

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS LORE BOOK

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Enjoy :D

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Ionian



Ionian is a land of unspoiled beauty and natural magic. Its inhabitants, living in scattered settlements across this massive island continent, are a spiritual people who seek to live in harmony and balance with the world. There are many orders and sects across Ionian, each following their own (often conflicting) paths and ideals. Self-sufficient and isolationist, Ionian has remained largely neutral in the wars that have ravaged Valoran over the centuries – until it was invaded by Noxus. This brutal conflict and occupation has forced Ionian to reassess its place in the world. How it reacts and the future path Ionian will follow is as yet undetermined, but will be of great importance to Runeterra.

Void



Screaming into existence with the birth of the universe, the Void is a manifestation of the unknowable nothingness that lies beyond. It is a force of insatiable hunger, waiting through the eons until its masters, the mysterious Watchers, mark the final time of undoing.

To be a mortal touched by this power is to suffer an agonizing glimpse of eternal unreality, enough to shatter even the strongest mind. Denizens of the Void realm itself are construct-creatures, often of only limited sentience, but tasked with a singular purpose—to usher in total oblivion across Runeterra.

Noxus



Noxus is a powerful empire with a fearsome reputation. To those beyond its borders, Noxus is brutal, expansionist and threatening, yet those who look beyond its warlike exterior see an unusually inclusive society, where the strengths and talents of its people are respected and cultivated. Its people were once a fierce reaver culture until they stormed the ancient city that now lies at the heart of their empire. Under threat from all sides, they aggressively took the fight to their enemies, pushing their borders outward with every passing year. This struggle for survival has made the Noxians a deeply proud people who value strength above all, though that strength can manifest by many different means. Anyone can rise to a position of power and respect within Noxus if they display the necessary aptitude, regardless of social standing, background, homeland, or wealth.

Mount Targon



Mount Targon is the mightiest peak in Runeterra, a towering peak of sun-baked rock amid a range of summits unmatched in scale anywhere else in the world. Located far from civilization, Mount Targon is utterly remote and all but impossible to reach save by the most determined seeker. Many legends cling to Mount Targon, and, like any place of myth, it is a beacon to dreamers, madmen and questors of adventure. Some of these brave souls attempt to scale the impossible mountain, perhaps seeking wisdom or enlightenment, perhaps chasing glory or some soul-deep yearning to witness its summit. The ascent is all but impossible, and those hardy few who somehow survive to reach the top almost never speak of what they have seen. Some return with a haunted, empty look in their eyes, others changed beyond all recognition, imbued by an Aspect of unearthly, inhuman power with a destiny few mortals can comprehend.

Demacia



Demacia is a strong, lawful society with a prestigious military history. It values the ideals of justice, honor and duty highly, and its people are fiercely proud. Demacia is a self-sufficient, agrarian society, with abundant, fertile farmland, dense forests that are logged for lumber, and mountains rich with mineral resources. It is inherently defensive and insular, partly in response to frequent attacks from barbarians, raiders and expansionist civilizations. Some suggest that the golden age of Demacia has passed and unless it is able to adapt to a changing world – something many believe it is simply incapable of doing – that its decline is inevitable. Nevertheless, Demacia remains one of the dominant powers in Valoran, and boasts the most elite, well-trained army in all of Runeterra.

Zaun



Zaun is a large, undercity district, lying in the deep canyons and valleys threading Piltover. What light reaches below is filtered through fumes leaking from the tangles of corroded pipework and reflected from the stained glass of its industrial architecture. Zaun and Piltover were once united, but are now separate, yet symbiotic societies. Though it exists in perpetual smogged twilight, Zaun thrives, its people vibrant and its culture rich. Piltover's wealth has allowed Zaun to develop in tandem; a dark mirror of the city above. Many of the goods coming to Piltover find their way into Zaun's black markets, and hextech inventors who find the restrictions placed upon them in the city above too restrictive often find their dangerous researches welcomed in Zaun. Unfettered development of volatile technologies and reckless industry has rendered whole swathes of Zaun polluted and dangerous. Streams of toxic runoff stagnate in the city's lower reaches, but even here people find a way to exist and prosper.

Piltover



Piltover is a thriving, progressive city whose power and influence is on the rise. It is Valoran's cultural center, where art, craftsmanship, trade and innovation walk hand in hand. Its power comes not through military might, but the engines of commerce and forward thinking. Situated on the cliffs above the district of Zaun and overlooking the ocean, fleets of ships pass through its titanic sea-gates, bringing goods from all over the world. The wealth this generates has given rise to an unprecedented boom in the city's growth. Piltover has - and still is - reinventing itself as a city where fortunes can be made and dreams can be lived . Burgeoning merchant clans fund development in the most incredible endeavors: grand artistic follies, esoteric hextech research, and architectural monuments to their power. With ever more inventors delving into the emergent lore of hextech, Piltover has become a lodestone for the most skilled craftsmen the world over.

Shadow Isles



The land now known as the Shadow Isles was once a beautiful realm, but it was shattered by a magical cataclysm. Black Mist permanently shrouds the isles and the land itself is tainted, corrupted by malevolent sorcery. Living beings that stand upon the Shadow Isles slowly have their life-force leeched from them, which, in turn, draws the insatiable, predatory spirits of the dead. Those who perish within the Black Mist are condemned to haunt this melancholy land for eternity. Worse, the power of the Shadow Isles is waxing stronger with every passing year, allowing the shades of undeath to extend their range and reap souls all across Runeterra.

Shurima



The empire of Shurima was once a thriving civilization that spanned a vast desert. After an era of growth and prosperity, the fall of its gleaming capital left the empire in ruins. Over millennia, tales of Shurima's glorious city became myth and religion among the descendants of the scattered survivors.

Most of the nomadic inhabitants of Shurima search for basic sustenance in an unforgiving land. Some defend small outposts built around a few oases. Others hunt buried riches among the ruins of the fallen empire, or obtain mercenary work, taking coin for their deeds before disappearing back into the sands. Now, the tribes are stirred by whispers from the heart of the desert: the city of Shurima has risen again.

Bilgewater



Bilgewater is a haven for smugglers, marauders, and the unscrupulous, where fortunes are made and ambitions shattered in the blink of an eye. For those fleeing justice, debt, or persecution, it is a city of new beginnings; no one on the twisted streets of Bilgewater cares about your past. It's a melting pot of cultures, races, and creeds, alive with activity at all hours.

While incredibly dangerous, Bilgewater is also ripe with opportunity, free from the shackles of government, regulation, and moral constraints. If you have the coin, almost anything can be purchased in Bilgewater, from outlawed hextech to the favor of local crime lords. Nevertheless, come daybreak, the unwary are found floating in the harbor, their purses empty and their throats slit.

Freljord



The Freljord is a harsh and unforgiving land. Proud and fiercely independent, its people are born warriors, with a strong raiding culture. While there are many individual tribes within the Freljord, the battle lines are being drawn in a three-way civil war that will determine the future for them all. One tribe unflinchingly honors the traditions that have ensured its survival; another follows the dream of a united future, as foretold by a young idealist; while the third worships the power of an enigmatic sorceress.

Bandle City



Opinions differ as to where exactly the land of the Yordles is to be found. Some maintain these fey creatures live far to the southeast, beyond a range of impassable mountains. Others claim the Yordles live under grassy green hills or deep in the hearts of impenetrable forests. Perhaps some of these tales are true or maybe none, for no expedition mounted to find the Yordle homeland has ever located it. Which is not to say that no one has visited the land of Yordles, for many claim to have travelled through unseen portals into a land of fey enchantment populated by diminutive creatures of mischief. In Bandle City every sensation is heightened for non-Yordles; colors are incredibly vivid, the food and drink intoxicates the senses for years and, once tasted, will never be forgotten. The sunlight is eternally golden, the waters crystal clear, and every harvest brings fruitful bounty. It is also a place of unfettered magic, where the incautious can be led astray by its myriad wonders and end up lost in a dream until they drop dead of hunger and thirst. Those who claim to have travelled to Bandle City speak of a timeless quality, which may explain why many such tale-tellers appear to have aged tremendously or, in fact, never return at all.

Kayn

Biography

A peerless practitioner of lethal shadow magic, Shieda Kayn battles to achieve his true destiny—to one day lead the Order of the Shadow into a new era of Ionian supremacy. He audaciously wields the sentient darkin weapon Rhaast, undeterred by its creeping corruption of his body and mind. There are only two possible outcomes: either Kayn bends the weapon to his will... or the malevolent blade consumes him completely, paving the way for the destruction of all Runeterra.

Noxian by birth, Kayn and others like him were conscripted as child soldiers, a cruel practice employed by only the most devious commanders of the empire. Ionian compassion was a weakness to be exploited—their warriors would hesitate before striking down a supposed innocent. Thus, barely able to lift the blade he had been given, Kayn's first day in battle was also expected to be his last.

The Noxian forces landed at the mouth of the Epool River. Kayn and the others were a reluctant vanguard, facing disorganized bands of locals defending their home from these returning invaders. While his young comrades were cut down or fled the battlefield, Kayn showed no fear. He dropped his heavy sword and snatched up a fallen sickle, turning to face the shocked Ionians just as the Noxian regulars swept in from the flank.

The carnage was staggering. Farmers, hunters—even a handful of vastaya—all were butchered without ceremony.

Two days later, after word had spread throughout the southern territories, the Order of the Shadow came upon the grisly scene. Their leader, Zed, knew this area had no tactical significance. This massacre was intended as a message. Noxus would show no mercy.

A flickering glint of steel caught his eye. A child of no more than ten lay in the mud, leveling his broken sickle at the master assassin, bloody knuckles straining white. The boy's eyes harbored a pain that belied his age, yet still burned with all the fury of a hardened warrior. This tenacity was not something that could be taught. Zed saw in this child, this abandoned Noxian survivor, a weapon that could be turned against those who had sent him here to die. The assassin held out his hand and welcomed Kayn into the Order of the Shadow.

Acolytes traditionally spent years training with a single weapon of their choosing, but Kayn mastered them all—to him, they were mere tools, and *he* was the weapon. Armor he viewed as a cumbersome burden, instead cloaking himself in shadows and slaying his enemies with quickness and stealth.

These swift executions instilled fear in the hearts of those fortunate enough to be spared.

And as Kayn's legend grew, so did his arrogance. He truly believed that one day his power would eclipse even that of Zed himself.

This hubris led Kayn to embrace his final test: to seek out a darkin weapon recently unearthed in Noxus, and prevent it being used against the weary defenders of Ionia. He accepted without hesitation, never questioning why he had been chosen for this task. Indeed, where any other acolyte would have destroyed the living scythe known as Rhaast, Kayn took it for himself.

The corruption took hold the moment his fingers closed around the weapon, locking them both in a fateful struggle. Rhaast has long awaited the perfect host in order to join its darkin brethren and lay waste to the world, but Kayn will not be easily dominated. He returns to Ionia in triumph, convinced that Zed will name him the new leader of the Order of the Shadow.

Story

Kayn stood confidently in the shadow of the noxtoraa, surrounded by dead soldiers, and smiled at the irony. These triumphal arches of dark stone were raised to honor the strength of Noxus—to instill fear and to demand fealty from all who passed beneath them. Now this one was a tombstone, a monument to false strength and arrogance, and a symbol of the fallen warriors' own fear turned against them.

Kayn relished fear. He counted on it. It was a weapon, and as his brothers in the Order of the Shadow had mastered their katana and their shuriken, Kayn had mastered fear.

But as he felt Noxian soil beneath him for the first time in years, amid the enemy soldiers slain and soon to be forgotten, there was unease. It hung in the air like the pressure before a storm, begging to be released.

Nakuri, Kayn's fellow acolyte of the Order, reversed the grip on his blade and prepared for a more personal fight. To his credit, he almost managed to hide the tremor in his voice. "What's it going to be, brother?"

Kayn said nothing. His hands rested empty at his sides. He knew he was in control. Even so, he felt a flickering sense of déjà vu, like something out of a dream. It came in a flash, and then was gone.

A voice rose from the empty space between them—a dark and hateful voice that echoed with the pained cries of a thousand battlefields, daring each of them to act.

"Who will prove worthy?"

Zed had summoned his greatest student.

Spies of the Order had confirmed the disheartening rumors. The hated Noxians had discovered an ancient scythe of darkin origin, as powerful as any magic in Ionia. A single eye of crimson hate stared out from the heel of the blade, tempting the strongest of men to wield it in battle. Evidently, none had proved worthy. All who touched it were quickly and painfully consumed by its malevolence, so it had been wrapped in chainmail and sackcloth, and secured by a guarded caravan bound for the Immortal Bastion.

Shieda Kayn knew what would be asked of him. This would be his final test.

He had reached the outskirts of the coastal city of Vindor before he ever considered the journey's significance. Taking the fight to the enemy in their own land was audacious. But so was Kayn. There was no other who could match his talents, none to whom Zed would entrust the fate of Ionia, and so there could be no doubt: Kayn was destined for greatness.

He set his trap shortly before sunset. The approaching caravan was just visible in the distance, as wisps of dust rising into the orange sky—ample time to dispatch the three guards at the noxtoraa.

He moved in silence across the archway's lengthening shadow as the first guard paced out a patrol. Kayn summoned his shadow magic and stepped into the black stone wall as if it were a passage open only to him. He could see the guards in silhouette, grasping their pikes tightly with both hands.

He lunged from the edifice cloaked in shadow, and snuffed the life from the second guard with his bare hands. Before the third could even react, Kayn dissolved into tendrils of pure darkness and darted across the cobbled road, reforming in front of his victim. In a flash, he wrenched the man's head around, snapping his neck with ease.

The first guard heard the bodies fall, lifeless and limp, and turned toward Kayn.

The assassin smiled, taking time to relish the moment. "It paralyzes, does it not?" he hissed, slipping into the shade of the noxtoraa once more. *"The fear..."*

He rose from the quaking soldier's own shadow.

"This is the part where you run, Noxian. Tell others what you witnessed here."

The soldier threw down his pike and sprinted for the safety of Vindor. He didn't get far.

Clad in robes every bit as dark as Kayn's, Nakuri leapt from behind the noxtoraa and plunged his katana into the belly of the fleeing soldier. The other acolyte locked eyes with Kayn. "The vaunted strength of Noxus? Such delusion..."

"I knew you were impetuous, brother," Kayn spat. "But this? Following me all this way, hoping to share in my glory?"

There was no time for further admonishment. They could hear the caravan of soldiers approaching.

"Get out of sight, Nakuri. I will deal with you later. If you survive."

The long shadows of twilight hid the bodies until the approaching soldiers were almost beneath the grand arch.

"Hold!" the first outrider cried, drawing his sword. "Fan out! Now!"

Confusion set in among the others as they left their horses and, for the first time, Kayn laid eyes on their cargo. It was just as Zed had described—wrapped in chainmail and sackcloth and strapped to the back of a sturdy Vindoran steed.

Patience was a virtue that Nakuri did not possess, and he heedlessly dove for the nearest soldier. Kayn always selected his targets carefully, and so struck with precision at the lead outrider, felling him with his own sword.

He turned again to the Vindoran, but the scythe was gone.

No. He had come too far to fail.

"Kayn!" Nakuri yelled as he cut down one soldier after another. "Behind you!"

A desperate Noxian had freed the weapon, its red eye now revealed and glowing with inhuman rage. The soldier's own eyes grew wide as he swung in vicious arcs at his own comrades. He was clearly not in control, trying in vain to release the scythe.

The rumors were true.

Calling again on his shadow magic, Kayn dove *into* the writhing Noxian's darkin-corrupted flesh. For the briefest of moments, he saw through the eyes of this ageless being, witnessing millennia of inflicted pain and suffering, screams and lamentations. This thing was death reborn again and again. It was the purest evil, and it had to be stopped.

He burst from what was left of the Noxian—the soldier's flesh having warped into scales of hardened carapace that shattered into black shards and choking dust. All that remained was the scythe, its eye now closed. Kayn reached for it as Nakuri dispatched the last of their enemies.

"Brother, stop!" the acolyte cried, flicking blood from his katana. "What are you doing? You saw what it can do! It must be destroyed!"

Kayn faced him. "No. It is mine."

The two of them drew up, neither willing to back down. Beyond the city boundaries, warning bells began to toll. The moment seemed to stretch out.

Nakuri reversed the grip on his blade. "What's it going to be, brother?"

The scythe spoke to Kayn, then. It seemed as if it was echoing in his mind, and yet the other acolyte's widening eyes showed he had heard it too.

"Who will prove worthy?"

Kayn conjured fingers of darkness that snatched up the weapon, lifting it into the night and spinning it into his waiting hands. It felt like a part of him, like it had always been a part of him, as if he alone was born to wield it. He spun it with a comfortable flourish and leveled the blade toward Nakuri's throat.

"Do what you must."

Rakan

Biography

As mercurial as he is charming, Rakan is an infamous vastayan troublemaker and the greatest battle-dancer in Lhotlan tribal history. To the humans of the Ionian highlands, his name has long been synonymous with wild festivals, uncontrollable parties, and anarchic music. Few would suspect this energetic, traveling showman is also partner to the rebel Xayah, and is dedicated to her cause.

On the ancient, mystical borders of Ionia's deep forests live the last of the Lhotlan vastaya. It is a place where magic is breathed like air and time has little meaning. To these chimeric creatures, the mortal realms have become like an unforgiving desert, virtually devoid of magic. Few willingly travel far from their shrinking lands, but Rakan has long walked a riskier path. He journeys along the edges of the world's magical streams, as an explorer, emissary, and song catcher for his tribe.

An entertaining rogue, a welcome performer for any tavern or village carnival, Rakan was content with the simple adventures of this life on the road... until he had a chance encounter with Xayah at the harvest festival in Vlonqo.

Seeing her in the crowd, Rakan performed one of his old songs, entrancing the entire town with his gleaming plumage. Though countless human and vastayan women had fallen for him in the past, this violet raven seemed immune to his charms, though not uninterested. How could she see him and yet choose not to follow him? It was a puzzle with no easy answer.

Intrigued, the battle-dancer decided he would accompany Xayah on her travels. He became fascinated by how she interacted with the world. She seemed always prepared, aloof, and focused where he was uninformed, affable, and frivolous—but in any dangerous situation, they fought together with uncanny harmony. Soon enough, the pair became inseparable.

After months of courtship, Rakan began to see the world through Xayah's eyes. Inspired by his partner's singular drive, he joined her crusade to reclaim the power of the vastaya, and take back all that their people had lost.

Through Xayah, he had found purpose, and Rakan had fallen in love.

Story

"Two paths lead to the monastery fortress from the villages below it," Xayah begins.

I follow her eyes and see a pair of golden stairways that stretch down from the mountain temple to the farmhouses below. Each wood-woven home probably has a whole family inside it. There, mortals are born, die, and—most importantly—create new songs.

Probably with harps and drums. Maybe flutes? I should make a reed flute later. First, I need to fluff my cloak. Did I remember to clean my feathers? The town below must have an inn. A bottle of wine would be great right now.



"Rakan..." Xayah says.

Crap. She was telling me the plan. I focus back on her face, on her crooked smile. The sunset's last rays reflect in her eyes. I love her eyelashes. I want to—

"Repeat it back to me."

Something in the monastery. She was... Uh...

"I *rendezvous* with you at..." I say, but I've already lost the thread. I pull at one of the feathers on my head, hoping to pluck the idea from it.

A tiny shimmer of light glistens from her scrumptious bottom lip. Are her lips purple today? They were violet yesterday.

"They will kill me if they catch me," she says.

The shock of the thought takes my breath. I feel my face twist into a snarl. "Who?!" I demand.

"The guards," she replies. "It's always guards."

"Then I'll distract them! When?"

She points to the sky. "Look for a green flash before the sun sets. Then draw the guards away from the western walls while I run along the ramparts to the cells."

"I put on a show the moment the sun sets," I say. "Where do we meet?"

"At the gate. I'll throw a golden blade into the sky. But you have to be there in ten breaths," Xayah says, plucking a feather from my cloak.

"I will be at that gate the moment you throw the blade," I say. Nothing in my life is more certain than that.

"I know."

She nods, and begins telling me the safest path to take. She plans things, which is why I know she

will be okay. Wow, the sky is gorgeous right now. That cloud is shaped like an eggplant. I saw a dog once...

I do not like these steps. I do not like them. The gold leaf covering the stone is almost the same color as my feathers. It's infuriating. I consider changing their hue, but it would take some magic. Damn, I can't be tired when she needs me. Xayah probably sent me this way *knowing* my plumage would blend in here. A red cape would look better against these steps. Maybe indigo? What's around this corner?

More steps. Only humans would cut stone into flat shapes to make a mountain boring! I should climb the cliff. Xayah said to take the steps... I'm pretty sure.

I pick up some pebbles and begin to juggle them. I hear the magic writhing north of me, within the twisting roots of the Lhradi Forest.

The forest's song finds its way into my head, and I begin to sing it.

"What was that?" a voice echoes from above.

An entry way! A human guard appears. His clothing is dark as shadow.

"Who are you?" he demands.

"I am Rakan!" I reply. How can anyone not know that?



"Who?"

I don't like him. I hate him more than steps.

"I am Rakan! The battle-dancer of the Lhotlan tribe. I am the song of the morning. I am the dance of the midnight moon. I am the charm that—"

"It's that vastayan entertainer," another guard interrupts. He too wears boring clothing—clothes I

haven't seen in this area before.

The first guard wears a shiny golden amulet on his chest. I snatch it from him.

"Hey!"

"What's this?" I ask. He doesn't deserve *this*. Whatever *this* is.

He grasps for it, but I flip it around my hand while still juggling the pebbles in the other.

"Give me that!"

I flick each stone into his face.

"No," I say. Then, as innocently as I can, I ask, "Is it important?"

He draws a pair of hook-swords. I take one away from him before he can raise them.

"Open the gate, I'll give you back this... uh... shiny thing," I offer as I twirl his amulet in my palm, and then send it spinning up my arm.

Instead, the rude fool swings at me! I flip over his attack, and land behind him. He turns to slash again. I dive under his blade, using my rear to knock him off balance. He falls down the steps with a scream.

The other guard watches his friend tumbling away, then looks back to me. I shake my head at him.

"Honestly, how could anyone not know who I am?"

This one stabs at me with his spear. I twist past him, allowing my feathered cloak to envelop him for a moment. Blinded, he stumbles and trips over himself. He falls onto his shield and shoots down the stairway with a clack-clack-clacking sound. Well, until he crashes into his friend on the first landing.

The impact sends them both sprawling. I laugh. *Now* I get steps.

"You are terrible dancers," I say as I check my cloak for dirt.

The two *people* stumble to their feet, glaring up at me.

"You okay?" I ask, thankful for the amusement.

They roar as they rush up the steps. Ungrateful bastards.

I leap away from them and ask, "Wanna know the difference between a party and a fight?"

They slash at me with their weapons again and again.

"One is an entertaining day," I say as I send them back down the stairs. "The other is... shorter."

A deafening gong sounds behind me. I smile. The fun part begins.

“You gotta do better than that!” I yell, taunting my pursuers as I run. I do need to get out of here, though. There are twenty guards now. Okay, maybe thirty? More than *lots*.

Running through their sleeping chambers was a bad idea. However, it did give me a chance to freshen up.

Some of the men have those strange crossbows. They use fire from a tube. They had a name. I’m gonna call ‘em tubebows. Their shots explode around me, eating holes into the wall as I dive out of the room.

I slide into the courtyard, performing a full twist to give it some flair. The gate is open. I could run for it, but Xayah needs me.

Hidden in an alcove, a guard swings at me with a large tubebow. *Or is bowtube better?* He pulls at the trigger. I leap toward him, diving over his shot.

“What’s a good rhyme for tubebow?” I ask out loud.

I kick the guard up in the air. As he falls, I spin and introduce my hand to his cheek. The sound is louder than his weapon.

“Oh, slap!” I say, mimicking its intensity. The human rolls to his feet, pulling a short sword. “How are you not getting the message?!”

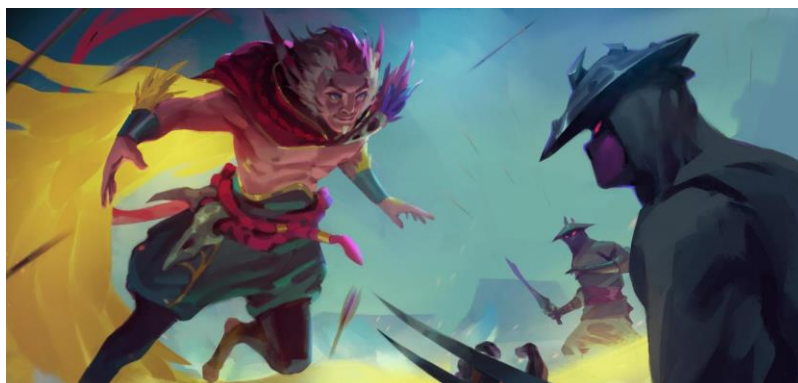
I wonder if I can find a kitchen. That’s where the chocolate would be.

The light in the sky is changing. I leap back into the air to check the sun’s location again. It disappears behind the hills, and an orb of green light flashes above it.

“Party time!” I scream. Now, the entire castle is chasing me.

“Surrender yourself!” a guard in a metal hat yells.

“No! I am distracting you!” I reply. He looks at me confused. I’m gonna slap him next.



A hail of arrows launches from the opposite wall. I swerve through them, enjoying the whistle they make as their fletching passes me.

Would I look good in that metal hat?

The golden blade hangs in the air for a second before falling. Xayah is ready to go.

I take my first breath. She said I had ten, but four breaths is much too long. I need to know she's safe.

"Wanna see some sweet moves?" I ask the nearest human.

He doesn't seem enthused. I roll through the group and appear behind him. He turns just in time to meet my cloak halfway. My feathers spin him up into the air like a top. Twelve spins is my record, but that was on a hill.

Second breath. The human slams into the ground after nine rotations. Damn. I don't have time to try again.

Third breath. I have to make it back to where she needs me, back to Xayah.

I leap up the rampart, then bound off its roof toward the gate.
I take the fourth breath in midair.

Xayah runs toward the gate with some fancy *juloahs*—they are hairy where we have colored feathers. They must be from the Sadjoko tribe. Too formal looking, but I do like the thick ridge of hair that flows along the back of their forearms. I should make my feathers do that. The eldest one's sarong seems like a terrible idea.

"We'll never make it," he cries. "They have rifles!"

"You mean the tubebows?" I ask.

Akunir stares at me blankly.

"Those are out of ammo," I explain. "The Xini longbows too."

"What?! How?"

"I am Rakan," I explain. I expect this from humans, but my own kind?

"All of you, run for the tree line," Xayah says.

A dozen men, covered in flour and chocolate, run out from the guardhouse. Mixed with eggs, they would make a thing called 'cake.' Pies are better though...

"Run!" Xayah yells. When the old juloah fails to move, I pull him along.

Coll kneels beside her guard's body. She and Xayah pray that his spirit finds our lands. One of his horns is broken, blood pools in the leaves around him. Coll removes the last arrow from his corpse. He carried her all the way here, even after the humans wounded him.



This julioah should not have died. Someone loved him. They will sing his songs. But only silence will answer.

My eyes well with tears. Softly, I sing for his loss, and his family's.

Xayah stands with her fist clenched. She won't grieve now. Instead, the pain will find her tonight when she thinks I'm asleep. That is her way. I will kiss away her sorrow then.

The consul is named Akunir. He might have been a battle-dancer when he was young. He and Xayah begin arguing about politics.

Coll kisses the forehead of her guard. Her jaw is tight. She holds an anger stronger than Xayah's. She glares at her husband Akunir. She has been waiting for him to listen for far too long.

"I will go back north, Akunir," Coll says as she rises. "I will tell them what was done to us." Her arms are as tight as branches, rigid against her sides.

"Coll, no," Akunir protests.

"I will bear word of Jurelv's fate to his kin, and mourn with them," she says. That must have been the guard's name. Perhaps he was kind. I like the smile lines on the side of his face. "Then, I will muster arms and prepare the tribe to fight."

"You cannot do that!" the consul yells.

"I forsake my claim to you. I forsake your claim to me," she speaks coldly.

Akunir looks as if he's been stabbed. He did not see this running down the hillside? Or in the forest? Or beside the dead guard? It was decided long ago. Moons ago.

"Coll... please."

"No," she states simply. He moves to grab her. I block him.

"I will speak with my mate," he says.

I can feel his breath on my chin. He ate guloo fruit recently. My nose nearly touches his forehead. He glares up at me.

I simply shake my head and shrug. I don't need words. For this, silence is better.

His remaining two guards tense. They don't want to dance with me. I am Rakan. They know my name. They glance nervously to Xayah holding her blades. They know her name too.

"Thank you, Xayah," Coll says before limping away.

Akunir and his guards watch her go. Wordlessly, they set off to the south, leaving us alone.

I move close to Xayah. I feel her sadness for Jurelv, Coll, and for Akunir. I'll drink wine tonight. Then I'll sing rude songs.

"Promise me nothing will come between us like that, *mieli*," she says.

"We're not like them, *miella*. We'll never be like them," I reply. I can feel her worry. She's smarter than me about so many things, but foolish about love sometimes.

"Where to now, Xayah?"

"Let's just stay here a moment longer."



I wrap my cloak and arms around her. I will tickle her later. We will laugh and drink. She will plan and I will sing. I feel her cheek on my chest. I'm glad that Xayah needs me now.

"Repeat it back to me," she says.

"We are not like them," I say again. "We are not like them."

Xayah

Biography

Deadly and precise, Xayah is a vastayan revolutionary waging a personal war to save her people. She uses her speed, guile, and razor-sharp feather blades to cut down anyone who stands in her way. Xayah fights alongside her partner and lover, Rakan, to protect their dwindling tribe, and restore their race to her vision of its former glory.

As a child, Xayah loved listening to her father sing the ancient folk-hymns about vastayan heroes. The haunting melodies transported her to a long-forgotten time, when the spirit realm danced freely throughout the physical world. But, with every new generation, humans encroached further into the Lhotlan tribelands, disrupting the raw, chaotic essence of Ionia for their own purposes. Unwilling to stand by and watch her kind fade, Xayah ignored the decrees of her people and set out to reason with the humans.

She ventured into villages beyond her secluded tribal home, and learned how little she knew of the outside world. A group of poverty-stricken villagers mobbed her, some of them trying to steal her feathers as priceless trophies. Others were fearful of her strange appearance and summoned the authorities, forcing her to defend herself. Xayah's attackers were soon taught the dangers of getting in her way, as she skewered them with her lethal quills.

Dismayed, she returned to her home, only to discover that her tribe, including her father, was missing without a trace. An ancient vastayan temple had been tainted by unnatural shadow magic, disrupting its connection to the spirit realm. Xayah destroyed the temple in order to dispel the corruption. Almost instantly, magic flowed back into the surrounding lands. It was a beautiful sight, but her tribe was still nowhere to be found.

After years spent flitting in and out of the most fortified strongholds and leaving a trail of bodies in her wake, she became known as "The Violet Raven." She lived alone, focused only on the next mission, and the next step toward freedom for her kind.

But then she met another vastayan who would change her life forever. As she entered the remote mountain town of Vlonqo in search of a stolen vastayan artifact, she was struck by the strange sight of a braying crowd of excitable humans. Onstage before them stood a preening, flamboyant performer, a veritable golden peacock, who sang old vastayan songs for his captivated audience. As he finished his show with a dazzling array of cheap tricks—as Xayah saw them—the crowd erupted and chanted his name: "Rakan." He took a theatrical bow. She dismissed him as a buffoon.

Xayah willed herself to ignore the entertainer, and completed her mission. She made her escape, which she had to admit had become far easier thanks to the buffoon's distraction of Vlonqo's inhabitants.

Despite vowing never to see this "Rakan" again, she couldn't seem to get him off her mind. It was a strange and complicated feeling; there was a *lightness* to his spirit that she found aggravatingly alluring.

As she left town, Xayah was preoccupied by these strange thoughts, leaving her momentarily distracted to an ambush from a group of mercenaries. She had been expecting a fight, so she was

glad to get her feathers bloody. A good brawl seemed the perfect antidote for useless diversions and unwanted feelings.

That was when Rakan made his grand entrance.

Xayah insisted she didn't need the swaggering vastayan's help. Rakan insisted he didn't care—he just didn't want to miss the party. Through the course of the fight, Rakan proved an unorthodox, but surprisingly dauntless and effective, ally. He leapt and pirouetted through the attackers who couldn't take their eyes off him, providing Xayah ample time to strike them down with devastating accuracy.

In spite of her protestations, Rakan continued to follow Xayah. Over time, she grew to welcome his company and—though she was initially loath to admit it—the world didn't feel so broken and lonely. They became inseparable, with her passion for the vastayan cause infecting the showboating battle-dancer. She has adapted to his free-spirited ways, utilizing the chaos Rakan creates as perfectly timed distractions. Together, they fight to release Ionia's abundant flow of magic so that the vastaya might thrive once again.

Story

Rakan is the worst.

He's not listening. He's fixated on his own golden feathers—as if they'd changed from when he cleaned them this morning. I'm going to have to repeat the plan. Although, thinking it over again, it probably *was* too complicated for a rescue mission. Simple is better.

"They will kill me if they catch me," I tell him.

"Who?!" He looks ready to kill at the thought of anyone harming me.

"The guards," I say. "It's always guards."

"Then I'll distract them!" He puffs his chest out. "When?"

"Look for a green flash before the sun sets. Then draw the guards away from the western walls while I run along the ramparts to the cells."



"I put on a show the moment the sun sets," he says like it was his idea. "Where do we meet?"

"At the gate. I'll throw a golden blade into the sky. But you have to be there in ten breaths." I pull one of his feathers from his cloak. It's warm on my fingers. A memory floods back of me lying in his

arms by the Aphae Waterfall. The sun filtering through the leaves, catching the edges of our feathers as they lay atop each other. That was a lovely day.

“I will be at the gate the moment you throw the blade,” he swears.

I take his hand in mine and lean close. “I know.”

That smug, confident grin cracks his face. I want to slap him. Or kiss him. Or both.

“Now, darling—if I were you, I would stay behind the cover of the tree line, so you’re not spotted.”

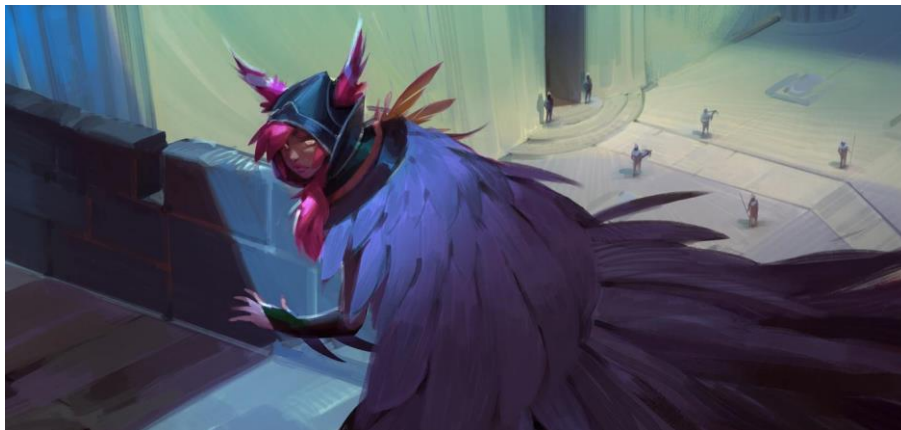
Our embrace is so warm I wish it would last all night. But the sun is dangerously close to the horizon, and our esteemed consul isn’t going to escape a dungeon guarded by a horde of shadow acolytes on his own.

Rakan tells me to be careful as he wanders away, looking at the sky. Every time he leaves, my heart sinks. I’m sure it won’t be the last time I see him. Although, one day, it might.

“Remember, my heartfire,” I whisper after him. “Sunset.”

I dart in between the fortress’ parapets unseen. Years of avoiding the stares of humans taught me their many blind spots.

Six acolytes guard the gate leading to the dungeons. They carry double-firing crossbows, swords tucked in their belts, and who-knows-what-else in the pouches fastened around their waists. I slink along the inner wall behind them to get within striking distance. I pluck five of my feathers and stack them neatly in my palm, holding them in place between my index finger and thumb, ready to send them flying.



There’s a noise from outside the walls. The crash of a gong. Shouts. Confused men. It has to be Rakan.

The prison guards hear it, too. Worry chokes my heart. I hope my love is okay. I *know* he’s going to be okay. He’d *better* be okay, or I will force a necromancer to resurrect him so I can murder him myself. He knows I’ll do that, too. I’ll figure it out.

The guards are distracted from their posts. He’s early, but it’s perfect timing. I can get in without needing to fell a single one of them.

I almost reach the dungeon door, when I see another guard climb the parapet and take deadly aim with his rifle. Nobody aims anything at *my* Rakan. I'll have the still-beating heart of anyone who dares to harm as much as one of his feathers. It'll make a cute beating-heart necklace.

I stop. The prisoners won't be going anywhere. I've got time to turn this guard into a sieve.

I leap back toward the parapet. The first feather I throw slices off the barrel of the gun. It clatters loudly to the floor. The rest slice through his chest. He drops like a bag of turnips.



"Intruder!" one of the guards at the gate shouts.

I duck and roll as crossbow bolts ping off the stone wall behind me, or stab into the wooden posts. Staying low, I race straight toward the acolytes who are fanning out to get better angles. I leap. They shoot where they think gravity will take me, instead of where I am: hovering in the air.

I throw another handful of feathers, shaping them into blades mid-flight.

Five of the guards drop, my quills sticking out of their chests. The remaining acolyte narrows his eyes and squares his shoulders, ready to fight. His sword is out before my feet touch the ground.

"Your soul will serve me forever," he grunts. I can feel the shadow magic bound up in his blade, the essence of every life it has taken.

I laugh. "I killed more people in the last twenty paces than you have in your entire life."

The acolyte hesitates before slashing wildly in my direction. His little sword leaves wavering trails of darkness. I don't have time for this, the sun is setting. I turn my back.

With a snap of my fingers, my quills tear free of the corpses behind the acolyte, and fly back toward me.

I hear the sword clang to the floor a moment before the dull thud of his body. I'm sure the Order of the Shadow will find some way to harness these men's souls into a slingshot or something. I don't really know how these guys work, but good on them for being so economical. One shouldn't waste life essence.

I take Rakan's feather and launch it high into the air. It hangs in the sky, a golden message that should turn some heads. But there's only one who knows what it means.

Meanwhile, I have a date in the dungeons with the consul.

He looks terrible sitting in a cage. Emaciated. Weak. Beaten. He doesn't look up, figuring me for one of the guards. He and his mate are Sodjoko, but his entourage are vastaya from other tribes. Their harrowed eyes thank me more than their tongues. They know as well as I that this is no time for gratitude. We're not out of the fortress yet.



As I lead the prisoners toward the eastern gate, I'm perplexed by the appalling lack of guards. Nearly every post is deserted. Isn't this supposed to be a fortress? Who makes their schedules?

We round past the armory and the barracks. There's the gate. Looks like Rakan found the guards. Dozens of them. They're surrounding him. My feathers bristle. *Heartbeat necklace, here I come!*

Rakan reaches us. His smile turns from confident to bemused as he speaks with the consul. Akunir is one of my father's oldest friends, and the most important of our ambassadors. I have much to discuss with him once we're out of this.

"All of you, run for the tree line," I command.

They're panicked, but thankfully Rakan took out the riflemen. More of us will survive crossing the field. "Run!" I yell.

Akunir's too slow. Rakan begins to lead him toward the forest.

The consul grabs at Rakan. "No. Please, protect Coll." Rakan turns back toward her.

I shake my head. Rakan understands. He drags the consul behind him.

I nod to the strongest-looking *juloah*. He lifts Coll in his arms. She calls him Jurelv, and he pledges on his horns to keep her safe.

He makes it ten paces before the first arrow strikes him, but he doesn't stop. He carries Coll into the forest. The shadow acolytes surge forward after them.

"Xayah!" Rakan yells. "Bowtube or tubebow?!"

I wish I had time to play, but I don't.

Instead, I join the fight.

And it's not pretty.

For the acolytes.

We were safe under the forest canopy by the time Jurelv's body could ignore its wounds no longer.



Coll kneels next to his corpse. His blood is on the leaves. We have already prayed that his spirit finds our ancestors in joy and peace. His family will mourn for moons.

I'm used to death. It doesn't move me as it once did. Rakan takes it hard; I have to be strong for him.

At least the consul is safe. After taking his hand off his wife's shoulder, he turns to me.

"I have friends in the south," he says. "The Kinkou must be informed."

"Humans broke the pact." I feel my blood rising. "How can you not see this as a grievous trespass? To them, magic is power. To us, it is life. They will never respect our boundaries."

"Humans are a splintered race, Xayah. Only Zed and his shadows broke the pact. They do not speak for all men."

"You are naïve. Your friends in the south will betray you. Then, they will turn on us all."

"The Kinkou are honorable. They will believe me. I trust them."

"So you're not naïve, you're an idiot." Akunir is shocked that I dare speak to him like this. I reject the notion of being diplomatic. Diplomacy will not restore life to the dead.

Coll stands up. Her face is a mask of grief and anger. "I will go back north, Akunir. I will tell them what was done to us."

I honestly didn't think she had it in her.

The glow fades from Akunir's eyes. "Coll, no."

"I will bear word of Jurelv's fate to his kin, and mourn with them. Then, I will muster arms and prepare the tribe to fight."

"You cannot do that!" the consul proclaims.

Coll ignores him. "I forsake my claim to you. I forsake your claim to me."

"Coll... please." His voice falters.

"No," she says.

The consul takes a step toward her, but Rakan stops him.

"I will speak with my mate," Akunir says to Rakan. To his guards.

But Coll is already turned away. She looks at me, and I no longer see a diplomat's wife. I see a warrior. She gathers those loyal to her—all but two of the consul's entourage.

"Thank you, Xayah," Coll says before she turns north and walks farther into the forest.

Akunir and his guards watch her leave, then wordlessly set off to the south.

Rakan moves in close to me. I feel his heart beating in time with my own.

"Promise me nothing will come between us like that, *mieli*," I say.

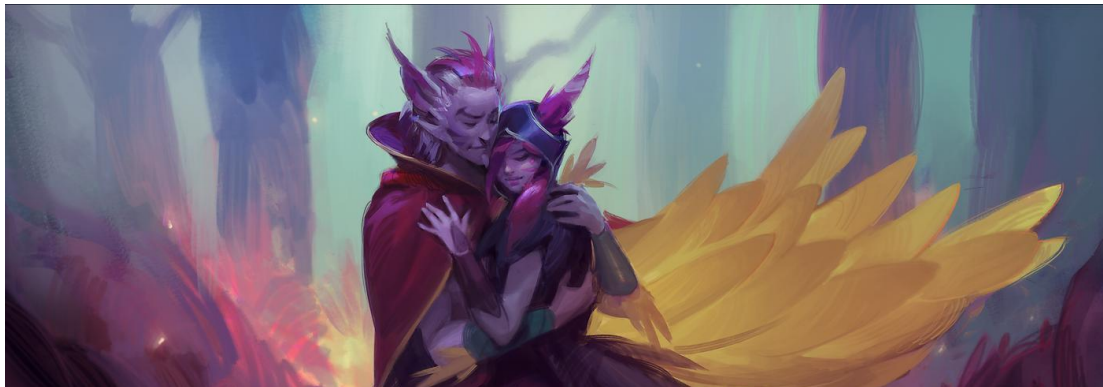
"We're not like them, *miella*." Rakan assures me. "We'll never be like them."

I watch Coll as she disappears among the trees.

"Where to now, Xayah?"

"Let's just stay here a moment longer," I murmur.

I bury my face in his chest. He drapes his cloak and arms around me. My head rises and falls with his breath. I could stay here forever.



"Repeat it back to me," I tell him.

"We are not like them," he says. "We are not like them."

He smiles and kisses my forehead. The vows we took at the Aphae Waterfall spring to mind. His heart beats for me, and mine for him. Home is within his arms, his breath, his smile.

There is no one better than Rakan.

Ahri

Biography

Innately connected to the latent power of Runeterra, Ahri is a vastaya who can reshape magic into orbs of raw energy. She revels in toying with her prey by manipulating their emotions before devouring their life essence. Despite her predatory nature, Ahri retains a sense of empathy as she receives flashes of memory from each soul she consumes.

Abandoned in the snowy woods of northern Ionia, Ahri knew nothing of her original family save the token they left her: a pair of matching gemstones. She joined a pack of icefoxes as they stalked prey on their morning hunt, and before long they adopted her as one of their own. With no one to teach her the magic of her kind, Ahri instinctively learned to draw it from the world around her, shaping destructive spheres and quickening her reflexes to take down prey. If she was close enough, she could even soothe a deer into a state of tranquility, so much that it remained serene even as she sank her teeth into its flesh.

Ahri first encountered humans when a troop of foreign soldiers camped near her den. Their behaviors were strange to Ahri and, curious to learn more, she watched them from afar. She was especially drawn to a hunter who, unlike his wasteful companions, used every part of the animals he killed, reminding her of her fox family.

When the hunter was wounded by an arrow, Ahri felt his life seeping away. She instinctively devoured the essence leaving his body, and gained brief flashes of his memories—the lover he had lost in battle, his children from a strange land of iron and stone. She found she could push his emotions from fear to sorrow to joy, and charmed him with visions of a sun-soaked meadow as he died.

Euphoric at the rush of absorbing the hunter's life, Ahri felt more alive than ever, and traveled Ionia in search of more victims. She relished toying with her prey, shifting their emotions before consuming their life essence. She alternated between dazzling them with visions of beauty, hallucinations of deep longing, and occasionally dreams colored by raw sorrow.

She grew drunk with memories that were not her own, and exhilarated in the lives of others. Through stolen visions, Ahri watched through their eyes as they pledged fealty to a temple of shadow, sacrificed offerings to a deity of the sun incarnate, encountered an avian tribe of vastaya that spoke only in song, and glimpsed mountainous landscapes unlike any she had seen. She experienced heartbreak and elation in tantalizing flashes that left her craving more, and wept at the massacres of Ionian villagers at the hands of Noxian invaders.

Ahri was surprised when the memories led her to discover the tale of an unearthly fox demon. As she absorbed more life essence, she grew to identify more and more with her victims, and felt guilty at ending so many lives. She feared that the myths about her were true—she was no more than a cruel monster. But whenever too much time passed between feedings, she sensed her own power fade, and could not help but partake once more.

Ahri tested her self-control by consuming small quantities of life essence, enough to absorb a memory or two but not enough to kill. She was successful, for a time, but was tortured by her unending hunger and soon succumbed to temptation, indulging in the dreams of an entire coastal village.

Tormented by her mistake, Ahri could not forgive herself and felt a deep sorrow that forced her to question her own existence. She withdrew to the forest caves, isolating herself in hopes of controlling her relentless desire. Years later she emerged, determined to experience every facet of life through her own eyes. Though she might indulge in occasional essence, she resisted consuming entire lives. With the twin gemstones as the only clue to her origin, Ahri set out in search of others like her. No more would she rely on borrowed memories and unfamiliar dreams.

Story

The market smelled of burning incense and rotting cabbage.

Ahri wrapped her cloak around her nine tails and fiddled with her twin sunstone tokens to distract herself from the stench, rolling them between her fingers and snapping them together. Each one had the shape of a blazing flame, but they were carved in such a way that their sharper edges fit together, forming a perfectly smooth orb. She had carried the golden stones since before she could remember, though she had no knowledge of their origin.

Though Ahri was in a new environment, she was comforted by the latent magic buzzing all around her. She passed a stand with dozens of woven baskets filled to the brim with polished rocks, shells etched with legends from a seafaring tribe, gambling dice carved from bones, and other curious items. Nothing matched the style of Ahri's sculpted tokens.

"Care for a gem to match the blue of the skies?" asked the gray-bearded merchant. "For you, I'll trade a cerulean bauble for the cost of a single cryraven feather, or perhaps the seed of a jubji tree. I'm flexible."

Ahri smiled at him, but shook her head and continued through the market, sunstones in hand. She passed a stand covered in spiky orange vegetables, a child selling fruit that shifted color with the weather, and at least three peddlers swinging tins of incense, each of whom claimed to have discovered the deepest form of meditation.



"Fortunes! Come get your fortunes told!" called a young woman with lavender eyes and a soft jawline. "Find out who you'll fall in love with, or how to avoid unlucky situations with a pinch of burdock root. Or if you'd prefer your future left to the gods, I'll answer a question about your past. Though I do recommend finding out whether or not you're at risk for death by poisoning."

A tall vastaya with feline ears was about to take a bite of a spiced pastry. He froze and stared at the fortune teller in alarm.

"The answer is no, by the way. Yours for free," she said, curtsying at him before turning to Ahri. "Now, *you* look like you've had a dark and mysterious past. Or at least some tales worth sharing. Any burning questions for me, lady?"

Beneath heavy layers of incense, Ahri paused at the scent of wet fur and spiced leather lingering at the woman's neck.

"Thank you, but no," she replied. "I'm still looking around."

"You won't find any more Ymelo tokens in this market, I'm afraid," the woman said, nodding to Ahri's sunstones. "Like the ones you have."

The back of Ahri's neck prickled and she drew closer to the woman. She would not let her excitement get the better of her. "Do you recognize these? Where do they come from?"

The woman eyed Ahri.

"I think they're Ymelos, anyway," she said. "Never seen a pair in person. He only carved a small number in his time, and many of the sets were separated in the war. Dead rare, those."

Ahri leaned closer with each word.

"I'm Hirin, by the way," the woman said.

"Do you know where I might find this craftsman?" Ahri asked.

Hirin laughed. "No idea. But if you come in I'll tell you what I know."

Ahri wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and eagerly followed the fortune teller past her booth, and into a caravan decorated wall to wall with animal skins.

"Tea?" Hirin said. "I brewed it this morning."

She poured two cups of liquid the color of plum wine, taking one for herself. The tea tasted of bitter oak bark, masked by a cloying dollop of honey. Hirin held out a hand for the stones but Ahri kept them close.

"I'm getting the sense that these are special to you," she said with a wry smile. "Don't worry, I have no interest in peddling stolen sunstones. Bad for a girl's reputation."

"Can you tell me where they come from?" asked Ahri, handing them over gingerly.

Hirin held them up to the light.

"These are beautiful," she said. "I don't know how they fit together so perfectly. I've not seen the like."

Ahri said nothing. She stood frozen with curiosity, and did not take her eyes off the woman.

"Legend says the sculptor known as Ymelo collected fossilized lizard eggs from a thousand thousand years ago that he carved into intricate shapes. These ancient lizards lived long before the Ghetu Sea dried up to a desert, leaving only petrified bones and dust."

Hirin coughed, and Ahri detected a bitter note upon her breath, as if she had been drinking vinegar.

"Ymelo stones are designed as small pieces that fit into a larger sculpture," she continued.

The woman dangled the golden pieces in front of Ahri's face.

"Just as your past has left you with information to be desired, these stones may have many more parts that, when combined, create another shape altogether. Who knows what you'll become when you track down your history. With the missing pieces, you may learn more than you'd like."

“Those are pretty words,” Ahri murmured, staring at the woman.

After a moment of silence, Hirin chuckled. “Some threads of truth, threads of my own invention. A fortune teller’s weaving must be seamless.”

The woman retrieved a hunter’s knife from a cabinet.

“I weave in just enough of what you desire to make you stay,” she said. “‘Til the tea slows your muscles, that is.”

A low growl escaped Ahri’s lips. She would tear this woman apart. She tried to pounce, but her limbs did not obey. She was rooted in place.

“Oh, there’s no need for that, lady. I only need a single tail. Useful for a variety of potions, you see, and extremely valuable. Or so I think. Never seen a vastaya with fox tails before. The tea freezes any pain, along with your... mobility.”

Hirin wrapped a bandage around one of Ahri’s tails. Ahri tried to resist, but she still could not move.

“You’ll wake up tomorrow, good as new!” said the woman. “Well, with one less tail. Do you really use all nine?”

Ahri shut her eyes and reached out to the reservoirs of magic around her. The environment had plenty ripe for the taking, but she was too weakened by the tea to draw them to her. Instead she reached into Hirin’s mind, which was far more malleable, and pushed.

Ahri opened her eyes and stared hard into Hirin’s. They deepened from lavender to violet.

“Hirin,” she said. “Come closer. I would look into the face of the one who tricked me.”

“Of course, lady,” Hirin replied, transfixed. The woman’s voice sounded hollow, as though it came from the bottom of a well.

She leaned in until her face was only inches away. Ahri inhaled, drawing essences of the woman’s life from her breath.

...Hirin was a young girl hiding, hungry and afraid, beneath a market stall. Two men argued above, looking for her. She had nothing but empty coffers to show for her days’ work...

Ahri continued to drain Hirin’s life, sampling memories of raw emotion. They felt rich in Ahri’s mouth, and she relished each unique flavor of emotion.

...Hirin told the fortune of a witch doctor shrouded in veils, receiving a copper for her troubles. She used the coin to buy a piece of bread, which she devoured in seconds...

...In a seedy tavern, a raucous group played cards. A man with eyebrows resembling butterfly wings gambled a golden Ymelo stone while Hirin watched from the shadows...

...Hirin tracked Ahri as she walked through the market. One of her fox tails peeked from beneath her cloak. She drew the vastaya into her caravan—

Enough.

Ahri stopped, her head spinning with renewed vigor. With each memory she stole from Hirin, she felt energy rush back into her weakened muscles, cleansing them of the poison.

Strengthened once more, she slowly shook her limbs awake, and flexed her tails with a shiver. They tingled with pinpricks.

Hirin stood wide-eyed and dazed, still very much alive. It was she that would wake tomorrow, good as new—less a few memories that she would not miss.

With knowledge of the woman's life, Ahri's rage had faded. She brushed her hand against the fortune teller's cheek, then wrapped her cloak tightly around her shoulders and stepped out into the sunlit market.

Hirin would not remember her, or their encounter. But Ahri had left the trade with a name to hunt—Ymelo—and the image of the man with soft-winged eyebrows was burned in her mind.

Akali

Biography

There exists an ancient order originating in the Ionian Isles dedicated to the preservation of balance.

Order, chaos, light, darkness -- all things must exist in perfect harmony for such is the way of the universe. This order is known as the Kinkou and it employs a triumvirate of shadow warriors to uphold its causes in the world. Akali is one of these shadow warriors, entrusted with the sacred duty of Pruning the Tree - eliminating those who threaten the equilibrium of Valoran.

A prodigal martial artist, Akali began training with her mother as soon as she could make a fist. Her mother's discipline was relentless and unforgiving, but predicated on the fundamental principle:

"We do that which must be done." When the Kinkou inducted her into the order at the age of fourteen, she could slice a dangling chain with a chop of her hand. There was no question - she would succeed her mother as the Fist of Shadow. She has had to do much in this role which others might find morally questionable, but to her it is in service of her mother's inviolable doctrine. She now works with her fellows Shen and Kennen to enforce the balance of Valoran.

Irelia

Biography

Even as a small child, Xan Irelia was fascinated by the grace and beauty of human movement. Under her grandmother's tutelage, she learned the traditional silk dances of her province—though she was dubious of their supposedly mystical connection to the Spirit of Ionia, Irelia's love for the dances was real. Seeking to master the art, she eventually left home to study with some of Ionia's most respected performers at the Placidium of Navori.

Irelia's people were peaceful and sought harmony with their neighbors, but rumors of foreign invaders sighted off the coast unsettled many at the Placidium. Irelia returned to her village to find it already occupied, with steel-helmed soldiers from distant Noxus shoving unarmed civilians through the streets with the butts of their spears. The Noxian Admiral Duqal had seized the Xan home to quarter his fleet officers.

Irelia's brothers and her father Lito had evidently protested; her entire family now lay in unmarked graves, in the gardens.

Ravaged by grief, the young girl saw Duqal's men hauling valuables from the house. Among the loot was a large metal crest, depicting the Xan family emblem. Irelia raced to it, wrenching it from Noxian hands. The admiral himself hurled her to the ground, and had his warriors shatter the crest with a heavy iron maul, before ordering them to dig a fresh grave for this upstart child.

As they surrounded her, Irelia averted her eyes, looking to the pieces of the Xan crest scattered on the ground. From deep within her soul, she felt a strange rhythm begin to beat. The shards of metal began to twitch, to twist, moving seemingly on their own, and Irelia felt the serene joy of the ancient dances once more...

With a sweep of her arm, she sent the pieces flying like ragged blades, cutting clean through two of the Noxians. As Duqal and his officers reeled in shock, Irelia snatched up the shards of her crest, and fled the village.

In the quiet forests beyond, Irelia mourned her family, and thought back to her grandmother's teachings. She realized that the techniques she had learned were more than mere dances—they were a powerful expression of something far greater.

The Noxian occupation soon began to test the fragile peace of the First Lands. It was said that even the religious leader Karma had been forced to strike back at the invaders with deadly magic, though her followers had now withdrawn to the Lasting Altar and would not condone any further violence. Across Navori, dissenting voices began to band together. A resistance was forming, one that would not rest until Ionia was free once more. Irelia joined their ranks, performing her cherished dances for them in the woodland camps, to preserve some vestige of their vanishing culture.

She was barely fourteen years old when she found herself back at the Placidium. Her band of resistance fighters joined the militia who had sworn to guard the monasteries and wild, sacred gardens.

But Noxus knew only too well what this place represented. A particularly cunning general named Jericho Swain captured the Placidium and took its defenders hostage, hoping to lure the inevitable reinforcements into a trap.

It was in this moment that Irelia rose to meet her destiny. Freed from her bonds, she unleashed the full potential of her ancient blade dance, lashing out with graceful zeal. A dozen of Swain's veterans fell, sowing chaos in their ranks as the other captives joined her, before she struck down the general himself—the sight of this rebellious girl hefting his severed arm over her head would be the turning point of the war.

This victory, the Great Stand at Navori, ensured that everyone in Ionia knew the name of Xan Irelia, and looked to her for leadership. Reluctantly, she led the growing resistance for almost three years of grueling battle before her triumph at Dalu Bay. There, she finally cornered the defeated Admiral Duqal, and exacted the vengeance she had sought for so long.

Though the war has long since ended, Ionia has been permanently changed by it. The First Lands are now divided, with rival factions fighting each other almost as bitterly as they did the Noxians. Many continue to look to Irelia for answers but, while others might welcome such power, Irelia remains uneasy with it.

At heart, she still yearns only to dance alone.

Story

"I believed in you, Blade Dancer!" the man choked, his lips frothing red. "You showed us the path..."

Irelia held her stance. She looked down at him, this devotee of the Brotherhood, on his knees in the mud. He had been pierced over and over by her blades.

"We could have been strong... United as one people..."

"That is not the Spirit's way," she replied. "If that's what you think, then you are wrong."

He had come to this village, waiting for the perfect moment before making his move. But he was clumsy and awkward. She had danced around him easily.

He had been determined to kill her. The worst thing was, he wasn't the first. Irelia's blades now hovered at her shoulders, following the graceful, circling movements of her hands. One simple gesture, and it could all be over.

He spat blood on the ground, his eyes burning with hatred. "If you will not lead Navori, the Brotherhood will."

He tried weakly to raise his dagger against her. This man would never be taken alive.

"I believed in you," he said again. "We all did."

She sighed. "I never asked you to. I'm sorry."

Her limbs flowing lithely around her body, Irelia whirled to the side, sending the blades out in a deadly arc. They sliced cleanly through his flesh, as much an act of mercy as self-defense.

A simple turn, just one elegant step, brought the blades back to her, their edges slick with blood. The man's lifeless body toppled forward.

“May the Spirit bring you to peace,” said Irelia.

Her burden was heavy as she returned to the camp. When she finally entered the privacy of her tent, she released a long, tense breath, and lowered herself to the reed mat.

She closed her eyes.

“Father,” she whispered. “I have bloodied our family’s honor once more. Forgive me.”

Irelia spread the blades out before her—like Ionia itself, they were the fractured pieces of something that had once been far greater, now turned to violent ends. She poured water into a small wooden bowl, and dipped in a rag. The simple act of cleaning the shards had become a ritual, one that she felt compelled to undertake after every battle she fought.

The water slowly turned red as she worked. But beneath the fresh blood, the metal carried much darker, older stains that she could never seem to remove completely.

This was the blood of her people. The blood of Navori itself.

Lost in thought, she began to slide the blades around, slowly reforming them into her family crest. Its three symbols lay cracked before her, representing the Xan name, her home province, and the rest of the First Lands, all in harmony. Her ancestors had always lived by the teachings of Karma.

They inflicted no harm on anyone, regardless of circumstance.

And now, here was their seal and crest turned into weapons, and takers of countless lives at that.

She could feel the eyes of her brothers upon her. Even in their eternal rest, at one with the Spirit of Ionia, she feared earning their disappointment, their resentment. She pictured her dear old O-ma too, broken and sobbing, devastated by each kill...

Many times, that thought had made Irelia weep more than any other.

The blades would never be clean. She knew that—but she would still do right by those she had harmed.

She passed many of her followers on her way to the burial grounds. Though they looked to Irelia for leadership, now more than ever, she recognized so few of them. With each winter the faces became less familiar, as the last of the old resistance were replaced by new and more zealous fighters. They came from faraway provinces, and towns she had never heard of.

Even so, she halted often to return their half-hearted salutes and bows, and would accept none of their help in dragging the shrouded body of her dead attacker along the road.

Finding an open patch beneath the blossom-heavy branches of a tree, Irelia set him down carefully, and turned to join in the grief of the widows and widowers, the orphaned sons and daughters.

“I know it is never easy,” she said, placing a consoling hand on the shoulder of one man, who knelt before a pair of fresh graves, “but each life, and each death, are part of—”

He batted away her hand, glaring at her until she retreated.

"It was necessary," she murmured to herself as she prepared to start digging, though she remained unconvinced by her own words. "It is all necessary. The Brotherhood would grip this land in an iron fist. No better than Noxus..."

Her eyes fell upon an old woman, sat on a simple wooden stool at the foot of the tree, singing a soft lament. Streams of tears had dried on her face. She was dressed plainly, with one hand resting on a grave marker next to her. It was adorned with food offerings for the deceased.

To Irelia's surprise, the woman halted her song.

"Bringing us some company, are you, daughter of Xan?" she called out. "Ain't much room left round here. But any friend of yours is a friend of ours."

"I did not know this man, but thank you. He deserved better than he was given in life." Irelia took an uncertain step closer. "You were singing one of the old songs."

"Helps keep my mind off bad things," said the old woman, tamping down a patch of dirt on the grave. "This is my nephew."

"I... I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure you did all you could. Besides, this is all part of the Spirit's way, you know?"

Her kindly demeanor had put Irelia entirely at ease. "Sometimes I don't know," she confided.

The old woman perked up, expecting more. Irelia continued, finally giving voice to the doubts that had plagued her for a long time.

"Sometimes... Sometimes I wonder if I killed our peace."

"Killed our peace?"

"When Noxus invaded. Perhaps we lost something when we fought back, something we can never restore."

The woman stood, trying in vain to open a large nut. "Child, I remember peace well," she said, thrusting one gnarled, knobby finger at Irelia. "Those were good days! Nobody misses peace more than me."

She pulled a knife from her belt, and began to pry open the nutshell.

"But the world's a different place now. What worked then don't work today. No point dwelling on it."

At last, the shell cracked, and she placed the broken kernel into a bowl on the grave.

"See, there? Used to be able to open these with my hands alone, now I need a knife. The young me would've fretted about it, damaging the nut like that. But that me don't matter, because she don't have to live in the here and now." The old woman nodded kindly, then went back to her singing.

For the first time in a long while, Irelia smiled. Within her satchel, wrapped in protective cloth, were the shard-blades of her shattered family crest. She knew it would never be clean, never be whole again.

But they were always ready, and that would have to be enough.

Jhin

Biography

Jhin is a meticulous criminal psychopath who believes murder is art. Once an Ionian prisoner, but freed by shadowy elements within Ionia's ruling council, the serial killer now works as their cabal's assassin. Using his gun as his paintbrush, Jhin creates works of artistic brutality, horrifying victims and onlookers. He gains a cruel pleasure from putting on his gruesome theater, making him the ideal choice to send the most powerful of messages: terror.

For years, Ionia's southern mountains were plagued by the infamous "Golden Demon." Throughout the province of Zhyun, a monster slaughtered scores of travelers and sometimes whole farmsteads, leaving behind twisted displays of corpses. Armed militias searched the forests, towns hired demon hunters, Wuju masters patrolled the roads - but nothing slowed the beast's grisly work.

In desperation, the Council of Zhyun sent an envoy to beg Great Master Kusho for help. Upon hearing of the region's plight, Kusho feigned an excuse for why he couldn't help. But a week later, the master, his son Shen, and star apprentice Zed, disguised themselves merchants and moved to the province. In secret, they visited the countless families emotionally shattered by the killings, dissected the horrific crime scenes, and looked for possible connections or patterns to the murders.

Their investigation took four long years, and left the three men changed. The famous red mane of Kusho turned white; Shen, known for his wit and humor, became somber; and Zed, the brightest star of Kusho's temple, began to struggle with his studies. Upon finally finding a pattern to the killings, the Great Master is quoted as saying: "Good and evil are not truths. They are born from men and each sees the shades differently."

Depicted in a variety of plays and epic poems, the capture of the "Golden Demon" would be the seventh and final great feat in the illustrious career of Lord Kusho. On the eve of the Blossom Festival in Jyom Pass, Kusho disguised himself as a renowned calligrapher to blend in with the other guest artists. Then he waited. Everyone had assumed only an evil spirit could commit these horrifying crimes, but Kusho had realized the killer was an ordinary man. The famed "Golden Demon" was actually a mere stagehand in Zhyun's traveling theaters and opera houses working under the name Khada Jhin.

When they caught Jhin, young Zed marched forward to kill the cowering man, but Kusho held him back. Despite the horrors of Jhin's actions, the legendary master decided the killer should be taken alive and left at Tuula Prison. Shen disagreed, but accepted the emotionless logic of his father's judgment. Zed, disturbed and haunted by the murder scenes he had witnessed, was unable to understand or accept this mercy, and it is said a resentment began to bloom in his heart.

Though imprisoned in Tuula for many years, the polite and shy Khada Jhin revealed little of himself - even his real name remained a mystery. But while a prisoner, the monks noted he was a bright student who excelled in many subjects, including smithing, poetry, and dance. Regardless, the guards and monks could find nothing to cure him of his morbid fascinations.

Outside the prison, Ionia fell into turmoil as the Noxian empire's invasion led to political instability. War awoke the tranquil nation's appetite for bloodshed. The peace and balance Kusho had famously fought to protect was shattered from within as dark hearts rose in power and secret alliances

competed for influence. Desperate to counter the power of the ninja and Wuju swordsmen, a cabal within the ruling council conspired to secretly free Jhin and turn him into a weapon of terror.

Now with access to the Kashuri armories' new weapons, and nearly unlimited funds, the scale of Khada Jhin's "performances" has grown. His work has brought fear to many foreign dignitaries and to Ionia's secret political underground, but how long will a serial killer, craving attention, be satisfied working in the shadows?

Story

I

The gun in his hand was simply a tool—but a perfectly crafted one. Gold type was inlaid into the blackish-green metal. It spelled the smith's name: This detail spoke of its creator's pride and confidence. It was not a Piltoverian weapon—those gaudy things that attempted to function with the minuscule amounts of magic available in those lands. This gun was made by a true forge master.

Magic pulsed from its bronze, Ionian heart.

He wiped the gun's stock a fourth time. He couldn't be sure it was clean until he wiped it down four times. Didn't matter that he hadn't used it. Didn't matter that he was only going to stow it in the bag under the bed. He couldn't put it away until he was sure it was clean. And he couldn't be sure it was clean until he had wiped it down four times. It was getting clean though. Four times makes it clean.

It was clean, and it was wonderful. His new patrons had been generous. But did the finest painters not deserve the finest brushes?

The scale and precision of the new device made his previous work with blades seem insignificant by comparison. Understanding firearm mechanics had taken him weeks of study, but evolving his chi techniques from blades had taken months.

The gun held four shots. Each bullet had been infused with magical energy. Each bullet was as perfect as a Lassitan monk's blade. Each bullet was the paint from which his art would flow. Each bullet was a masterpiece. It didn't just cut apart the body. It rearranged it.

The rehearsal at the mill town had already shown the gun's potential. And his new employers had been pleased with the work's reception.

He had finished polishing it, but with the gun in his right hand, the temptation was too great. He knew he shouldn't, but he unpacked the black, eel-skin bodysuit. He drew the fingertips of his left hand across the slick surface of the clothes. The feel of the skin's oily surface quickened his breath. He picked up the tight, leather mask, then—unable to help himself—slid it over his face. It covered his right eye and mouth. It constricted his breathing and removed his depth perception...

Delightful.

He was putting on the shoulder armor when the bells he'd hidden on the steps leading up to his room sounded. He quickly folded up the weapon and removed the mask.

"Hello?" the maid asked through the door. The lilt in her voice hinted to an upbringing far south of this town.

"You did what I asked?" he said.

"Yes, sir. A white lantern every four yards. A red lantern every sixteen."

“Then I can begin,” Khada Jhin said as he swung open the door to his room.

The woman’s eyes widened as he exited his room. Jhin was well aware of how he looked. Normally, it elicited pangs of self-conscious loathing, but today was a performance day.

Today, Khada Jhin cut a slender, elegant figure as he walked out with a cane. He was hunched, and his cloak seemed to cover some huge deformity on his shoulder, but a jaunty stride belied this. He forcefully tapped the cane ahead of him as he marched toward the window. He tapped the frame rhythmically—three beats, then a fourth. His gold sparkled, his cream cloak flowed, and his jewels glittered in the sun.

“What...what is that?” the maid asked, indicating Jhin’s shoulder.

Jhin paused for a moment to study the woman’s cherubic face. It was round and perfectly symmetrical. A dull and predictable design. Removed, it would make a terrible mask.

“It’s for the crescendo, my darling,” Khada Jhin said.

From the inn’s window, he had a clear view of the rest of the town in the valley below him. This performance had to be wonderful, but there was still so much work to do. The councilman would be returning this evening—and so far, all of Jhin’s plans for tonight seemed... uninspired.

“I brought some flowers for your room,” the woman said, walking past him.

He could have used someone else to place the lanterns. But he didn’t. He could have changed clothes before opening his door. But he didn’t. Now she had seen Khada Jhin in his finery.

The inspiration he needed was so obvious now. So preordained. There was never a choice. There was no escaping the Art.

He would have to make this maid’s face... more interesting.

II

The candied pork glistened on top of the five-flavor broth. The aroma entranced Shen, but he set aside his spoon. As the waitress left, she smiled and nodded in approval. The fat had yet to melt into the broth. Doubtless, the soup was already excellent, but in a moment, the flavor would be at its peak. Patience.

Shen considered the interior of the White Cliffs Inn. It was deceptively simple and rough. The wood weavers had been masters, removing the tree bark and living leaves only where necessary.

The candle on Shen’s table flickered...wrongly. He slid away from the table, retrieving his blades from under his cloak.

“Your students are as quiet as a pregnant worax,” Shen said.

Alone and dressed like a merchant, Zed entered the inn. Brushing past the waitress, he sat down three tables from Shen. Every part of him wanted to dash at his foe. To avenge his father. But such was not the way of twilight. He calmed himself as he realized the distance was too far... but only by the length of Shen’s index finger.

Shen looked over at Zed, expecting to see him grin. Instead, his rival sighed. His skin was sallow, and dark folds hung beneath his eyes.

“Five years, I have waited,” Shen said.

“Have I misjudged the distance?” Zed asked wearily.

“Even if my head is cut off, I will still close and strike,” Shen said, sliding his foot backward and cocking it against the floor. Zed was ten paces and one half of a finger length away.

“Your path’s closer to mine. Your father’s ideals were a weakness. Ionia could no longer afford them,” Zed said. He leaned back in his chair, keeping himself just outside of the range Shen would need to strike a killing blow. “I know that’s not something I can make you understand. But I will offer you a chance for vengeance.”

“I do not act because of vengeance. You defy the balance. For that, you are damned,” Shen said as he inched forward to the edge of his chair.

“The Golden Demon escaped,” Zed replied.

“Impossible.” But Shen felt a hollowness had caught in his chest.

“Your father’s greatest victory. And now, again, his foolish mercy has tarnished his legacy.” Zed shook his head. “You know what that... thing is capable of.” Then Zed leaned over the table, well within Shen’s range—his neck intentionally exposed. “And you know that we are the only two people who can get close enough to stop him.”

Shen remembered the first time he’d seen the body of someone killed by the infamous Khada Jhin. His skin prickled from the memory; his teeth clenched. Only his father had been strong enough to still believe a merciful justice could be served. Something in Shen had changed that day. Something in Zed had broken.

Now, that monster had returned.

Shen put his swords on the table. He looked down at the perfect bowl of soup in front of him. Little droplets of the pork fat’s oil shimmered on its surface, but he wasn’t hungry anymore.

III

There was still no sign of Zed. It was disappointing. Very disappointing. He certainly must have sought out his former friend. It was likely Zed was hiding, watching. Jhin needed to be careful.

From the jetty, Jhin looked back to the foreign ship. The tide had come in, and the ship would be leaving in a few moments. He would have to return soon if he was going to perform in Zaun next month. Risk on top of risk.

He stopped to check his reflection in a puddle. From the water, a worried, elderly merchant stared back at him. Years of acting practice combined with his martial training had given him total control of his facial muscles. It was a common face, and he had given it an unexceptional expression. When he walked up the hill, Jhin blended easily into the crowd.

He checked the white lanterns above him, counting the distance. If Zed appeared, he would need them. At the inn on the top of the hill, he glanced at the planters where he had hidden traps. Sharpened steel blades, shaped like flowers. They protected his escape route in case anything went wrong.

He thought of how the metal would slice through the crowd and splash the building’s freshly painted teal walls with red. It was tempting.

He was pushing through the crowd when he heard the village elder speaking to Shen.

“Why would the demon attack her and the councilmen?” the elder asked.

Shen, dressed in his blue outfit, didn’t answer.

Another kinkou, a young woman named Akali, stood beside Shen. She walked to the doorway of the inn.

“No,” Shen said as he blocked her path.

“What makes you think I’m not ready?” Akali asked, annoyed.

“Because I wasn’t when I was your age.”

At that moment, a town guard stumbled from the entrance, his face pale and hollow.

“Her flesh, it was... it was...” he said. He took a few steps, then collapsed to the ground in shock.

“He saw it. He saw the flower!” Against the far wall, the tavern’s owner laughed. Then he began weeping—his face painted by madness.

These were not people who would forget seeing Khada Jhin’s work.

Shen scanned the faces of the onlookers.

Clever boy, Jhin thought, before fading into the back of the crowd.

He checked the rooftops for Zed as he walked back to the ship.

The work was inescapable. Together or apart, Zed and Shen would chase the clues he had left. They would follow them back to the Blossom Festival. Back to Jyom Pass. And when they became desperate, then they would have to work together again.

It would be like it had been when they were young. They would huddle together in awe and fear.

Only then would the great Khada Jhin reveal himself...

And his true masterpiece would begin.

IIII

YASUO

Biography

As a child, Yasuo often believed what the others in his village said of him: on the best days, his very existence was an error in judgement; on the worst, he was a mistake that could never be undone.

Like most pain, there was some truth to it. His mother was a widow already raising a young son, when the man who would be Yasuo's father blew into her life like an autumn wind. And, just like that lonely season, he was gone again before the blanket of Ionian winter settled over the small family.

Even though Yasuo's older half-brother, Yone, was everything Yasuo was not—respectful, cautious, conscientious—the two were inseparable. When other children teased Yasuo, Yone was there to defend him. But what Yasuo lacked in patience, he made up for in determination. When Yone began his apprenticeship at the village's renowned sword school, a young Yasuo followed, waiting outside in monsoon rain, until the teachers relented and opened the gates.

Much to the annoyance of his new peers, Yasuo showed natural talent, and became the only student in several generations to catch the attention of Elder Souma, last master of the legendary wind technique. The old man saw Yasuo's potential, but like trying to bridle a whirlwind, this pupil was known to ignore most teaching. Yone pleaded with his brother to set aside his arrogance, gifting him a maple seed, the school's highest lesson in humility. The next morning, Yasuo accepted the position as Souma's apprentice, and personal bodyguard.

When word of the Noxian invasion reached the school, some were inspired by the great stand that had been taken at the Placidium of Navori, and soon the village was bled of the able bodied. Yasuo longed to add his sword to the cause, but even as his classmates and brother left to fight, he was ordered to remain and protect the elders.

The invasion became a war. Finally, one rain-slicked night, the drums of a Noxian march could be heard in the next valley over. Yasuo abandoned his post, foolishly believing he could turn the tide.

But he found no battle—only a raw grave for hundreds of Noxian and Ionian corpses. Something terrible and unnatural had happened here, something that no single blade could have stopped. The land itself seemed tainted by it.

Sobered, Yasuo returned to the school the next day, only to be surrounded by the remaining students, their swords drawn. Elder Souma was dead, and Yasuo found himself accused not only of dereliction, but of murder. He realized the true killer would go unpunished if he did not act quickly, so he fought his way free, though he knew this would all but confirm his apparent guilt.

Now a fugitive in war-torn Ionia, Yasuo sought any clue that might lead him to the murderer. All the while, he was hunted by his former allies, continually forced to fight or die. This was a price he was willing to pay, until he was tracked down by the one he dreaded most—his own brother, Yone.

Bound by honor, they circled each other. When their swords finally met, Yone was no match and, with a single flash of steel, Yasuo cut his brother down.

He begged forgiveness, but Yone's dying words were of the wind techniques responsible for Elder Souma's death, and that his brother was the only one who could have known them. Then he fell silent, passing on before he could grant any absolution.

Without master or brother, Yasuo wandered the mountains distraught, drinking away the pain of war and loss, a sword without a sheath. There in the snow, he met Taliyah, a young Shuriman stone mage who had fled the Noxian military. In her, Yasuo saw an unlikely student, and in himself, an even more unlikely teacher. He trained her in the ways of elemental magic, wind shaping stone, embracing at last the teachings of Elder Souma.

Their world changed with rumors of a risen Shuriman god-emperor. Yasuo and Taliyah parted ways, though he gifted her the treasured maple seed, its lesson now learned.

As she returns to her native desert sands, Yasuo has set out for his own village, determined to put right his mistakes...

Karma

Biography

Karma is the living embodiment of an ancient Ionian soul, who serves as a spiritual beacon to each generation of her people. Her most recent incarnation came in the form of a 12-year-old girl named Darha. Raised in the northern highlands, she was headstrong and independent, always dreaming of a life beyond her provincial village.

But Darha began to suffer strange, fitful visions. The images were curious—they felt like memories, yet the girl was certain they had not happened to her. At first, the problem was easy enough to conceal, but the visions grew in intensity until Darha was convinced she was descending into madness.

Just when it seemed she would be confined to the healing huts forever, a group of monks visited her village. They had come from a place known as the Lasting Altar, where the divine leader Karma had passed away some months earlier. The monks were in search of the old man's next incarnation, believing him to be among the villagers. They applied a series of tests to everyone they met, but eventually prepared to leave empty handed.

As they passed the healing huts, Darha threw herself out of her cot and ran to stop them. She wept, telling them of her visions, and that she had known the monks' voices from the babble in her head.

They recognized the signs immediately. This was their Karma. The visions were past lives rushing to fill a new vessel.

In that moment, Darha's life changed forever. She bid farewell to all she'd ever known, and journeyed to the Lasting Altar to learn from the monks. Over the years, they taught her to connect with her ancient soul, and the girl found her own voice drowned out by thousands of others, each espousing the wisdom of ages past. Karma had always advocated peace and harmony, teaching that any act of evil would bring about its own repercussions, and so required no response. But even as she *became* Karma, Darha struggled to understand this simple truth.

Indeed, these philosophies were truly tested when Noxus invaded Ionia. Many thousands were killed as the enemy warbands advanced inland, and Karma was forced to face the harsh realities of war. She could feel the immense destructive potential that swelled in her soul, and with it, the impetuous voice of young Darha screaming: *What is the point of this power, if not to use it?*

Karma agonized over this. Eventually she compromised, deciding to kill just *one* person, but that it had to be the right person to kill. She confronted a Noxian commander on the deck of his own war frigate, and unleashed her divine fury. But instead of a single, measured attack, she obliterated the entire vessel and its crew in a heartbeat.

Though the Ionians rejoiced at this apparent victory, Karma was left strangely empty. The voices that had spoken so clearly in her mind now fell silent, and she felt Darha returning to prominence—this brought little comfort, however, as she realized she had made a huge mistake. She returned to the Lasting Altar to meditate and perform penance for upsetting the spiritual harmony of her homeland. Killing would always be easy, but came at the cost of true enlightenment. She had already tarnished her own undying soul along with those of her followers, and she would try her utmost to do no further injury.

Though the war with Noxus is now long over, there are still many in Ionia who have become only too glad to meet violence with violence, even against their own neighbors. Karma has pledged to guide as many of them as she can to more peaceful means.

And with every conflict she averts, more of the lost voices return to offer their eternal wisdom.

Kennen

Biography

There exists an ancient order originating in the Ionian Isles dedicated to the preservation of balance.

Order, chaos, light, darkness -- all things must exist in perfect harmony for such is the way of the universe. This order is known as the Kinkou and it employs a triumvirate of shadow warriors to uphold its causes in the world. Kennen is one of these shadow warriors, entrusted with the sacred duty of Coursing the Sun - tirelessly conveying the justice of the Kinkou.

Kennen was born in Bandle City and it was said that in his first living moments he bolted first from the womb and second from the midwife who delivered him. His parents had thought that he would outgrow his boundless energy, but as he matured his energy found no limits and was matched only by his unnerving speed. Despite his astonishing gifts, he remained unnoticed (or at least uncaught, as he was quite the prankster) until, on a dare, he ran straight up the great outer wall of the Placidium. When word of this feat reached Kinkou ears, Kennen was quickly and quietly brought in for an audience. He found that the role of the Heart of the Tempest suited him, frenetically delivering both the word and the punishments of the Kinkou across the realm. He now works with his fellows Akali and Shen to enforce the balance of Valoran.

Lee Sin

Biography

Among the many spirits Ionians revere, none are as storied as that of the dragon. While some believe it embodies ruin, others view it as a symbol of rebirth. Few can say for certain, and fewer still have ever been able to channel the dragon's spirit, and none so completely as Lee Sin.

He arrived at the Shojin monastery as a boy, claiming the dragon had chosen him to wield its power. The elder monks saw flashes of its fire in the talented child, but also sensed his reckless pride, and the disaster it could bring. Warily, they nonetheless took him as a pupil—though, as others advanced, the elders kept him cleaning dishes and scrubbing floors.

Lee Sin grew impatient. He longed to fulfill his destiny, not waste time on chores.

Sneaking into the hidden archives, he found ancient texts describing how to call upon the spirit realm, and chose to flaunt his skill during a combat lesson. Brashly, he unleashed the dragon's rage in a wild kick, paralyzing his learned instructor. Consumed with shame and banished for his arrogance, the young man set out to atone.

Years passed. Lee Sin wandered far, to distant places, benevolently aiding those in need. Eventually he reached the Freljord, where he met Udyr, a wildman who channeled the primal beasts of his homeland. The so-called Spirit Walker struggled to control the powers that warred within him, and Lee Sin began to wonder if controlling the dragon was even possible. Sharing a need for spiritual guidance, the two men forged a bond, and he invited Udyr on his journey back home.

The two were dismayed to hear that the empire of Noxus had invaded and occupied Ionia. Monks from every province had fallen back to defend the holy monastery at Hirana, high up in the mountains.

Lee Sin and Udyr found it besieged. Noxian soldiers had broken through to Hirana's great hall. As Udyr leapt to join the fray, Lee Sin hesitated, seeing his former peers and elders fall to the enemy's blades. The wisdom of Hirana, Shojin, so much of Ionia's ancient culture—all would be lost.

With no other choice left, he invoked the dragon spirit.

A tempest of flames engulfed him, searing his skin and burning the sight from his eyes. Imbued with wild power, he crippled the invaders with a flurry of breakneck punches and rapid kicks, the untamable spirit flaring brighter and hotter with each blow.

The monks were victorious, but Lee Sin's desperate actions left the monastery in ruins, and his vision would never return. At last, in the blind darkness, he understood that no mortal could ever bend the might of the dragon spirit to their will completely. Devastated, agonized, he bound a cloth over his sightless eyes and tried to stagger away down the mountain paths.

But the surviving elders stopped him. In forsaking all desire for power, their disgraced pupil was finally ready to begin anew. Although they would not forget his previous arrogance, the monks offered absolution: the dragon's wrath was deadly and unpredictable, true enough, but the humblest and worthiest mortal souls could counter its fiery nature, and direct it from time to time.

Gratefully, Lee Sin stayed with the monks to rebuild their monastery, and after the work was done and the Spirit Walker returned to the Freljord, Lee Sin devoted himself fully toward the pursuit of enlightenment.

In the years since the war with Noxus ended, he has continued to meditate on his role in Ionia. Knowing his homeland has not faced the last of its trials, Lee Sin must master himself, and the dragon spirit within, to face whatever foe is yet to come.

Story

Ancient roots, sinuous trees and thickly-leafed vines clinging to the rocks all but obscured the path through the lush jungle. Three men sweated as they hacked their way onward, driven by hearts filled with greed and dreams of untold wealth. For six days the jungle had defied them, but now the temple reared from the undergrowth. Its facade was carved into a colossal stone outcropping, with blossoms of red and blue spreading around its base. Serene statuary filled golden alcoves and garlands of golden orchids were entwined around its eaves.

“You see, Horta?” said Wren. “Didn’t we tell you the temple was real?”

“So long as the treasures inside are real” said Horta, tossing aside the blunted hatchet and drawing a freshly sharpened sword. “You both staked your lives on that, remember?”

“Don’t worry, Horta” said Merta, with a rasping cough. “You’ll be able to buy your own palace after this.”

“I’d better” said Horta. “Now draw your blades. Kill anyone who gets in our way.”

The three brigands approached the temple, weapons glinting in the setting sun. Horta saw its corners were not sharp and defined; every edge flowing together instead of meeting at angles. As they made their way inside, they passed between two magnificent Ionian Whipwillows, their trunks curved to form an entranceway, with bark so white it seemed painted.

“Why aren’t there any guards?” he asked, as he stepped inside.

The question went unanswered as his eyes adjusted to the sepulchral gloom of a chamber hewn into the rock. The arched roof was carved with bas-relief, and every wall glittered with colored chips of glass to form a mosaic of vivid landscapes that rippled with light and life. Ivory tablets engraved with ancient Shojin parables were situated upon pillars of carved bronze, and gem-studded idols of jet stood watchfully in sunken alcoves. Statues of warrior-gods, each trimmed with gold, stared down from plinths of porphyry and jade.

Horta grinned. “Take it. Take it all.”

Wren and Merta sheathed their swords and flung open their packs. They began filling them with everything they could reach: statues, idols and gemstones, whooping with glee as they dragged a fortune in gold behind them. Horta circled the chamber, already planning their deaths when they got back to civilization, when he noticed that one of the statues was moving.

At first glance, he’d thought it to be a painted idol of a warrior monk, seated with his legs crossed and his hands resting on his knees. His back had been toward Horta, but now the man stood and turned on the spot with the fluid ease of a coiled snake. Lean and powerfully muscled, he wore loose-fitting trousers and a red bandanna across his eyes.

“Not so empty after all” said Horta, flexing his fingers on the leather-wound grip of his sword.

“Good. I was hoping I’d get to cut someone up.”

The monk cocked his head to the side as though listening to sounds only he could hear and said

“Three men. One with a blighted lung, another with a weak heart that will not see out the year.”

The sightless monk turned and stared directly at Horta, though there was surely no way he could see him through the thick fabric bound across his eyes.

“You have a twist in your spine” he said. “It pains you in the winter and forces you to favor your left side.”

“What are you, some kind of seer?” demanded Horta, nervously licking his lips.

The monk ignored the question and said “I am Lee Sin.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?” asked Horta.

“I give you this one chance to put back what you have taken” said Lee Sin. “Then leave this place and never return.”

“You’re in no position to make demands, my blind friend” said Horta, letting the tip of his sword scrape across the stone floor. “There are three of us and you aren’t even armed.”

Wren and Merta gave nervous laughs, wary of the monk’s confidence even in the face of their advantage of numbers. Horta gestured with his free hand, and his two companions moved to flank the monk, each drawing a curved blade from leather sheaths.

“This is a sacred place” said Lee Sin, with a rueful sigh. “It should not be desecrated.”

Horta gave the others a nod. “Put this sightless fool out of his misery.”

Wren stepped forward. Lee Sin was moving before his foot hit the ground. The monk went from being utterly still to a blur of motion in the blink of an eye. His arm whipped around and the hard edge of his hand struck Wren’s neck. Bone crunched and the bandit dropped, his head twisted at an unnatural angle. Lee Sin swayed aside as Merta slashed with his sword. The blow was wild, and the reverse stroke flashed over Lee Sin’s head. The monk dropped flat, twisting as he fell to sweep his shin out and scythe Merta’s legs out from under him. The bandit collapsed, his weapon skittering away over the tiled floor. Lee Sin sprang to his feet and hammered his heel down on Merta’s sternum.

Merta gave a strangled cry as his ribs cracked and the splintered ends were driven into his weak heart. Stolen gemstones spilled from his fallen pack as his eyes bulged in agony and he fought for breath like a landed fish.

“You’re fast for a monk” said Horta, slicing his sword through the air in a series of blindingly swift maneuvers. “But I’m no slouch with a blade.”

“You believe you are fast?” asked Lee Sin.

“Trained by the best, so you won’t find me as easy to beat as those two idiots” said Horta, nodding toward the bodies of his former companions.

Lee Sin made no reply as they circled one another. Horta watched as the blind man tracked his every motion. The monk's steps were fluid and precise, and Horta had the uncomfortable feeling that every passing second was revealing more of his own abilities to his opponent.

He roared and threw himself at the monk, attacking in a blistering series of high slashes and lunges. Lee Sin swayed aside, moving like a wind-blown sapling as he dodged, deflected and spun away from Horta's desperate strikes. He kept his blade in constant motion, forcing Lee Sin back with every attack. The monk hadn't even broken a sweat. His impassive mouth, covered eyes and casual disdain infuriated Horta.

He gathered himself for one final attack, drawing on every scrap of training, fury and strength he could muster. His sword cut the air around the monk, but never once made contact.

Lee Sin spun away one last time and bent his knees, his body taut.

"You have speed and not a little skill" he said, sinews pulsing beneath his skin "but anger colors your every thought. It has consumed you and has led to your death."

Horta felt the air in the chamber grow warmer as streamers of energy coalesced around Lee Sin. A fiery vortex engulfed the monk and Horta backed away in terror, his sword falling from his grip. Lee Sin was trembling, as though fighting to control energies more powerful than he could contain. The chamber reverberated with the sound of a rising wind.

"Please" said Horta. "I'll put it back. I'll put it all back!"

Lee Sin leapt, propelled by the blitzing hurricane of energy. His foot hammered into Horta's chest, hurling him backward. Horta slammed against the wall and stone cracked under the impact. He fell limply to the floor, every bone in his spine shattered like broken pottery.

"You had a chance to avoid this, but you did not take it" said Lee Sin. "Now you pay the price."

Horta's vision greyed at the edges as death approached, but not before he saw Lee Sin return to his seated position. The monk's back was to him, and, as his posture relaxed, the vortex of lethal energies began to dissipate.

Lee Sin bowed his head and resumed his meditation.

Master Yi

Biography

Through the ancient martial art of Wuju, Master Yi has tempered his body and sharpened his mind until thought and action have become one. Though he chooses to enter into violence as a last resort, the grace and speed with which he wields his blade ensures resolution is always swift. As the last living practitioner of Wuju, Master Yi has devoted his life to finding able pupils to carry on the legacy of his lost people.

Even before Yi mastered Wuju, he was considered one of the most skilled practitioners of the mystical martial art. He would soon prove his mastery when word of a massive Noxian invasion reached his remote village. Yi swept across the battlefields of Ionia, turning back the tide of Noxus's vast infantry with swift and deadly strikes, much to the embarrassment of Noxian High Command. Recognizing the threat the Wuju disciples posed to their invasion, the Noxians chose to unleash a nightmarish chemical attack on the home of the deadly art. Those who somehow survived the poisonous concoction had their minds twisted beyond repair. Yi's home was left in ruin.

At the war's conclusion, Yi returned to the grotesque remains of his village. There he became the attack's final casualty. Slain in spirit, if not in body, Yi clung to the only feeling left within his heart: vengeance. Driven only by his desire to punish those who'd destroyed his home, Yi spent years training in seclusion. He became a deadlier swordsman than he had ever been, but true mastery of Wuju still eluded him.

At the height of Yi's frustration, a monkey of unusually noble bearing interrupted his training. Standing as straight and tall as a man, the monkey watched and mimicked Yi's movements. Yi shooed the monkey away, but the agile creature took great amusement in turning Yi's own techniques against him. Gradually, Yi felt his anger subside as he sparred with the playful animal, and when the burden of his hatred had fully lifted, he found he had caught the monkey by his tail. Yi then understood that he would never master Wuju so long as he pursued it for vengeance, and as he let go of the monkey, he also released his desire to shed his enemy's blood.

Yi thanked the monkey for showing him what he'd been blind to, and was surprised when the creature actually replied. He wished to learn Yi's art of fighting. It was an odd request, but through it Yi saw his new path: the way to honor the memory of his lost people was to pass their teachings on to a new generation.

Shen

Biography

Leader of a secret clan of mystic warriors, Shen serves as the Eye of Twilight, entrusted to enforce equilibrium in the world. Longing to remain free from the confusion of emotion, prejudice, or ego, Shen continually struggles, spirit blade in hand, to walk the unseen path of dispassionate judgment.

An enigma to the shadowy realm of the spirits, as well as the mortal territories of man, Shen belongs to neither. Within him exists an uneasy fusion of human soul and arcane power. He is seen by both sides as someone to be feared. He is immovable. He is constant. He answers to nothing but his purpose.

Although his birth within the most revered of Ionian clans marked him as destined to serve, it was his iron will that made Shen the chosen leader of a shadowed order. Wielding his spirit blade – the symbol of his duty, as well his connection to the spirit realm - Shen roams both worlds, unerringly drawn to any place where one side threatens to overwhelm the other.

There are countless legends recounting Shen's battles across the realms. From his innumerable clashes with the Seven Demon Clan throughout Ionia's physical and ethereal planes to Shen's brutal scourging of the loathsome skin devourers from the Black Steppes of the Freljord, the truth is lost among the tales told in his wake.

One of the most fanciful stories recounted by Ionians is of the day Shen suddenly appeared in the central court of Noxus. Standing in the very heart of his enemy's stronghold, onlookers watched in rapt horror as he appeared to fight a terrible battle against a threat they could not see. To the crowd, Shen seemed to flash in and out of existence, wounds blossoming all over his body from nowhere. Unknown to the Noxians, he singlehandedly defended their entire empire from an incursion by the spirit world.

Though Shen walks a lonely path on both this plane and beyond, he does not always walk alone. Other members of his hidden sect - the mortal shadow warrior, Akali, and the lightning-quick yordle, Kennen - always stand ready to assist him.

Though he has allies, Shen is solely entrusted with his father's blade and the responsibility it carries.

The Eye of Twilight is forbidden from allowing passion to sway his judgment. While he still unswervingly executes his duty, Shen struggles to contain his anger over the murder of his father at the hands of Zed, a man he once considered his brother.

With the fate of the world of men, as well as the spirit realm, resting on his shoulders, Shen struggles to maintain the balance between his human emotions and his spiritual focus. How long can one man balance two worlds on the edge of a blade?

Story

"It was no tempest. It was a spirit" said the fisherman, still rattled by the shipwreck he'd barely survived two nights ago. The man told of his fishing vessel being sunk by a creature, large as a house and quick as the wind.

Shen listened to the tale, silently weighing the facts as presented.

“Show me where it happened” said Shen.

The man led him to a beach in the bay, where a team of villagers worked to recover the drowned bodies of the mariners. Shen knelt to examine a piece of wreckage. The gashes in the driftwood were deep and savage, the work of powerful claws.

“How many dead?” he asked.

“All but me... Six” responded the fisherman.

The spirits are strong, thought Shen, digging through the wreckage for any further evidence.

At last, on the edge of a splintered portion of the hull, he found it: a small tuft of gossamer hair. Most people would overlook it, or if they did see it, they’d never believe a creature that could break a ship in half could leave something so delicate. But Shen had seen hair like this before. Any doubts he’d had about the veracity of the fisherman’s tale faded as he watched the fine, silvery tuft dissolve into nothing at his touch.

“A demon” Shen remarked. “You must have sailed into its path.”

The fisherman nodded grimly. Spirits of all kinds were known to mingle with the physical world, especially in Ionia, where the barrier between realms was thin and passable. The ethereal and material planes were in constant contact, sliding peacefully past one another like oil atop water.

As the Eye of Twilight, it was Shen’s duty to walk between the worlds, ensuring neither side overwhelmed the other. To humans, he was a ghost, vanishing in the space between breaths to reappear many miles away. To spirits, he was a human, flesh and bone who ought never to venture into ethereal realms.

He knelt on the beach to examine one of the corpses that had been recovered. The man had been torn in half, just below the ribs. What was left of his innards dangled from a pale, bloated torso.

“You need not worry. I shall have the monster before nightfall” said a voice from behind.

Shen turned to see a holy man sent by the local temple. Several acolytes stood around him, carrying an assortment of mystical trinkets and oils. They were beginning a cleansing ritual to root out any spiritual disturbances in the area. The holy man stared at Shen, as if sizing up his value.

“Can we count on your help, sir?” the man asked.

“Balance will be restored” said Shen with an assuring nod.

He parted ways with the holy man and continued to follow the faint trail of gossamer hair. He thought of the dead seafarers and the cost he’d need to exact from the demon. The words of his father still rang true: “The hardest part is finding the point of balance in all things.” True neutrality, the precise center of all forces at work in the world - that is what the Eye must be able to distinguish.

Enforcing that equilibrium was its own struggle. For the task, Shen carried two blades on his back.

One was an Ionian steel saber that could cleave through a person in one blow. The other was a sword of pure arcane energy. It was used for dealing with spirits, and had been passed down through many generations of Shen’s ancestors. He had slain countless demons, ghosts, wraiths, and sprites with it over the years, and fully expected to take one more before the day was done.

At last, Shen came to a secluded inlet, quiet and devoid of human activity. On a sandbar in the shallows lay the demon, its fine, glossy coat shimmering in the dusk. The creature swelled as it

rested, engorged from consuming the mortal essences of its victims. Shen crept through the rushes, silently edging toward the sleeping demon. He could see its massive ribcage expand and contract with deep, restful breaths. When he was but a few paces from the sandbar, he drew his spirit blade, readying his strike.

Suddenly, a distressing sound stayed his hand. It was a shrill, ghastly cry, emanating from the very air itself. It sounded familiar, but before Shen could identify the noise, he heard it again. And again. And *again*, culminating in a chorus of blood-curdling shrieks. These were the cries of dying spirits. Shen's eyes darted back to the demon, now beginning to stir from its slumber. Shen took one more look at his spirit blade, calmly weighing his options. He then clasped his hands together, carefully focusing his ki, and disappeared in a vortex of crackling energy, leaving the demon alone on its sandbar.

A moment later, Shen reappeared at the site of the shipwreck. All around, smoldering pools of black ooze evaporated into the air, coupled with the lingering reek of terror.

Shen counted the dissipating black puddles, each the remains of a slain spirit. His tally was interrupted as the holy man entered the clearing with his acolytes. One of the men held a cord of flax and silver. Tethered to the other end was a smaller spirit - an imp of no significance. It struggled against the choke of its leash. It wailed as it saw the remains of its brethren.

"Would you care to dispose of this one?" the holy man asked Shen, casually, as if offering him a bowl of soup at dinner.

Shen looked at the sticky, smoldering pools that were mighty beings of the otherworld just moments ago. Then he turned his gaze toward the priest and the wailing imp.

"I am sorry for this, Your Holiness" he said. He placed his spirit blade back into its scabbard and drew his steel saber instead. It was not the sword he had expected to use that day.

Soraka

Biography

A healer gifted with the magic of the stars, Soraka holds all living creatures close to her heart. She was once a celestial being, but she sacrificed her immortality and entered the world of mortals. So long as evil threatens life in Valoran, Soraka will not allow herself peace.

Soraka lived for centuries in an enchanted grove. A being of the stars, she healed the wounded and sick that sought her out. One man called Warwick came to her grove and begged her to heal his wife, who lay lifeless in his arms. His despair touched Soraka's heart. Though it was too late to save his wife, she offered to help heal the pain of his loss. Unwilling to let go of his grief Warwick ran from the grove, but returned over the following days to hear Soraka's guidance. She began to grow attached to the grieving man. One day Warwick told her he had found the men who killed his wife. He believed revenge would heal his pain - and if he died fighting, he would at least find peace. Though she pleaded with him, Warwick ignored her and left the grove. The voices of the stars warned her not to follow him, but Soraka had to intervene.

She stepped into the mortal world for the first time, and soon found Warwick desperately fighting a group of men. She tried to heal him, but for every wound she closed, the men inflicted two more. Soraka realized that she would have to fight to save her friend. The stars screamed in her mind, telling her not to use her powers for harm. Ignoring their warning, she struck the attackers with a flash of brilliant light. Crying out in terror and shielding their eyes from her divine radiance, they fled. Soraka's celestial form faded and the stars fell silent - for her transgression, she became mortal. She still felt the power of the stars within her, but they no longer offered her guidance. She took comfort in Warwick's safety, gently healing his wounds, but the man she had called her friend slipped a dagger between her ribs. As her blood spilled, Soraka realized he had fooled her, and everything he had done was a complicated ruse. Feeling humiliated and betrayed she called once more on the power of the stars, searing his flesh and cursing his cruelty. He retreated with an agonized howl, leaving Soraka to reflect upon her fate. Though her life had changed, she felt empowered and renewed with a singular purpose. No longer bound to the grove, Soraka set out into the mortal world, vowing to heal the wounded and protect the helpless.

Syndra

Biography

Born with immense magical potential, Syndra loves nothing more than exercising the incredible power at her command. With each passing day, her mastery of magical force grows more potent and devastating. Refusing any notion of balance or restraint, Syndra wants only to retain control of her power, even if it means annihilating the authorities that seek to stop her.

Throughout her youth in Ionia, Syndra's reckless use of magic terrified the elders of her village. They took her to a remote temple, leaving her in the care of an old mage. To Syndra's delight, the mage explained that the temple was a school - a place where she could develop her talents under his guidance. Though she learned much during her time there, Syndra no longer felt her power growing as it had in her youth. Her frustration grew, and she finally confronted her mentor, demanding an explanation. He revealed that he had dampened Syndra's magic, hoping to help her learn control and restraint. Accusing him of betrayal, she advanced on the mage, commanding him to lift the spell that was holding her back. He backed away, telling her that if she couldn't control herself, he would be forced to nullify Syndra's magic completely. Furious, she summoned her power and dashed the old man against the walls. With her mentor dead, Syndra felt the rush of her unbounded potential for the first time in years. Though she had won her freedom, she refused to return to the society that had tried to steal her gift. Instead, Syndra decided to claim her former prison as a stronghold. Pushing the boundaries of her magic, she tore the structure from its foundations and raised it into the sky. Free to delve further into her art, Syndra now aims to grow powerful enough to destroy the weak, foolish leaders of Ionia - and anyone else who would dare to shackle her greatness.

