

RollPlay



GM NOTEBOOK
ISSUE SEVENTEEN

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Welcome, Patrons!

This issue is a special one - it's not what you're used to, I'll wager. Instead of the usual notes and commentary, presented here is an alpha version of the Court of Swords RPG. I've been working on it a while now and thought it might be time to give it over to you. There are bits and pieces missing of course, but the core of the game is ready enough for you to give it a read, make some characters and try it out. Expect more refinement in the future, but I'm so excited to let you take a look at what I've got so far. If you read it and have feedback, please feel free to contact me directly, or start a forum thread about it. If you play the game, I would love to hear how it goes.

I think this game is a nice, simple, easy-to-play way to dive into what I see as core themes of the Court of Swords. I hope you'll enjoy trying it out, even if it's still in the early stages.

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 17 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel
RollPlay GM



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The Core Rules

The Unnamed Court of Swords micro-rpg is a game meant to be played in exactly five sessions, one for each season. You will follow your characters through a Fire, Water, Earth, Air and Void session, in each session meeting challenges, exploring the world and fighting dangerous foes. In each session you will be tempted to turn from your fate, as presented by your sign, the tarot and the will of the dice.

Will you gain dharma and follow the path set before you, or will you give in to temptation and seek your own fate?

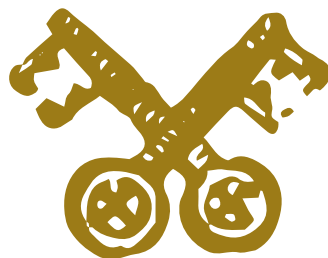
The Core Rule

When you need to accomplish something whose outcome is uncertain, roll + the appropriate stat. On a <6, you don't do it and a bad thing happens. On a 7-9 you do it, but the GM

will tell you some additional cost or complication. On a 10+ you do the thing.

The GM's main job is to adjudicate this roll, presenting you with options and costs on a 7-9 and moving the action forward on any result. Whenever you do anything that doesn't have a specific mechanism to use, this is the rule.

The GM will never roll dice, nor will they engage the mechanisms the players do. In future iterations of the game, the GM's role will be more clearly defined but for now, their job is to tell you which stat feels appropriate and tell you what happens when you succeed or fail.



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Character Creation

Everywhere Signs

All throughout the world, folk of all cultures and people are born under the elemental signs. Your sign can be divined, and will stick with you forever - it is a part of your soul. These are the signs, and what they are associated.

- Fire (Tejas)

- Direction: South
- Associations: Anger, Will, Passion, Lust, Destruction, Desire, Purification, Protection, Strength
- Colours: Red, Orange, Gold, Yellow

- Air (Vayu)

- Direction: East
- Associations: Thought, mental power, communication, travel, intellect, abstract thinking, teaching, divination, freedom, happiness, laughter, beginnings
- Colours: Blue, Pastels

- Water (Apas)

- Direction: West
- Associations: Emotions, dreams, compassion, love, sadness, healing, rest, cleansing, dissolution, rebirth
- Colours: Green, Silver, Purple

- Earth (Prithivi)

- Direction: North
- Associations: Stability, prosperity, food, money, wealth, crops,
- animals, home, mountains, strength, grounding, protection
- Colours: Brown, Black, Green

- Void (Sunya)

- Directions: None
- Association: rejection of authority, individualism, selfishness, endings, nihilism, hopelessness, the present, temptation, solitude
- Colours: White

Assign Your Stats

To create your character, draw three tarot cards, looking at number and suit. Ignore the major arcana unless the reading is only major arcana. Whichever card has the highest value, that is your sign and array. If there is a tie, you may choose.

If you draw three major arcana, you are born under the sign of the void, and are free to choose your stats, because heaven has no plan for you.

Assign each of your stats a value according to the array below, arranging them as you like. For example, a character born under the Fire sign might have a Mind of +3, a Heart of 0, a Body of +3 and a Soul of +1.

The Signs

Fire	-3,	+1,	0,	+3
Earth	+1,	+1,	0,	-1
Water	+2,	-2,	0,	+1
Air	+2,	-1,	-1,	+1

Void - Choose as you like, but it has to add up to +1 total (within -3 to +3 range)

The Stats

Mind

Thought, observation, reasoning, cleverness.

