was not a better warrior! That baby will not come back to life and was killed because that woman is a Gemlord! I am going to the Lord and I am telling him that she is here." A door slams shut.

She had already pulled herself to her feet and stood swaying slightly before the old woman entered the room. "Why did you take me in and help me? You lost your granddaughter because of my incompetence." The old woman shook her head in disbelief. "I was part of the Sammair compound." Tamosyn thought back to her studies. The Sammair compound was a group of Mormons that had gone off on their own when they were persecuted by the local Christians. They had worked together and achieved a balance with the land. Crops were plentiful and life seemed ideal. Then a reaver horde came through. In a few hours, that compound ceased to exist. Tamosyn looked to the old woman in surprise, "You survived that?!" The woman nodded softly. "There was nothing you could have done against that thing that would have prevented those deaths." She paused, "It was a tragedy to be sure, and I am saddened beyond belief about my loss." A single tear rolled down the wrinkled cheek, "All anyone could do against those things is hide." She fiddled with a corner of Tamosyn's blanket as she spoke. "My father shoved me in an old cabinet and died on top of it to protect me. The fact that you stood up to it and even killed it at all is a true miracle. You should have been called a heroine and not taken thirty lashes." A ghost of a smile formed on the old face, "Now I have done what I could and nursed you back to some semblance of health. Take your fancy sword and leave out the back. My worthless son will be back with the guard before long, and I can't protect you from that." Tamosyn's eyes misted a little. "Thank you for your words. May I know your name?" The old woman's gravelly voice was lost to Tamosyn as the front door was kicked in. "She's in the back!", A man's voice yelled. Tamosyn quickly exited through a back window and disappeared into the streets.

The mercenary life is a lonely road for most. Many having been pushed into it by life circumstances. Some form small companies of mercenaries and hire out as a named group. The majority of mercs, as they prefer to be called, come from the Trinity and almost all are former guard members. The Trinity holds no leniency for failure and most who fail them do not live to tell the tale. Some few, do escape out into the Beyond and make their way as mercs. Trinity mercs tend to be the most honorable of the bunch, but very scrupulous in their dealings. Not many people short change a Trinity merc and live. Freewomen mercs tend to be a mix of extremes, either very honorable or a ball busting man hater that will only deal with women Patrons, and most likely to put a sword through the nearest male in a combat zone, enemy or ally makes little difference. All others tend to be from the grunge or the enlightened zones. Neither tend to be amazing fighters, but they come cheap and make superb cannon fodder.

Men! Men were at the gate requesting entrance. Melani rushed to a vantage point overlooking the entrance zone, her questing eyes picking out three young men in the twilight. Giggling, she watched as the gates opened and a squad of the guard quickly surrounded and captured them without a weapon being drawn. Giddily, she went to find her close friend Amelay to tell her what she had seen. They were both almost of age and would have the right to pick a mate and the three men would be through rehabilitation before then. Daydreaming, she envisioned coming back from a patrol to a clean dwelling and the smell of cooking dinner in the air. As she came through her door, she would have a bouquet of wild flowers for him and maybe some wild seeds for his garden. Seeing her, he would coo over the flowers and seeds and hug her. He'd Encourage her to relax while he finished dinner, he would ask her to put her weapons away, his distaste of them quite clear. She would sigh and put them

away to keep the peace, grateful in her heart that he cares about her welfare. They would eat a quiet dinner together, and she would complement him on his cooking skills and smile as he blushed with pleasure. Then, he might sing her a tune or two while she hummed along. Then they would be off to bed and... what? She frowned. They would sleep? That didn't sound right from hearing some of the older women talk, but she supposed she would figure it out in time.

Snapped out of her reverie by the clanging of metal on metal pipes, she changed course and headed for her small dwelling. Amelay almost ran into her as she rounded a sharp corner. "What's going on?!", the young dark haired girl demanded. "I don't know! They just captured three men, so maybe it has something to do with that." Melani replied, pausing long enough to respond and then speeding down the hall. Entering her room, she quickly gathered her sword and bow, then exited heading for the gate area.

Melani was one of the first to arrive, several others quickly falling into line behind her. She approached the Guard Mistress, "What's happening?" The Guard Mistress was a tall woman, her blonde hair was streaked with grey and her face weathered by many years of long patrols in the sun. It currently wore a concerned frown which deepened the lines between her brows. "An unidentified force is approaching the gates. It's all men." Without thinking Melani blurted, "The poor things! They must be forced to participate!" The older woman visibly restrained herself and the younger girl took a step back uncertainly. "Not all men are properly domesticated, Melani! These men are savage and most will be unable to be rehabilitated. They will hold you down and all of them will use you if you allow them and then they will kill you! No more talk of "poor things" being part of an invading MILITARY force!" Melani, white in the face and looking visibly shaken and ill, bowed her head and said, "I understand." The older woman, not acknowledging her turned back and looked through the spyhole in the gate. Three men were approaching the gate on foot bearing a flag of parley.

Sighing, the Guard Mistress opened the inner gate, leaving the barred ones closed securely. "You are trespassing on Freewomen lands! This is the only warning you will get to turn and leave!", her alto voice tumbled across the space between them. "You fuckin' bitches have a few of our men! We will have them back or we will burn your lands down around your fuckin' ears!", a deep masculine voice responded. Several women gasped at the audacity of this man. Didn't he know they were superior in every way? Keeping a level head, the Guard Mistress replied, "They are our prisoners. They asked for sanctuary and we granted it. They will receive proper education and become part of our society. You may leave now, I will NOT ask again!" The emphasis of her demand quite clear in her tone. "Well, then, how about a prisoner exchange? Those men are important to us, so let's have us a trade. Let it be said that Jinga Vego is a fair man." The deep voice carried back across. The furrow in her brow grew deeper as she saw three women trudge woodenly forward. A voice from behind her exploded in the stillness, "Mother?!" Melani did not shrink away from the Guard Mistress's glare. Her eyes narrowed in anger, "Did you know she was still alive?" The older lady met her gaze evenly. "I knew there was a possibility, but those women were taken far from our lands, and to pursue would potentially start a war we weren't ready for." She paused, weighing her next words, "We are now."

The masculine voice rolled across the landscape, "Are you whores going to trade or not? I've got better things to do than to waste my time with you bitches." Melani's anger was palpable, "Make the trade! That's my Mother!" The Guard Mistress's eyes did not leave Melani's as she issued her orders. "Notch!" She paused. "Fire!" The young women's stricken look almost broke her heart, but she

knew the condition of those women. Better to keep her mother's memory preserved in her mind rather than the memory of the broken woman standing before their gates. "I hate you!" Melani shouted and lunged at the Guard Mistress who promptly stepped to the side, tripping the young woman. "Save your anger for the battle! We will settle up after!" the older woman growled and turned to command her troops, her eyes scanning the battlefield and the three sad shapes that lay unmoving on the battlefield. "Attack!"

