

# TAINTED GRAIL

## Song of a Dying World

### Excerpt



# ON WYRDNESS

On Avalon, humanity has always lived under the threat of the Wyrdness. From its first steps on the island until the Fall, it has had to adapt and protect itself from the unpredictable magical mists that can greatly transform living beings. Although some repellents allow the settlers to temporarily escape its effects, the Wyrdness remains an irremovable power and its existence is intimately linked to the nature and functioning of the island.











# A PRIMAL FORCE

**T**he Wyrddness has always been a part of Avalon, suffusing its power through the island since time immemorial. The very existence of Avalon is governed by its presence, and the Wyrddness that people see and know as the mists represents but a fraction of its true power; it shapes the world ad infinitum, sometimes perverting or even obliterating it. Some have come to regard the Wyrddness as the beginning and end of all things. It is an untamable and unpredictable power, and a carrier for unceasing metamorphosis.

## THE SOVEREIGN FOG

**F**or the average person, the Wyrddness is often described as the thick fog that has suffocated the land of Avalon for a century now. Its veil appears as a moving misty expanse, present across all of Avalon and stretching over dozens of miles. These pockets of mist are carried by the winds and seem possessed of a consciousness of their own: the Wyrddness reacts to its environment and several witnesses claim to have seen it come to life. Near the ground, wispy tentacles stretch and grasp at their victims, dragging them into the heart of the nebulous haze, while vaporous appendages pull away from the fog and spread across the ground, penetrating the earth deeply. Near the coasts, the Wyrddness alters its course and throws itself entirely inland, its primary environment. Due to its constantly varying density, unwary travelers can feel thin threads of mist caress their cheeks or be covered by a thick mantle of fog.

Although it can be temporarily dispersed by means of repellents and ancient menhirs, the Wyrddness is never truly defeated or dispelled. Despite the efforts and ingenuity of humanity, it is constantly reforming and taking over every landform, space, or cavity exposed to its influence. The Wyrddness seems to well up from an infinite reservoir and many islanders, convinced that such a power can't be tamed, have resigned themselves to live their lives trapped within its clutches. ■

## A MULTIFACETED THREAT

**S**ome suspect that the fog isn't the Wyrddness's sole manifestation. Some say that the tiny dew drops that form in the early morning are charged with its power, which is said to water all the plants on the island. In the northern, most cold-swept part of Avalon, villagers face inexplicable blizzards that petrify the trees and split the rocks before suddenly vanishing. Inland, the center of human activity must face an ever-changing palette of phenomena, varying in form and intensity. Iridescent crystals appear at the border of villages, casting distorted reflections to observers; the foliage is filled with heavy, silver stalactites that whisper a strange melody when rustled by the wind. Elsewhere, the water lilies on the outskirts of Dark Morass release vapors as caravans pass by, which suffocate the animals or encourage predators. Each part of the island is exposed to different phenomena: thus far, the Wyrddness and its thousand faces have escaped any and all attempts at categorization due to its many ever-changing shapes.

For lack of a better explanation, everyone blames the Wyrddness, this insidious and untamed power, for the evils that afflict civilization. Reality or superstition, every place in Avalon is still exposed to this phenomenon. In fact, no sane settler would venture out without a Wyrddcandle or a talisman to keep evil at bay—even if they were headed somewhere seemingly safe and protected from its effects. ■







# THE WYRDNESS AND ITS EFFECTS

**T**he Wyrdness indiscriminately alters everything it touches. No one can escape its caress and all living things caught in its grip eventually suffer its effects. All creatures in Avalon are exposed and vulnerable to the Wyrdness. Everything seems to indicate that the Fore-dwellers themselves show sensitivity to the mists. Did they create their millennial empire by taming the Wyrdness? By adapting to its touch? If human scholars ever knew these answers, they were lost during the Century of Mists.

## A COMPONENT OF EVOLUTION

**T**he Wyrdness, however, seems to hold infinite possibilities and isn't limited to perverting reality. Clear-sighted observers who can ignore lowly superstitions know that the Wyrdness creates as much as it destroys. As such, while the island's flora and fauna bear resemblance to their mainland counterparts, their unique characteristics come from centuries of evolution under the Wyrdness's influence. Certain plants have developed unexpected means of communication, such as specific scents or the pattern of their roots. Elsewhere, animal species have evolved to surreal proportions, inverting the order of the food chain. The game in Grubwood, hunted extensively during the Age of Legends, has seen its hide strengthen into impenetrable leather; north of the island, the jackdaws that were chased from their nests by the fog can now dive into the wildest waves to fish for their meager food. On the other hand, nature sometimes fails to adapt to the Wyrdness, degenerating upon contact. Swarms of rodents, driven mad by hunger, have fused into mountains of flesh and mouths which consume themselves if they can't find prey. Larger beasts that were swallowed by the mists

have reappeared broken and half-mad, driven to attack nearby human settlements or challenge their predators. The Wyrdness's whims and effects are unpredictable, and all of Avalon fears its passage. ■

