

KINGS OF WAR



The World Of Pannithor



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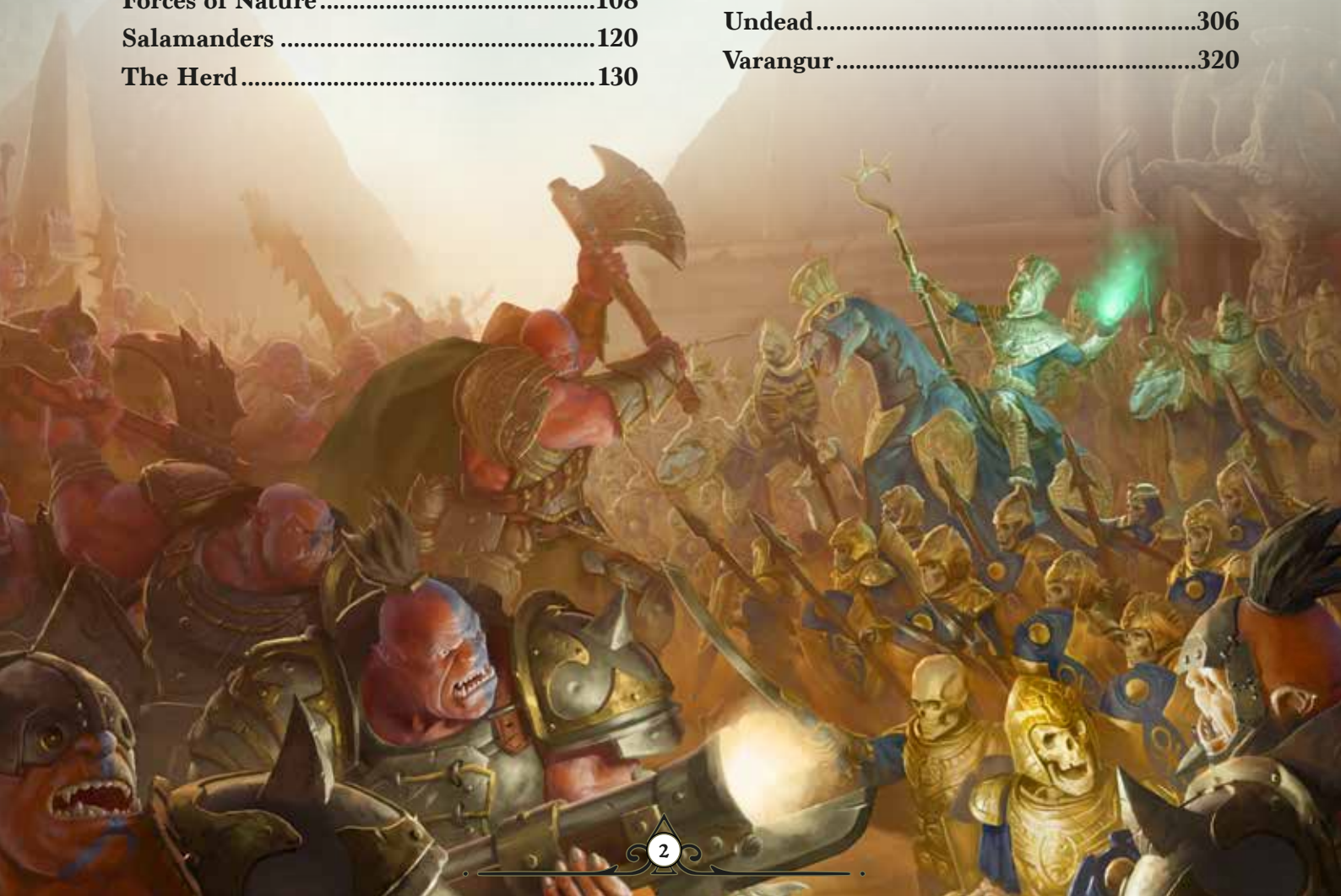
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CREDITS

Rules Writing & Army List Development

Matthew James, Daniel King, Chris Morris, Jason Moorman, Jeffery Swann

Background Material

Rob Burman, Michael Grey, Matt Gilbert, Guy Haley, Mark Latham, Thomas Pike, Anthony Reynolds, Greg D Smith, David Symonds

Miniature Painting

Duncan Aldis, Luke Barker, Mark Bedwell, Alex Cairns, Andrew Chesney, Conflict in Colour, Matt Gilbert, Golem Painting Studio, Matt Kennedy, Ben Macintyre, Dave Neild, Paul Scott Miniatures, Chris Straw, Studio Giraldez, David Symonds, Chris Webb, Andrew Wedmore, Dave Wilson, Winterdyne Commission Modelling

Terrain

Elvis Fisher, Gale Force Nine, PrintableScenery.com, Ben Sandum, Sunny Shukla, Tabletop World, Nick Williams

Art

Jeff Brown, Robin Carey, Robert Cirillo, Juan Diego Dianderas, Shen Fei, Heath Foley, Michele Giorgi, Des Hanley, Yann Hoarau, Ralph Horsley, Tugsbayar Jamts, Rob Jenx, Stef Kopinski, Alan Lathwell, Ciaran Morris, Phil Moss, Thomas Putman, Michael Rechlin, Boris Samec, Lie Setiawan, Tan Ho Sim, Luigi Terzi, Damian Ziomek

Editing & Proofing

Ead Brown, Rob Burman, Christopher Fisher, Matt Gilbert

Graphic Design & Layout

Duncan Aldis, David Lanza

Photography

Ben Sandum

Playtesters

Patrick Zoro Allen, Michael Blyth, Roger Connor, Michael Crossman, Matthew Curtis, Nick Davies, Andrew Goodman, Jez Gurney, Alec Habig, Frank Habig, Daniel Hannon, Ed Herzig, Geoff Holland, Christopher James, Kris Kapsner, George Kirke, Eldon Krosch Jr., Yan Zhi Lai, Sami Mahmoud, Elliot Morrish, Adam Padley, Michael Percy, Cyle 'Dino Lord' Pool, Tom Robinson, Todd Serpico, Paul Smith, Adrian Smith, Erich Trowbridge, Nick Williams, Eric Winters

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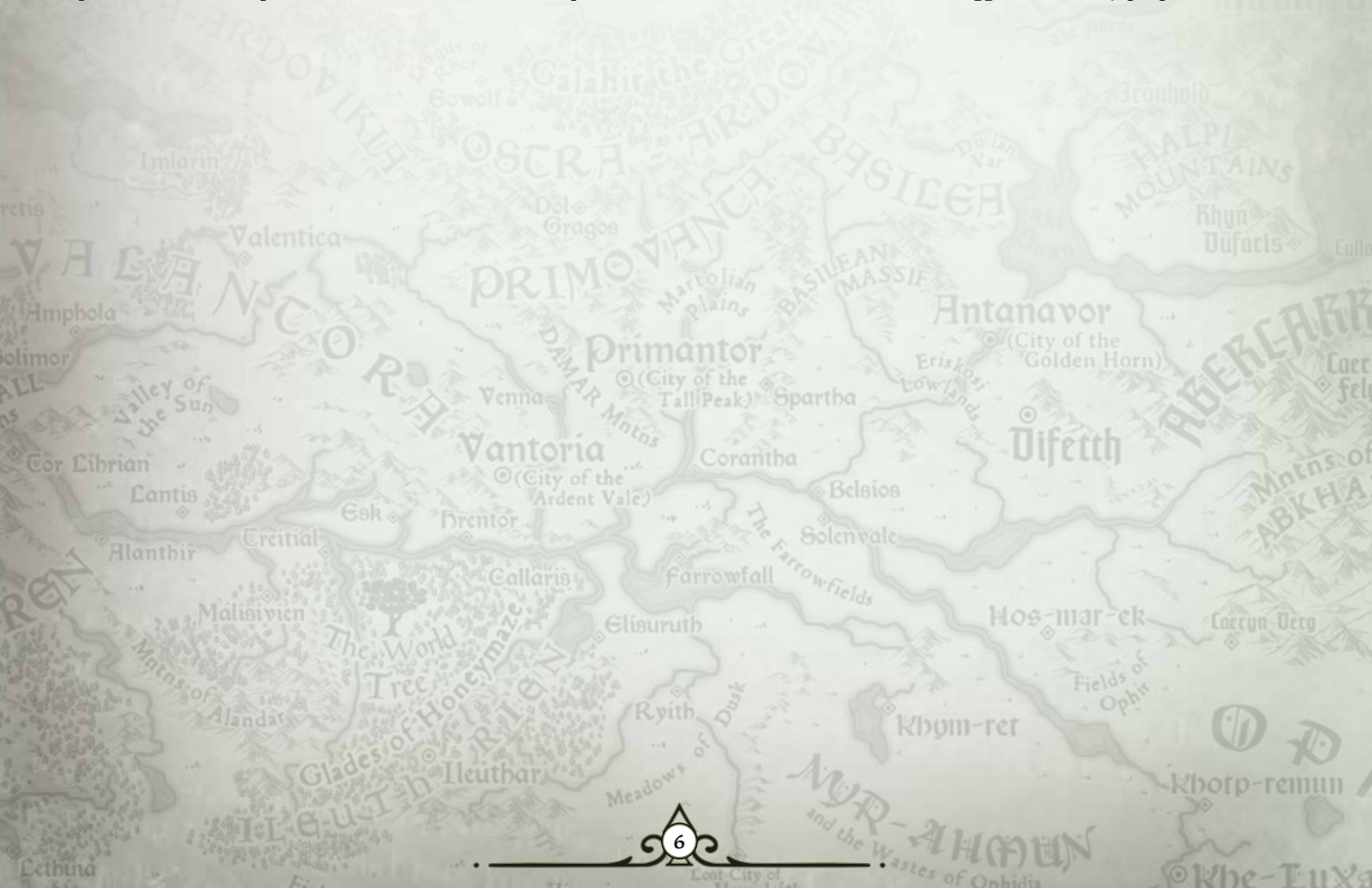


PANNITHOR

PANNITHOR

Behind the massive walls of Therennia Adar, deep down in the twilight gloom of the city streets there is a door. It is a nondescript, unremarkable wooden door, passed daily by the feet of thousands as they go about their daily lives. The door has no key, no handle that can be seen by those who do not know its secret – their eyes slide past as they walk on, unseeing. Yet behind this unexceptional door, protected by spells woven by Valandor himself almost one thousand years ago, is a vast room, lit by glittering mirrors that cunningly re-cast soft light from the heavens far above. Tiered wooden shelves surround the central chamber, heavy with the dusty books and grimoires of the learned elven races. In studies and lecture rooms off the main hall, students and teachers absorb the knowledge recorded by their ancestors while scholars continue to chronicle the history of the world and the secrets it contains. In the middle of the central hall is an immense table made of a single piece of polished hardwood, carved with astonishing skill by the hands of ancient elven artisans. On the table lies a massive animal hide, taken from Y'Roon Thunderfoot, the ancient king of the mammoths. As fascinating as they may be, the table and the enormous piece of leather draped across it are not what will capture the

imagination. A giant quill, filled with a limitless supply of black ink made from the blood of hydras, scratches its way endlessly over a fantastically detailed map of the entire world. Since time forgotten, the quill has faithfully recorded the ever-changing shape of the world; the rise and fall of empires, the kingdoms and borders that shift and merge and come and go. The fate of entire civilisations and the decisive events and battles that have dominated history have all been steadily and dispassionately recorded by this unerring cartographer. As an observer you can ask the map to redraw itself to show the world as it was at any time. It is possible to watch the fate of nations unfold as they have struggled to survive to the present day. The destiny of the noble races and their influence on the surface of the world is clear but perhaps more intriguing is to study the minor players or those that fall between the cracks of history. The authority of the noble races and the impact of the major forces of darkness are common knowledge. But to study the map is also to understand the subtle influence that the so-called minor peoples have had on the shaping of the world and the ripples of their interactions down the ages and into the future. You can also see the places you never knew existed. The world is much bigger than many people believe.





IN THE BEGINNING

Before the dawn of the noble races, in a time so long ago even the elves have scant record, the world came to be. It was created, in all of its bleak majesty, by the efforts of the Old Gods, known as the Primogenitors.

The Primogenitors were each themselves fashioned of the very stuff of which existence is composed: Life, Death, Darkness, Light, Earth, Water and Air - each of them wholly possessed of and driven by the nature of their own makeup.

Bhanek was among the youngest, twin of Shobik. Bhanek was the God of Life, delighting in bringing the spark of sentience to a vast and bewildering array of creations and forms, his imagination as limitless as his capacity for joy. His brother, Shobik, presided over Death, though the word itself does the concept little justice. In reality, Shobik represented time, entropy, decay and the hope of rebirth. For a mortal mind to even attempt to comprehend the full majesty and perfect harmony of the one twin with the other is simply impossible. Where Bhanek was excitable and intemperate, Shobik was aloof and logical. Where Bhanek would often let his creations loose in the world with no idea as to their potential or capability, Shobik's every action was considered and calculated, never resulting in anything other than exactly that which he had intended. The two were as fire and ice, Bhanek's flames rising to melt Shobik's ice, which would in turn douse the conflagration of Bhanek's ardour. It is impossible for the mortal heart to comprehend the depths of emotion exchanged between these two beings - a fraction of their fraternal love would burst the hearts of a million suitors, a mere sliver of their jealousy and rage would send whole populations insane with anger. And yet, the two coexisted closely, Bhanek's creations giving him delight, Shobik's inevitable attentions taking them away, paving the way for the next and the next. Theirs was a relationship of perfect harmony, such that the whole of creation was balanced more finely than any scale by their actions.

Ohmpek, God of Light and Raiser of the Sun, was paired with Lonok, Queen of the Shadows and Bringer of Darkness. Unlike the twins, these two enjoyed a fiery co-existence of endless opposition, each constantly battling to vanquish the other utterly. Their struggle was endless, chasing one another around the globe, neither able to best the other or cast the world fully under their own influence. Where there was Darkness on one side, so there was Light on the other. Where the sun rose and illuminated the lands at one pole, the stars winked from the cyclopean darkness at the other. The Sun

itself, dragged forth from the heavens to shine the brighter near the world, is countered by the Moon, which Lonok uses to drag shadows across the globe. In some of the older parts of the world, in lost civilisations still holding to the Old Ways, a solar eclipse is seen as a sign that the two are at the peak of their rage with one another, the longer periods of twilight and dusk that follow the result of the exhaustion of each as they slink away to regain their powers for another day.

Threnekka and Korgaan's relationship was a playful one - the God of the Air would send forth mighty winds to stir Threnekka's oceans, whipping them to frenzy. Threnekka would take these winds and use their strength to form enormous waves, and the resulting storms were as epic as they were beautiful. Neither cared much for the creatures gifted both of them by Bhanek, not the birds of the skies nor the beasts of the deeps, as each was too wrapped up in their affections for the other. Even the ancient wyrms, mothers of dragonkind, were considered clumsy and beneath contempt by both gods. Some of the greatest lakes, mountains and rivers were formed by their constant and tempestuous back and forth, and in a very real sense they shaped much of the world as it is known today.

Of all the Primogenitors, Dianek alone lived a solitary and mournful life. Hers was the earth and all that lay beneath it. Bhanek had no interest in making creatures he was unable to see and show off to the others. Shobik bestowed only the lightest attention on the Underworld, ensuring that time would drag there infinitesimally slowly. Ohmpek had no use for a realm in which light could not survive, and Lonok saw no use for a realm whose stygian depths drank light more deeply and completely than any shadow she could conjure. Threnekka found Earth to be anathema to her, fit only to wash away in slow erosion as she carved her signature through it, and Korgaan blew across the top of the earth without once touching it. While the other Primogenitors played and marvelled above the earth, exulting in their powers and vying to outdo one another through the heavens, Dianek remained below and tended to her depths in solitude. Try as she might, she could fashion no truly sentient creatures from the clay and mud, though she could raise simple mindless constructs of rock to do her bidding, puppet-like.

None living can truly say how long the reign of the Primogenitors lasted before Bhanek ushered in the beginning of its end with his creation of the elves. All that is known is that these seven between them begun the shaping of the world into what it is today.

On the Origins of the Noble Races

The world has undergone much upheaval and many wars in the span of its existence. Entire civilisations have been wiped clean from both existence and memory, and new ones have come after. Wars have raged in which Gods and God-like beings have fought over continents. Mortals have offered up entire seas of blood in sacrifice for some ideal or belief now consigned to the oblivious vaults of history. Throughout its history the world has been given many names. To the ancient race of men, it has been known as both Mirramoth and Minaholm. The dwarf's ancestral name, often still used today is khôlen-bakkar which means 'The over-earth', although Berranonn is also used in more modern texts and carvings. The elves of old called everything they surveyed Shalath'enir meaning 'between the seas', but it is Pannithor, a name of unknown origins, which has survived the test of time and is still the most prevalent name, across languages, cultures and species.

It is perhaps to be expected then, that the creation of Pannithor itself and the races upon it are lost to the depths of time. And yet, before the War with Winter, before the God War and even before the Celestians themselves bestrode the world, Pannithor and her three noblest races existed under the auspice of very different gods. While so-called lesser races prevailed, the triumvirate of elf, dwarf and man were dominant.

Though the elves are reckoned the most ancient of the noble races, it is the dour dwarfs who have the strongest impression of their own creation. To the dwarfs themselves, this is no surprise as they find elves equally as contemptibly in thrall to the Shining Ones and their Celestial forebears. To a dwarf, forgetting one's own roots and legacy is about the gravest sin any mortal may commit.

The dwarfs have it that they were created from the tears of the goddess of the Underworld, bereft at her lack of children to call her own. These tears are held to have gathered to form a stalagmite in the form of a dwarf, and thus the first of their kind was created. There is a certain poetic beauty to the tale that resonates and gives it the ring of truth, speaking as it does so well to the character of dwarf kind. They are strong and firm like the rock from which they sprang, yet filled with the deep and sombre passion of the goddess whose great sadness formed them.

The elves were of course the cause of this grief. Where the dwarfs were formed from the despair of a bereft deity, the elves were formed from the sheer joy and unbridled conceit of another. Though the gods of old Pannithor were wont to engage in many contests among themselves, seeking to outdo one another in the breadth and splendour of their accomplishments, there was always balance. Bhanek, the Breath of Life in the world, would delight in creating beasts of every type, shape and size - birds in the skies, fish in

the oceans and mammals on the earth. Shobik, the Keeper of Time, would take them back again as the years claimed them. Ohmpek, the raiser of the Sun, would spread light and life from horizon to horizon, and Lonok, Bringer of the Dark, would cover the world in her velvet embrace once again. Korgaan, God of the Winds would delight in stirring the depths of Threnneka's oceans, the two dancing together endlessly. Dianek, the Goddess of the Underworld, was the loneliest of all the Gods, alone in the eternal twilight of her realm and ignored by the others, and the story of her children began after Bhanek's greatest creation came to pass - the elves.

Bhanek had tired of his creations being simply left to wander the world for their allotted span, and wished for a creation which could surprise him, one which might leave its own marks upon the world, perhaps even commune with him. His ambitions were lofty, but after many spans, he had created the first of elven kind. Made to be perfectly pleasing to their creator in every way, elves were beautiful, intelligent, fierce and talented. So taken was Bhanek with his new creations, that he feared to show them to Shobik. He could not bear the thought of time stealing away his new children and their beauty, and so he hid them away for many years, flourishing and growing in the heart of what is now Ileuthar, beneath the World Tree, his previous greatest and most lovely achievement.

Of course, the elves could not be hidden forever, and when his siblings discovered them, there was great consternation. Shobik wanted to destroy what his brother had wrought utterly in his rage. Ohmpek delighted in the detail of his brother's work, admiring the beauty and ability of these little creatures, where Lonok saw them as objects of suspicion. Eventually, after much quarrelling, it was agreed that Bhanek should create some other race of creatures which might be given over immediately to the untender mercies of his brother. Appeased, Shobik bade Bhanek make it so. Thus began the creation of man.

Dianek meanwhile had remained silent. Her realm beneath the earth was barren, home to great wealth and treasure but no life. Bhanek had no interest in creations he could not see, nor Shobik in the unaltered depths, and neither light nor dark nor wind nor ocean made any difference in the subterranean walls of her realm. Her anguished sorrow henceforth brought about the dwarfs, or certainly their shape, and in shame, her fellow Primogenitors heard her tears and bestowed life and the gentlest touch of time upon them in recompense, giving the dwarfs their sturdy vigour and longevity.

Meanwhile, Shobik's penalty on men, assembled in haste by Bhanek and unlovely and emotionally stunted where elves were sleek and advanced, gave forth a race which would ironically rise one day to dominate the world. For all their awareness of mortality and its grim grip on their destiny,



individually and as a species, they were driven harder to test its bounds, to escape the embrace of death itself and bestride the world as Gods themselves.

By the time that Bhanek and Shobik realised the sum result of their endeavours, it was too late. They had set in motion events and circumstances that would prove their undoing.

While men raged and cursed at their limitations, elves followed their own path. Their immense lifespans and uncommon beauty combined with their keen intellects to make all things seem possible to them. Great art, philosophy and scientific progress all came easily to them as they bent their attention to each. As they studied the mysteries of creation, they inadvertently stumbled upon the very power of creation itself – magic.

Every single thing upon the face of the world is composed of matter, in various combinations of the base elements. But magic is the binding force, injecting the spark of life and intelligence into each living creature. Various cultures describe it as the ‘soul’, the ‘life energy’ or the ‘essence’. It is only with magic that life may be created from nothing, that the crude meat, bone and flesh they makes up a human or an elf may become a breathing, sentient creature.

The gods had used magic in all their creations. What they had never anticipated was that those creations might discover how to harness this power themselves. With such a miraculous discovery, the elves elevated themselves yet further above the humans and dwarfs with whom they shared the world. Early human mages were taught by the elves as the two noble races became ever more closely entwined with one another. Though they lacked the lifespan and iron will of the elves, human mages made up for this with discipline and focus, driven by fear of their own mortal frames and the limitations these placed upon them. The elves came to admire this spirit, indeed it is said that the first love affair between man and elf came about between an elven mage and his human protégé. It was however also to birth the darkest and most dangerous of all the arcane arts – Necromancy.

The knowledge that magic could be used to halt or even reverse the ravages of time was known to the elves of course

– their command of the breadth and depth of possibilities afforded by magic was unrivalled. But they had no need of its use. They were near immortal creatures, capable in their long lifespans of perfecting any craft to which their attentions were turned. The concept of regret, of feeling as if one’s life had been lived incompletely, was alien to them. Not so, to humans.

Whether it was in fact the love between a human and an elf which first prompted this obsession with the shortness of span afforded the former is not known, though given the fact that the first human mages were taught by elves, and the closeness that was fostered between such apprentices and their masters, it seems likely. Seeing such beauty and accomplishment at close hand and knowing that it was the result – among other things – of a lifespan many times that afforded to themselves, it stands to reason that this would be a factor in triggering the obsession with magical resurrection and rejuvenation which would eventually morph into the foul art of Necromancy in all its many forms.

The elven appetite for knowledge was voracious. They began to reach out and touch the mortal boundaries of the temporal, and take fleeting glimpses of the spaces between worlds, beyond even the stars in the skies above them.

It was on one such journey that the elves drew the attention of the beings known to antiquity as the Celestians.



rec: II.X.a

A Map of
HISTORIC PANNICHOR
 circa 2487 P.A

At the dawn of the Time of Ice, before Winter's War and the Great Inundation that drowned much of the Lands of the Elves and the Republic of Primovantor.

Scale 0 30 100 150 200 250 Leagues

Map Key: Provinces - Settlements Controlled by

BASILEA - Lantis	: The Republic of Primovantor
YNDAREN - Lleuthar	: Domain of the Elven Kindreds
ABERCARR - Giraeth Dui	: The Dwarfen Realms
OPHIDIA - Ul'Arab	: The Ophidian Empire





THE TIME OF LIGHT

Precious little is known of the Celestians, save that they were extremely powerful, and not of Pannithor. Some theorise that they come from a distant star, the few survivors of some ancient, advanced civilisation. Others say that they came from another dimension altogether, a mirror world in which mortals had created the gods rather than the other way around. Others still assert that the Celestians come from the future, the elves' childlike meddling in powers they did not understand slipping loose the bonds of time itself.

Whatever the truth of their origins, the impact of the Celestians is clear. Even before their arrival, the influence and power of the old Gods had begun to markedly fade. As humans, dwarfs and elves alike spread across the world and began to forge their own legacies, their reliance on and belief in their creators waned. For the elves, this process was more or less instant. Their increased delving into magic had seen them pay less and less attention to their divine overlords and even their creator himself. With the arrival of the Celestians - all-powerful and all too eager to share their wisdom with the elves, the use of 'gods' eluded them more and more.

But the Celestians were not content merely to share the limited realm of the elves. Such beings would not be contained, and spread their attentions across the whole world, taking in the cultures of humanity and, eventually, even dwarf-kind. The dwarfs were naturally the very last to succumb, isolationism and suspicion built into their very being, but eventually even they were brought forth by the wonders which the Celestians could bring.

And what wonders they were. The history of each of the noble races speaks - frustratingly briefly - of the Time of Light; that almost mythical time of ancient history in which all three races united in peace and prosperity, and reached further and achieved more than at any time before or since. Those who know where to look can find more detail.

Buried beneath the tower of Therennia Adar, in chambers protected by powerful wards, are records of the elves from that distant time. Of the great majesty of their magic and art, the long reach of their exploration as they walked amongst the stars themselves and captured their very essence. Mighty cities of such beauty that mortal men wept at their very sight were raised across the whole of their Western domains. Fleets of ships majestically sailed to each corner of the world, mapping every coastline, inlet and island. It was said that at its height, the elven Empire's collective expeditionary fleets could have stretched around the globe, and allowed a man to walk the circumference without once getting his feet wet. Their energies were also bent to the arts. The elves created wondrous sculptures so exacting in detail that they could drive mortal minds to extremes of love. More than one account exists of men and even dwarfs being so entranced by

an elven statue as to fall instantly in love and stand transfixed forever more until they wasted away. Their paintings of this period were so vivid they almost seemed as windows to the scenes they depicted, every brush stroke meticulously hidden, every colour hauntingly vivid. In music, they devised ballads that could crush their audience with grief in one verse, then lift the heart to the highest ecstasy in the next. And in magic, they became accomplished masters, taking to the mystic arts with the same sense of wonder and discipline as they did all things. It is no coincidence that, to this very day, the mightiest mages in all of Pannithor hail from the elven race.

In every way, the elves excelled, mastering all they turned their hand to in ways which made their previous achievements seem as childish play, and all along they were encouraged by the Celestians, to whom they believed themselves - in their vanity - to be equals.

That vanity would eventually cost the elves - and the rest of the world - dearly, but for a time, there was nothing that they could not accomplish. The realm of the elves grew and sprawled outward, its cities vast monuments to perfection. The Time of Light shone at its very brightest.

Beneath the dark waves of the Infant Sea, buried under the watery grave of Winter's final spite, lie the ruins of the greatest human civilisation ever to have existed - Primovantor. In the Time of Light, Primovantor covered much of the globe, and represented the very apex of humanity's existence on Pannithor, rivalling even the ancient realm of the elves for size. In those dark ruins, preserved in submerged murals and carvings, lie the records of the heights of that civilisation. Driven by their ever-present knowledge of their own mortality, humans sought the power of magic for their own ends. Art and literature were all well and good, but humanity sought dominion over life and death itself.

However, for a time, the empires of man and elf grew together in harmony, and the realm of Primovantor - the greatest empire of men ever known in the history of the world - grew ever outwards, covering a large proportion of the globe. Beneath the sprawl of cities and towns composing this mighty empire lay the realm of the dwarfs.

Dwarfs by their nature are an insular people, and this was ever the case, even during this golden time of plenty. Though they lived in harmony beneath the feet of humans and elves during the Time of Light, and treated regularly with both, they did so guardedly. Some theorise that this mistrust of outsiders springs from their creation myths, which they take more seriously than any other of the noble races. Indeed, though the dwarfs respected the Celestians and were known to make great friends of some, they never really recognised them as gods, with the exception of Fulgria. For the dwarfs, Dianek was the only ancient god of note, the one who gave them life and the one to whom they pray and still give quiet obeisance to this day. Fulgria is recognised as the Goddess of



Fire, worshipped by certain factions within dwarfen society, but no other deity approaches the Goddess of the Underworld in the affections of her children.

Thus, the dwarfs traded with the other noble races in the Time of Light, growing their empire beneath those of men and elves who had little reason to complain, having no need or use for the land beneath their feet. The more bitter-spirited of dwarf kind maintained then and to this day that the other noble races looked on them with disdain, seeing them as no better than the spoil and waste they threw beneath the ground. For their part, the dwarfs made good use of their freedom, their empire sprawling out for many leagues. They mined precious rocks and minerals, created huge subterranean cities and profited from providing some of their innovations to their neighbours. Many cities in Primovantor and beyond benefited from dwarfen plumbing, sewers, and other innovations. Always the dwarfs held back though, largely refusing to involve themselves in the politics and affairs of the other races, and mostly treating the Celestians with cautious respect.

The dwarfs never approved of intermarriage between races. The tendency of humans and elves to freely intermix, though not common, was often enough to draw the quiet disgust of the dwarfs. To them, the thought of mixing blood in this way is abhorrent. During the Time of Light, it was a subject deftly avoided by them, and there is certainly no verifiable historical record anywhere on Pannithor of a mixed marriage involving a dwarf.

Of the Celestians

It was during the Time of Light that the Celestians finally displaced the Old Gods of Pannithor by way of their incredible powers and abilities, as well as their appealing natures. Well able to command the loyalty of any they encountered, the Celestians were easily able to bend the wills of the noble races to their own whims. None really sought to question how they did this at the time, and few have considered it since. However, the scribe Athalaneus, later committed to the sanatorium for his own safety, wrote extensively on the God War and its aftermath, making some interesting observations on the nature of the Shining Ones, the Wicked Ones, and on the suggestions each of these made regarding the original nature of the Celestians.

Firstly, Athalaneus observed that the Celestians seemed, at least in his opinion, neither wholly physical nor entirely ethereal. This in and of itself he concluded, disqualified them from being gods as such – instead Athalaneus asserted that they were beings of great power, who simply appeared as gods to the much less sophisticated mortal races of Pannithor at that time. Claiming to have studied fragmented records stored in the Grand Library of Therennia Adar (a claim which first raised the questions as to his mental equilibrium), Athalaneus spoke of strange ‘otherworlds’ and ‘planes of reality’ which

the elves learned to visit by magical means (as taught to them by the Celestians). He posited that the Celestians knew the paths to these places having emerged from there themselves. Literally, he claimed that the Celestians had arrived at Pannithor from another plane of existence altogether, seeking refuge from some calamity or other and seeing in this world an opportunity to rule as deities, easily able to manipulate the naïve, lesser races which dwelled there.

Certainly, there are elements to the behaviour of the Celestians as it is recorded that invite consideration of Athalaneus’ observations. The elves were flattered by the attentions of these new godlike beings, who immediately began satiating their desire for knowledge and arcane powers. In humanity the Celestians found worship and subservience, feeding on the natural superstition of humans borne of their shorter, more violent lives and credible natures. With the dwarfs, the Celestians sought neither worship nor friendship, happy to maintain the sort of arms-length relationship typical of those dour folk. It was as if the Celestians were simply all things to all noble races, knowing exactly which feelings and instincts to massage in order to maintain their own position of superiority over all three.

And it was not as if any of the noble races did not benefit – at least for a time. The ministrations of the Celestians, their wisdom, encouragement and gifts, helped to usher in the brightest time in the history of all three races, the Time of Light seeing the very zenith of what could be achieved by civilised races. Mighty fleets sailed the oceans, endless cities rose from horizon to horizon, and through the depths as well.

In that time, there were so many Celestians, and so much prosperity and wonder, that the endeavours of individuals are now mostly lost to history. A few notables remain: Liliana, now subsumed into the Green Lady, the Lady herself, and Valandor. All achieved great things and performed mighty deeds. And yet none can equal the one name that echoes loudest down through the ages. A name accursed by all who speak it, the name of he who brought the downfall of everything the Celestians had built, for reasons which remain disputed and unclear to this very day. Oskan, sometimes called the Father of Lies, though this soubriquet would not be earned by him until after the nefarious events he set in motion.

Athalaneus speaks much of Oskan in his fevered writings. Whether his ideas are the ramblings of a madman or are truly insightful, the truth has been eroded and lost by time. He asserts that Oskan was the youngest of the Celestians, possibly even the child of an unhappy union among their kind. Bitter, and full of loathing both for his own kind and the noble races of Pannithor, Athalaneus writes that Oskan conceived of a way to destroy both without challenging his peers himself. Young and weak as he was, barely tolerated by his kin, Oskan feared the oblivion of death more than anything else. He sought the destruction of his own noble

impulses, which he saw as an alien being trapped within him, so that he could give in to every dark impulse. For this, he would need a pawn. One fateful day as he wandered the sacred glades of Therennia Adar, Oskan crossed paths with none other than Calisor Fenulian, greatest of his kind and the most powerful elf to have ever lived. Oskan could not have found a better pawn for his plans.

After Athalaneus was committed to the sanatorium, he continued to write furiously until his death. Upon examination of his cell, works were found carved into every surface by a sharpened rock. One word repeatedly scrawled and scratched out that has continued to baffle scholars and historians alike was the name Reiliur. Many outlandish claims were made, including that Valandor's twin aspect was Ba'el, the loathsome general of the Abyssal armies, and that both would one day return for a final reckoning.

The Fenulian Mirror

The saga of Calisor and Elinathora is more commonly referred to as the tale of the Fenulian Mirror. There are almost as many different tellings of the story as there are stars in the sky, and certainly the details of this epic myth differ wildly amongst the different noble races. To the elves, it is a tragic story of doomed romance, a tale for the ages of the lengths to which an elf may be driven by love. To the humans, it is a tale of the selfishness and arrogance of elvenkind, the horror of an elf not being able to accept the will of a human and instead seeking to override that will by means of sorcery. To the dwarfs, it is a simple warning of what happens when the other races intermix in the way that elves and humans have often been wont to do throughout history. The dwarfs view such intermarriage and interbreeding with horrified disdain, maintaining that if only the other noble races could have 'stuck to their own' as they themselves do, then the world would not be half so full of woes.

Nevertheless, regardless of the colour which might shade an individual's viewing of the tale, the salient facts remain the same. Calisor Fenulian was the most brilliant elf who ever trod the lands of Pannithor. There was no single endeavour beyond him - the arcane arts came to him as easily as the physical ones, his mastery of warfare was equal to his gift with poetry, and his peerless appearance was matched only by his easy charm and wit. To read the chronicles of Calisor is to read a tale of a being who appears surely mythical in the modern age; even amongst his own kin, there are those who question whether any one elf, however gifted, could possibly have been responsible for such a lengthy and varied list of achievements and great deeds.

Such talent and passion combined with the near immortal lifespan of an elf could only end badly. Calisor's mastery of everything to which he turned his hand made the charismatic young elf prideful, even by the standards of his kind. When he finally fell in love, it was the unmaking of him and his era.

Elinathora was daughter to a minor but respected noble, brought with her father to Therennia Adar's court when he accepted his post as envoy to the elves. Her mother had died when she was young, and Elinathora had taken care of her father and family from that day forward. Strong-willed, fiercely independent and loyal, she was a remarkable woman in her own right, but her station in life had given her no expectation of marriage into nobility.

Calisor, however, was entranced by the young woman from the first moment he laid eyes on her in the court of the High King. He resolved that he must have her hand in marriage at any cost, and began a pursuit of the young woman that would be the downfall of him and the world he knew.

For her part, Elinathora was respectful, polite, but uninterested. Not only did she have her own affairs to attend to in looking after her father and siblings, but Elinathora had a healthy fear of the impact of committing to a life with an elf, let alone one as mighty as Calisor. Her mortal dread was to live with a husband who would not only drastically outstrip her in every way - physical and mental - but who would also live for several hundred lifetimes longer than she. Half-elf children tend to take far more of the elf aspect than the human, and the thought of children she would never see reach their full maturity, paired with a husband who would never age relative to her as she withered and grew old, filled her with horror.

Acquaintances of both begged Elinathora to reconsider, including her own father. Here was an opportunity to be wedded to the most radiant member of the most radiant race on Pannithor save the Celestians themselves. Her father implored her to think of the possible benefits to their own family, their city and their very people. The elves who came to see her were less romantic, confused by how this simple human woman could refuse the attentions of their greatest scion. Though not exactly cruel, they were baffled by what they saw as her temerity - even arrogance - at saying no. None could sway her, and nor could the overblown attentions of Calisor himself, who tried all manner of outlandish gifts and feats to impress the object of his desires. All was to no avail, and the greatest son of elvenkind slipped into a deep, morose depression.



The effect of Calisor's upset was felt throughout Therennia Adar and the wider elven realm. His people had come to rely upon Calisor for so many things, not least the simple knowledge of his greatness and his steady hand at the tiller of so many duties. Eventually, rebuked formally by the High King for his inattentiveness to his responsibilities, Calisor cast down his symbols of office, wrapped himself in a simple traveller's cloak and took to the glades surrounding the city to wander alone in misery.

Perhaps at this juncture, had he wandered a different way, or not driven away any who might have otherwise accompanied him, the history of the world might have been written very differently. This point in the tale is one where the tellings diverge as one might expect. The dwarfs write Calisor off as a sulky child, striding forth to pout at not getting his own way. The elves tell it as a heartbreaking apex point of the tragedy, the final breaking of Calisor, body and soul, from the anguish of his heartfelt and unrequited love. Men recount it with bitter cynicism – the first and best example of the flighty nature of elves, the hubris and arrogance with which they view the world and the hollow nature of their capability in the face of adversity. Regardless, each tale recounts what happened next with equal horror.



As he wandered, Calisor cursed the heavens, sometimes loudly and sometimes beneath his breath. He wandered in deliberate patterns, seeking to avoid contact with any other, though in truth none lived in Adar who any longer had patience to speak with him. It was therefore cruel fate, chance or perhaps something darker that saw the elf happened upon by Oskan, when he was in the very nadir of his misery.

Exactly what passed between them is unknown. Perhaps Calisor vented his woes to the young Celestian – after all, he was used to treating with the divine beings on a regular basis, and would have felt no sense of awe at the Celestian's presence, nor any sense of shame in divulging his sorrows to him. Perhaps Oskan vented his own feelings of displeasure with his station among his peers, his unhappiness on Pannithor, his disdain for the noble races and the way they looked upon his kind. It is clear however that Oskan learned, one way or another, of the source of Calisor's misery, and his solution for this was something which would echo down the ages – the Fenulian Mirror.

The exact nature of the Mirror is disputed by scholars. Some insist that it was a literal mirror, forged through arcane means from various artefacts but nonetheless identical to its mundane counterparts in basic operation, if vastly more lavish in appearance. Others argue that it was a mighty spell, the like of which has never been performed before or since, and that the complexities of it were such that it could only be described to lesser minds than Calisor's as a mirror in a kind of simplified metaphor. Whatever the truth, and regardless of the version of the tale being told, certain basic factors remain the same. The Mirror was suggested to Calisor as a means to win the heart of Elinathora, if she would but gaze within its depths. To create it was an undertaking that would go beyond any magic previously attempted by any elf including Calisor himself, and would require many exotic and rare elements, but rarest of all, the glimmer of the Star of Heaven. This is a literal translation from every text detailing the event, and the wording remains the same in ancient Dwarfish, Elvish and Primovantian.

Oskan's caveat – that Elinathora must be prevented from gazing into the mirror past the singing of a golden bird being heard from its depths – seems to be delivered as an afterthought, and this would appear to be no accident. Surely, by that point Calisor was too enraptured by the thought of his love being returned to notice the oddity of this detail, or to pay it too much heed. Why Oskan would mention it at all is another matter which baffles those who study the tale – perhaps some rule or customary practice among his kin, or perhaps simply a slip of the tongue motivated by his nobler self, acting in vain against him. Whatever the truth, it is unimportant in the context of the legend. Calisor strode forth from the glades that day with renewed purpose, and something of his old vigour returned to him. When he arrived at the Court of the High King and begged the use of a mighty fleet and massive resources for his quest, the High King gladly granted both, happy to see the elves' brightest and best son returned to something of his old self. It was this concession that damned the elves in the hindsight of the dwarfen telling – had the King been more mindful, had he paid more attention to the gleam in Calisor's eye, or questioned him more closely on the nature of his quest, maybe disaster might still have been averted. The elven telling is predictably more forgiving – the High King was under much pressure from many quarters in Calisor's long absence, and his apparent return must have granted much relief.

At any rate, Calisor set forth on his quest, which was to last several years. He gathered the required materials from far and wide, taking each at great cost in resources and sometimes people. None dared question him, but by the time he declared his quest complete and secluded himself in his private chambers to commence work, the fleet he had taken was

decimated and the coffers of the High King were substantially emptier. This was of no consequence to Calisor – he had what he needed, and the great work could begin.

Legend tells that the world itself shuddered with paroxysms at each stage of the work. Mighty earthquakes shook the very foundations of Therennia Adar, the seas boiled over and flooded inland, and the skies darkened. Nothing could dissuade Calisor however, and eventually the Mirror was ready for its final piece. Aiming it at the Star of Heaven one fateful night, the Mirror captured the light from the star, trapping it, fusing with it, and drawing power from it to fuel its function.

Whether the light was necessary for the function Oskan had intimated is unclear. Some posit that the Celestian simply used his own powers of illusion to create the simple fantasy that would capture Elinathora's heart, and that the true purpose of the device itself was the sundering of the Celestians all along. Certainly they enjoyed some special and particular link with the Star of Heaven, apparently drawing their power from it, or possibly even their very essences.

Whatever the truth, with the light captured, the Mirror was complete, and the next task which lay before Calisor was perhaps the hardest of all – getting Elinathora to gaze into its polished depths.

Once more he found himself frustrated, his wit, charm and wealth unable to cajole, persuade or bribe her into ascending his private tower to witness his new marvel. Elinathora had not changed one iota in her convictions, and in truth was disappointed. She, like all in Therennia Adar, had heard of the new lease of life in Calisor and had hoped that this signalled his final acceptance of her rejection, and perhaps even a new love in his life. Now he was again lavishing the same smothering affections upon her, and it was all she could do to remain polite.

But Calisor was not to be ignored. He pestered Elinathora, and her father. He harangued her friends, her maids and anyone else who might have any portion of her attention and affections. Eventually, after many long weeks of not being able to speak with a single person who would not entreat her to see Calisor one last time and marvel at his great works, Elinathora relented, presenting herself at his chambers to witness his creation and maybe regain her own life once more.

And thus, the inexorable course of history was set. Elinathora gazed upon the Mirror and saw images which melted her heart and turned her every thought towards love for Calisor. Visions came one after another – a life of wondrous and endless invention and adventure. A life lengthened many times over by Calisor's attentions and ministrations, and a glorious, golden twilight to this magnificent life, lived out in a vast and beautiful castle raised by Calisor in her

honour, perfected to her every wish in every last detail, and surrounded by the adoring multitudes of elves, humans and dwarfs, united in their love for her and devotion to her husband. She saw children, fine and strong, heroes of the world and loved by all. She saw her beloved father, happier than he had been since the last day her mother had been with them all, and living just as long as she. Every last detail quashed every last one of the convictions she had held against the union, and she reached out to grasp Calisor's hand even as she remained transfixed by the tableau which played out before her unblinking eyes. Calisor grasped the hand eagerly, so enraptured by this final achievement of his heart's most ardent desire that he failed to notice the singing of a bird, fine in golden plumage, until it was too late.

The images in the Mirror darkened, taking on a different aspect than before. A marble tomb appeared, breathtaking in its stark beauty and bearing Elinathora's name. Calisor noticed the bird, and began trying to drag Elinathora away from the mirror, Oskan's warning loud in his memories. But the woman was planted as if in rock, fixated on the images which played before her, and he dared not exert force for fear of breaking her delicate human frame. Horror-struck, Calisor could only watch as the love so recently born in Elinathora's heart for him withered and died to be replaced by horror as she witnessed the Mirror's prediction of their union's end.

In the images, an unkempt and dishevelled Calisor screamed at the sky as he beat his fists bloody on the unyielding marble of the tomb. A flash, and the scene changed to their bedchamber, flash, flash, flash, each one a new woman or women sharing their marital bed with him, none of them even close to her beauty or radiance, all discarded in short order as he sought some physical solace from his pain. Another flash, and their children appeared, wracked with torment at the duality within their very souls. Their eldest son, embittered by his mother's loss, enraged by his father's desecration of her memory with his string of lovers, took up arms against him. They met on a blood-drenched battlefield, face to face, and Calisor, old now and feebler than ever, was run through and then crucified. Even his own men cheered as he died, finally rid of their mad master.

After many minutes, as the jeers of his men at his final gasps of agony died to a murmur, Calisor became aware of the sound in the room beside him. Elinathora was screaming, the cry of the truly broken tumbling uninterrupted from her lips as the horror of what she had witnessed battered at her sanity. With a sudden movement, her balled fist lashed out, smashing the glass of the mirror and splintering it into a mass of shards which rained down around them. Calisor was reeling from all he had witnessed in its depths. The dead weight of Elinathora falling beside him brought him back to the reality of the room, to the lifeless corpse of his beloved, a shard of mirror buried deep in her heart, her hand resting atop it.



The eventual fate of Calisor is unrecorded, and for the purposes of the tale itself, unimportant. Though he had been the greatest of his kind, his hubris had brought about the worst consequences. Whether the act of capturing the light of the Star of Heaven itself caused it, or the smashing of the mirror by Elinathora in her rage, the outcome was the same – the Sundering of the Celestial race, destroying many outright and splitting many others in twain, their nobler aspects removed from their darker ones to create mirror image twins of hatred and love which would face one another in a conflict that would change the face of the world forever.

The Mirror itself is a different matter. The so-called ‘God Splinters’ are said to be fragments of the Mirror from its smashing. Oskan’s dark aspect himself is said to have plucked the very shard with which Elinathora had ended her life

to use as his own weapon, steeped as it was in sorrow and the weight of a life taken by itself in despair, making it a powerful dark artefact indeed. With it, he ended the life of his nobler half, the first God Murder, imbuing the shard with more power still. It is said that he gathered several other fragments which would eventually be distributed among his Dark brothers and sisters before he was driven away. The remaining splinters were gathered and secreted away, though they still appear from time to time as amulets, charms, weapons and other artefacts. The genuineness of these artefacts is always difficult to prove – indeed, the existence of shards of the mirror itself is highly questionable and hotly debated among scholars. But the fact remains that some magical artefacts possess unimaginable powers from unknowable origins.

THE GOD WAR

When the Fenulian Mirror shattered, the Celestians were either destroyed or split apart, and the conflict known as the God War began.

No war before or since has matched it for intensity, scope or impact. The blood of mortals ran in rivers of red across the land, the skies remained unnaturally dark, rent by thunderclaps which smote the ground and flashes of lightning in colours no human eye could perceive. The oceans rebelled, tsunamis of foaming waters crashing over entire continents and vast, monolithic creatures of the deep rising in fury to crush those who had disturbed their stygian depths. The world of Pannithor today first began to take shape from the scars cut into it by the War between the Gods.

Oskan was prepared like none of the others, having orchestrated the construction of the Mirror and the events that led to its sundering. His own splitting was a dark blessing his baser self had longed for, and it was quick to seize the splinter of mirror lodged in the heart of Elinathora and use it to murder its noble twin. No longer dragged down by the capacity for love of his nobler self, Oskan became a creature of true darkness.

His title, the Father of Lies, came about from his first actions of the War. Oskan was powerful, and had the advantage of expecting the trauma of the Sundering, but he was still not strong enough to take on hundreds of Shining Ones alone, nor was he trusting enough to rely on the assistance of the Wicked Ones. Oskan knew that only a demonstration of strength and ruthlessness would guarantee his victory, and to this end he sought out Shining Ones, pretending to be as wounded and confused as they, earning their trust before brutally slaying them. Two dozen fell to his concealed blade, a dagger named Calisor's Sorrow, before his true nature was widely known. Upon learning of his deeds, the Wicked Ones quickly fell into line under his leadership, while the Shining Ones attempted to rally together to fight against him. Now, the war began in earnest.

It was the war to end all wars. The mighty heights reached by the civilisations of men, elves and dwarfs ensured a dizzying fall as they found themselves caught up in this conflict between god-like beings. Various legends survive of some of the epic conflicts, which took place in those dark times, and shaped the world today – such as the tale of Eoswain & Zbortan and their duel which raged through the heavens for years and ended in their plummet to the earth of the Ardovikian plain, still locked in a fierce combat. It is said that they still fight to this day, beneath the earth; the irregular earthquakes felt in the area echoes of their wrath. As Tulann shrieked from the heavens, throwing castle-sized boulders down at his imagined foes, the savage tsunamis and

earthquakes caused by their impacts killed thousands and smashed the land asunder, creating the islands as they are now – standing like the upturned teeth of some monstrous draconic beast, where once stood a land mass stretching the length of the Eastern span of the great elven empire.

As the war dragged on, the Wicked Ones looked to find advantage in any way they could. Most mortals had allied themselves to the Shining Ones and though they were pitiful compared to the might of the Gods, they were many where the Gods were few.

Oskan himself is said to have first created the demon creatures that would eventually become the Abyssal Hordes, using his own power mixed with shards of the Mirror to summon forth living extensions of his single-minded purpose. Creatures of pure darkness and evil intent, these first demons were the metaphysical forefathers of the Abyssal fiends and beasts known today. Just one of these creatures wielded enough power to slaughter many times their number, and Oskan brought forth whole legions of them to blight the land. Others sought to copy his example, to greater or lesser success, creating various creatures and races, some of which persist to this day, others consigned to the darkness of ancient history. The most successful and enduring of these was the orcs.

Created by Garkan the Black, twisted Wicked One of the Celestian Belkon of the Forge, the orcs were a twisted amalgamation of the aspects and souls of various different sentient creatures, ripped apart and spliced back together in the fleshforges to become terrifying beasts.

The orcs, demons and other creatures drawn forth by the Wicked Ones saw the God War enter a new, grinding phase of attrition. Where before there had been spectacular battles between ethereal beings of unimaginable power, now there was all-out war between all living things, whole continents heaving with the mass of bodies set in combat, shuddering beneath the tread of millions of boots, hooves and claws. Atrocities were committed by the mortals of both sides which would leave deep and enduring scars on their cultural psyches forever – the dwarfs to this day despise the orc on an instinctual level and to a degree perceived irrationally focused by the other noble races, due to the massacre at Faeyrnhold. It is the one matter which unites both the Imperial and Free dwarfs completely.

Such slaughter could continue only so long, and eventually, the conflict came to a head when the Hybrid – also known as Domivar the Unyielding, faced Oskan on the great Northeastern Plains. On the ground, their two titanic armies clashed in a fight which encompassed almost every remaining able-bodied warrior in all of Pannithor. Above, Domivar had assumed his god-like aspect, legacy of his Father Mescator, and ascended on mighty white pinions to face Oskan.



Oskan had become ever more powerful as the slaughter of the War had raged on. His infamous dagger was reborn, becoming part of a mighty axe bearing the same name. The power of Calisor's Sorrow was augmented by dark forging, which had harnessed the cold black of the void between the stars themselves. As the blade of this mighty weapon moved, it seemed to cut through not just the air, but the very stuff of existence, leaving reality itself bleeding in its wake.

Domivar wielded his father's sword, forged from star-iron and woven with enchantments of strength and power. It had seen him best every mortal challenger he had faced, but it was not equal to the task, scratching harmlessly across Oskan's hide until it was caught by a parry from his almighty axe. The blow shattered it, the fragments scattering in an explosive release of Celestian power.

Oskan bellowed with laughter, savouring the moment of his final triumph. This time, Oskan's arrogance would prove his undoing. Buried within Domivar's blade had been a final, terrible secret – a tiny splinter of the shard which had ended Elinathora's life, a piece lodged so deeply in her heart it had evaded even Oskan when he tore free the larger part of it. How Mescator had come to possess it, none knew, but he had ensured that the piece was forged into his sword, using an element of the very treachery that had begun the war to visit justice on those who would prosecute it. Whether he had known his son would end up in mortal combat with Oskan is unclear, but unnoticed by the Wicked One the shard had flown free when the blade shattered and lodged in his flesh, a mere splinter, an irritant beneath his notice.

Now, as he raised his axe to finish his opponent, Oskan felt the monstrous strength begin to leave his swollen frame. The swing he delivered was slow, half-hearted, and Domivar was easily able to avoid it. He swung again, and again, but each swing was wilder, weaker and less focused than the last. Finally, Domivar grabbed the hilt of the axe and wrested it from Oskan's trembling fingers. With a rousing cry, Domivar dove towards the ground, raising the axe above his head and bringing it down with all the force his tired muscles could summon.

The impact of the weapon upon the earth was devastating. The ground cracked beneath it, splintering for miles in either direction. The gap widened like a beastly maw, the red glow of the world's very core rising up in a flash of heat. Either side of this gaping wound, the earth itself began to blacken and die, and the mortal creatures too, hundreds dropping stone dead or flashing to withered husks. All of the bitterness, anger and heartbreak trapped in Calisor's Sorrow, at the heart of the evil blade, had been added to a thousand-fold by the hateful slaughter the axe had made. All that poison was anathema to the world it touched, and the rapidly widening wound in the world began to drag everything towards it with inexorable force, including Oskan, his followers, and his bestial generals. The Wicked Ones, so full of malice, murder and wickedness, were sucked hungrily down by the maw that had formed. Whether this process took minutes, hours, or even days, history fails to record. What is known is that when the foul winds from the pit finally died down, and the surviving mortal creatures were able to venture close enough to see, the body of Domivar, once again human and frail, was found at the edge, the axe crumbled to dust, and a shining, irregular silvered fragment clutched in his dead hand. Thus was the Abyss created, at once a home and a prison for the Wicked Ones and their foul spawn.





THE TIME OF ICE

Following the banishment of the Wicked Ones, something approaching peace settled on the world, but not the peace of previous generations – the existence of new and awful threats like the orcs and their kin, the changed geography of the world itself and the fall and breaking of the great kingdoms saw to this. Settlements, regions or entire empires had been destroyed or cut off. Further, the bonds which had existed for so long between the noble races were forever weakened. There was a lack of trust, a sense that each must look to their own, that had not existed before. Disputes would erupt into battles and all-out wars much more frequently and easily than they once had, and this, combined with the need to defend against raids from evil creatures, left the world a crueller place.

Then came the cold.

It began simply as unseasonable bad weather. Crops failed, the levels of the oceans began to drop as water formed massive ice shelves and the caps of the tallest mountain tops began their march downwards, snow and ice reaching down to the earth in an inexorable advance. Within a year, the ice was covering much of Pannithor, all sense of seasons gone, and the world was in the grip of a devastating, endless cold.

It was the elves who discovered the source of this unnatural turn of events. The Wicked One known as Winter, dark aspect of the Ice Maiden Shakara, had somehow escaped the Abyss and was waging her own slow war against the world in revenge for her imprisonment. The elves sent envoys in secret to the humans and dwarfs, but their reception was not favourable. Both races still recalled the disasters which had befallen them as a result of the elves' actions. Alerted by this activity that she had been discovered, Winter gave up on her subterfuge and unleashed the full extent of her powers on the world.

Winter's glaciers advanced on civilisation, armies of weird and terrifying creatures marching before them. These legions were headed by Winter's seven knights, immense elemental constructs of flesh and frost, bound together with ice magic and fiercely loyal to the one who gave them life. Faced with this, the old alliances were reborn, albeit much weaker and less trusting than they had once been. The dwarfs in particular remained reluctant for some time, finally agreeing against their better judgement to join men and elves in this fight when it became clear they simply could not avoid doing so.

Nor could the assistance of the Shining Ones be counted upon. Much of their power had been expended during the God War, and some were mere fragments of their former selves, with wandering attentions and minds. The one shining hope of the age was Valandor.





Valandor had appeared amongst the noble races in the aftermath of the God War, and was revered among them all. To the Primovantians, he was the essence of humanity's potential distilled, a great warrior and magic user and a supreme general. To the elves, he was a brother, an elf somehow separated from his kin but still of them, a supremely gifted artist and mage. To the dwarfs, he was a spiritual kin, a craftsmen of rare skill even by their exacting standards and the only non-dwarf they would truly trust and embrace as a friend.

Valandor was not keen to dispel the perceptions of any of the three races, and less keen still that they should discover not only his identity as a Shining One but also that his Wicked One counterpart was one of the most hideous and reviled generals of the Abyssal hordes. He worked tirelessly to try and mend relations between the three noble races, and thought he was making substantial progress when his erstwhile sister Winter revealed her hand.

In the war that followed, Valandor was everywhere. Legends of the War against Winter among all the noble races speak of his presence, shoring up defences, weaving his magic and facing the enemy in open battle. Such ubiquity was a necessity, as the very elements bent to Winter's will and she was able to send forth her armies across the span of the world. Valandor knew as he faced each force and defeated each foe, he was just biding time – only by finding Winter and confronting her directly could the war be ended. As he stood shoulder to shoulder with the elves at Lethuia, facing down a legion of Ice Giants, he knew the battle was immaterial. As he commanded the garrison at Sathoi repelling ten thousand capering frost sprites, he knew victory was essential but meaningless. As he helped construct the bulwarks at Dolgarth against the encroaching glaciers, he knew it would never be enough.

Winter was cunning, hiding from view and sending her minions forth to do her bidding. She knew full well that Valandor represented her one true foe, and she had little intention of facing him openly until she had worn him down. Endlessly she threw forth her armies, accompanied by the very ice itself moving over every surface. The war dragged on, and the world slowly began to strangle under the iron grip of the ice.

Finally, at the battle of Ileuthar, Valandor stumbled as he repelled the fifth charge that day from a horde of Ice Demons. His spells of protection wavered as he went to one knee, and suddenly Winter was there, resplendent in a cloak of ice daggers, eyes burning like cold fire and a wicked smile across her features. She stalked towards Valandor, power building in her clenched fists, the air crackling with tension as the elves looked on in horror.

Valandor waited until the last moment, until a blade flowed into cruel existence from the tips of Winter's fingers and rested a hair's breadth from his bowed head, before he made his move. Winter's mocking laughter ringing in the frozen air, he surged forwards with explosive force, hammering into his erstwhile sister with immortal flesh and ethereal power, sending her backwards, surprised and angry. He had awaited this opening for many months, and he could not afford to waste it. Doubling the concentration of his power, he rained down blows on Winter. Recovering herself from the shock, Winter responded, and the battle began in earnest, two demigods fighting on every plane at once, magical, mental and physical, locked in combat. Their soldiers stood and watched on, all thought of battle forgotten as their generals fought. Winter had the benefit of freshness, Valandor having been fighting constantly for many years. But Valandor was the more experienced, having tested his mettle against every type of beast sent forth by Winter. None of her tricks would catch him, and he knew her well enough that her prowess was no guarantee of her victory. He pressed forward, and she became reckless as frustration took hold of her, seeing her victory being slowly wrestled from her grasp.

When the opening came, Valandor hesitated, still loath after all this time to end the life of a fellow. His blade rested on her neck as she stared defiant murder back at him. He expected a curse, or maybe a plea for her own life to fall from her frost blue lips. Instead, she merely glared, face twisted in a wicked grin. In his mind's eye, he saw the image she sent him, the death of his brothers and sisters, many at her hands, during the God War, and he shoved the blade forward hard. She shattered, disappearing in a flurry of ice shards behind a blinding flash of ice magic. A bitter laugh echoed across the field, and the first ominous rumble from the glaciers surrounding them confirmed Valandor's worst fear. Winter had bound her world-consuming ice to herself, body and soul – with her defeat, so too came the immediate dissipation of it all, melting away with a speed entirely unnatural. The Great Inundation began.

Valandor, already taxed almost to his very limits, now found himself once again rushing to defend the world. At Therennia Adar, he raised a mighty wall to save the inner city from the raging flood waters, though he was able to save little else. At Basilea, he thwarted and diverted what he could, but still vast swathes of the old Primovantan Empire were lost to the Infant Sea as it was birthed from the rising flood tides. Everywhere he went, Valandor failed as much as he succeeded, and much of the old world, already scarred by the God War, was lost beneath the unnatural floods of Winter's Final Gift.

THE AGE OF CONFLICT

The world of Pannithor turned on, and a new age began – one forged in pain and conflict. The ranks of the half-gods, both Shining Ones and Wicked Ones, were thinned, but they survive still and their numbers grow. The conflicts of the ancients have re-wrought the world time and again, offering fresh territories to man, dwarf and elf alike. While some view the age as one of rebirth, the midwives in attendance are war and strife.

Old oaths have been broken, alliances forgotten. Where once the three Noble Peoples were united under the banners of vast empires, they now bicker and squabble, fighting amongst themselves, carving meagre territories in lands plagued by violence and darkness.

The elven kindreds struggle to unite and function as a whole, the previous glories of Primovantor are long gone, and the dwarfs have hardened their hearts against the surface world. The threat of resurgent orcs, goblins and other hideous beings is never far away, nor is the fear of the undead marching to war. As the peoples of Pannithor find their way in the world and fight bitterly for their existence, the ever present hell-scar of the Abyss looms large, and the predations of the beings known as the Nightstalkers are an ever increasing menace.





In the madness of new boiling seas and flooding plains, Valador was lost to the onrushing tides. None know at what exact point he finally succumbed, but none doubt that much less of the world would endure today without his efforts. When his body was recovered near the Brokenwall Islands, it was borne with full ceremony to its final resting place atop the Tower of Waldeep, where it has rested there ever since. Mounted on a high, ornate plinth, and reclining on a carved couch, his body lies pristine in state – free of the effects of age or time, and the focus of much adoration from millions of pilgrims each year who come from far and wide to venerate the Hero of the Winter War.

With Winter seemingly vanquished, and with the world changed once again, the noble and lesser races alike began to rebuild. Primovantor was shattered, and no kingdom of man has yet to approach its majesty and glory. The elves were irrevocably split into distant kindreds, their once great realm scattered across the world. The dwarfs were sundered into different factions, many of their old Holds destroyed or abandoned either in the war or its aftermath. The forces of darkness alone grew bolder, as their foes found themselves divided and weaker than ever before.

The Flooding of the Abyss

As time flows through the world and drives the endless cycle of birth and death, civilisations rise and fall, heroes and villains write their small passages in the history books of their descendants and the influence of the Abyss waxes and wanes. At its worse, the region is a malignant threat, simmering with wicked potential. At its worst, when the winds of magic strengthen alongside unimaginable cosmic alignments and the thinning of reality's barriers against the other planes of existence, the Abyss will vomit forth legions of foul demons to lay waste and inflict their evil upon the world. Due to its location, the region of Mantica, ancestral home to the Noble races, the empires and peoples here have suffered the most. Ancient texts, found hidden in dusty, long forgotten libraries make mention of far off places with worrying descriptions that resemble the hellfire of the great wound in the land. It is postulated that if such places exist, they may be collateral damage from the aftershock of Domivar's victory. Such fears are easily dismissed as rumour or idle fancy. The Abyss in Mantica is certainly a horrifying reality.

Twelve hundred years after the war with Winter, Pannithor was plunged into its darkest period since that cataclysmic age. After centuries of magical preparation, the sacrifice of countless slaves and the forging of new and deadly artefacts, the influence of the Wicked Ones over their infernal prison


grew and the earth began to heave and buckle with an almighty crack. The gaping chasm in the earth began to tear its way through new ground and countless hordes of Abyssal monsters spilled forth to devour everything before them. Never had such vast numbers of demon spawn been seen before and the horrors that were unleashed triggered cataclysmic events across the land as the Forces of Good and the will of the Green Lady fought to halt the monumental destruction being wrought, while vile races sought to take advantage.

The war raged for many years, and even the Green Lady was pushed to the point of exhaustion and despair - the taint and spread of the Abyss seemed inexorable. Slowly, the forces of Good, bolstered by the support of the Green Lady and her followers, pushed the demonic legions back through the lands charred black by their passage and on towards the burning chasm. The Green Lady sensed the cracks appearing in the dark magics impelling the invasion and, with the Thuul Arch-Mythicans of the Trident Realm, enacted a desperate plan. Gaining the reluctant acceptance of those who would be most affected, the Green Lady instructed the Thuul to begin their rituals. Through them, she awakened and channelled ancient, forbidden magic, a distant memory from her previous incarnation in Celestian form. The Frozen Sea, north of the Abyss and the Steppe began to seethe and boil. As ancient ice sheets gave way, the Green Lady wept for the lives lost and the sacrifice of the earth as a tsunami the likes of which had not been seen since the creation of the Infant Sea, swept ferociously across the Steppe and flooded the hell-scar in an unstoppable deluge. The chaos that had been unleashed upon the world had been halted.

Eventually, the flood-waters dissipated and the extent of the damage was revealed. The tortured lands around the Abyss had swelled in many directions and the great rent in the world had opened far into new territory. A decade on and the aftershocks from the rending of the earth are still felt in northern Basilea, the Halpi mountains and along the coast of the Frozen Sea. Many lands remain uninhabitable.

While the forces of the Green Lady and her allies lick their wounds and rebuild, the agents of the Wicked Ones are gathering their strength once more. The Abyssal Dwarfs have raised a new fortress city, Tragazahk, that guards the hellish chasm that now reaches deep into Tragar. From here and their other strongholds of Deiw and Zarak, fresh new legions are preparing to march north behind a vanguard of ratkin, slave orcs and worse, as the Wicked Ones turn their attention to the city of Chill.

rec: XV.III.b



The Map of Northern
PANNITCHOR
and the
Regions of Mantica, Nordgared, Ophidia
and the borders of the Lands beyond...

Commissioned & drafted for the cartographic collection of
the Euhedral Library, drawn under the gracious patronage of
Lord Uske of Callenburg

Scale 0 50 100 150 200 250 Leagues

Diesha	: Continents & Territories
ABERCARR	: Kingdoms, Realms & Major Regions
Eastern Reaches	: Provinces & Minor Regions
High Sea of Bari	: Seas & Waterways
Blades of Eij	: Mountain Ranges
Forest of Galahir	: Forests & Woods
The Three Kings	: Islands
Iceblood Fjord	: Landmarks & Notable Locations
⊙ ZHRAK	: Capitals & Major Settlements
⊙ Valentica	: Key Settlements
⊙ Port of Lantor	: Major City Ports
⊙ Ruins of Naethorn	: Historic Sites

V
c.e



OF MAGIC

Some describe it as the soul. Others as the spark of life. These, and a hundred other poetic descriptions of the primal element known as Magic, fail to fully capture the complex beauty and intricacy of the thing. Even elven language, with all of its subtlety and nuance, cannot fully capture the true depth of Magic.

Just as a smithy controls fire in his furnace, and a farmer manages the earth to cultivate his crop, so an experienced mage can exert their will upon magic to achieve all manner of things. Being the pure stuff of life, Magic is a powerful and unpredictable energy, and only those properly trained in its application, manipulation and use can even hope to properly control it.

It is a common belief that some special natural 'talent' for magic is required in order for this training to be given. Indeed, various traditions exist the world over in different societies, and even in different colleges or 'factions' within the same society, to choose those deemed 'worthy'. In the Golden Horn, the Order of the Ardent Light takes apprentices only from noble families whose lineage can trace some connection back to Valandor himself. In Therennia Adar, only the first-born sons and daughters of noble houses are considered able to take on the mantle of mage. The truth is, with enough discipline, training and focus, many individuals can master the art of controlling magical energies, though the extent of their abilities will be bound by the limits of their endurance, their physical prowess and their mental capacity.

Thus it is that orcs and goblins have their crude magics, and those races in the alliance of nature may make use of arcane powers. Such usage is done in a less regimented and more 'natural' way than by men and elves - for orcs and goblins, the crude energy of their creation tends to cause a natural build up when many of them gather, and their shamans act almost as lightning rods for this energy, directing it as much by instinctual reaction as any form of planning. For the forces of nature, including the druidic and shamanic orders, the flow of magic is simply part of the natural balance of life, another thread to master the ebb and flow of, acting as a conduit rather than attempting anything so crude as control or direction.

Dragons too derive much of their power from magic, for how else could a biological creature conjure fire from its lungs or exert its will upon other living things merely with a gaze? As dragons age, their aptitude for these arts increases, meaning the older the dragon the more dangerous it becomes. It is for this reason the elves of Alandar bond with dragons when they are almost freshly hatched - it would be folly indeed even for one of these fabled dragon masters to attempt to exert their will over a fully mature dragon and expect to live.

Of course, darker forms of magic lurk in the hearts of all mortals, but foolish indeed are those who seek to pursue such paths. The art of Necromancy is more varied than the uneducated assume - some practitioners seek the departed soul of the subject and drag it back to its mortal shell. Others learn to split their own essence, transferring shards of their own soul to the shell of the departed. Still others steal the energy required from the living to puppet the corpses of the dead. Whatever the precise form of Necromancy practised, the focus and energy required mean that only the most talented and well-trained can hope to master the art, and this means that Necromancers tend to be singularly dangerous individuals. It is seldom that any mortal seeks dominion over the dead with noble motive, and indeed some of the greatest threats to the order of the world have come from practitioners of this dark art. From Mhorgoth the Faceless to Mortibris himself, powerful Necromancers have been a dread threat to the noble races.

The dwarfs tend to avoid magic - ingrained within their culture is a belief that only work done by the sweat of the brow and the strain of the sinew is honest. Their natural distaste for adopting any of the practices or customs of other races also feeds into this reluctance, and the legend of Calisor Fenulian is to them a cautionary tale of the excesses an individual is wont to pursue and the disasters that may arise from an over enthusiasm for the arcane arts. Nevertheless, like all mortals, they are physically able to harness the mystical energies of the world, though few actually do so. In dwarfs, with their particular affinity with the earth and the stone on which all of the world rests, this manifests itself in an incredibly esoteric way, which the dwarfs themselves refer to as being 'stonewise'. Individuals so afflicted can be dangerous left unchecked - their talents can cause seismic shifts in the earth and rock of a hold - and they are rightly viewed with a mixture of suspicion, awe and fear by others in their society. Nevertheless, once taken in by the Order of Stone and taught to properly channel and control the power they possess, they become immeasurably useful parts of the dwarf arsenal. Theirs is the power to control the very earth itself, and they are taught to harness this by summoning Earth Elementals - terrifying semi-sentient constructs of earth and stone bound by magic and sent forth to smash apart the enemies of the dwarfs in battle.

Magic is simply a part of life on Pannithor, wherever one may wander. Such has been the scope of the magical conflicts between gods and mortal races, between gods and gods, that the world remains positively soaked in this most vital and volatile of elements.



From the enlightened writings of the Scribes of the Universities in the City of the Golden Horn, coupled with the detailed records of the tome keepers within the vast Euhedral Library, the Collegiate Arcana present:

A Study of the Known Structures of MAGIC

Of Valandor
A magic user whose like may never be matched, borne of the Celestian Schism.



Text offered to further the safe learning in the Arcane.

The Fifth Element

Glaciomancy is the arcane name for Ice Magic and is considered a Fifth Elemental School of Magic.

Magic permeates all of life in Pannithor, indeed, it IS life itself. Touching all walks and occasions, from nobles to street scriers, from wedding parties to mass battles. Magic seeps through it all. Some would state that only certain learned or naturally gifted souls can hope to control the arcane. Though that is a myth long in the making. It is open to all and any, though success in practiontir will undoubtedly vary!

There are recorded FIVE realms of primary existence, referred to as 'the Planes' wherein the magic of the world flows.

- They are the:
- 1) Material Plane
 - 2) Emphyrean Plane
 - 3) Abyssal Plane
 - 4) Etheric Plane
 - 5) Astral Plane
- Magic is bound up in all these planes but it is to the Astral Plane and the Arcane Mantle amidst the stars whence it seeks to escape. Magic from the Material Plane

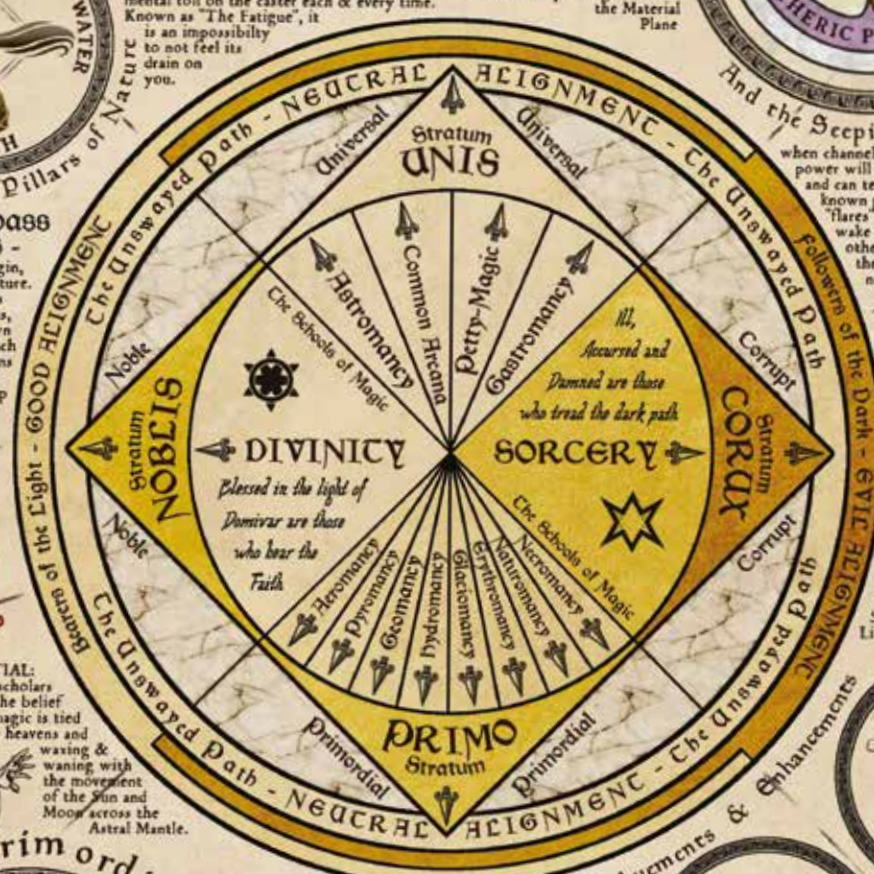


THE FATIGUE
Whilst true that any can hope to learn how to wield magic at varying levels or degrees, it is also a truism that it takes a physical and mental toll on the caster each & every time. Known as 'The Fatigue', it is an impossibility to not feel its drain on you.

when channelled or released with enough power will seek to reach the Astral Plane and can tear through the fabrics of the known planes to do so. These Arcane 'flares' leave a planar passage in their wake that may allow beings of the other realms to transit betwixt the Material Plane with un-nerving ease.

The Arcane Compass - The ARCANES -

Whilst naturalistic in origin, magic does follow a structure. Disseminated into what is called the Arcane Compass, the various levels of known magic are layered upon each other and their connections established. As a piece of instrumentation, it can help track arcane sources.



Terminology

Arcane Terms of Note:
Stratums:
UNIS - Universal, CORUX - Corrupt, NOBLIS - Noble, PRIMO - Primordial
Schools: Erythro - a Blood & Life, Naturo - a Druidism



CELESTIAL:
Some scholars have the belief that magic is tied to the heavens and stars, waxing & waning with the movement of the Sun and Moon across the Astral Mantle.



Crystals Borne of Magic



Apparatus Arcana

Practise of the arcane arts is not simply a case of waving arms and cheap parlor tricks. Learned study allows magical energies to be harnessed in all manner of items, or simply enhanced to devastating effect. From enhanced spell scrolls, potent elixirs and imbued weapons & artefacts, the apparatus of magic is many-formed. Even mining natural fractures of 'power' crystals or the harnessing of great dragon-steeds is considered the craft of magic as a tool and for a purpose!



The Undiscovered

It should be noted that whilst the Arcane Compass has clearly defined Schools and Magics adorned upon its surface, it is not an exhaustive account. There are many "would be" schools of magic that have been encountered but not yet formally recognized by the governing mages of the Arcane Universities. Further study and practise in these fledgling magics is required, under strict controls, before they are deemed "in agnoscis" and officially classified. And still there are the variances and schools as yet undiscovered, survived or those that have since been expunged from records as "ex-arcanis"...

Many are they who still hold the FOUR original elements as being the only true primordial magics. There are THREE others of as equal, if not greater, import. From the coalescence of these come the errant forces of Time, Spirit & Strife.

BASILEANS



abbess aurelia
sisterhood order of maritara



The Fall of Primovantor

The Grand Republic of Primovantor was the greatest civilisation not only of Man, but in all of Pannithor's long history - at its height covering a third of the known world, rivalling Elvenhome and the mightiest dwarf Holds in size, power and opulence.

A grand coalition of nations ruled by an elected senate and headed by the High Consul, it was a place of high art and high science, a beacon of hope against the relentless chill of Winter's Age of Ice, the last era of the God War. The Celestians themselves had been friends to the learned scholars of Primovantor, and humanity's power was at its very apex.

The men of this time were long-lived and keen-minded. Nearly a thousand years after the republic collapsed, its feats of magic and art have yet to be matched. The Primovantians learned much from the elves, and gave them much in return. From their mountain home of Primantor, the early Primovantians brought as many lands into their Republic by diplomacy as by conquest. All citizens were treated equally under her laws, no matter whether they willingly joined or their country had been defeated in war, and it flourished because of it. Every man who fought for Primovantor did so willingly, to protect a land they were proud to call their own.

It was the High Consul of the Primovantians who urged the ending of Winter, and thus sealed the fate of his own land. By that point in history, the God War had ravaged much of its lands, the splitting of the Celestians hitting the republic harder than any other place. Some say that it was a mercy of sorts when Primovantor sank beneath the waves of the Great Flood, wiping clean the bloated and fragmented place that it had become.

Winter's War finished the Republic, and the provinces north of the Dragon's Teeth mountains were ground to clay under the ice, its rich southlands drowned by the sea.

Some of the glory of Primovantor did survive, in Basilea, the Eastern portion of the Republic. Basilea persists to this day, albeit in much diminished form and certainly not as a republic, but as the hidebound Hegemony. The twin cities of Primantor and the Golden Horn, perched atop their mountainous bedrocks, were spared the scouring of Winter's floods. Primantor stands to this day as a monument to the follies of that long-forgotten age. The Golden Horn became the centre of humanity's rebirth in the years following the Great Flood, its succession of rulers struggling to bind their people together in the face of threats from every direction.



The Birth of Basilea

After the events of the God War and the ruinous scouring of Winter's floods, the belligerent dwarfs had retreated underground, determined no longer to involve themselves in affairs outside their own. The elves fragmented along the lines of the shattered remains of their former glories, concerned more with their own survival than the matters of lesser races. In the face of this abandonment, men fought creatures of the Abyss, marauding orcs and goblins, and even the savage men of the steppes, alone. Humanity teetered on the brink of extinction many times over those dark centuries, surviving by dint of sheer tenacity. Even the Shining Ones, the broken remains of their former patrons the Celestians, had become unreliable and fickle.

It was at the last, when all hope seemed lost, when the Hegemon Bolisean's armies were exhausted, surrounded and cut off by a far larger orc horde, that the balance shifted. Bolisean was alone, his guards smashed into the mud, a fresh charge of orcs pounding towards him, and his blade shattered. Slumping to his knees, Bolisean threw his head back and bellowed a plea to the lightning-streaked skies above for the Shining Ones to descend and save him and his people. In return, he offered the eternal and heartfelt fealty of him and his people to the Shining Ones as the true gods of humanity.

Whether his plea caught the fickle Shining Ones in a favourable mood by chance, or whether there was something different in his cries that moved them, none will ever know. But what happened next passed forever into legend. The spirit of Domivar himself – the son of Mescator and the hero who smote the Wicked Ones into the Abyss at the end of the God War, appeared before Bolisean, and asked him to repeat his oath, sealing it with his own blood in the sacred ground on which he knelt. Without thinking to pause, Bolisean sliced open his palm on the jagged end of his sword, allowing several drops to mix with the wet filth of the ground.

The reaction was instant. The rains stopped with a thunder-crack of pressure and a blinding flash of lightning. As the eyes of all present adjusted in the aftermath, it was to the sight of thousands of Elohi, the winged warrior guardians of the Shining Ones, standing ready over the men of the Golden Horn. The orcs faltered, and were destroyed. The magnificent and terrible creatures overwhelmed them with violence and fury that even their savage nature could not match.

The pact had been made in blood, and on that bloody field at the edge of their protectorate, the realm of Basilea was born, Bolisean becoming the first Hegemon of this new empire of men.

Since that day, Basilea has been the last shining bastion of humanity, the centre of man's power and learning, and the upholder of the traditions of Primovantor, in whose shadow it persists.



Here follows an extract from the diary of Hegemon Bosilean at the battle of Antovar, may he forever be blessed in life and in death, in memory and in prayer.

Day 47

We broke camp at dawn. I began this day in low spirits. Bad weather continues to make the road difficult. We marched this morning. The soldiers sang.

We halted at the village of Larroway joined by three companies of Paladins. Impressive fellows. Our full force is assembled, some 23 battalions under arms, not counting the cavalry divisions of the Sisterhood.

My main desire was to write letters home. I have allowed the men to build fires and cook soup. I shall spend today at prayer, and I have advised my captains to do likewise. This will be our last day of rest.

Our respite was short-lived. Word of a rear-guard action has reached me. I have sent for clarification of these reports. This cannot be correct.

Day 48

No further reports have reached us. We broke camp and marched 11 hours to improve our position. We crossed a wide, shallow river. Its waters ran black. The men were silent at this. 40 men fell ill, 3 have since died. The rest are completely exhausted from fatigue. There was no singing today.

We halted at Antovar. Here there is little wood for cooking, and we managed few fires. The sky churns with darkness. Many ill omens befall us this day. And Rain. A heavier downfall I have not seen.

Rain all night. This, and rats, prevented us from sleeping. We turned our attention to an account of supplies. Low, as we expected, but on full accounting not so low as to cause alarm.

Day 49

The first raid came shortly before dawn. How can the orcs be this far south in such force?

Disguised by thunder, a heavy charge of foul gore-riders hit us. Their battle-drums striking at our resolve. Our line broke, the enemy being repelled only by our Knights. This drew cheers from the remaining men-at-arms, but I am not satisfied. We inflicted few casualties. It was a probe, nothing more.

The enemy is fierce and hardy. I have repositioned the arbalests and dispatched cavalry to probe their flank in kind.

The fighting continues. Each of their charges comes harder than the last. Endless ranks of disorderly Gore and Ax. Trolls and worse have been sighted. The Sisters have not returned. The enemy has darkness as its ally, this is certain. May our bold hearts prevail.

Day 50

We formed columns and struck at their left flank. I led the attack myself. The enemy was stopped directly only to pivot and counter to our right. Fighting continued all day. I have little energy to write.

Day 51

Their tribal nature does not leave them without the wit of war. The fighting is desperate, our losses severe. We are at half strength, perhaps less. I must assist in tending to our many casualties myself.

To my surprise, the fighting has abated. Night has fallen. Their war drums echo across the valley. The battalion commanders are a woeful sight to behold. Brave men reduced to wide-eyed ruins, gaunt faces flickering in the dying candlelight. I am preparing my morning address. They look to me now, as I look to the Shining Ones.

Day 52

In the dawn light our forces appear pitiful indeed. I have not slept for the groaning of our wounded. The rain continues, whipped into a brutal spray by incessant winds. I struggle to focus my mind. My faith is with me yet.

The first engagement of the morning has come to pass. The heaviest yet. I must rest. There is no time. My scouts report the enemy in force on all sides. I send riders, they do not return. We are surrounded. There is no hope of supply or relief. We cannot withstand another charge. I hear the drums again..



BASILEA TODAY

Conservative by nature and paralysed by ritual it may be, Basilea still reflects some of the ancient glories of Primovantor. Its cities are the largest, its princes the richest, its mages the most powerful of all the kingdoms of Men. Basilea insists that it is the only true protector of Primovantor's legacy.

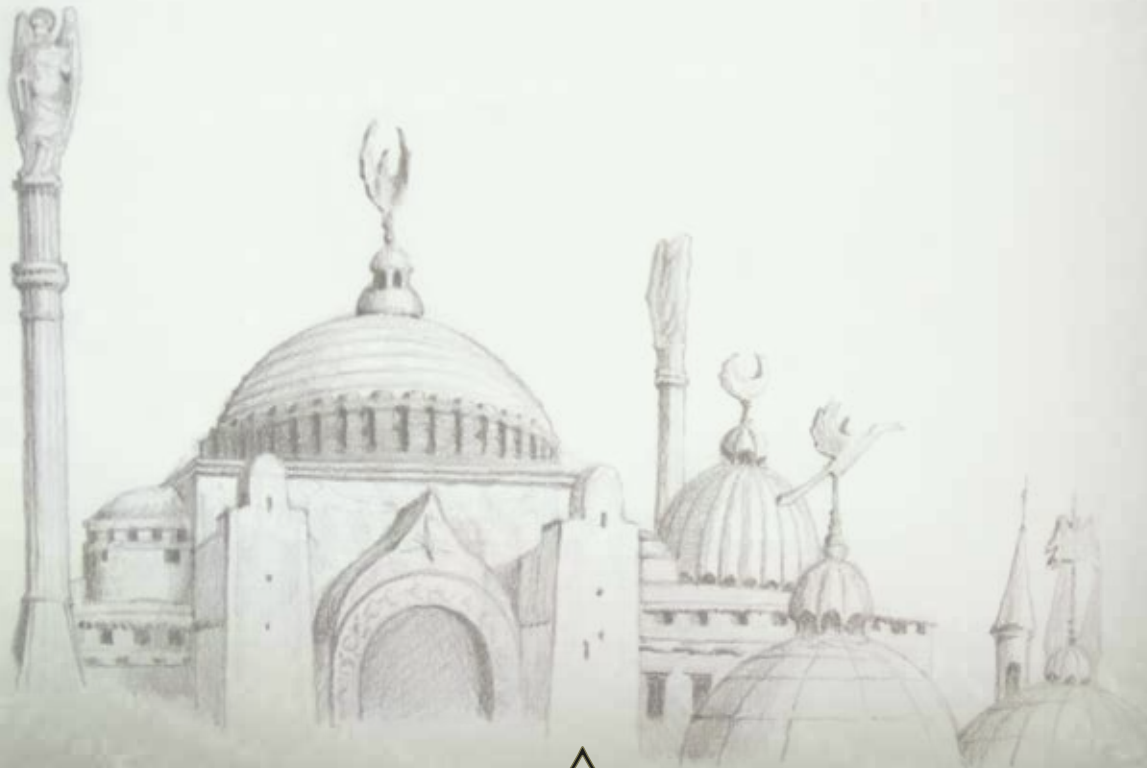
While some temples are still maintained to the long-gone Celestians in Basilea, the worship of their good aspects, the Shining Ones, is an integral part of life. It is a kingdom where time has stood still, where some of the glories of the elder days might still be found. Noble Paladins devote their entire lives to battle and prayer, undergoing arduous quests to prove their purity to the Shining Ones. Many Orders of the Sisterhood guard the borders. Purity, courage and strength are the watchwords of these warrior virgins.

The Hegemon of Basilea is king and high priest both. It is within his power to appeal directly to the Shining Ones. These remaining noble aspects of the Celestians dwell atop the mountain of Kolosu, an impossibly high pillar of rock, and from there they watch over the Hegemony. They rarely manifest directly, instead choosing to send an avatar or emissary in their stead, even in these lesser times. More often, they will choose to send their servants to the aid of the Basilean armies, should the occasion warrant it. These are the Elohi, angelic beings of immense power, who appear in the guise of beautiful, winged humans armoured all in gold. In war they are all but unstoppable, as terrible in combat as they are merciful and kind out of it.

But alongside the purest aspect of true faith and benevolence, Basilea has its sinister side too. Free thinking of any kind is not easily tolerated, and Basilean culture therefore remains hidebound and unchanging. Periodic panics about agents of the Wicked Ones sweep the nation, leading to innocent and guilty alike being condemned to death by mass drowning in the Cleansing Pools. The Hegemon does not rule unchallenged; blood feud is all too common, driven by fires of honour and religious fervour that cannot be quenched. Orcs press upon Basilea from the north, while relations with the dwarfs to the east are at their lowest ebb. And atop their pillar of stone, the Shining Ones watch, for the most part silent. Protectors of Mankind, some say, capricious immortals who toy with the lives of lesser beings, say others.

The People of Basilea

Being a people watched over by literal gods, the Basileans are both pious and conceited. It is difficult not to feel arrogant when one has beings of such power at one's back, and it is equally difficult not to have faith when your gods manifest physically before you. The Golden Horn is full of churches, and the faith holds great temporal power. It is through the Shining Ones' power and guardianship that the Hegemony has persisted these last nine hundred years, and none of its people are soon likely to forget this. Its position as a trade route and its importance as a central hub in human civilisation, combined with the reliance of smaller, satellite states on its protection, have seen Basilea grow rich and powerful. Though it may never truly rival the scale and sheer majesty of the old Primovantor, Basilea is undoubtedly one of the wealthiest nation states in all of Mantica, if not the whole of Pannithor.





The Armies of Basilea

The Basileans are adherents of the Shining Ones, and large numbers of paladins, warrior monks and battle nuns are found in their armies. The angelic Elohi fly above the hosts of Basilea, lending their pure voices to the battle hymns of holy warriors, and their strength to the army's assault.

Basilea's wealth means that its footsoldiers march to war clad in the finest plate and bearing the very best weapons that money can buy. Vast armies of them march to protect its borders, bolstered by the elite religious warriors of the Paladins on foot and atop mighty warhorses, and the fanatical sisterhood, fighting on foot or riding to battle mounted on war panthers or chariots pulled by these magnificent, if terrifying apex predators. Their war machines are intricate and well built, and their magical support can rival the best, Basilea having the highest concentration of magical colleges anywhere in the world.

Following the flooding of the Abyss and the near total destruction of the lands and fortresses of the Brotherhood, the political schemers of Basilea quickly began courting the remaining Exemplars, offering their support in rebuilding

the Brotherhood's fortresses. The Brotherhood as it was has fragmented and a fledgling new order now stands guard on the north-eastern fringes of the Hegemony as the first line of defence against future incursions.

On the border with Tragar, in land ceded to the new order and designated The Brothermark, many of the ruined fortresses are being rebuilt and reinforced by this newly formed force. Due to this defence line's importance, garrisons from Basilea have integrated with former Brotherhood soldiers and are assigned to its guard. The pennants of the Order of The Brothermark now fly high over the towers of St. Victor Dupont, continuing their steady vigil against the forces of evil.

With these forces alone, Basilea could endure for centuries as one of the great powers of Pannithor. When the forces of the Shining Ones are added, the eternal supremacy of the Golden Horn is assured. Elohi march alongside the troops of Basilea, living manifestations of divine fury, each the equal of many dozens of men. It is no surprise that Basilea has become as arrogant as it is fervent. There are simply no powers in the world who can match it. For now.



Great Plains of the Mammoth Steppe

Munhir Amok

The NORTH MARCH

Deiw

FOREST OF GALANIR

The Province of NOVA ARDOVIKIO

THE BORDER MARCH

Plain of Ash

The Desolation of the Abyss

Barrow of Voitolius

St Victor Dupont

The Warden Land

Marshes of Basilea

The Samanites Samank

Tarisios

Ardar

Neica's Mirror

Zantaportz

Ruins of Du lan Var

The Copper Road

Havalthom

THE WESTERN MARCH

Neica

Mountain of Kolosu

The Province of NOVA PRIMOVANTOR

Katollis

Mountains of Tarkis

Eruks

Kurros

Gc

Lake Katomere

The Province of SOLIOS

Aenia

Low Sea of Suan

Martolian Sound

The Province of CORCIA Cortis

Turthania

Eis Pegcis

Mese Aemilianus

Geneza (City State)

The Province of SPARTHA

Sigeion

Karathos

City of the Golden Horn

Port of Elkhos

Amuklai

Nakhion

Lor Amellinus

Sea of Eristos

Bay of Geneza

Spartha

Enuthrai

Beiger

Hymemirkos

Dolgarth

Melis

THE PROVINCE OF KERETIA

Koronai

The Infant Sea

rec: XII.VI.a
A Map of
The HEGEMONY of
BASILEA
and her subsidiary Provinces
Scale 0 10 20 30 40 50 Leagues

Ploutoria



OATH OF PASSAGE



THE BEARER
 RUND GILTHELN
 HORN OF DARLUND

HONOURED AND RESPECTED TRADER
 OF THE IMPERIAL THRONE.

IN THE NAME OF HIGH KING GOLLOCH, RULER OF
 ABERCARR AND ALL DWARVERN LANDS BEYOND, IT IS
 REQUESTED AND REQUIRED OF ALL THOSE WHOM IT
 MAY CONCERN TO ALLOW THE BEARER TO PASS
 FREELY AND WITHOUT LET OR HINDRANCE AND TO
 AFFORD THE BEARER SUCH ASSISTANCE AND
 PROTECTION AS MAY BE NECESSARY. FAILURE TO
 UPHOLD THIS OATH OF PASSAGE WILL BE SUBJECT
 TO JUSTICE AS THE HIGH KING FEELS FIT.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Royal Quarter | 5. Free Parish |
| 2. Temple Quarter | 6. Drowned Quarter |
| 3. Governance Quarter | 7. Toll forts |
| 4. Route of All Trades | 8. New Curtain Wall |
| | 9. Others |

Men-at-Arms

The backbone of Basilean forces, the men-at-arms are the largest, and most highly trained, standing army in Mantica. Comprised of legions numbering in the thousands, they ensure the Hegemon's supremacy through strength of arms and hold back the dark forces of the world with seemingly endless faith and determination.

Men-at-arms are well equipped with weapons and armour paid for from the Hegemon's bountiful coffers. Most are armed with the 'Koliskos', a broad-bladed spear in use since the age of the Republic of Primovantor, and the simple but effective 'Daga' sword. These soldiers are heavily armoured, clad in scale mail and plate and additionally protected by large winged shields often embossed with the sun emblem of Basilea.

With such a large military fighting on all fronts, men-at-arms legions regularly contain seasoned veterans who have fought some of the worst creatures that Mantica has to offer, from the dread chimeras to the disturbing terrors. They are iron-willed and nigh-on unbreakable in melee, their faith holding no matter the odds. Units of these peerless warriors can often be seen holding the line, inspiring others to stand firm against the foe.

Although the ever present threat of the Abyss and their swift-footed creatures means that skill at arms is more prized than missile weaponry, such weapons are still found among Basilea's military. The most prominent is the crossbow, wielded to deadly effect by skilled marksmen, for in battles against the forces of the Abyss there is rarely time for a second shot.

The other missile weapon seen often in the ranks of the Hegemon's armies is the Arbalest, a heavy crossbow. Of little use in fighting the fell creatures of the Abyss, these warmachines are still common in garrisons as their armour piercing bolts have proved invaluable in battling King Golloch's heavily protected Dwarf warriors.

