



lecteurs de tarot

jacob milnestein

“lecteur de tarot”

a sampler

by JACOB MILNESTEIN



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Card One

Summer faded soon enough, the leaves of the trees curling inwards and the branches slowly shaking them free so as to send them toppling on their lonely way towards the ground.

The small village, fashioned in a horseshoe with an odd sort of gate at its mouth, had prospered over the preceding months. Although unhappiness had not been uncommon and, behind closed doors, the villagers had known more than their fair share of grief at fate's unkind hand, the quaint settlement had, for the most part, enjoyed a peaceful summer.

Time had passed in which the small community of s'Hertogenbosch, composed of three distinct generations of travellers from the over-reaching cities of Earth, had quietly laboured; going about their business with nobility and cheerfulness.

Yet on this particular day and at this particular hour, at the very centre of the village stood a young boy, his eyes closed and his lips moving in softly spoken prayers.

The dirt at his feet swirled like a miniature storm as light gathered about the simple wooden box adorned with gold plate strapped to his right wrist. With every breath he took, the box seemed to tremble, a faint song of vibration rising up from its protesting shape and whispering softly to the air around him and the dirt beneath his feet.

He was young, no older than ten or twelve years, his hair a messy shade of brown. Perhaps as a baby, it had been the palest of shade of blond yet now it was the colour of the humble mouse, a trait that had earned him his nickname.

Covering his face, he wore a wooden masque carved in the likeness of his associative animal, a symbol of both his reputation and spirit, whilst over his shoulders hung a humble cloak of torn green beneath which he wore a long grey coat and simple shoes.

Across from him, on the other side of the small mound of dirt with the necessary boundary of white paint that identified it as a *lecteur de tarot* Field of Play, his opponent leered with derision, hauling himself up to his full height and reaching up to tighten the bandanna tied about his greasy, long hair.

"Hah! If that's all the great Maus of s'Hertogenbosch is capable of, then I'll have this wrapped up before my gang even knows I've slipped away!"

He slammed a foot forward, his heavy boots leaving a firm imprint in the dirt, his belly swaying from side to side with the movement. Slowly, deliberately he pulled out a single tarot card from beneath a metal studded Borametz band on his left arm and lazily swiped the card through a similar device on his other arm.

The card dissipated into particles of light with the motion, trailing off like abandoned fireflies.

Behind him, wind began to gather, the tied knot of his bandanna dancing behind his head. He sneered at the silent boy across the arena from him, eyes closed and hands clasped before him, a pale throb of light about his frail body indicating the pulse of his gathering *chi* energy.

There was a gulf of experience between them, the older player reflected with pride. He had dedicated ten years of his life to training; ten long years in which he had mastered the most difficult fighting styles and powerful melee weapons. He had travelled to the Maudlin Mountains and fought solitary *leonhearts* in the shadows of the great phantom forests and even in defeat, he had improved himself.

He was the most powerful of his clan, the undisputed warrior monarch of a new order of travelling fighters; a child would not beat him.

“If all you can do is *focus*, boy then you better think about finding yourself a new profession!” he cried, his own chi exploding like ethereal flames of fire about him, twisting and burning in every direction.

He thrust his open hands out, bruised and bleeding, as light and form slowly manifested itself.

“*Wushu Double Axes!*” he roared, spit trailing from his mouth and staining his stubble.

Before him, the light transformed into two hefty weapons, their black steel heads glistening and their handles carved from the finest oak.

With a cry of expectant triumph, the older man charged forwards, his entire body shuddering with the movement as he hefted the weapons up above his head and brought them to bear upon the motionless child, absorbed in prayer before him.

Laughing wildly, he brought the weapons down in a lethal arc towards the boy’s head.

Beneath the carved animal masque he wore, the child’s pale blue eyes snapped open.

“*Sicherung Magie,*” he whispered, stepping sideways out of the reach of the twin axes and flicking open the buckle of his belt, snatching several playing cards and slicing the first one through the device bound to his arm.

A thunderclap of sound echoed through the village, shaking the foundations of every house as he tore the second card through the narrow trench.

The heads of both weapons slammed hard into the dirt ground, their owner staggering and grunting, his hands still grasping the handles and his back bent double.

“*Summon spirit,*” the boy cried out, tearing the next card through the device, “*Guardian Deity... URIEL!*”

His entire body ignited in illumination, golden rays of sunshine pouring from him as the masque was cast away and his youthful boy’s flesh was translated into that of an impossibly tall woman with a short fringe of silvery blue hair.

With a flick of the wrist, light dispersed, steam rising from her revealed body.

Upon her shoulders and forearms, she wore plate armour. Likewise, her feet and shins were encased in steel whilst from her back hung a cloak of royal purple, fluttering in the gentle wind of movement. Yet of those assets which human women sought most to conceal, there was no covering.

The ax wielder allowed his hands to slip from the handles of his weapons, his back straightening and his eyes widening as he gazed upon her, jaw slack.

She lifted an armoured hand, another card materialising in a flash of light and disappearing just as swiftly as she sliced it through the device bound to her wrist – the same device the child she had replaced had worn.

“*Lunar staff,*” she murmured gently as the particles of gathered light translated instantly into a long shaft of ancient moon rock.

Her opponent shook his head from side to side, mouthing unspoken words as he staggered backwards upon the small mound.

“N-No,” he stammered at last, jabbing his finger in the air towards her, “y-you’re not supposed to do that! H-How was I to know you could use *Sicherung Magie*, this isn’t fair!”

“You idiot!” cried out a voice from the crowd behind and he whirled about, his face flushed with anger.

Standing at the edge of the arena were two other boys. The first slouched with his hands deep in his pockets, his baseball cap worn to the side, lips curled in a jeering smirk whilst the other remained rigidly still, pale blond hair and blue robes fluttering in the breeze, a heavy Borametz leaf bound volume before him, fingers trembling upon the yellowed pages within the vast tome of knowledge.

“Don’t you know Maus is the only *tarot* player in the village to master *Sicherung Magie*? That’s why he’s so famous!” the boy in the baseball cap sneered, “God, what an idiot!”

He turned towards the shorter boy and slapped him on the shoulder, almost knocking him into the ring.

“Luc, can you believe this idiot?” he smirked.

The older man turned once more toward the Guardian Deity, watching fearfully as she advanced, armoured feet hovering just above the dirt and staff slung over her shoulder.

“You can’t do this!” he protested, “I didn’t sign up to fight *you*, just the kid!”

The ethereal woman stopped, lashing out with the staff and slamming it hard into his stomach.

“I am the unyielding law of justice,” she whispered, stepping slowly forwards again, advancing even as her opponent backed away.

“The promise of friendship...”

Her legs broke into a run, stirring the dust as she rushed toward him, the staff held ready at her side.

“A blade to protect the weak and a sun to bless the forlorn!” she cried out, her eyes wide with desperate anger.

With a heave of her shoulders, she swung the staff and lashed out once more, slamming it hard under his chin and lifting him bodily into the air.

His entire form rose up and, without pause, she launched into the air after him, his eyes widening and hands reaching out to grasp at nothing as she dived towards him, her leg outstretched in a brutal kick that struck hard into his gut, damping his lips with blood.

He crashed down outside of the white markings of the arena, bruised and stunned as, about him, the villagers began to clap their hands in admiration.

Uriel landed gently upon the soil, gesturing with her hand and restoring the countenance of the young boy once more, his hair tangled and his brow damp with sweat. On the ground, the carved wooden mouse masque rocked gently in the

warm breeze coming in from the coast.

“That’ll teach you to interfere with the wagons from Orthen,” Maus proclaimed with an assured smile.

The villagers cheered, their voices rising up and startling the fledgling sparrows and larks from the branches of the trees.

With a face warm with embarrassment and disgrace, the older man hauled himself up and began to retreat, shoving away any unfortunate enough to cross his path.

“I won’t forget this, you little bastard!” he shouted above their cheering, “You’ll regret crossing paths with me!”

Maus leered at him and stuck his fingers up in an indecent gesture.

Spitting on the ground, the other turned and fled the village.

The young boy smiled, bending down to scoop the masque up off the ground and study its carved face once more with intent.

“You came through for me again, Uriel,” he said softly, slipping the masque on and moving it to the side of his head so that his face was still visible, “I owe you one.”

From the crowd, the young boy with the baseball cap and his nervous looking friend broke free and ran into the arena, followed by a tall, elderly man with a storybook wizard’s beard and a crown of pressed gold fashioned in the likeness of a sprig of mistletoe. The crown itself lay not upon his head but rather about the cone of a steepled hat, contributing further to his curious appearance.

He smiled warmly, folding his arms behind his back.

“Congratulations are in order, I believe,” he beamed, his blue eyes twinkling softly with perhaps the faintest hint of mischief, “and, of course, our thanks dear Maus. Were it not for you then who knows how serious the situation here might have become... and, between you and me, I don’t think I’d like to have been the one to explain to Madame Calohan that the ingredients she ordered to bake her son’s birthday cake hadn’t arrived!”

Maus smiled in return, his cheeks warm with embarrassment and his eyes wide with excitement.

“Thank you, Mister Weisz, sir,” he answered, unable to keep the joy from his voice, “I’m just happy to be able to put my skills to good use.”

The young boy had lived in the small village of s’Hertogenbosch for almost six years now. His parents had come across from Earth with the most recent wave of settlers, following in the footsteps of two generations of farmers and traders from the cities hoping to establish themselves in the newly discovered lands.

There was a difference of views between each generation of human settlers and, although he had little experience of them himself, there was apparently an even wider gulf between the settlers and the native Mononoke of the villages further north toward the endless forests beyond which very few had travelled.

The Mononoke, a curious species of animals, some appearing little more than upright teddy bears whilst others appeared as normal animals of varying sizes, were not a common sight in s’Hertogenbosch.

According to the elderly mage, there had been a Mononoke guide in residence last summer, living out near the coast and offering to ferry across adventurers to the Sighing Caves but Maus had never met him. Likewise, there was supposed to be a kingdom beyond the forest inhabited by both Mononoke *and* humans but Maus had never met anyone from there either.

People seemed uncomfortable with clarifying whether the humans reportedly living in this distant city had been in residence before SUNNY Corporation had discovered the lands and sent through their first envoys or whether such people were simply travellers and settlers, or the descendants thereof.

It often seemed to Maus that Albert Weisz, who had numbered amongst the original settlers all those years ago, knew a lot more than he had ever said about such matters, yet he never seemed to wish to talk about such issues.

There had been an incident last winter when a messenger had arrived in quite a fluster and spent a great deal of time with Mister Weisz. Maus remembered this clearly, as it had been only a month or two beforehand that a giant, skeletal robot had crushed the magician’s house in an unfortunate accident, and both the elderly man and his guest had been forced to seek board at the inn.

He had asked several times since then what message the magician’s guest had brought yet had been granted only with silence or evasion.

“You’ve done well, Maus,” the old man said, reaching out and patting the young boy on his head, “it’s always gratifying to see a student of mine apply his strength for the greater good of others.”

He paused, turned and narrowed his eyes, glaring at the other boy in the baseball cap with the messy brown hair.

“Quite unlike Shugo here, who seems only interested in instructing his animal guardians in the art of stealing food from the inn.”

The other boy laughed nervously.

“Ah, I thought no one knew about that,” he murmured, looking down at his feet, the third boy patting him in a consoling manner upon the shoulder.

