



Codex Arcanis





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Introduction

Welcome to Arcanis, the World of Shattered Empires.

The book you now hold details various nations and peoples of the continent of Onara, as well as new Prestige Classes, Spells, Feats and Magic Items that can be used in any world setting as well as Arcanis.

The intent of this book is to give the reader a feel for the world of Arcanis and to give enough information so that a campaign can be set in the Shattered Empires. It cannot give exhaustive details on every topic. GMs should feel free to assign trade routes or the exact tonnage of export if they so desire.

Note: Each chapter is purposefully written with the prejudice of the people detailed ingrained in the text. Even when written in the third-person, the bias is still present in every chapter but this one. We have no secrets from each other here, so you can believe every word written in this introduction as gospel truth.

Trust me, why would I lie about something like that?

Religion

The Pantheon of Man is a collection of twelve Gods that have been worshipped collectively since the time of the First Imperium to the present day. Although, by definition, they are the Gods of humans, Dwarves, Gnomes, and some half-Orcs also pay homage to these Celestial beings.

In an Arcanis campaign, Gods and religions differ from those of other RPG campaign settings in one very important way: ***Alignment is determined by the religious institution, not the God itself.***

In other words, the Gods don't have alignments, the churches do.

What does this mean in practical terms for your campaign? It allows for very interesting role-playing situations where two priests of the same God can have very different moral outlooks from each other.

It means that you can have a Lawful Good worshipper of Neroth, the God of Pestilence, Death, and the Undead as well as a Chaotic Evil practitioner of the Pleasure Goddess. It all depends on the particular slant or aspect that the player chooses for his character.

In the above examples, the Lawful Good worshipper of Neroth could practice the tenants of Neroth as taught by the Mother Church in Coryan.

There Nerothian priests stave off pestilence and help the infirm or the mad.

The Chaotic Evil adherent to Larissa could focus on the Goddess' aspect of Forbidden Pleasure, spreading pain as a form of Holy Communion.

Every God, regardless of its domains, have aspects that can be viewed as Good, Evil, or Neutral. Use this as a tool to provoke your players to examine those gray areas that most Fantasy Religions stay away from.

The War of the Gods

Most humans believe that the Gods created them and the world around them.

The Mother Church, as well as most other splinter religions, tells of a Mythic Age where the Gods walked beside Man and taught him the fundamental concepts needed, not just for survival, but for the creation of civilization.

Man worshipped and learned from the Gods in great Temples built for Them and all lived in harmony until the coming the Other. Whether it was a foreign God or a Being of God-like power is not known. All mention of this Being has been stricken and wiped clean as if It had never existed.

But It did.

It destroyed the peace and harmony Man so enjoyed with the Pantheon and caused the doom of millions as it tore down the glorious civilization that existed.

It gathered those people and Valinor it could corrupt with Its honeyed words and false promises and made war upon the Gods, attempting to absorb Their Divine essence. Its cowardly attack stole some of the Gods' power and in at least one ancient rendition of the tale, destroyed the gentlest member of the Pantheon.

Weakened by the Thing's treachery, the Gods called upon Man's assistance and they readily gave it, knowing that the wrath of the Other would fall upon them like a curse.

The legends are fragmentary as to what occurred, but they all agree that the Other was forced to flee to the Western continent of Onara with what few degenerate humans and Valinor still survived, leaving the home of Man a charnel house.

The Gods gave chase shortly thereafter, bringing with Them Their Valinor and Their Chosen, those groups of humans for which They had a particular love and devotion.



Arriving upon Onara, a race calling itself the Elorii welcomed them with entreaties of friendship and peace. Though humanoid in shape, these haughty beings were no cousin to Man and the humans were cautious in their dealings with the Elorii. This wariness proved wise as it was discovered that the Elorii and their “Elemental Gods,” creatures of immense power that lorded over the deluded Elorii, had given sanctuary to the Other and His followers. The Elorii extolled the peaceful purpose of the Other and asked for differences to be put aside.

The Elorii’s naïveté proved their undoing as the Other kidnapped one of their False Gods. They and their Elemental Lords pleaded with the Pantheon to help them find their companion and punish the Other. Agreeing, the Elorii and the humans joined forces to hunt down the followers of the False One while the Pantheon and the Elemental Lord made war upon the Other.

The battle was titanic and laid waste to many disparate parts of the Onara. Huge tracts of arable land were made barren and desolate, especially the area surrounding the Elorii’s capitol.

At last, the Other was confronted directly by the Pantheon and the Elemental Lords, but of the Elorii’s missing fifth Deity there was no sign. Defiant even when surrounded by Its enemies, the Other attacked His assembled Foes with such power and fury that the Gods began to falter. So weakened were They by the Other’s theft of Their Divine power, that all was feared lost.

At that most critical juncture, where the fate of all humanity was precariously balanced before a yawning abyss, salvation came from an unexpected quarter.

The Goddess Anshar appeared before Illiir and whispered in His ear, “I am your sister, Anshar, captive these many years by the jealousy of the Other. I have hidden in this distant land waiting for You to save Me from exile.”

Illiir responded grimly, “I cannot save you, sister, as all of us may soon fall to Its power.”

Anshar leaned in closer and smiled. “Worry not, brother, for your deliverance is close at hand. The Other grew in power because He absorbed the entire essence of the Elemental Goddess as It attempted to do to You.

“You have at your side creatures that have immense power which could turn the tide of battle. You need only do to them what It will do to you should you fall.”

Illiir was taken aback. “We cannot betray those who have extended the hand of friendship to us.”

“If you do not, not only will the Pantheon be as dew in the morning sun, but you will condemn your children to an eternity of bondage. It is a small price to pay.”

Reluctantly, Illiir agreed, but He would not stain His hands with the treachery that had to be done. He called upon His sons, Hurrian and Nier; His brother Yarris; and lastly, His wife, Saluwe’ to unmake the Elemental Lords and assure not only victory, but also salvation.

As the Elemental Lords were hunted and absorbed, Illiir spoke to His children and explained that the Elorii would view these actions as betrayal most foul, unable to see the necessity of this act. He told the Chosen of the Pantheon that they must fall upon the Elorii and take away their ability to harm them.

Thus as the Gods made war upon the Elemental Lords, so did the humans make war upon the Elorii. Man hunted the Elorii with vicious efficiency, ensuring that they would not pose a threat.

With heavy hearts, the Gods fell upon the Elemental Beings and in battles that raged across the continent, the Elorii’s False Gods fell to the inevitable.

The Pantheon had their final confrontation with the Other before the Ashen Temple. This enormous shrine was built in the high mountains by the Other’s heretical cultists, upon a field of black crystals. Yet, even infused with the energy of their fallen allies, the Pantheon was not able to destroy the Other. Instead, They imprisoned Him, sealing It for all Eternity away from those It would feed upon.

Returning to Their Chosen, who themselves were bloodied but unbowed, They rejoiced. His heart full of pride, Illiir addressed His followers; “This day we have sealed away a menace that would have seen us all at Its feet. The losses you have suffered have been great. You have lost your lands, your homes, your dearest blood to follow us. We shall not let this go unrewarded.”

Illiir motioned to the Ancient Elorii capitol and said, “Let this magnificent city now be your capitol. Take it and spread from its boundary to the furthest reaches of this new continent and forge the greatest Empire to the envy of all who would gaze upon its hallowed halls.”

With but a wave of His arms, Illiir transported the multitudes to the gates of the mighty city. “Let this be the First City of Man upon Onara; let this be the beginning of a Golden Age of Mankind.”

- *The Illuminated Perfection, the Codification of the Teachings of Illiir, IIIrd Scroll, Temple of the Pantheon, Coryan.*

The Afterlife and Resurrection

The churches of Arcanis teach that Man is comprised of three main elements: the Body, the Intellect, and the Soul. The body is the shell that houses and protects the other two components. The intellect is the total sum of experiences and facts accumulated over a lifetime as well as logic, cold and calculating. Lastly, the soul is the essence of who a person is. The soul determines if one is kind or cruel, creative or unimaginative.

When one dies, the body begins to decay, the intellect dims and slips into a deep lethargic state, while the soul starts to separate from its shell.

According to dogma, the morning rays of Illiir guide a soul to the Underworld where it is judged by a Valinor, called the Judgment of Nier. This Valinor weighs the manner in which the soul lived its life and determines where it shall go.

The tenants of the Pantheon do not include the 'Heaven and Hell' concept. Hell is considered a place or a different plane of existence that is home to the Demons and Devils that so plagued mankind during the Time of Terror.

Heaven is called the Paradise of the Gods, a place where worthy souls live side by side with the Gods and Their Valinor for a short time before being reincarnated back on Arcanis.

Those unworthy of Paradise are consigned to the Underworld, a roiling, boiling soup of souls in the Cauldron of Beltine. Here, the unworthiest of souls are weighted down by the evil they have done in life. They try to claw and grapple their way up to the top of the Cauldron in hopes of being remade and having their torment end.

When new souls are needed, Beltine stirs the Cauldron with her ladle, scooping up bits and pieces of different spirits. These pieces are then forged into a new soul, hopefully one more deserving of life than its previous components.

To have a person resurrected is thus a very complex affair. If the **resurrection spell** can be cast by morning before the soul departs, then the spell works as described. If not, it then becomes an arduous task, as the representatives of two different Gods must be convinced to allow the resurrection to take place.

The God Neroth holds sway over the intellect and the body, while the Goddess Beltine presides over the soul. As long as the body of the deceased is not raised as an undead being, then Neroth usually does not interfere.

Beltine, however, is very jealous of her charges. One must convince Her High Priest why the person should be taken out of the natural cycle and be restored to life. If the High Priest can be

convinced, then the way to the Underworld is granted.

How the soul is retrieved from the Underworld is a matter better left unsaid, as there may be those faint of heart reading this section. Suffice it to say that the path is guarded by fierce Guardians and fraught with peril, the price of failure being the consignment of a living being to the Cauldron. Definitely not for the timid!

A final note on death: Proper burial and rites should always be given to the deceased. Not doing so causes the soul to bypass the Judgment of Nier and immediately enter the Cauldron. A portion of the soul lingers, anchored to the remains, yet still feeling the torment of the Underworld. These tortured souls are Shades but are often known as Wraiths, Specters, Banshees, or Ghosts, among other things.

Unless laid to rest, the Shades will haunt an area around its remains, attacking the living. The torment they feel often leaves them mad and even the kindest of persons can leave behind the most malicious of spirits.

The Pantheon

The Gods of the Pantheon are twelve in number, each controlling particular domains and spheres of influence. They are also attended by Valinor, celestial beings birthed by the Gods and gifted with a portion of Their essence.

A Valinor's name is completely unpronounceable by humans and so is known by the aspect of the Gods it serves, i.e., The Mercy of Neroth, The Word of Illiir, The Judgment of Nier, The Voice of Sarish.

Just before the God's War, the Pantheon quibbled and bickered amongst itself. These disagreements, some say fomented by the Other, erupted into all-out war between some of the Gods.

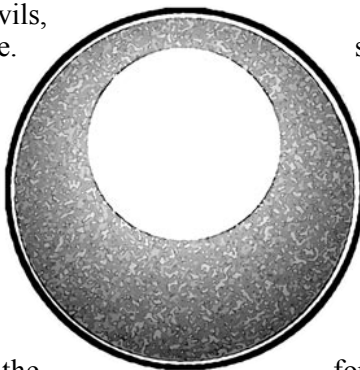
During this time, the Valinor of Sarish, who chose to remain neutral in the conflict, were lent as mercenaries to the different factions. The God who engaged them in turn gifted these Valinor with even greater power.

Jealousy and resentment against Sarish's Valinor began to grow, eventually causing many to be tempted to Sarish's side. After the War of the Gods was over, many of these Valinor were cast out for betraying their original patron and fell from grace.

These Valinor, still immensely powerful, were given an option by Sarish. They could be cast out of Paradise to wander aimlessly for eternity throughout the planes or they could

lead His bound Demons and Devils, assuring their continued obedience. Almost all of the Valinor elected to join Sarish's ranks and become Demon or Devil Princes. The few who did not accept Sarish's bargain still roam the cosmos, looking for a place to call home, yet never finding anything that comes close to the Paradise of the Gods.

Since the God's War, the Pantheon has learned to set aside its differences and reign in harmony, each over its chosen domain. Unfortunately, this harmony does not always extend to Their respective worshippers, as the numerous Religious Crusades can attest. The Gods do not involve themselves directly into these battles. As long as humanity itself is not threatened and They receive Their daily prayers, They care little about which sect or church has ascendance over the others.



The clergy of Illiir is made up solely of male priests, although some female errant priestesses can be found. The reason for this stems from Illiir and Saluwe' being husband and wife. As such, the priests of Illiir and the priestesses of Saluwe' are considered two halves of the whole clergy. In fact, the two consider each other "ecclesiastic siblings" and are forbidden to mate with one another.

Spheres of Influence: Holy, Honor, Protection, Sun, War

Holy Symbol: A radiant orb, preferably golden.

Position within the Pantheon: Head of the Pantheon. Husband to Saluwe', Father of Hurrian, Nier, and Larissa and elder brother to Neroth, Yarris, and Anshar.

Favored Val Family: val'Assante'

Favored Weapon: Gladius, "Blinding Truth"

Animal: The Golden Falcon

Color: Gold or White

Appearance: Illiir usually appears as a golden shower of light, but has also manifested as a young man of perfect features.

Secret Society: The Eternal Illuminati (also referred to as the Illuminati). This secret organization has members outside the clergy as well as within and counts amongst its fraternity some of the most powerful people on Onara. During the times when the Empire was not ruled by Illiir's chosen, the val'Assante', the Coryani Empire declined in power such as when Canceri, Milandir, and Altheria seceded. This society is committed to maintaining the val'Assante' dynasty on the Alabaster throne into perpetuity at all costs.

They have close ties with the Followers of the Azure Way, seeking to put a val'Assante' upon the Throne of Man, ensuring a Golden Age for Mankind, under their wise guidance, of course.

Saluwe', *Giver of Life, the Green Mother, the Innocent Maiden, The Stern Matriarch, Goddess of Fertility, the Wellspring of Harmony and Peace.*

Saluwe' is the patron of all women and guides and protects them through all the phases of their lives. She also has dominion over the normal cycles of life, not only that of the changing of the seasons but also the human cycles of birth, aging, marriage, and death.

Farmers give daily offerings in Her name to ensure abundant crops and healthy livestock.

Wedding ceremonies always invoke her blessings, asking her to provide harmony in the matrimony as well as the fertility of bride.

The Gods of Arcanis

The following is a short entry on each of the twelve Gods of the Pantheon. Although whole volumes could be written on the Pantheon itself, only the most basic of information on each God will be made here. Future products will delve deeper into the History, Myth, and aspects of the Deities and the religious organizations and cults spawned from Their worship.

Illiir, *Leader of the Pantheon, the Bringer of Light, His Radiant Perfection, Lord of Truth.*

As the head of the Pantheon, Illiir enjoys the respect and adulation of His peers as well as the vast majority of all the worshippers of the other Gods. Illiir has been the patron of Emperors and Rulers of all types since the days of the First Imperium and is considered to be the warden of the Coryani Empire.

Illiir is also associated with the Sun and His name is synonymous with that radiant orb.

Worshippers of Illiir tend to be those in power and leadership positions or those who wish to be. As head of the Pantheon, most devout Pantheists at least pay him lip service and offer a few short prayers in His honor.

Priests of Illiir tend to be noble men, unusually handsome, yet very stern and rigid in their ways. Most have an aggressive attitude and seek to play a commanding role in every situation.

As noted earlier, Saluwe's clergy is strictly comprised of priestesses, with the rare male attendant. Those males who feel the calling of Saluwe' do not join the official clergy, but instead leave the civilized areas of man and seek solitude in pristine forests as Druids.

Priestesses of Saluwe' tend to have a nurturing attitude until confronted with the brutal treatment of any natural setting or of women. The bravest of Milandiran knights seek to be elsewhere at that time, as these gentle souls become living furies that even Nierites admire.

Spheres of Influence: Animal, Earth, Holy, Nature, Plant, Protection

Holy Symbol: A wreath of Mistletoe and Nightshade.

Position within the Pantheon: Wife to Illiir, Mother of Hurrian, Nier, and Larissa, Sister to Beltine and Althares.

Favored Val Family: val'Dellenov

Favored Weapon: Spear, "The Striking Reed"

Animal: Horned Deer

Color: Deep Green

Appearance: Saluwe' often appears as a beautiful young maiden, but in ancient times also manifested as an animate oak tree.

Secret Society: The Sisterhood of the Golden Bough. This secret organization within the clergy seeks to turn humanity away from the urban lifestyle to one where they live in harmony with the rest of nature. They feel that paved streets and stone buildings cut mankind's link to nature and make her a colder and crueler creature. A few more radical elements with the society believe that it will be necessary to bring about a cataclysm that destroys all of civilization before humanity can return to the primeval state she was meant to live.

Yarris, *The Sea King, Ruler of the Waves, Master of the Oceans.*

Master of all things above and below the seas, Yarris is the patron God of fishermen and sailors. Before going too far from port, Sea Captains stop the ship and offer a libation of the finest wine they have available to the Ruler of the Waves, praying for calm seas and a safe return.

Yarris' clergy tend to be very moody with quick shifts in disposition, much like a calm sea that can turn into a raging tempest without warning.



The priests usually hold rites and rituals in or near any body of water, such as lakes, rivers, or streams. More often than not, the faithful wade into Yarris' sacred realm during the ceremonies that usually end with a quick and total immersion.

Devout worshippers of Yarris allow their beards to grow out and wear them in a wavy, roiling mass quite contrary to Coryani social norm.

Spheres of Influence: Protection, Sea,

Water, Holy

Holy Symbol: A gilded Conch shell.

Position within the Pantheon: Brother to Illiir and Neroth.

Favored Val Family: val'Ossan

Favored Weapon: Trident, "The Scepter of Yarris"

Animal: Dolphin

Color: Blue-green

Appearance: Yarris appears as a muscular, middle-aged man with a foaming beard. At sea, he has appeared as an animate waterspout.

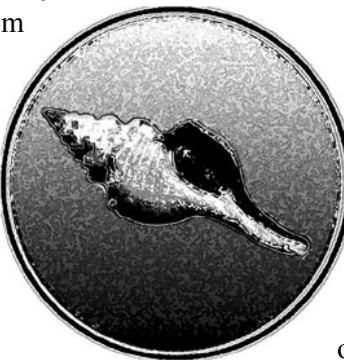
Secret Society: The Lurkers Beneath the Waves. This secret society began after the events of the Yarric Heresy during the early years of the Empire. Based in the Salentia province, these worshippers believe that Yarris existed before the Pantheon and He was added as a way of converting His worshippers.

The Lurkers espouse that Yarris' true children live beneath the waves. He seeks to allow mankind entrance to the Paradise of the Deep by having them mate with these perfect creatures and sire a new form of man.

Some people, including worshippers of Yarris in the north, view this as a complete abomination, warning of a diabolical ruse to lead the faithful from the true path. The Lurkers know the truth, though. They know that the others feel envy that they were chosen by Yarris above all others to commune so deeply with Him.

Neroth, *Lord of the Dead, the Decayed Master of Pestilence, Summoner of the Ancients, He Who Extends Life Beyond Death, Grim Sovereign of the Catacombs.*

This fearsome God not only holds sway over the body and intellect after death, but also during life. Neroth is usually only associated with disease and the



hordes of undead that so characterize His worship in far off Canceri. In actuality, many healers pay as much obeisance to him as to His wife, Beltine.

Worshippers of Neroth believe that those who are faithful to His doctrine will be rewarded with life beyond death. The degree of one's faith determines whether one is raised at all, and if so, what type of undead. The truly devout regain a measure of unlife very similar to their time before the grave.

Unfortunately, Neroth only has dominion over the body and intellect and not the soul. Therefore, the recently raised undead will find that he is slowly becoming devoid of any emotion and as more years pass, the more removed from his humanity he becomes.

Many feel that the sacrifice of one's soul for an eternity of continuance is a small price to pay.

The priests and priestesses of Neroth are a grim and sardonic group, tending to emulate their Lord's twisted sense of humor. Nonetheless, they are not without compassion (at least those still among the breathing) and in many areas, such as in Coryani, actually try and stave off disease and tend to the mentally infirm.

Spheres of Influence: Death, Destruction, Disease, Holy

Holy Symbol: The Ankh, symbol of rebirth.

Position within the Pantheon: Brother to Illiir and Yarris, Husband to Beltine, Father of Sarish.

Favored Val Family: val'Mordane

Favored Weapon: Scythe, "Soul Reaper"

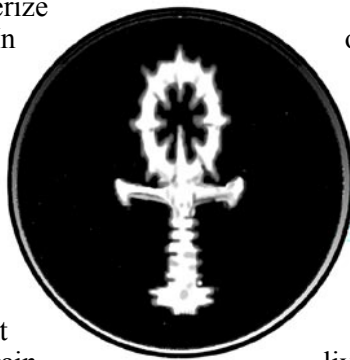
Animal: the Scarab

Color: Brown

Appearance: Neroth usually appears as a frightening, hooded, fleshy skeleton, with a wicked grin. He has also appeared as a burrowing scarab.

Secret Society: The Brotherhood of the Bronze Catacombs. This society is made up entirely of those who have received Neroth's blessing and are now undead. For obvious reasons, only those undead who retain their intellect are members of this most secretive society.

They believe that the dogma of Beltine telling of the soul being reincarnated is false and that the reality is that after death, the soul shrivels and dies. Only by accepting the gift of unlife can one continue upon this plane.



These undead are very protective of their descendants and those beliefs that they followed while alive. They feel that they should use their extended "life" to promote and protect what was important to them before death, not stay within their Necropolises and wait until they are needed.

Led by a very ancient Lich who was rumored to have lived when Vintaka was still being built, these undead are very active across Onara, moving behind the scenes to assure that their agenda proceeds unopposed. Just what this agenda is exactly is unknown outside the highest level of the Brotherhood.

Beltine, *Warden of the Afterlife, Keeper of the Gates to Paradise, Mistress of the Cauldron of the Underworld, Nurturer of the Spirit, Forger of Souls.*

Gentle Guardian of the Afterlife, Beltine is worshipped throughout Onara. Her clergy is tasked with attending to the funerary rites for the dead as well as the healing of the infirm and weak, a task that is shared with the clergy of Her husband, Neroth.

Beltine is also the forger of souls in the Mother Church's dogma. All souls are vested with a certain amount of time on Arcanis to enjoy and live out their destiny as dictated by their nature. Those who do so are allowed access to the Paradise of the Gods. Those who were judged unworthy are consigned to the Cauldron of the Underworld, a vast boiling soup of souls. When new souls are needed, Beltine stirs the cauldron with her ladle and takes bits and pieces of spirits to make a new soul, one that is hopefully not as flawed as their previous incarnations.

The priests and priestesses of Beltine tend to be very calm and peaceful people who are neither easily upset nor distressed. Their unnatural calm gives them an air of saintliness, which has a way of diffusing the most difficult of situations.

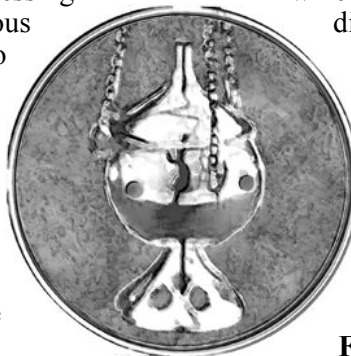
Spheres of Influence: Afterlife, Divination, Healing, Holy, Spirit

Holy Symbol: An incense-burning Thurible or censer.

Position within the Pantheon: Guardian of the Paradise of the Gods. Sister to Saluwe', Wife to Neroth, Mother of Sarish.

Favored Val Family: val'Ishi

Favored Weapon: Quarterstaff,



“Mender of Souls”

Animal: Raven

Color: Yellow

Appearance: Beltine appears as a matronly woman of indeterminate years. She is normally surrounded in a haze as if in a fog.

Secret Society: The Guardians of the Tombs. This very militant society believes that the blessing of Neroth is an abomination to the natural cycle of life. A body without a soul is merely a horrific echo of the person it once was and the souls of the undead writhe in pain until their mortal remains rest peacefully.

Members of this order guard the tombs and necropolis’ and ensure that the remains of the dead rest in peace. A smaller faction actually hunts undead and removes them from this existence.

Little love is lost between members of this society and the minions of Lord Neroth.

Althares, *Artificer of the Pantheon, Eternal Seeker of Wisdom, Patron of Sages, Guardian of the Vault of Ancient Knowledge, Lord of Arcane Mysteries.*

Althares is the patron of teachers, scholars, sages, artificers, and inventors. His priests are highly sought after as instructors, having earned a reputation of being the most learned people in Onara.

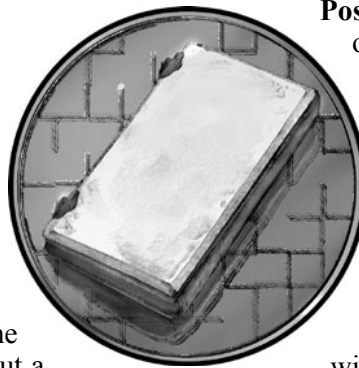
The High Academy of Altheria is located in Coryan and has been acclaimed as being the premiere center for higher learning. It is a little known fact that the Temple to Althares is built on the same grounds as the Academy and acts as a secondary rectory for the Altherian church in Coryan.

Although almost all of those from the nation of Altheria exclusively worship Althares, He has many other followers spread throughout Onara. Any who seek knowledge and attempt to unlock the great mysteries of the universe are welcomed into the fold, regardless of nationality.

Priests and priestesses of Althares tend to be very thoughtful and rational, though the tendency for single-mindedness and obsession while pursuing a goal is widely ascribed to them also.

Spheres of Influence: Artifact, Divination, Holy, Knowledge

Holy Symbol: A small book with the Holiest of Althares’ words is worn on a thin chain around the neck of the priest.



Position within the Pantheon: Artificer of the Gods. Sister to Saluwe’ and Beltine.

Favored Val Family: val’Abebi

Favored Weapon: Warhammer, “Forge-shaper” and the Flintlock, “Althares’ Word.”

Animal: Owl

Color: Dark Blue

Appearance: Althares usually appears as a wizened old Altherian with a shock of wild, tangled white hair.

Secret Society: A small sect calling itself the Seekers of Forbidden Lore are strongly opposed to the restriction of excavating old Tenecian ruins in the south of the Empire. Said to have been a tyrannical empire that rose during the Shadowed Age, the despots of Tenecia were said to have had secret lore lost to modern man. The Seekers are driven to uncover those secrets and deliver them to the modern age.

Hurrian, *the Reluctant Warrior, the Storm Lord, the Thunderer, the Grand Strategist of the Gods, the Noble Champion.*

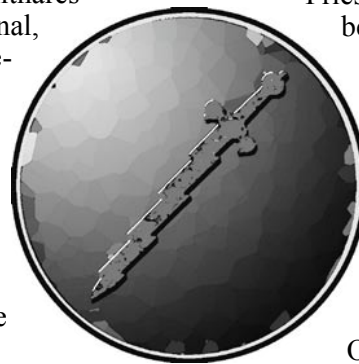
Hurrian serves the Pantheon as its general, marshalling Their forces to battle in a precise and orderly manner.

Hurrian is also known as the Reluctant Warrior, one who takes up his sword, not for glory or the sheer joy of destruction like His brother Nier, but because society must be protected against those who would see it fall in ruin. Hurrian teaches that no pleasure should be taken from the death of an opponent, nor should wanton destruction of property or innocents be permitted.

Hurrian is also known as the Storm Lord, after having bested the Elemental Lord of Air during the God’s War. Ever the intellectual warrior, storm clouds are a sign of his mind planning and plotting new strategies for battles yet to come.

Priests and priestesses of Hurrian tend to be stern and pensive, yet can always be counted upon to protect the weak and champion any noble cause. Slow to anger, these warrior-priests are some of the most formidable combatants when immersed in battle.

During the God’s War, Hurrian sacrificed himself to save His father Illiir from an attack by the Other. He was horribly burnt across



the entire left side of His body, leaving his handsome face disfigured. Beltine offered to heal his scars, but Hurrian refused. He wanted a reminder of the consequences of leaving one's guard down.

The priests of Hurrian thus normally wear a metallic mask that covers the left side of their face, to honor their Lord's sacrifice. The truly devout actually disfigure the left side of their face as a show of piety to their grim Lord.

Spheres of Influence: Air, Holy, Protection, Storm, Strength, War

Holy Symbol: A small pendant in the form of a sword, pommel up, the blade in the form of a stylized lightening bolt.

Position within the Pantheon: General of the Pantheon. Brother to Nier and Larissa, son of Illiir and Saluwe'.

Favored Val Family: val'Tensen

Favored Weapon: Longsword, "Thunderstorm"

Animal: the Shadow Lion

Color: Gray

Appearance: Hurrian may appear as a battle-scarred veteran, weary but unbowed, always keeping his left side to the shadows. He has also appeared as a roiling massive storm cloud.

Secret Society: The Sons of Righteous Fury. Many within the clergy and the val'Tensen family feel that the val'Assante' line has grown fat and decrepit. It has allowed their beloved Empire to become decadent and corrupt, slowly spiraling down into a new age of darkness.

The Sons believe that their time has come and gone and that a new dynasty should rule. High General Menisis val'Tensen is the Empire's only hope for greatness again and any measures taken to assure his ascension to the Alabaster Throne are justified.

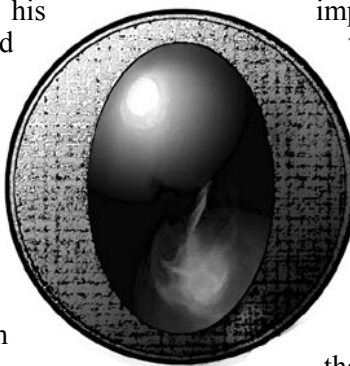
Any measures.

Nier, the Lord of Flaming Destruction, the Judgment of the Gods, the Ultimate Warrior, the Purifying Crucible, Master of Burning Ruin, Ruler of the Fields of Ash, Reveler in Violence.

Nier is the perfect warrior, one who relishes in battle and thrills to see His foes fall before Him like wheat before the scythe.

His is the power of the Cleansing Flame, that which sweeps aside the old and corrupt to allow the new to rise from its ashes. His followers were the ones who brought down the indolent First Imperium that eventually gave rise to the glorious new nations and empires that dot Onara.

His servants act as a crucible, whereby the



impure is burnt away leaving only what is worthy of existence.

Nier's priests and priestesses tend to be very aggressive in their attitudes.

Hot tempered, brash, and usually spoiling for a good fight, the clergy are also known for their fairness and steadfast adherence to justice at all costs. Since the time of

the First Imperium to the Day of Exile during the Modern Age,

Nierites have been known as the Champions of Dogma and zealous in the pursuit of heretics and Infernalists.

Since the time of the Day of Exile, Nier has been relegated to a minor position within the Mother Church of Coryan. Though worship is not proscribed, it does carry a social stigma, branding one a mindless sociopath and zealot. Only in the Theocracy of Canceri is the worship of Nier promoted and tolerated.

Nestled in the volcanic mountain range known as Nier's Spine, Nierites have for ages mined a precious gem found no where else on Onara. Known as the Fire Opal, this gemstone appears as an egg-shaped amber, but within a small flame can be seen.

Altherian scholars theorized that these opals are actually the eggs of a Fire Salamander and that the flame within is an embryonic salamander still gestating. It has yet to be determined whether there is any merit to this hypothesis.

Spheres of Influence: Destruction, Fire, Holy, War

Holy Symbol: The fire opal.

Position within the Pantheon: The Judge of the Gods. Brother of Hurrian and Larissa, son to Illiir and Saluwe'.

Favored Val Family: val'Viridan

Favored Weapon: Greatsword, "Purifying Crucible"

Animal: Fire Drake

Color: Orange-Red

Appearance: Nier usually appears as an animate flaming pillar.

Secret Society: The Order of the Hidden Flame. This secret society is made up of worshippers of Nier within the Empire and a few moderates within the Theocracy of Canceri. They seek to reintegrate the exiled Nierites back into the mainstream of Coryani society, making the Pantheon whole once more. They fervently feel that ostracizing the Nierites has led to the moral decadence that now grips the Empire. Only their innate passion in seeing the will of the Gods followed can forestall the steady slide into darkness once again.

Larissa, *Oracle of the Gods, Mistress of Forbidden Pleasures, Lady Luck, Temptress of the Pure, Divine Harlot of the Sixty-Seven Acts of Debauchery.*

Up until the latter years of the First Imperium, Larissa was only known as the Oracle of the Gods. Her divining powers were used during the God's War to track down the Other's minions as well as blunting several sneak attacks by It.

Always appearing as a shy, demure maiden, she was tasked with the codification of the history of Man. Before leaving for the Paradise of the Gods, Illiir asked each Deity to bestow a gift that would give Mankind assistance in the years to come.

Larissa, with Althares' help, created the Crypt of Memories below Her temple in the First City. The Crypt is a labyrinth that winds its way in a random fashion, with the entire history of Mankind written upon its walls. The history is in no particular order and it is said that one will only find the passages one was meant to see.

Stories abound of meeting people from different eras of history as well as strange robed curators that will not speak and only guide if willed by Her.

Not satisfied with knowing only the past, Larissa extended her divinatory powers to their limits, seeking to pierce the veil of the far future. She awoke from Her trance screaming in fear, unable to communicate coherently what She saw.

Larissa began to immerse Herself in the pleasures of the senses, hoping to forget what terrible sights She witnessed. Her clergy in turn followed suit, becoming hedonists and sensates to the extreme. No pleasure or excess was too great for this sect, and soon this formerly austere group became renowned for their wild revelries.

Larissa's clergy tend to be very seductive and pleasure-seeking in attitude and quite immodest in their choice of attire. This is not to say that they are non-functioning hedonists incapable of coherent acts. They usually seek pleasure in moderation while outside the temples and religious festivals, only indulging in uninhibited behavior on the High Holy Days or while visiting Sweet Savonna.

Spheres of Influence: Charm, Divination, Fate, Holy, Luck, Protection, Senses

Holy Symbol: A golden coin suspended from a fine silver chain.



Position within the Pantheon: Oracle of the Gods, Wife of Cadie, Mother of Sarish, Daughter of Illiir and Saluwe'.

Favored Val Family: val'Sheem

Favored Weapon: Rapier, "Larissa's Kiss"

Animal: Snake

Color: Scarlet

Appearance: Larissa usually appears as a young woman of unearthly beauty. Her every move is hypnotic, while her very scent is intoxicating.

Secret Society: The Sirens of Forbidden Delights. This society is comprised of the most alluring and beautiful courtesans in the Empire. They ply their wiles on the most influential of people across Onara, knowing that the most sensitive information can be garnered during the most intimate of moments.

They use this information to further their agenda and accumulate favors in all the different strata of society. Even the noble and honorable knights of Milandir are not beyond their temptation and have unwittingly assisted the Sirens in the pursuit of their goals.

Cadie, *the Dark Hand of Illiir, Master of the Darkness, Keeper of Secrets, the Thief of Joy, the Bringer of Lament, the Lord of Epics and Songs.*

Cadie is the patron God of rogues, spies, assassins, and bards. He serves Illiir by performing tasks distasteful to the Perfect Lord with cold efficiency.

During the God's War, Cadie was feared as an unstoppable force of nature; cold, merciless, and relentless. These are the virtues that His worshippers aspire to. But even the unfeeling slayer had a chink in his otherwise impregnable armor. That weakness was the unrequited love He had for Larissa.

In the age before the war with the Other, Cadie attempted to woo Larissa, but the demure, innocent maiden would have nothing to do with the heartless God.

Despondent, Cadie roamed Arcanis until He came across a large spider's web, still beaded with the morning dew. He sat and listened with His divine senses and heard the most beautiful sound as the weight of the dewdrop plucked the strand of web before falling to the earth. Inspired, Cadie fashioned a lyre whose strings were made from the strands of that web.

That evening, He sat in a grove that Larissa frequently visited and began to play. The beautiful sounds pulled at the strings of the maiden's heart and She went to see who could stir such emotion with only a few notes.

Amazed to see that it was someone She thought incapable of any tenderness or feeling, Larissa knelt by Cadic and listened as He slowly won Her heart with each melodic note.

Priests and priestesses of Cadic tend to be a paradox. They are usually very forthright and open, even cautiously friendly, yet in an instant, can turn into ruthless, cold-blooded killers, capable of anything.

Many worshippers of Cadic are also very capable musicians, storytellers and artists. Those from outside the sect are astonished that anyone who can be so cold and calculating can also have such passion as to stir the soul with only a few words or the plucking of a string.

Spheres of Influence: Murder, Holy, Knowledge, Trickery, Music

Holy Symbol: A disc of polished obsidian.

Position within the Pantheon: Dark Hand of Illiir. Husband to Larissa, Son of Beltine and Neroth, Father to Sarish.

Favored Val Family: val'Borda

Favored Weapon: Short Bow, "Silent Death"

Animal: Fox

Color: Black

Appearance: Cadic can appear as a charming young man with a roguish smile but icy eyes that can petrify with but a glance.

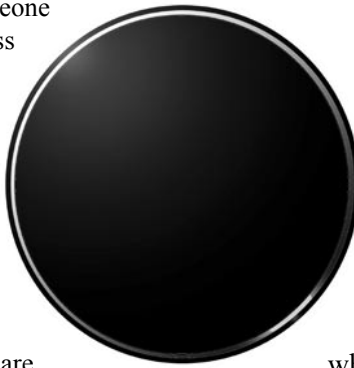
Secret Society: The Troupe of the Final Note. Not every bard is an assassin; in fact, the vast majority is not. Members of the Troupe of the Final Note are those rare bards who are also quite skilled in the art of murder.

These master assassins usually join a troupe as much as a year before eliminating their target. During that time, they act as a normal member of a bardic group, performing at many different locations and functions until they finally arrive at the intended destination.

Sometime during that evening, the victim hears a faint tune before unexpectedly facing the Judgment of Nier in the Underworld. Before the body is found, the assassin is long gone, abandoning his cover and disappearing into the night.

Notables from every corner of Onara invite bardic troupes to play for them as a sign of prestige and prominence. To cancel a performance on the off-chance that an assassin is within their ranks is seen as a sign of cowardice and weakness. This, of course, plays right into the Troupe of the Final Note's hands.

Pride is such a wonderful tool.



Sarish, the Oath Maker, the Binder of Demons and Devils, Master of the Arcane, Patron of Sorcerers and Magi, He Who Strides the Planes, the Blood God, the Keeper of Scroll of True Names.

Sly Sarish is the patron of all those who seek knowledge of a more esoteric and arcane nature than those who follow Althares. Some legends tell of Sarish freely gifting Mankind with the secrets of Magic, while others tell of its theft. Regardless, Sarish now guides and blesses those who are gifted with the arcane "Gift."

Sarish also governs over oaths and contracts. It is said that Sarish will hear an oath taken in His name and if broken, the transgressors will be cursed. Whether or not this is an old wives tales is unsure. What is known is that those contracts "bound" by a val'Mehan or priest of Sarish certainly do invoke a curse upon any that would break the agreement.

Sarish is also known as the Binder of Demons and Devils. Over the ages, Sarish has accumulated an enormous amount of Outsiders, which He or His worshippers have bound to service. These creatures are governed by Fallen Valinor that have taken the titles of Demon or Devil princes.

Yet, for every Outsider Sarish has in His service, countless others remain free and ready to spread havoc across the realms of man. Such was the case during the Time of Terror. Countless Outsiders, called Infernals by the populace, roamed unchecked, spreading chaos, mayhem, and in a few cases, their seed, throughout Onara.

Sarish's clergy were in great demand during that time, helping to stem the tide of the Infernal, as well as gaining a few new servants.

Priests of Sarish tend to be quite charming and eloquent, contrary to what would be expected of those who have frequent interaction with Infernals. They tend not to be very aggressive, letting those whose natures are brash and impulsive take the lead. But they are always there, whispering in the right ear or saying just the right words to achieve a desired result.

Spheres of Influence: Dæmonology, Holy, Magic, Oath, Secrets

Holy Symbol: A disk inscribed with the sigil of Sarish.



Position within the Pantheon: The Oath Maker. Son of Cadie and Larissa.

Favored Val Family: val'Mehan

Favored Weapon: Sarishan Dagger, "Oathmaker"

Animal: Cat

Color: Purple

Appearance: There are no records of Sarish himself ever appearing. Instead, His "representatives" appear in His stead.

Secret Society: The Seekers of the Hidden Master. This society is hidden deep within an organization that is, by nature, already secretive.

During the Time of Terror, very powerful Infernals known as the Devil-Kings ruled over Nishanpur. When the First Crusade of Light finally arrived, these powerful Outsiders were either killed or driven out of the ancient city. After the Wall of the Gods was raised, these Devil-Kings, along with a horde of other Infernals, were believed destroyed by the Gods.

Members of this secret society are the descendants of those who served these unbound Devils. They believe that the demon horde and their *true* masters were not destroyed, but are actually still on the other side of the God's Wall, or at the very least, entombed within that gigantic mountain range.

Their goal is to somehow pierce the Wall and usher in the return of His Infernal Majesty. Given the immense size of this undertaking, it is no wonder that this sect has not yet succeeded in this grandiose scheme.

Anshar, *the Far Traveler, the Suffering Martyr, the Weeping Goddess, the Guardian of Outcasts.*

Anshar is unique in the Pantheon, having only rejoined it during the God's War. She is quiet and shy, gentle in manner and generous with Her favors. These usually take the form of endurance while under torture or the fantastic Portals of Anshar.

Anshar looks after outcasts, regardless of the reason for their being ostracized. It is said that the truly devout will be led to a promised land on Arcanis itself, where the former pariah will be treated as a brother. A trail of tears, ostensibly from the Weeping Goddess herself, leads the way to this fabled land.

If any have found this trail, there are no records of what was found at its end. If indeed it is a paradise on earth, then it is little wonder that none have returned to tell the tale.

A formal clergy of Anshar does not exist. Many of the val'Inares family hear the call of their patron deity and become wandering mendicant priests, tending to the needy and hopeless.

Some few do tend to the chapels (Anshar does not have true Temples) scattered across Onara. These simple structures double as shelters for the poor and house the fabled Portals of Anshar scattered across the continent.

Worshippers of Anshar tend to be somber, dejected people who nevertheless will sacrifice themselves in order to save another life or to preserve a hopeless cause.

Portals of Anshar: Illiir tasked all the Gods to give a gift to humanity before leaving them to rule over the First Imperium. Anshar saw the vast distances that man would one day need to cross and decided to create a gift that remains unsurpassed in its usefulness, even in the modern age.

Scattered across all of Onara are large portals in the shape of an arc. These portals usually have a white marbled façade covered in benedictions to Anshar in Ancient Altharin.

Only priests of Anshar or those of the blood of Anshar, the val'Inares, can activate these portals.

If the location to another portal is known, then the proper blessings may be spoken which will cause the interior of the arc to glow with a soothing blue light. By passing through the plane of the arc, one is instantly transported across the intervening distances, emerging from the sister portal unharmed.

It is rumored that the locations of hundreds of portals have been lost during the Shadowed Age and that they once created a network that spanned the entire globe. Sacred texts found on tablet fragments also hint that these portals once connected Arcanis to other worlds and planes of existence. If this is true, then that knowledge was destroyed when the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame wiped the First Imperium from the face of Arcanis.

Spheres of Influence: Healing, Holy, Pain, Strength, Suffering, Travel

Holy Symbol: A strand from a thorn bush.

Position within the Pantheon: Illiir's youngest sister

Favored Val Family: val'Inares

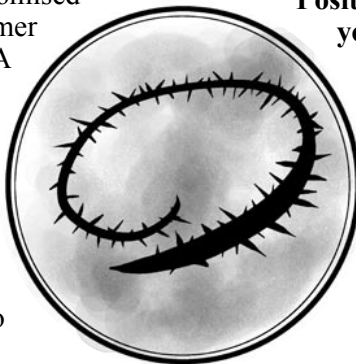
Favored Weapon: Unarmed Strike, "The Touch of Pain"

Animal: Horse

Color: Sky Blue

Appearance: Anshar appears as a sobbing female weeping bloody tears.

Secret Society: None known.



The Vals

Having suffered such horrendous loses during the God's War among Their human followers, Illiir tasked the Valinor of the different Deities to mate with a chosen family. The offspring of this union were humans that had the blood of the divine flowing through their veins.

Each of these human families added the prefix of val to their names to honor the Valinor that had sired them, thus giving rise to the val'Holryns, val'Sheems, val'Assante's, and others.

Vals were then given the arduous burden of leading the rest of humanity into the Golden Age envisioned by Illiir. Before leaving to the Paradise of the Gods, Illiir told the assembled mass of humanity that the Vals would be their guardians, protectors, and benevolent leaders who would guide them through the ages to come.

These Vals, as they were collectively known, look and act just like normal humans except for their eyes. Vals are born with steel grey-colored eyes, unlike any other human born on Arcanis. Yet the Vals are from human.

Each Valinor was created from the very essence of the God they serve. Thus, when they mated with the chosen human families, a touch of the respective deities' power passed on. These powers and abilities are known as Blood Line powers, and are as unique as the Divine Being they come from. (See Appendix VI for a complete listing).

Vals are also gifted with unique powers of the mind. All Vals are considered latent Psions, but must be "Awakened" by another Val, usually in a very private ceremony amongst family or, very rarely, spontaneously due to an attack by another Psion.

There are thirteen major bloodlines throughout the central portion of Onara with numerous minor Val families scattered throughout the same area. There are other Val families that live almost exclusively in the Khitani Empire but it is beyond the scope of this book to detail those foreign clans.

When a Val and a normal human mate, the offspring is always a Val. When two Vals from different bloodlines mate, the offspring is also always a Val but may have the blood of either the father or the mother as their birthright. Thus a Val may be a val'Mehan by name but have the powers normally associated with a val'Mordane. It is always best not to assume when confronting a Val opponent as to his blood abilities.

The Thirteen Major Bloodlines

val'Abebi – The Abebi family were originally from the far south of the Eastern Continent. Renown for their

analytical minds and vast knowledge, the val'Abebi are regarded as the finest scholars on Onara today.

Patron Deity: Althares

Ancestral Home: Altheria

Typical Appearance: The typical val'Abebi has very dark skin and kinky hair. They tend to be tall, lanky, and athletically built.

val'Assante' – The val'Assante' family is traditionally viewed as the preeminent clan of all the Vals. They are famous for their oratory and leadership skills as well as their overwhelming presence.

Patron Deity: Illiir

Ancestral Home: The Coryani Empire but centered on the city of Coryan itself.

Typical Appearance: The typical val'Assante' is synonymous with the typical Coryani; of medium height but imposing with short blonde hair and olive skin.

val'Borda – The val'Borda family is usually viewed with fear and suspicion. Though never linked directly to various shady or otherwise disreputable activities, they always seem to be peripherally associated.

Patron Deity: Cadic

Ancestral Home: The city of Plexus in the Coryani province of Annonica.

Typical Appearance: The typical val'Borda is short and thick, with dark hair and features.

val'Dellenov – Unique among the different Val families, the val'Dellenovs are strictly a matriarchal clan. The populace at large tends to generalize their activities as being closely associated with nature. This is due, in no small part, to their very close link with the Green Mother, Saluwe'.

Patron Deity: Saluwe'

Ancestral Home: Panari, in the Coryani province of Balantica.

Typical Appearance: The typical val'Dellenov is tall to the point of being reed-like and tends to be a brunette.

val'Holryn – Noble and fiercely loyal, the val'Holryns are generally held in high esteem throughout central Onara. This family, once believed to be a minor bloodline, raised in prominence throughout the years until finally being elevated as a major bloodline.

Patron Deity: None. The val'Holryn are commonly referred to as the 'Bastard Children of the Gods.'

Ancestral Home: The city of Tralia in the duchy of the same name in Milandir.

Typical Appearance: val'Holryn are very atypical. They tend to take on features that compliment the bloodline they inherited, i.e. those with an affinity for Nier have red hair, those for Illiir tend to be blonde, etc.

val'Inares – Pitied amongst all the Val families, woe and suffering tend to follow the val'Inares throughout their lives. Parents lose infants to crib death, fortunes are gained and lost with regularity, bright sons and daughters disappear without a trace, or some of the elderly contract a horrible, disfiguring disease. Yet, through it all, the val'Inares family perseveres and amazingly, grows stronger.

Patron Deity: Anshar

Ancestral Home: None as they are spread out throughout the central portion of the continent.

Typical Appearance: Unexpectedly beautiful in an understated manner, the typical val'Inares tends to have a light complexion with sandy colored hair.

val'Ishi – Viewed with reverence due to their association with the afterlife, the val'Ishi are treated as Holy men by the populace at large.

Patron Deity: Beltine

Ancestral Home: Centered in the city of Enpebyn in the Coryani province of Valentia

Typical Appearance: val'Ishi tend to be small in stature, with brunette-colored hair. There seems to be a hint of Khitani blood in their family characterized by the slight almond shape of their eyes.

val'Mehan – Known for their great skill in diplomacy, the val'Mehans are a glib-tongued people and are thought of as master manipulators throughout Onara. The general populace treats the val'Mehans with fearful respect, as one never knows if there is an invisible demonic bodyguard close by.

Patron Deity: Sarish

Ancestral Home: Centered in Nishanpur in Canceri.

Typical Appearance: The typical val'Mehan is tall and barrel-chested with a severe countenance. They usually have jet-black hair although most males shave their heads.

val'Mordane – Surrounded by an air of death, most give the val'Mordanes a wide berth. Strangely, there seems to be a slight schism in the family as the val'Mordane of the north tends to be very introspective and isolationist while those of the south are militant and expansionistic.

Patron Deity: Neroth

Ancestral Home: In the south, the city of Abessios while in the north, it is centered upon the ancient city of Vintaka.

Typical Appearance: val'Mordane from the south are tall and muscular, with a copper bronze tan due to the unrelenting sun, while those in the north are sallow skinned and sickly looking.

val'Ossan – The val'Ossan family is considered to be a noble if slightly aloof people. They enjoy being near the ocean and become introverted if away from a body of water for too long. It is rumored that the val'Ossan are amphibious and spend as much time below the waves as above it. The val'Ossan make little comment about these allegations.

Patron Deity: Yarris

Ancestral Home: The duchy and city of Naeraanth in Milandir.

Typical Appearance: Tall and regal looking, the val'Ossans tend to have raven hair and piercing blue eyes.

val'Sheem – val'Sheems are a hedonistic and passionate people. Extroverted to the extreme, they are famous for their quick wits, their winning smiles, and their unsurpassed endurance while imbibing.

Patron Deity: Larissa

Ancestral Home: Centered around the city of Savonna, in the Coryani province of Cafela.

Typical Appearance: val'Sheem men are typically tall, dark, and handsome, while the women radiate sensuality and are known as the most beautiful women on the continent.

val'Tensen – This noble family has a reputation for not suffering fools lightly. It is a rare sight indeed to see a val'Tensen laugh heartily as these somber people value stoicism above all things. val'Tensen tend to be very even-tempered and are slow to anger, but when they do, they are like a living tempest and a whirlwind of vengeance.

Patron Deity: Hurrian

Ancestral Home: The ancestral home of the val'Tensen is split between the Coryani province of Ulfila and the Milandiran duchy of Moratavia, a sore spot for both sides of the clan.

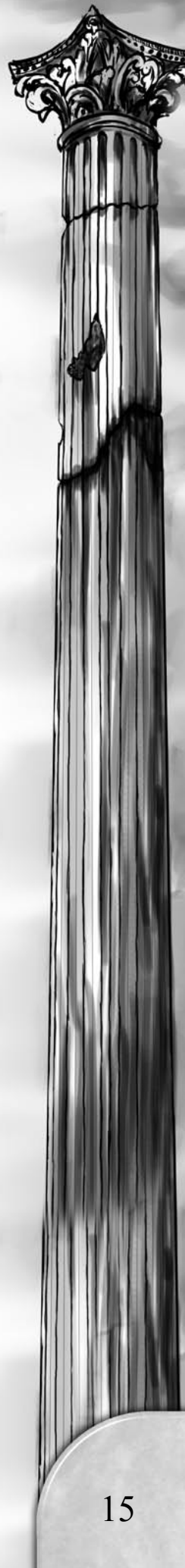
Typical Appearance: The most prominent feature of a val'Tensen is their hawkish nose. They refer to it as a proud profile. Hair color tends towards gray to shades of silver.

val'Virdan – Renown for their reputation as fierce and incomparable warriors, val'Virdan strive everyday to live up to this reputation. Contrary to the popular notion that the val'Virdan family has a mercurial disposition that causes them to react rashly, they are actually quite adept at complex strategies and know the value of patience.

Patron Deity: Nier

Ancestral Home: The northern portion of Canceri, nestled against Nier's Spine.

Typical Appearance: val'Virdan tend to have bright red hair and a ruddy appearance. Years of required military service shape them into lean, muscular instruments of Nier's will.



Timeline

The following timeline is intended to be an overview of the major events across Onara and is not exhaustive. Many of the events detailed below are not known by the majority of the inhabitants of the world with the exception of the rare Elorii that has lived for millennia.

The dates of this timeline are based off of the Coryani calendar, which begins the Modern Age with the raising of the Wall of the Gods. I.C. stands for Imperial Calendar.

Other calendars, such as the one used by the Khitani start at different periods of time.

All dates before the founding of the Coryani Empire are approximate at best.

- 7000 Ssethregoran Empire at its apex of power.
- 6000 Elorii become servants of the Ssethregoran Empire.
- 5738 Ssethregoran Empire is cast down by the Elorii.
- 5710 Elorii city of Belestor founded on the ruins of the Ssethregoran capitol.
- 5480 Return of Ssethregoran army and subsequent defeat.
- 3800 Arrival of the Other and His followers to the shores of Onara.
- The Pantheon and humanity soon follow.
- 3790 The “death” of the Elorii Elemental Lords.
- The Banishment of the Other.
- The downfall of the Elorii Empire.
- 3760 First Imperium established. First City built upon the ruins of Belestor.
- 2870 Decline of the First Imperium into decadence.
- 1800 Exodus of the Khitani to the northwest portion of Onara.
- Overthrow of the First Imperium by Leonydes val’Virdan.
- The establishment of the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame.
- Arrival of the Sorcerer-King to Arcanis.
- 1770 The defeat of Leonydes val’Virdan, the Sword of the Heavens, on the plains of Nishanpur.
- Shadowed Age, also known as the Time of Darkness, begins.

- 1740 Illiir curses the Dwarves.
- 1700 Founding of Mandragore.
- 1660 Myrantian Hegemony founded.
- 1400 Myrantian – Eryunell War.
- Myrantis sinks into the swamp.
- Destruction of Mandragore.
- 1398 The Founding of Ymandragore upon the ruins of Mandragore.
- 900 Founding of the City-State of Whon.
- 750 Founding of the League of Princes.
- 730-380 Rise and fall of the Axunite Empire.
- 317 Foundation of the Milandisian League.
- 187-120 Rise and fall of the Tenecian Empire.
- 120 1st Gift of Althares given. Floating City of Khafré.
- 35 Time of Terror begins.
- 32-0 1st Crusade of Light begun by the First Emperor.
- 0 Rising of the Wall of the God’s.
- Founding of the Coryani Empire.
- 4 I.C. Establishment of the Mother Church of Coryan.
- 42 I.C. New city of Coryan founded.
- 58-62 I.C. The Deliverance of Abessios.
- 78 I.C. First City rediscovered by the Emerald Society.
- 374 I.C. Nierites Exiled from the Coryani Empire.
- 376 I.C. Founding of Censure and the Great Trade Route.
- 398 I.C. 1st Khitani-Coryani War.
- 428 I.C. 2nd Gift of Althares.
- 430 I.C. Conquest of the city of Altheria by the Coryani Empire.
- 536-538 I.C. Coryani-Ymandragore War.
- 764-806 I.C. Second Khitani-Coryani War.
- 767 I.C. Becherek Heresy.
- Canceri Insurrection.
- 803 I.C. Milandir secedes.
- 804 I.C. City of Sicaris founded.
- 805 I.C. Altheria secedes.
- 984-1012 I.C. Heretic War between Milandir and Canceri.
- 1023 I.C. Milandir-Coryani Conflict.
- 1024 I.C. Current year.



The Mighty Coryani Empire

The Centurion plunged his gladius into the last of the Sarishan slavers. The Cancerian's eyes glazed over before he could finish the incantation summoning whatever hellish beast waited beyond the veil.

Chest heaving, he sought to assuage the burning in his lungs. The battle had been fierce but brief as well as totally reckless. Yet the Centurion could not have just turned a blind eye to this.

"It was a matter of duty and honor," he muttered grimly. His grimace turned to a self-deprecating smirk; "It's always a matter of duty and honor."

Turning towards the children, he called them together. "Gather close to me and do as I say. Other Sarishans will soon come around to investigate. We'll need to be far from here before then."

The children stared at him through wide eyes. Not understanding what they were transfixed by, he looked down and saw a red strain on his side slowly expanding. With a final look at the children, all went black.

A cool damp sensation awakened him. He discovered he was in a small hovel being tended to by the eldest of the children. A quick glance at his wound showed that it had been bound with a makeshift bandage.

"Very resourceful of you." He weakly tussled the young boy's hair and smiled. "Resourcefulness is a Coryani virtue. Well done."

The boy looked down at the Centurion. The small group of children squatted all around and hung on his every word. They all wore the same expression of fascination mixed with fear; fascination at seeing an actual Coryani Centurion, and the fear of reprisals from their wicked taskmasters, the Canceri.

"But we are not Coryani, Centurion. We are just slaves, laboring for the glory of our Sarishan masters." The boy's words were matter-of-fact, but the Centurion could hear the undertones of hope in them.

"When I came across your small group working on this damnable Red March, I was offended to see that the Sarishans would use children as slave labor." Tenderly gripping the boy's jaw, the Centurion turned it from side to side. "But one look at those blonde locks and that noble profile and I knew that you were of Coryani stock."

With some discomfort, the Centurion struggled to get to a sitting position without undoing his bandage. "And my son, no Coryani man, legionnaire or not, would suffer to see his countrymen in chains. For duty and honor." Smiling, he met the children's gaze. "In this case, it is both."

The children looked aghast. "No, please. Do not take us. We were born into our lot. If we try and turn against our masters, they will send their demons and monsters to devour us. Please! We are not worth your trouble!"

The Centurion's face hardened. His next words were said softly yet carried clearly into each of the children's ears. "Whether you are Coryani-born or not is not the issue here. The Gods teach us that all men carry within them a noble seed that cries for freedom and yearns to live each day with vigor and passion. A face should be turned up to feel the warm rays of the sun or the joy of a light rain shower, not fixed upon the ground with only the ache of your back to let you know you are alive."

He tapped the child on his chest lightly as he looked at each child in turn. "If you have that in your hearts, children, then you are Coryani. And as Coryani, I will see you home to safety."

Trying to lighten the tense mood, his next words were said in a flippant tone. "Or is it that you fear the Temple instructors more than you do your taskmasters here?" He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Between us, I'm not sure what I would rather face; a horde of drunken Yhing-heer spoiling for a fight or the stern rod of my teacher at the Temple of Althares in Plexus."

The children's laughter brought a smile to the battle-scarred warrior's face. But the laughter soon turned into a barrage of questions by the inquisitive children.

"Don't the Coryani have slaves?"

"Is it true that the first Emperor made the Wall of the Gods?"

"Can anyone be a Centurion?"

"Is Coryan truly the center of the world?"

"What about the great games that take place in the Grand Arena?"

Holding both hands up, the Centurion feigned surrender. "So many questions from my young wards. I will answer them all, but first let's start moving out of this hiding hole you've placed me in. It's a long march to the Milandisian border."

It was not until dawn broke upon the firmament that the Centurion paused to give the children a rest from their trek. They had made good time and had put quite a few miles between them and the slaver's quarters where he had found them.

The children patiently waited for him to wet his lips from his wine skin. After a brief swig, he passed it to the nearest child. "Naeraanthian wine. Not as tasty as that from Sweet Savona, but it'll slake your thirst just as well. And while you rest, I'll tell you about your glorious heritage and the great sacrifice made by our first Emperor."

The Founding of the Empire

"Before the Time of Terror, the many cities that now make up the Empire were isolated and contentious. Communications between the many City-States of the former First Imperium were almost non-existent. The few attempts to form alliances were met with suspicion and outright hostility. So when the Gates of the Infernal spewed forth its blasphemous issue, Mankind was ill prepared and appeared marked for extinction.

"The small City-State of Coryan was no exception. Its leaders were shortsighted and timid men who received what they deserved at the hands of these horrors. All except for one man. Our beloved First Emperor."

"What was his name?"

"That blessed name is lost to time now. Who he was and what he did in Coryan before the Infernal came is unknown. That he was a great leader and a paragon among men is without question. Only a man with those qualities could have performed the miracles he did.

"That is why he was the first Soldier-Saint anointed by the Holy Patriarch as well as the father of our mighty Empire. But, I am getting ahead of myself. First he had to beat back the tide of evil that washed over us and forge the greatest nation since the First Imperium.

"The exact details are not known. Remember that this happened over one thousand years ago. What is known is that the Emperor rallied the greatest of Coryan to his side and in a brief but brutal battle swept the streets of Coryan clean of the Infernal creatures.

"That evening after securing the city, a golden glow filled the night sky and a Valinor of Illiir descended from the Heavens. He held in one hand a gladius that radiated with the purest of light and in the other, a battle standard from the First Imperium.

"With a voice as soft as the flutter of a falcon's wings he spoke and was heard by every person in the city.

"He said, 'The fulfillment of the Gods' will begins this night. Millennia ago the Golden Age of Man as decreed by the Pantheon fell. Tonight, you have beaten back the dark night of evil and have been deemed worthy to once again enter Paradise.'

"He extended the gladius and said, 'Take this, our Lord's sacred arm, and cut down those who would drag you down into despair and darkness. Let its light illuminate the barbarism that shrouds humanity and bring the warmth of brotherhood.'

"He then extended the standard and said, 'Take this, the battle standard of the First Imperium's finest Legion, and let it and the others that will follow defend this Empire from all who would do it harm.'

"The Emperor took the gladius from the Valinor and girded it at his side. He then took the standard and with but a few solemn words reestablished the Legion of Vigilance.

"The Emperor and the 'found' Legion of Vigilance rode off the next morning to the nearest City-State and offered them brotherhood and safety.

"The Emperor spoke the *Pact* that he would utter so many countless times over the next thirty-odd years: 'I will rid your city of the Infernal and offer to you the hand of friendship. Join us in the making of a mighty Empire and help us rid Onara of this scourge that so plagues our people.'

"Time after time, year after year, the Emperor spoke the Pact and his ranks swelled to huge proportions. The standards of some of the Ancient Legions were found along the way and were remade. A huge host swept northward spreading the word of Illiir and the promise of brotherhood, freeing city after city from the Infernal yoke. Victory became commonplace and the impossible a minor inconvenience.

"Until they reached the Blasted Plain.

"Until they reached the End of Hope.

The Battle of Hope's End

"For thirty-two years, the Emperor and his forces had defeated the Infernal, destroying all who stood before their forces or striking such fear in them that they fled rather than face him.

"As the host of Legions fought northward, so did the Infernal scamper to hide from the light of Illiir's blade. Though cowardly when alone, these beasts grew confident when joined by others of their ilk. So it was that they decided to make their last stand on the Blasted Plains, one hundred thousand strong and desperate for victory. Lead

by the immense Devil, Uhxbractit, whose very breath reeked of poisonous sulfur, they awaited Coryan's Legions.

"When the Emperor's host crested the broken cliffs above the Blasted Plains and gazed upon the vast army arrayed against him, he quickly assessed the chances of success.

"Speaking to Almeric val'Assante', first general of the Legion of Vigilance and his confidant since this odyssey began, he said quietly, 'We cannot win through force of arms. Though these men who follow us are the bravest the world has ever seen, I will not spill their blood needlessly nor send their souls to Beltine before their time.

"With the first rays of Illiir's light, I will go down alone and see if victory can be stolen through guile rather than paid for by blood.'

"At dawn, the Emperor rode down alone to the middle of the plain. Uhxbractit, the Devil general, was puzzled by the human's actions and strode out to meet with him alone also.

"What was said between the two will never be known. What is known is that the Emperor shouted back to the Legions, 'Let none interfere with what is to follow, for I have bargained with the Devil and have stolen for us a chance. Should Uhxbractit fall to me, the Infernal Horde will go back to the many Hells from whence they came.'"

"And what if the Devil should win?"

The Centurion looked at the child in amused surprise. "No one asked. He was not only our Emperor, he was Coryani; and Coryani never fail when the stakes are so high.

"From the written accounts by the famous poet-warrior, Evansol val'Sheem, the battle between the two titans lasted for eight days and eight nights with neither combatant giving nor gaining ground during the time in between. The blows from our Emperor's elegant gladius against the Devil's vulgar Axe-Cleaver weapon were deafening, the sparks, blinding. But where one fought with the desperation fed by its own cowardice, the other battled with passion and conviction.

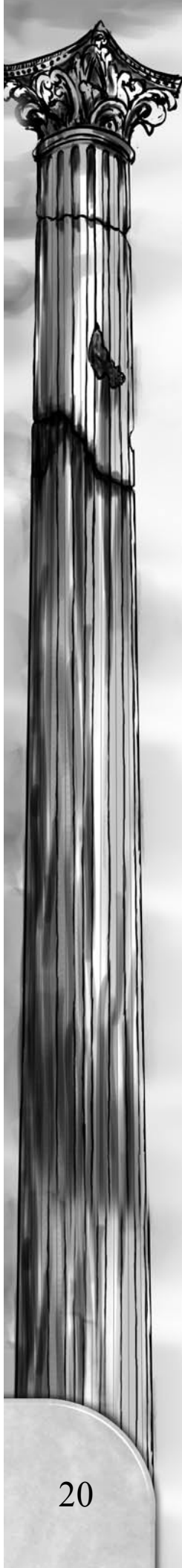
"From whence the poison dart came was unknown. That it was seen by the eagle-eyed Yolim val'Tensen, of the Legion of the Reluctant Warrior, assured that the treachery would not go unanswered. With a mighty roar, the Legions rushed downward as the Emperor struggled to fend off the savage fiend's attacks. Seeing that the humans rushed forward, the Infernal Hordes did also.



"As night fell, the two forces pulled their leaders aside and regrouped to their respective camps to await the coming dawn and the final battle.

"The poison coursing through his veins, the Emperor was laid upon his cloak and made as comfortable as possible. His closest friends and





confidants came to stay by his side during his last hours, yet he did not speak to them, but rather prayed to the Gods.

“For hours, he beseeched them, saying the same prayer endlessly, ‘Let not my weakness condemn your children to an eternity of darkness. Let not our sacrifice have been in vain.’

“The Emperor hung on to life as a drowning man clings to a bit of flotsam; The poison destroying his body inch by inch, so that by the time dawn rose, only his eyes and lips could move by their own volition.

“As the first rays of the Sun broke the horizon, a savage growl ripped from the Infernal army, assured of their victory now that the human’s leader had fallen.

“But that cheer was suddenly silenced as a low rumbling quickly rose in pitch and hue. The very ground shook and roiled like the frothing ocean during one of Yarris’ angry fits. Yawning pits broke open under the demonic horde, swallowing many of them whole, while in other places, the gigantic pieces of jagged rock ripped through the plain’s pristine landscape.

“Worried that they might also fall prey to the earth’s fury, the Legions pulled back to a safe distance, taking their dying Emperor with them.

“The groaning and shaking of the earth was not stilled until dawn the next morning. When the sun rose full into the morning sky, a huge mountain range stood where before only flat plains existed. Of the Infernal horde, there was no sign.

“A great cheer went up throughout the Legions as the significance of the event began to sink in. The crusade was over. The Empire was safe. They had won!

“The generals of the great legions did not join in the cheers and jubilations. They knelt by their friend and Emperor’s side and heard his last words to them. ‘The Empire is safe. The Gods have answered our pleas. Let this be the northernmost extent of our Empire. Beyond is hope’s end.’ He laid a hand upon Almeric val’Assante’s arm. ‘Protect our people and prove worthy of the Gods’ gift to us.’

“With that, the Emperor’s body shook slightly and he passed on. Yet so beloved was he by the Gods that Illiir sent down His Valinor to gather him up and take him to Heaven to be by His side.”

“With heavy heart, Almeric val’Assante’, the second Emperor of the Coryani Empire, rode back to Coryan to begin the arduous task of consolidating the Empire.”

The Emergence of the Mother Church

After the fall of the First Imperium and the subsequent implosion of the short-lived Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame, the Pantheistic Church was forgotten.

During the Imperium, each city, though Pantheistic, had a patron God that watched and cared over it. After the Fall, the citizens of a particular city began praying to their patron deity more and more, until, over the years, the Pantheon was all but forgotten. The Pantheistic priests became the priests of the Patron God, evoking only those rituals and services to the exclusion of the others.

During the 1st Crusade of Light, as it was later called, the First Emperor’s troops not only fought back the Infernal, but also began to learn and exchange ideas between the different cities liberated. A priest of Illiir, Vesiti val’Assante’ began reconstructing the rites and rituals of the Pantheon, much to the First Emperor’s approval.

When Almeric val’Assante’ returned to Coryan, he appointed Vesiti Patriarch of the Mother Church and tasked him to reestablish the old Pantheistic religion as it was during the Imperium. Though Vesiti was cousin to Almeric and accusations of nepotism were whispered, he was the best person suited for the job. Astute, clear-headed, and vigorous, Vesiti set out to do his Emperor’s bidding.

First, he called to Coryan the high priests of the different cities to confer upon doctrine and dogma. Vesiti listened for weeks on end about the different tenets used by the priests throughout the fledgling Coryani Empire. These doctrines and belief systems seemed to oppose and contradict each other as much as they agreed.

Just as difficult were the clashing personalities of the high priests. These men and women were all highly intelligent and passionate about their beliefs. Many feared that the reinstatement of a Pantheon would marginalize or lessen the importance of their God. Most argumentative of this contentious lot was Hiraksu val’Ishi, High Priest of Beltine, spiritual leader from Enpebyn, City of Weeping Souls.

Hiraksu val’Ishi argued that the actions of the val’Mordanes from the North were barbaric and blasphemous and that their God, Neroth, should be banned from the Pantheon. Neroth, he explained, was Beltine’s consort and a minor godling whose domain was the protection of the body as the vessel of the soul. Once the soul departed, the vessel was like an empty water urn, useless and a burden. To raise the body after the soul departed was obviously blasphemous and therefore of the Infernal.

Nephasser val'Mordane, rumored to be an undead being himself, laughed heartily at these accusations. In an unforgettable speech that was both passionate and eloquent, he reminded his colleague that Beltine was Neroth's wife in the Pantheon, not her consort, and quoted the ancient text from *The Illuminated Perfection, the Codification of the Teachings of Illiir, VIIth Scroll*, "Give unto every God His due." The soul was indeed Beltine's, but the body and intellect after death was Neroth's.

Vesiti's head spun as speech after speech made it clear that the leaders of the different churches were loath to give up their prestige and position within society for the sake of reinstating the First Imperium's religious doctrine. The task seemed doubly unlikely when the religious beliefs of other areas, such as that of the Myrastian Hegemony to the south, were taken into account.

During the evening, after an especially raucous day of religious zealots pointing fingers and levying accusations at each other, Vesiti was awakened by a golden glow that washed in through his window. Though he did not hear a sound nor see anyone before him, he felt the presence of Illiir calming him and soothing his troubled soul. In a moment of perfect clarity, Vesiti val'Assante knew what he must do.

The Convocation of the Divine

Vesiti proposed a compromise to the assembled clergy. All the Gods were considered equally worthy of worship in the eyes of the Mother Church, but the hierarchy of the First Imperium would be followed as a model. None of the priesthoods would be abolished in favor of an all encompassing one, but remain as they were.

A council of twelve Pyrmes, one chosen from each of the priesthoods of a particular God, would elect a new Patriarch upon the death of the previous one from within their ranks.

Each city would have a high priest and a body of priests to serve the spiritual needs of the populace. If a given populace worshipped more than one God, then multiple churches would be erected and the clergy would work together to administer to the faithful. Above them a Prelate would deal with the needs of a region, while an Arch-Prelate, appointed by the Patriarch, would coordinate all the priesthoods of a given Province.

This simple, yet elegant system seemed to address most of the greatest points of contention including the semi-autonomy of the different priesthoods under the administrative eye of the Mother Church.

Another consideration was the agreement that any and all priests of the Pantheon were allowed to proselytize to the populace without fear of recrimination or persecution.

In exchange for this concession, the twelve churches represented in this conclave would have the authority to decide what the doctrine and dogma for their respective Gods were and what was considered heretical. This last concession would be the cause of great consternation and sorrow in the years to come for the Mother Church.

After a short debate, the Convocation of the Divine, conceptual foundation for the Mother Church, was agreed upon. The brevity of the discussion was due, no doubt, to the absence of Hiraksu val'Ishi, who had fallen gravely ill during the evening. His passing was a great loss to all the clergy assembled.

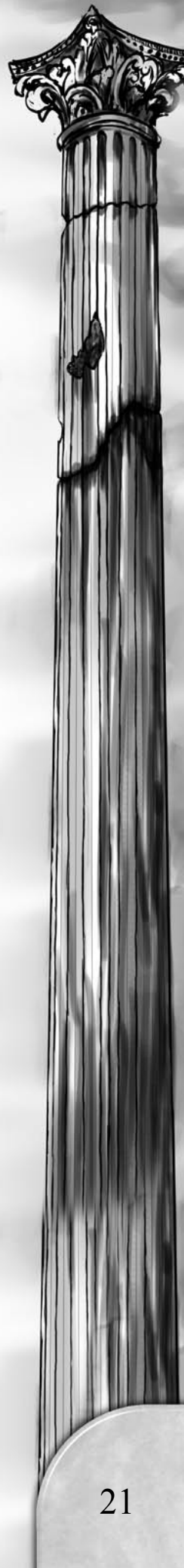
It was also concluded that the two greatest threats to the spiritual body of the Coryani people were the remnants of any Infernal Cults that lingered from the Time of Terror and Heretical Cults throughout the Empire. How correct their conclusions were would be discovered less than three generations later.

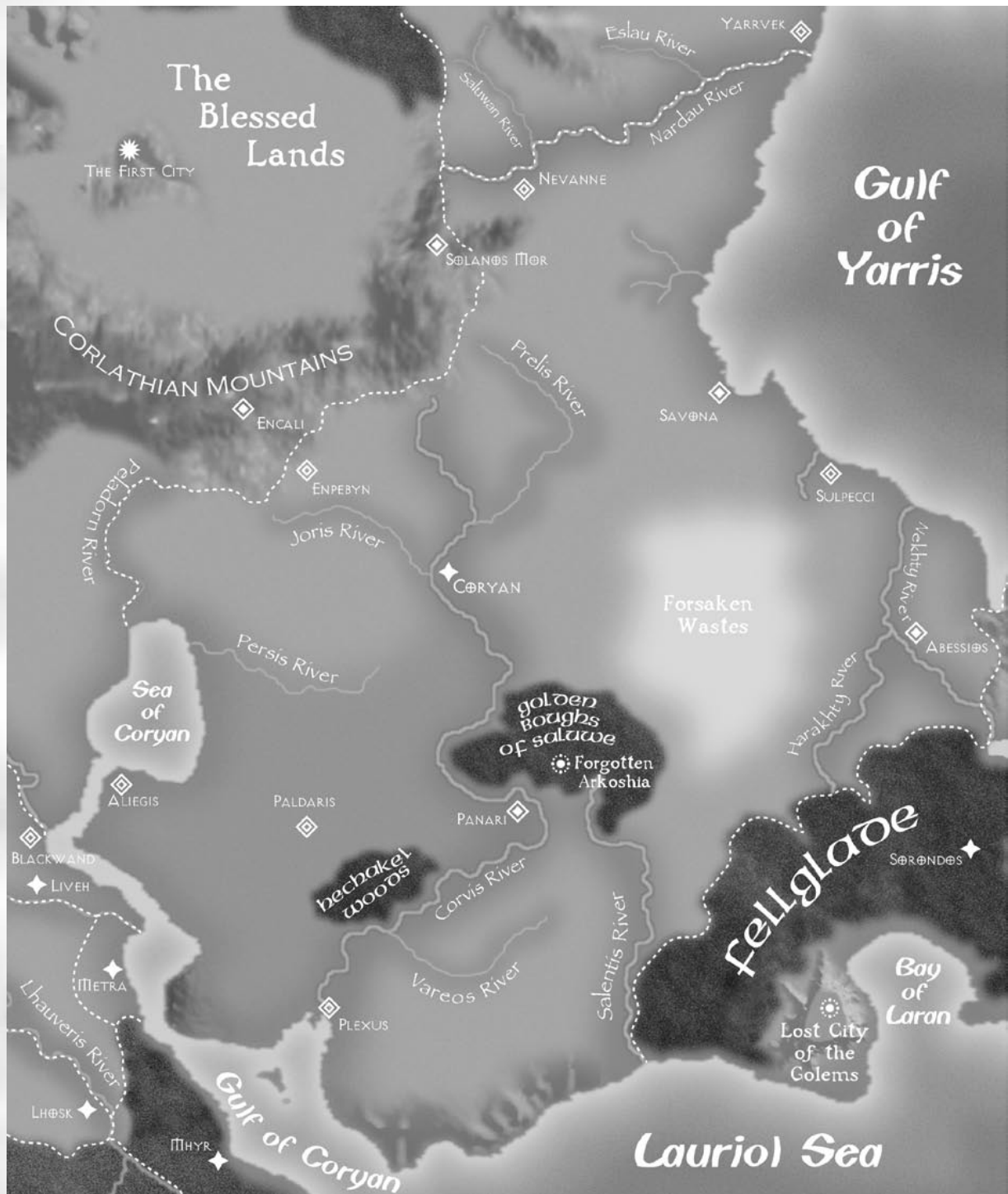
A concerted effort to find sacred texts and artifacts that had been lost throughout the centuries was also made by the Conclave. Any found would be immediately returned to Coryan for study and its eventual display for all the citizens of the Empire. To this end, an agency was created, answerable only to the Council of Pyrmes and the Patriarch, and charged with the discovery and subsequent extraction of these relics.

By this edict the Emerald Society was founded and exists even to the present day. Although now only marginally associated with the Mother Church, it still performs its function in the discovery and acquisition of not just holy relics, but artifacts mundane and arcane.

It was members of the Emerald Society that rediscovered the First City, whose location and even existence was lost since the Shadowed Age and largely considered mythical. News of this find caused great excitement throughout the halls of the Temple of the Pantheon, the recently completed Cathedral of the Mother Church, as well as throughout Coryan itself. Ancient legends and fables told of the First City ignited the imagination and fueled the devoutness of the faithful.

Decades of exploration across the Badlands revealed new wonders from that mythic age. Twelve holy sites or shrines were uncovered in the region, one for each of the Gods. In a rare





secular decree, the Patriarch, with the Emperor's consent, renamed the Badlands, the Blessed Lands.

Over the centuries, countless faithful have undertaken the perilous trek, under the auspices of the Mother Church, to each of these Holy sites. Once in a lifetime, a true believer is expected to journey to these Holy shrines and receive their blessings. The pilgrimage concludes when the devotee takes a small stone from the ruins of the Temple of the Pantheon inside the First City itself.

The Cult of the Thousand-Eyed Man

During the reign of the fourth Emperor, Eladru val'Assante', "the Divine Architect," a general uprising in the cities of Kofan, Nagar, and Panari in the Balantican Province sparked a firestorm of fear throughout the Empire.

Overnight and simultaneously, the three cities' governmental and religious officials were captured and sacrificed to a heretofore unknown Infernal Lord known as the Thousand-Eyed Man.



Gruesome public ritual torture preceded a horrific death by impalement of any citizen who did not swear their souls to the hoary Devil.

Most unsettling was the betrayal of the legion stationed in Kofan, the Legion of the Might of the Empire, comprised of followers of Hurrian, thought to be completely incorruptible. To this day, the descendents of those legionnaires strive to undo this great blemish to their families' honor by performing the greatest feats of heroism and valor the Empire as ever seen. To this day, no Emperor has rescinded the stigma the original legion earned that day, the changing of their legion's title from the Might of the Empire to the Legion of the Accursed.

No less than five full legions, led by the Legion of Vigilance and an entire cadre of Nierite Inquisitors, whose ranks were swollen by the conscription of Sarishan priests, were sent to these rebellious cities.

What was found there horrified even the most hardened amongst them. City streets garnished with the broken bodies of citizens. Street gutters slick with the blood that had flowed from the mutilated carcasses that rotted in the warm day. Atrocities upon atrocities were seen by the legionnaires, each worse than the one before, but each with one commonality; the absence of the victim's eyes.

Within days, Nagar and Panari were retaken and Coryani order re-established. Brutal fighting took place as the frenzied cultists gave up each inch of their territory dearly. Many heretics were cleansed by the flaming crucible of Nier that day as well as the multitude of Infernal that were bound and castigated by Sarishan priests. Finally, the leaders of the cult were rounded up and beheaded. Surprisingly, many of these cultists were not just deranged and depraved flotsam at the edge of society, but nobles from the Val families that ruled the area for centuries. These members were declared Mandir (outcast in Ancient Altharin), as the nobility attempted to quickly separate themselves from the shame their cousins had indulged in.

The greatest outrage of all came when the assembled legions and inquisitors entered the city of Kofan. As they arrived, no screams of battle were heard, the stench of Hell did not assail their nostrils, nor did they see any of the horrific sights that had greeted them in Nagar or Panari. Nothing moved in Kofan. Nothing stirred. Even the wind seemed timid and frightened.

The Coryani marched into a city that once held over ten thousand souls, yet now was as quiet as the necropolis at Ventaka. Leaving the bulk of their troops to establish a defensible perimeter in case this should be an elaborate ruse, the heads of the legions and inquisitors stormed into the Governor's Palace in the city's center. Again, no one attempted to bar their way.

When the leaders returned a few hours later, they were blanched and unnerved. They reported that like the rest of the city, the palace was empty. No sign of the cities inhabitants were found except for what was found in the governor's audience hall. There, perfectly arranged in bizarre diabolic sigils were ten thousand sets of eyeballs, staring unblinking at the legionnaires as they entered. The walls were smeared with blood, leaving a message addressed to the Patriarch by name.

What it said was taken to the graves by those few who entered the audience hall. It is curious to note, however, that the Patriarch cancelled all public appearances from that day on and a Sarishan Pyreman was quickly appointed as his successor.

Before riding out, the Coryani general of the Legion of the Cleansing Flame, visibly shaken, gave one last order before leaving Kofan. "Burn it to the ground," he said in hushed tones, "all of it!" Although Nagar and Panari were restored and are thriving hubs to this day, Kofan was never rebuilt. A black ashen patch, miles long, overlooking the Straits of Coryan is all that remains of that benighted city.

The Yarric Heresy

The worship of Yarris, God of the Seas, was codified by the val'Ossan family and the ancient Milandisian priesthood as prescribed by the Convocation of the Divine. The practices of the Yarric church up and down the east coast of the Coryani Empire thus became dogma and were duly sanctified by the Mother Church.

Unfortunately, these same practices did not hold for religious beliefs in the far south. There, in the newly enlightened province of Salantis, it was discovered by the priests of Saluwe' that something was greatly amiss.

In a hoarse, croaking voice, the elder of the benighted fishermen of the province, explained that Yarris existed long before the coming of the Pantheon and was outside and above it. It was also learned from the batrachian-looking elder that the Valinor of Yarris now were not his original messengers. The pre-God War Valinor were of the deep and often came on the dark of the moons to educate and have congress with the villagers.

It was this devout worship, untainted by outsiders, which allowed his people to prosper where other villages nearby could not. In his hubris, the elder lead the stunned priests down the rocky walls of the cove to where the dark waters lapped endlessly against the craggy coral reefs. There, carved into the wall were a series of craven stone idols of a Yarris. The first was crudely sculpted, yet still recognizable as the Sea God, but each successive one was more and more bizarre, until the last was wholly alien.

Fearful that they would be sacrificed, the Saluwean priests complimented the elder on the fine likeness of the Sea God and quickly left the village.

As soon as they were able, couriers bearing scrolls describing what they had seen were sent back to Coryan and the especially to the General of the Nierite legion, The Legion of the Cleansing Flame. Over the years, this legion's zealous and some would say obsessive adherence to Church Dogma elevated them in the eyes of the Patriarch. Such was their passion in ferreting out

dangers to the Mother Church that the Patriarch took them as his personal honor guard and, by extension, the Church's the strong arm.

Once again, Inquisitors were sent to investigate the provincials' heretical practices and to determine the best course of action. The church of Yarris in Naeraanth also demanded that they be allowed to send representatives to establish idolatry of an Elemental being or, worse yet, an Infernal.

After vigorous questioning, the surviving elders confessed their sacrilegious practices before the assembled populace, denouncing their version of Yarris to be false and infidelic. This public display of the orthodoxy's might culminated with a procession down to the rocky shoals and the destruction of the idols.

Satisfied that the populace had been enlightened, the Legion of the Cleansing Flame retired to Coryan leaving the Naeraanthian priests of Yarris to administer to their spiritual needs.

The populace, properly cowed, listened attentively to the priests until the darkening of the twin moons. That evening, *something* came in on the high tide; *something* that tore and clawed and gnawed at the good Yarric priests and their converted flock.

One surviving priest babbled of the fish men that came out of the ocean, delivering their children back to the safety of the deep. Those who stood against them fell as wheat before their webbed talons and needle-like teeth. He alone was spared, he said, so that the Word of Yarris could be heard. With each successive syllable, unfortunately, his speech slurred and his mouth frothed as a man possessed.