The Freewoman guard corps, tend to be superbly trained, most girls learning the basics of fighting as toddlers, and then begin formal weapons training when they are strong enough to lift a bow and then a blade. A mother's job is train her daughter until her late teenage years, gaining the honored title of Weapon Mistress. Due to the nature of the training, the choice of weapons falls to the mother. Few women know multiple weapons and those that do are typically marked with tragedy. Mothers sometimes die on patrol, and other mothers must fill the void, the honor of training the daughter of a fallen comrade is universally accepted, even among women who hate each other.

Young women who reach the age of majority are tested by a panel of three other Weapon Mistresses. Should they pass, they are sent on a series of choreographed patrols that they are evaluated on. The young women being tested have no knowledge of the nature of the patrols and are graded on their instincts, reactions, and judgements. Those that pass are awarded a position in the guard, the others are trained in other jobs, such as architects, stonemasons, or other job skills that benefit their society. Only guardswomen are ever allowed to ascend to freewomen government, and are typically groomed by the Guard Mistress for these positions.

Gillis took another sip of coffee, his fifteenth cup tonight. Tiredness was heavy upon him but sleep terrified him. The nightmares would come when his eyes closed. Terrible and horrifying disjointed images that would engulf him and make his reality their own. Even as his mind winced away from the thought of them, his eyes betrayed him and closed momentarily. Again, he was standing on the beach as the monstrous wave sped toward him in slow motion. He watched as fishing boats were lifted up into the wave and then hurled off the crest, small ant-like shapes falling from them to plummet into the water below. As horrible as the wave was, he did not fear the wave as much as what he knew his behind the wave. A vile loathsome intelligence coiled on the horizon like a giant poisonous snake poised to devour all of Acorea and maybe the entire world...

Birds scattered as his scream echoed throughout the small coastal village Gillis called home. His mother ran into the house wielding a frying pan like a knight of the old stories wielding a dragon slaying sword to rescue her dear son. She found him huddled and shaking in his closet, drenched in sweat. Unseeing eyes looked through her at terrors that she couldn't comprehend. Making a choice, she grabbed a bucket, rushed to the shore and filled it with cold sea water. Upon entering his room, she drenched him with it.

As the wave crashed down upon him, he felt the coldness of the sea water and was ejected from the unnatural nightmare. His eyes focused and locked onto his mother standing before him with an empty bucket. Throwing his arms around her, the tears poured from him in a torrent as she tried to console the young boy. The tears subsided in time, and she finally spoke. "I think it's time for you to go to the island of the seers." "No, Momma! You need me here. I just need some speed weed. I'll go find

some.” He made to leave and she held him there. “No, Gillis. You can’t fight this. Your Papa tried for a long time when he was young and it almost killed him. I don’t want that for you. You will come back when you can control it. I will be fine until then.” Fresh tears began spilling down his face again. “I’m sorry, Momma! I should be stronger, then I could stay with you!” “Hush child. The gods will what they will. You must follow the path they have decreed for you. I will always be upon your path no matter where they take you.” She said with a small sniffle of her own. “Now come, let us get some clothes together and a couple meals to get you to the island. You best leave today.”

The seers inhabit a small island off the coast of Southwatch. It is said the island can only be found by those with genuine need and many have been lost at sea in their search for it. Only a handful of Seers have been heard of in the past two hundred years and none have been confirmed. Stories tell of a Seer’s ability to predict and influence events, of the ability to remove themselves and sometimes others from harm’s way, and of their unique fighting styles that rely on hand and fist. If the old stories hold true, little training is needed to be a Seer as one is born to it, and the suspected Seers that have been recorded are all socially awkward, and maybe a little or lot on the autistic side of life.

Alesandur’s attacks were brutal, each slamming deeper and deeper into her shield and it was all she could do to keep the image of her shield in her mind. Already her skin was dry and cracked from the intense heat that penetrated into her shield and her mind reeled in pain. The man was going to kill her if she didn’t do something soon! Thinking back, Alesandur had told her that her attunement was Zircon, so her range was White to Blue, but what did that mean really?? Just then, a particularly keen attack slammed through her shield and the force of it knocked her off of her feet and into the wall, the heat of it scorching her badly. Heat? What if Blue meant water? Before the next attack was able to hone in on her, she pictured her shield in her mind once again, this time she added a faint sheen of water to the surface of it and reached mentally for the white gem hanging from the necklace between her breasts. The jolt of power suddenly flowing through her was much more familiar after the months of training since her first time handling it, and although it was still difficult, she touched it to her mental construct and felt it come to life around her. Just in time! A larger attack than before slammed into her shield and she felt very little heat, the surface of her shield rippling around her like ripples on a small pond when a stone is dropped into its center.

“Very good, Sarah! I was worried for you for a moment, but again you excel in your studies!” Alesandur exclaimed! “Now come, let us tend to those wounds. You are fortunate I was going easy on you, a true Gemlord won’t be so gentle!” Sarah gasped! “Going easy on me?! You were trying to kill me!” He just shook his head and smiled sadly. “No, young one. True attacks will be much more terrifying and deadly than you can imagine. You must learn to creatively use your attunement range against other ranges, or you will die.” He paused for effect, watching a bead of sweat drip down her forehead and then continued, “You have learned that the extreme portion of your range is water and that counters heat, but what if the Gemmer or Gemlord you face uses the earth against you? That neat shield trick you just used will be a detriment to you. The water on the shield will accumulate the earth and you will have a ball of mud around you, making it very hard to see. What then? If you cannot see, you cannot counter more creative attacks. Begin thinking of different scenarios you may face and begin building your mental arsenal, Sarah, you won’t have time to do it on the field.” She nodded, her

temperament now more thoughtful than eager. This power was exciting and she couldn't wait to explore it further, but she had never stopped to think how it could be used against her. This session had been a sobering experience.

Gemmers are the best kept secret in Acarea. As far as Acarea or the world is concerned, the Gemlords are dead and not returning. The general attitude is, "Sure, there are some professions that use gem-like abilities, but that's just divinity or smoke and mirrors, right? Best not look too close, as they do their utmost to protect us from what lies in the beyond." This attitude changes if they see something truly unexplained come directly from an individual. A proverbial witch hunt begins and the individual accused must go through life walking on proverbial eggshells, unable to sleep, lest he/she be caught unaware. The life of a Gemmer is a truly lonely one, as they cannot trust anyone not turn them in, and if they take that leap of faith, the thought is never far from their minds.

To take a journey as a Gemmer, is to take the Tiger by the tail and attempt to hold on as it takes you through life, trying to lose you at every twist and turn. Wielding incredible powers that they can't openly use, constantly having to think on their feet against other Gemmers with a mistake meaning an incredibly horrible death, and all in a land that hates them is mentally exhausting. Those with a low mental fortitude are often victims of mental health issues, and are a danger to themselves and those around them. Most that survive into adulthood, however, do not fall into that category and will hunt those that do. Life is hard enough while people believe that the Gemlords are gone, if they actually knew that Gemmers existed, life would be impossible.

