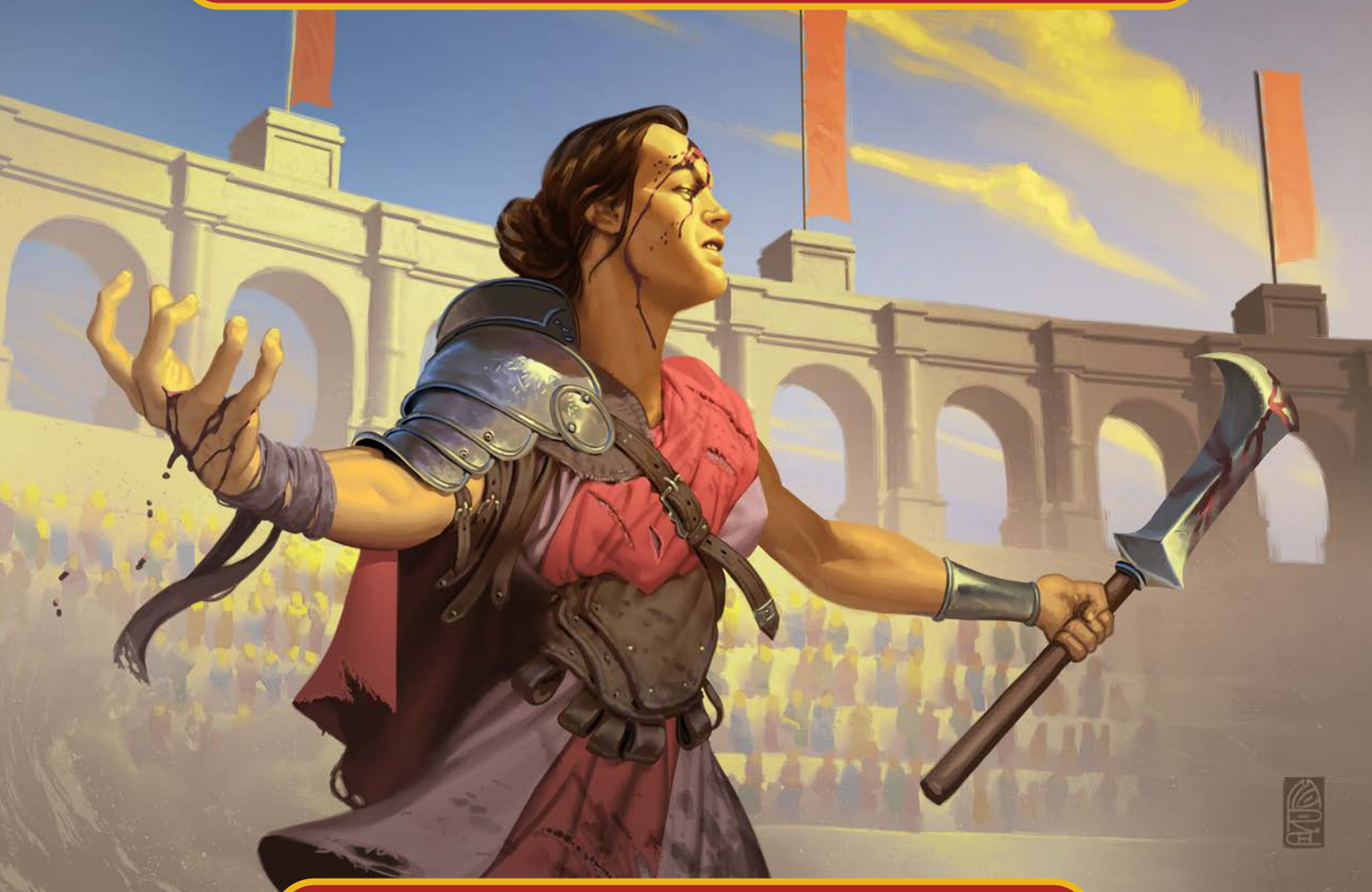


BOOK of BLADES

EXPANDING THE BARBARIAN



Celeste Conowitch

KOBOLD
Press





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Book of Blades is a 12-part series filled with resources to make melee amazing! We begin with the barbarian.

INTRODUCTION

Barbarians are ferocious, heavy-hitting warriors fueled by rage. With a wide variety of weaponry at their disposal and no need for cumbersome heavy armor, they are mobile strikers that dish out damage at alarming speeds. With a solid subclass, a flavorful background, and a go-to magical weapon, barbarian characters are master melee characters.

TACTICAL OVERVIEW

Barbarians have relatively simple mechanics compared to other classes in the game, but what they lack in diversity, they make up for in effectiveness. A barbarian's job is to get into the middle of combat and bring down foes as quickly as possible with their astounding damage output before a foe can punch back, since these warriors lack the high AC common among other martial classes.

