

# Weight of the Underworld



## *Lands in Shadow for Shadow of the Demon Lord*

Mortals with souls stained with corruption go to Hell. Most other souls sink down to the Underworld, a place of different horrors, of quiet misery, protracted grief. Here the torment is not punishment but erasure, as everything you are is eaten away by the coruscating wind. Should you awaken to see its grey deserts, rejoice, for you are not in Hell. Then despair, for other agonies await.

*Weight of the Underworld* joins the other installments of the *Lands in Shadow* series, each zooming in on one part of the world and providing you with the lore you need to realize the place in play. While most *Lands in Shadow* deal with places characters can easily reach, this entry examines a place no one wants to go but one where almost everyone winds up. Read on to discover the cold dread of the Underworld.

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## Beginning of the End

Elves live forever unless cut down by violent means, but even so, they only live once. When mortals appeared on Urth, the elves were affronted by their ability to go on living, seemingly forever. They lived tiny cycles of existence and non-existence, becoming wiser and stronger with each new life. To the elves, it was confusing, chaotic, and dangerous. It had to be stopped.

Thanatos, a Prince of the Fey, stepped forward to offer a solution: He would build a realm to strip mortal souls of all their living memories and then send the emptied souls back to the world to be reborn as if new. His wife would assist at his side, her tears burning those memories into nothingness. And all would be well, and ordered, and final. Thanatos named himself God of the Endings and shaped this realm of souls to his perfect purpose. He fashioned a great well to drain off mortal minds, and above it built his great Hall of Shadow. The souls of the dead are pulled down by savage maelstroms into his shadowed valley and drawn inexorably into the Hall, and have so in an orderly fashion for thousands of years.

What the Fey did not expect, however, was how mortal belief would affect them, shaping them into forms created by their collective imagination. As centuries passed, humans found new forms for their "gods." The Prince of Stags became the vicious Horned Lord, timeless Anemoi became Old Man Winter, while Thanatos found himself transformed into a literal skeleton and his staid marbled Hall morphing to resemble the skull-adorned gothic-style Cathedral of Death outside Caercas. Unlike all the other fey lords and ladies, Thanatos resisted these changes, feeling his dominion over endings should mean he remain as he was, but he could not stop the changes to his own flesh. He has since devoted all his power into holding his Hall as it was. In the face of these warring forces, the building and the land around it have begun to collapse. Inside the Hall of Shadow, pillars have fallen into rubble, and fissures cut across the ground outside and giving way to form canyons. The Underworld itself decays and dies, and in those cracks, the taint of the Void rushes in to make things worse. Increasingly, the dead return to walk amongst the living.

## Paths of the Dead

It is impossible to map the Underworld, but it is also impossible to get lost here. There's only one way to go. The moment a soul leaves a body, it becomes trapped in a swirling storm that speeds the soul to the bottom of cliffs so sheer as to be impossible to climb. Gravity pulls the new arrivals down from those rocks, slipping

and tumbling into loose dusty gravel. The deathly desert extends at this sharp angle ever downwards from all sides toward the enormous vaulted Hall that sits in the very center. Those who try to walk away find the climb excruciating and their way blocked by other inhabitants. Souls who have resigned themselves to their fate cannot bear the insult of others daring to resist, and rush screaming to tear down anyone trying (as *manes*). They may be aided by the *dirges* (see below), although they have different goals.

At the foot of the great slope, the land levels out into flinty beaches cut by seven spiraling streams that eventually combine into the great river Acheron that flows down into Hell below. The only way forward is to cross, and no boats can be found. The rivers are highly acidic, designed to burn away the skin and flesh that appear on the mortal soul. Any given stream is  $2d6 + 10$  yards wide, and any path through the Underworld requires crossing  $1d6 + 1$  of them. The rivers are only waist deep, but deal 1 damage at the end of each round a creature spends in them. Rushing across requires the creature to make an Agility challenge roll with failure indicating the creature falls prone and takes  $2d6$  damage from being immersed in the liquid. As the Underworld shudders, the riverbanks shift and the ground heaves, so falling is always a risk even while traveling across dry land. Lava bubbles up from cracks in the dry ground at random intervals, while eruptions launch fiery boulders into the air never to fall. Constant shears and subsidence make traveling at speed impossible.

