



# Character Themes

## Fringes of Kara-Tur

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Developing your character into someone who has a rich story can be a fun and rewarding process. You likely have an idea of what race and what class you want to play, but you might have only a general idea of what your character's life was like before you start playing the character at the gaming table. A theme can help you flesh out your character and provide some interesting options for developing his or her background.

This article details two character themes, Hordelands nomad and sohei. Both of these themes have a flavor that ties them to the FORGOTTEN REALMS setting, particularly a campaign that centers on or touches on the fringes of the far eastern realm of Kara-Tur.

### Character Themes

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity. For example, if you're a warlock who chooses the Hordelands nomad theme, you grew up on the steppes of the Hordelands as a student of the tribal shaman or someone innately in touch with the tribal ancestors or fey of the plains. You are a master rider who understands the arcane

forces of the prairie, and you interact with the spirits your tribe reveres.

Each theme can encompass several unique stories within the same concept. For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore," *Dragon* 399.

### HORDELANDS NOMAD

Between Faerûn and Kara-Tur is a vast steppe, held through history by more than one ancient empire. Despite the area's turbulent past, the advent of the Spellplague, and the rise of the Tuigan nation of Yai-munnahar, the folk of the Hordelands live as they have for centuries. Because the steppe offers few resources, all the nomads of the Hordelands—Taan, as they call themselves—are master riders and hardy survivalists. They rely on their mounts and livestock, as well as connections to nature and primal power, for survival.

People of the Hordelands venerate Teylas, the Sky Lord, who is called Akadi in Faerûn, and worship Etugen, Earth Mother, known among Faerûnians as Grumbar. Additionally, and to a lesser degree, the nomads idolize a plethora of other primal spirits. Some of these latter entities live in named places,

such as oases, across the plains. Others represent important or fierce animals of the prairie.

Tribal customs among the nomads focus on pleasing the spirits as they seek to ensure that the elements remain in balance. Those living in the Hordelands believe that bad luck, such as an inability to find water, is the work of offended spirits. To aid them in their work with the spirits, the nomads use primal magic, and their familiarity with it grants them a sixth sense when it comes to spiritual influences. Not only do they gain closeness to the spirits that surround them, they can sense the presence of myriad fey crossings on the plains, which provides them with the opportunity to interact with fey creatures, too.

## Creating a Hordelands Nomad

Nomads of the Hordelands are predominantly human, although a few have nonhuman blood. Every adult nomad is a warrior, though with varying skills, and all nomads respect primal spirits rather than deities. Martial practitioners and primal spellcasters are most widespread; only a few tribesfolk practice arcane arts. Fighters, rangers, and warlords

### HORDELANDS LANGUAGES

Adventuring nomads speak Common, but they also speak Tuigan, which uses the Thorass alphabet as Common does. Other common languages in the Hordelands include Shou, the language of Kara-Tur, and Primordial, the language of the “gods” of the nomads. Members of the shaman social class use Primordial and its Barazhad alphabet to communicate information not meant for common tribesfolk.

are common, as are barbarians, druids, seekers, shamans, and wardens. Warlocks, especially those of the fey or vestige pact, and sorcerers are the usual wielders of arcane power among the nomads. These people consider a “shaman” to be anyone who has powers unrelated to weapon use, even if those powers are not primal.

## Starting Feature

Hordelands nomads are born to ride and shoot from the saddle. Fast travel, skilled riding, and accurate shooting are central to the nomadic way of life. As a nomad, you have spent more years in the saddle than not. Few can match your adeptness at fighting while astride a mount.

**Benefit:** You gain proficiency with the shortbow. You also gain the Mounted Combat feat.

## Mounted Combat

**Benefit:** While you are riding a creature, it does not take the normal -2 penalty to attack rolls that is imposed on mounts. In addition, the creature can make Acrobatics, Athletics, Endurance, or Stealth checks using your skill check modifiers (not including any temporary bonuses or penalties) in place of its own.

## Additional Features

### Level 5 Feature

Hordelands nomads have a knack for interacting with the natural world, as well as for sensing the mystical and the elemental. Most tribesfolk use this ability to avoid offending the spirits. As an adventurer, you can use your aptitude to discern nearby supernatural influences or creatures.

**Benefit:** You gain a +2 power bonus to Nature checks. In addition, you can use the Nature skill as if it were Arcana to sense the presence of magic, and to

make monster knowledge checks about creatures that have the elemental, fey, or shadow origin.

## Level 10 Feature

Spirits favor those who show them reverence, and Hordelands nomads have an immense amount of respect for them. Your own deference to the spirits has granted you a small boon in the form of greater luck.

**Benefit:** You gain a +1 power bonus to saving throws. If you are attempting to avoid being knocked prone while mounted, your bonus is +5 instead.

