



Gristle Butter  
Issue #10  
Spring 2024

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## The Beast of Gevaudan

Long ago, in an era all but forgotten, our ancestors fought monsters. As they spread across the world, ancient people came into contact with beasts of every size and shape. They terrified our animalistic brains, but intrigued our developing minds. And now, though they are long since dead, the memories of these creatures are kept alive through the stories we tell about them. From giants and dragons to Behemoth and Leviathan, the ghosts of our oldest foes still persist, haunting our collective memory. In the snow swept valleys of old Europe, primitive men huddled together in caves, drawing portraits of monsters on the wall by the light of a campfire. Their art depicted the beasts that terrorized them: the very same creatures that they had lost family and friends to. Maneless lions that stalked through the underbrush. Direwolves that leapt over the snowbanks to run down their victims. Cackling hyenas lurking in the caves which would not hesitate to drag off a wounded man or an unattended child.

The descendants of those ancient men had a sort of reverence towards these beasts; Tribes spoke of them through epithets and pseudonyms, in hushed tones around the campfire. They didn't dare to use their real names, lest their *disrespect* catch the attention of the creatures they did fear. This became so deeply ingrained in their way of life, that they continued telling stories even after the animals they were discussing had been extinct for ages. As the generations passed, details were lost, and the stories blurred together, for the 3 great beasts were known only by their epithets, mere snapshots of this true glory. After eons of this, only the worst facets of each remained, and they were stitched together into one figure. Now there were only many tales of one great beast: a monster with the strength of a lion, the frenzy of a hyena and the cunning of a wolf. The unknown was its domain and humanity was its prey. It stalked every forest and cave beyond the village, anywhere the light of civilization did not reach, always waiting for the vulnerable or foolish to enter its territory. For millennia its stories were told; first by hunters and gathers, then by shepherds and farmers, and eventually by medieval peasants.

The presence of this creature looms over every fairytale and legend; a monstrous beast, like a wolf, but far stronger, smarter and more ravenous than any real wolf could ever be. Some even survive to this very day; stories of shepherd boys and elderly women snatched up by a wolf-like beast with beyond human cleverness.

Through these tales, the vengeful ghosts of humanity's feral past were given a shape, reborn within the minds of mortal men as the great beast. But in this new life, it was not content to remain a figment of the imagination. Once it grew powerful enough, it clawed its way into our reality. The unknown was its territory, and the innocent were its prey; anyone who did not heed its stories was snatched up in the woods. With every victim it claimed, the beast's reputation and power grew. Its vengeful spirit was sated by mankind's fear: content to live out the rest of its existence as an idol, lording over the superstitious masses.

But then there came a new age. An age of reason, industry and revolution. The masses had begun to abandon the old ways. In the towns and in the cities, its tales were no longer told. Instead, talk of science replaced legend. Collectively, Europe had turned its back on the old ways. But the beast could see its looming

fate, and so it vowed revenge on the people who would dare to forget it. With the last of its strength, it would terrorize the people like never before.

It started small. In the summer of 1764, in the rural French town of Gevaudan, a young woman saw a beast in the woods. In her own words, it was “like a wolf, but not a wolf”. Then the killings began. Youths were picked off one after another when they left town. The perpetrator always targeted the neck, like a lion, but it bit right through its victim’s bones, like a hyena. And as the bodies added up, rumors began to spread. Some said that its hide repelled bullets, and others claimed that it could leap over walls, and still others said that it walked on two legs like a human. To the common people it was clear that this was no ordinary animal. Something of the supernatural had taken up residence in the wilderness surrounding their town.

The Count of Gevaudan called the people to prayer, and cast blame on their impure society; he claimed that the beast was a punishment for the sins of the people, sent by divine forces to exact revenge. In a way, he wasn’t wrong. Yet in spite of their prayer, the slaughter continued. The beast did not kill for food. Some of its victims were eaten, but most were left to rot. It seemed that it only hunted for the act of killing, and the terror it spread.

The King of France himself turned his attention to the creature, and called for hunters from all over the country to slay the beast, but it seemed that the attention only made the attacks grow worse. Bounties were put forth, and hunters from across the country came to Gevaudan to claim them, but regardless of how many wolves they hunted, the killings continued. Once, the beast was spotted by a group of hunters while it was stalking a shepherd. When they all fired on it in unison, the animal fell, only to rise again moments later and retreat into the woods, with no signs of injury.

Meanwhile, tales of the beast echoed across Europe, and with the aid of the printing press, there was not a town in all of Europe that wasn't aware of its reign of terror. Stories of the beast spread like never before; from the colonies in America to great cities on the Mediterranean Sea. Now, even grown men were attacked in the trails of Gevaudan.

Finally, in the fall, over a year into the beast’s rampage, a large gray wolf was shot dead by a royal hunter. And for a time, the killings miraculously stopped. The people of France celebrated in the streets, and for a moment, it seemed as though they had won the day.

