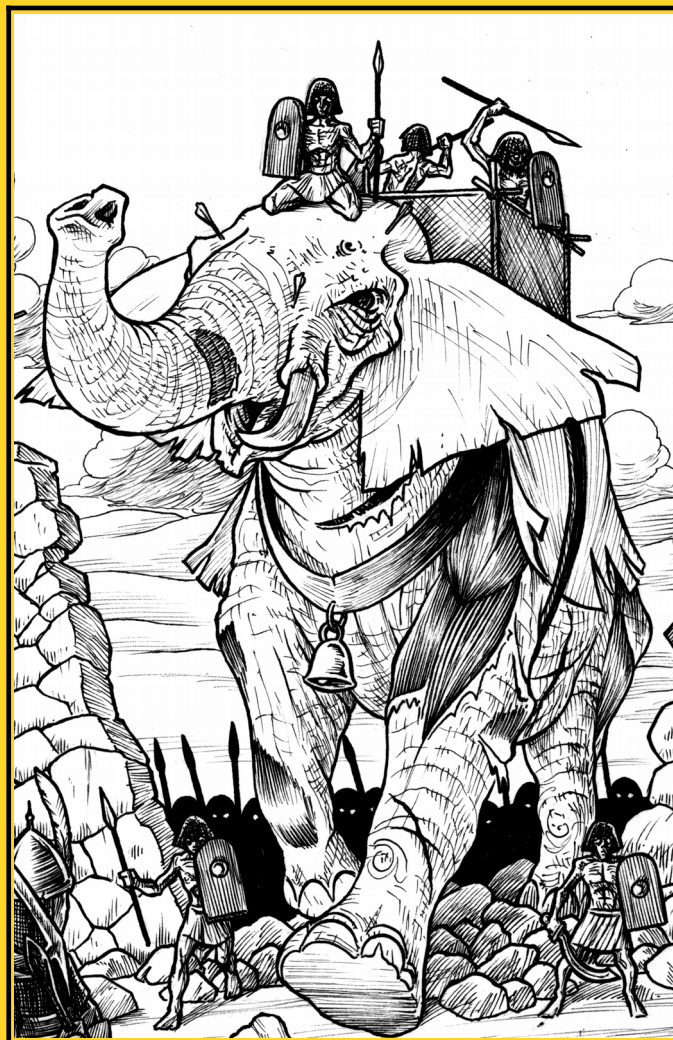


BRAZEN

BACKGROUNDS

CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS FOR

BRONZE AGE SETTINGS

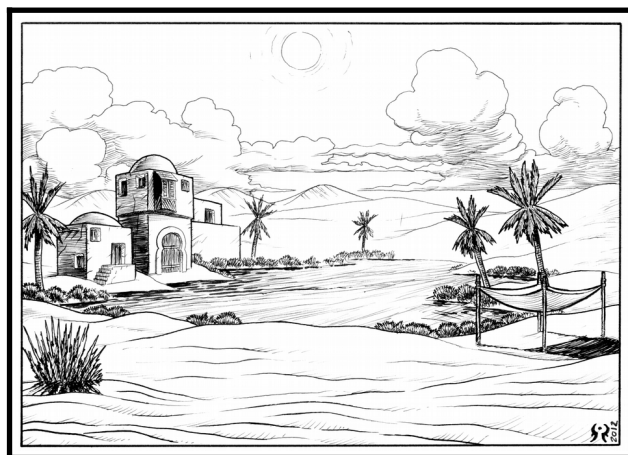


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BRAZEN BACKGROUNDS



CHARACTER
BACKGROUNDS
FOR
BRONZE AGE
SETTINGS



ALSO SUITABLE FOR SWORD-AND-SORCERY
OR LOW FANTASY ROLE PLAYING GAMES

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*Brazen Backgrounds:
Character Backgrounds for Bronze Age Settings*

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BRAZEN BACKGROUNDS

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WELCOME TO BRAZEN BACKGROUNDS – a character-background generator written specifically for role-playing games in Bronze Age fantasy settings. System-neutral, this resource can also breathe life into characters for any low-magic, low-fantasy, or sword-and-sorcery campaign.

The author is a professional scholar, with a doctorate in the study of ancient history and archaeology. To be sure, this tool supports *fantasy* games, and it does not aim at perfect historical accuracy – but from the moment of character generation, these backgrounds will ease players into a setting that many find less familiar than the faux-medieval worlds more common in fantasy games. (Just to be clear, the real ‘Bronze Age’ happened at different times in different parts of the world, and even the famed Bronze Age in the ancient Near East contained many distinct sub-periods. The setting implied throughout this document takes *most* of its inspiration from the kingdoms of the Near East and eastern Mediterranean during the mid- to late-second millennium B.C. – societies like the Minoans, Mycenaeans, Hittites, and New Kingdom Egyptians).

Adventuring parties in a Bronze Age context should be subtly different from their later, Iron Age peers. For example, (unless your GM decides otherwise) a safe *default* assumption is that characters are illiterate unless otherwise noted; generally, Bronze Age writing systems were much more complex and harder to learn than the alphabetic systems that emerged in the Iron Age. Limiting literacy to

characters with explicitly literate backgrounds (for example, physicians or scribal scholars) will emphasize the weird, almost magical nature of binding words in solid form, and may add a bit more mystery even to very low-magic campaigns. Similarly, most characters (including warriors) will not be adept at riding on horseback. Although horse-drawn chariots played a key role in late Bronze Age warfare, cavalry was really an Iron Age phenomenon (and the stirrup, helpful when charging, came even later). For that reason, the pages that follow include a variety of period-appropriate fighting specialists, but only one nomadic sub-background presents a character familiar with fighting from horseback.

Many of the backgrounds connect characters to social tensions that weakened the real Bronze Age palatial system. By the Late Bronze Age, much of what we today call ‘the economy’ involved top-down oversight from the palaces, and royal administrators collected many resources for redistribution as kings saw fit. Much long-range shipment of trade goods was essentially diplomatic, passing from court to court in the hands of kings’ servants. Some major conflicts certainly occurred, but the Late Bronze Age was marked more by cooperation between great kings; diplomatic correspondence, peace treaties, royal marriages, and lavish exchanges of rare goods helped bind rulers together. Quite simply, the powers-that-be that ran the palaces helped prop each other up. Although centralized palatial controls obviously benefited kings,

they probably increased some social tensions and may have sparked resentment against palatial rule. Free traders and independent travelers existed, but their activities sometimes cut against the grain of the system favored by great kings.

In the twelfth century B.C., most of the palace complexes across the eastern Mediterranean and Near East were destroyed. We are not exactly sure why; most likely, multiple problems all snowballed at the same time. But it *may* be the case that many palaces fell *in part* because they alienated armed, mobile people who had opted out of the palatial system. Merchants, entrepreneurs, freebooters - the line between those identities can blur easily in troubled times - these people may have rejected the restraints that fossilized the international order, and when the palatial system weakened, they struck. If you're about to run an RPG campaign set in the twilight of a Bronze Age world, it may be clear that "armed, mobile people who have opted out of the palatial system" offers a pretty convenient way to imagine a typical party of adventuring player characters. In the backgrounds that follow, such tensions offer hooks connecting characters to endless sources of trouble and opportunity.