## Optional Utility Powers

Nomads of the steppes have to be skilled in combat and survival techniques due to the unforgiving nature of the Hordelands. These hazards hone survival skills and staying power, making nomads hard to kill. By remaining close to nature, humble toward primal spirits, and true to tribal beliefs, plainsfolk can develop uncanny abilities.

### Level 2 Utility Power

A spiritual kinship with the plains ponies of the Hordelands is foremost in a nomad’s upbringing. The horse moves with clever grace and sure footing. Riders of the steppes learn to utilize this ability in the saddle and draw upon their connection with Earth Mother to mimic their mount while out of the saddle.

#### Steppe-Horse Spirit Hordelands Nomad Utility 2

*You draw deeply upon your tie to the land and leap into motion, avoiding retaliation with your first steps and moving with ease despite hindrances.*

**Encounter ♦ Primal**

**Move Action**

**Personal**

**Effect:** You move up to your speed, ignoring difficult terrain and suffering no negative effects for squeezing. If you are mounted, you can instead grant your mount this power’s effect.

## Level 6 Utility Power

Beneath the steppe's vast sky, a nomad can feel the awesomeness that is Teylas, the Sky Lord. The great sky spirit moves as the breath in every creature's lungs. He is life. When life is threatened, through Teylas it endures. When you are threatened, Teylas moves through you to support you.

### Breath of Teylas Hordelands Nomad Utility 6

*The wind is knocked out of you, but the breath of Teylas sustains you and carries you to safety.*

**Encounter ♦ Healing, Primal**  
**Immediate Reaction Personal**

**Trigger:** An enemy bloodies you or scores a critical hit against you.

**Effect:** You spend a healing surge and regain a number of additional hit points equal to your highest ability modifier. Then, shift up to half your speed. If you are mounted, your mount also regains a number of hit points equal to your highest ability modifier, and it can shift instead of you.

## Level 10 Utility Power

The earth is a mother to the tribes of the Hordelands. She gives sustenance and shelter. Her body is a source of protection and solidity. Steppe tribesfolk keep their feet or the hooves of their horses firmly planted. Each nomad keeps his or her soul properly grounded by respecting the spirits of the earth. These spirits can reciprocate, providing stability when it is needed.

### Hooves of Etugen Hordelands Nomad Utility 10

*Earth spirits return control of your movement to you when an enemy tries to push you around.*

**Encounter ♦ Primal**  
**Immediate Interrupt Personal**

**Trigger:** You or a mount you are riding is subjected to forced movement or knocked prone.

**Effect:** Neither you nor your mount is forcibly moved or knocked prone. Instead, you or your mount can shift up to the number of squares you would have been moved forcibly.

## Optional Attack Powers

### Level 3 Encounter Power

Legends of the Hordelands nomads speak of the otherworldly nature of their ranged attacks. Those who have witnessed the nomads fight tell of the accompanying boom of thunder that resonates when their arrows strike home.

#### Sky Arrows Hordelands Nomad Attack 3

*With a whispered homage to the storm spirits, you loose a ranged attack that rumbles with thunder.*

**Encounter ♦ Primal, Thunder**

**No Action Special**

**Trigger:** You hit an enemy with an at-will ranged attack.

**Effect:** The enemy takes 1d8 extra thunder damage from the attack.

### Level 13 Encounter Power

Some tales describe how a nomad whispers to an arrow or a wand before attacking. Such shots can carry the fury of Teylas in his storm form.

#### Storm Arrows Hordelands Nomad Attack 13

*Calling upon the storm spirits, you send forth an attack imbued with thunder or lightning.*

**Encounter ♦ Primal, Varies**

**No Action Special**

**Trigger:** You hit an enemy with an at-will ranged attack.

**Effect:** The enemy takes 2d8 extra thunder damage or 2d8 extra lightning damage from the attack.

## Level 23 Encounter Power

Veterans among the Hordelands nomads send forth both a wave of thunder and the shock of lightning in each attack they make from afar.

#### Tempest Arrows Hordelands Nomad Attack 23

*Thunder accompanies the crackle of lightning as you call upon the spirits of the storm to strike your foe.*

**Encounter ♦ Lightning, Primal, Thunder**

**No Action Special**

**Trigger:** You hit an enemy with an at-will ranged attack.

**Effect:** The enemy takes 3d8 extra thunder and lightning damage from the attack.

## BRIDGING CULTURES

The Hordelands and the Tuigan nation of Yäi-munnahar are part of the imposing expanse that separates Faerûn from Kara-Tur. Travelers from either territory must cross the steppes to access the other area. This makes Hordelands nomads valuable allies in Faerûn and Kara-Tur, and sometimes they seek adventure elsewhere. In either land, however, the nomads are considered to be barbarians and outsiders. They must work hard to gain respect among people who are not their own.



