

THE HOMECOMING OF COUNT INCHIOSTRO

PCs arrive in the sleepy Zingaran village of Cruetz, a day and a half's ride from the Aquilonian border. Built of worn white stone and red tile, dusty Cruetz isn't large enough to support an inn. The sun dips close to the horizon, and Zingaran peasants in rancher's garb watch PCs from shadowed doorways, their dark eyes gleaming with suspicion.

Ask the players what would draw their characters to such a remote border town. They need not arrive as a group. As usual with running BoL adventures, PC backgrounds can serve as inspiration. Merchants might be journeying as part of a caravan, thieves running from the law, mercenaries riding north to enlist in Aquilonian armies, or mariners traveling south to the port city of Kordava. Offer a Hero Point to the player who can come up with the best explanation!

In the village square a cracked fountain bubbles. Two figures sit on the fountain's rim: an older, balding man in a dented cuirass, with a gilt sword belted at his waist, and a plump little man holding a faded standard. The former is **Count Inchiostro**, a Zingaran nobleman fallen on hard times, and the latter his attendant, **Pacha Sanzo**.

Inchiostro has several bottles of fine Aquilonian wine cooling in the fountain's waters. He's quick to offer a drink to any able-looking PCs who approach (or dubious ones, for that matter--he's not picky). Anyone willing to listen to his story will soon be plied with more wine. Pacha can be sent after a roasted haunch, as well.

Inshioistro's tale goes something like this:

"My ancestral estate lies less than two day's ride from this homely little town. I was cast out as a youth--the circumstances are too painful to relate. By Mitra, just the recollection threatens tears. Forced to forsake all the comforts of my station, the love of my siblings, I roamed the whole of the Hyborian continent. In Aquilonia I made a name for myself as an instructor, teaching the soft gentry there the finer points of Zingaran swordsmanship. For a time I was a freebooter on the Western Ocean. Once I even traded sword-strokes with a certain bronze-thewed Cimmerian, whose eyes smoldered like coals within a wolf's skull. But that's a story for another time."

Inchioistro stands straight and whips the sword from his belt. Pressing the keen blade to his lips, he continues:

"I swear by my sword, Triste, that I will reclaim the manor where I was born! My wanderings, my blood and sweat have erased whatever imaginary crimes have been lodged against me. But the way is not clear. I've heard rumors that a robber-chieftain, El Gancho, and his band have taken up residence within my old marble halls. To drive him forth I need fighting-men with wills of steel. Men such as yourselves."

Inchioistro heaps flattery on the PCs, encouraging them to talk about their origins and heroic skills. A certain amount of boasting is expected. This is an excellent way for new characters to introduce themselves to one another. If asked about compensation for their help, Inchioistro explains he currently has little means--but that will change once he reclaims his manor, and the vaults stuffed with treasure beneath the estate.

As empty wine bottles start to pile up, several of the more stalwart villagers come forward, drawn by free alcohol and talk of treasure. Some go so far as swearing allegiance to Inchioistro's standard, but the Count casts dubious glances at their drooping bellies and hairless chins. *"We'll see how many of them are up for it, come the morning,"* he whispers to the PCs.

The milling peasants present an opportunity to gather information, if the Heroes are so inclined. Some possible rumors:

+ **El Gancho**, 'The Hook,' leads twenty bloodthirsty men, all former soldiers from a border garrison. He lost his left hand in a duel with the Viscount of Kordava (True, though the number of men with El Gancho varies depending on the number of PCs and the GM's discretion).

+ A Zamoran witch named **Illia Stregha** has been glimpsed in the village occasionally. She heads a coven of women who can turn into crows (True, and Illia, not El Gancho, is the real villain of this adventure).

+ Inchiostro's family has not been heard from for some time. His estate lies in ruins and is said to be haunted (Basically true; parts of the manor have fallen into disrepair, and there is *something* haunting the family vaults . . .)

+ Many people consider the Count to be touched in the head, though no one doubts his skill with a sword (True, Inchiostro is generally considered an eccentric, and despite his title holds no real power over the villagers of Cruetz, who are ruled by a minor baron to the south).

+ Ghouls sometimes stray from the forests of Argos to roam the scrub-plains north of town (False, though the GM could make this true if he wants to stretch the adventure out).