Paladin Chapters

The paladins epitomise the Basileans at peace and at war. Holy men, utterly devoted to worship of the Shining Ones, they spend their days in meditation and prayer, aiding the sick and needy, teaching, or preserving and spreading ancient knowledge. That is until battle calls, when the paladins take up their swords and head to war.

Since the founding of the first order three hundred years ago by Oredorus the Pure, the Paladins have risen to challenge the men-at-arms legions as the primary military force in Basilea. There are now many chapters of Oredorians spread across the Hegemony, each solemn brotherhood ready for war at any time.

Paladin foot guard march to war in heavy, ornate plate armour. Each wields a hefty two-handed sword known as a 'sparthion', cleaving foes into pieces with each precise strike. Some paladins go to war on barded chargers, fighting from atop their mounts with shields and long lances. The devastating charges of these armoured cavalry have turned the tides of many battles.

Each paladin chapter is led by a high paladin, who is a warrior, strategist and monk in one. These powerful fighters can be found on the front lines, launching holy wars or coming to the aid of others in their time of need. High paladins are masters of warfare, more than capable of fighting on foot, or mounted on a barded warhorse. The most powerful of their number ride immense, ferocious dragons – mythical creatures bound by the iron will of a high paladin. Such is the power of Basilea's faith.

After the mighty high paladins, the chaplains are the highest ranking member of a Paladin chapter. They are unwavering in their dedication to the Shining Ones and are more blessed because of it. Able to wield magic beyond that of the brethren, they are bulwarks against the darkness that would claim the world.

Between the ranked warriors of the paladin foot guard and the upper echelons of each chapter there are the paladin defenders. Even among the elite brethren of the paladins, the defenders are mighty warriors. Each chapter can only boast a dozen of these peerless fighters, and they take to the field only in the times of direst need. Should they be deployed in a conflict that is unjust, then the blessings of the Shining Ones will swiftly fade from them – leading them to quit the field before they risk the wrath of the gods. This provides a useful check to the power of the Hegemon, should they prove to be bloodthirsty or unstable. The paladins are literally the favoured of the gods.



Sisterhood Convents

There are monasteries of many religious orders all over the countryside of Basilea. Many of these convents, for reasons known only to themselves, are exclusively female. Staying off the beaten track to avoid the iron rule of the Hegemon, these sisters in arms are pledged to the Shining Ones and thus the defence of Basilea as a whole.

This remoteness of their existence means that they must rely on themselves for their defence, and the sisters spend as much time training their bodies as their souls. The sisterhood will often lend their defenders to nearby garrisons in times of need. Most of the orders eschew armour for speed and act as skirmishers, light cavalry, scouts and infiltrators. Their preferred weapons are heavy flails and a curved variant of the Koliskos known as a glaive.

It is rare for members of the sisterhood to remain at war for prolonged periods. Most fight out of necessity or duty but return to their peaceful existence shortly thereafter. The few that do fight continuously are elite warriors. They are highly prized for their skills and experience within the convents of the sisterhood and can commonly be found training the newest acolytes on the front lines.



The sisterhood convents have also been known to ride the vicious Gur Panthers to war. These deadly feline hunters can be found roaming the forests of Gur in the province of Tarkis, whose borders are piously guarded by the sisterhood. There is a strict limit on the number of juvenile cats that can be removed from the forest for taming so that this precious resource is never lost.

Raised and trained by dedicated handlers, a panther will grow to be almost as large as a horse. Panthers in training are directed to fight on the battlefield in packs, their tamers letting the animals give in to their hunting instincts. Once fully trained, these beasts are made even more dangerous when mounted by a battle sister. Warrior and panther will fight as a deadly pair, either as lancer light cavalry or from swift chariots. Each pairing of human and beast is a permanent relationship, the sister and panther bound to each other, going through training and battle together. Should one die, the other will be unable to find a new partner again.

While most sisterhood excel as light infantry, it is those that hail from the mountainous region of Basilea, Tarkis, that are most renowned as scouts. Lethal shots with bows, these skirmishers are in high demand to fight alongside the Basilean military. This doesn't affect the scouts' deployment - they go where the Shining Ones will them.

The holy leaders of each convent are known as abbesses. These individuals are almost always strict and uncompromising, keeping their charges in order both on and off the battlefield. Each is obeyed with unquestioning loyalty, for any who see the abbess fight on the battlefield or in training can see their unwavering dedication to the Shining Ones. Setting amongst the enemy with a heavy flail or curved Koliskos, the abbess brings the light of the gods to those without faith.

Agents of the Hegemon

In Basilea, faith is given as much importance as might or military genius, so it is no coincidence that those who lead armies on the battlefield are zealous devotees to the Shining Ones and the Hegemon. Most of these aren't members of military organisations per se but are appointed as leaders of combined arms forces by those who wield power in the Basilean capital.

The most powerful military organisation that the Hegemon has direct control over is the Palace Guard. Exclusively comprised of ogres wearing heavy plate armour, they are rarely seen beyond the walls of the palace. When these towering warriors do fight abroad, it is on direct orders from the Hegemon themselves. The Palace Guard are gifted fighters, but painfully few in number, so their deployment must be warranted by dire circumstances. When the need is truly great, whole phalanxes of Palace Guard may be led by one of their captains – dedicated generals who will see their missions completed, whatever the cost.

Each prized suit of armour worn by the Palace Guard is painstakingly inscribed with the deeds of its previous occupants. Each warrior who dons the armour is added to this roll of glory upon their death, granting them a measure of immortality in ogre culture. It's little wonder that so many ogre youths aspire to join the ranks of the Palace Guard.

Basilea is filled with holy men and women who have dedicated their lives to spreading the word of the Shining Ones. These priests who follow the troops on the battlefield are fully able to defend themselves, usually while exalting the virtues of their gods. Should an army launch a great holy

crusade, the priests can invariably be found marching in step with the line infantry – whether they are invited to or not.

Many armies are lead by the bombastic Dictators, the voices of the Basilean faith. Generals drawn from the ranks of the priesthood, sisterhood, paladins or even the lowly men-at-arms, they draw up grand strategies to protect the lands of the Hegemon from harm. As they tend to be older men, they might not be the most powerful of warriors, but their presence on the field is nevertheless vital to guide the Basilean legions to victory.

War wizards have become an increasing common sight on the battlefield over the last few decades. For Basileans, magic is an integral part of all walks of life, including battle. War wizards, masters of fire and weather spells, wreak havoc upon the foes of Basilea with inferno and lightning. In particular, their magic has been found to be a potent weapon to counter the denizens of the Abyss, against which it seems to have a greater effect.

Only the bravest and most virtuous amongst the young acolytes are given the honour of carrying into battle one of the holy icons of Basilea. These take many forms, from golden statues of a saintly hero or heroine of history, to the battle flags of renowned regiments.

Warriors of the Gods

The elohi are the angels of the gods, the mightiest of Basilea's warriors, sent from the top of Mount Kolosu to protect the land the Shining Ones have chosen as their own. They are beautiful beyond mortal understanding, tall and free of blemish. Wings sprout from their shoulders, their limbs clad in gleaming armour of unknown metals. They wield swords and spears reminiscent of the terrible weapons of the God War.

The ur-elohi are the most powerful of their number, shining beacons of light and good, flying high in the sky to guide the armies of Basilea and its allies against all evil. Legends are told of these beings, like Kurilia, the Phoenix Maiden, who led the charge against the abyssals at Baraskoi, or Beraphael, who ended the undead abomination known as the Gorelord with a single blow from his shining spear. Time and again, the ur-elohi have torn victory from the jaws of defeat.

The phoenix is the symbol of Basilea: an emblem of rebirth, holy fire and blazing fury. These semi-magical birds are summoned by the mages of Basilea to fight with the armies of the Hegemon. Phoenixes are vast birds of prey, part fire and part feather; it is unknown exactly how they came into being. They are the favoured creature of the Shining One Fulgria, the goddess of fire, and legend states how they were created from her own sacred flames. They are noble birds who will serve the pure-hearted alone. They possess the power of speech and cannot abide the sight of evil.





Danor, Wizard of Basilea

Danor was once a reluctant student of the Basilean magical Order of the Ardent Light. The order – like many others in Basilea – claimed to have direct connection in their history to the legendary mage, Valandor the Great. They only accepted members whose ancestors fought alongside this figure – like Danor, who resisted becoming an apprentice for a long time. Once he did join the order, he was found to be a naturally gifted student of the magical arts.

It was Danor's expedition to the ruins of Du'Lan in pursuit of the necromancer Mortibris that changed everything. After encountering the still living spirit of Valandor, Danor seemed to glean some perspective and understanding of the greater war between the forces of good and evil, even going so far as to summon Valandor's spirit to the battlefield when the need was dire. Although he has spoken little of his experiences, it is clear that Danor now walks his own path, guided by some destiny that others cannot perceive.

Gnaeus Sallustis, Paladin Grand Master

Gnaeus Sallustis is the Grand Master of the order of Basilean paladins. His appearance on the battlefield is a bad omen for the enemies of Basilea, as no army he has led has ever lost a battle. He rides into battle atop his gigantic Basilean lion, Nakir, cutting a swathe through the enemy ranks to reach his ultimate objective: a final confrontation with the enemy general.

Supremely pious and devout, yet a terrifying warrior and cunning tactician, Gnaeus epitomises every aspect of what it means to be a paladin. As a novice, he showed uncanny talent and piety beyond his years. He was the youngest novice to ever be sent on an initiation – at the age of 14. He was immediately sworn as a brother and became a full paladin when he returned from his initiation quest riding a young Basilean lion.

Jullius, Dragon of Heaven & Samacris, Mother of Phoenixes

During the God War, the Celestial Fotia was split in two. The Shining One, who retained the name Fotia, and the Wicked One called Prykagia.

The wars between the two aspects were many, but their final conflict came during the Time of Ice. The pair were duelling upon the plains of Ardovakia. Prykagia had managed to find and wield an artefact of magical ice, an anathema to both her and her counterpart. She intended to end the Shining One with it. Fotia was supported by her mortal followers, including her high priestess, Irdima. Fotia cared greatly for

her followers and did her utmost to battle Prykagia and protect them from harm. Seeing this weakness, Prykagia launched a feint, moving to strike Irdima down. Fotia threw herself before the blow and was cleaved in half – as Prykagia had intended.

Her victory complete, Prykagia quit the field in a flash of light – retreating elsewhere to celebrate. Fotia's followers fled, fearing the worst.

Irdima was left alone on the battlefield, cradling the two parts of Fotia's corpse and weeping. Suddenly, by the great power of her words of love and frantic prayers, a miracle manifested and the two halves did not die. Instead, one half, representing the cauterising, vengeful, and warlike nature of fire, became the er-elohi Jullius, the Dragon of Heaven. The other half, representing the nurturing, renewing, and cleansing nature of fire, returned as the ur-elohi Samacris, Mother of Phoenixes.

And so, the Shining One who was Fotia was reborn as the Phoenix and the Dragon. Weaker now individually, they are more powerful united, and their story is told as a parable of passion and the indestructibility of love, their strength in unity giving rise to sayings such as 'You can't cut fire with a sword', meaning that the two lovers are inseparable.



DWARVES



IRONCLAD SERGEANT HADRIN STONEHEART
OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY



It is a common mistake amongst the peoples of Pannithor to fancy that they know the dwarfs. Scholars and poets across many lands happily parrot the old conceits: that the dwarfs embody the mountains they hail from, that they are as enduring as stone and that their backs are as strong as the spines of the ranges they mine; that their wisdom is timeless, their valour impeccable, and that their realms shine with the uplifted wealth of a thousand kingdoms of men. These might well serve as facts but do those who speak them truly understand the stout, strong armed, gravelly voiced wanderers that appear in metropolitan cities such as the Golden Horn of Basilea? Can they reconcile the image of the ancient and hardy people famed for their great martial virtues, whimsical fondness for alcohol, and stalwart opposition to evil with the dread that churns in the stomach at the mention of the mighty dwarf king Golloch and the swelling of his empire of subjugation? Such academics and artists are forced to admit that the gulf between these two visions of dwarfhood are deep indeed and that the actuality of the dwarfen character and the culture that informs it is not quite so simple as either extreme suggests.



The Great Pastime of Smoking

Mining, brewing, and craftsmanship spring readily to the minds of outsiders when considering what must surely be the wealthiest and most respected industries amongst dwarfkind. They are not wrong; however, the dwarfs themselves know that those clans with an ancestral claim to the so-called 'smoke trade' are amongst the richest and most influential in any region they operate in.

Even the most casual observation reveals dwarfs as keen smokers. Only the rarest and most outlandish of dwarfs goes far without a pipe and weed-pouch at his hip and the vaulted ceilings of grand dwarfen halls are thick with the warm blends of a hundred different flavours of exhalation. Every hold is riven with smoking chambers, asheries, and pipe-guild outlets. Dwarfs will typically smoke every chance they can get and consider being seen with a pipe between their lips a sign of good sense and virtue. In fact, it is popularly thought that a dwarf who does not smoke is somewhat strange and perhaps has spent too long surface-gazing and has lost his taste for 'the breath of Fulgria'. This is sometimes employed as a backhanded slight against rangers who, while they do smoke, are resented for forbidding the use of pipes while leading dwarf forces on scouting trails or in ambush.

The crafting of pipes and the cultivation of tobacco and other similar plants is a major concern in dwarfen economies and members of such clans and guilds are often placed shoulder to shoulder with great Warsmiths and renowned brewers on ruling councils and tribunals.

What can be said with complete certainty is that dwarfs are an intensely private people. Even those that live amongst humankind or as transient warriors upon the roads of the world let little slip of their true thoughts. Even at their most drunken excesses a dwarf will speak little to non-dwarfs of his own private thoughts. This is mirrored on a societal level as few non-dwarfs will ever come to know how the dwarfs live, what they feel, or even much of how they think. Their kingdoms, weather lauded or feared, are the very essence of true secret societies; rising, warring, and sometimes falling in complete seclusion beneath the earthen crust of Pannithor.

This penchant for secrecy is deeply rooted in dwarfen history and is reflected in one of their creation myths. The dwarfs have it that the goddess of the underworld – which to dwarfs signifies not an Abyssal hellscape but the deepest reaches of subterranea – was distraught at her inability to conceive. While the other powers of creation sired and nurtured mortal progeny on the surface, the barren goddess secreted herself away in her realm and wept for the children she could never

have and for the wasting of her passions on childless eternity. Her tears stained the very rock of her deep realm. In the strange admixture of divine sorrow, immortal desire, the elements of stone, the salt of enchanted tears, and the icy cold chill of deep-flowing water, a stalagmite took shape and became magically fertile. In awed disbelief, the goddess pared away the mound of stone and what her hands drew forth from the rocky afterbirth was a creature of noble aspect, inborn with all of her wisdom and love for deep places and earnest labours, a mistrust for the ephemeral sky and a resolute kinship with the hard, reassuring earth. Now the goddess wept for joy, and so were born the dwarfs.

The fullness of this myth is extraordinarily detailed and has been reproduced without variation or dispute as long as dwarfen history records. It is reflective of key dwarfen values. They see themselves as the rightful heirs of the underworld and all that is within it. It seems to champion the virtues of isolation and that great things can come of one's own will and one's own hands. That they record it so meticulously is also quite telling for it is a romantic tale and dwarfs are certainly not given to romance. The poetry of the dwarfs is criticised for being utterly bland and lacking all nuance. The dwarfs see these criticisms as high praise. It is often claimed by dwarfen balladeers and singers that their people have a deep love for the well-crafted word but to the dwarfen mind well-crafted means direct and unambiguous; its true meaning instantly and completely evident to any who encounter it.

The literalist approach to language can also be seen in the great crafts of the dwarfs. Everything from utensils, to clothing, to weapons all possess a direct practicality that makes elven and human crafts seem frivolous. This is not to say that the dwarfs do not enjoy decoration. Indeed, one of the great dwarfen past-times is displaying one's wealth, and gold inlays and silver trim abound on all sorts of objects. However, such ornamentation never betrays function or form. Dwarfen jewellery might be considered an exception as they are greatly fond of filigree and ostentation on their torcs and bands. Of course, it could be argued that such opulence is the form and function of jewellery and in that case the dwarfs are just as direct as ever.

The greatest of all of the dwarfen crafts is undoubtedly that of war. To look at a dwarf is to see a figure that is made for the labours of battle. They are very muscular and tough; their bones are dense and difficult to break. Their hands and wrists are large, dextrous, and dwarfs are almost impossible for other folk to grapple with or overpower. They are, of course, short; their compact frames give them a low centre of gravity that is planted squarely on steady legs and sturdy feet. They are broad of shoulder and their mass hunches forward, helping to protect their vital organs from taller foes. Add to this armour that is designed around their physiques – such as plates piled high atop their shoulders and brows and flexible coats of mail that guard their loins – and a dwarf becomes a



walking fortress. Indeed, armour is a great symbol of status amongst dwarven society and even in human realms it is rare to see a dwarf without at least a sturdy brigandine. Those who go without armour are invariably berserkers and as such are not 'proper' dwarfs according to the mores of dwarven culture.

In battle, dwarfs have been called 'artless' and 'blunt' by the generals of other folk. Again, the dwarven mind would struggle to find these anything but complimentary. They favour tactics that have stood as reliable and sure for untold generations of dwarfs, to the point where dwarven generals who have suffered a defeat at the hands of innovation mutter at the dishonour of their foes. For example, the great soliloquies against elven dishonour composed in the wake of the dwarven defeat at Black Pass will certainly be recited for untold generations to come.

Dwarven weapons of war reinforce their reputation for direct, workmanlike brutality; the axe and the hammer. Even in innovation the dwarfs do not stray from their values of forthrightness. The handgun is certainly an innovative weapon but it has been said that it is one that could only have been conceived by dwarfs. It is loud, dirty, and brutal. It has

no function save for the direct application of a penetrating deathblow. Elves, champions of elegant warfare, despise this weapon above all others, citing that it fosters no skill or beauty in its application. To dwarfs, its application, the act of war, is craft not art. It is hard work and earnest labour. Figurative statements of the elusive beauty of the killing stroke reveal all that a dwarf would ever care to know about the feeble elven conception of aesthetics.

Dwarfen Hold Schematic



rec. III.XI-R
Dept. Cultural Intelligence

Archivist: Glantiel Willowspear
Research: Perival Grochunstein
Cartographics: Willem of Tarn

Compiled from original works by P.
Grochunstein, circa 3257 c.e.

Archivist Notes:

This annotated schematic has been recreated and updated from originals by PG - historian and emissary. A wealth of information was collated and presented in crude sketches and pocketbook notes, found in PG's study upon his death, indicate his familiarity with the internal layouts of Imperial dwarfen holds, noting that, in his belief, each hold is constructed following a closely guarded but templated framework.

PG's research, conducted while acting as envoy to the Imperial court, was cut short and never completed, due to escalating concerns over security following the incident at Ironhold (rec: c.ppp.i-a)

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|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. CURTAIN WALL | 13. FORGEFATHER'S WORKSHOPS |
| 2. AGRICULTURE (TOBACCO FIELDS, ETC) | 14. SMITHY |
| 3. MAIN HOLD GATE | 15. FOOD STORAGE |
| 4. WATCHTOWER | 16. BREWERY |
| 5. ELEVATOR TO STORAGE CHAMBERS | 17. KITCHEN |
| 6. BARRACKS | 18. PRINTING PRESS |
| 7. MARKET HALL | 19. MINE |
| 8. TROOP ROOM | 20. DWGGEOD |
| 9. KING'S CHAMBERS | 21. GREAT LIBRARY |
| 10. TREASURY | 22. TEMPLE OF THE ORDER OF STONE |
| 11. ALTAR OF FLAME | 23. JOINTING CHAMBERS |
| 12. FEASTING HALL | ? UNKOWN/UNEXPLORED BY OVIKIDERS |



Warsmiths

The handgun is only one of a great array of arms devised and built by a special caste of dwarfen society: the Warsmiths. Each dwarfen clan within a hold is bent to a particular avenue of industry, but the Warsmiths have almost complete dominion over the accoutrements of war and they are unfettered by clan loyalties or political boundaries. Instead they are beholden to an array of interrelated guilds, each of which operates like a small part of a greater machine. The Warsmiths refer to these guilds as 'chambers' and each has its own secrets, jealously guarded. A dwarf wishing to become a Warsmith need only forsake his clan ties and make pilgrimage to one of the chambers that dot dwarfendom. Here, he falls into a life that can only be compared to monasticism. Each chamber guards the long-perfected secrets of a single facet of the Warsmith's art. One chamber may be devoted to the honing of axe blades and another to the precise fitting of armour to its wearer and still others to the more cryptic interrelations of cogs or the measuring of blasting sand.

A Warsmith is expected to take an oath to the chamber and remain there in seclusion, learning from the grandmasters of that one particular skill until he has mastered it. Then he may remain, a master himself, or continue his training as an Undgwer (literally 'journeying man'), wandering from chamber to chamber mastering the hundreds of discreet skills that make up the Warsmith's discipline. Such dwarfs are renowned as great innovators of war-crafts and at least a few new chambers are founded each century. Likewise, some chambers have been lost for all time, either to the depredation of monstrous foes or simple calamity. Some few of these 'empty chambers' have taken their secrets with them leaving the remaining Warsmiths to puzzle over the unknown natures of such concepts as 'cold forging' and 'the balancing of the inlay'. Once a Warsmith's journeying days are behind him he may freely practise the secret crafts he has learned, oftentimes returning to his hold and clan. A Warsmith is a great prize to any hold, however, and they are known to receive lavish offers of patronage from lords, kings, or entire communities of dwarfs.

The comparison to monasticism is apt for each chamber is a temple in a very literal sense. Each one is dominated by an altar of flame, a steel structure kept white hot year round in tribute to Fulgria, perhaps the single most revered divine figure amongst the dwarfs. She is the Goddess of the White Fire and hers is the purity of the forge, the heat of the earth, and, through them, the transformative arts of forging and reshaping that allow mere ore to become a brilliant treasure. It is to her that the Warsmiths offer their passions and their craft and with her fiery will the true marvels of the dwarfen world are born. Of course, no divinity is without its darkened double and Fulgria is opposed by Ariagful, She of the Red Flow. Just as her name evokes both lava and blood, hers is the dominion of the undisciplined forge and terrible violence. The distinction is manifest amongst the dreaded Abyssal Dwarfs, who revere Ariagful and turn her savage philosophy toward the crafting of the crude blunderbusses of the Decimators – simplistic and ugly weapons that nonetheless sacrifice nothing in terms of direct killing power. These weapons are in fact marked by an unnecessary brutality that re-enforces their functions as weapons of fear and terror, offering no clean deaths to those caught in their clouds of shrapnel. Furthermore, Ariagful is all too happy to tempt dwarfs with sorcerous solutions to practical problems, an offer that the Abyssal Dwarfs are only too happy to embrace.

This devotion to one of the Shining Ones – who most dwarfs do not accept as gods – sets those more traditionalist dwarfs on edge – especially those of the Free Clans. This might go some way towards explaining why the Imperial dwarf armies can be found fielding the Warsmiths' latest innovations and weapons, while the Free Dwarfs stick to older, reliable weapons, such as crossbows and hammers. Forged weapons and masterful artifice have been a mark of dwarfen society for centuries, as much for the Free Clans as for the Imperials. In the end, even the most stubborn dwarf cannot deny the worth and usefulness of a Warsmith's craft and will pay handsomely to procure their services.



The Order of Stone

While the Warsmiths embrace a spirituality that elves or men might find easy to relate to, much stranger is the arcane Order of Stone. Dwarfs are famous for their lack of affinity for magic. Not only does the typical dwarf consider it a frivolous crutch leaned on by other cultures, the dwarf mind is such that the unnatural patterns of thought required to practice the secret arts are almost impossible for the logical and forthright dwarfs to perform. That said, every generation there are a bare few dwarfs born 'stonewise' who have an innate connection to the all that is earthen and deep. A world of mysticism is open to them and from an early age they are able to sense the very spirits of stone and gem. Such dwarfs live troubled lives, for this is the stuff of magic and their families will not understand the way they stare at formations of rock or patterns of sediment. Indeed, those around such strange dwarfs will rightly fear the calamities that can be brought about by unchecked sorceries. The Order of Stone exists to find such dwarfs and bring them under its care. The Order is composed entirely of such 'stonetouched' dwarfs and has, over long centuries, become a powerful and influential structure in the dwarfen realms. Within the bounds of the Order, a dwarf finds kinship with those that understand him and he may master the great secrets of stone and one day assume the mantle of Stone Priest; an uncontested master of the elemental forces of the underworld and a living echo of the mythic origins of the dwarfs. Proper dwarf society will still fear and mistrust him but these feelings will be deeply couched in respect, for none can deny the great value such dwarfs bring to their realms in times of trouble.

The Battle of Black Pass

The Battle of Black Pass was an early event in the centuries following the War with Winter, remembered shamefully by dwarfs to this day. After a centuries' long blood-feud, the elf prince Nualador lured the dwarfen army of the Ironhelm clan into Black Pass and a bloody slaughter.

In the twisting maze of canyons of the Knife Spires, Nualador and his kinsmen engaged the dwarfs in a series of masterfully directed hit-and-run attacks. The two armies faced each other across the narrow defile of Black Pass, and the dwarfs marched resolutely through the hail of arrows launched by the elves. They outnumbered the elves heavily and were confident of victory. Just before the dwarf charge hit home, the elves turned tail and fled, their ranks seemingly in utter disarray. The dwarfs pushed forward, advancing further up the ever-narrowing canyon in pursuit of the fleet-footed elves. As the walls closed in, the crush became ever more oppressive as the entire dwarf army surged forwards. Only then did Nualador launch his trap. The young prince had positioned vast batteries of Dragon's Claw bolt throwers upon the ridges overhead, and as the dwarfs pushed into the narrow defile below, they unleashed their fury. The dwarfs could not escape the brutal fire of the war machines, so tightly packed where they, and hundreds died in the first barrage. Those elves that had been feigning flight turned back upon their pursuers, cutting them down with relentless waves of bow fire before Nualador led the counter-charge of his spearmen, breaking the back of the enemy army and cutting through them without mercy. The dwarf momentum was stymied and their army crumbled under the sheer fury of the elven blades. Nevertheless, it was the horrific toll that the Dragon's Claw bolt throwers exacted that accounted for the vast majority of the dwarf casualties that day. By sundown, it became clear that more than ten thousand dwarfs had been slain, including their lord, Balor Ironhelm III, for the loss of less than fifty elves.



Berserkers

Stone priests are not the only dwarfs to break from the norm. Under the grim influences of the 'red curse', berserkers are likely the most famous rogues of all of dwarfen society and are renown far abroad for their terrifying efficacy on the battlefield. The red curse is popularly thought to be brought on by ancestral anger at the many great tragedies of dwarfen history, but an examination of berserker writing and poetics, as unencumbered by subtext as any dwarfen art, reveals that almost any emotional duress may plant the seed of this so-called curse. A dwarf who struggles greatly with the weight of a broken heart, dissolution with his craft, or even the great shame of exile may feel the red curse upon him.

The red curse is characterised as a great and violent rage that fills a dwarf with bloodlust and inures him to pain but it is only on the battlefield that berserkers work themselves up into their famous frenzy. In private, the curse manifests as a great and dismal lethargy. Dwarfs engage with depression as directly as they do any other foe and wilfully feast and drink to excess until their lassitude is buried beneath their assumed joys. Berserkers often form tightly-knit groups in support of each other and the largest and most famous of these is the great hold of Cwl Gen under the renowned berserker king, Sveri Eligax. The realm of this legendary warrior is known for almost constant feasting and celebration and for its major export: bloodthirsty warriors.

Some berserkers become addicted to the battle frenzy for all woes vanish in the heat and rush of combat. These congregate not in Cwl Gen but wander farther north where promises of eternal bloodshed are uttered in secret tongues beneath dark skies. Such berserkers are named 'vanished fellows' by their brethren and it is hoped that they are never encountered again.

DWARFEN ORIGINS

The great histories of the dwarfs remain unknown to the world at large having passed by deep beneath the mountains of Abkhazia and Halpi that rise endlessly in the east of the world. Generation upon generation has lived and died in total seclusion. Great wars and campaigns have been undertaken far from the gaze of the sun and great heroes have carved legends that have never reached the ears of men or elves. Even during the fabled Time of Light when the civilisations of the three noble people were at their zeniths, the dwarfs were insular and secretive; dealing with outsiders only on very specific (although not unfriendly) terms. While Primovantor glimmered brightly beneath the heavens and Elvenholme stretched afar as a grand and united realm, the dwarfs made their deepest delving and their mightiest constructions; cities and halls, timeless and fixed with endless grandeur, secreted beneath the earth. Secreted, too, was the dwarfen spirituality of those times. Little has ever been learned of the particulars

of the dwarfs' relations with the Celestians. Today, it is difficult to discern if the underworld goddess of the dwarfen creation myth has Celestian origin or if she is an older figure, or even if her aspect was taken up by one or more Celestians to better influence the dwarfs. It could be that Fulgria and Ariagful, the light and dark aspects of fiery, earthen creation, are the remains of this masquerade but of this matter the dwarfs say nothing.

Despite some skirmishes and minor feuds, the military history of the dwarfs does not truly intersect with men and elves until the wild throes of the God War. This was the first time the full force of the dwarfen war-machine was on display and of all the great rumblings that shook the earth in those terrifying days, the march of the dwarfen legions were surely amongst the deepest.

Before this era, the dwarfs paid only moderate heed to the ways of surface warfare, happy as they were to cede the open spaces of the surface beyond their mountains to those who were born to it. Their traditional foes were monsters of the deep, marauding goblin bands, or, occasionally, rival clans, all to be fought from tunnel to cramped tunnel and cavern to rocky cavern. The God War brought the dwarfs to a new orientation of war: the pitched battlefield. This was an environment where the dwarfs were forced to shed the long-drilled traditions of subterranean warfare and embrace new tactics that could exploit the dimensions and sight-lines of the surface: dense gun lines, terrifying artillery, and vast blocks of infantry all commanded by generals who could see the battlefield in its entirety from atop strategic rises. The dwarfs did not struggle with these unfamiliar methodologies. They excelled.

During this period the hitherto obscure tradition of dwarfen rangers grew to greater prominence. There had always been a need for warriors specialising in surface tactics to guard the passes and valleys where valuable surface industries such as herding aurochs or growing crops for the lucrative smoke-trade are conducted. With greater attention turned to the world above, the ranger was suddenly a boon to the efforts of dwarfen warfare and security. The role was and remains largely the province of the young and the curious. Most such dwarfs are expected to get their fascination of the sky and wind out of their system by true adulthood but some never do, going on to become grandmasters of the arts of path finding, hunting, and tracking.

Sadly, the God War took a toll on the dwarfs' already fragile capacities for trusting outsiders. Hard-won diplomatic bonds fell away and more and more often the dwarfs practised the arts of surface war against former allies over debts and slights both great and small. The elves bore the worst of dwarfen ire as the mountain folk, perhaps rightly, placed the blame for the ruined state of the world squarely on their shoulders. While this was a bitter time in many respects it was also a period of growth and expansion for the dwarfs as



great wealth in gold and gems was struck in the north and a mighty wealth-rush into the Hapli Mountains led to the founding and expansion of many new holds. The boldest and greediest of these dwarfs paid no heed to the dire warnings and omens of Warsmith and stone priest alike and ventured far into the rich lands that abut the Abyss; a shattered land where the rending of that great and evil void tore many of the most precious ores and gems up from the earth and left them scattered about the very surface. Then came the reign of Winter and contact with those adventurous souls was lost.



The dreadful Winter War took a black toll on the dwarfs and it is here that can be seen the first signs of the great division in their people. When men and elves called for aid in the titanic struggles of the surface, the dwarfs of Abkrazia were reluctant to answer. It is said that Odador the Twice-Crowned, the high king of those times, mulled long over the decision to join the war. After weeks of council, it was decreed that the old oaths to man and elf still held and that the dwarfs would march. No decision in dwarfen history has ever been regretted so quickly or so deeply. Firstly, the northern dwarfs, wealthy, powerful, and secure in their newly delved holds refused the order of the high king to join the war. Odador knew he could not compel those mighty holds to march without risking bloodshed and resolved to deal with them later. The grand army that took to the frozen surface of the world was thus under-strength, demoralised, and wavering in its faith to its monarch. It suffered tremendous losses in the field as whole clans lost the entirety of their fighting strength and had to be absorbed into stronger clans to avoid annihilation. Not even the royal household was spared as Odador was cast from the walls of a Primovantian fortress by a triumphant archfiend. His body was recovered and he stubbornly lived on within his crushed armour for many hours, speaking deliriously of the duty that now lay on his three sons. None had the heart to tell him that all three had been slain. While Winter was defeated, the dwarfs were never the same. They returned in misery to their kingless kingdom and sealed their gates to the surface world for many decades to come.

The northern dwarfs, for all their might and surety in their fortifications, also suffered greatly during the war. More than the loss of surface meat and good leaf to fill their pipes, the coming of the Winter War brought with it an assault by terrible forces from below. Frenzied hordes of orcs and goblins broke through the upper fortifications of many holds while the shapeless and unspeakable horrors of the Abyss bubbled up from hitherto unknown depths to lay waste to others. The fighting was bitter and many holds, clans and families simply vanished in the horrific time known as the fall of the north. Even with all of the strength bent to the struggle, only five holds survived the onslaught: the bloody minded Cwl Gen, the pragmatic Gars, the stoic Marn, the so-called 'tomb-hold' of Llyfanifeg and defiant Rhyn Dufaris, known as 'the peak' for having been carved into the upper spires of Mount Rhimerad.

All of dwarfendom was thus devastated, kingless and divided. The dwarfs of the south saw their northern kin as betrayers and oath breakers whose refusal to join the war led directly to unspeakable losses and the termination of the royal line. For their part, those in the north cursed the southern dwarfs for following the foolish edict of an unwise king; leaving them friendless against a terrible foe that, had the fighting strength of the north not been there to sacrifice itself, would have devoured every hold, clan and kinship in all the dwarfen realms.

The two sides would never trust each other again. The newly minted Free Clans in the north declared that they would never be beholden to any king, lord, or power to ever rise from the southern holds. In the south, the death of Odador and his sons left an incredible power vacuum and many lords vied to fill the gap and claim possession of the Royal Hoard.

A series of weak high kings followed. Each was wanting for regal stature and able to grasp the throne only briefly through highly disputed claims. As such few of these kings had any real loyalty from those outside their own clans. This led to disaster as, during the brief reign of Kludis Foesweeper the Royal Hoard was infiltrated and the greatest of its treasures were gone. The Twenty-Seven Boons of the Gods, most prized and beloved of all dwarfen treasures, were stolen by a no-account thief called Gilgulli, later named 'goldless', the most shameful of all dwarfen titles. Ashamed at his powerlessness in keeping the Royal Hoard secure, Kludis abdicated and removed himself from gentler dwarfen society by taking on the strange oaths of the berserker.

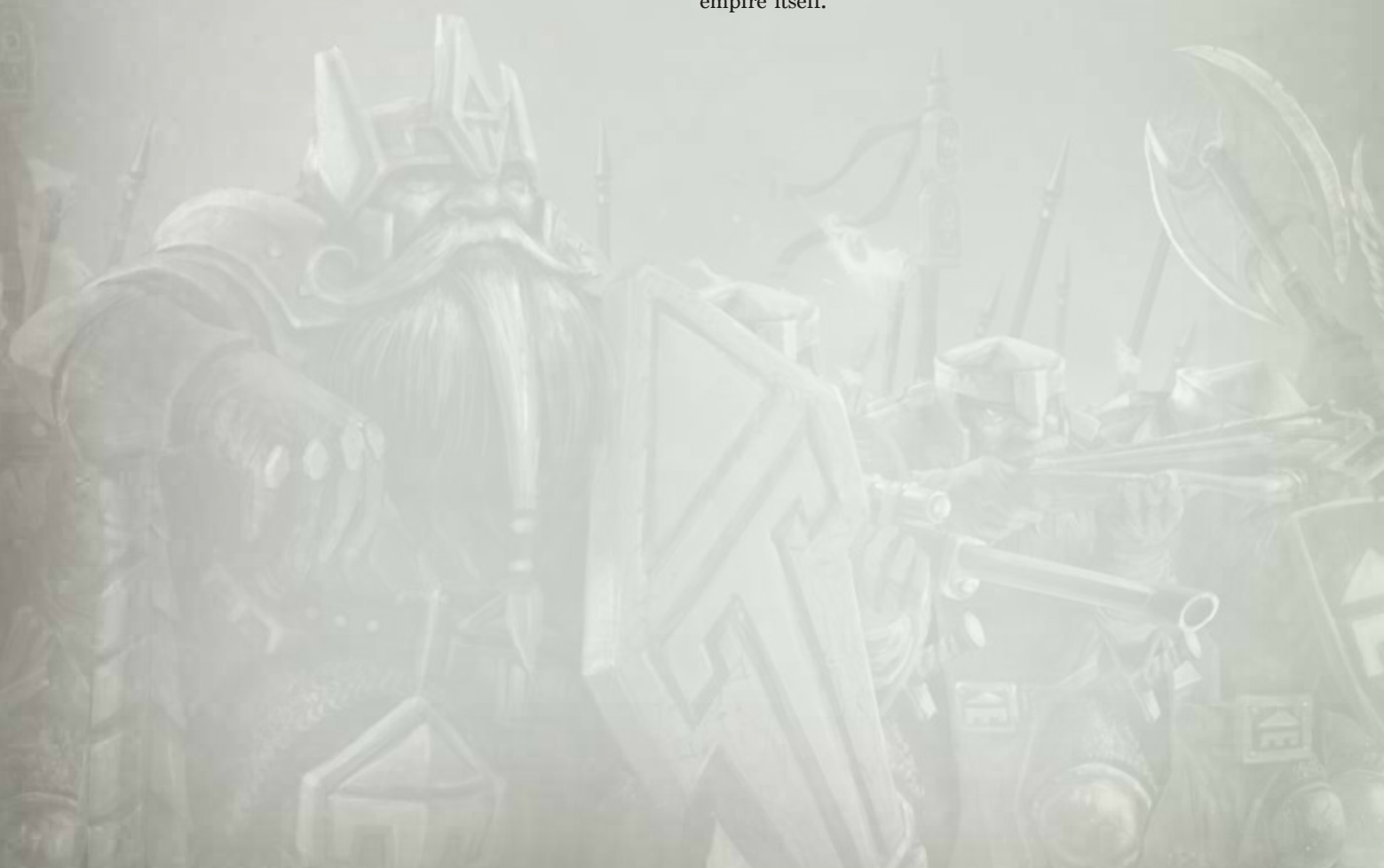
The scrabbling for the throne would end with the claim of Golloch. For long this king had bided his time. His clan was wealthy and large, having absorbed a great many of the Sundered clans of the Winter War and thus his troves were bolstered by theirs and he had a surplus of marriageable women and a host of loyal orphaned wards who were by now coming into age as strapping dwarf warriors. These were all tokens he would employ in his rise to power.



Golloch did have a legitimate claim to the throne through his mother Dorak the Instant (who by all accounts was a temperamental hag) but he did not pursue his claim in any direct or proper fashion. Instead he approached it in a way that could only be called mannish. With his wealth he took on the debts of impoverished clans. He arranged favourable marriages for many of his foster daughters and other womenfolk of his hold into the wealthiest of his rival clans (collecting handsome dowries and oaths of friendship as he did so), and for those clans who would not be brought into his loyalty or his debt he arranged embargoes of trade enforced by his menacing and ever-growing military. Moreover, several of his outstanding rivals suffered conspicuous misfortunes such as landslides, cave-ins, and deep, pure streams suddenly becoming tainted. Many holds realised what Golloch was up to but general disunity amongst them prevented any effective opposition and many kings refused to believe that any dwarf would stoop so low as to seize power politically rather than by pursuing a just claim. Much of Abkhazia was thus unprepared when Golloch renamed his great hold 'Caeryn Golloch', declared himself High King, and demanded that all loyalties of all dwarfs be turned immediately to him; any who refused could consider themselves at war. A great many refused.

So began the bloodiest and most shameful chapter in dwarfen history: the great civil war. Here the worst traits of the dwarfs were made clear. Brother turned against brother as greed overtook valour. Promises of great peerage and wealth in the new dwarfen empire drove great rifts in sturdy allegiances and brought many dissenters to heel behind the ascendant Golloch. Those that fell to the new High King's military might were subjugated. Many clans sought to avoid this fate and fled northwards toward the freeholds, causing new and bloody conflicts to erupt as imperial dwarf clashed with free clansmen as Golloch closed his iron fist around Abkhazia. When the dust had settled, Golloch stood atop a great new empire and bore a new title: Conqueror.

Conquest remains the chief pastime of Imperial dwarfs as Golloch's tyrannical ambition pushes his borders ever outward. In the north his hand reaches toward the free holds. In the west, his fingertips brush against the very walls of Basilea. To the east, many free cities of men now feel the weight of the imperial yoke as they are pressed into vassalage from below. Only the south and the deserts of Ophidia seem free from Golloch's ambitions. Here his empire terminates suddenly in the great Southern Watchline, a vast wall carved and built upon the very mountains. Great fortresses rise from this vast barrier that stretches across the breadth of the empire itself.



The free Dwarfs held steady in the north, watching with glowering apprehension the glow of Golloch's northernmost holdings from across the sea of Suan. These dwarfs looked not to expansion but to reclamation; bringing the lost holds of the north back to prominence and prestige. The north became a haven for dwarfs seeking to escape the tyranny of Golloch and return to the ways of old, when dwarfs shunned the outer world instead of vying to claim it. Few Warsmiths pilgrimaged between these realms and the secrets of several chambers had become all but exclusive to the Free dwarfs or their imperial rivals, leading to not only differences in general military comportment but in battle philosophy, iconography, and culture; the horned helm and the round shield has become a potent anti-Imperial device while the Bearded axe and iron-banded hammerhead have come to symbolise the rightness of imperial rule.

There was one place where Free and Imperial dwarfs could meet without fear of violence: Culloch Mor. This is a rocky outcropping topped with bleak, hardy trees that juts up from the very centre of the Great Cataract; the vast and terrifying waterfall formed by the high sea of Bari disgorging itself eternally into the low sea of Suan. This sacred place could be reached by the Chainway; an incredible feat of dwarfen ingenuity that joined the north and south to Culloch Mor by way of ferries that were pulled along a great chain that hung over the very lip of the Cataract. On certain nights, Free and Imperial dwarfs stood with each other in the shadow of the altar of Culloch Mor to treat with each other, sometimes on matters of state, other times to re-unite briefly with estranged relatives or friends. The Chainway was maintained by the

only clan to remain neutral during the civil war: the dour Thistledew clan; a cryptic lineage that held neither with the north or the south but seemingly only with the roar of the waters and the surety of the chain. Alas, the Chainway was severed over a decade ago, when the Abyssal Dwarfs invaded from the north and took the Halpi Mountains for themselves.

Thus is the world presented with a cleft civilisation when it gazes upon the dwarfs. The cities and lands of men are no stranger to the stout folk – Basilea in particular is rich with the benefits of long association and the City of the Golden Horn is home to no less than three free clans who, while cloistered in their quarter of the city with typical dwarfen aloofness, are invaluable allies and advisors on how best to handle the reaching of Golloch. More common across the land are dwarfen adventurers, alone or in small groups, who reject the conflicts of Halpi and Abkhazia and take to the world at large. Successful examples often summon their families, their family's allies, bondsdwarfs, respected Warsmiths, artisans, and assorted hangers on, and before long new holds have appeared in remote corners of Pannithor.

All the while, however, the threat of Golloch's desire hangs over much of the world and the very word 'dwarf' has come to evoke fears of conquest and war as much as it has long been associated with steadfast honour and stout nobility. This is the duality that now marks the dwarfs and their ambiguous position in the world. One thing remains certain, however: they have endured the worst excesses of both god and mortal and their realm, though divided, remains undiminished.



THE DELIRIUM OF BETRAYAL

Ramborim's part in the dwarf Civil War was over the moment he struck off the head of his brother. The helm fell away as the neck gave beneath the sweep of the axe and the head rolled naked down the rocky mountainside; hair and beard tumbling over each other, becoming smaller and smaller. A great cheer went up as the deed was done, Ramborim's supporters jubilant at his victory-stroke. Ramborim did not hear it, however. He was transfixed by the muffled thumping of the severed head as it bounced and rolled from rock to rock, striking each in turn. Now and then there was a glint from within the tumult of hair; an eye, wide with shock, flashed into view, locked with Ramborim's gaze for the briefest of instants, then was gone; rolling, rolling, and rolling away.

Hands seized Ramborim. He looked up to see his banner rise up against the sun. Its dancing silhouette was pierced by the glow of the great orb and, though it was surely of the finest make and entwined with jewels and golden chains, it seemed a frail and threadbare thing as the rays of the sun punched through it, making it look like the bare wisps of a dark and ghostly shroud. Ramborim felt his hand being raised in glory and of great and tight embraces from those he valued; those who supported him and surely loved him though he hardly knew their names. He was lord, now, of Deepglitter hold, and his hand had been just. The crowd swept around him and a bagpipe hummed above the tumult of voices and newly-struck pipe smoke. Someone took the axe from his hand as a great cloak was wrapped around his shoulders. A crown was pressed upon his brow and the edge of its silver-wrought brim bit into his flesh. It does not fit, his thoughts told him, but soon, in the deep of the hold, they were silenced.

The throne seemed too big for him, and his elbows hung short of the bone-chased arm-rests. A herald had appeared, clad thickly in the livery of Golloch, and from

a graven tablet he read of Ramborim's new titles. He was now Ramborim the Loyal Beyond Blood, Stain-Cleaver, Eater of Betrayals, Lord amongst the Loyal, The Wise, the True-Fisted, First Among Friends, and more and more. As they were read, Ramborim's back stiffened. His posture became prideful. His elbows became rigid as his arms seemed to encompass the throne. He felt his face smile. He had done right.

A coffer was brought forth, its bulk encompassed by great iron chains and a gilded lock. The herald of Golloch brought down his silvered hammer and the lock was no more – what is given now shall not be retaken was the grand gesture Ramborim knew. Cries of awe came up from the courtiers – his courtiers; his clan, now, though the faces were new. Jewels filled Ramborim's eyes. Rings of gold and platinum. Amulets of silver and ruby stud. A figurine of Fulgria, arms thrust toward him beneath her jade eyes, her hands full of shining white fire. His mouth was moving. He breathed; 'mine.'

Before him the traitors were paraded. He held his freshly jewelled fingers to his chin and he heard their pleas. They spoke of closeness and rightness and bonds of blood; of the sale of a legacy and true betrayals. In his heart pains were stirred. He looked to the herald who shook his head. Ramborim shook his head too and waved away the pleadings of the chained. 'Conspirators,' his mouth said as his eyes were locked to the white fire sat proudly by his throne, 'no blood of mine.'

So he said of his brother's wife, and of his nephews and nieces, and bondsmen to his house. His old arms master, who taught him the sweep of the axe, spat at his feet, cursed the name of Golloch and what his gold could buy. The herald had him taken away and suspended further sentencing until tomorrow.

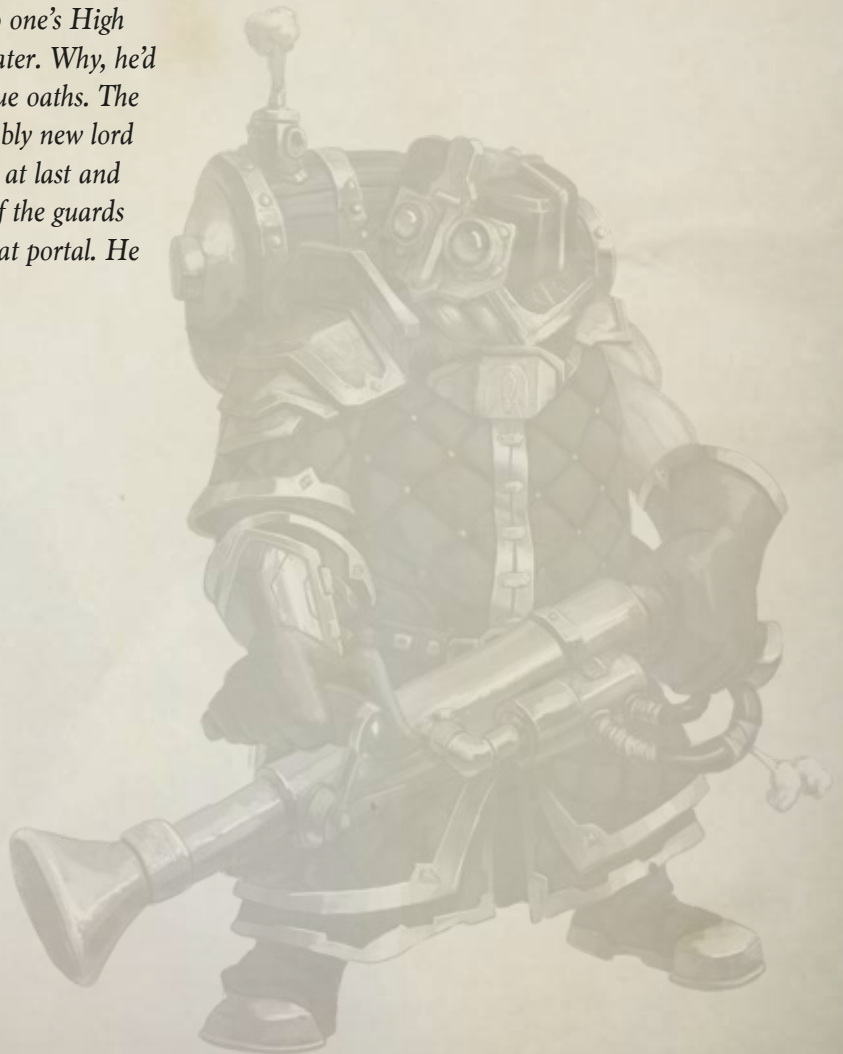


Food was brought by unfamiliar servants and Ramborim filled his belly with the tasteless flesh of surface cattle and the empty satisfaction of his household's mead.

His mead, by rights. A balladeer raised his voice and the words made it clear as they formed the struggle of Ramborim. He alone was courageous and stood against the corruption of his house. Rightful High King Golloch was generous to the brave who kept true to the oaths of fealty to the High Throne. None who were betrayers – not beggars, not princes, not kin – were right to rule over any corner of the great realm that was beneath Golloch's gaze. Ramborim, great champion, was so honoured.

The Herald led unsteady Ramborim away, teetering with the depth of his cups. His words spoke of how older oaths mattered more than new ones; mattered more than blood and all. They were the real oaths; sworn to one's High King, whomever it be. No lineage was greater. Why, he'd sire a new lineage! One rightwise to the true oaths. The herald smiled and nodded and led the wobbly new lord to his bedchamber. The door swung closed at last and Ramborim smiled drunkenly at the faces of the guards outside as they disappeared behind the great portal. He couldn't place their faces.

He sat down onto the comforting hardness of his bed, cradling the shiny figure of Fulgria in his broad hands. He looked deeply into the white flame and saw his moist lips smiling back at him in the weird curves of the platinum fire. He tried to follow the distorted reflection and marvelled at how much that smile now looked like a frown, and how his moustaches and cheeks were suddenly damp. In the strange illusion of the graven fire, his lips had come apart and he knew then that he was howling. His eyes stung and he squeezed them tight. His fingers clenched the figurine desperately as he fell backward onto the bed, his face contorted with painful shame. Behind his eyes there was a glimmer in the dark; the flashing of a sad, dead eye in a head that was rolling and rolling and rolling away.





LOSS OF THE HALPI MOUNTAINS

A decade ago, the power of the Abyss waxed strong, and the world was thrown into a great war with the Abyss and all of the evils it had spawned. The dwarfs' dark kin, now empowered by the fell demons flowing from the Abyss, surged south, eager to wipe out the dwarfs once and for all. The invasion was larger than any could have predicted, tens of thousands of slaves and Blacksouls marched ahead of hundreds of mortars, whose infernal firepower was so great it blocked out the sky. Shambling, mewling Halfbreeds and Grotesques, in seemingly endless varieties of form and size, were goaded into battle by their cruel creators. Although they were too stubborn to admit it, the dwarfs never stood a chance.

Each battle that followed could be considered a legend in its own right. At Cwl Gen, Jarrun Iremonger bought time for the dwarf armies to march south and regroup with their kin by emptying his workshop and the hold's entire armoury. Well over a hundred warmachines held the walls of the hold. For seven days and nights they fired continuously, making the foe pay dearly for every step they took. The siege only ended when the last of the Ironclad had evacuated and reserves of ammunition had been all but depleted. Iremonger and the rest of the crews fought a retreat to join the muster, buying themselves time by detonating the last of their powder reserves - bringing the hold itself down upon the advancing armies.

The legions of the Abyssal Dwarfs could not be stopped. Each hold valiantly fought to the last, but try as they might, they simply couldn't match the Abyssal Dwarf's numbers. When the Abyssal Dwarfs broke through, they butchered the defenders and razed their homes. So much was lost in both life and history that many dwarfs fell to the red curse. In the Battle of the Bloody Steppe, berserker king Sveri Egilax led an entire army of these blood-mad survivors, fighting more for honour than for any kind of tangible victory. Though each warrior took scores of the enemy with them, the Abyssal Dwarfs' greed could not be halted.

The final muster of forces gathered at Rhyn Dufaris. As the closest hold to the Great Cataract, it was the only chance of survival against the impossible odds. Although it galled the Free Dwarfs to abandon their homeland, they knew that staying would mean not just their deaths, but that all of the history of their holds being forgotten and lost. Warriors and civilians from every hold in the mountains had come, each carrying tales of miraculous survival and endless cruelty and desolation. The evacuation efforts were painfully slow, the Chainway being unable to transport too many at a time.

The last to arrive were Herneas and a single regiment of his rangers, all bloodied and exhausted. They came bearing a single message:

They are coming.

As the armies of the Abyssal Dwarfs marched from the mountains, the number of Free Dwarfs remaining on the shores of the Great Cataract dwindled. Ironclad, Bulwarkers and Ironguard from a dozen different holds stood shoulder to shoulder, resisting the tides of slaves as the last refugees boarded the ships. When they retreated, it was slowly and reluctantly. They were still fighting when they boarded the ferries of the Chainway. Artillery fire screamed overhead, most shots missing the crafts. Those that did hit severed the ferries' connection to the chains underwater, sending the occupants cascading into the mists of the waterfall. The final warriors left behind were to defend the Chainway's mechanisms at all costs until the survivors were safely across to the other shore. Victory was won by the slightest of margins - as the last dwarf disembarked, the last defender fell.

They were met by the dwarfs of the Thistledew clan. Although they had chosen to take no part in the defence or the evacuation, they knew of the infernal forces awaiting on the distant shore and knew what must be done. It was the head of that clan, Baine Thistledew, who hefted his enchanted Greataxe and stuck the massive chains. Though it took many blows, eventually the link was shorn in two. With a sound of tortured metal, the entire Chainway pulled away from the shore and sank into the depths. The dwarfs stood in a sullen silence, considering the loss of the sacred meeting place and what it meant for the future of their kind. They awaited the Abyssal Dwarf invasion. It never came.

The Aftermath

Unknown to the dwarfs, the rest of the world had struck a victory against the Abyss. The Green Lady, the leader of the Forces of Nature and the last remaining Celestian, summoned her most powerful mages to melt one of the glaciers to the far north of Tragar. The resulting flood consumed the Abyss, which now lay steaming under a newly formed lake. With their homeland under attack and their power cut off, the Abyssal Dwarfs could not risk further conflict. Thus, they consolidated their position, but many of the legions retreated back to Tragar.

The Free Dwarfs were met by an entourage on behalf of Golloch. The leading herald announced that they shared the pain of the refugees and that every single Free Dwarf would be welcomed with open arms into the holds of their kin. There was no way to mask the chastising nature of the speech - the Free Dwarfs had not been able to defend their homes,



TRAGAR

The Halpi Mountains

rec XIII.11.a

Detailing the Lost Lands of the Free Dwarfs, desecrated and despoiled by their traitorous kin and other foul things.

- | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|----------------|
| | Dwarf Hold | | Dwarf Port | TRAILS: |
| | Desecrated Dwarf Hold | | Dwarf Mine | |
| | Dwarf Keep | | Caverns | |
| | Ruined Dwarf Keep | | Abyssal Dwarf Stronghold | |

- KNOWN FACTIONS VYING FOR CONTROL -**
- Free Dwarfs
 - Abyssal Dwarfs
 - Goblins
 - Ravens
 - Undead

and were looked down on because of it. Regardless of this, the leaders of the Free Dwarfs gave their respectful gratitude – they knew what would happen to voices of dissent.

The scattered clans of the Free Dwarfs now live across Pannithor. Many reside in the northern realms of Abercarr and, in recent years, further into Estacarr – living in an uneasy truce with their Imperial brethren. Some have relocated to the lands of men – the dwarfen quarter of the City of the Golden Horn in Basilea is now full to bursting. Many have chosen to make the dangerous journey to the outlying dwarf holds in other lands.

Banick grunted as he spotted the towering archway that signalled the entrance to King Golloch's domain. It had been some time since he had been here. He paused for a moment before the surging crowd of dwarfs began pushing him forward once more. He tightened his grip on the drill - desperately trying to ignore the bloodstains that streaked the handle - and pulled it behind him.

His attention was grabbed by the sound of laughter ahead... a sound few of them had heard recently. A group of young dwarfs were climbing up Craggoth's back and using the Elemental's blue crystals as makeshift handholds. When they got to the top, Craggoth would lift them down so they could repeat the process once more. Banick swore he could hear a rumbling laugh coming from Craggoth.

Banick wasn't sure how the magic that bound the elemental together worked but no matter the battles they had fought alongside each other, the arcane powers that held him together never seemed to falter.

Craggoth turned and gave the Dwarf a wave. Banick hoped it would hold for a bit longer... or at least until he could consult a Stone Priest. Since joining forces with Craggoth, he'd become strangely attached to the lumbering giant. The pair made an odd but effective fighting force. Banick considered if he could learn the magic needed to maintain the elemental's dwindling life force.

The line of dwarfs stretched as far as Banick could see. They were all refugees from the war against the Abyss.

The Imperial Dwarfs' arrogance has only grown. In their hubris, they believe that Golloch and his empire is so fearsome, that the Abyssal Dwarfs were afraid to attack them - lest they risk the wrath of Golloch himself. Under the leadership of the hero Rordin, they have retaken their ancient capital of Dolgarth - worryingly close to Basilea - and started fortifying it with every artifice Golloch's Warsmiths can produce. Their derision of the Free Dwarfs is clear and although the two groups are living amicably for now, there are tensions rising on both sides. With the Abyssal Dwarf threat fading into memory, it is only a matter of time before the truce is forgotten.

They had been pushed from their homes in the Halpi Mountains by the swarm of vengeful Abyssal Dwarfs that descended upon them. With nowhere to go, they had fled across the Great Cataract and into the kingdom of Golloch. The Free Dwarfs weren't so free anymore.

Of course, Golloch's songsmiths told of a great victory against the Abyssal Dwarfs. They sang of a courageous last stand against countless hordes of Blacksouls, Gargoyles and Golems, which allowed the refugees to flee the slaughter while the crossing over the Great Cataract was destroyed. Banick still shuddered as he remembered the sound of the bridge splashing into the water.

He guessed it was a victory of sorts - at least the Abyssal Dwarfs hadn't reached into the Halls of Golloch. He could only imagine the slaughter that would have taken place there. Years spent mining had made him sceptical, perhaps he should be grateful for a moment. While he contemplated the events of recent days - and tried to push some of the more bitter memories from his mind - he became aware of some shouting.

"Golloch's rule is over!" came the cry.

Banick spotted a young Ranger standing on a rocky outcrop.

"The Free dwarfs must be free," he continued before some older Dwarfs, dressed in the livery of King Golloch bundled him away.

A victory, thought Banick... but at what cost?

Oathsworn Warriors

Each dwarf hold supports its own military, with many residents possessing skills at arms. In times of war, these warriors are mustered into regiments with their close kin, creating a well-drilled and powerful fighting force on the battlefield. Once their honour has been satisfied and victory achieved, many will go back to their peaceful lives, with few dwarfs remaining as a standing military between conflicts.

In the new age of King Golloch, things have changed. He demands tithes from the holds under his rule to support his own vast army. This fighting force protects Abercarr, never at rest or disbanding. Golloch's expansionist ideals have seen the dwarfs fight more and more conflicts with each passing year, with many young Ironclads having never known peace in their lifetimes.

Regardless of whether they belong to a clan hold, or Golloch's Imperial army, the dwarf forces follow the same regimented structure as they have for centuries. Dwarfs are not known for their flexibility, so each warrior's role on the battlefield is firmly set in stone.

The Ironclad fighting technique epitomises the dwarvern way of war. They lure their opponent into attacking first, trusting their rugged physique and thick armour to protect them. Then, once the foe has come within reach, the Dwarfs will respond in unhurried, deadly manner.

The strongest Ironclads go to war equipped with heavy, two-handed hammers, whose weight alone is enough to break bones and splinter shields with equal ease, earning the Shieldbreakers their name. Shieldbreakers are aggressive fighters, with little to no thought of self-defence. Often encountered on the front lines of an army, these belligerent warriors can also be found joining an advance party to clash with the enemy all the faster.

Unlike the Shieldbreakers, Bulwarkers are stoic, their battlefield role requiring stubbornness and grit. Armed with long spears and thick armour, a Bulwarkers regiment will manoeuvre themselves into the path of a cavalry charge before bracing behind heavy shields to receive it. The enemy cavalry meets a wall of dwarf steel and sharp spears, usually coming to a sudden and messy end.

Black Powder Weaponry

Without the reliance on magic that the elves possess, the dwarfs were the first race in Pannithor to develop black powder weaponry. From its early, dangerous firearms, the development of these weapons has come far in the passing centuries. Modern dwarf firearms feature rifle barrels, shaped charges and a dozen other enhancements that make them the most accurate and reliable weapons on the battlefield.

The oldest dwarf warriors are often assembled into the ranks of the Ironwatch. Most dwarfs lose none of their wits or keenness of sight with venerable age and thus they take to battle armed with crossbows or black powder rifles so they may fight from a more sedentary position.

Unlike the Ironwatch, dwarf Sharpshooters are recruited from among the hardest apprentices from the warsmiths' guild-temples. Bringing the latest long-ranged black powder weapons to war, their units are one part deadly sniper troop and one part experimental field-testers!

The warsmiths' guild is responsible for many of the dwarfs' more advanced weapons of war. The Ironbelcher, for example, has seen continuous use for many centuries. The simplicity, durability and destructive power of the design has made it an enduring weapon of war. Most commonly found are the heavy bore cannons, capable of killing dozens of warriors with each shot.

Close range battles have favoured the Organ Gun, named for its similarity to dwarvern musical instruments, a five-barrelled light cannon that discharges its payload in a tight spread to deal with tightly packed enemy formations.

The Flamebelcher fires goutts of flammable liquid over the dwarfs' foes, consigning them to a horrible death. Despite its short range, it is the ultimate area-denial weapon, partially due to its fell reputation. This war engine has seen particular success in the dwarfs' many underground battles, holding narrow tunnels and mine entrances against goblins, ratkin and other foes.

As a relatively recent addition to the dwarfs' arsenal, the Jarrun Bombard is still controversial, with some holds refusing to field the weapon out of principle. Created by Free Dwarf warsmith Jarrun Iremonger, this revolutionary weapon has been highly successful when deployed. It can be fired directly into the enemy ranks like a cannon, or indirectly like a mortar - bypassing fortifications to hit vulnerable troops beyond. While most dwarf lords will reluctantly admit to the weapon's usefulness, it is its origins from among the Free Dwarfs that causes concern. The concept that the Free Dwarfs could create something that surpasses the war machines created by Imperial warsmiths is something that no one would openly admit to, but the concern of those within the Imperial army is clear. Nevertheless, as long as the Bombard sees continued success on the battlefield, it will find a place among the armies of the dwarfs.

Berserkers

Some dwarfs fall under the influence of the 'red curse', a violent rage that, in battle, transforms them into frenzied lunatics. These individuals group together in small warbands, or rarely into whole clans, and march to whatever battles they can find. Fighting with wild abandon and seemingly feeling no pain, these Berserkers do not stop fighting until they are killed outright.

Only a Berserker would be mad enough to trap and tame the vicious Brocks that inhabit the dwarfs' realm. Securing such a steed is deemed a sign of courage and honour within the berserker clans.

Few berserkers live long enough to amass wealth and status, or even a hold of their own, but those who do master the red curse are mighty warriors indeed. Usually carrying a pair of magical axes as a symbol of their power, they are nigh-unstoppable killing machines in battle.

Secrets of Steel

Keepers of the ancient Secrets of Steel, warsmiths are master craftsmen whose guild-temples furnish the dwarf armies with destructive war engines and the finest weapons and armour. Their knowledge of mechanical devices and black powder weapons is without peer and thus they have a strong influence over dwarf lords.

The warsmiths are pledged to Fulgria, the Shining One of white fire. Through worship and study, the dwarfs are able to bend metal to their will and forge artefacts of stunning power and beauty. Some dwarfs go even further in their veneration, bringing weapons to the battlefield that unleash the cleansing fire of their patron upon their foes. These Flame Priests walk a dangerous path, for the destructive power of fire has led many dwarfs to the path of damnation.



With mechanical and forging abilities far beyond that of most other races, these dwarfs have been able to create devices and weapons to aid their brethren both on and off the battlefield. The mining guilds, in particular, have benefitted from ingenious tunnelling devices created by the warsmiths. The unsubtle 'Battle Drillers' will bring these devices with them to battle, charging them into the enemy ranks with spectacularly unpredictable results.

The most revolutionary weapon to be created by the warsmiths is the Steel Behemoth. Resembling a giant mechanical beast, these innovative fighting vehicles are powered by the black blood of the earth. Protected by thick metal plates and equipped with flame-spitting weaponry, they are a nightmare made manifest for the dwarfs' enemies.

Warriors of the Wilds

Although technologically advanced, some dwarfs share a deep kinship with nature. These individuals can often be found wandering the surface around the dwarvern holds, exploring the forests and foothills of their home and learning much about the world around them. Inevitably, many of these wayward dwarfs band together and become Rangers.

Rangers are often young, vigorous dwarfs, curious about the world outside the holds. Though greeted with suspicion by older, more traditional dwarfs, Rangers become expert scouts, explorers and pathfinders, specialising in ambush warfare and flank marches.

Those who feel an affinity with animals take on the duty of raising livestock for the hold. While most of the beasts are used for food, clothing or as beasts of burden, the dwarvern mastiffs are bred for war. Younger dwarfs often mock Packmasters for work they consider to be beneath a warrior. Such mockery lasts only until the Packmaster sets his charges loose – a pack of purebred wardogs with sharp teeth and a taste for ankles.

Strength of Stone

Within the dwarf holds, Stone Priests are outsiders, for their innate mastery of magic is treated with suspicion by all right-thinking dwarfs. In battle, however, they are capable of summoning and controlling powerful Earth Elementals to smash apart the dwarfs' foes.

Summoned to war by the mysterious Stone Priests, these supernatural creatures are formed of the very earth and rock of the dwarf holds – the living embodiment of the mountains come to protect their people. In times of great need, a Stone Priest may risk his own life to summon an immense Greater Earth Elemental. The rites to raise such a creature are dangerous, putting a heavy burden upon the summoner, but the destructive power and impenetrable forms of these beings can turn the tide of a battle in seconds.

Lords of the Hold

Each dwarf hold is ruled by a lord. These noble rulers come from ancient lineages and inspire utter devotion in their people. With a lifetime of warmongering behind them, and bearing magical, rune-encrusted weapons and armour, they are mighty warriors on the battlefield. Some lords will fight from atop mounts, such as unnaturally large burrowing creatures or bears. But most prefer to fight in what they consider the true dwarven way – with both feet planted firmly on the ground. Although each lord's rule over their hold is absolute, only Golloch is king of all dwarfs.

When a dwarf lord goes to war, he does so surrounded by his personal guard and military advisors. Most of his retinue are Ironguard – hand-picked veterans and sworn protectors of the dwarf lords. Chosen from the toughest and most experienced fighters, they form defensive shield walls upon which even the strongest enemies expend their strength harmlessly.



It is the greatest, most solemn honour to carry one of the dwarfs' revered banners to battle, and only the most loyal retainers of the dwarf nobles are entrusted with this duty. These banners and icons are older than any living dwarf and are often inscribed with the feats and heroes of one of the noble houses.

The Steel Juggernaut, a mechanical suit of armour, is slowly becoming more common among wealthy dwarf lords. Based on Knorri Ironheart's personal battle armour, it has divided opinion amongst the clan lords. Some have placed orders for their own personalised versions or have their own engineers scrambling to copy the design. Others see it as an affront to warfare and the armour of a coward.

Rordin, High Guardian of the West

Rordin lived amongst the humans of the City of the Golden Horn for so long that he has – somewhat to the annoyance of his king – picked up many of their customs and manners. As the nephew of Golloch himself, Rordin was always somewhat of a black sheep within the noble family, and some mutter that his diplomatic posting to the Basilean capital was more of an exile so that he could not cause further shame to the family.

Where most dwarfs are dour and insular individuals, Rordin is positively cheerful and fond of socialising (so long as there is strong ale involved). For all his faults, he is a fearsome and capable warrior, and as much as Golloch despairs of his foolish ways, he respects his abilities.

After Rordin's successful expedition to the ruins of the dwarven capital of Dolgarth, which ousted the necromancer Mortibris and his undead minions, Golloch has tasked the young noble with the reclamation of the ancient hold. Repairs

are being made, troops are marching to garrison the ancient city and the Basileans watch with concern as the Dwarfs re-establish a foothold worryingly close to their territory. Rordin himself has been named as the High Guardian of the West – Golloch's pawn and shield against the Hegemony of Basilea.

Golloch's Fury

In order to keep up with their king's demands, warsmiths have been designing, producing and testing new engines of war at a far faster rate than any period in dwarf history. The Steel Behemoth known as Golloch's Fury is one such creation.

Although it is based on the same chassis as existing Steel Behemoths, it has been fitted with a gun commissioned by the king himself. This weapon spits a hail of shots at a terrifying rate, relying on motorised cranks and loaders to maintain its weight of fire. This experimental weapon is longer ranged and harder hitting than the Behemoth's normal weapons, but it wears out by the battle's end, the gun's warped and tortured barrels needing immediate replacement.

The name of this prototype is no coincidence. When enemy ranks fall before the might of this war machine, it sends a very clear message to both the dwarfs fighting alongside and the foes that face it: Golloch is watching. The deployment of this weapon is tantamount to the king taking to the field himself – although he would never deign to do so – this Behemoth ensuring that his will is done on the battlefield.

ELVES



Lyrenthia Brightstar
mage of the Northern kindred.



Of all the folk that walk the realms of Pannithor, the elves are supreme. There are few beings as ancient as they and none who are as storied. It could be argued that their histories are the very histories of the world and that they are entwined with it, essential to it.

There is nothing that is noble or valuable that has not been mastered by the elves. Their refinement of culture and art beggars the belief of lesser folk who can merely dream of grasping the intricate meanings of works such as the Triptychs of Adar or whose languages are too blunt and infantile to reflect the resonant depths of subtext and significance exemplified in elven poetry and song. In statecraft, they are matchless. In nobility, peerless. No mage of mortal bent can even hope to contest the mastery of the elven magicians who spend their long, enchanted lives given entirely to the illuminative crafts of the arcane.

And none doubt their prowess at arms. Other races watch with breathless awe at the timeless display of elven archery. Fighters, man for man, stand aghast against the unstoppable brilliance of elven swordsmanship. Rampant beasts, thought unkillable by human hunters, sink down into death; their hearts transfixed by the impossible precision of an elvish spear. There is no task or pursuit that the elven psyche will not elevate into an artform.

All of these skills, all of this brilliance, are bound in tall, graceful bodies that are virtually immune to age and the ravages of illness; in minds that do not suffer the dimming and the madness that afflicts the elders amongst men or dwarfs. Their senses are sublime; shaming all but the most developed of the creatures of nature with their perceptive ears, immaculate sense of touch and presence, uncanny sense of smell, and eyes that are even said to penetrate the bleakest dark. They can feel emotions more deeply and more sensually than any being. They are the pinnacle of conscious life.

All of these things, elves are. Why then are they not masters of the world?

The ravages of the God War, the reign of Winter, and the terrific flood that flowed in her demise all took a tremendous toll on the kingdoms of the world. But where the dwarfs endured, the elves have faltered. Where the humans of Basilea surge up with unmatched vitality from the corpse of Primovantor, the elves remain staggered; barely clawing

their way back from the brink of oblivion. Their lands are sundered, their race is atrophied and scattered, and their ancient bonds of kinship and loyalty are reduced to bare strands of insubstantial obligation. Elvenholme – the diminished heart of the elven world in the region of Pannithor known as Mantica – is now a constant reminder of faded glories. Elven births are fewer than ever and the children of Elvenholme are born to a culture of ancestral guilt generated by the fact that the greatest of the world's woes can be lain at elven feet. For all their excellence, many elves live and die in the shadow of the mistakes of the past. The striving of the young and the vibrant in elven kingdoms new and strong may not be enough to save the elven people from succumbing, at last, to the attrition suffered since the deluge of Winter's end.



ELVENHOLME

To human eyes Elvenholme is a vast realm of untarnished grandeur where an undying alliance of ancient kingdoms glitters eternal beneath the endless sky; the enchanted land of the ageless and ensorcelled race that mastered the world long before humanity ever took shape. For the elves who dwell in its varied realms Elvenholme is not so and the shadow of what it once was lies dark and heavy across their days.

Twelve hundred fleeting years have passed since Winter's Final Gift, as it is known to the elves, when vast swathes of Elvenholme simply vanished; swallowed by the surging ocean. Today, Elvenholme barely extends from the great wall of Therennia Adar to the bitter edge of the Mouth of Leith but at one time it ran for leagues more and the shining spires of bright cities thrust up from the green bosoms of enchanted forests, and the Brokenwall Islands were still great mountain fastnesses that overlooked valleys of gold. Although they wear a veneer of haughty pride, those elves that remain in the diminished kingdoms of Elvenholme struggle with tremendous depths of guilt and regret.

This age of mourning has chewed away at the culture of Elvenholme's kindreds. In Therennia Adar the songs that ring out now are dirges to the former glory of their drowned groves. In Alandar, the Dragon Kindred mutter funeral hymns to the ages of brilliance that will now never come. In the east and south dour utterances have caught on that equate the eroding lands with the eroding of the elves themselves. The old alliances, too, have been worn away and loyalties have become frail. Respects paid to the Mage Queen from further afield than Ileuthar are often token at best and great kings in the west and east look to their own realms rather than ancient and frayed bonds.

Still, Elvenholme endures and the kindreds that still call it home, from the endless sea to the Ophidian sands, are as yet unbroken and some small hope remains that they will yet triumph and new golden ages may yet be born.

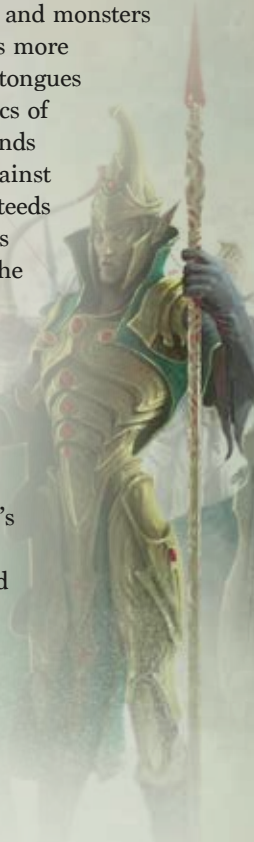
Elven Spears

'I am Starwhisper, bane of trolls and beloved of Idrilim. Do you believe in me?' - cryptic inscription on an ancient elven spear.

In the legends of the elves it is not the sword that shines brightest but the spear. Indeed, the elven word for 'blade' refers specifically to the long-bladed spears used for bringing down great beasts and monsters while the elvish for sword translates more directly to 'shear' or 'scissor' in the tongues of men. As a result, translated poetics of elven legend place swords in the hands of heroes which are then 'braced against its master's vault' or 'transfix four steeds abreast' and other unlikely scenarios that bring forth much mirth from the elves that read them.

Many legends and myths are told of elven warriors and their spears. In ancient times, it was the spear of Ikarimeth the Doubter that punctured the belly of the crippled dragon Sliphid, ending the monster's reign of terror once and for all as the mortally wounded beast tumbled from the eastern steppes to the savannah below. From its wound crawled a snarling brood whose form matched their parent's disfigurement. Thus is Ikarimeth called the father of Dragons and his spear known as 'Lifegiver'.

Malinius of Treitial was said to be so at one with his spear that it would thrust toward gaps in the defences of foemen before Malinius even knew about them. Malinius is often called the 'spear-wielded', a term that survives today as a compliment paid to spear-wielders of particular excellence.







THERENNIA ADAR

Therennia Adar was and is one of the most remarkable cities in the world. Once it was merely a speck of civilisation nestled amid the great Groves of Adar. The city had no walls in those times and an elf could make their way directly from the orderly avenues and thoroughfares to the winding paths of the wood without ever being able to pinpoint exactly where one ended and the other began. The Celestians walked those paths, too, in the days when they were whole. Their otherworldliness did not ward them against the entrancing beauty of the wild ways; the hidden grove, the secret pool. Above it all, the Spire of Ages struck up from the heart of Therennia Adar, an icon of triumph hundreds of feet high. It bathed in the warmth of the sun above and the glow of the vast woodland below. Stories are told of how light, birdsong, and the very wind itself were woven into mighty spells that swirled above the great kingdom and protected it from intrusion and disaster. Those spells are as broken as the age that birthed them.



Therennia Adar now sits hundreds of feet below sea level, yet it did not drown. This is because of the sacrifice made by great Valandor – the warrior-mage whose powers transcended both man and elf. He stood before the onrush of the deadly waters as they hungrily devoured the shining groves. The streets thundered with the flight of forest creatures and the air was thick with the roaring of the waters. Valandor stood fast before them, pitting all his might and will against the devouring tide. Soon the earth shook, and a great rumbling drowned out all sound as Valandor tore a great wall up from the earth; a vast curtain of rock that spared Therennia Adar from the fate shared by so much of Elvenholme. His might spent, Valandor fell from atop the wall to the churning waters below.

Today the vast majority of Therennia Adar sits in perpetual gloom, always in the shadow of the greatest wall outside dwarfendom and neither wind nor sun strikes the city streets. Of the old city, only the very tip of the Spire of Ages peers above the wall. It is here that the battered body of Valandor, recovered from the cruel waters, is held in state where it attracts pilgrims from both land and sea.

Despite existing in shadow, Therennia Adar has transcended its fate and so have its people. They have reclaimed their heritage of wind and sun by transitioning from a land-locked spiritual paradise to the great maritime superpower of the world. Atop the mighty barrier wall are great buttressed towers overlooking the elegant, sweeping shipyards that have been erected in the centuries since the fall of Valandor. Some say this is the true heart of the city and its people; bristling with activity, energy, and motion that is to be envied by the inland attitudes of mournful lassitude. It is certainly true that the people of the old Western Kindred have found new life in their bond with the ocean.

On the waves, the Warfleets of Therennia Adar are unmatched and there are few states that would dare molest the trading ships of the Sea Kindred. Their King – Ariandaris – is known all across the world for his great foresight and statesmanship. No other kindred of elves can hope to forge the kinds of bonds with other kingdoms that come with mastery of the sea and the diplomatic opportunities it offers. Humans and even dwarfs are no strangers to the elegant docks and moorings atop the great wall, though they seldom progress further toward the city proper than to raise a toast to the spire and Valandor. The view of Therennia Adar from the wall's edge gave birth to its vulgar name, popularly used in the realms of men: WalldEEP.

Still, the sorrows of the past run deep. Many elves of Therennia Adar are practitioners of the divinitive arts – Ariandaris himself among them – and they have been known to slip into trances where their spirits walk free of their bodies out beyond the great wall. Through the strange magics of the Weird, they see not shoals of fish or clusters of weed but the very Groves of Adar themselves; as though they were alive again and bristling with the echoes of birdsongs the phantoms of the past. For the sensitive elves, such trances can be difficult to will themselves back from and, having seen the very perfection of the enchanted green, the reality of the present can be difficult to bear.

Elven Archery

'It is a primitive weapon as all weapons are primitive. It is the art of archery that gives meaning to the bow.' – attributed to Madriga, Sea Guard Fleetmaster and hero of Dolgarth

To elves, archery is the most beautiful of the war arts; a perfect blending of skill and grace with awareness and foresight. Master marksmen from among other peoples have been known to mutter accusations of sorcery upon witnessing an elven archer at one with his bow. As uncanny as it is, there is nothing supernatural about the near universal elven mastery of marksmanship. Their otherworldly skill is a product of the natural aptitude and long experience that only elves possess.

Elven remarks on the subject are cryptic at best, expressing mild bemusement that other races cannot sense the twisting of the wind and the quivering of the shaft in the instants before they happen. 'Your people loose arrows,' one Sea Guard marine famously remarked to a Basilean official, 'my people place them.'

Still, for all the precise brilliance afforded to the individual elven archer by their unparalleled senses and potential centuries of experience at the peak of health, it is the deadly rain of the volley that rules the battlefield and many a proud marksman chafes to see their arrow lost amid a brutal, indiscriminate cloud.







The Sea Kindred

Of all the kindreds of Elvenholme, none can say they both lost and gained as much in the calamities of Winter's end as those of the west. Vast tracts of land were swallowed, including the ancient and magical Groves of Adar, the most enchanted of all mortal places. Of the untold numbers of lives lost to the triumphant sea, a vast majority are from these kindreds. In their sufferings, however, they found new strengths that would be the envy of the kindreds of the north and east who wallow deeper in their sorrows. The Western kindreds, focussed in the still-standing city of Therennia Adar and the Brokenwall Isles have regained mastery of the sea and a bold new identity as the Sea Kindred - lords of the very thing that destroyed their past.



Basilean sailors swear that when elven ships sail, the very waves part to receive them

The Brokenwall Isles

These stark islands were once the tops of great mountains that overlooked the western reaches of Elvenholme, dominated by the elegant castles of noble elves. Today, these castles have surrendered their pictorial beauty to become lordly coastal fortresses. Each is host to a fleet that flies the colours and heraldry of the great house to which it belongs. The Brokenwall Houses compete with each other at feats of maritime valour and distinction just as surely as their noble forebears competed to have the grandest castle in the heights. These houses have taken to the sea with an aplomb that rivals

Therennia Adar itself and have adopted names that are as stark and sharp as the cutting sea wind such as the austere House Nightspray or the feared House of the Morning Gull. Their rivalries seldom slip into true bitterness, however, and they are united against threats from outside.

The great Houses of the Brokenwall Isles share a firm alliance with Therennia Adar and count themselves fully amongst the Sea Kindred. Adar's great warfleets are often joined by a dazzling motley of Brokenwall colours and heraldry. Some of the lords of the Houses wish to solidify this alliance even farther by way of royal marriage; aggressively positioning their sons as contenders to the hand of the wayward princess Tabinriorn, daughter of King Ariandaris. He might even agree if only she could be found and coaxed back home...

Ileuthar

Ileuthar is a city of a kind unlike any other known to mortal peoples. Its shape and structures are formed from the very trees themselves. It is said that the woodland was not coaxed into doing so by ancient elvish magic but rather formed itself, as a gift of acceptance to the kindreds that first walked there.

It is shaped like a great ring and in its centre is the deepest and most enchanted heart of all the Twilight Glades. Beneath these strange and twisted boughs are the paths and groves of the Twilight Glades proper - a place where the burdens of reality are fully shed and the twisting paths are said to lead anywhere, everywhere, and even, terrifyingly, nowhere. These paths of the Glade of Ways are unsafe even for the elves. Only the most beloved of the wood can be sure of their steps here, and there are none known who can claim that honour save the Mage-Queen, Laraentha Silverbranch herself.

The court of the Mage-Queen and Ileuthar itself are open to all kinds and kindreds of elves. It is the very heart of elvendom; the single place where all feuds and debts are forgotten in a strange truce that would befuddle both man and dwarf. Here, Dragon Lords will walk beside the marines of the Sea Guard. Ice elves will laugh with undisguised warmth at the jests of wayward princes. Even the reviled elves that dwell within the Mouth of Leith can occasionally be glimpsed stalking through the city's gardens and galleries in small, secretive cadres.

The Twilight Glades

To pass into the Twilight Glades is to pass into a dream. This woodland realm is nestled in a deep valley amid a range of sullen hills south of the infant sea like a pool of magic caught in a rocky bowl. The enchantments that permeate this realm were not crafted by mortal mind or living hand. The magic of this place grew within it. Its deep shadows are dotted with phantom lights, its glades are filled with secret whispers.

The living sculpture that is the city of Ileuthar can only be found by those who know the paths or who have a willing guide. For those that don't, the glades are a perilous place, the shifting tracks and paths leading the weary journeyman round in circles, deeper into the undergrowth, never to return. The very air is alive with a pervasive energy, there on the edge of consciousness, primal and tantalisingly full of promise but always just out of reach. Even those not blessed, or cursed, with knowledge of the arcane can feel something on the edge of perception, a taste of something alien and cryptic.

For the elves who live here, however, much of the glamour is lost. These realms are nothing, they say, compared to those that once spread in the west and clutched precious Therennia Adar to their bosom. In light of their memory, these glades are weak and diminished. They are a certain reminder to the elves that they dwell not in the great day of their race, but its twilight. Recent events have made the glades even more perilous for the unwary and there are some areas where even the elves now fear to tread.

The Northern Kindreds

The elves of the Northern Kindreds are the proudest and most aloof of a notoriously proud and aloof people. They hold that their ways are the true ways and continue in them undaunted by disaster or folly. This is both a blessing and a curse to them. While they are unshakable adherents to tradition, bolstered no doubt by their great love and loyalty to their Mage-Queen and the host of great champions that walk amongst them, they are also loath to surrender their sorrows. The Northern Kin, more so than any other, worry away at the wounds of the past at the expense of present joys and those yet to come.



Thus, these traditionalists have garnered a reputation for morose fatalism. Considering the numbers of young elves that turn their backs to the northern courts and wander far afield in quest of life's rich pageant, it is a reputation that is well deserved.

Here follow extracts from letters written by Mage-tutor Callinah of the Willowdale to the mage-masters of Ileuthar.

Esteemed colleagues of the court,

The boy has arrived. Should you see fit to visit me here, you will know him by his golden hair, happy countenance and most surely by his uncommon aptitude. I have arranged for his tutelage in the arts of the arcane to begin immediately.

I hope my decision to bring him here will prove wise. I am aware of your doubts. Rest assured the child remains under my close supervision and I shall report to you once again upon completion of his first season.

Yours, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

My Esteemed colleagues,

Blessings be upon you all. While it is a pity none of you have visited, I am happy to report the child has far exceeded our expectations. There was little in the first season of which he was not already familiar, or able to grasp within mere days. After only half a season, I am delighted to report that I have seen fit to advance him. Never has a human boy of this age obtained such mastery so quickly. I trust you share in my delight, and await my next report as eagerly as I do.

Your faithful servant, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

Learned Mages of the Court,

I have considered your concerns. Sadly, I cannot agree that this boy needs anything other than challenge upon challenge in order that we might ascertain the true level of his ability. Perhaps we have among us a child of the ages? To stop now could deny us something spoken of among the very stars themselves. I stake my reputation on it, in your eyes and in your faith for all time. His fifth season will begin at once.

Your servant, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

Colleagues of esteem,

It is with regret that I must inform you of a great tragedy that has befallen our brightest pupil. News lately reached us that his Mother and Father have been slain. After his letters to them were not returned I made enquires on his behalf and sure enough, they are indeed no more. May they rest on the winds of summer. The details I will not trouble you with, suffice to say that his sister of similar age is said to have survived as a prisoner. He draws some comfort in this. I was only mildly wounded in his display of grief, being as I was the bearer of this news. However, the intensity of his studies has since doubled, which I cannot deny is most pleasing.

Your servant, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

My lords,

I thank you for your continued concern, but I do not think we need to involve the Mage-Queen directly at this stage.

Yours, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

My esteemed colleagues,

I apologise for not writing sooner. My duties here keep me more occupied than ever before. With ten seasons past, and with three times that number studied by the boy, I must interrupt our progress again with word of deepest tragedy. Now comes news that his sister too has left this plane. Worse, in an equally unsavoury manner as his mother. While it is obvious he never recovered from the passing of his parents, his reaction to this latest news was, I admit, disturbing, though he has now returned from a long period during which his whereabouts were unknown to us. I fear the impact of my guidance upon his actions is waning, but rest assured all efforts will be made to rein him in. The boy would appear to have depths we never imagined.

Yours servant, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

My learned colleagues,

I fear I have reached the limit of my ability to train this child. He is demonstrating knowledge of techniques forbidden to his level of learning, and several sacred texts have gone missing. I know he is behind it, and his trickery has gone from playful to wicked in nature. He appears bent on pursuing his own course, and I ask for your immediate intervention lest we should lose someone in whom we have invested so much time, and of course my lords, so many secrets.

Humbly, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale

My learned colleagues,

The situation has become grave. You were right. How foolish that I could not see it. The boy, now a full man by any human standard, has not returned from his latest fit of rage, and I fear he will never again do so willingly. Two of our charter-masters have been found dead, and yet more restricted texts are missing. I awoke from a restless sleep this day to see a letter hovering over me. Its foul contents I cannot bear to relay until we meet in person, but I can report that he has taken a name – the letter was signed Mhorgoth. You know the meaning of this name as well as I, and what must be done. I shall arrive at court post-haste, to seek your forgiveness and to make immediate preparations.

Ashamedly, Mage-tutor Callinah of Willowdale



The Dragon Kindred

The mountains of Alandar are virtually impenetrable. They thrust up from the body of Elvenholme like a cluster of spearheads that threaten the sky. Their foothills bristle with monster-haunted woods that would chill the boldest of huntsmen and across it all streak the shadows of dragons.

It is said that Great Calisor, in the age prior to his fall from grace, brokered a friendship between dragons and elves – but dragons are creatures of incredible depths of pride and nobility matched only by their wrath and beauty. They will not suffer any but the worthy to look freely upon them or to lay hands upon their scales. Those few clans that meet the dragon's approval count themselves among the Thandreen – the Dragon Kindred. Only the very greatest amongst these select few – the wisest, purest, and most valiant – may be taught the secrets of the dragon speech and forge the legendary bond between dragon and rider.

Amid the forbidding peaks, the great fastnesses and eyries of these rarest of elves have been carved by sorcerous means from the very rock. The power and influence of these few noble lords cannot be overstated. Although they live in an inhospitable realm they enjoy every luxury and every honour due to them. Great gifts and tributes are made to them from other kindreds in exchange for their support. The swooping shadow and the plunging lance have spelled doom for many an army of foemen and only annihilation can come to those who face a dragon's breath. The mere sight of a dragon and its lordly rider upon the battlefield is immediate confirmation to any general that the favour of one of the Dragon Kindred is worth every courtesy.



The Southern Kindred

The elves that inhabit the fading southern edge of Elvenholme are the very image of stubborn pride. Their mighty castles are under constant siege by the sands of the moving desert and the foul, cursed creatures that inhabit them. Their great, sand-blasted fortresses have surrendered their beauty to the erosion of the ages, becoming worn and pitted; their once-famous reliefs obliterated by the cruel winds of nearly a thousand summers. But still they stand, windows and battlements framing the defiant sneers of these elves.

Though the outer walls of the elven cities and citadels are blasted, within they have retained their ancient opulence. The spells of old that once defied the desert have been drawn inward to protect the great halls and galleries where gems shine from every tapestry and portraits shimmer with gilt detail; and the enchanted gardens from which the elves subsist in the harshest times. However, nothing is as prized and protected in these magnificent halls as the libraries. Each of the great southern families has one and none are greater than that belonging to Prince Mathaleer. It is said that much of the histories and lore mourned by other kindreds as lost, remain in the ancient scrolls of his house. It is also said, in dark and fearful whispers, that Mathaleer is an obsessive keeper of secrets and has lore enough to shame many a noble head. All of the libraries of the Southern Kindred are closed to outsiders and their lore is jealously guarded. They open only in exchange for marvellous treasures, lasting pledges of support, favourable marriages, and other great gifts. Even then, access is watched with fearful strictness. No one knows with certainty that Mathaleer has ever opened his library to anyone. Scandalous whispers hiss with another possible truth: there is nothing in his library but shadows and dust.

The Eastern Kindred

The elves of the Southern Kindred are not the only ones to suffer the relentless expansion of the Ophidian sands. The Eastern Kindred too have watched their lush grasslands and rich savannahs wither away as that hellish southern realm seeks to swallow all. This has taken a great toll on the hearts of the nomadic easterly elves who were once renowned as the finest poets, most captivating singers, and quickest wits of all the kindreds of Elvenholme. Now their poetry has become litanies of battle, their songs are bloody war ballads, and their jests are dark and sardonic. Once their bright caravans rolled merry and carefree beneath the endless eastern sky but now that tradition has been turned toward bloodier ends as the wagon trains of clans and families have become itinerant war-columns that roam ceaselessly across their domain.

In battle, the Eastern Kindred carries great respect for not only are they matchless in the great war-arts of the bow and the spear, but they are powerful innovators. It is on the great expanse that the chariot was born; first for flights of pleasure, now for the dealing of death. For ages, the Drakon was considered a wilful and dangerous beast until the bold horsemen of the Eastern Kindred mastered the art of their breaking and now the Drakon is a feared and terrible foe for any evil that might swell up from the desert sands or the hateful Mouth of Lieth. Perhaps their greatest weapon, however, is the genius of Elthenar Bladesinger. He is the youngest lord to set the Helm of Dawn upon his brow and draw all of the loyalty of the east to his rune-etched blade, the legendary Deathbringer. His prowess is such that even elves are struck into wordless awe at his spear and swordplay and his gift for battle strategy is said to shame even the war-masters of old. Beyond this, there is said to be a darkness within him – perhaps the product of his tragic life – that drives him to ever greater brutality. Some in the east are disturbed by the extremes this might reach but until then the bitterness inside Elthenar is well-matched by that of his people.



THE ELVES OF ELSEWHERE

While Elvenholme remains host to the most ancient of elven traditions and cultures, elves may be found anywhere in the world. Communities, clans, or families live in the grand human cities of Basilea and other lands. To humans, these might seem to be enigmatic figures that exist amongst them, unchanging, for generations. To the elves these settlements are impermanent dalliances amongst an interesting folk and nothing more. Lone elves are known to wander all realms, seeming to go wherever their adventurous hearts take them. Many of these are known to take on interesting pseudonyms, perhaps to hide their origins from other elves they might meet (as many are said to be hated exiles or missing princes) or perhaps merely to cultivate a romantic mystique. One such elf, known abroad by the brusque and decidedly un-elflike of name of Madriga, is greatly celebrated in the City of the Golden Horn for her valour in the terrible ruins of Dolgarth and the recovery of the Tome of Valandor. Despite this fame, or because of it, Madriga has vanished from the city, perhaps to seek adventure elsewhere.

