

The Penitent Legion



nsanity is a fickle lover. She does not consider bank accounts, family ties or social standing when she selects those to whom she will give her gift. And she takes as mercilessly as she gives, prying apart families, starting wars, stealing memories and loved ones without thought to consequences or apologies. In short, she's a bitch.

The Penitent Legion is the bastard child of this particular bitch. The Laughing Lady open her doors to all of Lady Madness' children, from homicidal maniacs to the little old ladies they kill. It has been said that the Penitent can be split into two neat categories: the totally sane and the totally insane. This cute little assessment is, of course, wrong. All of the Laughing Lady's folk are at least a little crazy. Death does strange things to people. It's just that some appear saner than others.

Membership in the Legion

Penitent Reapers have particularly difficult job. The souls of those who died from madness are almost always at least routinely claimed by other Legions. Those whose madness drove them to suicide get tagged by the Silent Legion, those who are killed by psychotics are claimed by the Grim, the victims of such diseases as Alzheimer's or of neglect in nursing homes get gobbled up by the Iron Legion, and so forth. The only ones that the other Legions are willing to give up without a fight are the truly, criminally insane. Of course, most of those find their way to Oblivion pretty quickly, and the rest have "Spectre In Training" stamped on their foreheads, meaning that were matters left to themselves, the ranks of the Penitent would get thinned out pretty quickly.

This harsh fact has led Penitent Reapers to become an aggressive, sneaky lot. They don't bother with paperwork, they don't ask the other Legions for arbitration in cases of questionable ownership, and they certainly don't bother pleading their cases with other Reapers. Penitent Reapers simply take what they think they can justify taking, and as long as the gathered souls fall more or less within the guidelines of the Legion's requirements, the Laughing Lady is happy.

With that in mind, consider the membership of the Legion. The Lady's wraiths aren't really bound by a common identity, a common goal or really even common deaths. On one hand, you have the insane. Madness is a many-faced demon, and very few of these particular wraiths have all that much in common. In fact, the only thing they can really agree on is the uniqueness of each of their situations. You have axe murderers, soldiers who have died in insane military operations, old men who watched everything that they knew and loved slip behind a gentle cloud of forgetfulness, scientists whose mad search for truth led to their demises, children with 15 different people in their heads trying to make sense of it all, and obsessive compulsives who were so intent on counting the number of steps across the street that they didn't see the truck coming. A varied crew, to say the least. On the other side of the room, you have the victims: the little girl who walked down the wrong alley, the wife who said no once too often, the father

who pushed his little boy to succeed until that little boy cracked, the cop who should have waited for backup before approaching that crowd on the corner. Their deaths were violent, horrifying. Some of them may have died at the hands of their fellow Legionnaires.

How to keep this crowd together? How to organize a bunch of murderers and their victims into a cohesive unit, a political power in the world of the Dead? This is the problem that faces the Laughing Lady every day.

A Common Goal

With the exception of the Silent Legion, the Penitent are the only ones to bunk with the people who killed them. Not every member of the Legion can directly blame their fellow Legionnaires for the present situation – in fact, most cannot – but stereotypes and prejudices are easy things to create. Maybe the specific officer who ordered that fatal charge has long since fallen to Oblivion, but there are plenty of other officers just like him all around. There are always plenty of people to blame. It is because of this rather sticky situation that the Laughing Lady built the Seat of Succor. Otherwise, her Legion would have torn itself apart within decades.

The Seat of Succor is nestled near the center of Stygia, and resembles nothing more than a giant, black, square rock. It towers up above the surrounding structures, looming over the passerby like some caricatured tombstone. Inside, a single voice in almost constant laughter can be heard, and echo of joy resonating from the cold walls. It is here that the disgruntled come, to search for the meaning of their madness, and to come to grips with the insanity of it all. Even those Legionnaires who are perfectly sane come to the Seat of Succor, seeking comfort, for none are turned away from the Lady's gates.

Those who walk into the halls of laughter may never walk out, and the Legionnaires who do leave never speak of their time inside. The only ones who seem to come and go as they please are the Laughing Lady's personal entourage, known as the Order of the Keepers. The Keepers are in charge of the mental welfare of the whole Legion, and maintain a vigilant watch over the health of its members. Thus the Legion of the Mad maintains an uneasy internal peace.