Wine continues to flow as night falls and the moon rises. It becomes clear that Inchiostro intends to sleep on the flagstones, next to the fountain: he has Pacha set up blankets, and invites PCs to bed down as well. In fact, the Heroes will find it difficult to find lodgings anywhere else, as the villagers of Cruetz distrust strangers.

In the morning, Inchiostro wakes with a splitting headache, and takes a long drink from the fountain. As predicted, none of the local braggarts have stuck around. Pacha fetches three horses from a nearby stable and saddles Inchiostro's mount, the least swaybacked of the trio. He offers the other two for the PCs use, if they intend on accompanying him. Pacha rides an ancient mule.

Into the Plains

After two hours out from Cruetz, the grazing-lands give way to chaparral, and the sun burns hot in a cloudless sky. Along the horizon looms the crimson peaks of the Rabirian Mountains, forming a natural border with Aquilonia.

Mention to the PCs that it's getting hot: Inchiostro wipes his forehead and pauses to take off his cuirass. Any Hero wearing armor heavier than Light starts roasting like a piece of shale, and soon suffers heat exposure (assume 1 LB per hour, but this *won't* recover by the usual means; only a full day spent out of the sun, drinking fluids will heal such damage).

Towards evening the terrain grows more sandy and open, with lizards scuttling between patches of black sedge. Wilderness-minded PCs can locate a comfortable arroyo to set up camp in.

Inchiostro has Pacha build a fire. PCs notice a gold locket suspended on a chain around the Count's neck. If asked about it, or pressed for more information concerning his estranged family, Inchiostro opens the locket. A portrait of a beautiful, raven-haired woman has been painted inside.

“My youngest sister, Rossa. And the dearest to me. I’d give a kingdom to see her real face again.”

Whether they want to hear it or not, the Count then launches into a longer explanation:

“My mother died when I was a young man, and my father, rot his bones, wasted no time finding a lamia to warm his bed. This succubus, whom I will not name, somehow convinced him I was an unfit heir, and had me expelled from the manor. Rossa cried the hardest.”

As he finishes, have any alert PCs make a Moderate (no modifier) Mind check. If successful, they catch a glimpse of an enormous crow with a three-foot wingspan, taking flight from a nearby bush. Only someone with a missile weapon ready at hand can take a shot at the bird, and then with a Tough (-4) modifier, given the darkness and trying to hit a moving target. If three or more LB damage is scored, a piercing feminine scream rips through the night. Investigation finds not the downed body of a crow, but a naked, feral-looking woman smeared with grease and feathers. This is one of Illia’s coven (see **Appendix A**). Inchiostro doesn’t recognize the body or what it signifies.

The rest of the night passes uneventfully.

Approach to the Manor

Close to noon the next day, the terrain changes once again to rolling hills. Fed by run-off from the nearby Rabirian Mountains, this new landscape is comparatively lush. Copses of Scrub Oak and Bloodwood appear. Crowded in the branches are hundreds of crows. The black-feathered, yellow-eyed creatures glare down at the PCs, cawing at their approach. Throwing rocks or other missiles causes them to disperse in fluttering clouds.

A short while later an overgrown trail appears, leading upwards through the tree line. Peeking above the oaks is a tall white tower, topped by a dome of blue marble. Inchiostro grows frantic. *“My home! We’re closer than I thought.”* He wants to spur his horse and go charging up to the manor gates, which he will, unless the PCs talk him out of it or otherwise restrain him. El Gancho has a sentry posted in the tower, and anyone approaching the gate by daylight will be spotted, raising a general alarm.