A quiet smile played across the old man’s lips.

“One does not get to be my age, young Master Shugo without knowing to cater for both the stomach *and* the mind.”

The three boys laughed happily and, despite the earlier conflict with the outlaw *útlagi*, Maus felt calm. The pace of life in the small, rural village of s’Hertogenbosch was slow but he was happy and, more than that, he was content.

The smile faded slowly as he caught sight of his friends and adoptive family suddenly stepping aside, their expressions grave as another figure moved through them, pushing past with disregard and cold disinterest.

His muscles tensed, fearing the presence of another *lecteur de tarot* player intent on challenging him to a duel or even

the *útlagi*, mad with the indignity of his defeat and returning to settle the score.

Within the settlements of the new land, the game of *lecteur de tarot* – a structured card game based around differing decks of tarot cards used to manifest physical objects and magical powers – was the strongest bond between villagers.

It was not unusual to encounter rogue game players travelling from village to village, eager to face the strongest fighters of each location and improve their reputation.

“You’re all fools,” a voice hissed as Shugo and Luc stepped hesitantly aside to reveal a boy no older than them, dressed in a black velvet jacket and shabby travelling cloak.

Like his clothes, his hair was dark, yet his face seemed remarkably pale, features well defined and eyes shadowed by lack of sleep.

At his side, moving silently amidst the dirt of the street was a terrible leopard adorned with a golden crown, its head held high and its eyes radiating a fearsome intelligence. The beast was at least as tall as its human companion was, regal and majestic like no other animal Maus had encountered before.

Despite familiarity with wild cats from books and television on Earth, the sight of the beast caused his heart to stir in both fear and awe.

Whilst the animal’s companion carried with him an air of furious impatience, the leopard held itself with repose and patience, as if all the gathered villagers of s’Hertogenbosch were nothing but children or, worse still, prey.

The boy raised his hand and pointed directly at Maus.

“You *especially* are a fool,” he snarled, eyes blazing with fierce indignation.

Maus stepped forward, reaching for the buckle of his belt and drawing forth his deck of tarot cards.

Gently, the old magician patted the boy on the shoulder.

“Now, now,” he said in a cheerful voice, “perhaps we can solve this without yet resorting to confrontation. After all, it never hurts to hear the other side of the argument now does it, my boy?”

The young boy nodded slowly, returning his deck to his belt.

“No, sir,” he said quietly, a little embarrassed of his impatience, “no, it doesn’t.”

“Good form, Maus,” the old man whispered in his ear before turning once more to face the stranger and his accompanying animal.

“Now, young master, what exactly appears to be your grievance with our humble village?”

The other boy grunted, his lips curled in a quivering sneer.

“How can you just sit here like this, with your petty games and your comfortable arrogance? Don’t you know there’s a war going on? Don’t you know that even now there are soldiers amassing in the phantom forests?”

A stir of panicked voices ran through the crowd and Albert Weisz’s face hardened, the appearance of the kindly old man suddenly replaced by that of a stern figure of authority, light catching the pressed gold crown he wore over his hat.

“I am aware of the events of which you speak,” he said with a sigh, crossing the dirt arena towards the other boy, “a messenger brought word from Eoz. They say the capital has been taken by the old Empress’ karura army and that the Queen is nowhere to be found.”

The boy nodded, his lips trembling.

“And the King of Ealdwíc, Martin Strauss is lost,” he whispered, his voice a pained, haunted croak.

He turned away, his fists tightening as all the while the leopard remained at his side, watching the gathered villagers with intent ferocity.

Calmly, Albert Weisz inclined his head.

“Yes, this too I had heard,” he murmured, his voice betraying increasing anxiety.

“Then why aren’t you doing anything?” the boy roared, whirling around to face him once more, “Why are all still here wasting your time like children? Don’t you care what happens to these lands? Or are the hearts of settlers so indifferent that they don’t care at all, just as long as an authority on Earth tells them everything is going to be okay?”

He looked about the crowd, glaring first at the old magician and his young apprentice, then towards Shugo and Luc, then to Madame Calohan, the old innkeeper, the blacksmith and the farmhands, his lips curled in contempt for each and every one of them.

“We earnt our right to stay here,” one of the farmers called out, “the Mononoke signed an agreement with SUNNY Corporation. We’re *entitled* to live here, it’s no concern of ours if there’s a war going on in some distant forest or not.”

The dark haired boy spat on the ground.

“It is your concern,” he countered angrily, “the man who attacks Eoz is a human from your world named Leon Cale. When he has crushed Eoz and the Mononoke, know that he will in turn cast his attention towards you... or did you think that being of the same world as him would somehow earn you grace?”

He laughed, his dark eyes staring at the faces of the gathered crowd.

“Once Cale has crushed resistance and his company have completely consumed SUNNY Corporation, as even now they are doing back on Earth, then he will exact promises of loyalty from settlements such as this.

“These quaint villages of which you’re all so proud will be turned into stations of industry. They will be turned first into towns and then cities and soon, rather than being a retreat from Earth as you may mistakenly have believed these lands to be, all around you shall be nothing but Earth’s reflection, another industrialised world filled to bursting with the folly of human progress.”

There was silence amongst the village, faces pale with shock and concern.

“Young man,” Weisz said calmly, his hard eyes studying the boy and his companion, “have you considered that your approach might not be the best for winning over the hearts and souls of those gathered here?”

“Have you thought that there are some of us here who have already felt the brush of these terrible events and known the bitter tears that spring forth from the loss of loved ones?”

“You have come into our village with your eyes ablaze, accusing us of inactivity for not yielding up our children to the fight, yet you scarcely know anything about us.”

He looked towards Madame Calohan, her large hands clutching at a pale handkerchief.

“This woman left behind her relations to retire with her husband and help care for these neglected lands. She left behind her children in London and came here with an accord to living her life quietly in peace.

“Every year she bakes a cake for her son’s birthday and barter with the traders from Farlas to carry it back to Earth with them. She has just learnt that her son has joined Lord Cale’s private army, despite her wishes and yet, regardless of the distance between them, she insists on sending home a cake as a sign of how much she cares for him.”

The old magician placed a hand on Maus’ shoulder, inclining his eyes down towards the boy.

“Likewise this child came to us not much older than a babe, no more than six years ago. His parents could not adapt to life here and died shortly after. They are buried beyond the fields.”

He took a deep breath, his chest swelling.

“Therefore, I find it uncommonly rude that you have the audacity to accuse us of not being aware of the world we live in.”

The young boy brushed away Weisz’s accusations with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“That proves nothing,” he said coldly.

With trembling hands, Maus reached up and pulled the masque around to cover his face, his breath warm against the impression of the wood and his eyes flashing with anger.

“Don’t you dare pass judgement on us,” Maus countered, his hands balling into fists.

The other boy took another step forward, his own hands tightening in like motion.

“Prove yourself,” he snarled, “prove that you’re better than I think you are then! Go to the phantom forests for yourself; see what it is that the people *you* brought here have done to Eoz!”

He reached out with both hands and slammed them hard against Maus’ shoulders, pushing the boy backwards.

Behind the masque, Maus’ lips curled in anger, his own hands lashing out and shoving back against the other.

“Fine,” he shouted in reply, “I *will* go!”

“Think about what you’re saying, my boy,” the magician warned, “think *very* carefully.”

Beneath the masque, Maus felt his face warm with anger, his fists burning at his sides and his mind clouded by rage. Had he been older, the prospect of a journey that disturbed his elderly teacher might have intimidated him, yet in the feverish grip of anger, the young boy paid it little heed.

“I want to go,” he said flatly, struggling to suppress his emotions, “I can’t stand the idea of these people thinking we’re cowards.

“We came here because we wanted to be a part of this world and if someone is threatening the peace of the life we’ve made for ourselves then I want to stand up and fight them. I won’t let anyone tell me that I’m doing the wrong thing because my heart tells me I’m not.”

He took a deep breath and pulled the masque away again.

“I’ll go to the phantom forests,” he whispered, sounding suddenly older than his short years of life gave him credit for, “I’ll go to the forests and not only that, I’ll fight for s’Hertogenbosch and for the life we live here.

“I’ll fight... and I’ll win.”

The old man smiled sadly.

“Yes,” he murmured, “yes, I thought you might say that. My own grandson was of much the same mind when last I saw him.”

He lifted his eyes to the sky, blinking as if suddenly troubled by something interfering with his sight.

“Of course, like Madame Calohan’s son, the path he took was not the path that you have taken.”

He sighed wearily and the other boy stood down, lowering his fists, the leopard at his side carefully watching the old man’s movements.

“It is a long and arduous journey you propose, young Maus, full of terrible danger and fright. I can’t help but feel that your dear mother and father might have been somewhat disapproving of such an endeavour.”

He smiled sadly, looking from Maus to the other boy and then towards Shugo and Luc, standing anxiously to one side.

“Yet it seems in these lands that children are wont to grow up earlier than on Earth,” he reached out and placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder once more, “even if some of us would wish to prevent it.”

The other boy turned away in disgust.

“We’ll meet you in the forests,” he remarked, his voice distant and indifferent.

Maus glared at him, waiting for something more, perhaps even an apology for his earlier behaviour.

“Just because you have more sense than others, don’t think that makes us friends,” the other added after a while, his back turned and his expression unreadable.

It seemed to Maus that the boy was only several years older than he was, perhaps two, maybe three. Yet upon his face were the characteristic signs of someone who had experienced a great deal in a short amount of time.

It was almost, Maus thought, as if the other had been forced to adopt the likeness of an adult in order to survive.

“What’s your name?” he asked suddenly, instantly regretting it.

The boy glowered at him.

“You don’t need to know,” he murmured.

“It’s only fair,” Maus continued, pushing the point despite himself, “that you tell me who you are, especially considering that you obviously know a lot about us.”

The other turned away, his cloak swaying about him as he moved.

“My name is Abyss,” he answered simply, “though it wasn’t always.”

“Who were you before then?” Maus questioned.

Abyss turned back towards him, his cheeks suddenly hot with anger.

“No one,” he hissed, jabbing a finger into the younger boy’s chest, “no one *you* need to know about.”

Maus felt the weight of the hand on his shoulder, despite which he was unable to prevent himself from pushing back against the other.

Weisz’s hand dropped from his shoulder as he moved forward again.

“What is your problem?” he said, his voice full of resentment. “I’m offering to help you.”

Abyss simply stared at him for a moment, his cheeks red and his eyes wide with anger. He said nothing, but simply glared fiercely.

Maus sighed, abandoning any hope of extracting an apology.

“What will you do until we reach the forests?” he asked.

The other shrugged.

“We’ll keep travelling, trying to spread the message about what’s happening.”

He sighed, looking out beyond the walls of the village and towards the distant coast and the fractured islands beyond.

“Maybe we’ll keep on travelling until we reach the King of Benevolent, maybe *he*’ll have a plan,” he lowered his eyes again. “Without Martin Strauss Mousk, the Mononoke clans are in disarray. We need heroes... we need people who can unite our fractured domains...”

Maus shifted his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“I can’t be a hero,” he answered, “and I know nothing of the Mononoke. I’m just a boy from Earth.”

The leopard growled softly, its lips pulled back from sharp, dangerous teeth.

Abyss said nothing but simply turned and began to walk slowly away, his cloak dancing about him in the gentle breeze of the early autumn wind. For a while, the leopard remained, eyes fixed upon Maus and then turned away as well, its powerful paws pushing down into the dirt and grass and its tail swishing from side to side.

