

MUMMY'S MASK



THE RIVER OF SOULS

No greater question vexes the living than the mystery of death. Yet no sooner does a soul pass the border between life and death and glimpse the answer than the mystery reveals itself to be a part of a far vaster enigma. For to the dead, the greatest riddle of existence is life.

These mysteries of existence are at once the best- and worse-kept secrets in all the multiverse. Beyond the guesswork of evangelists, there sprawls a vast and vital truth, a cycle of creation and dissolution responsible not only for every life, but also every death, and the endless transitions between the two. It is a cycle as old as existence, responsible for the stability of the planes themselves. It is nothing less than the pulse of the living multiverse, the answer to the questions that haunt both the living and the dead. Among the planes it is called the River of Souls, and all who live will journey upon its endless course.

TERMINOLOGY

For the purposes of this discussion, certain terms take on specific meanings, sometimes uncharacteristic to their wider use. These terms are used in impossibly broad contexts and are fraught with exceptions, but their accuracy applies to the vast majority of circumstances. The following philosophical definitions (and, in fact, all details of this article) do not change or undermine existing rules.

Death: When a mortal's soul vacates its body and joins the River of Souls.

Mortal: Refers to any being that hasn't yet been judged by Pharasma since receiving a soul. Not being mortal does not necessarily make one immortal.

Quintessence: A philosophically aligned material that makes up the Outer Planes. It has infinite potential for shape and state and is reactive to prevailing beliefs. It can recreate any material known to the Material Plane, and can react and change as though alive, though it has no innate intelligence. When merged with a soul, quintessence takes on the alignment of that soul and becomes an outsider, its shape typically following specific planar templates.

River of Souls: The cycle of life and death, its best-known length being the procession of recently deceased souls traveling from the Material Plane's innumerable worlds to the Boneyard on the Outer Planes.

Soul: An invisible metaphysical energy that provides motivating force to mortal beings. Over the course of a mortal's life, sentience, experience, and outside influences might realign a soul's innate neutrality toward extremes of law, chaos, good, or evil. Souls retain the personality and memories of a mortal life for a period, though these fade over time and through transitions into other states.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?

Mortals who have experienced death often describe the experience as a feeling of floating or lifting, being drawn toward a misty ribbon of light, or being swept along in an indistinct crowd. Some remember glimpses amid a vague timelessness, of unfamiliar faces and bit of conversations with strangers. But even those returned to life after centuries have little sense of what they were doing or how they occupied themselves during that time. The bodiless state following death proves difficult for most mortals to comprehend, much less accurately report on. Metaphysically, though, what happens upon a mortal's death is not so vague.

Death severs the connection between a mortal's body and soul. The body becomes inert material, while the soul manifests nearby upon the Ethereal Plane, either invisibly or as just one more indistinct form in that ghostly realm. In most cases, the unfettered soul departs the body, proceeding upon one of the most discussed legs of its journey along the River of Souls. The specific course of the River of Souls is illustrated and fully detailed on page 73.

Eventually this progression reaches the Boneyard, the plane of absolute neutrality. There, psychopomps and emissaries from the various planes assure that the newly arrived dead make their way toward the courts of the goddess Pharasma. Each in turn, souls have the deeds of their lives scrutinized, considered, and recorded by the goddess's servants. Those with clear destinations in the afterlife, such as those devoted to specific deities or clearly aligned with a particular plane, are sorted by lesser courts and directed toward their eternal fates. Higher courts judge souls with peculiar fates or less certain destinations, while Pharasma herself sits in judgment over the most extraordinary cases. Eventually each soul is directed through one of countless gates, emerging upon their new home in the afterlife.

HOW DOES PHARASMA JUDGE SOULS?

Although the death goddess keeps her own counsel regarding the sorting of souls, eons of examples suggest two primary factors that influence her judgments: faith and conviction.

Souls who have devoted themselves to deities typically pass through Pharasma's court most swiftly. If a soul is a true devotee, agents of the deity and Pharasma's servants direct it to its patron's realm. The plane in question typically matches the deity's alignment, but there are exceptions.