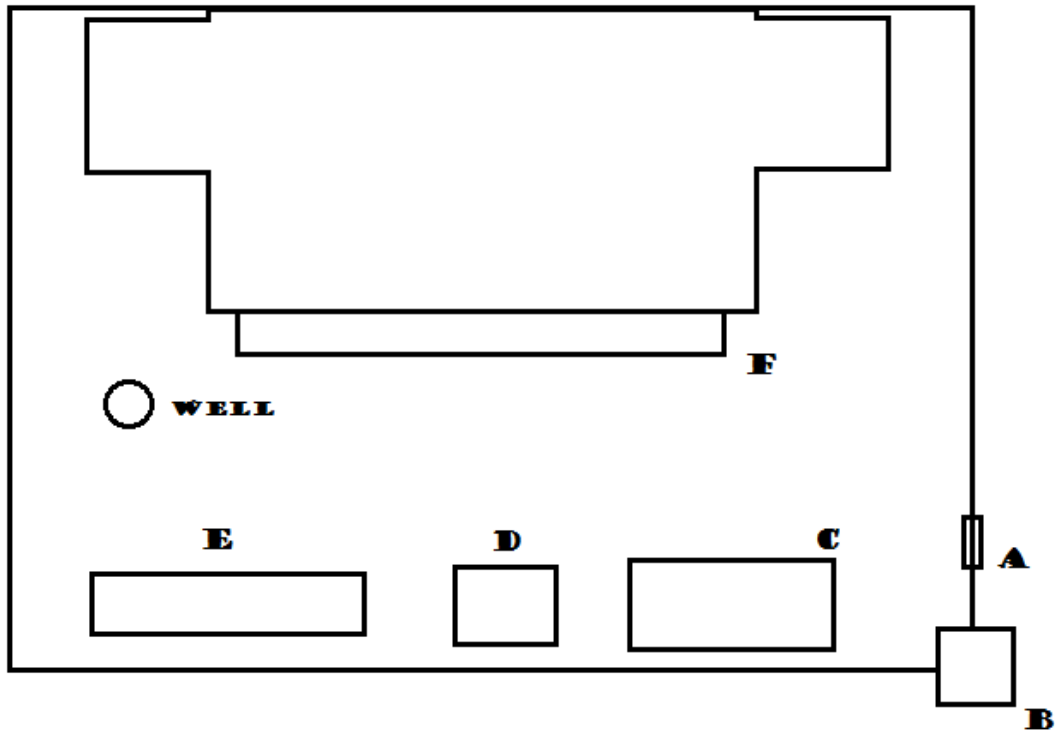
Options: Can I Just Kill Off Inchiostro Already?

Too much attention to NPCs takes the spotlight off players, and many GMs dislike a ‘scripted’ adventure as it saps spontaneity. Count Inchiostro’s main purpose is to start the adventure and provide some background information, as well as get the PCs to the manor. Once they’re there, feel free to smoke him at the first opportunity. You can ignore any descriptive text describing his actions/reactions and wing the rest of the plot. The adventure will still work.

El Gancho's Encampment

The manor consists of a grand house with a marble portico, stables, servants quarters, an old smithy, a well, and a fortified tower, all surrounded by a 10' stone wall. El Gancho and his men occupy the tower, stables, and servants quarters. Illia and her coven live in the grand house.

THE INCHIOSTRO ESTATE



Note that the northern wall and rear of the grand house (F) backs up against the Rabirian mountains, making an approach from this direction nigh-impossible.

A) Gate: Double-doors sheathed in bronze. The hinges have recently been replaced. This is kept barred until El Gancho and his men opt to venture out.

B) Tower: 60' tall with three stories. During the day a sentry is always posted at the top. Archers can fire through windows on the upper two stories at ground targets.

C) Servant's Quarters: One-storied building of crude stonework. The bulk of El Gancho's men sleep and cook here.

D) Smithy: This currently serves as El Gancho's armory.

E) Stables: There are enough horses for each of the men, as well as Gancho's purebred white stallion.

F) Grand House: Detailed in the next section.

Assume Gancho has 3-4 times the number of PCs (plus Inchiostro) in men. All are classed as rabble. For an extra challenge, you can designate one as a second-in-command with NPC status (8 + Strength LB, 2 points in Attributes, 2 points in Combat Abilities). At any given time, roughly half the men will be on duty, wearing armor and posted in defensible positions (mostly in the tower), while the other half are unarmored and lounging around. A small contingent (four or less) will be gone part of the day, scrounging for extra food in the old vineyards and fields to the south of the estate.

If the alarm is raised, those men not on duty rush to the makeshift armory (D) to don armor and weapons, while men in the tower loose arrows at any visible targets and shout warnings if the PCs try to force the gate or go over the wall. Shooting back at bandits in the tower windows incurs a -2 penalty in addition to any range modifiers.