Those who act up are dragged to the Seat for discipline. Others make the journey to Stygia more voluntarily; not everyone can forget the reasons behind their deaths or put old grudges behind them. If one cannot, he is taken to the Seat of Succor. Inside, he learns to deal with his internal strife, or he simply never comes out.

One thing that the Legion has managed to agree on is that Madness is an extension of Oblivion in the Skinlands. The insane, willing or not, feed Oblivion. Pointless wards, killing fuel to the fire. Therefore, the members of the Penitent Legion are largely responsible for the growth of Oblivion. Hence the name, Penitent. The Legion must make up for the damage that its members did before they died. Legionnaires must earn the forgiveness of their fellow wraiths, and the more spectacular the penance the better. The Penitent fight twice as hard, work twice as fast, and attack Oblivion with twice the fury of other Legions. After all, they have a lot of catching up to do.

The Penitent's hatred of Oblivion has focused in particular on the Shadow. Members of the Penitent Legion view the Shadow as the most obvious manifestation of madness on this side of the Shroud, and attack it however they may. The Penitent were against the dissolution of the Pardoners Guild, and offered shelter to many of the Guild's members following the revolt. Castigate is the most commonly practiced Arcanos in the Legion, and while the existence of the Guild is universally denied by the Legion's spokeswraiths, the higher officials in the Legion maintain covert ties to the underground Guild.

The status of every wraith's Shadow is closely monitored by the so-called Keepers. While they can't hope to keep detailed records on every wraith in Stygia and the Skinlands, these Legion officials certainly try. Theoretically, each Keeper's specific job is to work to maintain the mental health of the Legion, and they have been known to keep tabs on wraiths outside of the Legion. If a powerful wraith is about to succumb to her Shadow, the Keepers may step in and intervene.

A Legion of madmen and their victims, trying desperately to come to grips with the nature of madness, all the while keeping a close eye on their own dark halves. The Penitent are working off a debt to society, but one of which they can never hope to absolve themselves. They fight side by side with those who killed them, while in the background the local version of Big Brother monitors their every move for suspicious behavior. It's a party.

Deathmarks

The Penitent have accrued a debt to the Restless. Members of the Legion see themselves as having either directly or indirectly been responsible for the growth of Oblivion. Part of the process of becoming a member of the Legion involves accepting the debt of the other members of the Legion as your own, so that no one wraith can be blamed more than any other. While this might not seem fair, it prevents internal strife and helps the Legion maintain a cohesive front.

The Deathmarks of the Legion, then, symbolize the debt that is owed. Penitent wraiths are stained with blood. The amount of staining is different from wraith to wraith, but the hands at least are always eternally purpled. Further infractions against society, such as allowing one's Shadow to gain too much power, increases the amount of staining. This tends to dissettle other Legions, as the Penitent proudly displays their greatest fault for all to see.

Friends and Foes

People tend to dislike the Penitent. Usually other Legions think of the Penitent as a bunch of cannibalistic, nun-killing psychopaths – and those are the high points. Of course, there's a little truth to that, but not enough to justify the widespread distrust that the other Legions hold for the Laughing Lady and her minions. To further complicate matters, the aggressive style of the Penitent Reapers tends to put people off. There is always some minor scrap between Penitent Reapers and their counterparts in the Silent, Grim, and Iron Legions to keep the insults flying and the dislike bubbling merrily away. On top of all that, the whole Legion acts like it's paying off some great debt to society, and is sure to let everyone else know how much they're suffering to do so. Self-proclaimed martyrs are rarely popular, and especially not ones who come complete with snoopy, arrogant Keepers.

Despite the various prejudices and mistrust that other Legions tend to hold for the Penitents, the victims of Madness are not a force to be ignored in the political machinations of Stygian society. The Penitent are capable of doing a lot for their friends, producing favors from providing military strength to arranging for the Keepers to apprehend a political enemy on suspicion of Shadow influence. On the other hand, this tends to produce a stream of momentary, quid pro quo relationships with other Legions. In the end, the only ranks with whom the Penitent are able to maintain fairly steady relations are the Emerald Legion, the Paupers, and the Ladies of Fate.