USING THIS RESOURCE

After this introduction, you will find a table listing twenty-four different Bronze Age fantasy backgrounds, divided across four archetypal groups. Two or three backgrounds per character

should produce a very richly detailed backstory, but each group should select its own number, in consultation with the GM. Players can simply choose backgrounds, but the table also offers several methods of random selection. Use the 'weighted' columns if you want a selection that favors backgrounds particularly well-suited to the classic adventuring lifestyle. If you prefer a more eclectic and even surprising mix of character backgrounds, then roll using either of the 'diverse' selection tables. Either way, you should end up with a group of interesting characters whose backstories breathe life into any ancient setting.

But wait, there's much more! After the initial table of backgrounds, each individual background receives further description, including two (d4) random tables. The first table provides extra detail on each character's particular experience in that background, and the second explains why the character left to do something else (they had to become an adventurer somehow!). As appropriate, many of the background descriptions and table entries grant characters a piece of equipment, or modify character attributes in some way to reflect their experiences (whether good *or* bad). Naturally, GMs should feel free to adjust any of these suggested changes to suit their own style and preferred rule-set. The entries have been written to be system-neutral, so they should be useful for many different gaming tables.

Once each character has two or three backgrounds, each with their own extra details, it will normally work fine to

treat the order in which they were selected as the chronological order in which the character pursued those vocations. In a very few cases, however, the circumstances described by the specific details rolled up will not make sense in that order, in which case players should just flip the chronological order of the backgrounds.

DIGGING DEEPER

Although a small number of popular Bronze Age game settings exist, many players find the historical Bronze Age unfamiliar. If you are intrigued by the idea of a rich fantasy setting informed by real-world Bronze Age dynamics, you may find the following resources both accessible and useful.

First, please consider following my blog: gundobadgames.blogspot.com . Not only do I often discuss connections between ancient history, archaeology, and fantasy, but my posts include discussions of Bronze Age gaming in particular. I am currently developing a setting inspired by aspects of the ancient Bronze Age, and sometimes post updates related to that project.

The following books offer good first introductions to the period:

Podany, A. H. *The Ancient Near East: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. [Approximately 80% of this little book covers the Bronze Age. See also other titles in the same series on Egypt,

Assyria, Babylon, Ancient Warfare, etc.] Cline, E. H. *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. [Authoritative, engaging study of the late Bronze Age world and its collapse during the twelfth century B.C.]

Walton, J. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018. [Written by a noted biblical scholar, this book is useful whether or not you are interested in the Hebrew biblical tradition. Includes a survey of ancient Near Eastern literature and a systematic survey of major themes in ancient intellectual, philosophical, and religious systems. Covers both Bronze Age and later Iron Age content.]

If you would like short, colorful introductions to the weapons, armor, equipment, and fighting styles of Bronze Age warriors in the Mediterranean or Near East, you will not find better than the volumes by military-history and gaming publisher Osprey. Two good examples on my shelf are:

Healy, M. (with plates by A. McBride). *New Kingdom Egypt*. Elite Series 40. London: Osprey, 1992.

D'Amato, R., & A. Salimbeti (illustrated by G. Rava). *Bronze Age Greek Warrior: 1600-1100 BC*. Warrior Series 153. Oxford & Long Island City, NY: Osprey, 2011.

GROUP (d4):	BACKGROUND:	DIVERSE d6 by GROUP:	WEIGHTED d10 by GROUP:	DIVERSE d100 no GROUPS:	WEIGHTED d100 no GROUPS:
1 FIGHTERS & KILLERS	Charioteer	1	1	1 - 4	1 - 3
	Foot Soldier	2	2 - 4	5 - 9	4 - 10
	Brigand/ Brigand-Hunter	3	5 - 6	10 - 13	11 - 15
	Street Tough	4	7 - 8	14 - 17	16 - 20
	Executioner	5	9	18 - 21	21 - 23
	Pirate/Raider	6	10	22 - 25	24 - 27
2 SAGES & SAVANTS	Royal official	1	1	26 - 29	28 - 30
	Scribal scholar	2	2 - 4	30 - 34	31 - 37
	Physician	3	5 - 7	35 - 38	38 - 43
	Speaker at the Gate	4	8	39 - 42	44 - 47
	Priestess/Priest	5	9	43 - 46	48 - 50
	Cultist	6	10	47 - 50	51 - 53
3 LABORERS & ARTISANS	Boater	1	1	51 - 54	54 - 56
	Sailor	2	2 - 3	55 - 58	57 - 59
	Metalsmith	3	4 - 5	59 - 62	60 - 62
	Skilled Laborer	4	6	63 - 66	63 - 65
	Manual Laborer	5	7	67 - 70	66 - 68
	Caravaneer	6	8 - 10	71 - 75	69 - 71
4 ROGUES & OUTSIDERS	Wildlander	1	1 - 2	76 - 79	72 - 77
	Barbarian	2	3 - 4	80 - 83	78 - 82
	Poisoner/Taster	3	5	84 - 87	83 - 85
	Tomb Robber/ Burglar	4	6 - 7	88 - 92	86 - 92
	Wastrel	5	8 - 9	93 - 96	93 - 96
	Performer	6	10	97 - 100	97 - 100



CHARIOTEER

The great thrones still maintain elite cavalry corps as the mainstay of their armies. You spent some time serving in one of these prestigious groups. You are accustomed to high speed, precarious balance, danger, military tactics, and the proper care of horses.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a chariot-driver, able to direct a team of two or four horses in tight, lightning-quick maneuvers. *Add either a shield or padded armor (class as 'leather') to your equipment inventory.*
- 2 You were a chariot-archer, skilled at shooting down the enemy while moving at high speed. *Add either scale armor (class as 'chain') or a bow-and-arrows to your equipment inventory.*
- 3 You were a shield-bearer for a three-man chariot crew. *Add a large shield to your equipment inventory.*
- 4 Even though you were supported by palatial artisans, you took pride in maintaining your own chariot. Compared to many other charioteers, you have above-average mechanical and artisanal skills.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 In a fit of xenophobia, the palace allowed a purge of foreign troops.
- 2 You were one of a few survivors to fight your way out of a great defeat.
- 3 You left after a rival gained advancement in your place.
- 4 You served a minor frontier prince who rebelled against his royal overlord. Recognizing the inevitable consequences, you left rather than take part in the uprising. That prince and his remaining soldiers are now all dead. Despite your cautions, were your prince's stated grievances justified or not?

FOOT SOLDIER

Even the greatest royal forces need ranks of skilled infantrymen, and lesser armies everywhere rely on competent spearmen or swordsmen to hold their battle lines. You are familiar with tactics, with the clash of blade on shield, and with the proper maintenance of fighting equipment.