Obviously, PCs who approach the grounds at night 'commando-style' should have a much easier go of things. The wall is low enough that it can be scaled with minimal preparation. Illia's crow familiars are everywhere and will notice a nighttime sortie by the PCs (unless they have some magical way of concealing their approach), but should only have time to warn Illia herself. In any event, Illia has half a mind to be rid of all the rude louts inhabiting her courtyard, and will not intervene on Gancho's behalf.

Gancho has been ensorcelled by Illia not to approach the grand house without her permission. He otherwise retains his free will and is not under her direct control. The bandits themselves are extremely wary of operating so close to a coven of evil witches, and Gancho's seeming ambivalence is a source of contention. However, all the men have a superstitious fear of setting foot inside the house.

Options: Straight-up Fight or Swashbuckling?

Zingarans are known for their love of flashy swordplay. If you're tired of the usual 'Thud and Blunder' associated with barbaric combat, you might consider some of the optional rules in **Appendix C**. Sure, it's kind of blasphemous muddying up the austere BoL engine with extra complications, but maybe, just this *one* time . . .

Options: The Horror Approach

The 'default' adventure setting assumes that when El Gancho and his men first came across the estate, Illia didn't try to kill him because she figured she could use the bandits as unwitting guards.

Another option, though, is that she *does* kill them with black magic, and when the PCs arrive at the estate they find the tower littered with dozens of skeletons, in the process of being picked clean by crows. One of the skeletons is missing a hand and has a large iron hook lying nearby, clueing the PCs that El Gancho has already been taken care of.

This option makes the adventure quicker. Just proceed to the **Grand House** section below. Maybe later Illia will animate the skeletons and send them against the PCs for a climactic battle, if she gets the chance.

The Grand House

Once El Gancho and his men have been disposed of, Inchiostro (if still alive) figures he's home free. He marches across the marble portico and knocks on the front door, loudly announcing his return.

Illia Streggha is the 'lamia' and 'succubus' Inchiostro referred to earlier who seduced his widowed father and eventually (after Inchiostro Jr. was expelled) took over the estate, killing off the rest of the family through deceit. Now only she and her coven remain.

Having watched the bloodbath in the courtyard from the house's windows, Illia casts a First Magnitude spell to make her appear as an older Rossa, Inchiostro's beloved little sister. The rest of the coven disguises themselves as servants. Illia/Rossa unbars the front door and welcomes her brother with open arms. She praises him and the PCs as 'liberators' who have rescued her from the bandit-lord living in the courtyard.

Inchiostro, of course, is completely taken in. If PCs ask Rossa the obvious question as to why El Gancho allowed her to live in the grand house, unmolested, she'll tearfully make up a story that the bandit was in love with her and trying to win her affections by acting like a gentleman. The explanation sounds less than convincing.

PCs making any accusations against Illia/Rossa will incur Inchiostro's wrath, up to and including his drawing of *Triste* and trying to run the offender through. Such is Zingaran family pride!

Note that if Inchiostro was killed earlier in the adventure, Illia will still take the precaution of disguising herself as Rossa before opening the front door. Any PC who saw Rossa's portrait in the golden locket will recognize her, making the deception seem more legitimate.

A Big Feast

Illia's next move is to try and get the PCs and her 'brother' into the dining room, for an impromptu celebration. The grand house's interior has clearly seen better days--tapestries are faded and fraying, carpets worn, fireplaces scorched with soot, and an ancient patina of dust and cobwebs lies over everything. Inchiostro bemoans the state of disrepair, but swears he'll use the family treasure to restore his home's greatness.

Illia commands her servants to decant the best wines and bring out platters of food. Everything (except Illia's portions) will be drugged with a slow-acting paralytic. Careful sampling reveals no strange odors, tastes, or ill effects, but after ten minutes the PC must make a Hard (-2) Strength check to avoid succumbing. The paralysis affects all voluntary muscles and lasts several hours, though the victim remains conscious. Even PCs who succeed at the check must take a penalty die on all actions due to spasms.

