SYCORAX

Background:
Sycorax is a potent old witch of indeterminate age. She is banished to a remote island 18 years before *The Tempest* takes place and is dead long before Shakespeare’s tale begins there. To avoid execution in Algiers, Sycorax lets the sea-god Setebos impregnate her with an unholy child. She gives birth to her son Caliban, a half-human monster, alone on the island – where she lives out the closing years of her life. Sycorax is a powerful witch who draws her power from the moon via her god Setebos. While she can channel these dark lunar energies, she can’t necessarily control them.

There is evidence that Shakespeare based Sycorax on the sorceress Medea from Greek mythology and I aim to colour Sycorax’s backstory with elements from Medea’s life. Among other heinous crimes, Medea murdered her own brother and children. In ancient Greece, murder of one’s own family was the most awful crime of all and three special demons were reserved to punish it: The Furies. Sycorax, for the murder of her brother and children in her youth, has been hunted by The Furies for most of her life. She has grown old moving from country to country and now, on this desolate island in the middle of the sea, The Furies are finally about to catch up with her.

The “Medea” backstory:
It’s worth going over the Medea legend just to fill in a few details: readers will not necessarily need to be familiar with this legend, but hopefully *Sycorax Waning* will inspire them to go away and find out more.

When Jason and the Argonauts arrived in Colchis, the king Aeëtes agreed to give up the Golden Fleece if Jason fulfilled certain tasks. Medea, daughter of Aeëtes, fell in love with Jason and used her magic to help him obtain the Golden Fleece unfairly. Jason and Medea then fled Colchis with their prize, chased by the furious Aeëtes. To slow their pursuers, Medea murdered her younger brother Apsyrtus, dismembered his corpse and fed it piecemeal into the sea behind Jason’s ship. Aeëtes was forced to stop and retrieve his son’s remains, thus allowing Jason and his crew to escape.

Jason and Medea later settled in Corinth and had two sons. When Jason subsequently decided to leave Medea and marry a young princess, she took her chilling revenge by poisoning Jason’s new love and killing her own children with a sword, leaving Jason alone and childless. It is for these bloody acts that The Furies will be chasing Sycorax (the aged, decrepit form of Medea) in *Sycorax Waning*.

Look and feel:
Sycorax is very old and the long years of her charmed life are taking their toll. She walks with a stoop and leans on a gnarled staff for support. She’s brown and wrinkled with a big pile of white hair on her head. In her white hair, offering stark contrast, are dozens of glossy, black raven feathers. She also has strikingly blue eyes. Visual inspirations: Mommy Fortuna from *The Last Unicorn*; the witch Aughra from *The Dark Crystal*; the old witch Baba Yaga from popular Slavic folklore.
CALIBAN

Background:
Caliban is Sycorax’s deformed son, the product of her unholy union with the aquatic god Setebos. In the future, he will be tamed and educated by Prospero and Miranda (see The Tempest). But during his first six years alone with Sycorax, Caliban is allowed to run wild on the island, indulging his feral nature and even – at one point – eating human flesh. Caliban has no grasp of language; he gets by with grunts, growls and signals. Sycorax will die when he is six years old, leaving him alone on the island for a further eight years until Prospero arrives.

Look and feel:
Caliban is essentially human in shape, but shares many characteristics with a predatory fish e.g. he has sharp fins protruding from his humped back, sharp teeth, webbed hands/feet, a mixture of skin and scales, gills about the ears, etc. With each chapter of this story he will grow one year older, thus his appearance will steadily change as he develops into a 6-year-old and finally a 15-year-old in the Epilogue. Visual inspirations include: the BBC’s portrayal of Caliban in Shakespeare: The Animated Tales; the angry mermaids in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire; previous incarnations of Gollum (e.g. as illustrated by David Wenzel) before the Peter Jackson films came along.
ARIEL

Background:
In Shakespeare’s own words, Ariel is “an airy spirit”. He is the island’s most powerful sprite, skilled enough to manipulate the sea winds and control the weather. He is good natured and will stand up against evil, as evidenced later in the bulk of *The Tempest*. Sycorax enslaves Ariel shortly after her arrival on the island and orders him to carry out her wishes. However, Sycorax cannot always force Ariel to act against his will. When she commands him to asphyxiate Lupus and the wolves, he refuses and renounces his service. In punishment, Sycorax imprisons Ariel in an old pine tree. He will remain trapped inside it for 12 years, emerging again only when Prospero has arrived and released him (as told in *The Tempest*).

Look and feel:
Ariel is the size of a young boy, but looks like an adult. He can fly and is almost always in a state of levitation. He’s sometimes transparent but mostly a varying shade of blue, depending on his mood. If he’s angry he may even turn puce or crimson. Visual references: Peter Pan; Lord Krishna (who plays a flute, similar to Ariel); The Ghost of Christmas Past in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*; the coloured flames in the British Gas adverts.
AUGUSTO

Background:
Augusto is an unlucky Spanish prison guard. He insults Sycorax just as she is being marooned on the island. In anger, she makes him her prisoner. Augusto will eventually be crucified and fed to Caliban.

Look and feel:
Augusto should be dressed as a Spanish official c.16th century (e.g. Mendoza from The Mysterious Cities of Gold). However, his clothes will slowly decay into dirty rags and his hair/beard will grow long and unkempt (e.g. Robert De Niro in The Mission.)
LUPUS

**Background:**
Lupus is a silver wolf, not quite a god and not strictly an animal. She can talk like a human and is endowed with the supernatural gift of foresight. Lupus is the leader of a small pack of wolves that lives and hunts on the island. She is killed, along with almost every member of her pack, in a nasty showdown with Sycorax. After her death, she becomes the ancient star constellation known as “The Wolf”.