The surviving priest was taken to the bleak, fortified towers of Morilon, where priests of Neroth care for those with brain fevers. There he died on the following darkening of the moons. Curiously enough, when the Nerothian priests examined him, it was determined that he had drowned. Curious because he was in a windowless cell, hundreds of feet above ground and miles away from any body of water.

Tragedy and Triumph

For over a millennia, the Mother Church of Coryan has nurtured and cared for the spiritual needs of the people of the Empire. Its many charitable deeds, from the care of the infirm to protection from the ever-present threat of the Infernal, have given Imperial Citizens throughout the Empire a sense of security and comfort during trying times.



But the years have not always smiled favorably upon the Mother Church. The Gods have tasked the clergy throughout the centuries with arduous and perilous events to test their devoutness and resolve.

During the reign of Emperor Marellius val'Assante', an assassination attempt conceived by the black heart of a Nierite General cost the Empire its kindest and most beloved Patriarch and the Mother Church the aid of its right arm. Having conspired to rid the Empire of both its leaders, the General of the Legion of the Cleansing Flame, Erdul val'Virdan, conspired to return the tyranny that was the theocracy of Nier, responsible for the downfall of the First Imperium.

Although thwarted by a valiant cadre of the Legion of Vigilance, the damage was done. When matters were finally sorted, the Patriarch, Hulantin val'Assante', was dead, the General executed, the Legion disbanded and the followers of Nier rounded up and exiled to the furthest corner of the Empire, the Gods-forsaken province of Canceri.

The fracturing of the Church did not end there. Centuries later, a madman and self-proclaimed prophet named Becherek began to foment heretical beliefs in the province of Canceri. He called for the elevation of the three gods, Neroth, Nier and Sarish, replacing Illir as the head of the Pantheon and that a Nerothian be immediately made Patriarch of the Mother Church.

Shocked by these statements and the support he was garnering, the Patriarch at the time, Hemill val'Tensen, reacted rashly. He placed the entire populace of the province under threat of excommunication, an act that would brand them heretics and strip them of their citizenship.

He then petitioned the Emperor, Quron val'Dellenov, an arguably unstable ruler, to send in the legions and bring the heretic, Becherek, back to Coryan. An entire Century of the Legion of Radiant Glory was sent to Nishanpur.

The Centurion in charge of the mission found that though he was able to arrest the apostate, the populace would not let them leave with Becherek. In an act of utter arrogance unmatched to this day, the Centurion addressed the crowd, "You wish to keep the heretic with you? So be it. Cradle the madman to your bosom, the Emperor only needs a small token of his remorse." With that, Becherek was brought out and with a quick flick of his wrist, the Centurion beheaded the Prophet and shoved the decapitated corpse into the crowd and held up the head to the stunned assembly.

Within seconds, the resolute but peaceful crowd howled in mad frenzy. One hundred legionnaires were ripped limb from limb that day. It is not known what happened to the body or head of Becherek. What is certain is that the wild dogs of Nishanpur ate well that night.

A full quarter of the Pantheon was sundered from the rest upon that fateful day. Yet the magnitude of the problem did not make itself clear immediately.

In 767 IC, days after the Becherek insurgency, the province of Canceri seceded from the Empire. A few decades later, Milandir followed, as did Altheria. Fearful that other provinces would take similar actions, especially the ever-rebellious province of Toranesta where worship of Neroth and Sarish was as fervent as in Canceri, the Emperor and Patriarch conferred to stem the tide of insurrection. Emperor Gorvaticus val'Assante' who ascended the Alabaster Throne after the assassination of the mad Quron val'Dellenov, announced that the edict proscribing the worship of the Neroth and Sarish was lifted.

Great efforts were made to promote goodwill with those worshippers, even to the point of appointing a Nerothian Arch-Prelate to the Toranesta province. Finally, the rumblings of secession were quelled and the Empire held together.

This act was of vital importance as far as the Mother Church was concerned. A prophecy was discovered in an ancient shrine to Larissa in the First City that was later verified by the Oracle of Savona, the venerable prophetess Vanya val'Sheem.

In it, the prophecy states, "*a falcon, wounded and torn would not stand before the deafening Quiet that was to herald the End Times.*" The Golden Falcon of Illir was the symbol of the Coryani Empire and its meaning, at least in part, was clear.

Other prophecies, such as those on the XVth Holy Scroll of Lanfallen, a translation and transcription of a portion of the Crypt of Memories in the First City, have guided the Mother Church and the Empire through many perilous times.

One passage in particular has triggered not one, but two wars of unprecedented magnitude with the Khitani Empire. *He who sits upon the Throne of Man shall rule all of Man.* Other translations of the same text adds, *He who sits upon the Throne of Man, consecrated by the Hierophant, shall rule all of Man.* Regardless of which version is adhered to, the meaning is clear; the Khitani can never take the First City. A man must rule over man, not their alien ruler, the Sleeping Emperor, Ruler of Khitan.

"Wars without End...Amen"

"Tell us about all the wars you've fought," asked the eldest boy eagerly. "No, tell us about all the wars."

"Our masters say that all the Coryani know is war and conquest, so that your brothels overflow with the young flesh of the vanquished." This last question came from a young girl who up to this point had not whispered a word.

Stunned by the resentment in her voice and the cynicism in her eyes, the Centurion paused and chose his words carefully.

Motioning her forward, he spoke to her in a firm yet soft voice. "Child, they are not your masters. They are very evil men who stole your heritage from you. Know their words for what they are; propaganda of the vilest sort that would turn child against parent.

"We Coryani," he spread his arms to encompass all of them, "fight because we have no choice. To stop fighting, to surrender to the will of others is to heap disgrace upon the sacrifices our ancestors made to give us the life we now lead, full of wonder and glory.

"It is our duty to go to all the lands of man and spread the joy of civilization and the enlightenment of our honorable rule. Under the banner of the Empire, all citizens are protected by our just laws and know a standard of life that is without equal across Onara.

"So it was when we met the leaders of the Myrانتian Hegemony and saw them for the vile monsters they were. It was our duty to free the people from the tyranny they lived under."

The Deliverance of Abessios

"During the founding of the Empire, our First Emperor's crusade took him northward until he reached the farthest reaches of Canceri. South of the Empire was another nation which called itself the Myrانتian Hegemony, taking its name from its lost capitol, Myrantis, swallowed to these many years by the swamp. This empire lost many of its people during the Time of Terror, but managed to stave off the Infernal forces due, in large part, to their priesthood.

"These people worshipped a strange amalgamation of Neroth and Sarish, which they called Tzizhet, the Many-Limbed. This blasphemous God constantly required huge monuments to be erected in His honor as well as blood sacrifices made in His name.

"The rigid caste system under which these people lived perpetuated this evil practice. Under the religious caste, comprised of the val'Mordanes,

val'Mehans, and, surprisingly, the val'Inares, the military and the builders' caste were made up entirely of those deemed expendable. This last caste was used for the massive labor necessary in building the cyclopean monuments to Tzizhet.

"When these workers were too frail or injured to work in the quarries or on the ramps constructing the tombs, they were taken to the central temple, hung by their ankles, and bled into a large ceremonial basin to slake the thirst of their profane God.

"But at the time none of this was known. Having just established our Empire, we wanted nothing more than to have time to consolidate our nation and have peaceful relations with all our neighbors.

"The Myrantians, and by this I mean Abessians, as the ruling capitol was now Abessios, took our peaceful entreaties of trade and cultural exchange to mean that we were weak and free for the taking.

"How wrong they were.

"After striking out across the frontier and into our territory, the Myrantian charioteers and slave troops made to take the fair city of Sweet Savona. Shocked to see our hand of friendship so contemptuously slapped aside, we none-the-less managed to hold Savona despite their reckless attacks. Thousands of slaves perished that day, their bodies lapping flaccidly, clogging the hundreds of waterways that make up Savona's streets and byways.

"Our counterattack was as swift and strong as our rage was hot. What they perceived as a weak and young army tore through their lines like a hot knife through butter. Did they think we had not learned from fighting the Infernal for over three decades? Did they not realize that to strike at any city within the Empire was an attack upon the whole? If they thought we had no stomach for war, they were taught a swift lesson in Coryani sayings: *'Drink with me and I shall call you brother. Strike at me and you shall be no more.'*

"When our legions arrived at Abessios and crossed the Nekhty River, hundreds of slaves greeted them with cheers. The leader of these people, the Phaeron Kefrin, hid in his den, surrounded by his vile allies.

"There, at the cringing Phaeron's side, was a woman of deadly beauty, hissing while baring snake-like fangs. With but a gesture, the carpet beneath the legionnaires feet writhed and squirmed as if alive. Dozens of venomous asps and other serpents sprang from the weave and attacked. This was a desperate act, aimed at delaying the rightful retribution that the Phaeron so richly deserved.

“Quick action on the part of a young legionnaire ended this mad charade. Ignoring the vipers preparing to strike, he threw his spear with the accuracy born of many years of Coryani training and skewered the fleeing monarch to the marbled wall. The woman, unfortunately, escaped, leaving no trace as to her whereabouts.

“In honor of his quick thinking and his superb aim, the young legionnaire was allowed to present the High Crown of the Phaeron to the Emperor, adding the title of Phaeron of all the Myrantian Hegemony to his hosts of honorifics.”

The First Khitani-Coryani War

“What of the Khitani? Didn’t they almost conquer all of Coryan?”

“The Khitani are our most implacable enemy, due to the fact that we are both children of the First City. Thus when you fight a Khitani-man, you are not only fighting a soldier who yearns for your land or women, but one who fights so that his beliefs will supercede yours.

“Sometime between the fall of the First Imperium and the Shadowed Age, the Khitani fled to the Northwest region of Onara, lead, they say, by a Valinor. What God this Valinor represented is constantly being debated, but suffice it to say that it is truly a Valinor and not some deception perpetrated by the Khitani.

“The Khitani enshrined it as their ruler, calling it the Sleeping Emperor as it has the penchant to sleep for days, years, even generations at a time and then awaken to impose new edicts



or decrees. It was one such decree that almost ran our Empires to the brink of ruin.

“Declaring that the Khitani were destined to see the First City once again, the fearful hosts of the Khitani rode down in mass through the Fervidus Hills towards the Blessed Lands.

“Luckily, the Voei of the Fervidus Hills tore into the Khitani cavalry with the same vigor that they normally reserve only for us. Pilgrims to the Blessed Lands hurried back and told the legions patrolling the border of strange men adorned in golden armor riding towards the First City.

“Ordered to investigate, the Legion of the Crimson Moon rode hard through the Blessed Lands and reached the base of the mountain upon which the First City lies in time to see the Khitani scaling to the summit.

“The Khitani, who we later learned had invaded with more than fifty thousand men, had been whittled down to a mere twenty thousand by the savage Voei. Even so, they outnumbered the Legion more than twenty to one. General Idan val’Borda sent back messengers requesting reinforcements while his men used “unorthodox” tactics to harry and wear down the enemy.

“By the time reinforcements arrived, val’Borda’s men had been all but wiped out. Somehow, the legion had managed to gain the pass up the mountain and was holding the Khitani below them. The General himself was engaged in fierce combat, holding his Legion’s Standard aloft and rallying his men. Transfixed by no less than three spear shafts, General Idan val’Borda smiled through broken teeth and bloodied lips at the sight of the charging Coryani army. Handing his Legion’s Standard to a young herald, he cried out to his men, ‘For duty and honor’ and led a mad charge headlong into the Khitani heavy infantry.

“By the time the Coryani troops were able to engage the enemy, the Legion of the Crimson Moon was destroyed, but the valor evidenced by the General and his men inspired the arriving legions to new heights of bravery and boldness. Taking up the courageous general’s battle cry, the weary Khitani-men were slaughtered almost to the man.

“To this day, ‘For duty and honor’ has become the maxim of not just the legions but of Coryan itself.

“As for the Khitani, their Sleeping Emperor did not lie. They did indeed see the First City. But due to the bravery of legionnaires like Idan val’Borda, they never set foot upon its hallowed streets.”

The Childrens' Crusade: The Coryani-Ymandragore War

For countless years, the Coryani have had an understanding with the Sorcerer-King of Ymandragore. His Arcane Majesty, in exchange for defending the shores of Onara from the Infernal who still rule beyond the waves, demanded a small tithe.

The Lord of Ymandragore wanted not wealth, land, nor goods. He desired only those who possessed the "Gift;" those who could channel the arcane forces. Sorcerers and Mages had always been viewed suspect, as they manifested powers similar to those wielded by those who bartered with the Infernal. As such, the Sorcerer-King's request was viewed as not unreasonable and even beneficial.

The second Emperor, Almeric val'Assante, wisely agreed to the Lord of the Isle of Tears' request, giving Ymandragore's agents free reign throughout the Empire in the pursuit and capture of his prey. Almeric knew that his nation had to consolidate its holdings and that the last thing it needed was conflict with an ancient power.

Time passed and the Coryani waxed in power. The Ymandragoran agents continued to carry out their distasteful task unhindered until the birth of twin boys to the Empress Shar val'Assante.

Mere months after the birth of the twins, an Ordainer entered the Imperial Palace and arrogantly demanded that the babes be delivered unto him for tutelage upon Ymandragore. So great was the children's potential, that the Sorcerer-King himself had taken notice and commanded their presence upon the isle.

Aghast at the thought of her babes being taken from her and raised by some inhuman creature, the Empress refused. The Ordainer laughed, calling her an insipid sow fit only to rule over mewling babes and not an Empire. The still grinning Ordainer's head was sent back to Ymandragore with a clear message tacked upon his headdress: 'Your reign of terror is done. Neither you nor your kind will again set foot upon the shores of Coryan. You have been warned.'

Ymandragore's response was swift and decisive. The Black Fleet set sail under the dark of the twin moons and set upon the port city of Celanto on the Verdant Coast with all the viciousness of a ravenous wolf. By the time the sun's first rays lit its resplendent towers, Celanto was littered with corpses of hundreds of its citizens. Undaunted and unopposed, the forces of Ymandragore marched directly for mighty Coryan itself.

News traveled quickly to the capitol, throwing it into complete chaos. Out of the swirling cacophony of voices, one spoke clearly and confidently. Senator Palic val'Holryn cut through the panicking mob of sycophants and knelt before the Empress. In characteristic Milandisian brevity, he stated matter-of-factly, "Your Majesty, give me command of the legions and the Ymandrakes will be swept from our lands."

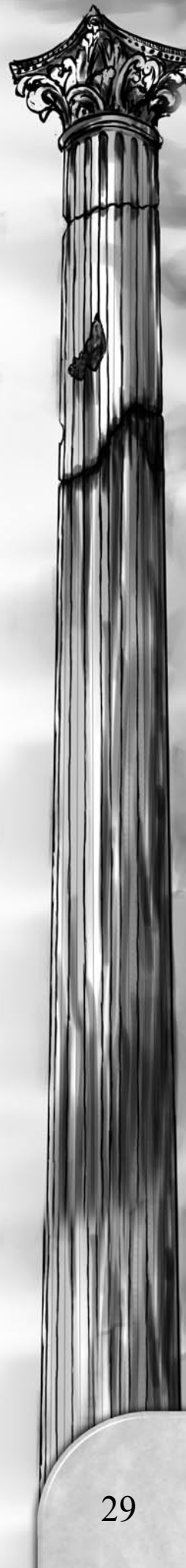
Taken aback by the Senator's directness, the Empress regarded him intently. The two locked eyes for what seemed ages until finally, the Empress called for silence. With but a few words, Senator Palic val'Holryn was named Defender of the Empire and given command of the entire might of Coryan.

The Senator lost no time in springing into action. He had, at an earlier time, risen through the ranks of the legions and had commanded men in battle before. He seemed undaunted by the fact that the fate of the Empire was in his hands.

On a cold windswept morning, the 16th of Anima, 536 IC, General val'Holryn assembled over one hundred legions and more than one hundred auxiliaries to meet the advancing Ymandragoran forces on the Plains of Olian. The battle was savage and merciless, with neither side asking nor giving quarter. The Ymandrakes fielded thousands of mages and sorcerers, who called upon their Arcane powers to rain death upon the legionnaires and hordes of beasts, both foul and fell, that stank of the Infernal.

The battle went on for weeks, the Coryani legions slowly gaining the upper hand, but at a horrendous cost. The finest and dearest blood was shed that day, but true to General val'Holryn's pledge to the Empress, the forces of the Sorcerer-King were pushed back. Steadfast, despite the dire losses suffered, the Coryani Legions chased the remnants of the Ymandragore army back across hundreds of miles of territory until at last they were within sight of glorious Celanto.

Yet the gleaming towers and stained glass windows of Celanto were no more. In its place was a smoldering ruin, which now was more akin to a charnel house than to the elegant city that it had once been. A cry of anguish ripped from the lips of the legionnaires as they strode into what was Celanto. Smoking, burned out ruins and citizens impaled upon stakes, resembling the meat snacks on a stick sold throughout the Empire, lined every street. Enraged by the horrors that lined every corner, the legionnaires brutally cut down any and all invaders that they were able to find. Ymandrakes attempted to flee upon any ships of the Black Fleet that were docked in Celanto's flaming harbor. They were not successful.



Not satisfied with wiping out every last invader on Coryani soil, General val'Holryn sent back word to the Empress that he and members of his personal legion, the Legion of the Rising Phoenix, were taking the war back to Ymandragore. In an uncharacteristic fit of rage, General val'Holryn vowed to see what color the inhuman Lord of Ymandragore bled. Commandeering one of the ships of the Black Fleet, he sailed off to the Isle of Tears.

General val'Holryn's expeditionary force was never seen again.

Weeks later, a message was sent from Ymandragore to the Empress of Coryan. In it, the Sorcerer-King threatened to continue hostilities between their two nations 'until the all of Onara mirrored Celanto,' unless they agreed upon a compromise. In return for the cessation of hostilities and the sovereignty of Coryani soil, the Dark Lord demanded one of the two boys be given over to him for apprenticeship.

The Empress reacted with indignation at the thought of giving up one of her children to 'that monster,' but very forceful arguments from the Senate, spearheaded by the Senator from the Altharian province, swayed her. They reminded that it was her duty to put the welfare the citizens of the Empire above her own personal needs.

Despondently, she sent the youngest of the twins, Jarok, to the Isle of Tears. Within two years, the Empress passed on beyond Beltine's Veil leaving the Alabaster Throne to her remaining child, Nurion.

The Sanctorum of the Arcane

When the young Emperor Nurion learned of these events, he was appalled at the death and misery he had inadvertently caused. Of even greater concern was the abduction of his brother whose fate was unknown despite the many inquiries made. Irrespective of the terms of the treaty between their two nations, reports of kidnappings continued to grow. Emperor Nurion knew that measures must be taken to safeguard his people. Abdicating his throne and naming his aunt, Duana val'Assante', Empress, he disappeared in the middle of the night without explanation.

Nurion began to search out those who shared his gift and found them living under the most adverse and squalid conditions. The people of the Empire feared and resented those who wielded power not of the Divine. In most places, practitioners of the "Gift" were shunned and given a wide berth. In others, hangings, burnings, and other fates too repulsive to mention befell them.

Adding to his "brethren's" misery was the constant threat of the Harvesters from Ymandragore. These hunters were themselves Mages and Sorcerers of great power, but their greatest advantage was that they never hunted alone.

Nurion, after a particularly harrowing encounter with a team of Harvesters, reflected upon this benefit and resolved to use Ymandragore's tactics against them. Using the vast resources of his family, Nurion slowly gathered others of his ilk, banded them together, and gave them whatever aid he could.

He began to establish safe houses in the major cities of the Empire, which he called Sanctorum. There he offered shelter, protection, instruction, and most importantly, the brotherhood of others who had 'the Gift.'

Within a few years these Sanctorum had denied the Harvesters many victims, its members assisting each other and coming together as a vibrant community.

Those who have "the Gift" are approached by associates of this arcane society and offered safety from those who would harm them, as well as training in their natural abilities or the chance to interact with others and exchange spells and concepts in the magical arts.

Members traveling can find these "secret" gathering places by searching for the Sanctorum sigil, the profile of a Hawk in flight and a shield. Once found, they can expect to be treated as a long lost cousin, given food and shelter in return for only their company and tales of their travels. It has become a tradition for members of the Sanctorum to exchange new spells with each other as a gesture of good faith and brotherhood. When a potential member is approached, a powerful spell created by Nurion himself bars the recipient from disclosing any information about the Sanctorum, its locations, or members. Much to the Sorcerer-King's dismay, even he has not been able to break this spell, as countless of shattered minds can attest.

As for Nurion, now known as the Undying, he still travels across Onara, still alive and relatively youthful due to the tremendous power of his magic. He is said to be searching for ways to contact his brother and bring him back home. He knows that he is still no match for the Sorcerer-King, so he bides his time, learning and growing in strength and might for the inevitable confrontation.

The Campaign Against the Voei

Each year, after the flood seasons, the northern portion of the Blessed Lands is strewn with small bits and pieces of the unearthly metal, Fervidite. This magnificent metal is renowned for its ability to slice through any known substance, even Mithril.

It was discovered that this miracle metal washed down from the hills north of the Blessed Lands, a vast hilly area, pocked marked with lakes. The hazy shimmer with which the hills glimmered gave it its name, the Fervidus Hills, which literally meant "the Hills which Glowed." A massive rush of miners, prospectors, and merchant entrepreneurs went in search of the source of this rare metal. What they found was death; tall, nasty, and brutish.

The hills, it was discovered, were home to a large number of feral and barbaric tribes that called themselves the Voei. The Voei were barely recognizable as human, standing on average seven feet in height, incredibly muscular and clothed in matted furs that matched their long, unkempt beards and scraggly hair.

The first encampment of miners vanished one night, without trace. Even the best trackers from the Corlathien Mountains couldn't find any trace of them or their attackers. These disappearances continued until a chance encounter between elements of the Legion of Deliverance and the savages took place.

The legionnaires had been assigned to patrol the area of the Fervidus Hills after members of the Imperial Assembly and the rich merchants of Sweet Savona put pressure on the Emperor to investigate these disappearances. The Centurion leading the soldiers happened to come across a small band of Voei in the midst of slaughtering miners. True to Coryani form, the legionnaires rode down the attackers without mercy. Though efficient killing machines in their own right, the Voei were no match for Coryani steel, tactics, and superior numbers.

After the battle, the Centurion placed the heads of some of the tribesmen upon stakes as a warning and posted written notice that the Coryani now controlled this land and that any attack upon the miners was an attack against the Empire.

Unfortunately, the Voei can't read.

While guarding a mining camp on the bare outskirts of the hills, the legionnaires were beset by waves upon waves of attackers. To their horror, these Voei had shamans with them who called upon a bizarre perversion of Pantheistic miracles to aid them. A few miners were able

to escape with their lives due to the valiant legionnaires who sold their lives dearly. The number of Voei, however, made defeat a forgone conclusion. This battle went to the savages.

Strangely, a few survivors of the massacre described the brutish Voei as twisted mirror images of the noble legionnaires from Milandisia. The nobles of the province have been uncharacteristically evasive on the subject and affect insult if the matter is pursued.

It was soon common knowledge throughout the legions that it was better to die while fighting the Voei than to be taken alive. The shamans, it was discovered, were able to perform a profane rite whereby the soul of the victim was bound upon death and trapped inside their own shrunk heads. To fall upon one's sword to avoid capture became standard practice among the unfortunate legionnaires stationed in the Fervidus Hills.

Even more shocking, legionnaires who were able to escape from their captors reported that the Voei did not keep slaves or prisoners, but rather used them to augment their larders. The Voei, it appeared, had developed a fondness for Coryani flesh.

Over the years, the Coryani have managed to create a small beachhead in the hills in the form of a fort with a shantytown built in its shadow, near the site of a huge deposit of Fervidite. This mining operation and the fort itself has been retaken and rebuilt many times over as the Coryani and Voei seesaw for dominance over the territory. But as long as the vast vein of ore continues to produce this rarest of substances, the Coryani mercantile interests are loathe to leave it to the savage Voei.

Despite countless punitive strikes against the few villages known, the Coryani have never been able to pacify the barbaric Voei. With each attack, the Voei become more dangerous as they scavenge weapons and armor from every battle.

To make matters worse, the Voei have of late been making use of cavalry, something once thought beyond these ignorant savages. Where they got these horses is unknown as they are not indigenous to the Fervidus Hills. With this the Voei have now become a greater threat than ever before, attacking not only mining interests in the hills, but also sweeping down into the Blessed Lands, menacing pilgrims and the First City itself.

The day will come when the Voei will seek to wipe their hills clean of the Coryani. When that day comes, the Underworld will fill to overflowing with the victims of their unholy wrath.

The Milandisian Campaign

After countless campaigns against the Voei, several skirmishes against the Khitani on the Flood Plains, the repression of a rebellion in Toranesta, a punitive strike against the Elorii of Malfelen, and a rare encounter with the Ssethregorans, General Menisis val'Tensen was finally awarded the title he most coveted, that of Defender of the Empire.

Menisis elected to move his command from Coryan, (and the numerous assassination attempts there), to his ancestral home of Nevanne in Ulfila. There, he would ride to the banks of the Nardau River and gaze across at the land that rightfully belonged to his family and the Empire. During one typically foggy morning, he saw three figures standing on the opposite shore. They neither hailed him nor moved away, but merely stood like sentinels, motionless. He dismissed this as strange Milandisian behavior and rode on. The next morning, he rode out to the banks and again saw the three figures staring at him from across the River. He hailed them but received no response. Peeved at their rudeness, he charged his horse across the river, but as he approached the far bank, the figures seem to melt away into the fog.

Week after week this strange event occurred, even when Menisis traveled to another point on the river or others accompanied him. The same three figures never moved nor spoke, only stared at the High General.

A visiting priest of Beltine heard of these events and offered to go with Menisis the following morning. As usual, the figures were already in their customary places when the two arrived, unflinching in the cold morning drizzle. The priest held aloft his holy symbol and slowly crossed the river on foot, with a wary Menisis at his side. This time, the figures did not retreat into the mist, but awaited their arrival.

Eager to finally speak with these men, Menisis pushed ahead of the priest. He began to see details he had been unable to make out previously. The three were hooded and were dressed in gauzy white robes, like burial shrouds.

Menisis addressed them directly as the priest finally made it to shore. "Who are you? Why do you mock me and fail to return the simplest of greetings?"

The three stood silent, as still as the dead. The priest's voice sounded quietly behind him. "Permit me, my General." The Beltinian took three steps and abruptly lowered his head and dropped to a knee. After a few moments answering unheard questions, he stood and

returned to Menisis' side. "They will speak with you, Lord, but only when you show them proper deference."

Menisis growled, growing impatient with this foolishness. "Bend my knee to a Milandisian? Do they know who *I* am? Not even if they were the three Priest-Kings of ancient Axun would I bow to them."

The priest bobbed his head nervously, but begged for the general's indulgence. "They know who you are, my General. They say they have been waiting to speak to you since before you were born." Waving his hands, the priest continued before Menisis could cut him off. "Yes, Lord, I know it sounds bizarre, but these three say they are the Shades of your ancestors. And General, one of them claims to be your father."

Stunned, he looked at the priest and then at the three figures. One did indeed look to have the right height and build, but his father was a fairly typical Coryani in physique. Not quite convinced, he approached the Shades and bowed curtly.

The Shade that most resembled his father spoke. Its voice seemed very far away and in some pain. "My son, always the proud Coryani." Recognizing the voice of his father, dead these long years, Menisis went to speak but was silenced. "Do not speak, listen, then act."

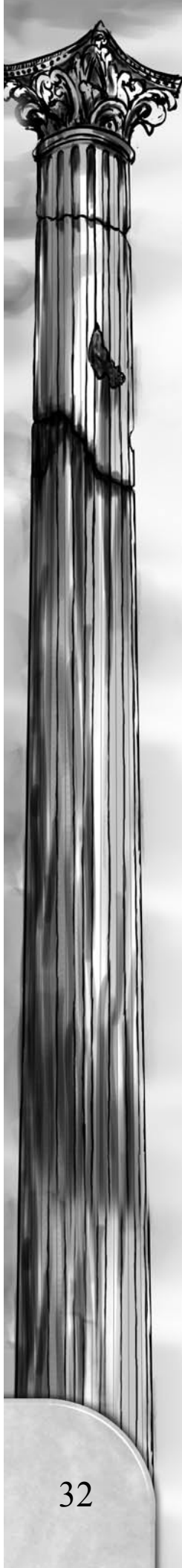
The taller of the Shades flowed forward and addressed Menisis in a voice that chilled him to his core. "For over two centuries now, our people have been separated, torn asunder by the 'honorable' actions of men who knew no better. By breaking away from the Empire, our family honor has been stained, regardless of how dishonorably a long dead Emperor acted. Our oath was to defend the Empire, not turn our backs on it when we felt slighted."

Its words exhausted, the Shade seemed to fade. The final Shade came forward and continued. "All of the val'Tensen bloodline, whether oath-breakers or loyal Imperial citizens, have been found unworthy to enter the Paradise of the Gods. Until this blemish is removed, we are all damned to the Underworld, in anguish."

The Shade of Menisis' father spoke again, his words like a whisper. "We have great hopes that you will wipe this dishonor clean, my son. Only you have the fire and the ability to do so. Release us from our torment, my son. Release us."

Squeezing his eyes to remove the tears that had welled, Menisis looked up and the three figures were gone. His jaw set grimly, he knew that his course was clear. Thanking the priest he went back to Nevanne and prepared for war.





Sending a message to the Emperor by slow horse, Menisis intended to have fully taken Moratavia before he could be ordered back. With several Legions under his command, General Menisis val'Tensen crossed the Nardau River, intent on conquering and reuniting his ancestral homeland and laying his ancestor's spirits to rest.

Although victory came quickly and easily initially, the Coryani Legions became bogged down in heavy fighting with the Milandisian knights. Having taken a full quarter of Moratavia, Menisis' attack was blunted at Treslau Pass. Then, without warning, the knights of Milandir retreated and formed a defensive formation.

Menisis took advantage of this lull and fortified his position, intending to reinforce his army and continue the attack before the Milandisians could counter. He never got the chance.

Unbeknownst to the High General, the Emperor, through the Senate, sent a message of peace in his name to the ruling council in Milandir.

Emperor Calsestus val'Assante' could not allow the popular general to succeed in this campaign. Already, the populace of Coryan adored Menisis and it would not be long before the High General made a bid for the Alabaster Throne.

Entreating the Regency Council of Milandir to accept peace in exchange for a pledge accepting the current border as inviolate, the Emperor hoped to foil Menisis' plans. The Regency Council, reeling from the crippling casualties suffered during the invasion and fearing that the legendary general would not stop until all of Milandir was again a Coryani province, they capitulated.

Menisis was outraged when a copy of the treaty was presented to him. He had underestimated the Emperor and now his ancestors would suffer for it. He had no choice but to honor the truce unless he was prepared to march on Coryan itself and rip the crown from the Emperor's brow. As a loyal Coryani citizen, he could not do that. He would have to wait for another opportunity to fulfill his duty to the val'Tensen and his destiny.

"There are countless other wars I could recount, like the Second Coryani-Khitani war when the Khitani actually invaded the Empire itself, but that's a tale for your teachers to tell."

"So that's what it is to be Coryani? An endless string of wars?" Once again the young girl cut through the songs of glory that had entranced so many young boys, himself included, and struck at the dissonance of his ballad.

He parried her quick jab with a wry smile. "No," he said. "We are not Milandisian."

Before she could press the issue, he continued. "Life in the Empire is full of wonders both subtle and extreme in numbers to satiate the most gluttonous of us all. Let me tell you what life will be like for you as Imperial citizens."

Family Life in the Empire

The heart of Coryani society is the family. Headed by the *familial patriarch*, (or matriarch, in some cases) the eldest male holds sway over his offspring, their mates, and progeny. The familial patriarch decides which of his children will succeed him in his chosen profession and which will join the military or the priesthood.

Such power does not come without a price. The familial patriarch is also responsible for the care and welfare of all his charges, from his mate to the lowest servant. He is expected to keep his family well fed and protected as well as providing proper education and instruction in whatever vocation has been selected.

Obviously the higher social classes have greater duties and expenses than those of the lower castes, but the premise is the same.

Women in patriarchal families are considered equals with the exception of matters dealing with ascension. The senior male, irrespective of any elder sisters, ascends to the head of the family upon the death of the familial patriarch. The reverse, of course, is true in matriarchal families.

Only during childbirth and childrearing are a woman's needs and desires ignored in light of her duties to the family. A mother is expected to care for her child until they become adults at the age of fifteen. Of course, in practice, more affluent women skirt this issue by having competent servants rear the children.

Education

As early as the age of five, Coryani children begin their schooling. The more affluent families have highly educated servants begin the child's instruction, but eventually they are sent to the church of the family's faith. There they learn how to read, how to write, history, the tenants of the faith and, most importantly, the ideals, or the *virtues paterna* of the Coryani: *duty, honor, courage, and resourcefulness*.

If deemed to possess an astute mind, or if the student is of high birth, they may continue their schooling past the age of fifteen at one of the various institutes of higher learning, the most



prestigious of which is the Altharian Academy in Coryan. There students are given instruction in higher mathematics, elocution, and philosophy as well as poetry and music. Various languages are also taught and most Coryani, from nobles down to the middle class, are fluent in at least two additional languages. For those of higher birth, one of these languages is expected to be High Coryan.

All legal documents are written in High Coryan and the Senate sometimes debates certain delicate subjects in High Coryan so that the common folk in attendance in the stands will not be able to understand what is being discussed.

In major cities, like Coryan, a public post in the main plazas would have daily bulletins relating current affairs. These communiqués address everything from public holidays, mercantile shipments, public executions, and, in times of war, the news from the fronts. Those items viewed as overly sensitive for the eyes of the common man, are published nonetheless but in High Coryan, thus assuring that any confidential news would reach only those meant to read it. Bad news, however concealed, always manages to make its way to everyone, regardless of social status.

Social Classes

Coryani society is divided into four distinct classes. With the exception of the highest class, these strata are not rigid and mobility up (and sometimes down) is common. Unlike most societies, where wealth is the greatest factor in determining the ranks of the upper class, the

blood of the Valinor acts as proof of the Divine Right of the Vals to rule. In theory, the most destitute of Vals can command the wealthiest of Patricians, though in practice, this rarely is the case. For classes below the highest, it's the quantity of your gold, not the richness in your blood, that establishes your place in society.

The Patrician Imperialis

As decreed by the Gods since the age of the First Imperium, the Vals have always ruled over the masses and helped guide humanity through some of its most tragic years. In the Coryani Empire, the position of the Vals is no different.

All of the major bloodlines, as well as a few of the minor ones are represented within the Empire and are usually in places of power as Governors, Senators and, of course, the station of Emperor itself. The val'Assante', those descended from the Valinor of Illiir, have had the longest dynasty, only broken occasionally by short-lived dynasties such as the val'Dellenov dynasty.

The patrician imperialis are expected to take an active and commanding role in Coryani society, extolling, by example, the *virtues paterna* of the Coryani. Thus, many of Vals are likely to be found as military officers, high public officials, or as priests in the Mother Church.

Only citizens of this class are allowed to wear a golden trim upon their toga. For anyone of a lower class to be caught affixing the golden trim upon their clothing, the penalties are harsh, from public lashings to death.

The Patricians

Second only to the Vals in status, the patricians are those normal humans that have ascended the social ranks through meritorious acts, assets in excess of one million Imperials, or marry into one of the Val families. If the latter, the patrician is allowed to affix the Val family name, without the prefix-val, to his own, i.e. Assante'-Voucis, Tensen-Balin.

The patricians are expected to emulate the patrician imperialis and also take positions of public service, military command, or service in the priesthood.

As a testament to the high value the Coryani affix to their *virtues paterna*, any man, even ones whose fathers were the lowest slave could rise to this station through exemplary service to the Empire.

Citizens of this class adorn their togas with a deep green trim, signifying their status.

The Plebeians

The plebeian class comprises the vast majority of the citizens of the Empire. These loyal citizens range from rich merchants and traders to the farmers, bawdy courtesans, artisans, and fishermen. The bulk of the Coryani legions are comprised of these hardy souls who are able to attain the rank of Centurion, but not general of a legion.

Plebeians are barred from taking any positions in the government by practical and not arbitrary reasons. All government posts are unpaid positions where the citizen is expected to disassociate himself from all other interests. As plebeians are usually not independently wealthy, the practicality of the situation is evident.

The Provincials

When a territory is liberated from the darkness of barbarism, its peoples are not immediately considered citizens of the Empire. A period of time must pass, usually three generations, though sometimes longer for the more contentious subjects, before the people are given limited civil status. They are considered provincials and are protected under Imperial law but may not hold any positions of power regardless of affluence. Provincials may legally own property and operate mercantile interests without the need of a Coryani partner. Permits are required for travel throughout the Empire and the governor's office must be petitioned for such permits.

A provincial may attain citizenship before his region is formally inducted as a province of the Empire by military service. After a normal tenure, anywhere from ten years to twenty in times of war, the provincial is awarded the title of citizen of the Empire with all benefits and honorifics thereof. From that time on, all the children of the new citizen are also considered citizens, assuming they were born after his entitlement.

Slaves

Lowest of the low, without any protection from Imperial law, this rank is reserved for criminals, heretics, traitors, and prisoners of war.

These persons are no longer even considered human, but are treated and traded as a commodity.

Woe to he who transgresses against the laws of the Empire or the tenants of the Mother Church, for regardless of previous station, he is cast down and branded *persona non-grata*.

The Gentiles

Those foreigners, who come to visit from far-flung nations and regions, including those non-humans who have not petitioned for citizenship, are considered gentiles.

Afforded protection by Imperial law and allowed to own and operate mercantile establishments, these fortunate people are said to have the best of both worlds. Foreign titles, such as that of Duke or Speculator Prince, are recognized within the Empire and are usually used to address these nobles.

Gentiles are, of course, prohibited from seeking public office or serving in the military except in special auxiliaries. Most do not mind these few restrictions, though many grumble at the higher taxes they must pay because of their status. But such is the price for living in the 'Center of the World.'

Imperial Government

The obvious head of the Empire is the Emperor or Empress. These august personages have always been a member of the *patrician imperialis* class and have ruled without question since the time of the First Emperor.

With such a vast Empire to guide, many public service offices were established to assist the Emperor in his duties. These offices include that of the Imperial Council, Provincial Governor, city governor, and a multitude of lesser positions.

Imperial Council

The heart of the Imperial Government, the Council is made up of two distinct bodies; the Senate and the plebeian committee.

All of the laws of the Empire are written by the Senate and ratified by the Emperor. The Emperor cannot make law on a whim and depends on the Senate to enact his wishes unless he abolishes the Senate, which has occurred from time to time. Public outcry and many back room dealings have always forced the Emperor to reinstate the Senate before too long a period has passed.

The Senate can also hold trials for offenders who have transgressed against the entire Empire or cases considered too complex or volatile for a local magistrate.

Senators are appointed to their position by the Emperor or by a majority vote by the senate. A position must be open, usually through death, though sometimes an ineffectual senator will step down "voluntarily" to allow a more persuasive individual a seat.

Any citizen, regardless of social status can aspire to hold a seat in the Senate. All it takes is the blessings of Larissa, a spectacular military victory, or enough imperials to choke a horse. Of course, those born to the upper class need only ask father to step down from his senatorial seat. The fortune of birth is a funny thing.

The plebeian committee hasn't any actual legislative power. This "assembly" is more like an unruly drunken mob than an actual public office. Any citizen of the Empire is invited to sit in the stands of the Senate and participate in the plebeian committee.

Originally created to act as the voice of the common man, this mob now makes its displeasure known through the banging of their crude wooden cups. If an unpopular Senator or piece of legislation is being discussed upon the floor, the rabble bang their cups until such a racket is made that the orator cannot be heard. It is common practice for Senators to pay key members of the committee to either keep order while they speak or to cause a thunderous raucous while a rival addresses the Assembly.

The Emperor no longer addresses the Council directly since the Night of Cups. Emperor Hecton val'Assante', the last of the first Illiiran Dynasty, made a disastrous decision to personally assure that a huge tax increase was passed. This increase was to fund a large monument in honor of his glorious reign, which, at that point had been less than a year. Derisive, contemptuous, and openly condescending, the Emperor berated the Senators for taking so long in passing his decree. When the plebeian committee began to pound their cups in disapproval, he sneered at their 'savage and ignorant ways' and told his small contingent of guards to 'clear the rabble so that their betters can conclude business in peace.'

During the ensuing scuffle, a guard ran a plebeian through with his weapon stunning the crowd. Disbelief quickly turned to unbridled rage as the unruly drunken throng, numbering hundreds, rushed down the steps and pummeled the guards and the Emperor to death. The vast majority of the Senators, reading the writing on the wall, hastily left the Senatorium before the carnage began.

Governors

Selected from patricians of the region, a governor is the representative of the Emperor in the city he administers. This can be a very prestigious and powerful office, depending on the city one administers.

The governor has almost unlimited power over his charge and not even a senator can override his decisions, though an edict from the entire Senate can. The only power that can summarily strip the governor of his duties is that of the Emperor and his personal representatives, i.e. The Legion of Vigilance.

Those patricians who are appointed to cities that are also the provincial capitol are some of the most influential people in the Empire. This plum assignment, though without pay, assures the governor a steady income in the form of grafts, favors, and gifts from those who must curry his good graces.

With the ability to levy taxes, and most importantly, distribute the revenue, the governor is besieged with offers and requests from the secular sector as well as the religious one. Churches constantly rely on the good will of a governor to build, augment, or refurbish existing temples. To say that the competition for attention is fierce is an understatement.

The Legions of the Empire

The Legions of Coryan are the finest military organization upon Onara. No other nations can compare with their raw power and disciplined might, regardless of what foreign leaders would want one to believe.

Organized in a very simple manner, a legion is a fighting force of up to one thousand men, led by a General. The legion is then divided into ten units of one hundred men called a Century and is lead by a veteran officer called a Centurion. Smaller groups, usually not more than a dozen, are called Cadres and are reserved for delicate missions requiring finesse rather than brute strength.

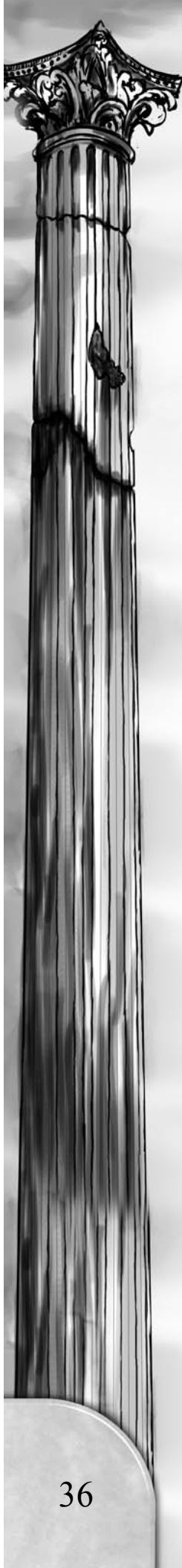
Legions are further characterized by type, such as light infantry, heavy infantry, or cavalry. The type of legion usually, but not always, indicates how it is equipped. A prestigious legion with a rich patron can be issued gear of better quality than one of the same, yet less esteemed, designation.

Legions may also have additional units designated as auxiliaries that augment or add unique abilities. Sappers, bowmen, slingers, divine and arcane irregulars, as they are called, can lend its support during times of war to whichever unit it's assigned.

The Founding of a Legion

To have a legion one must first have a patron. This patron is usually a wealthy patrician such as a senator, a governor, or the Emperor





himself. It is also common practice for a particular church, especially Illiir or Hurrian, to sponsor a legion.

Once a patron decides to found a legion and has the assets to house, equip, and train it, he must muster one thousand warriors to his side. This can be done by appealing to one's general populace for support, coaxing a popular general out of retirement, lavishing gifts upon prospective recruits, or having the Ancient Standard of a legion from the First Imperium.

These standards from the First Imperium are all but indestructible, having been created using methods lost to time. Unlike the present day, where a legion's standard, along with any war trophies captured, is kept at the legion's headquarters, the legions of the First Imperium carried their standards into battle. A few of the more fanatical legions that have an original standard also carry on this tradition, to their patron's dismay.

Patrons fund adventurers, scholars, and even members of the Emerald Society to search and return lost standards of the First Imperium so that it may be 'remade.' According to tradition, if a patron that has assembled one thousand men that pledge themselves to the honor of a lost First Imperium Legion presents the Emperor with the standard of that legion, the Emperor must allow it to be remade.

Only once before, during the reign of Quron val'Dellenov, did an Emperor fail to remake a legion to his and the Empire's eternal regret.

Emperor val'Dellenov reigned during the time when the Canceri seceded from the Empire, during the Second Coryani-Khitani war. A retired centurion, adventuring in the province of Ulfila, stumbled across a lost legion's standard while investigating an ancient crypt. Knowing that the Empire was desperate for troops, he hastily assembled one thousand men from his birthplace and practically bankrupted himself outfitting them.

Racing to Coryan, he arranged for an audience with the Emperor and presented his legionnaires and the standard. According to tradition, until the Emperor officially accepts the legion into the Empire and has its name inscribed upon the Roster of the Valorous, the warriors are forbidden from calling itself a legion. When the Emperor had the Imperial Seer, a Larissan High Priestess, determine the identity of the lost legion, he was incensed to discover that it was the Legion of the Black Sun, dedicated to Nier. In a fit of rage, he decreed that the standard be locked away in the deepest vaults and that the offending patrician be executed for this affront.

Somewhere, deep in the lost catacombs in the province of Ulfila, the earthly remains of the Legion of the Black Sun rose from its eternal rest, awakened by the curse of the Emperor.

How it reached the south of Canceri is unknown, but the Nerothians of that abysmal place now count amongst its defenders the Legion of the Black Sun, the scourge Coryan.

Not all legions must be the reincarnations of ancient legions. Some are founded entirely without lineage, such as the Legion of the Singers of Sweet Savona. Of course, pedigree equates with prestige in Coryani society. Such legions do not receive the benefits or the respect more celebrated legions have.

Once founded, the Legion is immediately transferred as far away from its home as possible. The logic of this is sound as legions are often used to quell uprisings. It is better, goes the saying, not to make a man choose between family and State, as the final decision may be most unpleasant.

Legionnaires show their loyalty and commitment by branding themselves. Upon the right upper arm, near the shoulder, the legionnaire receives the mark of the Empire, the Golden Falcon symbolizing that he is the strong right arm of the Empire. On his left, he is branded with the emblem of his legion, keeping the honor and memory of his unit close to his heart forever.

All legionnaires are trained and equipped to master the short sword, called a gladius, as well as the javelin or spear. A shield and steel breastplate, greaves, and helmet provide protection from attack. Some legions, due to a patron falling upon bad times or because of its designation may have different or lesser equipment, such as leather armor or no shield at all.

At the present time, the Empire enjoys the leadership of General Menesis val'Tensen of Ulfila, *Bane of the Khitani, Conquer of Moratavia and Defender of the Empire*. As Defender, the general has absolute control over all the legions of the Empire, their disposition, and placement. A brilliant tactician, many whisper privately that this man may be the only hope for an Empire beset by corruption and bloated on its own excesses. The legions have always held a special place in the hearts of the imperial citizenry and the general is viewed as the ideal legionnaire, noble and incorruptible.

Coryani Overview

Capitol: Coryan

Population: According to the Census of 1000 I.C. 67,438,911 (Humans/Vals 98.7%)

Government: Imperial



Religion: The Mother Church of Coryan
Currency: Imperial (1 gp), Decus (Silver), Centus (copper)
Primary Import: Ivory, Iron Ore, Salt
Primary Exports: Grains, Wine, Gems, Marble, Textiles, Sculpture, Silk
Alignment: Any, but typically Lawful

Geographical Overview

The immense Coryani Empire is host to a vast array of terrains and climates. Gentle hills and endless plains make up the lion's share of Coryan's geography, with the massive Corvis River bisecting it from top to bottom, but deserts, rivers and mountains abound also.

Ulfila

The province of Ulfila forms the northern border of the Empire abutting the rebel province of Milandisia. It is bounded by the Corlathian Mountains to the west, the Gulf of Yarris, and, until recently the Nardau River to the North.

Long the ancestral lands of the val'Tensen's, the scions of Hurrian; a portion of Ulfila broke away from the Empire during the Milandisian Rebellion, a dark stain on that family's honor. For years the val'Tensen have longed to be reunited with their errant cousins, and last year, General Menesis val'Tensen took a large step towards making that dream a reality.

Ulfila is made up of rocky, broken crags that extend down and across from the Paerthian and the Corlathian Mountains, respectively. This difficult territory gradually becomes hills the further south one travels.

Northern Ulfila is wracked by violent storms, raging wind, and lightening strikes. It is considered an ill omen for the skies to clear as it signifies Hurrian's displeasure. These windswept lands produce some of the finest rangers on Onara. Said to rival the Elorii in ability, these austere folk are easily identified by their Wind Staves, used to call upon Air Elementals for aid.

Overlooking the Nardau River and perched on the starkest crags of the region is the palace of the Provincial Capitol, Nevanne, the Scarlet City. The city's appellation refers to the reddish hue of the stones quarried to build it. These stones, ranging from a rosy color to a dark shade of red, were mined directly from the base of the escarpment and are also responsible for cliff's name, the Fiery Palisades. The irony of the name, considering the rivalry between Hurrian and Nier is not lost on the inhabitants.

The city proper lies at the base of the cliffs in the shape of a huge semi-circle. Once a haven for the arts and sciences, Nevanne has become an armed camp with the return of the Defender of the Empire and last year's conflict with the Milandisians. No less than five entire legions are stationed there, straining the resources of the city and the sparse outlying area to its breaking point.

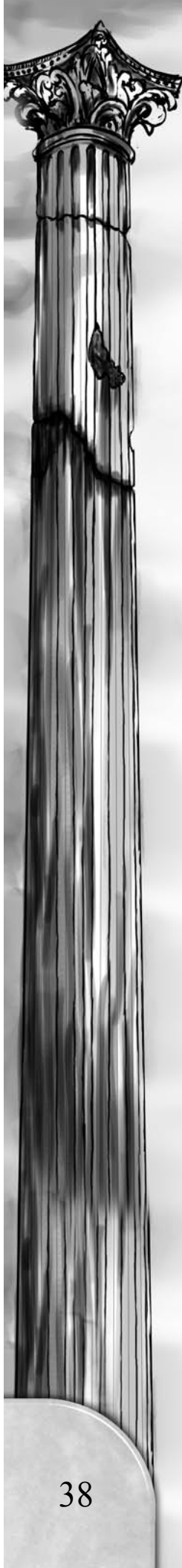
The City of Nevanne

Type: Large City
Population: 23, 017 +5,000 legionnaires.
Governor: Fedor Tensen-Curtius
Power Centers: The Governor, General Menesis, the Arch-Prelate of Ulfila
Military: Legions: 5,000 legionnaires
City Guards: 350
Industries: Trade, quarried stone, spring water, gems (rubies and sapphires).

Valentia

The province of Valentia is a bleak and foreboding territory, bounded by the Corlathian Mountains to the north, the Western Marches to the west, and the Corvis River to the east.

The ancient city of Enpebyn, now the Provincial Capitol, was originally founded during the time of the First Imperium and is the ancestral home of the val'Ishi family, Blessed of Beltine. Known as the City of Weeping Souls, visitors to



this city report feeling uneasiness as if unseen eyes are constantly observing them.

Many consider a post in Valentia punishment for a transgression that does not merit execution or exile, but nonetheless deserves castigation.

This may be because, since the process of creating steel was discovered, a large smelting forge was built near the hills and mountains surrounding Valentia, which are rich in iron ore. Quickly becoming the primary source for weapons, armor, and metal goods for the Empire, the Forge continued to increase in size.

Today, the Forge operates night and day, encompassing the entire production process from mining to smelting to the smithing of weapons and armor. As a result, large black billows of smoke and cinders hang above the area and the city of Enpebyn. The colossal Corlathian Mountains act as a barricade, impeding air movement and prevents the clouds of smoke from dissipating. Despite the heroic efforts of the citizens of Enpebyn, the city lies covered in black soot and ash.

The Forge is managed and operated by the Society of Smelters, a loose organization of plebeian miners, blacksmiths, and iron workers and wields considerable power and influence in the area.

After the discovery of the First City, hundreds of scholars began to recover lost lore and ancient text from its hidden recesses. The citizens and rulers of that golden metropolis practiced many strange and alien traditions, unique among them was the ritual performed before the crowning of a new Emperor.

Before being able to sit upon the Throne of Man, the ruler walked a circuitous route throughout the First City called the Azure Way, a task which must have taken days given the city's tremendous size.

Upon hearing of this tradition, the Emperor Quintelus val'Dellenov decided to have an Azure Way built connecting the entrance of the Palace in Coryan to the gates of the First City. Although thought by many to be a complete fool's errand and a waste of resources, these people wisely kept their council and congratulated the Emperor on his inspired idea.

Work began immediately, laying down a path lined in blue mosaics that ran as commanded. Given the vast distances, the completion of the new Azure Way would take generations, but the Emperor who succeeded Quintelus continued to pour money into the project.

After more than forty years of work, the Azure Way reached the city of Enpebyn in

Valentia. Commanded to create the quickest, most direct route possible, work began on carving a path through the Corlathian Mountains. Luckily, the Second Coryani -Khitani war cut short that project as all available men and troops were needed to fight the conflict.

Since that time, Emperors have used the project to punish those Patricians who fall out of favor by tasking them to oversee the completion of the roadway. The phrase, 'to walk the Azure Way' is now a colloquialism in Coryani society referring to a path to ruin or an unwise decision.

The first thing one notices upon entering the city are the numerous ancient skulls covered in arcane symbols that hang from every corner building. These sentinels have stood vigil over the city since before the Coryani Empire was born and are tended by the priests of Beltine. Over the centuries the thongs from which they are suspended have been changed and the symbols have been repainted, but the skulls are never replaced.

The reason for this lies in the aftermath of the fall of the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame. In the frenzy following the Sword of the Heavens defeat, armies fell upon armies in a fury of bloodletting never before seen. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers met death that day, far too many for the priests of Beltine to bless and give proper burials to. Denied the opportunity to enter the Paradise of the Gods, these tortured souls roamed unchecked, wishing to share their torment with the living, which they blamed for their anguish.

The city of Enpebyn was near one such area, a place where the forces of Nier and those who would see them destroyed engaged each other in a titanic struggle.

Soon thereafter, Shades of incredible power began to hunt the inhabitants of the city, swelling the ranks of the damned until they were too numerous for the priests to contain.

A gathering was held to decide what if anything could be done. As the conclusion that the city would have to be abandoned was becoming evident, a general from the Legion of the Doom of Chendo proposed a radical idea.

He explained that he and the remnants of his legion had lost family, home, and hope. They had lost purpose and now only awaited death to claim them. Only in this city had they been welcomed and given a chance to be at peace again.

In very terse, desperate words, he explained that they could not allow another city that had befriended them to fall. To forestall such a fate, they were willing to stand watch over the city and its people from beyond the veil itself.

That night, a dark ritual was performed that ripped the soul from the legionnaires and bound them to a fetish fashioned from their very skulls. Using these fetishes as an anchor, the spectral legionnaires were able to battle the Shades on the Nether plane and consign them to Oblivion.

Since that time, however, the souls of the sacrificed legionnaires can be heard weeping in the dead of the night, lamenting all they have lost.

Enpebyn, City of Weeping Souls

Type: Large City

Population: 19,780

Governor: Gemel val'Sheem

Power Centers: The Governor, the Arch-Prelate of Valentia, the Society of Smelters

Military: Legions: 1,000 legionnaires

City Guards: 300

Industries: Steel, weapons, armor

Illonia

This huge region is never called a province, but always referred to as the Heart of the Empire, in case any of the Emperor's many courtiers, sycophants, or other hangers-on overhear.

Compared to any of the other regions, the gentle rolling hills and pristine wood glades are unmatched in their beauty.

Home to the Imperial Capitol, Illionia is the hub of the world. The constant streams of people and goods make this region the crossroads of Onara, with wealth and prosperity beyond reckoning. As a result, the region becomes increasingly populated the closer one gets to Mighty Coryan itself. Ironically, though many citizens of the Empire dream of visiting the many columned byways and monuments of the Imperial city, many of its more affluent residents long to leave its overcrowded streets and have villas and estates in other parts of the Empire.

The native Coryani is not an especially tall person, the tallest reaching a height of six feet. Those of pure Coryani stock, especially the val'Assante', tend to have blonde hair. The women wear their hair in long curls or picked up, whereas the men cut theirs very short and are always clean-shaven. This last conceit is to further differentiate themselves from those less civilized people who tend to wear their hair long and have facial hair.

The city of Coryan is the most populated urban locale within the Empire and possibly the

whole of Onara. With over one million inhabitants, many of them living in filthy, congested tenements called rookeries in the plebeian quarter, one can see representatives from all parts of the world. It is not an unusual occurrence to see Dwarves from Solenos Mor, knights from Milandir, or even the rare Khitani aristocrat or Elorii throughout its teeming streets.

The sights of the capitol are just as magnificent and delightful as its people. From the opulent Royal palace, the Dome of the Valinor, and the Senatorium in the Imperial quarter, to the ancient temples, noble manor houses, grand libraries, marbled bathhouses, and the Grand Amphitheatre, Coryan is a place of wonder. One need only stride through the main thoroughfare, the *via imperialis*, to feel infused with the centuries of culture and refinement, passing refreshing plazas, marble statuary, gigantic monuments of marble, copper or bronze, magnificent architectural splendors, endless colorful shops, and cool fountains. Once visited, there can be no doubt that this is the pinnacle of human culture.

Sports are a favorite pastime for the citizens of the Empire and large amphitheatres were built in every major city to satisfy this interest. Everyone from the Emperor to the lowest plebian is allowed to witness the events held weekly. Depending on the personality of the Emperor, the events were either exciting athletic challenges such as chariot racing or mock combat to some of the bloodiest and savage gladiatorial battles ever witnessed.

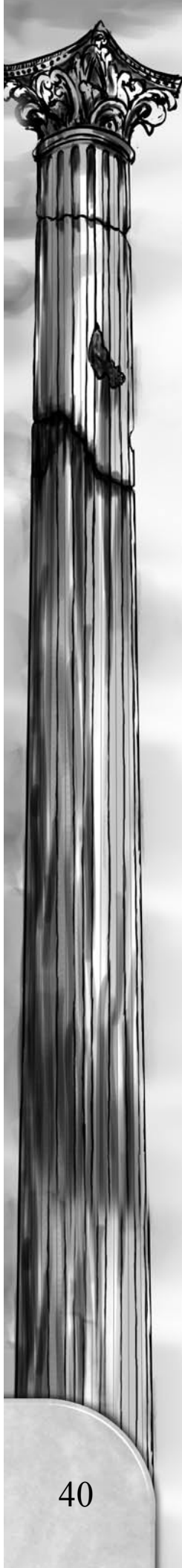
Huge bounties are offered for exotic animals and magical beasts. These creatures are used to commemorate special occasions by providing gladiators with unique and deadly opponents.

The current Emperor, a worshipper of Larissa to the indignation of his val'Assante' family, is a great fan of these spectacles and lavishes praise and gifts upon those gladiators who he favors.

The current site of the city of Coryan was not its original location. Shortly after the founding of the Empire, the small city of Coryan was beset by hundreds of wagons, animal trains, and people all carrying tribute from throughout the Empire. Within a generation, the population of Coryan exploded to one hundred times its original size.

The fourth Emperor, Eladru val'Assante', "the Divine Architect," could no longer stand the endless cacophony of traffic moving through the capitol and decided to build a city that could cope with the multitudes of people that Coryan now attracted.





Situating the new city just upon the next hill, the Emperor made an innovative design requirement. To mitigate the never-ending flood of merchants and tribute, a roadway would be built below the foundation of the city. This would allow shop owners and the like to receive deliveries of goods and material without clogging the streets above. This underground labyrinth would also act as a sewer system, removing refuse from the city and allowing it to flow into the mighty Corvis River. To assure that this plan was adhered to, an Imperial edict was passed prohibiting wagons, carriages, and even horses from within the city limits.

Traveling from one side of the huge city to the other soon became a daylong affair until an innovative plebeian began to offer wealthy patricians palanquins a quick, comfortable, and discreet way to cross the city. So profitable was this enterprise that his descendants are now themselves Patricians, attending functions in the Imperial court itself.

Only in Coryan.

Grand Coryan, Imperial Capitol

Type: Large Metropolis

Population: over one million

Governor: Velorin val'Assante'

Power Centers: The Emperor, the Senate, miscellaneous ambassadors, the mob

Military: Legions: 6,000 legionnaires

City Guards: 10,000

Industries: Anything found throughout Onara, both exotic and mundane.

Cafela

Renown throughout the Empire and Onara for its wild festivals, beautiful women, and sensuous excesses, Cafela and its most prominent city, Sweet Savona, is the most popular destination after Coryan itself. It is also the ancestral home of the val'Sheems, favored of Larissa and the flavor of the city reflects their hedonistic tendencies.

Savona is an urban marvel and unparalleled anywhere else in the known lands. Built upon two hundred eighteen individual islands and interconnected by a spider web of walkways and bridges, the port city of Savona is a welcome sight to the hundreds of sailors and merchants who converge upon it daily.

The most prominent feature of the city, besides the Bridge of Exquisite Delights that spans the central waterway, is the many-stepped ziggurat temple of Larissa. Easily the tallest structure in all of Savona, the temple is vibrant and

bustling with many worshippers and the curious enjoying the holy services of the priestesses. Anyone not familiar with the Larissan religion could easily mistake the church as a market or brothel rather than a holy shrine.

Crowning the temple is a large brazier that is kept constantly lit and is used to burn unique holy incense that spreads across the city. This incense is neither cloying, pungent, nor overpowering, but is amazingly, some say miraculously, just enough to enrapt the senses with its pleasant scent. This pervasive fragrance gives the city its nickname of Sweet Savona.

Cafelans in general and Savonans in particular, are sensualists at heart. They enjoy good music, fine art, exquisite food, excellent wine, and most importantly, the expression of carnality. They have a saying in Cafela, 'The Coryani may be the heart of the Empire, but Cafela is its passion.'

The average Cafelan is slightly darker than a Coryani native, tending towards brunette hair, dark eye color, and olive-tan skin tones. Although the men of Cafela emulate their Coryani cousins in being clean shaven and keeping their hair short, the women tend to let their ebony, luxurious hair cascade down to their waists.

Given the day-to-day carnival atmosphere and its strategic location as a port city, it is no wonder that Sweet Savona is the destination of merchant fleets from every nation. So eager are the men to participate in the religious ceremonies of Larissa that captains have had to restrain their crews from jumping ship when they sight Savona.

To alleviate this problem a small island off the coast has been turned into a large warehouse and storage facility where the merchants can offload their wares before they lose their crew to the festivities. Native Savonan sailors then ferry the merchandise to the city proper for shipment throughout the Empire.

Only the wealthiest of patricians, merchant princes, and sea captains can participate in the temple functions, interacting with the Larissan priests and priestesses and enjoying the full benefit of communing with the Goddess of Forbidden Pleasure. Others make due by attending services at smaller, more intimate shrines or by enlisting the aid of the itinerant priestesses that can be found on almost any street corner of Savona.

Although the incense hasn't any adverse side effects for humans, dwarves, gnomes, and even the rare half-orc, Elorii, for some reason, have an allergic reaction that causes violent sneezes. When the Elorii trade in Savona, they wrap their faces in heavy scarves to combat the effects. Native Savonans began to call them "our masked visitors."

Later, those nobles, especially from stoic Milandir, who wished to indulge in the excesses of the city, began to hide their features by emulating the Elorii. The Savonan merchants humored these shy nobles and turned a blind eye to their affectations. Today, the phrase, “a masked visitor” has a double meaning, referring also to a hypocritical person.

Sweet Savona

Type: Metropolis

Population: 123, 675

Governor: Meliza val'Sheem, High Priestess of Larissa

Power Centers: The Larissan Church, Hyrum Ralcarrion, Merchant Prince of Savona

Military: Legions: 2,000 legionnaires

City Guards: 5,000

Industries: Every earthly pleasure known to man.

Balantica

The province of Balantica is the heartland of the Coryani Empire. Balantica feeds not only the Empire and its legions, but also the world, or so they say. West of the Corvis River, which divides the province, are thousands of acres of farmlands growing every possible type of grain, fruit, or vegetable. Flat grassy plains disappear into the horizon where herds of wild horses roam freely. To the east of the Corvis, rolling hills similar to those of Illionia can be found. A pristine forest, remarkably devoid of Elorii, covers the countryside. The woodland, known as the Golden Bough's of Saluwe', is a primordial forest, seemingly untouched by man. The val'Dellenov's who claim this region consider the forest a sacred place and fight to maintain its unspoiled beauty for all.

Another forest to the west, the Hechakel Woods, is the source of timber and paper products that are exported throughout the Empire. Sorcerers and Mages covet the paper made from these trees as scrolls fashioned from them seem resistant to fire, acid, or accidental tearing.

Another resource exported to the far corners of the Empire is the wild horses of the plains. The size of these beasts, which tower over the horses of the Hinterlands, in addition to their aggressive nature, makes them excellent warhorses. Those legions that are primarily cavalry covet these steeds and pay premium prices to acquire them.



Given all these abundant raw resources, as well as easy access to the Corvis River for shipping, the provincial capitol of Panari is one of the richest cities of the Empire.

Panari is an odd mixture of rustic ambience with an obviously sophisticated population. Sometimes called the Crossroads of the Empire, Panari lies in the dead center, straddling both sides of the Corvis. Trade from far-off Enpebyn to Plexus, the Gateway of the Western Lands goes through Panari. The people of Panari enjoy an elevated level of comfort, as the governor spares no expense in providing for her people.

Panari, Crossroads of the Empire

Type: Metropolis

Population: 358,120

Governor: Elana val'Dellenov, matriarch of the val'Dellenov family

Power Centers: The governor, Merchant's Guild

Military: Legions: 3,000 legionnaires

City Guards: 3,500

Industries: Wood byproducts, timber, food, horses.

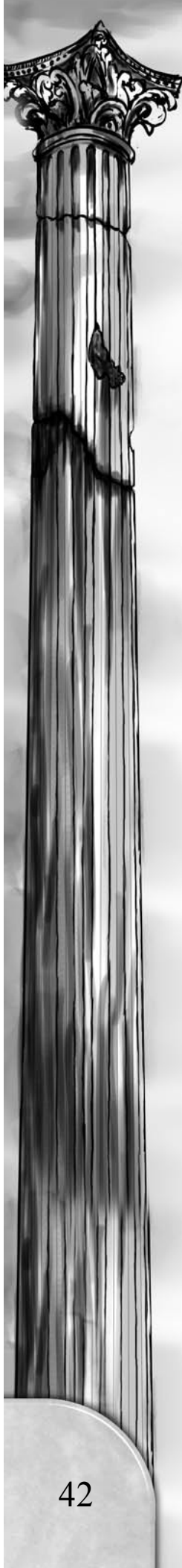
Toranesta

Once this region was home to the ancient Myrantian Hegemony, an Empire so steeped in malevolence that even those from Canceri would shudder at its vile practices.

The ancient city of Myrantis was lost long ago, swallowed by the ever-encroaching swamplands to the south. Abessios, second city of this unholy union, took over the reins of power but continued to use the name Myrantian Hegemony in memory of their wicked capitol.

Toranesta itself is an inhospitable place of hot, stale winds, saturating humidity, glaring sunlight, and endless tracks of wasteland. The provincial capitol, Abessios, is not much better. Enclosed as it is by the high bluffs of the Altharian peninsula and the swampland to the south, Abessios is an uncomfortably sweltering place, without any prevailing coastal winds to cool the area nor woodlands to absorb the heat. Even the Nehkty River, its closest waterway, is sluggish and tepid as it drains into the swampland.

The life cycle of Abessios is decidedly nocturnal, with the



“day” beginning a few hours before sunset and ending after dawn. That is not to say that no one works during daylight hours. Huge squads of slaves, mostly captured pirates, criminals, marauding humanoids, or those purchased from the Hinterlands, work to maintain the countless monuments and the necropolis that lie within the city limits. As expected, the mortality rate among these squads is very high, with dehydration and exhaustion being the predominant factors.

The Coryani conquered the province of Toranesta very early in its history. Even so, after centuries of occupation, the native people still consider themselves Mryantian and an oppressed people rather than Imperial citizens. The inhabitants have attempted to revolt no less than five times since its conquest and for that reason are still considered ‘provincials’ and not full citizens of the Empire.

To further separate themselves from their conquerors, the native Abessians wear clothing very distinct in appearance and style. Both men and women are usually bare-chested but for a utility harness and wear a pleated kilt and sandals. Both sexes also shave their heads to prevent lice infestation and wear wigs to protect their scalps from sunburn. A thick, black paste is applied below the eyes to reduce glare, making the native Abessian look menacing and grim.

The val’Mordanes and the val’Mehans of this region are very different from those of far off Canceri. Where the Canceri are isolationists or masters of diplomacy, those of this region are imperialistic and aggressive in the manner. Twisted mirror images of each other, woe to the Coryani should they ever decide to marry their strengths.

Abessios

Type: Metropolis

Population: 230,865

Governor: Severin val’Inares

Power Centers: Governor, Arch-Prelate Kosnuri val’Mehan, General Hemin val’Tensen, Commander of the Legions.

Military: Legions: 7,000 legionnaires

City Guards: 2,000

Industries: Gold, silver, gems (diamonds)

Salantis

The coastal province of Salantis enjoys the rich bounty that Yarris, Lord of the Seas provides. The fisherman of the region say that no real skill is necessary to fish off the coast, as the fish practically leap into the boats and nets. Calm and clear waters assist in their task, with most

fishing only a few hours before coming back with their boats filled to capacity.

The land itself is generally flat and fertile. Only on the coast can one find small bluffs and cliffs. White shoals and coral reefs are strung out like pearls at the mouth of the cove and can be waded to at certain times of the day.

On the largest of these shoals is a shrine to Yarris. Made of white coral and precious metals, a statue to the Sea God is the centerpiece of the cenotaph, which seems to rise from the waters during low tide. Sailors and fishermen alike always stop a moment above the shrine and proffer a libation of wine before sailing out of the cove to ensure a safe journey.

The coastal area is also the breeding ground of a species of giant crustacean. These magnificent beasts are ill-tempered and aggressive. Their meat is considered a delicacy throughout the Empire giving the people of the region an additional commodity. Over the years, the men and women of the region developed a process by which the shell of these giant creatures can be softened temporarily and molded into a spiny, ceramic-looking armor, which has the strength of steel.

The region is also a favorite spot for wealthy patricians to vacation and rest from the stress of life in the capitol. Opulent and splendid villas dot the coastline and the Emperor himself has a residence here that rivals many palaces in other nations.

Annonica

Divided into two separate regions, Upper and Lower, Annonica is the southwestern most province of the Empire. Known for its high bluffs and cliffs, it also serves as the training grounds for freshly mustered legion recruits.

Upper Annonica has a higher elevation than its sister. The grassy plains of Balantica begin to gradually rise until they reach the coastline where the land is far above sea level.

These crags and cliffs are honeycombed with caves and grottos, which are the nesting place of hundreds of bats of all types and sizes. Enterprising plebeians climb down the treacherous rock face and collect as much bat guano as they can carry. This is then sold as fine fertilizer in Balantica for a tidy profit.

This endeavor is not without its risk, however. Besides the danger of falling to the jagged rocks below or the rare attack from bats, these caves are also home to numerous Night and Sea Hags, who would greatly enjoy a change of diet from their usual meal of raw bat.

Lower Annonica is not as high as its sister, but is still home to beautiful white precipices and cliffs. A long and narrow extension of land

almost encloses the Bay of Annonica, leaving only a slender waterway for merchant ships to enter.

At the end of this land bridge is a gigantic statue called the Monument of the Fallen Legionnaire. Built by the Dwarves of Solenos Mor as a gesture of good faith between their two people, this statue looms over the Straits and Bay of Annonica.

The statue looks downward, its face hidden by its helm, one hand by its side gripping a gladius, the other holding up an immense brazier. This brazier is lit by magical flames and acts as a beacon, warning unwary ships of the shoals and sand bars that abound in the area. Legend has it that the statue is magical and will animate in times of crisis.

At the very apex of both halves of the province, situated at the mouth of the Corvis River is the provincial capitol, Plexus. Known as the Gateway to the Western Lands, Plexus is a rich city serving as a convenient point of departure or entry to and from the Empire. With the League of Princes so conveniently located across a narrow portion of the Gulf of Coryan, trade between it and the Western Lands is brisk and highly lucrative.

The Western Marches

If the Empire has a frontier, then it must be the rugged and wild lands of the Western Marches.

Divided into two protectorates, the Upper Marches is marked by numerous plateaus and jagged, broken cliffs. This desolate and barren region is home to a strange race of winged reptilian creatures the legionnaires call the Cormorants. These cruel creatures have a frightening level of intelligence that is as dangerous as their razor sharp talons.

Standing as tall as a man, these deceptively thin beasts have pale, sandy-hued skin that blends into the surrounding landscape making them almost invisible when they are motionless. The two legions stationed in the Upper Marches lost a great many men before the creatures were even spotted. Their name, given to them by a sardonic val'Borda, stems from their unending appetite for human flesh.

Scholars from Altheria as well priests and Druids from the Balantican province feel that these creatures are an offshoot of the same legendary beasts that once roosted in Nier's Spine. If so, then it may be some time before the Upper Marches are safe to roam at will.

The Lower Marches are a much more pleasant land than its elevated sister. These lands are lush with vegetation due to the cyclical

flooding of the Peladorn River, which drains into the Gulf of Coryan to the south. Towards the western edges, indications of the trackless wastes that lie beyond are evident.

Many in the Senate questioned the need for six entire legions to patrol such a sparsely populated region. The Senator from western Illonia, which borders the Marches, informed his distinguished colleagues of the Chauni bandits and slave traders that were constantly raiding the surrounding area and towns before the stationing of the legions there. Even so, reports of kidnappings and pillaging still persist, just not in the same numbers as before.

Even more ominous is the knowledge that no one truly knows what lies beyond the Marches. Every expedition sent out that travels beyond these outposts are not heard from again, including those accompanied by the best Elvish and human rangers on Onara.

Senators Gaius Tensen-Balin and Phineas Assante-Voucis feel that the unknown is the greatest threat the Coryani Empire faces. Without knowing what potential threats exist beyond the border, the Empire is vulnerable. To rectify this deficiency, the Senators are actively recruiting a force to go and learn, once and for all, what exists beyond the Marches. So far, there haven't been many who are eager to leave the comforts of high civilization and forge out into the wastes.

The Lost City of Mattawab and the Temple of the Monkey God

Somewhere in the mountains where the Upper Marches abuts the Corlathian Mountains is an ancient trail that leads to a lone temple. Hundreds, if not thousands of different species of monkeys and apes populate this temple, built in a strange and hauntingly beautiful architectural style.

A pair of adventurers stumbled across the trail while seeking new passes through the Corlathian Mountains. Continuing on, they caught sight of the temple and were amazed at the numerous monkeys living in it.

Moving closer, small spider monkeys approached them and began searching them in a playful manner for food or treats. Allowing the primates to grow tired of their search, they eventually were able to advance a little further until they were just within sight of the temple. They immediately noticed two things. First was that the overgrown temple was covered in writing and secondly, the small spider monkeys had given way to orangutans and baboons who did not seem as playful as the first.

Beating a hasty retreat, the adventurers escaped the hordes of snarling and howling apes



that chased them down the pass but no further. When they returned to civilization, they told their story to any who would listen and added one additional piece of information. One of the adventurers had been able to read a small portion of the inscriptions on the temple. Written in Ancient Altharin, it spoke of the Temple as a Gateway to the city of Mattawab and riches beyond imagining.

Unfortunately for the two, they have not been able to find the path that leads to the lost temple. It is as if the Gods themselves are not ready for man to discover its secrets.

Standing, the Centurion brushed himself and made ready to continue the journey. "I have spent too long waxing nostalgic about the Empire. Let us continue and I promise to finish answering your questions this evening."

Before he could take a step, a fist materialized out of thin air and clubbed the unsuspecting Centurion across the back of the head, stunning him.

Fully dispelling the enchantment that had rendered him invisible, a Sarishan loomed over the fallen Centurion.

Reaching down and taking his gladius, the Canceri spat. "You have been a thorn at my side for far too long, Bernarr. You should have turned a blind eye to these slaves. I once told you your vaunted Coryani arrogance would be your downfall. And now by your own sword, I send you to Nier's Judgment."

Before the Sarishan could run the stunned Bernarr through, a rock smashed into his temple. Then another. And another, until he fell, blood running down his face. Wiping his eyes clear, he saw his former slaves picking up more rocks.

Sneering, a spell leaping to his mind the Sarishan gasped and fell dead, his empty stare one of disbelief.

Pulling his recovered short sword out of the Sarishan's carcass, Bernarr rubbed his throbbing head. "Give my regards to the Nier's Valinor."

Turning, he saw the children smiling, hope replacing their fear of returning to the slave pits. The young girl who had grilled him so poignantly dropped the stone she held and crossed her clenched right fist across her chest. "For duty and honor!"

Bernarr could not help but laugh. He stood at attention and returned her salute. "For duty and honor!"

Who's Who in Coryan

Emperor Calsestus val'Assante' Light of the World.

The Emperor Calsestus ascended the Alabaster Throne late in life. Just when it appeared

that his father would outlive them all, he died while on holiday at the Summer Palace in Salantis. The lady Livinia val'Sheem, High Priestess of Larissa and his father's consort, comforted him through the long months of mourning before the fallen Emperor's final interment.

Calsestus, already late in his fourth decade of life, quickly became infamous for his opulent lifestyle and garish parties. In less than a year, his festivals and weeklong spectacles in the Grand Arena threatened to stress the bountiful Imperial coffers.

His disregard for the day-to-day governance of the Empire earned him the scorn of many senators and high-ranking military officers who see him as a foppish buffoon not fit to sit upon the throne. This open contempt was quickly quashed when the Emperor ordered a purge by the Legion of Vigilance.

Calsestus' reputation for cruelty and vengeance soon erased his image as a wanton reveler. Within the last few months, a royal visitor and her entourage appeared at the gates of the Imperial Capital.

Claiming to be the ruler of a far-off southern Empire, Queen Alezha, as she was introduced, came bearing gifts for the Emperor. Dozens of elephants and other rare pack animals were laden with chests and coffers of gold, silver and unique items never before seen in the Empire.

Alezha, a raven-haired woman of unearthly beauty, quickly ingratiated herself with Calsestus and entranced him with her exotic nature. This has caused an unheard of alliance between the val'Sheem and val'Dellenov families, each of whom see their chances of having one of their own wed the Emperor diminish with each sultry move of the foreign queen.

General Menisis val'Tensen, Defender of the Empire

The General is a typical val'Tensen; curt, pragmatic, fearless and proud. These qualities have made the High General the epitome of a legionnaire and the mark by which all others are measured. He is beloved by the men he leads into combat and is admired by the general populace at large for his decisive victories against the enemies of the Empire. These attributes and achievements have earned him the title of Defender of the Realm, commander of all the Empire's Legions as well as the enmity of many powerful men, including the Emperor himself.

These men fear that the general will one day move against the Emperor and take the throne. Should that occur, many illicit business ventures and dealings would come to a screeching halt and topple them from the lifestyle they have become accustomed. Unknown to these fearful power-mongers, Menisis does not lust for power. His primary concern is making sure that the Empire does not fall to its many enemies and precipitate another

Shadowed Age. He truly believes in the promise of the Empire, spreading the light of civilization to the benighted rabble of humanity.

Soon may come the day, though, when he may conclude that the only way to keep his beloved Empire together and hold back the tide of night is to seize power himself. On that day, Coryan's many sycophants and parasites will weep red beneath his baleful gaze.

Patriarch Felician val'Mehan, the Vessel of Illiir

The first val'Mehan to hold the position of Patriarch, Felician is a man dedicated to ideal of the Mother Church and the spread of its teachings throughout Onara.

Born in Abessios to legionnaire parents, Felician was given a Coryani name and sent to study in Coryan itself. Though still broad-shouldered and bearing the golden tan like all native Abessians, he distanced himself from his native land and embraced all things Coryani.

He moved up the ranks of the clergy of Sarish and eventually became the confidant to the previous Patriarch. On his deathbed, the Patriarch named Felician his successor and the council of Pyrman honored the elder by voting him into office.

All exactly as the visions he received since he was a child prophesied. But destinies sometimes demand a considerable price. This one is no exception.

A new vision has asserted itself now that the previous one has come to pass. In it, he sees a falcon, broken and crippled, beset by predators on all sides. As the falcon is ripped apart, a light shines upon a huge stone throne, The Throne of Man in the First City, which immediately crumbles to dust and blows away.

The pillar of flame, which cast the light, is extinguished and in its place is a dark, empty silence. Eternal and omnipresent.

Felician has interpreted this falcon to be the Empire, crippled from having been sundered into so many individual states. Determined to see that this vision not come to past, he has begun by opening a dialogue with the Sarishan Temples in Canceri. He hopes that if he can re-unite the Theocracy of Canceri with the Empire, Milandir and Altheria will have no choice but to return to the loving arms of the Empire and the Mother-Church, staving off the horrible fate he has seen.

The World According to the Old Centurion

"Altheria

Arrogant to the extreme, the Altharians invariably irritate true sons of Coryan. The conceit, first to think that their relationship with Althares is superior to that

of our beloved Patriarch and then they look down their noses at others, even the true sons of Coryan. If it were not for the value of the Blastpowder we'd have left them to the snakes long ago."

"Canceri

They are nothing but filthy heretics and traitors. It is fortunate for them that Milandir lays between the Empire and their dismal realm. Their pacts with unholy powers, be they dead or demonic, are an affront to honorable men. One day their wickedness will be put to an end at the point of the Empire's Gladius."

"Milandir

They're honorable enough and good in a fight I suppose, but insufferably arrogant and prudish. They have the gall to preach honor to the people that have brought honor to all of Onara. Everything they have, they owe to Coryan and one day Milandir will return to the fold, like a petulant child that plays at running away."

"Dwarves

They should keep to their mountains. Onara is for men and Coryan doubly so. Plus I cannot trust a people that can never seem to relax and have a good time."

"Elorii

Which elves are you speaking of? The grim ones from the southeast that will kill you or the sarcastic ones from the north that will stand at your side and kill everything that opposes you? Either way, we'd all be better off if they stayed in the forest."

"The Hinterlands

No people are in need of the civilizing influence of our glorious Imperium as the unwashed savages and bandits that eke out their meager existence in the blasted wastelands of the far north. If they were wise, they would join the Empire of their own volition. "

"The Pirate Isles

Pirate scum and barbaric tribesmen are beneath the attentions of a Coryani."

"Ymandragore

Those that steal children deserve only death. Once the Ymandrake tried to take away the heir of our empire and, to their sorrow, they found that Coryani are made of sterner stuff than the pathetic nations that littered Onara before the coming of the First Emperor. I would never hesitate to slay one of the Witch-King's harvesters."



The Blessed Lands

The Epistle

To his most Reverent Lordship, Risel Prio of Arcetta, High Savant and Steward of his Holiness, the Patriarch of Coryan.

Greetings to your Lordship, from the Savant-Scribe of the Nerothian Temple of Hophis at Arcetta

What follows are the basic synapses requested by his Holiness, the Patriarch of Coryan, which will sum up and correlate the more extensive treatises collaborated on by so many for this greater work on the subject of the peoples and regions of Onara. As requested, this particular treatise has been kept brief and concise due to clerical knowledge within the Mother Church, of these common facts.

The work no doubt is included to make these details available for future generations in addition to those not fortunate enough to have the wisdom and the prolific, erudite learning of the noble clerisy at large, particularly where it concerns the respective lesser churches of Onara.

This has been kept foremost in mind since the work's inception and I have hopes that this rudimentary piece to the greater whole will suffice to placate your Lordship's wishes, as well as his Holiness, the Patriarch.

May Illir smile upon your most esteemed Lordship, in all his works and endeavors.

Anlock Heptu

Savant-Scribe of the Temple of Hophis
Arcetta, Cafella

Introduction

Of all the events that have transpired across the face of Onara, be they hapless or fortunate, from the works and deeds of the serpentmen, Elorii, giants, men or any other countless nations of beings, every one of these have revolved, however remotely, around the Blessed Lands.

This ancient region is the locus of the continent, and through millennia of wars, pilgrimages, and the foundation and collapse of empires, this land stands as testament to the reverence and veneration of many peoples and races.

To give a summary recapitulation is near to impossible, and doubtless, there will be many more accounts of discovery and revelation in the centuries to come, which will add to the already indefatigable abundance of rich history this region contains.

What follows below is a mere summation of modern sites, active groups and places one might find, which is hoped will enlighten and inform to the glory of the Mother Church, and the worthwhile scholarly pursuit of secular historical record.

Of Knights and Pilgrims

To know the true heart of religion and faith is to know and firmly realize the minds and whims of the laity. So it is within the Blessed Lands.

Truly, nothing can be fully grasped in this land without full understanding of the pious aims of the common pilgrim, whose trials and hardships in this somewhat inhospitable region are endured only through steadfast faith and reverent devotion. Many of these men and women save for this journey for years, with no guarantee of safe passage or salvation, so they might touch the worldly representation of the divine, risking robbery, disease and death. Some are even more devout than this, wandering the wilderness in search of visions, or sequestering themselves away in tiny hovel shrines to contemplate the will of the Gods.