Heart

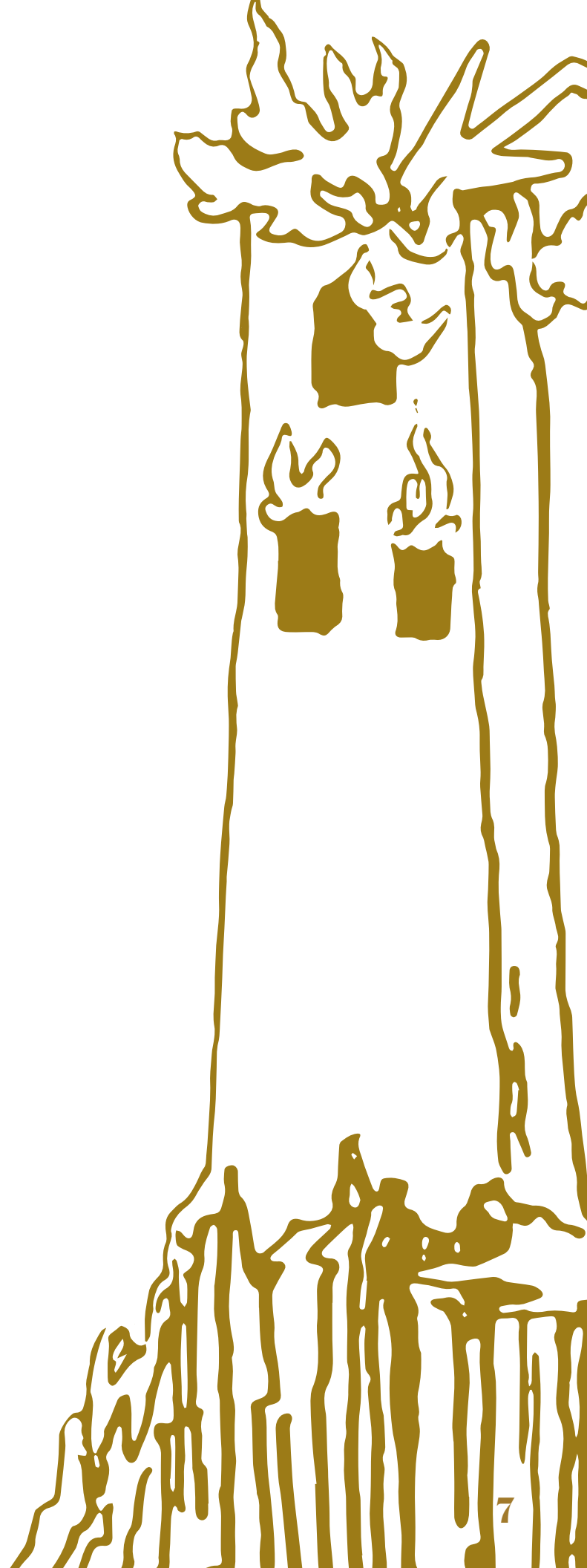
Feelings, empathy, emotional energy, connection to others, manipulation

Body

Body stuff - speed, agility, brawn, etc.

Soul

Magic - the power of the fountain, the bonds of the mara, inner light stuff, etc, enlightenment



Kin, Culture and Craft

Choose your kin (who you are) your culture (where you are from) and your craft. Talk with the other players about what this might mean to your character, and share your ideas about what these things mean to the world at large. Ask questions. GM, take notes and encourage conversation!

Kin

Dwarf, Element-touched, Garuda, Human, Mogwai, Naga, Taotie, Tian Shi

Culture

Academic, Divine, Enslaved, Military, Monastic, Nomadic, Penal, Rural, Solitary, Urban

Craft

Choose a craft, profession or trade your character had previous to becoming an adventurer. You might have been an actor, a carpenter, a courtier or a sage, perhaps.

The reason we establish these things is to understand the characters' background and where they came from. During the game, the GM is encouraged to allow players to *fictionally position* their characters for success using these background elements, and let them have success without rolling when it makes sense.

For example, if you are a Garuda, it makes sense you can probably tell which way the wind is blowing, or spot something shiny from far away. If you were raised in a prison, you can tell who is in charge of a hierarchy or call on favours from the criminal underworld. If you were a sailor, you probably ought not have to roll to swim or navigate at sea.

These are flags to the party and the GM about what your character is about at a deep level, before we apply a class of adventurer to them.