The base class features of a barbarian ensure they always have access to high damage output, so players should focus on choosing options as they level that compensate for their weaknesses. Barbarians have no way to deal magical damage—and few subclasses offer a way to inherently deal magical damage—so barbarians must acquire a magical weapon to live up to their full potential at higher levels. It is also helpful to collect features that enhance mobility. Though barbarians get a static movement boost at 5th level, getting access to even more speed can make all the difference for quickly getting into the middle of combat.

INSPIRATION

Studying the fictional and historical inspirations that led to the barbarian class can help you bring the ferocity of your barbarian character to life. The following sections highlight sources of major inspiration to get you started.



FICTIONAL INSPIRATION

The biggest pop culture inspiration for the modern fantasy barbarian class is uncontestedly the character of Conan the Barbarian, created by Robert E Howard in the 1930s. Since then, Conan has appeared in comics, films, television shows, and novels, which all contributed hugely to the narrative of the fictional barbarian. From aesthetic depictions like Conan's signature loincloth garb to his hybrid one-weapon and hand-to-hand fighting style, Conan is the creative inspiration upon which the barbarian is built.

HISTORICAL INSPIRATION

The word "barbarian" has been used in a multitude of ways throughout history, but the barbarian archetype commonly portrayed in the fantasy genre is primarily inspired by the wide variety of people who took up arms against the Roman Empire in the centuries before its fall in AD 476. "Barbarians" in this context encompassed many different non-Roman cultures spread across Eastern Europe, Asia, and North Africa. While it is impossible to account for all the unique qualities of these various peoples, barbarians were generally considered "enemies of civilization" because they were often organized into tribal or nomadic societies.

TACTICS

Barbarian groups employed various battle tactics depending on their resources and technology, but the majority relied on mobility-based strategies to overwhelm their foes. Here are just a few historical reports of barbarian tactics that have contributed to the modern fantasy barbarian archetype:

- Various Norse sagas and poems feature berserkers, fearsome warriors said to have fought in a trance-like fury.
- Greek historians from the Hellenistic period describe Celtic warriors as fighting nude to intimidate their opponents.
- The Huns reportedly used ferocious war cries to scare and confuse their opponents.
- Barbarians relied on high mobility tactics to devastate their foes with hit-and-run-style attacks.
- Barbarian cultures conquered large regions full of different people, which allowed them to develop and master new weaponry at an extraordinary rate.

CHARACTER OPTIONS

As ferocious warriors who risk their lives daily, death is a constant companion to a barbarian. Barbarians often hail from remote tribes, far from the safety and comfort of civilization, where even minor injury or illness can lead to death. Such cultures typically develop strong beliefs and traditions to comfort the living and give meaning to the ever-present possibility of dying. When narratives about death form the cornerstone of a people's belief system, individuals who routinely resist death, or even return to life, are celebrated as extraordinary figures worthy of legend.

When you create your barbarian, consider how they view death. After all, most barbarians hail from cultures where death is a part of daily life, and choosing the path of a warrior likely means committing to an early grave. Perhaps your views on dying allow you to throw yourself into combat without fear, or maybe it pushes you to take foolish risks in pursuit of glory. Whatever the case, the following options work excellently for characters themed around narratives of death and dying.

This section includes a new background well-suited to barbarian characters and a new option for barbarians to choose when they gain the Primal Path feature upon reaching 3rd level.

NEW SUBCLASS: PATH OF THE UNDYING

Barbarians who walk the Path of the Undying rarely choose it for themselves. They are set on this course by the heavy hand of destiny. Undying barbarians all possess a soul that has crossed into death, then been pulled back into the world of the living by extraordinary magical means. Returning from true death is a turbulent process that shatters a soul, then reforges it into something entirely new. Creatures in possession of such souls are often psychically scarred by the experience, but they gain a measure of mastery over death. Those who walk this path can't be pulled into death until their destiny—the reason their soul returned—is fulfilled.

DEFY DEATH

Starting at 3rd level, whenever you begin your turn with a number of hit points less than your barbarian levels, you may expend one of your Hit Dice to recover hit points equal to the number rolled plus your Constitution modifier (no action required). You can use this feature while unconscious, but not if you are dead.

SOUL OF WRATH

Starting at 3rd level, you become possessed by supernatural wrath when you enter your rage. While you are raging, once during each of your turns when you hit a creature with an attack roll, you can force them to make a Wisdom saving throw with a DC equal to 10 + your proficiency bonus. On a failed save, the creature is frightened of you until the end of your next turn.

Additionally, you deal an extra 1d6 psychic damage whenever you hit a creature that is frightened of you with a weapon attack.

FEAST OF SUFFERING

At 6th level, your soul consumes ailments that hinder your physical form. As a bonus action, you can end one condition afflicting you and gain temporary hit points equal to half your barbarian level (rounded down). These temporary hit points last for 1 minute.



VENGEANCE SNARE

At 10th level, while you are raging you can use a bonus action to project your wrathful soul outwards. When you do so, all creatures of your choice within 30 feet of you must succeed on a Wisdom saving throw (DC equal to 10 + your proficiency bonus) or become frightened of you for 1 minute or until they are more than 60 feet away from you. If a creature was already frightened of you when they fail this saving throw, they are also paralyzed until the end of your next turn.