Beyond the rivers is the Hall of Shadow. The pillars surrounding it are called the Howling Gates. From within comes a terrible wind that scours what flesh remains. Creatures take  $1d3$  damage at the end of each minute spent in the face of the Gates or inside the Hall. Creatures incapacitated by the damage have all their skin and outer flesh torn off and gain the Horrifying trait (*Shadow*, page 214).

The hall itself is several miles square and impenetrably dark. Grim reapers (see page 6) lurk in the corners and in the very center Father Death sits on his throne. In his Hall, he shuns his dark cloak, his bone wings folded high behind him, his skull-eyes sparking with mad blue lightning, the same dancing along the blade of his enormous scythe. Beside him is a throne reserved for his now-absent Queen. In the old days, the wind and water would leave souls nothing but a skeleton with the last trace of memory a dying blue spark in their eyes, whereupon the Lady would kiss them, taking that last memory for herself. Then Father Death would sweep his scythe, cutting the soul free from his realm, and it would shoot skyward into the light shining through the great hole in the ceiling. The memories, as part of the skin and the flesh, would drain through the grate in the floor, down to the river of Lethe.



Nowadays the process is far less elegant. The crumbling edifice of the Hall and the erupting of gothic buttresses leave souls sometimes unable to reach the center, becoming lost or delayed for centuries. Panicked and confused, the hordes of souls surge forward, and Thanatos takes wild swings with his scythe without pattern or solemnity. The souls stolen by clockwork-builders, necromancers, and demons go unnoticed. For the moment, the process still works. Thanatos' silent servants drive the crowds forward and catch most souls that go astray with their own scythes. The wait may be interminable, but the count of souls leaving the Hall is equal to those entering. However, Thanatos' impotent rage and ennui eat at him more with each passing moment. It would not take much to push him to quit his work, choking the Underworld with souls and forcing the dead to rise from every grave.

Parts of that process have already begun: the area of Rûl known as the Desolation is an outward echo of the Underworld. Powered by the Void-touch of the Demon Lord, the grey desert of the Underworld is mirrored onto that blighted landscape. Souls who trip and fall into the sands of the Underworld sometimes find themselves in rotting bodies tearing free of the toxic soil of the Desolation, each hungry for flesh and thirsty for hot blood.



## Underworld Events

You can use the following table whenever you need inspiration for encounters in the Underworld.

### Underworld Events

#### d20 Event

- 1 A decrepit soul pulls a hanging piece of skin off its chest and gives it to a character. If the character keeps this item until he or she returns to Urth, it becomes a memory of drowning a red-haired man.
- 2 A geyser of lava shoots up, erasing a dozen manes. Nearby characters are scattered in blood and burning flesh, and gain 1d3 random, terrifying memories. For each, a character must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1 Insanity.
- 3 The ground cracks open revealing fiery magma. Each creature on the ground in the area must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or fall in and take 2d6 damage plus 2d6 damage at the end of each round it remains there. As well, creatures in the magma automatically catch fire.