Heretics and Renegades pose a peculiar problem to the Penitent Legion. Outlaws to a soul, they lie outside of the influence of the Hierarchy, and therefore outside of the careful vigilance of the Keepers. This makes the Penitent nervous. After all, there's no telling what kind of Oblivion-feeding activity is going on in the minds of those miscreants. Most Penitents, being the cynical lot that they are, consider religion to be a little like madness, and would be more than happy to absorb the various sects into their Legion. Of course, the Heretics might not be too pleased by this, but after a stay in the Seat of Succor, they would inevitably change their minds.

The only real ties that the Legion has to those outside of its members are with the dissolved Pardoners Guild, and only the highest members of the Legion are aware of this relationship. It's a rather shadowy affair, and is largely based on a mutual hatred for the Shadow rather than any commonality in political belief or ideology. The Penitent want the Shadow defeated, and so do the Pardoners. That's as far as it goes.

The Military of the Mad

War is insane. Pure madness. That means that when the gauntlet gets thrown down, the Penitent is right at home.

The leader of the military forces of the Penitent Legion is a wraith named Liamh, a warrior killed during the early phase of the Roman invasion of Albion. It was Liamh's troops who met Julius Caesar's befuddled Romans on the beach, and who slaughtered the centurions whose heavy armor had sunk them into the sand just offshore. Of course, Liamh felt he had a secret weapon in these wars, for the voices of the gods spoke to him every night after evening fell and helped him plan his battles.

The voices foretold the coming of the Romans, and warned the young warrior to prepare. They outlined for him the strategies that would be effective against the invaders. Liamh took these messages from beyond to heart, and summoned a mighty force to his side. When the Romans came, he was ready.

Unfortunately, he was also a sucker.

The Romans were not the enemy that Liamh was destined to fight. The cold minds behind the voices that Liamh heard were those of artisans preparing a tool. They pushed Liamh into a risky endeavor, an all-or-nothing frontal assault that claimed his life, as well as the lives of most of his host.

When the dust settled and Caesar had been given time to record his victory in his annals, Liamh was already being trained on the other side of Shroud to lead another, greater host against another, greater foe: Oblivion.

It's been two millennia since Liamh fell on the beaches. He's finally started to think that he and his troops are ready.

Military Units Among the Penitent

The Legions were originally set up to assist new wraiths in their dealings with death, and to assist them on their path toward whatever Fate held in store for them. The ranks were a community of sorts, providing support for Enfants and giving them connections to other mortals who had died as they had. But with Charon's declaration that Transcendence was a myth and the banishment of the Heretics, the focus of the Legions shifted. The ranks no longer concerned themselves with achieving Transcendence, and

became focused on staving off Oblivion. With that shift, the Legions transformed themselves from a support network to a military force dedicated to battling the forces of Oblivion, ensuring the safety of the citizens of the Hierarchy and enforcing Charon's laws.

These days, the Legions are regularly called upon to do battle with marauding Spectres, militant Renegades and dangerous Heretics, as well as occasionally enforcing the will of the Hierarchy in exotic locales. The Penitent Legion, under the leadership of Liamh, has adapted well to this new set of duties, perhaps more so than any other Legion. Members of the other Legions look at Liamh's innovations, shake their heads and chuckle. "He's crazy," they say, and dismiss as worthless whatever soulforged monstrosity he's having his troops work on at the moment.

They're half right.

The Skirmisher Corps: The Storm of Night

The Storm prides itself on history. When Liamh first entered the Shadowlands, he was inducted into the body that became the Skirmisher Corps. The initiation rites that an *Enfant* entering the Storm takes today are the same rites that Liamh himself underwent centuries ago. Despite the hundreds of years that have passed since then, many things remain the same in the Skirmisher Corps. The uniform, which consists of jet-black light armor, has only been modified to keep up with technological advancements. Corpsmen still use bows and arrows, light swords and bucklers to attack the foe. The banners that fly over the Skirmisher Corps and hang in its barracks hall between conflicts tell the story of a hundred battles, a thousand martyrs and countless soldiers gone down into the final darkness. The Corps' greatest battles are depicted in rich pictograms, much like medieval stained glass windows told Biblical stories.