Once you use this feature, you can't use it again until you finish a long rest.

REJECTED BY DEATH

Starting at 14th level, death no longer desires you. If you die and your body is destroyed, your soul remains. After 24 hours, your soul inhabits and animates another humanoid corpse on the same plane of existence, and the body returns to life with all your hit points. Upon awakening, you recall your former life and experiences. You retain the capabilities you had in your original form, except you exchange your original race for the new one (if different than your previous form) and change your racial traits accordingly.

NEW BACKGROUND: GRAVE KEEPER

You have spent your life tending the dead and helping the living celebrate memories of the departed. Whether you have spent time conducting the funerary rites of one culture or many, you intuitively understand loss and the many ways mortal creatures cope with death.

You are familiar with all aspects of laying the dead to rest, including preparing corpses, performing burials, conducting memorial services, and maintaining gravesites. If you come from a small or remote community, you may have been the sole conductor of all those services.

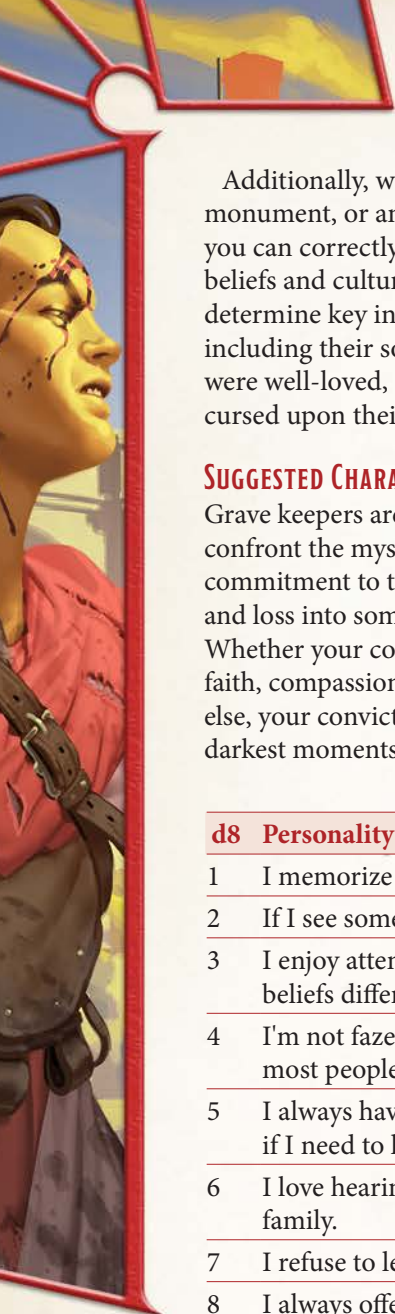
Skill Proficiencies: Choose two from among History, Insight, Medicine, or Religion

Languages: Two of your choice

Equipment: 2 blocks of incense, a set of traveler's clothes, a shovel, a tinderbox, a trinket that once belonged to someone close to you that died, vestments, and a pouch containing 25 gp

FEATURE: NO STRANGER TO DEATH

As a grave keeper, you are afforded great respect and reverence by people with religious or cultural practices that honor the dead. When asked to do so, you can perform secular funeral rites in exchange for money, access to lodging, gratitude, or other compensation deemed appropriate by the GM.



Additionally, when you view a tombstone, tomb, monument, or any other kind of grave marker, you can correctly ascertain its makers' religious beliefs and cultural traditions. In addition, you can determine key information about the deceased's life, including their socio-economic status, whether they were well-loved, and whether they were disgraced or cursed upon their death.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Grave keepers are among the rare people willing to confront the mysteries of death daily. It takes a deep commitment to transform the ugly realities of decay and loss into something that comforts the living. Whether your commitment comes from religious faith, compassion for those left behind, or something else, your convictions carry you through even the darkest moments.

d8 Personality Trait

- 1 I memorize the names of every person I bury.
- 2 If I see someone suffering, I have to get involved.
- 3 I enjoy attending religious events to learn about beliefs different from my own.
- 4 I'm not fazed by the sights or smells that bother most people.
- 5 I always have a few jokes or anecdotes rehearsed if I need to lighten the mood.
- 6 I love hearing stories about people's friends and family.
- 7 I refuse to let people walk away angry.
- 8 I always offer an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on, regardless of my own emotional state.