One wall of the dining room has an enormous, gold-veined mirror covered with a thick layer of dust. Illia is careful to avoid the mirror, as her reflection is not affected by the disguise spell. However, any polished surface like a silver platter might inadvertently reveal her identity at some point during the feast. Note that this is one of the few ways to convince Inchiostro his 'sister' isn't who she claims to be. He will recognize Illia's reflection on sight and likely attack in a fury.

What Happens Next

If the PCs were dumb enough to get drugged, Illia places them in a deathtrap of some sort. Maybe she ties them to stakes in the courtyard, and invites her crow familiars to slowly peck the flesh from their bones. Or binds the Heroes around a pentacle, intending them as sacrifices in some diabolical ritual. Less dramatically, she might lock them in one of the family vaults (see **The Final Surprise**). No matter what happens, PCs should have an opportunity to engineer an escape.

More likely, the Heroes will confront Illia at some point, and a fight ensues--possibly against Inchiostro, as well. If attacked, the rest of the coven leaps to their Mistresses' defense. Swarms of crows are summoned, bursting through the windows and down chimney flues to bedevil the PCs (see **Appendix B**). Illia and her followers are all armed with *Arthame*, magical daggers of cold iron, making them more of a physical threat than the Heroes suspect.

There is one NPC coven witch for each PC, plus one for Inchiostro (if he is still alive at this point).

If killed and her body searched, the Heroes find an iron key around Illia's neck. This opens the family vaults in the cellars below.

The Final Surprise

Once Illia is dispatched, the PCs can search the rest of the house in safety. The furniture is in poor repair, and aside from the dinner service and crystal there is little of great value. A study in one wing of the house has several treatises on black magic (all Illia's) which might be of interest to sorcerers. A 'trophy room' on the second floor has different swords and lances from all over Hyboria, as well as suits of heavy armor that could be made useable with a little care.

Inchiostro will take a dim view of anyone grabbing up his familial possessions. He insists on his original arrangement of rewarding PCs with treasure from the vaults. Stone steps lead down to a large cellar and a (mostly depleted) wine collection. Iron gates separate the cellar from the Inchiostro family crypts, but these can be opened easily enough with Illia's key. The vaults beyond do indeed contain treasure, mostly in the form of rough gold and silver ingots, as well as the moldering remains of the Inchiostro line.

One of the vault-chambers has been secured with a stout door and barricaded with heavy crates on the PCs side (the door is hinged to open outwards). As soon as anyone approaches, a frantic scratching can be heard from within the sealed room. If Inchiostro is with the Heroes at this point, he gets the idea that someone from his family is trapped inside. "*Rossa,*" he calls, "*is that you, beloved sister?*"

At the mention of the name 'Rossa,' the scratching gives way to pounding. Inchiostro begins pushing crates aside and exhorting the PCs to help, so as to rescue his sister. If the door is finally cleared, it bursts outwards with a wave of charnel stink. A vaguely feminine figure wearing a filthy white dress lunges at the closest person (likely Inchiostro) and begins clawing with ragged nails several inches long. The figure has slate-gray skin and eyes like black pits. It is *Rossa*, or what's left of her after Illia turned the corpse into a ghoul. The creature attacks only one person at a time and must be hacked apart to stop. Despite years of decay, *Rossa's* features can still be discerned in the ruined face.

If a final embrace from his sister doesn't kill him, Inchiostro goes irrevocably mad, slumping to the flagstones and refusing to rise again under his own power.

Not the homecoming he had envisioned . . .

Appendix A: Supporting Cast (in order of appearance)

Count Inchiostro, Exiled Zingaran Noble

Attributes

Strength 1

Agility 2 (1)

Mind 0

Appeal 1

Combat Abilities

Brawl 0

Melee 1

Missile 0

Defense 3

Lifeblood: 11

Hero Points: 3

Protection: Medium Armor (cuirass) + buckler, d6

Weapons: 'Triste,' Zingaran Dueling Sword, d6+1, or *Lancia*, (great-spear), d6+3**Boons/Flaws**

Heirloom Sword ('Triste'), bonus die

Carouser

Touched in the Head (flaw)

Careers

Noble 1

Champion 1

Pirate 1

Mercenary 1

A tragic (some would say 'Quixotic') figure, the Count has wandered over much of Hyboria after being exiled by his lust-smitten father. Handsome and balding, he is in his mid-40's, and wears a dented cuirass as well as a gilt dueling sword (rapier) at his waist. The Count is prone to impulsive behavior (Touched in the Head flaw). His high defensive value is a reflection of his precise fencing style.