**Look and feel:**
Lupus, though female, is the size of a male wolf. She has sleek silver fur and bright amber eyes. Visual inspirations: Akela from *The Jungle Book*, the forest wolves in *Princess Mononoke* or photographs of real wolves online.
**BRUIN**

**Background:**
Bruin is a huge Brown Bear. Like Lupus, Bruin can talk and has a semi-magical gift: Herculean brute strength. But Bruin rarely uses his might; he is mostly a gentle, thoughtful creature that doesn’t need to fight. He prefers his own company and hunts fish alone in and around his waterfall. Bruin gets turned into stone when he confronts Sycorax over the death of Lupus. His body is shattered into pieces on a shingle beach and gently washed out to sea. After his death, Bruin becomes the old star constellation known as “The Great Bear”.

**Look and feel:**
Bruin is a very large Brown Bear (this is a specific species; see Wikipedia). He can become formidably vicious, but he almost always looks meditative and docile. See Masashi Tanaka’s brilliant bear drawings in the *Gon* manga series or search online for photos of real Brown Bears.
SETEBOS

Background:
Setebos is the strange aquatic god worshipped by Sycorax. He is rarely seen – but when he does appear, he takes the form of a giant mutated octopus. Setebos draws power from the tidal forces of the moon. This power, in turn, feeds the lesser lunar magic of Sycorax. When Sycorax murders Lupus and Bruin, she offers them up in sacrifice to Setebos. Sycorax must keep Setebos happy, as he gives her protection from The Furies. When he leaves the island in Chapter 7, Sycorax is left open to attack from her deadliest foes.

Look and feel:
Setebos is, at core, an octopus – but he’s more than that. He’s mammoth in size; as big as an aeroplane or a warehouse. He’s a forgotten god of the ocean: he’s eerie and strange and reminiscent of those weird creatures that live deep in the ocean and never get discovered. He has three big hearts that beat visibly within his body, full of cold green fire.
THE FURIES

Background:
In ancient Greek, the “Erinyes” or “The Angry Ones”. The Furies are female deities of vengeance, who physically channel the anger of the dead. More specifically, they are sent to punish those guilty of familial murder i.e. those who have killed their own blood relatives. The Furies’ heads are alive with hissing snakes, similar to Medusa... and they are dripping from head to toe with fresh blood (the blood of the unjustly slain). They are gory and horrific to look at and drive their victims insane with wild screeching and chattering. Sycorax has been hunted by The Furies ever since she killed her brother and her own children, many years ago. Since she came under the protection of Setebos, The Furies have been unable to find her. At the end of this tale, however, Setebos disappears – and the The Furies invade Sycorax’s island, where she can no longer escape.

Look and feel:
The Furies are really quite nasty. Serpents instead of hair; wide, screaming mouths; sharp, scratching nails; dark, torn cloaks; empty, harrowing eyes; blood and gore all over the head, face and body. They’re supposed to be the world’s worst nightmare sent out to haunt the world’s worst offenders. They should be fun to work on! Visual inspiration: The Mouth of Sauron from Lord of the Rings; the blood-soaked girl in The Descent.
THE MUNDI

Background:
The Mundi appear only once in this tale. They rise from the earth when Sycorax summons them to imprison Ariel in a pine tree. The Mundi are small but pernicious Earth sprites, easily controlled by higher powers. They always appear in great numbers, giving them increased strength.

Look and feel:
Each individual Mundi is only a few inches high. They’re made out of soft earth and mud, meaning their shapes will vary... but they always maintain a vaguely humanoid shape i.e. two arms, two legs, and a head/face. They snarl a lot and are generally quite vicious. Visual references: The Gnome King and his minions from Return to Oz (but much smaller); the Stink Spirit in Spirited Away; Sackboy from LittleBigPlanet; Concrete from the Concrete comic series (but in miniature).
THE NAIADS

Background:
The Naiads are ancient water sprites, female in origin. They pop up on numerous occasions in this story, usually in brief supporting roles (e.g. they help Bruin to remove a boulder that is blocking the mouth of his waterfall). They do not speak but are very expressive with their arms/faces.

Look and feel:
The Naiads should be graceful and feminine, but not overtly so. We only ever see their faces, hands and arms: they take form by inhabiting water and shaping it for their purposes. Visual inspirations: the strange alien-controlled water in The Abyss, the molten appearance of the T1000 in Terminator 2 (but female rather than male).
MINOR CHARACTERS:

THE DOCTOR

Background:
The Doctor appears briefly at the start of this tale, when he discovers that Sycorax is pregnant.

Look and feel:
The Doctor is an Arab physician. He is short and very serious-looking. He should have dark skin and a white moustache with a tidy white beard. He wears a turban on his head and rich, elegant robes on the rest of his body. Visual inspirations: see below.

SAILORS

Background:
At the beginning of this tale, six sailors row Sycorax ashore to her island prison.

Look and feel:
These sailors are low-ranking Spanish naval men. They will essentially be variations on the look and feel of Augusto i.e. generic Spanish dress for the 16th century... but more casual and dirty. See below for starting points (NB: do not include firearms or guns, this story is too early for gunpowder.)
The enchanted island where Sycorax Waning takes place is virtually a character in itself. It’s alive with fairies, sprites and spirits and its lush landscape is full of unexpected surprises. This is the magical island where The Tempest will take place... and no-one really sums it up better than Caliban when he says:

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,*  
*Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.*  

“The Tempest” – Act III Scene 2