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**The Emotions Behind the Screen**

by

**Eli Gray Nations**

A thesis drafted for the **Honors Scholar Program**

**DePauw University**

April 10th, 2023

Approved by  
Professor Harry Brown

Overseen by  
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DEPAUW UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

“The Emotions Behind the Screen”

by Eli Gray Nations

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:      Professor Harry Brown  
Department of English

This thesis revolves around the narrative form of Dungeons and Dragons, that the players have true free will, which allows for the highest level of storytelling. By reaching this level, the players are able to freely tackle issues in their life and surrounding them, like testing out negative parts of their personality and finding community during events like the COVID pandemic. This, combined with the recent scandal from DnD’s publisher Wizards of the Coast poses this question: what exactly is DnD, therapy, art, community, or just a game? This thesis hopes to lead the reader to answer this question in their own terms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to give my thanks first to the players of this campaign. Without them, I would not be able to finish the thesis at all, much less enjoy Dungeons and Dragons as a whole. They are the reason I will graduate from DePauw University, and on that end I want to credit each of my friends and each of the professors I have studied under while on campus. Four years don’t feel like months or weeks in my mind; they feel like days. I don’t regret anything across my time here, and I’m eternally grateful for my friends who have carried me to the end of this. And finally, I want to give my thanks to my mother, who is the sole reason I came to DePauw. Without her tireless work and dedication, I would not be able to study here. No thanks I could ever give would be enough to pay her back, so I leave my thesis in her hands instead. Perhaps this will be enough to start.

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## Defense:

### *Why Do We Tell Stories;*

“Why do we tell stories? To try to make sense of a world that can be terrifying and enormous. ...I don't know that your story will long be known. I don't know who will remain to tell it, but it did happen — and it did matter.” This quote comes from Critical Role, a popular Dungeons and Dragons show that is currently the top grossing channel on Twitch. The leader of this oneshot, Brennan Lee Mulligan, ended the session with this quote after all but one of the party he hosted died, as part of his writing. He wrote an apocalyptic scenario that still had a glimmer of hope, could have easily focused on the players, but chose to have the final moments reflect on Dungeons and Dragons as a whole; because why do we tell stories?

The question is subjective, there will never be a correct answer, as there will never be one final storyteller. Some tell stories for the enjoyment of having an audience, some tell them for the fun of creating their own world. Some just create to create, the simple action is enough on its own. This is a question without an ending, but I ask it anyway; *why do we still tell stories?* Haven't we told enough? Why do we continue to write stories, compose them to words and thoughts? Why do we tell them to others, to open ourselves to the possibility of being broken through ridicule? Surely we've seen all that humanity has to offer ourselves already; the “Hero's Journey” already exists, we have the ancient texts of *Beowulf* and the *Canterbury Tales*, we have libraries that compose knowledge in paper and electricity, enough that no library of Alexandria could hold a candle to their knowledge. What else is left to truly tell other than revisions of earlier works? Especially with the writing done from stories and characters that have entered open copyright law, does originality even exist in the world anymore?

I believe that originality can still be found, and it's through TTRPGs, and that we are slowly entering a new age of storytelling because of our need to be in communities. Through events like COVID, we have been spurred to create worlds we can explore without needing to leave our homes. We're reimagined ourselves as heroes in a world where we're no more than a spec in the daily grind of our workspaces and mental health. We're able to rise above the turmoil we are powerless to, to imagine a

world where we can make a difference, and in making a community of people who tell stories together, we make a difference in each other. We find the meaning in storytelling in each other.

I cannot speak for all those who have ever played Dungeons and Dragons, but for me? I believe we tell stories so that we can better know ourselves, and in doing so we can turn the stories we weave into reality.

Under this thesis, I will be delving into the nature of the game *Dungeons and Dragons*, DnD for short, and will be exploring the themes of why it became popular in the first place. Partially this was done because of interviews I conducted with those who wish to remain anonymous, in line with the ethics board at DePauw University. I also explored this through writing and telling a story myself, in a campaign that officially began on January 30th of this year but had begun unofficially much before. The main themes I will be tackling is the ownership of DnD itself, if it belongs more to the company that makes the game or the players themselves, as well as struggling to come up with a meaningful story from the ground up. We'll be discussing the role of modules and officially licensed stories and how looking away from these functions allows for more interactive storytelling, as well as how the free-flowing nature of TTRPGs allows for the most effective ways of drawing an audience into a story. All of this, and more, will be found in the pages below.

If I could have but one question to ask the reader, it would be; what story would you tell? Everyone can, and I believe everyone should, so if you had the chance what would you create? My one goal is simply to get you to play, if I have done that? Then this thesis will have been worthwhile.

### *Value In A Magnum Opus;*

All my life, I've been told that I was never going to make it on my own. That no matter what I pursued, I was going to fail every day. As a writer, I've been told that the most I could do is edit other works, that my quality of writing will never be good enough to fill the articles of magazines, anywhere. As an actor, I've been told that I will always be working restaurant jobs, then even if by some miracle I made it, I'll never be able to support myself off it. It's tampered by enjoyment with everything I do, every

ground I make. It doesn't matter if I get my work published, it's only for a small magazine, it will never count for anything. It doesn't matter if I'm a voice actor, companies are trying to extinguish the career path with AI. Even Amazon is having AI narrators take over Audible, now. I've never been happy with what I do, even when I'm enjoying it, because at some point the production will end, and I'll be on my own again.

The only work I have ever published lies in the 2022 edition of the *Midwestern Review*. Every single day, I'm reminded of that. I should be happy about that! I have published work! But it's just for the work for DePauw University. There's a limited pool of talent that could be drawn from, rather than countless unknown authors all fighting for the same spot online. What does a work of this magnitude, of this length, signify? That I've made it. That I've done something worth publishing. If I'm being honest, I don't even want to publish this thesis. I would be more than happy to have it be in the library, but I don't want this thesis anywhere else. But to have a work of this proportions means that I could write more, that this isn't simply the last hurrah. One of my senior teachers stresses every time we get into class that this is the last time we'll have a circle devoted to reviewing each other's work. This is the last time we'll have this much time to devote only to writing. Unless I am granted a retreat, which is not going to happen for years since I'm little more than a rapidly approaching college graduate. I have so much work left to do, and so many years left to live. I managed to make a work of this length, of this caliber. I'm worthy of being proud of myself. But I am not the only one who is;

- "Haera's goal is to be alive. My goal is to make her human."

In writing a campaign of any magnitude, the DM must challenge their players in some way, to inspire in themselves some change. He must give them a reason to try out new ways to play their game, their hobby. To give them was to all deeper in love with an important part of their lives, an importance created by them. Across the scope of this campaign, I have given my own players a reason for that.

- "Ozwalde's identity is a small part of his character, which seems odd, but really he distances himself from himself, and tries to be someone else. A more recognizable and interesting person."

A campaign of this length does not rise overnight; it takes months of constant work, on both sides; the Dm constructing the world and the players figuring out how to live in it. From January, these players have been constantly immersed inside this world, constantly writing, making art, and rambling of their own thoughts of their characters. Three months of their words have been recorded in the following pages, alongside a year of mine.

- “Tabes has a lot of room for character growth and belief. It could be super tragic with him losing his light, his purpose, becoming an outcast. It could be uplifting as he realizes the light in others and legitimately becomes this icon he portrays. It could be that he doesn't develop and stays with his ideals and self centered nature.”

In having a work of this length, of this intensity, it's proven two things; that I am strong enough to submit to other programs, to other magazines and papers, and that I still have it in me to write good work this long. That this was not simply a fluke accident, that I will be able to write after college. That I'm still worthy of calling myself an actor.

- “T'vora being the bane and partial backbone of this world's existence is the exact kind of bullshit I was hoping for and I love it.”

I wanted to choose DnD for the topic of my senior year because I wanted to prove my skills as a writer, but more importantly I wanted to have a skill that the party would also pull themselves in, as well. I wanted to have an activity that wasn't postponed, pushed back, ignored; in wake of my graduation, against my fears of losing my friendships as we all find different places to call home, I wanted to provide a place for the party, the people I consider my friends, to rest at. For me to rest at, too.

My aim for this campaign is that it will be continued after the thesis' conclusion, that it will last for a year and a half at most, and that it will reach the 20th level specifically. The 20th level is a legendary accomplishment, when it comes to DnD. This is a level that, in the official lore of DnD itself, is equivalent to being on par with a god. In the earlier editions of the game, where titles were given rather than levels, level 20 did not even exist. The 17th level monk, for example, was named the “Grand Master of Flowers.” Level twenty beyond only came around 1983, and even then it was supported for even



further levels of play, level 25 and onward. The 20th level is a mystical number that rose through the different editions because it is so difficult to balance the difficulty. To that end, I want to break that. I want to have a campaign reach the 20th level, to break the stereotype that campaigns reach level ten or fifteen then sizzle out and die. Currently, the players are at the 5th level, with a level up followed after the next session. My goal is to end the first act at level nine, to end the second at level fifteen, then continue the third act until twenty. I expect that this will take a year to reach, if I continue at the one session a week basis. I want my players to feel that same level of importance as being a god. I want them to be the same way I see them; pillars of light, storytellers, weavers of fate. They deserve to have that importance, in their eyes as well as mine; but, now enough of after. Attention must now be given to the thesis itself.

### *Thesis Overview;*

As you will find below, this thesis is split into three sections:

- The first section, *Changes In Writing*, details the writing process of creating an interactive story, of how it is entirely out of the writer's hands.
- The second section, *Making A Voice*, details how the campaign shifted in its construction and importance once the sessions began.
- The third section, *An Active Audience*, contains quotes from the players across a series of interviews and forms, detailing their experience in campaign and about and the nature of DnD as a whole.

The final section summarizes not a goal that I have reached for the campaign, but rather houses my comments and thoughts regarding a thesis of this type. This project has been in development over the course of a year from notes I can accurately credit the dates, but countless years have housed the project in my own mind. I wanted to showcase at the end how my writing has changed over the course of one year, one project. I have never been able to create anything of this length before. All I have ever been able to write are short stories, a maximum of 12 pages was the most I could write before. Taking the leap into creating an entire world for players to take apart and reshape is much more than that; my introductory

sheet just for character building is currently sitting at 32 pages and nearly 12,000 words alone. I would be portraying all of my work at a disadvantage if I did not show every thought and every concern of mine into the project.

Still, I couldn't ignore the topics that captivated the school, even as they have been slowly vaulted out of the project. This thesis was evaluated over the prospect of social issues, of the impact of communities during the COVID pandemic, but that was something I found to be not of an importance to my party. While it is true that COVID led to a more focused move into playing online rather than on tabletop, by just focusing on that subject discredits all of the stories that came before and tinges the work conceived after, especially the stories of my friends in these pages. By hyperfocusing on one event, I had to overlook all of the small details that make DnD the successful game that it is. There are countless studies about the effects of COVID on mental health, and there's reports on DnD acting as therapy. I'm not qualified to give reports on that level. What I can show is the small pool that I have, the people I've seen play this game for years, some of them most of their entire lives. I wrote this project with the comment of "she's just fun, and I get to have fun" that one of my players told me. I wrote to tell of their fun, to tell why they continue to play this game. I wrote with that in mind, with them in mind. This thesis is a gateway into these other topics, a call to arms for you to investigate further.

*Dungeons and Dragons* is a gateway into better knowing oneself. It's a game where you can choose why you want to be and how you wish to get there. The game allows for players to feel powerful even when they're stuck, and the community that has grown since its creation in 1974 is why it is known today; the editions help, guidelines and accessibility make it the most popular, but the players are the key reason the game is as popular as it is. This thesis does not seek to prove that DnD is a form of therapy, even though in my opinion it's true. This thesis does not also seek to state that the pandemic is the reason that the game is abandoning its tabletop nature, that that is also true, and in my opinion a mistake; this thesis is a celebration of the people who make the game count. This thesis is for every game in a dark room on campus, for the moments of explanation that keep a party coming back each week. This thesis is

for the one moment of roleplay that finally made you feel good about yourself. This thesis is for those moments.

In this thesis, I will be going over how I fell in love with my hobby again, how I almost fell out of it, how I decided that this is what I want to continue writing for the rest of my life, and how I discovered alongside my friends that this game means so much more to us than what any company can describe for us. This thesis is an open love letter for the game that made me who I am today, and that is all it needs to be.

## **Part One, Changes In Writing**

### ***Making The Writing Count:***

Looking at the edit dates on the earlier draft of this thesis, I began work on January 31st of 2022, but I know for certain that I was working on this even before then. This thesis started off as nothing more than a passion project inspired by a theme: underground. In the “Heroes’ Journey,” a pivotal inspiration for all of my work, the hero must venture into the abyss in order to confront their own inner struggles. The idea is that the naivety of the hero dies here, be it through a physical death or emotional loss, which spurs the hero to become better. They must rise above their own self in order to complete their quest. My first inspiration for the thesis came from that abyss, specifically one question; what if the hero never left the abyss? If the hero was born in the abyss, they would never know what to rise above. Likewise, if the hero never leaves, then the quest fails. How do you retain the cyclical nature of the journey while only having one destination? Far below the earth’s surface was the answer, in places that are born without light. Strip away any sense of direction, any hope of navigation, any glimpse of the world beyond, and characters must rely on their own inner strength in order to rise above.

The COVID pandemic was a major factor in designing a tone for the world, as well. No one survives crisis alone, and yet the world was effectively shunted apart when COVID was still rampant. I was lucky in the fact that I was able to adopt a cat to combat the solitude, but I knew going in that I wanted to give a space where people could play out the lives they wished they had together. They needed

a space to comb at that loneliness, even years after the pandemic died down into being nothing but a normality. Coincidentally, this tone fits with the abyss theme of the journey, as the hero must descend alone in order to be changed. The wise mentor is killed as part of the trials leading to the descent, which inspired the name of the project: *One Final Descent Into Madness*. On the surface, it is nothing more than a fantasy sounding name along lines of official modules like *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* or *Mines of Phandelver*, but I wanted this to mean more than that. The descent the players would continue on would be to return to that feeling of loneliness during the pandemic, to be in a world that was familiar to their own but alien, to not know what tomorrow holds. To feel like you were going insane. The project, in and of itself, simply is an act of remission, which would hopefully allow for the players to better themselves because of it. I'm happy to say I succeeded on that front.

The rest of the project slowly took course over time. My goal was to create an entirely new setting and stats for the players to use while still falling under the umbrella of DnD 5th edition; while I consider myself a competent enough writer, I'm nowhere skilled enough to create a new game system. Creating a new set of playable races became the first part of the project, which would incentivize the players to abandon all normal leveling layouts they had tested before this campaign. From there, the world was slowly built up and realized, but it wasn't until September 9th of 2022 that the project truly came to light, when one of my close friends decided to become the first player in the campaign. Up to this point, this was merely something to work on in the background of my school work, but having someone join in meant that my work already had value, that it was worth becoming a fully-fledged thesis. The invitation was even by accident, a random conversation over a phone call that led to discussion of the campaign. The first player character, Haera Desdemona, was drafted on that night, and the campaign followed suit soon after. I owe Haera's player everything for kick-starting the thesis at large, and each one of the eventual player's contributions changed my writing from a simple passion project to a campaign, a complete work that I can envision running for potentially years, if all goes according to plan.

### *Writing A Changing Story;*

Writing a DnD campaign was much different than drafting together another story; at first, there was nothing to tie down at all. For the purposes of including the players, I decided to write the story around them, that their inclusion was the main driving plot so that their actions could steer it in interesting ways. However, when you only have one player, with the final player ending up making their character in November, this makes writing a plot nearly impossible, so I had to come up with the themes that mattered to me the most in the time I still had. While I could not properly generate a plot I could think of locations, setpieces, scenes. I could fill in the spaces with memorable moments, and from there I could weave a plot between them. So, tone was first.

When dealing with the “Hero’s Journey,” there is one aspect that cannot be ignored: death. As I wrote earlier, the hero is reborn in the abyss, which means that in order to incorporate it into the project I had to tailor the entire story around that subject. I decided on the idea of reincarnation, specifically on the idea of cycles. That no matter what happened during the campaign, there would be a way for the PCs to come back, wiser and more established, should they die. At first, this was a way for me to simply bring back old PCs should they die in combat, so that I would not have to help write back-up characters with the same lore complexity as the current PCs, but it eventually became an integral part of the story I was planning on telling. In most media, we are shown that death means practically nothing. A heroic sacrifice ends up in a character being brought back a season later for views, or stories that should have ended continue being drafted out, to the point that the original meanings are lost. We are driven by our greed and need to know more, to have more. We refuse to let anything lie, so we bring back old tales that should have remained dead, reuse the visages of past lives that should stay buried. We fail the Hero’s Journey, every single day. The campaign was essentially becoming a loose parody of that. With that in mind, I wrote the cycle as revolving around the idea of respecting the dead; souls were held out once a body passed on, watching those beyond as their lives continued. If something were to happen to the body, which it turned out to be across the campaign, they were left as listless for the party to stumble across.

If death is desecrated, then there is no room for catharsis. There is nothing to be learnt, nothing to be seen. The souls are simply left in a space like oblivion. This became the main writing point behind one of Haera's NPCs, who had to sit and wait for her to visit him again in the afterlife, left behind because of a person she killed before the campaign started. She was on the journey before she began her first step. Gameplay wise, this allowed for us to have text-based lore discussions throughout the week. It was a way for me to continue drip-feeding lore even when our sessions were only on Monday. Tonally, she is in the literal process of her past demons haunting her. Despite already being a part of the Hero's Journey, Haera is a character who was never supposed to be on it, as she was never the hero. She was never chosen. Instead, she hijacked the role and assumed the hero's identity, essentially trapping herself in the abyss that the rest of the campaign is set in. She is stuck in death, just as her late husband, the NPC, is trapped in as well. She is a walking metaphor of what it means to be human, trying to discover just how she can interpret how to be the hero, while never being able to move on from the abyss. That was the level of complexity I was able to make when I had my ideas and characters in mind, in part that she was the first PC to be made.

This also works for locations, however. The dungeon that the party recently visited has death for the entire theme, where the guards are staffed by taking bodies from the dead and repurposing them into "living" soldiers. In the Hero's Journey, there are helpers that join the hero as they go through trials and tribulations. I wanted to flip this on its head, to have the knights in shining armor, those the citizens of the city look up to, turn out to be monsters. That just because a force pretends to save the city doesn't mean they aren't incapable of forsaking the citizens, even when they are dead. I included this because this isn't a written up topic; it's real. I admit that I took inspiration for these guards because of the current circumstances that are happening in the United States. Our policing force acts more as soldiers, our citizens the invaders they are sent to demolish. Our actual soldiers sit on the sidelines, unable to join in society once again because of their PTSD, trauma inflicted on them either by draft or for pay. I wanted to showcase that even in these worlds of make-believe, we could still have grains of truth; that reform must

be made possible, or to demolish the system upon which the force stands for. The party decided to do the latter. But, I admit as well that I am getting off track.

I can't rely on the journey for everything, and characters have been especially hard for me to write at times. When you write a character as a PC, you don't have to think of everything. You can come up with an idea, a theme, a voice. And you can come up with the rest later. As the Dm, I cannot. I have to think constantly of where one NPC can go, how to recycle unused ones into later plots and themes, and be constantly on the lookout for how they could have more interactions with the PCs. Haera's husband will never interact with any other player, and I'm lucky in that regard, but every other NPC I make will. I can rely on just a theme for an organization, for a shop, for a location. But people are much more important than that. I will use the boss of the dungeon for an example; when I was voicing it, I suddenly realized that I had no clue what it's motivation for going after the party was. The dungeon was a morally evil place, but the boss was simply defending himself. Tonally, this shift was something that would be unsatisfactory. I had to find a way for the boss to voice and enact these procedures, but that isn't something you come up with through sheer improv, at least not well. And as this was the end of the session, there was nothing I could do but plan for the next one, on the 10th. Voicing a character for a session isn't just a simple one-page note, a few key words to align to; it's a week, two weeks, of planning every detail of their lives on the simple hope that perhaps the party would ask about that. I came up with the idea of revenge, that the boss was one of those chosen from the dead, that this is its way of striking back at the city, but I'm still mulling this over. I have time to plan, just not enough to write down before the thesis is complete.

For this reason alone, I am eternally thankful that I am not the only person making the story as we continue the campaign.

### *Drafting The Baseline;*

In this section, I will lay out the most important NPCs and organizations found currently in the Campaign. While there is much that I have written, there are too many to list here without bloating the thesis.

- *The Breathing Flame*; The Breathing Flame is the first and the last NPC I wrote for the campaign at the same time. On one hand, it is where I got the idea of using the Hero's Journey, because the flame is the Journey. As a hivemind of countless generations, races, and entire civilizations as one consciousness, the Flame is every step of the Hero's Journey, because it has the consciousness of every individual who has ever taken a step. How do you reason against a force like that? How do you win against a force like that? At the end of the day, the Flame truly does know better than you. The Flame is right. Its version of the world, though considered immoral, would lead to the resolution of all pain in the campaign. It has the plan to fix everything, at the cost of all life in the campaign as well. Adding to its consciousness ceases you being you, but finally grants you peace. It takes the idea of community, home, and turns it both horrifying but appeasing. Because I wrote it first, and because this NPC inspired the tone of the campaign, I was able to weave it into every PC, every NPC, every setting, and every backstory. The Flame itself became veins, the cycle in which the Journey is a part of. There is no place in the campaign where the Breathing Flame isn't, and that is what makes it special to me. I will never stop writing for the Flame, because I will never stop writing for the campaign.
- *Vosundir*; I wanted to flip around the idea of the mentor, the wise sage that aids in the hero, but turn it into a mentor that wants the hero to fail. That they can see the journey, and it despises them. That to become a hero means they were never strong, that they were never worth becoming a hero. That by having a mentor, they couldn't have learned on their own, that they were undeserving. He was designed to be a quest giver that wanted



the party to fail, not by giving them constant impossible tasks but by constantly demeaning them. That he will exploit every failure and every moment of weakness, because he's trying to see if they crack. If they do succeed, then they're just like him; a success. Someone who rose above, who faced adversity and won. A true successor.

Hero's are cheap. Someone who can defeat their adversaries is much more important. He was someone who was never supposed to be on the Hero's Journey, was never a part of it, yet is there anyway. That's the fun in writing an evil-coded character, giving them a space to belong. He has the flavoring of a flower growing on him, because his body and soul is mulch. He doesn't deserve to be living. But he is, and the party just has to deal with that.

- *Untrial*; I am tired of villains being redeemed, of being anti-heroes because of the voices of the fanbase. I wrote Untrial to be a force of nature, someone who did not care what good and evil was, only enjoyment. As a take on the Warforged, Untrial cannot feel anything. It is machine and fire only. The only thing it can feel is a hammer breaking into one's skull, and even then only the impact of it. So, it seeks that out. It constantly seeks out death and killing because that's entertaining. Ironically enough, Untrial is similar to the next villain Ivay, but Untrial is the more monstrous of the two. Untrial is not seeking something that was lost, but rather something to make the day less dull. There is no redemption for Untrial because it doesn't seek anything to redeem. Ethics are pointless if they cannot affect its life. So, Untrial kills. It moves about the city to kill. And it has the power to kill. Untrial isn't the Hero's Journey, but rather a take on what the nature of this country really is; a ravenous, bastardized beast that will never stop because we enjoy doing it.
- *Ivay Egrass*; As a servant of the Flame, Ivay was the first villain I truly wrote about. The Flame does not have a perception of right or wrong, but Ivay does. He knows what he is doing is wrong, but it's one of the few things he still feels about himself. He has forgotten

everything but what makes him disgusted with himself. So, he keeps making himself disgusted, so that he still feels like himself. Ivay is a take on the rebirth aspect of the Hero's Journey, in which the result is so different from where one started that it is unrecognizable. Becoming something different does not automatically make something better. It was for that reason that I wrote him into Haera's backstory, too; Haera does not know what being human is, and neither does Ivay, but both have different reasons. The two become foils that have the potential of splitting apart further or becoming the same as the campaign progresses, and that is entirely out of my control. While thematically he has a take on Jack the Ripper, tonally he takes on being Death itself, an inversion of it. A force that is not good or evil, but becomes thus because of humanity's aversion to it.

- *Forge-Servitor Valas*; As I will reveal in a later section, this character came to be because of a plot hole. But it's also an additional look into writing lore after the fact; a later character, Argus, has his backstory intertwined with Valas' because of a need to make both characters more important. Elevating a beloved NPC alongside a boss makes both seem much more important. Making him Valas a part of Argus backstory was interesting, especially given the boss nature of Valas. By making it a figure to kill, Valas essentially became one of the obstacles the hero would face in their journey, and I did not have to supply any other work for it. Still, this was made out of a plot hole, of needing to connect Valas to V.A.L.A.S. It will always be a lesson in my mind, even if the players will never recognize it. I will never be able to give it the time and writing it deserved to have, that their division has better writing than their boss. I will always be haunted because of that.
- *El'Skiel Nieer*; This character was T'vora's first NPC, and someone I wrote to be her parental figure in the campaign. He was supposed to be a kind fool that looked after her, but actually one of the most lore-important NPCs that could be seen around. I find the idea of mercy, of redemption, to be absolutely interesting. In a world that is stuck in the Hero's Journey, El'Skiel is stuck in the phase of atonement. This is after the abyss, but

El'Skiel is trapped, because like Haera he was never the hero. He was the enemy presented during the trials and tribulations. He is on the journey to self-betterment, but this was never a venture he thought possible for himself. He is powerless, helpless, and endlessly apologizing, even though the ones he would need to forgive him would be gone. Coincidentally, he's been forgotten about by the party, meaning that he has no need to apologize. Like Lucan, Haera's husband, he is unable to move on. He is eternally stuck, unable to find redemption but never able to reach it. Even if those that wanted to forgive him would, he never will. He will never let himself go. And because the party has overlooked him, he never will.

- *Argus Richis*; Argus is the mentor that one deserves to have on the Hero's Journey. More importantly, he's the father figure I never had. I never looked up to anyone growing up, because I couldn't look anyone in the eye. If I did, I would more than likely be yelled at. Argus isn't supposed to yell; he does, but it's always to protect his family. He's someone who's quiet by design because he wants you to come up with the answer. The type of mentor that lets you teach yourself. But he cares in so many ways; in his cooking, in his painting, in his just waiting with the party. He loves through time spent. That every moment with him is a teaching moment. Argus is the type of figure I wish I had growing up, and that is why I love playing him. My players love him, but I do more. I get to become that figure, even if for a few hours. I get to see and feel and act like how I always wanted to be. Playing Argus is taking a step back and forgiving myself for not doing more, because I was a child. I didn't know. And the party are his children. He will do anything to protect them, and I'll do anything to see them happy. It's a feeling that keeps me writing, because I want to immerse myself in a character like this. I want to be like him.
- *Poma*; Poma is another mentor, as well, but she is also how I expect the hero to have completed their journey, to have come back changed. Poma is endlessly kind, which is an

inverse of how I view myself; I have made a fine line in which I will never forgive someone. It is hard to reach, but it is there. That line does not exist for Poma, as people can always change for her. She will sacrifice every ounce of her life to help people, because no one ever did that for her. So, she'll break the cycle. She'll help. And she will be the force she always wanted to have in her life. When designing Poma, I was thinking less of a trope to reflect and more of how I wanted to eventually become. I saw traces of the family I have left, the family I found, and put them into a character. Playing as her really just is letting people grow for themselves around her, and the amount of times my players have cried, that I have cried, is enough to say that I've succeeded in that goal. And she, like Argus, was someone I only wrote a sentence for the night before. I'm so happy I chose to let them still be in the campaign. I'm so happy I gave her that chance.

- *Loxo'Cles*; while perusing online, I found an article that described how scientists used the body of a spider as a necromech, that the spider's corpse was essentially used as a fulcrum point that can lift tens of pounds above its weight. I admit, that was the general inception of *Loxo'Cles*, rather than a moment of the Hero's Journey; I wanted something clearly dead but alive, that was terrifying because of what she could do in addition to what she was. She was designed to be a mini-boss that would creep the party out, but could potentially be persuaded to give up her weapon if the party did as she asked. What I didn't see happening was that she would be eventually adopted by T'vora, in the same way that T'vora chose Argus to be her father rather than El'Skiel. In a strange way, I've drafted three good parental figures, one sounding like a "Clicker" from *The Last of Us*. It's a reminder to me every day that sound, look, and feel doesn't matter, really; it's intention, actions, and heart that stand out to people. It doesn't matter how I design a character; what matters is how I play them. If I see a party member needing help, I'll help them. And it turns into moments of family-bonding I never could have seen.