5 Classes

Class

Choose a class and record its special abilities. The Classes are separated into subtypes, so if you are a Monk, you are also a Warrior. If you are a Shaman, you are also a Magician. Each type, Warrior, Magician and Rogue, has several subtypes. Choose one of those as well. You will have four special abilities when this step is complete.

Super secret advanced mode: choose a class (Warrior, Magician or Rogue) and then choose any two abilities from any subtype, mixing and matching as you like. You might be a Warrior with Discipline and Rage. Name your new subclass.

Warrior

- *Armament*

You may wield any weapon or wear any armor without undue discomfort or difficulty.

- *Fortitude*

Once per session you may ignore a single attack. It still hits, but you are able to push through the ill effects.



» Monk

- *Discipline*

Gain a +1 on any roll to resist external influence on your mind or spirit.

- *Kung Fu*

Your body is trained to perform near supernatural physical feats.

» Soldier

- *Command*

Gain a +1 on any roll to issue to an order to someone who would reasonably listen to you.

- *Tactics*

Once per session you may ask the GM a question about a battle you are [a part of or planning to be in] and they will answer honestly.

» Ardent

- *Smite*

When you harm any creature considered anathema to Heaven, inflict a single additional level of harm.

- *Inquisit*

You may ask a single question of anyone who is at your mercy, which they must answer honestly.

» Brute

- *Rend*

+1 to any roll to damage, destroy or otherwise ruin a physical object.

- *Rage*

Once per session, for a single scene, you may become enraged, change the text of all of your harm to I AM UNSTOPPABLE. When the scene ends,

erase half the wounds you took, and revert them to normal.

Magician

- *Mysticism*

You are capable of perceiving and harnessing the power of the Fountain.

- *Oracle*

You are entitled and empowered by culture and the world itself to read the Tarot for yourself and others.

» Scholar

- *Spellcraft*

You can use rote formula and practiced ritual to [cast spells.]

- *Occultism*

You have access to and knowledge of the dark secrets of the scholarly underworld.

» Sorcerer

- *Fountaincraft*

You may [channel] the raw power of the Fountain into magical effects.

- *Sixth Sense*

Your senses extend beyond that of normal mortals - you may perceive auras, spirits and ghosts when otherwise they are hidden.

» Priest

- *Ceremony*

You can perform basic rituals honoring any and all of the Arcana, and more obtuse and complex rituals honoring a single Arcana (choose it when you gain this ability).

- *Prayer*

You may pray to the Arcana for their intercession in the mortal realm via [miracles].

» **Shaman**

- *Conjuring*

You may [conjure] a spirit, ghost or god and bargain with it for services.

- *Sacrifice*

If you perform an appropriate sacrifice, treat any one missed roll as a 7-9?

Rogue

- *Murder*

You may kill outright anyone who is at your mercy.

- *Deception*

Take +1 on a roll to convince someone that a lie is true.

» **Thief**

- *Crime*

You are trained and practiced in the various arts of making other people's property your own.

- *Cartel*

Once per session you can declare "I know someone..." and have access to a criminal with the skills and disposition to help you with some illegal endeavour.





» Assassin

- *Poisons*

You are able to safely create (given the ingredients), recognize, and handle poisons of all sorts.

- *Stalking*

Once per session, you may ask the GM “how can I put this person at my mercy?”

» Outcast

- *Feral Heart*

Animals of the wild recognize you as one of their own, and treat you accordingly.

- *Woodcraft*

You have the skills you need to survive in the wild.

» Vagabond

- *Hearsay*

Once per session, ask the GM “what does the street say about this?” and they will answer honestly.

- *Ingenuity*

Once per session, you may declare you have one small item on your person, so long as it is not too outlandish to do so. Use your common sense.

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Inventory

In addition to the checked boxes, choose a number of items you carry equal to twice your Body (minimum one for those with 0 or less Body) when you set out from civilization on an adventure. You may choose more, but doing so means you are Overburdened.

If you are Overburdened, the GM may invoke your burden to reduce a 10+ result to a 7-9 once per session.