Around him, the village erupted into debate and commotion, yet standing at the centre of the sand and dirt arena, Maus felt as if he were utterly alone.

Several weeks passed in which summer finally faded completely and autumn resumed its reign over the quiet human settlement towards the southernmost tip of the continent.

The wild boars, grown fat on lime bread and scraps and made tame by the constant presence of playful children and jovial farmers, began to retreat either into the forest in some cases, or closer to the hearths of the village’s ramshackle houses when permitted.

Madame Calohan, being of a kindly nature, turned a blind eye to the beasts as they crept in with assumed stealth through her door, piling up in front of the fire and blocking the warmth from the rest of the room regardless of her husband’s protests.

Despite the approaching autumn and the festivities of the winter festival, an odd malaise weighed upon the settlement, the words of their mysterious and unwelcome visitor hanging over the villagers like a fog of discontent.

None seemed truly comfortable with their place in the world, leaving many to speculate and some to act on the desire to return home, crossing over through the bridge back to Earth maintained by the mages of Orthen and taking with them a tiny fraction of both the settlement’s pride and its purpose.

The atmosphere within the village became quiet, subdued even and, all the while, Maus continued to deliberate.

Having committed himself, perhaps rashly, to a journey across the continent as the weather turned increasingly towards winter, he spent every waking hour practising his skill and finalising his *lecteur de tarot* deck.

Despite the rain, despite the wind, every day he stood outside in the small dirt circle, constantly pushing his ability with every technique and every item in his deck.

Night and day, he remained within the boundaries of the Field of Play, sometimes focusing his attacks on the ground before him and sometimes fighting any stray beast that was foolish enough to wander within range and remain in his line of sight for too long.

Of the village’s other *lecteur de tarot* players, none challenged him.

Within the warmth of his study, the candle casting his shadow large across the dust covered volumes of ancient knowledge and the cluttered desk at which he sat, Albert Weisz watched the movements of his youngest pupil with more than a little sadness.

The game of *lecteur de tarot* was a complex and many textured tradition, originating with the Mononoke and eventually earning popularity in Eoz before its adoption by SUNNY Corporation as a means to gain additional revenue from the discovery of the new world.

The central appeal of the game was its facilitation of fantastic tasks and the appeal of being able to customise the deck one used to individual tastes. Although only the eldest of Mononoke knew its original purpose, the appeal for many humans lay in the fact that the cards were often shorthand for complex and time-consuming magical rituals, many of which were lost to the sands of time.

Both Mononoke and human decks differed in the spells they represented and, despite both stemming from similar

decks, the three occupations open to players of each race were strikingly different.

Within s'Hertogenbosch, the most popular occupation was that of *trainer*, an occupation involving the care of beasts and animal spirits and their use as summoned soldiers in the Field of Play, whereas in the village of Orthen, the occupation of *mage* was more popular.

Somewhere in between came the *hero* class, of which there were very few.

Watching the young boy's movements and the manner in which he used his cards it was obvious that despite his experience, he still had not settled upon an occupation.

With a weary sigh, Albert Weisz rose up from his desk, taking hold of a simple candleholder and, as his thumb slipped inside the golden loop and fingers beneath the base, the old magician made his way to the door and stepped out into the cold night air.

Maus turned the edge of his *bokutō* upward through the air, drops of rain falling from the wooden sword as he twisted once more, striking out against imaginary enemies.

"Maus," the old man called out as he crossed the distance from his house to the arena, "Maus, don't you think you've done enough for tonight?"

The boy straightened, dropping his arm and allowing the sword to dissipate into particles of drifting light. With trembling hands, he reached up and removed his masque, revealing a face flushed with exertion and hair damp with sweat.

"N-No, sir," he said, his voice shaking, "I have to practise more. I want to make sure that I've done all I can here before I begin my journey."

The flickering of the candle cast the boy's face in golden light, heavy shadows beneath his eyes, betraying the intensity with which the child had been training his powers.

The old man sighed sadly, reaching up with a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"You're still intent on following in our reckless visitor's footsteps then?"

The boy's back stiffened slightly.

"No, sir, I plan on surpassing him," he answered fiercely.

Weisz arched an eyebrow.

"Whatever do you mean, my child?"

The boy turned away, looking down at the wooden box bound to his wrist, the simple piece of machinery that identified him as a *lecteur de tarot* player.

"I don't want to be like him," he answered, his voice trembling with emotion, "I don't want to become so angry and twisted inside.

"I want to do the *right* thing."

The magician nodded slowly.

"Sometimes," he said, his voice little more than a whisper, "doing the right thing can be the most difficult of the choices open to you."

The boy sighed dejectedly, pushing a hand back through his damp hair, his shoulders sagging.

"I notice," the old man said with a cautious smile, "that you are still using the original *lecteur de tarot* deck you inherited upon your arrival here."

"Yeah," Maus said fondly, looking down at the buckle of the simple utility belt he wore, "I still haven't been able to decide which one to pick."

The old man exhaled, rocking back upon the heels of his slippers and smiling cheerfully.

"If you'll forgive me for making a suggestion but what with how well Luc has been progressing with his magical study and how Shugo seems to have developed such an affinity with animals, would it not be worth considering the *hero* deck?"

"I can't be a hero," the boy reiterated once more with a shrug.

"Have you considered that such a path might be easier with the help of friends? Indeed, the entire journey in which you so foolishly insist on undertaking might be less arduous in the company of others."

Maus flashed him a confused frown.

"I don't understand, sir."

"Let us again use Shugo and Luc as an example. One has dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the study of magic and alchemy and will before any of us know it I suspect, be ready to graduate from this small community and take on duties with a master magician in Orthen.

"The other has, through optimism, luck and blind faith built up such a rapport with the spirits of his deck that he radiates a certain presence that calms wild beasts and tames even the fiercest animals. Why, even my own much-maligned pet cockatrice, Penmaenmawr seems to have begrudgingly come to accept him.

"If such a situation were to take place that you found yourself under attack from an evil witch or ronin-mage then Luc would be a worthy ally to have by your side.

"Likewise, should you find yourself accosted by the Benevolent or pounced upon by wild crocotta or karura then Shugo would fight with all his strength to protect you."

Doubtfully, Maus looked away, studying the wooden beams and plaster of the houses, his eyes roaming across every curious little house as if in some way he wished to preserve the image of s'Hertogenbosch in his mind.

The old man delved within the sleeves of his robes and produced a fresh set of cards, bound together by the addition

of a golden clasp.

"In turn, the benefits of becoming a hero would allow your powers to benefit *them*."

The boy looked hesitantly up at the sealed cards held in the older man's hand.

"I don't know if that's me," he said quietly.

With patience, the magician reached out and took the boy's hand in his, gently placing the sealed deck in the palm of his hand.

"Nonetheless, embarking on such a journey is a heroic act, young Maus," he said softly, "I may be consumed by anxiety at the prospect of your departure but never doubt the fact that I am proud of you."

He smiled, his blue eyes twinkling amongst the wrinkles and lines of his aged face.

"You have put an old man to shame with your courage, my boy so please consider this deck to be my gift to you. Even if you never use them, I feel they will be in good keeping should they remain with you and, if you decide that such a path is not for you then you can return them to me when next we meet."

Maus turned the deck over, studying the cards with curiosity.

"I guess it can't hurt to take them with me," he smiled, "as a safety precaution, I mean. The last thing I want is for you to leave them out one night and for Penmaenmawr to try eating them."

The old man nodded.

"Quite so! That impatient and pedantic cockatrice does indeed have a voracious appetite."

He smiled and straightened his back, adding in a low, quiet voice, "Thank you, Maus for humouring this old man's eccentricities."

The boy shrugged and looked embarrassed.

"It's no problem," he murmured quietly.

Weisz nodded and smiled.

"Now, if you'll forgive me for such a suggestion, I do believe that it's way past any sort of reasonable bed time."

He patted the child on the head and waved his farewells, turning back toward the old house with the candle to light his way through the darkness.

"Don't stay awake too long, young man," he called over his shoulder, "sleeping in would be a bad sort of way to start a heroic journey."

Maus nodded.

"I'll try," he said in a distracted manner, his eyes fixed upon the deck of cards in his hand.

Around him, sleepy s'Hertogenbosch was silent once again, the final light going out and leaving him utterly alone. From the fields beyond and the groves of lime trees that lined the path to the village gate, came the chirping sound of cicadas.

He sighed and dropped the deck unopened into the right breast pocket of his shirt before carefully arranging his heavy cloak over it with meticulous care, just as his mother had shown him all those years ago.

Slowly, he lifted his head, cast his eyes up and looked directly at the squat, rounded moon that hung low over the tall houses of the village.

Was this the same moon that could be seen from Earth, he wondered; was this the same moon that hid behind clouds high above Shepherd's Bush and Ravenscourt Park?

He slipped his hand into a trouser pocket and drew out a handful of second edition basic cards, some sugar mice wrapped in crumpled paper and his father's tea stained, six-year-old Oyster card.

It had been so long since he had seen London that all he had were half-remembered impressions; the warm air that rushed up on Underground tube platforms as a train passed, the sight of fairy lights blinking over Oxford Street in winter and the smell of warm cakes and sweet bread from Chinatown.

He smiled sadly and slipped them back into his pocket, wondering quietly if it was s'Hertogenbosch he was fighting for or some half-remembered dream of a larger city on a distant world.

A flicker of moonlight played at his feet and, with alarm, he suddenly sensed a presence behind him.

Instinctively, he dropped his hand down to the belt buckle, flipping it open as he turned and drawing out a thin playing card, his right arm rising up to bring the *lecteur de tarot* reader within reach.

Abruptly he stopped, lowering his arms, a frown upon his face.

Standing on the dirt path beyond the gate at the far end of the village was a ragged looking bear, a foot shorter than he was, and with glistening eyes and a damp nose. Had it not been for the wrinkles of the animal's snout and the thin whiskers then Maus might have completely mistook him for a soft toy of sorts.

He smiled sadly at the boy, gently lifting up a paw and waving slowly at him.

With a look of startled confusion, Maus slowly raised his own hand and waved in return without quite understanding why.

There was another flicker of moonlight before him, momentarily capturing his attention and, when he returned his eyes to the gate, all signs of the Mononoke bear had faded completely.

Silently, the young boy stood once more in shadow, bewildered and confused.

Card Two

He left the village early in the morning on the day after, packing a small rucksack full of previously brought provisions and additional *lecteur de tarot* cards.

In his pocket, wrapped up in a spotted handkerchief, he kept the *hero* deck Albert Weisz had given him, its seal still unbroken.

He told no one of his departure, not wishing to complicate the jumble of emotions he already felt about leaving.

For so long s'Hertogenbosch had been like a home to him. Even though he still remembered the cold rain and the dour grey of London and even though he still yearned for the sounds and noise of that dream-like city of his youth, he had felt at home in s'Hertogenbosch.

Sadly, he turned upon the path, the lime trees casting long shadows on the ground before him as the sun rose overhead.

He looked fondly at the ring of houses and the large gate at its mouth. The first wisps of smoke rose from the chimneys and the wild boar, already awake, shuffled out from the cover of neighbouring woodland and towards the scent of breakfasts cooking upon countless hearths by diligent mothers.

With sudden sorrow, the boy realised just how much he would miss the small village at the southernmost tip of the continent. Despite the sorrow of the occasion, he was not sad to leave.