This is not to say that all pilgrims are zealous hermits or squalid common masses. As is well known, it is expected to journey to the First City at least once in ones lifetime, something that is encouraged, and yea, even funded by the varied munificent orders of Onara. Many of the landed gentry trek across the dusty wastes to worship and fulfill their obligations, some of them taking their entire families as well as servants and retainers with their kin. In most lands, a pilgrimage to the Blessed Lands (successful or not) is seen as a worthwhile and esteemed personal trial of faith, endurance, and accomplishment, and marks one's family with honor.

Tens of thousands amass on the borders of more civilized lands at certain times of year, hoping for protection in numbers and comradely support from hardship, bandits and predators. Much of the traffic along the well-established roads occurs just before the tidal months, coinciding with festivals and press into the First City.

Armed patrols along the outer rim of mountain ranges are rare, and the vastness of the region precludes full protection from monsters and troupes of highwaymen who prey on passing pilgrims and merchants.

Sometimes knights, typically of Milandir, traverse the length and breadth of the land, delivering wagonloads of goods or escorting pilgrims,



but unfortunately, this is all too rare. The only commonly seen group is a dutiful order, which skirts the periphery of the thoroughfares and wild terrain of the Blessed Lands. They are a well-established order whose only goal is the protection and safety of any pilgrims journeying to the First City.

The Order of the Soldier-Saints of Dagha

This valiant order's elite ranks consist of those who believe in the continued liberty of the First City and the Blessed Lands. This, along with escorting all pilgrims and visitors who come to worship in the ancient temples of the Pantheon, regardless of race (human, elf, or otherwise) or nationality. Although they are currently at peace with every nation that surrounds them, great conflicts have erupted in the past due to wars or political rivalries outside the order, the Patriarchal Seat not withstanding.

The origins of this order stem from the first Coryani-Khitani War, when pilgrims from all nations were harassed, pressed into levies, or butchered outright.

At one point during the campaigns after a massive battle near Ghunlud, two small groups of Coryani and Khitani soldiers became lost in the wilderness while stalking one another in the dark. Much of the soldiery was made up of creatures pressed into service; these being orcs, dwarves, and men of many nations. Eventually the Coryani troupe surprised and killed the Khitani squad near a ring of primitive altar stones.

These men were so tired from the day's events that they encamped around the altars, sliding bodies aside and laying down between them in a shameless display of lurid indecency. They were awakened in the night by a searing light from the head altar stone, and saw a terrible vision of Illiir before them.

The soldiers cowered before His radiance, groveling like dogs. Illiir chafed the soldiers for profaning His sacred ground, proclaiming the guilt of all nations involved. In His wisdom and might, Illiir charged these men with the task of delivering

all pilgrims, regardless of their origins, to the gates of the First City, in penitence for their gruesome acts. Illiir told these men that they would be persecuted for their deeds, but that they should go about their task unabated, and seek His everlasting will and glory, and not men's temporal favor.

These soldiers sought out a priest, (it is unknown to which church he belonged, or even if he was human) to bless and purify the altar stones. They then constructed a small chapel fort in the wilderness, and proceeded to escort any pilgrims that needed help, hunting bandits and monsters alike fearlessly. Some of these men were arrested and put to death for desertion or as enemies of the Khitani and other races, even after they had explained their tale. Anyone who had ever judged, sentenced or executed these men were found strangely burnt as if immolated, and as word traveled of these miracles, the penitent soldiers and their fort chapel were left well alone.

Since then the rag-tag group of soldiers has become a devotional group with extensive contacts, funds, and many fort chapels still based on the design of the humble edifice constructed so long ago. They were given the illustrious honorific of the Order of the Soldier-Saints of Dagha, still tasked with their holy mission to escort the penitent to the rock plateau whose name their order bears, and on which is the most holy site on all of Onara. The number of the order rests at around fifty warriors, with nominal accompanying priests, servants, and specialists staffing the various chapel forts and holdings.

They accept any man, woman, or being into their ranks, so long as they pass the Rigors of the Penitent, which is a mixed test of survival, faith, and devotion to the Blessed Lands and the pilgrims within. It is said to be easier to find a living dragon than to pass this arduous series of trials, and some do not survive it at all.

The Roster of the Canons holds none too few names of men, and one woman (Saint Brigid, The Zealot of Naeraanth) from this order over the centuries. These names include Rindar Karyo (the Just), and the famous Coryani Legionnaire, Alrameus Vernico of Plexus, who is personally responsible for the patroning of the Legion of Honorable Accord, which guards the First City to this day. Many Coryani applicants who fail the Rigors of the Penitent fill the ranks of this honorable legion. Others might serve in the chapel forts or as messengers and emissaries.

These warriors are stoic and impartial, often riding through and camping in the dusty terrain for days or weeks at a time. They swear fealty only to the temples and pilgrims of the First City, and the ancient command given by the Vision of Illiir so long ago.

The Twelve Citadels of the Pantheon

During the Shadowed Age, the wonders of the First City and its very existence were forgotten, a mythical place that had no real worldly location. It was through the works and endeavors of the Emerald Society that the First City and its secluded inhabitants were rediscovered. Many of these folk combed the vastness of the Blessed Lands, and discovered a ring of twelve citadels; each dedicated to a specific God of the Pantheon. These archaic edifices dated back to the before the First Imperium, and were cleared of monsters as well as fitted with modern accoutrements. Many of these citadels are currently patrolled by the Soldier-Saints of Dagha, and the appropriate priests and monks of each respective church within them run the day to day affairs, much akin to abbeys. It is thought that they were designed as a first line of defense against invasion of the First City, and to solidify travel and congress amongst the inhabitants and visitors of the Blessed Lands. Some are afforded units and small armies at times, but they are usually merely way stations more than thriving communities.

Pilgrims often stop at one or more of the citadels, and though it is not expected, the most devout worshippers of all lands attempt to visit as many as is possible before entering the First City. Many of these faithful go first to Coryan, to visit the ruins of the Temple of the Pantheon, taking a small stone from the rubble with them on their journey, to place it in the First City at the finale of the pilgrimage.

One of these Citadels is lost, it is assumed by monsters of some kind, within the rows of petrified trees that cover the southwestern curve of the Corelathian Mountains. Once this area was a lush forested region, lost now to the eldritch magical nature of the Kurenthe, or powerful elven death curses uttered here during and after the God War between the Pantheon and the Elemental Lords.

The citadel, perhaps appropriately, is dedicated to Nier, God of War, Destruction, and Flames. The capture of this citadel or even meager scouting efforts have been thwarted, due to some unknown enemy or force that resides within the stony bowers of the petrified forest. Many questing knights and paladins of Nier have ventured into the forest, never to return.

Sometimes statuary can be found within the forest as well, remnants of an ancient culture or perhaps the stony remains of the brave souls who have entered and been petrified by monsters. Some tales relate that these statues move from time to time, and that they are in fact either golems, petrified remains, or else something that matches additional accounts of indigenous soldiers and travelers in or near the region.

Reputedly, they relate that an ancient tribe of primitive cannibals lives within the forest, which disguise themselves with ash or white clay to give the semblance of statues, to ambush the unwary. These cannibals take some of those so captured back to stone temples, wherein live Medusae whom they worship. Bandits of the region often use this camouflage tactic, and many that debate it is these criminals that are in fact the "cannibals". Whatever the truth of the place, it is true that the Soldier-Saints and legionary patrols report more missing soldiery, merchants, and pilgrims in this area of the Blessed Lands than in any other region, and travelers are forewarned.

The Plateau of Dagha

This rocky mount stands on the western edge of the Blessed Lands, next to the Plain of Ghunlud at the mouth of the Flood Plain. A vast natural depression, ringed by a ledge of hilly protrusions has been carved out around it from millennia of the quarterly tidal floods from the tidal basin. The plateau is stark and rugged, with many caves and overhanging cliffs. The tidal waterlines are roughly defined by trees and grasses, which grow in uneven circular rings on the plateau walls.

The massive entrance to the First City is a large pass cut into the eastern face, surmounted by a marble arch with a large bejeweled golden sundial surrounded by the holy medallions of the Pantheon. A large staircase hewn from the dark rock with many adjoining passages and stairwells grant access upward to the fortified Gate of the Patriarchs. Sometimes merchants selling water, refreshments, or salt are allowed on the thirteen tiers of the staircase, particularly when the weather is hot or inhospitable. Two slim paths connect with the mammoth stone piers placed on the northern and western sides of the plateau for small boats and ships sailing in when the tidal basin floods.

Upon passing through the stalwart Gate of the Patriarchs, the First City is seen to be mostly uninhabited. Fully three quarters of the city are in ruins, once a majestic, sprawling metropolis that now lies unused and inhabited by monsters. This portion of the city is cut off by a long, zigzagging wall with many well-lit towers, placed here during the retaking of the plateau to protect those living there from roving monsters, flying horrors and undead. These creatures can occasionally be heard shuffling about or spotted through arrow slits or stop the catwalks on gloomy, ominous days or at night.

A small section has been retaken since the re-founding of the First City, in which resides the original Temple of the Pantheon and many of the original holy sites and shrines of the First

Imperium. They have been refurbished and built upon, tended to by a dizzying array of monastic orders, priesthoods, hermits and holy men of all castes, race, and nationality.

The city itself gives the impression of being cramped and lacking in space within most quarters, particularly on the narrow streets. They are lined in close rows by many tall buildings, crenellations, temples, and towers, along with the myriad of hostelrys, shops, and businesses required for the worshipful masses visiting the First City. Many of the thin paved lanes culminate in broad plazas of the ancient style, square with fountains, huge monuments on elaborate pedestals, and are lined by large decorative columns adorned with beautiful gilding and gargoyles of all types. Buildings facing into these plazas have loggias, porticoes, and elevated covered walks with colorful tiled steps in front of their entrances.

The population numbers at around fifty thousand, with this number tripling and sometimes quadrupling during holy days, festivals, and the tidal months. The city is administered by an appointed Altherian Prefect, Lord Ufem N'degoche', who also has the ecclesiastical rank of Divine Steward of Dagha, along with a large staff of Altherian bureaucrats, administrators and their staff. Lord Ufem administers the normal laws, and they are enforced by the Legion of Honorable Accord, along with a small contingent of Khitani soldiery and priests. These warriors are stationed in the Hall of Valor or in the small garrison buildings and forts around the city. A select body of clerical officials chosen by various lands to represent the interests of their respective churches runs the affairs of the temples and shrines, and hold elections, help to pass laws, and hold debates on church doctrine and policies.

Most of the affairs go on daily as they would in any large city of the land; contrasted against the background of many centuries of worship and devout prayer that continues to this day.

Ruins of the Fallen Ages

As was mentioned, the First City is by no means entirely inhabited by saintly priests and throngs of humble pilgrims. What lies beyond the great wall that separates the city proper and its quarters are the remnants of thousands of years of war, decay, progress, and temporal passage. Many of the ruins are so old as to date back to the time before the God War, when the capitol of the Ssethregoran Empire was the only city here, called Yahssremore. It is even suspected by many explorers and scholars of the Emerald Society that there may have been another settlement outdating this. What this settlement was is not completely known, but many strange Stella and artifacts exist

within the ruins that are clearly not of saurian origin. After the Ssethregore came the race they spawned, who rebelled against their masters after the death of the wizard Salos. Upon taking Yahssremore, the Elorii founded the city of Belestor, "Shining Home," and according to records and written descriptions, along with marvelous findings within the ruins and crypts of the First City, it earned its lofty name well.

After the God war came the peoples of the First Imperium, who were brought here by the Pantheon, making the First City the center of all doings within their expansive provinces, states and holdings. They worshipped the same gods, though they had animal representations. This is still seen today in certain temples or on ruins, many having sacred animals on the large temple grounds within the city proper. Then was the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame, which defeated the armies of the First Legions under the banner of Leonydes val'Virdain, better known as the immortal Sword of the Heavens. The Theocrat ruled until he became too despotic, and was killed in a rebellion.

What had happened during the ubiquitous Shadowed Age, (also called the Time of Darkness), is completely unknown. Whole generations lived and died never having seen or even heard the tales and legends of the First City. Fusions of separate Gods within the Pantheon were worshipped in remote city-states, while the rest were cast aside during this dark and pagan time.

Then came the Time of Terror, when devils, demons, and unspeakable planar beings plagued every corner of Onara. Out of this chaos rose the First Emperor, who named Almeric val'Assante as his successor upon his death, founding the dynastic Imperial Families of the Coryani. Since then the city has been disputed throughout modern history, and the arrangements which stand today serve to entreaty all nations and races so they might travel and worship in this the holiest of cities.

The ruins and crypts reflect this many-layered succession of occupancy, though the main body of these structures dates to the First Imperium.

Within certain portions of the ruins, large covered stairwells leading down into massive labyrinths, sepulchre-lined caves, subterranean rectories, Elorii Halls, and saurian spiral chapels. These passages and rooms are truly so vast as to still not be fully documented.

It is believed by the Emerald Society that there are at least five distinct cultural layers to the subterranean crypts. Many holy relics and treasure hoards have been discovered, along with countless stella, preserved scrolls and tomes of many ages. Roaming beasts, undead, powerful summoned and bound creatures or cunning traps and deadfalls or riddles often guard these places.



It is unknown how deep the caverns and passages go. Deep well shafts often pierce the multitude of levels, likely they were for sacrificial purposes, and evidence suggests a massive cavern beneath the plateau that is filled with brackish water.

Literally, there are too many things and even basic facts to relate here.

(I strongly suggest to your Lordship that the entire Plateau of Dagha be well documented through the Emerald Society, in a very extensive work or works separate from this one.)

The Flood Plain

West of the lofty Dagha plateau on which rests the First City is a place the Chauni nomads call Ghunlud, a worn and scored land that makes up the large pass between the Khitau and Aqtai mountain ranges. Broad plateaus descend from this passage toward the western Sea of Lanterns, and where they were once bold and jagged, they are now worn smooth from millennia of erosion due to the massive lunar tides that mark the seasons.

Below the rounded cliffs of Ghunlud, the land drops in elevation, becoming more level and lusterless, a great expanse of stony, pocked ground in shades of brown and ochre lined with flinty stones and bleached shells or coral. Ancient glossy fossils inundate the cliff walls or dot the pebbly ground, polished from the shifting tidal currents. Occasionally there are small oases lined with mangrove plants, but this is largely near the coast, or in shaded stodgy pools fed by mountainous water runoff that mixes with the salt water and forms warm brackish saline flats or ponds. Sometimes the ghostly skeletal hulls of Khitani ships lie stranded upon the mountaintops, or jut upward half-buried from the stony ground, their ragged sails flapping eerily on splintered masts with the dusty gales.

Very little can survive here normally, being migratory animals, birds, or strange amphibious creatures and fish. These adaptive beasts climb the mountain cliffs and secure themselves in rain filled crevasses or else dig into the water softened ground until the quarterly tides rush in to replenish the water and edible aquatic life of their homes.

One creature, the Gillicar, is a gigantic amphibian animal that can grow to lengths of twelve to fifteen feet. It resembles a dun armored carp with a toothy maw and hook like finned appendages, which it uses to walk or slide and thrash about the brackish, muddy slicks with copious speed. Normally the Gillicar is rather sedate and sluggish, and can easily be mistaken for a half-submerged rock or petrified log. However, they are fierce creatures when provoked, and have

been known to ambush travelers at the water's edge, or climb and spring off tall rocks with their tails, especially during the leaner parts of the year. The armored plates of the Gillicar are very dense and hard, and humanoids as well as the Chauni and Voei nomads of the region hunt this beast, using the plates for shields and armor.

The Tides

The seasonal flux of waters has been filling the tidal basin since the primordial creation of Arcanis due to the pull of the dual moons, Viridis, and Aperio. The waters rush in during the tidal months ascending and receding for a period of six days, Winter Tide (Muto) is the highest and Summer Tide (Dirigo) the lowest. The other two seasonal tides fluctuate the most according to conditions. The currents build and rise to fill the entire cone shaped basin and lap at the foot of Ghunlud for the first two days, and finally build to vault in frothing waves over the highest mesas to fill the bowl-like groove that surrounds the Dagha plateau and the First City. The tidal flows cause maritime winds and pull in storms, causing rains, and massive lightning strikes to score the mountaintops.

Many festivals and holy days have been held during these tidal months since just after the God War. Ancient monks and priests (particularly adherents of Yarris) placed great piers of stone with tidal markers so pilgrims might sail to and ascend to the temples and sites held sacred by every being on Onara.

During the night, the glowing lights of many iridescent creatures, which give the Sea of Lanterns its name, swim about the waters or drift along with the currents. Gillicars, dolphins, sharks, and great shoals of shimmering Moon Fish leap or rush about the piers, making this normally parched environment a fisherman's paradise. When the tides rush out, many of these creatures become stranded in tide pools, and Chauni, Hobgoblin, Gnoll, and Voei alike descend on the Flood Plain to reap the bounty the marooned aquatic life creates. Predators and scavengers dwell here in abundance also, picking up or devouring what remains of the nomadic hunts and foraging. Near the end of these periods, a great fishy smell fills the Flood Plain, fading slowly with the coming dry weeks. The various hunters and scavengers assault the basin floor and leave when the waters dry up as quickly as they came.

Lanzhou Island

The broad mouth of the Flood Plain ends abruptly in sheer cliffs of burnished dark rock. They are pocked with caves and bird rookeries, and under them is a cove called Gin Ho. At the center of Gin Ho Cove is a tall formation of rock, used in

times of old by the Khitani for seminal invasions of the Flood Plain. It is used nominally now as a base for training or as a harbor during rough weather.

Lanzhou Island is hollow, with two large cavern apertures on the eastern side and at the top. Stairwells have been carved up the sides of the inner cave shaft, and wind-twisted mangrove trees and rugged grasses ring the lip or dot the nooks and cracks of the cliff tops. Other than the occasional Khitani sailor, nothing sets foot on Lanzhou Island with the exception of scuttling crabs and aquatic lizards, birds, and other flying beasts. That is to say...nothing normal.

Saamurkond and the Black Colossus

In ancient times, men would come here in search of great artifacts left from an ancient race of giants who lived there and on the surrounding cliffs. To this day, great blocks of foreign stone can be found in the shallows of Gin Ho Cove, or on the nearby natural balconies overlooking the sea. They look to be foundations of antediluvian buildings and streets, now nearly completely eroded and almost unrecognizable save that they are of a different color and cast than the native cliffs and sea floor.

Some of the blocks have old symbols chiseled deep upon their surface. The language seems to resemble the markings found on other mysterious monoliths in farther regions of Onara (such as the Sorcerer Stones in the western Hinterlands, or upon the path markers at Maduwaab in the province of Valentia.

Refugees from the Khitani Empire speak of an elder magnificent port city of cyclopean giants, called Saamurkond, founded before the First City. The tales say that the giants became infected with the sin of hubris from their greatness, building a mammoth statue in their own honor, which rose above the highest buildings of Saamurkond at the heart of the city. The Gods cursed the city and a dreadful cataclysm befell Saamurkond, plunging it beneath the waves.

Many of the Cyclops of Saamurkond died, but some survived a more horrid fate, becoming scaled and gilled like fishes, cursed to roam the watery streets of their ruined city and the mountainous sea floor as they did on land. Their hands and feet became webbed, and their large eyes became bulbous like a frog, casting a great beam of light to search the sea and illuminate their way.

Many accounts exist of men seeing flashing beams of light in the Sea of Lanterns, or even upon the Flood Plain on misty nights. These lights can occasionally be seen from as far away as the First City or at the southern edge of the Vastwood over the Khitau Mountains.

There is also a documented encounter from a book titled "Investigations of Onara," by the renowned Milandisian knight and explorer, Sir Armind Gerhard Tildighast, which reads as follows:

Night of the Twenty Eighth, Pallidus

I had traveled late in the autumn season on the Flood Plain in hopes of finding the wreck of a large Khitani vessel said to be stranded atop a mountain peak near Gin Ho Cove. I felt such a vessel would truly be worthy of study, and worth the risk of Voei marauders or the inclement foggy weather in this treacherous landscape, lest the coming tides of winter carry it off. Aperio was full that night, and its glittering black form appearing through the parting fog caused my native Chauni guides to babble on about ancient Saamurkond and the fishy giants that stalk the tidal basin on nights such as this. (I must confess that at the time, I thought it rather nonsensical and childish.)

The fog became too thick to press onward, so we encamped for the night, making due within the confines of a deep crevasse. The native guides continued their senseless ramblings as I prepared my papers by lantern light.

Suddenly, a low watery howl pierced the dreadful silence, cutting through the fog and resounding off the cliffs. It was answered in kind by three other howls in the distance, and as the frantic Chauni guides scampered about and bemoaned their lot, I shined the powerful lantern beam into the fog, drawing my Altharian flintlock and cocking it.

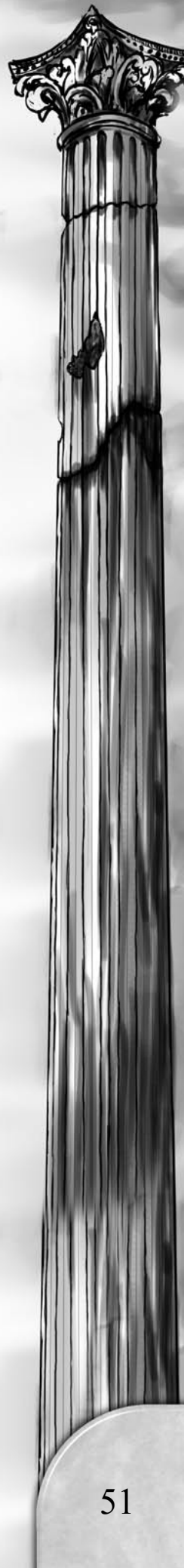
What followed was chaos and madness. At one point during the cacophonous melee, I had heard a slogging noise directly behind me, and wheeled around, leveling my arm for a steady shot. I was stunned mentally as I spied the towering, glistening form of a hulking giant...that which can only be described as a thing. It was armed with a glinting trident and grabbing for a guide. As I made to shoot it, it turned on me with a searing light emitted from its lone bulbous eye, blinding me completely and causing me to lose consciousness.

When I awoke in the cool morning air, all that remained were the sparse remnants of our camp, and the body of one of the Chauni guides, shot through the head from my discharged flintlock.

I believe his name was Hoko.

Right. Must remember to bring an astute wizard with me next time or perhaps a priest of Hurrian.

Whatever these beasts are, and what remains of hoary Saamurkond is not fully known. It is enough to say that the Flood Plain and all its inhabitants are strange beings and creatures, unique to this far flung corner of Onara.



The Western Lands

Past the provincial ports and green cliffs of the Gulf of Coryan lie the Western nations, known collectively as the League of Princes. Within one of these nations, Mhyrcia is the bustling, stoic merchant town of Qhoon, a place where one might rise from ambitious commoner to wealthy merchant prince in a short span of time. Years ago, one man in particular set out in his youth from Coryan to capitalize on the lucrative opportunities he had heard so much about from merchant tales in the markets of the Imperial capitol.

He bartered and dealt successfully, first becoming relatively prosperous, then wealthy, and lastly well respected as a shrewd and honored member of the Speculator's Council. He lived a long and contented life, and when at last he passed away, many spoke of this foreigner as one of their own, a powerful man and seasoned merchant. He had no wife or family there, and his will declared that his estates and holdings were to be split between various folk or causes that he favored in his final years. The executor of the will sent many packages and parcels via messengers across the land in order to fulfill the merchant's last wishes.

One such package was carried through the Governors Gate in distant Coryan, to the humble quarters of a struggling young man of distant nobility named Florian Reed, and left with the landlord. When Florian at last came home and opened the package, he found a deed of ownership in his name for a small but valuable merchant house, and a letter explaining that the previous owner was a distant relation, now deceased. It also contained a detailed mercantile log, a well-worn diary, and a golden signet ring, along with directions to a place called Hollow Mound Castle in the town of Blackwand. After examining the contents of the package thoroughly, Florian made immediate arrangements for departure. He traveled through the western provinces, to arrive some weeks later in Blackwand, a quaint fortified city at the isthmus of the Amaryllis River.

It is here that we begin our tale.

It is said that Hollow Mound Castle was built by adventuring men and mercenaries. "Hmm. It showed its meager roots all too clearly by way of its wretched, unappealing design", he thought.

Florian stepped through the dim, gargoyle-lined archway to the rear of the dusty, book-cluttered library tower, which revealed a climbing

stairwell. A clerk behind him had directed him here; saying cryptically that what he searched for was past the stone arch, before Florian had even uttered a word. The elderly Undir clerk was the only soul present in the room. When Florian turned to ask for a lantern or assistance, the strange man had left his post; a well used wooden counter. A steaming cup of sour smelling wine was the only trace that he had been there at all.

Libraries were characteristically quiet, excepting the bustling Great College in Coryan,



but this one in particular had an uneasy air about it, feeling more like an abandoned hall or courtroom than a place of higher learning.

He turned back to the stairwell at the echo of voices conversing from the top of the dust lined stair, and convinced himself to ascend so he could put an end to all of this ubiquitous foolishness. He had traveled for weeks to meet someone he had never heard of before, and claim an inheritance from a man he had never known personally. The Gods and all the Valinor be damned if he would turn back now, even in this strange outlandish place.

Florian climbed the steps to another of the lurid doorways where a large tamed forest cat with green tinged russet fur was languidly resting across the threshold. He stepped over the lounging creature into a cool room of bluish-gray stone, presumably the top of the western tower from the great distance he had climbed. The new room appeared much as the library; cluttered and with the same abandoned cast about it.

At the center of the room, a tall woman with long tresses of white-blonde hair had her back turned to the door, and she stood behind a diamond shaped oak table, thick as a man's wrist. She seemed to be engaged in working something intricate that Florian could not see, and she spoke suddenly without turning.

"You must be Florian Reed of Coryan. I will be right with you." Her voice had the sound of many years of life, and an attractive, sober clarity, with only the slightest hint of Kio accent. How did she know his name? She spoke again in crisp tones. "Do you happen to know anything of engineering, or inventions? I suppose not." Still she did not turn, and continued her anonymous fumbling.

Florian became impatient and decided to take the lead. "Madam, I have come a very long way, and as an aside, had not announ-

"Silence young man!" she interrupted sharply, "I know why you have come here, for it is I you seek! Now sit you down there." She stabbed a finger toward a corner where a chair sat, and took a deep breath. Taken aback and flushed, Florian pulled out the chair and sat down quietly. He looked over toward the door, and saw the yellow-eyed forest cat staring at him intently, no doubt wakened from the noise. The woman finally turned, revealing an oblong wooden device of some kind in her hands, with a thin rocking bar that moved in time with a clacking sound from side to side. She placed the device on the table, and as she motioned to sit, a twisted driftwood chair scurried and creaked as if alive from another corner of the room to catch her

just in time. The woman slid her graceful arms up on the high curving rests of the chair, settling deep into its confines.

Florian sat dumbfounded, locking his gaze with the woman's face, who was no doubt of pure Kio descent given her hair, lily-white skin and fiery green eyes. They were almost wolfish, and seemed to bore deep into him. She was old now, but it was clear to Florian that she was once very striking. In the flustered state he was in, he could not decide to dispel his comfort by excusing himself politely and fleeing, or by striking up a conversation. The device on the table kept its droning pace with a steady click-clock, click-clock sound.

He still wondered how she knew it was he, and how in fact she knew him at all. As if she could read minds, she answered. "I have been waiting for you and had estimated your arrival somewhat earlier. Besides, no one else comes here unless they are announced to me." Her voice became softer and sincere. "I knew your great-uncle, who tasked me with your education. My condolences. His passing was a loss. He was an honored man." She bowed slightly in her magical chair.

"My education," he asked, "What do you speak of?" She replied, "Did you not come here to claim your inheritance, and to learn the laws and customs of the League?" Florian responded. "Well yes, but "

The Kiowoman interrupted again, "I can only assume you have. Moreover, do try to convince yourself that there are more important things for me than your affairs, especially at my age. I would not even be speaking to you now, were it not for a personal debt I owed your great-uncle. I will settle it in you. We Kio keep our oaths, and do not take them lightly."

Florian was intrigued. "What was the debt?" he asked. Her face became fiery and stern in character, and she leaned out over the table at him. The fingers on her hands were claw-like on the table's edge. She barked her words out as a hound might. "That is none of you affair, and does not influence what transpires between us!" Florian nearly fell over in his chair. Again she breathed deeply, and closed her eyes, letting out a measured sigh. She opened her eyes again and smiled, speaking calmly now. "Perhaps I will one day come to know you better and reveal it to you. But for now, I shall be your Antar, and teach you all you need to know."

She emphasized the word "need," suggestive of a gradual or restrictive process. Florian did not like the idea of that, and stood up to leave. She stopped him in his tracks by



saying, "You wish to know if the family stories in the diary are true, don't you?" He stiffened and turned around to face her more confidently, setting his gaze on her wolfen eyes.

She must have read the diary somehow or worse yet, been involved directly. The Kiowoman continued calmly, "There is some truth to the tales." Florian straightened himself and sat back down in the chair. She stretched over the table and leaned close to him, almost whispering. "You must learn the histories of your new home, including proper conduct and custom. I will teach you *everything*, my young disciple. But first, we will begin...small."

The League of Princes

To grasp the notions of the west along with the current state of affairs, one must peer into its turbulent history.

The League of Princes was once an untamed verdant wilderness. A vast jungle landscape grew out to meet the coastal edge of what is now the Gulf of Coryan. Fierce reptilian monsters prowled the humid forest floor, and leathery winged beasts or leaping tree dwellers

lived in the leafy canopies. Ancient tales relate that huge monumental cities of white stone built by the gods or spirits were hidden away in the dark confines of the jungle, home to tribes of intelligent white ape-men, lost civilizations, or lurid demon cults of evil humanoids. Certain ruins still stand within the far western frontier, and it is thought these are the cities that inspired such tales. What lied beyond the jungle was unknown, and this distant territory remains a largely unexplored tract of terrain to this day. The landscape is a combination of low plateaus that descend downward from the Lhauzyr Mountains to the north and west, with lowland basins and plains struck through with stony, green hills, and hot, tangled forests or groves. Many lakes, rivers, and lesser tributary streams line the lowlands and meander into the woodlands from the plateaus of the Lhauzyrs to spill out in the Gulf of Coryan. The various forests are temperate flora and fauna in the north, and give birth to tropical plants and animals as one travels further south. Even the cleared and populated regions are rife with vigorous plants and creatures that constantly encroach on civilized, cultivated areas, and must be cleared with regularity.



The Undir

The only men to live in this pristine wilderness were the Undir, placid clans of boat dwelling folk, said to be descended from a lost tribe of humans who mated with female water spirits called Undines. The Undines taught the people how to survive and ply the waters for their wealth and sustenance, and the offspring of these pairings became the Undir, or Watermen. It is not known if this is true, but many Undir show strange, almost fey characteristics, such as strangely colored and inhuman looking eyes, slightly webbed digits, or pointed ears. Some of them converted to the worship of the Elemental Lords, though most adhered to their ancient gods, many of which are subtle versions of the Pantheon. They were also taught not to stray too far into the depths of the forest, as this was the home of Elorii, savage beasts, and humanoids that would molest or harm the Undir. Many of the current Undir populace can still be found along the various streams, lakes, and on both sides of the coast, though none too few have settled far into the mainland on both sides of the gulf.

They are usually short and lithe, both in build and in features, with dark straight hair and skin the various colors of river clay. They dress in simple, loose garb of white and earthy tones, and carry large parangs or work knives stuffed into sashes and work belts. Some Undir are renowned for their expert knife throwing skills and challenges of nimble “deck duels,” which take place in ship’s rigging and masts, on small rocking boats, slim docks, or poles. Sometimes these are merely competitive contests, with belaying pins or clubs substituted for knives.

They are a simple folk, piloting fishing boats and rafts or becoming adept sailors at a very early age. Both the women and men can be found working on docks, at river fords, as merchants and marines for various nations, or as potent priests of Yarris. Most Undir are excellent swimmers. Given their locales, it is easy to see why they are called Watermen.

The Undir have a written language called Unden, with characters taken mainly from the Kio alphabet. They can be stubborn and a touch xenophobic, garnering traditional ways over fast change. However, the Undir are somewhat soft-spoken and though they are simple folk in nature, they are well mannered, and are often generous to those who fall on hard times.

The Undir are often blunt and frank of speech, getting directly to the point of a matter, and this is often misconstrued as being (ironically) cryptic or elusive. They make up a large percentage of the populace in the League, and are found in every nation, particularly on the coast.

Invaders from the Gods

The Undir lived the same way for many centuries, and some villages in northern Bhiharn (mainly in the Sword Fens) are the same as they were three or four hundred years ago. They interacted sparsely with the elvenfolk, and traded sporadically with the various peoples of the nearby coastal nations. However, a large influx of another ethnic group would change many things for the Undir irrevocably.

The tribal histories of the Undir relate that during the Time of Darkness, a great flying island of stone descended deep into the jungle near a mountain called Djuar, and many of the people were frightened. Many thought the True Gods were angry for the heresy of worshipping the Elemental Lords (or worse, devils and demons), and that they came seeking retribution. Religious infighting and clan feuds were a common occurrence. After a time, nothing changed, so the appearance of the island and the religious fear it caused were forgotten.

Then, tall white-skinned warriors with shiny golden hair and glinting metal armor appeared out of the forest in small groups, reigniting the clan feuds and volatile fear of divine retribution. They were the Kio, and the Undir mistook them for the Valinor of the Pantheon.

The foreigners were scouts from a western mountain city, looking for new lands to settle. Many Undir panicked at the mere sighting of these warriors, and it took months before any of the Kio scouts could speak with them. Many of the warriors supposed them to be savages and incapable of complex speech or written languages.

Finally, the gathered chiefs of all the tribes sent for a wise Undir elderman named Manuop, who was also a powerful priest of Yarris. Manuop went to see the “Valinor” near Yibho Lake where they had made a fortified encampment (currently near the city of Whon.)

Manuop used spells and spoke to the Kio, establishing a truce. The Kio explained their true origins, a lofty sky citadel from Yhriwhon, known collectively as the Sky Kingdoms. They said the city crashed during a bloody civil war in Yhriwhon, which nearly destroyed their civilization.

The Kio settled here, and many other settlements followed over the next century. The current locations of many cities of the League sit upon the original sites of these settlements and forts. Many of the Undir have mixed with the Kio, forming new clans and familial alliances. Not all of the contact between these peoples



was as friendly as with the original Kio scouting party and Manuop, however. In truth, many of the countries are beset with tales of bloody Kio conquest, long-lived racial or factional hatreds dating back hundreds of years, rooted in grim civil wars and despotic, tyrannical rulers.

There is no conceivable way to record them in a modest written record. One might sum them up in the subjects of subjugation, clannish feuds and territorial disputes, struggles for supremacy of both clerical and royal seats of power, racial or political separatist groups, and the heresies of elemental and demonic worship. Some of the more relevant exceptions will be spoken of in detail within specific regions, cities, or locales. Many of the towns within the League are not safe at times for traveling Imperial citizens, and although most incidents involve minor crimes, such as thievery or cons, some are brutal examples of what can befall the unwary. Ignorance of certain customs, laws, or biases by no means warrants either innocence or safe passage here.

The Kio

The Undir tale of Manuop and the Kio tells when they met, but it does not detail much beyond their far-fetched origins. Many Kio consider the tale a fantastic version of real events, but some adhere to the belief that the Sky Kingdoms were, and in fact still are, very real. Many people here claim to have seen these fairy tale floating islands firsthand, and say that sometimes they float by silently in the night. These folk say they spied the glimmering outline of graceful spires, ethereal lanterns, and curving domes, particularly when the Emerald moon was full.

Whatever the case, no other viable origin is given for the Kio, and it requires further study and exploration. They are a tall and comely people overall, with every hair color, though an unusual number of them have very pale blonde hair, with hues ranging from the color of dandelions to shiny golden straw. Many of these folk have light eyes of beautiful cast, being icy pale blue, shiny jade green, and rarely lavender or yellow-hazel. They are typically pale of skin and have bold, almost hawkish faces.

Kiowomen were very prized in ancient times as wives or courtesans, and many were forcibly taken by slavers to every end of Onara and sold at hefty prices. Many of the Kio have interbred since then with the Undir and the Coryani in the League, but the kidnappings of old caused many noble families to protect their wives

and daughters fiercely. They hid them away in convents, or allowed travel only if they were accompanied by heavily armed warriors with famous reputations. Even these warriors were not completely trusted, and the patrons of these precious women sent only reputable Kiomen to guard them, assuring that if carnal liaisons did indeed occur, the child would be of the purest descent possible. Many of the noble families still practice this old tradition.

The Kio dress in well-tailored handsome clothes of bright or neutral colors that offset and contrast by hue with organic or avian patterns and motifs. (Examples would be forest green and cream, ice blue or blood red high collared shirts with green knotwork, paired with russet or black paneled skirts adorned with yellow bird designs, clouds, stars, or spirals.) Long cloaks with towered, gilded collars, and sparse but large adornments and jewelry are common as well. Sensitivity to sunlight and an aesthetic preference for pale skin cause many Kio to be mainly nocturnal or cover their bodies almost completely with long sleeves, high collars, and broad rimmed hats, even in this torrid environment.

The Kio have extended familial ranks beyond the normal social castes in the League, which is somewhat militarist in function. At the top are the Kyhm'me' (Sky Chiefs), which can be of either sex, and are typically the heads of noble families. They make all major military, social, and monetary decisions and act as the commander of the families or houses in their charge. Below the Kyhm'me' are the Kyh'yit (Wing Lords), who serve them directly in the role of generals or officers of law and finance. They act as direct judges and arbiters in common trials, and perform weddings and funerals if no priest is available to do so. Next are the Antarn, (Eldermen, or women) which are mainly older warriors, priests, or simply wise and respected elders that act as chancellors, extended familial patron-guardians, and teachers to a specific person. Having a child watched over by an esteemed Antar is coveted and lends much prestige to one's family reputation. Then come the Vyhre'ki, (Talonmen) who have four to six warriors in their charge. These warriors are called Vyhrn (Talons) and the collective unit is a Ve'ki (Flight). From one to three Ve'ki are placed under a Kyh'yit and obey him or her with implicit devotion and loyalty. Three Vhyre'ki units under a Khyh'it make up a Kyhn (Wing).

Typically two of these Vyhrn are given the additional titles of Yh'gi (Kite) and Ujch'ki (Shieldman) respectively. The Yh'gi have multiple tasks, acting simultaneously as scout, information officer and planner. Often these

men or women also take the role of the troop's troubadour, and are responsible for relating tales of daring at court, raising morale, or entertaining while deployed or abroad. They often have trained kites or falcons that carry messages and hunt for their troop or family.

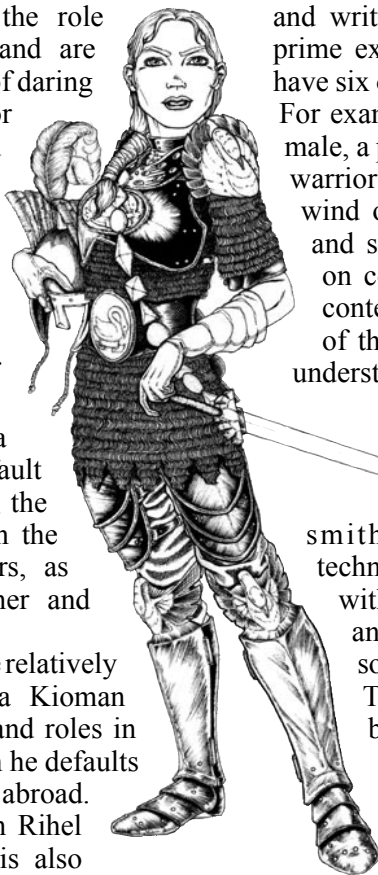
The Ujch'ki acts as a subordinate military officer, bodyguard, and trainer of new soldiers for the Vyhre'ki. Unless it is obvious that a member of a Kyhn is at fault for a particular transgression, the fault lies with the Ujch'ki in the eyes of his or her superiors, as they are the warrior's trainer and immediate commander.

Most of these roles are relatively clannish and private, and a Kioman might have additional titles and roles in normal League society, which he defaults to publicly, especially while abroad. An example would be Baron Rihel val'Sunga of Grakha, who is also the Antar of Lord Veerimar, Speculator-Prince of Qhuoon. Multiple combinations do rarely occur, making some Kio heraldic familial studies into a complex and arduous process.

The Kio are not what could be called overly patient, but do not give up on failed attempts easily. This may stem from their view of temporal matters, due to their long life spans. A Kioman of pure blood might live as long as two hundred years or more, and examples of much longer life spans are not unheard of. Folk who have interbred benefit from this gift, though the span of life seems to delineate as successive generations dilute with non-Kio infusions into the bloodline.

The Kio mindset is hard to grasp and almost as complex as their titular nomenclature. They are often very regal, formal, and are conscious of others in their perceptions of etiquette and cultural social trappings. Nevertheless, they can seem obtuse and aloof to an outsider not familiar with their manner and customs, especially within the daily routines that often do not warrant explanation (particularly from the Kio perspective.)

They are just as prone to fiery outbursts and paroxysmal behavior as they are to calmer notions of conduct, making them seem dichotomous or downright insane. This can be particularly true during times of war or inspiration. The spoken



and written form of their language, Kion, is a prime example of Kio thought. One word can have six or seven separate and distinct definitions. For example, the word Ki can mean a human, a male, a person of Kio heritage, a Kio male, a Kio warrior (both sexes), an avian creature, even the wind or sky itself. These separate meanings and sentence structure are largely dependent on connotation and inferred meaning in the context of the sentence, making Kion one of the most complex languages to learn and understand, second only to High Khitan.

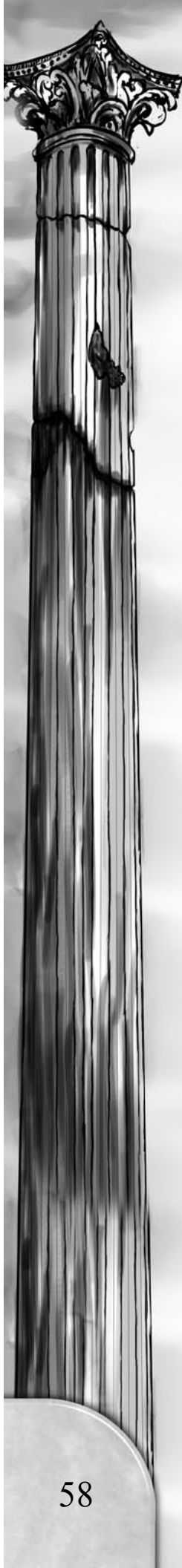
There are more practical pursuits, which can be understood universally, particularly Kio smithing and swordsmanship. Kio master smiths have harbored an ancient smithing technique that uses an alloy of purified steel with infusions of mithril and meteoric iron, and they forge the finest swords in the southern lands, if not the whole of Onara. They are fashioned with double-edged blades like broadswords, but are much more akin to rapiers in physical qualities and fighting technique. These blades are light, durable, flexible, and easily enchanted, and to see a Kio duelist fight with such a blade is truly a marvel of fierce and dexterous martial prowess.

Some swords are hundreds of years old and are passed down as inherited heirlooms, still completely functional. It is rare to see one up for purchase, and they are usually only given as great gifts. So great is the repute of certain of these swords (even non-magical blades), that some Kio warriors are recognized first by the blade they carry before they formally introduce themselves (though they are allowed to do so out of courtesy.)

One thing is certain, that the Kio are an alien and distant folk, in their manner, view and culture, and that at times foreigners can grasp only basic relations within the spheres of the Kio tongue and thought concepts.

Nations

The League of Princes consists of six separate lands, consisting of two relatively autonomous suzerainty-kingdoms, their territories, one Free City (in Bhiharn) and one Coryani satrapy. Various trade and political compacts bind them by treaty, and a High Council convenes four times a year on the tidal months to discuss seasonal or emergency events regarding commerce and governmental policies.



The League has many lesser nobles, Speculator-Princes, wealthy merchant commoners, and pirate lords, all with ostentatious or lengthy titles, earning its colorful name well. (When the Soldier-Saint Alrameus Vernico of Plexus visited the League, he commented that if one swung a cat by its tail in the countryside, one could not help but hit a prince with it.)

The Coryani have made many attempts over the years to persuade or conquer various nations and cities of the League and add them to the list of Imperial States. However, they now seem mainly content to forgo the overwhelming resources and political troubles of this undertaking, and instead allow the nations of the League to pay tribute and reign as allied suzerainties of the Coryani Empire. Many of the natives have no love for the Coryani, particularly where it concerns Eppion and its policies.

Though the lands are similar in ethnic makeup, they have distinct opinions, cultures and policies regarding a multitude of subjects, including religion, trade and alliances, particularly within the realm of the aforementioned historic (as well as current) views and conflicts. These particularities and relevant points on geography or cultural influences will be spoken of where logic warrants that will form a clear, distinctive separation of peoples. Listed below are the names of the lands and respective rulers (with full noble titles), capitol and population, in addition to ethnic nomenclature and a brief description of inhabitants, major cities, and geography.

Capharra

Ruler: Gyhliphe' val'Sungha (of Larrisa and Sarish), Regent-Prince of Capharra, High Kyhm'me' of the Kio, Knight-Commander (Vyhre'ki) of the Order of the Yhrki

Capitol: Whon (pop. 146,700)

People: Capharrans

Once the most wise and powerful of the western nations, elder Capharra has become tainted with imperialism, Coryani ideals, and treachery, both from within and without. Capharra is still a lush and vibrant land however, a place of refined Kio culture and beautiful countryside. A highland plateau in the north splits the country, and the halves are provincially referred to as upper and lower Capharra. There is a political split along this border as well within the populace, and much of the lesser nobility side with Duke Geone' of Pajharo than the royal court of Whon.

Most of the ancient lowland forest has been cleared and made into fertile pastures, paved roadways, and arable land for farming. It

is still dotted with smaller forests, especially on the eastern borders. Much of the populace is relatively content and healthy, and the standard of living is fair when compared to most lands of the east. There is a dizzying array of princelings and lesser nobility with estates and a multitude of lengthy titles. Appointed military officials called Archons act as judges and mediators, especially in borderlands or non-Kio territories where there are no Kyhy'it to keep the common peace.

The current ruler of Capharra is Ghyhliphe' val'Sungha, who was proclaimed Regent-Prince in favor of the unstable and warlike Duke Geone' of Pajharo, until he completes his duty as Antar to his young cousin, Tryhkon. Ghyhliphe' has worked a tenuous peace and treaties between the Coryani Empire, the nobility of Mhyrcia and Lhyllifel, and suppression of separatist movements in northern Bhiharn. She is also Knight-Commander of the Order of the Yhrki, an order of female knights who forsake all familial connection and titles, and who swear allegiance to uphold the ideals and interests of the Kio as a people, regardless of nationality. These knights are based in Whon of late to support Ghyhliphe's rule and enforce her policies. It is rumored at court that Duke Geone' is hateful of Ghyhliphe' and not being chosen as the "rightful" sovereign of Capharra. Many plots befall the Regent-Prince, and it is whispered that her health is failing due to an assassination attempt by poisoning.

Whon

The capitol, Whon, is a prime example of elegant Kio architecture and civilized culture. Whon is one of the oldest cities in the league, and is situated on and around a large hill between two deep lakes, Yibho, and Ghalka, which are fed from the northern Lhauveris River. It was patroned by the Kio Matron-General, Yhgime' Sungha, who also founded the val'Sungha dynastic line of Capharran Kings after being crowned High Kyhm'me' and Queen at an unknown point during the Time of Darkness.

There are ancient arches, frescoes, and graceful white statuary on the city walls, said to have been brought from Yhriwhon when the city was founded, from which it derives its name. The buildings are slim and tall, and have windows with many arches or ribbed domes decorated with colorful tiles and painted murals. Large moats with fortified covered bridges and canal locks follow the curve of the city walls, adorned with seven arched gates and ancient Kio statuary.

The city is well maintained and beautiful, with many towers, magical stained glass windows,

and door-lined canal streets fed from the lakes. Whon is the agricultural nexus of the League, and its main export is grown or milled produce, such as soy, yams, rice, various fruits and Huj, which is a leafy stalk plant with elongated bulbs that bears similarity to breadfruit.

The Water Labyrinth

Many cities within the League built near water have additional underground chambers or duct systems constructed for the purpose of irrigation and defenses. Whon is no exception, and in fact, it is the prime example of this complex architectural technique. The canal walls are made with thick interlocking blocks of pale stone, waterproof and strong. Many of the old walls have small treated doors (or doorways where they have rotted away) that lead to a dizzying array of tunnels, ducts, waterchambers and diverting systems, a few of which are attached via shafts or pulleys to mills on the surface. Some of these chambers are so well constructed that they require little or no maintenance, and only routine checks and repairs.

Many thieves, smugglers, and cultists make their way into the labyrinth, including an evil religious order known as The Cult of the Frog who gathers on the shores of Lake Yibho. They kidnap people in the night, or sacrifice orphans and thieves they come across in the Water Labyrinth. (In Undir, Yibho means Frog God, and the lake is said to house a powerful, ancient batrachian demon.) Nocturnal wild beasts and aquatic creatures live in the labyrinth, and though most are the normal variety, river serpents and other large reptilians have been sighted, trapped or killed, as well as more unnatural creatures.

Pajharo

Ruler: Geone' val'Sungha, Duke of Pajharo, Kyh'yit of Gyhliphe', Antar of Tryhkon val'Sungha, Lord-Archon of Bhiharn, titular King of Capharra and High Kyhm'me' of the Kio
Capitol: Grakha (pop. 23,000)

People: Jharks

Whereas Capharra is largely cultivated lowland, Pajharo stands in contrast with its high stony hills, tall mountain ranges, thick, mist enshrouded woodlands and rugged natural beauty. The weather is often overcast and misty, with drizzling rains or heavy fog at night.

A good deal of the land is wilderness, except the eastern Lhauveris River Valley where Pajharo meets the high plateau of upper Capharra. The population is mainly Kio in the highlands, but the

river valley is largely Undir with a few Coryani settlers, and sprinkling of Chauni desert nomads from the northern plain. There is excellent hunting and timber in the north and western Suhwe' and Luphyx Forests, long known as dangerous places due to large predators, lurking monsters, traps, and hunting humanoids from Uggur.

The ruler, Duke Geone' val'Sungha, is a scheming fiery man; especially since he was passed over in favor of his cousin, Gyhliphe' for the Capharran throne. He had angered the previous king for collusion with the High Coryani Ambassador and the Satrap of Eppion, interested only in his own power driven goals over his appointed duty. By Kio tradition, Geone's duties as Antar to his younger cousin, Tryhkon, are not yet complete, so the King used this as an excuse to stave the Duke off from Capharra and replaced him with the current regent. The Knights of the Yhrki have uncovered many plots against Gyhliphe' which vaguely point to the Duke, but all of these lack proof.

Grakha

Grakha sits at the head of the eastern river valley on a cliff side overlooking Lake Dynurech. The city has many dark granite buildings decorated with carved wooden beams and large animal horns hung over door mantles. Some of the larger homes and buildings have large courtyards on their crenellated roofs for gathering places or outside taverns when the weather is pleasant. The castle-like roofs lend the nickname of the City of Towers.

Grakha is a hardy city, and its people live as rugged and wild as the countryside. They do a modest trade in ores, gems, timber, furs, and cured meats with the townsfolk of upper Capharra, as well as Blackwand and Liveh in Bhiharn.

All male Jharks must serve in the army for four years when they come of age, and the large ducal army is based here in the capitol, in the smaller river towns, or in walled townships in upper Capharra.

Jharks are partial to the Pantheon, particularly Illir, Saluwe', and Hurrian, and do not tolerate the heresies of elemental worship or dark cults.

The penalty for this, thievery, or violent crimes is varied, usually swift and harsh, and fits the crime so committed as mandated by the Kyh'yit or Archons. They are loyal more to the Duke than Capharran policies here, and they enforce his law more fiercely in collusion with military troops.

Fort Tyroch

There is an old mountain fort atop the plateau that sits just within the shady bowers of the Luphyx forest. The fort is named after the half-orc scout of a Kio war troop who discovered it and held it against superior humanoid forces until reinforcements could arrive.

The fort is a stopping point for many mountain men and adventurers from Blackwand who risk the dangers of the woodlands and Uggur for hunting and looted treasures. They are welcomed here as long as they help to kill off hobgoblin soldiers, giant-kin and monsters from Oliocho or the many ruins and caves of the plateau.

Tyroch is now the center of operations for the Red Dragoons, a military wing of elite soldiers led by the younger cousin of Duke Geone', Tryhkon val'Sungha. This auburn haired army commander's brutal tactics are feared almost as much by his own men as the humanoids of Uggur. He often raids deep into enemy territory recklessly, and it is a secret hope of Duke Geone' that one day Tryhkon will be killed or lost, freeing him of his burden as Antar so he can be crowned as king.

In truth, Tryhkon is looking for an ancient hidden cave door, said to lead via tunnels in the plateau, directly to the northern humanoid city of Oliocho. Tryhkon believes many of these beastly creatures stage raids into Pajharo from here. He hopes to cut off the route completely by finding it, or stage a major raid of his own.

Bhiharn

Ruler: Prince Yhrgar Mathyhji of Bhiharn, Yh'gi of Duke Geone'

Capitol: Liveh (pop. 17,480)

People: Harns

This oblong land sits along the Gulf of Coryan, a strip of lowland countryside from the Amaryllis River in the north, abutting upper Capharra in the west, to the rocky cliffs of Eppion at its end. The Quebho River splits Bhiharn in two, starting at Chimera Falls, meandering past the capitol, Liveh, and fanning out slowly to spill into the Sword Fens around the Sarkhwood Forest. Bhiharn is a mellow country south of the river, filled with pleasant shrubs, copses and rolling hills or farmland, with many types of bright songbirds and flora. The northern portion has slightly more rainfall from Pajharo, with more undergrowth and hills, making it slightly higher and untempered country.

The foppish Prince Yhrgar Mathyhji rules Bhiharn from Liveh, and though he uses Archons appointed by the Duke of Pajharo, and serves as his Yh'gi, he is a very popular ruler here despite the hatred of the Duke by most Harns. Prince Yhrgar is hailed as one of the greatest diplomats of the League, and is best known for diffusing volatile conflicts with his eloquent wit and speeches, particularly concerning the Duke and Undir separatist rebels of the Sword Fens. The Duke uses the talent of his witty Yh'gi often at court in Whon. The Duke actually despises the genteel Prince, and often tries to embarrass or dishonor him with political maneuverings or social ploys. Though Geone' has tried many times to hinder, manipulate or entangle the Prince, Yhrgar has always cleverly outfoxed the boorish Duke.

Many Harnish bandits and Undir pirate lords masquerade as patriots to hide behind Harns who wish to gain independence from Pajharo and its hefty taxation on trade. The Duke does nothing about this, pulling his Archons back at decisive moments and placing the blame on Prince Yhrgar, Mhyrcia, or the Coryani to infuriate the Regent-Prince in Whon. Occasional isolated banditry, piracy, and outbreaks occur across Bhiharn, but are usually selective to the north and the adjoining coastal waters.

Liveh

In the Kio tongue, Liveh means "Fiery Aura," and the city truly earns its name. Many reputed glassmakers and their traditional techniques come from the capitol, and rare sands and materials have been traded on the Amaryllis River for centuries. These glassmakers fashion beautiful and intricate designs for stained glass windows, bottles and lenses, and at night the cobblestone streets of Liveh sparkle, strobe, and glow with radiant splendor. Much of the city is Kio in architectural design, though the fieldstone hive houses of the Undir appear here and there, especially along the Quebho in the River District. The city is at once quaint and majestic, easily equaling the grand statuary and alabaster spires of Whon.

The city is built around the natural stone basin of Chimera Falls, with many arching bridges and a tall temple to Yarris, replete with Undir frescoes and magical stained glass windows on the northern side of the basin. Prince Yhrgar commissioned it from his personal coffers to end a lengthy civil war, which stemmed from multiple high taxes and merchant trade house conflicts in the ports along the coast. The waters beyond the temple docks are said to have magical healing powers on certain holy days.

Yarris is often switched with Illir as the head of the pantheon, causing heretical schisms, and canonical conflicts between the Mother Church in Coryan and the Yarrite priests of Bhiharn.

The Sword Fens

Much of the coastline of Bhiharn is swampland or snags of mangrove copses and salt marsh. This murky growth extends from the mouth of the Amaryllis River and is seen in tangled patches within the rocky shoals of Eppion, ending along the northern towns of Mhyrcia.

Stiff blades of serrated sword grass shoot up from under the trees and brackish pools, harboring all manner of beasts, fish, and fetid swamp life. The Sarkhaward forest tangles its roots through an oval isle of packed rocky soil, and there are many gulches, hollows, and hidden trails cut by tributary streams from the Quebho River. The Sarkhaward and the Sword Fens are home to many Undir villages built in the old style, woven reed huts built on poles with floating platforms or plank bridges connecting them. The Harns that live here are reclusive and adhere to the old customs and traditions, uncaring for who rules the “highland” in this tribal backwater.

They are a mix of Harns and the common Undir that came from the eastern side of the gulf with the val'Bhausicz clan (of Sarish and Saluwe', and the ancestors of the val'Sungha) during the Time of Darkness. They settled along many parts of the coast, mainly here, in Eppion, and northern Mhyrcia through marital alliances and treaties. It is these Undir that are the progenitors of the Harnen dialect, and many do not speak Low Coryan at all.

The Sword Fens also give a hidden refuge to highwaymen and pirates that have erected shantytowns around shallow coves or clearings. Sometimes dark heretical cults that worship sea demons around carved coral shrines, tidal pools, and altars spring up among them.

However, the infamous fens are best known for monsters of all types. River serpents as long as two ships have been reported, and coveys of Green Hags occasionally crop up, aligned with trolls, other unnatural beasts and their Night Hag sisters across the Gulf of Coryan on the rocky cliffs of Annonica. Nocturnal flights of stirges or the occasional harpy fly out of the woods or up the coast from the Southern Forest. Sometimes, Sahuagin stage nighttime raids from the salt marshes on ships, ports, and coastal villages, and numerous schools of sharks constantly patrol the shoreline.

The Free City of Blackwand

On the northern tip of the turbid Sarkhaward trail, at the isthmus of the Amaryllis River, is an independent port called Blackwand. This quaint fortified town is a haven for river merchants, spice traders from the northwest, privateers, and most notably, an adventurer's guild underneath Hollow Mound Castle in a maze of excavated rooms and natural caverns. Blackwand was founded over five hundred years ago by a group of adventurers hired by an Undir merchant prince to clear monsters from the northern Sword Fens and the Sarkhaward forest. This arduous and expensive task took almost a year, and bankrupted the merchant, who fled to greener pastures without paying his hirelings. The adventurers found the lair of an enormous river serpent shortly after and killed it, gaining a great hoard of gems and trinkets. They decided to stay in the area and constructed Hollow Mound castle as a mutual guildhall and safeguard against humanoid pirate attacks along the coast. As the area became more civilized, a town sprung up underneath the castle, and the Undir developed relations with the Harns, Pajharo, and a healthy spice trade along the river with the lands of the nomadic Chauni to the northwest.

The history of this town involves many attempts at siege or takeover by Pajharo, the Coryani or pirate lords, but the city has always expunged itself of these invaders eventually. It now claims total independence, ruled by a council elect of six, called High Captains, a Lord Mayor, and fields an army comprised mainly of specialists, ex-adventurers and seasoned ship captains. The symbols of their office are the gold-capped black wands they carry, said to have wonderful or deadly powers and effects.

It is the only city in the League to have an ancient style Pantheon church, representing every God with but one order of priests and monks. Everyone is allowed to trade here freely, (even pirates) especially the archaic Undir from the Sword Fens, as long as they acknowledge Blackwand's liberal beliefs and laws. There is no appointed Archon for Blackwand.

The city even flies its own flag, seven black ships and seven black wands split by a yellow sable on a green field, with an inscription in Harnen that reads “Live Free, Fight Proud, and Die Well.” Many adventurers and freebooters come to Hollow Mound Castle seeking training, knowledge in its library, or to equip before leaving to the Sword Fens or Fort Tyroch in Pajharo, chasing tales of pirate gold or artifacts.



Eppion

Ruler: Alphaeus Jona of Plexus, Satrap of Eppion

Capitol: Metra (pop. 34,900)

People: Eppish

The Satrapy of Eppion is more Coryani than Undir or Kio in nationality, and culture, and it has a dark and sordid history. It was originally ruled over by the decadent and diabolical val'Baucisz, (of Sarish and Saluwe') a tyrannical Undir family that allied itself with the Coryani as client kings. Demonic visitations, vicious acts of cruelty and despair were brought upon the common folk, sometimes for the mere entertainment of the nobility, or to spread senseless terror. Eventually, a massive revolt flared up, and many of the val'Baucisz were butchered in their homes, or fled into exile. The leaders of this rebellion seized the capitol of Rajhau as a base of operations.

Many of the rebels blamed the continuing rule of their sadistic masters on the Coryani, and in the frenzy of the revolt they attacked or expunged any Coryani colonials they found. Imperial troops were sent to attempt an evacuation, and were summarily ambushed and killed en masse while landing south of the capitol. The Eppish rebels then decapitated the commander's bodies and put the severed heads atop their Imperial standards along the shoreline, in full view of passing ships as a warning.

The Coryani answer to this gruesome and dishonorable display was to stage a full invasion. Three entire legions descended on Rajhau, butchered its inhabitants, sacked the city, and then burned it to the ground. In but one year, the legions founded a satrapy ruled by force, based in the newly constructed port of Metra where the old capitol once stood. Shortly after, a few of the surviving val'Baucisz in exile returned, seeking harsh revenge in a reign of terror that would last another two hundred and sixty years. They suppressed any remaining

rebel forces, and acted as regents under the Coryani Satraps, who were easily bribed and corrupted.

Since then, Metra has become a major trade port, vying for mercantile control with Mhyrcia and Blackwand by way of political maneuverings, embargoes, or Coryani tariffs levied from Plexus.

Only two small val'Baucisz families remain, with the rest having been assassinated, killed in wars, or else absorbed into the val'Sungha line, which have erased the blasphemous name of val'Baucisz from the royal heraldic records. The val'Baucisz of Mhyrcia have forsaken their familial name and become a monkish order called the Penitent of Saluwe' in Mhun. The remaining val'Baucisz live in the wild southern countryside of Eppion, content to rule over their ancestral lands and serfs under the watchful eye of the current Satrap, Alphaeus Jona of Plexus.

The Satrap is a stern and militaristic man who is interested more in control and order than in justice, and rumors abound that he is more loyal to indigenous noble coffers and his carnal appetites than the Coryani. The Satrap has placed many of the traditional noble titles up for sale, making Eppion a land of wealthy Coryani citizens and foreign aristocrats who purchase what they cannot earn.

Whatever the case, Alphaeus keeps Coryani goals, culture, and ideals at the forefront of his policies. So long as he keeps control of his domain, the Empire will continue to ignore the dark and unseemly rumors that surround the common doings of this land.

Laws and punishment in Eppion are harsh, and bondage into slavery or public execution by hanging or beheading is not uncommon, particularly for rebellious inhabitants, pirates, thieves, and heretics. The Gods of the Imperial Church are the only worship that is legal here.





Lhyllifel

Ruler: Girokhar Sungha-Mikyr, King of Lhyllifel, Lord-Archon of Mhyrcia, Guardian of Broken Reach, "Elf Friend."

Capitol: Lhosk (pop. 37,849)

People: Lhyllifens

Lhyllifel has long considered itself a sister nation to Capharra, and it is very similar in many ways, both in its lands and in people, with a few notable exceptions. Firstly, Lhyllifel has no great love for the Coryani, though they hold no grudges with Capharrans for doing so. Lhyllifel pays its annual tributes to assuage war or political strife, but its lack of loyalty to the Coryani lies within another matter.

Many villages in southern Lhyllifel have good relations with the Elorii of the forest, and this attitude carries over to the northerly capitol, Lhosk. Some of these towns are arboreal since the days when Uggur occupied the country for sixty-three years, causing many Lhyllifens to flee to the safety of the Southern Forest and entreaty themselves to elvenfolk for three generations.

This has in turn spawned long-lived elven-human relations, and more notably, heretical elemental worship among many Lhyllifens. The political ramifications are harsh whenever Lhyllifel deals with the pious Coryani Emperor and the Mother Church, who are as a rule racially biased and mistrustful of elvenfolk.

A secret organization called the Order of the Twilight Bough is largely believed to be the center of this heretical activity. Its leaders are mainly human rangers and druids, who are loyal both to Lhyllifel and to their elven counterparts. The Archons of Lhyllifel have not yet been able to fully penetrate this order or determine an approximation of members, or any of their lesser motives and workings.

Lhosk

The Lhyllifen capitol is much like Capharra, but lakes and canals are replaced with large grass covered earthworks and sloping ramparts lined with wild flowers or eldritch trees. Lhosk gives the impression of a giant cultivated fort with tiers of agrarian orchards and a pale statue-lined city at its center. Its main trade is in the wealth of the Southern Forest, agriculture, as well as iron, gemstones, gold, copper, or rare ores shipped and refined from mines in the humanoid and monster riddled pass of Broken Reach near Uggur.

Lhosk has a small but powerful army, including many rangers, archer units, Kio wizards, and professional mercenaries of high caliber.

The king of Lhyllifel is Ghirokhar Sungha-Mikyr, who is also Lord Archon of Mhyrcia. King Ghirokhar roams Lhyllifel frequently, overseeing the affairs of the lesser nobility and officials, and tending to the basic welfare of his people. Two pet saber toothed lions often accompany him, a gift from a noble elven druid.

Ghirokar is an older Kioman now, but he is still greatly respected, and commands a burning cunning and intelligence. He keeps the balance of power between all political groups, be they from his in-laws, the val'Sunghas of the League, Uggur, or the lands aside the eastern coast of the Gulf of Coryan.

Mhyrcia (The Shadow Towns)

Ruler: Rabauk Saskla, High Speculator-Prince of Mhyrcia

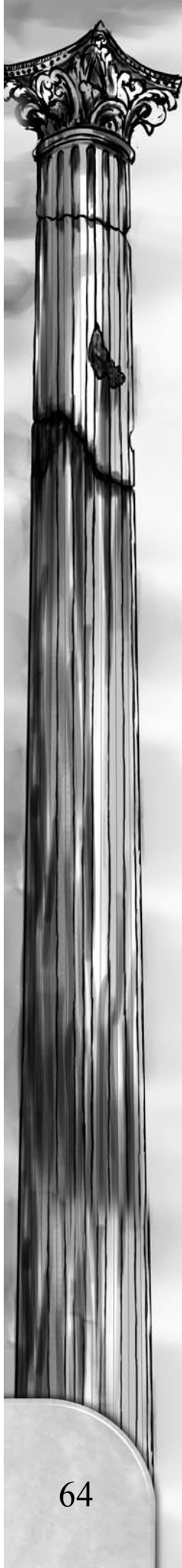
Capitol: Mhyr (pop. 87,200)

People: Mhyrcians or Shadow Towners

At first glance, the emerald shores and tropical coves of Mhyrcia lend the appearance of an overgrown, untamed land, rife with much colorful flora, flapping birds, and unusual jungle creatures. However, closer inspection reveals man made stone channel entries with deep canals concealed under the leafy, vine-covered bowers. The misty, overhung canals cut miles into the jungle, and at their farthest point, dock-lined inlets and faceted Undir buildings linked in rings appear along the shore. Whole cities conceal themselves within the trees, home to thousands of people. These are the five trade cities of Mhyrcia, better known to foreigners as the legendary Shadow Towns.

The Shadow Towns of Mhyrcia are the oldest settlements of the League, originally built as simple villages before the Time of Darkness by the Undir, and enlarged as fortified trade cities by Kio settlers from the west. They have since become the wealthiest and most powerful merchant cities on the Gulf of Coryan, easily comparable to the Coryani ports along the eastern shoreline. Many of the lucrative trade goods from Mhyrcia are rare or obtained nowhere else, coming from within the confines of the Southern Forest, the other nations of the League, or else from hoary Uggur.

At one point, the Coryani were on the brink of war with the Shadow Towns over maritime trade lanes, but could not afford a costly and enduring campaign. They rattled their saber and attempted a grand bluff out of the conflict by way of imposing amazingly high annual tribute and trade compromises to seal a treaty between the two powers. The Coryani ambassador assigned to deliver these terms came back from Mhyrcia white faced.



Fearing the worst, the ambassador's superiors questioned him harshly about logistics and troop counts, and orders were presumptively given to convene a war council. However, they were very surprised to discover that not only had the Shadow Towners agreed readily to the terms, but in addition, they gave a Mhyrcian galley over as well, laden with treasures equaling the outrageous tributary sum.

Shortly after this, agreements were met to bring Mhyrcia and its brother nations into the fold as suzerainty states, and to recognize the title of Speculator Prince as noble and genuine within the Coryani Empire. They have been loosely allied with the Coryani ever since.

A council of appointed officials and nobles rule the Shadow Towns, the Speculator Princes, under the guidance of the senior council member, the High Speculator Prince. They are chosen from the ranks of the most successful and politically neutral merchants of Mhyrcia (even foreigners may be chosen, though they must have lived and traded here for no less than eight years.) They vote on and decide all policies and laws, particularly where it concerns commerce, tariffs, and the economy at large. The Speculator Princes are allied strongly with both Capharra and Lhyllifel, but are bound by bias and treaty to use the latter for the appointment of Lhyllifen Archons as lesser officials to enforce the regional law. By League tradition, this makes Mhyrcia a nominal territory of Lhyllifel.

The cities vary in appearance and makeup, mainly Undir in design and architecture, with clever fusions of Kio defenses or aesthetic splashes. The two most common elements are a balanced collaboration with the jungle environment, and the sober activities that surround trade and commerce, in all its facets. Any profession that does not produce or accentuate these pragmatic goals is often seen as impractical. Religion for example, is tolerated in all its forms, so long as it breaks no laws and is not disruptive. Moreover, there are very few public temples, and though the role of priest is not forbidden, it is seen as an impractical and unseemly vocation, and nothing one could not do at home with a private shrine.

The top five Speculator Princes under the current High Speculator Prince, Rabauk Saskla, govern the cities. He is a kind-hearted, sensible and learned Undir elderman who speaks five languages and "does not truck with political dichotomy or religious nonsense" of any kind.

There are currently slight conflicts between the older nobility and the newer merchant elite over control of Mhyrcian policies, but the High Speculator Prince holds this from erupting into major conflict.

Eejho

This northern hill town rests in the shadow of the sloping cliffs and hills of southern Eppion. It is known for producing some of the finest crafts and items in Mhyrcia from raw materials and its Craft Guilds have an old and reputable tradition in the League and the Coryani Empire. Excellent boats, woodcraft, distillates or alchemical elixirs, and basic improvements or inventions are its stock and trade, but many other basic goods are fashioned here as well.

Eejho is also known for the large amount of capable and noteworthy councilors, barristers, and emissaries that are trained in the esteemed School of Laws, which dates back three hundred years. However, a small but popular liberal movement has started here, with the theme of mutual liberty and equality for all citizens of the League, much akin to Milandiran ideals.

Due to this movement, the Speculators Council often scolds this town and its Speculator Prince, Giem Mano, for being too active in the respective arenas of religion and political disturbances. These events usually surround exiled heretics from the other nations of the League, or harboring escaped serfs and slaves from val'Baucisz lands in southern Eppion, as well as the obvious repercussions.

Mhun

The city of Mhun rests on a lone mount of rock at the center of a vast network of agricultural orchards and groves. It has an obvious heavy Kio influence in its architecture, and Mhun's illuminated spires can be seen from the coast on the clearest nights. The main industry is agrarian, in addition to keen glasswork based in Harn traditions, aquatic farming and fisheries, rare plants, herbs, woods and by products (such as rubber and hemp), woven expensive clothes, ropes and nets, gold, high quality gemstones, copper, worked jewelry and niello. The current Speculator Prince is Armenna Ghikyr; a retired knight of the Yhrki Order turned merchant and farmer. Armenna sometimes teaches her Kio fencing style to worthy warriors.

The people are a pleasant mix of Kio and Undir attitude, being easy going yet focused and well learned. There is also a small stone monastery on the northern outskirts of the city; home to a small enclave of monks called the Penitent of Saluwe'. They are all that remains of the val'Baucisz in Mhyrcia, and have renounced their family name, seeking redemption through contemplation of the atrocious acts of

their ancestors. They are sometimes behind the political strife in Eejho, smuggling escaped slaves to safer locations. It is rumored that Armenna is also connected with these disturbances and the new liberal group in Eejho.

Whalka

The town of Whalka is the closest to the Gulf of Coryan, sequestered behind a maze of channels and canal locks. It has a large interior port, with many jetties and broad steps that descend to the water's edge for smaller boats. Much of the trade from the Shadow Towns exits at this port, and visiting merchants, travelers, and sailors swoon at the mention of its name.

Whalka is widely known for reasonable rates and fine goods, excellent cuisine, beautiful women, and copious amounts of taverns and gambling halls. It is the liveliest of the Shadow Towns, and the best for hospitality. The Speculator Prince, Trokar Herbood, is a garrulous and social Undirman who often frequents the waterfront taverns, walks, and plazas, speaking at length with all castes of folk who bring up anything interesting to say. He is a very popular leader, and entertains most dignitaries and ambassadors who come to the Shadow Towns seeking pleasure rather than business.

In addition to being Mhyrcia's most used and frequented port, Whalka produces fine clothing and woven crafts, massive amounts of produce, expensive spices, extracts, and perfumes, carved amber, ivory and jade to name a few.

It is also home to a pair of beautiful Kio twin swordsmiths, Hyhga, and Vyhktar, who fashion Kio blades on a secretive regal estate at the rear of the city. Even the typical blades produced from these Kiowomen are said to rival dwarven quality, both in performance and in elegant beauty. They have a fencing school, which teaches a technique called Five Branches on the rear of the estate, run by their three daughters, who are said to be more beautiful than their mothers are.

Qhuoon

The majestic town of Qhuoon is an interlocking walled city on both sides of a large bulbous inner harbor capped by a vaulted natural dome of trees, and connected by three arching bridges further down the outward channel. Fair sized schooners can fit their masts underneath the tall bridge arches, and guard towers rest underneath the ends. It is known colloquially as the City of Birds for the endless variety of parrots,



waterfowl, hawks, and songbirds that flit about the masts of the harbor.

Qhuoon is home to the Hall of Archons and the center of all activity in Mhyrcia where it concerns these officials. The two largest temples in the Shadow Towns are here as well, to Saluwe' and Yarris respectively. Yarris is often switched with Illir as the head of the Pantheon (sometimes he is even portrayed as being Saluwe's husband) and this causes no end of consternation with the Speculator Princes, through the Patriarch of Coryan. If any of the cities are specialized in specific trades, Qhuoon is the exception only by virtue of the fact that it dominates all trades, products, exports, and designs across the scale in comparison. The current Speculator Prince is Lord Veerimar of Qhuoon, a stately and savvy noble merchant and politician who carries himself with the regal countenance of a king.

Mhyr

The capitol of Mhyrcia, Myhr, is simply the grandest of the Shadow Towns.

Myhr is much akin to Qhuoon in design, though it is much more Kio in the design of its lesser buildings. It has three inner harbors, with many side canals where boat markets and trade barges sell right on the water to docking customers. Where Qhuoon drowns out the other Shadow Towns in diversity and bulk of trade, Mhyr pales it in comparison with the legendary skills of its master crafters, artisans, and the

sheer worth of its goods. Anything that can be garnered, fashioned, traded, sold, constructed, or imagined from a vast exotic wave of wealth and materials is found or made in the capitol.

The sites of the city show the magnitude of its proficiency and splendid grandeur. From its mosaic paved waterfront plazas, gilded lantern lit docks, vaulted guildhalls and manors, colossal fountains, decorated arches, tree shrouded lofty buildings and garden lined thoroughfares, Mhyr is the equal of Whon, perhaps more so in appearance from its natural arboreal dome.

The city is cool and under constant shade from the forest cover and large glowing insects drift about at all hours, giving Mhyr an eldritch, dreamy cast. The Speculator's Council and High Speculator Prince Rabauk Saskla rule Mhyr as they rule Mhyrcia, with detachment, practicality, and unbiased equanimity (insomuch as can be afforded). They have forsaken proselytized or publicized religion, lofty noble aspirations, expansion, and prolonged or unnecessary war in exchange for order, natural communion, and the pronounced ideals of the art of commerce.

The Grove Tenders

When Mhyr was young, an entourage of Elorii came from the Southern Forest representing several clans. They gave the gift of a small green pouch of seeds they called Ellifyr to the Kio Kyhm'me' of the city as a secret test, and disappeared back into the forest. The seeds were planted in a special grove ringed with stones, and took some years to mature into bright green leafy trees with silvery bark. It was discovered that the Ellifyr trees had many uses in healing, foods, and magical studies. The Kio sent many scouts to find the Elorii of the forest to lavish gifts upon them in return for such a powerful boon. None were ever found, and it was assumed that they had left completely, or else migrated nomadically within the forest.

One year later, the workers of the grove woke to find many colorful beetles had come out of the forest and were eating the leaves and sap of the Ellifyr trees. At first, they were destroyed by magic, but wave upon wave assaulted the trees continuously. Finally, one of the workers noticed that the beetles secreted viscous oil after devouring the leaves and sap of the Ellifyr trees. The Kio tested the substance as highly magical, and useful in more ways than the trees themselves. The Khym'me' himself made an altar to Saluwe' and many sacrifices were made in atonement for killing the beetles. He had a wall erected around the grove to protect it, and then gave the workers

there the title of the Grove Tenders, proclaiming they would serve and protect the Ellifyr trees as an Ujch'ki to his sire.

The day after the completion of the wall, the Elorii returned to Mhyr, telling the Kio they had passed the test given to them, and were allies to the elder race.

The Ellifyr grove has grown large and tall over the centuries, and Ellifyr Oil is one of the most valued substances in the League of Princes and beyond.

Though the worship of Saluwe' has fallen largely to the side, the original altar still stands at the head of the Ellifyr grove, and the Grove Tenders are a current and honored tradition in the city of Mhyr.

Uggur

Across the western borders of Lhyllifel, Capharra, and Pajharo lies a vast tract of territory called Uggur. It is filled with impassable cliffs, dark jungles, and inhospitable scrub broken by jagged ravines and dead falls. Humanoids, enormous saurian creatures, flying beasts, and monsters of all kinds skulk about the periphery, and even normal animals act with an uncharacteristic cunning and savagery, as if demonic spirits possesses them. Not much else is known of hoary Uggur or its inhabitants. The actual length, size, and total geography of this frontier territory largely remains a mystery, and only a few tales and intelligence reports shed any light at all on this murky subject. Apparently, the region is divided into three lesser territories, each ruled by a city-state.

Tales of Maalioch

The older stories come from the ancient migrating Kio, or snippets of conversation told by Lhyllifens eavesdropping on Uggurian humanoid warriors during their country's lengthy occupation. According to an old Kio historical document, broad rugged plateaus ascend to the foothills of the Lhauzyr Mountains. There are many passes to the top, all fraught with danger from predators, horrid creatures, and monstrous humanoids, but only one is the correct path to an ancient Kio city called Maalioch, now likely overrun by humanoids. The history relates that Maalioch is the original home of the waves of migrating Kio that flooded ancient Undir lands. They fled in separate groups over the years from another faction of sinister Kio that took over the city and used humanoids in their armies, under a banner bearing a bloody crescent moon.

This may indeed be true, for there is proof in other well founded histories to support this. In fact, mercenary hobgoblin and orcish armies under the founder of Whon, Yhgime' Sunga bore this standard, when she first invaded Lower Capharra.

Maalioch is said to be a huge city that was cracked in two from an earthquake, (sometimes a great magical disturbance in the tales) and though the lower half slid off the city's plateau foundation, many of the well-constructed buildings survived, or protected their inhabitants from harm completely. The upper section had a large edifice called the Hall of the Moon at its center. Within the hall was a powerful magical artifact called the Moon Table, and it was attributed with a variety of powers, including telekinesis, many types of defensive wards, and the power to harness and control storms. There were also many under-corridors and secret passages throughout the city proper and very few knew all of them. The troubles with the "Red Crescent Faction" and their humanoids began when the Kio used many humanoids for more dangerous tasks in the tunnels, and that these laborers eventually learned to navigate them. Many secret armories and treasure vaults underneath Maalioch were looted of Kio swords and magical artifacts. The Red Crescent faction armed and equipped itself and seized the city by force, which set off the migrations.

The Lhyllifen tales go on to say that the rulers of Maalioch are a great council of the highest chieftains and strongest generals of its armies. There is also many temples and priests, which sound very similar to the Pantheon and its respective religions. One of these priests knows a sacred chant as complex as a full language, and this magical song can waken an ancient monster called the Hegig. This creature slumbers for ages in an ancient cavern in the Lhauzyr Mountains, and is very hard to awaken. The Hegig was seen flying over Lhyllifel in the night during the first invasion of the country, described as a cross between a dragon and an enormous black bat, which could vomit volatile balls of green flame.

Hegoch

Newer intelligence trickles down from the northern mountain pass under Fort Tyroch in Pajharo, through the Red Dragoons, who penetrate deep into northern Uggur on scouting missions and retributive raids.

The military reports tell of a mountain city-state, resting on an inaccessible plateau above a huge cold lake in the north of Uggur. Details of

battles with indigenous hobgoblin warriors, giant-kin, and gnolls speak not of thieving bandits or unkempt humanoid rabble, but of highly disciplined soldiers armed with high quality weapons and armor. These warriors used well-practiced tactics and ambushes that included complex traps, poisons, and trained war beasts, such as saber toothed lions or huge carnivorous white apes.

All these facts suggest a highly developed and motivated society, and the Red Dragoons warn adventurers entering Uggur that the Humanoids of Hegoch are not the average variety found across the wilder pockets of Onara. Nothing else is known beyond this of Hegoch, its leaders, or the details of life in the city and its inhabitants.

Quaaga

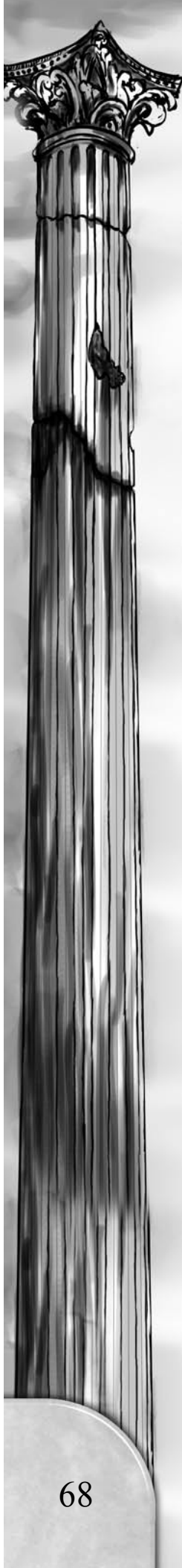
The irony of this city-state is that it is the best known, yet most obscured of the territorial capitol. Hidden Quaaga lies in an enormous cavern at the center of a subterranean lake, somewhere underneath the roots of the Southern Forest. Quagga's exact location is unknown, but it is believed that an obscure access tunnel exits from the giant cavern to the sea. Occasional raids by humanoid pirates on passing merchant ships on or near the mouth of the Gulf of Coryan lend credence to this theory.

A half-orc chieftain, known as Ig of the Many Tongues rules Quaaga. He was once a mighty Coryani centurion who disappeared with a penal troop into Uggur while searching for one of the lost legionary standards of the First Imperium.

Neither Ig nor his troop ever returned, and it was thought they had been killed or died somewhere on the wild frontier or possibly defected, so they and the search for the imperial standard were forgotten. By the time Ig had resurfaced, he had risen to the rank of High Warlord of Quaaga, founded three humanoid legions commanded by the most loyal of his officers, and amassed a wealth of stolen goods and treasures from conquest, banditry, or acts of piracy. Some of these treasures included hefty sums of gold ore from Broken Reach in Lhyllifel, Ellifyr Oil, scrolls and potions stolen in Qhuoon, and an entire Altharian galley pirated with a cargo of newly designed armor, flintlocks and alchemical powder destined for Pajharo via Blackwand. All prisoners taken in these raids are sold as slaves to various humanoid tribes.

Further crimes include the witnessed kidnapping of Salkyhl val'Sungha, who was hunting near the Southern Forest in Lhyllifel. Since no demands have been placed, it is assumed that either she is dead, sold as a slave, or worse, kept in the High Warlord's harem for the purposes





of breeding an orcish Val bloodline. This bloodline would have titular claim to the thrones of Capharra and Lhyllifel as well as their lesser states. According to Kio tradition and laws, the strongest of their leaders are seen as fit to rule in the rare event of contested rule, a coup, or the winner of a personal martial challenge.

Intense interrogation of a captured orc scout reveals that human and half-orc messengers were quietly sent out before these occurrences, with the express purpose of delivering a message to any humanoids they might come across while traveling Onara (particularly orcs.) They were to tell any that they deemed worthy that once a warrior reached Quaaga, they would be given training, a weapon, and two meals a day, so long as they flocked under Ig's banners. Reputedly many humanoids slowly made their way to the shady bowers of the Southern Forest, or crept out of Uggur, swelling the ranks of Quaaga's legions. The scout died with an evil smile before the location of the city-state was found, stalling his interrogators with this tale as he slowly expired from a sword wound.

Whatever the truth is, it is clear that Uggur and all of its inhabitants should be researched by seasoned experts thoroughly. This, along with any hefty preparations, divinations and well-trained scouts a group or expedition can possibly muster before penetrating this perilous frontier.