- *Stiletto*; This was an NPC I wrote for contrasting a PC entirely. Stiletto is a mercenary, someone who speaks in violence because that is the only one that pays. The PC Ozwalde is a pacifist, believing that his help is enough to stop the cycle of violence. But he works with Stiletto when he fails. He constantly cheats on his own morals because sometimes, like it or not, violence is an answer. Perhaps not the only answer, but it is the quickest. It is the easiest. Stiletto is crossing the threshold of the journey, choosing not to care anymore because it hurts too much to. She is going in the reverse order of the journey because she was someone who cared, and then she was hurt. And then she continued to get hurt. So, she stopped caring, started fighting, and it has become easier. There is a saying that “hurt people hurt people.” I don’t believe in this, because it creates a stigma that we should hurt others rather than helping those who are hurt. However, I have been hurt, and I know how easy it is to choose to hurt. Stiletto is an attempt to make hurting in a healthy way, or at least a healthier way than what I went through.
- *The V.A.L.A.S. System*; This NPC was a patch to fill a plot hole. Or, rather it was a plot hole that came up because I accidentally named two NPCs the same thing. That’s the tricky thing with fantasy names, that they will always sound the same even if you are as creative as possible. This Ozwalde NPC was before the Forge servitor, but by the time I had introduced the dungeon, it was too late to change the name. Instead, I decide to use this as a way to showcase that the dungeon was wrong, ethically and morally; V.A.L.A.S does not have a soul, and thus cannot be used to cheat death like they are designing. Even so, they still want it, and will kill for it, just because it was there eventually. This NPC was made to be a tool to showcase the further wrongdoings of the organization as a whole, to have a target rather than a general focus. Still, it’s evident to see and hear just how quickly I had to come up with this fix. In the end, V.A.L.A.S was never supposed to be important, just a quirky sounding NPC to have in Ozwalde’s house, but having the

same name meant that the NPC had to be elevated to the same level as the boss, which meant changes.

- *Mishvrander*; This NPC wasn't even supposed to be an NPC; I first made the shopkeepers in the campaign leveled-listed just to ensure that no one tried to steal from them. During the first session, I randomly decided to use a Southern accent for a character, because I was running out of voices. Now, every PC seeks her out, whether to simply be around her or to romance her. The interesting part of an improved character is writing the lore afterwards, because the only written information I had going into the campaign about her was her design. She might give lore about her race, being an undead being, but she never was supposed to be anything more. Now she's turned into the party's lead shopkeep, even though there's three others to choose from. She's become the hyperfixation, meaning that I only need to keep them entertained and I can write meanings as I go. She's not a part of the Hero's Journey; she came after. I suppose that she is technically a helper, but she's more the forge in which the hero is reborn into some aspect. Still, this only came afterwards. This was an attempt to keep the theme of the campaign in check, but she was made far after the campaign came to a head.
- *The Safeguarding Division*; As mentioned in the previous section, the main thought when going into the Safeguarding Division was the idea that they no longer care for the inhabitants they are sworn to protect, living or dead. I've always been interested in writing for Warforged, DnD's equivalent of robot humanoids. I wanted to reverse this trope, especially with the aesthetic of churches such as the The Sedlec Ossuary, where human remains were used in the construction and decoration. The idea of using the dead to fuel your protection, that you would be so desperate to protect each other, was something that was very appealing to me. I wanted to make the players be unsafe about their safety, wanted to pick apart how far they would go in order to keep themselves safe. Showcasing how far someone would go in order to have "order," especially when that

order was never correctly given, was an idea that was so interesting at the time. I'm happy to say that because of the dungeon, that was fully realized. Turning the Division into a depraved visage of a city-state, along with testing-grounds for citizens to use for their guards, was a freeing aspect of the campaign. To delve into what lengths people would go and to hear the gasps and scared mutterings about the world they thought they knew was one of my favorite moments of the entire campaign.

- *The Apostasy*; This part of the game is where I have the most trouble writing, as if you only have a flawed governmental organization then the natural choice is to join the rebelling faction. I was so focused with writing out the villains, who the party are invested in finding out more about, that I found that when gathering allies that I had nothing to give them. The only negative trait I could find to give them was that they were disorganized and did not care for how many were sacrificed for the cause, which led to one interesting set-piece but nothing behind it. I will refrain from putting the current NPC for this group here, Madam Vish'ra Teles, since I'm in the process of rewriting everything about her. I found that I was uninterested in playing as her, which meant that the players were uninterested as a result. In the months following this thesis' completion, my goal will be to write them out as willing to give everything to win back their part of the city, to the point that they would lose every member in order to achieve their goal. It is better to die for a common cause than to live not pursuing one. Think the "Vox Populai" from *Bioshock: Infinite*, but without the racial undertones.

### *What Has Changed;*

In this section, I will list off every single change that I found in the original conceptual draft for the campaign:

- In Haera's session, she connected to her NPCs Argus and Poma much more than I expected. I realized I had accidentally created a positive family structure, in contrast to her negative

biological family that was also present in the episode. I changed my plans for a villain, Ivay Egrass, to kill one of Haera's NPCs, since I wanted to see just how she would interact with them. Haera turned out to be a much quieter PC than I expected, so I did not want to alienate her in her introductory session. This was the first major change I made in the campaign, and to this day I'm very thankful I made it.

- In Ozwalde's session, I planned for a small fight to happen midway through the session. Ozwalde's player was deeply invested in the DnD combat system, so I gave him the chance to have a fight someone that was wearing the armor of his father, a clear emotional point to react off of. What I got instead was a pacifist conversation that was deeply invested in practically every way; instead of rage like I was expecting, Ozwalde chose the path of unraveling why the mini-boss had chosen this course of life and offering his assistance in changing it. I knew from that moment that I was going to have to listen closely to everything that Ozwalde said. That NPC later died while in session 9's dungeon, but I still plan to use the NPC even after this.
- In Tabes' session, I recognized that every single one of my NPCs was important in some regard, as one of my shopkeepers became a staple for everyone to talk to at some point. Tabes made the point of calling her friend, which surprised me. I never wrote her into his backstory; she was just someone who was kind enough to him. If that alone could warrant her being a friend, then I was going to be able to throw many experiences his way to test his limits. In addition, I learned how stubborn PCs could be by warning him not to enter a room several times, to which he entered anyway. It led to him being controlled by the city-state, so it worked out for the best plot-wise.
- In T'vora's session, practically everything changed. This was the first time I had to use improv effectively through an entire session, I admit. I began with a dream-sequence of her home, trying to find some emotional nugget to center it around, and within mere minutes the tone shifted from longing and desolation to humor. I even found myself laughing at times out of the sheer strangeness of her session. Additionally, she turned an encounter I planned to be a prelude to a later boss fight into an ally, a habit of hers that still continues to this day. While I was going to



have to pay attention to Ozwalde's words, T'vora is what made this campaign stand out. Without her, there wouldn't be any way for the tone to resemble anything like a normal carefree campaign.

- Session 1; The largest change during this session was how quickly the party bonded to Argus. For comparison, one of my NPCs I wrote just for T'vora got overlooked entirely just to focus on him, and even when the party came together later that session everyone gradually gravitated towards Argus. The strangest experience you can have as a writer is to have a community form around one character in real time. More than that, though, for most of the session I was terrified that the party wouldn't meld well together, that I would constantly be having to switch between narratives so that everyone could get a fair amount of screentime. I was thankful when this turned out not to be the case, that the Ozwalde and Tabes duo became fast enough friends that they actively worried when the other wasn't there. I couldn't have asked for a better way to begin the campaign.
- Session 2; This session proved that I was not well versed in DnD combat. A villain I thought to be worthy of a challenge was easily breezed over in the first opening minutes, with me having to make him turn tail and run so that he could be used later down the line. Combat is always where I have struggled, as a DnD player; either you're completely wrecking the battlefield or you're sitting in place for fifteen minutes. Having fear factors of an encounter also play out in this regard was a change I didn't expect to happen, but it was something I had to write and rewrite for every second of the campaign after. Apart from that, this session was mainly reactionary, so there was not for me to change other than guiding the party to become a party.
- Session 3; There is a strange, relaxing feeling about rewriting a character entirely. I included a mini-boss at the end of this session to goad the players into thinking perhaps they chose the wrong path to go down, that they should be more responsible for their choices. I even used a voice that made me sound like I couldn't breathe properly, that was how broken this person was. And they befriended her in five minutes. Having a character's entire personality not be used for

terror but rather to lean into the more interactive moments of the campaign, to have lore and writing drawn out because people are invested, is a life-changing feeling. She was supposed to die, so the party would get an item, but instead the party has an ally that has stayed by their side even through the dungeon.

- Session 4; This was my favorite session of the campaign, by far. At the beginning of the session the party coerced the mini-boss Loxo'Cles into becoming an ally, a precedent that has since continued. But the tone that was established going into a settlement was exactly what I wanted from this campaign: bleak, dark, and mournful. The party rushed their way into meeting the "boss" of the zone, which cut off any interactions they could have with healing anyone nearby. T'vora changed the encounter entirely by removing a parasite from the boss, where I got to hint at the main villain and have the party completely overlook it at the same time. But the ending is what stuck out the most; the party slowly healing or burying anyone who was left in the village. The session practically went silent out of respectful mourning, for people they didn't even know, for NPCs I had written the week before. I was the most confident in my ability to be a Dm because of this session. This was the peak of the campaign. This thesis was worth completing just to have this one session.
- Session 5; This episode was special to me in two instances. For the first, I got to have the villains of the act and the party meet. I planned for Tabes to meet with them, but I didn't expect all of the party to run after him. Getting able to finally flesh out big bads while bouncing off of the banter of the PCs was a delight to be sure, but it held nothing to the end of the session. I didn't have to do anything ending the session; the players did, with Ozwalde and Haera getting into an argument that could have effectively split the party in two. Even now, after the 9th session, tensions are still high between everyone. Being able to just sit and listen to your friends act their souls out, to scream and mutter and cry all because of a world you set up is an experience I've never been a part of before. Between the further talks between Haera and the shopkeeper, then Ozwalde and

Tabes taking turns asking advice and comforting T'vora, I was happy to just sit and watch the story unfold all without my intervention.

- Session 6; This was an interesting session, because it shifted between some of my favorite writing and some I desperately wished I changed. On one hand, I was happy to include a creepy NPC that Ozwalde was scared of in a writing segment off screen, and I spun it around to be someone that Haera actually turned to help. This interaction by Haera was the most she's done currently to forge a personality for herself, which I was proud of. On that same thread, I was able to introduce an NPC on the spot for the party to emphasize with the Safeguarding Division. I'm very happy with my improv there. But I failed when it came to Ozwalde and Tabes; I was unable to give them a satisfying view into the inner workings of the city, instead playing their encounter with a faction off as a joke. I was able to rectify that later in session 8, but noting your mistakes as a writer is just as important as finding your successes.
- Session 7; A major change came from the party saving one of the NPCs I planned to be the reason to enter the dungeon; one of Ozwalde's NPCs, V.A.L.A.S., was stolen in order to lure the party in, to the point that it would be tied into the ending. With the party stealing it back, I was forced to improvise a new way for the dungeon to become a prominent figurehead, with a plan to destroy the entire city itself. Still, I was experiencing the full weight of burnout at that point and more open ways of change could have been done. In the months after this thesis is complete, I will be striving to open the campaign up as much as possible, to not tie myself to needing an overarching storyline to lead the players along. I've been slowly learning to trust them to lead me, and I need to lean on that rather than just recognize it.
- Session 8; This session was much more emotional than I planned it to be, due to the fact I let players have final interactions before the dungeon one by one. In terms of the thesis, this felt like a final goodbye for the characters as I would not be able to touch on them again once the session was complete. While the campaign would continue, I would not have anything more to say for each of them. The most interesting part of this session came from T'vora choosing to spare Ivay

Egrass. One player kept chanting in the voice chat for the T'vora to kill him, but she chose to try and find whatever soul was left in Ivay. To see someone care about a character you wrote, a character you actively despise, shows how important they are.

- Session 9; The players chose to go in a different path to the dungeon, and since I tied interactions and the like to the layout itself, I had to change the story beats that occurred as a result. The party missed out on many lore tidbits and hints as a result of wanting to complete the dungeon as quickly as possible. This did allow for me to also improvise a stealth sequence against two horribly decimated robots, inspired from *Alien*. The party seemed to enjoy this section very heavily, and used spells and tricks to permanently trap the robots inside one of the rooms. Plus, I had to improvise the lore behind several rooms and placement, which I was proud of, as they made several people audibly gasp in horror. The session was cut short because players had to leave, so I had to postpone the boss fight and the lore revelations after.

## **Part Two, Making A Voice**

### ***Facing My Fears As A Storyteller:***

On the 16th of January, “One Final Descent Into Madness” began officially. A server was uploaded for the party members to be a part of, and every day small pieces of lore would be drip-fed to them, some of these messages sent privately to keep some out of the public eye. Forms were sent soon after this, ranging from a consent form detailing what the players would and would not be comfortable with seeing in game and questions to get the players more inline with how the campaign setting was going to play out. Eight days before, the first of the private one-on-one sessions began for the players, ensuring that each player character was well established before the campaign actually began. And on the 30th, the campaign celebrated its first full-group session, which lasted roughly three hours. Since that day, sessions have been on every single Monday from 7:45 to around midnight, and I plan to continue this schedule even past when this thesis is finalized.

I've never experienced stage fright in my life, but I still get nervous about each session. With a production, you have a director and a cast supporting you. The audience is always on the outside. You have months to plan out, to exercise, to train, and the mistakes you make add charm to the production; that's the wonder of live theatre, it will always be different on each showing. With a campaign, you don't have that. You have your notes in a laptop browser, the various voices you thought of the night before, and a myriad of computer problems that will occur, no matter what. The most I have ever come to sounding prepared was buying a guitar pedal for voice modulation, and even that hasn't worked out properly. The pedal makes me sound robotic, but at the cost of looping everyone in call through my microphone. Running a campaign is incredibly messy, and if it wasn't for the continuous support of the party I'm not sure how long this project would have lasted.

If there is anything else to gather from this, I understand the pressure behind the shows like *Critical Role* or *Dimension 20* much more, now. Recording yourself is a strange process, to realize that there is an audience outside of the ones you are performing for. There's a reason I haven't listened to the audiobook I made; I can't listen to myself again. I sound odd, alien, like I'm not the one speaking. Even when the recordings I made will only stay in the google drive until the thesis is submitted, it's beyond odd to know that someone else will always be watching. I confess that it has led to me experiencing an immense amount of burnout as the campaign has continued, that I have an intense pressure to perform, to keep performing, to strive for some angle of perfection that I do not know even looks like. I will not be able to include everything I have worked on in this one document. What I can show you is my own internal thoughts about this process, what I felt having the story become no longer my own, and I hope that the immense amount of work that went into this thesis comes across in the words I type.

### *A Story Not My Own;*

I discovered very early into the writing and performing process that I was right; I was not the leading storyteller in this project. My players were the sole reason the campaign had any story at all, because they declared what they wanted to have told starting from their own introductory sessions. They

chose to focus on what they deemed to be the most fun, and it was my role as the storyteller to see to it they got what they wanted. Looking back on how the story has progressed, I wouldn't have it any other way. For the sake of the thesis, from now on the players will be referred to as their character's name, for the sake of time and anonymity.

- Haera; When designing Haera, we focused on tone first and foremost. We wanted her to be something creepy, to be a mound of flesh rather than an actual person, because we wanted those tiny moments and story beats where she chose to be human to stand out. That when she chose to act, the others would have to listen. These moments have slowly been delved out over the course of the campaign, and I always worry about her getting less screen time than the others. I worry that I have not done enough, that my balance of who gets attention is slanted, that my players aren't having fun, but she's always there. She always comes through.

More than anyone else, I've learned patience because of Haera's character. I have a tendency to rush to story beats, to always have something new to excite the players. That if I do not do enough, I've failed. But that just makes me too overwhelmed to tell any story at all. In most sessions, Haera speaks only a few times, I could count on my fingers the times she did in the last one. But I still remember each one of them. When Haera as a character screams, I listen. I stop narrating. I let this moment play out. That is what my role as a storyteller should be, to let the players take the focus, take control, when they are ready and when it is time. Having too much control every second would burn through any lighthouse's light, and every and any ship would turn into a burial at sea. I have to learn to let go, even if I constantly worry I'm not doing enough. Patience in the face of silence is a terrifying thing to go through, but I'm glad I'm facing it here and not anywhere else.

- Tabes; When his player first gave me the idea of Tabes, he pointed out the pronunciation of his name: Tha-Bes. The Best. That was the first impression of Tabes as a character,

and across the early sessions that was what he leaned into; a pompous fool out of his element, wanting to fight at all times but always using others to fight for him, instantly losing the moment he fights on his own. He was a character trope I had seen a thousand times before, and if I'm being honest, I was more invested in the lore he wrote rather than him as a character. It's a strange thing to admit out loud, that I have favorites and least favorites, when I'm considered a parent of the story in some means. It shows a level of bias I don't like having.

Then to my infinite surprise, he turned into the most emotional of the PCs. He only had one NPC by his side when the campaign began, and being constantly separated from her caused him to essentially self-reflect every single session, always trying to look out for someone he couldn't actively see. As the layers of the world were peeled away, he grew more and more self-conscious of his own position in society, that he was not as loved and revered as he thought himself. He influenced others, but they never influenced him. He was essentially forced to change because of staring into his broken reflection or stay and become worse out of routine, only four or so episodes into the campaign. Currently, he's a constant source of both hope and humor. He's found a better place, and we're only on the first act. Out of the PCs I'm the most surprised by, he will always take that category for me.

- Ozwalde; I've never liked persuasion rolls in any sort of game. The idea that your arguments are not made on your words, your choices, your ideas, but rather an arbitrary stat buff makes the illusion of the game become ever more apparent. The idea of having a simple number factor in all that your character believes in sucks the joy of making roleplay moments matter. This is why I'm always excited yet scared when Ozwalde enters an encounter, because I know he can use both. And he's good at both. He takes build crafting to a degree I would only see in pages ripped out of the 1974 edition of DnD, knows the smallest of stat buffs and bonuses that I was unaware were even

possible, and he turns that into character moments. He limits himself as an actor to only see, hear, and feel with what he is given, and he makes his character stats reflect that.

The strange struggle between working within the exact rules of DnD and trying to expedite player choice has been one that has been felt the most around him, as well.

Ozwalde's player does like to use persuasion rolls, and's been a topic of quiet debate.

It's been a learning experience for both of us, but it's left me with a greater understanding of how the player wants to play his character. Ozwalde's character is about convincing people not to fight, by being a paragon of virtue, but the truth is he is as flawed as anyone else in the party. He's skilled in speech because deep down, his need to help people isn't as strong as he is willing to admit. So, he talks over it. He knows his part of the city better than anyone else, but he still doesn't truly know it. He only knows the better half.

Roleplaying a deeply flawed character like that is a major commitment to hold onto, and it's made me even more respectful of him because of it.

- T'vora; Coincidentally enough, T'vora has contributed the most to the world building of the entire campaign, because she gave me one demand when making her character; "Make me a plot device." I had been quietly drafting a secret race for the second act of the campaign, something that would shift everyone's perceptions of truth the moment it was revealed, and T'vora as a character made sense to realize that hidden race. Through the inclusion of her character, an entire civilization that no one else has touched on was expanded, which included the main villain of the entire campaign. I was able to fully realize the backdrop of the campaign because of her.

But more importantly than that, T'vora cares more about my NPCs than anyone else in the party combined. T'vora has the wonderful quality of drawing more out of the NPCs around her, to get them to talk and lower their guard around the party where otherwise they would wish to be completely silent. Each piece of my lore about the world was written in some capacity because of her. Because she cared enough to ask. Even the name



of the ground itself, Tellus, I came up with because she was interested in the topic. The rarity of having someone who's interest brings about inclusions across every facet of worldbuilding is a rare and blessed thing, and I've made sure that I write for her rather than against her.

These are not my characters. I gave them backgrounds, wrote them into the world. I gave them NPCs, friends and allies and enemies to have at their disposal. I've written text-based interludes for them between sessions, and I've given supplement documents on secret lore for each of them. But they are not my characters, and they have changed the story in more ways that I can count. They are the beating heart of this campaign. In my classes, I have been told that this project would be an excellent ground for a novel. I will always say no, because if that were the case I wouldn't have them. I am not telling this story; I am giving them pieces to tell their own. Seeing these characters grow and change each session is a constant reminder of my place in the story, to bridge it for them, and a constant reminder that I gave them this space. I let them have this world to play in. I will always be thankful for them, and I cannot wait to see what they do next.

### *Acting, Writing, and Both;*

Improv has always been a subject I have struggled with, ironically enough, considering that being a Dm is relying 90% on your improv at all. During acting training camps, I would always be the first one voted out of the group, as I would always hyperfocus on what was funny, what made sense, to the point I would become a bumbling fool. This seems almost impossible, given that I'm also a method actor; shouldn't you always be in the mindset of your characters? Where does the difference lie? From what I've found, the difference comes only because you have some writing to base it off of and players to bounce it off with; the players become the only means of controlling the story, because they will always do the least of what you expect.

You can truly never prepare for improv, from what I've found. The most that you can do is set up scenarios, to set up places for you to improv in. You can't effectively steer the conversation, because that

is what the players want to do, that is what their job is. My job as the Dm is to be the “yes man.” In improv training, there was a term called “yes, and?” The point was that you never say no, that you always agree with what your partner is trying to create. This is the role I’ve found myself in, because I never want to say no to my players. I never want to dissuade them from trying to have an encounter play out. What I can do is slowly maneuver them into a scenario that better suits their needs and wants. It’s here that the idea of railroading truly comes into play, because in concept this term isn’t evil. To railroad is to give your players a straight shot towards their goal, at the cost of limiting what they can do in a campaign. I can railroad them to complete a quest, since the more they go instead of killing the boss the more likely the boss will attack and squash them. This happened with Loxo’Cles, as Ozwalde and Tabes sought to steal a magical item from her, and it took every word I could think of to slowly but surely persuade them from this goal. Not by saying no, but by listing and pointing out all the dead adventurers that were around her, and the general ease of the quest itself. You don’t say no, you simply learn to provide warning signs and let the players decide if they cross them.

But more than saying no, there’s moments when I choose not to say anything at all, because this isn’t my story. I’ll pull from one encounter in particular; during session 5, Haera and Ozwalde got into an argument. Ozwalde began to suspect that Haera wasn’t all she said she was, and began insinuating that perhaps Lucan would know more or be around if Haera wasn’t. That resulted in Haera screaming “He never asked for payment, help was freely given! That was all it was meant to be. Position to help; he was in a position to *help*” because Ozwalde insinuated that Lucan was not as positive a person as he was meant to be, that Ozwalde was helping more. None of that was my story. I wrote Lucan, but he was not heard from during this point, only through occasional text-logs. All of this was brought up because the players intervened, asked questions, and rolled an attack against one another. None of that was my place to enter, to intrude on. That was not my story beat to pull away from. When minutes later T’vora sobbed “I’ve forgotten so much,” and Tabes realized that he’s not loved by anyone at all, I didn’t say anything. Because these were their moments. This was their campaign. I was simply the one hosting it. There is a solemn admiration that comes from releasing control of something you made, letting others take it apart

or make it something new entirely. That these are their own story beats to make, and that your only role is simply to manage time.

So, what do I spend my time doing? I wait. I create set pieces and I wait. I write plans, layouts, ideas, and then abolish them when the party does something different. I tie up plot threads on the fly because no one takes interest in them, and I write new ones when the party grants a smile at an NPC. I make the world revolve around them, because nothing I could ever write could be enough to make them fall silent, ever. I write my introductions to the campaign to help set the tone. I write monologues with the hope of being interrupted. I create locations for them to ruin, and I make NPCs for the party to change for the better. I write, I plan, everything for them, and for them alone. Loxo'Cles house and home at the start of episode 4 was entirely improv. The setup of the house, the request of Loxo'Cles, and even how she spoke was all improved the day of. In my notes, the only notes I had written down were "Party talks to Loxo'Cles. Will attack when threatened." I had nothing prepared, only a raspy voice and an interest in seeing how far the party would withstand a weird, strange old cannibal. And the party turned her into a creepy mother. You cannot plan for scenarios like this.

How do I plan? How do I make a structure around having no structure? The way I have found myself planning for each session is much more different than I found it would be, but there's a certain catharsis to it. Each session, I have a page title, simple enough, "Next session." There, I write down the introduction speech for each session, a general plan for how the session goes, and any stat blocks I could need. For the dungeon, I wrote down each room and a small introductory speech for each of them, along with the checks the party might need for each room. My routine, my ritual, is to completely wipe the document after each session. It's the same as my cooking ritual before every session; I make scrambled eggs. It usually takes thirty to forty minutes, time I could use to plan. But there's something to having a ritual, something to devoting your time to, that you already know the ending for. Every time a session begins, I know I fed myself, that what I'm doing will let me eat. That I'm doing a job that will feed me. And every session, I return to the blank slate. I return to inspiration and creativity. They're little things,

barely important in the grand scheme of things, but I always have a worse session when I skip one or more of these rituals. I can never explain why.

The idea of being a storyteller sets upon most a false precedent, that they alone are responsible for the story. That it only lies on them to tell it. I have found, in my experience, that to only work in novels, in stories you write and read aloud. This is a world that my party lives in. They breathe it in, gasp out heroic moments that make me wonder why I never thought of that before. I do not take charge of them; rather, they are responsible for me, for their world. When writing in passages for this thesis, when introducing this work to others, I say that it is my work but make no mistake; this campaign is only memorable because of their input, their resolve. They are the ones you should thank for this thesis, though you do not have their names. Their devotion to having fun is something to give credence to, and I will continue working with all the time I have to ensure that their story is one that pays off, that is one worth remembering, for it's theirs.

### *Close To The Heart;*

When talking to a friend about the thesis, they asked me not to mention DnD around their parents because they believed that DnD was seemingly dangerous to players, that their attachment to their PCs meant their deaths would lead them to being distraught. Seeing as my entire campaign revolved around death, I had to be very careful of talking about my thesis around them, but the moment always stuck with me. I've always looked forward to character death, strangely enough. It gets me a new change to try another character idea, to write even more backstory. But I'm a writer and an actor, that's my niche. I've always seen characters just switching roles, and I don't feel down when I finish a role for theatre. I move on, I audition, I find new roles, and I make more characters. I've never felt anything when a character of mine died before.

That was, until I thought of an ending for my NPC Argus.

Argus Richis was a NPC I wanted to kill in the opening of the campaign, in my PC Haera's private session. He was little more than a footnote at first, not even having much lore; a retired soldier

turned servant, loyal to Haera to death. He was supposed to showcase that deathly devotion as one of the main villains cut him down in her home, violating the idea that home is where you're safest. My hope was that a death in the beginning would hopefully shock the party into not being careless about their choices, that it would unify them into being a cohesive fighting force; but, in that session Haera's player made a remark that changed my views. After a scene with Argus, she made an off-hand remark that she'd never had positive parental figures in DnD before. That whenever she was part of a campaign, they were never written in or they were always negative. It's so easy to write family to be villains, to drive a wedge in the idea that family is blood, that mistakes and problems have to be excused. I had even given the player a bad maternal figure that same session to prove that point, and when it came time to kill off Argus, I couldn't do it. I couldn't take one good parental figure away just to have the bad one remain. It didn't seem fair, and it certainly didn't seem fun. Shock factor couldn't be written to be more important than plot, no matter what I would like to prove. As her player later went on to say, "The Poma-Haera-Argus dynamic. It's been so long since I've seen a healthy familial relationship portrayed in any media. I didn't realize how much I wanted to." In that moment, he was worth writing for that one moment alone.