Varus

Biography

One of the ancient race of darkin, Varus was a deadly killer who loved to torment his foes with arrows, driving them to insanity before closing for the kill. Possessed of wondrous beauty, Varus was imprisoned at the end of the Darkin War, but escaped, centuries later, in the remade flesh of two Ionian hunters. The two men had unwittingly released Varus and now bear the bow containing his bound essence. Varus now hunts those who trapped him in order to enact his brutal vengeance, but the souls bound within him fight him every step of the way.

The mortal mages of Runeterra wielded wild magic, heedless of the consequences beyond their own world. Their reckless use of magic attracted the hunger of the darkin, who sent their fiercest warriors to conquer this new world. Varus traveled to Runeterra with the second wave of invaders, and with his crystalline bow, he assassinated enemy commanders and champions, helping the darkin defeat the mortal armies with ever greater ease.

Soon after Aatrox's fall, Varus was cornered by vastayan moon-stalkers and human mages in service of a golden-armored warrior queen. They bound him within his crystalline bow, leaving him to howl with impotent rage. By now, the corrupting influence of the darkin was known, and the warrior queen alone wielded the deadly bow in the final battle of the war, loosing the last bolt that broke the bridge to the darkin world forever.

At the end of the Darkin War, the queen carried Varus's bow to a land that would become known as Ionia. Her last act was to imprison the bow deep within a lightless cell sunk deep beneath a mountain temple overlooking the village of Pallas. There it remained, imprisoned by the natural magic of Ionia and the ritual ministrations of its guardians.

The bow remained hidden deep underground for centuries, unknown, untouched, and all but forgotten until Noxian invaders attacked Ionia. Two beast hunters - Valmar and his heartlight, Kai - fought the first wave of these invaders at the Temple of Pallas. Though their courage was great and drove off the attackers, Kai was mortally wounded. A grief-stricken Val carried him inside, praying the temple's magic would restore him.

But the temple held only damnation, and both hunters were consumed by the unleashed power of the darkin. The very matter of their bodies was unraveled and bound together in a warp and weft of new flesh to craft a perfect body, fit to bear the soul of Varus. What emerged from the temple was a gestalt creature, pale and inhumanly beautiful, part human, part darkin, Varus was reborn as an entity with a war for supremacy being waged in its soul.

The human and darkin elements of this newborn body are in constant flux, with each element sometimes managing to wrest control of the body for a short time before being reined in by the other. Varus fights to overcome Val and Kai's resistance once and for all so that he may wreak vengeance on mortals for the destruction of his race. But Kai and Val fight on against his malevolent influence, hoping against hope that their love can overcome the darkin's baser urges.

How long Val and Kai can keep Varus fully at bay is anyone's guess, but should this sadistic and egotistical darkin killer come to fully dominate his new body, it is certain he will seek to reunite with the survivors of his race in hopes of reducing Runeterra to an ashen wasteland.

Story

Varus followed a river running through the desert. Its water was gritty, but drinkable. The new body he had wrought to bear his bow was beautiful, fast and strong, but it came with the weaknesses of flesh. It hungered. It thirsted.

Days earlier, a crook-backed creature with a withered arm and birdlike features had told him this was Shurima, but that couldn't be true. The Shurima Varus remembered had been a desolate wasteland.

"Was I imprisoned for so long?" he wondered.

He despised the human noises his new mouth made. It sounded bestial and primitive, but at least he could speak aloud once more. As to how long he had been imprisoned... it was hard to say. He retained no concept of how mortals measured time, and the bird creature hadn't recognized what he was. She had no idea how far back the Darkin War had been fought.

"My kind all but destroyed this world," he said. "And now we have been forgotten? How is that even possible?"

With enough time, even the greatest horrors can fade.

The voice echoed in his skull, impossible to ignore. Which one was it? Kai or Valmar? He suspected Val, but mortal minds were so simple and muddy that it was hard to tell one from another.

"Any race that can forget staring into the abyss of its own extinction does not deserve to live," said Varus.

We don't forget. This was Valmar, decided Varus. Horrors become myths so we can bear to hear them, so we can learn from them and not go mad.

Such a notion was ridiculous, and Varus knew he would never allow the doom of his species to fade from memory. He was about to say so, when he heard noises from around a bend in the river ahead; shouting voices, braying animals and the sound of tools on stone. He darted forward, into the shadow of a toppled obelisk, and scanned ahead.

The new river had exposed the sunken ruins of some ancient structure comprised of pillars and statues of animal-headed gods. Yes, this was the source of the magic he had sensed. Old magic. The kind the flame-haired queen used to enslave his kind.

The kind used to imprison him beneath the rock of Ionia.

Tanned, wolf-lean men worked the ruins, digging out hidden reliquary chambers as thick-limbed beasts of burden dragged excavated rocks from deeper inside the structure. Armed warriors wearing boiled leather breastplates and carrying hook-bladed spears guarded the perimeter. Varus grinned and vaulted onto the obelisk, drawing back on his bow as he landed. Violet light built in the crystalline weapon as it flexed, and a coruscating arrow of purple lightning formed in the air.

Why must you kill them? This was Kai. He hated unnecessary killing.

Varus felt his hands tremble as Kai fought to make him lower the bow.

"Your kind destroyed my kin," said Varus, exerting his will to steady his aim. "That's the only reason I need."

He sighted along the crackling arrow as a burly warrior with a forked beard and shaven scalp saw him and yelled a warning.

So everyone you see must die?

Varus exhaled, and in the space between breaths loosed the fiery arrow. It flashed through the air to pierce the bearded warrior through the heart, burning a hole clean through him. He dropped to his knees, his mouth wide with shock. Other warriors hurled spears, but Varus was already moving. He sprang from the obelisk, loosing fiery, blood-red bolts from his bow. Varus hit the ground running, and five warriors died in as many bolts. A further three fell, pierced by the same crackling shaft.

A hook-spear swung at Varus. He dived to the side, rising to his feet and sending a pair of crimson shafts through his attacker's chest. Varus sprinted, leapt and dashed through the ruins, blazing shafts of light eviscerating his targets with absolute precision.

In seconds it was over. Sixteen dead, and he hadn't even broken sweat. He felt the anguish of the mortal souls within him and grinned. Every death gnawed at them, weakened them and made them less able to fight him.

The men excavating the ruined city fled, throwing down their tools and running for the river. Varus let them go. They were an irrelevance, and the killing of mortals without weapons always provoked the mortal souls within him to rebellion.

Varus entered the ruined structure, briefly glancing at a pair of jackal and crocodilian statues as he passed. Inside, it was cool and dark, the walls covered in vivid bas-reliefs depicting wide discs spreading golden rays over a bountiful land. The stone floor was inscribed with a magical script that had been ancient even before the darkin came to Runeterra.

"Warding sigils. Potent once, but faded," said Varus, crossing the inscribed flagstones to where a towering statue of a great serpent-headed god had once stood sentinel. Some past catastrophe had toppled it, and beyond its sandstone remains lay a lightless chamber.

Varus entered, the glow from the smoldering light at his heart revealing nothing but bare stone, burned black and glossy with ancient fire.

Varus sighed. *"Where are you, sister?"* he said.

Zed

Biography

Zed is the first ninja in 200 years to unlock the ancient, forbidden ways. He defied his clan and master, casting off the balance and discipline that had shackled him all his life. Zed now offers power to those who embrace knowledge of the shadows, and slays those who cling to ignorance.

An orphan, Zed was taken in and trained by a great ninja master. Only one other student appeared to be Zed's equal - the master's son, Shen. It seemed Zed could never win the favor of the master, as every match between the rivals ended in a draw. Frustrated and jealous, he sought an advantage.

The young ninja ventured into a sealed part of the clan's temple, where he found an ornate, foreboding box. Sensing the dark knowledge within, Zed knew he should not open it, but he peered inside nonetheless. In an instant, shadows touched his mind, revealing techniques that had long been hidden. Now armed with a secret edge, he challenged Shen, and this time he defeated the master's son. He expected praise and recognition in his moment of victory, but somehow the master knew Zed had used forbidden ways, and banished him.

Humiliated, the young ninja wandered for years. His bitterness turned to ambition, and he began to train others in the style of the shadows. As his power grew, so did his circle of followers, but he knew that without the box, his technique would never be perfect. One day, Zed looked at his followers and saw that his students were now an army. He led them back to the temple to claim his prize. At the gates, he was surprised to find the old master waiting, receiving Zed and his disciples as if they were welcome guests. The old man laid his sword at Zed's feet, declaring that he had failed Zed as his master. By banishing his former student, the master had doomed Zed to the shadows, instead of leading him to the balanced path. The old man implored Zed to enter the temple, destroy the box, and lead his followers to balance. The dark ninja followed the master inside. Moments later, the assembled ninjas heard Zed cry out in pain. Mysteriously, he emerged unscathed, and threw the severed head of the master at Shen's feet. Screaming in rage, Zed commanded his followers to slaughter the master's students and seize the box.

That day, the old ninja order fell. Though many students died, some escaped thanks to Shen's heroic efforts. Now the temple is a dark training ground for the Order of the Shadow. Zed rules as the Order's master, and his edict is simple: perfect one's technique, and kill all ninjas who refuse to embrace the shadows.

Wukong

Biography

Wukong is a vastayan trickster who uses his strength, agility and intelligence to confuse his opponents and gain the upper hand. After finding a lifelong friend in the warrior known as Master Yi, Wukong became the last student of the ancient martial art known as Wuju. Armed with an enchanted staff, Wukong seeks to prevent Ionia from falling to ruin.

Within Ionia's treetops dwells a vastayan tribe known as the Shimon. These apelike creatures are a wise, cautious people, and as pacifists, chose to build their society away from landwalkers, cultivating their society atop the tallest trees in Ionia. The Shimon see life as an evolutionary climb to wisdom, thus upon death, the Shimon believe they become stones, returning to the soil to begin the climb of life again.

Even from an early age, Kong had very little in common with his fellow Shimon. Impulsive, clever, and fun-loving, Kong was a constant thorn in his village's side. When war came to Ionia, Kong was engrossed by the sounds and colors of the battles below – they awoke something true and undeniable in him, a calling. Kong left his tribe to prepare for what he knew to be his destiny.

Armed only with instinct and with no training under his belt, Kong wandered Ionia, in search of challengers to learn the art of combat. Though Kong often earned bruises and broken teeth for his trouble, with each fight, he was carving himself into the warrior he felt called to become.

In his travels, Kong ran across a goggle-wearing man meditating in a glade. Kong challenged him to a fight. The man stood up and knocked Kong to the ground in a single motion before returning to his meditations. Kong had challenged many opponents, but he'd never experienced anything like this.

For weeks, Kong came back to the glade every day and attempted to defeat the warrior. Though stronger and faster than the begoggled man, Kong was outmaneuvered at every turn.

Eventually, Kong decided to try something he'd never attempted in his many years of life: humility. He kneeled before the man and humbly asked for training. Without missing a beat, the swordsman asked a question of Kong: *why do you fight?*

Kong realized he'd never thought about that before. He could have stayed in his peaceful society, but something inside him had demanded otherwise. Kong asked the same question of the man, who only replied that he did not fight anymore. Kong spent the next several days sitting in the glade with the warrior, pondering the question.

The man saw Kong's change of heart and quiet determination. He introduced himself as Master Yi, and agreed to train Kong in the virtues of discipline, patience and combat, which Yi called Wuju. Kong's technique and precision improved with each lesson as Yi channeled Kong's propensity for recklessness and impulsiveness into a lethally swift and surprising fighting style.

The two grew to respect each other over the course of this training, yet Kong sensed a deep sadness in Yi that even Kong's most hilarious pranks couldn't lighten.

More than that, he still hadn't found an answer to Yi's question. Maybe if he'd known what Yi had once fought for, he could answer the question for himself. Kong made Yi a proposition. The two

would engage in a friendly spar. If Kong won, Yi would have to tell him what he'd fought for. If Yi won, Kong wouldn't speak for an entire year.

Yi eagerly accepted.

Kong lured Yi from the glade into a field of smokepoppies, and each time Yi attempted one of his swift attacks, Kong would disappear into the haze the poppies burst with when agitated. In the confusion, Yi struck out at what he believed to be Kong, but instead was a straw doll Kong had woven in his own image and planted in the field as a decoy. Kong seized his opportunity and felled Yi with a blow to the temple.

Yi smiled at Kong's cleverness. The smile disappeared, however, as he explained why he had given up the sword. Yi was once an integral part of Ionia's defense against Noxus during the invasion. Yi and his disciples had been so effective at meeting the Noxians in combat that the invaders had eventually turned to chemical warfare. Yi blamed himself for the hundreds of lives lost to their Zaunite scientist's chem-bombs. No longer able to answer why he fought, he banished himself to the glade to meditate upon the question.

Kong had come from a people who chose to stay out of the world's fights, but all that did was leave those who might be less equipped to face those threats alone. Kong admired that, whatever the outcome, Yi had fought to protect others. Kong realized he wished to do the same.

Through Kong's eyes, Yi saw that he had been running from the truth: that, as much as he may try to deny it, he was a warrior and his people needed his help. A thankful Yi granted Kong an enchanted staff, crafted by the legendary blacksmith Doran, and a new honorific, reserved only for the brightest students of Wuju. From that day forward, Kong was known as Wukong.

Yi and Wukong walked out of the Ionian wilderness, intent on finding a new cause to fight for.
Together.

Story

Fast and dumb, or slow and smart?

That's what Yi always asks me. Well, I say "asks," but it's not really a question. Not up for discussion. Not really. You can be impulsive and quick and improvisational and have fun... or you can do things Yi's way. The *right* way. Slow. Patient. Strategic. With a gruff, determined expression on his face, like he stepped in crap. Because he did. Because I shoved some inside his boot, thinking he'd find it funny.

He didn't.

(I did, though, so it all kinda worked out in the end.)

The *really* irritating thing, though: he's usually right. Through the years we've trained together, I've beaten him in combat something like...twelve times? Versus the hundreds of times he's walloped me. And every time – every single time I ate a mouthful of dirt – I knew it was because I'd gotten impatient. Took a swing I wasn't sure would land. Lunged for an opening that ended up being a trap.

And I'm not being humble. I'm *good*. *Really* good. Yi, humorless as he is, just happens to be one of the best warriors I've ever met. It's not like the guy is slow, either: he's fast. Faster than anyone I've ever seen. As in: he unsheathes his blade, then there's a blur, then three guys are bleeding on the ground. That fast.

So when he tells me to choose slow and smart over fast and dumb, I try to listen most of the time.

Keyword being “try.”

And “most of the time.”

We were wandering through a forest of man-high mushrooms when we heard the shouting.

In addition to cutting off the punchline of an incredible joke I’d been telling, Yi made me dive into the thick of a thistleshrub to avoid detection.

There were six of them. Five bandits and their rope-bound captive, an elderly farmer with anxious eyes.

I felt this situation called for a liberal application of hitting people in the head with my staff, but Yi held me back. He put a finger to his lips, then pointed at his eyes. *Observe. Strategize. Fast and dumb, or slow and smart?*

I sighed and looked over the group with a discerning eye.

Raggedy clothes hung off their hunched backs, taut with stress. They seemed to take far better care of their blades than themselves. Their eyes scanned their surroundings as they marched, on the lookout for any potential ambush. One shoved a gag into the old farmer’s mouth, presumably to stop the shouting we’d just heard.

Bandits.

The old farmer collapsed to the ground. The tumble was intentional; anyone could tell that. His captors certainly did.

The leader stopped and faced the old man. “Well, that tears it,” he said. “You’re old, my friend, but you’re not *that* old. Falling over every few hundred steps to stall for time? Give yourself a second to think about how you’re gonna get out of this? That’s an old trick. Older than you.”

He squatted to the farmer’s level.

“You don’t *really* have a chestful of precious stones at home, do you?”

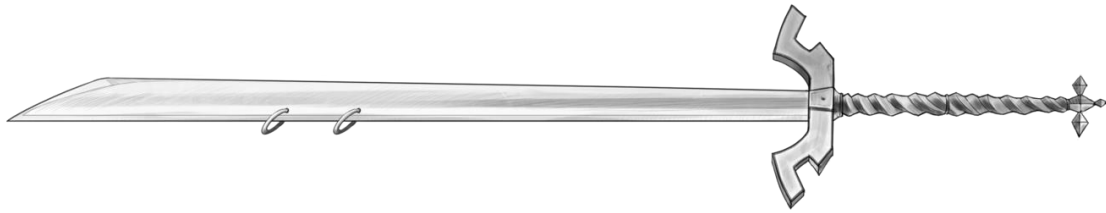
The old man stared at the bandit, terror slowly replacing itself with resignation.

He shook his head.

“That’s a shame,” the bandit said, a genial smile on his face. The kind of smile that usually leads to somebody pulling out a dagger.

“I’m gonna go save him now,” I whispered to Yi.

Yi shook his head as hard as he could without rattling his goggles. I didn’t have to ask why. He likely wanted one of us to sneak around them and attack from the other side of the pass, trapping them in a pincer. Or something equally cunning and time-consuming. Slow and smart.



Yi's big problem – apart from not finding me funny, and the fact that his goggles make him look like a man-sized bug – is that he spent the last handful of years sitting alone in a field of flowers. His patience is infinite. He thinks everything can be thought through. Planned for.

Still, Yi had said to go slow. We'd try it his way. I nodded at him, then at the path behind the thugs. *You get behind them. I'll attack on your signal.*

Yi circled back through the brush. He darted to the other side of the trail, too quick to notice, even if they had been looking in his direction. Classic ambush setup: he'd get their attention, and while their backs were turned, I'd hit them from my side of the path.

That's when the lead bandit pulled a blade out of his right pocket. A small little thing, not good for much more than peeling fruit. Or slicing the throat of a tired old farmer.

I couldn't see Yi in the brush on the other side of the road, but I knew he couldn't see the blade. He didn't know what was about to happen.

They were about to kill the old man, no matter how safe Yi wanted to play it. We had no time to go slow.

Thankfully, I had a secret weapon up my sleeve: I'm really, really, *really* good at fighting.

The leader grabbed the old man's scalp and put a knife to his throat. I leapt out of the brush, staff held high, and smacked the blade out of his hand. Then we got to my favorite part.

Whenever I get the drop on somebody, I usually get about a two to three second window as they try to make sense of me. Most people have never seen a vastaya, much less a Shimon. They stand there slack-jawed, which typically gives me a chance to hit 'em before they realize what's going on.



I drove my knee into the lead bandit's chin, and his teeth clacked together so hard, even I winced at the sound.

"Stay where you are, Yi!" I shouted into the bush where he waited, unseen. "I got this."

That's when a knife hit me in the shoulder.

Apparently, one of those jerks had been wearing a bandolier of throwing daggers across his chest, and I hadn't noticed. I tried not to imagine Yi smirking to himself.

"Still 'got this,' do you?," he yelled from the brush. Likely staying out of the fight just long enough for me to get my teeth kicked in, so he could leap in, save me, and shout that he told me to slow down.

“Completely!” I shouted as I tossed a handful of smokepoppies to the ground. (I always keep a few on me. They’re useful in combat, and even more useful for irritating Yi when I’m bored.)

Then I beat the hell outta the rest of them. I won’t trouble you with the details—

—Wait, yes I will, because they’re great.

I held my staff out and twirled around, aiming high so as to avoid the prone old man. My arms shuddered with every impact of wood against skull. I dodged blows, parried strikes, and only got punched in the face, like, twice.

By the time the smoke cleared, I was the only one still standing. Well, me and the old man, once I got him to his feet.

Yi stepped out of the brush, sighing.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “What are you sighing for? I saved the grungy old man—”

“—Hey!” the old man said.

“And my shoulder will probably heal in a couple of days. Ow,” I said, touching the wound. “What’s disappointed you this time?”

Yi cut the man’s bindings. “I’m not disappointed,” Yi said. “I’m irritated.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like admitting I’m wrong. You were impatient, reckless, and you absolutely made the right call.”

I smiled.

“Fast and dumb.”

He patted me on my non-bleeding shoulder.

“Fast and dumb,” he said.

Cho'Gath

Biography

There is a place between dimensions, between worlds. To some it is known as the Outside, to others it is the Unknown. To those that truly know, however, it is called the Void. Despite its name, the Void is not an empty place, but rather the home of unspeakable things - horrors not meant for minds of men. Cho'Gath is a creature born of the Void, a thing whose true nature is so awful most will not speak its name. Its fellows have been poking at the walls that divide dimensions for a crack, a way into Runeterra, where they can visit their own personal paradise of horror upon the world. They are called the Voidborn, creatures so ancient and terrible that they have been removed from history altogether. It is rumored that the Voidborn command vast armies of unspeakable creatures on other worlds, that they were once driven from Runeterra by powerful magic lost to antiquity.

If such tales are true, then the rumors that follow must be equally true - that one day, the Voidborn will return. Even now, something dark stirs in Icathia. Cho'Gath, an alien creature of malice and violence, causes all but the most stalwart to cringe in fear. Cho'Gath even appears to feed on its predations, growing and swelling as it gorges itself. Worse yet, the creature is intelligent, perhaps greatly so, hinting at the sentient horror of the Void.

Kassadin

Biography

Kassadin started life as a lowly offcast, walking the harsh sands of the Great Sai alongside merchant caravans to draw predators away from their more valuable goods. He survived many of these treks across the desert, and began to serve less as bait, and more as a guide.

The foreign tongues that sought his talents, “*Kas sai a dyn?*” or “whom does the desert know?” often slurred their Shuriman, and so he became fondly known as Kassadin in the back alleys and markets of Bel’zhun. He spent many years exploring the ancient ruins of his homeland, making his employers exceedingly wealthy, but it wasn’t until a dig near Zirima that he found a treasure of his own—he fell in love with a woman from one of the desert tribes.

With his wife and newborn daughter, Kassadin settled in a small village in the rocky canyons to the south. He was on the road often, his work sometimes requiring him to accompany particularly valuable relics to some faraway sponsor. But, no matter where his travels took him, Kassadin would always return with exciting tales from the world beyond.

Journeying home from distant Piltover, Kassadin and his fellow caravaneers were watering their beasts at an oasis when they encountered the first terrified survivors stumbling out of the desert. They spoke of the disaster that had claimed their homes, as if the maw of the underworld itself had opened up to devour them. They had barely escaped with their lives.

Fearing for his own family’s safety, Kassadin left the others behind, riding hard, driving his mount almost to exhaustion. When he finally reached the place where his village had once stood, he found only shifting sand and rubble. He clawed at the debris until his hands bled, screaming out his wife and daughter’s names, though no answer came. Days later, Kassadin’s companions caught up to him, now just a broken and empty man weeping beneath the scorching sun.

They dragged him back to Zirima, but Kassadin would go no further. For years, he tried to drown his grief, reduced to little more than a vagrant... until word reached town of “the Prophet.”

Whispers of unspeakable horrors that dwelt beneath the earth, and of sacrifices made in their name, chilled Kassadin to the bone. He knew well the legends of old Icathia, and the fate that befell that accursed place—if the Void had been deliberately drawn toward Shurima once more, then it had likely been the death of his entire village, and countless more besides. He also knew there were few, if any, who could stand against it.

In that moment, Kassadin swore that he would avenge his wife and daughter, by destroying this insidious Prophet, and the source of his abyssal power. He was a man who had made his living by finding safe paths through the most dangerous places, and resolved to arm himself with the most arcane and esoteric weapons ever known in Valoran, fused with Zaunite ingenuity, and blessed by Ionian spirit-healers. He called in every favor he could, from scholars of antiquities to common smugglers, for their help in... *acquiring* what he sought. Many called him a madman, believing this the last time they would ever see their old friend alive—Kassadin merely thanked them for their

concern, and bid them farewell. He would face the Void alone.

Last of all, he stole the infamous Nether Blade of Horok, the sword that had slain a thousand deceivers in the latter days of the empire. He could feel the cold pull of oblivion in its edge, but no longer had any regard for his own mortality, and nothing of his old life left to lose.

Disguised in the robes of a pilgrim, more than a decade since he had last set foot anywhere near that desolate land, Kassadin made his way into Icatia. He would go where no man was ever meant to walk.

He would have his vengeance, even if it killed him.

Kha'Zix

Biography

A vicious Void predator, Kha'Zix infiltrated Valoran to devour the land's most promising creatures. With each kill he absorbs his prey's strength, evolving to grow more powerful. Kha'Zix hungers most to conquer and consume Rengar, the one beast he considers his equal.

When Kha'Zix crossed over into this world, he was fragile and ravenous. The animals he first encountered were too small to fuel the rapid evolution he craved. Kha'Zix focused his hunger on the most dangerous creatures he could find, risking his life to satisfy his need. With each kill he feasted and changed, becoming a stronger, faster predator. Kha'Zix soon chased his prey with unrestrained aggression, believing he was unstoppable. One day, while savoring a fresh kill, the predator became the prey. From cover a creature pounced in a blur of fangs and steel, tackling him to the ground. It roared in his face slashing and clawing, and Kha'Zix felt his blood spill for the first time. Screeching in fury, he sliced at the brute's eye driving it back. They fought from sunset to sunrise. Finally, near death, they reluctantly separated. As his wounds closed, Kha'Zix burned with anticipation at the idea of devouring one who could match the Void's strength. He resumed his search for powerful prey with renewed vigor. Someday, Kha'Zix will feast on Rengar.

Kai'Sa

Biography

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the fearless hunter of the Void known as Kai'Sa is how unremarkably her life began. She did not descend from tribal warriors hardened by generations of battle, nor was she summoned from distant lands to fight the unknowable menace lurking beneath

Shurima. Rather, she was just an ordinary girl, born to loving parents who called the unforgiving southern deserts their home. This was where she would spend her days playing with friends, and her nights dreaming about her place in the world.

In her tenth summer, the young girl Kaisa's destiny would be changed forever. Had she been older, she might have noticed more of the unusual events that had begun to unfold in the villages—every day, her mother urged her stay home, for fear of strangers wandering the land, demanding tribute to dark powers below. Kaisa and her friends did not believe it, until one evening they came upon a pen of sacrificial goats bought from nomad herdsman. Using the knife her father had given her on her eighth birthday, she cut their tethers and set the animals free into a nearby canyon. It seemed like a harmless prank, until the unthinkable happened. The ground began to quake, flashes of light scorched the sky, and the children ran for their lives.

The Void had been awakened. A great rift split the bedrock, swallowing up Kaisa's village and everyone in it, leaving nothing behind but sand pierced with twisted columns as black as night.

Kaisa regained consciousness to find herself trapped underground. She was filled with crippling fear, but there was still hope; she could hear the faint cries of other survivors. They called out to each other feebly, repeating their names one by one like a mantra. Sadly, by the third day, hers was the only voice left. Her friends and family were all gone. She was alone in the darkness.

It was only when all seemed lost that she saw the light.

She followed it down.

Along the way, she found meager sustenance. Amid the debris left by the collapse were ragged waterskins, rotting peaches—anything to keep starvation at bay. But, eventually, Kaisa's hunger was replaced by fear once again. She found herself in a vast cavern, illuminated by an otherworldly purplish glow, and she could see she was no longer alone.

Skittering creatures swarmed in the depths. The first that came for Kaisa was no bigger than her, and she clutched her knife in both hands, ready to defend herself. The voidling horror knocked her to the ground, but she drove the blade into its pulsing heart, and the two of them tumbled deeper into the abyss.

The creature was seemingly dead, but its unnatural skin had taken hold upon the flesh of her arm. The dark shell tingled, but was hard as steel to the touch. In a panic, Kaisa broke her knife trying to remove it. But when the larger beasts came, she used it as a shield to make her escape.

Soon enough, she realized the shell was becoming part of her. As her daily struggle to survive drew out into years, this second skin grew with her, and so too did her resolve.

Now she had more than hope, she had a plan. Fight hard. Stay alive. Find a way back.

She was transformed, from frightened girl to fearless survivor, from prey to predator. For almost a decade, she has lived between two worlds in an attempt to keep them apart—the Void hungers to consume not only the scattered villages of Shurima, but the whole of Runeterra. She will not allow that to happen.

Though she has slain countless Void-constructs, she understands that many of the people she protects would see her as a monster herself. Indeed, her name has begun to pass into legend, an echo of the ancient horrors of doomed Icathia.

No longer Kaisa... but Kai'Sa.

Story

"Listen to me," I tell the little girl who found me here, beside the pit. "I need you to hear me. There isn't much time."

She leans forward, without a hint of fear in her eyes. "Tell me what to do."

I like her. A slight smile breaks across my face, for the first time in what seems like... forever. "Not this," I say, gesturing to the arrow gripped in her hand. She holds it like a spear.

I was only a child when the Void took me from my family, so I didn't know any better either. But the rest of them, they were so careless. Sacrifices, offerings, tributes—whatever you want to call them, they were never going to work. It isn't some god, appeased by gifts and prayers. It just wants to devour everything.

"You want to kill it? You want to destroy it?" I ask her.

She nods.

"Then *starve* it."

The sensation of needles on my flesh grows stronger, as if in response to these words. The threatening presence is closing in around us, and my second skin constricts, pulling taut as a bow. I take one last deep breath before they come.

The sand begins to shift, puckering and falling away, like in an hourglass. Eerie pulses of light filter into the sky, as the construct-creatures heave themselves up into the Shuriman night, screeching and drooling. I steady myself, charging the energy inside my shoulder pods.

I grit my teeth, and release it.

Bright blooms of heat and pain find their targets quickly, raining down, stopping the creatures in their tracks, flinging them aside. The air is filled with an acid reek, and the hiss of melting chitin.

Soon there is nothing left of them. I wait for the needles' itch to stop, but it doesn't.

The girl is crouched beside me, ready. She probably cannot understand what she is seeing.

"Does it hurt?" she whispers, her hand reaching out for the glowing scales on my arm.

I pull back reflexively. She doesn't even flinch.

"Sometimes," I confess.

Not too far away, her village sleeps on unaware, for the most part. Curiosity had no doubt gotten the better of this little girl. So many stories, fables both frightening and fantastical. The voidling beasts hunting in the dead of night, calling to one another.

She just wanted to see for herself. See what lurks beyond the rocks, see the thing her people both fear and adore at the same time.

My skin tightens again. The needles, the constant itch...

I blink. "I'm sorry, you didn't tell me your name."

She stands up proudly, still brandishing the arrow. "I'm Illi. I came to protect my family from the monster." She is no more than ten years of age.

"Well, Illi—sometimes running is the best thing to do."

"But you don't run," she says, narrowing her eyes, "do you?"

A clever one, this girl. I shake my head. "Not anymore."

"Then I won't either!" Illi proclaims. Brave as well.

She has no idea what they're dealing with. None of them do. All these things her people have done to rid themselves of the creatures, they were just ringing the dinner bell.

"You need to tell them, Illi. You need to make them understand. No more dancing beneath the new moon. And no more animals tied to stakes. The Void has no mercy to offer—it feeds or it dies."

The day I came to understand this, was when I knew I had a chance. Maybe that's why I survive, while so many others perish.

But survival always has its price. Ever since I found my way back, I've been paying it.

"Look..." the girl whispers. "They are coming to find us."

I don't have to look. I knew they would come. By instinct, the carapace draws over my face. Illi stares up at me.

"Don't be frightened," I say to her in a voice now so twisted and monstrous, it could have the opposite meaning.

"Of what?" she asks. I find myself wearing a smile she cannot see.

There are only a handful of people who've ever seen me in the flesh, or whatever it is that now covers my body. All but two of them are dead.

Illi's people appear to be capable hunters. Only the capable live out here. I can see where she got her bravery. Their torches twinkle in the night.

"Papa!" she calls out to the searching villagers, without warning me. "I found her! The girl who came back!"

They're heading toward us now, weapons at the ready, fire in their eyes. "Illi!" her father yells, nocking an arrow to his bow. "Get away from that... *thing!*"

She looks up at me again, confused. For every little girl like Illi, there are ten others who would run the other way. Or worse. I know what most people say about me. I've seen their fear scrawled across mud walls, scratched into the canyon rocks.

Beware the girl who came back a monster.

They don't know a thing about me. To them, I'm just something they do not want to face—a living, walking, fighting embodiment of what they fear most. I guess that's why they added the mark to my name.

Ten years ago, I was only Kaisa—very much like Illi, hopeful about a future as limitless as the stars in the night sky. That future died the day the Void dragged me down.

The needles are back. Illi releases my hand just as my luminous weapons materialize over my arms. "Go to him," I tell her. "Go to your father."

"Illi, *run!*" her father pleads. He draws back his bowstring with trembling hands.

"No!" she yells, turning to me. "I don't run anymore."

I usher her forwards, keeping my eyes trained on the villagers. "No, Illi, you were born a fighter. They will need you."

After a few steps, she turns back. "What do I tell them?"

"Tell them... Tell them to be ready."

The Void has taken so much from me, but I refuse to let it take everything. These moments, where kindness and humanity shine through, where innocence and trust extinguish fear—they fill me with hope that we can defeat the rivers of timeless poison that flow beneath the world.

The first time I escaped the abyss, I did it for myself.

Maybe one day, it will be for them.

Kog'Maw

Biography

When the prophet Malzahar was reborn in Icathia, he was led there by an ominous voice which thereafter anchored itself to his psyche. From within, this voice bestowed upon him terrible purpose, and though Malzahar was no longer tormented by its call, the voice did not cease its unrelenting summons. This baleful beacon's gentle flicker - now fastened to Runeterra - drew forth a putrid beast that ambled across a threshold it did not understand, widening a fissure between the spaces which were never meant to meet. There amongst the haunting ruins of Icathia, Kog'Maw manifested in Valoran with unsettling curiosity. The spark which led him to Runeterra teased him still, urging him gently towards Malzahar. It also encouraged him to familiarize himself with his new environment, to the stark horror of everything he encountered on his journey.

The enchanting colors and aromas of Runeterra intoxicated Kog'Maw, and he explored the fruits of the strange world the only way he knew how: by devouring them. At first he sampled only the wild flora and fauna he happened across. As he traversed the parched Tempest Flats, however, he came upon a tribe of nomads. Seemingly unhampered by conventional rules of physics, Kog'Maw consumed every nomad and any obstacles they put in his way, amounting to many times his own mass and volume. The most composed of his victims may have had time to wonder if this was due to the caustic enzymes which stung the ground as they dripped from his gaping mouth, although such musings were abruptly concluded. Even this feeding frenzy did nothing to satiate Kog'Maw's appetite. His swathe of destruction continues still as he is inexorably drawn towards Malzahar. What happens when he finds him is anyone's guess.

Malzahr

Biography

Beneath the glare of the Shuriman sun, there have always been those blessed with the power of foresight. The only son of aging trinket peddlers, Malzahr did not realize his gift until his parents had already succumbed to a wasting sickness, leaving the young, traumatized boy to fend for himself on the city streets of Amakra. He read fortunes in the gutter, for a coin or scraps of bread.

As his auguries proved more and more accurate, his reputation grew. He used his second sight to predict who a curious cameleer might marry, or where throwing daggers would land in games of chance at the bazaar. Soon, he began to receive patrons dressed not in dirtied sandals, but jeweled slippers.

However, for all this, Malzahr could never see his own destiny. His future was hidden.

Increasingly disillusioned with his success, he noted the common disparities of wealth, and witnessed those unhappy with their lives acting out in spiteful violence against one another. It was apparent to him that people were bound up in a never-ending cycle of pain, often of their own making, and no hopeful prophecy seemed able to break it. Malzahr himself soon felt nothing but a sense of emptiness, finally relinquishing his mortal possessions and leaving Amakra for good.

For years, he roamed the land, from the trackless wastes of the lesser *sai* to the ruins of old Shurima.

By distancing himself from others, he was alone with his thoughts at last. He divined not just how callous people could be, but also how corrupt the world might yet become. Feverish visions began to plague his waking hours, along with otherworldly whispers of war and strife, and endless suffering.

He wandered far, until the sands turned to salt. He could not know that he had arrived in Icathia, a lost city ravaged in the wars of a bygone age. There, gazing into the depths of a ragged abyss, Malzahr opened his unsteady mind, desperate for understanding.

And the Void answered.

That would have been the end of any other tale, and yet somehow Malzahr endured. What lay in the darkness below brushed against the soul of the broken seer, only for an instant, and yet its strange and unknowable energies saturated his mind completely.

The lone figure that eventually strode out of Icathia was no longer just a man, but something greater. Malzahr had seen in the abyss an end to all the suffering he had witnessed in his mortal lifetime. He realized the future he had believed hidden from him all this time was in fact a vision of his true calling: to accelerate the world toward inevitable oblivion. He had to return to the people, and spread word of the holy nothingness that would gladly embrace them, the willing and non-believers alike. He would become the herald of the world's salvation.

Among the nomads of the deep desert, he found his first disciples. Before their astonished eyes, he used his new Void-given powers to rend the very earth itself, summoning chittering, nightmarish

creatures to carry away any who dared to deny him. Within a matter of months, strange rumors began to travel with the merchant caravans; rumors of men and women gladly sacrificing themselves to unseen powers, and of powerful quakes opening up the bedrock of Shurima in new fault lines hundreds of miles long.

In the years since, Malzahar's legend has spread even to the northern ports. As followers of "the Prophet" grow in number, nearby settlers are said to experience malefic visions grasping at their hearts, and fear gives rise to superstition—even the hardy villagers of the far wastes now make offerings of livestock to appease the voidling creatures below.

Little do they know, this only helps Malzahar in shepherding the coming of the end.

Rek'Sai

Biography

The largest and fiercest of her species, Rek'Sai is a merciless predator that tunnels through the earth to ambush and devour her prey. Her insatiable hunger has laid waste to entire regions of the once-great Shuriman empire. Merchants, traders and armed caravans will go hundreds of miles out of their way to avoid these vast areas, though cunning bandits have been known to lure the unwary into her killing grounds. Once Rek'Sai detects you, your fate is sealed. There is no hope of escape; she is death from below the sand.

Story

Six boys and a camel, and the boys were cheaper to replace. Some were orphans and escaped slaves, but most were *off casts* — teenagers abandoned by families too poor to keep them. When Shahib offered him the work, Jaheje hadn't eaten in days.

Only the desperate would try crossing the *Sai Kahleek*, but those with any meager possessions bartered for Shahib. Jaheje looked across the cooking fire at the older boy. A few small tufts of facial hair had sprouted on Shahib's cheeks, and his voice no longer cracked when he spoke. Few boys survived crossing the desert for more than a couple seasons. No one chose to do it after earning any money. No one except Shahib, who had walked the *Sai Kahleek* for almost ten years.

Shahib whistled and the other boys ran to his side. He showed them how to cut the callouses from their feet.

"Feel each step" he instructed. "Start with your big toe, then roll outward until your whole foot touches down. Only then do you shift your weight from your rear foot." He stood and demonstrated how to move with long, silent strides.

"Practice" he explained. "If the camel walks too slowly, it will reveal our presence. You must be quiet, and you must be swift."

Jaheje's feet bled badly the first day; he nearly fainted from the pain. He practiced long after the caravan stopped and the ground cooled. By the fourth day, the pain was so intense, he used a bit of leather to bite down on. Shahib complimented him on his technique.

Shahib laughed as he indicated it to the other boys. "Watch" he said. "Jaheje is quieter than me. Copy how he moves. Each step as soft as a mouse, each stride as long as a gazelle. Yes, this is how you survive Sai Kahleek."

Longing as much for the older boy's praise as the training he needed to survive, Jaheje soon followed him everywhere. He saw how Shahib rested with one foot raised and wrapped around the pendant spear. He saw how Shahib retied the spear's pendant every morning, making sure the flag's *cut-cloth* always flowed like the leaves of a desert palm. He saw how Shahib's eyes searched the desert in a pattern, over and over, stopping only when he closed them for sleep.

After the second moon, they arrived. From the top of the dunes, Jaheje looked down at the skeleton of the dead god. No one knew what the monster had been when alive, but its huge ribs raked into the sky, each casting a shadow that engulfed the caravan as they passed. Its bones meant they were entering the Sai Kahleek.

Northerners called Sai Kahleek the “Bone Sea” but this was a mistranslation. The Laaji tribes had never seen an ocean. *Sai* was the word the Laaji used for plains of sand and loosely packed rock, which were slow and painful to walk on. It meant the land was pockmarked with tunnels. It meant the *Xer’Sai* preyed here. It meant death lurked beneath the sand.

Dragging the old camel behind them, the team of boys left before dawn, a half day’s march ahead of the caravan.

Jaheje found his first burrow on the second day, and waved his signal flag. Shahib soft-stepped over to him. They approached the burrow cautiously and stopped a dozen yards from it. Its opening was no larger than a melon, but from it, the poisonous vapors of activity brewed. Shahib sent one of the boys back to redirect the caravan.

Jaheje looked back and asked Shahib “Can we kill a Xer’Sai that large?”

Shahib scratched his chin, responding “Their skin gets harder with age.” Slowly, a grin appeared proudly. “Last season I killed one the size of a jackal. We lost the camel, but I killed it.”

Jaheje smiled, enjoying his mentor’s boast. But he found himself asking “Does Rek’Sai exist?”

Shahib chilled, his mood suddenly bitter. “I have seen her.” But before Jaheje could ask about the famous beast, Shahib stood and told Jaheje to keep moving. They crept away from the burrow, listening, waiting, scanning the horizon for any movement.

When Jaheje heard the first gong of a sounding bell, it took him a moment to process what it meant. Something was coming from behind them, to the east. He had been so focused on looking for hidden burrows, he had forgotten to watch the horizon.

The camel brayed, and Jaheje looked for the signal spears of the other boys in his crew. At the edge of his visibility, he could see their three flags.

The bell sounded again. The boy who had sighted the Xer’Sai would now use the sounding bell to confuse the beast. Jaheje had to chase the camel away from the path of the caravan and toward the lookout. Assuming the lookout wasn’t killed, the Xer’Sai would follow the camel away from the caravan and allow the lookout a safe path to retreat.

Jaheje could see Shahib running toward him. The bone-thin teen had abandoned silent-stepping, racing as fast as he could toward the camel and Jaheje. Shahib dropped his spear as a cloud of dust suddenly appeared behind him.

Jaheje ran to the huge king-bell attached to the camel. He dragged it down to the ground and struck it with all of his might. Even muffled by the earth, the sound battered his ears. He kept hitting, but the cloud of dust pursuing Shahib didn’t change course. Each second it gained ground.

At the moment, it seemed certain to overtake Shahib. Instead of running or dodging, he froze and screamed "Don't move!"

The other boys stood as motionless as their bodies would allow. At the exact instant, the old camel began running.

And then, before a word could be spoken, an energy crackle hit them like a wall. The hair on Jaheje's neck stood on end.

"It's close" Jaheje whispered.

"No" Shahib warned. "It's not close. It's big." And for the first time Jaheje saw real fear on the older boy's face.

Shahib scanned the desert, looking for a fin, a dust cloud, anything. Then he judged the distance.

"The caravan's too far. If it heads for the camel we can make it to the rocks."

Jaheje desperately turned, looking for the hidden creature. "Where is it?!"

In the distance, they heard the camel bray in pain. The animal's screams ended suddenly.

"What could kill a camel that quickly?" Jaheje asked.

Shahib pushed them forward. "We have to reach the rocks" he insisted.

And with that, they began to run.

When Shahib told them to stop, they stopped. When he indicated for them to silent-step, they did so. Jaheje could only hope Shahib saw what he did not.

But the black rocks seemed to run away from them. No matter how many steps they took, they never grew closer. So they ran as clouds covered the sun and the desert became black. They ran as the wind swept away their trail. They ran knowing the Xer'Sai was behind them; knowing it heard every misstep, every stumble. They ran knowing that it followed, and that every mistake led it closer.

When Jaheje saw it, it seemed to be a giant mouth cut into the rock, vapors hissing from it menacingly. The burrow's entrance was so large, even standing upright, he would be able to walk into it without lowering his head.

"Rek'Sai" he whispered in terrified awe. As he turned, he realized that all around them, the black stone was pockmarked with the creature's giant tunnels.

Young Xalee gave voice to the horrible realization that they all understood: "She can tunnel through rock." The cliffs they had thought to be their salvation were instead Rek'Sai's lair.

"We should go back, try and reach the caravan" Xalee suggested.

"Try if you like" Shahib answered.

"We can silent-step."

"A day's travel" Shahib cautioned. "Can you travel soundlessly for a whole day?"

"What will you do Shahib?" Jaheje asked.

"If we go back, we will die in the Sai Kahleek. I will go forward and pray a guardian watches over me."

Xalee asked "Where does this valley lead?"

"It doesn't matter where it leads. It is our only choice."

They moved cautiously along the cliffs, entering a wind cut valley, and hoping it would lead to water soon. Avoiding the monstrous burrows was impossible. Each boy silently prayed Rek'Sai had heard, and pursued, the distant caravan instead of them.

As the sunlight crept over the edge of the valley, it revealed the desolate obstacle they faced. It was impossible to walk silently in the canyon, for bones were scattered underfoot. The sound of each footstep echoed with a hollow lifelessness.

She launched from an unseen hole behind them, which had appeared dead. For Jaheje, everything became a blur.

"Back!" Shahib screamed to the others. "Get downwind!"

The warning was already too late for Xalee. The creature brought down the boy like a wolf taking a mouse. Her huge fangs snapped Xalee's spine, killing him before he could cry out.

Rek'Sai loomed above Jaheje, twice his height. Her powerful forelimbs stalked left and right. Her leech-like tail, many times the size of an alligator, dragged behind her body. Her long tongue rose, then swayed like a dancing cobra, sniffing the wind.

Jaheje could feel every muscle in his body aching to move. He stood transfixed as the huge Xer'Sai turned toward him. Gore covered the beast's eyeless face and armored beak.

Rek'Sai was so alien and perfect in her deadliness, Jaheje felt his mouth open in awe. The boy gripped his spear staff, certain he wouldn't be able to pierce her armored hide if she attacked.

"Down!" Shahib barked.

All the boys ducked flat to the earth as Rek'Sai's "fin" pulsed a sickly green color. Jaheje could feel the invisible energy crackling above him.

The Xer'Sai turned, facing the distant caravan. Her tongue sniffed the air again, and considered the distance. Suddenly, the fin returned to its original violet color, and Rek'Sai pulled Xalee's body down into her burrow.

Save the pool of thickening blood and Xalee's absence, no evidence of the great beast remained.

Shahib whispered to go. The survivors silently retreated, deeper into the canyon.

No one spoke. The dark stone, pockmarked with burrows, robbed them of the ability to speak, to cry, to mourn.

Breaking free of the spell, his exhaustion cast over him. Jaheje looked around the canyon walls. He realized in an instant the enormity of what stalked them and why Shahib had decided to press on.

Since Omah 'Azir's time, when stone was clay and Shurima built itself to the sun, Rek'Sai had fed here. This valley was hers alone. And all believed the Xer'Sai existed only to eat.

"But why do they stay here?" Jaheje said aloud.

Suddenly, the monster appeared. She burst out of the ground in front of them, diving at Jaheje.

Jaheje ducked as Rek'Sai soared past him, her mass blocking the sun. As she landed, her forelimbs ripped apart the ground and she disappeared beneath the surface.

Hidden in the brush, VezKah, the youngest boy, motioned Jaheje closer. Just then, his mouth opened in horror. A pulse of dark energy ripped from Rek'Sai's fin, tearing apart the earth as she rushed toward VezKah. The earth cracked apart as Rek'Sai ripped the ground up and threw the boy into the air. VezKah landed in a heap as the huge fin rushed toward them.

Together, Shahib and Jaheje ran out of the gully as quickly as they could.

The creature lurched forward, then slowed a rhythm, which matched the swerving pattern of her pursuit. She pushed them even further into the valley, blocking any other road of escape.

Silent-stepping was meaningless now. Rek'Sai was too close. All that was left was to run.

When Caleeb lost his breath, Rek'Sai took him. Seeing this, Shahib stopped. He collected Caleeb's spear and waited. All around him, the air churned and bent like a reflection in the water.

"What are you doing?" Jaheje whispered.

"I will be the camel. Go silently." Shahib acknowledged the walls around them. "Tell people what you have seen here."

Jaheje followed Shahib's eyeline. Behind him, the stone cliffs had been cut apart by burrows into a pattern of intersecting circles. From them, a bizarre connection of ink-black energy flowed and dripped like a sticky liquid. And through this matrix, an incompressible reality bent and twisted as someplace else prepared itself to enter our world.

Hidden in this isolated valley, the true lair of Xer'Sai was a half-constructed tunnel. A tunnel to the nightmare place where these creatures had been born, and fouler things waited hungrily at this unfinished gateway to our world.

"Keep going, Jaheje" Shahib said with a tired smile. "Each step as soft as a mouse, each stride as long as a gazelle. You must survive the Sai Kahleek."

Jaheje made it to the far cliff before he heard the scream. Turning to look, Jaheje rolled his foot down, then slid his heel to the ground just as Shahib had taught him.

He did this as his teacher was reduced to the sound of bones snapping, and the great beast chewing.

Jaheje watched as Rek'Sai opened her maw and pulled a sticky ball of dark energy from Shahib's ruined body. The ball rotated as tendrils dripped to the ground, sticking and stretching as Rek'Sai manipulated it into a pattern, which she attached between two of the burrows.

Jaheje looked away, then turned silently and soft-stepped out of the valley.

Jaheje ran out of sweat the next day. He felt his dry eyes scratching against his eyelids. His lips swelled, then split open bloodlessly.

When his calf muscles locked in a cramp from dehydration, and he was no longer able to soft-step, only then did he fall to the ground to cry. He cried for the days of hunger he'd suffered before joining Shahib's caravan. He cried for knowing his parents *off cast* him instead of his brothers. He cried for Shahib, the first person who'd shown him kindness. And it was those last tears that dragged him back onto his cramped legs and made him stand. Knowing each shaky and tired step revealed his position to any Xer'Sai nearby, Jaheje stumbled onward.

When Jaheje reached the great river *Renek* and told his story, few believed him. But soon, those who tried to cross the Sai Kahleek with any meager possessions left, bartered for Jaheje. And Jaheje taught *off cast* boys how to cut the callouses from their feet and how to soft-step by rolling their heel. He taught them how to survive the Sai Kahleek, and he warned his students of the monster named Rek'Sai.

Vel'Koz

Biography

A tentacled horror of the Void, Vel'Koz explores Runeterra with singular purpose: to absorb all knowledge. With his unceasing gaze, Vel'Koz fires disintegrating beams that obliterate and analyze all in his path, feeding him vast quantities of information. None know why he requires such material, though some speculate he seeks to understand Runeterra in order to hasten its ruin.

Story

I pass into the sudden glare. Blink. Blink, blink, blink. My eyes adjust and evaluate the landscape before me.

There's a scurrying. I look down to find a small, white creature standing on its hind legs, sniffing at my body. It intrigues me.

What use are you?

I analyze the creature. A flash of hot magenta light, a dust pile where it was quivering.

Mammalian... Nocturnal... Impeccable hearing. Incredibly weak. Yet they breed so prodigiously.

"Hmm" I mutter to myself. Hopefully there will be more complex things to be found; those fascinate me.

Consume and learn: this is my purpose. The others who travel with me are primitive: kill and eat, kill and eat. I need to gather all available information - harvest any valuable resources.

Eventually, we come upon a destroyed city, save for one pristine tower. It appears to be protected - or intentionally left standing. I deconstruct the composition of the ruins. My analysis suggests this habitat was a place of great magic; I'm not surprised it was a target of such destruction. There is something compelling about the tower. While the others are off scavenging, I enter the citadel.

Cryptic instruments are strewn about. I examine one. Another flash of hot magenta light, another dust pile.

Fascinating: a tool to alter their concept of time.

Strange.

Unprecedented.

From the state of the tower, it seems the owner departed only recently. The artifacts left behind have existed in more than one time and place. Some are more complex than others; all are more impressive than anything I have seen on this plane. Clearly, the owner knows things I have not encountered in any of my travels.

I require such knowledge.

Leaving the tower, I find the others closing in on the entrance, ready to destroy it as they have destroyed everything else we have met. They will only get in the way of my goal. There are some things the Void should not consume indiscriminately.

Without warning, I lash out a tentacle, its tip glowing white hot. Lightning arcs through the first creature, knocking it back. Its screams fade as I extend all three limbs, energy crackling between them, scorching the air where the streams meet. The other two run; they know what's coming.

Must they always flee?

I open my eye wide and unleash a beam of energy, following the escaping creatures. They are instantly reduced to ash. "Hmm. Void-native melting point is inconsistent" I note.

But that is of no consequence. The hunger inside me grows. I am ravenous. Insatiable, as never before.

I have glimpsed the ultimate knowledge.

And I will have it.

Cassiopeia

Biography

Cassiopeia is a terrifying creature - half woman, half snake - whose slightest glance brings death. The youngest daughter of one of Noxus's most influential families, she was once a beautiful and cunning temptress capable of manipulating the hardest heart. Transformed by the venom of an ancient Shuriman tomb guardian, she continues to serve Noxian interests as she always has, just in a more... visceral way.

Story

Cassiopeia reclined against a crenulated rooftop and gazed over the winding alleys and crowded streets of Noxus. Untroubled by the cool night air, she wore a shift of translucent silk, which revealed the transition at her hips where soft skin merged into overlapping scales of sinuous snakeskin.

The scent of roasted meat wafted up to Cassiopeia's hidden aerie, but it could not mask the vile stench of thousands of people living on top of each other. Her mouth burned as noxious venom mingled with her saliva. She flexed her muscular tail, cracking the stonework and sending crumbled fragments to the streets below.

Rats scattered from the falling stone. Filthy street urchins dashed around street corners as hooded figures whispered in the shadows and burly soldiers staggered in and out of taverns. All were oblivious to the predator lurking in the darkness above.

Cassiopeia brushed a taloned hand against her scaly side, her serpentine figure concealed by the shadows. These days, she emerged only under cover of night. Once, she had been a powerful figure in Noxus: assassins killed at her slightest whim, soldiers spilled their darkest secrets, and generals willingly followed her counsel in the hopes of patronage. Cassiopeia sighed. No longer was she an influential voice in Noxian society, not since she had been reduced to this grotesque abomination in hiding.

Upon her return from Shurima, Cassiopeia had hidden in her family's crypt, fearful of her transformation. She remained alone in the cold, dank vault for weeks, filled with disgust for her serpentine body and mourning the loss of her aristocratic life. Eventually, a growing desire to hunt overwhelmed her, and she ventured out to roam the city by night as her family slumbered.

Cassiopeia put aside her reverie as a broad shouldered soldier in a leather breastplate stumbled from a tavern, drink in hand. Finally; *this* was the man she'd been waiting for. She trailed his movements from above, following him silently over fortress walls and archways, until he entered an empty courtyard. Perfect. Cassiopeia slithered onto an adjacent roof, eyes glinting with predatory thrill.

Her figure cast a shadow across the soldier. He turned, drunkenly defiant.

"I know you're there! Show yourself!" he said.

Cassiopeia's tail twitched in anticipation. Her forked tongue extended, tasting the air. She drew the sweet scent of his blood into her lungs, then exhaled with great satisfaction.

“Fight me face to face!” he shouted. “I ain't gonna be stalked like some animal.”

Cassiopeia let out an angry hiss. By the time the soldier looked up, she'd slid to the opposite side of the courtyard and perched directly above him, remaining out of sight in the shadows.

“You consider yourself better than an animal, do you?” she said.

The man's head turned abruptly, trying to pinpoint the sound of her voice.

“How'd you get across so fast?” he said, his wavering tone betraying false bravado.

“Even beasts are nothing to your savagery” said Cassiopeia.

Breathless, he edged away, looking for an escape. He hammered his fists against every door, but each was bolted shut. Cassiopeia imagined his mind racing to solve the riddle of who was hunting him and why.

He unsheathed his sword, turning on the spot, unsure where to direct his threat. “You don't want to cross me. I've gutted worse enemies than you.”

“Not just enemies” Cassiopeia replied. “I've seen your handiwork. You're not the only one who creeps about in the dark.”

She spat a bilious wad of venom as he turned toward the sound of her voice. The man howled in pain, coin-sized holes burning through his armor and into his skin. She inhaled the satisfying sear of burning leather and flesh.

The man brandished his sword. “Who are you? Why're you doing this?”

“I've been watching you” replied Cassiopeia. “I know what you are, what you do...”

“What I do is no business of yours.”

“I know you're murdering children for drake meat. I hear it's quite lucrative.”

The man tried to pry open the shutters of a nearby window with the flat of his sword, but they too were bolted shut.

“Then there's the three tavern wenches” said Cassiopeia. “Sarmela, Elmin, and Lyx. They were found in the river yesterday. Their faces were hardly recognizable once you'd finished with them.”

She relished the thought of sinking her talons into his flesh.

The man readied his stance. “You can't fight me from the shadows. Show yourself!”

“Very well” Cassiopeia said.

She slithered down to the courtyard and rose to her full height. The man's eyes widened in horror, his hands trembling. Cassiopeia stood head and shoulders over the man, glaring down with narrowing eyes.

“Monster!” he cried.

“Monster” murmured Cassiopeia. “Not the worst I've been called.”

She slid left and whipped her tail across his legs, effortlessly knocking him to the ground.

Curling her tail around his chest, she squeezed his ribcage tighter and tighter, sensing his pounding heart straining beneath her grasp. She heard bones crack. She resisted the urge to break him completely, and released her grip. He crawled to his sword, grasping it in desperation. She so enjoyed watching him tremble.

She circled him slowly. He met her gaze and stared in slow recognition.

"I know your face. The Lady Cassiopeia!" he said. "Look at you!"

Point to the ground, he pushed himself onto his feet with his sword.

"You chase drunkards like me through the filthy gutters of this city now, is that it?" The man spat a wad of blood. "From such great heights we fall, eh?"

She hissed, exposing dripping yellow fangs.

Cassiopeia's gaze bored into the man's eyes, locking them in a cold-hearted bond. She screamed, pouring all her rage into the cry; fury at the unfairness of her current state, anger at the loss of her privileged life, resentment for her failed ambitions. She channeled it all into the screeching, mind-shredding wail.

As she screamed, her fury was replaced with joy. It felt like she was floating, her potential for greatness infinite. Every fiber of her being sang with ancient power.

Searing emerald light blazed from Cassiopeia's eyes. The man's final panic was outlined in silhouette as he petrified from the inside out. His stare hardened, greyed, and stiffened, his last cry of terror stifled as her curse transformed his flesh to stone.

Cassiopeia slithered up to the statue and softly caressed its hard cheek. What was once skin fractured into a grisly pattern resembling a dried riverbed.

"Once, I had to manipulate, bribe, or otherwise... persuade people to orchestrate my schemes" she said. "But now... now I simply take what I want."

She whipped her tail forward, smashing the statue to the ground. She smiled, eyes glinting, as it shattered into a thousand pieces of dust and rubble.

Cassiopeia flushed with pride as she considered her handiwork. Her life as a noble was over, yes, but never had she felt such boundless power coursing through her veins. She slithered back onto the rooftops, her mind awash with ideas.

Her next victim would offer her a far greater challenge.

Darius

Biography

Darius and his brother Draven grew up as orphans in the port city of Basilich. Darius struggled to provide for them both, constantly fighting with gangs of older urchins and anyone else who threatened his little brother—even the city guard. Every day on the streets was a battle for survival, and Darius earned more scars by his twelfth summer than some soldiers do in a lifetime.

After Basilich was seized by the expanding Noxian empire, the victorious commander Cyrus saw the strength in these defiant brothers, and they found a home within the ranks of his warhost. Over the years, they fought in many grueling campaigns of conquest from one end of the known world to the other, as well as crushing a number of rebellions against the throne.

Within the empire, anyone could rise to power, no matter their birth, culture, or background, and none embraced this ideal more fervently than Darius. From humble beginnings, he rose steadily through the ranks, always putting duty before all else, and garnering great respect for his aggression, discipline, and refusal to ever take a backward step. On the bloodsoaked fields of Dalamor Plain, he even beheaded a Noxian general after the coward ordered a retreat. Roaring in defiance and hefting his bloodied axe overhead, Darius rallied the scattered warbands and won a great and unexpected victory against a far more numerous foe.

He was rewarded with a senior command of his own, attracting many thousands of eager recruits from across the empire. Darius turned the majority away, accepting only the strongest, the most disciplined and iron-willed. Such was his fearsome notoriety, even in the lands beyond Noxus, that it was not uncommon for entire cities to surrender at the first sight of his banners.

After a grinding victory against the cloud-fortresses of the Varju, a proud warrior people who had resisted decades of Noxian aggression, Darius was named the Hand of Noxus by Emperor Boram Darkwill himself. Those who knew Darius best knew he craved neither power nor adulation—he wished merely to see Noxus triumph over all—so Darkwill ordered him and his warhosts far north into the Freljord, to finally bring the barbarian tribes to heel.

The campaign dragged on for years, ending in a bitter, icy stalemate. Darius narrowly survived assassination attempts, ambushes, and even capture by the vicious Winter's Claw. He was growing weary of endless wars of attrition, and returned to Noxus to demand a reconsolidation of the military.

He marched his veterans into the capital, only to find that the emperor was dead, killed in a coup led by Jericho Swain. The act had been supported by many allies, including Darius's own brother, Draven.

This was a difficult position. As Hand, many of the noble houses would expect Darius to avenge Darkwill, but he had known and greatly respected the disgraced general Swain, and had spoken against his discharge after the botched offensive in Ionia some years earlier. The oaths of the Hand were to Noxus, not any particular ruler, and Swain was a man who spoke honestly of his new vision for the empire. Darius realized this was a leader he was prepared to follow... but Swain had other ideas.

With the establishment of the Trifarix, three individuals would rule Noxus together, each embodying one principle of strength: Vision, Might, and Guile. Darius gladly accepted his place on this council, and pledged to raise a new, elite force—the Trifarian Legion, the most loyal and prestigious warriors the empire could produce—and lead the armies of Noxus into a glorious new age of conquest.

Draven

Biography

Unlike his brother Darius, victory in battle was never enough for Draven. He craved recognition, acclaim, and glory. He first sought greatness in the Noxian military, but his flair for the dramatic went severely underappreciated. Thirsting for a method to share "Draven" with the world, he turned his attention to the prison system. There he carved out the celebrity he desired by turning the tedious affair of executions into a premiere spectacle.

At Draven's first execution, he shocked onlookers when he ordered the doomed prisoner to run for dear life. Just before the man managed to flee from sight, Draven brought him down with a flawless throw of his axe. Soon, all Draven's executions became a gauntlet through which Noxian prisoners raced for a final chance at life. He used this trial as his own personal stage, and turned executions into a leading form of entertainment. He rallied onlookers into a frenzy, while desperate prisoners scrambled to evade him. They never succeeded. Rejecting the solemn, black uniforms of Noxian executioners Draven donned bright outfits and developed flashy signature moves to distinguish himself. Crowds flocked to see Draven in action, and tales of his performances spread quickly. As his popularity grew, so did his already-inflated ego. He belonged at the center of attention. Before long, the scope of his ambitions outgrew the population of Noxus. He decided that the glorious exploits of Draven should be put on display for the entire world.

Katarina

Biography

Born to one of the most respected noble families of Noxus, Katarina Du Couteau found herself elevated above others from an early age. While her younger sister Cassiopeia took after their politically brilliant mother, Katarina was very much her father's daughter, and the wily General Du Couteau pushed her to learn the way of the blade; to cut away the empire's enemies not with reckless brutality, but deadly precision. He was a harsh teacher with many pupils, and notoriously difficult to impress.

So it was that Katarina's childhood—if it can be called such—had little room for kindness or rest. She spent every waking moment honing herself into the ultimate weapon, testing her endurance, her dexterity, her tolerance for pain. She stole poisons from the city's least reputable apothecaries, testing their efficacy in tiny increments upon herself, gradually building her resistance even as she catalogued their effects. She scaled the tallest towers in the dead of night, unseen by anyone.

She yearned to do her part for Noxus. She yearned for the opportunity to demonstrate her hidden strengths in service of the empire, and the throne.

Her first mark came straight from her father, camped with his warbands on the eve of one of the military's innumerable westward invasions... She was to assassinate a line officer of the opposing army, a low-born wretch by the name of Demetrius.

Katarina was livid. She hadn't trained her entire life to have her talents wasted on some dunghill barely skilled enough to swing a sword! He simply wouldn't do. Instead of her assigned target, Katarina stole into the enemy camp and slit the enemy commander's throat as he slept. It was a flawless execution. It would bring a swift victory, and glory to Noxus. It would make her father proud.

At dawn, his face daubed with ashes, the vengeful hero Demetrius led a berzerk charge into her father's encampment. Dozens of Noxian soldiers were slaughtered, along with the general's personal retinue. Katarina's father himself barely escaped with his life.

He was furious beyond words, refusing even to look his daughter in the eye. She had shamed him, and their family name. The greatest assassins do not seek recognition or glory, he reminded her. They do not expect to occupy a place of honor at their master's right hand.

Overwhelmed, Katarina struck out into the wilderness, alone. She would complete her original mission. Demetrius would pay with his life. Even so, her mind swam. Could she ever forgive herself? How had she been so foolish?

She was so distracted, she didn't see her attacker until he had nearly taken her eye out.

For Katarina's failure, General Du Couteau had sent another of his protégés after her; a nameless whelp dragged up from one of the lesser assassins' guilds. But even with blood streaming down her face, the years of rigorous training kicked in, and her blades were in her hands in an instant.

Six hours later, she tossed Demetrius's severed head at her father's feet.

She told the general she had considered taking *his* head instead, but eventually decided—as much as she hated to admit it—that he had done the right thing in ordering her death. She had failed. Not just as an assassin, or as a daughter, but as a *Noxian*.

And failure must have its consequences. She ran her fingers along the raw, deep gash over her left eye, and thought of the price others had paid for her arrogance.

She knew she had lost her father's favor, and could never regain it. He would raise others in her place, simply to spite her. Still, she vowed to redeem herself, no matter the cost—to rededicate her talents to the empire, and to become the sinister weapon she always intended to be.

Kled

Biography

A warrior as fearless as he is ornery, Kled is a popular folk hero in Noxus. Embodying the furious bravado of his nation, he is an icon beloved by the empire's soldiers, distrusted by its officers, and loathed by the nobility. Tall tales such as "The Great Hussar" "The High General Marshal Sergeant" and "The Mountain Admiral" trace back to the founding of the empire. Many soldiers claim Kled has fought in every campaign the legions have waged, has "acquired" every military title, and has never once backed down from a fight. Though the veracity of the details is often questionable, one part of his legend is undeniable: Charging into battle on his *un-trusty* steed, Skaarl, Kled fights to protect what's his... and to take whatever he can get.

The earliest known story of Kled traces back to the empire's infancy and the Battle of Drugne. In the dusty hills of those badlands, the First Legion was on the run from a barbarian horde. Having lost the two previous battles, the men's morale was low, the army had been forced to abandon its supply train in the rout, and they were a week's march from the nearest outpost.

In command of the Legion was a gaggle of wealthy nobles bedecked in spotless golden armor. They were more concerned with their appearances and the intrigues of their class than the men they were commanding. Worse, these commanders—though well versed in assassination and tournament fighting—had proven hopeless on the field. With the remains of the army surrounded by enemy forces, the nobles ordered the Legion into a defensive circle in hopes of negotiating ransoms for themselves.

Then, as the morning sun rose, the mysterious figure of Kled appeared on the hilltop overlooking the battlefield. He rode Skaarl, an immortal desert drakalops. The mount stood on only two legs; its ear-like forelimbs fanned from the side of its head, hanging down apologetically, like a butler who had accidentally dipped his hands in soup.

The lone rider stood on his steed's saddle. His weapon was rusted, his armor was worn, and his clothes were tattered— but a relentless anger burned from his one good eye.

"I'll give you one chance to get off my land!" Kled announced to the barbarian horde, but the yordle didn't wait for their answer. He spurred his steed and angrily screamed his charge.

Desperate, starving, and furious with the nobles, the Legion's anger ignited like blasting powder at the yordle's insane act of bravado. The enlisted men rushed after Kled and Skaarl as they tore into the center of the enemy formation.

What followed was the bloodiest melee the Legion had ever fought. The initial success of its surprise attack was crushed when the barbarians' reserve forces smashed into the Legion's flanks. With the battle turning against the Noxians and the enemy attacking from every side, Skaarl panicked, threw Kled, and abandoned the fight. Like the cowardly lizard creature, the Noxian soldiers faltered. But at their center, Kled fought on, chopping down foes, kicking out teeth, and biting faces.

Enemy bodies piled around Kled, and his clothes were soaked with blood. Despite the casualties he inflicted with every swing of his long axe, he was still forced back by the barbarians' relentless tide. He screamed louder challenges and cruder insults. Clearly, the yordle was willing to die before ever backing down.

Courage and cowardice are as infectious as the plague, however, and seeing Kled's determination, the legionnaires pressed on. Even Skaarl stopped running and turned to watch the Legion's last stand.

Then, as the Noxian line was breaking and the enemy's superior numbers pulled Kled to the ground, the drakalops triumphantly returned and crashed into the barbarians' rear. Snarling and clawing, it dove into the churning melee until it freed its master. With his mount again beneath him, the reinvigorated Kled became a whirlwind of death, and it was the barbarians who broke and ran.

Though precious few of the Noxian soldiers survived, the battle was won. The tribes of Drugne were defeated, and their lands were added to the empire. The bodies of the nobles, and their fine golden armor, were never found.

In time, most of the empire's other legions acquired similar stories of Kled, proving no defeat is certain in the face of insane courage. It is said he rides wherever the legions travel, claiming the spoils of war and land for himself and Skaarl.

Most Noxians find the truth of these tall tales questionable at best. But in the legions' wake, signs can always be found proclaiming each new territory "Property of Kled."

Story

The Northern Steppes ain't the place for fancy undies and golden piss pots. It's tough land. Ain't nothing go here but barbarian raiders, poison grass, and harsh winds. To survive, you gotta eat rocks and crap lava. And I'm the toughest, meanest, killingest bastard in these parts. So I figure that makes these plains mine.

"But how did I end up here? And why am I alone with yer dumb yella hide?" I say out loud, starting it off again.

Skaarl snorts her response from the rock she's sunning herself on. Her scales is dark metal with hints of gold. Ain't nothing can break that drakalops's skin. I've seen a steel sword shatter against her leg.

Don't make her farts smell any better though.

"I'm callin' you a damn coward. You got somethin' to say about that?"

"Greefrglarg" it says as it looks up and yawns.

"It was a hooked grouse! No bigger than my hand. And you run... Darn dumb, stupid animal!"

"Greef...rglarg?" Skaarl asks as it swats the flies away from its half-opened eyes.

"Oh, good retort! Yeah, real funny, right? Ha ha ha! I'm damn tired of yer heretical pontifications. I should leave ya here to die. That's what I should do. You'd die o' loneliness. Hell, you wouldn't last a day without me."

Skaarl lays its head back down on the rock.

There ain't no use communicating with her. I should forgive her—but then, and no doubt to mock me, her sphincter splutters rhythmically as she breaks wind. The smell hits me like a frying pan.

“That’s it, you bastard!” I throw my stinking hat onto the ground and march away from the campsite, swearing I’ll never set eyes on that foul-mouthed drakalops again. ‘Course, it was my good hat, so I have to trot back and snatch it off the ground.

“Yeah, keep sleeping, ya lazy flapat” I say as I walk away. “I’ll do the patrol!”

Being ten moons from any farmstead don’t preclude doing *the patrol*. It’s my land. And I aim to keep it that way. With or without that treason-ish lizard’s help.

The sun’s dragging its way down to the horizon by the time I reach the hills. This time of day, the light plays tricks on you. I meet a snake who wants to discuss pie crusts. Except it ain’t a snake, it’s the shadow of a rock.

Damn shame. I have some durn specific notions about pie crusts. At least when I remember what they are again. I ain’t had a proper conversation about the subject in years.

I’m about to take a swig of my mushroom juice and explain my views to the snake, when I hear them.

Drake hounds howling and braying. It’s the sounds those beasts make when they is herding elmarks. And if there’s elmarks, then there is *humans*. And those humans is *trespassers*.

I scramble up a nearby boulder and check north first.

The rolling hills of my grasslands is empty, save for the iron buttes scattered across the horizon. The braying sounds might be the mushroom juice playing tricks on my head... But then I turn south.

They is about a half day’s walk from this hill. Three hundred elmarks grazing. Grazing on *my land*.

The drake hounds circle around the herd, but there’s no horses. A few humans walk around them on foot. Humans don’t like walking. So it don’t take a genius to figure they must be part of some larger convoy then. ‘Course, I am a genius. So that was easy to figure.

My blood begins to boil. That means more damn trespassers, disturbing my peace. Here, when I was about to have a lovely conversation about pie crusts with that snake.

I take another sip of mush-juice and head back to the campsite.

“Get up, lizard!” I say as I grab my saddle.

It raises its head, grunts a response, and returns to lying in the cool grass.

“Get up! Get up! GIT UP!” I yell. “There’s trespassers, invading the peaceful serenity of our environs.”

It looks at me blankly. I forget sometimes she don’t understand me when I’m speaking.

I buckle the saddle onto its back. “There’s humans on our land!”

It stands, and its ears perk up nervously. *Humans*. That word it knows. I jump into the saddle.

“Let’s get those humans!” I roar, indicating our southward destination. But the damn beast immediately starts going north.

“No, No, NO! They’s that way! That way!” I say, using my reins to pull the cowardly beast back in the right direction.

“Greefrglaaarg!” the drakolops cries as it kicks off. In an instant, she’s running. The insane speed of it makes my eyes close. Scrub grass whips painfully against my legs. A cloud of dust billows behind us. What’d take me half a day of walking is past before I can get my hat tied down.

“Greefrglorg!” the drakolops screeches.

“Now, don’t be like that! Weren’t you saying you wanted company last night?”

The sun is just starting to dip below the horizon when we reach the herd. I slow Skaarl to a trot as we approach the humans’ campsite. They’d already started a fire and have a stew going.

“Hold, stranger. Show your hands before you approach” a human in a red hat says. Their leader, I figure.

I slowly take my hands off the reins. But instead of putting them up, I pull my long axe from its saddle loop.

“I don’t think you understand me, old timer” the human in the red hat says again. His fellows ready weapons: swords, lassos, and a dozen repeater crossbows.

“Greefrglooorg” Skaarl growls, ready to leave already.

“I got it under control” I tell my lizard, before turning my attention back to the humans. “I ain’t impressed with your fancy, city-folk weapons. Now I’m giving you one warning. Get off my land. Or else.”

“Or else what?” a younger human asks.

“You boys best know who you’re dealing with” I say. “This is Skaarl. She’s a drakalops. And I’m Kled, Lord Major Admiral of the Second Legion’s forward artillery—cavalry multiplication.”

Several of the humans start snickering. I’ll learn them soon enough—once I’m done talking.

“And what makes you think this is your land?” asks the human in the red hat, smirking.

“It’s mine. I took it from them barbarians.”

“It’s property of Lord Vakhul. He was granted it by the High Command. It’s his by rightful dispensation.”

“Well, High Command! Why didn’t you say so?!” I say before spitting on the ground. “The only law a *true Noxian* respects is strength. He can have it. If he can take it from me.”

“You and your pony best be moving on, while you still can.”

I forget sometimes humans don’t see us like we see them. It’s the last straw though.

“CHARGE!!!!” I scream, and snap the reins. The drakolops kicks off, and we rush them. I meant to make a clever retort first, but I got ahead of myself.

The humans let loose their first volley, but Skaarl raises her ears. Like giant bronze fans, they shield us as the crossbow bolts ricochet off her impenetrable flesh.

She roars happily as we dive through their camp at the leader in the red hat. Swords clang against Skaarl's hide, while my axe swings. I turn two of them humans into confetti. The bastard in the red hat's quick. He ducks under my blade as we pass by. Another volley of crossbow bolts hits us.

Skaarl screams in fear. Damn thing's unkillable and immortal, but easily spooked. Problem with magical beasts, they don't make no sense.

I yank the reins, and we ride back into the middle of the humans. I easily kill the rest of his men, but the red-hat bastard's a tough one. My blade slams into him—but the blow clangs dully against his heavy breast plate. That should give him something to think about, anyway.

That's when the ballista fires. The bolt is longer than a wagon. It smashes into the drakolops, knocking my long axe from my hand, and sends us rolling to the ground. Skaarl ain't hurt. But she shakes me off the saddle and runs for the hills.

"You ungrateful bastard! We had the frassa-gimps in the razabutts!" I mean to scream more insults, but my words start tripping over themselves.

I roll to my feet. Dust and grass cover my face. I throw my hat toward the cowardly lizard's path, then turn back to kill the man in the red hat.

But behind him, on the hill line, is another hundred of them humans. Iron warriors, bloodrunners, and a wagon-mounted ballista. Red-hatted blurf-herder brought most of a legion with him.

"You ain't nothing but a durn sneaky-sneak!" I scream.

"You don't look like much" he says "but I guess you're the one who's been giving Lord Vakhul's ranchers so much trouble."

"Vakhul ain't no real Noxian. Your lordship can kiss my lizard's puckered mudflap!"

"Maybe I'll let you end your days in Lord Vakhul's fighting pits. If you can learn to keep your mouth shut."

"I'm gonna rip your lips off and use them to wipe my butt!" I roar.

I guess he don't like that 'cause him and his hundred friends start running at me, weapons drawn. I could run. But I don't. They'll pay dearly to kill me.

Red Hat's fast. He's nearly on me before I can recover my weapon from the ground. His blade is high. He's got the killing stroke. But I've got my hidden scattergun.

The blast sends him to the ground. It knocks me back, too. I tumble end over end. The single shot buys me some time. But not much.

The bloodrunners are closing fast. Their hooked blades is ready. I'm gonna die in this turd-stain. Well, if it's my last stand, might as well make it a good one.

I dust myself off as the first line of bloodrunners attacks. I'm carving those dark magical bastards apart, but they're cutting me to ribbons. I'm beginning to tire from the effort and loss of blood.

Then the iron warriors scream their battle cries, as they charge in their thick black armor. They've split into two groups, doing one of those "pinching" maneuvers. Plan on using those two walls of metal to crush me flatter than a Noxian coin.

Damn it.

Any hope I got of surviving this, it's gone...

And that's when I see her. The most loyal, trustworthy, honorable friend an undeserving bastard like me could ever have.

Skaarl.

Riding like hell toward me. Faster than I've ever seen her run. A rooster tail of dust is shooting up behind her. The damn lizard even picks up my hat on her way to me. I run to her just as those black-clad warriors are about to crush me.

I leap into the saddle, and we circle around the iron warriors. There'll be time to kill them after we get rid of that ballista.

"It's been a while since we took on a whole army together" I say.

"Greefrglarg" Skaarl screeches happily.

"Back at you, buddy" I say with a smile wider than a croxagor's.

'Cause there ain't nothing I love more than this dang lizard.

LeBlanc

Biography

Matron of the Black Rose, LeBlanc's identity is as intangible as the whispers that describe her, as ephemeral as the illusions that give her shape. Perhaps it is unknown even to herself, after so many centuries of mimicry and deception...

Remnants of an order that has existed far longer than Noxus itself, initiates of the Black Rose have schemed from the shadows for centuries, drawing the rich and powerful to their ranks. Though they do not often learn the origins of their matron, many have uncovered legends of a pale sorceress who aided the broken barbarian tribes, in their struggle against the infamous Iron Revenant subjugating lands already ravaged by the darkin. Even today, his name is whispered in fear: *Mordekaiser*.

Uniquely skilled among the revenant's inner circle before she betrayed him, the sorceress pledged to neutralize the source of his power, the Immortal Bastion, cutting him off from the well of death that fueled his nightmarish empire. Yet, even as the barbarians built an empire of their own in the bastion's shadow, they failed to realize that the arcane secrets it held had not completely been locked away. The pale sorceress had always been gifted at illusion, and her greatest trick was to make Noxus forget the dark power roiling in its own heart, before she was burned from the pages of history around the time of the Rune Wars.

The Black Rose exists now to further the clandestine interests of those who can wield such magic—with its rank-and-file composed of mundane nobles, drawn to rumors of miracles, kept in thrall and ruthlessly exploited. Even the most powerful military commander could only ever serve the cult's true masters, as they fight one another for influence in games of intrigue and conquest, both in the Noxian capital and beyond its borders.

For centuries, LeBlanc has served in secret as an advisor to foreign dignitaries, appearing in many nations at once, her illusions driving order into chaos. Rumors of a new matron rising with each generation only raise further questions—which is the “true” version of herself? When she speaks, is it with her own voice? And what will the price be, for the favor she offers?

Boram Darkwill was but the latest to learn this last answer for himself. Though the Black Rose had aided his bid for the throne, he refused the counsel of their hand-picked advisors, requiring LeBlanc to take drastic measures. Manipulating a young nobleman named Jericho Swain into revealing the cult's involvement, LeBlanc allowed herself to be executed along with the most prominent conspirators... or at least, so it appeared. In time, she reached out to Darkwill herself, and found an increasingly paranoid ruler, fearful of his own mortality.

After promising him the secrets to extend his life, LeBlanc slowly poisoned Darkwill's mind, even as she empowered him. Under his rule, the Noxian reverence of strength became something far more sinister, and together they ensured Swain's legend would end in disgrace on the battlefields of Ionia.

But Swain, emboldened by forbidden lore from within the Immortal Bastion, did something wholly unexpected, managing to drag Darkwill from the throne and seize Noxus for himself. This new Grand General was not interested in his own legacy, but the glory of the empire—and such a man could not

so easily be corrupted. After countless centuries, LeBlanc wondered, had she finally found a worthy nemesis?

Her actions have pushed Runeterra to the brink of all-out war many times. In the wake of desperate campaigns across the Freljord, on Targon's peaks, and deep in Shurima's deserts, the darkest magic has begun to spread once more, circling closer and closer to Noxus. Whether LeBlanc is still the same pale sorceress who betrayed the Iron Revenant, or merely one of countless hollow reflections, her influence clearly stems from ancient roots.

The Black Rose has yet to truly bloom.

Riven

Biography

Built on perpetual conflict, Noxus has never had a shortage of war orphans. Her father lost to an unnamed battle and her mother to the girl's own stubborn birth, Riven was raised on a farm run by the empire on the rocky hillsides of Trevale.

Physical strength and ferocious will kept the children alive and working on the hard scrap of land, but Riven hungered for more than simply bread on the table. She watched conscriptors from regional warbands visiting the farms, year after year, and in them, she saw a chance at the life she dreamed of. When she finally pledged the empire her strength, she knew Noxus would embrace her as the daughter she longed to be.

Riven proved a natural soldier. Young as she was, her years of hard labor allowed her to quickly master the weight of a longsword taller than herself. Her new family was forged in the heat of battle, and Riven saw her bond to her brothers- and sisters-in-arms as unbreakable.

So exceptional was her dedication to the empire, that Boram Darkwill himself recognized her with a runic blade of dark stone, enchanted by a pale sorceress within his court. The weapon was heavier than a kite shield and nearly as broad—perfectly suited to Riven's tastes.

Not long after, the warhosts set sail for Ionia as part of the long-planned Noxian invasion.

As this new war dragged on, it became clear that Ionia would not kneel. Riven's unit was assigned to escort another warband making its way through the embattled province of Navori. The warband's leader, Emystan, had employed a Zaunite alchemist, eager to test a new kind of weapon. Across countless campaigns, Riven would gladly have given her life for Noxus, but now she saw something awry in these other soldiers—something that made her deeply uncomfortable. The fragile amphorae they carried on their wagons had no purpose on any battlefield she could imagine...

The two warbands met increasingly fierce resistance, as if even the land itself sought to defy them. During a heavy rain storm, with mud pouring down the hillsides, Riven and her warriors were stranded with their deadly cargo—and it was then that the Ionian fighters revealed themselves. Seeing the danger, Riven called to Emystan for support.

The only answer she received was a flaming arrow, fired out from the ridgeline, and Riven understood this was no longer a war to expand the borders of Noxus. It was to be a complete annihilation of the enemy, no matter the cost.

The wagon was hit straight on. Instinctively, Riven drew her sword, but it was too late to protect anyone but herself. Chemical fire burst from the ruptured containers, and screams filled the night—both Ionian and Noxian falling victim to an agonizing, gruesome death. Shielded from the scorching, poisonous mists by the magic of her blade, she bore unwilling witness to scenes of horror and betrayal that would haunt her forever.

For Riven, memories of the time that followed come only in fragments, and nightmares. She bound her wounds. She mourned the dead. But, most of all, she came to hate the sword that saved her life. The words carved into its surface mocked her, reminding her of all she had lost. She would find a way to break it, severing her last tie to Noxus, before the dawn.

But when the blade was finally shattered, still she found no peace.

Stripped of the faith and conviction that had bolstered her entire life, Riven now wanders Ionia's battle scarred landscape in self-imposed exile, seeking atonement from those who cannot forgive:
the land, the dead, and herself.

Sion

Biography

A blood-soaked Noxian war hero from a bygone era, Sion was denied oblivion and brought back so that he may continue to serve the empire even in death. An unstoppable behemoth, he is unleashed on the enemies of Noxus, smashing friends and foes aside as he plows into the heart of the slaughter, hacking and killing at will.

Story

BLOOD.

SMELL IT.

WANT. ACHING. NEED!

CLOSE NOW. THEY COME.

NO CHAINS? FREE! KILL!

IN REACH. YES! DIE! DIE!

Gone. Too quick. No fight. More. I want... more.

A voice? Unfamiliar. I see him. The Grand General. My general.

He leads. I follow. Marching. To where? I should know. I can't remember.

It all bleeds together. Does it matter? Noxus conquers. The rest? Trivial. So long... since I've tasted victory.

The war wagon rocks. Rattles. A cramped cage. Pointless ceremony. The waiting. Maddening. Faster, dogs!

There. Banners. Demacians and their walls. Cowards. Their gates will shatter. Thoughts of the massacre come easily.

Who gave the order to halt? The underlings don't answer. No familiar faces. If I do not remember, neither will history.

The cage is opened. Finally! No more waiting. WE CHARGE!

Slings and arrows? The weapons of children! Their walls will not save them!

I can taste their fear. They shrink at every blow as their barricades splinter. SOON!

Noxian drums. Demacian screams. Glory isn't accolades; glory is hot blood on your hands! This is life!

A thousand shattered corpses lie at my feet, and Demacian homes burn all around me. It's over too quickly! Just one more...

The men stare. There's fear in their eyes. If they're afraid to look upon victory, I should pluck those craven eyes out. There is no fear in the Grand General's eyes, only approval. He is pleased with this conquest.

Walking the field with the Grand General, surveying the carnage, I ache for another foe. He is hobbled, a leg wound from the battle? If it pains him, he does not show it. A true Noxian. I do not like his pet, though; it picks over the dead, having earned nothing. His war hounds were more fitting company.

Demacia will be within our grasp soon. I can feel it. I am ready to march. The Grand General insists that I rest. How can I rest when my enemies still live?

Why do we mill about? The waiting eats at me. I'm left to my own devices. The bird watches. It's unsettling. Were it anyone else's, I would crush it.

Fatigue sets in. I've never felt so... tired.

Boram? Is that you? What are you whispering?

Where am I?

Captured? Kenneled like some dog. How?

There was... the battle, the razing of the fortress, the quiet of the aftermath. Were we ambushed? I can't remember.

I was wounded. I can feel the ragged gash... but no pain. They thought me dead. Now, I am their prize. Fate is laughing. I will not be caged! They will regret sparing me.

Demacian worms! They parrot kind words, but they are ruthless all the same. This place is a dank pit. They bring no food. There is no torture. They do not make a show of me. I am left to rot.

I remember my finest hour. I held a king by his throat and felt the final beat of his heart through my tightening grasp. I don't remember letting go. Is this your vengeance, Jarvan?

I hear the triumphal march. Boots on stone. Faint, through the dungeon walls. The cadence of Noxian drums. I shall be free. Demacian blood will run in the streets!

No one came. I heard no struggle. No retreat. Did I imagine it?

There is no aching in this stump. I barely noticed the iron boot. It's caked in rust.

When did I lose my leg?

I still smell the blood. Battle. It brings comfort.

The hunger gnaws. I have not slept. Time crawls. So tired.

How long?

So dark. This pit. I remember. Grand General. His whispering. What was it?

Not who I think.

Fading. Mustn't forget.

Message. Cut. Remember.

"SION – Beware ravens."

FREE ME!

BLOOD.

Swain

Biography

Born into a patrician family, one of many to exist since the first walls were raised around Noxus, Jericho Swain seemed destined for a life of privilege. The noble houses had played a key role in Boram Darkwill's rise to power, stoking rhetoric that their proud heritage was the nation's greatest strength.

However, many hungered for greater influence, plotting against Darkwill in a secret cabal united by nothing more than the symbol of a black rose. Uncovering their intrigue, Swain personally executed the most prominent conspirators. Among them were his own parents, whose whispers of a "pale woman" had first alerted him of the danger to Noxus, which he valued more than house or kin.

They sought a power, a shapeless voice cackling in the darkness of the Immortal Bastion. *Something like a raven's caw...*

For exposing the cabal, Swain was granted a commission in the Noxian army, far from anything he had ever known. There, he learned firsthand that the empire was not strong because of Noxians, as he had believed, but because of the way it could unite *all* men in spite of their origins. On the front lines, a foreign slave could be the equal of a highborn noble.

But still, Swain found only darkness in the wake of each battle. *Clouds of carrion crows...*

After securing the western borders, Swain's own reputation was secured in Shurima, where his forces raised countless *noxtoraa* above the desert sands. Yet, in time, it became clear that greed was the sole purpose driving the empire forward. Fighting wars on too many fronts, lusting over magical relics, the aging Boram Darkwill was clearly growing unhinged.

When Noxus invaded Ionia, Darkwill began to move even more brazenly, retasking entire warbands to scour the land for anything rumored to extend a mortal lifespan. With Swain's forces depleted, it became nearly impossible to engage the enemy. Finally, at the Battle of the Placidium, after luring the local militia into what should have been a trap, Swain's warhost was overrun. His veterans were routed, and Swain was gravely wounded, his knee shattered, Ionian blades cleaving through his left arm.

As he lay on the verge of death, a raven approached to feed, and Swain felt an old, familiar darkness press upon him again. But he would not let it take him. He *could* not. Staring into the the bird's eye, he saw reflections of the evil strangling the heart of Noxus. *A black rose. The pale woman... and her puppet emperor.* Swain realized that he had not defeated the hidden cabal, and they had betrayed him to what should have been his death, after seducing Darkwill, the man they failed to overthrow.

All this was glimpsed, not in the mind of a raven, but something *more*. The power his parents had been seeking, the demonic eyes blazing in the dark...

Cast out of the military for his "failure," considered nothing more than a cripple, Swain set about uncovering what truly lay within the Immortal Bastion—an ancient entity, preying upon the dying and consuming their secrets, as it had attempted to consume his own. Swain stared into that darkness, seeing what even *it* could not: a way to wield it.

Though his meticulous preparations took many years, Swain and his remaining allies seized control of Noxus in a single night. Physically restored by the demon, he crushed Darkwill in full view of his followers, leaving the throne shattered and empty.

Swain's vision for the future of Noxus is one of strength through unity. He has pulled back the warhosts from Darkwill's unwinnable campaigns and, with the establishment of the Trifarix, ensured that no individual can rule unopposed. He embraces any who will pledge themselves to the empire—even the Black Rose, though he knows, in secret, they still plot against him.

Gathering knowledge as the demon did before him, Swain has foreseen far greater dangers lurking just beyond. However, many Noxians secretly wonder if the darkness they face will pale in comparison to the dark things Swain has done...

The sacrifices are only beginning, for the good of Noxus.

Story

He arrived at the camp only moments before the strategy council was to begin, flanked by a small honor guard, each handpicked from the Trifarion Legion. They remained at the entrance as I watched him approach.

Some men cast a shadow greater than themselves, but few could bring a darkness such as this, one that circled above us and hungrily cawed. In a way, the ravens that seemed to follow him around the camp were a grim reminder of every warrior's fate, the tattered cloth in their beaks a match for the state of our own banners. Yet, as he strode into the remains of the war tent, I realized I had not prepared myself for how truly *mortal* he looked.

There was grey in his hair, framed by a crimson sky choking on ash. His battle-worn armor gave way to a functional coat, and he kept his arms tightly within its folds—as I imagined one of his lineage might. I smiled, for he was still, at his heart, a gentleman. He wore no signs of rank beyond the telltale scars of a soldier who had seen his share of bloodshed. There were many gathered now for the council who demanded more fear and respect, swaying their warhosts with powerful displays of strength. Each of them seemed more than capable of breaking the man before us.

But, somehow, this was the man who led us all. The Grand General of Noxus.

Looking at him, I could feel there was something I could not place, no matter how closely I looked. Something truly unknowable, perhaps? Perhaps it was *because* there was something unknowable about this man, that so many flocked to his side. Whatever the draw, Jericho Swain stood before us now, and it was far too late for me to turn back.

Five warhosts had marched onto the Rokrund Plain, but it had been only a matter of weeks before the locals had shattered our positions. They blasted through our hastily-constructed berms with explosive powder, mined from hills that seemed even more barren than those of home. Disaster had built upon disaster, until Swain himself had no choice but to intervene. I had made sure of that.

For months, I had prepared. I had sent warmasons deep into the mines. I had mapped every detail, every conceivable twist of the land... and the fates upon which Noxus now balanced, the whispers that gave each moment shape...

My ear itched at the memory of the pale woman's words. Of the moment she first commanded me, and gave voice to our plot.

Everything was in place. I had accounted for it all. Here, where the earth opened into a maze of canyons impossible to escape, I and I alone would determine the future of the empire.

After all, was that not what Swain had called upon this council to do?

“My trusted generals,” Swain said finally. The power in his voice rang out like the drawing of a blade. He paused, as if giving us a moment to test ourselves against its keen edge. “Tell me how Noxus may prevail.”

“There are twelve war-barques here, in the hills,” Leto began, pointing to a spot on the map already worn white by his attention, “each drawn by a basilisk. Send them before the warbands, and we’ll be marching over the enemy dead. Those beasts would rut with a hedge of rusty spears if we let them.”

He smiled, pleased at his own cunning, but Swain was more concerned with the wine being poured into his glass.

Will it be poison? his eyes seemed to ask, as he peered around the table. I stared at my reflection in his armor. I would betray nothing of my intent.

“We can scarcely control the basilisks ourselves,” Swain finally murmured, carefully regarding the fine Ionian vintage. “Imagine even a *single* explosive, dropped by a sapper within earshot of the beasts. And then tell me, in your imagination, who runs first—the basilisks with their tails between their legs? Or your vaunted warhost?”

“We scorch the earth then,” Maela petitioned before Leto could respond, the words flying wildly from her mouth. “Set fire to the pitch they’ve laid to burn on our advance. Drive them out of those damn mines.”

Swain sighed. “We came here for the very earth you would burn. Though I suppose it is too much to expect you to know the uses of saltpetre.” He swirled the wine in his glass, betraying a hint of disappointment. “All you have done so far is bury your own men with it.”

“The redblades are still sharp,” Jonat spat impatiently from the shadows where he lurked, the darkness seeming almost bright against his Shuriman skin. “We’ll enter the mines after dusk, take out their leaders. Clean or messy. Doesn’t matter.”

“An admirable strategy,” Swain laughed. “But those leaders are not soldiers. Not yet. Our enemy here merely follows whomever bellows the loudest. Kill one, and there will be *three* bellowing by morning.”

I laughed, nodding to the frowning leader of the redblades. “For a moment, I was afraid you’d find a way for us to actually win, Jonat.”

Silence fell around the table. The candles were burning low beside the maps.

This was my moment. The pale woman would be pleased. I would say her name as I sent our Grand General to oblivion.

“The truth is, you cannot win this battle,” I continued. “No one can fight death. Not even the ruler of Noxus. Darkwill showed us that.”

Swain and the others watched as I carefully drew the flint striker from my tunic. The fuse line was already in my other hand. Leto, aging hero of the Siege of Fenrath, bristled.

“Granth, what are you doing?” he growled, glancing down at the crude demolition charge I had carefully positioned under the table, barely an hour before. “You would threaten the Grand General? This is treason.”

Still, none of them dared approach me. I held the striker over the fuse, ready.

Except... someone was laughing. It took me a moment to realize who it was.

“And there, General Granth is the only one who has the right of it,” Swain chuckled, smoothing this wrinkles from his coat. “He alone understands. The rest of you, you see a battle and ask what you must do to avoid defeat. But some battles cannot be won. Sometimes, the only strategy is to burn. To charge into the flames, knowing full well you will die, but that twenty thousand march behind you. And that behind them, there is a greater power.”

He let his coat fall open, to reveal... To... reveal...

“Granth and I,” he said with a cruel smile, “we always look for what must be sacrificed in order to *win*.”

Maela lunged for my trembling hands. Leto too. But it was Swain’s inhuman grip that clamped around my throat, hefting me from the ground, the unlit fuse forgotten.

“If only you could tell her yourself how you failed,” the Grand General whispered, his voice rumbling with the wrath of eons. “If only she, too, could heed the wisdom of the dead.”

I tried to scream then, to confess it all. To somehow beg for forgiveness.

But there is nothing now, save for the soft murmur of whispers. I spill my secrets, this tale, into *your* ears. Fading like the rustling of wings, as the raven cries its carrion caw...

Talon

Biography

Talon's earliest memories are the darkness of Noxus' underground passages and the reassuring steel of a blade. He remembers no family, warmth, or kindness. Instead, the clink of stolen gold and the security of a wall at his back are all the kinship he has ever craved. Kept alive only by his quick wits and deft thievery, Talon scraped out a living in the seedy underbelly of Noxus. His mastery of the blade quickly marked him as a threat, and Noxian guilds sent assassins to him with a demand: join their ranks or be killed. He left the bodies of his pursuers dumped in Noxus' moat as his response.

The assassination attempts grew increasingly frequent until one assailant met Talon blade-for-blade in a match of strength. To his surprise, Talon was disarmed and facing down his executioner's sword when the assassin revealed himself to be General Du Couteau. The General offered Talon the choice between death at his hand, or life as an agent of the Noxian High Command. Talon chose life, on the condition that his service was to Du Couteau alone, for the only type of orders he could respect were from one he could not defeat.

Talon remained in the shadows, carrying out secret missions on Du Couteau's orders that took him from the frigid lands of the Freljord to the inner sanctums of Demacia itself. When the general vanished, Talon considered claiming his freedom, but he had gained immense respect for Du Couteau after years in his service. He became obsessed with tracking down the general's whereabouts, and scours the land in search of those responsible for Du Couteau's disappearance.

Vladimir

Biography

There is a temple hidden in the mountains between Noxus and the Tempest Flats, where the secrets of an ancient and terrifying sorcery are kept. The area surrounding the temple is littered with the exsanguinated corpses of those who have mistakenly wandered too close. These served only to pique the curiosity of Vladimir, when - in his youth - he trekked through these mountains during his flight from Noxus. A day earlier, the teenaged Vladimir had brutally murdered two boys his age, for no better reason than to enjoy the intoxicating scarlet bloom that surged forth. He realized immediately that he would never be able to suppress his murderous desires, and if he remained in Noxus, his foul deeds were sure to catch up with him. Without hesitation, he abandoned the city-state, and journeyed south.

The trail of bodies led him to a crumbling stone temple. Inside he found an aging monk who appraised him with eyes of pure crimson. Vladimir surprised the monk by returning the wicked gaze with zeal. Recognizing the boy's sinister craving, the monk taught Vladimir how to manipulate and control the fluid of life, often practicing on passing travelers. When it came time for Vladimir to learn the final lesson, the monk warned that failure would result in death. Vladimir did not fail, but success bore a grisly surprise. During the ritual, every drop of the monk's blood was drawn from his body and fused with Vladimir's, imbuing him with his master's magical essence, and that of every hemomancer before him. Left alone and suddenly without purpose, Vladimir resolved to return to Noxus, determined to prove the supremacy of his craft. When the Noxian High Command observed the gruesome fates which befell the palace guards, they elected to avail themselves of Vladimir's unsavory talents.

Leona

Biography

Imbued with the fire of the sun, Leona is a warrior templar of the Solari who defends Mount Targon with her Zenith Blade and Shield of Daybreak. Her skin shimmers with starfire while her eyes burn with the power of the celestial Aspect within her. Armored in gold and bearing a terrible burden of ancient knowledge, Leona brings enlightenment to some, death to others.

To live in the lands surrounding the towering peak of Mount Targon is to embrace a life of hardship. That many willingly do so is testament to the power of the human spirit to endure anything in search of meaning and higher purpose. As harsh as the rugged foothills of the mountain's base are, it is nothing compared to the hardships borne by those who dwell on the mountain itself.

Living high on Targon is fraught with danger. When the glittering mist wreathing the summit descends, it does not come alone. All manner of otherworldly things are left behind when it withdraws; radiant creatures that kill at random and muttering voices that whisper unspeakable secrets to drive mortals mad.

Eking a living from mountain plants and their precious herds, the Rakkor tribe dwells at the very limits of human endurance; honing their warrior skills to fight the war at the end of the world. Rakkor means Tribe of the Last Sun, and its people believe that many worlds have existed before this one, each of which has been destroyed by a great catastrophe. Its seers teach that when this sun is destroyed there will be no more, so its warriors must be ready to fight those who seek to extinguish its light.

To the Rakkor, battle is an act of devotion, an offering to keep the sun's light shining. All members of the tribe are expected to fight and kill without mercy or hesitation, and Leona was no exception. She learned to fight as soon as she could walk, mastering sword and shield with ease. She was fascinated by the mists wreathing the summit and often wondered what might lie beyond them. That fascination did not stop her from fighting the ferocious beasts, inhuman entities and pallid, eyeless strangers that came down the mountain.

She fought and killed them as she had been taught until one day when young Leona encountered a golden-skinned boy with horns and bat-like wings wandering on the mountainside. He did not speak her language, but it was clear he was lost and frightened. His skin shimmered with soft light, and though everything she had been taught since birth told her to attack, Leona could not bring herself to murder someone so obviously helpless. Instead, she led the boy to a pathway leading to the summit, watching as he walked into a ray of sunlight and vanished.

When she returned to the Rakkor, she found herself accused of failing in her duty to the sun. A boy named Atreus had seen her leading a creature of the mountain to safety instead of killing it. Atreus had told his father what Leona had done and he in turn denounced her as a heretic for going against the beliefs of her people. Leona did not dispute this, and the laws of the Rakkor allowed only one sentence for such a transgression – trial by combat. Leona would face Atreus in the fighting pits beneath the noonday sun, and by its light would judgment be rendered. Leona and Atreus were evenly matched; her warrior skills were formidable, but Atreus had ever been single-minded in his pursuit of martial excellence. Leona took up her sword and shield, Atreus his long spear, and none who gathered around the pit could predict the battle's outcome.

Leona and Atreus fought beneath the blazing sun, and though both bled freely from dozens of wounds, neither could land a deathblow. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, an elder of the Solari marched into the Rakkor camp with three gold-armored warriors and called a halt to the duel.

The Solari were adherents of a martial faith built around sun worship, whose unforgiving tenets dictated life around and upon Mount Targon. The elder had been led to the Rakkor by dreams and an ancient Solari prophecy that spoke of a warrior whose fire burned brighter than the sun, a daughter of Targon who would bring unity to the celestial realm. The elder believed Leona was that daughter and upon learning the nature of her transgression, his belief was only strengthened.

The tribal seers warned against interfering in the duel, but the elder was adamant; Leona must come with him and become one of the Solari, to be fully instructed in their beliefs. The Rakkor were fiercely independent, but even they paid heed to the holy decrees of the Solari. The warriors lifted Leona from the pit and bore her wounded body from the Rakkor toward her new life.

