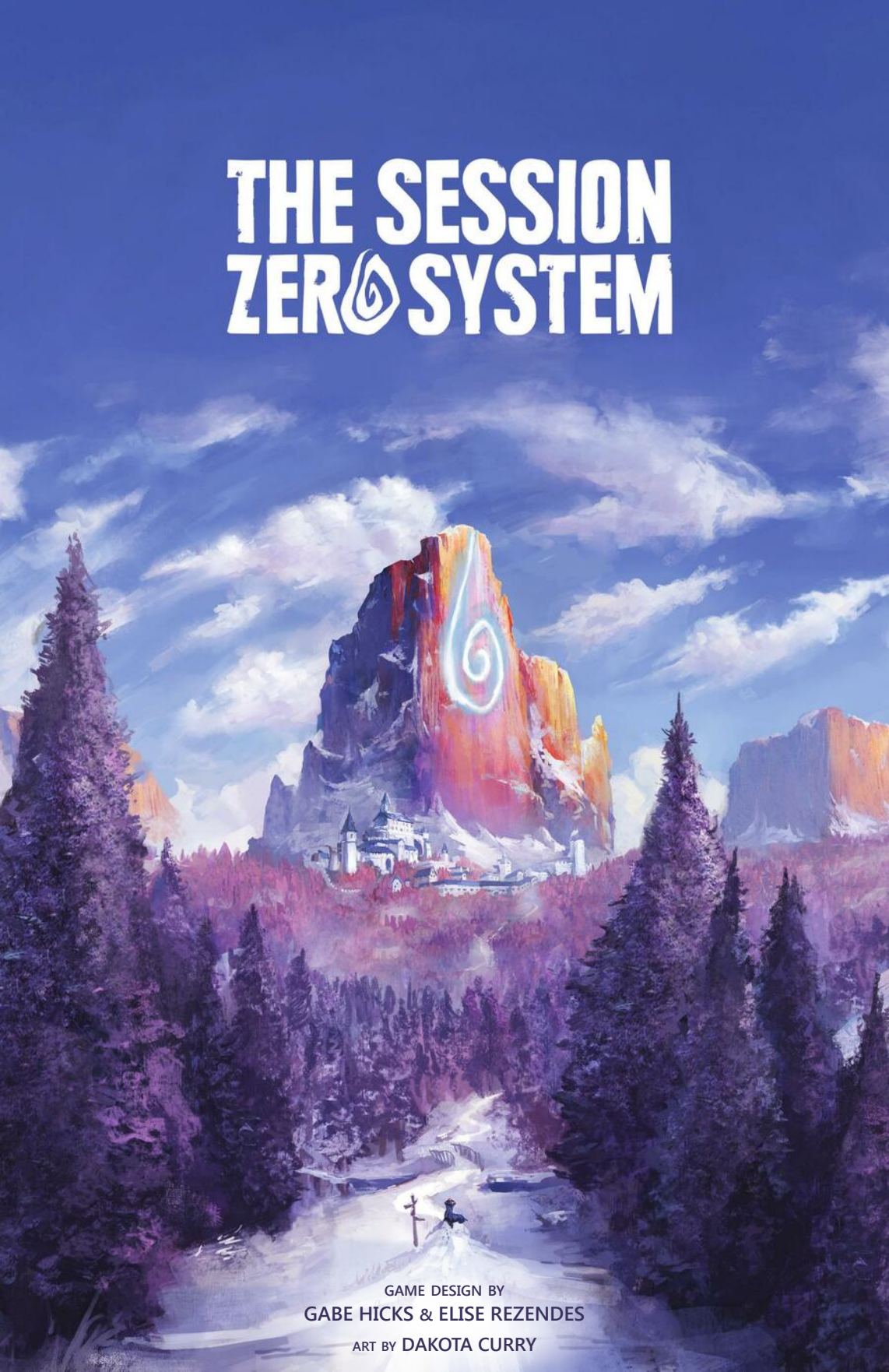
THE SESSION ZERO SYSTEM



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TO OUR BACKERS

THE SESSION ZERO SYSTEM WAS ABLE TO GROW BEYOND OUR WILDEST EXPECTATIONS BECAUSE OF YOUR BELIEF IN US AND YOUR LOVE OF THIS UNIQUE GAME WE WANTED TO CREATE.

WORKING WITH EVERYONE WHO GOT A CHANCE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE EARLY ACCESS PROGRAM HELPED US NURTURE THIS GAME INTO SOMETHING WE ARE TRULY PROUD OF. WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO DO SO MUCH MORE BECAUSE OF YOUR SUPPORT.

THANKS TO ALL 3,654+ OF YOU WHO HELPED US BRING THIS GAME TO LIFE.

For Ben, whom without this game would not exist. Your love and encouragement has left its mark on every single page.
For Rick and Phyllis, champions for the excitement and passion from start to finish.

Cover Illustration by Dakota Curry.
A lone figure finds themselves at the merging point of three paths. Ahead they face the consequences and the rewards of all the choices they've made along their journey thus far.

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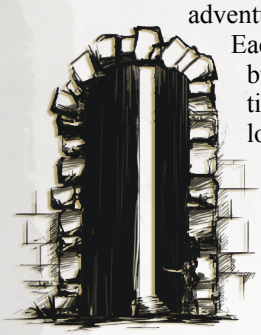
Introduction

The Session Zero System is a robust collection of foundational tools that you can use to help build incredible worlds and tell remarkable stories. It is a playable framework that can be added onto any tabletop roleplaying game to create a starting point for important conversations about expectations, wants, and hopes for the party's adventures. It is also a toolkit for players and GMs looking to build out interconnected adventures where dynamic character backgrounds inspire and impact everything around you!

*We've designed this game to come in three different flavors because every table's needs are unique. You can choose between **the PDF,** the **Art Book,** and the **Fragment Deck**! In each of these, players will get the exact same game, tools, and mechanics that we've built to help bring parties together and create characters as incredible as the stories they exist inside of. Any way you want to play, there's a version for you!*

What is a Session Zero?

In tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), a Session Zero is when everyone playing the game gathers to address group decisions that may need to be made, discuss the game basics or necessary world lore, and make sure everyone is ready to tackle the adventures ahead of them. Each table's needs differ, but at its heart, this is a time to sort out pregame logistics so that when that first step into the adventure is taken there is a support structure firmly beneath everyone's feet.



A Session Zero is also an opportunity to unite over the stories that make us human and a time to breathe life into everyone's characters.

By exploring what motivates our actions and what drives the decisions we make, we can explore how our adventurers may do the same. The characters can then move through the world of the game as fully actualized people and by knowing their hopes, fears, and aspirations, we can dive deep into their reality!

Most often, these sessions happen before an adventure or campaign begins and can include character creation from scratch. Or, you can also show up knowing exactly who you want to play and use this as a time to build connections between each other's stories, characters, and the setting of the game. The exact contents of the Session Zero depends on your specific table's needs and preferences!

Are you introducing everyone's pre-built characters and adding a few safety tools that the party wants to include?

Are you collaboratively building the world and establishing the lore that will fold into different story arcs and different characters' journeys?

Are you somewhere in the middle?

When you are done, what do you want to have added to your game? What does your table want to get out of your Session Zero to steer it in the most exciting and impactful direction?

How to Use This System:

The Session Zero System was built to be a playable compendium of references filled with all manner of modifying aids that can blend seamlessly into any TTRPG.

We want you to 'flavor to taste' with this game! If something here delights or inspires you or your players we hope that you will take it and make it your own. For everything else, leave it to wait within these pages for when it may be of use to you in the future.

Very rarely are you looking to use every instrument a multitool holds at once, but it is a great object to carry with confidence knowing that you can rely on it in many different circumstances.

When you reach the end of this collection, everyone will have access to the same suite of game modifying options to choose from.

We've built out different mechanisms for your party to steer the direction of the story by helping you discover and flush out different ***Expectations, Tone, and Mood*** at the table.

We've collected a series of optional ***House Rules*** and ***Safety Tools*** to look through so you can add additional guardrails or establish failsafes that best suit your party and the needs of your table.

Players and Game Masters alike can forge bonds and enrich world lore by following the same prompting structure to drive backstory and character creation with the ***Story Path.*** By working with a collection of archetypal fragments you get to create your own starting point for a character's origins.

By building out a Story Path you will have to answer 3 essential questions:

- Where did you come from?
- Who was someone that had a monumental impact on your life?
- What was an event that set you on the path you still walk today?

For the rest of your adventures, you get to play the why!

- Why did these circumstances lead your character to make these choices?
- Why did these choices have such impact on who they are today?
- Why did these events lead them to where they find themselves now?
- Why do these moments still linger so prominently in their mind?

Why? Why. why... why... why?

Once you've played through the Session Zero System, your table will have had a chance to go over:

- How to set the Tone, find the Mood, & uncover everyone's Expectations for the game
- Safety Tools and different ways that establishing boundaries for the table can be added
- House rules and options to include them to make the game your own
- Backstory creation guides so your character's motivations are fully realized
- Ways of building connections between characters, lore, and the wider adventure
- And how to add frameworks for compassionate communication across the table so you can bind everything within the world together and bring it to life!

PART I

EXPECTATION, TONE, & MOOD

Whether it is in-game or out, at the table or away from it, coming together and discovering where you each want your game to go is both exciting and helpful. By talking over each other's Expectations for the game and examining what Tones and Moods everyone wants to include, you can set your table up for as much success as possible.

Setting Expectations:

"A Belief, An Assumption. A strong feeling that something will happen. A deep want or desire for an event to occur."

It's important to make sure players have the opportunity to think about and share specific desires they have for the game. Some players may already have ideas for the story they want to tell, and others may not yet know. No matter the stage the player is at, everyone can use this time to discuss collective and individual hopes to build a shared understanding and avoid disappointment at the table in the future.

Maybe players have contrasting ideas of how much danger their characters are in at any given time and how deadly this world is. If the game is a puzzle and trap-heavy dungeon crawl, one player's assumptions about the ratio of exploration to roleplay might be vastly different from that of another player.

Conflicting expectations that are left hidden can lead to unnecessary friction and disappointment, so we've built some tools to help you navigate them!

Take a moment to check in with each other and share expectations openly with your party. Once some hopes and desires are on the table, everyone can work out how to weave them together or as a group you can pick a few elements you all are interested in including. If your party doesn't seem to have any immediate strong feelings or doesn't know where to start, take a look at the checklists we've included and compare answers to see where the party is.

Talk with one another and decide if you want to tackle this as a group or if you would like time to answer these individually and share the results with everyone afterwards.

We also urge players to come up with their own checklist if they feel inspired or a topic that applies to you isn't covered here! Only you know what the best questions to ask will be!

EXPECTATION CHECKLIST:

ROLEPLAY:	YES PLEASE	EITHER WAY	NO THANKS
We're more interested in the rules than the roleplay.	◯	◯	◯
We mostly talk in the third person; "My character..."	◯	◯	◯
Out-of-character talk happens as needed.	◯	◯	◯
We are happy knowing things our characters do not.	◯	◯	◯
We're ready for great roleplay to outweigh a die roll any time.	◯	◯	◯

MECHANICS:	YES PLEASE	EITHER WAY	NO THANKS
Rules light sounds right! We love a cozy game.	◯	◯	◯
We'll pick & choose the rules we want to use from the game.	◯	◯	◯
We're just as happy using mechanics as we are roleplaying.	◯	◯	◯
We play by the book just as the game rules were made.	◯	◯	◯
The crunchier the better! We can handle a lot of math.	◯	◯	◯

FLAVOR:	YES PLEASE	EITHER WAY	NO THANKS
We're just here to cause pandemonium!	◯	◯	◯
Actions have very few consequences here; it's all for fun.	◯	◯	◯
We'd like to see our characters win more than they lose.	◯	◯	◯
It's a dangerous world and the risk of failure is high!	◯	◯	◯
We'll explore the character's backstory in depth as we go.	◯	◯	◯

GAMEPLAY:	YES PLEASE	EITHER WAY	NO THANKS
We want to create a deeply immersive environment!	◯	◯	◯
We don't mind having player conflict at the table.	◯	◯	◯
We want to use our imaginations & theater-of-the-mind.	◯	◯	◯
A few interruptions while we're playing are not a big deal.	◯	◯	◯
We don't expect for everyone to know all the rules!	◯	◯	◯

OUT OF GAME:	YES PLEASE	EITHER WAY	NO THANKS
We want a game we can pick up now and then.	◯	◯	◯
Getting together is also about catching up, not just playing!	◯	◯	◯
We only play when everyone can make it.	◯	◯	◯
We're looking for a longstanding game to commit to.	◯	◯	◯
We'll be plotting and planning a lot between sessions!	◯	◯	◯

STRENGTH IN A COMPROMISE:

At the heart of this entire system is the belief that compromise and generous communication are the keys to having fun in TTRPGs. Approaching one another with understanding and compassion empowers everyone to make themselves heard, which will lead to a better game experience.

WORK TOGETHER WHEN SHARING YOUR OWN OR LISTENING TO WHAT EXPECTATIONS YOUR FELLOW PLAYERS HAVE.