Some souls aren't spoken for by deities, though. Rather than going to the realms of specific divinities, the spirits of animists, polytheists, agnostics, and others who don't worship specific divinities are sent to planes best matching their individual alignments and philosophies. Virtuous souls might find their ways to the good-aligned planes, while wicked souls are sent to evil planes. Such isn't a reward or punishment, but rather an organizing of like souls. Wherever they're sent, these souls become petitioners and are left to experience existence among those who share similar beliefs.

A soul's judgment is not always so obvious, though. In some cases a soul's alignment radically differs from that of the deity it worships. In such cases, Pharasma and her servants employ visions from the soul's mortal life and the powers of the Boneyard's courts to determine the greatest influences on the individual's life. The soul is then directed to either the deity's realm or a plane of like-minded individuals. In such cases, agents of the opposing deities or planes make their arguments in Pharasma's courts—potentially presenting evidence to support their claims. The goddess or her greater agents then rule on the soul's proper destination.

Yet while instances like these are relatively common occurrences, there are endless exceptions. Pharasma employs diverse agents when a soul's fate comes into question. Despite her countless judgments, the goddess still occasionally makes rulings inscrutable to other beings. Whether she condemns a good-aligned soul to the Abyss or sends a neutral soul wandering the planes, the goddess's rulings are her own, and few dare dispute them.

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WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A SOUL IS JUDGED?

Upon departing Pharasma's realm, a soul emerges onto its new home plane. On the lawful planes of Axis, Heaven, and Hell, souls appear at particular entry points and undergo additional sorting. Those sent to the neutral-aligned planes of Nirvana or Abaddon appear at the fringes and are allowed to find their own paths toward the plane's more populous lands. Souls bound for the chaotic planes of Elysium, the Maelstrom, or the Abyss appear in or near any of those lands' disparate realms, left to contend with the plane's inhabitants as they will. If the soul is a worshiper of a particular deity, it might arrive in the deity's realm, or that deity might have servants assigned to shepherd newly arrived souls.

Regardless of a soul's final destination, upon receiving Pharasma's judgment it finds itself changed. No longer a mortal being, the soul has become an outsider, a true native of the plane it now inhabits. Souls inhabiting the Outer Planes are known as petitioners and, as they've begun new lives, can no longer be returned to life by mortal magic. (In her capacity as the goddess of fate, Pharasma knows which souls are and aren't done with life, including those destined to be called back to the Material Plane via magic. These souls are not judged or transformed into petitioners. Rather, they're left to wait in the Boneyard until resurrected and allowed to progress toward their true death.)

Once transformed into a petitioner, a soul regains a physical body, though not necessarily one similar to that which it had in life. The Outer Planes are realms of philosophy rather than physicality, and the petitioner's body is formed from quintessence charged with the fundamental tenets of its new home plane. Many petitioners appear as humanoids or vague shapes with only general similarities to their mortal bodies. Some planes subject petitioners to more radical transformations, like reconstitution into animal-like forms, script-covered humanoids, or maggot-like larvae. The prevailing philosophical forces of a plane itself determine the particulars of this form, with indirect influence based on the soul's personality and experiences.

Once a soul takes up residence upon a plane, its existence is largely determined by the strictures and leaders of that realm. On lawful planes, a soul might be directed toward some duty, responsibility, or torment. On chaotic planes, souls are often left to do as they will. Good-aligned planes are usually hospitable to petitioners. Evil-aligned planes are dangerous places where petitioners occupy the lowest rungs of vast hierarchies—or food chains.

Not all souls leave the Boneyard, though. Perfectly neutral souls are allowed to seek peace and equilibrium in the solitude of the plane, while worshipers of Pharasma remain in the goddess's court, directing new arrivals from the Material Plane and serving Psychopomp Ushers. Yet, despite the endless work of the Boneyard and its inhabitants, the plane serves other unique functions as well.

ARE PETITIONERS IMMORTAL?

Many philosophies claim that a soul's journey ends upon reaching the afterlife; that Pharasma metes out eternal rewards and punishments. In truth, the goddess herself neither rewards nor punishes, and her verdicts are far from eternal.