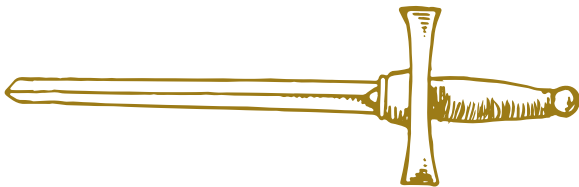
- an item reflecting your Kin or Culture
- a tool for practicing your Craft
- a 1-wound weapon
- specialist clothing
- a pouch of coins
- a source of light
- some food
- adventuring gear

Warriors

- A 1-wound weapon
- Any other weapon
- Any armor
- A shield
- A trophy of a previous victory

Magicians

- Arcane Implements (Cards, Astrolabes, etc.)
- Scrolls, Books, etc.
- Alchemical Unguents and Poultices
- A musical instrument
- Regalia, Vestments or Raiment



Rogues

- a 1-wound weapon
- another 1-wound weapon
- an easily-concealed murder tool
- poison
- false papers (a fake identity, travel papers, etc.)
- a hidden supply of cash

Carrying Treasure & Coins

On the sheet there will be Coin Slots, basically, that reflect carrying capacity for treasure - you can slot treasure into them, but they're full, you're Overburdened. We'll work this out in a future version of the game.

Miscellanea

If you want something not on the list specifically, it either falls under adventuring gear or is probably a one-slot item. Talk to the group and figure out whether it makes sense.

Some Weapon Examples

Improvised Weapon (a wall, a broken bottle, a small horse) (1 wound, awkward, range varies)

A knife (1 wound, close)

Throwing stars or darts (1 wound, limited, ranged)

A club (1 wound, stunning, close)

A sword (2-wound, medium)

A mace (2 wound, heavy, medium)

A crossbow (2 wound, reload, ranged)

A bow (1 wound, ranged)

Some Armor Examples

Light (Leather)

Medium (Lamellar)

Heavy (plate-equivalent)

A Shield



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Fighting and Dying



This game contains violent themes - the Courts don't clash in war, but it's a world where death is present and the characters will be called upon to do battle and murder. It's a thing. It's part of the game.

Suffering Wounds

When you suffer and injury, the GM will tell you how many Wounds are inflicted. If you're wearing armor, choose how many wounds your armor absorbs. This will describe your current condition. Check off that many boxes on your sheet.

Wounds can come from many different sources, the world is a dangerous place.

Weapons and Armor

Weapons inflict a number of levels of harm and have tags. They give fictional positioning (halberd vs. dagger) and do actual damage.

Armor has ablative levels of damage reduction. When you take a hit, your armor can take it for you, but then needs to be repaired. For example;

- In fine condition
- Slightly Damaged
- Ruined

Wounds

- I am hale and hearty
- I am merely winded
- My wounds are beginning to show
- I am bloodied but unbeaten
- **Death lurks, close at hand
- **I have but a moment left to live
- **I die

Recovery

When you are wounded, you may wish to become whole again. This can be accomplished with rest and care, or with magic. Magical effects will describe how many wounds to erase.

A night's rest allows recovery of a single wound level. A whole day of rest will allow you to recover 1 + Body, if your Body is a positive number. A week of rest sets you back to Hale and Hearty.

If you have been wounded past "Death lurks, close at hand" you cannot recover with rest. Death will claim you too quickly. Magic is your only hope. You will get worse quickly and die without aid.

Dying

When you reach the end of your life, your soul leaves your body and returns to the Wheel to be measured, judged and reseated in a new-born body.

If your companions are particularly resourceful, lucky and quick, or they've made the wrong sort of friends, maybe you can get your soul into a new body, or your original if it's not in too bad a condition.

There is always a price to pay, but hopefully someone else will pay it for you. Otherwise, better luck next life.

They say there are those who walk the earth, bereft of their soul but somehow remembering a life they think belongs to them. Woe be-tide you if you ever become such a foul thing.

What Happens When We Die?

When someone dies before their life's journey ends, their Dharma remains to be carried on.

If your character dies before the Void session, you have two choices.

1) You become a hungry ghost, doomed to lurk over the shoulders of your friends as they continue on without you. You become a split pool of points, which you can use to influence the game.

a) Spend a point of Yin essence to

- manifest a vision of darkness, death or otherwise ominous nature.
- Make an NPC's mood turn dark, sad or somber
- Force someone to lie
- Cause someone to ignore a passion

b) Spend a point of Yang essence to

- Manifest a vision of gluttony, hedonism, or otherwise exuberant nature.
- Make an NPC's mood turn lustful,

aggressive or brash

iii. Make someone blurt out a truth

iv. Cause someone to pursue an impulse

You regain Yin essence when the living characters follow their desires, seek pleasure of the flesh, become drunk or feast.