Pacha Sanzo, the Count's loyal attendant, is classed as rabble.

El Gancho, Bandit Leader

Attributes

Strength 1

Agility 1

Mind 0

Appeal 2

Combat Abilities

Brawl 0

Melee 2

Missile -1

Defense 2

Lifeblood: 13

Villain Points: 1

Protection: Light Armor, d6-2

Weapons: Zingaran Dueling Sword, d6+1, Hook, d6-2

Boons/Flaws

Hard to Kill

Attractive

Missing Left Hand (flaw)

Careers

Courtier 1

Musician 1

Bandit 2

El Gancho's career originally began in the courts of Kordava, and looked promising for a time. However, his penchant for married women got him into a duel with the Viscount of Kordava, a far better swordsman. Gancho lost his left hand, his status, and gained a new nickname. He persuaded the garrison of a border fort to give up the military life for the more lucrative career of banditry, and has never looked back.

Gancho has piercing black eyes and sports a goatee. He wears fine clothes, including an embroidered leather vest and matching cloak. In combat, he will try to bring his hook into play as a surprise weapon.

El Gancho's Men

Attributes

Strength 0

Agility 0

Mind 0

Appeal 0

Combat Abilities

Brawl 0

Melee 0

Missile 0

Defense 0

Careers

Bandit 1

Lifeblood: 3 (rabble)

Protection: Very Light Armor, d3-1

Weapons: Sword, d6, or Bow, d6, or *Lancia*, d6+2

These men are nothing special, though they enjoy an unusually high morale. They dress in mismatched armor typical of brigands and ride passably well.

Illia Streggha, Zamoran Witch

Attributes

Strength 0

Agility 1

Mind 2

Appeal 1

Combat Abilities

Brawl 0

Melee 1

Missile 0

Defense 3

Lifeblood: 8

Villain Points: 3

Arcane Power: 14

Fate Points: 1

Protection: None

Weapon: Greater Arthame, d6+special (see below)

Boons/Flaws

Greater Pact (+2 Arcane Power)

Etiquette

Delicate

Untrustworthy

Careers

Rogue 0

Alchemist 1

Priestess 1

Sorcerer 2

Illia's age is hard to determine, though much of her beauty has already faded. Tall and slender, her silver hair is shot through with streaks of black. Long ago, she seduced her way into the Inchiostro family and took over, eventually killing off the entire clan (except for the Count). She has made pacts with several infernal powers.

Illia's Greater Arthame is a crudely-forged iron dagger with a ten-inch blade. Its magic is activated by running her thumb along the edge, drawing blood. The dagger makes an animal growl in combat and throws off sparks when it strikes. Each round, Illia can opt for either a bonus die or an increase in damage by expending Arcane Power: 1 point for the former or 1 point for each additional damage point (up to a maximum of +4 damage).

Illia knows spells appropriate for a Hyborian witch, including necromancy. Most of her combat-oriented spells involve a crow motif (see **Appendix B**)

Illia's Coven

Attributes

Strength -1
Agility 0
Mind 1
Appeal 1

Combat Abilities

Brawl 0
Melee 1
Missile 0
Defense 1

Careers

Priestess 0
Sorcerer 1

Lifeblood: 7 (NPC 8 – strength)
Protection: None
Arcane Power: 11
Weapons: Lesser Arthame, d3-1 + special (see below)

Illia's coven is a small group of female witches drawn from Zamora, Koth, Shem, Nemedra, and Corinthia. They are all relatively young and attractive. In combat they cast spells similar to Illia's and wield Lesser Arthame; magical daggers that can confer either a bonus die (2 Arcane Power/round) or a damage bonus (2 Arcane Power per point of extra damage, up to +4).