## SOHEI

In Kara-Tur, as in the West, grand shrines can be found in the teeming cities. However, those seeking a quicker path to enlightenment or total devotion to the gods prefer remote monasteries or temples. Such places of worship offer immersion in spiritual pursuits and isolation from the distractions of civilization. Most are hidden high in remote hills or mountains, making the very act of finding the place a show of one's dedication to the sacred.

An urban shrine's clergy can look to the local authorities for protection from monsters, bandits, and enemies of the faith. A wilderness temple's devotees cannot—most secluded places of worship are as much fortress as monastery. Just as such a holy place needs walls, it also needs guardians who share the spiritual values of their less militant fellows.

A sohei, sometimes called a yamabushi ("mountain warrior") due to the usual site of far-flung monasteries and shrines, is a monastic soldier trained as a temple guardian. Rather than focusing on intense religious instruction, a sohei receives training in meditation, body control, and martial techniques. Although devoted clergy of the same religion or sect might practice pacifism, a sohei warrior-monk does not.

The difference between a sohei and a fellow priest is type of duty. The warrior-monk looks out for the safety of the temple, allowing other priests to fulfill duties that are more spiritual. A sohei can also serve as the face of a religious order, going out into the world to spread the faith, strike against the temple's enemies, and seek objects and people important to the religion.

A sohei's superiors are figures higher in his or her religious hierarchy. Every sohei is a devoted combatant with mastery over preferred weapons, and each serves those higher in the hierarchy with obedience. As part of their service to the religion, they also learn

to wield magical power. Often divine in nature, this power is a blessing of the sohei's commitment to a deity. However, legendary sohei—even those from the same religious sect—wield varying mystical capabilities.

A sohei can come from any walk of life. Children given into the service of a temple, whether orphans or nobles, can become sohei. Older initiates might be anything from outlaws to ronin. Requirements for becoming a militant priest include strength and willpower, as well as an abundance of energy and ambition that compels the individual to abandon the wholly meditative life.

An adventuring sohei frequently takes on a quest for his or her religious order. A few sohei go into the world to experience its mysteries, using worldly knowledge as part of a path to enlightenment. Other sohei, such as ronin, have been expelled from or have lost their temples. These wanderers search for a new purpose as much as any ronin does.

## KENSEI

The kensei paragon path from the *Player's Handbook* is for those who have mastered one weapon to the exclusion of all others. Such martial perfectionists can become famous for their techniques and start schools of weapon mastery. Samurai and other warriors are the usual members of this path. An adventuring sohei might also seek such perfection, and you can ask your DM to allow you to take this path even if you are not a fighter.



## Creating a Sohei

Sohei are religious devotees focused on martial practice. Although they might have different religions, purposes, and techniques, divine power unites them. Most of these warrior-monks come from among weapon-using divine classes, such as the avenger, cleric, paladin, and rune priest. Some sohei focus more on the martial aspect of training than on the supernatural, as fighters, rangers, and warlords do. Obscure religious orders that are devoted to primal or ancestral spirits could train barbarians, druids, seekers, and wardens to become sohei. Other cults might focus on the power of the mind over the body. Psionic practitioners such as ardens, battleminds, and monks could be sohei among these sects. Religious devotion can also involve arcane practice or shadow magic—a pious assassin, blackguard, hexblade, or swordmage might become a sohei.

### Starting Feature

A key tenet of your early training is the importance of pressing your initial attack. As you finish off one successful strike and turn to confront a second target, your enemies get an idea of who they're up against.

**Benefit:** You gain the *sohei flair* power.

#### Sohei Flair

Sohei Attack

*The blood you've drawn spurs you on, and you lash at other enemies around you with divinely inspired fury.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine, Weapon**

**Minor Action**      **Melee weapon**

**Requirement:** You must have hit an enemy with a weapon attack during this turn.

**Target:** One creature

*Level 21:* One or two creatures

**Attack:** Highest ability modifier vs. AC

**Hit:** 1[W] damage.

*Level 11:* 2[W] damage.

## Additional Features

### Level 5 Feature

A sohei must spot danger, overt or subtle. The quiet of the surrounding forest is a portent, and the furrow in a temple visitor's brow a warning. When a threat is revealed, a sohei acts without hesitation.

**Benefit:** You gain a +2 power bonus to Insight checks and Perception checks.

### Level 10 Feature

Duty requires the sohei to maintain clarity of purpose and to avoid outside influences, especially magical ones. Meditation and religious devotion help a sohei develop a mind stronger than that of the typical warrior. When others might break under the strain of mental pressure, the sohei remains resolute.