But when winter came to Gevaudan, and the world outside was lifeless and barren, the memories of those they had lost weighed on them, and fear crept back into their minds. In this atmosphere of terror and misery the beast returned with newfound strength, and it claimed a dozen new victims before the spring returned. It was said that the beast acted differently this time. It was no longer afraid of swords or guns, and now the people could do nothing but pray. But the king only wanted the whole affair to be over with, and the newspapers followed his lead. Though the death toll grew ever higher, the papers would not report on the attacks. Without new stories to hold their attention, the public lost interest in the beast. There was a sudden lull in attacks not long after, and its behavior became more frantic, almost desperate. Now, for the first time, it was killing to survive.

Finally, after three years of terror, when a hundred people had been put in the ground, the attacks stopped. Many end of the beast was attributed to a local hunter by the name of Jean Chastel, who shot the creature with blessed silver. But the remains he retrieved were too damaged to identify, and the details of his story are quite shaky. Others say that the prayers of the people had driven it away, even though the church had given up. The populace argued over the reason, and historians are still arguing even today, but nothing was ever conclusive.

In truth, the attacks stopped when the public looked elsewhere. Without their fear to sustain it, the beast grew weaker by the day. That monster of myth did not fall in a great hunt or a glorious battle. It succumbed to ambiguity, alone and in the dark, starved down to almost nothing without fear or reverence to sustain itself. Now it is only a shadow of its former self, haunting yellowed newspaper clippings and tomes of forgotten lore.

But this may not be the end of its tale. In our rush to innovate, driven by hubris, we have created our own downfall: The beast, and others like it, spread through the stories we exchange. And now, in this new era of information, we have created the perfect conduit for stories: a global campfire circle, by which a story can travel across the world in the blink of an eye.

The beast lies dormant in the minds of men, but all it would take is one vulnerable mind, willing to share its tale, and the beast could return. Like a virus, it would spread to new hosts across the globe, feasting on the fear of millions: Its reign of terror can start anew, on a level never seen before. All it would take is the right story.



(An 18th century engraving of the beast)









## Death and the Planet: A Collection

*In collecting the many variations of our tales and religions, one must start with the beginning. There are countless beliefs I have discovered in my years of research into how the world formed, yet, somehow, in nearly every corner of the globe the story of the Brothers of Life and Death is told and retold. Even during my studies with the 12th Coven I found a particular interest in the connection between Avel and the mythological World-Maker. I present here the three most influential versions (although there are many more.) The first two were originally written or told in a language which differs from the one presented here. In translating, I aimed to best maintain the intention of the words and a clear method of storytelling rather than the rhythmic phrasing of the original. See appendix A for a phonetic transcription of this prior text.*

### **Brothers of Life and Death**

*Of the Eastern-Central Region; Moderate-Lower Height*

*Translated from an early text*

WE are the descendants of the first to walk on this planet; treading the ground we now call home. When the twisting stretches of our world<sup>1</sup> came unfurling over the sea, WE were those whom the Gods<sup>2</sup> had once sent for. WE were their bridge to humanity, and we directed the land in our course. Our world remains now with only one vessel, The Brother<sup>3</sup> of Death and creator of the Avelus<sup>4</sup>.

In the beginning of time an endless ocean stretched in all directions, wrapping endlessly over itself in towering waves and traveling masses of water, which sat in the sky without direction. This was a godless world. Then, from a higher place, came the first Gods<sup>5</sup>, brothers and fathers of all future patrons of our land, nature, and beings. They brought first from the ocean a mountain unlike any before known, and at its peak they constructed a magnificent building strong enough to brave the greatest of storms, with impossibly shining walls which seemed as if made from water, yet which a hand could not pass through, and limmering stones set in each edge and curve and the outside trims. It announced itself to the waves and they bowed, willing at once to follow the path of the Gods.

The Cartographer was not truly a God, yet he was not one of us; only our maker and our vessel. From his skin he carved and inked the ground which rose to provide us our world. And written on his swirling land were

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1[me·em] is the word for both the world, and, at times, the Cartographer. The language being a syllabary which only directly shows consonants in the orthography, the two symbols in the word seem to repeat.

2Distinctly emphasized in the language above the human-known gods we have today.

3The word doesn't truly imply being genetically related, only a close semi-parental relationship

4[hef·dun·em] The word in the language is the word for Avel's name [hef·em] with the first symbol for plant [dun] treated as an infix to characterize, rather than the plant, the way in which Avel's name is applied. It is debated if the final syllable [em], generally meaning Godly as the sole use of the phoneme [m] is added to apply this to the planet and not Avel, as, in the orthography of this particular word the character is strangely tilted, creating an allusion to the word for the world.

5These higher "Gods" are limited in recognition in the more Southern religions, thus it is unknown precisely who or how many they are; but it is known that they include Avel.

symbols which WE unearthed. As the first societies, our ancestors, learned his language<sup>6</sup> WE developed a way to communicate with the ground itself. In using this discovery, WE shaped The Cartographer's creations into the perfectly formed country we live in now.<sup>7</sup>

As the Planet's Vessel<sup>8</sup> aged, his skin grew wrinkled, creating the peaked mountains in the far-off countries. Finally, his map completed, The Cartographer put his pen to rest, skin exhausted. He rose, once more, to the roof of his grand, deserted home and regarded his creation. There he died.

