



from the roots and the strength from branches, the killing hunger that makes trees turn on each other, the sound of fruits drying on the vine and crumbling to ash. Where she blows, she leaves desiccation and malice behind her, and she delights in seeing others destroy each other. All who witness her know they have feared her all their lives. Semiramis is profoundly untrusting, and will always betray; it is not in her nature to tolerate alliance with any other being, be he unshaped, shaped, human, divine or Exalt, though she always pretends that she will keep her word. Semiramis prefers the Southeast, though in high summer she sometimes drifts further westward, seeking prey.

THE ELEMENTAL POLE OF WOOD

Creation's Eastern limit is an eternal world of green thought and green shade. However far one climbs, one cannot reach the sky or the ground—nothing but trunks and branches, vines and smaller plants, going up and down forever. The very light is green, filtered down through countless leaves above.

Animals and birds of living wood and leaves move silently through the foliage and among the trees. Giant serpents woven from vines and withies slither among the branches and between the roots, rising to swallow anything nearby. Everything here is quiet, except for the rustling of leaves and the whisper of reeds. The sound of voices carries for a long distance and draws anything nearby.

This is the pole of growing things and abundant life, where nothing dies except when it is eaten or assimilated into something else. All things change their shape, alter, grow and decay, but nothing can escape the cycle of vegetable life. Moss and molds grow on the unprotected clothing and bodies of travelers, leaves and fruit sprout from human skin and flesh and sleepers may be overgrown, waking to find themselves living masses of wood and flowers, their bones threaded through with

vines. A visitor requires at least two Charms to survive: a general Charm such as Element-Resisting Prana and a Charm against Shaping effects, such as Integrity-Protecting Prana, lest the Pole of Wood consume her and make her its own.

The Elemental Dragon of Wood does not come here often, as events elsewhere in Creation keep him busy. In his absence, a lesser elemental dragon of Wood named Kotomaro the Hidden Lightning has set up dominion here, claiming that as the most spiritually evolved entity in the neighborhood she has the right (and indeed the moral duty) to take command. Her every scale is a perfectly shaped leaf carved from ironwood or ebony, her eyes shine the pure green of spring willows, and her claws have the strength of a thousand oak tree roots. Kotomaro does not mention that she had to flee Heaven on short notice due to the investigations of an auditing Sidereal team—or that she had previously accepted bribes from the minions of the Deathlord known as the Dowager of the Irreverent Vulgate in Unrent Veils—or that she now hides from the attention of both Heaven and the Dowager. Instead, she lords it over the lesser elementals, ruling firmly and harshly. She gives instructions that any visitors be brought to her palace of copperwood and flame trees for her inspection.

Other elementals and spirits in the area grow weary of Kotomaro's rule. None yet suspect that she is anything except haughty and sadistic—traits that are not unknown among gods and dragons. However, a couple of the lesser spirit courts now plot against her. They hope to lure a powerful Exalt to their domain, and then bribe the Exalt to dispose of her. The spirits have much to offer, since the Elemental Pole of Wood has all the potential treasures of its element. The one thing these spirits do not want is to draw the attention of Sextes Jylis, the Elemental Dragon of Wood himself: they do not wish to find themselves under a possibly more tyrannical clawed heel, or sent out into Creation.