Who's Who of The Western Lands

Ghyliphe' val'Sungha, Regent-Prince of Capharra

The left-handed and martially astute Ghyliphe' was seen as an obvious addition to the ranks of the Order of Yhrki in her youth. After becoming a knight and following the custom of renouncing her family name, Ghyliphe' served faithfully only in the name of her order.

She was called to serve as Regent-Prince in place of the ambitious, unwieldy Duke of Pajharo. She has dedicated herself to the sacred oath given to the previous king before he died, and though she is quite capable of her role as regent, Ghyliphe' doubts herself constantly. Her role as a knight was quite different, and now that she is burdened with Capharran policies and the welfare of the people, this has clouded her once impartial judgment.

She is by no means a weak-willed commander, fearing instead the long-term repercussions of striking without hesitancy. She longs for the day when she might return to the ranks of the Order of the Yhrki and leave a capable leader on the throne of Capharra. (In truth, she has been heard saying

that if she were "merely a knight," she would have already killed the Duke personally, and put his younger cousin, Tryhkon on the throne.)

Ghyliphe' is the epitome of a righteous monarch, and her retainers are fanatically loyal to her. They are not burdened with her doubtful worries, and will not hesitate to serve her to the death, or raise an army in her defense with frightening speed.

Geone' val'Sungha, Duke of Pajharo

The only reason this man is alive are many alliances with the Satrap of Eppion, the Mother Church, and the regent-prince of Capharra's wish to keep peace with the people of Pajharo. Geone' is ambitious, arrogant, and very lucky (so much so that he has escaped impossible odds in fatal situations and has also been accused of making pacts with devils to protect him.)

He plots constantly to seize the Capharran throne, and would even murder his own cousin to free him of his duties as Antar so he could be crowned King and High Kyhm'me of the Kio. He uses every angle possible to drain Capharra's resources and give the Regent-Prince a bad name. This has failed miserably, much to the Duke's chagrin. Geone' has been adopting certain Coryani tactics in his army, and his relationship with Eppion may break out into an alliance with the Coryani Empire and be the staging ground for a full invasion.

Ig, High Warlord of Quaaga (of the Many Tongues)

No one is so hated and feared within and near the Western Lands as the elusive half-orc leader of the hidden city of Quaaga, Ig of the Many Tongues. Ig was once a brave Coryani centurion, and his exploits and victories could not easily be counted. Since then, he has defected, formed three humanoid legions of his own, (one of these is the dreaded Legion of Fury, supported by an elite cavalry corps of orcish fighter-berserks) and taken the title of High Warlord of Quaaga. It is estimated that fully one third of all bandit activity or piracy in the Western Lands, the Gulf of Coryan, and the Lauriol Sea is tied to him and his operations.

Not much else is known of Ig, except that he speaks at least six languages and is still a very driven and capable tactician. He is said to have an amazing cunning, with many agents throughout the Western lands, Uggur, and the western coastal provinces of the Coryani. Those venturing too close to the Southern Forest by land or sea are often swallowed up and disappear, never to be heard from again.



The Noble Nation of Milandir

As commanded by His Divine Grace the Holy Patriarch of Coryan, the vessel of Illiir on Onara, this detailed history of Milandir and description of true and noble behavior of the enlightened has been prepared.

A Milandisian is the equal of all; no man is property, and it is this simple fact that separates my land from the unenlightened nations of Onara. If His Divine Grace wishes to understand Milandir, he must first learn the import of this truth.

To explain Milandir, I will start at the beginning and explain what has come before.

The Fall of the Cleansing Flame

It is common knowledge that in the fading days of the First Imperium there arose a mighty theocracy of Nier. What is less known is that the rebellion that broke the iron grip of tyranny found its first spark in the Milandisian cities. Though the Sword of the Heavens was invincible in battle, he could not defeat the armies of Prince Volthar val'Holryn of Tralia as the Prince refused to meet him in battle. In a brilliant campaign, the Prince struck with uncanny foresight, striking only where the invincible general did not command. Alas, the Prince's own prowess led to his demise when the Sword of the Heavens resolved to remain within Milandir until the insurrection was smashed.

In the seventh year of rebellion the lands of Milandir lay in ruin, the farms burned, the cities razed. The Sword of the Heavens finally managed to trap the Prince's army on the banks of the Tares River. With the Prince's retreat blocked by the rain-swelled torrent and his efforts burdened by teeming masses fleeing the Nierite's wrath, victory was beyond hope. The Prince's men stood bravely and sold their lives dearly to bleed the enemy white, Volthar's own demise coming at the point of the tyrant's spear. In the dying light of day the Tares ran red with blood as the Sword of the Heavens was without mercy, a gruesome orchard of impaled women stretched for leagues. The sheer brutality of the massacre led the entire Empire to rise in revolt and the Empire collapsed under the weight of its own cruelty.

The Campaigns of Dolfgar val'Ossan and the forging of the Milandisians League

The righteous insurrection against the stifling oppression of the Cleansing Flame carried a great cost and this debt of blood took many generations to overcome. Slowly the land healed

its wounds and the abundance of the region could only serve to return the people to their prosperity. This prosperity drew the wicked greed of the Canceri. Too lazy to bring themselves to prosperity, they sought to steal what they were unwilling to earn. Armies of the dead and the unholy, heeding the commands of their treacherous masters, swarmed into Milandir like locusts leaving destruction in their wake. The Prince of Naeraanth, Dolfgar val'Ossan, in an inspired move, suggested to the other Milandisians Princes that they form a grand alliance to oppose the Canceri invader, but first he had to prove that the Canceri could be beaten. The campaign of Dolfgar of Naeraanth is widely considered one of the most brilliant military accomplishments of the Shadowed Age.

The Vintakan army of the dead, lead by the Lich-Lord Ratik was met in battle on the banks of the Niechau. Heavily outnumbered, Dolfgar drew the Nerothians to his position behind an intricate system of earthworks and palisades. In the daylong battle, the Nerothian priests were separated from the bulk of the walking dead and cut down. Without the control of living, the dead were no longer an effective force and were butchered. So many of the dead were present, to this day, there are still tales of undead stalking that region.

Encouraged by the victory, the other dominions of Milandir rallied to the val'Ossan banner swelling the ranks. The remaining Canceri army, the far more powerful of the two, continued to cut a bloody swath through the countryside of Milandir. The demons of the Sarishans and the elite hoplites of the Nierites posed a far more serious threat than the mindless horde of Nerothian dead. Abandoning a thousand years of military experience, the Prince set aside the time-tested formation of the shield wall in favor of a new tactic. The Nierite phalanx was far more powerful than any the Milandisians could muster, and stones dropped by flying demons found easy targets in the tight formations of a conventional formation. Using javelins and arrows to foul the shields of the enemy, Dolfgar's army disrupted the Nierite formation. Unable to effectively wield their long spears, the Canceri were unable to defend themselves when the Huscarls of Tralia and Naeraanth crashed into their front line. Soon a general rout ensued as the Sarishans broke and fled at the sight of the slaughter, taking their infernal servants with them.



Acclaimed as the savior of Milandir, Prince Dolfgar reforged the alliance into the Milandisians League of Cities, the first nation of Milandir. A majority of the Princes of the five city-states of Milandir would select one of their own to lead the league. This pact of cooperation and mutual defense preserved Milandir throughout the remainder of the shadowed age.

Alliance and Empire: The Time of Terror

The centuries of the Shadowed Age passed and Milandir enjoyed relative peace. The strength of the league served to deter would be aggressors and warfare in this period was mostly fought against various barbarians from the east. This idyllic existence was abruptly shattered as the veil between the mortal plane and the underworld was torn asunder and the legions of hell poured forth.

Many years of war followed, and the foresightful unity of the league cities was Milandir's saving grace. Where one city may have fallen, the combined might of five stood defiant. The Milandisians despaired of war without end until a great army of men arrived from the south, led by the First Emperor of Coryan. His offer was welcome, aid in defeating the armies of hell; but his price was less so, submission to his will and allegiance to his fledgling empire. The excesses of the First Imperium left wounds that even centuries of independence could not salve. Demanding of the First Emperor proof that his empire would not follow in the footsteps of the last, Prince Walport val'Holryn, then Overprince of the League, at first refused to submit. In a brief private meeting, the First Emperor convinced the val'Holryn that his Empire would be just and that only through unity could humanity survive the infernal onslaught.

The thousand armies of Coryan marched ever northward with the men of Milandir as the vanguard. The Huscarls of Tralia served as the First Emperor's personal guard. At the Battle of the Godwall, it was Prince Walport himself who pulled the First Emperor from the clutches of the treacherous demons who poisoned him. The men of Coryan despaired at the loss of their Emperor until these words were spoken by the Prince of Tralia, "My new countrymen, our Emperor is no longer for this world, but do not despair for he has told me that a great miracle shall save us from the Hell spawn. We must march south, as on the morrow this place shall not be fit for man or demon." With this command the thousand armies broke camp and marched southward through the night. When dawn arose and Illiir looked upon the field of battle, he made a great mountain range to erupt from the earth, trapping the hordes of Hell beyond.

A Crown for Milandir

For thirty generations the men of Milandir stood as citizens of the Coryani Empire, honoring their oaths of service as the Emperors of Coryan honored their oaths of stewardship. Some two centuries past the Canceri followed the heretic Becherek into insurrection against the Coryani Emperor. When the Imperial governor had Becherek slain, the Canceri nation rose up in insurrection. The insurrectionist heretics formed their own church to legitimize their distasteful practices and created a potentate to rule them in a twisted mockery of the office of Patriarch. They elected Arthmoor val'Virden to the office of Dark Apostate. It is said that Arthmoor sought redress for the actions of the Emperor six centuries before when the disloyal guard of the Patriarch was banished to Canceri. It is far more likely that he was a greedy man with Imperial ambitions of his own. Arthmoor set his sights upon the northern reaches of the Coryani Empire, then the province of Milandir. Governor Osric val'Ossan appealed to the Emperor to honor the oaths of protection that the First Emperor swore to Milandir during the Time of Terror. The Emperor, fighting a war with the mysterious Khitani of the west disregarded these oaths and chose to leave Milandir to its fate. The val'Ossan, under no further obligation to the oath-breaker and left with little option but to recall the Milandisians legions sent to the far reaches of the Empire, some of which were engaged with the Khitani, was branded a traitor by the deceitful Emperor. From his Alabaster throne, the val'Dellenov pronounced sentence upon the val'Ossan, sending the dreaded Vanomiran guard to return his head. Unbeknownst to the Emperor, the General in command of the Vanomiran legion, one Augustos val'Tensen, held bonds of affection with the val'Ossan house, desiring the hand of Osric's sister in marriage. Together, they turned back the Canceri threat at the battle of Ashvan as again the wicked saw no success against the righteous. A great alliance was formed with the other noble houses of Milandir, Osric being crowned King of Milandir, and Augustos being made the Count of Moratavia.

The Unquiet Crown

Surrounded by enemies, Milandir has not enjoyed peace during its centuries of independence. Most val'Ossan monarchs spend more time in the saddle than on the throne. Prosperity invites greed and strength at arms often encourages the strong to take what they think they can grasp.

The Battle at Nacre

Shortly after wresting free of the Coryani, Milandir was faced with an ancient threat. The Sorcerer-King of Ymandragore sent his minions to steal the gifted children of Milandir. Rebuked, they returned to Ymandragore empty-handed. Threats followed, but the favor of Yarris was thought to be adequate to keep away the Black Fleet of Ymandragore. It was not.

The waves were swept clean of Milandisian ships and the coastal villages were sacked and burned. Realizing the need for a powerful fleet Osric I commanded that one should be built. In short order a fleet of fifty war galleys was completed and rowers were trained. Put to sea, they met the Ymandrake fleet in sight of the city of Naeraanth. The inexperienced sailors of Milandir were slaughtered and Osric I was slain when his flagship was consumed by Dragon's Fire.

Bound by oaths of protection, the nobility never considered simply permitting the talented children to be taken, but it was clear that a new tactic would be needed to forestall defeat. A new type of ship was built to fight a new kind of war. Long and sleek, these galleys sliced through the water at great speed. Ramming was abandoned as a tactic; instead the goal was to close to grappling and disgorge masses of heavily armed men onto the enemy ship.

Using the older ships to attract the attention of the Black Fleet, the newly constructed navy hid in the mouth of the Niechau River near the island of Nacre. Upon sighting the Black Fleet, the older galleys fled as if they were seeking refuge in the river. Giving chase, the Ymandrake fleet was

surprised by the sudden appearance of the mass of the Royal Fleet. Turning to face this new threat the tactics of the Black Fleet failed them. As they moved to ram and shear oars from the galleys they found themselves grappled and boarded. The carnage was great on both sides, but the day was won for the Crown. Fewer than a dozen ships escaped back to Ymandragore and the Sorcerer-King's fleet has not troubled Milandir since.

The Barbarian Wars

Without the guardianship of the mighty Coryani Empire, the savage Ying-heer saw Milandir as vulnerable. Seeking wealth and women, the barbaric Hinterlander nomads descended upon the eastern reaches of Milandir, ravaging the land as they went. Mounted on their swift steppe ponies, the lightning raids of the savages were difficult to stop. Though both peoples relied upon the horse, that is where the similarities ended. The powerful steeds of the Knights of Milandir, though mighty in battle, were ill-equipped to chase the Ying-heer back into the steppes of the east. For years these acts of banditry persisted until an ambitious chieftain named Ni'Hu arose among the barbarians and united them into a massive army.

Ni'Hu's army swept from the east like a great wave, capturing several fortresses and towns of Milandir with apparently impossible ease. King Osric II set out from Naeraanth with sixty thousand men to put an end to the Hinterlander threat. The King advanced on the Ying-heer, who retreated slowly until they reached the plain of Darsh, near the Niechau River. The Ying-heer



then crossed the river, vanishing beyond the forest on the opposite bank. Osric camped on the plain and drew the wagons of his baggage train around into a laager for security and sent Knights to hold the only bridge across the river.

Even while the Milandisians were securing the bridge, Ni'Hu had found a fording point to the south. Just before dawn of the following day, he led thirty thousand of his horsemen across and with the sudden reappearance of the main Ying-heer force, Osric found his army surrounded. By midmorning, the Milandisians, finding themselves completely outmaneuvered, fell back and took refuge in their camp. For remainder of the day they Ying-heer assailed Osric's camp with catapults, throwing stones and burning tar.

By late afternoon, a conspicuous gap to the west appeared in the Ying-heer lines. Cautiously, a few of Osric's men tried to escape through the gap and passed without difficulty. Others followed and soon the flight became uncontrollable. As the army retreated, however, they began to string out, at which point the Nomads reappeared in force, riding along their flanks and showering them with arrows. The retreat degenerated into a panicky, disorderly rout and moving in for the kill, the horsemen rode them down and killed thousands with lance and axe.

With the destruction of the army of Osric II there remained but one force between the invader and Naeraanth. Hopelessly outnumbered by the barbarian host, Duke Andreas val'Holryn set about an audacious plan. Sending his infantry into the cities to serve as a core garrison, he conscripted all able-bodied men between the ages of fourteen and forty into service. Armed in many cases with the tools of their respective craft, this citizen army stood to hold the walls of their cities. The Duke's Knights moved from their heavy chargers onto their lighter travel mounts to increase mobility and set out eastward to harass the Ying-heer. Using screens of mounted crossbowmen to counter the horn bows of the nomads, the Duke led a fighting retreat westward past several of the city garrisons.

Determined to see an end to the Duke's army, Ni'Hu bypassed the cities, and pursued Duke Andreas back to Naeraanth. There at the walls of the capital, with the sea to one side, the Ying-heer laid siege to the great port. Supplied as it was by sea, the city held for several weeks while the val'Holryn's stratagem developed. The bypassed garrisons marched southward to the sea and took ship, landing behind the Ying-heer lines. With the sea blocking retreat to the south and east and the city to the west, the Ying-heer lost their advantage of mobility. The heavily armored men

of Milandir held all of the advantages in such a fight and crushed the barbarian host.

The Interregnum and the Pretense Wars

Put simply, the great bloody civil war that tore at Milandir's heart began because Willem II had too many sons. Had his brood been a smaller one, it would not have expanded as it did into a family with so many ambitious men of noble blood. With so many claimants and so little of Milandir to go around, conflict was inevitable. The period during which the rightful val'Ossan line did not rule Milandir is known as the Interregnum.

Willem II, King of Milandir, courageous, stolid and seemingly tireless, had time and again humbled his enemies be they Canceri, Coryani or Barbarian. He left behind three sons and an elder grandson, heir of the dead Crown Prince, to take his throne: Andreas I. King Andreas showed little of the martial prowess of his grandfather, but had a famously evil temperament, with a dose of egomania as well. He refused to follow traditions of government, promoting his favorites at the expense of any he took a disliking to. His taxes were indiscriminate and excessive and infuriated the people.

As with all tyrants, Andreas crossed the wrong man in the end. Oswald Val'Inares of Eastmarch, son of Willem II's eldest daughter Princess Marelda, was indicted in an odd conspiracy to betray the Crown and the young King exiled him to Coryan for 10 years. It was unwise of Andreas to alienate as powerful a personage and the young King further compounded his error by abruptly seizing his cousin's rich lands for his own. It was his last mistake. When Andreas went to settle a peasant uprising in Moratavia, Oswald broke exile and landed in Eastmarch, gathering support as he marched on Naeraanth. King Andreas could only muster feeble adherents to his side, and was eventually captured and brought before his cousin. Oswald demanded that Andreas abdicate his throne. Andreas, despised throughout Milandir, was in little position to refuse. Oswald declared himself King Oswald I. The former King Andreas was imprisoned, eventually dying months later, reportedly due to starvation. Oswald was undoubtedly a better man than Andreas, but what right had he to set aside the rightful heir of Willem II? Even disregarding this, the second son, Osric of Vulgast yet lived. With this dangerous precedent, what was to prevent any would-be usurper who considered himself to be more worthy than the reigning monarch from making a play for the throne?

Many said that the Gods would punish the usurper. Perhaps they were right. Oswald's reign was exhausting and largely fruitless. While he was a man of some intellect, he was never truly great. Those who had loathed Andreas now spread rumors that he yet lived, and this became the focus for rebellions. For although Oswald had freed Milandir from the injustices of its former King, his methods won him little sympathy. Usurpation is a dangerous business and plots against the stolen crown were common. Oswald went so far as to have his uncle, Osrice of Vulgast and an Archprelate, Rudolphus Pious, executed for treason. Outrage followed. When Oswald became afflicted with and died from a horrible disease that dried his skin so that it was covered in scaly shingles of necrotic flesh, all saw it as the Gods' will, both for murdering clergy and for the betrayal of his oaths to the rightful King.

Oswald II was not the man his father was and upon his coronation, he gave insult to Bernar val'Holryn, Duke of Tralia. The Duke arose to depart and the King was said to ask, "How am I to know your loyalty without your oaths?" To which the Duke replied, "The val'Holryn line has always been faithful to the rightful Kings of Milandir. You will know my loyalty by the absence of my armies." Osrice of Vulgast's son, also named Osrice, grew to manhood under the tutelage of the parfait knight, Tretan val'Holryn, the Duke's young brother. One of the most powerful and best-trained masters of the Valanoric arts, the Prince was determined to reclaim his birthright. Osrice led the forces of the val'Holryn and val'Ossan against

the Usurper and roundly defeated him at the hamlet of Tehwara when the val'Tensen levies set aside their arms in favor of the val'Ossan prince. Oswald II's queen, born of the val'Dellenov, fled with their infant son to the safety of Oswald's Val'Inares kin in the Hinterlands. As a reward for their actions, the Count val'Tensen was elevated to Duke and Tretan val'Holryn was granted suzerainty over those lands of the Val'Inares not taken for the Crown. The val'Dellenov, despite not aiding the rightful prince in any form, acted as though they were slighted and have agitated against the Crown ever since.

In the centuries that have followed, the Pretender's heirs have attempted to enforce their claims upon the Crown of Milandir. Many noble sons have died in these wars of Pretense, until at last, the final male issue of Oswald's line died in the battle of Jerrold's Bridge just ten years ago.

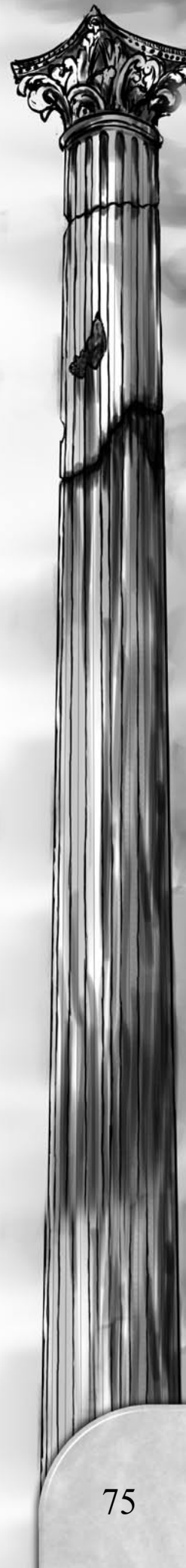
The Infants' Sleep and the Heretic Wars

Though plague is not unknown to Milandir, never before had the Kingdom known pestilence of such horror as that of the Infants' Sleep. Spreading south along the trade routes of Milandir the disease afflicted thousands, but it only killed the very young.

The direction from which the disease spread clearly proved from whence it came and Archprelate Hayden of Tralia, long an outspoken critic of the heretical doctrines of the Church of the Dark Triumvirate, placed blame squarely with the val'Mordanes and called for their destruction. Shortly thereafter, his Grace was assassinated. With the threat of the Canceri made so plainly obvious, the Patriarch of Coryan called for a crusade to be waged against the heretics. The men of Milandir, outraged at the death of their spiritual leader and bound by oaths of piety, formed great armies to destroy the Canceri.

The first such holy host set out northward some twenty years ago under the command of Duke Sigmund val'Holryn of Tralia, at first they met with great success, smashing a Canceri army outside the city of Kielmun and occupying it for the push onward to Vintaka. Alas, the noble Knights of Milandir began to die in droves. The twisted val'Mordanes polluted their own people with disease, poisoned the wells and even slaughtered the herds of their own farmers to spread rot and sickness. The crusading army was decimated. In just two weeks, what appeared to be certain victory became a hopeless campaign. The old Duke came to realize that his army's position was untenable and ordered the retreat back into Milandir.





Other defeats followed each as costly in both lives and wealth as the first and there was precious little gain to show for such a high price. The entire crusade against the heretic church was in jeopardy. King Andreas II appealed to the Patriarch of Coryan for assistance. The Patriarch agreed to finance the war against Canceri and the campaign resumed in earnest once Coryani gold flooded into the royal coffers.

This time a young man arose to lead the crusade, Sir Aeorin val'Holryn. Favored by both Illiir and Saluwe' it was thought that none could defeat him. He swore by Illiir that even invincible Vintaka would fall to him within a year.

Victory upon victory was his as each army of Canceri fell before him. On the plains of Kielmun, the walking dead were trampled beneath the hooves of the great coursers. Before Sohbuk, the sky was black with the arrows of countless archers and the earth was salted with the blood of Sarishan dead. The Nierites declined to meet him in battle east of Nishanpur, showing their intellect at least, if not their fabled courage.

None believed that he could fail to take the city. His men loved him and would have marched into hell itself if he but asked. The righteous might of Milandir, bolstered by other faithful from places as far as Altharia and Abbessios, camped before Vintaka with the expectation of a glorious morning of victory.

It was not to be, none know what became of young Sir Aeorin val'Holryn, but on the morrow he was not in his tent and the army, despairing of the loss of their invincible general, fell into disarray. The Nerothians poured forth from the city, driving all manner of undead, both of man and beast, into the camp of the crusaders. As the battle raged, the fallen men of Milandir arose to join the enemy. Without their general, and caught ill-prepared for such a ferocious onslaught, the army of the Gods fled the field. Curiously, the Nerothians did not attempt to finish the battle and declined to pursue beyond the border.

With such a recent conflict there is much firsthand knowledge of the campaign. I have attached a letter from a Knight of the order of the Brethren of the Shield, present that day and sent to His Grace, the Archprelate of Tralia:

The Battle of Jerrold's Bridge

Ten years ago, the last of the Val'Inares Pretenders, the would-be Oswald III, attempted to capitalize upon what he must have perceived as weakness due to the Canceri defeats and returned to enforce his frivolous claim upon the throne. Leading an army of Val'Inares Hinterlanders

Most Holy Father,

Although I did not have the opportunity to report personally to your Holiness, I now confidently do so by manner of this missive. I send you news of the late conflict, in which it was not so much our strength, but our spirit that was betrayed. Having had wide experience in matters of the martial arts since my youth, I easily admit that the whim of military fortune is such that, according to the slightest movement of the divine Spectators, it falls to fortuitous or unfortunate outcomes. The Gods may be the judges of those who were the cause of such misfortune for the Milandisian people. With the cause of our faith so ably led by Illiir's favored son, we marched with our army, crossing into the territory of the Heretic. As all that we required was our own faith, we confidently penetrated farther each day into that benighted realm. Many of the enemies surrendered without resistance, some we crushed with but little difficulty. Soon we stood before the great dome of mighty Vintaka. We then were faced with a situation beyond our anticipation for our General was not to be seen upon the day of battle. An inequitable battle then took place and though fiercely fought, victory was beyond hope. Only the setting sun halted the carnage. The battle became a staggering defeat one because of the continuous waves of an endlessly attacking multitude of unholy charnel, from which we retreated, not so much defeated as overwhelmed when our own dead arose to join the ranks of the Heretic. Nevertheless, I saw with mine own eyes that we did not inflict fewer wounds to the enemy than we suffered. If nothing else, we left the Heretic with the remains of a bloody and costly victory. It is worthwhile to lament with great cries of grief the deplorable casualties suffered by the faithful. For there perished at Vintaka, the Margrave of Eastmarch, our most illustrious lord and father, Kerbasi val'Ossan, whose soul was virtuous and sound. Defeat was found neither in our weakness nor in the superior bravery of the Heretic. It was a divine reprimand, which administered the defeat to us; the Heretic won the day because of our sins. Recognizing more the weight of our guilt than that of our wounds, we have a firm hope that the Gods will provide a remedy and will move the mind of Your Holiness to strengthen the unbroken but bent power of the Faithful.

Lord Valdemarr val'Ossan,
Margrave of Eastmarch



and mercenaries, he invaded Eastmarch with the stated goal of Naeraanth. Not wishing to provide the Usurper with any opportunity to raise support among the Val'Inares of Eastmarch, Andreas II set out with a hastily assembled army built around the core of the Knights Militant of the Blinding Truth and the Dolphin Guard. With so many men of Milandir north fighting the Canceri Heretic, this small force was all that could assemble quickly.

The Royal forces met the Pretender on the plains of Darsh at Jerrold's Bridge. As so many times in the past, the mobility of the Hinterlander light horse was troublesome. With the flanks harried by swift cavalry, the King drew his infantry into a great square. With the long Tridents of the Dolphin Guard to the outside backed by the stout halberdiers and crossbowmen of those city cantons able to march with the King surrounding the ensigns, the enemy cavalry was effectively negated. The Pretender prepared to commit his mercenary infantry to the fray when the men of Milandir knelt and began to pray, a move which drew scorn from the sell-sword scum and prompted Oswald himself to order the attack.

By this time the Milandisian infantry squares were firmly established and a small forlorn hope of two hundred Knights of the Blinding Truth, wielding their Altharian handguns, was sent forward to harass the enemy advance causing great disruption and with the sharp reports of their handguns taking a terrible toll on the enemy's morale.

The Milandisian square must have been a glorious sight. With over two thousand men

in shining scalemail and polished crested helms packed together to form a veritable forest of pikes and pole axes. In the center flew the great azure Dolphin banner, surrounded by twenty-one other standards; and before that, mounted upon his mighty steed was the august personage of King Andreas. The small force of val'Holryn lancers was positioned directly to the rear to await an opportunity to counterattack, their brightly colored wings and banners fluttering in the breeze.

The battle was opened with a great volley of arrows from the Hinterlanders that tore into the square. The massed tridents and pole axes of the Milandisian formation provided some protection from the arrows' flight, and the city cantons responded in kind with several damaging volleys from their crossbows. The skirmishing knights soon felt the brunt of the mercenary advance as they hastened to return to the safety of the square, which had leveled their weapons in anticipation of the Hinterlander assault.

As the mercenaries ground against the disciplined formation of the Milandisian square, the Pretender formed his knights into a wedge, placing himself in the fore. This second wave had no significant effect upon the hedgehog of the Dolphin guard and the Val'Inares' horse was slain beneath him, though he escaped without injury. The right wing of Hinterlander horse, commanded by the Pretender's brother, Tormod hit the left flank of the square and vicious hand to hand fighting erupted between the Val'Inares knights and the halberdiers of Vulgast. Tormod attempted to seize the banner from the ensign and only succeeded in having his horse slain under him and he was felled by a young Knight named Basilius val'Tensen. A man of Vulgast named Thayer Dekens managed to capture his banner, a gold and azure affair bearing the sign of a coiled serpent.

At this stage in the battle, despite the stolid resistance of the Milandisian line, the situation began to look grim for Andreas. The crossbowmen were nearly out of bolts and the handgunners had exhausted their shot. The Pretender, sensing his opportunity pulled his forces back to consolidate for a final decisive attack.

Ordering his archers to the flanks and his main body of infantry to retreat slightly, he set his cavalry in position to perform the decisive maneuver. Allowing his archers to soften up the square he formed up his knights in preparation of the final assault. This was Oswald's fatal mistake.

Andreas sent the hussars around the right flank, meeting them to lead the charge himself. Right as the enemy was reforming, the

val'Holryn lancers struck. The shrill and drone of the val'Holryn's mighty hunting horns and the great howl of their wings, combined with the sight of the Pretender's vanguard yielding ground, led the ill-disciplined mercenaries to believe that their van was repulsed and retreating. Panic-stricken, they turned and fled causing chaos in the rear and flanks, leaving Oswald in command of only his cavalry to fight out the remainder of the battle in a hopelessly isolated position.

Forced to abandon the fight, Oswald fled the battlefield, eventually losing his horse, and was captured trying to sneak back to Sicaris in a wagon disguised as a woman. He was promptly beheaded.

Though the line of the Usurper, Oswald of Moratavia, was extinguished, there was no rejoicing, for Andreas was mortally wounded and died shortly thereafter when not even the miracles of the church could heal him.

The Regency and the Coryani War

With the death of Andreas II, his young son, then a boy of four, was crowned Osric IV. The King's young age required a regency council to be formed. In the tradition of the ancient Milandisian League of Cities, the leader of each of the five domains served to rule the nation until the King's majority and the addition of the guidance of the church:

Duke Victor val'Holryn of Tralia
Duke Adolphos val'Tensen of Moratavia
Margrave Valdemarr val'Ossan of Eastmarch
Duchess Eldora val'Dellenov of Sylvania
Queen Orlantha, Dowager Queen and Duchess of Naeraanth
Archprelate Sabinus of Tralia

These six souls guide Milandir until such time as our sovereign attains his majority this autumn. A majority vote holds, with the Queen breaking all ties. This has proven to be less than an ideal method of governance, as the Coryani war will illustrate.

A year ago, the master of those Milandisians content to serve the line of an oathbreaker, Menisis val'Tensen invaded the south of Milandir with several legions of Coryani soldiers.

Making the absurd claim of a right to an ancestral homeland, he moved quickly to cross the River Nardau and seize control of several border keeps. Quickly moving to lay siege to the walled town of Boskowitz, the invader was met on the fields before the town by the Knights of Saint Theomund the Missionary.

Menisis in a shrewd move reinforced his own cavalry with detachments of light infantry to guard his flanks. Knowing he could not match the heavily armored cavalry of the knights, this served to counteract some of the order's advantages. Forming his men into the ancient phalanx of the First Imperium, unseen for more than a millennium, the long spears formed a troublesome wall of spines that blunted the knight's charge. Without their primary advantage of the heavy horse, the knights were forced to yield the field of battle to the invader. These modest territorial gains failed to satisfy the greed of the Coryani and Menisis pushed forward, deeper into Moratavia.

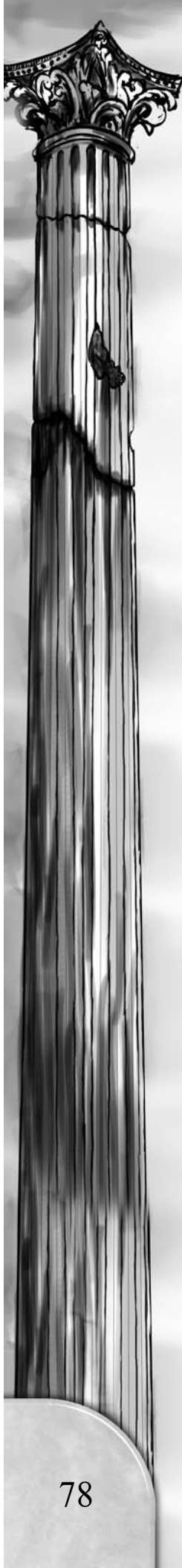
At Traver's Bridge, the noble retinues of Moratavia met the retreating Knights of St. Theomund. Explaining the difficulty of assaulting the Coryani phalanx, and lacking the infantry support of the still mustering city cantons, Duke Adolphos hit upon an inspired plan. Ordering his knights to dismount and form up into squares, using their lances as pikes, the deficit in infantry was negated. Only the men at arms with their lighter mounts and crossbows were left horsed. Though still numerically inferior to the legions, the dismounted knights enjoyed superior arms and armor.

The first wave of the Coryani assault inflicted significant casualties on the Moratvian ranks, but soon the superior weight of the lances began to tell as the ranks of footmen ground together. Menisis must have recognized his predicament and he abandoned the frontal assault after only a few hours. Ordering a sudden change in formation, a lodgment in the knights' front was almost immediately achieved.

The Knights again were left with little option but retreat and they withdrew in good order across the bridge, using the men at arms to screen the movement. Preserving his force to oppose Menisis again, Duke Adolphos withdrew beyond Treslau Pass, leaving its defense to a small force of soldiers and lizardmen hurriedly sent south from Tralia. Those brave souls of Tralia held the invader for fifteen days. Of the nearly five hundred warriors that held the pass, only twenty three survived.

The time they purchased with their lives permitted a great army to muster on the plain beneath the pass. As Adolphos prepared to smash the invader, Menisis sent a messenger with an offer of peace. Saying he was satisfied with the reclamation of much of his 'ancestral homeland' he would advance no further into Milandir. Adolphos was convinced that the day would be his was prepared to disregard the offer out of hand when Duchess Eldora insisted that the Regency Council discuss the issue.





While they debated, Menisis fortified his position against attack; he must have sent the offer only as a ploy to gain time. It succeeded beyond his expectations. Though Adolphos was eager to reclaim his loses, he was overruled when the Archprelate, the Queen and the Duchess of Sylvania decided that there was enough bloodshed and agreed to accept the General's terms.

The other three men were furious with the decision and with Osric IV prepared to assume his majority; it is unlikely that this occupation will persist overlong.

The Foundations of the Pact of Oaths

After the fall of the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame, Milandir was very different than the nation of today. During the Shadowed Age the Milandisians lived a life that many modern men would envy. For the most part, life was lived in simple hamlets and was almost entirely self-reliant, the only significant imports being silk and metals. Space was abundant and enormous tracks of unspoiled wilderness were available for industrious people to clear and farm.

The striking thing to a man of our age is the isolation. After the ravages of the Sword of the Heavens, the great cities of the First Imperium lay abandoned in ruin. The only town of note was the trading outpost of Naeraanth. For every Milandisian who could call himself a townsman there was likely another score that were villagers.

As a nation of farmers, the Milandisian people were primarily concerned with the land. With the destruction of the ruling class, the farmers' plots of land were owned outright by those that cleared and cultivated them and were inherited by their children. But such independent farmers had little recourse beyond their own strengths. With no defense against barbarian raids, storms or even something as simple as a series of poor harvests, a village was a fragile place.

Over the course of centuries, nearly every Milandisian attached himself by mutual oaths to a powerful man, someone who could protect him and his family in times of adversity. In exchange for a portion of the fruits of their labors and a promise to aid the common good at the command of their new protector, the people would know security. Eventually, these protectors would need protectors of their own and larger domains arose. Though many have called this a loss of freedom, the freedom of lone men is illusory, subject to revocation at the whims of fate. What was brought instead was an end of anarchy.

With greater security came greater prosperity and soon the old towns evolved into city-states. The structure of oaths had become quite elaborate by the time the Cancerimen came to steal the product of Milandisian industry during the time of Dolfgar. At the bottom were the bondsmen, men who had lost their freedom due to crimes or were taken as prisoners in battle and refused ransom. Above them were the freemen who farmed as much as a hundred acres or labored in the cities. Then came the Carls, or warriors, who served much the same role as the Knights of today who either drew support from a village under their protection or from a lord they served directly (a Huscarl or House Carl). Then came the lords themselves who were either independent or served one of the Princes of the city-states. Each man, without exception, held duties to everyone below them as well as above. Though men have always been imperfect a man who failed in their duties, thereby breaking their oaths, would be punished and laws were written to ensure a remedy against an oath-breaker. If a Carl failed in his protection, a Lord was bound by custom and law to grant the people a protector they required and if a Lord failed, then his master would replace him as well.

Chivalry and Decorum

What the unenlightened peoples of Onara should know about Milandisians is the value of honor. Where a promise is merely the convenient sophism that a Coryani sycophant uses to placate his master and even the Canceriman swearing by the Demon God will seek a way to pervert an arrangement, a Milandisian considers his word to be his defining trait. Sully the reputation of a Milandisian and you will likely find yourself at the point of his sword. It is only this inherent nobility that sustains the pact of oaths.

With such a regard for honor, it is perhaps natural that a code of conduct has developed to aid a man in his endeavors. Each man is expected to strive for the highest ideals in personal integrity. To this end, unsightly displays of emotion are to be avoided. If a Milandisian allowed animal passions to govern his actions as lesser men do, Milandir would surely suffer the same internal dissention afflicting other lands. Honestly is highly valued, as are the qualities of courtesy, generosity, piety, compassion and loyalty. Taken in full these qualities are referred to as chivalry.

In contrast to other nations ruled by absolute autocrats, the rulers are as bound by law and loyalty as is the yeoman. It is the duty of the strong to defend the weak from oppression. Even

the King and his Dukes are bound by custom and oath to provide for those in their care, for the powers they hold are granted upward from the people. This is the nobleman's obligation and history is rife with examples of those that fail their duty and meet distasteful ends.

The Three Estates

The Peers of the Realm

The val'Ossan

Four great houses make up the majority of Milandir's gentry. Each house is typically associated with one of the four cities of the ancient Milandisian League.

The descendents of Dolfgar val'Ossan rule the great port of Naeraanth to this day. Favored of Yarris the SeaLord, those of the royal house typically have an affinity for the sea. The current King is Osric IV, soon to be of his majority and he looks to be a formidable monarch. Already the Valinoric talents have awakened with him and with Duke Victor of Tralia as his teacher there is little doubt that he will be a mighty and chivalrous knight.

The great strength of the val'Ossan is the Royal Navy. Milandir remains as the only continental power to ever defeat the Black Fleet of the Sorcerer-King at sea. This prowess preserves Milandisian merchants' rights to trade by sea and protects those of arcane potential born of Milandir from slavery to the undying Witch of Ymandragore.

The val'Holryn

Duke Sigmund val'Holryn was a wise and noble Duke. He led campaigns against many enemies of the Crown and the church until he vanished years ago. The only witness claimed that the old Duke was carried off by demons in the night, but as this witness was a shameful drunkard. Who is to trust the value of his words?

Sigmund's second son, Victor now rules Tralia, just as his distant ancestor Volthar once did. The Duke rules as a man of much personal integrity and courage. It is unfortunate that his rule is marred by the brutality of his actions during the Heresy of Brechau. The entire town was burned and most of those within perished and although they were heretics the brutality of the slaughter has cast a shadow upon Victor's tenure.

The val'Holryn are noteworthy on two other accounts. Since the time of the Interregnum each Crown Prince of Milandir has served

as a squire to the Duke of Tralia. This close association with the Crown strengthens the Kingdom's northern frontier against the Canceri Heretic. Also, several generations ago, a clutch of lizardmen came to Milandir seeking sanctuary. Finding only fear and scorn in the other nations they finally found a homeland in Milandir as the val'Holryn offered them lands in exchange for the customary oaths of fealty. Since that time, the lizardmen have served the val'Holryn and the Crown in countless battles.

The val'Dellenov

The children of Saluwe' the Great Mother, the val'Dellenov, are by tradition ruled by women. Their perspective on the affairs of state often bears a sharp contrast to that of the other families. Though this has proven useful in the past, recently this has been a hindrance in the war against Coryan. Instead of seizing the opportunity to smash the invader, the Council of Regents decided to accept an offer of armistice. As a result, the conquests of Meniseus stab at the heart of Milandir as would a dagger, and the heart of Milandisian pride is similarly wounded. Some accuse the Duchess of disloyalty, citing the old grudge against Osric III that dates from the Interregnum; it appears more likely that her soft feminine heart grew tired of battle and the fields of the dead.

The val'Dellenov are famed across Milandir for their prowess as hunters and woodsmen. The Knights of Sylvania are more likely to excel at archery than horsemanship and are unlikely to fit the mold of the traditional heavy horseman. Unique among Milandisian gentry, women often take up arms and pursue a martial life; the famed Sorority of the Vastwood is the only Knightly Order made entirely of women, mounted upon their powerful griffons. They are greatly feared by Milandir's enemies.

The val'Tensen

The children of Hurrian, the Reluctant Warrior, guard the southern reaches of the Kingdom. Split between Milandir and the Coryani, the val'Tensen are a deeply wounded family. Brothers should never be forced to stand apart yet there are those of ancestral Moratavia that would follow the oath-breaker on his Alabaster throne. The honorable val'Tensen of Milandir look across the Nardau at their ancestral lands and it burns at their soul. The day will come where all val'Tensen lands are united under the Crown of Milandir.

Chivalry is even more valued among the val'Tensen than it is among the other families



of Milandir. The val'Tensen are great patrons of Knightly Orders. No fewer than seven orders of Knighthood, both secular and religious, enjoy the support of the Dukes of Moratavia. These orders have been granted the care of several important castles and lands of adequate income to support them.

Moratavia is also famous for its great tournaments and lists. Knights from all over Milandir come to compete in the joust, and the other lists draw warriors from throughout the world.

The Val'Inares

Anshar's children once held many positions of esteem throughout Milandir, even holding the title of Margrave of Eastmarch. All this changed when the Usurper deposed his rightful liege. Though King Andreas I may have broken his own oaths of rulership in this tyranny, there were better claimants to the Crown than Oswald of Eastmarch. When Oswald's heir revealed himself to be a tyrant as well, it was only fitting that the rightful heir to the kingdom deposed him in turn.

Perhaps the children of the Suffering Goddess were never meant to know the joys of acceptance in a nation as enlightened as Milandir. Nevertheless, a few Val'Inares who remained loyal to Milandir retain their estates in Eastmarch and elsewhere and are treated with the respect that any faithful man of Milandir deserves.

Other Peers of the Realm

There are many other Val families throughout Milandir, though none are as numerous or influential as the five great families. Recently, the Milandisian passion for music has led several of the val'Borda family to immigrate to Milandir from other realms. Mostly younger children with little chance at inheritance, they seek to find a home as well as fame and fortune among the great musicians of the land.

Milandir is a nation of freedom and nobility, and any man that can prove his worth can be elevated to the ranks of the nobility by the authority of a Lord, regardless of the absence of the blood of the Valinor. Typically these men receive the accolade of knighthood due to great acts of personal integrity and courage. Those knights of this bent that are entrusted with the protection of those less capable than themselves are bestowed with the title of Knight Protector and share oaths with the men they protect.

Faith and the Church

Only a pious man could ever hope to maintain the strict code of honor that separates the Milandisian from those of less integrity. Without the tenets of faith a man would have no measure of what is right and proper. There is no limit to the accomplishments of the faithful and no end to the treachery of the Heretic.

Many times in the past, great crusades have been waged against the Infidel and the Heretic, most recently in Canceri. But many Knights swear crusader oaths and travel far to uphold the Mother Church against all that would see her destroyed. One such popular destination for the crusader is the city of Altharis, threatened as it is by the savage Ssethregore.

Shortly after independence, the Crown of Milandir granted itself the right of approval over church appointments. The practice of conducting services in High Coryani was abolished in Milandir and faith was brought to the people in the Milandisian tongue. The people now could appreciate the pact with the Gods directly.

The King enjoyed this approval of all church appointments of import in Milandir until the Heretic War, where in return for the treasure required to wage war, His Divine Grace, the Patriarch of Coryan was granted the next right of appointment for each Holy See in the Kingdom.

The Highest of Churchmen are chosen mostly from the landed gentry. Only the wealthy are able to spare sons from labor and send them to



the Church for a proper education and as a result few of the freemen ever gain the knowledge and skills needed to administer the great resources and burdens of a Holy See or Abbey.

This weight towards the nobility has given rise to a new breed of priest: the Knight Militant. Since the betrayal of the Nierite honor guard centuries ago the Coryani Church has been forbidden its own army in the empire. With the independence of Milandir and the tradition of martial prowess of its people, perhaps it was only natural that the Church would gain its army in another nation. The knights of the church are sworn to a particular God, Valinor or Saint and are sponsored by a noble patron, be that a Duke, a Prelate or even the King. Five such Orders are active in Milandir today.

Cathedral Building

Milandir is a prosperous land and the nobility are keen to support the Church. A certain level of competition has benefited the Mother Church as the great Lords attempted to build the most impressive church in the land. Even modest towns built cathedrals in honor of the pantheon, incorporating such extravagances as: sculpture, gilding, stained glass and illuminated domes.

The Freemen

Milandir no longer has bondsmen, criminals not put to death either languish in prison or are exiled to foreign lands. So below Peers and Priests are only the freemen.

Most freemen are farmers and they prosper in the fertile lands of Milandir. Milandisian villages are simple places, numbering perhaps ten families that each cultivate as much as one hundred acres. A low stone wall typically surrounds such villages and the farmland they claim is surrounded by yet another wall. It is customary when a visitor approaches a village to blow a horn as he crosses the wall to signify that he approaches openly.

In centuries past seldom did these farmers venture beyond their village, a trip to a neighboring hamlet was a rare treat and a journey to one of the walled towns or a great city the event of a year. But as Milandir grew and trade in the cities replaced farming as the lifeblood of the kingdom a new type of freeman arose.

In the simple villages, binds of blood and fealty were the only ties of merit. In the teeming populace of the city these arrangements proved inadequate. From this need guilds arose. At the start, these were commercial guilds concerned

only with mercantile pursuits, but in the tide of years, these guilds came to be used for every conceivable purpose. Guilds arose for common defense against criminals, fellowship and even drinking. Common chests were kept to provide for the widows and orphans of members much as a family of a villager would. Admittance into a guild is granted upon receipt of oaths.

Guilds exert tremendous influence within the cities and in keeping with the oaths, by which every Milandisian is bound; they aid the lords of the city by providing an avenue to organize the conscripts in time of war. The Guildmasters serve as officers in command of soldiers raised entirely from their guilds and as a result many such men have earned knighthood through their valorous deeds.

Also, as is appropriate for honorable men of Milandir, guilds hold a close relationship with the Mother Church, most guilds have a saint as a patron and many would maintain the costs of a chapel or a priest in the quarters of their home cities.

Milandisian Passion and the Arts

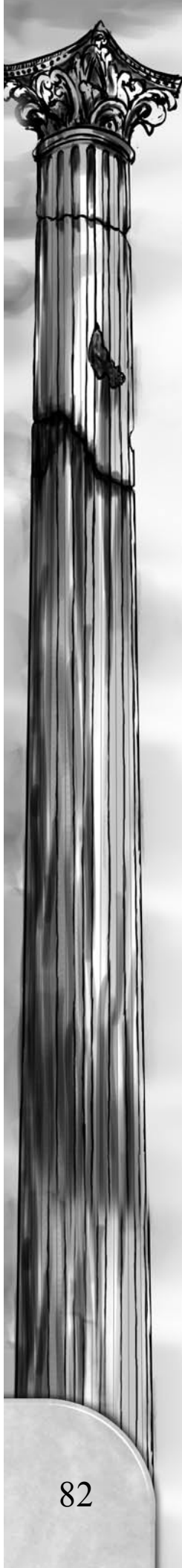
Regardless of the mastery we Milandisians show over the animal pulls of emotion, we are a passionate people. Such a burning force as passion requires a proper outlet and is found in the arts. The nobles of Milandir are great patrons of the arts. All of the great cities maintain symphonies and opera houses and even modest landholders will provide patronage to painters.

Literature

Growing directly from the ancient tradition of Coryani literature, Milandisian works are merely the adaptation of ancient style to the subjects of interest to the people.

Epic poetry is the Coryani style of the most appeal to Milandisian sensibilities. At first, these poems were written only in High Coryani, which was the language of the nobility. As time passed and the landed gentry grew closer to the freemen, these works found their way into the common vernacular. Such works detail the exploits of great warriors from the past. Referred to as Songs of Deeds, these are celebrations of the martial feats of national heroes. Some popular poems include the Song of Volthar and the Song of the First Emperor, celebrating the lives and heroic deaths of such august figures. Battles are often described in bloodthirsty detail, as this passage from the Song of the First Emperor will illustrate:





The Demon Prince, a mighty foe, strong of arm
and sharp of claw
Before him now comes the Emperor, he'd never
seen, but knew him the instant
By his proud stature and his noble aspect, his
haughty gaze and his manner
The demon, mortal fear that betrays him, fain
he'd fly, but to what avail?
With ferocious valor the Emperor smote him,
that to the nub, the Prince's horn is brast
Cloven the snout, the teeth and shoulder, the
stunned Prince he staggers
The infernal host falls wailing for sorrow,
The thousand armies all cry: "Hail our
champion!"

Music

Milandisian music pulls at the heart, providing release for the desires of life. In Milandir, music mirrors the melodious beauty of the land. For generations, music has been the crowning glory of Milandisian culture.

As with much of that which is Milandisian, music grew out of adherence to faith. Not only were the scriptures translated into Milandisian, but the chorale was adopted as an essential accompaniment to the mass. Over time, instruments were added to provide counterpoint to the choir and the compositions grew in complexity.

Duke Jerrold val'Holryn was a great patron of musicians, inviting many to come and entertain the court and people of Tralia. One such artist was the great composer Warwyk of Lustia. The first to compose purely instrumental music, he wrote a grand piece that would require several dozen musicians to play as one. Tralia provided perhaps the only place in the entire world where this was possible. The effect was astonishing; the Crown Prince, who was in attendance, was so moved that he bestowed the accolade of Knighthood upon Warwyk and commanded him to build a great college of music. From this grew the great tradition of music as it exists today.

Dance

The dance of Milandir is energetic and passionate. The rules of decorum prevent the scandalous displays of public lust common in Coryan, especially Carfella. Other than his intended, a man is not to touch a woman outside of his family. Indiscreet contacts have caused tremendous scandal to befall courtly houses.

Those passions still burn within the soul and they find an outlet in dance. Romantic interest can only be safely displayed if there are no improper

words or touches. As a result, the style of dance common in other lands where the dancers grope and caress each other in a most distasteful display is not permitted in Milandir. Nevertheless youthful lusts still require release and a certain level of titillation can be achieved by dancing very closely, almost touching, to music that makes the blood boil. These movements, hinting at the possibility of impropriety, come very close to contact.

Theater

As a result of their alliance with the Church many guilds participated in religious pageants and in morality plays. These plays were staged on wagons drawn from one exhibition point to another across a city and vast crowds would appear wherever they performed. Soon these became a great source of income for the guilds that gave the best performances.

As the people demanded more and more performances, the classical dramas and lessons from scripture were quickly exhausted. The townsfolk began to tire of the same stories and the revenues melted away. Theater may have faded into the past if it were not for Tobias of Naeraanth, Guildmaster of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers.

Still thought of as the greatest playwright in history, Tobias wrote new plays that spoke to the passions and values of the Milandisian soul. Drawing from history, he wrote plays that called upon the lessons of history to show the price of sin. Tales of treachery ended with the unpleasant death of the traitor. Tales of pride showed the price of hubris. His plays were spectacular successes. And today the Harbor Theater of Naeraanth remains as the finest venue of drama today.

Opera

As the spectacle of theater grew alongside the blossoming beauty of orchestral music, perhaps it was inevitable that the two would find a home together in the art of Opera.

The commoners prefer the simplicity of theater, where the words are clearly heard but to the gentry of Milandir, Opera is the pinnacle of artistic achievement. Written to cater to the themes of their patrons, Operas are tales of noble men and noble deeds. Grandiose tales of Gods and heroes are common as are dramatized accounts of historical events. The composers of the Royal College of Music are tasked to provide new Operas for every month of the theater season in Naeraanth, with these compositions finding their way to the other cities in the following season. As a result, Naeraanth is a favored destination of the wealthy so they can enjoy the debuts of new Operas.

The Might of Milandir

There is little by way of permanent armies in Milandir. Those Lords entrusted with fortresses maintain cadres of men capable of holding them under siege, but to fight wars, great armies are required.

There was a time when feudal obligations alone could provide a mighty army for the Crown. But as the costs of knightly accoutrements grew the gentry became less capable of maintaining a constant body of manpower to make war. The only permanent military forces remaining are the Navy and the Various Orders of Knighthood.

The Royal Navy

Though now a great and powerful fleet, the Royal Navy wasn't always so. After the founding, the fleet numbered less than a dozen warships, taken in the harbor of Naeraanth when the Coryani were cast out. Little cause was seen for a larger force, and even these ships were not out at sea and vigilant. Only a small core of officers was maintained, with sailors being recruited during time of war. The flaws of this system were rudely exposed by two events.

First, the pirates of the Freeport savaged Milandisian shipping from Censure to Altharia. Such a small fleet was incapable of protecting merchantmen in distant waters and the galleys themselves were ill suited to such long journeys.

Second, no longer a part of the Coryani Empire, the Sorcerer-King considered his agreement with the Alabaster Throne to not apply to Milandir. The Ordainers came again to steal children and when they were sent back to Ymandragore empty-handed, he set his fleet to savage the Milandisian coast.

An emergency shipbuilding effort was initiated and by the end of the reign of Osric I Milandir had built fifty ships with more under construction; it was this fleet that first opposed the Ymandrake fleet.

Not a nation of sailors, Milandir had great difficulty arriving at a successful stratagem to overcome these traditional great sea powers. The Black Fleet had the might of the sorcerers of Ymandragore as well as the arcane formulation of Naphtha, or Dragon's Fire, and the captains of Freeport were some of the canniest sailors of any age.

It was quickly learned that the newly built Royal Navy was no match for its enemies in terms of seamanship and the first few battles against the Black Fleet were disastrous defeats. The tactic of the day was ramming the opponent to put a hole in his side with the metal encased ram on the



prow of every warship. This required more skill than the inexperienced men of Milandir possessed as the timing for such a maneuver relied upon an opportunity of a few seconds. Arriving late, a ship would miss its opponent entirely and would be punished by the Dragon's Fire. Arriving early would see the would-be attacker rammed instead.

Finally, General Marque val'Ossan hit upon an idea. If the sailors of the Crown were no match for their enemies, then it would be the soldiers of the Crown that brought victory at sea. Scores of sleek, fast ships with great numbers of rowers were built and for battle, the decks are crammed with heavily armed marines. Built onto every ship was a forty-foot bridge with a claw at the end to bite into the other ship's deck and bind the ships together. These ships are less seaworthy than other vessels, but in the placid waters of the Gulf of Yarris, such concerns are minimal. It was this new breed of ship and new tactic that delivered defeat to the Black Fleet at Nacre.

The Dolphin Guard

Only the most dedicated and courageous warriors become Marines of the Crown. With the heavy armor that such men wear, a sunken vessel is certain death. After the Interregnum the need for an elite guard of such men beholden only to the Crown was clear. One thousand men were chosen from the fleet to serve as the core of the Crown's army and to guard the King and his family. Given the Dolphin Banner of the ancient Milandisian legion of Naeraanth, they were charged to protect the Crown even to their own death.

The Knightly Orders

Once it was feasible for knight of modest means to maintain an independent stance, ready to answer the call to arms at a moment's notice in full battle array. As such it was not necessary for rulers to maintain a standing army on a regular payroll. Booty taken on campaign was considered a fair and adequate reward for the personal risk undertaken to fulfill a knight's oaths. As the costs of fighting as a knight became more and more expensive fewer of the landed gentry, the traditional core of knighthood, had either the inclination or the financial wherewithal to take it up. For a knight that was neither wealthy nor prominent, the risk of such valuable articles in warfare comprised a tremendous burden. As a result, sons of knights that were less than willing to take up the burdens of service had to be provided with an avenue to avoid financial ruin.

The answer was the knightly orders. Previously there were orders sanctioned by the church that provided armaments to men who otherwise would not possess them due the clergy's vows of poverty. If the church could provide such patronage, then certainly the King and Dukes could provide the same. Just as the freemen had their guilds, so too would the nobility have their fraternal organizations.

Men of suitable birth or those that had obtained the accolade of knighthood would be welcomed into these orders. In exchange for oaths to the order and its patron, these knights would receive a horse, armor, and arms as appropriate to the order. These orders provide an elite corps of warriors to march in defense of Milandir on a moment's notice.

The Conscripts

After the campaign against Ni'Hu the Ying-heer a practice began in which the towns maintained arms for use by the citizens. All men between fourteen and forty were required to train with a weapon of a type chosen by the city's cantonial (defense) council made up of the various Lords and Guildmasters. There are three types of conscript. First to be called in times of emergency are the young unmarried men, typically between eighteen and thirty. If greater numbers are needed, the conscription age rises to forty and only in the direst of circumstances would the young men of less than eighteen be called. Any lost or damaged weapons are the responsibility of the soldier to replace. Upon muster, those called to serve were obliged to bring six days of food on the march. This way, a large force of fighting men could be raised very quickly and mercenaries are rarely required to supplement the cantonial forces.

Conscription has replaced the ancient practice of the levy by providing a trained fighting man rather than a peasant. Outside the towns, conscription has been applied to the farmers as well, so it is likely that any man you meet in Milandir is a capable warrior and in possession of a weapon by which he can defend himself. This has had the additional benefit of dissuading banditry.

The typical armor of the city cantons is a hodgepodge of styles. Armor is not provided for the people, but booty taken in battle has been passed down through families where most have at least a helmet and breastplates are common. A wide variety of styles exist where you may see the chain shirt of a Coryani legionnaire worn with a turbaned helmet of Sarishan steel. Weapons favored by the cities are the crossbow and the halberd though most any pole-arm will be used and the ransuer is gaining popularity.

In rural areas armor is uncommon and the longbow is the favored weapon. Traditionally a val'Dellenov weapon, the high rate of fire and devastating impact of the arrow has persuaded the Crown to embark upon a great program of training in the weapon throughout the countryside.

Each muster called by a Great Lord sets out in detail how many men are to be conscripted from each city and outlying communities and what arms they were to bring. Also officers are then assigned, with the guilds required to choose the men for the muster and provide leadership. A Commander is chosen and an Ensign who bears the Cantonial Banner assists him. Around this standard are carried the standards of the guilds and noble families of the town and its surrounding countryside.

Milandir Overview

Capital: Naeraanth

Population: 19,240,300 (Humans/Vals 99.5%, Ss'ressen 0.4%)

Government: Monarchy

Religion: Church of Coryan

Imports: Silk, Ivory, Spices

Exports: Armor, Weapons, Food, Artwork, Iron Ore

Alignment: LN, LG, NG

Geographical Overview

The two words that best describe Milandir are green and pleasant. Once covered in primordial forest, legend claims that a squirrel could have traveled from the Tares to the Niechau without touching the ground, most of the woodlands

having been cleared to provide prime farmland. Hills are few and far between, with only one small mountain range providing any obstacle to travel.

Moratavia

The ancestral home of the val'Tensen family, Moratavia guards most of the southern border of the Kingdom from the decadent Coryani. To the south the river Nardau flows from the Corellathian Mountains and the river marks the border with Coryan. A shallow and placid flow for most of its length, the river itself provides no obstacle to travel, as at most points a man could wade across, the only barrier would be the crocodiles which appear in startling numbers. Traditionally the land to the south of the Nardau is part of the Milandisian region of Moratavia, but those that call those lands home choose to remain as part of the Empire. Many of the Moratavian Dukes have attempted to reunite their ancestral lands. The volcanic Paerthian range lies in the center of Moratavia. The mountains are split by the lava tunnels and ridgelines of Treslau pass, so named for the seat of the val'Tensen family, a city that lies in their shadow to the east. Consisting of only a dozen peaks it is only a matter of days to ride completely around them.

The City of Treslau

Type: Metropolis

Population: 33,913

Ruler: Duke Adolphos val'Tensen

Power Centers: The Duke, Guilds, Brethren of the Missionary

Military: Knights: 2200 (5000 in wartime)*Castle*

Soldiers: 500 (8200 noble retinue in wartime)*City*

Guard: 500*Cantonal Conscripts:* 9,500

Industries: Trade, Granite, Foodstuffs, Effervescent Water

Sylvania

The sparsely populated Duchy of Sylvania, the ducal seat of Lustia is the only city of any size, is looked upon as a rustic backwater by the remainder of Milandir. The unusual matriarchal system of the val'Dellenov and the fact that no traditional enemy lies to Milandir's west combine to marginalize the region's importance. The Vastwood marks the western extent of the Kingdom. Even though there is no visible nation to halt further expansion westward, the val'Dellenov caution against traveling too far into the untamed forest, as not only do the Elorii take a dim view of trespassers, but there are many tribes of dangerous goblinoids deep within the wood. These tribes are wont to raid the western villages

of Sylvania and small yet fierce battles are fought between the forest cantons and the woodland savages. The other families are preoccupied with the more obvious threats of Canceri and Coryan, leaving the val'Dellenov to fend for themselves.

The City of Lustia

Type: Metropolis

Population: 17,777

Ruler: Duchess Eldora val'Dellenov

Power Centers: The Duchess, The Woodsmen of Vastwood, Sisterhood of Saluwe'

Military: Knights: 400 (1,300 in wartime)*Castle*

Soldiers: 700 (3,400 noble retinue in wartime)*City*

Guard: 900

Cantonal Conscripts: 3,800

Industries: Lumber, Furs, Amber, Rare Woods, Wood Syrups, Wood and Ivory Artwork

Tralia

The ancestral home of the noble val'Holryn family is the great city of Tralia, seat of the senior churchman in the entire kingdom and a great center of enlightened learning. The city and the duchy itself take their name from an ancient city of the First Imperium destroyed by the Sword of the Heavens during his reign of terror. To the north, a great cursed swamp marks the border with Canceri. Its blighted and diseased nature is clearly an indictment of the culpability of Neroth in the destruction of the old town of Ashvan. Trade from the north of Milandir as well as Canceri must come to Tralia if it wishes to make use of the great river Tares. West of Tralia the Tares is marked by a great many rapids and waterfalls and travel on the river is impossible. The lands of Tralia are dotted with farms and several major towns lie along the Tares and the Cold Road, the ancient Coryani trade route that runs from Naeraanth to Nishanpur. In the west of the duchy lies the Sulfur Marsh, home to the Black Talon Egg Clutch, a tribe of Ss'ressen that sought refuge in Milandir. The swamp is kept warm year round as it is fed by hot springs. South of the Tares is a great forest named Faerdwalden. Rumored to be the demesne of the walking dead, unholy relics from the time of Dolfgar and known to be home to tribes of vicious ratmen, the wood has a dire reputation. Knights from the City of Faerdlau and the surrounding countryside often hunt those ratmen that accost the villages that abut the forest and it has become fashionable for knights to wear the pelts of ratmen in lieu of the more traditional skins of great cats, wolves, and bears.

The City of Tralia*Type:* Metropolis*Population:* 87,771*Ruler:* Duke Victor val'Holryn*Power Centers:* The Duke, The Archprelate of Tralia, Guilds*Military: Knights:* 400 (2500 in wartime)*Castle Soldiers:* 600 (3400 noble retinue in wartime)*City Guard:* 900*Cantonial Conscripts:* 17,500*Industries:* Trade, Arts, Iron, Cloth, Food, Whiskey, Fine Steel Weapons and Armor***Naeraanth***

The Royal Duchy and seat of Milandir's kings, cosmopolitan Naeraanth is the greatest city in the nation. A great port, Naeraanth lies at the mouth of the Tares River. The Royal Palace, which is built upon an island, dominates the harbor entrance. Great artistic achievements make Naeraanth one of the most beautiful cities in the world. The Royal Conservatory of Music, the Harbor Theater of the Fishmongers, the Cathedral of the Pantheon, these are but the beginning of the beauty of Naeraanth. The King's Palace is a wonder of gardens and artistic masterpieces. The roofs of the city are tiled in beautiful coral and even the home of the most modest family is clean and bright. This beauty is the result of the great wealth of the city, the Tares, the Cold Road and the Caravan Road meet at Naeraanth and as a result almost all trade to and from the northeast of Onara passes through Naeraanth. People of every stripe and nationality can be found here as can nearly every commodity, the one exception being slaves as slavery is an affront to freemen and slavers are punished with death. The outlying areas of Naeraanth are extensively farmed and many fishing villages and port towns line the coastline. Towns of fair population, built around large wayhouses and inns, appear at each day's travel along the roads and the great river.

The City of Naeraanth*Type:* Metropolis*Population:* 867,123*Ruler:* Dowager Queen Orlantha, Custodian for King Osric IV*Power Centers:* The Queen, The Boy King, The Archprelate of Naeraanth, Guilds*Military: Knights:* 5000 (15,000 in wartime)*Castle Soldiers:* 1000 (13,600 noble retinue in wartime)*City Guard:* 3,000*Cantonial Conscripts:* 190,000*Industries:* Trade, Arts, Coral, Ships, Cloth, Wine, Fish, Silk***Eastmarch***

The lands of Eastmarch extend along the border with the Hinterlands. Existing only to protect Milandir from the depredations of barbarian raiders, there are no cities of note and most significant settlements are built in the shadow of a border fortress. The traditional home of the Val'Inares family, few of that line remain in Milandir after the treachery of Oswald. In the north, the River Niechau marks the extent of Milandisian territory as it flows downhill from the highlands. In the south many farms lie to the east of the Niechau and the border with the Hinterlands becomes indistinct, the farming villages get smaller and less frequent as one travels east until all that is found is prairie. Peaceful Ying-heer tribes continue their nomadic ways in the untamed land between the villages unmolested by the soldiers of Eastmarch and some tribes are even loyal vassals of the King, providing some of their famed light horsemen for the King's armies.

Who's Who in Milandir***King Osric IV***

Just now approaching his 14th birthday, and with it his majority, the King is already a formidable personage. With the trademark raven hair and gray eyes of the val'Ossan family, the handsome young monarch is highly sought as a husband, even more so than a bachelor king would typically be.

Milandir has been ruled by a regency council for ten years as Osric's father, Andreas II, died in battle with the heirs of the val'Ossan family's mortal enemies, the val'Inares Usurpers. There is some concern that the transfer of power will not be easy. The Council has held the authority of the crown for ten years, and with Osric's young brother Jerrold close at hand as an heir, the early death of the King could provide four more years of power. Also, the Coryani would not grieve for his loss as it was the Regency Council that saw fit to accept the terms of the Coryani invader. The King has on many occasions publicly stated that the Coryani occupation of Southern Moratavia shall not be permitted to continue, making it likely that war will erupt with the Empire within the year.

Osric is already a shrewd player of the game of politics. He learned the art of statecraft in the court of Duke Victor val'Holryn of Tralia and it is unlikely that he could have found a better teacher. The young King will allow others to dismiss him as a boy and will often feign a

childish ignorance or naiveté in order to learn the motivations of his subjects. Already he is an accomplished swordsman and his Val blood has awakened the potential of his mind. These skills have been taught to him by his friend, champion and mentor, Sir Gerhard val'Holryn.

There are troubled times ahead for Milandir and this boy king must lead his nation through the coming storm. Those that serve their King well in such times can go very far.

Archprelate Sabinus val'Assante

A man of daunting girth, Sabinus is the senior churchman in all of Milandir. Holding the Holy See of Tralia, which for time immemorial has been the foremost holy position in the entire north, the Archprelate is supposed to be the spiritual leader of the faithful in Milandir, Canceri and the Hinterlands. Instead, he is little but a pawn of the Alabaster throne.

Twenty years ago the Patriarch of Coryani called for a great crusade against Canceri. Exhausting to Milandir in both men and wealth, Andreas II appealed to the Patriarch of Coryan for assistance and the Holy Father agreed to finance the war. However the Patriarch required that, in return, King Andreas would approve all his religious appointments within Milandir, Sabinus is the result.

A loyal servant of the Coryani Emperor, Sabinus holds a position of power on the Regency Council due to his position of head of the Church of Milandir. This situation is detrimental to the Kingdom for obvious reasons and it was the Archprelate who convinced the Queen and the Duchess of Sylvania to accept the terms of the Coryani invaders.

His oaths of loyalty to the Crown are worthless to him and if he were sure he could get away with it, he would assassinate the King in order to extend his hold on Royal power as a regent.

He is despised by his servants and aides, all of whom are Milandisian, as he is a tyrant, quick to anger and unwilling to accept responsibility for his own mistakes. He only pays lip service to the Pantheon and his lack of faith is betrayed by his meager divine skills. Lecherous, Lustful and Gluttonous, he is the very picture of what a priest of Illiir should not be.

Physically he is enormously obese and would not likely be handsome even if he were fit and trim. The corpulent flesh of his chubby fingers have grown around his rings of office to the point that were he to die, it would be necessary to sever his fingers to recover the holy relics. He is perpetually covered in a glaze of sweat, even in

wintertime and as a result his blond hair adheres to his head in greasy strings. The miasma of those that cannot reach everywhere when they bathe forever surrounds him. Walking appears to be an unmanageable burden and even short distances leave him without breath.

Sir Gerhard val'Holryn

The King's honor and personal welfare are well looked after by his champion, the redoubtable Gerhard val'Holryn of Faerdlau. A famous Knight and hero of many battles, he was at the late King Andreas' side during the decisive charge of the val'Holryn lancers on the banks of the Niechau. His valor and prowess so impressed the King that the King asked Gerhard to be Osric's guard and champion.

Since that time, Gerhard has not only defended the young King, but has served as a shining example of the courage and honor that a Milandisian Knight should display. Approaching forty, but not yet showing any signs of slowing or weakening, the fearsome reputation of Gerhard's sword arm is enough to deter any would be challenger to the King's honor or authority.

Gerhard is an imposing figure, even to those that do know his reputation. Towering over other men, he dominates a room by his very presence and the grace with which he moves indicates his formidable prowess at arms. Gerhard is fiercely protective of the King and tends to view everyone with suspicion. He will not drink to drunkenness and is not given to wanton indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. It is difficult to make Gerhard into a friend, but if such a feat could be accomplished, there could be no better ally.

Relations with other Nations

Altharia

The Altharians are great friends of Milandir. Their learned knowledge and diplomatic skill are happily welcomed in the Kingdom. Like Milandir, Altharia is a nation surrounded by enemies. The Ssethregore of the Myrantis Basin constantly assault the walls of the great city. A crusade is always in effect against the inhuman serpentmen and Milandisians often travel to defend Altharia in fulfillment of crusading oaths. Occasionally dispute arises over the Ss'ressen folk of the Sulfur Marsh as many Altharians have difficulty separating this group of Milandisian lizardfolk from the ruthless Ssethregore.



Canceri

Everything wicked comes from Canceri; the Blighted Mire and the Infant's Sleep serve as illustrations of this truth. If there is a nation that serves as a direct counterpoint to Milandir, it is Canceri. Where Milandisians enjoy freedom, the Cancerimen are oppressed. Where the Mother Church is revered in Milandir, it is despised in Canceri. Every Milandisian knows that Canceri would destroy Milandir if given the chance and most are willing to see the Heretics destroyed first. Thrice already have armies from Canceri invaded Milandir and it is likely inevitable that they shall do so again. The sons of Milandir are prepared to meet this threat and end it once and for all.

Coryan

The debauched tyrants of the Alabaster Throne naturally seek the return of the jewel of their empire. Fortunately none of them have had either the courage or the skill to return Milandir to the empire by conquest. That is until now, General Menisis is perhaps the most capable general that Coryan has seen in six centuries and his conquests stain the nation's honor. The threat of Menisis is so sharply known because he is val'Tensen and of Milandisian blood.

Dwarves

Dwarves are largely unknown to Milandisians. Those that are seen are typically mistrusted, as it seems that they are always attempting to bait a man into an unfavorable bargain that will burden his descendants.

Elorii

Rarely seen but valued as mercenaries and scouts, Elorii typically find a warm welcome in Milandir as those Elorii that are known to Milandisians are usually noble and courageous. Many a Milandisian noble family has a generation spanning friendship with one of these long-lived folk.

The Hinterlands

The untamed wastes to the east are home of savage barbarians and ruthless humanoids and what few cities that lie therein are founded by thieves and cutthroats. Few Milandisians travel to this treacherous land and most that do are merchants seeking the rare goods of Censure. The one exception is the city of Sicaris, where a man can gain great honor and earn his fortune in the spectacle of the arena. The concept of honorable personal combat has a great appeal to many of the more headstrong Milandisian youths.

The Pirate Isles

Freeport is a den of jackals and the Captains of the city cannot be trusted to stick to lawful commerce. Villainous slavers and savage tribesmen dominate the other islands. Never trust a man of the isles, for he would as soon steal your purse as shake your hand.

Ymandragore

The Ymandrake harvesters come in the night to steal children away. Though the Arcanely gifted are no more loved in Milandir than they are in other lands, a Milandisian is protected by his oaths and the oaths of his liege regardless of any accident of birth. Any harvester caught in Milandir is executed as a slaver or at the very least maimed and returned to the Isle of Tears as a warning to those that would follow. Needless to say, relations with the undying suzerain of Ymandragore are strained.

The Republic of Altheria

An Introduction
By Magister Amans Ludi,
Imperial Ambassador

The Wise, as the Altharians call themselves, live in what could be called a paradise on Arcanis, if it were not for the constant threat of having their land being overrun by scaled monsters from the surrounding swamps.

Prayers Are Answered

It wasn't always this way. Far in the past the Altharians lived peaceably in their homes, inventing all sorts of new devices for the betterment of themselves and those around them. However, in those days—the time after the fall of the First Imperium of Man—“those around them” were a barbaric lot, mostly comprised of rampaging warbands of savage humanoids, mostly humans and orcs.

Despite the Altharian's technological superiority over their neighbors, they were vastly outnumbered, and it seemed that it would only be a matter of time before their glorious but small civilization would be overrun by the rampaging hordes knocking on their collective door. Desperate for a solution, these learned people did the only thing that they could: They prayed to their God for help.

The Altharians are the chosen people of Althares, the God of knowledge and artificers, and they were as then as they are now. The very fact that they had named themselves after their chosen deity proclaimed to all that they were bound to Althares for all time and that they held His tenets as their own.

For this reason, when the mass of the Altharians all prayed to Althares at once, all with the same intent, the God sat up and listened. Being a wise God, Althares knew that what His followers were looking for was an easy way out of their situation. And there are no easy ways out of hard situations. But this was a lesson the Altharians had yet to learn.

Further, the Altharians had put their request for power as a test of their God's faithfulness to them. If they were truly the chosen of Althares, if He really loved them as much as He claimed, then He would give them the power they sought.

Althares decided that, if His chosen people were ignorant about the problems inherent in what they were asking for, then it was only His duty to teach them. Their hubris only made the decision that much easier for Him.

Althares descended into the home of the Altharians, a large place known as Altharé. There He spoke with the Altharians' Council of Wisdom and He offered them a bargain.





"Because you are my people, and because you have been good and just followers of whom any God would be proud, I will grant you what you ask. Furthermore, I shall give you not merely one gift, but three," Althares stated. "By these gifts, all shall know that I am your chosen patron. These are gifts of wondrous power, but before you take each of them, know this. With each of these amazing gifts shall come woe and hardship as you have never known."

Prideful in their ability to withstand any difficulties that might come their way, the Altharian Council of Wisdom ignored the warnings of their God. They accepted Althares's gifts on behalf of the Altharian people.

The First Gift

The First Gift that Althares gave His followers was a simple demonstration. He showed them how some earthly materials, such as amber, could retain the energies of the heavens. He called this faculty in matter conductivity. Whereas before only wizards could call down the powers of the universe, Althares showed His followers that any human applying His principle of conductivity could store and manipulate forces akin to the lightning that raged unchecked in the stormy skies above.

His followers immediately begin experimenting with the God's revelation. They quickly discovered the basic principles of magnetism, and invented the compass and

a simple glass ball that glowed with a light of its own. By means of a secret technique, the Altharians were able to coat their armor with a charged substance that violently repelled other metals that come in contact with it. A process of electrical forging revolutionized that manufacture of weapons among the Altharians, enabling their smiths to make blades extremely light yet incredibly resilient and sharp. To this day, Altharian armor is prized for offering great protection but still being incredibly easy to use.

Of course, designing improved armor was not enough for the Altharians. After puttering around with the process for a while, perfecting different aspects of it, they decided that Althares' real intention had been to give His worshippers a way out of the Time of Darkness.

By using different conductors made of alchemically and magically treated metals, the Altharians were able to create platforms that repelled against the earth itself.

The Altharians set about making flying sailboats out of these treated metals. Though difficult to steer and prone to upset, the Altharians pushed ahead with the design, building a small fleet of the vessels. These new devices filled them with pride, and rather than devoting further meditation on the nature of Althares' gift, the minds of the people turned towards profiting from it.

With their growing fleet of skyships, the home of the Altharians started to dominate trade with its neighbors. Not only were they able to transport goods from one point to another with little or no interference from brigands or bandits, but some of the Altharians had taken to selling their priestly works at prices that could cause a king to choke on his wine as well.

Even worse than their prostitution of the God's gift, in some instances the greed of the Altharians drove them to violence. When a community refused to trade with them, the followers of Althares put on a demonstration of their technological superiority, sailing down into the midst of the non-believers and drawing down lightning from the heavens to awe them into submission.

Those that still would not trade their goods for Althares' gifts were forced to do so with more direct threats, and afterwards a priest of Althares would be installed to oversee their interests in that region. The Altharians claimed that such backwards people as would refuse their gifts could only profit under the 'enlightened' rule of their priesthood.

It didn't take long before the other peoples of Onara began to see the people of Althares as their enemies. As the Altharians rose to prominence, they also became Onara's most prominent target.

The Altharians were able to repel the first few attacks handily. After all, their weapons and armor were the most advanced in all the land, and they could use their skyships to spy upon the movements of any enemy troops. But the attacks grew more frequent and determined as the years wore on. The Altharians determined that something had to be done.

The City of the Air

Under the direction of the Council of Wisdom, the people of Altharé began construction on the most wondrous device of all: a network of conductor rods driven deep within the earth that would harness the power of the Gods, ripping up a mountain from the ground and allowing the temples of Althares to rise above the barbarism of the rest of humanity.

Construction of Khafré, the city of the air, took years, even with every artificer in Altharé working on the project at once. Not only did the city have to be able to hold every resident of Altharé, it needed to be safe from sabotage while it was being built.

The only real problem with a project of that magnitude was that it was almost impossible for the existence of Khafré to remain a secret for long. The illusion-wielding wizards of Altharé did their best to hide the work of the priests from outside viewers, but the resources required for such an undertaking were staggering.

Eventually, someone figured it out, and word about Khafré spread across Onara like wildfire.

The result was worse than the Council of Wisdom could possibly have feared. Rumors about the reasons behind the construction of Khafré spun like a tornado around the city. Some claimed that the Altharians were headed for the stars. Others believed that the Altharians were preparing for a full-out assault on the heavenly home of the Gods themselves. The rest just figured out the truth: that the Altharians were going to remove themselves from the fray on the ground, making it almost impossible to assault them directly.

In any case, all of these people realized one thing: If they were ever to make a move against the Altharians, it had to be soon. Once Khafré was complete, it would be almost impossible for a rival to bring it down.

Soon enough, a nation of orcs launched their ultimate assault on the city of Altharé, their aim being to take the floating city for themselves. Their warlord wished to use Khafré as a flying platform from which he could rain death down upon any who caught his eye, all without much fear of reprisal from those who might dare to oppose him.

The Altharians repulsed the attack, but not without taking heavy losses. As the battle began, the Council of Wisdom retreated to the relative safety of Khafré, taking as many of the nonessential people living in Altharé with them as was possible. During the course of the orcs' assault, the Council of Wisdom first attempted to launch their construct. With only two-thirds of the rods in place and charged, Khafré nearly tore itself apart, but the resulting earthquakes decimated the orcish forces. A great rift opened up beneath Khafré and the city hovered above it, so that only the Altharians' dwindling fleet of skyships could cross. Massive moorings were constructed to counteract the force of the lifting rods.

Though his army was only a shadow of its former self and with his goal drawn out of his immediate reach, the warlord of the orcish forces determined that after suffering such heavy losses he would not be turned away. He remained camped outside the city, deciding that if he could not win the prize, no one would.

The Land-Air War

Eventually, the orcs were defeated, but not by the Altharians. A coalition of humanoid kingdoms from across Onara had banded together to combat what they considered to be the ultimate threat to the continent: the Altharians.

What, these people asked themselves, was to stop such a powerful people from using their amazing, magical technologies to destroy any enemies or even rivals at will? What kingdom could hope to stand against a full-scale attack from Khafré—or, worse yet, from a virtual armada of floating cities? The rulers of these lands had been growing more and more uncomfortable with the rise of the Altharians throughout the years, and this discomfort had given over entirely to outright fear. Formerly mortal foes banded together to fight against what they perceived as the ultimate enemy.

Of course, as unified as these peoples were in their purpose, they were divided on many other fronts. They had instantly seen how poorly the orcs had performed against the Altharians, and this was before Khafré had even been properly launched. It took time for them to be able to settle their differences and to ban together under a common banner.

While the other peoples argued about how to combine their forces to take down the Altharians, the orcs in their own foolhardy pride laid siege to Altharé. Despite the fact the orcs were landbound, their spellcasters did their best to bring down the skyships constantly sailing in





and out of Altharé over the heads of the orc army. Surprisingly, they met with some success in their efforts, although just enough to slow down the resurgent work on reinforcing Khafré.

By the time the allied humanoid army arrived, the orcs were on their last legs. Wary from the battle, they still turned to face the new invaders, and then attacked them to prevent the intruders from taking what the orcs considered to be their fair booty. They were destroyed almost to a man.

This setback thrust the orcs out of the fore of the Time of Darkness. Some historians consider this the turning point of the entire era, since the crushing defeat the orcs had taken allowed the “civilized” peoples to renew their own efforts at improving their civilizations, unhindered by having to defend themselves constantly against the orcish hordes.

In the meantime, though, the Altharians had to deal with the largest army Onara had ever seen. While the slowness of the kings to band their people together had bought the Altharians another year, it had barely been enough. Myrantian architects immediately began building massive bridges and siege engines to span the gap around the Altharians’ city, so that the allied armies could assault Khafré directly.

With their hearts in their throats, the Altharians went to war against the combined might of a dozen nations, all to protect that which they had struggled so hard and so long to build.

After the initial battle, it quickly became clear that the army of allies vastly outnumbered

the Altharians. It was only a matter of time before they would be overwhelmed. The forces arrayed against them included a unit of griffon riders from Eurentheyll as well as other soldiers on flying mounts, cutting the aerial edge of the Altharians to the bone.

Eventually, it became as clear as the Onaran sky what had to be done.

The Altharians cut Khafré loose and ran.

City on the Run

Pushed about by the Onarans winds harnessed by a complex series of massive sails, Khafré was able to quickly outrun the land-based bulk of the armies allied against them. Still, in the process of leaving the area, they took heavy losses. The midair skirmishes with Eurentheyll’s griffon riders had entirely exhausted their fleet of sky ships.

Thousands were dead, but the people of Khafré were free, sailing away into the clear, blue Onaran sky. Or so they hoped.

In fact, the Altharians soon realized that while they had won the battle they were inevitably going to lose the war. As a floating city, they had little or no means of producing food or water for themselves, making them entirely dependent upon trading with those in the lands below. Many of these peoples were reluctant to do so, fearing that by selling anything to the Altharians they would be traitorously lending aid to the foes of their king.

Additionally, whenever Khafré strayed too close to a military force of any size, those who feared the Altharian’s much-vaunted might invariably attacked the city preemptively. It soon became clear that something had to be done.

This was obviously the woe and hardship that Althares had warned His people about. The question now was what could they do about it?

Some leaders in the Council of Wisdom proposed that the Altharians become the people whom everyone seemed to fear that they already were: power-mad marauders intent on subjugating the entire continent. These people, the Councilors argued, were superstitious and cowardly. They did not deserve to be allowed to continue on. By taking these people under their enlightened guidance—whether by force or not—the Altharians would be doing them a favor.

There was a great deal of support for this position among the Altharian people. After all, they had barely survived the attack of the orcs before being subjected to the combined wrath of the other humanoids that called Onara home. What did they owe these horrible people other than a quick death?

While the priests of the Council of Wisdom debated, the people prayed to Althares for deliverance. The answer came, though it was not what the Altharians would have expected.

As Khafré drifted with the wind, toward the waters east of Onara, a huge storm blew in from the sea and engulfed the city as it passed over a mountain range on the edge of a swamp. Lightning descended upon the hapless Altharians, attracted to their lifting rods like the hand of an angry God.

With almost every one of their conductor rods demolished and facing revolt by a frightened populace, the Council of Wisdom set Khafré down among the mountains for the duration of the storm. In a frenzy of terror, the people smashed the housings for the lifting rods and scattered the parts. To allay the peoples' fear of their God's anger, the Council of Wisdom afterwards forbid the further use of the God's first gift and decreed that the Altharians would remain isolated for the time being, contemplating the lesson of Althares.