He had known happiness and contentment within the tiny settlement but he had also become restless, his spirit yearning for something more than the quiet, peaceful pace of life in the village, enlivened only by confrontation with other *lecteur de tarot* players.

Reaching down into his pocket, he once more drew out the cards from his pocket, unknotting the handkerchief and staring at the sealed deck. Would it be possible for him to master such a deck, he wondered. Did he have the skill and technique to elevate himself to such a level?

Of the three primary professions, or *classes* as they were oft called, the *hero* deck was renowned both for its rewards and for its difficulty. Because of the nature of the game's structure, the cards in his palm did not simply constitute a complete set by themselves; rather they were designed to replace specific cards in his standard deck, thus providing a greater level of flexibility.

The key to *lecteur de tarot* was the creation of a deck that reflected the game player's personality and style. Adhering rigidly to one set of cards led to the cultivation of weaknesses.

Once more, he wrapped the cards up in their handkerchief and slipped them back into his pocket, lifting his head up again and regarding the village.

His own current deck was nothing more than the standard hand all humans inherited upon crossing the great bridge that stretched out from the London of the real world to the magical village of Orthen. In the years he had lived away from Earth, he had made no additions or subtractions, simply focusing on developing his skill with what he'd originally been given.

Whilst his friends had graduated into different classes and many others had adopted cards from a variety of classes, some even from the Mononoke decks, Maus had remained focused on his basic deck and the cultivation of both his fighting skill and his relationship with the Guardian Deity, Uriel.

The idea of changing those cards now filled him with dread and terror. The basic deck he had inherited was his last connexion with a life he had left behind; they were the last relic of an era in which his parents had lived.

A sad smile touched his lips as the wind gently blew his fringe of hair over his eyes, hiding what might have been tears.

Suddenly, from the picture of quiet pastoral peace before him, he caught sight of two figures, both roughly his own age and both running at great speed towards him.

He swiftly brushed both hair and tears from his eyes, his smile widening as he saw Shugo, weighed down by a great rucksack yet buoyed up by a fierce looking boar and Luc, running with difficulty alongside him, waving his arms frantically.

Maus smiled broadly and, as they approached, he called out to them.

“What brings you two out so early in the morning?”

His heart felt lighter with the expectation of that which he already knew.

“Idiot!” Shugo called in response, jumping down from the boar and sending it on its way with a pat on the head, “As if you don’t know!”

Luc hurried along after him, breathless from the weight of the large spell book he carried upon his back.

“Maus!” he chided breathlessly, resting his hands upon his knees, “I can’t believe you tried to leave without us!”

Maus blinked in surprise.

“I didn’t know you were coming with me,” he answered, and then looking down at his feet, added, “I didn’t want to ask you. After all, I really don’t know why I’m doing this at all... it just, well, it just felt like the right thing *to* do, I guess.”

Shugo scowled darkly, sulkily pushing his hands deep in his pockets.

“We heard what that guy said yesterday as well, you know. It’s not just you who wants to do the right thing,” he looked away, glaring fiercely at the horizon, “besides didn’t old Albert give you a hero deck and that same old talk about people of different skills working together?”

A guilty look crossed Maus’ face, lines of doubt forming upon his forehead.

“Yeah, he did,” the boy murmured quietly, “but I’m not sure if I’m going to use it yet.”

Shugo’s head snapped round, his expression one of incredulity.

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” he cried loudly, “Maus, it’s a *hero* deck! Those cards are awesome!”

The other boy felt his face redden.

“If it’s so great why don’t you use it then?” he snapped angrily.

Swiftly, Luc stepped in, smiling nervously and placing himself between the two friends.

“Perhaps this isn’t the most auspicious way to begin a journey?” he said with a polite, if not uncertain laugh.

His friends glowered at one another and then slowly, Maus relaxed.

“You’re right, Luc,” he said, “I guess I’m just feeling a little anxious about stuff.”

He turned away and looked at the long winding path through the fields and hills that led away from the village and towards Orthen.

“It seems like suddenly there’s all this pressure about what’s important and how I should achieve that and I’m lost in the middle, trying to make sense of it.”

Luc placed a hand on his friend’s arm.

“Maus, I’m sure Mister Weisz wasn’t trying to confuse you.”

The other boy sighed.

“I know... I just don’t know what to say about this deck of cards he gave me. I just don’t feel like a *hero*, you know.”

Shugo shrugged.

“Then don’t use them, dude. Problem solved.”

The other boy looked over at him with a rueful smile.

“Is life always that easy for you?” he asked.

The trainer shrugged once more and smiled.

“Of course,” he remarked, putting his hands behind his head, “where I come from, it *pays* to be laid back.”

Luc groaned and rolled his eyes.

“This isn’t going to turn into another story about where you grew up, is it?” he whimpered, pulling the hefty book free and cradling it in his arms.

Shugo scowled at him, his cheerful charm fading with displeasure.

“You guys are just jealous because you both lived in cities on Earth. I bet you’ve never even seen a beach.”

“That’s not true,” Maus countered with a smile, knowing that his response would only agitate the other boy further, “I went to Southend once.”

“Southend!” Shugo proclaimed, “Don’t talk to me about Southend! That’s not a beach!”

Luc giggled behind his book and, with a smile, and the agitated protests of Shugo, the three friends began their journey into a wider world.

They continued down the road, laughing and joking with one another as they travelled, oblivious of the weight of their

packs and simply happy to be out beneath the endless blue sky.

Of the three of them, only Luc showed any kind of hesitation about their journey, his hands and eyes frequently returning to his book of spells and the map of the land he had stuck to the inside cover of the great volume.

Like Maus, Luc was a product of Earth's industrial culture. His early childhood had been spent in an expensive quarter of Paris, his father an entrepreneur of some repute and his mother a former fashion model from Hong Kong.

When given the choice of a practical education at a boarding school or an apprenticeship within SUNNY Corporation's settlements in the Mononoke lands, the young boy had made his decision without hesitation. It had only been the years of study, and his awareness of how deep magic ran beneath the unconquered lands, that made the young boy any less impulsive than his companions.

As they traversed the long road leading out of the village, past fields of open land and the occasional farm, they eventually found that slowly, on either side, the woodland became thicker and thicker. Fir trees and holly bushes waiting for the dawn of winter, sprung up with increasing frequency, as did the presence of hawthorns and the familiar London Plane trees so recognisable from their station overhanging the pavement of many a London street.

Haunting the treetops was a parliament of fowl, from the inconspicuous lark and sparrow to the belligerent crow and raven.

Both the pace of their walking and their conversation slowed as they passed beneath the overhanging branches of the trees, birds of every sort calling out and following them with dark eyes.

"Do you ever get the feeling...?" Luc asked cautiously.

"That they're talking about us?" Shugo completed his friend's sentence and then nodded grimly, "Yeah, they *are*."

"What are they saying?" Maus asked, craning his neck to see the birds as they called out to one another.

Shugo shrugged in an agitated manner.

"I don't know," he said sulkily, "I only have a standard version of card #19 and no actual bird spirit to translate for me."

Luc raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you got into a fight with Penmaenmawr so you could replace your training card with a cockatrice?"

The other boy glowered darkly, pulling down the brim of his baseball cap further.

"I lost," he sulked.

"Isn't the correct term for birds supposed to be *class aves*?" Maus asked suddenly.

Shugo frowned slightly.

"I think so," he murmured, straining his memory to recall everything he had learnt about birds before enrolling as a trainer.

"And isn't one of the Mononoke tribes called Class Aves?" Maus continued, his voice trembling slightly.

Shugo glanced up at the trees, taking note of the many different species, cawing and crying out as they passed above.

"Oh shit," he said softly.

The raucous din of the birds became louder and louder.

"I think we should run," Luc said suddenly, holding onto his book for dear life.

"I think you're right!" Shugo agreed.

With a sudden cry of instantaneous alarm, the three boys broke into a sprint, their feet hammering against the dirt path and their bags slamming hard into their backs as they raced along beneath the overhanging trees.

All around them, the cries of the birds became increasingly agitated, each squawk more excitable than the last.

"Why are they so angry?" Maus cried out breathlessly, his arms pumping at his sides as his feet carried him forward.

"I have no idea!" Shugo shouted, turning quickly towards Luc, "Hey, do you know if this is Mononoke land or something? Where we suppose to ask permission before coming through here?"

The young mage shook his head frantically.

"This is the path the wagons from Orthen and Farlas come down," he protested, his eyes wide with fear, "there's no reason for them to be so angry with us!"

He cried out suddenly as a large, vicious looking magpie swooped down, inches from his head.

Shugo stopped abruptly, turning amongst the hail of feathers and snapping open his belt buckle.

"I'm not having this," he said with determination, his face hardening into an expression of resolve.

Before the magpie could manoeuvre itself to make a second pass, the young boy in the black baseball cap with the simple silver cross stitched on its front, reached up with his card and sliced it swiftly through the *lecteur de tarot* device bound to his wrist.

Light flashed, particles of spirit energy streaming forward and resolving into the shape of an agitated billy goat, its hooves stamping against the dry soil and its horns lifted to the heavens.

"Bradfield!" Shugo called out, pointing up towards the magpie as it swooped down again, "Repel those birds!"

The goat snorted loudly and rose up onto its hind legs, thrusting its head up and knocking the magpie back with its horns.

From the beast's left, a massive rook swept forward, cawing loudly and spreading its wings wide. Without blinking, the goat turned, knocking it away before moving back to deflect the attack of a similarly sized crow from the right.

"Stop!" roared a fierce voice from within the tumultuous gathering of birds, "Stop this foolishness at once!"

Both Maus and Luc, standing several steps further along the path, returned to stand at their friend's side as, before them, the crowd of birds parted to reveal a large snowy white owl sitting upon a low branch of a fir tree, dark eyes like coal amidst the spotted white feathers.

Maus swallowed hard, recognising it instantly as *Mononoke* despite his inexperience with the species. There was often an unusual variance of size with Mononoke, some seeming smaller than their earthly counterparts whilst others seemed unusually large. The owl was relatively average in size and would have been able to pass as a native on that distant world had it not been for the fierce, burning intelligence of those dark eyes.

The Mononoke gazed at them with dark eyes, inclining the head forward slightly in a bow.

“Greetings, human travellers,” he proclaimed in a deep voice, “I am Valentinus, emissary of the Parliament of Crows.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Shugo shouted, his voice raw and his face flushed with anger, “Why did you attack us?”

The owl stared at him for a moment, as if considering addressing the manner in which he spoke but instead refrained, choosing only to answer the question posed.

“We have been ordered by parliamentary decree to prevent all humans from leaving their settlements and journeying to rendezvous with their comrades in the north,” he said simply, “please turn back so that we do not have to enforce these measures more stringently.”

“What about the boy you let through here a while back?” Maus said, stepping forward, his eyes meeting those of the owl.

“That boy,” remarked the owl loftily, “was in the presence of the King of the South. Our mandate does not run to arguments with monarchy.”

Maus and Shugo exchanged a worried glance.

“King... of the South?” Shugo repeated slowly.

“O-Oberon,” Luc whispered, his voice trembling, “t-that leopard at the boy’s side was King *Oberon!*”

A frown crossed Maus’ brow, his heart quickening with sudden anxiety.

“Luc,” he said calmly, “who’s Oberon?”