Most Gemmers pick up some sort of weapon skill because using Gem magic is incredibly draining and not a solution for most everyday problems. This is usually a dagger, bow, or slingshot as their studies typically don't afford them an opportunity to build the strength to wield a heavy blade. There are some rumored to use blades, but these are extremely rare. In the mental arts, Gemmers excel in their attunement area. To understand their elements, is to understand how to use them properly and what their weaknesses are. Unlike the mages of legend, however, they are not super intelligent and only tend to learn what they take an interest in.

Gemmers tend to feel a sense of guilt, whether it be real or imagined, over the era of the Gemlords. As a result they tend to feel they are the protectors of the weak when it comes to the creatures that come out of the Festerlands. They view Bounty Hunters as rank amateurs, using luck to deal with what is clearly a gem-induced problem. They will get along with the bounty hunter as a person, but professionally disagree with anything they suggest that seems silly or frivolous, and tend to take credit for any solution the Bounty Hunter comes up with that happens to fit with the Gemmer's solution.

Conceiving a Character

//Waiting on attribute, skill, attunement, and combat generation//

Starting as a Grunger

Life in the Grunge is hard, dangerous, and completely unforgiving. Most wake up before the sun crests the horizon, eat a very sparse breakfast if they have been at all prosperous in their scrounging along with a cup of bitterroot coffee, and then head out into the Beyond to scrounge. They sift through the places of the before times, hoping to find metals and maybe precious metals that the Trinity and others will buy from them for a pittance of chits. Rarely, a Grunge family will stumble upon a huge find and if they can get it back safely, they may make enough to buy their way into the Trinity where they are protected by the Trinity Militia and city walls. Their station in life will be significantly improved for their family and children's family forever.

Once every five years, the Trinity holds a lottery that allows a family to be allowed citizenship duty-free. Predictably, this has become a holiday known as Trinfree. It is celebrated by a day without work and an excess consumption of food, sweets only sold during Trinfree, and mass consumption of alcohol. The last is probably the largest contributor to the amount of deaths during the holiday; That and a predator that only surfaces during this holiday, the scalpor. Scalpors will knife people and steal the coin that is provided for the occasion to each family in the Trinity Grunge, to increase their own chances of being selected. Others steal them to sell to the highest bidder, as they are banned from the Trinity, or just don't have the interest to live there. Families that are given a coin will often cycle it through their family so no one knows who has it at any given time. This decreases the odds of getting targeted by a scalpor.

Other than a rags to riches story, the only thing a grunger has to look forward to is to maybe become a member of the grunge council. It is the council's sole responsibility to deal with whatever government their grunge is on the outskirts of and to make sure that a defensive network is in place

against the hazards of the Beyond. They are the ones to settle general disputes, including disputes over salvage. Their word is law, and to be banished by the council means you no longer exist to any grunger and any who sympathize with the banished are also ignored until they fall in line.

Raider Life

Depending on the roll that was made upon creation, a character may start out in two very different styles of life within raider society, a citizen or a slave. Neither tends to escape raider life without scars, as to leave it as a soon to be former citizen may lead to a maiming of a sort chosen by their former raider leader, or escaping as a slave already branded as property with many physical or psychological scars and perpetually hunted by their former Master or Mistress.

Citizen

Characters that have spent a majority of their lives within a raider compound are often morally corrupt and can be abnormally cruel. Concepts such as kindness, caring, and mercy are viewed as a basic weakness by most raiders. Although, there are exceptions to this rule, a majority of raider characters will be hard and seemingly uncaring people. If they perceive an exceptionally handsome, beautiful, or skilled individual, chances are they are marking the location of that individual in their minds as a potential slave or future asset. Additionally, they will tend to treat the individual in question as a potential possession and not an actual person, referring to them as an 'it' or 'the merchandise'.

Although there was a reason that the character left their old compound, the journey from raider to Acorea productive citizen should not be an easy transition. Old lessons are the best learned, so while they may travel with their newfound companions (or future possessions), they will always be slow to fit in or even accept their companions as equals. Equivalent of the pirates of legend, they have existed to plunder, pillage, and rape. The strong get what they want and the weak suffer because they are weak and thus deserving of their lot in life. This is the hurdle that a raider character must eventually bridge before they will fit in with general Acorean life.

Slave

Characters that have spent a large portion of their lives within a raider compound as a slave, are very distrustful of any potential kindness that are shown to them. Raiders use kindness and charity as a weapon against slaves as a useful tool to break their will. Depending on the variety of slave the character was within the raider compound, the character may be abnormally distrustful in differing situations. If they were a pleasure slave, then they may be distrustful on where they sleep during the night and take extraordinary measure to assure they are not molested or if they were a mule, they will be unwilling to help carry anything but their own equipment. Former slaves as a whole will refuse to be confined by anyone, even to hide.

All slaves are branded by their owner. The brand will distinguish who owns them and what their purpose was. Former slaves will do anything to keep this mark hidden, even kill, as the brand may tempt someone to find the escaped character's Master or Mistress and turn them in for a respectful reward in chits. Whenever another person sees their brand and they are not in a position to silence them, they will flee immediately, even into the Beyond. Death by a fiend is preferable to recapture by their former owner.

Living the life of the Enlightened

Characters that are born in one of the three enlightened zones have been subjected to set of rules and laws set down by the Council of God or the Body of the Mother, a majority of their lives. Due to the physical, spiritual, and moral dangers that lie in the Beyond and the lands that exist within it, both councils have decreed that young people are not allowed to leave until they reach the age of majority, which is currently sixteen years of age. As a result, either Jesus or Magdalena play a big part in their lives.

The enlightened zones follow a rigid set of laws that are said to have been given by Jesus himself. These are referred to as the Divine Laws and are adhered to under the penalty of losing your soul. If you are found to have lost your soul, a death sentence follows, to be carried out in a timely fashion. It is said that a soulless body invites demons like an abandoned house invites vagrants. Once a person has been declared soulless, they are considered beyond redemption and even their families will want to kill them to prevent their eventual corruption by demons. If an individual escapes an enlightened zone after being declared soulless, the church will dispatch a Holy Warrior to find the escapee and carry out judgement.

The Divine Laws

It is said that after the breaking of the world by the Gem Lords, Jesus appeared before a young boy named Santino Truman. He gave the boy a set of metal tablets that had the divine laws inscribed upon them. The tablets themselves were made of a strange metal that he assured would withstand the ravages of time, as would Santino. It is said that Santino still rules the council to this day.

In addition, the Lady Magdalena is said to have appeared before a young girl named Shannon Lael and provided her an identical set of tablets, and assured her that she would last as long as the tablets would. Many believe she still leads the Body of the Mother, though that would make her over two hundred years old. Both sets of tablets are said to hold the following laws:

Thou shall not kill for vanity.