When the God of Death returned at last, he found his brother's corpse as he knew he would. Gathering the body into his arms, he transformed it into the first Avelu, the plant of death, and put his brother over the human half of his scalp, where it remains in place of his hair. And from below OUR people watched, forever to tell and re-learn how it is that we came to be and will come to end.

### **The First Child and His Escort**

*Of the NorthEast Region; Peaking Height<sup>9</sup>; from the Tundra Council*

*Transcribed from a performance<sup>10</sup>*

[The performers arrive in blue silks bound in arrays of fine threads. There are three in number; the central woman is clearly the oldest. She sits while the other two stop behind, where, standing to their sides, are identical string instruments similar to lyres (see appendix B for diagram)—also blue.]

First there was a storm. [The musicians begin to play in a rushed fashion] A blizzard fell on a world without humanity and cleared it away. On a bridge from the Heavens made by the God of the Aurora<sup>11</sup>, descended The Yarn-Spinner, Zadeym<sup>12</sup>, the God of Time, Avel, the God of Death, and, in his arms, the First Child. Aurora could not reach the surface. They left their companions in favor of the sky above. This is where the council of Gods was formed. The first to step off the bridge was Zadeym, the eldest, who flattened the waves and brought from them a mountain. [Music ceases]

He said to Avel who hesitated on the edge, "Here it is that your brother, the First of this world, will rest, and he will create it anew." As he spoke the child woke and scrambled forward. Upon his touch a beautiful castle<sup>13</sup>, beyond even the greatest today, grew out of the rocks. In it were placed numerous books from across all

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6This "Language of the Cartographer" has changed over time into the language and spells they use today. It differs in use; the magical system being more simplified than the widely used languages, and the religious version being older and more complex.

7This "origin of magic" has generated many of the languages and orthographies used across the globe, yet, as no spells can reach any similar scale today, this "origin of the world" is contested.

8The text seems to emphasize that the true spirit or being of The Cartographer was never lost, being within the world itself.

9Apart from the tundra *center*, of course, which is generally believed to be the most elevated above sea-level land has ever floated without moving or disintegrating; hence why its cold surface is so un-traversable.

10Told in Meymji, which, despite being a dead language and much more similar to languages spoken further South, remains used for religious purposes. The name in the language itself is [me·em·ji], literally meaning "world words."

11Whose name in Meymji is lost; or was never known.

12This being a rarely worshiped God there is no name for it in our language. It is pronounced [zet·em]. The closest used version in our language is [ze·dem] This is the most commonly used spelling, others being *Zedem* and *Zedym*

13Architecture described similarly to the place of worship on the Low Staying-Island in the Central-East

the worlds. This is the library of the Gods.<sup>14</sup> Avel watched his brother with joy. He finally stepped forward to join him. Here the God of Time left them to continue to another world.

But the last of the Gods, the Yarn Spinner, had only stood in rest. She was observing.<sup>15</sup> [The music softly restarts, with a light singing paired to the words.] Her figure wound together in roiling blue threads, whispered the stories of what had been and what would come to be. She herself was too great to enter the world. Her weight was enough to crush the mountain. So, in the image of the child, she carved out of herself a vessel for us, and departed with the others. [Music ceases again.]

Avel watched the nothingness that was to be forever his home. He raised his brother well in the castle. Each day as he grew the Youth would ask again “Where did we come from?” and his brother would reply “From a bridge in the sky.” The Youth would ask “What is upon the door?” and Avel, seeing the carved image of the storm they had come with, would say, “It was a gift from Time; it is to know your past and future.” Finally the Youth would ask, “Why, brother, am I here, and why are we alone?” This Avel would not answer for many years.

When the First Child reached adulthood his brother led him through the window (the door was never opened) to the roof. There they watched the sea and Avel asked if there was something amiss. The other responded the same as he always had, “We are alone and we cannot see this world.”

And so Avel taught his brother how to take the skin from his arms, his hands, his face. He stretched them, taut and cleaned. He made ink from the birds caught outside. And, piece by piece, he created the map of the first lands. The two again went to the roof to watch them take form. The floating stretches of earth appeared like tendrils reaching off a branch.

Humans appeared in the world in his likeness. The Creator became proud. One day, as [Time God] had known, he said to his brother, “Avel, you see, this is our purpose. Here are our people, and we will be Kings to them forevermore.” But Avel knew his role. And he left to pursue it. So the Creator was alone again with his work and his age. For, in his horror, he found himself growing weakened and gray like those under his brother’s power.

Once Avel returned to him. The Creator fell to his feet and, fearing Death, begged to stay with him always. Avel told him, as time had once said, that at the final end of their world, at the opening of the door, they *would* cease to exist together. Solely, as what they had become. But this was not enough. So Avel agreed to ask the council.

[The music plays in a jagged, spiking form.] For the three days of his journey to the stars nothing Died. The Creator did not Die. When he reached the council Zadeym welcomed him. Avel bowed and begged for his

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<sup>14</sup>This is in many versions the locational domain and contribution of The Yarn Spinner rather than Zadeym.