d6 Ideal

- 1 **Memory.** It's our duty to honor the memory of those we have lost. (Lawful)
- 2 **Ardor.** Live life to the fullest, because it can be over in an instant. (Chaotic)
- 3 **Knowledge.** Learning how people treat the dead is the best way to understand how they live. (Any)
- 4 **Empathy.** Though I bury the dead, it is the pain of the living that I lay to rest. (Good)
- 5 **Responsibility.** I must do what I do to ensure the souls of the dead rest in peace. (Any)
- 6 **Compassion.** No one deserves to die alone and forgotten. (Any)

d6 Bond

- 1 I have seen too much suffering at the hands of the restless dead, and I refuse to let it happen again.
- 2 I am one in a long line of family members who have been grave keepers.
- 3 After serving the same community for many years, I'm taking a sabbatical to learn more about my craft.
- 4 I am part of a religious or humanitarian organization whose members travel the world helping those in need.
- 5 A few years ago, I died for a short time before I was resuscitated. While I was dead, I had a vision that set me on this path.
- 6 Lost souls speak to me in dreams and visions. I must do what I can to lay these spirits to rest.

d6 Flaw

- 1 I struggle to relate to the living and have anguish that people won't like me because of what I do.
- 2 I have a dark sense of humor that often upsets other people.
- 3 My compulsion to sanitize and organize often makes daily life difficult.
- 4 Every once in a while, I can't help but shut down under the weight of everyone else's burdens.
- 5 I am drowning my own grief by helping others process theirs.
- 6 I resent people that never question their faith or religious beliefs.

WEAPONS OF LEGACY

Barbarians are masters of melee combat. With a weapon in hand, they can deal staggering amounts of damage in a short time, so it is critical they acquire weapons that complement and enhance their already fearsome capabilities. There is a reason pop culture's most famous barbarians wield legendary swords, axes, and bows with awesome magical properties. These items often have their own legacies before they come into a warrior's hands and histories soaked in blood. Wielding such a weapon undoubtedly adds to a barbarian's personal legend, but the relationship between warrior and weapon is a two-way street. In the hands of a champion, a weapon can grow in power with each battle won, mighty foe defeated, or land conquered.

FABLED MAGIC ITEMS

The weapons presented in this section use the “Fabled Magic Item” rules originally published in *Vault of Magic*, but they are summarized here for ease of use.

FABLED RARITY

Magic items are typically categorized by their rarity: common, uncommon, rare, very rare, or legendary. Fabled is a new magic item identifier, though it is not, strictly speaking, a measure of rarity. Fabled items scale in power as the character does, and a fabled item can be thought to encompass all levels of rarity.

PROPERTIES AND ATTUNEMENT

A fabled magic item begins as a common magic item. It has a small, but useful, property the item grants to any character that possesses it. This minor property *does not* require attunement to use.

To use any of the higher-level properties, a character must attune to the fabled item per the standard magic item attunement rules. Once attuned to the fabled magic item, the character can use the fabled item’s more powerful properties as the character increases in level. When an attuned character reaches a property’s specified level, the property listed at that level becomes immediately available to the character. If a character of a level higher than 1st attunes to a fabled item, the item’s level-dependent properties, up to the character’s current level, become immediately available to the character.

At the GM’s discretion, an item’s more powerful properties might become available to a character only after the character completes a particular quest or event related to the item’s story rather than immediately upon reaching each property’s required level.

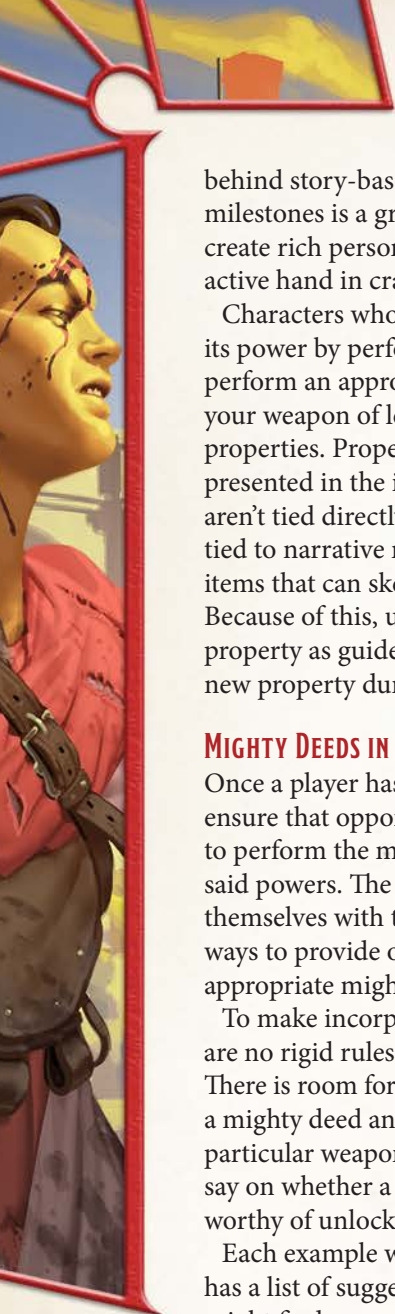
If a character chooses not to become attuned to the fabled item, the item remains a common magic item, granting the character only its minor property, regardless of the character’s level.

Unless otherwise noted, all properties granted by a fabled item are in effect as long as the character is wearing, carrying, or touching the item.