The young mage turned to look fearfully at his companions, his lips forming words yet no sound reaching their ears.

“He is a powerful Mononoke king,” the owl said gravely, his deep voice resounding through the trees, “following the ancient war between the Mononoke and Eoz, when first the aged Empress ruled over that nation, Oberon was the most damning in his condemnation of humanity.

“It was he who lobbied the other kings for harsher punishment of the soldiers of Eoz and it was he who resisted the foundation of a new kingdom of Eoz presided over by the Empress’ daughter and aided by Mononoke advisors.

“He is a dread and terrible force. If you have met him and he has not revealed his identity then all the more reason you have to fear his wrath.”

“Ancient war?” Maus murmured, “You mean there really were humans here before SUNNY Corporation?”

The bird clicked its tongue loudly in his beak, a sharp, derisive sound as he turned his hard eyes toward Maus.

“Yes, boy,” he remarked, his voice low and threatening, “the fields and forests of these lands have a greater history than promoted in the settlers’ records.

“There have been humans here for almost as long as there have been Mononoke, the world that you come from is not the archetype to which all others must follow.”

He turned his head toward the trembling magician’s apprentice, glaring at him with dark eyes.

“You there, mage, you know this to be true, do you not?”

Hesitantly, Luc nodded.

“Y-Yes sir,” he stammered, his expression fraught, “Mister Weisz taught me to read the runes of the language of Ealdwīc... though I can’t pronounce any of them, he taught me their meaning. I read the history of Eoz and about His Majesty, King Oberon.”

“Hey,” Shugo murmured, nudging the younger boy in the side, “why didn’t you tell us about any of this?”

The other boy looked sheepishly away.

“I wasn’t sure how to tell you,” he whispered, “the idea that this world is *real*, that it’s not just some fantasy constructed by SUNNY Corporation and that everything here has its own path of existence changes everything.”

The magician lifted his head up, his eyes intent.

“We know nothing of this place. We’ve been convinced to pay for passports to an alien world and we don’t even know its name, let alone its history,” he laughed and shook his head sadly, “how do you explain that to someone?”

Shugo smirked and adjusted his cap.

“Just tell them you’ve found out something awesome,” he said, “tell them that Earth sucks and being a settler is a bigger adventure than they ever imagined. Problem solved.”

Luc stared at him with incredulity.

“You can’t be serious,” he murmured.

The other boy nodded, straightening up.

He was at least a year older than Luc and Maus and, when he could refrain from slouching, he was almost a head taller.

Whilst he was far from being the most intelligent of children, there was a genuine honesty about his nature and a strong belief in standing up for those weaker than him. This made Shugo instantly both loved and reviled amongst his peers.

Standing tall with dark brown hair pushed back beneath his cap and a warm complexion, he was the perennial big brother, unshakable in his faith and unrelenting in exacting justice on behalf of his younger siblings.

"I'm deadly serious," he answered softly, "I didn't leave Earth just to become a farmer."

Maus smiled, pulling down his masque and opening up his own belt buckle.

"Which means then that all we need to do is fight our way out of this, right?"

The summoned goat stamped its hooves against the soil impatiently, glaring at the gathered birds in the trees and calling out a fierce challenge to them.

Luc shook his head.

"This is madness," he whispered, his face pale with fright, "these aren't normal birds, they're *Mononoke!*"

Shugo loosened his shoulders, rolling his head like a boxer preparing for the fight.

"I've fought Mononoke *leonhearts* before," he smirked, "I'm not going to let some crazy parliament of birds tell me what to do!"

The owl's eyes widened in terrible anger, his beak clicking and his snowy white wings spread wide.

"Your overconfidence is your weakness," he roared fiercely, "do you really think we would allow you to both insult our pride and pass here to meet with your friends in the forest? You are mistaken!"

"Wait!" Luc cried suddenly thrusting his arm out to prevent his two friends from acting hastily. His eyes met those of the great owl and asked, "What do you mean by our 'friends in the forest'?"

"The soldiers," Valentinus hissed with fury, "Cale's soldiers!"

Shugo stared at him for a moment and then, with a low whistle, shook his head gently from side to side.

"Idiot," he smirked, "why would we want to team up with a bunch of soldiers? We're going to the phantom forests to help you guys!"

The owl blinked hesitantly, his expression softened yet his feathers remained ruffled.

Maus lifted up the wooden masque once more.

"We heard what the traveller Abyss said and we want to help," he said earnestly, "just because we're settlers doesn't mean that we don't care about what happens here. This is our home too."

The owl lowered its wings, staring hard into the boy's eyes.

"Perhaps I have misjudged you," he said quietly, "nonetheless we cannot allow you to pass through here without a challenge."

The owl turned his head unnervingly around until his deep, piercing eyes rested on the fidgeting magpie that had initially attacked them.

"Ezekiel," he said softly, "you will fight the trainer's goat familiar."

Shugo glanced from the agitated goat at his side to the large magpie sitting in the branches of a nearby tree.

Once more, the owl's head turned and his gaze fell upon the three travellers.

"If you can defeat Ezekiel then he will serve as your guide until you reach the phantom forest. If you are defeated then, without question or protest, you will turn from this path and return to your village."

"Be careful," Luc hissed anxiously.

Shugo smiled and stretched his arms, rolling his head slightly to ease the tension from his shoulders.

"You don't need to worry so much, Luc," he offered a casual smile over his shoulder, "me and Bradfield have fought loads of animals in the wild. We're more than up to this."

"Luc's right," Maus offered, "don't underestimate these guys."

Ignoring him, the older boy stepped forward, shuffling the cards from his belt into his hand and preparing to fight.

"All right," he called out to the birds, his voice echoing amongst the trees, "we'll fight, but don't blame me if you get your feathers all ruffled in the process."

Without deigning to reply, the large magpie spread its wings wide and dived down towards the goat.

Instinctively, Shugo drew a card from the deck and tore it through the device bound to his wrist.

"Bradfield!" he shouted, directing the course of the energy not towards himself but rather in the direction of his summoned familiar, "*GUTS UP! FIGHTING SPIRIT!*"

The beast rose up on its back legs, shaking free flecks of sparkling, golden light from its coarse fur, as raw spirit energy suffused its whole being.

The magpie accelerated, a shield of its own spirit aura igniting before it, transforming the bird into an arrow of flesh and light.

With a snort, Bradfield stepped back and the bird skimmed the ground, the light of its aura tearing a deep trench into the soil as it headed toward Shugo and then, at the last minute, tore away into the sky again, looping over and preparing for another strike.

Undaunted, Shugo pulled free a second card, sliding it swiftly through the card reader with a similar spark of illumination.

"*Focus Chi!*" he commanded.

Agitated, Bradfield stomped heavy hooves against the soil but yielded nonetheless, closing its yellow eyes and gathering its strength, the golden light of its own aura growing like a flame taking to kindle.

Shugo felt his heart hammering in his chest, his palms damp with sweat as he clutched hold of the deck with one hand and tightened the other into a fist before releasing it once more in an unconscious display of nervous energy.

The card used was a technique from the basic human deck, a means of channelling reserves of hidden spirit power for use in battle. It was the same card that human *lecteur de tarot* players used before transformation into a Guardian Deity; a gathering of spirit in the face of danger. Therein lay the disadvantage.

In order to harness such spirit power, the user was forced to place themselves in imminent danger, focusing all their

senses on meditation rather than the external foe that may, even as they prayed, be rushing forward to deliver the finishing blow.

His eyes darted from the goat to the magpie, its beak open in a furious cry as it descended from on high once more, aiming the burning arrowhead of energy directly at Bradfield.

“Come on, Bradfield,” he whispered softly, “don’t let me down.”

The bird grew closer and closer and suddenly the goat’s eyes flashed open, fierce yellow staring ahead at the descending threat.

Without waiting, Shugo turned over his next card and slashed it through the *tarot* reader.

“Bradfield!” he shouted again, thrusting his palm out, “*ASCENSION!*”

Flames of ethereal gold exploded from the goat’s aura, its horns lengthening into curls of bone as a tremble ran through its flesh. The stout legs lengthened and its shoulders broadened until the beast was several times its original size.

The magpie squawked in panic, struggling to turn away but it was too late.

Shugo sliced another card through his *lecteur de tarot* device and, as the goat lifted its head to regard the panicking magpie, he cried out, “Bradfield, *SHADOW-LESS KICK!*”

The goat turned its back toward the descending bird, desperately struggling to avoid a collision course. With one swift kick so fast and so powerful that no shadow could be traced upon the dirt path, the goat’s hooves slammed into the bird and sent it spiralling backwards into the air with an indignant cry.

At the last moment, it recovered its balance and landed awkwardly on a branch at the top of Valentinus’ own tree.

“I... am defeated,” the bird said slowly, blinking his dark eyes and struggling to regain composure.

The large owl nodded his head in disgruntled agreement.

“Very well,” he sighed angrily, “you may pass through here on your path to the forest. Ezekiel will remain at your side however and, should you show any signs of treachery or an inclination to join the human Cale and his army, he will bring down the wrath of every bird in the kingdom upon you.”

Shugo smirked, looping his thumbs through his belt holes and affecting an air of smug confidence.

“I think that me and Bradfield will be able to handle whatever you birds throw at us,” he sneered.

Valentinus’ eyes narrowed, his feathers ruffled.

“Which isn’t to say that we’re looking for another fight,” Luc said hastily, “just that Shugo is confident in his deck, that’s all.”

“Do not tempt fate, children,” Valentinus whispered softly, “Class Aves is a noble and respected house of the Old Kingdom. We will not tolerate mockery.”

Shugo’s smile died on his lips.

“Sorry,” he murmured quietly, all his bravado now forgotten.

The owl nodded once more and looked up towards the young magpie resting at the top of the tree. As the bird began to speak, Maus found that he could no longer think of it as an *it* but rather was forced to concede that it was a *he*, just like the large owl that had first confronted them on their journey out from the village.

“You understand the task you are charged with, Ezekiel?” Valentinus asked.

The magpie fanned the dark blue feathers of his tail and blinked in annoyance.

“I understand, sir,” he answered reluctantly.

Maus looked from one to the other, feeling an odd sort of compassion for the magpie and his reluctance to embark on the journey.

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” he said, deliberately ignoring Valentinus and staring directly at the other bird, “I know that I wouldn’t be going on this journey if I didn’t feel that I had to, so please don’t feel you have to come along for my sake.”

He turned towards Shugo and Luc and smiled sadly.

“That goes for you guys as well.”

“Idiot!” Shugo said loudly, reaching out and slapping a hand lightly against the back of Maus’ head, “We’re in this for the long haul. After all, you didn’t think we’d let you run off and have all the adventures by yourself, did you?”

Ezekiel opened his beak to answer but find himself silenced by a withering glare from Valentinus.

“Whilst your magnanimous nature does you credit, young man, you are not in a position to provide dispensation for Ezekiel’s inability to defeat your colleague. He shall accompany you on your journey or suffer consequences most dire.”

The magpie bowed his head.

“I understand,” he said and spread his wings.

Without warning, he swept down from the tree and landed upon Maus’ right shoulder, who to his credit, did not flinch at the bird’s swift movement or at the sharp depression of its clawed feet.

“We will not detain you any further,” Valentinus said impatiently, turning away on his branch, “do not tarry here. Whilst you may have won passage from here to the lands beyond, we must still be watchful for agents of Cale Corporation. Your continued presence here does nothing but hinder our ability to perform that which we have been charged with.”