Then there are the Young Kingdoms – up-thrust growths of bright civilisation and culture that dot the face of the world, even beyond Mantica and the influence of Elvenholme. Many of these have been established by youthful and charismatic elves, paying only lip service to the traditions of old and shirking the guilt that rests like a great mantle across so many of their kinfolk. Some shine only briefly before being snuffed out. Others, bolder than the rest, have carved out a place in the world that may yet see them remembered in legend and song.

The Sylvan Kindred

This enigmatic Kindred are drawn to nature above all else. Many of their number live in the enchanted forest of Galahir. This place is beloved of the Green Lady, the enigmatic triple-goddess whom the Sylvan Kindred revere. She embodies the naturalistic mindset these elves favour, seeing no shame in beauty, ugliness, capriciousness, beneficence, cruelty, life, or death. In her shadow, the Kindred exemplifies the oldest ideals of elfkind, the green time when there was no divide between elves and the natural world. A significant number of Sylvan elves live in the Twilight Glades where some of them hold positions of high influence, serving at the right hand of the Mage-Queen.

The elves of the glades are different from the other Kindreds, more in tune with the natural world around them. Meeting them offers a mirror into the past glories of the race. They are a people cursed with introspection and regret, forever

contemplating the follies of their ancestors who they believe turned from nature's path. Ancient practices and rituals were shunned in favour of building with stone and forging with steel, spoiling the essence of their people forever. They hold true to the ancient ways, living in harmony with nature and close to the origins of the world-tree. They are an enigmatic people, as much a part of their forest as any bird, beast or tree that lives there. They nurture it, tend it and protect it with their very souls.

In the deepest, darkest and most treacherous parts of the glades the charge in the air is palpable, the forest alive with purpose. Little light breaches the canopy of the ancient arboreal sentinels. The mists hugging the massive roots and snaking between the impossibly twisted branches sparkle and flicker with faerie fire, while will-o-the-wisps and capricious forest sprites frolic across the patchwork marshland of ponds and streams that lie between the trees. Those unlucky enough to find themselves in this place lie drowned in these fog-pools, armour and weapons rusting around their bones, their grinning skulls visible just beneath the surface, watching and waiting for a companion to join them in eternal slumber. This is the domain of the Sylvan Fey.







The Fey are Sylvan Kin who have fully become one with nature as they believe the ancestors once were. They are an extension of the living forest, spread from the seedlings of the world-tree and as ancient as the land on which it grows. Unlike the elves of the other kindreds, whose skin can have an almost alabaster appearance, most Fey are born with pale green skin which darkens with age. Those most proficient in magic stand out as blue-tinged individuals, with crackling yellow eyes. Mysterious even by the standards of the other elves in the Glades, the Fey inhabit the most magical parts of the forest, amongst the faeries and sprites that dwell there and are a rare sight to behold for the alien visitor. If they are seen, it is because they choose to be. Encountering them is often fatal for anyone foolish enough to encroach upon their world. There are stories of the Fey taking other elf children in the night, never to be seen again. Elven scholars scare their young charges with tales of the Fey spirited them away should they fail their lessons. These are perhaps just legends and fairy stories, for the Sylvan Kin and the Fey are on peaceable terms. The Fey are even known to lend martial support to the armies of the Glades, but such aid can be fickle, coming when and where the Fey so choose.

The Shadow Paths are known to both the Kin and the Fey. Accessed by the portal known as the Glade of Ways, the pathways offer the traveller routes to all places, but they are perilous and can be trodden only by those with supreme knowledge and power. There are few Kin with the skill and bravery to walk the Paths but the Fey use them without thought. The Paths are simply an extension of the forest and world in which the Fey are a part. Magic seeps through them, and they through it. As a consequence, the Fey will travel across the world where they feel their presence is required. The largest concentration of the Fey outside the Twilight Glades is thought to be in the Forest of Galahir, west of the Abyss, on the edge of the Mammoth Steppe. No one truly knows though and it is a brave or foolish man who would try to find out.

Wildness permeates every facet of Sylvan Kin society and nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in their approach to war. They disdain conventional organisation, often casting aside such rigid concepts as 'regiment' and 'troop'. For them, there is nothing clinical or controlled in the art of war. It is the savage struggle; the doe in the jaws, the diving hawk, the darting hare. They march in seeming disarray; a rich pageant of shining spears and snapping banners often accompanied by the pipes of satyrs, the glow of pixies and wisps, and the teasing mockery of fairies and sprites. This display has been the doom of many a foe, for when the horn of battle sounds the chaos vanishes and the Sylvan Kin take to killing with a terrifying blend of instinctual bloodlust and elven skill.

Despite having the favour of the Green Lady, the Sylvan Kin have no influence over her. They cannot compel her to join them in battle directly, nor to listen to their pleas or praises. Instead, the Lady has chosen the Druids, favoured humans, to be her agents in the world and to them she gives her deepest council. This is greatly troubling to many Sylvan elves and clear evidence of just how far their kind has fallen from the true green paths they were born to.

Following the almost apocalyptic recent events of the expanding Abyss, a dark horror has stained the glades and the Fey have become even more insular as they strive to fight the insidious evil. The Paths have become all the more treacherous and travellers must be constantly wary of the predations of the Nightstalkers. Ofttimes, the fabric of the Paths ripples and tears, creating temporary portals to the voids and immortal planes of insanity. When such rifts occur, hell is let loose into the world.

The Valellion Legacy

Before the Time of Ice, before Winter's Final Gift took so many elven lives and land, the house of Valellion was a stabilising and highly respected royal blood line and servant of the elven empire. Its lineage could boast of ancestors documented to the Time of Light and perhaps even beyond. Valellion mages were much sought after for their sage advice, and their military was second to none. Lord Valellion himself was one of the closest confidants of the great elf king Thominus Moonweaver and the sun always shone on the rolling green valleys and woodland of Valellion's realm.

Growing up in this seemingly idyllic world were two brothers – twins – inseparable since birth. Tyris and Talannar were minor princes, too far from the line of succession to be considered significant, but with enough spirit and sense of daring that they were always in the thick of, or the instigators of, many misadventures. Both showed some latent talent for magic, but neither expressed any desire to pursue that journey, considering it too time consuming and a distraction from their comfortable and privileged lives. They were competent although mostly reluctant warriors and for the most part could be found in the ale houses of the human quarters of the nearest and largest elven cities. It was during one such frivolous undertaking that Talannar fathered a child. Not unusual for an elf of his age, except the mother was a human.

The effect on Talannar was profound. He became increasingly protective and devoted to the mother and she to him. Tyris implored him to remember the stories from their childhood, of Calisor and Elinathora and the destructive power of such love but Tyris was blind to reason. When the babe was born but a few months later, Talannar was in rapture. The girl was his pride and joy, and he cared not for its mixed parentage, an unspoken taboo in elven culture.

When word reached lord Valellion as it inevitably would, he decreed that the child and mother be banished from the kingdom or face destruction. Talannar was aghast and Tyris stood firmly beside his blood brother – Talannar was the father and he had a right to bring the child up as he saw fit, in the safety of his own home. Valellion refused and generously gave the mother and child seven days to leave Elvenholme forever.

Incensed at the injustice and bitterly aggrieved, Talannar turned to his old school master for advice. Scholar Yrillith shook his head at the folly of youth and said that he could think of no law that could overturn the ruling of his lord. Reluctantly, he allowed the young men access to the Valellion library, thinking such an act was harmless.

In truth, it was Tyris that spent every waking hour pouring through old legal texts and histories. Talannar spent as much time as he could with his beloved family while desperately worrying and praying his brother would find something of use – some shred of something to grasp onto and make a case from.

And find something he did.

At the last hour, when all hope seemed lost, Tyris uncovered the awful and hypocritical truth. In historical texts buried deep in a dusty tome, the chronicles of the Valellion line recorded the illicit joining of Wytirith Valellion to a human male, thus polluting the bloodline with a secret kept suppressed for generations. Tyris felt ashamed and afeared to have made such a discovery but told his brother all the same. Talannar was stunned, but soon his astonishment turned to joy as he realised he had the perfect weapon to defeat the cruelty being imposed upon his kin.

On the day of reckoning, the brothers entered Lord Valellion's court side by side. Tyris trod fearfully, deeply unsure they were following the right path. Talannar strode purposefully, straight backed and with steely determination. King Thominus was in court that day and the room was packed with dignitaries. Having requested their audience, the brothers were called forwards. Lord Valellion frowned and reminded them he had made his decision and that it must be respected. Talannar fought back, declaring the judgement deeply dishonest and duplicitous. Valellion was enraged at this affront to his authority in front of his king and ordered the pair from the hall. As guards began to haul the brothers away, Tyris was loath to speak but Talannar shot his brother a desperate glance. Swallowing his terror, Tyris decried the hypocrisy at the very heart of the household and in the stunned silence that echoed in the great hall, the Valellion bloodline's assumed purity, standing and authority across the lands of Elvenholme came to a crushing and humiliating end.

The Ice Kindred

In his *Survey of Noble Peoples*, the Basilean philosopher Anslew wrote: 'Each elf partakes of the natural world around him.' The strange Ice Kindred may prove the literal truth of his fanciful words. More than two millennia have passed since the exiled Tyris Valellion led his small band from the borders of Elvenholme and into the frozen inhospitality of the Bitter Lands. Rather than succumb to the unliveable conditions of that rain-frozen and ice-blasted place, Valellion's people somehow thrived and carved out a kingdom that is of great concern to the wise heads of Elvenholme.

The Ice Kindred are a changed people. Their skin has taken on the icy hues of the wasteland, their hair has run to white or icy blue, and their hearts, according to some, have become hardened against joy and pleasure. In Elvenholme it is speculated that Valellion had solved a sorcerous riddle that would allow his people to master the frozen wasteland. Certainly this seems to be true as the Ice Kindred are known to batter their foes with enchanted winds that chill the bone and blizzards of cutting ice summoned up by the words of the Kindred's sorcerers. To the incomprehension of the elves of the south, none are more versed in this ice magic than Valellion himself who demonstrates this most directly in his command of Tyris' Gate, the great blade of ice that cuts across the only land-bound route into his realm. Retracting only at Valellion's will, this impossible barrier makes the Bitter Lands immune to invasion by land.

Argus Rodinir, famed master of the cryptic Altar of Elements, warns of this so called 'ice magic', saying that it isn't truly about ice at all, or even freezing. According to Argus, it is the magic of cold, a long-neglected arcane philosophy the mastery of which could lead to knowledge of the great heatless void said to exist beyond the stars; of stasis, and the terrifying permanence and fixity of absolute zero.

Following their expulsion, the brothers became bitter enemies, each blaming the other for their downfall. Time has not fully healed the scars between Tyris and Talannar and his mood at any given time is reflected by conflicting emotions of love, loyalty, betrayal and deep regret. The Bitter Lands seem aptly named, for they describe well the state of the elven lord that claims dominion over them.

Kindred Warriors

Clad in fine elven armour and carrying the long spears that are their namesake, Tallspears are trained in defensive warfare from an early age. Highly regimented, these elven militia form a solid line at the heart of any elven army. Well-drilled groups of warriors can outmanoeuvre and surround an opponent with deadly speed before dealing the final blow with their weapons.

Elven tactics rely heavily on firing a deadly rain of arrows into the advancing enemies to thin their numbers before the clash or even to completely annihilate them before they can make contact. This task falls to the Kindred Archers, who are well-equipped to suit their role. Elven bows can comfortably out-shoot those of other races, while the armour worn by all elves is light and flexible enough to allow an archer to operate unimpeded. Even their shields are articulated, able to be collapsed to further free an archer's movement.

Gladestalkers act as the vanguard of the elven forces, scouting ahead of armies and loosing hails of deadly arrows from the cover of the woods. Elves are renowned across Pannithor as woodsmen and pathfinders without peer, and the Gladestalkers are exemplars of these skills. They live solitary lives guarding the great forest trails and pathways, gathering into regiments in times of war.

The elves of Therennia Adar fight on the seas, maintaining a mighty fleet of vessels that ply the world's oceans. The warriors who crew these vessels are known as Therennian Sea Guard. Trained to fight on the upper decks of the sleek elven ships, the highly flexible Sea Guard are equipped to fulfil the roles of both Tallspear and Archer, an ability that makes them the most adaptable unit in the elven army. Such is the demand for these peerless warriors that they can be found seconded to armies from other kindreds, fighting on dry land as naturally as they would at sea.

Unlike many of the other races in Pannithor, elves do not make use of cannons or black powder weaponry. Instead, elven armies are supported by bolt throwers. These powerful war machines hurl bolts as tall as a man with such force that they can level castle walls or skewer half a dozen knights with a single shot. They are quick to load and fire and light enough that they can be swiftly moved around the battlefield, rapidly redeploying wherever their firepower is required.

A variant on the bolt thrower is a flame-throwing weapon known as the Dragon's Breath. Such is the heat of the inferno unleashed by the Dragon's Breath that it is able to melt armour and flesh, making this ensorcelled war machine one of the most feared weapons on the field of battle.

Palace Guard

The most experienced and skilled elf warriors are drafted into the ranks of the Palace Guard, where they swear their lives to the service of their lord. They wear the finest enchanted armour and fight with impossible speed and elegance.

As the situation requires, Palace Guard can fight with a variety of different weapons. The most favoured of these is a long, curved glaive, which is carried by the guards from the more militaristic kindreds. Those who fight in close spaces or forests favour short arms like two-handed swords and axes. Such is the skill of the Palace Guard that they can carry a shield while fighting with either of these weapons, making their defence all but impregnable. Different kindreds of elves have varying names for these warriors based on ancient traditions and roles. Those of the Sylvan Kindred are known as Forest Guard, the Western Kindred call them the Shield Watch, and the Dragon Kindred call them the Drake Wardens.



Forest Wardens

Like a true force of nature, wild and untamed, the fey creatures and elemental constructs of the forest gather in great hunting bands when the elves march to war, honouring ancient pacts between the elves and the Green Lady.

Gnomes, fauns, will-o'-the-wisps and sprites form packs of spiteful warriors, fighting with the full fury of the Great Wild. The dryads, forest shamblers and wardens – elemental constructs of wood, foliage and earth – lumber into battle against the enemies of the elven realms. Though slow to anger, when awoken they are mighty and determined defenders of their woodland homes.

The task of raising these warriors is that of the Tree Herders. These wooden giants carefully watch over and tend to the magical forest of the world. In times of war, they stride between the trees, rousing their defenders and leading them to battle. Each of these beings is impossibly ancient, some claiming to pre-date the noble races of the world.

Swift Riders

The elves breed horses that are noble of bearing and fast as quicksilver, elegant creatures that are deceptively strong and sturdy. In battle, the elves make use of these beasts to form swift cavalry units to support their battle lines.

Stormwind Cavalry are clad in shining armour, bearing long lances and shields. They are devastating on the field, striking where the enemy least expects with speed and grace. Silverbreeze Cavalry, meanwhile, are lightly armoured, acting as mounted scouts. These peerless horse archers harry the enemy's flanks and pick off vulnerable foes with their deadly, accurate fire.

Some kindreds, especially the Eastern and Southern Kindreds, hitch their steeds to finely wrought chariots who compete in dangerous races during the Elfmoots. In battle, these chariots are pressed into service as devastating shock troops. It is common for the nobles and princes of these kindreds to go to battle atop their own personal war chariot, whereas others of the royal court will choose barded eleven chargers as their steeds.



Elven Royalty

Each kindred has one or more noble courts within their borders. These are the provinces of elven royalty – ancient noble houses that have endured for centuries. The courts are places of political intrigue, where ambassadors, mages and princes bicker and vie with each other for power. These high-born elves are not craven, however. When the elves go to war, their leaders march at the front line.

The nobles of the elven courts often fill their youth with martial feats, practising swordplay and learning strategy for what would be a lifetime for a man. These princes are great assets on the battlefield, though they can be headstrong, vying with each other for feats of heroism.

The war leaders of the elves are their kings. Peerless warriors and masters of battlefield strategy, they have honed their killing arts over centuries of warfare. These kings are often above and beyond the petty concerns of the other members of the court, looking out for the fate of their kindred as a whole.

Elven lords are accompanied on the battlefield by their own retainers. Standard bearers, usually drawn from long-serving champions of the Palace Guard, have the singular honour of carrying the army standard into battle. Bearing ancient enchantments of protection, the standards of elven lords are a blessing to their warriors and anathema to the forces of evil.

The mages of the elven courts are amongst the most powerful magic users in the world. They are inducted into the arcane mysteries at an early age and are able to harness the raw power of the elements, making them the masters of battlefield spell craft. Many elven lords are advised by the most esteemed of these mages.

Drake Riders

The ancient pact between elves and dragonkind is a bond stronger than any treaty writ on paper or carved into stone. It is a symbiotic relationship, written in magic, fire and blood. Those elven lords who ride into battle atop one of these mighty beasts are powerful indeed, for when the will of an elf and the strength of a dragon unite, few can stand before them.

More commonly seen are the Drakons. Also known as cold drakes, these winged reptiles are smaller cousins of the dragons. They are easier to tame than their larger kin but are no less ferocious for it. Drakon Riders form units of fearsome, winged shock cavalry. In recent years, attrition has thinned the numbers of Drakons amongst the armies of the elves to the extent that the Dragon Kindred has started trying to breed more drakes to replenish their population.



Madriga, High Warden of the Seas

Hailing from the city of Therennia Adar, Madriga grew up hearing the legends of the mighty Valandor like many of her kind. These tales of adventures inspired her to tread a different path to the role intended for her. She joined the ranks of the Therennian Sea Guard and quickly carved out a reputation as a fierce warrior and leader, but she found the formality and ritual of the Sea Guard suffocating. Upon gaining the rank of fleet captain, she chose to resign her commission and travel the world in search of the adventure she had heard about in her youth.

In Dolgarth, she found it. As one of a party of heroes to face down the dreaded necromancer Mortibris, she fought bravely against hordes of undead warriors and their master for the fate of the known world. Emerging as a hero, the tired elven warrior returned to her people, where she was given the title of High Warden.

Although her experiences in Dolgarth have clearly changed her, Madriga has lost none of her ferocity. She leads the elven fleets across the seas, fighting battles across the world. When their allies call for aid, she takes companies of Sea Guard onto dry land to fight alongside them – sometimes against her superiors' orders. The wars of recent years have seen Madriga march to war more than ever, with some whispering that she represents the spirit of the ancient elves, unbowed by the tragedies of history.

Argus Rodinar, Sentinel of the Elements

A highly ranked member of the court of the Mage-Queen, Argus Rodinar serves his mistress as both high seneschal and supreme general. He accompanies the armies of the northern kin wherever they may campaign, serving not as commander, but as adviser and mystic. His duty is to balance the elements and to forge victory from potential defeat, to manipulate the unseen forces of the world in an effort to ensure that victory lies with the servants of the Shining Ones and that the enemy, the slaves of the Wicked Ones, are denied their use.

While the armies of the elves and their foes clash upon the field of battle, Rodinar stands apart and aloof, concentrating entirely upon his task. Before him stands the Altar of the Elements, a relic of ancient times imbued with unimaginable power. Upon the flat surface of the altar, Rodinar enacts his spells, aligning dozens of small magical artefacts in order to balance the power of the elements as they rage unseen about the battlefield. Should elven archers find the wind against them, Rodinar turns it so their arrows fly far and true. Should rain or flood slow the warriors' advance, he causes the waters to recede. Should fire erupt upon their heads or the sun beat down with too much force, this Rodinar counters too, and should the earth itself be set against the elves, Rodinar's spells can force it to shift and part to their advantage.



Rodinar's spells are not all defensive, for he is equally capable of disrupting nature's balance to the elves' benefit, though such an undertaking is perilous and never attempted without great caution. By the alignment of certain pieces, the Sentinel of the Elements can cause entire enemy formations to burst into flame, or conversely, to sink into the suddenly flooded ground and drown in bitter waters. He can call forth great storms that cause enemy flyers to come crashing from the skies and summon such tremors that mountains shake and rockslides crash upon the foe.

Tydarion Dragonlord

Able to speak natively to the great drakes and even rouse them from their enforced slumber, Tydarion has spent much of his long life away from his kin in the caverns of the wyrms. He has learnt much that even the elves have forgotten but has been sworn to secrecy. Such is his fame that even the distant shattered clans have heard of the elf that may know the true nature of their god's hatred of all dragon-kind. When he flies to war, he has the honour of riding Ocrid-kacer, Prince of the Snowhorn Valley.



rec: III.X.c

A Map of

Elvenholme

and the

Lands of the Elven Kindreds

extending South to edges of the jungles of the equator & the Viesha subcontinent

Scale 0 50 100 150 Leagues



None may tread here,
lest they abandon all life,
The Eternal Light of Faith
And march forth on they
shall be damned Forsaken

East to Opukia & the Empire of Dusk

To the jungles of the Equator
and the fell things there

Edge of the
Southern Rift

SYLVAN KIN



ALYNNA ROOTCALLER,
SYLVAN KIN MASTER HUNTER



The Sylvan Kin, the Fey, inhabit the most magical parts of the forest, among the faeries and nymphs that dwell there, and they are a rare sight to behold. They are a capricious and elusive people, deeply suspicious of most other beings, even distrusting their fellow elves. They are at one with nature.

Long ago they rejected the ways of the other kindreds and fully embraced the arboreal origins of Pannithor. They are antagonistic to any who would alter the natural order of the world and have little contact with other races. Most dwell inside the bounds of the mystic forest of Galahir, but a large contingent live in the Twilight Glades.

While the armies of the Fey still continue to adopt many of the traditional elven battle formations and unit types, their appearance mimics the wild nature of the Fey themselves. Armour and weaponry may appear organic and even grown in place, adapting to the wearer. When the Fey are roused to war, the clarion calls of ancient ironoak horns resonate and reverberate through the trunks of the majestic woodland sentinels—a sonorous and mournful note that stirs the creatures and spirits of the forests and summons the great Host to battle.

The nobility of the Fey, if they can be considered as such, do not take the title of Queen, Prince, or King as would their more arrogant cousins. Instead they consider it is their ultimate duty to guard the forests and the pathways that criss-cross Pannithor and as such adopt titles such as Custodian of the Ways, or Garddrws. Rarely, one of these champions will stir a mighty barkwurm from its slumber—a sight to rival the famous Dragon Lords of Alandar.

Boskwraiths are wild, even by the standard of the Fey. Most are young adults, with the energy and passion of their youth still burning bright within them. They fight in chaotic formations, unpredictable and deadly. They get their name from the glittering pixies and excited will-o'-the-wisps that are drawn to the frenzied and effervescent elves and surround them with a ghostly aura. These fiendish imps delight in frolicking among the enemy and biting at any exposed flesh. Whereas most Boskwraiths will mature and join the ranks of the more disciplined Forest and Palace Guards, the Archwraiths are solitary beings that have embraced the extremes of life and the wild ebullience it can provide. They live on the edge of Fey society and are even more enigmatic than the Fey themselves, if that is possible. They are mercurial and spiteful, and named as much for their previous life as Boskwraiths as for the throng of mischievous fairy kings that swarm around them. Mostly, they come and go as they please, but if they feel the call of the Host, they are menacing and deadly warriors.

Although the beings of the forests tend not to take interest in the affairs of mortals, a few beings are affected by the continual destruction of the green places of the world. The forests bring life to the world and they can also bring death. The most powerful of these beings is the ancient tree herder known as the Wiltfather. All beings are doomed to die and it is the Wiltfather who brings this fate to them, draining the life force of all in their presence. While some may see them as a cruel being who strides alongside the forces of the Green Lady, in truth they are a kind soul. To the Wiltfather, life is a struggle and death is the release.

To join the Windborne is to receive the recognition of an elf's supreme skills with horse and bow. Drawn from the ranks of the exuberant youthful Thornsprites and Gladestalkers, the Windborne often stand aloof and proud, picking and choosing when and where they fight. When they do, however, they will often turn the tide of battle by punishing the enemy with their magically infused, silver-tipped arrows.

Although they are famed for fighting alongside the forces of Basilea, wild panthers can be found all over Pannithor, especially in forest regions such as Galahir, Elvenholme or the Vieshlar Hinterlands. The large predators are strong and swift, capable of tackling a fully grown orc to the ground and disembowelling them in short order. When hunting in packs, they can take down much larger and more dangerous prey, leaping onto shoulders or back and sinking their teeth into exposed flesh.

With their affinity to nature and the Green lady, the Sylvan Kin are one of the few forces outside of Basilea who can lure these predators into battle. While they are a great asset to any army, they are still wild, untamed animals who can be as dangerous to their handlers as they are to their foes.

Known as Stormwind to the elves, heavy cavalry go by the name of Fen Rangers in the Host of the Fey. The Fey don't have many horses, but their herds graze in enchanted glades during the day and are taken to pasture under moonlit skies at night where their hooves leave a faint trail of fairy-fire across the open grasslands. All elves are more than competent bareback riders, but the Rangers protect their steeds with ensorcelled leather and bark barding that is as tough as steel.

The Fey's Archmages are known as Spirit Weavers. Of all the Fey, they are most likely to communicate with the Green Lady. While they may beseech her guidance or support in war, the Lady rarely listens, trusting the Fey enough to deal with matters on their own. Occasionally, however, when the Fey's needs are commensurate with her own, the Lady may project an Avatar of herself to fight alongside the Host—a formidable ally indeed.



El'Rik was raised in a lonely sentinel spire on the southern slopes of the Mountains of Alandar. He represents the coming together of two very different strands of the world in which the elves exist, combining both into a truly unique individual. El'Rik's mother was a mage serving in the court of Ileuthar, a spellcaster well known for her ability to manipulate the strands of fate. His father was a wild battle-dancer, an Archwraith of the Sylvan Kin from distant Galahir. The two came together when the mighty Accord of Light was raised to repel an invasion of dead-things pouring from dark Ophidia. The union was doomed from the start, and soon after El'Rik's birth, both of his parents were lost when the Bastion of Dusk fell to a horde of Living Dead said to swarm from one horizon to the other. Though the remains of neither were ever recovered, few harbour any hope that they, or any of the defenders of that once mighty citadel, could possibly have escaped.

And so the infant El'Rik presented the kin of both his parents with something of a problem. Neither would entirely accept his mixed heritage nor agree how he should be raised. The wild forest-dwelling Sylvan Kin of his father's line saw in the elven babe something they could not entirely trust, while the magic-steeped peers of his lost mother regarded him as too wild to control the magical inheritance he was almost certain to develop as he matured. In time, the Mage-Queen Laraentha herself took pity on the infant and intervened in person. She decreed that El'Rik would become the charge of the royal household and be raised by the wardens of Tor Alandar, a watchtower guarding the southern reaches of Alandar, and when he came of age he would choose his own path in life.

El'Rik's youth was spent in isolation from the mainstream of elven society, his only company the taciturn wardens of the watch-spire. He learned much in the ways of war and the wilds, and as he grew to his maturity, El'Rik found himself coming into the inheritance of both his parents in equal measure. From his father he inherited a love of the wilderness as well as the feral grace of the Fey, while from his mother he inherited great skill at manipulating the strands of fate and magic.

Elves mature far slower than men, and so have many long years to master themselves. By the time he was held ready to leave Tor Alandar, El'Rik was a master of magic and a warrior beyond compare. Yet, in him both disciplines became far more than the sum of their parts. El'Rik somehow combined his skills as a fighter with those of a Spirit Weaver.

Presenting himself at the Court of the Mage-Queen, El'Rik demonstrated his abilities, weaving a war dance that defied anything even the most accomplished of the Sylvan Kin could achieve. By calling upon the powers of magic, El'Rik leaped to impossible heights, passed through solid obstacles and even vanished entirely to re-appear somewhere else. All of this was achieved with an impossible grace that bewitched all who witnessed it.

It was not long before El'Rik was demonstrating his twin mastery on the field of battle, where his abilities proved utterly deadly to the enemies of the elves. In war El'Rik tears across the battlefield like a tornado, a trail of dead and broken bodies cast aside in his wake. Yet, he must ever remain cautious to ensure the twin aspects of his heritage are properly balanced against one another for it is only in the finely tuned continuum of the spell-dance that his soul knows true peace. To indulge one aspect over the other would almost certainly prove fatal for El'Rik, and cost him far more than his life.





NORTHERN ALLIANCE



GROKK
SNOW TROLL PRIME



Icekin

Talannar is a worrying enigma to the elves. When he was still known as Talannar Valellion, this unremarkable prince was exiled from all of Elvenholme for bringing great shame upon his kin. Exactly what his crime was is neither recorded nor shared and the high lords of the elven realms likely thought never to hear of him again. Not so. What was rumoured to be a settlement of the Ice Kindred in the far north turned out to be something else entirely; a remarkable Young Kingdom under the rulership of a reinvented and renamed Prince Talannar Icekin.

The elves do not have a clear picture of what happened to Talannar in the great northern Winterlands. From what little is known, the exiled prince wandered the world for centuries alone, eventually striking north as far as he could go and traded his rings – priceless heirlooms – for the loyalty and protection of at least one savage tribe of ogres. These brutes carved out his first settlements and kept his borders while, by some unknown sorcery, Talannar rebuilt and raised a greatly-spired city from the very ice and rock. He named this glistening capital ‘Chill’, a simple word known to many folk in many tongues, and, in an act that would horrify his forebears, threw open his court to all who would come before him. Now Chill is a beacon to many savage folk. Besides ogres, tribes of northmen have bent their knee before Talannar’s throne, as have snow trolls and even dispossessed dwarfs. And, of course, word of his realm has attracted elves who have cut their ties to the old world and sought new glories as part of this Young Kingdom. Half-elves, outcasts from their own lands, seem to hold a particular attraction, and a welcome home, within the walls of Chill.

Mercenaries returning from campaigns in the far north name Talannar the ‘Silver Emperor’ and spend freely with freshly minted silver coins bearing the marks of Chill and Icekin. Of the city itself they speak of great wonders. Beyond its blue-tinged icy walls, warm gardens flourish brightly beneath the mighty sweep of many-faceted towers. Bright banners line every avenue and music and song ring through the air. These sounds are accompanied by one even rarer and more precious: the laughter of elven children; seldom heard in the ancestral south.



Chill

Deep in the Ice Mountains, on the frozen edge of the range known as the Howling Peaks, there stands an impossibility. It is enchanting, awesome, dominating and incomprehensible in equal measure. Bridging a high valley between mighty sentinels of rock, stands the implausible city of Chill. It stands as a symbol of hope for the repressed and dispossessed. It is a home for the disenfranchised and the lost. Above all, it is a rallying point for those that wish to unite for something greater, and a bastion against the darkness in the world.

Early attempts to establish a permanent settlement as a base of safety and central operations for Talannar's new alliance met with constant difficulties and set-backs. Providing a supply of traditional building resources became impossible due to weather and location, and raids from the orcs and goblins of Iceblood Fjord were a constant menace. The threat became so great that the snow trolls tasked with the bulk of the foundational construction work were diverted instead to support the ogre mercenaries in a bid to hold off the invaders. Over a decade, many violent clashes resulted in ongoing delays and on two occasions, vast swathes of defences and building work was destroyed by greenskins breaking through the lines.

To compound the situation, Talannar himself was not always present. Construction, leadership and security was left to trusted clan lords while the prince was abroad, embarked on

recruiting and diplomatic missions. Ofttimes, he would take off on his own, refusing company and heading high into the mountains where he would remain for weeks, if not months, at a time. Those that tried to track him, concerned for their leader's safety, eventually lost their prey as a squall of icy wind or flurry of blinding snow forced them to lose sight. The prince left no tracks and even the master hunters were baffled. The greatest, Tiemjinn Wolfsbane, managed to follow him further than anyone before, but still ultimately lost him as the prince slipped into a fissure in a sheer wall of ice and rock. Only minutes behind, Wolfsbane arrived at the entrance to a dark cavern with no other visible egress. His prince was gone.

When scouts from the east began reporting the movement of a vast horde of greenskins swarming through the peaks and hell-bent on all-out war, the alliance braced itself for the worst. Several outposts were swept aside and contact lost with remote tribes. Refugees fled west, trying to keep ahead of the tide of orcs and goblins that boiled and seethed through the high passes and south through the wild tundra and plateaus of the northern Steppe. As the clansfolk fled towards Blackridge, the largest of the Alliance settlements, doom surrounded them from all sides. The clans fought back with fury, bolstered by packs of their vicious snow trolls and charges from their hulking frost-fang cavalry. But the green tide seemed endless, and slowly, inexorably, the orcs pushed on. Goblin Sniffs pestered and harassed as their Spitters



NORTHERN ALLIANCE



poured a rain of crude arrows into the fur-clad ranks of the alliance. Hill giants were goaded into the front lines by their orc captors to smash and grind their way through the melee. Above all, the ice magic of the elves and clan magi, crackled and clashed violently with the spiteful and malicious sorcery of the greenskins.

Pushed back on all fronts, Talannar made a decision. Calling the lords and thegns to an emergency council, he ask for them to fall back, to abandon Blackridge and stage a controlled retreat up into the mountains, through the pass of Hykrim and across the mighty Fangspire glacier to a place known to the most northern clans as Wraithsight. Tribal and snow troll legends all spoke of a haunted place that turned even the strongest and most stalwart into gibbering wrecks. Even the foul creatures that lived in the shadows, the orcs, beastmen and worse, were seen in far fewer numbers the closer to Wraithsight you dared to go.

At Talannar's proclamation, the war room fell into incredulous silence before erupting into a cacophony of vehement objections and dismay. Exerting his full bearing and majesty, Talannar rose to his feet, dominating the room. He seemed to fill the space, his being omnipresent and the room was bathed in a golden light that melted through the frigid air and spread blissful, soothing warmth into the bones of all present.



What Talannar said that evening, none in that room have ever spoken of. But the gathering emerged highly energised and with a steely and burning determination. Orders were given and the great mobilisation and retreat was put in motion. Talannar went ahead, taking the most powerful of the ice queens and magi with him, preparing the path as much as they could. The fighting retreat would be treacherous, and many would sell their lives dearly for the safety of the whole before the end. Scores of trolls were lost holding off an assault by goblins in the night as the alliance slowly moved up the Ygrituul valley and generations of clansfolk were lost when an avalanche swept them aside on the sides of the mountain known as the Laughing Man.

The tale of the great frost giant, Grimjaw Igurdottir, is firmly woven in to the songs of skalds. Grimjaw sacrificed herself to save hundreds of clansfolk and elves as they made their way, embattled, through Hykrim pass. Sickly green beams of light blazed from a cadre of orc godspeakers, carving a monstrously huge sheet of ice from the cliff face which plunged into the chasm below. The orcs screamed in delight at the expected massacre below. Sensing the danger, Grimjaw threw down her weapons and caught the massive berg with a bone crunching impact. Mortally wounded, Grimjaw held the ice aloft as the refugees escaped around her. For three agonising hours, she endured the crushing weight as more snow, rock and ice rained down upon her. As the last of the Alliance's peoples passed beneath her, the greenskin pursuers were close on their heels. As they hacked and slashed at her dying body, Grimjaw let the strength ebb away from her muscles and the immense mass of ice and rock came crushing down to seal her fate.

Two months after the retreat began, with food running out and hope fading, the first of the Alliance reached their goal. And what a sight it was. Many dropped to their knees in astonishment or disbelief; many more with exhaustion. All were filled with a sense of wonder and an intense feeling of belonging. Tears flowed freely.

Raised and made from the rock and ice itself, a majestic city stood before them, framed by the twin peaks of Usmund and Burgljot. A vast, glittering blue wall surrounded the construction and ran as far left and right as could be seen. Beyond the wall, elegant spires and buildings could be seen and in the distance, at the heart of the city, rose an imposing and beautiful citadel, an enormous bastion of azure blue ice and jet black obsidian.

In front of the massive doors, Talannar Icekin rode ahead of a fresh army of elves and men. Astride the wall, the Frostdrake, Einnar, stretched its long sinewy white neck and roared a welcome to the newcomers. The ranks of Talannar's army parted and the great flow of people poured through the gate. They were home.

A Growing Power

In the comparatively little time that has passed since the construction of Chill, the Alliance has continued to build layers of defences around the city. Lines of watchtowers and outposts run throughout the Ice Mountains for scores of leagues in all directions. With the support and stability of Chill, and the aid of the ice queens, many smaller settlements have been established, garrisoned and protected by the armies of the Alliance. None have the stature and majesty of Chill, but each is remarkable in its own right and these offer a welcome sanctuary for weary travellers.

After the greenskin invasion was defeated at the wall of Chill and the remnants pursued and ridden down, work quickly begun on securing and maintaining safer and more reliable roads into the city. Traders and merchants, while still at the mercy of the weather and bandits, now regularly make the journey to and from the city, watched by Alliance patrols. All return south with astonishing stories of the city and its wonders, still dismissed by many in their audiences as fanciful and exotic nonsense.

The birth of this new kingdom and its growing influence has not gone unnoticed. Talannar's Northern Alliance must keep a constant vigil against those that would threaten it and seek to uncover its mysteries. Talannar is believed to have discovered a great and powerful secret in the frozen wastes, and jealousy, curiosity and fear in equal measure have led to a succession of skirmishes and outright conflict with the clans of the Varangur and others. The Basileans remain deeply unsure of this new but powerful ally against the wave of evil spilling into the world.

In the depths of the Abyss, suspicious minds have turned their baleful gaze from the forces of the Green Lady to the watch towers and caverns of the mountain empire, and the forges of Zarak and Diew have been working tirelessly to prepare for invasion. The defences of the Alliance will soon be tested once more.







The Armies of the Alliance

The forces of Talannar's alliance are hardy, veteran warriors with years of experience surviving and fighting in the harshest of conditions. Life isn't fair, so deal with it – a common saying amongst the northern tribes that make up the bulk of the troops at Talannar's disposal.

Talannar is a scrupulous potentate of immense charm, compassion and persuasion and a ruthless pragmatism. Knowing that respecting and understanding cultures is the key to co-operation and integration, he has adopted the military and social hierarchies of the northern tribes through his domain. The tribe chiefs and clan lords serve directly in his Witan, the council where all strategic decisions are made, whether political or military. Accompanied by their personal champions, the Skjoldcarls, they are the generals in his armies and such are the demands of the role, and the difficulty in travelling and maintaining order across the vast areas they are responsible for, they may only visit Chill once or twice a year.

Serving under the chiefs and lords are the Thegns. These powerful and imposing warriors command deep respect from friend and foe alike. Thegns will pick their best and most trusted fighters to join their Huscarls. In battle, these fearsome, heavy-set infantry may form elite units to bolster the Alliance's front lines or operate as a bodyguard for their Thegn. Individual Huscarls can also command units of clansmen, acting in the role of sergeant or as a focal point for rallying and aggression.

Clansmen

The humans of the Northern Alliance come mostly from the northern clans who have sworn allegiance to Talannar, but they can come from many disparate lands. Of these, some are remnants of eastern tribes desolated by Varangur raids. Others are refugees of wars to the south, or exiles from the numerous Kingdoms of Men. Whatever their heritage, each has found a home as part of the Alliance and will fight to their last breath to protect it.

The Ice Kin are more rugged than their southern brethren. They dress in thick furs and leather, the delicate fabrics worn by the other elves not being suited to the lands of the north. Despite their rougher appearance, these elves are every bit as graceful and swift as those of other kindreds. With sharp blades and sharper senses they fight to protect their newfound home, their winter attire doing little to stymie their elven celerity.

Many refugees from the Free Dwarf Clans have travelled north of late. Under threat of invasion and unwilling to join the Imperial Dwarfs, these outcasts are drawn to Chill, braving the harsh frozen wastes to reach sanctuary. The

Alliance is also a home for outcasts and the disillusioned from many civilisations who seek a new life and purpose and the stubborn dwarfs have proved their worth many times over as artisans, labourers and warriors.



Half-Elves

Half-Elves are almost universally treated as outcasts within the realms of Elvenholme. Conversely, they are often seen by humans as enigmatic and desirable. More impetuous and hot-blooded than their elven kin, they struggle with their dual heritage, constantly fighting internal battles to retain control. Only the Ice Kin, backed by the understanding of Talannar for their plight, are willing to take these unfortunate beings in, helping them to temper their anger and focus it on the field of battle for a good and worthy cause. As such they are ferocious fighters, shunning armour and embracing the climes of their adoptive home. Ritual and mental training steels their bodies against the harshest of conditions and in battle they are a whirlwind of cold fury and keen elven steel.

The greatest of the berserkers are supreme warriors, elevated to levels seemingly impossible for any mortal. Simply known as Ice Blades, these individuals are unrivalled blade masters with astonishing balance and acuity. Many souls have found death on the edge of an Ice Blade's cold swords. These lone berserkers have become something greater and somehow far more terrifying. No one outside of the Ice Kin knows what brings about this change, although tales abound of lone pilgrimages across the winterlands and sacred animal spirits, and whispers of occult rituals and ancient magics.



The Hunters and the Hunted

In the frozen north and across the great plains of the Mammoth Steppe, hunting is critical to provide both food and furs to keep the cold at bay. Teams of hunters from the Ice Kin venture frequently from Chill tracking the herds of the tundra. Master Hunters may spend weeks or even months in the wilderness and mountains on their own, acting as scouts and spies, feeding information back to Chill through the network of watch-towers and bastions built into the mountains. These lines of forts form a network of layered defences and communication and between them and the scouts of the Ice Kin, they are the first line of defence and the eyes and ears of the Alliance.

Clansmen from across the wild lands learn to hunt not long after they learn to walk. While the Ice Kin favour the bow their heritage demands, the clans have a variety of tools at their disposal. From slings to bows and javelins for taking down larger prey such as mammoths and shaggy Oolox, all can be equally effective in war.

Alpha predators are also prized by the daring and skilled, such as the ferocious Frostfangs and swift Tundra Wolves, but these animals are rarely hunted for food; they are often captured and brought back to the clans or even the citadel of Chill to be tamed and utilised in the defence of the Alliance. The most fearless, or deranged, lords and Thegns may hunt alone for sport to prove their right to lead and their skill in the hunt. The ultimate prize for these brave, or fool-hardy, individuals is to capture a Frostfang or even, on occasion, a mighty chimera to use as their personal battle mount.

Packs of Tundra Wolves are commonly spread throughout the northern regions of Mantica. Their thick arctic fur is a prized possession among the human tribes and clans, but many have also become semi-domesticated. The ultimate prize for any hunter is wolf pups, which, when trained, become ferocious guardians and invaluable hunting aides. Smaller snow foxes also make for great hunting companions and are used by both Ice Kin and clansmen alike. Sometimes, they are trained in packs to harass and disrupt enemy lines, distracting them long enough for other, harder hitting, Alliance units to move into position.

Bulky war engines are impractical in the environments the Alliance operates within and defends. Treacherous snow and ice, steep rocky landscapes and inclement weather all curtail the use of what many armies would consider mandatory and conventional artillery. The Alliance is not without ingenuity,

however, and the Ice Kin have adapted the bolt throwers of their southern kin to develop their own version capable of great mobility and light-weight practicality, while still delivering a chilling and devastating punch to their foes.

Here be Monsters

Much of Pannithor is open wilderness, where the noble races and others have yet to spread, or have abandoned, with once sprawling empires left to crumble and rot. The region of Mantica is no different, despite the historic concentration of civilisation. Vast tracts of land are uninhabitable, or not suitable for settlement, and across the immense plains and mountain ranges of the north, biodiversity is strong and thrives without the pressures imposed by farming and demands for land.

Pannithor's history, its turmoil and trials, the currents of magic that ripple through the earth and skies, have all had a profound effect on the world and the creatures that have evolved there, whether naturally or through pain, suffering and the meddling of gods.

Few of the clans in the foothills and lower slopes of the Howling Peaks and in the northern-most limits of the Ogre Lands have managed to tame the brutal and elusive Frostfangs. These beasts are an ancient, primeval ancestor of the Gur Panthers that the forces of Basilea employ in battle. Where the panthers are sleek and graceful, the Frost Fangs are heavy-set but hugely powerful. Known to the shattered clans as Direfangs, they are savage killers, covered in a thick hide and dense white fur. Their claws can shear through plate like butter and their jaws are strong enough to crush the skulls of giants. Only the bravest, or sometimes craziest, of volunteers will attempt to ride such beasts, though in truth they do little else than try and steer the creatures toward the enemy.

Snow Trolls are remarkably intelligent compared to other members of their race. Those that march into battle alongside the Alliance could almost be





called clever, to a degree. They wear armour, rather than having it crudely nailed into their flesh, and can understand and obey orders as well as most humans. When it comes to combat, however, they still tend to grab the biggest object to hand and pummel it into the enemy. All trolls are fighters, even the smarter ones found in the far north. When that intellect is turned to warfare, some Snow Trolls seem to be gifted with tactics and strategy beyond expectations. Elevated above their kin to a command role, Snow Troll Primes are greatly respected by the Trolls they lead, as well as the other warriors in the Alliance for their fearsome leadership and brutal efficiency. It is said that the Snow Trolls were the first to swear themselves to Talannar when he arrived in the north, a tale that will surely become embellished and shrouded in clan myth.

Cavern Dwellers are but one of the horrors found within the expansive northern ice caves. These colossal creatures are able to slow their metabolisms and go years without food. They lurk motionless in the darkness, waiting for their prey to wander within their ensnaring reach. They are blind, but their remaining senses are highly tuned. With the willing assistance of the cruel cave trolls, a clan may risk the dangers of capturing one of these ghastly beings to keep it chained up for years. Starving and half mad, it will then be goaded to battle where its voracious appetite is unleashed upon the enemy. In recent times, there have been sightings of elven hunters risking their lives to stalk these monsters, but to what end the elves would range so far from their southern homelands to find these horrors it cannot be imagined. Such rumours have mostly been dismissed as fanciful nonsense or the ramblings of madmen.

The Titans of the North

Giants have lived in Pannithor since before even the noble races became dominant. They have an ancient heritage that binds them to the gods of old. Solitary creatures, they are rarely seen in in any numbers, except in the sky-scraping mountains of The Shadowed Spires. From the ice encrusted cliffs on the coast of The Crystal Sea and as far as Drakes End, the dominion of the Frost Giants has remained theirs for thousands of years.

Frost Giants rarely leave the Arctic Wastes but on occasion they may drift south in ones or twos, searching for food, or to resolve some issue that has angered them. The greatest migration in recent times was during the war with Winter when the Wicked Ones agreed on a pact with the giants – a permanent expansion of their domain in return for their support in the war against the world. Despite the advantage the giants gave Winter’s armies across the world, they eventually found themselves on the losing side, driven back to their homelands and losing a great many of their number.

It is astonishing therefore to think that Talannar has managed to not only communicate with these elusive and dangerous titans, but that the armies of the Alliance now even boast such immense and powerful beings within their ranks. Just what Talannar has negotiated or what sacrifice has been made, only his closest advisors know, and it remains fiercely guarded knowledge – yet another in Talannar’s increasingly long list of secrets and mysteries. Perhaps some deal has been struck with Hrimm, lord of the Frost Giants, for this legendary and mighty hero has been seen on more than one occasion, towering over the enemy and fighting in the lines of the Alliance when Talannar himself is in the field.

From the Depths

The farthest reaches of the Neritican Kingdom of Myrrhimm stretch into the icy waters of the North and encompass both the Crystal and Frozen Seas.

There are Naiad populations spread all over the world, even beneath the polar ice. These beings have adapted to the colder climate they dwell in and can survive near-freezing temperatures both above and below the waves. When Prince Talannar beseeched the Green Lady and the Trident King of Myrrhimm for aid in the coming wars, these dour warriors were felt the natural choice. Wielding weapons with crystalline ice blades many times harder than steel, these implacable beings now fight alongside the forces of the Alliance as long as Talannar’s promises hold true.



The Icy Breath of Magic

Magic permeates the world. It is pervasive, omnipresent and fickle. In the skies above the Howling Peaks and the Arctic Wastes, you can see it.

On cloudless nights, when the stars glitter brightly against a pitch black sky, coruscating waves of magic can be seen rolling across the heavens, a breath-taking kaleidoscope of greens, blues and purples that illuminate the mountains and cast beguiling shadows through canyons and glaciers alike. To those attuned to the winds of such celestial power, here it feels cleaner, more natural and raw.

The mages of the Ice Kin practice a distinctly different form of magic than the mages of Elvenholme. Ice magic is notoriously temperamental and difficult to maintain, but in the fortress city of Chill and the northern clan holds, the Ice Kin have bent it to their will. Mastery over the cold was essential when the exiled elves first settled in the north and it was only with the assistance of the first mages and Ice Queens, with knowledge gleaned from the magi of the clans, that the city was created in the first place. The elves of Chill are not the only ones to have fused their knowledge of magic with the learnings of the magi. In the Bitter Lands, the mages of Valellion, Talannar's brother, have also demonstrated this new form of sorcery. It is possible the brothers have shared their knowledge, although this seems unlikely given their fractured relationship.

In times of war, the mages use their powers to freeze enemies, summon great blizzards, or awaken the ice elementals. These elementals are a rarity in Mantica, able to be summoned only in the frozen northern realms. Sustained by the magic of the Ice Kin or the clan magi, these magically transformed water elementals can subsequently be led to war in any environment.

The Storytellers

To be a skald in the clans is to bear an immense responsibility. Little is physically documented and tradition dictates that all the memories, knowledge and history of the tribes and clans are learnt, maintained and retold by their skalds. Due to their vast knowledge of what has gone before, skalds are often close advisors to both Thegns and Lords alike. Skalds are the very essence of the clans and their collective memory and experiences. They can be fierce fighters, knowing what dies with them, and they are hugely revered and protected by their tribe.

The duties of a skald are varied. Loquacious scholars, poets and historians, they must educate and inspire their tribe. They must remember and recall all the deeds and failures of

their heroes and leaders. They can find themselves teaching classes of children about the history of their forebears, fortifying the hearts of warriors around a campfire on the eve of a great battle or fighting in the most bitter of conflicts, urging their fellows on to glory with bombastic and inspirational rhetoric. In the aftermath of any conflict, the names of the fallen are added to the skald's threnodies and elegies sung softly to the warriors thankful they are still alive.

The skald Clarion is the emissary of the Alliance. For a decade, he has travelled the length of Talannar's kingdom and back, instilling fresh purpose and belief in those brave souls far from Chill, putting their lives on the line for the greater good. His is a monumental task, to perform a skald's work for the whole of the Alliance. But he is more than capable – a patient and powerful man with an incredible memory, passion and empathy. Clarion has now been sent south, the herald carrying Talannar's message to the lands that must become allies, or suffer whatever fate has in store for them.

Orlaf Skull-Splitter

Orlaf suffered from wanderlust. When his clan elders and lord swore their allegiance to the Northern Alliance, the young man left his homelands on the coasts of the Frozen Sea and headed south through the Ogre Lands to make his living as a sell-sword, hiring his skills out to the highest bidder. Tremendously strong and skilled with blade and fist, his travels took him through the lands of Basilea to the City of the Golden Horn where he established himself as the go-to professional for wealthy merchants and nobility who lacked the physical wherewithal to solve their own problems.

His reputation was such that he was hired as one of a party to tackle the now infamous necromancer Mortibris, which only served to inflate his reputation and ego. City life agreed with him too much and standards slipped. A life of easy comforts, rich foods and vice soon took their toll and life quickly spiralled out of control.

A dishevelled, broken wretch, he was found in the gutter by a traveller from the north. The softly spoken man fixed him with kind, but piercing and firm blue eyes. He was a herald he said, and the north needed their son to return for great work that was to come. It was time to return home.

At the gates of Chill, a lean, hungry and wiser Orlaf Skull-Splitter sought an audience with the prince he had heard so much about.

Orlaf, skjoldcarl of Talannar, has returned to his people. Woe betide any who seek their harm.

FORCES OF NATURE



deeproot
forest warden of calahir

FORCES OF NATURE



To understand the forces that march beneath the banners of the Green Lady, one must first understand the deity herself. Unique among all the old and new gods of Pannithor, the Green Lady seeks always to preserve balance in the world, to stave off the dominance of good and evil alike, and to crush those who would seek to undo it, whoever they may be.

The reason for this lies in the unique nature of the lady herself. When the Fenulian Mirror shattered, it is common knowledge that all of the Celestians either perished forever or were split into opposing halves of their own selves, their noble and dark sides becoming separate identities which would then go on to wage the most destructive and costly war in the history of the world. What is less well-known, is that at least one Celestian was subject to neither fate. Karinna, ever one of the most withdrawn and secretive of her kind, was deep within her sacred groves when the mirror was rent asunder. Enveloped within those dark canopies, she was protected from the effects of the Sundering. As her kin raged and fought around the world, and cataclysm after cataclysm smote the heavens, the land and the sea, the Lady knew her time was short. If she was to survive the catastrophe which had claimed her Kin, she had to find some way to become more than she was.

The answer presented itself when the Wicked One known as Liliana stumbled into her glades. The creatures of the Forests rallied to destroy this invader, instinctively looking to protect their Lady. But the Lady saw in Liliana's eyes a sense of torment. The Wicked One had fled into the Glades to escape the war outside, feeling neither part of one side nor the other. The rending of Liliana's soul in twain had not been clean. Good still clung to her, leaving her neither wholly evil nor by any stretch pure. The Lady looked upon her kin and knew what must be done - calling on the powers of the elements, Fire, Earth, Air and Water, she bound Liliana's suffering, pain and essence within her own frame, becoming more than she had once been.

The conjoining of the two beings soothed the pain of Liliana, while providing the power the Lady needed to venture outside her own realm. Everywhere, the world was in chaos, a conflict to end all conflicts, whose size and ferocity confounded even the mighty intellect of a Celestian such as the Lady. She knew only one goal - balance. And that balance must start in her own bifurcated soul. With that single drive in mind, the Lady set out to make her way through the God War in search of Liliana's Shining aspect.

It was a journey which took her through some of the most horrific battles of the war. With each fresh atrocity she witnessed, her Celestian heart took pity upon a new mortal race which had fallen victim to this terrible conflict - even as Liliana's thirst for vengeance drove her own darker nature to perform terrible acts against those who made them suffer. Thus it was that the Salamanders, the Hydras, the Pegasi and more came to swell the ranks of the Lady, groups of each retreating with her to the Forests to make their new home, even as their own habitats burned in the fires of the Wicked Ones' spite or the Shining Ones' vengeance.





BACKGROUND

After many journeys, and many battles, the Lady finally found Liliana's Shining aspect at the battle of Madness. Where the Straits of Madness lie today - so called because of the tendency of sailors who chance the passage to succumb to insanity - was once a chain of paradisaical islands, hunting grounds for naiads of the Neritican realm. Ba'el, one of the mightiest of the Wicked Ones, had gathered an army of demonic creatures to lay waste to these creatures, and Liliana stood before him. The ocean waters heaved in revulsion at the presence of such evil, the sky above as black as tar. Liliana was battered but defiant when the Lady arrived, at the head of a vast fleet of her allies, elves and other, feyer creatures all working side by side in the name of the Lady. The sight of her shining aspect alive but in such pain and peril drove the wicked shard sharing the Lady's body into a terrible fury, such that even Ba'el and his army of darkness could not stand before her. Legions of hellspawn were immolated in the fires of her anger, and Ba'el himself retired from the field to lick the wounds inflicted upon him that day. When the battle was over, an exhausted Liliana fell, limp, to be caught at the last moment by the Lady. At her touch, Liliana's corporeal form flashed into motes of light, which were absorbed into the Lady's divine frame. Within her, the twin aspects of Liliana

became whole once again, extinguishing the pain both halves had felt, and creating a gestalt which would rule over the forces of Nature forever more.

From that day to this, the Lady has commanded not merely the creatures of the Glades, but races from across the world, united in their debt of gratitude for her actions during the God War and inspired by her vision and energy. The elves of the Sylvan Kin also worship her, but it is in her own forces that the true power of the lady lies, not least of which are the druids, an order of men scattered throughout the known world and beyond and sworn to her service. Thus, though the Lady is but one (albeit powerful) being, she has eyes and ears and reach across all of Pannithor.

The Forces of Nature are unique in Pannithor. No other race or faction in the world commands such diversity amongst its ranks. No other king, lord or deity can command such fierce loyalty as the Lady does from so many far-flung ends of the globe. With the power at her command, the Lady could crush all before her and rule supreme, should she so choose. It is the very fact that she does not which ensures those loyalties, and maintains her position in the world.



FORCES OF NATURE



The real uniqueness of the Forces of Nature lies in the way in which they are used. Other armies march for coin or power. They stride forth to conquer territories for distant masters, crush enemies in petty vengeance or simply for the chance to exult in the act of war itself. The Forces of Nature play a larger and more patient game.

It is the singular composition of the Lady – a Celestial heart balanced by the darker and nobler aspects of one of her kin – that informs and strengthens her striving for balance in the world above all other things. Alone of her kin, the Lady saw the true horrors of the God War. Where the Shining Ones and Wicked Ones fought against each other with all the petty focus of siblings trying to outdo one another, conscious only of their own goals and desires and largely heedless of the destruction they rained upon the world around them, the Lady saw all of the horror and hope of the God War in equal measure. She witnessed the nobility of the mortal spirit fighting against impossible odds and she despaired of the awful selfishness of those who would use slaughter to further their own ends. She saw the awful complacency of good men when victory seemed assured, and the unimaginable terror of a world blanketed by evil that nearly blotted any trace of light from its face.

It is this need for balance which drives every decision of the Lady, and every action taken by her forces. The Druids form a secretive network which is threaded throughout the world, mysterious lone travellers wandering from place to place and observing the course of all life in every corner of civilisation. When a Druid observes something which might indicate a tipping of the balance – the fall of a final line of defence for one faction or another, or the swelling of a conquering force to invincible proportions – they will send word back to the Forests of Galahir via the very birds, insects and other creatures, that the Lady may judge the situation and call forth her forces accordingly.

In battle, the Forces of Nature are nigh unstoppable once roused to action. Usually commanded in the field by one or more members of the druidic order, the army will represent a balance between the four elements, Earth, Wind, Water and Fire, with creatures representing each in its ranks. Accompanying them will be all manner of additional creatures – mighty giant Eagles, Elemental Constructs, enormous Forest Shamblers and more. To face the wrath of the Lady is to war against nature itself, and the irresistible might of her armies is matched by the ferocity of their magic, which calls on the very elements themselves. An army fighting the forces of the Lady fights as though facing the very world itself.

It is only rarely that the Lady herself will take to battle with her forces. Even the druids themselves give thanks for this, as the fury of the Lady is terrible to behold and nigh impossible to contain, even for her most trusted lieutenants. It is when her darker aspect is roused that the enemies of Nature tremble, knowing that their inevitable doom by her hand is nigh.

The Druids

Legend has it that the first druid was a man bewitched into the Lady's service by her magic. Some tales have it that this was a mighty warrior of noble birth who wandered into her realm one day. Impressed by his boldness and having need of influence beyond the borders of Galahir, the Lady enraptured him with her powers and caused him to forswear his old path in favour of a new life of service in her name, preserving peace and balance throughout the world. Other versions of the tale have the man as a mere foot soldier, the sole survivor of a particularly brutal battle in the God War, who swore fealty to the Lady having witnessed her attempting to save his people. Still others have him as a learned mage who sought the Lady out to study her unique nature in the years following the God War and instead fell hopelessly in love with her and swore an oath to be forever in her service.

Whatever the truth, the man became the first of the sacred Order of Druids, a secretive sect which has grown and spread to cover the entire world with a network of agents dedicated to the teachings of the Lady and the preservation of balance.

To be a druid is to forsake all other masters, all other loyalties and pledge oneself completely to the Lady and her works. It requires a particular combination of skill, intellect and raw physical stamina and prowess, to say nothing of courage and determination. It is a profession suited more to humans than any other noble race, and it is for this reason that the Order of Druids is almost exclusively composed of humans. Elves may be stronger magic users, but they also lack humility and the will to subvert themselves to a greater cause. Dwarfs are stubborn, and generally mistrustful of anything and everything that is not dwarfish. During the God War, the Lady learned the capacity for humanity to sit right on the edge of morality and judgement, to walk the grey line others either do not or cannot see. It is no accident that she chose a human as the first druid, nor that the order is mostly human in composition to this day.

Druids are masters of magic to rival even the greatest elven mage, though they use magic in a very different way. Where elves and human mages tend to forcefully take what power they require and actively bend it to perform their will, druids are more subtle, sensing and feeling the ripples, ebbs and flows of magical force and gently altering these to achieve the desired effect. Ever mindful of the need for balance in all things, a druid will never commit to 'mastery' of one or the other form of magic as other magic users do, nor will they ever attempt magic that is beyond their limits. To be a druid is to accept limitations rather than push against them, to ensure the world and the forces which shape it are disturbed as little as possible by your actions. Where an elven battle mage might be described as a tsunami of magical force, pummelling his opponents with raw magical might, a druid is more akin to a river, gently eroding with natural force. Where a human wizard might spend years mastering one particular lore or element of magic, a druid will study all, seeking never to master, but merely to guide appropriately.

A druid is a spy as much as a mage and leader, and must be able to escape difficult and often outnumbered situations should they be discovered. They must also often take responsibility for the direction of armies in battle, marshalling their disparate resources to the best possible effect, sometimes while ensuring the foe is not completely destroyed. Thus, every druid is statesman, warrior, general, mage, academic and more. There are no comparable individuals in the world, and no similar order exists in any of the realms of men, elves or dwarfs.



FORCES OF NATURE



So subtle are the druids, that to this day the full extent of their infiltration and works in the world at large are not even suspected, far less known. Elves, dwarfs and men of whom a druid knows every last intimate detail, who he may even have walked a mere step behind during many years of observation, would still greet him as a stranger should he reveal himself.

Such dedication and power require great sacrifice. A druid forsakes all former ties, all former family, friends and oaths when admitted to the order. Nothing less than total dedication to the Lady and her cause is acceptable. It is telling that in the centuries since the first druid, not one of their kind has betrayed this dedication, nor even appeared close to doing so.

Galahir

Galahir itself is an enduring marvel of the world. As the fastness of the Lady, it is fitting that its size and boundaries wax and wane over the course of time, though the central forest itself, the great green cloister of the goddess, remains unchanged and, until recently, unsullied. Originally the heart of the elven civilisation in times long since past, it was deserted by most of them as their power grew, and with it their appetite for conquest and the building of mighty cities of stone and glass. Those few who remain – the Sylvan Kin – retain the favour of the Lady as well as her gratitude, for theirs was part of the power that warded off the calamity of the Sundering from splitting her in twain. Returning the favour during the Time of Ice, the Lady wove arcane defences around the centre of the forest realm, preventing the glaciers of Winter from crushing the Sylvan Kin and their realm while Primovantor and Arkovidia were smothered beneath the frigid onslaught. The Sylvan Kin worship and fear the Green Lady in equal measure, as awed by her beauty and kindness as they are terrified by her unpredictable moods and awful temper.

Other creatures live within the borders of Galahir – in fact in no other place in the world are so many races represented in so small a space. Naiads, Sylphs and more cohabit in the varied environs of the great space, each keeping to the part most suited to them but co-existing in peace and harmony. Many of these creatures are not native to this part of the world, such as the Salamanders, and are either descendants of those who took refuge in Galahir during the God War or emissaries from their homelands, sent as part of the ongoing pacts and debts made during that terrible time.

Thus Galahir has untold acres of sweeping woodlands, but the common reference to it as a forest realm is a misnomer. Within her borders, the Lady counts mountains, streams, lakes and dark caverns. Truly, like its queen herself, the realm of Galahir is a many faceted thing, reflecting all aspects of the world around it.

Of course, this bountiful variety and its place in the world mean that Galahir is often subject to the unwelcome attentions of outside invaders. Orcs and their smaller cousin races often trespass into the borders of Galahir as they continue their endless quest for destruction. Abyssal Dwarfs have been known to venture within, seeking fuel for their furnaces in the magnificent and ancient trees of the forests. Even men, from the wild barbarians of the Ardovikian Plains to adventurers and rogues from Basilea and other, smaller cities in the remains of Primovantor, seek to penetrate the mysterious depths of the realm in search of sport, plunder or both. Few meet with any success, and most lose their lives, or worse, when they cross the borders of Galahir and seek to make sport of its inhabitants.



The dull thunk of the axe biting into the trunk seemed swallowed by the oppressive canopy above, lost among the branches and leaves which blotted out the sky. Krug didn't like it, his every instinct revolting against the unnatural dark. An orc needed to see the sky, even if it was choked with thick black smoke, covered in dirty rain clouds or lit only by the pinpricks of stars. His hindbrain railed against this enclosure like a chained beast, keeping his limbs tense, his ears pricked and his eyes flitting from shadow to shadow.

Krug had not ascended to leadership of the Bloody Tooth tribe by being a coward, but neither had he wrenched that authority to himself by being stupid. He didn't like being here in the forest like this, and the solution was

simple – the trees needed to be felled quickly. He gestured to the big troll, and the dull creature swung its oversized axe again, the blade hitting the wood with the same dull thud, shivering the trunk as the notch in it was opened another foot. The tree was massive, probably ancient, but that was of no concern to Krug – young or old, it would burn just the same, and its absence would at least admit a bit of light into this place.

He was jolted from his reverie by the arrival of his number two, Dul. Or, more accurately, by the vile stench that his most trusted lieutenant brought with him wherever he went, announcing his presence seconds before the orc himself arrived. Krug noted as he turned that Dul was chewing on a goblin leg, and hoped another conversation about eating their servants wasn't on the cards.

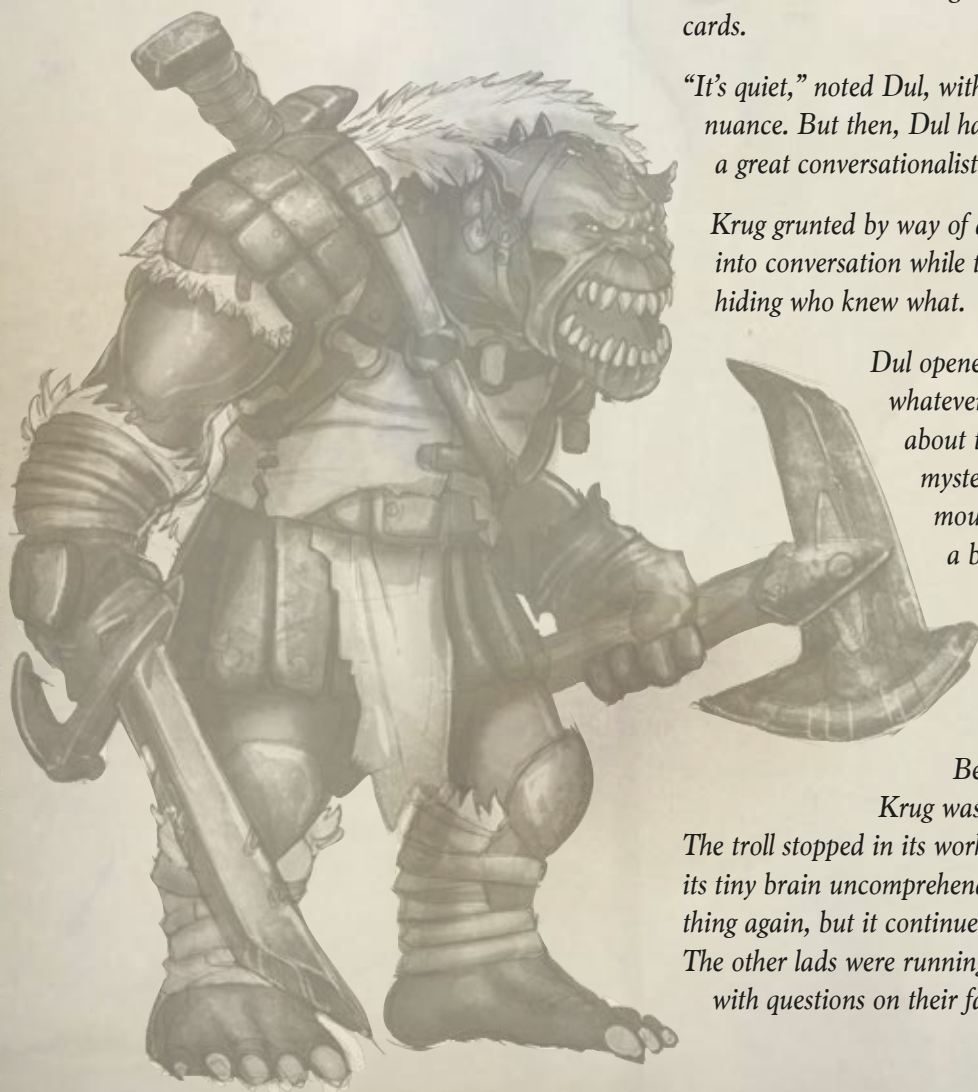
“It's quiet,” noted Dul, with all of his usual observational nuance. But then, Dul hadn't got his position by being a great conversationalist – his scars attested to that.

Krug grunted by way of a reply, unwilling to be drawn into conversation while the darkness was everywhere, hiding who knew what.

Dul opened his mouth again, but whatever nugget of wisdom he was about to share would remain a mystery, stuck to the roof of his mouth along with his tongue by a bolt the size of a small dagger.

Dul's eyes crossed as his legs went from beneath him, his corpse sliding heavily on the floor.

Before he had hit the ground, Krug was running, bellowing orders. The troll stopped in its work and looked up, confused, its tiny brain uncomprehending. Krug bellowed at the thing again, but it continued to stare stupidly at him. The other lads were running now, coming towards him with questions on their faces. He realised that aside





from Dul's slumped body there was nothing out of place. No swarm of enemies, no sign of the killer, just the eerie, unnatural quiet of the forest.

He straightened up and punched the nearest orc in the gut for good measure. It wouldn't do to look weak in front of his troops.

"Some sneaky blighter has done for Dul. Orgug, you're my number two. Raghat, Hig, search those trees over there and see if you can find the sneaky wotsit. The rest of you, keep your eyes peeled."

They snapped to it, though he couldn't help but feel they went about it with a little less speed than they could have done. He'd have to watch this.

A cry from the direction of the troll had him turning on the spot, ready to yell at whatever idiot had got in the thing's way. Instead, he saw one of the lads laid out flat, a flaming sword buried in his guts. Now the others were paying attention. Orgug was forming them up, weapons drawn, tightening into a circle and scanning the surrounding darkness, looking for some sign of the enemy.

Another noise, this time the unmistakable sound of bone shattering. Krug turned to remonstrate with the troll for whoever it had just broken and stopped.

Standing there, rising above everything around it was a – well it looked like a tree. Except an enormous, murderous tree, with massive trunk-like arms and enormous trunk-like legs. Its red, glowing eyes narrowed, burning into him like coals. Buried in the side of one leg, still quivering, was the troll's axe, looking now like a goblin's toy. His eyes moved down the trunk-leg to the pile of liquefied

bones and pulverised flesh that had been a troll only seconds before. Krug made a very hasty decision.

"Hack it to pieces!"

As if his words broke some spell, the other lads began to move. Above the sound of their charge came a whistling and two went down, half a dozen arrows in each of their backs. An inhuman scream, almost like a horse, rolled out, and the sound of hooves reached him. Krug was yelling, hoping the rest of the tribe might hear. It was too late.

The centaurs burst into the small area, crashing through the undergrowth and charging straight into the orcs. Those who were not trampled beneath the hooves were hacked apart by wicked blades, and then, as quickly as they had appeared, the centaurs vanished again, leaving Krug alone with the rapidly cooling corpses of his scouting party.

Krug had fought many battles, both among his own kind to reach his current position and against all manner of other foes. Never in all those years of battle had he seen two dozen orcs and a troll wiped out with such casual efficiency. He looked back at the giant walking tree, but it was no longer there – all that remained was the gently wobbling axe in the tree trunk. It was as if he had simply imagined the whole thing, only the bodies and blood there to bear witness otherwise.

Krug ran, heading as quickly as he could for the edge of the forest and daylight. Behind him, the bodies of the fallen were already sinking into the loamy earth, claimed by the forest. None invaded the Lady's realm without consequence.



Warriors of the Forests

The forests of Pannithor are truly ancient. Indeed, there are records of the forest of Galahir that date back to before the coming of the Celestians. Although accounts from that time are rarely reliable, if they are true, it would mean that the arboreal realms of the world are home to some of its oldest living inhabitants. Whether it is true or not, those beings who stride amongst the trees seem content to hold their silence on the matter.

The green places of the world are wild places, saturated with magic. Sprites and will-o'-the-wisps frolic beneath their boughs, lumbering tree herders speak to the ancient trees, and forest shamblers and dryads shadow any who enter their domain. The great forests live in a natural state of equilibrium: always changing yet always the same, living and dying in a constant, unrelenting cycle. It's no wonder that these places are considered by many to be the centre of balance in the world.

The guardians of these glades are enigmatic beings. Most are elemental constructs, their normally inanimate forms given will and mobility by powerful magics. They channel the innate sentience of the forests – the implacable patience and the anger of loss belonging to all trees. They can be summoned to fight by the ancient tree herders, the druids or even an avatar of the Green Lady herself. The power that binds their forms allows them to be built anywhere within the trees, their bodies being broken down and absorbed back into the woods, before being regrown in moments elsewhere. It is in this way that the relatively small numbers of guardians are able to protect vast swathes of woodland against all intruders.



The most ancient of the shamblers are known as wardens. These beings have been fighting for many centuries, or even millennia. Unlike their younger brethren, they are not subsumed back into the forests when their work is done. Their ancient battlelust and rage is too ingrained and, ironically, poses a threat to the forests if reabsorbed. Instead, they are charged as the vanguard of the woodland realm. When they encounter a threat, they summon the defenders of the woods toward them, often using overwhelming force and numbers to decimate small incursions into their

domain. It is troubling that in recent decades, more and more forest shamblers have taken to this path – abandoning the tranquillity of the forest in favour of a lifetime of war. Perhaps this is nature itself preparing for some greater threat that is still to emerge.

When summoned by nature, these arboreal guardians are a sight to behold. Glowing with powerful magic, the wardens and shamblers march forth, led by the towering Tree Herders. Dryads, sprites and critters swarm about their feet, eager to begin the hunt. Although their power wanes as they leave the protection of the trees, they are still many times more powerful than the mortal or demonic warriors they face. Their only weaknesses are that they are few in number and vulnerable to fire, but even these hindrances are of little concern to the guardians themselves. In the end, if they cannot defeat their foes, they will simply outlast them.

Warriors of the Sea

The guardians who hail from the oceans of the world are most commonly Naiads. An amphibious race of humanoids who dwell beneath the waves in the Trident Realm of Neritica, naiads are bitter and militaristic, having suffered much at the hands of other races. They maintain standing armies of well armed and armoured warriors, who are all-too-ready to go to war in the Green Lady's name.

Flitting between alluringly beautiful and terrifyingly ferocious, naiads draw power from the water. As long as they are near to the ocean, a river or even an underground spring, they can regenerate even the most grievous wounds. The naiads' way of war has been created in response to the seafarers who repeatedly invade their waters. Regiments of Ensnarers skilfully disarm opponents with barbed nets before impaling them on tridents, in similar manner to the fishermen of the seas. In cruel mockery of those who prey on sea creatures, Heartpiercers carry heavy harpoon launchers that can skewer their foes from afar. Blessed with a natural longevity, naiads spend decades practicing with these weapons, becoming preternaturally deadly shots.

Wyrmridders go to battle atop mighty sea serpents, adding their spite and fury to the charge of their ferocious mounts. Though their powers are limited out of the water, these heavy cavalry are carried into battle on currents of water magic for a limited time – usually all they need to smash the enemy's ranks asunder.

Stalkers are solitary figures among the naiads. Not strictly a part of the Neritican military, they have sworn to avenge their sisters who have fallen to the predations of sailors and soldiers over the long centuries. Their bitterness and rage is palpable, driving them to join every battle they can find in the hopes of exacting punishment on the enemies of the naiads.

FORCES OF NATURE



The naiads are led to war by Centurions. These commanders are veterans of many battles, both on the land and sea. Each one commands a mixed company comprised of Ensarers, Heartpiercers and wyrmriders, along with numerous other warriors. Although they are most regularly seen among the forces of the Trident Realm of Nertitica, some naiad companies fight on land alongside the other Forces of Nature, lending their own aggression and soldiers to the Green Lady's cause.

Naiads often march to war alongside summoned elementals of the sea. Naiads are closely attuned to the sea and this connection runs both ways. When the anger of the Neriticans is roused, the anger of the waves is manifested as violent water elementals. These beings can be summoned and controlled but still pose a risk to both friend and foe.

Warriors of the Earth

Across the great plains and slopes of the wilds roam the centaurs. Centaurs are a race of simple hunter-gatherers with strong ties to the earth. Although generally peaceful, they are highly territorial and will attack and run down any who provoke them. They live a nomadic existence, travelling in herds of extended families of both young and old.

When they take to battle, most centaurs use their hunting tools. Many carry heavy two-handed weapons, normally used to fight the beasts of the Mammoth Steppe, but also more than capable of bisecting a man. Others make use of sturdy bows, firing on the move with deadly accuracy. Those who lead the centaur herds are marked for greatness. The wise individuals have fought for many long years and would see their people survive, whatever comes to pass.

The centaurs act as scouts and outriders for the Forces of Nature. They can cover great distances quickly and are commonly employed by the druids to look into threats and report back from ongoing conflicts. This suits the centaurs fine, allowing them to satisfy their wanderlust and protect their way of life.

Elementals of the earth are a stark contrast to the centaurs who they share their realms with. Made of rock and soil, these lumbering constructs are slow and almost peaceful in their existence. Although a single blow from one of these giants can flatten just about any foe, they are rarely summoned as fighters. Their stone bodies render them almost indestructible, so the earth elementals will commonly act as defenders rather than attackers. It is this role that forms the link between the centaurs and the elementals of the earth – the desire to protect the world and their kind.



Warriors of Fire

From the volcanic island known as the Three Kings come the salamanders. Reptiles whose blood burns with magical heat, they are formidable warriors who can be found across Pannithor. Each salamander is covered in toughened scales which are as effective as plate armour and sharp claws and teeth that can rend flesh. This all combines to make them fearsome warriors.

Although salamanders of all ages go to war, it is those who are at the peak of their abilities – known as Primes – who go to war alongside the Forces of Nature. These beings can channel the heat that inhabits their bodies into their weapons, heating their swords and axes to such a degree that they are capable of melting through armour. These abilities come at a cost – each salamander must regularly return to the Three Kings to replenish their inner fires in the heat of the volcanoes. If they are extinguished, then the salamander will perish with them.

Despite their ferocious appearance, salamanders are a noble and peaceful people. They fight when threatened or summoned to war, like many among the armies of nature. Their veterans can be found leading the contingents of these warriors, using these battles as a proving ground. These veterans often go on to become battle captains in the salamanders' own armies.

The elementals of fire are entities of sizzling, scorching energy, bound together by strong magic. Taking the form of warriors of fire and lava, their fury is fearsome to behold. The rage of nature personified, fire elementals are difficult to control and can be dangerous to both friend and foe. Only the salamanders, tempered by the fires of the Three Kings, can withstand their flames for long – so when these fire spirits are summoned, they are often accompanied by the reptilian warriors.

Warriors of the Sky

The denizens of the skies are often called the invisible forces, for though they are rarely seen on the field, the results of their efforts affect battles far and wide. The light-hearted sylphs are messengers, carrying the Green Lady's word far and wide but avoiding conflicts if they can. The air elementals fight in their stead.

Air elementals are often invisible until they manifest fully in one location. While they are insubstantial, they can perceive the world but do not possess the strength to affect it. When they do gather their strength, they appear as a whirling cloud or storm and can strike their foes with winds matching those of a hurricane. When the foe comes to strike back, they simply dissipate back into the air, ready to reform elsewhere. The magic to summon these beings is fragile, leaving the elementals vulnerable if they are struck at the wrong moment.

The other denizens of the sky seen among the forces of nature are the pegasi. Gentle creatures of the air, it is rare to see a pegasus take to battle unless it has been subdued and harnessed by force or coercion. However, when the Green Lady's domain is threatened, these majestic beasts circle the battlefield, picking off isolated enemies and vulnerable war machines.



Heralds of the Green Lady

The varied warriors of the Forces of Nature can only be brought together by the power and authority of a Druid – a representative of the Green Lady herself. While they can hail from any races of the world, druids are most commonly human. Humans are capable of great good and great evil and so can be as neutral, benevolent or vengeful as the Green Lady requires. These enigmatic individuals are skilled in the ways of the wild, able to communicate with not only beasts and animals but each of the various races with the forces of nature with ease. They can even commune with and summon the elementals to war when the need is great.

Because of her close affinity to the forests of the world, there are also many gladewalker druids within the ranks of nature's armies. The gladewalkers are a long-lived and mysterious race. They tend to the great forests of the world, quelling the spirit of the trees. When one of these is roused to anger by the destruction of their forests, they lead the Forces of Nature to war, summoning the guardians of the trees and the magic of the world to crush their opponents. Like all druids, these beings are pledged to act upon the whims of the Green Lady, to her love and anger for the world.

When the anger of the Green Lady is truly roused, she summons the dread creatures of the wilds – the so-called beasts of nature – to fight in her behalf. The origins of these monstrosities are known only to the druid elders and the Lady herself, though they are rumoured to have been created during a violent episode of her Wicked Aspect. Terrifying to behold, they combine the most formidable traits of chimera, sphinx, mantichore and other monsters besides, forming a patchwork avatar of nature's wrath.

The allies of the druids are the unicorns. The lords of all horses, these noble creatures bear a single bladed horn atop their head. Although there are many fables of fair maids who have ridden upon the backs of these majestic beasts, it has long been held that they cannot be tamed or broken. The druids may, with no small amount of humility, be allowed to be carried by one in the manner of a mount – but this is a relationship of equal partners, rather than a rider and their steed. Unicorns are magical creatures too, capable of healing the most grievous wounds with but a glance.

Avatar of the Green Lady

In times of great need, when the fires of war come to the realms of the Green Lady, she may deign to enter the battle herself. She does not truly leave her home in the forests, instead creating an avatar to her liking to appear before her subjects. Manifesting as a ghostly maid, she has access to only a fraction of her true power, but even this is a sight to behold on the battlefield. She drifts across the battlefield, healing her loyal subjects and smiting her foes. Her beautiful form belies the terrible ferocity that lies only skin deep, waiting to be unleashed. These manifestations are short lived before the Lady's attentions are called elsewhere, but those who see them never forget the beauty and destructive power of nature standing before them.

Keris & Shaarlyot

Keris is a young, headstrong Druid initiate and bearer of the Solar Staff; Shaarlyot is a princess of the Sylphs, a gifted air-shaper and creature of the skies. And yet, through adversity and opposition from both the Sylphs and the Druid Order, these two unlikely companions have found love. While their relationship has caused great consternation, none can doubt their staunch commitment to the defence of the Whychwell Forest against the Elves and Undead who would both seek to unbalance the natural order.

SALAMANDERS



*KORATL,
salamander prime of the southern patrols*



The Salamanders form but one part of the race known as the reptilians, but as they are the most frequently encountered members of that race, the wider world tends to refer to the race as a whole by their name.

The reptilians are an ancient species, descendants—after a fashion—of a race brought forth by the Primogenitors in the pre-history of the world. In truth, Bhanek found them unlovely in appearance and dull in process, and quickly grew bored of them, leaving them to do as they wished. During the God War, these mighty creatures were sought out by both sides, choosing the side of the Shining Ones and fighting in many battles as they rapidly evolved under the sorcerous influence of their new mentors. When the God War ended and the Shining Ones retreated to their own counsel, the reptilians were left with no choice but to try and make their own way in the new world.



The brief, somewhat perfunctory nature of the Shining Ones' interest in them left little lasting mark on the creatures, who had already evolved their own culture, traditions, and beliefs. Not for them the human and elven way of chasing after the attentions of the gods, nor the dwarf way of suspicion and introspection. The reptilians were a practical race, with compassionate hearts and an abiding sense of natural justice. These qualities have remained with them throughout their long history and have shaped them as they endured through the same tragedies and upheavals as other races into what they are today.

A SPECIES ON THE RISE

After the God War, the land was much changed and the reptilians found themselves isolated from many of the Noble Peoples who still resided in and around Mantica. Originally living in the fertile rainforests of the central basin, far east and south of Abercarr and Ophidia, the race was one naturally at ease in warm, humid climes and rapidly expanded the bounds of their empire, unfettered by the chains of the more dominant civilisations at the time.

Soon, their domain stretched to the very edges of the land and they began their first steps toward becoming a seafaring nation. Against all odds the reptilians took to the nautical life as naturally as if born to it, and their small expeditionary flotillas grew and swelled into a mighty fleet which would travel the globe, becoming one of the most powerful and respected naval forces in the world, rivalling even the majesty of the ancient elven fleets. Geography made contact with the peoples of Mantica difficult, and over the centuries only the dwarfs and Ophidians have any significant contact with the reptilians. Further east and south however, the reptilian empire sprawled. Voyages across the Sable Sea took trade and exploration north, too, to the scattered tribes of barbaric humans that survived in those lands, even as far as what is now called Gaer Carrog. The humid jungles and bountiful swampy plains so inimical to other races provided much in the way of rare and exotic plants, herbs, minerals, and ores with which to trade with the rest of the world, and they quickly became a prosperous society driven by its merchant class.

Mighty cities were raised in the lands of the reptilians, the various sub-species of their people living together in harmony—unheard of outside the conurbations. Where each would take to the environs best suited to their physiology in the outside world—Salamanders to hot springs, volcanic isles, and the like; Arkosaurs to warm seas; and so on—in the cities all would come together, with artificial arrangements of quite sophisticated design made to keep all comfortable. Each city would be ruled over by one of the great clans, supported by money from the wealthy merchant families. In this way, trade drove the development, expansion, and rulership of the cities. Any ruling clan which ignored the interests of the merchants would swiftly find itself supplanted by another, and the power of the reptilian people as a whole grew immensely as the merchants consolidated their position and the Clans ruled in their favour.

Over time, one Clan city rose to pre-eminence, thanks not to the merchants but rather to the individual born there who would rise to be the most important, influential, and revered Clan Lord in the history of her species. Her name was Kthorlaq, known to this day as the Deliverer.

Kthorlaq's birth was an auspicious one. Even among the clutch of Royal Eggs, hers stood out, being yet more massive, smooth, and pale of hue than any of the others. Down one side, the shell bore a dark red swirling pattern, a sure mark of greatness for the occupant in the traditions of the reptilians. The clutch mothers shivered in equal parts fear and delight, knowing that such a sign could only be an omen,



but knowing not whether it presaged continued greatness for the Fire Clan or the bringing low of their great city. All they knew was that this one would be different, and so from the moment her egg first cracked open, Kthorlaq was watched incredibly closely. Unsurprisingly, she was the largest of her clutch when born, and she grew at an astonishing rate. Within a handful of cycles of the moon, she was showing intelligence and perception way beyond expectations, and within a few years her tutors had nothing more to teach her. Before she reached full physical maturity, Kthorlaq was dispensing wisdom to the Elders of the city, and Elders from other cities and clans flocked to see her and to hear her speak on many matters great and small. The power of the Fire Clan grew beyond even what it had enjoyed before, and the city prospered and became the natural capital of the reptilian people.



As much as her Clutch mothers rejoiced, they were also wary, for Kthorlaq was seer-touched and would make various predictions large and small. Her everyday predictions were eerily accurate, and this concerned them because of the largest prophecy that Kthorlaq had recited since she was very young—that the Clans would all be reborn in the shadows of the three kings of fire. Some speculated that her visions were premonitions of a war with the enemy to the east. Reports had arrived of vicious fighting and territorial expansion that severely threatened the far borders of the reptilian empire. What this prophecy truly meant—if anything at all—was unclear, but as every other of her prophecies came true, so the wisest began to ponder ever more closely the words she spoke.

THE SUNDERING

There was not long to wait. Within months of Kthorlaq reaching maturity and rising to take leadership of the Clan and the city, disaster struck the whole world.

The coming of Winter struck the reptilians early and hard. The oceans began to shrink as the ice grew, making seafaring more difficult by the day until it became impossible. The unseasonable cold destroyed their crops and livestock and the very blood in their bones began to thicken, making them sluggish and weak. In a very real sense, the advance of Winter was killing the reptilian people.

Then came the glaciers, advancing implacably across the land, before them riding the various evil forces conjured by the spiteful Wicked One. The armies of the reptilians fought as bravely as any other, but they were at a particular disadvantage and the Noble Peoples were of little assistance—both distance and their own troubles too great. Slowly, the Great Clans began to be driven one by one from their home cities, retreating across the land as they desperately fought to escape the clutches of the cold.

Kthorlaq, seeing that her people could not defeat the advance of the ice, issued a decree that all Clans should abandon the great cities and surrounding lands and flee to the west. Reptilians are a proud people, with a noble sense of justice, and many warriors chose to defy her order, instead remaining to buy their fleeing kin as much additional time as possible. At the gates of the great Temple City of Haelthorn on the very western edge of their lands, fourteen cohorts of these warriors from cities that had fallen to the onslaught rallied together to make a final stand against the advancing forces of Winter.

Knowing that there was no chance of victory, the reptilians nevertheless stood and fought, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible in defence of their people and their leader. The battle fought there was a titanic one, thousands of reptilians standing shoulder to shoulder to receive a charge which had buckled and trampled whole legions of other races. Even as their very blood froze in their veins, the reptilian warriors fought on until the very last one remained, atop a hill of his fallen comrades, the corpses of various ice demons and other abominations piled at his feet. It is said that Winter herself came forth to dispatch this remaining thorn in her side, her rage at being delayed so long enough to overcome her natural caution as she hid from Valandor. With contemptuous ease, she obliterated the lone Salamander utterly, and the advance could continue.



The brave sacrifice of the cohorts had bought valuable time for Kthorlaq and her people. Many thousands still perished in the long flight west, succumbing to the cold or the harrying forward elements of Winter's invasion, but many more survived as their journey took them across frozen seas and ice-blasted plains and into the mountainous regions of Abkhazla. Reluctant dwarf hold lords allowed them passage through the passes that were still open, but refused to let the refugees use the safer tunnel routes. Finally, starving, battered by cold, and almost on their knees from exhaustion, the reptilians came in sight of three great smoking peaks in the mountains, and Kthorlaq, herself at the end of her own impressive endurance, declared that they had found the place that would be their haven. To her, the three peaks rising before them were as familiar as her own markings—here were the three kings which had lived in her mind's eye since she had first learned to see the future.



What happened next is unclear, as the histories of the reptilians are threaded through with legend and myth, passed on in an oral tradition which stretches back to the dawn of their people. Hence, when their recollections talk of the last great sacrifice of Kthorlaq, it is not clear what is literally meant. Some argue that the warrior-seer, driven to the very precipice of total exhaustion, simply used her remaining strength to cast one final spell, giving up her life through over-exertion to save her people. As the reptilians have it, Kthorlaq finally fulfilled the destiny she had always been marked for, the strange markings on her hide glowing brilliant white, and the mighty queen then disappearing with a thunderclap, becoming an all-encompassing magical shield around the three peaks that protected her people and spoke to them long after she had gone. Whatever the precise truth, the facts speak for themselves—a great magical shield enveloped the peaks of the three mountains, and under their protection, the surviving refugees from the great exodus west gathered and were safe from the predations of Winter and her minions.

Decades rolled by, the reptilians remaining safe within their haven, the Mage-Priests listening to the slowly dwindling song of Kthorlaq they perceived in the weft and warp of the magic which protected them, the various sub-species of their people taking to the most suitable parts of the mountains which now formed their home. Over time, as the song grew weaker in the perceptions of the priests, it seemed that the shield itself grew thinner, and the people girded themselves for a final conflict with Winter that none expected to survive. The priests tried to keep the faith, sure that their mighty queen would not have failed them, but as the shield began to visibly weaken, and the hordes prowling outside grew larger, they began to wonder if Kthorlaq's auspicious birth had been an omen of mighty doom for their people after all.

Finally, as the shield stretched paper thin and all seemed lost, Valador bested Winter in the final battle of the war. The barrier shattered with the vanquishing of the Wicked One. Then came the backwash of her magical energy being released, a chaotic outpouring of her powers which streaked across the globe, undoing much that she had put together in one final act of spite. The backlash murdered every one of her followers and undid the bindings of the mighty glaciers and ice sheets in unnaturally rapid fashion. Flood waters began to rise uncontrollably across the world, and whole civilisations were drowned and wiped out as the face of the world was changed forever. To the reptilians, however, the effects of the magic were more direct.

Something in the magic of Winter's passing reacted with the substance of the magical barrier that had protected them, the two energies meeting as the shield cracked and the resultant fusion arcing back into the upper reaches of the mountains themselves. The Salamanders, naturally drawn to the thermal vents atop the mountains whence the smoke issued, bore the main brunt of this feedback. The changes wrought on their bodies were terrifying but powerful—their bodies wracked with spasms, they were afflicted with a deep cold which could never truly be warmed, causing them to need greater and greater heat to stop the icy chill of Winter from stilling their hearts. Some say that the collision of the two magical energies was a final conflict between Kthorlaq and Winter, one that continues to this day in the veins of every Salamander, fought in their blood. Certainly, though fire seems to run through them, expressing in ashy breath and a smouldering gaze, Salamanders always seek the warmest climes, the hottest fires, as though in spite of their blistering heat they are never truly warm.



In the aftermath of the Sundering, the reptilians came down from the Three Kings and rediscovered their love of the seas, fashioning a new fleet and taking to the Infant Sea to find new homes in the islands scattered across it. In the centuries since, they have raised new temple cities and grown a strong naval presence, the scourge of pirates and other rogues who would visit evil on the waters. The ghost ships of the Ahmunites haunt the Straits of Madness and small fleets of Ahmunite bone-hulks are a constant menace and distraction for patrolling frigates from the Salamander navy as they police the waters of the Infant Sea.

They have long memories as a people and have never forgotten the sacrifice and example of Kthorlaq, nor their own debts such as that owed to the Lady. Detachments of their kind may often be found fighting alongside other races for worthy cause, and they maintain a permanent presence in Galahir, ever ready to answer the Lady's call. The Arkosaurs and Salamanders between them are the most dominant species in the new order, and it is by their hands that the majority of the rebuilding of the reptilian empire has been done.

Though strongly reptilian in appearance, the original Salamanders were actually amphibious, warm-blooded creatures who evolved the tough scaly side and muscular appearance common to reptilians over thousands of years. Winter's curse completed the transformation in a fatal way, instilling the death-chill of Winter's ice into their very blood, where it wars alongside the white hot fires that were Kthorlaq's final blessing to them.

This fire is not enough on its own to sustain them, however, and they must periodically recharge their internal fires, lest they succumb finally to the chill. Younger Salamanders have the fire burning hottest within them, able to go weeks or even months at a time with no need for external replenishment of their heat. It is for this reason that the ranks of the reptilian armies are mostly swelled by these younger warriors and why the general reputation of Salamanders among other races is as fiery, wrathful individuals. Some even take a lonelier path, becoming adventurers and mercenaries for hire. All eventually require the nourishment of fire to stave off the cold.