Thou shall kill all enemies of the faith, be they mortal or alien.

Thou shall not create false gods.

Thou shall not elevate another god above Me.

Honor thy family and thy leaders.

Thou shall not steal from thy neighbor.

Thou shall not covet another's mate.

Thou shall not bare false witness.

Thou shall lift thy fallen brothers and sisters, lest no man or woman lift you if you fall.

Thou shall never take thy own life or thou will be lost from my sight.

These laws are universal in all enlightened zones, and are held as above the laws of any land. To go against the laws is to be declared soulless. Any seeking entrance to the enlightened zone, must swear a holy oath to follow these laws and must go through trials to determine if the individual in question has a soul or not. The trials are secret and are extreme and deadly, but those that survive are accepted as an honored and respected member of the community. Visitors are also expected to follow these laws while upon enlightened lands, otherwise they are forcefully ejected back into the Beyond.

The Holy Warriors

The holy warriors of the enlightened zones fall into two categories. The Order of the Cross and the Guardians of the Temple. The Order of the Cross acknowledges and respects Jesus's wife Magdalena, but its prime loyalty is to Jesus Christ. Order knights are always male and the bravest, most devout followers of Jesus and the Council of God and will lay down their lives to defend both. In contrast, the Guardians of the Temple are a mix of men and women that follow the tenets of Lady Magdalena. While they acknowledge Jesus and worship him as an equal to Magdalena, their loyalties lie uniquely with Lady Magdalena and the Body of the Mother. While both the Order and the Guardians follow the same basic religion, disagreements and fistfights have been known to occur between the two.

Be it the Order or the Guardians, their training is similar. Members are chosen at a very young age and are trained in a selected weapon, are given basic schooling, and are taught how to call upon the miracles of their deity. Holy warriors have an attunement in light and healing. Depending on their Attunement Level, they may be able to perform small miracles such as calling holy light into being or even regenerate a lost limb. These miracles come at a cost to the warrior and have been known to kill the person calling upon them so are used sparingly by all but the most devout.

Beginning as a Homesteader

Characters beginning as a Homesteader tend to be made of stern stuff. Choosing to leave the relative safety of the Grunge and even places such as the Trinity or Enlightened zones, they have decided to take back a piece of the Beyond as their own. Many of these choose to adventure to try to earn additional chits for their new homestead, discovering that weapons, armor, and household needs aren't always readily available or cheap in the Beyond.

Daily these characters fight off or hide from the hazards of the Beyond. Fiends, wildlife, and sometimes even nature poses constant threats. Those that begin building too close to an established settlement often find themselves sieged by standing armies or driven out by constant raids. As such, only a small percentage of homesteaders survive long enough to actually fortify their property enough to create a new safe haven; Those that do, are often very familiar with tragedy and personal sacrifice. However, their drive for a place of their own, free from oppression or subjugation is always omnipresent with them.

Beginning as part of a mercenary camp

A vast majority of mercenary camps are very honorable places. The word of the contract is binding law for a mercenary, and any character beginning life this way will not enter into any party without a clear contract detailing what they are accomplishing within or for the party, and more importantly, what they get for their services. Many mercenary camps require their members to spend two years as roving mercenaries to test their mettle and provide them with much needed seasoning before they will let them join a regular mercenary squad. As such, they require a letter of commendation from every contract they fulfill while roving. This helps reinforce their honor as an individual and their combat prowess, as well as knowing where to assign them.

It is worth noting that any camp devolving into anything less than honorable conduct find themselves unable to get contracts for their services and rapidly become raider compounds and bandit camps and will soon find themselves purged by standing militias that are close to the camp. If they are far enough out in the Beyond, they are ignored unless they cause significant problems for any established settlements attached to the major settlements. Many raider compounds started from mercenary camps, and as such some settlements distrust mercenaries in general.

Beginning as a Trinity Citizen

All things in your character's life has been provided to him/her by the Trinity of the ruling houses, as such, the Trinity expects major concessions. Two years of service in one of the Trinity's standing armies and one third of your total income as long as you are a Trinity citizen, regardless if you choose to live in the Trinity or not. When your name is recorded into the Trinity's Book of Life, you are forever bound to it. Each town within the Trinity will be given an allotment of the proceedings to assist its growth and feed its citizens. If there comes a time your character does not pay his allotment, enforcers will be sent to collect it. The minimum is always seven hundred and fifty chits, as that is a third of the average income of a Trinity citizen. Should your character be unable to afford this, he will be given a single week to achieve the funds. If he/she is still unable to pay, he/she will be stricken from the Book of Life and death squads will be sent to deal with the rogue character. The amount is due yearly on December 26th, a holiday called the Day of Honor.

Anyone starting life as a Trinity outcast, does so knowing they have been stricken from the Book of Life, and as such will be perpetually hunted by death squads whenever they are located. On the Day

of Honor, the Trinity's Onmyōji, rumored sorcerers of the ruling houses of the Trinity, pinpoint the locations of those still living that have been stricken from the Book, and the death squads are dispatched. Should the character survive, he is allowed to live until the next year's Day of Honor, when another death squad is dispatched. This will continue until the character's death. Each death squad will always be stronger than the last sent.

Trinity Doctrine

From birth, children in the Trinity are indoctrinated into the Trinity's way of life. The three ruling families are the absolute law and the rituals and conducts that are demanded by these families are mandatory to follow for their society to succeed and purport themselves with absolute honor in every facet of society. Men and women wear kimonos, women include an obi which is a giant sash that they wrap around their waist and is elaborately tied in the back. Warriors wear a woodblock pattern on their armor and their daily clothing as well as hakamas, similar to a skirt and baggy pants underneath the hakama. They occasionally wear a winged vest on top of a robe.

Unlike feudal Japan, men and women are considered equals in all things, dividing daily chores, including cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. All people within the Trinity are responsible for themselves and their town's well-being. If a town member is short on food or injured, it is up to the town to assist them in any way they are able. This could be applied to the party members, the character is traveling with. If the character is fresh out of the Trinity, he may expect this as a given outside the walls as within them.

Even the most despicable outcast of the Trinity will comport himself with the honor dictated by his Trinity Doctrine Score. The final score the character had when they left the Trinity, will never change. To determine the score, the base is 10 plus the number of years the character lived within the Trinity. A score of 25 or higher, ensure the character will always act with impeccable honor. A score below 24 will reflect that a character will always try to act with honor, but may bend the rules every now and then. A score below 10 or below understands the precepts of honor, and may try to live by them, but it isn't first and foremost in their life.

Life in a religious compound

Religious compounds are considered by most outsiders as cults. The only widely accepted religion within Acaarea is Christianity as defined by the Enlightened zones. A character beginning in a religious compound may live a very mundane life or an exceptionally surreal one, depending on what the compound has accepted as their way of life. There are religious compounds worshipping almost the entire pantheon of gods and goddesses, from Greek Gods to Sumerian ones, and everything in between. The only thing in common between each of the compounds, is the absolute fanaticism within each.