The Solari temple was a towering citadel on the eastern slopes of Mount Targon, a glittering spire of gold-veined marble and polished granite. Here, Leona learned the ways of the sacred order – how they worshipped the sun as the source of all life and rejected all other forms of light as false. Its strictures were absolute and unyielding, but fueled by her belief in the elder's prophecy, Leona excelled in this disciplined environment, devouring her new faith's teachings as a parched man in a desert seizes upon fresh water. Leona trained every day with the warrior order of the Solari, the Ra-Horak - a Rakkor title which means Followers of the Horizon - honing her already fearsome skills with a blade into something sublime. In time, Leona rose to command the Ra-Horak, becoming known around Mount Targon as a just, devoted and, some might say, zealous servant of the Sun.

Her path changed forever when she was called to escort a young member of the Solari to the heart of the temple. The girl's hair was purest white and a shimmering rune glowed upon her forehead. Her name was Diana, a troublemaker well known to Leona from the exasperated woes of the temple elders. Diana had gone missing months before, but now returned, clad in a suit of pale armor that glinted with strange silver light. Diana claimed to bring great news, revelations that would shake the Solari to its foundations, but which she would only reveal to the temple elders.

Leona brought Diana in under armed guard, for her warrior instinct sensed something awry in the girl's demeanor. Presented to the elders, Diana spoke of the Lunari, an ancient and proscribed faith that venerated the moon, and how all the truths the Solari clung to were incomplete. She described a realm beyond the mountaintop, a place where the sun and moon were not enemies, where new truths could show them fresh ways to look at the world. Leona felt her anger build with every word Diana spoke, and when the elders rejected her words and named her a blasphemer, Leona knew it would be her blade that ended the heretic's life.

Leona saw Diana's incredulous fury at the elders' denial, but before she could react, the white-haired girl hurled herself forward. Blinding light exploded from Diana's outstretched hands, and orbs of silver fire burned the elders to dust in the blink of an eye. White flames surged in a hurricane of cold lightning and blasted Leona from the chamber. When she regained consciousness, she found Diana gone and the Solari leaderless. As its remaining members struggled to come to terms with this attack on their most sacred space, Leona knew there was only one path open to her. She would hunt down and destroy the heretic Diana for the murder of the Solari elders.

Diana's trail was easy to find. The heretic's footsteps were like shimmering mercury to Leona's eyes, leading ever higher up the slopes of Mount Targon. Leona did not falter, climbing through a landscape that seemed strange and unfamiliar, as though she followed paths that had never existed

until this moment. The sun and moon passed overhead in a blur, as if many days and nights passed with her every breath. She neither stopped to eat nor drink, letting fury sustain her beyond what should have been humanly possible.

Eventually Leona reached the top of the mountain, breathless, exhausted, starved and stripped of all thought save punishing Diana. There, sitting on a rock at the top of the mountain was the same golden-skinned boy whose life she had spared as a child. Behind him, the sky burned with blazing light, a borealis of impossible colors and the suggestion of a majestic city of gold and silver. In its fluted towers and glittering minarets, Leona saw how the Solari temple echoed its magnificence and fell to her knees in rapture.

The golden-skinned boy spoke to her in the old Rakkor tongue, telling her he had been waiting for her to follow him since that day, and that he hoped she wasn't too late. He held out his hand and offered to show her miracles and to know the minds of gods.

Leona had never turned from anything in her life. She took the boy's hand as he smiled and led her into the light. A column of searing illumination stabbed down from the heavens and engulfed Leona. She felt an awesome presence filling her limbs with terrifying power and forgotten knowledge from the earliest epochs of the world. Her armor and weapons burned to ash in the cosmic fire and were in turn reborn as ornate warplate, a shield of sunlight wrought in gold and a sword of chained dawnlight.

The warrior who came down the mountain looked the same as the one who had climbed it, but inside Leona was much changed. She still had her memories and thoughts, was still master of her own flesh, but a sliver of something vast and inhuman had chosen her to be its mortal vessel. It gifted her with incredible powers and awful knowledge that haunted her eyes and weighed heavily upon her soul; knowledge she could only ever share with one person.

Now, more than ever, Leona knew she had to find Diana.

Story

The raiders attacked before dawn; fifty wolf-lean men in iron hauberks mantled with strange furs and bearing ash-dulled axes. Their steps were swift as they entered the settlement at the foot of the mountain. These were men who had fought as brothers for years, who lived in the heartbeat between life and death. A warrior in battered scale armor and bearing a heavy-bladed greatsword over his shoulder led them. Beneath his dragon-helm, his face was bearded and raw, burned by a lifetime of war-making under a harsher sun than this.

The previous settlements had been easily overcome; little challenge for men weaned on battle. The spoils were few and far between, but in this strange land, a man took what he could get.

This one would be no different.

Sudden light flared ahead, sunlight gleaming brightly.

Impossible. Dawn was an hour or more away.

The leader raised a callused hand as he saw a lone figure standing athwart the settlement's street. He grinned as he saw it was a woman. Finally, something worth plundering. Light enflamed her, and the grin fell from his face as he stepped closer and saw she was clad in ornate warplate. Auburn hair spilled from a golden circlet and sunlight glinted from her heavy shield and long-bladed sword.

More warriors emerged from the street, taking their place to either side of the woman, each gold-armored and bearing a long spear.

“These lands are under my protection,” she said.

Leona lifted her sword as the twelve warriors of the Ra-Horak formed a wedge with her at their center. Six to either side, they swung their shields and hammered them down as one. Leona made a quarter turn and locked her own shield into place at the apex. Her sword slid into the thrust groove beneath the shield’s bladed halo.

She flexed her fingers on the leather-wound grip of her sword, feeling the surge-tide of power within her. A coiled fire that ached to be released. Leona held it within her, letting it ease into her flesh. Embers flecked her eyes and her heart pounded in her chest. The being she had joined with atop the mountain longed to burn these men with its cleansing fire.

Dragon-helm is the key. Kill him and the rest will falter.

Part of Leona wanted to give the power in her free reign; wanted to scorch these men to smoldering bone and ash. Their attacks had killed scores of people who called the lands around Mount Targon home. They had defiled the sacred places of the Solari, toppling sacred sun stones and polluting the mountain springs with their excretions.

Dragon-helm laughed and swung his greatsword from his shoulders as his men moved away from him. To fight with such a huge weapon and keep it in constant motion needed space. He yelled something in a guttural tongue that sounded more like animal barks than anything human, and his warriors gave an answering roar.

Leona let out a hot breath as the raiders charged, their braided beards flecked with frothed spittle as they pounded toward the Ra-Horak. Leona let the fire into her blood, feeling the ancient creature merge its essence with hers more completely, becoming one with her senses and gifting her with perceptions not of this world.

Time slowed for Leona. She saw the pulsing glow of each enemy’s heart and heard the thunderous drum-beat of their blood. To her, their bodies were hazed with the red fires of battle-lust. Dragon-helm leapt forward, his sword hammering Leona’s shield like a stone titan’s fist. The impact was ferocious, buckling the metal and driving her back a full yard. The Ra-Horak stepped back with her, keeping the shieldwall unbroken. Leona’s shield blazed with light and Dragon-helm’s mantle of fur smoldered in its furnace heat. His eyes widened in surprise as he hauled his enormous sword back for another strike.

“Brace and thrust!” she yelled as the rest of the raiders hit their line. Golden spears thrust at the instant of impact and the first rank of attackers fell with their bellies pierced by mountain-forged steel. They were trampled underfoot as the warriors behind them pressed the attack.

The shieldwall buckled, but held. Axes smashed down, sinews swelled and throats grunted with the effort of attack. Leona thrust her sword through the neck of a raider with a scar bisecting his face from crown to jaw. He screamed and fell back, his throat filling with blood. Her shield slammed into the face of the man next to him, caving in his skull.

The Ra-Horak’s line bent back as Dragon-helm’s sword slammed down again, this time splintering the shield of the warrior next to her. The man dropped, cloven from neck to pelvis.

Leona didn’t give Dragon-helm the chance for a third strike.

She thrust her golden sword toward him and a searing echo of its image blazed from the rune-cut blade. White-hot fire engulfed Dragon-helm, his furs and hair instantly igniting and his armor fusing to his flesh like a brand. He shrieked in hideous pain, and Leona felt the cosmic power inside her revel in the man's agony. He staggered backward, somehow still alive and screaming as her fire melted the flesh from his bones. His men faltered in their assault as he fell to his knees as a blazing pyre.

"Into them!" shouted Leona, and the Ra-Horak surged forward. Powerful arms stabbed spear blades with brutal efficiency. Thrust, twist, withdraw. Over and over again like the relentless arms of a threshing machine. The raiders turned and fled from the Ra-Horak's blood-wetted blades, horrified at their war-leader's doom. Now they sought only to escape.

How and why these raiders had come to Targon was a mystery, for they had clearly not come to bear witness on the mountain nor make an ascent. They were warriors, not pilgrims, and left alive they would only regroup to kill again.

Leona could not allow that and thrust her sword into the earth. She reached deep inside herself, drawing on the awesome power from beyond the mountain. The sun emerged from behind its highest peaks as Leona thrust her hand to the light.

She dropped to one knee and slammed her fist on the ground.

And sunfire rained from the sky.

Diana

Biography

Bearing her crescent moonblade, Diana fights as a warrior of the Lunari, a faith all but quashed in the lands around Mount Targon. Clad in shimmering armor the color of winter snow at night, she is a living embodiment of the silver moon's power. Imbued with the essence of an Aspect from beyond Targon's towering summit, Diana is no longer wholly human, and struggles to divine her power and purpose in this world.

Diana was born as her mother and father sheltered from a storm on the unforgiving slopes of Mount Targon. They had travelled from a distant land, drawn by dreams of a mountain they had never seen and the promise of revelation. Exhaustion and blinding stormwinds overwhelmed them on the eastern slopes of the mountain, and there, beneath cold, pitiless moonlight, Diana came into the world as her mother breathed her last.

Hunters from the nearby Solari Temple found her the next day as the storm abated and the sun reached its zenith, wrapped in bearskin and cradled in the arms of her dead father. They brought her to the temple, where the foundling child was presented to the sun and named Diana. The girl with the sable hair was raised as one of the Solari, a faith that dominated the lands around Mount Targon. Diana became an initiate, and was raised to venerate the sun in all its aspects. She learned the legends of the sun and trained every day with the Ra-Horak, the warrior templars of the Solari.

The Solari elders taught that all life came from the sun, and that the light of the moon was false, offering no nourishment and crafting shadows in which only creatures of darkness found succor. Yet Diana found moonlight entrancing and beautiful in a way the harsh sun glaring down the mountain could never match. Every night the young girl would wake from dreams of climbing the mountain to sneak from the initiates' dormitories to pick night-blooming flowers and watch freshwater springs turn silver in the moonlight.

As the years went by, Diana found herself ever at odds with the elders and their teachings. She couldn't help but question all she was told, always suspecting there was more that went unsaid in every teaching, as though what she was being taught was willfully incomplete. As she grew, Diana's sense of isolation only became stronger as childhood friends distanced themselves from the mordant, questioning girl who never quite fit in. At night, watching the silver moon rise over the impossibly distant summit, she felt more and more like an outcast. The urge to climb the mountain's flanks was like an itch that could never be scratched, but everything she had been taught since birth told her the mountain would claim more than just her life should she ever try. Only the most worthy and heroic dared make such an ascent. With every passing day, Diana felt more alone and more certain that some vital aspect of her life remained unfulfilled.

Her first clue as to what that might be came when she was sweeping the temple library as punishment for arguing with one of her elders. A glint of light behind a sagging bookcase drew Diana's eyes, and upon investigation, she discovered the partially burned pages of an ancient manuscript. Diana took the pages and read them beneath the full moon that very night, and what she read unlocked a door into her soul.

Diana learned of an all-but-extinct group known as the Lunari, whose faith saw the moon as a source of life and balance. From what Diana could glean from the fragmentary texts, the Lunari spoke of the

eternal cycle — night and day, sun and moon — as essential for universal harmony. This was a revelation to the girl with the sable hair, and as she looked beyond the moonlit temple walls, she saw an elderly woman wrapped in a bearskin cloak trudging up the far path that eventually led to the mountain's summit. The woman's steps were faltering and she leaned on a carved staff of willow to remain upright. She saw Diana and called for help, saying that she had to reach the top of the mountain before morning — an ambition Diana knew was utterly impossible.

Diana's desire to help the woman and climb the mountain warred with everything the Solari taught. The mountain was for the worthy, and Diana had never felt worthy of anything. Again the woman asked for her help, and this time Diana did not hesitate. She scrambled over the walls and took the woman's arm, leading her up the mountain, amazed someone so aged had even made it this far. They climbed for hours, above the clouds and into the chill air where the moon and stars glittered like diamonds. Despite her age, the woman kept climbing, urging Diana onwards when she stumbled or when the air grew thin and cold.

As the night wore on, Diana lost track of time as the stars wheeled overhead and all but the mountain faded from view. Together, Diana and the woman climbed ever upwards and each time her steps faltered, she drew strength from the pale glow of the moon. Eventually Diana fell to her knees, exhausted and weary beyond imagining, her entire body strained to the limits of exhaustion. When Diana looked up, it was to see that somehow they had reached the mountaintop, a feat that should not have been possible in a single night. The summit was wreathed in cascades of spectral illumination, veils of brilliant light, spirals of vivid color and the glimmering ghost of a vast city of silver and gold hovering in the air.

She searched for her companion, but the woman was nowhere to be seen — only the bearskin cloak mantling Diana's shoulders suggested she had existed at all. Looking into the light, Diana saw the promise of the emptiness within her being filled, of acceptance and the chance to be part of something greater than she could ever imagine. This was what Diana had sought all her life without truly knowing it, and fresh vitality flowed through her limbs as she rose to her feet. She took a hesitant step towards the incredible vista, her resolve growing stronger with every breath.

The light surged and Diana screamed as it poured into her, a union with something vast and inhuman, impossibly ancient and powerful. The sensation was painful, but also joyous - a moment or an eternity that was both revelatory and hallucinatory. When the light faded, the sense of loss was an ache like nothing she had known before.

Diana stumbled down the mountain in a fugue state, oblivious to her surroundings, until she found herself before a cleft in the mountainside; a cave mouth that would have been invisible but for the moonlight shadows. Cold and needing shelter for the night, Diana sought refuge within the cave. Inside, the narrow cleft widened into the crumbling ruin of what might once have been a temple or vast audience chamber. Its crumbling walls were painted in faded frescoes depicting warriors of silver and gold fighting back to back against an unending host of grotesque monsters as the sky rained comets of searing light.

At the center of the chamber stood a crescent sword and a suit of armor unlike any other; a mail shirt of spun silver rings and wondrously crafted warplate of polished steel. Reflected in the gleam of the armor, Diana saw her once sable hair was now purest white, and a rune shone on her forehead with incandescent light. She recognized the symbol so exquisitely etched into the plates of the armor; the same symbol depicted in the pages of the burned manuscript she had found in the

library. This was Diana's moment of truth. She could turn away from this destiny or choose to embrace it.

Diana reached out, and as her fingers touched the cold steel of the armor, her mind exploded with images of lives she had never lived, memories she had never experienced and sensations she had never known. Scraps of ancient history raged like a blizzard in her mind; secret knowledge she but dimly grasped and innumerable futures scattered like wind-blown dust.

When the visions faded, Diana saw she was now fully clad in the silver warplate, armor that fitted her as though wrought especially for her. Her mind was still afire with newly-acquired knowledge, but much of it remained frustratingly out of reach, like a picture half in shadow, half in light. She was still Diana, but she was also something more, something eternal. Feeling vindicated with this new knowledge, Diana left the mountain cave and made her way unerringly towards the Solari Temple, knowing she had to tell the elders what she had learned.

She was met at the temple gates by Leona, the master of the Ra-Horak and the Solari's greatest warrior. Diana was brought before the temple elders, who listened with mounting horror as she told of what she had learned of the Lunari. When she had finished her tale, the elders immediately denounced her as a heretic, a blasphemer and peddler of false gods. For such a heinous crime, only one punishment could suffice; death.

Diana was appalled. How could the elders reject what was so patently true? How could they turn their back on revelations brought from the very summit of the holy mountain? Her fury built at their willful blindness, and blazing orbs of silver fire spun in the air around her. With a scream of rage-fueled frustration, Diana's sword swept out, and where it struck, silver fire burned with killing light.

Again and again, Diana lashed out and when her fury ebbed, she saw the carnage she had unleashed. The elders were dead and Leona lay on her back, her armor smoking as though fresh from the forge. Appalled at what she had done, Diana fled the site of the massacre, escaping into the wilds of Mount Targon as the Solari reeled from the savagery of her attack.

Hunted by the warriors of the Ra-Horak, Diana now seeks to piece together the fragmentary memories of the Lunari hidden within her mind. Driven by half-remembered truths and glimpses of ancient knowledge, Diana has only one truth to cling to — that the Lunari and the Solari need not be foes, that there is a greater destiny for her than that of a simple warrior. What her destiny might be is unknown, but Diana will find it, whatever the cost.

Story

Night had always been Diana's favorite time, even as a child. It had been that way since she was old enough to scramble over the walls of the Solari temple and watch the moon traverse the vault of stars. She looked up through the dense forest canopy, her violet eyes scanning for the silver moon, but seeing only its diffuse glow through the thick clouds and dark branches.

The trees were pressing in, black and moss-covered, their branches like crooked limbs reaching for the sky. She could no longer see the path, her route forward obscured by rank weeds and grasping briars. Wind-blown thorns scraped the curved plates of her armor, and Diana closed her eyes as she felt a memory stir within her.

A memory, yes, but not her own. This was something else, something drawn from the fractured recollections of the celestial essence that shared her flesh. When she opened her eyes, a shimmering image of a forest overlaid the close-packed trees before her. She saw the same trees, but from a

different time, from when they were young and fruitful and the path between them was dappled with light and edged in wildflowers.

Raised in the harsh environs of Mount Targon, Diana had never seen a forest like this. She knew what she was seeing was an echo of the past, but the scents of honeysuckle and jasmine were as real as anything she had experienced.

“Thank you,” she whispered, following the spectral outline of the ancient path.

It led Diana through overgrown and withered trees that ought to have been long dead. It climbed the slopes of rocky highlands, and passed through stands of twisted pine and wild fir. It crossed tumbling mountain streams and wound its way around sheer slopes before bringing her to a rocky plateau overlooking a vast lake of cold, dark water.

At the center of the plateau was a circle of towering stones, each carved with looping spirals and curving sigils. On every stone Diana saw the same rune that shimmered upon her forehead and knew she had reached her destination. Her skin tingled with a sense of febrile anticipation, a sensation she had come to associate with wild and dangerous magic. Wary now, she approached the circle, eyes scanning for threats. Diana saw nothing, but she knew something was here, something utterly hostile and yet somehow familiar.

Diana moved to the center of the circle and drew her sword. Its crescent blade glittered like diamond in the wan moonlight penetrating the clouds. She knelt with her head bowed, the blade’s tip resting on the ground, its quillons at her cheeks.

She felt them before she saw them.

A sudden drop in pressure. A raw charge to the air.

Diana surged to her feet as the spaces between the stones split apart. The air buckled and a trio of screeching beasts charged her with ferocious speed; ivory flesh, bone-white carapaces of segmented armor and steel talons.

Terrors.

Diana dived beneath a snapping jaw filled with teeth like polished ebony, slashing her sword in an overhead arc that clove the first monster’s skull to its heavy shoulders. The creature fell, its flesh instantly unraveling. She rolled to her feet as the others circled like pack hunters, now wary of her gleaming blade. The creature she had killed now resembled a pool of bubbling tar.

They came at her again, one from each side. Their flesh was already darkening to a bruised purple, hissing in this world’s hostile atmosphere. Diana leapt over the leftmost beast and swung her sword in a crescent arc towards its neck plates. She yelled one of the Lunari’s holy words and incandescent light blazed from the blade.

The beast blew apart from the inside, gobbets of newly-wrought flesh disintegrating before the moonblade’s power. She landed and swayed aside from the last beast’s attack. Not fast enough. Razored talons punched through the steel of her pauldrons and dragged her around. The beast’s chest split apart, revealing a glutinous mass of sense organs and hooked teeth. It bit into the meat of her shoulder and Diana screamed as numbing cold spread from the wound. She spun her sword, holding the grip like a dagger and rammed it into the beast’s body. It screeched, relinquishing its hold. Steaming black ichor poured from its ruptured body. Diana spun away, biting down on the pain racing around her body. She held her moonblade out to the side as the clouds began to thin.

The beast had tasted her blood and hissed with predatory hunger. Its armored form was now entirely gloss black and venomous purple. Bladed arms unfolded and remade themselves in a fan of hooks and talons. Unnatural flesh flowed like wax to seal the awful wound her blade had ripped.

The essence within Diana surged. It filled her thoughts with undying hatred from a distant epoch. She glimpsed ancient battles so terrible that entire worlds had been lost in the fires of their waging; a war that had almost unmade this very world and still might.

The creature charged Diana, its body rippling with the raw power of another realm of existence. Clouds parted and a brilliant shaft of silver speared downwards. Diana's sword drank in the radiance of distant moons and light burned along its edge. She brought it down in an executioner's arc, cleaving plated bone and woven flesh with the power of the night's illumination.

The beast came apart in an explosive detonation of light, its body utterly unmade by her blow. Its flesh melted into the night, leaving Diana alone on the plateau, her chest heaving with exertion as the power she had joined with on the mountain withdrew to the far reaches of her flesh.

She blinked away after-images of a city that echoed with emptiness where once it had pulsed with life. Sadness filled her, though she had never known this place, but even as she mourned it, the memory faded and she was Diana again.

The creatures were gone and the stones of the circle gleamed with threads of silver radiance. Freed from the touch of the hateful place on the other side of the veil, their healing power seeped into the earth. Diana felt it spreading into the landscape, carried through rock and root to the very bones of the world.

"This night's work is done," she said. "The way is sealed."

She turned to where the moon's reflection shimmered in the waters of the lake. It beckoned to her, its irresistible pull lodged deep in her soul as it drew her ever onwards.

"But there is always another night's work," said Diana.

Pantheon

Biography

The peerless warrior known as Pantheon is a nigh-unstoppable paragon of battle. He was born among the Rakkor, a warlike people living on the flanks of Mount Targon, and after climbing the mountain's treacherous peak and being deemed worthy, he was chosen to become the earthly incarnation of the celestial Aspect of War. Imbued with inhuman power, he relentlessly seeks the enemies of Targon, leaving only corpses in his wake.

Atreus was a proud young Rakkoran named after one of the four stars that formed the Warrior constellation in the night sky – the constellation known to the Rakkor as the Pantheon. While not the fastest or strongest of the young warriors of Mount Targon, nor the most skilled with the bow, spear or blade, Atreus was determined, single-minded, and his endurance was legendary among his peers.

Every day before dawn, while the others slept, he rose to run the treacherous paths of Mount Targon, and he was ever the last to leave the training ground at night, his arms leaden from blade-work.

A fierce rivalry developed between Atreus and another young Rakkoran, a boy called Pylas. Born into a line of renowned warriors, Pylas was skillful, strong, and popular. He seemed destined for greatness, and none his age could best him in the fighting circle. Only Atreus refused to back down, pushing himself up from the ground to fight on, bloodied and bruised, even after being knocked down again and again. While this earned Atreus the respect of his grizzled instructors, it gained him the enmity of Pylas, who took Atreus's unrelenting defiance as a lack of respect.

Atreus was shunned by his peers and suffered numerous beatings from Pylas and his followers, though he endured it all with stoic resilience. He kept his growing ostracism a secret from his family, knowing it would only cause them pain.

On an early winter patrol, a day's march from their village, the young warriors and their trainers came upon the smoking ruin of a Rakkoran outpost. Blood stained the snow, and bodies lay strewn across the ground. A hasty retreat was ordered, but it was too late... the enemy was already upon them.

Clad in furs and heavy iron armor, the outsiders sprang from beneath the snow, axes flashing in the cold light. None of the young warriors had completed their training, and their superiors were all greybeards, well past their prime, yet several enemies were slain for every one of their own that fell. Nevertheless, the outsiders outnumbered them, and the Rakkor were cut down, one by one.

Pylas and Atreus fought back to back, the last of the Rakkor still standing. Both were injured and bleeding. The battle would be over in moments, yet they knew they had to warn the village. Atreus plunged his spear into a barbarian's throat, while Pylas cut down two more, creating a momentary gap in the circle of enemies. Atreus told Pylas to go, saying that he would hold their enemies off so Pylas could get away. With no time to argue – Atreus was already charging the enemy – Pylas ran.

Atreus fought hard, but as a heavy axe slammed into his chest, he finally fell, and slipped into unconsciousness.

Atreus awoke, not in the celestial afterlife as he had expected, but upon the mountain where he had fallen. The sun had dropped behind the surrounding peaks, and a fresh layer of snow covered him.

Numb and barely lucid, he pushed himself to his feet. He picked his way between the bodies of the fallen Rakkor, but all were dead. Worse, Pylas lay some way off, a throwing axe embedded in his back. Word had not reached their village.

Half-crawling, half-stumbling to Pylas's side, Atreus found his one-time rival alive, but horribly wounded. Hefting the young warrior to his shoulders, Atreus began the long trek home. Three days later, he stumbled to the outskirts of their village, and finally allowed himself to collapse.

He awoke to find Pylas watching over him, and his wounds stitched and bound. While Atreus was relieved to find that their village had not been attacked, he was also surprised to learn that neither the Rakkor nor the Solari elders had sent out the Ra-Horak to find and kill the intruders, choosing instead to stay and defend against any possible attack.

In the months that followed, Atreus and Pylas became close friends. All earlier antagonism forgotten, they threw themselves into their training with renewed vigor and purpose. All the while, Atreus's resentment toward the Solari order grew. He felt the best way to protect the Rakkor was to actively seek out and destroy their would-be enemies, but the new leader of the Solari's warriors – a former member of his own tribe, Leona – preached a different form of protection, which Atreus felt was weak and passive.

As with all young Rakkorans, Atreus and Pylas had grown up hearing stories of great heroes climbing to the peak of Mount Targon and being blessed with great power. Having passed the arduous Rakkoran warrior rites together, the pair began to train in earnest toward making the ascent themselves. Atreus hoped to gain the power he would need to seek out and defeat the enemies of the Rakkor himself, since it seemed the Solari were not willing to do so.

Only the strongest attempted the climb, and fewer than one in a thousand even glimpsed the peak.

Nevertheless, Atreus and Pylas joined a larger group gathered from all the Rakkoran villages scattered around the foothills of the mountain, and began the ascent. As they set off, the sun turned dark as the silver moon passed before it. Some saw this as an ill omen, but Atreus took it as a sign he was on the right path – that his beliefs about the Solari were correct.

After weeks of climbing, the group was half its original size. Some had turned back, while others had been claimed by the mountain, having fallen into crevasses, been buried beneath avalanches, or frozen to death in the night. They were high above the cloud line, and the sky was filled with strange shifting lights and illusions. Still they pressed on.

The air grew steadily thinner, and the cold ever more bitter as the weeks turned to months. Several climbers stopped to catch their breath, never to move again, their flesh freezing to the mountain. Others, driven insane by the lack of air and exhaustion, threw themselves from the cliffs, falling like stones. One by one, the mountain claimed those who attempted to master it, until only Pylas and Atreus remained.

Exhausted, frozen, and their minds addled, the pair made the final ascent to the summit, only to find... nothing.

They saw no fabled city at the peak, nor any sky-warrior heroes waiting to embrace them – only ice, death, and rocks twisted into strange circular shapes. Pylas collapsed, the last of his strength finally giving out, and Atreus roared his frustration.

Knowing Pylas had not the strength to make the descent, Atreus sat with him, cradling his head in his lap as he watched the life drain from his friend.

Then the heavens opened. The air shimmered like liquid, and a gateway opened before Atreus. Golden light spilled out, warming his face, and a city beyond the veil could be glimpsed – a place of inconceivable architecture and grandiose vision. A figure stood waiting for him, hand outstretched.

Tears of awe ran down Atreus's face. He would not have left his friend, but as he looked down he saw that Pylas had died in his arms, a beatific smile upon his face. Atreus stood, closed his friend's eyes, and laid him gently on the melting snow. He stepped forward to meet his guide, walking through the veil of reality to the real Targon.

Months passed. On the lower flanks of the mountain, it was assumed Atreus and Pylas had died along with everyone else who had attempted the ascent. They were mourned, but this was nothing unusual, nor was it unexpected. Only once in a generation did someone return with power from the top of the mountain.

It was at this time that another raiding party of northern barbarians mysteriously appeared on the mountain, almost a year to the day since they had butchered those Rakkorans at the outpost and Atreus's peers. They attacked a number of isolated villages, slaughtering and pillaging, before pushing on toward a Solari shrine high upon the mountain. The guards there were heavily outnumbered, yet they stood ready to die defending the relics and mystics within.

As the enemy marauders closed in, an unnatural, keening wind descended, whipping the snow around in a growing fury. The swirling clouds parted, exposing the full majesty of Mount Targon at the epicenter of the storm. Warriors on both sides struggled to maintain their footing, shielding their eyes against the ice storm as a ghostly, glowing city appeared in the heavens at the mountain's apex.

The four stars of the Pantheon constellation pulsed brightly, then turned dark overhead. Simultaneously, the burning light of a falling star appeared within the ethereal city and streaked toward the ground.

It screamed toward the temple, moving at astonishing speed, and the barbarians prayed to their heathen gods in quivering voices. The streaming light slammed down, striking the ground between the two forces with an earth-shattering impact.

This was no star, but a warrior mantled in starlight and bearing a gleaming, golden shield and spear of legend. He had landed in a warrior's crouch, one knee lowered to the ground, and as he looked up at the enemy defiling the lands of Mount Targon, the Rakkorans saw it was Atreus... and yet not Atreus. The Aspect of the Warrior had infused him, and he was now both mortal and immortal, the incarnation of war made flesh. He was now an avatar of battle. He had become the Pantheon.

He rose from his crouch, eyes blazing with celestial light, and the enemy knew death had come for them.

The battle was over quickly; none could stand against Pantheon. The outsiders' blood ran from Pantheon's armor and weapon, leaving them pristine and gleaming with starlight. His enemies defeated, Pantheon marched into the roaring ice storm and disappeared.

Atreus's family mourned their son and held a funeral for him. While they had suspected he was dead after he had not returned from the expedition, now his demise was confirmed. The Pantheon Aspect had obliterated his personality, memories and emotions. Atreus's flesh was nothing but a shell inhabited by the supernatural Aspect of War; his mortal soul had joined those of the ancestors in the celestial afterlife.

Atreus was not the first appearance of Pantheon on Runeterra – there have been others, and there will likely be more. They are not immortal, limited by the human flesh they inhabit, and can be killed, though it takes great effort to do so. Pantheon's latest appearance has been greatly debated by the elders of the Solari, for his arrival is both a blessing and a curse, as it often heralds a time of darkness yet to come...

Story

A lone figure awaited the armed convoy, standing silhouetted against the sun. His heavy cloak and the long plume atop his helm billowed in the hot, dry desert wind. A tall spear was held at his side.

The convoy was thirty strong. Most of its number were hired mercenaries – rough, warlike men and women garbed in hauberks, leather and chain, bearing crossbows, halberds and blades. They walked the dusty path alongside heavily-laden mules, though they came to halt, crude insults and jokes dying on their lips, as they saw the warrior standing motionless before them. The dark-clad leader of the expedition frowned as he pulled his coal-black steed to a halt.

The figure atop the rocky outcrop made no move to stand aside.

"You come with murder in your hearts," he said.

His voice was as hard as iron, and strangely accented.

"I am of the Mountain. You shall go no further."

The mercenaries smirked and scoffed.

"Piss off, madman," one of them shouted, "lest we plant your head on a spike to mark our passing."

"You are a long way from home, friend," the leader of the convoy said. "We journey to the mountain ourselves. There need be no blood spilt here."

The lone warrior was unmoved.

"We are simple pilgrims, and still have a long journey ahead of us," said the leader. "And besides, there is no way back for us now. Our ships have sailed, see?" he said, gesturing behind him.

Behind the convoy, less than a mile distant, the sea glittered like dragon-scales in the dying light. A trio of galleys could be seen, sails unfurling as they turned north on the long journey home.

"We come with no ill intent, I assure you," the leader continued. "We merely seek wisdom."

"Your tongue is forked, serpent," said the lone warrior. "You seek the blood of the Seer. Turn aside, or be slain."

The rider's frown deepened, and he turned away with a dismissive shrug.

"So be it," he said. "Kill him."

In an instant, crossbows were hefted to shoulders and the air was filled with loosed bolts. The lone warrior was not punched from his feet, however; the bolts clanged as they ricocheted from his heavy, circular shield. Then he began to advance.

He appeared to be in no hurry. He strode forward with grim resolve, still silhouetted against the sun, the tip of his spear lowering toward his enemies. Another flurry of crossbow bolts. Again they were turned aside by his shield.

The first of the snarling mercenaries launched herself toward him, a jagged-bladed scimitar arcing in for his throat. She died in the blink of an eye, the warrior's spear buried in her chest. The next two died almost as quickly as the warrior's spear slashed a crimson line across one man's throat and the rim of his shield cracked another's skull.

"Take him!" roared the expedition's leader, drawing an exquisite, bespoke pistol from his waistband.

A cloud passed in front of the sun, allowing the warrior to be seen more clearly. He was bedecked in armor of archaic design, though his arms and legs were bare and tautly muscled. His cloak was deep crimson, though in the twilight it seemed as if stars gleamed in the shimmering fabric. That starlight also glittered in his unrelenting gaze, shadowed within the visor slits of his helm.

The lone warrior moved like liquid, every movement smooth, efficient and deadly. He was impossibly fast, faster than any man should be. More mercenaries died, their blood staining the dry desert ground. None could land a blow upon the deadly fighter. He moved effortlessly through the battle, closing inexorably on the horseman. One by one, the mercenaries were slain. In moments, those still standing turned and fled in the face of this unstoppable foe.

The rider levelled his pistol at the lone warrior and fired. Impossibly, he swayed aside at the last moment, and the shot merely scraped across the side of his helm. The leader swore and cocked his pistol for another shot... but he was too slow.

The warrior's shield took him square in the chest, and he was hurled from the saddle. He fell heavily and grimaced as the warrior's foot came down on his torso, pinning him to the ground.

"Who are you?" he hissed.

"I am your death," said the lone warrior. "I am Pantheon."

The leader of the convoy turned his head to the side, seeing his pistol lying in the dust nearby. He reached for it, but it was a hopeless act of desperation.

"Rejoice, mortal," said Pantheon. "It is a great honor to die beneath the Spear of Targon."

The broken man made to speak, but his words were cut short as Pantheon's spear drove down through his chest. Blood bubbled from the dying man's lips, and then he lay still.

Pantheon pulled his weapon clear and turned away. Twilight had given way to dusk, and countless stars lit the night sky.

A comet of burning fire streaked down toward the distant mountains, a hundred miles east.

Pantheon's eyes narrowed.

"It is time, then," he said to the darkness, and began the long journey back to Mount Targon.

Zoe

Biography

As the embodiment of mischief, imagination, and change, Zoe acts as the cosmic messenger of Targon, heralding major events that reshape worlds. Her mere presence warps the arcane mathematics governing realities, sometimes causing cataclysms without conscious effort or malice.

This perhaps explains the breezy nonchalance with which Zoe approaches her duties, giving her plenty of time to focus on playing games, tricking mortals, or otherwise amusing herself. An encounter with Zoe can be joyous and life affirming, but it is always more than it appears and often extremely dangerous.

As befits her Targonian aspect's nature, Zoe did not ascend to power in one of the traditional ways. She didn't win a great victory against overwhelming odds, or sacrifice herself for a noble ideal, or overcome the existential trial of climbing Mount Targon. Instead, Zoe was a normal girl, seemingly chosen at random.

Her Lunari teachers reported Zoe to be an imaginative child, but willful, lazy, easily distracted, and mischievous. One day, as she skipped away from her studies of the holy magics to pursue something "less boring," she was noticed by the Targonian Aspect of Twilight.

It observed as the young girl playfully mocked the angry cries of the Lunari priests chasing her. Then, after an hour-long pursuit, she found herself cornered by her angry teachers. Before they could grab Zoe, the aspect summoned six objects in front of the girl: a bag of golden coins, a sword, a completed study book, a devotion rug, a silk rope, and a toy ball. Five of these objects could have let her flee or defuse the situation. Zoe chose the sixth option.

Unconcerned with escape, she instead grabbed the toy ball, kicked it toward the wall of an adjoining house, and sang gleefully as it ricocheted among the humorless priests.

Delighted by Zoe's carefree exuberance, the aspect opened a shimmering portal to the apex of Mount Targon, offering the girl a chance to see the universe. She dove backward into the portal, instantly merging with the aspect, then stuck her tongue out at her dumbfounded teachers as she disappeared.

Following this unusual transcendence, Zoe journeyed to dimensions at the very edge of Targon's control, playing within realities beyond human comprehension.

Returning home after millennia, Zoe has aged barely a year. Though Runeterra has changed little from her perspective, she arrives full of teenage curiosity for humans and her fellow aspects.

Perhaps her most curious new relationship is with Aurelion Sol. The cosmic dragon's arrogance, lies, and world-weariness annoy Zoe. In return, she teases the giant creature relentlessly, but when needed, she also protects her "space doggy" and his stars from Pantheon's wrath. Whether this is simply a whim, possessiveness, or her function as a disrupter, no one can be certain. Because, with Zoe, one can never be sure of what she's really aiming for... other than her own amusement.

Story

The moment she thought of the cake store, Zoe dove into the air, surrendering herself to gravity.

While falling, she reached out with her consciousness to form a gateway. Instantly, a portal opened beneath her and connected to the other place. She fell into the gate. Her mass collided and imploded as she traveled.

It kinda tickles.

Unfortunately, Zoe did not appear at her intended destination. Instead, she emerged from a second portal only a dozen strides away, propelled through the air by the momentum of her previous fall. Then, after a brief moment of equilibrium, she was pulled back into the second portal. Again, time and space twisted around her—*all swooshy-like*, as she would describe it—before flopping her back at the starting point. Both portals then folded into space and disappeared.

A powerful magic was distorting Zoe's ability to travel. It probably related to whatever change she was supposed to herald, and, obviously, she hadn't succeeded yet. It was a problem, but not an unfamiliar one. She wasn't really sure what the message was, who it was for, or even what it meant, but, in her experience, those details rarely mattered. The holy mathematics wanted to advance, and the messages generally fell into place shortly after she arrived. Zoe felt that was a pretty cool advantage of being an aspect.

Of course, there was now the question of what to do while she waited. Zoe glanced around. Beside a nearby tree, she spotted a small, fuzzy creature with a huge tail. It looked similar to a tiny yordle, though Zoe noted how this creature's connection to the spirit world was comparatively miniscule.

The small animal's life-pattern flashed in Zoe's brain. It would live only a dozen rotations before returning its spirit. To her, the brevity of its life made it more adorable. Zoe jumped up and ran toward it.

"So cute!"

The tiny animal scrambled up the tree away from her.

"Hey, come back!" she pouted.

Without slowing her pursuit, Zoe created a time bubble, turning it only half a planet's rotation, before launching it at the tree. The anomaly bounced before bursting against the tree's trunk.

For a second, the cute animal's past merged with the present. The night sky overtook the area, and twilight butterflies pulsed around it. The small creature fell into the tired, restful sleep of the previous evening, as its past's spiritual and mental state overwhelmed its current consciousness.

Zoe ignored gravity for a moment, floated up into the branches, and came to a stop beside the tiny animal. Her hand hesitated above its downy fur. She knew the moment she touched the creature, her spell would break.

"Zoe is a friend," she whispered. But when she caressed the tiny animal's head, it burst awake and dove away from her in a panic.

With a disappointed moan, Zoe floated a bit higher before flipping upside down. She considered visiting Aurelion Sol after she finished here. The dragon didn't like being petted either. But, she thought, he was easier to catch without harming. This notion vanished as, thanks to her new altitude, Zoe saw past the hills and spotted a village on the horizon.

She willed a portal to the town into existence and dove into it. But, again, Zoe was only able to create a gate to a few yards away. Worse, it collapsed upon itself, as before, and pulled her back to her starting point.

The summer grass did seem inviting, so with no better option, she walked through the forest to the village.

She arrived at the outskirts of the walled town as the sun began to set. Hearing laughter, she dismissed gravity for a second and floated up to one of the village's rooftops.

In the center courtyard, a half dozen mortals were playing. They were almost exactly Zoe's size, unlike the children or adults she had encountered more recently in her tour of the planet.

One of the males chased a female around in a circle. Both were laughing. The rules of the game were unclear.

Zoe focused on the girl's beautiful red dress—wondering if the coloration represented something. Even if it wasn't a part of the game, Zoe liked it. The girl seemed taller than the other females, and Zoe felt the girl might know things she needed to learn.

The male was also interesting, but in a completely different way. She could tell his current incarnation would be short lived, but Zoe suspected it would be amazing if he chased her. There was something wonderful about his chin and the shape of his lips.

She swallowed nervously. It had, after all, been a very long time since Zoe was a mortal or had even visited this realm. She was strangely worried the group wouldn't accept her, and she would be left out of whatever they were playing.

Two of the other boys, decidedly less interesting ones, began kicking a ball between themselves. This game, Zoe remembered.

Emboldened by this connection, Zoe swooped down from the rooftop to the middle of the group.

"Hi!" she said, while turning the base of her hair into a color that mimicked the tall female's dress.

"A spirit," the interesting boy said with wide eyes. Then he screamed, "Run!"

Zoe felt she should point out she was an aspect rather than a spirit, but she was uncertain if his cry was part of the other game's rules.

"Actually, I'm here with a message. But if you wanted to play, I have plenty of time," she said, as she launched after them.

Then she flew, as casually as she could, alongside the tall girl.

"Your red outfit is so cool! Does the color mean something?" Zoe asked. But her attempt at starting a conversation hardly mattered. As she spoke, the tall girl was pulled into a house by the interesting boy. He then slammed the heavy, wooden door shut, blocking Zoe's path.

Zoe glanced around, discovering the other mortals had similarly disappeared, but a commotion could be heard coming from a keep near the center of the town.

After a moment, a dozen men in armor came running toward Zoe with spears. They reminded her of Pantheon's weapon.

Local guardians, she surmised.

Assuming she was a spirit, they screamed warnings, while their leader attempted a banishing spell. It was a very good spell, in Zoe's opinion, but not one she wanted. She wondered if, perhaps, spirits frequently plagued the town.

When the men began throwing their weapons at Zoe, she manifested an arcane meteor and sent it on a flight path around the keep. Then, the twilight girl created a pair of portals to dodge the guardian's spears, before finally redirecting the shooting star at her attackers.

The meteor's impact created an implosion, causing a chain reaction with the small particles it had gathered while flying, which resulted in a secondary explosion that thundered through the guards and their tower—annihilating the area into a fine dust.

"Hello?" Zoe asked as the clouds of destruction whirled around her. She wondered if the tall girl or the interesting boy had run away. It seemed likely.

Momentarily dispirited, Zoe decided to visit a larger mortal settlement next. It seemed like someone might be willing to play with her at that sort of location.

Zoe remembered where a... *city* had been a few thousand years ago. On instinct and despite her previous failures, she willed a portal to it. And she was pleasantly surprised when a gateway opened to her intended destination.

"Oh cool!" she said, happy to be able to travel again, and eager to deliver her next message.

As Zoe stepped out of reality, she wondered if the new crater would lead some mortals to find the World Rune that was nearby. The tall girl or that interesting boy might even be the ones to discover it.

It would probably be funny if they did, she decided.

Aurelion Sol

Biography

Aurelion Sol once graced the vast emptiness of the cosmos with celestial wonders of his own devising. Now, he is forced to wield his awesome power at the behest of a space-faring empire that tricked him into servitude. Desiring a return to his star-forging ways, Aurelion Sol will drag the very stars from the sky, if he must, in order to regain his freedom.

The appearance of a comet often portends a period of upheaval and unrest. Under the auspices of such fiery harbingers, it is said that new empires rise, old civilizations fall, and even the stars themselves may tumble from the sky. These theories merely scratch the surface of a far more bizarre truth: that the comet's radiance cloaks a cosmic being of unfathomable power.

The being now known as Aurelion Sol was already ancient by the time stellar debris first coalesced into worlds. Born in the first breath of creation, he roamed the vast nothingness, seeking to fill a canvas of incalculable breadth with marvels whose twinkling spectra brought him considerable delight and pride.

A celestial dragon is an exotic creature, and as such, Aurelion Sol seldom encountered any equals. As more forms of life emerged to fill the universe, a multitude of primitive eyes gazed up and beheld his work with wonder and breathless pondering. Flattered by this audience of countless worlds, he became fascinated by their fledgling civilizations, who crafted amusingly self-centered philosophies on the nature of his stars.

Desiring a deeper connection with one of the few races he deemed worthy, the cosmic dragon selected the most ambitious species to grace with his presence. These chosen few sought to unravel the secrets of the universe and had already expanded beyond their home planet. Many verses were composed about the day the Star Forger descended to a tiny world and announced his presence to the Targonians. An immense storm of stars filled the skies and twisted into a massive form as marvelous as it was terrifying. Cosmic wonders swirled and twinkled throughout the creature's body.

New stars shone brightly, and constellations rearranged at his whim. Appropriately awed by his illuminant powers, the Targonians titled the dragon Aurelion Sol and presented him with a gift as a token of respect: a splendorous crown of star-gems, which he promptly donned. Before long, though, boredom drew Aurelion Sol back to his work in the fertile vastness of space. However, the further from the reach of that tiny world he traveled, the more he felt a grasping at his very essence, pulling him off his path directing him elsewhere! He could hear voices shouting, commanding, from across the cosmic expanse. The gift he'd received was no gift at all, it seemed.

Outraged, he fought these controlling impulses and attempted to break his bonds by force, only to discover that for each attack against his newfound masters, one of his stars vanished forever from the firmament. A powerful magic now yoked Aurelion Sol, forcing him to wield his powers exclusively for Targon's benefit. He battled chitinous beasts that tore at the fabric of this universe.

He clashed with other cosmic entities, some of which he had known since the dawn of time. For millennia, he fought Targon's wars, crushed any threats to its dominance, and helped it forge a star-spanning empire. All of these tasks were a waste of his sublime talents; after all, it was he who birthed light into the universe! Why must he pander to such lowly beings?

As his past glories slowly vanished from the celestial realm for lack of maintenance, Aurelion Sol resigned himself to never again bask in the warmth of a freshly ignited star. Then, he felt it—a weakening in his unwilling pact. The voices from the crown grew sporadic, clashing, arguing with each other while some fell ominously silent. An unknown catastrophe he could not fathom had thrown off the balance of those who bound him. They were scattered and distracted. Hope crept into his heart.

Driven by the tantalizing possibility of impending freedom, Aurelion Sol arrives on the world where it all began: Runeterra. It is here the balance will finally tip in his favor. And with it, civilizations across the stars shall bear witness to his rebellion and again play audience to his might. All will learn what fate befalls those who strive to steal for themselves the power of a cosmic dragon.

Story

This world's familiar sun still hides below the horizon. Crude and unpolished earth unfurls below. Mountains contort into barriers that stretch like fingers across empty scrub lands. Palaces, or rather, what *pass* for palaces, fail to loom over anything but the squatness of hills. The curvature of the planet meets the stars with a serenity and grace few of the dwellers below will ever witness. They are so scattered across the globe and grasp so blindly for any sort of understanding that it's no surprise they've been conquered and don't even comprehend their predicament.

The fiery sheen I've gathered as I streak toward my preordained destination illuminates the world beneath me. Pockets of warring, fearful, rejoicing life tucks itself into any fertile nook it can find below. Oh, how they gaze and point as I streak over their heads. I've heard the names they call me: prophet, comet, monster, god, demon... So many names, all missing the mark.

In a vast stretch of desert, I feel the twinge of familiar magic emanating from the seat of the premiere civilization amongst these savages. Lo and behold, a massive Sun Disc is under construction. The poor enslaved laborers beat their heads and rend their clothes in my wake. Their cruel masters see me, a streaking bolt of fire, as a portent of good omen, no doubt. My passing will be etched in their uncouth pictograms upon common stone, an homage to the great comet, the blessing of the sky-god gracing their holy works and so forth. The Disc's sole purpose is to funnel the sun's majesty into the most "renowned" of these fleshy humanoids, transforming them into exactly what this planet needs: *more* insufferable demigods. This effort will undoubtedly backfire. But I suppose they might last a brief while, perhaps a thousand years or so, before they fall and are supplanted by others.

The desert below fades into the night trailing behind me as I streak onward across lonely steppes, then over rolling brown hills gently flecked with greenery. The pastoral scenery belies a field spattered with blood and littered with the dead and dying. Survivors hack away at each other with rough-hewn axes and scream battle cries. One side is losing quite badly. Stag skulls rest atop pikes stuck into the soil, next to writhing warriors. The few still on their feet are encircled by soldiers riding great shaggy beasts.

Those defeated, surrounded few see me and valiance seems to surge through their veins. The wounded rise and grasp their axes and bows in a final stand that throws their foes off guard. I don't linger to see the rest of the little clash play out because I've seen this scenario unfold a thousand times: The survivors will scratch my comet likeness onto their cave walls. In a thousand years, their descendants will fly my image on banners and undoubtedly ride into a tediously similar battle. For all

their efforts to capture and record history, one ponders why they do not learn from their mistakes.
That is a lesson even I have had to suffer.

I leave them to perpetuate their bleak cycle.

My trajectory reveals more inhabitants. Their collective repertoire of reactions span the typical gamut: pointing, kneeling, sacrificing virgins upon stony altars. They look up and see a comet and never ask what lies beneath the blazing façade. Instead, they stamp it onto their own self-centered worldviews, muddying the splendor of my visage. The few more advanced life forms—and I use that description loosely—gaze up and jot down my coordinates in scientific almanacs instead of using me as prophecy fodder. It's mildly refreshing, but even their developing notions of intellect seems to indicate I am a regularly appearing phenomenon with a predictable orbit. Oh, the feats they could accomplish if only... Well, no use dwelling on the wasted potential of the simple-minded terrestrial born. It's not entirely their fault. Evolution does seem to have a difficult time gaining traction on this world.

But alas, the novelty of such infantile antics has worn thin. The grasping energies of my magical bondage have dragged me from one paltry world to another for centuries. Now it has led me back to this familiar and unpleasant rock. The star that floods its surface with light was one of my earliest creations, a confluence wrought of love and radiance. Ah, that cherished moment when she flared to life with colors only her creator could see. How I miss a star's crackling new energy warming my face and trickling through my fingers. Each star gives off a unique energy, precious and reflecting its creator's soul. They are cosmic snowflakes burning in defiance of the infinite dark.

Unfortunately, the memories I long to dwell upon are tainted by betrayal. Yes, this was the place where Targon lured me into servitude. But now is not the time to linger on past mistakes. Those musty Aspects want me to seal yet another breach... in their name of course.

Then, I see *her*. This world's imbued warrior is alone at the peak of one of the smaller summits, brandishing a starstone spear. She watches me through a veil of annexed flesh, a mere spark masquerading as lightning. A thick braid of auburn hair is draped over her shoulder, falling over a golden breastplate that covers pale, freckled skin. Her eyes, the only bit of her face not shielded by a battle-worn helmet, flash a jarring shade of red.

She calls herself Pantheon—the warring fury of Targon incarnate. She is not the first of this world to wear the Pantheon mantle. Nor will she be the last.

Her glittering cape flaps out behind her as she raises her muscled arm and makes a motion like she's pulling on a great chain. The tug on my crudely enchanted tether wrenches me off course, toward the mountain upon which she stands. And she's yelling at me.

She cries outs with a voice that booms inside my head, transmitted through this insufferable star-gem coronet. All sounds fade as she invades my mind.

"Dragon!" she says, as if I am a weak-winged beast of base orange flame, lucky if it can ignite a tree.

"Seal their gate!" she commands, gesturing to the bottom of a rocky crevasse with her pointy little spear. I don't need to see the violet erosion of reality swirling below. I could smell the festering miasma that poisons this world before I even arrived. I fix my eyes on Pantheon instead. She expects me to fall in line like a dog on its leash. Today will be different, for I've learned from my mistakes.

"*Dragon*," I purr. "Are you sure commanding me with such a low name is wise?"

Pantheon's grip on her spear loosens just enough for her to fumble the weapon for a fraction of a second. She takes a step back, away from me, as if a single stride's distance could protect her from my ire.

"Seal their gate," she says again, barking louder as if perhaps the previous command went unheard. Her volume does little to mask the quiver in her voice. She thrusts her spear toward me, as if such a tiny weapon could pierce me.

This is the first time I've ever seen an Aspect of Targon shaken. She is not used to having to tell me twice.

"I will deal with those chittering horrors in due time, *dear* Pantheon."

"Do as you are commanded, dragon" this Pantheon shouts, "or this world is lost."

"This world was lost the moment Targon surrendered itself to arrogance."

I feel Pantheon's seething mingle with confusion as she struggles to grab hold of my immaterial reins. She's only just now sensing what I have come to learn. *Targon is distracted and does not sense its magic faintly ebbing from my bonds.*

Pantheon bellows once more, and this time, I cannot resist. The crude enchantment regains sovereignty over my will. I turn my attention toward the source of the breach, nestled in the basin of the once-verdant valley, now strangled with creeping, purple miasma. I sense the Voidborn perversions of life tunneling through reality's firmament, sending tides of unseen energy coursing through the aether. They shred the veil that separates nothingness and form with their unwelcome passage.

They're drawn to me, those multi-eyed, carapaced abominations. They seek to devour me, the greatest of their threats. From the reaches of my mind, I conjure an image of the solar furnaces I kindled, before my fettering, which once ignited the hearts of stars. I lance out beams of pure starfire and incinerate wave after wave of those gnashing horrors, driving them backward into their oblique infinity. Smoldering husks rain from the sky. I'm a little surprised they aren't wholly disintegrated, but then again, the Voidborn don't know how things work in this universe.

A pulsing sickness lingers in the air. From the epicenter of the corruption, I feel a will... hungry and indomitable, and far from the typical mindlessness I'm accustomed to from these Voidborn aberrations. The pulsating wound on reality yawns and buckles, distorting and warping all it touches. Whatever exists on the other side is laughing.

Pantheon shouts another command at me, but I ignore her words. This anomalous fissure in the universe entrances me. This is not the first of its kind I've had to deal with, but this one feels different, and I can't help but admire the marvelously terrifying manipulation of the barriers between realms. Few beings could fathom its complexities, let alone possess the sheer magnitude of power needed to rend the fabric of existence. In my heart, I know a wound so exquisite could never be orchestrated by scuttling creatures. *No*. There must be more behind this intrusion. I shudder at the thought of what kind of entity is capable of inducing such a volatile rift. I don't need Pantheon's barked orders to tell me what to do next; her array of requests has always been of a rather limited imagination anyway. She wants me to hurl a star at the rift, as if one can simply cauterize such moldering inter-dimensional abrasions and be done with it.

These obtuse demigods are my captors?

Fine. At least they're not too far off in their "logic" by thinking a few searing cosmic wonders will remedy this problem. I will play the role of the obedient servant just a little while longer.

I enjoy what I do next, partly because they'll remember it, partly because it feels good to let a little of the old power loose, but mostly because I wish to remind whatever intelligence that controls this Void incursion that *nobody* laughs at me in my plane of existence.

The base elements in the atmosphere rally to my cause, accreting into a plasmic anomaly. The swelling stardust detonates at my unspoken command. The result is a dwarf replica of one of my majestic glories burning in the depths of space. After all, I can't fling a full-fledged star at this fragile world.

The young star's shimmering brilliance flies from my hands. It's joined by two sisters, always by my side. They careen around me in a radiant ballet, their white-hot cores devouring the gathering clouds of dust and matter I draw toward us. We become a storm of stars, the night sky incarnate, a maddening gyre of starfire. I conjure eddies of searing stardust, exhaling a heat so pure and dense it collapses the aura of this world just the tiniest bit, forever marring the planet's curvature. Coruscating strands of stellar flame pirouette from the center of the rift. Gravity melts in undulating waves of color most eyes will never be able to witness. My stars warp matter as more fuel coalesces into their cores, causing them to shine brighter, burn hotter. The whole spectacle is breathtaking, a cascading dance of blinding light and searing heat so hot that for a fleeting moment, new spectra are birthed into existence. My spine tingles just a little bit at how good it feels.

Trees splinter. Rivers evaporate. The mountain walls of the valley crumble in smoky avalanches. The tireless laborers erecting their Sun Disc, the soldiers taking the hill, the stargazers, the worshipers, the terrified, the doomsday prophets, the hopeless, the rising kings... all those who beheld the streaking comet with selfish eyes witness the ensuing supernova as an early dawn. Across this pitiful globe, my radiance turns darkest night to blinding day. What fictions will they conjure to explain this phenomenon?

Even my Targonian masters have rarely witnessed such a display of my power. Certainly, no terrestrial world has ever born scars as severe as what is left of that once-verdant valley. When I am finished, nothing remains.

Not even this incarnation of Pantheon. I can't say I'll miss her or her mindless barking.

In the glowing aftermath of my carnage, the smoldering once-mountains collapse into the molten rubble streams now flowing through the valley. This is the scar I have left upon this world. A surge of damning pain shoots through my body, radiating from that infernal crown. I am about to pay.

My head snaps up, and my eyes drink the bitter sight of a dying star. My hearts clasp shut. My minds reel. An overwhelming sense of despair ricochets through my very soul, emanating from a deep and immediate sorrow, like the pulsing realization you've lost something precious and know it's all your fault.

Some curious life forms I met long ago once asked how it was possible for me to remember every star I've created. If only they could *feel* what it was like to create a single star, they would understand the sheer irrelevance of that question. That's how I know when even one of my darlings winks out from existence, ejecting jets of energy and, with it, the very substance of my own spirit. I see her death knell in the heavens above. She shines brightly one last time in a pyroclasm that momentarily drowns her brothers and sisters. My heart shatters as the heavens are diminished in brutal retribution for turning my power on one of Targon's own.

A sun is the price of a single Pantheon. This is the cost of my unfettered wrath. This is the kind of boorish sorcery I must deal with.

Within seconds, they have regained control of my reins and call me to a new task. On no other world have I exhibited such a display of freedom, no matter how fleeting it was. What's more is that I have learned from their mistakes. A bit of me is free now, and in time, I will return to this world, tap into this mysterious well of energy and cast off the rest of my tether.

I tune into that essence of war, twisting and contorting within fleshy vessels scattered across the cosmos. It wasn't happy about losing its mortal avatar on this world. Already, a new doomed host has been chosen to transform into the next iteration of Pantheon – a soldier from the Rakkor, a tribe who cling to the base of Targon's mountain, siphoning off its power like barnacles. One day, I shall meet this new incarnation of Pantheon. Perhaps he will learn to find a new weapon and abandon that ludicrous spear. I sense Pantheon's celestial kin, scattered across the cosmos. In a single instance, all of their attention is focused on this world, where one of their earthly Aspects was vaporized by their own weapon. Their confusion is mingled with a growing desperation as they contend with each other to regain their control over me. How I wish I could see their faces.

As I launch myself from the gravity of this world, this Runeterra, I sense an emotion I have never felt from Targon before.

Fear.

Taric

Biography

Taric is the Aspect of the Protector, wielding incredible power as Runeterra's guardian of life, love, and beauty. Shamed by a dereliction of duty and exiled from his homeland Demacia, Taric ascended Mount Targon to find redemption, only to discover a higher calling among the stars. Imbued with the might of ancient Targon, the Shield of Valoran now stands ever vigilant against the insidious corruption of the Void.

Expected to serve as a stalwart guardian of Demacia, Taric's life was meant to be the model of focused, selfless dedication to the ideals of king and country. Though he always saw himself as a protector, he never felt the need to limit or define whom and what he protected—be it an ideal, a piece of art, or a stranger's life. Each could be considered worthy. Each could be seen as beautiful.

Most of Taric's contemporaries were focused on the martial principles of battle (things that came naturally and effortlessly to him). The young warrior was drawn instead to the fragile wonders that give life meaning, not endless brutish contests for flag or crown.

This was a potentially treasonous philosophy, especially for one of Taric's standing and role within the Demacian military hierarchy, but he chose to dedicate himself to understanding the simple truths of love, beauty, and life, so he could become their champion. Admired by all, Taric used his disarming manner and innate warmth to charm his way past most obstacles, and on the rare occasion they failed, his skill with hammer and sword could be counted on to settle the matter.

As his quest for understanding broadened, Taric would miss combat training to wander the forest in search of a glimpse of a rare animal, neglect parade drills to sit in a tavern and listen to a bard's hauntingly simple ballad, and skip regimental meetings to take horseback rides to observe the silver cloak of night settle across the countryside. Taric knew that, in his own way, he was training in a manner just as dedicated and focused as his fellow Demacians, but it wasn't seen that way by his superiors.

Taric's casual nature, disregard for orders, and disinterest in his patriotic calling finally put him at odds with nearly everyone in authority—his family, his king, and especially his long-time friend Garen. And while the commoners saw Taric as a charming rogue, Garen recognized him for what he truly was—a man with the potential to become one of Demacia's greatest heroes. The fact that Taric seemed to be thumbing his nose at his destiny as well as his country enraged Garen.

Eventually, even his former friend could no longer protect him, and Taric's military career started to crumble. Demotion after demotion pushed Taric further from Demacia's heart, until, at last, he found himself commanding a small squad of lowly recruits assigned to guard an inconsequential ruined fortress out in the borderland wilds. After weeks spent standing in the rain and mud as ordered, and with no threat evident, Taric decided to let his men sleep while he wandered to a nearby temple to take in its cyclopean architecture.

As morning lit up the temple's overgrown cloisters, Taric finally decided to head back and check on his men. He was greeted by a scene of carnage. His troops had been butchered in their sleep, their corpses bearing the jagged hallmarks of the Void's monstrous predators.

Taric had failed his men, his country, and most painfully, his self-avowed mission to protect life.

Returning to Demacia in shame, Taric was stripped of his rank and sentenced by Garen to endure “the Crown of Stone,” a ceremony that demanded a dishonored soldier ascend Mount Targon, known to all as a death sentence, as few mortals had ever survived the climb.

And while the Crown of Stone was traditionally used by the dishonored to simply flee Demacia and make a new life in exile, Taric decided to actually atone for his mistake and set out for the towering spire of Mount Targon.

The ascent nearly claimed him, body and soul, numerous times, but Taric pushed past the pain, past the memories of his mistake, the ghosts of his dead men, and other tests inflicted upon him by the mountain.

As he approached the summit, Taric was challenged by a seemingly neverending myriad of conflicting realities, each warped existence offering a new, horrifying vision. Taric experienced the infinite fates that could befall those who had no one to protect them in their times of crisis. He saw the Alabaster Library engulfed in pitch and flame, and still he dashed into the roiling inferno to retrieve the poetry of Tung. He screamed in rage as the Frostguard ran the last dreamstag off a blind cliff, and then leapt into the abyss himself in a desperate attempt to save it. Before the ebon gates of Noxus, Taric slumped to his knees at the sight of Garen’s shattered body chained aloft as a warning. Between Taric and his friend stood the sum total of Noxus’s might. And yet still, without hesitation, Taric raised his shield and drove all before him. Claiming Garen from the gates, the young warrior marched toward Demacia, heavy with his burden, knowing full well that his return would ensure his execution. As he walked, Taric looked upward—and the blood-strewn fields of Noxus gave way to the star-filled expanse above Mount Targon.

His trials complete, and freed from all illusion, Taric found himself at the pinnacle of the mountain, and he was not alone.

Before him, cut from the sackcloth of night itself, stood something wearing the shape of a man. Its features composed from the pinpoints of stars, Taric was struck by the odd familiarity of its nature.

Its voice spoke in a thousand whispers that cut through Taric like a mountain wind. Though he heard no recognizable words, he understood the figure’s intent with utter clarity.

It called itself “the Protector.”

Impressed by Taric’s steadfast resolve, the otherworldly being deemed the fallen Demacian hero a worthy avatar, imbuing him with its ethereal powers. The Protector spoke of the truths Taric had known his entire life, and of the mantle that he had unknowingly been preparing for with every decision that brought him to the top of the mountain.

As the Protector’s whispers faded, Taric received a final warning: He would stand as the Shield of Valoran, but crashing against him would be a wave of howling madness, an ocean of gnashing teeth intent on consuming all, a squalid horror born of the Void.

Reborn with power and purpose, Taric gladly accepted the seemingly impossible challenge and now dedicates himself to his sworn duty—as the steadfast guardian of an entire world.

Story

I look out across the once-verdant field, now scarred and ruined by the toil of battle.

The loss of life will be immense, but I cannot save those who seek their own destruction. All those sons, all those fathers, all those futures lost. Demacians and Noxians, ever at each other's throats, magnetically drawn to one another by something lesser than both.

Plenty of defenders exist for their lofty ideals, and they all stand in my way, almost gleefully slaughtering themselves over a scrap of land, with no idea of its true importance. Two armies entwined, both committed to their ruinous dance.

I could try to reason with them, ask them to move their brawl elsewhere, but my former countrymen now see me as something between a traitor and a wrathful god, and the Noxians... well, the Noxians have always been short on patience.

My usual weapons—wit, charm, and warmth—are useless in this cauldron of desperation. So I push aside those who would slow me, and wade into those who would stop me. Every kind of horror one soul can inflict on another rages around me as I near my goal.

And there, dead center of the roiling fury of battle, the blaze of color calls to me—a delicate life about to be snuffed out amid the mud- and gore-covered boots. Standing bravely, unbowed by the thudding dullness of the armored brutes around it, its beauty rings out like a single crystal bell. It is the last flower of its kind. If it dies, no more shall bloom. I can not allow it to perish.

The two opposing commanders pause in their combat as I approach, an uninvited guest at their last moments. They turn to me, suddenly allied in their outrage at my intrusion.

I stand at the very eye of the two armies, seemingly inviting the cold embrace of death from all sides. But unlike all those who are now taking wary steps toward me, their sword hands trembling, I know why I fight.

Garen

Biography

Garen is a warrior of Demacia who has devoted his life to defending his kingdom and its ideals. Armed with his magic-resistant armor and broadsword, Garen puts his life on the line for both his nation, and his fellow soldiers.

Born to the Crownguard (an honorific given to the family charged with protecting the king), Garen and his younger sister, Lux, come from a long and noble Demacian lineage. Garen's father, Pieter, devoted his life to the defense of King Jarvan III, and in preparation of the inherited honor, Garen trained to defend the king's son, Jarvan IV, should he be the next to rule. Knowing the important role he would play in adulthood, Garen's family instilled in him an unshakeable pride for Demacia and everything it stood for.

Demacia was founded by the weary survivors of the Rune Wars, those looking for a life of peace after enduring the unspeakable destruction that came from the misuse of magic. Many wouldn't speak of those dark times, but Garen's uncle spoke of it often. He was one of Demacia's best scouts. Vigilant in his pursuit to keep Demacia safe from magic, Garen's uncle would brave the wilds beyond the wall to root out magical threats. He told Garen that the outside world held innumerable wonders, but it also possessed innumerable dangers. One day, something – whether it be mages, the creatures of the Void, or something unimaginable – would attack their walls because times of peace are never long for this world. Yet they are longer when they are defended.

Seven months later, Garen's uncle died in a tragic accident. It was said he was slain in battle, but Garen soon learned from the whispers throughout his family's estate a mage's bloodletting spell had taken his uncle's life. This confirmed Garen's worst fears about the horrors of magic and he vowed angrily to never let its presence within Demacia's walls. Only by following Demacian ideals, only by displaying Demacian strength, could the kingdom be kept safe from the corrupting influence of magic.

All of Demacia seemed to rally around Garen after the death of his uncle. Strangers on the street, including commoners with little to call their own, expressed their condolences, gave him gifts of respect, and offered adages of support. He was surrounded by compassion and saw Demacia as a kingdom of unity where people took care of one another, healing wounds of others as if wounds to themselves. He saw an ideal Demacia, where no one was ever truly alone.

Still, the impending threat of magic loomed over Garen's mind, often making monsters of shadows. He wrestled with a gnawing suspicion that his sister, Lux, possessed magical powers, but never let himself entertain the idea for long. The thought of a *Crownguard* being capable of the same forbidden powers that killed their uncle was too unbearable to confront.

At twelve, he left home and joined the ranks of the Dauntless Vanguard. His days and nights were consumed with training and the study of war, foregoing close friendships and romantic relationships. He devoted every waking moment to perfecting his swordsmanship, even after his lessons had ended. Most nights, his superiors had to take away his practice sword so he wouldn't sneak out and spar with his own shadow.

While training with the Vanguard, Garen met Jarvan IV – the boy likely to become Demacia's next king, and thereby Garen's future ward. Jarvan's presence spurred Garen to fight even harder – he

saw greatness within the prince even at his young age. They became fast friends, always eager to spar against one another. When their training was complete, Garen gave Jarvan a pin embossed with the sigil of Demacian eagle as a reminder that he would always look out for his newfound brother.

During the Noxian assaults on Demacia, Garen gained a reputation as a particularly fearsome fighter – one of the greatest in all Demacia, willing to risk life and limb to protect his fellow soldiers and defeat the enemy. He took a crossbow bolt to the chest to save one of his men during the search for the Freljordanian ever-filling goblet. He walked armorless through the Silent Forest to ambush the fetid servants of the Rancid King.

Despite his courage and skill, Garen's greatest failure came in the midst of a Noxian offensive, where he was unable to protect his prince. Against his counsellor's advice, Jarvan IV and his troops pursued a retreating band of Noxians. The young Jarvan was determined to avenge the hundreds of massacred villagers, and failed to see the recklessness of his plan. The Noxian retreat was a trap, and both he and his men were captured.

Garen was furious at himself for failing to be there when Jarvan needed him most. He had known Jarvan was prone to making rash decisions in the heat of battle, and blamed himself for not anticipating the prince's impulsiveness. Garen led a detachment of knights and rode out in search of his captive prince.

Garen and his men discovered the Noxian camp, only to find Jarvan's armor discarded next to a bloodsoaked executioner's post. The Demacian eagle pin glinted up at him from the sticky pool of blood. Though Garen combed the wilderness in search of the prince, he knew in his heart that Jarvan was dead.

For days, Garen was inconsolable. He couldn't stop blaming himself for the prince's death, even as his family and fellow soldiers tried to convince him otherwise. He remembered how the kingdom rallied around him following his uncle's demise, and wished he could do the same for the kin of his fallen soldiers. He took up residence in the barracks with his fellow soldiers in training, and all that he earned went toward supporting the families of the fallen.

Hearing of this, King Jarvan III was impressed with Garen's humble and pure reflection of Demacia's ideals. The king grieved for his son, but recognized Garen's courage, a warrior who viewed all Demacians as if they were his own family. The king honored Garen, reminding his people that Demacians never stand alone – in battle, or at home.

Though Garen's sister, Lux, had followed in her brother's footsteps, coming to serve the crown in Demacia's capital, their relationship remained distanced. Garen refused to acknowledge the things he'd suspected of her before he left to train with the Vanguard. Though he always loved his sister, some small part of him had a hard time getting close to her. He tried not to think about what his duty would force him to do if his suspicions were ever confirmed.

Today, Garen stands ready to defend Demacia with his life. In the rare occasions a rogue mage or Noxian spy is discovered to be within Demacia's borders, Garen is the first to volunteer his sword. He stands resolute on Demacia's wall, defending his home from all foes. Garen is more than Demacia's most formidable and feared soldier, he is the embodiment of her core values – Strength, Courage and Unity.

Story

The old woman pulled the rope taut around the Demacian soldier's throat. He'd attempted to speak, which was forbidden by the rules she had laid out. One more infraction and she'd have the right to slice the head from his shoulders and use his widowpeaked helm as a chamberpot. Until then, she could only tighten her grip, hope and watch as the tendrils of memory leaked from his head into hers.

Of course, she *could* just decapitate him whenever she wished, but that wouldn't be proper. Much could be said of the gray-skinned seer, but nobody could say she didn't live by a code. By a set of rules. And without rules, where would the world be? In disarray, that's where. Simple as that.

Until he broke those rules, she would sit here, siphoning away everything he had – his joy, his memories, his identity – until she was done with him. And then: slice. Chamberpot.

A voice screamed out in pain somewhere near the entrance of her cave. One of her sentinels, no doubt.

Then another scream.

And another.

Tonight was shaping up to be very interesting.

She could tell he was an unyielding fellow by the persistent slamming of his heavy boots onto the wet cave floor, announcing his long approach. When the echoing steps finally fell silent, a handsome, broad-shouldered man stared at her from across the cavern, the look of grim determination on his face illuminated by the den's dim torches. Rivulets of blood dripped down his breastplate. Even from the back of the room, she could smell something sour in his armor – some sort of acidic tang that calmed the magic flowing through her veins in a way she did not like.

This would be an interesting night, indeed.

The knight, broadsword in hand, ascended the stone steps to the old woman's makeshift rock throne.

She smiled, waiting for him to haul the blade up and bring it screaming down toward her head – he'd be in for quite the surprise once he did.

Instead, he sheathed the sword and sat on the ground.

Wordlessly, he stared into the old woman's eyes, patiently holding her gaze. He did not break their connection even to flick his eyes in the direction of the leashed soldier at her side.

Was this a ploy to throw her off? Was he trying to wait her out, make her talk first?

Most likely.

Still, this was boring.

"Do you know who I am?" the woman asked.

"You feed off the memories of the lost and the abandoned. Children say you are as old as the cave you inhabit. You are the Lady of the Stones," he said with confidence.

"Ha! That's not what they call me, and you know it. Rock Hag. That's what they say. Afraid I'd smite you if you used that name, eh? Trying to butter me up?" she coughed.

"No," the man replied, "I just thought it was a rude name. It's impolite to insult someone in their home."

The old seer chuckled until she realized he wasn't joking.

"And yours?" she asked. "What are you called?"

"Garen Crownguard of Demacia."

"Here are the rules, Garen Crownguard of Demacia," she said. "You have come for your lost soldier. Correct?"

The man nodded.

"Do you intend to kill me?" the woman asked.

"I cannot lie. I think it likely that either you or I will die, yes," he replied.

The woman chuckled.

"Eager to spill my blood, are you? Maybe you'd even succeed, with that armor." She coiled the rope squeezing the soldier's neck tighter around her ancient hand. "Still – if you raise your sword against me before our dealings are through, I will pull *this* so quickly you'll hear the snap of his neck echo in your mind for the rest of your days."

She yanked the leash taut for emphasis.

Garen's gaze remained unflinchingly focused on her eyes.

"So, the rules. If you can give me a single memory I find more delicious than the accumulated memories in this one's mind," she said, flicking the prisoner's helmet, "I will take it from you, and give you *him*." She watched Garen's eyes closely now for any hint of doubt. "If you cannot, well..." she tightened her grip on the soldier's leash. "Should either of us attempt to renege on our deal, the other is entitled to take repayment however they wish, with no resistance. Do you agree?"

"I do," he said.

"Then let me hear your opening offer. What is this soldier's life to you? Apologies for my rudeness – I'd refer to him by name, but I've forgotten it already," she said.

"I do not know his name either. He joined my battalion only recently," Garen replied.

She frowned at the young man. He clearly did not know what he was getting into.

"I offer a memory," he said, "from childhood. My sister and I astride my uncle's back as he barked like a Noxian drake-hound. We laughed for many hours. It is a good memory, unsullied by what would later happen to him at the hands of one like you."

The old woman scratched at the gelatinous film of her eye.

"You do me disrespect," she said. "You think to trade a joyous memory as if that is all I savor." She cupped the soldier's head in her hand and relished the wisps of memories flowing into her mind from his. "I want... *everything*. The pain, the confusion, the anger. Keeps me looking young," she laughed, dragging a twisted finger across her wrinkled cheek.

"I offer my grief, then, at my uncle's death," Garen said.

“Not good enough. You bore me,” said the Lady of Stones, and pulled tighter on the leash.

Garen sprang to his feet and unsheathed his sword. The hag’s heart leapt at the thought of killing the impatient young knight. But instead of attacking, he dropped to one knee, lowering his head before her, and gently placed the tip of the blade on her lap, pointed toward her midsection.

“Search my mind,” he said. “Take whatever memory you wish. I am young, but I have seen much, and experienced a life of privilege that you might find pleasurable. Should you try to take *more* than one memory, of course, I will push this sword through you, but any single memory is yours for the keeping.”

The woman could not help but cackle. The arrogance of this boy! He had the nerve to think *one* of his memories would outweigh the lifetime she could absorb from his colleague?

His courage – or ignorance – was unquestionable. One had to respect it.

Smacking her lips, she leaned over and placed her palms upon his head. She closed her eyes and peeled back the layers of his mind.

She saw triumph at the Battle of Whiterock. She tasted the lyrebuck roast at his lieutenant’s wedding feast. She felt a lonely tear fall as he held a dying comrade on the fields of Brashmore.

And then she saw his sister.

She felt his intense love for her, mixed with...something else. Fear? Disgust? Discomfort?

She pushed deeper into his mind, past his conscious memories. Her fingers probed his thoughts, pushing aside anything unrelated to the golden-haired girl with the big smile. His armor made the search far more difficult than it would have otherwise been, but the old woman persisted until–

Childhood. The two of them playing with toy figurines. His soldiers charge her mages, ready to slaughter them. She tells him it isn’t fair; they have magic, it should be an even fight. He laughs and knocks her clay mages over, batting them aside with his metal crusaders. Upset, the girl shouts and suddenly there is light shooting from her fingertips, and he is blinded, and confused, and frightened. She is taken away by their mother, but before their mother leaves the room, she kneels and tells the boy that he didn’t see what he thought he saw. It wasn’t real – just a game. The boy, his mouth agape, nods. Just a game. His sister is not a mage. She couldn’t be. He pushes the memory as deep as it can go.

Stretching her fingers, the old woman finds more and more memories like this spread amongst the knight’s childhood, each ending in a blinding splay of light. Buried deep. Cacophonous mixtures of love, fear, denial, anger, betrayal, and protectiveness.

The knight had not been wrong – these were good memories. Far juicier than those provided by the broken man.

She smiled. The knight had been clever, putting his sword to her stomach, but he wasn’t clever enough. Once she took a memory, he would forget he’d ever possessed it – she could take whatever she wanted.

Branching her fingers, she sifted through his memories, searching for anything involving the girl of light. She snatched up every single one she found before pulling out of his mind.

“Yes,” she said, opening her eyes. “This will do.” She pointed at the cave’s exit.

“Your bargain is accepted. A single memory for a single life. Take the boy and leave at once.”

Garen stood and moved to the leashed soldier. He bent down, helped the soldier up, and began to walk backward out of the cave, never once looking away from her.

Quaint. He was worried she might break the deal. Poor thing didn't realize she already had.

The knight stopped.

He dropped his companion to the ground and charged, his eyes still locked on hers.

The old woman thrilled at his impetuous attempt. He was too big, too lumbering, too slow to ready his cumbersome sword before she would descend upon him. Her fingertips crackled with dark energy, thirsting to drink in more of his mind, but she couldn't take her eyes off his. In them, she saw the years of luscious memories she would feast upon, until there was nothing left to –

She felt something cold inside of her. Something metal. The sour tang of the knight's armor stronger than ever now, tickled the back of her throat.

The hag looked down to see Garen's sword jutting from her breast. Stains of red and black seeped from the wound, dripping onto the knight's gauntlets as he stared steadfast into her fading eyes.

He was faster than she'd thought.

“Why?” she tried to say, only to cough up a mouthful of black bile.

“You lied,” he answered.

The hag smiled, acidic tar bubbling between her teeth. “How'd you know?”

“I felt... lighter. Unburdened,” Garen replied.

He blinked.

“It didn't feel right. Give them back.”

She thought for a moment as her blood mixed into the mud of the cold cave floor.

The hag's fingers went numb as she placed them on Garen's skull, forcing the memories back into his mind. He gritted his teeth with pain and when he opened his eyes, she could tell from their weariness that he'd gotten everything he wanted. The poor fool.

“Why even bother with the trade?” the old woman asked. “You are stronger than I thought. Much stronger. Leash or no, you could have sliced me to ribbons before I'd lifted a finger. Why bother letting me into your mind at all?”

“To draw first blood in a stranger's home without giving them a chance would be...impolite.”

The hag cackled.

“Is that a Demacian rule?”

“A personal one,” Garen said, and pulled the sword out of the hag's chest. Blood gushed from the open wound and she slumped over, dead.

He didn't spare her another look as he picked the soldier up and began their long march back to Demacia.

And *without rules*, he thought to himself, where would the world be?

Sona

Biography

Sona has no memories of her true parents. As an infant, she was found abandoned on the doorstep of an Ionian adoption house, nestled atop an ancient instrument in an exquisite case of unknown origins. She was an unusually well-behaved child, always quiet and content. Her caretakers were sure she would find a home quickly, but it soon became apparent that what they mistook for uncommon geniality was actually an inability to speak or to produce any sound whatsoever. Sona remained at the adoption house until her teens, watching in hopeless silence as prospective adopters passed her by. During this time, the caretakers sold her unusual instrument to anxious collectors, hoping to build her a trust. For a myriad of bizarre and unexpected reasons, however, it would be returned, or simply appear again outside the house.

When a wealthy Demacian woman named Lestara Buvelle learned of the instrument, she immediately embarked to Ionia. When the caretakers showcased the instrument for her, she rose wordlessly and explored the house, stopping outside Sona's room. Without hesitation, Lestara adopted her and left a generous donation for the instrument. With Lestara's guidance, Sona discovered a deep connection with the instrument which Lestara called an 'etwahl'. In her hands, it played tones which stilled or quivered the hearts of those around her. Within months, she was headlining with the mysterious etwahl for sold-out audiences. She played as though plucking heartstrings, effortlessly manipulating the emotions of her listeners - all without a single written note. In secret, she discovered a potent and deadly use for her etwahl, using its vibrations to slice objects from a distance. She honed this discipline in private, mastering her gift, that she might be prepared should a fitting recital require the harmony of her talents.

LUX

Biography

Luxanna Crownguard is a powerful young light mage from Demacia, an insular realm where magical abilities are viewed with fear and suspicion. Forced to keep her power secret for much of her young life, she grew up fearing discovery and exile, but learned to embrace her magic and covertly wields it in service of her homeland.

Luxanna - or Lux, as she preferred to be called - grew up in the Demacian city of High Silvermere, one of two children born to the prestigious Crownguard lineage; an honorific given to the family tasked with protecting the king. Her grandfather saved the king's life at the Battle of Storm's Fang, and her father took up the mantle of protection during the Noxian assault known as Cyrus's Folly. Lux's older brother, Garen, was also expected to bear that honor.

From the earliest age, both Lux and Garen were taught to fight, to ride and to hunt. But where Garen chose to follow family tradition to join the Dauntless Vanguard - one of Demacia's elite fighting regiments - Lux harbored dreams of venturing beyond Demacia's borders to explore the wider world. Her parents frowned upon such notions, and as their only other child, they expected her to take up the role of custodian and defender of the family's estates. While this was an important duty, it was not what the idealistic and headstrong Lux envisioned for her future. She idolized Garen, but railed against his insistence that she put her ambitions aside and do what was expected of her, as all Demacians should.

Being told what to do did not sit well with young Lux, an irrepressible girl with big ideas and bright dreams. To the endless frustration of tutors who sought to prepare her for a life of dutiful service to the family, Lux would question their every teaching to pursue interesting new ideas, debate differing perspectives and generally frustrate her tutors. Yet it was impossible to be angry at Lux, her zest for life like an inner radiance soothing even the most ruffled of feathers. Lux had taken this state of affairs for granted, but with every passing day she came to suspect this was more than just poetic euphemism. The truth of what that meant finally came to light when Lux was enjoying a solitary ride in the northern mountains at dusk.

As the last light of day sank in the west, her horse lost its footing on a patch of ice and fell, breaking its foreleg. Lux was stranded; too far from the nearest town to reach it before nightfall, and too distraught at her mount's pain to leave him. She knew what Garen would say; kill the horse swiftly to end its suffering. But Lux couldn't bring herself to kill a mount she had ridden since she was a child. As Lux prepared for a night alone on the mountain, a lean and hungry sabrewulf pack, scenting the horse's blood, descended from their dens in search of fresh meat.

As night fell and Lux had still not returned home, her father and Garen rode out to find her. They searched all night, and eventually found her the next morning, shivering and alone next to her frightened horse. The corpses of six sabrewulfs surrounded her, their fur scorched and flesh seared. Lux refused to speak of what happened and begged her father to rescue her beloved steed. A wagon was dispatched from the family home, and the horse was saved as Lux nursed it back to health.

Since that night, Lux knew she possessed abilities beyond those of everyone around her; abilities the people of magic-averse Demacia would view with hatred. Since a babe in arms, Lux had been taught that magic had once brought Runeterra to the edge of annihilation. Her own uncle had been slain by

a mage, and Demacia's folktales were replete with stories portraying sorcerers as twisted servants of evil, that told of how even the purest heart could be corrupted by magic. Would she become evil? Was she an abomination to be killed or exiled beyond the great wall? Fear and doubt gnawed at Lux, and she spent many nights squeezing her eyes closed, clenching her fists to stop the light rippling from her skin.

The terror that there was something wrong with her almost crushed her spirit. But after a strange night in the capital of Demacia when Lux was thirteen years old - a night where it was said a great stone colossus walked abroad in the darkness - she returned to High Silvermere with a fresh perspective on her powers.

The Crownguards left Garen in the capital to train with the Dauntless Vanguard, and Lux only saw her brother on his rare visits to High Silvermere, their relationship becoming more distant with each return. Upon Lux's return home, she was determined to embrace her powers, not fear them. To the eternal consternation of her bodyguards, she regularly managed to evade them and ride away for hours at a time, far from judging eyes. Alone in the wild forests, she would give free rein to her magic, gradually learning to better control it. Finally she was free to let her powers loose in all their wild majesty. She could bend light to blind and confuse, bring forth radiance upon the palm of her hand or summon illuminated figures from thin air. She could also craft light so intense that it could burn and destroy. Once, these powers had frightened her, but now she reveled in them, joyous as she was finally able to fully express herself.

Yet even as she understood more of her powers, Lux knew she still had much to learn. Many times over the next few years, Lux was often the epicenter of curious phenomena within Crownguard Manor; dancing lights appearing throughout the castle, statuary reciting limericks to passersby, or giggling laughter where no one could be seen. Her family always found ways to explain away such events, and turned a blind eye to their obvious source. To confront the reality of what was happening would be to acknowledge a painful truth and expose the family to unwanted attention.

Seeking to ground Lux in the realities of the world, her mother took her on regular tours of the Crownguard estates, visiting the many families under their protection. Despite her initial reluctance to take on this duty, Lux quickly became known as someone who would always listen, and always do whatever she could to help her people in times of adversity.

At the age of sixteen, Lux and her family traveled to the capital city of Demacia for a month to witness Garen's investiture into the ranks of the Dauntless Vanguard. While in the capital, she continued her altruistic efforts, working to help those in need alongside a charitable religious order of Demacia known as the Illuminators. In the capital, as in High Silvermere, Lux made a name for herself as a young woman of immense kindness and great wit. During her stay, she befriended a knight of the Radiant Ones, the warrior order of the Illuminators, named Kahina. She regularly sparred with Kahina between the many balls and functions she was expected to attend with her family, quickly establishing a deep bond with the warrior woman.

But as each night fell, Lux's zestful streak once again came to the fore, and she would use her powers to slip beyond the city walls. Demacia had beguiled Lux with its beauty, but on one exploration to a village in the shadow of a wild forest, she was to learn that darkness can take root even in the brightest garden.

Lux stumbled upon a nest of flesh-eating creatures preying upon the village's inhabitants and tracked them to their forest lair. The creatures dwelled in a subterranean cave system filled with gnawed bones, and, seized by a sense of youthful invulnerability and wrathful indignation, she

attacked with coruscating blasts of searing magic. Lux killed dozens of the monsters, but, in her impetuosity, she had underestimated their numbers and the creatures soon overwhelmed her. Just before the monsters tore out her throat, a cadre of Radiant Ones who had also been tracking these monsters attacked the lair and put them to the sword. The leader of these warriors was Kahina. And she had seen what Lux could do.

Lux was escorted back to Demacia and presented to the innermost circle of the Illuminators. Here, she was given a stark choice. Use her powers beyond Demacia's borders to learn of its enemies or be exiled forever as a wielder of magic. That Demacia had an order willing to use magic came as a shock to Lux, but the choice they offered was too enticing to refuse. Lux readily accepted. Her parents returned to High Silvermere, told only that their daughter had been seconded to serve the crown and would remain in Demacia to join the ranks of the Radiant Ones. They were surprised, but pleased Lux had finally found her place in Demacia.

Lux remained in the capital for a number of years, training with the Radiant Ones and learning from the Illuminators before taking on her first mission. She was to infiltrate the contested lands between eastern Demacia and the Noxian empire to investigate signs that enemy agents were attempting to unite these buffer states against Demacia. Lux's mission was a complete success and the nefarious plot failed, the fragile alliances being brokered by Noxian agents collapsing in a flurry of betrayals and deceit. Further missions followed, each one cementing Lux's reputation as someone who could get the job done, no matter how difficult.

Beyond Demacia's walls, Lux learned more of the world and saw its rich diversity, storied history and myriad peoples. She came to understand that the Demacian way was not the only way, able now to recognize its flaws as well as its boons. While away from her homeland, Lux can freely wield her powers, but keeps them hidden when she returns home to visit her parents and Garen. To her brother and family, she is a loyal servant of Demacia... which is true, just not in a manner they would ever expect.

Story

The earthquake had struck Terbisia at dawn, the earth bucking like an unbroken colt and splitting apart in gaping fissures. Lux rode Starfire through the toppled ruin of the defensive barbican, the thirty-foot high walls of sun-bleached stone looking like Noxian siege engines had bombarded them for weeks. She guided her horse carefully between fallen blocks of masonry, heading to where a makeshift infirmary had been set up within a blue and white market pavilion.

The scale of the devastation was unlike anything Lux had seen before. Terbisia's buildings were crafted from hard mountain granite and Demacian oak, raised high by communal strength. And almost all of them had been completely destroyed. Dust-covered men and women dug through the shattered ruins with picks and shovels, hoping to find survivors, but instead, dragged corpses from the debris. Entire streets had simply vanished into the many smoking chasms now dividing the town's districts.

Lux dismounted as she reached the pavilion, and pushed inside. She wasn't a healer, but she could fetch and carry or simply sit with the wounded. She'd thought that seeing the scale of the devastation would prepare her for the suffering within the tent.

She was wrong.

Hundreds of survivors pulled from the wreckage lay on woolen blankets. Lux heard mothers and fathers crying for lost children, wives and husbands clinging to their dead loved ones, and, worst of all, bewildered, glassy-eyed orphans wandering lost and afraid. Lux saw a surgeon she recognized in a blood-stiffened apron washing his hands in a pewter bowl and made her way toward him.

“Surgeon Alzar,” she said. “Tell me how I can help.”

He turned, his eyes haunted and rheumy with tears. It took a moment for recognition to penetrate the fog of his grief.

“Lady Crownguard,” said Alzar, giving a short bow.

“Lux,” she said. “Please, what can I do?”

The physician sighed and said, “Truly you are a blessing, my lady, but I would spare you the horror of what has happened here.”

“Spare me nothing, Alzar,” snapped Lux. “I am Demacian, and Demacians help one another.”

“Of course, forgive me, my lady,” said Alzar, taking a fatigued breath. “Your presence will be a boon to the wounded.”

Alzar led her toward a young man lying stretched out on a low pallet bed near the back of the pavilion. Lux gasped to see the horror of his wounds. His body was broken, all but crushed by rubble, and his eyes were bound in bloody bandages. From his stoic refusal to show pain, she guessed he was a soldier.

“He dug a family from the rubble of their collapsed home,” said Alzar. “He rescued them, but kept looking for survivors. There was a second quake, and another building fell to ruin on top of him. The rubble crushed his lungs, and shards of glass put out his eyes.”

“How long does he have?” asked Lux, careful to keep her voice low.

“Only the gods know, but his time is short,” said Alzar. “If you would stay at his side, it would ease his passing into the arms of the Veiled Lady.”

Lux nodded and sat beside the dying man. She took his hand, feeling her heart break for him. Alzar smiled gratefully and turned back to helping those he could save.

“It’s so dark,” said the man, waking at her touch. “Gods, I can’t see!”

“Steady now, soldier. Tell me your name,” said Lux.

“It’s Dothan,” he said, wheezing with the effort.

“You’re named for the hero of Dawnhold?”

“Aye. You know the story? It’s an old tally against the savages.”

“Trust me, I know it well,” said Lux with a rueful smile. “My brother told it all the time when we were children. He always forced me to play the Freljordian corsairs while he played Dothan, defending the harbor single-handedly against the skinwalkers.”

“I tried to be like him,” said the young man, his breathing labored and his voice growing faint. A rivulet of blood leaked from beneath the bandage like a red tear. “I tried to live up to my namesake.”

Lux held his hand in both of hers.

"You *did*," she said. "Alzar told me what happened. You're a true Demacian hero."

The lines on Dothan's face eased a little, his breath rattling in his throat as his strength began to fail.

"Why can't I see?"

"Your eyes," said Lux slowly. "I'm so sorry."

"What... what's wrong with them?"

"Surgeon Alzar told me you have shards of glass in them."

The man drew in a sharp breath.

"I'm dying," he said. "I know that... but I should... have liked to behold the light of... Demacia... one last... time."

Lux felt the magic stir within her, but whispered the mantra taught to her by the Illuminators to keep it from rising too close to the surface. Over the years, she'd learned to better control her power, but sometimes, when her emotions ran close to the surface, it was hard to keep the energies contained. She looked around and, satisfied no one was watching, placed her fingertips on the bloody bandage covering Dothan's eyes. Lux eased the numinous radiance of her magic down through the man's skull to the undamaged parts of his eyes.

"I can't heal you," she said, "but I can at least give you that."

He squeezed her hand, his mouth falling open in wonder as Demacia's light shone within him.

"It's so beautiful..." he whispered.

Jarvan IV

Biography

Prince Jarvan IV comes from a lineage of kings, and is favored to lead Demacia in the next era. Raised to be the paragon of Demacia's greatest virtues, Jarvan IV often struggles with the heavy expectations placed upon him. On the battlefield, he inspires his troops with his fearsome courage and selfless determination, revealing his true strength as a leader of men.

Though the Demacian ruler is chosen by a high council from a selection of worthy candidates, the last three kings were descendants of the same line. As King Jarvan III's only child, Jarvan IV was groomed since birth to continue that tradition. His family's intentions were reflected in all aspects of his life, from his courtly duties to his name. Educated by the finest historical scholars and tutored in the ways of ruling a kingdom, Jarvan IV also studied the techniques of war.

During Jarvan's combat training, he was often paired against a young warrior named Garen, who was preparing to serve as the next ruler's Crownguard. Jarvan admired Garen's sheer fortitude, and Garen, the prince's quick thinking. The two were soon inseparable.

When Jarvan IV came of age, his father bestowed upon him the honor of serving as a general in the Demacian army. Though Jarvan IV had studied the theories and tactics of warfare, and could win a duel against his swordmaster, he had never stood on the front lines of a battle, much less taken a life.

Determined to prove his worth through victories in battle, Jarvan IV led his troops against bands of Winter's Claw reavers, warring tribes, and even a coven of rogue mages. Though he commanded his troops to great success, Jarvan was always flanked on all sides by guards sworn to protect him, and felt that his impact as a fighter was often stifled.

When Noxian warbands raided the farmlands near Demacia's border, Jarvan IV led his troops to defend the nation. He and his men rode for days in the wake of the Noxians. To Jarvan's horror, the atrocities were far worse than he had anticipated. The Noxians had razed entire townships and slaughtered hundreds of Demacians, with only a handful of injured survivors left to tell the tale.

His officers advised the prince to withdraw and send for reinforcements. But Jarvan was shaken by the faces of the dead, and he could not turn his back on survivors in need. He would protect the wounded while ensuring the enemy forces did not escape without a fight. Besides, he reasoned, a secondary force of Demacian soldiers could not possibly arrive in time to face the Noxians. He was convinced that he had to act now.

Jarvan split his troops, ordering some to remain and care for the injured civilians, while he led the remaining soldiers onward. They ambushed the Noxians during the night, but in the chaos of battle, Jarvan was separated from his guards. He fought fiercely and slew many enemies, but was ultimately overwhelmed. The Noxians took Jarvan IV prisoner, to be paraded through the Immortal Bastion in chains upon reaching Noxus.

As Jarvan was dragged further from Demacia during his weeks of captivity, he was ashamed that the rashness of his decision to pursue the Noxians had led to needless Demacian deaths. Crushed by the loss, he came to believe he no longer deserved to live in Demacia, let alone inherit its throne.

One moonless night, Garen and an intrepid band of soldiers known as the Dauntless Vanguard attacked the Noxian encampment. Though the Demacian warriors could not reach Jarvan, he used the distraction to fight his captors and escape. As he ran, a Noxian soldier shot an arrow into Jarvan's side, but the young prince persevered and fled into the wilderness.

Jarvan sprinted until he collapsed, hiding in the hollow of a fallen tree and bandaging his wound as best as he could. He lay for days drifting in and out of consciousness, knowing his death must be near. Unsure if he was awake or dreaming, Jarvan would later recall a purple-skinned woman with eyes of fire who carried him to a remote Demacian village. There, he rested under the care of local healers, who treated him with medicinal herbs as they nursed him back to health.

As Jarvan regained his strength, he found solace in the small settlement nestled in the wild hills of outer Demacia. For the first time in his life, he was free from the pressures and demands of his royal duties. He felt at peace in the village that had welcomed him so openly, though he was a stranger.

Jarvan also learned that his strange, purple-skinned savior was a fellow newcomer known as Shyvana.

The serenity of village life was disrupted when a monstrous dragon terrorized the nearby communities, burning buildings to cinders and farmlands to ash. Jarvan knew the settlement would not survive a dragon attack, so he led the villagers to a nearby stronghold - Castle Wrenwall.

That night, Jarvan caught Shyvana leaving the compound. She confessed that she was half-dragon, and that the ruinous creature plaguing them was her own mother, Yvva, who resented Shyvana as a blemish on her bloodline. The monster would not stop until Shyvana was dead. Like all Demacians, Jarvan had been raised to distrust the magical beings of the world - but he saw Shyvana's goodness and strength, and was determined to repay his life-debt to her. Only together could they take down such a fearsome enemy.

With the dragon's return an ever-present threat, Jarvan trained the Demacian villagers to fight alongside the soldiers of Castle Wrenwall. He chose the ancient petricite ruins to the west as the scene of their battle. The structure had once been a high temple built during the cataclysmic upheaval of the Rune Wars, but now the magic-nullifying stones would serve as their best defense against the dragon. He even tipped their arrows with sharpened petricite, knowing that only by drawing all their efforts together did they have a chance of killing such a mighty beast.

Jarvan and the soldiers hid themselves nearby, while Shyvana stood in the center of the ruined courtyard. Jarvan watched in awe as she transformed into a dragon, roaring plumes of fire into the sky as an open challenge to her mother. Though the villagers backed away in fear, Jarvan steadied their courage, reminding them that Shyvana would help destroy their enemy.

Soon enough, an even more fearsome silhouette blackened the sun, and Yvva, the great dragon, was upon them. On Jarvan's command, the soldiers loosed dozens of petricite arrows into the dragon's back, weakening her powers with every strike. The dragon reared up in pain and exhaled streams of flame. Soldiers were charred in their armor, but still more arrows flew and the close confines of the nullifying ruins anchored her to the earth.

Jarvan stood in awe as Shyvana and her mother collided with earthshaking force. The colossal beasts battled in a furious blur until Jarvan could hardly tell them apart, and he held his archers back in fear that he would wound his friend. He despaired as Shyvana collapsed back into her human form with blood streaming from her neck. But she looked her mother in the eyes and, with flaming claws, tore the steaming heart from her breast.

With the threat vanquished, Jarvan IV finally felt worthy of returning home. He had come to understand that true Demacian values were not simply about victory, but about standing together as one, no matter their differences. To reward Shyvana's bravery, he promised that she would always have a home in his kingdom. But they both knew Demacia as a kingdom remained deeply suspicious of magic, and Shyvana vowed not to reveal her dual nature as she fought at Jarvan's side. Together they traveled to the capital with the skull of the dragon Yvva in tow.

Though many were thrilled to see their prince return safely, others questioned Jarvan's judgment in recruiting Shyvana into his guard, and suspicions grew as to why he had not gone to the capital immediately after escaping the Noxians. No matter what King Jarvan III himself thought, outwardly he welcomed his son back into the court. As Jarvan IV resumed his royal duties, he swore to uphold Demacian ideals by building a nation that valued each one of its citizens, uniting them together against whatever threats they faced.

Story

General Miesar slid an ivory cone across the map. Jarvan wondered at the simplicity of the white piece. No head, no features denoting a face. Just a simple rounded shape, neutral and plain, with no resemblance to the hundred Demacian soldiers it represented.

"If we lead our knights south now, we can attack the argoth head-on before they reach Evenmoor," said General Ibell, a stout woman with commanding eyes.

"The argoth are fiercest in swarms," said General Miesar as he paced the length of the tent. "They rely on overwhelming numbers to defeat direct attacks. If we cannot divide them, they will slaughter us long before we reach their queen."

Jarvan strode to the edge of their tent, parting the fabric and gazing out across the valley. He might have enjoyed the view – morning light made the verdant landscape sparkle with dew, and the village of Evenmoor looked peaceful from a distance. But an ominous gray shape swelled on the horizon as the horde thundered in the distance.

The argoth were not enormous creatures; fighting one alone would be easy enough, but in large numbers, they were subject to the dominating will of a queen, able to move and fight as one vicious unit. This swarm was bigger than any Jarvan had seen before.

Miesar wiped sweat from his brow. "They'll be here by this evening?"

"Sooner," said Ibell. "We have an hour, maybe two if we're lucky, until the argoth overwhelm Evenmoor."

Jarvan turned back to the map. Ten ebony cones representing the argoth stood at the outer edges of Evenmoor, overshadowing the single Demacian cone. The queen was marked by a smaller figurine of red jasper, right in the heart of the ebony mass.

"Any charge would need to fight through hundreds of argoth to get near her," said Jarvan, gesturing to the red stone. "What do you propose?"

Miesar halted his pacing. "I'm afraid you won't like this, my lord, but we could retreat. Surrender Evenmoor. Return on the morrow with forces strong enough to cut through the horde and slay the queen."

“Leave Evenmoor to the argoth?” asked Ibell. “That’s a death sentence for these people. They will be overrun in a matter of hours.”

Jarvan stared at the ebony and ivory until they merged in his mind’s eye. All he saw was the red queen stone.

Ibell raised her eyebrows. “You see something?”

“A desperate plan,” Jarvan replied, “but it is all we have. We conceal our fiercest fighters within Evenmoor and lay an ambush. With such a small band they won’t anticipate our attack. Then, when the queen is within reach, we strike hard and fast. With her death, the swarm’s unity will be broken.”

“Into the center of the argoth, my lord?” Miesar said. “That, too, may be a death sentence.”

“But we give Evenmoor a chance of surviving the attack,” said Ibell.

“No plan is without risk,” Jarvan said. “I will lead only those willing to join me, and will not engage until our hope of victory is greatest. We bide our time until the eye of the maelstrom is upon us, and then strike from within. With the queen dead, it will be a simple matter to fight our way out.”

Ibell slid a single ivory cone to the village on the map, then moved the circle of ebony pieces forward until they overlapped Evenmoor entirely. The jasper queen stood at its center. With a flick of her finger, she tipped the red stone over. That done, she slid two more white cones to join the fight.

“This is our plan,” said Jarvan. “Ibell and Miesar, you and your troops will lead the second wave.”

“Aye,” said Miesar.

“And you, my lord?” Ibell asked. “Where will you be?”

“I have a queen to kill,” Jarvan replied.