- 4 The ground tilts, revealing the endless nothingness of the Void and the true horror of the Demon Lord. Each character must get a success on a Will challenge roll with 2 banes or gain 1d6 Insanity.
- 5 A character's finger cracks and falls off, taking 1d3 damage and losing all memories of a loved one. If the character returns to Urth, the person is as a stranger.
- 6 A character's facial appendage (nose, ear, eye, lips) dries up and falls off. The character takes 1d3 damage and loses a random profession.
- 7 A character swallows something blowing in the wind, and gains a random profession.
- 8 A nearby mane becomes swallowed up by the earth perhaps to appear as a zombie in the Desolation. Other manes nearby try to follow, choking themselves to death as they throw themselves into the sinkhole.
- 9 An enormously fat mane who was an orc offers to eat passing souls to speed their escape from the endless cycle of death. This doesn't work—the souls he eats remain alive inside his belly, screaming in agony, but as a side effect, the orc gains every single profession and language of the souls it has swallowed. It is also completely insane.
- 10 The characters find themselves in a different place, with wounds they do not recall gaining (no more than 1d3 damage) and with no memory of how they received them.
- 11 The characters forget everything that happened since they arrived in the Underworld.
- 12 A mane who has fashioned wings from a corpse attempts to fly up the cliffs, back to life. It explodes on the rocks in a fountain of gore.
- 13 A mane begs the characters to help him return to life, saying his baby is cold and he's just a few feet from safety. A few minutes later, his child crawls past him.
- 14 A mad mob of manes tries to build a bridge across the Acheron, using the bodies of other manes, who scream in agony. The bridge collapses, carrying everyone down to Hell.
- 15 Wind blows a fierce spray from the rivers. Digging into the earth or hiding behind rocks is the only protection, apart from human shields. The rain deals 1 damage per round of exposure.
- 16 A gigantic jotun slays every thing near him, hoping it will gain him access to some divine warrior paradise. He charges the characters if he sees them. Eventually his sword arm tears off.
- 17 A living being runs to the characters, claiming to be their friend who has journeyed with them for years, but was separated from them earlier during an earthquake. He knows intimate personal details to confirm his story. He is, however, a devil who plays this game whenever he sees mortals in the Underworld.
- 18 A witch offers the characters a squirming pink eyeball that she claims will let them choose the form they will have when reborn. In return, she demands they visit her coven and convince them to bring her back from the dead. She'd go herself, but she's been young and hated it. The eyeball works to a degree—the player can choose a mortal ancestry.
- 19 A great fire in Caecras delivers hundreds of crisped children and elderly onto the desert in a great pile.
- 20 A character forgets ever meeting the rest of the group, though he remembers every experience they've been through. The character might react violently to the strangers around them.



## The Hidden of Memory

For all its pomp and circumstance, the Underworld is but a slaughterhouse. The souls appear in flesh and blood, and all that flesh and blood is flensed away: a transfiguration of the stripping of identity until the soul is nothing but an animus, a chaotic force of life. At the edges of the realm, the dead remember their old life and ache to return, but by the time they reach the cavernous darkness of the Hall, they have nothing left in them but a hollow emptiness for what they have lost. They press forward, eager for Thanatos' scythe, because it is better to be nothing than to be so empty.

The removed flesh and viscera is flushed down into the great cloaca beneath Father Death's throne. Here it is supposed to drain away into the river Lethe, to be dissolved forever, but as above, so below: the cellars are falling apart and the drains are blocked. Eddies and backwashes are everywhere, and the sewers are clogged with centuries of gore, which is, in fact, the physical manifestations of those memories every soul has lost as it passes through this horrific place. Anyone looking for a secret could find it here, if they had the time and stomach to search through the towers of effluent, or magical means to identify the mind in question.

Some of the waters have bubbled upstream, forming a dark deep pool. Beside it sits the Lady of Sorrows. For reasons she keeps to herself, she abandoned her throne and role and instead sits weeping by its black-mirrored surface. Her tears are still the source of the river of Lethe and are said to be so caustic that a single teardrop could burn a hole through the walls of reality. This might be an exaggeration, but servants of the Demon Lord are keen to put it to the test to allow his full entry.

## Entrances and Exits

The quickest and easiest way to enter the Underworld is of course to die. Thanatos designed his world to capture every mortal soul not long after it leaves its body, be it human, dwarf, orc, faun, or halfling. Animal souls also journey to the Underworld but have so little memory they are usually dispersed by the maelstroms before they even arrive. The "souls" of fey creatures are bound to their corporeal nature and rot away just as their flesh does. Unnatural monsters, demons, and other such abominations have no souls to speak of.

At the bottom of the lake Dark Waters, if you could swim down and see through the gloom, lies a cave guarded by ancient and terrible leviathan (as a **huge monster** with the aquatic trait). The cave exits into the dark pool where the Lady of Sorrows weeps. In the cursed fifth tower of the Freeholds of Nar there is

a mist-shrouded, flesh-dissolving pool that leads to a whirlpool in the Acheron. It is said the Dark Lady grows her army of undead through her own private passage to the Hall of Shadow, but if true, she is not keen to share.