MIGHTY DEEDS

When using the fabled magic item rules to introduce weapons of legacy into your games, it is recommended that characters do not automatically unlock weapon properties by simply reaching the appropriate level. Instead, weapons of legacy properties should be unlocked only upon achieving story-based milestones by performing thematically appropriate “mighty deeds.” Locking new properties





behind story-based milestones instead of level-based milestones is a great way to encourage players to create rich personal narratives and give them a more active hand in crafting their character's legacy.

Characters who possess a weapon of legacy increase its power by performing mighty deeds. When you perform an appropriately thematic mighty deed, your weapon of legacy gives you access to new item properties. Properties are unlocked in the order presented in the item text. While weapons of legacy aren't tied directly to experience points (they are tied to narrative milestones), they are potent magic items that can skew the balance of standard gameplay. Because of this, use the level listed by each weapon property as guide for when characters should unlock a new property during a long-term campaign.

mighty deeds in your game

Once a player has a weapon of legacy, the GM must ensure that opportunities arise for the character to perform the mighty deeds needed to unlock said powers. The GM should start by familiarizing themselves with the weapon concept, then think of ways to provide opportunities to achieve thematically appropriate mighty deeds in the campaign.

To make incorporating mighty deeds easier, there are no rigid rules about what a mighty deed must be. There is room for creative flexibility in what constitutes a mighty deed and what types of mighty deeds a particular weapon finds acceptable. The GM has final say on whether a character has achieved a mighty deed worthy of unlocking a new weapon property.

Each example weapon presented later in this section has a list of suggested mighty deeds that the weapon might find acceptable. The Example Mighty Deeds table also provides a sample of potential deeds.

EXAMPLE WEAPONS OF LEGACY

Several weapons of legacy are provided below, ready for use in your game. The weapons here could easily fit into most fantasy settings. Feel free to change details—including item names—to better fit into a particular campaign world or character history. If a player wishes to craft a weapon of legacy that better suits their character, use the structure of the provided weapons and the Example Mighty Deeds table as guides.

SOUL REAVER

A long haft carved from yellowed bone supports a single blade head perpetually stained crimson.

Weapons are tools of destruction. They are forged with the potential for great violence, regardless of their intended purpose. Some weapons take more easily to their violent potential than others, and such weapons crave the fulfillment of bloody possibility. In the hands of a skilled warrior, a bloodthirsty weapon can claim hundreds of lives, collecting a psychic imprint with each death delivered. As more souls are claimed, these weapons increase their supernatural affinity for spilling blood.

SUGGESTED MIGHTY DEEDS

Potential mighty deeds for this weapon:

- Claim the lives of seven noble champions.
- Strike a bargain with a celestial or fiend to empower the weapon with souls.
- Bathe the weapon in the blood of a legendary creature.

EXAMPLE MIGHTY DEEDS

d10 Mighty Deed

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | The wielder must defend a stranger's life in battle against a creature of a particular alignment. |
| 2 | The wielder must defeat an opponent of equal or greater skill in single combat. |
| 3 | The wielder must lead a group into battle against overwhelming odds and win. |
| 4 | The wielder must liberate or conquer a particular settlement or military stronghold. |
| 5 | The wielder must sacrifice something they hold dear to get justice for a stranger. |
| 6 | The wielder must protect their enemy should they beg for life, even against the wishes of the wielder's allies. |
| 7 | The wielder must win rights or resources for a community. |
| 8 | The wielder must give their life for that of an innocent. |
| 9 | The wielder must train with a master warrior. |
| 10 | The wielder must complete a quest given to them by a god or other powerful extraplanar entity. |

SOUL REAVER

Weapon (Battleaxe), Fabled (5th-Level and Higher Properties Require Attunement)

While holding the axe, you can use a bonus action to focus on one creature you can see within 30 feet of you. When you do so, you learn if the creature is weaker than you (its CR is at least 2 below your level), if you are evenly matched (its CR is equal to or within 1 of your level), or stronger than you (its CR is at least 2 higher than your level).

Grim Harvest (Requires Attunement). As your level increases, you gain the following benefits while wielding this weapon.

5th level. You gain a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon. In addition, whenever a melee attack made with the axe reduces a creature of CR 1 or higher to 0 hit points, you regain hit points equal to your proficiency bonus.

9th level. While holding *Soul Reaper*, you can use an action to command the souls within the axe to defend you for 1 minute. When you do so, fiendish spirits come forth from the axe in a 5-foot radius centered on you. When a creature enters the area for the first time on a turn or starts their turn there, they must succeed on a Wisdom saving throw (DC equals 10 + your proficiency bonus) or take 3d8 necrotic damage. You must complete a short or long rest before you can use this feature again.

13th level. You now gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +1. In addition, if damage dealt by *Soul Reaper* would reduce a creature's hit points to 10 or less, it instead reduces the target's hit points to 0.

17th. You now gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +2. Additionally, whenever you score a critical hit against a creature with *Soul Reaper*, you can designate a number of creatures within 30 feet of the original target (including the target) equal to your proficiency bonus. Each designated creature takes a number of d8s of necrotic damage equal to your proficiency bonus.