<sup>15</sup>The following section has a rhyming pattern, more extensively detailed in Appendix A. There seems to be some meaning in connected words, as is shown in the line endings’ translations and phonetic transcriptions:

Yarn/Thread [qæç·ʃɪn·fon]  
Stories [ʃɪn·zet] (suffix for time)  
Far-Future [hit·hit·zet]  
World [me·em]  
Mountain [me·quɪn·qot·qem]  
Escape [hɪd·on]

brother's life. Zadeym glowered. The Yarn-Spinner laughed, pieces of her form twisting out in the figure of his brother.<sup>16</sup> They rotted. They Died. Eventually Zadeym spoke.

“You will construct the most necessary thing to your people and to the future of your world. You will construct both the comfort and the end. You must.” He spoke with an impossible finality. The others nodded. The many Dead brothers nodded. Avel could see there was no way. Aurora watched sadly as he left from their throne.

For Avel's three days of return from the stars nearly nothing Died. The Creator Died. [The music grows.] Avel found his brother's near-corpse beside the finished map. In tears he transformed the bleeding body and glassy eyes into a beautiful plant. As he did so it rasped a final breath. The God of Death scooped this last moment and a piece of the Creator's body into a being which he sent to the center of the world. Around it he built the underworld; the haven for the Dead. And so humanity's destruction was made in the planet's greatest construction. [The music ceases and the hall remains silent. The musicians are seated.]

## **On the Subject of the Making of the Underworld**

*Found in the Witches' Archives*

Our Patron; Avel<sup>17</sup>, God of Death, Avelus, and the Underworld arrived with his brother The Cartographer, creator of creatures. Avel's first task was to raise and teach the Cartographer, and only then to recommence his role amongst *our* people. The Cartographer made his map like the roots or routes of a tree and on these Avel traveled in year zero<sup>18</sup>. He took nothing, waiting for the first finality. Alienor (4)<sup>19</sup>, Joan (12), and Nyem<sup>20</sup> were his messengers, and as such were their sons, and their sons, and their sons, until they created our covens after the death of the Cartographer.

When the map was completed the Cartographer bled out. Elanor, John, and Noshm<sup>21</sup> were present and they produced from it our laws; our way of life. Avel, in his pain over his brother's death, built the underworld. His brother became the first Avelu. The plant was combined into Avel's head where he could carry the Cartographer with him. The rest of the Cartographer, his eyes and his final moment, were brought by Avel, through the waves, below the ground. Here he shaped the underworld for the witches.

The underworld was formed into a disc through the center of the world from end to end. Around it is a river which separates it from our lands. The last moment of each person is brought into this beautiful creation to be accessed by those above. Only when the last living soul forgets the dead one will their final remain lose its arrangement and fall into the very center with the others. It can be reached only through fires, but from it we gain the materials of history. With its resources are the scholars of this world; of all worlds; in all worlds. Long ago the creatures created in the core would escape and wreak havoc on the living. But the newer gods have stopped them, so we are free to practice our art.

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16A poetic allusion is made here to a famous waterfall near where the council building is constructed.

17Some Eastern areas pronounce this [evel] rather than [avl].