You regain Yang essence when the living characters act with dispassion, seek logic, ignore the immediate, pursue necessity.

The GM will tell you when you regain essence, but it never hurts to ask.

You begin with two of each essence, plus one according to the nature of your demise. Ask the group, discuss it.

You may only spend one sort of essence in a scene, starting with the first point you spend.

2) You create a new character, bound in the fiction by a dharmic debt to the character who died - a husband mourning his lost wife, a child their parent, a boon companion, a business partner, etc. You inherit the dharma of the character who died, and have only whatever sessions are left to tell your own story. You **must** narrate your Void session epilogue to include the dharmic debt your characters owe each other.

At Your Mercy

There are occasions where someone might be At Your Mercy - this means they're helpless, defenseless and have no further recourse. You may use any move that requires this tag.



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Magic

The Scope of Magic

Here is what magic (that is to say, mortals channeling the power of the Fountain) can and cannot do.

No

- Affecting heaven directly
- Create new souls / gods / spirits
- Destroy souls / gods / spirits
- Unseat or destroy the Fountain itself
- Effect the cycles of reincarnation
- Effect / Detect “farang”
- Leave The World
- Change the flow of time

Yes

- Literally everything else

Practical Magic

There are four ways to create magical effects, granted as class abilities. These all supersede the core move of the game, because they’re magic, and they have their own effects.

Casting Spells

- Aligned with Swords / Air
- rote, predictable, inflexible, practiced, not reliant on natural talent, tied inherently to systems of writing, grammar, math, predictable outcomes
- When you study your spellbook at dawn, committing the day’s magic to memory, roll + Mind and hold 3. On a 10+ your studies are as expected, your commit the spells to memory. On a 7-9, the GM also holds 1. On a miss, the GM holds 2.
 - Name your spell and describe a straightforward magical effect, and spend hold to make it occur.
 - When you cast your spell, the GM may spend hold to add a complication or unforeseen effect of a mistake in your memorization.

At sunrise the following day, lose all your unspent hold. The GM will as well.

Channeling

- Aligned with Wands / Fire
- Being a vessel, siphoning, funneling, guiding, raw talent, destiny, blood, adaptive, flexible, costly, unpredictable, chaotic, hard to control, wild talent, cost
- When you attempt to channel the power that flows through you to create a magical effect, roll + Soul. On a 10+ choose one, on a 7-9 choose two. On a miss, all three or something worse will occur.
 - Your body suffers the cost
 - Someone or something else suffers the cost
 - The effect is out of your control

Conjuring

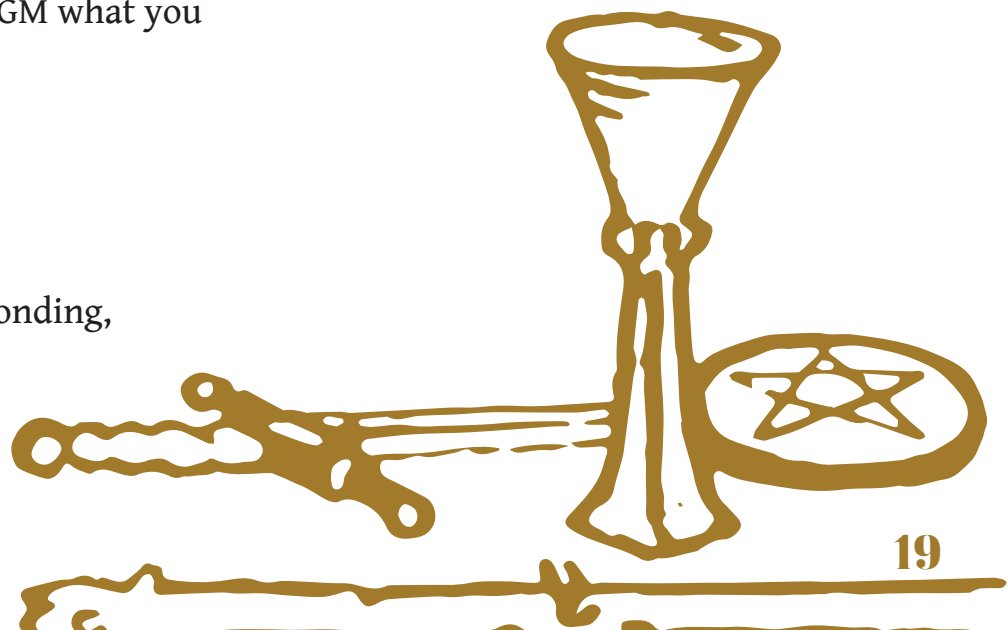
- Aligned with Coins / Earth
- Spirits, gods, making deals, paying a cost, negotiating, sacrifice, equity, bargains, begging, cajoling, intimidating, servitude, chains, domination, relationships, friendship, loyalty, favours
- When you wish to bargain with the gods of the world or heaven, tell the GM what you offer to lure them.