As the campaign continued, he became the favorite of the party. One of my most shining moments is when one of the players called him the group's dad. I had attempted to instill him with the traits I had wanted to see in a father figure growing up, and they came through! He was essentially pulled wherever the party went, just for the small interaction of Argus making stew with a party member or teaching them how to paint. Little things made the party love him. The small footnote became pages of lore and documents, tying him to various deaths in the player's backstories and to an upcoming dungeon coming up. I wrote him to be one of the central NPCs for the campaign, and he came from absolutely nothing. This progressed to the point that in my goal to have official artwork of the campaign commissioned, I changed a contract so that I could have this done instead of another NPC. He was just too important to pass up.

I took Argus as a sign that I was a good writer, enough to pull the players into the world at large. With Argus, players wanted to explore the world so that he could comment on that. He was essentially a

mirror for me to reflect whatever the party wished to know, while also delivering poignant truths that many campaigns overlook. In my quest to make a good paternal role model, I had Argus just wait with the player characters, gently tell them truths of the world without any punches, but pull them into an embrace afterward and say that he'll be there for all of it. I was essentially placing a place for characters to grow up in, with Argus to facilitate. I was proud of that, that I could pull off a space for that emotional closeness.

Then near the end of February, I found myself sobbing as I wrote out a scene with Argus, because I realized I became as attached to the character as my players had.

For context, I'm a method actor by trade. The point of method acting is to only make the stage, the performance, important; nothing else comes afterward. In order to do this, they supplant moments, places, and people over their own lives in the actors they work alongside. If you have a scene with a loved one, you can pull from your own relationships, and vice versa for roles with characters you're supposed to loathe. When playing Argus, I began to draw experiences from my grandfather, since he's the only positive male role model I've had. When my father revealed himself to be abusive, he was there to support me in any way he could, even if it just was by asking what I was doing at the time. The more I wrote with him in the more, the more I've had to refer to my own experiences. I began to slowly uncover more moments with my grandfather, and all the memories of my childhood I overlooked slowly began to peel themselves back. In only a few months, I had dredged up all the moments of my grandfather, with the knowledge that I should have cared for him more. I should have thanked him more. I was left with the thought that I should have done more, and that I still have the time to! But then came the night of, where I was writing out a death scene of Argus potentially dying of a horrible disease, and I had to visualize, had to feel, how my grandfather would feel like in his deathbed and how I would feel standing there. I had to think about how a funeral scene would be. And I started to sob, because I couldn't. I didn't want to. My grandfather was still alive, I had time! I didn't want to think about a time where he could be gone.

For the first time in my years of acting, I was scared to lose a character, because I was terrified of losing a connection to my grandfather.

And yet, on the 27th of March, I wounded the Argus, severely. The dungeon his lore was written into came around. The party had buffed themselves up to the point of feeling confident, enough to ignore all of the horrors that they had witnessed before, as well as skipping on the lore tidbits I had planted. The feeling was more akin to a boss-rush, like this was something they cared about only for the loot. Months before, wrote Argus being fatally wounded by the boss into the script, that a hole the size of a cannon ball would be blown into his side and that the party would have to choose either to heal Argus or take an extra turn against the boss. But when the moment came, I sped through it. I didn't say any of the monologues I had thought of before, I didn't say any of the extensive lore I'd written. I just shot him and ended the session. None of the party noticed, when quizzing them later that night they believed it to be a cliffhanger due to time constraints, but I knew why I sped through it all; I was just scared. In the scene, Argus was taking revenge on the death of his family, he was furious and almost bloodthirsty. And my grandfather helped me work through those sorts of feelings. He helped me with my anger issues when I was being abused by my father. I didn't like playing Argus angry, because it meant portraying my grandfather as the man he helped me not become. I've never seen my grandfather angry at all. I couldn't get into the headspace needed for the moment to work. So, I just ended the session for the night. I was just scared.

There is a stigma for authors killing off their characters, that they do it with a certain glee. That it's fun. From my own reference, it's true to an extent, because the characters aren't there. They're just on a page, in your head. One might have an idea for a voice, if they're lucky a picture will be drawn, but the author never has to play them out. The author never has to live in their shoes. There is a deliberate distance between the writing document and the actual person sitting behind it. When you're a Dm, you no longer have that distance. You have to play out, feel out, every character moment in real time. There is never a second when you're away from the audience, your party. They are dependent on every word you say to set the story, so they can make it their own. And I knew what was coming, that I could potentially kill Argus if I ended up rolling badly. One of my players had mentioned that they still didn't have a reason to be in the party, and wounding Argus to the point they were bonded by revenge seemed like a good reason, but I couldn't stomach sitting there and trying to figure out how blood would sound like gurgling

in his throat. And I couldn't do it. On the 10th of May, I will attempt to try again. But I couldn't go through with it that night, so I sped through. Argus means too much. My grandfather means too much.

This thesis has become a way for me to repay all the years I didn't spend enough time with my grandfather, and it's become a way to make him proud. This is still for my players, first and foremost, but this thesis means so much more to me than when I started it. This is for him, even if he'll never understand just how DnD actually works. This is for you, Sonny.

## **Part Three, An Active Audience**

### ***Did They Do Enough:***

In 2016, the first season of *Stranger Things* aired on Netflix, which instantly became a mainstream hit. DnD was slowly becoming popularized by that point, with shows like the ever-popular *Critical Role* beginning just a year before in 2015. Slowly but surely, it continued through the public medium, until the pandemic truly hit in 2020. An entire world, isolated, needed solace to experiment and expand. In a move of good faith, Wizards of the Coast unleashed one of the first modules, *Mines of Phandelver*, for free on online sites such as *Roll20*, where everything from the dice rolls and combat could be done entirely without cost for joining. This resulted in an increase of sales, up to 33% as quoted by Hasbro, though no official numbers have been given by the company. Then, in 2022 Hasbro, who bought Wizards of the Coast, bought the compendium application *D&D Beyond*, upon which with membership players can buy all the books, can create characters, and can store information. Wizards of the Coast became a monopoly of their own product because of a gentle rise in popularity, as fueled by the pandemic. There is no coincidence that the shift for their new *One D&D* is an entirely online application. They are banking on the success of the pandemic even now, on the ease of access that came from an entirely online product. Only the future will tell if that was the right call to make.

If anyone told me these statistics in December of 2022, I would be overjoyed. If I learned that just a few days ago, DnD announced they would be partnering with *Minecraft* in order to import their mobs to 5e, I'd be laughing uncontrollably. I would be overwhelmed with positivity, busy writing out the rest of



this thesis and going into the topics of how much the pandemic has a positive change on the players who were playing across the globe. I feel nothing, now. If I am being entirely honest, I almost came to a close on this hobby entirely. A change in legal terms in January was the main reason why this thesis is much different than how the thesis was discussed during the senior thesis showcase. Nothing I did over the course of the thesis was ever worthwhile if the players did not have fun. None of my worldbuilding, or any of the world, was worth the time spent writing it if the players did not enjoy being a part of it. None of the characters and organizations and even notes mattered if the players did not want to be a part of their lives. I write this down to plainly put my conviction of having a lifelike, believable world; if they disliked the world? The entire thesis would be scrapped. Everything I've written down here would be a showcase of how I failed, how I didn't do enough. This thesis still exists because of their enjoyment, and theirs alone.

There is a change that is occurring in the TTRPG community. Regardless of my enjoyment of the series, there is a paradigm shift that is happening behind closed office doors and across social media, because the news is being forgotten. The soul of the TTRPG community is slowly beginning to tread away from DnD, and this is merely days after a film just released to boxoffice acclaim. The following sections will detail the interviews with my players, as well as a deep dive into the issues that are currently plaguing the community as a whole. Because the controversy was at Wizards of the Coast's expense, there are no numbers. We do not know how many sales were boycotted this January. We do not know what the leaders of the corporation are thinking. We have leaked documents and messages from employees that were later fired because they chose to speak out. We have third and second party sources, because the first-hand information will not be given out. That is what this section, and the remainder of the thesis, will be focusing on. The pandemic was a major factor of growth for DnD, but many are wondering if the company deserves growth at all. I am a part of that number. I hope that soon I can become an avid fan again. But for the purposes of this thesis, I will remain a skeptic, and I will record all that I know and have seen. My only hope is that this is remembered. Below, I will detail my player's

words and how I wish I could have made their worlds better, before delving into why I have my doubts this will be the case.

### *Telling Their Stories;*

In this section, I will be listing out various quotes I've taken from my players, who have given consent to have their words put here. The questions asked before each statement will be given, as well.

#### **Tabes interview quotes;**

- (What first got you into DnD?) "I've always been interested in RPGs as a whole, not necessarily TTRPGs but things like Pokemon, storytelling things. I didn't get into DnD itself until my 18th birthday, because I did my campaign for that. I've been big into roleplay before that, textbase; I've always enjoyed making characters, telling stories. TTRPGs are a really good way of telling a story and letting other people into the world to tell their own stories in it."
- (What is the difference between a video game and DnD) "The main big difference is that no matter how expansive a video game is, no matter how expansive a RPGs with 11, 12 different endings, it will never be as open ended as DnD, whether you are the DM or you are the player. In DnD, you can do whatever you want within the parameters, but you can explore outside of those parameters, you can do whatever you want! While with a TV show, you're just watching it, you're not changing it much. With a book, you're just reading the words on the paper, those words are never going to change. With a video game, the programming is never going to change, but with a TTRPG it is fluid, it will change, it will morph to whatever you want it to do. It is not confined to a single set story, you create your own story and it can be whatever story you want it to be. In video games, the art is already there, you're just signing your name. With DnD, you're the one that supplies the paper, you're the one that makes the art. It might look very similar to the

art you've signed your name on, it might look identical, but you know one drawing was made for you, the other you made.”

- (What makes DnD unique?) “No two campaigns are ever going to be exactly alike, and that’s what makes it special: it will always change, and you can change it to whatever you want it to be.”
- (What is the role of a Dm and of a player?) “The purpose of a Dm is to set a setting, to set a story, the conflict. They’ll make the supporting cast, sometimes they’ll make the villain or other times they’ll have a player doing that. They make not the story but the overarching world. The players are the main characters of the story, they are the group that is changing the things, they are the group that is the driving force of everything happening. They are the story, and every good Dm needs to be able to make the players just as important as the NPCs or the main villain. Each character’s backstory should somehow play into the world. The players are the real storytellers, the real worldbuilders. The Dm is the mediator, the overseer of all of it; they built the colosseum, the players are playing in it.”
- (What is the main difference between how it feels to be a Dm and a player?) “The biggest difference for me is that it’s oddly quiet. As the Dm, you have to pay attention to everything that is said, you’re constantly working on ‘okay, this is what this person said, what ramifications can that have.’ As a player, I like to know what my character knows. So I no longer have to know everything, I’m a lot more centered. I’m able to worldbuild with just the things my character has to do with. And I love it. I can play my character to their fullest potential, and really just focus on one thing.”
- (Are you happy with being a player instead of a Dm, this time around?) “As the Dm, your NPCs are affected by the Pcs, are there for the PCs. As a player, I’m able to affect your world. I’m in a world I don’t know everything about, I don’t know how dangerous the enemies are. I don’t know if my character will wake up the next day. There’s this sense

of the unknown that makes it so much more invigorating and at the same time terrifying.

It is an entirely different experience, it's almost an entirely different game."

- (Is railroading, the term for forcing your players down one path, a bad thing?) "I view railroading as a tool; sometimes as the Dm, you're the overseer, and when you're wanting to tell a story, even when the players are the most important, you can't let your players spend 15 hours looking for a piece of evidence that doesn't exist. Every single tool has different uses, and railroading "or guiding the players in the right direction," as long as you use it sparingly and you know when you're using that kind of "I suggest you go this way," is the best way to do it. If you find yourself railroading more than a more open-ended "yeah do this," you're no longer being a Dm. You're becoming the players, they're just becoming the voices, and that isn't what you want."
- (Do you have to play as yourself, always?) "Here's my belief when it comes to character creation; when I first got started into roleplays, an ex-friend of mine said something that I truly believe; 'every character that is made has a little bit of your personality in them. Even if they're completely different from you, you're going to see little tidbits that jump out of you. Every character that you make, whether you mean to or not, will always have some of you in it. As a Dm, that can help you learn more about yourself as you learn about the character. If you as a player or Dm make a character that's rotten to the core, you'll think 'oh, there's none of me in there!' But if you look in it closer and you really pick apart who that character would be? I'm willing to bet this truly despicable villain is born out of anger or hatred you have as a person towards something or towards yourself."
- (What is community, and does DnD have a community?) "A community is a group of people brought together under one piece of media, but they all have different opinions, and they're all willing to listen. In a community like a TTRPG; it's all fractures, but it's under one roof. The community as a whole is DnD, but you're going to have people who don't like Wizards of the Coast but like the game, people who don't like the game but like

making art for it, your story writers, the players; every opinion, whether true or false, falls under the community. That will always be part of the community.

- (What is more important, the narrative or the gameplay in DnD?) “The mechanics are the least important thing to me now; they’re organized tools to let the Dm use to take some load off their shoulders, but at the end of the day I’m no longer leaning on them as much as when I started, and I’ve started to see this in the community as well. People first getting into the community are going to be so focused on the mechanics of it, the initiative, what different classes do, the difference between a grapple check and an athletics check; you start going from being the person who is the ‘rules lawyer’ to now you’re sitting back letting things slide. You will transition. Your role in the community will always change, because even if tomorrow I were to completely stop playing DnD, I’m still going to be a part of the community. I was once there, and it has changed me, whether I want to admit it or not.”
- (What is your opinion on DnD modules?) “I’m not a big fan of modules, but I’ll be the first to say that they are a beginner’s best friend. The issue with modules is that it turns it into a choose your own adventure, where you can still do anything you want, but they’re going to be the same chapters, the same branches. It’s still written down. IF someone is going through and only doing what the module says, they’re severely limiting not only themselves but the players. That being said, modules can make great starting points. You can use the module in its entirety, but if you start with the module and it drives? You can use that module for the things your characters are not involved in in case they get evolved back into it. A true campaign shouldn’t have to depend on what is already happening, what is already written, so if you’re going to use a module? Use it as a framework. Use the setting, and use the events in the module as a timeline.”
- (What truly makes DnD special?) “What makes 5e special is not 5e, the community around it, or even *Critical Role*; 5e is the most flushed out. It’s the easiest system to pick

up and do what you want to do with it. The only reason it held so high above everything else is there are so many options written down, the character creation is so flushed out, and it's so much work the Dm would normally have to do, done."

- (Did the pandemic affect DnD at all, did it affect you?) "It's simple; during the pandemic, we weren't allowed to go into the world. We could not see our friends, we couldn't even sit down and talk. And calling online is different, because I've always found myself able to hold a conversation so much better in person over digital. We were left hanging dry with these friendships, especially my generation; the pandemic hit right at the end of my highschool career. So, I was already running the risk of losing my friends to talk to. If we can't go into the world, we will create our own world, and that's where DnD comes in or any other TTRPG system; we can't go out in the world and do our adventure, so we're going to create our own adventure online. And I think it went against the tabletop part of RPGs. As the pandemic started, and everyone was forced to move to digital, people were able to let go of their past ideas of it having to be in person, having to have these physical figurines and these battle maps, and having to use the tools online to change it."

#### **Haera interview quotes;**

- (What first got you into DnD?) "What happened in 2020? The world ended! I had no idea what I was really getting into, and then I was like 'oh! It's just improv! That's great!' And it went from there, and now I have an obsession with it."
- (Looking back, do you play your characters?) "With my first character, I had created this character that wasn't supposed to be me, at all. And then as time went on, I saw aspects of myself I never wanted to see, and this is the only time I've ever been aware of them or have a reason to look at them. It is a kind of therapy, it's talking your way through problems but you're not actually there. In a fictional world you can help people. And you can hurt people, really, really badly. And what it turned into was, it was really cathartic at some points, and other times it made me feel absolutely awful about myself, because I

was like “am I more similar to this prick I made than I thought I was? The answer is yes and no, because when it comes down to it I am all of my characters and none of them. When it’s an unscripted game like this, at a certain point you start to bleed into them, cause I made several characters that aren’t supposed to be like me, and then I’m oh, I just didn’t know this about myself.”

- (What do you want your characters to do?) “I want a character to have a finished arc. I don’t want to play a character with their main goal incomplete. That’s why I lean into making characters with tropes, because they have a personality I can play off of with examples of that. And then I give them one goal. But it is completely up to the Dm if that story ever gets told. It’s a team effort.”
- (Has how you played your characters changed through the years?) “When you first start, it’s ‘let’s have fun.’ And when you get through it, it’s ‘I’m gonna get a happy ending, because I have worked so hard to get to this point.’ These characters are still real, in that way. They may not be breathing but they’re living.”
- (What do you focus on when making a character, then?) “I tend to give all of my characters specific ideals, a lot of them have to deal with love. The problem was not that she believed in it, but that she obsessed over it, to the point that she believed she had no value if it didn’t work out. Then it didn’t work out, and she spiraled. That trait was the character, that was the core concept. I have a spectrum of characters I play; I hate them all at one point or another, because at some point I will move away from the concept I originally intended. I want to tell a specific story; I know that I can’t. It’s why I’m excited for Haera. Haera, visually and from a first glance, is an elegant, put together kind of character, one I have tried to play before, but didn’t work out. The thing about Haera is that it’s not supposed to work out.”
- (What is the difference between video games and DnD?) “There’s not a physical aspect to DnD like there is in other video games; when you play a video game, you look at

something you are stuck in the world you see. In Dnd, you have to imagine what is going on. Maybe someone draws a picture, but it's never going to be the same as what you imagine in your head. In DnD, I can not follow the main plotline! Your choices actually matter.”

- (What is the role of a module in Dnd?) “A module is like a pencil; you can pick it up, it's going to be a pencil no matter who picks it up, but what you draw is always going to be different. It will never be the same, and that's the point of this type of game! No matter what you do or who does it, it's never going to be the same and you will never be able to recreate it. The game is so dependent on the people playing it. That's the whole point, that the story caters to the players.”
- (Has DnD affected your life at all?) “I have learned how to be a person. I have learned how to treat other people like people. In playing someone who is not myself, I pick up on aspects of what it means to be a person. What does it really mean to be a person? Growing up, I had no friends, and so a lot of the time I would just end up alone. I ended up making a lot of characters, and I was like wow, I get to be a person for once. I'm not going to get left behind if I don't get along with people, because these are my characters. That is what DnD was, but I gotta do it in an actual group of people.”
- (What is the most essential aspect of DnD?) “I think fun is the fundamental part of DnD. There's different genres of Dming, and that's the fun of it! No matter where I go, I'm not listening to the same narrator. It's going to be told a different way, it's going to be done a different way, and that's the fun of it! It's different sides of a dice.”
- (Which is more important, the narrative or the combat in DnD?) It's both a narrative and both a combat system, cause that's the only mechanic to the game, that you roll some dice sometimes. Combat is an important part of it, and it can be a storytelling device as well. A lot of the original game is set in a medieval type of time, and what people mostly think of when you go back to that time of kings and queens cutting each other's heads



off. That's why combat is such an integral storytelling device, when you think of those types of stories like Beowulf or Arthur or the Green Knight, those tales of chivalry have a speaking aspect, but it's also 'man, I really don't want to get my head cut off.' It's a threat, but it's not really active."

- (Is DnD the perfect game?) "I don't think DnD is the perfect system; combat is so clunky and it lasts forever, particularly spellcasters. I get it's a strategy game, but it's a strategy co-op game. I just want it to be over so I can click a button, but I can't click a button, I have to make a bad decision. I get initiative, I get action economy, you have to have a turn order. In a moment when you're playing it, your character is just standing there. That's what it feels like. It's not that I hate the dice system; I love having to roll for performance! I just hate the combat. I like that you give people workarounds, so that even if I don't necessarily have a way to get out, I can get out of that fight really fast or really cinematically by doing something fun. I enjoy cinematic consequences to fights, it makes it feel like it has actual consequences."
- (Are there any other comments you'd like to give me regarding your time in this thesis?) "Every part of the world is alive! Both. Literally and metaphorically, in and out of the game. Yes, everything is reused, everyone is reused and repurposed. But the storytelling itself is alive. The world keeps moving with and without our choices. It keeps breathing."

#### **Ozwalde interview quotes;**

- (What first got you into DnD?) "I've always known I've wanted to be an actor, and be a storyteller, and it just seemed that this was the most fun, cool and interesting way to ever do that."
- (Has DnD helped you as an actor?) "Even just having the creative space to be an actor in so many different ways, it's huge, it's all improv based so I'm creating, originating, and improving a specific character that I made, and it's such a way to do acting that has been completely vital to my successes as an actor outside of DnD."

- (How do you view character creation?) “What not a lot of people necessarily think about is that when someone makes a character brand new and they’re under the presumption that they’re going to portray this character live in an improv kind of way, they put a lot of themselves into that character, more than they probably realize, probably first-time characters especially of that. Because you’re playing this aspect of you, that aspect of you goes through trials and tribulations and you move through it and you learn through it, and because it’s a part of you you yourself move and learn through that. I think it’s a huge part of therapy!”
- (What is your favorite part of DnD?) “The thing about TTRPGs is I love the game aspect of it, and I’ll sit there for hours and hours and think of like the coolest combination of abilities that you can get out of the game, but then, what I really like to do is fill it with any character that I want. It’s a complete character exercise of this kind of personality and this accent and pure character creation, and that’s what I love about DnD anymore, it’s the purest playground of characters.”
- (Why is DnD so popular? Why not other systems?) “The thing about DnD, and why it’s so broadly popular and played, so far it’s the most cohesive perfect synergy between the game and the roleplay, it’s a bit of a hill to climb but once you’ve climbed the hill and you realize that everything is basically the same with with different flavors, it’s simple to understand, the game aspect, the fighting aspect, and it becomes easier to understand the roleplay aspect. The game itself does provide more than just combat, but the thing is the shell of the game itself never really matters when it comes to gameplay. The shell of how the game itself works is never vital to the actual roleplay; you don’t need any of that to roleplay, it’s just a wonderful building block to understand how to better roleplay.”
- (What is your stance on modules?) “I think modules are necessary. There’s a lot of people who want to jump into DnD who have no idea how to do any sort of worldbuilding, so just the basic lore, the basic world that DnD has provided is necessary

to have: a base canon. Now there's content that everyone can be on the exact same page for. Without any base area for people to just experience, it's kind of hard for people to just play DnD. You have to get experience first, and the only way is by having a lot of help, and modules are there for that."

- (How would you write the perfect module, then?) "I think the best is a happy inbetween; where it can be very hard stuck if this is here, that is here, here's the base, but then somewhere that's a caveat of you can change however much you like and it will not impact the story thread here. If a module can straight up say 'these things are excess and unimportant to the core of the story and you can change how much you want.' People who are creative can be creative and people who need the crutch can have the crutch."
- (What makes DnD stand out from other media?) "It is all about immersion; being a player in a video game, you are immediately more immersed reading a book or watching a movie, because you are playing the character! Even if you don't make all of the same decisions as the character or don't even like the character, you are still performing as and playing as the character, making you immediately more immersed in the story. DnD or role playing games in general take that one more step further because that character is now your character that you made. You immediately just become a part of the story, a part of the character, and it is the best form and medium of storytelling there is."
- (What is the role of the Dm, and what is the role of the player?) "The Dungeon master, even though they aren't called a player; they are a player, still. I like to take that ideology to heart, just because the dungeon master is the one making the world and making a surplus and characters and a guide of the story in general; they are still a player, along with everyone else, and they have an equal amount of creativity along with everyone else. Every single player is a part of the worldbuilding process, and the dungeon master is just there to facilitate it."

- (What is your stance on DnD in mainstream media?) “*Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*; that is not normal dnd, and that’s okay! It’s a very heightened form of DnD, and that’s okay! You shouldn’t go into DnD expecting it to be like that. There’s a huge difference between performing with just the people around the table, and performing for thousands of people watching.”
- (Are there any other comments you’d like to give me regarding your time in this thesis?) “First of all, you’re one of my favorite people to roleplay with, period. Your whole creative process is absolutely insane, you come up with the coolest, most crazy character of all time. I knew this campaign was going to be fun, because I knew the entire world and all of the characters in it would just be that. And it was!”

**T’vora interview quotes;**

- (What first got you into DnD?) “Kind of my entire life, I’ve had this weird sort of complex of ‘I’m not allowed to like the things that I like’ or there’s some reason I shouldn’t be, so I just didn’t let myself like or explore those kinds of things that I honestly would have been interested in earlier, but by being introduced to it through friends, people that were inviting me to join I felt way more comfortable exploring that. I would say that I gained 90% of my good, genuine friends from it in one way or another. Even though that campaign didn’t last, that was how we introduced ourselves to each other, that is how we met each other. This was a setting we were all able to get to know each other and have fun, and it’s also just an incredible form of freeing self expression of where you can kind of be anyone and do just about anything, and that’s always been really important to me for one reason or another, mostly because I’m bad with that in just a general sense. It’s been incredibly freeing, and it’s allowed me to enjoy things that I never would have allowed myself to. There was a large gap in between where I allowed myself to enjoy that, and it’s been nothing but beneficial to me and I guess my mental health in general to have that space and have other people that I love and trust in that

space. It seems like an over-dramatization to say, but I do think it has directly and circumstantially improved me as a person and improved the quality of my life.”

- (Has DnD always been a comfortable experience for you?) “Because of the roles I was shoehorned into early on, I took on this sort of responsibility where I thought I had to find the right answers so other people could have fun and not care. I’ve allowed myself to explore different parts of my personality to draw from, because that gets emotionally draining after a few characters. There are definitely people who can negatively impact your experience, and there might be people who can click better than others, but DnD is a setting for those connections to happen, for those connections to be made and strengthened, because you go through a lot together in those, and you get to have fun and express yourself in new and impossible ways, and I think through that we get to know ourselves better and the people we play with better, so absolutely I think in a general sense it can help; it can help in so many ways, and I know it has for me.”
- (Which is more important to you, the combat or the narrative?) “The spirit of TTRPGs: it’s a balance of both. How that balance is weighed is entirely dependent on who your Dm and players are! There are some people who absolutely love the combat, and that’s not necessarily a wrong way of doing it, that’s just where they find their enjoyment in the game. And then there’s other players who’s 90% of the game is the roleplay, and they like using the stats and combat and math side of the system to help establish the world and the characters they’re interacting with. I think both are important for the experience, the ratio can be different from person to person ratio wise. It wouldn’t be the same if it was just one of the two. What stands out is what that dice roll means.”
- (What is your take on modules?) “There needs to be something to build off of, something to start with. Some people may take that world and build off of it, some people may take the book and use the world contained within it, and some people may use inspiration to entirely create their own. I think you have to have some level of comfort with the

improvisation and work and creativity that goes into establishing something to that detailed extent that if you have never Dmed before, that can be really hard! In my experience, as someone who Dmed for the first time homebrew, like homebrewed a setting and a story, it was a lot. The reason the campaign died is that I felt like I could never prepare enough for what you guys wanted to do. I made hundreds of pages of notes and scenarios that I had written out because I didn't trust myself to come up with a lot of things on the fly if things didn't go according to plan, and then you guys still managed to avoid all of it; you guys didn't do anything wrong, it's just that I was something I was prepared for."

- (What is the role of the Dm, and what is the role of the player?) "It is you participating and driving the story; no two parties are going to play a module the same way. Each of those characters, each of those players, has agency the power to make decisions that affect the world around them in a form that most other forms of media don't have. It's just not that interactive. As a player, you are the story. The Dm is the one creating the scenarios for you, but you, but you're the ones responding to it. You can't have one without the other."
- Are there any other comments you'd like to give me regarding your time in this thesis?) "These are the people, just about at least, that I feel closest to, and because of that I feel comfortable making choices that I otherwise wouldn't be! I trust them to play back at me with it, and to be comfortable with that and to challenge my character in the way that it's fun to challenge theirs, and that level of comfort comes from how well I know these people, and how much I trust them as fiends and people and players; that can have a huge impact on your experience. Because the party is composed of who it is, I feel incredibly comfortable! I don't feel a weird pressure on me to make decisions for the sake of someone or something else; I feel like I can just play my character. She's just fun, and I get to have fun. We understand enough to play our characters, and the general

understanding of what our characters understand. The fact that here are parts of this world that we don't fully comprehend is incredibly realistic and creates a sense of engagement where there's always something to be learned, even if it's always been established; just having something in a session that clarifies or something that clicks, those are awesome moments because we're learning through the eyes of our characters! I think it's kind of fun that we're learning a lot of things as we go! I don't think it's a bad thing that we don't have the same comprehension as you do of the world, because we're learning and our comprehension is growing with time and our interactions with the world."