As they grow older, their skin hardens and darkens, becoming a deeper hue of red, and the time they are able to spend away from the fires diminishes. Though heat from any source can be used to sustain them, the purest and hottest fuel is to be found in the Three Kings themselves, perhaps touched by the spirit of Kthorlaq. Regular pilgrimages to the mountains are a feature of Salamander life, and in the fiery caverns and lava flows they reinvigorate their inner fire and reforge their weapons, emerging renewed and ready to fight once

again. Eventually will come the final pilgrimage, the end of a Salamander's days where they will return to the fires once more and lay back in the fire pit a final time, the flesh melting from their bones that themselves turn to ash, their very essence absorbed back into the fires, ready to invigorate the next generation. This is a ritual of great significance to the Salamanders, and they firmly believe that the experience, wisdom, and power of previous generations of their kind are wrapped up in the healing fires. It is for this reason that, whatever the obstacles, every Salamander will return to the Kings where possible.

Some of their younger, more adventurous kind, not yet ready for the solitary life of an adventurer or mercenary, volunteer in the navy as muscle for the fighting crews. No more than a dozen or so will tend to be found on any one ship, their boisterousness being one factor and the sea captain's natural aversion to fire being another. Nevertheless, their usefulness in battle is inarguable, and they are somewhat reluctantly accepted by captains who calculate that their usefulness may outweigh the risks. In truth, many such Salamanders do not last long at sea, their natural hot-headedness demanding a sense of adventure that the voyages of most ships in the navy can seldom provide, and a captain will often find—with a sense of gentle relief—that he has lost one or more of his Salamander compliment at a port as they run off in search of more immediate action.



The Ghekkotah

A shorter sub-species of the Salamander lineage, and perhaps the evolution of a failed experiment by the Primogenitors, the Ghekkotah most closely resemble the now extinct Gheko race. For some reason, the same magic that transformed their Salamander kin left them entirely untouched, and they continue to be warm-blooded creatures to this day.

Intensely social, they are always to be found operating in large groups in any task. Though they are rarely to be found in the great cities, preferring to live in their own small villages and collectives in the plains and jungles surrounding the Three Kings, they have an intense and fierce loyalty to their other reptilian kin and are often to be found in their armies.

Given their small stature and apparently boundless courage, there are many specialist functions they can fulfil in a Reptilian army, including scouting before the main advance and providing aerial cover from the back of jrooka, which they are small enough to ride quite easily.

The Arkosaurs

Forming the majority of the builders, merchants, and administrators of the new empire, the Arkosaurs tend to a peaceful, more introverted role in the affairs of the reptilians. Though they form the majority of the manpower of the fleets of the empire, they do not mix comfortably with other races, and even when in port they tend to remain on the ships, leaving Salamanders to go forth and deal with matters on land. When Arkosaurs do venture into foreign lands, it is usually brief, but they are always impeccably attired and courteous.

The officer classes within the navy have adopted an amalgam of uniform styles from the many cultures within Mantica that they have admired from afar, and the result is often eclectic and confusing for those dealing with them when trying to determine hierarchy formal etiquette. Those few who have had direct dealings with them in the outside world describe lithe creatures with smooth, pale green or blue skin, sly features, and cunning yellow eyes.



THE ORDEAL OF FIRE

The lives of reptilians, and Salamanders in particular, are dominated by ritual and tradition, mostly linked back to Kthorlaq, whom they venerate above all else in the world. Built into this devotion is a stirring sense of responsibility and self-sacrifice in pursuit of the betterment of their people and the protection of their civilisation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ritual known as the Ordeal of Fire.

Usually restricted to those warriors who have proven themselves many times over in battle, occasionally the ritual can be carried out where a youngster has achieved some great deed or famous victory against the odds. Whatever the case, the ritual is not to be undertaken lightly, for although it grants the individual great power and strength, it does so at a cost.

The exact details of the ritual are unknown to any save the secretive priests beneath the Three Kings who administer it and those who have endured it. All that is known is the effect—the fire within the individual Salamander is stoked to immense levels such that their eyes glow permanently and to stand in their presence is to be scorched by the intense heat that radiates from glowing cracks in their flesh. These individuals march with the power of their ancestors in their steps, and their wisdom in their every command. Much revered among their kind, they are looked to as leaders and great warriors in battle.

The cost is to their lifespan. Even a Salamander's veins can only run so hot, and the vast energies of the fire that courses through them after the Ordeal takes its toll in years. However, such individuals will never need to return to the Kings to replenish their own heat, for it will burn furiously for the rest of their life, and they will go forth further and deeper into the dark places of the world to fight. When such a champion falls, the reptilians will risk anything and everything to bring his body back to the Kings to be absorbed into their fires. To date, not one such champion has failed to be so delivered, and should this ever change, it would surely bring calamity to the reptilians.

CHILDREN OF KTHORLAQ

The Salamanders are an ancient race of reptilian fire-people, whose scaly red hides protect them from enemy weaponry as well as granting them a fearsome appearance. Their blood burns with great heat, manifesting in billowing vapours that exude from their fanged mouths, and channelling through their crude weapons, which sear and burn as well as they cut and crush.

As their internal fires develop and their blood sizzles with the energy of new life, young hot-headed Salamander warriors, known as Unblooded, often join the army early to cut their teeth, and scales, on the forces of darkness. Until their training is complete, they are not permitted to carry the Sparkstone swords and clubs borne by the more experienced and mature warriors. Instead, and until they have earned that right, the Unblooded favour pairs of razor-sharp obsidian fist-blades, the edges of which are honed to a wicked lethality by greedy and mischievous ember-sprites.

Those in the prime of life fight for their homelands on the isles of the Three Kings and abroad, favouring battle alongside the Forces of Nature. While many offer their services to all those who oppose the armies of darkness, they find a comfortable companionship among nature and the creatures of the Herd they can empathise with. A rank of particular honour is that of Ceremonial Palace Guard, and most Primes will aspire to serve in such a capacity for at least a few cycles during their lifetimes. When not watching over the Clan Palaces and Temples at home, these warriors are sent to fight with their brethren on the front line on rotation to keep their skills and instincts sharp.

Salamander Ancients are battle-hardened veterans who know their time on Pannithor is near an end, but who still wish to fight and lend their experience in training the younger generation. They are not as agile as they once were but make up for it in their combat experience and fearlessness. They know death is near, and so nothing can faze them. These grizzled warriors, with aging, dark skin, growing stiff and cold as the fire inside begins to dwindle, form implacable anchor-points in the battle lines of the reptilian armies.

Tyrants are large, heavily muscled brutes that were nearly made extinct during the War with Winter. A bare few survived the great exodus but their numbers are steadily increasing to a point where they are confident accompanying the Salamanders to war. Similar in appearance to Arkosaurs, they have a physique more akin to an ogre and a temper as short as an orc's.

Jungle Tribes

Social beings, the diminutive creatures known as the Ghekkotah are often seen in large groups with many family members working together. Despite their appearance, they are warm-blooded and keep to the shade of the pools and jungle canopies of the Three Kings as much as possible. Ghekkotah village chiefs and clutch wardens often gather their younger warriors together for military training alongside the armies of the Salamanders. This is especially true when the homelands are threatened and the Ghekkotah leave the protection of their jungle homes in defence of their land. Ghekkotah that are hatched together or within the same family groups retain a fierce loyalty to each other throughout their life, and Clutch Wardens are the biggest and bravest among their siblings, tasked with the safety of the tribe.

Hunting packs that have worked together for years will supply the villages with food from the jungles and, when foraging further afield, the plains that stretch to the far-off shores of their homelands. Their importance is too great to the tribes for them to be spared in large numbers, but small groups that are comfortable operating away from the lines while harassing the enemy flanks are not an uncommon sight on the battlefield.

A current innovation, believed to have been inspired by stories told by brave Ghekkotah returning from fighting overseas, is the mighty Slasher, captured by hunters and trained to carry a Ghekkotah crew into battle atop a seemingly ramshackle howdah. Sporting a bolt thrower reminiscent of that seen in goblin armies, these beasts now stride alongside the other great monsters the reptilians employ among their ranks.

In recent times, one Ghekkotah has risen to fame, both in the homelands and far across the Infant Sea. Plucked from a seemingly simple life of hunting in the jungles surrounding The Three Kings, Artakl's ability to blend into the shadows of the battlefield made her a deadly assassin. When the Green Lady requested the aid of the Mage-Priests and Clan Lords, Artakl was selected as the best agent at hand. The story of her successful involvement in securing the sorcerous artefact known as the Eye of the Abyss has now taken on an almost mythical status in the clutch-nurseries of the deep jungle of her home.

Raging Inferno

Salamanders have an innate affinity for flames. The scorching heat of elemental power boils through their veins, staving off the death-chill they must succumb to in old age. The sacrifice of Kthorlaq has granted them a lasting bond with nature and a commanding knowledge of the raging maelstrom that is elemental fire magic.

From the bubbling fire pits of the Three Kings, Mage-Priests will summon and harvest the proto-elementals that are born in the glow of molten rock. The lives of these mischievous Ember Sprites are often fleeting, their spark disappearing and fizzling out as quickly as they came into existence. Every so often, an unknown catalyst causes them to begin to fuse together, and as the collective draws on the magma around it, the Mage-Priests in attendance work to bind them together, infusing them with Kthorlaq's spirit. Thus are Fire Elementals spawned in the Three Kings, entities of sizzling, scorching energy that assume their form from fire and lava. When these warriors of flame march to war, their fury on the battlefield is fearsome to behold.

In times of great need, the Mage-Priests may unite to craft and summon a Greater Fire Elemental to battle. These molten behemoths loom large over the battlefield, leaving a trail of smouldering destruction in their wake.

Wings of fire

Descendants of the first great dragons to arrive on Pannithor, lithe, tempestuous Fire Drakes spend most of their time coiled around searing thermal vents. Some Mage-Priests, having studied and learnt the secrets of wyrm-tongue, can entice the drakes to war in return for fresh meat, and worse. Very few winged drakes remain and those that do can only be enticed to leave their fiery slumber by the most powerful and cunning individuals. The price of their service is only known to those brave enough to seek it.

Scorchwings soar high above the peaks of the Three Kings, gliding on the thermals while watching over their domain with keen, glistening black eyes. These excitable and short tempered bird-like creatures are in fact elemental constructs, born from within the hellish magma chambers deep within the molten hearts of the islands. They spew forth from steaming vents and flock near open lava pits, where they squabble and bicker among themselves. Mage-Priests can bind them temporarily to their will when required, but permanent mastery requires dedication and intense training. Many Ghekkotah hunters have tried, for a Scorchwing is

considered the ultimate prize—if you can manage to keep all your fingers and toes. The rare few that have claimed one as a mount, using protective saddles enchanted by the Mage-Priests, are the true lords of the sky and masters of the hunt. After years of training and dedication, these deeply respected elite hunters have formed an incredible bond with their sleek, fiery Scorchwing mounts.

Rarely, and on a cycle that is difficult for even the most studious of observers to comprehend, the great Phoenixes that reside on Mount Kolosu migrate south, where they may spend months, or even years, basking in the sunny climes of the Salamander homelands. Whether the Kings are the birth, or rebirthing, place for these majestic beasts, nobody is certain. What is known is that the Ur-Elohi Samacris, the Mother of Phoenixes, may grant their use to Salamander armies to wage war against the evil in the world—something that the monstrous flaming birds take to with an almost gleeful abandon.

Making Waves

The Salamander navy has a highly skilled force of marines used for both defence and protection, as well as in aggressive boarding actions as part of the policing activities in the waters around the homelands. They are also used in targeted commando missions and, on some occasions, given free rein to sow chaos and destruction upon their enemies in whatever way they feel will be most effective. These independent, buccaneering crews have become renowned for their lightning raids and disruptive actions on smugglers, pirates, and slavers alike. Small bands of Corsairs sometimes hone their skills away from the navy and fight with the Salamander land forces where they are employed as advanced skirmishers. While it is rare (although not unheard of) for female Salamanders to fight in the army, female Corsairs are a much more common sight.

Firebrand is a legendary Corsair, renowned for breath-taking feats of bravery, swashbuckling action, and daring escapades. The stories of her adventures go back for centuries, however, and Firebrand often vanishes for years at a time before resurfacing in some spectacularly explosive way. Her fantastically exciting life and phenomenal skill are what all other Corsairs aspire to. To have the enigmatic Firebrand fight alongside them is something they can rightly boast of in their old age. Whether Firebrand is the same person now as when the legend was born nobody knows. It's highly likely that when an incumbent dies, another picks up the mantle to keep the mystique and adventure alive.



Thunder and Lightning

Although vast numbers were left to fight at the epic battle of Haelthorn, enough of the large pack-hunters known as Kaisenor Raptors were herded as part of the exodus. Those that survived have flourished in the plains of the Three Kings, where they live on the edge of the jungle during the hottest parts of the day. When Kthorlaq's great shield fractured, the backwash of magical energy crackled and surged through the Raptors, igniting something within them. Even today, the effects have transcended the generations and the beasts sport a deep red skin, slashed with yellow and orange bands, while their sanguine eyes smoulder with deep cunning and a spark of devilish fire.

The beasts are left to learn and hone their hunting and killing skills before being captured and trained to be ridden. They are sleek, agile predators, whose instinctive manoeuvring in formation at speed makes them excellent cavalry mounts.

Not all the animals used by the Salamanders were native to that ancient empire. Many creatures indigenous to the volcanic isles are utilised as beasts of burden or else their natural abilities adapted as tools in the Salamander arsenal. Ancient Salamanders are granted the honour of thundering to battle on the near unstoppable Rhinosaurs. These blocky brutes live in herds on the fertile plains and both Raptors and Rhinosaurs have learnt to live with and avoid each other. While a pack of Raptors may target a weakened individual, they can still pack a lethal punch, and so the Raptors tend to favour easier prey.

Lekelidons and Komodons are both predatory beasts that bring down their prey with ranged attacks—either with accurate, deadly jets of sticky acid or by dropping a barrage of poison from afar. The Lekelidons are giant spitting lizards with spiky tempers and are prodded into battle by their Salamander handlers. In rare cases, and if captured young enough, juvenile Lekelidons have the brains to be trained to operate semi-autonomously, although often with mixed results.

Living, moving artillery pieces, Komodons are usually found in high mountain passes where they watch their prey from above, camouflaged against the black rock. The Komodon is able to spit gobs of poisonous bile over great distances, ideal for use as offensive firepower—if you can get them to aim in the right direction.

Command and Control

The Clan Lords are the supreme commanders of the Salamander armed forces, often leading from the front and by example. These elite warriors are vastly experienced in warfare and are masters of tactics and logistics. The trusted deputies of the Clan Lords, the Battle-Captains are superior warriors and tacticians in the prime of life. Battle-Captains are often given command of large divisions of the army and the freedom to take the battle to the enemy as they see best. Striding between the ranks, the Heralds call the cohorts to war with sonorous blasts from the sacred horns they carry reverently into battle. The sound of a Herald's call stirs the dying embers of faltering friends and puts fire back into their bellies.

Revered throughout reptilian society, the Mage-Priests are consulted on all matters of government, diplomacy, and war. While most are Salamanders, there have also been sightings of both Arkosaurs and Ghekkotah dressed in the robes of the mage. They are immensely powerful individuals with great knowledge on matters both magical and spiritual. They alone have the ability to commune with the elemental shards that whorl and crackle deep in the heart of the earth.



THE HERD

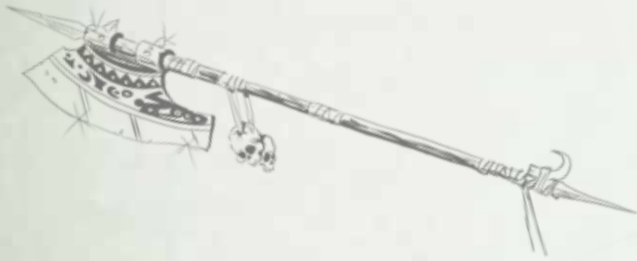


Leafblade
tribal warrior



Of the many tragedies of the God War, perhaps one of the worst concerns the genesis of the Herd. As Garkan worked to forge his twisted creations and send them forth, he was aided by Dark Kyron, who assisted in tearing apart the very essences of many sentient beings and beasts to provide the raw material for Garkan's furnace. Once the orcs had been assembled and vomited into the world, Dark Kyron took the unused elements tossed aside by Garkan and fired up the soul forges to make his own whimsical creations. These unfortunate creatures, part noble beings and part beasts, were shoved forth, unloved and discarded by their creator into the world.

orc. Thus, as the Lady rode to the rescue of men the length and breadth of Pannithor while the God War raged, these noble creatures were shunned, reviled, and even attacked as enemies. Even the blessing of the Lady herself would not assuage these base fears in the hearts and minds of men, and soon the dwarfs followed, distrustful by their very nature of anything suggesting the hybrid or mutant. The elves tolerated them, but as the God War continued the Herd became ever more of a liability to the armies of the Lady, causing distrust among many of those she would save and making the task of her forces all the harder at a time when such weakness was not needed.

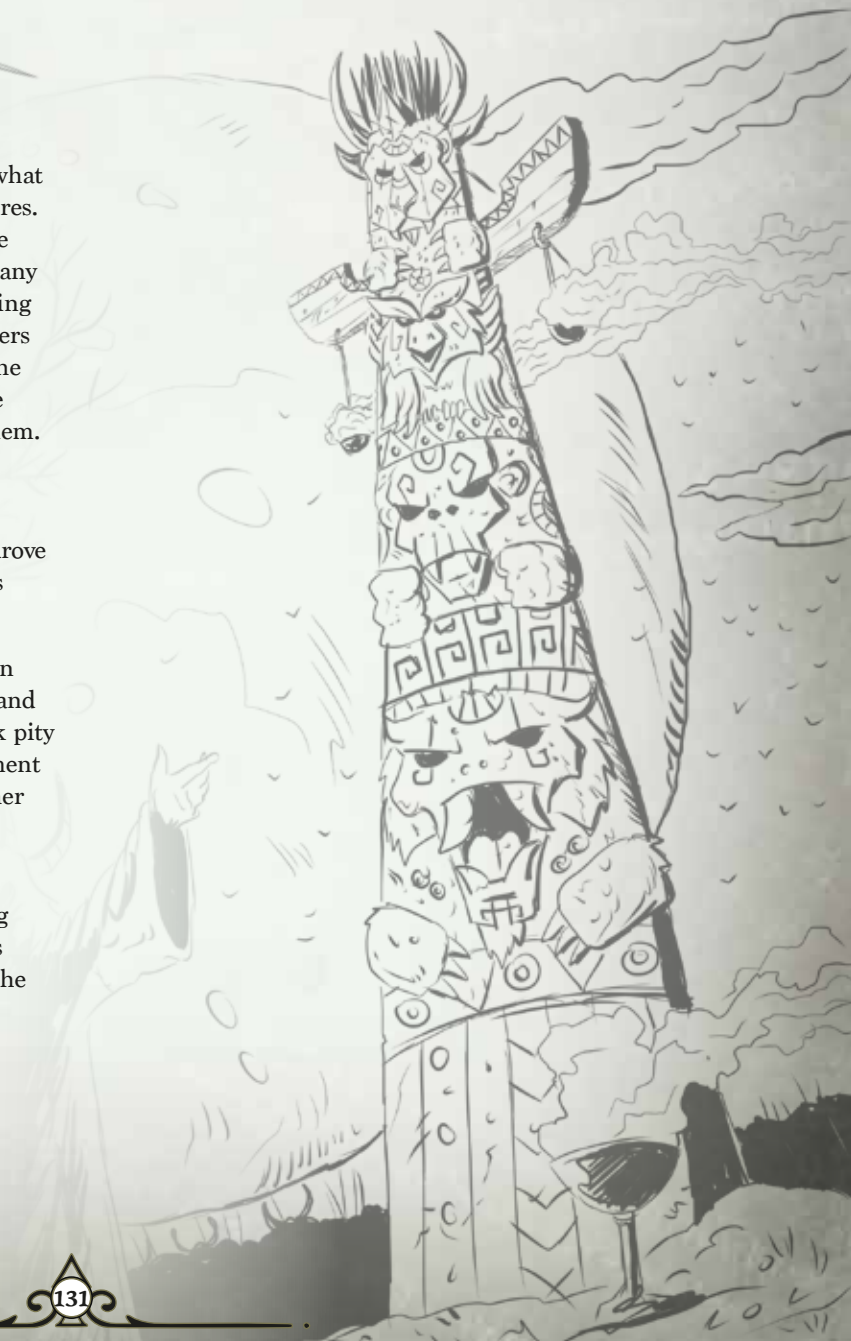


Brave Kyron, the Shining aspect of his twisted kin, saw what had happened and bent his will to the aid of these creatures. Alas, he found the work of the forges was irreversible, the fusion of wildly disparate beings unable to be undone by any magic he possessed. Instead, to avoid the same fate befalling them as had befallen the orcs, Brave Kyron used his powers to heal the damage within their souls and hearts as best he could, giving comfort and relief, opening their eyes to the possibilities of a better life than had been intended for them.

Not all listened—some were too far gone in their agonies and Dark Kyron, spiteful and enraged by his brother's interference, stoked the rage and pain within them and drove them toward the dark, more legions of fodder for Oskan's mad crusade.

The others, the ones able to be saved, had their perception altered, seeing for the first time their place in the world and retreating into the depths of Galahir where the Lady took pity upon them. The Herd declared her Mother, the embodiment of the whole world, and set their efforts to worshipping her and living to serve her and her realm.

Dark Kyron was not done though, and used his fell powers to whisper into the ears and hearts of men, setting them wholeheartedly against the creatures of the Herd as abominations against nature, to be feared as they feared the



Eventually, the Lady beseeched them to remain within her realm, guardians of the outer borders of Galahir, set to watch for marauding bands of the enemy attempting to invade her realm while her attention was elsewhere. Proud as they were, these noble creatures saw the truth behind their new duty, but cared not. The opinions of men, who to them were too easily swayed anyway, mattered little, and the guardianship of the borders gave them the opportunity to repay the kindness of the Mother, and to fight against their wayward kin, orcs and other foul things that would despoil her realm. It is a duty which they continue to carry to this very day, in Galahir and beyond, set apart from even their own allies within the Mother's domain, and much removed from all other Noble Peoples.

Herd culture is actually far more sophisticated than their esoteric language and strange appearances may suggest. The Herd are a brotherhood, joined by shared experience and possessed of one of the more astute perceptions and cultural memories of any race on Pannithor. They know exactly where they came from, for what purpose they were created, and what role their benefactors played in shaping who they are today. Away from the arrogance of elves, the pride of dwarfs,

or the constant search for meaning of humans, the Herd are content. They observe the skies, patiently watching the unending dance in the heavens as Brave Kyron endlessly pursues his evil twin.

Seen by other races as superstitious and savage, they are in fact simply at one with their environment, their existence, and their purpose. When not required to fight, they tend naturally toward a peaceful existence, managing their crops, hunting, and tending to their people.

In battle, they are a disparate but highly capable force. Alongside the forces of the Lady, their ranks are swelled by tribal warriors of fauns and satyrs, hulking lycans, brutal centaurs and flying harpies. Theirs is a diverse people, able to use that variety to deadly advantage. This is even truer when the creatures of the forest rise up to fight alongside them and the great tree herders march to war among their ranks. Were they more aggressive, or less tied to their duty, the Herd might be a force that would overwhelm the world very rapidly. It is shameful that Brave Kyron is barely remembered outside of their own kin, as he surely saved the world in more ways than one the day he saved the Herd.



The Herd are an immensely valuable tool in the arsenal of the Green Lady and for her constant struggle to find balance in the world. The despicable orcs and other evil things have a special hatred reserved for them, but even the Noble Peoples are not always content with what they have, and the Herd must fight to protect the Mother-world from predation and plunder from all quarters.

The Herd can deploy a very unique and varied array of troops into battle, from regiments of tribal beastmen, to troops of owlbears, minotaurs, and centaurs, and even the very trees and creatures of the land themselves—summoned and infused with the magic of the Lady's druids. The lifeblood and spirit of Brave Kyron throbs through the veins of the Herd, and the thundering of blood in their ears is mirrored in the trembling of the earth when they stampede to war.

Fauns, Satyrs, and the like are equipped with light armour, hand weapons, and shields; the tribal warriors of the Herd are mighty and brave. Given a choice, however, they would rather live at peace with everything around them. As such, some tribespeople are less suited to the rigor of frontline combat but are still duty-bound to protect the tribes, families, and world around them. The Herd knows all too well how the humble spear can destroy the momentum of an assault and use it themselves in defence and counter-attack.

The biggest and bulkiest of the frontline infantry are known as Longhorns. These beastmen are powerful and hard hitting with vast combat experience. Before leading the Herd into battle, the druids will bless their arms and armour during solemn and ancient rituals.

Tribal Spirit Walkers spend much time with the druids. Together they explore the meaning of nature, the world, and the Herd as a whole. Fuelled by a concoction of sacred potions, their actions not quite their own, these warriors have established a spiritual bond with their honoured ancestors, those who fell in battle defending the land. Caring no longer for their own lives, they will willingly sacrifice themselves in battle for the Herd.

Tribal commanders greatly value the skills of the Trappers, who can glide silently through the land, stalking their unknowing prey. They are lightly armoured and use a variety of throwing weapons or bows to lethal effect.

Tribal Might

Supporting the massed ranks of the tribal warriors are great, muscle-bound and ferocious beastmen that tower above even the Longhorns.

Lycans are those of The Lost that Kyron rescued after Garkan's experiments in merging man and wolf. The Werewolves were lost to darkness, becoming perverse and

twisted things shut off from the Mother. Lycans are at one with nature and share a deep connection with the world. Their very life force is sustained by the Mother and nothing other than death itself can bring them down for long. While the fallen Lykanis are twisted monstrosities, the Lycan Alphas are noble and brave. They are fast and immensely powerful beings, and their feral-looking eyes glitter with a surprising intellect.

The lycan known as Moonfang was first encountered 10 years ago, fighting alongside the forces of the undead as war engulfed the world. It was more lethal than most of its kind, claiming the lives of more than a score of tribal warriors before it could be subdued. After the battle, the beast was taken before the tribal druid, who freed the creature from its torment. Now a noble soldier, it fights alongside the armies of the herd.

In times of peace, those known as the Guardians are typically solitary, territorial, and reclusive individuals. Each innately knows the land they are tasked to protect. When the threat is great, or when the Herd must gather to march to war, all manner of these powerful beastmen will band together, from minotaurs to owlbears and even more unusual forms. They form blocks of massive shock troops within the Herd's front lines. As well as their natural savagery, they are often equipped with brutal weaponry and huge wooden shields. Others may have armoured hides, razor-sharp claws, and powerful beaks which they use to rend their enemies.

Not given easily to fear or defeat, where others would bow their heads, the mighty Guardian Brutes will bellow their defiance and smash their way back into the fray. This apparent recklessness is epitomised by the thunderous and devastating charges of the surprisingly agile Minotaur Chariots. These huge engines of war are hauled by snarling, bloodthirsty bull-men and driven by highly skilled, and perhaps slightly deranged, Longhorns.

Shepherding the Beast

Raised from the ranks of the Longhorns, the mighty Tribal Chieftains are both wise and mighty. They listen closely to their Shamans and, when the Mother-earth and the Lady require, they will lead the tribes of the Herd to war. While generally a chieftain prefers to remain on foot close to their warriors and the earth, sometimes they will ride to battle on a powerful minotaur chariot where they can better see the ebb and flow of the fight.

The tribal Druids, or shaman as they are sometimes known, share the deepest connection to both the Mother and the Father and advise the great chieftains on all matters. In times of dire need, the shamans from many tribes will gather to combine their skills and powers to beseech the Father for the power and guidance to lead their warriors to victory.

KINGDOMS OF MEN



ANTHONIOUS WIRSON
FOOT GUARD SOLDIER OF GENEZA



What does it mean to be a human of Pannithor? To the other races of the world, the answer to this question is as elusive as it is to humans themselves.

In the taverns and bartering houses of Mantica there is a common saying, 'A dwarf is a dwarf is a dwarf.' Likewise, to describe something as 'elvish' is to endow it with an immediate and widely understood set of characteristics. The mention of man, however, leads to a raised eyebrow, a stroked beard and yet more questions. To talk of men is at once as meaningless and as meaningful as to talk of love, of gods, or of nature itself, for down to the last all men differ, each swayed by a unique, emotionally conflicted heart, forever changeable.

Some men glide wistfully over the gleaming battlements of their legendary castles, garbed in the finest robes, their bejewelled headwear tilted to the sky in contemplation of the deepest philosophies. Others toil in the fruitless dirt of forgotten villages, praying for a bountiful harvest to see them through the lean winter, cherishing every coin, shivering each night in the pitiful shacks they call home. There are men who devote their lives to the gods, to the battles of their time, to helping the needy, while others plumb the depths of cruelty, depravity and betrayal to further their goals. All are men and yet no two are ever truly alike.

While numerous clans, tribes, and kingdoms of men have formed, risen, and fallen during the long ages of time, humans' immense diversity has always been at once their strength and the reason they have never fully conquered the world.





MEN AT WAR

Naturally, man's method of war differs from place to place. The Successor Kingdoms are the homes of engineers and wizard-scholars, and their armies reflect this. Crude gunpowder weapons such as cannon and primitive handguns are common there. Basilea also possesses this technology but relies more on divine magic and armoured horsemen to win its wars, backed up by dragons and the Elohi.

All the kingdoms born from Primovantor's ruins favour blocks of polearms, weapons used for millennia. The Ophidians can draw upon a wide range of troops from across their empire, including desert horsemen, fierce tribal warriors from the green south, and all manner of light troops suited for their harsh land, supported by heavy infantry and horse drawn from the Ophidian cities. The Ophidians also enslave desert spirits to fight for them and make use of legions of the undead.

The northern tribes are less disciplined, but formidable nonetheless. Whether steppe rider or sea raider, all are raised as warriors from childhood, and they are consequently skilled individual fighters.

THE NATURE OF MEN

First stepping onto the world as the hasty creations of a god whose true affections lay elsewhere, Man has ever since struggled with its own identity and self-worth, their shortcomings painfully evident in everything they do. The devout among men merely expose their insecurities, the brave do little but reveal their own need for acceptance, and the depraved exacerbate their need for love. The flaws of each man are clear to all but himself. This ignorance, combined with a great fear of their own mortality and a diverse set of skills, has nonetheless allowed mankind to prosper and propagate, becoming easily the most numerous of the Noble Peoples—on rare occasions even obtaining mastery as individuals, and often achieving great things as a people.

Men can be found everywhere, from the most verdant valley to the harshest environment; anywhere a living can be scratched from the land. Men dwell in blazing deserts, the frozen north, jungle, plain, and mountain alike. They exhibit a bewildering array of outer forms and skin colour, and the palette of their emotions is equally as varied. Men can be black of heart or as pure as snow. Men have been known as great elf friends, and men have been known to embrace and serve the Abyss willingly. Men are anything but predictable.

Men live in societies ranging from those of great culture to simple, orcish barbarism, and everywhere in between. To the far north, hordes of tribesmen fight over the herds of mammoth and bison with goblins. On the icy seashores

beyond the Bitter Islands, reavers set sail in longships, raiding and trading as far south as Elvenholme and Basilea. Upon the contested plain of Ardovikia's young kingdoms, new lands reclaimed from the ice's retreat are founded. Caravans of camels criss-cross the deserts of the south between oases and dry cities, bringing exotic wares from cultures so far-flung that what little is known of them by the nations around the Infant Sea is more legend than fact. All add yet more colour to the tapestry of the civilisations called Man.

As a whole, men have a somewhat ambivalent relationship



with the other speaking races of Pannithor. Several states have very close ties with the elves, the Valenticans in particular, with two great elven cities actually being part of it, and elven quarters in almost every other city besides. Dwarfs live throughout man's lands, descendants of refugees from the fall of the northern holds and, more recently, King Golloch's reign. The northern tribes sometimes make common cause with the orcs or the Abyssal Dwarfs or are else forced to fight for them as slaves. The great alliances of the past are fading memories, men are as likely to fight shoulder to shoulder with the elves and dwarfs as they are to oppose them, and on many occasions men have fought on both sides of the battle in these grand alliances. Men most often fight other men, however, whether through greed or hatred or honour, or just through misunderstanding. Men are hot-blooded, and not always wise. Their vivacity is a curse as much as it is a blessing.

THE SPREAD OF MEN

With the High Consul of Primovantor dead and much of the land laid waste, the shock of the inundation after the War with Winter was the final blow to the tottering Republic. The remnants of it broke up into warring statelets and much was forgotten. Beyond Basilea, dozens of independent city states now rule small kingdoms all over the peninsula of Primovantia, known as the Successor Kingdoms, and to the north and west of the Dragon's Teeth mountains, known as the Young Kingdoms.

The Successor Kingdoms

The Successor Kingdoms are descended from Primovantor, but the similarity to Basilea ends there, for they have been much influenced by admixtures of culture and thought from other lands and have followed their own path. There are as many as a hundred of these small statelets, ranging from independent cities to large dukedoms and the genuine kingdom of Valentica. These small lands are in a constant state of rivalry. War between them is not uncommon.

The people here are great traders, keen-eyed sailors with a thirst for adventure, and they hold close ties with the Sea Kindred of the Brokenwall Islands. Also of note is the mountain duchy of Sathoi, a provider of skilled mercenary companies, and the city state of Geneza, another sea nation of traders, and great rivals of both the Valenticans and Sea Kindred. Geneza is unique in that it is built atop the ruins of an earlier city, drowned by the sea. Unable to escape, the Genezans simply built upward, and modern Geneza sits upon the waves like a stone ship. Primovantor itself persists as one of these states, although it is greatly shrunk in size, its inhabited portions like villages surrounded by a harsh wilderness of broken stone and briars.

For the main part small and individually weak, it is these same kingdoms now that see the flowerings of rebirth. For many years little more than barbarian realms, the city states, dukedoms, and petty principalities of the coast and mountains have reached fresh levels of understanding while art and science once again flourish. The great Euhendral Library is a prime example of cross-species co-operation and is a highly valued centre of art, study, and learning nestled in the picturesque Valley of the Sun. Scholars, artists, and academics from all the Noble Peoples, ogres, salamanders, and even, on rare occasions, Neritican thuul, can spend years of their lives buried in books and texts, both ancient and new, within the endless corridors and study rooms of the library buildings' glittering spires.

Over the mountains to the north, realms expand and new countries are born from the virgin lands of the Young Kingdoms, where men of the Successor Kingdoms have exerted their dominance. While a few elf or dwarf settlements still exist, they are few and far between.

Valentica

Perhaps the greatest of all the Successor Kingdoms is Valentica, which occupies the entirety of the lands bearing the same name. The city of Valentica itself sits on the edge of Lake Harrowmere at the source of the mighty River Valen which meanders its way south to empty into the Endless Sea at the great estuary of Amphotia. Great docks line the water's edge, with piers and jetties thrusting out welcoming arms for traders to load and unload their exotic wares. The city is

sprawling and cosmopolitan, with several quarters including elven, salamander, and even, in the insalubrious shadow of the southern city walls, goblins. In recent times, the rapid rise of Lord Darvled to power has coincided with much more aggressive and human-centric policies and bias. The number of criminal convictions, property confiscations, and failed business deals involving other species has risen dramatically and many are feeling increasingly unwelcome and ostracised. Across the counties that surround the great city, special constables now enforce the law and are taking heavier taxes, especially from the "alien" races that live there.

Perhaps even more disturbing is Darvled's "master plan"—the wall being built to the west of the Dragon's Teeth Mountains far to the north. Ostensibly a barrier to keep out invaders such as marauding orcs or goblins, many whisper that perhaps Darvled is trying to build himself a far-reaching empire and keep his subjects contained. That he feels safe enough to stretch his arm so far, for the wall is theoretically well beyond the northern limits of his realm, is noteworthy. A decade of building has resulted in an incomplete hotchpotch of a defensive line, however. Elegant and imposing in places and barely a line of sharpened wooden stakes in others, Darvled nonetheless insists on the project continuing and Valentica's military size and aggression toward its smaller neighbours is becoming a serious concern.

Darvled certainly has ambition, but also seems possessed of an unhealthy and damaging personality—he can be both charming and ruthless in equal measure and is known to have a fierce, often irrational, temper. How he came to power is still unclear, as is his stability, and both are the subject of much whispered debate among the small, clandestine pockets of rebels that are beginning to question and resist his rule.

Primovantor

Whereas once Primovantor was a mountain kingdom looking over fertile plains, it is now a peninsula and landmass containing the vast Bay of Geneza. Most of Primovantor that was not ruined in the war was drowned under the Infant Sea. The holy city of Primantor itself survived, although it is greatly shrunk in size. The city is now mostly ruinous, trees fill its wide boulevards, and the inhabited parts are little more than villages, divided by a wilderness of crumbling masonry.

At times, Basilea has controlled nearly all of the Peninsula of Primovantia and land to its west; at others, hardly any at all. Money is the weapon of choice here; bribes and gifts bring the bickering, faltering cities into the armpit of the Hegemon, or pay for armies of mercenaries should these ploys fail. In truth, the remains of Primovantor have little to offer in terms of economy or resources. Its cities and regions are poor and, among the ruins of high mountain keeps and villages, bandits prey on the weak and lost, while the phantoms of the past haunt the dusty, wind-worn peaks.



The Young Kingdoms

Upon the Ardovikian Plain, new nations are being born. From the Dragon's Teeth Mountains in the south to the edge of the Mammoth Steppes, hundreds of small kingdoms, independent townsteads, isolated keeps, and fortified manses have been established, and lost to ruin, each one alternately warring and allying with its neighbours.

The vast majority are ruled by humans, although there are realms of all kinds to be found, from small dwarf holds to, albeit rarely, minor elf princedoms, and even—in isolated forests or bleak moorlands—the lairs of Vampires. After 12 centuries, some are only now showing true promise, absorbing others through treaty or conflict and becoming players on the grander stage.

Letharac, a city state west of the Forest of Galahir, is a thriving hub and major trading post—gateway to the plains. Merchant caravans move their goods via the Copper Road, the great trade route that connects the Ardovikian Plain to the Hegemony of Basilea. The copper ore mined in the foothills of the Dragon's Teeth Mountains to the south and smelted in the forges of the free dwarfs lends the road its name, and mercenary companies from Sathoi are often employed to guard the trains as they travel east.

Further west from Letharac, the city of Eowolf sits anchored in the heart of the Ardovikian landscape, the centre of an alliance of small city states. The undulating and peaceful

halfling shires border the alliance to the north and west. With fields of soft wheat, gurgling streams, and bountiful orchards nestled in the combs of gentle hills, the shires are seemingly bathed with an almost unnaturally golden sunlight, even during the winter months.

Cruel tyrants, idealistic nobles, religious zealots, chancers, pauper kings, outcast knights, sorcerers, and mercenaries—many and more have attempted to carve out a kingdom here in the Ardovikian Plain by the strength of their steel or the depths of their cunning. Some few have been so successful that they even now look beyond the Young Kingdoms, dreaming of the day that they may conquer those lands and perhaps march across the Dragon's Teeth to Primovantor and beyond at the head of an unstoppable army.

With deep, dark forests, lazy rivers, rolling hills, and vast tracts of unclaimed land, the Ardovikian Plain is a region of adventure and opportunity. It is unforgiving, though, and danger in the form of orc or goblin predation has been the downfall of many an aspiring and fledgling new kingdom. Among the trees of the forests and the grasses of the plains lie the crumbling ruins of once-great castles or towns, their names and builders now lost to time.

The wise see the powers of the future taking root upon the lush and fertile Ardovikian flatlands, yet for now it remains a wild land, full of both promise and danger alike. To be a king here is hard, but then again, here anyone can become a king.



The Northern Tribes

Across the vast plains of the Mammoth Steppe and into the cold, bitter climes of the north, humans have flourished where the other Noble Peoples have not. Since before the God War, humans have spread their net wide, finding a way to live in places considered too difficult, inclement, or downright inhospitable to others. The elves' only real focus was their beloved Elvenholme, and while the dwarfs built their empires across the world, theirs was a life underground.

The lands of the north are not an easy place to live and the people who scratch a living there are hardy and resilient from necessity. Food is scarce and life is tribal and harsh. Human clans have dominated the region, alongside the ogres, for countless centuries.

From the warlords of the horse tribes to the fur-clad huntsman of the mountain folk and the raiders of the bleak, icy coasts and the Shattered Clans and peoples around the Frozen Sea, the human tribes here have developed an eclectic, abundant, and ingenious variety of cultures and a stubbornness to survive.

Great cities, such as those built in the southern lands, are not possible in the harsh and bitter wilds of the north. The largest known settlements are really small, fortified towns. The nomadic nature of life makes any settlement larger a waste of precious resources. Perhaps, therefore, it is partly the fascination of Chill, the impossible city built by Talannar in the ice-cruled mountains of the north, that has seen so many tribes migrating and swearing allegiance to the Alliance he has built.



KINGDOMS OF MEN



Ophidia

Ancient Ophidia, the most venerable of all man's realms, has weathered catastrophe and war implacably. Long the rival of Primovantor, its roots stretch back from even before the ancient Time of Light, born from the hubris and folly of the Ahmunite people. For thousands of years the God-Kings have watched over their subjects, who toil as they ever have on the perilously thin green strip of fertile land adjoining the River Ophid. From the depths of their lavish citadels, they also watch and shape the world: through their vast network of spies and agents, secretly and subtly weaving the tapestry of history, the rise and fall of empires, and always to their own, unfathomable ends.

Ophidia is a harsh land, of ritual and cruelty, but also of beauty and opportunity, of gold and mystery. Its nobility are sorcerers, demonologists and even necromancers, though many whisper that its true masters are anything but human. It is a place where adventurers can find their fortune, braving serpent-haunted tombs and ancient ruins. Assassins lurk in every shadow, alchemists ply their trade in vast painted markets, and women of enviable beauty dance the long nights away to the hypnotic sound of drums.

In crumbling temples and golden towers, the Cult of the Magi make pacts with demonic djinn in exchange for wealth and near-immortality. From this source, the magi draw magical

powers the envy of other realms of men, but they do so at a cost to their souls that few would be willing to pay. It is only the wisdom of the elven Southern Kindreds that allows the magi to tread the fine line between arcane mastery and damnation, and this pact between men and elves is a rare thing in these troubled times.

It is a hard truth that much evil in the world has come from Ophidia: the necromantic art of death magic, unbound abyssals and those terrible perversions of humanity: the vampires and the ghouls, ghastly by-products of the Ophidian sorcerers' never-ending quest for mastery over death. Elven scholars studying the ancient histories wonder if the arrogance and greed of the God-Kings will consume them as they forget the lessons of their own ancestors and the curse they inflicted upon them.

This is a land where desert-borne spirits are enslaved to raise the monuments of the God-Kings, where elaborate funerary rituals are essential to prevent the return of the dead, where proud warriors fight alongside their reanimated fallen ancestors, and where, at the heart of it all, the true, cold-blooded Ophidians plot and scheme from their glittering towers - surely concocting a return to past glories.





Of all the Noble Peoples, humans are the most numerous. They can be found everywhere, from the most verdant valley to the harshest environment, anywhere a living can be scratched from the land.

The great alliances of the past may be fading memories; men are as likely to fight shoulder to shoulder with the elves and dwarfs as they are to oppose them, and on many occasions men have fought on both sides of the battle in these grand alliances. Men, however, most often fight other men, whether through greed or hatred or honour or just through misunderstanding. Humans are hot-blooded, and not always wise; their vivacity is a curse as much as it is a blessing.



The Might of Men

The Successor Kingdoms are the homes of engineers and wizard-scholars, and their armies often reflect this. Gunpowder weapons such as cannon are common there although none are as reliable or as well-crafted as those manufactured by the dwarfs. The venerable bow is the most common ranged weapons in human kingdoms, although some human rulers equip their troops with crossbows, trading tactical flexibility for hitting power. Ranks of warriors bristling with glittering spears are a staple of most human armies, and all the kingdoms born from Primovantor's ruins favour blocks of pole-arms, weapons used for millennia.

Aeons of warfare have not diminished the classic shieldwall formations favoured by many human armies and civilisations through the ages. Warriors are equipped with chain mail or leather armour and carry a sword or axe and a wide shield that they can lock together to adopt a defensive barrier. Human noblemen tend to equip the elite warriors making up their foot guard with the best armour and weaponry that their wealth can afford. Many city states have a militia to varying degrees of professionalism and training. Hurriedly conscripted in time of dire need, these rag-tag formations never last very long on an open battlefield but are useful for demonstrating strength of numbers—or sacrificing so the real soldiers can escape in an orderly fashion.

The Mobility of Men

Humans have forever used horses as beasts of burden, tools of war, or simply creatures of leisure. Across all the human lands, units of cavalry may vary wildly in their appearance and training, but fundamentally any military scholar would categorise them in a similar way: heavy horse, light horse, and skirmishers.

Elite household guard, fanatical templars, brave knights on a chivalrous quest, or disinherited noblemen in search of redemption, heavily armoured cavalymen make fearsome shock troops. Lightly armed compared with the knights, mounted sergeants are swift cavalry units used most often on the wings of a battle line to pursue and cut down enemies that are retreating from the battlefield. Mounted scouts are deployed in skirmish or reconnaissance roles. They are fast and flexible warriors that form the eyes and ears of an army as it advances.

Chariots are one of the most devastating weapons deployed by the Kingdoms of Men, and only the finest warriors are permitted to use them. Training hard to acquire the expertise to handle the warhorses which draw them, as well as to gain the skill to make use of their weapons on the jolting, shifting platform, charioteer units are the pride of any army and the bane of many foes.





The Machines of Men

When it comes to engines of war and destruction, mankind has adopted, borrowed, or simply stolen designs from all over the known world.

The most ancient of war engines, the catapult is mostly used in sieges, but other more modern devices have appeared of late, firing explosive shells or even rudimentary rockets in high arcs. Scorpions are torsion-powered giant crossbows, whose bolts can easily skewer several enemy warriors. Cannons are the simplest and perhaps still the most cost-effective of the war machines used by men, and a dwarf tradition that the humans were very keen to make their own.

The Monstrosities of Men

Men are considered some of the most successful hunters in the world, so much so that they are often viewed more as a plague of ravenous locusts to be feared, rather than one of the celebrated Noble Peoples. Tribal hunters from the north are employed to capture the huge creatures that make the wild places their habitat. As such, mammoths and other beasts of their ilk are not an uncommon sight in the armies of men. Giants too are oft-times seen striding angrily among the serried ranks of human pole-arms, goaded into action with the promise of an unrivalled feast among the enemy corpses, so long as they help their side to victory. Not all these colossal beings live in such servitude, however. Some more enterprising and intelligent giants, notably the Goliaths of Keretia and the cyclopean Swamp Lords of Khopacati, offer their unique, destructive services for a fee—one their paymasters are keen to dispense of as soon as possible, lest they have to contend with an enraged and ravenous monster smashing down their door.

The Majesty of Men

From elf lords and princes, dwarf kings and Salamander clan lords, to snow troll primes, orc Krudgers and undead pharaohs, the great leaders of the world are often equally as fearsome in battle as they are in political scheming and the running of empires. Human nobles and generals, however, are not always the most powerful warriors, but they are the best battle-leaders. Recognising that devolving responsibility for the actual fighting to their champions and trusted heroes while they lend their intellect to logistics and strategy is a useful, and often decisive, skill. When human generals do take to the field, only the richest noblemen can afford to ride a hippogryph, manticore, or similar winged beast.

The legendary figure known as the Captain is the most seasoned of mercenary leaders. Born Alvaro Raposa, the Captain hails from a mountain village near Dol Gragos, His family scraped a living from a small vineyard business, but Raposa was orphaned at an early age when bandits killed his parents and destroyed his home. The young boy made his

way to Dol Gragos itself where he eventually joined the city guard and then the official state military, specialising as a member of the patrols in the mountain passes, hunting down the brigands that haunted the land and preyed on the weak. Having built up his reputation as a cunning and ruthless operator, he left active service to form his own warband, offering his expertise and skills to the highest bidder. Decades later, the Captain is much in demand—his grasp of tactics and his ability to read a battle and anticipate enemy movements is unparalleled. His services are expensive, but worth every coin.



The Magic of Men

Mankind has a fascination with sorcery. Magic is regarded with superstition and fear and is also a road to power and prestige. Human wizards must learn their trade quickly, for they do not have the centuries that the great elven mages do to practice, study, and hone their abilities. As such, human wizards are often hot-headed, impatient souls, and a thirst for knowledge and power can be a destabilising and dangerous companion. It is not, therefore, a surprise that many take dangerous risks, and that most of the necromancy in the world is practiced by man. Competent and trustworthy battle-wizards can be lonesome, mysterious figures, but they are a rare and powerful addition to any human army.

LEAGUE OF RHORDIA



merrick fletcher
CROSSBOWMAN OF THE BETRONBURG GARRISON

LEAGUE OF RHORDIA



Basilea is the self-appointed successor to the old Republic of Primovantor, but that doesn't mean that other realms do not claim the same. Whereas Basilea is geographically closer and has close contact with the Shining Ones, Rhordia claims that it is politically and culturally closer to the old Republic, less corrupted by the new-fangled dedication to the Shining Ones, and standing on its own two feet. The Rhordians acknowledge the presence of the Celestians that were, while not being enslaved to either their darker or lighter aspects. Where Basilea relies on the fickle, often whimsical support of the Shining Ones and their celestial armies, Rhordia has traditionally placed its faith in science, reason, and gunpowder. Throughout its brief history, it has lacked the haughty arrogance of the Basileans, thereby enabling it to form alliances and closer friendships with other races like halflings and dwarfs. Free will and cultural progress have, until recently, been encouraged in the League, concepts that are anathema to the Basilean way of thinking.

During the God War, the Celestian known as Eoswain waged a terrible and far-reaching war with her own dark reflection. Her wicked side, now reborn as Zbortan, raged across the firmament and attempted to rain devastation upon the lands of the Noble Peoples while Eoswain battled to thwart her at every turn. The collateral damage from the titanic feuding between these two deities wrought terrible destruction upon the world below as awesome energies crackled across the storm-swollen skies. The climax of their struggle resulted in a cataclysmic impact in the area now known as the Ardovikian Plain, as the pair plummeted from the heavens, locked in a deadly embrace, and slammed into the ground below. The immense shockwave tortured the land for scores of leagues in every direction as the gods' conflict was buried in the heart of the world. Some say they are still there, locked away in an eternal struggle deep in the world's fiery core, the minor tremors and quakes often felt in the plains the echoes of the conflict raging still beneath the feet of mortals.

The story of Eoswain and Zbortan, and its derivatives, survive today in Pannithor mostly as myths and in children's rhymes. In a small area of the Ardovikian Plain, however, the story is still recalled and used as a moral against excessive belief and action. An extreme of anything, the Rhordians believe, can be corrupting and damaging, even if the intentions seem good. Today, the Children of the Fall preach this mantra as a key part of their dogma. They yearn for a return to the golden Time of Light, before the shattering of the Mirror, and thus their churches worship the former Celestians—those that oversaw a world in balance.

Following the impact, the survivors slowly pieced their shattered lives back together. As is the human way, centuries of toil and warfare rolled across the land as minor realms and kingdoms came and went. As elsewhere, settlements grew into towns, towns into cities, and religion and politics vied equally for reasons to quarrel with bordering states. Tensions reached a breaking point resulting in an episode now known as the Reaping Time. Relations between five major city states dissolved into open warfare. Alliances were forged and broken and a series of vicious and bloody battles stained the land with the lifeblood of brothers and friends alike. At the height of the conflict, the orcs came.

Sweeping through the farmlands around the north-eastern cities, the orcs razed and destroyed everything in their path. Already broken from years of warfare and grief, the land and the people crumbled before the new, terrible menace. Two cities fell and the rest looked on in fear, knowing their fractured armies could not withstand the onslaught.



At least not on their own; together they stood a chance. From the City of Eowolf, one man spoke up. The chaplain Alobart Rhor, head of the Church of the Children, saw his people forgetting the lessons of the past. He browbeat the dukes from the remaining cities together and forged an alliance against the new, common foe. For the next few years and by sheer force of will, Rhor led the new alliance into a counter attack that first blunted and then pushed back the orc assault, ultimately defeating it at the Battle of Halman's Farm.

Rhor himself was grievously and fatally wounded in the battle but lived to hear that the dukes had agreed to forge a permanent alliance and work together to rebuild their lands and cities. The pact was signed a week after the battle and a council formed to govern the joint affairs of the fledgling alliance. In memory of the man who had led them to victory and laid the foundation for its creation, the governing body became the Council of Rhor and the alliance itself known as the League of Rhordia.



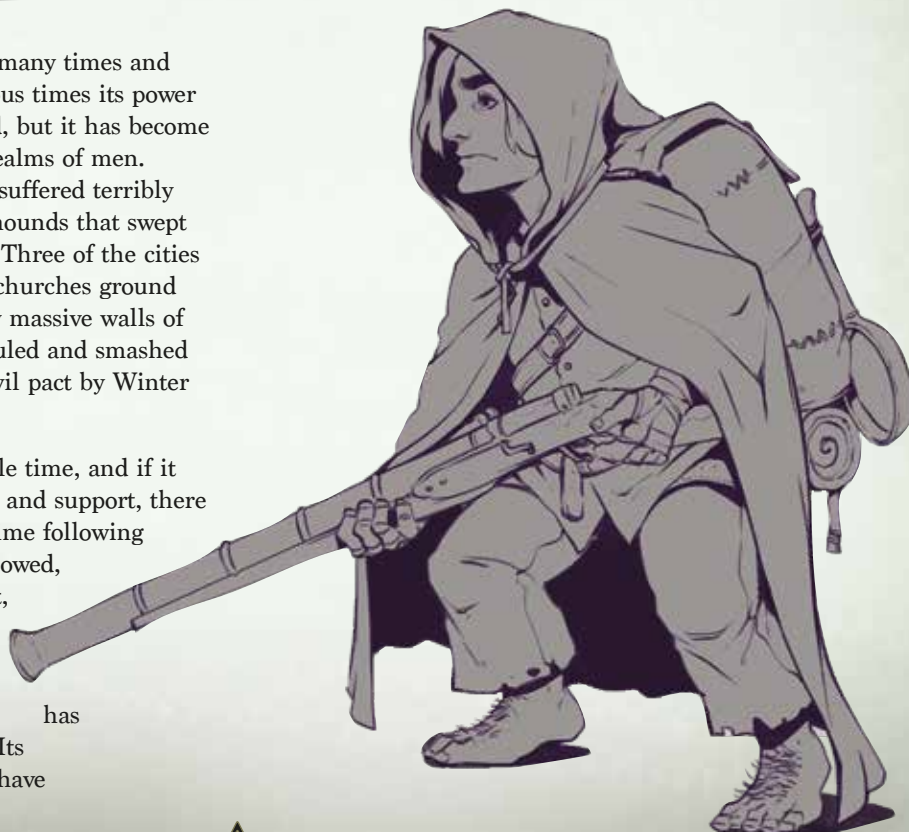
the same recognition as somewhere like Valentica, the League is a destination for many academics, historians, and skilled tradesmen seeking a good life and education. The individual city states are still governed by their own nobility, but the dukes from each have a seat on the Council, which rotates its Chair every eight years. In all states, the Church of the Children is prominent and the Chaplain of the Church has a seat on the council, ensuring the Church plays its part in keeping the alliance together. Unlike the Basilean religion, however, which indoctrinates an introverted and hidebound mentality, the Church of the Children encourages open debate and supports advancements in science and technology.

Long-time neighbours, the halfling shires joined the League several decades after its recent rebirth. Originally the halflings were simply local trade partners supplying food and tools. However, several extremely harsh winters followed by a devastating plague, which swept up from the foothills of the Dragon's Teeth Mountains far to the south and into Rhordia, saw the shires sheltering refugees and providing much needed aid. In return, the dukes proffered the idea, and eventually agreed, to offer the shires a seat on the Council and a place in the League. After a protracted debate, which, to the Council's exasperation, lasted almost three years, the shires agreed to formalise their membership in the League. The shires' administrative assembly agreed to put forward their own shire captains as candidates for their Council seat with no one single individual sitting for more than the same eight years as the Council Chair.

Since its creation, the League has rebuilt many times and grown prosperous in its own way. At various times its power and influence have grown and diminished, but it has become a significant, if still small, player in the realms of men. During the War with Winter, the League suffered terribly at the hands of the ice demons and frost hounds that swept across the lands from the north and west. Three of the cities were all but destroyed, their colleges and churches ground to nothing more than a pitiful moraine by massive walls of crushing ice. Towns and villages were mauled and smashed by ferocious snow trolls, tricked into an evil pact by Winter herself.

This was arguably the League's most fragile time, and if it were not for the pact of mutual protection and support, there its history would have ended. For a long time following the end of the war and the floods that followed, the League painstakingly grew and rebuilt, overcoming many set-backs and even two major civil wars.

In the last two hundred years, the League has once more begun to prosper and develop. Its cities are expanding, and while it doesn't have



LEAGUE OF RHORDIA



Members of the League for well over a hundred years, the shires have become the breadbasket of Rhordia and the loyalty, cunning, and ingenuity of the halflings are highly valued by all League members. In the decades that have followed their joining, many of the states grew to have significant halfling populations and their appearance became commonplace everywhere across the lands of the alliance. However, in recent times, there is disquiet in the shires and, within the halls and burrows of the assembly, whispered conversations talk of seceding altogether. There is discontent due to the increasingly isolationist and nationalistic politics and sentiment they believe is infecting the Council and some of its more influential members. Strange new advisors have appeared in the courts of the barons and some Council sessions have expressed open admiration for the work of Lord Darvled, counter to the League's normal enlightened and progressive philosophies.

Fewer and fewer halflings have been seen in recent times as an informal migration back to the homelands has begun. While some voices on the Council have raised alarm, the

majority seem unconcerned and little has been done to stem the tide. The shires have abstained on most recent policy votes and have, even more recently, stopped attending some Council sessions altogether.

The League's army is made up of professional human soldiers from the towns and cities, with all states providing troops to a common standing army. Sometimes mercenaries are used—the common sell swords who will take coin from all the warring human realms. The College of Warcraft in Eowolf has seen a few, now legendary, halfling engineers pass through its doors.

Halfling regiments and battalions once formed a strong and important contingent within the armies of the League of Rhordia, and while the shires remain members of the League, they will fulfil their minimum military obligations. But the numbers of halflings within the ranks of the League forces is diminishing, while the army of the shires must surely be swelling as a consequence.



The armies of the League are typical of those found in many human kingdoms and city states. The League as a whole invests more money and time in training than many of its peers, however, and while the methods and structures vary between the different city states of the League, each boasts a higher quality of soldier than the average. It employs a professional standing army and takes the security of its citizens very seriously. As such, the city militias are well-maintained and equipped and serve time in the army as part of their training. They are well-trained in crowd control and formation fighting and these skills prove useful on the battlefield.

A Spine of Steel

Considered the backbone of the army, blocks of troops wielding a variety of spears, halberds, and other polearm weaponry dominate the front lines when the League comes to the field. The alchemists and scientists of the League's colleges are employed to constantly refine the metals used in the smithies to ensure that only the best weapons with the keenest edges are put into the hands of their men.

Fighting alongside the regular infantry, the Foot, or House, Guard are elite, professional veterans—well-drilled and experienced campaigners. Used as their bodyguard, these units are greatly valued by barons and dukes alike for their loyal and efficient service.

War at Arm's Length

Despite the investment in blackpowder weaponry, it is still an expensive and sometimes fickle option. As such, the humble crossbow is still a frequent sight within the ranks of the League. Muskets are, however, starting to see more service in the League. Halfling involvement in their design in recent times has made them more reliable, though, and so commanders are more confident in taking them to the field.

Of all the halflings that live and work in the great human cities of the League, it is the Halfling Engineers that have found the current situation most distressing. As they watch the slow exodus of their people back to their ancestral homes, they are torn between their kinship and their love of engineering, caught by the lure of the urban workshops where they feel most at home. Rumours of great new foundries and tinker-shops being built within the Shires are sure to tempt even the most stubborn back home eventually. If they can continue their great works among their own kind, so much the better. Their legacy will be to impart a comprehensive knowledge to the League's arsenal, and the human forge masters have learnt their craft well. Thus it is that the League is fielding new cannon and even the volley-guns once thought only possible to construct with halfling knowhow.

Beasts of War

Horses have been utilized for travel, work, and war by both elf and human for millennia. The League is no different, and vast herds of horses are bred and trained for use across its states. The warhorses employed by the various Household Knights are agile, strong, and responsive beasts, trained not to falter, even in the most gruelling of encounters. Most Households favour chestnut or deep brown colouring for their knights' mounts except in Eowolf, where tradition holds that the duke's personal guard ride the same white warhorses as chosen by the warrior monks of the Church, while the barons' knights may only take black roans or dapple grey mounts.

The majestic aralez live out on the plains in small family groups. Often mistaken by the ignorant for chimerae, these large dog-like beasts are well-known for their unique ability to heal minor wounds by touch. Many adventurers, lost and exhausted in the wilderness, tell of an aralez coming to them in their dreams and afterward waking fully refreshed, their scrapes and bruises healed.

Aralez can be fiercely loyal, and the champions of the League are sent by the dukes to claim them as their companions in a ritual known as Binding. Man and beast hunt and live together for seven days, and after this time, if a bond is formed, the aralez will serve at the champion's side as their faithful steed as part of the Honour Guard until the death of one of the partners. The oldest, wisest, and most powerful of the aralez watch over their packs as guardians and will only form a bond with those who wield similar power and responsibility. An aralez whose champion has died returns mournfully to the plains and lives out the remainder of its life in solitude, never seeking companionship from any other species ever again.

Rarely, aralez are born winged, and these individuals become the dominant leaders in the family packs. Binding with such a creature is incredibly tough and takes a great deal of endurance on both sides, but the honour of succeeding and the lasting friendship that follows if successful is profound.

The menagerie of Targun Spire, the smallest of the city states, uniquely has a number of impressive mammoths, captured from far-flung expeditions to the steppe in the north. These huge beasts are difficult to keep in captivity but are employed in times of war, loaned to the army, often as a political make-weight in some deal or scheme between the dukes. They are highly prized for their dominating and destructive battlefield presence, and so the beast masters of the Spire have become wealthy men indeed.



The Power and the Glory

The League has a strict hierarchy that has been replicated across all its city states. Holding the seat of power in each state is a duke. Together, these nobles form the Council and between them they ensure the smooth running of the League. All make a commitment to stand alongside their subjects in times of war and none have ever been known to shirk this duty. Succession of the position itself does differ in some states, however. In Eowolf, Targun Spire, and Hetronburg, the incumbent's position is hereditary. In Torffs Valem a plenum of priests and barons elect a successor, while in Berlonviche a secret ballot involving the barons only decides their ruler after a number of rounds of nominations.

The barons are responsible for governing the sub-divisions within the League, and while they have some degree of autonomy, they still take their orders and swear allegiance to their duke. Each baron will be responsible for the protection, taxation, and management of a swath of countryside outside their state capital. Most operate a feudal society, they themselves vassals to their lords. All barons are granted the honour of attempting the Binding so that they may fight alongside the Honour Guard in battle.

Of Faith and Magic

Science and technology have their place, but magic is still very real in the world. Combining the various disciplines is accepted and encouraged in the colleges and universities of the cities and even some Halfling Engineers have been known to have a quiet word with a wizard in the past about a special project or two. Pilgrimages to the Euhedral Library are a common occurrence, with both professors and pupils alike taking advantage of the protection offered by merchant caravans on the way.

Rarely, a wizard will ask his or her duke for the honour of bonding with one of the majestic winged aralez. From their lofty vantage point as they soar above the battlefield, the pair can best judge where their magical assistance can best be utilised.

The Church of the Children does not shy from its spiritual and guiding duties and ensures it is always a focal point for the League's soldiers to rally around. At times of great need, the Church will allow one of the rare Battle Shrines to be taken to war. These combine innovative and experimental weaponry from the College of Warcraft with blessed standards and soul-inspiring iconography.

The Halflings

The preconception of halflings as gentle, unconcerned folk, careless of the world around them, is mostly unfounded. While they hark from an idyllic and bucolic homeland, they are acutely aware of the dangers that surround them and the threat of raids and marauding warbands of greenskins. To this end, the shires have a conscription program, enforced by their recruitment sergeants, ensuring that they fulfil their obligations to the defence of the League. While the contingent of halflings within the League is now at a bare minimum in terms of what membership demands, there are still many committed units in all the states, with the Braves forming the core of the support they provide.

Many halflings take up archery for sport, and competitions between the villages of the shires to find the best marksmen are a popular summer attraction. The rivalry can be fierce and also the source of many smouldering grudges and family disputes.

While the humans supply the heavy chargers, so the halflings fill the role of light cavalry. Traditional horses are too big to be practical and so more appropriate mounts are often utilised, such as ponies or even large goats, although they are rarely mixed in the same units. Impressed by the ritual of the Binding and the fearsome aralez, some halfling cavalry captains have returned to the shires, their heads filled with ideas and grand plans.



HALFLINGS



PERSON Blythe
TANMILL LAB ENGINEER

HALFLINGS



The race of people known as the ‘halflings’ are, as their name would imply, rather short compared to the other peoples of Pannithor. The humans, elves, and even dwarfs are all considerably taller, although generally not twice the size. Outside the military, male halflings are typically about four feet tall, while females are a little less. They are shaped as humans, although their heads, hands, and feet are a bit larger in proportion to their height. Skin colour in the north is generally fair, but the southern halflings have a much more tanned and somewhat reddish complexion due to many generations of living in much sunnier climes. Hair colours range from black through brown, with red or blonde also seen, but not common. Beards on the males are not unknown, but most prefer to be clean shaven. Some have tufts of hair on the tops of their feet, but most wear shoes or boots so it’s unclear if this is a universal trait. Halflings are not blessed with long life—the eldest recorded individual, Old Mother Chimesbury lived to the grand age of 72. Typically, most halflings live no more than into their late fifties, with perhaps the halflings of Ej living a little longer.

The halflings do not refer to themselves as such since in their eyes they are exactly the right size and it is the other races who are abnormally large. They generally just call themselves ‘The People’, although those who have settled in the Shires most often refer to themselves as ‘Shirefolk’. Those who settled in the southern regions near and within the elven city of Ej call themselves the ‘People of Ej’.

Surprisingly, even among the noble races, nothing is definitively known of the halflings’ origins. Most scholars postulate that they were created by the gods after the elves, humans, and dwarfs, but no tale tells which god, when, or where. The halflings’ own oral histories are vague and contradictory at best. They do not appear to worship or affiliate with any particular god or gods, but their most ancient legends say that prior to the God War the halflings did indeed have deities they revered, but the specifics are lost to the mists of time. It is theorized that whichever gods they did worship were perhaps killed during the God War or even pushed aside some time before, but the halflings, unable to conceive of a god being slain, have come to speculate that their gods simply left and are thus ‘missing’. Even today, a common phrase or exclamation heard in the company of halflings is: ‘missing gods.’





The first recorded mention of the halflings occurs during the years of the Grokan Dynasty, over three thousand years ago. These are brief accounts of groups of wandering nomads distinctive only due to their small stature. For the next few thousand years there are a scattering of historical notes in the dusty libraries of the world, in those that have survived from those tumultuous times. These records are all similar: beings of small stature, travelling in groups, herding sheep and goats, living in tents or hastily constructed huts. Scribbled footnotes suggest they tended to avoid other people, but would sometimes approach villages and towns to trade. The halflings' own legends simply refer to these as the 'wandering times'.



The first more detailed records of the halflings come from the dwarf archives. In the year 927, Naprastor, a chronicler in a dwarf hold on the western edges of the Mountains of Abkhazla, wrote that a detachment of rangers encountered a group of odd creatures camped on the edge of the hold's grazing lands. "Small they are," he wrote, "just a tad shorter than ourselves, but slender and gangly as are men or elves, but only half the height. They are skittish as would be expected from ones so weak and vulnerable, but became friendly enough when they realized we meant them no harm. They were eager to trade and had sheepskins and wool of very fine quality to offer. They seemed much interested in iron tools and steel blades. They live in ingeniously made dome-shaped wood and leather tents which fold up easily to be carried on pack animals, and which can be erected in moments. Our rangers were quite taken with them and traded a dozen small axes for two. A few of the creatures knew a smattering of the common tongue but they appear to have some language of their own which made no sense to us."

More accounts from dwarf, elven, and human sources record similar encounters in the following years. Several of these noted that although the halflings normally tried to avoid trouble, if forced to fight they did so with an unexpected ferocity. So much so that one human record dubbed them 'The Wolverine People'. Nearly all the accounts noted that the halflings were shrewd traders.

Spread of the halflings

It was during the second millennium after the God War that the halflings adopted wide-scale use of both the wheel and writing, apparently learned from the elves, and gleaned from the dwarfs whose engineering they appeared to admire. The increased use of the wheel resulted in the halflings developing small carts and then larger wagons. At first they traded to get ready-made wheels, but soon achieved the means to make their own. Indeed this is when the halfling's well-known penchant for tinkering and crafting began. The wagons allowed the halflings to acquire more material possessions and trade goods. The wagons often replaced the tents as living spaces and in times of danger the halflings would park the wagons in a circle, creating a ready-made fortified village. Their herds now included ponies, cattle, and oxen to haul their wagons. Most of their crafts were of wood or linen at this time as their wandering lifestyle made crafting metal difficult. Halflings had therefore traditionally acquired most of their metal tools and weapons through trade. Rapid learners, halflings seemed to have an innate talent for tools and figuring out how things worked and so it's no surprise that they began to have a reputation for ingenuity and tinkering.

Initially, their written works seem to have been limited to business dealings and from the start all halfling records were written in the common tongue. Their native language, which they referred to as Tinker-tongue has remained in usage even to the present day, but there are few written examples of it that have been found.

The early records of halfling encounters mention only small groups of a few score which seemed to be extended families. But as time went by, larger groups were observed and on occasion several of these groups would come together and establish camps which remained in one spot for weeks or months before moving on again. These gatherings were for trade, sport, and celebration, and often to allow young people to find spouses outside their immediate family. As halfling numbers increased, these gatherings became more common and would often take place near human or elf or dwarf settlements where trading on a large scale would occur. For the most part, halfling relations with the other civilised races were cordial and their goods, especially handicrafts, were welcome nearly everywhere. The other races often seemed to regard the halflings with amusement. What conflicts which did occur were usually over the use of grazing lands and water supplies and this would often force the halflings to move on sooner than they desired.

Conflict with uncivilised creatures was a far more serious matter, of course. While halflings could usually hold their own against small groups of goblins, or human bandits who foolishly thought the halflings easy prey, their only hope against larger monsters was to flee or hide—something at which they were quite adept.



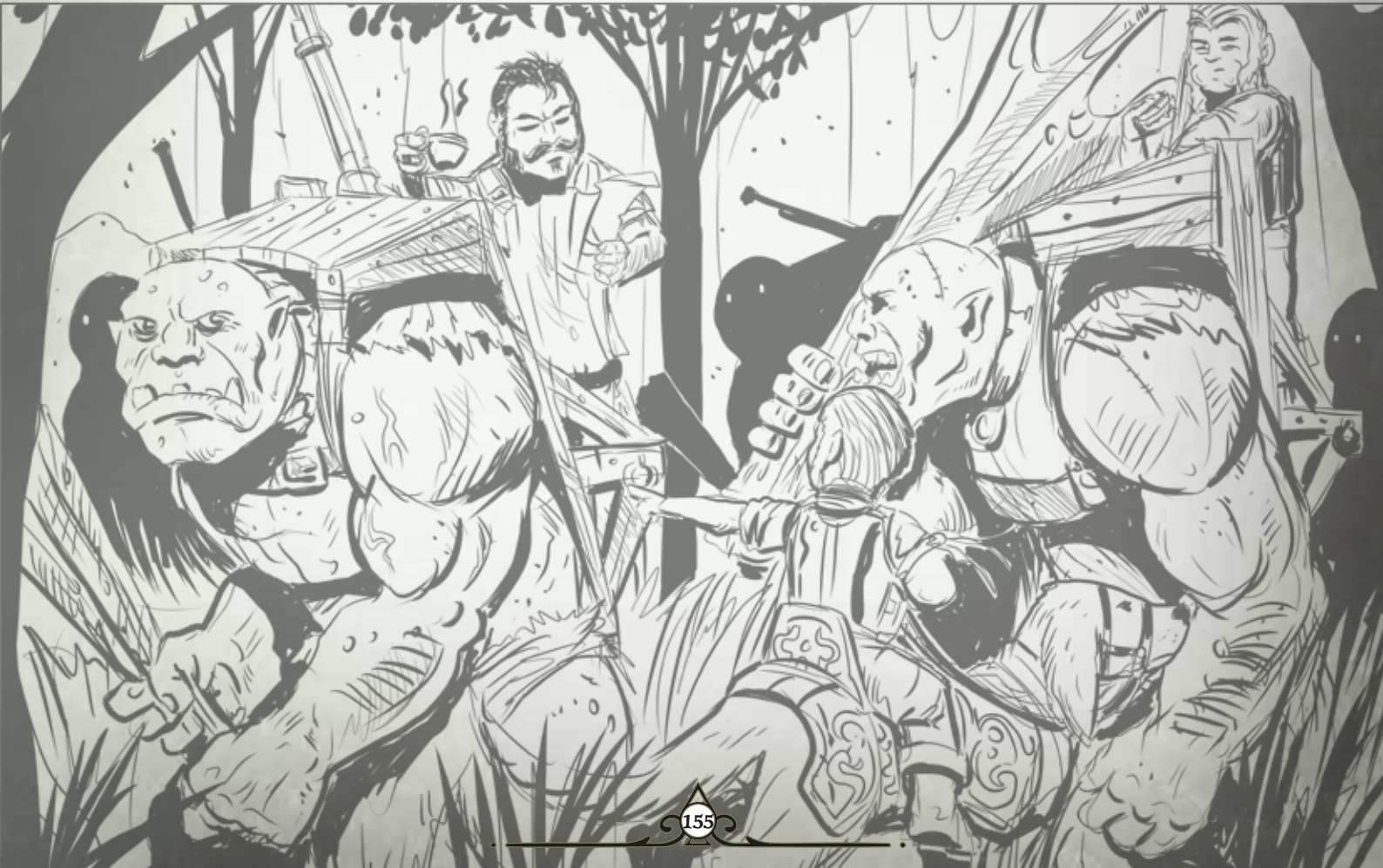
Contacts with other civilised races gradually increased the halflings' interest in large scale agricultural methods. They had a natural knack for growing things, but their nomadic lifestyle made it difficult to plant crops. Early in the second millennium halflings began setting up semi-permanent camps in secluded areas where crops would be planted for a season or two. If nothing disturbed them, they might extend their stay to a year or more before moving on.

Establishment of the Shires

In 2180 a large gathering of halflings came together under the direction of Bron Abbet, the leader of one of the larger clans. They met on the Ardivikian Plain in the lands to the north and west of the recently founded League of Rhordia. Abbet declared that he and his family were tired of the endless wandering. The land there was rich and fertile and nearly unoccupied. Abbet stated his intent to found a permanent settlement and invited the others to join him. There was a great deal of debate over such a radical idea, but in the end, the majority of the families agreed to stay. A region was staked out and named Abbetshire. The chief settlement was made near a lake and named Yangmere—which in Tinker-tongue simply meant 'Laketown'.

Word of this quickly spread among the other halfling families in the region but most took a wait-and-see attitude at first. But after a dozen years without disaster befalling the settlers, many began to flock to Abbetshire and the population grew rapidly and other communities were founded. Countless years collating and subsuming all the knowledge of the peoples they had met on their travels began to pay off, and the accumulated wisdom was put to good use. At last able to make full use of their agricultural skills, Abbetshire was soon growing more food than was needed locally and trade was quickly established with surrounding human settlements, especially the nearby League of Rhordia.

With the passage of time, more and more of the wandering halflings were drawn to Abbetshire, although a few retained their traditional nomadic lifestyle, and even still do to the present day, either in small groups or in larger, travelling families. As the population grew and more land was cultivated, the halflings spread out and ultimately established four more shires: Tanshire, Daleshire, Southshire, and Hoddingshire, covering an area about sixty miles east to west and sixty-five north to south. It should be noted that while these lands were sparsely inhabited by local humans, they were not uninhabited. The halflings proved to be rather ruthless in evicting these people, and creatures, and making sure no more tried to settle in lands they now considered their own.



Government

Historically, the halflings had lived in family groups with the eldest family member, male or female, establishing the rules and making the decisions. If a group became too large to be supported by the land they could graze, the group would split, but the family ties were remembered. If the groups came together again to trade or during one of the gatherings, the eldest member would have authority over the whole group, or clan as it was called.

When the halflings settled permanently in the Shires, a different social structure developed. At first, Bron Abbet was acknowledged as the leader, but after his death no one accepted the idea of leadership automatically passing on to one of Abbet's sons. Notions of hereditary kingship as was practised by humans, dwarfs and elves was never accepted by the halflings.

Even before Bron Abbet's death, the communities outside of Yangmere had set up their own system of leadership with mayors and town councils selected by the local families, and sheriffs to keep the peace. It wasn't exactly a democratic system since each family cast a vote rather than each person, but it was still definitely self-government. Abbet wisely consulted with these mayors before making important decisions.

After his death, a new council, called the Assembly, was created with a representative from each village and town. They would meet in Yangmere to discuss issues and vote on them. A Head Councillor was selected from the others to serve a three-year term. As time passed and more communities were established, it became impractical to have a representative from each serve on the Assembly. To solve this problem, each of the five shires created its own Shire Council and sent three representatives to the Assembly. In 2325 the meeting location of the Assembly was moved from Yangmere to the town of Hodenburg which had become the largest town in the Shires due to the volume of trade which had developed with Eowolf, the capital of the League of Rhordia.

This system of government has persisted mostly intact to the present day. It should

be noted, that over the centuries the role of female halflings in government has declined slightly. During their wandering days, the halfling families and clans were ruled by the eldest member, male or female. But once they were permanently settled, families tended to grow in size and the women became more and more involved in running households than in running villages and towns. Although though not officially involved in government, it's often the matriarchs of each sprawling family that get together and make the important decisions for each settlement - while the men bicker and argue in the council chambers. Although it's not overly common, women do also serve in the military and will defend their village just as fiercely as the men ranked up alongside them.



Shire Economics

The chief activity of the Shire halflings is undoubtedly agriculture. The lands seem blessed with perfect growing conditions, a stable climate and predictable, mild seasons. For years, renowned scholars and academics have studied the area and there is frequent speculation that sorcery is involved, for the surrounding areas are not nearly as bountiful. However, even the great arch-mages and professors from the Euhedral Library are at a loss to explain the phenomena.

In fields and valleys awash with golden sunshine grow a bewildering variety of crops including wheat, barley, rye, oats, hops, and a large selection of vegetables, especially potatoes. Orchards and vineyards dripping with fruit are common, with wine and beer being a major export. They are also experts in animal husbandry and large herds of cattle. Flocks of sheep and goats cover those areas better suited for grazing than farming. Shire dairy cattle are renowned and the cheese produced is in great demand. Putting their knowledge of animal rearing to good use, in recent years, the Shire military have started breeding a miniature version of the aralez, a fabulous dog-like creature from the plains, large enough to be ridden comfortably as cavalry for the army.





rec: VII.II.e



Being a Map of The Shires



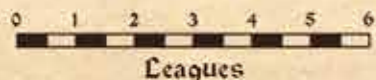
after the secession from the League of Rhordia circa 3868 C.E

The holdings therein are named:

- Abbetshire
- Daleshire
- Hoddingshire
- Southshire
- Tanshire

Legend:

- City
- Major Settlement
- Guardburg
- Mine
- The Shires Border
- Other Rhordia Boundaries





The Shires also grow tobacco. The halflings picked up the habit of smoking and the tobacco plants from the dwarfs who are extremely fond of pipe smoking. Once established in the Shires they started growing their own tobacco and have been very successful at it. The local humans are not as avid smokers as dwarfs but there is still a considerable market with them and any excess can be shipped to more distant buyers.

The halflings have put their tinkering skills to good use in supporting their farms and they have ploughs, planters, and reaping machines far superior to those found elsewhere (where they exist at all). This allows the halflings to produce far more food than they need—although halflings actually eat more for their size than humans. The Shires quickly became a significant source of food for the League of Rhordia.



To aid the shipping of Shire goods a system of roads was built connecting the major communities. Although only paved in some areas, they are still well maintained today by the efforts of the community. In later years a canal was constructed between the town of Tanmill and Hodenburg to further help the shipment of freight.

The one thing the Shires are not well-supplied with is metal. There are some mines in the hills around Tanmill, but these have mostly produced copper with lesser amounts of tin and silver. Only a few iron deposits have been found and the quality was generally poor. Iron, therefore has been a major import to the area.

Manufacturing in the Shires occurs mostly in the small workshops that are common in villages, towns, and on individual farms. Only a few places, mostly near Tanmill, produce things on a larger scale. There are just a few foundries in the Shires that can cast iron or bronze in quantity. Obviously, these are very important, but they can only meet local needs. As a result, exports are almost completely limited to foodstuffs and non-metallic handicrafts. Very few metal manufactured goods are exported.

Defending the Shires

From its founding, defence of this new homeland was a major concern for the halflings. No longer able to simply avoid or flee from trouble, they had to be prepared to deal with it head on. The halflings planned for this in two ways: defensive structures and military forces.

Halfling architecture evolved from the simple tents of their wandering days into permanent structures of wood, stone, wattle and daub, and thatch. Initially these were in the same dome shape as the tents, although much larger. They were called cloctans in the halfling tongue. Later, they tended to be eight-sided or twelve-sided in plan because it was easier to build with straight pieces than curved ones, but the upper floors were usually smaller than the lower ones so the same dome or beehive shape of the tents remained. Sometimes dirt would be thrown up to cover walls or roofs and grass grown. The villages and towns tended to be circular in plan, too, reminiscent of the circled wagons used near the end of the wandering days. The halflings never went in for the stone wall defences that humans and others used, but by barricading the spaces between their circled houses they could quickly create a defence when needed. The doors and windows of their houses tended to face the inside of the circle and presented few openings to an attacker coming from outside. As their villages grew into towns, more circular rings were added as needed, but always keeping the potential for defence.

Once the boundaries of the Shires were more or less settled, a series of fortified strongholds called guardburgs were constructed to protect them. These could vary in size from a walled farmhouse or inn with just a dozen people as garrison in more secure areas, to a large post with facilities for several hundred in areas considered dangerous. Patrols would range out from the guardburgs to give advance warning of any approaching threat.

The military forces of the halflings have evolved greatly over time. In their early wandering days every halfling capable of wielding a weapon was expected to be able to fight. Weapons were a variety of spears, axes, and clubs, and of course, bows. Archery had been a favoured halfling pastime from as far back as they can remember. It was a useful skill for gathering food, and in a fight, the ability to strike a (probably larger) foe before they could get close was often the difference between life and death.

Once they became permanently settled, things began to change. With distinct, and generally peaceful borders, fewer and fewer people saw the need for everyone to be ready to fight on a moment's notice. As farmers they had better things to do with their time. Looking at their human neighbours they saw they had people who were full-time soldiers, so the rest could be full time farmers, and the halflings began to adopt similar ways. Not identical, because few halflings



wanted to be full-time soldiers, but similar in that some people trained for war, while many more did not.

Each community, or collection of communities, created groups called ‘trained bands’ to protect them. These were volunteers who spent some of their time drilling, some of their time manning the guardburgs, some of their time patrolling the borders, and some of their time back home doing their normal jobs. They (or more frequently, their families) were paid (usually in food or other goods) for their service. Most of the volunteers were young and unmarried, mostly males, but with a fair number of females, too. As they grew older and started families, they tended to become less active, although many halflings attended at least one training session a year until they reached middle age.

Each Shire had a ‘Muster Captain’ who inspected and controlled the trained bands in their territory. These were all coordinated by the ‘Muster Master’, who was the overall commander of the Shires’ military. The Muster Master was selected by the Assembly and had a seat in that body.

At first, the trained bands were armed and equipped very simply. Spears were the most common weapons, but there were many archers, too. Archery was a common pastime among the halflings, both for practical purposes, like hunting, but also as a recreation. Archery competitions between the communities were a frequent occurrence and this created a sizeable reserve force in times of crisis in addition to the formal trained bands. The early bands had little in the way of armour beyond simple wooden shields. As more and more ponies were raised, some of the bands became mounted and the Shires fielded light cavalry to better patrol the borders.

With the passage of time the halflings began to see the need for improved equipped and better trained troops. The example of the nearby League of Rhordia and several sharp encounters with roving bands of orcs convinced the Assembly to provide support and funding. First homemade leather armour, and then later metal armour commissioned from the metalsmiths in the League, turned some of the Shires’ light infantry into heavy. Some of the largest halflings were given small horses and, clad in metal armour, became their first heavy horse. Both the infantry and cavalry trained in close order movements and formations copied from the humans and after a few years the Shires had a force to be reckoned with. It was well that this was so, because hard times lay ahead.

The War With Winter

In 2499 the so-called War with Winter began. This was another clash of the old gods, the last in modern times. Huge swaths of the world were gripped in a seemingly endless winter that lasted for decades. The halflings—like many of the mortal races—had no idea what brought on this catastrophe, but they were forced to expend every effort to survive. Only their great skill at producing food allowed them pull through. Even so, there was famine and disease and more than half the Shires’ population perished. The crisis produced many roving bands of human refugees which had to be turned away by the halflings’ trained bands.

Eventually, the war ended and Winter was defeated and the unnatural snows and ice melted with fantastic quickness. Mighty floods followed and the Infant Sea was born, drowning many ancient civilizations. The Shires and the surrounding human kingdoms recovered in time, but the long period of relative peace was over and the Shires were beset with invasions from all manner of foes, both mortal and uncanny, which had been stirred up by the disasters. The reformed trained bands proved up to the challenge, but it was a near-run thing at times.





The Halflings of Ej

Prior to the War with Winter, the Shires were the only permanent halfling settlement in the world. Large numbers of other halflings still roamed the lands, the majority in central Pannithor, hundreds of miles to the south of the Shires. These suffered greatly during the long winter and many more perished in the great flood. Those who survived had to move either north or south to escape the rising waters of the Infant Sea.

Those who went south slowly gathered near the forest of Vieshlar which was in elven territory. The elves, perhaps taking pity on the refugees, welcomed them to their lands and in 3017 a permanent settlement was founded near the elven city of Ej.



The Ej Halflings were more herders than farmers, and living under the protection of their elven hosts, they were able to flourish in their new lands. Retaining their natural affinity for tinkering, and building on the knowledge and skills of the elves, they have developed and produced some wondrous contraptions. Concepts devised for travel and patrolling the mountainous Blades of Ej have developed into fascinating and unique equipment that is slowly finding its way back north, to the military units of the Shires.

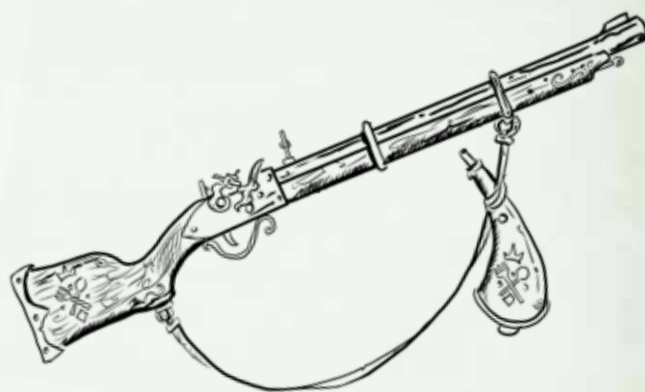
Many years after the great floods, the People of Ej made an effort to restore contact with their distant kin from whom they had been sundered by the Infant Sea. In 3255 the people of Hodenburg were astounded to receive a delegation from Ej who had travelled on foot for nearly two years to reach them. Subsequently contact was maintained with a small but steady trickle of people back and forth between the Shires and Ej. Bold young people from both places dared to take The Long Walk as they called it. Activity between the regions has increased significantly in recent years, and old family ties re-established and strengthened. Delegations make bi-annual journeys in both directions, and graceful elven ships now frequently ferry halfling officials and tourists between Lethuia and Valentica, much reducing the length of the journey.

The Rise of the Tinkerers

It took several generations, but eventually a normalcy returned to the Shires after the chaos that followed the end of the long winter. The population rebounded, trade was re-established, and halfling civilization progressed, one mirrored in the nearby League of Rhordia. The League, like the Shires, was a small confederation surrounded by many potential enemies. They could not hope to match all their foes by raw strength, so they did so by being smarter. The League became a centre of learning with an emphasis on science, engineering, and to a lesser extent, the magical arts. For better defence they established the College of Warcraft in Eowolf, one of the only institutions of its kind anywhere. Their halfling neighbours soon saw the benefits in this and many of their best tinkerers migrated to the League cities to learn.

And learn they did. In an amazingly short time the sophistication of halfling tinkering advanced dramatically. Farm implements became even more efficient and the halflings were soon constructing windmills to grind their grain and farm yields became so great that they began construction of the canal from Tanmill to Hodenburg to better move them. The canal was a huge undertaking in resources and manpower and took over ten years to complete, but once finished was a local wonder.

Advances were made in military equipment as well. The League had begun to adopt crude gun powder weapons by copying the techniques of the dwarfs and the halflings quickly followed suit. They still preferred bows over muskets, but they were soon casting their own cannons and a small gunpowder mill was built in Tanmill.



Some of the halflings advanced far beyond the tinkering stage and became engineers and even artificers capable of creating items imbued with magic. A few became legendary figures in the Shires. Percival Arbuckle and later his apprentice Paddy Bobart made great advances in the creation of artillery and both made copies of the dwarf Steel Behemoth war machines. Bobart, in his later years, founded an engineering and magical research centre in the hills north of Tanmill based on the League's College of Warcraft.



Magic users had always been a rarity among halflings. While some of them, like Arbuckle and Bobart had limited abilities and could use magic in the devices they created, very few had the abilities of the classic wizards. Those that did were highly prized, by the Assembly and Muster Master, but it was rare to have more than one or two at a time. Even so, the halflings were always finding new ways to use even their modest skills. A prime example is the recently revealed innovation of imbuing food with magic. Alchemists had known how to make magical potions for millennia, but these were usually only a single draught affecting a single person. The halfling 'Gastromancy' as it has been dubbed can create a magical effect that can be served to hundreds or even thousands at a time. One of the first widely known practitioners is a halfling woman named Mama Beata and she has gone on to teach others her art. Thus halfling armies often have rations which can extend endurance, increase strength, and give courage.

Joining the League of Rhordia

As the centuries passed, the Shires and the League of Rhordia grew closer and closer. Trade between them became a vital part of both economies. The League was especially dependent on Shires-grown food, and the halflings got most of their metals from the League. More than a few halflings moved to the human cities of the League to expand their businesses and a few humans even relocated to the Shires. The trade became so important that the Tanmill Canal was extended all the way to the League city of Eowulf.

Military cooperation was established and threats to their borders were often met by joint halfling-human armies. In 3712 a particularly dangerous orc invasion was defeated by the combined armies and ten years later the Shires formally joined the League.

It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, but not without some drawbacks. The League became more and more dependent on food imports from the Shires and the Shires became more and more dependent on the military power of the League to defend it. The halflings, never natural soldiers, slowly let their heavy infantry and cavalry units dwindle, fielding more and more light infantry and cavalry, such as they had in the early days of the trained bands. As long as the alliance with the League remained strong, this wasn't a serious problem and, in fact, the combination of League heavy infantry and cavalry teamed with the light cavalry and infantry of the Shires proved a very effective one.

But sadly the alliance with the League collapsed with shocking swiftness.

The Broken Alliance

About a century after the forming of the alliance, relations between the Shires and the League started to deteriorate. The humans accused the halflings of overcharging on the food they sold them, and the halflings complained that the taxes they paid to support the League military were too high. Insidious, anti-halfling feelings and aggressive non-human policies began circulating and infecting the League. Many cast suspicious eyes at the mysterious and sinister advisors that had slowly begun to appear at the sides of the League barons. Other rumours linked the change in opinion to the same wave of human-centric politics emanating from Valentica and spreading north. At first it was just grumbling, but soon it became more serious with anti-halfling violence in the League cities growing at an alarming rate. A few suspected that this crumbling of friendship had some darker source, but could not discover it.

After only a few years things became so serious that the Shires withdrew from the League, and established a trade embargo against them. The League, fearing a famine without Shire-grown food, declared war and began a campaign to subjugate the Shires and turn them into serfs.

The initial battles went badly for the halflings and they realised that allowing their heavy infantry and cavalry to disappear had been a serious mistake. They were routed at a battle south of Hodenburg and the capital and several other towns were put under siege.

Had it not been for the foresight of Paddy Bobart the war surely would have been lost. He had established his centre for science and engineering in a secret place called the Holdfast north of Tanmill and was assembling a new army, much better equipped than the other halfling forces. By good fortune, shortly before the war broke out a delegation from the Ej Halflings had arrived, not on foot but in a wondrous flying machine. They brought other amazing devices and pledged their help in the coming conflict.

By even greater fortune, the Shires had among them a military commander of outstanding talent. Aeron Cadwallader had been a cadet at the League's College of Warcraft, but returned home when the Shires left the League. Although young, he quickly proved his worth and Bobart placed him in command of the new army.





Aided by the Ej Halflings, Mama Beata's magic food, and every mage the Shires could muster, Cadwallader began a lightning campaign that routed the League forces at the Battle of Picksbury and then raised the siege of Hodenburg and sent the League forces reeling back into their own territory.

The war between the Shires and the League came to a sudden end when it was realised that they had all been betrayed. The dispute between them had been deliberately created by foreign spies working for Lord Darvled, a tyrant from south of the Dragon Teeth Mountains. It had all been a plot to disrupt the League and prepare it for an invasion by a large mercenary army. Eowolf was placed under siege and it appeared the League was doomed to be conquered.

Despite many misgivings, the Shires put aside their differences and came to the aid of the League. Cadwallader again devised a daring plan and the mercenaries were defeated and scattered and the League saved.

The Present Day

Politically, both the Shires and the settlements in Ej remain mostly neutral, only getting involved in affairs that directly affect, or benefit them. This attitude is common amongst individuals too. They are kind and pleasant, generous too at times, but equally prepared to let others sort out their own problems and remain aloof.