Some folks want combat-heavy games, others want lots of puzzles to solve; some are interested in a cozy experience, while more may want political intrigue and social challenges. Perhaps you are a GM looking to play through a deadly world and suddenly you realize you have a table of players who want to see their characters' stories through to the end of a campaign…

WHEREVER YOU FIND YOURSELVES, MAKE SURE ALL OF THESE IDEAS ARE OUT IN THE OPEN SO YOU CAN AGREE ON SOMETHING THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE!

PLAYING A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE:

At their core many, TTRPGs are dynamic and center around a story that is constantly unfolding. As players grow alongside their characters, their expectations and desires will likely change from where they were at the start of the game.

You might not notice right away that your mind has changed. Sometimes it can be a slow burn, creeping up inch by inch; other times, it can well up all at once in a surging realization. It's natural for minds to change and as long as you build a framework for the game to evolve along with your party there will always be room to grow together.

CHECK IN FROM TIME TO TIME AND SHARE YOUR FEELINGS WITH THE OTHERS AT YOUR TABLE AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THE STORY!

ALWAYS OFFER, NEVER A DEMAND:

In the very same vein as generous communication comes our belief that each collaborative storytelling game is an offer or an invitation to engage with what the group is building. Nobody should ever feel entitled to having a specific element included in the game. Always offer. Be open to new ideas and work with your fellow players to include as much as feels right to yo!

Player 1: *"I've included a lot in my backstory about my missing relative, they are the one who trained a lot of us and I don't think my character knows what happened to them. If it's interesting to you to include them somewhere, I'd love to see where weaving them into the narrative could work. I'd only note that I'm not keen on them showing up in the story as a major villain."*

GM: *"Oh, that's very interesting. Are you okay with that being a complete surprise to you as a player, or do you want a heads up if I find a good place for them? Are you okay with me writing their journey between when your character last saw them to now and deciding whether they are still alive?"*

Player 1: *"I want it to be a complete surprise and I'm happy for you to let your imagination go wild! Even if it's just a rumor or a small part of our tale, it would be interesting to explore somewhere down the road."*

Finding Mood & Tone:

Mood

"A general state of emotion or feeling; the prevailing atmosphere surrounding current circumstances, events, or affairs; the overall experience of external happenings."

Tone

"The attitude a player or the narrator expresses towards someone or something in particular; a specific emotion or impression perceived in the face of different situations or interactions."

Mood and Tone can often be seen as incredibly similar, in part due to their flexible use. For this system we define *Mood as the overall vibes of the situation,* whereas *Tone is the way each individual player experiences the story* and how it relates to their character. Mood is mercurial and shifts according to the events unfolding before everyone. Tone is more situational and can highlight the stakes of a specific moment.

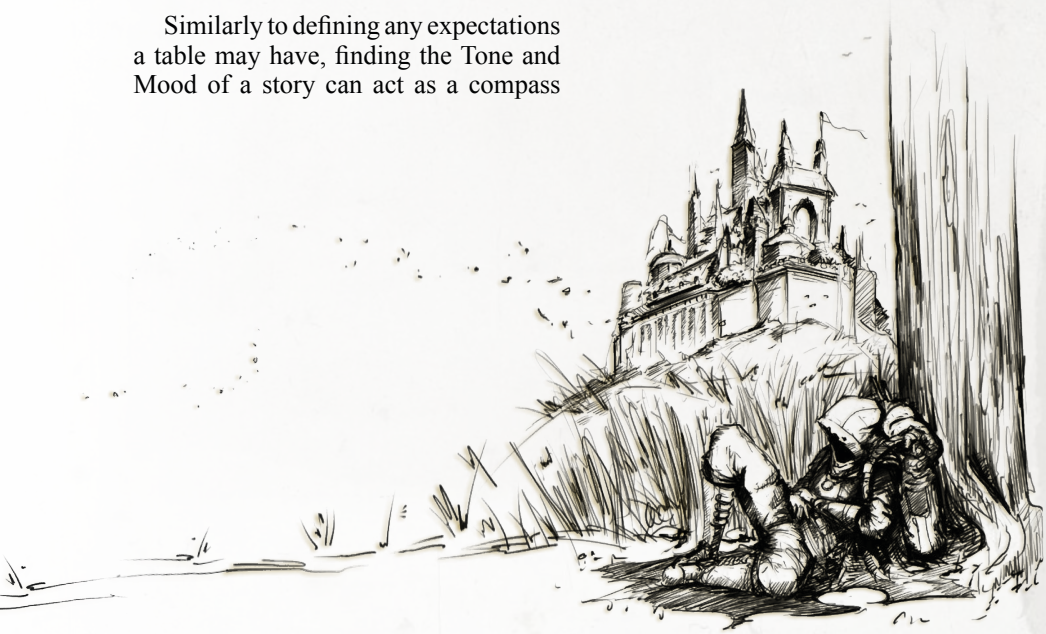
To help distinguish these two clearly, think of Mood as the feeling a certain song can give the room while Tone may be heard in someone's voice describing the music based on their unique perspective: Mood music vs. Tone of voice.

Similarly to defining any expectations a table may have, finding the Tone and Mood of a story can act as a compass for players to guide their choices by in-game and may help better define the areas your table wants to explore.

Playing with these within the game can also be a great way to show growth, highlight important decisions, or reveal dramatic choices. By changing or breaking the mold of the mood/ tone you've all decided to include, you can open up endless opportunities for incredible storytelling.

Useful Tools:

Use the lists we've provided on the next page and select as many options as you feel apply to your game. You can also be inspired to make your own descriptions that best fit with the story your party is telling!



MOOD

OUR WORLD IS:	THE VIBE IS:	PEOPLE HERE CAN BE:
WHIMSICAL, LIGHT, BRIGHT	TENSE AND UNCOMFORTABLE	CRUEL AND UNCARING
HOPEFUL, OPTIMISTIC, PROMISING	UNSETTLED AND MYSTIFYING	WEARY AND WORN DOWN
CONSTANT, UNCHANGING, STATIC	BORED AND DRAINED	TIGHT LIPPED AND SECRETIVE
STRICT, MILITANT, RIGID	THREATENED AND ENDANGERED	DEDICATED AND HARDWORKING
WILD, UNBRIDLED, UNPREDICTABLE	WELCOMING AND AT EASE	BOASTFUL AND LOUD
BOISTEROUS, ROWDY, INDULGENT	VALIDATING AND RESPECTFUL	THOUGHTFUL AND GENEROUS
RESPLENDENT, DECADENT, GILDED	REVERENT AND REGAL	TRUSTWORTHY AND RELIABLE

EXAMPLE:

"Our world is CONSTANT, UNCHANGING, AND STATIC. Life goes on as it always has and DEDICATED, HARDWORKING folks carve out a place for themselves as they can. Though that may be enough for some, we find ourselves yearning for more! The party has decided it's time to go search the ruins of the Old City where few have walked for generations. That region has a lingering cloud surrounding it that leaves all who enter UNSETTLED AND MYSTIFIED."

Now the party knows their town is predictable, if not a bit dull, filled with dedicated people and is located close to old ruins filled with many secrets. These facts about the world can help inform relationship choices as well as feelings about those spaces and peoples.

TONE

THIS SITUATION LEAVES US FEELING:	THIS PLACE SEEMS:	THIS PERSON APPEARS TO BE:
AS IF IT'S ALL ON THE LINE NOW!	UNSTABLE AND READY TO EXPLODE	UNTRUSTING AND SUSPICIOUS
WORRIED IF WE'LL MAKE IT OUT	UNCHANGED BY PASSING AGES	DESPERATE FOR MORE TIME
WATCHFUL OF OUR BACKS	TAINTED BY SOMETHING MOST FOUL	COLD, UNFEELING, AND CRITICAL.
DESPERATE FOR ANY ACTION!	UNIQUE AND FREE FROM INFLUENCE	SLY AND PRONE TO TROUBLE!
SAFE AND PROTECTED BY OTHERS	IMPENETRABLE AND GUARDED	GENEROUS AND SELF-SACRIFICING
OPTIMISTIC AND FULL OF HOPE	SACRED AND CHARGED WITH ENERGY	ALWAYS IN CONTROL AT ALL TIMES
FULLY CONFIDENT IN OUR ABILITIES!	LIKE NOTHING HAS LEFT A MARK	MAGNANIMOUS AND POWERFUL

EXAMPLE:

"The party faces an upcoming arena challenge to settle a debt that leaves them CAUTIOUS AND WATCHFUL of their backs. Rumor has it that some here want them to lose. The town seems on edge, UNSTABLE, AND READY TO EXPLODE with all that rides on this event. One party member is becoming more wary of the figure running things, who seems to be DESPERATE FOR MORE TIME as the games approach. None of the other players seem to feel that anything is amiss. These next three days are going to be incredibly exciting!"

With this, the players know the stakes of the adventure and more about the specifics. They can make informed choices and decide who or what they want to focus on given what they aim to accomplish. Setting the tone can also help drive the pace of the story!

ONE SENTENCE:

Sometimes a few key words may be all it takes to transport everyone at your table into the world of your story! By setting the ***Mood*** or the ***Tone*** in this way, you can help your party get into character or jump back into where your story left off last time!

Perhaps it reminds everyone of what is at stake, highlights how dangerous or magical this place is, embodies the spirit of your adventuring party, or showcases the overall goal of the game. You can work together to find a phrase that encapsulates your table's unique flavor and use it as a way to set the tone or the mood when you all sit down to play.

It can be used before everyone jumps into character, to bring everyone back to where you last left off in your adventures, as a reminder of the greater aims ahead of your characters, or as a cue in game to show how the wider world around you all operates.

WORK TOGETHER TO CRAFT A SENTENCE THAT ENCAPSULATES WHAT KIND OF MOOD AND TONE YOUR PARTY WANTS TO SET

"Our world finds a way to thrive under the suffocating cloud of untamed magic and we're going to put an end to this chaos—no matter the cost!"

"No puzzle too puzzling nor trap too perplexing, we'll rid your whole town of all magics most vexing!"

"The party rarely trusts folk outside of this rag tag group... even fewer members trust one another within it."

MOOD AND TONE IN GAME:

You can continue to develop Mood & Tone as the game goes on—not just during your Session Zero! Below are a few different ways a GM or a Player could think about their own personal journey using both these tools as they go farther along in their adventures!

FOR PLAYERS:

- Use these individually to help drive character interaction. Decide the Moods or Tones your character observes in different situations, places, and people they encounter along the way.
- When a moment of change or personal growth occurs, use this tool as a guide to show character development as they continue their adventures, convey a shift in perspective, show off their progress, or perhaps highlight lessons they've learned that have left a mark.
- Allow them to pick up on the Moods and Tones other Characters and NPCs may perceive and allow those realizations to drive moments of friction or comradery!

FOR GAME MASTERS:

- You can always call on this tool to guide all manner of elements of narrative as you build out this world for your players.
- Use Tone and Mood to help you create an NPC's worldviews and motivations based on how they feel about the situations, places, and people they encounter.
- Telegraph changes in Mood or Tone to help a situation feel off or appear as expected and boost player confidence.
- Showcase different NPCs experiencing a character's perception of different Moods and Tones in the story and allow them to make informed judgments based on how those make them feel.

House Rules:

It's your house so they're your rules! ***House Rules*** are variations on or additions to the game's official rules with your group's particular needs at heart. There are also House Rules about no House Rules! Anything goes when you are setting yourself up for an incredible game.

House rules can be as complex or self-explanatory as you want! They can serve any purpose or clear any murkiness a game may bring up for your party and come in one of three main flavors:

An Open Rule

A Modified Rule

A Closed Rule

An Open Rule is defined by its creativity and exists outside the official rule set more than any of the others. An example of an Open Rule would be: "LET'S SEE IT, THEN," *(see below)* where you add a whole other game into your TTRPG.

A Modified Rule takes an existing rule into account and changes it in some way that makes the game more interesting for your party. These tend to come with time and experience playing a specific system! An example of a Modified Rule is "A CRIT IS A CRIT," *(see below)* applied to ability checks in many dice based systems.

A Closed Rule does just what it says in the name: it deletes a rule that you don't want to use in your game. Often, this can be a great tool to steer gameplay in the direction you want by tweaking the official rules to your liking. "WE DON'T DO THAT HERE" *(see below)* is a perfect example. At many tables, rules are removed that make gameplay clunkier or less fun to play.

> Only consider adding these rules after discussing them with everyone at the table!

Below, we've included some of our favorite House Rules that we use in our own games. Each highlights a specific element of gameplay we want to lean into or move away from.

Rarely are all of them added at once—*unless you really want to test your game's limits*— but each has a purpose, a form, and a function.

If one here calls to you, we hope you will give it a shot!

YOU'VE GOT OPTIONS!

NO ROLL NEEDED: *Sometimes it's not up to the dice. Sometimes the storytelling is just so good there's no leaving it up to chance.* Once per session, a player or the GM can call out "No Roll Needed!" and whoever is roleplaying and prompting that exclamation can automatically succeed on their attempt!

LET'S SEE IT, THEN: *A tried and true favorite because the possibilities are endless.* Rather than taking it to the dice or the game mechanic arbitrating success, you can use another game entirely to decide successes and failures. A table may include a tower brick game and allow a character who is trying to pick a lock, for example, to attempt clearing three levels to succeed on their task. Or perhaps a game of pick-up-sticks on a timer can simulate a character attempting to diffuse a mechanical device! *Different players have different skills, so be sure everyone is on board with this method and the other game you are bringing in.* With this rule, dice never have to be the limit at your table.