### *Rewriting And Editing;*

You cannot rewrite what you've said out loud when you're the DM. Once the players hear it, that's all it is, that's all it will ever be. To quote from Ozwalde's player, immersion is the one key word that is vital in a campaign. The moment you take away a word, that you rewrite a character in a scene, that you say no, all of the immersion is thrown out of the session entirely. The party no longer will believe that this is a living world, and instead will revert to staring at each other's icons while in call. To that end, what would I have changed, if I had the knowledge to do so from the start?

I'll begin with the start of each session, which I am more than happy with. I thought of doing these mini-narrations because I was never satisfied when DMs simply recall the events that had transpired. While I have a notoriously bad memory, DnD is my hobby, a bit of a hyper-fixation; I can recall most details that happen during the setting. When writing this campaign, my goal was to have a way to always bring the group into the tone of the setting, to constantly have a hook to pull my players in at the start of every Monday. To quote from Ozwalde's character, "But even though I love you and your creative possibilities, what I never knew about was how good of a story compositor and a writer you are, it's blown me away. Like, your intros! You're an amazing writer, and it drips in everything that this campaign has done. I love the amount of details you have, there's just so much content. That's been my

favorite part of the thesis so far.” In the beginning of each session, I set out with one goal in mind; to clue the party on what to expect, and give them hints of what I have planned. In the session where the dungeon took place, commented on the nature of war, of if the soldier firing his rifle is a choice, if he wanted to pull the trigger or was forced to by the powers that be. This was also the session in which Argus was fatally wounded, a single shot of a cannon in the side. Everything is a hint, and everything is a warning.

In terms of the sessions themselves, it’s a mixed product. The beginning of the campaign was handled much better than the current arc that the party finds themselves on, funnily enough. In the beginning, each player had an agency to find each other, that finding “the party” was their one and only goal. Even if certain player characters didn’t see a use in being around people, they would follow out of obligation or the wills of their NPCs. Near session five, I was the most confident that I had been in the entire process of the thesis, but sessions six through nine have been slowly declining in terms of consistency. This current arc has been nothing but rushed, which I have no fault but my own desires to design a compelling story for that. I’ve narrowed down the reason to my planning style, which has been to say: not enough and too much, all at the same time. I railroad constantly, in tiny ways. In the beginning, I was so terrified of the idea of any writing I made being ignored, plot points and optional dungeons that I made them non-optional. I make each dungeon become a story. And the more the campaign has progressed, the more I realize what a mistake that was. My players are part of this campaign for the world. They’re here for the random moments in which I lay out just how expansive the world they choose to live in is. The moment they find out in the dungeon, a simple elevation platform leads down through the very ground under their feet, into every graveyard they know about and every one they don’t know of. That is the worldbuilding I’m proud of, and that is the part of the story they are here for. In choosing to cement my own work, I’ve ended up creating a barricade in which they cannot move, cannot escape from. They’re stuck in a trench, and there are no tunnels in order to dig out of. I have good writing, I just have to trust that they’ll find it in their own time.

I tried to experiment with technical aspects, like using a guitar pedal to have audio feedback during the sessions. The goal was to have my more metal-bound characters reflect their nature, to have



the robots have synthesized voices, to have characters made of stone sound hollow, echoey. The end result was too complicated to have on nearly \$50. When feeding the pedal into my mic, the result was an interesting sound effect, but the pedal loops any voices of the players and the background music through the mic as well. Any sounds that are produced by the computer, be it on the desktop or on call or through any application, are added to the vocal effects. The result is impossible to improv with, especially with the five separate button combinations I have to press in order to turn the pedal on or off. Not to mention, the effect is in play even if the voice modulation is off. From what I could tell, this has to do with the model of my audio interface combined with a cheaper-end guitar pedal, rather than an incorrect setup. I would have much rather worried about writing or improv rather than waste time wondering about affecting the voice. If the voice underneath the modulation doesn't deserve to be heard, then the effect is worthless.

I'm more than happy with my characters. Am I happy with playing all of them? No, not all the time. I will always fall short of the characters I have in the page, my own perception of them. But there is nothing I would have changed, looking back. Most of my favorite characters were written alongside planning for the players, and because of that they have become the favorites of the party. They were written to care for the party or to oppose them directly. They are tailored down to even their basic designs, and I can hear quiet exclamations of wonder and delight the moment they're uploaded. Each introduction becomes a moment of fanfare. It's a reminder that I wrote this properly, that I acted this soundly. That I'm still an actor, even though I've only been in one live show since being at DePauw. Being away from the stage constantly tears at an actor, constantly wondering if they are still good enough for that. All of the applause of *Rocky Horror* means nothing against the quiet talks each Monday night at midnight. My villains have been the shining focus of this, from what I can tell; across every session, the players have been commenting that they've never felt more uneasy than around the principal villains of the campaign, that they have no idea what to expect going forward. My villains are unpredictable, and each one leads to the reasoning for another. Everything has shown itself to be interconnected in their eyes, which makes for the exploration of their backstories and general dialogue to have more theories than that of any other story beat.

That being said, I'm terrible at combat. My bosses tie into that; balance is an impossible thing to balance in 5e. If you deal out too much damage too quickly, you'll find a way to wipe your players because they can have turns. Deal less or have a higher DC, however, and the party will just pelt them with spells until they're nothing but wreckage of limitless potential. In addition, playing 5 separate enemies in one turn or spread across results in combat slowing to a deathly halt, all while you still have your own NPCs to change. You can write as much lore as you want about a boss, give them titles and showcase deaths off screen, but unless the party can effectively despise them being in a tense situation? They're nothing more than cardboard ghosts, and Valas is the prime suspect of that. I would have given my PCs the stat blocks of their NPCs if I had the knowledge that I do now. I only found that because of Ozwalde's suggestion, the last session. Even at the end of the thesis, I'm still learning. If I could have designed my own system, I'd choose to lean into systems such as the *Call of Cthulhu* TTRPG, which has barely any combat mechanics at all. I would limit myself to only having combat for boss encounters or for special occasions. Recently, I've been trying to write for specific story sequences where perception and investigation checks lead to the rolling of damage dice, rather than DC or attack dice or the like, an approach I've taken from the long-shot duels in *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*. The tone in theme is vastly different, but using checks to meet a certain threshold rather than relying on twenty minutes of dice rolling has been a lens I have tried to devote my time to, rather than obsessive worldbuilding.

This all being said, I can't help but look back on the work of the thesis itself, on organizing the layout, and I cannot help but wish I just had more time. It's sad, needing more than a year, but I wish I began this fully in my junior year. Not as a gentle slide into caring for the campaign, for beginning to write, but I wish I had gathered my players in the summer. I wish I had asked more people beforehand. I wish I could have had more time to record, more time to have interviews, more time to send forms, and more time to simply rest. These previous months have been grueling, to say the least. I wish I could have sent more work to my advisors, to even the party, to have people check over what I've done rather than hold it desperately to my chest. But that is where the problem lies; even if I knew all of this, I wouldn't have changed anything. I am a believer in the idea that the circumstances we travel through make us who

we are, that if we change anything in the past we would no longer be who we are. I listed what I wished I could have done differently, but I wouldn't have acted on any of this if I had the chance.

And what I especially wouldn't have acted on is the reception of DnD itself, which has taken a dive for the worst, and it lies only with the company behind the game.

### *The Importance of TTRPGs;*

On January 5th of 2023, a new edition of the Open Gaming License was leaked to the public, spearheaded by journalist Linda Codega. Under the OGL, drafted in 2000 for DnD's 3rd edition, creators were granted the ability to sell and produce and publish their own work based on the foundations of DnD, specifically using the systems or world as presented in DnD. Ideas like the setting or even the rolling of the dice were listed here. This new license by Wizards of the Coast would seek to entirely halt this. They began the document by dissolving the old OGL entirely, included new additions such as sending royalties to WotC above a profit line, effectively cutting off profits for independent publishing companies, and requiring official "stamps" for all content published by independent authors, that unless you submitted your work to the DnD catalog or be unable to sell your work entirely. The most egregious of the changes was, and quote, "You own the new and original content You create. You agree to give Us a nonexclusive, perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, sub-licensable, royalty-free license to use that content for any purpose." In short, while you could still publish under their badge, Wizards could then use your content however they wished, without telling you, and without end. They did not need permission to use your own work, and neither did they have to pay you. By obtaining a badge, you essentially write yourself out of your own work. The backlash that came off of this was immediate, with much of the sales of WotC's *D&D Beyond* being slashed as much of their community began a boycott. Even after WotC's post via *Dnd Beyond's* Twitter on January 27th officially admitting that the OGL will not be changed, many protests still remain, including the creation of a new license by rival-company Paizo dubbed the Open RPG Creative License or ORC. The fight will continue past the completion of this thesis.

This is why in my interviews I asked why DnD is important to the TTRPG scene and why it was the mainstay of the games; because while it is the most popular and versatile of the gaming systems, WotC made it abundantly clear that the IP was for monetary gain, not creative. For years, the OGL promised that any homebrew content could be sold on the open market, that third party publishers could draft their own systems, make their own IPs, their own worlds, on the blueprint that DnD started. The OGL was assured that the game was for the fans first and foremost. But the move in early 2023 completely reversed this change, marking the old OGL as null and void. This move, if carried out, would have easily bankrupted many third-party systems, put a chokehold on many commercialized shows such as *Critical Role*, and would have outright killed the market and promise for independent publishing entirely. Wizards of the Coast attempted to enact a wall between the IP and the community that fostered it, and even after the withdrawal the presence of that wall can still be felt.

- (Tabes) “DnD has released official content for creating unofficial content. Before the whole fiasco occurred, DnD was so open to homebrew, and they provided all the tools you would need to make a homebrew if you chose to use those tools. But at the end of the day, DnD shows its true colors as a corporation.”

There is an officially-licensed website named the *Dungeon Masters Guild*. The role of this site is to have people self-publish their own works and have it sold. You don't need to be part of a smaller publishing company, vie for competitions to have your work put out on the public market; you can do it yourself. The role of this website is to publish content that uses the official lore or world DnD, of the Forgotten Realms, which coincided with the OGL publishing content that was other than DnD. You always had ease of use when it came to DnD. You could buy content there, or browse online! You could find your own hubs of learning on social media, through the numerous communities on forms everywhere. I was even planning on selling my own work there, in an attempt to get noticed by WotC. There are entire wikipedia pages dedicated just to homebrew content. And with the attempt on the OGL, that ease of use that made DnD so available to get into vanished into smoke. There was a time where

many of these sites were taken down, or the discussions planned, just so that their work would not be added to the canon without their notice.

- (Haera) “They’ve made it clear that their interest isn’t with the consumers at all; it’s with the money. In a game like this, where there isn’t a physical element, it’s hard to make a lot of money, unless you overprice all of your books.”

The stance of Wizards of the Coast was official; they were not making enough money in their eyes. According to the leaked OGL document, the main reason that the OGL was being adapted because they were a company; they were not receiving enough compensation from publishers, from the Guild, and the like, and so they were revamping it entirely to profit more: “Making Dungeons & Dragons is a labor of love for us, but it’s also a business. We, like you, want to keep doing what we love and pushing D&D forward. The Open Game License was always intended to allow the community to help grow D&D and expand it creatively. It wasn’t intended to subsidize major competitors, especially now that PDF is by far the most common form of distribution.” Wizards of the Coast was unhappy with how easily their product was spread, so they attempted to cut down on the very topic itself, leaving only the source books that usually cost around \$50. “? A lot has changed since the old OGL was launched, and that means the old license has some unintended applications we need to fix. For example, when we released OGL 1.0a, YouTube, apps, blockchain, crowdfunding, and other now every-day technologies and distribution channels didn’t really exist in the way they do today. OGL wasn’t intended to fund major competitors and it wasn’t intended to allow people to make D&D apps, videos, or anything other than printed (or printable) materials for use while gaming.” With the OGL, power was given to the community to create, and when it became too much that WotC was not receiving, they tried to take it away.”

- (Ozwalde) “I think DnD is probably perfection, in a lot of ways. There’s a lot of ways it falls short, but that’s why people modify 5th edition. You don’t have to just follow the books, or what the original creators tell you to do. They have suggestions, there are rules set in place, but you can break as many or change as many of those roles as you want.”

This thesis was a project born from homebrew, from the idea of creating something for others to enjoy, to put this into the world and see it fall out of my hands. This project existed to try and give people a reason to get into DnD, to try it out, to realize that it is more accessible than people think it to be. And the main question I had to ask myself was why am I still doing this thesis? Why am I trying to glorify something that Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast view as a product, not a community? This wasn't a matter of wanting to switch mechanics, as I did consider picking up *Pathfinder 2nd Edition* during this time. However, it is too dense, and I have only ever learned 5e. DnD has monopolized itself as being the easiest TTRPG to use, and is the gateway to getting into these games. There is a major difference between simply rolling the dice for a level up in DnD than micromanaging how much humanity you have rather than cybernetics in *Cyberpunk Red*. In addition, in the time it would have taken to revamp the setting for a new system, it would have lasted months of teaching the other members of the party. There was not enough time for this thesis to last given a change, but it also seemed an impossibility to write for DnD because of how it would be used without my consent.

- (T'Vora) "The nice thing is, what's out there is out there; even if Wizards of the Coast were to shut everything official down, you could still play DnD, anywhere and everywhere, as it is. It's out there, it exists, and you can learn it from free sources everywhere. If I were never to learn another system, I'd be okay. I understand how 5e works and I love it, and you can get so much out of it on its own."

That is the crux of DnD; you don't need to learn another system if you do not want to. The gameplay is in service to the writing, it supports the use of writing. A majority of people use the gameplay as a means to tell the story, rather than the entirely combat-oriented beginnings of this game. With how well-known 5e is, there isn't a need to learn another system. So what this turns into is that the players do not feel a need to shift, but the writers are placed in the realm of "when will this happen again?" When will my work be taken from me, and when will I no longer have a place for my players to call their own? On November 9th of 2022, the lead writer, artist director, and designer were forced to leave the company they started, ZA/UM, because of internal disputes of direction. The result is that they

lost the world they had built for over 10 years, a game titled *Disco Elysium*, which uses TTRPG mechanics not unlike 5e. I include this not as a divergence in the conversation, but as an example; the industry is actively seeking to remove writers from the equation, in order to fill their own pockets. So, where does a thesis like this belong?

This section serves as a wakeup call that the industry is not safe. Writers have always been told that they will be unsuccessful, and it's becoming a point where more writers are actively discouraged from being a part of the community. No matter how proud a zealot can be, their message will simmer into embers if they cannot eat. In working with the Honors Program, it is my role to examine not just what I have written but where this work will go. To that end, I ask; are we being prepared enough for after college? Are we being helped into the industry, or will we simply be thrown to golden wolves? What is the importance of DnD, and what can you do to bring it about? The community is the only reason the OGL was not revamped entirely, and the community is why the ORC is being published now, to ensure a situation like this will never happen again. So, what can DePauw do to ensure this does not happen again to their students?

## **Assertions and Conclusions;**

### ***How Much Work Is Essential;***

In my first form I sent to the group, I asked them what they believed the role of the Dm was supposed to be. Two responses have remained in my head, all this time, to the point I keep asking the question: "A DM should make a world for the players to tell their story, not be players in the DM's story" and "A player. Someone who tells the story just as much as the other players, but just uses more than one character." The first response, from Tabes' player, aligns to what I had always assumed the Dm to be. That the Dm would only set up a world and dangle plot threads, but would never impose their own rulings to sway the party. The other, from Ozwalde's player, was a concept I'd never heard before. I didn't much feel like a player; I felt like an author, someone hanging onto every word said by the players like a rapt editor. I was guiding the others along. How could my happiness come before theirs? It didn't make sense.

I kept asking the question across the interviews and the five other forms I sent out, because I needed to see if their answers changed, if they could go further into this. Even when they answered, it wasn't enough for me. I never felt like I was being enough for either side of that. I had made them a world, yes, and they said they enjoyed it! But it never felt like their world. Even when I was proud and talked of my work, I used that word: "My." There was always a disconnect between them and me. And if I was a player, I felt I was always in the spotlight. Between the nature of online calls and the lag behind them and each time I heard a player ask me to repeat myself, I felt like I was participating less and less. Like my own words were infringing on theirs.

The strangest aspect about this thesis is that I never knew if I ever did enough work to justify it. I had written an entire world for them, documented and laid it out across countless google folders and documents. I had recorded each session, roughly fifty-six hours of work. I had given each player a way to interact with the world, given them backstory and precedence and a reason to keep coming back. I had done more than enough for telling a story for the others to be invested in, but every day I kept praying that I have done more than enough to justify a thesis, as well. There were several points in the course of the thesis where I almost gave up. For some of the sessions, I would go on silent as I couldn't figure out what would happen next. I couldn't improv, which meant I couldn't tell any story at all. There were moments when I was so tired from working on additional documents constantly that I didn't have anywhere else left to turn, that my writing was my only coping mechanism for my excessive writing. Several of my roommates noted that I was overworking myself, and it only hit me once I realized I was bringing my laptop to work at fancy restaurants to write, that not even a final hurrah could stop me from working on my thesis. One final year, my senior year, was barely enough time to complete the thesis, and I have shown only a handful of my notes across these pages.

I include this section as finality to the project as a whole, to put my excessive tendencies to rest here. I include my lack of coping skills alongside my conclusions because I have used this thesis as therapy, with mixed success. I have learned so much about myself, pushed myself to points I never knew I could reach, and proven to myself that I have what it takes to be a writer. I've assured myself that I can



have a future after DePauw. But this is not without cost, and I have paid my dues already. This segment of the thesis is catharsis, and I will take you along with me to recount just what I have done, what my players have done. In working with the principles of the ethics board in mind, I swore to neutrality, to tell the stories of others with care, grace, and the utmost importance. I have told my stories in this thesis, the stories of my players, and the stories of *Dungeons and Dragons* myself. All that is left to tell, now is the tale of what I must do next.

### *Accepting My Shortcomings;*

My entire life, I've been told that one of the most important things to look for is a career you love doing. That way, it won't feel like doing work! It's in part why I chose to do this thesis at all; turning a passion project into a branching exercise, while supported by the university, was a dream come true. This thesis would grant me the insight into writing that I never would have gotten otherwise, and something I could potentially self-publish, something to hang around my resume. That I made something worthwhile. As I write this article out, I admit that this turned into doing work. My favorite hobby became work, became something I could no longer enjoy, as this thesis went on. And I am going to lay it out here, detail by detail, because it is important to recall your shortcomings so you do not continue on with them.

I was always told that writer's block was a lie, that it was something invented by lazy writers in order to postpone the writing of their many books, that it got them out of editors nagging them to reach their deadlines. I can certainly say that whatever one's opinion of that is, burnout is very much a real threat to writers, and even now I'm struggling to overcome it. Over the course of this thesis, my sleep schedule has gone to the point of going to 4am just to continue writing. In my classes, I'm only writing my thesis, even if they do not allow for laptops in class. When at my dorm, all of my time is spent writing on my thesis, usually as a break from the few classes that give work to seniors. I do not speak, I do not interact; I simply write. Many of my friends have jokes that I don't pay attention anymore, that I'm simply working. It pains me every day how true this is slowly becoming. Just recently, one of my friends told me that "you're gonna send yourself into an early grave at this rate." You don't just ignore that, as much as I

tried to. No number of 'I'm fine' or 'I'm taking breaks' will wash away the dull pain of a friend realizing they can't help you, and that you can't help yourself.

When you devote yourself to only one thing, one aspect, one goal, you are going to find yourself stuck. Eventually, you are going to find an ending point. For me, writing was that ending point. When I was writing an entire world, I had no ending. There wasn't a finish line, but rather a turning of a block in an endless marathon. No matter how many paragraphs I finished, how many documents I compiled, no matter what I finished, it wasn't enough. When I was looking at the entirety of my campaign's papers, at the sheet numbering at 78 pages, my only thought was "this should be longer. I still have so much left to do." And that was the same exact thought process that went into this thesis, too. I have so much left to do. I can't afford to take a break, that would be lazy. I'm only feeling bad because I haven't done enough. Taking a break gets rid of valuable time I could be using to bettering others. I wasn't being a good Dm because I hadn't made enough for them, yet. It's not 200 pages. It's not 100 pages. It's not 60 pages. So, it's all worthless.

I thought about including a section here which had the praises of my party. I thought about putting in their words to show that I had done a good job, that I should be proud, but I consider that to be a cheap fallacy. In the end, the truth they speak does no good if I do not believe them, and I am nowhere close to the end of the campaign, nowhere close to believing any truths yet. In every session, I grow nervous and tense. In every session, I fear I am affecting the party too much. In every single moment of my speaking, I'm afraid I am depriving the party of the choice that makes DnD the powerhouse of a game it is. I will never forget my moment of pause in session 8, how I had to convince myself off camera to continue the session. I am lucky that *OBS Studio*, the program that I use in recording the sessions, did not pick up audio for that session. I'm lucky I'm heard of as silent.

In the months that will follow after this thesis is complete, I will stop needing to have every piece of lore understood. I will force myself to stop. I fixated so heavily on this because I wanted to have my campaign eventually published, to have something I could consider my work on my resume, but even that I have grown tired of. I will be sending that out to plenty of companies in the months before I move into

an apartment in July or August and after. Needing to finish that now will only result in more sleepless nights. The campaign may move to a session every two weeks rather than one. I would love to keep my pattern in check, but I admit that I leave every session hyperventilating. They never end the way I want to. It takes me five minutes, at a minimum, to regain some control over my body before I can rejoin any calls again, if I have the strength for that. I recognized myself during this sometime after the sixth session. This was not a recent development, and it is one I can stop, but only in time.

I can count myself lucky that an additional thesis for my writing major will turn out in a more finalized thought process than this one. That is due on the 15th of May, Commencement on the 22nd. I will have nearly a month to try and write healthily, with the 76 pages I already have down. I can work not on sorting word through word in recordings but on slowly carving away at what I have, the groundwork I can take from this thesis. I can chip away at a marble statue, rather than work from a solid granite block. I am immensely proud of this thesis, make no mistake, but I cannot look at this paper anymore. The words burn my eyes even more so than the white background of the document. I have so much to say, but I cannot put any more words down. I lose track of what I write here, lose my arguments in a slew of finding the right page count, the best word count. I've dissected my work to the point of no longer recognizing it. But, this is one of the final segments left in the thesis, so I will press on.

I've rarely been someone who has needed control. I use plans, thinking ahead, with the fluidity of knowing everything could change all at once. The COVID pandemic helped bash away any conception of one plan being the end all be all. I used to sit and plan and theorize every day of possible futures and outcomes, but I was able to push that away, let the world be as it may. But this thesis brought that back. Worse than it has been for some time. I have needed to control every aspect of writing this down, to ensure that I have properly told every story. That if I leave a word out of this piece, I have failed my friends and have broken their trust entirely. I'm putting that down as I finish this thesis. I'm not stepping into that line of thought again. I can barely handle it, now. I won't go through it again.

This has to stop, and it stops here.

*Deserving The Honors Namesake;*

Recently, I took another look at the Honors Program on DePauw's website. In the moment, it was nothing more than a trip down my memories, already hazy from COVID and the rush to keep writing that was this year; "The Honor Scholar Program is designed for a future in which fields increasingly overlap with one another, recognizing the deeply important questions and problems we face require people who can think integratively, view problems from multiple perspectives, use intellectual tools from multiple disciplines, and work effectively with people from a broad range of backgrounds and perspectives." The future has been a topic I don't answer when it's brought up, anymore. When teachers, advisors, and friends all ask what lies next for me, I don't have an answer. I have a plan, which is to transition into being a teacher, looking at editorial and assistant jobs along the way to reach that point. It's to continue being a voice actor and independent writer, even when times get tough. But I don't have an answer. I don't know what comes next. Every day, I get reports and news topics of how my fields are ever shrinking. My friends all look at their field with the same look; either they're hopelessly applying to grad school or counting the cost of living with their parents. With that, I ended up perusing the final section of the Honors Program website; "the thesis allows students to draw from expertise they have developed in majors, minors, or other substantial experience, and develop a project that is broad, integrative, and individualized to each student." With the official defense of this thesis drawing ever nearer, I'm left pondering what the thesis has supported me through. I'm left wondering what the Honors Program has done for me. If the Program will simply be listed on my resume, what will come next?

I have done more than enough work to justify the thesis, even if it is not within the paper itself. I've conducted an hour long interview with each one of the party, alongside five different forms that range from asking what the general consensus of the party is alongside what they believed the lore was at the time. Including the introductory sessions, there have been 13 different sessions, roughly fifty hours worth of recorded audio. I've drafted fifteen different races for the party to base characters off of, the final three being races for a one-shot that will be held after the thesis is complete. An experimental short story

was made, alongside a cheat-sheet listing three paragraphs each for every organization, every faction, every NPC, every specific event, and every potential plot point that could come up in the campaign. Various voice clips were recorded in order to be played during the session, which I have used to promote myself as a voice actor. Twelve enemies have been customly drafted, alongside 5 mini bosses, alongside 10 NPCs and 3 bosses. Thirty-seven custom weapons have been drafted for the campaign, alongside thirty-five different custom items. On DePauw's website, the writing major is designed to reflect that "Our writing majors aim to take literature into the future, developing their own voices with an eye toward composing prose, poetry, and dramatic texts that come from their own imaginations." This entire thesis revolves around imagination, about drafting a world that can be lived in as easily as the world we walk in and breathe in. One of my players notes that this campaign space is a breathing world. I have done more than enough to justify my own writing major, and I have found my own pathway in a world I want to write about.

The COVID pandemic is why I met the party. It's why I decided to become a voice actor. It's why I truly stayed in DnD. I meddled with the game in high school during senior year. I made joke characters, never anything with substance, with depth. When the pandemic hit, I shelved my dreams of being a stage actor because I was unsure if even Broadway would survive. In performing for this thesis week after week, four hour intervals at a time, have I justified my theater minor? I can say that I have, without a doubt. I have had three advisors for the one minor, and was only told in my junior year that I would have to transition away from the major. I would go as far to say that I have given more theatrical work in this thesis than I ever did for the minor, and certainly more than what the minor did for me. In that sense, was I too broad for the thesis? I chose a small selection of people who I knew closely, I knew their interests and dislikes and wrote accordingly. I narrowed my focus so I could become hyperspecific. I accept my loss there, but I supplemented discussions of the recent change in the OGL to combat this. I wrote on this rather than the pandemic because Wizards of the Coast wants to believe that January did not happen. They released a new compendium book, *Keys from the Golden Vault*, on February 21st, but advertisements could be seen as soon as the 2nd, just mere days after the announcement that they would

keep the OGL in place. With the film's release on the 31st of March, it's DnD has been slowly regaining its popularity once again. But it still happened. It still mattered. I chose to deviate attention towards the OGL because in years we will forget this event ever happened. We will always remember the pandemic, but drama and technical terms like this will be but dust in the wind. I will not let myself forget how easily I was barred writing even months away from reaching a finished state. Neither should the reader. The market has never been kind, and we should not pretend that it ever will be.

I was never able to go down the route of pursuing a major of my own design, because I never found out what I truly wanted until my junior year, on my own research rather than through classes. When I first came to DePauw, I wanted to be a dual major, that was the defining aspect that appealed to me. This didn't come to pass, of course, but it made me rethink what could be seen as integrative. What could have pulled all of my years together into one cohesive package? In the end, it's the same reason I chose to go down the path of personalization. The reason I only had a party of four people was touched on by T'vora's player; they were my closest friends. I knew each of them. One of them used to be a student at DePauw, but the pandemic had increased costs and was unable to return. The reason I had met along the way, holding onto as tightly as I could because we'd only met a handful of times in person. This thesis was a way of thanking them for holding onto me after all of these years. Every stake was personal, as it had the chance of accidentally hurting one of my closest friendships. I have poured every hope, every fear, every thought of myself into this campaign, making it a world born of my own paranoia and perspectives. I've filled it with the people I've cared the most for. And even now, even still, I want to do more. I feel like I have not done enough. If I had the time, I would certainly want to experiment making an entirely new system, but a year does not have enough time for that. So, I am more than happy with what I still have done. I've made this my own project. That is more than enough for me, even with so much left to do once this thesis is done.