A New Home

Though many among the Altharians bemoaned the cruelty of their God in the coming years, they prospered in their new home.

It would have been a natural choice for settlement. The peninsula it was on—which would later become known as the Altharian Peninsula, named after its most prominent human residents—was cut off from land-based attacks by the sea to the north and east, and by the swamplands to the south. The mountainous terrain made any attacks from the Onaran mainland to the west unlikely at best.

The rivers atop the Altharian plateau were able to supply a nearly inexhaustible source of water for the people and their animals and crops. Best of all the area of plateau overlooking the Gulf of Yarris had plenty of fertile land for growing crops and planting a city.

The last that the pursuers of Khafré saw of the city, it was about to head out over the ocean. Some of those who witnessed this exit cheered, believing they had run the Altharians off of Onara once and for all. Others celebrated a bit more cautiously, fearing the people of the flying city were simply running off to lick their wounds for a bit before returning for vengeance.

When the city disappeared into a massive lightning storm, few thought that the Altharians could survive. They believed that the justice of the Gods had finally descended upon the Altharians, punishing them for their pride. In reality, when they were finally grounded, the followers of Althares resolved to do without the creature comforts offered by contact with the

outside world. Instead, they began to pursue a simple life of contemplation, far from the rest of humanity.

In this way, New Altharé was born.

New Altharé Rising

To this day, the city of New Altharé is the capitol of Altheria. The legend of Khafré has become just that; a legend. Most people don't even believe that such a thing ever existed. No matter how amazing the Altharians are, the idea of an entire city flying through the sky is a bit hard for people who haven't actually seen it to swallow.

And no one has seen such a thing for scores of generations. Even most of the Altharians themselves don't realize that the city of New Altharé was actually once the floating city of Khafré. The network of sails that once dotted the city's landscape have long since been taken down and destroyed, and the borders of New Altharé are much broader than those of Khafré ever were.

The Council of Wisdom realized, however, that there would always be those who would be jealous of their abilities and their relationship with their God. It would only be prudent to do whatever they could to tighten their security as much as they could.

To that end, the Council of Wisdom founded a new order of warrior monks dedicated to the God Althares and His teachings. These stalwart and stoic soldiers were charged with acting as a top-secret espionage service for the Altharians, as well as with the development of new tools and techniques to allow the Altharians to excel in battle.

The primary tenet of the Order of Althares is that the best way to win a battle is to never enter it. While some of the more savage peoples might call this cowardice, this wisdom has saved the Altharians endless amounts of grief.

Over the years, the people of New Altharé soon forgot about the problems that had plagued them after Althares granted them the first gift He had promised them. While their skyships no longer ply the skies, they retained the technology for them, and they continued to make their amazing weaponry and armor.

Eventually, the Altharians became tired of hiding their light under a bushel. The latest version of the Council of Wisdom had little or no connection with those people who had made the request for the original gift. They had nearly forgotten the lessons of Khafré, and so they were ready to ask Althares to grant them the second of their three great gifts.





Althares did as His chosen people asked, although reluctantly. He had hoped that they would have learned their lesson from the first gift: that there are some things that the world is not ready for, and that having possession of these things can be as dangerous to those who have them as those who don't.

Unfortunately, the Council of Wisdom could not be dissuaded.

The Era of the Blast

The Altharian monks were given the secret of how to create through alchemy a powder that ignited with explosive force. This "blastpowder," as it became known, could be used to make bombs more destructive than any spell.

The people of New Altharé were thrilled with their new gift, and they took to it like children to a shiny, new toy. During their holidays, the skies over their mountain home were filled with colorful and brilliant explosions from blastpowder-formed fireworks. These displays of Altharian power could be seen from scores of miles away, and the serpent people who lived in the shadows of the Altharian plateau saw these strange lights and heard these strange noises, and their attention was drawn beyond their hidden Empire for the first time in millennia. Once again the Altharians would know the sight of war.

Meanwhile, the monks of the Order of Althares were hard at work, struggling to make

the best use of their new gift. In short order, one of their top researchers managed to fashion a new kind of weapon; one that used blastpowder to propel a lead ball down a metal barrel, striking a target with terrible force.

The monks called their new invention a "gun."

The early versions of the Altharian guns were crude, unrifled, long-barreled devices in which the blastpowder had to be ignited through a breech in the stock. They quickly advanced to the point at which the guns were capable of striking their own spark by means of pulling a trigger. These "flintlocks" were a great advance in the weaponry of the age, since they put the power of death in the hands of those who had not the training to fire a bow or even a crossbow.

The Altharians slowly began equipping their own people with these new weapons, and word of them quickly spread throughout Onara. It wasn't long before the Emperor of the fledgling Coryani Empire caught wind of this startling new development. Eager to cement the standing of his new nation on the continent, the Emperor determined that the secret of the blastpowder would be his.

This time the Altharians were left with no place to run, and they weren't inclined to take part in a head-to-head fight with an entire Empire. Instead, having learned something from their earlier troubles, it seems, they negotiated a peace in which Altheria became the newest province in the Coryani Empire. In exchange for a limited supply of guns and blastpowder—to be distributed only among the upper level of the Empire, of course—the Emperor agreed to extend the benefits of membership in the Empire to the Altharians.

To some outsiders, it seemed like Coryani had taken Altheria without drawing a single blade. To others, it seemed like the opposite might be true. Within a decade, the Coryani court was filled with advisors hailing from New Altharé, many of which had direct access to the emperor's ear.

The Saurian Solution

Annexing Altheria also meant that the Coryani had taken over responsibility for the protection of their newest holding. In particular, this meant defending the Altharians against incursions from the Ssethregorans. Though the reptilians had long since fallen from power, their bite still had teeth.

The Coryani Emperor was quick to see that the Ssethregorans were a threat not only to the Altharians but also to each and every one of

his southern holdings. With the advice of his new Altharian counselors, the Emperor came up with a plan to contain the Ssethregoran danger. It also had the added benefit of quelling jealousy within the ranks of the Empire's aristocracy over being giving flintlocks or not.

The leaders of each and every province of the Coryani Empire would be eligible to receive Altharian flintlocks to distribute among their aristocracies as they saw fit. In exchange for this boon, however, they each had to pledge a number of troops to the Altharian Border Patrol.

The Patrol, as this multinational force soon became known in short, was charged with defending the border between Ssethregore and the rest of Onara from being overrun by the reptilians. At first, there were several horrible clashes along the undefined border as the Ssethregoran and the Patrol disputed various bits of territory, but this soon settled down into a regular cycle of prodding on the part of the Ssethregorans and quick and severe responses on the part of the Patrol.

Some have questioned the wisdom of the Patrol's leaders over the years. Wouldn't it be better, they ask, to gather all these forces and launch an offensive directed at ripping the heart out of the Kingdom of Ssethregore?

Just such an attack was attempted in the early days of the Patrol, led by an ambitious young Coryani patrician eager to earn himself a name. Instead, all he found himself was an early grave.

At first the attack went well, but as the Coryani forces dug deeper and deeper into Ssethregore, they quickly found themselves surrounded, fighting a war on several fronts at once. While the reptilian responses was disorganized and chaotic, the creatures reacted by launching guerilla attacks aimed at picking away at legionnaire's slowly until they eventually were overwhelmed.

Not too surprisingly, the route the reptilians took worked. The Sauris Swampland itself helped them, as the Imperial forces were often unable to move at the speed they wished. Also, they knew the terrain better than anyone and were able to maneuver the scouting parties in traps time and time again. Few such scouts ever returned from their sorties into the swamp.

Eventually, the young general and his men decided to retreat, but it was too late. They were eradicated before they made it halfway back to the border.

Since then, the Patrol's policy has exclusively been one of containment. Every now and then, the Patrol sends an exploratory excursion into the swamp to learn what it can

about any plans the reptilians may be hatching, but these are solely fact-finding missions.

The Modern Patrol

Today, with a unified Coryani Empire but a distant memory in the minds of many, the Patrol still lives on. When the outlying provinces of the Coryani Empire revolted, the Altharians were quick to separate themselves from the internecine fighting and establish New Altharé as an independent city-state. This actually gave the Patrol even more reach, as several nations that weren't part of the Coryani Empire struck their own bargains with the Altharians, guaranteeing a steady albeit small supply of flintlocks and blastpowder for their upper class, as well as enlarging the numbers and the strength of the Patrol.

Making a flintlock itself is no mean feat, but just about any qualified blacksmith can handle the task. The Altharians maintain their control over the weapons by jealously guarding the secret behind the manufacture of the blastpowder that makes the flintlocks something more than a well-crafted hip ornament. The Altharian monks and clergy have kept this secret locked safely away for literally hundreds of years, and there is no indication that they are going to spill it any time soon.

To keep such tight control over these weapons, they are only given out by Altharian monks. They visit each eligible aristocrat upon his or her coming of age and present the young person with the weapon. This is often the high point of any elaborate coming-of-age party, and the monks who attend such celebrations are usually treated as honored guests.

Only aristocrats and Altharians are permitted to carry blastpowder weapons or to use blastpowder in any way. Any others who are found with such contraband are subject to the stiffest penalties, up to and including death.

At this point, just about every one of the "civilized" nations of Onara has a unit taking part in the Patrol. Were the Patrol to actually be amassed under a single general, it would qualify as one of the largest and most powerful armies on the face of the planet. As it is, with the Patrol's forces strung out along a border hundred of miles long, the force is often stretched to its theoretical limits.

The Patrol is made up of entire legions, orders, and cohorts sent from allied nations. An Altharian General by the name of Mkenbe oversees all of these forces.

In some societies, being sent off to work in the Patrol is the equivalent of exile. Others—far



fewer, it must be said—regard it as the ultimate honor. Only the best—or the worst—are given a shot as such a dangerous assignment.

In the end, it's the soldiers who work the Patrol who know the truth. Without their work, the Altharian border would be a sieve, penetrated at will by the genocidal reptilians who would like nothing better than to see every "warm-blood" wiped off the planet. They are the first line of defense against the inevitable reptilian incursion, and they take their duties seriously. If not, they are usually soon dead. Life on the border is not kind to the unwary.

New Altharé

New Altharé is something of an aberration in Onara. It is the sole republic on the entire continent. It's led by a Council of Wisdom, seven officials elected from the population at large. Elections are held every year, and terms are for seven years each. The Council in turn elects a president from among their number to act as the city-state's chief executive.

The elected officials are generally selected from the city-state's most prominent and respected citizens. The Altharian people appreciate proven ability over a magnetic personality, making the society more like a meritocracy than any other in Onara.

The Council oversees a vast bureaucracy that has been built up over the centuries to take care of the daily tasks of maintaining the Altharian government. The chief advisor, the Altharian president's right-hand man, oversees this complex

organization. The position is currently held by a lifelong bureaucrat by the name of Tulubo, a man who has been chief advisor for eight different presidents. As a non-elected, apolitical fixture in Altharian society, Tulubo is respected by the masses as the man who actually gets everything done. The Council may set the policies, and the president may be the country's figurehead, but it's Tulubo who makes things happen.

There are two different factions within the Council of Wisdom these days. The first, led by President Solumak, is fairly conservative. It prefers to keep the country on a steady course, uneager to involve itself any further in the ways of the outside world or to rock the boat in any way. Solumak is joined by Wikumte (the leader of the Altharian monks), Janusaka (a prominent alchemist), and Zurkank (a former general in the Altharian army who once led the Patrol).

The other faction feels that it's time to get off the fence and make a stand. These people are tired of being constantly on the brink of war with the reptilians. They feel that the Altharians are being used by the other nations, forced to keep watch on the border with the Sauris Swamplands and having to pay others—by means of the treasured flintlocks—to help them out.

This faction wishes to cut off the supply of blastpowder to the rest of Onara and use the supply to create massive bombs to be dropped on the population centers throughout Ssethregore. By putting a decisive end to such a horrific threat which has plagued the continent for so long, the Altharians would be putting the rest of the Onaran nations on notice that there is a new power in the area, and it's not going to be putting up with any troubles from anyone.

The militant faction is made up of three people. Kratundi is an ancient man who was once the most prominent alchemist in the land. He has long since lost that title to Janusaka. The second is a woman by the name of Cradnaka, a staunch feminist who is leading a movement to put more women in places of power in Altheria. The last is a young man by the name of Mkowtan. A brash adventurer, Mkowtan captured the hearts of the nation with his exploits, the tales of which have spread throughout Onara, making him something of a celebrity in many circles, both at home and abroad.

To help them in their grab at re-empowering their nation, the members of this faction wish to petition Althares for the third and final gift. This is an issue on which there are no fence sitters. Everyone in Altheria has an opinion on which way the Council should go.



At the moment, the sentiment is clearly leaning against asking for the Third Gift. The risks, most people feel, are simply too great. Of course, the others believe that there is no danger so intimidating that the Altharian people could not surmount it if the very survival of their people was at stake.

With elections on a yearly basis, and with the Council so evenly split on the issue, public opinion and the makeup of the Council could shift almost overnight. The only thing it would take would be a massive threat of a clear and present danger to the nation's people. With such an impetus, the reaction would be swift and sure.

Altheria's neighbors are well aware of the ongoing debate about the Third Gift, and to a one they have all urged the Altharians to act patiently and judiciously—in other words, to not do anything at all. These nations fear the power that the Third Gift could give a newly ascendant Altheria, and they are prepared to nip it in the bud if need be.

Altheria and Althares

Religion plays a key role in the everyday life of most Altharians. As the chosen people of the God of knowledge and artifice, they feel a moral and ethical responsibility to learn as much about the world around them as is possible. They have been charged with this duty by Althares Himself, and they take it extremely seriously.

Of course, knowledge comes in many forms. Some Altharians spend their days locked in alchemical labs, struggling to uncover the secrets of the universe in their magi-chemical form. Others spend hours engaged in prayer, seeking to cajole the answers they're hunting for directly out of the Godly mind of Althares.

And then there are the chroniclers. These are the men and women sent out into the world by Altheria to learn what they can about other cultures and their history. The chroniclers often take it upon themselves to hook up with a party of adventurers so that they might record the results of the group's daring deeds. They can be soldiers, spellcasters, musicians, whatever, but at the end of the day their true calling is to think about everything they see, interpret it as best they can, then write it down and send it back to Altharé by any means available.

These reports stream in from all over Onara and beyond on a regular basis, by means both magical and mundane. They are collected in the Great Library of Althares—the storehouse of the collected knowledge of the Altharians in Altharé—and then collated, examined, and filed by the legion of librarians who have dedicated

their lives to understanding what they can of the world, albeit vicariously.

Other Altharians spend their days trying to take the accumulated knowledge of their people and transform it into something useful. These engineers and architects are constantly on the lookout for the means to contribute something new to the Altharian body of knowledge by way of their own artifice.

Just about everything in Altharé screams “well-done!” The city is the home to some of the greatest craftsmen in the world, and they have been let loose on the place for countless centuries. Statues and other carvings cover just about every square inch that's not already graced by a mural or some other work of art.

The high priest in charge of the Church of Althares is a man by the name of Platiro. Secure in his prominence as the people's best conduit to Althares Himself, Platiro meddles very rarely in the politics of the Council of Wisdom. When he does, however, he is not shy about making his opinion known.

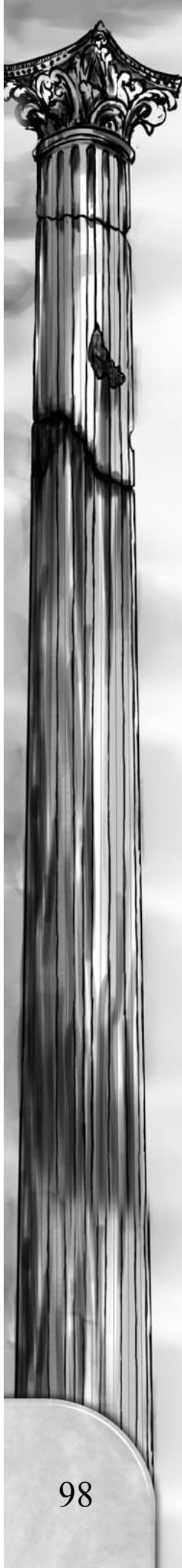
Platiro has made it quite clear to everyone in Altharé how he feels about the Third Gift. In his opinion, this is one stone that's best left unturned. Not everyone in his congregation agrees with him, for sure, and Platiro can respect that. As part of his duties, he has accepted the responsibility of possibly being the one to actually petition Althares for the fabled Third Gift. He has sworn to do so if instructed in this manner by the Council of Wisdom. In the meantime, he does everything he can to make sure that such an order never comes his way.

To Platiro, the lessons of the first two gifts are clear. Knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and to doubt the all-knowing Althares is to court disaster. Only the most prideful people could believe that they could handle any hardships that life could hand them, and the Altharians are nothing if not proud. They have survived a great many troubles over the centuries, but there's nothing that says that they are guaranteed to be able to handle the problems sure to come with the Third Gift, as these trials are almost guaranteed to be the most difficult of them all.

The Third Gift

Only Althares Himself knows what the Third Gift could be and what woe it might bring upon the Altharians. Of course, it's in the Altharians' inquisitive nature to want to know what it is and what they could do with it, so it seems like it's only a matter of time before Althares receives an official request to reveal His latest and last gift to His people.





Many of the leaders of Altharé are doing their level best to put that day off for as long as possible. After all, the Altharians have gone a long time with just the first two gifts, and with any luck they should be able to survive without the Third Gift indefinitely.

There are two arguments against acquiring the Third Gift. First, Althares has been very clear about the woeful consequences of gaining such knowledge through Him. Second, to many Altharians, using up the final gift is the kind of last-ditch effort that should be reserved for the city-state's darkest days. If they use it now, they won't have that final option available to them when hard times befall them.

Supporters of asking for the final gift now say that it's better to have knowledge than to live in ignorance. As one of the basic tenets of Altharian life, this is one argument that rings true with many of the chosen of Althares. Furthermore, they say that they'd rather have the knowledge earlier than later. If the knowledge is only acquired at a crisis point, it may be too late to actually make any serious use of it. Knowledge in and of itself is not wonderful unless it can be put to use. Lastly, if the knowledge would cause hardship for the Altharians, wouldn't it be better to recognize and deal with that hardship at a point in the history of Altheria when the Altharians were ready to deal with it?

The arguments for both sides are compelling, but the Altharians have managed to avoid the temptation to requisition their Third Gift for centuries. This is mostly due to the one thing that most Altharians are most reluctant to ever admit to discovering in themselves: fear of the unknown.

The Altharian people are dedicating to turning over every rock that they come across. In the end, it may be that the Altharians finally realize that Althares may have already given them a Third Gift, one that comes with no strings attached: the realization that with knowledge comes the responsibility to use it wisely. In the end, that's the real measure of a culture's wisdom: the ability and the courage to do what's right with what it knows to be true.

Once the Altharians, as a culture, come to realize what's been staring them in the face, they will be able to ask for the Third Gift without any reservations. At that point, they should be secure in the knowledge that no matter what Althares's final gift might hold for them, the Altharians have the mettle to deal with it. In the end, after all, it was never the secrets of the first two gifts that got the Altharians into trouble. It was what they did with those secrets once they had them.

Only time will tell if the Altharians are able to take this last hurdle that Althares has put in front of them. If they fail, Altheria and the entirety of Onara are certainly in for the kind of change that shakes even mighty empires to the ground. On the other hand, if they succeed, they could very well usher in an era of unrivaled enlightenment for themselves and—eventually—all the peoples of Onara who care to listen.

Master Ludi-

Thank you for sending me your introductory treatise on our nation. You will notice that I have taken the liberty of editing the document in certain places, as I understand that the Emperor himself will be reading it. You and I have spoken, and we both have the same high opinion of His Divinity, a man who has little tolerance for error in any form. The changes I made to your treatise may save you and your family some discomfort, my friend.

What follows is a short addendum to your treatise, dealing specifically with more spiritual matters; things that I feel would not be of interest to someone from the courts. I trust that you will see that it is delivered to our mutual friend, the Patriarch.

Keep in mind the words of Althares; "Every journey is a lesson." I hope your trip to the capitol goes well, and that you will consent to dine at my home upon your return.

*Be well,
Platiro*

The Children of Althares **A Short Discourse on the Chosen** **By Platiro**

Your Holiness,

Before I begin, I wanted to extend my thanks for all your efforts on my people's behalf. You have truly made a place for Althares at the table of the Pantheon during your term of office, and your deeds have not gone unnoticed by His children. You are a great teacher to your people, and they could benefit from your example.

As a gesture of goodwill, I have prepared the following essay for your edification. You will notice that it may deviate from, expand upon, or even contradict our good friend Amans' account at times. All I have to say on that is that Amans is writing for a very selective and discriminating audience.

Men such as you and I are interested in higher truths.

Notations on Altherian History

My people have historical records going back hundreds, even thousands, of years. We have, for example, documents that date from a time before the eastward migration of men to Onara, when humanity dwelt far to the west. These histories are damaged and incomplete, but they give us a better idea of our origins than do those of most nations.

The Altharians once possessed an empire far more advanced than its neighbors. The other nations of man grew jealous of the Altharians' knowledge, and overthrew their empire. Most Altharians became slaves and ended up serving as tutors and engineers, spread thinly between all the nations of man. The only thing that preserved our identity as a people was our worship of Althares and the distinctive color of our skin.

Then there came a time when the ancestral home of man was threatened, and the Gods led humanity to a new place, a place of sanctuary. This was the land of Onara.

During the exodus, many of our people managed to throw off their shackles and rejoin their free brethren. They founded a new nation, and swore they would never be separated again.

Much of the rest of our history is as Amans describes it, save our travails with the Second Gift. Blastpowder has been a mixed blessing for us. When we first received the gift, the Council of Wisdom determined that we would share the powder with others and therefore buy their good will.

At first, this worked, but there were those who wanted the gift for their own. The institution of the Border Patrol was not the result of clever diplomacy. The Emperor Menedemus, to secure the supply of blastpowder to Coryan, first imposed a garrison on us.

Further, priests of Althares were seized and carried off to Coryan. The Emperor's "advisors" went through many trials. A number died under mysterious circumstances. In the end however, none would part with the secret of the blastpowder and Menedemus' successors were forced to keep dealing with Altharé as the sole source of blast weapons.

The international character of the Patrol came about later. Even before the northern provinces of the Empire secured their independence, there was fierce competition between the Coryani lords to determine who would be appointed to the position of Governor of Althares. Rivalries became so serious at times that the Emperor feared it would spark a civil war.

In order to settle the matter, Altharé was

made politically autonomous and the garrison force occupying it was drawn from all over the Empire. From this point on, the Patrol did not meddle in Altharian politics. They protected the blastpowder, and made sure all continued to receive their fair share.

Eventually, when Canceri and then Milandir declared their independence, the Coryani Emperor did not at first recognize them as independent states. Neither did the Altharians. The flow of blastpowder continued to the temples of Althares in both rebel nations, and the Emperor could not even determine how the powder was being shipped, much less stop it.

Altharé has remained a neutral ground for all the nations of man along the eastern coast. A similar situation exists to the west in the First City, the place where the Gods first set foot on Onara. We are the caretakers of the City because we remain neutral in the wars between Coryan and Khitani, and are trusted by both. You might ask how this came to pass.

That is another secret, Your Holiness; one that we may share with you one day, if it is in my people's best interests.

The Altherians and Althares

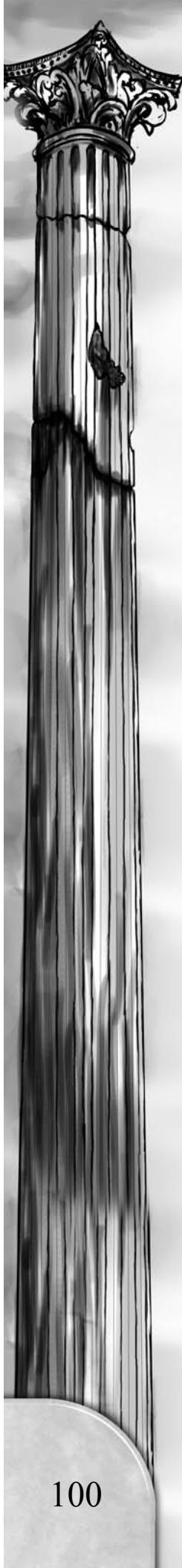
It is common knowledge that Althares and His children share a special relationship. What is not common knowledge, however, is the exact nature of that relationship. This is how the Altharians have preferred it, because it is doubtful that your people would understand our beliefs regarding the Gods if you knew them. But I will endeavor to explain them to you.

One of the many things that have shocked visitors to Altharé is the practice of its priests in taking many wives. They ask why Althares' priests, specifically, are permitted to have more than one wife while the laymen are not. As with every custom, there are many reasons for its practice. First, our images of Althares always depict the God with many children sitting at His feet. While others have interpreted these children to be His pupils, our people worship the God as the Father of our people. We are thankful for His fecundity as much we are for His wisdom.

It seems natural for His priests to do as Althares does and produce many children. Many of my fellow priests argue that a large number of wives are required to help them tend to their flock and maintain their temple. I get along fine with only three myself.

Another far more practical reason is that each bride carries a dowry with her into marriage. As a result, our priests have always been the wealthiest of the citizens of Altharé.





Recently however, this last practice has caused some dissension in Althares' priesthood. One of the members of the Council of Wisdom, the woman Cradnaka, has claimed that the priestesses of Althares should be allowed to marry many husbands, just as the priest are permitted to have many wives.

Furthermore, Cradnaka demanded a dowry from her first husband, which the man and his family have paid, and would like to see this become standard practice among the priestesses. The issue is a point of sore contention between Cradnaka and the more conservative voices on the Council.

Another tradition among my people that confuses outsiders is that of our monks, the Order of Althares. Many of your people fail to distinguish between our priests and our monks. The differences are many.

Our practice of priests taking many wives was in place since before the time of the First Gift. When our hunger for worldly pleasures made the First Gift into a curse, there were those among the priests who decided to embrace a different path.

These men became the monks of the Order of Althares. The monks take a vow of poverty, chastity, and formally sever their ties to family and friends in order to serve Althares and His children indiscriminately. The rule of their order is that each monk is "every man's brother, every father's son. The whole of the people is your family."

The monks take the rule literally, and treat each Altharian they encounter as a member of their immediate family. It has become customary among my people to respond in kind. Altharians will offer food, shelter, even clothing to a monk of Althares. A member of the Order never has to worry about going without, even though he owns nothing of his own.

Lastly, our worship of Althares and the Gods is fundamentally different from that of the rest of the Coryani Church. I hesitate to delve into the differences in our faiths, but I believe that a deeper understanding between us can only be a benefit. I trust you to be both open-minded and discreet, Your Holiness.

There is a cult in the Empire that goes by the name 'The Mourners in Silence.' This group contends that the Gods no longer answer our prayers because They have died and that the world will soon follow. The Coryani Church has failed to provide a suitable argument against this group's claims because Coryani dogma supports the notion that the Gods no longer speak to men.

According to the dictates of the Patriarchs, the decrees and tenets of the Gods were set down in the Holy Codex and the Gods have since distanced Themselves from the affairs of humanity. The Emperor has responded by persecuting the group,

but so far his soldiers have been ineffectual. It is my experience that when an idea has taken root, it is hard to dislodge. And if the idea is bad, it is like a weed. It grows and grows, and chokes the life out of everything around it that is useful and good.

These Mourners have had little success among my people for a reason, and I risk a great deal in telling it to you. It is a secret of my people, and you must help us keep it.

The secret is that we talk to the Gods all the time.

The Altherians and the Gods

You have no doubt heard that Althares inspires all the strange and wondrous things my people make in their workshops. We take no credit for our crafts. Every one, at least in part, is a small gift from or is built upon a gift from the Gods.

What is not well known is that we appeal to the Gods to help us in all our endeavors. And the Gods respond. It is similar to our petitioning of Althares to bestow on us the Great Gifts that are our birthrights as His children, but on not so great a scale.

What is done is that a priest of Althares will go through a purification ritual, involving fasting, separation from his wives, and meditation. Then he gathers together his scribes and acolytes in a prayer chamber. The acolytes sing chants and burn incense that is appealing to the Gods and Their spirits, and the priest enters a sacred circle.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the priest will enter a trance in which he becomes sensitive to the presence of the Divine. Divine spirits manifest with the priest as an agent in one of two ways.

The first way involves a God or Messenger of the Gods becoming visible to the priest on the periphery of the circle. The priest repeats the words of the spirit, which are then recorded by the scribes to be deciphered later. Usually, these words are prophecies or revelations regarding our craft.

The second way in which the spirits manifest is through the body of the priest himself. When Althares appeared among us twice before, He took possession of the body of a priest and walked among His children. Other Gods and spirits have chosen to walk among us over the years.

Some spirits have been known to try to trick the priests in the past, so the Council of Wisdom insists that it review every revelation before it is implemented. There are some visions that they have determined are not the will of Althares, and the record of these has been locked away in our Vault of Forbidden Oracles.

The Council of Wisdom has chosen to never reveal the true nature of our relationship, because they were afraid how other men would react. But lately, with the current Emperor more concerned with religious orthodoxy than his predecessors have been in the past, we have decided the safest course is seeking your assistance in this matter.

If the secret of our communication with the Gods came to the attention of the people of Coryan, we believe there are those who would condemn our practices as heretical. If that happens, I pray that you will be our ally in this matter.

The Coryani Church could benefit greatly from the friendship of the Children of Althares.

New Altharé

I entreat you to pay a visit to Altharé. I know it is an arduous journey for you through the mountains. The city itself is perched upon a veritable pillar of stone that rises above the other mountaintops, but I assure you, the view from the top is worth the dizzying trip up the Great Stair.

The Great Stair itself is a wonder worth seeing. Cut into the side of the mountain, it passes beneath a trio of waterfalls known as the Tresses of Saluwe'. When you finally arrive in our city, you will agree that the Goddess does live among us.

The plateau at the top is a garden within which every fruit conceivable grows. Our bridges extend to nearby mountains, connecting our community to more arable land that helps supply both our people and the foreign garrison.

While you are here, you must visit the Shrines of the Gift, the ruined legacy of Althares' Second Gift to His people. They still dot the edges of our mountain, wreathed in our people's offerings to the God.

I myself will take you on a tour of the Vault of Memory, the single greatest historical repository in all of Onara. The only possible rival to the jewels one might find there is our Vault of Utility, in which the greatest of Althares' mechanical revelations are on display. Some of the devices in the vault hold secrets that have yet to be discovered.

Finally, I entreat you to meet with our own Council of Wisdom. I have spoken to them of you and told them of your many selfless deeds. Perhaps you can offer them a share of your own wisdom regarding our many troubles, in exchange for some bit of knowledge that may aid in a time of need.

Threats to Altharé

As you know, Your Holiness, the lizard folk continue to be a problem for us, and it is only thanks to the aid of the Emperor that we are able to

stave off their attacks. I imagine our dependency upon him is similar to the relationship between the Coryani Church and the Empire.

It is an old story, the spiritual and the temporal; they are two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other. As servants of the Gods, we know this. Better than anyone, the Altharians know that the gifts of the Gods can seduce us away from our duty to the Gods. We cannot let the Emperor forget that even he has a duty to the Gods.

There are other problems that the Council would greatly appreciate your advice on. Recently, a priest named Kondjorou has begun challenging the rule of the Council. We have never experienced this before, and are not sure how to proceed.

When each acolyte of Althares is initiated into the priesthood, it is customary for him or her to enter the prayer chambers and communicate with the Gods directly. Every priest has had some vision, some message, something, that has guided them through the initiation. All save Kondjorou.

When Kondjorou enter the prayer chamber, he had undergone the ablutions. He had abstained from worldly pleasures. He had fasted for a week. All the elements were in place, and still he felt nothing.

Kondjorou has begun to say that his lack of revelation was a revelation in itself. He has indicated the fasting and the ceremonial incense, and claimed that these elements combine to distort the senses of the priests; that all our inventions are the product of our own minds, and the visions we experience merely self-inflicted delusions.

Despite our protests, the man continues to preach to the children of Althares, and he is attracting more followers every day. He still calls upon the power of the Gods and builds devices, but he claims they are his alone, and refuses to submit them to the Council for approval.

Worse, he sells the gifts of Althares, and shares their secrets. Even with foreigners!

When the Council of Wisdom attempted to censure him, Kondjorou challenged them. If Althares was real, he said, let His children call upon Him to prove His existence. The Council sat dumbfounded, and Kondjorou simply walked out. A moment later, the Council once again fell to arguing over the merit of invoking the Third Gift.

We are sorely in need of guidance, Your Holiness. Perhaps we are too close to the matter to see it clearly. Perhaps you can provide the perspective we are sorely lacking.

With reverence and respect,
Platiro





The Hinterlands



To the reader,
What is below is all that remains of the endeavors of a small expedition funded by the fourteenth Baron of Eerati, Piter Gravus, through the Imperial Sciences Guild six years ago. The author of the accounts below was one Politian of Rell, a wizard, and scribe of historical antiquities in the employ of the Great College in Coryan.. They are for the most part fragmentary, as the expedition lost contact after passing deep into the hostile and vaguely charted regions within the Hinterlands. (One passage in particular is believed to have been censored by the Patriarch of Coryan for its heretical content before being turned over to the Great Library.)

The mummified remains of but one of the expedition members was ever identified and recovered, preserved naturally within a partial sheath of mineral laced clay and condensation at the back of a cave at Nel Mirada near the Bleak Coast. The mummy is presumed to be the body of the scribe Politian, as it still wore an Imperial College seal around its neck, with several dozen sheaves of vellum clutched to its chest (which the reader sees below in this greater work). What could be salvaged and pieced together has been, along with a relevant letter donated by the noble Assante'-Trodjar family from the Ducal library at the estates of Eerati.

To keep continuity, any piece that is missing will have small entries or commentary when necessary. Fragmented sentences or passages have been kept in the text (along with the preserved original work) in the hope that new discoveries, future techniques, and incantations may prove useful in regaining the lost or damaged passages, which will shed some light or give a clue to what the fragments truly mean in their proper context.

The Patron's Letter

To the Regent of North March, His Lordship, Piter Gravus Assante'-Trodjar, Baron of Eerati,

Greetings and Salutations to your Lordship. The letters you have sent the Head Deacon at the Abbey of Rell expressing your desire to have a firm grasp on the inhabitants and history of the province known colloquially as the Hinterlands, have been well received. So well in fact, that they were sent with due haste to the offices of the Great College, the keepers of which have a more extensive library on the subject of ancient lands and peoples, and who have a more

unbiased composure and equanimity concerning, shall we say, certain "pagan heresies."

On the one hand, it is my regret to inform your Lordship that a large fire within the confines of the lower rectory of the library tower has consumed most of the pertinent lore related to this request. This has put no small delay on the research material vital for the requested work.

However, on the other hand it gives me great pleasure to pass along that a small expedition has been commissioned which is even now being assembled for a long trek to the Hinterlands, so that future adherents to ancient studies may peruse the newfound intelligence, and if I may be so bold to say, for many generations to come.

I have been tasked by the Master of Professional Studies to tour the region and compile a treatise for your Lordship concerning the inhabitants and again, if I may be so bold to say, somewhat mythical locales within the interior of this harsh land. I am truly honored to be chosen for this studious effort, and though we have never met personally, I have perused the letters sent to us many times, and I feel I have a keen grasp on what the work requires for your Lordships' satisfaction, as well as to the subject at hand.

Despite the length and duress of this task, I have readily accepted to write the work with utmost zeal and studious effort, as I have devoted my personal studies to ancient myths and histories, particularly where it may concern the Imperium. I shall endeavor to learn as much as I can, and send regular reports back to the Master of Studies, via the Ducal estates of the val'Holryn, in Milandisia.

I look forward to meeting your Lordship personally, which should coincide nearly with your thirteenth Nameday, in the half week of the month of Fortune.

Your servant Respectfully,

Politian of Rell, Scribe of Antiquities

The Great College of Coryan

(Note: a legible Library seal of authentication is missing here.)

Prelude

A Treatise on the native peoples, customs and legends of the Hinterlands, as written and interpreted by Politian of Rell, Scribe of Antiquities at The Great College of Coryan. Fifth day of the Sixth moon, Imperial Year 1017.

(Beginning of Introduction missing)

In this work, I shall endeavor to explain what I can of the landscape and native creatures, indigenous peoples, settlements, and passable routes, with of course, commentary on the mysterious myths, and legendary places that pervade this appropriately named region. It shall be written in a factual style, and with an informal candor not typical of such works. Though some of the tales of this place are well known to a few, I shall write the work as if the reader has never heard of such a place, and clear up misconstrued facts as much as is possible. For many years th... (Passages damaged or missing.)

Land and Diversity

The range and breadth of the Hinterlands is by and large, a hostile place. It has always been known, even from the fragmented ancient histories of old, as a foreboding and mysterious land.

Travelers, cartographers and explorers, caravans, fortune seekers, scouts, pilgrims, and even entire armies have scaled the gentle upward slope that defines its borders. After leaving civilized lands and penetrating the uncharted territory, they met with nothing but conflicting intelligence and details, mixed success, and sometimes did not return at all.

Tales exist of those who came back successfully from the ubiquitous interior. Some were in good health and laden with great treasures. Others were mad or struck with fever and spoke of the land itself as if it were a hostile and aware entity. They claimed it struck out to punish trespassers from every side, jealously guarding its secrets and sacred places.

The natural landscape is overall high in altitude, with an arid climate. Many assume wrongly that the Hinterlands are perpetually hot, but dreadfully freezing temperatures (along with snow and ice, depending on the season) are not uncommon, especially at night, in the north and the coast, or at higher altitudes. There are mere pockets where one might hope to survive for any reasonable duration and it is estimated that only a third of this already small number of places are known of definitively. Even where the land meets the ocean, there are barren salt flats strewn sporadically with pale, natural rock formations which seem to stand a ghostly watch over the empty stretch of coast, to the tune of howling winds from the sea.

(Passage damaged) under every rock.

The only vegetation of note in the wild are small stunted thorny shrubs, trees, and cacti that dot the landscape. Small creatures, many of them poisonous or equipped naturally with

strange powers live amongst the sparse, waxy leaves and hollows in or underneath the hearty plants. Some of them have pungent flowers, pollen, and sap whose scent carries for leagues and range from sweetly fragrant, to subtle, to repugnant like rotting meat.

One of a few exceptions to this rule is the southern Pengik peninsula, which is covered by a large, tangled forest comprised mainly of giant cacti and squat trees. Other places are rare, being the occasional coveted oasis, the Ganjiir Vale, or cultivated areas.

Large colorful mesas of striated stone will occasionally appear on the horizon (mostly within the central interior) and many are eroded and carved into sharp curving forms that have an air of stark, primal beauty.

Harsh deserts with seemingly endless dunes, baked mud flats, gypsum laced pools of water or strange "lakes" of fine silt and ash next to charcoal fields encompass the western and northern borders here. Sandstorms are conjured up as if by sorcery on the horizon, causing all within their wake to seek shelter or perish. Occasionally there is relief in the form of an oasis, but the traveler should be wary, as often, there are gathered about these watering holes large felines or skulking bandit raiders, both human and otherwise.

There are also huge packs of monstrous hyenas, dire lions, gnolls and goblinoids, giant serpents and scorpions, as well as the normal (if they can be called such) varieties of rodents, spiders and beetles, asps and large, bold hawks. These are but a few of the dangerous inhabitants here.

There are also nocturnal herds of fleet grazing beasts, two types of shaggy rhinos, tall flightless birds, endless hares, and various types of loping lizards that run on their hind legs in packs, which can reach amazing speeds. Jackals and other scavengers cry out in the night, giving the traveler a most unrestful sleep, if safe purchase can in fact be found to do so.

Indigenous Peoples

Considering these facts, one might wonder why anyone would wish to live here at all. They do however, and in great numbers. Throughout the interior, south and eastern portions of the Hinterlands live tribes of savage, hearty nomads who call themselves the Yhing-heer.

The Yhing-heer are divided into four distinct tribes, and as a general rule are specific to a geographical territory within the Hinterlands. They will be spoken of overall, and then more specifically within the chapters containing their

native region as separate and distinctly different peoples, with as clear a view as can be afforded. The origins of these peoples are not factually known, but their language might serve as some kind of clue. The known words and structure of the tongue (also called Yhing-heer) resemble Low Khitan and the ancient tongues of the First Imperium, but there is a main root language that is not reminiscent of any other that is currently known on Onara. According to the Yhing-heer, they originally came from the plains and steppes north of the demonic mountain ranges of Direhaven. They were on their customary winter journey south and were trapped here when the Wall of the Gods was erected (which signified the end of the Time of Terror.)

The Yhing-heer are ruled over by chieftains known as Nawals, and there can be one or more depending on the tribe, the Nawal's respective strength and fitness to rule, and the region.

The Yhing-heer are on average a relatively short and bow legged people. They are swarthy of complexion with rounded faces, which are somewhat reminiscent of the Khitani, especially in the eyes, cheeks, and skin tone. Hair is usually black or dark brown, and both sexes wear their locks in many long, tight braids festooned with silver beads and clasps.

The native style of dress is garish and bright. Prime colored shirts and expensive vests of finely stitched leather or quilted cloth with lavish embroidery and fastenings. Various caps and riding hats decorated with plumes or silk tassels (so varied are they that I am unable to list them all here) adorn their heads, with small turbans and broad, long sashes of expensive cloth being less common. The men wear dark, loose barbarian style pants (to afford them better purchase while mounted) that go past the calves and tuck into high leather boots with slightly squared points and gently curving toes. The women of the Yhing-heer are very striking and exotic, and are typically dressed the same with the exception of more sashes and loose, gauzy skirts with complex knotwork patterns, either painted or embroidered. Sometimes the most beautiful maidens will don lucid veils or shrouds lined with coin bangles, which conceal their faces and voluptuous bodies to tempt the imagination.

Both sexes are partial to decorative silver jewelry of all types, usually studded with moonstones, turquoise, large garnets, opals, jade, pearls, coral, and shells.

Although it may vary according to the location and tribe, the Yhing-heer way of life is still largely nomadic. This is not to say that there

are no large, sedentary cities in the Hinterlands. But the average clan travels on a seasonal route, from the borders of the northern waste, along the coast of the Pale Sea, the borders of Milandir, Canceri and even as far west as the inhospitable Flood Plain. They live in many colored, large tents when not in cities, (many of the Yhing-heer consider city dwellers somewhat barbaric!) and the duration of an encampment is

(Passages missing.), despite this outlandish claim. No proofs of this, except the braggart's tales of the Yhing-heer (particularly the Khur Gi) have been found to support this legend.

Lords of the Horse

"He without water is desperate. He without coins is untrustworthy. However, he without a horse is not even a man. He is nothing."

Yhing-heer Proverb

To the indigenous tribesman of the Hinterlands, the horse is everything. No small truth lies within this statement, for many reasons.

The obvious comes to mind at first. Travel in the rugged interior, a brave warrior's steed, a sign of wealth, prosperity, and nobility, or as a practical animal of labor.

However, the Yhing-heer revere the common horse (though the best breeds of all types can be found in this region) as a divine gift. The Gods gave the horse as a show of mercy, but also as a test of manhood and worth (both in the animals capture and training, as well as its upkeep.)

This is the essential reason an "outlander," as we are called colloquially, (and none too ironically), may be treated with the characteristic disrespect the Hinterlanders are known to display towards citizens of the Imperium. This rude behavior is often misinterpreted as the callous act of a barbaric and uncivilized people. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Typically, a kinder tribesman will still not speak with a man who does not own a horse. Yet, he may instead send his son to speak with the traveler, who will explain the custom. The boy will go on to say that if he should purchase a horse, then the "child" will be dealt with as a man of worth, and thus worthy of respect.

I was personally prepared with the knowledge of this custom, and a horse, though I have seen it happen to others since my arrival. The transaction was a most comical affair, as the local children took full advantage of the situation.



It happened while I was passing through the city of Mil Takara, while a group of Canceri merchants was disembarking from an early seasonal caravan that just pulled into town. They could not get anyone to speak with them, and thus could not get lodging or sell their wares. The very drovers that brought them in the wagons did not inform them of this knowledge, and placed bets on various outcomes.

Finally, one of the least malicious of the cart drivers called a few Yhing-heer boys over, instructing them to enlighten the outsiders. The boys thrust their chests out as they approached the Cancerian merchants, zealously acting the part of grown men. They taunted and bullied them, as they would smaller children. The clever boys then proceeded to explain the customary ownership of a horse, and then bilked the disgruntled and travel-weary "outlanders" of many coins through their uncle, who was a horse peddler.



Another reason for the importance of the horse is tied to the sinister sorcerers of the region, called Ehtzara, who reputedly cause the beasts to react most unfavorably by their characteristic unnatural presence. The implications for the tribesman, the horse, and the Ehtzara, are obvious.

It is a most outlandish, yet strangely sensible custom, given the nature of the region.

(Note: I have yet to meet one of these Ehtzara, and have been given foul glances at the mere mention of them, let alone bringing up being taken to one of their abodes.)

Regions

The South

Most of the accesable land in the southern Hinterlands surrounds the Great Trade Road and its respective arteries further to the north. It slopes ever upward, matching the angle of the steppes and high hills, and it has a long and turbulent history that rivals (passage damaged)

Long ago, as the Coryani Empire was expanding ever northward, the provincial territories were linked by laborious efforts to build roads that could deliver legionary troops expediently, as well as promote trade and communication.

When the hateful aggressions of the Khitani Empire encroached upon the northern provinces, the imperial reaction was a foregone conclusion. Many defensive measures were taken along the Bleak Coast in the Hinterlands, mainly in the (at the time) penal colony of Censure.

Legions from Cafella and northwestern Altharia were sent by ship to land there and train in the harsh, arid climate, and then sailed to ports on the Milandirian coast. However, a suitable site was still required to quarry blocks of stone for the mass of northern border forts. Continuing attacks by immense sea serpents, pirates, or the black fleet of the Sorcerer-King caused distress and delays for troops and supplies arriving by sea. An inner road system within the Hinterlands would breach the gap this harsh land created. Many of the... (passage damaged)

Many legions were founded to fill the need for troops in the north, and before they earned their names, they were simply identified with numbers. The three that were stationed farthest north (Four, Nine and Thirteen) were given the collective title of the Northlander legions, under the command of General Marius Colonna in Milandir. Legion Nine established relations with the Vanomir, and a garrison town over a quarry (called Edge Fort), as well as a road

were built to transport the stone blocks through the tribal territory.

The Vanomir still used many bronze weapons then, (as the Hinterlands are poor in iron) and the barter of iron weapons, fabrics and worked goods for salt, water, gemstones, guides and fleet horses made Edge Fort a booming center of commerce, giving the Great Trade road its name. Conflicts with rival Yhing-heer tribes and humanoids from the northern wastes went well for the newly equipped combine of allies, and the Vanomir dubbed the Ninth legion "Uk'hi Ghek'hit' Livhe'ho Im Gi'barr". Roughly translated, it means "The Golden Haired Warriors of the Shining Pillar of Im Gibbar." The title refers to a holy oasis shrine lost to humanoids in the northern desert, and the victory the legion brought over the vile forces from that region. (This ostentatious name was shortened to the Legion of the Shining Pillar.)

The Empire made many of the Nawal clan heads into client kings, and Marius Colonna personally pledged that the road was an eternal symbol of unity and peace between the Yhing-heer and the Coryani.

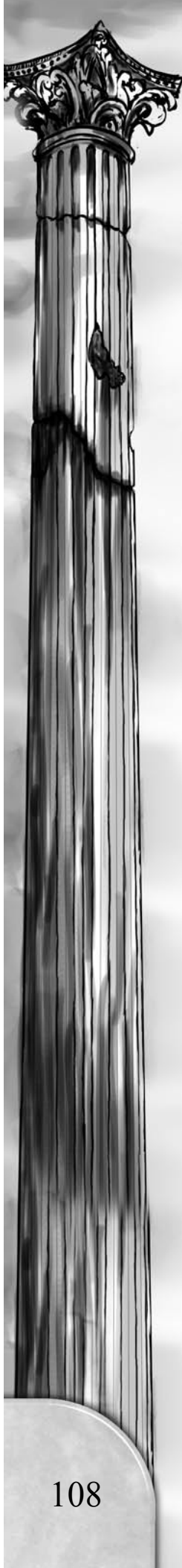
The road remains, running from the Imperial port of Talbith, through Milandir and finally roams into the Hinterlands to connect the cities of Pearlspar, Jappa, Censure and Sicaris with the more civil lands and ports of the south. Travel along this road in the central Hinterlands is dangerous now, as bandits, humanoids, lurking beasts, and even the Yhing-heer take full advantage of its seclusion by preying on travelers and caravans.

Mil Takara and the Khur Gi

The city of Mil Takara is another of many small towns of nomadic Yhing-heer that settled due to the invigorating trade that the new roadway brought into their territory. It is home to the Khur Gi, a smaller southern tribe of Yhing-heer that have interbred with the many Khitani refugees that have settled here over the centuries.

Their dialect is quite different, but they still manage to speak fluently with their tribal cousins. Although many of the inhabitants of Mil Takara are Khur Gi, the majority do not dwell here, living instead within the cities territorial confines in large colorful tents. Some other notable differences include a more Khitani style of dress, more aggressive behavior toward neighboring peoples (mostly Milandiran farms and Canceri caravans), and a penchant for braggartly statements about one's exploits. They go armed everywhere (sometimes even when sleeping) with wicked looking barbed scimitars or





strange Khitani weapons, which they conceal in their clothing. They are also partial to very strong spices in their food, and taunt newcomers into eating and drinking contests, wagering recklessly on the outcome.

They are harsh and sometimes very hard to deal with, and it would seem they respect little else but use of guile, overpowering force, and sacred oaths. (The Khitani influence here is usually the target of prejudices, and the assumed cause of such behavior, and after a very short stay among these folk, I cannot honestly say I am inclined to disagree.) These folk are the first Yhing-heer a traveler is likely to run into, and many assume the whole race is of this nature.

There is only one Nawal here currently; an elderly warrior and wealthy merchant named Lo Kaijou the Black who is respected and feared as much as a king would be. However, there is a tall and red haired half-breed contender named Yeh Chu Li the Southern Fox. He has made a name for himself recently by banding large numbers of Khur Gi and Khitani horsemen together with his charisma and his cunning prowess as an outstanding war captain for Lo Kaijou. It is also believed that Yeh Chu Li is the head of a large criminal network involved in the opium trade, smuggling slaves to Canceri, extortion, theft, kidnapping, banditry and professional assassinations, and that this network includes corrupt officials in Milandir (and of course, the mercenary Canceri) as well as Sicaris to the north.

The Southern Fox is seen as the most likely successor to the aging Lo Kaijou, and may attempt to overthrow him, plunging this area into war and chaos yet again.

Mil Takara is on the eastern edge of a plain of tall red grass, dubbed both the Blood Plain, and the Plain of Falling Stars.

The first name comes from the detestable Canceri, who have tried for years to build a road from Nishanpur that stretches across the interior to Censure as a port. In the typical lurid fashion of the Nihang priests, they have named it the Red March from all the blood spilt during its construction.

The other name as far as I can determine it, comes from the profuse amount of shooting stars that fall over this region, tied to a legend that dates back to when the First City was (*Large passage damaged*)

Mil Takara acts as a trade liaison between the Khitani and the northern lands. This tenuous relationship has been a mixed blessing, particularly for Milandir, and is always being used as an excuse politically by both sides for a variety of (*several passages damaged or missing*)

and it is this reason the ring of small, half subterranean forts was constructed around Mil Takara. (*Passage damaged*) and the Khitani style monastery (called a Sho) within the city's high quarter.

The city may be a thorn in many sides, but it has stood for almost three hundred years through attacks, plagues, and even an outbreak of vampirism. It would appear to have a long while yet before it will pass on into history.

Pengik

The southern edge of the Bleak Coast ends in an elongated peninsula that is split almost down the middle by an angular plateau which slopes downward on the eastern half of the lands mass.

The Pricklespur Forest, a dense and overgrown mass of spiky plants and vines, tall-branched cacti and squat trees with waxy leaves and bark, covers the majority of Pengik. Some of these plants are giant and carnivorous, or move about freely as animals would. Other more normal plants have amazing varieties of colored and perfumed thorns, luxuriant blooms and flowers that could easily rival the Royal Gardens of the Imperial Palace in Coryan. (I have timed my arrival to coincide with both the trade months and the spring rains to observe this.)

Maze like tunnels shoot through much of the forest, and it is easy to be lost or misdirected for hours and even days. In addition to the typical desert creatures, all manner of weird beasts make their home here, and some have unique magical powers.

One creature in particular, the Igiho, is a small marsupial rodent the size of a mouse that lives in the hollows of several varieties of cactus in warrens averaging twelve to twenty in number. They appear to be linked mentally in some way, and can teleport much as Blink Dogs do.

What makes the Igiho so dangerous is the typical act of men cutting overgrown brush, long thorns, and cactus branches while traveling the paths of the Pricklespur. It is likely that they will eventually cut into an Igiho warren.

Once a warren is disturbed in this way, these normally timid creatures become very aggressive and territorial, swarming onto the "invader" of their lair, biting and teleporting to a new location on the victims body. If they are angry enough, they can call other warrens into the fray mentally, setting off a chain reaction throughout the bowers until the menace has fled or is incapacitated.

This happened to one of the porters in my expedition. He was at the lead with a sharp machiara, chopped into a large warren, and was

set on instantly by the beasts. The popping sound of the vicious teleporting beasts coupled with both his and their high pitched shrieks was both comical and horrible simultaneously. Luckily, there were no other warrens nearby, and the bites were largely minor. (I expended several valuable spells to get us out of that mess.)

The man has become foolish and superstitious in a most unseemly and pagan way, fashioning a crude holy symbol of Saluwe' to ward himself. He has also taken on a strong phobia to rodents of all kinds. (I cannot say I blame him for the latter.)

Large water traps in stone lined delves are a welcome sight, not only for the water (which is often filtered through the root systems of spongy plants and very pure) but the shady, beautiful array of flora and colorful singing birds which ring them.

The muddy lip of these water traps are rife with the tracks of indigenous fauna, some quite normal, others less so, and are a good indication of the dangers involved in traversing that particular area of the forest. Many of the tracks are from relatively normal creatures, but the mark of leucrottas, giant insects and various dire animals of monstrous proportions are more than usual here, especially in the drier months. I am told that subterranean clans of dark scaled kobolds and lizard folk dwell in the southern portion near the coast, and that an occasional Minotaur sighting crops up from time to time.

There is also a tribal tale of bestial men dubbed the Green Lurkers by the natives. The

Lurkers were originally normal men that became lost and insane within the convoluted paths of the Pricklespur, who were then "chosen" by evil spirits. These twisted men keep the council of their spirit masters, and practice diabolical rites of cannibalism, ambushing the unwary and eating of their flesh to gain spiritual powers by way of transubstantiation through their grisly feast.

They can be very stealthy and clever, running about at times on all fours with blinding speed and camouflaging their naked bodies with plant dyes and branches. From the descri (passage damaged), though some of them seem to be light of skin and hair, which suggests a more southerly origin.

Another of the interesting denizens of this unique environment are very large tawny owls. They are attributed with the atavistic traits of magic, wisdom, and artifice, much like the sacred owls of the Temple of Althares in the First City. The Pengik natives believe an elder owl taught them how to survive here by communion with nature rather than its domination. Only one of these elders (called Opith, the Owl Sage) is said to still live and give advice to those who would seek her out within a thorny cactus maze in the deep forest interior. She commands the lesser creatures of the forest, and can reputedly see through the eyes of her lesser kin. Tribesmen and outlanders alike have visited her for many generations, and whether Opith is very long lived or has had successors to her title remains a mystery.



Hurkomir/Pengik

The eastern side of the Pengik peninsula is lower in altitude and as the land stretches outward to reach the rocky shore of the Pale Sea, the Pricklespur starts to break up and disperse. Scrub and rocky slopes peppered with wind twisted trees and sea grasses replace the thick growth, and compact copses of mangrove trees grow in warm, shallow coves along the windy shoreline. It is here that the merged tribes of the Hurkomir and the Pengik (from which the peninsula gains its name) make their home. The overall impression that one gets is one of (passage damaged)

When the Yhing-heer spread out over the Hinterlands, two tribes, the Takomir and the Hurkomir, traveled along the sea toward the south. The Takomir settled on the Bleak Coast, adapting to a life of sailing and harvesting the bounty of the sea. The other tribe, the Hurkomir, pressed further south to claim the strip of land between the Pale Sea and the Pricklespur Forest.

It is here that they encountered clans of short, curly haired sallow skinned natives, the Pengik. The natives were not greeted fondly, and a long lasting conflict ensued. The Pengik were a primitive people, not as advanced in weaponry or tactics as the Hurkomir, but they had lived here for hundreds of years and developed a keen balance with the hostile environs.

The Hurkomir went into this conflict overconfident that they would dominate a primitive, backward people, but suffered many losses from conjured elementals and storms, animated poisonous cacti, deadly traps, and many guerilla ambushes by the Pengik.

The natives were not a warlike people and offered a truce twice before the stubborn invaders finally agreed. Agreements were met, and since then, their cultures have mixed considerably, though distinct examples of their respective ethnicity still exist. Notable comparisons are the Leh (passage damaged) the two tribes seem to have been mixed for some time, with Yhing-heer and Pengik customs combined into worship, esoteric knowledge and daily life.

The Hurkomir are much the same as their kin the Vanomir in dress, custom, and physical appearance. There is a little less emphasis on horsemanship, but where this is missing, it is replaced with a keener knowledge of the environment here. Both they and the Pengik are partial to using single bladed swords with a slight curved shape like a willow leaf, called machiaras. The mounted warriors use lances, and all are very partial to horn bows with an amazing draw strength. They are still a stern folk, but unlike their distant cousins the Khur Gi, are a much

more reasonable and amiable people insofar as common relations. Most Hurkomir barely consider the Khur Gi a relation at all.

The Pengik however, are quite distinct, both in appearance and in culture. They have a written language of hieroglyphs, yet almost no examples of this exist except on sacred stone tablets that they keep hidden from view to preserve what can only be translated to me as a sort of secret power within the words. Only the highest initiations of the tribe are allowed access to the tablets.

Instead of scrolls or books, certain members of the tribe are taught to memorize lengthy histories and sacred tales, spells, incantations and esoterica or other more mundane lore. One of these tales could fill three volumes, and a priest might teach his apprentice three hundred stories or more. *(It is a marvelous and amazing adaptation, one I can only assume raised up out of the lack of durable writing materials.)*

The Pengik are attractive of face, which is strongly defined and symmetrical, strangely cat like and devoid of facial hair. They have small, wiry bodies, averaging five and a half feet, and it is very rare to see them fat or of bad posture.

They don leather armor and carry oval wooden shields decorated with their totem, along with many slim javelins or spears in times of war or dangerous travel. Missiles are typically slings, bows, and long, hollow reeds, which they use to propel barbed, poisonous darts through by blowing into them with deadly accuracy. Bronze or iron machiara and axes or huge knives are typically worn, tucked into dun sashes.

Men usually wear leather or hide talismanic neck pouches on a leather thong, branded with their totem animal. They fill it with tiny sacred objects and the shriveled umbilical cord preserved from their birth. Their dress is a mix of drab colored Yhing-heer clothing and taut kilts, and they often go scantily clad and are not partial to donning footgear of any kind, even in this rocky land. The men are responsible for the defense, labor, crafts, and hunting of their direct family, and remembering a lengthy oral history of the their familial clan.

The women wear the same kilts as the men, but with colorfully dyed fabrics and jewelry made of gold, pearls, shells, polished bone, and thorns. Although most leadership roles are male, familial lines are matriarchal, and the Pengik are much more egalitarian about female social roles (such as priests, advisors, chieftains and use of weapons or hunting) and general treatment of women than the Hurkomir. It is not unknown for them to bear arms during times of war, especially

if their husband, brother, or father is wounded or killed. They are tasked with the same oral history of their tribe (mainly the female side and their mates) as well as a great deal of apothecary (maternal or otherwise), along with the normal feminine duties of a family.

Both tribes are arranged into large extended families, each with its own respective territorial holdings and responsibilities. They trade openly on the Bleak Coast with the Takomir of Pearlspar, Censure, and occasionally, Milandiran ships, and even pirates or (rarely) the black ships of the Sorcerer-King. Many of the trade goods are raw materials, and it is the...*(passage damaged but continues)* have told me of an aquatic race of Elorii they meet with in a mangrove lagoon when the Emerald moon is full. When the appointed time came, they were nowhere to be found. Many of the children blamed us for their absence and would not speak to us for some days, but I do not think the elders took it too seriously.

Of Snake Gods and Ancient Ruins

Some of the Pengik still speak of the primitive gods of their ancestors, stating that there were in fact other deities that existed before the Pantheon, though few still pay these gods homage. The Pengik tell tall tales of a great antediluvian kingdom of "snake gods" that ruled over this region and beyond with powerful magic and enchanted boats that flew through the sky.

The tales go on to add that these gods created the Pengik and bred them as thralls to serve and fight for this ancient kingdom. The gods reputedly had great wisdom, but are sometimes described as sinister and uncaring for humanity in general; having viewed them as nothing more than intelligent livestock to be used as servants or to vanguard their armies.

They were learned of the high sciences and had an intricate understanding of the human body and dreadful powers such as how to harness the elemental forces of nature to their bidding with nothing but a thought. The tales relate that a few of these thralls learned the sacred techniques of elemental magic, and overthrew the gods in a rebellion, scattering them across the land, banishing them forever from this region.

Some Pengik tribal roles are hereditary, and they proudly claim direct ancestry from the priest and warrior thralls that served and walked among these gods. These particular families are called the Inchan'gi (men and women of sacred blood lineage) and are typically larger and stronger, sometimes much more so than the typically small and wiry Pengik. Great care is taken in arranging marriages between these noble families.

Whatever the facts are, it is true that some of the pagan shamans are known for implementing complex surgical techniques and fantastic elemental spells of unique and deadly caliber. It is also true that the Inchan'gi have almost superhuman physical attributes and long life spans.

As to the reputed snake gods and the ruins of their hoary culture, it is said amongst the Pengik that the temples and ruins of the hills and forests are not to be entered or disturbed. The priests tell scary tales to their children of the horrid remnants of ancient, powerful beings that were banished long ago, which still reside in remote places or forgotten ruins. They send their slithering minions out into the world, which are summoned by evil thoughts, rising from the earth itself to carry off the wicked.

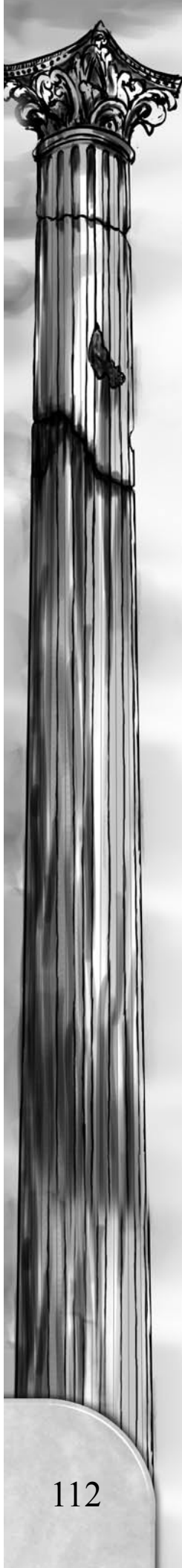
The Lost Temple of the Hidden Star

Of all the legends and treasure maps of this region leading to ruins with fabled riches, one stands out in particular; the Lost Temple of the Hidden Star. Many a pilgrim, mystic, fortune hunter or tomb robber has sought this ancient temple, often to no avail, or a gruesome fate afterward.

The legend of this site is spread far and wide, even into Milandir. The Milandiran clergy, due to the story's heretical nature, have largely suppressed the tale, and it is against church law to relate it in certain towns. The story crops up from time to time, and there are many versions, some of which conflict in detail with one another. However, certain notable themes remain intact.

The tales relate that the temple was built long ago, and the god it is consecrated to it is lost to memory. Many of the versions speak of a wasting disease brought on by a curse that guards the treasures of the temple. The temple itself is described as being a large dome (or domed edifice) with many columns and crenellated arches at the top of a broad frontal dais or stair. Sometimes the tales relate that it is buried in the sands and uncovered on occasion by the winds, a fact which has not only kept it hidden, but is also tied to the powers of its sacred guardian, called the Black Unicorn. It is unknown exactly what the creature is, but the name can be traced back to a recorded exchange between a Milandisian priest sent by his liege during the Barbarian Wars to write down the tales of the region, and a Yhing-heer guide. When the priest (one Yosef Petroc of Perobka) was told the tale, he merely recorded it in the fashion of his time by relating it to a known creature, a unicorn. Thus as the tale spread, the creature was dubbed the Black Unicorn.





The creature is described as having four legs that end in claws (or hooves) and being either a horse like creature or draconian in nature. Its hide is black, and is either scaly, shaggy with fur, in loose folds, or it is wrapped in shrouds like a mummy. All the accounts relate that it has a singular black horn on its head with dreadful magical powers, which has a purple sparkling aura, or is bedecked with gems. The creature is said to summon mighty winds and sandstorms, give interlopers horrific dreams, utter invocations and pestilent curses, and can even raise the dead as zombies using its magic horn.

Sometimes its demeanor is one of munificence to the pious, such as guiding the lost from a distance with its glowing horn. But many of the tales relate either an uncaring neutrality (usually coupled with mere sightings of the beast) or a much more sinister tone (the creature chasing men on wild nocturnal rides through the desert, hunting and killing them cruelly and suchlike.)

Within the temple is an alabaster alter, studded with lustrous gems and semi precious stones of every color in celestial patterns and motifs (some tales say, of unknown stars or constellations). There is a secret water chamber hidden under the temple, spilling over with the precious offerings and tithes of age-old pilgrims to this archaic shrine.

A more esoteric version of the tale exists. It speaks of a powerful ancient secret preserved upon a jade tablet somewhere in the guarded chambers below the temple. This secret is related to the myth of the Imprisoned God and the lineage of ancient kings, and tells not only a different version of the War of the Gods, but that a bloodline descended from a surviving Va..(Passages missing, omitted or censored)

Given the nature of this heretical tale, it comes as no surprise that the patriarchs and their servants in the churches of the land would ban such a tale. In any case, the people of this region do not stray into that part of the desert at night, believing firmly in the legend and sightings of the dreaded Black Unicorn.

The Middle Lands

The central body of the Hinterlands is a mix of large, shallow valleys and plateau ridges lined with sandy hills and mesas. It is cut abruptly short in the west by the She'haulk Mountain range, which extends for some miles south and culminates at the Plain of Falling Stars.

The cliffs of Nel Mirada and the gentle slopes and passes of the Sparkleflint hills near the Bleak Coast define the eastern border, with the top being the deserts of the Northern Wastes.

The southern portion, Ganjiir, is a series of sand dunes and low, broad vales, which are slightly more vegetated and dotted with water holes. It is here that the Yhing-heer and predators come to hunt, and large herds of a variety of animals are found. Wild horses and long horn goats, a bewildering assortment of deer like creatures, Skimmer lizards and Cho'hi fachu (wolfish packs of carnivorous bipedal reptiles), lions and hyenas, jackals, all manner of weird avians, and shaggy rhinos collect around the lowland water holes and wells.

The normal hunting implications are obvious, but there are three of the creatures that the Yhing-heer hunt for specific reasons. The first of course, is the horse, hunted with lassoes and herded into corrals within box canyons or bluffs. The second are large flightless birds called Axe Beaks, which can run at speed that almost equals horses and deliver viscous pecks with their large beaks. A single blow is enough to disable a horse or kill a man, even in full armor.

A young boy who wishes to be initiated into manhood must kill one of these creatures and bring it back to his family. Some of these birds have been domesticated and kept in pens like cattle, their large eg (passage damaged)

The third creature is the Ya Uk'hekh, or Shovel Horn Rhino, which is associated with the Nawal clan heads and the right to rule.

When a candidate wishes to be chosen for leadership, he strings his horn bow, grabs his lance and calls the most trusted and loyal men (or boastful men whose character he wishes to test) to track this beast down. Any of the men can attack the creature, but it is the Nawal-to-be who must land the telling blow (the sign of a wise and strong leader).

The hunt is watched from afar by other Nawals and a priest, who divines the future reign of the Nawal from what transpires before him. If he is victorious, the newly appointed chieftain is given a territory and his men become his war captains or trusted advisors. The broad "y" shaped horn of the beast is blessed by the priest and the current Nawals, fashioned into a baton and wrapped in red silk, which becomes the symbol of the Nawal's office. Some of these horn batons are imbued with magical powers as a wand migh (passages damaged)

Stone Garden

The northern portion of this region is rife with mesas, boulders and protruding mounts of stone, many of which are resplendent with effulgent color. The Yhing-heer refer to this place simply as Stone Garden, as if the place

was grown by magic and not naturally formed at all. It is a well-earned name however, as many of the graceful formations, balancing boulders and bridges seem almost contrived in nature as if placed by ancient giants.

Many canyons, yaws, and caves play across the surface of these mesas, not a few of which have natural beasts and birds, hoary temple ruins, opulent crypts or repulsive horrors lurking within their confines. (I have seen them myself, and it seems most prudent not to describe them here.)

Falling rocks and whole avalanches (or flash flooding in the heavier rainy seasons) are a more common danger, and it cannot be overstressed that a traveler should be well prepared when entering here.

Sometimes there are paintings and petroglyphs from primitive humans or humanoids. These carvings are typically found near circular rings of chiseled and polished stones, presumably ritualistic in nature, with some more positively identified for use as astrological devices. The measurements and distances of these stones are frighteningly accurate and symmetrical when compared with certain heavenly bodies. There is amazi (*passages missing*), though this can only be speculated at, yet I am inclined to believe the latter.

Huge clusters of quartz and chalcedony, as well as agates, jasper and opals of amazing color and size have been found or dug out around these mesas. Sometimes cult artifacts made of this crystal are found in the sands, carved into the likeness of gods, horses, fertility idols, chalices, and wands.

The Vanomir and Sicaris

Within the deep interior of the Hinterlands, in the central and western portions that are cut off by the She'haulk mountains and the Wall of the Gods, are the tribal lands of the Vanomir. This tribe is the most sedentary of the nomadic Yhing-heer, since the days when the Northlander legions founded the quarry town of Edgefort (now Sicaris) and the Great Trade Road that connects Milandir and the coastal Free City of Censure. Other minor settlements and trading posts can be found sporadically along the

central stretch of the route, where critical life-giving wells are constructed.

The Vanomir are the most typical of the Yhing-heer, and are the most adherent to the ancient ways of their people. Their dress and manner are much akin to the Hurkomir, except that horsemanship is key, and they use lances, scimitars or axes as armament, along with the traditional composite bow. In fact, their horsemanship is unmatched and they can perform dangerous acrobatic maneuvers for show or to intimidate outlanders. They can fire their strong bows at a full gallop, and are expert archers.

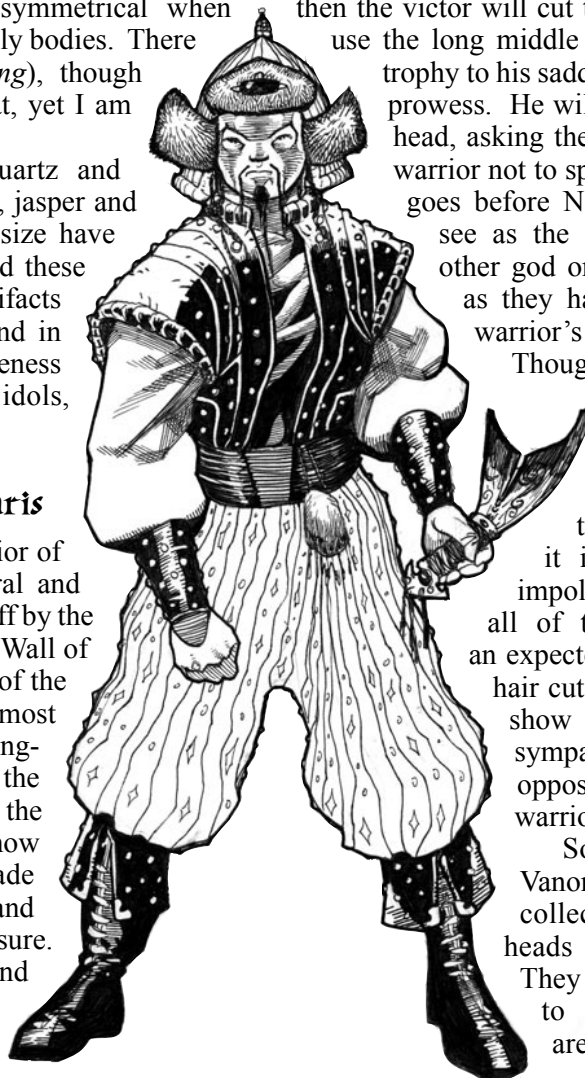
The only obvious difference is in the way the males cut their hair. The male warriors of the tribe keep only the middle portion of their hair long for a very strange reason, part of a barbaric and unseemly custom.

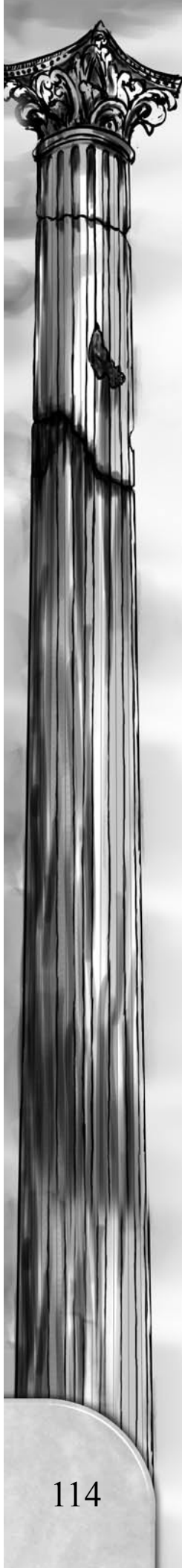
It is in explaining the custom that I may lend the reader a glimpse into the primal psychology of the Vanomir, and the Yhing-heer as a people.

Apparently, it is a courtesy to a warrior's enemy. If he should engage in battle and lose, then the victor will cut the losers head off and use the long middle locks to tie the grisly trophy to his saddle as a sign of skill and prowess. He will then apologize to the head, asking the spirit of the deceased warrior not to speak ill of him when he goes before Nier (whom the natives see as the Divine Judge) or any other god or spirit in the afterlife, as they have been given a true warrior's respect and repose.

Though the tradition is a very old one amongst the Yhing-heer, and rarely seen outside the Vanomir tribe in everyday life, it is actually considered impolite and in bad taste by all of the tribes to go into an expected battle without one's hair cut in this fashion. It is a show of mutual respect and sympathetic relation to the opposing side as men, and warriors.

Some of the oldest Vanomir warriors still have collections of the cured heads of vanquished foes. They show them with pride to honored guests who are visiting their homes,





relating the names of each warrior as they describe the battles where the trophies were taken.

This custom only holds true for humans, as the Yhing-heer overall view the majority of the other races from at best suspect, to worst, demon spawned. I have witnessed notable exceptions to this rule, particularly when the creature in question shows merit and a goodly nature over time.

It is truly ironic that the Vanomir are the most fervent adherents to the ancient customs of their nomadic ancestors, yet the most sedentary of the tribes here. They have adapted to the settled life quite well, mainly in the tribal capitol of Sicaris. The city's main gate is a tall arch, carved out of the cliff of a mesa, supported by two gigantic caryatid columns in the form of sphinxes, the top decorated with many gargoyles of mythic beasts. Past the arch is a long cave with two levels. The upper level curves through cavern homes and shops, then on to the city proper. The lower is a paved market, complete with a working marble fountain and passages further into the mesa. After passing the gate and entering the city, the first thing that comes to a traveler's eye is a large, oval arena fashioned in the ancient Imperial style, ringed by many rock shelves. The shelves are naturally formed or left over from the quarry that was here from the Northlander Ninth Legion. Many long mesas ring the city proper that is shot through with canyons on which streets are built. The buildings come in all manner of style and shape, a hodge-podge of different cultures slammed together that resembles a mass of large, convoluted puzzle pieces.

(I leave it up to the viewer to decide if it is vulgar or pleasing to the eye, although I personally found it quaint and most stimulating in its overall aesthetic.)

An Imperial official, known now as the Commander-Magistrate has been appointed since the days when Sicaris gained its independence, along with a nominal imperial legionary garrison and an elite troop of highly trained specialists dubbed the Color Guard. Shortly after Milandir seceded and cut off the vital southern portion of the Great Trade Road, the client-kings among the Vanomir and Takomir seized the imperial fort by force, renamed it, and claimed nominal suzerainty. The fort stands much as it was, and the plateau it rests on has many passages and hidden chambers, some of (passage damaged)

Despite supposed Coryani rule, the Nawal clan heads are the true military and economic power here. They set and control all trade rates and restrictions, as well as direct

military concerns, and command respect from every corner of the Hinterlands. The current Nawal of the Vanomir is Kharkofen, Slave of Hurrian, Scourge of the Canceri, who is a popular and pious ruler to his people. He is known for many famous exploits and great acts of charity (such as the construction of the Temple of the Fountain, dedicated to Hurrian) and is a generous patron to the arts.

Sicaris forms a central trade hub and gathering place for the arrival of seasonal caravans from all over the northern lands of Onara, and the bargaining savvy of the Sicarite merchants is legendary. It is in fact a matter of pride and reputation here, being equal parts business, finesse, courting and flattery, with a little guile, bluffing or even intimidation mixed in for good measure. It can often be an arduous and lengthy task, even for a simple purchase, and not following the proper etiquette is considered quite insulting.

All manner of expensive goods can be bought and sold in the many exotic market places, and it is a dizzying site to see the multitude of caravans pull in to the city during the trade months. The tide of goods seems endless, both in bulk and in variety.

From the finest breeds of Yhing-heer horses to resplendent leather harnesses and saddles chased with decorative silver and bells, red silk tassels or eagle feathers. Textiles, dyes, woven cloth, worm silk and luxuriantly patterned Khitani rugs in a multitude of colors come in from the guilds of southern Mil Takara and as far away as the inner provinces of the Khitani.

Strange wagons shaped like boats roll in from the northern waste, or those bearing the six animal seals of the noble guild houses of Censure. They bring loads of grain, barley, rice, statues of black volcanic glass, ancient saurian treasures, luxurious crafts and artwork, and worked jewelry or yellow salt.

The list goes on: western tea and spices, rare animal pets, seeds, herbs and spell components from Pengik or the Great Forest, Milandisian wool and cured hides from cattle or tougher, more exotic beasts, iron ingots and keen steel blades from Nishanpur in Canceri, horn bows and carved ivory, weighty gems, crafted goods and semi precious stones from the dwarven mines under lofty Erduk in the She'hauk mountains, or the Feldspar Hills.

These are but a few, and I might add that many of the common citizens of Sicaris afford themselves a lifestyle that matches the high nobles of the Empire.

The black market exists as well, and a fraternal order of dashing, thieves dubbed the Night Foxes keeps a subtle underground trade of carnal vices, illegal slaves, drugs and poisons, restricted magic and even stolen Altharian flintlocks and powder.

They are said to be ruled by the Circus Master of the gladiatorial arena, an Altharian man named Sylab, (the simple locals here actually gossip that this man is the true ruler of Sicaris!) though it has never been proven. It is true that this man has resurrected the old amphitheater and the gladiatorial arena to all new heights. The arena is the true heart of the city, flying the Imperial standards as well as the clan flags of every Hinterland tribe and noble house.

Anything that transpires at all in the territory has a very good chance of linking itself to the arena somehow. Many political dealings and power struggles, commercial or otherwise tie in to the matches, the gladiators, and their patrons, who receive much prestige and face for ownership of a popular fighter. The gladiators with famous reputations receive many gifts and live in sumptuous quarters; many have slaves of their own. Even the warriors that are granted freedom usually continue their dangerous yet lucrative trade.

The gladiators can win freedom from their patron or the whim of the crowd via the Commander-Magistrate, and by duty, he is expected to attend all major matches. An unpopular ruler can gain much favor in this way, and it is he who holds life or death over the warriors in keeping with ancient Imperial fashion. The whole affair is a magnificently preserved snippet of Coryani history, and is at once enthralling and addictive. Despite the sanguine images conjured up at first, the gladiatorial matches are not the only entertainment here. Many extravagant plays and performances of high caliber are put on by the Harlequin Actor's Guild, as well as famous orchestral pieces of Milandir (such as the great composer Sir Warwyck of Lustia's Battle of the Neichau) or plays from the troupes of the Theater of Umbral Shadows, in Censure.

Despite these abundant and shameless, almost immoral displays of wealth and showmanship, the Vanomir are a level headed, practical and largely pleasant people, not given to hubris or arrogance often. They remain devout worshippers to the Pantheon all their lives and both their attendance and practice of the faith is largely within the clerical norm.



Moon Hollow (The Sculptorium)

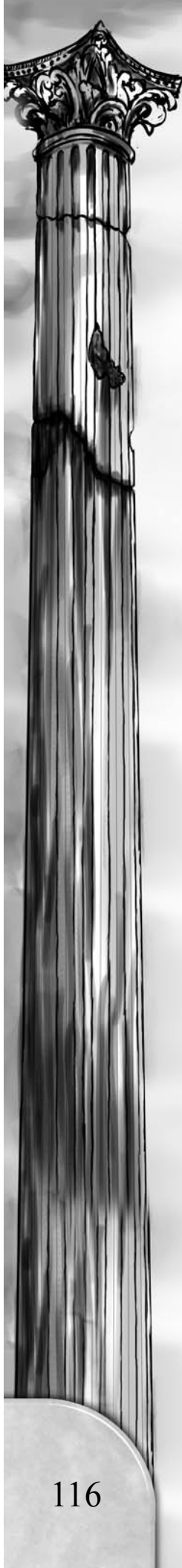
As one walks the complex paths and canyons of Stone Garden northward, the land slants upward and at the top is a place called Moon Hollow.

The mesas and canyons change their appearance, looking pale and alien. Striations of alabaster or limestone run through the cliff faces. The stark, primal rocks and cliffs are warped and eroded from the evening sand laced eastern winds (dubbed the Widow's Lamentation, as it makes an eerie sound akin to a thousand women softly mourning). The reverberations and echoes from the rocks play tricks on the mind, and a traveler is well advised to bring a seasoned scout when venturing through.

Some of the rock walls have a glassy sheen, and some of the finest marble and dolomite slabs are carved from this particular spot. Often the distant ping of metal striking stone is heard echoing through the canyon paths, and as one draws closer to the source of this sound, weathered statuary and intricate frescoes appear, perched atop the cliffs or in crafted niches.

Somewhere in this morass of intersecting divides (*I really cannot give an exact location, as we became lost for some hours, even with a competent guide*) is a canyon lined with corroded brass lanterns, and many worked caves and doorways along the cliff walls. This "street" in the middle of nowhere is the entrance to the Sculptorium, where many highly skilled masons





and sculptors dwell in utter seclusion. The Sculptorium itself is an open-air amphitheater lined with pedestals, utterly life like bas-relief, intricate frescoes, ancient statuary, busts, crenellated columns and gilded arches.

They are mainly Yhing-heer, though some of these people (and a few Elorii, humanoids, and Ss'ressen as well) live in communal harmony while mastering their crafts. They worship their respective gods privately, but all the beings of the Sculptorium pay homage to the Stone Maidens. The statues are a muse of sorts to these folk, who call themselves the Children of the Stone Maidens, some of them believing fully in their guidance and matronly protection.

The Maidens are beatific, winged statues of angelic women, formed of flawless, pure white alabaster that is lucid and sparkles with color when daylight streams from behind them. The Maidens are set on pedestals in a ring atop the Sculptorium. They are amazingly dense and sturdy, something uncharacteristic of this stone, and I can only assume they were created by powerful magics. They are much akin to caryatid columns, both in appearance and in the fact that the Stone Maidens reputedly protect the Sculptorium by animating and defending it, should the need arise.

The maker of these beautiful statues is lost to time, but the style is reminiscent of the statuary found in the southwestern Imperial provinces, which came not from here, but the Kio sculptors of the League of Princes. This *(paragraphs damaged)*

One old sculptor told me a myth that one of the ancient sky dwelling warriors of lofty Yhriwhon, named Yhrmia, gave them as a gift to a Yhing-heer shepherd as payment for returning a lost magical ring dropped from her aerial island citadel.

The warrior Yhrmia is also attributed with teaching the man stone craft, and founding the Sculptorium. The tale goes on to say the shepherd fell in love with Yhrmia, but she returned to the sky without him, so in lamentation he created a statue to remember her. The foremost Stone Maiden of the ring is said to be this very statue. The finest statuary of the empire is chiseled in this humble locale and the adornments of many a palace and *(Passages damaged)*

The Haunted Wastes

Along the western side of the Hinterlands that borders Canceri, is a large tract of territory known as the Haunted Wastes, a mixture of sandy desert, dry lowland plains, and low, rock strewn hills covered in dust.

The Graveyard of the Titans

Out among the dunes of the Western desert, there is a large, shallow depression or crater some twelve miles in width, with almost perfectly rounded edges. Sand has covered most of the rim now, and the floor of the natural bowl is caked in layers of sediment and dried mud, as if a lake or shallow sea once flowed here. When traversing this crater, large pale shapes can be seen in the distance, and closer examination reveals that they are very large, fossilized bones sticking out of the baked mud, some of them three or four stories high. Some of these bones have fallen over, while some are complete skeletons of gigantic versions of known creatures, such as the shovel horned rhino. However, not a few of them have perplexed sages and Yhing-heer alike, from not only their immense size and what they are exactly, but particularly where they came from.