Add an extra 1-hand weapon of your choice to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a skirmisher or scout, skilled with missile weapons and fleet of foot. You are a skilled tracker, at least of human quarry.
- 2 You've stood in the front lines as a heavy spearman in several clashes, and have scars to prove it. *Reduce your Charisma/Appeal attribute by 1, and add 1 to your Strength attribute.*
- 3 You were a chariot-runner, a skirmisher paired with the chariot corps. You know a foreign noble lord well.
- 4 While in garrison, your duties included supervising new troops' military drill. You know how to inspire people, but also how to pressure them, if need be.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You were badly wounded, and left behind with some peasants. By the time you recovered, your comrades were long gone.
- 2 You were proud to help defend a mighty port city - but then that city fell to coastal raiders. You did your duty bravely, and were lucky to escape with your life at the end.
- 3 You were ordered to hunt down a band of renegade peasants, but you ended up switching sides and helping the renegades.
- 4 Wanderlust. It was just time to see more of the world.

BRIGAND / BRIGAND-HUNTER

Despite their grandiose pretensions, even the great palaces can only maintain order so well. On the fringes of society, the strong and violent impose their own order and take what they want - or use similar methods to protect their own dependents.

Add either a short sword or bow-and-arrows to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a bandit, preying on overland trade routes.
- 2 You were a cattle-rustler and raider on the edges of remote villages.
- 3 You were part of a border town's brigand-hunting defense force, which meant you had to master the skills of bandits in order to track them down.
- 4 You were a monster-hunter, part of a group with the dubious honor of hunting down creatures too terrible for shepherds and villagers to drive off on their own. In consultation with the GM, select a Favored Enemy creature type; you are familiar with this foe and the tactics needed to combat them. If the GM agrees, you get a bonus on rolls in combat against this enemy.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A larger bandit group finally burned down the local town (if you were a bandit yourself, these were your rivals).
- 2 A corrupt local landowner made himself patron to the local brigands, liquidating any bandits or bandit-hunters who resisted his schemes. You were among those squeezed out.
- 3 A foreign army rampaged through your homeland, and you narrowly escaped with your life.
- 4 Local sources of wealth dried up in a severe drought. The region could no longer support commerce, let alone bandits or those who guard against them.

STREET TOUGH

The greatest citadels cast the longest shadows. In the largest, busiest cities, local patrons and crime lords fight their own battles in the alleys, squabbling over crumbs of wealth skimmed off the palace system. Such wars demand muscle.

Add +1 to your Strength attribute (or equivalent).

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a semi-enslaved pit fighter. The well-to-do made and lost fortunes gambling on your fighting skills, but you gained little more than scars.
- 2 You were hired muscle in the service of a wealthy townsman who wanted his neighbors to respect him properly.
- 3 You grew up as an urchin but were taken in by a violent street gang in a large palatial city.
- 4 A local temple hired you to guard its premises (and to help beat up members of rival cults on the side).

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You always wanted something better. A ship came in needing to hire on another crewmember, and you jumped at your chance to seek a new life.
- 2 A gang loyal to rivals grew too powerful; your choices were *leave* or *die*.
- 3 A new governor cracked down on crime in the city. You fled after the third day of executions.
- 4 You finally stole enough to buy passage with a ship or caravan heading elsewhere.

EXECUTIONER

Whatever royal propaganda may say about legitimacy and divine blessing, most palace lords maintain control through wealth – or, if need be, through brutal violence. To save face, however, they often hide the dirty work and pass it on to outsiders – like you.

Add a leering, frightening bronze facemask to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You developed significant improvements to the Technique of the Forty-Seven Groaning Ruptures.
- 2 You carry an oversized, bronze-headed axe that shows plenty of wear.
- 3 Your identity was always hidden, but you fear terribly that Someone Knows.
- 4 You learned a terrible secret from a political prisoner. You and the GM should define that secret together.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 The nightmares became too much for you.
- 2 You found a conscience, quite inconveniently.
- 3 Mother begged you to.
- 4 You knew too many secrets. Your palace lord tried to have you killed, but you escaped.

PIRATE / RAIDER

On the Inner Sea, the line between buying merchandise for exchange and taking it at sword-point is a thin one. Not all merchants are pirates, but most pirates are merchants. As the palatial order continues to break down, many choose to take wealth, wares, and even slaves by force. Others may fight for what they think of as nobler causes, yet still be branded 'pirate.'

Add an extra 1-hand weapon to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were enslaved at a young age yourself, but your captors recognized your skills and press-ganged you into service on their pirate ship.
- 2 You were a crewmember on a merchant vessel. The violent captain turned to piracy and threatened to kill any crew who wouldn't help.
- 3 You were part of a mobile band that raided palaces to spread their wealth among the downtrodden.
- 4 Really, it all just started as a misunderstanding over some cargo and harbor fees. When it was over, four ships had been sunk and two petty principalities were threatening each other with war.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You didn't want to be there in the first place; you jumped ship at the first safe opportunity.
- 2 Watching a prisoner being beaten to death changed your view on things, and now you can't go back.
- 3 The ship sank in a storm and you washed up alone on a nearby beach.
- 4 Someone put a blood-price on your head, and it was time to relocate.

ROYAL OFFICIAL

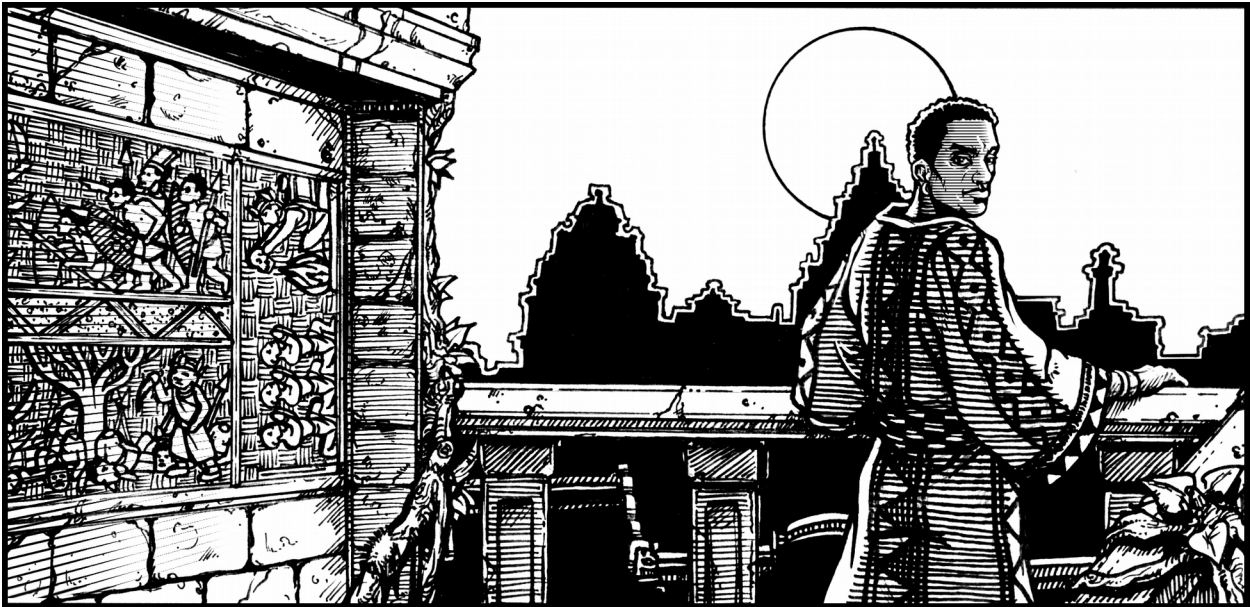
Palatial propaganda always emphasizes the great kings, but well-equipped armies and centralized economic redistribution are only possible because of the unceasing administration of royal officials. Courtiers and officials form networks of professional colleagues, conversant in the ancient diplomatic languages and practicing shared logistical skills. Officials are literate.