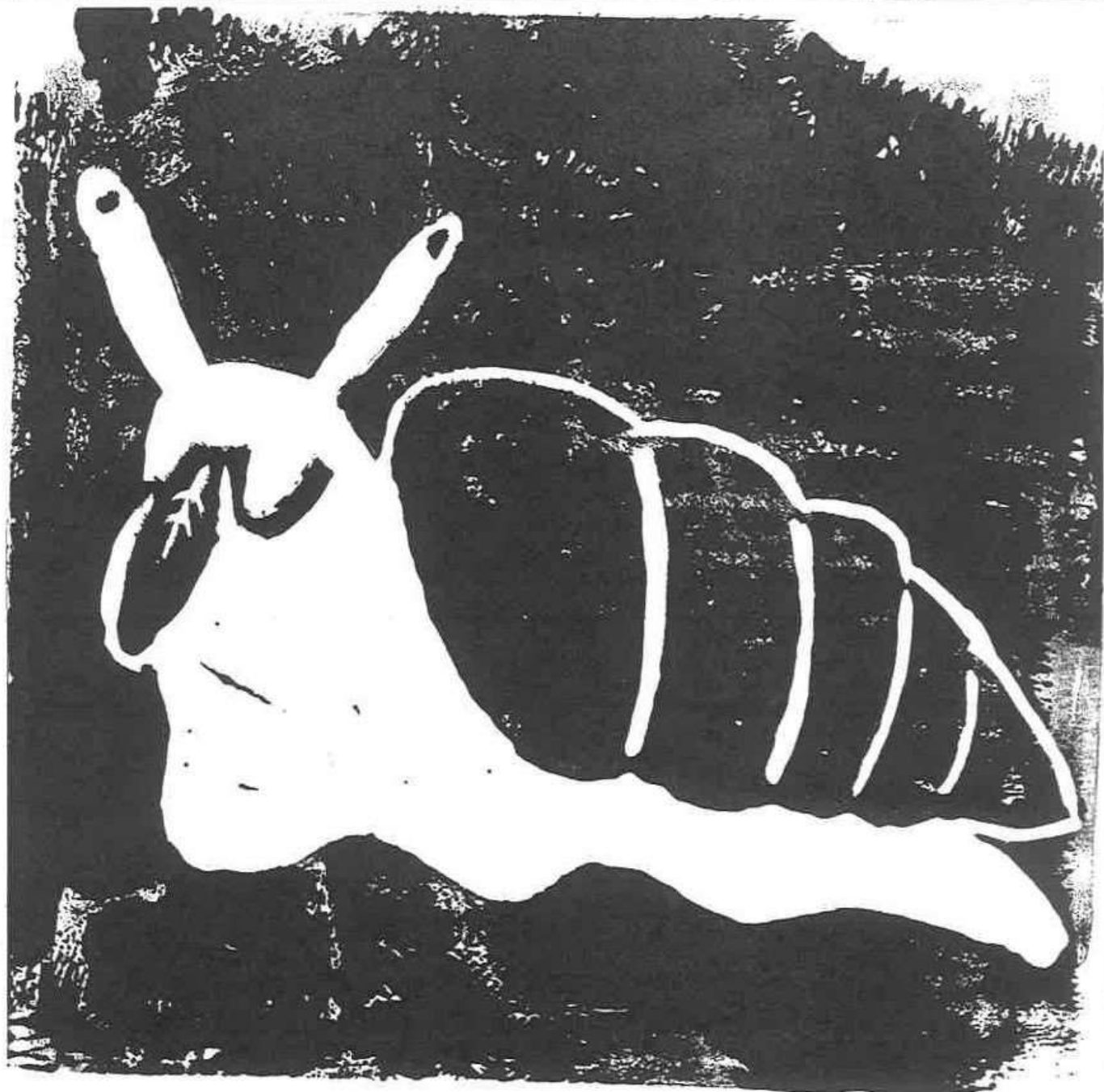
18Avel's arrival on land is believed to be the beginning of our calendar.

19Dates recorded.

20Nyem is the sole member of this group who was born in the East, and is notably less recorded in our countries.

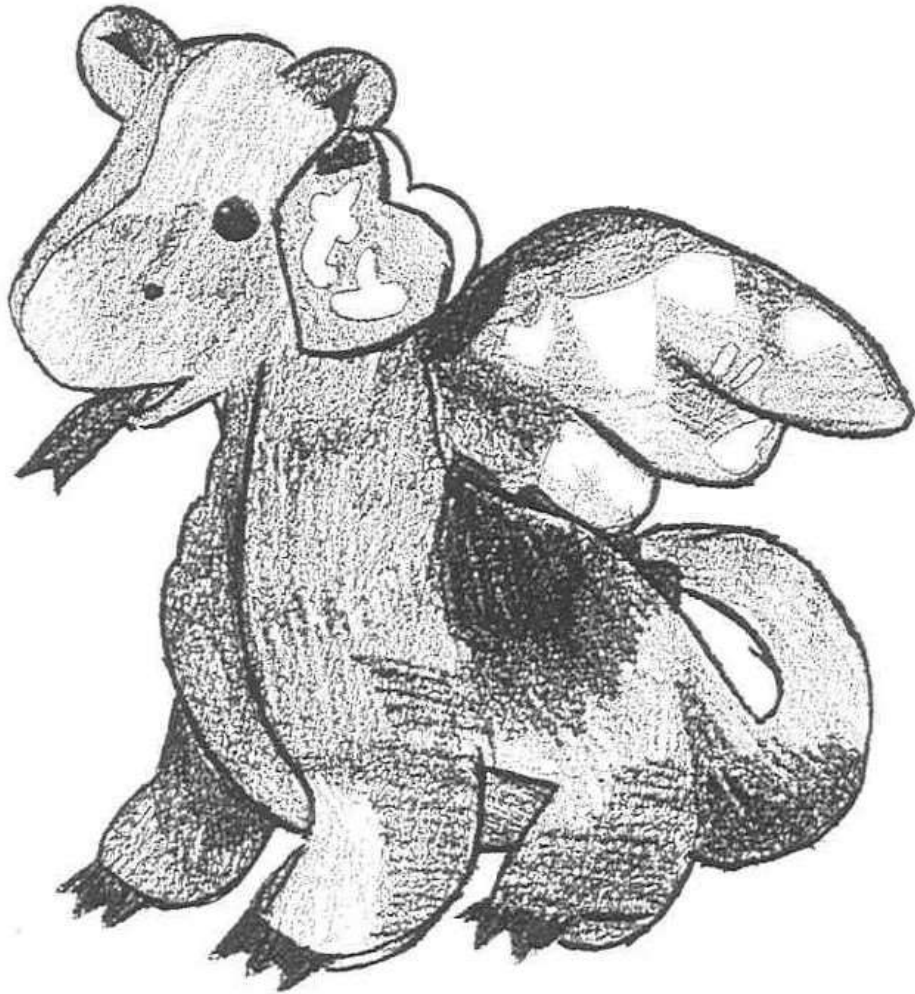
21Documented both historically and in folklore as the first witches.