The existence of a petitioner varies dramatically from plane to plane. Being formed of living quintessence aligned with the plane it now calls home, a petitioner's body and soul form a single unit. Should a petitioner be destroyed, nothing is released, the quintessence of its body gradually deteriorating to be absorbed by the surrounding plane. The details of a petitioner's existence vary widely from plane to plane, but most can expect to face one of two fates: absorption or ascension. Although exceptions exist, like the potential for some beings to reincarnate, these cases prove exceedingly rare.

For a common petitioner, no matter how long it survives on an Outer Plane, it cannot last forever. Some petitioners are destroyed, whether by planar forces or violent natives. Others have ages of new experiences. Gradually, though, petitioners lose their grip on individuality. Memories of their mortal lives fade, typically becoming inconsequential over the span of millennia. Across vast gulfs of time, even the wonders of the planes become commonplace, and boredom inevitably sets in. Many petitioners meet their ends pursuing new sensations, while others turn increasingly inward. Eventually, some petitioners just find a place and never move again. Slowly, the quintessence of these individuals merges with their home, suffusing the plane with their experiences and vital force.

But dissolution isn't the only fate petitioners can expect. Some might become higher forms of outsiders—so dubbed because they are “outside” the progression of soul to petitioner and back again. Whether by the will of powerful planar beings, natural processes of a plane itself, or other exceptional causes, a petitioner might be reformed. The methods of such rebirth vary between planes and beings, in terms of whether the process takes instants or ages, what sorts and how many souls are required to make such a transition, and so on. For example, on Nirvana, animalistic petitioners that achieve enlightenment might become agathions, while in the Abyss, larvae guilty of specific sins might be remade into specific breeds of demon. Regardless of how they're created, these outsiders are true children of the planes, and any memory of a mortal existence is typically wiped away. These beings are sentient embodiments of their realms' alignment, ethics, ideals, and objectives. Well suited to life upon the planes, such outsiders rarely lose interest in existence, and might live for vast spans, potentially growing in power or taking on new forms over the passage of ages.

Ultimately, though, the fate of the vast majority of outsiders is the same as that of petitioners. Though sacrifice or violence, all such beings are eventually destroyed. At that point, their signature quintessence is released to contribute to the power of their home planes.

THE RIVER OF SOULS

WHERE DO SOULS COME FROM?

Many planar scholars claim that souls come from the Positive Energy Plane. While this isn't incorrect, the truth proves more complex.

Amid the searing light and unbridled energy of the Positive Energy Plane drift sparks of formless, unaligned quintessence. Over time, the plane infuses this unaligned planar force with its vigor and potential, creating what are, in effect, unaligned souls, devoid of all will or sentience.

Gradually, at focal points and planar vertices, these souls seep from the Positive Energy Plane into the realms beyond. They first pass through the riotous expanse of the First World, sparking new growth, giving rise to radical changes, and sparking the creation of fey beings in their passage. (Fey prove somewhat exceptional in the manner in which they come into being, as, instead of being vessels that attract souls, their forms result from soul energy becoming mired amid the energies of the First World.)

Eventually, souls breach the Material Plane and drift throughout the overlaying Ethereal Plane, gravitating toward worlds already rich with life. There they imbue empty vessels, suited to host them. When and how a soul enters a burgeoning mortal body remains a topic of debate, but by the time a creature can exist independent from a parent, it typically has a soul.

Souls are not created entirely upon the Positive Energy Plane, though. While the plane serves as the starting point of a soul's journey, a soul's existence is a cyclical process—and this cycle begins at the end of a soul's journey.

Upon an outsider's destruction—whether it be a petitioner naturally merging with a plane or the violent destruction of another planar native—its quintessence returns to its home plane. This transference of energies might be an immediate or a gradual process, depending on where the being's existence ended. Beings of specific alignments destroyed away from their home planes have their energy released into the multiverse. While such energy gravitates toward the properly aligned plane, more often than not it becomes lost in the Maelstrom. In the cases of those whose existence as an outsider ends on a plane of matching alignment, its quintessence infuses the plane in a manner similar to corpses on the Material Plane returning their nutrients to the soil. In this way, the plane is supplied with new quintessence, along with new ideas and beliefs from the evolving multiplanar zeitgeist.