Lucian

Biography

Lucian wields relic weapons imbued with ancient power and stands a stalwart guardian against the undead. His cold conviction never wavers, even in the face of the maddening horrors he destroys beneath his hail of purifying fire. Lucian walks alone on a grim mission: to purge the spirits of those ensnared in undeath, his eternal beloved among them.

Like the twin relic weapons they wielded, Lucian and his wife Senna were carved from the same stone. Together they battled evil in Runeterra for years, bringing light to darkness and purging those taken by corruption. They were beacons of righteousness: Senna's dedication to their cause never faltered, while Lucian's kindness and warmth touched the hearts of the many lives they saved. Two parts of one whole, they were devoted and inseparable.

Though Lucian and Senna witnessed terror that would break most warriors, nothing they had seen compared to the horrors wrought by the Shadow Isles. When the spectral denizens of that accursed place began to manifest across Runeterra, Lucian and Senna hunted them down wherever they appeared. It was grim work, but the fearless pair prevailed until one tragic encounter with the soul-collector Thresh. Lucian and Senna had faced such nightmarish undead before, but never one so deviously clever and cruel. As the terrible battle unfolded, Thresh sprung an unexpected ploy. To Lucian's horror, the creature tricked Senna and ensnared her soul, trapping her in a spectral prison. Nothing could bring her back. Senna was lost, and for the first time, Lucian faced his mission alone.

Though the Warden had taken half of Lucian's heart, he had also created the Shadow Isles' most dangerous foe. Lucian became a man of dark determination, one who would stop at nothing to purge the undead from the face of Runeterra. In honor of Senna's memory, he took up her fallen weapon and vowed to see their mission through to the end. Now wielding both relic weapons, Lucian fights to slay the undead and cleanse the souls of the Shadow Isles. He knows that Senna's soul is lost, but never loses hope that one day he will bring her peace.

Fiora

Biography

The most feared duelist in all Valoran, Fiora is as renowned for her brusque manner and cunning mind as she is for the speed of her bluesteel rapier. Born to House Laurent in the kingdom of Demacia, Fiora took control of the family from her father in the wake of a scandal that nearly destroyed them. House Laurent's reputation was sundered, but Fiora bends her every effort to restore her family's honor and return them to their rightful place among the great and good of Demacia.

From an early age, Fiora defied every expectation placed upon her. Her mother had the finest craftsmen of Demacia fashion the most lifelike dolls for her. Fiora gave them to her maids and took up her brother's rapier, forcing him to give her lessons in secret. Her father obtained a host of dressmaking mannequins for her personal seamstress to craft wondrous dresses. Fiora used them to practice lunges and ripostes.

At every stage in her life, Fiora has embodied all that is noble in Demacia, striving for perfection in all things and brooking no insult to her honor or that of her family's ideals. As the youngest daughter of House Laurent, she was destined for a life as a political pawn, to be married off in the grand game of alliances between patrician houses. This did not sit well with Fiora, whose temperament saw only dishonor in being maneuvered by another's will, even that of her beloved father. Despite her resistance, a politically advantageous marriage was arranged with an outlying branch of House Crownguard, and plans were set for a summer wedding.

The ancient families of Demacia sent their invited representatives to House Laurent to attend the marriage ceremony, but instead of meekly accepting her fate, Fiora defied it. She declared before the assembled host that she would sooner die than be dishonored by allowing someone else to control her fate. Her husband-to-be was publicly shamed and his family demanded a duel to the death to wipe away Fiora's scandalous insult.

Fiora immediately stepped forward, but as Master of House Laurent, it was her father's duty to accept. The champion of House Crownguard was a truly deadly warrior, and defeat was almost certain. To lose would see House Laurent ruined and his daughter exiled in disgrace. Presented with so stark a choice, Fiora's father made a decision that would damn his family for years to come. That night, he attempted to drug his opponent with a draught to rob his blows of speed, but his attempt was discovered and the Master of House Laurent was arrested.

Demacian law is notoriously harsh and unforgiving. Its justice allows no leeway, and Fiora's father had broken its most fundamental code of honor. He would suffer public humiliation upon the executioner's scaffold, hanged like a common criminal, and his entire family expelled from Demacia.

On the eve of his death, Fiora visited her father's cell, but what passed between them is a secret known only to her.

An ancient and all but forgotten code of honor allowed for a family member to expunge the shame of one of its number in blood, and thus avoid the virtual death-sentence of exile. Knowing they had no choice, father and daughter faced each other within the Hall of Blades. Justice would not be served by a mere slaying, Fiora's father had to fight and be fought. The battle was blindingly swift, a dance of blades so exquisite that those who witnessed it would never forget what they had seen.

Fiora's father was a fine swordsman in his own right, but he was no match for his daughter. They said farewell in every clash of the blade, but in the end a tearful Fiora buried her rapier in her father's heart and assured her family's continued place in Demacia. With her father dead at her feet, Fiora became the head of House Laurent (much to the surprise of her older brothers...).

Though the honor of House Laurent was not entirely ruined, scandals are not easily erased. In the years that followed, Fiora proved a sagacious leader of her House and swiftly learned not to make the mistakes of brash youth. She became a formidable mistress of blade and negotiation, cutting to the heart of any matter with her customary clarity and seemingly cruel directness. Some still speak of her House's disgrace or decry how standards have fallen that a woman should dare call herself ruler of a noble House, but only in private. For when such gossip reaches Fiora's ear, she is quick to call out those rumormongers and demand justice on the edge of a sword. Yet even here, she is not without pragmatic cunning, offering each challenger a way out that will allow honor to be satisfied without death. So far, none have accepted her offers, and none have ever walked away from a duel with Fiora.

With the fortunes of House Laurent on the rise, Fiora has no shortage of suitors, but none have yet proven worthy of her hand. Many suspect Fiora herself puts every suitor through an impossible gauntlet of courtship in order to remain aloof and unmarried, for a wife would, traditionally, relinquish power to her husband.

And Fiora has never done *anything* traditionally.

Story

The man Fiora was going to kill was named Umberto. He had the look of a man very sure of himself. She watched him talking to four men, so alike they must surely be his brothers. The five of them were cocksure and preening, as though it was beneath their dignity to even present themselves in the Hall of Blades in answer to her challenge.

Dawn cast angled spars of light through the lancet windows, and the pale marble shimmered with the reflections of those who had come to see a life ended. They lined the edges of the hall by the score, members of both Houses, lackeys, gawkers and some simply with unhealthy appetites to see bloodshed.

"My lady" said Ammdar, her second older brother, handing her a mid-length rapier with a bluesteel blade upon which light moved like oil. "Are you sure about this?"

"Of course" replied Fiora. "You heard the tales Umberto and his braggart brothers were spreading in the Commercia?"

"I did" confirmed Ammdar. "But is that worth his death?"

"If I let one braggart slide, then others will think themselves free to wag their tongues" said Fiora.

Ammdar nodded, and stepped back. "Then do what you must."

Fiora stepped forward, rolling her shoulders and sweeping her blade twice through the air – a sign the duel was about to begin. Umberto turned as one of his brothers nudged him in the ribs, and anger touched Fiora as she saw his frank appraisal of her physique, an appraisal that lingered far too long below her neck. He drew his own weapon, a long, beautifully curved Demacian cavalry saber

with golden quillons and a sapphire inset on the pommel. A poseur's weapon and one entirely unsuited to the requirements of a duel.

Umberto stepped up to his duelists' mark and repeated the sword movements she had made. He bowed to her and winked. Fiora felt her jaw tighten, but clamped down on her dislike. Emotion had no place in a duel. It clouded swordplay and had seen many a great swordsman slain by a lesser opponent.

They circled one another, making the prescribed movements of foot and blade like dance partners at the first notes of a waltz. The movements were to ensure that both participants in the duel were aware of the significance of what they were soon to attempt.

The rituals of the duel were important. They, like The Measured Tread, were designed to allow civilized folk to maintain the illusion of nobility in killing. Fiora knew they were good laws, *just* laws, but that didn't take away from the fact that she was about to kill the man before her. And because Fiora believed in these laws, she had to make her offer.

"Good sir, I am Fiora of House Laurent" she said.

"Save it for your grave-marker" snapped Umberto.

She ignored his puerile attempt to rile her and said "It has come to my attention that you did injure the good name of House Laurent in an unjust and dishonorable manner by the indulgence and spreading of malicious falsehoods in regards to the legitimacy of my lineage. Therefore it is my right to challenge you to a duel and restore the honor of my House in your blood."

"I already know this" said Umberto, playing to the crowd. "I'm here aren't I?"

"You have come to your death" promised Fiora. "Unless you choose not to fight by giving me satisfaction for your offense."

"How might I give milady satisfaction?" asked Umberto.

"Given the nature of your offense, submit to having your right ear severed from your head."

"What? Are you mad, woman?"

"It's that or I kill you" said Fiora, as though they were discussing the weather. "You know how this duel will end. There is no loss of face in yielding."

"Of course there is" said Umberto, and Fiora saw he still thought he could win. Like everyone else, he underestimated her.

"All here know my skill with a blade, so choose to live and wear your wound as a badge of honor. Or choose death, and be food for crows by midmorning."

Fiora raised her blade. "But choose now."

His anger at what he assumed was her arrogance overcame his fear and he stamped forward, the tip of his sword thrusting for her heart. Fiora had read the attack before it was launched and made a quarter turn to the left, letting the curved blade cut only air. Her own blade swept up, then down in a precise, diagonal arc. The crowd gasped at the wet spatter of blood on stone and the shocking suddenness of the duel's ending.

Fiora turned as Umberto's sword clattered to the granite flagstones. He fell to his knees, then slumped back onto his haunches, hands clutched to his opened throat from which blood pumped enthusiastically.

She bowed to Umberto, but his eyes were already glassy and unseeing with impending death. Fiora took no pleasure in such a slaying, but the fool had left her little choice. Umberto's brothers came forward to collect the corpse, and she felt their shock at their brother's defeat.

"How many is that?" asked Ammdar, coming forward to collect her sword. "Fifteen? Twenty?"

"Thirty" said Fiora. "Or maybe more. They all look the same to me now."

"There will be more" promised her brother.

"So be it" answered Fiora. "But every death restores our family honor. Every death brings redemption closer."

"Redemption for whom?" asked Ammdar.

But Fiora did not answer.

Poppy

Biography

Runeterra has no shortage of valiant champions, but few are as tenacious as Poppy. Bearing a hammer twice the length of her body, this determined yordle has spent untold years searching for the “Hero of Demacia” a fabled warrior said to be the rightful wielder of her weapon.

As legend describes it, this hero is the only person who can unlock the full power of the hammer and lead Demacia to true greatness. Though Poppy has searched the furthest corners of the kingdom for this legendary fighter, her quest has proven fruitless. Each time she has attempted to pass the hammer on to a potential hero, the results have been disastrous, often ending in the warrior’s death. Most people would have abandoned the task long ago, but most people do not possess the pluck and resolve of this indomitable heroine.

Poppy was once a very different yordle. For as long as she could remember, she had been in search of a purpose. Feeling alienated by the chaotic whimsy of other yordles, she preferred to soak up stability and structure where she could find it. This drive brought her to the human settlements of western Valoran, where she gazed in wonder at the caravans striping the countryside in an endless file. Many of the people there looked tattered and weary, but they stumbled on in pursuit of some ephemeral better life that might lie just beyond the horizon.

One day, however, a different sort of caravan passed through. Unlike the other travelers, these people seemed to move with purpose. They all awoke at the exact same time each morning, roused by the sound of a watchman’s horn. They took their meals together every day at the same hour, always finishing within a few minutes. They set up their camps and took them down with remarkable efficiency.

While yordles used their innate magic to fashion extraordinary things, these humans achieved equally astounding feats through coordination and discipline. They acted in concert like the cogs of a gear, becoming something much larger and stronger than any single person could ever be. To Poppy, that was more marvelous than all the magic in the world.

As Poppy watched the camp from the safety of her hiding place, her eyes caught the gleam of armor emerging from a tent. It was the group’s commanding officer, wearing a brigandine of gleaming steel plates, each piece overlapping, each an integral part of the whole. The man’s name was Orlon, and his presence seemed to stir the souls of everyone there. If someone became discouraged, he was there to remind them of why they pressed on. If someone collapsed from exhaustion, he inspired them to get up. It reminded Poppy of certain yordle charms, though again, *without magic*.

Poppy crept in for a closer look. She found herself following this shining commander, as if drawn to him by fate itself. She observed Orlon as he led his soldiers in training exercises. He was not a large fellow, yet he swung his massive battle hammer with surprising alacrity. At night, Poppy listened intently to his hushed discussions with the elders of the camp. She heard them making plans to pull up stakes and head west to build a permanent settlement.

Poppy’s mind was overwhelmed with questions. Where was Orlon going? Where did he come from? How did he assemble this meticulous band of travelers, and was there a place for a yordle in it? At that moment, she made the most important decision in her life: For the first time ever, she would reveal herself to a human, as this was the first time she’d ever felt a connection with one.

The introduction was a jarring one, with Orlon having just as many questions for Poppy as she had for him, but the two soon became inseparable. He became a mentor to her, and she a devotee to his cause. In the training grounds, Poppy was an invaluable sparring partner—the only member of Orlon’s battalion who was unafraid to strike him. She was never obsequious, questioning his decisions with an almost childlike innocence, as though she didn’t know she was supposed to meekly follow orders. She accompanied him to the site of the new settlement—an ambitious new nation called Demacia, where all were welcome, regardless of station or background, so long as they contributed to the good of the whole.

Orlon became a beloved figure throughout the kingdom. Though few had actually seen him wield his hammer, he always bore it on his back, and the weapon quickly became a revered icon for the fledgling nation. People whispered that it had the power to level mountains and tear the earth itself asunder.

Orlon passed the hammer to Poppy on his deathbed, and with it, his hope of an enduring kingdom. It was only then that Orlon told her the story of his weapon’s creation, and how it was never truly intended for his hands. He explained to Poppy that the hammer was meant to go to the Hero of Demacia—the only one who could keep Demacia whole. As her friend drew his last breath, Poppy swore to him that she would find this hero and place the weapon in his hands.

But what Poppy possesses in resolve, she lacks in ego, as it never even occurred to her that *she* might be the hero Orlon described.

Story

Poppy had nothing against the briar wolf, aside from the fact that it was about to maul her. Its muzzle was stained crimson from a previous kill, and the yordle wouldn’t chance being its next. She was hot on the trail of a renowned monster slayer, and she didn’t intend to die before she found the man and judged his worth.

“You should step back. You won’t survive this” Poppy told the wolf, holding her hammer aloft as a deterrent.

But the briar wolf was not discouraged. It padded toward her, propelled by some strange desperation that Poppy couldn’t identify. Then she saw the telltale foam at the corners of its mouth. This animal was not driven by hunger or territorial instincts. It was in pain, and it wanted release. The wolf leapt at her, as if it had made up its mind that its next act would be to kill or be killed.

Poppy swung the hammer, using every ounce of her strength to move the weapon’s considerable weight. The blow she delivered collapsed the animal’s skull in an instant, ending its torment. Poppy took no pleasure in the kill, but she supposed it was the best possible outcome, for her and the wolf.

The yordle looked around at the empty meadow, but sensed no trace of the monster slayer she’d come to find. She had roamed the countryside, following rumors of his activities, hoping this mysterious hunter might be the fabled hero she had sought for so many years. But thus far, all she’d found were wolves and wyverns and highwaymen, most of whom she’d been forced to kill in self-defense.

She had spent weeks traveling from hamlet to hamlet in the far-flung corners of Demacia. She walked as fast as her tiny gait would allow, but the monster slayer always seemed to be one step

ahead of her, leaving naught but tales of heroic exploits in his wake. For a yordle, time is a curious thing whose passing is seldom felt, but even for Poppy, the search was beginning to grow long.

One day, just when she was beginning to doubt herself and her mission, she spied a notice nailed to a roadside post:

“All are invited to attend the Festival of the Slayer!”

It was a celebration to honor the very monster hunter Poppy had been seeking. If there was any hope of locating this elusive hero, she would certainly find it there. He might even make an appearance, and then she could size him up in person to determine if he was worthy to carry the hammer Orlon had bequeathed her. The prospect put a spring in her step, and she marched with renewed purpose toward the celebration.

Poppy was anxious when she arrived at the village, its banners and streamers gaudily proclaiming the day’s festivities. Ideally, she would have arrived early at such a public event and claimed a spot in the rear of the crowd, so as not to draw attention. But the main market was already packed with spectators, and Poppy found it hard to maneuver through the press of bodies. She squeezed through the legs of the townsfolk, most of whom were too inebriated to notice her.

“I’d buy ’im a pint if ’e were here” slurred one voice above her. “Saved my goats by killing that monster.”

Poppy’s heart raced, as it always did when she heard tales of the hunter.

What if he turns out to be the one? she thought.

But deep inside, Poppy asked a different question. What would she do once she was rid of the weapon? Would she find an entirely new purpose? A yordle without one was a pathetic sight indeed. She stopped her mind from wandering and brought it back to the task at hand.

The tiny warrior finally managed to weave her way to the back of the market. She found a tall lamppost both easy to climb and behind the eyes of the crowd. She then shimmied up the post, just high enough to see over the throng.

Poppy was just in time. On the far side of the market, a speaker stood with several Demacian officials on a dais, and behind him, something tall was draped in a ceremonial veil.

Even with her keen yordle senses, Poppy could barely hear the man’s words. He was talking about the monster hunter, and how he had saved numerous farms and villages from wyverns, rabid wolves, and bandits. He said that although this revered warrior had chosen to remain anonymous, it shouldn’t stop them from celebrating his deeds. The slayer had been spotted several weeks ago near the town of Uwendale, leaving the first eyewitness accounts of his appearance. With that, the speaker pulled off the veil to reveal a stone statue.

Poppy grew faint with excitement as she saw the hunter’s likeness for the first time. He was the paragon of a Demacian warrior—seven feet tall, armored in heavy plate mail, and rippling with sharply defined muscles. Beneath him lay the corpse of a wolf he had presumably slain.

Just as the image had begun to settle in Poppy’s mind, she heard the sound of a child’s voice a few yards away.

“Look, Da. It’s the slayer! The one from the statue!” declared the wide-eyed girl.

Poppy saw the girl was pointing in her direction. She whirled around to see if the slayer was standing behind her. But no one was there.

“No, lass” said the girl’s father. “That one’s no monster slayer. Too small by half.”

The girl and her father quickly lost interest and strolled through the village to partake in the various amusements.

As the crowd in front of the statue dispersed, Poppy moved in for a closer inspection. Now she could see the fine details of the hunter’s marble depiction. His hair was long, fair, and bound in two separate side knots. His hands were gnarled from a hundred battles, and in them, he held a massive battle hammer not unlike the one Orlon had given her. If there was a truer hero in the kingdom, Poppy had never seen him.

“He has to be the one” Poppy said. “Hope I’m not too late.”

She turned and left the festival as fast as her legs could carry her, taking the swiftest route to Uwendale.

Quinn

Biography

Quinn is an elite ranger-knight of Demacia who undertakes dangerous missions deep in enemy territory with her legendary eagle, Valor. The two share an unbreakable bond that is uniquely deadly, and their foes are often slain before they realize they are fighting not one, but two Demacian heroes.

Quinn and her twin brother, Caleb, were born in Uwendale, a remote mountain hamlet in the northeastern hinterlands of Demacia. Raised to believe in the nobility and righteousness of their homeland's values, the two were inseparable. Uwendale was a thriving town of hunters and farmers, protected by mountain rangers expert in intercepting and killing any monsters that came down from the high peaks to hunt.

While the twins were young, King Jarvan III visited Uwendale on an inspection tour of the East Wall, the barrier between Demacia and the lawless, tribal states beyond. Hoisted high on her father's shoulders, Quinn thrilled to the pageantry of the king and his warriors, resplendent in gleaming sunsteel plate. Quinn and Caleb were captivated, vowing to become knights of Demacia and one day fight alongside the king. Their childhood games cast them as heroic knights, bravely defending the land from vile monsters, savage Freljordians or black-hearted Noxians.

They spent every moment they could in the wilds surrounding Uwendale. Their mother - one of the village's foremost rangers - taught them how to track beast of the forest, how to survive in the wild, and, most importantly, how to fight. Over the years, Quinn and Caleb developed into a formidable team, working together in a way that brought out the best in both of them; her keen eye for tracks, his skill at baiting their prey, her aim with a bow, his prowess with a hunting spear.

But one excursion high into the mountains north of Uwendale ended in tragedy when the twins encountered a party of Buvelle nobles hunting a giant tuskvore, a predatory killer known for its thick hide, long razorhorns and ferocious temperament. The nobles had failed to kill the creature outright, and the wounded beast turned on them, goring several of the family's young scions to death. Quinn and Caleb were quick to intervene. They drove the tuskvore off with a flurry of arrows to its skull, but not before Caleb was gored to death by the creature while saving the Buvelle matriarch's life. The nobles thanked Quinn profusely and helped her bury her brother before gathering their dead heirs and returning home to mourn.

Caleb's death almost broke Quinn. They had dreamed of fighting as a pair, and without her twin by her side, Quinn's hopes of becoming a knight seemed hollow. She fulfilled her duties to her village, as was expected of any daughter of Demacia, but her heart was broken and the joy that had previously energized her dimmed like the last light of summer. Without her brother by her side, her prowess in the wilderness waned and she started making mistakes. Nothing life threatening, but she missed easy tracks, her aim was off, and became dour and uncommunicative.

Quinn regularly visited Caleb's grave at the site of their battle with the tuskvore, unable to move on and forever reliving her moment of loss. A year to the day after Caleb's death, she returned to the mountain clearing as she had many times before. Lost in grief and reflection, Quinn didn't hear the approaching tuskvore. Amid the razorhorns crowning its skull were the broken shafts of arrows she and Caleb had loosed in their previous battle with the beast.

The monster charged, and Quinn desperately fought for her life against the enraged beast. She fired a dozen shafts at the creature, but none of her arrows were accurate enough to find the weaknesses in its thick hide. Exhausted from the battle, Quinn stumbled, and the beast was upon her. She dived from its path, but not quickly enough, and the tip of its horn sliced her from hip to collarbone. Badly wounded, Quinn fell as the beast circled around to finish her.

Quinn looked the beast in the eye and knew this was her death. She reached for the last arrow in her quiver as a flash of blue sliced through the air. A beautiful, blue-pinioned bird swooped in and raked its claws over the tuskvore's face. The bird was an Azurite Eagle, the breed said to have inspired the winged symbol of Demacia and long thought extinct. The screeching bird dived again and again, its claws and beak ripping bloody gouges in the tuskvore's skull even as the beast's horns gouged its body and tore its wings.

Quinn slowed her breathing and drew back her last arrow as the monster bellowed in fury and charged. She loosed, her bowstave snapping with the force of her draw. But her aim was true, and the arrow flew into the monster's open mouth to pierce its brain. The tuskvore's body plowed a great furrow in the earth toward her, but it was dead and Quinn let out a shuddering breath of relief. She crawled to where the eagle lay, its wing broken, and saw in its eyes a deep well of kinship.

She bound the wounded bird's mighty pinion and returned to Uwendale with the tuskvore's horns as a trophy. The wounded bird perched on her shoulder the entire way, refusing to leave her side. She named the eagle Valor, and nursed him back to health. The bond that formed between them rekindled the fire in Quinn's heart, and, once more, her thoughts turned to serving Demacia in battle. With her father's help, she crafted a new weapon from the horns of the tuskvore, a finely-wrought repeater crossbow capable of firing multiple bolts with a single pull of the trigger.

With her parents' blessing, Quinn and Valor traveled to the capital and petitioned the drill-masters of the Demacian army to join their ranks as a ranger-knight. Ordinarily, years of training were required to serve in the highly disciplined Demacian military. Quinn did not have such training, but she easily passed every test the full ranger-knights set her.

The drill-masters had no idea how such an individualistic hunter and her unique eagle might fit within their rigid command structure, so prepared to reject her petition. But before their verdict was delivered, Lady Lestara Buvelle, the noblewoman whose life Caleb had saved, intervened and vouched for Quinn's courageous heart and great skill.

Quinn was immediately inducted into the Demacian army and though she proved a fine ranger-knight, she struggled with the inflexible hierarchy and (in her view) needlessly prescriptive regulations. Her fellow warriors acknowledged her skills, but still viewed her as something of a wild card, a Demacian who preferred operating outwith the established order, who crafted her own missions and came and went as she pleased. She never remained within the city walls for long, preferring to live out in the wild as opposed to keeping the company of her fellow soldiers. Only the fact that she was so successful in uncovering nascent threats and rooting out hidden enemies allowed her a degree of leeway unheard of in Demacian ranks.

When a Noxian assassin struck down Castle Jandelle's commander on the Day of Lost Light, Quinn's talents proved themselves once again. The killer escaped battalions of knights dispatched to capture him, but Quinn and Valor tracked and killed the assassin after a night of lethal traps, counterattacks and ambushes. She returned with the assassin's blade, earning the nickname, *Demacia's Wings*. Quinn remained in Jandelle just long enough to receive her commendation before she and Valor once again departed the city to return to the wilderness where they were most comfortable.

Since then, Quinn has ventured far and wide in service of Demacia, risking journeys to the far north of the Freljord and deep into the Noxian empire. Each time she and Valor have returned with intelligence vital to the security and defence of Demacia's borders. While her methods do not easily fit within the heavily codified strictures of the Demacian military, none can doubt Quinn and Valor's preternatural brilliance in the field.

Story

Quinn waited for the Noxians to light a fire in the forest clearing and drink two wineskins. Drunk soldiers were easy to predict. She wanted them drunk enough to be stupid, but not reckless. Mistakes got you killed in the wilderness, and these men had just made two big ones. Lighting a fire told her they were overconfident, the wine that they were sure no one was in pursuit.

*Rule One: **Always** assume someone's after you.*

She eased herself through the mud on her belly, using her elbows to pull herself toward a hollowed out, rotten log at the edge of the clearing. The rain had turned the forest into a quagmire, and she'd spend the next few hours picking bugs and worms from her clothes.

*Rule Two: Survival **never** takes second place to dignity.*

Careful not to look directly at the campfire and lose her night sight, she counted five men - one less than she expected. Where was the sixth man? Quinn started to ease herself upright, but froze as the hair stood up on the back of her neck, a warning from above.

A shape moved from behind a tree in the darkness. A warrior. Armored in boiled black leather. Moving with skill. The man paused, scanning the darkness, his hand never leaving the wire-wound hilt of his sword.

Had he seen her? She didn't think so.

"Hey, Vurdin," called one of the men seated around the fire. "Better hurry if you want any of this wine. Olmedo's drinking it all!"

*Rule Three: Stay **silent**.*

The man cursed, and Quinn smiled at his obvious frustration.

"Quiet," he hissed. "I think they heard you back in bloody Noxus."

"Ach, there's no one out here, Vurdin. The Demacians are probably too busy buckling on their armor and giving it a polish to bother with coming after us. Come on, take a drink!"

The man sighed and turned back to the fire with a weary shrug. Quinn let out a slow breath. That one had some talent, but he too believed they were alone in the wilderness.

*Rule Four: Don't let **stupid** people drag you down to their level.*

Quinn smiled and glanced up, seeing the smudge of night-blue darkness of her eagle companion against the rainclouds. Valor dipped his wings, and Quinn nodded, their wordless communication refined over many years together. She circled her right fist, then raised three fingers, knowing Valor could see her perfectly and would understand.

*Rule Five: When it's time to act, do it **decisively**.*

Quinn knew they should just take these men out quietly and without fuss, but the affront of Noxians this deep in Demacia was galling. She wanted these men to know exactly who had caught them and that Demacia was not some primitive tribal culture to be crushed by Noxian ambition. The decision made, she pushed herself to her feet and strode into the campsite as if her being there was the most natural thing in the world. She stood at the edge of the firelight, her hood raised and her oiled stormcloak drawn tightly around her.

“Give me what you stole and no one has to die tonight,” said Quinn, nodding toward a leather satchel stitched with the winged sword symbol of Demacia.

The Noxians scrambled upright, blinking as they scanned the edge of the forest. They fumbled to draw their swords and Quinn almost laughed at their surprised ineptitude. The one who’d almost walked right over her hid his shock well, but relaxed as he realized she was alone.

“You’re a long way from home, girl,” he said, raising his sword.

“Not as far as you, Vurdin.”

He frowned, put on the back foot by her using his name. Quinn saw his mind working as he tried to figure out how much more she knew. She kept her cloak pulled tight as the men spread out, surrounding her.

“Give me the satchel,” said Quinn, a note of boredom in her voice.

“Take her!” shouted Vurdin.

It was the last thing he said.

Quinn swept her cloak back over her shoulder and lifted her left arm. A black shafted bolt from her repeater crossbow buried itself in Vurdin’s eye, and he fell without a sound. A second bolt tore into the chest of the man to his left. The remaining four came at her in a rush.

A screeching cry split the night as Valor swept down like a lightning bolt from a clear sky. His wings boomed as he spread them wide and swung around in a scything arc. Hooked claws tore the face from one Noxian, and the eagle’s slashing beak clove the skull of the soldier next to him. The third Noxian managed to raise his weapon, but Valor sank his claws into his shoulders and bore him to the ground. The eagle’s beak slashed down and the man’s struggles ceased instantly.

The last Noxian turned and sprinted for the trees.

*Rule Six: If you have to **fight**, kill quickly.*

Quinn knelt and loosed a pair of bolts from her crossbow. They hammered into the Noxian’s back and burst from his chest. He managed to reach the edge of the trees before pitching forward and lying still. Quinn remained motionless, listening to the sounds of the wilderness, making sure there were no other enemies nearby. The only sounds she heard were those she’d expect to hear in a forest at night.

She stood, and Valor flew over to her, the satchel of military dispatches the Noxians had stolen held in his claws. He dropped it and she caught it with her free hand, looping it over her shoulder in one smooth motion. Valor perched on her arm, his body rippling with the thrill of the hunt. His claws and beak were red with blood. The eagle’s head cocked to the side, and his gold-flecked eyes glittered with amusement. She grinned, her bond with the bird so strong she already understood his thoughts.

“I was wondering that too,” said Quinn. “How did these Noxians get this far into Demacia?”

The eagle gave a shrill screech, and she nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” said Quinn. “South it is.”

*Rule Seven: **Trust** you can rely on your partner.*

Shyvana

Biography

Shyvana is a half-dragon with the magic of a fiery rune shard burning within her heart. Though she often appears humanoid, she can transform into a fearsome dragon at will. Unsure if she is fundamentally human or beast, Shyvana fights to master her powers as she shifts between two forms.

The interminable mysteries of dragons confound and elude all theories. Those who study the subject speak of ancient, elemental runes split between dragon bloodlines, fractions passing from female dragons into their firstborn daughters. These shards instill the dragon that bears it with potent magic of wind, earth, water or fire.

One such dragon egg nested deep within an equatorial volcano, pulsed with the faint echoes of a fire rune. Drawn by its power, a daring mage attempted to extract its runic magicks, only to be interrupted by the dragon mother's return. The mage fled, having unknowingly infused the egg with his own mortal magic in the chaos. The dragon mother, Yvva, marveled at the fiery energy swirling beneath the shell, oblivious to the alloyed magic within. She and her mate planned to name their progeny Shyvana to honor Yvva's legacy.

The blood moon of autumn gave way to winter and the egg finally hatched, revealing a human infant with violet skin. As the child took her first breath and began to cry, her body shook and rippled, taking the form of a dragon. Yvva recoiled at the hybrid abomination and sought to kill her child – she would not allow such an unnatural thing to pollute her bloodline. But her mate could not allow Shyvana's murder, and after a ferocious battle, Shyvana's father fled with the newborn in tow.

For years, Shyvana and her father flew from place to place to escape Yvva's vengeance. As Shyvana grew, she struggled to control her tempestuous emotions and volatile power. Her father helped temper her dragon side, which unleashed a ruthless fury she had inherited from her mother. While in her humanoid form, Shyvana suffered numerous self-inflicted burns as she learned that life could be fragile and not everything could be set aflame without consequence. Occasionally, her dragonfyre activated the runic echo within her, an echo that was intrinsically linked to her mother.

As Shyvana's power grew in strength, Yvva was able to sense her daughter's presence from afar. She found the child alone and taunted Shyvana with tales of her origin, revealing that her true father was a feeble human who had twisted her noble draconic lineage into a disgusting perversion. Her mother would undo what should never have been brought to life, and attacked. Young Shyvana defended herself, but suffered many wounds before her father arrived to save her. He fought with savage fury to give Shyvana time to escape, showing no mercy or restraint to his former mate. Ultimately, he succumbed to the heat of Yvva's dragonfyre and was slain.

As Shyvana grieved, she fled in search of a strange land her father had told stories of – a place awash with petricite, stones of nullifying power that diminished any nearby magic. When she reached the outer territories of Demacia, she knew she had discovered what she sought. The land itself felt heavy and oppressive, making it difficult to wield her runic powers, and Shyvana found it easier to remain in human form. Here, she hoped she could mask her magic enough to hide from her mother.

While hunting for fresh meat, Shyvana followed the scent of blood and came upon an injured warrior named Jarvan near death in the wilds. Though her predatory instincts told her to finish him,

her human side recognized that he needed her help. No one was likely to find him in the remote hills of greater Demacia, and he would die without aid.

Shyvana carried the semi-conscious Jarvan to the nearest town, despite her fear that she'd be met with the same disdain she'd encountered all her life. To her surprise, the locals welcomed her to their town and thanked her for helping the soldier. She saw how the villagers pulled together to nurse Jarvan back to health, even though he was a stranger, and Shyvana observed something she'd never known: comradery. Demacians looked out for each other, she learned, and the more she saw of the community, the more she longed to be part of it.

For months, Shyvana lived in peace, hunting wild boars and white elk by day, and returning to the village with her spoils to share by night. She learned that Jarvan had been a prisoner of a neighboring realm and escaped his captors, but felt unworthy of returning to his life in the capital.

One evening, Shyvana heard the sound of leathery wings beating in the distance, and knew her mother had come for her once more. The great dragon ravaged the land in search of Shyvana, burning towns and fields with her flaming breath. Jarvan led the panicked villagers to Castle Wrenwall, a high-walled stronghold where they could shelter behind its stone walls.

Knowing her presence would only harm those she had come to care for, Shyvana decided to return to the wilderness. Jarvan confronted her as she prepared to leave, and she ruefully admitted that she was a half-drake, and the root of her dragon mother's furious wrath. Jarvan refused to let her leave – she had saved his life, so he would lay down his to defend hers. Jarvan proposed they fight Yvva together. With the support of the local villagers and Wrenwall's soldiers, he was convinced they could defeat the monster. Moved by his concern for her safety, Shyvana accepted his offer.

After Jarvan had trained the townsfolk to fight alongside the soldiers of Wrenwall, Shyvana entered a nearby ruin built from ancient petricite, shivering as the nullifying stones suppressed her powers.

The soldiers and villagers hid themselves nearby as piercing horns grew from Shyvana's forehead and she erupted into a scarlet-winged drake. She roared, shooting plumes of fire into the sky to lure her mother to the ground.

Shyvana heard the telltale beating of ancient wings as Yvva approached. Upon her mother's arrival, soldiers loosed volleys of arrows tipped with petricite to weaken her. The great dragon retaliated with tearing claws and roaring torrents of flame that roasted scores of soldiers in their armor. At Jarvan's command, the villagers continued their barrage of attacks as yet more nullifying arrows pierced the dragon mother's flesh, anchoring her to the ruins below.

Shyvana stood before her mother in proud defiance, but Yvva only laughed; she had always underestimated her daughter's wrath. Tooth and claw tore flesh from bone as the two dragons clashed in a titanic battle, crushing the foundations of the ruins to dust. Shyvana ripped Yvva's wing from her back, but her mother locked Shyvana's neck between her razor-sharp jaws. Blood streamed from Shyvana's collarbone, and she collapsed into her human form.

As Yvva loomed over her daughter, ready to end the life she had begun, Shyvana channeled all her grief and fury, and summoned the power of the fire rune within her blood. She dug her claws into her mother's flesh and tore the living heart from her chest. As Yvva's lifeblood drained, Shyvana felt no mercy, and roared in triumph.

Before the entire village, Jarvan honored Shyvana's bravery, declaring that she would always have a home in Demacia. For the first time, Shyvana knew she belonged to something greater than herself,

and, thanks to Jarvan, understood that Demacia's strength was its unity of purpose. She was humbled, and in turn swore her service to Jarvan, offering to fight alongside him no matter his path.

With the great dragon destroyed, Jarvan's faith in his ability to lead was restored, and he felt he could return to his home city. Shyvana returned to the capital with him, and they bore her mother's skull as a reminder of their incredible triumph. Shyvana knew Demacia could be dangerous for someone as magical as her, but she had never felt a greater sense of belonging.

In the capital, Shyvana remains in her purple-skinned humanoid form as she defends her adoptive home, though every so often, she escapes into the wild to spread her wings. She proudly serves Demacia, but knows that someday she must answer the runic call that burns within her heart.

Story

The gated watchtower was empty.

Shyvana knew its stern, gray-bearded guard, Thomme, would have cut off his own hand before abandoning his post. She had scented human blood while patrolling the northern hills of Demacia and followed its trail to this tower.

Inside, the smell was all but overpowering, though no bloodstains were visible. As a soldier of Demacia, Shyvana remained in her humanoid form most of the time in order to conceal her true nature, though her draconic instincts remained sharply intact. She chewed her tongue to distract herself from her growing hunger at the scent. Shyvana climbed to the top of the tower where she could better survey the surroundings, and fixed her gaze on the thick, tangled trees where leaves rustled near the edge of a clearing.

Shyvana leapt from the window of the watchtower and landed on her feet, five stories below. She detected a hint of blood on the wind, and sprinted west into the forest, dodging branches as she pursued the scent. At the edge of the clearing, a large feline beast with golden fur feasted on Thomme's mangled body. Atop the creature's shoulders were black feathered wings, and its forked serpentine tail twitched as if independent of its owner.

The smell of fresh blood was intoxicating, but Shyvana forced herself to focus on the hunt. She had joined Demacia to be part of something greater, not to surrender to her animalistic desires.

She crept toward the beast and felt dragonfyre warming in her hands as she readied to strike. But before she could attack, the creature turned from its kill. Its face was hairless and wrinkled, like an old man. It smiled at Shyvana through bloodied fangs.

"All yours," it said.

Shyvana had heard stories of the vellox's ferocity, its appetite for human flesh and its slick agility. But nothing had prepared her for the creature's eerily human face; its unblinking eyes held her gaze as it slinked into the brush and disappeared. Shyvana's heart raced as she sprinted to catch and kill the beast. The vellox's fur mingled with the dappled sunlight, camouflaging its torso as it leapt over fallen bramblewoods and raging rivers. It could not disguise the blood on its breath, however, and Shyvana followed the scent.

A fallen boulder blocked the path ahead. The vellox's claws scraped the rock as it leapt and disappeared over it. Shyvana dug her heels in at the top of the crag to halt her momentum – the rock marked the edge of a wide crevasse, plummeting in a steep vertical drop.

Across the gap, the forest continued indefinitely, and the vellox was already deep into the thicket. Shyvana sighed; there was only one way to cross the ravine, and she had not wanted to resort to it.

She checked to ensure no one was watching, inhaled as much air as would fill her lungs and felt her breath burn within her chest. Even across the width of the ravine, she could smell Thomme on the vellox's fangs. She embraced her hunger until it powered the furnace-heat beneath her skin. With an exhalation of streaming flame, Shyvana burst into her enormous draconic form and roared. The ravine shook as it echoed back her mighty call. She spread her thick, velvety wings, and swept across the ravine into the forest ahead.

She no longer had to duck between trees. Instead, she barreled through their branches, tearing down anything in her path. She leaned into her wings and the forest blurred into a whirl of brown and green. Woodbears, silver elk, and other woodland creatures scrambled to evade her path, and Shyvana relished the power she felt at their fear. She breathed a flaming torrent of fire, burning a thick grove to smoldering ash.

She spotted a trace of gold fur ahead and leapt onto the vellox's back. Its teeth raked her flanks but she barely noticed the pain.

"I know you," the vellox snarled, fighting to break free. "They call you the Chained One."

The golden beast leapt, slashing taloned paws and grazing her throat with its teeth. Shyvana sank her claws into its back and savored the sensation of tearing flesh.

"Why do you hunt me?" the vellox asked. "We are not enemies."

"You killed a soldier of the Demacian army," Shyvana said. "Thomme."

The vellox drew blood from her neck, but she exhaled plumes of fire and it spun away to avoid the flames.

"Was he your friend?"

"No."

"And yet you attempt to avenge his death. I fear the rumors are true. You are merely a tamed pet."

Shyvana growled.

"At least I am no killer of men," she said.

"Truly?" the vellox smiled through its stained teeth. "You have no thirst for human blood?"

Shyvana circled the vellox.

"I see the hunger in your eyes," it said. "The taste for living meat. You need the hunt as much as I. After all, where's the fun in a meal without a good chase?"

Now Shyvana smiled.

"Which brings us to my intent," she said.

Shyvana dashed forward. In one quick motion, she pinned the vellox's body to the mulched forest floor and gorged on its throat. The vellox spit scorching venom and clawed at her chest, scraping scales from her skin. Shyvana's eyes burned from his poison and her wounds stung, but she held fast.

The vellox's once-glossy fur was now sticky and matted with blood. Its watery human eyes stared up at Shyvana in horror as its life dripped away.

Though her hunger was unrelenting, Shyvana stopped herself before she devoured his flesh. She exhaled, releasing the dragonfyre from her chest and shuddered as she transformed back into a human. She was disturbed at how much she had enjoyed the kill. Shaking, she lifted the vellox's body and dragged him back to the crevasse. There he would lie, proof of her inhuman hunger, hidden in the darkness beneath the rock.

Vayne

Biography

Shauna Vayne is a deadly, remorseless monster hunter who has pledged her life to finding and killing the demon who murdered her family. Armed with her wrist-mounted crossbows and a heart full of vengeance, Vayne is only truly happy when she's slaying practitioners or creations of the dark arts.

As the only child to a wealthy Demacian couple, Vayne enjoyed an upbringing of privilege. She spent most of her childhood indulged in solitary pursuits – reading, learning music, and avidly collecting the various insects found on their manor's grounds. Her parents had traveled across Runeterra in their youth, but settled in Demacia after Shauna's birth because more than any place they'd found, Demacians looked out for one another.

Shortly after Vayne's sixteenth birthday, she returned home from a midsummer banquet and saw something she would never forget.

An unspeakably beautiful, horned woman stood before the bloodied corpses of her parents.

Vayne screamed in agony and terror. Before disappearing, the demon looked down at the young girl and flashed her a terrible, lustful smile.

Vayne tried to brush the bloody hair out of her mother's eyes, but that haunting smile lingered in her mind, growing and consuming her. Even as she shakily smoothed her father's eyelids closed – his mouth still agape, frozen in his last horrific moments of confusion – the demon's smile seeped through her thoughts.

It was a smile that would fill Shauna's veins with hatred for the rest of her days.

Vayne tried to explain what happened, but no one truly believed her. The thought of a demon on the loose – in the well-defended, magic-averse kingdom of Demacia, of all places – was too far-fetched to consider.

Vayne knew better. She knew from the demon's smile the enchantress would strike again. Even Demacia's tall walls couldn't keep dark magic from creeping through the cracks. It may disguise itself with subtleties or keep to shadowed corners, but Vayne knew it was there.

And she was done being afraid.

Vayne had a heart full of hatred and enough coin to outfit a small army, but where she would go, no army dared follow. She needed to learn everything about dark magic: How to track it. How to stop it. How to kill those who practiced it.

She needed a teacher.

Her parents had told her stories of iceborn warriors who fought against an Ice Witch in the north. For generations, they had defended themselves from her unknowable forces and dark minions. This, Vayne knew, would be where she would find her tutor. She evaded her appointed custodians and booked passage on the next ship to the Freljord.

Shortly after arriving, Vayne set out in search of a monster hunter. She found one, although not in the way she intended. Traversing a frozen ravine, Vayne was ensnared by a cleverly carved icetrap.

After tumbling to the bottom of a jagged, crystalline pit, Vayne stared up to see a ravenous ice troll, lips smacking with anticipation as he gazed upon his catch.

His gigantic blue tongue fell limp as a spear whistled through the air, pierced the troll's skull and planted itself deep in his brain. The giant toppled into the pit and Vayne rolled aside just in time to escape being crushed. A sticky pool of drool and blood collected at her boots.

Vayne's savior was a grizzled, middle-aged woman named Frey. She bandaged Vayne's wounds as they clung to the warmth of a campfire that struggled to stay ablaze in the frigid canyon. Frey told Vayne of her life's work spent fighting the Ice Witch's minions who had murdered her children. Vayne implored the woman to take her on as a student and teach her to track the dark creatures of the world, but the Freljordian had no interest. Vayne stank of privilege and money, neither of which kept your teeth gritted or your blade sharp through the grueling perseverance of a fight.

Vayne couldn't accept Frey's answer and challenged her to a duel: if she won, Frey would train her. If she lost, she'd offer herself as bait to the Ice Witch's minions, so Frey could ambush them. Vayne had no reason to think she'd win – her training amounted to a single afternoon of studying fencing before she wearied of trying to fight with one hand behind her back – but she refused to back down. To reward Vayne's mettle, Frey threw snow in Vayne's eyes and subsequently taught her the first rule of monster hunting: don't play fair.

Frey saw a determination in Vayne she couldn't help but respect. The girl had a long way to go as a fighter, but each time Vayne pushed her bruised body up from the dirtied snow to continue the fight, Frey saw a little more of the relentless hunter this girl could become. Beaten in skill, but never in spirit, Vayne beseeched Frey one last time: both of their families were dead. Frey could spend the rest of her days tracking ice trolls until one of them caved her head in, or she could teach Vayne. Together, they could kill twice as many monsters. Together, they could save twice as many families from experiencing the pain that defined them both. Frey saw the same hatred and loss in Vayne's eyes her own had burned with for years.

Frey agreed to accompany Vayne back to Demacia.

Together they made the journey south, heavily disguising Frey to illude Demacia's border guards.

Once back at Vayne's estate, the two spent years training. Despite the pageant of suitors who solicited Vayne's company, Shauna had no interest in anything other than training with Frey. As a result, the two became incredibly close.

Frey taught Vayne the fundamentals of dark magic, conjured beasts, and vile spells. Vayne committed every word of Frey's teachings to heart, but found it slightly unnerving that Frey never explained how she came to know so many specifics of these malefic practices.

Due to the kingdom's watchful soldiers and antimagic trees, dark creatures were rare within Demacia's walls, so Frey and Vayne would venture into the border forests at night to hunt. Vayne earned her first kill – a bloodthirsty creature who preyed on traveling merchants – at the age of eighteen.

Soaked in the creature's viscera, something awoke within Vayne: pleasure. The hot flush of vengeance and violence raced through her blood, and she relished in the sensation.

Vayne and Frey spent several years hunting dark creatures, their respect for one another growing with every kill. One day, Vayne realized that she loved Frey like a mother, but her emotions of

familial love were so tangled with pain and tainted by trauma, Vayne fought them as she would any beast out to hurt her.

Vayne and Frey traveled Valoran, until tavern tales from the highlands caught their ear, whispering of a demonic horned creature of mesmerizing beauty. According to the stories, the demon had been busy: she'd formed a cult, designed to attract worshippers who would do her bidding. People would walk into the hills, never to be heard from again. It was said the cult's high priests had a holy grounds near the cliffside, where they'd prepare the demon's sacrificial offerings. Vayne and Frey immediately set off on the hunt.

As they journeyed into the hills by cover of night, Vayne found herself distracted. For the first time since their partnership began, she felt worried for Frey – worried she might lose her mother figure for a second time. Before she could confess her fear, one of the demon's priests lunged from the brush, swinging a mace into Vayne's shoulder.

Vayne was badly wounded. Frey had a brief moment of hesitation, but her eyes steeled with certainty as she apologized to her friend and transformed into a monstrous Freljordian wolf. As Vayne watched in shock, Frey – in her animalistic form – tore the priest's tendons from his throat with a swift snap of her mighty jaws.

With the priest's body laid strewn at Vayne's feet, Frey retook her human form, yet her eyes betrayed the scared animal within. She explained that after the death of her family, she had become a shaman, inviting the curse upon herself in order to gain the power to change shape and fight against the Ice Witch. The ritual that gave her these powers involved dark magic, but she made this sacrifice to protect—

—Vayne put an arrow through Frey's heart without allowing her another syllable. Whatever affection she had felt for Frey evaporated upon discovering her true nature. A tear formed in Frey's eye as she collapsed, but Vayne didn't notice – whatever warmth the two had shared died with Frey.

There were still hours left before dawn, which meant hours left to continue the hunt. Vayne thought only of the demon. The kill that would be hers to savor. And all the kills to come. Runeterra's underworld would come to fear her, just as she had once feared them.

For the first time since her parents' death, Vayne smiled.

Story

Vayne had one arrow left in her wristbolt launcher. She was bleeding from three different wounds. The previously-human beast she'd spent all night hunting had just knocked her to the ground and it was about to bite the head off her shoulders.

Things were going better than expected.

Slime dripped from the shapeshifter's maw as it shrieked in anticipation of its kill. Scanning the darkness with her nightseeker goggles, Vayne found neither weapons nor cover nearby. She'd tracked the beast to this open patch of meadow specifically so it couldn't take cover behind the alderwoods of Demacia, but that decision left her exposed as well.

Which was fine by her. There's no fun in an easy kill, after all.

The beast grabbed Vayne by the shoulders, its mandibles opening to reveal rows upon rows of jagged teeth. If its jaws didn't kill her, its fetid breath could certainly finish the job.

Vayne rapidly reviewed her options. She could try to dodge the beast's bite, but that would be a short-term solution at the very best. She could kick the creature in its absurd number of teeth and attempt to land her last wristbolt in its bucking forehead, but she couldn't trust her arrow would find its mark through its gnashing forest of fangs. Or, she could try something flashy, violent and slightly stupid.

Vayne chose the latter.

She shoved her entire arm into its gaping mouth. The creature's razor teeth ripped strips of skin from her knuckles and arm, but Vayne smiled – she had the beast right where she wanted it. She felt its jaw clench, ready to bite and rip her limb off. She didn't give it the chance.

Vayne twisted her arm, dragging her wristbolt launcher across the inside of the creature's gob until the silver tip of her final arrow pointed directly at the roof of the beast's mouth. With the flick of her wrist, the bolt tore through the monster's skull, shredding its brain.

The shrieking stopped as suddenly as it started, the creature's body limp as it collapsed upon the grassy soil. Vayne crawled out from under it and attempted to remove her arm from its skull without cutting herself more than she already had, only to find that her fist was stuck inside the creature's head.

She could either keep trying to pull her hand through the shapeshifter's jagged mouth – and probably lose a finger or two in the process – or she could dig her arm in further to punch through the top of its head and snap its jaw like a wishbone.

As always, Vayne chose the latter.

The hard part wasn't killing the damned thing. The hard part was carrying it back to its bride.

Well, widow.

The widow Selina was beautiful beyond imagining, with hair that caught the sunlight even in the darkness of her fire-lit cabin. The deep scratches on her face, and even the tears that streamed down her cheeks, did nothing to diminish her beauty.

Vayne laid the carcass at the woman's feet as gingerly as she could. Its flesh was monstrosously transformed and wracked with wounds both self-inflicted and not-so-self-inflicted; it looked more like a collection of limbs and meat than a person.

"Was it quick?" the widow asked through sobs.

It had not been quick. Vayne had tracked the changeling to its den in the forests outside eastern Demacia. She'd managed to interrupt it mid-transformation: its eyes had multiplied and expanded, its mouth had grown mandibles, its left arm had formed into a razor-sharp pincer – and it was angry.

Vayne flicked a glob of brain off her wrist, a clinging remnant from when she'd punched through the creature's skull.

"Erm," Vayne said.

"Oh, my love," Selina said, dropping to her knees and wrapping her arms around the mutated body.

"What could have caused such a tragedy?"

Vayne knelt beside the couple as the widow brought what was left of the man's head to her breast, either not noticing or caring as his blood smeared her dress.

"Some people transform themselves into beasts. Some are transformed against their will," Vayne said.

She picked up the bulging hand of the corpse, casually examining it. "He belonged to the second group."

The widow's eyes went wide with fury.

"Someone *did* this to him? Who would – why would—"

The widow collapsed onto the body in tears, unable to find the words.

"Sometimes, therians – shapechangers – want a companion. Sometimes they're just savage: they lash out and bite somebody out of confusion or anger. Others I've met just get bored. They think it's *fun*," Vayne said, patting the woman's head. "But some...some just need to eat."

The widow looked up, sniffing away tears.

"I don't – I don't understand."

Vayne gave the widow a pitying smile.

"They want to eat somebody, but sometimes that somebody gets away. And the thing that tried to eat them accidentally passes on its phage. Then they end up turning, too."

The widow glared at Vayne. The wristbolt launcher on Vayne's arm clinked as she brushed the woman's hair out of her tear-filled eyes.

"The last therian I killed told me his victims tasted better if they loved him. Something about the juicy flavor they took on when they blushed. Can't even imagine how they must taste while on honeymoon, hmm?" Vayne mused.

The widow stopped crying. Her eyes grew hard.

"He did love you, you know," said Vayne.

The widow tried to stand, but Vayne gripped a fistful of the woman's hair and pulled tight.

"He must have been shocked after you bit him. People are unpredictable when they're scared. And there's nothing more frightening than being betrayed by someone you love."

Vayne flicked her wrist, cocking the wristbolt launcher on her forearm.

"So, who turned you?"

The woman stared back with hatred, her eyes slowly darkening to a deep red.

"Nobody," she said in a voice like knives scraping across rock. "I am of my own design."

Vayne smiled.

"How did you know?" the widow asked, sliding her hand behind her back.

"Bite marks on the front of his neck, rather than the back, combined with the lack of wounds anywhere else on his body, told me he was attacked by someone he trusted. Go ahead. Try it."

The widow paused.

“Try what?”

“The pincer you’re forming behind your back. Slash me. Let’s see if you can cut my hand off before I put a bolt through your forehead,” said Vayne.

The widow retracted her pincer from behind her back, crestfallen. The game was up.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why what?” Vayne blankly replied.

“Why not just walk in and kill me? Why this whole... *presentation*?”

Vayne smiled. A sly, hateful grin.

“Because I wanted to be sure I was right. Because I wanted you to feel the panic and the fear he felt. But mainly...”

Vayne tightened her wrist. With a metallic twang, a six-inch bolt of cold silver pierced the changeling’s brain. The widow’s eyes rolled back into her head. She collapsed to the floor like a bag of stones.

“Because it’s fun.”

Xin Zhao

Biography

Whenever Jarvan III, the king of Demacia, delivers one of his rallying speeches from the glinting marble balcony atop the Royal Palace, Xin Zhao is at his side. Coined the Seneschal of Demacia, Xin Zhao is the personal steward of the Lightshield Dynasty. His enigmatic, silent vigil has led to an abundance of conjecture concerning his "secret life" and origins. Whether it's "Zaun double-agent" tendered at the dinner table or "indebted rune mage" mused in the editorials of the "Demacian Constant", Xin Zhao betrays no hints to sate the curiosity of the masses... for good reason.

Years ago, Noxus was renowned for a spectacle called The Fleshing. It was a gladiatorial event with a cruel twist: as a fighter won matches, his number of opponents (generally prisoners of war) fought simultaneously would increase. This meant eventual death for every contender, but with unparalleled glory. Xin Zhao, known then as Viscero, was slated to face 300 soldiers, nearly six times the previous record. This was clearly meant to be his final match.

Jarvan II, hearing of this unprecedented feat, infiltrated the arena to offer him an alternative: serve Demacia and punish those who ultimately sentence him to death in exchange for his freedom. Xin Zhao accepted, astonished that a king would risk his own life on his behalf. Under the cover of a prearranged Demacian assault on Noxus, Jarvan liberated Xin Zhao and his 300 opponents. During their retreat, Xin Zhao took a poisoned dart meant for Jarvan. This act of loyalty, from a man who vowed no allegiance, earned Xin Zhao a spot at his side until the day the king died.

Now in the service of his son, Jarvan III, Xin Zhao continues to fight for his adopted country and honor the legacy of the man who gave purpose to his life.

Galio

Biography

Outside the gleaming city of Demacia, the stone colossus Galio keeps vigilant watch. Built as a bulwark against enemy mages, he often stands motionless for decades until the presence of powerful magic stirs him to life. Once activated, Galio makes the most of his time, savoring the thrill of a fight and the rare honor of defending his countrymen. But his triumphs are always bittersweet, for the magic he destroys is also his source of re-animation, and each victory leaves him dormant once again.

Galio's inception began in the aftermath of the Rune Wars, when refugees across the lands fled from the destructive power of magic. Some say that in the west of Valoran, a band of these displaced people were pursued by a vicious band of dark mages. Exhausted from days without rest, the refugees hid among the shadows of an ancient, petrified forest. The sorcerers that pursued them suddenly found their magic to be ineffective in the strange woods.

It seemed the fossilized trees were a natural magic-dampener, and any sorcery used within them would simply fizzle upon casting. No longer helpless, the refugees turned their swords on the dark mages and drove them from the land.

Some decided that this sanctuary from magic was a gift from the gods, others saw it as a fair reward for their terrible journey, but all agreed that this should be their new home.

As years passed, the settlers crafted items of protection from the enchanted wood. Eventually, they found it could be mixed with ash and lime to make petricite – a material with a powerful resistance to magic. It would be the foundation for their new civilization, forming the walls of the new kingdom of Demacia.

For years, these petricite barriers were all the Demacians needed to feel secure from the threat of magic within the borders of their homeland. In the rare event that they needed to settle a conflict abroad, their military proved fierce and formidable. But when their enemies employed sorcery, Demacia's roaming army had little to counter it. The elders of the kingdom decided that, somehow, they needed to take the security of their magic-dampening walls into battle. They commissioned the sculptor Durand to fashion some manner of petricite shield for the military, and two years later the artist unveiled his masterpiece. While it was not what many were expecting, the great winged statue Galio would become vital to the defense of the nation, also serving as a symbol of Demacia's might across Runeterra.

Each time the army was deployed to face a magical threat, they would mobilize Galio. Using a system of pulleys, steel sledges and countless oxen, they would pull the great stone figure to the battlefield. The presence of that much petricite easily nullified almost any arcane attacks, giving the people who had once fled from magic the ability to face it head-on in open warfare. Many would-be invaders were paralyzed by the very sight of the awe-inspiring figure that loomed above the trees before them – the titan who "ate magic" inspired a kingdom, and terrified those who opposed it. All the while, none thought to consider what exposing the statue to such untold amounts of arcane energy might do...

The strange effect of those magicks would alter the course of history. Demacia had been mired in a grueling battle with Noxian forces in the Greenfang Mountains of northern Valoran. Unbeknownst to

the Demacians, Noxus had assembled an elite group of warmages known as the Arcane Fist. As the invading ground forces pinned the Demacians in a great vale, the Arcane Fist bombarded them with crackling bolts of raw mystical power. To the Demacians' shock, the projectiles tore through Galio's anti-magical field.

For thirteen days, the Demacian army was pounded by their foes, and those who survived felt their morale evaporating by the hour. Just when their spirits could be brought no lower, they heard the all-too familiar thunder of arcane explosions tearing through their ranks. But this time, the explosions were followed by a new sound. A slow, deafening rumble shook the vale, as if two mountains were grinding against each other. As a great shadow grew above them, the terrified Demacian troops shuddered, steeling themselves for death.

"Shall we fight?" bellowed a deep voice from above.

To the Demacians' astonishment, the sound came from the towering colossus at their backs. Galio was moving, and speaking, entirely on his own. Somehow, the accumulation of absorbed magic had given him life.

The stunned onlookers gaped at the titan, struggling to make sense of what they were seeing. Before they could comprehend it, another blazing projectile descended toward the Demacian camp on the perfect trajectory to wipe out the few remaining soldiers. Galio threw himself in front of the troops, shielding them, and absorbing the attack with his massive, stone frame.

Galio turned toward the source of the projectile and spotted five tiny humans on the slopes of the neighboring mountain.

"Enemy mages! Let us make violence!" shouted the colossus.

As he bounded up the mountainside, the Noxians focused all their effort into a concentrated funnel of arcane energy that would have melted almost any stone in Valoran. But as the funnel dissipated, the mages saw that the titan remained standing, eyes closed and glowing warmly, as if he was drinking in the offending magic. Then, with an almost youthful enthusiasm, Galio continued up the slopes and squashed the Arcane Fist into the craggy soil.

As the remaining Noxian forces fled, the surviving Demacians erupted with cheers of victory. They were eager to thank the petricite sentinel that had saved their lives, but as quickly as he'd come to life, the fearsome protector had ceased moving, returning to the same pose he'd always held up on his pedestal.

Back home, the bizarre tale of the living colossus was told in hushed tones by the few who had survived the Battle of the Greenfangs. But it was always received with silent incredulity, as one would the tales of a madman. Eventually, those who had witnessed the animation of Galio simply stopped talking about it, out of fear their sanity would be questioned. It became mere legend – perhaps an allegory invented in ancient days to help people through hard times.

No one from the four corners of the kingdom would have believed that the colossus continued to see all that transpired around him. Even while immobile, he maintained his consciousness, longing to experience the visceral sensation of battle once again. Punching enemies with giant stone fists was thrilling, but being trapped in a gargantuan stone body, unable to move, was tragic.

Forced to observe in silence, Galio watched the humans pass beneath him, paying him tribute year after year, like a distant, hazy dream. Though he knew very little about them individually, he began

to feel as though he knew them as a people. It puzzled him to see them disappear one by one as time rolled on, seemingly replaced by new bodies with new lives of their own.

He wondered where they went when they vanished. Perhaps they were sent away to be mended, as Galio was when he returned from a fight?

After one of the many battles against the barbarians of the Freljord, Galio saw long columns of men carrying what looked like draped cots back into the city. As the procession filed past him, one of the coverings fell away, revealing the still, pallid face of a young soldier. He was a boy Galio had seen before, and the colossus could not understand why someone so bold would choose to be carried on a covered litter around the city. Galio began to realize the sorrowful answer to his question – unlike himself, the people could not be repainted, or have their damage easily repaired. Humans were frail, ephemeral creatures, and he now understood just how much they needed his protection. Fighting had been his passion, but the people were now his purpose.

Since then, Galio has been able to join the fight only a handful of times, sometimes going centuries without moving. Magic is rarer in the world than it once was, and so he remains in his dormant state, observing the world through the murk of his waking dreams. The giant statue's greatest hope is to be blessed by a magic so powerful that he will never be forced to sleep again.

Only then can Galio truly serve his purpose, to forever stand and fight as Demacia's constant protector.

Jinx

Biography

A manic and impulsive criminal from Zaun, Jinx lives to wreak havoc without care for the consequences. With an arsenal of deadly weapons, she unleashes the loudest blasts and brightest explosions to leave a trail of mayhem and panic in her wake. Jinx despises boredom, and gleefully brings her own chaotic brand of pandemonium wherever she goes.

No one knows for sure exactly where Jinx came from, but many urban legends and folktales have sprung up around her. Some have her as a young gang member who fell in with the wrong crowd and was either traumatized by one too many killings, suffered too much at the hands of an enemy or was simply driven insane by sump fumes. A few of the old timers in Zaun remember a young girl who might fit Jinx's description, but the girl they speak of is a far cry from the one who became Piltover's bane. This girl was sweet and innocent, a tinkerer with big ideas, who never quite fit in and came to a bad end. Some even whisper that Jinx isn't even human, that she is some kind of avenging spirit of mayhem, come to wreak havoc upon Piltover in revenge for the thousands who died when Zaun sank into the earth.

Jinx made her first appearance on Roguery Night, a barely tolerated annual tradition where youthful girls and boys throughout Piltover play practical jokes on their family and neighbors. Jinx hijacked the occasion to unleash the first of many crime sprees; bridges were blocked with stampeding livestock freed from Count Mei's menagerie, scores of roads were shut down by explosions that made them impassable, and every street sign in the city was moved and placed somewhere new. Jinx had succeeded in spreading chaos throughout the streets and bringing the city to a halt. It had been a good day.

The wardens attributed her crimes to chem-punk gangs, rounding up dozens of known troublemakers and sending them back down to Zaun. Having others get the credit for her manic schemes didn't sit well with Jinx, and so she made sure to be seen at every future crime scene.

Reports circulated of a mysterious, blue-haired Zaunite girl, but talk of her carrying chemtech explosives, a shark-mouthed launcher and a repeater gun were dismissed as preposterous. After all, how could a Zaunite chem-punk possibly obtain such lethal firearms?

The crime spree escalated in lunacy until Jinx detonated a series of explosives simultaneously throughout the city. A great many of the civic art structures erected by the Piltover clans were destroyed in fiery conflagrations that lit the sky in blazing pyrotechnics until dawn. Due to the late hour, no one was hurt, but numerous clan leaders were outraged at the sight of their great works reduced to rubble.

Jinx's crime wave continued for weeks, with the wardens' attempts to catch her thwarted at every turn. She tagged her crime scenes with insulting graffiti and taunting messages directed at Piltover's newest ally in the fight against crime, Enforcer Vi. These bright pink tags finally revealed the name of Piltover's newest troublemaker; Jinx.

With every bold crime, Jinx became ever more legendary, with people in Zaun divided as to whether she was a hero for sticking it to the Pilties or a dangerous lunatic that would bring the full force of the wardens down to the undercity. That moment came even closer when Jinx sabotaged the Sun

Gate and delayed the flow of ships by several hours – costing the city’s ruling clans vast sums of lost revenue.

Having seen exactly which buttons to press, Jinx offered a challenge that couldn’t be ignored – she threatened Piltover’s money. She daubed the walls of the Ecliptic Vaults, one of Piltover’s most secure treasuries, with a caricature of Enforcer Vi, together with details of exactly when Jinx planned to rob it.

An uneasy sense of anticipation settled on Piltover and Zaun in the weeks leading up to the appointed date of Jinx’s heist. Many doubted Jinx would have the guts to show up and risk almost certain capture. When the day of the heist arrived, Vi, Caitlyn and the wardens were taking no chances and had prepared a trap for Jinx around the treasury. The clocktower bells rang at the appointed hour, but nothing happened. It seemed Jinx had chickened out, but she was one step ahead of her would-be captors.

Jinx, despite the seeming recklessness of her actions, had a plan and it had been in motion for days. She had hidden herself within a modified coin-crate at the Toll Towers of the Sun Gates and had been delivered to the vaults two days previously. Jinx was already inside, and was even now wreaking havoc, leaving her signature pink tags on every gilded wall, swinging from the chandeliers and leaving explosive surprises in every lockbox.

Hearing the cacophony from within, Vi realized what was happening, she stormed inside the building, ignoring Caitlyn’s order to go in as a team. The battle they fought tore the vaults to pieces in a back and forth chase of explosions and demolition. Eventually Jinx and Vi confronted one another in the deepest, most secure vault. No one knows what passed between them, for Vi had pursued Jinx far ahead of the others. With the two of them trapped together underground, Jinx fired her rockets into the ceiling of the vault, and the entire structure collapsed. The wardens in the upper reaches of the vault escaped before the building came down, but Vi was left trapped inside. Only by hiding in the same lockbox Jinx had used to break in was she able to avoid being crushed to death.

Eventually she punched her way out from the ruins, wondering for a moment if Jinx lay dead somewhere in the ruins, only to see one last tag left in the patterns of destruction – a final taunt daring Vi to catch her. No trace of the blue-haired hellion could be found, and to add insult to injury, not a single coin had been taken from the vaults.

Jinx remains at large to this day, and is a constant thorn in Piltover’s side. Her actions have inspired copycats among the chem-punk gangs of Zaun as well as numerous satirical plays, sayings and the like throughout both cities. Her ultimate end-game (or why she is seemingly obsessed with Vi) remains a mystery, but one thing is certain; her crimes are continuing and growing in sheer audacity.

Story

Jinx hated petticoats.

Corsets too, but she grinned at how she’d put the space under and within the stolen dress to good use. Her long blue braids were concealed beneath a ridiculous feathered bonnet that was the latest fashion in Piltover. Jinx sashayed between the wedding guests, keeping her smile fixed and trying not to scream at the dead-eyed people surrounding her. It took an effort of will not to grab each one by the shoulder and try to shake them awake.

Jinx had come here to get all explodey on the observatory atop Count Sandvik’s mansion, but when she’d seen there was a wedding underway... well, that was too good an opportunity for mayhem to

pass it up. The count had spared no expense in making his daughter's party a grand spectacle. The cream of Piltover society was here; the heads of the major clans, lauded hextech artificers, and even fat Nicodemus had managed to finagle an invite. The Warden-Prefect looked like an overstuffed poro in his dress uniform, chest puffed out and beady eyes ogling the sprawling buffet table. Music from a small orchestra drifted over the wedding guests, so slow and ponderous it made Jinx want to yawn. She'd take the foot-stomping, spin-around-till-it-made-you-sick music of Zaun any day.

Hexlumens fitted with rotating zoetropes and oddly-angled lenses projected spectral dancers onto the floor that pirouetted and spun to the delight of laughing children who'd never known a moment of hunger, pain, or loss. Mimes and sleight of hand artistes moved through the crowd, delighting the guests with the fingerwork of their card tricks. Jinx had seen better. The sump-snipes of the Boundary Markets would quite literally give any of these performers a run for their money.

Pictures of Piltover's bigwigs hung on walls paneled with oak and inlaid with geometric copper fretwork. The men and women in the portraits looked down on the people below with haughty disdain. Jinx stuck her tongue out at each and every one of them as she passed, grinning as they tutted and turned away. Windows paned with colored glass patterned the mosaic floor with rainbows and Jinx skipped merrily over every bright square as she made her way to a table heaped with enough food to feed a hundred families in Zaun for a month.

A liveried waiter passed her, bearing a silver tray of fluted glasses filled with something golden and fizzy. She took one in each hand, spinning away with a grin. Flying foam stained the backs of dresses and frock coats of nearby guests and Jinx sniggered.

"Drink up," she said and knocked back what was left in the glasses.

She bent awkwardly and set the glasses on the mosaic floor, right in the path of oncoming dancers, and burped the opening bars of Vi is a Stupid Fathead, a tune she'd only just made up. Cliques of society ladies turned to sneer at her coarseness, and Jinx covered her mouth in mock, wide-eyed embarrassment. "Sorry, I accidentally did that on purpose."

She skipped on and helped herself to some weird looking fish-things from another waiter's platter. She tossed them into the air and managed to catch at least one in her mouth. A few fell into her enhanced cleavage and she plucked them out with the glee of a sump-scrapper who'd found something shiny in the ooze.

"You thought you could get away from me, fishy-fishes!" she said, wagging a finger at each morsel. "Well, you were wrong."

Jinx stuffed the food into her mouth and readjusted her dress. She wasn't used to this much up top, and stifled a giggle at what she had stuffed down there. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled, and she looked up to see a man staring at her from the edge of the chamber. He was good-looking in a stiff sort of way and wore nice, formal clothes, but was so obviously a warden that he might as well have had a sign around his neck. She turned and pushed deeper into the throng of guests filling the chamber.

She reached the buffet table and sucked in an impressed breath as she saw the towering wedding cake; a frosted masterwork of pink fondant, whipped cream and lacework caramel. A replica of the Tower of Techmaturgy in sponge, jam, and sweet pastry. Jinx reached out, lifted a ladle from the punch bowl, and scooped out a cave in the sponge. She tipped it out onto the floor, licked the ladle clean and tossed it back onto the table. She saw a number of the guests looking at her funny and bared her teeth in her best, manic grin. Maybe they thought she was mad. Maybe they were right.

Jinx shrugged. Whatever.

She reached down into her décolletage and pulled out four chompers. She stuffed three deep into the hole she'd scooped in the cake and dropped the other in the punch bowl.

Jinx strolled along the length of the table, pulling out another two chompers and depositing them in various dishes. One went in a copper soup tureen, the other replaced the apple in the mouth of a suckling pig. Her dress was a lot looser without the additional baggage upstairs, and as she pulled down the side zipper, Jinx spotted the good-looking man she'd earlier pegged as a warden making a beeline for her through the guests.

"About time," she said, spotting another four, gussied-up wardens, three women and a man, converging on her. "Oooh, and you brought friends too!"

Jinx reached around to the small of her back and pulled the knot securing the petticoats around her narrow waist. The bottom half of her dress sank to the floor as her corset fell away to surprised gasps of the men and women around her.

Revealed in her pink leggings, ammo-belted shorts and vest top, Jinx ripped off the bonnet and shook her hair loose. She reached down and swung Fishbones up from where it had been concealed beneath her dress, and hoisted the weapon up to her shoulder.

"Hey folks!" she yelled, leaping onto the buffet table and drawing Zapper from her thigh-holster. "Hope you're all hungry..."

Jinx spun on her heel and fired a crackling bolt of energy down the table to the chomper in the pig's mouth.

"Cause this buffet is to die for!"

The chomper exploded, draping the nearest guests in ribbons of scorched meat and fat. A chain reaction of detonations followed. The tureen blasted into the air to drench scores of guests in hot beef soup. The punch bowl blew up next, and then the climax of the detonations; the wedding cake.

The three chompers inside detonated simultaneously and the towering confection launched into the air like a rocket. It almost reached the stained glass ceiling before it arced over and nosedived back to the floor. Guests scattered as the giant cake exploded on impact, and fondant fragments flew in all directions. Screaming guests ran from the blasts, slipping and tumbling in patches of gooey cream and sizzling punch.

"Seriously folks," said Jinx, blowing a loose strand of blue hair out of her face. "Screaming helps, not at all."

She skipped down the ruined buffet table and fired a rocket from Fishbones that blew out the nearest window. Iron bolts from hand crossbows flashed past her to embed in the walls, but Jinx laughed as she leapt through the shattered window frame to land in the garden beyond. She rolled back to her feet and pulled up short. She'd had an escape route sort of planned out, but looking toward the Sandvik Mansion's entrance, she saw a tall, gleaming ring-rider that looked like it'd be a ton of fun to steal.

"Now, that I gotta try..."

She slung Fishbones over her shoulder and elbowed a host of gawping Sandvik footmen out the way, settling into the disc-runner's hand-tooled leather saddle.

“So how do you start this thing?” she said, staring at the bewildering array of ivory knobs, brass-rimmed dials and gem-like buttons on the control panel in front of her.

“Time for a little trial and error!”

Jinx hauled back on the nearest lever and hit the biggest, reddest button she could see. The machine throbbed beneath her, spooling up with a rising whine and hum of building power. Blue light spun around the outer edges of the wide disc as the main doors to the mansion slammed open. Stern voices yelled at her to stop. Like that was going to happen! The stabilizer struts retracted into the gleaming frame and Jinx whooped with manic glee as the disc-runner shot away from the mansion like a super mega death rocket.

“See ya!” she yelled over her shoulder. “Awesome party!”

Ekko

Biography

A prodigy from the rough streets of Zaun, Ekko manipulates time to twist any situation to his advantage. Using his own invention, the Zero Drive, he explores the branching possibilities of reality to craft the perfect moment. Though he revels in this freedom, when there's a threat to his friends he'll do anything to defend them. To outsiders, Ekko seems to achieve the impossible the first time, every time.

Born with genius-level intellect, Ekko constructed simple machines before he could crawl. Amazed by these displays of brilliance, his parents, Inna and Wyeth, vowed to provide a good future for their son. In their mind, Zaun, with all its pollution and crime, was no place for a child of his genius. They toiled through long factory hours and worked in dangerous conditions in order to forge a path for their son to have opportunities in Piltover.

But Ekko saw things differently.

He witnessed his parents aging beyond their years, trying to make ends meet with small wages while their handmade goods were sold to wealthy Piltoverans for exorbitant profits, profits they'd never see thanks to the greedy Factorywood overseers and their shrewd buyers. Pilties wandered over to the Promenade for good, cheap times or down to the Entresol to indulge in "everything goes" type clubs. No, his parents' vision of Ekko living a good life in the privilege-filled City of Progress was one he didn't share.

Zaun, however... Where his parents only saw the oppressive layers of choking pollution and a blight of criminality, Ekko looked beyond and discovered a dynamic city overflowing with energy and potential. It was a hotbed of pure innovation, a melting pot of faraway cultures, immigrants united by a single desire to pioneer the future. But even they could not hold a candle to the native Zaunites. Not the tech-augmented thugs or bottom-feeding scum whose wicked deeds dominated Piltover newspapers; but the sump-scrappers, the chem-jacks, the horticulturalists that tended to the cultivairs. These, and so many more, were the heart and soul of the city. They were resourceful, resilient, and industrious. They built a thriving culture out of catastrophe and flourished where others would have perished. That Zaun spirit enchanted Ekko and drove him to build his machines exclusively out of junk no one else valued, and spurred him on to test them on himself.

He wasn't alone in possessing that spirit. Ekko befriended scrappy orphans, inquisitive runaways, and anyone whose thirst for excitement was as infectious as the grey-pox. Each had unique talents: from climbing to sculpting, from painting to planning. Many Zaunites eschewed formal education in favor of apprenticeships, these self-dubbed Lost Children of Zaun looked to labyrinthine streets to be their mentor, and as such wasted time in glorious, youthful fashion. They challenged each other to footraces through the Border Markets. They dared each other to climb the precarious routes from the Sump to the Entresol and up to the Promenade. They ran wild and free, answering to no one except their own whims.

To stand out from criminal gangs and other chem-punks, he and his friends opted to keep their bodies whole. Augmentation was, to them, a waste of money and frowned upon. So was stealing from anyone who had nothing or less than they had. This made uppercrust Pilties and tech-

enhanced bullies such enticing targets for their mischief. They adorned their secret hideouts with pilfered goods and works of art painted directly on walls. The Lost Children of Zaun felt invincible.

As he grew up, Ekko's inventions became more fantastic and complex, requiring exotic components that needed to be "liberated" from the scrapyards. Good thing he subscribed to a conveniently flexible view of trespassing. Soon, tech-enhanced vigilnaut thugs and unnervingly aggressive security guards were constantly on lookout for Ekko and his misfit crew, and often gave the teens a merry chase. It always amused him how Piltover laboratories and Chem-Baron factories fiercely guarded their junk. It's not like they were using these discarded bits of tech for anything. He, on the other hand, could put their trash to good use with a little ingenuity.

One night, while Ekko scoured the rubble of a recently demolished laboratory, he made an astonishing find: a shard of a blue-green gem that glittered with magical energy. He quickly searched and discovered other fragments of the glowing jewel. The shards hummed like they were trying to sing a broken melody, the song growing louder when near other pieces. He painstakingly searched for every splinter of the broken crystal, though some were buried deep beneath tons of debris that required him to squeeze and wiggle between chunks of smelly rubbish. Every child of Zaun heard tales about hextech crystals. They powered weapons and heroes. They could create energy on their own. Hextech crystals had the potential to change the world. Now he held a broken one.

Before he could celebrate his find, the place was crawling with vigilnauts scanning the ruins, searching for something. Ekko knew it was the pieces of the crystal he held in his hand. He barely escaped detection.

After meticulous study, Ekko noticed that faint traces of energy surged when the crystals were brought closer together; the edges crackled and sent waves of rippling distortion through the air.

When he pulled the pieces apart, a magnetic-like resistance fought his efforts. It was as if the splintered crystals remembered being whole. Even curiously, Ekko felt the strangest sensation; a haunting feeling of remembering a moment, only slightly differently.

His hands couldn't keep up with the ideas his mind had for the crystal. During one of his less-than-scientific experiments, the gem exploded into a vortex of shimmering dust, triggering eddies of temporal distortion. Ekko opened his eyes to see several splintered realities—and several "echo" versions of himself—staring back in sheer panic amid the fractured continua.

He'd really done it this time.

After some tense coordination between Ekko and his paradoxes, they contained and repaired the doozy of a hole he'd torn in the fabric of reality.

Eventually, Ekko harnessed the shattered crystal's temporal powers into a device that would allow him to manipulate small increments of time — well, at least in theory. Before he could test his latest machine, his friends badgered him into climbing Old Hungry to celebrate his name day — so Ekko slung the device over his shoulder and brought it along.

They trekked out to the old clockwork tower in the heart of Old Zaun, and climbed, occasionally stopping to paint an obscene caricature of a prominent Piltie or two. They were near the top when a handhold gave way causing one of his friends to slip and fall off the spire. Instinctively, as if he'd done it a thousand times before, Ekko activated the crystal-containment device. The world shattered around him and he was wrenched backward through swirling particles of time.

The hair on his arms tingled with electricity. A strange wooziness clouded his mind. Then he saw his friend reach for the rotting plank to repeat his soon-to-be-fatal error. CRACK! The plank gave under the boy's weight, but Ekko reached out and grabbed his plummeting friend by the shirt collar and swung him to a nearby ledge. Unfortunately, he misjudged the trajectory and tossed his friend into the clockwork tower's grinding gears. Whoops.

Numerous rewinds and some adjustments for windshear later, Ekko saved his friend's life. To others, it looked like Ekko had the reflexes of a god. Instantly, his status was elevated. He told them about the crystal and the time manipulation and made them swear to keep quiet. Instead, they shamelessly exaggerated their friend's exploits and dared each other to attempt increasingly reckless stunts, knowing they would be kept safe. With each trial (and so much error) the time-warping device – which he'd dubbed the Zero Drive – grew more and more stable. Ekko found he could pilfer components, clobber imposing chem-punk bullies, and even get pickup lines right, making a good first impression every time. The only limit was how much his body could take before exhaustion set in.

Rumors and tales of Ekko's time-bending antics reached the ears of certain powerful people within the twinned cities. Viktor, a much respected (and feared) Zaunite scientist, has a keen interest in an audience with this defiant genius, and outfitted several of his low-level enforcers with powerful enhancements to encourage the boy to join his services. Piltover-renowned innovator Jayce, meanwhile, was eager to size up the Boy Who Shattered Time and reverse-engineer his technology. However, Ekko values his independence too much, and has no desire to be a part of anyone's agenda. A few pursuers might catch a glimpse of Ekko before being thwarted, often embarrassingly so, by the sump-snipe with a preternatural knack for pinpointing their exact weakness.

In his wildest dreams, Ekko imagines his hometown rising up to dwarf the City of Progress. Piltover's golden veneer would be overshadowed by the sheer ingenuity and relentless spunk of a Zaun born not from generations of privilege but from utter daring. He may not have a plan yet, but Ekko has all the time in the world to make his dream a reality.

After all, if he can change the past, how hard could it be to change the future?

Story

It had been a weeklong sort of day.

For Ekko, this was both literal and metaphorical. Everything went wrong and it took forever to put it back just right. First, Ajuna had nearly gotten himself killed trying to climb Old Hungry. The younger boy wanted so desperately to be like Ekko that he vaulted up the side of the clockwork tower at the heart of the sump before any of their friends could stop him. It was the first tricky jump that nearly did the kid in. Good thing Ekko had triggered his Z-Drive. Eighteen times he heard the blood-curdling scream of the boy falling to his death before he figured out how and where to arrest the fall and save his life.

Then, while pillaging a scrap heap with ties to Clan Ferros for bits of tech, a particularly aggressive gang of vigilnauts surrounded him. Big ones, too, covered in augments that made the ugly even uglier. Ekko was surprised at their speed, but less surprised at how they shot to kill. Pilties and their backup didn't care about the lives of sumpsnipes like him. Good thing the Z-Drive existed to get him out of seemingly inescapable encounters like that one. After a few dozen rewinds, he changed tack

and pulled out his latest toy: the Flashbinder. It was meant to explode in a dazzling flash and pull anything not bolted down in toward its center.

But the Flashbinder didn't work. Well, at least not as intended. It exploded. And that's when things got interesting. Unlike most of Ekko's inventions that exploded, the blue-hot magical detonation froze in mid blast. Columns of billowing blue energy fanned out from the epicenter. Bits of the disc's shrapnel twisted at a snail's pace along what, at normal explosion velocity, would be a deadly trajectory. Even the spherical blinding flash itself was frozen in space.

And then it got even more interesting. The explosion *imploded*, reforming itself into the palm-sized Flashbinder, and rewound back toward Ekko, landing square in his palm, as cold as the wind.

Cool, Ekko thought. He rewound the moment so he could throw it at the vigilnauts a few more times. For science, of course.

When Ekko finally got home, his body was tired, but his mind was alert. The apartment was functional – the furniture sparse and with little flourish. Ekko's room was a little curtained-off nook filled with discarded books, bits of scavenged technology, and hiding spots for the Z-Drive and Flashbinder. Today was one of the rare days both his parents would be home early, and he had something to tell them.

"Mom, Dad." He practiced to his reflection, which stared back at him from the Z-Drive's shiny cylindrical surface. "I'm not going to apply to any of the Uppside clans or a snooty Piltie school. I'm staying here with you and my friends. I'll never turn my back on Zaun."

The words were filled with the confidence that comes with being alone in an empty apartment, with only walls and reflections to respond. And their response was silence.

He heard the jingle of the keys, muffled by the front door. Without a second to spare, Ekko tucked his Z-Drive under the table and draped a black cloth over it. He didn't want them worrying about his escapades with an unstable hextech time-manipulation device.

The door opened and Ekko's parents returned for the first time that night. They looked like strangers to their own son, their jobs aging them even more in the weeks since he'd seen them last together. Their routine was predictable. They'd shuffle home, supply a meager meal purchased with the day's wages, save the rest of the money for taxes and bribes, then fall asleep in their chairs, chins resting on chests, until Ekko removed their workboots and helped them into their beds.

The bags under their eyes carried enough weight to pull their heads down. Tucked under his mother's arm was a small paper-wrapped bundle, bound at the ends with twine.

"Hello, my little genius." His mother expended energy she couldn't afford in an attempt to make the words come alive. Yet her expression in that moment of lightness when she saw her son sitting at the table, waiting, was something no one could fake.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad." The three of them hadn't sat at a table as a family in such a long time. He quietly chided himself for not saying something substantial.

His father beamed with pride; then he mock-scowled as he brushed his fingers through his son's mohawk. Ekko struggled to remember a time when his father didn't look so old, before the prematurely thinning hair and the deep wrinkles in his brow.

“I thought I told you to cut that hair” his father said. “It’ll make you stand out in the Piltover academies too much. The Factorywood’s the only place you can look like that. They’ll take anyone. And you are not anyone. How are your applications coming?”

This was the moment. Ekko felt the words he’d practiced swimming up to be spoken. The hope in his father’s eyes gave him pause.

His mother filled that empty moment before Ekko could.

“We have a treat for you.” She set the brown parcel down on the table. They pulled their chairs close to watch as Ekko reached over and untied the knotted twine, straightened both strings, and laid them next to him. He unraveled the butcher paper without a single rip. In the center lay a small loaf of fragrant sweetbread, its crust glazed with honey and candied nuts. The cake was from Elline. She made the finest pastries in all of Zaun, and charged a pretty penny for them too. Ekko and his friends often pilfered her desserts from the rich folk who paid the hefty price without even a tiny hesitation.

Ekko’s head shot up to see his parents’ reaction. Their eyes were beaming. “This is too much” he said. “We need meat and real supper, not sweets.”

“We would never forget your name day” his father said with a chuckle. “Looks like you did, though.”

Ekko had completely lost track of what day it really was. Still, the gift was too extravagant. Especially since he was about to shatter their hopes for him. Guilt rose in his throat. “The landlord’ll have our heads if we’re late with rent again.”

“Let us worry about that. You deserve something nice” his mother said. “Go on, you can have cake for dinner once a year.”

“What are you going to eat?”

“I’m not hungry” she said.

“I ate at work” his father lied. “Cheese and meats from Piltover. Real nice stuff.”

They watched Ekko take a tiny bite of the cake. It was sweet and buttery and the crumbs stuck to his fingers. It was so rich, the taste stuck to his tongue. Ekko went to divide the cake into three pieces, but his mother shook her head. Her soft voice hummed the name day song’s playful melody and he knew they wouldn’t partake. It was his parents’ gift to him.

His father would have joined in singing the name day song if he hadn’t already fallen asleep, slumped in his chair, chin dropping to his chest. Ekko glanced over to his mother, her eyes fluttered closed as the melody was swallowed by her own encroaching slumber.

One future Ekko briefly considered was the Factorywood life and barely living wages for some other city’s benefit, for someone else’s glory. He couldn’t stomach the thought. He remembered fragments of conversations, snippets heard through the filter of infant ears, of his parents’ whispered dreams of inventions, and entrance to the clans. Ideas they hoped would change the world and contribute to a future unwritten by the birth of their son. Ekko knew they saw him as their only hope. But he loved life in Zaun. If he did as they wished, who would take care of them or his friends?

He couldn’t dash their dreams. Not tonight, on his name day. Maybe tomorrow.

Ekko didn't finish his cake beyond the first bite. Instead he primed his Z-Drive. His home shattered into swirling eddies of colored dust. The thrum of the everyday fell to absolute silence. The moment splintered and encircled him in a vortex of light.

When the fragments of the future reassembled into the past, Ekko's parents were coming home for the second time that night. It would be followed by a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and so on.

Each time he went back, Ekko didn't change a single thing; the light in his mother's eyes, his father's proud smile as he nodded off. But Ekko fought the edges of sleep to hold onto those stolen moments forever, until finally, he let his mother's soft voice, and the warmth of their little apartment lull him to sleep.

It had been a weeklong sort of day.

Twitch

Biography

A plague rat by birth, a connoisseur of filth by passion, Twitch is a paranoid and mutated rat that walks upright and roots through the dregs of Zaun for treasures only he truly values. Armed with a chem-powered crossbow, Twitch is not afraid to get his paws dirty as he builds a throne of refuse in his kingdom of filth, endlessly plotting the downfall of humanity.

Story

H.I.V.E. Incident Report
Code Violation: Industrial Homicide
Casefile Status: Unsolved
Investigating Agent: Rol, P.

Team responded to report of suspicious character, criminal activity; proceeded to Sump Works, Sector 90TZ. Sector 90TZ notably absent. In its place: sinkhole, smoke, noxious fumes. Interviews with private security indicate urgent need for better private security.

Response team entered sinkhole. Toxic runoff had melted away building wreckage. Two survivors located, one partially liquefied and dripping off catwalk. Six deceased bodies found among wreckage, three of them partial; two appear to predate incident. Causes of death include acute deceleration, caustic liquidation, and/or fatal crossbow wounds. Unclear if lab's destruction was itself the perpetrator's motive or an attempt to cover tracks.

Survivor #1 (Ra Quintava, facility researcher) brought up for interview, but unable to provide statement due to 1) post-traumatic stress and 2) liquefaction of tongue and lower jaw. Awaiting toxin screen and prosthesis fitting.

Search-and-rescue discovered apparent shantytown constructed from refuse. Recovered items include:

57 waterlogged romance novels, illegible, with edits made in crayon
108 bottles, unlabeled (possible toxic runoff or discarded shampoo remnants)
200 pounds chewing gum (possible installation art project)
1 jar toenails, labeled by toe/finger, date, and mood

Survivor #2 (Valori Olant, Sludge Analyst) in recovery; regained lucidity following prolonged therapeutic electrocution. Statement transcript excerpt follows:

V.O.: GOT TO DO SOMETHING -
NURSE: She's lost so much blood --
P.R.: Her co-workers lost a lot more than that --
V.O.: IT'S STILL OUT THERE!
P.R.: Ma'am, I need you to focus. Tell me what he looked like.
V.O.: LIKE A RAT! (pause)

NURSE: Like a what?

P.R.: You mean, small? Beady-eyed? Sorta rat-faced -- ?

V.O.: I MEAN IT LOOKED LIKE A GIANT GODSDAMNED RAT! (pause). WITH A CROSSBOW! (pause).

P.R.: (to nurse) Can we moderate her painkillers?

V.O.: YOU'RE NOT LISTENING! IT'S A HOMICIDAL, PSYCHOPATHIC, GIANT FREAKING RAT!
IN A WAISTCOAT!

P.R.: Nurse?

NURSE: (injecting Olant's arm with sedative) On it.

[EDIT]

V.O.: We were just scientists, working on refining human waste into inexpensive baby formula...

[EDIT] I saw - I don't know how else to - this crazed, enormous RAT - screaming at us! Kicking over vats! Spitting on our food! [EDIT] The lab was sealed. Industrial waste was spilling everywhere. Nowhere to run. [EDIT] I woke up in the dark. Well, the acid had melted my eyeballs. I could SMELL the twitchy bastard inches from my face. It said "NOBODY STEALS TWITCH'S JUICE!" cackled wildly, and skittered off... I can still smell it in my mind. OH MY GODS, I CAN STILL SMELL IT-

End transcript. At this point victim began screaming; has yet to stop.

[UPDATE: Qintava, Written Testimony]

Suspect summary, as reported:

NAME/KNOWN ALIASES: "Twitch."

SEX: Male (unconfirmed).

AGE: Unknown.

HEIGHT: 4'9" (hunched)

WEIGHT: < 99 lbs. (wet).

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Is a giant rat.

STATUS: At large; armed, extremely dangerous; DO NOT ENGAGE.

H.I.V.E - Enforcing Progress!

Blitzcrank

Biography

Blitzcrank is an enormous, near-indestructible steam golem originally built to dispose of hazardous waste in Zaun. Evolved beyond his primary purpose, Blitzcrank selflessly uses his strength and durability to protect others. Able to see past false veneers and artifice to the truth of an intention, Blitzcrank moves to help those in need.

Shortly after the development of hextech, inventors and scientists flocked to Zaun, a place where they could experiment with volatile materials undeterred by the stringent regulations and rules of Piltover. Their experiments often ended in disaster, with entire buildings destroyed and toxic chemicals spilled into nearby streets. A team at the College of Techmaturgy developed steam-powered golems who would remove the hazardous debris, a task deemed too dangerous for even the most desperate of Zaunites.

The golems labored tirelessly through the streets, carrying waste to the growing number of disposal sites around the city. Even among such hardy machines, accidents were common, and the automatons were frequently sent back to the college in pieces. Dredging up slime at the bottom of Zaun was no easy task, and acidic, noxious chemicals gradually wore down their metal shells.

An ambitious young inventor known as Viktor longed to create a durable machine that could clean more effectively and eliminate the need for costly repairs. He gathered broken parts from the retired golems, avoiding the flashier components popular among his peers. Even employing an assemblage of unwanted materials, Viktor designed a more resilient machine.

He named his creation Blitzcrank, hoping the golem would quickly eradicate all waste and become far greater than the sum of his discarded parts. After instilling in Blitzcrank a relentless desire to serve the people of Zaun by removing the toxins in their path, Viktor sent him into the Sump to help.

The golem took Viktor's ideology to heart, believing self-sacrifice and altruism could lead to true greatness for the entire city. Blitzcrank joined the other machines in their cleanup program, leading scouting efforts far past the usual areas of pollution. He fearlessly cleansed toxic neighborhoods of the most noxious chemical spills without any need to return to the college for repairs.

As Blitzcrank encountered other civic dangers, he developed increasingly ambitious plans for his crew of golems, but found his own design was limited such that he could not extend his work beyond cleaning chemical spills. One night, he borrowed Viktor's prized toolbox, and wrenched open his own steam-engine. He reconfigured his mechanics and removed all limits to his function so that he could make an even greater difference in the city.

In the following weeks, Blitzcrank orchestrated neighborhood-wide evacuations to help people avoid toxic fumes, redirected a food distribution system to increase its efficiency, and repaired an elaborate filtering system to dispense clean water into a community well. With every good deed, Blitzcrank's sense of his own purpose solidified, and he gained a consciousness that no other golem had yet achieved.

Viktor noticed the unusual changes in his creation, and sought to replicate Blitzcrank's profound sentience and self-sufficiency in other machines. But Blitzcrank never revealed what had caused his awakening, and without that knowledge, Viktor could not replicate his success.

Blitzcrank roamed the streets of Zaun at all hours, refusing to pause or rest when there might be people in need. His assistance extended beyond just humans to street animals and even broken-down automatons. When a gas fire devastated the Davoran Clocktower, he rescued a family of mechanics and their soot-black cat with his enormous crank-like arm — even stopping to recover a miniature mechanical dancer from a child's bedroom.

No task was too small for the steam golem - in a single day he stopped a chem-punk robbery, caught a child's icefruit before it fell to the pavement, and rounded up a lost poro from a traveling circus before it collided with a malfunctioning velocipede.

As time passed, Blitzcrank learned that several of the people he had previously saved succumbed to illnesses after their exposure to noxious chemicals. Anxious at his inability to help, he turned to his creator. Viktor, who had an interest in evolving humanity beyond its frail mortality, was eager to assist. He promised Blitzcrank that, with his developments in techmaturgy, they could defeat death.

Blitzcrank convinced a family of sump dwellers to try Viktor's approach, and worked with the inventor to install machinery that seamlessly integrated with their bodies to eliminate the disease.

At first, the transition was a success, and the family regained the mobility they had lost since falling ill. But after a few months of good health, their bodies began to fail. Viktor and Blitzcrank worked tirelessly to try to find a cure, but their efforts only delayed the inevitable. Before long, the entire family was dead.

Saddened by their failure, Blitzcrank knew this way of helping people was not his. He parted ways with his creator as a friend and peer, hoping to make the greatest difference he could for the people of Zaun.

While some view Zaun as a chaotic place where reckless experimentation and lawlessness run rampant, Blitzcrank sees only its infinite possibilities. He searches Zaun for ways he can create change for good, paying extra attention to those forgotten or discarded by society. With a bit of axle grease, Blitzcrank believes Zaun will grow into the greatest city Valoran has ever seen.

Story

The plump belly of the Rising Howl looms before me, churning with its endless gears and elaborate ironwork. Some say the Howl is named for the wrought iron wolf that cries atop the apex of the hexdraulic descender; others swear the ghost of a black-veiled gentle-servant haunts the cabin, and when the Howl lifts him away from his lost love in Zaun, the sounds of his moans reverberate and shake its metal core. Many Piltovals, convinced as they are in their own sound judgment, are sure the name refers to nothing more than the cold wind whistling between the crevasses below their city.

But to me the Howl is not a single lone cry. It is an orchestra of noise, a melodic blend of a thousand unique sounds. It is why I am drawn to the machine.

The multi-tiered elevator, supported by three vertical structural beams which span the height of the city, descends to the Promenade level and slows to a lurching halt.

"Disembark for the Promenade!" the conductor announces, her voice magnified by a bell-shaped sonophone. She adjusts her thick goggles as she speaks. "Boundary Markets, College of Techmaturgy, Horticultural Center."

Passengers pour from the descender. Dozens of others board and spread throughout its floors: merchants traveling to Zaun to trade in the night bazaars, workers returning home to sleep, wealthy Zaunites visiting night blooms in glass-domed cultivairs. Then there are the unseen riders who have made the Howl their home. I spy them scurrying in the shadows: plague rats, shadowhares, and viridian beetles.

Sometimes I climb down the crevasses to descend to the Sump, but tonight I long for the harmony of noise I know the descender will create.

Instead of entering through the doorway, I swing around the outside and lock my grip on the bottommost bar where ridged steel brackets frame the glass windows. My metal plates clank as I clamber onto the Howl, drawing stares from the passengers and what looks like a grimace from the conductor. My knowledge of facial expressions grows each day.

Most passengers ride within the compartment, away from the cold and soot, but outside, in the open air, I can hear the satisfying click-clack of mechanical parts snapping into place and the soft hiss of steam releasing as we sink into Zaun. And besides, I don't easily fit through most doors.

A small boy clings to his sump-scrapper father's hand and gapes at me through the window. I wink at him and his mouth opens in what I estimate is surprise. He ducks behind his father.

"Going down!" says the conductor. She rings a large bell and adjusts the dials on a bright red box. I can almost feel the commands buzz as they surge through wires into the descender's engine.

Below us, the iron pinnacles of Zaun's towers and green glass cultivairs glitter like candles in the dimming light. The Howl whirs and creaks as its cranks spiral down against the three towering beams, weighted down with iron, steel, and glass. A blast of steam whistles from the topmost pipe.

Inside the cabin, the sump-scrapper and his child look on as a musician tunes his four-stringed chittarone and begins a sonorous melody. His tune synchronizes with the clacking gears and whirring machinery of the Howl. The father taps his foot to the rhythm. A beetle snaps her pincers as she scrambles away from the man's heavy boot. A gang of chem-punks lean against the wall in soft repose, a pause so unlike their usual frenzied jaunts through the city.

The Howl whirs in its perfect fusion of sounds during our descent. I marvel at the symphony around me and find myself humming along to the deep buzzing tones. The rhythm thrums through me and I wonder if those around me feel it.

"Entresol!" the conductor calls out as the descender slows. A pair of couriers carrying parcels wrapped in twine disembark, along with a crew of chemtech researchers and a crowd of chem-merchants. A merry crowd of Zaunites from the theater district steps aboard.

"Down we go!" she says, ringing her bell, and the Howl responds with a whirl. The descender sinks and the windows mist as vapor pours from pipes above. Beads of water spread across my metallic chest as the harmony of clanking machinery and whooshing steam begins anew.

A discordant murmur interrupts the pattern of sounds. The vibration is subtle, but I can tell something is off. The descender continues as if all was normal, until a jarring clunk breaks its perfect rhythm.

Though I have never dreamed, I know a break in the pattern this abrupt is a machine's most frightening nightmare.

The spiralling gearway is jammed, and the cabin's iron brackets grate against it with a horrible screech. Many lives are at stake and I feel the machine's pain as it braces desperately against the support beams. The entire weight of the Howl heaves against its bending columns and the cabin tilts at a lurching angle. Rivets burst from their seams as metal is pulled away from itself.

We wobble for a moment, then drop.

Inside the cabin, passengers scream and grasp at the nearest railing as they plunge. This is a different kind of howl.

I tighten my hold on the cabin's bottommost platform. I extend my other arm, launching it toward one of the three vertical structural beams. The iron column is slippery in the mist and my grip misses it by inches. I retract my arm and steam blasts from my back as I try again, whizzing it toward a second beam. Another miss.

Time slows. Inside the cabin, the chem-punks cling to a ledge while the viridian beetle flies out an open window. The sump-scrapper and his child brace themselves against the glass, which fractures under their weight. The boy tumbles out, scrabbling at the frame with his fingers before he slips and falls.

I reach up and catch the boy in mid-flight, then retract my arm.

"Hold on," I say.

The child clings to the plates on my back.

I fire my arm up toward the support beam once more, and this time my hand meets solid metal with a resounding clang as I secure my hold. My other arm is forced to extend as it's wrenched down by the plunging cabin, so much that I feel my joints might fracture. Suspended in midair, I try to steady my grip.

With a great jolt, my arm jerks as the descender halts its freefall. It shakes from the sudden stop, now supported only by my arm. The boy shudders as he tightens his grip on my back.

The Howl is still fifty feet above the ground, hovering over the Sump-level buildings. My overlapping metal plates groan as they strain against the weight and I concentrate all my efforts on holding myself together. If I fall, the Howl falls with me, along with all its passengers.

While locking my arm onto the support beam, I slide my arm down the pillar. We drop ten feet and the cabin sways precariously before stabilizing again.

"Sorry about that!" I shout. Statements of empathy can be reassuring to humans in moments of crisis.

I must try again. I must be strong.

I release my grip on the support column ever so slightly, and with a piercing screech we gently slide down the remaining forty feet to the ground. My valves sigh as they contract.

Passengers echo my sighs as they stumble through the doors and broken windows into the Sump level, leaning on each other for support.

The boy on my back breathes rapidly as he holds my neck. My arms whirl as I retract them and lower myself to the floor, crouching down so the child can touch the ground. He scrambles back to his father, who embraces him.

The conductor emerges from the descender and looks at me.

“You saved us. All of us,” she says, her voice shaking from what I think is shock. “Thank you.”