Luc bowed low and, upon realising that both Shugo and Maus were just standing there, reached out and pulled them down.

“Thank you, sir,” the young mage said politely, “we are honoured to have your blessing.”

Valentinus did not reply, his eyes facing towards the distant shape of s'Hertogenbosch and the slow, rising trails of smoke in the mid-day air.

Hurriedly, Luc ushered his friends away and, together, they began once more upon their journey.

Omake

みなさん、こんにちは。私の名前は URIEL である。喜ばされる会うために。私は保護者の神である。

Today, I am going to teach you the basics of the *lecteur de tarot* card battling system. Please select an option from the following menu:

- **Introduction to lecteur de tarot**
- **Choosing your deck**
- **Creating your character**
- **Starting your game**
- **The class system**
- **Equipment and items**
- **Fields of Play**
- **Conclusion**

INTRODUCTION TO LECTEUR DE TAROT

The *lecteur de tarot* card system is a game designed for two or more players. Each player has a deck of 78 cards. These cards are divided into two primary groups, Major Arcana and Minor Arcana. There are 22 cards in the Major Arcana and 56 in the Minor Arcana.

The Major Arcana consists of special attack and defence patterns and six special Ultima Cards, which are often unique to a specific species or character. The Minor Arcana is divided into four specific suits: **Wands** (weaponry), **Cups** (devices), **Swords** (swords) and **Pentacles** (armour).

Each card in a deck has its own stats that define the way it works. These stats are broken down into four specific categories:

- **AP (Action Points)** – This defines how many turns a single card remains in play.
- **CHI** – This indicates how much of the player's CHI energy a card consumes when in use.
- **EXP** – This indicates how much experience each card has accrued during play.
- **SP (Special Points)** – These are unique points that are collected during play. When the required amount has

been reached, the player may trigger a specific Ultima Card attack in his or her hand. Unless modified, SP is reset to zero at the beginning of each match.

In order to play *lecteur de tarot* successfully you will need to use a combination of Major and Minor Arcana cards. The Minor Arcana suits Wands and Swords use several six sided dice (D6) to attack. All level one characters (Lv1) roll with a basic, unassisted attack of 1d6 but many of the weapons cards in these suits will upgrade your character's attack power i.e. **CURSED SWORD (Sin Mage/Ace/Swords)** from the basic Sin Mage adds an extra D6 to the player's attack roll for as long as it is equipped. This means that the player will now roll with 2d6 in attack.

Standard Major Arcana cards use a combination of the player's current dice roll plus their character level and their current SP (i.e. if a Lv10 character with an SP of 9 is attacking with 4d6 and rolls 13, the final attack will be 32). These moves represent devastating techniques that have been learnt by the character through trial and error. As you progress through the world of *lecteur de tarot*, you will have the chance to learn new techniques and skills by acquiring new cards, some from other decks and some that commemorate special occasions or events. It is important to experiment with your deck and advance your cards. A player who remains with only his or her basic cards will soon find themselves confronted by opponents who vastly outstrip anything their decks have to offer. However, each change of your deck will cause subtle changes in your character. This will be clarified later on in this guide.

Ultima Cards, many of which require at least 10 SP, are unique. Unlike other skills, weapons and equipment, other races cannot learn these cards. It is possible to increase the number of Ultima Cards you have to choose from by learning the techniques of classes within your race, but it should be noted that whilst there is no limit as to how many Ultima Cards you can collect, a deck with more than six of these cards is invalid and cannot be fielded in play. Ultima Cards, unless specified otherwise, attack with a standard dice roll of 10d6.

At the end of each battle, EXP points will be awarded to cards used in play and to the player's character. Character levels range from Lv1 (HP: 200/CHI: 100/SP: 0) upwards, whilst the EXP acquired for cards is more structured, dividing at first into one of three basic levels: **Apprentice** (cards with EXP points up to 100), **Intermediate** (cards with EXP points of 101 to 500) and **Master** (cards with EXP points of 501 upwards). It is possible that, as decks continue to evolve, more levels will be discovered but at present, these are as yet unknown.

EXP is vital to the effectiveness of your cards. A basic equipment card such as **SHADOW STAFF (human/Ace/Wands)** will roll with more die and deal more damage at Master level than the equivalent card at Apprentice level. In much the same way, even the most basic of Apprentice cards can be used more successfully by a Lv100 character than a Lv1 character. Gaining experience is imperative for any player if he or she wishes to defeat an array of increasingly more powerful opponents.

Of course learning to work with allies and companions is also a significant development for players. A group of six players with little EXP will have an increased chance at defeating a single high-level opponent than if the player were to try to defeat the same enemy without assistance. Make friends with your fellow *lecteur de tarot* players and experiment with battle strategy. As a team, you will soon find that even the most daunting of tasks may be overcome. Many villains have fallen by underestimating the sheer power of friendship and co-operation.

CHOOSING YOUR DECK

When selecting which of the initial three decks to begin with it is important to remember that your choice will have important implications for the development of your character. The primary location for *lecteur de tarot* is in the virtual arenas (or Fields of Play) within *tarot-space*, a burgeoning world brought into existence by the sheer force of the CHI energy used to create the first *lecteur de tarot* decks hundreds of years ago. Since their inception the vast global zaibatsu, SUNNY Corporation have invested countless trillions of yen into the development of new systems and cards for *lecteur de tarot*. The most significant of these scientific achievements was the technology used to bridge the real world with the artificial portals of *tarot-space*.

Since the discovery, thousands of people have subscribed to SUNNY's *tarot-space*, making it a truly global and culture-spanning phenomenon. People of all ages and backgrounds have followed in the footsteps of the original adventurers and architects who began to build the first human towns and villages within *tarot-space* as early as 1983. The unique duality of the thousands of people who play *lecteur de tarot* has resulted in decks that are versatile and advantageous, featuring a balance of powerful physical attacks and skills to inflict untold damage upon opponents, traditional weaponry and clothing to protect from status effects and magical attacks and antique items to boost abilities whilst fighting.

The second race is a species indigenous to *tarot-space*, a curious collective of anthropomorphic and seemingly unreal

animals named Mononoke. The relationship between humans and Mononoke has always been slightly strained, although it is rumoured that prior to the foundations of modern villages in the new world there were once cities of a prior human civilisation in the distant lands beyond the eastern horizons of Eoz, but these areas have been treated as restricted for many years. The Mononoke are secretive and seemingly arrogant at times, their involvement with human players has been limited up until now, with only a number of exchanges taking place on disputed ground. Recently however, the Mononoke have been seen in greater numbers, though their attitude remains just as secretive as ever. Of the little that humans know of their decks it would appear that their cards are mostly constructed around the principles of healing and other perceived 'white' magics. If an alliance between human and Mononoke characters could be forged then the combination of human attack cards and Mononoke defence cards could progress the game to a new level.

The final known race of *tarot*-space have no specific name, human beings have only ever encountered one of their race. The creature has been recorded by history as a Sin Mage, a shadowy sorcerer composed of smoke and darkness with a deck driven by dark magic and curses.

The race you align yourself with and the deck you choose will shape your experiences in *tarot*-space. As you progress with the game and acquire new cards, you will have the opportunity to bolster your deck with cards from other races. Whilst you will be unable to master the Ultima Cards of another species, you may find that a deck featuring human weaponry and Sin Mage curses will give you a necessary edge against prospective adversaries. Experimentation with the style of your deck is certainly encouraged however, it should be noted that the number of cards from other races used over a prolonged amount of time will definitely influence the appearance and traits of your character. A human character with a deck comprised of 70% Sin Mage cards will certainly find him or herself on the path to transforming into a pure Sin Mage, whilst a Mononoke who equips solely human weapons and attacks will find that they have might begin to resemble the other race more and more in appearance and attitude. Evolution within *tarot*-space is an uncontrollable force and even warriors of the most human settlements may find themselves seduced by the powerful magics of the Sin Mage deck. Be comfortable with who you are and choose carefully.

CREATING YOUR CHARACTER

Three very important aspects will influence the character you play within *tarot*-space. These are as follows:

- **HP (Health Points)** – This indicates the amount of health a player has. When a player's HP is exhausted, the character dies and loses the match.
- **CHI** – CHI is the body's energy force expressed in physical manifestations. Often in battle, an enraged warrior will cast an aura of burning CHI about them or appear as if ghostly flames are consuming them. CHI is the energy by which many of Major Arcana attacks are released.
- **EXP** – This is the amount of experience your character has accrued during combat.

The basic stats for an entry-level character are fixed at certain points like thus:

- **Name:** Maus
- **Race:** human
- **Level:** 1
- **Deck:** human/basic
- **HP:** 200
- **CHI:** 100
- **EXP:** 0
- **SP:** 0

These stats will change over the course of the player's experience in *tarot*-space starting almost immediately. Different classes and races of opponents will obviously yield different amounts of EXP. Interacting as a member of a team involved in defeating powerful enemies whilst the player is still at a relatively low level will boost EXP significantly as points are distributed throughout the group at the end of combat. Even if a player fails and is defeated in combat, EXP may still be awarded though at a much-reduced rate.

In addition to these basic skills, there are a number of other factors that can be increased through the accumulation of EXP points and the acquisition of higher-level cards. These factors are directly related to the class system of each individual species, which will be explained later.

STARTING YOUR GAME

Once you have generated your character then you can begin your first match. As established earlier, *lecteur de tarot* is played mostly within the confines of a virtual world. Whilst creation of this universe was initially ascribed to human technology the presence of species such as the Mononoke cast a certain shadow upon these facts, suggesting that *tarot*-space may not have begun solely with human ingenuity and that it may possibly be part of a larger picture.

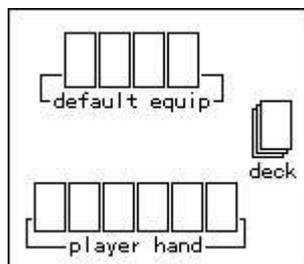
Within the universe, there are many towns and villages, some established by humans whilst others have remained the purest of Mononoke settlements, hostile to the intrusion of outsiders. Amongst these villages, sometimes in the most unlikely places, are numerous Fields of Play. These are the traditional arenas of *lecteur de tarot*, each has a different aesthetic, and a different number of bonuses for specific characters, an example of this is the phantom forests.

The forests that border the eastern lands of Eoz are charged with accumulated Earth CHI gathering in the branches of the dead trees that overcrowd the skies. Because of this build up of world energy, any characters with distinct magical skills or a deck based on the utilisation of magic, such as Sin Mages or human/mages, will gain an added bonus when playing. This is called a field bonus. A list of the current unearthed FoPs can be found towards the end of this tutorial.

The arena in which your duel takes place can be arrived at by one of two ways: one, you are challenged or ambushed whilst passing through the area or a location near by, or two, both players agree to duel and roll 2d6 to decide who goes first. The player with the highest score has the first turn and also may select the area in which the duel will take place. This is the more common method by which agreements are arrived at.

Once the FoP has been decided, both players will proceed to shuffle their decks and draw six cards into their hand. For the initial player these six cards are the sole starting point, more advanced players however will have the option at any time after their first match of choosing four cards to equip by default. These cards are removed from the deck prior to shuffling and are all Minor Arcana cards. The cards are placed face up and towards the opponent so your foe is aware of what kind of armour and weapon you are using, just as if he had challenged you in the real world.