Optional Rule: there is a 30% chance that such officials are eunuchs.

Add to your equipment inventory either a stately formal robe of office (with stripes) or a writing-kit (which holds either a pen and ink set or a book-like set of tablets, coated in wax, with a stylus – the stylus’ pointy end writes in the wax, and the reverse flat nub of the stylus can rub out lines in the wax as an ‘eraser’). To be clear, the pen-and-ink allows you to record or send messages if you have papyrus available. The tablets and stylus are less useful for sending messages (it isn’t cheap to buy a set of waxed tablets every time you need to send a letter), but they are re-usable, fast, and helpful for making your own records and drawings.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a very senior official in one of the smallest, least significant palace-states. You miss the feeling of being respected, but you also know how limited your real influence was.
- 2 You were a very minor official for one of the largest and most powerful palace-states. You miss the feeling of being part of something really big - but you also know what a small cog you used to be in a very large machine.
- 3 You once helped a palace manage the effects of a multi-year famine, and you saw how close the system came to breakdown. More than most, you can see how unsustainable the palace-states really are.
- 4 For many officials, duty is just a means to profit or simply a matter of repeating routine procedures. For you, service in the palace was always about trying to maintain order and protect the weak - even if the system sometimes worked against those goals.



TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 Because there was a rebellion, your sector's palatial tax fell short. Because your sector's tax fell short, you were dismissed.
- 2 A rival accused you of treason and you were driven away.
- 3 Raiders struck and burned the palace while you were overseeing work projects in the countryside.
- 4 You were sent with a diplomatic mission to deliver gifts to a foreign palace, but a large band of robbers cleaned out your caravan. Rather than return home an empty-handed failure, it seemed prudent to keep moving.



SCRIBAL SCHOLAR

Scribal scholars are literate – among the very few who know the weird art that binds thoughts and speech to clay, wax, papyrus, or stone. It takes years to master the complex scripts of contemporary languages, and years more to learn the ancient courtly language of the Old Empire, still important when consulting ancient archives or sending diplomatic messages. Usually, only the palaces can support the lengthy, costly endeavor of training scribes, so even those who study lore instead of administration likely depend on royal patronage.

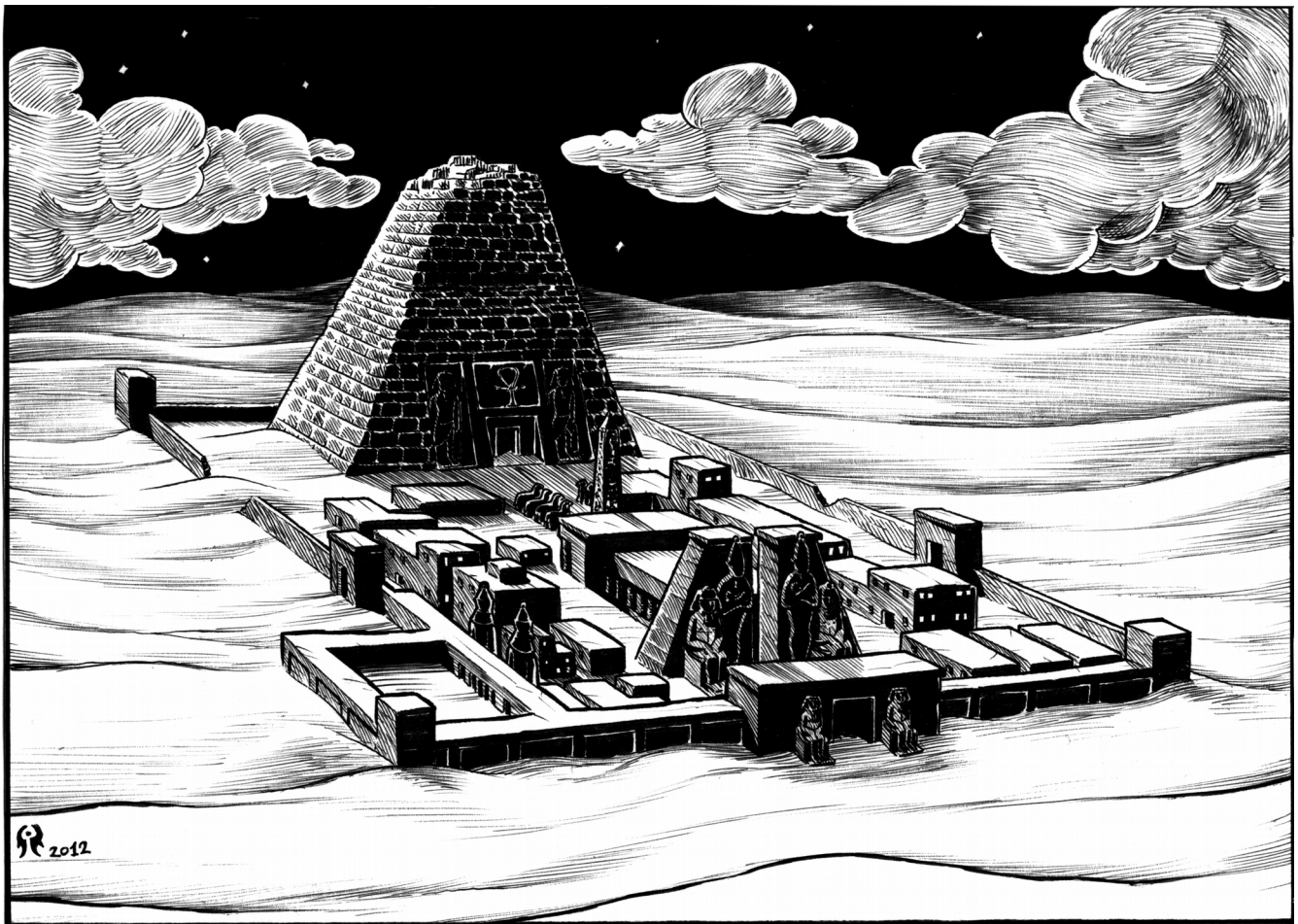
Add a writing-kit to your equipment inventory (either a pen and ink set or a book-like set of tablets, coated in wax, with a stylus - the stylus' pointy end writes in the wax, and the reverse flat nub of the stylus can rub out lines in the wax as an 'eraser') To be clear, the pen-and-ink allows you to record or send messages if you have papyrus available. The tablets and stylus are less useful for sending messages (it isn't cheap to buy a set of waxed tablets every time you need to send a letter), but they are re-usable, fast, and helpful for making your own records and drawings.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 Your writings on the early dynasties have become minor classics. There is a 2-in-6 chance that other scholars you meet will know who you are (in which case they react favorably to your reputation).
- 2 Despite the range of your scribal training, you spent much of your time as a scribe helping royal officials with administration. You have a good eye for logistical and administrative matters, and your skilled (in fact somewhat *creative*) translation of diplomatic correspondence once averted a minor war.
- 3 Law codes are your specialty, which means that you make an effective legal advocate in several realms.
- 4 You are particularly well-versed in the lore of worship traditions, whether of the Creator or in the new cults, and you have an extra 2-in-6 chance of knowing something interesting or useful about such matters when you encounter them.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You were sent abroad to deliver diplomatic correspondence, but before you could return, raiders sacked the palace you served.
- 2 You decided to travel the known world as an observer, for you hope someday to write a truly authoritative treatise on the world's geography and cultures.
- 3 An intellectual rival now dominates the academy where you once trained, and has blacklisted you among fellow scribes in the region.
- 4 You are obsessed with ancient lore, and have gone wandering in search of ancient relics and texts from the Old Empire - or even from times before it.