Fanaticism is a dangerous concept within Acorea, given that if enough people believe absolutely within a being it may come into being. These are called Avatars. If an Avatar comes into being, it serves the general tenements as laid down by a faith, but with absolute expectations of obedience to the precepts as laid down with no margin for error. Entire religious compounds have been destroyed, because of these beings and not all have been brought down by standing armies and militias. Some are said to have been seen wandering the Beyond in search of worshippers. There are also religious compounds that are said to be ruled by the most cunning of these beings. Their favored servants are said to be granted powers such as those granted by Jesus and Magdalena, just more elemental and at a fraction of their power. Such powers are accepted by the fanatics living within the compound as a proof that their god is all-powerful, though outside powers are still viewed with extreme distrust and fear as being Gemlord touched.

Determining Compound Size

A roll on a D100 will determine the size of the character's starting compound as found on the chart below.

<u>Score</u>	<u>Compound size</u>	<u>Amount of people</u>	<u>% Avatar Chance</u>
0 - 50	Small	50 or less	0
51-75	Medium	51 to 200	15
76-96	Large	201 to 500	30
97-00	Mecca	501+	50

When the size of the compound is determined, the GM needs to secretly roll if the compound has an Avatar, if it does, there is a 10% chance that the character is a favored individual, and has either met or been subjected to the Avatar in question. If so, the character will have an attunement range appropriate to the avatar. For example, if Zeus is the avatar, Electricity and Air will be the characters attunement range. However, in the case of Attunement Power, this is determined by the characters Religious Doctrine score divided by two.

Religious Doctrine Score

The character has lived and breathed the culture of the compound, has eaten the traditional foods, worn the traditional clothing, and has had friends and lovers that have upheld the same tenements held as sacred. This has left a permanent imprint on the character, and while the character may have left of his/her own volition, he/she will still have strong feelings regarding the religion. Other than roleplay, this value is reflected in his/her Religious Doctrine Score. His/her religious score will be reflected as a base of 10 plus one for every year he/she has lived in the compound. If the character stop practicing the religion in general, this score will decrease at a rate of a point a month as the memories move further and further into time. If the individual is a favored individual, the powers granted will also fade with the Religious Doctrine Score.

Life in the Sisterhood's Free Zone

The sound of swords clashing and the feminine screams of warriors in training are a common and reassuring sound within the Sisterhood. Toddlers run to and fro playing, under the watchful eye of the men. Older girls are taught in classrooms by female scholars, listening intently, understanding that any knowledge that comes from them could mean life and death in the future. Meanwhile, the husbands of the various women do housework, work their gardens, and prepare meals for their women that love and protect them from the evils of the world.

A character born in the Sisterhood will have a completely different experience depending on the sex they are. Women are raised to believe that men are the softer side of the species. If a man is taught to fight and left alone to run amuck, he will inevitably become evil and try to dominate everything and everyone around him because it is in his nature. As long as he is raised right, and protected by the women in his life, he will live a happy and docile existence. Woman was destined to rule and was ordained as such by the old world, the evidence being of the mighty woman in their harbor holding the hilt of a mighty sword aloft, the blade presumably lost in time to the deep waters that are waist high to the massive statue. Thus all positions of power, trades, and defense are handled by the women.

A male character has had much freedom within the Sisterhood, overseen by various men who have hugged them when they have fallen and hurt themselves, taught them how to plant various flowers and vegetables, how to properly make, repair, and clean clothes, and to properly keep house for their potential future wife. Of course, they have been severely disciplined if they touched a woman's weapon or armor without express permission to clean it. A male character that expresses interest in anything outside of what is socially allowed is gently but firmly discouraged.

Leaving the Sisterhood

A female character that has left the Sisterhood has done so only because either a disciplinary action has required her banishment or she has decided to become an adventurer because she feels she has something to prove, though this is also very frowned upon and may result in banishment anyway. Very few women leave the Sisterhood because they disagree with the social order of the Sisterhood. Female characters will view male characters with pity and extreme alarm that a man can use a weapon. She may even attempt to coddle him and always expect him to cook and clean the gear, as she is above that kind of stuff.

Male characters that have left the Sisterhood, have escaped. Men do not get to choose to go into the Beyond, as it is too dangerous for them for them to survive. The player's character is one of the few exceptions to that rule, having survived to get to some semblance of civilization. They are very socially stunted in society and may also abhor weapons in the hands of men and will be very distrustful of women from outside the Sisterhood, if not submissive to them. The journey from house husband or docile male to able bodied adventurer should be a difficult transition.

Welcome to the Southwatch, Mon!

Southwatchers are a fairly relaxed but hardy people that pull their food from the sea. They are expert net fishermen and build simple huts that are easily moved as they follow the various schools of fish as they move to different places of the coast. Though they do have a permanent settlement called Southwatch, only the elderly populate it during the spring and summer months. Throughout the year, delicious smells of cooking seafood waft through their settlements.

Life appears very easy for these hardy people, until you look closer. The fishermen wear swords, carry wicked looking spears, and are armored to the teeth. Some are missing limbs, legs, or teeth. Fiends or evolved sea creatures are often caught in their nets and they are hard pressed to kill them or release them before they do irreparable damage to the nets or the boats. Some hunt the boats and are rumored to be hundreds of feet in length and are writhing masses of horror, and entire fleets have disappeared because of them. As if to adapt, an odd type of ability has begun to manifest itself in some of the Southwatchers in the past hundred years or so. Those that have been affected, bear a mark in the shape of an eye on their bodies and have begun to be called watchers. Premonitions strike them seemingly randomly about future events. As such, every fleet has a watcher onboard one of their ships whenever they go out. This has caused a decline in the loss of ships to the leviathans of the seas, but smaller fiends still wreak havoc on occasion.

Whenever a watcher dies, the mark randomly seems to reappear on one of the younger members of their family. When this happens, they only have a few weeks before they are driven mad by the visions. When the eye marks first appeared, almost all that had them went mad at ended their lives, but the marks just moved on to other family members. As such, those that mastered the mark established a training location on an unknown island in the South Sea, formerly known as the Gulf of Mexico. New bearers of the mark were provided with a rowboat and two days' worth of food and sent out to the island. When they came back, they were in control of their gift. At some point, the island came under attack by one of the leviathans. Mist from the sea poured into the harbor during the attack, obscuring the island from site during the battle. When the mist cleared, the leviathan and the island were gone. It was presumed lost, until the next bearers of the mark began to go mad. They were provided with a rowboat and again, two days' food and sent into the sea. Again after a couple weeks, they returned in full control of their gift, and a message for future generations that if the need was great enough, the watchers would always find the island.