Whilst in play, all *lecteur de tarot* decks are arranged into a default and familiar pattern, as demonstrated below:



During a turn you have the option to equip a card, play a Major Arcana card or attack with your basic roll plus any modifiers added by your equipment cards. You may also either discard a card from your hand and draw one from the top of the deck or draw a card to bring your hand up to the full compliment of six cards. An example of equipping items and weapons in a match between two Lv1 players is as follows:

[Player X (human/HP: 200/CHI: 100/SP: 0) vs. Player Y (Sin Mage/HP: 200/CHI: 100/SP: 0), Game #1:]

[TURN #1:]

- **Player X** equips **NIHONTO (human/4/Swords)** and draws a card from his deck.
- **Player Y** equips **CHI ROBES (Sin Mage/7/Pentacles)**. His CHI level of 100 is raised to 105. He draws another card from his deck.

[TURN #2:]

- **Player X** equips **YUKATA (human/2/Pentacles)**. His HP Level of 200 is raised to 205 and he now rolls with 3d6. He draws another card.
- **Player Y** uses **FOCUS CHI (Sin Mage/1/Magician)**. His CHI rises by 1 point. He draws another card.

[TURN #3:]

- **Player X** equips **MANEKINEKO (human/Ace/Cups)**, which allows him to now roll with 4d6. He draws another card.
- **Player Y** bides his time. **FOCUS CHI** continues.

[TURN #4:]

- **Player X** (SP rating: 2) performs a basic attack using **NIHONTO** and 4d6: He rolls 16. **Player Y** has no defence against physical attacks on his armour and thus loses 16 HP.
- **Player Y** (HP: 184) finishes **FOCUS CHI**. His CHI is now 208 and his SP is 6. He uses a basic attack with no equipped weapon and rolls with 1d6. He rolls a 2. **Player X** cannot defend against physical attacks.

As demonstrated in the diagram above four equipment cards may be equipped at any one time, unless otherwise specified, whilst characters are at Apprentice level. The standard formation for equipment is one weapon (**Wands** or **Swords**), one armour (**Pentacles**) and two device cards (**Cups**). Some cards, like **HAORI (human/4/Pentacles)** allow other weaponry cards to be equipped in place of a device card. It is important to find a balance that you are comfortable with. As soon as equipment cards have 1 EXP point they may be used as a default equip card.

Once equipment has been chosen (if not before), it is customary to begin the combat phase of your duel. Do not be disappointed if at first you do not triumph. It is important to keep trying. Customise your cards and your deck and, most importantly, *never give up*.

THE CLASS SYSTEM

The class system in *lecteur de tarot* represents a number of skills that can help further define your character whilst in *tarot-space*. To begin with, each race has three classes defined above the basic entry level but it is expected that more will be discovered as you progress and meet more unusual characters in the game. Class decks are composed partly of new edition versions of regular numbered cards, basic cards and special skill cards. New edition cards can be acquired by trading, completing pre-set missions and visiting the website on special festival days like Valentine's Day and New Year's Day.

Some new edition cards may seem minimal in what extra they have to offer the player, however each card, and each new fusion of old and new cards into the deck, presents different possibilities. An example of new edition cards is found in the human armour cards. In the human/basic deck **human/2/Pentacles** is the **KIMONO** card. **KIMONO** increases HP by 1 point and allows one additional D6 to be rolled against poison attacks. The second edition version of **human/2/Pentacles** is **YUKATA**, a card that increases HP by 1 point and allows one additional D6 to be rolled against confusion attacks. The use of variant cards represents new opportunities and brings a new dynamic to your deck. As always, it is important to experiment to discover which cards work best for you.

Special skill cards are slightly more complicated. The use of these cards however will allow for extra details to be added to your character information. Once special skill cards have reached Master level, players may choose to approach a Master level **Mononoke/mage** in order to burn the image of these skills into specified equipment cards that can be used in the default equip line up, thus allowing for further customisation of decks.

The class your character enters defines the kind of special skills you will encounter. Try to train in as many classes as possible in order to unlock your full potential as a *lecteur de tarot* dueller.

At Apprentice level the classes for each race are as follows:

human

- **human/basic** – The default deck that all human characters begin with in *tarot*-space. Includes **GUARDIAN DEITY URIEL (human/2/High Priestess)** (*that's me!*).
- **human/mage** – A selection of cards that emulate some of the more common Sin Mage magic techniques and introduce new kinds of magic for human players and magical enchanted equipment.
- **human/hero** – Additional cards containing many advanced fighting techniques and new weaponry for human characters including the first of a series of cards that allow for specialised **LEGENDARY ARMOUR (human/Knight/Pentacles)**.
- **human/trainer** – A deck focused not on physical strength or magical techniques but the training of native animals and Mononoke partners. All Sword cards in the trainer deck represent a secondary device selection as opposed to actual weapons as trainers may only equip Wand cards if entering combat.

Mononoke

- **Mononoke/basic** – The default deck that all Mononoke characters begin with in *tarot*-space. Many of the Mononoke cards are based around white magical techniques, healing rituals and co-operative cards used in addition to cards from human and Sin Mage decks.
- **Mononoke/mage** – The profession of the mages is the most significant in Mononoke culture. An ancient role with a deck based on ancient elemental – and often brutally destructive – magic cards, the mages are both the central figures of Mononoke village authority and outsiders destined to a life of isolation and meditation.
- **Mononoke/gijinka** – Outcasts from the Mononoke villages, the *gijinka* deck contains many cards and techniques adapted from the Apprentice level human classes, a fact that reflects the near-human appearance of these Mononoke. Often the children of the awkward union between Mononoke and human settlers, the *gijinka* deck favours physical power and strength over magic. Unlike the standard *gijinka trigger* Ultima technique of other Mononoke decks, the almost-human appearance of **Mononoke/gijinka** players is permanent.
- **Mononoke/leonheart** – Only the bravest of Mononoke train as leonhearts. With decks comprised of ancient Eoz machinery and weapons, and devastating summon cards, the leonhearts are the final line of defence for many Mononoke villages and outposts. Whilst not as common in the cities or larger urban areas due to the presence of higher Intermediate and Master Mononoke classes, the leonhearts have always held a special place in the safety of rural Mononoke settlements.

Sin Mage

- **Sin Mage/basic** – The only confirmed incarnation of the Sin Mages. In the only recorded encounter with the species dubbed *Sin Mages*, a single warrior destroyed the decks of five opponents and killed countless more. What little we know of this species comes from Mononoke folklore, much of which will be explored at a later date. The Sin Mage deck focuses on curses and dark magic techniques.
- **Sin Mage/puppet** – The puppets are legendary amongst *tarot*-space, often living alone in remote locations, appearing once every few years to attack any travellers or villages in the remote vicinity. Legend has it that once these fearsome creatures were the frontrunners of a Sin Mage invasion, commanding groups of standard Sin Mages in battle against the Mononoke. Their decks feature a fierce variety of devastating physical attacks as well as a specialised magic-based Ultima Cards. It is rumoured that no two puppets are ever the same.
- **Sin Mage/duke** – The third and fourth variations stem from stories that some believe predate the civilisation of Eoz. Beyond the phantom forests and the boundaries of Eoz, it is rumoured that Sin Mages gather high above the mountains in craft that are equal parts galleon and tree. Each craft has its own markings and lore as well as a court. Within this court, the dukes are the most vicious and vindictive, constantly striving to overcome one another for a chance to command vast armies of Sin Mages as the generals do. Their decks are allegedly a natural evolution of the standard Sin Mage cards, containing more advanced techniques and blasphemous familiar spirits.
- **Sin Mage/general** – According to myth, the generals rule their troops with brutality and cruelty. Answering only to the craft's royal family, the deck of the Sin Mage generals features brutal machines carved from sacred trees and cast in the deep furnaces of the earth alike. A terrifying fusion of summoning power and machinery, the Mononoke live in fear of the return of Sin Mage generals to *tarot*-space.

EQUIPMENT AND ITEMS

Many *lecteur de tarot* duels are won and lost by the selection of equipment cards. Despite the power of your magic or the ferocity of your attack, there is always the chance that your opponent may have the armour to deflect it or the weapon to block it. With this in mind, it is important to have a defensive strategy whilst playing in addition to powerful attacks. Device (**CUPS**) and armour (**PENTACLES**) cards are thus an important, if underrated, key to your success. Whilst it may seem superfluous to dedicate two blocks of cards to protection, these cards can change the very nature of the game you play. Once you venture outside of the starting village you will find many other players of different classes, many of whom may be hiding the full extent of their powers – fighting against Intermediate players will require skill and forethought for Apprentice characters.

As you progress through *tarot*-space you will begin to earn EXP, vital points that can be spent not only on the improvement of fighting techniques and magical spells but the amount of damage dealt by weapons and the effectiveness of armour and items. EXP used on these cards will be imperative as characters level up and seek to bind specific spells to a favourite weapon or shield, fuse items together or evolve armour that has outgrown its usefulness. Whilst you may be tempted to tip the balance of your deck in favour of attack rather than defence, never underestimate your device and armour cards... or the cards of your opponent.

FIELDS OF PLAY

The terrain of your battle may well prove the key to victory. The various Fields of Play, often abbreviated as FoPs, of *tarot*-space have numerous unique properties and histories, often adding or subtracting to the statistics of certain classes of characters. Each race in *tarot*-space has a natural environment and thus each race has its own element. It may be advantageous for players to take note of their surroundings before recklessly engaging in combat. If the elements and surroundings are against you then you will need to muster all of your skill in order to overcome. A group of friends, each one with a different class or from a different race, will find themselves much more versatile on the varied FoPs of *tarot*-space than a single player.

A list of the current available FoPs for Apprentice characters to visit follows:

- **s'Hertogenbosch** – The starting village for all human players and one of the first settlements in *tarot*-space maintained by humans. s'Hertogenbosch is a moderate village, slightly larger than some other human villages on the eastern continent but still quiet enough to retain the peacefulness and solemnity of rural settings. The main element for s'Hertogenbosch is **EARTH**, meaning that magics and weapons attuned to the land will gain an extra bonus of 1d6 in either defence or attack, depending on the classification of the item. All human characters gain 1 extra D6 in both attack and defence and 30 extra HP points whilst playing in s'Hertogenbosch.
- **Sighing Caves** – Caves rumoured to be haunted by the spirits of ancient Mononoke gods. It is rumoured that these caves are where **CAT SWORD (human/Page/Swords)** was originally uncovered. The caves lie on the central island just off the coast of the eastern continent and link s'Hertogenbosch and Orthen in a triangle. The element of the sighing caves is **HOLY**, an extra 1d6 in attack or defence may be assigned to holy cards. Apprentice class **human/mage** characters gain an extra 1d6 in defence and 20 extra HP points whilst **Mononoke/mage** characters gain an increased 2d6 in defence, 1d6 in attack and 40 extra HP points due to the patronage of the Mononoke deities slumbering there.
- **Orthen** – A smaller village than neighbouring s'Hertogenbosch, Orthen is a place of study and learning and the home of the place where many human characters begin their training as mages. Many rare items can be found in Orthen due to the scholarly nature of its institutions. Because of the numerous amount of mages in Orthen it is a natural point of focus for characters who wish to teach and learn magic and thus it is not uncommon to see a handful of **Mononoke/mages** gathering on the cobbled streets beneath the spires of the mage academies. Many traders, both human and Mononoke visit Orthen in order to sell or trade magical items and relics. The elements of the village are **EARTH** and **HOLY**. Holy magics and magics attuned to the land gain 1 extra D6 in attack and defence and 30 HP points for the wielder. **human/mage** characters gain an additional 1d6 in attack and 10 extra CHI points. **Mononoke/mage** characters also gain 10 extra CHI points whilst **Sin Mage** characters also draw on the magic being studied in Orthen and also gain 10 extra CHI points.
- **Eskirma Fields** – Once presided over by Mononoke farmers, the Eskirma Fields are now home to a number of feral and wild animals as well as numerous **human** characters wishing to garner more EXP by defeating the native animals. It is a tradition of the people of s'Hertogenbosch to send out those young enough into the fields so that they may train and one day perhaps bring glory to their home village. The element of the fields is **WIND**, meaning that an extra 1d6 in attack or defence may be assigned to wind elemental items. In addition,