I THINK I KNOW SOMEONE: T*his rule is a double-edged sword and can push storytelling and gameplay along—at a price.* In a moment of need, any player may declare that they "think they know someone" and create or tie in an NPC from their background to be located in the area. The moment they are brought up in this context, this NPC exists and is immediately controlled by the GM. Improvise the how and why this NPC may know important information and what their connection to the current story is. The GM rolls a d20 in secret. On an even number, the NPC wants to get even and will actively work to sabotage the party. On an odd number, the NPC wants to help the party out and will work with them. There are many more details you can explore with this rule to shape it to the table's liking. Try it out and see how it works for you!

LUCKY TABLE: *To be used when the stakes are high and the swings are big!* At the start of the game select 3 dice, or your game's arbitrating equivalent, to be rolled and set aside for the duration of play. At any moment, a player or players may ask to use one of the predetermined outcomes for themselves, another player, or an NPC to substitute after success or failure has been determined. This allows for more than fate to drive the story and can give the whole table a morale boost when the stakes are dire!

FINAL STAND: *Sometimes you have to go out swinging.* At that last moment, impossible things are made possible. At the moment right before the end, a character can take one last turn to do something extraordinary and go out with a bang. They can take this turn at a narratively appropriate moment chosen by the player or the GM. This rule is a combination of a lot of similar tropes from film, television, and great works of fiction with an aim to add a beautiful and bittersweet taste to the end of a character's story.

FAILING FORWARD: *This is a favorite because somehow, it can be so much more interesting than an easy success.* When a character fails a task badly, they may still succeed, but at a high cost. Sneaking onto a ship to get off-world and you fumble picking a lock to open the hatch? Oh, you get the door open but very loudly, and now a lot of people know you are here. Don't be afraid to have failure look any number of different ways. Each can help move your story forward while still stinging when you can't accomplish what you set out to do.

A CRIT IS A CRIT: *This house rule rewards rolling the highest number on a die, or your game's mechanical equivalent.* On a critical success where the highest number is shown, that attempt automatically succeeds.

WE DON'T DO THAT HERE: *This one is all in the name.* If an official rule is not to your liking and your table plays without it, consider it struck from the rules and enjoy its refreshing absence! This is a delicate one to add at the beginning of a new game or with players new to a system. We recommend always playing games as intended before introducing this House Rule!

THIS STORY DOESN'T END HERE: *Sometimes a character falls before we are done with them… but ending one chapter doesn't mean the tale is over, only that it's time to start a new one.* When a character falls during a game, your party can work with the GM to include bringing them back into the adventure. Perhaps it's as simple as intervention from powers beyond your own. Maybe there's a fight into the abyss to find their incorporeal self. Perhaps the character wakes up with no memory surrounded by worried party members they no longer know. It could take a few sessions or be instantaneous. Work together as a table to find the right way to continue telling the stories you want to tell.

It's also incredibly common to add rules once you have a little bit of experience with the system you are playing. See how the game runs as intended and then start making collaborative tweaks when it becomes clear your table will have a better time if you do!

PART II

TTRPG SAFETY TOOLS

Above all else, the aim of using safety tools is to have the enthusiastic consent of everyone at the table for what is happening in the story. This does not mean every secret is known or shared; rather, everyone knows the subject matter of the game and is happy to engage with the content that will fill the table's adventures! Safety tools also act as a safeguard mechanic for everyone to use if things veer off into uncomfortable territory. Even with the best intentions, sometimes you'll need to check in with everyone; better to have safety tools in place before you need them to make sure everyone keeps having fun!

The most important step when adding these tools to your game is to set the intention for how you want them to work within your group.

Are these safety tools necessary because of the game's themes?

"Our table is going to play a dark horror game and we want these safety tools to act as a guardrail. That way, we can trust one another to get close to uncomfortable content in this world while at the same time knowing at any moment we can call it quits if things become too much to handle."

Are they useful because some subject matter is hard for folks at the table?

"Our group has some hard lines with certain topics. In our long-term campaign, we want to make sure there's an easy way to steer the game away from those subjects if they ever come up or people forget."

Are they going to be useful as best-practice options for a new group?

"Everyone here is new to these games or is new as a group and we want to know that if something comes up unexpectedly, we can keep everything fun and safe!"

Once you've set the intention for your safety tools and decided as a group what role you all want them to play, it's time to determine what you want to use at your table.

YOU'VE GOT OPTIONS!

It's important to remember:

We use 'player' fluidly throughout this text to include everyone playing the game as well as to differentiate between those playing characters & the person running the game, the game master (GM). The GM is absolutely a player and their wants and needs should be included in communal discussions throughout!

Communal Safety Tools:

The idea of safety tools is hardly new to the TTRPG space and we are happy to share some of the most well-known bastions that have impacted countless games across the community! You may have even heard of a few without even knowing their origins.

The TTRPG Safety Toolkit co-curated by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk is a collection of safety tools and a great first stop when looking to add something to your game. It includes so much of what has become standard practice in the space and acts as a living collection of incredible tools for any table. From different fully flushed-out safety systems, consent checklists, macro tools, compilations, resource links, and more, The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a great place to start.

The X-Card by John Stavropoulos is an optional tool that allows anyone in your game (including you) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play. In its most distilled form, it is a physical (or digital) X card that once tapped or clicked lets everyone know that the current scene or narrative moment is going in a direction that makes someone at the table uncomfortable. A simple and incredibly effective safeguard!

The Open Door Policy is a simple but powerful safety tool to add to any table. It is impossible to know everything that may be confrontational for folks at a table and with the Open Door Policy in place, players can leave the table for any reason at any time with the understanding that the GM will narratively weave that into the story in a seamless way until they return. It cements the idea that no matter what, there is space for anyone to take care of themselves.

Tools of our own Making:

Each game played by unique groups of people will require, by default, a unique and different blend of safety tools. Every time you change the game or the players at the table, it is important to come together and talk about what added safeguards will have the greatest positive impact for each of you.

As such, we've included some of the tools we have come to rely on the most and organized them below by which environments they help foster or what complications they help prevent!

PLAYER WELLBEING:

The best thing we can do as improvisational storytellers building worlds is protect the well-being of those at our table. Subject matter in TTRPGs can be unpredictable, so when things edge closer to being difficult to handle, it's important we have systems in place to slow down, change, or bring to a close those story threads as each table needs. The following are some great options to help do just that!

Check Points: We recommend using these as a mechanism to pause and see how everyone is doing. Check Points / check-ins can be regular occurrences done at the end of each session, or they can be handled as needed. Discuss with your table how often you'd like to have a moment to see where everyone is and how the table feels about the game so far.

Your table can:

- Share overall feelings for the story in general far or discuss specific elements
- Talk over where the table started and where they're headed, covering character or party arcs and what has been accomplished and what players would like to accomplish.
- Bring up new aspects of the game or story that may need a new safety tool added
- Share worries or concerns and recalibrate everyone to be on the same page
- Discuss theories and guesses for plot based on what everyone at the table knows so far!

Narrative in game can move fast. Knowing that, it is important to establish a frequency for checkpoints throughout the game that makes sense for you. That could be after a set number of sessions or after you reach certain milestones. You could have a checkpoint anytime you finish a major arc or story, or just when it feels like a good time to take the temperature of the room. Find a set of checkpoints that works for you and your party so that you can keep playing the way you like and if you need to you have ways that you can adjust as needed.

Character Tone: Bringing the same tools of 'in-game tone' to your character can help clearly define where a player ends and a character begins. All too often, the water can be muddy when differentiating between those two voices. By deciding on and sharing your ideas for character tone, you can keep communicating clearly. Decide on a few keywords that help define character tone so everyone stays immersed in the game even when the stakes are high!

Aimless	Ambitious	Irritable	Patient
Active	Stoic	Loving	Harsh
Careless	Careful	Motivated	Apathetic
Composed	Excitable	Orderly	Chaotic
Critical	Sympathetic	Proud	Humble
Discrete	Indiscreet	Strict	Playful
Generous	Frugal	Talkative	Dry
Honest	Devious	Unaware	Perceptive
Realistic	Imaginative	Wry	Direct

Code Words: If challenging moments come up in a game, it can often be difficult to know how and when to break character to raise the alarm. Worrying that speaking up may 'ruin the scene' or concern for how another player may be feeling is entirely normal, and the Code Words tool offers a solution. When you gather for Session Zero, decide on a Code Word or Code Phrase.

A player can build the word or phrase into their character's dialogue and still communicate that the story is veering into unpleasant territory.

The chosen word or phrase should be unique enough that it won't accidentally come up in normal conversation.

Code words can be used to:

Signal that a player wants to move away from the new topic

"It's not as complicated as playing **cat's cradle***..."*

Remind folks that the current topic is a boundary for someone

"We've seen **the tail wag the dog** *before I'm sure."*

Or to say that a moment out-of-character to recalibrate and recenter is needed.

"Excuse me, I've just seen a **jelly doughnut** *that I can't leave behind.*

BEWARE OF 'LOADED QUESTIONS':

TTRPGs are all about the possibilities of what you can do and rarely should they be built to be restrictive. That being said, it's easy to fall into the trap of asking loaded questions without being aware it's happening, so we're flagging it!

A loaded question is one that comes with an ulterior motive, a preferred answer, an inherent assumption, or a judgment that others at the table may not have.

Even if done so unintentionally, this can result in the person being asked feeling trapped or uncomfortable.

Not every example below is explicitly a loaded question but they often can be depending on what the asker is looking for. The key is to look at how they make the other person feel! Use that as your compass when navigating through these waters.

"You all know that this took a lot of hard work and time to plan… we're going to have fun playing right?"

"Are you going to make that foolish decision and risk everything? You don't really think it's worth it, do you?"

"When did you decide to sabotage this plan & make it harder on the rest of us?"

"Why are *(insert common character stereotypes here)* always so predictable?"

"If we wanted to have a really goofy time playing, what would help get everyone super silly tonight?"

"That's a risky call and could cost you if it doesn't pan out… What price would be too high and make you regret this choice?

"What moral math or risk assessment did your character do to come to this decision?"

"What about (*insert behavior here*) makes it your go-to for this character?"

With generous and kind communication being your aim at the table, start to pay attention to if and when you ask loaded questions that leave others feeling less than great.

CHARACTER CONFLICT VS. PLAYER CONFLICT:

Some players are fine with their character fighting with other players, and some are not. During your session zero, be sure to establish boundaries around this topic. An in-character conflict can spill over into disagreement between players, and vice versa. Having had time to address this early can make it easier to resolve if it comes up later.

Talk openly and directly about what everyone feels will be workable for your specific group. The safety tools above are excellent for staying on track and navigating conflict in game!

CAREFUL!

"IT'S WHAT MY CHARACTER WOULD DO"

is a sentence that offers an almost immediate diminishing return. A player may use it as an excuse in bad faith to continue behavior others voice concern over. Often, it can be an indication that a player could cross boundaries later down the line using character choice as a mask. Leaning on any of the safety tools contained in this section will help your table navigate issues like this.

CHARACTER BLEED:

Part of the joy we get from roleplaying is the chance to go on incredible adventures through the experiences of someone different from ourselves. The trouble comes when the act and the actor begin to blend together and the distance between player and character is shortened to the point that there is not enough separation between the two. When players feel their character's negative or harmful emotions as their own, too much bleed has happened. The following are great tools to help everyone at your table maintain that balanced distance.

On the Table / Off the Table: This is useful when it comes to distinguishing between a player's feelings and a character's feelings. It's easy to feel the emotions your character may be experiencing and accidentally take them on as your own. Sometimes it can be cathartic, but in other instances it can be detrimental. Use the phrase **"On the Table / Off the Table"** when talking about the topics and types of conversation you are all comfortable having in character vs. out of character.

Player 1: *"I'm happy to leave battle planning **On the Table** but I think I want to be careful when it comes to character-to-character conflict. I'd rather have those kinds of conversations **Off the Table** for now so I don't get too sucked in. I'll let you all know if that changes!"*

GM: *"That's absolutely fine. Are you comfortable with me narrating the kind of conflicts that may come up in shorter summaries rather than playing them out?"*

Player 1: *"If that works for everyone when it comes to my character's scenes, yes. I'm totally fine with other folks roleplaying whatever they feel up to otherwise."*

Everyone else: *"Sounds great!"*

"You, or your character." Some roleplayers are more practiced at separating their feelings from the person they are playing. When in doubt, it's always great to find an 'off table' moment to check in and make sure what is or has happened in a scene is challenging for a player's character and not the player as well. As a shorthand reminder for breaking in and out of roleplay, you can ask your friend at the table if the moment upset You, or your character. Reinforcing those differences can be helpful to combat miscommunication.

Player 2: *"Hey, that was a pretty passionate speech you gave there and I know we are fighting against a lot of what your character's morality is based around… so I just wanted to make sure your character was the one upset and that you weren't hurt by the choice the rest of the party made? It's okay if they are, but it's not okay if this decision hurts you."*

Player 3: *"Yeah, I'm a bit shocked at how much I felt that as a betrayal, but don't worry; I know this is just my character's feelings. I'm actually looking forward to holding you all accountable for this choice later because they definitely don't agree with you. Thanks for checking in. I'm all good."*

AFTERCARE:

The end of a session can come with cliffhanger moments, intense roleplay, or simply a rowdy fun time that no one wants to end. In those moments it can be a challenge to drop back into reality. Aftercare is exactly what it sounds like: care for afterwards.