“I am simply fulfilling my purpose,” I say. “I am glad you are not hurt. Have a good day.”

She smiles, then turns to direct the crowd of Zaunites who have gathered to offer their assistance to the passengers and begin repairs. One of the chem-punk girls carries the musician’s chittarone for him as he crawls from the descender. Several of the theater-folk comfort an elderly man.

Two Hex-mechanics stumble toward me and I direct them to a medical officer who is setting up a tented repair station. The murmurs of the passengers and the hissing groans of the wounded descender blend with the whirrs and churning of the Sump. The steam-engine within my chest murmurs along, and I am moved to whistle a tune.

The boy turns and waves shyly at me.

I wave back.

He runs to catch up with his father, his heavy boots tapping a rhythm on the cobblestones. Shifting wheels sing and gears click-clack within the belly of the Rising Howl. The viridian beetle snaps her pincers in time with the beat as she zooms away into the Sump.

Dr Mundo

Biography

Utterly insane, unrepentantly homicidal, and horrifyingly purple, Dr. Mundo is what keeps many of Zaun's citizens indoors on particularly dark nights. This monosyllabic monstrosity seems to want nothing more than pain – both the giving of it, and the receiving of it. Wielding his massive meat cleaver as if it were weightless, Mundo is infamous for capturing and torturing dozens of Zaun's citizens for his nefarious "operations," which seem to have no overall point or goal. He is brutal. He is unpredictable. He goes where he pleases. He is also not, technically, a doctor.

Stories differ as to the first sighting of Zaun's unpredictable purple madman. Some say they first saw him as a baby, crawling through the Piltover marketplace and terrifying the upper-class aristocrats with his foul smell. Others say he was born in Zaun and spent the first years of his life sloshing through the sewers and choking the life out of sumprats. Only one thing is for sure: when he was roughly three years old, he arrived on the doorstep of the Zaun Asylum for the Irreparably Troubled.

The other inmates of the asylum kept Mundo at a distance, but the asylum staff found the boy a source of constant fascination. They looked at him not as a child to be raised, but as a patient – a thing to be studied. Why was he purple? Who could have survived giving birth to someone of his size?

Within a year of his arrival, the doctors realized his skin was never going to change from its shockingly bright shade. When Mundo turned four, they discovered the extent of his unprecedented strength when he accidentally crushed an orderly's windpipe for not bringing him his favorite type of candy (toenails). When Mundo turned six, they discovered he had a relationship to pain that was... unusual. To say the least.

Specifically, Mundo didn't seem to mind pain. More than that, he actively sought it out. If left unsupervised, he'd stick sharp instruments into his shoulders. If he was placed anywhere near other patients, it'd only be a matter of minutes until one or both of them could be heard screaming in agony.

Soon the asylum staff tired of merely observing Mundo. It was time, they decided, to start experimenting. Whether they began their tests out of medical curiosity, a desire for scientific breakthrough, or sheer boredom is unknown. Whatever their reasons, the doctors unquestionably put a great deal of effort into understanding the purple enigma before them.

Over the next several years, they tested his tolerance for pain. They'd stick needles into his fingernails, and he'd giggle. They'd put hot irons to his feet, and he'd fall asleep. Soon, scientific curiosity gave way to outright frustration: they couldn't get Mundo to react negatively to pain at all, and they couldn't understand why. Not only that, but whatever damage they could do to him invariably healed itself within a few hours.

Throughout his teenage years, Mundo's life consisted of complete isolation and routine torture.

He'd never been happier.

He came to see the doctors as aspirational figures. If pain was Mundo's passion, it was seemingly these doctors' life work: their myriad attempts to push beyond his pain threshold grew more

unconventional as the years went on, including dipping his feet in acid and throwing flesh-eating mites on his face.

The asylum doctors were initially amused when the purple teen began to refer to himself not as “Mundo,” but as “*Doctor Mundo*.”

He’d steal a syringe from an orderly and fill it with a mixture of cavernberry juice from breakfast and god-knows-what from his chamber pot. “*Mundo make medicine!*” he’d happily exclaim before jabbing the concoction into his own forehead.

In time, however, Mundo grew tired of experimenting on himself.

Later, many would speculate what Mundo’s motivations were. Some assumed he was taking revenge for the years of torture he endured at the hands of the asylum staff. Others thought he was merely a psychopathic monster with no sense of morality.

The truth was much simpler: Mundo had decided it was time to put his research into practice.

One night, Mundo snuck into the kitchen. There, he found a massive meat cleaver. “Medical” blade in hand, Mundo proceeded to go from room to room, “operating” on every “patient” he found with no logic to his method of “treatment” other than what would amuse him the most at any given moment.

By daybreak, every single person in the asylum was “cured,” save for Mundo.

He donned a physician’s coat from one of his victims, his massive muscles ripping it as he pulled it over his gargantuan frame. Mundo had realized his dream. He was a doctor! As a new member of a long and illustrious line, he had to share his medicinal skills with the rest of the world. His work had just begun.

He barged through the locked doors of the asylum and past the steps where he’d been left so many years ago. Mundo walked into the streets of Zaun, a smile on his face and a spring in his step.

The doctor was in.

Story

It has been while, Mundo thought, stroking the massive purple tongue that hung from his mouth like an executed criminal swinging from gallows, *since Mundo made a housecall*.

He rolled out of his bed (a large wooden box filled with sharpened knives and rusty nails), brushed his teeth (with a nail file), and ate breakfast (a cat). Mundo felt exuberant. He felt alive.

Today was a fine day for practicing medicine.

He spotted his first patient hawking shimmerdrops just outside Ranker’s Limb Maintenance. The man limped around in a circle, shouting at everyone within arm’s length about how shimmerdrops would make their eyes roll into the backs of their heads and how if they didn’t buy some right now, right this second, then they were damn idiots and did you just give him a condescending look? Because he’ll kill you and your family and your family’s family.

Mundo took out his notepad, a tool he often used to mark down observations about his patients, both past and present. The notepad was large, yellow, and imaginary.

Patient exhibits signs of mania, Mundo would have written if he hadn't been tracing random squiggles in the air with a meaty finger. *Possible infection of nervous system via cranial virus*, he might have inscribed if he were capable of such multisyllabic thought.

"MUNDO CURE HEAD AND FACE AREA GOOD," he said to himself.

Rank was just about to pack up his shimmerdrops and head home for the night. He needed to get new shoes. These ones rubbed his feet raw when he walked, and at the end of a long day's work, hadn't he earned the soft leather of grayeels?

As Rank was thinking this, a huge purple monster jumped out of the shadows and yelled, "MUNDO HAS RESULTS OF YOUR BLOOD WORK."

Mundo left his first patient more or less as he found him (save for a few limbs) and took to the Commercia Fantastica, a market specializing primarily in gearwork toys. Though most of the shops were closed, Mundo spied a lone Zaunite teetering to and fro as he stumbled down the path. The Zaunite sang a song of a Piltovan beauty and the shy boy from the undercity who loved her, except he seemed to have forgotten most of the words apart from "big ol' eyes" and "gave it to her." An empty bottle dangled from his hand, and he looked as if he hadn't had a bath in months.

Was this man afflicted by the same disease that had ravaged the shimmerdrop dealer? Was this a virus? An epidemic in the making? Mundo had to act fast.

This was clearly a man in need of medical attention.

"TAKE TWO OF THESE AND TALK TO MUNDO IN MORNING," the purple monstrosity said as he tossed a meat cleaver into the drunk's back.

Mundo descended into Zaun's Sump level. If there was a virus going around, chances were it originated here. There must be a patient zero somewhere. If he could just cure the first sufferer of this mystery disease, Mundo knew he could cure the rest of Zaun.

But how was Mundo to find one specific patient in the sprawl of the Sump level? What steps would he take to isolate, quarantine, and fix this most suffering of Zaunites? How would he—

Mundo heard something. Footsteps, and a rhythmic clang of metal against metal.

He followed the noise as carefully and quietly as he could – wouldn't want to spook the patient into running away and infecting even more people – and found exactly what he was looking for.

A young boy. No older than fifteen, probably, with a shock of white hair and a large metal sword-looking-thing in his hand. He had some sort of hourglass tattooed onto his face. Maybe a warning? A symbol that he was not to be approached under any circumstances?

Mundo knew he'd found him. Patient zero.

It would be a complex operation, requiring skill, planning, a careful eye and—

“YOU MIGHT FEEL A LITTLE STING,” the creature said, leaping out. His enormous purple form hurtling through the air, massive cleaver in hand, tongue flapping in the wind.

The boy was surprised, but not unprepared. Anybody hanging out in the Sump knew to be ready for trouble at a moment’s notice, and the kid had plenty of time to prepare.

Nothing but time, in fact.

No two ways about it: this was a troublesome patient.

He refused to answer Mundo’s questions about his medical history, and repeatedly evaded Mundo’s attempts to make him take his medicine. He repeated himself over and over again (perhaps suffering from a case of physical amnesia?) and had no respect for Dr. Mundo’s authority.

The two scuffled over the child’s sickness for what felt like hours. Mundo made what he thought were very salient points about the merits of treatment, but the child constantly evaded Mundo’s attempts to help him.

Mundo grew tired of arguing with the boy. He mustered up one final attempt at treatment, wielding his precision scalpel with the artistry of a Demacian duelist. The words of his medical vows – “MUNDO FIX ALL THINGS, MUNDO DO MEDICINE VERY HARD” – ran through his head again and again. His desire to cure this child filled him with purpose and determination.

He swung with all his might.

The treatment was a success.

But then – somehow – the treatment reversed itself. Whatever good Mundo had accomplished in his last attempt at a cure was suddenly undone. To Mundo’s utter confusion, the child scurried away, utterly uncured.

Mundo screamed in irritation.

“WHY CAN’T MUNDO SAVE THEM ALL?” he screamed to the sky.

Not every operation was a success. Mundo would be the first to admit that. Still, Mundo tried to focus on the positive. Apart from this most recent patient, Mundo had helped an awful lot of people. He’d done a full day’s work, and now it was time to rest.

As the sun came up, Mundo retired home and tucked himself into bed. Who knew what tomorrow might bring? Another patient to help. Another epidemic to stop.

A doctor’s work was never done.

Janna

Biography

Armed with the power of Runeterra's gales, Janna is a mysterious, elemental wind spirit who protects the dispossessed of Zaun. Some believe she was brought into existence by the pleas of Runeterra's sailors who prayed for fair winds as they navigated treacherous waters and braved rough tempests. Her favor and protection has since been called into the depths of Zaun, where Janna has become a beacon of hope to those in need. No one knows where or when she will appear, but more often than not, she's come to help.

Many of Runeterra's sailors have strange and unusual superstitions, which is no wonder as they often live or die by the tempestuous whims of the weather. Some captains insist on pouring salt onto the deck so the sea doesn't notice they're from the shore. Others make sure to throw the first fish they catch back into the water as a show of mercy. It's not surprising, then, that most implore the wind itself for steadfast breezes, calm seas, and clear skies.

Many believe the spirit Janna was born out of these prayers.

She started small. Seafarers would sometimes spot a bright blue bird just before a healthy tailwind billowed their sails. Others could swear they'd hear a whistling in the air right before a storm, as if to warn them of its approach. As word of these benevolent omens spread, sightings of the bird grew more common. Some swore they had seen the bird transform into a woman. With tapered ears and flowing hair, this mysterious maiden was said to float above the water and direct the wind with a flick of her staff.

Seafarers created ramshackle shrines of seasparrow bones and shining oyster shells which they tucked into the bows of their ships. The more successful vessels built their shrines as figureheads on their masts, hoping their more ostentatious displays of faith would be rewarded with even better winds.

Eventually, Runeterra's seamen agreed upon a name for this wind spirit: "Janna," an ancient Shuriman word meaning "guardian." As more sailors came to believe in Janna and made increasingly elaborate offerings to gain her favor, she grew ever stronger. Janna helped explorers traverse new waters, blew ships from treacherous reefs, and – on particularly starless nights – wrapped the comfort of a warm breeze around a homesick sailor's shoulders. For those sailing with ill intent – pirates, raiders, and the like – Janna was sometimes said to blow them off course with sudden squalls and storms.

Janna took great joy in her work. Whether helping people or punishing the deserving, she felt happy to watch over Runeterra's oceans.

For as long as Janna could remember, a single isthmus separated the western and eastern oceans of Valoran. In order to move from the west to the east, or from the east to the west, ships would have to brave the long, incredibly dangerous waters around the tip of the southern continent. Most ships subsequently made offerings to Janna for strong winds that would expedite their perilous journey around the rocky coast.

The city fathers of the bustling trade city on the isthmus's coast tired of watching ships make the long trek around the southern continent, which could often take many months. They hired the most

innovative scientists to use the rich chemical resources recently discovered in the area to create a massive waterway that would unite Valoran's major seas.

Word of the canal spread like a pox amongst sailors. Such a passage would open up boundless trade opportunities, allow for easier passage through dangerous waters, reduce time at sea and introduce the transportation of perishable goods. It would bring the east to the west, the west to the east, and above all: it would bring change.

With the canal in place, sailors wouldn't need Janna's winds to keep their ships safe from Valoran's cliffs. They wouldn't need to build elaborate shrines or watch the stormy horizon for bluebirds. Their ships' safety and speed no longer depended on an unpredictable deity, but the ingenuity of man.

And so, as construction progressed over the decades, Janna fell out of favor. Her shrines grew ragged, picked apart by gulls, and seldom was her name whispered, even as the waters grew sharp and choppy with winter.

Janna felt herself weaken and her powers fade. When she tried to summon a squall, she'd only conjure a light draft. If she transformed into her bird form, she could only fly for a few minutes before needing to rest. She'd meant so much to those at sea only a few years prior – was this how easily they could forget someone who just wanted to keep them safe and honor their prayers? Janna was saddened by her slow decline into irrelevance and as the canal reached completion, all that remained of her was a faded breeze.

The opening of the canal was a joyful celebration. Thousands of chemtech devices were placed across the isthmus. The city fathers gathered for the ceremonial igniting of the charge as travelers from all over the world watched and waited, smiles on their faces and pride in their hearts.

The devices activated. Chemical fogs of molten rock bloomed. Booms echoed through the isthmus.

The cliff faces began to crack. The ground began to shake. Those assembled heard a roar of water and a hiss of gas.

That is when the screaming started.

In the years to come, no one would know the exact cause of the disaster. Some said it was the instability of the chem bombs, while others argued it was a miscalculation by the engineers. Whatever the cause, the explosions caused a chain reaction of earthquakes that shook the isthmus to its core. Entire districts collapsed into the ocean, and nearly half of the city's denizens suddenly found themselves fighting for their lives against the clashing currents of the western and eastern seas.

As thousands sank beneath the tides, they begged for help, praying for someone to save them. They called out for the name that, until recently, their hearts had always beckoned in times of great danger on the high seas:

Janna.

Struck by a sudden surge of desperate pleas for aid, Janna felt herself materialize with greater power than she'd ever felt before.

Many of those who had fallen into the water had already drowned, but as clouds of toxic chem-gas leaked from cracks in the streets, poisoning and suffocating the hundreds of people unlucky enough to breathe them, Janna knew how to help.

She disappeared into the bleak, billowing gas, its acrid grasp overwhelming the helpless victims of the great canal's birth. Holding her staff high, she closed her eyes as wind swirled around her, the vortex so powerful that those who had summoned her feared they might be swallowed whole or ripped to pieces. Her staff glowed a brighter and brighter blue until she finally slammed it down, blowing the gas away in one ferocious burst of air. Those who had summoned Janna caught their breath and looked upon the woman who had saved them, vowing never to forget her again.

With that, a gust of wind blew through the streets, and Janna was gone... though some swore they saw a bright blue bird make a nest high atop the iron and glass spires overlooking the city.

Years after the city called Zaun was repaired and the shining town of Piltover was built above it, Janna's name endures in countless stories that tell of the wandering wind spirit who appears in times of great need. When the Zaun Gray grows thick, some say Janna blows it away, then vanishes as quickly as she came. When a Chem-Baron's thug goes too far or a victim's screams go unanswered, a fearsome torrent of wind might sweep through the alley and aid those who others are unwilling to help.

Some say Janna is a myth: an optimistic fairy tale that Zaun's most desperate tell themselves to bring an ounce of hope to their hour of need. Others – the ones who think of Janna when the wind whistles through narrow corridors of the city or huddle around handmade shrines (now crafted of scrap and gearworks rather than bird bones) – know better. When the gust rattles the shutters and blows the laundry off the line, Janna is surely in the air. Every Progress Day, no matter how cold the weather, the believers throw open their windows and doors so Janna can blow away the stale air of the year past and welcome the new. Even skeptics can't help but feel their spirits lift when they spy a curious blue bird swooping through the streets of Zaun. Though none can be sure when, how, or if Janna will appear, most everyone can agree on one thing: it's nice to have somebody watching over you.

Story

They think Zaun is where the losers live.

They won't admit it, of course – they'll smile through their teeth and pat us on the back and tell us that Piltover would be nowhere without Zaun. Our hard workers! Our bustling trade! Our chemtech that everyone in Piltover pretends they don't buy, except they constantly do! Zaun is a vital part of Piltover's culture, they'll say.

All lies. Obviously.

They think Zaun is where the idiots go. People too stupid to make it in Piltover's golden towers.

People like me.

I spent months dealing shimmer so I could afford to apply for Clan Holloran's apprenticeship. I studied every crusty, dog-eared book I could find on gearwork machinery. I built a prototype gearbrace for people with broken or arthritic wrists that increased their mobility. I did everything I could have done to earn an apprenticeship in Piltover. I even made it to the final stage of the vetting process: a face-to-face meeting with Boswell Holloran himself.

They said it was a formality. Just a way to welcome me to the family.

He entered the room, looked down at my Gray-stained clothes, and laughed a strangled, joyless laugh. He said, "Sorry, my boy – we don't take sump-rats here."

He never even sat down.

So now I'm back here. In Zaun. One more idiot.

The Gray rolls through the streets, welcoming me back. Most days, it's thin enough that you can breathe deep without coughing up something wet. Today, though, is what we call a Grayout. You choke with every breath. Your chest feels tight. Can't see much past your fingertips. I want to run, but I know there's nowhere to run to. The Gray feels like it's closing in on me, crushing me, smothering me.

These are the times I pray to Janna.

Not everyone in Zaun believes she's real, but my mother always had faith. She told me a bluebird hovered outside her window on the day of my birth, and she knew – she knew – it was Janna telling her I was going to be fine.

She was wrong, of course. I wasn't fine, in the end. Couple of years ago, she – my mother – died while sump-scrapping, and I had to raise myself with the few gears she left me. Then, the usual: couldn't make friends. Got beaten up a lot. Boy I loved didn't love me back. Tried to study, tried to think my way up to Piltover. Couldn't. Figured Janna had forgotten about me.

But I still keep the pendant my mother gave me: a wooden engraving depicting the bluebird she saw. Just in case of moments like these.

So I sit on the wet ground because I don't care enough to find a bench, and I take out the bluebird pendant I always keep tucked in my shirt, and I talk to Janna.

Not out loud, of course – don't need people thinking I'm some chem-burnt freak – but still, I talk to her.

I don't ask her for anything. I just tell her about my day, and the day before that, and how scared I am that I'll never become anything worthwhile and that I'll die down here knee-deep in the Sump with nothing to show for it just like my mother, and that sometimes I just want to run away somewhere I can breathe and stop being so frightened and not feel like crying all the time and how I hate myself for feeling like I want to cry because I have it so much easier than some other people, and how sometimes I think about throwing myself into the chem pools of the Sump, just throwing myself in with my mother where I'd let myself sink to the bottom and my lungs would fill with fluid because then it'd be over, at least. I tell Janna I hope she's okay. I hope she's happy, wherever she is.

That's when I feel the breeze caress my cheek. Just a light flutter, but it's there. Soon, I can feel it blow hair across my face. The wind whistles loud and fast, and soon it's whipping my coat in the air and I feel as though I'm at the center of a maelstrom.

The Gray swirls before me, pushed up by a breeze that seems to flow from everywhere at once. The fog slowly dissipates, and I can see other passersby on the Entresol level watching it float away.

The wind stops.

The Gray clears.

I can breathe.

Not just small, cautious gasps, but deep breaths that fill my lungs with cold, fresh air. No longer veiled in Gray, the sun shines past the towers of Piltover into Zaun itself.

I can see the Piltoverians above, peering down at us. Without the Gray clouding their view, they can see us from their lofty bridges and balconies. I don't think they like it very much. Nobody wants to be reminded they live above a slum; I see a few scowls.

That's when I see him again: Boswell Holloran. Holding a sweetcake in his hand, looking down at me again. An expression of disgust on his face, just like before.

I'm so busy staring at his contemptuous face that I don't notice the presence behind me until her hand is on my shoulder.

"It's okay," she says, and I know without turning who it is.

She squeezes my shoulder, then kneels and crosses her arms in front of my chest, pulling me into a hug.

"It's going to be okay," she says.

Strands of her hair fall onto my shoulders. She smells like the air after a long rain.

"It might not be okay now. You might not be okay for a while. And that's fine. But someday, without knowing exactly when or why or how it happened, you'll feel happy," she says. My face is warm and wet and I don't know when I started crying but it's a relief, like the clouds are clearing, and I hold her arms and she holds me, just telling me over and over that it's okay, that she's here, that things will be better.

I don't know how long she holds me, but soon I see everyone on Zaun's Entresol and the balconies of Piltover above are staring.

Before I can say anything, she says, "Don't think about them. Just take care of yourself. Will you do that for me?"

I try to speak, but instead I just nod.

"Thank you," she says, and she kisses my wet cheek and gives me one last, quick squeeze.

She rises and glides past me. For the first time, I see her in her entirety – a tall, ethereal figure that I would've assumed was from my imagination if she hadn't just touched me. I notice her long, pointed ears. Feet that don't touch the ground. Hair flowing in the wind, even right now when there isn't any. Eyes so blue I feel a little cold just looking at her.

But then she smiles, winks, and says, "You'll want to watch this next part."

There's a massive gust of wind, so fast and sharp I have to cover my eyes. When I open them again she's gone, but the wind is still blowing. It blows up toward Piltover and its gawking citizens.

It whistles as it picks up speed and strength, and the Piltoverians run for cover but it's too late, the breeze hits them full force, sending their frocks sailing and mussing their hair. Boswell Holloran shrieks in terror as the wind launches him off the balcony.

It seems as if he's about to plummet toward certain death, but another gust of wind shoots up toward him, and his descent slows significantly, as if the wind is guiding him down. You wouldn't

know it to look at him, though. Even though he's falling with all the velocity of a tumbling leaf, He screams the entire way down. Very high pitched. Very undignified.

His clothes flap upward, smacking him in the face as he descends, until he's hovering a few inches above a puddle.

"I—," he begins, before the wind disappears altogether and he plops ass-first into the puddle, ruining what I assume was a very expensive ensemble. He yelps in a mixture of surprise, pain, and irritation, splashing around like an angry child. He tries to get to his feet, only to slip and fall back down all over again. If I'm being completely honest, he looks like an idiot.

And I can't stop laughing.

Singed

Biography

Singed is a deranged chemist from Zaun who is as brilliant as he is amoral. A child prodigy, he taught himself the ways of chem-tech and biological experimentation, constantly testing the boundaries of conventional science. For over a century he has continued to refine his art, having extended the natural span of his life through a mix of volatile chemicals and extensive self-performed surgery. He lets nothing – not morality, and certainly not other people – come between him and the knowledge he seeks.

Urgot

Biography

Once a powerful Noxian headsman, Urgot was betrayed by the empire for which he had killed so many. Bound in iron chains, he was forced to learn the true meaning of strength in the Dredge—a prison mine deep beneath Zaun. Emerging in a disaster that spread chaos throughout the city, he now casts an imposing shadow over its criminal underworld. Raising his victims on the very chains that once enslaved him, he will purge his new home of the unworthy, making it a crucible of pain.

Urgot always believed that he was worthy. As a headsman, an executioner of the weak, he was a living embodiment of the Noxian ideal that strength should rule, making it a reality with every swing of his axe. His pride swelled as the bodies piled ever higher behind him, and his intimidating presence kept countless warbands in line.

Even so, a single word was all it took to seal his fate. Sent to distant Zaun to eliminate a supposed conspiracy against the ruler of Noxus, Urgot realized too late the mission was a setup, removing him from the capital even as the usurper Swain seized control of it. Surrounded by agents of the chem-barons, and enraged that everything he believed was a lie, Urgot was dragged down into the chemtech mines beneath Zaun. He was defeated. He was *enslaved*. He was not worthy after all. He endured the mine's hellish conditions in grim silence, waiting for death.

In the Dredge, death came in many forms...

The mine's warden, Baron Voss, would sometimes offer freedom in return for a prisoner's tortured confession—granting it with the edge of her blade. From the screams that echoed through the tunnels, Urgot learned about the wonders of Zaun. There was something special about the city, something marvelous and evident even in the secrets that spilled from slit throats. Urgot didn't know what it was until he was finally brought before Voss, fearing that she would break him.

But as the baron's blade cut into his flesh, Urgot realized that his body was already wracked with agony, far beyond anything Voss could inflict. The Dredge had made him stronger than he'd ever been as a headsman.

Pain was Zaun's secret. His laughter drove Voss back to the surface, and a reign of anarchy began in the depths.

Seizing control of the prison, Urgot reveled in new trials of survival. He found the parts of his body that were weakest, and replaced them with scavenged machinery, technology created by those who would die without it—necessity being the mother of pain.

The guards could no longer enter the areas Urgot had carved out of Voss' grasp. The prisoners themselves were more afraid of their new master than they were of her. Many even grew to hold a fanatical respect for Urgot, as they were forced to hear his feverish sermons on the nature of power, his grip tightening around the necks of those who would not listen.

Only when a Noxian agent arrived in the Dredge was Urgot finally forced to confront his own past. Though the spy recognized him and sought his aid in escaping, Urgot beat him mercilessly, and hurled his broken body into the darkness.

It was not strength that ruled Noxus, Urgot now realized, but men... and men were weak. There should be no rulers, no lies, nothing to interfere with the pure chaos of survival. Starting a riot that ignited a chemtech vein within the mine, Urgot shook the city above, and cracked the prison open in an explosion that rivaled the birth of Zaun itself. Many prisoners died, and thousands more disappeared into the Sump beneath the city. But the worthy, as ever, survived.

Since then, Urgot's reign of terror has only grown. A hideous fusion of industrial machinery and Noxian brutality, he slaughters chem-barons and their lackeys one by one, gathering his own following among Zaun's downtrodden masses. To any who find themselves spared in his murderous rampages, he delivers a message: he is not here to lead, but to *survive*. If you are worthy, you will survive too.

And the trials... they are only just beginning.

Story

We were running through the streets of Zaun. The pipes and stained glass were blurred, smeared colors against the Gray, and the fog that hung in every chem-soaked alley. Zori was to my left, all matted hair and rusty knives—her smile was the only sign that she was beautiful beneath the grime. Blenk was behind her, with a spray-philter full of glowing paint and a head dripping with ideas. Scuzz brought up the rear, every bit the kind of lug you'd expect to be called Scuzz. But he was *our* Scuzz, every scuzzy bit of him.

He yelled our gang's name into the billowing smoke, marking the night as ours.

"Sump Riders!"

We laughed, and yelled it too. We were young, we were alive. Nothing could stop us. It would have to catch us first, and we were still running.

The city itself seemed to carry us forward as we slid down into its depths, farther and farther from the sump-scrapper we'd just robbed and left bleeding in the gutter. His cogs still jangled in our pockets. More than enough for a bit of fun. We were on our way to the Black Lanes, the market at the heart of Zaun.

"Think they'll sell us any shimmerwine?" Zori asked. "Bleedin' that sumper made me a mite parched."

Blenk scoffed. "They'd sell shimmer to a *child* in the Lanes. And then they'd sell the child."

"Gob it, both of you," Scuzz growled, catching up. His face showed a kind of concern that I'd never seen before, a frown slowly forming. "Can't you hear that?"

I squinted my eyes and peered into the night—since you can't squint with ears, you ken? Not without a few augments. "I can't hear nothin'," I said with a shrug. "Not even a plague rat's brown cough."

"That's what I mean," Scuzz muttered.

And the silence after... It weighed heavier even than Piltover, glittering above us.

Pushing slowly into the market through the fog, we found dram-carts overturned, their wheels spinning lazily. Stalls abandoned, still full of exotic wares. There was a stench in the air that

reminded me of the sump-scrapper—a stench strong enough to make my eyes water, when even seeing him bleed had not.

And there were bodies here, too. Many of them were wearing a chem-baron's emblem. They'd been torn to pieces, the cobbles red beneath them.

It was a massacre.

"Nasty bit of work, eh?" Blenk grinned, rooting through one of the dead men's pockets, carefully picking away giblets of flesh. "Guess that means we're gettin' a discount."

Zori only shuddered. "There's someone... *in there*," she whispered, pointing into a cloud of raw chemtech that was spewing from a pipe in the clearing beyond. It was the source of the stench that was only growing stronger, crushing my senses, somehow making my ears hum. "It's... It's a man."

"That's not a man," I murmured, following her gaze into the growing green veil. "Not anymore..."

It was a hulking shape, with mechanical legs and many guns, fused savagely to its flesh the way a mechanic would fuse two pipes. Burning and searing. Just looking at it made me wince. In one hand, it held a much smaller figure aloft. A man, choking in the chemtech cloud. As he writhed, the monster taunted him, its voice a mechanical buzz vibrating deep in my gut, threatening to loose the bowels within.

"This is what you want," it almost cooed, cruelly forcing the man's face into a rent in the pipe, the chemtech gas gushing out around them. "Breathe it. Make it yours."

But the man only writhed, kicking uselessly, growing weaker and weaker—until finally, only his augmented arm still jittered, echoing his last, desperate thoughts. Even after they ceased.

And with that flash of brass, it hit me. The dangling corpse, he was a chem-baron, the only kind of person who could afford newfangled kit. Baron Crimson, or somesuch. These were his men, scattered around us.

Were his men. And now...

"We have to get out of here," I gasped, turning from the carnage to my friends behind me. But I couldn't see them. The gas from the pipe, it was spreading, a toxic green cloud making it harder to breathe... Harder to... to...

Run. We had to run.

I could hear Zori, Blenk and Scuzz panicking and coughing somewhere nearby. I reached out into the swirl for anyone, *anything*, to pull along with me as I made my escape. But there was only the sound of a body slumping softly to the ground, a spray-philter rattling across the cobbles.

Blenk. I stumbled as the truth hit me. He was gone.

And the worst was still to come.

The monster pushed itself through the cloud, a massive, armored leg slamming down beside me, and then another, and *another*—all revealed chemtech-filled tubing, and protruding gun muzzles that smoked with the very same heat still smoldering in the bodies around us.

I could taste it at the back of my throat, a truth as bitter as the acrid air. I was going to die here.

The monster grabbed me by my ragged scruff, lifting me close enough to see its face. It was a visage of terror, all the more horrifying because it was human. More human than the rest of him, at least.

His tox-mask glowed as it vented pure alchemy, but his eyes were somehow even brighter.

Intelligent. Almost seeming to smile as they took my fear in.

"A son of Zaun. What is your name?" he growled as he brought me closer. His accent was sharp, but I couldn't place it. His words battered my resolve, each one hitting with the force of his hate.

I couldn't even stammer an answer.

He laughed. "The baron, you recognize him? Like many, he tried to rule this city, casting countless people into the depths, to mine this..." He breathed in deeply as the gases swirled. "...this *misery*.

Now he is no more, killed by that which gave him power over others. It is you, the gutter rat, at home in the squalor, who survives. So, tell me, which of you is stronger? Which of you *deserves to live*?"

Suddenly, I was falling back to the ground, landing on top of my friends. They were shuddering, choking as the chem-baron had. Scuzz, his mouth was foaming. And Zori... I closed my eyes against the tears before I could see what had happened to her.

"Run," the monster said. "Tell the city how you survived and a baron did not. You will be my witness. The first of many."

I hesitated.

"*Run!*" he bellowed. I saw Zori then, sobbing, reaching out for help with the last of her strength. I didn't want this to be the way I would remember her. I wanted to remember her smile. I still do.

But I was running again, through the streets of Zaun.

And can you imagine how it felt to realize, with burning lungs and heaving breaths, that my screams were the message I was to bear?

I was alive. My friends were not.

I was worthy.

Viktor

Biography

The herald of a new age of technology, Viktor has devoted his life to the advancement of humankind. An idealist who seeks to lift people to a new level of understanding, he believes that only by embracing a glorious evolution of technology can humanity's full potential be realized. With a body augmented by steel and science, Viktor is zealous in his pursuit of this bright future.

Viktor was born in Zaun on the borders of the Entresol level, and, encouraged by his artisan parents, discovered a passion for invention and building. He devoted every waking minute to his studies, hating to interrupt his work even to eat or sleep. Even worse was having to rapidly relocate if there was a nearby chemical spill, accidental detonation or incoming chem-cloud. Abandoning his work, even for a short time, was anathema to Viktor.

In a bid to impose a level of order and certainty on his world, Viktor researched Zaun's many accidents and came to realize that almost all of them were the result of human error, not mechanical failure. He offered his services to the local businesses, developing inventions that made them far safer working environments. Most turned him away, but one - the Fredersen Chem-forge - took a chance on this earnest young man.

Viktor's inventions in automation reduced the number of accidents in the forge to zero within a month. Soon, other establishments sought his work and Viktor's designs became common in Zaun, improving production with every innovation that removed human error from a process. Eventually, at the age of nineteen, he was surprised to be offered a place in Zaun's prestigious Academy of Techmaturgy. But Viktor's work had attracted the eye of Professor Stanwick of Piltover, who convinced him to leave Zaun and travel to Piltover's academy instead. There, he could work in the most advanced laboratories and gain access to all the resources the City of Progress could offer. Thrilled to be singled out, Viktor accepted his offer and took up residence in Piltover, where he refined his craft and sought to perfect his theorems in ways that would benefit everyone.

Viktor worked with Piltover's best and brightest; including an insufferable genius named Jayce. The two were equally matched in intellect, but where Viktor was methodical, logical and thorough, Jayce was flamboyant and arrogant. The two worked together frequently, but never truly became friends.

Often, the two would butt heads over their perceptions of intuition vs logic in the process of invention, but a level of mutual respect developed as each saw the flawed brilliance in the other.

In the midst of his studies in Piltover, a major chem-spill devastated entire districts of Zaun, and Viktor returned home to offer his help in the rescue efforts. By grafting a sophisticated series of cognitive loops upon existing automata-technology, he crafted a custom-built golem, Blitzcrank, to help in the clean-up. Blitzcrank was instrumental in saving scores of lives and appeared to develop a level of sentience beyond anything Viktor had envisioned.

Even with the spill contained, Viktor remained in Zaun to help those afflicted by the released toxins. With the golem's help, he attempted to use his techmaturgical brilliance to save those whose lives had been blighted by the spill. Their attempt was ultimately unsuccessful in preventing more deaths, and the two parted ways. Though Viktor was distraught at the loss of life in Zaun, the work taught him a great deal about the merging of human anatomy with technology and how mortal anatomy could be enhanced with technology.

When Viktor returned to Piltover, weeks later, it was to find that Professor Stanwick had held a symposium on Blitzcrank and presented Viktor's researches as his own. Viktor lodged formal complaints with the masters of the college, but his impassioned claim that he had designed Blitzcrank fell on deaf ears. He turned to Jayce to verify his claims, but his fellow student refused to speak up, further widening the rift between them, and the matter was decided in Professor Stanwick's favor.

Bitter, but resigned, Viktor returned to his studies, knowing that his ultimate goal of making people's lives better and enhancing humanity was more important than one stolen project and a bruised ego. He continued to excel, finding ever new ways to eliminate human error and weakness from his work, a facet of his researches that came to dominate his thinking. He saw human involvement in any part of a process as a grossly inefficient aberration - a view that put him at odds with a great many of his fellow students and professors, who saw the very things Viktor sought to remove as the source of human ingenuity and creativity.

This came to a head during a reluctant collaboration with Jayce to improve the diving suits used to keep Piltover's docks clear of underwater debris and lingering chemical waste. Viktor and Jayce's enhanced suits allowed the wearer to go deeper, remain underwater for longer, and lift heavier weights. But many wearers claimed they saw phantom corpse lights in the depths or suffered from chem-induced hallucinations. When divers experienced such symptoms, they panicked and often got themselves or their fellow divers killed. Viktor saw the problem was not technical, but with the wearer's nerves unraveling in the inky depths. He devised a chem-shunt helm that allowed an operator on the surface to bypass the wearer's fear response and, effectively, control the diver. A heated discussion between Viktor and Jayce on free will and mental enslavement turned bitter - almost violent - and the two vowed never to work together again.

Jayce reported the incident to the college masters, and Viktor was censured for violating basic human dignity - though, in his eyes, his work would have saved many lives. He was expelled from the college, and retreated to his old laboratory in Zaun, disgusted by the narrow-minded perceptions of Piltover's inhabitants. Alone in the depths, Viktor sank into a deep depression, enduring a traumatic period of introspection for many weeks. He wrestled with the ethical dilemma he now faced, finding that, once again, human emotion and weakness had stood in his way. He had been trying to help, to enhance people beyond their natural capabilities to avoid error and save lives. Revelation came when he realized that he too had succumbed to such emotions, allowing his naive belief that good intentions could overcome ingrained prejudice to blind him to human failings. Viktor knew he could not expect others to follow where he did not go first, so, in secret, he operated on himself to remove those parts of his flesh and psyche that relied upon or were inhibited by emotion.

When the surgery was done, almost no trace of the young man who had traveled to Piltover remained. He had supplanted the majority of his anatomy with mechanical augmentations, but his personality had also changed. His idealistic hope to better society was refined into an obsession with what he called the Glorious Evolution. Viktor now saw himself as the pioneer of Valoran's future - an idealized dream where man would renounce flesh in favor of superior hextech augmentations. This would free humanity from fatal errors and suffering, though Viktor knew it was a task that would not be completed easily or quickly.

He threw himself into this great work with a vengeance. He used technological augmentations to help rebuild Zaunites injured in accidents, perfected breathing mechanisms, and worked tirelessly to reduce human inefficiency by decoupling physicality from emotion. His work saved hundreds of

lives, yet seeking Viktor's help could be dangerous, as his solutions often brought unexpected consequences.

But if you were desperate, Viktor was the man you went to.

Some in Zaun, hearing fragments of his philosophy and seeing the successes of his work, saw him as a messianic figure. Viktor couldn't care less for them, viewing their quasi-religious cult as an aberration; yet another reason to eliminate emotional foibles and the belief in that which could not be empirically proven.

After a toxic event in the Sump saw hundreds of men and women in the Factorywood transformed into rabid psychotics, Viktor was forced to use a powerful soporific to sedate the victims and bring them back to his labs to try and undo the damage. The toxins had begun to eat away portions of their brains, but Viktor was able to slow the degenerative process by opening up their craniums and employing machinery to slowly filter their bloodstreams of poison. The technology available to him wasn't up to the task, and Viktor knew many people were going to die unless he found a way to greatly enhance his purgative machinery.

As he fought to save these people, he detected a surge in hextech energy from Piltover and saw immediately that this could give him the power he needed. He followed the powerful energy surge to its source.

Jayce's lab.

Viktor demanded Jayce hand over the source of this power, a pulsing crystal from the Shuriman desert. But his former colleague refused, leaving Viktor no option but to take it by force. He returned to Zaun and hooked the strange crystal to his machinery, readying a steam golem host for each afflicted person in case their body gave out under the stress of the procedure. Empowered by the new crystal, Viktor's machines went to work and, gradually, the damage from the toxins began to reverse. His work would save these people - in a manner of speaking - and had Viktor retained more than a fragment of his humanity, he might have celebrated. As it was, the barest hint of a smile was all he allowed himself.

Before the process could complete, a vengeful Jayce burst in and started smashing the laboratory with an energized hammer. Knowing an arrogant fool like Jayce would never listen to reason, Viktor ordered the automatons to kill Jayce. The battle was ferocious, and only ended when Jayce shattered the crystal Viktor had taken, bringing the entire warehouse down in an avalanche of steel and stone, thus ending the existence of those Viktor was trying to save. And for this, Jayce returned to Piltover, feted as a hero.

Viktor escaped the destruction of the laboratory, and returned to his mission of bettering humanity by ridding it of its destructive emotional impulses. In Viktor's mind, Jayce's impetuous attack only proved the truth of his cause and strengthened his desire to unburden humanity of the failings of flesh. Viktor did send chem-augmented thugs to raid Jayce's laboratory not long afterward. This was - Viktor told himself - not for revenge, but to learn if there were any more shards of the Shuriman crystal he could use for the advancement of mankind. The raid was unsuccessful, however, and Viktor thought no more of Jayce.

Instead, he intensified his efforts to find ways in which humanity could be shepherded beyond their emotional weaknesses and brought into a new, more reasoned stage of their evolution. Such researches sometimes transgress the boundaries of what would be considered ethical in Piltover (and Zaun), but they are all necessary steps in bringing about Viktor's Glorious Evolution.

Story

Viktor's third arm emitted a thin ray of light that welded metal into his left arm with steady precision. The smell of burning flesh no longer bothered him, nor did the sight of his left wrist splayed open, veins and sinewy muscle fused with mechanical augments. He did not wince. Instead, he felt a sense of achievement gazing at the seamless blend of synthetic and organic materials.

The sound of children shouting gave Viktor pause. Rarely did anyone venture down the fog-bound confines of Emberflit Alley. He had chosen this location for that very reason — he preferred not to be interrupted.

Keeping his left arm immobile, Viktor adjusted a silver dial on his iridoscope. The device contained a series of mirrored lenses that angled light to allow him full view of the street outside his laboratory.

Several children were violently shoving a malnourished boy toward Viktor's wrought iron gates.

"I doubt Naph will last a minute in there," said a girl with imitation gemstones embedded above her eyes.

"I bet he comes back with a brass head," said a boy with a shock of red hair. "Maybe then his brain won't be dull as the Gray."

"You better return with something we can sell, or we'll be the ones to give you a new head," said the largest one, grabbing the small boy by the neck and forcing him forward. The other children backed away, watching.

The young boy trembled as he approached the towering gate, which screeched as he pushed it open. He passed the front door encrusted with interlocking gears and shimmied through an open window. An alarm blared as he fell to the floor.

Viktor sighed and pressed a switch that quieted the ringing.

The skinny boy stared at his new environment. Glass jars, containing organic and metal organs floating in green fluid, lined the walls. A leather gurney stained with blood, upon which lay a mechanized drill, sat in the center of the chamber. Dozens of automatons stood motionless against every wall. To Viktor, his laboratory was a sanctuary for his most creative and vital experiments, but he could imagine it might seem frightening to a child.

The boy's eyes widened in shock when he saw Viktor at his workbench, arm splayed open on the table. He ducked behind a nearby crate.

"You will not learn anything from that box, child," said Viktor. "But on top of it, you will find a bone chisel. Hand it to me, please."

A trembling hand reached to the top of the crate and grasped the handle of the rusted metal tool. The chisel slid across the floor to Viktor, who picked it up.

"Thank you," said Viktor, who wiped off the instrument and continued work on his arm.

Viktor heard the boy's rapid breathing.

"I am replacing the twisting flexor tendons — ahem, the broken mechanism in my wrist," Viktor said, reaching into his arm to adjust a bolt. "Would you like to watch?"

The boy peeked his head around the crate.

"Doesn't it hurt?" said the boy.

"No," said Viktor. "When one eliminates the anticipation and fear of pain, it becomes entirely bearable."

"Oh."

"It also helps that my arm is almost completely mechanized. See for yourself."

The boy stepped away from the crate and sat across from Viktor without a word, eyes fixed on his arm.

Viktor resumed welding a new bolt drive onto the tendons beneath his skin. When he had finished, he sealed the flaps of dermis onto his arm. He drew the beam of light across the seam, cauterizing his flesh and fusing the incision.

"Why did you do that?" the boy asked. "Didn't your arm work fine as it was?"

"Do you know what humanity's greatest weakness is?"

"No..." said the boy.

"Humans consistently ignore the endless infinity of possibilities in favor of maintaining the status quo."

The boy gave him a blank stare.

"People fear change," Viktor said. "They settle with fine when they could have exceptional."

Viktor walked to his stovetop. He mixed a blend of dark powder and Dunpor cream into a saucepan, heating the liquid with his laser.

"Would you like a glass of sweetmilk?" said Viktor. "A weakness of mine, but I have always enjoyed the anise flavor."

"Um... you're not going to saw off my head and replace it with a metal one?"

"Ah. Is that what they think of me now?" Viktor asked.

"Pretty much," said the boy. "I heard one kid had theirs replaced just because they had a cough."

"Did you get this information directly?" said Viktor.

"No, it was my neighbor Bherma's cousin. Or uncle. Or something like that."

"Ah. Well in that case."

"Would replacing someone's head even get rid of a cough?" asked the boy.

"Now you are asking the right questions," said Viktor. "No, I imagine it would not be much of an upgrade. Coughing stems from the lungs, you see. And to your earlier point, I am not going to saw your head off and replace it with a metal one. Unless, of course, you want that."

"No thanks," said the boy.

Viktor poured the thick liquid into two mugs and passed one to the boy, who stared longingly at the hot drink.

“It is not drugged,” said Viktor and took a sip from his own mug. The boy gulped down the sweetmilk.

“Are the others still watching outside?” said the boy through stained teeth.

Viktor glanced through his iridoscope. The three children were still waiting by the front entrance.

“Indeed they are. Do you wish to give them a scare?” Viktor said.

The boy’s eyes lit up, and he nodded.

Viktor handed him a sonophone and said, “Scream as loud as you can into this.”

The boy gave an exaggerated, blood-curdling shriek into the sonophone. It echoed along Emberflit Alley, and the other children jumped in terror, quickly scattering to hide. The boy looked at Viktor and grinned.

“I find that fear is more often than not a limiting emotion,” said Viktor. “Tell me something that scares you, for example.”

“The Chem-Barons.”

“The Chem-Barons are feared because they project an air of dominance and often the threat of violence. If no one feared them, people would stand up to them. And then where would their power go?”

“Uh...”

“Away. Exactly. Think of how many Chem-Barons exist compared to how many people live in Zaun. Fear is used by the powerful few to control the weak because they understand how fear works. If someone can manipulate your emotions, they can control you.”

“I guess that makes sense. But I’m still afraid of them,” said the boy.

“Of course you are. Patterns of fear are carved deep into your very flesh. Steel, however, has no such weakness.”

Viktor retrieved a vial containing miniscule silver beads floating in milky fluid.

“That is where I may be able to assist,” he said. “I have developed an augmentation that eliminates fear altogether. I could let you try it out for a short time.”

“How short?”

“The implant will dissolve in twenty minutes.”

“You’re sure it’s not permanent?”

“It can be, but not this one. You might find that without fear, your friends out there lose their grip. Bullies feed on fear, you see. And without it, they will starve.”

The boy nursed his drink, considering the offer. After a moment he nodded to Viktor, who inserted a thin needle into the vial and injected one of the silver beads into the skin behind his ear.

The boy shuddered for a moment. Then he smiled.

“Do you feel your weakness falling away?” Viktor asked.

“Oh yes,” said the boy.

Viktor walked him to the door and twisted a dial to unlock it before waving him out.

“Remember, you can always return if you wish a more permanent solution.”

A wave of fog created a ghostly silhouette around the boy as he emerged from the laboratory. Viktor returned to his workbench to watch the experiment through his iridoscope.

Emberflit Alley was empty, but as soon as the boy walked out his companions emerged.

“Where’s our souvenir?” asked the red-haired boy.

“Doesn’t seem like little Naph has held up his end of the deal,” said the girl.

“Guess we have to punish him,” added the large boy. “We did promise him a new head today, after all.”

“Don’t you touch me,” said Naph. He raised himself to his tallest height.

The bully reached for Naph’s neck, but Naph turned and punched him square in the face.

Blood streamed from the bully’s nose.

“Grab him!” the bully screamed.

But his companions were no longer interested in grabbing him.

Naph stepped toward the bullies. They stepped back.

“Get away from me,” he said.

The bullies eyed each other, then turned and ran.

Viktor closed his iridoscope and returned to his work. He stretched the fingers of his newly repaired arm and tapped them on his desk in satisfaction.

Warwick

Biography

Warwick is a monster who hunts the gray alleys of Zaun. Transformed by agonizing experiments, his body is fused with an intricate system of chambers and pumps, machinery filling his veins with alchemical rage. Bursting out of the shadows, he preys upon those criminals who terrorize the city's depths. Warwick is drawn to blood, and driven mad by its scent. None who spill it can escape him.

Though many think of Warwick as no more than a beast, buried beneath the fury lies the mind of a man—a gangster who put down his blade and took up a new name to live a better life. But no matter how hard he tried to move on, he could never escape the sins of his past.

Memories of that time come to Warwick in flashes before they're inevitably lost, replaced by searing echoes of the days he spent strapped to a table in Singed's lab, the mad chemist's face looming above him.

His world a haze of pain, Warwick could not recall how he fell into Singed's grasp... and even struggled to remember a time before the suffering began. The scientist patiently carved into him, installing pumps and hoses to inject chemicals into his veins, seeking what an alchemist always seeks: transmutation.

Singed would reveal his subject's true nature—the deadly beast hidden within a “good man.”

The chemicals pumped into Warwick's veins boosted his healing, allowing Singed to gradually and painfully reshape the man. When his hand was severed in the course of the experiment, Singed was able to reattach it, augmenting it with powerful, pneumatic claws, and bringing Warwick ever closer to his true potential.

A chemical chamber was installed on Warwick's back and integrated with his nervous system. Whenever he felt rage, or hate, or fear, it would drive liquid fury deeper into his veins, fully awakening the beast within.

He was forced to endure it all, every cut of the mad chemist's scalpel. Pain, Singed assured his subject, was necessary; it would prove to be the “great catalyst” of his transformation. Though the chemicals enabled Warwick's body to heal through most of the physical damage, his mind was shattered by the unending agony.

Warwick struggled to recall a single memory from his past... All he could see was blood. But then he heard a little girl screaming. Screaming something he couldn't understand. It sounded like a name.

He'd already forgotten his. He sensed that was for the best.

Pain soon overwhelmed all other thoughts. Blood was the only thing left.

Though his body and mind were broken after weeks on the slab, Warwick stubbornly resisted the chemicals transmuting him. Toxins leaked from his eyes in place of tears. He coughed up gobs of caustic phlegm that sizzled against his chest, before burning shallow holes in the floor of the lab. Restrained against the cold steel of the table, Warwick writhed in agony for hours on end, until his body finally gave out.

With the untimely death of his subject, Singed disposed of the corpse in a charnel pit deep in Zaun's Sump, before turning his mind to the next experiment.

But death proved to be the true catalyst needed for Warwick's transformation. As he lay cooling atop the pile of corpses, the chemicals could finally complete their work. The chamber on his back began to pump.

His body contorted unnaturally, bones bending and snapping, teeth growing, sinews tearing and then healing with a faint alchemical glow, dead flesh replaced by something new and powerful. By the time his heart started beating once again, the man Warwick had been and the lives he'd lived were gone.

He awoke to hunger. Everything hurt. Only one thing mattered.

He needed blood.

First, it was the blood of a nearby sump-scrapper, rooting through the charnel pile. And then a priestess of the Glorious Evolved, seeking a member of her flock. Then a Piltovan apprentice taking a shortcut, and a philter-faced merchant avoiding a gang, and a dram-dealer, and a tallyman, and a chem punk...

He set up a den not far from a place that itched at the back of his now-animal mind. There, he continued the slaughter, not caring who fell to his claws. So long as blood dripped from gnashing teeth, he would feel nothing but a smear of red on his conscience, the hunger in his gut overwhelming any concern for his random victims.

Yet, even as he surrendered to the beast, glimpses of his past began to haunt him. He saw a bearded man reflected in the eyes of a beggar as he tore out his throat. The other man looked somber, somehow familiar; there were scars on his arms. Sometimes, as he fed in dark alleys on stray gangers, the flash of knives would remind him of an old blade covered in blood. Blood passing from the blade to his hands. From his hands, to everything he touched. Sometimes, he remembered the girl again.

And still there was blood.

It had always been there, he realized, his entire life, and nothing he did could wash it off. He'd left so many scars that even if he didn't remember his past, the city would. When he peered into the eyes of Zaun's criminals—the gang bosses, murderers, and thieves—he saw himself. The chamber on his back would fill his body with hate. His claws tore out of his fingers.

He hunted.

No longer content to kill indiscriminately, Warwick now pursues those already covered in the stench of blood. Just as he was the day he was dragged to Singed's door.

He still wonders if he'd truly wanted this. He can't remember details, but he remembers enough. Enough to know Singed had been right all along—the good man had been a lie, before disaster had burned it away, revealing the truth.

He is Warwick. He is a killer.

And there are so many killers to hunt.

Story

I find her near the Black Lanes, where merchants and thieves do business. Anything is for sale.
Everything is stolen. I could kill them all.

Do they think the shadows hide their misdeeds? The gleam of their knives? The deals they make, shrouded in darkness? I can smell the shimmerwine on a beggar's breath from across this wretched city.

I know their crimes. I can taste them.

Then I see her. She's taking a message from one of Baron Spindlow's men—the lump-faced one, all scars and scowl—and placing it into a pneuma-tube. He mutters instructions to her.

Who knew the dob could even speak, let alone write a message? I've only heard him scream. The last time we met, I took his leg. Its replacement is already rusted.

The cogs clink as they pass from the thug's meaty hand into the girl's. I can smell the blood on the gear-shaped coins. The pain that passes from person to person. If you want something in this city, it doesn't matter how many cogs you have. Pain is the true currency.

I remember a man who knew this—the blood and cogs on his hands—but that man is gone.

I growl, and the two figures flinch in surprise. Even the shadows seem to draw back as my augments cast a sickly, green glow. The girl takes one look and flees, but not deeper into the alley. She's a pneuma-tube runner. She clambers up, into the darkness, taking a path few can follow.

Afraid. Fast, but vulnerable. Carrying a pneuma-tube with a chem-baron's seal. The gangers will come for her.

She's perfect...

I begin the hunt.

We move so quickly, the city is a blur—my claws cutting through the smoke, scrabbling for purchase as I leap across rooftops, following the pneuma-tube runner. Carving a path so deep through the city, it seems to bleed chemtech, toxic puddles gathering in the alleys.

She tries to double back, skittering beneath a cart full of tinctures. She knows the city almost as well as I do. She knows where I'm driving her. Away from sanctuary, toward a place all the runners fear, where only the Zaun Gray escapes.

I need to remind her to be more afraid of me than what lies in the darkness. I land ahead of her, roaring with rage, my claws tearing a chunk out of a steam conduit. She hesitates, but only for a moment, before turning back into the depths. Where I need her to run.

I can hear the gasps of effort as she scrambles up walls and slides down railings. She's praying to the wind goddess to save her. Perhaps I should do the same. The animal inside me wants more than murder. It wants meat.

I could kill her right now. It would be so easy. I feel my claws emerging, greedy for flesh. I forget why I should spare her, until I draw closer. Close enough to see my reflection in her eyes, as she stumbles on a ledge and looks back.

Her eyes brim with tears.

It's all so... familiar.

I pull back and howl into the darkness, driving the girl forward. She drops down into a maze of pipes built for the ancient pneuma system. I follow behind her, hanging back as she reaches the dead end.

The girl thinks I'm going to kill her. That her pale throat is the reason I bare my teeth. But she is only the bait. This is where she'll lure out my true prey.

Those who'd prey on her.

"Well, well. Look what fell outta the Gray," says a ganger emerging from the darkness. He and his friends surround the girl, their blades catching what little light survives in these depths. I recognize their tattered rags. The Gray Nails. A dead man once had dealings with them.

There was another girl...

I shake away the memories. I don't want them.

"I know you," says one of the Nails, her face ringed by piercings. "You run for Boggin, eh? One 'a Spindlow's mugs. What's that krovin' psycho got to say that he don't want us to hear?" She pokes the pneuma-tube with her dagger and smiles.

"Please, you don't understand!" the girl sobs, scanning the gray darkness behind her and trying to rush past.

"Neither do you," the first ganger says. "We're gonna have some fun."

I hesitate as the thug knocks the pneuma-tube from the girl's hands. It's worth more cogs than their own lives. It's their ticket out of this miserable pit, to a slightly less miserable one.

I thought the pneuma-tube would distract them for the moment I needed. It cracks against the alley stones, Spindlow's seal broken.

What have I done?

The runner cries out as a Nail grabs her roughly. There's a struggle, a flash of steel, and then...blood.

Its scent enrages me.

The chamber on my back pumps, and I am lost.

A roar fills the darkness.

"It's him! The Howler!" a Gray Nail cries out as I race into the clearing, trying to focus on the punk. I slash into him, and the alley wall steams with red mist. He crumples to the stones.

Where is the girl? I've lost track in the mayhem. Surrounded. Blades stabbing like clumsy teeth. Claws a metal blur. Jaws clamp down, and bones crack along with armor.

I taste blood. And still there's more.

I see her now. One of the Nails hovers above the girl, his shiv raised. I can stop him.

But the machine pumps again, and my limbs surge with power.

The red haze fills my mind. Everything is a blur. Everything is forgotten.

Everything is blood.

I don't know if I saved the girl. I don't know if I killed her. I'm still biting through flesh when the surviving Nails flee into the darkness.

I turn, following them into the night. I have no choice.

They are the monsters I hunt. And I am one of them.

Zac

Biography

Zac is the product of a toxic spill that ran through a chemtech seam and pooled in an isolated cavern deep in Zaun's Sump. Despite such humble origins, Zac has grown from primordial ooze into a thinking being who dwells in the city's pipes, occasionally emerging to help those who cannot help themselves or to rebuild the broken infrastructure of Zaun.

A group of Zaunite children first encountered Zac when they were out skimming rocks over a sump pool and some of the stones were thrown back. The "Returning Pool" became well-known to Zaun's Sump dwellers, and eventually drew the attention of a shadowy cabal of chemtech alchemists. Over the protests of the local residents, the alchemists pumped the contents of the pool into vats and carried the substance back to their laboratories for experimentation.

Via a series of experiments designed to test negative and positive reinforcement techniques, the alchemists discovered the coagulate mass within the pool appeared to have psychotropic tendencies. Simply put, it mirrored whatever stimulus was provided to it. If treated well, it responded with childlike glee and playfulness, but when its response to pain and aggression were tested, the alchemists lost numerous augmented sump-scrappers in the ensuing destruction.

Most of the alchemists attributed this to nothing more than a simple reflex response, but two among their number weren't so sure. They questioned the morality of experiments that seemed entirely driven to produce a creature of unmatched aggression. When the pair dug further, they discovered the project was being funded by Saito Takeda, a Chem-Baron with a notoriously violent temperament and reputation for bloody gang warfare. The implication was clear; Takeda sought to develop a fighter who could shrug off mortal wounds, squeeze into places humans could not and who would obey any command. They also discovered the project's true name; the Zaun Amorphous Combatant.

As they pondered the best course of action, the two dissenting alchemists saw more than just a mirroring of whatever stimulus was applied to the viscous gel. They saw behaviors manifest without any obvious stimulus - behaviors consistent with sentience. They came to know the creature as Zac and concluded that he exhibited the behaviors of a thinking, feeling being. They brought their findings to the spindle-limbed leader of their research team, but their concerns were ignored.

Unwilling to let the matter drop, they began their own covert efforts to counter the violent teachings of the rest of their team. They sought to show Zac right from wrong, exposing him to acts of altruism and generosity. Their efforts bore fruit, with Zac showing sadness when one of the researchers hurt her hand and reacting badly when another killed a rat in the laboratory. Eventually, they could no longer tolerate the cruel experiments being done to Zac by their fellow alchemists.

One night, during Zaun's Progress Day remembrances, when the laboratory was empty, they drained Zac into a wheeled septic tank and dragged him to a far distant part of Zaun. When their act was later discovered, the footsoldiers of Baron Takeda sought them out. But Zaun is a big place, and the researchers were able to hide from their pursuers. They had thought to give Zac his freedom, but Zac did not want to be released, for he now considered the two researchers his family. They alone had shown him kindness, and he wanted to learn more from them. In truth, they were pleased by his reaction, for they had become so fond of Zac that they considered him their adoptive son.

To stay hidden from Takeda's men, they changed their identities and appearance, taking up residence in a remote part of the Sump, far from prying eyes. Zac learned to mimic their voices, and quickly adapted to shift his gelatinous mass into the required shapes to form sound. He lived alongside his adoptive parents for many years, hiding when necessary in sump pools or in the cracks in the cliffside rocks. His 'parents' told Zac of the world in which he lived, how it could be beautiful and full of wonder. They showed him the moon rise over the Sun Gates, the play of rainbow light on the stained glass roofs of Zaun's commercial halls, and the bustling, vibrant beauty of their city's heart. They also explained how the world could be cruel and harsh, and Zac learned that people were sometimes mean and unkind, hateful and prejudiced. Zac rejected such behaviors and helped his parents where he could as they used their skills to aid the people around them without attracting undue attention.

They did what they could to treat the sick, mend broken machinery or otherwise put their chem-knowledge to benign use. These were golden years for Zac, and he roamed Zaun through its almost limitless network of pipes and through the many cracks in its bedrock. As much as Zac was a sentient being, too much stimulus from his environment could sometimes overwhelm his senses and cause him to temporarily absorb the dominant emotions around him, for good or ill. Oft-times he couldn't help getting involved in aiding the oppressed and downtrodden against thuggish bullies; leading to rumors of his presence spreading through Zaun. Though the majority of tales were of him helping, others attributed destructive events to Zac; a factory destroyed or a crevasse ripping open in a Sump neighborhood.

Eventually, those rumors reached the ears of Saito Takeda, and he sent a band of augmented thugs to retrieve what he saw as his property. His alchemists had been attempting - without success - to replicate the process that had created Zac from droplets left behind in his vat. Takeda wanted the creature returned, and his augmented heavies surrounded Zac's parents' home and attacked. They fought back, for they were chemtech researchers and not without esoteric means of defending themselves, but their defiance could not last forever and eventually they were killed, despite Takeda's order that they be taken alive.

Zac had been exploring subterranean seams far below Zaun, but sensed his parents' distress and raced back through the pipes of the city to the rescue. He arrived too late to save them, and the fury that overwhelmed him upon seeing their bodies was unmatched by anything the baron's men had ever seen. Zac attacked in a ferocious display of stretching, smashing, and crushing. In his grief and anger, he demolished dozens of nearby dwellings, and by the time the battle was over, all the augmented thugs were dead.

When the heightened emotions of battle drained from Zac's consciousness, he was overcome with remorse for the homes he had destroyed, and vowed to continue the good work done by his parents. He helped rebuild what he had destroyed, but as soon as the work was done, he vanished into Zaun's vast network of pipes.

Now Zac lives alone, dwelling in the tunnels and caverns threading Zaun, and bathing in the emotions of the city's inhabitants. Sometimes this enriches him, but other times it saddens him as he takes on both the good and bad of the city. He has become something of an urban legend among the people of Zaun, a mysterious creature that sometimes emerges from cracks in the rock or a section of damaged pipework. Most times this is to help those in need, but in times of trouble, when the city's moods turn grim, his appearance can be cause for trepidation.

Story

The golden hour between fifth and sixth bell. That's my favorite time of day. It's when most people in the Factorywood finish their work shifts. They're bone tired, but they're done for the day. Work is behind them. A hot meal and home are ahead. The people here are nice, and I always feel good squeezing my gelatinous body through the cliff-cracks seaming the rocks around the Factorywood. I feel love emanating from a man going home to his newborn son. I relish the anticipation of a married couple looking forward to a romantic dinner in the Boundary Markets.

Their thoughts soak into me. It's nice, like a warm bath, though I tend to stretch out pretty thin when things get too hot. There's always a few people in the mix who aren't so happy. After all, life in Zaun can be hard. Some people are nursing broken hearts, while others can't stomach the thought of another shift and feel nothing but seething resentment. I absorb the good and the bad, because that's the way I was made. The bad feelings sometimes make me angry, but there's nothing I can do about that. My parents taught me it's okay to feel bad sometimes. Without the bad you can't properly savor the good.

I follow the crowd until people start to go their separate ways. A few lingering bad feelings drift through my thoughts, so I decide to do something good to push them out. I seep down through a network of cracked vents I've been meaning to fix for a while, but just hadn't gotten around to. I collect fragments of metal in my body as I go, extruding them from my amorphous form wherever there's a crack, then heating my outer layers to weld them in place. With the cracks sealed, clean air from the pump station higher up in Piltover flows once again. Which hopefully means fewer cases of lung blight in a good many of the streets below.

The bottom of the pipe brings me out in the upper reaches of the Sump level. Things aren't so nice here. Lots of people don't have much of anything, and there's plenty who want to take even that from them. The sump pools, full of toxins and runoff from the chem-forges, remind me of the time I spent alone as a specimen in a laboratory. I try not to think of that time, because it makes me angry. And when I get angry I sometimes break stuff, even though I don't mean to. I don't like feeling like that, so I ease myself into my favorite cleft in the rock, the one running beneath the twisting rookeries of the Skylight Commercial. It's always nice there. People out together, browsing the galleries, meeting friends, dining or going to see one of the companies of players that tour the undercity with their satirical works. The atmosphere warm and friendly, it's the perfect place to bask in all that Zaun has to offer.

But as I pass beneath the outlying streets, a spike of anguish ripples through me. A tremor of fear and pain disturbs my liquid flesh. I don't like it. It feels out of place, like something I'd expect to find deeper down in the Sump. That's the place where bad things happen more often than good things. It shouldn't be happening here! I get angry as more of the bad feelings soak into me. I follow them down, wanting to stop them from spreading.

I push my body from the corroded pipes running below a metalsmith's shop. My bulk fills the space under the warped floorboards. Light shines in angled beams through the louvers of a grille set in the floor. Angry voices come from above. Shouts and the sound of a weeping man. I press my body against the grille. My gelatinous mass breaks apart, only to reform on the other side. I push hard and quick, re-establishing my form inside the shop.

The owner of the shop is on his knees beside a woman who bleeds from a deep wound in her belly. He kneels at her side, one arm outstretched toward the four men standing in the wreckage of his

shop. I know these kinds of men. I see them all the time in the Sump; thugs who force good-hearted people to pay up or face seeing their livelihoods smashed.

The interior of the shop is lit by chem-lanterns, one of which is held by a man wearing a butcher's apron and who has a meat-hook crudely fixed to the stump of his other hand. The other three are mere brutes, slab-muscled simpletons in canvas overalls and thick magnifier goggles. Their eyes grow stupidly wide with shock at the sight of me rising over them. I bloat my body, greenish limbs swelling with power as I form a mouth where I think it ought to be.

I want to really hurt these men. I know it's their emotions I've been feeling, but I don't care. I just want to hurt them as badly as they hurt these people.

"This is gonna get messy," I say.

My right arm shoots out, smashing the first thug from his feet. He slams into the metal stanchion by the door and doesn't get back up. A second thug swings a heavy iron club, a sump-scrapper's oversized wrench. It hits me in my middle and is promptly swallowed by my pliant flesh. I reach down and pluck him from the ground, hammering him up to the latticework girders of the ceiling. He drops back down, his limbs bending in ways even I can tell they shouldn't. The third thug turns and runs, but I reach up and stretch my arms toward the girders. I spring forward and hammer my feet into his back. I squash him to the ground as their leader slices the blade of his butcher's hook down the center of my back.

It hurts! Oh, how it hurts. The pain causes my body to lose cohesion. I fall to the floor in a shower of liquid green ooze. For a moment, I lose all sense of spatial awareness, seeing and feeling the world from a thousand different perspectives. The thug stands over me, a gap-toothed smile splitting his stupid face. He's glad he killed me, filled with pride at his destruction of a living thing.

His pleasure at this destruction courses through me like a hateful elixir. I don't want to feel like this, it's not what I was taught, but to help these people I need to use the wrath that fills me. I must turn it against these men. My scattered globules reform in the time it takes him to realize he hasn't killed me as thoroughly as he thought. I surge from the floor and crash into him, altering my density to that of a thundering piledriver. We smash into the wall of the establishment, the flesh and bone beneath me disintegrating at the force of impact.

I peel myself from the bloody wall, feeling the anger slowly drain from me. I form my body into something man-shaped as I feel the mixed emotions emanating from the couple behind me. The man looks at me with a mixture of fear and trepidation. His wife smiles at me, though I can feel her tremendous pain. I kneel beside her and she takes my hand. It is soft. I am immediately soothed by her gratitude.

I nod and place my hand on her stomach. Heat spreads from me as I ease a sliver of my form into her wound. I'll be leaving a piece of me behind, a piece I'll never grow back, but I give it willingly, knowing she will live because of me. The portion of my body within her repairs damaged flesh, knits ruptured tissue and stimulates regenerative growth in her stomach lining. Her husband wipes his hand over her wound, and gasps to see her skin is pink and new.

"Thank you," she says.

I do not answer. I cannot. Expending such power drains me, leaves me thin. I allow my cohesion to loosen, flowing back down the grille and into the pipes. It is all I can do to maintain my form as I pour

down through the cracks in the rock, heading toward the places I know will be awash with good emotions. I need to renew myself. I need to feel all the good Zaun has to offer.

I need to feel alive.

I need to feel.

Ziggs

Biography

Ziggs was born with a talent for tinkering, but his chaotic, hyperactive nature was unusual among yordle scientists. Aspiring to be a revered inventor like Heimerdinger, he rattled through ambitious projects with manic zeal, emboldened by both his explosive failures and his unprecedented discoveries. Word of Ziggs' volatile experimentation reached the famed Yordle Academy in Piltover and its esteemed professors invited him to demonstrate his craft. His characteristic disregard for safety brought the presentation to an early conclusion, however, when the hextech engine Ziggs was demonstrating overheated and exploded, blowing a huge hole in the wall of the Academy. The professors dusted themselves off and sternly motioned for him to leave. Devastated, Ziggs prepared to return to Bandle City in shame. However, before he could leave, a group of Zaunite agents infiltrated the Academy and kidnapped the professors. The Piltover military tracked the captives to a Zaunite prison, but their weapons were incapable of destroying the fortified walls. Determined to outdo them, Ziggs began experimenting on a new kind of armament, and quickly realized that he could harness his accidental gift for demolition to save the captured yordles.

Before long, Ziggs had created a line of powerful bombs he lovingly dubbed "hexplosives." With his new creations ready for their first trial, Ziggs traveled to Zaun and sneaked into the prison compound. He launched a gigantic bomb at the prison and watched with glee as the explosion tore through the reinforced wall. Once the smoke had cleared, Ziggs scuttled into the facility, sending guards running with a hail of bombs. He rushed to the cell, blew the door off its hinges, and led the captive yordles to freedom. Upon returning to the Academy, the humbled professors recognized Ziggs with an honorary title - Dean of Demolitions. Vindicated at last, Ziggs accepted the proposal, eager to bring his ever-expanding range of hexplosives to greater Valoran.

Camille

Biography

Weaponized to execute outside the boundaries of the law, Camille is an elegant and elite operative who ensures the Piltover machine and its Zaunite underbelly runs smoothly. Camille's true strength is her adaptability and attention to detail, viewing sloppy technique as an embarrassment that must be put to order. Raised among manners and money, she is the Principal Intelligencer of Clan Ferros, tasked with cutting down her family's darker problems with surgical precision. With a mind as sharp as the blades she bears, Camille's pursuit of superiority through hextech body augmentation has left many to wonder if she is more machine than woman.

Camille's family gained most of its wealth through a rare crystal harvested from a creature native to the sands of a distant valley. These first hex-crystals, or "first crystals," contained power normally reserved to those born with innate magical ability. Camille's Great-Great Aunt Elicia lost an arm, and nearly her life, during one such early expedition. Her sacrifice was celebrated, and it set an expectation that is still reflected in the Ferros family motto today, "For family, will I give."

The creatures Elicia Ferros found, the Brackern, were not an unending resource, and Camille's family had to look for ways to augment the crystals they had accumulated. Utilizing certain shadow investments in chemtech and runic alchemy, the Ferros family brought to market the less powerful, but easier to procure, synthetic hex-crystals. Such power often comes with consequences, and the production of synthetic crystals is rumored to be a heavy contributor to the Zaun Gray.

Born into one of the wealthiest houses in Piltover's illustrious Bluewind Court, Camille was the sixth child of Rhodri and Gemma, then Masters of Clan Ferros. However, Camille and her younger brother, Stevan, were the only children who survived to adulthood.

With the family's focus set upon Camille as the eldest surviving child, no expense was spared in her education, instilling both her aristocratic attitude and sense of duty at an early age. With so many of Valoran's finest visiting Piltover, Camille had no shortage of exceptional tutors. Accordingly, she speaks the Zhyun dialect of Southern Ionia and Ur-Noxian fluently. As a child, Camille was encouraged to take an interest in Valoran history, and learned to read and write Ancient Shuriman while assisting her father on digs in the Odyn Valley. Camille also became quite an accomplished musician and plays the cellovinna at a concert master level.

Among the leading families of Piltover, it is customary for one of the younger children to take up the mantle of the family's principal intelligencer, the sword and shield of their clan. Those chosen are tasked with operating in the best interest of a Piltover family, working with the clan master to secure the family's continued success by any means necessary. Clan Ferros, with its wealth of secrets, has always taken this position seriously, putting forward considerable resources to ensure its intelligencer was always the best. Camille's brother, Stevan, had been born with a weak constitution and was considered ineligible. Her parents—her father especially—were extremely proud when Camille took Stevan's place as the principal intelligencer for the clan. Stevan's jealousy simmered as he watched Camille embrace her additional training and tutoring. She became quite adept in combat, espionage, and interrogation. Camille's favorite techniques were fighting with the Shon-Xan footed glaive, gaining intelligence through classic inquisition, and rappelling from a certain broken clock tower with a grappling line and hook native to the Western Serpent Isles.

When Camille was 25, she and her father were attacked by a band of augmented thugs. The gang was determined to move up in Zaun's underworld by laying hands on some of the family's more lucrative secrets. Both Camille and her father were wounded. Camille recovered, but her father succumbed to his wounds. Camille's mother passed away soon after, unable to bear the anguish that settled over the house. The title of clan master passed to Camille's brother, Stevan. Young, impetuous, and eager to prove himself as a strong leader of the family, Stevan doubled the already extensive Ferros research in human hextech augmentation.

After a year of mourning, the Ferros house was decorated resplendently for the next Progress Day auditions. Stevan personally oversaw the induction of Hakim Naderi as the

lead artificer for the family, a promising young crystallographer from the Shuriman coastal city of Bel'zhun.

Shaken by her inability to protect her father, Camille requested a hextech augmentation from Hakim to push her power beyond that of her human body. When Hakim met Camille, he was instantly enamored and was determined to draw Camille out of the darkness surrounding her parent's death. They bonded over the work at hand and late night stories of the sands of Shurima. After months of intimate work together, Camille could no longer deny she returned Hakim's feelings. As the day of Camille's augmentation approached, they grew reckless in their affair, as they knew the surgery would mark the end of their time together. Hakim would move onto other projects for the family, and Camille would once again be fully committed to her duty as principal intelligencer. More than that, Hakim worried that in carving away Camille's heart, he might cut too deeply and deprive her of her humanity as well.

Days before Camille's operation, Hakim's reservations about the procedure boiled over. He proposed marriage and begged Camille to run away with him instead. He painted a picture of their future--wandering the sun-kissed sands of Bel'Zhun, uncovering the ruins of Ancient Shurima, raising their children together--a future far away from the duty that bound Camille to her house. For the first time in her life, Camille was torn.

Stevan's position as clan master depended heavily on Camille's ability to execute his vision. When he learned of the secret proposal, he saw his principal intelligencer dangerously close to slipping away, and by extension, his control over the Ferros family. Stevan devised a plan to remind Camille of the duty she swore to their father. Stevan set himself up to be attacked the next time he knew Camille and Hakim were to be together. Using the fragility that had once denied him his place, Stevan presented himself bloodied and beaten to his sister, preying on her dark memories of the night she failed her father. Camille could not deny the evidence that stained her hands, proof of what could happen when the intelligencer's attention was divided.

Hakim pleaded with Camille, but she would not have it. Hers was a duty going back generations, one that if she had been better prepared could have saved her father's life and should have prevented injury to her brother. Camille insisted her surgery go forward and ended her relationship with Hakim.

Hakim still loved Camille and knew that he was the only one who could perform the surgery safely. Unable to let the love of his life die on the operating table, he cut away Camille's heart as she asked. Once he was sure that her new mechanical heart would beat without him, Hakim resigned. Camille awoke to find the lab she and Hakim had shared empty and abandoned.

Camille threw herself into her work, taking on further refinements in the form of bladed legs, grapple-spindled hips, and other, minor hex-augmentations. Each addition pushed Camille and the ever more ambitious technology to the limits. This led some to wonder how much of the lady was still left. As Clan Ferros amassed more power and wealth, the missions Camille ran for her brother became darker and more deadly.

Thanks to the rejuvenating vibrations of her hex-tech heart, time passed for Camille without age, and soon, Hakim Naderi became a distant memory. The years were not so kind to her brother. Stevan's body grew more frail, but that did nothing to loosen his iron grip on the title of Clan Master.

On a recent assignment, Camille uncovered a naïve Piltovan's ill-fated engagement and with it a series of events that exposed the depth of Stevan's treason. The lies that drove Hakim away now threatened to destroy Camille and the clan. She saw his greedy machinations for what they were; selfish and no longer in the best interest of the family. In that moment, she discarded the last sentiment she felt toward her brother and took control of Clan Ferros.

Camille now runs the family's public affairs through her favorite grand-niece she installed as master of the clan. This allows Camille to continue the more shadowy operations that ensure her family's success. Committed to her role as a solver of difficult problems, Camille has embraced her more-than-human transformation and the cutting judgment it affords her. With hex-crystal energy coursing through her veins, Camille has never been content to sit idle, and instead gains invigoration from well-executed industrial espionage, a fresh-brewed cup of tea, and long walks in the Gray.

Story

The first sound I heard was the scrape of sharp metal against rock. My sight was blurred, my vision still swimming in murky darkness, but something in the back of my mind registered it, that knife-edge slide on wet stone. The rasp was the same as my mason when he marks out which rock to cut away from the cliff. It set my teeth on edge. The fog in my brain receded, but it left me with only one panicked thought as I strained at the ropes binding my hands:

I was a dead man.

In front of me, there was a grunt and a heavy wooden creak. If I squinted, I could make out the bulk of what I guessed was Gordon Ansel sitting across from me. So much for hired muscle. It looked like he was coming around as well.

"Oh good. You're both awake." A woman's voice, refined, polished. "I was just about to put the tea on."

I turned toward her. Half of my face felt fat and bruised. The corners of my mouth were stuck together. I tried to move my swollen jaw and a coppery taste pooled on my tongue. I should have been thankful I was still breathing. The air had a lingering chemical smell, like it would singe off your nose hair if you inhaled too deeply.

Just my luck. I was still in Zaun.

"One of you knows who is responsible for the explosion at the docks," the woman continued. She had her back to us; a flickering bluish light illuminated her slim waist and inhumanly long legs. There was a faint slosh of water as she set a glass kettle above the near-invisible flame of a chem-burner.

"Go pound a sump, lady," Ansel groaned.

Leave it to Ansel to make a bad situation worse.

“Baron Grime's men always have such a way with words.”

The woman turned to face us: It wasn't a lamp that lit her figure, but something within her that gave off an unsettling light. “You will tell me what I want to know as if your life depends on it.”

“I ain't saying nothing,” Ansel snarled.

Metal scraped the floor as she shifted her weight. She was deciding which of us to carve from the quarry first. The sound made no sense until she began walking toward Ansel, and then I understood. Her velvet shadow separated from the silhouette of the table. Mystifying blue light pulsed from her hips, leading my eye down her lithe form... to twin blades. She was a high-end chimeric, unlike any I'd seen in Piltover or Zaun.

“Do not insult my courtesy, Mr. Ansel. Others have. They are dead now.”

“You think them legs of yours scare me?”

The woman stood in front of my thick-headed acquaintance. I could hear the water in the kettle start to boil. I blinked and there was a flash of silver and blue. The rope that bound Ansel's hands fell to the floor.

A hoarse laugh escaped my bodyguard. “You missed, darling.” Our captor seemed to be waiting patiently. Ansel leaned forward a few inches, an arrogant smirk plastered across his weather-beaten face.

“You can lick my—”

The woman spun around. This time, the razor-sharp blade of her leg sliced cleanly through Ansel's neck.

The severed head rolled to a stop in front of me just as the kettle whistle blew. Ansel always had a big mouth. Now it lolled open, silenced at last.

I kept telling myself Ansel was dead, but his eyes still stared at me in horrified surprise. The fear in my brain climbed down my spine, stopping to throttle my gut until I was convinced whatever was left inside was going to end up on the floor.

“Now, Mr. Turek, we are going to have a cup of tea, and you will tell me what I wish to know,” she said, her words unhurried.

The woman sat down at her table and smiled. A whisper of steam escaped as she poured the boiling water into her porcelain teapot. She looked at me with an imperious pity, like I was a schoolboy too slow at his figures. It was that smile that I couldn't look away from. Deadly. Knowing. It scared the piss out of me.

“Tea?” I nearly choked on the word.

“Oh, my boy,” she said. “There is always time for tea.”

Caitlyn

Biography

A determined and skilled investigator, Caitlyn is one of the sheriffs of Piltover, the City of Progress. She is a fiercely intelligent woman with a strong sense of justice and a resolute devotion to the law.

Armed with a magnificent hextech rifle, Caitlyn is a patient hunter and the bane of criminals throughout her city.

Born to a wealthy and influential family of hextech artificers in Piltover, Caitlyn swiftly learned the social graces of city life, but preferred to spend her time in the wilder lands to the south. Equally adept at mingling with the moneyed citizens of the City of Progress or tracking a deer through the mud of the forest, Caitlyn spent the bulk of her youth beyond Piltover's gates. She could track a bird on the wing or put a bullet through the eye of a hare at three hundred yards with her father's Bilgewater repeater musket.

Caitlyn's greatest assets, however, were her intelligence and willingness to learn from her parents, who reinforced her innate understanding of right and wrong. Though the family's engineering skills had made them wealthy, her mother always warned of Piltover's seductions, of how its gilded promises could harden even the kindest heart. Caitlyn paid little attention to her mother's warning, for Piltover was a city of beauty to her, a place of order she would cherish after each trip into the wild.

All that was to change one Progress Day, five years later.

Caitlyn returned from one of her long forays into the woodlands to find her home ransacked and empty. The family retainers were all dead, and no trace could be found of her parents. Caitlyn secured her home, and immediately set off in search of her mother and father.

Tracking quarry that does not want to be found within the confines of a city was very different from hunting in the wild, but, one by one, Caitlyn located the men who had invaded her home. None of these men knew the true identity of who had hired them, only that they had acted via a proxy with the initial "C." The trail eventually led Caitlyn to a secret hextech laboratory where her mother and father were being forced to work for a rival clan under pain of death. Caitlyn rescued her parents, and the wardens, acting upon Caitlyn's information, arrested the clan leader behind the kidnapping. She and her parents returned home and began to rebuild their lives, but something fundamental had changed in Caitlyn.

She had seen that Piltover could be a dangerous place, where ambition and greed were as deadly as a cornered beast. During the course of her investigation, Caitlyn had seen beneath Piltover's veneer of progress and science. She had seen people in need of help, a host of souls lost and alone. And she had seen that she could help them. Though she loved her parents, Caitlyn had no desire to follow in their footsteps as an artisan, and looked for a way to earn a living in the sprawling metropolis. She established herself as an investigator of sorts, utilizing her skills as a superlative hunter to act as a finder of lost people and retriever of stolen property.

For her twenty-first birthday, Caitlyn's parents presented her with a hextech rifle of exquisite artifice. The weapon was a thing of beauty, with specialized shells that enabled it to shoot with greater accuracy than any rifle she had ever owned. The weapon could also be modified to fire a variety of different ammunition types, and went with Caitlyn whenever she took a case.

Caitlyn knew Piltover's nooks and crannies as thoroughly as the forest paths of her childhood, and turned a tidy profit in a profession that brought her into contact with the many and varied layers of society. Her profession exposed Caitlyn to a great deal of strange encounters that taught her, first-hand, the dangers of untested hextech and rogue chemtech development. Over the next few years, she quickly made a name for herself as someone to go to for help in matters both mundane and esoteric.

One particularly traumatic case involving a missing hextech device and a series of child abductions led to Caitlyn working closely with an agent of the Piltover Wardens; one who, like her, had developed something of an affinity for stranger cases. Caitlyn refused to give up, even when the trail grew colder with every passing day. She chased it like a dog would a bone, and eventually, broke the case. Caitlyn and the warden rescued the children after a battle with a host of rogue chimerics in the employ of a lunatic chem-researcher driven mad by his own concoctions. As she and the warden shared a celebratory drink, he offered her a job as a sheriff. At first, Caitlyn refused, but eventually came to realize that, with all the resources the wardens had to offer, she could potentially get closer to discovering the identity of the mysterious "C," the only person involved in the attack on her family home she had yet to apprehend.

Caitlyn now works as a highly respected officer within the ranks of the Piltover Wardens to keep order in the City of Progress - particularly in areas where overzealous hextech artisans cross the line of what is acceptable in Piltover. She has recently partnered with a new recruit from Zaun, the brash and reckless Vi. How such an unlikely pairing came to be, and has proven to be so effective, is the subject of numerous wild rumors and tavern speculation among their fellow wardens and those they haul away to jail.

Story

Even three bells after the Sun Gate had closed, Piltover was still full of life - life that was currently getting in her way. Caitlyn sprinted down Mainspring Crescent, weaving a path between midnight revelers strolling down the fashionable promenade of cafes and bistros. The supper clubs were emptying, as were the nearby theaters inside the Drawsmith Arcade, so this street was going to get a whole lot busier. If they didn't catch up to Devaki soon, they were going to lose him.

"Do you see him?" shouted Mohan from behind.

"If I could see him, I'd already be drawing a bead on him!"

The hextech rifle slung over Caitlyn's shoulder was loaded and ready to shoot, but she needed a target, and Devaki was more nimble than a spooked doe. He'd robbed three clan workshops (that they knew of) in the last five weeks, and Caitlyn had him pegged for two others. Working a hunch that something big was in the works, she and Mohan had been keeping watch on one of House Morichi's workshops, and sure enough, Devaki had shown. Though they hadn't known it until the city lighters had worked their way down the street to ignite the glow-lamps and Caitlyn caught his reflection in the glass of the cafe across the street. Devaki had seen her in the same instant, and took to his heels like a startled wharf-rat.

Caitlyn skidded to a halt at the next junction. The caged flames atop the fluted lampposts bathed the dozens of surprised people staring at her with a warm, amber light. Her pale blue eyes darted from person to person, seeking Devaki's distinctive silhouette.

A young man crossed the street toward her, his cheeks ruddy with a night's enjoyment. He waved at her.

"You looking for a man on the run?" he asked. "Fella with a big hat?"

"Yes," said Caitlyn. "You saw him? Where did he go?"

The young man pointed left and said, "Down that way at a good clip."

She followed his gaze and saw cheering theater-goers spilling from the Drawsmith Arcade, a vaulted structure of colored glass and ironwork columns. They mingled with stall-holders selling refreshments and promenade-girls looking for a wealthy mark. Mohan finally caught up to her, sweating and breathing hard. He bent at the waist and propped himself up with his palms on his knees. His blue uniform coat was askew and his hat tipped back over his head.

"Figures he'd try to lose himself in the crowd," he said between gulps of air.

Caitlyn took a moment to study their public-spirited helper. His clothes were finely-tailored and must once have cost him a pretty penny, but the cuffs were frayed and the elbows worn. Her eyes narrowed as she took in last season's colors and a collar that hadn't been in style for a year.

Wealthy, but down on his luck.

Mohan turned toward the busy street and said, "Come on, Caitlyn! Let's go or we'll lose him."

Caitlyn dropped to one knee to look at the street from a different perspective. The cobbles were slick from the evening rain and were well trodden. From this angle, she saw the scuffs of heel marks on stone that only a running man would leave. But they weren't heading left, they were heading right.

"How much did Devaki give you to tell us that?" said Caitlyn to the unfashionably dressed young man. "If it was less than a gold hex, you were swindled."

The young man put his hands up and said, "It was five, actually," before turning tail and running toward the crowds with a laugh.

"What the...?" said Mohan, as Caitlyn sprinted in the opposite direction. She'd lost valuable seconds, but knew exactly where Devaki was going now. She soon left Mohan behind, her sometime partner a little too fond of the sugared pastries the District-Inspector's wife made for her husband's officers.

Caitlyn ran a winding path through the city, along seldom-traveled alleyways and crooked paths between the gables of tall, brick-fronted warehouses. She cut across busy streets, drawing cries of annoyance from those she barged out of her way. The closer she came to the great canyon bisecting Piltover, the narrower the streets became, but she was betting she knew the shortcuts of Piltover better than Devaki. After a dozen twists and turns, she emerged onto a crooked street of undulating cobbles that followed the jagged line of the cliff. Known locally as Drop Street thanks to the wheezing hexdraulic conveyer at the end that ran late into the night, it was deep in shadow.

The iron-framed cabin hadn't yet opened, the lozenge-patterned grille still in the closed position. A group of fifteen Zaunites, a great many of whom were intoxicated, gathered around the ticket booth. None of them were the man Caitlyn was looking for. She turned and dropped to a crouch, resting the barrel of her rifle on a packing crate bearing the brand of Clan Medarda. Stolen property, no doubt, but she didn't have time to check it.

Caitlyn thumbed the rifle's primer switch to the upright position. A gentle hum built within the breech as she worked the action to ready a shot. She pulled the butt of the rifle hard against her shoulder and slowed her breathing. Her cheek pressed into the walnut stock and she closed one eye as she took aim through the crystalline lenses.

She didn't have long to wait.

Devaki swung around the corner, his long coat billowing out behind him and his hat a tall silhouette.

He appeared to be in no hurry, but then, he believed he had shed his pursuers. He held a heavy brass-cornered case in his metal-clawed hand; a crude thing Vi said he'd had done in one of Zaun's ask-no-questions augmentation parlors when he was a foolish youth.

Caitlyn focused her aim on the pneumatic monstrosity and squeezed the trigger. A searing flash of orange-red exploded from the weapon's muzzle and Devaki's hand vanished in a pinpoint blast. He cried out and fell back, his hat toppling from his head as the case fell to the ground. Devaki looked up, his eyes widening in pain and surprise as he saw Caitlyn. He turned to run, but Caitlyn had been waiting for that. She toggled a thumb-switch on the breech and pulled the trigger again.

This time the beam struck Devaki in the back and exploded in a web of crackling energy. Devaki's back arched and he fell, twitching, to the ground. Caitlyn powered down her rifle and slung it over her shoulder as she walked toward the fallen Devaki. The effects of the electro-net were dimming, but he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. Caitlyn bent to retrieve the case he'd dropped and shook her head with a tut-tut sound.

"H-h-h...how?" said Devaki, through the spasms wracking his body.

"How did I know where you were headed?" asked Caitlyn.

Devaki nodded, the movement jerky and forced.

"Your previous thefts were meaningless in themselves, but when I looked at them as part of a larger scheme, it seemed like you were gathering components to build a version of Vishlaa's Hexylene Caliver," said Caitlyn.

She knelt beside Devaki to place a hand on his rigid body.

"And as we all know, that weapon was outlawed as being too dangerous, wasn't it? No one in Piltover would dare touch that kind of banned hex, but someone, maybe in Noxus? They'd pay handsomely for that, I imagine. But the only place you could get something like that out of the city is through one of Zaun's less reputable smugglers. This is the only quick route down into Zaun that's still running at this time of night. Once I saw you weren't going to try and hide out in Piltover, all I had to do was get to the conveyor before you and wait. So you and I are going to have a long talk, and you're going to tell me who you're working for."

Devaki didn't answer, and Caitlyn grinned as she reached over his prone body.

"Nice hat," she said.

Ezreal

Biography

A self-assured explorer with the uncanny ability to find his way out of trouble, Ezreal traverses Runeterra in search of adventure. Armed with a magical gauntlet procured from the ruins of ancient Shurima, he tempts fate daily by seeking out treacherous, uncharted places and daring to untangle the world's most cryptic mysteries.

As the child of two renowned traders whose work often required journeys to dangerous and remote destinations, Ezreal was left in Piltover under the care of his uncle, Professor Lymere. The Professor did not enjoy having to wrangle such a rash and unruly child, and to ease his burden, assigned the strictest tutors to teach him subjects like techmaturgy, hextech mechanics, and archeological history. Ezreal had a knack for absorbing information, and found laborious study a waste of time. He passed assessments easily with little or no preparation, which infuriated his uncle.

Ezreal's appetite for exploration was irrepressible, and he took great pleasure in evading authority figures to roam the grounds and uncover its hidden places. His extraordinary spatial awareness allowed him to easily navigate labyrinthine tunnels beneath the university and cross its rooftops, allowing access to the most secluded vaults filled with strange and mysterious treasures. Ezreal polished his lock picking skills by sneaking into professors' offices to rearrange their belongings for his own amusement.

The boy's parents returned to Piltover periodically to sell whatever remarkable wares they'd acquired from afar. In his quest for increasingly rare and magical treasures to trade, Ezreal's father was determined to discover the location of the lost tomb of the mage Ne'zuk, an ancient Shuriman whose head was crowned with twisted horns. The tomb was rumored to contain a magical gemstone that allowed the user to jump instantly from one place to another. If Ezreal's father could obtain the priceless relic, he joked that wherever he was traveling, he would simply drop into Piltover for dinner each night.

Ezreal longed to embark on adventures with his parents, but they cited the many dangers they encountered daily. As the boy grew older, the time between his parents' visits grew longer and longer until one year, they did not return at all.

Professor Lymere heard that the couple had ventured deep into the ruins of Shurima, and were never seen again. He told Ezreal his parents had most likely perished, but Ezreal was convinced his family was still alive somewhere, trying to return to him. He would often prolong dinners as long as possible, hoping his father and mother would appear bearing the magical stone of Ne'Zuk.

Though he told no one, Ezreal was determined to find his parents, or at least learn what had happened to them. His only clue to their whereabouts was the last place his father had searched for: the lost tomb of Ne'Zuk.

Over the years, Piltover had become Ezreal's playground, with no workshop or laboratory closed to his exploits. Ezreal spent weeks collecting supplies from the university; celestial diagrams, translations of runic sigils, detailed guides to burial practices of Ancient Shurima, and a pair of protective goggles. After leaving a note of farewell for his uncle, he snuck onto a supply ship bound for Nashramae, a harbor city in Shurima.

Halfway through the voyage, the ship's steward discovered the stowaway, and the captain threatened to throw Ezreal overboard. While balancing on a wooden plank, Ezreal told the captain he planned to abandon ship anyway; his chances were better in the ocean than aboard their doomed vessel. He revealed his star charts, showing that they were headed for a perilous rocky shoal notorious for dashing ships to pieces. Ezreal was instated as the chief navigator, the ship's drunken navigator cast into the sea in his place.

After the ship docked in Nashramae, Ezreal began his search for the tomb of Ne'Zuk. For months he ventured deep into cavernous ruins and lost temples that had been sealed for centuries. He relished in the boundless freedom of the unknown as he mapped out routes through ancient catacombs and escaped from untold horrors guarding hidden chambers. With each step, Ezreal imagined himself following his parents' path, growing ever closer to solving the mystery of their disappearance.

In the underground crypt of a long-deceased emperor, Ezreal noticed the mosaic tiles covering the floor were perfectly smooth, as if they had been added only recently. He eagerly chipped away at a corner of the floor, revealing the edge of a portrait which had long faded from its original bright colors.

Ezreal removed each tile with growing excitement. He uncovered an enormous fresco of a man with Ne'Zuk's characteristic curling horns protruding from his head. The mage's gaping mouth opened to a sinkhole of churning sand. Ezreal secured a rope and dove in, blindly feeling his way around the tomb as his lungs begged for air. He emerged wearing a heavy bronze gauntlet with a bright azure amulet inlaid at its center.

As Ezreal pulled himself from the tomb, the walls around him shook with powerful tremors and began to collapse inward. Though he could no longer see his escape route, he visualized himself standing in the cavern entrance just above. He felt power build in his gauntlet, and as the amulet glowed he was instantly teleported to the location he had just envisioned.

The gauntlet, which retained potent energy within its crystalline core, proved to be the perfect escape tool. Ezreal learned it could channel beams of magical light after he mistakenly destroyed the foundations of a stone bridge. With the glove, he broke free from a band of nomads convinced he was the reincarnation of an Ascended warrior, survived a brutal desert storm which buried him beneath crushing layers of sand, and blasted a horde of Xer'Sai into oblivion.

The relic was not without its limits, however; it took long moments to recharge its power and only allowed for teleportation between short distances. Worse, Ezreal could not help but feel that if his parents were still alive, he would not have found the gauntlet at all. Unbeknownst to him, the glove had a twin that had been excavated from the tomb years before. Ezreal vowed to carry on his parents' tradition of exploring the world and chasing thrills of the unknown.

Armed with his magical gauntlet, Ezreal tempts danger with nail-biting, narrow escapes. He fearlessly seeks out the most exciting and perilous corners of Runeterra, trusting in the luck that has favored his travels thus far and never failing to answer his true calling: adventure.

Story

After hours of trekking through the stiflingly humid jungle, the cool air of this underground crypt is sweet bliss. Sure, potential death awaits at every turn, but so does certain glory.

I step through a stone archway and clouds of dust rise like phantoms, revealing a pathway of circular patterns carved into the rock. This tomb is rumored to be impenetrable, uncrackable, and deadly. No explorer has yet escaped with their life, but then, none of them have been me.

So far I've infiltrated miles of labyrinthine tunnels, navigated spike-filled sand traps, crawled beneath swinging blade-pendulums, and wrestled hissing pit vipers. Nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here.

Dozens of lidless stone eyes leer at me from the walls. Well, I'd leer too. I doubt they've seen anyone this astonishingly handsome since the last Rune War.

At the center of the room, a crystal vial rests on a pedestal. It shimmers with lambent fluid, casting tiny rainbows on the floor. That's what I'm here for. Many will dismiss a grandiose tale of bold adventure as pure fiction, but there's no denying a physical artifact. Collecting legendary treasure proves beyond doubt you've conquered the impossible.

The Elixir of Uloa is sought after by cults hoping it will imbue them with immortality, withered dynasties looking to reclaim power, and pilgrims seeking wisdom beyond belief. Quite a lot to promise for a vial whose contents wouldn't fill a teaspoon.

I know every trap in the book will trigger as soon as I lift it from the pedestal. That's the nature of places like this. I flex my fingers and the gemstone at the center of my gauntlet glows a satisfying cerulean blue. Now the real fun begins.

I approach slowly. A stone trembles underfoot and I step back to avoid activating a trigger. I pick my way across the room, only stepping on the most immobile stones. As my fingers close over the Elixir, deep cracks split the stone floor of the chamber. I activate my gauntlet, charging it with magical energy. Swirling rays of light overwhelm my vision as I teleport to the archway fifteen feet away. Not a second too soon. Hundreds of knife-sharp stakes cascade from the ceiling, missing me by a hair's breadth as the entire room collapses into a shadowy crevasse below.

My gauntlet's power is perfect for tight spots, but doesn't lend itself to crossing great distances. And takes longer than I'd like to recharge.

A thunderous boom shakes the walls and echoes down the corridor. Sounds like the ancient foundations of this tomb won't hold much longer, so it's time to speed things along. I prefer my ground strictly solid, with a generous helping of reliability, so I sprint down the tunnel as widening cracks obliterate the floor behind me.

I chase the directional marks I chalked when I entered the tomb, sliding beneath collapsing archways, leaping over boiling quicksand, and dashing around colossal boulders rolling in to block this ever-narrowing passageway.

The wall to my right splits apart and a barrage of colossal insects tumble through, giant pincers snapping and venom dripping from their jaws. Thousands of red spider eyes gleam with hunger while scorpions scuttle forward with stingers poised. Jungle vermin are a damn nuisance, but I've got just the remedy!

I close my eyes for a split second. Energy flows down my arm, jangling my nerves with a pulsating beat as I concentrate power into the gem. I steady my gauntlet and aim it at the largest spider. As the monster opens his jaws I unleash a blazing ray into its mouth, blasting it back into the crawling horde. The smell of burned chitin stings my throat and my stomach churns.

I turn and run, firing blinding beams of light behind me at every twist of the passageway. A slab of rock the size of a house breaks from the ceiling directly overhead. My gauntlet recharges just in time and I reappear ten feet ahead in a whirling spiral of light as the tunnel behind me collapses.

Two toppling pillars fall toward each other and I slide between them a moment before they smash to dust. I dash into a chamber with a floor angled toward the surface.

A sliver of sunlight shines ahead, and I grin as I bolt for it. Freedom is close. The ground shakes with a deafening rumble and I stumble mid-run as the chamber falls apart in front of me.

Freedom *was* close.

Then again, backup plans are a particular specialty of mine.

I ready my gauntlet and concentrate all my energy into the gem. I feel it drawing power from me. My vision blurs and the world seems to tilt as the gem fills with magic. The gauntlet pulses the blue of a clear sky.

I open my hand and a brilliant arc of golden light as wide as the tunnel bursts from my palm. The force of the blast staggers me, but I maintain my focus. The light blazes in a continuous glowing channel, gleaming brightly as it disintegrates everything in its path, leaving a precariously narrow gap. My favorite kind of gap!

I close my hand into a fist and the tunnel darkens once more. The ground lurches unpleasantly, sending me to my knees. I'm so spent I can barely move, let alone stand. Inches from my face, cracks spread across the floor faster than I can track them. Not good. The tomb won't hold much longer, so

I muster my remaining strength and rise, sprinting to what I dearly hope is safety.

I'm losing sight of the sunlight. Another crash - the walls crumble around me. I close my eyes and dive through the hole. Nothing wrong with hoping for a bit of good luck, and I am exceptionally lucky. I hit the ground, roll to my feet and inhale the sweet air of the jungle.

Behind me, the entrance to the tomb caves in completely, releasing a billowing cloud of ancient dust. I brush the dirt from my clothes, toss my hair out of my eyes with a well-practiced flick and walk away.

Another impossible ruin traversed. Another treasure to prove the truth of my daring tales.

And all before lunch.

Jayce

Biography

Jayce is a brilliant inventor who has pledged his life to the defense of Piltover and its unyielding pursuit of progress. With his transforming hextech hammer in hand, Jayce uses his strength, courage, and considerable intelligence to protect his hometown. While revered throughout the city as a hero, he hasn't taken well to the attention it brings. Still, Jayce's heart is in the right place, and even those who envy his natural skills are grateful for his protection in the City of Progress.

A native son of Piltover, Jayce was raised to believe in the principles that made the city great: Invention. Discovery. Not going to Zaun if you could help it. With a knack for understanding machinery, Jayce earned the honor of being the youngest apprentice to ever be offered patronage by Clan Giopara, one of Piltover's most respected ruling clans. Utterly unsurprised, Jayce took the offer, and spent most of his early years constructing potential hextech devices and designing transformable multi-tools for Piltover's working class: a wrench that transformed into a prybar, a pickaxe that could morph into a shovel, a hammer that could turn into a demolition beam, if only it had a sufficiently powerful battery. Everything Jayce touched put his contemporaries to shame.

Most things came easy to Jayce, and he could never understand why his peers had so much trouble with what, to him, were simple concepts. As a result, nearly everyone who worked alongside Jayce found him arrogant, dismissive, and unwilling to slow his pace to help his colleagues catch up. As time went on, his patience became shorter, while at the same time, a chasm grew between decorum, charm, and Jayce's natural demeanor.