When mortals dream, they are in contact with their soul, which can allow them brief memories of the Underworld. With magical help, dreams can be a gateway for mortals to view or perhaps even enter this realm. Mirrors, too, are doors into the Underworld. The Acheron flows turgidly, and every moment of stillness upon its silvery surface can reflect a mirror in



the real world. Glancing at a mirror at the wrong time can drag a mortal body and soul into the Underworld. Likewise souls can escape the Underworld if, at such moments, they leap across. **Poltergeists** are therefore often associated with mirrors, and wise folk keep such things covered when out of use. Creatures called **oculi** are souls that tried to cross over these reflections but were tainted by the Demon Lord as they passed, as his influence runs everywhere across the landscape. Indeed, the easiest way to leave the Underworld is to fall into the Void itself.



The other ways out of the Underworld lead to Hell. If one can withstand the burning waters, the Acheron flows over a cataract a thousand miles high, down into Hell and thence into the Abyss—another gateway to the Void. Despite the low chance of survival, there are always some souls trying it, ready to take Hell over forgetting. Beneath the Hall of Shadow, tunnels run through the rock that also connect down to Hell and are frequented constantly by devils and faeries alike, as souls are always valuable.

Souls can escape the Underworld by falling under Father Death's scythe and being born again. This escape does not work for mortals, but manes and mortals alike can ask for Father Death's favor. Thanatos is old and bored, so any good challenge or deal might amuse him enough to grant it. Manes returned this way become revenants; mortals as they were when they left the land of the living. Both typically wake in the sands of the Desolation. Powerful magic can also pull souls back from the Underworld, but such travel is usually hijacked by the Demon Lord.



### Fire and Forget

The Underworld eats away at sanity—and other parts of the mind. The first time mortal creatures see the Underworld, they must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1d3 Insanity. Moreover, any time a creature gains Insanity or takes damage in the Underworld, it must also get a success on a Will challenge roll or reduce its Intellect score by 1 and lose knowledge of a language or a profession (GM's choice). These losses are permanent. A creature that loses all known languages gains the Turntongued story complication (*Demon Lord's Companion*, page 4).

**Turntongued:** Whether because of your intellect, savage upbringing, or a severed tongue, you have no power of speech, nor much ability to understand it. You communicate only in grunts and gestures.

**Silent** You cannot cast spells. You make attack rolls in social situations with 3 banes.

**Unaffected Words** have no meaning to you. You are immune to Persuade or Taunt attacks, and make challenge rolls to resist being charmed or compelled with 3 boons.



## New Creatures

The following creatures are particular to the Underworld, though they might sometimes slip free to terrorize the mortal world.

### Dirge

A dirge is the soul of a mortal who tried to resist the natural process of death, particularly those who used dark magic to do so. Unable to face life again or lose the last fragments of their identity, they refuse to leave the Underworld and grasp at others to make them join them. Some say that vampires, when they truly die, become dirges, which explains their infectious touch. Dirges are found everywhere in the Underworld, lying in their own filth and decay, and screaming at the other souls to surrender their march and join them in despair.

Dirges appear as they did in life, but with dark circles under their eyes and their skin and flesh slowly drying out to have the consistency of old shoe leather. The hair and nails seem to elongate as the skin shrinks; in some places, it pulls apart to reveal leathery muscle. Soft parts like the eyes, tongue, and genitals wither away first.

#### DIRGE

DIFFICULTY #

Size 1/2 or 1 horrifying spirit

**Perception** 6 (-4); darksight

**Defense** 11; **Health** 25

**Strength** 13 (+3), **Agility** 12 (+2), **Intellect** 2 (-8), **Will** 8 (-2)

**Speed** 10

**Immune** damage from cold, disease, fire, and poison; gaining Insanity; asleep, diseased, fatigued, immobilized, poisoned, slowed

**Eternal** When a Dirge becomes incapacitated it dissolves into a pool of acid. It reforms in the Underworld one hour later.

#### ATTACK OPTIONS

**Claws and Teeth** (melee) +3 (Strength) with 1 boon (1d6 + 1 plus Grab on 20+)

**Grab** The dirge can attempt to grab the target as part of the same attack.

#### SPECIAL ATTACKS

**Unholy Grasp** The dirge makes a Strength attack roll against the Strength of one creature it has grabbed. On a success, the dirge sustains the grab, and the target takes damage equal to half its healing rate and loses all strength in one of its limbs (roll a d6: 1-3, arm; 4-6, leg) for 1 hour. A target that loses strength in its arm becomes impaired, while one that loses strength in its leg becomes slowed. A target that loses strength in all four limbs falls prone and becomes immobilized. A target incapacitated by the damage from this attack dies and rises up as a new dirge one hour later. A creature can restore strength to an affected limb with a successful use of a healer's kit.