Although the differences between the Shires and the League of Rhordia have been patched up and pledges of friendship made, the Shires have not re-joined the League and do not intend to. Nor have they forgotten the lessons they learned. They now maintain a well-balanced and well-led army of their own. While they will cooperate with the League when it suits them, the Shires' defence is in the hands of the halflings alone.





rec: VII.I.a

Showing the League of Rhordia & The Shires

- ⊙ Region Capital
- ◇ Major Settlement
- Key Towns
- ⚙ Mines
- Boundary
- - - Roads



Deraldry of the League	Eowolf 	Detronburg 	Cargun Spire
	Berlonviche 	Torff's Valem 	The Shires



Scale 0 2 4 6 8 10 Leagues



The Army of the Shires

The halflings would be the first to admit that they are not natural soldiers. They don't have a lust for blood like the orcs, they don't leap into battle over points of offended honour like the dwarfs, nor do they feel a thrill over the pomp and glory of an army with banners like many humans and even elves. Halflings are far more interested in tinkering in their workshops, reaping bountiful harvests, and sharing a good meal, good ale, and perhaps a relaxing smoke with family and friends. Many outsiders often mistake the halflings as weak and cowardly because of this outwardly good nature.

In this they are gravely mistaken. Because, while the halflings do love the pleasures of life, they are willing to go to great lengths to protect those things from anyone they think might be trying to take them away. They will defend their own with a savagery and viciousness that have taken many by surprise – and to their fatal cost. They can be kind, gentle and generous, but equally cold, pragmatic, and utterly ruthless.

During their wandering days of old, every halfling had to be ready to pick up a weapon to protect their family. Once settled in the Shires, they realised they needed a real army to defend themselves. For the most part they copied the sort of armies they saw in the world around them, with infantry, cavalry and artillery, but as with most things they gave it a unique halfling twist.

The armies of the Shires have changed with time and circumstances but the present organisation is a well-balanced one that commands respect from friend and foe alike. To counter their obvious limitations over other races such as humans, elves and orcs, the largest halflings are encouraged to sign up to the military to serve in the guardburgs or other divisions of the army. Some impressive individuals can reach the giddy heights of four and a half feet tall.

Like many armies, much of a halfling army is composed of infantry. Medium and light soldiers are the most common, although they also have a solid core of heavier troops, plus some unique specialists they can call on. Halfling cavalry is mostly light, but again, there are some heavier mounted troops that can be deployed. In recent years enough of the miniature aralez have been bred as part of an ongoing program, to mount all the halfling cavalry. These valiant creatures are nearly as large as the ponies used previously, but are still suited for a halfling to ride and with their fighting capabilities have made halfling cavalry a near match for larger human cavalry. While the breeding program has not fully replicated the native healing abilities of the larger aralez from the plains, the natural qualities of the smaller breed do retain some of these benefits, protecting their halfling riders from injuries that might otherwise put them down.

Trained Bands

The Trained Bands are the most common troops in the Shire Army. Many so-called braves that are drafted to the Bands are not full-time soldiers, although they are better trained than some militias found elsewhere. They typically have padded leather armour and wooden shields or bucklers, and carry a variety of weapons.

Many Trained Bands use blocks of Spearspikes – spears being an ideal weapon for the small halflings. Their length allow the troops to keep the enemy at a distance and resist cavalry charges. There are also other enthusiastic troops armed with swords, clubs, axes, or even farming tools. They tend to favour close combat, using their small size and quickness to get past the guard of their enemies.

The army is usually preceded by swarms of unarmoured and light infantry brandishing bows, slings, rifles and hand weapons. This vanguard will scout ahead of the main force, killing any game animals (or enemy livestock) they encounter to be collected by the army's cooks following up behind. A Feastmaster is often the leader of these halfling elite scouting warbands. The last thing a marching halfling army wants is to spend the day walking and then have to wait for their food. When the Feastmaster and his gangs are sent ahead to scout for any potential enemies and grab as much food as they can, anything they can trap, shoot and snare gets shoved in the pot. And if they come across any enemies? Well, let's just say people have seen some odd-looking meat in halfling pies.

Some Trained Bands are organised and equipped as light cavalry riding highly trained miniature aralez. Their primary mission is scouting and skirmishing, but on the battlefield they will harass the enemy with ranged fire and protect the army's flanks, charging into melee if absolutely necessary. In training, with their mounts, it has become common for recruits to engage in long races across the plains giving them their nickname of Wild Runners.





Heavy set

Some units of halflings have made soldiering a full-time profession. These Stalwarts are better equipped than the Trained Bands, with metal armour (a mix of thick leather and plate mail), helmets and strong shields. Similar to the Trained Bands, these include blocks of spear-armed infantry that can provide a solid core to a halfling army. Some favour hand weapons, preferring to get in close and personal.

Heavier battle cavalry, mounted on armoured aralez are armed with lances. They are designated as knights by outsiders simply because their weapons, equipment, and battlefield role is similar to the knights of other armies. However, as the halflings have no noble class, the name 'knights' is misleading in the true sense. The halflings themselves know them as Juggers.

Black Powder

In recent years halflings have progressed their adoption of gunpowder weapons, despite their long history of traditional archery. They have found that their short bows, although as powerful as their craft can make them, have trouble penetrating more heavily armoured enemies. After some brief experiments with crossbows, most divisions of the army have begun to switch to muskets and even rifles – an influence surely from their time amongst the armies of the League. Although not as powerful as the shoulder-breaking weapons invented by the dwarfs, they are able to take down most man-sized opponents, despite heavy armour. Whether such weaponry remains in the military domain, or creeps back into the summer sports competitions and everyday rural life, remains to be seen. It is clear though, that the game hunters and poachers that are drafted into military service, or who volunteer themselves outside of the hunting season, are quite taken with them.

Most halfling musketeers are armed with light-weight carbines and can operate either as skirmishers, like their bow-armed comrades, or be used in close formations for concentrated firepower. The dwarfen method of rifling weapons for longer range and better accuracy is a recently imported innovation. But these uncommon, cumbersome and slow-loading rifles are often unsuited for fast-moving light infantry known colloquially in the Shires as "gun-dogs". Thus rifle-armed halflings are used mostly as snipers, in the warbands of the vanguard, or sparingly, massed in formation for long-range firepower.

The Marvels of Tinkering

Halflings have used their mastery of 'tinkering' to devise some truly unique and effective weapons for the battlefield. Some of the most amazing are the flying machines imported from the People of Ej. Those halflings that have settled within the great forest city of the elves and on the rugged slopes of the Blades of Ej are more herders than their crop growing cousins in the Shires. Their technology has combined halfling ingenuity and elven knowhow to create flying machines used for tracking herds and rescuing animals (or people) from high in the treacherous Blades. Aeronaut balloons are able to observe herds from above and reach high places for rescues, while mechanical wings for individuals help them traverse ravines and mountain rivers. These inventions have been adopted by halfling militaries from both the Shire and Ej itself for their obvious tactical and strategic advantages.

Perhaps the most daring troops in a halfling army are therefore the Ej Grenadiers. Using their mechanical-wings, these hot-blooded individuals swoop over the battlefield like birds of prey, raining down destruction with their firebombs before dropping into the midst of the chaos they have created to wreak more destruction. They are supported by the graceful Aeronauts flying in their hot air balloons. Staying high overhead and dropping larger bombs onto the hapless enemies below, their mere presence in the sky can be as much of a psychological threat as a physical one.

War Engines

Most halflings are natural tinkerers with small home workshops where they build various devices 'to make life easier'. Some however, are much more gifted, and produce works of engineering that can arguably match the skills of the dwarfs.

Halflings have created many agricultural machines which have allowed them to grow food more efficiently than almost any other race. The Harvester is a slightly ramshackle crop harvester pressed into combat – a strange mix of wood, metal – and troll. Utilised on the battlefield, it incorporates the cutting devices of a reaping machine and the momentum of a juggernaut fully capable of slicing through enemy troops – like, fittingly, a scythe through ripe wheat.

Originally conceived by the dwarfs as their Steel Behemoth, the concept of an Iron Beast was later brought to the Shires by the halfling Percival Arbuckle and the design later evolved by Paddy Bobart. While the designs of individual machines



vary, they are all essentially an enormous four-legged, steam-powered behemoth controlled from a small cabin on the top and armed with guns, piercing tusks and unstoppable momentum. An implacable foe, they are eminently capable of smashing through an enemy army, spreading death and sheer panic.

Following their membership of the League, some gunpowder artillery is also used by both the Shire army and also the brigades in Ej, as the – mostly due to exchanges in military hardware. Volley-guns deliver multi-barrelled, devastating close-range fire-power, while the howitzer is a long range cannon capable of firing high explosive projectiles.

Beasts of War

The largest known concentration of forest trolls on the Ardivikian Plain can be found in the Targun Deeps. However, the Forest of Kharne and the swamps to the east of Yangmere are home to small tribes of forest trolls that have migrated from their traditional haunt to find a new home. While most people consider such brutes to be terrifying and stupid beasts, the halflings have, over time, learnt to accommodate and appreciate the presence of the creatures, sometimes trading food and other goods in return for labour. Indeed, some of the most difficult sections of the Tanmill Canal were only possible with the muscle of the trolls. The trolls themselves also love a good fight and in times of need the halflings are able to recruit some of their most willing youngsters with the promise of adventure and the inevitable (although stomach-churning) feast that follows a glorious victory. Their huge strength and toughness makes them a formidable foe—or a very good ally.



Command and Control

Like all armies, the halflings have some commanders, champions and individuals that play unique and crucial roles in keeping the army organised, outwitting the enemy, or just throwing in a lethal surprise.

Sergeants, Constables, Muster Captains and Generals form the main command structures when the halflings march to war. While the goal of halfling leaders is to defend and protect, avoiding conflict where possible, it is the duty of these same leaders to bring the full force of halfling savagery

to the enemy if pushed too far. Once the army engages, keeping the halfling battle lines under control in the face of their anger and desire for relentless revenge can be a daunting and sometimes hopeless task.

Giving the ranks of warriors a distinct advantage are the Saucerors, who can cast magical battle magic like a wizard and also imbue their provisions with the mysterious powers of Gastromancy. This can be a great boon, but there are sometimes horrible side effects. A few unlucky souls become so addicted to it and will stuff themselves to bursting, that they grow into deformed, hideous creatures who will eat quite literally any living thing that cross their paths. Called Greedyguts, these rare abominations are almost uncontrollable and the halflings keep them restrained until they can be turned loose against an enemy on the battlefield where it is hoped they will sate themselves until the next fight.

Legends of the People

From adventurers and warriors, to scholars, merchants and clan leaders, the halflings have many ancestors that have etched their names into the history of the People and into the annals of far-flung places. There are also some halflings whose feats have elevated them to legendary status in recent times.

Born in the Shires, Aeron Cadwallader was educated at the League of Rhordia's College of Warcraft before the Shires seceded their membership of the League. In the brief conflict that followed, Cadwallader demonstrated a remarkable genius for strategy and tactics that ultimately saw the halflings emerge victorious. His knowledge and experience has since been instrumental in expanding, re-shaping and training the armies of the Shires.

Abandoned to the streets at a very young age, the diminutive Ally McSween grew up amongst what polite society might term "the wrong crowd". The bullying of the tiny orphan quickly stopped when the same crowd realised the inherent usefulness of someone half the size of the average man, with tiny hands, and who was incredibly light on their feet. Ally went on to become one the most notorious thieves in Geneza, and as her reputation grew, so did her taste for the high life. This hunger for finer things drove her to become a professional thief, offering her skills to the highest bidder, including, on occasion, the League of Infamy. Her adventures are now legendary and she is frequently the protagonist in many halfling children's games and stories. That she has recently visited both the Shires and Ej on her travels has only helped to swell her adoring fan-base. She has said that she still has a few more years in her before she retires, but is elusive as to her future plans.



BROTHERHOOD



SIR VERANCE,
KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF THE BROTHERHOOD

BROTHERHOOD



The origin of the peoples and kingdom of the Brotherhood are lost to all but the most informed of scholars in the wake of the Time of Ice. There was one of many kingdoms swallowed by the Infant Sea's rapid expansion following the vanquish of Winter. As they returned from the north following her defeat by Valandor, they were met by the bedraggled survivors of their kingdom fleeing the devastation. All that remains today is the mouldering ruins atop the Forsaken Isles.

As the forces of the alliance returned southward, Valandor realised the full implications of Winter's demise. Desperately he halted and prepared to try and prevent the impending flooding as the ice melted. The Brotherhood's ancestors knew that their own lands were under threat, and so a great many of them also stopped the long march south and remained to aid Valandor. As the last desperate remnants of Winter's forces sought to bring him down, the Brotherhood prepared to sell their lives dearly so that Valandor could concentrate on the great magic he would need.

Valandor infused the armour of many knights with water magic, summoned great beasts and water elementals to aid them, and demonstrated to the sorcerers how to control them. Departing the Brotherhood and the remains of the alliance, he left to endeavour to avert the disaster and was never seen by those warriors again. Although Valandor's magic and armies were ultimately successful at annihilating Winter's forces, he was unable to prevent worldwide destruction, and the Brotherhood's kingdom was one of many that disappeared beneath the waves that later formed the Infant Sea. The small part of the population that was able to escape made their way northward and ultimately united with the surviving army.

Desperate for purpose as a faltering civilisation, the remainder of the Brotherhood dedicated themselves to ensuring that evil would never rise again to threaten such catastrophe. Settling north of Basilea, the Brotherhood established a forbidding fortress facing the Abyss, and thus began the Eternal Watch of a proud and resolute people over the heart of evil.

The Knights of the Brotherhood swore great oaths dedicating their lives to one purpose: hunting down and eradicating the agents of the Wicked Ones wherever they could find them. Those knights whose armour had been ensorcelled by Valandor became the Order of Redemption, taking on the burden of fighting the fiercest enemies as penance for the failure of the forces of good in fully protecting the world

from Winter's aftermath. Over time, as knights from the Order of Redemption fell in battle, their suits of armour were installed into the heart of the Brotherhood's fortress, the amphitheatre-like hall known as the Council Chamber. The Captains' Council sat on the stage and the knights up on the surrounding benches. Every knight had an equal right to put their opinion before the Captains' Council, regardless of rank or experience. The central seat on the stage was left empty, to represent Valandor, under the belief that the righteous decisions made in the hall were guided by his noble spirit.



Valandor's vain sacrifice to try and save their homeland was already considered an act of great nobility by the Brotherhood. His actions were perceived as an act of martyrdom and following in his footsteps became a subject of almost religious devotion. Between battles and training, many knights could be found in meditation and contemplation in the Council Chamber. On one fateful day, on completing his period of reflection, one knight felt an unwavering compulsion to lay his hand on one of the blessed suits of ensorcelled armour, an act that had previously been unthinkable. In a flash of searing blue light, a portion of the elemental water magic was bestowed upon the knight, and he became the first new recruit into the Order of Redemption. Over the years other knights felt the same calling to touch a vacant Armour of the Tides, and the Order of Redemption established itself as the mightiest and noblest of the Brotherhood's warriors.

Brotherhood society existed on a permanent war footing, with every member of society fulfilling a function to support their unending quest to thwart the forces of darkness. A line of smaller fortresses and watch towers, stationed and operated by one or more of the orders, formed a first line of defence against the Abyss, guarding the borders that led to the lands of men. The Eternal Watch meant that military training of some degree was compulsory for even the lowest peasant, and everyone was required to maintain at least basic weapons to defend their lands and farms or supplement the armed forces. Thus the Brotherhood could put a wide spectrum of soldiers into the field: noble knights, standing soldiers to support the knights, and peasant militia for when forces were stretched thin—alongside the mystical water creatures it could summon to the field.

Although much of their activity took place in the shadow of the Abyss, bands of the Brotherhood roamed far and wide, lending aid to any who faced the forces of darkness. As time passed, the Basileans' relationship with the Brotherhood became one of ostensibly cold, or even arrogant, indifference. Whilst "misunderstandings" had, on occasion, been settled on the field of battle, the proximity of the Abyss proved a strong enough incentive to avoid open warfare between the two kingdoms.

When the Abyss swelled and the demonic legions poured forth, the Brotherhood were one of the first to face the onslaught as the scorching hell-fires torched the earth and the hordes of evil spilled across the land. Lifetimes of training and preparation heroically stemmed the tide and even pushed back against the horror in places, but the Brotherhood took severe losses and were eventually put on the back foot until help arrived. From the forest of Galahir, the Green Lady's forces swelled the ranks of the Order of Redemption as man, beast, and elemental fought side by

side. From the south, the legions of Basilea marched to war and paladins, sisters, villeins, and knights fought and died shoulder to shoulder. Bonds were made, but more were broken. Attrition began to take its toll.

Whereas the forces of Nature and Basilea could more readily call upon reinforcements, the Brotherhood were battling with a depleting reserve. The ranger, Swain, fought like a madman, stories of his exploits being recounted from across the front lines, spanning an almost impossible tract of land. But even the feats of their heroes and the support of their immediate allies couldn't prevent the destruction of the Brotherhood's lands and dwellings. Castles and outposts fell one by one and many were abandoned in favour of more defensible or strategically valuable locations.



BROTHERHOOD



The final blow came with the catastrophic conclusion to the war—the drowning of the demonic maw. A bittersweet moment for the Brotherhood, the flooding of the Abyss was a dagger to the heart of evil but also swept away vast swathes of their lands and property, sluicing clear much they had built and wiping it clean from the earth.

The survivors lacked the resources to quickly rebuild and re-establish the Eternal Watch to even a vague shadow of what it had been. The political schemers of Basilea quickly began courting the remaining Exemplars and offered their support in rebuilding the Brotherhood's fortresses, for surely the quenching of the Abyss would only be temporary. Such support was of course not without some distasteful and, to many, unacceptable conditions. The Brotherhood would more than ally themselves to the Hegemony—they would become part of it, and while they could retain some of their traditions and military doctrines, it was clear that their culture and military expertise was to be absorbed.

Fierce disagreements erupted between the Exemplars as the options were discussed, and while no knights came to blows, the situation drove a final wedge in a shattered people. Some reluctantly sided with the Basilean proposal. Others argued that the Green Lady most represented their interests, loyalty, and purpose, whilst yet more declared that the Eternal Watch should exist everywhere, not tied to one place, unless that was to mean a return home to the ancestral Forsaken Isles.

And so the Brotherhood continues to survive, albeit in a fragmented form. The Orders of the Brothemark and the Green Lady have both been born from the remnants of the old Orders. These institutions still live on in the hearts of all the Brotherhood, however, especially the roaming groups of those that seek out darkness wherever it lurks and wander the land in small warbands, hunting evil in every corner. Swain maintains links with new orders and refugees alike, passing on messages, keeping stories and history alive. His great hope is that one day the Brotherhood will reunite, but at least for now the Eternal Watch is very much still alive.





THE ORDER OF THE BROTHERMARK

When the grand orders of the Brotherhood reluctantly agreed to disband, the Basilean generals and politicians quickly moved to establish their authority and ensure the assets they had positioned themselves to subsume were taken and integrated as quickly as possible.

In return for the promised financial and infrastructural support rebuilding former Brotherhood fortresses lost to the war and the flood, including the ceding of land now known as the Brothermark, just over half the newly formed Order is comprised of Paladin chapters and garrisons of Men-at-Arms sent from the provinces of Nova Ardovakio and Solios. This in turn has imposed much of the standard Basilean military doctrine and structure on the Order and so most of the former Brotherhood knights have joined the ranks of the Paladins or have become sergeants in the legions of Men-at-Arms. While some Brotherhood traditions were allowed to persist, and the new Order is quite unique within the vast array of the Basilean armed forces, there is no doubting the Order's command structure and where the ultimate power really lies in the new relationship.

To the knights of the former Brotherhood, honour is paramount. They would rather fall in the attempt to fulfil an oath than live with the shame of breaking one. The hardships that have befallen the knights in recent years have fostered righteous rage and fury, with many taking the so-called 'Oath of the Gauntlet'. These knights have sworn to best an enemy champion on the field of battle and in so doing, regain some small measure of vengeance for their fallen brothers. The sign that shows the oath is a red cross on their gauntlet - the knight believing that the dead are behind each righteous swing of the sword. This drives those who take it to fight longer and harder when face-to-face with a champion of the foe.

The vast majority of the Brotherhood villeins and families that lived off the former Brotherhood lands choose to remain and help rebuild their lives and homes. The new Order still requires all able-bodied members of society to become trained infantry. The Order operates a rotation system of service so that these most productive members of society spend several months fighting and several months using their practical skills to provide food and other essentials and weapons, always required by the fortress garrisons and field armies.

Those villeins that show sufficient skill-at-arms and courage join the ranks of the Paladin Initiates, where they train to become fully fledged knights. They are indoctrinated with both the morals and values of Basilea and the history and traditions of the Brotherhood. Exemplar Paladins and Chaplains take great care over the Initiates under their command, ensuring the knights of the future have both the physical and spiritual fortitude to face the horrors of war.

Initiates that fall short of the standard required to become full knights can still put their training to effective use, either by joining the ranks of the Men-at-Arms or re-focusing their skills as skirmishing units. These swift cavalry groups are used most often on the wings of a battle line, to pursue and cut down enemies that are retreating from the battlefield.

The Order of the Abyssal Hunt has been allowed to remain mostly intact and, while some former Basilean paladins now grace its ranks, their Exemplars have been granted a fair degree of autonomy and licence to operate where they feel best, all along the front lines. The Basilean high command recognised the unique skills the Order possessed—the knights specialising in hunting down the great monsters that plague the world of Pannithor. They fight from horseback, wielding great swords and hammers with unparalleled skill.

ORDER OF THE GREEN LADY



THE ORDER OF THE GREEN LADY

Inspired by the actions, compassion, and righteous fury of the Green Lady, the Orders of the Brotherhood, Redemption, and Forsaken all swore new vows to the protection of the natural world, fighting beside the elementals and ancient Forces of Nature. It is rumoured that the Green Lady personally visited the highest-ranking members of each Order, although what was discussed has never been revealed. Her direct intervention, following the destruction of the Brotherhood's lands, is seen as a major factor in the fragmentation of the ancient Orders by those that are most resentful. Indeed, her name is not spoken among the Roamers—those that refused to join either of the new Orders and now wander the lands, restless and impatient to rebuild anew.

The Order of the Green Lady has based itself in Galahir, but it takes the fight to evil alongside the Lady's Forces of Nature all across the known world. This, the knights say, is their true destiny—the old Orders were too focused and inflexible in their outlook and suffered from a self-imposed and literal line in the sand, from which they would not move.

The schism in the Order of the Brotherhood saw many of the knights and soldiers merged into the new Basilean fighting units. However, a significant number also elected to retake their oaths to include service not only to the Brotherhood, but to the Green Lady as well. As such, the Order of the Brotherhood still provides the bulk of the fighting forces.

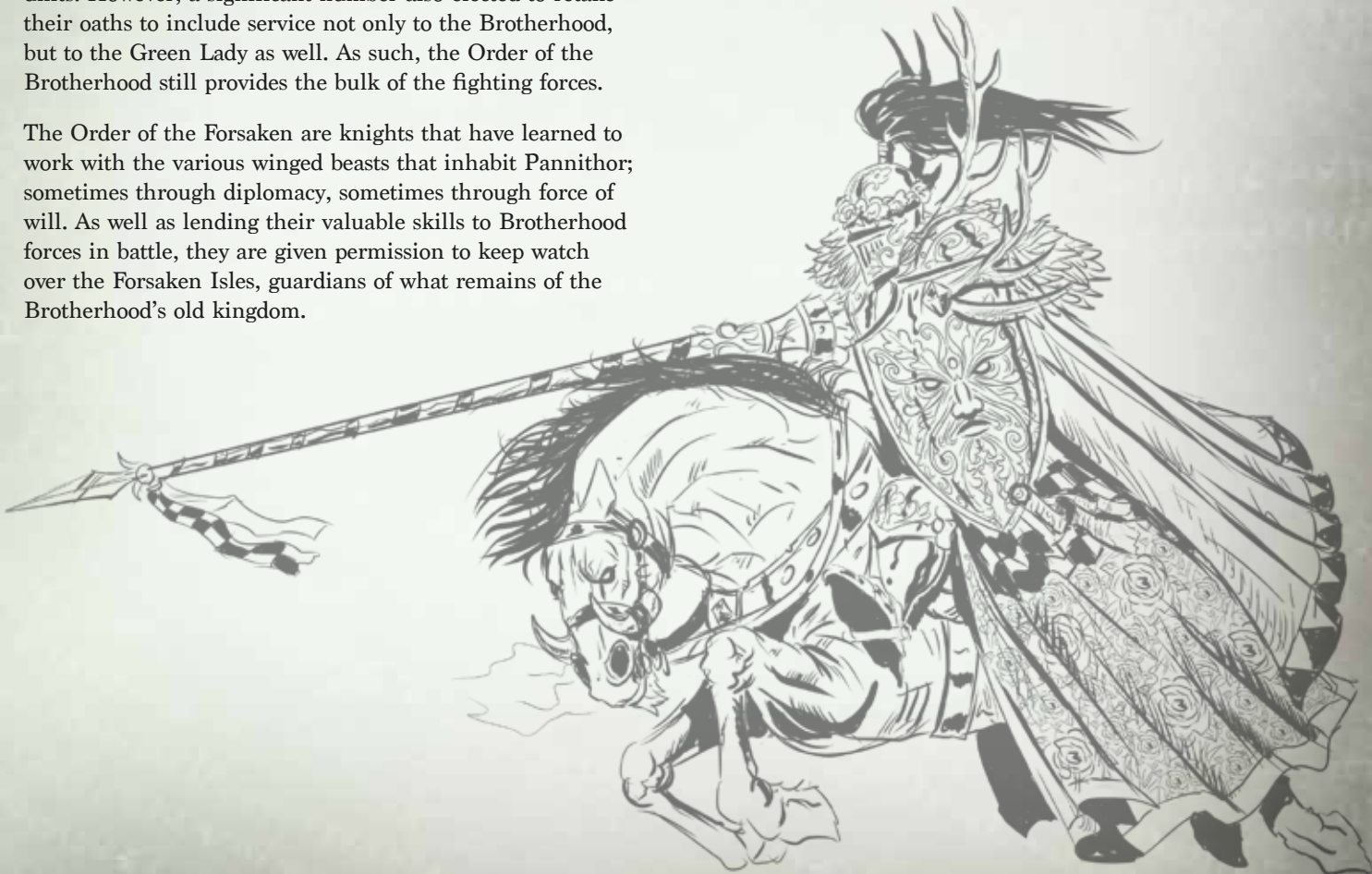
The Order of the Forsaken are knights that have learned to work with the various winged beasts that inhabit Pannithor; sometimes through diplomacy, sometimes through force of will. As well as lending their valuable skills to Brotherhood forces in battle, they are given permission to keep watch over the Forsaken Isles, guardians of what remains of the Brotherhood's old kingdom.

The Order of Redemption consists of those knights that have reached a level of devotion that allows them to wear the Armour of Tides, granting them powerful abilities and making them the mightiest warriors the Brotherhood can put in the field. Of all the warriors in the new Order, the Redeemers are the most in tune with the elementals the forces the Green Lady can bring to battle.

The Exemplars of the Order of Redemption are the greatest knights in the Brotherhood's ranks, drawing on the water magic that imbues them to produce legendary feats of arms and inspiring those around them to efforts they thought beyond their abilities.

Exemplar Adjutants carry banners depicting great victories over the Forces of the Abyss, which act as rallying points and symbols of defiance when Brotherhood forces are sorely pressed.

A small number of women are born with a connection to the water-magic that defined the Brotherhood. They devote their lives to mastering divination as a means to predict where the dark forces of the Abyss might sally out into the world. Working closely with the Druids, they also bring other powers to bear on the battlefield.



OGRES



Kağarak, Ögre Boomer
Grokakamok's mercenary company



Of the ogres' origins as a species, history remains silent. As with so many things regarding these creatures, their physiology and psychology are contradictory and strange, and offer no clues as to their original, yet ancient lineage. Their massive size and brutal strength recalls the orc, yet their temperament and sophistication of speech and culture speaks more to the noble races for which they are seemingly contemporaries, if the legends and myths surrounding them have any glimmer of truth.

The most frustrating element of all to scholars looking for answers to this question is the attitude of the ogres themselves – put simply, they could not care less. There is a culture which relies on the oral tradition rather than written history, and concerns itself with the practical – the deeds and achievements of living, breathing ogres as they march the world, rather than the metaphysical comings and goings of gods. It is not that the ogres are foolish enough not to believe in gods as others do, nor that they are too unsophisticated to grasp such lofty concepts. It is simply that knowing anything about ancient history or the deeds of ethereal beings is of no use in learning how to use a weapon, hunt for food, or obtain work. If the ogres have any concept of, or belief in, a deity of any kind, it is a very well-kept secret, or simply not worth mentioning to outsiders.

Living in the sprawling and frozen landscapes of the Mammoth Steppe, the ogre race is a tribal one, scattered across those wild lands in countless groups ranging in size from small family groups to hordes several hundred strong. With no cities, no capital and no recognised overall leader, these tribes move and flow across the steppes, sometimes meeting but mostly and mysteriously keeping to their own paths in some great, swirling dance across the endless plains. Ogres are very family-orientated, with a calm and neutral temperament in day to day life. They have no interest in fighting amongst themselves, unless for pay, and tend to keep to their own save for the annual gathering known amongst their kind as the Thing.



THE THING

The Thing functions in equal parts as a social gathering and a 'Parliament' of sorts to ogrekind. Disputes will be settled, marriages and other bonds and agreements between tribes arranged and trade carried out. Of greater note to the outside world, it also serves as a recruitment place for the great mercenary companies of the ogres.

Each year, a handful of ogres will feel the Calling. This is the name given to a feeling experienced by a relative few that they do not wish to be part of their family or tribe, but instead want to make their own way into the world and see what can be seen. Sometimes, they will die, because even an ogre with their mighty strength and ability is but one creature in the frozen wastes, which are a hostile and terrible place. Others however, will make the perilous journey into the wider world, drawn inexorably to one of the towns or cities that spread across the southern reaches of the continent and beyond.

An ogre who has survived to maturity in the harsh environs of the Steppe and the fraught journey from it to civilisation will be a fearsome individual indeed. In physical stature alone, ogres stand a sight taller than the largest man or elf, and several times as broad. Prominent jaws belie the fierce

intelligence possessed by their kind, and the mountainous slabs of muscle, broad shoulders and barrel-sized fists of their kind all combine to give an instant impression of power and strength. Ogres do not usually find trouble in gaining employment wherever they wander – there is always someone with money who needs things done of which they themselves are not capable, and whether going forth to retrieve some stolen artefact or kidnapped relative, or fighting in the army of a small fiefdom, the usefulness of an ogre is undisputed.

Some such ogres naturally find themselves gravitating to others of their kind over time, throwing in their lot with some ogre captain or other and joining a mercenary band to wander the world offering their services to whoever pays the best coin. Others – a rare few – will become captains themselves, recruiting more of their kin and carving fierce reputations in whatever part of the world they work.

The Thing is the one time each year when these mercenary companies will return home to the Steppe and catch up with the stories of their kind, bring back gold or other riches, and see if any others fancy trying their chances at the mercenary life. Those who are tempted will seldom rise to captaincy themselves – they do not feel the Calling in the same way and will often return home after a few years – but they will still form an important backbone of the mercenary company and ensure the growth and continuance of its legend.





Ogre Mercenaries

Beside their obvious physical attributes in terms of size, strength and fighting ability, ogres possess a number of other qualities which have seen them become the recognised mercenary race in all civilised lands. Firstly there is their general attitude – an ogre is naturally neutral in temperament, not easily roused to anger and willing to listen to all sides of any story. Of course, it is far easier to be this relaxed on these matters when you are large and powerful enough to end any argument very quickly indeed, but it is still of note just how neutral ogres are. It is not unheard of for them to fight for any side – including the forces of the orcs, the Abyssal Dwarfs and sometimes even the Abyss itself, as often as they fight for humans, elves and dwarfs. Sometimes they will even find themselves fighting the very forces they aided mere weeks or even days before, driven simply by the economics of the situation.

The other quality which assists them in their ubiquity as soldiers for hire is the sophistication of their speech, something obviously cultivated heavily in a people which relies on the oral tradition of storytelling to preserve what they see as the important parts of their history and culture. This extends into a surprising talent for languages, and the most renowned and storied among the ogre captains can command many dozens of languages, from the lilting musical speech of Therennia Adar to the gravelly, blunt tones of Golloch and of course, the Common tongue. It is a tremendous asset indeed to a mercenary to be able to speak and understand not just the speech but the subtle nuances of the language of their employers, and few indeed are the races who will dare attempt to double cross or mislead an ogre captain more than once.

Finally, there is their apparently inherent grasp of tactics and strategy. Ogres on the plains rarely fight each other, and even more rarely find themselves confronted with any other race brave enough to challenge them, yet somehow they seem to have an understanding of military matters almost in their blood. Many are the opponents who have been caught napping by the clever flank manoeuvre or sudden enfilade of a canny ogre captain and his crew, their perception of the ogres as unsophisticated brutes melting away in a haze of chopping blades and devastating crossfire.

These sophistications aside, the main asset of an ogre to any fighting force is their enormous strength and prodigious fighting ability. Wielding two handed weapons which a man would struggle even to lift, the ogres are a whirlwind of destructive force, barrelling through entire regiments of the foe and scattering even the bravest and most capable warriors around them. Some take to firearms, having enormous, artillery-sized crossbows or cannons constructed for them by willing dwarf artisans and using them to devastating effect.

Ogre Armies

Though ogre mercenary companies are a common enough sight across the length and breadth of Pannithor, whole armies of them are a rarer encounter. Ogres in general have very little reason to form armies – they have few if any natural enemies in the wider world or on the plains, and their pressing desire is generally for more money and notoriety.

Nonetheless, sometimes honour or other, baser motives will necessitate such a gathering, and none who witness such a spectacle are likely to forget it. In some cases, a foolish king or other ruler of some minor state will refuse payment of his due to a mercenary captain once the work is complete. In others, an especially brave orc or barbarian band will seek to carve a little slice of their own territory in the ancestral lands of the Tribes, perhaps attacking the women and children of a Tribe to do so. Whatever the reason, when motivated to war, there are few military forces on Pannithor that can stand in the way of the ogres.

Rallying to them come the goblins who naturally follow any ogre mercenary band, attracted both to the wealth and power of the larger ogres and also to the protection afforded them by proximity to the mighty warriors. Goblins who follow ogres in this way are often referred to as ‘red’ goblins, from their habit of wearing bright red rags tied to their armour so that the ogres might distinguish them from the enemy in the heat of the fight. For their part, the ogres tolerate the goblins well enough – they eat little, and prove useful in many menial tasks such as the upkeep of weapons and the beasts of burden such as gores for the chariots and the giant mammoths of the Steppe. Ogres take a fairly proprietary attitude towards ‘their’ goblins, and woe betide the unlucky individual who makes the mistake of kicking a goblin wearing the red rag, or indeed the goblin who is foolish enough to wear one in order to try and benefit from its protection when not a member of an ogre entourage. Ogres do not take kindly to anything belonging to them being mistreated, as many have discovered, most in a fairly terminal way.

Giants are also known to fight alongside ogres, recognising in them a sort of equal and also an opportunity for good fighting and good ale. The stature of giants is matched only by their appetite and they are not fussy eaters – some of the more lurid tales of ogres eating the slain after battle are actually in reference to giants who, while not especially enamoured of the taste of uncooked man, dwarf or elf flesh, will eat anything that presents itself in a pinch.

Thus, as the ogres do the bulk of the fighting, their warriors move forwards with unstoppable force, smashing and hacking apart anything standing in their way. Their Boomers and Shooters wreak bloody havoc from afar and their chariots pulp anything stupid enough to stand before



them. Meanwhile, the allies of the ogres swarm forth to mop up what remains behind them. An ogre army is thus akin to a force of nature in a very real sense, its enemies destroyed before it and left behind picked clean and quite often eaten. Once the point is proven, the army will often disband again, splintering into its component warbands who will once again go their separate ways, but the raw violence and brutality of their passage will live long in the memory of those who witnessed it.

It is well indeed for the other races of Pannithor that ogres do not tend towards the conquering life – for surely if they did, none could stand in their way.

Money

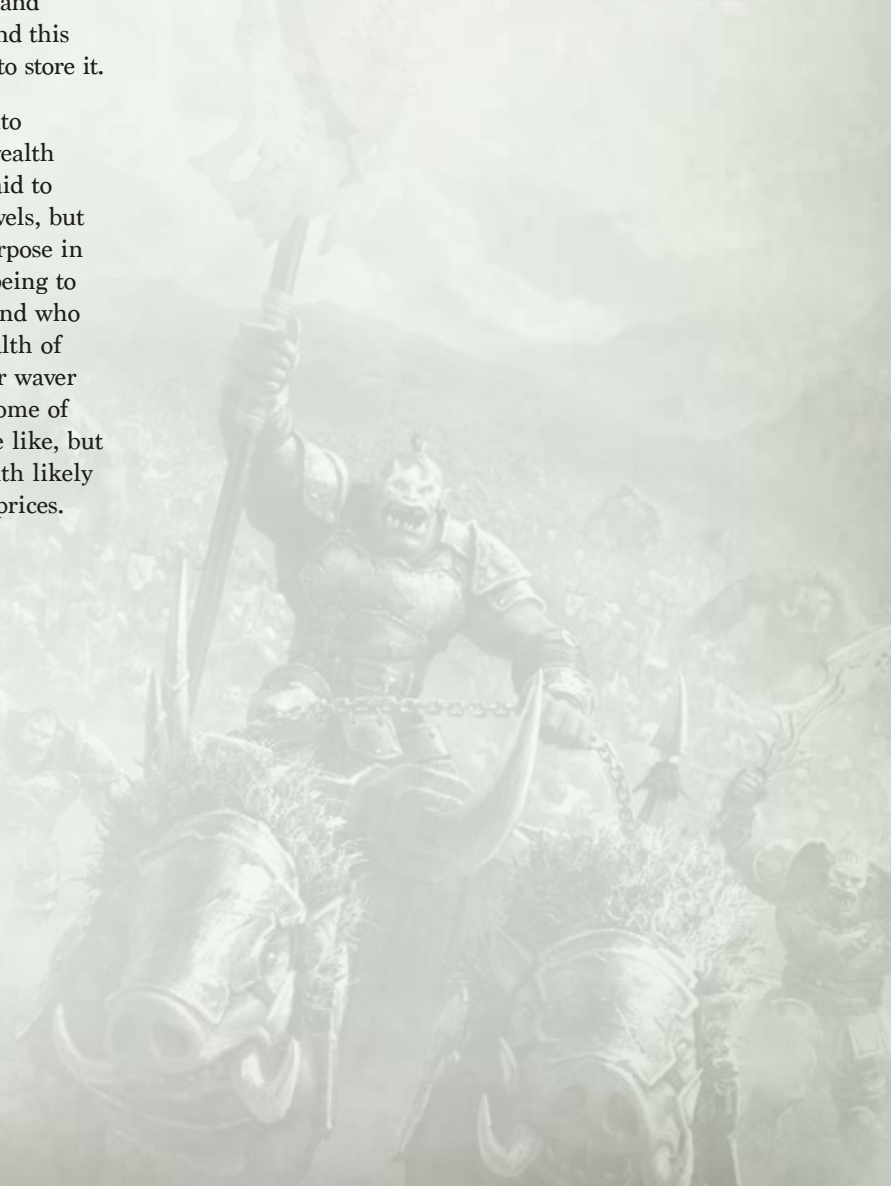
The relationship of ogres to money is perhaps the greatest mystery about them after that of their origins. What is certain is that they do not use it on the Steppe, where no cities exist and trade is done rarely and on a barter system. Gold and jewels are of no help in surviving the frozen wastes, and this nomadic people have no vaults or fortresses in which to store it.

And yet, when a mercenary captain ventures forth into the wider world, the acquisition of more and more wealth becomes his or her primary goal. Dwarfs are often said to have a passion for gold and other fine metals and jewels, but ogre mercenaries seem consumed by it, their sole purpose in building up their reputation and legend apparently being to drive up their prices. There are some among their kind who – by any educated reckoning – have acquired the wealth of a small kingdom many times over, and yet they never waver from their life of mercenary wandering. Of course, some of the wealth must go on food, travel, weaponry and the like, but ogres are not fools and rarely is any merchant or smith likely to try and take even the slightest advantage in their prices.

This being the case, where the money goes is a mystery.

Some posit that the ogres bury their wealth, and this has led to many ill-fated expeditions into the frozen wastelands and beyond in search of some secret hidden hoard. Others assert that the ogres eat their winnings, which has led to some even more ill-fated expeditions into the privies of various establishments. Certainly it seems that they do not take their wealth home to the Thing to pass to their tribes – for who among them would have use for it?

Whatever the truth, the fact remains that ogres fight for money and money alone – they have even been known to face each other on different sides of whatever dispute is occurring in their vicinity, a fact which bothers them not one jot as long as the pay is good. Perhaps one day the mystery of where this wealth goes to will be revealed – in the meantime it is enough to know that any with enough money to offer will be able to secure the services of the best mercenaries in the world.





GROKAGAMOK AND THE GRANITE FISTS

Even in the rarefied company of his massive kin, Grokagamok is a legend, spoken of with equal reverence by his fellows as by those who have been fortunate enough to hire his services and the relatives of those unlucky enough to be on the receiving end of his attentions.

For three decades now, the Granite Fists have plied their trade over the length and breadth of Mantica, the vast region circling the infant sea and reaching into the icy lands of the north, ranging further and for longer than any other mercenary band in the history of the ogre race.

Grokagamok himself is massive, even by the standards of his kind. Covered in criss-crossing scars which are so many and dense that not a single patch of original tissue remains, he stands a head taller than any of his fellows, and noticeably broader. In one hand he bears the massive axe known as the Amputator, a weapon which has earned its title many times over in the fierce battles Grokagamok has waged over the years.

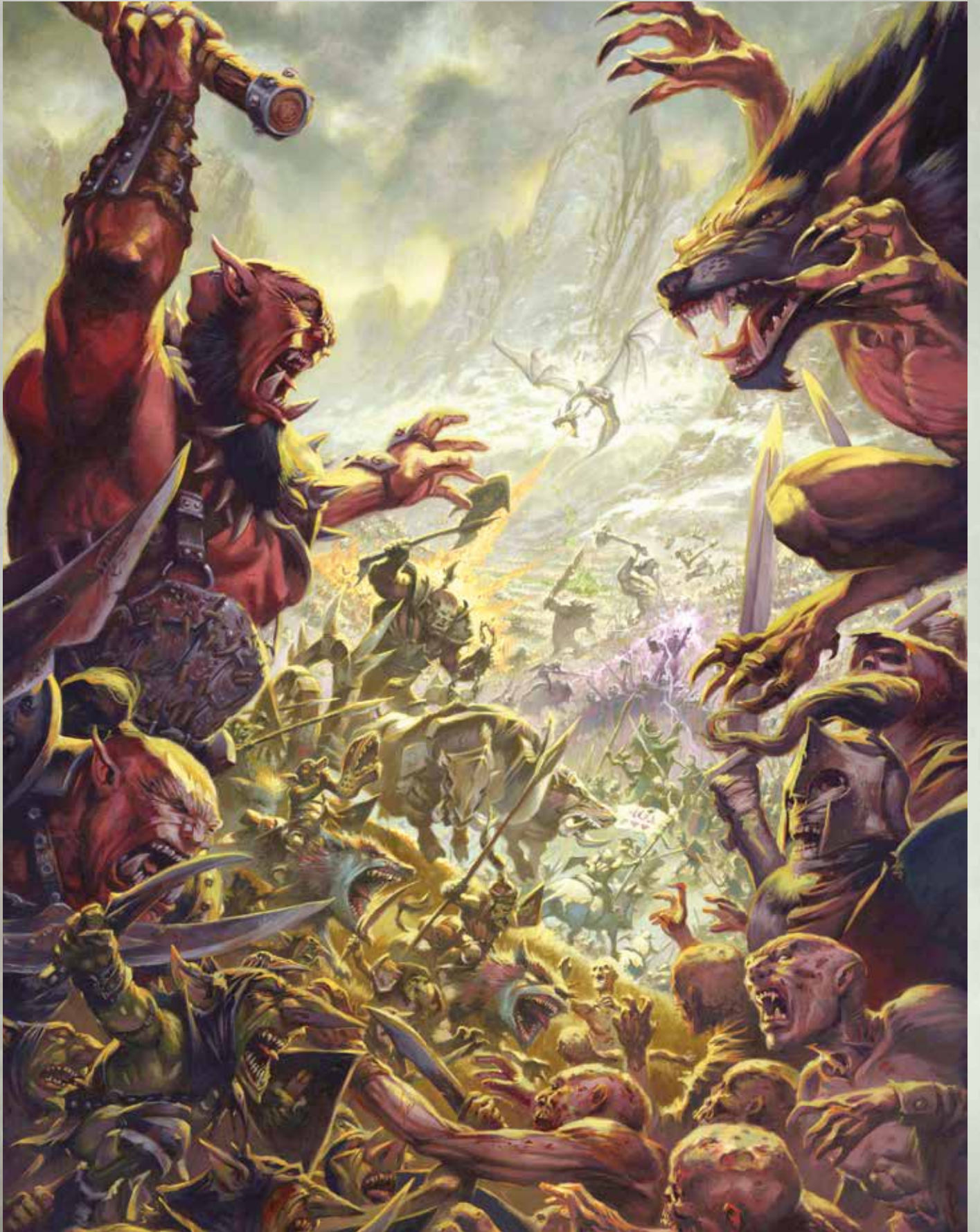
He has fought for all of the noble races, and other, darker masters in his career, but Grokagamok tends to prefer fighting alongside men. Elves he find haughty and aloof, not impressed by his scatological humour and feeling themselves superior even to one who speaks their many dialects as flawlessly as he. Dwarfs he finds personable enough, with their solid belief in the power of promises and their promptness of payment, but he also finds their short stature a challenge, and is left with a persistent back ache whenever he has dealings with them. Even orcs have sometimes hired his services, though they have occasionally found themselves unable or simply unwilling to pay, which has resulted in exchanges which were far more unpleasant for them than Grokagamok. Along the northern shores of the Infant Sea however, there tend to be many rich men who own small countries or city ports and find themselves often in need

of the services of dependable mercenaries to defend their interests. These are Grokagamok's bread and butter, and in recent years he has taken more and more to staying in that area.

Given his enormous length of experience, Grokagamok has acquired a wealth of tactical and strategic expertise which surpasses even that of his fellow ogres. Few indeed are the battlefield tricks which Grokagamok has not learned, perfected and even adapted, and never in the long and storied history of the Granite Fists has the band been defeated, no matter the foe.

The Granite Fists themselves are a curious group - unlike most mercenary bands, and in common with their captain, they rarely go back to the homelands, and never permanently. Nobody ever leaves the Granite Fists - in most bands long-serving members may eventually go forth to make their own fortune as captains, but such is the legend and kudos attached to being a member of the Fists that none can conceive of any captaincy which would surpass it. And anyway, none would dare tread on Grokagamok's patch, which in fairness is wherever he says it is on any given day.

Over the course of his immense career, it is certain that Grokagamok has acquired an enormous personal fortune, but where it has gone and what he intends for it is just as mysterious as for any of his kind. It is true that the Fists have greater expenses than most, living in the finest quarters in whatever part of the world in which they live, and using only the best weapons and equipment, but even this cannot account for the sheer amount of coin which they have earned in their 30 years of work. Some wonder if Grokagamok, in keeping with his unusual nature, is planning on one day retiring and buying one or more of the kingdoms in which he has fought, to spend the rest of his days. Others presume that the ogre captain is just keeping every option open, just as he does on the battlefield. One thing is for sure, whatever his plans, the world will know about them when Grokagamok is good and ready, and not a moment before.





Mercenary Troops

Hulking, massively muscled creatures, Ogres are twice the height of a man, and many times his weight. Young ogres have left home for years of adventure since time immemorial, only returning to their tribe to start a family. The life of a mercenary comes naturally to them.

As each ogre is the survivor of a brutal childhood in the frozen north, they are natural warriors, used to hunting giant beasts and defending their family group from all manner of threats. Once recruited by an ogre captain at the yearly ogre Thing, an ogre brave will be given more advanced weapons training and taught battle drills, turning an already formidable fighter into a deadly, monstrous soldier.

Ogres are extremely strong and so carry heavy swords and shields. His armour in the north is generally of tough hide, but once he joins a mercenary band an ogre will spend his first few months' pay on proper armour of thick iron plates – all provided at a reasonable price by his captain, of course. Some favour huge two-handed weapons they call Orc Cleavers which, when brought down hard on the skull of an orc, generally tend to live up to their name. The veteran mercenaries of Mosfitt's Iron Hammers use their trademark weapons to crush their foes' skulls, making sure they are well and truly dead.

Ogres enjoy the hurly burly of close-quarter fighting a lot, but they are cunning hunters, too, and for a proportion of them missile weapons hold an undeniable draw. Prosaically called Shooters (the ogre language is blunt and to the point), these ogres spend their mercenary days providing ranged support for their paymasters, although the weapons the ogres carry are so large that 'artillery support' is probably a more apposite phrase.

Ogres either carry giant crossbows the size of small ballistae or fearsome blunderbusses that are more akin to short-ranged cannons than any firearm a man might wield. Their crossbows are powerful enough to punch a hole in the thickest armour and knock a man 10 feet backwards when hit (an experience, needless to say, he is unlikely to survive), while their blunderbusses kick out a wall of scrap and shot that will mash anything in front of it to mincemeat, especially when an entire group of boomers open fire at once.

Both these oversized weapons are ordinarily crafted for the ogres by the dwarfs, who are as delighted by the deep pockets of the shooters as the shooters are by the dwarfs' meticulous expertise. Once an ogre shooter feels the irresistible pull of home and hearth and heads back up north, he will take his pride and joy with him, where it will be much admired by his kinfolk, and eventually passed on to his eldest son.

Red Goblins

Many goblins are attracted to the wealth and power of ogre mercenary armies. They become camp followers and attend to all of the most menial of tasks in an ogre encampment. Occasionally, hordes of these creatures are marched to war, their natural stealth and strength in numbers complementing the ogres well.

Goblins are regularly pressed into service by ogre sergeants, who mark them with red clothing or warpaint as a sign of ownership. The so-called 'red goblins' wear this colour with pride and an uncharacteristic loyalty to their masters. While the small creatures are still too cowardly for combat, the fear of their hulking masters is greater than their fear of the enemy. Red goblin Biggits lead their rabble into battle on behalf of their ogre masters. They think they are in charge, but in reality, they wield no more power than the other goblins.

The primary role of red goblins in war is as regiments of archers offering fire support to the ogres' advance. They may also be formed up as warriors or spearmen – known as rabble and sharpsticks, respectively – when the ogres are outnumbered on the field of battle. The more enthusiastic and skilled goblins ride Mawbeasts as cavalry. They fight as scouts ahead of the main force, harassing the enemy with bow fire and reporting their movements back to the ogre warlords.



The ogres are more than encouraging to the goblins who want to go the extra mile in war. Some biggits will go out of their way to capture a giant reptile known as a slasher, and attach a bolt thrower to its back, creating a sort of vicious artillery. Goblins who are obsessed with explosives will secure chariots or wagons and load them up with several barrels of gunpowder. These volatile contraptions – known as blasters – are then propelled toward the enemy using either unfortunate beats of burden or unreliable steam engines. The end result is almost always the same – a spectacular detonation, scores of dead (from either side) and the annihilation of the blaster’s creator – always standing far too close to the explosion.

The Best that Money Can Buy

Ogre warlords are all too happy to charge extra to their clients for the deployment of ‘specialists’. These troops excel in one particular area of war, often coming from a long line of ancestors who have been practising the same discipline for generations. You could say that their skills are invaluable on the battlefield, but an ogre warlord knows that everything has a price.

Ogre hunters are skilled trackers and scouts, adept at fieldcraft and hunting. Ogres live in a harsh and unforgiving landscape of wild beasts and extreme temperatures. In order to survive, the tribes must hunt the behemoths of the Steppe as food or risk becoming food themselves. In times of war, ogre hunters go to battle with the tools of their trade – a plethora of axes, skinning knives and hunting spears. Some might say that it is a shame that one of the strongest heritages of ogrekind can be hired out and monetised so easily, but the ogres themselves see no problem with it.

Siege breakers are ogres who specialise in breaking down castle gates – they carry hugely destructive hammers and protect their advance using giant tower shields. An ogre can only afford such tools if they are veterans of a mercenary company, as each set of armour, weapons and shield uses enough metal to armour a regiment of human knights. Warriors of such skill and wealth are rare, which is a relief to most human lords who hire or battle the ogres. However, rumours persist of an entire company of siege breakers attacking forts within the successor kingdoms, demanding payment lest they tear the structures down. The ogre warlords do nothing to dispel such tales – they are, after all, good for business.

A particularly wealthy ogre warlord may acquire the services of a giant. These massive humanoids are living engines of destruction, each one easily equal to a horde of ogre warriors. Giants themselves are not interested in coin or equipment like the mercenaries they fight alongside; instead, it is the task of the giant’s master to ensure that their immense appetite is sated.

Thunderous Cavalry

How can the irresistible charge of an ogre be made even more powerful? That is a question that ogre generals have tried to answer for centuries. Attempts have been made at creating ogre cavalry, but a beast that can stand the weight (and smell) of an armoured ogre for any length of time is still to be bred. Instead, the ogres have resorted to using chariots of orcish make, either looted or bought from the orcs, together with herds of Gores to pull them. Organised in thundering squadrons, these very heavy chariots are easily capable of shattering the most well-drilled of battlelines.

The success of these charioteers has attracted other ogres to create their own heavy cavalry. Not content with sitting back and blasting away with their noisy, lead belching hand-cannons, some hot-headed boomers ride to battle on chariots, demonstrating immense skill and dexterity as they seamlessly operate two engines of war.

The considerably slower and rarer alternative to the chariots used by ogres is the mighty mammoth. Great beasts of the Steppe, they are herded or even ridden into war by ogres. Their immense bulk and thick hide can withstand almost anything that the enemy can throw at them. In fact, these attacks only serve to enrage the mammoth, making it even more dangerous as it thrashes and charges anything in sight.



Scarred Veterans

Not all ogres return home. Sadly, there are fatalities. Some ogres never feel the mating urge and remain in the south all their days (the Basileans have perfected a means of ensuring this). Others return home, but once their children are sired they yearn for war and plunder, taking up their swords again.

Ogre warlords are the mightiest of these war-loving veterans. They alone of the ogres venture from the south to the north and back over and over, attending the great Things every few years to entice a new generation of ogre braves into a life of warfare in exotic lands. Warlords are usually bigger and stronger than other ogres and all are expert fighters. A rare few display a gift for tactics and strategy and rise to high rank in the militaries of other nations.

For these expatriate ogres, the ways of the southern peoples are too fascinating or just too comfortable to abandon. For other ogres, these warlords hold a strange mix of fascination and repulsion – that they are mighty and rich is beyond doubt, but what right-minded ogre would exchange a comfortably draughty cave for silk bedsheets in a room with a door?

As a result, there are many different war leaders amongst ogrekind. Sergeants often act as the right hands of warlords, keeping the troops in line or even taking temporary command in their stead. The ogres don't engage in politicking or infighting like the kingdoms of men or orcs. For them, the strongest leader is simply the best and should another show themselves to be stronger, most leaders will step down and accede to them. Because of this pragmatic view, leadership disputes are rare among the mercenary companies.

Some sergeants are drawn from particularly successful regiments of boomers. These bombastic individuals are able to yell orders to their troops through the din of their weapons firing, making them effective battlefield commanders.

Ogres are natural hoarders. Their bellicose and mercenary tendencies help satisfy their need to collect trophies and plunder. Of course, the biggest and most aggressive ogres tend to claim the best loot and love to boast of their prizes.

Such bragging can goad those less fortunate into jealous anger. More often, wily ogre warlords have exploited the trait and nominate trusted sergeants to take responsibility for the best of the band's collective treasures, displaying them as an often grizzly, eclectic mix of items, proudly displayed in times of war to rally the troops and make them yearn for more.



Grokagamok

Few ogre mercenary bands are as well known, as feared or indeed as expensive to hire as the Granite Fists. The leader of the Granite Fists is the renowned mercenary Captain Grokagamok, a veteran warrior of whom it is said has more scar tissue than skin, so many battles has he fought over his long years of service. Grokagamok is both a potent warrior and a highly able commander of his fellow ogre mercenaries, a rare combination and one that when complemented by his shrewd business acumen is responsible for his quite staggering rise to fame and fortune.

In common with many long-serving ogre mercenaries, Grokagamok very rarely returns to his homelands, preferring instead to dwell amongst the populations whose rulers employ him. Some have speculated however that he must by now have amassed a sizable horde of gold, yet, if so, none can say what he has done with it. Perhaps it is buried in some mountain cave or hidden in some ancient crypt only Grokagamok knows about.





TRIDENT REALM OF NERITICA



NEMON
placoderm of medu'syth

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THE TRIDENT REALM OF NERITICA



A wind starts in the west, blowing in the mountains and sighing gently onto the plains below, following the paths carved by once-mighty rivers. The wind squalls across the ocean, churning the surface into a boiling and deadly surf that crashes onto the coast of island chains. As the storm unleashes its fury, lands are flooded, ships and lives are lost. It streams over the land, a lofty spectator as it soars over clashing armies and blood-stained fields. It howls through the deserted remains of a city ruined by earthquakes and villages devastated by flooding. The wind, which has travelled so far and seen so much goes almost unnoticed by those below the surface of the waters of the world. The rivers, the seas, the oceans and the lakes – these are the domains of the Neriticans, known to simple land-folk as ‘fishmen’.

Deep beneath the seas of the known world lies the Trident Realm – a triumvirate of glittering underwater kingdoms, ruled by an aquatic race far beyond the ken of land-dwellers. Created during the God War by the Dark Smith, the Neriticans are as capricious as the vast oceans that surround them, in parts gentle and nurturing, in others spiteful and full of wrath.

The great Kyron was friend to all beasts of the land, air and sea. When his dark side helped reform the beasts of the earth and sky, the Dark Smith had also turned his cruelty on those of the sea. Hideous magic and dark powers roiled the waters of the world and man and beast were fused in terrible pain. When the Lost were rescued by Brave Kyron, those of the sea fled to the dark depths of the oceans, sent away by their father to escape his brother’s evil curse. The beings that were now neither of land nor sea but a strange amalgam of both, hid themselves away in terror, not understanding what had become of them. Over the centuries that followed, the fishmen slowly, cautiously, emerged from their submarine retreat and began to explore their new world and identity. Of the races on the land, the fishmen identified most with their fellow sufferers, the beastmen. Like them, the fishmen began to fracture into tribes and clans, sometimes divided by type, sometimes by necessity. They too watched the Great Hunt in the skies as Kyron stalked his wicked self across the stars by night and day. But the fishmen felt the effects of the chase more keenly as the ocean tides responded to the wandering gods.

As with many races, the fishmen’s influence on the world since has ebbed and flowed. They are fiercely territorial and have clashed and sided with many land dwelling peoples, especially when their watery domain is encroached upon by the vile, filthy cities that are built on coasts and rivers. Their relative isolation and remoteness has given them a certain aloofness to the general woes and conflicts of the other races, but when their anger is roused, few can stand in the way of the hordes that pour forth from the ocean waters. They still feel the call in their hearts to protect the Mother world from the darkness from which they were rescued and this more than anything is what drives them to arms and to venture onto the land.





THE NERITICAN PEOPLE

If a land-dweller was able to visit the undersea realms of Neritica, they would find a diverse population of creatures, from humanoid sea-folk to all manner of lesser races, aquatic beasts of burden, and ferocious monsters. Though all of these creatures would seem strange to the average mortal, scholars have recorded four distinct species of sentient 'fishman', for want of a better word, all of whom are naturally suited to certain tasks, be it at war and at home.



Naiads

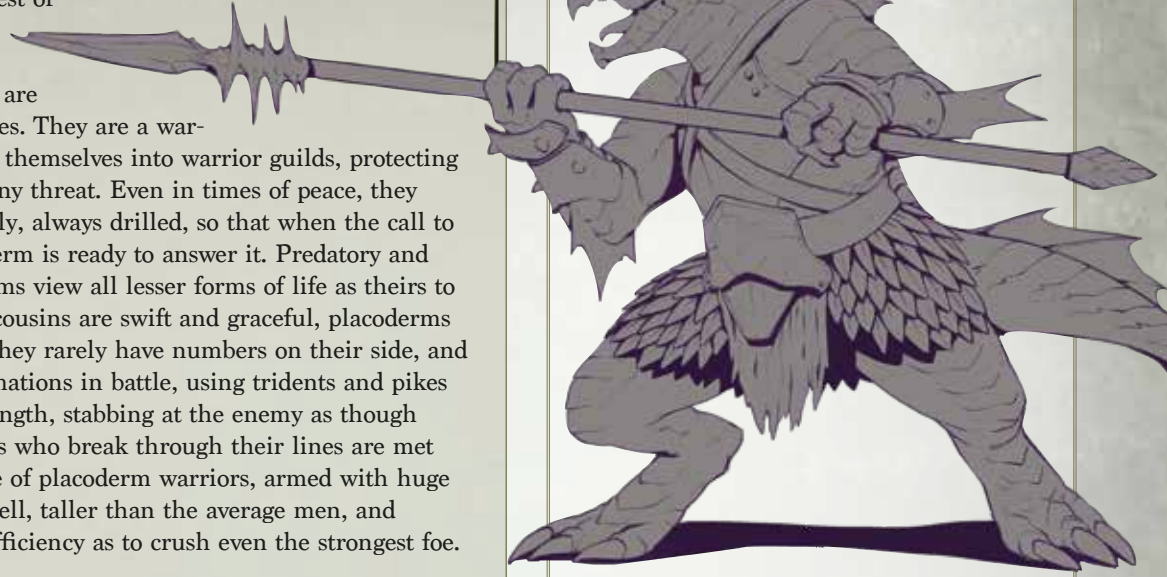
The most common of the Neriticans to be seen above the surface are the naiads. These lithe and graceful female warriors are often seen fighting alongside the armies of the Mother herself and, far more rarely, with some human realms lucky enough to acquire their services. Naiads have a fell reputation amongst Pannithor's sailors, for they have been known to use their strangely alluring forms to attract ships onto jagged rocks, and drag men to their doom. They are spiteful, fickle, and ferocious, fighting with a skill to rival the elven races. As long as they are near to water - whether a babbling spring or the open ocean - they are also incredibly resolute, drawing energy from the water's flow to heal even the most grievous wounds. Naiads are ingenious, too, harnessing the great sea-monsters known as Wyrms to carry them into battle, and making use of advanced weaponry, such as harpoon launchers. Long used by the land-dwellers to hunt aquatic creatures, the use of these weapons is an irony that brings the naiads great joy.

THE TRIDENT REALM OF NERITICA



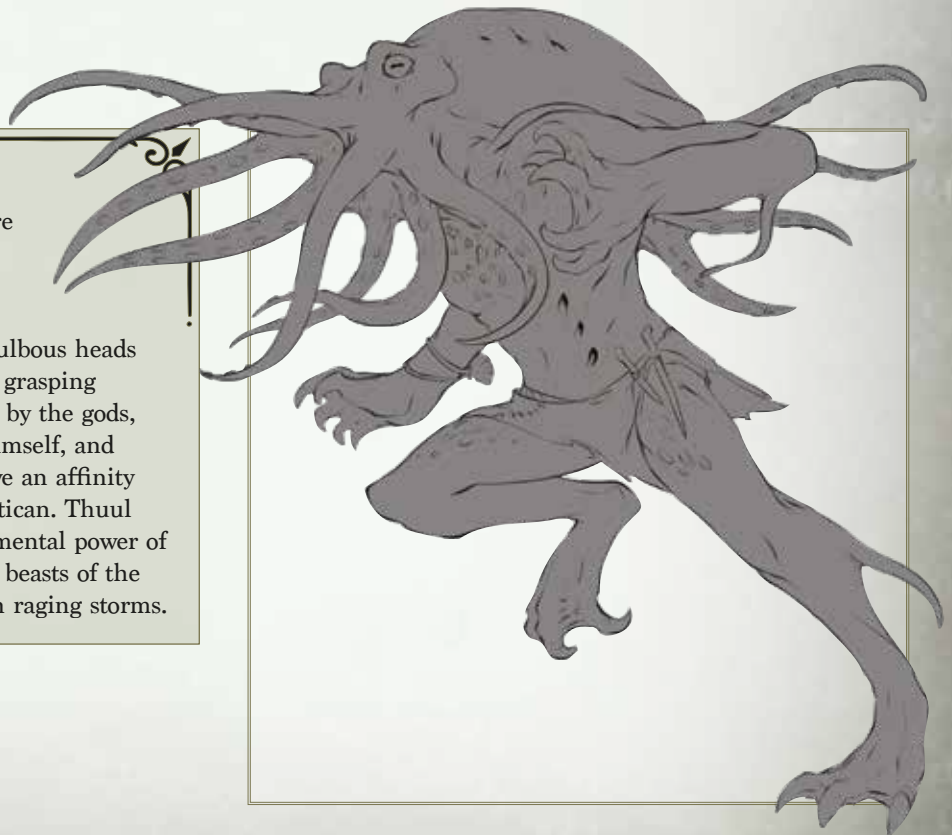
Placoderms

Placoderms are the toughest of the Neriticans, being large and strong, and plated in thick scales that are almost impervious to blades. They are a war-like species, who organise themselves into warrior guilds, protecting the Trident Realm from any threat. Even in times of peace, they organise patrols relentlessly, always drilled, so that when the call to arms comes, every placoderm is ready to answer it. Predatory and bloodthirsty, the placoderms view all lesser forms of life as theirs to hunt. Where their naiad cousins are swift and graceful, placoderms are steadfast and hardy. They rarely have numbers on their side, and so tend to adopt solid formations in battle, using tridents and pikes to keep the foe at arm's length, stabbing at the enemy as though from hell's heart. Enemies who break through their lines are met only with the second wave of placoderm warriors, armed with huge axes of stone and thick shell, taller than the average men, and wielded with such grim efficiency as to crush even the strongest foe.



Thuul

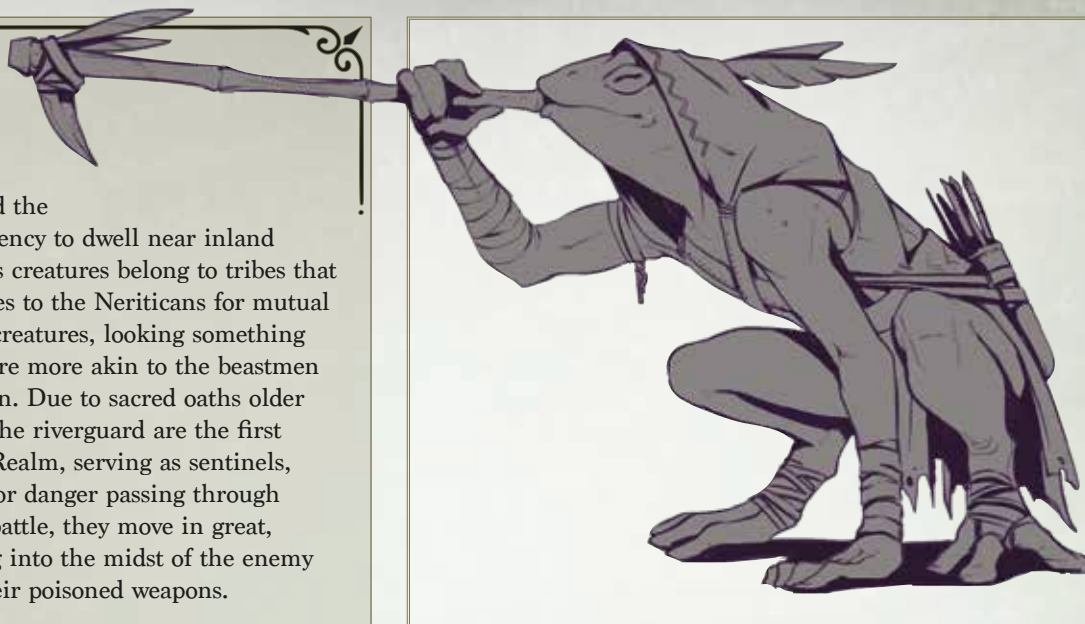
Perhaps the strangest of the Neriticans are the thuul. These creatures are a bizarre mix of halfling and octopus. Their skin is smooth and often purplish in hue, their bodies squat and broad, and their bulbous heads terminate at mouths surrounded by long, grasping tentacles. Some whisper they are touched by the gods, being fashioned in the image of Kyron himself, and this may well be true, for their elders have an affinity for magic far greater than any other Neritican. Thuul sorcerers are naturally attuned to the elemental power of water, harnessing it to summon the great beasts of the ocean to war, and scupper enemy fleets in raging storms.





Riverguard

The fourth race often encountered by land-dwellers are not true Neriticans at all. Dubbed the riverguard for their tendency to dwell near inland waters, these amphibious creatures belong to tribes that long ago allied themselves to the Neriticans for mutual benefit. They are rangy creatures, looking something like frogs, and perhaps are more akin to the beastmen of the Herd than fishmen. Due to sacred oaths older than most civilisations, the riverguard are the first defence for the Trident Realm, serving as sentinels, and carefully watching for danger passing through rivers and estuaries. In battle, they move in great, bounding leaps, crashing into the midst of the enemy before attacking with their poisoned weapons.



The Trident Kings

There is, however, a fifth major species, though it has rarely been encountered, and most land-folk would not recognise it even if they saw one. These massive Neriticans are the Trident Kings, and to the best of anyone's knowledge there are only three in existence at any one time – each a ruler of one of the kingdoms of the Trident Realm. No one knows for sure the identity of the Trident Kings, as they always wear one of the three fabled Masks of Medusa, from which they draw godlike power. They are widely believed to be immortal, although it is more likely that, as a Trident King dies, the mask is gifted to his replacement, who gains some portion of the knowledge, skill and strength of all the previous wearers. Of course, who exactly these replacements are, and where they come from, is anyone's guess. They certainly do not live amongst the royal families of the naiads, placoderms and thuul.

A few sainted scholars of Euhedral and from far-flung Cerulea claim to have studied fragments of certain texts, written upon scrolls of whale-hide in tongues almost lost to knowledge. It is thought that the present Neriticans have no written language, but instead retain racial memories of their history, lore and spirituality from their birthing – so who wrote these scraps is still a mystery. These blasphemous writings speak of the gods themselves – soul-fragments of divinity, cast to the oceans at the culmination of the God War, and lost for millennia until finally they might be claimed by a worthy avatar, and the gods might dwell amongst mortals once more. It is said that when the stars are right, and the Trident Realm is in great need, a new champion emerges from the deepest part of the sea – one of the great, forbidden rents in the ocean floor, where it is believed the Neriticans' gods slumber. Some might call these rents 'chasms'; others might well use the word 'abyss'...

THE TRIDENT REALM OF NERITICA





THE THREE KINGDOMS

Deep beneath the surface of the oceans, there currently exist three major kingdoms, each ruled by a near-mythical Trident King. The kingdoms were born from the forced breakup of a former, larger empire when the war against Winter ended and the Infant Sea was created. This catastrophic event had far reaching consequences above and below the surface. The three new kingdoms may bicker and squabble amongst themselves, but they have a unity of sorts, and together form the Trident Realm. The exact location and range of the kingdoms seems fluid and neigh on impossible for any land loving creature to fathom – in fact many confused attempts are a result of contradictory evidence. The Neriticans are not in any rush to correct any wayward assumptions however.



Medu'Syth

The largest and most powerful of the kingdoms is Medu'Syth. This vast realm of reef-cities and cave-dwellings covers many hundreds of leagues of ocean floor beneath the Endless Sea, sprawling across Pannithor's equator and culminating in the great undersea city of Yth'Medu, with its labyrinthine mazes of coral, sunken elven ruins, and carved rock-temples. If any of the fishmen's territories can be said to be cosmopolitan, it would be Yth'Medu. Here large domes of magical energy create pockets of air so that friends of the riverguard may take respite from the salty sea, and even emissaries from the Brokenwall Islands may visit to treat with the ruling family. None should ever mistake the hospitality of the Sythians for weakness, however, for any outsider who has laid eyes on the glories of Yth'Medu cannot have failed to notice the living forts of the placoderm army, and the ceaseless patrols of those ferocious warriors.

Myrrhimm

The kingdom of Myrrhimm occupies the space nearest the Great Deep – that impossibly deep trench that is so venerated by the Neriticans. Watchtowers line either side of the trench, their bioluminescent beacons pulsating should any trespasser draw near. Of course, given that such trespass usually results in some hulking depth horror eternal bursting from the long dark in defence of the trench, such trespass is rare indeed. The city of Myrr'Uulis is the capital of Myrrhimm, and its many iridescent towers shimmer like beacons in the darkness to pilgrims from across the Trident Realm. Myrr'Uulis is home to the elders of the thuul, whose priests are inducted into the many mysteries of the Great Deep from the moment they breach their egg-sacs. This vast temple-city is protected by the mysterious gigas – large, powerful crustaceans, who scuttle endlessly around the sea bed, beady eyes vigilant for intruders to this most sacred realm. The farthest reaches of Myrrhimm stretch into the icy waters of the north and Myrrhimm's king has been rumoured to have dealings with the fledgling Northern Alliance both above and below the ice. Whether Myrrhimm itself extends similarly to the southern ice cap remains a mystery.

Ilythish

The farthest-flung kingdom is Ilythish, home to the greatest population of naiads in the Trident Realm. Ostensibly the smallest of the realms, it is also the most beautiful, with verdant fields of aquatic flora, resplendent reefs and bioluminescent fauna providing its cities and villages with unrivalled splendour. The naiads themselves are often seen as vain and self-absorbed, although in truth they live long, peaceful lives, which they fill with light and laughter. Yet they harbour a dark secret: naiads have a thirst for killing and cruelty that goes beyond the simple barbarism of their placoderm kin. They go to great lengths to ensnare victims, body and soul, often sending parties to the surface to seduce sailors, fishermen and coastal villagers, before dragging them back to Ilythish. If one were to look closely at the settlements of naiads, they would find that the coral grows amongst mountains of glittering treasure, hulks of human ships, and the skeletal remains of mortals, picked clean by swarms of carnivorous fish.

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THE NERITICANS AT WAR

The Neriticans' major allies are, predictably, those of the Forces of Nature and the beastmen of the Herd with whom they share a common history and empathy. The armies of the fishmen will march to war whenever they feel threatened or the natural balance of the world is endangered. So relentless are they in defence of the natural order that even orcs have learned to be wary of water, lest some great beast drags them to a watery grave.

Neriticans excel at hit-and-run attacks, usually emerging from lakes and estuaries with great rapidity, and in great number, with a fury that only nature can conjure. Should a foe attempt to engage the Neriticans upon the seashore, they will quickly count the cost of their mistake, for that is where the fishmen's home advantage becomes overwhelming. Not only do the Neriticans draw great strength from the salty spray of the ocean, but they can also summon forth the greatest monsters of the deep to aid them in battle, from krakens and wyrms to knuckers and depth horrors. The sorcerer-priests of the thuul begin their sibilant, ululating chants, summoning forth great storms to pummel the enemy, as more and more horrific beasts drag themselves from the surf. Elementals and devilish nokken materialise within the waves, and propel themselves at the enemy with unrivalled spite and fury.

This harnessing of the sea's elemental power can sometimes result in the creation of a truly terrible being - the coral giant. Knitted together from the living creatures of the sea, these massive beasts drag themselves to the shore, gathering strength and regenerating even the most grievous wounds as they fight. Such an embodiment of nature's wrath has rarely been seen on Pannithor, but typifies the ferocity and resolve of the Neriticans.

The ability of the Neriticans is not limited to their proximity to water, although canny generals quickly learn that they are more dangerous when water is abundant. Most Neriticans have lungs as well as gills, and can march as well as any man. Eventually, however, they do have to return to their aquatic homes, and so Neriticans rarely have any interest in holding objectives or fortifying positions. They attack swiftly and decisively, sacking any settlement or stronghold that they see as a threat, before retreating back whence they came. The coordination and single-mindedness of the Neriticans is so alien to most mortal commanders that they are often caught on the backfoot - Neriticans will always attack rather than defend, always sally forth rather than be besieged, and always fight to the bitter end rather than allow any to taint their natural habitats.

When the winds of war blow strong and sweep across the land, they stir the waters of the world and nervous eyes keep watch of the rising tide. Who knows what will emerge from the depths?



Neritican Military

The bulk of the Trident Realm's armies are naiads. Swift, lithe and aggressive, they make natural warriors. Over the centuries, the Neriticans have developed a well-organised and well-drilled military. This is not only to fight off the larger creatures that live in the depths of the world's oceans, but also to combat the many raiders and armies that enter their ocean realm.

Each naiad wears sculpted armour of rust-free metals or bone, which resemble the scales and fins of fish. The skilled design of this armour streamlines them underwater, allowing their gills to breathe. It also provides superb protection, equivalent to the plate armour worn by other races.

Naiad weapons are made from the same materials as their armour, but their forms mimic the weapons of the sea-faring invaders they battle so often. Tridents and rapiers are favoured, alongside barbed nets, by warriors known as Ensnarers. They use the nets to entangle and pin down their foes before impaling them on their tridents.

Those who favour ranged combat carry small harpoon launchers and are known as Heartpiercers. They can use these weapons with uncanny accuracy, incapacitating or outright killing enemy infantry and monsters. Many flying creatures have been brought down by harpoons tearing their wings to shreds. These naiads are supported by an artillery piece – the Leviathan's Bane – which fires much larger harpoons designed for bringing down large, armoured targets. It was one of these weapons that dealt the killing blow to the winged Abyssal Archfiend Ara'koth the Sunderer during the war with the Abyss, piercing his black iron armour to impale his heart.

Although the Neriticans don't have cavalry in a traditional sense, they are capable of riding great sea wyrms into battle. These creatures are not amphibious like their masters and so must be constantly supported by nearby Aquamages to survive and fight. The time they can stay on land is therefore limited, meaning that they must be used quickly and aggressively in battle. This suits the naturally aggressive Neritican commanders perfectly.

It takes a strong will to lead the vicious naiads to war, and a keen mind to lead them to victory. The Naiad Centurions possess both, having waged war for at least a century before assuming command. Most prefer to fight on foot along the battlelines of Ensnarers, but a few belligerent centurions will take a sea wyrm as their mount – seizing the honour of leading the first charges into the foe. These peerless warriors are supported by Envoys – fiercely loyal messengers who travel between the battle lines, vanguard forces and the

Trident Realm itself to relay reports and commands. Without this strong network of communication, the Neriticans would be unable to coordinate the defence of their borders.

Naiads train for decades to fight in strictly drilled regiments and companies, dedicating all of their time to practice and patrols. Each kingdom places great importance on their armies, with more recruits joining year on year. This constant military growth causes worry among the Neriticans' few allies, who wonder if they may one day become the Trident Realm's next target.

Riverguard

The Riverguard are the ever watchful amphibian sentinels of the Trident Realm. Their ability to leap beyond enemy lines and cause panic with their poisonous attacks is much prized by their Neritican commanders. Fighting in small skirmishing groups known as 'clutches', these lithe warriors favour javelins as their weapons, attacking their foes at range before disengaging and retreating back into cover. Treeleaper clutches prefer to strike the enemy in close combat with heavy two-handed tridents, literally leaping onto enemy warriors to deal a final, heavy blow.

When the rivers under the protection of the Trident Realm are encroached upon by humans, dwarfs or elves, the Riverguard deploy their heavy cavalry – the Dambusters. These giant amphibians are tremendously strong, able to leap over dam walls and lay waste to these constructions and their defenders with ease. It takes fast reflexes and intuition to fight atop these mounts, so only the elite of the Riverguard can be found in Dambuster clutches.

The skilled leaders of the Riverguard are known as Sentinels. They are given responsibility for whole river basins or lake systems. It is their duty to relay all news to their Neritican superiors, and they are regularly visited by the royal envoys of the Trident Realm in order to make their reports. Sentinels are regularly drawn from the clutches of the Dambusters, some retaining their massive mounts and leading whole armies of the Trident Realm to war.

Thuul

The Thuul are some of the Trident Realm's most bizarre inhabitants. These ferocious creatures are a bizarre blend of halfling and octopus. These betentacled and slippery fiends are aggressive and surprisingly powerful given their size. Only a fool would underestimate them, and there are the bodies of many such fools feeding the things that lurk in the depths. Many Thuul are also able to attune themselves to, and channel, the currents of raw magic that flow both above and below the waves, making them natural mages.

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Outwardly, the Thuul don't appear to be as civilised as the rest of the Trident Realm. These small, tribal creatures are possessed of a keen intellect, however, and their grasp of magic is almost unmatched within the three kingdoms. It was the Thuul aquamages who were entrusted by the Green Lady with the task of flooding the Abyss, ten years ago. They succeeded in this great feat, although many lost their lives in the process. The true power of these beings and what they are capable of remains to be seen.

Placoderms

Fishmen warriors covered in tough, natural scale mail, Placoderms are stoic defenders, able to hold back whole bodies of troops single-handedly. These indomitable warriors are the tough core of the Neritican battle line, fighting relentlessly with long spears or pikes to hold back the foe. These weapons have proven effective against both the large, aquatic monsters that they fight beneath the waves and the massed cavalry charges used by their foes on dry land.

Although they are an asset to any Neritican army, Placoderms are most commonly found with the three kingdoms themselves. They are diligent guardians, standing watch over the most important areas and individuals with absolute loyalty. What inspires such dedication is known only to the Placoderms themselves, but their warrior guilds have served the Trident Realm since its inception.

Creatures of the Deep

Such is the mastery of the Trident Realm's enigmatic leaders – the Trident Kings – that they can hold sway over the many creatures of the deep oceans. When the Neriticans march to war, they do so alongside the creatures of the depths who vary almost endlessly in size and form. These beings are mostly aquatic and so need to be sustained by the same water magic that empowers the Naiad Wyrmmriders, but the destruction they wreak is well worth the efforts to bring them to the field of battle.

The smallest and most common of these are called tidal swarms. A collection of crabs, sea snakes and other small creatures, they are an unintentional side effect of the larger beings brought onto land – dragged up alongside them when they come ashore. Still controlled by the will of the Trident Kings, they fight ahead of the Neritican battle lines, harassing, clawing, stinging and biting enemy warriors en masse as a literal living tide.

Gigas are large, slow, crab-like creatures. The deadly pincer-like claws of these huge crustaceans can crush and slice through even the thickest plate armour while their own natural protection makes them a fearsome foe. These are commonly used as defensive screens by Neritican commanders, their heavy shells providing cover for more lightly armoured troops.

Depth Horrors are terrifying to behold. Ugly creatures that dwell at the bottom of the seas, they live at depths devoid of all light. When summoned to fight for the Trident Realm, these ugly brutes haul themselves from their watery lairs to delight in the fresh meat on offer in the strange, dry world above. Depth Horrors are weaker in direct sunlight, cowering back from it when they fight on the surface. The Mythicans will summon dark storm clouds to cover these creatures in battle, blocking out the sun to allow them to see and fight unhindered. On the darkest of days, the alpha beasts will emerge – the Eternals. Stronger and older than their kin, it is rumoured that these hideous beings are immortal, sleeping away the aeons far beneath the waves, only emerging once or twice a century to feed.

Knuckers are great water wyrms, larger and more vicious than the sea wyrms of the naiads. Their glittering scales provide them with a natural camouflage, allowing them to slither unseen as they hunt their quarry. When the moment is right, they will attack, striking their prey at lightning speed with unerring accuracy. Most are killed outright by this attack, but a few are left stunned and alive. Either way, the ferocious Knucker will quickly devour their prey whole before slithering back into the shadows to hunt once more.

When the magic of the sea runs wild, it may result in the summoning of a Coral Giant. These immense beings are an amalgamation of many different sea creatures – a huge, living embodiment of the ocean and its might. An eerily silent giant, its massive fists smash through bone, flesh and armour alike, the creature only pausing to regenerate any damage it has suffered before resuming its onslaught. When every foe has been reduced to a flattened mess, the Coral Giant will lumber back into the ocean, there to remain inert until it is called upon once more.

Siren

The Siren was once a Naiad Stalker who rescued a half-elf sailor from a shipwreck off the treacherous eastern coastline of the Forsaken Isles. Against all odds, the two fell deeply in love. When her unlikely lover was murdered by a Twilight Kin slaver's crew, the Siren's vengeance was terrible. Since that day she has lived with an unfathomable grief, and her haunting song as she pines for a love returned ripples across the ocean, luring unfortunates to their eventual doom when they do not live up to her warped and broken dreams.



Trident Kings

There are only three Trident Kings at any one time. Each rules one of the three kingdoms of the Trident Realm from behind the scenes, operating through envoys and representatives and very rarely appearing in public. Because of this, some scholars on dry land don't believe that they exist at all. Those who have witnessed these masked individuals in battle know that they are very real. Taller than any of the other Neriticans, resplendent in royal armour, riding atop an elaborate chariot pulled by four sea wyrms, the absolute authority and power of these beings is plain to see. They command their forces without a word, sending warriors to their deaths with cold and calculated fury. Fortunately for the enemies of the Trident Realm, the Trident Kings enter battle extremely rarely, with years or decades passing between each encounter, although there are unreliable accounts that claim that three such individuals fought in the Battle for the Frozen Sea only a decade ago.

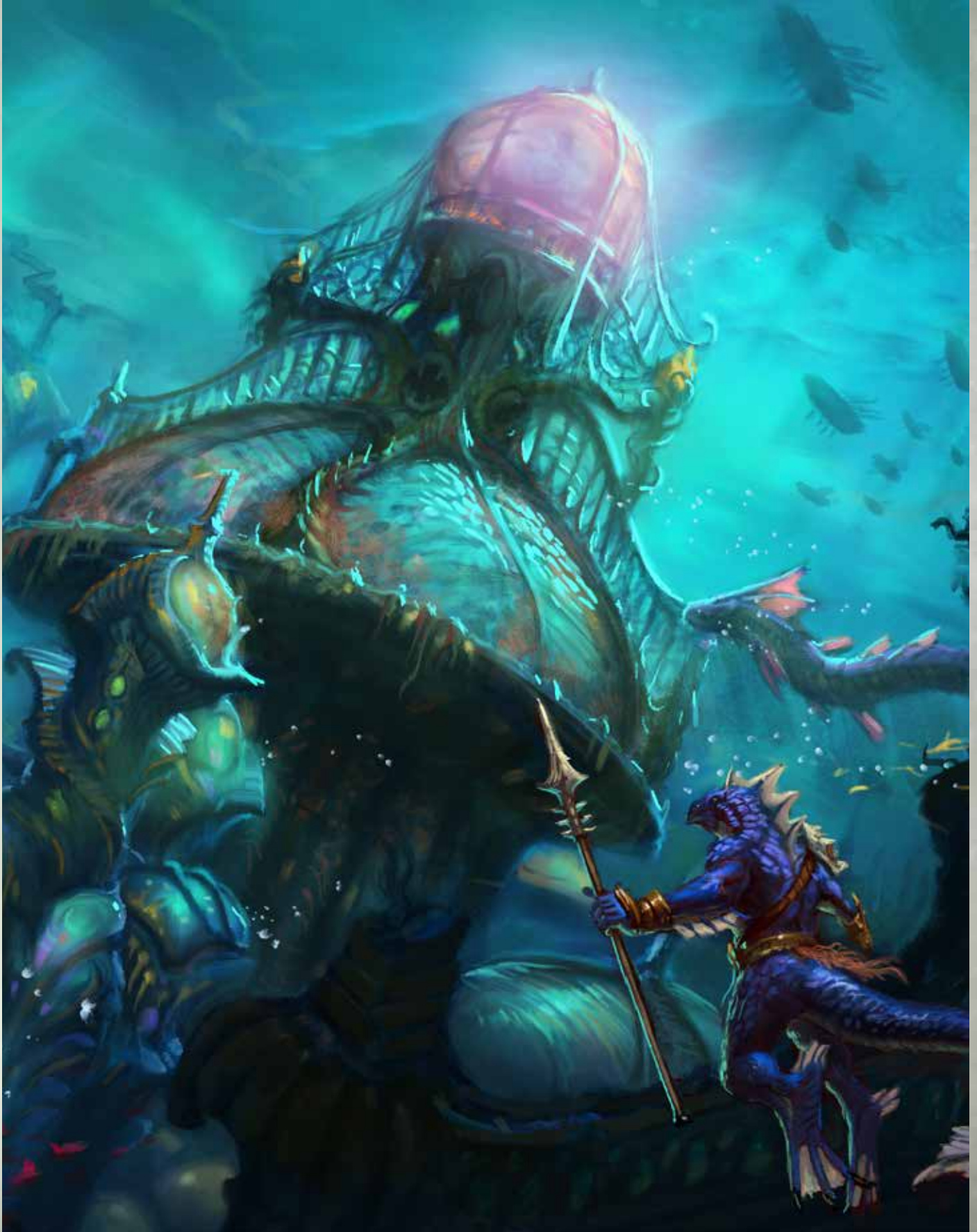
Eckter, Placoderm Defender

Eckter has spent time both on land and in the watery kingdoms of the Trident Realm. For a time, he fought alongside the Forces of Nature against the abominable orcs that stalked the land. Before he returned to the sea, he pledged that if the Green Lady should ever need his services again, he would gladly provide his spear. Ten years ago, the demonic forces of the Abyss invaded like never before, bringing all of the dark forces of the world along with them. It was time for Eckter to honour his pledge.

In the years following the conflict, Eckter has found his services in demand the world over. Fighting for both the armies of the Trident Realm and the Green Lady, he has become something of a legend among the other races. This is not only for his skills, but also for the ancient horn he sounds in times of peril – the Krakenmaw. This magical artefact can summon an ethereal tidal wave containing the ghostly visage of a kraken.



THE TRIDENT REALM OF NERITICA



ABYSSAL DWARVES



*KARAZ, BLACKSOUL CHAMPION
THE LEGIONS OF DIEW*

ABYSSAL DWARFS



From the distant lands of the north, the lost kin of King Golloch's folk plot and scheme within their fire-lit halls. Twisted almost beyond recognition, the Abyssal Dwarfs are driven by a thirst for power and wealth that surpasses mortal concepts of desire – and driven by these lusts they plan a campaign for world domination.

Abyssal Dwarfs are a breed unto themselves, every bit as strong, squat and hardy as their southern counterparts, but often grotesque and pale of features, twisted of body and vicious of temperament. The flinty, intelligent eyes of their cousins have been replaced by dark gimlets which stare at the world with undisguised loathing. They are more portly than other dwarfs, for their reliance on slaves has led them to a lifestyle of excess and slovenliness. Despite this, the Abyssal Dwarfs have lost none of their strength, and their thick fingers are still as dextrous, making them just as skilful in metalworking as other dwarfs – a skill that is used frequently to display an individual's personal wealth. Each Abyssal Dwarf has a longing for wealth and power that is a yawning chasm in their very souls – a chasm that can never be filled. Their unrestrained avarice makes them more ostentatious than their unsullied dwarf-kin, adorning themselves in finery, elaborate armour and jewels.

The dwarfs of Pannithor have long battled with their gold-lust – a love of riches that borders on obsession. Each dwarf knows that they must conquer this extreme avarice, or risk losing their grip on the very reason, honour and doughtiness for which their race is duly famed. It is difficult for other races to imagine the nobility with which the dwarfs carry this curse – and it is indeed a curse, unleashed upon this ancient people during the God War, by the Father of Lies.

When the good peoples of the world forged together to face the Dark Gods, the dwarfs were there, as implacable and stalwart as they are today. But the Father of Lies, great and powerful among his dark kin, espied the potential for corruption within the dwarfen heart, that their love of all things precious could be twisted as the Dark Ones twist every beautiful thing. To this end, the Father of Lies planted a seed within the dwarfs that could tip their love of gold into a secret, burning need; the urge to collect personal riches above all other considerations. If a dwarf succumbs to these urges, they lose all control; they will covet each other's wealth, take it any

way possible, and perhaps perform the most unspeakable act known to dwarfkind: murder. When this happens the Father of Lies looks up from whatever hell pit he has been banished to and smiles, for at this final step another dwarf has been lost to the Abyss.

The longer a dwarf spends in close proximity to the Abyss, the more twisted they become. It is a small blessing for the wider world that Abyssal Dwarfs are slow to reproduce. Indeed, many scholars believe that proximity to the Abyss means that Abyssal Dwarfs cannot be born naturally at all. Rather, their ranks are swelled by the corruption of renegade dwarfs migrating to Tragar from the southern holds. Some believe that the Abyssal Dwarfs are so imbued by demonic magic that they are effectively immortal, cursed to face an eternity of treachery and wickedness. Whatever the truth, it is a fact that any Abyssal Dwarf army will see the dwarfs within it outnumbered by the slaves that they drive before them and the magical constructs they conjure to fight alongside them, sometimes greatly so.





TRAGAR

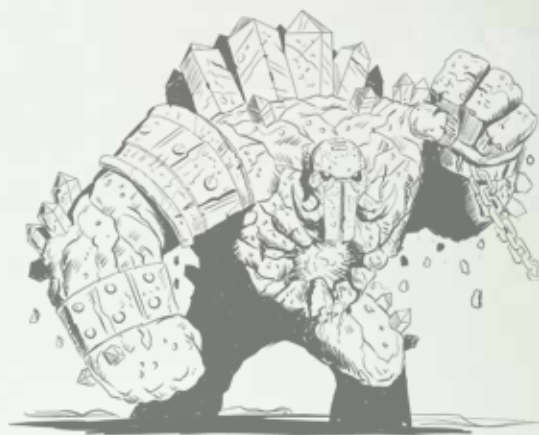
The fate of the northern dwarfs who had established mining communities around the Abyss went undiscovered for centuries. Drawn there by the promise of riches, these once noble-hearted creatures were twisted by the dark whispers of the Father of Lies. Now their hellish industries surround the Abyss. Mines and settlements cling to the precipice above the vast, smoke-belching chasm. Their twin temple-cities loom large at either end – Zarak and Deiw – the ancient dwarf words for power and pain. These towering sentinel-mountains are almost maddening in their scale, wrought of stone, iron and brass, and adorned with leering, blasphemous carvings. The cities are constantly expanding as the Abyssal Dwarfs increase their domain, building ever higher, and burrowing ever deeper until the warping power of the Abyss seeps through the rock and makes hellish dens in the deepest chambers. Surrounding the twin cities – almost dwarfed by them – are mountains and foothills that are home to Orcs, Giants and Trolls. Atop the highest spires, Dragonspawn swoop and soar on thermals rising from the Abyss, while mutated Basilisks slither in the lava-rivers that cascade from the cities' vast forges into the lower reaches of the hellpit below.

The Abyssal Dwarfs call this kingdom Tragar, and all fear it. It is a dangerous realm, built upon slavery and treachery, where a knife in the dark is every bit as commonplace as open war. Within the sprawling twin cities, districts are formed around one of many temple-bastions, each with its own workshops, barracks, temples, centres of commerce, guilds and keeps; and each ruled over by an Overmaster or Iron-caster, who must fight every day to gain influence, and defend himself from the jealous ambition of his rivals.