Rossa, Ghoulish Little Sister

Attributes

Strength 3
Agility 2
Mind -1

Combat Abilities:

Attack with two claws, +2, d3+3, or one bite, +1, 1d6+1+special (see below)
Defense: 0
Protection: d6, Undead Vigor
Lifeblood: 13

Beautiful in life, Rossa has been transformed through Illia's magic into a slaving undead creature as a final punishment. She is surrounded by a gangrenous smell. Rossa's only tactic is to attack the person closest to her. Anyone she bites must make a Strength check to avoid being paralyzed for d6 rounds.

Note that she is not the same kind of Ghoul that haunts the ancient forests bordering between Zingara and Argos.

Appendix B: Crow Coven Spells

In addition to Beguile, Compel, Evil Eye, Pass Unnoticed, Summon Beast, and Summon Mighty Beast (see *Barbarians of Lemuria, Legendary Edition*, pg. 52), the following spells are commonly used by Illia and her coven.

First Magnitude

Alter Appearance

A simple illusion causes the caster to appear as someone else. The spell does not change the caster's reflection, which will always show his or her true form. Requires Obvious Technique. Cost is 5 Arcane Power and Difficulty is Moderate (0).

Bloodcurdling Caw

The caster emits a shriek that acts exactly as the War Cry Boon (see *Barbarians of Lemuria, Legendary Edition*, pg. 110). Requires Obvious Technique. Cost is 5 Arcane Power and Difficulty is Moderate (0)

Crowsight

Another simple spell, this allows the caster to see (and hear) through the sensory organs of any crow within a five mile radius. Requires Obvious Technique (the caster closes her eyes and “reaches out with her mind”). Cost is 5 Arcane Power and Difficulty is Moderate (0). The spell lasts as long as the caster wants to remain in contact with the particular crow.

Summon Swarm of Crows

This spell calls a flock of normal-sized crows which follow the caster’s bidding. Typical uses in combat are to have the crows flap around and distract a single opponent (incurring a penalty die on most of the target’s actions), or to have them intercept incoming attacks as a sort of living ‘armor’ for the caster (d6-1 protection). Requires Line of Sight and Obvious Technique. Cost is 3 Arcane Power and Difficulty is Tricky (-1).

Second Magnitude

Crow’s Shape

This spell allows the caster to physically transform into a large crow, allowing her to fly. The spell lasts from sundown to sunup, or vice versa, or whenever the caster wants the transformation to end or is killed. Note that in crow form the caster will have 3LB, making her somewhat vulnerable. The spell has two variations: a ‘ritual’ version that requires Ingredients (specially rendered fat and crow’s feathers) and Casting Time, and an ‘instantaneous’ version that can only be attempted at night. The ritual version costs 9 Arcane Power and is Hard (-2) to cast, while the instantaneous option costs 10 Arcane Power and is Tough (-4).

Raise the Bones

This ritual allows the caster to animate the remains of up to 4d6 humans into living skeletons, who can function as servants or attack on demand! The skeletons are treated as rabble and must be armed in order to fight. Requires Casting Time and Ritual Sacrifice. Cost is 9 Arcane Power and Difficulty is Hard (-2).

Appendix C: Optional Combat Rules

BoL is designed to run “fast and furious,” but there are times when the GM and players might desire additional rules to emulate heroic combat. The following are *suggestions*, as they have not been rigorously play-tested and will almost certainly slow down the tempo of the game.

But before we get to that, consider the Old School Option (sometimes called the ‘Roll and Shout Method’): instead of using variant rules, the GM makes up arbitrary *rulings* on the fly, based on the situation. This often involves modifiers to a roll (positive or negative), bonus/penalty die, and “if-then” outcomes.

Example 1: (player) “Rayenna Scarlett jumps up on the table and kicks one of the thugs in the face.” (GM) “Pass a moderate Agility check and I’ll give you a +2 to your attack roll. Blow it, and you attack with a penalty die.”

Example 2: (player) “I want to knock the guy’s sword out of his hand.” (GM) “Make an attack roll at -2. If you hit, I’ll tell you if you’re successful based on the damage rolled.”

This approach is both quick and flexible, and sometimes involves a fun ‘bargaining’ element between player and GM (unfortunately, it can involve a ‘whining’ element as well). Nothing says you have to be consistent with your rulings; you can change them later if you think they’re too tough or too permissive.