## Grim Reaper

Father Death casts a dark shadow across the Underworld, his gleaming scythe severing old lives to make room for the new. In olden times, Thanatos would venture into the mortal realm astride his pale horse to harvest the souls, but as his madness grows, he relies more and more on the grim reapers who serve him by chasing down those errant scraps of essence that somehow resist being drawn into the Underworld or Hell.

Once elves, mortal belief has transformed these wretched servants into horrifying specters of death. Each appears as a skeleton wrapped in hooded robes spun from shadow. Like their master, they wield scythes with gleaming blue blades. From under the hood, the light of the scythe is mirrored in pools of blue light that gather in their empty eye sockets.

Grim reapers carry out their mission with singular focus. No words can sway them, no excuse can stay the sweep of their blades. When mortals die, the grim reapers come to claim their souls.

When not prowling the shadows of the mortal world, grim reapers attend Father Death, lending aid in the grisly harvest with each precise swing of their wicked weapons. They also protect their master from harm, moving to block any attempt to harm him, even if doing so would mean their own ends. Grim reapers have no desires or ambitions other than to claim mortal souls.

When grim reapers bother to speak, they do so in High Archaic or, rarely, the Common Tongue.



## GRIM REAPER

DIFFICULTY 750

### Size 2 horrifying spirit

**Perception** 25 (+15); truesight

**Defense** 20; **Health** 100

**Strength** 20 (+10), **Agility** 20 (+10), **Intellect** 20 (+10), **Will** 20 (+10)

**Speed** 12; flier

**Immune** damage from cold, disease, or poison; gaining insanity; charmed, diseased, poisoned

**Insubstantial** A grim reaper takes half damage from weapons, can move through solid objects and other creatures, and ignores the effects of moving across difficult terrain.

**Spell Defense** A grim reaper takes half damage from spells and makes any challenge roll to resist a spell with 1 boon. A creature attacking a grim reaper with a spell makes the attack roll with 1 bane.

**Revealed in Death** A grim reaper is invisible to all creatures other than spirits and incapacitated creatures. If the grim reaper uses an action to attack, it loses this trait for 1 round.

**Eternal** When a grim reaper becomes incapacitated, it collapses into streams of dissipating shadow. It returns to life 24 hours later in the Underworld with no damage.

### ATTACK OPTIONS

**Scythe** (melee) +10 (Strength) with 1 boon (3d6 + 6 plus Wrack Soul)

**Wrack Soul** A living target must get a success on a Will challenge roll or become impaired for 1 minute. If already impaired in this way, the creature becomes defenseless for as long as it is impaired.

### SPECIAL ACTIONS

**Mark for Death** The grim reaper can use an action, or a triggered action on its turn, to choose one creature it can see within medium range. Until the grim reaper uses Mark for Death again, it becomes incapacitated, or the target becomes incapacitated, the grim reaper makes attack rolls against the target with 2 banes, and the target automatically begins dying when it becomes incapacitated.

**Swift Casting** The grim reaper can use a triggered action at any point during the round to cast a spell it knows.

**Messenger of Death** The grim reaper can use an action to move from the Underworld to an open space of its choice within short range of any living creature in the world or use an action to move from the world to any open space in the Underworld.

### MAGIC

**Power** 5

**Death** *killing touch* (6), *injure* (3), *life drain* (2), *decay* (2), *feast of souls* (2), *death fog* (1), *stop heart* (1)

### END OF THE ROUND

**Shed Afflictions** A grim reaper removes all afflictions from itself.

**Death Knell** Each living creature within short range must get a success on a Strength challenge roll or take 2d6 + 2 damage. A creature that takes this damage heals half damage for 1 round.

**Harvest Soul** The grim reaper kills one dying creature within short range. During the next round, the grim reaper can take one additional action and one additional triggered action.