Miracles

- Aligned with Cups / Water
- Faith, performance, ritual, bonding,

belief, civilization, community, surrender, behaviour, authority, piety, obedience, protocol

- When you pray to the Arcana for intervention in the affairs of mortals, describe what you want and tell the GM. The GM will tell you what the Arcana demand, one or more of the following:
 - The ritual requires many participants
 - The ritual demands a great deal of time
 - The ritual requires a specific location to function
 - The ritual can only take place at a particular time
 - The ritual necessitates a taboo or proscriptio
 - The ritual demands the conversion of someone faithless
 - The ritual requires a shrine / temple or wat be built
 - The ritual requires a purification, first
 - The Arcana demand the blood of an enemy



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Adversaries

Adversaries

Adversaries might be terrible monsters, or they might be simple peasant soldiers. They're anyone or anything that might get in the PCs way.

Answer these questions:

How much damage can they do?

How much armor do they have?

How much health do they have?

What do they want?

What makes them special?

Some Examples:

Rust Monster

Biting Mandibles 1 Wound

Carapace Armor [][]

- Hearty Creature
- Missing a Limb or Two
- A Splattered Mess

Wants: To consume metal

Special:

- Causes 2x normal wounds but only to metal armor
- Can destroy any non-magical metal object

Mogwai Warrior

Rusty Dagger 1 Wound

No Armor

- I'm Dead!

Wants: Riches and Power! To be Best in Caves!

Special: There's so damn many of them

Mogwai Warswarm

Many Rusty Daggers - 2 Wounds

Ablative Bodies 1 armor

- There's still so many of them
- I think they're thinning!
- That's about half, right?
- Only a few left

- That's the last of them
- No more mogwai

Wants: MORE STUFF

Special:

- Can be broken down into multiple mogwai
- Can incorporate single mogwai to regain health