**Benefit:** You gain a +1 power bonus to saving throws against fear effects and effects that render you dazed, dominated, or stunned.

## Optional Utility Powers

Sohei are a diverse group, but lore about them indicates that they share a set of divine powers. Such tales tell of sohei parrying arrows, overcoming mighty magic charms, and fighting on despite a dozen wounds. In all the stories, the valiant sohei's combat prowess is that of a fanatic possessed of divine battle madness. What those unfamiliar with the way of the sohei see as insanity is really the outgrowth of finely honed skill and the lack of a fear of death. All sohei know that to perform one's duty well is worthy of any sacrifice, and death in the name of duty is the ultimate honor.

### Level 2 Utility Power

The first steps toward weapon mastery are defensive—the wielder must survive in order to defeat the enemy. When a foe's attack hits, a sohei can steel his personal defenses against that attack in the instant before it connects.

#### Sohei Parry

Sohei Utility 2

*Divine guidance helps you place your weapon in the path of an attack.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine**

**Immediate Interrupt**      **Personal**

**Trigger:** You are hit by a melee or ranged attack while you are holding a weapon.

**Effect:** You gain a +2 power bonus to the defense targeted by the attack until the end of your next turn.

### Level 6 Utility Power

Sohei battle on in spite of adversity. When an enemy hinders that fighting spirit, the spirit rebels. A sohei's meditative exercises sharpen this ability, allowing the warrior to cleanse the body or mind with a single act of focused will.

#### Sohei Clarity

Sohei Utility 6

*Your mind instinctively finds its center, ridding you of a hindrance to the performance of your duty.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine**

**No Action**

**Personal**

**Trigger:** You start your turn subjected to a dominating or stunning effect that a save can end.

**Effect:** You make a saving throw against the effect.

### Level 10 Utility Power

Perfection in sohei training allows the soul to control the body when the mind is sapped. This unconquerable aspect of a sohei's spiritual being is related in tales in which a celebrated sohei would not be felled until his or her duty was done.

## Sohei Invincibility

Sohei Utility 10

*Your conscious mind can no longer be relied upon, so your sense of self retreats to your innermost soul and keeps acting.*

**Daily ♦ Divine**

**No Action**

**Personal**

**Trigger:** You start your turn dominated, stunned, or unconscious and have at least 1 hit point.

**Effect:** You ignore the triggering condition and are instead dazed for the same duration as the triggering condition.

## Optional Attack Powers

### Level 3 Encounter Power

When foes threaten the temple or its allies, sohei charge fearlessly to the front. This initial advance allows the temple guardians to form battle lines and, combined with *sohei flurry*, deliver a vicious opening assault designed to break enemy formations and weaken the foes' resolve. An advancing sohei can do the same when leading the charge of a smaller group.

## Sohei Advance

Sohei Attack 3

*Centering yourself as you move, you draw your weapon and rush to engage your enemies.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine, Weapon**

**Standard Action**      **Melee weapon**

**Target:** One creature

**Attack:** Highest ability modifier vs. AC

**Hit:** 2[W] + highest ability modifier damage.

**Effect:** You grant combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

**Special:** You can draw a weapon when using this power. When charging, you can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

### Level 13 Encounter Power

An experienced sohei can quickly draw his or her weapon and rush forward to open with a brutal, focused attack.

## Sohei Rush

Sohei Attack 13

*You attack without consideration for your own safety, trusting in the power of the divine to see you through the fight.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine, Weapon**

**Standard Action**      **Melee weapon**

**Target:** One creature

**Attack:** Highest ability modifier vs. AC

**Hit:** 3[W] + highest ability modifier damage.

**Effect:** You grant combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

**Special:** You can draw a weapon when using this power. When charging, you can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

### Level 23 Encounter Power

With supreme skill and deep faith, a sohei steps into combat with a savage attack against multiple foes.

## Sohei Supremacy

Sohei Attack 23

*More than one foe faces your attack, which you bring to bear with a swiftness granted by unshakable focus and the power of faith.*

**Encounter ♦ Divine, Weapon**

**Standard Action**      **Melee weapon**

**Target:** One or two creatures

**Attack:** Highest ability modifier vs. AC

**Hit:** 3[W] + highest ability modifier damage.

**Effect:** You grant combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

**Special:** You can draw a weapon when using this power. When charging, you can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

## About the Author

Chris Sims has played roleplaying games for thirty years, and he has helped produce games for nearly ten. Before he set up his freelance shop in the Seattle exurbs, he was an editor, developer, and designer at Wizards of the Coast. There, he worked on the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® and MAGIC: THE GATHERING® games. You can read Chris's "Analysis Paralysis" blog at <http://critical-hits.com>, and you can follow him as @ChrisSSims on Twitter.

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