- all **human/trainer** characters gain 2 additional D6 in defence against native animals and 10 extra HP.
- **Farlas** – To the North-East of Orthen and Eskirma Fields lies the Mononoke trading village of Farlas. Often only inhabited during the bitter winter months, Farlas is one of the few Mononoke settlements where humans are welcome. Whilst many of the village's sometimes inhabitants are more than willing to supply the human villages with much needed food and equipment there is a constant air of distrust and many Mononoke will feign confusion and lack of understanding if questioned about matters not directly relating to the sale of goods and supplies. The main element for Farlas is **WATER**, due to the frozen lake that acts as an arena for *lecteur de tarot* duels on the outskirts of the village. All Mononoke characters gain 1 extra D6 in both attack and defence and 30 extra HP points whilst playing in Farlas.
 - **Maudlin Mountains** – Once host to Vernon the Martyr, a **human/hero** who dedicated himself to understanding the mysteries and power of the **Mononoke/leonheart** class so much that he was eventually transformed into a Mononoke himself. The Maudlin Mountains, east of the phantom forests, are now home to the vast Sin Mage fleet that hovers in constant expectation over the rocky terrain, preventing all but the bravest of adventurers from crossing the mountains and entering the old Mononoke city on the eastern coast. The element of the Maudlin Mountains is **FIRE**, adding an extra 2d6 in attack to all fire elemental items. All **Sin Mage** characters draw an increased 3d6 in attack from the presence of the sinister Shadow Barges and other Sin Mage craft as well as 1d6 in defence and 50 extra CHI points.
 - **The phantom forests** – The forests are the furthest northern point human settlers have dared tread on the eastern continent. It is rumoured by the Mononoke that beyond and to the east lie the lands of Eoz and the once domain of the Queen of Eoz, the fabled October Gardens, but the forests are so dark and foreboding that none who venture within have dared map their full size and journey through to the other side. The element of the phantom forests is **WIND**, meaning that an extra 1d6 in attack or defence may be assigned to wind elemental items. Some of the traders from the Mononoke villages have mentioned that a great number of soldiers from overseas have amassed in the forests with a view to storming the lands beyond. The Intermediate class **human/soldier** gain 2 extra D6 in attack and 50 extra HP in the phantom forests.

CONCLUSION

Thus ends your introduction to *lecteur de tarot*! Now that you are aware of the rules of *tarot-space* and the peoples that inhabit it, you are ready to decide upon your affiliation and your avatar. Will you choose to join the ranks of the **human** settlers and if so will you choose the path of a **trainer**, spending time raising animals and caring for nature or will you become a **hero**, standing against the evil that invades the phantom forests or a **mage**, dedicated to supporting your fellow humans and healing those who have suffered at the hands of the cruel invaders? Will you instead be born into the noble village of Farlas as a Mononoke, the natural inhabitants of the world and beyond that will you choose the path of the powerful and wise **mage** class, the outcast **gijinka** fighters or the knight-like **leonheart** defenders? Or will you be incarnated as an insidious **Sin Mage**, rising through the ranks of warrior **puppet** to military **duke** and eventually the **general** of a whole Shadow Barge?

The future of *tarot-space* will be shaped by the actions you take, the paths you choose. Welcome to *lecteur de tarot*, the final outcome of centuries of magic and technology. The destiny of the human race will be crafted by the stories you tell.

Good luck!

The Black Iron Prison: The Hands Stained Red

They began to stockpile weapons the evening the decision was made. Stolen kitchen knives sharpened into *baïonnette* blades, borrowed ordnance pistols and aged penknives. Empty bottles of turpentine and wood alcohol were stuffed with rags soaked in alcohol or paraffin, blast bombs created from out of date fireworks and packed nails, both looted from sheds of homes surrounding the school.

Bottles of Sidol were stolen from garages, their necks smashed and replaced with rusting metal tubes, screws driven into the metal to act as a timer for improvised grenades.

The Count and Louis fashioned gun barrels from steering wheels of abandoned vehicles left open along the streets, drivers absent either for reasons of passion or apprehension by militant city wardens. Shotgun shells from the groundskeeper's hut were loaded into holes in asbestos covered pipes and bound together in a larger tube of metal. The end of the tube was capped and a nail was driven into the metal so that when the improvised barrel was pulled back, the nail would strike the shell and fire it out through the end.

Such weapons were clumsy and awkward, yet all four became adept at the art of blasting old, sunken paint tins lined up along the grass verge of endless, distant fields and silent roadways.

Days lengthened into weeks, silent preparations continuing under the cover of darkest night whilst, about them, the routine of education and brutality stretched endlessly out to a desperate horizon.

The sun rose through grey clouds, illumination falling over damp grass and antique spires and everyday it became harder and harder to hide their secret agenda.

Louis became distant, his presence in classes erratic, his health seemingly assaulted by gout, at least in as far as the rumours that filtered down from those in the same house told.

Rin was unable to believe a word of it. She had seen Louis in a light that his classmates had not, she had witnessed at first hand the malevolence and the vindictiveness that underpinned his cruel smile and darting eyes, she had seen the maleficent joy he took in violence and retribution.

Gout had not afflicted him, rather Louis himself had stolen away to make final preparations before their assault on the dank beneath the chapel ruins and the illustrious and impossible palace beyond.

She found that she could not imagine the palace as a genuine physical location, rather she saw it as a phantasy of splendour coloured by years of indoctrinated religious dogma.

Each child was taught of a world in which land and life were ordained by kings who were in turn elected by the distant and unknowable power of God Himself.

Education and authority expounded upon the majesty of the King as being inherently of the same source as God, that the reign of monarchs was decided on by the alien majesty of He who shaped the world. The rights of royalty, as the noble Bossuet had espoused, were established by His law.

God in His Heaven cast His unblinking eye down upon the surface of the globe from behind the cover of cloud and raised up those who found favour with His chaotic nature. Only the man whom God had blessed would be able to weather the storms of a nation and still hold firm to the throne upon which he sat. The LORD did not chuse those who

might fail. Only those of noble character were enthroned by His grace.

Rin found herself bitterly contemptuous of such a system of rule. She cared not for the King's right to rule nor did she care for God's right to elect rulers. The system was corrupt, undermined by bribery and narcissism, a monarchy that espoused belief but practised only cruelty not just to those whom it was allegedly answerable to, but to all who challenged its will.

The King himself had not been seen for countless years, long before Rin had even been born. Though his coronation ceremony was immortalised in the pages of history books and jubilees celebrated the event with pomp and circumstance, none could remember the event nor could the specific date or year of the King's ascension be recalled.

Deep in thought, she turned the corner and found herself confronted by the emotionless wrought iron of the Count's masque, his arms folded over his chest and his cloak billowing behind him. At his side, cheeks ruddy and hands animated, the English master gesticulated with excitement.

She felt her blood turn to ice, fragments of frozen tears clogging her veins and killing her slowly. Her heart faltered, her knees trembling.

I have been betrayed, she thought to herself, we have *all* been betrayed.

She staggered and reached out for a wall that was not there only to find herself suddenly lifted up by the Count's hands, his eyes suddenly full of emotion as he looked down upon her from out of the masque's badly carved eye holes.

"Ah, Rin, dear child! What fortuitous luck!" the English master purred, striding over to them with a look of uncommon glee.

With each movement, the swollen tyrant swayed, his corpulent bulk unsteady upon legs unfit to support him.

"You are indeed a sight for sore eyes, yes indeed, child."

His fat tongue slid out from between his lips, caressing the tender curves of the darker flesh and revealing yellow teeth stained by brandy and wine within the maw of his mouth.

She remembered Louis' promise to her beneath the London plane tree, remembered what she had asked and what he had sworn they would accomplish and every muscle in her yearned at once for violence, for retribution; for *destruction!*

"I don't suppose that, what with your lower social standing and all, you've ever met the dear Count de Villèle, have you, child?"

He gestured towards the girl, reaching out with a fat hand to lift her head up as if she were a farmyard animal awaiting the Count's inspection.

"Your Lordship, this is Suzuka Rin, an exemplary and exquisite student of..."

"I know the girl," the Count rumbled dispassionately.

A look of surprise crossed the English master's face, followed by a sudden sneer of understanding.

"Oh, do you now?" he grinned, his bulging eyes turning towards Rin, "Been getting around, have we, child?"

His fat hand landed with a cruel slap between her legs, fingers digging upwards through the material of her skirt and leaving red marks upon her buttocks and inner thighs.

She gasped, a strangled cry of fear barely held in check.

"Get your hand off her," the Count hissed, turning his gaze sharply to glare at the older man.

The hand fell away, the English master's expression paling with fear. Yet despite this, he struggled to maintain an air of authority, of nobility.

"Now, listen here, Count, I understand that you are a noble..."

The boy threw back his jacket, revealing the ornate handle of the pistol tucked into his trowsers.

"I'm glad you understand, sir," he snarled, "it means I don't have to explain it to you in more graphic terms, terms which, due to my own standing, may only be able to ensure short term physical discomfort, yet are bound to result in grander sufferings once my father hears of my displeasure."

The English master's face became paler still.

"Y-Your Lordship, I meant no offence, of course," he stammered fearfully, his eyes watering as he turned to look at Rin with a pleading expression. "T-This child and myself, we have an understanding..."

Without waiting for the completion of his explanation, the Count yanked free the pistol from his waistband, levelled it and pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked and the English master's trowsers dampened with urine, yet still he remained standing.

It took moments, minutes even, for him to realise he was unharmed.

"Get out of my sight, insect," snarled the Count, rising up to his full height, his lips curling in bitter contempt beneath the masque as he slid the gun back between the material of his shirt and the waistband of his trowsers.

The older man remained standing rigidly before him, his eyes fixed on the handle of the pistol.

"I said, *get out!*" the Count roared, lifting the back of his hand and striking the other full on in the face.

Blood spattered against pale skin and the English master stumbled again, clutching at his face and blurting frightened apologies as he retreated backwards, a maligned beast forced to crawl back from its prey in the face of a more aggressive predator.

The Count turned and looked down at Rin, his gaze softening slightly.

"Tomorrow night," he whispered gently, "tomorrow night, we change the world."

Without a further word, he turned away and strode solemnly down the path she herself had once trod, his cloak fluttering in the air about him.

She watched him go and, in her eyes, stood tears of triumphant joy.

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Jacob Milnestein writes stories. His previous stories include *Love Amongst Strangers* (1999), *Do Not Choose to Ask My Name* (2001), *A Nation of Shadows* (2003) and *Sophistry* (2008).

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