Vampires

Damage as per weapons

Terrible claws of shadow - 2 wounds, ignoring armor

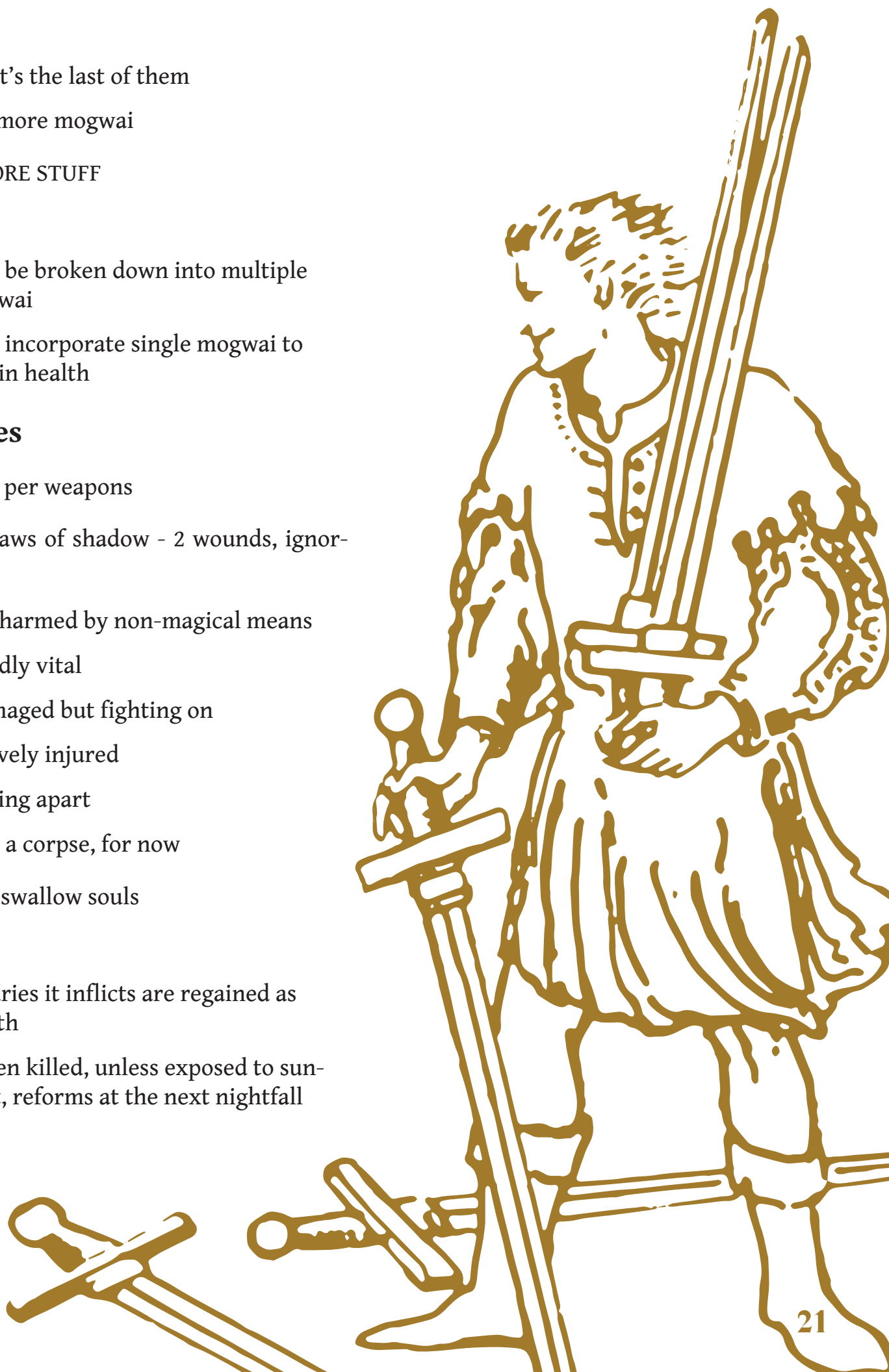
Cannot be harmed by non-magical means

- Deadly vital
- Damaged but fighting on
- Gravely injured
- Falling apart
- Just a corpse, for now

Wants: To swallow souls

Special:

- injuries it inflicts are regained as health
- When killed, unless exposed to sunlight, reforms at the next nightfall



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Dharma and the Soul's Reflection

At the end of a session, players will be rewarded Dharma for playing their character, following the bonds of their Tarot reading, and pursuing their goals.

When the adventure begins, draw a tarot card to bind each character to each other character. In a party of four, each character will have three cards, and a trigger for gaining Dharma accordingly.

Tarot Card	Mark XP When You...
Fool	Show blind trust or faith in your companion
Magician	Take a swift and decisive action together
High Priestess	Work together to uncover a buried truth
Empress	Nurture growth in your companion
Emperor	Convince your companion to obey the rule of law
Hierophant	Teach your companion a tradition of your kin or culture
Lovers	Help your companion follow pleasure or passion
Chariot	Overcome together a corporeal obstacle you could not overcome alone
Strength	Show courage in the face of a grave danger to your ally
Hermit	Take time apart from your ally to reflect on your actions together
Wheel of Fortune	Convince your ally to choose randomness over a concrete plan

Tarot Card	Mark XP When You...
Justice	Treat your companion as a true equal
Hanged Man	Surrender an argument or conflict with your companion
Death	Take something away from your companion they can never retrieve
Temperance	Convince your companion to take a more moderate path
Devil	Surrender power to your companion
Tower	Utterly destroy something meaningful, together
Star	Give your companion hope
Moon	Convince your companion to share a hidden truth
Sun	Bring your companion light in a time of darkness
Judgement	Help your ally find a new beginning
World	Complete a momentous goal together
Ace of Cups	Help your companion experience a moment of joy
Two of Cups	Illustrate to your companion a way in which you complement one another
Three of Cups	Encourage your companion to celebrate a victory
Four of Cups	Encourage your companion to be dissatisfied with what they have
Five of Cups	Give your companion reason for self pity
Six of Cups	Show your companion a simple act of compassion
Seven of Cups	Encourage a flight of fantasy in your companion, convince them to embrace the unrealistic
Eight of Cups	Convince your companion to abandon a goal in search of something better
Nine of Cups	Convince your companion to indulge their desires
Ten of Cups	Encourage your companion to find happiness when they would otherwise reject or avoid it
Page of Cups	Create something artistic with your companion