Only one person ever managed to match Jayce's intelligence while also maintaining a healthy indifference to his superior attitude.

His name was Viktor.

The two met at a mandatory Progress Day party, and immediately bonded over how little either of them wanted to be there. They started working together shortly after. Viktor expanded Jayce's intellectual horizons and challenged many of his assumptions. While Jayce sought to improve humanity via versatile technology, Viktor sought to solve problems inherent to humanity itself, such as physical decay or illogical prejudices. They constantly argued with one another, but their conflicts never got personal – though their methods were different, the two colleagues knew their ultimate goals were very much the same. More than that, they both knew what it was like to be ostracized by their colleagues: Viktor because of his unconventional thinking, Jayce because of his rudeness.

Together, Jayce and Viktor invented a mechanized construction suit for Piltover's dockworkers – something hearty enough to enhance the wearer's strength, but light enough that its wearer wouldn't immediately drown upon falling overboard. However, the two reached an impasse when Viktor's design for the next version of the suit included a chemtech implant that would increase the wearer's strength output by tenfold, while also preventing them from getting tired, panicking, or disobeying instructions from their superiors. While Viktor considered this feature a brilliant means of reducing the frequency of construction accidents, Jayce found its indifference toward free will immoral. The two nearly came to blows over the design and ultimately, after Jayce warned the academy of Viktor's invention, Viktor was stripped of his honors and ostracized from Piltover's scientific community.

Viktor was the closest thing Jayce had ever really had to a friend, and distraught over their falling-out, went back to working on his own. He grew more insular. His patience toward others grew even thinner.

As Jayce studied in solitude, Clan Giopara's explorers discovered a raw, blue crystal deep within the Shuriman desert. Though Jayce volunteered to experiment on it (specifically by suggesting the clan's other scholars wouldn't be smart enough to get anything out of it), his lack of tact in doing so prompted Clan Giopara to give it to their better-mannered scholars as a form of punishment. Yet, after many months, the scholars reached a unanimous conclusion: the crystal was worthless. A power-drained hunk of rock. The disappointed clan leaders finally handed the crystal over to Jayce, assuming that even he, with his remarkable intelligence, wouldn't be able to learn anything from it.

Something inside the crystal called to Jayce. No, more than that – it sang to him. He couldn't explain why, but he knew the Shuriman gem still held mysteries yet to be discovered.

He spent many months running every variety of test on the crystal. He braced it into a cogwheel centrifuge; he superheated it and deep-froze it; he tinkered, and observed, and hypothesized, and beat his head against his copper pantograph. Quite simply, Jayce wasn't used to working hard: this damned crystal was the first thing that had ever resisted his considerable mental aptitude. For the first time, he realized how his peers must have felt, trying so hard to solve a problem, only to bump against your own limitations. It felt frustrating. It felt unfair.

And it probably felt much, much worse if you were working alongside an arrogant inventor who dismissed your every effort.

Jayce realized that despite how dismissive he'd been toward his fellow scholars, none of them ever gave up. None of them ever stopped seeking the very things that defined Piltover: Progress. Discovery. If they wouldn't give up, Jayce decided, he wouldn't either.

And maybe he'd try to be nicer.

Maybe.

Jayce approached the problem from a completely different angle. Rather than trying to experiment on the crystal as a whole, he wondered, why not run more invasive experiments on a smaller shard? Jayce chiseled off a piece of the crystal and suspended it in a liquid alloy. As he sent a voltaic current through the liquid metal, Jayce's eardrums nearly shattered from the booming baritone note that blasted from the shard. Heat radiated from the crystal and, with a flash, it glowed bright enough to nearly blind him. This was unexpected. This was potentially dangerous. But this was progress. Jayce couldn't erase the smile from his face as he worked well through the night, into the dawn.

The next day, Jayce was surprised to find his old friend Viktor on his doorstep. Alerted by the massive power spike from the crystal shard, Viktor had a simple proposition.

Since his expulsion from the Piltovan scientific community, Viktor had commenced work on a secret project in Zaun. He'd finally learned how to achieve his dream – how to eradicate disease, hunger, hatred. If Jayce joined him, the two would accomplish more than anyone from Piltover or Zaun could have dreamed of: they'd save humanity from itself.

Jayce had heard a monologue like this before from Viktor. He never liked where it led.

Viktor told Jayce that he only needed one thing for his Glorious Evolution – a power source like Jayce's crystal. Jayce disagreed, informing Viktor that what he truly needed was a moral compass.

Viktor, who had long grown tired of Jayce's rudeness, leapt upon him, grabbed the crystal and knocked Jayce unconscious with it. When Jayce awoke hours later, he noticed that though the Shuriman crystal was gone Viktor hadn't seemed to notice or care about the smaller shard.

Jayce knew whatever Viktor was planning, he would only resort to these measures if he were close to completion. Even though he didn't know what Viktor's Glorious Evolution consisted of, it probably didn't have a lot of respect for the free will of others. Without wasting a second, Jayce retrieved the suspended shard and installed it into a massive, transforming hammer – a demolitions invention he'd abandoned years ago for lack of a strong enough battery to power it. Though he had no idea where Viktor might have taken the crystal, he could feel the hextech hammer vibrate, pulling him not north, south, east or west, but down, toward the undercity of Zaun.

The shard, eager to be reunited with the crystal from which it was chiseled, eventually led Jayce to a warehouse in the depths of the sump. Within the cavernous building, Jayce found something horrifying. Dozens of corpses, their skulls sawed open and hollowed out, their brains transplanted into an army of immobile metal soldiers, hooked up to the now-pulsing crystal.

This was the first step in Viktor's Glorious Evolution.

Jayce's stride grew less confident as he approached Viktor. He and Viktor had not always seen eye to eye, but this was something else entirely. For the first time, it occurred to Jayce that he might have to kill his old friend.

He called out to Viktor, flinching as the army of robots stood to attention. Jayce asked him to look around – to see what he was doing. Whatever this was – this Evolution – wasn't the progress they fought for in their youths. He even, to Viktor's surprise, apologized for acting like such a jerk.

Viktor sighed. He had only two words in response: "Kill him."

The automatons sprinted toward Jayce, breaking free of the wires connecting them to the crystal and introducing Jayce to another new emotion: panic. He gripped the hammer tight, realizing he'd never actually used it before. When the first golem was within reach, he swung as hard as he could, feeling the shard's energy surge through his muscles, accelerating the hammer's movement until Jayce was worried it might fly out of his hands.

It slammed into the automaton, all but exploding it into a hail of metal. Despite the obliteration of their comrade, the other machines didn't even pause as they rushed at Jayce, trying to pummel him into unconsciousness.

Jayce analyzed the formation of the mechanical wave coming at him and attempted to quickly calculate how to take out the largest number of them with the fewest amount of swings. It was pointless; they were on him before he could swing even once. As he fell to the ground under a storm of their blows, Jayce saw Viktor looking on, not with triumph, but with sadness. He'd outsmarted Jayce and ensured humanity's future, but he knew that future came at a cost: he couldn't let his old friend live. Jayce vanished under a sea of swinging metal limbs.

That's when Jayce, for the first time in his life, decided to stop thinking and just break stuff.

No longer caring for his own safety, Jayce used every last bit of strength he had to break free from Viktor's automatons. He sprinted to the glowing crystal, and struck it with all of the hextech-enhanced force his hammer could muster, crushing the mystical object.

Viktor cried out in horror as the crystal shattered to fragments, the shockwave blasting them all backward as the army of automatons collapsed lifelessly to the floor. The very foundations of the warehouse shook, and Jayce barely managed to escape before the entire building toppled.

Viktor's body was never found.

Upon his return to Piltover, Jayce informed his clan masters of Viktor's nefarious plans. Soon, Jayce found himself a topic of discussion in both Zaun and Piltover alike. Hailed for his quick thinking in a time of crisis, Jayce became a beloved figure (at least, amongst those who hadn't met him), earning himself a nickname: the Defender of Tomorrow.

Jayce cared little for the adoration of his fellow Piltoverians, but took the nickname to heart. He knew that Viktor was still out there, plotting his revenge. One day – maybe someday soon – an awful lot of trouble was headed for Piltover.

And Jayce would be waiting.

Story

Any fool could have predicted that Viktor would strike back at some point. If one weren't a fool, one might predict the exact date and time of an attempted counterattack.

Jayce was not a fool.

He stood in his workshop, bathed in sun rays from his skylight, surrounded by dozens of artifacts of his own genius: Gearwork boots that could cling to any surface. A knapsack with articulated limbs that always kept the user's tools within easy reach.

Greater than all these inventions, however, was the weapon that Jayce now held in his hands.

Powered by a Shuriman shard, Jayce's transforming hextech greathammer was renowned throughout Piltover, but he tossed it from hand to hand as if it was any other tool from his workshop.

Three sharp taps echoed from Jayce's door.

They were here.

Jayce had prepared for this. He'd run experiments on Viktor's discarded automata. He'd intercepted the mechanical communications. Any second, they'd beat down his front door and try to rip away his hextech hammer. After that, they'd try to do the same with his skull. "Try" being the operative word.

He flicked a switch on the hammer's handle. With an energetic sizzle, the head of Jayce's masterpiece transformed into a hextech blaster.

He took aim.

Stood his ground.

Watched the door open. His finger tightened on the trigger.

And he almost blasted a seven-year-old girl's head off.

She was tiny and blonde and would have seemed adorable to anyone who wasn't Jayce. The girl pushed the door open and walked in with shuffling, tentative steps. Her ponytail swished to and fro as she approached Jayce. She kept her head down, ever avoiding his gaze. He had two hypotheses regarding why she might refuse eye contact: she was hugely impressed to be in the presence of

someone so acclaimed, or she was working for Viktor and about to surprise him with a chem-bomb. Her blushing indicated it was likely the former.

“My soldier broke,” she said, proffering a limp metal knight, its arm bent backward at a perverse angle.

Jayce didn’t move.

“Please leave or you’ll probably die.”

The child stared at him.

“Also, I don’t fix dolls. Find somebody with more time on their hands.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes.

“I don’t have any money for an artificer, and my muh—,” she said, stifling a sob, “mother made him for me before she passed, and—”

Jayce furrowed his brow and, for the first time in quite a while, blinked.

“If it’s so precious to you, why did you break it?”

“I didn’t mean to! I took him to the Progress Day feast and somebody bumped into me and I dropped him, and I know I should have just left him at home—”

“—Yes, you should have. That was stupid of you.”

The girl opened her mouth to speak, then stopped herself. Jayce had seen this kind of reaction before. Most everyone he met had heard the stories of his legendary hammer and his unyielding heroism. They expected grandeur. They expected humility. They expected him to not be a massive jerk. Jayce inevitably disappointed them.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked.

“Most facets of my personality, so I’ve been told,” he replied without hesitation.

The child furrowed her brow. She shoved the broken doll into his face.

“Fix it. Please.”

“You’ll just break it again.”

“I won’t!”

“Look,” he said. “Little girl. I’m very busy, and—”

Something flitted across the skylight, casting a quick shadow on the two of them. Anyone else would have assumed it was nothing more than a falcon passing overhead. Jayce knew better. He fell silent.

A wry smile spread across his face as he yanked the girl toward his workbench.

“The thing is,” he said, “machines are very simple.”

He lifted a large, thin sheet of bronze and began to hammer its corners with sharp taps. “They’re made of discrete parts. They combine and recombine in clear, predictable ways.” He beat the sheet over and over until it took the form of a smooth dome.

“People are more complicated. They’re emotional, they’re unpredictable, and – in nearly every case – they’re not as smart as me,” he said, drilling a clean hole into the top of the dome. “Now usually, that’s a problem. But sometimes, their stupidity works in my favor.”

“Is this still about my doll, or—”

“Sometimes, they’re so insecure in their inferiority – so desperate to take their revenge – that they make a foolish mistake.” He grabbed a shining copper rod, and screwed it into the center of the dome.

“Sometimes people fail to protect their most precious assets,” he said, nodding at her tin soldier before holding aloft the newly-formed metal umbrella. “And sometimes, that means instead of assaulting my workshop through the more obvious front door, they try to take...”

He looked upward, “...the more dramatic approach.”

He handed her the umbrella, which took all of her meager strength to keep aloft.

“Hold this. Don’t move.”

She opened her mouth to respond, only to yelp in surprise as the skylight shattered above her. Glass bounced off the makeshift umbrella like rain as a half-dozen men leapt down to the floor. Tubes of bright green chems protruded from the base of their necks, connecting to their limbs. Their eyes were dead, their faces emotionless. They were definitely Viktor’s boys, alright: drugged punks from Zaun’s sump level whom Viktor had pumped full of hallucinogens and hypnotics. Chem-stunted thugs who would follow Viktor’s every whim whether they wanted to or not. Jayce had been expecting to see automatons, but Viktor likely couldn’t have gotten so many through Piltover unnoticed. Still, these chem-slaves were just as much of a danger. They turned toward Jayce and the girl.

Before they reached the pair, however, Jayce’s hextech blaster exploded with voltaic energy. An orb of hextech-powered lightning shot out of its core and detonated in the middle of the group. The chem-slaves slammed into the workshop’s immaculate walls.

“So much for the element of surprise, huh, Vikto—”

A hulking brute of a machine leapt down amongst the pile of unconscious chem-slaves. It looked, Jayce thought, like a cross between a minotaur and a very angry building.

“Watch out,” the girl yelped.

Jayce rolled his eyes. “I am watching him. Stop panicking. I have the situation well in-ow!” he said, interrupted as the metal beast rammed him in the chest.

The beast sent Jayce hurtling backward. He landed on a rolling cart, his back cracking from the impact.

Grunting, he pulled himself to his feet as the beast charged again.

“That’s the last time you touch me,” he said.

Jayce swung his hextech weapon as hard as he could, transforming it back into a hammer mid-swing. The minotaur lowered its head to ram Jayce again, foolishly ignoring the weapon’s arc.

The hammer found its mark with a resounding crunch. The minotaur, its head caved all the way back into its metal neck, collapsed to the floor. A cloud of escaping steam hissed from its carcass.

Jayce pulled back the hammer again, readying for another attack. He watched the skylight. A few minutes passed. Soon enough, he seemed satisfied the assault was over.

He tried to step back toward his workbench, only to double over in pain, grasping at his stomach. The girl rushed to his side.

“Still hurts where he tackled you, huh?”

“Obviously.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have let him,” she said. “That was stupid of you.”

Jayce raised an eyebrow at the kid. Her eyes widened, unsure if she’d crossed a line. A slow smile crept across his face.

“What was your name?”

“Amaranthine.”

Jayce sat at his workbench and grabbed a screwdriver.

“Gimme the doll, Amaranthine,” he said.

A massive grin broke out on her face. “So you can fix it?”

Jayce smirked at her.

“There’s nothing I can’t fix.”

Orianna

Biography

Orianna is a technical marvel comprised entirely of clockwork, but it was not always so - she was once a girl of flesh and blood. As a young child in Piltover, Orianna fell ill, and her dying organs were replaced with elaborate prosthetics until she became the first fully mechanized person. Her closest companion is the mechanical ball she created to serve as her protector and friend. Introspective and curious about her place in the world, Orianna seeks her true purpose.

Growing up in a wealthy district of Piltover, Orianna was sheltered from the cruelties and injustices of the outside world by her father, renowned inventor Corin Reveck. His elaborate designs were so beautifully detailed that even those without a medical need sought his clockwork and mechanically powered augmentations. Patrons swore his work had an uncannily lifelike quality, as if he wove magic into his creations amongst the cogs and gears.

Eager to learn his craft, young Orianna trained tirelessly as his apprentice. Her father was brilliant, but reclusive, and relied on Orianna to interact with his customers. With her inquisitive and friendly nature, she soon became the face of their business.

Though she seldom ventured beyond her neighborhood, Orianna often stole away to the theater, where she watched dancers portray stories through leaps and pirouettes from lands beyond Piltover. Epic adventures unfolded before her eyes: an ageless mage who wandered the desert in search of a spell he'd lost a century ago, a maiden who disguised herself as a rock in a magic-infused jungle, a pilgrim who longed to climb an impossibly tall mountain that healed all who ascended its peak, and dozens more stories of faraway places that thrilled her imagination.

Entranced by the dancers' tales, Orianna dreamed of one day visiting these strange and distant lands. From the theater balcony, she'd study every movement and detail, then return to her father's workshop to create miniature figurines that recreated the dazzling show.

One quiet day in the shop, after Orianna fitted an elderly woman's mechanical hand, the patient mentioned a terrible accident that had occurred in Zaun, the city over which Piltover had been built. An explosion had released a cloud of noxious fumes, poisoning the air in the surrounding streets. Left untreated, the chemicals would cause organ failure and a slow, lingering death. Those infected were sequestered to a medical encampment in the heart of Zaun.

Thinking their skills could help those suffering from the foul air, Orianna urged her father to descend into Zaun and aid the victims. Corin knew exposure to such toxicity was too risky and forbade his daughter from visiting such a dangerous place. But Orianna was not to be dissuaded, and just before dawn, she snuck from her home. She bore as many respirators as she could carry, and donned a protective mask before riding the hexdraulic descender into the depths of Zaun.

Orianna was shocked at the devastation; debris filled the streets at the site of the explosion, and Zaunites walked through thick pooling clouds of toxins with their faces covered by no more than oily rags. Never in her life had she witnessed such suffering. Orianna joined a group of volunteers tending to those most affected by the fumes. She returned, night after night, to repair broken breathing equipment and install esophilters in her patients, allowing them to breathe the noxious fumes safely.

After giving away all her respirators, Orianna noticed a young child with deathly, labored breathing. Without a second thought, she removed her own filtration mask and gave it to the child, donning a handkerchief to cover her own face. Within days Orianna fell ill herself, and soon struggled to breathe even the clean air of her home. Every breath was anguish as her lungs deteriorated from within, and she was forced to face her own mortality.

Devastated at his daughter's failing health, Corin threw all his efforts into developing his most ambitious project yet: replacing Orianna's dissolving lungs with automated replicas. Corin used the finest bio-mechanical filtration materials, normally reserved for his highest paying customers. After weeks of sleepless nights developing an exquisite device of clockwork, Corin embedded it within Orianna's chest. Wanting to prevent Orianna from exposing herself to danger again, Corin installed a mechanism to power her lungs with a key only he could wind. The artificial lungs worked perfectly, and soon Orianna was back to tinkering in the shop.

Sadly, Orianna's fortune would not last. After a few months of good health, her condition worsened as the blight spread to the rest of her body. Orianna and her father worked feverishly to develop clockwork replicas of various organs, and as each body part failed, it was replaced.

As her anatomy was inexorably altered, Orianna grew more uncertain of her own identity. Over time, more and more of her body was exchanged for whirring cogs and gears. She retained most of her human memories, but felt a peculiar distance from her former self. Her father, too, noticed the change; Orianna sometimes heard him crying late at night. He bought her tickets to the Piltovan theater to cheer her up, but Orianna insisted on leaving halfway through, saying she had already learned everything she could from the show. Devastated at the gradual loss of his daughter's personality, Corin tried to help Orianna recall her old memories and former demeanor, correcting her when she strayed too far from her past behavior. Orianna followed his instructions, but increasingly grew to resent his interference, wishing she could simply be herself.

Within a year, Orianna was almost entirely mechanical, save for her heart, which remained miraculously untainted by the creeping toxins.

During the years of Orianna's decline, Corin had focused solely on his daughter, neglecting many of his wealthy clientele, and losing most of their patronage. Without funds to keep their business afloat, Orianna and Corin were forced to sell what possessions they could and move down into Zaun. They set up shop above a chemtech lab halfway down the canyon wall, and soon found work modifying breathing devices to filter the infamous Zaun Gray.

Orianna's skill in crafting mechanized clockwork was better than ever, for her hands no longer tired under the meticulous work and her inhuman mind needed little rest. She had no need for measuring devices, for she could glance at a gear and immediately know its exact dimensions, and was able to solve complex formulas that would normally take hours in a matter of seconds. Orianna learned to maintain her own body, greasing cranks, replacing worn parts, and fixing jammed clockwork as needed, though she relied on her father to wind her whenever her gears slowed.

With wheels and gears ticking endlessly within her body, Orianna often became frustrated that time never seemed to move forward - at least not for her. As the months passed, new creases appeared on her father's forehead and gray hairs grew at his temples. But Orianna's gears maintained their constant rotation, and she experienced little change. She wondered if her life would continue forever on its steady, immutable course, and felt the loss of all the things she might never experience.

With most Zaunites accustomed to breathing chem-rich air, people visited Corin's workshop only occasionally, and business slowed. Compounding that problem, Corin had developed agonizing chest spasms since their move to Zaun and was forced to rest often.

One day, Orianna noticed a young sumpsnipe who frequently passed their shop, and spent an afternoon crafting a mechanical figurine for him. The tiny clockwork gentleman tipped his hat and bowed when his key was wound. The child was delighted. Thinking that life in Zaun could use more joy, Orianna designed a series of elaborate figurines. In a place where most objects were purely functional, her wondrous creations brought smiles to many Zaunites. The figures sold faster than she could make them, and the renown of Corin's workshop grew. Once again, they could afford more expensive materials, even a rare hextech crystal.

With notoriety came more visitors, but not all of them were welcome. Thugs employed by Petrok Grime, a formidable Chem-Baron, stopped by one day to offer Corin their unwavering protection from thieves, scoundrels, and general mayhem in exchange for coin. Corin turned them down, believing it better to stand up to criminals than appease them. But that night, Corin's shop was raided and all their money was stolen. Orianna spent the next month developing a tool to serve as their protector: a brass sphere that could radiate powerful energy, causing its target tremendous pain. Corin noticed that the ball assisted Orianna in her work automatically, as if they had some unseen connection.

As Corin's health continued to deteriorate, Orianna was forced to obtain costly tonics to treat his pain. She tended to him as best she could, but a Zaunite sawbones confirmed that the chem-rich air had infiltrated Corin's bloodstream and poisoned his heart.

Despite their advancements in bio-mechanical clockwork, neither Corin nor Orianna had yet developed a mechanism elaborate enough to reproduce the intricacies of the human heart. Her own live, healthy heart had proven especially resilient throughout her illness. Yet it was also an unbreakable link to her past, freezing her in time.

Orianna knew her father loved the daughter he once had, but she no longer felt like that girl. Perhaps giving her heart to her father would keep his daughter's memory alive, since she no longer could. If she could create a mechanical heart for herself powered by hextech, her lungs would no longer need a winding key. Maybe then, time could move forward.

Orianna slipped her father a sleeping draught and crafted her new clockwork heart using the hextech crystal they recently obtained. The bespoke organ hummed with delicate machinery that drew power from the ever-renewing gemstone. It was beyond the scope of anything she or her father had ever created. With help from the ball, she removed the key from her back and installed the new device, knowing her hextech-powered heartbeat would never again depend on someone else. She then cut open Corin's chest and replaced his failing heart with the last remnant of the Orianna he had known and loved.

Orianna listened to her father's steady heartbeat through the night, and at dawn, she left for good. Though she still loved him, she wanted to see the world. She had become something entirely new, a lady of clockwork, and now that she was entirely mechanical, she was free.

Corin woke to find his workshop filled with hundreds of miniature figurines: clockwork people who could balance upon a string, sing folk tunes, or even juggle tiny silver balls. With such a rich inventory he could return to Piltover in no time. But there was one figure he vowed never to sell: a golden dancer with no winding key, who pirouetted in a dance without end.

Story

Orianna walked through the fairground, empty and still in the evening gloom. Sir Feisterly's Fantastical Fair opened its gates to delighted crowds of Zaunites but twice a year, and Orianna did not want to miss her chance to see its wonders. She had waited until everyone had left for the day, and the rowdy laughter and accordion tunes had fallen silent. Only the low hum of nearby pipelines pumping steam through the chem district disturbed the quiet. Detritus lay strewn along the ground; colorful streamers and bright balloons mingling with crumpled wax paper that once held sweet jam pastries.

Orianna's clockwork ball hovered beside her as she passed a stall overflowing with roses, which according to a sign, smelled like each day of the week. She walked by a wind-up monkey holding a pair of cymbals, and a cart laden with sugared apples. None of these Zaun-born delights piqued her interest; Orianna had eyes only for the glass cabinet tucked into a secluded corner at the far edge of the grounds.

A glimmering wink of metal flashed in the moonlight. It came from the mechanical boy sitting behind the glass. Orianna had seen nothing like him, and drew closer, intrigued. He was clad in a midnight-blue suit and a silk hat. His skin was a shell of pure porcelain that masked the delicate clockwork gears below, and his eyes shone with glints of silver thread. As Orianna approached him, his lips rearranged into a smile.

"Can you keep a secret?" the boy said. His voice reminded Orianna of softly chiming bells.

"Hello," she said. "Of course."

"What say we make a trade. My secret, for your name."

"That seems fair. I am called Orianna."

"Or-ee-AHN-uh," he repeated. "Such soft sounds."

Orianna could have sworn his porcelain cheeks blushed.

"I suppose it's my turn. My name is Fieram. My secret is that I fear the outside world, though I long to see distant shores and far-off mountains."

"Is that why you live in a cabinet?" she asked. "Because you are afraid?"

"From here, the world visits me," said Fieram. "Behind the glass, I am safe. I'm very fragile, you see." He pointed to a hairline fracture on his forearm. "There it is. I'm getting old." Fieram's mouth opened into a lopsided grin.

Orianna giggled and shrugged her shoulders, a gesture she had recently acquired, though she wasn't quite sure if she had used it correctly.

"Oho! You haven't seen my tricks yet," said Fieram. He reached into his sleeve and produced a bouquet of daisies with a flourish.

"Ta-Da!" he exclaimed. "And..."

Fieram removed his hat and dipped his head in a nod. A half-dozen mechanical pigeons fluttered from beneath the brim. He brought his hands together in a clap and the entire cabinet filled with opaque red smoke. By the time it dissipated a few seconds later, the pigeons were gone.

Orianna applauded in delight. The ball whirred, impressed.

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Like magic.”

“And that wasn’t even my best execution. Fumbled my sleeve a bit,” he admitted, folding his hands. “But small miracles are my specialty. Like you finding your way to me, in this great city! You, above all others.”

“You winked at me.” said Orianna. “Why?”

“We are kindred spirits, you and I. But you already knew that,” said Fieram. “It’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” He shuffled his feet. Orianna marveled at the subtlety of his movement.

“It is just that I have never seen another like you,” she said.

“I’m one of a kind, aren’t I? Same as you,” said Fieram. He gestured toward her mechanical frame, and winked again.

Orianna smiled. Fieram leaned in against the glass.

“Your smile is—”

“Fabricated?” she said. “Yes. I am still mastering certain expressions.”

“... beautiful,” said Fieram.

“Well now you are going to make me blush.”

Orianna’s ball, hovering at her left shoulder, nudged her gently.

“Not now,” she told the ball. She lifted the mechanical monkey from its stall nearby and turned its key. It scuttled about the floor, eyes lit with a red glow, clashing its cymbals together at every third step before slowing to a halt.

“You are not like him, are you, Fieram? All wound up at the turn of a key?” she said. “You have a mind. You have thoughts.”

“I may be comprised of cogs and wheels, but I have dreams, like anyone.”

“I know you dream of leaving this place. Surely you are lonely behind this glass. Come with me. We could leave now, together,” Orianna said.

“Leave?” Fieram’s expression fell. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“You have no doubt listened to the restless bustle of Zaun, or heard of the grand marvels in Piltover?” Orianna asked.

Fieram cocked his head.

“I like to ride the Rising Howl at dusk to catch the last of the day’s golden rays,” Orianna said. “From the very top you can see the harbor beyond the sea-gates, and the endless glistening ocean. From up there, you can imagine the smell of faraway lands.”

Orianna’s ball whirred as it spun in the air and nudged her again.

“I suppose now is as good a time as any,” she said. “Fieram, would you like to see the world? We could leave together, right now. I can protect you.”

“I can’t think of anything more wonderful,” he said.

Orianna circled the glass cabinet in search of an opening. An iron padlock secured a small door at its base. She raised a fist and brought it down upon the lock, smashing it open.

A watchman approached them.

“Hey! Stop that!”

With a glance from Orianna, the ball shot toward the watchman. It clanged upon impact with his helmet, then hovered in the air as if waiting for a command. Orianna nodded and the ball radiated waves of coruscating power. Caught in the energy flux, the watchman raised his baton and bashed it into the ball, which spun in midair before returning to his target.

A second watchman ran toward Orianna. She tried to pull Fieram through the door but his chair jammed in the opening.

“Fieram! Can you repeat your trick?”

The ball reverberated with energy as it whirled around the first watchman. His metal helmet fizzled with sparks.

“My tricks?” Fieram reached into his sleeve and pulled out the bouquet as Orianna spun away from the watchman.

“No, the other one!”

Fieram replaced his bouquet.

“The very last trick,” she said. “Quickly!”

The mechanical boy drew the bouquet from his sleeve once more.

Orianna spun toward the watchman, her metal dress fanning out in a flurry of sharp blades until the man backed away, baton raised.

“Get away from him, you!” said the watchman. “That’s our property you’re tampering with!”

“From here, the world visits me,” Fieram said.

He tipped his hat and pigeons poured out. The watchman aimed his baton at Orianna’s head, and she ducked just as Fieram clapped. The baton shattered the side of the glass cabinet and crimson smoke poured from the opening, obscuring all movement.

The first watchman had responded to the ball’s galvanic attacks with rageful abandon, throwing all his weight into every punch. The ball was relentless, however, and shot a final blast of energy toward his helmet, and the watchman fell down, unconscious. Whirring in satisfaction, the ball flew to Orianna. It unleashed voltaic waves toward the second watchman, rendering him motionless.

Orianna stepped into the smoke-filled cabinet. She lifted the mechanical boy from his chair but his legs would not flex to stand.

“Fieram! Fieram, we must leave.”

“Leave? I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.” A pair of metallic pigeons flew through the broken glass, but dropped to the ground a few feet from the door.

“Fieram, stand up so we can go,” Orianna said, her face falling. “Please.”

“Oho! You haven’t seen my tricks yet.” He pulled the bouquet from his sleeve.

Orianna ignored Fieram’s attempt to tip his hat and dragged him, still fixed in a seated posture, from the glass enclosure. Outside, her ball had cornered the second watchman, who had collapsed in a buzzing heap.

“And that wasn’t even my best execution. Fumbled my sleeve a bit,” said Fieram.

“You are not... your voice is... repeating?” Orianna said. His head lolled back awkwardly and she held it upright.

“My secret is that I fear the outside world,” he said.

Orianna noticed the embroidery lining his jacket.

Sir Feisterly’s Fantastical Fair
Friendly Fieram

He was nothing more than a simple automaton, a spectacle for the crowds.

“I was certain you had a mind. Had thoughts. Like me,” she said.

Fieram looked up at her with eyes that glinted with silver. “I’m one of a kind, aren’t I?” He shuffled his feet nervously, though they were in midair. “Same as you.”

The ball returned to Orianna and whirled gently.

“We should go,” she whispered. She set Fieram back upon his chair, which she placed just outside the shattered glass cabinet. “I wish you well.”

“Small miracles are my specialty,” he said. “Like you finding your way to me.”

“Goodbye, Fieram,” said Orianna softly. The two watchmen lay unconscious on the ground. The ball hovered at her side as she walked away.

She did not look back until she was clear of the park’s towering gates. As she turned, she thought she saw a glint of metal winking in the distance.

Vi

Biography

Once a criminal from the mean streets of Zaun, Vi is a hotheaded, impulsive, and fearsome woman with only a very loose respect for authority figures. Growing up all but alone, Vi developed finely honed survival instincts as well as a wickedly abrasive sense of humor. Now working with the Wardens of Piltover to keep the peace, she wields mighty hextech gauntlets that can punch through walls and suspects with equal ease.

Vi remembers little of her childhood, and what she does remember, she wishes she didn't. Running with the sumpsnipe gangs, she quickly learned to use her wits, as well as her fists, to survive. Developing a thick skin was just as important, and everyone who encountered Vi knew her as someone who could punch or talk her way out of trouble. More often than not, she chose the former.

None of the old timers from Vi's youth could tell her anything of her parents, with most assuming they had simply died in one of the industrial accidents that were, sadly, all too common in Zaun. A few vaguely claimed to remember her as one of the brats from Hope House, a crumbling orphanage cut into Zaun's cave-riddled cliffs. On his deathbed, a notoriously mad sump-scrapper claimed to have found Vi adrift in a bassinet large enough for two in the ruins of a collapsed chem-laboratory. In the end, Vi gave up on any notions of learning anything about her parents, figuring some things were better left unknown.

Wilder tales than that soon came to surround Vi as she garnered a reputation among the undercity's gangs. With her wild pink hair, Vi was a distinctive sight on the streets of Zaun; hightailing from angry shopkeepers in the glittering arcades of the boundary markets, swaggering through the colorful bazaars of the Lanes or hitching rides up into Piltover aboard the hexdraulic conveyors. Wherever there was a scrape to be gotten into or a scam to be run, odds were, Vi was in the thick of it. Despite her reputation as a troublemaker, she followed a code that meant she never stole from those that couldn't afford to lose what she took and never hurt those that didn't deserve it.

As she got older, the capers of childhood became more audacious and daring, with Vi forming a gang of her own. Brash and quick to anger, she still liked to use her fists a little too much, and though she was usually the last one standing in any dispute, her eyes were frequently black and her lip split from fighting. Over the years, Vi formed a friendship with the owner of a bar on the edges of the Lanes, and he was able to temper some of her more self-destructive tendencies. He reinforced her code and showed her how to fight with discipline, as well as teaching her ways to better direct her simmering anger.

Despite his steadying influence, Vi's gang ran riot across Zaun, with the Chem-Barons tolerating their antics only because they knew she and her crew were sometimes useful. Vi became known as someone who got things done, no questions asked. Despite her life as a lawbreaker, Vi's sense of morality began to trouble her ever more frequently as she saw the damage she and other gangs were leaving in their wake.

The final straw came when she worked alongside another gang on a smash and grab heist at a chemtech facility that had just struck a rich seam. Listening in on miners' chatter in the bars, Vi learned when payment for the ore was being delivered, and hatched a scheme to relieve the mine's

owner of his gold. The plan required extra bodies to pull off, so Vi reluctantly brought the Factorywood Fiends in on her score. The job went to plan until the leader of the Fiends used a chem-powered mining golem to kill the owner with its oversized Pulverizer Gauntlets. His men drove the workers into the mine as he started demolishing the opening, driving the golem into an overload.

This wanton slaughter and destruction infuriated Vi. It had been a perfect score and now these psychotic idiots were ruining it!

Grabbing their share of the gold, the Fiends made their escape, but the miners were now trapped below ground and would soon run out of air. Vi could not leave them to die, and swiftly donned the overloading golem's powered gauntlets before it tore itself apart. The wrist mechanisms clamped down on her arms, but Vi endured the agony long enough to smash a path through to the miners and save them from certain death.

With the miners free, Vi and her gang fled with the rest of the gold. And the following day, Vi paid a visit to the Factorywood Fiends. Still wearing the powered gauntlets, she administered a beating to the entire gang that is still spoken of with awe by the gangs of Zaun to this day. The debacle of the mine robbery was the last straw for Vi, and she swore never to work with anyone she didn't fully trust. She kept the Pulverizer Gauntlets, and had them modified so as not to burn her whenever she used them to break into supposedly impregnable vaults or ambush heavily armed convoys of gold, tech, or whatever else she decided to steal.

Vi disappeared from Zaun during a time of great upheaval, a time when tensions between the two cities were at an all-time high. Rumors circulated between the gangs that she had been killed in a huge explosion in the heart of Zaun, but so too did stories that she'd struck out for distant lands. The truth finally came to light when Old Hungry's Scars, a vicious gang whose murder sprees had spread to Piltover, were finally brought down by the Sheriff of Piltover and her new ally... Vi. The former gang leader of Zaun was now in the employ of the wardens, and she'd had an upgrade. She'd replaced the chem-powered gauntlets with a pair of prototype hextech gauntlets. She also seemed somehow older, as if she'd seen and done things that had changed her forever. The Vi from the streets of Zaun, who'd use her fists before her wits, was still there, but she'd grown up some and seen that the path she had been on had only one ending.

No one yet knows how Vi came to be working alongside Caitlyn, but whatever secret binds them together can only be guessed at. Given the personal nature of a recent crime wave sweeping Piltover, speculation runs rife that it involves a certain blue-haired hellion from Zaun...

Story

Vi stifled a yawn as she moved through the gilded chamber at the heart of Piltover's Hall of Law. Dawn was less than an hour old, and the place was quiet. A few drunks were sleeping it off in the shaming cells, and she'd heard there were a couple of chem-augmented thugs in the deeper, more secure lock-ups. She'd ask around later, see if she could provide any insight as to what they were doing up in Piltover.

She rolled her shoulders, the muscles there stiff after a hard night's work. It had been a long shift, and her forearms were aching from the pressure of her powered gauntlets. All she wanted to do was go back home, get them off, and bathe her fists in ice water. Maybe throw back a few glasses of something strong and sleep some, but the pneuma-tube from Caitlyn had been full of imperatives about getting herself down to the district house on the double. Vi had cocked an eyebrow, tossed

the message and given it an hour before leaving her cramped home in the dressmakers-quarter to answer Caitlyn's summons.

"Hey, Harknor," she said to the desk-warden when she reached the cells. "What's so important Caitlyn has to drag me from an erotic dream about—"

"Ah, ah, stop right there," said Harknor without looking up from his elevated desk as he ran a finger down the list of prisoners brought in during the night. "I'm not in the mood to hear another of your lurid fantasies."

"You sure?" grinned Vi, leaning on his desk and blowing a loose strand of pink hair from her eyes. "This was a good one. Had a plot and everything."

"Quite sure," said Harknor, looking away and holding out the charge sheet. "Caitlyn and Mohan brought in a hextech thief last night. He hasn't said a word to anyone, but she thinks you might be able to get him to talk."

Vi arched an eyebrow as she scanned the page.

"Devaki? You've been a very naughty boy," she said, rolling her eyes and curling her metaled fingers into a fist. "Yeah, Devaki and I knew each other back in the day. I'll get him to talk."

Harknor shook his head, saying, "Listen, Vi, I don't want to have to call the surgeon back here again. Caitlyn wants this fella to be able to speak when he goes before the procurator."

"Where is she anyway?" asked Vi. "She isn't even here to say hello?"

"Chasing down a lead at the docks," said Harknor. "Said she figured you could handle this one on your own. She wrong about that?"

"Nope," said Vi, turning and sashaying toward the cells. "Which cell's Devaki in?"

"Number six. But remember, he's got to be able to talk!"

Vi nodded and said, "Yeah, yeah..."

She reached cell six and slid back the locking bar. Normally, another warden would secure the door, but Vi didn't need anyone at her back. She knew Devaki from the old days, even worked with him a few times before the job with the Factorywood Fiends went bad. Devaki was a thief, not a fighter, and if she needed backup to restrain his scrawny frame, then it was time to find a new line of work.

Devaki was sitting on the edge of the chipped hunk of stone they called a bed with his back to the wall and his knees drawn up to his chest. He cradled one arm close to his body, the limb ending at a bandaged stump where his hand ought to be. He looked up as she entered, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Vi?"

"Piltover's finest," she said with a petite curtsy that, despite where he sat, made Devaki smile. "What happened to your hand?"

"Your damn sheriff shot it off," he said. "What happened to yours?"

"I got an upgrade," said Vi, holding up her hextech gauntlets. They hummed with a low buzz and she turned them around to let Devaki see just how powerful they were. "Fully customizable with variant levels of hurt. I can punch through walls with these babies."

“Yeah, I heard what happened to the Ecliptic Vaults,” said Devaki with an easy smile, as if he was talking to the old Vi, the Vi from the Lanes. He wasn’t bright enough to know that Vi wasn’t the one standing in front of him.

Devaki held up the arm ending in a stump. “I’m gonna need an upgrade too. This was a high-end augment from Bronzio’s. That sheriff didn’t need to shoot it off.”

“You can bill her,” said Vi, closing the distance between them in two strides and lifting Devaki off his feet. She threw him against the opposite wall, rattling his bones and sending plaster dust billowing into the air.

Devaki slid to the floor, shocked and gasping for breath. “They’ve been playing nice so far, but now they send you in? What gives?”

“I’m the one they send in when asking all polite doesn’t get you anywhere, cupcake,” said Vi, letting the power build in her gauntlets. “I’m the one who’ll go to town on you with these beauties. Unless, of course, you tell me what I want to know.”

“Whoa, wait! Vi, what are you doing?” spluttered Devaki, holding his remaining hand out before him as he scrambled to his feet.

“I’m interrogating you, what’s it look like?”

“But you haven’t asked me anything!”

Vi cocked her head to the side. “Yeah, I should probably get on that.”

She reached down and hauled Devaki to his feet, applying a growing pressure to his shoulder.

“So, who was gonna buy that stolen hextech?”

Devaki winced in pain, but didn’t answer.

“Come on, you’re tougher than that,” said Vi, releasing his bruised shoulder. “You want to see what happens to a face when I don’t pull my punches?”

“No!” cried Devaki.

“Then tell me what I want to know.”

“I can’t.”

Vi tapped a finger on her chin, as if weighing whether to punch him again. She smiled, the expression worrying Devaki more than the thought of her fists.

“Be a shame if word got round the Lanes that you’d been informing on all your criminal friends for the last couple of years.”

“What?” said Devaki, spluttering in pain and indignation. “That’s a lie!”

“Of course it is,” said Vi, “but I know all the right people to talk to down there. A lot of folk’ll listen if I let it slip that you’re in the wardens’ pocket.”

“I’ll be dead in a day if you do that,” protested Devaki.

“Now you’re catching on,” said Vi. “Tell me what I want to know. I’ll make sure it gets about you resisted arrest. Even give you a black eye so it looks like I beat it out of ya.”

Devaki's shoulders slumped, knowing he had no defiance left in him.

"Fine, I'll tell you what you want to know."

"Excellent," said Vi, "Now we're getting somewhere."

Heimerdinger

Biography

A brilliant yet eccentric yordle scientist, Professor Cecil B. Heimerdinger is lauded as one of the most innovative minds and esteemed inventors Piltover has ever seen. Relentless in his work to the point of neurotic obsession, he is fascinated by mysteries that have confounded his contemporaries for decades, and thrives on answering the universe's most impenetrable questions. Though his theories often appear opaque and esoteric, Heimerdinger believes knowledge should be shared, and is devoted to teaching all who desire it.

Story

10.14

09:15

Current meteorological conditions in Bandle City seem optimal. Atmospheric pressure is ideal for today's experiments!

Running a fifth trial for my Tridyminiumobulator this afternoon. Some fine tuning is required; singed my mustache. Need to adjust the energy throughput.

16:00

Tridyminiumobulator is still not maintaining intended proper energy efficiency! Necessary to run more numbers. In the meantime, I have found something else that's very intriguing.

While returning home after today's tests, I passed a gaggle of young yordles throwing a spherical projectile at each other. It's a simple enough concept: throw the object at someone, catch it, throw it at another yordle, repeat. But yordle miscalculations result in several errors! They throw with inconsistent accuracy and force, and the "ball" (as they refer to it) is frequently dropped... There are many ways for this process to be improved. According to my calculations, and after collecting data from the participants, if the pitching was consistent in both speed and arc there would be a 44.57% increase to fun! I need to ponder this for the evening.

10.15

05:20

Eureka! I've devised a solution.

I've invented an automated ball pitcher. Current name: H-28G. It employs a consistent speed and trajectory, ensuring that the recipient will always be able to catch the ball. It redirects itself to the nearest yordle (if there is more than one in the vicinity) ensuring everyone has a turn. I'll take it to the young yordles today and demonstrate my invention.

Also: spilled toxic acid on my shoes this morning. Bothersome.

10:30

Tested the automated pitcher today. It did not go as planned. The young ones were excited enough about my invention, but, when the machine was turned on, it was far too powerful! Even at its lowest setting it completely knocked a yordle off his feet. Clearly, I overestimated the velocity behind their throws... I'll return soon to make adjustments.

But my priority, for now, is the Tridyminiumobulator; I must fix its complications before lunch. Once it's in good shape, I'll need to test it somewhere else. Bandle City is proving insufficient for field research.

10.16

15:55

Apparently, there's a giant in town. A highly annoying anomaly. The noise outside is disturbing my research!

Must check fish tank today. They've been strangely quiet...

10.17

10:40

I have heard that many yordles have been injured due to the giant-related disturbance. If this doesn't stop soon, intervention will be necessary! I hope H-28G is still intact. I would lose a lot of time if it has to be rebuilt.

16:30

Everything is quiet again. It seems that the giant came to his senses and ran off. I need to gather H-28G tomorrow, once I've finished with more pressing matters. I've almost perfected the Tridyminiumobulator!

10.18

08:30

Today has been quite eventful already. I was surprised by a knock at my door. It seemed like the entire city was standing in front of my house. Normally, when a crowd has gathered, it's because they have some petty grievance about my work. But this time, they were celebrating!

Astonishingly, it seems one of the young yordles took advantage of the H-28G prototype I had left behind amidst the giant tomfoolery. He proved to be innovative, and repurposed the invention into a makeshift turret. It's powerful enough to scare off a giant - imagine that! What an ingenious little fellow.

I wish I could employ his like-minded encephalon in the near future - I have big plans and his assistance could be valuable - but he'd have to leave Bandle City. The scope of my plans necessitates a more expansive testing ground.

Runeterra should suffice!

Hecarim

Biography

Hecarim is an armored colossus who charges from the Shadow Isles at the head of a deathly host of spectral horsemen to hunt the living. A monstrous fusion of man and beast, cursed to ride for eternity, Hecarim revels in slaughter and crushing souls beneath his armored hooves.

Born into an empire long since gone to dust and forgotten, Hecarim was squired to a legendary company of knights known as the Iron Order, a brotherhood sworn to defend their king's land. There he endured the harshest training imaginable, a punishing regime that schooled him to be a formidable warrior.

As Hecarim grew to manhood, he mastered every form of combat and war-stratagem with ease. He quickly outstripped his fellow squires in mounted warfare, and the Knight Commander of the Iron Order saw greatness within the young man and recognized a potential successor. But as the years passed and Hecarim won victory after victory from the back of his mighty warhorse, the Knight Commander finally recognized a growing darkness within his lieutenant. Hecarim's thirst for wholesale slaughter and obsessive hunger for glory was eroding his honor and the Knight Commander knew the young knight must never become the master of the Iron Order. In his private chambers, he told Hecarim that he would not be his successor and though his lieutenant was furious, he bit back on his anger and returned to his duties.

When the Order next rode to war, the Knight Commander found himself surrounded by enemies and isolated from his fellow knights. Only Hecarim could ride to his aid, but in a moment of rancor, he turned his mount away and left the Knight Commander to die. At battle's end, the surviving knights, oblivious to what Hecarim had done, knelt on the bloody ground and swore to follow him as their master.

Hecarim rode to the capital, and met with Kalista, the king's general. Kalista recognized his exceptional nature, and when the king's wife was wounded by the poisoned blade of an assassin, she tasked the Iron Order with staying at the king's side while she sought a cure. Hecarim accepted, but being given what he perceived to be a menial task planted a seed of resentment.

Hecarim remained with the king as he descended into grief-induced madness. Gripped by paranoia, the king raged at those who sought to separate him from his dying wife and despatched the Iron Order to quell what he saw as dissent throughout his kingdom. Hecarim led the Iron Order in bloody suppressions of discontent, earning a dreadful reputation as a ruthless enforcer of the king's will.

Villages burned and the riders of the Iron Order put hundreds to the sword. The kingdom was in darkness, and when the queen died, Hecarim spun falsehoods around the king, speaking of how he had uncovered the truth behind her death, seeking sanction to lead the Iron Order to foreign lands and earn yet more dark renown.

Before he rode out, Kalista returned from her quest. She had found a cure for the queen's malady upon the legendary Blessed Isles, but was too late to save her. Horrified at what had become of the kingdom, Kalista refused to share what she had discovered and was imprisoned for her defiance. Hecarim saw an opportunity to win yet more favor and visited Kalista's cell. Promising to keep the king from any rash actions, Hecarim persuaded Kalista to reveal what she knew. Kalista reluctantly agreed and guided the king's fleet through the glammers veiling the Blessed Isles from sight.

Hecarim led the ruined form of the king to the center of the magical island, where he met with its guardians and demanded their aid. The guardians offered their sympathies, but told the king his wife was beyond their help. Enraged, the king ordered Kalista to kill the guardians one by one until they relented. Kalista refused and stood between the king and the island's inhabitants.

Hecarim recognized a crossroads in his life and made a decision that would damn him for eternity. Instead of supporting Kalista, he drove a spear through her back and commanded the Iron Order to slay the inhabitants of the Blessed Isles. Hecarim and his warriors slaughtered the guardians until a lantern-bearing wretch finally led the king to what he sought - the secret to resurrecting his wife.

But when the queen returned to life she was a horror of decayed meat and maggot-ridden flesh who begged to be allowed to die once more. Repulsed at what he had done to his beloved wife, the king enacted a spell to end their lives and bind them together for all eternity. His conjuration was successful, but unwittingly empowered by the many potent magical artifacts stored on the island, its power was increased a hundredfold.

A hurricane of black mist surrounded the king, spreading across the island and killing everything it touched. Hecarim abandoned the king to his doom and led the Iron Order back to their ships, killing all in their path as the spirits of those slain by the black mist arose as undying wraiths. One-by-one, the knights were dragged down into undeath until only Hecarim remained. As uncontrolled sorcery filled him, he and his mighty steed were fused together in a monstrous abomination that reflected the true darkness of his soul.

Howling in rage, the titanic beast known as the Shadow of War was wrought in an agonizing transformation, a brazen monster of fury and spite. The sins of his former life were heightened by the maelstrom of dark magic, birthing a creature of endless malice and terrifying power.

Now Hecarim is bound to the Shadow Isles, patrolling its nightmare shores and killing all before him in a mockery of his former duty. And when the Black Mist reaches beyond the Shadow Isles, he and the spectral host of the Iron Order ride with him to slaughter the living in the memory of glories long passed.

Story

Icy waves crashed on the bleak shore, red with the blood of the men Hecarim had already butchered. The mortals he had yet to kill were retreating over the beach in terror. Black rain doused them and stormclouds boiled in from the mourning heart of the island. He heard them shouting to one another. The words were a guttural battle-cant he did not recognize, but the meaning was clear; they actually thought they might live to reach their ship. True, they had some skill. They moved as one, wooden shields interlocked. But they were mortal and Hecarim savored the meat-stink of their fear.

He circled them, threading crumbling ruins and unseen in the shadowed mist rising from the ashen sand. The echoing thunder of his hooves struck sparks from black rocks. It gnawed at their courage. He watched the mortals through the slitted visor of his helm. The weak light of their wretched spirits was flickering corporsant in their flesh. It repulsed him even as he craved it.

"No-one lives," he said.

His voice was muffled by the dread iron of his helm, like the corpse-rasp of a hanged man. The sound scraped along their nerves like rusted blades. He drank in their terror and grinned as one man threw down his shield and ran for the ship in desperation.

He bellowed as he galloped from the weed-choked ruins, lowering his hooked glaive and feeling the old thrill of the charge. A memory flickered, riding at the head of a silver host. Winning glory and honor. The memory faded as the man reached the dark surf of cold breakers and looked over his shoulder.

“Please! No!” he cried.

Hecarim split him from collarbone to pelvis in one thunderous blow.

His ebon-bladed glaive pulsed as it bathed in blood. The fragile wisp of the man’s spirit sought to fly free, but the mist’s hunger would not be cheated. Hecarim watched as the soul was twisted into a dark reflection of the man’s life.

Hecarim drew the power of the island to him and the bloody surf churned with motion as a host of dark knights wreathed in shimmering light rose from the water. Sealed within archaic plates of ghostly iron, they drew black swords that glimmered with dark radiance. He should know these men. They had served him once and served him still, but he had no memory of them. He turned back towards the mortals on the beach. He parted the mists, revelling in their terror as they saw him clearly for the first time.

His colossal form was a nightmarish hybrid of man and horse, a chimeric juggernaut of brazen iron. The plates of his body were dark and stamped with etchings whose meanings he only vaguely recalled. Bale-fire smouldered behind his visor, the spirit within cold and dead yet hatefully vital.

Hecarim reared as forking trceries of lightning split the sky. He lowered his glaive and led his knights in the charge, throwing up giant clumps of blood-sodden sand and bone fragments as he went. The mortals screamed and brought up their shields, but the ghost-knights charge was unstoppable. Hecarim struck first as was his right as their master, and the thunderous impact splintered the shieldwall wide open. Men were trampled to bloody gruel beneath his iron-shod bulk.

His glaive struck out left and right, killing with every strike. The ghost knights crushed all before them, slaughtering the living in a fury of thrashing hooves, stabbing lances and chopping blades. Bones cracked and blood sprayed as mortal spirits fled broken bodies, already trapped between life and death by the fell magic of the Ruined King.

The spirits of the dead circled Hecarim, beholden to him as their killer and he revelled in the surging joy of battle. He ignored the wailing spirits. He had no interest in enslaving them. Leave such petty cruelties to the Chain Warden.

All Hecarim cared for was killing.

Karthus

Biography

The harbinger of oblivion, Karthus is an undying spirit whose haunting songs are a prelude to the horror of his nightmarish appearance. The living fear the eternity of undeath, but Karthus sees only beauty and purity in its embrace, a perfect union of life and death. When Karthus emerges from the Shadow Isles, it is to bring the joy of death to mortals, an apostle of the unliving.

Karthus was born into abject poverty in the sprawl of dwellings built beyond the walls of the Noxian capital. His mother died at the moment of his birth, leaving his father to raise him and his three sisters alone. They shared a crumbling, rat-infested almshouse with scores of other families, subsisting on a diet of rainwater and vermin. Of all the children, Karthus was the best ratter, and regularly brought gnawed corpses for the cook-pot.

Death was commonplace in the slums of Noxus, and many mornings began with the wailing of bereaved parents who woke to discover their child cold and lifeless beside them. Karthus learned to love these laments, and would watch, fascinated, as the tally-men of Kindred notched their staffs and bore the bodies from the almshouse. At night the young Karthus would sneak through the cramped rooms, seeking those whose lives hung by a thread, hoping to witness the moment their soul passed from life to death. For years, his nightly travels were fruitless, as it was impossible to predict exactly when a person would die. He was denied witnessing the moment of death until it reached his own family.

Outbreaks of disease were frequent in such cramped confines, and when Karthus's sisters sickened with the plague, he watched over them intently. While his father drowned his grief, Karthus was the ever dutiful brother, caring for his sisters as the disease consumed them. He watched each of them as they died, and a sublime connection seemed to reach into him as the light faded from their eyes - a yearning to see what lay beyond death and unlock the secrets of eternity. When the tally-men came for the bodies, Karthus followed them back to their temple, asking them question after question about their order and the workings of death. Could a person exist at the moment where life ends, but before death begins? If such a liminal moment could be understood and held, might the wisdom of life be combined with the clarity of death?

The tally-men quickly recognized Karthus's suitability for their order and he was inducted into their ranks, first as a digger of graves and pyre-builder, before ascending to the rank of corpse collector. Karthus guided his bone-cart around the streets of Noxus to gather the dead every day. His dirges quickly became known throughout Noxus, mournful laments that spoke to the beauty of death and the hope that what lay beyond was something to be embraced. Many a grieving family took solace in his songs, finding a measure of peace in his heartfelt elegies. Eventually, Karthus worked in the temple itself, tending to the sick in their final moments, watching as whatever death had laid its claim upon them took its due. Karthus would speak to each person laid before him, ushering their souls into death, in search of further wisdom in their fading eyes.

Eventually, Karthus reached the conclusion that he could learn no more from mortals, that only the dead themselves could answer his questions. None of the dying souls could tell of what lay beyond, but whispered rumors and tales told to frighten children echoed of a place where death was not the end - The Shadow Isles.

Karthus emptied the temple's coffers and bought passage to Bilgewater, a city plagued by a strange black mist said to draw souls to a cursed island far out at sea. No captain was willing to take Karthus to the Shadow Isles, but eventually he came upon a rum-sodden fisherman with a mountain of debts and nothing to lose. The boat plied the ocean for many days and nights, until a storm drove them onto the rocks of an island that appeared on no charts. A black mist rolled out from a haunted landscape of gnarled trees and tumbled ruins. The fisherman freed his boat and turned its prow in terror for Bilgewater, but Karthus leapt into the sea and waded ashore. Steadying himself with his notched tally-staff, he proudly sang the lament he had prepared for the moment of his own death, and his words were carried on a cold wind to the heart of the island.

The black mist flowed through Karthus, ravaging his flesh and spirit with ancient sorcery, but such was the force of his desire to transcend mortality that it did not destroy him. Instead, it remade him, and Karthus was born anew in the waters of the island as a fleshless revenant.

Revelation filled Karthus as he became what he always believed he should have been; a being poised at the threshold of death and life. The beauty of this eternal moment filled him with wonder as the wretched spirits of the island rose to behold his transformation, drawn to his passion like predators scenting blood in the ocean. Finally, Karthus was where he belonged, surrounded by those who truly understood the boon undeath truly was. Filled with righteous zeal, he knew he had to return to Valoran and share his gift with the living, to free them from petty mortal concerns.

Karthus turned and the Black Mist bore him over the waves to the fisherman's boat. The man fell to his knees before Karthus, begging for his life, and Karthus granted him the blessing of death, ending his mortal suffering and raising him up as an immortal spirit as he sang his lament for passing souls. The fisherman was the first of many such souls Karthus would free, and soon the Deathsinger would command a legion of unliving wraiths. To Karthus's awakened senses, the Shadow Isles was in a state of apathetic limbo, where the blessings of death were squandered. He would galvanize the dead in a crusade to bring the beauty of oblivion to the living, to end the suffering of mortality and usher in a glorious age of undeath.

Karthus has become the emissary of the Shadow Isles, the herald of oblivion whose laments are paeans to the glory of death. His legions of unbound souls join with his funereal dirges, their haunting song reaching beyond the Black Mist to be heard on cold nights over graveyards and charnel houses all across Valoran.

Story

The sea was mirror-smooth and dark. A pirate's moon hung low on the horizon as it had for the last six nights. Not so much as a whisper of wind stirred the air, only that damned dirge carried from who knew where. Vionax had sailed the oceans around Noxus long enough to know that seas like this only ever presaged ill-fortune. She stood on the Darkwill's foredeck, training her spyglass on the far ocean, searching for anything she could use to plot their position.

"Nothing but sea in all directions," she said to the night. "No land in sight and no stars I recognize. Our sails are empty of wind. The oar decks have rowed for days, but no matter which way we turn, land never comes and the moon neither waxes nor wanes."

She took a moment to rub the heels of her palms against her face. Thirst and hunger growled in her belly and the constant darkness had made it impossible to accurately gauge the passage of time. The Darkwill wasn't even her ship. She'd been it's first mate until a Freljordan reaver's axe had split

Captain Mettok's skull and given her a sudden promotion. The captain and fifteen other Noxian warriors were laid within sewn-up hammocks on the main deck. The growing stench rising from the bodies was the only consistent measure of time's passing.

She lifted her gaze to the open ocean and her eyes widened as she saw thick black mist rising from the water. Shapes moved in the mist, lambent suggestions of clawed arms and gaping mouths. That damned dirge rang out over the water again, louder now and accompanied by the dolorous peals of a funeral bell.

"The Black Mist," she said. "All hands on deck!"

She turned and vaulted down to the main deck, running for the quarterdeck and the ship's wheel. Not that she could do anything to move the ship, but she'd be damned if she'd be found anywhere else. A haunting lament for lost souls drifted over the ship as men stumbled from below decks, and even as terror shivered her spine, Vionax couldn't deny the poetry in the sound. Tears pricked her eyes and ran down her cheeks, not in fear, but from infinite sadness.

"Let me end your grief."

The voice in her head was cold and lifeless, the voice of a dead man. It conjured the image of iron-rimmed wheels on a corpse-heaped cart, a knife cutting yet another death mark on a staff. Vionax knew the tales of the Black Mist; she knew to avoid the islands brooding beneath the darkness in the east. She'd thought the ship was far from the Shadow Isles, but she was wrong.

She pulled up short as black mist boiled up over the gunwale, bringing with it howls and screeches of dead things. Wraiths spun overhead, a swirling chorus of the damned, and the Darkwill's crew cried out in terror at the sight of them. Vionax drew her pistol and cocked the hammer as a figure loomed from the mist; towering and wide-shouldered, robed in tattered vestments like an ancient prelate, yet his shoulders and gaunt skull were armored as a warrior. A chained book hung at his waist and he carried a long staff with its haft notched by countless tally-marks. Spectral light shone at its tip and burned like a fallen star in the palm of his free hand.

"Why do you cry?" said the creature. "I am Karthus, and I bring you a great gift."

"I don't want your gift," said Vionax, pulling the trigger. Her pistol boomed and fire exploded from the barrel. The shot struck the monstrous wraith, but passed through it without harm.

"You mortals," said Karthus, shaking his helmeted head. "You fear what you do not understand and would turn away from a boon that is freely offered."

The monster drifted closer, and the dark radiance of his staff bathed the ship's deck in pale, sickly light. Vionax backed away from the wraith's chill as her crew fell before the light, their souls drifting like steam from their bodies. Her heel caught on one of the laid out hammocks and she tripped, falling backwards onto her haunches. She pushed herself away from Karthus, scrambling over the bodies of her fellow sailors.

The hammock beneath her moved.

They were all moving, squirming and writhing like fresh-caught fish gasping for air at the bottom of a boat. Tendrils of mist rose from tears in the canvas and between the rough stitches the ship's sailmaker had used to sew them shut. Faces moved in the mist, faces she'd sailed with for years, men and women she'd fought beside.

The wraith towered over her and the dead crew of the Darkwill stood beside him, their spirit forms limned in moonlight.

“Death is nothing to be feared, Mistress Vionax,” said Karthus. “It will free you from all your pain. It will lift your eyes from your mundane existence and show you the glory of life eternal. Embrace the beauty and wonder of death. Let go of your mortality. You do not need it.”

He held his hand out and the light there swelled to envelop her. She screamed as it pressed through her skin, into muscle, through bone, down to her very soul. The wraith clenched his fist and Vionax cried out as she felt herself being unwoven from the inside out.

“Let your soul fly free,” said Karthus, turning to carve another notch in his staff with a sharpened nail. “You shall feel no pain, no fear, no desire to feel anything but the beauty of what I have to show you. Miracles and wonders await, mortal. Why would you not crave such rapture...?”

“No,” she said with her last breath. “I don’t want to see.”

“It is already done,” said Karthus.

Thresh

Biography

Sadistic and cunning, Thresh is a restless spirit who prides himself on tormenting mortals and breaking them with slow, excruciating inventiveness. His victims suffer far beyond the point of death, for Thresh wreaks agony upon their souls, imprisoning them in his lantern to torture for all eternity.

In an age history has all but forgotten, the man who would later be known as Thresh was once a member of an order devoted to gathering and protecting knowledge. The masters of this order tasked him with guarding a hidden underground vault filled with dangerous and corrupted magical artifacts. Thresh was incredibly strong-willed and methodical, which made him well-suited to such work.

The vault Thresh guarded was buried deep beneath the citadel at the center of an island chain and protected by runic sigils, arcane locks and potent wards. Spending such time in the presence of dark spells began to affect Thresh as the magic sought out his innate malice. For years the relics preyed on his insecurities, taunting him with his deepest fears and feeding his bitterness.

Thresh's spite surfaced through wanton acts of cruelty, as his talent for exploiting vulnerability bloomed. He slowly tore pages out of a living book, binding it back together when it was all but spent. He scratched the glass of a mirror bound with the memory of an ancient mage until it was opaque, trapping the man in darkness, only to polish it anew and repeat. Just as a secret wants to be told, a spell wants nothing more than to be cast, and Thresh denied this each day. He would start to recite an incantation, then let the words trickle off his tongue, halting just before the last syllable.

He became exquisitely skilled at covering all evidence of his cruelty, such that no one in the order suspected he was anything other than a disciplined guard. The vault had grown so vast that no one knew its contents as completely as Thresh, and the lesser artifacts faded from the order's memory, as did Thresh himself.

He resented that he had to hide his meticulous work. Everything under his watch was evil, or corrupted in some way - why shouldn't he be free to do as he would?

The vault held many peculiar magical artifacts but no people, until one day when a chained man was dragged into the sunken catacombs. He was a warlock who had infused his body with raw sorcery, which gave him the power to regenerate his flesh, no matter how grievous the wound.

Thresh was delighted at his new ward - a being who could feel the full range of human suffering, but would not perish, a plaything he could torment for years to come. He started methodically separating the warlock's skin from his flesh with a hook, and used his chains to lash and tear the open wound until it healed. He took to wearing the chains as he patrolled the vault, reveling in the warlock's fear at the long, dragging sound of his approach.

With ample charges to torment in the vault, Thresh became even more distanced from the order above. He began to take his meals in his underground chamber lit by a single lantern, rarely emerging from the catacombs. His skin developed a pallid complexion from lack of sunlight, and his face became gaunt and hollow. Members of the order avoided him, and when a series of mysterious disappearances plagued the order, none thought to investigate Thresh's lair.

When the disaster known as the Ruination struck, magical shockwaves claimed the lives of all who lived on the isles and transformed them into a state of undeath. While others screamed in anguish, Thresh reveled in the ruin. He rose from this cataclysm as a spectral abomination, but unlike many who have passed into the shadow world, Thresh did not lose his identity. Rather, his penchant for cruel torture and ability to discern weakness was only heightened.

He relished the chance to continue his cruelty without fear of reprisal, unfettered by the limits of mortality. As a wraith, Thresh could torment the living and the dead endlessly, delighting in their despair before claiming their soul for an eternity of suffering.

Thresh now seeks only particular victims: the most clever and resilient, and those with a strong will. His greatest joy comes from tormenting his victims until they lose any last glimmer of hope, before facing the inevitable hook of his chains.

Story

A horrible scraping of metal chains drifted over the fields. Outside, an unnatural fog rendered the moon and stars all but invisible, and the regular hum of insects fell silent.

Thresh approached a ruined hovel. He raised his lantern, not to see his surroundings, but to look inside the glass. The interior of the lantern resembled a starry nightscape with its thousands of tiny green glowing orbs. They buzzed frantically as if trying to escape Thresh's gaze. His mouth twisted in a grotesque grin, teeth glinting from the glow. Each of the lights was precious to him.

Behind the door, a man whimpered. Thresh sensed his pain, and was drawn to it. He knew the man's suffering like an old friend.

Thresh had only appeared to the man once, decades ago, but since then the spectre had taken everyone the man held dear: from his favorite horse to his mother, brother, and recently a manservant who had become a close confidant. The specter made no pretence of natural deaths; he wanted the man to know who caused each loss.

The spirit passed through the door, scraping his chains as they dragged behind him. The walls were damp and ingrained with years of grime. The man looked even worse: his hair long and matted, his skin covered in scabs - angry and raw from clawing. He wore what had once been fine velvet clothes, but were now little more than torn, tattered rags.

The man shrank from the sudden green glow, covering his eyes. He shook violently, backing away into the corner.

"Please. Please, not you," he whispered.

"Long ago, I claimed you as mine." Thresh's voice creaked and stretched, as if he had not spoken for an age. "It is time I collect..."

"I am dying," the man said, his voice barely audible. "If you're here to kill me, you'd best hurry." He made an effort to look at Thresh directly.

Thresh stretched his mouth wide. "Your death is not my desire."

He set the glass door of his lantern slightly ajar. Strange sounds came from within - a cacophony of screams.

The man did not react, not at first. So many screams emerged that they blended together like scraping glass shards. But his eyes widened in horror as he heard voices he recognized plead from Thresh's lantern. He heard his mother, his brother, his friend, and finally the sound he dreaded most: his children, wailing as if being burned alive.

"What have you done?" he screamed. He scrambled for something to throw - a broken chair - and threw it at Thresh with all his strength. It passed through the spectre harmlessly, and Thresh laughed mirthlessly.

The man ran at Thresh, eyes wild with fury. The spectre's hooked chains whipped out like striking snakes. The barbed hooks struck the mortal's chest, cracking ribs and piercing his heart. The man fell to his knees, face twisted in delicious agony.

"I left them to keep them safe," the man cried. Blood gurgled from his mouth.

Thresh wrenched his chains hard. For a moment, the man did not move. Then the ripping began. Like a rough-spun sheet being slowly torn, he was excruciatingly pulled from himself. His body convulsed violently, and blood sprayed along the walls.

"Now, we begin," said Thresh. He pulled the captured soul, pulsing brightly from the end of the chain, and trapped him within the lantern. The man's hollow corpse collapsed as Thresh departed.

Thresh followed the curling Black Mist away from the cottage with his glowing lantern held high. Only after Thresh was gone, and the fog dissipated, did the insects resume their nightly chorus and stars once again filled the night sky.

Kalista

Biography

A specter of wrath and retribution, Kalista is the undying spirit of vengeance, an armored nightmare summoned from the Shadow Isles to hunt deceivers and traitors. The betrayed may cry out in blood to be avenged, but Kalista only answers those whose cause she deems worthy of her skills. Woe betide those who become the focus of Kalista's wrath, for any pact sealed with this grim hunter can only end on the cold fire of her soul-spears.

In life, Kalista was a proud general, niece to the powerful king of an empire none now recall. She lived by a strict code of honor and expected others to do the same, serving her king and queen with utmost loyalty. Her king had many enemies, and when the rulers of a conquered land sent an assassin to slay him, only the speed of Kalista's sword arm averted disaster. But in saving the king, she damned the queen. The assassin's deflected blade was envenomed and sliced the arm of the king's wife. The greatest priests, surgeons and sorcerers were summoned, but none could draw the poison from the queen's body. Even the king's magic could only slow its progress. Wracked with grief, the king dispatched Kalista to quest for a cure. Before departing, she tasked Hecarim of the Iron Order to stand at the king's side in her stead. He reluctantly accepted this task, bitter at being denied the chance to join Kalista.

Kalista traveled the world, seeking a cure from learned scholars, hermits and mystics, but always without success. Finally, she learned of a legendary island beyond the ken of mortal eyes, a place said to hold the key to eternal life – the Blessed Isles - and set sail on a last voyage of hope. The island's inhabitants knew of her quest and, seeing the purity of her intent, drew her boat to the shores of their island. Kalista begged them to heal the queen, and the master of the order instructed Kalista to bring her to the island, where they would cleanse her body. As Kalista boarded her ship, she was given arcane words to pierce the glamours protecting the island, but was warned against sharing that knowledge. Kalista sailed for her homeland, but arrived too late; the queen was already dead.

The king had descended into grief-stricken madness, locking himself in his tower with the queen's festering corpse. Her uncle learned of Kalista's return and demanded she tell him what she had found. With heavy heart, for she had never before broken her oath to the king, Kalista refused, remembering the warning given to her and knowing there was no purpose in bringing a corpse to the island. The king named her a traitor and imprisoned her until such time she relented. There Kalista remained until Hecarim convinced her to tell the king what she knew. He urged her to let the king find peace, either in his wife returning to him or in finally accepting she was gone and allowing her to be buried on the Blessed Isles. Between them they could assuage the king's madness and bring him back with no harm being done. Hesitantly, for she sensed something amiss in Hecarim, Kalista agreed.

And so the king sailed for the Blessed Isles with a flotilla of his fastest ships. Kalista spoke the mystic words to undo the veil shrouding their destination and the king cried out as its glittering coast was revealed. The king marched towards a distant white city at the centre of the island where he was met by the master of the island's guardians. The king ordered the man to bring his wife back from the dead, but was told that trying to cheat death went against the natural order of the world. The king flew into a fevered rage and commanded Kalista to kill the guardian.

Kalista refused and spoke of the great man he had once been, but her appeals fell on deaf ears and he again ordered the guardian's death. Kalista called on Hecarim to stand with her, but Hecarim now saw a chance to realize his long-simmering ambition of replacing Kalista as the king's favorite. He stepped towards Kalista as if to stand at her side, but instead drove his spear through her back in a monstrous act of betrayal. The Iron Order joined him in treachery, their own spears plunging into Kalista's body as she fell. A brutal melee erupted, with those devoted to Kalista fighting desperately against Hecarim and his knights. Despite their courage and skill, their numbers were too few and Hecarim's men slew them to a man. As Kalista's life faded and she watched her warriors die, she swore vengeance with her dying breath upon those who had betrayed her.

When next Kalista opened her eyes, they were filled with the dark power of unnatural magic. The Blessed Isles had been transformed into a twisted mockery of life and beauty, a place of darkness filled with howling spirits condemned for all eternity to the nightmare of undeath. She knew nothing of how this had happened, and even as she clung to her last memories of betrayal, they slowly faded until all that remained was a thirst for vengeance burning in her ruined chest.

A thirst that can only be slaked in the blood of traitors.

Story

The sword-wife stood amid the burnt out ruin of her home. Everything and everyone that mattered to her was gone, and she was filled with fathomless grief... and hate. Hate was now all that compelled her.

She saw again the smile on his face as he gave the order. He was meant to be their protector, but he'd spat upon his vows. Hers was not the only family shattered by the oath-breaker.

The desire to go after him was strong. She wanted nothing more than to plant her sword in his chest and watch the life drain from his eyes... but she knew she would never be able to get close enough to him. He was guarded day and night, and she was but one warrior. She would never be able to fight her way through his battalion alone. Such a death would serve no purpose.

She took a shuddering breath, knowing there was no coming back.

A crude effigy of a man, formed of sticks and twine, lay upon a fire-blackened dresser. Its body was wrapped in a scrap of cloth torn from the cloak of the betrayer. She'd pried it from her husband's dead grasp. Alongside it was a hammer and three rusted nails.

She gathered everything up and moved to the threshold. The door itself was gone, smashed to splinters in the attack. Beyond, lit by moonlight, lay the empty, darkened fields.

Reaching up, the sword-wife pressed the stick-effigy to the hardwood lintel.

"I invoke thee, Lady of Vengeance," she said, her voice low, trembling with the depth of her fury. "From beyond the veil, hear my plea. Come forth. Let justice be done."

She readied her hammer and the first of the nails.

"I name my betrayer once," she said, and spoke his name aloud. As she did so, she placed the tip of the first nail to the chest of the stick-figure. With a single strike, she hammered it in deep, pinning it to the hardwood door frame.

The sword-wife shivered. The room had become markedly colder. Or had she imagined it?

"I name him twice," she said, and she did so, hammering the second nail alongside the first.

Her gaze dropped, and she jolted in shock. A dark figure stood out in the moonlit field, a hundred yards in the distance. It was utterly motionless. Breathing quicker, the sword-wife returned her attention to the unfinished task.

"I name him thrice," she said, speaking again the name of the murderer of her husband and children, before hammering home the final nail.

An ancient spirit of vengeance stood before her, filling the doorway, and the sword-wife staggered back, gasping involuntarily.

The otherworldly being was clad in archaic armor, her flesh translucent and glowing with spectral un-light. Black Mist coiled around her like a living shroud.

With a squeal of tortured metal, the spectral figure drew forth the blackened spear protruding from her breastplate — the ancient weapon that had ended her life.

She threw it to the ground before the sword-wife. No words were spoken; there was no need. The sword-wife knew what was being offered to her — vengeance — and knew its terrible cost: her soul.

The spirit watched on, her face impassive and her eyes burning with an unrelenting cold fury, as the sword-wife picked up the treacherous weapon.

"I pledge myself to vengeance," said the sword-wife, her voice quivering. She reversed the spear, aiming the tip inward, towards her heart. "I pledge it with my blood. I pledge it with my soul."

She paused. Her husband would have pleaded for her to turn away from this path. He would have begged her not to condemn her soul for theirs. A moment of doubt gnawed at her. The undying specter watched on.

The sword-wife's eyes narrowed as she thought of her husband lying dead, cut down by swords and axes. She thought again of her children, sprawled upon the ground, and her resolve hardened like a cold stone in her heart. Her grip tightened upon the spear.

"Help me," she implored, her decision made. "Please, help me kill him."

She rammed the spear into her chest, driving it in deep.

The sword-wife's eyes widened and she dropped to her knees. She tried to speak, but only blood bubbled from her lips.

The ghostly apparition watched her die, her expression impassive.

As the last of the lifeblood ran from her body, the shade of the sword-wife climbed to her feet. She looked down at her insubstantial hands in wonder, then at her own corpse lying dead-eyed in a growing pool of blood upon the floor. The shade's expression hardened, and a ghostly sword appeared in her hand.

An ethereal tether, little more than a wisp of light, linked the newly formed shade to the avenging spirit she had summoned. Through their bond, the sword-wife saw her differently, glimpsing the noble warrior she had been in life: tall and proud, her armor gleaming. Her posture was confident, yet without arrogance; a born leader, a born soldier. This was a commander the sword-wife would have willingly bled for.

Behind the spirit's anger, she sensed her empathy — recognition of their shared pain of betrayal.

"Your cause is our cause," said Kalista, the Spear of Vengeance. Her voice was grave cold. "We walk the path of vengeance as one, now."

The sword-wife nodded.

With that, the avenging spirit and the shade of the sword-wife stepped into the darkness and were gone.

Mordekaiser

Biography

The baleful revenant Mordekaiser is among the most terrifying and hateful spirits haunting the Shadow Isles. He has existed for countless centuries, shielded from true death by necromantic sorcery and the force of his own dark will. Those who dare face Mordekaiser in battle risk a horrific curse: he enslaves his victims' souls to become instruments of destruction.

Mordekaiser was once mortal, a brutal warlord-king who ruled the lands of eastern Valoran long before the rise of Demacia or Noxus. He waded into battle bedecked in heavy iron armor and slaughtered all who opposed him, crushing them beneath his ensorcelled mace, Nightfall.

As hated as he was feared, his enemies finally rallied to end his dark reign. After a long and bloody day of battle, Mordekaiser met his fate standing atop a mountain of corpses, surrounded by his foes. He laughed even as he died, pierced by arrows, swords and spears, promising his killers that he would come back for them.

His body was hurled upon a immense pyre amid great celebration from his enemies. While the flames were unable to do more than blacken his armor, Mordekaiser's body was reduced to charred bones.

The fires burned for days on end, but as they finally died down and the victors moved on, a coterie of sorcerers slunk forward and sifted through the ashes, gathering up Mordekaiser's armor and bones. They bore them away in secret, and on a moonless night they laid the skeleton upon a rune-carved slab and enacted a spell of vile, necromantic sorcery. As their dark magicks reached a crescendo, a shadowy form appeared upon the slab. The deathly shade rose to its feet, leaving the skeleton behind.

It was a wraith formed of pure darkness, yet its eyes burned with malice. The fire-blackened pieces of armor slammed into place around the shadowy spirit, as if drawn to a powerful lodestone, and the sorcerers dropped to their knees before their risen master. They had been promised great power for their service, but had not foreseen how they were to be rewarded.

With newfound mastery over the necromantic arts, Mordekaiser gifted the sorcerers with undeath, trapping them between life and death. They became vile liches, living corpses cursed to serve him until the end of time.

Over the next decade Mordekaiser saw all those who had defied him slain. He cursed them into eternal servitude, drawing out their souls and forcing them to obey his undying will.

Having assumed the mantle of Iron Revenant, Mordekaiser's nightmarish reign of darkness lasted many centuries. Several times he was seemingly slain during this period, yet always he returned, brought back by the power of his soul-bound liches.

Mordekaiser's bones were key to his unholy reincarnation, and as the centuries rolled on he became increasingly paranoid about their safety. He constructed a monolithic fortress at the heart of his empire that came to be known as the Immortal Bastion. Locked away at the core of this epic stronghold he hid his remains.

The Immortal Bastion was eventually besieged by a concentrated alliance of tribes and warbands. During the siege, an unknown thief infiltrated the mighty fortress, bypassing its fiendish defenses to steal Mordekaiser's skull. His skeleton needed to be complete in order for his resurrection to be enacted, yet fearful of their master's wrath, his enslaved liches kept the theft a secret.

On the walls of the Immortal Bastion, countless enemies fell before Mordekaiser, yet it was not enough to stave off defeat. His fortress was overrun and he was dragged down by sheer weight of numbers. His deadly mace was torn from his grasp and great chains wrapped around his limbs. The booming of his laughter echoed through the darkness – he had no reason not to believe he would be reborn anew, as he had been many times before. The chains binding him were hitched to hulking Basilisks, and with a barked order the immense scaled beasts ripped him apart.

Mordekaiser's skull was taken across the sea to the Blessed Isles, a land hidden in mist and legend. The wise adepts of that land knew of Mordekaiser, and of his weakness. They had stolen his skull in order to rid the world of his unholy presence, placing it in a vault deep beneath the ground, secured behind locks and magical wards. Mordekaiser's servants were scattered to the corners of the world, seeking his lost skull, but were always unable to locate it. It seemed Mordekaiser's reign was truly over.

Years rolled into decades, decades to centuries, until a cataclysm was unleashed upon the Blessed Isles. A king whose mind had been ruined by grief and madness unleashed a terrible spell that condemned the isles to darkness, turning them into a twisted realm of the undying – the Shadow Isles. During that great sorcerous explosion, the vaults securing Mordekaiser's skull were torn asunder.

Drawn like moths to a flame, Mordekaiser's liches made their way to the newly born Shadow Isles. They bore with them their master's bones, and digging his skull from the ruins, were finally able to unleash him upon the world once more.

Mordekaiser has since carved out his own empire upon the Shadow Isles, enslaving a growing army of the dead. He looks down upon these newly formed undying spirits as a lesser breed, for he chose his path freely, while these others are merely lost souls. Nevertheless, he sees their use; they will be his foot-soldiers in the conflicts to come.

Unlike the lesser spirits, Mordekaiser is not bound by the Black Mist – he is too powerful for that – yet its baleful energy grants him considerable power. For now at least, the Shadow Isles serves as the perfect place to build his strength.

While he consolidates his power, and constantly obsesses over making his bones ever-more secure, Mordekaiser has begun to look across the seas, towards Valoran. He has set his sights on the empires and civilizations that have risen since his absence. In particular, his attention is drawn to the Immortal Bastion, that mighty fortress that now acts as the capital city of the upstart empire called Noxus.

A new era of darkness beckons.

Story

The Black Mist coiled and twisted like a living creature as it rolled forward to encircle the isolated, grey-stoned castle.

A massive, armored figure walked within the darkness of the Black Mist. His heavy warplate gleamed like oil, and orbs of cruel witchfire burned within his horned helm.

Grass withered underfoot as the armored revenant marched towards the castle's gatehouse. He could see movement on the walls. They knew death had come for them. His own name drifted on the wind, whispered in fear:

Mordekaiser.

Arrows sliced through the night. Several struck Mordekaiser, ricocheting from his armor. One sank into the gap between his helm and gorget, but his inexorable approach did not slow.

A heavy iron portcullis barred Mordekaiser's advance. The revenant extended a gauntleted hand and made a wrenching motion in the air. The lattice ironwork screamed in protest as it was twisted out of shape before being hurled contemptuously aside, revealing the heavy oak gate beyond.

White hot warding runes burst to life upon the gate, forcing Mordekaiser back half a step. The Black Mist roiled around him, and it was possible now for the defenders to see other forms within it - hateful, shadowy specters that hungered for living souls.

Mordekaiser stepped forward, brandishing his immense spiked mace, Nightfall. A weapon of dark renown, thousands had fallen before it. With a powerful swing, he slammed the weapon into the oak gate.

The runes exploded, Mordekaiser's dark sorcery overcoming the petty protective spells of his enemies. The gate smashed inwards, ripped off its hinges.

The Black Mist flowed through the breach, Mordekaiser striding within it.

The garrisoned soldiers and men-at-arms waited for him in the courtyard beyond. Weaklings all. His gaze swept over them as he sought a foe worthy of his attention. His undying gaze settled on a silver-clad knight that stepped out to meet him, sword drawn.

"Begone, revenant, or I shall see you banished," said the knight. "This hamlet and its people are under my protection."

Rising to this threat, a host of specters and translucent warriors manifested in the Black Mist behind their master.

"This one's soul is mine," Mordekaiser said, holding the eager spirits at bay. His voice was deep and sepulchral, the timbre of death itself.

Mordekaiser pointed, and a cone of malignant unlife burst towards the knight.

The knight's armor shone brightly for a second, then returned to its normal, mundane form, leaving him unharmed by Mordekaiser's necromantic sorcery.

"Demacian steel," sneered Mordekaiser. "It will not save you."

He stepped forward and brought his spiked mace down toward the knight's skull. The strike was met with a two-handed parry, though the power of it forced the knight to his knees. Mordekaiser towered over him.

The knight spun away, avoiding Nightfall as it swung toward him in a lethal arc. He sidestepped and sank his blade deep into Mordekaiser's side, biting through the banded links and chain. To a living

man, it would have been a mortal blow, but to the armored behemoth, it was as nothing.

Mordekaiser backhanded the knight across the side of his head, sending him reeling.

The Iron Revenant stepped in to end the fight, but the knight turned aside his strike with exquisite skill, and rammed the point of his blade into Mordekaiser's chest with all his strength and weight.

With a wrench of metal, the blade punched through the breastplate above the heart. There was no resistance from within, as if the suit were hollow.

Mordekaiser grabbed the knight by the throat in one giant hand and lifted him off the ground.

"You thought you could protect these mortals," said Mordekaiser. "But know that it will be you who slays them."

He squeezed, tightening his grip on the knight's throat. The mortal's feet kicked in the air.

Mordekaiser watched closely, eyes burning, as the life drained from the knight. Finally, he dropped the lifeless corpse to the floor.

Mordekaiser knelt and placed a hand upon the dead knight's chest. When the armored giant rose, he drew forth the shade of the dead warrior.

The spirit of the knight looked around it, horror writ in its spectral eyes.

"Now," commanded Mordekaiser, knowing that the shade was powerless to resist him. "Kill them all."

Yorick

Biography

The last survivor of a long-forgotten religious order, Yorick is both blessed and cursed with power over the dead. Trapped on the Shadow Isles, his only companions are the rotting corpses and shrieking spirits that he gathers to him. Yorick's monstrous actions belie his noble purpose: to free his home from the curse of the Ruination.

Even as a child, Yorick's life was never normal. Raised in a fishing village at the very edge of the Blessed Isles, he always struggled to find acceptance. While most children his age were playing hide-and-seek, young Yorick was making friends of a different kind—the spirits of the recently deceased.

At first, Yorick was terrified of his ability to see and hear the dead. Whenever someone in the village passed away, Yorick would lie awake all night, waiting for the chilling cry of a new visitor. He could not understand why they chose to haunt him, and why his parents believed the spirits to be nothing more than nightmares.

In time, he came to realize the souls were not there to harm him. They were simply lost and needed help finding their way to the beyond. Since only Yorick was able to see these spirits, he took it upon himself to be their guide, escorting them to whatever awaited in eternity.

The task was bittersweet. Yorick found that he enjoyed the company of ghosts, but each one he brought to rest meant saying farewell to another friend. To the dead, he was a savior, but to the living, he was a pariah. The villagers only saw a disturbed little boy who spoke to people who weren't there.

Tales of Yorick's visions soon spread beyond his village, and drew the attention of a small order of monks who dwelled at the heart of the Blessed Isles. Its envoys traveled to Yorick's island, believing he could become an asset to their faith.

Yorick agreed to journey to their monastery, and there, he learned the ways of the Brethren of the Dusk and the true significance of their trappings. Every monk carried a spade as a symbol of their duty to conduct proper burial rites, which ensured souls would not lose their way. And each brother wore a vial of water drawn from the Blessed Isles' sacred spring. These Tears of Life represented the monks' duty to heal the living.

Yet, no matter how he tried, Yorick could never gain the acceptance of the other monks. To them, he was tangible proof of things that should only be known through faith. They resented his power to easily perceive what they themselves had struggled their entire lives to understand. Shunned by his brothers, Yorick found himself alone again.

One morning, as he tended to his duties in the cemetery, Yorick was interrupted by the sight of a pitch-black cloud roiling across the surface of the Blessed Isles, devouring everything in its path. Yorick tried to run, but the cloud quickly enveloped him and plunged him into shadow.

All around Yorick, living things began to writhe and contort, corrupted by the foul magic in the Black Mist. People, animals, even plants began to transform into vile, ghoulish mockeries of their former selves. Whispers emanated from the turbulent air around him, and his brothers began ripping the vials of healing water from their necks, as if the objects were causing them great anguish. A moment

later, Yorick watched in abject horror as the monks' souls were ripped from their bodies, leaving cold, pale corpses behind.

Among the quieting screams of his brethren, Yorick alone could hear voices within the mist.

"Remove it. Join us. We will become one."

He felt his fingers grasping for the vial at his neck. Mustering all his resolve, Yorick forced his hands away from his throat and commanded the howling souls to stop. The Black Mist writhed violently, and darkness overtook him.

When Yorick awoke, the winds had calmed, and the once-fertile lands had transformed into the grotesque hellscape of the Shadow Isles. Isolated tendrils of the Black Mist clung to him, trying to overtake the one living thing not yet corrupted. As the Mist wrapped itself around him, Yorick saw it suddenly recoil from the vial at his neck. Yorick clutched the blessed water, realizing it was all that kept him alive.

In the days that followed, Yorick scoured the islands for survivors, but found only the twisted remnants of what once lived there. Everywhere he walked, he witnessed wretched spirits rising from the bodies of the dead.

As he searched, Yorick slowly pieced together the events that led to the cataclysm: A king had arrived seeking to resurrect his queen, but instead, had doomed the Isles and everything on them.

Yorick wished to find this "Ruined King" and undo the curse he had unleashed. But he felt powerless in the face of the seemingly endless death that surrounded him.

Almost lost within his grief, Yorick began to speak to the spirits around him, attempting to find solace with them as he had as a child. Instead, as he communed with the Mist, corpses left their graves, guided by his voice. He realized the bodies he once laid to rest were now his to command.

A glimmer of hope shone from the heart of his despair. To free the dead of the Shadow Isles, Yorick would wield their power and their strength.

In order to end the curse, he would be forced to use it.

Story

"Help... me," begged the shipwrecked man.

Yorick couldn't say how long the survivor had been lying there, bones broken, bleeding into what remained of his wrecked sailing vessel. He had been moaning loudly, but his cries were drowned out by the multitude of wailing souls that haunted the isle. A maelstrom of spirits gathered around him, drawn to his flickering life force like a beacon, hungry to reap a fresh soul. The man's eyes widened in horror.

He was right to be scared. Yorick had seen what happened to lost spirits taken by the Black Mist, and this—this was warm flesh, a rarity in the Shadow Isles. It had been how long—a hundred years?—since Yorick had seen a living being? He could feel the Mist on his back quivering, eager to wrap this stranger in its cold embrace. But the sight of the man stirred something in Yorick he had long forgotten, and whatever it was would not allow him to surrender this life. The burly monk heaved the damaged man onto his shoulders and carried him back up the hill to his old monastery.

Yorick studied the face of the injured man as he groaned in agonized protest with each step the monk took. Why did you come here, live one?

After completing the climb, Yorick carried his guest through several corridors in the abbey, before coming to a stop in an old infirmary. He eased the shipwrecked man onto a massive stone table and began to check his vitals. Most of the man's ribs were shattered, and one of his lungs had collapsed.

"Why do you waste your time?" asked a chorus of voices, speaking in unison from the Mist on Yorick's back.

Yorick remained silent. He left the table and made his way to a heavy door in the rear of the infirmary. The door resisted as he pushed, his hand doing little but leaving a print in the thick layer of dust. He pressed his shoulder against the wood and heaved his entire weight into it.

"So much effort for naught," sneered the Mist. "Let us have him."

Again, Yorick answered it with contemptuous silence as he finally forced the door open. The heavy oak dragged across the stone tiles of the monastery floor, revealing a chamber full of scrolls, herbs, and poultices. For a moment, Yorick stared at the artifacts of his former life, struggling to remember how to use them. He picked up a few that looked familiar—bandages, yellow and brittle with age, and some ointment that had long turned to crust—and returned to the man atop the stone table.

"Just leave him," said the Mist. "He was ours the moment he came ashore."

"Quiet!" snapped Yorick.

The man on the table was now gasping for breath. Knowing he had little time to save him, Yorick tried to bind his wounds, but the rotten bandages fell apart as quickly as he could apply them.

As his breath grew more ragged, the man convulsed. He grabbed the monk's arm in agonized desperation. Yorick knew there was only one thing that could save the man's life. He uncorked the crystal vial at his neck, and considered the life-giving water it contained. There was precious little left. Yorick was unsure if it was enough to save the man, and even if it did...

Yorick was forced to face the truth. In trying to save the man, he was just chasing the memory of his former life, when this cursed place was called the Blessed Isles. The souls in the Mist had taunted him, but they'd taunted him with the truth. This man was doomed, and if Yorick used the Tears of Life, he would be too. He closed the vial and let it rest against his neck.

Stepping back from the table, Yorick watched the man's chest rise and fall one last time. The Black Mist filled the room, spirits clawing out from it in anticipation. The Mist shivered eagerly, then ripped the dead man's soul from his body. It uttered a faint, feeble cry before it was devoured by its new host.

Yorick stood motionless in the room and uttered a barely remembered prayer. He looked at the soulless husk on the table, a bitter reminder of the task he had yet to complete. While the curse of the Ruination remained, anyone who came to these isles would suffer the same fate. He had to bring peace to these cursed islands, but after years of searching, all he had found were whispers about a ruined king.

He needed answers.

With a single motion of Yorick's hand, a thin strand of Mist poured into the man's body. A moment later, it rose from the table, barely sentient. But it could see, it could hear, and it could walk.

“Help me,” said Yorick.

The body shambled out the door of the infirmary, its sloughing footsteps echoing through the halls of the monastery. It continued out into the foul air of the cemetery, walking through the rows of emptied graves.

Yorick watched as the corpse trudged toward the center of the isles until it disappeared into the Mist. Perhaps this one would return with the answer.

Maokai

Biography

Maokai is a rageful, towering treant who fights the unnatural horrors of the Shadow Isles. He was twisted into a force of vengeance after a magical cataclysm destroyed his home, surviving undeath only through the waters of life infused within his heartwood. Once a peaceful nature spirit, Maokai now furiously battles to banish the scourge of unlife from the Shadow Isles and restore his home to its former beauty.

Long before living memory, a chain of islands erupted from deep beneath the ocean tides as blank slates of rock and clay. With its creation, the nature spirit Maokai was born. He took the form of a treant, with his tall body covered in bark and long limbs resembling branches. Maokai felt the profound loneliness of the land and its potential for teeming growth. He wandered from island to island in search of signs of life, growing ever more forlorn in his solitude.

On a hilly isle covered in soft, rich soil, Maokai sensed a boundless energy radiating from deep beneath the ground. He plunged his great roots downward until they reached a spring of magical, life-giving water and drank deeply. From this potent liquid, he grew hundreds of saplings and planted them across the islands.

Soon the land was shawled with verdant forests, groves of towering virenpine, and tangled woods, all steeped in wondrous magic. Magnificent skytrees with expansive canopies and thickly winding roots covered the isles with lush green foliage. Nature spirits were drawn to the lavish vegetation, and animals reveled in the fertile greenery.

When humans eventually came to the islands, they too thrived in the land's abundance and formed an enlightened society of scholars devoted to studying the world's mysteries. Though Maokai was wary of their presence, he saw how they respected the sanctity of the land. Sensing the deep magic within the woods, the humans built their homes in areas not heavily forested, to avoid disturbing any nature spirits. Maokai occasionally revealed himself directly to those he trusted and blessed them with knowledge of the verdant isles, even its greatest gift – the underground spring that could heal mortal wounds.

Centuries passed, and Maokai lived in idyllic contentment until a fleet of soldiers from across the sea beached upon the shores of the isles. Maokai sensed something was terribly wrong. Their grief-maddened king bore the corpse of his queen and in hopes of reviving her, bathed her decayed flesh in the healing waters. Reanimated as a rotting corpse, the queen begged to return to death. The king sought to reverse what he had done, unwittingly casting a terrible curse upon the land.

From leagues away, Maokai felt the first ripples of the disaster that would soon devastate the isles. He sensed a horrific force gathering beneath the soil, and a bitter chill washed over him.

As the ruination spread, Maokai desperately plunged his roots deep into the ground and drank of the healing waters, saturating every fiber of his being with their magic. Before the cursed water reached him, Maokai withdrew his roots, severing all connection to the pool. He howled in rage as the sacred reservoir he had entrusted to men was fully corrupted – the spiraling coils churning underwater until nothing pure remained.

Moments later, the mists surrounding the islands blackened and spread over the land, trapping all living things in an unnatural state between life and death. Maokai watched in helpless agony as all he knew – plants, nature spirits, animals, and humans alike – twisted into wretched shades. His fury grew; the great beauty he had cultivated from tiny saplings fell to ruin in an instant at the careless hand of man.

The enervating mist coiled around Maokai, and he wept as the bright flowers adorning his shoulders crumbled and fell to dust. His body shuddered and contorted into a mass of gnarled roots and tangled branches as the mist leached life from him. But Maokai's heartwood was saturated with the precious waters of life, saving him from the terrible fate of undeath.

As grotesque wraiths and horrific abominations flooded the land, Maokai was overcome by a host of lifeless men. He struck the spirits with his branchlike limbs in manic violence, realizing the force of his blows could shatter them to dust. Maokai shuddered with revulsion: he had never killed before. He flew at the breathless shapes in a frenzy, but hundreds more overwhelmed him, and eventually he was forced to retreat.

With his home all but decimated and his companions turned to deathless horrors, Maokai was tempted to try and escape the nightmare of the isles. But from deep within his twisted form, he felt the sacred waters giving him life. He had survived the Ruination by carrying the very heart of the islands within him, and he would not abandon his home now. As the Blessed Isles' first nature spirit, he would remain and fight for the soul of the land.

Though surrounded by endless hosts of malicious foes and darkening mist, Maokai fights with furious vengeance to conquer the evil that plagues the isles. His only pleasure comes from dealing savage violence to the soulless wraiths who roam his land.

Some days, Maokai subdues the mist and its deathless spirits, breaking their hold on a grove of trees or a small thicket. Though new life has not bloomed in such cursed soil for an age, Maokai strives to carve havens, however temporary, free from regret and decay.

So long as Maokai continues to fight, hope remains, for steeped within his heartwood are the uncorrupted waters of life, the last remaining chance of restoring the isles. If the land returns to its joyous state, Maokai, too, will shed his twisted form. The nature spirit brought life to these isles long ago, and he refuses to rest until the isles bloom once more.

Story

The chill wind whips through cracks in my bark with a hollow whistling sound. I shiver. My limbs have long forgotten the warmth of summer.

The towering shapes around me fracture and fall in the gale. The lives within died long ago; now they are my silent companions. Their brittle trunks remain only as empty husks, rough gray sketches of the lush forest that once bloomed here.

A spirit weaves between the trees in front of me, pale and spectral against the night air. A knot tightens in my bark. Normally I would lash my roots through its heart, but today I hold still, trying not to alert the wraith to my presence. I am tired of resisting. That I exist at all is an act of defiance against the curse plaguing these lands.

Its moonlike eyes are vacant. There is nothing alive and vulnerable to fuel its cold bitterness on this isle of death, nothing to be hunted or consumed. The spirit slips between the trees, leaving me to my solitude.

I look across the forest of shadows and my branches waver. My gaze catches – a tiny flame of red growing amid the endless gray. Nestled in a mound of black dirt, the smallest flower bud pushes up from the ground, its petals so bright they burn my eyes.

It is a nightbloom. Long ago, they carpeted the floor of the Blessed Isles, blossoming on the evening of the summer solstice. By morning the flowers wilted, leaving only blackened petals, not to be seen again until the following year. But for one night, they illuminated the forest with blazing crimson, as if the very ground were aflame.

I look around and, for a fleeting moment, hope that if one flower exists there might be others. But there is only the somber gray of these dead isles.

My boughs creak as I take a shaky step forward. I approach the bloom, transfixed, crushing ashen leaves to dust underfoot. My colossal frame towers over its delicate shape. I lean down until my face is inches above the sweet-scented petals. The potent groundwater within my heartwood stirs, awakening in recognition. *Life.*

The flower's neck is tilted as if curious. Deep vermillion veins spread across each petal, and its pale green stem is coated with hundreds of silvery, velvet-soft hairs. I could spend eternity basking in its every facet.

Every moment it grows and shifts in subtle ways; its stem pushing ever higher while its petals slowly unfurl. I am enchanted by each movement, however minute. I watch as the bloom spreads to reveal the filaments extending from within, its heady scent flooding my mind with color. For a moment I forget the cold, the hollow wind, and my own bitterness.

A pale light flickers and I flinch. A glowing shape approaches. My bark tingles. Nothing from these bloodless woods is an ally.

The cursed spirit is returning, attracted to the lure of movement. Life is not so still as death.

I flex my limbs in fury, no longer eluding violence. I welcome it.

For one night, a living thing will exist on these barren isles unmarred by corrupt forces.

The spirit glides toward us. She was once human, but is now translucent and bone-white. Her blank expression grows ravenous as she sees the blood-red blossom.

The specter races toward the flower and tries to inhale its fragile life. Before the bloom withers into a lifeless shade, I fling my limbs forward and lash them about the spirit's legs. She screeches, recoiling as if burned, and I roar. The groundwater within me is anathema to such unnatural beings.

She twists and breaks free of my grasp. I hoist my roots and smash them to the ground. The impact splits the barren topsoil and sends shockwaves through the earth. The reverberations strike the wraith and she reels in agony. I laugh bitterly. As she stirs, I sling my limbs through her form and she dissolves.

Dusky mist rises from the ground, accompanied by a foul stench. As the wind moans, dozens of spirits materialize before me, their garish faces gaping silently at the scene before them. The

nightbloom and I grow before the wall of shadows. I will not let them destroy this one pure thing amongst so much darkness.

I throw all my rage into my blows, driving them back with furious strength. I cannot destroy every spirit on the isles, but I can hold them off for a time. A wraith tries to dart past me. I howl as I lift my roots to pierce its heart, and it dissipates into mist.

My strength is draining with so many spirits nearby, but I refuse to concede.

The flower grows brightly beneath the moonlight, oblivious to this battle for its very existence. A single crimson petal falls from its perfect blossom like a drop of blood. The lifecycle of the bloom is near its end, bringing death, and with it, respite. But I do not crave it. I feel I could cleanse the entire island of its scourge in my fury.

The cursed mist has risen above the treeline and swirls in great clouds. An endless host of spirits pours from the fog, mouths agape with ghoulish hunger. I rise to my greatest height and slam my limbs into the ravenous spirits, shattering one after another into dust. Still, more come.

I howl as I stir the air into a crudely twisting spiral, and nourish the storm with my wrath until it expands in a tempestuous whirlwind. I revel in the chaos as the maelstrom surges in a frenzied circle around me and the flower. It blasts the spirits violently back beyond the trees. From within this nightmare, I have carved a sanctuary where life can grow.

I turn to the flower. We are silent together at the eye of the storm, still amidst the madness. A second fiery petal falls from the nightbloom, then another. My energy drains into the maelstrom, but I do not falter and the tempest rages on. With each passing moment, the blossom droops further until it faces the ground. It is perfect in its slow, natural decay. I cannot look away as it gradually loses its crown of flaming petals and wilts completely.

It is dead.

I lower my branches and the maelstrom quiets. Above me, the sky is slate gray - as bright as it ever gets in this grim place. The gloom of the mist encroaches once more and the spirits return. Their faces are blank, no longer sensing the illicit life of the nightbloom, no longer anticipating the joy of a fresh kill.

They retreat into the hollow woods. I whip my roots through a specter as it passes me, scattering its essence into the fading mist. The others edge farther away from me as they return to their gloom.

Though the land appears unchanged, these isles are not the same gray wasteland they were yesterday. The waters of life stir within me and the soil beneath my roots is fertile again.