The smoke of the Abyss chokes the air, the ruddy light of the fires in its depths make it impossible to tell if it is night or day. The air rings with the sounds of the Abyssal Dwarfs' industries and the screams of their slaves. Thousands are sacrificed daily, pushed from the Gift-Piers of Zarak and Deiw, long stone arches that end high above the broil of the pit; all for the greater glory of Oskan and his twenty-six Abyssal Lords. The slave-pits burn with industry, fierce and strong, their baleful light casting malevolent shadows that flicker and chase across the sheer rock sides. Within this warren of chasms, mines, tunnels and caverns, the screams of the slaves echo through the endless night as the rest of their fleeting lives are played out in a never-ending nightmare of misery, brutality and pain.

Many of these wretches are from far off lands, seized by roaming slave gangs and raiders, or are unlucky prisoners from battlefields far from the Abyss. Unlucky that they survived the fighting only to find a fate worse than death. Many more are born into slavery. Some are bred for it.

The Abyssal Dwarfs employ each race of slaves for the tasks they are most suited for: dwarfs are excellent miners and smiths, elves make amusing playthings, humans can be put to work on the most gruelling tasks, and goblins are perfect house servants. Orcs, however, have one clear area where they excel above all others – war. Their great strength and brutal ferocity are an asset to any army, and the Abyssal Dwarfs push vast hordes of the brutes towards the enemy before committing their own troops. Orcs are employed both as living shields and line-breakers – two tasks at which the brutish creatures excel. It matters little to the slavers if hundreds of orcs are slain in the process – there are always more to replace them.



Abyssal Dwarf society operates on the basis of individual greed and lust for wealth, explaining its fluid and ever-changing nature, as various individuals rise to prominence, dominating their fellows and expanding their own tiny spaces into minor empires within Tragar before they topple once more. Though the twin cities thrive, their rulership is in a state of constant flux, with various powerful individuals making and breaking alliances as they all vie for 'rightful' rulership of their people. Ostensibly, the commanders of Tragar's temple-bastions owe fealty to the Overking, but in reality even this lauded individual has a precarious grip over his people. The current Overking is Zerkziz, who daily navigates the many avenues of politicking, diplomacy and displays of strength and cruelty in order to keep the lords of his land on side. Zerkziz has grown fat within his palace, and must be carried everywhere upon a palanquin hoisted by slaves. Though his martial prowess has long failed him, the Overking's mind has lost none of its cunning and steel. Zerkziz dispatches his armies to war regularly, knowing that he must never let his strength be questioned, and secretly hoping that any pretenders to his throne might be slain in battle.



So it is that the greatest, most cruel and wealthy of the Abyssal Dwarfs often lead their armies into battle personally, knowing that gaining fame on the battlefield is a sure-fire way of rising through the ranks of Abyssal Dwarf nobility. Mighty Overmasters, armed with ensorcelled weaponry and covered in the most impenetrable obsidian armour, bellow orders to their warriors. Mysterious Iron-casters unleash the twisted fire-magic of Ariagful, the evil Queen of the Black Flame, and summon her abyssal servants to the field to do their bidding alongside the monstrous half-breeds and other strange war-engines that they have created. This pairing of sorcerous Iron-caster and martial Overmaster is both the secret of the Abyssal Dwarfs' success, and their greatest impediment. The balance of power between these two ruling factions rests on a blade-edge, and they are as like to turn on each other as to unite.

Occasionally, a leader will rise of such power and magnificence that he is able to unify the Abyssal Dwarfs as a race, and they will march forth to make war on the other civilised peoples of the world, driving their armies of slaves before them and supported by magical constructs and wicked creatures of darkness. The last time the Abyssal Dwarfs marched in unison, it was under the command of the Overking himself, aided by the legions of the now dead Supreme Iron-caster, Arhak Soulbinder. Arhak had discovered the location of the lost dwarf hold of Hirath Dur, reputed to be the location of the fabled Quartz Sceptre, capable of subduing even the most resolute will, making its bearer capable of ruling the world. The War of the Quartz Sceptre brought Zerkziz and Arhak into conflict with the Free Dwarfs, led by the Berserker Lord Sveri Egilax, king of Cwl Gen. A bitter campaign that almost saw the Free Dwarfs wiped from the face of Pannithor culminated at the Battle Among the Crags. Arhak Soulbinder almost claimed the sceptre for his own, and would have succeeded had Egilax not led a daring assault on the Overking himself. Facing death at last, Zerkziz sounded the retreat, and the Abyssal Dwarfs retreated. The Quartz Sceptre was secured by King Egilax, and its location lost to the Abyssal Dwarfs, at least for now...

Thankfully for the free people of Pannithor, such times of ill-omen are short lived, for the fractious nature of the Abyssal Dwarfs tends to ensure that any alliance lasts only as long as it takes for the ambitions of another to arise.

THE ABYSSAL DWARF ARMY

Like other dwarfs, all Abyssal Dwarfs are accomplished warriors, and all are expected to fight on the field of battle in service of the Iron-casters and dark dwarf lords. The most powerful and infamous leaders can summon troops from across the realm of Tragar, while others must form their own mighty legions by sheer strength of will, raising militia, bartering for support, and amassing huge slave hordes from the sweltering pits.

Some leaders have amassed such notoriety that entire cults have formed around them, for only by securing a fanatical following can most Overmasters be sure of their dark kin's loyalty. Within the vast temple-bastions of Tragar, these cult leaders are revered alongside the dark gods who grant them favour, and their names have become legend amongst the Abyssal Dwarfs. From the Blackblood Legion, who coat their armour and weapons in the blood of slaughtered slaves before each battle, to the Engine-Legion of Vhrakziz, whose champions hack off their own right arm in sacrifice, to have it replaced by a mechanical device of brass and iron, it is to these cults that the great warlords look when planning a military campaign - or plotting a coup against their rivals in Tragar.

The Abyssal Dwarfs themselves are every bit as steadfast, enduring - and, unfortunately, slow - as their noble counterparts. As such, they play to their strengths, marching in large infantry blocks, protected by thick armour and shields. As the enemy approach, they are met with long lines of Decimators - Abyssal Dwarfs bearing short-ranged black powder weapons, which fire clouds of grapeshot capable of stripping flesh from bone, and stopping the most determined charge in its tracks. If this is not enough, the Decimators rush aside, allowing the enemy to be trapped in the teeth of their waiting kin. Blacksouls form the backbone of the army, and these doughty warriors prefer to receive the enemy charge, letting the foe expend their might against their ranks, before hacking into them with vicious axes. Impetuous foes who overcome even these warriors might be unfortunate enough to see the Abyssal Dwarfs' elite troops, the Immortal Guard. Granted eternal life by the Iron-casters, the Immortal Guard are said to be little more than living suits of armour, fused into some terrible, bloodthirsty semblance of a dwarf, and utterly without fear or mercy. Their sole task is to protect their commander on the battlefield, and it is a duty they fulfil with grim efficiency.

Given the nature of these most numerous of troops, one might be forgiven for thinking that the Abyssal Dwarfs operate entirely defensively on the battlefield, but this could not be further from the truth. While the core remains steadfast and resolute, the units operating on the flanks are aggressive in the extreme, relishing their job of funnelling the enemy towards the unbreakable wall of Blacksouls and Decimators. Slave orcs, both on foot and mounted on brutish gores, are pushed towards the foe, although in truth they need little encouragement from the lash of their masters. Orcs are bred for war, and once the scent of blood gets in their porcine nostrils they will gladly throw themselves into battle with wild abandon. This slim glimpse of freedom is enough to make them fight with unbridled ferocity, even though they hate and fear their dwarfen overseers. Equally ferocious are the Abyssal Dwarf berserkers. They are normally found trying to keep up with the orcs, howling like madmen until finally they reach the enemy lines, where they become



whirling, frenzied death-dealers. Berserkers are twisted forms of their noble kin; they are not driven to battle-lust by the tragic history of their people, nor even by guilt over their betrayal of Golloch's folk. No, these berserkers have given themselves over entirely to the death-cults of Tragar, giving up their very souls to the creatures of the Abyss in return for the promise of endless slaughter. Only through killing can they hope to stave off eternal damnation, at least for a time.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, packs of halfbreeds form the Abyssal Dwarf equivalent of shock cavalry, ably assisted by hulking obsidian golems, and the flapping, carrion forms of gargoyles that swoops and soar overhead. All the while, great war engines rain down iron and flame upon the heads of the enemy, their constant thudding providing a drumbeat to which the army marches to ever greater feats of slaughter.

Halfbreeds

The Abyss's unwholesome presence is not restricted to engines of war, and too often living beings are the focus of the sorcerous engineers of the fallen dwarfs. The dreaded halfbreeds are the most widely known of the Iron-casters' mad experiments. Sick amalgams of bull-like quadrupeds and dwarf, the heavy thunder of their hooves are heard and feared further across the northern steppes as the herald of death or slavery.

Most Abyssal Dwarf halfbreeds are reckoned too unruly and unpredictable of temperament to command others of their kind, resulting in them being set loose upon the foe individually or in small groups in the manner of mindless berserkers. The one exception is the fearsome warlord Brakki Barka. So preternaturally strong is Barka, and so unending the extremes of his fury when denied, that he has risen to a station that none of his cursed kind has ever been known to hold. He is the lord of the army of an entire temple-bastion, known as Bhardoom. The Legion of Bhardoom has earned a reputation as being both utterly relentless and supremely obedient. Even the slightest transgression amongst the legion is met with uncompromising force. A warrior who hesitates in enacting Barka's orders is crushed beneath his fearsome hooves and, if any object, their entire company is driven from the heights of Bhardoom and pitched into the raging ocean of lava at the bottom of the Abyss. If this regime appears harsh, life is a hundred times worse for the slaves of Bhardoom. Should one slave falter in his work then he and ten others are instantly slaughtered as an example to the rest. Needless to say, the slave-masters of Bhardoom are ever searching for more unfortunates to add to their workforce.

The Birth of the Gnorr

Bharzak the Grim, Overmaster of the Gift-Piers of Zarak, wanted more. More work, more blood, more pain, more productivity, more sacrifice. More slaves. While other Abyssal Dwarfs lust for gold or jewels, or titles and power, Bharzak thirsts only to swell the already endless ranks of his slave-pits. No amount of cruelty can satisfy his insanity. Taking out his frustrations in an orgy of torture and hideous experimentation, he once butchered over a hundred dwarf slaves until there was nothing recognisable left. In a rage he threw the last of their sundered bodies into the far reaches of the pits, good for nothing but food for the rats. And in that moment, Bharzak had a flash of inspiration.

Rats are everywhere. Rats are vicious, hard creatures that can survive in the harshest of conditions, living in filth and eating worse. They thrive in adversity. The darkest, most miserable places in the world are the domain of rats. If ever a race was destined for slavery, ideally suited for the despair and brutal life it offered, it was the vermin. And so Bharzak cloistered himself away in his laboratory, and toiled for almost 13 years, experimenting on stricken slaves, and vermin infused with the power of the Abyss. At last, a new race was born, the Gnorr, or 'Ratkin'. A subservient slave-race, with a propensity to multiply rapidly, they seemed the answer to Bharzak's prayers. And yet they would eventually prove his greatest failure.

Unseen by their masters, the Ratkin tunnelled into the very chasm of the Abyss, undermining the vast cellars and sewers of the twin cities, and eventually escaping Tragar completely. Though Bharzak tried to stop them, it was far too late - the Ratkin had multiplied beyond reckoning, and a new race of evil was unleashed upon an unsuspecting world. Bharzak held on to his position only by his fingertips, and now rules his subterranean domain with one eye on every flickering shadow, expecting always to see the blade of his bitterest rivals, or the gleaming red eyes of his malign creations...



THE LEGIONS MARCH

When the Abyss grew and swelled with power, the Abyssal Dwarfs were invigorated with strength and purpose. Great armies were raised, new infernal creations were pressed into service and the armies of Zarak and Diew marched south. With the power of the Wicked Ones at their backs, the Abyssal Dwarfs were eager to eliminate their kin once and for all. The dwarfs of the south were divided, bickering and weak, whereas the dwarfs of Tragar were strong and united under the Overking Zerkziz. The time to strike had come.

Numberless armies marched on the Halpi mountains. The sky was darkened by mortar fire and polluting fumes. New, colossal obsidian beasts lumbered into battle carrying great shrines that channelled their patrons' infernal power. The Free Dwarf clans set up desperate defences and fought with every warrior they could muster, but the Overking could not be denied. The Abyssal Dwarfs advanced like a great lava flow, slowly consuming and razing all in their path. No army could stop them, no hero could see victory, and as they surrounded the last defenders at Rhyn Dufaris, their dominion was all but guaranteed.

Then came the flood. With their attentions focussed so eagerly on the south, no one could have foreseen the Green Lady's plan. Neritican aquamages melted a great glacier to the north of Tragar, flooding the Abyss and all of the lands surrounding it. Zarak and Diew, built on high peaks at either end of the chasm, survived, but they were cut off from the land and the raging fires of the Abyss itself. With their homeland and power under threat and the power of the Abyss draining from them, the Abyssal Dwarfs chose to consolidate their holdings and retreat - for now.

With their armies cut off or unable to leave the Abyss, the Wicked Ones have chosen new proxies in this world. Exercising their will, they fill the minds of the Abyssal Dwarfs with visions of conquest and terror. They whisper ideas and secrets to the mind of the Overking. A power in the north, a lost elven prince, glory everlasting. Zealous in his worship of the Wicked Ones, the Overking obeys.

Years have passed and the Abyssal Dwarfs have prospered. The Halpi mountains are their domain, every hold either destroyed or occupied and corrupted. The floodwaters have evaporated from the Abyss, the damage repaired by legions of toiling slaves. What's more, the great chasm has split the ground further, with Diew no longer marking the edge of the Abyss. At the Abyss' furthest point, thousands of slaves are forced to raise immense structures of black iron and obsidian. Wails fill the air, as forges burn bright to smelt vast quantities of materials needed for one purpose - to build a third city.

Alliances with other evil races in Mantica have yielded new weapons, the likes of which have not been seen since the God War. Things so terrible, that they are best left unspoken, lest they invite madness.

For the Abyssal Dwarfs, failure is fleeting, but the desire for conquest is all-consuming. There are always new schemes; new lands to plunder; new foes to decimate and slaves to capture. Only through bloody conquest can the Abyssal Dwarfs find even a sliver of satisfaction, and to this end their armies prepare to crush the lands of dwarfs, men and elves.



The Dark Host

Although they aren't numerous, the legions of the Abyssal Dwarfs are as disciplined and effective as any other fighting force. With arms and armour comparable to their more noble kin reinforced by the enchantments of the Iron-casters, they are tough foes to face in battle.

The line infantry of the dwarfen infantry of the temple-cities are the Blacksouls. They favour heavy axes and hammers, marching to war in tight regiments, often bearing ensorcelled dark iron shields. Although the Abyssal Dwarfs are usually fractious, each warrior in the ranks works as part of the group, for these sadists understand that this is the most effective way to make the enemy suffer. When the battles are over, the in-fighting and back stabbing begins quickly, as each dwarf vies to consolidate its position and power a little more.

Unlike their cousins, Abyssal Dwarfs favour close range carnage over long distance stopping power. The thunderpipe used by their Decimator troops reflects this – a short-ranged blunderbuss of a weapon designed to inflict horrific and painful injury so that the victim might be dragged in agony back to the slave pits.



The exceptions to these well-drilled troops are the Abyssal Berserkers. Lured into the service of the Wicked Ones by the promise of eternal slaughter, these violent warriors care little for strategy or power, often charging without provocation the moment they see the enemy. Cunning overmasters will factor the berserkers' bloodlust into their plans, often using them as bait or a diversionary ploy for the rest of the army.

Slaves to the Abyss

Tough, capable and eager to fight, the orcs make ideal slave soldiers. Their great strength and brutal ferocity are an asset to any army, and the Abyssal Dwarfs push vast hordes of enslaved brutes toward the enemy before committing their own troops.

Most of these unfortunates go to battle on foot, acting as expendable shield walls for their cruel masters. Some, however, fight atop captured Gores. Although beasts are abused as their riders, they are capable of covering ground at

a punishing rate. These primitive cavalry hit the opposition like a solid brick wall, pulverising lesser troops entirely and bringing even elites to their knees.

The vicious individuals behind these hordes are the Slave Herders. They are varied in their approaches, each Abyssal Dwarf exercising their own particular brand of cruelty on their charges. Some will march into battle at the head of the Slave Orcs, driving them on with barbed lashes. Others will ride into battle by chariot, keeping pace with the gore riders – steering them toward the foe. The Slave Drivers, exceptional torturers who rank above the herders, lead the hordes as a whole. They often carry dread totems and pennants to war, revelling in the despair that they inspire amongst their enemies.

The lowest ranking Slave Herders aren't yet permitted by their betters to herd Slave Orcs. Instead, these torturers must learn their craft with Mutated Mastiffs – misshapen canines created by the Iron-casters. These beasts are dangerous and volatile, easily capable taking on an unprepared dwarf as a pack. This foul temperament is only made worse by the horrible treatment of the eager Slave Herder. Should the Slave Herder successfully bring them to heel (and survive the experience), he may be allowed to work with more valuable charges.

Mutated Monstrosities

The Iron-casters of the Abyssal Dwarfs are free to experiment without any concept of morality or sanity. The results of these debased endeavours are vile and varied, disgusting, misshapen beings that defy logic. Although these beings are created by melding the flesh of intelligent races with the essence of abyssals, it is not clear whether the resulting beings possess any intelligence themselves. It's probably best not to dwell on how aware these beings are of their torment.

These beings are often pressed into war, as they often combine unnatural strength with the regenerative abilities of the abyssals. The most commonly found mutants in Abyssal Dwarf armies are Halfbreeds and Grotesques. This isn't preference on the part of the Iron-caster but is simply the result of most of their creations having a forgivingly short life span – few, if any, making it to the battlefield.

Halfbreeds vary, but usually take the form of the upper torso of a dwarf fused with the body of a quadruped abyssal. They are intelligent enough to wield weaponry and follow some orders, but their low status and the chronic pain of their tortured forms drives them into a state of fury, making them dangerous and unpredictable on the battlefield. Most Halfbreeds will charge the enemy at first sight, galloping at great speed before swinging their heavy hammers to crush the foe. The worst of their kind are the Halfbreed Champions – uncontrollable killing machines who must be unleashed upon the enemy swiftly, lest they endanger their own side.

ABYSSAL DWARFS



Huge hybrid creatures, Grotesques are disgusting to behold and terrifying to face. These multi-limbed mutants are excessively violent, often tearing their opponents to pieces, leaving little more than chunks of flesh and bone in pools of blood. Although their presence is highly sought after by overmasters, their size and strength, coupled with their inability to communicate, means that they commonly have to be destroyed at the end of each battle to prevent them from killing their masters.

Although they aren't mutants themselves, there does seem to be an odd kinship between the Gargoyles and the creatures created by the Iron-casters. Perhaps it is because both share low positions in their respective societies, or a common desire to slaughter and feed. Either way, these dim-witted lesser abyssals follow the Abyssal Dwarfs to war. They hang in the sky like a sinister pall, ready to plunge with voracious appetite onto wounded warriors and stragglers.

The Flamebound

Some Iron-casters specialise not in the mutation of hybrids, but in the creation of bound constructs. Made from obsidian, bone, metals and magma, these artificial beings are strong, reliable and all but indestructible. Although they are mostly humanoid in form, years of endless experimentation by Iron-casters have yielded many bizarre varieties of construct, many of which can be found supporting the armies of the overmasters.

The methods of creating these constructs are a closely kept secret of the Iron-casters and their acolytes. Some believe that the inanimate forms are bound with the essence of the Abyss itself, while others think that the souls of lesser beings are bound to the obsidian frames. Knowing the Iron-casters, the truth is probably best left hidden, although this does allow them to charge extortionate tithes for the use of their warriors.

The most common constructs by far are golems. Resembling a hunched, muscular humanoid, even the smallest of these beings stand taller and far broader than man or dwarf. Facing them in combat is akin to fighting an avalanche, each blow meeting unrelenting stone and brass. The golems are slow and dim-witted, pummelling opponents to death with heavy fists, or dousing them with magma cannons, before standing idle to wait for new orders. Wealthy overmasters may be able to secure the service of the most destructive of their kind – the Greater Obsidian Golems. Towering over the battlefield, these immense beings are engines of destruction, able to tear down castle walls or crush entire regiments with ease.

When the Abyss opened 10 years ago, fell energies were unleashed upon the world, invigorating the forces of evil. It was Dravek Dalken, a former acolyte of Arhak Soulbinder, who devised a means to harness this energy for the legions

of Tragar. Brass shrines were constructed, blazing with hellfire and malice. These unholy icons, known as Hellfanes, channelled the power flowing from the Abyss into nearby Abyssal Dwarfs, invigorating them with greater strength and speed. The effect had only a limited range; so great obsidian bearers were constructed in the form of beasts to carry them into battle. Although the flow of energy has lessened in recent times, these constructs are still able to draw on it and reinforce the Abyssal Dwarfs' battle lines.

The Hexcasters are another recent addition to the Iron-casters' arsenal. Small, insectoid constructs bound to runes of hatred and spite, they manipulate the flow of fortune and magic to bring ill omens and bad luck to their masters' foes. While they are usually employed against the armies facing the Abyssal Dwarfs, their subtlety means that they can be used against allies without raising suspicion. Many ill-fated overmasters have found their strength being sapped from them while standing before a powerful foe, only realising their betrayal far too late. Many Abyssal Dwarfs have learned to be wary of an Iron-caster flanked by one of these loathed constructs.



While the Immortal Guard aren't created, the binding rituals used on them are similar to the magics of the Iron-casters – enough so that they can be reinforced or repaired, should the need arise. Becoming an Immortal Guard requires a quality that is rare among the Abyssal Dwarfs – loyalty. Part of the binding ritual to their charge is that the warriors in question must dedicate themselves – body and soul – to the service of a title. In return, they will become immortal, fighting in the crucible of war for all time. Should the individual holding said title be slain, the Immortal Guard are sworn to protect their successor. Over time, those who join the ranks of the guard will lose themselves, a piece at a time, until nothing remains but their obedience and will to fight, forever encased inside gilded armour. Some warriors accept this fate all too readily, becoming something more than their kin. These spirits of war are named as guardians, the only higher rank in the Immortal Guard, and are given the honour of directing their subordinates on the battlefield.



Like their nobler kin, the Abyssal Dwarfs are skilled with black powder weaponry. The war machines of the dwarfs are based on tried and tested designs that have been in use for thousands of years. Those fielded by the Abyssal Dwarfs, however, are new and volatile creations of the Iron-casters. Mortars, rocket launchers and flamethrowers are the weapons of choice – anything which causes devastation and excruciating pain.

These infernal machines are created bearing the likenesses of abyssals, with leering faces and sharpened teeth. Their appearance is far from coincidence, for the Iron-casters use their foul art to bind the essence of Ariagful's children to their frames. Each engine is, on some level, alive and viciously sentient. They rage against their metal prisons, their aggression fuelling the fires of the weapons they employ. With but a word, an Iron-caster can invoke the regenerative powers of the abyssal inside the machine and use it to magically repair any damage caused. Ariagful herself bears no ire to the Abyssal Dwarfs for her abyssals' imprisonment, as the denizens of the Abyss are of little consequence to her.

Lords of the Pit

Abyssal Dwarf society is ruthless, with only the most violent individuals fighting their way to the top. The leader of a group of Abyssal Dwarfs is called an Overmaster. These sadistic dwarfs are wealthy and paranoid, their position over their kin being tenuous at best. They will clad themselves in enchanted obsidian armour and constantly lead raids against the world at large, loudly declaring their devotion to the Wicked Ones. An Overmaster must stay active at all times, for a single moment's lapse of authority can lead to their demise. Each Overmaster, and their subordinates, vie for power over each other, with betrayals and coups being the norm.

Iron-casters are a powerful sect within Abyssal Dwarf society. They commune with the Wicked Ones, wielding unnatural powers and running debased experiments that combine mortals with the demonic creatures of the Abyss. The most dangerous results of these trials are the Greater Halfbreeds, immense monsters that are used as mounts by both the Iron-casters and particularly wealthy Overmasters. While Iron-casters rarely wield power openly, they are the true influence behind many Overmasters. Their abilities and manufactured warriors allow them to hold a lot of sway in the matters of rulership. Many Iron-casters will slowly ply Overmasters with promises of power and conquest, all the while working toward their own, hidden ends.

Ba'su'su the Vile

Most Halfbreeds live a short but painful existence, their tortured forms an utter anathema to the mortal world. A select few will survive longer than this and will take their place in the Abyssal Dwarfs armies. However, one Halfbreed has managed to not only survive, but thrive for many blood drenched decades. He is Ba'su'su the Vile, the Lord of Gargoyles.

In form, Ba'su'su the Vile exemplifies the unnatural arts of the Iron-casters. His body is a hybrid not just of two creatures, but of many, all conjoined together in horrible union. His features resemble those of a hairless dog, his eyes radiating the fell heat of the deepest Abyss. His body is that of a man, albeit one twisted and over-muscled by the arcane rites of his creation. His feet are reverse-jointed and taloned like those of a mighty vulture and upon his back are two pairs of wings as black as the ash clouds that tower over the northern realms.

ABYSSAL DWARFS



Ba'su'su the Vile has earned the title 'Lord of Gargoyles' by dint of the fact that he is ever to be found wheeling and soaring above the Abyss upon the searing thermals. There he is master among the winged things of the heights. As such, wherever Ba'su'su goes, there too is to be found a mass of gargoyles so dense that the sun itself is often blotted out and the land below cast in stygian darkness. This is especially true when the armies of the Abyssal Dwarfs march forth to make war upon the lands of men and the other speaking races of Mantica, for where his creators go, there Ba'su'su the Vile goes too.

Brakki Barka

Most Abyssal Dwarf Halfbreeds are reckoned too unruly and unpredictable of temperament to command others of their kind, resulting in them being set loose upon the foe individually or in small groups in the manner of mindless berserkers. In the case of the Halfbreed known as Brakki Barka, the insane fury of his kind is married to an indomitable will and the ambition to rule over the hosts of his masters. So preternaturally strong is Barka, and so unending the extremes of his fury when denied, that he has risen to a station that none of his cursed kind has ever been known to hold. He is the lord of the army of an entire temple-bastion, commander of the legion of Bhardoom.

In truth, the Halfbreed lord is commander in title only, for upon the field of battle he is so consumed with rage he issues very few orders. Instead, Barka instills utter obedience in the legion of Bhardoom by the age-old custom of slaughtering any warrior that shows the least sign of cowardice or disobedience. This is as true on the field of battle as it is off it, and thus the legion of Bhardoom has earned a reputation as being both utterly relentless and supremely obedient. Even the slightest transgression amongst the legion is met with uncompromising force. A warrior who hesitates in enacting Barka's orders is crushed beneath his fearsome hooves and, if any object, their entire company is driven from the heights of Bhardoom and pitched into the raging ocean of lava at the bottom of the Abyss. If this regime appears harsh, life is a hundred times worse for the slaves of Bhardoom. Should one slave falter in his work then he and 10 others are instantly slaughtered as an example to the rest. Needless to say, the slave-masters of Bhardoom are ever searching for more unfortunates to add to their work force.



EMPIRE OF DUST



Nercophys
high priest to his imperial excellence,
khotem the ever-living

EMPIRE OF DUST



The Ophidian obsession with mastery over death and everlasting life is a curiosity in the eyes of the northern lands. But little do most know that beyond Ophidia lies a more sinister place – the remnants of a kingdom long thought destroyed, whose vengeful overlords rise from the sand once more in the name of their everlasting god, Shobik.

South of the Infant Sea lies an expanse of arid desert that is truly vast, stretching along most of the lower seaboard. The mysterious and beguiling kingdom of Ophidia, sustained by its rich river valley, occupies much of the west – precious oases, desert cities and other, stranger kingdoms scattered across its interior. But beyond Ophidia, mysterious ruins, dead trees, and the bones of long extinct creatures are all that challenge the whispering sand for space. Straddling the Wastes of Ophidia and the wretched land further south lie the broken towns and cities of the once great empire of Ahmun.

In the Time of Light, beyond the scorched and barren region now known as the Cracked Lands, a people migrated north. Driven from their own lands by years of drought and plague, they sought and found a new land, with rich soils and fresh, bountiful rivers. As they settled and slowly began to re-establish themselves, they begun to explore and trade with the other noble races. Relations and trade pacts were built between the elves to the west and kingdoms of men and dwarfs to the far east and north. The Ahmunites flourished, becoming an influential and important cog in the economic and political stability of the southern regions.

It began as most things do. An idea corrupted and warped. The Ahmunites had long revered the dead, believing in an existence after the mortal vessel had served its purpose. Their high priests had dabbled a little in the art of necromancy and a vain fashion amongst the noble classes developed – raising their most loyal warriors to serve again in their undeath in a rite known incongruously as Purification. Under the toil of countless undead slaves, the great city of Nehkesharr grew, until its size and power rivalled the greatest civilisations of the mortal realms. It became a necropolis-city, where soon the dead outnumbered the living.





The once-fertile lands began to dry. Hot, arid winds howled from the south – and as they blew, the whispers of the dead were heard in the ears of the black-hearted, sowing the seeds of destruction. The practice of Purification began to spread insidiously. Across the lesser regions, more and more people were raised from their rest, slaves for the living. The families of these undead workers were ignored – cries of protest falling on uncaring ears. Politically powerful and devious, the high priests were rumoured to be the real power behind the thrones of the Ahmunites. Spurred on by these priests, the noble houses plunged ever deeper into darkness, until the cities of the empire began to echo with the shambling and mournful groans of the dead. Souls and bodies were unwillingly forced back into service. The people of Ahmun feared the setting of the sun, which heralded the terror of the night as petty kings and beggar-princes turned their private armies of the dead upon each other.

As the Ahmunite empire began to consume itself from within, the rulers of the northernmost regions, or ‘sepats’, agreed to take their people and escape the madness. A mass exodus began as tens of thousands fled to the east, the remnants of culture transplanted to a new home. They settled around the mouth of the great river, now called Hokh-man, and forged themselves a new life. The princes were seen as the saviours of their subjects and were to be revered as the ‘God-Kings’ of the people.

The Rise Of Ophidia

The great journey had taken its toll and the young realm, now called Ophidia, was desperately vulnerable and short of man-power. Aghast at the decision they had to take, the new God-Kings finally decreed that once again necromancy must be used to return their people from the grave. But this time the motives were different – not selfish, not arrogant. Service to the new empire would be for altruistic reasons. Strict laws were established to control the learning and practice of the once dark art. As the fledgling empire grew and became the masters of undeath, the God-Kings cast their sad eyes south to Ahmun, to the people they had left behind, and watched an ancient empire tear itself apart. The madness had to be stopped before it could spread any further, before the armies of the dead turned their baleful gazes to the wider world.

Gathering together their most trusted and masterful magi, the God-Kings summoned the most powerful and spiteful of the demonic djinn. Together, they unleashed a monstrous and lethal sandstorm that engulfed the Ahmunite armies, flensing skin and flesh from bone and driving them back to the wastes. Plagues of insects, so vast they blotted out the sun, descended on the cities of the Ahmunites and devoured the living so thoroughly that as the swarm passed by, only bones remained.

The Ahmunite people were driven back into their broken, crumbling cities and scoured from the face of the world. The Ophidians had condemned an entire civilisation to an eternal torment of undeath, stripped bare for all to see as a terrible reminder to those who seek to abuse power and believe they can master both life and death. What was once a prosperous, sprawling empire of merchants, art, learning and science is now a shattered, bitter, hateful and smouldering lesson against hubris and conceit.







The Ahmunites Return

What prompted the Ahmunites to look beyond their barren realm once more is unknown. Some speculate that one of the many bands of tomb-robbers, drawn south by the promise of gold and precious stones, inadvertently unlocked some thrice-warded chamber, unleashing a curse of untold magnitude. Others still claim that emissaries of the carrion-goddess, the Wicked One Akshun'arha, arrived amidst the ruins and awoke the Ahmunites with a great spell.

For centuries, the Ahmunites had long been directionless. The pharaohs and cursed priests had retreated to the safety of their tombs, leaving their skeleton legions to stand dormant, and guardian slaves to toil aimlessly. Now, they had awoken. Kings of old burst forth from the dunes on the gleaming chariots they had been buried with. By their sides, the high priests began great incantations to bring the skeletons back to un-life, and return lost souls to the mummified remains of ancient warlords. Skeletal giants and revenants dragged themselves from the sand, ready to fight for Ahmun once again. The djinn were summoned, and trapped within bodies of gold, bronze and stone, so that one might think the very statues of old Ahmun had come to life in defence of their lords. The Great Pharaoh, Zhar-Teph, who in life had struggled to maintain a hold over his bickering rivals, now took unwavering command of them in death. The Incantation of Cleansing was begun. The great rivers ran red with foul ichor, the very blood of Shobik. The skies over the desert

burned with liquid fire for seven days and seven nights. Great storms blasted the sands from the necropolis-cities of Ahmun, until the towering pinnacles of the sky-catacombs once more gazed down upon the cities of the dead from lofty heights. Every living thing within a hundred leagues was scoured, poisoned, slain; cured to join the ranks of the dead. Zhar-Teph looked upon this great work, and saw that it was good.

Were it not for an unexpected interruption, it would have been the hated Ophidians to first feel the new-found power of the Ahmunites. Instead, drawn by the incredible power of the incantation, a warband of Twilight Kin, the dark hearted elves from the Pit of Leith, crossed the desert to investigate. Marching only at night, the Twilight Kin sought to steal the source of this magic for themselves. The venture was cursed almost as soon as the elves set foot on the desert sands. Swarms of scorpions and gigantic, tunnelling sand worms beset the Twilight Kin and their infernal allies, relentlessly, forcing them ever onwards, until they reached the ruins of Sekhaat, a long-abandoned Ahmunite outpost. There, the very statues came to life, setting upon the elves with great weapons of stone and polished gold. On and on the elves fled, their numbers dwindling, until finally they glimpsed the peak of the sky-catacombs, long thought buried. They climbed a great dune, and what they saw filled even the cruel Twilight Kin with dread. Before them, the vast necropolis-city of Nehkesharr stood; and as one, thousands upon thousands of long-dead, skeletal soldiers turned to look upon the intruders.





Only one of the elves made it back to the Mouth of Leith, emaciated and raving, pale skin blistered and burnt by the desert sun. The Twilight Kin have shown no immediate inclination to return. Although many battles have been fought against these undead foes since, that lone elf's raving testimony remains the only first-hand account of the full power of Zhar-Teph's legions.

It is not only on land that the growing threat of the Ahmunites is felt. Ghost ships haunt the Straits of Madness and small fleets of Ahmunite bone-hulks are a constant menace and distraction for patrolling frigates from the Salamander navy. At the height of its most recent expansion, when the winds of dark magic poured forth from the Abyss, the Ahmunite high priests were able to raise a vast armada of warships, stopped only by the desperate intervention of the Trident Realm and the unleashing of a mighty kraken to wreak havoc on the ghostly fleet.

The armies of Ahmun are almost numberless. The greatest cities had become nothing more than enormous necropolises before the empire fell, constructed with both skulls and blocks of stone, and filled with the dead. Only now has the true ambition of the high priests become known, for the sheer number of warriors assembling beneath the banners of the pharaohs are seemingly endless. Rank after rank of skeleton warriors, armed with khopesh, spear, bow or crossbow, march and fight almost as one, drilled to ceremonial perfection in death as they were in life, the only sounds they make are the

clacking of bones and the scrape of steel. The very creatures of the desert are likewise reanimated, falling into line with the skeletal army almost as a by-product of the necromantic power flowing through the land. Scorpions, giants, dragons and behemoths lumber to war at the behest of the Ahmunite priests.

The undead architects who built the necropolises have also arisen, now turning their skills to the construction of baleful war engines and monoliths of dark power, designed to extend the influence of the necromancers in battle. It is a riddle that has baffled countless military and political commentators; why, with all the Ophidian God-Kings' power and influence, have they let the Ahmunites rebuild and grow so strong once more. Perhaps they mean to use them as a tool. Perhaps they see them as no real threat at all. As with all things, the motivations and plots of the Ophidians are shrouded in mystery and deceit.

The Ahmunite pharaohs are driven by a willpower that conquered death itself centuries past, and are now almost unstoppable in their unquenchable wrath. To the sound of golden trumpets, the pharaohs roar their proclamations from parchment-dry throats: the great kingdoms will be restored. The world of the living will end, starting with the treacherous Ophidians, and a new empire will rise.

An empire of dust.

Ahmunite Legions

At its height, the Ahmunite Empire possessed thousands of well-trained soldiers. As the use of necromancy spread, ranks of raised corpses replaced these legions. The pharaohs found that the skeletal warriors were not only immune to pain, but also far more loyal than their living counterparts. In modern times, the Ahmunite Empire has not even a single soldier of flesh and blood. Instead, rank upon rank of skeletons march in grim silence at the command of their superiors, their previous lives lost and forgotten.

These armies are equipped in death much as they were in life. Infantry regiments carry tall shields and fight with either spears or a variety of ancient hand weapons. Ranged troops are generally equipped with bows, but some regiments are armed with the rarer crossbow. This archaic weapon is believed to have its origins in the Ahmunite Empire and even as lifeless bones, the so-called 'Deadeye' formations can fire it with deadly skill. Some of the most skilled archers would fire from horseback, harassing the enemy with bow fire and driving them into the shield walls of infantry. Their role remains unchanged today, although their demise and decay has cost them much of their ability.

The Balefire Catapult was originally a creation of the high priests – a weapon designed to use the ensorcelled skulls of the slain as ammunition with the intention of demoralising the foe. While these weapons were highly effective, they were just as terrifying to their living crews as they were to their targets. The crews were swiftly replaced with skeletal soldiers – who had no feelings about their task whatsoever – but the weapon's dark reputation remains to this day.

Royal Guard

Each of the Ahmunite pharaohs was paranoid and ruthless. They would pay handsomely for a high priest to resurrect skilled warriors and bind them as their personal guard. It was common for those individuals planning to challenge a pharaoh's rule – usually a skilled captain or noble – to be assassinated to prevent them from carrying out their intentions. Once dealt with, their bodies would be resurrected and pressed into the service of the pharaoh – making most of the Royal Guard the remains of a pharaoh's own rivals.

Better trained and quipped than other warriors, these platoons fulfil more specialised roles within the Ahmunite legions. Many fight on foot as armoured infantry, carrying two-handed glaives and pole-arms that were once a sign of

their honoured rank. Some fight from horseback or atop gilded chariots, acting as heavy cavalry for the armies of the pharaohs.

The most revered members of the Royal Guard in life were the pharaoh's personal champion and standard bearer. Gifted with ornate armour and weapons, these individuals would inspire the massed warriors of the empire, fighting on the front line and bearing the pharaoh's colours for all to see. In death, the grandeur of these roles has been lost. The champions now lead the legions to war in deathly silence, while the enchanted banners borne into battle serve only to reinforce the curse of undeath that holds the army together. Glory and inspiration are forgotten concepts to the soldiers of the Ahmunites.

The high priests of the Ahmunites know neither bound nor taboo. In their effort to create the armies of the dead, they even raided ancient tombs of nobility, using their foul magic on the embalmed corpses of past royalty. Through some quirk of the embalming process, these mummies are unnaturally strong, if slow, warriors. They are bound to the will of a pharaoh, utterly loyal until their corporeal forms are finally destroyed and they find rest.





Creatures of the Desert

The incantations of the high priests can be made to work on any living thing, not just humans. In times of war, the mages will raise the husks and remains of the creatures that inhabited the dunes of the Cracked Lands. From swarms of insects and small reptiles, to lumbering undead behemoths, nothing is beyond the defilement of necromancy. The practice of summoning these creatures began while there were still living warriors among the Ahmunite armies, with human soldiery being backed up by obedient undead insects and animals. Although it was unnerving, none could deny their effectiveness in combat. In death, they are still staples of the armies of the pharaohs, usually acting as natural battering rams and scouts.

Reanimated Behemoths are some of the largest of these undead creatures. The skeletal remains of giant lizards, they are thought to be distantly related to the slashers tamed by the orcs and goblins of the north. At some point in the past, there was a great migration of the creatures across the sands of Ophidia. Many great behemoths fell and it is unknown if any did survive to complete their journey. The high priests raise them to fight in service to the Ahmunite armies, enchanting their remains with powerful dark magic that drains life from those nearby.

All manner of man and beast have become lost and wandered aimlessly to their deaths in the barren wastelands of the Cracked Lands and the southern deserts. Colossal giants rarely venture so far, but those that do share the same fate as all of the other lost souls – eternal service in the unholy ranks of the Ahmunite Empire.

The great flying wyrms of the southern deserts are ferocious foes – too dangerous to tame while they are still alive. In death, however, they can be bound by necromancy and can serve as mighty steeds to the chosen champions of the Royal Guard. Some priests will hunt out these beings while they are still young and without wings. These flightless wyrms travel by burrowing beneath the sands, erupting from beneath their prey in spectacular and deadly fashion, often swallowing them whole. Although they are not as dangerous when resurrected, the size and strength of these beasts is an asset to any revenant champion.

The carrion birds of the south are degenerate creatures. They have more in common with ghouls than their own kind, as feasting on the flesh of both the dead and undead alike has changed them into unnatural carnivores. Their flesh is twisted, their feathers are matted, and their bones grow into sharpened spines that pierce the skin. They follow in the wake of the Ahmunites' armies, voraciously devouring any scrap of meat they can find, living, dead or otherwise.

Warriors of the Gods

Ophidia is sometimes called the land of the gods. This ancient domain has been steeped in sorcery and supernatural powers for all of its long history, saturating the very sand with unseen energies. It is no coincidence that there are many magical creatures and idols in the southern deserts, or that the Ahmunites can wield their necromancy with such success in these enchanted lands.

The monoliths are ancient standing stones, expertly tapered and decorated with secret meaning and scattered throughout the desert lands of the south. The elven scholars have tried to study them from afar and believe they form some kind of arcane power grid, although their purpose and how they work remains unfathomable. In battle, the hieroglyphs on the sand-blasted stones glow with an inner fire, fuelling the spells of the empire's mages.

The djinn are powerful and fickle desert spirits. They prey on wayward travellers, promising to grant them their greatest desires, but taking everything from them. They dislike the undead they share their lands with, seeing no gains in treating with these soulless husks. The priests, however, see great power in the djinn, and will risk much to trap and bind these incorporeal beings.

Sealed into large bodies constructed from bronze, fabric and skin, the djinn are slaved to fight at the priests' command as Enslaved Guardians. These armoured beings are far taller and stronger than any human, capable of wielding large ensorcelled weapons with ease – from heavy two-handed axes to small bolt throwers. The magic of the djinn is channelled through these weapons, instilling them with the power to pass through armour or to turn their victims to dust with even the slightest touch. Even the armour itself can channel this magic, summoning swift sandstorms to push the enemy back.

The djinn rage against their imprisonment continuously. If they ever find a weakness in the spells that bind them, they will shatter their cage and seek out their captors to enact cruel vengeance. More than one high priest has been lost in this way, but the power the enslaved guardians provide outweighs the risk of the djinn escaping their bonds.

The worst incantations of the high priests can summon the dreaded Soul Snare. The swirling, mystical energies of this abomination float ominously above the ground, radiating malevolence. The beguiling and evil miasma will strike out to rip the essence from the living and feed the soldiers of the empire with freshly captured souls. To witness one of these storms of magic in action is a harrowing experience and those who do survive the onslaught are often rendered catatonic by what they have seen. Fortunately, this magic is erratic and can only be maintained by the priests for a short time before it collapses and dissipates.

The Ahmunite Royal Court

Driven by a willpower that conquered death itself centuries past, the fallen pharaohs of the Ahmunites are almost unstoppable in their unquenchable wrath. Great is their ire and the vengeance they exact on those who violate the Ahmunite's domain. In battle, these cursed rulers radiate ruthless dominion over friend and foes alike, their burning eyes commanding obedience. It is through their will alone that the Ahmunites have endured their curse and remained to threaten the world.

The legions of undead warriors and creatures that fight for the Empire are only made possible by the cursed high priests. Politically powerful and devious, the high priests were often rumoured to be the real power behind the thrones of the Ahmunites. They share their masters' bitterness and hatred of the living and seek revenge for the terrible curse bestowed upon them. Steeped in the arts of necromancy, there is no corpse that cannot be bent to their will through incantations and dark magic.



Idol of Shobik

The ancient god Shobik has long been forgotten by the other civilisations of the world. The Ahmunites once worshipped the old god in their empire and great stone statues of its likeness stand proudly at the entrances to temples, palaces and mausoleums alike, once acting as powerful lodestones for magic and worship. These idols still simmer with innate power and can be summoned to life by high priests chanting blasphemous texts from forbidden scrolls. As literal sandstone giants, these immense beings are not only towering engines of destruction in battle, but they are capable of summoning the blessing of their god to aid the Ahmunites in battle. Only the high priests know the lost vows and rituals to persuade Shobik to fight on the Ahmunites' behalf, and what the true cost of their god's endorsement holds.

Apaphys, Champion of Death

Apaphys was born into a wealthy Ahmunite family, the 13th and youngest child. His parents were both murdered early in his life by souls reborn unwillingly during the rite of Purification. The family fell on hard times and were made destitute, forced to survive in the gutters of civilisation. As the Ophidian Empire began to establish itself, the Ahmunites left behind found themselves in a world of plague, despair and undeath. It was through this backdrop of misery and tainted morality that Apaphys charted his rise to power.

When the Ophidian God-Kings unleashed their curse on the blighted Ahmunites, Apaphys had already bargained with and sold his body to Soppdu, the corrupt djinn of war, in return for immortality. Apaphys's soul was replaced by Soppdu and granted the freedoms and pleasures of flesh. The Champion of Death now travels the world, unleashing a reign of terror upon the back of his wyrm N'Jem D'ru. The despoiled and rotting body of Apaphys burns with the insatiable desire for chaos from the djinn that flows through his veins, and whose malevolent gaze is the last thing countless foes have seen.

FORCES OF THE ABYSS



ānaq'pha'sū the world-render
archfiend of the abyss

FORCES OF THE ABYSS



Far to the northeast of the Infant Sea, amidst the shattered, soot-stained remnants of Winter's glaciers lies the Abyss – the greatest wound inflicted upon the world in the God War. Here, the last of the wicked gods reside, 27 in number, their dark magic spewing ceaselessly into the world, twisting men and nobler creatures still into dark images of themselves.

A great rent in the ground, the Abyss is many miles deep and countless leagues across. A pall of smoke hangs above the Abyss, so that it and all the lands about it are shrouded in unnatural, perpetual night. The empires of the Abyssal Dwarfs as well as countless orcs, goblins and other wretched creatures all exist there. Further down this hellish crevasse, the taint of the malevolent energies of the Wicked Ones becomes stronger, and things far worse than orcs dwell.

When the constellations are in alignment and the power of the Wicked Ones waxes strong, their infernal legions march forth. Cackling, spiteful devils march alongside muscled behemoths. They are the Forces of the Abyss and the world screams in their wake.







THE CIRCLES OF DAMNATION

The Abyss is a chasm, both literal and metaphorical, in the skin of the world. It is thought by many to be a vast, physical cleft in the earth, leading to some cyclopean, volcanic depth far below. This is only partly true, for mortals must ever reconcile that which they cannot understand with absolutes. The deeper one ventures into this dizzying realm of darkness, the more it becomes obvious that the Abyss and all its denizens are anathema to natural law. The veil between planes of existence is thin, a dark parody of the power of the old Celestians to walk between worlds. Bare rock breathes with bilious life; black smoke coils with dark sentience, corrupting all that breathe it; measureless caverns convulse and twist into labyrinths that would take a lifetime to traverse. Countless tortured souls gibber as they suffer exquisite pain in the endless dark, their fevered imaginings giving form to new realities, new monstrosities, and new sorceries. Deep down in the shadows and billowing fumes, perpetually lit by the glow of hellish red fires, fouler creatures reside – beings of unfettered evil, whose very existence is an abomination against the natural order of things, living in a twisted mirror of the celestial orders above.

These are the Abyssals, immortal servants of the Father of Lies. The Abyssals are emanations of their Lord's mind – pure Evil incarnate. They are organised into a strict hierarchy, which perversely mirrors that of the celestial hosts of the Shining Ones, and is related to which level, or 'circle' of the Abyss in which they reside. Each Circle of the Abyss increases in size to accommodate the burgeoning hordes that dwell there, and yet diminishes in power the farther from the sight of the Wicked Ones they are cast.

The Seventh Circle

Ruling over this hierarchy are the supreme beings that dwell in the depths of the Seventh Circle, which is at the very bottom of the Abyss – they are the 27 Wicked Ones, kin to the Father of Lies, bound by the power of Domivar never to leave the Abyss, and yet ever plotting and scheming to exert their will onto the mortal realm. It is said that the Wicked Ones live in the Eternal Dark, inimical to life both mortal and Abyssal, and yet these godlike beings endure, their power manifest in every corner of their realm.

The Wicked Ones each carve out domains of unmitigated evil upon the magical plane of the First Circle. Each realm is as unique in appearance and workings as it is possible to be, and as the fortunes of these dark gods ebb and flow, so too do their domains expand and shrink, sometimes clashing into each other, resulting in war and intrigue between the Wicked Ones themselves. These domains defy mortal description, although crazed seers have sometimes written forbidden texts describing cities made of writhing, pulsating flesh, or great plains of precious stones that shine as far as the eyes can see.

They rave of kingdoms where the air is thick and noxious, and shadowy denizens shuffle about the feet of their dark lord, dragging plague-ridden souls behind them. They speak of a kingdom of dog-headed spiders, and of palaces of bone, and the endless forges of Ariagful, whence cursed artefacts are forged and remade over and over, before being sent out into the world to taint the hearts of mortals.

'The prayers of mortals are a double-edged sword, granting courage, but reinforcing fears. Due deference cannot be given to the Shining Ones without also acknowledging their dark halves. The Wicked Ones delight in prayers, for they thrive on fear and uncertainty, and more so on belief. If man believes in good, then he must also believe in evil.'

- The Book of Malborgia

Some of the Wicked Ones may never recover the power they enjoyed before their fall: Akshun'arha, Mother of Vampires, for instance, is little more than a wraith – a sliver of the god she once was. Most of her divine power was bound into the hearts of mummified Ophidians in a bid to escape banishment to the Abyss, but most of these were destroyed. And yet the other Wicked Ones are ever jealous of their weakling sister, for some shards of her power live on in the mortal realm, in the form of the first true vampires. Only Garkan the Black can truly say that he has unleashed such a darkness upon the wider world, in the form of the brutish orcs. Other Wicked Ones reign over vast kingdoms, and the names of Ju'bilex, Barglurath and Vraz'zt are feared – and worshipped – in the mortal world. Kyron, the Dark Smith, has recently grown in prominence, for the very oceans of the mortal world answer to his call; and yet his power ebbs and flows as surely as the tides, and even he pales in comparison to the lord of all evil, Oskan. From hell's heart, Oskan plots and schemes, always looking for a way to exert his malign influence over the mortal realms, whilst keeping one eye on the many intrigues of his 26 Abyssal Lords.



The Sixth Circle

The will of the Wicked Ones is interpreted and enacted by the most powerful of their servants – the Archfiends, Lords of the Sixth Circle, who are the generals of the Abyssal host, creatures of great might, both physical and sorcerous. The Sixth Circle has never been seen by mortal eyes, and if it were it would surely drive them to madness. In these cursed depths, impossible towers of brimstone and gleaming crystal twist into endless skies of fire and blood. Atop monuments made from the remains of vanquished foes sit effigies of nameless gods from forgotten planes, while at their feet, lumbering Molochs and Despoilers train endlessly for war in brutal testing grounds. The servants of the Archfiends endlessly search the Abyss for portals into other planes, particularly the mortal realm, where the sweetmeats of mortal flesh are bountiful. As opposed to the Wicked Ones, the foul Archfiends can leave the Abyss when the signs are right, and will march at the head of their legions to unleash the power of the Abyss upon the world.

‘And behold, the infinite numbers of the Abyss, and the souls of mortals beyond counting, are churned in the endless gears of the Archfiends’ mills. And from this grist of bone and blood and pure malevolence, the armies of the Wicked Ones dance anew to the tune of their masters.’

- The Book of Malborgia

Greatest of the Archfiends is the so-called Lord of Lies, who has risen to prominence by his very deviousness. Such is his cunning that it is said the Lord of Lies is an avatar of Oskan himself; a means for the Father of Lies to escape the Eternal Dark and experience conquest in the mortal realm, for a limited time at least.

No one can know for sure how many Archfiends there are at any given time, for they rise to prominence rapidly, and fall almost as quickly. The true names of these mighty demons are hidden from all but the most depraved geniuses, or else guarded by chaste warriors of pure heart. For should anyone be so insane as to call upon an Archfiend by name, they would as like create a tear in the very fabric of reality, through which all the hordes of the Abyss could flow.

The Fifth Circle

The Fifth Circle is the abode of the Abyssal Champions, crafty Lower Abyssals or mortals that have gained the favour of the Wicked Ones and been elevated to levels of power that most of their kind cannot imagine. These champions draw countless slaves from the lesser circles to construct mighty fortresses and monuments to their strength, exerting cruel power over their one-time brethren.

‘To find favour in the eyes of the Wicked Ones is to be truly blessed.’

- The Book of Malborgia

It is not unknown for a champion to rise as a mighty conqueror, bloated with power, and to take to the mortal world at the head of his own army. However, as the power of the Abyss recedes and the gateways to the mortal realm are shut, the Abyssal Champions turn their violent gaze upon each other. Revelling in the chaos of war, these mighty avatars of the Abyss battle constantly, honing their skills and growing in power. Fortresses topple and are rebuilt in an endless cycle. Champions are defeated, only to return more powerful than ever. This is a realm of unending war and bloodshed, and the Abyssal Champions would have it no other way.

The Fourth Circle

The Fourth Circle is a plane of fire, which feeds the volcanic pits that mark the bounds between the Dark and the mortal realm. Here, the blessed children of Ariagful walk upon conflagrating seas, seeking egress into the world beyond.

‘It is the greatest honour to walk the red-litten halls of the majestic Efreet. They are the gift-givers, the enchanters, the master smiths. In their name the mightiest weapons and the lowliest trinkets are forged, to corrupt the hearts of men, sealing their fates.’

- The Book of Malborgia

This is the domain of the demonic Efreets, who oversee the forging of great artefacts for the armies of the Archfiends. They harness the lava that cascades into their great forges, and produce items of power that are desired by both gods and mortals. Moulded by the furnaces of the infernal pit that they tend, Efreets are suffused with flickering, magical fire. Their very touch can incinerate a mortal where he stands, and when they get the chance to take to a battlefield against mortal foes, they delight in pyrotechnic displays of power, shooting balls of flame into the unfortunate enemy.

Of lesser power, but no less obsessed with fiery conflagration, are the Flamebearers. These lesser Abyssals are saved a fate on the First Circle by the usefulness they represent to the Efreet. When hordes of these creatures are unleashed, the ground upon which they walk burns hot enough to sear flesh and melt armour.



'What fate to live a life of cruelty, only to be found unworthy of a place at the Wicked Ones' table. What exquisite tortures are inflicted by those who have spent a thousand lifetimes perfecting their arts. What joy to suffer, knowing that it aids the cause of the Abyssal Lords.'

- The Book of Malborgia

The Third Circle

The Third Circle is a wellspring of magic and corruption that feeds the other circles, above and below. Endless labyrinths of living stone twist and turn through the underbelly of the Great Pit, and countless torture chambers echo with the screams of the cursed. Here, Succubi and Temptresses practice perverse sorceries on victims plucked from the mortal realm, perfecting their arts, ready to unleash exquisite pain upon the mortal world when next they are called to war. Alongside these alluring, mocking creatures, lumbering, molten, black-skinned Chronneas manipulate time itself, so that the tortured souls can experience their torment for all eternity. In battle, the Chronneas reverse this power, speeding up time all around them, so that mortals wither and die in a heartbeat.

The Second Circle

The Second Circle is a wild land, a blasted waste inhabited by bestial creatures of raw strength and rage. Across plains of ash, beneath a sky of liquid fire, hordes of nomadic horsemen engage in the endless hunt, before feasting upon the day's kill in great halls dedicated to the Wicked Ones. Once mortal, these Hellequin are now corrupted beyond recognition, and ride down the tortured souls of the Abyss for sport, packs of slavering, three-headed Hellhounds racing alongside them.

'Those who embrace fear can fear no more. Those who embrace change can change no more. Those who embrace death will be born again, to fight in service of the Wicked Ones.'

- The Book of Malborgia

When they are summoned to battle, these Abyssal Horsemen gallop through the rift at the head of the Abyssal horde, armed with lance or huge, hell-forged axes. Such is the awesome sight of these dark riders upon the battlefield, that mortals of corrupt intent long to be like them – to wield for themselves just a fragment of such strength, whatever the cost. So it is that the Second Circle has no shortage of warriors to call upon, for the hearts of mortals can ever be swayed by a lust for power.

'Those who believed that the Wicked Ones were defeated when Domivar cast them into the Abyss knew not how wrong they were. There, in a realm beyond realms, a world of the Celestians' own making, the demonic legions thrive, and wait, and grow into a horde unimaginable.'

- The Book of Malborgia

The First Circle

The bulk of the Abyssal denizens are born of the First Circle, which straddles both the mortal realm and the incorporeal domains below. Here, in seemingly limitless numbers, Lower Abyssals, or 'Diaboli', and winged gargoyles are birthed from volcanic pits, breathing in toxic miasma as if it were clean air. These sly, cruel creatures are usually to be found tending to the torture of mortals who have been dragged back to the Abyss, but fight for supremacy amongst themselves constantly, so that when they are summoned to war they have already been tempered by battle. Tiny imps scamper through black caverns, serving the more powerful Abyssal Warriors as a means to survive, or else ending up as dinner for the many predators that lurk in the darkness. For many Lower Abyssals, life in the Abyss is violent and short, with no chance to attain the favour of their masters. There are some, however, possessed of more ambition than to accept their lot. These creatures sometimes strike unholy alliances with the lesser beasts of the First Circle, fusing with their mount to create an altogether new, and utterly freakish, abomination. These 'Harbingers' are often used as swift outriders in the Abyssal army, and success in battle earns them a gift beyond the reach of most Diaboli – promotion to the Second Circle.





The Southern Rift

South beyond the Cracked Lands lies a fractured landscape of parched stone and craters. Some sages maintain this was the site of a powerful kingdom, flattened by a falling comet during the God War, but others whisper that it is a site of evil to rival the Abyss. Those of the Noble Races that have crossed the desert and ventured into the Cracked Lands in recent times are but a handful in number, for there is insufficient water to sustain a camel there. On the far side these travellers assert the land abruptly changes, becoming verdant and green, hills cloaked with jungle and teeming with life.

These assertions are likely the word of madmen, for none who have looked upon those distant lands have ever remained unchanged. If one were to look closely at the throngs of

birds and vast stretches of steaming jungle, one might find all is not well. The creatures of that land are many-eyed, fanged, and unnatural to behold. The trees pulsate with life, their leaves dripping venom, roots drinking blood. And deep within the heart of that place, a great chasm falls away into a blistering hot darkness, falling seemingly forever. This chasm represents the growing danger of the Portals Beneath the World. Given time to grow, to feed on the magical energies of Pannithor, the portals cause such disruption that they become vast rifts in reality, transforming and corrupting all they touch. If left unchecked, these portals will grow into a void worthy of the Abyss, and the legions of the Wicked Ones and the nightstalkers will gain unassailable footholds across the world.



FORCES OF THE ABYSS



DESCENT

High Paladin Gnatius took the knee, the point of his sword pressing firmly into the frozen ground, and muttered a prayer to the Shining Ones. The price of victory had been high. The snow-swirled ruins around him were draped in corpses, both proud Basilean soldiers and thrice-cursed demons alike.

The Abyssals had come from nowhere, hidden by unnatural shadows and the relentless blizzards that had hounded the expedition's every step.

'Lord, we must not linger here.' It was Vaelleri who interrupted the paladin's prayer; the blessed Sister looked about the hilltop ruin furtively.

Gnatius rose. 'And where is "here"?' he asked. 'How did we even come to be here?'

Vaelleri frowned, and looked around the few remaining soldiers of the warband, who now beheld Gnatius with equal confusion and, perhaps, suspicion. 'My Lord?' she said.

'I mean,' said Gnatius, 'just yesterday we were bartering safe passage through the contested Chainway of the warring dwarfs. And yet we are somehow here, leagues away. Look – these carvings. These were made by northmen. We should be south of the Cataract, and yet here we are, nearing the Abyss.'

'My Lord, I mean no disrespect, but North is our direction. These seven moons past crossing the Halpi Mountains, do you... do you not recall?'

'Do not be ridiculous, Sister, I...' and Gnatius stopped. The awkward looks of his men said it all. He remembered so clearly setting out to treat with the warring dwarfs; securing passage through their lands to the lands of Abercarr, to seek out the sorcerers of far Abkhazala. Was that not their mission? To find the Abyssal sorcerer Zhortan, and visit justice upon him?

Gnatius shook his head. Other memories jostled for supremacy in his mind. He remembered discovering a book in the cloisters of some desecrated monastery. He

remembered seeing brother monks, eyes plucked from their heads, driven mad by what they had read. Was that real? Or a dream? It had been in the mountains north of Basilea, had it not? They were to seek out the hellish things that had corrupted those monks...

'My Lord, I say again we must leave,' Vaelleri urged. 'Tell me, Lord, is your mind... compromised?'

Gnatius pulled away from the woman, suddenly angry. 'I am High Paladin of the House of Embers!' he said. 'My mind is gated and barred against the influence of the Wicked Ones. If there is sorcery afoot, I shall uncover it, and destroy it, as I always have.'

Vaelleri was about to say something more, when a great roar pierced the night. The soldiers flinched, drawing swords from befrosted scabbards, gripping halberds that much tighter.

Gnatius saw a deep red glow on the edge of his vision; saw movement in the darkness, through the swirling snow. Guttural roars carried on the cold air towards him. More Abyssals came from every direction, and his force was too sorely depleted to fight so many. Gnatius looked around for inspiration, hoping that the Elohi would send him a sign.

'Here!' Vaelleri yelled, dashing to a trapdoor, half-buried under snow.

Had it been there before? If so, none had seen it during the frenzy of battle. Now, the sight of a way out lifted Gnatius' spirits. He pushed the men towards the trapdoor, urging them to smash it open, praying that it would lead to salvation.

Soon, Gnatius led the way through cramped tunnels hewn from earth and rock, sloping gradually downwards. Men-at-arms lit the way with torches, and perhaps that explained the growing heat, which seemed unnatural in this frozen waste. Dozens of times the passages split, and Gnatius had to pray for guidance, trusting his instincts to lead them on.



They did not know if they marched for hours or days. Every passage began to feel like a slog across an arid desert, and yet each time the end was reached, it felt as though only seconds had passed. Sometimes they would reach a dead end, only to find that the walls parted at their touch, like membranous flesh rather than rock.

Other times, they would see daylight ahead, only to find the path blocked by walls of coal-black rock. The only indication that time had elapsed in any great measure was their exhaustion. One by one, the men fell. Soon, the others would grow too tired to drag their comrades along, and would leave them. When they looked back, the fallen were gone, and moments later, Gnatius found himself wondering if they had ever truly been there, or if he had miscounted the number of his party.

When at last they reached a great door, bound in brass and set in a wall of carved stone, Gnatius realised that only two of them remained. He looked to the blessed Sister Vaelleri. ‘The others...’ he began, ‘what became of them?’

‘What others?’ she asked. ‘This quest was ours alone.’

‘This is... the monastery?’ he asked, with growing uncertainty.

‘Brother Gnatius, what are you talking about?’ Vallaeri asked. ‘This is the end of our journey. It is the lair of Zhortan of Abkhazala, the demonologist. Steel yourself, for behind this door is the one we must slay.’

Gnatius pushed the doubts from his mind as best he could, shaking off the enchantments that had surely beset him. He was here now, with Vallaeri, and all that mattered was the success of their quest. He drew his sword, pushed open the door, and stepped into the chamber beyond.

Gnatius stood upon a vast plain, the air around him shimmering with heat, scorching his flesh. The sky overhead burned with liquid fire. The sounds of battle echoed all around, though the combatants were little more than shadows on the periphery of his vision. Vallaeri was gone – indeed, he wondered if she had ever been there.

Had he dreamt her? He squinted, his vision not what it once was. Before him stood a dark figure, in robes of deepest crimson.

‘Zh... Zhortan?’ Gnatius croaked, his voice robbed of its old steel.

I have many names. The words were unspoken. They formed in Gnatius’ mind, unbidden, all his training as for nothing. Tell me, Gnatius, what have you learned?

‘Learned? I... Enough, sorcerer!’ Gnatius did not know what was happening. He lifted his sword, which felt far too heavy. He saw his own gnarled, weathered hands, and wondered just how long he had been searching for this wizard. But it did not matter – all that mattered was the quest. Gnatius staggered forward, and with a great roar brought down the sword upon his foe.

There was a great burst of flame, a gibbering, maniacal laugh, and red-skinned figures danced impishly all around Gnatius, prodding him with pitchforks, goading him with blasphemous insults. And then came the voice in his mind once more.

The way to the next circle is barred to you. Disappointing, Basilean, most disappointing. And yet, the Wicked Ones are ever merciful, for they will allow you to try again. And again...

Gnatius roared with anger, strength returning to his ancient limbs. He spun, slashing with his sword at his fiery torturers, until the blood-rage clouded his vision, and all was black. He felt the enemy disperse, heard cries and shouts, then finally felt the swell of hard-fought victory.

Gnatius sank to one knee, the point of his sword pressing firmly into the frozen ground, and offered praise to the Shining Ones for his deliverance.

‘Lord, we must not linger here,’ Vallaeri said.

Gnatius opened his eyes and looked about the shattered ruins, masked by the swirl of endless snow.

OVERLORDS OF THE ABYSS

Many times, champions of the Abyss have risen to threaten the mortal worlds. Time and again, they have been turned back. For most champions of the Abyss, defeat signals an end to their brush with greater glories. But for some, a taste of the greater prize to be had beyond the Abyss consumes them, driving them to greatness. These singular lords of the Abyss are favoured by the Wicked Ones, and given every advantage in order to once again take the fight to the mortal realms. The greatest lords of the age are Ba'el and Drech'nok, whose many misdeeds have made their names rightly feared across Pannithor.

Ba'el

Bane of the Mortal Kingdoms, Bringer of Woe, Eater of Realms. The Demon known as Ba'el has gone by many names in his long life. After the God War, he was one of the most prominent and powerful warlords of the Abyssal hordes, and his name was feared wherever it was spoken. Whole civilisations disappeared from the map under the unstoppable advance of his armies, rivers of blood and mountains of the dead the marks of his passing. Finally, he was brought low by the mighty hero known as Valandor, who bound him to an eternal prison beneath the ruins of the last civilisation he had razed – that of the Du'lan Var. Indeed, some secret cults in the darkest parts of the world whisper that Valandor could no sooner kill Ba'el than kill himself, for the two were inextricably bound together. In Basilea, such heresy is punishable by death; in Elvenholme, such talk will earn immediate exile. Whatever the truth, legend tells that Valandor intended to return and destroy Ba'el once he had righted the damage done by him, but the Great Flood claimed him before this could come to pass.



Drech'nok the Destroyer

Drech'nok was one of the most powerful warriors of the Abyss, rising amongst his kindred and marked out even in that hellish realm for his cruelty and delight in slaughter and war. He was finally imprisoned by Valandor himself in one of the massive battles before the Great Flood in the war with Winter, sealed ritually in a sarcophagus and buried deep beneath the skin of the world to wait out eternity. His tomb held for centuries until it was accidentally discovered by a dwarf mining expedition digging for a new mineral seam. Their drill having shattered his ancient prison, Drech'nok slaughtered the dwarfs and escaped back into the world to wreak havoc anew. His years of imprisonment have driven him into a state of permanent, blinding rage, and he is one of the deadliest foes encountered in all the lands.



FORCES OF THE ABYSS



The Call to War

At the signal from the Archfiends, great shadow-bridges are formed between the circles, and the Molochs adopt the role of enforcers, herding the Abyssals together into a mighty demonic horde. Plumes of ash and coruscating arcs of pure magic erupt from the heart of the Abyss. War-horns sound, and the ground trembles as the armies of the Wicked Ones begin their march of conquest. When these creatures venture forth from the pit, they spread like a stain across the surface of the world. Crops wither and die under their tread, and their shadow blights the world until they are banished back to the Dark whence they came, but always at great cost.



Hordes of the First Circle

The denizens of the first circle of the Abyss – which lies the closest to the mortal world – are by far the most numerous. These are the legions of the Wicked Ones, Lower Abyssals. Summoned into existence by their dark masters, these vicious, red-skinned demons are capable fighters, especially when facing their foes en masse. They are semi-corporeal – able to regenerate wounds, even during combat. Cut off one arm, and they will grow another, cut off their head and the leering face will appear in their chest.

The existence of a Lower Abyssal is one governed by constant violence and bloodshed, even amongst themselves. Those who rise to the top of the pile, by dint of cunning, martial prowess or, most likely, a combination of the two, will earn the right to don ceremonial armour and wield more powerful weapons. These elite fighters are known as Abyssal Guard.

Gargoyles are lesser abyssals spawned from the first circle of the Abyss. Unlike the Lower Abyssals, they are dim-witted, little more than flying beasts driven only by their voracious hunger. They follow the armies of their eager kin into battle, darkening the skies like a sinister pall, ready to plunge down on the wounded and stragglers. Unlike most other abyssals, gargoyles seem to be able to maintain their form beyond the Abyss for a considerable length of time and can commonly be found amongst the armies of other devoted races.

The weakest denizens of the Abyss are the Imps. These diminutive homunculi are found on every level of the Abyss, whether as servants, pets, torturers or tasty delicacies. They are chattering, spiteful, vicious little monsters, as likely to slit a warrior's throat as to play a childish prank on them. Although they don't appear threatening at first, large numbers of these malevolent creatures can drag down and overwhelm an opponent many times their size, tearing them to pieces in an orgy of excited slaughter.

In the blasted, desolate wastelands of Tragar, once-human creatures scavenge amongst the blackened rocks feasting on carrion and preying on the lost and weak. These Abyssal Ghouls are lost souls – warriors left on the field of battle, the survivors of villages or towns ravaged by Abyssal incursions, or even depraved individuals, drawn to the Abyss by the voices they hear in the night. Trapped in a hellish existence between the world they once knew and the eternal fires of the Abyss, packs of these feral beings roam the countryside, drawn to war and suffering so that they can feast. The champions of the Abyss have been quick to use them as tools in their infernal crusades – they are ferocious and expendable, ideal traits for any general to have at their disposal.

Hunters of the Second Circle

The great ashen fields of the second circle of the Abyss are home to the Great Abyssal Hunt and the demons and prey that take part in it. An eternal chase across barren, fire-blasted plains, the hunt can last anywhere from minutes to long years, depending on the success of the quarry. These Tortured Souls are run ragged, tortured and herded for miles. They were once mortals who thought they could defy the lure of the Abyss but they were disavowed of this notion. Dragged through the first circle, they have been stripped of all identity, becoming little more than beasts driven by instinct. Ultimately, each and every one is captured and torn to pieces, but this is not the end. Their souls belong to the Wicked Ones now, and so they are resurrected so the great hunt can begin again.

The hunters of the Abyss are many. Hellhounds are vicious demonic beasts with three heads and snapping jaws full of enormous teeth. Used as hunting hounds by the denizens of the second circle, these terrifying beasts are as ferocious as they are ugly and unpredictable – prone to attack anything within reach, whether friend or foe. It is these creatures who hunt down and capture the tortured souls, maiming them so that their Hunt-Masters may deliver the final blow.

The hunt is led by the Hellequins. These heavily armoured knights ride demonic steeds into battle and are armed with long lances to impale their foes on the charge. It is said that they were once mortal but were elevated into the service of the Abyss, giving up everything for demonic power. They see themselves as favoured in the eyes of the Wicked Ones and demonstrate their superiority with acts of violence against any being they meet. In truth, they are slaves to the power of the Abyss, no more favoured than the lowliest Imps.

Hellequin Blood-Masques are the lords of the hunt. Dwelling in the hellish wastes of the second circle of the Abyss, they lead Hellequins and Hellhounds in great hunting parties that run down the tortured souls. When the great hunt marches to war, the Blood-Masques unleash the Tortured Souls to charge the foe head on. Invigorated by their release, these unfortunates drain the souls from any mortals they find, trying to free themselves from eternal torment. It is all too soon when the ranks of cavalry and packs of hounds catch up and drag the Tortured Souls and their victims back into the pit, so the hunt can begin once more.

Tormentors of the Third Circle

The third circle is the realm of the Succubi covens. These infernal matriarchies torture the captives of the Abyss with their basest desires. Each of these cruel beings lures their prey into submission before flaying them alive with razor sharp blades. Despite their appearance, the caress of a succubus is never gentle.



Seductresses are the matriarchs of the Succubi covens. They oversee the eternal torture and delicious pain of the most prized captives in the Abyss. In battle, they can appear as beautiful maids, irresistible to all, and yet in an instant become a fanged harridan bringing swift death to their foes.

While most Succubi use wiles to lure their victims, the elusive Lurkers favour subterfuge. Cloaked in unnatural shadows, these vicious beings follow their prey like an unwelcome desire, delivering the killing blow when their prey least expects it. They can usually be found hiding amongst their sisters, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

This desire to torment isn't just base sadism – the Succubi feed on the pain they cause. It revitalises them and they are desperate to cause more. For every Succubus at the height of their powers, there are a dozen who are malnourished. These larvae take to battle in hordes, falling upon their enemies with savage glee, tearing them limb from limb in an effort to devour even the slightest sustenance.

The other inhabitants of the third circle are the Chrones. It is said that these black-skinned beasts have roamed the world since its creation, finding service with the Wicked Ones during the God War. Around them, time can flow faster or more slowly than elsewhere, and their enemies are often caused to wither and die in a heartbeat as the curse of ages is placed upon them. These enigmatic beings stride amongst the Succubi of the third circle, slowing time to make each torture last an eternity.

Fires of the Fourth Circle

The fourth circle of the Abyss is a blazing magical inferno, where the Efreets can practice their dark arts, summoning the flames of the Wicked One Ariagful and forging weapons for the legions of the Abyss. These sorcerous beings propel themselves on columns of flame and are suffused with such magic that they can summon fire that can melt through armour and flesh alike.

Lower Abyssal Flamebearers, the acolytes of the Efreets, work tirelessly for their masters, slowly learning to summon the all-consuming fires of the Abyss and channel them into fireballs and weapons. A fortunate flamebearer may attract the attention of Ariagful herself. The Wicked One will bless their favoured subject, but the dark god's caress is not kind, filling their souls with power but shattering their sanity. These dangerous warlocks are carried into combat, where their violent outbursts of magic can be directed at the enemy. They issue rambling orders to those around them, but it's doubtful these remarks have little to do with reality.

Champions of the Fifth Circle

An Abyssal Champion is a Lower Abyssal that has distinguished itself under the watchful gaze of the Archfiends – or rarely, the lords of the Abyss themselves. Rewarded with powers far superior to their dark kin, the creature has now become a leader amongst them. Arrogant and violent, they lord their status over others, torturing their enemies with savage glee. The Lower Abyssals fear these masters, but strive for the chance to take their power for themselves and enjoy the same cruelties.

For many Lower Abyssals, life in the Abyss is violent and short, with no chance to attain the favour of their masters. There are some, however, who are possessed of more ambition than their brethren, and who refuse to accept their lot. Striking pacts with lesser beasts of the first or second circles, they fuse their essences to create an altogether new and freakish abomination. These Harbingers are more powerful than many Lower Abyssals, but do not enjoy the same favour as the champions. Other abyssals still treat them with fear and envy, however, aspiring to usurp them if given the chance.

A new abyssal now stalks the plane of the fifth circle. The demon prince Scudku-z'luk, spawned by the unholy rituals of the Gnorrr, has joined the ranks of the infernal host. It has carved out its own realm amongst the other champions, vying for power and followers. The Abyssal Champions despise this newcomer with a loathing fuelled by the fires of hell, holding it as usurper to their position – a strange concept considering the champions' own ascendance to power. The only thing preventing the agents of evil from attempting to defeat and banish Scudku-z'luk completely is that the Wicked Ones have not done so themselves. Disturbingly, it seems that the lords of the Abyss approve of the new demon prince of rats.

Lords of the Sixth Circle

The most favoured of the Wicked Ones are the Archfiends of the Abyss – the only demons capable of communing with the Wicked Ones directly. Grotesquely muscled, they tower over the denizens of the other circles, commanding them as supreme generals and warlords. These winged monstrosities are lords of destruction, capable of decimating mortal regiments on the battlefield.

Their lesser kin are the Fiends and Molochs, who act as enforcers on behalf of the Archfiends. Molochs are large lumbering beasts, comparable in size to an ogre. They tend to be solitary creatures, as they are barely capable of containing their rage. Occasionally they band together into small groups when war calls, but these pacts never last for long before another bout of infighting breaks out. They are kept in

line by the Fiends, who are far stronger than the Molochs themselves. The Fiends are feared by all abyssals save for the Archfiends, for they are the dark princes of the Abyss. While the Archfiend leads in the matters of war, it is the Fiends who see to the continuous activities within the Abyss, from the forging of weapons from the fourth circle, to the torture of captives by the third circle. Nothing happens within the Abyss without their notice, and even the slightest failure to follow commands is punished severely.

The fate of these unfortunates is paraded for all to see. The Despoilers, the fused remains of those demons who have drawn the ire of the Fiends, are insane abominations. They are led into battle alongside the Molochs, their only fate to die in battle amidst the enemy's ranks and be reborn in their cursed form in the bowels of the Abyss. There is no escape from their punishment, just an eternity of slaughter and suffering.

Ba'su'su the Vile

Despite his nature as a halfbreed created by the Abyssal Dwarfs, Ba'su'su, the Lord of Gargoyles, can often be found soaring above their armies with the other gargoyles. It is the habit of the gargoyles to feed upon the dead and the dying, whether friend or foe, but when Ba'su'su is in their midst, they are cowed into hissing submission. It is Ba'su'su the Vile's right to feed first and so none of his winged kin may slake their hunger for flesh until he himself has partaken. Ba'su'su commands great flocks of these lesser abyssals, although he doesn't seem to have any kind of relationship with the other denizens of the Abyss.

Mau'ti-bu-su

Mau'ti-bu-su revels in the torture and destruction of her victims. She will often stay on the battlefield long after the fighting is finished to find those unfortunate souls who are clinging onto the last gasps of life. However, rather than speeding up their demise, she takes great pleasure in prolonging their agony before sending them into the fires of the Abyss.

With her skills of deception and her ability to disguise herself as a fair maid, many have fallen into Mau'ti-bu-su's wicked web. Most will be forced to endure months, if not years, of horrific torture that is accompanied by the cruel cackle of their captor. When their body finally gives way, their soul is still locked into a life of torment as one of Mau'ti-bu-su's desperate slaves.

The Well of Souls

The screaming void at the heart of the Abyss given form, it is hard to tell if the Well of Souls is sentient or merely a force of destruction. It tears across the battlefield as a wailing vortex, ripping the very souls from mortal foes and sucking them into the Abyss.

Manifestation of Ba'el

Bane of the Mortal Kingdoms, Bringer of Woe, Eater of Realms. The Wicked One known as Ba'el has gone by many names in his long life. After the God War, he was one of the most prominent and powerful warlords of the abyssal hordes and his name was feared wherever it was spoken. Whole civilisations disappeared from the map under the unstoppable advance of his armies, rivers of blood and mountains of the dead the marks of his passing. Finally, he was brought low by the mighty hero known as Valandor, who bound him beneath the ruins of the last civilisation he had razed. Legend tells that Valandor intended to return and destroy Ba'el once he had righted the damage done by him, but the Great Flood claimed him before this could come to pass.

It was the machinations of the necromancer Mortibris that created a manifestation of Ba'el in the mortal world. Although the demon served the necromancer for a time, Ba'el was slave to no one. Since that time, he has become a scourge upon the world once more, leading armies of abyssals against the cities and strongholds of the mortal races. Although his corporeal form has been destroyed many times, wherever there is slaughter in the name of the Abyss, Ba'el can become manifest. Surely, it can only be a matter of time before he breaks his bonds entirely and regains his full strength.



The Abyssal Crusade

After the God War had scarred the very earth, vomiting forth strange new races and rendering evil into flesh, and the spite of Winter had consumed fully half the globe, drowning ancient and noble kingdoms, came a time of relative peace. The marauding hordes of orcs and goblins nibbled at the edges of civilisation. The twisted inhabitants of the Abyss would occasionally venture forth to wreak havoc on the world, before inevitably stretching themselves too thin and too far from their realm and being driven back. Diplomatic discord would occasionally spill over into minor conflict. But still, the soil of Pannithor rested under a peace of sorts, a natural equilibrium that saw civilisations flourish and grow, and the cycle of life resume.

Then came the Necromancer.

Mortibris was not the first of his kind. Nor was he the sole architect of the dark times that would follow. But it was his pursuit of the Portal of Khul-Harakh, and the subsequent opening of the seals on the Entrance to the Underworld, which began the dark times. Human scholars had referred to the previous age as the Age of Conflict. They would soon discover how inadequately framed their experience had been.

From the moment Mortibris and Ba'el unleashed their hellish crusade upon the mortal world, nothing would ever be the same. Simmering tensions between the civilised races were exacerbated in the wake of the conflict, with civilisations attempting to capitalise on gains made, and territories occupied. The suspicion with which the dwarfs of the Golloch Empire and the humans of Basilea viewed each other worsened. The elves of Walldeep saw the need for their kind to take a more active role in the affairs of the world beyond their walls once more, a decision that did not sit well with the other races. And the ancient kingdoms such as Ophidia found themselves once more drawn onto the world's stage, expected to take sides and engage in endless politicking, which distracted them from their true work. The bestial orcs were agitated by the conflict, pushing further against the edges of civilisation as they sensed weakness and opportunity. The Abyssal Dwarfs rallied to launch a mighty assault from their twisted kingdom, and the Twilight Kin sensed discord amongst their kindred elven peoples, and wondered at how best to exploit it.

The Necromancer's meddling with the Portals Beneath the World had its own effect. Now that one portal had been opened, and the unearthly energies had been allowed to vomit forth into the real world, the rest of the network pulsed once again with urgent life. Strange sights were seen in many places – children would be born with strange deformities or unnatural gifts, and weird creatures would be spotted at the fringes of cities and towns. The Abyss, ever turbulent, was beaten into a frenzy of activity by the campaign of Ba'el and the possibilities that the network presented. As divided as the noble races were, they would need to unite once again to meet the threats to come in the years ahead, lest they all perish.

The Wicked Ones gazed up from the Seventh Circle, and poured their favour upon Ba'el, for truly he had found a way to crush the world of mortals. The Abyssal Crusade had truly begun.

The Abyssal Incursions

Under the leadership of Ba'el, the Abyssal hordes have come to represent the greatest threat to Pannithor since the Wicked Ones instigated the God War. The Portals Beneath the World twist and snake through the fabric of the world, so that incursions – small and large – can occur anywhere, at any time. And the power of the Abyssals grows with each victory, until the horde attains such momentum that the fabric of reality tears, and a gibbering horde pours through it. The Green Lady herself, combining her magic with that of the Thuul Mythicans of the Trident Realm, only just stopped the latest assault on the world, quenching the flames of the Abyss, albeit only for a short time. Nothing can extinguish the raging fire at the heart of the hell-scar in the earth and the Abyss is stirring again, a fresh horde of demonic evil biding its time, getting ready to strike.

It is a horde that concerns itself only with the end of mortals, and the burning of the world.

GOBLINS



*Grizgul eye-poker
master spitter of the shadow stabbers tribe*



It is easy to dismiss the diminutive goblin as little more than a weakling pest. But these cousins of the orcs are as cunning and cruel as they are small, and their numbers are now so vast that they are more than merely pests: they are a plague.

No scholar has yet offered a convincing account of the moment or method by which goblins came into being. The fabric of their history is so closely woven into that of orcs as to be all but indistinguishable, and few early records exist where one is mentioned without the other. Some suggest, rather uncharitably, that Garkan the Black created goblins with 'whatever was left over' after orcs were made - and perhaps, given their renowned propensity for scavenging and invention, this slur would not displease them. What they lack in stature or strength they more than make up for in sheer numbers, ingenuity and savage cruelty. Many a brave warrior has been drowned in a flood of vicious green-skinned fighters as they overwhelm their chosen target.

Goblins are scrawny creatures, no taller than a dwarf and considerably slighter. Their ears and noses are grotesquely large, lending them a well-developed sense of hearing and smell, the better to notice approaching danger. Their beady red eyes are full of malign intelligence, and flicker about furtively, always scanning for danger, something to steal, or an easy target to kill.

As a group, an instinctive and almost rodent-like ability to propagate drives the goblins to a constant, frenetic level of activity and fills them with a boundless energy for progressing the swarm ever onwards. The trouble now is that goblins have been overlooked for so long by the noble races of the land, that their population is reaching breaking point. If left unchecked for much longer, the dam will break and the goblins could spill across the continent in a tidal wave of violence.

Thankfully for everyone else, goblins are prone to short tempers, mindless brutality and petty spitefulness. They are keen to exact swift vengeance on their foes - whether perceived or real - and this means that although a goblin army will occasionally swell to terrifying numbers, it will quickly fall apart due to in-fighting and squabbling. A goblin commander spends as much time keeping an eye on their warriors - keen to avoid a knife in the back - as they do on their rivals across the battlefields. As a result, their decisions in battle are often more concerned with keeping themselves safe, than defeating their opponent.

Unlike the predominantly destructive and chaotic evil races of the land, the goblin race is a great maker of things. Perhaps fuelled largely by their own physical inadequacies or hierarchical shortcomings, they apply their quick and energetic minds to the conception of occasionally baffling contraptions. So-called 'Gadjits' toil away in crude workshops before emerging astride some bizarre contraption usually designed to cause harm in unthinkable ways, or to otherwise levy some sinister confrontational advantage. Unlike great engineers like the dwarfs or halflings, goblin machines lack true craftsmanship and their designs are just as likely to cause damage to their own troops as they are the enemy.



Goblin Clans

There is no one goblin kingdom. Instead, large clans are scattered across the land, each with their own self-elected (and often tyrannical) leader. It is not uncommon for these miniature megalomaniacs to declare themselves king – and there can often be multiple goblin ‘kings’ ruling at any one time. Typically the kings will spend the majority of their short-lived reign fighting other goblin kings or hiding away from would-be attackers. If any goblin king ever managed to survive the petty squabbling and back stabbing to unite the clans in a common goal, it would be a dark day indeed for the other races.

The problem is that it’s impossible to tell how many goblin clans there are. This is because goblins are incredibly proficient at tunnelling; preferring to hide away from the world in the safety of caves or vast, underground warrens. In fact, some say the goblins rival the dwarfs themselves in their ability to form subterranean dwellings – though they never say it in earshot of a dwarf, if they value their lives.

Scant knowledge of these goblin settlements has been pieced together from the ramblings of prisoners that have managed to escape the cavernous, maze-like burrows. Unlike dwarf holds that have an organised structure, a goblin’s underground city is seemingly built at random. Narrow tunnels will criss-cross each other before coming to an unexpected end, while others will spin off in random directions back toward the surface or head even deeper underground. It is likely to be the goblins’ nervous, skittish energy that leads them to constantly start new projects, without completing whatever task they were previously working on.

There are some consistencies in each gloomy burrow, however. All have a large communal area where the goblins retire after a furious period of tunnelling or raiding. Hundreds of greenskins will huddle together when sleeping – the sheer volume of individuals seemingly giving them a comforting sense of safety. At the heart of this chamber you will find the appointed king and their most loyal Biggits, while goblins held in low regard and any prisoners must sleep toward the edge of the hall. It is thought the king sleeps in the very centre so that in the case of an attack, the invaders will need to wade through the other sleeping goblins before reaching their leader.

When the goblins are not sleeping, the tunnels are alive with the thrumming of machinery or the booms of distant explosions. Deep within the chambers, you will find the crude workshops of the Gadjits and Banggits. These are kept away from the sleeping quarters, just in case of accidental blasts from unstable experiments. While the Gadjits enjoy building, the Banggits delight in destroying things in the most spectacularly violent and explosive way possible.

It is likely the goblins discovered the destructive nature of black power weapons in their many skirmishes with dwarfs. While the dwarfs use black powder in their intricately designed weaponry, goblins prefer to pack in as much as possible and hope it doesn’t blow their face off.

Although goblins excel in digging, they lack the necessary powers of concentration and determination for farming or cultivating livestock. As such, large numbers regularly flood from hidden entrances to their tunnels, to raid the nearby surroundings. These infrequent, surprise attacks can quickly overwhelm unsuspecting settlements and comparisons to immense plagues of locusts are not uncommon. The goblins will strip the land of whatever they find: crops, animals, weapons, building materials, etc., before hauling them back to their underground lair.



The Goblin who would be King

The only goblin to come close to becoming a true goblin King is Grogger Split-tooth. From humble beginnings as the commander of a Rabble regiment, Grogger showed a true talent for leadership – something normally lacking among his fellow goblins. As Grogger said himself, other goblins ‘actually listen’ when he speaks and seem to (mostly) do what he tells him. During the war against the Abyss, Grogger came close to conquering the Forest of Galahir and it was only a desperate last-minute defence by the Forces of Nature that drove him out. But Grogger is undeterred. After the defeat he retreated to lick his wounds but, more importantly, he’s been carefully plotting his revenge and the Forest of Galahir will be the first place to feel his wrath.



Goblin Magic

Unlike some of the other races of Pannithor, goblins do not show a natural affinity for magic. Their skittish nature and malicious minds make it almost impossible for them to study the secrets of spellcasting in any great depth. As such, magic users among a goblin clan are outnumbered by the likes of Gadjits or Banggits.

Occasionally though, a goblin will show an interest in the arcane arts – although it is not clear whether this interest develops because they can sense the winds of magic blowing across Pannithor. During the many goblin raids into civilised settlements, they will steal any magical artefacts, spellbooks or trinkets they find, dragging them back to the warren with excited glee.

The problem is that without the proper training, these would-be magicians are unable to control the magical items they find. They will drink mysterious potions, read banished incantations or simply disappear into a ball of blazing light. It is not uncommon for entire clans to be wiped out by a goblin accidentally unleashing a particularly destructive spell.

As such, these goblins – known as a Wiz – are treated with acute suspicion by their fellow greenskins and treated as outsiders. Many are not allowed inside the communal area and are banished to nearby caves. Left to their own devices though, some will gain some a modicum of control over their burgeoning magical abilities and are quickly drafted into the ranks of a goblin army... whether they want to or not.

However, an enemy commander can normally tell where a Wiz is among the goblin army. This is because the other goblins tend to give the Wiz a wide berth during battle, just in case they're overwhelmed by the powerful magic coursing through their body and dramatically explode in a shower of body parts and unstable energy.

Goblins at War

Because of their cowardly nature, goblins tend to avoid all-out war, instead preferring sneak attacks or moonlit raids on unsuspecting villages. However, their seemingly relentless ability to propagate results in an increasing demand for supplies. Sometimes small factions will break off from the tribe to set up their own warren, which temporarily decreases the ever-growing need. Other times a leader that still has control of his followers will convince them to muster their forces and march to war, which causes its own problems.

Although goblins show a propensity for crafting ingenious, though unreliable, war machines, they have little skill when it comes to smithing weapons or armour. Instead they must rely on whatever they've scavenged from previous raids. As a result, a goblin army is a ramshackle mix of ill-fitting armour, filthy jerkins, rusty blades and tired-looking bows. It would almost be an amusing sight, if they weren't so potentially lethal.

Another issue for a beleaguered goblin commander is trying to get his troops to follow simple commands. There's a saying in Pannithor when trying to organise an unruly crowd that it's like 'giving orders to a rabble' – the term commonly used to describe an unwieldy regiment of goblins. Left to their own devices, the edgy greenskins will simply run away from battle, start fighting among themselves, get distracted by immediately collecting the spoils of war, or just charge wildly into the opposition without the slightest hint of battle tactics.

When they can be safely goaded into combat, the goblins mass together in huge hordes. With so many other goblins packed around them, a kind of battle frenzy overcomes their normally timid nature. They charge into battle, violently swinging their rusty weapons and screeching foul battle cries. Many goblins die on the initial charge, as they're struck by the swords or spears of eager comrades.

Those that do make it to the enemy, quickly engulf them in a blur of gnashing teeth and wild slashes. Unlike the dwarfs or elves, who rely on hours of military drilling and battle planning, goblins simply trust sheer numbers to overwhelm their foe. The problem is that if left unchecked, the goblins could grow in large enough numbers to overwhelm Pannithor itself – something to send a chill down the spine of even the hardest warrior.







Green Tide

Although thankfully a rare sight, the swarming mass of a goblin army on the march is akin to witnessing a green sea sweeping across the land. And just like a flood, any village or town unlucky enough to get in its way is washed away by its unrelenting destructive force.

Goblin armies are made up of disparate clans from across Pannithor, typically brought together by the delusions of an individual goblin determined to rise to the lofty position of goblin king. Goaded and pushed into battle by their superiors, what goblins (severely) lack in training and tactics, they make up for in sheer strength of numbers.

However, the clan-like structure of goblin society means that in-fighting and squabbling quickly breaks out among the ranks. What starts as a mighty wave of ferocity quickly descends into chaos as regiments begin bickering and wrangling for supremacy over clans they feel are lower on the pecking order.

At the heart of any goblin army, you'll find scores and scores of Spitters. Armed with crude bows, the Spitters may not be accurate, but when you're firing hundreds of arrows across the battlefield you'll hit the enemy at least now and again. Being a Spitter is actually a sought after position among the goblins – mainly because you get to stay away from the enemy!

Of course, occasionally a goblin will (unfortunately) need to engage in melee combat. In this case, they will scavenge whatever weaponry they can find and group together in large, unwieldy swarms. The resulting Rabble is chaotic but potentially deadly. Buoyed by the presence of so many other goblins, a kind of battle fever overwhelms the Rabble and it will head into combat with a remarkable eagerness. Unfortunately they tend to run away with equal relish.

Unlike a Rabble, some goblins take their combat training a little more seriously, i.e. they learn where they should be aiming the pointy bit. In this case the pointy bit is on a large stick they aim in the general direction of the enemy and hope for the best while marching forward. The Sharpsticks aren't exactly elite troops, but they get the job done.

Although mostly cunning, furtive, little creatures, occasionally goblins will grow to almost the same size as a man. Unfortunately, the extra height comes at an intellectual price. Luggits are slow-witted and clumsy, compared to their devious brethren, but their bulk means they can wield ridiculously oversized weapons with potentially devastating results.