Characters beginning in Southwatch are assumed to possess the gift, but have foregone the simple life of a Southwatcher due to a recurring vision that has driven them to search for answers or allies against a cataclysmic threat from beyond the South Sea. They will tend to be a friendly and relaxed individual, but always be on alert for potential threats or things that don't seem "quite right".

The Holidays

As dangerous and uncertain as life is, people still find reasons to celebrate just being alive. Throughout the year many different holidays and traditions have sprung to life, and some still survive from the before times, albeit in differing forms. Many old holidays, such as May Day, Christmas, New Years, Easter, and Halloween still exist, but many have very different meanings now. The new Holidays consist of Contact Day, Independence Day, Amarra (Diamond), Alundra (Emerald), Sabritch (Ruby), Vantiri (Sapphire), Crochtia (Jade), Day of Honor,

Wildlife in the Beyond

Just like in the old times, wildlife still proliferates the wilds and the Beyond. Birds still fly in the sky, deer still graze in the forest, squirrels still gather and forage for nuts for the winter months, and chipmunks still chipmunk. Survival in the beyond has grown increasingly difficult for these creatures, and as such, wielding the new force of attunement, Mother Nature has stepped in and further evolved her wildlife.

Sven quietly stalked the large spotted buck with his improvised spear. Many days and nights had passed since his last meal of blackberries and casa roots and as he closed the distance, his angry stomach gurgled a long tortured moan alerting the buck to his presence. Rather than bolt, as Sven expected, it lowered its antlers towards Sven and stood in a defensive posture. Undeterred by the menacing of the buck, he thrust his spear at its neck and paled as the sharpened point glanced harmlessly off the buck's hide. As he looked closer, he realized the spots on the beast's hide seemed to be shifting and moving in a beautiful hypnotic pattern. He followed its weaving and flowing movements and didn't even realize the buck had disemboweled him with its razor sharp antlers, now dripping with his warm blood. Sven stayed mesmerized with the hide until his eyes closed for the last time.

Skills

Skills are as much a defining characteristic in Gemfyre as their eye color, hair color, or where they were born. The particular skillset a character has defines his/her function within societies, the Beyond, or even the world as a whole. Many of the skills a character knows will have, ultimately, been acquired during childhood, and where they were raised will have a direct impact on what type of skills they may have learned. As an example, a Grunger child learns how to scrounge at an early age, but a typical Trinity born child won't have a clue unless great lengths were taken to learn that skill. The Grunger child will not have learned how to read and write, as it is not considered a useful skill for a Grunger, but the Trinity child would, given their formal education.

In addition to learning skills, it is important to consider that the character may not have a natural knack for the skill. Skills are a combination of the know-how of the character and their natural attributes. A character may understand the concept of juggling, but if their agility is lacking, they may find the juggled objects flying in random directions more often than naught. Each skill will have an attribute that it relies on to be effective, so it is important to consider that when the character chooses his/her starting skills.

Skill checks

To determine if a character has been successful in performing a skill is considered a *skill check*. A skill check is a d100 roll that is added directly to the rating of the skill being used. If the total meets or exceeds 100, the skill check is successful.

Arbon examined the ancient map, turning it this way and that and no matter the way he had it turned, it made no sense. Molly snickered at him with a wry grin on her face, "Let me see it." He sighed and handed it over knowing full well that she had been studying the ancient books that the former Captain had unearthed in his lifetime of travels.

Molly's Ancient Languages: English skill is currently at 38, her d100 dice roll nets her a 78 giving her a grand total of 111. The result is over 100, so this grants her a success.

Molly smiles brightly as she makes out the names on the map, but hands it back over in defeat, as she realizes she has no idea where they are in relation to the old names and dots on the map.

Skill check: Critical Successes and Critical Failures

Occasionally, a character will roll a 100 on a D100, this is considered a critical success. At GM discretion and depending on the action the character is taking, extremely beneficial effects may come into play. Conversely, should the character roll a 1, this is considered a critical failure and the character may suffer an extreme penalty. If this is a skill check, it is assumed, in addition to any negative penalty, that the action they were attempting is impossible for their character throughout the remainder of the scene.

Combat Rules

While most people in the current age prefer to live a life of peace, conflicts, fiend attacks, and personal disputes still happen. Physical combat is resolved via a set of rules that apply to a majority of situations. Outlined below are the shape of those rules.

Performing a basic attack

A basic attack is the attempt a player makes to hit his opponent with the weapon the player is wielding. If the attack succeeds, the player may then roll the wielded weapon's damage dice and the result is subtracted from the opponent's health. To perform a basic attack, the player rolls percentile dice, adds their wielded weapon's Attack Score, and then subtracts the opponents' Defense Score. If the result is above 100%, the attack is a success and the weapon damage can be rolled.

Tamosyn eyed her surroundings wearily. After escaping the Trinity, and sliding into the Beyond, it seemed everything wanted to kill her. Allowing her mind to drift into the past, she tried to think of any affront that could account for her current circumstances, but nothing came to mind. Always an exemplary citizen and soldier, she had always done what was asked of her and more if able. Karma should be in her favor, she decided, and all that had happened leading up to this was just plain bad luck.

The sound of someone running behind her broke her out of her reverie and she spun, sword drawn without thinking. A lone reaver, wielding a wicked looking two-handed broadsword above his head, was charging at her. Bracing herself as he closed, she swung her sword in a vicious sideways cut.

Tamosyn rolls percentile dice and receives a result of 78. Adding the Attack Score of her katana, a 40, she reaches a result of 118. The reaver is poorly armed and has a Defense Score of 15, so subtracting his defense score from her Attack Roll of 118, results in a 103. The result is equal to or above 100, so the attack succeeds to inflict damage.

Applying Damage

After a successful attack has been determined, damage must be applied. Damage is determined by Strength Class, Skill Class, and Weapon Class. Tamosyn is a fairly strong individual at 12, so her Strength Class is AA, which gives her an increased die of damage. Her Skill Class with a katana is Exceptional, which gives her an extra die of damage. The katana has a Weapon Class of a D10. Putting all this together, her Strength Class increases the katana's D10 to a D12, and her Skill Class gives her an additional D12 of damage. Tamosyn will be rolling 2D12 for her damage vs the reaver. Rolling her dice results in a 10.

The katana sliced through the air effortlessly and bit into the reaver's exposed torso, tearing through with ferocity, trailing blood and intestines. He toppled to the ground, still completely unaware that he had died. An outraged scream shattered the silence as the reaver's partner charged Tamosyn. Determining that she would be unable to strike before the reaver woman was on top of her, Tamosyn elected to parry the attack.

Parrying

A move action may be substituted for a parry. Performing a successful parry requires a wielded weapon and a successful attack roll against the opponent. If it is successful, the attack is blocked, however, if it is unsuccessful, the opponent's attack no longer factors the player's defense score as the player is no longer focused on defense, but rather offense. Parries are always calculated first before the attack action. Additionally, the player's weapon must make a Break Check vs the opponent's wielded weapon's Break Rank.