You always have the following tools at your fingertips when it seems the table needs a little something more to help come down from a particularly emotional, engaging or stressful session.

Debrief Phase: To break the spell of roleplay and return from the liminal space of the imagination back to reality, adding a debrief phase can be incredibly grounding for the party. Different groups prefer different rituals post-game; sometimes, it can be as simple as sharing feelings out of character or commenting on moments in roleplay or combat that were impactful or incredible to watch. See if adding a moment after the game to relish, reset, and recalibrate feels right to you.

NOTE: Make sure you communicate how long everyone has available for a debrief phase, perhaps when knowingly going into more intense or exciting story lines your table can work together to allot more time as needed!

Debrief Phase Options:

✦ *A Quiet Moment:* Some tables naturally fall into this after a particularly powerful scene to let everything sink in. Focusing on breath, on how a player feels in that space, or simply letting the ending moments drag on without trying to find words to describe it can be very cathartic.

✦ *Questions, Anyone?:* Not necessarily to be answered by anyone, sharing questions that have come up for everyone at the table is a great way to cap the end of a session, GMs included! What lingering threads are you inspired to pull on after a reveal? What plot or backstory has you hooked? What do you most want to know to fill in tantalizing blank spots in the story? Share questions between one another to cement important points you want to examine next time!

✦ *Favorite Moments:* Share a particularly impactful or memorable moment from the table that left an impression on you. It's a great way to celebrate your fellow players and go over events that made you really feel something!

✦ *Casual Table Talk:* Sometimes the best thing you can do, especially in the event of a particularly shocking cliffhanger, is immediately end the session and dive right into casual table talk player, to player. Build in some time in to keep it easy!

✦ *One on One:* Perhaps there is a moment or a story element a player or GM wants to talk privately about. You can always take a moment to debrief in smaller groups away from the larger table to make sure anyone playing has what they need.

What's Next: Perhaps looking at what steps could come next for the party can act as a balm while everyone begins putting their character sheets and dice away for the evening. Sometimes, talking over the next steps can help players remember more details from session to session and help make cliffhanger story moments easier to come back to fresh.

"Okay, well, that didn't go at all like I thought it would… So, to get out of this mess here's what I'm thinking…."

Take Something / Leave Something: To acknowledge the things that have affected your table and cherish those moments that made an impact on you as players, Take something / Leave Something is a powerful way of looking after yourselves. Go around the room and share one or two of each to close out a game. This can be a great way to bring those good things along with you as you leave and allow something you'd rather not continue carrying to stay at the table.

"I'm taking that feeling of family and triumph we got after successful negotiations, that felt really powerful, and I'm leaving the doubt that I had the whole game that I couldn't play this scene well enough. I don't need to bring that with me!"

The Epilogue: This is a great tool to continue telling the story. By narrating 'cut' style scenes that the characters may not know about the GM can show the players events happening at the edges of their story! An epilogue can foreshadow things that are going to come up, focus on what adversaries have worked towards while the session was happening, or reveal new and tantalizing pieces of lore to delight and surprise everyone at the table.

GM: *"You hunker down for the night in this makeshift camp, safe for the moment from the elements and the creatures outside. As the flint lamp slowly turns to embers, we fade to black. All we hear is the steady pattering sound of rain on canvas. In the darkness, a spark is lit. As you all rest safe in your bedrolls, we pan over to another camp illuminated with sickly yellow glow globes and we see a clawed hand twists one of your lost packs in their grasp. A jagged nail runs over the hand-embroidered name tag again and again… and again. The light is too low to see their face fully but their breath puffs from their lips in bouts of steam. Another cloaked figure enters the room nervously. "We've tracked them down, Director. They're closer than we thought. Should we make a move?" The first figure throws the backpack to the ground and turns on their compatriot. "No. Observe them but no more. I'll go for them myself when the time comes. Those brats are mine." They reach out and crush the illuminated globe in their clawed hand, plunging the room into darkness… And that's where we'll end tonight!"*

REMEMBER, YOU CAN'T ANTICIPATE EVERYTHING!

A great kindness you can do for your entire table is acknowledge that even with all the preparation in the world, you may not be able to prevent every difficult moment. More important than perfection is the commitment you all have to one another. Setting that commitment from the outset can make sure that when situations do appear you can all tackle them as a table with each other's wellbeing in mind.

Pick a commitment to revisit discussions and topics when things happen to get complicated or passionate and use these tools as a way to recenter and reclaim the energy at your table.

We Are Committed To...

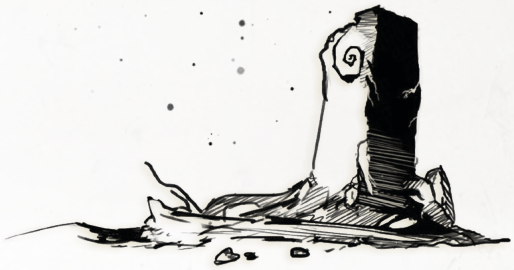
...making sure that having fun is the most important thing for our game. If someone isn't having fun, little else is more important. Our friends come first.

...listening and being generous storytellers that share the table and ensure everyone has moments that matter. There's room for everyone to share moments in the sunlight.

...speaking up if we need support from our fellow players so that nothing lingers unsaid or unknown at our table. We're choosing bravery, honesty, and trust!

...to be empathetic to each other's opinions and experiences. Each person's perspective is valuable and we celebrate our uniqueness.

Make a commitment with your table to honor the space you share together. Whatever it is, make it perfectly your own so you always have a touchstone to return to in times of need.



PART III

STORY PATH & FRAGMENT GUIDE

Now it's time to go back to the very beginning and choose your past wisely!

What is a Story Path?

Imagine *three main ingredients* that shape who a character is on a fundamental level. These elements will act as their main driving forces and will help inform future choices by being grounded in their experience in the past.

It would be easy to build a more elaborate system. We've kept things simple and at the heart of it, we've found you can distill a lot of what makes a person who they are by working out the following:

Where *did they come from?* — *That's a character's* Legacy Path

Who *was an impactful person in their life thus far?* — *That's a character's* Bond Path

&

What *was an event that set them forward on their journey?* — *That's a character's* Catalyst Path

ALL TOGETHER THIS IS WHAT MAKES UP THE **STORY PATH**

By building these three avenues out, you can give your character a motivating past, meaningful connections, and moments in time that are important enough it sets them on their adventures. Even how you answer the prompts can illuminate what sets your character apart from someone else's.

> Your goal will be not only to answer what choice the character made when looking at prompts but also to answer why that choice in particular was the one they made.

With all these elements in place, you can build a character that is entirely unique to you and the stories you want to tell!

How does it Work?

Story paths are built in rounds:

Each player begins by randomly selecting a prompt from the ***Legacy Fragment Path.*** Then, they describe how they want it to relate to their character. *(If playing with the **Fragment Deck,** return the card and proceed to the next player.)*

When everyone has made their selection, move on to the next round where players do the same with ***Bond Fragments***, followed by the ***Catalyst Fragments*** until everyone at the table has one prompt from each **Path** (*three in total*).

It is absolutely possible for players to pick the same prompt from each group

of Fragments! We aren't scared of seeing a few cards repeated within a group of adventurers. How someone interprets and answers the questions posed offers endless possibilities as unique as the players themselves!

Once each player has chosen their Story Path, we move on to the ***Amalgam Phase.*** This is where everyone decides how, if at all, each of their stories intertwines!

Going around the room: each Player chooses one of their Fragments to connect in some way to another player's Fragment at the table!

These can be in big ways, or small; trivial ways, or ways that cut deeply.

ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT AND TRUST IS KEY FOR THIS STEP OF THE GAME

Players have full agency to turn down the offer of any Amalgam they do not wish to include in their story. Your table must work together to tie in elements of these paths together in a way that delights and inspires everyone involved!

Once the ***Story Paths*** and ***Amalgam Phases*** are complete, your table will be full of history and shared lore populating both the character backstories and the world around your adventures! *We'll go into further detail about each specific section further on as you build this chapter out together.*

Alternatively: if your party is looking for a few more options to choose from: ***Pick 3 Fragments*** *from each path but choose only one to keep that best suits the character. Do this for the* ***Legacy, Bond, and Catalyst Paths*** *before moving onto the* ***Amalgam Phase*** *as described above.*

DRIVING NARRATIVE CHOICES:

So what is a choice?

"The act of making a decision when faced with more than one possibility. Standing in the face of multiple options and determining which is best given the circumstances and what may be at stake or instead what may be gained."

... and how do we make choices?

"We consider what we want, how we believe we personally may be able to achieve any of the options before us, and make the best guess based on our feelings, past experiences, and instincts in the given moment and our inner morals or principals."

For Players:

Let's dive more deeply into the anatomy of choice and how that inquiry can help anyone tell genuinely motivated human stories.

We created the Story Path for the ***Session Zero System*** to jump-start your character's personal history by grounding their decision-making in a past that is unique to them. This way, when looking at what choices they might make, you have an opportunity to base those decisions on previous experiences that matter to this character and have impacted their story in ways that changed them.

A character with a past that includes a Bond Figure who betrayed them could be played with justification to be less trusting than another character with a Bond Figure who was a trusted mentor. Conversely, that same betrayed character could be played to be incredibly friendly but deep down expects most people to eventually leave.

This is what we call playing the 'why.' As you adventure into these stories alongside your fellow players, that 'why' will continue to change and grow as you build on that past and experience new motivating moments together.

This system gives you a grounded place to start so you can journey far and away from those humble beginnings, while also having somewhere real to begin your character's story.

For Game Masters:

As the person at the helm of this story, there can be a lot of upfront work building a world that feels like it's real. To make a story breathe and move like it's a living thing requires numerous intricate details. By leaning on the Story Path much of that impactful history will be built right in front of you. Every choice your players make is a gift to the adventure because it helps you populate the world with people, places, and events that ***matter*** to your players.

You can build on the outlines of the story and work to include the ***Bonds, Legacies,*** and ***Catalysts*** your players choose and weave them into the world you are playing in.

In this way, the ***Story Path*** becomes a road map guiding you through the kinds of plot hooks and tales your players will bite on every time. Where their story begins will always inform where they will be willing to go. Find those juicy morsels of character identity in their Story Paths that drives character choices and weave those themes into your adventures! You can do this by including in the actual people, places, and events someone has added to their Story Path or you can choose those larger universal themes found in their backstories and create captivating situations that motivate your characters to charge right in!

In the end, you will have a story that impacts the players and have players who care deeply about the story!

LEGACY FRAGMENTS

This Path represents the many ways in which your character's story could begin. What peoples and places do they hail from? What traditions and customs started shaping them from the very start? What framework or cultures did they grow up with that still influences them today?

A person can become who they are *because* of or *despite* their origins. When choosing from these fragments, keep this in mind and decide not only what influences were there at the start but how those factors impacted your character and what unique choices they made in the face of them.

Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer the questions it poses then return the fragment to the deck. (*Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.*)

LEGACY FRAGMENT ROLLABLE TABLE

d20	FRAGMENT	PROMPT
1	ANEW	*You don't remember your past; in fact, you can only recall events that occurred very recently.* How do you deal with that blank space? What flashes of recognition offer clues about your past? What questions drive you? Are you looking for answers or is this better?
2	BEYOND	*You come from and were forged in places unknown.* Who was behind the scenes shaping things to their own design? How did you fit into their plans? Did you embrace or run from those plots? What strange shadows still linger at your back? What lies ahead?
3	CATACLYSM	*A disaster struck your homeland, nearly wiping it off the map.* What manner of catastrophe occurred? What did you lose? Did your people rebuild, or did they forge a new path to find a new home? How does that still impact you and the wider region today?
4	DESCENDANT	*You come from a long line of storied adventurers.* What is something your family is well known for? Are you staying with or breaking from their traditions? What made you choose that path? What did you lose or what did you gain in making that choice?
5	ESCAPE	*You ran from a life of wealth, subjugation, and bland duty.* Why did the prospects of those demands drive you away? Who did you leave behind? What did you want for yourself instead? Who or what are you still hiding from? Are others searching for you?
6	FISSURE	*You come from another realm far distant from this one.* Where did you travel from? If you know, how did you arrive here? What do you remember from your home domain? What keeps you from returning? Are you looking for a way back?
7	GRIT	*Unyielding scarcity forced all in your town to scrape together what they could to survive.* What skills did you have to learn then that you still rely on today? Before you departed, how were your people faring? What are you in search of to bring back to them?