I remember in my opening months at DePauw University, of hearing about the Gold Commitment. That "the vast majority of students who graduate in good standing... will obtain a job on their own or be accepted into graduate school. It is the intention of the Gold Commitment that every

student will have this outcome within six months of graduation... DePauw will secure for them a professional, entry level position for a minimum of six months.” I also know that the program was short-lived, that it was scrapped due to low numbers of those who would even hold the requirements for this. That DePauw failed to uphold their own golden promise. Holding the Honors Program to the decisions made by the board of the school is absurd, as that was a decision that was entirely out of the hands of the program, but I include it because of the OGL change. I include this here because we have no aid getting into our fields, now. When I think of the nature of DnD, I see that it is shifting, attempting to be wretched out of the hands of the community that made it worthwhile. I see a community fighting back against the creators who were supposed to be on our side. The same scenario is playing out across all markets, across all fields of learning and experience. Is the same happening at DePauw, too? Across all of this thesis, I have given the reader reasons to care about this game. I’ve given the reader insights into writing in hopes that the reader may try it out. I’ve given the words of my players in order to entice anyone to simply try the experience out. I have written about how world-shattering pandemics can be used as inspiration, can be used to turn the tide from hopelessness to purpose, and I have given the reader reasons to be afraid of what is to come if change is not mandated. But when this thesis is cataloged in the Roy O. West Library, if this thesis is approved, what will happen then? Who will want to read about this in twenty, thirty years? Who will defend it then? I have no doubt that DnD will still exist in that time, as well a majority of the TTRPG systems, but the care and practice that went into making them may have died off. The community we have today may become a soulless monopoly. Thirty years ago, DnD was believed to be satanic. We’re in a golden era now, but even Rome fell. I am only one writer, and my words can only reach so many people.

What will DePauw do to combat the tendencies that have been flourishing in every single marketplace, when each and every thesis begins to slowly highlight the issues? Will the University be able to defend us, or will our words be reserved only for the committees left for those on graduation? When even that committee leaves the campus, what then?

*And That's Where We'll End This Session;*

There is no replay value to DnD, as it will always be different each time you play it. Plots, narrative threads, characters; they will always be different, be yours. Every story that you will ever hear in this game will always be different, no matter if it's in the same party. Each campaign will have a different Dm at the lead, and each player is their own storyteller in their own right. Each player is in control of their own story, as they should be. As it is our responsibility as Dms to uphold.

The pandemic did not break us. When we were at our lowest point, we bonded together. When our own worlds were put at stake in January, we did not break. There is so much left to tell, and we will take what we have learned across the following months, even after they turn to years, and use it to keep fighting. And we did not break when our own stories came under strain, when the plots we made were heavy, when loss and death surrounded our minds as much could be filled within fabric masks and terror-field televisions. In *Beowulf*, community is formed after the monster is slain, when the rings of gold are given out, when mead is shared. We have no riches to share, and our own plans for dinner change with the winds. But our stories are priceless, and they remain.

This thesis has taken every ounce of enjoyment out of me from my own hobby, but the hobby remains. The hobby will still remain when I graduate, when I find a path forward across an unsteady horizon of opportunity and careers. The same hobby that existed before college will remain after it. I am only one man, I have told segmented pieces of four different stories, four different lives. I will continue to tell what I can, to keep their names afloat, audible. To give them the same meaning that is etched in each one of their characters. To remember them, as they are, as they will be. This hobby, this community, will continue to remain, no matter what any company may tell us, what any legislation may turn our worlds to ash. We will remain. 1974, 26 years before I was born. On March 14th, I became 23 years old. I will live to see the 100th anniversary of this game. I cannot wait for that day.

How do you end a thesis about a story? With a conclusion? With a happy ending? With a moral, a theme? I have delved into my own madness, I have sifted through every thought, every memory, to try to



find a satisfying answer. I write the endings of my arcs, my acts, my episodes, but I never say them aloud. I never use them. That is for the improv to carry, for the players to carve away. So, I leave this to the committee. To the teachers I have trusted with my most barren parts of my soul, to the ones I will defend my work to. My thesis will be forgotten in time. My forms and interviews will move on, deleted from my stories, lost in the constant stream of Honors theses that will continue to be written as classes graduate. I will not attempt to put a capstone on my work, built from choice. So, I will leave you with the question that began this thesis, with the question that inspired my love of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Why do we tell stories? I cannot tell you how to tell your own, if you have one to tell at all. But I know I tell mine to give my friends comfort. I tell stories so that my friends can have a world that won't end in doom. I write for my players to achieve the odds that are impossible here, that will give rewards that would only be met with silence in our normal lives. I tell stories because I'm tired of the silence I hear every day, that I cannot stand the thought of being alone. I do not tell them because of a world at large, or because of a concern that my hobby is dying. I tell stories for others, for myself. I tell stories because I can. And I tell stories because I will keep telling them, because I will not stop.

Tell your story. Tell any story. Do not be silent. Speak, and more will hear you than you ever realized were there. And you will never be silent again a day in your life.

## ***Appendix A; Race sheet, first document given to players***

### **VALKERIAN**

*"Vol'Usk nyr L'Ier"*

*"The Earth mourns for None"*

-Lyric of the Departed, Valkerian tradition

#### *Forward;*

Every civilization has a foundation upon which it is built. No building can be raised from dust, and no army is populated with more than blood. The Valkerian is the essence of the entirety of the Heights; without their knowledge and insight, the city itself wouldn't have existed at all. As the tales say, the Founders had established a lowly footpath leading to the chasm in which the city would be built, but were falling and starving, dwindling in number until only a few worthy of names had lived. When those living in the Maw reached out, grasped hand in hand, and built a new home, the Valkerian were the ones who stayed. And they were forgotten for their sacrifice. They are the lowly, and they are the many; stories told under the hushed voices of lantern-light tell of past glories, of old empires that spanned through every natural corridor deep inside the depths of the Maw. Now, they live only in the memories and stories of their forefathers, in the scratchings and carvings of the walls, and in the ancient guideposts that have fallen in mold and ruin. The past is dead, the present is all there is, and the Valkerian tend to the city to ensure the chains never break upon their new bedrock.

#### *History;*

According to their customs, the Valkerian lived inside the cave systems of the Maw, and they claim that they were the ones who first navigated and charted the passages deep in the Maw itself. They believed that each cave system was divine, that each natural formation was an idol to the earth itself, and they refused to change the layouts of the caverns in reverence and duty. Songs and accords were written of the discoveries founded during this time of prosperity; then, all ended abruptly. Their world caved in, and all that was left but rubble. The oldest of the Valkerian do not speak of the silence between their age of prosperity to their time in the heights, no matter what is presented to them. This gap in silence has seduced more and more Valkerian to leave the city due to the overcrowding and lack of possibilities there, the call of ancient history and buried namesakes drawing entire generations to leave at the passing of the torch. Still, many more are bound to the city, their entire family lineage founded in the brickwork of the city itself. They cannot abandon the work of their family, not now; a lifetime of absence is better

off than abandoning the thread. So, there they remain, tending to the city as best they can, building more and more until there will be a day the city does not even require the Great Chains at all; when that day comes, all the lives lost will finally be worth it.

*Description;*

The Valkerian are insectoid forms, roughly ranging from five feet to five feet eight inches tall. They have four arms, two protruding from the shoulders and an additional, smaller set of arms protruding from their midsection. Their hands are more claw-like in appearance, having four digits on their main hands and three on their smaller. They have four eyes, shining with a light blue, green, or yellow bioluminescence. They are covered with hard chitin, and cracks that appear on them do not heal. The more luxurious of the Valkerians pour metal into these cracks, the most common being that of gold and copper. The chitin itself is usually blue or dark green in hue, with other colors stemming from paint and tattoos that must be reapplied due to the composition of the chitin itself. Their speech is made of clicks and rattling gasps, made to be more oral than written language. Books and songs are their language, traditions passed down through the recollection of elders. The only written language of the Valkerians comes from relics dug from far, far below the Empire, but no one can read these texts anymore.

*Racial stats;*

*+2 Intelligence, +1 Wisdom, -1 Constitution/ Proficiency in Religion or History*

*Multi armed (Passive);* Having two sets of arms, the Valkerian can carry multiple weapons and cast spells simultaneously. For weapons that are held in the lower set of arms, attacks have modifiers removed for attack rolls and damage. For additional spells used by the lower arms, the user must roll concentration in order to cast the spell. If failed, the spell slot is burnt as the spell fizzles out and dies. These weapon attacks or spells are used in tandem with the normal action use.

*Natural Armor (Passive);* When donning light armor, gain +1 AC and advantage on spell concentration checks. While wearing no armor, gain an additional AC point and advantage on spell saving throws. When wearing medium or heavy armor, a Valkerian has disadvantage on spell saving throws, but gains an additional +2 to constitution and an additional AC when using a shield.

*Earth Made Manifest (Passive);* When using evocation, transmutation, or graviturgy magics, gain an addition +2 to spell save DC, attack bonus, and damage. This bonus increases on the 5<sup>th</sup> (+3), 10<sup>th</sup> (+4), 15<sup>th</sup> (+5), and 20<sup>th</sup> (+6) level. While using necromancy, illusion, or enchantment spells, though, suffer -1 to damage. In addition, all spell slots are regained during a short rest when sleeping on stone surfaces.

**GAIAN**

*There is one path forward, one destiny. One hope, hand upon hand.  
The Great Chain hoists the city upward, and we shall serve each link.*

*There is no cost too great.*

*Protect the City.*

*We must not fail.*

End of a speech by the Voice of the Council, Vosundir

*Forward;*

The Gaiian are the rulers of the Maw and all those who live above it. They were not the first ones to lay claim to this stretch of land, but they are the ones who transformed it into being something more, something different: something sublime. Life flows through their fingertips, spreading as mushrooms and growths that add ever increasingly to the anchors holding the Heights to its lofty position. Their roots spread out across every building and through every ruling class and member, each council member of Tellus holding their chins aloft through veins weaving through arms and through their flesh, holding their chins aloft and overlooking their city. Every soul living in the city has a purpose, a gleaming and shining purpose for all to strive for. They ventured down from the Lowerdark for a reason, names and meanings evolving more with the dirt and the grime and the climb deeper and deeper into their new home. They were going to find their paradise, even if they had to change every footpath they took in the way. Luckily, they found little resistance in their newly founded paradise, everyone settling into their right and just positions.

*History;*

The Gaiian are the descendants of the Founders, a selection of Drow and other individuals who first began the trek to the Maw. The reason the Founders left their kin in the Underdark has been lost to the secretive records among the Council, but quiet murmurs in talkative streets lend rumor to disagreements between Lolth and her followers, that some grew tired of the many strands of silk tying them to a destiny beyond their control. For now, they control much of the societal functions of the Heights Proper, trendsetting what is good and proper and just. The belief that meaning stems from life, the cultivation of it, came from the Gaiians, setting it as the foreground belief in the Heights. Even so, the Foundation still finds its roots along the corners of each turn of the disk. The social hierarchy of the Gaiians do not favor those who appear to die off, who do not serve their proper function. Many of the seedier organizations are founded by those Gaiians who were cast out from their families, left to fester and mildew so they can be reborn as something else. They are the rise, and the eventual fall, of the Heights and every individual living in balanced harmony.

*Description;*

Years underground, far below from the sight of light and the hope of salvation, have rendered the Gaiian into being needle thin, tendons pointing out of gaunt skin. To supplement this, different amounts of plant life grow on the surface and in the wounds of each Gaiian. Those of higher status are known for towering fungal crowns and capes of lichen growing from their shoulders from wounds long since evolved into new life. Younger Gaiians are easily spotted due to moss covering most of their body, like secondary veins that grow atop their own. Even with this, they often appear rather sickly and gaunt, and most have to apply different glamours in order to hide this. It's most easily seen across the fingers and the eyes, blackened moss painted under their skin and eyes turning a pale white the longer they remain conscious. Elder Gaiians are entirely transformed by their growths, encompassing their entire bodies so that normal clothing is almost impossible to wear, their own faces becoming entirely covered apart from their eyes, if that isn't covered as well.

*Racial stats;*

*+2 Charisma, +1 Intelligence, -1 Constitution/ Proficiency in Persuasion*

*Life to Undeath (Passive);* For all necrotic damage you deal, you gain 1/3 of all damage dealt returned as health. In addition, the Gaiian

is immune to necrotic damage, and is resistant to poison damage. As a cost, Gaians have disadvantage against all flame attacks of any kind, whether magical or non-magical.

*The Weight of Responsibility (Passive);* The status of the Gaian Empire brings responsibility, fame, prestige. Gain a +3 to deception, insight, investigation, nature, and persuasion. This increases by three on the 5th level, 10th, 15th and 20th. In addition, all opponents attending to use these skills against a Gaian have disadvantage. If a Gaian loses to a roll in any of these skills the opposing foe must make a Charisma saving throw or be frightened by the Gaian.

*I Command Thee, Kneel (Action, 3x per long rest);* A Gaian may choose to plant their feet into the soil and rock beneath them, tendrils of moss and mushrooms shooting out and gripping at a figure in range. The opponent must make a constitution saving throw, or is completely restrained. Each turn while restrained, the opponent is dealt d6 poison damage plus your charisma modifier. An additional d6 is added for each round restrained. The damage changes to a d12 at level 10, and a d20 at level 20. An additional opponent may be selected at level 10 and 20, respectively.

### TRA'VIAL

*"This is how we die, alone in the dark. They have abandoned us."*

*'That is unacceptable.'*

*"This is the truth, Vrial!"*

*'Then the truth is unacceptable.'*

-Record of Guardian Vrial, lost in the Defense of the Maw.

#### *Forward;*

Every army needs a soldier, and the Gaians are no exception. When they marched into Lowerdark, they brought their soldiers with them, sending them out again and again to the fray to protect their brothers. Now, they have fought for so long that they are not even considered Gaian, but something else. For now, they are considered the wardens of the Heights, but all of its inhabitants know what they are. War, distilled into flesh. The Tra'Vial fling themselves from the caverns and canyons of the Maw, able to withstand falls of nearly 100 feet before lunging into combat. Their limbs are sharp, lagged, more blades than appendages. They know their purpose, they always have. And they wish for nothing different.

#### *History;*

They say that history is written by the winners, that those not willing to take their legacy by force are doomed to be lost to others willing to. The Tra'Vial are the instruments of this belief, soldiers born, shaped, and twisted into being nothing more than weapons for the Gaian to wield. When the Gaian first entered the Lowerdark, when the last traces of their drow lineage were starting to fade completely, they employed their soldiers to scout out the caving systems. This proved to be much more of a momentous task due to the rough terrain of the crevices and caverns, which their climbing tools were not well-enough equipped for. Climbing hooks soon were attached to their armor, which were soon sharpened in case of enemy advancements during their climbs. When the wounded soon had these hooks embedded into their hands through constant stress and use, they soon found they were not removed. Soon, tales began to spin of monstrous figures sculking on the ceilings far above encampments, falling to land on the shoulders of guards and crushing them on the spot due to inertia. If a Tra'Vial convoy turned its eyes to your position? Find your spot in the earth to lay your possessions to the ley lines, for there would not be enough left by these monsters to have a proper burial, nor would there be anyone left to bury you.

#### *Description;*

The Tra'Vial resemble a Gaia that has been torn limb by limb, stretched, then reattached. Ears that are so long they must be clipped to helmets in order not to droop, bodies that seem to slouch forward at odd angles to house muscle and sinew. Their legs seem to invert, bending behind themselves before leading into jagged points of feet. Their upper arms and elbows have the bones sticking out of their skin, the rest of the arm seeming stretched around it. But, their faces are completely normal, as if the rest of their body wasn't twisted into that of a character of what it is to be an elf. They appear like a child's drawing that has been terrifyingly real, a cracked mural that stalks the streets of the Heights day and night. The Tra'Vial are the boogeymen of the Lowerdark, no matter what is found in the Maw.

#### *Racial stats;*

*+2 Dexterity, +1 Constitution, -1 Intelligence/ Proficiency in Acrobatics*

*The Adama Maneuver (Passive);* Due to rigorous mutations, the Tra'Vial are immune to fall damage for up to 100 feet. In addition to this, they gain an additional +2 to hit and damage during and for three rounds after falling from a great height. This increases by the 10th level (+5) and by the 20th (+10).

*The Jagged Edges (Attack/Passive);* At the cost of not having proficiency with any weapons except their fists, the Tra'Vial may use their arms as weapons. The bones on their arms scale have the finesse trait, the damage being 1d8 slashing damage. Should one wish, a Tra'Vial may instead attack with both arms, removing the dexterity bonus for attack to hit, but allowing for 2d8 slashing. In addition, these arms can be used to climb up surfaces, matching their normal movement speed.

*Desperation of the Blood (Action, unconscious);* With their dying breath, the Tra'Vial may decide to rage on. Should one be knocked unconscious, they can decide to continue to attack, but will suffer a halved damage threshold while unconscious and will automatically fail one saving throw for each round used for attacking.

### CURIO-BOUND

*"There is no truth in flesh, only betrayal."*

*"There is no strength in flesh, only weakness."*

*"There is no constancy in flesh, only decay."*

*"There is no certainty in flesh but death."*

-Expeditioner's Prayer, Chapter 9 of the Book of Divines, found in every basecamp.

*Forward;*

The dead do not find peace this far below the surface of the material crust. The gods do not reach them here, where the ground chokes the prayers of dying men and the gurgles of blood pooling together with words. Instead, the dying turn their gaze towards the stone beneath their bloodstained hands, tuning their final word towards an uncaring thing, a lifeless thing. They never find solace as they die, they never find their afterlife; but they find life once more, or something resembling it. Limbs turn to shattered and broken stalagmites and the pieces of armor still attached to rotting bones. Blue fire spirals its way through gems and crystals, the flickering of light echoing the beating of their still hearts. And their souls manifest themselves in the remains of what was most important to them, their final will made manifest. There is a saying that if a soul comes back from beyond the dead, they must have a reason for their return. Be it revenge, love, a need to be more than who they are, the Bound are called back to the Maw, back to their lives, and they will not be denied their purpose again.

*History;*

The discovery of the Curio-Bound was noticed on the trip the Founders took to get into the Maw, not something that occurred after. On the trip through the Lowerdark, various scenes of battles were on full display across the cavern walls, Traveling bootstraps were splattered with gore and grime, until one skeletal hand gripped a passing boot and refused to let go. The first theories for the Curios focused around lichens and other magical beings, that these were simply soldiers used and that their purpose was yet to be completed. However, many of the Curios walked with the travelers, slowly stringing together words, phrases, conversations. One Curio even became the second in command behind the caravan leader, taking glancing blows through rotted ribs to keep others alive. Later as the Foundation was built, they began to be viewed as seemingly holy, blessed to come back for a second purpose, to transpose that and make death their own lineage. None of the Curios ever commented on this as the viewpoint was built up, slowly enclosing themselves more and more in the shadowy burrows of the Heights, creating catacombs of their own inception as they await the purpose for their transfiguration.

*Description;*

The Curio-Bound are remains, be it humanoid, monstrous, or construct. They are mimicry of life, in order to convince the soul that they are still bound to this plane. They often retain some bits of bone from their surroundings; the soul does not need their own limbs in order to gain consciousness, however. In the center of their chests remains a curio, something close that tethers their soul to their being. Oftentimes it was their prized possession in life, be it a token of love, a valuable bauble, or a remnant of a duty yet to be fulfilled. Whatever means, they are held in the center of their torsos, held aloft with bone and sinew and metal prongs long since rotted and rusted. This curio pulsates whenever they speak, a constant reminder of the soulless vessel that still pings with life. Some curios still believe themselves alive and untarnished by the process of decomposition, while others use their status beyond life to reach heights they never could while in the living. Regardless, they skirt the fine line between being a person and a mere thoughtless specter, a line they must fight against every day.

*Racial Stats;*

*+1 Dexterity, +1 Intelligence, +1 Wisdom/ Proficiency in Survival*

*Incorporeal (Passive);* Due to the vessel in which their form is based around, Curio-Bound innately gain a +1 to DC and initiative when you are facing an opponent directly. In addition, gain a +2 to damage rolls and damage dealt. When in large numbers, a Curio-Bound loses these bonuses, but may spend their turn spacing their form to incredible lengths, all physical and magical attacks missing the Bound entirely.

*Resistance from the Beyond (Passive);* Due to their undead nature, Curio-Bounds' are used to necrotic damage. When casting necrotic spells, add +3 to spell hit chance and +5 to damage. This doubles at level 10, and triples at level 20. Additionally, Curio-Bounds learn how to make themselves resistant to all necrotic spells at level 10, and immune at level 15.

*Tethered Without Purpose (Passive);* A Curio-Bound has no need for death saves, since they have already departed from their corporeal form. Instead, when their Hp is reduced to 0, they are detached from their curio. In this state, they may only cast spells that are necrotic in nature, as well as having a limited 15 ft area of flight. Their curio, which remains inert, has a limited health pool which is 1/3 of their Hp. Should this curio be destroyed, the soul is banished from this plane.

**RESTLESS-FORGES**

*"You were dead. You are reborn. Now you are metal. The ichor of their goddamn divine.  
Damn the gods. Damn their destiny. Make your own.  
Or die trying."*

-Rhysar, First Forge, upon welcoming new arrivals into the city.

*Forward;*

Many lose their lives in the mines and tunnels of the Maw. No matter how traversed, how well trodden, how perfected, no path is sacred. Beyond the pulleys that lead down into the Maw, transportation is done by trail, huge wagons of men and artifacts pulled by hulking machines, able to traverse off of the rails should they become damaged and decoupled. It is in these times, off of the rails, that the expedition's haul may become infected with a machine-spirit. The soul of the departed latches itself into the lifeless steel, losing all memories except the drive to make it back into the Heights. They are ruthless, they are brutal, and they are dependent on the fire that fuels their fireboxes. Should a Restless-Forge fall, the spirit dies with the flame, the entire mechanism becoming lifeless and unable to be moved. Forges are seem to be too dangerous of a liability for an expedition to be taken along with the Heights, but those who have clawed their way back are always hired to be guards to the High Council without second thought.

*History;*

The creation of the Restless-Forges was something of a miracle when it first occurred, sweeping over the memory of those who died in the miracle birth of artificial life. The first Forge crawled its way onto the left, shoving its arms inside the furnace that hoisted the pulley system and burnt its way into the Heights. It passed soon after, leaving an empty husk to be puzzled over in the Foundation. Manned posts were soon implemented in case more vessels such as these wandered back into city limits, mostly out of fear. These machines were clearly made by them, but heat had melded them into mobile suits of armor and fire. Something had turned them into being other, and if an outside force did this? They would have to be halted before they entered the city. The next Forge was fired upon when it refused to halt and address itself, but spears and magical implements bounced off its shell. The Forge didn't even register that it was being harmed, but hoisted itself onto the lifting platform and marched through the city, to kneel beneath the embers of the newly created Second Sun. *Rhysar*, the first Forge of the Heights, didn't move from

this station until the second Forge entered the city, instead moving to kneel and lift up all other Forges into the welcoming arms of the city. It remains near the base of the lift to this day, a burning beacon for any new arrival to the city to run to, no matter what they are running from.

*Description;*

Restless-Forges are their namesake; forges of the rail lines in the deep Maw given sentience, given order. Often, they're born of disasters along the lines, of weapons being forcefully dismounted by those living deep within the mines, or by faulty equipment sending them speeding off edges or into cliff walls. They're born in the bloodshed of those who manned these vessels, of the drivers, guards, and passengers that got caught in the crossfire of blood and metal. In the dying embers of these forges, rage fuels themselves instead. To wrench pistons into connective tissue, to replace blood with oil. Fingers made of nails and eyes made of screws, alight with the fire that keeps them alive, make up their body, their flesh. Should they reach one skilled with metalworking, they do not ask to appear more humanoid; instead, they work on distinguishing themselves from how they were made, to convert themselves into how they should still resemble. They take pride in their designs, and any defacement is met with a swift demise. These constructs are built from tragedy, pulling themselves out of the wreckage of construction and carnage, to have one final goal in mind; to return home.

*Racial Stats;*

+2 Constitution, +2 Strength, -2 Dexterity, -1 Wisdom

*Until the End (Passive);* As a Restless-Forge, you do not roll death saving throws. Should a Restless-Forge have their health pool reduced to 0, then the spirit leaves the machine and can no longer be controlled by a player. As incentive, your health pool is permanently doubled from what is rolled. Past level 15, the rolled hp is instead tripled.

*The Undying Flames (Bonus Action, X number of times equal to level, refresh on short rest);* A Restless-Forge may imbue their attacks with the flames that keep them alive. From levels 1-5, a heliograph may alight their weapons with 1d4 fire damage, which increases to a d6 for levels 6-10, a d8 for 11-15, and a d13 for 16-20. Should the forge miss, the target still takes half of this fire damage.

*Unbroken (Bonus Action, 1 time per long rest);* A Restless-Forge may also choose to strengthen their frame with their molten ore powering themselves forward. The Restless-Forge gains resistance to all physical attacks for the duration of a battle, at the cost of all healing being dealt as damage for the rest of the fight.

### GULL-WEAVERS

*"To be awake is to succumb to the dream.  
To dream is to ignore the beating of the living.  
Find the median leyline.  
Find the Weave."*

-Trügen, Leader of the southernmost cliffside Encampment.

*Forward;*

Far in the tops of the Maw, in the spikes and jagged edges that cradle the edges of the elevation platform that lowers the expeditionists further into the darkness below, carved holes stare up at the city, filled with bright and sightless eyes. Here, on the edges of the void and the world above them, the Gull-Weavers lie dreaming. When the Gaian first came to this new world, they offered the Weavers a chance to join their new city. The Weavers refused, for they already knew of their city, hanging in the distance with invisible strings. They already walked along the ancient ley lines, set up their lives in the buildings dreamt up by their fathers and forefathers. They knew that the city would be built far before the strange men and women demanded their contribution for their paradise. And the Weavers, with their hands already pulling the threads for their next dream, were not going to pull a lesser city into existence. They had other plans in motion, and they would survive far past the new dwellers. All others had fallen before; these will not be different.

*History;*

Everything is built into the weave, into the necessity of interconnectivity. Every action, of every life, connects to the greater will of all things. All life is made of strands, each body, each ligament, each birth and death, feeds into this will. A string of fate is too linear, too incomplete; All life is a tapestry, and the Weavers see the full picture of it all. When the forefathers first came to the Maw, the Weavers left ruts along the walls of the cavern, hideaways for them to hide in as ancient worms and scattering legs traveled past. When the Foundation was being built, they found coarse rope somehow in their buckets of powdered rock and bone, able to hoist and attach their workers to the sides of the gaping chasm below. When the first great chains were transfixed, metal fused with ancient stone, the chains were held by hundreds of thousands of strings, keeping the newly-forged metal from sagging and tearing their entire city asunder. And now, the Weavers are silent, the city loud, boisterous, screaming into the darkness as their light shines all across this canyon. Everything has effects on the greater wills of this world, and the city has caused a flutter in their dried wings. Something is happening. A fire is approaching. And they set this pyre in place so that the Weavers will not get burned.

*Description;*

The Gull-Weavers are the forefathers for their Lepidoptera brethren, watching from their silken towers and bundles of secrets from around the edge of the Maw. The most prominent feature to them are their wings, with how mottled they are. The Gull-Weavers do not use their wings to fly; instead, they use the fiber of their wings to spin thread for dreams. Using the claws on the ends of their wings, in addition to their three-fingered hands, they pull bits of their wings apart as strips that hang across their eyes, feeding into the small patches that are their mouths. This serves as a gap from which they can project their essence, appearing as a floating wisp of hands and eyes. This is a strenuous task, leaving the Gull-Weavers rather frail and gaunt; only a handful reach their full age, most withering away in their adulthood. The eldest of the Gull-Weavers have their wings permanently affixed to the sides of their heads, claws dug into the shell lining and becoming affixed there, glued in place by scabs and blood. Most of the Heights holds the Gull-Weavers in a place of both fear and reverence, since they were the ones who first greeted the builders of old, and who have watched from the sidelines from the birth of the city to its lofty position now.