Tarot Card	Mark XP When You...
Knight of Cups	Convince your companion to take action in seeking their heart's desire
Queen of Cups	Learn your companion's hidden desires
King of Cups	Convince your companion to hide their true desires
Ace of Coins	Work with your companion to set a concrete goal together
Two of Coins	Convince your companion to take on multiple tasks at once
Three of Coins	Engage in simple, honest work with your companion
Four of Coins	Take a larger share of some reward than your companion
Five of Coins	Show your companion a way they do not fit in
Six of Coins	Give your companion something without recompense or reward
Seven of Coins	Show your companion patience when you otherwise would not
Eight of Coins	Craft a plan with your companion
Nine of Coins	Convince your companion to enjoy something luxurious or decadent
Ten of Coins	Encourage your companion to spend their money on something responsible
Page of Coins	Teach your companion something new
Knight of Coins	Encourage your companion to take a measured, thought out action
Queen of Coins	Heal your companion of an ill
King of Coins	Treat your companion to some luxury
Ace of Swords	Find a new opportunity together
Two of Swords	Convince your companion to doubt their actions or decisions
Three of Swords	Betray your companion

Tarot Card	Mark XP When You...
Four of Swords	Help your companion find rest or respite
Five of Swords	Encourage your companion to take a hostile act when they otherwise would not
Six of Swords	Convince your companion to leave something behind
Seven of Swords	Convince your companion to abandon a plan, or make a new one with you in secret
Eight of Swords	Show your companion a way in which they are powerless
Nine of Swords	Express a deep anxiety to your companion
Ten of Swords	Sabotage something your companion desires
Page of Swords	Encourage your companion to act as a child does - without thought to the future or repercussions of their actions
Knight of Swords	Overcome a powerful foe, with your companion, through force or action
Queen of Swords	Convince your companion to speak truth to power
King of Swords	Use law and logic to make your companion change course
Ace of Wands	Expose your companion to a new idea
Two of Wands	Convince your companion to contemplate their goals
Three of Wands	Help your companion reap the rewards of an effort
Four of Wands	Show your companion safety and security
Five of Wands	Engage in a meaningless competition with your companion
Six of Wands	Celebrate your companion's success
Seven of Wands	Show your companion their success isn't as meaningful as they imagine
Eight of Wands	Convince your companion to take an action with haste and immediacy
Nine of Wands	Show your companion the worst possible outcome
Ten of Wands	Convince your companion to abandon an ideal

Tarot Card	Mark XP When You...
Page of Wands	Evoke inspiration and excitement in your companion
Knight of Wands	Convince your companion to follow a passion or ideal
Queen of Wands	Act as a confidant for your companion
King of Wands	Help your companion achieve a difficult goal in service of their ideals

At the End of the Session

As each session closes, follow this protocol for each player.

- When you illustrate your Sign, at the end of a Session, mark Dharma
- When you illustrate the desires and drives of your Class, mark Dharma
- When you illustrate the patterns of your Kin or Culture, mark Dharma
- When you obey the precepts of your Tarot Bonds, mark Dharma for each obeyed

These points are banked, to be used at the end of the game to narrate your epilogue.

Spending Dharma

If your mortal life is more important than your inevitable reincarnation, you may shuck the bonds of fate and spend your dharma, either to reroll, bend fate altogether or rebind yourself to your companions. Here are the costs:

- 2 dharma to reroll
- 3 dharma to bump a miss to a 7-9 or a 7-9 to a 10
- 1 dharma to draw a new Tarot with someone
- 3 dharma to choose a new Tarot with someone

Epilogue

During the Void session, we reflect on our adventures, and spend the Dharma from our bank to narrate the epilogue. We're given more freedom to do so the more Dharma we have.

For now, there are no rules for this, but basically, those with more Dharma get a more "enlightened" epilogue - they die, are reborn as greater beings, and reach ever closer for the Fountain. Those with less Dharma are forced to relearn their lessons, born into harder lives.