SECOND CHANCE

Checkered patterns decorate this double-headed axe whose blades are carved like dragons—one grinning and the other grimacing.

Only warriors of incredible skill have a chance to survive multiple years of their profession, and luck plays no small part in ensuring a soldier lives to see their golden years. Champions with seemingly endless luck often sit at the heart of legend, enchanting

audiences with tales of ever-riskier exploits and thrilling narrow escapes. Weapons in the hands of such warriors often take on a measure of their wielder's luck, becoming precious tools to keep their masters fighting in the rare moments their luck runs out.

SUGGESTED MIGHTY DEEDS

Potential mighty deeds for this weapon:

- Emerge as the sole survivor of a battle or disastrous event.
- Miraculously win a dangerous wager with a powerful being like a god, ancient dragon, or other extraplanar being.
- Risk your life and the lives of others to turn the tides by pulling off a nigh-impossible stunt or gambit.

SECOND CHANCE

Weapon (Greataxe), Fabled (5th-Level and Higher Properties Require Attunement)

Whenever you must choose between two options (such as turning left or right) or engage in an activity where the odds are 50/50 (such as flipping a coin) while holding the axe, you get the most favorable possible outcome (as determined by the GM).

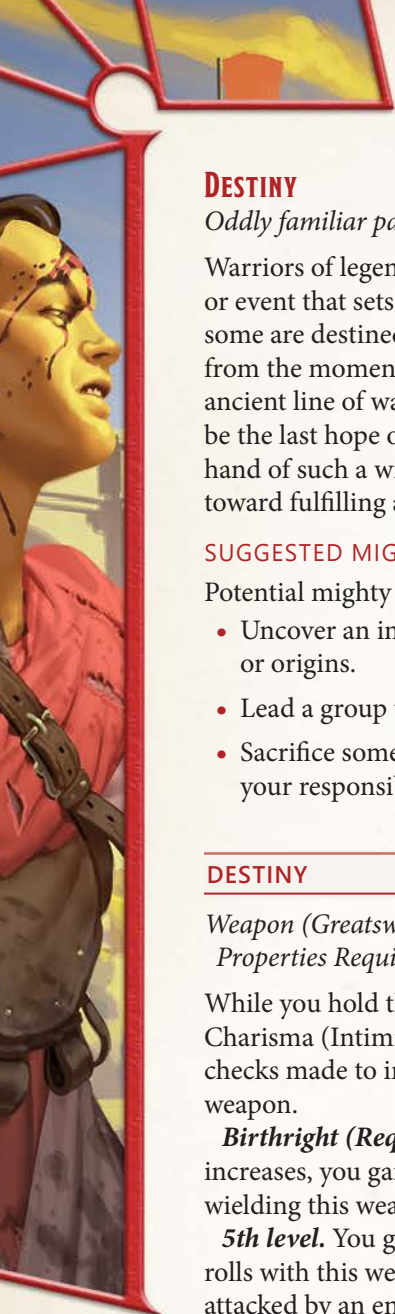
Good Fortune (Requires Attunement). As your level increases, you gain the following benefits while wielding this weapon.

5th level. You gain a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon. Additionally, when you miss on a melee attack made with *Second Chance*, you can spend your reaction to successfully hit instead. Once you use this feature, you can't do so again until you complete a short or long rest.

9th level. If you would drop to 0 hit points as a result of taking damage while the axe is within 30 feet of you, you instead drop to 1 hit point. Once this property has been used, it cannot be used again until the following dawn.

13th level. You now gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +1. In addition, once per turn when you roll a 1 on an attack or damage roll made with *Second Chance*, you can reroll the die. You must use the new result.

17th level. You now gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon, instead of +2. In addition, once per long rest when you fail a saving throw, you can choose to succeed instead.



DESTINY

Oddly familiar patterns are etched into this silver blade.

Warriors of legend are often marked by a unique trait or event that sets them on their remarkable path, and some are destined to walk the champion's path even from the moment of their birth. Whether born to an ancient line of warrior monarchs or prophesied to be the last hope of a dying people, a weapon in the hand of such a wielder grows in power with each step toward fulfilling a destiny of leadership.

SUGGESTED MIGHTY DEEDS

Potential mighty deeds for this weapon:

- Uncover an important secret about your ancestry or origins.
- Lead a group to victory against astronomical odds.
- Sacrifice something you care about to live up to your responsibilities.

DESTINY

Weapon (Greatsword), Fabled (5th-Level and Higher Properties Require Attunement)

While you hold this sword, you have advantage on Charisma (Intimidation) and Charisma (Persuasion) checks made to influence creatures who can see the weapon.

Birthright (Requires Attunement). As your level increases, you gain the following benefits while wielding this weapon.

5th level. You gain a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon. In addition, when you are attacked by an enemy within 5 feet of a friendly creature who can see or hear you, you can expend your reaction to direct that ally to strike. That ally can immediately make one weapon attack against the enemy creature.