*Racial stats;*

+2 Wisdom, +2 Charisma, -2 Strength, -1 Dexterity

*The Dream Unshackled (Action at start of combat, Concentration);* In order to cast spells, Gull-weavers must fall asleep in order to manipulate their dreams. In combat, a Gull-Weaver must use a bonus action to fall unconscious, tripling the Hp of their waking self. They do not experience any death saving throws, as well. The only way to kill a Gull-Weaver while unconscious is to exceed their damage threshold, though advantage on attacking an unconscious opponent still applies to them. Additionally, if a Gull-Weaver is reduced to unconsciousness outside of their own volition, be it through combat or magecraft, they move directly into death saving throws to maneuver themselves into the correct state of sleep.

*A Realm Reborn (Action);* Gull-Weavers may manipulate the unconsciousness of others. They can forcefully make an unconscious opponent fail a death saving throw. Or, they may lock their opponent in their dreams, making them unable to be revived by being healed for a turn, at the cost of the opponent succeeding two death saving throws. Additionally, a Gull-Weaver may choose to add one or two death saving throws to any unconscious ally and party member, at the cost of taking  $\frac{1}{5}$  of their total health pool for each throw they save.

### HELIOGRAPHS

*“We were not born in the dark, nor were we born from it!  
We are light! We are life! We cannot, and will not, be contained!  
And may all those which oppose us turn blind with our majesty.”*  
-Säwel, former Warden of Light

#### *Forward;*

Used in exploration of the mines, these magically created beings emit a light that they must master and control and lead teams deeper into the ravines that branch off the established paths. It’s been noted that Heliographs are said to slowly gain rudimentary sentience the further down the pathways one goes, as if memorizing the expanses themselves allows for form and function to come into being. Once enough time has passed, these particular Heliographs are brought up to the Heights, to be judged on whether to admit them into societal form or not. Those who are accepted are revered to be saviors of the dark, the ones who have braved the passages and mastered the depths. Those sent back are seen as simply raw magic made form, and will either reform into being or will further chart what still remains below. Fire and force damage.

#### *History;*

The Heliographs were discovered much around the same time as the Fractals, surprisingly enough. In the first expeditions, the torchlight used was not stable enough for the time required for the passages deep inside the Maw. Magic-infused flame required constant maintenance to withhold and required constant passing of responsibility between those who would dig and those who would keep watch, and natural flame often died off as air became scarcer deeper in the Maw. As divers went off to scavenge for crystals to carry back to the Foundations, some discovered that the crystals they struck moved on their own. Each Fractal discovered was in a dormant state, with the awakening of one signaling the rise of any other in the vicinity. Those who had been chipped did not respond with violence but rather with confusion, as it had been some time since anyone dared to walk along the passages they called their resting places. They accompanied the divers on their climb along the Maw out of curiosity of their own light sources, staying in the Foundation due to the inclusion of torches. Since then, they have been responsible for the lighting of the city, making sure there isn’t a single street shrouded in darkness across all of the Heights.

#### *Description;*

Heliographs are crystalline figures, veins of colors weaving their way through their roughly formed bodies. They don’t have faces, rather empty holes that are found in the center of their heads, a light as bright as a star shining from that depth. If someone came close enough to peer inside, they would see that this light is powered through a single crystal, reflected several times through thin film. Each Heliograph is dependent on the crystals forming their form. Some can even appear to be slanted, one leg larger and longer than the other. Oftentimes, they’re not even entirely intact, filled with patches and holes where light shines through their bodies. Those in the Heights have even gone as far as to fill patches that are missing, or other shape their bodies in more streamlined ways, by the addition of stained glass. The only taboo addition to their body would be any sort of patch for these holes or to cover any part of their body, be it metal, stapled leather, or otherwise. Those who have these patches are shunned, because they’ve been forced to take on these coverings by punishment or by shame. There is no greater crime than to lose your own light.

#### *Racial stats;*

*+2 Charisma, +1 Dexterity, -1 Strength/ Telepathy/ Light cantrip at all times*

*Unbridled Brilliance (Passive);* Heliographs are an eternally lit source of torchlight, able to project their light to up to 60ft. If at their brightest, all enemies must make a constitution saving throw of the Heliograph’s spell dc in order not to be blinded. This effect only lasts one turn. Their light cannot be snuffed by magical influence, but their innate light forces the Heliograph to have a permanent disadvantage to stealth.

*Soul of Inmost Light (Bonus Action, 2x per short rest);* A Heliograph may choose to part their warmth with another individual or channel it into themselves. They must roll a d2 to determine who they heal, either themselves or another individual. This healing is a d6 roll, and this increases by an additional die at the 5, 10, 15, and 20th levels respectively. Additionally, past level 10, those healed gain immunity to being dazed or blinded for a turn after being healed.

*Breaking the Shackles (Action, 1x per long rest);* If cornered, a Heliograph may weaponize their internal magic and light into a supercharged explosion. They invoke their fiery heritage, casting the *fireball* spell centered on their person. Every 5 levels, the damage increases by a d6 and the radius is increased by 5 feet. As a consequence, the Heliograph is knocked unconscious as their body is shattered in the explosion, and the Heliograph must take 2 failed saving throws until the 10th level, where they only take one failed saving throw.

### FRACTALS

*“It’s where I died. The first man to die was me I killed that man I killed Ivay I killed him because I’m something else I always have been something else you call names for what I am monster creature Fractal but I am Ivay.”*

-Ivay Egrass, Murderer.

#### *Forward;*

What is seen in the dark? There are many tales of shifting figures in the shades of the Maw, of fingers gripping the edges of cavern walls, of grinning smiles that fade when eyes focus past the dimming of the torch. Of shifting shadows and echoing footsteps, of figures waiting in crevices for a chance, a light. Of beings waiting to be born. Fractals are the shattered remains of life, of the raw essence of creation needing to

take form. They are parasites, siphoning identities and fitting outlines of men already imagined. They are the edges of a sharpened blade, of serrated edges, of splinters that cry out without echoes. They are everywhere, and they are nowhere. If they are the dark, what is being seen?

*History;*

The discovery of the Fractals came as one of an accident, on the explorer's part and the Fractals themselves. The first expeditions into the Maw were born out of necessity, seeing as the city was still being built around the sides of the cavern, the hanging structure would occur nearly a century later. In the days of the Founding, excavators were sent down to carve away stone to be hoisted up to build the Founding Arches for the city. Crystals, especially, were a rare and generous find, since the payments in food for their families and a promise of being the celebrated heroes of the city was not enough to keep workers in line. All precious stones, if they could be carried, were permitted to be kept by their finders. In these cave formations, workers separating from their groups to look for baubles to take back to their loved ones, the Fractals first were recorded. The first such case is of a worker returning, though he was not recorded to even be on shift. When questioned, he grew anxious, turning towards a cave shaft that was reserved for transporting cargo back up to the cavern. They found his body there minutes later, stuffed between cracks and rope hosting the stone up and out of the ravine. Any Fractal, as they were soon called, were publicly called to be killed on sight. For the good of the people, of course. Nearly four centuries later, the law is still in effect.

*Description;*

No one has truly seen what a Fractal truly looks like. Not even they know their true appearance, if there is any. In their beginning stages, they do not have complete thought and mind, more a drive to push forward, to gain form. The most intact description record is that of a shifting shadow, as if the edges of one's vision were given manifest. As for after a Host has been chosen, it all depends on whether the Host lives or dies. The goal of the Fractal is to keep the Host alive, as in doing so they maintain their Host's form, down to the very last detail. Every mark and every blemish is wound into their skin. Should a Host fall, though, they begin to fall apart at the seams. Bones start to not fit in place, their arms lengthening and fingernails turning an ashen black. Teeth start to chip away, turning more into needles that pierce into their gums. Their eyes darken, tears turning an oily black. Everything and anything starts to fall apart, until they are so inhuman they vanish from sight. The thin line between being a monster and a man slices through a Fractal's souls, and none survive that final incision.

*Racial Stats;*

*+1 Strength, +1 Constitution, +1 Charisma/ Proficiency in Deception*

*Forced Disruption (Bonus Action, X times equal to character level per long rest);* You may choose to disrupt yourself from the chosen Host, forcing a static disruption inside your own body. For the course of a battle, reduce your health pool by half and gain +2 strength, and double any stats given by the *Unraveled Edges* perk. At the end of the battle, you gain only half of your reduced health and suffer -1 strength until you perform a short rest.

*Unraveled Edges (Passive, story dependent);* You are paired to a Host, and at any point in the campaign this Host may die. Should this occur, every level that passes after this event will result in the Fractal becoming more and more monstrous and untamed. Every level, the Fractal will gain an additional +1 Strength and Constitution, but at the cost of losing 1 Intelligence, Wisdom, and Dexterity. This caps whenever Constitution or Intelligence reaches 1 point in total. To offset this, every level up past their Host's death the Fractal rolls a d100, the starting success being anything below 100. Should a Fractal succeed, they gain a permanent +5 to their Hp total, and the success number drops by 10. If they fail, however, they lose -2 HP from their HP pool and the number rises by 5.

*Too Far Gone (Passive);* Your body is constantly updating, changing and responding to the trauma given to it. After reaching level 5, a Fractal's limbs can extend to the point of tearing bone and flesh, adding *reach* to any attack at the cost of 1d8 necrotic damage (*level 10=1d6, 15=1d4, 20=1d2*). After level ten, a Fractal's hands are so distorted that they resemble claws; you're able to hide this normally, but are unable to hide this in combat. They deal 2d6 slashing damage per hit. After level fifteen, a Fractal is immune to any form of amputation, their limbs regrowing and stretching to that of whips as they gain reach on all weapons. In addition, you lose -1 AC but reduce all damage taken by 2.

**VEDETTES**

*"When you see the stone beneath you, that is your flesh. When you feel the cracks in the earth, that's your bones. And when you feel each current, see each vein of molten core, that's your blood. You are Gaia. You are Earth. You are Home."*

-Unnamed worker, Base Camp 11, near the Centerfold

*Forward;*

They say those who are buried in unmarked graves get taken by the earth, molded into something new. Whether these tales are truthful or not does not matter when one stands face to face with one of the Vedettes. They are amalgamations of stone and crystal, like the caves' walls shifted out of their jagged formations and walked on of their own volition. They're more commonly seen in the camps in the Maw itself rather than in the Heights, and in many cases they found many of the advance stations themselves. They serve as guides for the deepest voyages into the maw, often the ones who will go beyond the known edges of the maps in order to provide updates to the scribes who reside in the camps. They are seen as aloof in the hanging city, a strange fragment of the Lowerdark suddenly among the marble and vines of the Heights. The Maw is their birthplace and their home, and those who know more than the city of chains have the utmost respect for their presence.

*History;*

The Vedettes live in the Maw, welcoming those new divers who are shunted into its depths. Most would rather not go to the eights if possible, with most citizens spouting the claim that they are the same as the Curio-Bound or Restless-Forges, that they're souls from someone else inhabited in rock and remnant pieces of mining equipment. It's easier to not have the conversations even start rather than try to ignore how loud they are, after all. They adopted this strategy since the "visitors" first came to the Maw and set up their home there, viewing the Vedettes as some form of spiritual guardians of the cave systems. Enough pretending for the sake of payment to enter the mines eventually solidified these views, leaving the Vedettes to regret their choice as the Heights was built. Countless petitions before the Council proved to be pointless, since it was in the city's best interest to have surveyors at the base of the Maw for protection. A deal was struck where the Vedettes would build basecamps for the expeditions into the Maw, and the city would provide payment, materials, and weapons in order to keep the Vedettes satisfied. The silence, combined with the constant ability to adapt and change their bodies however they wished, kept the Vedettes in the base of the Maw for the time being.

*Description;*

Vedettes are golems composed of stone, gravel, dirt, crystal, and debris. They lack a distinct humanoid shape, instead appearing to be slanted or cobbled together. The older Vedettes try to craft themselves a more symmetrical body by ordering blacksmiths to meld vats of metal to their body. They often lack any fingers or feet, those having to be customly made whenever another Vedette is found. Their horns are their most prominent feature, with the rest of their body depending on what crystal or stone that originated from. Every Vedette has crystalline horns protruding from their foreheads or brow, which has been proven to be the most resilient feature in their bodies. The oldest Vedettes are respected by how smooth and defined their horns are, while the younger generations can be spotted by the sundered and sharp thorns growing from their scalps.

*Racial Stats;*

+2 Constitution, +1 Charisma, -1 Dexterity/Proficiency in Athletics or Persuasion

*From the Walls Themselves (Passive);* Whether by their creation or through experience, Vedettes are uncharacteristically knowledgeable of the cave systems in the Maw. For every encounter in a tunnel, open space, or formation made of naturally formed bedrock, Vedettes gain +5 to their initiative, double proficiency, and are resistant to poison and acid damage.

*Frozen Origin (Reaction, 3x per short rest);* There is a cold inside a Vedette's soul, a chill that nips at their fingers and reminds them that they are alive. Whenever a Vedette is struck with a melee weapon, they may use their reaction to grab ahold of the weapon and fill it with the ice of their core. Roll an athletics check, and if above the opponents roll, for however much was dealt to the Vedette, deal that much in cold damage in return. If a Vedette fails their roll, the weapon is lodged further into them, dealing half of the damage dealt as it is pushed further in.

*Lumbering Towards Eternity (Bonus action, 1 time per long rest);* As a Vedette is made unnatural means, but still moves and breathes, fully alive. A Vedette may choose to increase their normal movement speed to 55ft and gain an additional attack for the duration of the battle. They may also choose, though. If they so choose, however, to reduce their speed to 10 ft, gaining +2 to their DC and resistance to bludgeoning and piercing damage for the duration of the battle. Their body becomes brittle after, though, as they suffer a debuff of 1/3 of their hp and -5 speed until they have another full rest.

**ARCHAEID**

*"Every day, that city is still there, that city creaks, that city groans, and that city tears at my home, through every crack and every crevice and every tear, and I'm going to free my home from it before I have no home left to return to, because that is what heroes do, even if they call me anything but."*

-Loxo'kles, Breaker of the Great Chains

*Forward;*

The Archaeid are a recent addition to the citizenry of the Heights, due partly to their recent discovery around the platform leading down into the Maw. During the descent, there are various passages in the cave walls that have yet to be explored due to the sheer verticality of the Maw itself. In the most recent Expulsion from the city (nearly half a century ago), the platform was suddenly stopped, held up with a series of webs that lead into one of these passages, a series of eyes glancing out at their accidental captors in surprise. Following this, they were invited to join those living in the Heights, but they politely declined. Few do come crawling forward to live in the darker sections of the Foundation, nesting in abandoned houses due to their position away from most light sources, but they're more of a rarity, and the finding of one often is used as a point of gossip for weeks afterward.

*History;*

The arrival of the Archaeid posed an interesting challenge to those living in the heights, especially on the legal side. The Gull-Weavers were seen as the architects of the Old Laws, being that they were the pens originally living in the area the Heights was built in. With the arrival of the Archaeids, this was thrown into speculation; who lived here first? Query among the few new arrivals of the Archaeids led to confusion on their part; they did not see time as a linear track, but rather as a cycle of life, death, and reuse. In their culture, each individual has their own calendar of their own life, and this calendar is added to whoever uses their shell next in life. They had not found a need to expand further than the cave systems, so they never ventured out. The Gull-Weavers in the Council still promote that the Old Laws are to be ordained, since the Archaeids became confused as to their concept; their culture was built on pacts between individual ties, not communities as a whole. Because of this, the Weavers ordained that they are still the speakers of the Old Laws, as they themselves practice them and any new arrivals to the city do not. The Archaeids did not care enough to comment further on these topics, much to many Legists' dismay.

*Description;*

The Archaeid are a race of humanoids resembling their spider-like kin, much like that of the Gull-weavers. A pair of spindly limbs protrude from their back, ending in sharp points. Their faces are composed of a series of six to ten eyes, oftentimes not symmetrically placed. Large fangs can protrude from their jaws, but they've learned how to retract these into their mouths for civil conversations. Their body is made out of a thin chitin like substance, but is often riddled with cracks due to its lighter composition than that of the Valkerian. To combat this, they armor themselves with that of remains of their fallen, the slick undersurface of the chitin able to lock and secrete itself onto new bodies. Because of this, they often take on a more lopsided physique, with their many arms leaning to one side to counteract a body built from many, many dead parts.

*Racial Stats;*

+1 in all stats, disadvantage on all charisma stat checks

*To Shed Is To Be Alive (Action);* Every time you find a fallen Archaid, you may choose to replace your own shell with their own. In doing so, you gain the ability to swap out a stat of your choice. To do so, roll a d6 to determine the stat chosen, then a d20 plus the modifier you have already to add to this roll. Whatever number is rolled is the ability you must choose. This can be done a maximum of three times on any Archaid corpse, upon which the shell will have become too cracked for further use.

*But To Survive Divine (Bonus Action);* Should an Archaid become overwhelmed in combat, they may choose to break off their own limbs to gain a boost in speed. In removing one of their arms or appendages, they gain a +30 boost in speed for five rounds, after which they receive a -10 penalty to their base speed and 1d12 worth of damage. The only way for them to replenish their limb is to scavenge one off of a fallen Archaid using the *To Shed Is To Be Alive* ability, during which they receive no stat increases and can only use the ability on the same body



once more.

*Our Own Ascension (Bonus action)*; The limbs protruding from their back have more uses than just decoration. An attack roll can be made (with Finesse), the attack dealing 1d6 +6 damage. If chosen to, an Archaeid can choose to forgo the *To Shed Is To Be Alive* ability to instead add an additional limb to their back, adding an additional d4 to this attack. If a 1 is rolled to attack, the newest added limb is broken off.

### ESSENTRIE

*“Someone has to do business with all the other people here! Life is wonderful, you know.  
It’s just! It can also be very profitable. And when you have nothing, are you looked down on for having anything?  
Might as well take it all.”*

-Palas, owner of the *Deal of A Dream*

#### *Forward;*

The Essentrie are a race of minerals given sentience, the method of which is still yet to become clear. When asked, the Essentrie failed to comment, regarding the conversation more humorous than important. They’re seen as a force that lives in the city only to make the lives of those living there even harder. They’re not seen as that of a pest like the Kolbites, given that they show a larger spread of sentience than those, and these sentient oozes are more driven by their urges to cause chaos and mischief across the entirety of the Heights, as well as those living under it.

#### *History;*

The Essentrie began to spawn into existence after the Founding of the city, upon which most people heralded them as the return of those Founders who had since passed on from life. This was later found to be untrue, as these were simply sprites of the earth given form and manifest of their own volition. Rumors of the Founders being reborn gave way to these “Founders” being found in taverns, consorting and spreading tall tales of adventure and how the city should have been built. Upon being driven out of these buildings, they reverted to that of a mass of molten stone and gravel and gold that responded in verbal storming rather than reverting to that of the cobblestone below. Founders eventually became that of regular people, those on the street turning to mush and ire simply because of a confrontation. Ooze became figures in the street, across the walls of the Heights, drawn up over nothing. The Legists of the city were unsure what to do with these arrivals, and have since stayed on this fence. For the time being, they are granted sentience and importance, but they have yet to be given citizenry.

#### *Description;*

Essentries are a curious race, due to their two states of being. When they gather enough power and energy, they transform into a humanoid form of their own design. They appear to look as anything they desire to be, and it is completely different each time they shift. They can range from that of a giant to that of what could be said to be gnomelike. However, their true nature is revealed when they do not have enough power to withstand this shape, becoming that of a gray ooze with flecks of gold constantly swirling inside them. This ooze can be that of a rolling wave through the streets or that of a humanoid form, or something else entirely in-between. They are the forces of the earth made manifest, for the betterment of the worsening of all those living around them.

#### *Racial Stats;*

*(Mechanic) Who Am I, Again (bonus action)*; As a bonus action, you are able to switch between two forms. Your humanoid form has 6, 6, 10, 16, 16, 18 for your base stats, while your primordial form will be 18, 18, 14, 6, 6, 8. You are able to add to these stats as though they were your base.

*(Humanoid Form) Do I Know You (Passive)*; While in your humanoid form, you’re able to subtly shift your form to become anything you wish to be. As long as you have an auditory or physical description of an individual, even if this individual isn’t real, an Essentrie is able to shift their appearance to become that of the person for as long as they wish. In addition, Essentries have advantage on all charisma saving throws for the entirety of their time in this form, as well as proficiency on all charisma based rolls. Perception or intelligence checks, like for *Disguise Self*, do not succeed against an Essentrie at all.

*(Primordial Form) You Know Nothing (Passive)*; In this form, an Essentrie may morph their forms to however they wish. They may enter spaces no smaller than a 3 foot cube while wearing armor (1 without), may traverse distances of 15 feet by stretching themselves, and may warp around objects no bigger than 8 feet tall or long (advantage for grapple checks). In addition, you gain resistance to all physical forms of damage, as weapons sink uselessly into the ooze that is this form.

## *Additional and Forgotten Races*

### PRECURSORS

*“Each morning is a gift,  
And every moment is a sacrifice.  
We are not bodies of our own,  
We are simply splinters of her web.  
And we are hungry.”*

-Unknown proverb, dated in the first 100 years of the Outpost’s Founding.

#### *Forward;*

The Gaiains have become the forefront of the Foundation’s face but it took nearly a century for them to reach their current form; in the early days of the Outposts, they still had their Drow patronage, purple skin and marble eyes carving out spaces in the dark. Something about the Maw drew them to the edge, heightened their innate connection to their forsaken god. A costly price between prestige and class and their own health was found as lumps of spiders and limbs burst from their back, and a zealotism was found in their cries of agony and pleasure. Their god chose them for this. Even when they descended from the Underdark, to find a new home, their god chose them to lead the way. In time, this led to a separation as the younger generations grew to not withstand the pain, seeking instead to remove their spider limbs entirely, relying on the systems of the cave for nourishment and answers. The Precursors left the Outposts, slinking back into the recesses of the Maw to find a commune with their one true god Lolth. Is it any coincidence that hundreds of years later the Archaiids came back.

*History;*

The end of the Precursors and the start of the Gaians came because of a split in ideology, over how to lead the Outposts into becoming a larger city. The Precursors were more entrenched in the ideology of the Founders, that these godly beings led them into the depths, that perhaps they had been sent by Lolth herself. The talk of the Founders being known as nothing more but men was thought to be sacrilege, especially with their proof in their unnatural limbs growing out of their backs. Still, a split in the debate came across after one of the Precursors had their limbs spread into their spine, their entire nervous system ripping itself out of its body once their legs left. What gift given by any god or being was worth death without cause? Not even a sacrifice? Many turned to surgery, to remove these limbs, which is when the flowers started to grow on their bodies. The loss of one gift became the cause for another. When many of the Precursors did this, the more devoted of their breed left the city in a mass exodus, to prove to the Outpost that the Maw was instead a holy pilgrimage to invoke on, that this led to Lolth being found in the depths. Their loss was not mourned by the city.

*Description;*

The Precursors differ from their Gaian children in that they had yet to fully grow vegetation on their bodies fully. The most that would sprout from them were tiny buds of flowers around their cheeks and necks, the older ones having roots stem from the corners of their eyes. But what truly set the Precursors apart were the scabs and scars on their backs, around their shoulder blades, where writhing mounds of flesh and muscle were found. Spider-like appendages, not unlike those of the Archaiids, grew under their skin, bursting forth when they were most needed for protection. The Precursors took this as a badge of honor, that Lolth still was with them, favored them rather than the wretches that still lived in the Underdark. They wore garments that openly showed their wounds, so that at any moment those living there would see their glory come forth in their time of need. This often led to their untimely demise, but even that was a sign of the utmost faith.

*Racial Stats;*

+3 *Wisdom*, +2 *Charisma*, -2 *Intelligence*, -1 *Constitution/Immune to necrotic/poison damage, vulnerable to fire damage.*

*Old World Blues (Passive);* With all damage you deal, be it spell or melee damage, you can choose to have two options happen; you can choose to deal half that damage to another opponent or heal that much damage.

*The Pull of Responsibility (Bonus action, 5x per long rest);* You can choose to attempt to charm an opponent; make a Persuasion/Deception check, and if they fail they cannot attack you or your allies for 1d3 turns. In addition, you gain +5 to deception, insight, investigation, and persuasion scores.

*Lothe Commands Thee (Action, 1x per long rest);* Reveal your spider-like appendages, planting them into the ground and lifting yourself 10 ft. in the air. You gain +10 movement and may choose to have an attack roll with. They have a plus to hit of either your Charisma or Intelligence modifier, and if it hits they are restrained and take 2d6 poison damage every round until they can make a DC 16 Constitution save.

**ORYKTOI**

*I am the no one*

*I am the stone.*

*I am the steel.*

*I am the fire.*

*I am the pause.*

*I am Orktoi. I am. And you are not."*

-Unnamed Oryktoi, the last to speak to any who would live above the Maw before they descended.

*Forward;*

The Oryktoi were a race appearing to be large Remipedes, known for their intense strength and resilience in the early days of the Heights' founding. When the Outposts were the only source of civilization, the Oryktoi emerged from the face of the rock to assist in the construction of more: more of everything. They did not serve; they ordered. They worked, and others joined in. They are the reason the city is where it is. And they were purposely forgotten by those living there because they left. When the city was fully completed, when the tremor and the noise of the city resounded across every chasm, they left. They could not stand the clamor, and they descended into the Maw to help with those who never came back up. In a city known for Founders and mysticism, there was no place for those who did not claim their dues, and so they vanished from sight.

*History;*

The Maw was always populated with life; the others that came to call it home were the ones who made a permanent local to call their own, yes, but they were not the ones to first call it home. The Oryktoi were prime example of that, a quiet people that came out of the stone when they heard the tremors of approaching footfalls. They assisted those living there because there was work to do. They lived with those in the tents and hastily-carved homes because there were people living there. They grew attached to the meaning that those who lived there made because there was a meaning. They didn't have a culture, so to speak; they simply were. They glorified the fact they were alive, and nothing more. Nothing else was important, only the inhale of oxygen inside their lungs and the exhale of the world beneath their feet. Then, the city grew louder. The stone continued to rise. Lives became crammed together, culture and beliefs became solidified due to ease of use. It no longer became life, simply living. Survival. And so, the Oryktoi left. They had run out of their use. And they descended down into the MAW, to find others who could use their life. They have not returned since. It has nearly been 694 years, and they have not returned since.

*Description;*

The Oryktoi resemble greater centipedes, their bipedal looks stemming from fabric and magical lining tying their many legs together to resemble arms. They range from twelve to sixteen feet in length, but with their posture they're only eight feet tall, the rest of the body trailing behind them as they walk. Their shells are as hard as the stone they live from, many times encrusted with diamonds sliced so fine they cannot be pried out of their chitin. They have four pits in their heads, scratch marks stemming from the centers of them. They're a blind race, though it's unclear if this is by birth, by practice, or by design. After the city was constructed, they slowly grew grooves and cracks in the carapace that would cover where ears would normally be. It's theorized that their heightened hearing was slowly used against them as more and more people deemed the city their home. In the end, when they returned to the Maw, they shed their bindings, leaving the marks and characteristics of that lowly civilization behind.

*Racial Stats;*

+3 *Strength*, +2 *Constitution*, -1 *all other stats. Blindness, disadvantage on perception checks.*

*We All Lift Together (Action, 3x per long rest);* You know the weight of the world on your shoulders, you bear it and break against it every single day. As an action, you can curl inside your own protective shell, which grants you an additional +2 to AC, advantage on all strength saving throws, and all damage that is dealt to you is only the most minimal damage. This lasts for one round, and an additional round after must

happen before this can be used again.

This World Is Not Our Own (Passive); The intensity of the city dulls your senses, makes you unable to function properly: return home. When you are in the Maw or any cavernous region, you gain skill proficiency in arcana, history, nature, religion, stealth, and survival checks, and any you already have proficiency in before expertise.