At the same time as the Outer Planes are growing in this manner, they're also being consumed. The Maelstrom endlessly erodes the shores of other planes, breaking off quintessence by minute grains and vast bergs. This unfettered quintessence gradually drifts away, joining the eternal storm that is the Maelstrom. Like a great stomach, the Maelstrom then breaks down quintessence, shattering bonds, scouring residual memories, and purifying the

essence of the Outer Planes back into unaligned potentiality. This insubstantial, purified quintessence follows the reckless courses of the Maelstrom to a nexus within that realm, a column of shimmering energy known as the Antipode. Guarded by legions of aeons, this focal point collects the unaligned spiritual potentiality of the Outer Planes and sends it streaming back into the Inner Planes, where it accumulates within the Positive Energy Plane like the grains of sand around which pearls form.

Imbued with the fundamentals of life but no philosophical alignment or predisposition, this potentiality starts the cycle anew. Through this course, the wills of mortals indirectly renovate and reshape the multiverse.



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WHAT SOULS DON'T LEAVE THE BONEYARD?

As the plane of absolute neutrality and the realm of the goddess Pharasma, the Boneyard serves as the destination of neutral-aligned souls and those who worship the goddess of death. Upon becoming petitioners, many find places of quiet peace or serve in Pharasma's courts. But two other groups never leave: dissident souls and failed souls.

The former unwaveringly believe that deities are not worthy of worship and actively refuse to participate in the cycle of souls. Their rejection goes beyond mere atheism or impiety, being a deliberate rejection of the metaphysical order. While many agnostic and atheist souls pass on to Outer Planes best aligned with their convictions, some dissidents object to the experiment of greater metaphysical reality—when given the chance to become petitioners and pass onto other realms, they actively refuse. These lost souls find crypts and crevices on Pharasma's Spire where they might eternally brood on the failings of reality. Many mortal philosophies teach that all atheist souls meet this end, but in truth, atheists and alarists who seek to pass on can experience the full range of afterlives just as adherents of any other belief system do.

The latter group—failed souls—might be considered spiritually stillborn. Whatever potential these souls carried onto the Material Plane was never stirred. They lived without convictions, passed through life without direction, and carried nothing with them in their passage. With no faith or passion to direct them to other planes, and no will to further the Boneyard's endless work, these souls are the flotsam of the River of Souls. Pharasma determines whether such souls were not afforded opportunity enough to amass their own beliefs, or if they were fundamentally incapable of doing so. If she judges the latter case, she has nowhere to send such souls.

For both groups, the results are the same. These souls are not transformed into petitioners, but are escorted into the Graveyard of Souls beyond Pharasma's court where they can forget and be forgotten. These vast cemetery-seas and the depthless crypts below are guarded by legions of psychopomps, as many upon the planes would eagerly prey upon even such failed souls. There, either willingly or because the lack the capacity to care, the dissenting and broken souls of the multiverse spend eons dissipating, forever excluded from future travels along the River of Souls. Eventually their memories fade, their personalities dull, and nothing remains but a handful of eternally stagnant quintessence. The spire the Boneyard perches upon is entirely composed of this soul debris, threaded through by vast crypts and catacombs that once comprised the plane's surface, but which new arrivals gradually force deeper. Within these morbid depths wind archives of dwindling souls and the hidden bastions of Psychopomp Ushers. Over fathomless eons these hidden places deepen, the residue of hollow souls contributing to the Spire's imperceptible but relentless growth.