Remember also, if your player is willing to burn a Hero Point . . . all kinds of gonzo stunts should be possible.

If you’re still feeling heretical, then read on. The optional rules are marked with an ‘*’ to indicate how disruptive to play they can be, with ‘***’ being the most blasphemous.

***Heroic Evasion:**

By spending a hero point, the character can try to dodge or parry an attack, even if he has already acted that round. ‘Parry’ is resolved as standard (Defender’s Melee + Agility – Attacker’s Melee, roll 9 or greater) and ‘Dodge’ is an active roll, not a static bonus (Defender’s Defense + Agility – Attacker’s Melee, roll 9 or greater). The Hero Point spent does not guarantee success; it just allows the character to make a roll. If feeling charitable, the GM can allow a Dodge or Parry against incoming missiles as well (the negative modifier being the attacker’s Ranged skill).

***Mighty and Legendary Parries:**

If the defender chooses to parry and rolls a mighty success, he not only blocks the blow, but can make an immediate riposte (counterattack) the same round. A legendary parry allows him to disarm his opponent *and* make a riposte.

***Daggers and Surprise:**

In surprise situations (as ruled by the GM), when the attacker is close to his target, a dagger does d6 damage instead of d3, simulating either increased accuracy or a flurry of quick blows. This allows assassin-types to do a reasonable amount of damage without carting around larger weapons. (This rule was cribbed from the Mazes and Minotaur’s RPG).

***Wary Swordplay:**

An attacker can opt to deduct ranks in his Melee skill score and add them to his Defense on a 1:1 basis.

****All-Out Attack:**

The attacker throws caution to the wind and attacks in a frenzy. He can roll a bonus die for either damage *or* initiative, his choice. 'Bonus Die' means roll an extra die and drop the lowest amount, *not* add another die. The attacker's Defense score drops to '0' for this round. If his Defense is already at '0', he becomes Easy (+1) for others to hit.

****Attack and Parry:**

The player needs to announce this option at the beginning of the round. He can make one attack and one parry the *same* round, but both attempts are at -2. He does not need to have a weapon/shield in his other hand to attempt this maneuver.

*****Reflexive Parry:**

All Heroes/Villains (e.g. player characters or NPC's with villain points), get one 'free' reflexive parry per round. This can be rolled after the character attacks. At the GM's option, 'Named' NPCs get a reflexive parry as well. A character with this ability can attempt *two* parries a round if they forego their attack, though these must be against separate attacks.

*****Iterative Attack:**

When fighting rabble, the character can attempt to attack several in one round. He must announce his intention to make this specialty attack. If the character hits his first target and does enough damage to kill/disable him with one blow, he may immediately attack another nearby target with a -1 modifier. This can continue for as many ranks as the character has in his Melee score, and the negative modifier becomes cumulative. Any miss or damage result that fails to kill the target ends the iterative attack. (This maneuver is a favorite of axe-wielding barbarians and samurai).

*****Feint:**

This maneuver causes the target to 'waste' his parry attempt. The attacker must have won initiative and announced his intention to feint. He makes his attack roll as usual, noting the total. The target then makes his parry roll, again noting the total. If the attacker's roll is higher than the target's (or if the target fails his parry), the feint is successful, and the attacker can then make a second attack with a -2 modifier. The defender does not have an opportunity to parry.

*****Counterattack:**

This is a maneuver often seen in action movies. In boxing, it's considered a legitimate strategy against an aggressive opponent. The character must win initiative and announce his intent to counter. He allows his opponent to strike first, and must successfully parry. Compare his parry roll against his opponent's attack roll; if the character's parry is higher, he may immediately launch a counterattack with a -1 modifier. His opponent is at -2 to parry the counterattack.

Note that the above rules do not necessarily 'stack' with each other. Use common sense when combining them.

Many of the rules could also be applied in unarmed combat. Just use Brawling in place of Melee. An unarmed defender who parries an armed attack takes the weapon's minimum damage (plus attacker's strength bonus).

CREDITS

Written by G-Man

Creative Inspiration and Editing/Hosting by The Venemous Pao

Special Thanks to: Robert E. Howard, Miguel Cervantes, and Procol Harum

11/20/11