8	HEART	*You were raised by a found family.* Who were they and how did they come to take you in? What new direction did your life take after joining them? What of your life before? Did you come to love these people or are there more complicated feelings between you?
9	INDUSTRY	*You grew up in a working merchant family.* What was their trade? What impact did the exposure to so many different cultures have on you? Do you still practice your trade or have you left it? What skills or connections continue to be of use to you even now?
10	JEST	*Your community was always on the move traveling to entertain from town to town.* What did life on the road impress upon you early in life? What perspectives did you gain as someone who lived on the edges of things? What tricks do you still keep up your sleeves?
11	KNOWLEDGE	*You were raised as a student at a grand school and received an education many envy.* What was your chosen field? Who were your most loved or feared teachers? How did these teachings open your eyes? What subjects were you prevented from delving deeper into?
12	LOSS	*Your home was taken long ago and many still fight to reclaim it.* Who pushed your people out and why? What stands in your way of returning? What rumors circulate of how it has changed from what you knew back then? What would you do in order to go back?
13	MINDFUL	*You were raised to respect and live in harmony with nature's power.* What secrets did you learn from your upbringing that others may not know about this region? What did it take to adjust to the more metropolitan world? What do you cherish most from home?
14	NEXUS	*The city of your birth sits atop ruins of a people long forgotten, but their magic remains.* What influence did such arcane exposure have on you or your people? Was this magic known or did it remain hidden? What rumors still exist about those dark places today?
15	OUTCAST	*You were exiled from a young age and had to make your own way.* What things did you do to survive? Why were you made to leave? How did the need to rely entirely on yourself change you? Where was your home before and is there anyone you miss still?
16	PROTEGE	*You were chosen by a powerful conjurer at an early age to be trained.* What kind of life did they pull you from? How is it different from the one you have now? What unique skills did they teach you? Do you resent your choice being taken or is this life more magical?
17	QUERY	*You were apprenticed to a skilled adept who vanished mysteriously.* What is rumored to have happened? Do you believe the gossip? What feelings still linger about that day? What have you done to try and find them? Do you think they want to be found?
18	RESTRAINT	*You were conscripted at a young age for service to settle a debt.* Whose credit did you work off and where were you sent? What finally ended your service or are you still bound? Who else served alongside you? What lessons do you carry with you still to this day?
19	SANCTUARY	*Your community raised you on hallowed lands as its protector.* What required safeguarding? What traditions do you hold dear from that experience? How does your upbringing impact what you see in the world today? What do you carry with you still from there?
20	TRANSCEND	*Long ago, your region was the site of a massive extraplanar event.* What realms collided and what ensued? What caused it? Are there relics or reminders of what happened around still? What stories do people tell about what happened to this day?

BOND FRAGMENTS

This Path provides archetypes to represent the different kinds of people who may have had the most lasting impact on your character's life thus far. They could be important figures in a community, a passerby, a close acquaintance, or someone they have never seen in person.

These can be as intimate and personal or as formal and distanced as you want. Someone can just as easily change your life from next door as they can from a world away! Keep distance in mind and whether this person is aware of your character or not. They may play a pivotal role in your story—but are you even a footnote in theirs? Perhaps not yet…

Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer the questions it poses. Then return the fragment to the deck. *(Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.)*

BOND FRAGMENT ROLLABLE TABLE

d20	FRAGMENT	PROMPT
1	ALLY	*An accomplice whose goals and desires are aligned with your own.* What event made you realize the two of you were on the same side? When did you first come to their aid or they to yours? What have you faced together thus far? What do you admire most about the other?
2	BELOVED	*Someone who has your heart and admiration entirely and they yours.* How did they first catch your eye? What about them draws you in? How long did it take them to return your affection or for you to return theirs? When did you realize they were everything you wanted?
3	CORRUPTER	*One bent on pulling as many as they can to their crooked arc.* What is their position and what power do they hold? How do they wield it? Who do they target with their machinations? What impact is there on the hierarchy they work to erode? What chaos have they put in motion?
4	DIVINER	*Someone with a view of things that have yet to be.* What future do they foresee? Does anyone believe them? Have they been accepted into society or do they operate on its fringes? Do you think they speak the truth or is it better if their visions are false and never come to pass?
5	ELDER	*A person of great authority with the ear of many.* How did you first catch their eye? What happened to show them your untapped potential and importance? How did they choose to invest in you? What good or ill have you seen them do? Has your opinion of them changed with time?
6	FRIEND	*Someone you can always count on to be there, no matter what.* Where did you first meet? What sparked the deepening of your connection? How did you come to see companions in one another? What do you rely on each other for? What secrets have you shared with only them?
7	GUIDE	*Someone to give direction to those lost Like A light in the darkness.* Who are they in the social structure of your world? What paths do they point to? How has their message been received? When did you hear their guidance and what did it lead you towards? Did you take it?

8	HERO	*A figure standing against otherwise overwhelming odds.* What great deed did they accomplish? What was the likelihood of their victory and did they survive their trials? What did they stand against and what drove them to do so? How did they cross your path?
9	INSTRUCTOR	*A teacher with wise words and wiser lessons to bestow.* How did you come to be a student of theirs? In what areas did they offer counsel? What of their teachings has most affected your life's direction? What lesson of theirs was the hardest to learn?
10	KINDRED	*Someone you can always rely on in treacherous times.* How did you come to rely on them for these reassurances? What secret do you both share? Is it yours or theirs? Why do you put your faith in them over others? What is at stake if this information gets out?
11	LIAR	*One with a silvery tongue and a taste for poison over honey.* What falsehoods do they spread? Why do you think they lie? Who, or what, do they target with their falsehoods? How have their words and actions impacted your life? Do they believe their own lies?
12	MYSTIC	*Someone close to hidden and unseen things.* What do they claim to know? What rites do they practice? Who do they keep around them and who flocks to their side? How did you meet and what knowledge was imparted to you? Do they still keep secrets?
13	NEMESIS	*An inevitable opponent, given where both of your loyalties lie.* When did you first learn this person would be your foe? What circumstance makes resolving conflict between the two of you impossible? What are you willing to do in order to thwart them?
14	OATHBREAKER	*A promise made and not held stings worse than never making it to begin with.* What was sworn? Why did they take that oath? Who are they to you or your community? How was that pledge broken and what were the consequences afterwards? Has that wound healed?
15	RIVAL	*One who stands in the way of what you desperately want.* What sets you at odds? What drives you to outdo each other? What conflicts have arisen between you? Has it stayed playful or is it growing into something darker? What future trouble do they pose?
16	SOVEREIGN	*A force standing resolute at the helm to guide everyone who follows.* How did they come to be in this position? Are they a just Leader or do they flaunt their power? What changes have they made to your world? What do you admire or despise most about them?
17	TRAITOR	*Someone who has turned their back on friend, country, and principle for their own benefit.* What promise was betrayed? How was this deception discovered? What reaction was there once this treachery was revealed? What was the price paid in the aftermath?
18	VAGABOND	*A fraud at almost everything they do.* What is their most common scam? Who do they target and why? Did they always need to take advantage of others? Are they good at their con of choice, or is it all too obvious? How were you roped into their schemes?
19	WATCHER	*One who stands in silent guard over a place worthy of protection.* Was this charge given to them by others or did they choose it? What do they defend against? How well do they shoulder this responsibility? What have you seen them accomplish already?
20	ZEALOT	*One so deeply ingrained in their beliefs there's no bringing them out.* What is the main drive behind their fanaticism? What word do they spread? Who do they seek to join them? How did you come to hear them? How have they tried ensnaring you with their zeal?

CATALYST FRAGMENTS

This Path gives options for the event that caused your character to set out on their journey or embark on a new adventure. Unlike the others, these are a bit different: each comes as a pair with a *constructive* and *destructive* option to choose from. Not every rogue needs a tragic backstory! These can affect a local area or the world at large. Your character can have heard of this event or experienced it themselves and either can be an equally impactful choice! ***Select only one of the two offered fragments from the prompt to answer.***

Keep in mind timing when integrating these Paths into your backstory. The amount of time that has passed since the event, as well as how long the event took to unfold, greatly influences the impact it has on your character. Use time as a way to set the tone of this impact.

Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer one question it poses. Then return the fragment to the deck. (*Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.*)

CATALYST FRAGMENT ROLLABLE TABLE

d20	DESTRUCTIVE FRAGMENT	CONSTRUCTIVE FRAGMENT
1	**A Faction Rises:** *They seek dominance, power, and have the will to match their ambitions.* Who are they? What are they willing to sacrifice to take control? Who do they look to overthrow? Why are they willing to risk so much now?	**A City is Saved:** *Rescued from dire calamity or imminent crisis by the grace of others.* What events led to this moment? Who came to lend aid? Was there a cost owed for their help? What changed for those survivors left picking up the pieces?
2	**A Storm Falls:** *It catches the region off guard and wreaks havoc.* What kind of forces were at work here? What was salvaged and what was destroyed? In the aftermath, how do people move forward? Who is most affected by the devastation?	**A Resource Uncovered:** *It brings great prosperity to those who find it.* What is its nature? What bounty does it bring? How is its power harnessed? How does it change those who possess it? What costs or risks come hand in hand with such rewards?
3	**A Leader Dies:** *They pass well before their time.* What upheaval springs from this loss of power and stability? What opportunities arise and for whom? Who steps in to fill the void? Is there conflict over the change or do others rally together in memory of the fallen? Are old traditions maintained, or are new precedents built?	**A Life is Spared:** *Done so in order to stop more bloodshed.* Who is saved and why does this act of mercy stave off more violence? Who wanted to spare this life? What does this person do with their second chance? Do they consider themselves indebted after being saved? What ripple effect does it have on the region?
4	**A Region Vanishes:** *Gone without a trace and no one left to speak of its whereabouts.* What fears are whispered in its absence? What fills the vacuum its loss leaves in the region? Whether it be people, untamed nature, or strange new magics, what disturbances linger about the area?Is there anyone who still looks for it?	**A Shrine Appears:** *As ancient and powerful as it is mysterious.* Where does it appear? Who or what does this place venerate? What powers does it bring and what does it come to symbolize to those in its vicinity? What comforts does it offer to those nearest? What is said to have brought it here and do people trust its offerings?

5	**A Curse Awakens:** *Bestowed long ago with hate and malice but left slumbering for an age.* What has awakened it? Was it intentional or an unfortunate accident? What are its effects and who is targeted? What is needed to undo this ancient magic? What now settles over the area holding those under this spell?	**A Blessing Given:** *One offered with hopes of a brighter future.* Who is the giver and the receiver of this gift? What powers or protections does this blessing bring with it? Is it done in secret or as a show of might and prowess? Does the one bestowed know they have been changed or do they have a journey of discovery ahead of them?
6	**A Coward Unmasked**: *They are revealed along with their misdeeds before everyone.* What choices did they attempt to hide? What consequences arose once they were named? Who discovered their duplicity? What harm did their cowardice cause? How do they react to the accusations? What will happen to them now and what damage must be undone?	**An Act Of Courage:** *One so grand that it inspires all who witness it.* Who found the will for such bravery in the face of such dire circumstances? What now remains of that person? What did they do to move so many with their actions? What has this act of courage inspired or caused in you? What was lost and what was gained afterwards? How are they remembered?
7	**Danger Closes In:** *Its arrival is sudden and unexpected, catching many off guard.* What forces bring these hazards? Who is threatened most by its arrival? How did these circumstances go undetected for so long? In the face of such a dire moment what is chosen to be lost and what is too precious to leave behind?	**Safe Haven Offered:** *In a moment of uncertainty sanctuary it is graciously given.* Who was most in need of help? What did they require protection from? What help did they receive and what state do they find themselves in now? For the ones that were able to provide such assistance where are they now? Does a threat still linger?
8	**A Friend Is Lost:** *They are gone with no warning and no means of being saved.* Who were they most dear to? What is rumored to be the reason they were lost? Who feels their absence most harshly? Are there those glad to be rid of them? Who is left behind wanting answers as to what happend?	**An Enemy Pardoned:** *It is done so against the advice of many.* Who was granted this grace and what were their misdeeds? What is the argument for and against such leniency? What happens when they escape justice in these lands? What cycle is attempting to be broken by this?
9	**A Foe Revealed:** *One unknown and unexpected.* Who are they in these lands? What made them show their hand? What makes them an adversary? Why act now? What do they hope for most by burning their cover? What are they willing to do to succeed in their aims now that their secret has been revealed?	**An Alliance Forged:** *In the midst of conflict, cooler heads can prevail.* What dangers are so great that other quarrels can be set aside in favor of self preservation? What do both sides give up by aligning interests? What do they each risk? How more likely is success in the face of banding together? Will such comradery prevail?
10	**A Treasure Stolen:** *It vanished without a trace from a location thought impenetrable.* What was the object taken? What significance does it hold and how important is it to the ones who were its protectors? What does this loss signify? What efforts are underway to recover it? Where is it whispered to be being held and what will happen if it is not found and returned?	**A Relic Returned:** *Brought back by those most unlikely.* Who returned it and what does this act of generosity herald? What boon is given to those who saw to its homecoming? Who was most affected by its loss and for how long has it been missing? What power does this item hold in the hands of its rightful owner? Now that it is back, what change is felt by its presence once more?

11 **A Lie Believed:** *Deceit and slander are poisons with few remedies.* What falsehoods were made to sound like truths here? What was the fallout of such misinformation being believed to be genuine? Who was most affected and were they an intended or accidental casualty? Were there those who wanted to believe?

A Truth Unearthed: *Long rumored but finally proven beyond all shadow of a doubt.* Who finally verified such important information and how did they uncover the truth? What does this revelation bring to light? What narratives does it now threaten to rewrite? What things must change in the face of such a discovery? Who still doubts?