Tamosyn rolls percentile dice and gets a 75, again she adds her katana's Attack score of 40 giving her a total of 115. Subtracting the raiders 15 Defense nets her a 100, just exactly what she needs to score a hit. The parry is successful, nullifying any potential damage from the reaver. The reaver is wielding an iron pipe with a Break Rating of 50. The reaver rolls percentile dice and gets a result of 80. Adding the two values together, results in 130. Tamosyn's katana is a sturdy weapon with a 70 Break Rating. Subtracting the reaver's 130 from the katana's 70, ends with a result of 60. With the result being below 100, the katana survives intact.

Tamosyn narrowly raised her katana in time to block the iron pipe that may have crushed her skull! A swift sideways cut with her katana ended the threat of the reaver permanently. <Continue Later>

Determining Defense Score

In the Beyond, an individual who walks around without some form of physical protection is an individual that doesn't remain walking around long. Many different forms of physical protection are available for varying amount of chits or favors depending on the location. Regardless of the type of physical protection employed, the armor has a location and a Defense Score. The defense score is not cumulative of all locations. Each location is cumulative with the Agility Rating, however.

Brawn Table

Score	Class	Push	Pull	Lift	Burden
1-2	F	2lbs	4lbs	1lb	.25lb
3-4	FF	8lbs	16lbs	4lbs	2lbs
5-6	FFF	32lbs	64lbs	16lbs	8lbs
7-8	D	64lbs	128lbs	32lbs	16lbs
9-10	DD	128lbs	192lbs	64lbs	32lbs
11-12	DDD	192lbs	288lbs	128lbs	64lbs
13-14	C	224lbs	384lbs	192lbs	96lbs
15-16	CC	256lbs	416lbs	224lbs	128lbs
17-18	CCC	288lbs	448lbs	256lbs	144lbs
19-20	B	422lbs	640lbs	320lbs	176lbs
21-22	BB	530lbs	802lbs	446lbs	240lbs
23-24	BBB	746lbs	994lbs	600lbs	308lbs
25-26	A	890lbs	1186lbs	744lbs	372lbs
27-28	AA	1102lbs	1378lbs	972lbs	466lbs
29-30	AAA	1256lbs	1570lbs	1112lbs	556lbs
31+	S	1660lbs	1954lbs	1308lbs	654lbs

Class – This stat is a direct representation of the strength rating of a character in the Gemfyre world. Various weapons and armor will have a class rating. If the character does not meet the minimum rating, penalties may apply for using that armor or weapon.

Push – The maximum weight of an object a character is able to push. If an object weighs more than the maximum weight, it is assumed that character cannot exert enough push force to affect it.

Pull – The maximum weight of an object a character is able to pull. If an object weighs more than the maximum weight, it is assumed that character cannot exert enough pull force to affect it.

Lift – The maximum weight of an object a character is able to lift. If an object weighs more than the maximum weight, it is assumed that character cannot exert enough lifting force to affect it.

Burden – The maximum weight a character is able to carry without being encumbered. If a character exceeds this rating, movement and possible physical damage can occur.

Agility Table

Score	Class	AR	PR	DR
1-2	F	-5	-6	-10
3-4	FF	-4	-4	-8
5-6	FFF	-3	-2	-6
7-8	D	-2	-	-4
9-10	DD	-1	-	-2
11-12	DDD	-	-	-
13-14	C	2	1	-
15-16	CC	4	2	2
17-18	CCC	6	4	2
19-20	B	8	6	4
21-22	BB	10	10	8
23-24	BBB	14	14	12
25-26	A	18	20	16
27-28	AA	22	26	24
29-30	AAA	26	32	32
31+	S	30	40	40

Class – This stat is a direct representation of the Agility Class of a character in the Gemfyre world. Various weapons and armor will have a class rating. If the character does not meet the minimum rating, penalties may apply for using that armor or weapon.

AR (Agility Rating) – The representation of how agile a character is. A particularly agile character is harder to hit with weapons and tend to be dexterous with their skills. On the other side of the fence, a low agility could cause a character to be clumsy and unable to fend off attacks and be terrible at skills or professions that require a high degree of agility.

PR (Physical Rating) – Depending on the agility of a character, it may lend to making easier hits with wielded weapons. This number is directly added to the characters weapon skills. Note: Distance weapons do not gain a benefit from this attribute.

DR (Distance Rating) – Many distance weapons require some degree of agility to use accurately. This number is added directly to a majority of distance weapon skills. Note: Melee weapons do not gain benefit from this attribute.

Learning Table

Score	Class	SR	US
1-2	F	NA	-6
3-4	FF	NA	-4
5-6	FFF	-	-2
7-8	D	-	-1
9-10	DD	2	0
11-12	DDD	3	0
13-14	C	5	1
15-16	CC	7	2
17-18	CCC	9	5
19-20	B	11	7
21-22	BB	14	9
23-24	BBB	17	11
25-26	A	20	14
27-28	AA	24	16
29-30	AAA	28	19
31+	S	35	21

Class – This stat is a direct representation of the Learning Class of a character in the Gemfyre world. Many skills can be learned by a novice, others can only be learned if their Learning Class is high enough.

SR (Scholar Rating) – Representative of the amount of learning a character has and the ability to apply their current learning to future skills. This score will be added to any learning-based skill the character has chosen at the beginning of the game and to any further skills a character takes the time to learn during the game. Note: This does not apply to unlearned or unknown skills.

US (Unlearned Skill) – At times, a character may need to try to do something he has no knowledge or training in. However, a character that has life experience and general schooling may be able to figure out at least the basics. This number is directly representative of that experience and/or schooling so he/she may be able to have a better chance to succeed. Note: Existing skills do not benefit from this attribute and additionally, if the unlearned skill is a higher Learning Class than the character would normally be able to learn, it is impossible to attempt.