Though its petals decay into dust, the luminous nightbloom burns fire-bright in my mind, igniting my fury. Just as these islands were born of burning rock, I will cleanse them of their pestilence in a flaming blaze.

I follow the trailing spirits as they slip between hollow trees.

They will pay for their wickedness.

Elise

Biography

Elise is a deadly predator who dwells in a shuttered, lightless palace, deep in the Immortal Bastion of Noxus. Once she was mortal, the mistress of a once-powerful house, but the bite of a vile spider god transformed her into something beautiful, undying, and utterly inhuman. To maintain her eternal youth, Elise preys upon the innocent, and there are few who can resist her seductions.

The Lady Elise was born many centuries ago to House Kythera, an old and powerful family of Noxus, and swiftly learned the power of beauty to influence the weak-minded. When she came of age, she plotted to marry the scion of House Zaavan to augment her house's power. The match was opposed by many within Zaavan, but Elise beguiled her intended husband and manipulated her detractors to secure a betrothal.

As Elise had planned, her influence upon her new husband proved considerable. House Zaavan grew stronger, which in turn saw House Kythera's star rise. Elise's husband was the face of his house, but those in the know understood who truly wielded power. At first, Elise's husband tolerated this, but as the years went by, his discontent festered as he became a light joke among Noxian families.

Eventually, his resentment grew ever more rancorous until one night over a typically frosty dinner, he revealed he had tainted her wine with a disfiguring poison. He offered his terms; withdraw from society and stay out of his way as he took up the reins of power and he would give her the antidote. Refuse, and he would watch her die slowly and painfully. With every breath the poison did its evil work, dissolving her flesh and bone from the inside out. Believing he would have the antidote somewhere about his person, Elise palmed a sharp knife and played the role of remorseful wife to the hilt. She wept and begged her husband to forgive her, using every wile in her arsenal to approach without alerting him to her deadly intent. All the while, the poison was wracking her body, discoloring her flesh with grotesque lesions and filling her limbs with agony.

When Elise reached her husband, he realized - too late - just how badly he had underestimated her disdain. She leapt upon him and rammed the knife through his heart, twisting the blade slowly as she watched him die. Elise found and drank the antidote, but the damage was done. Her face was monstrously disfigured with grotesque weals and necrotic flesh, like a cadaver given hideous animation.

Elise was now mistress of House Zaavan, and such was the nature of Noxian politics that she was lauded for cutting a weakness from the empire. Yet so entwined were her particular notions of beauty and power that she retreated from public life and took to wearing a face-covering veil. Eschewing daylight, and turning away all allies and petitioners from her door, her once powerful house began a slow descent into obscurity. Elise roamed the empty halls of her palace in isolation and became a denizen of darkness, only ever venturing beyond its high walls at night.

On one of her midnight wanderings, Elise was approached by another veiled woman, who pressed a waxen sigil of a Black Rose into her palm and whispered that the Pale Woman would greatly value her talents. Elise pressed on, but as she walked away, the woman's voice echoed after her with the promise of being made whole again. However absurd she told herself it was, vanity and the hope of her beauty being renewed drove Elise to investigate further. She prowled the streets for weeks until

she saw the Black Rose sigil again, etched onto a shadowed archway leading into the catacombs beneath Noxus.

Following the hidden sigils brought her to the Black Rose, a secret society where those who dabbled in the darker powers of magic shared hidden knowledge and secrets. Elise became a regular visitor, going unveiled among its members and swiftly establishing a close rapport with the Pale Woman, an agelessly beautiful individual of great power. Elise embraced the society's ways, but always sought the gift she had been promised; her beauty made whole again.

The Pale Woman spoke of a haunted place known as the Shadow Isles and a serpent-bladed athame belonging to one of her acolytes who had been slain in the lair of a voracious spider god. The dagger was imbued with powerful magic, and if it was returned to her, then she would use its magic to restore Elise's beauty. Elise immediately accepted and led a group of Black Rose devotees to the shunned island, knowing there would be a blood price to pay for such a prize.

Elise found a desperate, debt-ridden captain willing to bear her and her fellow pilgrims across the ocean. The ship sailed for weeks until a craggy island loomed from seething banks of black mist. Elise came ashore on a beach of ashen sand and led her followers deep into the island's haunted depths like lambs to the slaughter. Many were stolen away by spiteful wraiths, but half a dozen remained by the time they reached the web-wreathed lair of the Spider God.

A bloated, monstrous creature of chitin and fangs erupted from the darkness and feasted on the screaming men and women. As they died or were swept up in streams of web, Elise saw the dagger the Pale Woman sought - held in the grip of a desiccated corpse. She snatched it up as the Spider God sank its envenomed fangs into her shoulder. Elise fell forward and the blade of the athame pierced her heart, its powerful magic flooding her and mixing with the lethal venom to wreak terrible changes on her body. Elise was transformed as the magically-empowered venom renewed her flesh, transforming it into a form even more beautiful than before. Her scars vanished and her skin became flawless and porcelain smooth, but the god's venom had ambitions of its own. Elise's back writhed with undulant motion as a host of arachnoid legs pushed their way from her flesh.

Elise rose, breathless with the agony of her transformation, to find the Spider God looming above her. Shared power flowed between them, and both immediately sensed how they might benefit from this unexpected symbiosis. Elise returned to her ship, untroubled by the island's spirits, and set sail for Noxus. When her ship arrived at the docks in the dead of night, Elise was the only living thing aboard.

Elise returned the athame to the leader of the Black Rose, though the Pale Woman warned that the magic maintaining her restored beauty would eventually fade. The two sealed a pact; the Black Rose would provide Elise with acolytes to offer up to the Spider God, and she in turn, would return any artifacts of power she discovered upon the isles.

Elise once again took up residence in the neglected halls of House Zaavan, becoming known as a beautiful yet unreachable recluse. None suspected her true nature, yet fanciful rumors cling to her, wild tales of her immortal beauty and a terrifying creature said to lair high in her dilapidated, dust-wreathed palace.

Centuries have passed since her first voyage to the Shadow Isles, and whenever Elise sees streaks of white in her hair or crow's feet at her eyes, she ventures forth to cull easily swayed souls from the Black Rose and set sail for the isle of black mists. None who accompany her ever return, and with

each voyage, it is said she is renewed and invigorated, bearing another ancient artifact for the Pale Woman.

Story

The weeks spent on the ocean had made Markus feel dizzy and weak, so he was glad to be back on dry land. The path leading from the basalt shore had a slick, oily quality, making it treacherous underfoot. The crooked trees to either side were wretched, blackened husks that wept yellowed sap from where it looked like some panicked animal had clawed them ragged. Soft light shimmered between the trees, dancing like the corpse candles that flickered over marshland and drew unwary souls to their doom. The branches were hung with what looked like canopies of ragged muslin, and it took Markus a moment to realize they were swathes of cobwebs.

Wiry bracken clogged the undergrowth on either side of the path, rustling with the motion of unseen creatures shadowing their passage through the forest. Perhaps the rats infesting the ship had followed them. Markus had never caught sight of one, beyond a fleeting glimpse of a swollen, black-furred body or the skittering sound of claws on wood. He'd never been able to shake the notion that it sounded as if these rats had a few too many legs than any normal rat should have.

The island's air was heavy with damp, and his finely tailored tunic and boots were sodden with clinging moisture. He held a scented pomander beneath his nose, but it did little to disguise the stench of the island, reminding him of the charnel pits beyond the walls of Noxus when the winds blew in from the ocean. Thinking back to his homeland, he felt a brief twinge of unease. The revels in the catacombs far beneath the city had been a deliciously illicit thrill, a reward for following the secret symbol of the black-petaled bloom. Within the darkened sepulchers, he and his fellows gathered as devotees.

Where *she* awaited.

He looked ahead, hoping for a glimpse of the beguiling woman whose words had brought so many of them to this place. He caught a flash of crimson silk and swaying hips before the mist oozing between the trees obscured his sight of her. He'd thrilled to the sermons of her ancient god, and had been overjoyed when he and the others had been chosen to join her on this pilgrimage. It seemed like a grand adventure when they boarded the heavily laden barque at midnight, under the still gaze of the mute and hooded steersman, but being so far from Noxus had begun to dull his enthusiasm.

Markus paused and turned to look back along the path. His fellow pilgrims pushed past, like vacant-eyed cattle en route to the slaughterman's hammer. What was wrong with them? Behind them came the steersman, gliding over the path as though his feet barely touched it. His robes were undulant with motion and suffocating fear flowered in Markus's breast at the thought of being near this repellent figure.

He turned away, only to find himself face to face with *her*.

"Elise..." he said, and the breath caught in his throat. He instinctively wanted to push her away and flee this awful place, but the intoxication of her dark beauty overpowered any thought of rejection. His sense of revulsion passed so swiftly he wasn't even sure he'd truly felt it.

"Markus," she said, and the sound of his name on her lips was divine, sending a surge of pleasure down his spine. Her beauty transfixed him, and he savored every detail of her perfect form. Her features were angular and sharp, framed by lustrous crimson hair, like that of a highborn girl he once

knew. Full lips and eyes of dark radiance drew him deeper into her web with the promise of raptures yet to come. A cloak of sable secured by an eight-pronged brooch, mantled her rounded shoulders. It rippled with motion, though there was no wind to stir it.

“Is something the matter, Markus?” she said. Her smoky tones soothed his fear like a balm. “I need you to be at peace. You are at peace, aren’t you, Markus?”

“Yes, Elise,” he said. “I am at peace.”

“Good. It would make me unhappy to know you were not at peace when we are so close.”

The thought of displeasing her sent a jolt of panic through Markus and he dropped to the ground. He wrapped his arms around her legs, her limbs slender and alabaster white, smooth and cold to the touch.

“Anything for you, mistress,” he said.

She looked down on him and smiled. For an instant Markus thought he saw something long, thin and glossy shift beneath her cloak. The motion was sickening and unnatural, but he didn’t care. She hooked a sharpened, obsidian-black fingernail under his chin and drew him to his feet. A rivulet of blood ran down his neck, but he ignored it as she turned and led him onward.

He willingly followed, all thoughts save pleasing her vanishing like wind-blown smoke. The trees thinned out and the path ended before a rocky cliff carved with time-weathered symbols that made his eyes sting. A shadowed cave gaped like a vile maw at the base of the cliff, and Markus felt his certainty waver as a sudden sense of dread uncoiled in his gut.

Elise beckoned him inside, and he was powerless to resist.

The interior of the cave was unnaturally dark and stiflingly warm, a clammy, fever heat that reeked like offal swept from a butcher’s block. A voice deep inside was screaming at him to run, to get as far from this hideous place as possible, but his traitorous feet carried him still deeper into the cave. A droplet from somewhere high above landed on his cheek and he flinched at the sudden, burning pain of it. He looked up at the cavern roof, seeing pale, grub-like shapes hanging overhead and swaying with frantic, trapped motion. In the translucent surface of the fresh-spun web, a human face screamed in mute horror against the suffocating, silken net.

“What is this place?” he asked, the veils of deceit woven around him falling away.

“This is my temple, Markus,” said Elise, reaching up to unfasten the eight-pronged brooch at her shoulder and letting her cloak fall away. “This is the lair of the Spider God.”

Her shoulders squirmed as two pairs of slender, chitinous limbs unfolded from the flesh of her back; long, dark and tapering to razored talons. They lifted Elise up as a grotesque, bloated mass shifted in the darkness behind her. Colossal legs heaved its corrupt body forward, the faint light from beyond the cave reflecting on the myriad facets of its eyes.

The vast spider’s bulk was enormous, furred and scabbed with wet, mutant growths. The terror of its nightmarish appearance shattered the last of Elise’s hold on Markus, and he fled toward the cave mouth with her cruel laughter ringing in his ears. Ropes of sticky web struck the rock beside him.

Glutinous strands struck his flailing limbs and his pace slowed as he became more and more entangled. He heard the clicking of clawed limbs in pursuit and wept at the thought of her touching him. Yet more strands of her web snared him as something sharp stabbed his shoulder with

astonishing swiftness. Markus fell to his knees, paralyzing venom spreading through his body and locking him in a prison of his own flesh.

A shadow fell across him and he saw the mute steersman with his arms outstretched. Markus screamed as the steersman's hooded robe collapsed, revealing that this was not a man at all, but a writhing nest of innumerable spiders given the semblance of a man. They fell upon him in their thousands, and his screams were choked to muffled grunts as they crawled into his mouth, clogged his ears and burrowed behind his eyes.

Elise swung into view above him, borne aloft by the jointed limbs at her back. She was no longer beautiful, no longer even human. Her features were alight with a ferocious hunger that could never be sated. The looming form of her monstrous spider god lifted Markus from the ground with its razored mandibles.

"You have to die now, Markus," said Elise.

"Why...?" he managed with his last breath.

Elise smiled, her mouth now filled with needle-like fangs.

"So that I can live."

Amumu

Biography

A lonely and melancholy soul from ancient Shurima, Amumu roams the world in search of a friend. Cursed by an ancient spell, he is doomed to remain alone forever, as his touch is death and his affection ruin. Those who claim to have seen him describe Amumu as a living cadaver, small in stature and covered in bandages the color of lichen. Amumu has inspired myths, folklore, and legends told and retold for generations – such that it is impossible to separate truth from fiction.

The hardy folk of Shurima agree upon certain things: the wind always blows from the west in the morning; a full belly on a new moon is an ill omen; buried treasure hides under the heaviest of rocks. They do not agree, however, about the tale of Amumu.

One oft-told story links Amumu to the first great ruling family of Shurima who succumbed to a disease that corrupted flesh with hideous speed. The youngest child, Amumu, was quarantined in his chambers and befriended a servant girl who heard his cries through the walls. She regaled the lonely heir with courtly news and stories of her grandmother's mystic powers.

One morning, the girl brought word that Amumu's last remaining brother had passed away, making him Emperor of Shurima. Saddened that he had to bear this news alone, she unlocked his door and ran inside to comfort him face to face. Amumu threw his arms around her, but as they touched, he fell back, realizing he had condemned her to the same terrible fate as his family.

Upon the girl's death, her grandmother placed a twisted blight on the young emperor. In her mind, Amumu had as good as murdered her kin. As the curse took effect, Amumu was trapped in his moment of suffering like a locust ensnared in honeyed amber.

A second tale whispers of another crown prince, one given to bouts of petulance, cruelty, and murderous vanity. In this telling, Amumu was crowned Emperor of Shurima at a young age, and convinced he was blessed by the sun, he forced his subjects to worship him as a god.

Amumu sought the fabled Eye of Angor, an ancient relic entombed in a gilded crypt, said to grant eternal life to whoever looked upon it with an unflinching heart. He hunted the treasure for years with a host of slaves who carried him through labyrinthine catacombs, sacrificing themselves to traps so the emperor could continue without hindrance. Amumu finally reached the cyclopean golden archway, where upon dozens of his stonemasons labored to breach the sealed door.

As the young emperor rushed within, determined to look into the Eye of Angor, his slaves seized their chance and sealed the stone doorway behind him. Some say the child emperor endured in the darkness for years, his loneliness driving him to insanity and causing him to claw at his own skin, which he was forced to wrap in bandages. His life was extended by the power of the Eye as he meditated on his past transgressions, but the gift was a double edged sword, for he was cursed to remain forever alone.

When a series of devastating earthquakes shattered the foundations of his tomb, the emperor escaped with no knowledge of how much time had passed, seeking to undo the suffering he had caused in life.

Yet another story of Amumu tells of the first and last Yordle ruler of Shurima, who believed in the innate goodness of the human heart. To prove his detractors wrong, he swore an oath to live as a beggar until he made one true friend, convinced his people would rally to help their fellow Shuriman.

Though thousands walked by the disheveled Yordle, not one stopped to offer a helping hand. Amumu's sadness grew until he eventually died of a broken heart. But his death was not the end, for some swear the Yordle still wanders the desert, forever searching for someone who might restore his faith in humanity.

These stories, despite their differences, are woven with parallels. Whatever the circumstances, Amumu is doomed to exist in a broken state of emptiness, eternally alone and friendless. Fated to forever search for a companion, his presence is cursed and his touch is death. On long winter nights when the fire is never allowed to burn low, the sad mummy can sometimes be heard weeping in the desert, despairing that he'll never know the solace of friendship.

Whatever Amumu searches for – atonement, kinship, or a single act of kindness – one thing is as certain as the western wind at dawn: he has yet to find it.

Story

"The gods were angry, and shook the land. Cracks rent the earth," said old Khaldun, his crag-featured face lit by firelight. "It was into one of these fissures that a young man ventured. He found an opening; the entrance to a tomb, hidden for the Jackal knows how long. The man had little ones to feed and a wife to please, and so he ventured in, lured by opportunity."

Adults and children alike crowded in close to hear the old storyteller's words. They were all weary - they had traveled far that day, and the Shuriman sun had been unrelenting - but Khaldun's tales were a rare treat. They drew their cloaks tight around their shoulders against the chill of the night and leaned in.

"The air was cool in the tomb, a merciful relief from the scorching heat outside. The young man lit a torch. Its light made shadows dance before him. He stepped cautiously, wary of traps. He was poor, but he was no fool.

"The walls inside were smooth obsidian and carved with ancient writings and images. He could not read – he was a simple man – but he studied the images.

"He saw a boy prince, sitting cross-legged upon a sun disk borne by a team of servants, a beaming smile upon his face. Chests of coins and riches were piled before him, the offerings of strangely garbed, bowing emissaries.

"He saw other carvings, again showing the smiling prince, this time walking among his people. Their heads were pressed to the ground before him. Stylized rays of sunshine radiated from the boy's crown.

"Before one of these images was a small, gold statue. It alone was worth more than he could have hoped to earn in ten lifetimes. The young man took it, slipping it into his satchel.

"He did not intend to linger. He knew it would not be long before others came upon this place. When they did, he wanted to be gone. Greed makes fools of even the greatest men, and he knew that others would willingly spill his blood to claim that golden statue - and the other riches that were

surely further in. Avarice was not one of the young man's faults, however. He felt no need to delve further. The other treasures hidden here were someone else's to claim.

"He looked upon one last image before he left the tomb. It showed the boy prince dead, lying upon a bier. Those closest to him were wailing... but further back, people were celebrating. Had the boy prince been beloved, or had he been a tyrant? There was no way of knowing.

"That was when he heard it: a sound in the darkness that made his skin crawl.

"He looked around, wide eyed, holding his torch up before him. Nothing.

"'Who's there?' he said. Silence was his only answer.

"The young man shook his head. 'It is just the wind, you fool,' he thought. 'Nothing but the wind.'

"Then he heard it again, more distinctly this time. A child was crying in the darkness further into the tomb.

"Heard anywhere else, his paternal instinct would have been to go to the sound. But here, in the darkness of a funereal tomb?

"He wanted to run... but he did not. The sobbing touched his heart. It was filled with such misery and grief.

"Was it possible there was another entrance to this tomb? Had a young boy found his way down here and become lost?

"Torch held high, he crept forward. The weeping continued, echoing faintly through the gloom.

"A wide chamber opened before him, its floor black and highly reflective. Golden artifacts and jewel-inlaid walls glinted within. Gingerly, he entered the room.

"He stepped back sharply as his heel sent ripples spreading out across the floor. Water. The floor was not made of reflective obsidian – it was covered in water.

"Kneeling, he scooped a handful of it to his lips. He spat it out immediately. It was salt water! Here, in the heart of Shurima, a thousand leagues from the nearest sea!

"He heard the sound of the boy weeping once more, closer now.

"Holding his torch before him, the young man glimpsed a shape at the edge of its light. It appeared to be the child, sitting with his back to the man.

"Carefully, he stepped into the room. The water upon the floor was not deep. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and fear clutched at his chest, yet he did not turn to run.

"'Are you lost?' he asked, as he stepped closer. 'How did you get here?'

"The shadowed figure did not turn... but he did speak.

"'I... I don't remember,' he said. The sound swam around the young man, echoing off the walls. The boy spoke in an old dialect. His words were strange... but understandable. 'I don't remember who I am.'

"'Be calm, child,' said the man. 'All will be well.'

"He stepped closer, and the figure resolved itself before him. His eyes widened.

“The shape before him was a god-statue carved in onyx, nothing more. It was not the source of the crying, nor of the child’s voice.

“That was when a small, dry hand grabbed him.”

The youngest of the listeners gasped, his eyes wide. The other children laughed in false bravado. Old Khaldun smiled, a golden tooth glinting in the firelight. Then, he continued.

“The young man looked down. The linen-wrapped corpse of the tiny prince stood beside the man. Dull, ghostly light emanated from the deathly boy’s eye sockets, though his entire face was bound in burial wrappings. The corpse-child held the man’s hand.

“‘Will you be my friend?’ the boy asked, his voice muffled by linen.

“The young man lurched backward, breaking free of the child’s grasp. The young man looked down at his arm in horror; his hand was shriveling, turning black and withered. The wasting touch then began to climb up his arm.

“He turned and ran. In his shock and haste, he dropped his lantern. It hissed as it fell into the lake of tears, and darkness descended. Still, he could just make out the glow of daylight up ahead. He ran toward it, scrambling desperately, even as the wasting death crept up his arm towards his heart.

“At any moment, he expected to feel the deathly boy’s grasp upon him... but did not. After what felt like an eternity, but could only have been a matter of heartbeats, he burst from the darkness into the desert heat once more.

“‘I’m sorry,’ echoed a mournful voice from the gloom behind him. ‘I didn’t mean to.’

“And thus, the Tomb of Amumu was unearthed,” said old Khaldun, “and the deathly child released into the world.”

“But everyone knows he isn’t real!” cried one of the children, the oldest of them, after a moment of silence.

“Amumu is real!” said the youngest. “He’s wandering the land trying to find a friend!”

“He’s real, but he isn’t a boy,” said another. “He’s a Yordle!”

Khaldun laughed, and pushed himself to his feet with the aid of a gnarled walking stick.

“I am old, and we have far to travel tomorrow,” he said. “It is past time I was abed.”

His audience began to dissipate, smiling and talking in low, familial voices, but one child did not move. She stared at Khaldun, unblinking.

“Grandfather,” she said. “How did you lose your arm?”

Old Khaldun looked down at the empty sleeve pinned at his shoulder, then flashed the girl a grin.

“Goodnight, little one,” he said with a wink.

Azir

Biography

Azir was a mortal emperor of Shurima in a far distant age, a proud man who stood at the cusp of immortality. His hubris saw him betrayed and murdered at the moment of his greatest triumph, but now, millennia later, he has been reborn as an Ascended being of immense power. With his buried city risen from the sand, Azir seeks to restore Shurima to its former glory.

Thousands of years ago, the Shuriman empire was a sprawling realm of vassal states conquered by powerful armies led by all but invincible warriors known as the Ascended. Ruled by an ambitious and power hungry emperor, Shurima was the greatest realm of its day; a fertile land blessed by the power of the sun that shone from a great golden disc floating atop the temple at the heart of its capital.

The youngest and least-favored son of the emperor, Azir was never destined for greatness. With so many siblings ahead of him, he would never be emperor. Most likely he would take up a position in the priesthood or as governor of some backwater province. He was a slender, studious boy who spent more time perusing the texts collected in the Great Library of Nasus than training to fight under the stern tutelage of the Ascended hero, Renekton.

Amid the twisting shelves of scrolls, books and tablets, Azir met a young slave boy who visited the library almost every day in search of texts desired by his master. Slaves in Shurima were forbidden to take names, but as the two boys became friends, Azir broke that law and called his new friend Xerath, which means 'one who shares.' He appointed Xerath - though he was careful never to endanger him by naming him publicly - as his personal slave and the two boys shared their love of history by learning all they could of Shurima's past and its long legacy of Ascended heroes.

While traveling with his father, brothers and Renekton on the yearly tour of the empire, the royal caravan stopped at a well-known oasis for the night. Azir and Xerath stole away in the middle of the night to draw the stars and add their own celestial maps to those they had studied in the Great Library. While they drew the patterns of constellations, the royal caravan was attacked by a cabal of assassins sent by the emperor's enemies. One of the assassins found the two boys out in the desert and was poised to cut Azir's throat when Xerath intervened, throwing himself upon the assassin's back. In the ensuing melee, Azir freed his dagger and plunged it into his attacker's throat.

Azir took up the dead man's sword and rushed back to the oasis, but by the time he returned, the assassins were already defeated. Renekton had protected the emperor and slain the attackers, but Azir's brothers were all dead. Azir told his father of Xerath's courage and asked him to reward the slave boy, but his words fell on deaf ears. In the emperor's eyes, the boy was a slave and beneath his notice, but Azir swore that one day he and Xerath would be brothers.

The emperor returned to his capital, with the fifteen year old Azir now his heir, and unleashed a merciless campaign of bloodshed against those he believed had sent the assassins. Shurima descended into years of paranoia and murder as the emperor took revenge on any he suspected of treason. Though he was now heir to the throne, Azir's life yet hung by a thread. His father hated him - wishing he had died instead of his brothers - and the queen was still young enough to bear sons.

Azir trained in combat, for the attack at the oasis had revealed how little he knew of the deadly arts. Renekton took up the task of teaching the growing prince, and under his aegis, Azir learned to wield

sword and spear, to command warriors, and to read the ebb and flow of battle. The young heir elevated Xerath, his only trusted confidant, and made him his right hand man. To better counsel him, Azir tasked Xerath with seeking out knowledge wherever he could find it.

Years passed, but the queen was never able to carry a child to term, every conceived infant perishing before it could be born. So long as the queen remained barren, Azir's life was relatively safe. Some around the court believed a curse was at work and a few even whispered the young heir's name in connection with this – though Azir claimed innocence and even executed some who dared voice such accusations openly.

Eventually, the queen bore a healthy son, but on the night of his birth a terrible storm engulfed Shurima. The queen's chambers were struck again and again by powerful bolts of lightning, and in the subsequent blaze, both the queen and her newborn son were killed. It was said the emperor went mad with grief and took his own life upon hearing the news, but tales soon spread of how he and his guards had been found lying in pieces on the palace floor, their bodies little more than charred skeletons.

Azir was shocked by their deaths, but the empire needed a leader, and with Xerath at his side he took control of Shurima as its emperor. Over the next decade, he expanded Shurima's borders and ruled with a harsh, but just hand. He instituted reforms to better the lives of slaves and privately developed a plan to overturn millennia of tradition and eventually free them all. He kept his plans secret, even from Xerath, and the issue of slavery would prove to be a continual bone of contention between them. The empire had been built on the back of slavery, and many of the great noble houses depended on enforced labor for their vast wealth and power. Such monolithic institutions could not be overturned overnight, and Azir's plans would be undone were they to become common knowledge. Despite Azir's desire to name Xerath his brother, he could not do so until all Shurima's slaves were free.

Through these years, Xerath protected Azir from his political rivals and guided the expansion of the empire. Azir married and fathered numerous children, some by wedlock, others by ill-advised liaisons with slaves and harem girls. Xerath stoked the emperor's grand vision of an empire greater than any the world had ever known. But to stand as ruler over the entire world, Xerath convinced Azir that he would need to be all but invincible, a god amongst men – an Ascended being.

As the kingdom reached the zenith of its power, Azir announced he would undertake the Ascension ritual, that the time was right for him to take his place alongside Nasus and Renekton and their glorious forebears. Many questioned this decision; the Ascension ritual was highly dangerous and intended only for those near the end of their lives, those who had devoted their lives to Shurima and whose service was to be honored with Ascension. It was for the Sun Priests to decree who would be blessed with Ascension, not the hubris of an emperor to bestow it upon himself. Azir would not be dissuaded from his rash course of action, for his arrogance had grown along with his empire, and he ordered them to comply on pain of death.

The day of the ritual finally came and Azir marched toward the Dais of Ascension, flanked by thousands of his warriors and tens of thousands of his subjects. The brothers Renekton and Nasus were absent, having been dispatched by Xerath to deal with an emergent threat, but still Azir would not turn from what he saw as his great destiny. He climbed to the great golden disc atop the temple at the heart of the city and in the moments before the sun priests began the ritual, he turned to Xerath and finally freed him. And not just him, but all slaves...

Xerath was stunned into speechlessness, but Azir was not yet done. He embraced Xerath and named him his eternal brother, as he had promised he would all those years ago. Azir turned as the priests began the ritual to bring down the awesome power of the sun. Azir was unaware that Xerath had studied more than just history and philosophy in his quest for knowledge. He had learned the dark arts of sorcery, all the while nursing a desire for freedom that had grown like a cancer into a burning hatred.

At the height of the ritual, the former slave unleashed his powers and Azir was blasted from his place on the dais. Without the protection of the runic circle, Azir was consumed by the sun's fire as Xerath took his place. The light filled Xerath with power, and he roared as his mortal body began to transform.

But the magic of the ritual was not intended for Xerath, and such awesomely powerful celestial energies could not be diverted without dire consequence. The power of the Ascension ritual exploded outward, devastating Shurima and laying waste to the city. Its people burned to ash and its towering palaces fell to ruin as the desert sands rose up to swallow the city. The sun disc sank from the sky and what had taken centuries to build was brought to ruin in an instant by one man's ambition and another's misplaced hate. All that remained of Azir's city were sunken ruins and echoes of its people's screams on the night winds.

Azir saw none of this. For him, all was nothingness. His last memories were of pain and fire; he knew nothing of what befell him atop the temple, nor what became of his empire. He remained lost in timeless oblivion until, thousands of years after Shurima's doom, the blood of his last descendant spilled onto the temple ruins and resurrected him. Azir was reborn, but was yet incomplete; his body little more than animate dust given form, held together by the last vestiges of his indomitable will.

Gradually resuming his corporeal form, Azir stumbled through the ruins and came across the corpse of a woman with a treacherous knife wound in her back. He did not know her, but saw in her features the distant echo of his bloodline. All thoughts of empires and power were forgotten as he lifted this daughter of Shurima and bore her to what had once been the Oasis of the Dawn. The oasis was empty and dry, but with every step Azir took, clear water began filling the rocky basin. Azir immersed the woman's body in the restorative waters of the oasis and as the blood washed away, only a faint scar remained where the blade had pierced her.

And with that act of selflessness, Azir was lifted up in a column of fire as the magic of Shurima renewed him, remaking him as the Ascended being he was meant to become. The sun's immortal radiance poured into him, crafting his magnificent, hawk-armored form and granting him the power to command the very sand itself. Azir lifted his arms and his ruined city shrugged off the dust of centuries spent beneath the desert to rise anew. The sun disc lifted into the sky once more, and healing waters flowed between temples heaving themselves back into the light at the emperor's command.

Azir climbed the steps of the newly-risen sun temple, weaving the desert winds to recreate the city's last moments. Ghosts formed of sand relived his city's last moments from long ago, and Azir watched in horror as Xerath's treachery unfolded. He wept as he saw his family murdered, his empire fall and his power stolen. Only now, millennia too late, did he finally understand the depths of hatred harbored by his former friend and ally. With the power and prescience of an Ascended being, Azir sensed Xerath somewhere abroad in the world and summoned an army of sand warriors to march alongside their reborn emperor. As the sun blazed from the golden disc above him, Azir swore a mighty oath.

I will reclaim my lands and take back what was mine!

Story

Azir walked the gold-paved Emperor's Way. The immense statues of Shurima's earliest rulers – his ancestors – watched his progress.

The soft, shadowy light of predawn seeped through his city. The brightest stars still shone overhead, though they would soon be snuffed out by the rising sun. The night sky was not as Azir remembered it; the stars and the constellations were misaligned. Millennia had passed.

With every step, Azir's heavy staff of office struck a lonely note, echoing through the capital's empty streets.

When last he had walked this path, an honor guard of 10,000 elite warriors had marched in his wake, and the cheers of the crowd had shaken the city. It was to have been his moment of glory – yet it had been stolen from him.

Now, it was a city of ghosts. What had become of his people?

With an imperious gesture, Azir commanded the sands beside the roadway to rise, creating living statues. This was a vision of the past, the echoes of Shurima given form.

The sand figures looked forward, heads tilted toward the immense Sun Disc hanging above the Dais of Ascension half a league ahead. It hung there still, declaring the glory and power of Azir's empire, though no one remained to see it. The daughter of Shurima who awakened him, she who bore his lineage, was gone. He sensed her out in the desert. Blood bound them together.

As Azir walked the Emperor's Way, the sand-echoes of his people pointed up at the Sun Disc, their joyful expressions turning to horror. Mouths opened wide in silent screams. They turned to run, stumbling and falling. Azir watched this all in despairing silence, bearing witness to the last moments of his people.

They were obliterated by a wave of unseen energy, reduced to dust and cast to the winds. What had gone wrong with his Ascension to unleash this catastrophe?

Azir's focus narrowed. His march became more resolute. He reached the base of the Stairs of Ascension and began to climb, taking them five at a time.

Only his most trusted soldiers, the priesthood, and those of the royal bloodline were allowed to step foot upon the Stairs. Sand versions of these most favored subjects lined his path, faces upturned, grimacing and wailing in silence before they too were swept away by the winds.

He ran, taking the steps faster than any man could, talons digging into the stonework, carving furrows where they caught. Sand figures rose, and were then destroyed, to either side of him as he climbed.

He reached the top. Here, he saw the final circle of onlookers: his closest aides, his advisers, the high priests. His family.

Azir dropped to his knees. His family was before him, rendered in perfect, heartbreaking detail. His wife, heavy with child. His shy daughter, clutching his wife's hand. His son, standing tall, on the brink of becoming a man.

In horror, Azir saw their expressions change. Though he knew what was to come, he could not look away. His daughter hid her face in the folds of his wife's dress; his son reached for his sword, shouting in defiance. His wife... her eyes widened, sorrow and despair writ within.

The unseen event blasted them to nothingness.

It was too much, but no tears welled in Azir's eyes. His Ascended form rendered that simple act of grief forever lost to him. With a heavy heart, he pushed himself to his feet. The question remained as to how his bloodline survived, for it most assuredly had.

The final echo awaited.

He advanced, halting one step below the dais, and watched as it all played out before him, reenacted in the sand.

He saw himself, in his mortal form, rise up into the air beneath the Sun Disc, arms wide and back arched. He remembered this moment. The power coursed through him, infusing his being, filling him with its divine strength.

A newcomer formed in the sand. His trusted bondsman, his magus, Xerath.

His friend uttered a silent word. Azir watched himself shatter like glass, exploding into motes of sand.

"Xerath," breathed Azir.

The traitor's expression was unknowable, but Azir could see nothing but the face of a murderer.

Where did such hate come from? Azir had never been aware of it.

The sand image of Xerath rose higher into the air as the Sun Disc's energies focused into his being. A cadre of elite guards rushed toward him, but they were all far too late.

A brutal shockwave of sand flared out, disintegrating the final moment of Shurima. Azir stood alone among the dying echoes of his past.

This is what killed his people.

Azir turned away, just as the first rays of the new dawn struck the Sun Disc overhead. He'd seen enough. The sand image of the transformed Xerath collapsed behind him.

The dawn sun reflected blindingly off Azir's flawless golden armor. In that instant, he knew that the traitor still lived. He sensed the magus's essence in the air that he breathed.

Azir lifted a hand, and an army of his elite warriors rose from the sands at the base of the Stairs of Ascension.

"Xerath," he said, his voice tinged with rage. "Your crimes will not go unpunished."

Nasus

Biography

Nasus is an imposing, jackal-headed Ascended being from ancient Shurima, a heroic figure regarded as a demigod by the people of the desert. Fiercely intelligent, he was a guardian of knowledge and peerless strategist whose wisdom guided the ancient empire of Shurima to greatness for many centuries. After the fall of the empire, he went into self-imposed exile, becoming little more than a legend. Now that the ancient city of Shurima has risen once more, he has returned, determined to ensure it never falls again.

Nasus's brilliance was recognized from a young age, long before he was chosen to join the ranks of the Ascended. A voracious scholar, he read, memorized and critiqued the greatest works of history, philosophy and rhetoric within the Library of the Sun before he'd seen ten summers. His passion for reading and critical thinking were not passed down to his younger brother Renekton, who was quickly bored, and spent his time fighting with other local children. The brothers were close, and Nasus kept a protective eye over his younger brother, helping to ensure he didn't get into too much trouble. However, it wasn't long before Nasus was welcomed into the exclusive Collegium of the Sun, leaving home to take up his place in this prestigious academy.

While the pursuit of knowledge would always be his passion, Nasus's grasp on military strategy and logistics ensured he became the youngest general in Shuriman history. While he was a competent soldier, his genius lay not in *fighting battles*, but in *planning* them.

His strategic foresight became legendary. In war, he was always a dozen moves ahead of the enemy, able to predict their movement and reactions, as well as pinpoint the exact moment to push the attack or pull back. A deeply empathetic man who took his responsibilities incredibly seriously, he always ensured his soldiers were well provisioned, paid on time, and treated fairly. Every loss of life pained him deeply, and he often refused to rest as he planned and replanned his troop movements and battle dispositions until they were perfect. He was loved and respected by all who served in his legions, and he guided the armies of Shurima to countless victories. His brother Renekton often served on the front lines of these wars, and the two of them quickly garnered an aura of invincibility.

Despite the acclaim Nasus won, he did not enjoy war. Though he understood its importance - for now at least - in ensuring the continued progress of the empire, he firmly believed his greatest contribution to Shurima was in the knowledge he gathered for future generations.

At Nasus's urging, all the books, scrolls, teachings and histories of the cultures he defeated were preserved in great libraries and repositories throughout the empire, the greatest of which bore his name. His hunger for knowledge was not for selfish reasons, but to share wisdom with all of Shurima, to enhance understanding of the world and bring enlightenment to the empire.

After decades of dutiful service, Nasus was cruelly struck down by a terrible wasting sickness. Some say he encountered Amumu, a long-dead child-king said to bear a terrible curse; others believed he was laid low by the evil magicks of an Icathian cult-leader. Whatever the truth, the emperor's own physician declared, with a heavy heart, that Nasus was incurable, and would be dead within a week.

The people of Shurima went into mourning, for Nasus was its brightest star and beloved by all. The emperor himself begged the priesthood for an augury. After a day and night of communing with the divine, the priests declared it the will of the sun-god that Nasus be blessed with the Ascension ritual.

Renekton, now a great war-leader, raced back to the capital to be with his brother. The terrible sickness had advanced dramatically, and Nasus was little more than a skeleton, his flesh wasted away and his bones as fragile as glass. So weak was he that as the golden light from the sun disc streamed onto the Ascension dais, Nasus was unable to climb the final stairs and step into the light.

Renekton's love for his brother was stronger than any sense of self-preservation, and he nobly bore Nasus onto the dais. Ignoring his brother's protests, he willingly accepted oblivion in order to save Nasus. However, Renekton was not destroyed, as was expected. When the light faded, two Ascended beings stood before Shurima. Both brothers had been deemed worthy, and the emperor himself dropped to his knees to give thanks to the divine.

Nasus was now a towering, jackal-headed being of great strength, his eyes glittering with fierce intelligence, while Renekton had been transformed into a heavily muscled behemoth bearing the likeness of a crocodile. They took their place alongside the other rare Ascended beings of Shurima, and became its protectors.

While Renekton had always been a great warrior, now he was virtually unstoppable. Nasus too had been gifted with powers far beyond the understanding of mortal men. The greatest boon of his Ascension - his newly extended longevity, which allowed him countless lifetimes to spend in study and contemplation - would, after the fall of Shurima, also prove to be his curse.

One side-effect of the ritual that disturbed Nasus was the increased savagery he saw within his brother. At the culmination of the siege of Nashramae, which finally brought that ancient city under Shuriman rule, Nasus witnessed the victorious Shuriman soldiers butchering everyone they came across and setting the city ablaze. Renekton led the massacre, and it was he who set fire to the great library of Nashramae, destroying countless irreplaceable volumes before Nasus was able to contain it. This was the closest the brothers ever came to bloodshed, standing in the center of the city, weapons drawn against each other. Under the stern, disappointed gaze of his brother, Renekton's bloodlust waned, and he finally turned away in shame.

Over the following centuries, Nasus bent his every effort to learning all he could, scouring the desert for years in search of ancient artifacts and wisdom, eventually going on to discover the legendary Tomb of the Emperors hidden beneath the Shuriman capital.

Nasus and Renekton had both been lured away when the Ascension ritual of Emperor Azir went terribly wrong, the young emperor betrayed by his closest advisor, the magus Xerath. The brothers returned as fast as they could, but were too late. Azir was dead, along with most of the capital's citizens. Filled with rage and grief, Nasus and Renekton battled the malevolent being of pure energy that Xerath had become.

Unable to kill Xerath, they sought to bind him in a magical sarcophagus, but even that was not enough to hold him. Renekton, perhaps attempting to atone for Nashramae years earlier, grabbed Xerath and bore him into the Tomb of the Emperors, bidding Nasus seal them in. Nasus refused, desperate to find another way, but there was no other option. With a heavy heart, he sealed Xerath and his brother within the fathomless darkness, locking them away for all eternity.

The Shuriman empire collapsed. Its great central city sank into ruin, and the holy sun disc fell from the sky, drained of power by Xerath's magic. Without it, the divine waters flowing from the city ran dry, bringing death and famine to Shurima.

Bearing the heavy burden of guilt for having damned his brother to darkness, Nasus took to roaming the sands, accompanied only by the ghosts of the past and his grief. A melancholy figure, he stalked

the now dead cities of Shurima, watching as they were slowly swallowed by the desert, lamenting the fallen empire and its lost people. He embraced isolation, a lean, solitary nomad who the occasional traveler claimed to glimpse before he disappeared into a sandstorm or an early morning haze. Few believed such stories, and Nasus became little more than a legend.

Centuries passed, and Nasus all but forgot his old life and former purpose, until the moment when the now buried Tomb of the Emperors was rediscovered, and its seal broken. In that moment, he knew Xerath was free.

Ancient vigor stirred in his breast, and as Shurima rose from the sands, Nasus traversed the desert, angling toward the newly reborn city. Though he knew he had to battle Xerath once more, hope stirred within him for the first time in millennia. Not only was this potentially the dawn of a new Shuriman empire, but he dared believe it might also herald a long-awaited reunion with his beloved brother.

Story

Nasus walked at night, unwilling to face the sun. The boy followed in his wake.

How long had he been there?

Those mortals who caught a glimpse of the monstrous vagabond always ran, all save the boy. Together, they wove a path through the bygone tapestry of Shurima. Self-imposed isolation chipped at Nasus's consciousness. The desert wind howled around their malnourished frames.

"Nasus, look, above the dune sea," said the child.

Stars guided the pair's sojourn across the desiccated expanse. The old jackal no longer wore the armor of the Ascended. The golden monuments lay buried with the past. Now a hermit dressed in tattered fabric, Nasus scratched at his matted fur before slowly raising his head to observe the night sky.

"The Piper," said Nasus, his voice low and graveled. "The season will change soon."

Nasus put a hand on the boy's tiny shoulder and looked down into his sunburnt face. There, he saw the soft lines and curves of Shuriman lineage, worn ragged by travel.

When did it become your place to worry? Soon we will find you a home. Wandering between the ruins of an extinguished empire is no life for a child.

This was the nature of the universe. Brief moments unfolded into the endless cycles of existence. The heady philosophy weighed upon him, but it was more than just another stone in his endless tally of self-imposed guilt. In truth, the boy would inevitably be changed if he was allowed to follow. Remorse darkened Nasus's brow like a thunderhead. Their companionship sated something deep within the ancient hero.

"We can reach Astrologer's Tower before dawn. But we'll have to climb," said the boy.

The tower was close. Nasus pulled himself up the cliff face hand over hand, the climb memorized to such perfection that he took great liberties with each handhold, tempting death. The boy clambered up by his side, his agile form utilizing every nook and cranny offered by the blemished rock.

What would happen to this innocent if I gave in to death? *The thought troubled Nasus.*

Wisps of fog rolled through the crags of the upper cliffs, each threading the narrow rocks like tiny mountain paths. The boy scurried over the top first. Nasus followed.

In the distance, metal clanged against stone, and voices could be heard through the haze — they spoke in a familiar dialect. Nasus was shaken from his reverie.

The well at Astrologer's Tower occasionally attracted nomads, but never this close to the equinox. The boy stood perfectly still, his fear palpable.

"Where are the fires?" asked the boy.

A horse's whinny pierced the night.

"Who goes there?" asked the boy. The words rolled through the darkness.

A lantern sparked to life, illuminating a band of riders. Mercenaries. Raiders.

The jackal's eyes snapped wide.

He saw seven of them. Their curved blades remained sheathed, but the look in their eyes spoke of martial training and guile.

"Where is the caretaker?" asked Nasus.

"He and his wife are asleep. The cool evening prompted them to retire early," replied one of the riders.

"Old jackal, my name is Malouf," said another rider. "We have been sent by the Emperor."

Nasus stepped forward, betraying the briefest hint of anger.

"Does he seek acknowledgement? Then let me give it. There is no emperor in this fallen age," said Nasus.

The boy stepped forward defiantly. The dark messengers backed away from the lantern. Long shadows obscured defensive stances.

"Deliver your message and leave," said the child.

Malouf dismounted and stepped forward. He reached a calloused hand into the folds of his shirt and produced a dark amulet bound to a thick, black chain. The geometry of the metal sparked recollections of magic and destruction in Nasus's mind.

"Emperor Xerath sends offerings. We are to be your servants. He welcomes you to his new capital at Nerimazeth."

The mercenary's words fell on Nasus like a hammer on glass.

The boy promptly knelt and snatched up a weighty rock.

"Die!" cried the boy.

"Take him!" said Malouf.

With a heave, the boy hurled the rock through the air, its perfect arc threatening to shatter mercenary bone on impact.

“Renekton, no!” roared Nasus.

The riders abandoned their half-hearted deception. Nasus knew then that the caretaker and his wife were dead. Xerath’s greeting would come in the form of cold steel. Truth began to eclipse illusion.

Nasus reached for the boy. The child tore into shadows of memory that dissipated across the starlit ground.

“Goodbye, brother,” whispered Nasus.

Xerath’s emissaries fanned out, their horses bucking and snorting. The Ascended was flanked on three sides. Malouf did not hesitate, drawing his blade and piercing Nasus’s side with it. Pain rippled through the ancient curator’s body. The rider attempted to withdraw his weapon, but it wouldn’t budge. A clawed hand gripped the blade, keeping it agonizingly buried within Ascended flesh.

“You should have left me to my ghosts,” said Nasus.

Nasus tore Malouf’s sword from his hand, shattering fingers and tearing ligaments.

The demigod pounced on his attacker. Malouf’s body cracked under the jackal’s enormous weight.

Nasus leapt to the next rider, pulling him from his saddle; two strikes ruptured organs and stole the wind from his lungs. His broken form spun off into the sand, a ruined mass of agony. His horse reared and fled into the desert.

“He’s mad!” said one of the riders.

“Not any longer,” said Nasus, approaching the mercenary leader.

A strange fragrance filled the air. Dead flowers spinning on lavender colored threads followed in his wake. Malouf twisted on the ground, the broken fingers of his right hand withered, skin sagging like wet parchment. The barrel of his chest caved in on itself like a rotting spine fruit.

White-knuckled panic overtook the remaining mercenaries. They struggled to keep their mounts under control, if only to retreat. Malouf’s body lay abandoned in the sand.

Nasus turned east toward the ruins of Nerimazeth.

“Tell your ‘emperor’ his cycle nears its end.”

Rammus

Biography

Idolized by many, dismissed by some, mystifying to all, the curious being, Rammus, is an enigma. Protected by a spiked shell, Rammus inspires increasingly disparate theories on his origin wherever he goes - from demigod, to sacred oracle, to a mere beast transformed by magic. Whatever the truth may be, Rammus keeps his own counsel and stops for no one as he roams the desert.

Some believe Rammus is an Ascended being, an ancient god amongst men who rolls to Shurima's aid as an armored guardian in its times of need. Superstitious folk swear he is a harbinger of change, appearing when the land is on the verge of a great shift in power. Others speculate he is the last of a dying species that roamed the land before the Rune Wars sundered the desert with uncontrolled magic.

With so many rumors of great power, magic, and mystery surrounding him, Rammus compels many Shurimans to seek his wisdom. Soothsayers, priests, and deranged lunatics alike claim to know where Rammus dwells, but the Armordillo has proved elusive. Despite this, proof of his presence predates living memory, with crumbling mosaics depicting his image on the most ancient walls of Shuriman ruins. His likeness adorns colossal stone monuments made in the early days of Ascension, leading some to believe he is no less than an immortal demigod. Skeptics often point to a simpler explanation: that Rammus is just one of many such creatures.

It is said that he appears only to worthy pilgrims in great need of his aid, and those blessed by his presence experience great turning points. After the Armordillo rescued the heir to a vast kingdom from a terrible fire, the man renounced his position to become a goat farmer. An elderly mason was inspired by a profound, yet brief conversation with Rammus, and constructed an enormous marketplace which became the bustling heart of Nashramae.

Knowing Rammus's guidance can pave an enlightened path, devout believers perform elaborate rituals designed to attract the favor of their deity. Disciples of the cult devoted to Rammus demonstrate their unwavering faith in a yearly ceremony by imitating his famous roll and somersaulting through the city in droves. Every year, thousands of Shurimans trek through the most treacherous and remote corners of the desert on a quest to find Rammus, for many teachings indicate he will answer a single question of those he finds deserving, if they are able to find him.

Knowing his enthusiasm for desert treats, the pilgrims arm themselves with offerings thought to attract his blessing, packing their mules with flasks of sweet goat's milk, chests filled with colonies of ants sealed in wax, and jars of honeycombs. Many never return from the deep desert, and fewer still with stories of the demigod, though travelers describe waking to find their packs mysteriously emptied of all edible provisions.

Whether he is truly a wise oracle, Ascended deity, or a mighty beast, Rammus is known for his miraculous feats of endurance. He entered the impenetrable Fortress of Siram, an imposing bastion designed by a crazed sorcerer. The structure was said to contain untold magical horrors - fearsome beasts mutated beyond recognition, corridors wreathed in flames, impenetrable tunnels guarded by shadow demons. Not an hour had passed when the enormous fortress collapsed in a plume of dust, and Rammus was seen rolling away. None knew why Rammus entered the darkened gate, nor what secrets he learned within the basalt walls of the fortress. In the year of the great flood he crossed

the vast lake of Imalli in just two days, and dug many miles deep to destroy a giant anthill and kill its queen, whose daughters had devastated the nearby farmland.

Sometimes he appears as a benevolent hero. When invading Noxian warbands attacked a Northern Shuriman settlement, disparate tribes banded together to defend the territory beneath the Temple of the Ascended. They were no match for the invaders in size or skill, and the battle was all but lost when Rammus entered the fray. Each side was so shocked to see the elusive creature that fighting halted completely as they watched him roll between them. As Rammus passed the towering temple, the foundations of the building shook, and enormous stone blocks toppled onto the invading army, crushing many of its warriors. Now outnumbered, the army retreated to elated cheers from the Shurimans. While many swear Rammus saved the town out of love for Shurima, others argue he was merely defending the territory in which his favorite cactus flowers grew. At least one tribesman claims Rammus was simply sleepwalking and had no intention of taking down a temple.

Whatever the truth, stories of Rammus are treasured by the people of Shurima. Any Shuriman child can list a dozen theories on the question of his origin, half of which they likely invented on the spot. Tales of the Armordillo have only increased with the rise of Ancient Shurima, as they did just before its fall, giving way to a belief that his presence heralds darker times to come.

But how can such a benevolent, epicurean soul herald an age of destruction?

Story

Ojan's knife whittled the edge of the ironwood into a soft curve. As an eight-year-old, he wasn't the most practiced craftsman; his wood block was just starting to resemble something round and spiky.

His sister, Zyama, leaned down from her bunk and grimaced.

"What's that? Rhoksha dung?" she said. "No one will want to buy that."

"It's not dung, it's a great and fearsome god, with his armor and everything! And it won't be for sale. It's for luck."

"We're traders, little brother," she said. "Everything here is for sale."

The caravan clinked and clanged as it rolled over the dunes. Every space from floor to ceiling was packed tightly with jars of spices, leaving just enough room for the family's narrow bunks.

"Something's chasing us from the south!" Ojan's mother shouted from outside. Ojan heard her whip crack, urging the camels to hurry their pace.

Zyama leaned out the window, staring through her most prized possession, an ornate spyglass.

"They're Kmiros! I'll ready the arrows," she said. "They must be after your Rhoksha dung."

Ojan replaced her at the window. Sure enough, hundreds of beetles the size of dogs swarmed over the dune behind them.

Zyama returned with a bow and quiver of colorful arrows. She fired, taking one beetle out, but the mass of insects charged on without pause.

"How many arrows do we have?" Ojan asked.

"About forty," Zyama said, looking into the quiver. She frowned.

Their mother's voice carried from the front. "We'll have to outrun them. Hold on!"

Whips cracked once more and the caravan jolted forward, knocking Ojan to the floor.

Zyama loosed another arrow into the swarm, spearing two at once. The creatures fell, but plenty more took their place.

"Oil! In the left cabinet!" their mother shouted.

Ojan ducked away and returned with a flask of lamp oil and a wad of rags. He doused a piece of cloth before wrapping it around the tip of an arrow. He lit the bundle on fire and carefully handed it to Zyama, who blasted the flaming shot into a cluster of beetles. They burst into flames, screeching as they burned. Ojan grinned.

Together they bombarded the horde with flaming arrows, firing as fast as Ojan could wrap each arrowhead. The air smoked with burning chitin. The caravan accelerated, and the gap increased. They were nearly safe.

Ojan's stomach dropped. The Kmiros spread glittering wings and rose to the skies as a unified black cloud.

Ojan flinched as a heavy thud shook the cabin from above. More followed, and the wooden slats groaned under the weight of the oversized insects.

"Hold on!" his mother shouted from the front as she veered them sharply left. Beetles tumbled from the roof, but Ojan heard a discordant scratching from above and knew more had landed.

Pincers broke through the layered beams in the ceiling and an enormous beetle tumbled into the caravan. Zyama drew her dagger and stabbed it, but her blade was unable to pierce its tough carapace. She pushed Ojan back and waved her blade before her, desperately trying to hold it at bay.

More Kmiros dropped through the smashed roof, all snapping jaws and clicking pincers. Ojan dove beneath his bunk, desperately kicking the insects as they clawed for him. He prised the round wooden figure from his pocket.

"Please, Rammus, I pray to you," he whispered. "Help us!"

The caravan jolted as beetles landed on the roof. It pitched back and forth like a ship on a rough sea. Then the world tilted sideways as the caravan overturned completely, skidding in the sand.

Ojan shielded his face from tumbling objects as dust clouded his vision. He was flung against the wall, his ears ringing and head throbbing as the caravan swerved. After a moment of stillness, he felt a hand tug his arm as his mother dragged him from the rubble. He squinted in the blinding sunlight.

The family huddled in the wreckage of their caravan, coughing in the dusty air as the Kmiros circled.

A beetle charged forward and Ojan's mother stabbed it between its clicking jaws. She skewered another as it scrambled to bite her daughter, spilling rank yellow innards across the sand. A third beetle leapt from the top of the caravan and landed behind them. Zyama screamed as it seized her foot in its pincers.

The beetles froze abruptly, halting their attack. They hunkered low to the ground, antennae flexing. In the silence, Ojan heard a distant whirring. He watched the western horizon as a sand cloud rushed

toward them in a fury of dust. The family brandished their weapons in readiness to fight this new threat.

A round armored shape exploded from the flurry of sand and smashed into the nearest beetle with terrible force, crushing it to pulp.

The shape barreled on, smashing beasts left and right. Though the insects snapped at the shape with their sharp pincers, it was unstoppable, and in a moment, no living Kmiros remained.

The dust began to settle once more, and Ojan glimpsed spiked armor jutting from the round shape ahead.

“Is that...?” Zyama said.

“Rammus!” Ojan shouted. He scrambled down the hill to meet his hero.

The creature’s shell was intricately patterned with spiral scales, and his claws were sharp as knives. He gnawed slowly on the hairy leg of a beetle, juice dripping from his mouth.

Ojan and Zyama gaped.

Their mother approached the Armordillo, bowing her head deeply.

“You saved us,” she said. “We are grateful.”

Rammus crunched the beetle leg as the family watched. Several minutes passed.

He rolled to the fallen caravan and rummaged through the debris, emerging with Ojan’s wooden carving of the Armordillo. The likeness wasn’t perfect, but certainly discernible.

“That’s you,” Ojan said. “Please, take it.”

Rammus knelt down and bit the wooden figurine in two with a crunch. He turned and walked a few paces before spitting the pieces into the sand. Zyama stifled a laugh.

“Hmm,” said Rammus.

He tore a leg from another dead beetle and dragged it through the sand as he rolled away.

The family watched him disappear over the horizon.

Ojan ran after Rammus to retrieve the broken pieces of the statue. He pocketed them and bowed.

“For luck,” he said.

Renekton

Biography

Renekton is a terrifying, rage-fueled Ascended being from the scorched deserts of Shurima. Once, he was his empire's most esteemed warrior, leading the armies of Shurima to countless victories. However, after the empire's fall, Renekton was entombed beneath the sands, and slowly, as the world turned and changed, he succumbed to insanity. Now free once more, he is utterly consumed with finding and killing his brother, Nasus, who he blames, in his madness, for the centuries he spent in darkness.

Renekton was born to fight. From a young age he was constantly getting into vicious brawls. He had no fear, and was able to hold his own against much older children. It was often pride that led to these confrontations, as Renekton was unable to back down, or let any insult pass. Every evening, he came home with cuts and fresh bruises, and while his more scholarly older brother, Nasus, disapproved of his street-fighting, Renekton relished it.

Nasus soon moved away, having been chosen to join the elite Collegium of the Sun, and in the years he was absent, Renekton's skirmishes became increasingly serious. On a rare visit home, Nasus was horrified to see his bloodied young brother return home from yet another street fight. Fearing Renekton's violent nature would see him imprisoned or in an early grave, Nasus helped him enlist in the Shuriman army. Officially, Renekton was too young for this duty, but his older brother's influence smoothed away this detail.

The discipline and regimentation of the army was a blessing for Renekton. Within a few years, he rose to become one of Shurima's most feared and capable war-captains, and he fought on the front line in numerous wars of conquest to expand the empire. He garnered a reputation for ferocity and toughness, but also for honor and bravery. Nasus became a decorated general, and the two of them served in a number of campaigns together, remaining very close despite their inherent differences and frequent disagreements. Nasus's skill lay in strategy, logistics and history; Renekton's lay in battle. Nasus planned the wars, and Renekton won them.

Renekton earned the title Gatekeeper of Shurima after fighting a desperate battle in one of the mountain passes bordering Shurima. An invading force had landed on the south coast, striking toward the isolated city of Zuretta. If it was not halted, the city was certain to be razed, and its populace massacred. Outnumbered ten to one, Renekton and a small contingent faced these aggressors, determined to buy time for the city to be evacuated. It was a battle that none expected Renekton to survive, let alone win. He held the pass for a day and a night, long enough for a relief force led by Nasus to arrive. With barely a handful of warriors left standing, none uninjured, Renekton was hailed a hero.

Renekton served on the frontlines for decades, and never lost a battle. His presence was inspiring to those fighting alongside him, and terrifying to his enemies. Victory after victory were his, and such was his reputation that some wars were won without a sword even being lifted, enemy nations surrendering as soon as they heard Renekton was marching on them.

Renekton was of middling years, a grizzled and battle-scarred veteran, when word reached him that his brother was close to death. He raced back to the capital to find Nasus a pale shadow of his

former self, having been struck down by a debilitating wasting malady. The sickness was incurable, similar to the rotting curse said to have cut down an entire noble line in antiquity.

Nevertheless, Nasus's greatness was recognized by one and all. As well as being a highly decorated general, he curated the great library of Shurima, and penned many of the finest literary works in the empire. The priesthood proclaimed it to be the sun's will that he undertake the Ascension ritual.

The whole city gathered to witness the holy rite, but the tragic illness had taken a terrible toll, and Nasus no longer had the strength to scale the stairs to the Ascension dais. In the ultimate act of self-sacrifice and love, Renekton lifted his brother in his arms, and climbed the final steps, fully expecting to be obliterated in the process by the holy energies of the sun disc. He deemed his sacrifice a small thing to ensure that his brother would live on. He was just a warrior, after all, albeit a talented one, while his brother was a peerless scholar, thinker and general. Renekton knew that Shurima would need Nasus in the years to come.

Renekton was not destroyed, however. Beneath the blinding radiance of the sun disc, both brothers were raised up and remade. When the light faded, two mighty Ascended beings stood before the onlookers, Nasus in his lean, jackal-headed body, and Renekton in his immense, crocodilian form. Their forms seemed apt; the jackal was often regarded as the most clever and cunning of beasts, and the fearless aggression of the crocodile fit Renekton perfectly. Shurima gave thanks to have these new demigods as guardians of the empire.

Renekton had been a mighty war hero before, but now he was an Ascended being, blessed with power beyond mortal understanding. He was stronger and faster than any regular man, and seemed virtually immune to pain. Though Ascended beings were not immortal, their lifespans were dramatically increased, so that they might serve the empire for hundreds of years.

With Renekton at the head of the Shuriman armies, the empire's military was all but unstoppable. He had always been a ruthless commander and ferocious fighter, but his new form gave him power beyond belief. He led the soldiers of Shurima to many bloody victories, neither giving nor expecting mercy. His legend spread far beyond the borders of the empire, and it was his enemies that gave him the name Butcher of the Sands, a title he embraced.

There were those, Nasus among them, who came to believe that a portion of Renekton's humanity had been lost in his transformation. As the years progressed, he seemed to become crueler, relishing the spilling of blood more than was natural, and whispers circulated of atrocities he committed in the name of war. Nevertheless, he was a staunch defender of Shurima, and he faithfully served a succession of emperors, ensuring the security and greatness of Shurima for hundreds of years.

During the reign of the Emperor Azir, word arrived that a magical being of fire had escaped the magical sarcophagus that bound it in its underground prison. It had laid waste to a Shuriman town, before fleeing across the desert to the east. Renekton and his brother Nasus set forth to recapture this legendary foe. While they were absent, the young emperor, guided by the manipulations of his magus, Xerath, attempted to join their ranks and become one of the Ascended. The results were catastrophic.

Renekton and Nasus were a day's ride from the capital, but even so, they felt the shockwave as the Ascension ritual went awry. Knowing that something terrible had come to pass, they raced back to find the glorious city in ruins. Azir had been killed, along with most of the city's populace, and the great sun disc was falling, drained of all its power. At the epicenter of the ruin, they encountered Xerath, now a being of pure, malevolent power.

The brothers sought to bind Xerath in the magical sarcophagus that had held the ancient being of fire. For a day and a night they battled, but the magus was powerful, and would not be held. He shattered the sarcophagus, and assailed them with spells fueled by the power of sun disc, which crashed to the ground as they fought.

Knowing that they could not destroy Xerath, Renekton finally wrestled him into the depthless Tomb of the Emperors, and bade his brother seal them inside forever. Knowing there was no other way to stop Xerath, Nasus reluctantly did as his brother ordered. As Renekton and Xerath fell into darkness, Nasus sealed the tomb for all eternity.

In the darkness, Xerath and Renekton continued their battle. For uncounted years they fought, as the once-great civilization of Shurima collapsed to dust in the world above. Xerath whispered poison in Renekton's ear, and gradually, as the centuries rolled on, his viperous words and the ever-present darkness took its toll. The magus implanted the notion in Renekton's mind that Nasus had sealed him in on purpose, jealous of his success, and unwilling to share his Ascension.

Piece by piece, Renekton's sanity cracked. Xerath drove a wedge into these cracks, corrupting his mind and twisting his perception of what was real and what was imagined.

Thousands of years later, the Tomb of the Emperors was opened by the mercenary Sivir, freeing Renekton and Xerath. Renekton roared his fury and thundered out into the Shuriman desert, sniffing the air for the scent of his brother.

Renekton now roams the deserts, seeking the death of Nasus, the traitor he believes left him to die. His grip on reality is tenuous at best, and while there are moments when he resembles the proud, honorable hero of the past, much of the time he is little more than a devolved hate-maddened beast, driven on by the thirst for blood and vengeance.

Story

Am I a god?

He no longer knows. Once, perhaps, when the sun disc gleamed like gold atop the great Palace of Ten Thousand Pillars. He remembers carrying a withered ancient in his arms, and them both borne into the sky by the sun's radiance. All his hurts and pain were washed away as the light remade him. If this memory is his, then was he once mortal? He thinks so, but cannot remember. His thoughts are a cloud of duneflies, myriad shattered memories buzzing angrily in his elongated skull.

What is real? What am I now?

This place, this cave under the sands. Is it real? He believes so, but he is no longer sure he can trust his senses. For as long as he can remember, he knew only darkness; awful, unending darkness that clung to him like a shroud. But then the darkness broke apart and he was hurled back into the light. He remembers clawing his way through the sand as the earth buckled and heaved, the living rock grinding as something long buried and all but forgotten heaved itself to the surface once again.

Towering statues erupted from beneath the sand, vast and terrible in their aspect. Armored warriors with demonic heads loomed over him, ancient gods of a long dead culture. Bellicose phantoms rose from the sand and he fled their wrath, escaping the rising city as light blazed and the moons and stars wheeled overhead. He remembers staggering through the desert, his mind afire with visions of blood and betrayal, of titanic palaces and golden temples brought down in the blink of an eye.

Centuries of progress undone for the sake of one man's vanity and pride. Was it his? He does not know, but fears it might have been.

The light that once remade his flesh now pains him. It burned him raw and seared his soul as he wandered the desert, lost and alone, tormented by a hatred he did not understand. He has taken refuge from its unforgiving light, but even here, squatting and weeping in this dripping cave, the Whisperer has found him. The shadow on the walls slithers around him; always muttering, always conspiring to feed his bitterness. He presses long, gnarled hands that end in vicious, ebon talons to his temples, but he cannot shut his constant companion in the darkness out. He never could.

The Whisperer tells tales of his shame and guilt. It speaks of the thousands who died because of him, who never had the chance to live thanks to his failure. A part of him believes these to be honeyed falsehoods, twisted fictions told often enough that he can no longer sift truth from lies. The Whisperer reminds him of the light being shut away, showing him the jackal-face of his betrayer looking down as he condemned him to the abyssal dark for all eternity. Tears gather at the corners of his cataracted eyes and he angrily wipes them away. The Whisperer knows every secret path into his mind, twisting every certainty he once clung to, every virtue that made him the hero revered as a god throughout...Shurima!

That name has meaning to him, but it fades like a shimmering mirage, remaining bound within the prison of his mind by chains of madness. His eyes, once so clear-sighted and piercing, are misted with the eons he spent in the endless dark. His skin was as tough as armored bronze, but is now dull and cracked, dust spilling from his many wounds like sand from an executioner's hourglass. Perhaps he is dying. He thinks he might be, but the thought does not trouble him overmuch. He has lived an age and suffered too long to fear extinction.

Worse, he is no longer sure he can die. He looks at the weapon before him, a crescent bladed axe without a handle. It belonged to a warrior king of Icathia, but a fleeting memory of breaking its haft as he had broken its bearer's army returns to him. He remembers remaking it, but not why. Perhaps he will use it to slice open his ridged throat and see what happens. Will blood or dust flow? No, he will not die here. Not yet. The Whisperer tells him fate has another role for him. He has blood yet to spill, a thirst for vengeance yet to slake. The jackal-face of the one who condemned him to darkness floats in his mind, and each time he sees it, the hatred carved on his heart boils to the surface.

He looks up at the cave walls as the shadows part, revealing the crude daubings of mortals. Ancient, flaking images, so faded as to be almost invisible, depict the desert city in all its glory. Rivers of cold, clear water flow in its pillared thoroughfares and the life-giving rays of the sun bring forth wondrous greenery from a newly fertile landscape. He sees a king in a hawk-headed helm atop a towering palace and a dark-robed figure at his side. Beneath them are two giants in armor wrought for war, one a hulking, crocodilian beast armed with a crescent-bladed axe, the other a jackal-headed warrior-scholar. In the reptilian form, he recognizes a mortal's awed representation of his ascended incarnation. He turns his gaze upon the remaining warrior. Time has all but erased the angular script beneath the faded image, but enough is still legible for him to make out his betrayer's name.

"Nasus..." he says. "Brother..."

And with the source of his torment named, his own identity is revealed like the sun emerging from behind a stormcloud.

"I am Renekton," he hisses through hooked teeth. "The Butcher of the Sands."

He lifts his crescent blade and rises to his full height as the dust of ages falls away from his armored form. Old wounds seal, broken skin knits afresh and color returns to his supple, jade crocodilian skin as purpose fills him. Once the sun remade him, but now darkness is his ally. Strength surges through his monstrously powerful body, muscles swelling and eyes burning red with hatred for Nasus. He hears the Whisperer speak once again, but he no longer heeds its voice. He clenches a clawed fist and touches the tip of his blade to the image of the jackal-headed warrior.

“You left me alone in the darkness, brother,” he says. “You will die for that betrayal.”

Sivir

Biography

Sivir is a renowned fortune hunter and mercenary captain who plies her trade in the deserts of Shurima. Armed with her legendary jeweled crossblade, she has fought and won countless battles for those who can afford her exorbitant price. Known for her fearless resolve and endless ambition, she prides herself on recovering buried treasures from the perilous tombs of Shurima – for a generous bounty. With ancient forces stirring the very bones of Shurima, Sivir finds herself torn between conflicting destinies.

Sivir learned firsthand the harsh lessons of desert life when her entire family was killed by marauding Kthaons, one of Shurima's most feared raider tribes. In the weeks and months after the massacre, she survived by stealing food from local markets and exploring deserted ruins in search of trinkets to sell.

Most of the ruins had long since been picked clean by thieves, but Sivir excelled at unearthing treasures others had missed. With her keen eye and relentless determination, she exposed secret passageways, solved ancient puzzles to reveal hidden catacombs, and dodged perilous traps.

Occasionally, she persuaded other children to help her plunder tombs that would be impossible to loot alone. Armed with no more than coils of rope and candles, the malnourished waifs would descend into the cramped tunnels beneath the ruins in search of anything worth selling.

One day, Sivir and her compatriots ventured deep into a secret tomb she swore was filled with riches beyond imagining. After many hours of exploration, they finally discovered a hidden doorway, but were crushed to find nothing more than an empty chamber. Enraged at their wasted effort, Mhyra, Sivir's oldest companion, demanded she forfeit her role as leader. Sivir refused, and a vicious fight ensued. Mhyra was larger and stronger, and quickly overpowered Sivir before pushing her off a ledge. Hours later, Sivir awoke alone in the dark. Fighting back panic, she retraced her steps, blind and feeling her way slowly back to daylight. Once she returned to her lair, she found her traitorous friend had fled, taking everything Sivir owned with her.

Sivir swore she would never allow herself to be betrayed again. Determined to learn to defend herself, she joined a band of sellswords led by the legendary Iha Ziharo, serving as a weapon carrier, navigator, and dogsbody for the belligerent mercenaries.

For years, Sivir slept with a dagger tucked under her blanket. She placed no trust in Ziharo's warriors, knowing their only loyalty was to coin, but she strived to learn all she could. Sivir trained to fight, practicing with staunch determination and sparring against the younger sellswords daily.

Sivir's unwavering dedication and swift-growing skill caught the eye of Iha Ziharo herself, who took Sivir under her wing - an honor few received. Over the years, Sivir became a formidable warrior, and as Iha's sergeant, she fought against numerous armies, raiders and warring tribes. When the wars ended and the mercenaries struggled to find paying work, Sivir led expeditions into the ruins in search of Shurima's lost treasures.

Eventually, Sivir tired of living in Ziharo's shadow. The domineering leader took the greatest share of the gold, and all the glory - though it was Sivir's knowledge of Shuriman tombs that brought them much of their wealth. Worse, Ziharo refused to fight for warlords whose reputations for cruelty were

at odds with her martial code of honor. But to Sivir, gold was gold, no matter how bloody the hands that paid it - morals played no part in the transaction.

Many of the mercenaries agreed with Sivir and plotted with her to replace Ziharo as leader. The night before their coup, Ziharo learned of the plan. Outraged, she struck first, planning to turn her blade on her former student as she slept. Sivir had expected such an attack, and defeated Ziharo in a vicious knife brawl. Nevertheless, she was surprised to find she couldn't kill her former mentor, remembering how Ziharo had taken her in when she was no more than a bitter girl with nothing to her name. Instead, she left Ziharo alone in the desert with a half-filled waterskin, a single coin and a hollow offer of good luck.

Sivir's warband quickly earned a fearsome reputation as warriors of renown and explorers who could find relics that had passed into legend. Desert barons, wealthy merchants and collectors of the arcane commissioned Sivir to fight their wars or recover rare, hidden treasures. Explorers willingly paid Sivir's high price for her skill in traversing dangerous territories and navigating the ancient ruins of Shurima. Ruling chieftains hired her company to defend their lands against raiding Noxians, while warlords procured their services early in their campaigns to ensure a swift victory.

In the Year of a Thousand Storms, the lord of an ancient Shuriman city known as Nashramae hired Sivir to seek a unique cross-shaped blade he claimed was a lost heirloom. He sent his personal guards along with her to guarantee its retrieval, and after a search that lasted many months, Sivir finally located the weapon. She pried it from the sarcophagus of a long-forgotten hero buried beneath tons of collapsed rubble with a strange sense that her entire life had been leading up to this moment. The weapon shone with gold and emeralds, and though it was ancient, its edge was as sharp as if it had been forged that day.

Sivir was transfixed by the crossblade, feeling as if it had been waiting for her. When the captain of the Nashramae guard demanded they return to their lord with his prize, Sivir knew she could never give it up. Sivir threw the crossblade in a curved arc, and marveled as it decapitated not only the captain, but the three men behind him before returning to her hand. Never had a weapon felt so natural in her grip, so powerful to throw. She fought her way from the tomb to emerge triumphant with the Lord of Nashramae's men dead behind her.

Tales of Sivir's exploits and ferocity in battle were already well-known within Shurima, but as her legend grew, her reputation spread beyond even the desert lands. In Noxus, stories of her deeds reached the ears of Cassiopeia, an ambitious noblewoman who desired a relic she believed was hidden in the heart of the desert. Cassiopeia had no shortage of coin, and hired Sivir as her guide to plunder the depths of the long lost capital of Shurima.

Though she instinctively distrusted Cassiopeia, Sivir was not about to dismiss such a profitable expedition. As they plunged deeper into the twisting catacombs of the buried city, many of Sivir's mercenaries were killed by a slew of deadly traps, but Cassiopeia refused to turn back. After days of endless descent into darkness, Sivir and Cassiopeia finally reached a great bas-relief depicting ancient emperors and Ascended warriors with bestial heads. Most of the buried structures they had seen were shattered from millennia spent beneath the sands, but this wall was uncannily intact. Sivir felt her blood stir as she gazed at the carvings, mesmerized by a creeping sense of recognition. In that moment of inattention, her fate was sealed.

Taking advantage of Sivir's distraction, Cassiopeia stepped in close and rammed a blade through her back. Sivir collapsed in agony, her lifeblood soaking into the sand. Cassiopeia pried Sivir's crossblade

from her grasp as her senses dimmed like a guttering candle. As warmth faded from her body, death closed in.

But fate was not yet done with Sivr. As her lifeblood drained, her ancestor, the long-dead emperor Azir, was resurrected by the echoes of royalty within her blood. He carried her body to the Oasis of the Dawn, a sacred pool once brimming with healing waters. Bone-dry for thousands of years, it now overflowed with crystal water at Azir's presence. The healing waters enveloped Sivr's body, miraculously undoing the fatal wound dealt to her by Cassiopeia.

With a labored gasp, Sivr opened her eyes, dazed and uncomprehending, as if dragged from a dream. A vaguely familiar face looked down at her with kindness, and Sivr blinked, unsure if she was alive or dead. All around her, spirals of dust whirled hundreds of feet in the air forming towering palaces, ornate temples, and expansive plazas. The ancient city of Shurima rose from its sandy grave in all its glory and splendor, crowned by an enormous golden disc shining brighter than the noonday sun. With Azir's return, the ancient city was restored to its former majesty.

Sivr had grown up hearing tales of the legendary Ascended, but thought only children and fools believed in such fantasy. Surrounded by a city that, stone by stone, restored itself from nothing, and confronted by a long-dead Emperor who spoke of his enduring bloodline and vision of a reborn kingdom, Sivr was shaken to her core. Everything she had ever believed in was cast into doubt.

With his words still ringing in her ears, she retreated to her life as a mercenary, taking solace in the everyday realities of fighting for coin. She struggled to accept she might be the heir to a forgotten empire, and tried to put such thoughts out of her mind. Even if everything Azir said were true, she was sure no one could unite the disparate tribes of Shurima. The most powerful warlords could command small territories for a time with enough gold and warriors, but the land would never rally beneath a single banner, let alone bow to one man - even if he truly was an ancient emperor.

As Azir strives to reestablish his once-mighty empire, Sivr is tormented by increasing doubts as to whether she can fully return to her former life. Looming forces encroach upon her world, and for better or worse, fate has given her a second chance at life.

Now she must choose her path, and forge a new legacy.

Story

Sivr's throat felt like it was coated in a layer of broken glass. The cracked flesh of her lips burned. Her eyes refused to focus. I've given them more than enough time to move on.

She leaned around the edge of the boulder. The caravan was still at the spring and showing no signs of moving on.

Why did they have to be Kthaons? Of the many, many tribes that want her dead, the Kthaons stood out in their persistence.

Sivr scanned the tribesmen again, looking for any sign the caravan might climb out of the old riverbed and continue its journey. She rolled her shoulders trying to judge if her muscles were up to fighting a half-dozen men. She'd have to take them by surprise to stand a chance.

That prissy Noxian got the drop on me...

Sivr shook her head, trying to clear her mind. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts. I'm becoming scattered from the lack of water. Why didn't I bring more water?

The city had been bursting with it. Huge streams poured from statues, all at the command of an Ancient. He healed my wound and saved my life. Then he returned to rebuilding the temples around him, calling out strange words in an old dialect she could barely make sense of. Talking to himself in a dead city filled only with sand. I had to get out before that sorcerer decided to sink it all back beneath the dust – or that I owed him.

Swallowing brought fresh agony to Sivor's throat. She looked at the spring again, a simple puddle of brown water in the center of the caravan.

I've given them a day, she reasoned. I will die, or they will die. For a few drops of water or a few slivers of gold. That is the way of the desert.

Sprinting toward the first guard, she readied her crossblade. Would there be enough time to reach him before he turned back around? She counted the distance. Fourteen strides. Twelve. Ten. He can't make a sound. Two strides. She jumped. Her blade sank completely through his neck, down into his shoulder.

Blood erupted as she crashed down on him. Her momentum drove them behind the line of rocks on which he'd been standing. Sivor grabbed his arms. He struggled against her, refusing to accept he was already dead. The guard's blood drenched Sivor as he took a final gurgling breath. This man didn't need to die.

Sivor thought again of Cassiopeia's blade. That Noxian bitch sunk a blade in my back. I died. That should mean something.

A distant rumble sounded. Horses? A sandwall collapsing? There wasn't time to wonder what it meant. Sivor crawled across the hard stones. It won't take the rest of the caravan long to notice the guard's absence. The next target was moving high along the ridge line. She needed to hit him before he walked away from the ledge. The shot has to be perfect. She threw the crossblade.

It hit the second guard, cutting him in half. The flying blade arced upward, but as it reached its apex, it slowed before reversing its direction. As it flew back toward her, it clipped the neck of the third man. There wouldn't be time for another throw now – the blade completed its arc, flying down toward the center of the water. She only had to reach it in time. The maneuver was an old standby. She would catch the weapon and kill the three remaining men in a single, spinning summersault.

But as she ran, her feet became heavy, and it seemed impossible to draw enough air into her pained lungs. Thirty strides. She had to make the distance before the second man's body hit the ground. Twenty strides. The muscles in her legs cramped, refusing to obey her commands. Fifteen strides. She found herself sliding, stumbling. No. Not yet.

Then, sooner than she had expected, the second man's body completed its fall and impacted the rocks. The sound was impossible to miss.

One mistake was enough. The Kthaons were a desert people. The remaining guards had weapons drawn before she took another step.

Her crossblade hit the water between the men and her. Five strides in front of them. Ten strides from her.

I could make it. Every reflex in Sivor's body willed her forward. Instead, she slid to a halt, nearly falling forward.

Failing to bring enough water. Waiting too long to attack. Misjudging distances. I don't make these mistakes. Why? *Some other part of Sivor's mind answered. She remembered the moment after Cassiopeia's dagger had pierced her back – she couldn't feel the blade itself. Instead, she felt a sudden, unexpected weight that seemed to steal her breath and crush her lungs.*

"I killed three of you before you heard me," Sivor coughed.

"You don't have a weapon," the largest of the Kthaons said.

"Only because I didn't want your blood in the water," she lied.

The three remaining men exchanged glances. They've recognized me.

"A year ago, I killed your chieftain and two dozen of your finest for a bag of thin gold. It was a cheap price for their lives." She met the three men's eyes. They were spreading out from the water, attempting to flank her.

"The gold I earned from killing your chieftain and kinsmen?" she asked. "I gambled it away in a single evening."

"We will avenge them and your insult," the largest man responded.

"I shouldn't have killed them," she said, "not for that gold. Don't make me kill you for a few cups of water."

The Kthaons' leader nervously adjusted the grip on his weapon.

"I'm telling you I can make it to the blade before you can act," Sivor explained. "And if I run for my blade. You will die." She indicated the foul brown water. "Your lives are worth more than that."

"Then we will die with honor," the largest man decided, though his fellows seemed less certain.

"Did I need that weapon to kill the twenty men you want to avenge?" Sivor warned. "You are too few."

The three men hesitated. They knew Sivor's reputation. The other two pulled the largest man away, before backing to their mounts.

Sivor edged toward the water.

"We will return with our tribesmen for vengeance."

"Lots of people have tried that," she said. "Never worked out for them."

Sivor rolled her swollen tongue against the top of her mouth, desperate for relief. Every part of her wanted to kneel down to the water and drink. I have to wait until they cross the far dune.

As the men climbed into their saddles and rode away, the strange rumbling sounded again. It was loud and growing louder. It's not horses or shifting sands. Sivor turned to its source and watched as a three foot wall of blue water rushed down the ancient riverbed. The water from the city.

The moment before the water hit Sivor, she felt the rush of cold, damp air in front of the flood. It shocked her like an unexpected kiss.

The first wave nearly took out her knees. The impact stung with cold, but as it enveloped her waist and legs, it became soothingly cool. Sivor laid in the water, letting it wash over her. She could feel the painful grit of the desert washing away as her hair floated weightless and free.

I was dead. I must make that mean something.

Skarner

Biography

Skarner is an immense crystalline scorpion from a hidden valley in Shurima. Part of the ancient Brackern race, Skarner and his kin are known for their great wisdom and deep connection to the land, as their souls are fused with powerful life crystals which hold the living thoughts and memories of their ancestors. In an age long past, the Brackern entered hibernation to avoid untold magical destruction, but recent, threatening events have roused Skarner. As the only Brackern awake, he strives to protect his kind from those who seek to harm them.

Long before men traversed the scorched deserts of Shurima, the very sand itself shone with primal, unchained magic. In a remote valley surrounded by steep cliffs and jagged rock formations, the age-old race of Brackern unearthed raw crystals from deep within the sand. Each of these noble creatures fused with a single stone, which retained their consciousness long after their death.

The demise of a Brackern was a rare occurrence, as their worldly lives stretched across millennia, but even death did not signify an ending. When a creature's mortal form perished, its life stone was buried in the valley for safekeeping until a new Brackern could uncover it. This practice protected the vulnerable crystals while preserving the wisdom of the ones who came before.

With a finite number of stones, the young Brackern searched for the crystal *meant* for them, just as the consciousness within the stone beckoned to the Brackern it had chosen to inherit its magic and memories. In a sacred rite, the rock fused with crystalline flesh, imbuing the creature's mind with memories and knowledge and flooding them with primal magic. A Brackern without a crystal would not long survive, for they lacked the strength, longevity, and power instilled by the stones.

The young creature named Skarner spent many years searching for the crystal meant for him. Afraid he would die before finding it, he grew more persistent in his search with each passing moon. Day and night, he delved deep into the ground, digging in a methodical pattern that covered the entire valley and neighboring hills with intricate spirals.

Skarner had all but given up when he finally felt an ancient consciousness tugging at his mind. He burrowed down, venturing ever deeper until the world's heart warmed his shell. Days passed, but the consciousness grew ever more insistent as it urged him onward. Skarner's pincers closed on a well-worn stone, and he heard a rasping whisper at the back of his mind. Though the voice was faint, he already felt intimately connected to its awareness, and he knew he had found his stone.

The crystal was larger than any he had seen, and so timeworn that its glow had faded to a soft glimmer. Its surface was cracked in several places and dulled from eons buried under the ground. Skarner examined the rock with the tenderest touch, afraid of further damaging something so ancient. The dim glow within pulsed as though breathing in response to Skarner's presence.

Skarner began the bonding ritual, burying himself deep underground with the crystal for weeks without sustenance. Though he ached with fatigue and his limbs atrophied in starvation, he was not afraid, for the voice within the stone comforted him. When the crystal finally fused with his body, he was overwhelmed with emotion as ancient memories and wisdom permeated his thoughts. He witnessed moments of incredible joy and crushing sorrow from generations long deceased. He felt magic all around him, suffusing his body with a deep connection to the world through a low constant hum, and sensed his kind communicating in a wordless meeting of minds.

When the cataclysmic forces of the Rune Wars began to devastate the world, the Brackern feared the turmoil would soon mark the end of their species. They resolved to hide in hibernation until humans wiped themselves out, as it seemed certain they would. Only then would it be safe to emerge from the sands once more.

The crystalline scorpions buried themselves deep in the Shuriman desert with the youngest and most ferocious positioned closest to the surface, ready to awaken first and defend the others in case of danger. The strength Skarner gained from his ancient life stone made him more powerful than almost all of his kin, so he was one of the last of his kind to enter the long slumber.

They slept in peaceful isolation as centuries passed before Skarner awoke from his shallow burrow in a panic. Deafening explosions shattered the ground, targeting the Brackern where they lay sleeping and stunning those closest to the surface. A band of robbers had discovered the dormant creatures and were prying crystals from crystalline flesh. Skarner, protected from the brunt of the attack by his crystal, erupted from the sand in a terrible frenzy of sharp pincers and poisonous stabs. Though their numbers all but overwhelmed him, he killed many of the thieves, and the rest fled in terror. Skarner was horrified to learn he was the only one awake, and that many of his people's crystals had already been stolen.

Skarner tried to revive his dormant companions, but the men had broken so many life stones in their thoughtless theft that several Brackern with damaged crystals died moments after Skarner woke them, while others would not wake at all. For weeks Skarner paced the sand above his sleeping brethren in sorrowful mourning. He was certain the crystals would quickly perish in the hands of men, and mourned their loss too.

Yet as the sun broke over the horizon many weeks later, Skarner heard distant echoes calling in his mind. The cries were faint, but rang clear over the land. These voices of the lost stones reached out to him in terror, imploring Skarner to reconnect them with their kind. Skarner hesitated, torn as to whether he should rescue the lost crystals or continue guarding the still-living Brackern. After weeks spent erasing all traces of the excavation, he could not stand to hear the minds of his kin suffering at the hands of the violent humans, and resolved to set out to save the missing crystals.

Skarner began the arduous task of tracking the stones, hoping no others would discover his kin beneath the sand. Though his search is lonely, he occasionally hears a lost crystal calling to him, a feeling that brings joy and anguish in equal measure. He focuses his sorrow into unshakable determination, and refuses to rest until he has recovered every last life stone.

Story

The softskins broke our slumber of a thousand spins.

For many long ages, I sensed the world's dizzying movement. Stars exploded and died above me, though I did not see them. I felt the warmth of the sun flood the sand with life.

When my heartpulse slowed and I curled in the dry sand to warm my body for longsleep, I thought my time below would be lonely, that the earth would not respond to my touch. But all around me were kin. I sensed them rustling in their slumber. I listened to their silent murmurs reaching for my mind. I heard their dreamsongs of worlds upon worlds. A place without softskins, without fear or pain or doubt. A place of great peace.

In the sand, we were all connected; we dreamed as one. Not just the singers, but all living things; the worms curling around smooth rockgrains, the molerats burrowing tunnels to birth their young, even a family of fur-soft spiderlings who rested for a night in the deepdark.

I thought the rocks would be immobile, cold, uncaring. But they, too, were part of us. The stones were warm, and the deeper we burrowed, the closer we got to this world's wombfire. Each time the underground boiled in rage, I was there; its tremors shook the sand until I sang back with my own anger. We are one, we are all. Your anger is as mine. I heard its gratitude in the raintime when wet drops soaked the sand and the earth grew fat and full.

When the softskins came, the ground knew only pain. Our songs became cries as we were torn and broken and scattered. I heard the sorrowsong as the softskins unearthed my kin. They tore crystal namestones from our bodies as we screamed, louder than earthshakes, and stole them away. I sang long into the many nights, sang until my heart was empty and cold, but they did not return.

Today, I am alone in the aboveplace. Today, the dry wind burns my skin. With every step, the sand grinds against me in protest. I fight my urge to bury myself down, down, to go inside the earth's deepdark. I am not apart. I am part of the one, not beyond.

From far away, a song of painfear reaches me. The tone is faint, but I recognize the melody, and I send out a song of my sorrow. A note of hope rings back in my mind, clear and fine. Almost, almost.

Another set of stars whirl overhead, and again. The endlessly blinking universe stares down at me. I feel moltenheavy with the weight of above. I should be down, but I am here, alone in the cold air.

I have been above for three moons. A blink of an eye, a sliver of existence. A warming murmur passes silently underground — yet in the aboveplace, I feel the eternity of alone.

Ahead, I hear softskins. They do not sing, they shout. Their tones scratch and clash without melody or cohesion. They burn meatflesh over a falsefire. Its fat smokes the air and I choke on the stench. Why would they do such a thing? The ground is plenty, plenty for all.

The melody calls to me weakly. Almost. The namestone is close.

I must explain; the softskins do not understand. Their race is but three turns young; they have only begun to dig; they have barely uncoiled the beginnings of underneath. They speak, but I have not yet heard them sing. They will learn.

I sing in their minds a song of the calmland, so they feel the great beauty that awaits us when we sleep. I sing for my dead kin, so they know what they stole.

The softskins do not sing back. They do not seem to hear me so my voice grows louder in their heads.

I sing for our namestones, wrongfully taken. Bring them back, they are ours. You murdered one cluster already. Do not deny our future also. I sing a plea. Let me carry the crystals to the deepdark, so they can bind with us again. I sing to heal this tearing wound.

The softskins are still shouting to each other. One of them releases a rhythmic sound... a laugh? I feel as though my body is being crushed by the air, so I burrow. I am comforted by the weight around me.

How can they not see the ruin they've caused? You are heartless, you are crude. How could you sever us like this?

My husk glows skywhite with rage. I will not let these softskins destroy us.

I hear them scream as I erupt from the sand. I summon energy from the ground and store the power in my namestone. A softskin throws a splinterblade and it hits my leg, shattering on my lucent shell. You sing only death. I, too, can sing this song. I release sunbright energy and sharp crystals burst from the ground, impaling flesh and cracking spines.

The falsefire spreads in their panic. Their crude structures of twig and hide burn through the darkness, carrying softskins into the flames. Smoke rises in an offering to the blinking stars. Softskins run from the chaos, but I am faster. I circle around them and lash out at a straggler, slicing his middle apart with my claw. I crush another underfoot. Lifeblood stains the sand. I roar in grief, not a song but a cry. Your blood is not worthy to touch the one and the all.

My tail lashes left and right and I knock the softskins down. I summon the sunbright once again, and more crystals spike from the sand to pierce flesh. So you can hear my song, after all...

I am crude like them. I am violence. I am death.

When I dream I see only rage. I am no longer worthy of the deepdark. But I cannot stop.

Only one remains. The softskin fumbles with a glowing thing of wood and metal. She means to kill me. A false sun blazes from the thing and punctures my hardshell, burning my insides. The light reflects inside my crystal, paralyzing me. I stagger in agonizing pain. I cannot move. I am broken. I am ended.

A fading song rings in my mind. Almost, almost. We are one.

She aims her weapon again and I shake with horror as I see the paling namestone strapped to it. Her weapon drains our life energy. They are wasting crystals to power their terrible song. I feel I will burst in fury and pain, but instead I pull strength from the ground. I cry out and lash with my sting, impaling the softskin as she writhes like a worm. I grasp the weapon and crush it with a claw. It crumbles to dust, leaving only the skywhite namestone.

I hold the crystal in my mouth where it will be safe. I am here, we are one.

I curl my stinger and she falls. Do not return. Do not take our namestones. We are not yours. We are all. We belong only to the deepdark.

I leave her alive and she runs. She lives not with my mercy, but because I know she has heard my dreamsong, and she has no choice but to sing.

Taliyah

Biography

Taliyah is a nomadic mage from Shurima who weaves stone with energetic enthusiasm and raw determination. Torn between teenage wonder and adult responsibility, she has crossed nearly all of Valoran on a journey to learn the true nature of her growing powers. Compelled by rumors of the rise of a long-dead emperor, she returns to protect her tribe from dangers uncovered by Shurima's shifting sands. Some have mistaken her tender heart for weakness and paid the price for their error, for beneath Taliyah's youthful demeanor is a will strong enough to move mountains, and a spirit fierce enough to make the earth tremble.

Born in the rocky foothills bordering Icathia's corrupted shadow, Taliyah spent her childhood herding goats with her tribe of nomadic weavers. Where most outsiders see Shurima as a beige and barren waste, her family raised her to be a true daughter of the desert and to see beauty in the rich hues of the land. Taliyah was always fascinated by the stone beneath the dunes. When she was a toddler, she collected colorful rocks as her people followed the seasonal waters. As she grew older, the earth itself seemed drawn to her, arcing and twisting to follow her tracks through the sand.

After her sixth high summer, Taliyah wandered from the caravan in search of a lost goatling that had been placed in her charge. Determined not to disappoint her father—the master shepherd and headman of the tribe—she tracked the young animal into the night. She followed the hoofprints through a dry wash to a box canyon. The little beast had managed to get high up the rock wall, but could not get down.

The sandstone called to her, urging her to pull handholds from the sheer wall. Taliyah laid a tentative palm against the rock, determined to rescue the scared animal. The elemental power she felt was as urgent and overwhelming as a monsoon rain. As soon as she opened herself to the magic, it poured over her, the stone leaping to her fingertips, bringing both the canyon wall and the beast down on top of her.

The next morning, Taliyah's panicked father tracked the skittish bleats of the goatling. He fell to his knees when he found his daughter unconscious, covered loosely in a blanket of woven stone. Grief-stricken, he returned to the tribe with Taliyah.

Two days later, the girl awoke from fevered dreams in the tent of Babajan, the tribe's grandmother. Taliyah began to tell the wise woman and her concerned parents of her night in the canyon, of the rock that called to her. Babajan consoled the family, telling them that the patterns of rock were evidence the Great Weaver, the desert tribe's mythical protector, watched over the girl. In that moment, Taliyah saw her parents' deep worry and decided to conceal what really happened that night: that she—not the Great Weaver—had pulled at the desert stone.

When children in Taliyah's tribe were old enough, they performed a dance under the face of the full moon, the manifestation of the Great Weaver herself. The dance celebrated the children's innate talents and demonstrated the gifts they would bring to the tribe as adults. This was the start of their path to true learning, as those children then became apprenticed to their teachers.

Taliyah continued to hide her growing power, believing the secret she carried was a danger, not a blessing. She watched as her childhood playmates spun wool to keep the tribe warm on cold desert nights, demonstrated their skill with shears and dye, or wove patterns that told the stories of her

people. On those nights, she would lie awake long after the coals had burned to ash, tormented by the power she felt stirring within.

The time finally came for Taliyah's dance beneath the full moon. While she had talent enough to be a capable shepherd like her father, or a pattern mistress like her mother, the young girl dreaded what her dance would truly reveal. As Taliyah took her place on the sand, the tools of her people—the shepherd's crook, the spindle, and the loom—surrounded her. She tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but it was the distant rocks, the layered colors of the land, that called to her. Taliyah closed her eyes and danced. Overwhelmed by the power flowing through her, she began to spin not thread, but the very earth beneath her feet.

Startled cries from Taliyah's tribe broke her out of her spell. An imposing braid of sharp rock reached up to the light of the moon. Taliyah looked at the shocked faces of the people who surrounded her. Her will over the stone broken, the earthen tapestry crashed down. Taliyah's mother ran to her only daughter, to protect her from the falling rock. When the dust finally settled, Taliyah saw the destruction she had woven, the alarm on the faces of her tribe. But it was the small cut across her mother's face that justified Taliyah's fear. Though the cut was minor, Taliyah knew in that moment that she was a threat to the people she loved most in this world. She ran into the night, so weighed down by despair that the ground trembled beneath her feet.

It was her father who found her again in the desert. As they sat in the light of the rising sun, Taliyah confessed her secret in choked sobs. In turn, he did the only thing a parent could do: He hugged his daughter tightly. He told her that she couldn't run from her power, that she must complete her dance and see where her path would take her. Turning her back on the Great Weaver's gift was the only danger that could truly break his and her mother's heart.

Taliyah returned with her father to the tribe. She entered the dancer's circle with her eyes open. This time, she wove a new ribbon of stone, each color and texture a memory of the people surrounding her.

When it was over, the tribe sat in awe. Taliyah waited nervously. It was time for one of her people to stand as her teacher and claim the student. What felt like eons stretched between Taliyah's hammering heartbeats. She heard gravel shift as her father stood. Next to him, her mother stood. Babajan and the dye mistress and the master spinner stood. In a moment, the whole tribe was on its feet. All of them would stand with the girl who could weave stone.

Taliyah looked at each of them. She knew that a power like hers had not been seen in generations, perhaps longer. They stood with her now, their love and trust surrounding her, but their worry was palpable. None among them heard the earth call as she did. As much as she loved these people, she did not see the one who could show her how to control the elemental magic that coursed within her. She knew that to stay with her tribe was to risk their lives. Though it pained all of them, Taliyah said farewell to her parents and her people, and set off alone into the world.

She journeyed west toward the distant peak of Targon, her natural connection to rock drawing her toward the mountain that brushed the stars. However, at the northern edge of Shurima, it was those who marched beneath the banner of Noxus who discovered her power first. In Noxus, magic like hers was celebrated, they told her; revered, even. They promised her a teacher.

The land had raised Taliyah to be trusting, so she was unprepared for the smooth promises and practiced smiles of Noxian dignitaries. Soon, the desert girl found herself on an unbending path,

passing under the many Noxtoraa, the great iron gates that marked the Empire's claim over a conquered land.

The crush of people and the layers of politics within the capital city were claustrophobic to a girl from the open desert. Taliyah was paraded through the tiers of Noxian magical society. Many took an interest in her power, its potential, but it was a fallen captain who swore to take her to a wild place across the sea, a place where she could hone her abilities without fear, who made the most convincing case. She accepted the young officer's offer and crossed the sea to Ionia. However, it was made clear as their ship dropped anchor that she was intended as a glorified weapon for a man desperate to regain his place at the highest ranks of the Noxian navy. At dawn, the captain gave her a choice: Bury a sleeping people in their homes, or be discarded in the surf.

Taliyah looked across the bay. The cooking smoke had not yet risen from the village's sleeping hearths. This was not the lesson she had come so far to learn. Taliyah refused, and the captain threw her overboard to drown.

She escaped the tide and the fighting on the beach and found herself wandering, lost, in the wintry mountains of Ionia. It was there she finally discovered her teacher, a man whose blade harnessed the wind itself, someone who understood the elements and the need for balance. She trained with him for a time and began to find the control she had long sought.

While resting at an isolated inn, Taliyah heard that the Ascended Emperor of Shurima had returned to his desert kingdom. Rumor had it this emperor turned god sought to gather his people, the disparate tribes, back to him as slaves. Even with her training unfinished, there was no other choice; she knew she must return to her family to protect them. Sadly, she and her mentor parted ways.

Taliyah returned home to the sand-swept dunes of Shurima. As the punishing rays of the sun beat down on her, Taliyah pushed farther into the desert, determined to find her people. Hers was a will of stone, and she would do whatever was necessary to protect her family and her tribe from the danger that loomed on the horizon.

Story

Taliyah was outrunning the sandstorm when she first noticed the water. In the beginning, it was faint, just a cool dampness she felt as she lifted the stones from deep beneath the sand. As she drew closer to old Shurima, wet streaks dripped from each new stone as if they were weeping. Taliyah knew the rock had stories to tell as she sped across the desert, but she didn't have time to listen, to hear if they were tears of joy or sadness.

When she was close enough to be covered by the shadow of the great Sun Disc, water from underground aquifers began to pour off the stone she rode like little rivers. And when she finally arrived at the gates, Taliyah heard the deafening water rushing along the bedrock. The Oasis of the Dawn, the Mother of Life, roared beneath the sands.

The people of her tribe had followed the seasonal waters for hundreds of years. The best chance of finding her family was to follow the water, and to Taliyah's dismay, the water in Shurima now flowed from a single source as it had in ages past. The tragic remains of the capital city had always been avoided, almost as much as the great Sai and deadly creatures that hunted there. Even thieves knew to keep their distance from the city. Until now.

Taliyah brought the rock she rode to a sudden halt, nearly stumbling from it as she pushed the stone quickly below the desert's surface. She looked around. The woman from Vekaura had been right. This place was no longer a forgotten ruin, haunted by ghosts and sand; indeed, the makeshift camp just outside the walls scrambled with life, like an anthill before a flood. Not knowing who these people were, she decided it might be best to reveal no more than was necessary.

It seemed there was tribal representation from all four corners of her homeland, but as Taliyah searched their faces, she saw none that were familiar. The people here were torn. They argued about the merits of staying in their temporary camps versus seeking shelter within the city. Some worried that just as it rose, the city would fall again, burying any caught inside. Some saw the storm that bristled with unnatural lightning and thought their chances were better within the walls, even if the walls had once been lost to the sand for generations. All of them moved quickly, packing haphazardly and worriedly glancing at the sky. Taliyah herself had won the race with the tempest, but it wouldn't be long before the sand lashed against the gates.

"Now's the time to decide." A woman called out to her, her voice almost lost to the noise of the churning oasis waters and the rising storm. "Are you going in or leaving, girl?"

Taliyah turned to face the woman. She was Shuriman, but other than that, unknown to her.

"I'm looking for my family." Taliyah gestured to her tunic. "They're weavers."

"The Hawk-father has promised protection to all those within the walls," the woman said.

"Hawk-father?"

The woman looked at Taliyah's concerned face and smiled, taking her hand. "Azir has returned to us. Ascended. The Oasis of the Dawn flows again. A new day has come for Shurima."

Taliyah looked around at the people. It was true. They were hesitant to move far into the massive capital, but the fear that worried their faces was more for the unnatural storm than the city or its returned emperor.

The woman continued, "There were weavers here this morning. They decided to wait out the storm inside." The woman pointed to the throngs of people pushing in toward the newly beating heart of Shurima. "We must hurry. They are closing the gates."

Taliyah found herself being pulled toward one of the capital's great gates by the woman, and driven from behind by a crowd of strangers who had decided at the last minute not to brave the sands by themselves. Still, there were a few groups clustered near their circled beasts, determined to face the storm as Shuriman caravans had for generations. In the distance, strange and threatening bolts of lightning crackled at the edge of the whirlwind. Old Shuriman traditions might not survive the storm's passing.

Taliyah and the woman were pushed across the golden threshold that separated Shurima from the desert surrounding it. The heavy gates swung closed behind them with a resounding thud. The immensity of old Shurima's glory stretched out before them. The crowd hugged the thick, protective walls, unsure where to go. It was as if they sensed the empty streets belonged to someone else.