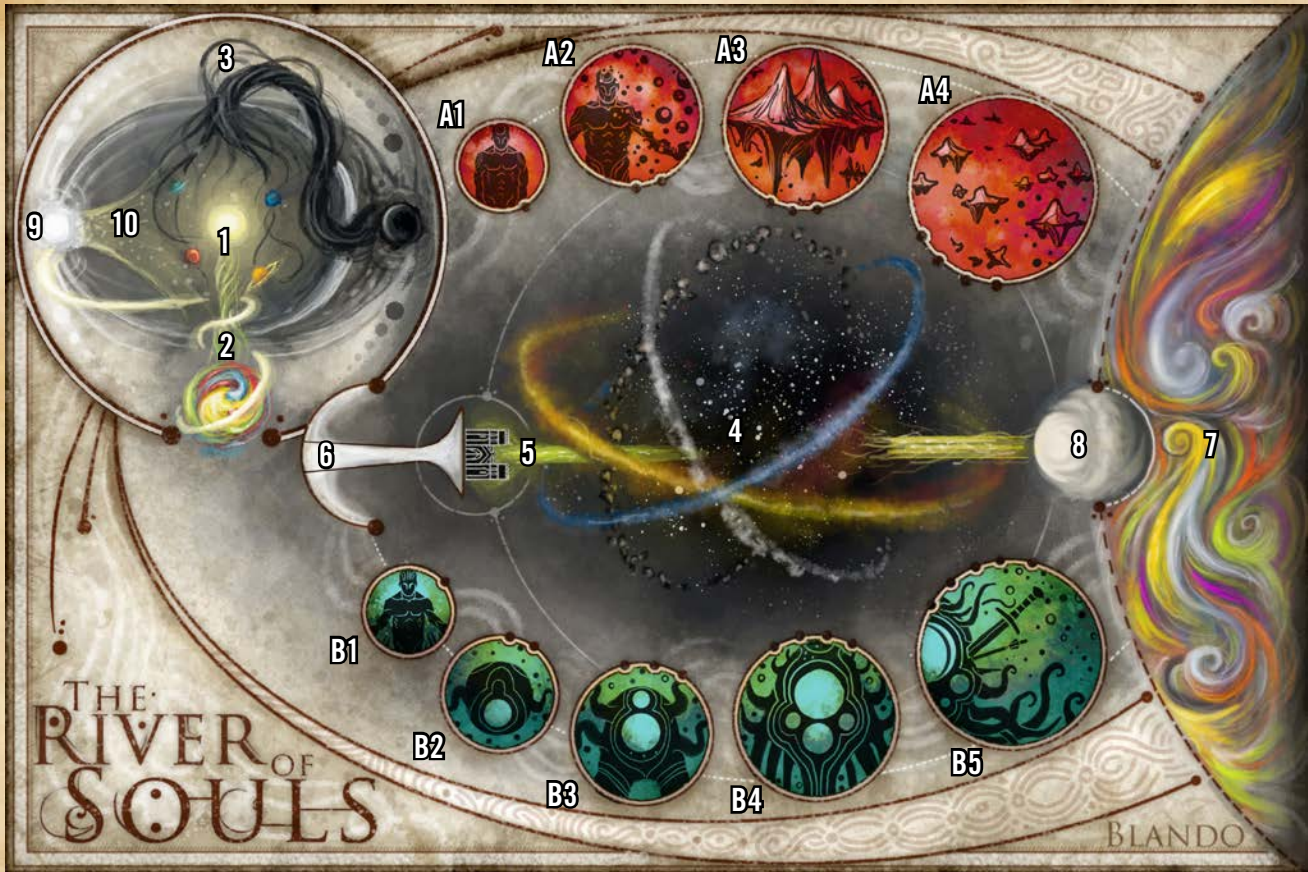
IS DEATH ALWAYS THE SAME?

While the forces that guide the multiverse are nearly impossible to resist, the path of every soul is not necessarily the same. Many belief systems inaccurately represent the experience of the deceased, but countless mortals cleave to these philosophies nonetheless. Some mortals believe their soul isn't free until it receives a proper burial. Some cultures say the soul has different parts with distinct postmortem functions. Some believe they personally have a purpose to fulfill before they pass on. Still others don't believe in souls at all, expecting dissolution after death.