Beasts of Battle

The march of a goblin army will be accompanied by the inhuman howls, roars and growls of all manner of weird and wonderful beasts. Clearly recognising their own frailty in combat, goblins will capture the most vicious beasts they can find. Snaggits will scout ahead of the main army, trapping any unwitting animal that falls victim to their cruel snares. Those that don't end up being poked and prodded into battle will end up in the cooking pot instead.

One of the most common sights accompanying a goblin horde are groups of Trolls. These large, dim-witted beasts are typically solitary creatures that roam the countryside eating livestock and generally causing a nuisance. Attracted by the cacophony of goblins on the march, Trolls will leave their caves in the hope of finding a good meal. That could be enemies overwhelmed by the greenskins, or sometimes the goblins themselves.



Occasionally a Troll will show an unexpected appetite for warfare – something the goblins will quickly learn to exploit. Given the 'responsibility' of commanding the other Trolls, a Troll Bruiser will bellow unintelligible orders at their lesser kin and bash them over the head if they don't do it quickly enough.

The most abundant ally of the goblin is a foul, stinking creature known as a Mawbeast. These vicious balls of knotted fur and gnashing teeth roam the Steppe in large packs, devouring anything that's too slow to outrun them – including other Mawbeasts. However, they can be trained, thanks to a mix of tainted meat and sharp clouts over the nose when they try to bite their handler's face off.

Although never exactly docile, a Mawbeast can be kept on the right side of 'bloodthirsty, indiscriminate killer' just long enough to strap a makeshift saddle to its back. A goblin will then quickly clamber on and hope for the best. Fleabag Riders – as they're known – make perfect shock troops in a goblin army. They'll make quick flank charges and cause havoc among the enemy lines.



As well as standard cavalry, Fleabag Rider Sniffs will also be sent ahead of the main army as ranged scouts. Even at the best of times, a goblin archer isn't known for their pinpoint accuracy, so when they're precariously strapped to several pounds of manic Mawbeast, it's often best to just close their eyes and hope for the best. Hitting the target is an unexpected bonus.

Along with their lust for violence, goblins have an unusual yearning for speed. As a result, groups of them will often pile into a ramshackle cart before attaching a group of unwitting Mawbeasts to the front and whipping them into a frenzy. The life of a Fleabag Chariot rider is typically short lived as they either smash uncontrollably into the enemy or the chariot speeds off a cliff or into a bog. Bizarrely this doesn't discourage the other goblins as much as you would think.

Sometimes the goblins will come across a Mawbeast that even poisoned meat and vicious swipes won't tame. After trying to cook the Mawbeasts - with mostly stomach-churning results - the goblins realised it was much better to herd these wild animals into battle. The Mawbeast Pack is an unwieldy mob of furious fur that's barely kept under control by a desperate handler.

Goblins can use their quick wits and sly tongues to convince Giants to join their armies. Having a Giant among the ranks is considered a great achievement for any wannabe goblin king and each would-be monarch strives for bigger and stronger humanoids. Unfortunately, this doesn't always go according to plan, as was the case with Durgurt the Brute. Durgurt was so big that, when felled by a Dwarf Jarrun Bombard, he fell on the goblin forces and completely wiped them out, including King Gropp.

Alongside a Giant, the other great coup for a goblin king is the taming of a Slasher. A king's most trusted, skilled and experienced Snaggits are sent into a Slasher cave to tame these powerful reptiles. When they don't come back out, the king sends in any old goblin to try and subdue it. Eventually the Slasher will be dragged from its den, blinking and confused about the Sharpstick Thrower now clumsily strapped to its back.

Gadjits and Gizmos

The furtive, constant fiddling of highly strung goblins means they're always looking for something to keep their sly fingers busy. As a result, they're naturally inclined to build bizarre but potentially devastating contraptions. In a goblin camp, the workshops of the Gadjits spew out all manner of pungent clouds and ear-splitting explosions, before a ramshackle war machine invariably rumbles from their depths.

Their propensity for inventiveness is matched by their talents for digging long, winding tunnels. Incredibly complex burrowing machines are used to quickly create goblin settlements underneath unsuspecting cities above ground. In war these digging machines are converted into lethal death engines known as Mincers. Built to withstand underground explosions and cave-ins, a Mincer's might is a sight to behold in battle.



Thanks to the goblin's desire to stay as far from the enemy as possible, a Gadjit's creative talents are regularly used to make all manner of powerful long-range war machines. Although crude compared to the engineering of the dwarfs, the boulder-chucking Big Rocks Thrower and the harpoon-launching Sharpstick Thrower can quickly devastate ranks of infantry.

Although goblins invariably prefer the extreme long-range of the larger war machines, occasionally they'll have to wield a War Trombone. These modified ogre blunderbusses are too heavy for a goblin to lift so are mounted on wheels instead. They're then crammed with whatever ammo a goblin can find - old bullets, bits of armour, nails, Mawbeast dung, etc. - before being unleashed on the enemy.

It was only a matter of time before an aspiring Gadjit created the Mawpup Launcher, a contraption that combines two of a goblin's favourite things: Mawbeasts and artillery. Seeing a pup hurtling toward them is often an enemy's first sign of a Mawpup Launcher's deployment. Following that initial furious flurry of teeth and claws, they tend to keep their eyes cautiously trained heavenward for the remainder of the battle.

Somewhat counterintuitively, a goblin's love for making things is matched only by its love for destroying things with spectacularly explosive results. Chief among these pyromaniacs is the Banggit. Armed with an array of volatile and incredibly dangerous explosives, a Banggit is very likely to blow itself up in fantastic (but deadly) style. However, when their grenades do hit the enemy, the results are remarkable (and messy).

The culmination of a goblin's explosive enthusiasm is the Goblin Blaster. Packed with the most volatile explosives and pushed by two unsuspecting beasts of burden, the cart is then propelled toward a foe as fast as possible. The resulting magnificent, earth-shaking explosion is met with a resounding cheer from the gathered goblins – or screams if they're in the blast area.

At the height of goblin technology is a cobbled together flying machine called a Winggit. A seemingly random jumble of wood, metal and bloody-minded goblin determination, the Winggit is a contraption that really shouldn't be able to take off the ground. But when it does, it provides an eye in the sky and rains bombs upon its foes.

Leading from Behind

Rising through the ranks of a goblin army is typically a story of back-stabbing, treachery and betrayal. However, the benefit is clear to any aspiring goblin leader – you get to stay at the back and shout the commands really loudly.

Being the nastiest, fiercest goblin around might not sound like much of an achievement, but Biggits still manage to command a grudging respect from their lesser brethren. They can be found on any battlefield where a goblin army fights, 'leading' the charge by standing behind everyone and pointing a lot.

The strangest goblins in any warband – and that really is saying something – are those dressed in Wiz robes. They seem to walk the line between genius and insanity, but their magical prowess cannot be denied. Many an enemy has met a cruel and unusual demise as a direct result of underestimating one of these diminutive sorcerers.

Although many goblins claim to aspire toward becoming a Biggit and leading their own warband, the more truthful of their number would admit that the life of a Flaggit is infinitely preferable. True, you have to lug a heavy Wiz-banner around, but the rest of your job mainly involves running away and screaming loudly.



Goblins are renowned for being incredibly sneaky, so the fact that even other goblins consider the Stinggit to be particularly crafty is a sign of their dark arts. These lone operators earn a lucrative wage as assassins for hire – something that certainly comes in handy for any aspiring Biggit or king. Of course, they've just got to hope their chosen target hasn't got deeper pockets than them!

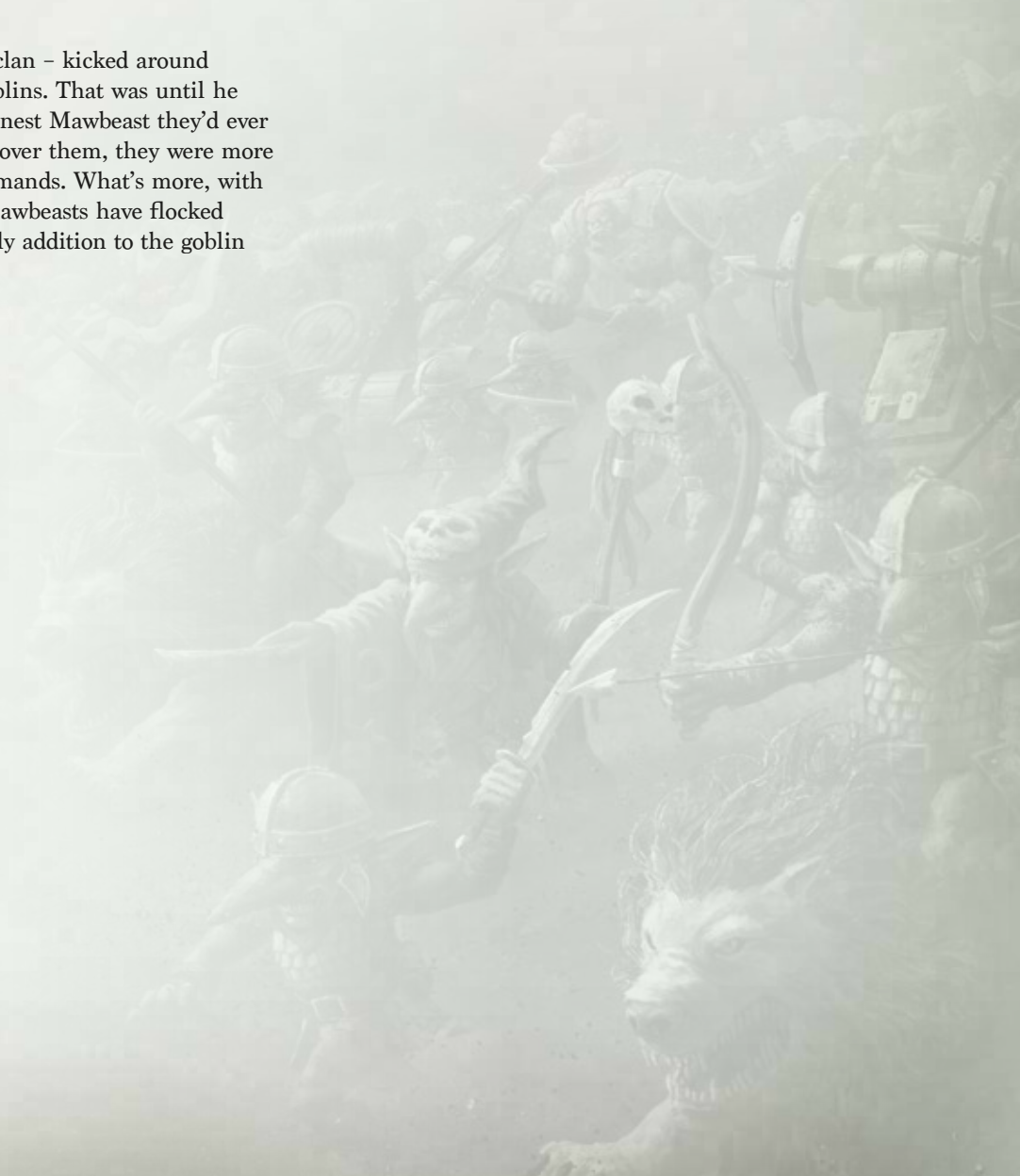
The pinnacle of goblin society is to be crowned as Goblin King. The term 'king' however is a catch-all for any self-imposed goblin monarch, as no one is sure how to tell the goblin sexes apart. Queen Grizzle of Glimmer is one such example. An infamous tyrant, she met an untimely demise after accidentally launching herself from her own Sharpstick Thrower, before being trampled by a Slasher and blown up by a Banggit.

Magwa & Jo'os

Magwa was always the runt of his clan – kicked around and abused by the other, bigger goblins. That was until he captured Jo'os, the biggest and meanest Mawbeast they'd ever seen. Suddenly with Jo'os looming over them, they were more than happy to follow Magwa's commands. What's more, with the alpha male at his side, other Mawbeasts have flocked to join Magwa, making him a deadly addition to the goblin ranks.

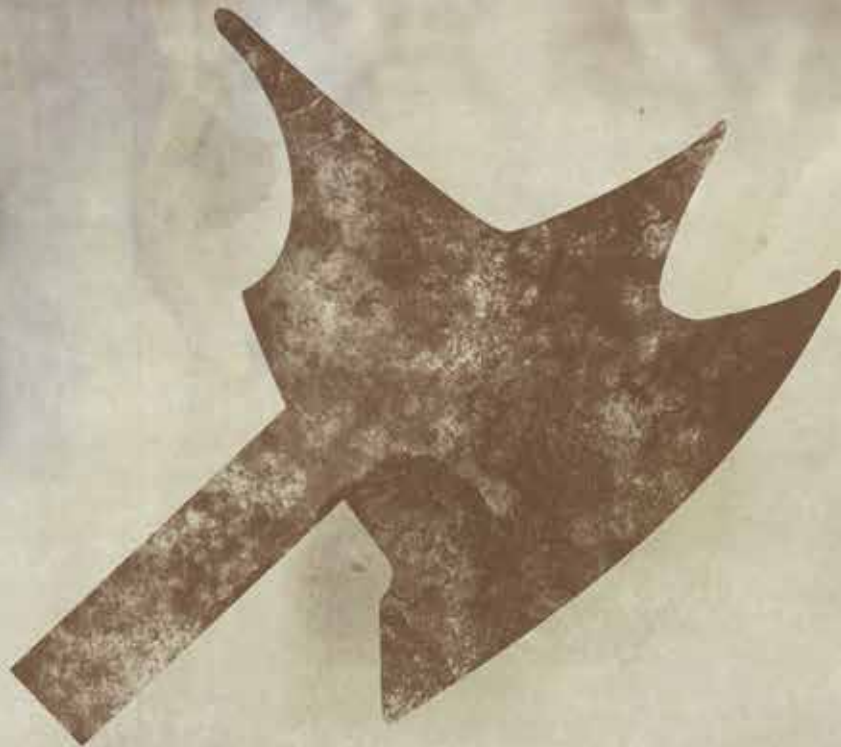
Kuzlo & Madfall

Kuzlo the Wiz and his steed Madfall are an unlikely combination. The giant reptiles that inhabit the underground caves of the Wailing Spires are more likely to eat any goblins that wander into their nests rather than be ridden by them. However, Kuzlo formed an unlikely bond with one of these creatures after he closely avoided throwing Madfall's egg into a steaming cauldron containing his latest potion. He raised Madfall (initially to use him as more potion ingredients) but quickly realised he was handy to have around as he had a tendency to eat Kuzlo's enemies. On the battlefield the combo of Kuzlo's unpredictable magic and Madfall's unpredictable tendency to eat anyone that gets too close is a dangerous one... to foes and allies alike.





ORCS



CHARANOK the Impaler
krudger of the splintered bones tribe



Orcs are brutish, evil beings, created for war. They delight in destruction. All their essence is bent towards violence, mind and body. They despise beauty and goodness, finding their very presence insufferable, and do all they can to burn what is right in the world to ash.

There is, perhaps, no creature on Pannithor more vile than the orc. While all other species in Pannithor have reached their native disposition through a process of natural reactions over thousands of years, orcs were made as they are; designed to be the perfect living weapons of a god mad on bloodshed, whose only aim was to see the world burn.



It was at the height of the God War when the Wicked One, Garkan the Black, looked upon the brutal mire which the face of Pannithor had become and thought he would add to that misery with a legion of man-beasts no other army could hope to best. There is some debate today of exactly when and how Garkan began his obscene experiments. Even the august Academy of Theologians in Basilea cannot agree on the precise details. Whether Garkan forged his creations hoping to swamp the forces of his kin's lighter aspects and bring a swifter victory, or to tip the balance as the dark gods began to lose the initiative. Or perhaps it was simply death and violence itself that was the ambition.

In fashioning the orcs, the dark god of smiths bent all of his talents to seeking out the perfect amalgamation of martial prowess and uncontrollable aggression. There was not a people in Pannithor he did not extract some slice of character from, for even the brightest, most peaceable creature possesses some sliver of darkness and violence. With the skill only a god could possess, Garkan disassembled these myriad creatures, and reformed them into something stronger, and fouler.

Garkan toiled at his soul forges and horrific flesh anvils, working malice, muscle and hate into living forms until, after 900 days and nights, he drew forth from the Abyss the first of orc kind. Their component parts were unidentifiable; they were driven near blind with pain and filled with unquenchable rage. It was this creature that Garkan unleashed, ensuring the world would never be the same again.

If the orc was intended to tip the war in favour of the dark gods, they failed. However, if death and blood was the objective, orcs have performed admirably. During the God War, hundreds of thousands of iron-shod orc feet pounded the fields of Pannithor, driven by the whips of their masters and the urge, nay, the need to see living things die.

The end of the God War was not the end of the orc race. Free of their insidious masters the orcs dispersed, the natural flow of their movements taking them to the lonely, wild places of the world. Winter's retreat scraped much of northern Pannithor clean, leaving the orc tribes alone in a sea of virgin grassland where they may have remained until nature took its course and they slowly killed each other off in internecine wars. Had that happened, Pannithor would be a very different world. Instead, something happened that would transform the orcs into a world-threatening force, or, more accurately, a plague.

How the orcs learned to multiply is a mystery to even the greatest scholars although it assumed basic biology takes part. The beasts themselves seem to make no real distinction between male or female, there is simply 'orc', and Garkan employed techniques unholy and profane in their creation. Some myths have orcs that sprout from the ground like

wheat; others say that they grow from discarded body parts. Others still point to more sorcerous means. It is thought that perhaps Talus, the dark aspect of the Celestian Hermanas often linked to lies and mischief, may be responsible for imparting the secret of reproduction to the orcs. If this is true, it is a trick rued by all races on Pannithor.

Orc Physiology

Physically, orcs are tremendously imposing. Their bodies are comparable in basic silhouette and size to a large man or even ape, though the details differ vastly. They are broad and hunched of shoulder, perhaps twice the weight of a grown man, with long, heavily muscled arms possessed of animal strength. Their bodies are hugely muscled and powerful, covered in tough green hide, akin to the leather armour of some steppes warriors. Orcs have long faces and jutting, fang-lined maws. Above tiny, snout-noses, red eyes glimmer in deep sockets like the Abyss wrought in miniature. Their capacity for pain and privation is unmatched by any other race in the world. They can march for weeks on little to no sustenance, fight for days with no sign of tiring and survive wounds that should rightly kill them. Their life-span is limited, however, and most but for the greatest of their kind live for only a dozen or so years, although studies are inconclusive as to whether this is through violence, the body burning out with so much pent up aggression, or natural causes.

Orcs are by nature lazy creatures, but suitably motivated by the promise of war or the slaver's lash, they can march without pause for day upon day, their shuffling run eating up leagues eagerly. Every aspect of their repulsive physicality is crafted to keep them alive and fighting as long as possible, from their unnaturally resilient flesh to their thick, green-black blood which flows slowly through their veins and means even the most grave of wounds will not slow them.

An orc's tongue is clumsy, ill-suited to speech, and their language is harsh and guttural, full of rasping and barking. Their minds are as narrow and ugly as their features; their greatest preoccupation is the invention of ever-greater torments for the innocent and good. It is easy to mistake their inability to concentrate and propensity for sudden, mindless violence as stupidity, but orcs are far from stupid. From their father god Garkan the Black they have inherited an affinity for forging; and though their creations are crude and ugly to others' eyes, they are strong and functional. Their weapons are heavy and rough-hewn, often made of black iron, and honed to a razor-sharp edge. They make little use of armour, largely because they do not need it, except to make themselves look more imposing in battle. Orcs are capable of awesome feats of smithing and engineering when inspired – the might of their weapons is surpassed only by the twisted ingenuity of their instruments of torture.

Orc Tribes

Orcs band together into nomadic tribes of varying size. The smallest may contain a single warband of a few dozen warriors, while the largest are thousands strong. The greatest concentration of orcs roam the open plains and foothills to the north, where a fight is never far away, either with their own kind, the ogres across the Mammoth Steppe, or the hated Abyssal Dwarfs of Tragar.

The concept of a 'tribe' in orc culture is, however, unlike that found in similar nomadic peoples. Orcs naturally despise order and peace. A typical orc has no real concept of loyalty, either familial or otherwise. It travels with a clan for the promise of war and plunder. If that is not forthcoming, or if a greater leader surfaces, an orc will change its affiliation in a heartbeat, serving whichever warlord, or 'Krudger' in their language, can promise the most bloodshed. So it is that tribes tend to be named for their current warlord, or favoured hunting grounds, and their banners bear simple motifs and colours which serve little purpose other than to provide a rallying point in battle. All orcs long for the call to a famous, marauding tribe, hoping that day their path of slaughter might be mentioned in the same breath as the Bonecrusher tribe, or Gakamak the Smasher.

Orc tribes are found across Pannithor, however, spreading like a cancer within civilised lands. In Mantica, across the Successor Kingdoms, Primovantor, Basilea, the Halpi Mountains, and even it is believed, the lands beyond the Infant Sea, orcs are a constant nuisance. They come from open steppe and dark forests, raiding in the night, slaughtering villages and towns, plundering all they can and burning what's left. No matter how many tribes are put down by the lords of dwarfs, elves and men, some always survive, retreating into the dark places of the world before springing up months or even years later, in ever greater numbers.

Orc society, or what passes for it, is predictably simple: the strongest leads. All orc tribal leaders have reached their position atop the corpses of their predecessors. An orc leader might last a decade or two before age and war-wounds take their toll, and they are bested in combat by another orc. The loser is often devoured by the victor, sometimes while they are still alive. So it is that the greatest warlords of the orcs are terrifying brutes, their size matched only by their ferocity and cunning.

If the presence of orc tribes goes unchallenged, they swell in size and power. Sometimes, an orc Krudger will rise to such prominence that he is able to unite several tribes under one banner. If he can hold on to his position for long enough, this great alliance inevitably sweeps towards settled lands without fear. Only by slaying the warlord will this threat be ended - a leaderless orc tribe rapidly loses all discipline. The ranks descend into a squabbling, disorganised mass, which crumbles and fragments. This is both the blessing and the

curse inflicted by Garkan upon the world: the orcs will likely never conquer all, but their threat is ever-present, an open sore that scars every race of Pannithor, ensuring that none will ever reign supreme.

The Godspeakers

It is perhaps a blessing to the rest of Pannithor that the orcs have little to no magical attunement. As a race, orcs seem almost entirely unable, or unwilling, to tap into the magical energies that other races take for granted, instead relying on strength at arms to carve out their territories. Scholars speculate that this lack of magical aptitude was a deliberate flaw, imbued into the orcs by their creator, Garkan. Legend has it that so assured was Garkan of the orcs' ultimate dominion over Pannithor, that he removed their ability to challenge him directly. Others say that Garkan would never have been so cowardly as to fear his own creations, and thus it was more likely a rival god who meddled in the creation of the orcs, removing any innate magical abilities.

Whatever the reason, there are some curious exceptions. Every tribe has one or more 'Godspeakers' amongst their number. These orcs are scrawny and weak compared to their warrior brethren. But they do not suffer the same violent fate as other runts, because they are marked out at birth as being different. Their eyes sometimes glow with weird green energy, and they talk to themselves a great deal - or, rather, they talk to the gods, which to the orcs often amounts to the same thing. As such, Godspeakers are shunned by their fellows and tend to live in relative isolation, following the tribes around the plains but keeping a respectful distance. The Krudgers ensure that the Godspeakers live unmolested and even send 'volunteers' to the Godspeakers' huts from time-to-time with food and offerings, in return for blessings or prophetic warnings of what lies ahead.

When orcs amass for battle, Godspeakers often march with the tribe, accepted for perhaps the only time in their reclusive lives, and driven to a frenzied ecstasy by the proximity of so many of their kin. They chant prayers and shout blessings upon the orcs, all the while hopping up and down on one leg, and flapping their arms about. Whether these charms work or not is open to debate, but the superstitious orcs would rather let the Godspeakers be, on the off chance that they really do talk to the gods. Better to have the gods on your side, than against you.

Armies of the Orcs

An orc army on the move is like a force of nature; indiscriminate and utterly destructive, yet it is a mistake to think of them as a directionless mob. All orcs inherently have a grasp of warfare, and the larger the orc, the more experienced they are in the arts of war, and thus the firmer this understanding. As such, even small bands of orcs can pose a threat, as long as they are organised around a



sufficiently experienced leader. For all their lack of discipline, an orc army is terrifying to face. Individual orcs are almost entirely fearless once in combat, and though their formations lack the precise coordination of more organised armies, they are all formidable warriors.

The average orc is psychotically violent, and a group of them together are possessed of barely enough discipline to march in the same direction. Squabbles and fighting among the ranks of an orc regiment are a constant problem, as anything judged a slight by an orc – and they are exceptionally touchy – can rapidly escalate into bloody murder. Other orcs expect this, and those that fall to fighting are abandoned to sort it out between themselves, the survivors expected to catch up. In those tribes with particularly strong chiefs, these fights are delayed until the army breaks its march. Organised fights then take place in a circle of jeering orcs, and are the cause of much wagering.

The typical orc fighting formation is a rowdy mob of 'Barki', or more commonly, the orc 'Ax'. Favouring viciously spiked axes and shields, they are found in great numbers wherever a strong Krudger marches. The more skilful and reckless

warriors often band together to form Morax regiments, identifiable by their use of twin axes, and usually found at the forefront of any orc infantry charge. They are supported gleefully by Greatax units – the 'Graka Mar-Kashgak' – heavily scarred veterans worth many of a lesser orc. These elite warriors bear double-handed axes into battle, and are rightly feared across Pannithor. Most Krudgers will hand-pick a mob of Greatax to form their personal guard in battle, always keeping one eye on the best fighters amongst them, in case they challenge his supremacy in the battle's aftermath.

Some orcs are so eager to get to grips with the enemy that they look for mounts to carry them faster into battle. Most riding beasts will not allow a foul-smelling, hyper-violent orc within a hundred feet, but thankfully for the orcs, the open plains of the north teem with one of the most bad-tempered, sharp-tusked brutes in Mantica: Gores. These massive, porcine creatures need little excuse to disembowel anyone who gets too close, including their own riders. Orcs find the very act of subduing a Gore into service as a cavalry mount a worthy challenge, and take great pride in hurtling across the battlefield upon their backs, ploughing a mass of muscle, tusks and iron into the foe.

Over this rampaging mob stands an orc Krudger, biggest, mightiest and loudest of his kind. Their dominance on the battlefield is often reflected in their appearance and fighting style. Some surround themselves with a horde of Greatax; some ride upon a particularly ferocious Gore, or atop a Gore-pulled chariot in order to get to grips with the enemy more swiftly. Others still display their battle-prowess and fame by riding to battle atop a winged Slasher, making them almost unstoppable in personal combat.

A battle-savvy Krudger knows that his orc warriors alone will not win him the day. The larger and more infamous a force, the more specialists it will attract, to fulfil those tactical roles not normally associated with the blunt instrument that is an orc warband. The strange breed of orc known as Godspeakers hop up and down beside the regiments, blessing the warriors in the name of the orc gods of war. Lumbering Giants and packs of Trolls provide not only muscle, but useful large targets to attract the arrows of cowardly foes who prefer to fight at range. The orcs, too, have archers, which they call 'Skulks', for they are not blessed with the fearlessness and strength of their brethren. The diminutive, imp-like Orclings scurry about the battlefield, fetching and carrying for the army, and mischievously harassing the enemy. Orc warbands are often defined by their territories. Those who wander the harsh, open plains of the north tend towards large, rag-tag units of Gore Riders and chariots, the better to hunt the lumbering Arrox and Hornbeasts of the steppe. Those from mountain lairs tend to lumber down to the lowlands with large numbers of Trolls in tow, as well as a Giant or two to put the fear into the enemy. Forest-orcs, by contrast, are so accustomed to raiding that they tend to attract larger-than-ordinary numbers of Skulks, trying (often unsuccessfully) to emulate the hated elves by peppering the foe with arrows from the shadows. Whatever crude tactics a Krudger tries to employ, however, the battle almost always descends into a straight-up fight, when the orcs' natural inclinations get the better of them and they rush into the fray in one vast rabble of axe, tusk and fist.

War Against the Abyssal Dwarfs

There is little love lost between the Abyssal Dwarfs and the orcs. The heartlands of both these wicked races centre upon the great Abyss, whence all the evil in the world comes. The orcs are regarded as unpredictable and destructive by the Abyssal Dwarfs and despite similar goals – the subjugation of the kingdoms of other races – the orcs and Abyssal Dwarfs find themselves battling one another more often than not. The orcs may be a plague upon the world, but if it were not for them, the Abyssal Dwarfs would be able to direct all their unholy energies south, towards the lands of gentler folk.

For the longest time, no orc dared assault Tragar head-on, for to do so would result in the orcs crashing against the

high walls of that industrial land, resigning thousands to a fate worse than death for an orc: slavery. All of that changed, however, when Gakamak the Smasher rose to prominence. He betrayed the Abyssal Dwarfs, slaying several of their lords at a parley, before launching an all-out assault on their lands. His fame spread rapidly, until it was whispered with dread as far away as Ileuthar, and he duly attracted many smaller tribes to his banner, spoiling for a fight with a foe that many had previously thought indefatigable. Tribe Gakamak became the greatest orc force in history, and soon they took the fight to Tragar, besieging the Abyssal Dwarfs' temple-bastions and inflicting a series of humiliating defeats upon the Overmasters.

Though they pushed the Abyssal Dwarfs back to the brink of the Abyss itself, Gakamak's mighty army was finally fractured. The tribes splintered and fled, though the Abyssal Dwarfs were in no position to press home a pursuit. So it was that Gakamak escaped, maintaining control of the core of his tribe. Such was his audacity and power that even defeat could not turn the other Krudgers away from his service – they knew Gakamak would rise again, and they would follow. Duly, Gakamak presided over years of wanton plunder persecuted against the elves of Galahir, the kingdoms of the Ardovikian Plain and any other who dared stand before him. Eventually, only when a particularly harsh winter descended, the Smasher's horde was at last spent, and despite his bellowed orders to the contrary it finally split into its constituent parts, the remains of the tribes returning to their own lands.

Frustrated, the Krudger headed into the wild tundra with a few trusted followers, to battle monstrous beasts and nomadic ogre war-parties. Some say he is there still, and fear the day he decides to return to his homeland to reunite the orcs.

Dreams of Conquest

For all their best efforts, the forces of men, elves and dwarfs have so far failed to curtail the expansion of orc tribal territories. Indeed, the numbers of orcs swell with each passing year, and the numbers of battles against the orcs increases accordingly. Of late, the greatest seers and mystics from the Vale of Imlar to the city of Spartha have begun to experience visions of increasing violence and clarity. Visions of a world ablaze with green flame, in which rivers run red with the blood of the noble races. The very wise believe this to prophesize the war to end all wars, in which all civilised peoples of Pannithor must unite if they are to survive.

If there is any truth to these portents of doom, it can only mean one thing: that an orc warlord of unprecedented power will soon ascend, and his army will be too large for any single nation to challenge.

The Great Horde

Orcs were made for war. It is a basic fact that every orc understands and thus every orc feels the need to fight. If not for conquest or resources, then just for the joy of the slaughter. Every single orc, from the lowliest Youngax to the mightiest Krudger, is a warrior first and foremost – although there are many different warriors among the hordes of the orcs.

Youngax are the most inexperienced of the orcs' warriors. This doesn't mean that they shouldn't be considered a threat, however, as even a single one of these muscled brutes is considerably stronger than a human warrior. These youths aren't as tough as Ax warriors but are far more numerous. The orcs callously throw their young into battle, using the crucible of combat to separate the strong from the weak. Only those who are strong enough to survive are worthy of fighting in the ranks of the orc hordes.

Ax warriors are named after the vicious axes they carry – orcs are pragmatic and unimaginative in their language. These orcs, who form the core regiments of armies, also carry sharpened, spiked shields that are as much a weapon as protection. Combined with their crude heavy armour, these orcs can survive storms of ranged fire long enough to charge the foe and attack in melee.

The toughest, strongest orcs discard their shields so that they can have both hands free to wield the huge two-handed cleavers they call Greatax. These monstrous weapons can cleave an armoured dwarf in two with a single blow, especially with the strength of an orc behind it.

The grizzled veterans of any horde are the Morax. These orcs are experts in close combat, able to fight with a large axe in each hand with uncanny ease, making them a fearless foe. Morax are thankfully rare, as an orc must have fought and survived many gruelling battles to attain the skill to fight in such a manner.

No matter an orc's age, their lust for violence and destruction always burns with a red-hot rage. Rather than retire to the battlecamps to live out their remaining days in relative peace, older warriors equip themselves with longer, lighter axes and head to the frontline. Despite being long in the tooth, the years spent marauding throughout Mantica ensure these Longax are well-trained and well-equipped to deal with the first charges of the enemy.

Orclings are tiny green creatures that follow the hordes into battle. They resemble small, pot-bellied orcs and it is unknown whether they are the orcs' infants or simply another strange sub-species of greenskin. In battle, they swarm around the feet of friends and foes, often of very little consequence, but a source of very great irritation for everyone.

Thunderous Charge

The orcs breed Gores for one purpose and one purpose alone – war. These muscled beasts are twice as heavy as an orc and just as foul-tempered and foul-smelling. They need little reason to disembowel anyone who gets too close, making them perfect battle-mounts for the bloodthirsty orcs.

A regiment of orcs mounted on gores can sweep aside all but the most determined opposition. Indeed, it takes a disciplined foe to stand before them at all. Gores and their riders form a wall of flesh that hits like an avalanche, gores biting with their tusks while their orc riders attack with their own crude but deadly weapons.

Orc chariots are as brutal and straightforward as their creators. Crude contraptions that ape the more refined machines of more civilised races but have their own blunt lethality. Pulled by a pair of wild gores, each chariot is a natural destructive force which tears through weak points in the enemy ranks, leaving a hole in its wake for the rest of the army to pour through. Not as elegant as the crafted chariots of men and elves, orc chariots are nonetheless murderously effective.



Orcs often mimic the ideas of the other races when constructing weapons and war machines, but often they will add their own unique take to deliver something different. Thus are born contraptions such as the Fight Wagon. Whereas a chariot can hit hard and fast, aiming to smash a hole in the weak point of an enemy line, a Fight Wagon takes a slower approach, driving a group of Morax toward the foe on a raised and spiked platform, their axes threshing a path through densely packed infantry and cavalry. There is never a shortage of Morax volunteers to serve on Fight Wagons, and any who face them will not soon forget the experience – in the unlikely event that they live.

Ruthless Raiders

Orcs revel in the violence of close combat. They prefer to meet the enemy head-on and defeat them through strength-at-arms alone. Those orcs who don't fight in this manner are seen as cowardly, dishonourable or even un-orcish. Nevertheless, there are always groups of orcs within every horde who favour the use of bows and subterfuge in battle. These outcasts are known as Skulks.

The scouting abilities of the skulks are of great use to orc Krudgers, although the warlords would never admit it. Gangs of skulks are often quietly employed to act as the vanguard of an orc army, seeking out the enemy and reporting the strength and position back. Though violent, orcs are intelligent creatures, especially when it comes to the art of war, and no orc leader would go into battle unprepared.



Skulks mostly fight on foot, taking advantage of cover and dangerous terrain to avoid enemy attacks. Outriders prefer to fight from the backs of temperamental gores, using their speed to cover distance quickly and outmanoeuvre enemy regiments, harassing them with accurate bow fire. When they do meet the enemy head-on, Skulks ride into battle in raider chariots, combining their ranged attacks with the chariots' devastating charge.

As the Skulk gangs have grown in number, they have gained leaders of their own. Stalkers and Marauders are veterans of the Skulks' way of war. It is often they who negotiate the price of service with Krudgers, promising discretion in their meetings so that the Krudger suffers no dishonour - for an additional fee, of course. In battle, these leaders are masterful tacticians, directing the other Skulks to strike the enemy's weakest points and letting the other orc forces take the brunt of the fighting. When challenged, these peerless warriors will demonstrate their skills with bow and blade, often surprising enemy champions with dodges, feints, and a distinct lack of reckless charging. When their enemy lies dead in the soil, the Skulks will seek out their payment, then simply move on to the next battle. For where there are orcs, war is guaranteed.

Bruisers

Trolls are large, feral humanoids whose appearance varies considerably depending on the environment they live in. However, all Trolls are dim-witted and have a voracious appetite. Trolls can regenerate almost any wound and only fire can truly destroy them, while their crude war-clubs smash through armour and crush bones with terrifying ease.

Trolls are led into battle by scarred leaders called Bruisers. Bruisers are the biggest and meanest of their kind, employed by orc armies to keep their lesser kin in check during battle, as well as for their own fearsome qualities. It is not unusual for this discipline to be enforced by the consumption of the worst troublemaker as a lesson to the others. There are rumours of entire armies of Trolls being led into battle by a particularly dangerous Bruiser warlord. These must be false, as such an army would wreak untold destruction upon the civilised world.

Orc armies are also commonly reinforced by Giants. Each Giant is a huge humanoid, a veritable mountain of bone, sinew, and flesh with a massive appetite. The brain of a Giant is way too small to properly control the creature's huge body. However, when goaded in the right direction, these dumb brutes are a terrible threat to any foe. Giants tend to follow the armies of the orcs into battle for the promise of entertaining violence and food to gorge themselves upon afterward.



Might Makes Right

As far as an orc is concerned, might is right. He who hits hardest, laughs longest, and all of their leaders have had to fight their way into their positions of power. A good orc Krudger might last a decade or more, before age, infirmity or old wounds weaken him and then he will be bested in combat by another orc and replaced, his body devoured at his vanquisher's victory feast. It is a brutal way of life, but the orcs do not bemoan it. For them, it is the way of things, and so only right. Other creatures that follow more civilised ways they see as weak and feeble.

Krudgers go to war armed with the strongest weapons and heaviest armour the horde possesses. Some will march into battle alongside the other orc infantry, showing their martial prowess to their rivals firsthand. Others may elect to ride into the fray atop a heavily armoured gore, or a spiked gore chariot. The most powerful Krudgers ride massive Slashers – great winged carnivorous reptiles, all fangs, claws and bad attitude. Only an equally lethal orc leader can even think of using one as a mount.

These leaders surround themselves with the strongest, most capable warriors – for a Krudger with weak warriors will die in ignominy rather than glory. Working alongside a Krudger, the Krusher is a brutal enforcer, typically bashing the heads of the other orcs together, while the Krudger is busy repeatedly smashing a foe's head into the dirt. These orcs are vital to maintaining a Krudger's authority over the horde but are also his strongest rivals.

An orc warlord will often have his largest bodyguards carry his personal banner into battle to remind his troops just who is boss. Orc Flaggers, as these 'champions' are known, are among the biggest and most brutish of orc kind, inspiring a Krudger's troops into battle through sheer fear and a mouthful of filthy threats. Trying to convince these hand-picked orcs not to use the large banner they carry as a weapon itself is not just difficult – it's pointless.

Some of the Krudger's champions will bear a large, crude drum into battle. The function of the War Drum is twofold. The rumbling, deep note that it produces, shivering the very air with its unholy racket, is designed to resonate in the gut of all who hear it. To any but an orc, this produces an involuntary fear response. To an orc, it simply provides encouragement. Sometimes, a War Drum will be mounted onto a chariot, so that it can join the charge as they continue to play.

The most veteran warrior in a Krudger's horde is the Morax Mansplitter. These orcs are tireless fighters, who have seen more battles than most Krudgers. These warriors don't fight for any one leader but travel nomadically from battlefield to battlefield – anywhere there are enemies to kill. They don't aspire to lead the horde, only to destroy their foes by brutally hacking them to pieces. The presence of such a pure warrior is an inspiration to all orcs, but none more so than the other Morax.

Orcs are elemental and instinctive users of magic, with little of the finesse or nuance of the magic users of other races. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their main obsession is with using magic for destruction, with a particular fascination for fire and explosions. Orc shamans, known as Godspeakers, are often unhinged and unbalanced, but most Krudgers calculate that it is worth the risk to use them.

Gakamak the Smasher

There is little love lost between the Abyssal Dwarfs and the orcs. The heartlands of both these wicked races centre upon the great Abyss, whence all the evil in the world issues. The orcs are regarded as unpredictable and destructive by the Abyssal Dwarfs, and despite similar goals – the subjugation of the kingdoms of other races – the orcs and Abyssal Dwarfs find themselves battling one another more often than not. The Abyssal Dwarfs have bound the Abyss in rings of iron and obsidian fortresses, although periodically some mighty orc Krudger comes along and throws it all down. The orcs may be a plague upon the world, but if it were not for them, the Abyssal Dwarfs would be able to direct all their unholy energies south, towards the lands of the gentler folk.

One such Krudger is Gakamak the Smasher. His early history is unknown; he fought his way up from obscurity to fame and, like many Krudgers, descended the same way. But for a brief period, Gakamak's name was whispered with dread as far away as Ileuthar. He rose rapidly, defeating other orc and goblin warlords, incorporating the remnants of their armies until he headed a mighty horde. He betrayed the Abyssal Dwarfs, slaying several of their lords at a parley, while simultaneously launching an all-out assault on their lands.

In battle, Gakamak the Smasher lives up to the title by which he is known and feared across the whole of northern Mantica. He is utterly unafraid of engaging even the most threatening enemy and has felled every foe from noble elven Drakon Knights to the winged abyssal demon known only as the Lord of Midnight. Each and every challenger Gakamak has met in battle he has smashed aside with primal, brutal contempt.

Wip the Outcast

In appearance, Wip has always been very obviously different from the burly orcs he grew up amongst. He is exceptionally tall and his smooth skin is a delicate, pale green where his peers' is dark and scabby. His eyes are ever so slightly slanted and his ears are distinctly pointed. Where most orcs are lumbering brutes, Wip is agile and fast, a trait that kept him alive throughout his early years and without which he would have been torn apart by his mocking companions long ago.

He has forged his own path in life, serving his tribe as he unleashes terrible magics upon the heads of its enemies. When Wip the Outcast accompanies the orcs to war, the air overhead seethes with anarchic energies and bright explosions streak down into the ranks of the foe, much to the guttural amusement of his brothers in arms.

RIFTFORGED ORCS



JAARG SKARCRÿ
TERROR OF THE PLAINS



From deep within the Abyss, the Wicked One Garkan the Black has toiled for millennia at his soul forges. Always seeking new ways to unleash terror upon the unsuspecting world, it seemed even for Garkan that he would never better his warlike creations, the orcs. Until now...

When the Abyssal Dwarfs inadvertently unleashed the Nexus of Power beneath the Halpi Mountains, the surge of magical energy was felt across all of Pannithor – a violent tear in the very fabric of reality, sufficient to distort even the Elven Ways, and widen the Abyss. Though ‘Halpi’s Rift’, as it became known, was eventually capped by an alliance of the noble races, it was not before the Nexus had wreaked considerable destruction upon the world and its terrible power felt from pole to pole.

At the height of the Nexus’ surge of energy, before the forces of good pushed back the armies of evil, there came a moment when the Southern Rift and the Abyss were infused with such power that the veil tore entirely, and the two pits of darkness were linked as one beneath Pannithor. At such an unholy coupling, Oskan himself saw that the time had come to herald in a new age of darkness. Oskan summoned Garkan, and together they formulated a plan to destroy all that was good in the world. Garkan harnessed the power of the violent, unnatural storms that raged across the world above, the flesh forges of the Fourth Circle came alive with energy hitherto unseen, and the souls of the tormented cried out in anguish. At this sign, Garkan the Black summoned his underlings, and set about the forges with renewed vigour. As the battle for Halpi’s rift raged in the mortal realm, Garkan selected the prime cuts from the fallen to fuel his twisted experiments. The orcs had always been his greatest accomplishment, but now, with this new power in his hands, Garkan strove to improve on his dark design.

Children of Garkan

Their twisted bodies animated by the power of a raging storm, their souls infused with very essence of the Nexus, the orcs that emerged from Garkan’s flesh forges were unlike any that had come before them. Their cracked skin was of a green-grey hue, and broader, more muscular, and yet possessed of a cruel cunning and impressive martial prowess, these ‘Riftforged orcs’ were truly Garkan’s finest creation.

But there was more to these creatures than mere brute strength. Their affinity with the rift-storms brought about by the Nexus of Power manifested in crackling energy, which wreathed their bodies and lent strength to their sword-arms. The more Riftforged orcs gathered, the greater this power became, and with extraordinary swiftness the young race

began to master this energy, fuelling it with their battle-rage. The greatest among them could command the elements, blackening the skies and bringing storms wherever they trod. These, Garkan called Stormbringers, the commanders of the new horde. But the Stormbringers were possessed of tempers quick as the lightning they commanded, and few would suffer others to live. Their competitive nature and martial pride was untameable, and many died in the early days of their creation, challenging each other to duels that shook the very halls of the Abyss. They fought not only for power and position, but also to win the favour of Garkan. For unlike the lesser orcs that had come before, the Riftforged orcs recognised their creator, and swore unshakeable fealty to him. Garkan the Black was pleased. With an army of these creatures, his own status amongst the Wicked Ones would surely grow. But he would not share this power – the Riftforged orcs were his to command, for one day Garkan the Black might have need of them to wage war on his brother gods. The Riftforged orcs pay lip-service to Oskan, Talus and Barglurath, but their true allegiance is never in question. One thing they share with all Wicked Ones, however, is a deep and burning hatred of the Shining Ones and all they stand for. The Riftforged orcs would wipe out everything that is good and pure in the world if they could have their way.



For a year and a day, Garkan toiled at his forges, expanding the ranks of the Riftforged orcs, creating legions of heavily armoured warriors, all under the command of the warmongering Stormbringers. Lesser demons whipped shackled souls to work ceaselessly, forging weapons and armour for Garkan’s new horde. Each brutish warrior would go into battle protected by thick armour plates, carved with the likenesses of leering Abyssals, and crackling with coruscating energy. With their great strength, they wield heavy hammers and carry thick shields, often jagged and spiked with lightning devices. The march of their mail-shod feet shakes the ground like the thunder they summon, and though they are more adept at strategy and battle-tactics than any orc before them, their battle-fury is wild as the untamed storms.



War in the Abyss

The Abyss itself proved the most effective testing ground for these new warriors. Gibbering demons provoked Garkan's new creations to battle almost at once, seeing them as mortal interlopers in their realm. Garkan granted the Stormbringers permission to seek retribution as they saw fit, and so the Riftforged orcs marched to war. Over myriad campaigns spanning many years, the Riftforged orcs fought battle after battle in Garkan's name, hunting in the second circle, braving the fires of the fourth circle, enduring the tortures of the third circle, and battling the champions of the fifth circle. In the Abyss, death is not the end, and so the orc warriors fought, and fell, and rose to fight again, each resurrection making them stronger, cannier, and more skilled. In those campaigns, veterans emerged from the ranks, along with great leaders and shamanic Stormcallers.



So powerful did the Riftforged legions become that their arrogance grew to match their strength. They came to despise weakness of any kind, looking down upon the races of the world, even the lesser forces of the Abyss. The weak within their own ranks are routinely culled, and the leaders of their forces control the horde only while they can rule with an iron hand – should they falter, they will quickly be deposed. However, such ruthlessness leads to discipline: every Riftforged orc follows orders without question, for they know their commanders rose to prominence through strength and determination alone. They earned their authority, and for as long as they bring glorious victories for their legion, their word is law. From amongst the most cunning and tactically minded Stormbringers, Garkan selected his most trusted lieutenants, naming them the Storm Marshalls. In effect a Riftforged Council, the Storm Marshalls have the authority to bring entire legions to heel in Garkan's name, and are powerful enough to command the respect of a dozen or more Stormbringers.

Over long campaigns, the Riftforged legions became well-organised, autonomous fighting forces, each with their own heraldry, traditions, and favoured strategies. The banners of legions such as the Drakeslayers, Thunderborn, and Blackhammers, quickly became legend within the Abyss, putting flight to hordes of Diaboli through sheer dread reputation. It was then that Garkan looked upon what he had wrought, and knew the time had come. The Riftforged

orcs had been born unto lightning, tempered in the fires of the Abyss, and now had but one more challenge to face. They would be unleashed into the mortal world, and carve their own path of glory and destruction in Garkan's name. It was time to set them free.

Legions Unbound

Time does not flow as expected within the Abyss. The Riftforged orcs had campaigned through Abyssal circles for well over a decade, yet when they emerged into the world of mortals barely a year had passed since the capping of Halpi's Rift. Legion after legion poured from the Abyss with grim purpose, marching tirelessly to the drum-like rumble of thunder. The Stormbringers had been given full autonomy by Garkan – they would march upon the lands of men, Elves, and Dwarfs. They would show the servants of the thrice-cursed Shining Ones the true meaning of power.

The fickle powers of the Abyss had split the hordes across half the world. Some legions poured into Tragar, where the Abyssal Dwarfs had been forewarned to stand aside, and advanced upon the Halpi Mountains, drawn to the site of the now-closed Rift that had led to their creation. Others ventured into Barica, while most went west across the Mammoth Steppe, battling ogre tribes in their first real test of strength. Most of these legions continued west across the Ardovikian Plain, where at last they found their most determined foes in the race of men. Advancing into the League of Rhordia, three full legions began a systematic invasion of those lands, sacking and razing every settlement in their path. Other legions, unable to cooperate with their arrogant kin for long, went instead to Basilea, where they assaulted the Brotherhood Watchline in the most violent incursion the Basileans had seen in over a century. Two fortresses of the Brotherhood Watchline have so far fallen, and the orcs have proven impossible to evict. Farthest north, the Riftforged orcs struck out across the Frozen Sea. Fighting both the hostile environment and the hardy Varangur, these legions slowly dwindled in size. And yet rumour has it that they have taken a foothold in the Ice Mountains, where they yet gather their strength.

Meanwhile, south of Ophidia, great storms raged, heralding the arrival of the Riftforged orcs at the mouth of the Southern Rift. The march of the legions, as always, was heralded by gathering thunderclouds. Torrents of lashing rain fell upon the Cracked Lands for the first time in many years, flashes of lightning illuminated thousands of heavily armoured orcs, ready for conquest in a strange land. Most began the long march across the Windblown Basin, determined to seek out the Elves so hated by their master, Garkan. They have already navigated the southern jungles, their glowing eyes fixed on Ej and Elvenholme. Some even ventured east to the Empire of Dust, but these have not been heard of since.

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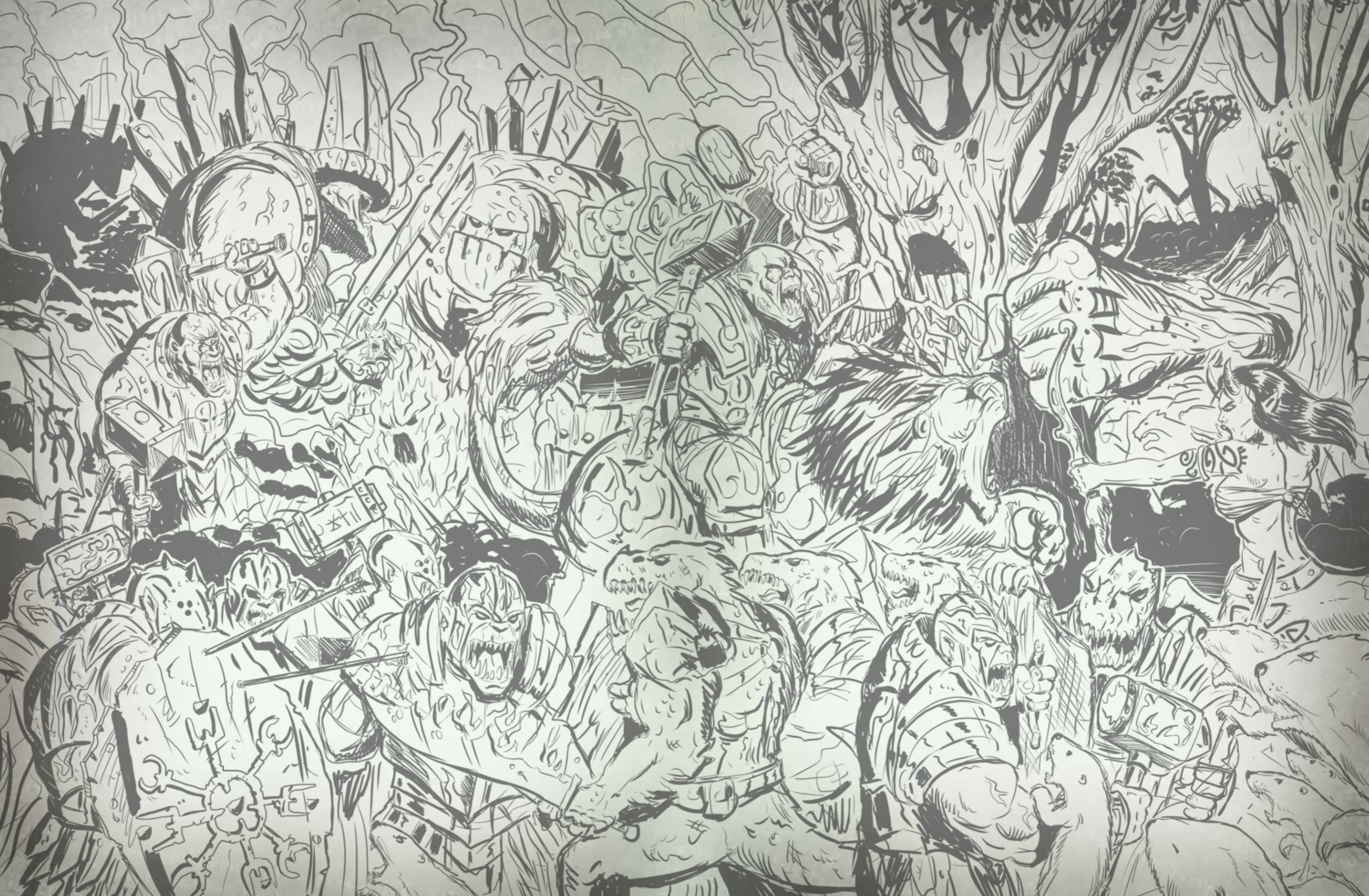
War for Orc-Kind

Wherever the Riffforged orcs have fought, they have found other, lesser orcs, who they see as Garkan's failed experiments. Sometimes, tribes of these lesser orcs refuse to be subjugated by their larger cousins, and instead resist with all their might. On some very few occasions, orc tribes of sufficient size and power have succeeded in driving off the predations of the Riffforged orcs - but these feats are few and far between. For the most part, when the Riffforged orcs encounter an orc tribe, the lesser orcs are either defeated in short order, or immediately recognise the superior strength of their strange new kin, and join with them willingly for the chance of greater glory on the field of battle.

For the Riffforged orcs, Youngax tribes make the perfect foot-soldiers. They are keen to fight, almost numberless, and

yet are highly unlikely to ever challenge the hierarchy of the legion. These aspirants wish to join the vaunted ranks of the legion, hoping to be recognised for singular acts of barbarism or bloodshed by their betters. Should they fall in battle, they are sent to Garkan's forges, where - if they survive the process - they may be reborn as a Riffforged warrior. In this way, the legion can always replenish its numbers, while the Youngax followers look on in awe as their former kin seemingly returns from the grave in a powerful new form. For the Youngax, there could be no greater ambition than to achieve such power. For the new Riffforged warrior, however, their former life is but the ghost of a dream; their entire will now focused upon serving their legion, for the greater glory of Garkan.







A Storm Unleashed

Heralded by blackening skies and pealing thunder, the Riftforged Legions emerged from the Abyss with nought but conquest on their minds. Hordes of regimented orcs, battle skills honed by years of campaigning in the Abyssal realm, set their sights on the servants of the Shining Ones, determined to wreak destruction in the name of Garkan.

The Legions, seemingly autonomous fighting forces, marched in all directions. They fought the Varangur upon the ice floes of the Frozen Sea; they razed fishing villages to the ground all along the coast of Carrog; they battled dwarfs on the mountain slopes of Abercarr; they besieged the watchlines of the Brothermark. The rampage of the Riftforged orcs was brutal and far-reaching.

Where the advance of the Riftforged Legions passed through the territory of common orc tribes, something extraordinary happened that would be of utmost concern to all civilised peoples. The orcs, so impressed by the intellect, strength, and strange powers of the heavily armoured legions, joined forces with them, turning the legions into vast hordes. Certainly, some Krudgers of sufficient infamy and strength resisted the rule of their strange, storm-calling kin, but these Krudgers were few and far between. Most were subjugated, or willingly gave their entire tribe over to the legions. And so, those Riftforged Legions that had marched west across the Mammoth Steppe, and as far as the Ardovikian Plain, grew in such numbers as to turn their measured advance into an avalanche of destruction.

The Torffs Valem Massacre

It was upon the Fields of Arbrin, an hour's ride north of Torffs Valem, that the legions first made their presence known in Rhordia, and there recorded their most devastating and infamous victory. At that time, Torffs Valem had been plagued by a great orc horde, led by a grizzled Krudger known as Krakok One-Eye. The army of Torffs Valem had mustered against the horde, and ridden out across the valley, where they met the orcs in battle. Though the orcs were great in number, the men of Rhordia drove their cavalry into the heart of the orc force, and there rode down Krakok One-Eye and his personal bodyguard of Morax warriors. Sent into disarray, the orcs fled, following the River Brint northwards, pursued every step of the way by the jubilant members of the League.

When at last they reached the Fields of Arbrin – a flat, open plain stretching beneath the wooded hills of Armbul – the League checked its advance. The orcs had ceased their flight, and now amassed once more into fighting ranks. Overhead, the skies blackened, and the heavens opened. The League wizards sensed danger ahead, and counselled the captains

to withdraw from the field, but the proud warriors of Torffs Valem would not hear of it. They formed their lines, and prepared for open battle. Lightning streaked across a slate grey sky, illuminating another force amassing behind Krakok's tribe. Countless orcs had come as if from nowhere, heavily armoured, ranks in meticulous order, eyes glowing with the very power of the storm. They advanced in unison through the driving rain, mail-shod boots shaking the ground.

Trusting to the tactics that had seen off countless orc invaders, the Rhordians marshalled their cavalry and charged en masse – but this time they charged to their doom. The common orcs threw themselves recklessly into battle, seemingly to impress the newcomers as to their bravery. By the time the armoured lines of the legion was met, the knights of the League were already faltering. The leaders of the orc legion, lightning crackling around their hulking forms, bellowed commands at their warriors, and the Riftforged orcs counter-charged with the unstoppable force of a raging storm. It was a massacre.

By sunset, almost every warrior of the League was slain or fleeing, the blood of the fallen washing down to the river. Before the next dawn the legion had reached the gates of Torffs Valem. By midday the city walls were burning, and the Riftforged were already marching south. Their cruel work done.



The League Beset

The Riftforged legion, which became known as the Abyssal Eyes due to the baleful heraldry of their banners, marched upon village after village, outpost after outpost, leaving a trail of burning farmsteads and shattered militia posts in their wake. Twice, the Dukes of Rhordia sought to meet the Abyssal Eyes in battle, and twice they were put to flight – although their valiant efforts at least slowed the legion's

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advance. This gave the League the opportunity to muster a grand army, uniting provinces under the command of Duke Hetronburg and Baron Gennefort. Under lashing rain and crackling lightning, the two armies met in bitter battle that raged a day and a night. When Gennefort's own knights launched a devastating charge, it seemed that at last the tide had turned. The storm eased for just a moment, the Abyssal Eyes faltered.

And then, presaged by a crack of lightning that gouged the very earth, a second army crested the hill. The booming war-chants of a new Riftforged Legion carried on the howling winds, and Duke Hetronburg knew all was lost.

The Abyssal Eyes, under the leadership of their Stormbringer, Grullik Headpuller, had known great success on the campaign trail, but their numbers were dwindling. Reluctantly, Grullik was forced to acknowledge the newcomer, Zargok, of the Blackhammer Legion, as commander-in-chief of the campaign. Their tenuous alliance was sufficient to bring Gennefort to its knees, before the horde marched upon the walled town of Rhordenne, sacking it after a five-day siege. This event marked a turning point in Rhordia's history – armies mustered across the League and beyond as word of the invasion spread. Zargok, determining that besting the humans was the more glorious path, took most of his legion east to face the Lords of Rhordia. With a few cohorts of Blackhammer legionaries as reinforcements, along with the bulk of the Youngax rabble who had tagged along for the fight, Grullik's Abyssal Eyes marched on, to see what lay beyond the Rhordian borders.

A Shattered Peace

Meanwhile, in the peaceful Shires, word of the sacking of Rhordenne had arrived to mixed reception. Many halflings disbelieved that mere orcs could bring such a well defended town so low, blaming the news on the notoriously exaggerated tales of wandering human bards. However, the halfling elders were swayed to action by Aeron Cadwallader, the Shires' greatest hero and youngest halfling to hold the rank of Muster-Master. Cadwallader's most trusted scouts had seen for themselves the strange nature of these new orcs, and so a council of the greatest commanders of the Shire was convened. Cadwallader convinced the Elders that the orcs were coming, whether some chose to believe it or not. Worse, there would be no help from outside – the League of Rhordia was beset by its own invasion, and assisting

in any kind of defence of the Shires would be the last thing on their minds.

By piecing together fragmented tales of these so-called 'Riftforged orcs', the halflings formulated a strategy of sorts. It was Dilwyn Brynmoor, Chief Artificer of the Shires, who came up with the theory that the march of the orcs was akin to the path of a fierce lightning storm, and like lightning it could be forked – split multiple times so its power would dissipate. The men of Rhordia had failed, Brynmoor said, because they'd allowed the orcs to dictate the time and place of battle, and thus Rhordenne had been sundered like a tree struck by a lightning bolt.

Studying their maps, the halflings determined that the Abyssal Eyes would come from the north and east, following the road from Rhordenne. They formed a twofold plan to halt the orcs' advance. A scouting force was sent north-east via the forest trails to pull as many orcs as possible away from the main column of march, while a larger militia force went north to the crossings on the river Erst. There, they would destroy the Erstbridge, forcing the orcs to ford the river, where they would be met by bow and spear. Even Cadwallader was not confident of victory against so mighty a foe, but the people of the Shires, peaceful as they were, were no cowards. The militia would divert the orcs from the most populated towns, and fight to the last.

Battle is Joined

The scouting force passed through the Forest of Kharne, and finally caught up with the Riftforged column less than half a league from Erstford. At once, they set about plaguing the orcs until at last the legion could ignore them no longer. Three full cohorts turned from the main column, marching inexorably under the barrage of archery. The halflings retreated in good order whence they had come, leading the legionaries as far as The Bogs. Realising their mistake too late, the orc cohorts became mired in the treacherous terrain, and were ill-prepared for the halflings' trap – an army of Abbetshire emerged from the forests, assailing the orcs from all sides. When at last the orcs fought their way to open ground, they were met by aralez cavalry and the debilitating magic of halfling Saucerors. The legionary commanders fought bravely, but without support they floundered in the face of a swift enemy on home territory, and by a thousand cuts they succumbed to the halfling attack. A few scattered remnants of the legionary force fled into the Northwolds, where they were forced to battle the hill-folk in a series of bitter skirmishes.





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Meanwhile, at Erstford, things did not go quite as planned. The Riffforged had reached the destroyed Erstbridge, but like a force of nature had not diverted to the ford where the halfling army waited. Instead, with grim efficiency they set about hacking through the nearby woodland. Hulking, ogre-like monstrosities lent their strength to the effort, and soon the orcs had created a pair of huge floating bridges, wide enough for their cohorts to march across. Such ingenuity and organisation had never before been seen from orc-kind, and the halflings barely had time to redeploy before the legion had reached the south bank of the Erst. When battle was joined, it was with a ferocity that the halflings had not expected. Lightning flashed across the sky, hulking Ambarox seared the halfling ranks with blasts of coruscating energy, and then the legion advanced, protected by thick armour, crushing all who dared stand before them.

Led by Conwy Macsen, a commander renowned for quick-thinking and flexible strategy, the halflings quickly reorganised. They had got the orcs' attention, and now Macsen's job was to lead the enemy away from the towns of the Shires. If the Riffforged were a thunderstorm, then Macsen needed a lightning rod to redirect their strength – and that rod was the long line of border towers that stood watch over the eastern boundaries.

Messengers were sent ahead on swift aralez to warn of the coming danger. Some were slain as they tried to flee the battle by vicious Helstrike Manticores, and were it not for the intervention of a small squadron of Ej Grenadiers, none would have escaped. Having done all he could, Macsen ordered his forces to scatter, with the bulk forming a fighting retreat to the south, the legion harrying them every step of the way. The rest of the force stole away to Hodenburg, with Macsen's hastily-written contingency plan.

In the days that followed, the border towers fell one-by-one. At each tower, the militia assembled, fought, but fled before the casualties mounted. The towers were blasted with lightning and razed to the ground. Each time, the halflings retreated towards the next tower. And yet unbeknownst to the orcs, a portion of each force later scattered, disappearing into the hills and forests, and making their way to Hodenburg. This was Macsen's gambit – the Shirefolk would conceal their true strength, and instead gather the greatest

army the Shires had ever seen at their capital. Macsen prayed it would not be needed – as much as he had faith in the people, the Riffforged orcs were like nothing he'd ever seen before. He would rather they did not set foot within a hundred leagues of the fair city of Hodenburg.

When the twin watchtowers of Tanmill fell, the exhausted Macsen knew he could do no more. The orcs of the Abyssal Eye had discovered the Tanmill Canal, and immediately recognised its strategic importance. No amount of goading by the ragtag halfling militia could now keep them from their prize – Grullik Headpuller organised his remaining legion and followed the canal north, into the heartlands of the Shires.

The Battle of Green Glades

From the steady stream of Macsen's battlefield reports, the council at Hodenburg had plotted the orcs' path around the Shires' border. The legion had dwindled somewhat in size, but was still too powerful to fight in open war – the walls of Hodenburg could not hold against a foe that could command the very elements. When messages reached them that the orcs had turned towards the city, Aeron Cadwallader sent word to the Feastmasters of the Green Glades to delay the orcs while the city prepared its defences.



So it was that when the skies above the Golden Fields blackened, and the orcs approached the great forest of Green Glades, the trees came alive with the exuberant hollering of halfling gangs. The Feastmasters of the glades were possessed of extraordinary knowledge of woodcraft and archery, and they turned all of their skills against the invaders. Finally, the orcs were forced to abandon their staunch battle tactics, their shield walls proving more a hindrance than a help against an enemy that hid in the forest paths. In skirmish bands, the orcs finally seemed beatable. Only the hulking Thunderseers were able to match the halflings in woodland, their gifts of foresight and keen senses uniting as they hunted the braves on their own territory. However, their numbers were few, and the rest of the cohorts suffered terribly.

Grullik, realising too late there was more to these small folk than met the eye, signalled for the cohorts to fall back to the meadows. To cover their retreat, he roared orders to the hordes of Youngax who had followed him all the way from the Ardovikian Plain. At his command, the Youngax





charged headlong into the woods, dying in droves to halfling arrows, but covering the retreat of the legionaries. Those Youngax who finally got to grips with the braves set about the fight with unbridled ferocity, for to prove themselves in the eyes of the Headpuller – and to Garkan – was the greatest ambition they could imagine.

His losses already unacceptable, Grullik marched what was left of the legion around the outskirts of the forest, staying as far from the range of the halfling bows as he could, abandoning the Youngax to the war effort. If they wiped out the halflings, so much the better, but at the very least they would keep them busy for days to come.

The Defence of Hodenburg

To the rumble of thunder and the lashing of rain, the Riftforged orcs assaulted the walls of Hodenburg. Wave after wave drove against the city walls, while the defences were blasted with elemental power, and a gargantuan Storm Giant pounded at the gates. Watching from the tallest tower, Aeron Cadwallader turned to Dilwyn Brynmoor once more – the artificer whose theories had proven accurate before – and posited an unorthodox strategy.

The orcs were no patient siege-masters, as their hasty attack on Torffs Vale had shown. They assaulted the walls ceaselessly, again and again, drawing power from the fighting, while their leaders crackled with elemental energy. It seemed that the more the orcs fought, the more angry the storm grew, and the more punishing their assault. If the Riftforged Legion could indeed be likened to a thunderbolt, then the halflings would once more have to split its power, forking the lightning into less destructive fragments. Reluctantly, the Elders agreed to Cadwallader's plans. Preparations were made across the city. And then, in an act that some considered reckless, but others prayed was genius, Cadwallader opened the gates.

The Abyssal Eyes ploughed through the gates, flooding into the city square. They met little resistance, but instead found many of the streets inaccessible, barricaded at Cadwallader's orders. Fully one third of the legion rushed through the northern streets, before the barricades were closed behind them. Another third was funnelled around the inner walls, down the slopes that led to the Grainbarn beneath the city, and again the way behind was shut. The remainder, including Grullik himself, were trapped in the courtyard, where finally the halflings mustered for battle.





The Battle of the Great Heath

The orcs that ravaged north found themselves shepherded to the Great Heath – a vast public ‘garden’ resembling a hilly meadow set about with lush wooded groves, characteristic of the orchards favoured by the halflings. Helstrikers took to the skies to scout a way of the seemingly deserted heath, only to discover a strange-looking halfling army speeding towards the orc lines.

This was like nothing the Riftforged had encountered before. Blackpowder carbines roared in armour-piercing volleys, while Ej Grenadiers, on secondment to the Shires, darted past the Helstrikers and dropped their explosive charges into the orc lines, disrupting the legionaries’ ranks. Before the orcs could recover from the onslaught, the air was filled by the sounds of clanking and whirring. From the gunsmoke rolled troll-powered Harvesters, blades whirring and churning, scything through the Riftforged ranks with abandon. The Helstrikers turned back to assist the ground forces, only to find themselves peppered with shot by Aeronauts, who had drifted gracefully over the Great Heath in their balloons. Helpless to intervene, the Helstrikers could only watch as the halflings smashed into the legionaries’ lines with Aralez cavalry and monstrous Iron Beasts. Only then did the bugles sound, and the halfling Spearspikes advanced

over the hills, led by Conwy Macsen who was now eager for revenge. The Spearspikes hunted the stragglers and wounded with venomous spite, while the Harvesters ploughed ahead, watering the meadow with orc blood.

Over the heath, the rain lightened, and a shaft of sunlight peeked through the clouds. The storm weakened, as Cadwallader had predicted. The orcs were put to flight, and with one last rueful look over their shoulders, the Helstrikers flew from the city lest they meet the same end as their fellows.

The Raid on the Grainbarn

Those orcs who had ventured underground were at first confident. After all what, was a mere dark dungeon to the endless cavernous horrors of the Abyss? And indeed, what they now found themselves within was a dungeon – the Grainbarn, a vast underground storehouse supplying food and beer to all the public buildings of Hodenburg. Many of the orcs could not resist helping themselves to kegs of delicious ale, and while they drank, they were unaware of movement in the long shadows...

The Grainbarn is a sprawling storehouse also for many rare and exotic – and, some whisper, forbidden – ingredients.

Thus, it is the domain of the Saucerors, and foremost among them, Mama Beata. There, in the darkness, Mama Beata had marshalled her gastromancers, passing enchanted rations around the troops at her disposal to imbue them with strength and courage belying their diminutive size. But she planned not on meeting the orcs with braves alone.

The Riftforged orcs were alerted to the presence of halflings by their Stormslayers – these brutish creatures scented the enemy, and began lumbering towards the hidden braves. When they were close enough that the halflings could see their glowing eyes, Mama Beata gave the order. Cages were opened, and the long-kept secret of the Saucerors was unleashed. Greedyguts – brutish, mutated halfling warriors bloated and empowered by gastromantic feasts – now lurched from the dark. The sounds of ferocious battle between Stormslayers and Greedyguts echoed through the Larder. The orcs ceased their revelry and formed into their cohorts, but the halflings had used the darkness to their advantage. They struck from hidden tunnels, fired volleys of arrows from walkways, while gun-dogs sniped the orc leaders from concealed niches and culverts. Saucerors assailed the foe with their magic and explosive potions, and when the cohorts were forced to scatter, the halflings took up the hunt, whooping and hollering through the echoing tunnels, hunting orcs in the dungeons, until they were nought but food for the insatiable Greedyguts.

The Fight for Hodenburg Square

The fiercest fighting took place in the great square behind the city gates. Here, the Riftforged were encircled by halfling braves on all sides, led by Aeron Cadwallader himself. But the orcs included Grullik and his personal guard, not to mention the bulk of the legion's support troops. The Storm Giant lumbered forward, setting about the barricades, plucking gun-dogs from their elevated positions on balconies and devouring them. Stormcallers blasted ranks of Spearspikes with powerful lightning bolts. Thunderseers avoided halfling volleys unerringly, their prescience guiding them into combat where their brutish strength could tear the smallfolk asunder.

And yet here the halflings had numbers on their side. They had the pride – nay, the very survival – of all the Shires at stake. If the orcs had previously seen only a diminutive people, rustic and slow to anger, he now saw a spiteful, vicious race of tiny warriors, each willing to sell their lives dearly to defend their city. Gunfire cracked from every window. Strange sorcery beset the orcs, filling the square with debilitating fumes. As the battle raged, a squadron of balloons drifted overhead, their aeronauts dropping grenades into the orc ranks. With their arrival came the news that the Battle for the Great Heath was won. The halflings took heart from the news, redoubling their efforts, closing their net on the surrounded orcs.

Grullik called for the Stormslayers to charge the halflings, but the order could not be carried out. Behind the orcs, through the city gates, came a roar of bestial rage. Forest trolls, goaded northwards by the enraged Feastmasters of the Green Glades, now launched their own charge. Troll and Stormslayer met in an earth-shaking clash of violence.

When the surviving Greedyguts emerged from the Grainbarn, it became apparent that the battle for the underground had also been won. They made for the Storm Giant, sensing a wondrous feast. They leapt upon the behemoth, dragging it to the ground, and though half their number perished in the attempt, they brought the giant low. Grullik saw his legion in tatters, his closest cohorts all that remained, battling pint-sized soldiers that should barely be able to pick up a spear, let alone slay one of his mighty legionaries with it. And then from the halfling ranks came Aeron Cadwallader himself, barging through the orc line on an aralez, leaping from his mount into single combat with Grullik. Massive axe met enchanted blade. Lightning crackled around Grullik, but slowly fizzled out, the power of the storm abating with each fallen legionary. Cadwallader was relentless, spinning and slashing, a whirling ball of fury.

Sensing defeat, Grullik called to his bodyguard. They closed ranks, forcing Cadwallader away. Orc drums beat out the command to fall back, while Grullik Headpuller, and the remnants of his legion, fled the city, peppered all the way by the arrows of the Green Glades reinforcements. At last, the clouds fully parted, and the sun shone upon the city of Hodenburg.

What Price Victory?

What became of Grullik Headpuller, who could tell? His shattered legion would be hunted across the Shires and beyond for weeks and months to come. Cadwallader's victory was one of the greatest ever recorded in the Shires, and cemented his fame as the halflings' greatest ever commander. But the cost of the victory weighed heavily upon Cadwallader's brow. Had he been more decisive when word had first reached them, perhaps they could have inflicted heavier casualties on the orcs at Erstford – perhaps they could have even stopped them altogether. Then the guardburgs would not have burned – a devastation that would take much time to undo. And though the songs of Hodenburg's defence told of glory and heroism, they failed to account for the true cost. How many braves had fallen? How many citizens?

Aeron Cadwallader had indeed met the sternest test in the Shires' modern history, but he knew the Abyssal Eyes were but one legion of Riftforged orcs. If they could cause such destruction, what would happen should they return, and in greater numbers? He prayed he would never have to find out...

RIFTFORGED ORCS



The Riftforged Legions

Infused with the power of Halpi's Rift, the Riftforged orcs are a breed apart from their green-skinned cousins. Though hunched, they stand as tall as a man, but are considerably broader and well-muscled. Their faces are bestial, with jutting lower jaws and sharp teeth, but these are creatures of brutal intelligence. At first, one might mistake them for a normal orc of Pannithor, but that illusion is soon dispelled. Their armour and weaponry is newly forged and meticulously maintained. The energy from which they were forged can barely be contained, manifesting itself in their glowing eyes and flickering electrical energy that crackles across their bodies whenever they are roused to war. They are the children of the storm, and the march of their legions is preceded by black thunderclouds and coruscating lightning.

Each Riftforged legion is an autonomous fighting force, disciplined and well-drilled. A campaigning legion might have as few as a hundred warriors at its disposal, or as many as two thousand – the number depends upon the success of its commanders, for Garkan grants reinforcements more readily to those legions who bring him the most glory in battle.

Stormbringers

Riftforged legions are organised into cohorts, each led by a Stormbringer – an orc of exceptional power and cunning, whose exposure to rift-energy has increased their physical strength, while often leaving them hideously scarred. Stormbringers are the foci of the legions – while but one of them draws breath, the power of the storm still rages, energising the horde. Such power makes the Stormbringers fiercely competitive and arrogant, ever ready to challenge their opponents to single combat in an effort not only to display their supremacy, but to tear the heart from the enemy force. The greatest Stormbringers are hulking specimens, their flesh charred and cracked, their armour gilded and embellished by Abyssal smiths in recognition of their might, and their rune-cursed hammers channelling the power of the storm to smite their foes.

And yet the Stormbringers were once ordinary legionaries – this power grows with age, experience, and success in battle – the energy within each Riftforged orc is a raging torrent, always threatening to overwhelm the weak. All Stormbringers are promoted from within the ranks – the very first of their number having led their brethren out of the Abyss. Should a Stormbringer show any sign of weakness, they can expect to be quickly dethroned by another aspirant, ensuring that the Riftforged legions are always led by the strongest and most merciless warriors.

Many Stormbringers ride to war on a monstrous mount – the most vicious and wild-spirited beast they can find. Riftforged orcs have a particular affinity for manticores, which they first faced in the mountains of Tragar shortly after leaving the

Abyss. However, when the Stormbringers first encountered tribes of normal orcs, they paid begrudging respect to those orc Krudgers who had managed to tame massive, bad-tempered Slashers, and determined to find such a beast for themselves.

Soldiers of the Legion

The mainstay of the legions are the Riftforged legionaries themselves. These disciplined, heavily muscled orcs were created for war. When not fighting, they train relentlessly, until their weapon drills are as practised and instinctive as they are devastating. In battle, any similarity between a legionary and a common orc is quickly dispelled. Besides their fearsome appearance, their perfectly maintained armour, weapons, and near-mechanical combat manoeuvres speak of highly trained, professional soldiers rather than marauding warbands.

Riftforged Legionaries are organised into cohorts, each containing several regiments of these drilled warriors. A legionary regiment will be equipped either with hammers and shields, or great-hammers. The former are tasked with holding the line in a near-unbreakable shieldwall, while the latter form units of shock troops – quite literally, given the elementally charged energy that builds around the regiments as the fighting escalates.

The creation of a Riftforged legionary is no easy task. Each must be flesh-forged within the Abyss, and thus it can take considerable time for a legion to receive reinforcements while on campaign. As a result, though they are almost without fear, no legionary will sell their life cheaply. That's where the unforged orc regiments come into their own. These common orcs follow the legions in great numbers, awestruck by the sheer power of their larger cousins, and desperate to take their place amongst the ranks. They race into battle as berserkers, performing reckless but devastating charges to soften the enemy lines, selling their lives so that the legionaries might notice their skill and bravery. If the Youngax aspirants had any idea of the true cost of being torn apart



and reconstituted as a Riffforged Orc, they might perhaps think twice. But for most, any price is worth paying for the chance at such awesome power.

Those legions who ventured to the frozen north found common orcs in shorter supply. Instead, the adaptable Riffforged orcs took their cue from the Northern Alliance, who use ravaging beasts as their army's vanguard. The Stormbringers of the northern legions sent hunting parties in search of vicious Tundra Wolves, and began to train packs of the swift brutes to direct into battle. The job of rearing and training Tundra Wolves generally falls to those Legionary veterans who have been too badly injured in battle to fight effectively – serving the legion as a packmaster is a fate far more preferable to being served up as campaign rations.

Death from Above!

The elite warriors of the legion, who have proven themselves many times in battle, are often formed into hard-hitting Helstriker units. Initiation into these savage airborne cavalry units is an ordeal in itself, for the chosen legionary must first select their mount from the legion's winged manticores. These beasts, captured in the mountains of Tragar, are renowned for their strength and ferocity, and breaking them into domesticity is virtually impossible. The only way to win the respect of such a monster is to dominate it with force of will, or a feat of brute strength, after which the manticore will – usually – accept the orc as its master. The potentate Helstrikers draw lots to see who will choose their future mount first. This is a dubious honour, for honour dictates that the orc must pick the biggest and most belligerent beast of those available. Many an orc has lost a limb in the attempt, making them fit for little other than rearing fledgling manticores, or exiling themselves from the legion in shame.

In battle, Helstrikers are tasked with swooping over the enemy ranks, causing as much disruption as possible by tearing apart enemy wizards, artillery teams and commanders, before launching devastating charges into the rear of larger formations, putting even the most powerful foes to flight.

Service in a Helstrike squadron is seen as the true proving ground for future Stormbringers. As such, it is no wonder that the strongest Riffforged Orcs are given such a dangerous role – it is a way of both reducing the pool of potential rivals through untimely death in battle, and also of ensuring that only the very best contenders survive to take up the mantle of Stormbringer, and thus add to the legion's legacy.

Call the Storm

The relationship between the Riffforged Orcs and their god, Garkan, is more direct and pragmatic than spiritual. Garkan created the Riffforged legions in the Abyss – many of the Stormbringers alive today stood in Garkan's august dark presence as he issued their first commands. He imbued each legionary with the power of the Nexus – the great Rift of Halpi – which even now allows the horde to summon forth roiling storms as they join battle.

So it is that the spiritual leaders of the Riffforged Orcs are not mere priests or double-speaking shamans, but living embodiments of their patron's power, whose toil at sacred elemental forges, or unto the anvil of battle, is a homage to the power of Garkan himself.

Some of these orcs are known as Stormcallers, and it is they who, through visions given to them by their patron Wicked One, summon the greatest storms that herald the arrival of the legion. The Stormcallers stand apart from the hierarchy of any one legion, forming their own conclave beneath Garkan's rule. They act as messengers and emissaries, often delivering the orders of the High Marshalls or even one of the Wicked Ones directly from the Abyss to the field of battle. Although none amongst the Riffforged would openly question the Stormcallers' authority, the legionaries are always uneasy around the enigmatic individuals, whose nature seems disturbingly similar to the Wicked Ones themselves.

There are also the Riffforgers – silent, sombre individuals at odds with the bombastic Stormcallers. Often the only sound that marks their passing is the repeated monotone clang of metal striking metal as they forge the unseen power that surrounds the legions. Each strike of the hammer empowers the Riffforged with crackling energies, strengthening their forms and striking down their foes. The rings of the Riffforgers are also responsible for maintaining the Riffforged armour and weapons. Each piece of enchanted artifice is beyond the understanding of most mortal smiths, but the Riffforgers are blessed with the dark skills of their patron.

They will often accompany the legions to battle to see their master's orders fulfilled, usually upon a huge, floating Stormforged Shrine – an elemental forge, from where the Riffforger strikes ritual runes, harnessing the power of the storm to destroy the enemy or bolster the legion's strength.

RITTFORGED ORCS



Elemental Might

The power of Halpi's Rift allowed Garkan to create the Riftforged Legions, but though these new orcs were his greatest success, they were not the only creation to come from his experimentations with the Nexus of Power.

The Thunderseers are abominations, crafted from cyclopes, their souls fragmented by exposure to the Nexus. They are tortured creatures, driven almost to the brink of madness by their gift of foresight. An eternity of torment in the Abyss is a terrible fate for most mortals, but for the cyclopes, who always see a few moments into their own futures, the horror is almost unimaginable – to know what they must endure is like living through it twice over. These shattered souls were plucked from damnation by Garkan, and fused with the same elemental energy of the Riftforged Orcs. The Thunderseers, as they are now known, are hulking creatures, revered and respected by the legionaries, for their gift of foresight makes them as adept at battle-strategy as they are at tearing apart the enemy with their massive strength.

Stormslayers, by contrast, lack any subtlety or guile. These massive creatures were created from the same stock as trolls, but exposure to the Nexus of Power drove them to a rage-fuelled frenzy. The lightning that arced around their hulking bodies was so powerful that most succumbed to the pain, and Garkan nearly discarded all of them as a failed experiment. Yet a few survived through sheer bloody-mindedness, and these Garkan saved. The Wicked One forged for each of them a pair of great falchions, with which they could control the lightning that might otherwise consume them. In battle, the Stormslayers are driven by pain-fuelled rage, and with each sweep of their falchions the foe are smote with the very force of the storm.

The Ambarox are a true oddity. No one is certain whether they were created by Garkan at all. Rather, drawn to the lightning upon which they seem to feed, these large, insectoid creatures burrowed out of their subterranean lairs when the Riftforged Orcs emerged from the Abyss. Their bony protrusions are able to channel lightning into their own bodies, causing them to glow and crackle with barely controllable energy, and then discharge it at the foe in powerful blasts. The Riftforged legions view these

creatures as heralds of Garkan, and treat them with great reverence, but whether they are truly creations of the Wicked Ones, or simply symbiotic creatures following a source of food, none can really be sure.

The last of Garkan's Riftforged creations, and the fewest in number, are the Storm Giants. Not only is the process of forging such a titanic being a truly gargantuan task, but the power required is so vast that the capping of the Nexus made it impossible to ever create more of their kind. Thankfully for Garkan – and the Storm Giants themselves – they are incredibly long-lived and very hard to kill. Possessed of the same uncanny elemental powers as the legions they follow, Storm Giants bestride the battlefield like gods of old, unleashing bolts of lightning with every crushing blow from their massive hammers, their baleful eyes brimming with the redolent energy of the rift that birthed them.



RATKIN



Bigtooth:spinebreaker
ratkin brute



Rats are everywhere. Rats are vicious, hard creatures that can survive in the harshest of conditions, living in filth and eating worse. They thrive in adversity. The darkest, most miserable places in the world are the domain of rats. If ever a race was destined for slavery, ideally suited for the despair and brutal life it offered, it was the vermin.

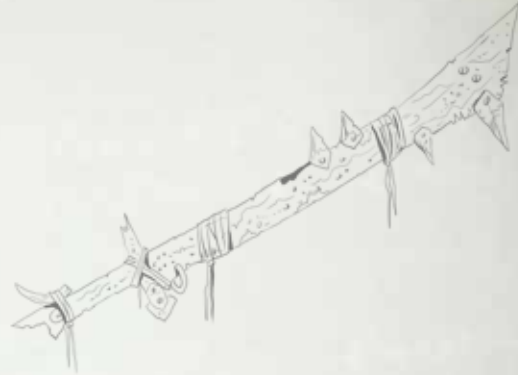
Bharzak the Grim, overmaster of the Gift-Piers of Zarak, wanted more. More work, more blood, more pain, more productivity, more sacrifice. More slaves. A seemingly endless supply simply wasn't enough.

The fires of the Abyss burn fierce and strong, their baleful light casting malevolent shadows that flicker and chase across the sheer rock sides. Between the walls, and within the warren of chasms, mines, tunnels, and caverns they imprison, the screams of slaves echo through the endless night as the rest of their fleeting lives are played out in a never-ending nightmare of misery, brutality, and pain. Many of these wretches are from far off lands, seized by roaming slave gangs and raiders, or are unlucky prisoners from battlefields far from the Abyss, unlucky that they survived the fighting only to find a fate worse than death. Many more are born into slavery. Some are bred for it.



Issuing a decree to double the number of pitiless creatures hurled into the pits to appease the Wicked Ones and working slaves to death with no rest, mercilessly flaying them to the bone with cruel barbed horsewhips was not enough. Bharzak's insanity and drive was insatiable. Taking out his frustrations in an orgy of torture and hideous experimentation, he butchered over a hundred dwarf slaves, captured on a recent raid on an Imperial dwarf hold, until there was nothing recognisable left. In a rage he threw the last of the body parts before him into the darkest corner, good for nothing but food for the rats.

Bharzak began to experiment. Consumed by his madness, he locked himself away while he worked in a frenzy on his project, rarely seen. Strange chittering screeches and agonised wails came from behind the locked doors of Bharzak's laboratory. After a while, Bharzak was forgotten and a new overmaster took his place.



Some thirteen years since Bharzak had sealed himself away, the heavy doors opened once more and Bharzak reappeared triumphant. As he emerged from his self-imposed exile, behind him streamed a vast pack of rats, but not rats as they had been. These were something new, something terrible—a horrifying hybrid of rats and other races: dwarf, human, elf, goblin. In their eyes there was a smouldering malignancy and their rapid, jerky movements were spine-chilling and beyond natural. Bharzak had bred a new race of slaves, a race he named Gnorr. Ones that could do more: work harder, work longer and, with the trait of the race he most desired, breed more slaves in vast quantities.

With the biggest brutes he had created, Bharzak reasserted his authority and quickly rose back to a position of power, even greater than before. Over the years that followed, the Ratkin became a commonplace sight in the slave dens, and their endless supply saw them sacrificed, tortured, maimed, worked, and discarded in inconceivable numbers. The Ratkin were bred for oppression and were thus cruelly exploited.



But they thrive in adversity. The darkest, most miserable places in the world are the domain of rats. They watched. They learned. They plotted and schemed.

The revolt and breakout was a maelstrom of blood, fur, teeth, and gore. When they turned on their masters and creator, they showed no mercy. Thousands of Abyssal Dwarfs died as the vast pack boiled through the halls on its way deeper into the earth. Unknown to their overlords, the Ratkin had been preparing for this moment for years. Miles and miles of new tunnels had been burrowed away from the Abyss, far away in an escape route that could expedite the flight of a new species of evil, somewhere they could form their own destiny and plot revenge on the wickedness that had spawned them.

More than a century after the exodus, the Ratkin are a menace that have plagued many of the civilised lands. Tales of savage beasts, of arcane magics and bizarre contraptions all marching to war. Names have attached themselves to the rumours like moths to a flame: The Scourge, Underkin, The Swarm, Skitterfangs. The Ratkin have learned from their masters. They have built their own battle engines, having stolen the knowledge from the war factories of the dwarfs and fashioned them in their own image. They have learnt about cruelty and suffering first-hand as they watched from the shadows as slaves. They saw the iron-casters in their forges, blending machine, flesh, and magic to construct lethal artefacts of war.

Despite their history, the self-exiled rats still look to their creators for inspiration both in war and, for some, even how they conduct themselves. For now, it's all they really know. The dwarfs themselves saw only opportunity in the initial breakout and continued the breeding program to create yet more rat-tools and battle-slaves. The initiative is still headed by Bharzak and there are many secrets he keeps to himself. Following his near-death at the hands of one of his brutes, he rebuilt his disfigured body with parts from both Ratkin and Grotesque, and he is now such a monstrosity to behold, even the most hardened and debauched Abyssal Dwarfs have to avert their gaze.

As the Wicked Ones writhe and curse the prison that continues to confine them, the Archfiends of the Sixth Circle have relayed their instructions to the dwarfs who suffered least from the flooding by the Lady and the Mythicans. Sealed behind the vast doors of their strongholds, the Abyssal Dwarfs are now their dark masters' primary instrument in striking back at the forces of the enemy. Baleful eyes have turned toward the Northern Alliance and the disturbing flicker of an ancient power that grows there.

The vanguard of the Abyssal assault on Chill will be spearheaded by the Abyssal Dwarfs, who excel at fighting in the caves and ice caverns of the northern ranges.

And the dwarfs have a deadly weapon that will spread like wildfire through the tunnels—a plague on the Alliance to spread from below.

The rats.





SCREECH-SONG

In the slave pits of Tragar, the Ratkin lived in misery and torment. Tortured by the Abyssal Dwarfs and regularly forced to eat each other due to starvation, the Ratkin prayed for quick deaths when finally thrown from the Gift Piers or sent into battle. As a result of their miserable existence, the Ratkin would often howl in lament – a piercing, high-pitched cry that would soar above the pits. More Ratkin would join the cry, resulting in a screeching dirge that would rise and fall like a tide of sound.

As the Ratkin developed language, words were added to the preening cry and each would become a song telling the plight of the rats and the horrors they witnessed in the pits. Many songs died along with their creators, but some have stood the test of time:

My tail is bent, my ears are torn

My claws are blunt, my teeth are gone

My fur is ripped, my back is broke

I long to die, to see the flame

To be reborn, and die again

After the uprising, the free Ratkin continue to sing the songs when heading into battle, led by the bloated Swarm-Criers. Enemies hear the shrieking wails long before they see the stinking, flea-infested ranks of the Ratkin army. As the Ratkin came closer, the tuneless screeching becomes a deafening wall of noise – a constant barrage on the ears that sends foes weak at the knees, makes their ears bleed and causes them to vomit.

The Screech-song, as the Ratkin call it, is often mistakenly reported by opposing armies as a plague carried by the rats, which causes sickness and madness. Meanwhile, the Ratkin themselves have no idea of the effect of the Screech-song, instead wanting to remind themselves that no matter how hard life is, it can never be worse than under the oppression of the Abyssal Dwarfs.

CHITTER

Bharzak never intended the Ratkin to speak. Of course, they could scream or cry out in agony, but Bharzak hadn't considered a need to communicate. After all, they just had to follow the commands of their Abyssal Dwarf masters and a slave doesn't need a voice to do that.

However, as the Ratkin scratched out a meagre existence in the Slave Pits, they began to find their voice. At first it was the nervous chattering of their forebears – squeaks of alarm or warnings to their kin. But over countless litters of new and

more evolved Ratkin, the squeaks formed words and those words became sentences and those sentences became the kindling for rebellion.

Many of Chitter's words are a mix between the sharp high-pitched squeaks of rats and the guttural language of their Abyssal Dwarf masters. A kind of pidgin dwarfish that to the untrained ears of the Abyssal Dwarfs sounded like the mindless chatter of rats.

It was only when the Iron Casters began studying the physiology of the Ratkin that they noticed patterns in the constant squeaking of their captives. Their eyes grew wide with the horror that their slaves could communicate and that could potentially lead to insubordination.

The Abyssal Dwarfs quickly worked to stamp out the Ratkin's voice. Slave Drivers would make an example of any Ratkin they heard chattering to each other, and the Gift Piers overflowed with those caught breaking the rules.

But in the gloom of the Slave Pits there were no Slave Drivers to crush the words of resistance. This meant that in the darkness the Ratkin's own language of Chitter began to bloom and with it came the seeds of rebellion.

THE UNSHACKLED

Although thousands of Ratkin escaped during the initial uprising, it was only a handful of the slaves the Abyssal Dwarfs had intensively bred. Many were too scared of the potential repercussions from their cruel masters to risk an attempt to escape. They watched in fear – and a small measure of envy – as their kin fled down the tunnels to freedom.

Those that did escape refer to themselves as the 'Unshackled' – the Ratkin that are free from the yoke of their creators. Meanwhile, the slaves still under the control of the Abyssal Dwarfs are simply referred to as 'Yellow-tails'.

Rather than trying to free their brethren, the Unshackled consider the Yellow-tails as traitors to their kind. Their ancestors refused the opportunity to escape when they had the chance and, instead, chose the Abyssal Dwarfs over their own kind.