12 **Darkness Looms:** *It threatens to devour much within its reach if left unchecked.* Is it the peril of mortals, beasts or magic that brings such threats in its wake? Who is in danger of being engulfed by this expanse? Is this force wielded with intention, is it untamed, or is its source unknown? What do people fear most as it moves closer? Who is turned on first in the ensuing panic?

Light Beckons: *It is a welcome refuge in uncertain and dangerous times.* Who offers this sanctuary in these bleak and uncertain days and who is in need of it? By what power are they able to offer protection? What benefits are given to those within its aura? What monstrosities does it keep at bay? For how long will this respite last and what happens if and when time runs out?

13 **Knowledge Lost:** *Once gone, it is a loss felt for generations.* How was such wisdom forgotten or made to be misplaced? What machinations caused such an unimaginable thing to happen? What fallout was there in the cloud cast by such absence? Is there any hope for its recovery or is such lore lost forever? Are there any left who still remember pieces of what was once known?

Technology Gifted: *An offer freely given with no expectation of anything in return.* Who was able to so generously give such advancements and to whom were they given? What were the nature of such sciences and what effects did their presence have on the ones who received them? What change do they herald? How do those consequences ripple ever outward?

14 **A Hard Choice:** *Dire circumstances often present the worst of options, but decisions must be made.* Who was forced to choose and what were they made to choose between? What did they sacrifice and what did they save? How were they put in such a position? What was left after their decision was made and have they lived to regret it? Do others fault them for choosing at all?

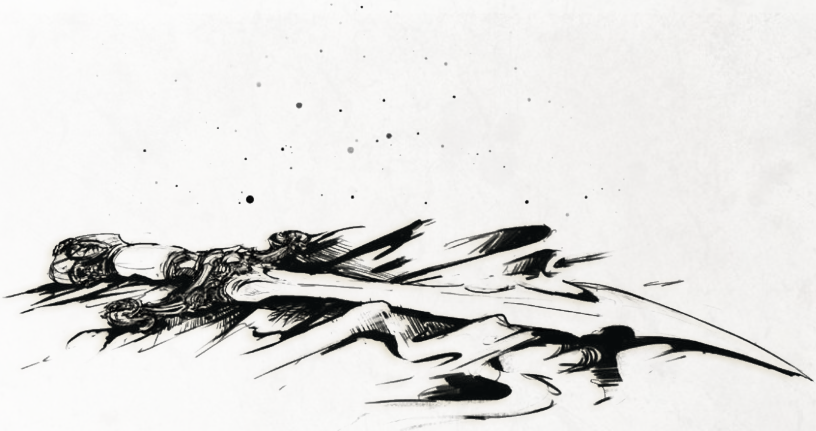
An Avoided Mistake: *Some more difficult to side step than others.* What circumstances led to this moment of chance and near disaster? Who came so close to this blunder and what helped them to steer clear of it? Was this an accident or was it intentionally placed along their path? What fate would have awaited them had their luck been less? Are they still so lucky?

15 **A Dynasty Diminished:** *All things, even empires, eventually come to an end.* Who's story came to a close and what moved them to finally fall? What does this absence of order bring about in the surrounding regions? Who felt this power vacuum the hardest? What new structures of power were built up after this collapse? Who benefited most from such turmoil?

A Hero Emerges: *Asked for or not; they have arrived.* What challenge do they set themselves against? Why did they choose to act when others did not? Is there something that makes them particularly well suited to this challenge? What order or chaos did their actions bring about? What is public opinion of them? Were they victorious or is their fate not yet decided?

16 **A Place Hidden:** *The decision was made to protect a secret from getting out and endangering others.* Who is protected by keeping such information quiet? By what manner of magic or might is a location obscured from sight and memory? Who was chosen to carry this weight? What cost is there in concealing this place from the rest of the world and what does it take to sustain such workings?

A Realm Revitalized: *With enough time almost any wound can be healed.* By what force was this land first damaged and what has been done to aid in its mending? How much time did such work take? Who championed this endeavor? Was the injury healed entirely or do scars still remain as a reminder to the hurt once caused? What new thing now grows here? What lesson was learned in those lands and at what cost?



17	**A Trap Sprung:** *Well laid and crafted with patience.* Who were the ones devising such a trap and why were they on the hunt? Who was their mark? Why were they targeted? What was the bait used to ensnare them? Did they knowingly walk in or were they unaware of the danger lurking? Now that they've been caught, what fallout follows? What fate awaits them now?	**A Cage Broken:** *No prison can last forever.* Who or what was held within this pen and why were they put there? For how long were they confined? Who was their jailer? How did they break from their bonds and did they have help? Once free, what do they seek to do now that their freedom has been won? What wrongs may they seek to right with newly unshackled hands?
18	**A Conspiracy Foiled:** *The best-laid plans never account for every factor.* Who was behind these schemes and what was their aim? Who was the focus of their plot and what did they hope to achieve? How were their machinations interrupted and who is to blame for doing so? What consequences follow in the wake of such utter failure? Will they try again?	**An Experiment Succeeds:** *Sometimes even the highest of risks is worth the reward.* Who was behind this enterprise? What great workings did they achieve and what peril did they dance close to in doing so? Why were they driven to attempt such a volatile undertaking? Once they succeeded, what did they unleash? Are they still in control of the thing they created?
19	**An Opportunity Missed:** *Inaction is still a choice, even if it doesn't feel like one.* Who missed this moment and was unable to move when opportunity presented itself? What stood to be gained and what did they lose out on? What made them freeze when others might have chosen to act? What was the cost of such inaction to them or those around them? What regret is left in their empty hands? What price was paid?	**A Chance Taken:** *Even when you know the odds some things are worth leaving for fate to decide.* What situation led to so much being put on the line with no certainty of success? What was wagered in the balance of such dire odds? Who took it upon themselves to risk so much and what reward did they hope for? Was this gamble ultimately worth it? What could have happened had things gone terribly wrong?
20	**A Prophecy Ignored:** *Those who choose to disregard it can never be made to listen once it comes to pass.* Who turned their backs on these predictions? What was foretold to happen and how much warning was given? Who made such divinations and why did they go unheeded? What was the cost once such augury came to be and what remains since there were none who stood to prevent it?	**A Wish Granted:** *With the power to rewrite reality there is no more creative or destructive force than that of a wish.* Who was the giver and who received such an unfathomable gift? What was it they wished for? What had to change in order to make such a thing real? Was the reality of their desire everything they wanted or did they live to regret ever asking for it? What happens when you get what you ask for?

Using Legacy Fragments:

There are many ways to further engage with ***Legacy Fragments*** that fill out or build onto the world around the story as the game is played. By tying a player's Legacy to a place in game or creating a new one, the world can become more familiar and important.

This absolutely necessitates that the GM and players work hand in hand to blend everyone's ideas as the goal! There may be limits that the game requires to stay in place or an offer may conflict with what someone had in mind. Collaborate openly to see what is possible!

MAKE IT EXIST:

If a ***Legacy Fragment*** offers the foundation for a place that the GM does not think exists in the game it is entirely possible to build out something new and tie it in. A player or GM may want input on the finished outcome, so be sure to listen and come to an agreement on what this looks like when it is done. This could be:

- A house, landmark, meaningful spot, or small and specific area that can be placed anywhere that makes narrative sense in the world of the adventure.
- A town, city, province, or location that covers a slightly wider area and can expand on the outline of an already existing location.
- A country, continent, or large landmass that can fill out an empty space in the wider map.
- Worlds, planes, or vast areas of existence that can complement and exist alongside the one this story takes place within.

ADD IT ON:

Perhaps there is an area in the story that already exists and can be amended or tweaked to include the particular Legacy a player has in mind. Conversely, if a place fits the description a player is giving, the GM can offer that location as an option for them to use as the site of their Legacy. Either way, part of the work is done already. Together, you can breathe life into the story.

Player: *I'm interested in having my Legacy Fragment 'Nexus' be the site of some arcane ruins that no one knows about. They rest deep underground, long forgotten. Maybe there is a side effect on the land itself and for generations we've been trying to figure out what has been causing it. Do you have any suggestions from the story that may fit that?"*

GM: *"I think I might. In the note for the adventure, there's a section about practitioners of magic who reached for powers beyond their control. In the northernmost region, there are the ruins of their towers scattered across the land. How about we have those sunken under earth over time and your town sits atop one such structure?"*

Player: *"I think that sounds like a great fit!"*

Using Bond Fragments:

By building on a ***Bond Fragment*** from a character's backstory players have the ability to use that relationship as inspiration in several ways as the game unfolds.

> Make sure players and GMs communicate with each other about their ideas for incorporating the Bond into the story.

Here are some options for how the ***Bond Fragment*** can be included in the game:

KEEP IT IN THE PAST:

Not everything we build comes back to visit us; some history stays well and truly in the past. If players have created a figure from their ***Bond Fragment*** that previously impacted them in meaningful ways but don't wish to evolve that storyline further, feel free to let that morsel stay where it is in their backstory. This Bond can still be referenced throughout the game in ways that matter but that figure does not have to be a living part of the story for their presence to be felt. Examples of Bonds kept in the past are:

- A family member or loved one who is no longer here
- A childhood friend who lost touch long ago
- A stranger encountered by chance whose name is unknown
- A person who intentionally cut ties after a significant event

INSTANT NPC:

The beauty of the ***Bond Fragments*** is the ease with which they provide the framework to build out and prompt the creation of NPCs that matter to everyone at the table! If Players want their Bonds to be an active part of the story, these figures can be included in the narrative arc of the adventure!

Perhaps one player's Bond is from a specific location so when the adventurers visit, they know this person is around. Maybe a player's Bond is associated with an organization of some importance that can lead to chance encounters along the way. If players want to see how their Bond can be included in the wider story, there are plenty of ways to do this.

> Keep in Mind: Most NPCs are run by the GM, so if a player has specific ideas about how their Bond will act, think, or feel, those details should be communicated and agreed upon collaboratively.

Examples of instant NPC Bonds are:

- The leader of a school, guild, or influential group
- A resident of a specific region, city, or town, either known or unknown to the party
- An NPC who is constantly on the move, either looking for or avoiding the character
- AN NPC who lives in the character's home

You can always include guardrails in terms of, "I'd like this figure to be morally good/ evil/ gray/ neutral" or talk over other caveats if that helps you feel confident turning over narrative control to the GM!

SURPRISE ME:

Fortune favors the bold! Players may end up building a Bond their character cares deeply about and decide to turn them over to the GM to choose their fate. If a player does not have specific designs for their Bond beyond a backstory element, there is always the option to have the player and GM agree on making who they are and how they are included in the story a surprise. Some players may enjoy the mystery of this option as a narrative thread to pull on going forward in the story!

Using Catalyst Fragments:

What makes someone take that first step on a new path is a truly memorable event. Using a player's ***Catalysts Fragment*** in a few different ways can make sure they feel those effects long after the event itself is over. A stone thrown in water ripples out and continues to disturb the surface even after it has sunk to the bottom. Below are a few ways you can make sure these Catalysts meaningfully affect the world of your characters throughout the adventure.

You can work collaboratively with your table to see if an existing event can fit with the prompt from the chosen Catalyst, or if a new event can be added to the world lore.

> It helps to have a rough idea of when this inciting moment happened, even if it is only a general estimation from the present day when the story at the table begins. This way, you can better situate what the current sentiment is towards what happened in this Catalyst Fragment.

LONG FORGOTTEN:

No longer is this event in the public consciousness. It has instead been relegated to the abandoned tomes of history or lost to ancient scrolls no longer able to be read. Perhaps the lingering consequences are all that remains and time has brought everything full circle to alter the very course of this tale. It's possible the characters themselves have no idea what forces or circumstances are at work, which can be an incredible opportunity to weave mystery and intrigue into the story!

WELL-KEPT SECRET:

It is not spoken of. Not ever. Precious few know the truth and fewer still remain who were there to witness it. While a fabrication of events left its mark, there are still those who diligently guard the knowledge of what really happened. Perhaps your character is in the know, or perhaps they are one of many sheltered from this knowledge. Tease out their relationship to this obscured event as a way to further solidify this Catalyst's effects on them.

LEGEND AND GOSSIP:

Known but perhaps believed less than it should be. Time or maybe lack of credible accounts has landed this event firmly in the realm of bedtime stories and idle whispers. The bite has lost its teeth as consequences dwindle and the bark exists now only as a rumor. Perhaps this character knows more than the common folk or knows how to find out more. Perhaps not and they tell stories with the rest of the crowd only to be surprised when the myths are proven true.

IGNORED OR DENIED:

History very rarely portrays an unbiased account of what happened. Events of incredible significance can be swept under the rug or flat-out denied. Is your character helping to cover up these events or do they see things from another perspective that challenge the status quo?

STILL FEARED:

Dreadful events often strike terror in the hearts of those who remember the consequences of such actions long after the major players are dead and gone. What awful things are still dreaded to this day and used as a warning to others? How does your character feel the effects of this cautionary tale?

WIDELY CELEBRATED:

Sometimes an inciting incident can be just the right thing to shake up established norms. With new beginnings comes new opportunities and those changes in fortune are rarely forgotten. Were circumstances favorably changed for this character due to the Catalyst? Were they for worse even if the day was hailed as a victory? How do they feel about public celebration of these events given the aftermath?

THE AMALGAM PHASE

Now that each player has chosen their ***Story Path***, it's time to build on those connections and weave the forces of chance and fate into the character's interpersonal history and the worlds in which they live!

