

RenQuest 2016: Ankou

By Michael Fuchs

The wizened woman cracked her staff against the floor of Draco Pavilion. “Silence! “

The chatter from those gathered ceased. The Initiate turned to look at her peers. Why did they fear the hag? She was frail, dressed in her red and black finery, and relied upon her staff for everything; the woman had clearly outlived her usefulness. A hand twisted into the Initiate’s cloak.

“Thinking like a fool, are we, Initiate?” The woman spit the words, pulling the Initiate’s face close to hers.

The Initiate stammered. “I-I did not think that—“

The woman twisted harder, forcing the Initiate to look into her eyes. “That is correct. You did not think. Perhaps in the future you should make that a priority, before I decide that the best way for you to serve our Goddess is in death.”

The woman released her grip on the Initiate’s cloak. The Initiate gasped for air; during the confrontation, she had forgotten to breathe. The elderly woman returned to her position at the head of the room with a grace that one her age shouldn’t possess and smiled with a mask of malevolence upon her visage. “Now that the unpleasantness is over, I am Lady Efah Gozerian. I have served our Goddess longer than any other, and I shall serve her long after you all are dead.”

Lady Efah paused as the candles flickered within the Pavilion and shadows danced on her face. The Initiate wiped her hand across her brow, and it came back wet. Why was she so uneasy?

Lady Efah continued, “You have all been brought here this day as you have proven yourselves mildly capable. You are now a member of our order, the Draco Disciples. Prove yourselves, and you shall flourish. Fail, and I will end your life personally. The choice is yours.”

Lady Efah’s gaze rested upon the Initiate. “Some of you have already made your choice, and your blood shall still serve some purpose. This is an undeniable fate. “

The Initiate balled her fists.

Lady Efah laughed. “Prove me wrong then. Prove you have a use within our organization. Serve our new Lord Praetor as he guides us into the age of our goddess.”

The door of the pavilion swung open violently, caught by the raging storm, as a young man tried to enter. He caught the wayward door and eased it closed with only minimal damage to the candle flames in the room. He shrugged off his cloak and tossed it onto the nearest chair. Attempting to smooth the moisture off of his baggy red chemise and black doublet, he approached Lady Efah and reverenced. “Lady Efah, the Band of the Twisted Claw continues to develop their plans to have Liam reinstated as the Justice of the Peace. Everything moves forward as our Praetor said.”

Efah bid him rise with her hand; the smile on her lips not truly reaching her eyes. “Initiates. This is Master Aiden Wormwood. Aiden, tell them the about the Ankou. I have a matter I must attend to that is far more important than wasting any more of my time with the new blood.”

Aiden flashed a smile at those gathered. The Initiate felt herself returning a smile. This man seemed much kinder than Lady Efah. Perhaps someone she could befriend to rise in the Disciples ranks?

Aiden’s expression darkened. “You lot should know your place. Listen carefully. Many of you will not survive the winter. Such is the fate of those that fail our goddess.

“There is being called the Ankou. It is a being of death, but much different from the Danse with which our Praetor communes – should you have been so lucky to have seen his prowess. The Ankou is more powerful than these spirits of death. Some would even call it a god.

“Picture this for me, little ones. Many years ago there was a village near our city. They were stricken by disease. Now, in this village there lived a man. As the disease ravaged the town, those around him fell. Yet, he did not. It is said that he would take his cart around the village, load the dying onto it, and before they passed on, harvest their souls and offer them to our goddess so that the disease would not touch his flesh.

“Our goddess was pleased with this arrangement, and one day, she blessed his form, removing the mortal weakness from it. Free from the curse of humanity, he walks the land as a being of bone with wispy hair upon his skull. His head is ever turning, the bare sockets searching for something...”

The Initiate frowned. This fabrication of a tale was supposed to do what, exactly? It was foolish. Beings like this Ankou did not exist.

There was a sudden gust of wind through the pavilion, and the candles snuffed one-by-one as Aiden spoke louder. “The Ankou now searches for those who abandon our Goddess. Once you serve Tiamat, you are Hers for life. You will not abandon your Mother, and never shall She abandon you.”

The Initiate snorted.

Aiden slammed his fist down on the table. “Is this amusing to you, whelp? Those that abandon *or fail* our goddess shall one day hear a knock at their door. And do you know who will be calling? He will.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The Initiate felt a chill run up her spine. She shook her head forcefully. No. It is not real. It is a myth. She squinted, trying to pierce the darkness of the pavilion. A smirk on Aiden’s lips was the only thing she was able to discern.

“Once you hear the knocking, your time is over. The Ankou will find you, no matter where you hide. His fingers will trace your form, undoing the threads that bind your soul to your flesh as you try to struggle. And then our goddess will devour you, as she has so many before.”

Aiden laughed.

Then the Initiate felt it. Fingers slowly running down her sides. It was ever so light, but the presence was there. She paled. "Tiamat, please forgive me for my transgressions. I shall no longer question your children. I did not mean any harm!"

Suddenly, two of the candles near the door flared to life, and the Initiate swore she saw a shadowed face staring at her. She tried to step back and fell. Hot breath filled her ear as it whispered. "Rogued."

The Initiate snapped her head around to see a blonde girl rattle a coin purse in her hand. The Initiate blinked. The blonde and the other face was gone. Did she... imagine it? Her hand darted down to her side for her coin purse, her only salvation, but emptiness greeted her fingers.