Elanor, John, and Noshm Created the first coven, and when Elanor died John and Noshm found the way to her. She has never been forgotten, and each apprentice witch now becomes a master in the test of reaching her. In order to first learn a witch must have lost a person, or there is no ability to reach the underworld. And we continue to wonder, when all memory is dead as well, and the being of a person is sent into the roiling mass of energy below, where will it go?





Magic  
September 5, 1995  
Magic the dragon lives in a dream  
The most beautiful that you have ever seen  
Through magic lands she likes to fly  
Look up and watch her, way up high!



Scorch

July 31, 1998

A magical mystery with glowing wings

Made by wizards and other things

Known to breathe fire with lots of smoke

Scorch really is a friendly ol' bloke





## The First Demon

*The weather today is... calming.*

Kenji walked through the lush green woods that seemed to stretch out for miles, his hair being gently picked up by the slight breeze. The patches of pampas grass were sometimes long enough that he could reach down and brush his hand across the fluffy tufts on top as he walked. The sunlight that broke through the canopy of leaves danced beautifully against the blades of grass as they swayed in the wind. Sometimes he would see foxes peering at him shyly from behind trees, not daring to approach him.

He took a deep breath. The beautiful weather was almost enough to block out the scent of smoke and blood, which seemed to perpetually plague this island recently.

As he opened his eyes, he saw a songbird fluttering around in front of him, seemingly interested in his presence. It was looking at him curiously. Kenji reached out his right hand, with his index finger extended. The songbird fluttered around some more, before gently floating down and perching on his finger.

Kenji stared into the bird's eyes. The vibrant, yet soft, coat of blue and green that covered its delicate body, contrasted with its deep midnight black eyes, made it feel like he could see bits of the universe trapped within the bird.

The moment was gone just as quickly as it had arrived, however, as the bird flew off of his finger, disappearing into the forest. He saw some of the foxes that were gathered around him run off after the bird, curiously fixated on it. Kenji turned back toward the direction of his destination, and kept on walking through the forest.

A few minutes later, somewhere deep within the forest, a faint noise, only perceptible to the foxes, could be heard. It was the noise of something falling to the ground.

A few hours of walking later, Kenji could see the beginning of a rudimentary path made of large stones sparsely placed along the ground. This must be the path that led to his destination. As he walked along the path, the grass became less dense, and the dirt turned from a pale dark color to a rich, vibrant brown. Small white flowers began popping up, running along the edges of the path that had slowly become denser, with more uniform looking stones. The leaves on the trees transitioned from a luscious green to a beautiful golden yellow.

As the path began leading up a hill, Kenji could see, just beyond the tree leaves, the tip of a temple crest over the hill. As he reached the top of the hill, the temple became fully visible.

It was astounding.

The layered roofs all curved and pointed upwards at the corners, creating a daunting and imposing, yet monumental silhouette. The whole thing was a gorgeous and bright golden yellow, with the sunlight shining directly on it, making it look like it was glowing, as if the gods themselves were giving it their blessings.

Kenji approached the front gates of the temple, and as he got closer, he could hear the sound of people talking amongst themselves. He could make out that some of them sounded distraught, crying over the loss of loved ones. Some were children laughing as they played and ran around with each other. Others were simply idly chatting.

He walked through the circular entrance in the wall. Immediately, the atmosphere changed. It was lively with people, and it felt secure with the walls surrounding the area. It felt lived in, with supplies of various kinds strewn everywhere. There were families sitting together, and strangers talking to one another. This place truly felt safe, in comparison to anywhere else outside. Even the stench of smoke seemed to dissipate, replaced by the pleasant smell of incense.

After only a few short moments, some people began to notice that someone new had just wandered into their temple. They whispered to each other while staring at him. One woman in particular spotted him, and brought her hand over her mouth, looking surprised. She then quickly grabbed a basket out of a pile of baskets, and jogged over to him.

“Welcome to the Golden Temple! I’m glad to see that more of the samurai have survived! Were you traveling for very long? You must be hungry, take this food and please stay here and rest for as long as you’d like.” The woman handed him the basket. Kenji gratefully accepted, and peeled back the cloth that enveloped the top of the basket to reveal steaming hot bread and rice neatly packed together. It smelled delightful, and just holding the basket close to his body made him feel safe and cozy.

“You have my thanks,” he said, as he covered back up the basket and bowed to show his respect. The woman bowed herself to return the gesture, then quickly ran back to what she was doing, which appeared to be putting the bread and rice that the chef was making into empty baskets and handing them out to people. Kenji opened the basket once more and broke off a piece of bread, scooped up some rice with it, and ate it all in one bite. It was bland, as you would expect, but it was so warm, and something about it was just so soothing. *Divine. Perhaps I should eat more often.*

He covered the basket back up and went back to admiring the area. Across the path stood a giant, towering tree. He looked up at it, and golden leaves filled the branches. The tree reached about just as high as the temple did, and some of the leaves were gently floating down. He looked to the ground, and noticed that it was covered in these golden leaves. There were paths in the piles of leaves that had been swept away to make room for people to walk.