The goal of the ***Amalgam Phase*** is to celebrate the impact a person, place, or people can have on the lives of others. Here, you'll build in serendipity, destiny, luck, coincidence, and inevitability by connecting backstory elements together and choosing where some paths may have already crossed.

Connecting Fragments:

Going around the room, each player chooses one of their ***Fragments*** and offers to connect it in some way to ***another Player's Fragment.***

These connections can be big or small, trivial or significant.

It can be as simple as: the prominent figure from one player's ***Bond Fragment*** sharing a home country with a figure from someone else's ***Bond Fragment.*** It can be as staggering as: the ***Catalyst Fragment*** of one player's story impacting another's ***Legacy Fragment.***

Your table must work together to tie in elements of these paths together in a way that delights and inspires everyone involved!We recommend you ask a lot of questions when offering a connection during the ***Amalgam Phase.***

Keep it open to possibilities rather than trying to tell the whole story yourself and always leave an avenue for alternate options.

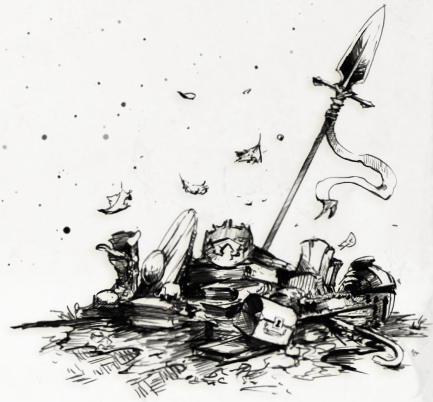
"What if?... How about?... Is X or perhaps Y compelling to you?... Does this interest you more?..."

As someone having an Amalgam offered to them, you should never feel pressured to agree to a connection that builds away from the story you want to tell with your character. Feel free to offer alternatives and tease out directions that are more in line with the story you are looking to build.

Players have full agency to turn down the offer of any Amalgam they do not wish to include in their story.

The Amalgam phase is complete when everyone has at least one Fragment that connects to another player's Fragment. Do what feels right for the story you are telling! Not every fragment needs to be connected and a player does not need to have Amalgams with each other player at the table!

If you are inspired to connect more fragments feel free to have as your table feels will best tie the world together!



CONNECTING 'A TREASURE STOLEN/ A RELIC RETURNED' CATALYST & 'KNOWLEDGE' LEGACY

Player 1: *"You said your character's Legacy is that they've grown up in a family of guardians around an ancient library. My Catalyst is that a treasure was Stolen from some place important. I think I want it to have been stolen by my brother and now I'm searching for him to put things right. Is there some way I could have the treasure linked to the library your family guards?"*

Player 2: *"That actually could work great! I was thinking there was a temple of arcane knowledge a long time ago that has slowly dwindled so we're a very small group now. What if, instead of your brother, it was someone older in your family? Maybe a parent or even a grandparent? That way, there's more time to feel the effects of this object's loss. I don't think anyone outside of our order knows what was taken, just that it was devastating! The GM and I can talk about what the treasure actually is. Maybe I don't even know, but I like this direction."*

Player 1: *"I like that. I think it will have been my grandmother then & my mother after her was on the same journey that I'm on now!"*

GM: *"We can work out the details separately and I have some ideas that I want to give you both to think about in private, but that sounds intriguing! Do you two think you two have ever met before?"*

Player 1: *"I don't think so. I don't know if my character even knows of the order anymore, just that there is this stain on the family because of this crime."*

Player 2: *"Agreed, and similarly I don't think my character necessarily knows anything about the family of the person who stole this treasure or that anyone is trying to find it besides our order of protectors."*

GM: *"That revelation will be fun to play out at some point. Let's see what happens!"*

CONNECTING 'DARKNESS LOOMS/ LIGHT BECKONS" CATALYST & 'FISSURE' LEGACY

Player 3: *"I'm thinking I'll have the Darkness Looms in my Catalyst be magical in nature and was wondering if you wanted to somehow weave your Legacy for Fissure into that. Maybe this has affected a larger part of our world in some way. Maybe that doorway or that opening between worlds let something else in besides you??"*

Player 4: *"I like the idea of that darkness in your fragment being otherworldly but I think I'm less drawn to having that be tied to where I come from. I want memories of my character's home to be positive for them rather than painful. Maybe once you find out where it's from I can have knowledge of it but I don't want my Legacy to be its source."*

Player 3: *"Oh that sounds great! No worries at all, that's a solid choice and I definitely like the idea of you knowing a little more about this darkness than me."*

CONNECTING 'RIVAL' BOND & 'FRIEND' BOND

Player 5: *"So, my Bond is with this rival that I've been fighting my whole life. And you and I are from the same town and we've decided our characters at least know of one another. What do you think of my Bond being the same person as your Bond?*

Player 6: *"The same as my dear and most beloved friend? Absolutely, let's do it. Do you think we both know they are the same?"*

Player 5: *"If it's more interesting to you then I say yeah! Let's have it known that there is this friction between us because of this person. That can be an interesting point of contention going forward."*

Player 6: *"Excellent."*

GM: *"We're going to be seeing a lot of this NPC, I think. Let me just make a note here..."*

WHO KNOWS WHAT?

The characters do not necessarily need to know of each connection made during this phase, but their players should have a good understanding of what bridges exist between one another's stories.

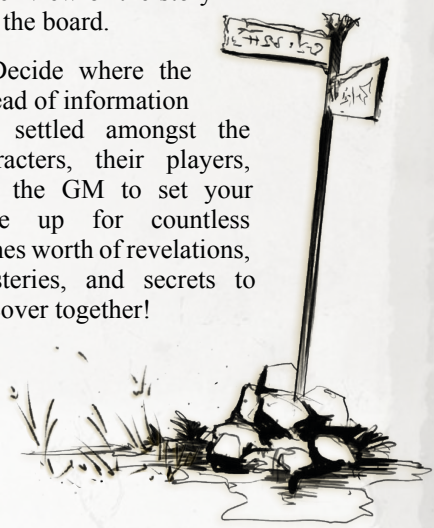
This is another element you can play with when weaving these different ties between one another: ***who knows what?*** Do both characters have an equal understanding of their relationship or is there more below the surface one or both of them have yet to glean?

It can be as detailed as: "You know Imari of Thane was a beloved Instructor and teacher to many young magic users in the neighboring realm. You recognize the sigil of their school on your Party Member's robes marking them as a student of her teachings. You also know the great shame of Mage Imari's wrongful execution after being blamed for the failed assassination attempt against your region's leaders. After her death it was proven false and the entire incident was covered up at great cost. It becomes apparent very quickly that your party member does not know what fully happened to their teacher and has vowed to avenge them."

It can be as simple as: "You know a Mage named Imari of Thane was wrongfully executed many years ago after visiting your city and being charged for a high crime that later were proved to be false."

In both instances, the core information is there, but how much detail gets shared is left up to your table. Many players love the heart stopping feeling of a plot reveal while others prefer to have more of a hand on the reins of role play with a wider view of the story and the board.

Decide where the spread of information has settled amongst the characters, their players, and the GM to set your table up for countless games worth of revelations, mysteries, and secrets to discover together!



BEYOND THE SESSION ZERO

There are many ways to continue using the tools we've built here once your game begins. Chance, fate, and destiny always have a seat at the table. Below are some more ways you can continue to invite them as your adventure unfolds!

Narrative Momentum:

"The driving force behind your own story, the thing that keeps you going no matter the odds. That which drives you to choose to say "yes" or "no" in the face of great circumstance!"

Right now, everyone has a ***Story Path,*** you've answered the Fragment prompts to make them unique to each character, and connections between player's backstories have been chosen! With all this in place you can begin to look at different ways in which these tools can be used to build up narrative momentum throughout your game!

Narrative Momentum is the gas in your tank and the wind in your sails. The more of it you have, the deeper and more easily you can connect your character's story to the adventure they are in; the less you have, the harder it is to weave their story into the larger adventure. When you find yourself deeply invested in the plot, find yourself caring about reaching their goals, find that NPCs and the world around you really matter, you are full of narrative momentum and character choices and role play can come more naturally.

The Legacy Fragments can be used to flavor new places as the party continues their exploration. Use them to set the Mood and Tone of a city or town by representing the main focus of the local economy or the wider landscape's prominent features that make them unique.

The Bond Fragments can be used throughout the adventure as a framework when meeting new NPCs. Let the art or the prompts help you to create different civilizations inhabiting the world or inform what role in the character's life these people may play.

The Catalyst Deck can be referenced to inspire recent or long past events with consequences which are still widely felt to this day. Use them to motivate looming threats or whispers of historical moments that continue to be reckoned with whose truths can be uncovered as the adventures continue.

WHERE WE START INFORMS WHERE WE ARE GOING:

Right now, your characters are at the very beginning of their story. As the game unfolds they will continue to evolve with each new experience. If we look at where they begin, we can better pinpoint times of growth, changes in ideals, moments of awakening and more!

By answering a few questions, you can define where each of you is in their own life's journey. When circumstances arise that challenge or change those truths, you can expand on and play with that difference and work to show the ways each character is affected afterwards.

HOW WOULD YOUR CHARACTER ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS AT THIS MOMENT?

I MOST NEED: _____

MY EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS HAS BEEN: _____

I DESPERATELY WANT: _____

MY DEEPEST HELD BELIEF IS: _____

I HOPE ABOVE ALL ELSE: _____

MY DARKEST SECRET IS: _____

I MOST LOVE: _____

These questions can act as a compass to guide your character's decisions by as you root them in their own world and in the stories of others!

RESOLVE A NEED:

This tool is fundamental when it comes to deciding how to make character choices and is a great starting point if you aren't used to having such a complex backstory to play with.

The section above asked players to describe a need associated with their character's Story Path, something they feel they must have to survive.

These needs can be broken down further in order of their rudimentary importance. With that you can start to see which of your character's needs may weigh heaviest on them and help you decide which one would win if pushed to choose between two. Different situations may change that answer, so below we've given you an outline to start examining where each need lands.

ANATOMY OF NEED:

SUSTENANCE | A character will often seek food, shelter, sleep, air, clothing, and water first before anything else if they are lacking them. These represent the most rudimentary and basic needs someone must have in order to sustain themselves. Survival instincts are some of the strongest and therefore incredible to overcome or set aside. That does mean that when a character chooses to forgo such sustenance they do so risking their own physiological well-being. Such a choice places an incredible amount of importance on the need they are prioritizing.

SAFETY | A character who feels unsafe or vulnerable will often instinctively prioritize safety in order to make it to tomorrow. Protection, employment, resources, health, and stability all fall into this category. These are individual needs just like the previous group and as danger escalates a character may be put into a position to weigh self-preservation against the safety and security of others. Putting their own safety on the line speaks to how much importance they put on something worth taking that risk for.

COMMUNITY | A sense of belonging and comradery starts branching into social needs and the importance of a group's wellbeing. There is strength and belonging to be gained in the company of friends, family or a lover. The need for comfort, help, and for connection are all deeply rooted in us. When it has been attained there is a calling in each of us to protect it. What would have to be at stake to knowingly put a group of dear friends in harm's way?

ESTEEM | The need for respect, to build a reputation, grow status, and accomplish great things is a powerful driving need. Every hero and adventurer is called to greatness in their own way and it is that compelling force that steers many choices. What would be worth tarnishing a character's name over? What would they choose to protect rather than their own status? Whose respect would they work to keep even if it means losing something important?

FULFILLMENT | Achieving the heights of one's ambitions and reaching life's full potential is the ultimate driving force for all of us. A character may seek to further a cause beyond their own needs or work towards a vision of the world they have no idea how to achieve. What could be so important a character would give up on their goals in order to save? What could they need to achieve so desperately that they choose to sacrifice everything else that they love instead? What would they give up on in order to save their friends?

Knowing all of that, you begin to see how categorizing fundamental needs may help you decide which would weigh heaviest on your character or which may outweigh another given the right circumstances. Early in their adventure, they may prioritize survival because they have so much they want to accomplish and can't do that if they fall in battle. Perhaps later in their story the stakes are so high that they choose to abandon their more basic needs to achieve something greater than themselves.

> PLAY WITH NEED, RISK, OR CHOICE IN WAYS THAT BETTER HELP YOU GROUND YOUR CHARACTER'S DECISIONS IN THE BACKSTORY YOU'VE CREATED FOR THEM AND LET IT LEAD YOU DOWN WHATEVER PATH MAY APPEAR!

SATISFY A WANT:

Sometimes it's not about the fundamentals. Sometimes it's not about what the character needs but what they want for themselves, for others, or for the world around them! Whereas a need is described here as something a character knows they must have, a want is something they wish for but perhaps know they don't fundamentally require.

Illuminating what a character wants is an incredibly important piece of the TTRPG puzzle and can help provide reasons why they stay with their party or choose the life of an adventurer. A character with no investment in the plot and no drive to engage with the storyline may not have strong enough narrative ties. By leaning on the work done in the Story Path, players and GMs alike can clarify what a character wants most in ways that allow the adventures ahead of them to peak their interest and call them to act!

Often in these games a GM is asking players to put a lot on the line when jumping into the fray. What a character wants gives the reason why they are willing to walk into danger again and again!