No examples of these bones have been found elsewhere on Onara, and it is unknown why there are so many in this particular spot, if nowhere else. (It is sometimes dubbed the Bone Grove). Since the skeletal structures are the one place that affords shade in the western desert, the only place to find water or significant plant life is under their bony canopies. Sometimes, small dwellings are carved into the high joints and hollows of the bones, home to a rare breed of goblinoids with spell like powers (called the Hua'gi by the Yhing-heer, or "Hoogies" by outlanders). The Hoogies dig pit falls, set snares, and strangle the unwary from above with slim nooses attached to balanced rocks or bones, which they push from a great height. There are usually tunnel complexes dug out under and around their aerial hovels, both through the large bones and in the packed mud layers of the crater floor.

Desert harpies and large flocks of ravens with sinister intelligence roost among the ancient fossils as well, making trouble for the lost or misleading travelers with promises of water, shelter, or treasure.

Large troves of baubles, magic, and coins, mixed with bright shells and the bones of unfortunates lured to an early death, have been found within the lairs of these wicked creatures.

Another legend of this place tells of the ancient battle between the Gods and the Great Elementals. It is actually a sort of parable, to teach children not to be too curious, akin to our "curiosity killed the cat."

During the battle, mighty Hurrian fought the Lord of Air, flying over the First City in a magnificent flying skiff made of gold, blessed by Illir with a solar radiance. *(Passage damaged)* Many of the ancient Elder Creatures

of the Hinterlands came out to see the battle, and gathered on a very tall spire of rock, *(passage missing or censored)* As the Lord of Air fell,

He tipped Hurrian's golden skiff, sending it spinning off to the very spire the giant creatures had gathered on to watch the battle, at the center of the lake so far off in the Hinterlands. The golden skiff crashed, drying the lake up, knocking over the tall spire, and destroying the Elder Creatures. As the parable goes, the bones stand as a testament that no matter how great or intriguing the goings on, it may seal the fate of the viewer.

The Chalk Seers and the Plain of Falling Stars

South of the ancient graveyard crater, small stands of grass start to appear among the dunes, and the land slopes down considerably in altitude over a few miles. Eventually the dunes give way to a large plain interspersed with small waxy trees, and an occasional outcropping of sun bleached rock within the waving sea of reddish grass. There are men who live here aside from the roaming Khur Gi, whom all of the Yhing-heer tribes revere as holy men. They are called Chalk Seers for their ability to divine the future as well as draw powerful mystical wards and symbols using specially prepared sticks of chalk. They use priestly invocations and stre *(damaged passage but continues)* and operate their spell craft much as a normal priest would. The intricate symmetry and aesthetic of these drawings are amazing in of themselves, let alone consideration that they are drawn entirely from memory, and the Chalk Seers use only simple tools such as string, pegs, and the consecrated chalk.

Many of these magic circles have the power to ward and even summon powerful planar beings and creatures, bound to answer and serve the priest that called them forth. Some of these priests are tempted often by devils and evil spirits, and a few turn to selfish pursuits or malicious sorcery with their craft. Many of them are merely humble ascetics that spend their lives in sage like seclusion or contemplation of life's mysteries. They can be visited for advice, sage lore, and divinations or refuge, and have an outlandish amount of uncanny knowledge, given their supernatural council and messengers. The Chalk Seers are rarely seen outside the plains, and if they are, they are typically on an important mission or objective of some kind. It is customary to bring gifts of basic comforts that are not available to them out here. It is the only wealth they allow themselves to keep.

The seers are guarded by natural beasts as well, albeit coincidentally. Packs of Blink

Dogs make the Plain of Falling Stars their home, and chase off or attack hyenas, lions, marauders, and humanoids. Sometimes Celestials known as Hound Archons masquerade as one of these beasts using their shape shifting powers, protecting the Chalk Seers from bandits or roaming undead from Canceri.

The Sorcerer Stones

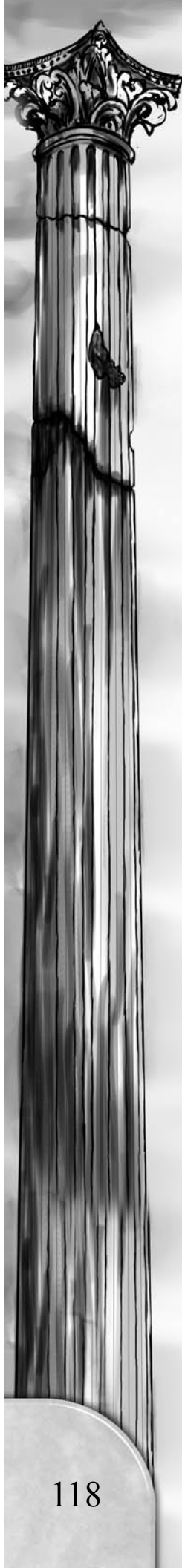
This ring of stones is akin to the tall menhirs found by people of ancient times and used as celestial calendars. Almost nothing else dwells here or can be seen for miles short of sparse animal and plant life living under boulders and in crevasses. The stones stand from twenty five to thirty feet in height, mounted in a large disc made of giant stone blocks and strange characters are inscribed upon them that is similar to dwarven script. No one knows what the writing means, but the stones are very similar to those found on or near the western Flood Plain, and rumors of stones like these exist in tales from the Great Forest. The stones there reputedly have strange incantations that give a wizard or sorcerer power over magnetic forces, sound and gravity, even over the flow of time. The Ehtzara and the Cult of the Jackal revere the Sorcerer Stones, and travel here is required for initiation as a sorcerer within the Hinterlands (thus the name).

Perhaps there is some truth to the tale, for many stories of flying stones and weird occurrences regarding ball lightning, storms and magnetic fields abound from this area. Large sand trolls and giant-kin make their lairs in the nearby cliffs of the She'haulks, and are a constant menace. The Yhing-heer say that the Cult of the Jackal, and the Ehtzara in particular enslave these beings, and it is they who constructed the stones for some dire purpose. Undead of all types are attracted to the stones for some reason, seen shuffling through the Haunted Wastes or nearby cliffs.

The Veil of Doom

Sandstorms are a frequent occurrence in the Haunted Wastes, but this particular phenomenon is even more frightening and deadly. It usually appears on the far horizon, a lucid white cloudy wall that looks like a woman's veil. Those who know what it truly is run in terror, those who do not suffer a grim and horrid death. The Veil of Doom acts almost exactly like a sandstorm, but it is composed of what the Yhing-heer call gassu, that is, very fine gypsum crystals. Any one caught in the veil inhales these particles, causing them to choke strongly at first. However, as the gypsum is more fully inhaled, the victim's choking becomes





a wracking, endless cough, and he spits up globs of blood and flesh due to the effect of the sharp edges of the crystals on the lungs and throat. Men and beasts alike caught in the storm curtain have almost no hope of survival.

The Veil of Doom makes irregular appearances, and local myths say that three powerful elemental sisters, A'nul, A'nuk, and Iphea, are bound by an ancient pact to protect this region, and that an appearance of the veil signifies their displeasure. They can be appealed to as a last ditch effort when trapped in the Veil of Doom, but they are described much akin to devils or evil air elementals. The sisters make pacts with foolish or desperate men, exchanging lives, or boons, with blood, foul deeds and binding oaths or souls as payment. They are jealous and vain, however, and have been tricked by the clever, or so the tales go.

The She'haulk Mountains and the Wall of the Gods

The Shehaulks are tall and craggy in many places, and there are only two passes through them. Both are treacherous, and climbing the slopes here invites attack from all manner of giant-kin, perytons, hippogriffs or giant bats. Avalanches of rock and snow, slippery ice or freezing temperatures complicate the climb and flames burn lowly with a strange blue hue. There are *(many passages damaged, but continues)* resting on the walls.

These demons are rare, and either keep to the high altitudes, the infernal rim of Direhaven, or are hunted down by the Swords of Nier and the Knights of the Holy Pillar respectively. The Wall of the Gods is thick, of the highest altitude known, and is impassible except to these tenacious, unholy creatures. Tales relate that a lush, emerald green land of rolling hills and majestic steppes rests on the other side of this range, and access by sea is cut off by a thick northern forest along the coast, filled with giants and ancient dra (Passage damaged.)

Erduk and the Mouth of Nier

I have sent a letter to the noble dictator of the Nierite City of Erduk, asking permission to tour the city and explaining the cause of my visit to the Hinterlands. The response was less than cordial, hinting at a breach of both faith and security.

What is written of Erduk, her inhabitants, and the volcano pass called the Mouth of Nier, is extrapolated from tales and other writings.

The city of Erduk was founded near the end of the First Imperium by loyal adherents of

Emperor Leonidys val'Verdain, known as the Sword of the Heavens when he was deposed and defeated.

The elite mounted warriors of the city, dubbed the Swords of Nier, believe the Sword of the Heavens is the worldly atavism of Nier and that He will rise again to rightfully claim what is His. Much of the activity in Erduk, including the sparse interaction with other nations, is the locus of this obsessive goal. The Swords train constantly on horseback and occasionally engage and skirmish with the Yhing-heer on the Ganjiir, despite being their nominal allies. They are also said to hunt down giants or terrible beasts for sport, and be fearless in their faith, almost suicidal.

The city itself is constructed of black basalt cut in slabs or blocks, remnants of huge giant's cairns and buildings over the mountain pass across from the dormant Mouth of Nier. High vaulted chapels to Nier are everywhere, fashioned in the old style of the First Imperium and crowned with large brass braziers of flaming coals. The other buildings are designed with minarets, crenellations and arrow slits or murder holes cut in bridges. Erduk is a series of linked fortified buildings that enjoin within the high mountain walls as one singular flame lined citadel.

The ruler of Erduk is the Autocrat, a despotic leader that commands all aspects of the city through the military. Tales of the normal inhabitants suggest a life of toiling servitude to the noble military caste and the priesthood. All other factual infor *(passages damaged)*

The Fire Dwarves

The greatest allies of Erduk reside below the city, in the one of the fabled Eight Dwarven Cities. It is not truly known when the dwarves came here, but it is assumed the citadel came first, the Nierites allying themselves to these folk. The finest swords and weapons of all kinds come from the master artisans; traded for all they need in secretive nocturnal transfers with trusted Yhing-heer families (it is unknown who this is exactly.) In return for favors in the outer world, raw iron, gold and more perishable goods not found or grown in the mountains, the dwarves forge items of great strength, beauty, and flexibility that rival the secret smithing techniques of the Kio. Many say the dwarves here have mystical powers over fire and heat, and this is how they dwell so close to volcanic vents and gases from the slumbering Mouth of Nier. They are dubbed the Fire Dwarves, altogether unique and largely unknown to the world that goes on outside their fiery halls and forges.

Ni'huk Ma, the Ehtzara, and the Cult of the Jackal

Some years ago, the Canceri attempted to scout the northern pass through the She'haulk mountains and possibly make contact with the mysterious denizens of the Ghost Jackal cairns on the eastern side. The purpose of this objective was to continue construction of the Red March through a viable route over the mountains and to the sea, and possibly gain political allies and new resources. The Nihang in charge sent armed scouts mounted on demons at first, but these ran into sandstorms or aerial spirits that forced them back, with vague reports of a clear pass and a large, black columnar gate with stone doors at the apex of the route. A ground expedition comprised of seasoned warriors, Khur Gi mercenaries and scouts, and powerful wizards was organized and outfitted to penetrate the tall stone gate at the top of the pass. They were never heard from again.

Then one evening, Canceri guards spotted an exotic entourage, seemingly Yhing-heer courtiers wearing expensive robes and veils who carried gifts, making their way down the western end of the Red March. They carried a black tasseled pennant marked with a ghostly jackal on a thin electrum pole, (the symbol of the Cult of the Jackal.) They would not speak when addressed, and were eventually taken before the Nihang of that region, the same Nihang that sent the expedition. The courtiers presented their gifts: chests of luxuriant spun cloth, fragrant and expensive incense in burnished vessels of green jade and lapis lazuli, lavish furs, rare writings and magical ivory wands set with gems. The courtiers were bedecked with gold and jeweled rings, bracelets, necklaces and weapons, and they delivered their gifts without uttering a word. When the Nihang and his guards became nervous, he asked them to reveal their faces, saying it was a Canceri custom that nothing should be hidden from him in his domain.

As the foreigners undid their veils, the Nihang realized the "courtiers" were none other than the very expedition he had sent to scout the northern pass, now dead and reanimated as undead of some kind.

Further examination by enthralled Nerothian priests revealed an intricate and advanced surgical process of vivisection and mummification. The bodies were stuffed with rare preservatives, myrrh, and golden arcane fetishes, along with a tiny leather scroll under the tongue of the expedition's late leader. It was printed with a complex arcane code and took days to decipher. It read simply "Fair Greetings to the Illustrious Nihang of the mighty Canceri,

from the High Ehtzara of the Ghost Jackal Cairns. Please accept these humble gifts as a show of gratitude. We would be most honored to trade further in this fashion." along with instructions for controlling the undead, and seemed further connotative that large groups or expeditions would not be acceptable.

Although the Red March has since progressed southward towards the Plain of Falling Stars and not through the Ni'huk Ma pass, the priests and necromancers of Canceri have established an agreeable if strange exchange system as a by-product.

The Canceri have been sending small groups of "emissaries" ever since, who are completely unaware of the grisly end that awaits them, and through these doomed traders they have bartered untold lore on obscure funerary rites and necromancy, myths, ciphers and arcane esoterica of all types.

The Ghost Jackal Cairns are at the center of a large cluster of dark, stony hills, which are referred to by the same name. The cairns are the resting-places of unknown ancient peoples that resided here before the Yhing-heer came to the Hinterlands, now the center of the Cult of the Jackal and its activities. It is unknown exactly how large or powerful the cult is, but there are reputedly members in every Hinterland city. Many normal or oppressed folk join in exchange for protection, revenge, or personal power, and no one is barred from joining. The cult seems to have varied tasks, many of which involve the spread of chaos and consolidation or control of magical power, but the true purpose of this cult beyond the obvious is unknown. One of their favorite tactics is to help the common folk, whose cries are often ignored, plying the masses against their "untrustworthy gods and leaders."

The leadership of the cult are the infamous Ehtzara, sinister desert sorcerers that commune with nature, ghosts and spirits to gain their otherworldly powers. They have a strong presence that can intangibly be felt by all, which frightens domesticated animals (particularly horses) and subdues the meek. They know the natural and the unnatural within the Hinterlands, communing in total harmony with the land, and surviving in the deep desert as well as the most seasoned scout or ranger. They can see through men's lies like water, utter powerful curses and summon storms, even in vengeance after being killed, and (*Large passage torn out and missing*)

An Ehtzara is initiated in one of two ways. He or she (unlike most of the tribal roles here, an Ehtzara can be female, and many of the legendary ones are. Some are not even human.)



is taught by another Ehtzara, provided he or she is deemed worthy. Otherwise, they either seek out or are chosen by the spirits of the dead to initiate and teach them. An initiate first crafts a personal alter made from various things sympathetic to its creator. They then go into the deep desert, whereupon they fast and for three days, receiving visions of wisdom, false truths revealed, and taunts from spirits and hallucinations. The initiate then fashions a black robe adorned with a tasseled cowl or hood, and adorns it with the symbols and invocative names of their patron spirits in silver thread. The initiate must take great care with this robe, as poor care or mistreatment of it offends the spirits, who will leave an Ehtzara defenseless in times of need.

The initiate then makes a pilgrimage to the Sorcerer Stones in the Haunted Wastes and returns with proof of his or her visit (*it is unknown what this "proof" is*). Those who do become initiated fully as an Ehtzara, are given full respect by others of their order, and a wide berth from native Hinterlanders of all castes.

It must be noted that many Yhing-heer do not distinguish between an Ehtzara and a member of the Cult of the Jackal. Although many Ehtzara are members of the cult, not all Ehtzara belong to it. Some are not at all evil, but their infamous reputation is not easily lived down. The most powerful Ehtzara (good or evil) are very charismatic, and have large followings in smaller towns and villages. The Ehtzara seek to aid and heal as well as corrupt or destroy by way of their powers, but the vast majority use this mask conveniently and rule through intimidation, devilish deals and fear.

There is an old tale told in the Hinterlands and Milandir that speaks of the Ehtzara, and best describes not only their stoic and traditional nature, but also the keen insight they have into men's minds.

Shortly after the founding of Edgefort, an entourage of priests came to visit and proselytize, and many Yhing-heer were converted. One

night there was gathered about the campfires of Edgefort a large group of Coryani, Milandisians, and Vanomir, when the respective discussions of faith and progress came up. (It is said that Marius Colonna himself and the Altharian known as Ni'rotogi were there.) The Vanomir were amiable enough to the philosophies of the south, and felt that the gods had blessed them with a long lasting age of peace, prosperity, and high learning, and so were content.

Later that night as the discussions of faith and fraternization continued, a lone Ehtzara hovered around the edge of the camp, listening to the outlander's words and spoke to their frightened horses. The topic of client-kings was then brought up, along with the eventual inclusion of the Hinterlands into the Coryani Empire.

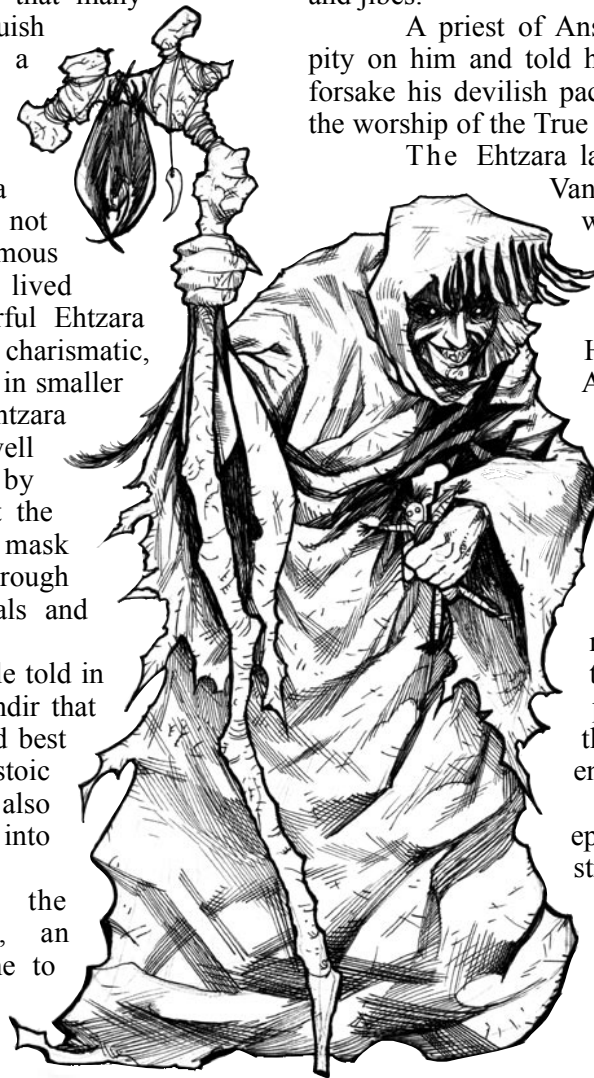
The Ehtzara became outraged, telling the Vanomir that they forgot themselves and sold their land to these blond haired devils like common harlots. Many of the southerners were offended at the sight of a sorcerer and spat on the ground at his passing, or taunted him with curses and jibes.

A priest of Anshar that was there took pity on him and told him to join them, and to forsake his devilish pacts, converting instead to the worship of the True Gods.

The Ehtzara laughed aloud, telling the Vanomir that the Coryani would one-day leave their allies naked and defenseless as newborns are to jackals. He then looked at the Ansharite priest knowingly before leaving, and sarcastically retorted, "For the lesser gods, we sing honest here." He then took the form of a bat and flew away.

The tale was remembered well when the Coryani failed to protect Milandir and the Vanomir from their enemies.

The Ehtzara are the epitome of the Hinterlands: strange and mystical, rich in culture yet ironically barbarian and archaic, completely in touch with the land and its people.



The Northern Desert

The northern portion of the Hinterlands drops considerably in altitude when compared to the lofty heights of Stone Garden and the She'haul Mountains, especially as one travels east off the steppes of the interior. Along the She'haulks, it is largely an ash laden dust bowl, broken sporadically by rock clusters, cliff shelves (mostly in the east) and pools, flows and lakes of fine ash and silt, some of which are quite deep when sounded. It grows very hot at times, and the high altitude combined with dust clouds and ash falling from the rumbling volcanoes within the Wall of the Gods make it difficult to breathe. There is life despite this harsh environment, which is mainly nocturnal, and the intelligent beings that make their home here are both very good and pious, or despicably evil. This region is ru (damaged passage)

Domain of the Hyena Queen)

Along the jagged northern cliffs of the She'haul mountains is a jutting crest of rock called the Seven Horsemen, and within it are many labyrinthine tunnels and caverns. One of these caves was once an ancient holy site, said to have a magical pool that restores youth and vigor to those that drink of its waters.

The cave is concealed within a dizzying maze of tunnels so tricky to navigate that even a seasoned dwarf could easily get lost within its confines. Only the elder hermits that lived there knew all of the tunnels, and it was a mystery how they traversed them without getting lost. The hermits would lead only those they deemed worthy to the healing pool, and it was whispered among the Yhing-heer that the holy men were jealously guarding the secret to immortality. They were tricked eventually by a handsome matronly woman posing as a pious pilgrim to the cave shrine. The woman charmed the holy men with her carnal affections and pitted them against one another with gossip, envy, and jealous hatred.

It is said they fell out of favor with the gods, and lost the power to navigate through the labyrinth. The "comely pilgrim" then revealed her true name and form, a were-hyena sorceress. She laughed at the holy men, tormenting them with remembrances of warm caresses, and told the hermits she would sire their children to inherit their domain. She hunted the hermits down one by one, murdering them in the caves.

The sorceress then fashioned a crown from the golden relics of the shrine, and studded it with the teeth of the wisest of the hermits. She bejeweled the grisly crown with huge garnets

the color of blood, enchanting them with dark essences and spells. (It is also said that she fashioned jeweled skulls with scrying powers and placed them on the inaccessible high cliffs of the region, which are linked to this crown.) She took the title of Ni'ri Hegoth, Hyena Queen of the North, claiming sovereignty over all of the northern deserts and the tribes that dwell within. She then drank from the magical pool while performing a sanguine demonic rite, becoming immortal. The inhuman queen then aspired to become a goddess, and set up a cult dedicated to her worship amongst the gnolls and other evil beings of the northern waste. She bore a large litter of children from the holy men's embraces, and it is said they serve their dark and undying matron-queen as loyal priests, acting as an instrument of her will amongst the northern clans of men and gnolls.

To this day, mighty warriors are loath to tread the lands of the northern deserts, fearful of the fanatical servants of the wrathful Hyena Queen.

The Silt Sea and Bone Black

The ashen flats of the north can be treacherous to those who walk across it, for concealed among the gray ground are pits filled with fine ash and silt much akin to quicksand. Many are but a few feet deep, but some are much more than that, and a group of travelers might not even notice one of their number missing until it were far too late. The sign of (*Damaged passages, but continues.*)

One such body of ash and silt in particular exists in the mid-section of this region, dubbed the Silt Sea. It has sluggish flows much like a sea or lake, and draconian beasts called Ash Drakes dwell around the rim or swim freely within its depths using their wings and tails for propulsion. (*We have not found the lairs of these creatures.*)

To the west of this "sea", is a place called Bone Black, called so from a large natural charcoal field just under the sediment of ash and dusty silt. It is rumored that an underground oasis is near this region, linked to caves in the mountains. (*I have found no sign of such a place and feel the myth is derived from tales of the subterranean city below Censure, called Balcony or the Dwarven City under Erduk.*) The few creatures (mainly gnolls or giants and their ilk) that dwell here mine the charcoal in sheets, and evidence of their passing suggest (*passages missing*)



The Knights of the Order of the Holy Pillar

Occasionally what looks like sails can be sighted on the horizon here, and it is in fact what they are. Large, boat shaped skimmer wagons, rigged with sails to catch the strong desert winds and large composite wheels to bounce over rocks or “float” on the silt flows. The hulls and wheels of these crafts are constructed from long pliant branches tied in bundles that flex when the craft moves, and are adjoined with wooden planks and pegs. The pilots of these sleek craft are Yhing-heer men from the Oasis of the Pillar near the top section of the Wall of the Gods, romantic desert knights that seek battle with the infernal demons crept over from the infernal yaw of Direhaven, the Serpentmen of Zhu, or the fanatical servants of the Hyena Queen.

When the Wall of the Gods barred the Yhing-heer from reentry to their native steppes, hundreds perished from famine, lack of water or wild beasts. Many fled across the Hinterlands, but some stayed and survived with the help of a holy man, a prophet of Hurrian named Im Ga'barr. Hurrian instructed Im Ga'barr to chisel an invocation upon a pillar of rock and sing the words aloud like music. He made a pact with Im Ga'barr and his people that if they chose him as their god above all others, he would turn the harsh desert around them into an worldly paradise, and told them they should take the tribal name of Wa'dir (People of the Oasis). They agreed and sang the invocation aloud for many days, and just when their throats grew harsh and they ran out of patience, it began to rain in torrents, causing many dormant plants and trees to grow and blossom. Since then, it has been the holiest site in the Hinterlands, particularly to the Yhing-heer.

The sacred pillar still stands here, at the center of a lush and prolific oasis, dubbed Ipwa'dir Livhe'ho Im Ga'barr, (The Oasis of the Shining Pillar of Im Gi'barr) colloquially translated as the Oasis of the Pillar. The Wa'dir no longer live there, and it is unknown when or why they left. It is held sporadically by powerful devils, the forces of the Hyena Queen, and even the Serpentmen of Zhu.

Some of the Yhing-heer claim direct descentance from the Wa'dir and their prophet, Im Ga'barr and they still use this tribal name to distinguish themselves. There are not many pure blood Wa'dir left, (several dozen at most) and many of the males belong to a knightly order called the Knights of the Holy Pillar.

The Order has sworn ultimate fealty to Hurrian, the retaking of the sacred oasis, and the protection of the Hinterlands, even over the

commands of the Nawals and priests if necessary. They are constantly waging war with cults and evil beings, particularly the Cult of the Jackal, the Ehtzara, and the Hyena Queen.

This order has spread to some of the southern cities, but the knights are rare. A knight who joins the order must first make a pilgrimage here and bless his sword upon the pillar while intoning a secret invocation. Upon completing the ritual, the blade gains a green glow and becomes temporarily magical. This knight-to-be must find another of his order, who then grants him full status and initiates his new brother into the secret mysteries of the Knights of the Holy Pillar. He must then take up powerful sacred oaths to defend the people of the Hinterlands and follow the True Path of Hurrian. He should protect pilgrims of all nations, act piously and with proper conduct, and does not hesitate to offer himself up for dangerous tasks when they are evident, or when called upon by his superiors within the order. Some of the main duties (Passages damaged)

Knights that are not of Wa'dir descent are not unheard of, and the Order has adapted over the years to accommodate cultural changes, though only men may join their ranks. The main goal of the order is to reclaim the Oasis of the Pillar from the Hyena Queen and her demonic servitors. However, there are lesser goals, such as the continued peace and solidarity of the Yhing-heer, the spread of the worship of Hurrian, and preventing the wicked from growing in power. There are domed chapter houses in Censure, Jappa and Sicaris, and the order seems to be wealthy and with holdings despite its minute size. It is much akin to the knightly orders of Milandir, or the wandering Illirite Mah Di warriors further to the south, and the Knights of the Holy Pillar are a strong ally and capable militant force within the Hinterlands.

The Valley of Glass

In traveling the northern desert, shiny glimmers and eventually large formations of twisted glass are found. It is naturally formed, presumably from the nearby volcanic activity of the Wall of the Gods, in thin sheets along the ground or in large worn clumps. Sandstorms and dust devils are particularly perilous and most lethal here, for they fast become glass storms, tearing at anything caught within them. Sometimes shards of this glass are thrown miles away, appearing to be glittering rain from a distance.

There are tales of a valley to the west next to the Wall of the Gods, and that within it is the City of Glass where dwell invisible men and beasts. Near the city is the Shimmercaves, lined

with glassy chutes, stalactites and tunnels where huge gems, and monstrous oozes and slimes can be found. There are also (passage damaged)

The Hidden Canyon of Zhu

Somewhere east of the Silt Sea on the salty flats, a crescent shaped fissure is cloaked from view by mirages, illusions, and enchantments, whispered lightly of as the Hidden Canyon of Zhu. It is home to the dreaded Serpentmen of old, who rest in a catatonic slumber in gem studded sarcophagi and await an ancient prophecy of a time of darkness. The cobwebbed and cavernous tunnels are filled with blasphemous shrines and enslaved eldritch horrors, waiting to be released when that black time comes, and the Serpentmen may wreak havoc and revenge on the surface and reclaim what is theirs.

They hid themselves away during the slave revolts that destroyed their kingdoms of old, and fled here when they were cut off from fleeing to the tropical south in Sseth'ragor. Their leader, an abomination named Zhu, forged an alliance with Lamias and humanoids, which guard the canyon and act as servants or priests to the lurid shrines. He cast powerful illusions and enchantments on stone totem poles fashioned into serpent men that ring the canyon to ward it. Sometimes travelers come across them, knowing their significance well from the tales here, and flee in terror back the way they came.

Travelers, questing fools, and skimmer boats often go missing in this area and are never seen again. It is said that the canyon floor is strewn with erected pyramids of the bones and gear of centuries.

Macabre mobiles of wagons, sails, and strange flying craft, their skeletal crews still at their posts, are hung from the craggy canyon walls, suggesting even passage through the air is unsafe here.

The Serpentmen and their servants and allies occasionally meddle in the affairs of men and Elorii through secret subterranean tunnels dug under the cities of the Hinterlands. They deal with the Hyena Queen for specific reasons, though covetous wars between them have occurred. (It is also rumored that some of the Khitanimen of House Zhuan in Censure are tainted with Yuan Ti blood, and are the creatures secret allies.)

The Bleak Coast

Entry to the strip of land known as the Bleak Coast is possible by sea in multiple ports, but by land is another matter entirely.

The only viable way by land is through one of three canyon passes. The first is via the

eastern fork of the Great Trade Road south of the Feldspars. The pass itself is tempered and safe, but brigands and wandering humanoids stalk the road in the interior. The second is a broad canyon passage that opens just north of Censure. Regular maintenance and stout patrols of Takomir cavalry make this the safest and least troublesome route. The third and most northern pass is called Nel Mirada, and it is rife with caves and boulders. It used to be the home of many ascetic hermits and fakirs, but large troupes of bandits and pirates drove them off and took the caves as their own. Occasionally soldiers are sent from Censure to dispatch and scatter these scoundrels, but they have always returned, stalking the coastal roads and nearby villages.

Pearlspar, Jappa and the Takomir

Censure is the largest attraction on the Bleak Coast, perhaps in the Hinterlands, but the quaint Takomir towns of Jappa and Pearlspar are still worthy of mention.

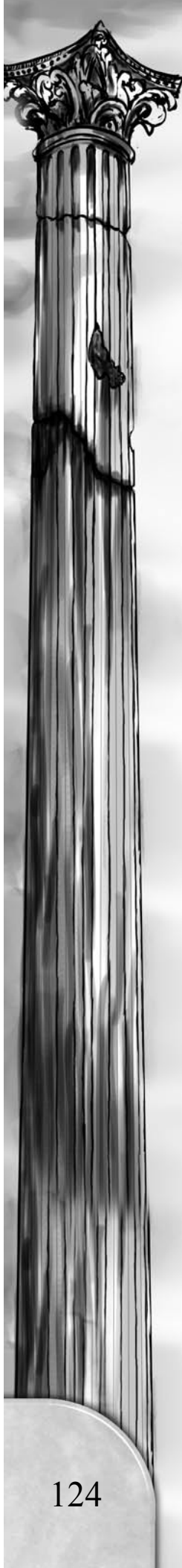
The sister ports are virtually identical, in appearance and organization, with a few notable differences. Firstly, Jappa has more of a Skohir influence to its architecture and defenses, with longhouses and sodden, hollow earthen ramparts topped with thick wooden palisades. The twin sea serpents of House Brand often frolic in its port; they are quite intelligent and humorous, and even play tricks on the unwary. Takomir clans and Skohir make up the population, numbering roughly 3,500. Jappa has a clash of colors, styles, cuisine, and customs much like Sicaris.

Jappa is also home to a group of seasoned Skohir warriors and a preist of Yarris; led by a red haired woman named Skia Rabakessel (she is often called The Roan, or Raven's Kettle.) The group has no given name, but they have a famous reputation on the Bleak Coast and in the ports of Milandir. They are not quite mercenary, nor are they knights, but they do seem to be some sort of courageous adventuring troupe, and have been hired in the past.

They are utterly devout in their faith to Illir, Saluwe', and Yarris, are fearless of death (like many of the Skohir), championing certain valiant causes or attacking pirate ships and camps mercilessly.

Pearlspar on the other hand, is much more Takomir in design. The Takomir are almost exactly like the Hurkomir and the Vanomir in custom, with the exceptions of being taller, occasionally having light eyes, and rarely, blonde or red hair (which is much prized.) They wear well-groomed beards and their hair in thick double braids with shells. They use horses on the





mainland and along the coast, but the Takomir have a penchant for sailing in fast sloops or schooners with triangular sails.

Pearlspar gets its name from the lucrative pearl beds near the city, warmed by water vents heated by volcanic activity off the coast, and broad, shallow coves filled with reefs, prolific fishes, and oysters are common here.

There is a monastic order here, but the monastery is a large, many decked ship, called The Way of the Pearl. The monks are all female, called Pearl Maidens, and make up the rank-and-file of this ship. Many of the Pearl Maidens are very beautiful, shapely, and muscular, due to the rigorous training they receive along with the ship's laborious duties. The order has its roots in a beautiful woman pearl diver that was raped and robbed of her catch by pirates. A traveling monk heard the tale, convincing her to sail back with him and train in his monastery so she might defend herself. When she returned five years later as a monk in her own right, she had a large ship, and many martial skills honed to a fine edge. The only way a Takomir woman may practice any martial skill was (and still is) by being a falconer, or a pearl diver. The monk then convinced the many women who were floating on rafts over the pearl beds to train in secret on the boat, or at night, lest they suffer the same common fate as her. Since then, the Pearl Maidens have become a proud and honored Amazonian tradition, harvesting the ancient pearl beds and protecting the meek from pirates, monsters and criminals of all types. They have many allies and a far ranging intelligence network, going to great lengths to bring wanted men to justice if it warrants it.

Censure and the Six Noble Guild Houses

The Hinterlands has no official capitol, but the magnificent grandeur of the mighty Free City of Censure is with no contest the default. Censure is situated on the northern coast of a large peninsula, which has been tenaciously cultivated into endless farms and pastures ringed by forts. Sailors often refer to it as the Jewel of the Coast, and it has had an auspicious rise from very humble beginnings. The founding of the city dates back eight hundred years, when the Coryani Empire was but a fledgling series of states.

Ancient Milandisian sailors brought back tales of fierce sea tribes called the Skohir, long of limb and golden haired, living amongst the Yhing-heer on the Bleak Coast. The prows and sails of the superb Skohir ships were adorned with sea wolves, and they often attacked stray merchant ships and coastal towns with lightning fury and surprise.

(It is rumored that the Sorcerer-King used them in those days as mercenary fleets for mastery of the waves.)

When the Coryani came to the Bleak Coast, they had many conflicts with the Skohir, neither side being able to fully defeat the other. Raiders from the Pirate Isles often joined forces with the Skohir in large armadas, but they were usually for a specific purpose, and not long lived.

This continued for two centuries, and eventually the Coryani made an alliance with the Skohir and their Hetman chief, Urgobrand. The Coryani purchased a nameless port village and a length of scrub lined rocky coast to dock imperial ships seeking a safe port from pirates or bad weather. The port was given the simple name of Null, and was more neglected than used, almost forgotten by history as the years passed by.

Later as the Coryani Empire grew, many provinces and conquered cities gave rise to rebel princes and leaders, or men who could not simply be killed due to special talents or sensitive information they had learned of. Some of these men in particular were of Valinoric descent, and the patriarchs of the Imperial church forbid execution, lest it offend the Pantheon and bring disaster. Expansion along the eastern coast of Onara and secret development of new ship designs meant finding a place that was virtually unknown to civilized men.

The answer lay in the Hinterlands, so distant and removed from prying eyes, and the remote, unimportant village of Null became a vital secret port and penal colony, renamed Censure. It was a harsh sentence to work in Censure, which was usually for life. The colony grew in population almost overnight, and swelled with ranks of rebels, heretics, conquered noble vals, anarchists, and the scheming deviants of the Empire, right next to brilliant inventors, engineers, shipwrights, and elite soldiery.

The prisoners and engineers built a sizable, fortified port town in a few months, and made it as self sufficient as possible to cut down on traffic coming or going. Some of the prisoners became organized and tried escape or nominal rule over parts of the city. An intricate program involving drugs and alchemical processes of mind control, or the delivery of slow acting poisons that needed daily antidotes curbed this activity.

During Censure's construction, vast caves with ancient saurian ruins were discovered. Some of the artifacts found were highly advanced, even by today's modern standards. A horrible smell pervaded the caves, and work crews went missing. When the Skohir learned of the excavations, they

warned the Coryani not to venture into the caves, for there were large hoards of beastly lizard folk and shapeless horrors who dwelled amongst the ruins.

The city went on like this for many years, growing larger and more fortified as trade with the Yhing-heer and alliances formed.

Though the alchemical control continued, the small groups of organized prisoners resumed, and as time passed many of them intermarried, founding tight knit extended families. The vast array (*damaged passages*)

Then a chain of events took place that would forever change Censure, both in its scope and in power. As the growing tensions between the Coryani and Khitani Empires increased, several new agricultural techniques were perfected in Censure on experimental farms, with the boom of crops and livestock encapsulating the peninsula. A wall and a series of sea forts encapsulating most of the peninsula were built in haste as protection against raiders.

As the annual reap of Censure exploded, so did war amongst the southern nations, a war that was long lived and caused much famine, disease and lack of resource. Milandir and Sicaris seceded from the Coryani and cut the Great Trade Road in half. One of the criminal families (Dragosi) saw an opportunity in this. A few of their clan had discovered the means to resist the alchemical drugging that held them captive by way of rare herbs and strange monkish exercises combined with a built up resistance to the drugs. They formed an alliance with a few of the other families, and planned a silent coup.

It is not completely known exactly how or when this transpired, for Censure went about its normal routine for years until it was discovered by accident. It is also known that the very guards who watched over the penal city were sent out into the world disguised as merchants with food and provisions to the famished southern countries. This invigorating trade fattening the coffers of Censure, or the list of powerful names who owed in favors what they could not pay in gold. The same alchemical process used on the prisoners controlled these guards, keeping up the illusion of normalcy and assuring not a soul would ever learn of Censure's true fate, until it was far too late. Soon after the trade boom, the families started the War of Houses for control of Censure, and whole families died off or were absorbed until a compact of compliance and non-aggression was signed to keep the peace.

The six families that remained became the current noble houses of Censure, each with a tribal animal standard in the Skohir fashion,

territorial holdings and diversified interests. They are as follows:

House val'Haupt (of Saluwe')

Crest: a sleek, white swan in water on a green field.

Current ruler: Tirgifre' val'Haupt, Baroness of Arcetta, titular Abbess of Perobka

This house has the finest breeds of horses in the Hinterlands and an elite cavalry detachment supplemented by Takomir mounted archers and scouts. They are arguably the most powerful of the noble guild houses, especially in mounted warfare and political allies. Other interests include large agrarian tracts on the peninsula, holdings in Milandir, Cafella, the Pirate Isles as well as various mercantile cells or companies in banking, mines, caravan shipping, fine porcelain, and livestock. The main guildhall is a massive three-story affair of granite, balconies, large exotic gardens and lawns that are resplendent with peacocks, and Great Forest swans in pools with many marble fountains.

This house is well represented by astute chancellors and heralds among the Hinterland tribes and in various courts of the southern lands. They have been allies with the val'Holryns of Milandir for some years, and ancient feuds with House Zhuan arise from time to time.

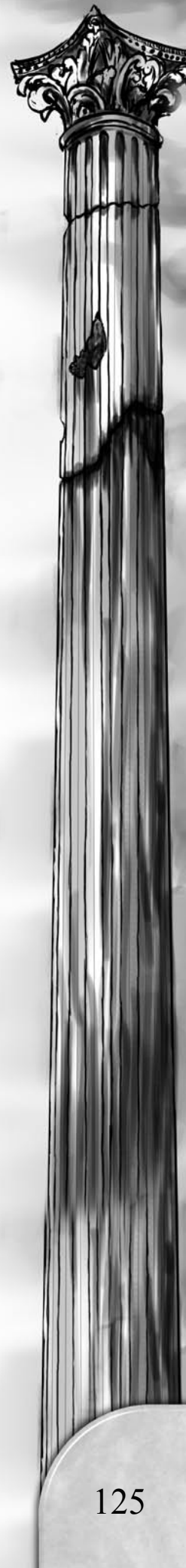
The Non-Aggression Compact that brought peace to Censure was drawn up by a val'Haupt named Marl, "The Wise."

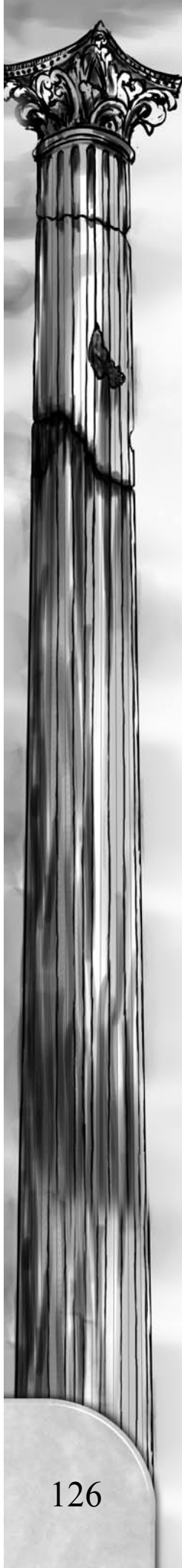
House G'mel

Crest: A black falcon holding a scroll on a blue field lined with stars.

Current Ruler: Sir Remere Bardicland G'mel of Censure

This conservative house deals mainly in specialized equipment, farming and provisions, packaging and distribution, and has a strong hand in legal affairs, printing, cartography and banking. They have several advanced courier systems, and deal in the delivery of information of all types. They have the largest force of armed specialists and infantry in Censure, a nominal, but well trained navy, and a large hand in organizing, outfitting and running the city's standing army and intelligence. G'mel has operations as far south as Altharia in various ports, and their maps are legendary for quality and accuracy. They are a valiant and respected house, trusted in many lands as men of their word. The house has a guildhall that resembles an elongated fort more than a dwelling or place of business, with high stairs, crenellations, arrow slits, and reinforced doors. They are descended mainly from various





Yhing-heer tribes and the original guardsmen and engineers of Censure. House G'mel is allied with every Yhing-heer tribe but the Khur Gi, House val'Haupt, the val'Holryns, House Dragosi and the Order of the Holy Pillar.

House Twylup

Crest: a black boar and a tankard split by a green sable stripe on a red field.

Current Ruler: Lord Grennel Twylup of Censure

A rustic house of drovers, shepherds, farmers, and fishermen. They own the majority of the land on the agrarian peninsula, most of the mills, many storehouses and urban properties, and large fleets of vessels for shipping and fishing.

They are renowned for their fine distilleries, producing fully a quarter of all liquors in the region, and produce many bails of wool and clothing. Their guild house is a series of tasteful, comfortable two story stone houses with sloped, colorful roofs, which are linked in a circle with a central courtyard. This house has many common allies along with House Brand.

House Dragosi

Crest: A raven, a troubadour mask, a black key, and a mushroom split by a central pattern of linked diamond mirrors.

Current Ruler: Unknown

This chaotic, ubiquitous house seems to have varied interests that shift and change over a wide array of holdings and speculation. The more stable ones are in architecture, fine glass and art galleries, subterranean farming, herbs, components and arcane studies, as well as printing and the noted Theater of the Umbral Mask (or Shadows). Strangely enough, they change the name, redecorating both the theater and their guildhall almost every month behind large expensive tarps, though the themes are typically mystic or artistic, and include mild touches of horror and the macabre.)

In fact, the entire guild and its officers are organized in cells as a theater troupe might be, with various titles that resemble these; Ordained Bards, Advocate Paragons, and the like. The finest bards and actors of Censure come from this house, and they hold extravagant plays, prosaic readings, and satires everywhere. They organize and run various non-affiliated charitable efforts, and seem to have a most humanistic center of philosophy. (*Passages censored*) They are difficult at times to understand, can be overly compassionate, vengeful, and even downright impossible. They look pale and some have unusual physical traits or hair colors (reddish black or pale browns)(*Passage censored*) The

Dragosi do not tolerate cruelties to animals of any kind.

Note: Some commentary on my source of information, which I find relevant. One evening, a wizard from House Zhuan approached me, revealing certain heretical practices and the true rulers of House Dragosi. He was found the next morning over Lantern Street in the Well Quarter. His body had been embalmed and remarkably preserved, and he was dressed and painted like a life-size marionette, hanging from a weeping willow on puppet strings.

Since then, I have chosen wisely to omit this sensitive information.

House Brand

Crest: A Sea Wolf on a blue-green wave pattern, with a horn above it.

Current Ruler: Eimgar Aiglefiir, Hetman of the Skohiir

These are what remains of the Skohiir sea tribes of this region. They are very traditional in their language, (Skiion) customs, and way of life. Brand is the undisputed master of the sea, controlling maritime trade, the docks and many water front storehouses, and the shipyards.

They have two trained sea serpents, large beasts with toothy maws, back spines and many hues of green on their scaly hides. They also have control of many toll roads and lanes, tariffs and taxation, gambling barges and houses, pit fighting and a few distilleries and mills. They pilot two types of ships which all bear sea wolf figureheads on the prow.

There is the traditional Kluus, a long keeled craft with a small hold (sometimes oars) and a single mast fitted with modern sail designs, and the Vargakittel, a large, squat warship with multiple sails and a huge cargo hold. Large waterproof doors are fitted just under the railings on one side, opening and releasing a ramp for smaller, seven man craft (called Vargas) which are akin to xebecs or outriggers.

Their guildhall is a mammoth longhouse with a slatted roof, thick oaken stilts, and colorful knot work adorning the inner beams. House Brand is allied with many ports in Milandir, the Pirate Isles, (though they often privateer frequently, so this is tenuous) and as far south as the atoll island of Jarko in Altharia.

House Zhuan

Crest: a green coiled serpent on a white field under a green moon encircled by many colored Khitani hieroglyphs.

Current Ruler: Ni Hsiu Shui, Marquis of Jhen Lou, Honourous Chancellor of Mil Takara, titular Viceroy of Mihung, Serpent Lord of Zhuan.

This is the second most powerful house in Censure. They have the farthest trade lanes and political connections, some of which extend far into the Khitani Empire. Zhuan has many interests and holdings, but the most lucrative trade goods come from the Khitani through Mil Takara, consisting of silk, varied spices, opium, exotic woods, green jade, restricted writings, new magic items and spells, and rare Khitani crafts.

They are not a trusted house by any of the other families, and are as xenophobic and mysterious as the Khitani. They have interbred somewhat with the Khur Gi, and have various holdings and trading houses in Mil Takara, Sicaris, Milandir, and the Pirate Isles. They have large mercantile fleets and Khitani style warships, and occasionally privateer to various nations (including the Pirate Isles and the Sorcerer-King.) Their guildhall is virtually a palace, with giant complex buildings, expensive fittings, polished statuary, koi pools, lavish quarters and gardens and a small exotic zoo, rivaling some of the largest lordly estates in Coryan. They are blamed for starting the War of Houses shortly before Milandir seceded. It is also rumored that Zhuan is allied with the Serpentmen in the Canyon of Zhu, and that some have mated with these foul creatures in return for pacts of power.

Their only other nominal ally are the val'Holryns in Milandir, through Duke Victor's Khitani War Master, ul-Zheng Yi.

The houses remain loosely allied, but political maneuvering, silent conflicts and espionage abound in Censure, and spill over outside the city's confines on land and sea. However, all the houses have agreed to cease all aggressions when the city itself is threatened from within or without, and they are fiercely patriotic. They remain

The City Proper

Censure is a large, thriving city, with the last annual census arriving at a population count of over 90,000 in the main city alone. It has a huge fortified port and an attached quarter, filled with a maze of piers, storehouses, and several shipyards

on or near the peninsula, and the most modern hull designs and navy known. (It is said that House Brand could subsist on the sale of these craft alone for years.)

Ships of all coastal nations, from as far away as the Western Marches can be found here almost all year round. Certain festivals, like the high holy days of Yarris, First Day or the Festival of the Many Colored Fishes, use entire fleets in plays, intricate mock-battles and linked barge carnivals replete with mast divers, resplendent banners, grand illusions, spells and fireworks.

The other quarters of the city are just as grand, and the sights and scents of many cultures assail a traveler at every turn. High walls with beautiful towers surround the city, lined with many fittings, statuary, gargoyles, catwalks, and the beautiful banners of every noble house flap in splendid color.

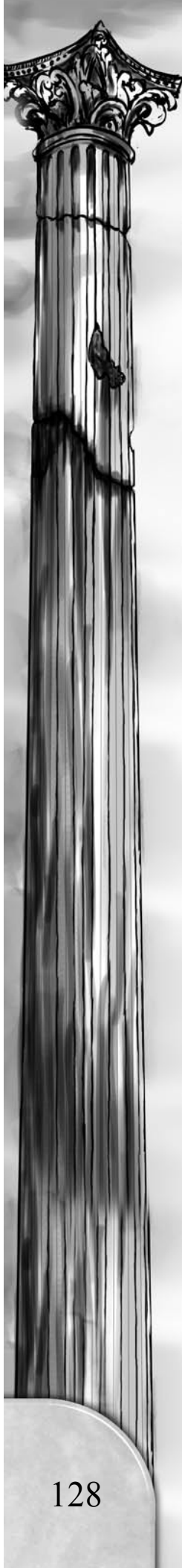
The streets and thoroughfares are well planned and very clean in comparison to southern cities. Older frontal roads are used for the mounted and pedestrians, and broad merchant roads behind neat interlocking rows of buildings, which have built in wheel furrows are reserved for commercial traffic only. (Thieves and beggars usually ply these lanes during lulls, or use them for dogfights, gambling, and escape routes.) The city is well lit at night with brass and paper lanterns, or glowing reflective bowl shaped braziers in gilded iron sconces.

Commercial trade is beyond rife, and matches any city on the continent. Anything that can be purchased, thought of, or crafted can be found in Censure. The markets and plazas teem with lucrative commerce and business affairs of all types. Nimble couriers or cat sized messenger lizards scurry by, delivering their news and quickly moving on.

One group of enterprising young folk has started a very specialized business, which consists wholly on professional, discreet bawdery and guidance through the city. These well-mannered men and women are called Laurels, and wear identical serpentine stone brooches of a graceful cat surrounded by a laurel wreath on their left breast. They glide through the crowded streets with ease, steering their clients past troublesome dangers or to special shops and dens of iniquity.

Censure has a well-trained town militia separate from the army, called Lantern Men, dressed in specialized black padded armor with interwoven metal plates. Their sole task is to





patrol streets and shops, keeping order in the port, markets and in shops, or investigating offenses and the source of illegal activity of all types. They have many wizards, diviners and turned thieves, and are very efficient, which makes long term criminals here very fast, or very clever.

Even the beggars and thieves have competing, commercially ambitious guilds, with as many as twenty six separate and distinct criminal syndicates, and a dozen beggar's guilds (one of which is estimated at 3,000 members or more!) They run gambling halls and barges, storefronts and kiosks full of stolen merchandise (called "swag shops"), opium halls and drinking dens, and a variety of slave markets, dogfights and gladiatorial games, carnal houses, pawn brokers and a multitude of false front shops laundering, swapping, forging, and smuggling all manner of vices and illegal services.

Some of the more notorious thieves are well known, and they will fight to the death in crowded streets over mere slander and insults. Some are consummate street duelists and hire out for very hefty sums to those that have been slighted, simply want impressive thugs, or assassins.

The main guild houses (colloquially termed "The Six") are not the only merchant houses and companies here. However, they largely control most taxes, tariffs, levies, and set the policies of trade through a council elect in the Hall of Commerce.

They are by no means overly greedy or monopolist, encouraging free trade and manipulating events to assure no lack of materials or blockades of any type, and a continued steady flow of economy.

There is even a large mint in Censure, and they produce seven different types of coins, the Golden Sail, or silver Doubles, Skiffs and Rilks (or "Traders") being most common.

Censure has seen some trouble in its economy and trade fleets from (*large amount of passages damaged*)

The Keepers of the Well

("That Which Lies Beneath.")

In certain older portions of the city, there are identical broad wells, some of which have handholds, and a cryptic symbol of a trident, an anchor and some sort of spherical vessel with rounded portholes chiseled on the rim. These wells have superstitious significance to the local

folk of lower castes, for they say that ghosts or guardian spirits live in the wells. These folk toss coins down the wells, or leave food and gifts on the rim in exchange for otherworldly protection against thieves and unseen dangers.

No one seems to venture into or disrespect the wells. Even the most hardened and irreverent thieves hold this superstition, and men who are known to have perpetrated crimes give a wide berth to the streets where these wells stand. Some of the folk here give a more tangible, though less likely sounding explanation. They are paranoid and nervous when speaking of it, even in their homes, whispering as if in a church. They say that there is an entire realm of caverns and cities below Censure and beyond, and that a great plateau city called Balcony rests directly below Censure. They refer to this realm cryptically as "That Which Lies Beneath." The "ghosts" are really a cult or fraternity of men (or subterranean races of different sorts, depending on who relates the tale) called the Keepers of the Well, and they went underground a long time ago. They are said to have many secret underwater hideouts, and give protection to those who leave them gifts out of kindness or respect. The tales go on to say that the Keepers secretly deal with House Brand, Dragosi and the marines of Censure, as well as many underground and aquatic races. Some of the men who relate these tales are sailors, and they say they have seen large gatherings of ships on fey evenings, at a place called Twilight Cove between Censure and Jappa to the north. The Keepers trade here with the "Aquans," and the subterranean races, as Twilight Cove is a cave isthmus for a trade river that stretches for hundreds of miles to the west. The river route is dubbed the Lavender Way, sort of a subterranean Great Trade Road that meanders through the home of many diverse cultures and races.

It is an outlandish tale, to say the least. However, there are many things in Censure's market places that have never been seen before, and the city does seem to bring in goods from very far away, almost impossible to get by way of normal land and sea routes.

(I find it a tantalizing and romantic notion, perhaps worthy of future study, but not now. I have heard of what happens to trespassers into this forbidden "realm," and what the local folk find afterward as a grim warning and reminder.)

Who's Who in the Hinterlands

Tirgfre' val'Haupt, Ruler of House val'Haupt

This well-mannered and stoic matron sits always near the forefront if not at the head of all major political and trade activity in Censure, and thus on the Bleak Coast. Tirgfre' is a distinguished woman from a distinguished family, and she insists that all retainers in her house keep in accord with seemly action and resolve, valuing the name of their family over personal goals and pride (or vendettas.) This disguises her cold, calculating nature, and she has even been given the secret name of the Golden Spider by the warrior-bards of House Dragosi. This name has circulated to non-Dragosi, and is used derogatorily by her competitors and enemies to describe her ubiquitous and seemingly bloodless disposition.

Tirgfre' is a long-term thinker, and a devotee to her ancestor, Marl the Wise, who made peace during the long remembered War of Houses. It is this personal code of hers that has kept peace in Censure and indeed the Bleak Coast, for so long, whether the other noble houses, and even the regional powers that be admit to it or not.

Tirgfre' has a massive amount of resource at her disposal, capable merchant stewards, as well as a very well-trained cabinet of advisors, retainers and heralds that rivals most southern noble courts. Any who venture on to the Bleak Coast have stepped onto sticky, trembling web strands that send a silent communiqué to the mistress of the val'Haupt. They will be seen and summed up eventually by the many eyes of the Golden Spider.

I'kir Ruhk, Abbess-Captain of The Way of the Pearl

Once the head falconer for the a'Nawali of the Takomir tribes, this woman was fascinated and drawn in to the mysterious techniques and martial skill of the matriarchal order of monks called the Pearl Maidens.

Since then, she has adopted their lifestyle and risen through the ranks to become Abbess-Captain of the orders only monastery, a ship

called Way of the Pearl. I'kir Ruhk is very young for this position, but her track record, her wisdom and her beauty leave nothing to question insofar as her leadership, and the respect offered her by the traditional male dominated Yhing Hir clans.

I'kir Ruhk goes to great lengths to keep peace on the Bleak Coast, and is very well informed by her strongest allies, House G'mel and val'Haupt, and she keeps many spies on ships and in ports of foreign lands. (It is rumored that she and Tirgfre' val'Haupt belong to a secret matriarchal order that extends into many other lands.) She will aggressively attack pirates and bandit chiefs, regardless of size or alliance (including the ruthless Crimson Pirates, and she has even been known to threaten the emissaries of the Sorcerer-King himself.)

Sylab, Circus Master of Sicaris

This mulatto Altharian Guild Master thief-turned entertainer has truly cornered the market insofar as subtle crime and a life of ease in Sicaris. He cares for little else short of the arena, its profits, and the stable peace of his allies to continue this goal, and can be played off or worked with by virtue of this motivation. He does respect oaths and a good show, even from his rivals and enemies. Sylab has made friends with the Yhing hir Nawal chiefs of the region, has made deals with the Commander-Magistrate of Sicaris, and in him resides the day to day true power of the city.

Sylab's dashing thieves, the Night Foxes, are his eyes and ears, and he uses force and strong-arm tactics sparingly. He instead plies people's sense of personal desire to get what he wants, in an artful way that leaves many with a smile instead of a shaking fist, even if they have been bested. Although he is somewhat manipulative, he is by no means lecherous or evil, merely seizing the momentum of a given course and following it to its logical conclusion, usually for "unbiased self-profit." Though he may walk the razor's edge and use dangerous situations for gain, he will usually go out of his way to see no great harm is done, and make amends when this is not possible.





Canceri

Introduction

A Generous Host

Kasmin awoke face down in the dust in complete darkness. The back of his skull was throbbing and he touched it with his hand. It felt wet. Extending a hand, he felt a tapestry and used it to pull himself to his feet. Then he remembered where he was. They had been pushing him into the crypt and knocked him out when he resisted. He clasped his hands together and in a panic, began to whisper a prayer, "O Illiir, please deliver me from this devilish place and I swear to you, I will never steal again."

Two little red lights appeared no more than two inches from his face and then a swirl of dust blinded him, "My, my. How fortunate for your victims."

It chuckled as its breath made him choke and sputter, "Who's there?" He wiped at his eyes, trying desperately to clear them. Whatever it was put a firm hand on his shoulder and forced him down on a low stone seat. The glow from the creature's eyes illuminated a wrinkled, smiling face and inch-long yellowed fangs that protruded over wasted lips.

"I am, some might say I was, Borghas val'Mordane. I built this place, and this is where I bide my time until I am worthy to ascend. Why are you here?"

"They- they put me here."

"Whom do you mean? My devoted relatives?"

"No. An architect caught me stealing some golden gilt meant to decorate a tomb he was working on. He took me to the priests and they decided that since I had offended the dead with my crime, that I should be sacrificed to them." Kasmin slid to the edge of his seat and rose to a crouch, trying to get some distance between the creature and himself. "I swear, I meant no offense, sir vampire. I do not understand your people's customs. I am from Milandir."

Borghas watched Kasmin with amusement and then took two steps forward and one to the left, cutting off his escape. "Really? And why did you leave Milandir to come to Canceri?"

Kasmin began to sweat and backed away, only to hit a wall of the tomb. Borghas advanced and the thief slid into a corner, crouching and wrapping his arms about his chest, as if trying to retreat inside himself. He started to pant. "Why ask questions? Why should I bother answering, when I'm going to be eaten?"

"What is your name, my friend?"

"Why?"

"Because right now I am above all hungry for companionship, but my patience with you is beginning to wear thin. Tell me your name."

"My name is Kasmin."

Borghas' eyes bore into his and Kasmin felt himself becoming resigned to following the creature's orders. "Good. Now tell me why you were driven out of Milandir."

"I killed a man." A tear appeared in his eye, and even though it wasn't likely the beast could see it, Kasmin rubbed it away. "He woke when I was burglarizing his house. He tried to stop me, but he was old. I thought I had knocked him out. It turned out he was dead. I was caught, but they couldn't prove I had done the deed. So instead of being executed, I was sent to Canceri."

"Why do you think they sent you to Canceri?"

"To punish me." Staring at Borghas' fiery eyes, Kasmin sensed the creature was displeased with his answer. In a small voice, he said, "No. I'm not sure. I steal to survive, but I'm not a murderer. It was an accident. I don't belong in this place."

"No one does, my friend. At least, no one thinks they do." Borghas wrapped an arm around the little thief's shoulders. He led him to a chair and lit the last candle he had been buried with. "I like you, Kasmin. I've had a lot of time to think down here, and I'd like to share my thoughts with you. Unless you're in a hurry to be on your way." The thief swallowed and said nothing. Borghas patted his hand and sat down across from him. "Good. That's what I thought you'd say."

An Outsider's View of Canceri

"First things first. What do your people say of Canceri?"

Fearing that he might upset the vampire, Kasmin was guarded in his reply, "That it is a place of unspeakable foulness and demons. That the noble houses of Canceri, always being of an evil character, betrayed the Coryani Emperor and turned on neighboring Milandir, beginning a series of wars that have lasted until this day."

"What about the priesthood of Canceri?"

Kasmin noted that the vampire wore the winding robes and turban of a priest of Neroth, "They say that they worship forbidden gods. That the followers of Neroth carry out their profane rites while the Nierites plan their revenge on

all of Onara and the Sarishans deal with devils. They have a saying; 'Everything evil comes to Canceri'. I have seen some of these things among the priests, but for the most part the people just seem-

"Scared?"

"Yes. They seem scared of their own shadow." Kasmin looked down and rubbed his hands together. "That is why I thought I could make a good living in Canceri. The people were so timid at first. But when I broke the law, it was as if they became possessed."

"Possessed by what?"

"I don't know. By fear, I think. They were possessed by the fear that all of them would be punished for my crime. In Milandir, the people hate thieves and murderers, but they do not fear the consequences of their crimes the way the Canceri do."

"A nation of heroes, eh? The courage of Illiir lives in every heart, even that of the smallest babe."

Unsettled by the vampire's leer, Kasmin shifted in his seat. "You're quoting one of our

favorite songs, the *Ballad of the val'Tensen*, aren't you?"

Borghas scowled. "Why not? We have no ballads of our own in Canceri."

A Land of Fear and Loathing

The vampire rose from his seat, bits of rotten fabric swirling in his wake. He retrieved a shriveled piece of fruit from a plate of wasted food and began to eat it. "Based on what you have seen Kasmin, would you call us evil?"

"I'm afraid to answer."

"That's a start, but I must insist you do so, and do so truthfully. Otherwise, this conversation is at an end."

"Alright then. Yes, I do. Canceri is full of predators, human and otherwise. The dead walk the earth besides the living. Cannibalism is not unknown in some parts of the country. This place is a stinking pit and the people in it are all damned. I would pity them, but if they choose to suffer, they deserve it."

Borghas contemplated Kasmin over the remains of a putrid apple. "What about you,





Kasmin? Are you evil?" The thief said nothing, and the vampire chuckled. "You know, I once went to the high priest, the Akali, of my church and questioned the liturgy of Neroth. I asked him why the followers of Neroth were made to suffer. Why were they born to an evil world? Were they born evil?"

"What did he say?"

"Essentially, he told me- yes. Human beings are evil. Because anything that is not purely good is, by definition, tainted. Compromised. Diseased. Evil.

Among the Nerothians, our religion teaches that by focusing on the wickedness, by wallowing in it, we eventually learn to rise above it. We believe that when we die, our spirits are unfettered from this world for a time. Each spirit has the option of moving on to a place of perfect goodness at this point, but most of them are seduced by the pleasures of the material world and inevitably return to be reborn into a new body. Through earthly suffering however, through a direct exposure to the foulness of life, our spirits may become disenchanted with mortality and ascend," Borghas gestured to his undead body. "I have not yet reached the point where I am ready to move on, but I am closer than some others."

"I'm not a priest. I- I'm not sure I understand."

"Yes. I see. Well, my father was fond of dabbling in metaphysics. I wasn't half the priest he was." Borghas walked over to a table, picked up a mace and began wiping away the dust. "Look at it this way. I don't agree with my father's belief that humanity is inherently evil. Nothing is purely evil or good, because the material world is an imperfect place where the lines between the two blur and mix. It's a world of grays. I do, however, believe that men are naturally disposed toward evil. But there is always a choice between the two. We can be one or the other at any given time. It's simply our- consistency, for want of a better word- that defines us as one or the other."

"Does that mean you aren't going to kill me?"

Borghas threw back his head and laughed. "I haven't decided yet. The point I was trying to make was that you're a murderer and a thief, but you don't think of yourself as evil. As for me, I know better. I feed on the living. If I did not find your conversation amusing, you would be dead by now." Borghas licked his lips. "But regardless of how low I sink, irrespective of how depraved my sins are, salvation is always a possibility. Because I am Canceri, and I know what true evil is.

Let me tell you about us."

Playing a Canceri Character

Players will probably be tempted to play Canceri characters for the same reason they enjoy playing evil characters. Role-playing games are primarily about escapism, and evil characters represent unlimited freedom. People play them so they can thumb their nose at convention and popular expectation. Their characters kill the local merchant for his goods, are excessively cruel toward defeated enemies and swagger about picking fights they know they can win. There's nothing wrong with this in the short-term, but most players will realize that consistently disrespecting the bounds of what is considered moral or simple good taste, even in a game of pretend, is anti-social. Since role-playing is essentially a social activity, evil player characters have the potential to ruin the fun of a game by their presence alone.

Should they be prohibited then? Not necessarily. The problem is that "good" and "evil" are inadequate when applied to the wide range of human behavior one encounters in a mature game. Many people, even when caught committing a crime, will not admit that they did anything wrong, and few are inclined to avoid similar behavior in the future for any reason other than to avoid further punishment. For a criminal, there are always extenuating circumstances, justifications, and reasons for the way they are. Even then, many express a desire to redeem themselves. Most "bad" people, though they consistently do evil things, are cognizant that they have a choice and experience anxiety, guilt and regret, just like everyone else.

This is doubly true of Canceri characters. Historically, the people of Canceri have had to do a lot of terrible, shameful things just to survive in a very harsh land. Their religion provides a justification for their actions and assuages their guilt. They are aware of how the people of other nations view them, and most Cancerites are unwilling to set foot outside their country to face the hate and contempt of the rest of the world. Those who actually venture out into this hostile world are especially fervent in their beliefs and the correctness of their way of life. If they weren't, they wouldn't live long.

By their nature, Canceri player characters can provide a complex and dramatic contrast to the rest of the player characters.

Using Canceri in a Campaign

It hardly needs to be said that characters from Canceri make excellent villains for a Gamemaster's campaign. Many of Canceri's people, especially the Nerothians, regularly

engage in practices that would be punishable by death in other nations. Their reputation is infamous throughout Onara. The nobility of Canceri also belong to an institution, the Church of the Dark Triumvirate, which is powerful, well organized, and antagonistic toward its neighboring governments.

But Canceri, the land itself, is rife with adventure possibilities as well. As the Milandisian saying goes, "Everything wicked comes from Canceri." The place is a repository for everything that is wrong with the world of Arcanis. A journey through Canceri can be milked for its horrific value by having the players confront the deviant practices of the Nerothians, the treachery of the Sarishans, or the brutality of the Nierites, and that's just the civilized areas. The surrounding countryside has been home to all manner of monstrosities since mankind first settled the area, and most of them resent the intrusion.

The land can also be used as a crucible. Life in Canceri is hard, and the choices one has to make while there are harder. If the player characters are on a mission, should they jeopardize that mission to right some wrong they come across by chance? Do the people of Canceri deserve their lot? Is the Church of the Dark Triumvirate innately evil? What is the right thing to do, when everything seems wrong? Few characters will escape unscathed by the

experience, and all will leave a little changed, for better or for worse.

Testimony of the Dead - A History of Canceri

"I'm trying to help you, Kasmin." Borghas sighed and his eyes flickered in the dark. "Your own people have thrown you out, and you've been less than successful fitting in among mine. If I let you live, you're going to need to know more about why your fellow Canceri are the way they are."

"If you let me live?"

"How well are you prepared to listen to what I have to say?"

"Pray, tell on, Sir Borghas. I will listen as if my life depended on it."

"Which of course, it does." The vampire sat and rubbed his chin. It scratched like sandpaper over old wood. "The beginning. We begin, of course, with fables."

Humans Come to Canceri

One thing all the stories agree on. The first humans to settle in Canceri were driven out of their native land by their enemies. There was a war, and the losers of the conflict were pushed north into a land of inclement weather and ferocious animals. The victors expected them to die, but to their surprise, the exiles adapted. One



tribe settled in the north, another in the east, and a third in the south. To the west was the forest of the elorii. As two people who had suffered much at each other's hands in the past, they were content to let each other be. In time, the human lands east of the forest became known as Canceri.

In the south, voracious winged beasts prowled at night and threatened to consume the southern tribe, as they had all other life in the area. At first the humans fought the creatures, but they kept returning, night after night, and the humans numbers began to dwindle. But a woman came to them and taught them to dig in the earth like worms, where the winged beasts couldn't reach. When the people complained that they were still too few, the woman showed them how to venerate Neroth, and call back the spirits of the departed to defend the living. Her name was Mordane, and she was mother to the lords of that land.

In the north, among the volcanic mountains, the northern tribe was beset by other troubles. Creatures which walked like men but spoke without voices rose up out of the caverns below the mountains to enslave them. A man named Virdan appeared and taught them to forge weapons of steel to fight the Voiceless Ones. When the soundless screams of the creatures threatened to shatter their sanity, Virdan taught them to discipline their minds against the threat. He fathered the val'Virdan clan, and their armies sought out every enclave of the Voiceless Ones they could find and killed them.

In the east, the tribe there suffered from famine. The land would yield nothing, and the people of this tribe fought amongst each other for every scrap they could lay hands on and were constantly raided by their neighbors. One day, a boy arrived and offered to feed them the tribe if they would fall down and worship him. Some laughed and tried to run him off, but a few followed him and begged him to tell them what he knew. The boy said, "Your neighbors in the south, they have food aplenty. And those in the north, they know how to craft superior weapons." One of the men replied, "So? We are too weak to take what they have from them." The boy laughed, "They don't know that. Besides, who said you should take it? They will give it to you. After all, the north and the south need each other, but neither of them can see that. You can take advantage of their lack of vision." The people were amazed and asked the boy his name. He told them, "I am Mehan, and my god is Sarish. There is much I can teach you, but you must promise to only do as I say and share my secrets with no other."

And that is how humanity found a way to survive in Canceri.

The First Conquerors

Far to the south of Canceri, a great empire arose and eventually its shadow stretch even to the mountains of Nier's Spine. When its armies arrived, the tribes of Canceri were divided. The val'Mehans decided to side with the invaders, and assisted them in crushing the val'Mordanes. The worship of Neroth was outlawed, and the religion went quite literally underground, were it prospered and spread throughout the Imperium. The last stronghold of resistance in Canceri was the val'Virdans, but through persistence and sheer numbers, the Imperial armies eventually defeated the followers of Nier.

Over the years, stories of the val'Virdan's heroic last stand had spread throughout the rest of the Imperium. When they finally fell, many of them were enslaved and transported to the Imperial capitol, where they were lauded by the masses for their great personal honor and courage. A great demand developed for val'Virdan bodyguards and military advisors, and even though many were slaves, their masters often treated them like members of the family.

The gods of the Canceri were accepted into the Imperial pantheon, though the active worship of Neroth was frowned upon. The god of the dead became a bogeyman to frighten children, while his true followers went about their dark practices unmolested.

The Nierite Revolt

The Canceri religion, being co-opted into that of the Imperial Pantheon, spread to every corner of the Imperium, as did its followers. The Nerothians preached to the downtrodden, the Sarishans acted as merchants and diplomats, and the Nierites hired out as mercenaries. The population of Canceri itself began to stagnate as the rest of the Imperium forgot about it.

It was the death throes of the Imperium that eventually revitalized Canceri. As the Emperor faced rebellion after rebellion, he relied more and more on Nierite mercenaries to put them down when his regular army failed. Some speculate that the Emperor defaulted on his payments when the treasury went bankrupt or that he tried to have their army disbanded, but an army of Nierites ended up engineering a coup against the Emperor. The coup was unsuccessful, and the Nierite army was enslaved and broken up. The Emperor immediately ordered the arrest of the val'Virdans.



From those who escaped, a Nierite by the name of Leonydes val'Virdan organized an army. Legend has it that Nier favored him, and Leonydes marched on the Imperial Capitol, overthrowing the Emperor and establishing his own regime. Nierite rule was brief and plagued by troubles. With the death of Leonydes, the so-called 'Sword of the Heavens', his empire swiftly collapsed.

In Canceri, the val'Virdan that remained distanced themselves from those outside of the country. Their worship of Nier became a very private affair, and they take no part in the religious wars waged to the south.

The Devil-Kings

Canceri remained isolated for a number of generations as different empires to the south rose and fell. At some point, the wars between rival nations caused a magical catastrophe that opened a great rift into Onara from the worlds beyond. Demons and other strange creatures moved freely between the worlds, and all the nations of mankind suffered from their depravations. All nations that is, save Canceri.

The followers of Sarish had long ago established contact with the most powerful of these beings and made preparations for their coming. The val'Mehan created a place for the infernal

hosts in the city of Nishanpur and persuaded the other nobles of Canceri to support their rule. The time is dimly remembered, but is most likely the origin of the rest of the world's hatred of Canceri. It is called the time of the Devil-Kings, when the people of Canceri collaborated with malefic entities to rule over mankind.

The reign of these horrors ended with the rise of the Coryani Empire. When the Coryani marched into Canceri, a third of the val'Mehan swore fealty to their Emperor in exchange for their lives and turned on their allies. With the assistance of these val'Mehan, the demon hordes were driven far to the north, and the people of Canceri, now a province of the Coryani Empire, went back into isolation.

For centuries, the country slumbered.

The Prophet Becherek and the Church of the Dark Triumvirate

Though the worship of Neroth, Nier, and Sarish had spread beyond the borders of the country, the families that specifically venerated those gods were largely confined to Canceri. When the Sarishans broke their oath of fealty to the Coryani Emperor, many of them were executed and the rest fled back to the val'Mehans of Canceri. When the Nierites who served the Coryani Patriarch were disbanded, they settled among the val'Virdan among the foothills of Nier's Spine. As long as the nobles of Canceri took no notice of the rest of the Empire, the rest of the Empire seemed content to take no notice of Canceri. All of this changed with the appearance of a prophet by the name of Becherek.

At the time, the Empire was embroiled in a war with the vast nation of Khitani to the west, a war that it was slowly losing. Becherek began to preach that Coryan was doomed because it had angered the gods. The Emperor, by interfering with the succession of the Patriarch and outlawing the organized veneration of a quarter of its gods, had brought down their wrath. The worship of the entire pantheon must be reinstated and a new Patriarch, independent of the Emperor's control, must be elected.

Becherek was especially effective in Canceri, where he accused the nobility of failing its gods. He appealed to their regional pride and encouraged them to fight against Coryani oppression. The Coryani Emperor had Becherek arrested and, in a blunder of epic proportions, had the priest publicly tortured and killed. Within days, the revolution the Emperor sought to stymie was well underway. The val'Mordane flung wide the doors to their crypts and unleashed all sorts of horrors on the Coryani garrison. An undead

army began to gather that grew with each battle it fought. The val'Mehan, forewarned by spirits, countered every attempt made by the Emperor to arrest or assassinate the revolt's leaders. Finally, the val'Virdan descended from their mountain holds and pushed the soldiers of the Empire south. Then they kept going.

The nobility gathered in their new capitol city of Nishanpur, taking oaths of service to their gods and founding a new religion, the Church of the Dark Triumvirate. They elected from among their number a replacement for the Coryani Patriarch, one that they called the Dark Apostate, and marched south to overthrow the Empire and install their leader at the head of the Coryani Church.

Their march ran into resistance just beyond the Blighted Mires that marked the southern boundary of Canceri. Hearing of the Canceri invasion, the province of Milandir had recalled its legions against the express orders of the Emperor. The new, seceded state of Milandir absorbed the full force of the Canceri attack and managed to push it back. Canceri, once again isolated from the rest of humanity, was content to allow the new nation of Milandir to suffer the invective and threats of Coryani's emissaries. The Dark Apostate simply sent their heads back to Coryan on pikes.

Since regaining its independence, Canceri is becoming a land in more than just name. Under the auspices of the Church of the Dark Triumvirate, it has revitalized its various faiths, repelled several invasions from Milandir, and expanded into the Hinterlands. Once demoralized and broken by its enemies, Canceri has found new strength to stand apart from the rest of mankind.

The World, the Flesh, and the Devil - Canceri Society

Canceri is made up of the three estates that characterize a feudal society- the peasantry, the nobility, and the clergy. Since the rise of the Church of the Dark Triumvirate however, the

lines between the last two estates have become almost indistinguishable. There is no such thing as secular law in Canceri- every decree by the Dark Apostate is also a statement of official Church dogma.

The People of Canceri

The peasantry understands that to be Canceri is to be a member of the Church, and to be a member of the Church is to be Canceri. Though the Church

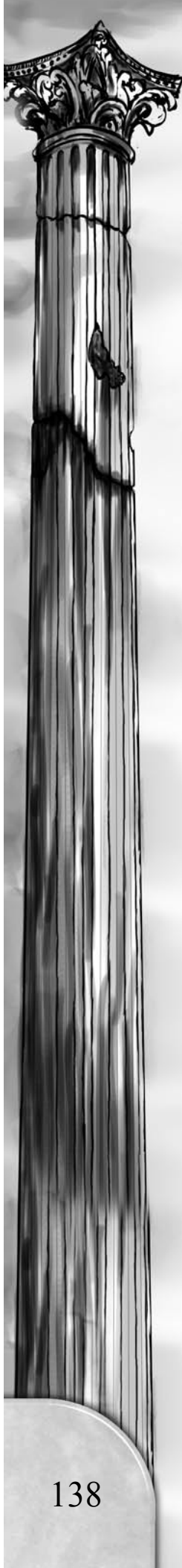


of the Dark Triumvirate pays lip service to the Coryani pantheon, select members are offered the opportunity to become consecrated to the service of one of the three chief deities of the pantheon in exchange for some valuable service they render to the ruling priesthood of their community. Becoming consecrated has its benefits. In exchange for informing the priesthood of Neroth in Kielmun that his neighbors are not observing a ritual involving self-flagellation, for example, an informant might become consecrated and afterwards enjoy better food or be given

preference when competing for employment. Certain professions also enjoy special privileges, depending upon the family they happen to live under.

The priesthood of Neroth especially prizes its artisans and torturers. Those who are able to represent the transcendent by means of base materials are held in high esteem and the necropolises are full of craftsmen competing for patrons among the clergy. Considering that most val'Mordane communities are domed, there is always plenty of work for a stonemason. As for torturers, the clergy of Neroth are surprising in that these followers of death rarely punish criminals by executing them. It is far more preferable to assign them penalties that involve the mortification of the flesh, especially those that are especially debilitating or painful. The more imaginative a torturer is, the more likely he will be offered a position with the Akali of a given necropolis.

Among the val'Mehan in the east, wizards and merchants are far above the peasantry in



station. The priesthood of Sarish has established numerous wizard chantries throughout their lands, as well as a Great Library full of lore, arcane and otherwise, in the city of Nishanpur. Caravans, trading houses and mercantile expeditions are all subsidized by the val'Mehan. The words of wizards and merchants tends to carry more weight in legal proceedings than those of the lower classes, though often a "donation" to the ecclesiastical court is requested in the event of a favorable ruling.

Those who worship Nier are, of course, partial to soldiers. Slavery is widespread in the northern mountains, but free citizens are all expected to serve a term in the military at some point during their youth. Those who stand out as especially brave or extremely adept at taking orders are accorded great respect by their peers and advance through the ranks of the army with greater speed. The val'Virdan expect much from their soldiers, but a warrior in the Nierite army never need worry about lacking the necessities in life. They are always provided for.

The Nobility

Technically, all nobles are part of a particular congregation of the Church. The oaths sworn by their forefathers remain binding, so that every val'Mordane is consecrated to Neroth, every val'Mehan to Sarish, and every val'Virdan is a worshipper of Nier. Every noble is considered a priest of the god their family is sworn to, though not all learn the rituals specific to that god's priesthood (Only the latter are priests in the sense that they belong to that class and are able to cast divine spells). Both groups may hold positions within the Church of the Dark Triumvirate, so that it is possible for a val'Virdan warrior of Nier to become a member of the Nihang Council or a val'Mehan Sorcerer of Sarish to be elected as Dark Apostate.

Even though the practices and organization of the nobility in Canceri is deeply tied to their religion, it should be understood that the religion of these families is not reflective of the worship of these gods. The priesthood has been affected as much by the noble family that it consists of as the family has been by their transformation into priests. As should be obvious, the priests of Canceri are free to marry and their offspring are in turn eligible to join the priesthood.

The val'Mordane family is further complicated by their line's curious tendency of being spontaneously raised as undead shortly after death. These undead val'Mordane, according to the desires of their family or personal choice,

may remain among their family in much the same capacity as they did in life, or may choose to pursue the contemplative life by interring themselves in the family crypt. In the latter case, it is believed that the undead noble will, through its suffering as one of the undead, eventually become alienated from the flesh and be allowed join Neroth in the sacred realm of the dead.

The val'Mehan family is accustomed to dealing with alien, extra-planar creatures. Due to the mental contortions required to understand the values and strategies employed by these beings, many members of the val'Mehan have been driven irretrievably insane. Some val'Mehan have even been known to subject themselves to extreme emotional distress or to ingest powerful hallucinogens to prepare themselves for the creatures they will encounter in the course of performing some service for their family. As a general rule, even the most stable of the val'Mehan are paranoid, hedonistic, and psychotic.

The val'Virdan are perhaps the hardest family for an outsider to understand. Normally patient, reserved and reflective, once they put their mind to accomplishing some task they are utterly ruthless in their efficiency. They spend their days in military drills and the study of tactics and strategy. The val'Virdan as a whole are extremely suspicious of outsiders. They do not recognize individual rights of any sort. They believe the value of people and property to be directly proportional to their utility in the service of the Church, and notions popular in the outside world, like privacy, are unheard of among them. The family does not normally deign to involve itself in the affairs of the rest of Canceri, unless those affairs threaten their own plans.

The Church of the Dark Triumvirate

The soul of Canceri is its religion. Since the death of Becherek, the Church has dominated every aspect of Canceri culture and society. The priesthood and a large mass of consecrated officials perform a variety of functions. All the courts are ecclesiastical. All contracts require the signature of a priest. The basis for Canceri's relationship with its neighbors, all its foreign policy, is religious in nature or is couched in religious terms. Even the daily business of the common folk, their toiling in the fields or crafting on goods, is meant to do honor to the gods and to support their Church.

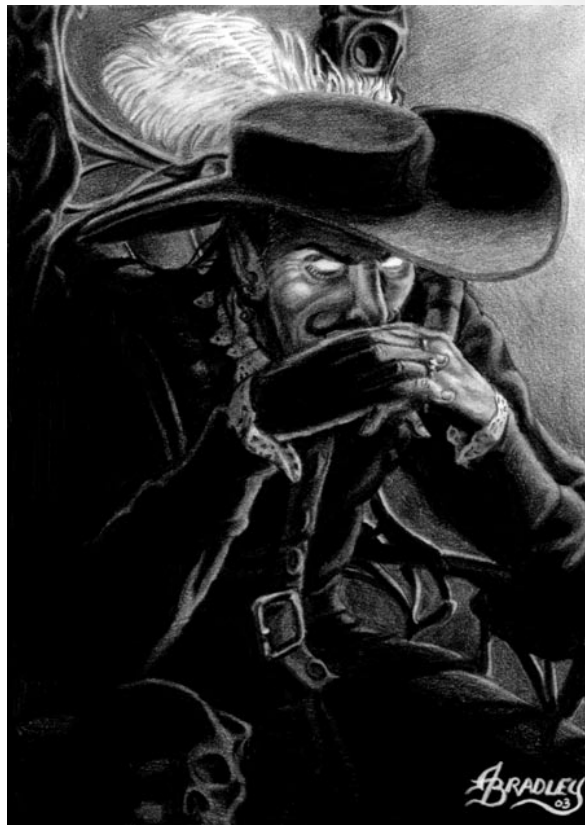
The organization of the Canceri government, to its lowest local level, is part of the Church of the Dark Triumvirate. Communities in Canceri are on the average not very large, and are organized around a city square with a

temple, called a *gurdwara*. A high priest called an *Akali*, who wields absolute power over the community, controls each *gurdwara*. Members of the nobility typically control the largest *gurdwara*, and the position of high priest of these *gurdwara* is typically passed down from parent to child. The nobility of each of the thirty-nine districts of Canceri in turn elect from their number a *Nihang*, a priest who sits on the Council that elects the Dark Apostate, and fills those positions among the *Akali* below them as they become vacant. All clerical appointments are held for life, or until the appointee is stripped of their office.