PHYSICIAN

From leechcraft to dietary advice, from medical potions to friendly elementals, physicians deploy every wholesome asset at their disposal to tend to the sick and suffering. Many physicians are motivated by mercy, others by profit, but all spend years of hard study to master their craft. Physicians are literate.

Add a physician's kit to your equipment inventory (bandages and pain-numbing ointment).

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 The treatment of wounds on the battlefield was your specialty.
- 2 You once dictated a learned medical treatise; your work may be familiar to other physicians you meet (2 in 6 chance they have heard of it/you, in which case they think favorably of your work).
- 3 You were particularly adept at formulating medical potions, which means you are also adept at formulating drugs and poisons (not that you would ever do such a thing, of course...).
- 4 Not even the most skilled physician can hold death at bay indefinitely, but you took the struggle very seriously. Every time a patient recovered from a serious illness, you added a tattooed mark to the tally-list on your left arm. Every time a patient died under your care, you added a tally to the right arm. *Tell the GM which side has more marks.*



TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A noble patient died under your care. You've always suspected that a rival slipped the patient some poison, but you were labeled a fraud and driven away.
- 2 Despite your skills, you grew heartsick at the suffering and losses you could *not* prevent. Leaving was an attempt to distract yourself from these woes.
- 3 You are traveling the known world in search of new drugs and treatments. You keep an eager eye out for other physicians as you travel.
- 4 You became convinced that medical lore from the Old Empire has much to teach you, so you sought out the company of the sort of adventurers who might help you find undiscovered ancient texts.



SPEAKER AT THE GATE

A bit older and wiser than most starting adventurers, these are the distinguished elders and lore-speakers whose counsels sway the gate-assemblies of towns around the Inner Sea. Like most people, such Speakers are illiterate - but only fools would dismiss them as ignorant or slow-witted. Unlike scribes, who rely on the written word to store information, lore-speakers use their capacious memories and way with words to inform, caution, inspire, or persuade. Because of these characters' age and experience, GMs may wish to have them lose 1d2 Strength and gain the same amount of Wisdom (or equivalent attribute scores).

Add a stately formal robe (with colorful stripes that signal your prestige) to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND

(D4)

- 1 You are skilled in the lore of old herbal arts, and adept at brewing health-restoring potions.
- 2 You are versed in oral histories of the large-scale events that have affected the Inner Sea in recent centuries.
- 3 You once eloquently persuaded a robber chieftain to accept payment and leave without burning your settlement.
- 4 At the gate-assembly, you had a reputation as a fierce advocate for the weak and vulnerable in the community.



TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 Ever curious, you set out to find ancient lore from foreign lands.
- 2 You met a scribe who translated an old tablet that contradicted lore you've always taken for granted. Troubled, you set out to try to learn more about the world through different perspectives.
- 3 You spoke truth to power one time too many. Rejecting your counsel, a local governor drove you away so he could continue exploiting the peasants.
- 4 You learned that a local governor was accepting bribes to allow slave-raiders to operate in the region unchecked. You traveled to the royal court to complain, and were rebuffed there by the governor's allies. Unable to return home safely, you now wander.



PRIESTESS / PRIEST

In every land, many abandon the old ways of Creator and turn to new cults. As the masses seek out new shrines, those masses also seek learned, charismatic leaders. Some cult-leaders grapple sincerely with the deep mysteries of life, while others use their authority to cover extortion or even murder.

Add either a bronze facemask or a fancy ceremonial knife (flint blade, intricately-carved ivory handle) to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You served at a shrine to an elemental associated with shadows and childbirth.
- 2 You served at the shrine of something with no name, 1d4 heads, and 1d20 stomachs. It always claimed that if you gave just a little more, it would reveal wonderful secrets.
- 3 You served a dark elemental that had enslaved several other elementals, forcing them to perform 'miracles' for the cult.
- 4 Your cult sought to reach some entity described on clay tablets from the Old Empire (you are *literate*).

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You couldn't bring yourself to carry out your first human sacrifice.
- 2 You couldn't bring yourself to carry out your seventh human sacrifice.
- 3 You tried to worship a fire elemental, and it demanded that you stop.
- 4 You first joined the cult as a path to arcane knowledge, but in time you found the offered answers unsatisfying and unwholesome. You left to find better answers elsewhere.

CULTIST

In these tumultuous times, throngs of seekers increasingly turn to new cults that venerate dark elementals or other entities (either invented or all too real). For a time, you yourself fell among one of these desperate, misled groups.

You have had to face your own inner darkness, but you have also tried to turn away from it. You are wary of falling back into old patterns; roll a bonus die when you resist attempts to control your mind.

Add either “dark robes” or “incense” to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 Incense, incense – all the rituals required incense. Whenever you smell incense burning, you get jumpy; if in combat, roll a bonus die for Initiative, but roll a penalty die when attempting any task that requires focused concentration.
- 2 The cult served a dark elemental associated with shadows. You get jumpy in low light; if in combat, roll a bonus die for Initiative, but roll a penalty die when attempting any task that requires focused concentration.
- 3 The cult served a nameless, hungry thing with d8 mouths and 3d6 eyes. The cult’s leaders once hinted that there are more things like it out there.
- 4 You’re still pretty sure the screams behind the curtain didn’t involve human sacrifice. Probably. Maybe. But if your past association with the cult were to become known, you could face capital charges in any of several principalities.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 When you accidentally dropped a ritual censer, you were marked for death by fellow cultists. They’re still looking for you.
- 2 An elemental riding the wind told you that your cult was a fraud.
- 3 You broke a vow of silence. Options were losing your tongue, or escape.
- 4 The cult took all your family’s wealth, and then lost interest in you.

BOATER

Boaters are excellent swimmers, have good balance, and are familiar with operating on the water.