"I'm sure your people are somewhere within the city. Most have kept close to the gates. Few are brave enough to go farther than that. I hope you find what you are looking for." The woman let go of Taliyah's hand and smiled. "Water and shade to you, sister."

“Water and shade to you.” Taliyah’s voice dropped off as the woman disappeared into the milling crowd.

The city that had been quiet for millennia now pulsed with life. Silently watching over Shurima’s newest denizens were helmeted guards that wore desert cloaks in gold and crimson. Though there was no trouble, Taliyah continued to feel there was something not right about this place.

Taliyah reached out to the thick wall to steady herself. She gasped. The stone throbbed beneath the flat of her palm. Pain. A terrible, blinding pain overwhelmed her. Tens of thousands of voices were etched into the rock. The fear and torment of their last moments, before their lives were cut down and their shadows were seared into the stone, screamed in her mind. Taliyah tore her hand from the stone wall and stumbled. She had felt vibrations in stone before, reverberations of memories long since past, but never like this. The knowledge of what had come before felled her. Wild eyed, she stood and stared, seeing the city anew. Revulsion washed over her. This wasn’t a city reborn. It was an empty tomb risen from the sand. The last time Azir had made promises to the people of Shurima, it had cost them their lives.

“I must find my family,” she whispered.

Xerath

Biography

Xerath is an Ascended Magus of ancient Shurima, a being of arcane energy writhing in the broken shards of a magical sarcophagus. For millennia, he was trapped beneath the desert sands, but the rise of Shurima freed him from his ancient prison. Driven insane with power, he now seeks to take what he believes is rightfully his and replace the upstart civilizations of the world with one fashioned in his image.

The boy who would eventually be called Xerath was born a nameless slave in Shurima thousands of years ago. He was the son of captured scholars, with only the prospect of endless servitude ahead. His mother taught him letters and numbers, while his father told him tales from history in the hopes that such skills might allow him a better life. The boy vowed he would not end up bent-backed and whipped like every other slave.

When the boy's father was crippled during the excavations for the foundations of a monument to the Emperor's favorite horse, he was left to die at the site of the accident. Fearing her son would suffer a similar fate, the boy's mother begged an esteemed tomb architect to take him on as an apprentice. Though at first reluctant, the architect was impressed with the boy's eye for detail and innate understanding of mathematics and language, and accepted. The boy never saw his mother again.

He was a swift learner and his master dispatched him on errands to the Great Library of Nasus to retrieve specific texts and plans on an almost daily basis. On one trip, the boy met Azir, the least-favored son of the emperor. Azir was struggling to read a difficult passage in an ancient text, and, despite knowing that to talk to royalty was to invite death, the boy paused to help the young prince with its complex grammar. In that moment, a tentative friendship was established, and over the coming months that friendship only grew stronger.

Though slaves were forbidden names, Azir gave one to the boy. He named him Xerath, which means 'one who shares,' though that name was only ever spoken between the two boys. Azir saw to it that Xerath was appointed to his household's slaves, and made him his personal attendant. Their shared love of knowledge saw them devour texts from the library and become as close as brothers. Xerath was Azir's constant companion, learning all he could from this new proximity to culture, power and knowledge, finally daring to dream that Azir might one day free him.

On the annual tour of the emperor's dominion, assassins struck the royal caravan as it spent the night at a well-known oasis. Xerath saved Azir from an assassin's blade, but Azir's brothers were all slain, leaving the young prince a heartbeat away from Shurima's throne. As a slave, Xerath could expect no reward for his deed, but Azir promised that one day they would be as brothers.

In the wake of the assassination attempt, Shurima endured years of horror and fear of the emperor's retribution. Xerath knew enough of history and the workings of the Shuriman court to understand that Azir's life hung by the slenderest of threads. That he was heir to the throne meant nothing, for the emperor hated Azir for living while his more beloved sons had died. Of more immediate danger, the emperor's wife was still young enough to bear other children, and thus far she had borne many healthy sons. The odds were good that she would produce another male heir for her husband, and as soon as she did, Azir's life was forfeit.

Though Azir was a scholar at heart, Xerath persuaded him that to survive, he must also learn to fight. This Azir did, and in return the young heir elevated Xerath, insisting he continue his education. Both youths excelled, and Xerath proved to be an exceptionally gifted pupil, one who took to the pursuit of knowledge with gusto. Xerath became Azir's confidant and right hand man, a position unheard of for a mere slave. This position gave him great - and some said, undue - influence over the young prince, who came to rely on Xerath's judgement more each day.

Xerath bent his every effort into seeking out knowledge wherever he could find it, no matter the cost, no matter its source. He unlocked long-sealed libraries, delved into forgotten vaults and consulted with mystics entombed deep beneath the sands; all to further his knowledge and ambition, both of which grew with unchecked rapidity. Whenever the whispers around court that spoke of his delving into unsavory places grew too loud to ignore, he would find cunning means to silence them. That Azir never mentioned these whispers was, to Xerath, tacit approval of how he was keeping his emperor safe.

Years passed, and Xerath took ever darker steps to keep the emperor's wife from carrying a child to term, using his nascent magical abilities to corrupt every infant in the womb. Without rivals to the throne, Azir would be safe. When rumors of a curse arose, Xerath ensured they were never spoken again, and oft-times those who had voiced such suspicions vanished without trace. By now, Xerath's desire to escape his roots as a slave had become a burning ambition to achieve power of his own, though he justified every murderous act by telling himself he was doing it to keep his friend alive.

Despite Xerath's best efforts to thwart the queen's midwives, a new prince of Shurima was brought into the world, but on the night of his birth, Xerath used his growing magical powers to summon the elemental spirits of the deep desert and craft a terrible storm. Xerath brought bolt after bolt of lightning down upon the queen's chambers, reducing it to burning rubble and killing the queen and her newborn son. The emperor rushed to his queen's chambers, only to be confronted by Xerath, his hands ablaze with arcane power. The emperor's guards attacked, but Xerath burned them and the emperor to cindered skeletons. Xerath ensured that the mages of a conquered territory were blamed for these deaths, and Azir's first act upon taking the throne was to lead a brutal campaign of retribution against its people.

Azir was crowned emperor of Shurima with Xerath at his side, the boy who had once been a nameless slave. Xerath had long dreamed of this moment, and expected Azir to end slavery in Shurima before finally naming him brother. Azir did none of these things, continuing to expand his empire's borders and deflecting Xerath's overtures regarding the end of slavery. To Xerath, this was further proof of Shurima's moral bankruptcy, and he raged at Azir's breaking of his promise. Azir's face was thunderous as he reminded Xerath that he was a slave and should remember his place. Something once noble died in Xerath that day, but he bowed in supplication, outwardly accepting Azir's decision. As Azir continued his campaigns of conquest, Xerath remained at his side, but his every action was carefully designed to increase his influence over a realm he now planned to take for himself. To steal an empire was no small thing, and Xerath knew he needed more power.

The famous legend of Renekton's Ascension revealed that a mortal did not have to be chosen by the Sun Priests, that anyone could rise up. So Xerath plotted to steal the power of Ascension. No slave could ever stand upon the sun disc, so Xerath fed the Emperor's vanity, inflating his ego and filling his head with impossible visions of a world-spanning empire. But such a dream would only be possible if Azir could Ascend as the greatest heroes of Shurima had before. In time Xerath's perseverance paid off, and Azir announced he would undertake the Ascension ritual, that he had

earned the right to stand alongside Nasus and Renekton as an Ascended being. The Sun Priests protested, but such was Azir's hubris that he ordered them to comply on pain of torture and death.

The Day of Ascension arrived and Azir marched toward the Dais of Ascension with Xerath at his side.

Nasus and Renekton were absent from the day's events, for Xerath had arranged a distraction for them by weakening the seal on a magical sarcophagus containing a beast of living fire. When that creature finally broke its bindings, Renekton and Nasus were the only warriors capable of defeating it. Thus Xerath had stripped Azir of the only two beings who might save him from what was to come.

Azir stood beneath the sun disc and in the final moment before the priests began the ritual, events took a turn Xerath had not anticipated. The emperor turned to Xerath and told him that he was now a free man. He and all Shurima's slaves were now released from their bonds of servitude. He embraced Xerath before naming him his eternal brother. Xerath was stunned. He had been given everything he desired, but the success of his plans hinged upon Azir's death and nothing was going to dissuade him from acting. Too many pieces were in motion and Xerath had already sacrificed too much to turn back now – no matter how much that part of him wanted to. The emperor's words pierced the bitterness enclosing Xerath's heart, but came decades too late. Unaware of his peril, Azir turned as the priests began the ritual and brought down the awesome power of the sun.

With a roar of anger and grief combined, Xerath blasted Azir from his place on the dais, watching through tears as his former friend burned to ash. Xerath took Azir's place and the light of the sun filled him, reshaping his flesh into that of an Ascended being. But the power of the ritual was not his to take, and the consequences of his betrayal of Azir were devastating. The unbound power of the sun all but destroyed Shurima, sundering its temples and bringing ruination upon the city. Azir's people were consumed in a terrifying conflagration as the desert rose up to claim the city. The sun disc fell and an empire built by generations of emperors was undone in a single day.

Even as the city burned, Xerath held the sun priests in the grip of his magic, preventing them from ending the ritual. The energies filling him were immense, alloying with his dark sorcery to create a being of incredible power. As he drew ever more of the sun's power into his body, his mortal flesh was consumed and remade as a glowing vortex of arcane power.

With Xerath's treachery revealed, Renekton and Nasus rushed to the epicenter of the magical storm destroying the city. They bore with them the magical sarcophagus that had imprisoned the spirit of eternal fire. The Ascended brothers fought their way to the Dais of Ascension just as Xerath fell from the deadly radiance engulfing the city. Before the newly-Ascended Magus could react, they hurled his crackling body within the sarcophagus and sealed it once more with blessed chains and powerful sigils of binding.

But it was not enough. Xerath's power had been great as a mortal, and that power - combined with the gift of Ascension - made him all but invincible. He shattered the sarcophagus, though its shards and chains remained bound to him. Renekton and Nasus hurled themselves at Xerath, but such was his newfound strength that he fought them both to a standstill. The battle raged throughout the collapsing city, destroying what had not already sunk beneath the sands. The brothers were able to drag Xerath toward the Tomb of Emperors, the greatest mausoleum of Shurima, a vault whose locks and wards were impossible to break and which answered only to the blood of emperors. Renekton wrestled Xerath within and called upon Nasus to seal the vault behind them. Nasus did so with heavy heart, knowing it was the only way to prevent Xerath's escape. Renekton and Xerath fell into eternal darkness, and there they remained, locked in an endless battle as the once-great civilization of Shurima collapsed.

Uncounted centuries passed and, in time, even Renekton's mighty strength waned, leaving him vulnerable to Xerath's influence. With poisoned lies and illusions, Xerath twisted Renekton's mind, filling him with misplaced bitterness toward Nasus, the faithless brother who had - in Xerath's fictive narrative - abandoned him so long ago.

When the Tomb of Emperors was finally discovered beneath the desert and broken open by Sivir and Cassiopeia, both Xerath and Renekton were freed in an explosion of sand and rubble. Sensing his brother still lived, Renekton charged from the ruins, his distorted mind leaving him little better than a savage beast. After an age lost to legend, Shurima was reborn, and as it rose majestically from the desert, Xerath felt another soul return to life beneath the sand, one he had thought long dead. Azir was also newly resurrected as one of the Ascended, and Xerath knew there could be no peace for either of them while the other yet lived.

Xerath sought the heart of the desert to regain his strength and understand how the world had changed in the millennia since his imprisonment. His stolen power grew with every passing moment, and he beheld a world ripe for conquest, a world brimming with mortals ready to worship at the feet of a new and terrible god.

Yet for all his newfound power, however far he has come from that nameless slave boy, a part of Xerath knows he is still in chains.

Story

This was the moment.

The singular moment that had cost him so much, that had taken a lifetime of planning. A corrupt empire and its strutting princeling would be struck down under the blankly idiotic sun symbol they both so trusted. The key to immortality, jealously guarded and miserly offered, would be his alone, stolen in front of the entire world. A singular moment of perfect vengeance that would finally free the slave known as Xerath.

Though his master's helm revealed no human expression, and knowing that the lovingly etched metal could not respond in kind, Xerath smiled up at the soulless hawk's face just the same, his joy genuine. A life spent in servitude, first for a mad emperor and now a vain one, endless manipulations for and against the throne, a near-damning quest for barely remembered knowledge that almost consumed him – all of it led to this grotesque masquerade of Ascension.

The very word when spoken aloud was an assault: We will Ascend, while you are chained to the broken stone as the sands of time swallow you all. No. Not anymore, and never again. The chosen golden lords will not be taken into the sun's embrace and made gods. A slave will do this; a simple slave, a boy who once had the misfortune to save a noble child from the sands.

And for this sin, Xerath had been punished with a horrible, maddening promise: Freedom. Unobtainable. Forbidden. Should the thought even dart through a slave's mind, it would be punished by death, as the Ascended could gaze past flesh and bone, deep into one's very soul, to see its dim traitorous glow. And yet, there it was, spoken by the young princeling he dragged from the embrace of the mercurial mother-desert. Azir, the Golden Sun, vowed that he would free his savior and new friend.

A promise unkept to this day. The words of a grateful child, innocently oblivious to the impact they would have. How could Azir upend thousands of years of rule? How could he fight tradition, his father, his destiny?

In the end, the young emperor would lose it all by not honoring his word.

And so, Xerath was elevated and educated, eventually becoming Azir's trusted right hand – but never a free man. The soured promise ate into what he was, and what he could have been. Denied a small, simple thing, the right to live his life, Xerath decided to take everything, all of the things denied to him, all of the things he deserved: the empire, Ascension, and the absolute purest form of freedom possible.

With each step taken toward the offensively grandiose Dais of Ascension, positioned respectfully behind his emperor and flanked by the inept sentinels who supposedly protected Shurima, Xerath felt an unknown lightness he was genuinely shocked by. Was this joy? Does vengeance bring joy? The impact was almost physical.

At that very moment, the overwrought suit of golden armor that was his tormentor abruptly halted. And turned. And walked toward Xerath.

Could he know? How could he possibly know? This spoiled, self-obsessed boy? This righteous, falsely benevolent emperor whose hands were just as bloody as Xerath's own? Even if he did, there was no staying the killing blow that was already in motion.

Xerath had planned for every contingency. He had bribed, killed, out-maneuvered, and plotted for decades – he even tricked the monstrous brothers Nasus and Renekton into staying away from the event – but he had not planned for this...

The Emperor of Shurima, the Golden Sun, Beloved of Mother Desert, soon to be Ascended, took off his helmet, revealed his proud brow and smiling eyes, and turned to his oldest and most trusted friend. He spoke about the love of brothers, the love of friends, of hard fights won and others lost, of family, of future, and finally... of freedom.

At these words, the guards flanked Xerath, moving in, weapons drawn.

So the princeling did know. Had Xerath's plans had been undone?

But the fools in armor were saluting. There was no menace to them, they were honoring him. They were congratulating him.

On his freedom.

His hated master had just freed him – he had freed them all. No Shuriman would ever wear chains again. Azir's last act as a human was to unfetter his people.

The foundation-shuddering roar of the assembled masses drowned out any response Xerath could have had. Azir donned his helmet and strode out onto the Dais, his attendants preparing him for the godhood that would never come.

Xerath stood in the shadow of the monolithic Sun Disc, knowing that an empire-destroying doom was but seconds away.

Too late, friend. Too late, brother. Far too late for us all.

Gangplank

Biography

As unpredictable as he is brutal, the dethroned reaver king known as Gangplank is feared far and wide. Where he goes, death and ruin follow, and such is his infamy and reputation that the merest sight of his black sails on the horizon causes panic among even the hardiest crew.

Having grown rich preying upon the trade routes of the Twelve Seas, Gangplank has made himself many powerful enemies. In Ionia, he incurred the wrath of the deadly Order of Shadow after ransacking the Temple of the Jagged Knife, and it is said that the Grand General of Noxus himself has sworn to see Gangplank torn asunder after the pirate stole the *Leviathan*, Swain's personal warship and the pride of the Noxian fleet.

While Gangplank has incurred the wrath of many, none have yet been able to bring him to justice, despite assassins, bounty hunters, and entire armadas being sent after him. He takes grim pleasure in the ever-increasing rewards posted for his head, and makes sure to nail them to the Bounty Board in Bilgewater for all to see whenever he returns to port, his ships heavy with loot.

In recent times, Gangplank has been brought down by the machinations of the bounty hunter Miss Fortune. His ship was destroyed with all of Bilgewater watching, killing his crew and shattering his aura of invincibility. Now that they have seen he is vulnerable, the gangs of Bilgewater have risen up, fighting amongst themselves to claim dominion over the port city.

Despite receiving horrific injuries in the explosion, Gangplank survived. Sporting a multitude of fresh scars, and with a newly crafted metal arm to replace his amputated limb, he is now determined to rebuild his strength, reclaim what he sees as rightfully his – and to ruthlessly punish all those who turned against him.

Story

The massive Noxian war captain shuddered and dropped his axe as Gangplank rammed his cutlass deep into the man's gut. Blood bubbled from the warrior's tattooed lips as he mouthed an unheard curse.

Gangplank pulled his blade free with a sneer and shoved the dying man to the deck. He collapsed in a clatter of heavy armor, his blood mingling with the seawater sloshing across the war galley's foredeck. The black-painted hull of Gangplank's ship loomed above, the two vessels locked together with boarding grapples and lines.

Gangplank's black and gold teeth gritted in suppressed pain – the Noxian had almost bested him. Nevertheless, he refused to let his crew see his weakness, forcing his lips into a wicked smile.

Wind and rain whipping at him, he turned to survey the rest of the Noxians. He'd issued a blood-challenge to the enemy captain, and now that he'd won, their will to fight evaporated.

"This ship is now mine" Gangplank roared, loud enough to be heard over the driving gale. "Does anyone else have anything to say on the matter?"

One of the Noxians, a huge warrior with blood-cult tattoos upon his face and garbed in spiked armor glared at Gangplank.

“We are sons of Noxus” he bellowed. “We would all gladly die before we let our ship be taken by the likes of you!”

Gangplank frowned, then shrugged.

“Fair enough” he said, and turned away.

Gangplank favored his crew with a vicious smile.

“Kill them all” he roared. “And burn their ship to the waterline!”

Graves

Biography

Malcolm Graves is a wanted man in every realm, city, and empire he has visited. Tough, strong-willed, and above all relentless, through his life of crime he has amassed (then invariably lost) a small fortune.

Raised in the wharf alleys of Bilgewater, Malcolm quickly learned how to fight and how to steal, skills that have served him very well over the years. Smuggling himself to the mainland in the bilge of an outgoing cargo ship as a youth, he stole, lied, and gambled his way from place to place. But it was across the table of a high-stakes card game that Malcolm met the man who would change his life: the trickster now known as Twisted Fate. Both men saw the same reckless love of danger and adventure in the other, and a dysfunctional partnership that lasted nearly a decade was born.

Combining their unique skills, Graves and Twisted Fate were an effective team, pulling off scores of heists. They stole from and swindled the rich and foolish for cash, fame, and the sheer thrill.

Adventure became as much of a lure as the payoff.

On the borderlands of Noxus, they set two renowned houses at each other's throats as cover for the rescue of an heir apparent being held hostage. That they pocketed the reward money only to ransom the vile young man to the highest bidder should have come as no surprise to their employer.

In Piltover, they hold the distinction of being the only thieves ever to crack the supposedly impenetrable Clockwork Vault. Not only did the two empty the vault of its treasures, but they tricked its guards into loading it onto their hijacked cargo ship. Only once the pair were over the horizon was the theft discovered, along with Fate's trademark playing card.

But eventually their luck ran out. During a heist that went wrong, Twisted Fate seemingly betrayed and abandoned his partner. Graves was taken alive and thrown in the infamous prison known as the Locker.

Years of imprisonment and torture followed, during which time Graves nursed his hatred for his former partner. A lesser man would surely have broken, but Malcolm Graves endured it all and finally escaped. He clawed his way to freedom and began his pursuit of Twisted Fate, the man whose treachery consigned him to a decade of unspeakable misery.

Years later, Graves finally had his showdown with Twisted Fate. Yet, after learning the truth of what had gone down between them and escaping certain death at the hands of Gangplank with his old comrade, Graves put his vengeance aside. Older, if not wiser, the pair look to pick up where they left off, seeking to make themselves rich using their unique blend of trickery, heists, and focused violence.

Story

Holed up in an empty bar, bleeding from a dozen wounds and surrounded by armed men who wanted him dead, Malcom Graves had seen better days. He'd seen worse ones, too, so he wasn't worried yet. Graves leaned over the smashed bar and helped himself to a bottle, sighing as he read the label.

“Demacian wine? That all you got?”

“It’s the most expensive bottle I have...” said the innkeeper, cowering below the bar in a glittering ocean of broken glass.

Graves looked around the bar and grinned.

“I reckon it’s the only bottle you got left.”

The man had panic written all over him. He clearly wasn’t used to being in the middle of a gunfight. This wasn’t Bilgewater, where fatal brawls broke out ten times a day. Piltover was regarded a more civilized city than Graves’s hometown. In some ways, at least.

He yanked the cork free with his teeth and spat it to the floor before taking a swig. He swilled it around his mouth like he’d seen rich folks do before swallowing it.

“Pisswater” he said “but beggars can’t be choosers, huh?”

A voice shouted through the broken windows, buoyed with confidence it hadn’t earned and the false bravado of numbers.

“Give it up, Graves. There’s seven of us to one of you. This ain’t going to end well.”

“Damn straight it ain’t” hollered Graves in return. “If you want to walk away from this, you best go fetch more men!”

He took another swig from the bottle, then put it down on the bar.

“Time to get to work” he said, lifting his one-of-a-kind shotgun from the bar.

Graves reloaded, pushing fresh shells home. The weapon snapped together with a satisfyingly lethal sound, loud enough to carry to the men outside. Anyone who knew him would know that sound and what it meant.

The outlaw slid off the barstool and made his way to the door, glass crunching beneath his boot heels. He stooped to glance through a cracked window. Four men crouched behind makeshift cover: two on the upper floor of a fancy workshop, another two in shadowed doorways to either side. All held crossbows or muskets at the ready.

“We tracked you halfway across the world, you son of a bitch” shouted the same voice. “Bounty didn’t say nothin’ about you being alive or dead. Walk out now with that cannon of yours held high and there don’t need to be no more bloodshed.”

“Oh, I’m comin’ out” shouted Graves. “Don’t you worry none about that.”

He drew a silver serpent from his pocket and flipped it onto the bar, where it spun through a pool of spilled rum before landing heads up. A trembling hand reached up to take it. Graves grinned.

“That’s for the door” he said.

“What about the door?” asked the innkeeper.

Graves hammered his boot into the inn’s front door, smashing it from its hinges. He dove through the splintered frame, rolling to one knee, gun blasting from the hip.

“Alright, you bastards!” he roared. “Let’s finish this!”

Illaoi

Biography

Illaoi's powerful physique is dwarfed only by her indomitable faith. As the prophet of the Great Kraken, she uses a huge, golden idol to rip her foes' spirits from their bodies and shatter their perception of reality. All who challenge the "Truth Bearer of Nagakabouros" soon discover Illaoi never battles alone - the god of the Serpent Isles fights by her side.

All who encounter Illaoi are struck by her presence. An intense woman, the priestess is fully committed to the experience of living. She takes what she wants, destroys what she hates, and revels in everything she loves.

However, to truly know Illaoi you must understand the religion she has devoted her life to. Nagakabouros, the deity of her faith, is usually depicted as an enormous serpent head with tentacles spiraling around it in endless motion, with no beginning and no end. Also called The Mother Serpent, The Great Kraken, or even The Bearded Lady, Nagakabouros is the Serpent Isles' god of life, ocean storms, and motion. (The literal translation of its name is "the unending monster that drives the sea and sky.") Central to the religion's theology are three tenets: every spirit was born to serve the universe; desire was built into every living being by the universe; the universe only moves toward its destiny when living creatures chase their desires.

Lesser priestesses are tasked with maintaining temples, calling holy serpents, and teaching people the ways of Nagakabouros. As the religion's Truth Bearer, Illaoi's role is to serve the god directly by unblocking the flow of the universe. To this end, she has two sacred responsibilities.

The first duty of a Truth Bearer is to be the spearhead in the war against undeath. Having fallen outside of the normal flow of the universe, the undead are considered an abomination against Nagakabouros. While it is the responsibility of every priestess of the Kraken to protect the indigenous population from the Harrowing, a Truth Bearer directly engages its most powerful spirits and drives the Black Mist back.

Second, Illaoi is tasked with seeking out individuals of great potential and challenging them with the Test of Nagakabouros. This task is the burden Illaoi's title reflects. With her massive, holy relic, The Eye of God, the Truth Bearer strips the subject's spirit from their body then forces them to stand against her to prove their worth. She does this knowing those who fail will be completely annihilated, for the great Kraken has no tolerance for cowardice, doubt, or restraint. But destruction is never the goal. Survivors of the ordeal are forever changed and often find the will to pursue their true destiny.

Though Illaoi is the most powerful and respected Truth Bearer in a hundred generations, it is where she has broken the traditions of her faith that speaks the most about her. Having completed her training as a Truth Bearer, and at the height of her power, Illaoi left the golden temples of Buhru for the squalor of nearby Bilgewater.

The pirate city is the only place foreigners are permitted on the Serpent Isles, viewed as a fetid gutter by Illaoi's people. Previous Truth Bearers ignored the city and viewed the arriving foreigners as little better than untouchables. Illaoi broke with tradition when she chose to protect residents of Bilgewater from the Harrowing, or even more controversially when she decided that some of its residents had souls worthy of the great test. Despite this, only a handful of temples have been

opened in the city, and very few *paylangi* (islander slang for residents of mainlander descent) have ever been permitted inside. Regardless, it is Illaoi who has brought the widespread awareness of the Mother Serpent to Bilgewater, and it is her indomitable spirit that has brought her religion into favor there.

Rumors persist that Bilgewater's most bloodthirsty and infamous pirate had his heart broken by the towering priestess. To anyone who has ever met her, this is no surprise. Illaoi's rough manner belies subtle intelligence, strength, and a magnetic confidence.

Many seek Illaoi's favor and welcome her to Bilgewater... yet everyone fears being tested by the Kraken's Prophet.

"There can be no rest. We are the motion."

—From *The Twenty Wisdoms of Nagakabouros*

Story

"Truth Bearer, this is why we must retreat to Buhru. We cannot save the *paylangi*" the Hierophant said. The heavy-set woman grinned, obviously pleased by the prospect of leaving Bilgewater.

"You've mentioned that before" Illaoi said, walking around the stone table in the center of the room. She rolled her shoulders, loosening the muscles to fight off a yawn.

Beside the Hierophant, an elderly serpent caller stood. He wore a vestment made from ropes. Each indigo-dyed cord had been woven to curl; their varying thicknesses and faded kraken ink gave him the illusion of being draped in rough-hewn tentacles. His face was completely covered by a black tattoo depicting the endless teeth of a leviathan's maw. *Monks and serpent callers were always trying to look scary. It was an annoying habit of most men.*

"The greatest beasts won't approach Bilgewater" the serpent caller said with a wheeze. "They stay out in the deep water, away from the stench of the Slaughter Docks. At best, a few half-starved younglings will heed our summons."

Only the greatest children of Nagakabouros were strong enough to consume the mists and defend the city from the Harrowing. The rest of the Serpent Isles didn't have this problem.

It was yet another reminder of the ignorance of Bilgewater's population. The mainlanders and their descendants didn't give time for fresh water to flow through and clean their docks. Instead, the *paylangi* settled permanent anchorages around every shore in the bay. It was so foolish. Many of the priesthood asserted it was proof the *paylangi* actually *wanted* to be consumed by the Black Mists.

"Crap" Illaoi said. If she was going to stay, she would have to find a way to defend the city without serpents. She picked at the food from one of the offering bowls around her, before selecting a mango. She needed a plan, and these two fools were useless.

A loud crack interrupted her musing. A heavy, wooden door had slammed open downstairs.

Gangplank's voice howled, the words were unintelligible, echoing around the stone walls.

"We pulled him from the water, as you commanded" the Hierophant smiled, adjusting the jade collar of her office. "Perhaps it would have been better to let his energy return to Nagakabouros?"

“You do not judge souls.”

“Of course Truth Bearer, it is for *Nagakabouros* to judge” he said, implying that Illaoi’s opinion was biased.

Illaoi walked between the two clerics, dwarfing the pair of them. Even for an islander, the Truth Bearer was tall. It had always been so. She was taller even than the largest Northman. As a girl, she had been self-conscious about it, always feeling like she was stumbling into people, but she had learned. *When I move, they should know enough to get out of my way.*

She lifted the Eye of God from its stand. The golden idol was larger than a wine barrel and many times the weight. Her fingers tingled against its cold metal. It had been placed next to the giant roaring fire, which illuminated the room, but the Eye of God stayed forever cool and damp to the touch. Illaoi deftly shouldered its massive weight. In a dozen years, the Truth Bearer had never been more than two strides from it.

“Hierophant, I remember my duties” Illaoi said as she headed down the stairs. “We will not be retreating to Buhru. I will stop the Harrowing here.”

The high priestess had done little but complain since arriving from Buhru, but there was some truth in her words.

When Gangplank’s ship had exploded, Illaoi’s heart had jumped. It had been many years since they had laid together, many years since she had ended the relationship... but some feelings still lingered. She had loved him once... stupid, old bastard.

Surrounded by tall walls of interlocking stones, the courtyard to the temple was shaped like the fanged mouth of a leviathan. The entrance looked over the blue waters of the bay far below. Illaoi stomped down the stairway toward the front gate. She assumed she would have to smack Gangplank in the mouth; he was prone to arrogance and rum. But still, it would be nice to see him.

She was unprepared for the snarling creature in her temple’s entrance. She knew he had been injured, but not like this. He was limping badly and bent over from shattered ribs. He cradled what was left of his arm.

He swung a pistol around the room with his other arm, in a half-mad attempt to force the monks and priestesses to back away from him; oblivious to the fact that these were the very people who had pulled his drowned body from the bay only a few hours ago. Worse, his pistol was clearly empty and completely useless.

“Where is Illaoi?” he bellowed.

“I’m here, Gangplank” she answered. “You look like crap.”

He fell to his knees.

“It was Miss Fortune. Had to be. Working with those two alley whores. They sank it.”

“I do not care about your warship” she said.

“You were always telling me to move on, to head back out to sea. I needed a boat.”

“You need only a canoe for the sea.”

“This is my town!” he screamed.

The monks and priestesses surrounding Gangplank tensed at this outburst. That Gangplank was foolish enough to make such a claim while standing in a structure thousands of years older than his city, was dangerous in itself. But a *paylangi* shouting at the thrice-blessed Truth Bearer in her own temple? *Any other man would've been dumped into the sea with broken knees.*

"It's my town!" he roared again. Spittle flew from his mouth in rage.

"So what are *you* gonna do about it?" Illaoi said.

"I, I need Okao and the other chiefs' support. They'll listen to you... if you ask them. If you ask them, they'll help me." He lowered his head in front of her.

"What are *you* going to do about it?" Illaoi said, raising her voice this time.

"What can I do?" he said hopelessly. "She took my ship, she took my men, she took my arm. Anything I had left... I used to get here."

"Leave us" Illaoi told the other priests as she walked toward the gate. She looked down on Gangplank. It had been ten years since she'd last seen him; drink and worry had taken his dashing looks.

"There is nothing for me but this town, and without your help..." his voice trailed off when he met her gaze. Illaoi kept her eyes as hard and unforgiving as the Kraken. She gave Gangplank nothing.

The priestess of Nagakabouros could show no pity or sympathy, even if it tore at her chest. In despair, the old captain's eyes darted away from hers.

"I could do that" Illaoi said "and with a word, the tribes and Okao's gang would join you. But why should I?"

"Help me, damn it! You owe me" he snapped like a child.

"I owe you?" Illaoi rolled the words in her mouth.

"I keep up the rituals. I offer the sacrifices" Gangplank snarled.

"But clearly you did not learn the lesson. Rituals? Sacrifices? You speak of things for weak men and their weak gods. My god demands action" Illaoi said.

"I suffered for this town! Bled for it. It is mine by right!"

Illaoi knew what she had to do. She knew it before Gangplank had spoken. She had known years before his ship had sunk.

Gangplank had strayed. For too long, he had festered in the hatred and self-pity his father had beaten into him. Illaoi had ignored her duty. She had ignored it because she had loved him, once, and because she had led him down this path when she left him. He had been content as a killer, a corsair, a true pirate, and never interested in his father's title of Reaver King.

He had only set anchor in his bloody quest to become the lord of Bilgewater after they had parted ways.

Illaoi felt a dampness in her eyes. His time had passed. He had been unable to move forward. To advance. To evolve. And now? Now he would not survive the Test of Nagakabouros. But he needed to be tested. He was here to be tested.

Illaoi looked at the old pirate before her. *Could I send him away? Trust that he still has some sliver of strength or ambition that might see him through? If I send him away, he might live, at least...*

That was not the way of Nagakabouros. That was not the role of a Truth Bearer. This was not the place for doubts or second-guessing. If she trusted her god, she must trust her instincts. If she felt he had to be tested, then it was her god's will. *And what fool would choose a man over a god?*

Gripping the Eye of God's handle tightly, Illaoi lowered the heavy gold icon from her shoulder. A familiar lightness replaced it, yet somehow she could still feel its weight there.

"Please" Gangplank begged. "Show me some kindness, at least."

"I will show you the truth" Illaoi said, steeling her will.

She stomp-kicked Gangplank, her heel smashing into his nose with a crunch. He flew backward like a drunkard, blood pouring down his lip. He rolled over and looked up at her with furious eyes.

"BEHOLD!" Illaoi intoned.

She reached out with her mind and called forth the energy of the Mother Serpent as she swung the giant idol forward. A glowing mist vomited from the icon's mouth and swirls of blue-green energy formed around the Mother Serpent's face, solidifying into ghostly tentacles. Touched by gold, these tendrils were as beautiful as the sunrise over water, and as horrifying as the darkest undersea abomination. More tentacles grew from the icon, replicating around the room as if born from some unknowable mathematics. Exponentially they grew larger, and somehow each one's growth seemed to hold all the promise and horror of the world.

"No!" Gangplank screamed. But the whirlwind ignored his cries as the storm of tentacles took him.

"Face Nagakabouros!" she yelled. "Prove yourself!" The tentacles grasped at Gangplank, then dived into his chest. He shuddered as ghostly images of his past lives shook around him.

He screamed as his soul was ripped from his body. His doppelganger stood unmoving before Illaoi. The spirit of Gangplank smoldered an almost blinding blue, its body crackling and flickering through his previous lives.

The mass of tentacles attacked the wounded captain. Gangplank rolled and stumbled to his feet, dodging what he could. But for each one that missed, more and more appeared. Reality twisted and churned around him. The swarm of tentacles crashed against him, pushing him down, pulling him further and further from his soul—toward oblivion.

Illaoi wanted to look away. More than anything, she wanted to turn her eyes. *It is my duty to witness his passing. He was a great man, but he has failed. The universe demands—*

Gangplank rose. Slowly, inexorably, and unrelentingly he forced his broken body to stand. He ripped himself from the mass of tentacles and advanced step by painstaking step, roaring through the agony. Bloody and exhausted, he finally stood in front of Illaoi. His eyes bulged with hate and pain, but full of purpose. With his final ounce of strength, he walked into the glowing visage of his spirit.

"I will be king."

The wind fell still. The tentacles ruptured in bursts of light. Nagakabouros was satisfied.

"You are in motion" Illaoi smiled.

Gangplank stood inches from his former love—glaring at her. His back arched and his chest swelled with the sweet air of resolve—he was the proud captain once more.

Gangplank turned and walked away from her, no less injured or limping, but his stride now held its familiar boldness.

“Next time I ask for help, just say no” Gangplank growled.

“Do something about that arm” Illaoi said.

“Was nice to see you” he said as he walked out of the temple and down the long steps toward the water below.

“Stupid old bastard” she grinned.

As the monks and hierophant returned to the antechamber, Illaoi remembered there were a thousand things she needed to do. A thousand little burdens she needed to carry. The Truth Bearer would have to meet with Sarah Fortune. Illaoi suspected Nagakabouros would soon need to test the bounty hunter.

“Tell Okao and the chiefs to support Gangplank” Illaoi said to the hierophant. “Help him retake the city.”

“The city is in chaos, many want his head. He won’t survive the night” the hierophant grumbled, looking at the injured captain struggling down the steps.

“He is still the right man for the job” Illaoi said as she hefted the Eye of God onto her shoulder.

We can never be certain if we’re doing the right thing, or how things will happen, or when we will die. But the universe gives us our desires, and our instincts. So we must trust them.

She began walking up the steps from the courtyard to the inner temple, the Truth Bearer’s idol on her shoulder. It was a heavy burden—but Illaoi didn’t mind it.

She didn’t mind at all.

Miss Fortune

Biography

Beauty and danger: There are few who can match Miss Fortune in either. One of Bilgewater's most infamous bounty hunters, she built her legend upon a swathe of bullet-riddled corpses and captured ne'er-do-wells. The booming echoes of her twin pistols in the port city's reeking wharfs and scavenger shanties are sure signs of another warrant from the Bounty Board being settled.

Like most who rise to notoriety in the twisting, salt-encrusted labyrinth of Bilgewater, Miss Fortune has no shortage of blood on her hands. Yet, it was not always this way, for she was once known as Sarah, the beloved daughter of a renowned gun-dame who lived peacefully at her isolated island workshop. Young Sarah helped her mother in the forge, filing wheel locks, calibrating trigger pulls, or casting custom pistol shot. Her mother's skill in crafting firearms was legendary, and her bespoke handguns were to be found in the collections of many a wealthy noble. But oftentimes, they were desired by those with more meager means and darker hearts.

One who desired such a weapon was an up-and-coming reaver of Bilgewater called Gangplank. Cocksure and certain of his power, he demanded Sarah's mother fashion a pair of pistols the likes of which no other man possessed. A reluctant deal was struck, and a year later to the day, Gangplank returned for his weapons. He had donned a red scarf face-mask and had no intention of paying for the guns – he was there to take them by force.

The pistols Sarah's mother had crafted were masterpieces, twin hand cannons of pinpoint lethality and exquisite beauty. Too fine for the likes of him, declared Sarah's mother, seeing the brutish pirate that Gangplank had become. Enraged, Gangplank seized the pistols and gunned her down with her own creations before turning them on her husband and Sarah herself. Then, for spite's sake, he set the workshop ablaze and smashed both pistols on the ground, declaring that if they were too good for the likes of him, then no one would ever bear a weapon with her mark upon them. By killing her and destroying her weapons, her legacy would be wiped from living memory.

Sarah awoke to agony, straw-colored hair stained red with her mother's blood and bullets lodged on either side of her heart. She crawled from the burning ruins of her home with the broken remains of the two pistols clutched to her bleeding chest. Her body healed, but a part of her mind remained trapped in her mother's burning workshop, and no amount of soap could wash the vivid red from Sarah's hair – or at least, so the story is told. Waking nightmares and night terrors would forever torment her, but Sarah endured them with an all-consuming obsession with vengeance. She rebuilt her mother's pistols and learned all she could of the red-masked reaver during his rise to power, preparing for the day when she would be ready to slay him.

Taking ship to Bilgewater, Sarah killed her first man within minutes of setting foot on the crooked timbers of the quayside, a drunken pirate with a gallon of Myron's Dark in his gut and a bounty on his head. Sarah shot him in his stupor and dragged his corpse to the Bounty Board, before tearing off a dozen more warrants.

Within a week, every one of them was settled, and those criminals who'd had the misfortune to be hunted by Sarah were either dead or in chains. She quickly earned a fearsome reputation in the taverns and gambling dens of Bilgewater, becoming Miss Fortune to inspire fear in those she hunted

and to mask her true intent with flamboyant exploits. Gangplank would never see her coming; she would be just another bounty hunter among many in the crowded streets of Bilgewater.

In the years that followed, tales of Miss Fortune spread far and wide, each more fanciful than the last. She captured the *Syren* from a captain who learned the hard way what it meant to slip a hand where it wasn't wanted, drowned the master of the Silk-Knife Corsairs in a barrel of her own rum, and dragged the insane Doxy-Ripper from his lair in the belly of a half-dismembered leviathan in the slaughter docks.

Gangplank was still too powerful to confront openly, so Miss Fortune spent the years wisely, surrounding herself with a small but loyal cadre of allies and lovers she would eventually use to lay her demons to rest. But just killing Gangplank would never be enough for Miss Fortune. Only his abject humiliation and the burning to ash of all he cared for would satisfy the bloody-haired bounty hunter.

And that day has come at last.

Miss Fortune has risked everything to make her opening move against Gangplank. Plots within plots have seen the *Dead Pool* blown to flaming wreckage at the quayside and the self-professed King of Bilgewater overthrown. Best of all, everyone in Bilgewater saw him fall.

Now, with Gangplank deposed, every reaver captain and ganglord in the port city is vying to take his position.

The battle for Bilgewater has begun.

Story

Bilgewater's White Wharf had earned its name thanks to the layer of bird waste covering it from end to end, which was only to be expected at a resting place for the dead. Folk here didn't bury corpses; they returned them to the sea. A grave of the sunken dead hung suspended in the cold depths, marked by hundreds of bobbing grave-buoys. Some were merely name posts, while others were elaborate tomb markers carved to resemble rearing krakens or buxom sea wenches.

Miss Fortune sat on an empty crate of Rapture Rum at the end of the wharf, legs crossed and a noxious cheroot dangling from her bottom lip. In one hand, she held a length of breathing tube connected to a half-submerged coffin floating low in the water. In the other, she grasped a length of frayed rope running through a rusted pulley block and tied to the coffin lid. Both her pistols were holstered within easy reach.

Moonlight cast a weak glow through the mist rolling in from the sea, staining the water's scummed surface tobacco yellow. Cawing carrion gulls lined every swaybacked roof on the quayside, which was always a good omen. They knew better than any the signs of fresh pickings.

"About time" she whispered, as a shaven-headed man in a drake-scale frock coat emerged from the narrow, debris-choked alley. A pack of needle-toothed wharf-rats stalked him, hoping he was drunk and might pass out to become easy meat. The man's name was Jakmunt Zyglos, one of the Painted Brothers. Any corsair worth his salt had tattoos, but every inch of Zyglos was inked with clawed serpents, lovers' names, and a record of every boat he'd sunk, every man he'd murdered. His skin was as good a confession as any she'd known.

He marched purposefully along the wharf, but his eyes darting warily from side to side gave the lie to his confidence. His hand gripped a long cutlass with a shark-toothed edge that hung low on his hip. He too boasted a firearm, a stubby carbine with glassy pipes running the length of its barrel.

“Where is he?” demanded Zyglos. “You said you’d bring him.”

“That a Piltover hex-carbine?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“Answer me, damn you!”

“You first” said Miss Fortune, letting some rope out through the pulley and allowing the coffin to sink a little more. “After all, I’m not sure how long this breathing tube is, and you wouldn’t want your brother to go without air, would you?”

Zyglos took a breath, and she saw the tension go out of him.

“Yes, damn you, it’s from Piltover” he said, drawing the weapon and holding it out by the trigger guard.

“Pricy” said Miss Fortune.

“I guess you’d know” he sneered.

She let out even more rope. Bubbles of air escaped the now fully submerged coffin. Zyglos held up his hands, instantly contrite.

“Alright! Alright!” he pleaded. “It’s yours. Pull him up. Please.”

“You’ll come quietly?”

Zyglos gave a bark of fatalistic laughter.

“What choice do I have?” he asked. “You sank my ships and killed all my men. You’ve sent my kin to the poorhouse or the gaol, and for what? A stolen hex-gun? A bounty?”

“A little of both and then some?”

“So how much am I worth to you, bitch?”

“Coin? Five hundred silver serpents.”

“All this mayhem for a lousy five hundred serpents?”

“It’s not the money that’s got you killed. It’s the fact that you’re one of Gangplank’s sworn men” said Miss Fortune. “*That’s* why I want you dead.”

“Dead? Wait, the warrant says alive!”

“True, but I’ve never been very good at following instructions” said Miss Fortune, releasing the rope and the breathing tube. The coffin plunged into the darkness of the sunken dead, trailing a froth of frantic bubbles. Zyglos screamed his brother’s name and ran at her, drawing his serrated sword. She let him get within spitting distance before drawing her pistols and blasting him with both barrels, one through the eye, one in the heart.

Miss Fortune spat her cheroot into the sea and blew the smoke from each muzzle.

“Self defense” she said with a smile, rehearsing her lie for the bounty pursers. “Crazy fool came at me with that fang-sword of his. I didn’t have a choice.”

Miss Fortune bent to retrieve the fallen hex-carbine. She turned the weapon over in her hands. Too light for her tastes, but artfully made and absurdly lethal. The ghost of a smile twitched the corner of her mouth as she thought back to the warmth of the old workshop, the smell of gun oil, and the touch of her mother's hand on her shoulder. Miss Fortune sighed and shook off the memory before it turned sour. She threw the pistol out over the water, sending it down to the dead. The sea demanded its due, after all, and she'd not lied; the weapon was worth a small fortune.

She stood and strolled back into Bilgewater. She knew she ought to throw Zyglos's corpse into the water too, but the wharf-rats and the carrion gulls had to eat, didn't they?

And fresh meat was a rare delicacy on the White Wharf.

Nautilus

Biography

Once, Nautilus was a sailor commissioned to explore the uncharted reaches of the Guardian's Sea. This expedition took him deep into unknown waters where he and his crew found a vast section of black oozing liquid that none of the crew could identify. Though their job was to investigate anything new that they found, no man aboard was willing to brave the murk except Nautilus. Only moments after he donned the hulking diver's suit and climbed over the ship's rail, something lurking in the muck grabbed hold of him. He clung to the side of the ship, but the thing below pulled him fiercely, rocking the entire ship. The other sailors grew afraid and made a terrible decision. As he stared and pled for help, they wrenched his grip free of the rail. He tumbled into the ink, grabbing the anchor in futile desperation. Dark tendrils enveloped him and he could do nothing but watch as the dimming outline of his ship faded away. Then everything went black.

When Nautilus awoke, he was something... different. The great iron suit had become a seamless shell around him, concealing whatever awful truth lay inside. All the details of his memory seemed fuzzy and indistinct but one fact remained clear: he was left here, alone in the sunless depths, to die. In his hands he still clutched the anchor that belonged to the men who had condemned him. Having no other purpose, he took this clue and trudged - too heavy to swim or run - in search of answers. He wandered without direction or sense of passing time in what felt like an eternal dream. By the time he stumbled upon the shores of Bilgewater, he could find no traces of the man he was. No house, no family, no life to which he could return.

Twisted Fate

Biography

Twisted Fate is an infamous card sharp and swindler who has gambled and charmed his way across much of the known world, earning the enmity and admiration of the rich and foolish alike. He rarely takes things seriously, greeting each day with a mocking smile and an insouciant swagger. In every possible way, Twisted Fate *always* has an ace up his sleeve.

Born to the nomadic river-folk of the Serpentine, the boy was taught the magic of the cards at an early age and soon learned what it was to be hated. Tolerated for the exotic goods they peddled, but shunned for their strange ways, the boy's people found only short welcomes wherever they berthed their colorful river barques. His elders claimed this was the way of the world, but their refusal to fight back against this prejudice always rankled the young boy's sensibilities.

When men who'd lost their fortunes in the gambling tents of the river folk returned in the dead of night to exact vengeance, they came bearing cudgels and emboldened by cheap rotgut. They beat the river folk back to their boats with curses and blows, eventually turning their weapons upon the boy's family. The boy could take no more and fought back, driving the men away with swift blows from their own clubs.

Proud of what he had done, the boy was stunned when his people turned their back on him. Retaliation went against the code of the river, and there could be only one punishment. Exile. His whole world falling apart around him, the boy watched helplessly as the barques of his folk sailed away without him, leaving him with nothing, alone for the first time in his life.

The boy grew to manhood drifting from town to town, trawling the gambling dens of every city he came to, using his preternatural skill at cards to earn coin to survive. That he was able to relieve the boastful, the arrogant, and the cruel of their cash was just an added bonus. Though always careful to let his opponents win at least *some* hands, he soon learned more ways to fight when many a disgruntled opponent sought to reclaim their lost fortunes.

Across one table, he met a fellow named Malcolm Graves and, recognizing a kindred soul, joined forces with him. The two spent years cutting a ruinous swathe across Valoran. With every con, swindle, and heist, he sought ever more dangerous means to make the cards bend to his will.

That search ended badly when a heist went wrong, resulting in Graves being taken alive, though the riverman ran free. The exact circumstances of that night and its dire consequences for both men remain shrouded in mystery, for the gambler never speaks of it. Seeking to begin again, he returned his birth name to the waters and took another: Twisted Fate.

In the time since, Twisted Fate has continued to ply his games of chance in the high parlors and low dens of every city he visits, earning countless fortunes along the way – though none can say what becomes of these winnings (other than his fine clothes) or why he seems driven to amass such wealth. He has been imprisoned with great fanfare on dozens of occasions, but there is no cell in Runeterra that has been able to hold him. Twisted Fate is always gone with morning's light, leaving only a mocking calling card to speak to his being there at all.

In Bilgewater, Twisted Fate and Graves finally had their day of reckoning. After a highly destructive running battle, and narrowly avoiding death at the hands of Gangplank, the pair finally put aside their differences, and are now once again working together.

Nigh-on impossible to track, Twisted Fate has been said to vanish into thin air every time an enemy believes they have him cornered. A useful skill indeed for a man who has parted thousands of souls from their gold...

Story

All eyes in Fortune's Glory were on Twisted Fate. He felt the gambling hall's many patrons regarding him with a mixture of envy, vicarious excitement, and spiteful longing for him to lose everything on the turn of the last card.

Beyond the avarice common to dens of chance, Twisted Fate felt a singular purpose at work here, a noose being slowly drawn around his neck. The cards were twitching in agitation, warning him of danger. He knew he should fold and get out before whoever was hunting him sprang their trap, but the opportunity to make a pauper of the man across the table was too enticing to forego.

He grinned at his opponent, a greedy merchant whose fortune was built on the whipped backs of enslaved miners. The man's robes were expensive: Freljord furs, hand-tooled leather, and Bilgewater sea charms. Every finger boasted a ring of blood gold worth more than most men would see in a lifetime. Aromatic smoke drifted from clay pipes to hang over the fortune in coin, jewelry, and deeds lying between them like a pirate's treasure horde.

Twisted Fate nodded toward the merchant.

"I do believe it's your call, Master Henmar."

"I am aware of the rules, river rat" said Henmar, as Twisted Fate ran his tattooed fingers in a repeating spiral pattern on the backs of his cards. "And do not think any of your fancy sleight of hand is going to distract me into making an error of judgment."

"Distract you?" said Twisted Fate, exuding laconic confidence in every gesture. "I declare, I would never stoop to such a low and dishonorable ruse."

"No? Then why is it your eyes keep darting from the table?" said Henmar. "Listen closely, I have negotiated with the best of them, and I know the tell of a desperate man when I see it."

Twisted Fate gave a sly grin, swapping the cards between his hands and theatrically doffing his wide-brimmed hat.

"You're sharp, sir. I can see that" he said, sweeping his gaze across the gathered crowd. The usual collection of hangers-on; men and women hoping that whoever won might be generous to those nearby. The cards trembled as Twisted Fate's eyes fell upon certain individuals and he felt his mouth fill with the rancid flavor of sour milk. He'd long learned to trust that reaction as a sign of imminent bedlam.

There. A man with an eye patch and a flame-haired woman. They were almost certainly armed and well aware of his slippery nature. Did he know them? Probably not. Were they working for Henmar, protecting his assets? Unlikely. A man like Henmar would make it obvious who he'd brought. Bounty hunters then. The cards were growing ever more alarmed in Twisted Fate's hands. He slipped them together and placed them flat on the table.

“You have a look that tells me you know you have already lost” said Henmar with the tone of a man who believes everyone to be his inferior.

“Then what say we make this a little more interesting, sir?” replied Twisted Fate, spreading the cards in a fan and watching as the hunters eased closer. “Care to double down?”

“Are you able to cover that much?” asked Henmar suspiciously.

“Easily” said Twisted Fate, locking his gaze with the merchant and lifting a heavy pouch of coins from the voluminous pockets of his long coat. “Can you?”

Henmar licked his lips and snapped his fingers. A flunky behind the merchant handed him a matching bag of coins. The patrons of Fortune's Glory gave a collective moan as it was added to the gold heaped in the middle of the table. Wars had been waged for less coin than was at stake here.

“You first” said Henmar.

“Always” agreed Twisted Fate, flipping over his cards as the bounty hunters made their move.

The man with the eye patch lunged at him with a capture collar. The woman shouted his name and drew a matching pair of pistols.

Twisted Fate kicked the underside of the table, spinning it into the air in a shower of coins, cards, and parchment. The pistols fired with deafening roars, blasting fist-sized holes in the table. The capture collar snapped closed, but when the smoke cleared and the screams stopped, Twisted Fate was nowhere to be found.

Henmar rose to his feet, his face twisted in outrage as he searched in vain for his opponent. He looked down at the broken pieces of the table and the color drained from his face.

“Where is the money?” he yelled. “Where is my money?”

Five cards fluttered face-up to the floor of Fortune's Glory.

A winning hand.

Ashe

Biography

With each arrow she fires from her ancient ice-enchanted bow, Ashe proves she is a master archer. She chooses each target carefully, waits for the right moment, and then strikes with power and precision. It is with this same vision and focus that she pursues her goal of uniting the tribes of the Freljord and forging them into a mighty nation.

As a child, Ashe was always a dreamer. She marveled at the colossal, abandoned fortresses of her ancestors, and spent hours by the fire listening to tales of the Freljord's fabled champions. Most of all she loved the legend of Avarosa, the renowned Queen of the once magnificent and united Freljord. Though her mother chided her foolishness, Ashe swore one day she would join the scattered and warlike tribes of the tundra. She knew in her heart that if her people would stand together once more, they would reach greatness again.

When Ashe was only fifteen, her mother was killed while commanding the tribe on a brash raid. Suddenly thrust into the role of leader, Ashe made the difficult decision to follow her childhood vision instead of seeking the revenge she craved. She spoke passionately against her tribe's demand for retribution, declaring the time had come to put blood feuds aside and broker a lasting peace. Some of her warriors questioned her fitness to rule and soon hatched a treasonous plot to kill the young leader.

The assassins struck while Ashe was on a routine hunt, but their plan was interrupted by the warning cry of a great hawk. Ashe looked back to see her tribesmen approaching with swords drawn. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, Ashe ran for hours. She found herself deep in uncharted territory, her weapon lost in the chase. When she heard another cry from the hawk, Ashe put her faith in the strange creature and followed it to a clearing. There she found the bird perched on a pile of stones - an ancient Freljord burial cairn. With a last glance at her, the hawk screeched and flew away. Approaching the mound, Ashe felt her breath turn to frost and an unnatural cold chill her to the bone. The stone at the top of the cairn was marked with a single rune: Avarosa.

The assassins burst into the clearing. Ashe lifted the runestone from the cairn to defend herself, revealing something hidden underneath: an ornate bow carved from ice. She grasped it, crying out in pain as frost formed on her fingers, and tore the bow from its resting place. Cold flowed from the enchanted weapon into Ashe, awakening a tremendous power that had always lived within her.

Ashe turned to face the assassins. She drew the bow, and by sheer instinct, willed arrows of pure ice to form from the cold, crisp air. With a single frozen volley, she ended the insurrection. Carefully replacing the cairn stone, she gave thanks to Avarosa for her gift, and returned home. Ashe's tribe immediately recognized the legendary weapon in the archer's hand as a blessing from the ancient Freljord queen herself.

With Avarosa's bow and her vision of peaceful unification, Ashe's tribe soon swelled, becoming the largest in the Freljord. Now known as the Avarosan, they stand together with the belief that a united

Freljord will once again become a great nation.

Lissandra

Biography

Lissandra's magic twists the pure power of ice into something dark and terrible. With the force of her black ice, she does more than freeze - she impales and crushes those who oppose her. To the terrified denizens of the north, she is known only as "The Ice Witch." The truth is much more sinister: Lissandra is a corruptor of nature who plots to unleash an ice age on the world.

Centuries ago, Lissandra betrayed her tribe to evil creatures, known as the Frozen Watchers, in return for power. That was the last day that warm blood ran through her veins. With her corrupted tribesmen and the strength of the Watchers, she swept across the land like a terrible blizzard. As her empire spread, the world grew colder and ice choked the land. When the Watchers were defeated by ancient heroes, Lissandra did not lose faith and swore to prepare the world for their return.

Lissandra worked to purge all knowledge of the Watchers from the world. Using magic to take human form, she masqueraded as numerous seers and elders. Over the course of generations, she rewrote the stories of the Freljord, and so the history of its people changed. Today the fragmented retellings of the Watchers are seen as children's tales. But this deception wasn't enough - Lissandra also needed an army.

She set her sights on the noble Frostguard tribe. Lissandra knew corrupting the Frostguard would take centuries, and so she launched her greatest deception. She murdered and stole the identity of the Frostguard leader. Then she slowly began to warp the tribe's proud traditions. When her human form grew old, she faked her own death and then murdered her successor to steal her identity. With each generation, the Frostguard grew more insular, cruel and twisted. Today, the world still sees them as a noble and peaceful tribe that guards against evil creatures like the Ice Witch. In truth, they now serve the witch and long for the glorious return of the Watchers.

Lissandra knows that on that day nations will fall and the world will be reborn in ice.

Sejuani

Biography

Sejuani was weaned on hardship and reared on barbarity. Where others succumbed to the harshness of the Freljord, she was tempered by it until pain became power, hunger an encouragement, and frost an ally in culling the weak. Through her ordeals, she learned that to thrive in the endless winter, one must become just as cold and unforgiving. In Sejuani's eyes, her followers either have the mettle to endure or the right to die. Once she has conquered the Freljord, she knows that those who survive will form a nation to be feared.

As a child, the leader of the Winter's Claw watched her tribe's numbers slowly dwindle. Cold and starvation took all but the most resilient. She was the only one of her siblings to survive to her tenth year, leaving Sejuani sure that she too would die in misery. In desperation, she sought spiritual counsel from her tribe's mystic. But the seer did not foretell Sejuani's death. Instead, she prophesized that Sejuani would one day conquer and unite the divided tribes of the Freljord.

Armored with absolute faith in her destiny, Sejuani pushed herself to extremes that would have killed anyone without her will to endure. She walked into blizzards without food or furs and trained while frigid winds raked her flesh. She clashed with the strongest warriors of her tribe, one after another, until her legs gave out beneath her. When she assumed leadership of her tribe, Sejuani commanded her warriors to follow her example. Under her rule, the tribe grew stronger than they had ever been.

In the end, it was an offer of peace - rather than an act of war - that began Sejuani's campaign of conquest. On the first day of winter, envoys from Ashe's tribe approached Sejuani's camp bearing a gift of Avarosan grain. Ashe's intent was clear: if Sejuani united with her tribe, the Winter's Claw would never go hungry again. To Sejuani, the gift was an insult. In Ashe's tribe, she saw men and women, slight and soft, who preferred to farm instead of fight. Her contempt for them was absolute.

Sejuani gathered her people and set the grain alight. She proclaimed that Ashe's offer of charity would bring only weakness. Stripping the envoys of their supplies, Sejuani sent them back with a message: the Winter's Claw would prove to the Avarosan that only the strong deserve to survive in the Freljord. As the grain burned behind them, Sejuani rode out with her warband to inflict the first of many painful lessons to come.

Tryndamere

Biography

Fueled by his unbridled fury and rage, Tryndamere cuts his way through the tundra, mastering the art of battle by challenging the Freljord's greatest warriors. The wrathful barbarian seeks revenge on the one who decimated his clan and strikes down all those who stand between him and his final retribution.

Struggling to survive in the harsh, frostbitten Freljord, the young Tryndamere and his people warred with other tribes over the scarce resources of the land. One such battle changed his life forever. Raiders ambushed Tryndamere's clan in the dead of night, and though his warriors were able to push the first wave of attackers back, they weren't prepared for the dark figure that next stepped forth.

He wielded a cruel, living sword, and inspired an unhinged bloodlust in the invaders with his unearthly magic. Tryndamere's tribe was overrun within moments. With no hope of defeating the enigmatic being, Tryndamere threw himself at certain death. The dark figure swatted him aside, mortally wounding the young barbarian.

Tryndamere saw death and destruction engulf his home as his life slipped away. No one was left standing - only the screams of the dying remained. Unable to surrender to death, Tryndamere gave in fully to his wrath. His blood boiled and his anger consumed him, banishing his mortality. He staggered to his feet - barely able to take hold of his sword - steeling himself for the decisive confrontation with the shadowy being. But the dark figure did not even lift his blade, and instead gave Tryndamere a knowing smile as he withdrew into the shadows. That was the last time the barbarian ever saw his nemesis.

A man robbed of his home and his people, Tryndamere wandered across the Freljord for years, vowing to forge himself into a brutal instrument of revenge. He visited all the tribes in the frozen wastes, besting each of their warriors until there were none left to challenge. In doing so, he mastered the barbarian ways of war and harnessed his anger as a force to be reckoned with. With sword in hand and rage in his heart, he is now on an undying quest for vengeance against the one who destroyed the life he once knew.

Braum

Biography

Blessed with massive muscles, and an even bigger heart, Braum is a beloved hero of the Freljord. Every child born to the ice knows of his legendary strength, capable of felling entire forests of frost-oaks in a single night or rending the very mountains asunder. With a colossal vault door borne across his back as a shield, Braum roams the land as a friend to those in need and a terrible foe of evildoers.

Story

"Would you like to hear a bedtime story?"

"Grandma, I'm too old for that."

"You're never too old to enjoy a good story."

The girl reluctantly crawled into bed and waited, knowing she wouldn't win this battle. A bitter wind howled outside, whipping the falling snow into devil whirls.

"What kind though? A tale of the Ice Witch, perhaps?" asked her grandmother.

"No, not her."

"What about a story of Braum?"

The girl nodded and the old woman smiled.

"Ah, there are so many, which to choose...? My grandmother used to tell me of the time Braum protected our village from a great dragon! Or once, this was long ago, mind, he raced down a river of lava! Or-"

She paused and shook her head. "No, none of them. Wait, have I ever told you how Braum got his shield?"

The girl shook her head. The hearth fire snapped, its warmth holding off the night's chill.

"Well, in the mountains above our village lived a man named Braum. He mostly kept to his farm, tending his sheep and goats, but he was the kindest man anyone had ever met, and he always had a smile on his face and a laugh on his lips.

"Now, one day, something terrible happened. A young troll boy around your age was climbing the mountain and happened upon a massive stone door with a shard of True Ice at its center. When he opened the door, he couldn't believe his eyes! Beyond was a vault filled with gold and jewels. Every kind of treasure you could imagine!

"What he didn't know was that the vault was a trap. The Ice Witch had cursed it, and as the troll boy entered, the magical door clanged shut behind him! It locked him inside! Try as he might, he couldn't escape.

"A passing shepherd heard the boy's cries. The entire village rushed to help, but even the strongest warriors couldn't open the door. The boy's parents were beside themselves. His mother's wails of grief echoed around the mountain. It seemed hopeless.

"And then they heard a distant laugh."

"It was Braum, wasn't it?" asked the girl.

"Aren't you clever? Braum had heard their cries and came striding down the mountain. The villagers told him of the troll boy and the curse. Braum smiled and nodded. He turned to the vault and faced the door. He pushed it. Pulled it. Punched it. Kicked it. Even tried to rip it from its hinges, but the door wasn't for budging."

"But he's the strongest man ever!" cried the girl.

"It was perplexing" agreed her grandmother. "For many days and nights, Braum sat on a boulder, trying to think of a solution. After all, a child's life was at stake."

"Then, as the sun rose on the fifth day, his eyes widened, and a broad grin lit up his face. 'If I can't go through the door' he said 'then I'll just have to go through-'..."

The girl thought for a moment. Her eyes went wide as she exclaimed "The mountain!"

"The mountain indeed. Braum headed to the summit and began punching his way straight down, pummeling his way through the stone, fist after fist. Rocks flew in his wake, until he had vanished deep into the mountain."

"As the villagers held their breath, the rock around the door crumbled. And when the dust cleared, they saw Braum standing amidst the treasure, the weak but happy troll boy cradled in his arms."

"I knew he could do it!"

"But before they could celebrate, everything began to rumble and shake. Braum's tunnel had weakened the mountain, and now it was caving in! Thinking quickly, Braum grabbed the enchanted door and held it above him like a shield, protecting the villagers as the mountain collapsed around them. When it was over, Braum was amazed. There wasn't a single scratch on the door! Braum knew it was something very special. And from that moment on, the magical shield never left Braum's side."

The girl sat upright, struggling to conceal her excitement.

"Grandma" she said "can you tell me another story?"

The girl's grandmother smiled, kissed her forehead and blew out the candle.

"Tomorrow" she said. "You need to sleep, and there are many more stories to tell."

Nunu

Biography

Sometimes bonds of friendship become stronger than even bonds of blood. When those bonds link a fearless boy to a fearsome Yeti, the bond becomes a force to be reckoned with. Given the responsibility of taming a terrifying beast, Nunu forged a friendship where others would have forged chains. Now Nunu and his burly pal Willump are an inseparable pair who combine youthful exuberance and brute strength with the mythical powers of the Yeti to overcome obstacles insurmountable to any ordinary duo.

Nunu had only the vaguest memories of his parents or the time before he was part of the reclusive Frostguard tribe. Never welcome among his caretakers, Nunu's wanderlust and compassion often put him at odds with the tribe's elders and the boy frequently dreamt of places far beyond the shadow of the Frostguard citadel. Sometimes he would do more than just dream, much to the frustration of his minders. This was never more apparent than when Nunu was apprenticed to the tribe's beastmaster and charged with the care of the creatures under his yoke.

The Frostguard held a menagerie of the Freljord's wildlife at their beck and call, but unique among their collection was the Yeti: an uncommon creature with mystical qualities and raw physical strength. The beastmaster taught Nunu that it was only a lean diet of plants and regular whippings that kept the vicious beast tame, but the more time Nunu spent caring for the creature, the more he learned that the Yeti was no feral monster.

As he saw his new friend Willump growing weaker and sicker, Nunu began to sneak the Yeti scraps of meat, hoping to restore his health. Day by day, Willump grew stronger and not the slightest bit savage - contrary to the beastmaster's claims. Nunu had hopes of convincing him that the Yeti posed no danger, but it wasn't meant to be. The next time Nunu came to deliver Willump a meal, he found the Yeti's cage shattered, with only a crude drawing inside signaling the Yeti's farewell. Without hesitation, Nunu rushed into the wilderness in search of his friend.

When Nunu finally caught up to Willump, he found the Yeti cornered by the beastmaster alongside a group of Frostguard warriors. Afraid that the men would hurt his friend, Nunu threw himself between the Yeti and the beastmaster's lash, but the brutal man would not stay his hand. As the furious beastmaster raised his whip once more, the Yeti swelled up with uncharacteristic fury. Even after so much mistreatment, it wasn't concern for himself but for the boy who'd shown him kindness that finally pushed Willump too far. The Yeti raged and left the man bloodied in the snow.

Terrified by Willump's fury, the remaining Frostguard warriors fled. Nunu realized there was no going back. He yelled at Willump to run before the men returned to kill him, but the Yeti refused to leave the young boy. Nunu was faced with a hard choice: abandon his sole friend and lead a life of captivity with the Frostguard, or strike out into the harsh wilds and leave behind the only home he knew. Nunu chose the only path that made sense. Leaping onto the back of the mighty Yeti, Nunu joined Willump in his great escape. The pair took their first steps into the wide world from which they had been kept for so long.

Olaf

Biography

Most men would say that death is a thing to be feared; none of those men would be Olaf. The Berserker lives only for the roar of a battle cry and the clash of steel. Spurred on by his hunger for glory and the looming curse of a forgettable death, Olaf throws himself into every fight with reckless abandon. Surrendering to the bloodlust deep within his being, Olaf is only truly alive when grappling with the jaws of death.

The coastal peninsula of Lokfar is among the most brutal places in the Freljord. There, rage is the only fire to warm frozen bones, blood is the only liquid that flows freely, and there is no worse fate than to grow old, frail, and forgotten. Olaf was a warrior of Lokfar with no shortage of glories and no hesitation to share them. While boasting one evening with his clansmen over the burning embers of a razed village, one of the elder warriors grew tired of Olaf's bluster. The old fighter goaded Olaf to read the omens and see if Olaf's fortunes matched his gloating. Emboldened by the challenge, Olaf mocked the aged raider's envy and tossed the knuckle bones of a long-dead beast to predict the heights of glory he'd achieve in death. All mirth left the gathering as the clansmen read the portents: the bones spoke of a long life and a quiet passing.

Infuriated, Olaf stormed into the night determined to prove the prediction false by finding and slaughtering Lokfar's feared frost serpent. The monster had consumed thousands, man and ship alike, in its long lifetime and to die in battle with it would be a fitting end for any warrior. As Olaf hurled himself into the blackness of its maw, he fell deeper into the blackness of his mind. When the shock of freezing water roused him from the dark, there was only the butchered carcass of the beast afloat beside him. Thwarted but not defeated, Olaf set out to hunt down every legendary creature with claws and fangs, hoping that the next battle would be his last. Each time he charged headlong toward his coveted death, only to be spared by the frenzy that washed over him while on its brink.

Olaf concluded that no mere beast could grant him a warrior's death. His solution was to take on the most fearsome tribe in the Freljord: the Winter's Claw. Sejuani appeared amused by Olaf's challenge to her warband, but his audacity would earn him no mercy. She ordered the charge and sent scores of her warriors to overwhelm Olaf. One by one, they fell until he lost himself in the bloodlust once again, effortlessly cutting a path to the leader of the Winter's Claw. The clash between Olaf and Sejuani rocked the glaciers with its force, and though he seemed unstoppable, Sejuani battled the berserker to a standstill. As they stood deadlocked, Sejuani's glare penetrated Olaf's berserker haze in a way no weapon ever could. His frenzy abated long enough for her to make him an offer: Sejuani swore that she would find Olaf his glorious death if he would lend his axe to her campaign of conquest. In that moment, Olaf vowed he would carve his legacy into the Freljord itself.

Anivia

Biography

Anivia is a being of the coldest winter, a mystical embodiment of ice magic, and an ancient protector of the Freljord. She commands all the power and fury of the land itself, calling the snow and bitter wind to defend her home from those who would harm it. A benevolent but mysterious creature, Anivia is eternally bound to keep vigil over the Freljord through life, death, and rebirth.

Anivia is as much a part of the Freljord as the never-ending frost. Long before mortals had ever set foot on the land's frigid tundra, she had lived countless lifetimes and died as many deaths. The beginnings and ends of her eternal cycle always heralded great change, from the calming of raging storms to the ebb and flow of ice ages. It is said that when the cryophoenix dies, an era ends; and when she is reborn, a new era begins.

Though Anivia's past lifetimes have faded from her memory, she knows her purpose: she must protect the Freljord at all costs.

When she was last reborn, Anivia witnessed the rise of a mighty and united human tribe. She guarded their lands with pride as they prospered, but such unity could not last forever. The great tribe fractured into three, and after that upheaval, Anivia watched the people of the Freljord become embroiled in battle. As she strove to calm the turmoil tearing her home apart, Anivia began to sense a greater threat: an ancient evil growing deep within the earth. To her horror, she felt the pure magic of the ice itself become blackened and corrupt. Like blood in water, darkness crept into the Freljord. With her destiny so tied to the power of the land, Anivia knew if such evil took root in her home, that same darkness would find its way into her heart. She could no longer remain a mere guardian - the cryophoenix had to act.

Anivia soon discovered an ally in Ashe, the Frost Archer. Ashe too believed in unification as an end to the Freljord's perpetual strife, and Anivia offered the tribal leader her aid. Now, with war on the horizon, Anivia prepares to fight for peace, but she knows the inevitable truth of her destiny. One day, evil will rise from the ice, and she must destroy it - no matter the cost.

Trundle

Biography

Trundle is a hulking and devious troll with a mischievous streak. There is nothing he can't beat into submission and bend to his will, not even the ice itself. With his massive, frozen club, he chills his enemies to the core and runs them through with jagged shards of ice. Fiercely territorial, Trundle chases down anyone foolish enough to enter his domain and laughs as they bleed onto the tundra.

Trundle's warband once followed a foolish and cowardly chieftain. Under such a weak leader, Trundle feared he and his kin would fall prey to the other troll hordes scattered across the tundra. When his challenge to the chieftain ended in humiliation, Trundle did something that wasn't very troll-like: instead of his fists, he turned to his wits. Thinking on his hairy feet, he spun a tall tale about the troll leaders of old, claiming they wielded weapons of great power as symbols of their right to rule. Though he'd made up the story on the spot, Trundle wagered that if he could find or steal such a weapon, he would become the rightful leader of the warband. The trolls believed him, but none thought him capable of undertaking such a challenge. Knowing the boastful troll would die trying, the foolish chieftain agreed and Trundle departed to the familiar sound of laughter.

Alone but undaunted, Trundle ventured into the foreboding realm of the dreaded Ice Witch. There, hidden among the many ancient and dangerous secrets, he hoped to find a weapon to prove his elaborate tale. He out-muscled the Ice Witch's guards and outsmarted her dark magic traps, but nothing he scavenged matched the power he'd described to his kin. Finally, he found an unexpected prize: a huge and magical club of never-melting True Ice. Grasping the weapon, he marveled at the cold power that ran through him. But then the wrathful Ice Witch herself appeared. As she summoned her dark magic, Trundle believed he had met his end, but another clever idea struck him. With a knowing grin, he offered the Ice Witch a devious proposition: a troll army, he told her, would be of much more use to her than one troll corpse....

When Trundle returned to the warband, his fellow trolls bowed to his conquest. Calling his weapon "Boneshiver" he took a moment to enjoy the look of numb shock on his chieftain's face before he caved it in. Seizing command, Trundle announced that there would no longer be chieftains - only a Troll King before whom all of his kind would kneel. The trolls rallied behind their brash, new leader and prepared for the coming war. With Trundle leading the charge, the time of the trolls had finally come.

Udyr

Biography

Udyr is more than a man; he is a vessel for the untamed power of four primal animal spirits. When tapping into the spirits' bestial natures, Udyr can harness their unique strengths: the tiger grants him speed and ferocity, the turtle resilience, the bear might, and the phoenix its eternal flame. With their combined power, Udyr can turn back all those who would attempt to harm the natural order.

In the Freljord, there is a unique caste that lives outside the society of those savage lands. They are the custodians of the natural world: the Spirit Walkers. Once a generation, a child is born under a blood red moon, a child said to live between the two worlds of spirit and man. This child is brought to the Spirit Walker to continue the shamanic line. Udyr was such a child, and knew the howl of the tundra wolves even before he learned the language of his ancestors. Through the Spirit Walker, Udyr would one day learn the meaning of the spirits' calls and tend to the balance of nature. The Spirit Walker often told Udyr he would be tested more than those who had come before him, for the spirits of the Freljord were growing ever more restless, though the reason remained clouded.

The answer arrived in the dead of winter, as Udyr and the Spirit Walker were descended upon by a fearsome figure known only through frightened whispers: the Ice Witch. Knowing the boy would fall easy prey to her vile magic, the Spirit Walker shielded the child from her assault at the cost of his own life. Wracked by grief, Udyr howled with fury, and he felt the Freljord itself howl with him. In that moment, the child embraced the spirits' primal nature and became a beast himself. Coursing with their untamed power, Udyr's angry roar shook the mountaintops and brought down a torrential avalanche. Once Udyr had finally clawed his way out of the frost, the Ice Witch was nowhere to be found.

For years, the tribes of the north learned to avoid the wildman and his domain. Then one day, Udyr caught the scent of a fearless trespasser. Determined to chase the intruder from his territory, he attacked, only to be deflected with ease. The wildman launched himself at the stranger again and again, only to be effortlessly cast aside each time. Exhausted and defeated, Udyr felt his animosity ebb and croaked a clumsy "who" to the stranger. Lee Sin had come seeking the Spirit Walker's guidance and instead found a man who had also lost his way. The monk promised he would right Udyr's path and guided him to a monastery said to be protected by four eternal spirits of great power and wisdom. There, Udyr would find harmony.

Lee Sin brought Udyr to a land that was a stark contrast to his birthplace. Survival was not the only law that governed the lives of Ionians or creatures of the land. For the first time, Udyr felt at peace with the spirits surrounding him and found comfort in human companionship. His time among the monks taught him to temper his instincts, while his meditations with the ancient temple spirits taught him wisdom. Through them both, Udyr learned to truly embrace his life as the next Spirit Walker.

Udyr owed much to the Ionians. It was a debt he was never asked to honor, but one he would ultimately repay many times over. When the armies of Noxus invaded, Udyr did not stand idle as the brutal soldiers oppressed the peaceful Ionians - he had not forgotten how to bare his teeth. Udyr

leapt at their armies with all the ferocity of a cornered beast and gave the invaders good reason to fear the wilderness. From the trees, his claws tore the Noxians down in scores; on the river banks, he threw them back like a flood, and in the fields, he consumed them with searing wildfire. Only when the Noxians fled with their tails between their legs did Udyr quell his rage.

Peace returned to Ionia, but still Udyr felt something stirring him from his rest. The spirits of the Freljord called out to him, warning of an unnatural evil emerging from the ice. Udyr understood the true threat that the Ice Witch posed to his homeland: she was the herald of a greater darkness that would soon envelop the land. Armed with the potent spirits of the temple, Udyr returned to the Freljord, seeking to defend the natural world from all who would threaten its balance.

Volibear

Biography

The unforgiving northern reaches of the Freljord are home to the Ursine, a fierce and warlike race that has endured the barren tundra for thousands of years. Their leader is a furious adversary who commands the force of lightning to strike fear within his foes: Volibear. Both a warrior and a mystic, Volibear seeks to defend the ancient ways and the warrior spirit of his tribe.

Though history recorded their once legendary feats in battle, the Ursine now lived in tranquil seclusion. The warriors were headed by a triumvirate of leaders who maintained a long-lived isolation, avoiding the petty affairs and conflicts of others. As shaman to the three, Volibear was a respected sage known for his insight. It was an era of unprecedented peace, but Volibear felt dread stirring within him. Prosperity was turning the tribe soft and weak, and many had long forgotten the sacred art of war. In time, Volibear felt the fire of their souls would be extinguished. When he revealed his misgivings to the triumvirate, they refused to listen and warned him to know his place.

Seeking wisdom, Volibear undertook a perilous climb to the peak of the Ursine's sacred mountain, a place forever shrouded in a thundering maelstrom. The eye of the storm was said to bestow portents, and legend held that the tempest would mark the next great chieftain of the tribe. As Volibear ascended the peak, he was struck by an unnatural bolt of lightning. When the shaman awoke, he was possessed by a horrific vision of the Freljord utterly consumed by darkness. Volibear saw an unprepared and complacent Ursine force slaughtered by terrible creatures of ice. In an instant, he knew his race would perish if they did not prepare for war.

Volibear rushed down the mountainside to recount what he had seen, but found the path blocked by three Ursine - the triumvirate. Knowing he would end the lasting peace, they refused to heed Volibear's warning and demanded his silence, by his word - or his death. Resolute and adamant, Volibear swore that the Ursine's very survival depended on his message, and launched into ferocious combat against the three. A terrible clash ensued, and just as Volibear succumbed to his opponents, he called upon the power of the maelstrom. Unleashing raw lightning, he struck the trio down with a thunderous blow. Stunned and astonished, the triumvirate beheld the sign of Ursine leadership: the force of the sacred storm.

Recognizing his foretold ascendance, the triumvirate appointed Volibear as the Ursine's new leader. His influence was swift and decisive: he roused his tribe from complacency, revived their battle-hardened traditions, and allied with Sejuani, the warrior who would fight with them against the coming evil. With time, the tribe grew lean and fierce, becoming known again as fearsome warriors of legend. Volibear and the Ursine now stand ready for the dark day that looms on the icy horizon.

Ornn

Biography

Ornn is the Freljordan demi-god of forging and craftsmanship. He works in the solitude of a massive smithy, hammered out from the lava caverns beneath the volcano Hearth-Home. There he stokes bubbling cauldrons of molten rock to purify ores and fashion items of unsurpassed quality. When other deities—especially Volibear—walk the earth and meddle in mortal affairs, Ornn arises to put these impetuous beings back in their place, either with his trusty hammer or the fiery power of the mountains themselves.

More than any other of his kind, Ornn values privacy, solitude, and focus. Beneath a dormant volcano that bears scars from some ancient eruption, he labors day and night, forging whatever his heart desires. The results are priceless tools destined for feats of legend—the lucky few who have stumbled upon these relics note their bewilderingly high quality. Some claim that Braum's shield was made by Ornn thousands of years ago, as it remains as sturdy as the day it was finished. No one can be sure, however, for none can find the forge-god to ask him.

Ornn's name was once spoken throughout the lands that would one day become known as the Freljord. However, almost all of his legends were excised from history by his enemies and the slow march of time—now only a few of his exploits are known, by the handful of tribes who can trace their lineage back to a forgotten culture of blacksmiths, architects, and brewmasters. This long-lost populace was called the Hearthblood, apprentices who journeyed from all corners of the world and gathered on the slopes of Hearth-Home to follow Ornn's example.

Despite this imitative form of worship, Ornn never considered himself their patron. He would only give them curt nods or frowns when they offered up their work, and yet the Hearthblood accepted this and were determined to hone their craft. As a result, they came to create the finest tools, design the sturdiest structures, and brew the tastiest ales the world had ever beheld. Ornn secretly approved of the Hearthblood's perseverance, and the fact that they were always looking to improve.

But, in one catastrophic night, all they had accomplished was destroyed when Ornn battled with his brother Volibear at the mountain's peak, for reasons no mortal could comprehend. The resultant cataclysm was a storm of fire and ash and lightning so intensely violent that it was seen ten horizons away. When the dust settled, Hearth-Home was a smoldering caldera, and the Hearthblood were reduced to scattered bones and cinders.

Though he would never admit it, Ornn was devastated. Through the Hearthblood he had glimpsed the sweeping potential of mortal life, only to see it all lost beneath the indiscriminate wrath of the immortals. Wracked with guilt, he retreated to the isolation of his foundry, and buried himself in his work for an age.

Now, he senses that the world is on the cusp of a new era. Some of his siblings have taken physical form once more, their cults of followers growing restless and aggressive. The Freljord itself is fractured and leaderless, and ancient horrors are lurking in the shadows, waiting for any opportunity to strike. A great change is coming.

During the wars to come, and in their aftermath, Ornn knows the Freljord—and the rest of Runeterra—will have need of a good blacksmith.

Story

No one knew who lit the fire, but we saw the plume of smoke from far away.

The Winter's Claw had driven our tribe north, where the land was so harsh that even our warmother Olgavanna shivered through the first night. Our *elnuk* herd died on the second. At least we had food for the third.

But even that feast was a memory as we climbed the mountain with no peak. Legless Kriek called it "the Half-Mountain of Old Ornn." Our shaman had lost his mind, but Olgavanna bade us carry the fool. He had convinced her that our survival lay at the source of that mysterious smoke. The rest of us believed we were marching to our doom.

The slopes of the half-mountain were a tortured landscape of black stone. We found the ruins of a forgotten city shown on no map—now just a maze of charred foundations. Kriek, perched atop Boarin's shoulders, insisted it was once named Hearth-Home.

Dark clouds to the east flashed lightning and winds carried the stench of wet fur and sweet decay. Our scouts did not return. We all knew what this meant, but none of us wished to utter the word "Ursine" aloud.

We climbed until we stood at the edge of a vast crater. Then, Kriek saw the fire. This was odd, because Legless Kriek was also blind.

In the center of that basin was the source of the smoke venting into the sky. Olgavanna reasoned that at least the steep crater walls offered respite from the howling winds, and so we descended into what would likely be our grave. The smoldering terrain proved difficult to navigate, but any halt would mean to bow our heads and accept slaughter.

Then we saw the furnace. The domed structure was the only one that looked hand-made. It was crafted like the head of a great ram, with tufts of goat-grass in the spaces between the smooth flagstones. In the ram's mouth was a flame so bright, we could find it with our eyes closed.

We huddled around it for warmth while Olgavanna laid out the plans for our last stand. It was better to die on our feet, than shivering and huddled in the cold. Most of us were farmers, builders, menders, and few were skilled in combat like the other tribes. We cared for our elderly, our sick, and our children. Now we were far from the aid of the Avarosans—but war craves only blood and bones.

We could only ever stand a chance against the Winter's Claw. If the Ursine struck first, our defense would be terrifyingly short. That hideous legion of half-bear abominations would overwhelm us.

And soon enough, we heard their battle-growls growing louder, along with the clamor of their footsteps. We smelled their stench. Hundreds descended the cliffs, like shadows twisting down the basalt slopes. We fashioned spears from our stretchers, and sharpened our carving knives on the flint. We would minister the Rite of the Lamb to our elderly and wounded, and the rest of us would dance with the Wolf. It would all be over by morning.

No one saw who stoked the fire, but it grew so hot that we needed to back away. Then the furnace *spoke*, its voice like crackling logs.

"Volibear is near," it said. "Seek shelter now."

“There is no shelter to seek,” Olgavanna replied to the fire in the forge. We knew not in whose presence we stood. “Enemies are at our heels. The Ursine are flanking us.”

“The Ursine...” and the forge grew hotter at these words, **“...will be stopped. The other problems are your own.”** The goat-grass caught fire. The flagstones grew red hot around the edges, then toward their centers. Steam sizzled from the cracks.

Some shed their clothes to seek reprieve as the temperature rose. Others fainted. The next wave of blistering heat dropped us all to our knees, gasping for air. “I never thought I’d see the day!” cried Kriek, weeping tears of joy.

Stone began to drip like candlewax. Masonry flowed down the base of the structure. The domed top of the forge melted inward, pulling the rest of the outer shell into a molten pool.

A flash of orange light blinded us, briefly silhouetting a humanoid figure. Then, a geyser of flame spouted into the air, drops of molten rock hardened on the ground at our feet. Where the massive forge had stood, there was now a hulking beast, its form blurred by waves of heat. There it was, the forgotten legend Kriek always told us about—Old Ornn, as tall as three frost pines. The ancient forge-master cooled rapidly into fur and form, lava dribbling down his chin and hardening into a braided beard. His eyes were glaring embers. In one hand he carried a hammer, in the other he hefted an anvil with equal ease.

We gathered behind our warmother. Olgavanna gripped *Fellswaig*, her true-ice axe, and approached Ornn. “If the Ursine are your foes, we will fight by your side,” she said. Then, in a gesture unbecoming of an iceborn warmother, she bent the knee and laid her weapon at Ornn’s feet. *Fellswaig’s* true-ice melted, revealing an ordinary bronze and iron axe beneath.

I had never seen true-ice melt. No one had ever seen true-ice melt. We felt it wise to join Olgavanna in her kneeling.

Ornn grunted. **“Stand up. Kneeling is death.”** He looked to the gathering thunderstorm swirling overhead. **“I will deal with the Ursine. Do not follow me.”**

He lumbered toward the advancing horde, who charged forward with vicious speed. We could see his fire reflected in their large eyes. Boarin hoisted the old shaman higher onto his shoulders. *“Old Ornn swinging his hammer, he pounds valleys from mountains,”* the legless fool half-sung.

We watched in stunned silence as the creature stood alone against the Ursine. With a roar, he brought his hammer down onto the ground, and a fissure cracked toward the advancing army, stopping just short of their vanguard. Spouts of lava and sulfur jetted into the sky, hardened fire rained down on the half-bear warriors.

Whatever Old Ornn was, he fought with the hot blood of the earth.

Behind the Ursine, giant chunks of slag broke through the ground, cutting off their retreat. Ornn charged and smashed them with more swings of his hammer. Still, they attacked with the viciousness of ten berserkers each.

But we knew when Ornn reached their rearguard, for there was a deafening explosion—the slag wall shattered, and Ursine flew through the air in contorted arcs of burning flesh and fur.

The sky darkened with ash. Columns of smoke rose to clash with the menacing thunderclouds, and bolts of lightning lanced through the haze. The world grew eerily still as the Thousand-Pierced Bear

itself took to the battlefield. We could see its telltale shape: spears, swords, tusks, all were stuck in its hide. Lightning followed in its wake.

And it laughed.

The answering blare of the horn shook our insides. Lava bled from the black cliffs, rivers of fire flowed down the slopes, rushing toward the valley basin, and formed a surging wave. Bolts of lightning stabbed back at the cliffs, to cauterize the wounds in the rock, and a thick, caustic fog blanketed the entire caldera. We saw only blue-white bolts and hellish crimson explosions filtered by the thick vapor. The heat from below the ground scorched the soles of our boots.

Then we saw that surging wave of flame form into a great stampeding ram. Ornn charged at the molten beast, catching the thing he had named as Volibear between his shoulder and the lava-ram.

The force of the explosion toppled us all. The legless shaman was thrown a hundred paces from Boarin's shoulders, laughing the whole time.

We waited all night for the great cataclysm to overtake us, but it never came. We only heard the roars of the Thousand-Pierced Bear, and the gruff bellowing of the forge ram.

When the pall lifted in the late morning, we saw that the slopes around us were covered in chunks of hissing scree, and unnatural columns of crusted basalt rose at odd angles from the ground.

As we realized what stood before us, we recoiled in horror and awe. The Ursine were frozen in stone, their faces petrified masks of agony.

We did not see any sign of Ornn, nor Volibear. We had no time to look, either. The hunting horns of the Winter's Claw announced their approach. We picked up our weapons and dug in our heels. What remained of our clothes were scorched tatters of cloth, but our skin no longer prickled with cold.

Olgavanna's hair had been singed away, her muscular back branded with heat. Her once true-ice axe was bronze and iron, as naked as we were. She had never looked stronger.

Our blood boiled. Our stomachs growled. We were raw and blistered, bare and exposed. We smeared our chests with ash in the shape of a hammer, and ram horns upon our faces.

We sang and chanted in the memory of last night, with the words of mad old Kriek.

We knew who lit the fire. The Winter's Claw would know, too.

Corki

Biography

When Heimerdinger and his yordle colleagues migrated to Piltover, they embraced science as a way of life, and they immediately made several groundbreaking contributions to the techmaturgical community. What yordles lack in stature, they make up for with industriousness. Corki, the Daring Bombardier, gained his title by test-piloting one of these contributions - the original design for the Reconnaissance Operations Front-Line Copter, an aerial assault vehicle which has become the backbone of the Bandle City Expeditionary Force (BCEF). Together with his squadron - the Screaming Yipsnakes - Corki soars over Valoran, surveying the landscape and conducting aerial acrobatics for the benefit of onlookers below.

Corki is the most renowned of the Screaming Yipsnakes for remaining cool under fire and exhibiting bravery to the point of madness. He served several tours of duty, often volunteering for missions that would take him behind enemy lines, either gathering intelligence or delivering messages through hot zones. He thrived on danger, and enjoyed nothing more than a good dogfight in the morning. More than just an ace pilot, Corki also made several modifications to his copter, outfitting it with an arsenal of weapons which some speculate were more for show than functionality. When open hostilities ceased, Corki was forced into a retirement, which he felt "cut the engines and clipped the wings." He tried to make do with stunt flying and canyon running, but it was never the same without the refreshing smell of gunpowder streaking through the air around him.

Lulu

Biography

Perhaps more than any other Yordle, Lulu marches to the beat of her own drum. During her youth in Bandle City, she spent most of her time wandering alone in the forest or lost in a daydream. It wasn't that she was antisocial; the day-to-day bustle of Bandle City just couldn't compete with the vibrant world of her imagination. She saw wonder in places most people overlooked. This was how she found Pix, a fae spirit, pretending to be stuck in a birdhouse. Lulu's imagination distinguished her to Pix and he seized the opportunity to lure her into his world. He brought her to the Glade, the enchanted home of the fae, which lay nestled in a clearing in the woods. There the rigid properties of the outside world - things like size and color - changed as frequently and whimsically as the direction of the wind. Lulu felt at home in the Glade and she lingered there with Pix, fascinated by this secret place.

She quickly lost track of time. Her life in the Glade was comfortable and natural. She and Pix played fae games together, the sorts of games that she had been told were "make believe"... and she got exceedingly good at them. It caught her by surprise when she suddenly remembered that she had left a life behind in Bandle City. The Glade had a way of making everything outside seem distant and surreal. Lulu decided to revisit her former home, to share some of the lovely things she'd learned, but when she and Pix returned the world had changed. Time, she discovered, was another property that behaved differently in the Glade, and centuries had passed while she was away. Lulu sought to reconnect to the residents of the outside world but her attempts had unfortunate results. She led all the children off to play hide and seek, temporarily changing them into flowers and animals to spice up the game, but their parents didn't appreciate her efforts. When the Yordles insisted that she leave their land, she left to seek out a vibrant magical place where those with unusual gifts were not just accepted but adored.

Rumble

Biography

Even amongst yordles, Rumble was always the runt of the litter. As such, he was used to being bullied. In order to survive, he had to be scrappier and more resourceful than his peers. He developed a quick temper and a reputation for getting even, no matter who crossed him. This made him something of a loner, but he didn't mind. He liked to tinker, preferring the company of gadgets, and he could usually be found rummaging through the junkyard.

Rumble showed great potential as a mechanic, and his teachers recommended him for enrollment at the Yordle Academy of Science and Progress in Piltover. He may very well have become one of Heimerdinger's esteemed proteges, but Rumble refused to go. He believed that Heimerdinger and his associates were "sellouts" trading superior yordle technology to humans for nothing more than a pat on the head while yordles remained the butt of their jokes.

When a group of human graduates from the Yordle Academy sailed to Bandle City to visit the place where their mentor was born and raised, Rumble couldn't resist the temptation to see them face-to-face (so to speak). He only intended to get a good look at the humans, but four hours and several choice words later, he returned home bruised and bloodied with an earful about how he was an embarrassment to "enlightened" yordles like Heimerdinger.

The next morning, Rumble left Bandle City without a word, and wasn't seen again for months. When he returned, he was at the helm of a clanking, mechanized monstrosity. He marched it to the center of town amidst dumbfounded onlookers and there announced that he would show the world what yordle-tech was really capable of achieving.

Teemo

Biography

Teemo is a legend among his yordle brothers and sisters in Bandle City. As far as yordles are concerned, there is something just slightly off about him. While Teemo enjoys the companionship of other yordles, he also insists on frequent solo missions in the ongoing defense of Bandle City. Despite his genuinely warm personality, something switches off inside Teemo's mind during combat so that the lives he must end while on patrol do not burden him. Even as a young recruit, the drill instructors and other trainees found it a little disconcerting that, while Teemo was normally charming and kind, he turned deadly serious and highly efficient the minute combat exercises began. Teemo's superiors quickly steered him toward the Scouts of the Mothership, which is one of Bandle City's most distinguished Special Forces unit alongside the Megling Commandos.

While most yordles do not handle solo scouting missions with a great deal of finesse, Teemo is remarkably efficient at them. His record of success in defending Bandle City from infiltrators easily makes him one of the most dangerous yordles alive, though you'd never know it by having a cup of honey mead with him at his favorite inn. His signature weapon - a blowgun - uses a rare ajunta poison he personally gathers from the jungles of Kumungu. To help cope with his lengthy periods of isolation, Teemo recently struck up a friendship with Tristana, a fellow member of Bandle City's Special Forces. Teemo is a pint-sized foe that many have come to fear and whose small size belies his fearsome resolve.

Tristana

Biography

Greatness comes in all shapes and sizes, as proven by this diminutive, cannon-wielding yordle. In a world fraught with turmoil, Tristana refuses to back down from any challenge. She represents the pinnacle of martial proficiency, unwavering courage, and boundless optimism. For Trist and her gun, Boomer, every mission is a chance to prove that heroes do exist.

Story

The fire was crackling away nicely, spreading a warm glow throughout the forest clearing. Tristana lay on her back with her head pillowed on her pack, watching a comet streak across the starlit sky. The winking lights glittered prettily through a swaying canopy of birch and oak leaves. The humans liked to name the patterns in the stars – she’d seen some in an old book in Heimerdinger’s laboratory – but she decided it would be more fun to give them names of her own invention.

“You can be the Growling Badger” she said, pointing to one group of stars. “And you can be the Cheeky Changeling. Yes, that’s much better than boring names like *The Warrior* or *The Defender*. And anyway, I can’t see those ones anymore.”

Her stomach rumbled and she sat up. Hunger was still something surprising to her, even though she’d ventured beyond Bandle City more than most of her kind. A pair of spitted fish were roasting nicely over the flames and the smell of them was making her mouth water. She’d shot them in the stream to the west of her campsite with a single, exceptionally carefully-aimed bullet from her cannon. Not a bad feat of marksmanship, even if she did say so herself. Too bad no-one was around to see it! She leaned over and patted the polished drakewood stock of her exquisitely crafted cannon; a weapon any sensible observer would say was far too large for someone of her diminutive stature to even carry, let alone shoot.

“Let Teemo have his cute little blowpipes, eh, Boomer?” she told the cannon. “I’ll stick to something with a bit more *oomph*, thank you very much.”

The fire crackled in a ring of stones, burning with cerulean flames, thanks to the pinch of her custom powder she’d sprinkled on the kindling to get it started. She knew now just how little she needed to use after her first time in the Upplands had cost her a perfectly decent pair of eyebrows. Sometimes it was hard to remember that things were so different in the human world compared to back home.

Deciding the fish were ready, she slid one from the spit onto a wooden plate she removed from her pack. She unwrapped a golden knife and fork from a rolled dreamleaf and cut the fish into slices. She might be on a mission, but that didn’t mean she had to eat like a savage. She took a mouthful of fish and rolled it around her mouth, savoring the taste and licking her lips in satisfaction. Mortal food was usually bland and tasteless compared to the smorgasbord of flavors she was used to, but the fish in this part of the world – Ionia, she’d heard it was called – wasn’t half bad. Perhaps it was the magic saturating every element of this landscape that made them extra tasty.

Tristana heard the crack of a twig. One of many she’d laid in a circle around her camp. The sound and type of twig told her exactly how far away the humans were and from which direction they were approaching.

She cleared her throat and called out “I have another fish if you’re hungry.”

A man and a woman emerged from the forest in front of her. Both were tall and lean, with fidgeting hands and cold eyes. They didn’t look friendly, but she was still learning how to read human expressions and she’d been taught to always be polite. Human languages were so unsophisticated that she often wondered how they managed to communicate at all.

The man took a step forward and said “Many thanks, old one, but we are not hungry.”

“Old one?” said Tristana with a playfully indignant grin. “I’m a young slip of a girl!”

The man blinked and she saw what might have been a look of puzzlement cross his face.

“The old crone’s insane” said the woman, looking sidelong at her, as if not quite sure what to make of what she was seeing. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn’t her true form...

“You’re sure you don’t want a bit of fish?” asked Tristana, taking another bite. “It’s really tasty.”

“We’re sure” confirmed the man. “But we’ll take any coin you’re carrying. As well as that gun of yours. I suspect it will fetch a pretty penny at auction.”

“You want to steal my Boomer?” said Tristana, sensing movement to either side. “You know, I just don’t see that happening.”

“No? You’re alone and there’s two of us” said the man. “And we’re bigger than you.”

“Size isn’t everything” said Tristana. “And there’s four of you. Why don’t you ask your two bandit friends to come out? Maybe they’re hungry?”

The woman shook her head. “He told you, we’re alone.”

“Oh, come on” said Tristana. “What sort of commando do you think I’d be if I didn’t know you had two friends in the bushes with arrows aimed at me right now? You came in from the north and split up a hundred yards out. There’s a fat man to my left and a man with a limp to my right.”

“Good ears for one so old” said the man.

“I told you, I’m not old” said Tristana. “I’m actually pretty young for a Yordle.”

The man’s mouth dropped open in surprise as something of her true nature became apparent to him.

Finally! An expression she had no trouble in reading.

Tristana ducked and rolled to the side as a pair of black-fletched arrows slashed from the undergrowth. They passed harmlessly overhead as she swept up Boomer and chambered a round. She fired into the bushes to her right and was rewarded with a cry of pain.

“Blast off!” she cried, vaulting toward the nearest tree and bounding higher. Tristana landed on a branch halfway up its trunk. Another arrow flashed toward her, thudding into the bark a handspan from her head.

“Hey, you’re pretty fast for a human” she said, racking Boomer’s crank and priming the barrel with a bunch of shells. She sprang away to another branch as the archer rose from the bushes – the fat one, which almost made it too easy. Tristana somersaulted from tree to tree and fired twice more. Both

shots caught the man in his meaty thighs, and he fell back with a wail, loosing his arrow high into the air.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby” she laughed. “I barely grazed you!”

Tristana landed by her fire as the two humans she’d first seen rushed her with drawn swords. They were likely fast by human standards, but to her they moved like lumbering giants.

“Time for some up and over!” shouted Tristana, unloading the rest of Boomer’s barrel in one almighty blast into the ground. She gave a wild, whooping yell as she sailed over their heads. Even as she arced through the air she was reloading. She pushed off from the trunk of a tree and spun back to the ground.

She landed right behind the bandits with a giggle.

“Boom! Boom!”

Tristana fired two blasts, and both humans cried out in pain as they each took a wound to the rump. The woman fell flat on her face, beating her britches as powder burn set them alight. She managed to pick herself up and flee into the bushes with her backside on fire. The man twisted as he dropped to the ground, scrambling away as she cranked Boomer’s loading arm.

He was making hand gestures he probably thought were some form of magical protection.

“You’re no old woman” he said.

“I kept telling you that” said Tristana.

The man opened his mouth to answer, but before he could speak the arrow loosed from the fat man’s bow finally came back down to earth. It thudded into the man’s chest and he fell back with a look of intense annoyance.

The other bandits were dragging themselves away as fast as their wounded limbs would carry them. She let them go, grinning as she gathered up her things before stamping down the fire.

“I was just trying to eat my dinner and have a quiet night” she said to herself. “But I guess four bandits who won’t trouble anyone again soon isn’t bad going!”

Tristana slung Boomer over her shoulder and set off once more, whistling a jaunty tune as she looked for more stars to name.

Veigar

Biography

To most, thoughts of yordles do not conjure images to be feared. The easygoing half-pint race, though fierce, is often regarded with some degree of joviality. Their high-pitched voices and naturally cute forms inspire something of a protective instinct in the larger races, or at least bring to mind images of children playing at being adults. Every now and again, however, a yordle turns so bad that even at its small stature it strikes terror into the hearts of others. Veigar is one such twisted yordle. As a master of the magical black arts, as well as a corrupter of cosmic energy, he is one of the most powerful sorcerers on Valoran.

As a child, Veigar was a normal yordle with one small exception - he had a deep curiosity for the world beyond Bandle City. The young yordle spent much of his time studying the rest of Valoran, and he jumped at the chance to join a business that traded with other major city-states. Unfortunately for both him and the world, a deal with Noxian trader turned into shady business and went bad; Veigar and his companions were subsequently set up to take the fall. Arrested by the authorities, he was imprisoned within the walls of Noxus for years. Such isolation is very dangerous for yordles - undoubtedly why his cruel jailers did such a thing - and Veigar was slowly driven mad.

He eventually escaped, having become a twisted version of his former self. Instead of returning to his people and Bandle City, he sought tutelage from dark wizards across the land. With his demented will focused on one task, he quickly became a dangerous and powerful wizard in his own right. Now he seeks to end all conflict on Valoran by bringing all of the city-states to their knees, regardless of their affiliation.