The *Akali* have a tremendous amount of influence. They essentially have the power of life or death over anyone in their community who does not directly serve a *Nihang* or the Dark Apostate. It is custom however, for executions to be announced publicly and the condemned to be given a week's grace in which the *Nihang* of the district might intercede on his behalf. It should be noted that many, many criminals are killed while resisting arrest. All suspects are considered guilty until proven innocent.

Part of the duty of the *Akali* is to collect tithes for his *Nihang*. The *Nihang* sets the tithes for a particular community at whatever level he sees fit, assigns agents to ensure that the *Akali* are doing their job properly (These agents are called *Excisists*), and apportions funds among the districts he is responsible for. As noted before, the *Nihang* may select priests to fill vacant positions among the *Akali*, though he require the approval of the Dark Apostate to remove an *Akali* from office. The *Nihang* may even veto acts of the *Akali*, though the *Akali* may appeal the decision to the Dark Apostate. Both rarely happen.

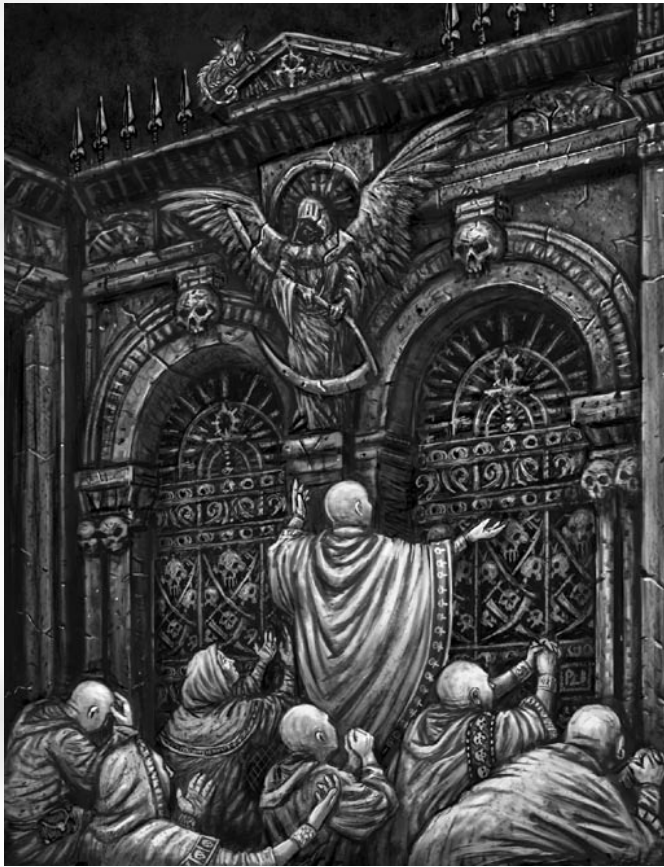
The apex of the Church's hierarchy is the Dark Apostate. Simply put, the Dark Apostate may do whatever he wishes, as long as it is in accord with the decrees of his predecessors. Church dogma holds that the decrees of the Dark Apostate have the weight of the Dark Triumvirate behind them, and that disobeying the Dark Apostate is tantamount to defying the gods. In order to see that his decrees are implemented, the Apostate may empower representatives to carry out his will directly. These representatives are called *Adjurers*. *Adjurers* are typically chosen from among the most potent servants of the Church, and are almost always fanatically loyal to the office of the Dark Apostate. When the Apostate sends an *Adjurer* on a mission to a particular district, both the *Akali* and the *Nihang* tremble.



A Realm of Trials and Tribulations-Geography

The land of Canceri is roughly defined as being border by the Blighted Mires and the kingdom of Milandir in the south, the Vosewalden in the west, the mountain range called Nier's Spine in the north, and the Hinterlands in the east. The eastern border of Canceri swells and ebbs with the fortunes of the val'Mehan's political maneuvering with the tribes of nomadic Yhinghir that populate the Hinterlands. The priests of Sarish play off one tribe against the other in order to extend the Red March further eastward, but always seem to eventually draw down the wrath of a temporary alliance of two or more Yhinghir tribes. Yet the Nierites always seem ready to push back the wild horsemen when Sarishan diplomacy backfires.

The Blighted Mires. The Blighted Mires is a swamp that lies along much of Canceri's southwestern border. Legend says that the Mire was once part of Milandir, but something horrible infected the land and the swamp is the result. An old road runs through it, linking Milandir to Canceri. All sorts of foulness, diseases and strange beasts breed in the swamp, and occasionally things will crawl out of it to infect the Vosewalden or the lands of Milandir. Canceri remains surprisingly untroubled by dangers out of the Blighted Mires, and some val'Mordane have indicated that they long ago made a pact with the spirits that haunt



the Mire. There is nothing to substantiate this, but the Nerothians have a yearly ritual in which they make a sacrifice to the Mire. If a fit animal sacrifice is unavailable, there are rumors that the priests make do with a human one.

The Cold Plains. North of the Blighted Mires and taking up two-thirds of western Canceri are the Cold Plains. The plains are wetlands that are littered with strange, tower-like rock formations of variable thickness. The peasants under the rule of the val'Mordane grow rice and tubers, while the stonemasons quarry the soft rock of the formations, which they find easy to work with, it being malleable and hardening quickly when fired. Countless bodies from a hundred battles over the course of millennia remain sunken beneath the surface of the plains, and once and a while some will rise and wander among the mesas.

The Vosewalden. The Vosewalden is distinguished from the rest of the Great Forest because it once contained a small Elorii kingdom that was allied with the First Imperium. After the Imperium fell, legend says that a warrior of Nier led Canceri against the elorii of the Vosewalden, destroying their civilization and cutting down a holy tree at the center of their land. Since then, the forest has been sick. Periodically, the nature spirits will go mad, corrupting trees and animals and turning them monstrous, full of a desire to

destroy anything that lies in their path. The elorii blame humans for their trouble and slay any other intelligent creature that ventures into the Vosewalden. There are rumors of priests however, heretics from Canceri, who have found ways of turning the sickness to their advantage and using it to protect themselves against the elorii.

Nier's Spine and the Holds of the val'Virdan. The mountains to the north of Canceri are called Nier's Spine. The temperature here varies wildly, ranging from freezing snow to oppressive volcanic-fed heat. The val'Virdan family has built their fortress among the cliffs and crags of the mountains, and there are a few of them that never fell to the Imperium or the Coryani. Each family of the val'Virdan is extremely clannish, sometimes even to the point of warring on each other, but they all grudgingly respect the authority of their *Nihang*. The *Akali* of a particular hold is always the oldest veteran of the family. Three of the largest holds are ruled by their region's *Nihang* and are named Hunder, Lohwach, and Vrain.

Hunder is the staging ground for all val'Virdan military action and its *Nihang* has declared that the huge fortress, conquered and enlarged by the Coryani centuries ago, is perpetually under a flag of true. The families of the val'Virdan meet in Hunder for their war-counsels.

Lohwach is a fortress that actually lies in a valley on the eastern edge of Nier's Spine. The *Nihang* of the region and his *Akali*, unlike the rest of the val'Virdan, are friendly with the Yhing-hir tribesmen of the Hinterlands. The val'Virdan of Lohwach hate the val'Mehan and their *Nihang* is the source of constant strife on the floor of the Council.

The Vrain is possibly the largest, best-defended hold of the val'Virdan. It is said that an army could march over it and not even realize it was there, because the Vrain is entirely subterranean. Some of its halls spin off into nowhere, many ending in huge, bottomless shafts. Strange lights can sometimes be seen wandering the halls in the distance, and they always leading pursuers back to one of the aforementioned shafts. Whoever built the Vrain, it certainly wasn't the val'Virdan and judging from some of the architecture, they may not have even been human.

The Necropolises. The *Nihang* of the val'Mordane apportion a great amount of their funds into public works, and it shows when one visits their communities on the Cold Plains. Each

major city of the val'Mordane is domed and grand tombs and sprawling monuments line the streets within. The families of the val'Mordane are close-knit and prolific, and the *Nihang* typically allow their *Akali* to handle their own affairs without their involvement. The three greatest necropolises of the val'Mordane are Ventaka, Kielmun and Sohbuk.

Ventaka is the oldest and largest necropolis in Canceri. Rumored to be the first real city founded and the capitol of the old province in the First Imperium, Ventaka is suffering from centuries of neglect. The foundation is cracked and the *Nihang* of the region simply cannot raise the funds to repair all that is wrong with the massive dome that spans the length of this city. The priesthood of Ventaka expects that the city will collapse any day now, killing thousands. Still, the beautiful statues of the Way of Spirits, only one among the many architectural wonders of Ventaka, continue to draw pilgrims from all over Canceri and beyond.

Kielmun lies on the edge of the Blighted Mires. Being the closest major city to Milandir, Kielmun has been occupied by the enemy countless times. Within the last few centuries, the *Nihang* haven't even bothered maintaining an army. Instead, they have devised a complicated network of passages beneath the city where his family can readily escape to and wage guerilla warfare on invaders. The current *Nihang* of Kielmun has, after the val'Mehan, one of the best spy networks in Canceri.

Sohbuk is a dead city. Rather, the family of val'Mordane who ruled Sohbuk was entirely wiped out. Then they came back. The necropolis became a haven for the undead and over the years the human population has dwindled and disappeared. The current Dark Apostate, the lich Hegrish, was originally the *Nihang* of Sohbuk. The priests of Sohbuk periodically buy slaves from elsewhere in Canceri and use them to replenish their numbers.

The Cities of the Red March. East of the Cold Plains is an expanse of sandy hills that is the home of the val'Mehan family. Unlike the Nierites, who pour their resources into the army, or the Nerothians, who invest their tithe money into public works, the *Nihang* of the val'Mehan believe that the best way to rule their domain is to not rule. The entirety of the money from tithes is spent on mercantile, arcane or diplomatic ventures. The bribery of val'Mehan Church officials is not only the custom; it is actively encouraged by the *Nihang*. For the wealthy, life is good. For the poor, it can be brutal and short. The val'Mehan are currently looking to expand

eastward into the Hinterlands. The east-west road called the Red March, named for all the blood spilt during its construction, is constantly pushing east toward the shore. The Sarishans ultimate goal is to secure a port for Canceri and begin trading along the eastern coast of Onara. The largest trading centers among the val'Mehan are Nishanpur and Stanivel.

Nishanpur is the capitol of all of Canceri, and its history stretches back to the First Imperium. For centuries, it has been the locus for all northern trade, with merchants as far south as Coryan coming halfway across the continent to trade with caravans from Hinterland cities like Censure. The Cathedral of the Dark Apostate and the Council of the *Nihang* both reside in Nishanpur, but the ones who really run the city are the priests of Sarish. Through wizardry, the Sarishans have seen to it that everything from the city watch to waste disposal is handled through demonic agencies, and found a way to profit from it in some shape or form in addition.

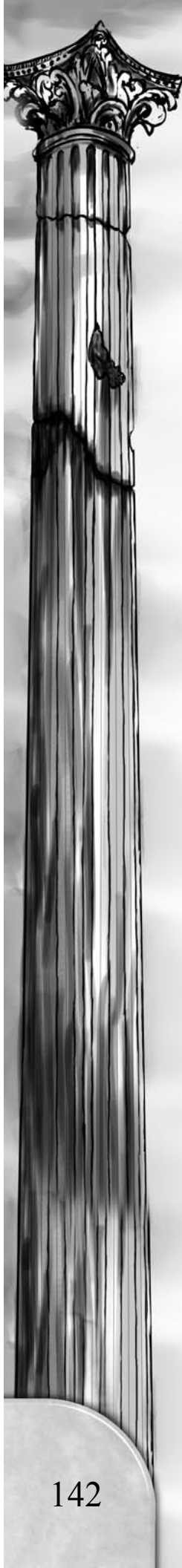
Stanivel is a city of tents and pavilions that the val'Mehan built out in the middle of the Hinterlands to trade with the Yhing-hir tribesmen. Despite the many reverses the val'Mehan have experienced in their eastward expansion, the Yhing-hir have never destroyed Stanivel. Even when contact with Canceri has been entirely cut off, the city has remained untouched. The Yhing-hir pretend it doesn't exist, but the val'Mehan know the truth. The nomads are addicted to the goods the city has to offer. The *Nihang* of Stanivel rarely bothers returning to take a part in the Council, instead choosing to live like a prince among the barbarians. There has been some discussion of late about replacing him, but the threats don't faze him. Anyone they found to replace him would become just as bad in time.

Who's Who in Canceri

The Dark Apostate Hegrish val'Mordane

Hegrish was born in the necropolis of Sohbuk, over five hundred years ago. He witnessed the execution of Becherek and joined the newly formed Church of the Dark Triumvirate. He, along with the rest of his city, was slaughtered by Coryani troops in the resulting internecine fighting. Fortunately, Hegrish had prepared for his own death and returned soon after as a lich. Taking command of the undead hordes of Sohbuk, Hegrish installed himself as the city's first *Nihang* and hunted down the commanders of the Coryani army who had sacked his ancestral home and broke their corpses to his will. After the





first Nierite Apostate died in a war with Milandir, Hegrish formed an alliance with the Sarishans to marginalize the val'Virdan's involvement in politics. After a succession of short-lived val'Mehan Apostates, Hegrish was elected to the post two centuries ago and has retained it ever since. His rule has marked a period of relative peace and isolation for Canceri. Motivations: Protect Canceri and the Church of the Dark Triumvirate from the outside world. The other nations are full of fools whose lives are but a drop in the ocean. They have no grasp of your priesthood's true purpose. You've existed for centuries, toiling for the redemption of the countless souls in your care, and the best way to keep Canceri on the path you've guided her along for so long is to keep her isolated.

Master Architect Sagrivan

Sagrivan was born in Kielmun, where he began designing crypts and inventing new kinds of traps to protect the treasures buried with the dead. He was forced to flee during an invasion by Milandir, and ended up being hired on by the Nierites during a counter-offensive. Sagrivan so impressed the Nihang of the val'Virdan that he was brought to the attention of Apostate Hegrish, who was then adding a new level to his Cathedral in Nishanpur. Hegrish gave the little man the title of "Master Architect of all Canceri".

Since then, Sagrivan has been busy, traveling throughout Canceri on one mission or another for the Dark Apostate. Sagrivan does not believe he will return as one of the undead to continue his work in death. More than anything else then, he would like to return to his homeland before he dies and see the wonders that first inspired him as a child.

Motivations : You've been dying to try your hand at rebuilding the great city of Ventaka, but you're stuck overseeing the construction of the Red March for the Sarishans. You are the Apostate Hegrish's olive branch to the val'Mehan, but you really wish that they would give up the idea of eastward expansion so you could at least study the masterpieces of Ventaka before they crumble to dust.

Eremis val'Virdan

Eremis was born in the stronghold of Hunder, the hub of val'Virdan diplomacy and trade. As a boy, he was exposed to fighting styles from all over Onara, and learned to use weapons as diverse as the horsebow of the Hinterlands and the cavalry spear of Milandir in combat. His father was Nihang, and took him on trips to the Council in Nishanpur.

Eremis' father led a faction that criticized the complacency of the current regime. He believed there was nothing to be gained from intermittent warfare with the "barbarians" of the Hinterlands, and was committed to subjugating Milandir to the Church of the Dark Triumvirate. When his faction became too influential, he was assassinated. Eremis inherited the title of Nihang at the tender age of fifteen, bit his lip and refused when his Akali demanded his father's murder be avenged. Patience, he counseled. They would have their revenge, but not at the expense of his father's vision.

He has waited over twenty years for his opportunity.

Motivations: You believe in Nier, you believe in Canceri, and you believe in the rightness of your cause. No one sees anything quite as clearly as you do. The Church could be so much more. The Church of the Dark Triumvirate could return man to his golden age, where he stood side-by-side with the gods themselves. Those who stand idle must be mobilized, and those who stand in your way must be struck down.

Palic val'Mehan

Palic's family is the closest any family in Canceri comes to royalty. While technically all the val'Mehan are related, those who originally hailed from the capitol of Nishanpur maintain especially close ties with each other and have branched out to take control of seven other Sarishan districts. The Nihang of Nishanpur has made it a tradition for the other Nihang in his immediate family to reside in the main temple of Sarish, the Hall of Contracts, within Nishanpur itself. This gives him greater control over the priesthood of Sarish and allows them to coordinate their efforts more easily. Palic inherited one of the best spy networks in all of Onara from his mother. Unfortunately, he's had a hard time controlling it. As soon as he became Nihang, a shadow war broke out between half a dozen different factions among the Sarishans, all bent on turning him into their puppet. Palic couldn't even identify the principals in each faction much less neutralize them, so he began assassinating underlings he suspected of working against him arbitrarily. Things quieted down rapidly after that. An unspoken agreement was reached in which Palic allowed his Nihang to do what they wish within Canceri, while he was given free reign to manage Sarishan foreign affairs. One of the results of his meddling was the succession of "Heretic Wars" with Milandir, though few outside of his priesthood are aware of his role in sparking the conflict. Recently Palic opened a diplomatic dialogue with the

Coryani Emperor. He'd like to see Canceri smash Milandir and expand into the Hinterlands, and thinks the best way to do that is forge an alliance, and perhaps even reunite, with the largest nation in Onara. To clear the way for that however, he'll have to get rid of Apostate Hegrish. A daunting task, but he has a plan in the works.

Motivations: You are not in control of everything, and you hate it. You plan everything ahead, but people insist on improvising, making their own choices, thinking their own thoughts. Which is why you have to have so many of them eliminated- quietly, of course. You keep setting things up to work like clockwork and then some new complication pops up. When it does, it's usually best to kill it quick before it ruins everything. Your agents are everywhere; the Hinterlands, Milandir, Coryani, even among the Altherians. Every report they send you has some bearing on a scheme of yours, and you can't help but meddle in everything. You're a paranoid egomaniac.

Spymaster Samiz

Palic chose Samiz to lead his spy network for reasons he can't quite fathom. Granted, Samiz is intelligent, efficient, and loyal. But there's something else about Samiz that Palic can't quite put his finger on. The truth is, Palic didn't chose Samiz. Samiz chose him, because Samiz has a secret. Samiz is the last of the fabled Devil-Kings. When the Coryani legions rolled into Canceri, Samiz sensed that the Devil-Kings that ruled Canceri could not win. The rest of the great infernal generals were gathering their strength farther north, and would not be able to lend their assistance in defense of Canceri. So Samiz took the form of one of his followers, concealed himself among the Sarishan wizards and prompted a few dozen to offer their fealty to the Coryani Emperor. The deception worked, and once Canceri was subdued, Samiz was able to remain behind enemy lines disguised as a mortal, ready to re-emerge once his brethren had crushed the Coryani army. But that was not to be. Great magic stopped the infernal horde and prevented humanity from being overrun, so Samiz remained hidden among the priests of Sarish for centuries. He's kept his true nature concealed even from other demons, afraid that they may have discovered his ancient betrayal. Sometimes he poses as an influential merchant, at other times he is a wizard, and sometimes a priest. Currently, he has become the head of the val'Mehan's intelligence network. The days that he ruled Canceri seem a distant memory now, but Samiz clings to the hope that he might one day have the opportunity to rule again over those he serves.

Motivations: Above all, Samiz wants to keep his secrets. Second, he keeps his ear to the ground, listening for rumors of the doings of Onara's major players- the Valinor, the Sorcerer-King, and the Elorii Elders. Last, he feeds the val'Mehan what he wants them to hear to nudge them in the right direction.

Borghas of Canceri explains the Wickedness of the World

Altheria

"Did your mother not teach you to share? Evidently, this is a lesson the Altherians never learned. They hold their precious inventions as bait to a fish and then hide behind a wall of foreigners. val'Abebi blood cannot be spent, they are far too important, they must be given the time to learn and invent. Such is for the betterment of all, truly".

Coryan

"Name something that the Coryani have invented? Trust me, you won't be able to, because invention is the enemy of the Coryani, it is something they can't control. 'Tell me something the Coryani have done for anyone? The War of Terror you say? Those that wouldn't become lackeys and slaves were left to survive on their own, much as the Southern Princes and Myrantians were. 'Perhaps it is courage and honor that redeems the Coryani? But then even their beloved first Emperor chose the val'Holryn of Milandir as his personal guard. 'Perhaps it is their stringent adherence to their moral values of rapine, adultery and larceny. How many slaves has the Myrantian Hegemony provided? How much gold? 'The Coryani will tell you that their nation is a Republic because its fat, rich, old noble families rule it. Whereas Canceri is a tyrannous religious plutocracy because it is ruled by its fat, rich old noble families."

Dwarves

"Which dwarf are we speaking of? The arrogant, self-righteous youthful dwarf or the jaded, greedy aged dwarf? Each is wicked in his own way, but I much prefer the honest embrace of wickedness from the elder variety."

Elorii

"They hide in their forests and pine away about their dead Gods. Then they murder defenseless men for a claim of vengeance that dates back thousands of years before even the eldest lich Nihang walked the earth, but if you ask an Elf, he'll assure you that he is good and righteous."



The Hinterlands

"The virtue of a Hinterlander can be uncovered in a very simple test. Force one to choose between his mother and his horse. I leave his wickedness to your judgment when he still has his horse."

Milandir

"When has a Milandisian known peace? The first time they were without enemies they killed their own king. The second, they invaded Canceri. They claim freedom, but are bound by more oaths than a val'Mehan's demonic servant. They are of the worst sort of wickedness, that that thinks of itself as the epitome of virtue, honor and justice."

The Pirate Isles

"Bandits, slavers, pirates and savages, there are others that live in the Pirate Isles, but you'd never meet them."

Ymandragore

"The Sorcerer King is to be admired. Like us of Canceri, he has made a mighty nation from a desolate wasteland. He has forced the other Empires to serve his interests and makes no pretensions of virtue. I think of all the foreign infidels, the Ymandrake have come the closest to the path of enlightenment."

The vampire let his voice trail off to nothing in the darkness of the crypt. The candle had long since extinguished itself in its own hot wax, but Kasmin found he could see the dim shape of Borghas standing a short distance away. There was some light coming from somewhere... Kasmin searched about, and discovered a bit of natural light shining from a crack far off to his right. That must be the door, Kasmin thought, and the light meant the sun had risen. He still had a chance to survive. He rose, and felt Borghas' head follow his movement.

"That was fascinating, good sir. I never really understood your kind- your people- before, but I think I am beginning to."

"Really."

"Indeed. In their own way, I suppose, the people of Canceri are heroic." Kasmin began edging toward the small beam of light that shone just a few yards away. "Heroic in a tragic sense. They have their own kind of nobility, an ideal as pure in its own way as that of the knights of Milandir, when you think about it."

"As pure as the knights of Milandir. My, my, that is a compliment." The vampire rounded the table between them and Kasmin could see its teeth as it smiled widely. He stopped dead still.

"Kasmin, my dear friend, I wish you could see in the dark as I do. You're white as lamb's wool. Are you afraid?"

"Yes. You've had your say, and now I would like to be on my way."

"You'd like to be on your way," the vampire mimicked with a sneer. "And if I were to allow you to be on your way, what would you do differently? Return to Milandir, a changed man? You're a thief and a murderer. You belong with us."

"No. No, I've changed. I've erred in the past, but I'm a good man, I swear to Illiir. There are many good works left for me to do."

Without consciously willing himself to, Kasmin began to fall backwards, one hand questing for the door to the crypt. There was a loud sizzling pop, and Borghas dissolved into nothing before his eyes. The thief cried out as a sudden fog roiled about him, then ran into the vampire as it reformed behind him. Snarling, Borghas snatched Kasmin up by his throat.

"M-mercy, sir vampire. Haven't I suffered enough?"

"We shall see, Kasmin, we shall see. Truly, you are about to be tested. For this is an evil world, and the only good we mortal creatures are capable of are our own suffering and the infliction of suffering on others." Borghas grabbed the thief's wrist and bit down, savoring the first flow of blood, and then moved to the chest and neck, inflicting a series of messy wounds. Kasmin twisted and screamed, but after a short time his spasms became more fitful, and then stopped altogether. No longer enjoying himself, Borghas let the thief fall to the floor.

Then he sat down and waited.

The vampire sat and watched the body with melancholy eyes for an interim that may have lasted hours, days, maybe even a week. Just as he was about to give up, the corpse of the thief twitched once, twice, and then opened its eyes. Kasmin sat up, and looked down at his hands, then stared up at Borghas with coal-red eyes, "I dreamt. I dreamt of the old man, lying there in his own blood. He looked so peaceful. I don't understand. What did it mean?"

Borghas sighed and rose, extending a hand to help Kasmin to his feet. Then he walked to the door of the crypt, the thief in tow, and opened the crypt to the night air and the moonlight. "It means, my dear Kasmin that your suffering is not yet at an end. But you're making progress. Follow me."

The Pirate Isles

Your Holiness, at your request, I have written this treatise on the people, history, and culture of the Pirate Isles. I humbly submit to you, the Supreme Patriarch of the Imperial Coryani Church, the knowledge I have gained through my many years living in the isles. I dedicate this work to you and pray that Althares will guide my hand so that my words may be meaningful and filled with truth. Respectfully submitted by Brother Gaetin your servant.

Introduction:

I think it necessary to briefly outline the shape that my manuscript will take. As you undoubtedly know, for many years I was a slave living in Garundi, the terrible city of the Crimson Slavers. To keep my sanity, I began to secretly write a journal. Later, I was bought by the infamous pirate Armind One-eye and hence was able to travel the length and breadth of the isles. Scattered throughout this work, you will find selected passages from this journal that I believe help to illuminate different aspects of life in the Pirate Isles. The remaining information has been learned firsthand or through extensive research, and investigation.

The Creation of the Pirate Isles

In the modern age, the Pirate Isles are an archipelago lying off the Bleak Coast north of the Hinterlands. I have learned however; that this has not always been the case. Buried in long forgotten manuscripts is another tale. At the end of the pre-human age, when the Elorii overthrew their Ssethregoran masters, a splinter group of the serpent people survived. They fled northward, away from the avenging Elven army, through Nier's Spine and into a frontier land filled with wild beasts and monsters. There they persevered and eventually founded the city of Valossa.

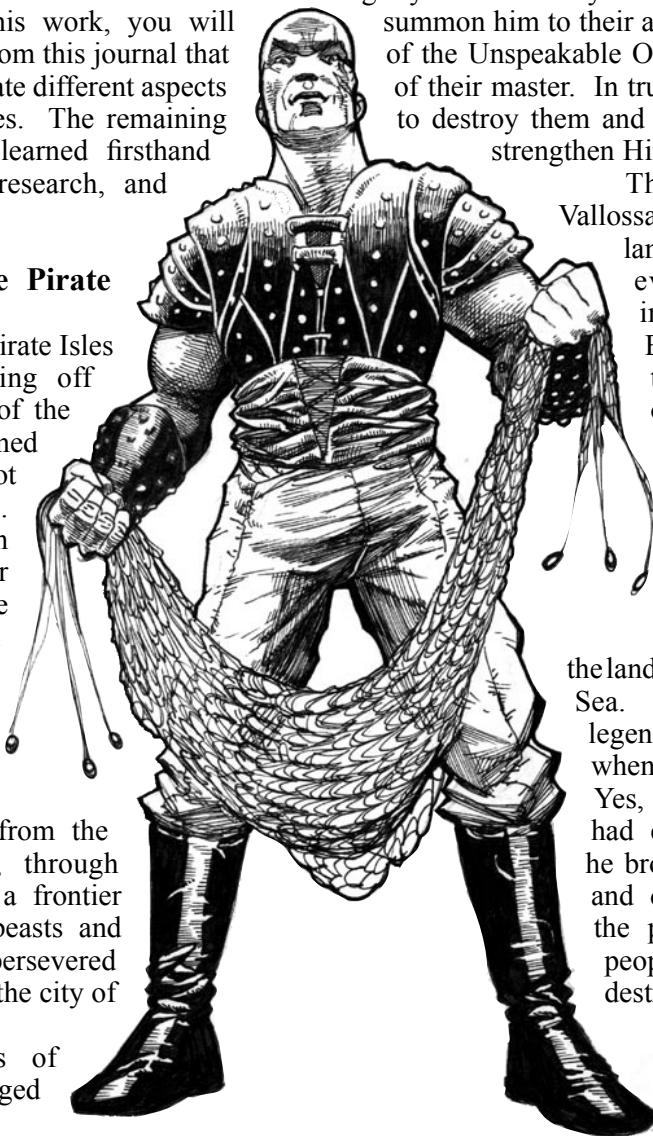
The mountains of Nier's Spine and the rugged

flora and fauna of the Hinterlands allowed the serpent people to prosper in seclusion. Forgotten by the Elorii, they were able to build up a small empire and Valossa soon grew to a great city, albeit a shadow of the greatness that had been the First City of the Ssethragor.

The destruction of their culture also left the Serpent people survivors disillusioned. They began to worship a serpent god named Yig. (I believe this was a manifestation of Beltine, God of the Afterlife, Spirit, and Preservation.) Yig became their protector and they placed all their trust in him.

Eventually, the serpent people grew restless. They yearned for a return to the greatness and power they had known before the Elorii had revolted against them. Secretly, many among them began to worship a god known only as the Unspeakable One. He promised a return to the glory of old if only the serpent people would summon him to their aid. Foolishly, the Cult of the Unspeakable One believed the words of their master. In truth, all He wanted was to destroy them and absorb their power to strengthen Him.

The destruction of Vallossa and the surrounding lands was a catastrophic event remembered in tales to this day. Barbarian tribes among the Skohir tell stories of a night when the heaven's fell and the ground shook with the footsteps of the gods. The Yhing-hir mystics tell of the cleansing fires of heaven that ravaged the land and created the Blasted Sea. Ancient Milandisian legend refers to the time when the night was as day. Yes, the Unspeakable One had come to Vallossa, but he brought only destruction and death as he absorbed the power of the serpent people and fed off of their destruction.



The Pirate Isles Today

What remained from that catastrophe is what we now know of as the Pirate Isles. Three large islands make up the main of this group of isles. The Isle of Sorrows can be found in the south where the slave-city of Garundi is located. The island of Naori lies in the northeast and is home to fierce tribesman and the great volcano of Ghord. The island of Ghauma (also called Giant Home) can be found in the northwest wherein live many giants and giant-kin, and its capitol, Magra, city of Khuld the half-ogre Pirate King. In between are spread many minor islands, most notably A'val and the Serpent's Teeth home to the modern city of Freeport and the site of the ancient city of Valossa. There are also many uncounted and undiscovered smaller atolls and islands scattered throughout the Blasted Sea.

From the beginning, the Pirate Isles have been home to individualists and those who did not fit in among their own people. The early colonists came from the people of the Skohir and Yhing-hir, which were either exiles from the mainland or those who were shipwrecked. (Patriarch, there is one exception to this, the Naori tribesman, which I will go into detail about later) The elders and mystics believed that the hand of the Gods had struck the land there and that no one should enter what they began calling the Blasted Sea. Therefore, only those who were outcast or did not follow the teachings of the elders left the mainland and traveled into these unknown waters. It is these brave souls who were the first inhabitants of the Pirate Isles.

Since then, many humanoid races have flocked to the Pirate Isles. Some seek opportunity and a chance to make a name for themselves. Others, like me, are forced into slavery and earn their freedom through hard work and perseverance. Still more seek the freedom to follow their own moral compass and the privateer lifestyle, which they believe is simply not possible within the Coryani Empire with all its religion and bureaucracy. (I mean no disrespect your Eminence. I merely repeat what I have heard throughout my travels. I beg your indulgence.) Although many that now inhabit the major city-states (Garundi and Freeport) have settled down, there is still a measure of the pirate freebooter or privateer within them all.

Politically, the two city-states of Freeport and Garundi are fiercely independent. Freeport will ally with forces on the mainland only when it suits their purpose. The Takomir of the Bleak Coast are frequent allies and nominally, many of the noble houses of Censure (particularly House Brand, Dragosi and Zhuan). Garundi does not

align itself with the mainland powers due to the competitive nature of the slave trade, but they do have a strong relationship with Freeport. It is rare when a ship of the Crimson Slavers attacks a vessel from Freeport. The Pirate King Khuld in Magra will sell his fleet to the highest bidder but his loyalty is suspect. The Naori keep to themselves and only seem to get involved in the affairs of the world around them when their own interests are threatened.

When pressed, the inhabitants of the Pirate Isles have been known to band together against a common enemy. The most notable example of this occurred fifty years ago. The Pirate War as it was called in Censure lasted only a few months. A brave noble from House Zhuan named Tsun Shi believed that the time had come to bring the Pirate Isles under the complete control of his house. He raised a huge armada and sailed to attack the city of Garundi. (Eminence, I have learned from one of my friends in Censure that the other noble houses encouraged Tsun and they and the Kingdom of Milandir even funded his efforts because they knew that he would fail and that this failure would cripple House Zhuan financially for years.) When he arrived he caught the slavers by surprise and was able to blockade the city. He sent messages to Freeport demanding that they surrender to his rule or suffer the same fate as Garundi. Their response was unexpected and swift. Freeport joined forces with the remnants of the Garundiite fleet and with the young buccaneer Khuld the half-ogre and counterattacked Zhuan swiftly. Together they drove the prince back to Censure in shame. Since then, there has been no further attempt to unite the Pirate Isles under one rule.

Undoubtedly, there are many stories and tales to tell about the smaller islands and it would not surprise me to learn of interesting events occurring there. In my view, your Eminence, it is far more appropriate for me to concentrate on the four main islands mentioned above. This will give the best possible picture of the current state of affairs in the isles.

Freeport: The First Pirate City

Day 120 with Armind, Swagfest

We sailed into the great harbor of Freeport this morning. So many ships! I thought that a forest had grown within the harbor. Not even in the port of those pigs, the Crimson Slavers of Garundi, had I ever seen so many vessels of all shapes and sizes. More incredible still, was that Armind could navigate his ship, Corrupter, to the pier without running into anything. The drunken fool is going to kill us someday I am sure of it.

Panga

Yatu

Naori

Kamda

Ghauma

(Giant Home)



MAGRA

Tandu

Katum

Kumar

Saura

The
Serpent's
Teeth



CITY OF
FREEPORT

Sakra

Sukra

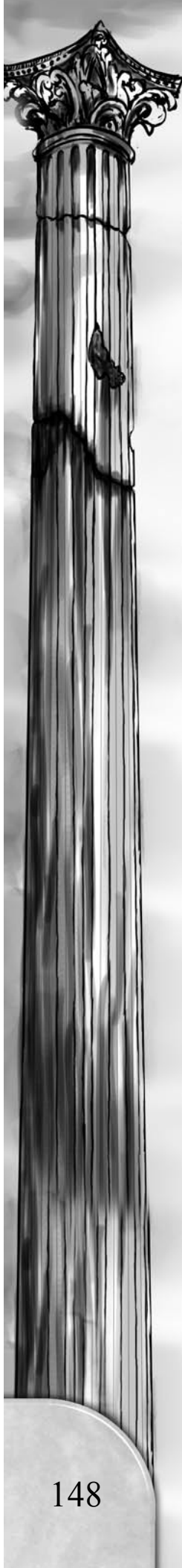
Badru

Isle of the
Crimson
Slavers



GARUNDI

The Pale Sea



One of the smaller islands just south of the city has some sort of construction going on. It looks like a huge square foundation. I asked someone in town what it was and they told me that it was going to be a lighthouse. Milton's Folly he called it. He spat when he said it as though he was disgusted. When I asked him what the problem was he said, "That damn thing is bleedin' us dry! One year gone by on the stinkin' project already and only the base completed. We doesn't repair the docks. We doesn't fix the harbor. Everythin' goes toward Drac's crazy tower." (Drac is the head of the council and Sea Lord of Freeport. I only know him by his reputation as a cunning and ruthless leader. Apparently, he is not one to be crossed.)

When we went ashore there was a great crowd of people on the dock. They were celebrating something called Swagfest, a major holiday in Freeport giving them an excuse to revel with reckless abandon. What a wild day! Rat races, dog fights, bouts of martial prowess, contests, races, gambling, and drinking, Armind and his gang fit right in. The celebration delayed us for almost the whole day.

Later, Armind was so hung over that he didn't even realize that the cloth merchant shafted him. We had pirated a merchant vessel headed to Censure filled with fine bolts of cloth. I thought they were at least worth ten times what Armind got for them. I didn't tell him however. And the Freeport merchant wasn't about to let an opportunity to fleece a drunkard pass him by. Armind deserved to get screwed. Someday I will be free of him.

The Origins of Freeport

The city of Freeport has a very long history your eminence. For many years I have studied at the magnificent temple of Althares within the walls of the old city there. Within the mass of treatises, epistles, psalters, and books (many of which are stolen from other libraries and sold here), I found ancient tomes and scrolls that gave me insight into the origins of modern day Freeport.

It seems that Freeport was founded on the very site that long ago was the city of Valossa. As I mentioned earlier, Valossa was founded by remnants of the great reptilian race that once ruled Onara. They built here a last, great, outpost of their civilization. At the height of its power, a corrupt cult sprang up that worshipped a being called the Unspeakable One. When they summoned him to the city, he destroyed it and the surrounding lands. This occurred at the beginning of the God War on Arcanis.

When brave Skohir and Yhing-hir tribesman ventured out into the Blasted Sea created by the destruction of Valossa, they founded a small village on an island with a good natural harbor. It was the center-island of a three-island chain that they called the Serpent's Teeth, based on the strange shape of the small archipelago. At first, it was only a minor trading port used by pirates and other seafarers to stop and get provisions. Gradually, as more and more people settled in, this small port grew into a city.

In the early years, pirates, who took advantage of the remote location, made the city into a haven for themselves. Soon, pirate captains and their men carved out territories in different areas of the city. Order was kept within the walls, but only just barely. The streets were filled with drunken revelers and fights were not uncommon. The library is filled with examples of petty factions, squabbles and minor political conflicts that divided the city for years at this time. No one man was ever able to unite the factions and take complete control. Some of these written accounts suggest Coryani interference and sabotage, and I suspect it stemmed from the then secret shipyards in Censure, and goals to keep such a place just that. It is unknown to me why Coryani ships did not simply sail to these isles and dominate primitive Freeport, which suggests either fear of the Blasted Sea, some sort of bargain, or collaboration of some kind.

The pirates of Freeport may have remained divided like this forever if not for a change in their fortunes. Merchant houses in the coastal cities like Censure soon tired of having their vessels raided and profits lost. They began to construct navies of warships and used them to hunt down the pirates and privateers. Individually, the pirates of Freeport did not have a chance. They realized that they had to band together if they were going to survive. Therefore, they gathered a huge combined fleet to raid the coast. Two competing pirates, Francisco and Drac, were named captains of the fleet. The Great Raid, as it came to be called, concluded with successful attacks on Censure, Jappa, Pearlspar, and many villages and tent towns along the Bleak Coast.

Eventually, the noble houses of Censure had enough. Historically, as you well know Patriarch, they had operated separately each in their own interest. They now joined as one and decided to strike back at the Freeport fleet. This is something the great orator Marl val'Haupt (called "The Wise") of House val'Haupt would later use to cite an example of corroboration between houses. This helped to lay the foundation of Censure's

Non-Aggression Compact and largely curbed piracy in the region). The War of Retribution, as it came to be called, lasted for ten years. Both sides suffered heavy losses but neither one was able to completely defeat the other. The war ended with a truce delivered by a Dragosi ambassadorial troupe, and both sides retreated to recuperate. Many reports of ghost ships flying the banners of this era have been sited, and these areas are even well documented on modern nautical charts.

Soon after this cease-fire, conflict broke out between Drac and Francisco. They had always competed with one another, but never openly, instead choosing to strike out from the shadows with subterfuge and hired assassins. However, with their common enemy gone, there was nothing left to stop them from trying to eliminate each other. They battled in the streets of Freeport and on the sea, neither one giving an inch. The city erupted again in conflict and was torn by civil war.

At this point Patriarch, the records are contradictory. There seems to have been a conscious effort to destroy the records from this period in Freeport's history. Most of the scrolls that I could find tell us that Drac defeated Francisco in battle and took over control of the city. I found one however that spoke of how Drac betrayed Francisco. The story goes that Drac set a trap for Francisco's fleet after making a deal with an unknown noble house of Censure. Only then could he assume absolute power. Whatever the truth, the Drac family has ruled Freeport ever since and the noble houses of Censure have had some influence within the city as well. Certain financial records of this time show a marked increase in House val'Haupt's holdings within Freeport, strongly pointing to them as the culprits and financial backing of the coup.

Freeport in the Modern Age

Freeport has grown to become one of the largest maritime cities of all of Onara. It currently boasts over fifty thousand citizens. (Great One, I am fairly certain that this number may be higher as the recent taxation census taken to raise funds for Milton Drac's Lighthouse was very unpopular and I am certain that many citizens did not take part in the census.) Artisans, laborers, and craftsmen of every kind have thriving communities within the city and some of them have grown to the point of challenging even the noble houses of Censure.

The city is ruled by a Captain's Council of twelve with Milton Drac presiding over the body as Sea Lord of Freeport. The citizens elect its members and they tend to represent the most powerful and influential families in Freeport.

Recently however, many of the councilors have been gaining seats under questionable circumstances. Those that oppose Drac invariably lose while those that support him win surprising victories.

The troubles in the city currently all seem to stem from the lighthouse that Drac is building in the harbor. It is nearing completion but too many funds have been diverted to make this happen. Crime is now rampant in the city and conditions are worsening. Just yesterday, I was attacked in the street by a band of common thugs. I fought them off but the city watch was nowhere to be found. Everyone will be happy when the lighthouse is finally completed. Things will most certainly get better when more money can be spent on improving the conditions within the city.

Relations with the mainland are strong as most of the noble families in Censure have ties to Freeport. Many treaties and deals are struck to ensure that important trade routes are protected and profits are not lost. In addition, Freeport's navy has been used many times in the past as a mercenary force when conflicts erupt in the Coryani Empire or between rival family interests in Censure. This has made the city plenty of money and also established allies that they can call on in need.

I have found almost every kind of good or service for sale on the streets of the city. Herbs and spices from the far off Khitani Empire, fine wines from Altheria, and exquisite decorative weapons and armor from Coryani can all be found in Freeport. In the open-air market of the old city and in the many shops that are scattered throughout the quarters, merchants and artisans ply their trades with zeal. If I had never visited Censure, I would be convinced that Freeport was the trading capital of Onara.

I am sorry to say, your grace, that the people of Freeport are not very religious. They have some temples, most notable the Temple to Althares God of Knowledge, but they do not spend too much time worshipping within them. There is also a temple to Yarris, God of the Seas that many of the sailors and pirates use, mostly out of fear I think. The Church of Yarris holds a traditional seat on the Captain's Council as well and they are certainly involved deeply in the politics of the city. In my opinion, the city is a prime candidate for missionaries from the mainland. There is far too little faith in Freeport at the moment.



Garundi, Fortress of the Crimson Slavers

Day 1, Garundi

It pains me to write onto this page the following words: I am now the property of Armind One-eye. Property! Another person now owns me. I feel hollow, as if I am only half-alive. Has it been days, weeks, or months since my capture? It is so easy to lose count. I certainly never thought that my life would come to this.

In Censure, life was good in the service of House G'mel. As a scribe and cartographer I was paid well for my work and treated fairly. My hopes and dreams for a bright future seem almost silly now. Everything has changed. I am a slave.

Why did I go on that minor mapping expedition? What an idiot! I even asked to go. The slavers came on us so fast we could not escape. Over the horizon we saw the sails of their ship with a blood red flag flying from the main mast. We made every effort to escape but their ship was just too fast. I will never forget the feeling I had when I saw that flag waving the crimson color of blood.

I write these words now so that I will not forget who I am and where I came from. I write these words to keep my sanity. The ship is called Corrupter; an appropriate name given the scoundrels that man its filthy decks and masts. I have made myself useful as a cartographer and translator to these illiterate mongrels, so as to keep writing materials and also spy some notion of where we are. They may be able to take possession of my body but they will never be able to take my spirit. This journal will be my friend and companion in my days as a slave. I make a commitment now that I WILL regain my freedom!

The Origins of Garundi

The study of Garundi and the Crimson Slavers has consumed me for a very long time Patriarch. I have always wanted to learn as much as possible about the city and people who changed my life forever. Through many personal interviews and countless hours pouring over old scrolls, I am confident

that this is the most definitive history of Garundi ever written.

The Sorcerer King founded Garundi during the Time of Darkness. In his quest to find the birthing chamber of the gods, his black ships traveled into the Blasted Sea. They found a small village on what is now called the Island of Sorrows. His servants leveled the village and subjugated the people there. Using them as slave labor, they constructed a huge fortress outpost for the Sorcerer King. It is appropriately ironic that a city of slavers was itself built by them when they were themselves held in the shackles of bondage.

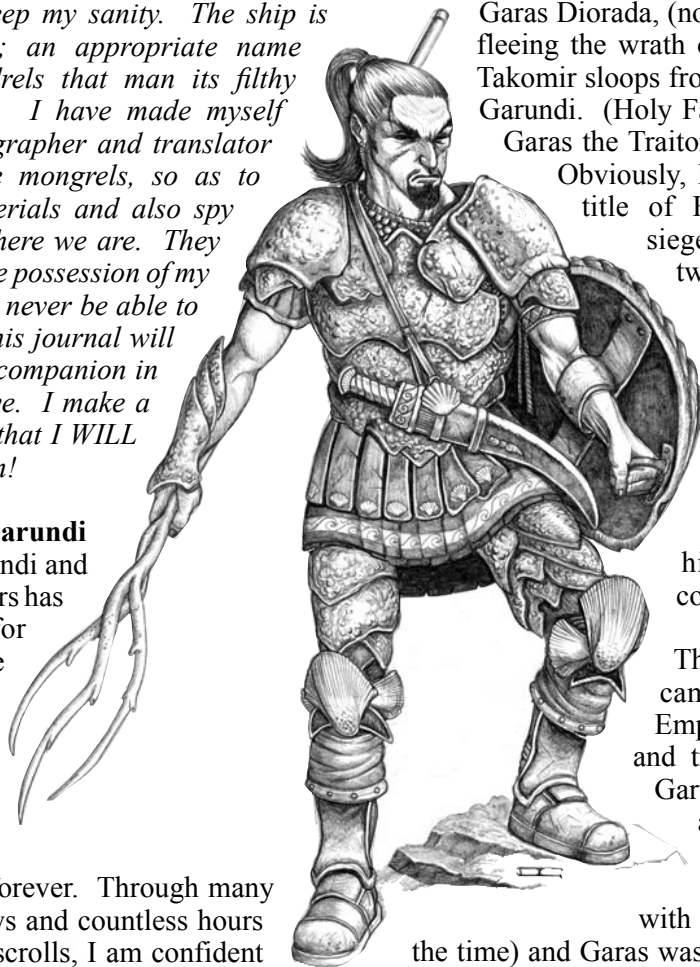
As the Sorcerer King's fruitless quest continued, he abandoned the fortress of Garundi. He had become embroiled in the Great Myrantis-Eryunell War and his forces were needed elsewhere. When the black ships sailed away, a brief period of freedom came to Garundi. The records from this time are scarce. I can only guess that the people who remained prospered after the retreat of the Sorcerer King's troops and mystical overseers.

Only one hundred years later, the city of Garundi would lose its freedom again. A renegade legion from the Coryani Empire led by Garas Diorada, (now known as Headtaker), fleeing the wrath of the emperor in stolen Takomir sloops from Pearlspar, landed near Garundi. (Holy Father, Garas is known as Garas the Traitor in the Coryani Empire.

Obviously, he preferred to keep the title of Headtaker.) They laid siege to the city for over two months. Garundi was captured when an elite force of sappers from the legion was able to tunnel under the city walls and open the gates allowing the rest of their force in. Garas took the city and named himself the supreme commander of Garundi.

Garas ruled for ten years. The only early challenge came from the Coryani Empire that sent a few ships and troops to assault him in Garundi but he was always able to beat them back.

The emperor then lost interest (due to conflicts with the Voei of Fervidus at the time) and Garas was left to rule the island as



his own kingdom. The island had rich farmland and fruit bearing trees. He enslaved most of the populace and made them work the land to support his troops.

A year before the death of Garas, a stranger named Zirth arrived in Garundi. I could find no mention of him in previous histories but he must have been important. Within a few months, he had risen to the position of special councilor to Garas. Many of the documents from this period bear his signature as he quickly began to take over the reigns of power in Garundi. He also aligned himself closely with favored officers within the military. Even so, it came as a surprise to many of his trusted followers when Garas named Zirth his successor.

The rule of Zirth was brutal and bloody. He put down an early rebellion led by some former legionnaires by having them decapitated and displaying their heads on pikes mounted on the fortress walls. His next move was to lay the groundwork for the slave trade. He commissioned the building of fast ships to be used in raids. He trained the army in non-deadly force and how to capture hostages. By the end of that first year, the Crimson Flag of the slavers began to be feared by the coastal villagers.

The descendents of Zirth have ruled Garundi to this day. There have been many rumors about the family throughout the years. Every son of Zirth that is born mysteriously takes the life of his mother. No one is allowed to see the child until he grows to manhood and then only when he takes over the mantle as supreme commander. All of the descendents of Zirth also look remarkably like him. Some have speculated that it is the same man but that would be impossible as he would have to be centuries old. (Unless of course he was some sort of creature, and not a man at all.)

Only once since Zirth came to power has there been a slave rebellion in Garundi. A monk of Anshar name Garen convinced many of his fellow slaves to simply not follow the instructions of their captors, electing to fight via a somewhat pacifist revolt. They refused to work the farms and simply allowed themselves to be beaten without resisting. The free population of the city had always been vastly outnumbered by the slaves and was thus dependent upon them. As the slaves began to ignore the orders of their masters, the city was brought to its knees. Zirth ended the crisis by killing thousands of slaves the last of which was Garen himself. With their leader slain, and many of their companions as well, the rebels gave up and the uprising was ended. This is remembered as the Blood Rebellion.

Garundi in Modern Times

By most accounts, the fortress-city of Garundi holds a population of twenty thousand souls, of which about fifteen thousand are slaves. The old fortress compound that sits on a hill above the harbor overlooks the city, and it has been added to over the years by the despotic rulers and flesh merchants of Garundi's elite. Within its walls can be found the palace of Zirth and the mansions and homes of most of the free citizens of Garundi.

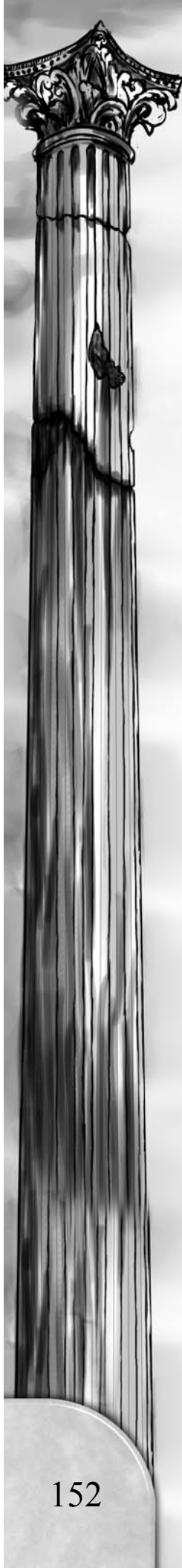
Dominating the harbor is a huge marble coliseum. Within are held the infamous gladiatorial games of Garundi. So many souls have been lost within its walls it has come to be known as the Arena of Death. Slaves are promised freedom if they can survive in the arena over the course of a year. To my knowledge only one warrior has ever survived the full year. Her name is Ariana and amazingly, she was set free.

By most accounts Ariana still lives. Stories tell of a woman almost seven feet tall with the strength of ten men. In her final arena appearance, she is said to have slain ten lions with her bare hands. Some say she has made a new life for herself on one of the islands in the Blasted Sea. Others say she is the captain of her own ship that hunts down any Crimson Slaver vessel she can find, and has allied herself with the monkish Pearl Maidens of Pearlspar. I doubt that these stories are completely accurate Patriarch, but she must be a powerful woman indeed.

Captives that are taken to Garundi are stored in vast slave pens. Some of these are located near the shore while others are located within the walls of the fortress. From experience, I know that there is a screening process that all captives go through. I remember them asking me complex questions about my life and what I could do. If you refused to cooperate you were beaten. There was also a strange man in a hood who occasionally interjected with seemingly unrelated questions to provoke reactions, and he cast some kind of spell on each of us. He then selected only one of the men in our group to go with him. Some people were taken to the arena, others were sent to work in the fields, and others like me were delivered to the great slave market and sold to the highest bidder.

I have often wondered why one of the mainland powers does not attack Garundi and level it to the ground. Certainly, the merchants of Censure do not appreciate that fact that the slave ships disrupt trade. I am equally sure that the Coryani Empire could easily crush the city if they wanted to. There seems to be some secret power protecting the city. Maybe the strength of





the fortress discourages would-be attackers. It is also possible that too many powerful people are making too much money off the slave trade. I have also heard a story about a fleet of ships gathered from Pearlspar and the House of Brand that sailed against Garundi. They never reached the city, and some say they were destroyed by the black ships of the Sorcerer King. The success of Garundi may be linked to an alliance with Ymandragore, though I do not have any proof of this.

Supreme Commander Zirth has complete control over the city and its slaving fleet. He rewards his captains with holdings, slaves, and gold to ensure their loyalty. He also has an elite unite of troops called Crimson Guards that are loyal to none save him, which are responsible for his safety. He is not often seen in public and spends almost all of his time within his fortified palace.

The Eagle and the Lion

Two important families control the day-to-day running of the fleet and the city. Braden Jekruyl leads the Jekruyl family. The family crest is a raging black lion on a crimson field. He is the admiral of the slave fleet and general of the army of Garundi. The Jekruyl family has been with Zirth from the beginning. Braden decides where the fleet will go in search of captives and he organizes the defense of the city. The sailors of the fleet of Garundi wear crimson colored tunics over their armor. They wield man-catchers, nets, and saps to subdue their prey and bring swords to bear for those that will not submit. Aryas Varhelion leads the Varhelion family. The family crest is a white eagle on a crimson field. Aryas runs the operation in the city and is in charge of keeping the slaves in line and making certain that the arena and the market are running properly. They use the brutal and heartless Blood Troopers to accomplish this. The troopers wear blood red tunics and black pants and wield vicious whips with barbed tails. They keep the peace by bringing pain to those who would resist. I had felt their whips more than once during my captivity there.

Naori: The Island of Fire

Day 1035, The Blood Reef

I am shipwrecked! Captain Armind ran us aground last night on the Blood Reef. We warned him. All of us had heard the stories about the treacherous waters and the infamous reef surrounding the island of the volcano, which has sunk so many wayward or foolhardy captains and their crafts. Of course, he did not listen.

The Secrets of Garundi

Garundi has some secrets that our author has only hinted at. In actuality, Supreme Commander Zirth is a powerful immortal Valinor, but it is unknown which God he serves or once served. He sequestered himself away in Garundi, and using his psionic abilities, was able to take control of the city. Since then, he has become somewhat unbalanced, delighting in the suffering and death that his slavers have caused.

For some reason, Zirth harbors a fierce hatred for the Mother Church in the Coryani Empire, and any institution connected with it. He uses the massive funds collected from Garundi's slaving operations to strike out at the Mother Church of the Coryani Empire. Much of this activity has slowly eroded the foundations of the lesser institutions and clerical bodies of the Patriarchal Seat over many generations.

When the time comes for Zirth to "be reborn," he forces his soul into the body of his son and continues his existence in the body of his offspring.

Zhirt has also made a shrewd alliance with the Sorcerer King of Ymandragore. In return for protection from hostile navies, Zhirt has agreed to allow the servants of the Sorcerer King to take from the captured slaves any who show signs of magical ability. It has kept him in power for hundreds of years.

The stupid drunkard! He had some crazy idea that we could raid the tribesmen that live on the island. He said that the tales about the reef were probably only spread by the inhabitants of the island themselves to prevent people from taking their riches. The idiot could not have been more wrong.

As far as I can tell, the sea has taken all of my captors. I seem to be the only one who has survived. I have always wanted to gain my freedom, but not this way. Stranded on a faraway island inhabited by strange savages! And the volcano! The stories do not give it justice! It rumbles on and off all day and the fire from inside bathes the island in a lurid, murderous looking red shroud of light at night. At least I have gathered basic supplies scavenged from the flotsam of the Corrupter and my journal to keep me company. I almost cannot believe myself, but I am sad that the ship and its idiotic captain are gone. Even slavery aboard Corrupter was a better fate than this.

Day 1040 Captured!

I am writing this entry from a cave, a prisoner of the savages. They do not seem to be as one would guess from the stories. They wear only a loincloth and their bodies are covered with red tattoos. I admit at first I was frightened but one of them spoke the common tongue. He was suspicious but ready to listen. I told him my story and he seemed to understand. I was to be taken back to his village so that the elders could decide what to do with me.

They bound me lightly at the wrists. The village was impressive. It had been carved out of the mountains in a quiet valley. Stone buildings line the valley floor and a river winds its way through the center of the village, although it appeared to be more of a city to me. In the center of all this was a large temple in the shape of a pyramid with steps leading to the very summit. At the summit burned a huge bonfire upon a stone brazier.

I await my fate in this small cave. Am I to be sacrificed? Killed outright? It seems the gods are cruel indeed if I am to die now that my freedom from slavery has only just begun.

The Origins of Naori

Few indeed are the scholars I have consulted that know a great deal about Naori and the savages that live there. From the beginning, it has been a mystery even to those who live in the Pirate Isles. The Blood Reef has much to do with this, but the people who live there do much to keep outsiders from the island as well. Much of what I am about to write, great Patriarch, will be conjecture and reasoned guesses based on what I have studied about Naori and my brief time among its people.

It is my belief that Naori is the only island in the Blasted Sea that was not populated by people from the mainland. The evidence to support this is overwhelming. A dangerous coral reef rings the island like a protective wall. Called the Blood Reef, due to the strange red coral, it has become the graveyard for many a ship unwary enough to try and find a way through it. There are also currents in the sea that tend to drive ships onto the coral. It is almost as if the island itself wishes to prevent ships from landing upon it. Clearly then, it would have been very difficult for colonists from the Yhing-hir and Skohir tribes to make it through to the island and more difficult still to establish a settlement there.

The people who inhabit the island have also developed a society and culture unlike anything I have read or heard about in Arcanis. They wear little clothing which, for the most

part, consists of leather loincloths. Their bodies are covered with strange red tattoos. There is a great temple that rises up from their city. It must have been at least one hundred feet tall. At its summit is an enormous bonfire. There is also an active volcano on the island. All of this leads me to believe that they worship an elemental god of fire. There are no elemental worshippers among the Yhing-hir or Skohir tribesman. Therefore, in my opinion, the Naori tribesmen are indigenous to the island.

Who can they be descended from then? They are not Yhing-hir or Skohir. Your eminence, it is my theory that they are humans that survived the destruction of Valossa caused by the Unspeakable One. I know that the serpent people used humans as slaves and thought of them as nothing more than animals. The Naori could have lived through the cataclysm and found they were alone on the deserted island. Keeping to themselves they used what skills they had learned from the serpent people and built the culture we see today. It is only a theory Patriarch, but I believe it may be the truth.

During my brief stay among them, it was also obvious to me that they are not savages as most people believe them to be. They are kind and compassionate and have a good knowledge of building and architecture. The city that they took me to was large with broad avenues and impressive buildings. These are not simple tribesmen that live in huts with mud floors and thatched roofs. They are far more advanced. A few of them have even journeyed off of the island and live in Freeport and Garundi. They should not be underestimated.

There is a tale that I have heard from more than one person about an incident that occurred many years ago near Naori. An ambitious pirate from Freeport named Fel'Alhir decided that he wanted to plunder Naori. He captured a Naori man living in Freeport. He planned to force the man to pilot a route through the Blood Reef. Once his ships were inside the reef, Fel'Alhir and his men would disembark and pillage the island. His plan worked to perfection, as the Naori man was able to lead them through the Blood Reef. When they got on the other side however; something terrible happened. Flames shot out from the trees on the island setting all of his ships ablaze. In no time, the pirate ships were at the bottom of the sea burnt to cinders. One of the men was found adrift on a makeshift raft by a passing Coryani vessel headed for Censure, but any other survivors and Fel'Ahir were never seen nor heard from again.



Naori in Modern Times

During my brief stay on Naori I was able to observe much of the natural landscape. The island is mountainous with tall peaks at the center that taper off to rolling hills as one gets closer to the shoreline. There are also river valleys that provide some farmland for the inhabitants. They supplement this by practicing a strange form of farming on the mountainside, your Eminence. The natives build steps on the mountains big enough to plant crops on. You have to see it to believe it. The great volcano, which the natives call Ghord, towers above the other peaks and its glowing summit can be seen from almost every vantage point on the island. The glow from Ghord is very bright. I have heard tales of sailors that have been drawn by the distant beacon of its luminous fiery light to their deaths on the Blood Reef.

Many animals live on the island as well. Wild boars inhabit the lowland forests near the coast. Many different species of birds live in the mountains and the trees. They are very colorful, many of which I have never seen before. One night, I was almost caught by a massive constrictor snake when I slept. I awoke just in time to escape its grasp. Later, I was surprised to see a black panther in the forest. Truth be told, one probably would have eaten me if the Naori had not happened upon me at the right time.

In the past one hundred years, Naori has become open to trade with the outside world. By open, I mean that they allow certain people to trade with them. They trade in fire rubies and exotic fruits. The terms are very strict. No ship can pass the Blood Reef. All trading must be done at sea. The Naori set the prices and there is no haggling. They have made some exclusive deals with trading families in Freeport and Censure. I have not learned of the family in Censure but I know that the Arnig family in Freeport has negotiated a deal with the Naori. This somewhat exclusive trade arrangement has understandably upset many of the other competing families and houses within these respective cities.

The Naori do not make ships the same way that we do, your Grace. Their ships are designed for short voyages on the seas around the island. They are thin, usually carved from the trunk of a single tree. They have strange arms protruding from one side attached to a log. This seems to give the ship greater stability and helps it stay afloat. With these types of ships, Naori is not a threat to any of the maritime powers of the mainland or the Pirate Isles. The natural defense of the Blood Reef has kept out invaders. They also seem to have control over fire, as evidenced

The Secrets of Naori

There are some important aspects of the Naori people that our author has not been completely aware of. First of all, Ghord is not only the name of the volcano but also the name of a fire elemental god that the Naori worship. They believe that he lives deep within the volcano and that he is their defender against outsiders. It is the will of the elemental god that any ship approaching the island that is unexpected be drawn upon the reef to its destruction. To that end, he has created currents in the water that will run ships aground on the reef. He also grants gifted worshippers special powers over fire. See the Fire Monk prestige class at the end of this section for details.

Second, fire rubies are actually prized gems sought after throughout Arcanis. The intense heat of the volcano creates them. The light is caught by the ruby in such a way that it appears that the center of the ruby is on fire. An eyeball sized fire ruby, if cut professionally, can fetch 300-500 gp on the open market.

in the story mentioned in an earlier section of this text, which helps them defend their island from unwanted guests.

The few Naori that I have met that have ventured forth from their island are strange to look upon. Their bodies are covered with bright, red, tattoos. They seem very skilled in hand-to-hand combat without weapons. I once saw a tribesman kill someone with his bare hands. Naori also have the ability to resist fire and in some cases even to control it. I heard a tale from a friend that he saw a Naori walk into a burning hut to save a child. He emerged with not a burn mark on his body and the child safely tucked under his arm.

Magra: The Stronghold of the Pirate King

Day 435 The Death of a Friend

This was a horrible day. My only friend aboard this godforsaken ship has been killed! Poor Arraik! Slaughtered in the street like an animal. If wish I could have saved him. Alas, they came on us too fast. If only Arriak had not resisted, he might be alive now. All this for some stupid package we had to deliver.

I warned that fool Armind that this place was not worth it. He never listens! Why did he think the contract was worth so much money? No one wants to come to this place. Magra! It shouldn't even be called a city. It is a disgusting pit of filth and refuse. The pigs that live in it are no better. This place should be blasted into rubble! No one would miss it.

The Origins of Magra

I have saved Magra for last Patriarch, because I believe that it is one of the most wretched places in all of Arcanis. In all my time here in the Pirate Isles I have only been to the city twice. It is a den of evil and corruption that I do not wish to see again. However, in the interest of knowledge and in honor of Althares, I am willing to put aside my personal feelings and write as honestly as possible about the city.

The history of Magra is filled with sorrow and destruction. The first settlers from the Hinterlands sailed north into the Blasted Sea and discovered the island that is known as Giant Home today. It is clear from the early writings that the presence of giants on the island was not known to the original settlers. They built a small town at the end of a large bay in a place with an excellent natural harbor. In the beginning, they prospered, farming the nearby lowlands and staying close to the shore. They named the settlement Aklatl, which I can only guess was the name of their tribe.

Soon after the founding of the city, the first encounter with the frost giants and hill giants that lived on the island ended in disaster. The records are unclear, but it appears that the settlers angered the giants in some way. Perhaps that wandered too far inland and encroached on the giant's territory. Whatever the reason, the ensuing battle between the two left the city completely destroyed and the few survivors fled the island.

I could find no reference in the library concerning Magra or Aklatl for almost one hundred years after the first destruction of the city by the giants. Over time however, the memories of men fade and a young Skohir chieftain named Baleos Magra decided to travel to Giant Home and raise the city of Aklatl from the ashes. The legends say that he took a fleet of over two hundred ships from his homeland and landed on the site of the ruined city of his ancestors. To ensure his legacy, he renamed the city Magra.

Magra grew rapidly into an impressive city within a few decades. Baleos had wisely forbidden anyone from travelling far into the mountains. He had reasoned that the giants would only attack the city if they felt their own lands were threatened. Instead, the people farmed the rich land near the coast and worked



the overflowing fisheries in the seas around the island. Trade with the Censure and Freeport also flourished.

Eventually, time would again cause the memories of men to forget the wisdom of their forebears. Vesteo, the great-great grandson of Baleos the city's founder, appears to have made a fateful decision. Needing to finance the building of a new palace, he sends an expedition into the mountains to search for gold and other precious metals. They soon return having found a huge deposit of gold. As a result, Vesteo recklessly lifts the time-honored ban against venturing inland and begins mining the ore.

At first there are no major incidents and the ore begins to flow into the coffers of Vesteo. This did not last however. I estimate that only a few months after the mining began the giants lashed out against the people of Magra. The mine was destroyed first and news of its destruction caused many in Magra to flee. Vesteo stayed behind with most of the military in a vain attempt to hold the city against the giants. He was never heard from again. The giants crushed the city and the second attempt to colonize Giant Home had failed.

Rumors and legends kept most people off



Secrets of Magra

Our author does not know the real reason why the giants have not destroyed Magra. Khuld has started mining the mountains on giant home but not without insurance. He has met with Grosh, the leader of the Frost Giants, and has struck a bargain with him. In return for Grosh allowing the mining of ore in the mountains, Khuld has agreed to give him a steady stream of captives as food!

Since the deal was struck, Khuld has had to send out his ships more often than he would like for the purpose of capturing living cargo. He knows that this will eventually anger the other powers in the area, but the gold he is getting from the mine is too good pass up. He has a plan however. When the going gets rough, he will begin putting out the word about the crimes of the giants. He is certain that heroes will be drawn to the island to attack the giants. When they are weakened enough, he will attack with his own men to eliminate their threat once and for all.

of the island after the destruction of Magra. Some intrepid adventurers did travel there in an attempt to come away with some of the island's riches. There is one story, although not completely substantiated your Eminence, that the fortune of the Grossette family in Freeport was made on one such foray to the island.

It is ironic that the city of Magra would be reborn at the hands of one of the most destructive pirates of our age, Khuld the half-Ogre. His ships have terrorized the Blasted Sea and the coast of the Hinterlands for many a year. Thirty years ago he landed on the ruins of Magra and began using it as his hideout. Since then it has grown into a rambling city of wretchedness and evil. Khuld now calls himself the Pirate King and has built a large palace that dwarfs all of the other buildings in the city. There are many people throughout the Pirate Isles that hope Khuld will go to far and be destroyed by the giants as so many before him have.

Magra in Modern Times

Magra is quite possibly the most disgusting and lawless place that I have ever visited in my long life. The streets are ill contrived with many dead-ends and poorly lit alleyways. Drunken pirates rule the streets and duels and fights are common. There is no city watch and roving bands of press gangs and thugs make it very dangerous to walk the streets.

The city has become a haven for pirates and buccaneers of the worst type. They come

here because their lecherous and thieving ways are not accepted in Freeport or Censure. Here they can come to buy supplies and unload their cargo for a profit without having to worry about the prying eyes of the law. They have to give a portion of their take to the Pirate King, but this is a small price to pay when no questions are asked about where they got the loot.

Khuld the half-ogre, self-styled, Pirate King rules the city. His word is law and he rules with an iron fist. It is not unusual for someone who has disobeyed him to find himself decapitated and his head displayed on a pike in front of his palace. He is surrounded by numerous cronies and bodyguards who support him in his autocratic rule. Their loyalty has been bought by the lavish gifts that he bestows upon them and also the fear of his wrath.

In his youth, Khuld did not care who he attacked or why. I know of one time when he attacked Freeport during the rule of Marten Drac. He was beaten back but only just barely. It appears that he has learned since then that he needs to pick and choose who his victims will be. Although he has an impressive fleet of ships he cannot simply attack other powers in the area at will. Doing so would jeopardize his rule over the city of Magra. It appears that Khuld has learned from the rulers of Freeport that the best option is to offer the fleet as a mercenary force to Censure or any other power that might be willing to pay for it. Over the past few years however, the fleet of the Pirate King with its black banner and mailed fist has been attacking more and more ships in the Blasted Sea. I have heard that they are taken prisoners in all of their raids, something they have never done in the past.

I have also learned that Khuld has been funding expeditions to search for ore in the mountains of Giant Home for many years. This surprises me. From the history of the island as I know it, this would mean certain death at the hands of the giants. But Magra still stands. Has Khuld made some sort of bargain with the giants? If not, is he only living on borrowed time until the giants strike back against his incursions? I am sorry to say Patriarch, that I hope the giants destroy this city of evil. Maybe then the soul of my friend Arraik can rest in peace.

Patriarch, here ends my treatise on the Pirate Isles that I have prepared in response to your request. I have made every attempt to be as accurate and truthful as possible in my representation of the islands and there people. I look forward to your comments and respectfully submit this document to you in the name of Althares, God of Knowledge.

The Lament of the Dwarves

Being tasked to assist the dwarf Oriss in his studies in the Great Library of Althre' was both my duty and a great opportunity to learn more about these reclusive beings. The Council of Wisdom granted unprecedented access to the body of knowledge accumulated throughout the centuries to the dwarf scholar in exchange for further information about his people's culture, lifestyle and history.

Try as I might though, Oriss refused to answer any questions that I might put to him until after his studies were completed. Imagine my frustration at having a being of semi-legend beside me without being able to inquire into his past, family or even his home.

He searched throughout the many rows of books, tomes, scrolls and tablets, tireless and relentless. He never told me exactly what he searched for, but based upon the questions he did ask, I reasoned that he was seeking out any traces to a city called Corett Palas.

Never having heard of such a city, even though I had been instructed by some of the finest scholars and philosophers of Altheria, my interest was peaked. I began to scour the Library looking for some hint or clue as to what this city was or where it might be located.

After six long months of thorough investigation, I finally found a solitary fragment inscribed on a clay tablet in Ancient Altharin, the Tongue of Man. It mentioned a great city far to the south across the Lauriol Sea, built into the cliffs that overlooked the ocean.

Upon showing this to Oriss, his face cracked to show the hint of the first expression I had witnessed from this stoic being. His nascent smile receded back to the stony countenance I had come to know.

"I assume that you will now mount an expedition to the South?" I asked him a bit despondently. I was hoping to spend some time delving into the near mythic culture of the dwarves.

"Corett Palas has been lost for countless centuries. It will wait a few more. You humans, always rushing." He patted my cheek and turned to walk out of our home of the past few months.

Almost as an aside, he muttered back over his broad shoulder, "I believe you had best prepare for an overland journey; my homeland awaits your presence."

Smiling like a young child on his Name Day, I rushed to catch up with my newfound tome of knowledge.

Physiology

Day 23: My frustration mounts daily with this obstinate stonewall! My stout companion and I have been traveling at a brisk pace through the Coryani Empire on our way to Solanos Mor, yet I may as well have traveled alone. Every question I ask him of his homeland or his culture is rebuffed by his now monotonous, "All will be explained when we reach my homeland."

Day 35: Today I tried a different tact. Instead of asking him direct questions, I made offhanded remarks out loud, making as if I were writing these observations into my journal! To my surprise, that cowed dwarf actually responded! These people may be ancient, but they are no match to the superior intellect of an Altherian.

I mumbled out loud, "During our time together in the Knowledge Stacks, I observed my new companion as he stalked the endless rows and came to certain assumptions about Dwarven physiology. "Oriss was powerfully built, almost as wide as he was tall. His muscular frame moved with near feline grace, for which I was a bit surprised to see. He neither waddled nor walked in a stilted fashion as I had expected."

Oriss rolled his eyes. "The Dwarven race is not made up of stunted humans, Umayid. The fact that we grow no larger than this," he motioned to his frame, "does not make our race an aberration of nature. Do the trees of the forest look down upon humans for only being as tall as they are?"



"To measure a being by his height is ludicrous." His thick fingers tapped my chest. "This is the true measure of any being, *'for from here comes greatness'*. Such is the word of our Lord Illiir." His voice sounded hushed in deep reverence at these words.

I was surprised to find that Oriss could quote from the Holy Book of Glory, but did not want to become sidetracked from this topic. There would be time enough to inquire into their religious practices later.

"Would you consider yourself to be typical in height and frame for your race?" I asked.

"There are some who are slightly taller than me and some slightly smaller. I would say that I am a true representative of the people of Solanos Mor. Those from Tultipet are somewhat less stocky, while those from Encali," his face shifted slightly into a scowl at the word, "are a bit shorter. But for the most part, all dwarves share the same basic frame. It is one of the few things we have left in common."

My mind whirled with the information Oriss had furnished. What were these places he had named? Was there some friction within the Dwarven community? What else did the dwarves have in common?

Oriss shook his head and mumbled something about the need of humans to rush everything.

Day 72 I stood with my guide completely awestruck. I have seen the wonders of my own land's Majestic Falls, witnessed the intoxicatingly lurid Dance of Desire in Savona and even the Rainbow Arches in the misty mornings in Salantica, but nothing could have prepared me for the imposing splendor of Solanos Mor.

Oriss huffed beneath his ever-present hooded cloak, "Are we to stay gawking at the mountainside forever or are you finally ready to move on?"

Carved into the mountainside was the most beautiful façade I had ever seen. Even the Great Cave Gate of Sicaris paled in comparison. Ornate towers, minarets, bridges that spanned the distances between the natural crags and more assaulted my senses.

Arrayed below it in a semi-circle was a small city, looking more like a child's toy-set as it laid below the majesty of the entrance to Solanos Mor. It appeared that the nearby provincial capitol of Nevanne owed much in its design to the Dwarven architects of Solanos Mor.

Oriss gruffly explained that the small settlement, called the Marketplace, housed human

and Dwarven merchants who traded year round. It acted as a sort of permanent bazaar as there were rarely any travelers allowed beyond the Grand Entrance into the city proper.

The Grand Entrance, double doors of mammoth proportions that gleamed with an inner light, deserved the euphemism and much more. It was situated halfway up the mountainside and could only be reached by a winding path that appeared carved into the stone itself. The jagged crags of the Corlathians deterred all but the most expert of rock climbers from approaching the Entrance by any other manner.

"Will I be staying in the Marketplace, Oriss?"

To my delight, Oriss shook his neatly bearded face. "No. In accordance with the agreement reached with your leaders, you will be allowed to remain for a time within the City of Shameful Penance itself. You will be my guest and reside within my home."

He looked upon my half-concealed smile and remarked, "Do not be so joyful to enter our home. Within only tears of shame and wails for our future resound."

So much talk of sadness and disgrace. I have found Oriss to be an honorable and dutiful being. I have read accounts of battles, which heaped only glory and respect upon his people. It appeared I had much to learn from and about them.

Day 74 I have stayed in Marketplace for over a day now, awaiting Oriss' return. He requested my patience as he informed his superiors and his wife about my presence and the agreement he had reached with the Council of Wisdom.

I have passed the time updating my journal and observing the dynamics of this settlement.

Settlement is a gross misnomer. Only in the shadow of Solanos Mor could Marketplace be called a settlement. Many towns could be hidden away in this place and not be found for sometime. Hundreds of kiosks with their merchants ply their wares, trading with each other or the multitudes of buyers that have come from as far off as Mhyrcia in the Western Lands as well as the occasional Khitani nobleman. I must make a mention of this fact to my superiors in Altheria. Marketplace could be a very useful resource in our endeavors.

Wondrous items, both magical and mundane are sold and traded here by the Dwarven craftsman of Solanos Mor. It appears that the obsession ascribed to them in myth is true. The Dwarves are said to have an almost compulsive need to create items of surpassing beauty, amazing qualities, and exquisite craftsmanship.

The abundance of these items, from weapons and armor to statues to jewelry, is apparent. Whatever they cannot or wish not to use is sold or traded for items that they are in need of, such as foodstuff. Everyone from the Coryani to the nomads of the Hinterlands prize and covet these spectacular products and go to great lengths to acquire them.

It appears that the Dwarves from all across the continent have this same drive and will trade their wares in one way or another.

I learned these nuggets of information as I spoke with a Dwarven trader, Analek by name, while admiring the most elegant longsword I have ever laid eyes upon.

“You have excellent taste and a discriminating eye, Emtazi. That blade was one of the first smithed by our own Master Artisan, Elabac, centuries ago. Although his technique produces the most masterfully crafted weapons and armor of all types, Master Elabac excels with blades in particular.

“The longsword which you now hold is known as *Lantas Dalo*, Cleaver of Trolls. Its still glowing blade was quenched in the black heart of the Troll warlord that led a brutal attack upon our home.

“It has served many great warriors who have wielded it with distinction and glory. Master Elabac’s enchantments upon the blade will alert you to the presence of any foul Troll that may be nearby, giving you the opportunity to smite it before it can attack.

“And if that were not enough to tempt you to purchase this noble blade,” he said with a flourish, “it also prevents the natural regeneration that the Trolls have from healing any wound caused by *Lantas Dalo*.”

I eventually purchased the blade, not because of the trader’s obvious exaggerations in the longsword’s magical properties, but because I felt that my superiors in Altheria would be most interested in a weapon crafted by the Master Artisan Elabac. I am sure they will approve of my using of the writ of credit they gave me.

I, of course, will make my own observations in its abilities while here in Solanos Mor. I cannot trust any courier in the delivery of such a splendid item all the way to Altheria. Until such time as I return to the homeland, I will keep it in trust.

Day 77 Today was quite a noteworthy day. Oriss finally returned to escort me into Solanos Mor. After more than four hours of negotiating the winding path, we arrived at the Grand Entrance. Made of solid iron, the intricate workmanship

of the twin doors (doors is such a poor word, but I can find no other that can adequately convey what this monstrous portal is) makes it both mesmerizing and foreboding. Spanning both of the double doors is a stylized face with eyes looking towards the heavens and its mouth shaped as if it were in anguish. It appears that sorrow and grief is a concept I will be exposed to constantly here in the City of Shameful Penance. I only hope that these moribund creatures do not begin to erode my own cheerful disposition.

The Grand Entrance is at least five spear lengths high and wide enough to allow three full wagon trains to enter abreast. The doors were open and Oriss grumbled under his breath that they are usually so, closed only during times of strife or war.

The tunnel entryway kept the same proportion as the doors and my concern that I would find myself in a cramped and claustrophobic environment was proved to be premature. The city of Solanos Mor is laid out in the most gargantuan cavern I have ever seen or read. So large is this cavern, or Vault as Oriss later corrected me, that although it was well lit, I could not see the far side of it.

All the buildings and halls were of huge proportions with high vaulted ceilings and entryways. I found myself wondering why these beings, scarcely tall enough to reach my chin, would design their city in such a way. While out above ground, Oriss constantly covered his head with a cowl, grudgingly admitting that the empty sky above filled him with a small amount of unease. Why then, would they desire to have wide-open spaces in their underground Vault? I was determined to unravel these conundrums during my time here.

Speaking of unraveling time-honored myths and speculations, I spied several Dwarven women as I walked beside Oriss and while they can hardly be described as ‘attractive,’ they most definitely did not sport beards.

Pity. I rather enjoyed that bawdy limerick of the near-sighted Milandisian knight and the bearded Dwarven battle maiden.

Oriss, I noticed, held his head down and began murmuring something below his breath. As I pulled back my senses from attempting to absorb the entirety of the city in one glance, I heard that the low murmur that came from my erstwhile host was blended in with the murmur of a hundred other low voices. So seamlessly did this occur, that I had not noticed that all those that we passed were chanting the same phrase over and over.



I struggled to make out the words, so low they were and spoken in such hushed tones that it was difficult to make out exactly what they were saying. Only as we drew closer to the center of the Vault, did I begin to understand.

- ...our duty forsaken, we did fail in Your eyes, O Father of All.

- Though I am not worthy, I pray for Your forgiveness and the blessings of Your Light.

- My life, my love, my eternal spirit are Yours to command. Only say the word and Your will be done.

Amazing! These dwarves of Solanos Mor were reciting a slight variation of the Catechism of Light, a prayer to Illiir, incessantly. I did not spy one whom I passed that was not chanting the same prayer over and over, in complete synchronicity. Were his most Holy, the Patriarch of the Mother Church, to see this, I'm sure he would move the entire Temple of the Pantheon here amongst these, the most faithful of the faithful.

Before I could ask Oriss about this curious behavior, I stopped short as we turned off a wide boulevard and entered the central city square. I must have been blind to have missed what stood at the very heart of the Vault.

Towering over the plaza, surrounded by a throng of kneeling dwarves keening the Catechism of Light while their bodies bent forward and back like a bed of kelp in a strong sea current, stood the statue of a giant man writhing in agony. It was chiseled to such a degree of perfection that even the most skilled of sculptors would weep at their own inadequate skill. Its face was a study in horror and torment, its body captured at a moment of exquisite suffering, eternal and unending. Muscular arms reached upward towards the heavens in supplication. Its voiceless mouth open in a mute appeal to the Gods for release from its damnation.

Embedded in the statue's chest was a ruby of enormous size, placed exactly where a living being's heart would be. This ruby pulsed with a life of its own, its glow waxing and waning rhythmically, bathing the faithful below in a blood-red sheen.

Was this some sort of God that the dwarves worshipped? This did not ring true in my mind as all other evidence pointed to the contrary. I was lost in thought for some moments until I felt Oriss' tug on my sleeve and indicating a small alcove with a nod of his head. Never once did he stop murmuring his prayer nor did he lose his place in it. Silently, I followed him into the cramped space.

Once inside, he stopped chanting and faced me, his countenance even more grave than before.

"A word of warning," he said in hushed tones. "While outside in the streets of the Vault, it is considered highly offensive to speak any words that are not the Catechism of Light.

"If you truly wish to understand my people, then you must understand the one thing that pervades every facet of Dwarven life, culture and history."

He lowered his head and his next words were tinged with shame. "The Curse."

After a moment, his eyes ranged up towards the tall statue. His face twisted into a grimace as he continued, "Before you ask, none of us may say exactly what the Curse entails. Your insatiable curiosity will have to be satisfied with the knowledge that it pertains to a wrong committed long ago in the eyes of Illiir, the Merciful. We failed in our duty and thus, the sins perpetrated by our ancestors, are visited upon all their descendants.

He stabbed a thick digit at the statue. "That is our progenitor, the Elder Vodik, leader of the Enclave that eventually settled here in Solanos Mor. He and the other seven Elders transgressed against the Gods and brought down the Curse on our heads and deservedly so.

"While some of the other Enclaves have heaped scorn upon the Merciful One for His just punishment, we of Solanos Mor accept the failures of our ancestors and are truly remorseful.

"The Encali believe they insult us when they call us the Penitent of Illiir, but what they say with derision, we hold with pride. The day will come when our actions will be deemed worthy of forgiveness and Illiir will bestow His blessings upon our Enclave alone and lift the Curse forevermore."

History

Before the Curse

Far to the North of the Known Lands of Onara, long before the raising of the Wall of the Gods, Giants ruled and warred.

The Celestial Giants once ruled the many different species of Giants now seen throughout the Onara. These Celestial Giants were greater in size and prowess and eventually subjugated the rest of their type, reigning over them like Gods.

These self-made deities were besieged, however, by the Ancient Dragons that roamed over the land and preyed upon the Giants, Celestial or

otherwise. A vicious and brutal war between the two waged for centuries, a war in which the Giants were slowly but surely losing.

To the South, the First Imperium of Man was in its death throes as The Sword of the Heavens marched on the First City.

Seeing the end of his children's Golden Age, Illiir struck a bargain with the Elders of the Celestial Giants. The Pantheon would intervene and hunt down the Dragons that preyed upon them in exchange for the Celestials taking stewardship over Mankind until the Man was ready to come back into its own. With their very survival in the balance, the Celestials readily agreed.

Dragon Hunt

Not since the time of the God's War had so many of the Valinor flown through the skies of Onara. Tasked with the elimination of the Dragon's threat, they split up into small groups and hunted down the mighty beasts.

Within weeks, the younger and less mature dragons fell easily to the Divine might of the Valinor, leaving only the dread Ancients to contend with. These Dragons, however, were not so easily defeated.

Though they fought with all the passion and skill at their disposal, the Valinor discovered that they did not have the power to kill these creatures. Only in one instance was an Ancient Dragon laid low and even then, at too great a cost.

It was the Valinor Aylansin, the Cunning of Sarish that finally developed a solution. If the Dragons could not be killed, then let them be trapped, bound and forgotten.