## HUMANITY AND THE REST

**A**s it turns out, mankind is more sensitive to the Wyrdness. The unfortunate souls marked by the taint of the fog are looked upon with suspicion, or even banished from their village without further ado. Still, the effects vary from person to person. Some people can walk through the Wyrdness for hours without apparent harm. Others can become horribly deformed simply by inhaling its fumes, or worse, turn into a frothing aberration overnight. The Wyrdness takes great care in reshaping the creatures that fall into its clutches, and humans are as malleable a material as any. When a victim is exposed to the mists, their body can be altered, their limbs atrophied or rearranged into an unexpected combination that defies reason. More than that, some claim that the Wyrdness also alters the minds of its victims. Some were struck with dementia or enlightenment, while others have had their memories and sorrows erased forever.

The effects of the fog aren't always visible and can take months, even years, to manifest themselves. A level-headed village chief may suddenly fly into a rage and slit the throats of his advisors for no reason; a soldier haunted by the specter of war may suddenly overcome her fears and resume her life. All these anomalies bear the mark of the Wyrdness, and humanity has always been careful to guard against its effects. ■



## THE WYRDNESS'S TERRITORIES

**T**he island, subject to the Wyrddness's surge in the Century of Mists, has been completely rearranged in some places. Near Tuathan, from where the Wyrddness flows, trees grow upside down and blocks of stone, violently torn from the surface, lazily hover a few feet above the ground. Entire territories are thus flouting the laws of nature. Rumors even speak of time passing... differently, depending on where one is. The Mistfarers point out places where pockets of fog, once dissipated, leave only a barren moor devoid of all life. Bards report that elsewhere, Wyrddness rains water the plains where gigantic crystal bulbs bloom together under the moonlight. The effects of the Wyrddness are unpredictable and, for thousands of years, the island of Avalon has been undergoing a permanent metamorphosis. ■







*My son gave his life to save our village. When the Wyrddness came and the four-armed monsters swept through Avalon, he was the first to answer the call of the brave. Without news from Camelot, abandoned by our heroes, we were doomed to disappear. The village council gathered posthaste and ordered we leave to the south, in hopes of finding shelter and perpetuating the history of Bundorca. My son agreed to stay behind and hold back the Fore-dwellers for as long as possible...*

*On the day of our departure, I gave him his father's sword and tried to hold back my tears as he helped me onto the last caravan. I tried not to shame him as he said goodbye and joined the heroes who honored the living with their sacrifice.*

*I was told that he fell near the ancient menhir. Though pierced by many blades, he died standing. Facing the Fore-dwellers. Facing the Wyrddness. He fought to allow our escape. He fought to honor our village, until Death itself, moved by his bravery, stopped its gloomy procession and took him with it.*

*I mourned him, day and night. In the fog, on our new land. A land that isn't ours, but that we must now call home. I wept for him, day and night, for nearly twenty years, until my eyes grew cloudy and blindness spared me the sight of his empty bed.*

*Despite our efforts, the Wyrddness found us. Despite the sacrifices, the rituals and the constant migrations, the Wyrddness found us. It caught up with our village, swallowed our horses and drove our beasts mad. It took everything from us, once again.*

*Then, one day, for no reason, it receded. Suddenly, the fog became tamer. It gathered at the edge of the village and released our people. The beasts of burden, the bloodhounds... and my son. Preserved from time and death. He emerged from the mists and ran into my arms. I ran my hands over his face, through the thickness of his hair and over his hands, pulsing with life. And I knew. I knew that the Wyrddness had returned my son to me.*

*I curse all the false prophets. The Mistfarers, the wizards, and the Wyrddhunters... all those impostors who warn us of the fog, who spill blood in the name of dark principles and supposed protection. These people are wrong. The Wyrddness isn't an enemy. It's nobody's enemy.*

*My son gave his life to save our village. The Wyrddness returned him to me.*

*Creane the Soothsayer*







# HUMANITY AGAINST THE WYRDNESS

**T**he presence of the Wyrdness determines the existence of all that lives in Avalon: since its arrival on the island, humanity has had to deal with this new and unavoidable reality.