Since the uprising, the Unshackled have regularly clashed against the Abyssal Dwarfs and invariably the Ratkin still forced, or born, into slavery. Rather than trying to free the Yellow-tails, their presence drives the free Ratkin into a ferocious anger, as the Unshackled believe they should be punished for the betrayal. After all, they still choose a life under the control of the Abyssal Dwarfs, instead of a 'free' life as part of a Brood Mother's nest. To be branded a Yellow-tail is one of the ultimate insults for an Unshackled Ratkin.



Lord Dallen,

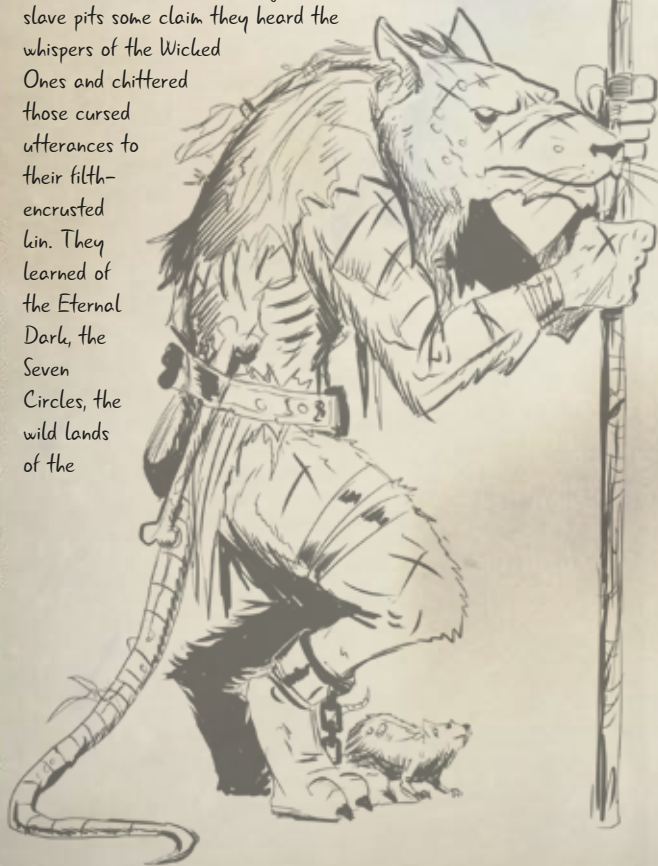
My humblest apologies I have been unable to offer this report sooner. The task you set was challenging, to say the least. My lost eye and scarred body are testimony to that. I expect I shall be compensated accordingly. At your discretion, of course, my lord.

However, as requested I have spent countless weeks and hours gathering the information you required. I hasten to add that, as suspected, the Ratkin pose no threat to the might of our kind. Their insignificant uprising will be crushed under our heels like a meagre bug. The details I present to you will simply speed up our ability to stamp them out.

A word of caution though, my lord. The details of Ratkin society were extracted from my sources under some measure of... duress. Many screeched out information that couldn't possibly be true or contradicted our own historical tomes. I have left the particulars for you to decipher using your immeasurable intellect. Apologies, I am rambling. My mind strays after the rigours of my work.

The Ratkin spent so much of their early existence in close proximity to the Abyss, that it is inevitable they would be shaped by its glorious presence, but what I have been told is heretical to our own teachings. Deep in the slave pits some claim they heard the whispers of the Wicked

Ones and chattered those cursed utterances to their filth-encrusted kin. They learned of the Eternal Dark, the Seven Circles, the wild lands of the



Hellequins... nothing was sacred. Even as we slaughtered the beasts in their thousands, under our noses a twisted religion had grown from the bloody dirt of their cages.

Some of my informants claimed it was a Wicked One that appeared to a meagre slave known as Zruleek and told him to devise the Ratkin uprising. Lies, of course, my lord. Yet, we cannot deny the uprising did take place – our damaged slave pits are testimony to that.

Once free from the Slave Pits, the Ratkin clung to their new faith with a fierce obsession. Yet, as they spread further from the Abyss, the whispers grew more distant and more intermittent. Without the guiding voice, the first Ratkin nests were fraught with savage anarchy as would-be leaders strived for supremacy. Without intervention it is likely Ratkin society would have ripped itself apart – something we would expect from such lowly, stupid beasts.

Again, it is claimed the usurper Zruleek led the way in these early days. Stating he had received a vision from the Abyss, he said the nest must be built in a mirror of the Abyss itself. The Ratkin should dig seven levels, in honour of the seven circles of the Abyss. It sickens me to write this, my lord, as it is an affront to our understanding of the Abyss. However, it is claimed that with tooth and claw, the first Ratkin slaves dug through the dirt to build the layers of their new home – each a shrine to the Abyss itself. And so I will guide you through these key parts of the nest to help you better understand how we can wipe them out or recapture them.

In the deepest, darkest depths of the Ratkin lair you will find the bloated, near-blind monstrosity known as the Brood Mother.

She lives only to further the cause of her horde and to spread the nest far and wide. Only females are allowed in her musty cave and she is tended by a plethora of birthing-

daughters – carers for the mewling, sightless Ratkin pups. From her birthing-daughters, the Brood Mother will carefully select those that are allowed to breed with males throughout the lair. She will typically pick the most loyal and weak-willed, constantly fearful that one of her daughters will attempt a rebellion and try to become a Brood Mother herself. Those not given permission to produce their own offspring, act as wet nurses to the hundreds of hungry mouths – a never-ending and entirely thankless task.

The inequality between the roles means that enmity is rife among the birthing-daughters – as they fight to become the Brood Mother's favourite – and gossip constantly swirls around their ranks. Most is petty jostling for recognition but occasionally a would-be Brood Mother will challenge the lair by gathering other birthing-daughters around her. The fighting is vicious as the rival camps brawl amongst each other and after a bloody scrap, the victor and her followers



will eat the losing leader and her supporters. As an extra precaution any pups recently birthed by the rebels are devoured too – lest the desire for rebellion is passed on. The remaining birthing-daughters and Brood Mother gorge themselves on the sweet meat of young flesh in a frantic display of cannibalism. One of the birthing-daughters I questioned confessed that when her sisters were hungry, they would spread rumours of a rival Brood Mother just to trigger a challenge so they could feed on the pups.

What of the Brood Mother's partners, you might ask? Unfortunately, I had contradictory statements regarding this, as most of the foul creatures did not know. So, make of this information what you will, my lord. Only the most powerful and successful warlocks or warchiefs are commanded to mate with the Brood Mother. It is a great honour for a male to be allowed into the Breeding Hall and many are invited following a great victory in battle. High on the joys of their success, the lucky male is treated to a sensual feast of food and pleasure, before being carried to the Mother by the birthing-daughters. The act itself though is brief and the male is... eaten following the deed. For the Brood Mother, it is a subtle way to stop any male getting a taste for leadership, which could lead to a coup against her. For the war chief or warlock it is an opportunity for their legacy to live on through a new generation of Ratkin, although they are seemingly unaware of the fate that awaits them once they have mated with the Brood Mother.

From the safety of her lair, hidden deep on the seventh level of the nest, the Brood Mother leads with a ruthless cunning. She dispatches her birthing-daughters to scurry throughout the clan and deliver her commands. However, it appears it is not uncommon for these messages to be interpreted in a way that will greatly benefit the receiver. The war chief that first receives the message often claims the Brood Mother has given his battalion the easier flank in battle or extra troops, for example. There are shrieks of treason if any dare question the legitimacy of the Brood Mother's instructions. The birthing-daughters are keenly aware of their own powerful influence in this process and will readily accept bribes from recipients keen to ensure they are first in line for the Brood Mother's instructions.

From the Brood Mother's lair, you travel upwards to the rune-encrusted halls of the warlocks. I must admit it came as a surprise to hear the Ratkin were able to harness magic. After all, they are mere beasts. Yet I have seen evidence that some can handle crude spells – particularly compared to the might of the

arcane arts wielded by powerful Iron Casters such as yourself, Lord Dalken.

A Ratkin nest will typically only have a handful of warlocks among its ranks, yet they are respected and feared almost as much as the Brood Mother and her birthing-daughters. They are respected because many claim to still hear the whispers of the Wicked Ones and recite these words as though they were religious texts. Obviously, I sincerely doubt the Ratkin continue to be visited by the Wicked Ones... if they ever were at all.

Meanwhile, they are feared for their voracious appetite to master the ways of sorcery, often through blood and sacrifice. Once touched by magic, a sort of fever descends on the Ratkin in question,



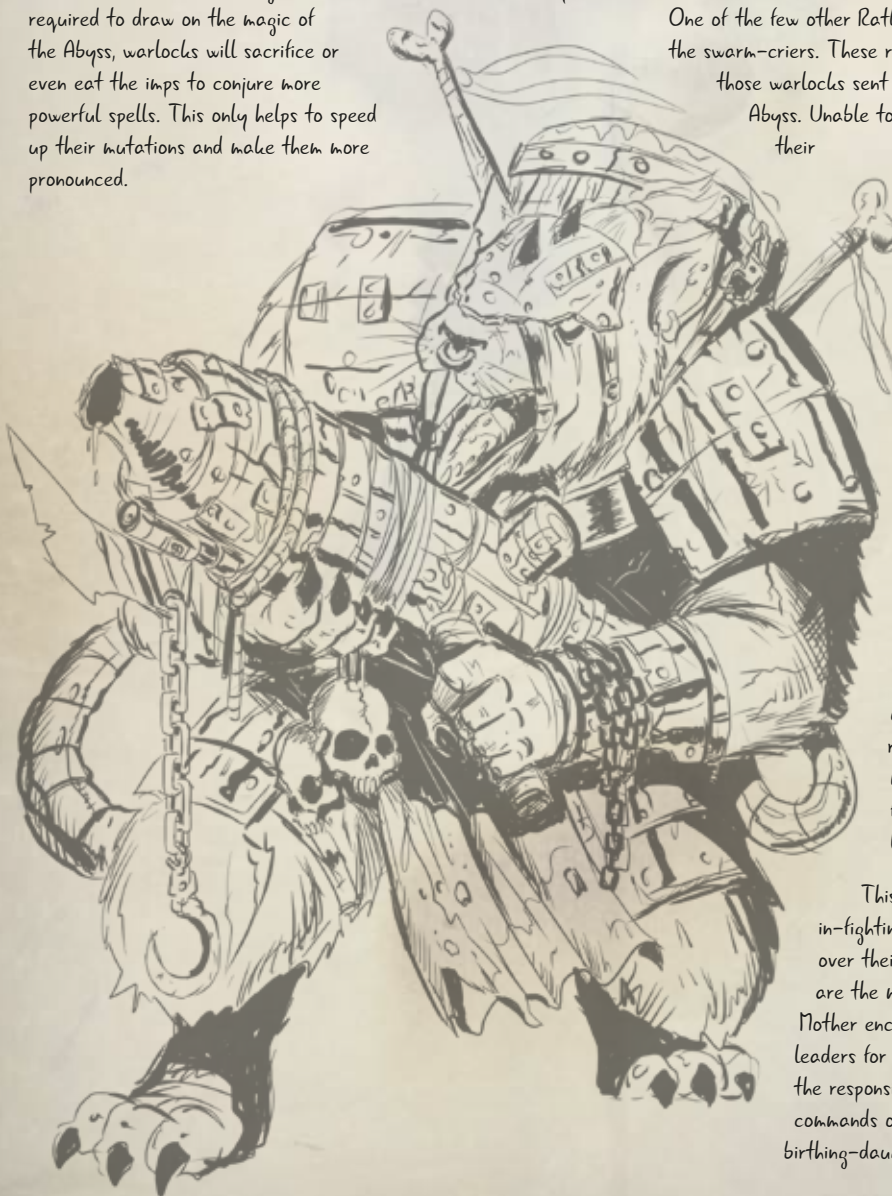


1. SLAVE PITS
2. CAGES FULL OF RATKIN AND OTHERS
3. MUSTERING AREA
4. HIDDEN ENTRANCES
5. BEAST PITS
6. FEEDING AREA
7. CAGES RARELY USED
8. SCURRIER LAIR
9. MESSAGE HOLES AND SECRET MEETING SPOTS
10. SPLICKER PIT
11. BLIGHTCRAFT ENGINEER'S WORKSHOP
12. WAR CHIEF TROPHIES AND TOTEMS
13. FIGHTING PITS
14. WARLOCK LAIR
15. SUMMONING EXPERIMENTS
16. NURSERY
17. BROOD MOTHER'S THRONE
18. GATEWAY TO THE ABYSS?
19. PATHETIC HUMAN CITY



pushing them to master more and more powerful magic. As they continue to draw on the almighty influence of the Abyss, they're mutated by its impact – becoming a bizarre mix of Ratkin and Abyssal. It is not uncommon to see Warlocks sporting the hooves of a Lower Abyssal, the wings of a Seductress, the tail of a Succubi or even a second demonic head, for example. Their fur often takes on a red hue over time as they continue to touch the influence of the Abyss.

I'm told that as they travel further from the Abyss and its influence becomes more tenuous, warlocks capture Abyssal Imps to use as familiars and lackies. During battle, when they're required to draw on the magic of the Abyss, warlocks will sacrifice or even eat the imp to conjure more powerful spells. This only helps to speed up their mutations and make them more pronounced.



In the warren of the Ratkin, the floor inhabited by the warlocks is avoided by most. Swirling with the arcane energies of the Abyss, it rests on a knife edge of existence. Sulphuric fumes exude from its tunnels, while the screams of unimaginable terrors echo upwards through the corridors. Ratkin, by their nature, are cowardly animals so the sounds and smells fill them with horror and many run with their tails between their legs. The location of the panic-inducing warlocks' chambers, above the lair of the Brood Mother, acts as a deterrent for any would-be assassins sent to kill the Brood Mother, as most are unlikely to make it past the infernal horrors leaking between dimensions.

One of the few other Ratkin to live alongside the warlocks are the swarm-criers. These repulsive and weak-minded vermin are those warlocks sent mad by the tumultuous sorcery of the Abyss. Unable to cope with the bizarre visions that plague their

fragile minds, most tear out their own eyes or go blind from the horrors they witness, while their fur turns a ghostly white. Unburdened from the curse of sight, they act as assistants for the warlocks and during battle bellow the teachings of the Wicked Ones to the gathered swarms or lead a chorus of the dirge-like Screech-songs.

From the realm of the warlocks, you travel up to the home of the war chiefs and their strongest warriors and shock troops. A Ratkin nest will have many war chiefs all vying for the attention of the Brood Mother. Like children fighting to gain the recognition of an uninterested parent, the war chiefs push themselves to greater feats of cruelty and violence to rise through the ranks of the pack. Although I suspect some may not push so hard if they knew what fate awaited them in the Brood Mother's lair.

This is a part of the nest that is fraught with in-fighting as the war chiefs battle for dominance over their own kind, each attempting to prove they are the most powerful. It is something the Brood Mother encourages, as she is keen to find the strongest leaders for her brood when it marches to war. It is also the responsibility of the war chiefs to carry out the commands of the Brood Mother – as passed on by the birthing-daughters.



When summoned to battle by the Brood Mother, they travel up through the nest, whipping the cowering Ratkin into order as they go. The army grows in strength at each stage, so that by the time it erupts out onto the surface, the force is a surge of filthy fur and crude weaponry. This explains why our scouts have failed to see the early warning signs of a Ratkin army massing for battle, my lord. All the preparation is performed in the safety of their nest, before spilling upwards.

So far we have travelled from the Brood Mother's dank lair, to the chaotic realm of the warlocks and then the battle pits of the war chiefs. Following that, we come to the laboratories of the blightcraft scientists. My sources tell me there is a fierce rivalry between the scientists and the warlocks lower in the nest. The scientists believe it should be them, armed with their lethal, if unreliable, contraptions that should have the honour of being close to the all-powerful Brood Mother. The truth is, it is likely the Brood Mother keeps them at a safe distance as their sorcerous devices and mutated creatures are unpredictable and potentially dangerous to her defenceless pups.

I am not surprised to hear the Ratkin are obsessed with cunning machinery and experimentation though. After all, who could not fail to be inspired by the powerful engineering of our own Iron Casters? Your supreme excellence included, of course. Within the ranks of the scientists there are two distinct camps – engineers that favour to build machines powered by arcane alchemy and splicers that prefer to work on live subjects. Unsurprisingly there is bitter competition between these two camps, with both trying to prove their methods are the most successful. From the reports I have received, it often seems like the Brood Mother is responsible for nursing thousands of squabbling children, rather than commanding a legion of well-trained warriors. Each wants to outdo the other to prove their dedication to the nest.

However, I digress, my lord! In the labs of the splicers you are likely to find all-manner of twisted and desperate beasts. The Ratkin may have been inspired by our own techniques but they clearly lack the expertise. Yet, under the command of the Brood Mother and her birthing-daughters, the splicers toil away to create bigger and more lethal living death machines. From the towering Nightmares and Brutes, which I believe to be pumped full of orc and troll blood (see my notes on how we may

implement this method), to the mindless Night Terrors, the Ratkin have had limited success in fleshcrafting, when compared to our own achievements.

What is more troubling, perhaps, is the rat's ability for developing crude but deadly machinery. I have been witness to their chaotic machines thundering across the battlefield with devastating results. Apparatus like the 'Death Engine' or 'Shredder' may appear to be ramshackle in their appearance, but there is no denying their effectiveness. My only concern is, my lord, that if the Ratkin gather stronger, more reliable materials, then their engineers could craft ever more lethal – and more reliable – war engines. Almost as dangerous as our own designs. I stress the almost!





Onwards and upwards though, through the rest of the nest. In the third level, I feel the Ratkin were struggling to mirror the elegant anarchy of the Abyss. After all, it is well written that beautiful but deadly Succubi exact their exquisite torture on those foolish enough to be dragged into the maddening pathways of the Third Circle. I think most agree that although many Ratkin possess an appetite for torture, they are certainly not beautiful. Far from it!

Instead the third floor of a Ratkin's lair is home to their scurriers. These are the scouts of the nest – sent out to scavenge for food and resources under the cover of darkness. It is possible, I suppose, that they're housed towards the top of the lair to make it easier to drag back the supplies and distribute them through the colony. Due to their role as scouts, the scurriers are among the most cunning of the Ratkin. They are constantly scheming amongst themselves and against the other parts of the nest to rise through the ranks and better themselves – only the birthing-daughters rival their calculating nature.

Through wily negotiations, stealing, murder and torture some scurriers will rise through the flea-bitten masses to become Master Scurriers. These are the de-facto leaders of the scurriers and they live in luxury compared to the rest of their hideous brethren. Once supplies have been sent down to the Brood Mother, the Master Scurrier will have first pick of the rest – although the hierarchy of the nest dictates those further down should receive theirs first. As you can imagine, competition is fierce between the scurriers for this privileged position and most Master Scurriers lead a short, if luxurious, life.

As I mentioned, only the birthing-daughters rival the scurriers in their craftiness and it is not uncommon for a birthing-daughter to promote herself to the role of Master Scurrier, once tired of unquestioningly serving the Brood Mother. Claiming she is backed by the Mother, she will violently overthrow whoever is in charge and take command of the scurriers. Birthing-daughters promoted in this way have slightly more success than those who must fight their way through the ragged ranks, as would-be challengers fear disobeying the will of the Brood Mother. It is only when a jealous birthing-daughter whispers to a rival scurrier of the deception that they quickly meet their demise.

Next, in a bizarre tribute to the blasted wastelands of the Hellequins, the Ratkin let their own flea-bitten cavalry roam wild on the second level of the lair. From the accounts I received it sounds like a most turbulent part of the nest. The mawbeasts stolen from the goblins regularly break free of their pens and cause havoc – eating the gathered Ratkin before being captured or killed. Those that are broken-in by their captors are ridden with a kind of wild glee by their owners. After all, there aren't many beasts that are lower than a measly Ratkin, so mastery over another living being must send them dizzy with power.

It is not uncommon for the so-called hackpaws to ride a mawbeast until it collapses from exhaustion. At which point it is quickly eaten by the gathered Ratkin or other mawbeasts lucky enough to get close. The enthusiastic rider simply selects another and begins the process all over again. The hackpaws constantly engage in petty competitions to prove who is the best rider or jouster. Many are killed during the challenges but there are always fresh participants eager to gain dominance over their stinking kin.

Finally, we reach the most disgusting part of the nest: the slave pits. This is where you will find the vast majority of the inhabitants of a Ratkin nest. A reeking, hideous labyrinth of squalor, the slave pits are home to Ratkin wretches and any other slaves unfortunate enough to be captured by the beasts. Forced to live on scraps of food – or each other – the slaves are kept in line by ruthless Brute Enforcers, who grow fat on a diet of slaves they have killed.

Cages line the walls of the pits and inside you will find all-manner of wretched creatures. From Ratkin too weak to fight their way through the ranks of the nest to goblins, humans, orcs and even, most pleasingly my lord, dwarfs. I had no reports that our own brethren are among the ranks of their foul slaves – clearly, we are too powerful to be dragged to their stinking hovels. When roused to war, the slaves are let loose from their cages and herded into battle by the Brute Enforcers. Many are trampled to death in the initial rush for freedom but the Brood Mother does not care, there are always more to replace them.

And so, my lord, we reach the end of my report. I believe this to be the most thorough study we have done of the Ratkin and, as you can no doubt see, the threat is minimal. Compared to the might of Zarak they are mere fleas on the fur of a rodent. I see no danger in us continuing our breeding plans, as the Ratkin are an endless resource of dispensable battle fodder and sacrifices. I am also pleased to report the Iron Casters are having some success in breeding mastiffs capable of sniffing out a Brood Mother, so it is only a matter of time before we crush those rebellious nests and stamp out the rogue Ratkin once and for all.

Your humble follower,

Kyshar Peakslord



Pack Mentality

Across the battlefield, a sea of baleful red eyes watches the enemy with hatred and fear. The pack's numbers, and the whips of brutal enforcers, hold them together and drive them to a bloody frenzy.

The backbone of a Ratkin warhost is a seething mass of hatred, teeth, and claws. Their Warriors form vast blocks of chittering steel and matted fur and large bristling units of spear-wielding troops are often seen defending the Ratkin flanks from marauding cavalry. Those individuals who were born bigger, stronger, and meaner than their siblings find themselves in the ranks of the Shock Troops, their role to soften the enemy for the Warriors to overwhelm with pure numbers.

Astonishingly, even the humble Warriors are not the most pitiful of the vermin. Wretches are scrawny, malnourished, and the lowest of the low; when they are not cannon fodder for the enemy, they are just fodder for the rest of the Ratkin army. These destitute beings are a rag-tag collection, all as broken and mindless as one another. Scampering under the feet of all and goaded by their handlers, multitudes of smaller vermin often accompany the armies of the Ratkin. This tide of base creatures swarms round the enemy like a vicious, biting carpet of death—within easy reach for any warrior that gets hungry.

Ratkin experiments have culminated in what the Abyssal Dwarfs have labelled blightcraft. These despicable creations result in foul, noxious instruments of war, infected with all manner of hideous diseases. They are often accompanied by a suffocating miasma of pestilence which assaults the enemy before the Ratkin even arrive.

Bones, dried skin, fur, and skulls are all used in the construction of the Ratkin's war banners and totems. Carrying these trophies and decorated with the unfathomable runes of the underworld are the blind, bloated, albino Swarm-Criers that march alongside the pack, preaching their hate.

Safety in Numbers

Ratkin are often skittish, fearful creatures. Bharzak was very careful to breed subservience and cowardice into his creations. Only the biggest and strongest in the pack possess the willpower to break this innate fear, and weak, lone Ratkin are next to useless unless driven into a frenzy. In a pack, however, they draw strength from each other. Nothing is stronger than the pack. Of course, the alternative is to be as far away from the enemy as possible and just throw things at them before running away.

The Abyssal Dwarfs' disdain for the enslaved Ratkin can be found in the use of the volatile device known as the Last Breath, or the Aht-Skro to Gnorr themselves. Sorcerous and explosive, this cruel contraption consumes the flesh and soul

of the being who carries it to create a potent, if short-lived, detonation. Driven to the edge of insanity by the treatment of the masters, there are all too many Ratkin slaves who would volunteer to carry one of these devices into battle, hoping to find some release in a death at their masters' command. Sadly, this is never the case as the explosion casts the bearer's soul into the Abyss, to be the subject of the infernals' torturing for eternity.

Scurrier teams train and act as scouts. They are agile and adept at striking enemy weak points (from a distance... they wouldn't like to get too close). Most Assassins will have learned their basic skills serving as scouts in the Scurrier teams. Those who show promise become Master Scurriers and are sent on near-impossible missions to further hone their lethal abilities. Scurriers are often tasked with raiding the fleabag pens of the goblin tribes they see as easy prey. The captured beasts, which the Ratkin find suitably nimble, are ridden back to the Ratkin lairs where selected warriors known as Hackpaws train to ride the best of them. The rest are eaten.

Taking the art of lethality from afar to extremes, the Ratkin Clawshot rifle is an arcane, long-barrelled contraption beloved of individuals who prefer to strike the enemy from the safety of a hilltop (and behind a large pavise). It's easier to run away downhill, too.

Bestial Brawn

Bharzak understood that slaves need to come in many shapes and sizes. After he had perfected the basic template for a Ratkin, he focused on developing a larger type that could survive in harsher conditions and, most importantly, be the work-horses of the mines. The result was the Ratkin Brute. Bred for war, these hulking slabs of muscle, claw, and fur are hard to stop once they get the scent of blood. Set to work among and alongside Abyssal Dwarf crews, they came to admire their masters and even now fashion their hair in plaits, attempting to mimic the well-groomed dwarf style. Before going into battle, Brutes are injected with a horrifying cocktail of steroids and regeneration serums, concocted by their Brood Mother and spiked with blightcraft. The most vicious of the Brutes are used as Enforcers, who march between the hordes and keep the rabble in line. Killing stragglers or those trying to sneak away often proves to be an incredible motivational tool.

The development and evolution of the Ratkin didn't stop once they had escaped their place of birth. Using techniques gleaned from the Abyssal Dwarfs, the Brood Mothers and their mewling daughters constantly experiment in an attempt to fabricate new and ever more lethal living weapons. The Night Terror is a mutation of the Brute gene, transformed through blightcraft and other sorcerous alchemy to create a deadly, preternatural killer that the pack delights in setting loose to find fresh meat—especially if it comes wrapped in



armour and holding a nasty sword. Not all these experiments are entirely successful, however. Many creations perish soon after birth, too utterly broken to survive. Sometimes, happy circumstance means that one of these hideous abominations, forged in the breeding pits of the Ratkin's underground lairs, manages to hold together and, even more pleasingly, is able to be put to work. Experimental and slightly unstable, these fearless Rat-Fiends are unleashed upon the enemy in times of war, or just when they get hungry.

The Will of Tyrants

Brood Mothers are the absolute rulers, and beating hearts, of any Ratkin lair. Deep underground, surrounded by their birthing-daughters, they plot and scheme, controlling the horde through a mysterious and compulsive telepathy. They are large, often bloated, nasty individuals, but they possess a sharp intelligence and a cunning that has been the downfall of many a foe. They are rarely seen on the surface of the world, preferring to send their Warchiefs and Warlocks to wage war on their behalves. These battle leaders patrol the lines barking orders and mercilessly killing those who show cowardice in the face of the enemy. The Warchiefs are the most vicious and cunning of the Ratkin and are both feared and revered in equal measure. The Warlocks study the dark arts, magic and sorcery from the depths of the Abyss. The taint of the Wicked Ones courses through their veins. They are twisted, evil individuals, but cunning and dangerous, too.

When a Brood Mother is stirred into action, she is a ferocious fighter. Their reputation and pack are both at stake and this impels them to crush and eradicate any and all that threaten them. In the short time since the Gnorr themselves first escaped the clutches of their creators, they have spread like wildfire, with new lairs and incursions reported each year and in new places, each further afield than the last. In recent times, one particular Brood Mother has been identified as the mastermind behind a plague of terror that has wracked the Basilean Province of Cortia and south as far as Amuklai. Known as Mother Cryza, this cruel and hideous despot is believed to be responsible for several plagues, the destruction of Beluggia, and she was almost certainly present at the massacre of Perino.

Whispered rumour also links Cryza with the incomprehensible meddling and dark magic that gave rise to the Demonspawn known as Scudku-z'luk. Born a monstrously deformed rat-fiend, the beast was taken deep into Cryza's most secret chambers to a coven of warlocks that had been selected for both their talent and insane depravity. The ritual lasted three days and the maniacal and often terrified screams of the sorcerers echoed through the tunnels of the lair above. The pack quivered in fear, with many Ratkin tearing their own eyes out or killing each other in desperation from the hallucinations and horrific visions that seared through their minds. Only two beings appeared from what the rats now call

the Chamber of Hell. Cryza emerged triumphant, her hands gripping the huge chains which snaked behind her and rose to wrap themselves around the neck of the huge beast that loomed above her. In its skull, eyes of fire raged with the fury of the Abyss and a quick, forked tongue licked blood speckled lips in anticipation of the joyous carnage it would unleash upon the world. Scudku-z'luk, demon prince of the Ratkin and infernal champion of the fifth circle of the Abyss, had been born.

Golekh Skinflayer is a slave driver of renown and infamy. Among the Abyssal Dwarfs he is known for his short, violent temper and the legions of slaves he commands from the grand keep of Khalazahrm. To the Gnorr, he is a terrible curse, a dark spirit of cruelty and pain that comes for the weak and the wanton. They call him Aka-Strach-Ya in their own language, which crudely translates as the burning lash. The ratkin slaves fear him more than their own deity.

In battle, Skinflayer rides atop a reinforced chariot yoked to a vat-overgrown gore. He lashes out at friends and foes alike with his whip, driving them into a terror-fuelled frenzy. In the ranks of slaves, this pushes them forwards to attack with desperate ferocity. Among the enemy, the strikes of his lash sow terror and discord, driving even the most disciplined troops to freeze in terror and be swiftly overwhelmed by the oncoming horde of screeching Gnorr.

Cunning Contraptions

Much like the goblins, the Ratkin have an unexpected fascination with machines. Whether it was something innate that blossomed when Bharzak's experiments unlocked the potential, or it developed from a desire to mimic the contraptions the rats witnessed the Abyssal Dwarfs themselves constructing, is unknown. What is known, and many an unfortunate commander in the field has learnt to their detriment, is that the Ratkin are rather good at building new toys, and all of them are rather successful when it comes to killing.

Death Engines are strange, rickety contraptions crewed by "volunteers"; no two are ever of the same design. A bizarre mix of arcane science and cunning sorcery, these great mechanisms rumble and grind their way through the enemy ranks, striking out with dark energies at those it cannot crush beneath its churning wheels and spinning blades. The Shredder is a smaller device but no less fiendish. Crewed by a team of crackpot Ratkin "engineers", it is a bizarre war engine infused with blightcraft that fires a cloud of spinning, poison-coated blades.

Mobile Weapon Teams carry all manner of looted Abyssal Dwarf weaponry, or even bizarre contraptions of the Ratkin's own cruel design. Some are more reliable than others, but all are only employed by those mad enough to see what happens when you pull the trigger.

RATKIN



Tunnel Runners were conceived by the Ratkin as both a fast and efficient ways of getting messages and items of importance quickly between the lairs of their increasingly vast and complex underground empire. Employed in a similar role to chariots in other forces, they are one of the new-fangled ideas that the Abyssal Dwarfs have permitted their slaves contingents to utilise—either using ones claimed from recapture Ratkin or modified versions, newly forged in the workshops of Zarak and crewed by the Ratkin slaves the dwarfs continue to breed.

The Tangle is a bizarre and disturbing contrivance. Its frame is made from the rusted iron beams of failed mechanical experiments, shaped specifically for one purpose using arcane and eldritch witchcraft. Atop the structure, soiled, filthy furs and cloths form a putrid nest filled with enormous fat, blind, and distended creatures called puss-bloats. They cannot leave the Tangle, for they are psychically and magically bound to it, their powers attuned and focused by the device. The whole devious apparatus is borne into battle on a seething carpet of plague-ridden rodents while an armour-encased Swarm-Crier rides at the rear, chanting hate and channelling the weird and obscene powers of the disgusting rat-things at its feet.



NIGHTSTALKERS



UNKNOWN REAPER
sighted inside the forests of Ileuthar

NIGHTSTALKERS



Since the creation of the Abyss, the veil between realities has thinned. Behind the veil lies every nightmare, fear and terror ever conjured by mortal minds and worse. Where the fabric of reality thins, these ravaging entities gather like moths to a candleflame, looking for ingress into the physical world. Terror given form, the Nightstalkers are creatures of dark fable, who hunger for the souls of mortals.

In a world steeped in magic, plagued by warfare, and touched by the gods themselves, it seems inevitable that spirits and shades should haunt the realms of mortals. And yet the Nightstalkers are more than mere ghosts: they are the stories by which parents scare their children abed. They are the monsters that dwell in the darkest forests, who demand sacrifice from superstitious villagers. They are the darkest dreams and ill omens made manifest.



The Tearing of the Veil

The elven Conclave of Heaven was a secretive, intellectual project devoted to the study of higher consciousness and the nature of divinity. The pinnacle of the Conclave's achievements and understanding came when it attracted the attentions of the young and seemingly curious Celestian known as Oskan. Oskan seemed to display a bond with the elves and hinted at great changes soon to come with wonderful gifts bestowed upon the mortal world. Oskan began to teach the elven arch-mages how to travel the paths between worlds and walk in the footsteps of the gods, luring them ever further away from their bodies, testing their minds for his own amusement.

One day, the entire conclave was invited deeper into the paths, beyond the mists of time, with Oskan leading and the elves displaying an almost childish glee to see the wonders of the galaxy and other, unimaginable planes of existence. Then Elinathora smashed the Fenulian Mirror. Chaos erupted and sorcerous turmoil swept across the land and skies as the bodies of the Celestians were ripped in two. As Oskan's body was split in twain, the backwash of cosmic energy shattered the bodies, minds and spirits of the Conclave around him. Acting as a conduit for this devastating surge of raw power, the mortal bodies of the elves formed the epicentre of an explosion that utterly destroyed the city where the Conclave had met. The souls of the entire population and all living creatures for miles in every direction were torn from the mortal plane and scattered across countless dimensions; the screams of the victims echoing across both time and space. Feeding greedily on the minds so cruelly sacrificed, Oskan, Father of Lies, was born.

When Domivar created the Abyss with the axe of Oskan it created a rent not only in the earth but in the fabric of the universe too. The paths between realities twisted, crossed, and swelled with power. The veil between worlds grew so thin in parts that the shadow-forms of myriad, strange creatures could be seen flickering in the air, and it is the waxing and waning power of the Abyss that attracts and repels these creatures in turn. The Abyss and other sites like it across the world of Pannithor are areas where reality has thinned, and such places draw things from other dimensions into the mortal world. It is here, behind fragile barriers between realities, that unimaginable things gather and lurk, desperate to find a way into the world of mortals. These are what remains of the beings horrifically torn from the world as Oskan was born. And in their absence from the mortal world they have encountered other things, too. Cosmic entities and obscene horrors who follow the shadows to the thinning veil, eyeing a new world to conquer; new souls to devour.

These are the Nightstalkers: the dreams, nightmares, fears and horrors of mortals become manifest. They lurk in the shadows and feed on the most powerful of mortal emotions - fear, hatred and pride. The essence of the Stalkers burrows deep into the psyche of mortals, so that each time an incursion through the veil occurs, the spirits gain a greater foothold in the world. When the power of the Abyss swells anew, those seeds that have taken root erupt violently until dark manifestations tear themselves from mortal hosts, terrorising communities, and sometimes gathering into vast hosts of unimaginable horrors. They come from shadow, sweeping through the mortal realm, taking nourishment from the very fear that precedes them. As their grip on the physical form fades, Stalkers often latch onto the bodies of the dead - or even undead - in desperation; this explains in part why shadowy spectres are so often seen in graveyards or roaming ancient battlefields. Such wretched spirits are often sought out by necromancers, for there is much they can teach the practitioners of dark magic, if they can be successfully bound - a terrifyingly difficult task, fraught with danger.

Cosmic Horrors

While the vast majority of the Nightstalker host comprises hollow remnants of Pannithor's distant past, there are things that follow them through the veil more terrifying by far. They come from other planes, other universes - even other worlds beyond space and time. They are alien, cold and unfathomable. Their twisted forms speak to the mortals of Pannithor on some primal level that few can understand. The oldest of the elves believe that these creatures serve cyclopean beings that were once gods, worshipped even before the Celestians, by cultures thankfully forgotten, or wiped out long before the elder races began to write down their history. They whisper strange names, almost unpronounceable, such as the Ch'wthall'thoi, and Tsatt'huul the fear-demon. Almost as a racial memory, these dark star-gods and their minions are still feared, such that the very sight of them can cause the weak of mind to be driven mad.

The Hosts of Shadow

Stalkers take many forms - often perceived by different races in different ways depending on the superstitions and fears of a culture or individual, or a hideous perversion of their once-mortal form. As in the life they were so cruelly ripped away from, there are many different types of Nightstalker, sometimes even shaped by remnants of memories and personalities of their lost mortality. Sometimes, when the powers of the Abyss are strong, the presence of the Nightstalkers rips a portal in the fabric of reality - a doorway between dimensions. The damage to the Shadow Paths in the Twilight Glades has created another vulnerability in the fabric of reality.

NIGHTSTALKERS



The power of the Abyss is channelled through such rents that seethe and boil in the air, painful for mortals to see directly. At the edge of vision the portal seems like a cage of glossy black, writhing serpents, screaming in perpetual agony. Nightstalker shadow-hosts burst forth into reality: a gibbering, cacophonous explosion of fear wreathed in the purple lightning of the portal. The baying of spectral hounds goes before the ravenous host, while the soul-rending screams of heartless Banshees chills their foe to the bone.

Most numerous of the shadow-hosts are Spectres – hollow remnants of once-living ancients. These are the creatures that often haunt places where the dead are interred. They are mournful, wraith-like creatures, wreathed in cloaks of mist and shadow. Cowardly beings, they huddle in vicious packs, lashing out at any mortal that comes near with tendrils of soul-mist. From their obfuscating presence, shambling, zombie-like Scarecrows emerge. Their presence is often heralded by wriggling swarms of bloated Blood worms, which congregate around the Spectres' victims, sucking the blood from the dead and dying.

Manifesting from the primal fears of their enemies, blade-limbed Reapers and skull-faced Phantasms are the harbingers of the horde, whose purpose is to sow the terror required

for the rest of the host to manifest. Wherever they appear, Doppelgangers are not far behind, whose mimicry of the enemy often leads to mistrust and bloody murder. And it is not merely the twisted spirits of men, elves and dwarfs that join the host: monstrous Stalkers also exist, such as the Shadowhulks, seemingly fused from the souls and bodies of several giant Cyclopes and now filled with the hunger of the void.

And from the void come those emissaries of the ancient star-gods. If these creatures were ever mortal at all, it must have been some bizarre form of life that no longer exists on Pannithor. Unspeakable and indescribable things, they have lived in the dimensions between worlds for an eternity. Perhaps they were known to the Celestians as they themselves travelled the stars. Some, like the monstrous Void Lurkers, have an intelligence of sorts and understand enough to sense the rents in the fabric of the universe and know how to locate them. They attach themselves to Nightstalkers as they stream into reality. There, they coalesce into mismatched and petrifying shapes. Other squamous horrors accompany these beasts, from vaguely arachnoid fiends, to flickering, tenebrous planar apparitions.



The Battle of Tarisios

One of the more remote and sprawling provinces of Basilea, Nova Ardovikio is a hub of trade for leagues around, for it stands as a gateway to the Young Kingdoms, the Successor Kingdoms, and the feudal realms of old Primovantor. The city of Tarisios is the centre of commerce for the region, and as such it is well protected by the Hegemony. Well protected, that is, against mortal foes.

It was during a particularly harsh winter, when many of the farmsteads and villages around Tarisios had been made inaccessible, that the incursion began. Old folk tales of shades haunting the burial grounds nearby, or of fey creatures lurking in the woods to carry children away in the night began to resonate more strongly than ever before. Peasants from villages miles apart began to experience nightmares of violent intensity – nightmares of shadow-formed beasts, slaving ghost-hounds, and, worst of all, many-eyed, tentacle things hovering silently in the dark. The citizens of Tarisios itself soon began to fall prey to similar nightmares and visions, until the cries in the night could be heard all around the city. An atmosphere of paranoia and fear pervaded every settlement, and the Paladins of the Hegemon soon took notice. Something was amiss, and at first the malign influence of Abyssal magic was suspected.

One by one, the villages, farms and remote watchtowers of Nova Ardovikio went dark, snuffed out like candles. Riders were dispatched, but were turned back each time by what they described as banks of unnatural darkness, like inky black fog – that is, if they returned at all. Cut off from the outside world, the citizens of Tarisios huddled together behind the city walls, their growing fear palpable on the air.

One night, the city guard saw a great pall of shadow encroach from all around, seeping up through the ground, smoking down from the Copper Hills, creeping forth through the trees of Galahir, blacker even than the darkness all around. Hideous forms squirmed, scuttled and jerked through the dark. Thousands of pairs of shining eyes fixed their cold, inhuman gaze upon the city. Panic rose, for as soon as man, woman or child set eyes on the army of shadow, they recognised the subject of their night-terrors. They saw legendary monsters they had feared since their earliest days, and with each sob of fear, the shadow-horde grew larger, stronger, and closer.

Though his men-at-arms were filled with dread at the prospect of facing their manifest fears in battle, the garrison commander, High Paladin Ecquitar, sallied forth with the city guard at his back. As his warriors drew close, the shadows shifted and parted, and the true horror of the foe was revealed. Black shapes scuttled across the ground. Lolling, slack-jawed killers shambled into view before vanishing from

sight, then reappearing in the midst of the Basileans. Pale-skinned beings, at first beauteous, lured soldiers from the ranks, before transforming into skull-faced monsters, with screams so terrible that the soldiers' minds were seared on the spot. Behind myriad, gibbering creatures, huge shadow-beasts lurked, chitinous and terrible to behold, their uncountable eyes brimming with alien intelligence. These terrors and more tore savagely into the defenders of Tarisios until all but the Paladins and the devout Sisterhood remained – a circle of light against an endless, encroaching darkness.

And yet Ecquitar was resolute. With every step forward he took, he saw the creatures before him diminish in strength. With every prayer he uttered, a shadow flickered, as though it might fade completely. Ecquitar saw that courage was the only weapon of any surety against these creatures, and at once ordered his Paladins to form a ring of steel around the Sisters. He ordered the blessed Sisters to abandon the fight and instead sing the praises of the Elohi. One by one the Paladins fell, and soon the shadow-maws of spectral hounds and the flickering scythes of deathly phantoms bit deep into the Sisters themselves, but they showed no fear. Still they raised their voices to the heavens in a choir that surely the arch-angels could hear.





And hear them they did. Bringing a brilliant light as of the dawn, an angelic host swept over Tarisios. Where their light shone, the people felt courage anew. Men-at-arms rallied. Citizens took up axes and torches and surged from the city to aid their High Paladin. Where previously the weapons of men had failed to harm the shadow-creatures, they now bit deep, and the creatures shrank away from the stout-hearted warriors.

Ecquitar raced forward, his faith driving him through the pack of wailing monstrosities, until he confronted the great beast itself, the thing from the void. It whispered his deepest fears into his mind; it transformed into things that Ecquitar wished he could unsee; and finally, it struck at him with blade-like talons of pure dark energy. The assault on mind and body rocked Ecquitar to his core, and although he felt the thing's pure evil begin to seep into his heart, he struck once more, his blessed blade biting deep. The creature screamed with such intensity that the other shadows began to dissipate, and every Basilean fell clutching their heads as mental pain overcame them. When they recovered, the creatures were gone – nothing more than sliding shadows on the edge of vision. In the east, the first rind of the sun heralded a new dawn, and the end of the alien threat. All that was left to do was count the cost.

For Ecquitar, it was only the beginning. During his battle with the void-creature, something had changed him. He felt a darkness inside himself, a seed of evil and fear gnawing at his faith, contaminating him. He knew this. And yet, in his shame, he said nothing...

The Lurking Menace

For all the sudden violence and catastrophic destruction that a Nightstalker incursion can bring, the waning of the Abyss drives them away like shadows before the rising sun. In the aftermath of such a battle, it is hard for a mortal to comprehend exactly what just happened, for all at once the spectral foe seems no more dangerous than bad dreams and tales to frighten children. However, with each incursion more Stalkers dig themselves deep into the psyche of unwitting hosts, gaining more of a foothold in the real world. The fracture in the elven ways, the expansion of the Abyss and Southern Rift, the wilful summoning by the crones of the Twilight Kin and simply the fear in the mortal mind; inch by inch, soul by soul, the Nightstalkers gain ground, for when enough of them can stake a claim to the realm of mortals, they no longer have to rely on the vagaries of the Abyss to bring them into being in force. And when that day comes, surely all of Pannithor will be overwhelmed by screeching shadow.





Wayward Souls

Most of the nightstalkers are the echoes of the Conclave of Heaven – those whose physical forms were lost when the Celestians were split. These are desperate, tortured beings, denied both life and death by their cruel quasi-existence and driven insane. No one knows what, if anything, is left of the original people that became the nightstalkers, but they seem to have taken a variety of new, unhinged forms to torment the mortals of the world.

The zombie-like Scarecrows are always right behind you, shuffling relentlessly and endlessly no matter how fast you run. These shambling beings make up the bulk of nightstalker incursions, assembling in great hordes to overwhelm their prey. Their name refers to the farming tools and effects they carry, although no one can reason why they do so.

Ghostly, skeletal and cowardly creatures, Spectres stay close together and lurk in the freezing air that eddies and swirls around them, lashing out with tendrils of white soul-sucking mist at the choicest and most vulnerable targets. They don't seem to be wholly corporeal, existing partially within this world, but also in another.

The Doppelgangers are faceless, silent, and yet spine-chillingly creepy. No matter how desperately the enemy fight, they match them blow for blow, turning their own fear and panic against them. As the melee continues, soldiers will watch in terror as the otherworldly infantry slowly change to mimic them further, until they find themselves looking into their own grinning faces.

Phantoms are phantasms that appear as cloaked, floating bodies. Their partially hooded heads reveal glimpses of the screaming and bloody skulls of people trapped between worlds. These foul creatures are often seen dragging their victims into their shadow forms, consigning them to a fate best left unknown.

Beings of the Void

Unspeakable and unimaginable things have lived in the dimensions between worlds for eternity. Some have an intelligence of sorts and understand enough to sense the rents in the fabric of the universe and know how to locate them. These Void Lurkers attach themselves to the nightstalkers as they stream into the fascinating and bizarre reality where the mortals reside. There, they coalesce into whatever mismatched and petrifying shape will best sate their voracious appetites.

Planar Apparitions also follow the nightstalkers from the void between worlds. They cannot maintain their presence in a plane of reality for any significant length of time. They appear to flicker in and out of existence, making them very hard to see and destroy, while all the time they are acting as erratic conduits for the dark energy of the shadow worlds beyond the Abyss.

Fiends prey on hatred and jealousy. Empowered by these powerful emotions, they are drawn to those who plot and scheme revenge and spin webs of lies. The most cunning and unscrupulous of the political elite, the most powerful crime lords and those that weave lies and distrust are like beacons to the most powerful and wilful of the chilling and sinister fiends. They are terrifying, arachnid-like monsters with venomous fangs and a chitinous armour that reflects no light. They wait in the shadows, watching and learning the weaknesses of their prey, slowly plaguing their thoughts and thriving on their fears of failure. When the time is ripe, the Fiends creep through the smallest of cracks in the skin of the universe to claim their prey. The hapless schemer simply vanishes, never to be seen again.



Hunters in the Night

Many nightstalkers are drawn to strong human emotions, like anger and fear. These creatures stalk their prey through multiple dimensions before emerging into the mortal world and tearing them limb from limb or abducting them back to their own shadowy realms. There is a bewildering array of different nightstalkers, each one vicious and deadly in the mortal world.

Armed with a bewildering array of wicked looking claws, limbs and scythes, Reapers stalk the dreams of those who abhor wanton violence, torture or pain, hell-bent on delivering their worst fears. Groups of these hunters can often be found on the battlefield, chasing down those who lose their nerve and flee the field.



Shadowhounds are huge, black, twin-headed canines, with gnashing jaws and fur matted with vile ectoplasm. Hunting in packs, those lucky enough to escape these beasts can still hear the howling in their heads long after they have awoken. The unfortunate victims who weren't fast enough are devoured, their screaming skulls forever leering from the shadowhounds' foul hides.

Butchers are uncompromising, unsubtle and brutally efficient killers. To many they appear as a horrific hybrid of ogre, golem and squid, with massive cleavers in their many hands, covered in dripping gore.

Shadowhulks are titans of the ether. These former giant cyclopes retain only a passing resemblance to their long forgotten mortal forms. Now, they are covered in weeping sores, extra mouths, wicked spines and hands that have fused into fleshless lumps of solid bone.

The slightest opening is enough to invite the presence of the Needle-fangs. These foul beasts can pour through keyholes

and under doors as they flow toward their food. Needle-fangs form a black tide of crawling, skittering, shapeless things and spiteful hungry warp pixies.

Death incarnate, the Soulflayers sit astride ghastly mounts whose six demonic hooves burn with a cold blue fire. Nightmares and their steeds are borne across the mortal realms on invisible streams of evil, leaked from another plane, and can summon icy winds to chill a body but keep the mind alive and fresh for later.

Even the beasts of the ocean were ripped bodily from the world by Oskan's deception. The plunging depths and trenches of the world's seas were no refuge from the catastrophe. Terrors are one such unfortunate kind of creature – grotesque masses of blubber, slime and indiscriminate parts of the kraken they might once have been.

Malevolent Intelligences

Nightstalkers don't have leaders in a way that a mortal could understand. Some souls are more intact or more malevolent than others and lead their brethren to the slaughter, but loyalty and leadership are truly alien concepts to these beings. Most simply follow the actions of others like some animalistic herd.

The freakish and malformed Horrors were once a delegation of dwarfen Stone Priests that were on a diplomatic and academic exchange with the elven magic schools when the catastrophe struck. Now only bearing a vague semblance to the esteemed and intelligent sorcerers they used to be, their warped and broken bodies channel the bitter winds of the shadow worlds. Sometimes, groups of these creatures are drawn to each other, howling their foul incantations in unison and drawing more of the shadow realm into the mortal world.

A Banshee is a hideous ghost that glitters with hoarfrost, the shattered remains of the spirit and mind of an Elven Mage-Queen. It will screech its rage and bitterness across the battlefield in a terrible wail that can drive the unwilling recipients back with an almost physical force.

Armour is of little use against the probing and invasive attacks of the insidious and devious monstrosity known as a Mind-screech. Victims fall to the ground, screaming silently, their hands clasped to bleeding ears. Their comrades are powerless to help them – and then they feel it inside their heads, too...



Butcher Fleshrippers are slaughter incarnate. They will attack anything they can find, ripping their victims to bloody ribbons in an orgy of violence. Somehow, these gory acts fuel the rage of the other Butchers around them, driving them into a violent frenzy, from which none can escape.

Reaper Souldrinkers are the cruellest of their kind. These vicious beings follow an all-consuming need to feed on pain and fear, so much so that they will consume their victims' souls entirely. The unimaginable terror and torment of such an act is invigorating to Reapers, intensifying their own terrible hunger.

The Dream Hunter

The Dream Hunter rips the dreams and souls from those in Pannithor's reality to feed itself and the nightstalkers around it. It has long been a bedtime story to scare little children of all cultures, going by many names, and it's the children who still fear it the most in later life that grant the Hunter a way in. Fairy-tales are a key to the mind. A visitation from the Hunter is to dream of paralysis and the feeling of helplessness while your very essence is teased from the pores of your defenceless body. Those unfortunate enough to survive the experience awake mute, emotionless and dead to the world, outcasts from society.

The Portal of Despair

Sometimes, when the powers of the Abyss are strong, the presence of the nightstalkers rips a portal in the fabric of reality – a doorway between dimensions. The power of the Abyss is channelled through such rents that seethe and boil in the air, painful for mortals to see directly. At the edge of vision, the portal seems like a cage of glossy black and writhing serpents, screaming in perpetual agony. Purple lightning crackles and dances across the rent, flickering out and feeding the stalkers with dark energy.

UNDEAD



Felkhan the Lost
undead wight slaved to the legions of mhorgoth



In Pannithor, the dead do not rest easy.

Across the Successor Kingdoms in Mantica, feudal barons look to the ancient burial grounds, where kings of old lie in thrice-warded barrows since before the Age of Ice. Those kings who served Oskan and the Wicked Ones, it is said, are cursed to spend eternity in a state of undeath, their tombs also becoming their prisons. Between the Successor Kingdoms lie vast swathes of land forever tainted by dark magic, where Domivar himself once spilled so much of the Wicked Ones' blood, that any corpse buried is liable to rise from the very earth as a cadaverous monster, unless it is first decapitated, and its heart pierced by a stake of ironwood. In the pious lands of Basilea, such superstitions are widely discouraged, although secretive bands of devout Paladins routinely venture forth to the ruins of old Primovantor, where practitioners of necromancy gather in dark covens to practise their arts.





Necromancy is the most abhorrent of sorcery, and those who practise it are hated and feared in equal measure. In all civilised places, save Ophidia, its use is outlawed. Those caught studying these black arts are likely to find themselves dragged in ensorcelled iron to a painful execution, but established necromancers are never short of acolytes. Necromancy offers immortality to those who master it, never mind that few actually do. The price of failure is to be condemned for eternity to the endless cold and night of the Utterdark.

For the handful that escape detection and succeed in their quest, such devotion does have its rewards – the most powerful necromancers are all but immortal. In violation of natural law, necromancers are able to use their power to defy death itself, extending their own lives virtually indefinitely. Furthermore, they are able to create armies to do their bidding, invoking powers learnt from ancient tomes to make corpses clamber back to their feet and skeletons claw their way up from ancient battlefields. The greatest necromancers are able to raise forces numbering the tens of thousands: forces that never grow tired, or hungry, or mutinous, and which know absolutely no mercy.

Good fortune then, to the rest of the world, that becoming a necromancer is difficult indeed. It takes not only fine magical talent but also an iron will, for damnation lies around every corner. A practitioner must have singular focus in order to animate and sustain the dead in contravention of natural law. These qualities are rare indeed in budding necromancers, for the path to this darkest of arts is fraught with mental toil, and few master the study with their sanity intact. It takes a lifetime – sometimes several natural lifetimes – for a necromancer to become anywhere near competent, for they must eke out fragments of knowledge in the darkest and most dangerous corners of the world, all the while evading the attention of men of noble heart. And it is most often men who pursue the study of necromancy; the older races know to leave the dark arts well alone, while humanity has ever been touched with a lust for power and immortality – a curse placed upon their line by the Father of Lies.

Necromancy is a universally loathed art, and with good reason. The souls of those risen by its black magics are dragged screaming from whatever afterlife they might inhabit and forced back into their decayed mortal frames. Trapped in prisons of decayed flesh, they can only watch as their new master uses their very essence as a fuel to drive their old body on as a magical automaton, hacking down the innocent – perhaps even those who were once known and loved by the reanimated warrior. Worse by

far is the fate of those imprisoned – if the vessel is destroyed, there is a good chance that the summoned soul will not be able to find its way back to its rest. Such benighted spirits wander Pannithor in agony until laid to rest by priest or paladin, or cast out into the Utterdark for all time. Their reanimated body, however, may be risen again and again, becoming no more than a warrior of meat or bone. It is for this reason that necromancy causes such revulsion in right-thinking folk.

Of course, there are those wicked creatures, tormented in infernal planes of existence, who welcome a return to the land of the living, even if it is as an unfeeling corpse. These spirits are the most dangerous of a necromancer's servants, for they obey them willingly and are thus allowed some measure of self-determination. Revenants, wights and wraiths all flock to the banner of an ambitious necromancer, hoping for some scant respite from the cold of the Utterdark.

Once a necromancer reaches sufficient power to begin putting their dark arts into practise, they risk discovery and thus a death sentence. It is hard to disguise necromantic magic, for it is indiscriminate. When a sorcerer weaves the incantations of awakening, it will re-animate every dead creature nearby. In such a manner, the decomposing bodies of dogs, rats, birds and horses will inevitably be raised along with the corpses of warriors and long-dead heroes. All are enslaved to the will of the necromancer, but all increase the chance of some do-gooder discovering the necromancer's foul experiments.



Ophidia, Land of the Dead

While considered neutral in its outlook, in the ancient kingdom of Ophidia, all manner of vile magical practises are condoned and encouraged. Here, necromancy, demonology and other unnatural arts are studied like any other school of magic, and skilled necromancers are awarded high status, and treated in many respects as priests. Most of the blasphemous texts that have found their way northwards originated in Ophidia, in one form or another, for mastery over death has been an ambition of these strange peoples since the earliest days of humanity.

Far from being reviled, the people of this strange land worship the necromancer-priests of the great temples. Drawn from the cult of magi, their duty now is to conduct elaborate funerary rituals, and to summon the Mighty Dead to walk alongside the living once more. So it is that in Ophidia the common man sees for himself some measure of immortality.

Ophidia is unusual in that its armies comprise undead and living warriors marching side by side; its monumental buildings are raised by the labours of the dead, who toil longer and harder than a hundred times as many slaves ever could. The most noble and powerful rulers of the land are laid to rest beneath three-sided pyramids of obsidian, their bodies ritually prepared for their triumphant return. Mightiest of all are the God-Kings. Little is known about these enigmatic beings but rumour has it they are interred along with their

warriors and servants, all of whom are mummified alive so that they might serve their lord in the afterlife. The God-Kings are believed to be divine, taking their place amongst the pantheon of Ophidia's deities, until heeding the call to rule again, and lead their people to glory even in death. The Ophidians are bemused by the reactions of others to their death-magic, pointing out with some justification that necromancy helps to keep their kingdom mighty. To them, death is only the beginning.

The work of Ophidia's scholars, however, has unleashed many unclean things upon the world, perhaps inadvertently. Both vampires and ghouls, for instance, are reckoned to be the products of the sorcerers of Ophidia who, in searching for elixirs to grant immortality, instead created monsters.

The Mark of the Vampire

It is believed that the curse of vampirism originated in Ophidia during the God War. Fleeing the wrath of Domivar, the Wicked One Akshun'arha made a pact with the magi of Ophidia. In return for knowledge of necromancy, the magi were to sacrifice 13 nobles, and bind Akshun'arha's essence into the husks, even as the souls left their bodies. So divided, Akshun'arha planned to lie dormant, hidden within these hosts until the war was long over. She could not outfight the Shining Ones, but she was determined to outlast them, even if it meant centuries of slumber beneath the pyramids of Ophidia.



None could have predicted what happened next. The Age of Ice swept over the land, and the battles against Winter took a heavy toll on the world. Pious men and vengeful elves learned of the dark sorcery that had taken root in Ophidia and came to investigate, learning eventually of the Wicked One's plan and determining to put an end to it. Delving deep below the pyramid, these raiders from the northern lands delivered final death to 10 of the hosts – but with each scream of rage and terror from a departing facet of Akshun'arha's essence the remaining hosts stirred and grew angry. Finally, their sarcophagi flew open and the last three creatures emerged. Disturbed from their rest too early and released without the proper incantations, the three remaining facets of Akshun'arha's psyche were driven mad, and fell upon the invaders hungrily, glutting themselves on blood in order to restore their shrivelled, desiccated bodies. They staggered from the tomb, venturing into the night, feasting on any who stood before them. The three hosts went their separate ways, fleeing to the farthest reaches of the world, even as the ice retreated, where they created others of their kind through the unnatural curse of the Blood Gift. What became of the first vampires is unknown – but their foul offspring have remained a blight upon Pannithor ever since.

Vampires are near-immortal. Barring the destruction of their body they cannot die, and the strongest of their number have even been known to survive burning and dismemberment. Time and again vampire lords have been slain and their ashes dispersed, only for their corrupt souls to grow a new body in some forgotten crypt. This longevity comes at great price, however. Although preternaturally swift and strong, their bodies are prone to bizarre afflictions. Some cannot cross running water; others burst into flames at the touch of the sun. Many of them carry the stink of the charnel house around with them wherever they go; some are grotesque and bestial; while others are as beautiful as they are evil. They hunger eternally for blood, and are inclined to terrible cruelty as they search for it. Many of them possess at least a grain of conscience and are tormented by every life they take. Others immerse themselves in savagery only to come to the horrified realisation of what they have become every so often, tormented first by shame and guilt and then by horror as their red thirst reasserts itself. Because of this, many vampires are driven mad.

Vampirism is a curse, though it is often bestowed as a gift. Despite its many and hideous drawbacks, vampirism exerts a lure even greater than that of necromancy. Vampires are terrible and glorious creatures, and to the most desperate men and women must appear as gods, above the concerns of humanity. They are also natural necromancers, their powers stemming from the faint essence of Akshun'arha that flows through their tainted blood. For this reason they are actively courted as often as they are hunted, and often take on human thralls to serve their every whim in return for the merest promise of the Blood Gift.

Eaters of the Dead

Wherever the dark energy of necromancy settles and congeals, all around becomes corrupted. Crops wither and die, trees become more gnarled and twisted, men are driven slowly mad and warped into something inhuman. The necromancer-priests of Ophidia have learnt to control this to a degree themselves, but go to great pains to conceal these horrible truths of their magic from the common folk, for the illusion of the Mighty Dead would surely be lost if the people knew the price of dabbling in the blackest arts.

It is the necromancers' human servants who were first to be changed beyond all recognition. Slowly, these humble men and women lost all semblance of self. Their hair fell out in clumps, their minds became addled. They developed an unnatural craving for the flesh of the dead, until nothing else could satisfy their hunger. Cursed for this vile appetite, their transformation was complete. Future generations born from these wretches were disfigured, deformed and bestial. They carried the same curse as their sires, and eventually became the creatures known as ghouls.

Ghouls are found across Pannithor, wherever the dead are interred. They gather in catacombs beneath the many-storied deeps of Basilea; they haunt the ruins of Primovantor, and the graveyards of Sathoi. Across the Successor Kingdoms, they can be found in the dead of night, digging at barrows like dogs in search of corpses. In some lands, particularly the tribal lands of the north, ghouls are so prevalent that burying the dead has become unthinkable. Instead, the deceased are burned on great pyres so that none can feast upon their flesh.

Ghouls are universally reviled and hunted. Often fleeing persecution, some animal instinct drives them to seek each other out and they form loose 'clans', ranging from small isolated groups of little more than a dozen individuals, all the way up to mighty cave-dwelling hordes numbering in their thousands. Most clans are ruled by a Corpse-Mother, the oldest and most respected matriarch in their repulsive community. Corpse-Mothers have absolute power over the clan and it is they who guide and direct the raids and attacks against the living, though they rarely take part themselves. While most ghouls are wasted, emaciated creatures, the Corpse-Mothers ruling over them are bloated, corpulent creatures, gluttonously feeding on the choicest meats and organs after a kill while the rest of the clan starves. Nevertheless, they are regarded with almost holy reverence by the clan, and any threat to a Corpse-Mother is met with savage, unbridled fury. It is these creatures that a necromancer must treat with if they are to bring ghouls to the battlefield, although it is normally a mere formality. Ghouls follow necromancers willingly, drawn to the stench of death and thrilled by the promise of slaughter.

MHORGOTH THE FACELESS

Mhorgoth the Faceless is arguably the most powerful Necromancer ever to blight the world, a twisted and ancient being that was old even before the mountain folk sealed the gates of their subterranean cities to the world above. What little is known of his past is clouded in darkness, lost in the mists of time, although some snippets of ancient lore make reference to Ophidia. What is known is that Mhorgoth is hated the length and breadth of the world, classed as enemy to all living beings, be they animal, man, elf or dwarf. As mad as he is powerful, Mhorgoth has sworn a pact to see every living creature perish.

Mhorgoth was once a man and his talent in the sorcerous arts, even as a child, was far beyond those of any of his kinsmen. It is believed that the northern elves took Mhorgoth into their realm when he was but a boy, partly to help guide and teach him, but also to keep him under close watch. He was a handsome child, charismatic and full of life, with golden hair and a happy demeanour. That was all to change, however. Tragedy followed Mhorgoth like a curse, and as the years rolled by, everything and everyone that he cared for was torn from him.

As he grew into a haunted, bitter man, Mhorgoth devoured every lesson in magic with a hunger that the elves found staggering and more than a little disturbing. How and when he was introduced to the dark arts of necromancy is a matter of great speculation, but whatever the case, Mhorgoth's true calling was finally revealed. The discovery was met with shock, revulsion and sadness by the elves. Mhorgoth fled, carrying with him a grimoire containing all his cursed teachings, but he was hunted down and the elves reluctantly sentenced him to death.

As his earthly flesh was consumed in the Eternal Flames, Mhorgoth unleashed the full extent of dark powers for the first time. When he was spent, there was no living creature within a mile of his location. With his flesh burnt beyond all recognition, Mhorgoth stumbled from the grove in agony. Repulsed by his own horrifically burnt countenance, he crafted himself a mask of iron and hammered it into his still raw flesh, thus becoming the terrible being known as the Faceless. He retreated from the world for many years, during which time his bitterness and madness slowly consumed him.

As the passing decades rolled into centuries, his life now unnaturally prolonged through dark pacts and his cursed arts, a plan began to formulate in his ravaged, agonised mind. After two hundred years of self-exile, Morgoth emerged at the head of the largest undead legion the world had ever seen, with just one burning aim consuming him; to exterminate the living, and re-populate the world with the dead.





Throughout history, other powerful Necromancers have threatened to destabilise the world with their insidious and wicked magic. Prince Glarion, who became G'laron-tza, The Shadow King, was a terror that despoiled the land for a hundred years, ruling with an iron fist from his cursed Shadowfort. More recently, Mortibris, once a pupil of the Order of the Ardent Light in the City of the Golden Horn, became a master of the dark arts and schemed to locate the fabled Tome of Valandor which he believed would grant him unrivalled power. In his madness, the agents he unleashed upon the world even attempted to free G'laron-tza from his banishment, plotting to bind him to Mortibris' will. Even worse, the Tome revealed to Mortibris the secrets of Valandor and the rituals that would release the Wicked One known as Ba'el, Valandor's dark half, whom he had imprisoned in an inescapable labyrinth to protect the world from Ba'el's evil. It was only due to the heroic actions of a small band of warriors, chosen by the Council of Rulers in Basilea, that ultimately prevented a catastrophic war from erupting. Locating the starmetal amulet that contained the last essence of the Shining One himself, the party released the spirit of Valandor to face Mortibris and Ba'el. After a titanic struggle between the twins of light and dark, Ba'el was defeated, banished back to his eternal torment, and the essence of Valandor was spent. Of Mortibris himself, no body was ever returned.

While such insane practitioners of death magic and wicked sorcery continue to dabble in powers they cannot ultimately control, the world will never be safe.

March of the Dead

When a necromancer or vampire does finally gather enough power to come out of hiding, the result is always a war of utter desperation. Undead hordes are virtually unstoppable; though slow, they never need to stop marching. Even a vampire can march in daylight by summoning vast stormclouds to blot out the sun, or submitting themselves to a coffin to be carried along upon a cart. After each battle, fresh bodies are raised so that an Undead army grows during a campaign rather than dwindle.

The bulk of an Undead force often comprises vast regiments of skeleton warriors. Raised from the grave by the darkest sorcery, they are utterly enslaved to the will of their Necromancer master and will obey their every command without question. Their empty eye-sockets filled with baleful witch-fire, they advance relentlessly against whosoever their master decrees, marching forward in unstoppable serried ranks, bringing inevitable death to all who stand against them. Skeleton warriors are notoriously difficult to destroy, and can usually only be stopped by smashing their skulls to splinters; if hacked in half, they will merely drag themselves forward, the need to kill impelling them on. Even when finally stopped, they may yet prove a threat, for with just one spell a necromancer is able to re-knit smashed bone and force the fallen to rise once again.





While skeletons have no vestige of their mortal soul remaining, the same cannot be said of the elite revenants. These skeletal creatures were once heroes and chieftains of old, who were entombed in cairns and barrows of stone and earth, still garbed in the armour they wore in life. Surrounded by their earthly wealth, they were sealed in with curses and hexes, ensuring that none disturbed their eternal slumber. However, while these ancient spells of warding might keep centuries of tomb robbers at bay, they pose little hindrance to the most powerful necromancers. The very wards that protected their resting places also cursed them to retain some of their spirit. Now trapped in an undying body bound to the will of a necromancer, they have become utterly twisted and spiteful. They are encased in heavy ensorcelled armour of bronze and iron, making them nigh on impossible to destroy. Their weapons radiate a deadly chill, and it is said that those felled by these cursed blades are damned for all eternity, their souls forfeit.

As the undead army claims the lives of its enemies, the newly slain are reanimated into shambling zombies. These slow, groaning creatures are perhaps the most fearsome of all, for they are a reflection of the grisly fate that awaits each foe should they fall. Worst of all, zombies are often animated before the soul has departed to the heavens, and thus the fallen mortal must watch on from behind dead eyes as they are forced to slay – and devour – their former kin. Zombies can only be stopped by decapitation, or by destroying the brain, finally offering some release for the unfortunate soul trapped within the rotting body.

Knowing that an undead army cannot be defeated piecemeal, most mortal generals adapt different tactics against them, drawing the deathly legion into a single, monumental battle or siege, with the aim of breaking the army utterly in one fell swoop. Canny generals often pay master assassins to creep behind enemy lines to slay the head necromancer, although this is no mean feat. However, it is often worth the risk: while undead armies are all but unstoppable in battle, the necromancer is its lynchpin – destroy them and the entire army will collapse, like puppets with their strings suddenly cut.

A Curse Unending

Time and again, necromancers have risen against the natural order and descended upon the lands of mortals. So far, outside of Ophidia, they have failed to gain a true foothold over the settled kingdoms of Pannithor, but it is surely only a matter of time. Mhorgoth plots and schemes to transform the entire world into the dominion of the dead, and he gathers the greatest unloving champions to his side to assist in this dark task. At times, his attention is drawn elsewhere in the world, but a return to sow destruction in and around Mantica and the Infant Sea is never far away. Balor, one of the Dragon-Kings of old, destroyer of the elven realm of the Moonlit Glades, scours the land upon his undead steed, the dragon Gharamesh, always ready to kill at Mhorgoth's bidding. Worjech the Tainted marches from the frozen north, with an army of undead northmen at his back, for what dark purpose who can tell? Rumours abound still that one of the so-called Liche-Kings, long thought a myth, has returned to the world, and has set his baleful sights upon his old enemies of Basilea.

Through all of these perils, the true battleground lies within the heart of mortal cities and townships – practitioners of necromancy are everywhere, tempted from the path of light by honeyed whispers of power beyond imagining, and life everlasting. Ultimately, no good can come of necromancy. It is the burden of all thinking, living things to come to terms with their mortality, and the existence of necromancy is yet another sign of Pannithor's lack of balance.



Skeletal Hordes

The long dead warriors of ancient battles still lie beneath the soil of Pannithor. There are thousands of these skeletal remains left without burial or respect, forgotten to the world. These remains are perfect fodder for a necromancer to create legions of undead soldiers.

These raised soldiers are slow and not particularly skilled in close combat, but they know nothing of mortal fear or dread. They are simply automatons under the control of their master, only possessing a modicum of the skill they had when they were alive. These warriors are armed with the rusted weapons of their time – swords, war hammers, axes and spears. They carry shattered shields and wear broken armour that does little to protect them from blows. This doesn't matter, for any skeleton that is destroyed can simply be raised to fight again. The numberless legions of skeleton warriors are a threat to all living armies.

Skeleton Archers are much rarer than the line infantry found in undead armies. Most are inaccurate and slow, but a few skeletons – usually the remains of elves – can fire with considerable skill. Hails of massed bow fire covers the advance of infantry on foot, favouring weight of fire over accuracy, each skeleton firing repeatedly and tirelessly until they are destroyed or ordered to cease.

Balefire Catapults are enchanted war machines created by the death-mages. Usually built from the remains of more mundane artillery left to rot on battlefields, the magic saturating the wood and metal of these weapons ignites their ammunition with balefire. Their skeleton crews diligently load and fire shrieking skulls into the ranks of the enemy. The enchanted skulls are not only terrifying, but they detonate on impact into sorcerous flames, burning living soldiers alive.

Revenants are the reanimated remains of elite fighters, often belonging to household guard regiments and other troops that were better equipped and trained than the average. This results in tougher, more skilled and more resilient undead warriors. Many will fight on foot, acting as an undead bodyguard to their master, but some will ride to battle on barded skeletal steeds. The knights that have fallen fighting the undead are often condemned to renege upon their vows by fighting as Revenants, feasting on the souls of those they had sworn to defend in life.

Corpse Eaters

The recently dead do not rest easy in the presence of dark magic. The energy saturates their corpses, bringing them back from death even without the incantations of a necromancer. These freshly raised corpses are Zombies. Their numbers grow exponentially during a campaign, as the bodies of felled enemy soldiers and civilian victims alike swell their ranks. Zombies travel in great swarms of grasping, biting bodies. They are drawn to death magic and so almost inevitably end up fighting alongside the armies of the undead.

A particularly resourceful necromancer may try to create Zombie Trolls. These large undead beings are difficult to create, as their regenerative abilities make them difficult to kill and even more difficult to raise, but the resulting monstrous warriors are well worth the effort. Although they no longer regenerate, they are still immensely strong and resilient, providing a threat that no human corpse could match.

Necromancy is a process of trial and error. For every successful reanimation, there are countless failures that blight the land, enduring a painful half-existence. Some more enterprising Necromancers will suture those failures still moving together, creating a vile, mewling abomination that still has some use in battle. After all, few soldiers hold their nerve when charged by a pulsating avalanche of flesh. These horrific creatures are known and feared as Goreblights.

Ghouls are not strictly walking dead, like skeletons or zombies, but rather deranged cannibals and eaters of the dead. They slowly lose their minds to the horror of their lives, degenerating into savage creatures that are half-human, half-undead. Some ghoul packs have existed for generations, descended from desperate survivors who ate their brethren's flesh to survive past cataclysms. These cursed beings hide in mausoleums or dank caves that have become great charnel houses that cater to the ghouls. Those who consume more flesh, lose more humanity, becoming the closest things these foul societies have to leaders – the Ghosts. Ghosts are vicious hunters who direct their kin to attack the weakest prey and choicest flesh.

A writhing mass of teeth, claws and bone, the Deathpack is a collection of horrific undead beasts herded into battle by a handler. They sweep over the enemy in a flurry of vicious attacks and only the hardiest warrior can withstand their frenzied onslaught.

Blood-Cursed

Vampires are an arrogant breed and it follows that those who join their ranks tend to be the mightiest and vainest of their kind. Thus it is that many knights have fallen to the vampire's curse and now wander in eternal unlife, always looking to prove their sneering superiority to lesser, mortal creatures. These are the Soul Reavers, the most formidable living dead warriors to be found in undead armies. Whether fighting on foot with great weapons, or mounted on cursed steeds, few enemies are brave enough to stand their ground against one of their devastating charges.

The most powerful and bloodthirsty vampires become mighty lords of the undead, combining an unparalleled fighting ability with great necromantic powers. These vicious patriarchs can lead whole contingents of Soul Reavers into battle as well as summoned lesser undead. Many will take a winged, corrupted mount as their own, either an undead pegasus or an undead dragon. The mere sight of one of these mighty creatures soaring over the battlefield is often enough to spread blind panic amongst the enemy.

The vampires are not the only beings in Pannithor cursed by their blood. The dread curse of lycanthropy turns its victims into huge wolf-man hybrids - their flesh nigh-invulnerable to most weapons, their fangs and claws razor-sharp. These children of the night move faster than the eye can see and fight with a ferocity and strength that far surpass their mortal victims.

Among the Werewolves, there must always be an alpha. The Lykanis is the strongest, quickest and most lethal of its pack, leading the others on their hunt. Maintaining their position through sheer strength and ferocity, these creatures are utterly lethal to any who cross them. To hear their howl is to hear your doom.



Restless Souls

In some cursed locations steeped in evil and foul sorcery, the spirits of the dead linger, refusing to move on. Malicious and filled with a burning hatred for the living, some of these spirits are strong enough to manifest and drain the life from those that incur their wrath. There are many of these restless souls across Pannithor, enslaved and bound to the armies of the undead.

The souls of the most powerful enemies of the vampires and necromancers are cursed to a ghostly quasi-existence, serving their masters eternally in death. Wraiths generally take the form of a cloaked and hooded figure clutching a curved scythe, plucking the horrific image of death from the minds of those who look upon them. They are ethereal, insubstantial beings that are able to move effortlessly through walls at will, and weapons and arrows pass harmlessly through their ghostly bodies. Nevertheless, their own attacks are deadly, causing death with every touch.

Once mighty warrior-kings of ancient times, Wights are creatures entirely of the supernatural. Where mortal creatures are constrained by the crude confines of physical flesh and blood, Wights are ethereal creatures who draw strength from their own spirit and legend. Freed from their earthly bindings and soaked in the blood of the countless thousands of enemies they slayed in life, these creatures swell to massive proportions. Each stands the size of an ogre, resplendent in ghostly armour and wielding two-handed spirit weapons. To face one is to face the myth of a warrior hero of ages made manifest.

The embalmed corpses of the ancient warriors are slow but almost impossible to destroy. Regardless of whether they hail from the lands of Mantica, or from the fallen realms of Ophidia, these ancient warriors are known as Mummies. Arrows, blades and spears puncture their mummified bodies with no apparent effect as they tear the enemy apart with blackened hands possessed of unearthly strength.

Ancient kings who prolonged their wicked lives using forbidden arts until their bodies wasted away, the accursed Liche Kings are perhaps the most skilled of undead sorcerers. These death-mages appear as ghostly figures, wearing fine robes and armour of ancient civilisations. Little of their mortal forms remain and they float across the battlefield, suspended by powerful magic. With but a gesture, they can raise entire regiments of undead warriors to fight at their command, or drain the life from a hated foe. It would seem that these individuals have crossed the line of death, becoming something immortal and terrible.

Lords of the Dead

The undead are slaves to the ambitions of individuals. Whether they be a vampire, revenant, necromancer or liche king, they all tread the same path – to try to live forever. With such contempt for the line between life and death, they have no qualms putting others' corpses to use to further their own ends. Ultimately, they become withered, bitter creatures, having lived for too long and lost anything that could be considered to be a life.

A Necromancer is a person for whom all scruples and morals are but distant memory. Though many tread this dark path, and each for his own specific goal, the result is always the same – the selfish need of the Necromancer overrules any other consideration, and the pillaging of the dead and the use of evil magics become yet another necessity in achieving it. Having dabbled incautiously with the dark lore of necromancy, these individuals often become unloving servants themselves, forever enslaved to another, more powerful mage.

Buried in their barrows together with their most precious weapons and armour, the Revenant Kings make superb officers for the legions of Skeletons and Revenants. They retain some of their intellect and battlefield strategy, making them capable commanders on the field, but they are often bereft of any kind of ambition or true will of their own. Every king has a master who summoned them back into the realms of the living – an ignominious fate for a once great leader.

Some ancient human kings favoured great wyrms as mighty steeds and were often buried with them, only to be resurrected to fight once again. Their immense, rotting bodies are as strong in death as they were in life, making them dangerous when combined with the fighting abilities of a Revenant King.

The Revenant Kings are joined in battle by their loyal retainers, who bear their king's or master's colours as they did in life. Most undead are uninterested in honour and duty, but the sorceries that imbue the gory standards of their armies are a source of unliving energy that sustains the minions of the undead lords.

Driven by a willpower that conquered death itself centuries past, the Cursed Pharaohs are almost unstoppable in their unquenchable wrath. Great is their ire and the vengeance they exact on those that trespass into their realms.



Lady Ilona

Even before she was gifted with the vampire's curse, Ilona was renowned as a cruel, vain and capricious mistress in her own land and beyond. The day that she became a vampire, all of those traits were magnified a thousandfold, and she slaughtered her own kin to take sole control of her realm. Ilona's contempt for anyone but herself extends even to her own dark kin, and her weapon of choice is a silvered greatsword, enchanted by countless dark blessings to be lethal to vampires. Ilona seeks neither unity nor even dominion, but rather the extinction of every other living and unliving creature in the world. She is undoubtedly the most dangerous of her kind ever to walk the world.

Mhorgoth the Faceless

Mhorgoth is known across Pannithor. He is the single greatest Necromancer to have ever lived, and his terrible deeds have ended the lives of thousands and cursed thousands more. His name is a curse, uttered in hushed tones, lest speaking it summon the Necromancer himself. Mhorgoth is one of the greatest threats the world has ever known and he has yet to reach the peak of his power. In recent years, Mhorgoth has been spotted less and less, as if his time is taken up by some great dark work.

Jarvis, Ophidia-Obsessed Academic

Unlike many that delve into the forbidden magic of necromancy, Jarvis is determined to ensure it doesn't corrupt his spirit. In the war against the Abyss, he only resurrected those brave souls willing to fight for good and led his shambling hordes with a mix of pride and revulsion.

He has been seen abroad many times in the decade since, seeking out information and artefacts of the elusive Ophidians. He is sure that he is close to a breakthrough - something about a 'league' - if he could only find that one last piece of evidence. He still leads the undead into battle if the need is great, reasoning that it is better to help than do nothing. But always there is that tug to darkness and Jarvis must ensure the battle against the forces of evil is not also a war for his soul.



VARANGUR



TALDAR the blessed
SON OF KORGAAN



The chill lands of the north of Mantica have been home to the warlike clans of the Varangur for thousands of years. While most men were drawn toward the Republic of Primovantor during the Age of Ice, the Varangur alone stood resolute in their great halls. Instead of fearing and retreating from the frigid cold, they embraced it, masters of the wild tundra and the slopes of the Ice Mountains. The Varangur's stubbornness was only surpassed by the dwarfs', and it was this more than anything that compelled them to stay. They shunned the outside world and became insular and disconnected. They had rejected all the new "gods" and sought something more.

And something was watching, waiting. Something immeasurably old was stirred into life. Once-omnipotent eyes turned their gaze on the Varangur, looked into their souls, and found what it needed to return.

But this was not a remnant of the former Celestians, those who were worshipped by the great realms of the elves, dwarfs, and men of the south. This was an ancient and malevolent thing, a deity long neglected that had become nothing more than a forgotten imprint on the world. A memory of an immortal past, a mere fading shadow. Once pushed aside by the Celestians and discarded by the mortal races, it now reached out, a whisper in the ears of the skalds and magi of the Varangur, probing and exploring. As time passed, the shadow-god grew bolder and the ensorcellment grew stronger. Gods can only truly survive if something believes in them and this one had found a new source of faith and mortal emotion on which to feed. Korgaan had found a way back.

The basest mortal emotions are the most malleable, the easiest to control and provoke: hate, anger, jealousy, and ambition. They are also powerful, if anarchic, emotions, and in the presence of conflict and war, both within and without, the source of Korgaan's nourishment bloomed. The old god began to weave the cords that would re-bind it to the world ever tighter. Appearing to the clans in three different guises—Warrior, Reaper, and Deceiver—it united them with a strengthened desire to wage war on the world, but divided them with a distrust of each other as they strove to seek approval from whichever face of Korgaan they followed.

This being, Primogenitor and once-god of Air, was both fickle and cruel. It began to craft a new culture in its image, and the Varangur started to venture out once more, south through the frozen wastes on great expeditions by land and

sea, raiding the fringes of every great empire. Word spread, and coastal settlements feared the inevitable raids of these warlike and bloodthirsty savages. The clans began to thrive and their primeval god swelled with power, wreaking havoc in the wake of the chaos Winter was sowing.

After decades of ever more aggressive and violent raiding and pillaging, the High Consul of Primovantor ordered a great fleet to sail north and crush the Varangur once and for all. Mere days after the fleet set sail, the War with Winter came to its apocalyptic end. Primovantor was destroyed by the birthing of the Infant Sea which rushed in to drown the realms of men. The fleet was never seen again.

As the Infant Sea engulfed the Republic and the Age of Ice drew to an end, the world was in upheaval. Korgaan was using all its nascent power to protect its grip on the mortal realm as the world around took on its new shape and the clans' faith was wavering. The old god saw courage and confidence replaced by fear and uncertainty. It had woken into a new world, a world of new half-gods and rivalries, and it would not give up its precarious foothold so easily. Its mortal followers must be absolute in their belief, purpose, and worship.





Korgaan led the clans to war against the armies of the Wicked Ones, the deceitful and insidious deities imprisoned in the hell-fires of the Abyss, the treachery of their forebears not forgotten. Crossing the treacherous Frozen Sea, a vast horde of clansmen cut a bloody swathe through the edge of the Ogre Lands and into the heart of the craggy, fiery peaks that ring the infernal scar of the Abyss. Driven by the omnipotent will of Korgaan, the fanatical clansmen pushed all the forces the Wicked Ones could muster right back to the edge of the Abyss itself. All but spent, the horde of the clans claimed victory over the power of the new gods and declared Korgaan to be the only true, complete god in Mantica. The Varangur retreated north, the survivors spreading the word of Korgaan and the time now known to the clans as the Reckoning.

As Korgaan manipulates the lives of the Varangur, the threat they pose grows ever more real, like a sinister and malignant cancer lurking in the north. Many fear that another Reckoning may come and whether the Wicked Ones will again be the focus of the clans' attention is hotly debated. For now, the outside world sees a fractured society, with bloodthirsty disputes and skirmishes preventing any meaningful or long-term alliance that would threaten

regional stability on a wider scale. The Shattered Clans, as they have become known to the outside world, seem mostly contained. For now.

As for the Varangur themselves, those in Korgaan's favour—the champions and trusted lieutenants of disorder—may have strange and wonderful gifts bestowed upon them, but those that cause displeasure are quickly cast aside. The clan warriors' battle skills are constantly honed against each other and in minor raids and border clashes with both the realms and kingdoms to the south, other, remote northern clans and, more recently, with the Northern Alliance. Suspicious of the secret Talannar Icekin is protecting, the Varangur have tried both subtle and direct approaches to discovering what it is that is hidden behind the walls of Chill. While many northern tribes and clans have sworn allegiance to the banner of the Alliance, the Varangur remain deeply mistrustful and hostile toward it.

Wary of the revenge the Wicked Ones are surely plotting for the Shattered Clans' hand in the defeat of the Abyss in the Green Lady's war, the old god Korgaan bides its time, growing ever stronger as the clans begin their slow and insidious spread into the world, preparing to revel in a maelstrom of havoc.





The tribes of the Shattered Clans occupy the lands around the edges of the Frozen Sea, north of the Abyss. Their domain is transient, sometimes stretching as deep into the mountains as Drakes End or east and south into the Ogre Lands. Internal savagery and bickering, and a certain wanderlust, mean their dominion over lands they have conquered can wax and wane. While they have a very different outlook on life to most other clansmen in the north, they share many similar traits and traditions and are considered to be a facet of those that people the north. In much the same way as the elves of the south view their dark cousins, so the Varangur are viewed equally with loathing, pity, and respect by their peers.

The military and social organisation of the Varangur is very similar to most northern clans and, by extension, the Alliance in the far off and despised city of Chill. It is not without a large dose of jealousy that the eyes of the Varangur chieftains and kings watch and spy on the minions of Talannar, envious of the riches and power they perceive capturing it would bring them.

A Core of Ice

Forming the bulk of any Varangur war party, bands of tribal raiders comprise of a multitude of different men and women armed with an array of weaponry. The only consistency between each warband is their extreme resilience and hardiness, which are inherent traits of all northmen. Those known as Bloodsworn are warriors who have made a blood sacrifice to Korgaan in exchange for unnatural strength and resilience. Wearing heavy armour and armed with even heavier weapons, they form the solid core of a Varangur force.

Reavers were once Bloodsworn that have donned the Mask of the Reaper, but they are unable to contain the immense bloodlust bestowed upon them. Their minds torn asunder, Reavers enter an extreme state of psychosis, becoming wild, savage, and debased beasts.

The Huscarls of the Shattered Clans are known colloquially as the Sons of Korgaan, believed to be blessed by their god itself. These heavysset veterans are the most elite and ferocious fighters from within Varangur society. They, however, answer directly to Korgaan, and it's not unheard of for whole groups of Sons to disappear in the night, halfway through a raid, called away by Korgaan toward some unknown end, even against the wishes of their Chieftain or King. Very rarely, a Son of Korgaan succumbs to the power of the Mask of the Reaper. Caring nothing for their own safety, these cursed individuals will rush headlong toward the enemy in a frenzied bloodlust.

Night Raiders are masters at remaining unseen and stalking their prey. Donning blackened warpaint, but forgoing all armour, they move in complete silence and only after sneaking within a few feet of their enemies do they unleash a barrage of axes and arrows before closing in for the final kill.

While Clan Horse Raiders do not traditionally take part in pitched battles, when they do, they excel at harrying supply trains and enemy outposts. When employed in battle they lie in wait for enemies to fall out of position and are superb at hit and run manoeuvres.

Brute Force

Not all trolls are equal. From the swamp trolls of the equatorial jungles of the south, to the dim-witted hill and cave trolls that are the scourge of many ranges across the world, to the cunning snow trolls that reside in the Ice Mountains, the species is varied in temperament, ability, and in appearance. Even within a particular race of trolls there are differences. While many of the snow trolls of the north have sworn themselves to the Alliance, a significant number have turned their allegiance to a power they feel they can relate to more—Korgaan, a god from their ancestral memory and one they know was heavily involved in the Troll Wars.



Frost Fangs, or as the Varangur would have it, Dire Fangs, are as prized among the Shattered Clans as anywhere. The Varangur possess no more skill in capturing and training these fearsome beasts than any other clan—indeed, doing so can be as equally fatal. The prestige of owning and riding one is great and the lucky rider considered to be greatly favoured by their three-faced god.

Korgaan's bitter hatred of all dragonkind is a terrible grudge that is rooted in the time before, and of, the Celestians. If any descendant of one of the former Great Drakes is foolish enough to stray within Korgaan's reach, its fate is to become captured, tortured, twisted, and deformed by Korgaan's eternal spite. The resulting abominations are known as Jabberwocks. Each is different, mutated into ever more repulsive and mocking effigies of their former selves, stripped of their freedoms and bound to Korgaan's malicious will. To this end, Korgaan has also lured a number of the titanic Frost Giants to his growing power base, knowing that they, most of all among his followers, have the power to single-handedly defeat the cursed dragon spawn in combat.



The Chilling Curse of Undeath

The destiny of all the Varangur is to die in battle, bathed in glory. To ultimately prove their worth, and to travel to the afterlife to be with their god in his eternal war chamber, they must die with their weapons in their hands.

Those that fall disarmed are disgraced. Their bodies are buried by their fellow clansmen in shallow graves, not set free on one of the great funeral pyres. Their spirits wander the frozen land until they are one day confronted by the Great Deceiver, who shepherds them back to their broken bodies and forces them to rise once more, giving them one final chance to atone for their failure. These Draugr, the again-walkers, are shambling, desperate zombies with a last chance to fulfil their dreams.

During The Reckoning, and at the behest of Korgaan, the Sons sought out and captured an entire colony of gargoyles. Brought back to his domain, Korgaan commanded the Sons to break open the tombs of the Var'Kyr, the first of Korgaan's ancient and forgotten followers. After a sanguinary ritual, the gargoyles' essence containing their powers of regeneration was infused into the long dead remains of these ancient warriors, granting them life once more. The Fallen are deadly warriors that fight in loose formations to better bring their hefty glaives to bear, being able to move at speeds that would make even an elf appear laboured.

Magnilde of the Fallen

Herja was once the ruthless leader of the long dead Var'Kyr. During the ritual performed by the Sons, her remains were fused with the body and essence of Sor'ik'su, the bride of Ba'su'su and queen of his lofty serail. Captured during The Reckoning, her fierce will and resistance took an age to break and such power and resilience was an ideal match for Herja. Sor'ik'su's spirit didn't fracture and succumb completely and Herja was reborn as the new champion of her god, as a true merging of two mighty individuals and with the potency and malevolence of both.

Chosen by Korgaan to aid the Green Lady in thwarting the schemes of the Wicked Ones, Magnilde dropped the cursed orb, the Eye of the Abyss, into the boiling depths of the Fourth Circle. Its destruction rippled through the Abyss like a beacon call to all its foul denizens, screaming for revenge. Korgaan, delighted with his new favoured champion's exploits, showered Magnilde with gifts and praise. At the same time, Herja, Korgaan's captured plaything, had failed in her mission to stop an Abyssal assault upon the southern reaches of the Clans' home range. Embittered and shamed by Korgaan's immense displeasure and seething with envy for Magnilde's subsequent rise in stature and power within the Shattered Clans, Herja plotted the assassination of her god's new favourite.

As Magnilde led the Clans to a bloodthirsty victory against the vicious hordes of the Wicked Ones, fighting side by side with the forces of the Green Lady, Herja turned on her ally in the midst of battle. Fighters from both sides fell back in awe as the two warriors clashed in an almighty duel, one fuelled by hate and jealousy, the other by her god's blessing and enraged at such betrayal.

As the champions tired from exertion and their wounds, Magnilde struck Herja a mortal blow, ensnaring the former Var'Kyr with her whip and burying her blade deep into the ancient being's heart. As her agonising scream pierced through the cacophony of the surrounding battle, the Var'Kyr's essence was finally released from the prison of Sor'ik'su's body. Seizing the one chance it had for survival, the soul of Herja called upon Korgaan to seek his forgiveness and extend her life. Laughing and relishing in the chaos his followers were enacting, Korgaan granted her wish and opened the ancient paths of the spirit world, forging a tunnel into the ailing body of Magnilde. Ecstatic with her god's acceptance, Herja poured herself into her new host and both mortal bodies collapsed to the floor.

With the battle raging around it, the body of Magnilde opened its black, oily eyes and raised itself to its feet. Once more two souls had been merged and now Magnilde of the Fallen will lead the Clans to glory.

Might and Magic

In Varangur society, the title of Thegn has mostly given way to the more common name of Chieftain. Chieftains are great warriors, loyal to Korgaan and blessed with the power of their god. They exert their immense influence over their clan, driving them to war and leading raids from the front. The mightiest of warriors, Chieftains who have combined the might of multiple clans under their control through conquest and bloodshed will proclaim themselves a King. Perhaps it is the arrogance of the Shattered Clans that these warriors consider themselves above the title of lord as their standing would be among other northmen. To truly prove their claim, it is clan tradition that a King capture and tame a wild chimera to ride in battle.

The Clan Magi are the voice of Korgaan. After proving themselves in battle, those with the gift of magic are transformed, their minds melding with their deity. They speak for Korgaan and dictate his wishes to the rest of the Varangur.

Some lesser Clan Magi are made to combine their power as a trio, each channelling a different facet of Korgaan's will and together these conclaves unleash powerful bolts of explosive energy over vast distances. The effort leaves them drained and all but defenceless. If a single untrained Magus were to attempt to channel such a spell, the sheer power would tear them apart. Only those with a power approaching that of an Ice-Queen would even dare contemplate such an endeavour.



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