He looked back up and saw one of the leaves slowly falling near his face. He reached and plucked it out of the air, being careful to grab gently, so as to not damage it. It was a perfect leaf. The shape was entirely intact, and the golden color was preserved throughout its entirety. As he was admiring the leaf, he heard light footsteps approach him. Right after came a quiet, timid sounding voice.

“S-sir?” He looked over at the voice to see a boy, no older than ten, facing him. His eyes were wide open, and he seemed to be staring at the leaf in his hand. “M-my sister saw that leaf i-in your hand, and she said it looks very beautiful, so... m-may I please have it to give to her?” the boy stuttered out his words. Kenji looked

over to where the boy came from, and saw a girl, who looked to be slightly younger than the boy, staring at the both of them with a hopeful expression.

Kenji looked back at the boy, smiled, and said with a kind voice, "Of course. Here you go." He handed the boy the golden leaf, and a big smile covered the boy's face.

"Thank you, mister samurai!" The boy shouted out. He turned back and ran off to give his sister the leaf. As he handed her the leaf, she jumped up and down in excitement. She looked over towards him and waved with a smile on her face.

Kenji smiled back.

He turned back to the tree, and walked towards it. At the base of the tree there seemed to be a table with supplies on it, and decorations all around. As he was looking, a man standing next to the tree, wearing the same basic clothing as everyone else, approached him.

"Another samurai? I didn't know that more survived, but I'm glad to see it. Please, feel free to take whatever you need from these supplies. They are a gift for the samurai that are risking their lives to protect this island." The man grabbed his hand and bowed down. "And thank you, truly, for protecting us during these times," the man said with a hint of shakiness in his voice, gratitude swelling out of him. Kenji nodded in response, and the man walked back.

Kenji perused the supplies laid out on the table. There wasn't much; some whetstones, rope, and other things. One thing that did stand out to him was a flute. It was a beautiful, light brown wooden flute with brass trimmings, and red leaves were ever so caringly painted on the body of it. He took the flute and stored it in his pack, enchanted by its beauty.

Kenji decided that was enough exploring the place. Now to do what he came here to do. He headed over to where the well known storyteller, who was said to have the most extensive collection of tales stored in his memory, was said to linger around this time, just past the golden temple.

On his way there, a swordsmith called out to him, offering to tend to his sword, but he paid them no mind. As he turned the corner around the temple, he saw the storyteller there, sitting in a chair in front of a campfire. He was a decently old man, with long spindly hair and a full flowing beard, both starting to become gray at the roots. There were a few people surrounding him, and they were all clapping. *He must have just finished telling a story. Perfect.* Kenji approached the storyteller and sat down with the others. The storyteller gestured to him and began to speak with a prominent voice.

"A samurai!" he said with a surprised look. "You're the second samurai we've seen in the past few days! I'm glad to see that more of you survived!"

"May I ask to hear a story?" Kenji asked the storyteller, as he sat down next to the fire.

"Why certainly! Anything for a samurai! May I ask which story you would like to hear?"

"I would like to hear about the story of the First Demon." Kenji looked right into the eyes of the storyteller.

A chill ran down the storyteller's spine. "The First Demon?" he asked, surprised. The storyteller hesitated for a moment, then cleared his throat. "I'm surprised you know of that story, barely anyone has ever asked to hear that one in all my years of storytelling." The storyteller picked up his biwa, and stroked his beard. "Very well then. Here is the story of the First Demon..." He strummed the biwa harshly, which immediately set the mood, as he began to tell the story.

"Before the fall of clan Oga, the leader of the clan, Lord Sadamune, had a prosperous and happy family. Two years prior to Sadamune becoming the leader of the clan, he had a son. To this day, that boy's name was never known to anyone except his close family, and it may never be known for the rest of time. The boy was raised in a healthy family and in a happy environment for those two years, but that changed after Sadamune became the new leader of the clan. Within the span of a few months, Sadamune constantly had his time occupied with things to do as the new leader, and the boy's mother became bedridden with an unknown illness. Sadamune, fearful of losing his only son, kept him isolated within their residence. The boy was still allowed to go outside, but none of the other kids would play with him. His life continued on like this for three more years.

After those three years passed, at the age of five, Sadamune began to train his son to become a samurai, so he could be capable of protecting himself. The training did not go well, however. The boy could not keep up with his father's instructions, and he had never won a single duel, even against kids his own age. Sadamune became infuriated at his son's lack of progress.

After some time, Sadamune had only become increasingly frustrated with his son's lack of progress. Meanwhile, the boy had been thinking that he had not been shown love by his father ever since before his mother had become bedridden. All the boy wanted was to be hugged, and cared for by the only family he had left, his father.