> How does your character trying to get what they want motivate their journey? Test their mettle when faced with opposing urges and explore what helps them make decisions in the face of such conflict! Where do they find a balance between what they want and what they need?

To satisfy a want, you can find your character in alignment with or in conflict with what is happening in the story. How your character responds to and acts on (*or chooses not to act on*) their wants is an opportunity for gorgeous roleplay and character development. This is a great place to explore where you can take their story and see how what they want may motivate them to make all kinds of different choices on their adventures!

A WANT FOR:

THEMSELVES:

- To live up to their family's name & make them proud of all they've accomplished!
- To answer the burning question that has evaded them their whole life...
- To see as much of the world as they can and quench a curiosity for knowledge.
- To exact revenge on those who have taken everything from them.
- To find what has been stolen and return it to where it rightfully belongs!

THOSE AROUND THEM:

- To once again have safety and security after an age of turmoil and hardship.
- To finally see the corruption within their own and fix what is broken.
- To find balance and harmony with those more wild forces around them.
- To slink back to whichever pit of ichor they crawled from to cause such damage!
- To trust one another in ways that allows everyone to thrive and succeed.

FOR THEIR WORLD:

- To make it through this time of danger with as little loss as possible
- To be all the better for having had champions who were worthy of it.
- To change the course of history so more perilous events may be avoided!
- To change before it is too late and all is taken by greater forces at work!
- To become stronger in ways that make life truly beautiful for all living here.

CHASE HOPE:

The most inspiring of all driving forces can often be what we hope for. When a character's ideals and integrity are tested, it takes a true act of courage to stand for what they want most. Hope is a blend of the lofty goals, energetic pursuits, and optimistic dreams that a character keeps close to heart.

Hope is a shield against despair when circumstances turn dire and fuels the will to act when faced with unfavorable odds. It is not passive by any means and hardens resolve when all other emotions would council retreat.

We use hope in its most idealistic definition here to help players and GMs capture what aspirations and desires most move each character to take action. Often these hopes can be a large part of their identity and can deeply influence their systems of morality, shaping them into who they are and who they have the possibility to become.

> When do their deepest desires matter more to them than anything else? What would they willingly risk to see that goal realized? What cost would be acceptable to them? What price would be too high to pay for a dream?

Rarely do we face such options in our daily lives and such a choice would be an exceptional one to behold. Find what hopes and desires most move your character. Throughout the adventure, see when they are strong enough to fight for their goals and what obstacles may be too grand for them to face. It can take a character's entire life to see a dream realized.The road they walk to do so is longer and more circuitous than any other. What twists and turns make them stumble on their path and what tests might they clear as they journey forward?

We've organized some starting options in a few different groups to help you find which hopes fit your character best.

HOPE ROOTED IN:

BELIEF:

"Conviction that a thing can and will happen no matter the odds!"

Hope that...

- Justice will always find those most deserving of its righteous sentence.
- No matter what force may try and take it, all beings retain their free will and choice!
- Corruption and avarice can be washed from these places of power and influence.
- Love is a force great enough to beat back the most harrowing of adversaries.

ACTION:

"With perseverance and determined efforts, a better future can be built!"

Hope that...

- The courage to sacrifice what is needed and do what is necessary burns eternal.
- Pursuing knowledge and scholarship will provide the architecture for a greater life!
- Riches and glory are within reach of those with the will to take them!
- With enough resolve we can find the place we were always meant to be!

OPTIMISM:

"Trusting there is always a best case scenario attainable somehow!"

Hope that...

- Life will be full of surprise and adventure, enough to never tire of!
- It's never too late to undo a wrong and have forgiveness gifted when asked for.
- The power to protect what is worth keeping safe lies somewhere within!
- Potential and possibility are cherished and nurtured wherever they are found.

Once you've added everything here that speaks to you, your table will be primed to tell incredible stories that have meaning unique to your party's specific and incomparable imagination.

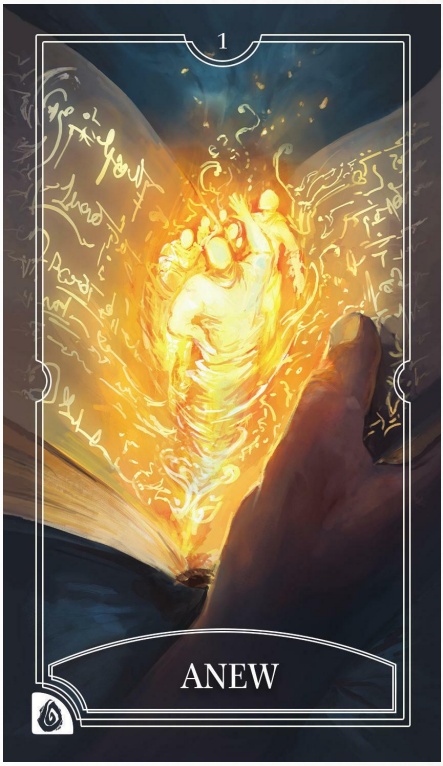
We hope you enjoy each and every moment of it together.

LEGACY FRAGMENTS

This Path represents the many ways in which your character's story could begin. What peoples and places do they hail from? What traditions and customs started shaping them from the very start? What framework or cultures did they grow up with that still influences them today?

A person can become who they are *because* of or *despite* their origins. When choosing from these fragments, keep this in mind and decide not only what influences were there at the start but how those factors impacted your character and what unique choices they made in the face of them.

Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer the questions it poses then return the fragment to the deck. *(Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.)*


1
ANEW

2
BEYOND

3
CATACLYSM

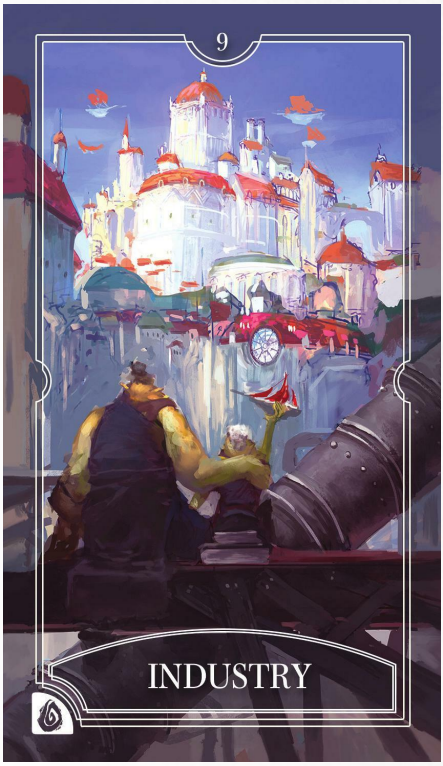
4
DESCENDANT

5
ESCAPE

6
FISSURE

7
GRIT

8
HEART


9
INDUSTRY

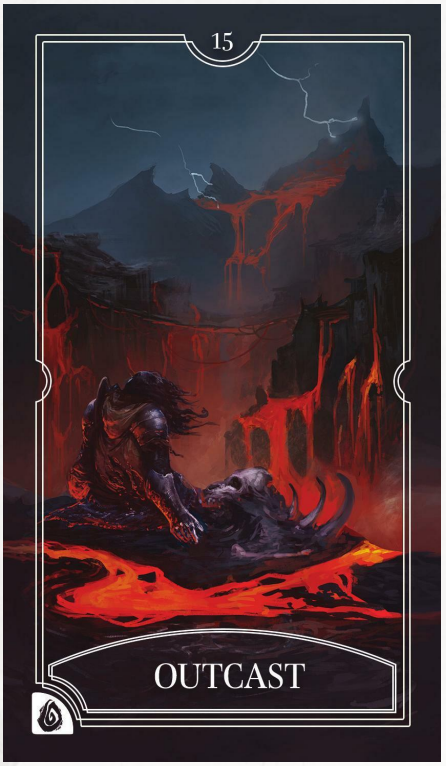
10
JEST

11
KNOWLEDGE

12
LOSS

13
MINDFUL

14
NEXUS


15
OUTCAST

16
PROTEGE

17
QUERY

18
RESTRAINT

19
SANCTUARY

20
TRANSCEND

BOND FRAGMENTS

This Path provides archetypes to represent the different kinds of people who may have had the most lasting impact on your character's life thus far. They could be important figures in a community, a passerby, a close acquaintance, or someone they have never seen in person.

These can be as intimate and personal or as formal and distanced as you want. Someone can just as easily change your life from next door as they can from a world away! Keep distance in mind and whether this person is aware of your character or not. They may play a pivotal role in your story—but are you even a footnote in theirs? Perhaps not yet…

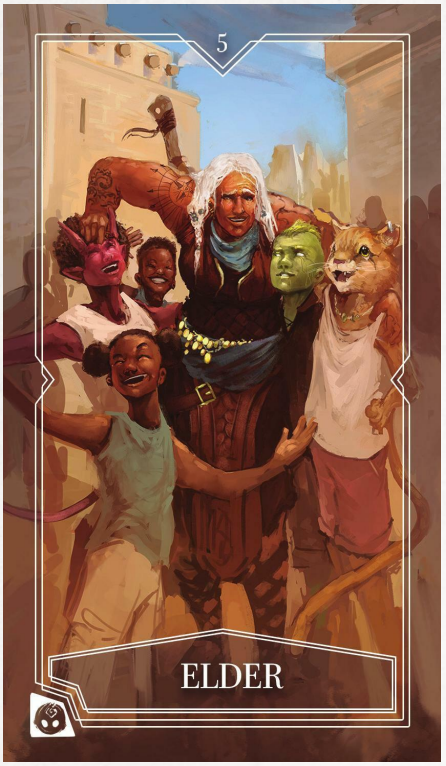
Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer the questions it poses. Then return the fragment to the deck. (*Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.*)

1
ALLY

2
BELOVED

3
CORRUPTOR

4
DIVINER

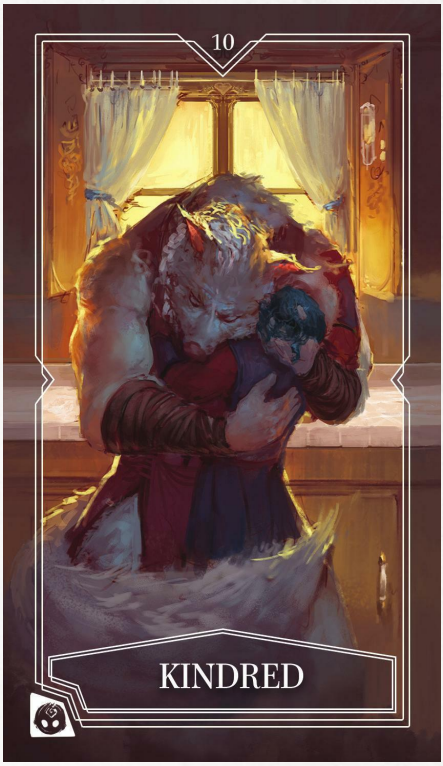

5
ELDER

6
FRIEND

7
GUIDE

8
HERO

9
INSTRUCTOR


10
KINDRED

11
LIAR

12
MYSTIC

13
NEMESIS

14
OATHBREAKER

15
RIVAL

16
SOVEREIGN

17
TRAITOR

18
VAGABOND

19
WATCHER

20
ZEALOT

CATALYST FRAGMENTS

This Path gives options for the event that caused your character to set out on their journey or embark on a new adventure. Unlike the others, these are a bit different: each comes as a pair with a *constructive* and *destructive* option to choose from. Not every rogue needs a tragic backstory! These can affect a local area or the world at large. Your character can have heard of this event or experienced it themselves and either can be an equally impactful choice! ***Select only one of the two offered fragments from the prompt to answer.***

Keep in mind timing when integrating these Paths into your backstory. The amount of time that has passed since the event, as well as how long the event took to unfold, greatly influences the impact it has on your character. Use time as a way to set the tone of this impact.

Randomly select 1 Fragment and answer one question it poses. Then return the fragment to the deck. *(Or alternatively, select 3 at random and choose the one that feels right for the character you are building.)*

1
A FACTION RISES
A CITY IS SAVED

2
A STORM FALLS
A RESOURCE UNCOVERED

3
A LEADER DIES
A LIFE IS SPARED

4
A REGION VANISHES
A SHRINE APPEARS

5
A CURSE AWAKENS
A BLESSING GIVEN

6
AN ACT OF COURAGE
A COWARD UNMASKED

7
DANGER CLOSES IN
SAFE HAVEN OFFERED

8
A FRIEND LOST
AN ENEMY PARDONED

9
A FOE REVEALED
AN ALLIANCE FORGED

10
A TREASURE STOLEN
A RELIC RETURNED

11
A LIE BELIEVED
A TRUTH UNEARTHED

12
DARKNESS LOOMS
LIGHT BECKONS

13
KNOWLEDGE LOST
TECHNOLOGY GIFTED

14
A HARD CHOICE
A MISTAKE AVOIDED

15
A HERO EMERGES
A DYNASTY DIMINISHED

16
A PLACE HIDDEN
A REALM REVITALIZED

17
A CAGE BROKEN
A TRAP SPRUNG

18
A CONSPIRACY FOILED
AN EXPERIMENT SUCCEEDS

19
A CHANCE TAKEN
AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

20
A PROPHECY IGNORED
A WISH GRANTED