Attunement

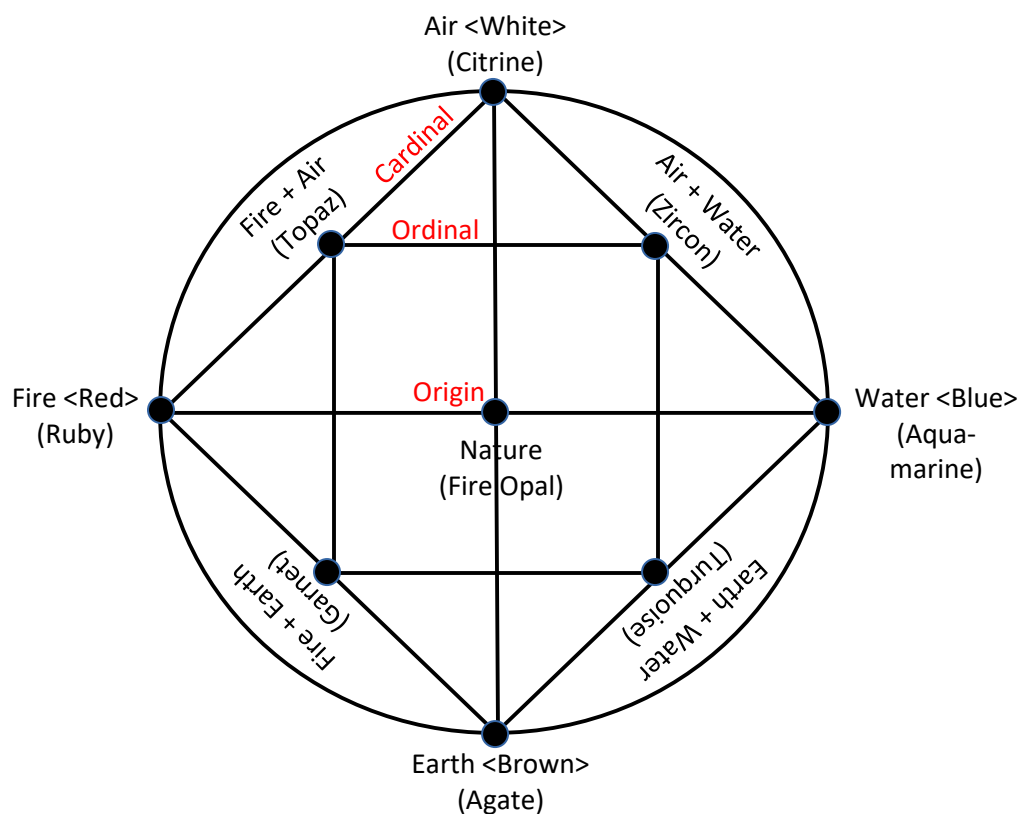


Diagram 1: Attunement Table

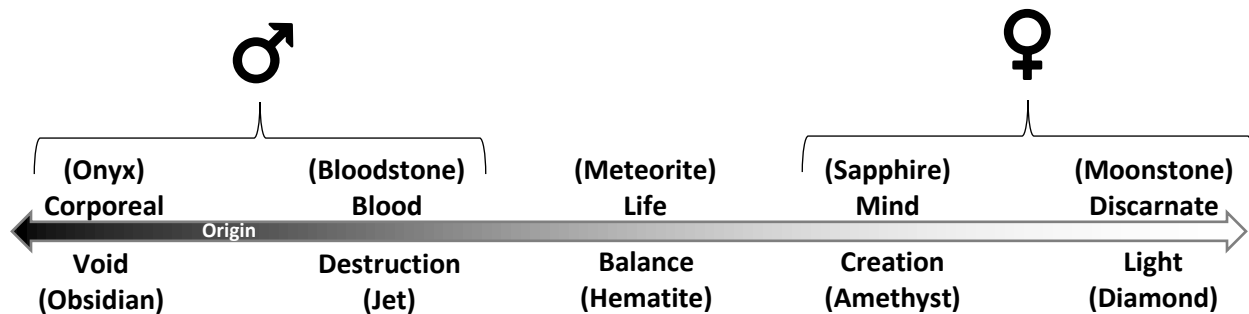


Diagram 2: Attunement Attitude Table

Attunement is the natural ability to manipulate the forces around us that are most compatible to our mind and bodies. Determining compatibility often comes down to eye color and trial and error. For instance, after the ability has manifested in a child, their reflective eyes will slowly acquire the gem color of their attunement. Ie, a child has the attunement to Topaz, so he or she may end up with orange looking eyes, or yellow eyes with orange flecks, depending on the strength of their attunements.

Equipment

Weapon Table

WEAPON NAME	MINIMUM RANGE	MODERATE RANGE	MAXIMUM RANGE	DAMAGE DICE	DAMAGE TYPE	BREAK RATING	RARITY	WEIGHT	COST†
DAGGER	Melee	25'	50'	D4	S, P	20	F	1lb	5

KNIFE									
-POCKET	Melee	-	-	D4-3	S	10	FF	-	12
-HUNTING	Melee	-	-	D4-2	S, P	15	FFF	-	18
-MACHETE	Melee	-	-	D4-1	S, P	20	C	1lb	25
-BUTCHER	Melee	-	-	D4	S, P	8	CC	-	30
WOODEN CLUB	Melee	-	-	D6-2	B	15	F	5lbs	3
3' IRON PIPE	Melee	-	-	D6-1	B	30	C	8lbs	45
6' IRON PIPE	Melee	-	-	D6+1	B	25	CC	16lbs	90
ALUMINUM BAT	Melee	-	-	D8-2	B	30	CCC	4lbs	130
WOOD WAR Mallet	Melee	-	-	D8-3	B	35	DDD	30lbs	90
HATCHET	Melee	25'	-	D6-2	S	25	B	5lbs	200
AXE	Melee	-	-	D8-3	S	35	D	10lbs	150
SWORD									
-COSTUME	Melee	-	-	D4-3	S	10	D	8lbs	10
-REPLICA	Melee	-	-	D4-1	S	20	C	12lbs	110
-SMALL	Melee	-	-	D4	S	40	BB	6lbs	300
-LARGE	Melee	-	-	D8	S	55	BB	8lbs	600
-KATANA	Melee	-	-	D10	S	70	AA	4lbs	1500
FIREARMS††									
-MATCHLOCK PISTOL	5'	30'	60'	D6-2	P	20	S	10lbs	2500
-MATCHLOCK RIFLE	5'	300'	600'	D10-3	P	35	S	20lbs	3500
-FLINTLOCK PISTOL	5'	30'	60'	D6	P	25	S	2lbs	4000
-FLINTLOCK RIFLE	5'	375'	750'	D10	P	40	S	10lbs	5500
-BAYONETTE	Melee	-	-	D6-2	P, S	25	S	2lbs	225
-REVOLVER	5'	110'	225'	D8	P	25	SS	3lbs	5000
-RIFLE	5'	1500'	3000'	D10+2	P	45	SS	8lbs	8000

-ASSAULT RIFLE	5'	500'	1000'	D10	P	50	SSS	11lbs	15000
-SNIPER RIFLE	50'	11,500'	23,000'	2D12	P	55	SSS	32lbs	35000

† Cost is for starting characters only. There is no government regulation of pricing, there is no stock market, and there are no factories filling supplies. Bartering is the primary method of exchanging goods and services in the Gemfyre world. Chits tend to only be accepted in the Grunge and by people who do business with people in the Grunge, and of course, inside the Trinity where they can be exchanged for the local currency.

Cheat Sheet

Scoring a hit = D100 + Weapon's Attack Score – Opponent's Defense Score

Parrying an Attack = D100 + Weapon's Attack Score – Opponent's Defense Score

Weapon Break Check = Opponent's Weapon's Break Rating + Opponent's D100 Roll – Defender's
Weapon's Break Check

Determining Defense Score per Location = Location Armor Defense Score + Agility Rating