The Storm of Night takes the role of the Legion's first line of pickets, making first contact with the enemy and attempting to disrupt the momentum of his advance. The tactics that the Skirmisher Corps uses are simple: Meet the enemy, disrupt his line, and use *Argos* to pull out before he can muster a concentrated response. Ideally, the Skirmisher Corps disrupts the enemy, luring units into pursuing isolated Skirmisher platoons and thus breaking up the battle line. With any luck, the enemy's front dissolves in chaos just in time for the rest of the Penitent Legion to hit it. In the meantime, the Storm pulls back and picks off key targets, staying out of the thick of battle.

The Phalanx Corps: The Wall of Skulls

The vast majority of soldiers inducted into the military forces of the Penitent Legion find themselves in the Phalanx. The Phalanx Corps can also trace its history back to before the time of Liamh, but the group's role has changed over the years. Originally, the Wall of Skulls was the only actual unit in the Penitent army, with the other Corps attached as minor supporting players in the theatre of war. Debacles such as Second Thermopylae (the Persian ghosts won this one decisively) demonstrated, however, that relying on the Phalanx was a sure way to get outmaneuvered and crushed. Thus, the Wall of Skulls passed into a supporting role, in which the Phalanx ties up the enemy so that the specialized units can do their work. When time or numbers are called for (the Wall contains over half of the wraiths in the Legion's military arm), it's the Phalanx that answers the summons.

The task of the Phalanx is to provide structure to the chaotic attack of the rest of the army. They are on the front line, marching steadily forward while the Skirmishers and other unit's wheel around them.

The Wall neither deals the deciding blow, nor draws first blood. Only once the Storm of Night has finished sowing chaos in the enemy ranks does the Wall of Skulls move up and engage the foe, pinning it down so that advance and retreat both become impossible. The Wall, as one might expect, is not a terribly mobile force, and depends upon the Skirmisher Corps to protect its exposed flanks.

Besides their distinctive bone shields, the Phalanx Corps is equipped with heavy armor, usually soulforged with a bone motif. The Corps also includes a contingent of musicians, drummers, and trumpeters whose job it is to maintain the steady advance of the line, as well as signaling for unit maneuvers and the like. The Corps makes wide use of banners in battle, to help maintain unit cohesion as well as to strike fear in their enemies. These banners tell of the past deeds of the unit they represent, proclaiming the force and power of their history.

The Beast Corps: The Razor's Song

Liamh may well be Stygia's leading military strategist. He recognizes the potential of certain Arcanoi, and utilizes them. While most Legions are content with grinding their enemies into submission, Liamh would rather strike a sudden blow that maims his foe and wins the day. With this in mind, he formed the Beast Corps, and assigned its members to a particularly dangerous mission. In most Legions, the barghests are used to hunt down convicts and other unpleasant elements of society. The barghests of the Penitent Legion, however, are called upon to perform military duty. It's a duty that, to be honest, one would have to be lobotomized to accept.

The Razor's Song is organized into small groups of six, five barghests and one beastmaster. The barghests selected for the Corps are created from the most fiendish of the criminally insane. They are Moliated beyond the normal parameters of barghests to the point where they're hardly recognizable for what they once were, adorned with hardened carapaces bristling with razor-sharp blades. The beastmaster for each unit is encased in hardened armor, covering every inch of his Corpus to a degree that seems more insectile than human. Only the bravest and most insane are selected for the Corps, because their duty requires a level of courage (or madness) that causes most warriors to pale.

Once the Wall of Skulls has closed with the enemy, and the grind of battle has begun in earnest, the Beast Corps is brought up. As the battle continues and casualties rise, the enemy brings up his reserves and weakens his defenses in the rear even as he reinforces his front and flanks. That's where the Razor's Song comes in. Having spent days before the battle whipping his charges into a murderous frenzy, the beastmaster then Flickers into one of the gaps in the enemy rear and turns the hounds loose. If things go well, all hell breaks loose shortly thereafter. If the barghests hit hard enough, the resultant fragmentation of the enemy line (caused by troops turning to meet the new threat) allows Legion infantry to engulf and annihilate the isolated segments of the enemy front.