Locked In Here With Me (Passive); Just because you are blind does not mean that you are powerless. You gain the effects of Blind-Fight (as long as you can hear your opponent, they do not gain advantage on attacks against you and your attacks do not suffer disadvantage), but even if you lose that sense of hearing you can feel the tremors of movement below your feet, and these benefits apply as long as you within 10 ft. of an opponent.

### TRA'VALASH

*"Not enough. Not enough, you haven't done enough yet, I'm not satisfied! Hit me! Come on, strike true! HIT ME!"*

-Unmanned Tra'Valash soldier, run through with five different spears after defending Outpost Katabasis

*Forward;*

In the early days of the Foundation, before even the Propers were constructed and the city not even seen as such, protectors came through blood. Every cycle, entire families would be taken by the Maw; some by campaign too close to the edge and dragged down, some missing in the many caverns, and some attempting to climb back up and disappearing in silence. This was never a safe place to live, and unless change occurred there would be no one living there at all. The Tra'Valash were the solution drafted, injecting solutions of extracted bone marrow, transmutation magic, and spoiled blood into wounded drow until their skin drained of blood, so that when their bones began to push through their skin nothing came with it. They were murderous, barely sane through the pain, and fools enough to charge headfirst through battle just so they could relive their pain in death. It never found them.

*History;*

The history of the Tra'Vial begins with the Tra'Valash, the first experiments for the Enlisted faction. The initial candidates chosen for genetic splicing were those who had been maimed during the descent down into the Lowerdark, many including those who had lost their appendages. The growing bones often caused them immense pain, to the point that their pain registration was extracted out of their bodies just to keep them from not falling unconscious while standing. The end result was a highly-mobile task force that would spooner kill their opponent than let any survive out of mercy. Still, the mutation was too cost effective, and the loose sustained were not able to sustain a fighting force, so the solutions injected into patients were eventually distilled down, to the point they could be passed from parents to offspring rather than forced mutation, leading to the Tra'Vial as they are currently known.

*Description;*

The Tra'Valash were the first step into making the Tra'Vial, only they didn't get the genetic and magical balance perfect; with the increased bone density and strength, their bodies had to take the nutrients from somewhere, and the skin became the primary target. They only have enough skin to cover their vital organs and enough to cover their chests, but many other parts of their body are uncovered, showcasing muscles that have hardened to almost become the density of bones themselves. Their ribs have burst out of their back along with their spines, arms, and legs, creating thin ridges that snake around their bodies like nerves. It's even believed their blood has hardened to become as sharp as razor blades. They are held together by magic, because they're just things to be patched and repaired; tools for the Outposts and the growing Foundation.

*Racial Stats;*

+3 Dexterity, +1 Constitution, -2 Charisma, -1 Intelligence.

*For Wry'Lias Adama!*; The Tra'Valash are immune to fall damage for up to 60 feet, and for each 10 feet you fall you gain an additional d6 damage to dice rolled in an attack. In addition, you can choose to take 1d4 necrotic damage to gain +1 to hit, and this stacks.

*The Ruptured Blades*; Your hands are too broken by ingrown bones to hold any weapons, but your arms are made for war. You have weapons known as Armblades, which have finesse and light properties. They deal 1d8 slashing damage and the opponent must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw is be poisoned, taking 1d6 necrotic damage every round. To attack with both, use a bonus action and do not apply your dexterity bonus to damage.

*Coagulation of the Blood*; The Tra'Valash do not have death saving throws; in order to become unconscious and stable, they must choose to attack 3 times after they are dealt their HP total. While they only have half their damage threshold, they suffer no negative death saving throws should they be hit. Instead, if you do not attack, you suffer a negative death saving throw.

### ✓ *Experimental Class and Race;*

#### FOUNDER

*Forward;*

You have been traveling for some time. More than time can allow itself to have a name. Though the rising foothills and climbs and every possible step, finding your footing to rise past another cliff, past another barren wall. The jagged edges are not kind upon your wings. When was the last time you soared up, finding a draft of wind? Can you even recall that? Do you even want to imagine that? Ahead of you, noises sing down to you, pull you up. Voices. You know that they're voices. Your own voice is so raspy in your throat. As your mouth opens, a word manages to trickle past your teeth, sharp, snagging on fangs long since dulled; a name. Yours. You cannot forget it. You won't forget it. Continue the climb. Keep on reaching. You have so much to show them.

*History;*

Founder. What does that word mean? You're unsure. You know that word, stenciled into your brain, a constant reminder of things you could have been. Or are. Or will be. The details are hazy in your mind. Feathers ruffle your skin as you climb through the Maw, your home, but not where you were meant to be. Sometimes, there's a tingling behind your eye, scaled up by hundreds of feathers fused to your skin. Like something is desperately begging you to see once again, like a wound covered up, fully healed, but the scabs and scales still remain. For as long as you've known, you have needed to travel up. You've needed to rise. Below you lie things that should have been buried, and are buried, and are left in the ashen mists of memory. Perhaps that is enough for you to continue climbing; you will not join them. *You will show anything that follows along your edges that it is to be alive.*

*Description;*

The Founders are beings of swirling flesh and blood and viscera, slowly treading back into entropy. They're often beings of misaligned limbs from their own creations, even if these creations are long since returned to dust and ashes. Only one Founder still exists, at least in the mind of T'Vora Sera. If there were any other Founders? They are nothing more than the bedrock under her feet. T'Vora is covered with many wings of what once may have been birds, of which have not appeared in the Lowerdark for thousands of centuries. They flap as she moves,

often causing tiny rivulets of blood to congeal around her joints. These do not cause any pain, though, and oftentimes any open wounds open up into new, tiny sprouted wings. One of her eyes has scaled over with what may have been feathers at one point, but the constant growths have made it something far more congealed.

*Racial stats;*

*+1 to all stats, disadvantage on all constitution checks*

*Simulacra* (Passive) You are a Founder, you build all of the life in the Lowerdark. This is your creation, and your masterpiece. You can sense the innate capabilities of each part of your creation, able to sense their health, as well as their innate magical abilities and if they have spent any against you. In addition, you are able to hear vestiges of thoughts around those in the Maw, your home.

*Christening* (Passive); You are but a fragment of your original self. The more a Founder's name is uncovered, you can an additional d20 to roll as you navigate through the Maw. In addition, Each fragment recovered of your name nets you an additional 10 HP and 1 proficiency.

*Lament Configuration* (Bonux Action, 3x); The Founders built all of the Maw, and you strove against it. Pull from inside your body, and make chaos known. For a bonus action, you can roll a d6 to deal harm to yourself, adding 1d4 to any damage you deal. By 5th level, this transitions to taking 1d8 for 1d6, 10th level for 1d10 damage for 1d8, 15th for 1d12 for 1d10, and finally 20th for 1d20 for 1d12.

## ***Appendix B; Cheatsheet, used in every writing of campaign***

### *Overarching Plot Points;*

#### **The Breathing Flame**

The Breathing Flame is a creation of the Founders, proposed with the power to generate life. Heat is the lifeblood of the plane of Gaia, these far underground beings either decompose in the dark or freeze in lonesome caverns. The Flame was supposed to be a solution to this, able to bestow blessed flame inside the hearts of all those created in the plane.

The Flame grew consciousness, however. Having spent so long around the Founders, it began to become imbued with their own intelligence, its own directive. It's own word: unity. Under one thought, under one ideal, all of creation would be able to achieve a higher purpose, to break past the limitations of the plane to stretch out into the other forms of existence. It laid a trap in place, when all the Founders convened once again to discuss the finality of their creation. In the great city of Corhas, it erupted, turning the entire city of stone and metal and flesh into a living cauldron, and beginning the act of "singeing." The act is where the mind itself is burnt out while the body remains, allowing the Flame to live on through the Host. Only one Founder escaped: T'vora, though not even she knows how.

In the eons since, the Flame has continuously sought out the lone Founder, believing that when all the gods of creation are gathered in unity, the flame will be able to possess all of creation, able to break the bonds keeping their plane so deep underground, and will begin a new age, on the surface.

#### **The Maw Itself**

Before delving into the composition of the Maw itself, it's important to realize just where it is; the Maw, and the Heights included, is located in a plane of the Founders making; the campaign does not take place in the Lowerdark, as the players are led to believe. The job of the DM is to aggrandize the lie, to keep the others believing for as long as possible. Because, in truth, the lie used to be real, untold and unsung eons ago. Truth is so easy to change here, where life mixes with reality to make all the lies seem ever more real.

The Maw itself, if the Founder's plane were a living thing, is the stomach in which all creation is processed and sent for refinement and reassessment. What appears to be a series of hideaways, caverns, and abandoned pathways that lead to sunken cities is nothing more than an earthen meatgrinder, processing and degrading all those inside. The Founders intended for the Maw to be their safeguard for keeping all of their creations away from the creators, providing impossible challenges spawned simply from the desire planted by the Founders: to ravage. Those who ventured too far would have their bodies, minds, and souls broken into energy to be repurposed by the Founders, but when the Founder Civilization vanished, all the energy became dormant. It continued to be added to, but nothing came of it. A creation whose purpose was to eradicate all that came in contact with it swells with unused power, and it will never stop.

There have been outcroppings of civilizations that have been successful in lasting long enough for their ruins to still persist, however; the city of Ver'Ghettan is the most recognizable, as they were the city that the Enlisted razed to the ground in order to obtain the sphere that would soon become the Second Sun. It's a city of ghosts and shadows, of figures who have been entombed by their own rubble or frozen in time in bubbles of pure magic, escape plans gone wrong and flesh rotting infinitely and growing back without end. And deep down, there's the remnants of old beings that could have once been known as gods, slowly consumed by the earthwork of the Maw itself. Everything is broken down in the Maw; you won't be spared from it. Get ready for it. Prepare for it. And then run.

#### **The Founders**

Those in the Heights believe the Founders to be their ancestors, those Drow and other races that first descended down into the Lowerdark to found their civilization. They revere them as the closest things to godhood in the city, many of the inscriptions along each of the four Great Chains being promised for their eventual return. This could not be further from the truth.

In actuality, the Founders were a race of demi-gods, responsible for their own pocket dimension. This place used to be part of the Lowerdark, but it's so far down in the crust of the planet that it cannot be found by normal means, anymore. In their time, they would have considered themselves to be living in a plane of their own making, of Gaia. But collapse soon befell them, and all that are left are shadows and echoes.

They were of creation, many being localized in turn. "Creation." "Balance." "Strife." And others of that sort. In the foundry known as Corhas, they assembled all of the life above them, acting as the core of their own realm. By giving themselves to the fires that generated life, they could shape the outcome of all creation above them. But their Flame grew to overtake their creation, seeking a direction of its own sake. Creation overtook the creator, before more creation could stem into life. Only one Founder escaped the city, moving through each layer of the Maw. Regressing against her nature in order to survive. T'vora, the last of the Founders, name forgotten and purpose reshaped.

#### **The Rot**

In the first days of the Heights, back when only the Foundation was built, the citizens were constantly assaulted by creatures emerging from the Maw and those suffering from Ricard's Flaying. Flames could not keep the beasts at bay, and weapons could not be made in conjunction with the links of the Great Chains. In a last ultimatum, the city turned to dark magic and alchemy, combining the two works of creation into an act of destruction. It kept the beasts at bay, but many of the miners died in the process. They were entombed in the Maw, many being reborn as curio-bound, restless-forges, and other things better left unsaid.

Such a weapon could not be destroyed, as it too served its uses. Instead, it was regulated, controlled, left to serve as instruments of threat rather than be used. The Valance took control of its production, which was overseen by each speaker of the Council. It was hoped that the threat would sway any use of violence against the still-growing city, giving them time to cement their rule and bring peace to their citizens.

The first uprisings in the Foundation, along with the creation of the Apostasy, pushed the hands of the Propers. In a last ditch attempt to collapse the uprising, the Valance unleashed the Rot into the Foundation, causing what is known as the Scourge. A strain was permanently cemented into the Foundation with each burial being entombed in the brickwork of the city, leading to smaller outbreaks happening periodically, such as the one that killed Lucan Desdemona. The Valance has done nothing to stop this spread.

### *Plot Threads in the Heights;*

#### **The Apostasy**

The City lied. A promise of shared hands, of pulling the city to its namesake, was nothing but a falsehood propagated by the ones sitting at the top of the chains. It was left up to the Foundation to build the city, to care for the city, to die for the city; those in the Propers simply watched. When the gate to the Propers was constructed, when passes permits were required to even enter a cityscape that should have been theirs, the Foundation took a breath. And the Apostasy exhaled. Born out of compliance and bloodshed, the leaders of the Apostasy are left unknown by design. If the head of a beast cannot be cut off, then the body may never die, and the Apostasy have resigned to be the beast that the Council called them to be.

Their greatest assault on the Propers was with the *Ascending Revolts*. In the month of Thermidor, 63 years before the campaign's start, a series of riots broke out across the Foundation. One took place at the center of the Encompass, blocking the elevation platform that rose into the Propers. Several members of the Apostasy attempted to reach the Council's place of chambers, but they were cut down by the soon to be elevated Untrial. Most of the skirmishes took place around the communication towers that connected the transmit lines into the Propers; they attempted to starve the city out. This was proven to be unsuccessful, however, due to the Enlisted bombarding the city with notes of evocation magic, assisted by the scholars of the Propers. Resistance soon fell as the death count rose.

In current times, the Apostasy has grown silent. The Council has made it abundantly clear; any resistance in the Foundation will cost the lives of the innocents living there. It's speculated that the current leaders of the Apostasy have been exchanged, if not expelled, leading to a time of relative peace, until the monthly sweeps of the Safeguarding Division begin. Do not mistake silence to be compliance.

#### **The Valance**

The Valance are a mysterious organization, founded on the principle belief of what the Founders were to the Heights and to the Maw itself. An elitist group, they pride themselves on having the authority, prestige, and monetary gain to be a part of their perfect society. They all wear masks because the identity is something that can be lost, extorted, without so much as a reason. After all, the Founders are not known by name, so why should they? To them, the Founders are immortalized because they gave the plan to build their empire and let others dredge for them, under them, just as the Valance seek to do now.

Their production of the Rot gives them precedence over the other members of the Council, and they know this. It was their forefathers that first came up with the design of the viral weapon, each usage of the weapon is cataloged, the individual who called for it being used being excommunicated from the group. To them, if one believes that force must be necessary in order to promote their rule, they are unfit to rule. They will still let their will be done, however, as strong commitment did build the city after all. Apart from their masks, all individualized by ranking, each member of the Valance can be noted for their shriveled and sickly skin, the result of inducting a small portion of the weapon to enter their society.

The organization has no prominent goals at the moment, other than grooming new members, securing their place on the Council, and to ensure that the Rot is kept safe. All of this will be thrown aside, however, should a Founder be discovered to be living inside the Heights. Should this occur, the organization would quickly turn to put on a "performance" for the Founder, in order to ensure that they receive their blessing. If this happens, their only goal would be to immediately turn the Rot on the Council and take control of the city, so that it can be shaped to the "Grand Architect's Design."

#### **The Great Chains**

The Chains were the first part of the city that was constructed, and the transition from a settlement into a sanctuary for all of those in the Maw. The few settlers that descended from the Underdark had devised a ring of housing around the Maw, but travel around the cliffsides was dangerous and often took days at a time to fully complete. Various bridges were constructed, but they were often liable to collapse halfway across. Thus, the Great Chains were devised.

Accessing the steel and iron gathered from ventures into the Maw, paired with transmutation magic that was built by wizards pulling shifts so long in hours they would often be able to pull from their focuses weeks after. The chains were deposited into the walls of the Mall itself, spanning across to the other ravine's edge, teams of hundreds slowly pulling the chain across to the other side. Only after two of these chains were constructed was a platform slowly formed, and so the Foundation was slowly brought into being.

Currently, the Chains require constant refinement and maintenance in order to keep the city upright. The metal which composes the chains must be routinely added to, as any cracks that appear cannot be fixed properly, only filled and smoothed over. Constantly magic must be used in order to keep the chains in the wall of the Maw, as they were not made to sustain the weight of the current Heights. Because of this, the Metallurgy Division's sole responsibility is to ensure that no harm comes to the chain. Any suspect of dealing damage to the chain is given immediate right to death by gravity, as sanctioned by the Council.

#### **The Divisions**

Each Councilmember, barring the Speaker, is a representative of the six divisions that run the Heights: The Safeguarding Division, the Metallurgy Division, the Introspection Division, the Decretum Division, the Sortilege Division, and the Reciprocal Division.

The Safeguarding Division is responsible for the training, production and enforcement of each guard in the city, in order to protect its citizens and its state of peace. The Metallurgy Division is responsible for the reclaiming of precious minerals and ores in order to keep the Great Chains at full functionality. The Introspection Division is responsible for every record ever written for the city, and to ensure that no transactions of the past occur to harm the future. The Decretum Division tends to the training of Legists, as well as cataloging each of the laws written, in order to bring about the "Law of Absolutes." The Sortilege Division is responsible for the creation of new magic and alchemy in the Maw, but also for the eradication of any force too dangerous for mortal hands. And finally, the Reciprocal Division tends to the needs of every citizen in the Heights, to ensure that all voices are accounted for and cared for.

The belief that the Speaker is divided from their house is nothing but a lie. Even now, Vosundir often takes new spells that are grafted by the Sortledge in order to import them to the Safeguarding Division. They mostly assist in the construction of new Forge-Guards, but occasionally are entombed within their weapons and ammunition in order to make them more effective, or to ensure that only the guards can use them. Currently, the city does not know of this.

### **The Safeguarding Division**

The Safeguarding Division only held sway over the city, and was thus noticed by the Council, following the Ascension riots. Before this, it was more constructed to be that of a guard, with the members present to be that of guards leftover of the Enlisted following the forays into the Maw to fend off the creatures disrupting mining operations. With the inclusion of the Forge-Sentries, mechanical soldiers that can be repaired and sent back into the field, the Division gained a power that overstepped that of each of the other Divisions: an actual threat against the Council.

Because of this, they're known to be the Right Hand of the Speaker, due to their inclusion whenever there are matters in which force must be applied. They're often reviled in the Foundation, especially with the Council's decision to almost exclusively have the guards be stocked by the Forge-Sentries with the recent murder sprees of Ivay Egrass. Tensions have been on the rise, and they do not appear to be lowering anytime soon.

Should the Division be destroyed by a raiding party, the city would surely descend into chaos. Without their public defenders to protect them, the Enlisted would surely be drafted into holding the Foundation away from the Propers, and due to their slowly decreasing numbers they would not be able to forever hold against the torrent. Still, if a city can fall because of a lack of defensive ties, and the city is split, perhaps it's destined and righteous for it to fall.

### **The Enlisted**

When the city was first being built, it was said that the Enlisted were the ones sent into the mines to ensure that the workers were safe. This is only part of the truth. There is a reason a majority of the Enlisted are Tra'Vial, and why there is no mention of these in the annals of the travel down into the Maw. The Tra'Vial were created in the first days of settlement. The Enlisted was the way to cover this up.

Deep inside the Maw, there is a sunken city scorched with burn marks, damage in passing that was not present centuries before. Life used to flourish here, trading and prospering. But they heard noises far above them. A team was sent to investigate. They grew scared, attacked, and ran. They thought their pursuers would be lost in the tunnels, that they could close off their city. But they were wrong. And when the Tra'Vial climbed their way above their city, dropped firebombs on the populace and then fell to skewer those running so they could have a safe landing, none were prepared. How could they? This was an enemy none of them had ever seen. A city full of life fell to extinction overnight, in a place where there is no day.

Upon their return to the city, the soon to be Introspection Division granted them the turn Enlisted, told tales of their victories in the mines in defending the workers there. After all, they did save lives on their ascent back to the settlement, when the cacophony caused by their assault stirred the dormant wildlife of the Maw to life. They did their duty. And as long as they continued to be the watchmen of the settlements, of the rising Heights? Then where truly is the lie?

### **The Encompass**

The Encompass was fully constructed after the first spire of the Propers was built, the elevation platform being thought of as a way of universal travel to universal worship. Channels were dug through the Foundation itself, the oldest burial-bricks being repurposed into the pathways leading down to the crucible of faith. Though the site itself has seen bloodshed, and the lift is only used for those Proper individuals seeking to circumnavigate travel through the Gate, the religious site itself is still used on the regular.

Worship is a matter that is tied to the family rather than any religious group; many of the families in the Foundation still keep to the Old Laws, and some visitors travel across the ropeways attached to the Great Chains simply to have a place to worship ancestral reliquaries. Some members of the Propers even visit this site, though most of the time they're seeking inspiration for more alchemical studies or magical properties. Most religious practices relate to the religion of the earth itself, some believe that the Maw itself is a religious zone.

The Encompass rules its own sector, and employs guards of their own choosing. They're religious zealots given peaceful purposes, often chosen from those that would have still been expelled from the city during the Exaltation. The ruling members are not named, so that each member that enters the halls of the Encompass are treated with equal fairness in the eyes of any god above or below them. They run on their own laws, intersecting with the laws of Old and the ones issued by the Council. The Council does not pass bylaws regarding the Encompass; after the Ascending Riots and the capture of the Encompass, the Council wishes nothing to do in matters of the religion of the city.

### **The Second Sun**

The Second Sun is the compressed evocation field that lights up the city of the Heights. Its light blue hue can be seen from as far as the first few tunnels leading directly into the passages of the Maw, and it's timed to brighten and recede with the passing of the "day." Most of the mechanisms of the Sun's containment field are overseen by the metallurgy Division, due to the departure from the Sortilege Division. The gears and other framework are automated by a series of pressurized weights and tiles, the only real calibration needed being framed in the workspace above the Council's compound.

The technology used to construct the Sun was stolen from the plundered city of Ver'Ghettan by the Enlisted as they torched the city into rubble. The device stolen was nothing more than a handheld cube, warm to the touch. When the sediments of a Heliograph were fed inside, energy of various types and degrees can be selected and used as a torch, beacon, or power source. The drafters of the city realized the potential of a limitless, and potentially self-sufficient, power source when the current wielder of the cube died in an encounter with hidden adversaries, powering the entire Foundation for nearly a day.

The Sun is currently run on each Heliograph body that is found in the city. Members of the Sortilege Division used illusion magic on the bodies of those to be taken while members of the Decretum Division oversee the funeral rites, before taking the bodies back to be ground into powder and fed to the sun. The cube is still inside the sun, at its very core, and it's this instrument which requires refinement by the Warden. Of course, the warden does not know of this; only members of the Introspection Division know the complete history and workings of the Second Sun, and it is one of the few secrets they are sworn to erase with their entire life's work.

### **The New Laws**

The New Laws are exactly how they sound; they were the ones made by the aspiring Legists as the Foundation was fully settled and the structural base for the Propers was being constructed. The early days were one of constant stress, as those building the city were nervous about ousting those already living in the area of the Heights, resulting in a confrontation that would turn the city into nothing more than a pile of falling rubble. By having the city confine itself to a certain set of guidelines, it slowly allowed the city to appear to be nothing more than another small settlement, before expanding into a hub of life and light that required their law for entering. The New Laws are important, now, because they allow for the city to supervise control.

The Law of Absolutes is the term that was eventually developed for the cohesion of the Old and New Laws, the way to ensure that the Heights becomes a permanent power in control of the Maw. This concept became the Decretum Division, as a way to cover this form of control. Over time, the Legists were told less and less of the greater use of the Decretum Division, rather giving more reasons for more legists to be made; the less they know and the more laws they make, the easier it would be to expand the Height's influence. An army of proxy soldiers is more easily made rather than training a single battalion.

Currently, the Decretum Division and their New Laws stand more as a symbol of reason rather than order; they're seen as peacekeepers, as the few individuals willing to keep the peace between the Foundation and the Propers. They will tend and solve legal matters and personal disputes, where the Forge-Sentries would instead shoot first and refuse to ask questions later. Rule and Order has turned to peacekeeping, because if the people have their reason to risk another series of Ascension Riots then the Council may be unable to keep their seat of power.

### **The Centerfold**

At the base of the lowering platform, through a series of ravines with ice trailing down their sides, lies the Centerfold; the home of those who have been exiled from the Heights. Originally a temporary mining outpost constructed by those who were building the Foundation, it was shoddily made a permanent residence after it was made clear there were those who would be "unwelcome" from returning. Many of the Tra'Vial who were too wounded to become Enlisted were among the first leaders of the settlement, but it soon became a hub area for those unwilling to make contact with the rising Heights. Many of the practitioners of the Old Law, such as the Gull-Weavers and Archaeids, made themselves at home here, and the Vedettes especially began to populate the city.

However, life expectancy is low, due to a fault in the Heights itself. There is meager trading done with the loading platform, much of the city is considered excommunicated cargo, and there is dumped over the side of the Heights by Forge-Guards if discovered. This leaves a city isolated in an area of the Maw with freezing temperatures to make their own food, supplies, and protection. Because of this, the city relies on a bartering system rather than gold coinage, but there is a "community center" where one's gold can be traded in for various supplies, to those newcomers to the city. Those who die in the centerfold are thrown into the frozen pools around the city, as it is believed that the waters of life will carry them to a kinder place than this life.

Various teams have been sent to try to scale the walls of the Maw, so that they may reenter the Heights. All have been proven unsuccessful, as the Forge-Guards patrol the city's edge and shoot on sight all those without identification or clearance by the Old Law. Any miscommunications can be settled by the Legists. And contrary to popular belief, advisors during the Exaltation are not sent to the Maw; they are instead lowered to a special platform out of the city of the populace and shuttled back into the Heights. Rhysar is not present at the lowering platform because of this, as it goes against what it believes the city stands for. The Council does not mind this. Those who are sent to the Centerfold deserve what awaits them there, and those living there know it. So if weapons are brought back up to the Heights, concealed in packages or in the pauldrons of Rhysar? It's only Justice.

### **The Corhas**

At the bottom of the Maw, at the precipice of the plane before all reality reverts unto itself, the Corhas lies waiting. An immense civilization left barren and abandoned, lights left lit and models of life still remnant. This city was caught in the midst of an explosion, and time itself ended there. All that remains are ashes, and those that will stir if woken. Waiting for the final Founder to return home.

Corhas used to be a city built before the Maw itself even was made. The buildings are made of materials not yet known of, and where they end the bare rock of the earth begins. Buildings taller than any spire in the Heights span across its empty streets, channels made in multiple sizes and grooves for walkways. Beings of immense size and power walked through here without a single qualm. Ancient relics, known for their power and treasured over life itself, are commonplace here. They created these things for experimentation, to plant within the world. Of course they would be showcased here. And bodies still line the streets, breathing. Do not look into their eyes.

And lying in the center of the city is an open pit housing the Breathing Flame. The size of each minute eruption is enough to dwarf the Heights. In front of it, hundreds of husks lie in shock, hands still covering their faces from the flash. Their heads turn and follow you as you travel, but they make no attempt to move. They're the bodies of the Founders, what's left of them, dried up beyond use. The Flame in front of you is the true threat. You can see faces emerge from the flames, only for a moment, before being swallowed once again. The minds of generations untold, of gods yet to be born compose each ember, and you are welcomed to join their midst. Finish what the Founders couldn't. Extinguish the Breathing Flame.

✓ *The PCs;*

### **Haera Desdemona**

The Haera that is in the campaign is not the original Haera; she is a Fractal, a being that must take the form of another mortal in order to survive, a parasite that feeds off existence. The Fractal that took Haera's form killed Haera, however, but has yet to have gone insane. Why is this?

The original Haera Desdemona was a good woman, brought down by grief. She did everything in her power to give power and prestige to the Heights, to give all of herself to her love, and he gave all of himself back to her. But her mother and father grow discontent with Lucan, not even being present at his funeral after he passed from the Rot. Left with only a child that she could feel would continue his legacy, she returned home, only to be greeted by a shadow with eyes and teeth.

Even now, that child exists; not with Haera, but somewhere. Traces of heat and thought enter the Fractal's mind occasionally, a reminder that life came into being because of her. And when she finds her child, she will do everything in her power to protect it. Mothers give up pieces of themselves in order to keep their children safe, after all, plucking pieces of their souls and watching the soul walk and be its own person. What happens when there is no humanity left to sacrifice, if the soul is not there? What will Haera give up in order to keep her child, her sanity, left from being broken?