Add either a net or a 15' pole to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a fisherman/woman, plying the waters, tending your nets, and selling fish.
- 2 You operated a ferryboat at a major river crossing.
- 3 You were a pole-punter carrying goods through coastal swamps to an inland city. You are very familiar with swamps and their inhabitants, lucky you.
- 4 You were a boatwright, crafting and selling boats near a riverfront city.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 One day you saw the glint of metal from the mud of the shallows. You pulled out a gleaming gold necklace. You sold the necklace for more than you could make in a year, then felt inspired to travel the world in search of other treasures. The wealth is all gone now, but not your thirst for more adventure.
- 2 A rival stole your tools and burned your boat(s). Distraught and with nothing left, you staggered off into the world to find anything else to support yourself.
- 3 Big things that looked like frogs, but walked upright like humans, claimed the waters where you worked. You fled with most of the human population.
- 4 Something pulled your cousin off his boat only a stone's throw from you. The water foamed red, and your cousin never surfaced. You were badly shaken, and you couldn't go back on the water for a long time. Did you see what pulled him under, and are you ready to return to the water?

SAILOR

Those who sail ships across the dark sea maintain the vital connections between royal courts – or, in other cases, free traders seek their own livelihood on the edges of the palatial system. Either way, sailors have good balance, are familiar with danger, and have experience with navigation, weather prediction, and working with ropes and lines of various kinds.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You sailed on an independent merchant vessel that made coastal shipments between small ports. *Add a net to your equipment inventory.*
- 2 You were a crewmember on a large sailing vessel owned by a palace or temple, and made shipments of diplomatic tributes and luxuries between palatial courts. *Add a vial of expensive perfume to your equipment inventory.*
- 3 You were a fighting shipboard marine in the crew of a royal vessel. *Add a 1-handed weapon to your equipment inventory.*
- 4 Simple seafaring became piracy; re-roll on the Pirate background tables, and *add a 1-handed weapon to your equipment inventory.*

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 Your ship sank in a storm, and you washed up on shore. What do you still carry from that ship?
- 2 You had a major falling out with the captain, who left you behind with hardly any possessions at a minor harbor. What was the subject of your disagreement?
- 3 Pirates attacked your crew in harbor, but you escaped along the shore.
- 4 A jealous shipmate pushed you overboard during a storm. You almost drowned, but got plucked out of the sea hours later by another ship – one that didn't need another hand, and dropped you off at their next port. Why was your shipmate upset with you?

METALSMITH

Few skilled craft-workers command more awe than those who take the raw bones of earth, apply heat to reveal the blazing light of sun within, and then shape new, useful products in which the powers of earth and heaven lie hidden. Metalsmiths work in copper, gold, silver, lead, and bronze (an alloy of copper with tin or - more rarely - with arsenic). Smiths gain 1d2 points in Strength and lose the same number of points in Constitution; if your preferred rule set lacks that attribute, deduct the points from Wisdom or the equivalent attribute. Perhaps these effects have something to do with long hours spent melting the lead dross off silver ore, or working with arsenic...

Add either bronze tongs or a pair of thick leather mitts to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were not a smith for a very long time. Unlike some smiths, your body seems not to have paid a sacrifice for unlocking the secrets within metal. You gain the Smith's Strength bonus but do not suffer the parallel penalty to Constitution or Wisdom.
- 2 You were particularly skilled at intricate goldsmithing. With time and the right tools, you can use your artistry to craft gold ornaments, enhancing the value of the quantity of gold used by 20%.
- 3 You were particularly skilled at crafting metal inlays for amber, lapis lazuli, or other stones. If you have access to the right materials, you are capable of converting a blade to a Sky-Blade (a blade with amber or lapis insets, capable of disrupting elementals' forms and causing them damage).
- 4 You were a particularly skillful blade smith. With the right materials, you are able to make bladed weapons that roll damage with one higher damage die than normal.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 As time passed, you became increasingly aware of the physical defects and ailments that commonly afflict smiths. You decided not to spend your life courting whatever curse haunts those who meddle with raw elements.
- 2 A wealthy patron asked you to copy some ancient artifacts made by smiths of the Old Empire. Enchanted by the beauty and skill of these objects, you decided to set out to find other such artifacts and learn more about their manufacture.
- 3 A wealthy foreign patron left a bronze-headed axe at your smithy after asking you to sharpen the blade. By the next day, the patron had been found dead, someone had tried to burgle your smithy, and two thugs warned that you would be killed if you didn't hand over the axe. Instead, you fled with the weapon, which appears completely normal but bears an odd script on the blade. *Add "mysterious axe" to your equipment inventory.*
- 4 Your smithy served the needs of a great palace. Shortly before a foreign army sacked your city, you escaped with a group of refugees.

ARTISAN / SKILLED LABORER

Far from the clash of arms and the machinations of the powerful, crafty men and women spend lifetimes honing their skill in a single, valued craft. Not you, of course, or you wouldn't be out here now risking your hide on these foolhardy adventures. You tried your hand at more than one craft - for a while.

After selecting your crafts below, add either a product or a piece of equipment related to one of those crafts to your equipment inventory.

TELL US WHICH CRAFTS YOU STUDIED (D12, TWICE)

- 1 Baker
- 2 Basket-maker
- 3 Brewer
- 4 Farmer
- 5 Gardener
- 6 Glassmaker and cutter (no Bronze Age glassblowing)
- 7 Embalmer
- 8 Jeweler or artist
- 9 Mason
- 10 Potter
- 11 Tanner (typically low-class/outcast)
- 12 Weaver (traditionally, often a female role)

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You were capable of competent work, but your heart was never in it – so nobody wanted your substandard services.
- 2 Right before the big rebellion, there were riots across the town quarter that housed your workshop. Everything you had was burned or smashed.
- 3 You fell madly in love with a mysterious buyer who was journeying from a distant land. You threw away everything to go looking for them. Have you given up yet, or are you still looking?
- 4 You claimed you were leaving to go study the craft in other lands, but you can't fool yourself; you wanted an excuse to leave and find adventure.



MANUAL LABORER

With no prestige, no honor, and few prospects, these laborers are near the bottom of the social pecking order. But they are strengthened by their labors; such characters should receive a +1 bonus to their Strength attribute (or equivalent).

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a slave on (d6) 1-3: a farm estate or 4-6: at an urban harbor, tasked with all sorts of menial labors.
- 2 You were a miner in a (d4) 1-2: copper mine, 3: silver mine, 4: gold mine. You are quite accustomed to working in dimly lit underground spaces.
- 3 You were a poorly paid digger of wells and ditches.
- 4 You were a tomb-carver, part of a crew hired to prepare resting places for the wealthy. Like miners, you are accustomed to working underground in poor light – but you enjoy a bit more social dignity.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 You ran away and joined a bandit gang. Add the “Bandit” background and select its option #1 or #2 for “Tell us about this background.”
- 2 A wealthy landowner sold you into slavery to raise emergency funds (if you weren’t already a slave, then this was highly illegal, but who was there to stop such oppression?). You escaped from the slavers and ran off into the countryside.
- 3 Raiders attacked your community and you became a refugee, wandering into neighboring regions.
- 4 En route to your labors before dawn, you spotted brigands burying their loot. Later, you returned to the spot, dug up the treasure, then fled to start a new, well-funded life. Unfortunately, that wealth is now spent.