9th level. While you are attuned to this sword, your Charisma score changes to 21. The item has no effect on you if your Charisma without the sword is equal to or greater than 21.

13th level. You now gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +1. In addition, you can use a bonus action to end a condition affecting an ally you can see within 60 feet of you.

17th level. You now gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +2. Additionally, when an ally within 60 feet of you would be reduced to 0 hit points, you can use your reaction to expend one of your Hit Dice. When you do so, the ally recovers hit points equal to the number rolled on your Hit Die plus your Charisma modifier.

Once you use this feature, you cannot do so again until you complete a long rest.

MANKILLER

A blade of razor-edged bone sprouts from this axe's living wood grip.

Becoming the fittest is the only way to guarantee a warrior's survival, a trait that places them in sync with the laws of nature. Warriors who embrace their inherent connection to their primal instincts often become champions of the natural world. They sometimes receive magical weapons that grow in power as the warrior's bond to the wild deepens.

SUGGESTED MIGHTY DEEDS

Potential mighty deeds for this weapon:

- Successfully defend an endangered species or environment from destruction by encroaching civilization.
- Complete a quest that aids a nature spirit, god, or other powerful environmental guardian.
- Win a battle against an invasive or extraplanar force.

MANKILLER

Weapon (Handaxe), Fabled (5th-Level and Higher Properties Require Attunement)

While you hold this axe, you have advantage on Wisdom (Animal Handling) checks.

Name of Power (Requires Attunement). As your level increases, you gain the following benefits while wielding this weapon.

5th level. You gain a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon. Additionally, you deal an extra 1d6 magical slashing damage to any objects or constructs you hit with the axe.

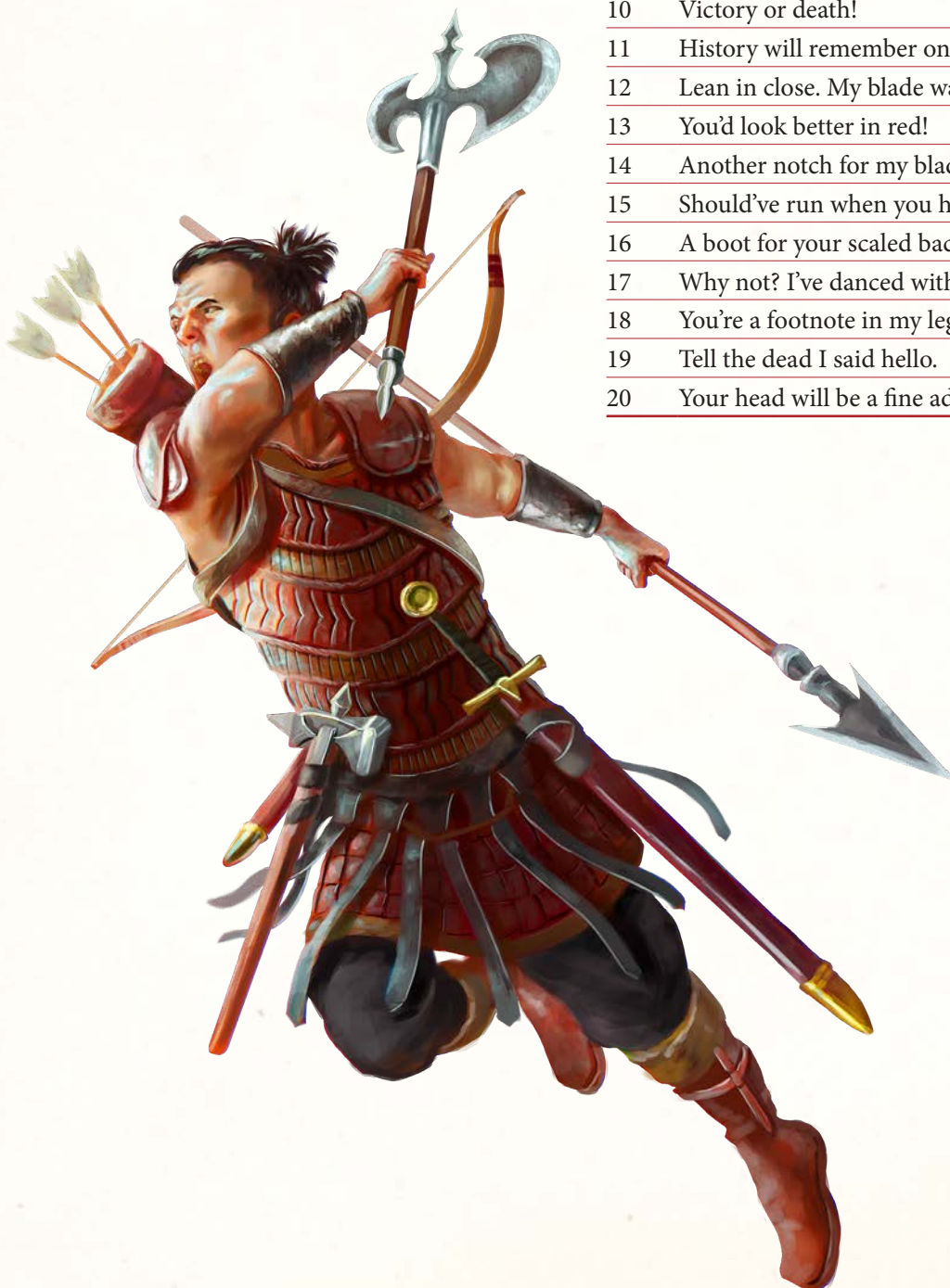
9th level. Once per turn, when you successfully hit a creature with the axe, they must succeed on a Strength saving throw (DC equal to 10 + your proficiency bonus) or have their speed reduced to 0 feet until the beginning of your next turn as they are covered by entangling plants.