## SAFEGUARDS FROM DANGER

**O**ver the centuries, humanity has learned to fear and protect itself from the Wyrdness. After witnessing the harmful effects of the fog on living beings, wizards strove to provide mankind with an effective and lasting means of protection.

### THE MENHIRS

Merlin successfully created a first line of defense against the fog in the time of King Arthur: the menhirs. Infused with magic and bearing some resemblance to the dangerous Fore-dwellers, these statues could protect entire territories. They allowed the humans entrenched in Avalon to create habitable areas “untouched” by the Wyrdness.

Unfortunately, the menhirs ran out of power: after several centuries, most of them burned out. Today, only a handful of menhirs still repel the Wyrdness, scattered around the island and coveted by the locals. Their history and inner workings have been gradually lost to time. If anyone still knows how to create menhirs or reactivate their power, they keep it a closely guarded secret.

### PROTECTION RITUALS

Faced with the decline of the menhirs and deprived of Merlin’s line, the wizards and druids had to invent new ways to keep the Wyrdness at bay. Numerous rituals (of varying effectiveness) were thus born, drawing as much from the established arts brought from the Continent as from the murky practices that followed the breakdown of civilization during the Fall. Rituals used to guard against the Wyrdness vary from one community to another, and their secrets are jealously guarded. Near Camelot, hamlets are protected by arcanists’ power runes: these are buried under the foundations of villages, or carved into the stones of their walls. In the southern part of the island, communities steeped in mysticism and ancient druidic customs rely on trivial rituals, involving offerings to the gods, protections drawn in blood and chalk, or feverish ceremonies with sacred songs and dances. Finally, in the north and among certain peoples exposed to the Wyrdness, many sacrifices, animal and human, occur to “calm” the mists and there is a rare, but existing, practice of theogamy, with the Wyrdness being represented by a cult official.



## WYRDCANDLES

Travelers who wish to venture into the fog without exposing themselves to its effects can use Wyrdcandles. These are a recent development fashioned with blackish silt, which is mined in cavities formed by the passage of Wyrdness storms. The wax is then refined and suffused with a fraction of power through a taxing ritual that can last several hours. The making of Wyrdcandles is the preserve of a cénacle of artisans scattered throughout Avalon: those few individuals who can

shape these objects of power are openly courted by most established communities. However, some claim that the infusion of Wyrdcandles is not part of any magical arcana, but rather the intuitive knowledge of (or even an intimate connection to) the Wyrdness. This, of course, arouses suspicion among certain communities. In any case, these rare and expensive candles can repel the Wyrdness in the area on which they shine. Though limited, the proffered protection is essential for travel in the changing lands of Avalon. ■

## THE WYRDNESS'S POTENTIAL

Far from such considerations and despite the danger of the phenomenon, some people choose to live with the Wyrdness, and even take advantage of it...

### WYRDNESS TRIBES

Some communities chose to settle near, and sometimes within, the fog of Avalon. Over the centuries, they developed a strange curiosity for this enemy. Some groups, whether tired of abandoning their homes or fascinated by the phenomenon, entered the mists and disappeared from the world of humanity. If they have survived, these communities will have paid the price of several decades spent in the mist. Their debased and deformed bodies, and their minds, withdrawn into themselves, will have brought them to the brink of the human condition. Such "Wyrdness tribes" haven't yet manifested themselves, but the end of the Century of Mists and the awakening of humanity may well precipitate their encounter.

### WYRDNESS MAGIC

Inspired by the feats of King Arthur in his time, wizards seek to tap into the power of the Wyrdness and subject it to their ambitions. Wyrdness magic

aims to harness the primordial force of Avalon, with users seeking to channel the fog in order to fuel incredible powers. These arcanists claim that, through focus, they could extract matter from the Wyrdness and shape it to their desires. Thus, they could lend shape to thoughts or alter the laws of the island, such as the passage of time, or even gravity.

However, Wyrdness magic is particularly demanding: it requires constant focus from the user, and even then mages remain vulnerable to violent psychic backlashes. This makes it difficult to believe people who claim to be Wyrdness users, as their minds seem to have been damaged by the proximity and experimentation of the Wyrdness. In its attempt to twist the Wyrdness and the physical principles of Avalon, this magic flouts reality and causes turmoil with every use. The only way for Wyrdness mages to limit these effects seems to be tapping into the Wyrdness even more, or directly into their life energy. In effect, several emboldened mages have drained themselves of blood by surrendering to this power. Now, Wyrdness mages tend to hoard expendable familiars to avoid such unpleasantness, which further taints their sinister reputation. ■