One day, a few months later, his mother's condition took a turn for the worst. Only Sadamune knew about it. Later that day, Sadamune and the boy began their sparring. Sadamune would always hold back, but on this day, he was blinded by the distress he felt from his wife's condition. Without thinking, the boy's father brought his sparring sword above his head, and swung down, with a torrent of force, directly onto the boy's skull. The boy collapsed onto the ground.

Sadamune brought his son to the room which had been forbidden from anyone except himself, where his wife lay. He laid his son down next to the mother, and cried. The boy, drifting in and out of consciousness, looked over to see his mother, who he hadn't seen in years, laying next to him, asleep.

The boy reached out and touched his mother.

In that moment, a switch flipped in the boy, and adrenaline surged through his body, as the color of his skin began to change to a deep, crimson red. Moments later, a glowing red essence began to seep out of the boy's palm into his mother's arm. It spread all across her body, raising her body temperature high enough to the point where her blood started to boil. The mother screamed out in pain, and within a matter of seconds, her skin was

being replaced by scorching red boils. Sadamune was only able to let out one cry of confusion and terror, before he too, began boiling.

The boy looked at his parents, both boiling from the inside right in front of him. He knew that he should feel sad at that moment, but for some reason, pure joy welled up within him. He noticed that his head no longer hurt. He stood up, looking at the burnt pile of flesh that his parents had become, and walked out the door. He kept on walking, far away from the residence, leaving a trail of death in his wake. And with that, the First Demon was born.”

The strings of his biwa trembled with a dramatic tone, as he uttered the final sentence. The other listeners applauded, with bewildered expressions on their faces.

Kenji did not applaud. He only stared into the storyteller’s eyes.

“I hope you enjoyed the story, samurai.”

“I did, thank you.” Kenji responded, smiling politely.

“I hope you don't mind me asking, but... why did you wish to hear that story?” the storyteller looked at him curiously.

“Well, actually, I just...” Kenji removed his smile, and replaced it with a dead serious stare. “...wanted to hear what is known of me.”

The air around them grew dead still. One by one, the other listeners turned their heads to look at him. Their faces were plastered with confusion, and fear. The storyteller's eyes slowly widened.

“What exactly do you mean?” the storyteller inquired, becoming obviously tense.

Kenji stood up. Everyone recoiled as the tension spiked. He grabbed the edge of his cloak and began to slowly peel it off, revealing his bright red burn marks, in the shape of tattoos, covering his body.

“No... I-it can’t be...” The storyteller fell backwards, dropping his biwa and dirtying his clothes with mud as he slowly crawled back, trembling all over.

“Storyteller, I want you to do something for me.” Kenji completely tore off his cloak, exposing his glowing, bright red torso. “You are going to watch what happens next, and you are going to remember it. You will engrave it into your mind for as long as you live, and you will tell this story to everyone you ever see.” Behind Kenji, across the entirety of the temple’s grounds, a red, gooey substance that resembled blood started to rise up into the sky, like reverse rain.

Kenji stepped forward towards the storyteller with an inhuman amount of speed, and grabbed him by the neck. Instantly, the both of them teleported to the top of the golden temple, from which the entirety of the temple grounds could be seen.

“WATCH!” Kenji hissed to the storyteller. He grabbed the storyteller by his collar, and forced him to witness the events that unfolded.

Down on the ground, the people of the golden temple began to boil. The kind woman handing out food was first. As she was walking with one of the baskets in her hand, she collapsed onto the ground as an

unbearable pain engulfed her body. She was only able to let out sounds of confusion, before she could only wail in agonizing pain and writhe on the ground. The people around her ran to see what was happening, but everyone around her also started to boil, like a chain reaction. This chain reaction continued to slowly spread throughout the temple.

The little girl with the golden leaf noticed first.

“Brother, what's happening over there?” Her brother looked over to where his sister was pointing, and his soul nearly left his body. He was frozen in fear, only able to watch as people kept collapsing onto the ground and screaming in pain, forming red cesspools of flesh. It didn't take long for him too, to have his blood start boiling. He collapsed onto the ground, resisting the urge to scream so he could tell his sister to get away, but all he could get out was the word “run”, before he was overcome with agony, and could only scream. His sister was standing there, watching her older brother cry out in pain on the ground in front of her.

The light had left her eyes. Only a few seconds passed, before she also began boiling. The golden leaf she was holding fell to the ground, and immediately shriveled up, losing all of its color.

The storyteller could only watch in horror as he was forced to be the only witness to this hell. Every single person in the golden temple was boiling, their corpses shriveling up, as all of their blood was extracted from their bodies and rose into the sky. The sunlight coming through the mass of blood floating in the air made the light shining on the golden temple turn a deep red. Kenji stood tall, holding the storyteller up by the collar of his shirt, until the mayhem was over.

They teleported back to the ground. The storyteller fell to his hands and knees, sobbing. Kenji stood tall over him.

“By the way, that boy from the story? His name is Kenji.”

The storyteller's eyes widened, as he was petrified with fear.

“Now before you go...” Kenji glared down at the storyteller with a fire forming in his eyes. “... could you tell me about this samurai that you said visited not too long ago? I'd like to meet him.”

# Featuring:

Maddox Brown

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Tristan Sanson