13th level. You now gain a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +1. In addition, while the axe is within 30 feet of you, you can choose to expend one Hit Die to recover hit points at the beginning of each of your turns.

17th level. You now gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls with this weapon instead of +2. Additionally, you can cast the *animal shapes* spell (see Basic Rules) once per long rest. Casting the spell in this way does not require a spell slot.

20 BATTLE CRIES AND CURSES

As frontline combatants, barbarians often find themselves at the heart of a fight, surrounded by foes on all sides. While these warriors thrive in tense, dangerous situations, combining bravado with martial skills is a killer way to bolster allies' confidence and intimidate enemies. Keeping a few pithy phrases on hand to conjure in the heat of battle is an excellent way to bring the boldness of your barbarian to life. The Battle Cries and Curses table provides a variety of sample phrases perfect for firing at your enemies.



d20 Battle Cries and Curses

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | A drink for my steel! |
| 2 | I've been to hell. The devils spat me out! |
| 3 | Even death fears my coming. |
| 4 | Onward to a glorious death! |
| 5 | It's a fine day to die. |
| 6 | I'll keep your widow warm. |
| 7 | A gift for my old friend, Death! |
| 8 | Quickly, while the gods are watching! |
| 9 | Your blood will water the thirsty earth. |
| 10 | Victory or death! |
| 11 | History will remember only one name this day. |
| 12 | Lean in close. My blade wants a kiss. |
| 13 | You'd look better in red! |
| 14 | Another notch for my blade! |
| 15 | Should've run when you had the chance! |
| 16 | A boot for your scaled backside! |
| 17 | Why not? I've danced with uglier. |
| 18 | You're a footnote in my legend. |
| 19 | Tell the dead I said hello. |
| 20 | Your head will be a fine addition to my mantle. |

Open a Trove of Wonders!

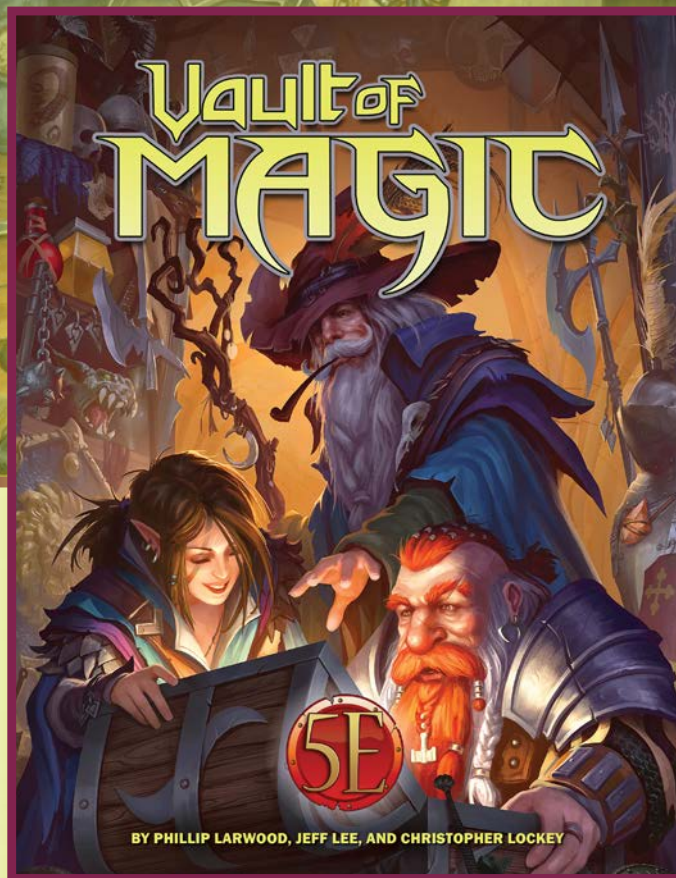


Inside *Vault of Magic*, find a vast treasure trove of enchanted items of every imaginable use—more than 950 in all! There are plenty of armors, weapons, potions, rings, and wands, but that's just for starters. From mirrors to masks, edibles to earrings, and lanterns to locket, it's all here, ready for your 5th Edition game.

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