CARAVANEER

Whether they carry trade goods for royal patrons or travel on their own initiative, overland merchants help keep the world connected. These travelers have experience dealing with pack animals, overland navigation, and foreign cultures – and they may be cunning appraisers of goods for sale.

Add either a spear or a goad (long staff with a spike and hook at the end) to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You worked as a caravan guard, driving off bandit attackers.
- 2 As an animal handler / driver, you cared for the caravan's donkeys.
- 3 As a merchant-agent for a royal palace (d6: 1-4) or temple (5-6), you oversaw the caravan's operations.
- 4 You lived among the Khori ram-riders, itinerant families of independent merchants who carry cargoes across mountain ranges in multi-level howdahs on the backs of giant rams.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A foreign palace official accused you of being a spy. You had to flee for your safety. (Was the accusation justified?).
- 2 Murderous bandits overwhelmed your caravan, and you narrowly escaped.
- 3 While still far from your destination, the caravan's animals all died from a terrible wasting illness. Unable to carry on with the cargo, the caravaneers dispersed with only what they could carry themselves.
- 4 Your caravan passed through a small town ravaged by a terrible plague. Days later, most of your fellow travelers were dying or dead. The survivors dispersed to other lands.

WILDLANDER

Even though 'civilized' city-dwellers welcome honey, wool, and other goods brought in from the countryside, they typically look down on country-folk as half-bandits or even barbarians. But let them scoff...you know the freedom of the open Wild, and you have the skills and mettle to thrive there. Wildlanders are adept at tracking, securing food, and finding their way in the wilderness. They are familiar with the lore of plants, animals, and even monsters from their native ecosystems.

Add either a spear or bow-and-arrows to your equipment inventory.



TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a hunter – skilled in tracking, finding, and slaying game in the wild stretches between settled lands.
- 2 You tended flocks for pay just on the edge of civilization, herding animals between their summer and winter pasturage.
- 3 You were a nomadic shepherd, wandering the semi-arid pre-steppes between the deserts and the lands of civilization.
- 4 You were a Wild Man or Woman, raised among beasts and running naked with them, barely conscious of your own humanity.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A princeling passed your way on a hunting expedition, undertook your services as a guide, and became a close friend. You accompanied him on many trips around the wilds, until one day he died in a hunting accident. Courtiers jealous of your friendship blamed you for his death, and you had to flee for your life.
- 2 You went down to a city to sell wool, got roaring drunk in a tavern, and woke up on a ship, having been press-ganged into sea service. By the time you escaped, home was a world away.
- 3 In a cave in the hills, you found a large clay pot. Inside was a gleaming bronze sword that strangely never takes on a lustrous tarnish. This discovery inspired you to explore the world in search of other wondrous treasures. *You still have the sword; add it to your equipment inventory.*
- 4 There was a terrible drought in your homeland. Unable to survive there any longer, you wandered down into the settled lands and sought more fruitful regions beyond.

BARBARIAN

Far beyond the palace-states of the Inner Sea lie the chiefdoms of the barbarians. Compared to residents of the Inner Sea, 'barbarians' are better able to withstand harsh environmental conditions. They often are familiar with wilderness survival and lore, even if they usually know little of the history and customs of 'civilized' lands. But it would be a mistake to see these individuals as cut off from the world of civilization; Inner Sea luxury goods travel deep into barbarian territory and become objects of great prestige and political power there. Similarly, barbarians are responsible for carrying essential goods like tin, amber, and lapis lazuli toward the Inner Sea. Nonetheless, most civilized persons will treat barbarians with a mixture of fear, contempt, and admiring awe.

Add either a gold-and-amber armband or a drinking-goblet crafted from a human skull to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You grew up among the horse-tribes in the furthest reaches of the Endless Steppe. Unlike most who dwell around the Inner Sea, you are comfortable riding, shooting, and fighting from horseback, rather than from a chariot or wagon.
- 2 You were a retainer to one of the Chariot-Princes who rule the steppes nearest to the settled lands of the Inner Sea. You are adept in chariot warfare and in the care of horses.
- 3 You come from the tribes along the Amber Route in the far northwest. You raised flocks, hunted in the hills, and answered the chieftains' call for strong arms in times of war. But during long winter nights, you practiced the skill of carving amber beads and ornaments.
- 4 In the hot forests far south of the Inner Sea, you trained as a lore-keeper for your tribe. You know all the stories of the old chieftains stretching back to the beginning, and the half-forgotten rumors of cursed treasures hiding beneath the land. You also know much about useful plants, or at least those growing in your homeland.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A tribal prophet announced that elementals in 'the great water' plan to destroy humanity. You and nine other youngsters were sent to the Inner Sea to learn more. You reached these settled, decadent lands years ago, and you now know much more about the world. Do you still believe in the prophet's mission, or have you left it behind with your homeland?
- 2 You were captured by raiders, sold to slavers, and brought to this land of decadent cities. After several years of slavery, you escaped. What kept your spirit strong during your captivity?
- 3 You were hired to escort merchants back to the Inner Sea from your homeland. Once you reached these lands, you decided to keep traveling across this realm of wonders. What caught your fancy the most?
- 4 You killed someone important in your tribe. Now you must wander in exile from your homeland. Whom did you kill? Do you regret it?



POISONER / TASTER

Skilled in the detection – and application – of poisons, these subtle specialists serve in the shadows or stand unobtrusively at the side of great lords, sniffing and sampling food and drink meant for the lips of the very great (and very paranoid). Poison-tasters likely have built up tolerances to low levels of common toxins. They are, of course, quite adept at making and delivering poisons, too.

Add either “poison, 1 dose (can be applied to blades)” or “antidote, 1 dose (effective against most common poisons)” to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You once saved a dozen lives by detecting the aftertaste of a common poison in a swig of particularly fine wine. Because you had built up a tolerance to that toxin, you finished off the rest of the wine with great contentment. They're still telling that story in the palace.
- 2 You perfected a method for masking the nutty aftertaste of a common liquid poison. Apparently, one of your associates sold the secret, because other specialists around the Inner Sea are now using the technique.
- 3 By adding a lethal 'special ingredient' to the ritual cakes at a controversial royal wedding, you once prevented a civil war.
- 4 In many cases, the only difference between a poison and a drug is the dosage. You were a drug-maker for a famous physician, until the local lord snapped you up and made you his pre-banquet taster.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 Whoever poisoned the frontier lord's drink was *very* good. They concocted a mixture that was subtle enough to escape your keen nose, mild enough to slip under your own immunity threshold, and dangerous enough that repeated doses over several weeks killed off your employer, whose sons turned on you. You barely escaped with your life.
- 2 After a few near misses, you decided to seek greater familiarity with foreign toxins. You set out across the Inner Sea, looking for new information on drugs and poisons wherever you go.
- 3 The local governor was cruel, brutal, and debauched. You were all too happy to sell a vial of poison to coat the assassin's blade...but the assassin was betrayed by a lover, the governor learned of your part in the plot, and you fled.
- 4 Really, you have to ask? You just got tired of sipping possibly poisoned wine and went looking for other work.