For most, these beliefs are peripheral to their greater being and don't affect their soul's greater journey. Yet, for some, these beliefs are strong enough to temporarily divert their travels upon the River of Souls. Fixated on some aspect of life, such souls become temporarily stuck near the Material Plane. Some are vaguely conscious of certain details in the world, usually their bodies or individuals of particular importance, and linger near them upon the Ethereal Plane. Some follow paths outlined by their philosophies to eventual reincarnation. Others loiter in wait for something to draw them back to life. But time weighs upon all souls. As passions and ties to the mortal world dull, the soul eventually slips away to join the River of Souls.

Fey also have an exceptional relationship with souls, being outgrowths of the First World clinging to young souls slipping from the Positive Energy Plane. When fey are destroyed on the First World, their souls are not lost. Instead, they resurrect as new incarnations of the beings they were. On the Material Plane, though, fey are cut off from the generative power of the First World. When slain on the Material Plane, fey souls are drawn into the River of Souls like any other. While they can be resurrected and returned to life, as any mortal, such doesn't happen naturally as it would on the First World. As such, most fey visiting the Material Plane prove more guarded and evasive than they do on their home plane.

The most dangerous lingering souls become haunts and spontaneously forming undead. Typically these souls were traumatized in the final moments of life, imbuing them with enough anger, confusion, or purpose to resist the pull to journey on. Such strong emotions allow them to influence the forces of negative energy acting on their deceased bodies. This might allow them to reinhabit their corpses, rising as types of undead creatures corresponding to the circumstances of their deaths. Others don't reconnect with their bodies, either being too spiritually weak to do so—thus creating haunts—or manipulating negative energy into new insubstantial forms—as incorporeal undead. But even undeath is only a temporary diversion from the River of Souls. Inevitably, time and exterior forces act upon such delinquent souls, drawing them along their intended paths. The process might take millennia, but such gulfs of time mean little amid the greater workings of the multiverse.



PROGRESSION OF SOULS

The vast majority of souls follow the same cycle.

1. Souls inhabit mortal vessels upon the Material Plane.
2. Upon death, a mortal body releases its soul onto the Ethereal Plane. Individual souls join with others as they migrate toward the boundaries of physical existence.
3. Some souls linger on the Material Plane, mired by energies from the Negative Energy Plane.
4. Souls pass through the Elemental Planes, leaving the Inner Planes, and emerging onto the Astral Plane.
5. Souls reach the Boneyard, where they are sorted by Pharamasma, her servants, and agents of the planes.
6. A soul is judged and assigned to one of the Outer Planes, becoming a petitioner of that plane (see A1 & B1)
7. Aligned quintessence crumbles into the Maelstrom. Ages of dissolution transform it into unaligned potentiality.
8. This spiritual potential is swept toward a point in the Maelstrom known as the Antipode, where it streams back toward the Inner Planes.
9. Spiritual potential collects on the Positive Energy Plane. Imbued with the fundamentals of life, this energy becomes unaligned souls.
10. Unfettered souls pass from the Positive Energy Plane, journey through the First World, and gravitate toward uninhabited mortal vessels on the Material Plane.

LIFE CYCLE OF OUTSIDERS

Outsiders typically experience existence in one of two ways.

AS PETITIONERS

- A1. A judged soul merges with the quintessence of its new home plane, gaining the physical body of a petitioner.
- A2. The petitioner meets a violent end or merges with its planar home, releasing its soul-infused quintessence to join with its home plane.
- A3. The philosophies and experiences of the petitioner's quintessence become part of its home plane.
- A4. All planes are gradually eroded by the Maelstrom. Aligned quintessence is broken down by the Maelstrom's endless chaos.

AS ASCENDED OUTSIDERS

- B1. A judged soul merges with the quintessence of its new home plane, gaining a physical body of a petitioner.
- B2. Through extraordinary circumstances, a petitioner ascends, taking on a new outsider form.
- B3. Exceptional beings become higher forms of outsiders.
- B4. Truly rare beings eventually become unique outsiders.
- B5. An outsider meets its end. Its aligned quintessence merges with its home plane or escapes onto the planes, eventually being claimed by the Maelstrom.