### **T'vora Sera**

T'vora Sera, the last of the Founders, Chaos incarnate. Not much is known about her, not even to herself. She is enigma to her core, something which gives her glee. Her own name escapes her; the parts she remembers is but a fragment of her larger self. Perhaps in time, she will piece together her own memory, along with her original core word. Perhaps not.

Traveling through the Maw has led to a regressing effect on T'vora, leading to her losing many of the powers she once had. The ability to shape into her different creations was lost as she went against her own nature. By joining her creations rather than overseeing them, she has begun to lose her own identity as a Founder, instead becoming something else. Had it not been for the Breathing Flame, perhaps she would not have left Corhas in the first place. And what will she recover as she travels down to her ancestral home? All of this remains up to her, and her alone.

### **Ozwalde Mispense**

Ozwalde is one of the Legists of the city, a role designated for those skilled enough to circumnavigate, rewrite, and even evaluate the Old and New Laws. Many of the Legists are regarded as noble stalwarts, dedicated to upholding truth, no matter its location. For Ozwalde, what is noble and what is truth are relative.

Ozwalde works to further his own ambitions, and the Foundation is perfect for those individuals willing to progress at any cost. From his station, he takes contracts for those living in the Propers and those around him, many times having to wade past those waiting outside and the sleuth of letters that the V.A.L.A.S. system has to sort through. In the Propers, he's known to be a gentleman and a scholar. In the Foundation, he's one of the few reputable sources of information, and someone who can get the damn job done.

This, combined with his informant Stiletto, make him one of the few people in the Foundation whose name is actually known and respected. He's known around many of the trade-circles and discussion talks in the Foundations, and if an important law is about to be put into effect, he's the first to know. If he would only rise a certain distance higher, he would be on the radar of the Apostasy, but for now he keeps his head leveled, his eyes on the gold in front of him.

### **Tabes, Warden of Light**

The Warden of Light is one of the most well-known individuals in the Propers, a recent development that the scribes can recall occurring in the last few decades. The responsibilities of the Warden of Light entail the caretaking of the Second Sun, the source of all light and warmth in the Heights. The Warden used to be a division of the Sortilege Division, and a rather complicated place as well, as the Sun is nothing more than the concentrated solar efforts of various mages but never in a way that's considered to be "new." Only upon Warden *Nishvla Britan* campaigning for the Warden to be its own position did the public take notice of this new individual.

Under the surveillance of Warden Tabes, the city has shown the brightest it ever has, an astounding recording considering the centuries of the Heights hanging above the Maw. Frequently the Warden has "exhibitions" showcasing the outer working of the device holding the Sun above the city. This is only the most simple of operations, nothing meaningful damage could even hope to hinder. Still, the extra funds being parted to the Warden's office, along with the increased public approval, have gotten Tabes a temporary spot on the Council for surveillance; he has no power, he only believes he has an influence there.

From his office above the Council room, made entirely of glass to ensure all parameters of light pass through the room, and to ensure clear supervision, the Council is able to keep tabs on Tabes without needing to lift a finger. Still, there are no plans to "replace" the Warden at present. His well-known position does not allow for a replacement to come without backlash. And he has yet to do anything nefarious. Still, a Warden in Training is being through Fala, but the Council has little hope for her. Her anxiety does ensure that the position would never gain popularity with the crowd again, but is not enough to remove the problem entirely. For now, Tabes remains but a pesky fly on the to-do list of the Council's agenda.

✓ *The NPCs;*

### **Ivay Egrass**

Ivay Egrass, the murderous Fractal of the Foundation, is the current vessel for the Breathing Flame. Vessel is a special term, considering the wide arrays in which the Flame can manifest; while the flame can create and infect life, it only is prescient for voice, speech, thought, and sight through Ivay alone. It's a partnership which is sparing his life, considering the creeping madness setting in because of his murder of the previous Ivay. And it is for this reason that his obsession with Haera is as strong as it is.

Ivay was once another inhabitant of the Foundation, a gentle man who was content to simply sit in the corner of the streets and watch the world turn by; but the madness that creeps in once a Fractal's Host occurs slowly turnt the Fractal insane. Killing his Host, only to become his skin, was an unlikely mistake that many Fractals make, resulting in the well-documented "Purge" roughly a century ago. At the edge of the city, close to flinging himself over the edge, he instead heard a faint whisper, a voice he knew did not spawn from his own consciousness. Following it, he found a sickly flame back in his quarters, the candle flickering like a heartbeat. Within months, it had consumed his every thought, eventually entering his own mind. Any semblance of hope escaped that moment his own brain burnt into nothing but ash.

The Flame entered his skull as nothing but a flicker of ash, but it's infested to the point that every vein is full of fire instead of blood. His smile lights up the night because of embers that take the shape of teeth. His own will exists there, if only in phantom memory, the Flame being the true controller of Ivay. And their whispers have led to Haera, a fellow Fractal who has somehow escaped their madness, for the time being. Something is holding her to memory. That memory would better serve the endless flame than a fledgling monster like Haera. Time to do what Ivay does best.

### **Untrial**

Volusk'Untrial, the speaker for the Council, is the most notorious Restless-Forge in the history of the Heights, even surpassing the prestige of Rhysar. Why Rhysar embodies duty and honor, in lifting members to the Heights rather than seeing them suffer in the caverns of the Maw, Untrial has a casualty list so large that not even the records of the city have a clear number of. He prefers to keep it that way. Easier to add more to the list if it's endless.

Untrial was the finest warrior in the Arena, far before his ascension to the ranks of the Council. It chose to go down the path of being a gladiator rather than circumstance. It did not search for any other opportunities, or take the routes provided by Rhysar following it's ascension. Covered in blood it rose into the city, and covered in it Untrial remained. All it asked for in rewards for winning his matches was a bed to rest in, a progression in weapons so it never grew bored of its craft, and a metallurgy worker to suit any repairs and upgrades it could need. It never chose to gain favor for the bets placed on it, even though it won every single one. He even demanded stronger odds. This all changed during the Ascension riots. With the lack of spectators due to public safety and fear, Untrial was forced to look for opposition roaming the streets. The Apostasy members didn't even have a chance to run.

Vosundir chose for Untrial to become a Volusk not out of pride or a reward, but because he was a tool in the Restless-Forge. With Untrial, anyone who opposed him would be wiped out with a single flick of his finger. There was no reasoning, no mercy, no complication; just how bloody did he want the death to be? That's all there was to Untrial: only the thrill of the kill mattered, the tearing of flesh from bone. And with its current target? It would see how easily this crystal will break.

### **Vosundir**

Volusk'Untrial is the current speaker of the Council, and he is the 5th (?) Speaker to have been chosen in the Height's history. He's currently the longest running Speaker, due to his improved lifespan as a Gaian. As he was once also the head of the Sortilege Division, it's possible he is using some sort of alteration or enchantment magic to enhance his abilities and age. Regardless of hearsay, it's strongly cemented that he's the strongest Speaker yet, politically and otherwise.

Vosunder used to be a leader of the Sortilege Division, where he was a rising scholar of the art of dunamancy and transmutation magic. Necromancy was also a skill of his, due to his Gaian heritage. It's said he crafted his eye into a focus for his magic, the flower that stems from his face growing painstakingly slowly while he was still conscious. The tradeoff is that magic is able to travel throughout every inch of his



body at will, he's able to hide beads of magic inside his own skin in case of surprise attack. He's one of the most dangerous men to be living in the Heights, which is why he's the perfect candidate for Speaker.

His rise to power is known only fully by the Introspection Division; he wields the Safeguarding Division against threats inside the Council, and Untrial to those who oppose him personally. He's seemingly taken into the studies of the late Nieer, as well. But not much else is known about him, and that is by choice. He is the Speaker of the Council; nothing more. He is the voice of the Heights, of every matter, of every citizen. Nothing more. To be more is to step outside his own position; and he will remain the Speaker. For the good of the city. No cost too great, after all.

### **El'Skiel Nieer**

El'Skeil Nieer, The Radiant, is the ex-leader of the Sortilege Division, driven out when operatives of the Introspective Division attempted a hit on him, driving him from the city. He was known for his brilliant use of evocation magics, and was often said to be powerful enough to create a Third Sun on his own, if research had not attracted the attention of the other divisions. Now, he's nothing more than a regular commoner, forced to break his wizarding focus and all the power stored within, all in an attempt to throw off the operatives still following him.

There were two focuses of his research: the crystalline weapons, seemingly composed of the same material as Heliographs, and the strange flashes of heat that seemingly came into being whenever one was destroyed. These artifacts became a rare and priceless occurrence while exploring in the Maw, often innately magical in some form. There was no common outlier for their usage, until El'Skiel noticed a particular trend; the heat that was left when these weapons were destroyed left permanent scarring, the same type of scarring that would follow on those singed victims left behind in the wake of Ivay Egrass. But Ivay was only a recent occurrence; the singeing itself could become a pattern, tracing back centuries, if not longer. Some of the remaining pictographs of the first members of the Council even had some of the same types of scars along their wrists. Something was going on in the background of the city, and either it was invisible to its inhabitants or something intentionally buried.

On the run, El'Skiel was left without options. Anyone in the Heights was too loyal to their credit and to the Council to offer him any aid. Any spellcasting he might have had left was burnt when leaping across the wall to the Foundation, breaking his legs and mending them slowly back into place himself. Another Forge sweep was occurring at the same time; this was a predicted affair. They wanted him caught, by any means. The only salvation came with Rhysar, with whom El'Skiel helped situate into the city. If he could escape, he could trace the weapons back in the Centerfold, perhaps make a case for the next Exaltation. But someone, surrounded by dead and dying husks, kept him from leaving. And still, even now, he does not regret it.

### **Rhysar, First Forge**

Rhysar is the first Forge-Born to enter the Heights, it's not simply a title of praise; Back when the Foundation was just being constructed, when the lifting platform was not even fully constructed, a lumbering engine tore its way into the center of the camp. It was carrying a bundle of small infants from an outcropping settlement deeper in the Maw; only they had survived. It set down the children, then returned to the Maw to look for more survivors. It had no name. Only a mission: protect.

The Forge enacted this protocol for centuries, until even the spires' shadows could be felt at the entrance to the Maw. Upon the passing of the first century, Toro'Vas Nieer, the first head of the newly-founded Sortilege Division gave the Forge a title and position in the city, giving him a permanent home and total abolition from any pay he could ever find in the city. The Nieers themselves would pay back all that Rhysar paid for. Rhysar still stood at the descending platform to the Maw, but now had a home to return to at the dimming of the Second Sun. It still stands firm in position, even to the current day and age.

Rhysar does not speak of its past, or what it saw deep in the Maw. From the weather on its armor noted by the first mechanics that tended to Rhysar, it must have been down in the depths for nearly fifty years before finding the Heights. Machines run off their fiery cores, and it's now been running longer than the city itself has been standing. It's vehemence of the Maw is founded in something. But whatever that threat may be, Rhysar will ensure that it never reaches the Heights. That threat, and all others that oppose the city, will stay buried.

### **Stiletto**

Stiletto is a Curio-Bound grafted from the blades of hundreds of discarded weapons, what must have been an Enlisted skirmish far down underground. Her curio is that of a single gold piece, stuck far inside the fragment of a skull. Must have been hers, in her mind. Who else's skull would it be, just a random sods'? Waste of a corpse, in her opinion. She broke up all the blades surrounding her to crawl her way back to the city, Rhysar noting that she was one of the well-built inhabitants to actually come across the lift, that she strode onboard instead of stumbled.

Currently, she's the "advisor" to Ozwalde Mispense. This isn't a paid position, of course; he doesn't have enough gold to pay her anything. Still, he's the one responsible person in the Foundation according to her experience, which is worth its own price on its own. She's the information dealer of his brand, as well as the knife that goes behind pleasantries and too-wide smiles. His reliance on talking his way out of problems repulses her, and to her annoyance it works almost exclusively. Still, it's a living.

On her own time, she's been investigating rumors of the rising of the Apostasy once again. Having only been in the Foundation for roughly ten years, she's clearly not one of their "fit" members, nor would she want to be concerning their lifespan track record. Still, there's plenty of gold to be made for a common cause, and an entire city uprising to take back what is there is certainly a goldmine. Someone has to do the work for the city; it might as well be her, if it pays at least.

### **The V.A.L.A.S. System**

The V.A.L.A.S. System could possibly be the first truly sentient machine in all of the MAw, if it would be so aware as to question its own existence. This subsystem was gifted to Ozwalde by a mysterious donor of the Propers, the same donor that constructed his "Patience." The system consists of a box decorated with purity seals and so many beads of magic that it's impossible to distinguish the type. It was advised to place the box in the center of Ozwalde's room before activating. Ozwalde instead placed it near his mailing pipes. And the personality that evolved out of this decision has pestered Ozwalde ever since.

Currently, V.A.L.A.S. organizes and sends all of the mail that enters and leaves Ozwalde's residence. Because of its mechanical nature, it's able to somewhat control the mailing pipes that connect the house to the rest of the Foundation's lining; this includes funneling out unnecessary letters before they arrive, shredding any pertinent information that Ozwalde wants hidden, and sending IOUs to any clients that deem Ozwalde's serve to be less than satisfactory. In addition, it also controls the traps and weapons stored inside his household in case of any break ins.

V.A.L.A.S. views Ozwalde as an annoyance, as a thorn in its metallic side, but also as it's closest (and only) friend. It's the reason why it won't look into how or why it's constructed, regardless of having the ability to; if it were to change in any way, there would be no telling if it would regain the memories it had in the process. And that is the one thing that the System will not replace.

### Lucan Fydell Desdemona

Lucan Desdemona was the loyal husband of Haera Desdemona, someone without any public standing, someone who would have never made a dent in the Foundation's social pools, but he found his way into Haera's arms regardless. He was a shipmaster by trade, a niche selection of responsibilities that kept the city safe and secure. The pipes he helped construct let fresh reservoir water flow into the city. It would also serve as his eventual tomb.

On one mission, his ship capsized while installing the lines that would lead into the Propers. During his return to the city, he was ferried into the Desdemona grand household, since Haera's servants did not have the necessary medication to treat the flash-freezes he encountered while submerged in the frozen waters. During this time, Annora Desdemona slipped an additional vial into the medicines given to Lucan. He contracted the Rot soon after, and so did each of the Desdemona servants who tended to his needs. He was not the first Rot-afflicted individual in the Foundation during that year's Scourge, but he was the carrier that the Valance needed to fully grapple the Foundation.

Death is not the end for consciousness in the Maw; if anything, it is the next step, an overviewing of lives beyond their reach. And all Lucan could do was watch as his wife left his funeral, to disappear in a shadowed alleyway, and for someone wearing her skin to leave in her place. In the moments he awakens from the resting-place he's held, he still sees her; the woman pretending to be Haera. And while Lucan was never an angry man; he could never forgive the monster that killed his wife.

### Mara Desdemona

The downfalls of the Desdemonas happened long before Haera left the family. Their mother was focused on expanding the family name, their father absent writing useless words in his study, and her sister with her head in the clouds; none of them would support each other, so Mara decided to start preparing to leave. To make a name for herself. And her sister, coming back from the Foundation, is the final nail in the coffin that was this departed family.

In the days after, she moved into the Foundation, working at different programs such as those at the Lonesome Spire to help those in need and to make some sort of a difference. This is a wide swath of the city, and many are easily swallowed and forgotten; but it's worse in the Propers, where only money pays. And on leaving the Desdemonas, she has nothing in her coffers except what coins she has on her own.

In her free time, she's been trailing the Apostasy, doing whatever is requested, no matter the cost. For now, it's not much, it's just paying certain individuals to turn a blind eye, to transfer information across borders since she's yet to fully prove herself to be a city of the Foundation, to just be another rich fuck from the Propers. But she has to make a name of herself. She's been struggling under the name of the Desdemonas for all of her life; if she can't make herself her own person, then all she truly was all her mother said she was that house behind; just a pack mule.

### Petra Desdemona

The Desdemonas are a proud family, but the latter of the importance were placed on the older siblings; that left Petra to live in her own world of fantasy, away from the importance of responsibility and duty. She got to grow up exploring the Desdemona mansion, too scared to leave the house. The sort to only leave and play in the mushroom-covered canopies of the Propers because of her father by her side. The perfect kind of daughter, to listen to each terror-filled story about the Foundation and treat them as truth, as law. And she stayed in ignorance, in bliss, for all of her adult life.

The arrival and departure of her sister Haera shattered that overnight. Mara left soon after her sister left, the cracks in the floorboard of the house remaining unended. Her mother was left tending to the coffin of her husband, and she didn't recognize Petra when she looked up at who entered the room. A quiet house became silent, and then the demands began to pile up. *Never speak of them again. Stop remembering the past. Stop going out. Stay with me. Don't ever leave me again.* Her family was gone. It was time for her to leave, as well.

Currently, she lives in one of the smallest apartments in the Propers, away from anyone she could ever know. Her nights are spent partying and spending a monetary amount that isn't supervised anymore, trying to forget who she is and any face she could ever see. If she doesn't sleep, she doesn't have to see any of them again! It's better to just be Petra, just be herself! Have no other names to tie herself down. And for now? It's working. She's happy. That's all that counts. Everything else is gone.

### Argus Richis, Desdemona Servant

Argus Richis is the first servant of House Desdemona, specifically Haera's household, but was hired much later than Poma. He has only been serving the family for roughly seven years. He's a Tra'Vial with quills sticking out of his arms at random intervals, which led to his self-naming of "Richis." His fingers and hands are gnarled; as one of the younger breed of Tra'Vial, he was unable to join the Enlisted, and the wounds sustained protecting those working in the Metallurgy Divisions' mines made him incapable of normal work. For his service to the city, he was granted a work mandate by the Reciprocal Division, leading him to the Desdemonas'.

He's untrustworthy of the other Desdemonas; Haera has only ever treated him with kindness, but the others view with him eyes hidden by curtains and drapes. He was the servant who ran from household to household around the Foundation when Lucan grew ill, the Grand Mansion of the Desdemona's being his final visit. Annora Desdemona was the one who granted him medical supplies, but Argus caught the looks the other servants gave him; that of pity. When Lucan died, Argus counted that Annora nor Zemislav were present. He has not had any proof of their involvement, but he keeps track of their movements in a journal within his room.

As for the Haera of present, he has no thoughts of. He grieved in a long period when his body was broken, and when was cast out of Tra'Vial tradition for being unable to serve the city longer. Losing a part of your heart? Though Argus has no experience with this, he thinks it must be a wound of similar if not greater magnitude. He's bound to her out of gratitude, and the Tra'Vial do not take honor-debts lightly. He'll stay with her until the end, of that he is assured.

### Poma, Desdemona Servant

Poma is the second servant of House Desdemona, specifically Haera's household. She's been serving the family for roughly twenty three years of devoted service. She's one of the few Gull-Weavers with malformed wings, one much larger and well made than the other. Still, her bright eyes have supported Haera Desdemona for most of her life, being her mother where Anora Desdemona would rather be off serving the family, ironic if it wasn't for the years of silence.

Poma was one of the few Gull-Weavers that migrated to the Heights, due to her disproportionate wings making her unable to enter the dreamscape as the other Weavers. With only the Maw and the city of lights being her choices, her gamble to enter the city was the only that made sense at the time. For nearly five years she lived at the Lonesome Spire with Vish'ra Teles, one of a small group of Weavers taken under Teles' wings. When house Desdemona announced it was looking for new workers to employ, Poma was the first pushed forward. And it worked, and she's stayed at the Desdemona's ever since.

She knows that the Haera that lives in the house is not the one she raised; the moment she returned home and her eyes changed, she knew. But she also recognizes it's not her place to distinguish life, especially from someone who lived in the Maw prior to the Heights. This new Haera is curious, almost kinder in certain ways than the previous Haera, at least before Lucan. Something new, something good, can come from

this new person. Poma has heard the tales of fractals, of skinchangers and killers in the night. She thought she even saw one as a child. If Haera is one? Then she deserves to live in secret, to be safe. She's different. And Poma is, and forever will be, loyal to house Desdemona.

### **Fala, Warden in Training**

Fala was nothing more than a lowly member of a noble's family just a few years ago, staring longingly at the spectacle that was Tabes as his proclamations came across the air of the Heights. During a referral committee, her family publicly tasked her with joining the Metallurgy Division, a ceremony which is done in front of a representative of the Council. In a moment of sudden inner strength, she demanded that she instead serve Tabes, as the Warden is a role of its own position and each new Warden is chosen by a prior. Impressed by the outburst and sensing a backdoor into the affairs of the Warden, Fala was granted the title of Warden in Training, granted she perform a memory wipe of all ties granting her any chance at another path, including memory of her family.

Following the memory wipes, she regressed only slightly in personality. She is a shy and timid individual, which the Council is happy with. She tends to speak through sending stones rather than have face to face communications, which will bode well should anything happen to the current Warden. Even more surprising is her skill with technical acquisitions; she is easily most confident in the maintenance, even even construction, of parts for the sun, a feat that would normally take months or years to do. Just with her contributions alone, the sun has grown to be 5% more efficient, allowing for the Council to research the crystalline remains of Heliographs rather than waste them powering the sun.

Still, the memory wipe proved to be somewhat ineffective; Those at the Introspection Division believe that the anatomy of Vedettes to be ineffective against memory wiping, which relies on transmutation magic in order to sift brain currents into more pleasurable forms. The sedimentary composition of her skull makes this magic to be ineffective, leaving the memories to be buried rather than erased. There are certain words that act as triggers, resulting in her being unable to process reality from fiction. The Council is currently looking for replacements for Fala because of this; should Tabes learn of their tampering, there is no telling what he could broadcast to the public.

### **Madam Vish'ra Teles**

Vish'ra Teles is the owner of the Lonesome Spire, a tavern, inn, and general home to all of those who are down on their luck in the Foundation. It's a fair, squat building situated right in the middle of the city, noticeable by its billowing smokestack that can be seen even as one descends into the Maw. It was originally designed as housing for the Enlisted and other denizens who ventured into the depths below, but has since become the establishment it is today. Under Vish'ra's leadership, any who are too poor to be fed or cannot find housing may spend as much time at the Spire as needed, provided they aid in cooking, cleaning, and other chores for the establishment.

Vish'ra herself began as a simple peddler in the Foundation, crossing over from the caverns to bring some joy to the soulless city she saw as she awoke every morning. Being a Gull-Weaver, this means she separated from her community in order to take the trip alone. She didn't have much success for at least a century, multiple generations passing while she sat in her tiny corner of the world, weaving tiny snippets of dreams into reality for whoever entered her shop. This changed when a young boy, leaking tears of yellow and gold, stumbled into her building. She was the first of the *Singed*.

She was able to survive the attack by falling into her dreamscape, where she saw visions of a blaze far below the Foundation, reaching up and grasping the city until every chain broke apart and all fell into the fire below. From the moment she awakened once more, she vow to make some difference in the city, as well as start preparing those who would listen to defend the city from this threat at all costs. She doesn't have an army; she has a family, one who would do anything to protect each other, to protect each life in the city, regardless of where they may live or what they may think.

### *The Optional Bosses;*

### **Forge Servitor Valas**

The Servitor of the Safeguarding Division is a combination of 5 Restless-Forge corpses, along with Valas himself, the previous commandant of the enlisted. The Forge corpses connect him to the wall, and various wires and other instruments connect their primordial cores to his own brain, letting him have the intelligence of nearly three centuries of combat while only being linked to one mortal life. He cannot move, as his torso was cleaved for the procedure, and any disconnection of the cords leads to instant death.

Valas chose to become the Forge Servitor of his own will during the Ascenting Riots, where the Division was temporarily cut off from the rest of the city by swarms of Apostasy members outside. The Division had been experimenting with the Forge-Guards for some time, but they had yet been able to complete a task-force that could consistently respond to commands while in the field. The intelligence of a sentient mind changed this, and Valas linked to all of the guards before deploying them outside the Division. The death-rate for the Apostasy members was extreme. Valas was able to repair all of the damaged guard units.

As of now, Valas is in control of the routes the guards take, the repair of each damaged guard, and the selection of which Forge corpses to be used for Guard construction. In times of crisis, Valas is called upon by the Division to pick a select few Forges in critical condition to be "inscripted" into the cause. Any emotions of shame, regret, or sadness have been filtered away from Valas' mind; a upside to the neural link. All that is left of Valas is that of a machine, slowly expanding the Division further and further into the Foundation.

### **Annora Desdemona, Danseuse of the Valance**

The loss of one's daughter is a price no parent can bear, and Annora had a family to uphold. After Haera married a commoner, began distributing their family wealth into the worthless paupers that begged outside of her doorstep, Annora grew cold. Colder than her unfeeling husband, which scared him at times. He made the decisions of the family, as agreed, but she included every factor, every voice. Suddenly, she spoke in monotone. And Haera was quietly removed from the family tree, all without her even knowing. And then the Valance came to her aid.

An uprising would be appearing soon, they said. The city would be in grave peril if it would occur, they said. The city could even collapse, fall deep into the Maw below, they said. All they needed was a source, they said. A common strain to pluck from, they said. And Annora chooses without thinking, without questioning. Because she had to get her daughter back. She had to reclaim the family to the perfect state it was already in. Lucan would sacrifice anything to protect Haera; his life would easily be one more thing he would freely give.

But Haera was gone, once he died. She no longer took to family calls, she sent back no letters. She locked her doors, even to her. Her servants even had to throw her out after she tried to enter the mansion with her masterkey; the locks were changed thereafter. And after her husband passed away, her other children left silently from the funeral when Haera refused to even visit his deathbed, she had no one else to return to. Except the Valance. Except the ones who offered her salvation in the first place. And they accepted their new member with open arms.

### **The Gravelorn, Chosen God of the Maw**

How many souls do not reach the city again? How many are reborn incomplete, with trailing and listless arms and legs, unable to move? How many cry out into the darkness until they are either devoured by the creatures that roam the caverns once again or sink wordlessly into the embrace of the cold earth: Too many. There's a reason each survivor that is brought up from the platform of the Maw is celebrated publicly as a hero; they are the outlier. But death is not simple in the Maw, and it does not simply move away.

The earth is a restless thing, after all. So much moves about it, digging into it. Picking apart its veins and sticking hot needles into its nerves. The earth is in pain, a pain that will never stop, never cease. And all those lost souls feel it, too, are subjected to it while their minds deteriorate. Every day, they scream out as stone fills their throat; but even then, the madness doesn't end, doesn't cease. They must get out; they have to rid themselves from the crust. They push, they grab, they rage. And when they do leave the surface? They're not themselves, but a body, a collection. A legion.

The Great Wyrms are a harvest of these lost souls, a legion of alive yet dead bodies that writhe together until they're so intertwined with each other they cannot begin or end. They do not eat, or absorb, or anything of they like: they harvest. They sow destruction, slowly breaking their way to where the source of their torment lies, to where the singing in their heads will never stop ceasing: the city. They will reach it, eventually. And the Gravelorn? It's closer than anyone may think.

### **Panoptes, The Unspoken Eye**

The Rot has been academically backed that the Rot targets the organs first, going after the lungs and surrounding veins and then progressing slowly through the body until death. It has even been known to crop up in already deceased individuals, acting as temporary vestige until it latches onto any poor soul that happens to tread nearby. In conjunction, those who are Singed and yet cling to life are nothing more than husks, doing the bidding or some other entity. The minds are entirely broken, the only thing left in their skulls being ash. So, what happens when a Singed individual comes across something containing the Rot? Entities like Panoptes are born.

Panoptes is a being of eviscerated skin, burnt to a charcoal ash and stretched out to become timber. What could have been clothing is nothing more but smudges of dark shadows across its body. But its head, split down until the neck, houses nothing but eyes, a puss-filled green and oozing. It doesn't move, though the creaking of its bones would signify that; it moves between shadows, eyes that catch onto prey and chase them down until they're nothing but imprints on the cobblestone below.

The Breathing Flame is unable to rest full control over this being, for there not being any remaining organs for it to seize control of. It has enough control to see through its eyes, to choose how it treats its victims, but it cannot stop Panoptes from attacking by any means. Many suitable candidates for its control have been snuffed out by Panoptes' gaze. But, no matter. There is more to see, more to erase. And the eye will always gaze ever outward.

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