TOMB ROBBER / BURGLAR

Why scrape by for years (some ask) when all the wealth anyone needs lies a few rooms up in the homes of the wealthy? Others seek forgotten treasures among the quiet chambers of the dead, assuming that the long-deceased guard their wealth less zealously than the living wealthy. Unfortunately, that assumption is not always correct. Nevertheless, these characters are usually good climbers and stealthy movers, and are alert for traps. They also have experience appraising the value of stolen items, or distinguishing fakes from genuine treasures.

Add “face-mask” to your equipment inventory.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You’ve never trusted the new cults that operate everywhere, and you once had the audacity to plan a series of thefts from several cult shrines. During one of these heists, you encountered an abomination that almost shattered your mind as you fled from its sanctuary. Whenever you encounter a well-known cult, you probably know something interesting or useful about that group and about the kinds of treasures it might have hidden away. On the other hand, if you fight against elemental foes, you [*you individually, not necessarily your party*] always lose combat initiative and act after the elementals.
- 2 During an outbreak of the dreaded White Lotus plague, your crew decided to plunder the urban homes of the formerly wealthy and recently deceased (it’s not like *they* needed that stuff anymore...). Alas, you and the rest of your fellow robbers promptly contracted the disease. Most of your comrades died horribly; after a terrible illness, you recovered – and looked for a new crew. Congratulations, you now appear to be immune to the dreaded White Lotus plague.
- 3 You’ve seen a fair bit of Old Empire stuff in underground tombs. Although you don’t really understand what you’ve seen, you can easily recognize the style of many artifacts from that period.
- 4 You once had a brief, intense love affair with a noble’s ward, who had caught you in their chambers during a burglary.



TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 A cousin or good friend got caught and had both hands chopped off. This rather soured you on the profession.
- 2 Your last haul left you with more wealth than you could imagine. That was several years ago, and now you've spent it all.
- 3 Pressed by your conscience, you decided that you could never really pursue an honest life in the company you were keeping...so you left for a wandering life. How are the people you're with *now* influencing you?
- 4 After breaking into a remote tomb, you encountered something in the burial chamber that whispered your name as it crawled forward into the torchlight. You didn't stop running for hours, and then you went looking for a different way to pay for food. But you haven't had the nightmare in several years; what has made you feel bold enough to raid the darkness again?

WASTREL

Whether from affliction and a lack of household or clan support, or because they fall into criminal or dissolute habits, some unfortunates find themselves scraping by without honor at the bottom edge of society. If such unfortunates turn to the adventuring life, however, they often benefit from their past experiences. These characters are cunning observers of human behavior and know how to melt unnoticed into a crowd. Some have even more specialized, if impolite, skills.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a cutpurse, liberating passersby of their belongings with your light touch and sharp blade. Roll or select from reasons for leaving #1-3.
- 2 You were a constant gambler, always ready for a friendly game of rolling the knucklebones. You won regularly; was it good luck, or cheating? Roll or select from reasons for leaving #1-3, and *add "Set of dice" to your equipment inventory.*
- 3 You were a beggar, fed by the pity of those around you, since you could not walk. Use reason for leaving #4.
- 4 You were a Mad Fool, touched by raving insanity, regarded with a mixture of fear, pity, amusement, and awe, supported with small gifts in your begging bowl. With the madness came weird insight; even today, you can pass an Intelligence attribute test (or equivalent) to decipher ancient texts, even though you never studied the language of the Old Empire and are otherwise illiterate. Use reason for leaving #4.

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 An angry passerby called you a thieving cheat, and then attacked you with a knife. You won the fight, but gained a nasty scar (tell us where!). Although you *technically* killed your attacker in self-defense, the angry community drove you out.
- 2 A rival with the same methods claimed that you were working on their turf and threatened to kill you. You left.
- 3 You won (or stole) a royal official's signet ring from said official's very drunk aide. The official's goons came looking for you, and you fled the town. *You still have the signet ring.*
- 4 One day a passing stranger tossed a small silver ring into your begging-bowl and hurried away. When you picked up the ring, you swooned and knew nothing for two days; when you awoke, your affliction [either lame legs or madness] was cured. The locals were as frightened of your transformation as they were glad for you; you soon decided to leave and seek a fresh start in life.

PERFORMER

Music, dance, and the chanted word bring comfort, drama, and expression to the lives of rich and poor alike. Most settlements welcome traveling entertainers, at least for a little while, and sometimes even offer them a spot in the most sacred of community rituals. It is not uncommon for a footloose musician or poet to fall in with wandering adventurers.

TELL US ABOUT THIS BACKGROUND (D4)

- 1 You were a dancer, either elegant or enticing, hired to solemnize great rituals or to enliven opulent banquets. At other times, you served as a professional mourner, paid to set the proper tone at funerals with your loud wailing and weeping. You can control your outward mannerisms quite effectively, and you know how to shape a crowd's mood. *(Traditionally, these roles would belong to female performers, but feel free to adjust to suit your own campaign setting).*
- 2 You were a puppeteer. Several times each year, the great cities hold puppet-shows reenacting the oldest legends and deepest tales. New cults also hire puppeteers to help spread their counter-narratives. You are adept at crafting and using puppets, at ventriloquism, and at copying funny voices. *Add "medium humanoid puppet" to your equipment inventory.*
- 3 You were a poet/orator, fed and housed while you recited long epic poems or even composed them, sometimes on the spot. You have an excellent memory, a quick mind, a flair for melodrama, and the ability to shape a crowd's mood with only your voice.
- 4 You were a singer or musician. You know how to soothe or excite by your playing, and in many places you can earn your room and board with a few hours' music. What is your instrument of choice? *(Voice, lyre, flute, pan-ipes, or drum-and-sistrum). Unless you chose 'voice,' add that instrument to your equipment inventory.*

TELL US WHY YOU LEFT (D4)

- 1 One night you dreamed vividly of the ultimate creative expression in your art. You awoke longing to give such a performance but dreading that you could never equal the task. The dream haunted you for weeks, until you lost heart and set your performances aside. Are you still running from your own fears, or have you found peace with your own limits and potential?
- 2 Jealous of your skills, a rival performer slandered your good name and had you driven from home on charges of gross impiety.
- 3 You fell in love, then had your heart broken when your beloved chose your artistic rival over you. For a long time, you needed to get away from your home and your art. Are you feeling better yet?
- 4 Who says you left? You're exploring the world to seek your fortune, letting the art pay your way as you travel.

BRAZEN BACKGROUNDS

With this guide and a handful of dice, you can easily generate thousands of medium-detail backstories for characters in Bronze Age fantasy settings. Reflecting the writer's own background as an ancient historian, the introduction briefly discusses aspects of the historical Bronze Age in the Mediterranean and Near East, offers some tips on gaming in a Bronze Age-inspired setting, and provides a short list of suggested titles for those wanting to learn more about Bronze Age history, archaeology, religion, equipment, and fighting techniques.

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