The uniform of the beastmasters is impressive. It is a solid shell of soulforged armor, with the helmet resembling a stylized hound's head with teeth bared. The masters are directed to avoid combat if they can, because it is their duty to transport the barghests into and out of battle. They utilize no banners in battle, but within the war kennels of the Corps, numerous pennants hang, telling of the terror that the hounds have caused and commemorating victories won through barghest savagery.

The Flesh Corps: The Tide of Horror

Finally, the deadly blow may be struck. The Flesh Corps is the product of Liamh's twisted imagination, a horrid manifestation of nightmare and violence. Inspired by the Korean National Dragons and using an unholy combination of Moliate and soulforging, Liamh has created two types of monstrosities. Liamh's first creation was the Leviathans that form the center of the Flesh Corps, multiple wraiths twisted into single elephantine abominations that tower above the line of battle. Howdahs filled with spearmen, archers and the occasional sniper ride on the beasts' backs, peppering opponents with deadly fire from above.

Flesh Corps tactics are simple: Find a weak point in the enemy line, and then hit it as hard as possible. Break through if you can, then turn and roll the enemy's line like it's cheap carpet. If some of your own troops get crushed in the process, that's the price that has to be paid.

The wraiths who ride the Leviathans are not actually members of the Flesh Corps, but Phalanx soldiers picked for special duty. The actual members of the Flesh Corps are usually not volunteers, but the Laughing Lady's policy is that leading lives – and afterlives – of unmitigated violence is as good a method as sticking your hand up and shouting "Pick me!" It's very simple, really: Psychopaths who cannot conform to the conditions of life after death find themselves Moliated into gargantuan, lobotomized beasts of war. It's one of the most effective and persuasive tools the Laughing Lady has for reform – no one in her right mind wants to be glommed onto a Leviathan.

The Machine Corps: The Cacophony of Death

The second form that Liamh devised to strike the final blow in battle is the Machine Corps. Soulforging is used to create hollow war machines, huge devices called Juggernauts that resemble early World War I tanks with giant scythes and battering rams attached to further the damage they cause when they crash into the enemy lines. These devices are powered by massive soulfire crystals, meaning that when a Juggernaut gets stopped, the resultant explosion is spectacular indeed.

The Machine Corps is a truly horrid sight as it rumbles into battle, slicing its way through enemy lines and crushing soldiers beneath its soulforged treads, even as the half-forged wraiths that make up its armor scream their agony. The drivers of these devices are rotated out frequently to prevent Angst buildup, and given preferential treatment by Legion Pardoners. Liamh privately considers the Machine Corps to be an improvement on the Beast Corps – more predictable, he says – but has not yet begun to phase the old unit out. In the meantime, few foes can stand against the screaming beasts and howling machines of these two units.

The Storm Maidens

The Storm Maidens are a specialized squad, and do not fall under Liamh's jurisdiction. Instead, they answer directly to the Laughing Lady. The Maidens are selected from the ranks of the Storm of Night, and are exclusively female in membership. The Laughing Lady uses them as an elite strike force, Helldiving into the Tempest to rescue stranded travelers and also to launch pre-emptive strikes on Spectral hives. The Maidens are unfailingly brave, and have saved many lost souls from the clutches of the Tempest. Liamh has repeatedly urged the Laughing Lady to dispatch the Maidens on a quest to find out what happened to Charon, but the Lady considers that to be an insurmountable task, and refuses to squander her resources on such a pointless mission.

The Laughing Lady

The Lady is an enigmatic woman, to say the least. She is never seen without her mask, a huge piece that sports an enormous, toothy grin. Despite her name, she doesn't laugh all that often. In fact, the grin on her mask looks less like a laugh and more like a maw that's about to bite something in half.

The Laughing Lady rarely ventures outside of the halls of the Seat of Succor these days, and is always accompanied by her personal unit of Keepers on those rare occasions when she does. She keeps to herself, making people wonder if she has lost control of her Legion and has become a mere figurehead. Those in the know think differently, of course, but wonder why she hasn't used the Storm Maidens to pursue the whereabouts of Charon. The sheer volume of information that she must be able to glean from the Maidens' observations must mean that she knows more about the Tempest – not to mention the Labyrinth – than any other Deathlord. Yet she does not act. Perhaps she knows something the other Deathlords do not – or perhaps she's just gone quietly mad. At the moment, no one's willing to investigate too closely.