Chasing the Dragons across the continent, the Valinor harried their prey and trapped them, some beneath the ground, others below the waves, while the Valinor of Sarish wove their eldritch spells and bound the Dragons to their eternal confinement.

Satisfied that they had done Illiir's Divine Will, the Valinor limped home to Paradise to heal wounds and mourn for their losses. The Dragons of Onara were no more.



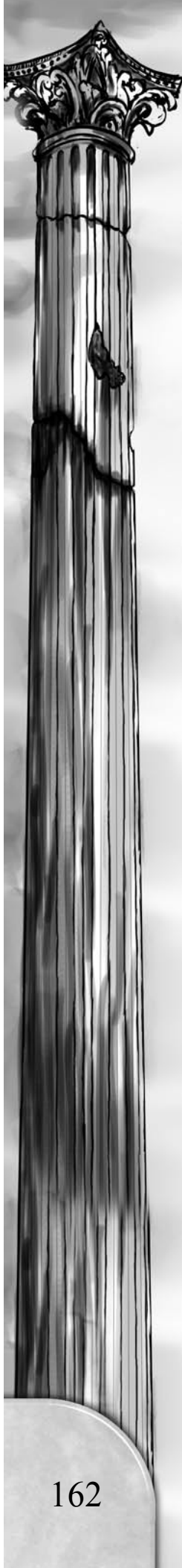
To Slay a Dragon

The Ancient Blue Dragon, Luqun'qun'ovn, fled madly from the three winged celestials that had dogged its trail for days now. Never in its millennia of life, had it known what it was to flee from prey. Never had it known the sickly sensation of fear.

Within weeks, dozens of their precious hatchlings had fallen to these vicious attacks, including its own brood. Rage fed its wings as it flew further south than it ever had. Vengeance fed its lust to devour these beings before its final breath came.

Above the barren wastes of the Blessed Lands, the three Valinor of Neroth finally caught up with Luqun'qun'ovn and joined it in battle. Using artifacts gifted to them by Neroth Himself, the three Valinor struck with all their skill and might. Yet the great beast would not die.

The Hand of Neroth swung his great scythe and ripped through the leathery wings of the creature, forcing it from the heavens. The Breath of Neroth lighted upon its back and cut deeply with his own Holy weapon, slashing through the beast's scales and into its flesh.



Mortally wounded, Luqun'qun'ovn nevertheless continued to fight on. It discharged its crackling breath, catching the overconfident Valinor in its wake. Momentarily stunned, The Breath of Neroth fell to the ground before the Great Wyrms.

Luqun'qun'ovn's victory was short lived, however. As it raised a clawed paw, preparing to rend the wounded Valinor with one mighty blow, it shuddered in pain. The Hand of Neroth had flown beneath the raised claw and struck at its exposed breast, while the third celestial drove its spear into the wound and pierced its black heart. Luqun'qun'ovn's last thought as its life ebbed was regret at not having tasted the flesh of his tormentors.

The Valinor of Neroth allowed themselves a moment of rest after the epic battle. Though these creatures were ordered exterminated by mighty Illiir Himself, they could not help but admire the fantastic beast that had inflicted such severe injuries upon them.

After some discussion, they were convinced that their Lord Neroth would find this creature a worthy gift. Resolved to present the beast as a steed for their Master, the three Valinor filled the Dragon with their Necromantic energies and raised it from the dead.

Luqun'qun'ovn awoke and was amazed. It was amazed that not only were its adversaries standing within range of its bite, but were actually ordering it to carry them aloft. Feigning submission, it allowed the three winged beings to approach closer, its head laid low. It held its now non-existent breath, hoping its deception had worked.

It had.

Striking with lightening speed, it took the three Valinor completely by surprise. A wing buffeted one against a jagged rock wall, a tail snap set the second reeling, while the third it simply devoured. Satisfied, it flew off into legend.

The two remaining Valinor regained consciousness in time to see the great undead beast flying off in the distance and with it, The Mercy of Neroth.

Exodus

During the titanic battles between the Valinor and the Ancient Wyrms, the majestic cities of the Giants were devastated, leaving them little more than smoldering ruins. Thousands of refugees slowly made their way south, skirting the Great Forest, heading deeper into the lands of Man. Some of the Giants, fearing that their enslavement under the Celestials would continue

once the Dragons were dealt with, fled from their masters and headed for greener pastures.

The Fire Giants made their way to the volcanic mountain range called Nier's Spine. The Frost Giants similarly disappeared into the very high peaks of the Corlathians and so on.

Thus it was only a small number of Celestial Giants that eventually arrived in the Known Lands just after the implosion of the Theocracy of the Flame and the beginning of the Shadowed Age. After so much bloodshed and chaos, the individual city-states welcomed the wise and sage-like Celestial Giants as guardians and mentors.

The eight individual Enclaves of the Celestials tried to spread out as best they could to reach as many humans as possible. True to their vow to Illiir, they protected the dispirited humans from roving bands of humanoids, Elorii and others. For a generation, the Celestials carried the burden of being humanity's caregivers, but eventually began to remember the old ways.

For millennia, they had ruled a vast Empire to the North through force of arms. Their subjects built monuments in their honor and gave praise on bended knee to their obvious superiority. Those monuments eventually became temples and the subjects, worshippers supplicating to the Gods that lived amongst them.

The greatest of the Elders, a formidable Celestial named Vodik, began to long for the old ways and became resentful of humanity. Before they were sung to as Gods and now their Empire lay in ruins, their subjects scattered and they were bound to play nursemaid to a people who had squandered their own Empire.

Vodik spoke with the other Elders and found that they were also chaffing beneath the yoke of servitude they had been coerced into.

Thus, in agreement, the Celestial Giants under the direction of Vodik turned upon their charges and enslaved them. The Giants ordered the humans to tear down the temples of their False Gods and instead, raise cenotaphs in honor of the Celestials' glory. Tribute was demanded and taken. Those who raised a hand in rebellion were made an example of, usually by being flayed alive.

Within a fortnight, the Celestial Giants had taken control over large swaths of territory of the former First Imperium in a relatively bloodless coup. Vodik declared himself First among the Elders and took the position of King of the Gods in the newly formed Pantheon, destroying all mention of Illiir and His ilk.

But Vodik's newly reformed Empire lasted less than the life of a lowly insect.

The Curse

Illir looked down from the Paradise of the Gods and witnessed the base treachery of the Giants. He had entrusted His beloved children to these creatures and they had betrayed that trust.

So great was Illir's rage, that the sun blazed hot and did not set for three days. On the fourth day, He made Himself known to all the Celestial Giants simultaneously, wherever they may have been. His perfect voice resounded throughout the land and carried forth the Curse.

"YOU HAD BEEN GIVEN A MOST SACRED TRUST AND HAVE ACTED MOST FOUL. THUS KNOW THAT YOU HAVE EARNED MY UNDYING CONTEMPT AND MY TERRIBLE WRATH!"

"YOU THAT LONGED TO REACH FOR THE HEAVENS WILL NOW BE MADE TO LIVE FOREVERMORE BELOW THE EARTH."

"YOU THAT LORDLED OVER MY BELOVED SONS AND DAUGHTERS, YOUR MIGHT AND SIZE SHALL NOW be dwarfed by ALL!"

"BUT FOR YOUR LEADERS DO I HOLD MY PERSONAL DISDAIN. YOU WISHED TO HAVE MY CHILDREN IMMORTALIZE YOU IN MONUMENTS, THEN SO BE IT."

Instantly, the eight Elders of the Celestial Giants screamed in agony and in that pose, were turned to stone. A glowing red ruby pulsed over their chests, an eternal prison trapping their soul in a perfect moment of unending torment.

"THOSE WHO FOLLOWED THESE CURS SHALL HAVE THEIR LIVES FOREVERMORE INESTRICABLY TIED TO THEM. TO LIVE FOR TOO LONG BEYOND THE GLOW OF THE ELDER'S TORMENT SHALL MEAN AN AGONIZING DEATH AS THE UNNATURAL AMOUNT OF YEARS THAT YOU VILE CREATURES LIVE CASCADES OVER YOU IN A WAVE."

"BARRED YOU ARE FROM MY GLORY, BARRED YOU SHALL EVER BE FROM MY PARADISE!"

"SUCH IS THE WILL OF ILLIR!"

A Chance for Redemption

Crushed, the former giants were aghast at what had befallen them and chaos ensued. Many could not come to terms with their new forms and threw themselves from great heights, preferring death to this new life. Yet, even in death, the cursed dwarves were denied any hope of peace.

Before complete despair overwhelmed them, the God Sarish appeared before them.

"Great though your sins are, I see a small spark of nobility within some of you. I offer you a chance at redemption in Our eyes and the lifting of the Curse.

"I task you to craft the perfect object and bathe it in the glow of your Elder's Heart Stone Gem. If it is truly perfect, the ruby shall crack, releasing the spirit of your ancestor from its eternal torment and all those of *that* Enclave shall be returned to their former glory."

Overjoyed at having even a slim chance to return to the life they knew, the dwarves set out to ensure that it was their particular Enclave who created the perfect object. Though Sarish had not openly stated it, He implied that only those of the Enclave who crafted such an item would be freed of the Curse, while the others would remain as dwarves, forever.

Over the centuries, each Enclave has desperately tried to craft such an object, but to date has failed. Though wondrous and magical, all the weapons, armor, jewelry, glassware, even clothes have failed to be worthy in the God's eyes.

Certain Master Artisans of an Enclave have earned particular acclaim in their chosen field. Given that dwarves may live for four or five hundred years, the artisan's reputation amongst humans can span generations. The Master Artisan Elabac, for example, is renowned for his elegant blades. Each blade crafted by Elabac's techniques may have different properties and even be of differing types, but they are all known as the Swords of Elabac.

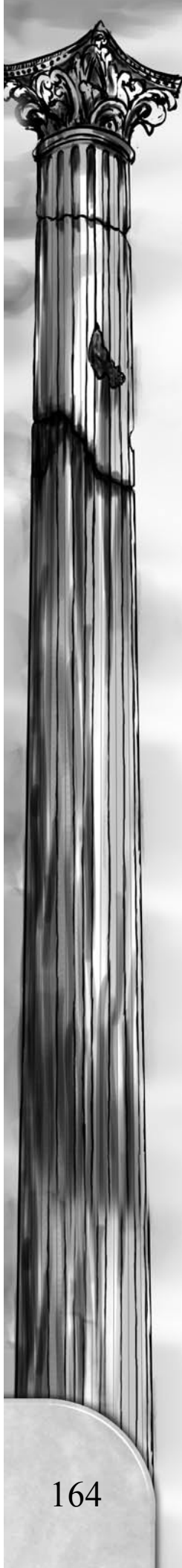
The Heartstone Gem

Part of Illir's Curse condemns the Dwarven people of each Enclave to live in the light of their Elder's Heartstone gem. The Dwarves soon discovered to their horror that they would age rapidly if they had not basked in the blood-red glow every decade or so. The period of time one must remain in the glow is negligible in Dwarven terms, a few weeks or a month at best, though the older one becomes, the longer one must remain in the Vault.

For this reason alone, dwarves have not expanded their settlements and generally keep only one city per Enclave.

It was also discovered early on that if the Enclave had to move from their original location, the Heartstone gem could be removed from its place in the chest of the statue and taken to a new city. Once there, an exact duplicate of the original statue would appear, awaiting the replacement of the ruby.





On the few occasions this was done, those that carried the gem were often driven mad as the soul of the Elder could be seen and heard suffering the eternal torment commanded by Illiir.

During one of the many conflicts between Solanos Mor and the goblin tribes, a bold strike into the Vault was achieved. But when an arrogant warlord attempted to take the Gem as booty, not only did he find he could not move it, he was struck dead within moments by a discharge from the Heartstone. It appeared that only a dwarf from the same Enclave might safely remove and handle the Gem.

Of Death and the Afterlife

Day 104 The King of Solanos Mor is dead. The ancient Lord was venerable, even by Dwarven standards, and had lived for just over six centuries. It was he who rebuffed the old Coryani Emperor's declaration that all the Dwarven Enclaves in or around Coryani territory be part and parcel of the Empire with the now infamous line, "Human, you presume too much." Needless to say, the Dwarven Enclaves remain autonomous nations to this day.

The weeklong mourning period was punctuated with Dwarven priests of both Beltine and Neroth conducting lengthy ceremonies over the body of the ancient ruler. It was the only time during my stay in Solanos Mor that the incessant dirge of prayers stopped.

The Nerothians, much like their human counterparts, officiated over the body's final preparations. It was first embalmed and then wrapped in a tight burial shroud giving it an appearance similar to any mummy found in the dismal city of Abessios. All the while, the King's Soul Shard was carefully kept free of the wrapping, but never once did it leave his body.

On the fourth day, after the body's preparations have been completed, the Nerothian priests retired and the Beltinian priests begin their ceremonies. These finally culminated on the seventh day with the internment of the body within an area of the Vault I had been forbidden to examine called the Chamber of Final Repose. By its name and from what I witnessed this day, I can safely assume that it is some sort of burial crypt or mausoleum used by the inhabitants of the city. But then why should they be so secretive and protective about a burial chamber? I am finding that with every question I answer, five more spring up in its place!

During the time when the Giants were first cursed, many could not accept what had befallen their race and committed suicide to escape their fate. To their horror, the newly formed dwarves discovered that even the peace of the afterlife was taken from them.

The spirits of the dwarves rose from their dead bodies and as minor shades were tormented by the scenes of life about them but being able to neither affect nor interact with it. This drove many insane with grief.

So dire was their torment that the Beltinian priests decided to take a most drastic and distasteful action; they shredded these lost souls and gifted them with Oblivion.

This solution was abhorrent to the Dwarven people, as they also believed in the reincarnation of souls in the same fashion as humans did.

The priests of Beltine finally discovered an answer to this dilemma with the creation of Soul Shards. These small crystals, which are given to dwarves upon their births, are hewn from the many crystalline forests that dot the underground vastness between Vaults. Divine enchantments granted to them by Beltine, allow the soul of a dwarf to migrate over the course of a day into the shard.

It was later discovered that if the body could be healed before the soul completed its transition to the shard, the spirit would snap back into the body of its own accord. After that period of time elapsed only the most powerful of enchantments could restore a dwarf to life and even then, only if the body was able to sustain life on its own.

Once a Soul Shard held the spirit, a complex ritual orchestrated by the priests of Neroth and Beltine melded the spirit and the intellect into a perfect union. This amalgamated soul now possessed all the life experiences and knowledge of the person as well as its essence. Originally, this was done with the hope that when the Curse was lifted, the souls would be admitted into Paradise and be allowed to reincarnate. Not too long after this practice was adopted, a wondrous discovery took place.

Interred in a consecrated burial tomb called the Chamber of Final Repose, the priests discovered that the chamber created a resonance whereby the souls could communicate with the living, in effect becoming a pocket Astral Plane.

This Spirit Array, as it came to be known, is a vast repository of knowledge and wisdom available to the leaders of the Enclave. By astrally projecting while within the Array, a person may speak with and interact with the ancients.

Even with all the incredible potential benefits afforded by the Array, it can be quite hazardous. Some spirits within the Chamber may be intransigent or even hostile to those seeking to speak with the departed. Visitors may find their connection with their bodies cut, or even more catastrophic, have their souls destroyed.

Some dwarves though stubbornly feel that they have not yet accomplished all they set out to do within their lifetimes and crave an

extension. These rare dwarves thus choose to sacrifice the chance for eventual salvation by foregoing internment in the Chamber and instead pray to Neroth for life beyond death.

If Neroth is so inclined to grant His blessings, the dwarf's soul is destroyed as it separates from the body by Beltinian priests. The intellect continues to reside within the carcass sustained by divine necromantic energies and the newly risen undead is free to continue his craft.

Recently, the Beltinian priests have discovered a threat to the entire Dwarven race. Birth records indicate that each successive generation has been smaller than the previous one. While dwarves are not known for being as "fruitful" as humans or Elorii, lately it has been noted that more and more Dwarven females are only able to bear one child to term during their entire lifetime. An increasing number of still-births are being reported yearly, causing great concern.

Beltinian priests have conjectured that since the souls of dead dwarves are not allowed back into the great cycle of life-death-and-rebirth, there are fewer and fewer souls available for reincarnation. If this trend continues, the Dwarven race may become a thing of myth and legend before another millennia passes.

The Dwarven Enclaves

Day 127 The Coronation of Noen, firstborn of the previous King, is to take place today. Noen appears to be an honorable and capable being and I have heard nothing but praise for his abilities.

Rather than have the seat of power within a keep or a palace, the Dwarven King resides within a massive tower that looms over the entire Vault. Once again, the contradictory nature of these people is evident. They readily admit to a mild phobia when dealing with anything in the open sky, yet they build their structures as if they were yearning to touch the heavens. Bizarre!

Of greater interest are the dignitaries of the other Dwarven Enclaves arriving to attend the coronation. Though Oriss has mentioned that there are or were eight Enclaves, only three others, with a fourth on the way, are to attend the ceremony.

I was quite surprised by the variation in dress and custom of the foreign dignitaries. I, like many of my fellow humans, always assumed that one dwarf was much like another. It appears that the different Dwarven nations are as varied as we are.

I of course know that the lost Enclave of Corett Palas will not be in attendance, but what of the other two? Even the dwarves from Encali will be here, a people that Solanos Mor holds in deep distrust. Can there be even greater animosity between the missing two Enclaves?



Oriss looked at me with the same exasperated look. "The Enclave of Deneki will not be in attendance as they have disappeared from the face of Onara. No word has been heard from them for quite some time."

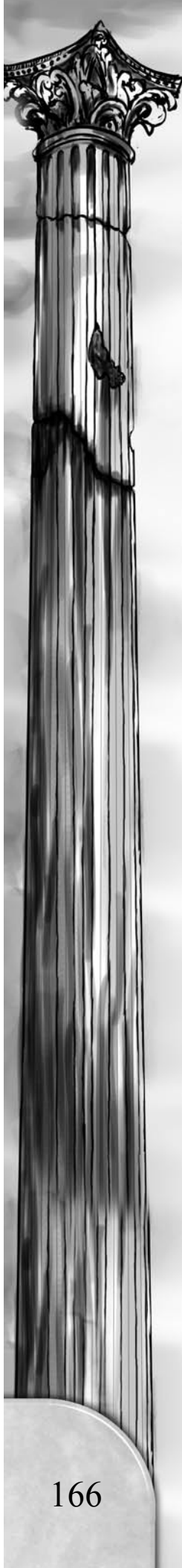
I could tell that this was a sore spot for him and it grated him to admit such a thing. His next words, though, were tinged with such hatred and disgust that it took me aback.

"Of the final Enclave, it is no more! What their name was and where they abide has been stricken from all records. These blasphemous abominations are no more in our sight and I would only acknowledge their presence with the edge of my blade."

I decided not to press the subject.

Solanos Mor – The City of Shameful Penance

O precious Pearl upon the Cliffs of the World, in thee gray-haired history is stored
– **Episian val'Borda, Poet Laureate of the Imperial Court**



Nestled in the Eastern reaches of the Corlathian Mountains, those of Solanos Mor are heralded as the noblest and most self-sacrificing of all the Dwarven Enclaves. They travel throughout the lands of Man, protecting, advising and sacrificing their lives, if need be, for the preservation of humanity.

Although the artisans of Solanos Mor craft objects in hopes that Sarish's offer will be granted, the majority of the populace feels that only by redeeming themselves in the eyes of Illiir can the Curse be lifted. To accomplish this, it is felt that only by fulfilling their ancestor's obligations and protecting Mankind until the Imperium is again restored can they deserve the mercy of Illiir.

After a period of sixty years, during which a young dwarf grows to adulthood and is taught a craft, he must decide whether he can better serve the Enclave by continuing to perfect his artisan skills or take up arms and travel beyond the Vault. Some, like the Master Artisan Elabac, find that their craftsmanship excels any who came before and are duty bound to continue the quest for the manufacture of the perfect object.

The craft for which the City of Shameful Penance is famous for are the elegant blades from the school of Elabac. Desired by almost every human nation, these blades are held in the highest regard by the Milandisians, who see them as symbols of their own nation's purity and chivalry.

Those dwarves that find that their craftsmanship skills are lacking, take up the mantle of the Penitents of Illiir. This order of dwarves strikes out singly or in small groups to find the injustices and dangers that plague Mankind and meet out the Justice of Illiir. Though not necessarily schooled as intensely in the dogma of Illiir's teachings as those of the clergy, not one is unfamiliar with His tenants.

Even the name that The Penitents of Illiir choose to call humans is indicative of their devotion to the tenants of the Merciful Lord: *Emtazi*, protected/beloved one.

Those schooled in the cultures of the dwarves can easily differentiate the different Enclaves by their beards. Considered by all dwarves to be the only trait carried over from the days when they were Giants, each Enclave wear their beards in the style their ancient ancestors did when they ruled the North. Those from Solanos Mor, for example, carefully groom their beards and often spend as much time preening their facial hair as they do caring for their weapons.

Relations between Solanos Mor and the other Enclaves are cordial, though the Encali are held with contempt because of their religious views. The only true enmity that exists is with the Reavers of Bealak Gempor, a feeling that is felt universally by all the other Enclaves.

Encali – The City of Sorrows

The reputation that many dwarves have of being untrustworthy or duplicitous can be directly traced to the dwarves of Encali.

The Vault of the Encali is situated in the Western Corlathian Mountain range, relatively close to Solanos Mor. In fact, in the early days of the Curse, both Enclaves worked closely together, building an elaborate tunnel system throughout the mountain range connecting the two.

During this period, the two fought together against the Goblin and Troll nations that lived in the Corlathians in three separate conflicts. It was then that the pious dwarves of Solanos Mor discovered, to their horror, the religious views of the Encali.

Contrary to the beliefs held by the dwarves of Solanos Mor, the Encali believe Illiir to be a capricious and unjust god. In their holy psalms, Illiir is called the Castigator. It is Sarish who is held in the greatest esteem as the Redeemer of the dwarves due to the bargain He offered.

Thus, priests of Illiir are rare in the City of Sorrows whereas Sarishan priests abound. Many of these priests specialize in the binding of Outsiders, but it is Sarish's aspect as the oathmaker that the majority of those from Encali take to heart.

Given that the average dwarf lives for four to five hundred years, the normal lifespan of a human is over in the blink of an eye. The Encali dwarves take advantage of their longevity and play upon a human being's nature to think only of the moment and not in generational terms.

A human warrior may be approached by an Encali and offered an item of great prowess or magical ability that could be of great help in the resolution of the current crisis. In return, he asks nothing from the human but a pledge that his grandchildren will honor a boon asked of them in the future. Most humans will readily sign the contract, not knowing if he will even have children, let alone grandchildren and go off to some epic battle.

The Encali, of course, bides his time and eventually will come to collect his due. With the honor of the family name and line at stake, most descendents will agree to honor their grandsire's obligation, cursing the old man for his shortsightedness; the same shortsightedness that the Encali counted upon. These "transactions" are normally targeted to the noble houses whose reputations are as dear to them as the very land they control.

The Encali Master Artisans excel at the crafting of jewelry, both magical and mundane. Pendants, rings, amulets and necklaces designed and created by the House of Setai are sought after, especially by the Coryani, who have more extravagant tastes than most.

When not holding a contract in one hand and the “bait” in the other, most Encali may be recognized by their unique style of beard. Usually pitch black in color, the beards are fashioned to resemble two forks, capped on each end with an ornate crown, giving the dwarves the sinister look that they relish.

Toltipet – The Wailing City

Crowning the relatively low Aqtau Mountains, Toltipet is a city of contradictions. Renowned as a city of academic study, it birthed one of the most feared and bloody scourges Onara has ever seen. The dwarves of Toltipet are one of the most open and gentle of all the Enclaves, yet are viewed with suspicion and fear due to their unusual habit of covering their bodies with mystical tattoos.

Since falling under the Curse, the Enclave of Toltipet distanced themselves from the other Dwarven communities. After a long and hazardous trek, they settled in the remote Aqtau Mountains and reflected upon their future.

Since the time when they still walked the land as Giants, those that would eventually inhabit Toltipet had a singular talent: the ability to pierce the veil of time. Since then, the oracular powers of the Toltipetans have become legendry, rivaling even the val'Sheem from Savona.

As with any people who are stricken with a persisting tragedy, the dwarves are obsessed with the day when the Curse will be lifted. Larissa, the Giver of Hope, has granted the Toltipetan oracles their ability to predict future events, but has barred their divining sight from foretelling when the Day of Redemption shall come and for whom.

This limitation has not stopped these oracles from being highly regarded and held with some reverence by all the dwarves. Though barred from exact details, some gifted oracles may be able to discern if a dwarf will play a key role or be instrumental in the lifting of the curse. The craftsman Elabac of Solanos Mor was one such being identified, but whether this means that Elabac himself will create the perfect item or if his technique merely points another in the right direction, is unknown.

The dwarves of Toltipet are a highly superstitious folk and have adopted the practice of tattooing their

bodies with mystical runes and symbols. It is not unusual to see an adult Toltipetan completely covered with these symbols, with hardly any skin left uncovered. Some even whisper that these dwarves have discovered how to infuse some of these runes with magical properties, but the truth of this is unknown at present time.

Due to their predilection for body tattoos, most Toltipetan dwarves wear their beards very short and close. This has resulted in other dwarves sneering at their symbolic lack of virility, but only when these mystical dwarves are out of earshot.

Some amongst the dwarves of Toltipet, born without the gift of “far-sight,” nonetheless are enthralled with the notion of predicting future events. One of these dwarves, Caltin by name, reasoned that since the Gods moved and lived among the stars, then the movements of these stars could foreshadow future events.

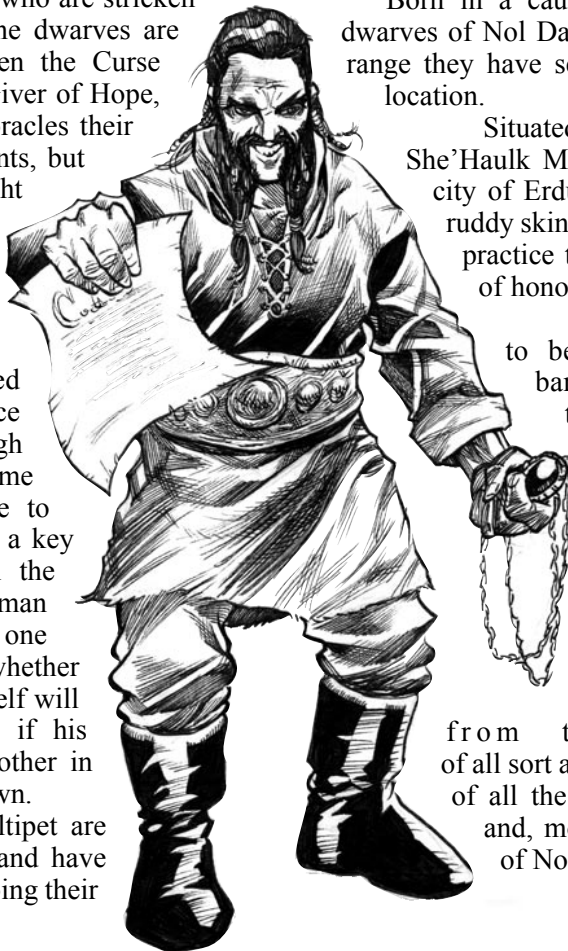
Upon the highest peak of the Aqtau she constructed an observatory with which the movements of the heavens could be tracked, studied and interpreted. To this day, scholars from all across Onara visit the Caltin Observatory, wishing to delve deeper into the secrets of the universe and gaze upon the face of the gods.

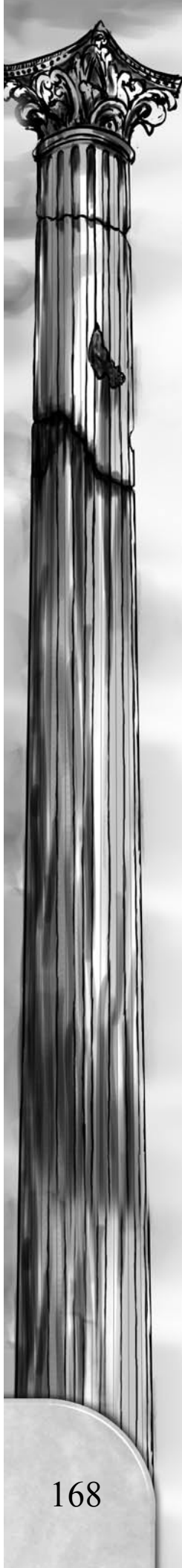
Nol Dappa – The City of the Thousand Laments

Born in a cauldron of pure flame, the dwarves of Nol Dappa thrive in the volcanic range they have selected as their Enclave's location.

Situated within the very active She'Haulk Mountains, near the human city of Erduk in the Hinterlands, the ruddy skinned dwarves of Nol Dappa practice their own particular brand of honor.

Considered by some to be nearly as savage and barbaric as the Horsemen tribes of the region, those from Nol Dappa are acknowledged as having the sophistication and skill necessary to build a city considered an architectural wonder by most. Within its Vault, the city itself is not hewn from the living rock, rather metals of all sort are used in the construction of all the dwellings, public offices and, most importantly, the Forge of Nol Dappa.





The Forge is the grandest and largest furnace in existence. Using the very flames and magma of the volcano to heat and smelt metal, the creations of the Master Artisans of this Enclave are singularly marked by a reddish tinge. Called Nier's Breath, regardless of the type of metal used in its crafting, all the weapons and armor have the same ruddy sheen, marking it as from Nol Dappa.

The weapons and armor that Nol Dappa's artisans are famous for are not like the elegant and light blades forged in Solanos Mor, but are created to inspire fear at its very sight. Barbed, with jagged edges and vicious hooks, weapons from here look as if they should belong in the hand of an Infernal Demon Prince. The armor also bears this design style, bristling with spikes and razor sharp edges.

The Nol Dappans feel that of all of the God's philosophies, that of Nier serves them best. They see Illiir's Curse as a crucible from which only the very best of the Enclaves will survive to regain their status and stature. By enduring the unending heat and harshest of environments that Onara has to offer, the Nol Dappans feel that they will be the ones to survive, while the other Enclaves return to the dust of ages.

A Nol Dappan can be easily recognized by his heat-baked skin color and unkempt, singed beard. Rarely covering their barrel chests, they are perpetually coated with a layer of ash and grime that many say even all the waters of Yarris could not wash away.

Gruff and morose, a Nol Dappan is rare to openly explode with anger. Instead, true to his homeland, he simmers and churns until he eventually explodes in an orgy of death and destruction. Even the deadly Reavers carefully plan their raids upon Nol Dappa, as even one ruddy dwarf can lay waste to an entire attack squad.

Tir Betoq – The City of the Mourners of Glory

Considered to be as noble and self-sacrificing as those from Solanos Mor, the dwarves from Tir Betoq are the unsung heroes of Arcanis. They are also quite humble as a people and avoid recognition as a matter of honor.

These modest dwarves reside in the far corner of the Known Lands, in the northern escarpments of the Lhauzyr Mountain Range, west of the League of Princes. Though tucked away in that far corner of the continent, they may also be found traveling throughout the Coryani Empire as they make their way to the outposts carved into the Wall of the Gods.

As remorseful as the dwarves of Solanos Mor, they also attempt to seek redemption by fulfilling the obligations of their ancestors. But unlike the Penitents of Illiir, they feel that the Time

of Terror was a test from the King of the Gods and that they should follow the teachings of Hurrian, acting as the Defenders of Man.

To accomplish this, they travel throughout the lands of Man, looking for signs of the Infernal. When found, their tenants teach them *"they shall suffer none of the tainted to live."* This attitude has lead to some tense moments when dealing with the Dark-kin of an area.

While ferreting out Infernal contamination within human society is deemed important, nothing overshadows the significance of the Sentinel Outposts carved into the Wall of the Gods. The dwarven warriors stationed in these remote and desolate citadels stand vigil against any incursions from *beyond* the God Wall.

Occasionally, small groups of powerful Infernals have attempted to negotiate the treacherous and almost non-existent trails through the Wall of the Gods and bedevil again the children of the Gods. By standing guard here, these selfless dwarves form the first line of defense against a repeat of the Time of Terror and the possible enslavement of all humanity.

To the observant, a dwarf from Tir Betoq can be easily distinguished by the manner in which his beard is elaborately braided and wound with strands of pure gold. The other trait common to the inhabitants of this Enclave are the sunken, haunted eyes that have witnessed the horrors of what lies beyond the Wall first hand.

Oddly enough, these battle-scarred beings are best known for their exquisite glassware. Delicate items of all types and designs are traded with the Shadow Towns of the League of Princes and beyond.

Unique among all these items are the Swords of Air fashioned by Tir Betoq's Master Craftsman. Blades of all sizes and types can be found looking and feeling as if they were made of the purest glass, yet enchanted to have the strength of steel.

Only the Master Artisan, Qoe, who believed he had fashioned the object decreed by Sarish, knew the secret of its creation. But when he presented the blade to the Heartstone gem of the Enclave's Elder, the Curse remained in effect. Despondent, Master Qoe disappeared into the wasteland beyond the Lhauzyrs, never to be seen again. The twelve enchanted Swords of Air he forged before he vanished are all that remain of his work.

Deneki – The City of Tears

Where Deneki originally lay is lost to the sands of time. Where its people were forced to rebuild their city is known only to a rare few outside of the dreaded Isle of Ymandragore.

These proud dwarves were unique among their people as they had an inordinate amount of

magicians and sorcerers in their population. Naturally, their natural talents turned to the crafting of the most wondrous of magical items, particularly wands, rods and scepters of immense power.

Left to their own devices, it is very possible that this Enclave may have been able to craft an item of such splendor that the Curse may have been lifted from them. Unfortunately, this possible future was negated because of the lust of one "man" and the jealousy of one dwarf.

Junik looked and was raised like any other dwarf in Deneki; in all respects he was the same as all the other citizens of the Enclave. The same, that is, in all but one aspect. Junik hadn't been born with "the Gift."

Try as he might, he could neither manifest the power from within himself nor learn the complex equations necessary to bend the laws of reality to his will. In a city of the Arcanely gifted, Junik was ridiculed for his obvious shortcomings. Pride burning from the endless stream of contempt, he left the Vault, roaming the lands of Man for years.

Eventually, Junik found himself pouring his heart out to a complete stranger at a tavern in Savona. He couldn't quite remember why he had felt so at ease with the strange little human, but before Illiir's light broke the night's hold upon the firmament, Junik and Teljeri hoNordi of Ymandragore were fast friends.

HoNordi convinced Junik that the Sorcerer-King could grant him his fondest wish, the ability to wield magic. All he wished in return was to punish the Enclave of Deneki for their own hubris. After all, didn't he agree that his countrymen deserved that for all the years of torment they heaped upon him?

The exact manner in which Junik was able to enter the square where the statue of the Elder lay and take the Heartstone gem unopposed is unknown to all but the conspirators. What can be told is that the day after, emissaries from Ymandragore arrived before the bewildered and panicked people of Deneki and issued an ultimatum. Having no other choice but face a slow agonizing death, the people of Deneki marched to the waiting ships of the Black Fleet and traveled to their new home.

Once there, those who were artisans were forced to craft their wares solely for the Sorcerer-King's use, while everyone else was consigned to work in the Life Mines. Junik was granted his wish and taught the secret's of the Wine Drinkers' power. He now lords over his former tormentors, demanding they call him master. To his frustration the only title they gave him was Betrayer!

Reavers of Bealak Gempor, The Doom of All

Shortly after the founding of the Toltpetan Vault, a dwarf by the name of Urkis rose from the ranks of these peaceful people and began to rile against the injustices committed against them. He played

upon their fears and resentment, preaching to anyone within reach his vision for redemption. At first, he was tolerated and even politely heard, but eventually he and his small band of converts were ostracized and finally exiled.

Undeterred, this charismatic warrior traveled from Enclave to Enclave spreading his philosophy of hate and vengeance. Time after time, his group of radicals was forced to leave but always a bit larger than when they first arrived.

Finally, the Hate-Monger arrived at the furthest Enclave of the dwarves, in the distant island of Ghauma, in the region now known as the Pirate Isles. There, Urkis was surprised to find that he was welcomed and his speeches were well received. Those that lived in this Enclave also resented their new place in the order of things and longed for the days of yore when they ruled as gods and were feared by all.

These bitter dwarves cursed Illiir vehemently and scoffed at Sarish's offer. Were they trained animals to jump through hoops, hoping that it would please their masters and earn them a small pat on the head?

For better or for worse, Urkis preached, this is the form they now held. They would mock the gods by not only accepting their Curse, but also thriving because of it.

They contemptuously viewed their fellows of the other Enclaves as no better than mongrels, devoid of any personal pride or honor. The chance that any of these could eventually be redeemed and given back their original form, burned in the pit of their stomachs.

The Reavers, as they began to call themselves, resolved to deny their brethren even the slightest possibility from breaking the Curse. Attacks upon the Enclaves were launched, targeting their greatest Artisans and leaders. Eventually, the Reavers began to prey upon any dwarf they came across, slaying and spreading terror across all Onara.

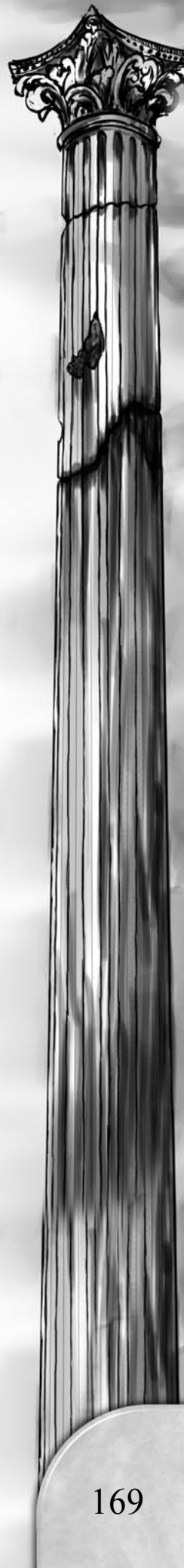
They held a special place in their putrid hearts, of course, for humans. These weak, pathetic beings, it was preached, were the reason for their current state. As they were the cause of the Celestial Giant's cursed condition, then the Reavers in turn would be a blight upon theirs.

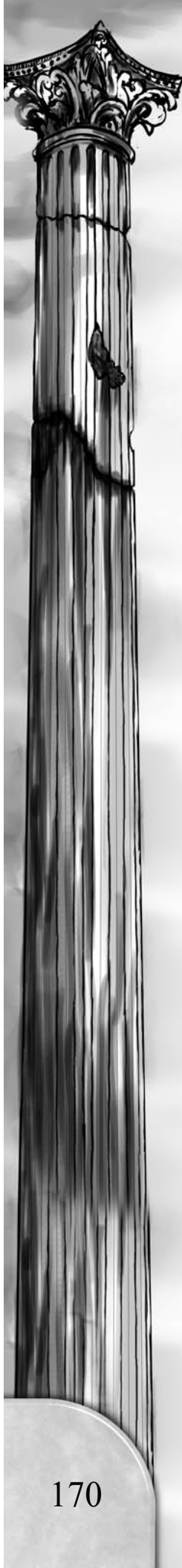
"Death to all humans!" became the Reavers' battle cry.

Urkis urged his fellow Reavers to abandon their Enclave, returning only as necessary to bask in the shameful light of their original Elder. By becoming a nomadic band, they would deny the hated humans and their Dwarven protectors a target.

"Join me," he urged, "and become a force unseen upon Arcanis, a true scourge upon all Mankind."

Before abandoning their city, Urkis demanded one last sacrifice to prove their devotion.





All the Dwarven cities were created with vaulted ceilings and doorways, in the hopes that when the Day of Redemption came, they would not be trapped beneath the earth as they assumed their previous size. To prove that they had truly rid themselves of that hope, all adult Reavers encase themselves in still glowing hot armor and have it riveted shut. If they were ever to be freed from the Curse, the metal shell would crush them before they were to take their first breathe as giants.

Other giants eventually discovered the empty city and settled there, wisely allowing the Reavers to come and go unmolested.

Luckily, the Reavers have not been as successful as Urkis wished. Their numbers have been dwindling of late, the result of poor leadership since Urkis died, and they have taken to kidnapping dwarven babes to replenish their ranks.

Gnomes – The Greatest Shame

Rare is the gift of true love between two people. Many barriers must be overcome, overlooked and, if all else fails, compromised upon. If the two are of the same race, these obstacles to love can be surmounted. Imagine if you will the love between two people of completely different species or races.

When prejudices and preconceived notions are eliminated, it is possible for the two to share their love and bear the embodiment of their union in the form of an offspring.

Imagine then the horror and astonishment when the two lovers are a human and a dwarf, and their issue is the abomination known as a Gnome. Twisted in shape, abhorrent in nature, to even gaze upon it is an arduous task. Why the offspring of a human and a dwarf always gives birth to such a monstrosity is well known to the dwarven parent: The Curse!

Many believe that if Illiir was enraged when the Celestial Giants merely attempted to rule over humanity, then he must be in a frothing fury at the thought of these duplicitous curs mating with his beloved children.

The Gnomes, as they have come to be known to all, are a symbol of great shame and disgust. Even in this modern and enlightened age, the thought of crossing the unspoken barrier of species is one polite society cannot abide. The twisted form of a Gnome is all the proof a detractor needs to validate his stance, for if the Gods have cursed the issue of the union, then how can any believe it is correct. On the contrary, he would say, the act is blasphemous in the eyes of the Gods. Of course, there are some, notably Larissan adherents to the Goddess' Forbidden Pleasures aspect that thrive on doing what is taboo. In other cases, the conception of a Gnome is done under duress. Regardless of the circumstances, Gnomes

are at best barely tolerated in either human or dwarven society.

Gnomes, like all other intelligent beings, are neither innately evil nor good. Some are kind-hearted and generous while others have hearts as black as Cadic's soul.

Due to their marginalized position within either society, Gnomes tend to be drawn to those vocations, which may be considered shady by some. Those who have "the Gift" usually see the art of illusions as a way of hiding their vile form. Cadic, not Illiir, sings to their hearts and Gnome priests usually find comforts in his tenants.

To the horror of many, it has been discovered that Gnomes breed true, their offspring having all the same traits as the parents. While many, especially the dwarves, strongly advocate that Gnomes should be kept from breeding, a dissenting voice has appeared from an unexpected quarter.

A radical sect of Dwarven priests of Beltine suggests that the only way to save the Dwarven race is to allow the Gnomes to flourish. As fewer and fewer true dwarves are born each generation, the Gnome population appears to be quite healthy. Perhaps this transmutation is merely another layer of Illiir's Curse and should be accepted as inevitable.

Many a sleepless night has resulted from this theory.

Day 417 I take my leave of Oriss and Solanos Mor. The wonders of the past year have given me more raw information than any scholar may study in a lifetime. I have written pages upon pages in my journal, which is now as thick as my middle has become thanks to the excellent cooking skills of Oriss' wife.

The Dwarven people are as complex and varied as any human. I count myself lucky to have had many of my preconceived ideas burned away in the crucible of truth as advocated my Lord Althares.

An adage that my instructor back at the Academy used to say, keeps resounding in my head and seems a most appropriate summary for my stay here in Solanos Mor: *The more I learn, the less I know*. A fitting subtitle to any academic paper.

But mine must wait until I return from another expedition. I am sending by courier my journals and notes on what I have seen here amongst the dwarves. A full report will have to wait as I am off to ancient Nishanpur, there to acquire the services of an astounding historian, who also happens to be a Nerothian priest. Then we're off to the greatest archeological site known to Man: The Catacombs of the First City.

I can hardly wait!

The Elorii

From the records of Polon val'Holryn, Court Scribe of His Most Resplendent Majesty, Osric II, King of Milandir, Duke of Naeraanth, Keeper of Oaths, Defender of the Meek

The testimony of Olisand of Seltemeris, Sage and Friend to the Elorii

12th of Glorious Summer Tide, Lunar Year 1021

Fair greetings and good health to his Gracious Majesty, King Osric,

It is for the fulfillment of his Majesty's wishes and pleasure that I deliver unto him this humble treatise that speaks of matters not known to common folk. Your Majesty must forgive me for broaching this matter so concisely, but I have great hopes it will not be taken lightly, and will be received with direst candor. It is that which has been my life's work and knowledge, and is relevant to the matters that should indeed concern the Great Princes of Onara, insomuch as it relates to their current and attendant affairs of state.

Hear me, O' King, for I speak of the noble race of Elorii, or elves as they often mistakenly called, whose recent return among the people of Onara concerns your Majesty so.

Save for the Ssethregore, the Elorii folk are the eldest race prevailing to this day. In those most ancient of times, Elorii served the

Serpent-folk as slaves. Your Majesty of course knows something of the cruelty and wickedness of the primordial Ssethregore, so I will not yet speak further of it, only to say that it served to provoke the Elorii to break the bonds of slavery and eventually drive their masters into the swamps, reducing them to what they are now.

That this occurred, there is no doubt, for there are Elorii today that remember these times. Yes, what your Majesty may have heard is true – the Elorii are, as they say, "ealas" – immortal. For certain, they may be killed, but they do not grow old and die as other races do. Like the dragons of old, their power only increases with time. Sickness cannot claim them, nor sleep. How can this be? Though the Elorii say they are "of this world," they are also, in part, unnatural. Elorii claim decent directly from their Gods, from whom they were first-born during a time long forgotten, when the ancestors of the Serpentmen that live in the Altheran Peninsula ruled Onara. That I say *first-born* at that time is significant, for according to the their religion, when an Elorii dies, its spirit travels to a place beyond the heavens, which they call Orumar, or Soulspring, where it waits to be reborn on Arcanis. Thus, every Elorii that lives has lived before – some even recall their former selves; most have at least faint memories of lifetimes before.





When an Elorii is born, it issues from the womb of a mother-Elorii, in much the same way we humans come into the world. Childbirth is an important religious event, and is considered among the Elorii to be a rare blessing. A Priest, or Lifewarden, as they are called, is always present to discern which Elorii-spirit is being reborn. This determination is reached by reading the alignments of the stars, and comparing those with the extensive record of previous births housed in their Temple. The God to which the child is most closely related is also evident at this time. Curiously, the child's parentage has nothing to do with the new Elorii's Divine Bloodline, which will be the same as that of its first incarnation. To the trained eye, this is visible in the newborn's overall appearance.

Physically, Elorii grow quickly, reaching adulthood in about ten years. Elorii are nearly as tall as humans, and stand just less than six feet in height. The exceptions are the Great or High Elorii. Every thousand years, Elorii undergo another growth cycle, so the eldest of them are very tall, some exceeding seven feet. All Elorii are slender, graceful creatures of surpassing beauty – a testament to their heritage, for the Gods which created the Elorii are said to have been both Elemental and Spiritual in nature. Their eyes are wide and bright, their features smooth, angular, and flawless, their ears long and pointed. Their teeth are white and sharp, with a hint of the fangs possessed by elemental creatures of lore. The color of an Elorii's hair or eyes can vary according to its Bloodline – the God to whom the Elorii is most closely related.

The Elorii Gods are no more, save one. In the time before men came to Onara they lived among their people in towering cities of white marble. They were:

Keleos – God of Fire, also called the Devourer, or the Shadow-Smiter – those of his blood are called Kelekene.

Beröe – Goddess of the Rivers and Sea, also called the Water Maiden – those of her blood are called Berokene.

Mârok – God of the Earth, also called the Unmoving – those of his blood are called Mârokene.

Osalian – God of the Wind, also called the Storm-King – those of his blood are called Osalikene.

Belisarda – Goddess of Life, considered the Mother of the Elorii, and wife to the other Gods, even Beröe. – Those of her blood are called Ardakene.

Of these five, only Belisarda lives. The rest, Elorii say, fell victim to treachery at the hands of the Gods of Men. I realize this must sound impossible, your Majesty, but there is not a living Elorii that does not hold this to be true. To understand, one must learn of Elorii history. For certain, your Majesty is aware of some of this. I most humbly beg forgiveness where I repeat what is already known.

The Forgotten Age

Millennia before man appeared on Onara, an empire of humanoid reptiles known as the Ssethregore ruled the land. They were masters of Elemental magics, unmatched in skill even to the present day. In time, the Ssethregore grew decadent, and began to deem themselves above labor and other menial tasks. Because of this, they summoned Elementals to do their bidding. These creatures, though strong, proved to be of limited intellect, and had the troublesome habit of returning to their plane of origin after completing

the chores assigned to them. Wizards of the ruling *Ssaanu* Caste, ancestors of the present-day Yuan-Ti, quickly grew weary of the incessant summoning rituals that were required to maintain the work force. Longing for an end to what they had come to see as drudgery, they wished to join the other Ssaanu in their debauched revelries. Eventually a conclave of wizards gathered from all over the Empire to discuss the problem. It was determined that a more permanent source of workers was necessary.

Thus, the assembled Imperial Wizards began a ritual meant to summon Elemental entities of such power as had never before been seen on this plane of existence. One such Great Lord was brought forth for each of the four Elements. The reptiles entreated them to provide a race of slaves, and in exchange the Ssethregore agreed to allow these newly created servitors to worship these Lords freely as Gods. In addition, they presented an offering, the Orb of Ancar, a relic of power from a previous Age, said to hold a primal Nature Spirit within its crystalline heart. The Otherworldly beings, sensing the great energy within the artifact, and intrigued at the prospect of an entire race of beings paying them homage, agreed to grant the Ssethregore's request. They then used their combined energies to shatter the Orb. The Spirit – a manifestation of Life Energy and the Natural Forces native to this Plane, once released, gave the Elemental entities a permanent foothold on Arcanis. They could come and go from this world as they wished.

Using sorceries now long forgotten, the Ssethregoreic Mages then created a great Nexus, though which the Lords combined their essences with that of the Nature Spirit, creating the first of the race known as the Elorii. For a hundred days and nights the ritual continued, until a thousand-thousand Elorii stood, ready to serve their new masters. The new Gods then took the Nexus from Arcanis and set it at the point where their respective home-realms touched. From this time, when an Elorii died, the elemental parts of its soul would recombine at this place, which the Elorii call the *Orumar*, or Soulspring, to return to this world through the womb of a mother-Elorii.

Enslavement

The Elorii served the Ssethregore faithfully for centuries, and their efforts increased the prestige of the Ssethregore a hundred-fold. Enemy cities were razed, great nations felled, and a dozen elder races were put, in their entirety, to the sword in the name of the reptilian Empire. Once their dominance was assured, the tyranny

and evil of the Ssaanu was multiplied. With nothing left to conquer, the Ssethregore resorted to acts of foulness and depravity that would make a Canceriman cringe. The reptiles, at first overjoyed with their new servants, now grew tired of them, and took to inflicting unspeakable cruelties and tortures upon them. Eventually, Elorii were routinely put to death in horrific and unthinkable ways for public entertainment. When the Elorii appealed to their Gods for deliverance, the Ssethregore outlawed worship of them, and ordered the shrines the slaves had erected for them destroyed.

The Elorii prayers would be answered however, in the form of an Elorii called *Salos*.

Savior

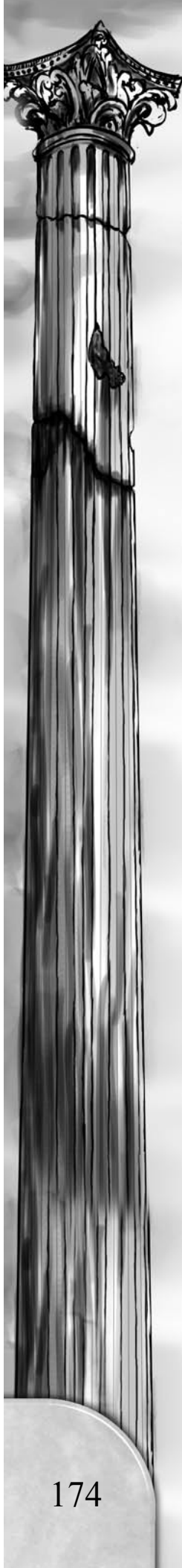
In the centuries Salos had served the High Wizards of the Ssethregore, he learned much of their magic. Although practice of the arcane arts was forbidden amongst the Elorii – and not thought possible by the Ssaanu – the brazen openness with which the competing High Wizards wielded their spells allowed a keen observer like Salos to gain great insight into the nature of the reptilians' Elemental Sorcery. In time, Salos was made the personal slave of the Great High Wizard himself – an ancient Ssaanu called *Sskoreth*.

It is not the nature of Elementals to require sleep. Such is true of the Elorii, which the Ssethregore felt to be a great boon, for it maximized the work hours their slaves accomplish in a given day. It was also to Salos's advantage, for while the venerable serpent slept, all of his arcane lore lay before the Elorii. Wisdom of ages past, the accumulated mystical knowledge of an Empire that had stood for thousands of years – all this he made his own, and all the while he carefully taught other Elorii what he had learned. Magics of incalculable power, including methods that could be used to enchant weapons, armor, or other items were now at Salos's command. The Elorii's inner circle soon included most of the slaves in the Hall of the High Wizards, eventually reaching Commanders in the Slave Legions of the Imperial Army, and even extending beyond the walls of the Ssethregoreic capitol to Elorii in key positions in other reptilian cities. A plan to liberate the Elorii would be crafted and refined over the course of a century.

The Battle – Translated from the Elorii Epic, Salosiames (Ballad of Salos)

Late at night, as time for the start of the Rebellion drew near, Sskoreth, High Wizard of





the Ssethregore awoke from dreams of smoke and death to discover Salos in his spell chamber, enchanting a blade with a serpent-killing charm. An incredulous Sskoreth could not believe his eyes. *An Elorii wielding magic?* What heresy was this? The very concept was unthinkable! Aghast at the mere idea of a spell-weaving slave, the great snake lashed out with a bolt meant to cripple Salos, leaving him writhing in pain for questioning, but Salos deflected it away with a potent defensive enchantment. Furious, Sskoreth let fly a killing spell, but Salos, even as drained as he was from his labors over the sword, again magically shielded himself from harm.

Thoughts raced through the old wizard's mind. How could this be? What bargain had his people made with the Elementals that could lead to this? What had they done? One thing was certain – this abomination had to be destroyed, no matter what the cost. With a hiss, the High Wizard unleashed a hailstorm of lethal magics that raged at Salos like a dragon berserk, shaking the whole of the Hall itself. Still, the Great Elorii stood before him.

"Fool sslave!" the wizard bellowed, before regaining his composure. "Ssooo... ssome of the Magicss, you have learned... ssurprising, thiss... trickss of the Elementalss, yess... but it iss a ssmall matter... You have committed the ultimate ssin... Now you will pay the price...."

"You speak to me of sin?" the Elorii replied, "You who have reveled in the deaths of millions? You who have abandoned your own gods for the favor of dark powers and the promise of eternal supremacy? You who have enslaved all you would not destroy? No, I will not hear of sin from you. My people's greatest sin was to do your bidding for so long. But no longer – the tyranny of the Ssethregore ends here and now."

"Impertinensse!" Prepare yourself for death, sslave! We sshall ssee just how powerful you have become," roared Sskoreth.

"I am tired of talking, serpent. If you mean to finish this, come at me now and do not hold back. I am ready for you."

As the battle between master and slave heightened, the walls of the city began to shake. Fire and lightning raged through the ancient Hall. Explosions thundered throughout the city, toppling sickly-green marble columns and shattering granite walls with childlike ease. Great fissures erupted throughout the streets and spread outside the walls into the surrounding countryside. The rumbling caused by the war between the two great mages could be felt all over Onara. Throughout the Empire, Elorii took this as a sign from their Gods, and began to attack the

Ssethregore. Everywhere but the Capitol. There, a throng of reptiles and Elorii gathered before the mighty edifice as the battle raging within rapidly destroyed what was once the center of sorcerous power on Arcanis. Plumes of pure eldritch fire cascaded upward into the night air, causing the sky to bleed an awful crimson before turning black from smoke. Then there was a rush of air, followed by a huge thunderclap, which seemed to roll on for an eternity before subsiding. Nothing further emanated from the ruined Hall, a great cloud of smoke and ash.

As the thunder faded and the conflagration dimmed, a silhouette could be seen making its way through the rubble.

The High Wizard, his shriveled form spent by the combat, dropped the Elorii's lifeless body in disgust. "Here... iss your ssalvation," he said to the crowd, gasping for breath.

The corpse tumbled through the ruins before coming to rest before the mob, at the feet of a soldier from in the Slave Legion, an Elorii named Auros.

Whispers arose from the mob, "That is Salos!" "Salos has fallen!" "We are lost!"

"Learn... from... this!" Sskoreth wheezed. "Death iss... the price... for defiansse..."

Auros would hear no more. With tears in his eyes, he drew his sword and charged the Ssethregoreic mage, shouting "For Salos... freedom!"

Sskoreth raised a clawed hand and prepared to smite this new offender, but the Elorii's approach was quick, and just as the old serpent was about to release his spell, he stumbled. Auros did not hesitate. His blade tore through the scarred and bloody hide of the Ssethregore like an angry beast. In seconds, he had cut the High Wizard to pieces.

A roar went up from the crowd. Everywhere, Elorii turned on serpent. The fighting spread like a wildfire through the city, cries of "For Salos! Freedom!" echoed on every street.

In a short time, the Ssethregore were defeated. Their Emperor's head lie perched atop a long spear displayed in front of the ruins of the Imperial Palace. Those reptiles that survived the slaughter fled east, where they were met by the Slave Legion and driven into the swamps.

The Golden Time

The Elorii chose as their leaders those that had distinguished themselves in some way during the rebellion. Auros, now called the Avenger, was among them. Others chosen included Telas, a close friend of Salos's within the Hall, and a master of Sorcery in his own right, and Relios, a Captain from the Slave Legion. It was he that cleaved the

head of the Ssaanu Emperor after battling through his bodyguards. The scene was similar in other former Ssethregoreic cities. The first act of this Ruling Council was the abolishment of slavery in any form. The second was to order the rebuilding of the city. All intact Ssethregoreic structures were brought down and a new city rose on the ruin of the old – one of magnificent spiraling towers and enormous domes of brass and gold. The Elorii called it Belestor, which means “The Shining Home.”

During the construction, among the remains of the High Wizards Hall, a sword blade with a twisting runed pattern etched upon it was recovered. The curiosity was brought before the Council, where Telas recognized it immediately – the sword Salos had been working on the night he died. The blade was affixed with a golden hilt fashioned for it by Ferelas, the greatest craftsman in the city. Named Kelisar (literally, Serpent-Eater), it was given a place of honor in the Council Hall.

Outside, a monument was erected in memory of the races the Ssethregore had ordered exterminated. A great oak tree was planted for each, twelve in all. The Council decreed that, from this time, when or if the Elorii encountered another people, they will be offered the hand of friendship, and every effort would be made to live with them in peace.

Lastly, construction began on temples to the Gods. The first completed was to be dedicated to Belisarda. On the day it was anointed in Her name, the Goddess Herself appeared on its steps.

“Your spirit gave you freedom,” she said. “Your actions prove you deserving of it. That you have served the wicked for so long, yet remain unstained by their taint fills me with a mother’s pride at seeing her children grown. I accept this place with joy. It will be my home, for I will always be among my children.”

As the other temples were finished, so the remaining Gods appeared, each in turn repeating Belisarda’s desire to live among the Elorii. So, for centuries, the Elorii lived in peace, in the company of their Gods.

The Serpent Returns

Elorii civilization flourished. Under the tutelage of their Gods, the Elorii at first mastered the elements and the world around them, and then became one with them. To this day, no other race is as attuned to the natural world as Elorii. Their cities grew mightier and even more splendid, and seemed in harmony with the surrounding land.

In the eastern swamps, however, the Ssethregore had prepared for war. In the passing

decades, the serpents had recovered their number, and were amassing an army. Before long, a great horde of scaled soldiers marched on Belestor. For the first time, its great gates were closed. The Ruling Council knew what would happen if the Ssethregore were to breach the walls. The invaders had to be stopped before they could reach the city. After much debate, it was decided that the enemy should be met on the western shore of the Ferilos River, east of the city, with every soldier that could be mustered. The following day, with Relios as General, a hundred thousand Elorii stood on the banks of the river in anticipation of the coming reptilian army.

They would not have to wait long.

That night, the ground trembled to the sound of marching feet. Scouts returning from the far side of the river reported the approach of an army of impossible size. The first rays of the morning sun revealed a host that forced Relios to catch his breath. The land on the opposite shore from the river to the rolling hills a league in the distance was black with swarming reptiles of every imaginable kind. Relios stood in awe. The enemy numbered a million or more. Huge lizardmen made up most of the first ranks, with foul smelling troglodytes massed on the flanks. In the center, coiled Ssaanu rode upon enormous scaled wurms larger than houses. When the sun cleared the horizon, thousands of horns blared from the horde. The great wurms, too, reared back and howled, the sound shattering windows in Belestor, a mile away.

“We must hold!” Relios shouted. “Consider your wives, your families! For them, we cannot allow this scourge to pass! Let us destroy the accursed Serpent now, forever! Belestor!”

The Ssethregore charged.

With a shout, the Elorii met them at the shore of the river. A great grinding could be heard as the two armies met. Relios gutted one of the wurms. Masses of lizards were slain – the Elorii seemed to be holding their ground, then Relios and his guard found themselves in the midst of the enemy, surrounded by wurms and serpents. They fought valiantly, felling dozens of Ssaanu and their monstrous steeds, but there were too many. For every reptile slain, two would be there to take its place. Relios and his guard were quickly overcome, a huge worm devouring the general. All seemed lost as the troglodytes prepared to close in from the flanks and surround the Elorii, when, in the distance, a rider on a white horse could be seen coming from the city. It was Auros, and he carried aloft a sword. As he approached the battle the blade erupted in an emerald fire. It was

Kelisar, taken from its place in the Council Hall.

"Novaras!" he bellowed – Never Forget.

Kelisar sang through the reptilian horde like an enraged demon. Scores of Ssethregore were cut down, their corpses burning with the greenish flame. Encouraged at the sight of the Avenger tearing through the enemy ranks, the Elorii rallied themselves, and doubled their efforts. Reptiles were soon falling by the hundreds.

The troglodytes were the first to break – their awful miasma trailing behind them as they ran – but soon the rout spread to the center, and the whole of the Ssethregoreic host was in full retreat. The Elorii gave pursuit and brought down many as they fled. Those that were not caught made for the eastern swamps, and remained there for centuries under the watchful eye of the Host of One Hundred Thousand.

The following pages are omitted from most copies of the testimony. Those words that are stricken are so on every existing copy, presumably at the insistence of the Mother Church, to prevent heresy from reaching the eyes of those ill-defended against it.

Ealavis Isel Beliketh: The God War and the Great Betrayal

The Elorii enjoyed several more centuries of peace, until a being that the Elorii now call Umor, or "He Who Waits In Darkness" came to Onara from across the sea. Umor brought his followers with him on ships from far away lands. These newcomers were a clumsy, homely people called humans. In accordance with the Council's long-standing decree, they were greeted with friendship, and given a wreath made of branches from each of the Twelve Trees.

Umor wished to speak with each of the Elorii deities, but his speech and manner were those of a madman, and only Belisarda, out of pity, agreed to hear him. He spoke incessantly of a thing he searched for, something he could not identify, but which was of such importance that the fate of Arcanis rested upon his finding it. The Elorii offered to help in his quest, for they knew Onara well, but Umor refused, saying that only Belisarda could help him find it. The Goddess sympathized, but said she would not leave her people, and urged Umor to accept their help.

It was then that more ships began to arrive – by the thousands, bearing more of these strange people to Onara's shores. These hated the ones that had arrived first, and wanted to kill them, but the Elorii would not permit it. They too, were offered the Wreath of Friendship, in

the hope of encouraging them to find a peaceful solution to their dispute. The land was plentiful – certainly there was room for all.

Then, other Gods appeared – eleven in total. Those humans that arrived originally with Umor fled at the sight of these new deities. They had a look of dread purpose about them, and when they approached the Temples, Marôk, Osalian, Beröe and Keleos greeted them. These Gods said they had come for Umor, saying He was indeed mad, and that His goal was the destruction of the other Gods, including those of the Elvish Pantheon. They had to stop him. Surely this could not be, the Elorii Gods said, for Belisarda had felt He was harmless, even kind.

"Who is Belisarda?" the Human Gods asked.

"Her Temple is there," pointed Beröe.

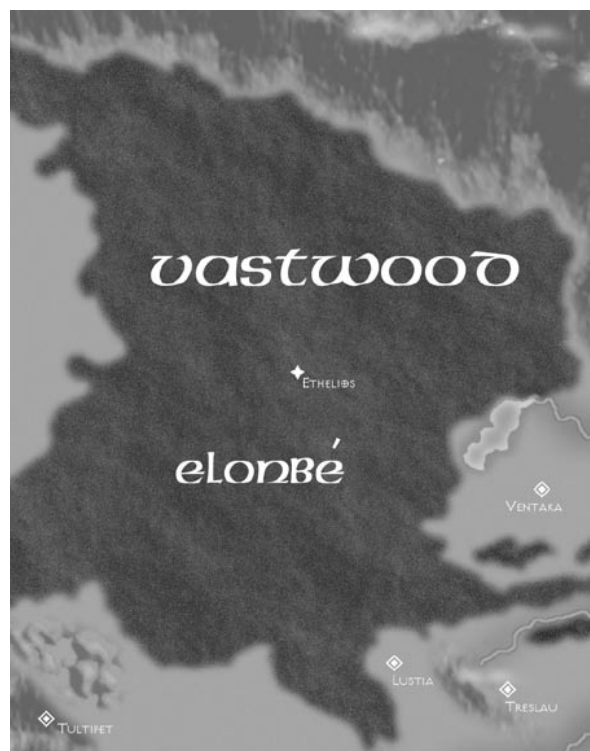
"She has been speaking with your Umor," said Osalian. "They are there, even now."

The Human Gods raced to Belisarda's Temple. The Elorii Gods followed. When they got there no sign of either Belisarda or Umor could be found.

"He has taken Her," said the Human God, Hurrian. "He will destroy Her unless we can find Him."

The Elorii Gods had shared a connection with Belisarda from the time she granted them a home on this plane. They searched for Her, but they could not feel Her presence anywhere on Arcanis.

"She...is gone," said Beröe.



Alliance with the Human Gods

"He will kill her," Hurrian repeated.

"Our battle has become yours," said the Human God Althares. "We should join together. Your bond with your Goddess may be useful in discovering where He has taken Her."

The Elorii Gods saw the sense in this.

"We will comb the land," said Mârok. "No stone, no crack or crevasse will escape our attentions. If Our Lady lives, we will find Her."

While Elorii scouts helped the newly arrived humans track those followers of Umor that had fled into the wilderness, the Deities scoured Onara, looking for sign of Belisarda and the renegade being. As Mârok searched under the mountains, so did Beröe beneath the waves and Osalian among the clouds. When every corner of Arcanis had been searched, Keleos's eyes turned toward the heavens.

"Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong place," he said.

"The green moon?" said the Human God Hurrian, "He is not there. We... have already looked there."

Keleos's eyes narrowed. "And what of the dark moon? Have you been there as well?"

The gathered Immortals regarded each other for a moment, and then left at once for the dark moon. There, at the center of a great desert, stood a citadel of black marble.

"I feel Her," said Beröe.

"As do I," Keleos assented. The two remaining Elorii Gods concurred.

The divine assemblage approached the fortress. "Umor!" bellowed Illir, "We have come! You must face us now! You will return to us what you have taken!"

An assured voice replied from within, "What I have hoped for has at last come to pass. That which I have searched for so long now lies before me. My quest is finished. You may enter, all of you. I submit to your judgment."

Beliketh

"Finally, it is over," said the Goddess Saluwe, and they passed through the doorway. Once inside, the Human Gods turned to face their Elorii counterparts.

"Our thanks," said the God Illir, speaking for the rest. "There is but one last thing you can do for us."

The Human Gods then fell upon the Elorii Deities and murdered them. Their divine essences were torn from their forms and consumed.

In Belestor, the Eternal Flame of Keleos went out. Cracks split the floor in the Temple of Mârok. The Great Pool at the Temple of Beröe ran

dry. At the orchard outside the temple of Osalian, the air was still.

Deep within the citadel, Belisarda felt the bond she shared with the other Gods savagely ripped away, and screamed.

"I am sorry," Umor told Her, "This, I did not foresee, but all is not lost for them. The day will come when we will all be needed. Nevertheless, there is little time...if the others find you here, they will destroy you as well. That I cannot allow. Of all, you alone have truly listened to me. Harken one last time, and remember all that I have told you."

Hurrian heard the scream and smiled. "Perhaps He has finally seen things in the correct light. Alas for Him, He has learned too late. He must pay for His transgressions."

The Gods strode further into the fortress. They found Umor sitting alone in a great, darkened chamber.

"Where is the Goddess of the Elves?" asked Althares.

"She is gone. I have done to Her what you did to the others," Umor lied.

"Do not expect sympathy from us, Umor," Althares said, "and do not take us for fools. You would have done the same to us, given the chance."

"Yes, because I felt I had no choice. It relieves me now to know it was not necessary," the captured God replied.

"Your relief will be short-lived," said Illir. "You are now at our mercy. Have you anything to say?"

"Do what you will to me," Umor said calmly, "but remember that it took all of you together to succeed."

"Your arrogance begs for you to be destroyed," said Nier, "but we will not do that to one of our own. Your fate may, perhaps, be worse."

The being known as Umor was imprisoned for all time. His name was struck from human history. No man may utter it, for fear of the Gods' wrath. From that time forward, he has been known to humans only as the Unspeakable One.

In the wilderness, the humans that had been searching for the renegade Umor's worshippers, at the urging of Priests that had been traveling with them, seized the Elorii that been acting as their guides, and executed them. Roving bands of humans attacked Elorii settlements, killing the villagers and burning their homes, tossing the bodies of the dead on to the flames. Some refugees tried to make their way to the cities, only to be ambushed by more humans, who cut them down in cold blood, leaving their corpses to rot by the roadside.

Outraged at reports of these and other atrocities, the Council sent emissaries to the leaders of the humans, who mostly were Priests. They returned with this message:

“Abandon your cities and leave Onara, lest the killing continue. Our Gods have given this land to us. Your Gods are no more. Leave now, or elf blood will continue to spill, until your race no longer infests Arcanis. This is the will of the True Gods.”

The Elorii went to their temples to beseech their Gods for aid, but received no response. The Priests could offer no explanation – their powers had vanished, too. This was the case at every temple, save one.

Prophecy

In Belestor, daily life as the Elorii knew it had ceased. The people of the city gathered around the temple of Belisarda, looking for a sign the Goddess had not suffered some cruel end, as it seemed the other Gods had. For a day, they waited. No Elorii spoke. The city was silent. The following morning, a figure in white appeared on the steps to the Temple of Belisarda. She was beautiful, even by Elorii standards. No one recognized her, and no one had seen her enter the city.

She spoke, her voice as clear as a lark’s on a quiet morning. It carried throughout the city, and could be heard on every street, in every building, “Hear the words of the Elorii Mother, the Goddess Belisarda. That which you have feared is so. The other Gods are no more. I alone escaped the treachery of the Gods of Man. But they are not forever gone from us. One day,

greater than ever, they will return, and we will have our revenge. Though now is not that time. Here alone, I cannot protect you against the power of all the Gods of Man.

“My beloved children, I doubt neither your courage nor your strength. Were it not for the human’s Gods, the hills would run red with the blood of their servants. But wait until the time is right. And blame not all men for the actions of their Gods, for they too will suffer at their hands. Indeed, there will come a reckoning when humans will be necessary to beat back the silent darkness. Therefore, stay your arm of vengeance, and come instead into my embrace, to the hallowed havens of oak, where I will keep you safe. Leave this land for men, and let it be their place of sorrow.”

Reclusion

In accordance with the words of the Prophetess, the Elorii withdrew to the forests by the thousands, taking with them only what they could carry. Telas was the last Elorii to leave Belestor, personally turning the city over to representatives of the humans. Their first act on reaching the city center was the felling of the Twelve Trees.

Most Elorii settled in what is now called Vastwood, though the mighty forest was considerably larger then. Elorii living in the far south journeyed to the rainforests of the Loreal Coast.

In the East, where the Host of One Hundred Thousand stood guard at the border of the Ssethregore Swamps, small armies of Elorii battled with those of men. Human losses were heavy, but the armies of man were plentiful, and attrition soon wore on the Elorii, many of whom spat the dreaded Kurenthe at their enemy, cursing them at the cost of preventing their own dying spirit from returning to the Orumar. Auros, who had been commanding the Host, rode out in to the midst of one such fray, and ordered the Elorii soldiers to heed the words of the Prophetess and leave this fight for another time. While shouting to the troops, he was hit from behind by a hailstorm of arrows, a score or more piercing his mailcoat. Though the barrage would have felled any lesser Elorii, Auros staggered to his feet. He gave the blade Kelisar to Magros, his Lieutenant, and urged him to get the soldiers away to the eastern forest, where Belisarda could protect them. Magros said he would, but what of



him? Auros took Magros's sword and smiled, blood on his lips. "I will draw their attention while you and the others escape," he said, adding at the last, "Novaras." The great Elorii turned and strode toward the enemy, who concentrated their bowfire on him once again. Auros raced through the cloud of arrows, straight into the heart of the human formation. After ordering the withdrawal, Magros looked back for his commander, losing sight of him until he saw the enemy's leader brought down by the stroke of a sword arm bearing his own blade. "Novaras, old friend," he said to himself, "I will not forget you."

The Elorii that settled the great forests would found the three Elorii nations: Elonbé in the north, Entaris in the south, and Malfelen in the east. In the heart of the Vastwood, in a clearing, they again found the Prophetess, who was called Ardelia. Around that place they built a temple to Belisarda, and about that, a great city amongst the trees. That place is Ethelios the Ever-bright, modeled after their beloved Belestor.

The Elorii remained in wooded seclusion for thousands of years. Events taking place outside their realm were of no concern to them, their sense of purpose wrapped up entirely in facilitating the return of their Gods and preparing for the great conflict where they would avenge themselves on the Gods of Man and their servants. So potent were Belisarda's wards against intrusions from the outside world that the Elorii were unaffected, perhaps even oblivious to the campaigns of the Sword of the Heavens, the Coming of the Witch King, and even the Time of Terror.

Reemergence

In the past year, Elorii calling themselves the Laerestri, or Wanderers, have appeared in the various countries bordering the Vastwood. They have hired out their services as scouts, guards, and soldiers in your Majesty's army and in those of your vassals, as well as those of neighboring states. Their aptitude in the wilderness, combined with their prowess with sword and bow has made them too valuable a tool not to take advantage of. For their part, the Elorii have proven themselves to be worth the price, being instrumental in several victories for your Majesty against both the Imperial Crown and the Barbarian.

Though encounters with Elorii from Elonbé in Vastwood are a late occurrence, the southern Elorii of Entaris have engaged in trade with the people of Lhyllifel for many years. The men of the area worship elemental spirits, and the Elorii, believing them to revere their own deceased Gods, have embraced them as partners in commerce, though they will still not permit

them into their city. Likewise, until recently, they would not venture forth from their lands into those of men, except on their ships. Even then, it is only in the very recent past that they would allow their sailors off-ship while docked at a human port. As for the Elorii of Malfelen in eastern Coryan, they still do not leave their wood unless it is to hunt, their prey of choice being either men of the Empire to the west of the forest, or more commonly, the Serpentmen to the east.

As for why, after all this time, some have chosen to leave the wood, there are a number of possibilities. One might first suspect a combination of boredom with the life they had known, and curiosity of the world outside. More likely, however, something has happened within Elonbe to trigger this. Perhaps the time of which the Prophetess spoke is at hand. One thing is certain – those Elorii which have come among us either do not share the hatred of Man held by the others of their kind, or have suppressed it.

For whatever purpose the Elorii have come, it is my most sincere hope this information will serve your Majesty. Forgive me sire, for I have grown quite weary from all of this. My health, I fear, is not what it once was so many years ago when I first met with the Elorii as a child. Your Majesty, forgive me, as I can continue no more today. I must rest.

Olisand of Seltemeris died in the early morning hours of the 13th of Summertide, 1021. Having grown up among the Elorii of the Vastwood, and subsequently educated at the University of Naeraanth, he was the foremost human authority on Elorii. His testimony is still referred to today when dealing with the forest folk. Though much of it is seen as incomplete, erroneous, or even heretical at times, no better treatise can be found on the subject of this still mysterious race.

Family and Bloodkine

Elorii essentially have two families. First is the one they were born into, which includes their parents and any brothers or sisters (though the vast majority of Elorii have no siblings); and the second is those that share the Elorii's bloodline.

Bloodkine, as they are known, are as important to Elorii as birth family, and Elorii young spend a large part of their early years with them. Gathering halls for each of the bloodlines are built into the temples, where the descendants of the appropriate God relax, share ideas, discuss current events, or engage in a number of leisure activities. The young are instructed in drawing on



the power inherent in their blood. In many ways, an Elorii's relationship with his bloodkine is similar to a human craftsman's with his guild, or a monk or knight to the brothers of his particular order. An offense against another of one's blood is taken personally, even if it is committed by another Elorii.

Though elven blood contains essences from all of the Gods, it is largely a mixture of that of the Life Goddess Belisarda and one other. Whichever God this happens to be determines the Elorii's bloodline. There are five:

The **Marokenes** are those of the blood of the Earth God, Mârok, and are typically the stoutest of Elorii. Their hair and eyes tend to be brown or gray. They may appear reserved or stoic at times, even stubborn. Marokenes are rarely subtle, preferring to be direct and to the point and prefer the company of other folk that share the same qualities. Those Laerestri of Marok's blood find that they get along well with the stout and honorable Milandisians.

Marokenes tend to favor roles that involve hunting, farming, and the natural labors of the land, along with basic crafting professions that require patience, remote locales, endurance, or great strength, such as roving rangers, hunters, trappers, masons, and sculptors.

The Halls of Marok

These primal gathering halls are usually in natural amphitheaters, or in caves, but sometimes they are heavily sculpted and worked thick stone buildings built partially underground. Natural rock formations and caverns are accentuated by design and accompanied by huge crystalline formations or polished stone pillars adorned with statuary. The scent of loamy earth is all-pervasive.

Activities, discussions, and events reflect the Marokene mindset; crops and farming, the weather, animals, or beasts encountered in the forest, as well as the other denizens that dwell nearby. Sometimes martial contests akin to wrestling or monkish techniques are held, along with bardic tales of the forests, battles or rare encounters within the wood, accompanied by music, subtle choirs, and costumed actors.

One three day festival in particular, Enorike' is held on the Spring Equinox in the Marokene Halls. It is a mix of hunting, foraging rare things from the forest, and searching for beautifully crafted articles donated by master artisans, which are hidden by the most seasoned scouts in secret places. Younger Elorii compete to forage and hunt for a great feast of game meat and the natural bounty of the forest while trying to find the items, which are given as gifts to those they favor at the culmination of Enorike'. Every



part of the animals hunted are used, either eaten or fashioned by the oldest hunters into clothes, weapons, tools, and jewelry or charms during the last day of the festival.

The **Osalikenes** are those descended from the Wind God Osalian, and are lithe and slightly taller than other Elorii. Their hair is most often white or silvery, their eyes gray or blue-gray. Osalikenes are free spirits. Their personalities are almost the opposite of the Marokenes, who see them as flighty and rude. Wind-blooded Elorii are inquisitive, but tend to bore quickly if their attention is not held. Osalikenes are partial to roles that are somewhat studious yet short lived and fast, such as travel, archery, hunting, scouting, and those that involve transport. None too few become falconers, tree climbing arboreal scouts and hunters, or mounted aerial riders among all the nations.

Many also favor the role of poets and artists, actors, singing minstrels, and bards. Among these are some that have traveled outside of the forests for prolonged amounts of time, some of which become adventurers.

The Halls of Osalian

Osalikenes build their temples in the broad windy bowers atop ancient trees hundreds of feet above the ground, which are accessed by concealed stairs, rope bridges, and well hollows within the trunks. Graceful chimes and elegant wind instruments affixed on rails and branches or within carved balusters fill the halls with ethereal, haunting sounds, and there are nooks and shelves lined with tokens carried in by the wind or from flying creatures.

Much of the activity here surrounds inquiry and information, (especially in times of war), including the topics of new routes or the events on known ones, making them one of the more constantly active halls. They are known for excellent maps and for contacting those involved with travel and related resources. Elorii frequent these halls for word from different parts of the forest or outside it altogether. A good deal of this activity also includes new artistic pursuits and performances or exhibitions.

Many birds and avians visit these halls, including giant eagles, owls, and griffins, some of which are used as mounts by a select few, and the Lifewardens of these halls provide roosts and large stables for such creatures.

The **Kelekenes** are those who share the blood of Keleos the Fire God, and are slightly more compact than other Elorii. Their hair tends to be golden or red-brown in color, while their eyes range from dark violet to a reddish orange. They are passionate, but can also be wrathful.

Fire-blooded Elorii rarely hide their feelings. They have a preference for straightforward pursuits and a penchant for the dramatic at times. Many are excellent orators, artisans and artificers, and some of the finest smiths, glassworkers, carpenters, and wood sculptors come from these Elorii. They are also known to have some of the best warriors, field commanders, and sorcerers, something that matches their temperament perfectly.

The Halls of Keleos

These halls are constructed with both choice beauty and martial skills in mind. They are rife with flame pits, fireplaces, worked and gilded flaming braziers on intricate stands, or splendid glass lanterns, along with masterfully painted murals, warm tapestries and finely crafted weapons accentuated with subtle lighting. Many crenellations, arrow slits and secret doors or hatches are worked into the walls, floor, and roof, and bold statuary stands aloft in high alcoves or on pedestals.

The Kelekenes hold many debates, prosaic readings, and dances in these halls, along with artful displays of martial prowess and games of strategy. Sometimes two competing troupes will don bright costumes and enact mock battles for their respective cities, which are somewhat operatic and improvisational, especially on the days when historic battles took place.

The **Berokenes**, those of the blood of the Water Goddess, Beröe are the most graceful of the Elorii. They are usually raven-haired, with eyes ranging from the lightest to the deepest blue. Patient and accommodating, these Elorii are typically calm and collected, but they can lash out violently if angered or threatened. Berokenes are typically attracted to pursuits and activities involving water. Some of these include swimming, fishing, aquatic farming and harvesting (sponges, certain sea grasses and shellfish or pearl diving) and sailing, piloting, guiding or captaining vessels, as well as the efforts of building such craft and the equipment associated with it (such as shipwrights or rope and sail makers). There are many Berokene merchants, marines, and even pirates or privateers from Entaris on the Gulf of Coryan and its connecting seas. Many of the Entaren Berokenes have befriended humans of the League of Princes, mainly the Udir that ply the same waters and also claim elemental ancestry. The most potent captains and water wizards come from this bloodline, and their water magic is the most powerful known on Onara.



The Halls of Beröe

The temples that hold the Berokene halls are constructed on islands surrounded by water, usually near the source if possible (such as springs or waterfalls.) Aquatic plants and creatures are profuse near these halls, and are fitted with docks and equipment stores used for boats and ships. The roofs of these halls are domes decorated with multicolored shells and tiles, or vibrant murals, held aloft by carved wood pillars set with barnacles and brass fittings. Beautiful fountains decorated with huge shells and aquatic themes sit next to luxuriant precious metal decanters and chalices or nautical equipment (such as maritime charts, and sextants) that are placed on display. Sometimes there are underwater entrances and exits to these halls.

Activities and events revolve around water activities, from patching nets and sails or hulls, songs and chanteys, contests of the best fish stories, to tales of derring-do, or encounters with pirates and aquatic beasts. Serious discussions involve things like trade, rainfall, irrigation and farming, or mercantile water routes and maritime threats.

The Berokene, particularly the Entaren Elorii, visit many of the maritime festivals held by humans, if only to watch from a distance in secret and share in the common love of the sea.

Rarest of all are the **Ardakenes**, those exceptionally strong solely with the blood of the Elorii Mother, Belisarda. Their hair tends toward varying shades of brown, with eyes of green or hazel. They tend to be thoughtful and cautious, their actions deliberate and in line with their convictions, though they are willing to examine all sides of a given issue. They have a respect for life and an aversion toward the unnatural. They share a very strong connection with nature in all its forms, and make for the best druids.

Many Ardakenes end up as leaders and Lifewardens, but a good number have also become very adept scholars, wizards, farmers, hunters and for some reason, architects. Ardekenes have made some of the best architectural structures ever planned and constructed, with many of the largest, most beautiful Elorii buildings falling into this category.

The Halls of Belisarda

These are the greatest of the halls; tall elegant affairs with sublime architecture. Ribbed or spiraling domes and shining white towerlets, arching bridges, floral ponds, statuary, and airy courtyards are built in or around them, and gargantuan boulders or ancient trees shoot up through skylights in the roofs. The halls are

teeming with all manner of life; hanging gardens, colorful hummingbirds, magical plants, and fey creatures of all types. They are lit at night by lucid phosphorescent mushrooms that shed a pale greenish-white radiance. The ghostly light attracts luminous insects such as fireflies and glow beetles, which drift about the halls or meander across floors and walkways. Often guardian forest cats or saber tooth lions stalk across garden paths in plain view, or lounge on walls and bowers. The greatest and most ancient libraries are housed within these Halls and are well maintained by the Ardakene scholars. The halls of Belisarda are the most frequented by all of the Elorii, for they are the pinnacle of elven religious belief, and the integral center of their society. By the will of Belisarda the Elorii survive and prosper, waiting patiently and striving for the time when the Prophetess will return and lead Her people.

This is not to say that all Elorii think only of this moment in obsession, but the most important activities and decisions are made within these halls, and they are a constant reminder to the Elorii of their history, and more importantly, their future. Nothing speaks this truth more clearly than the common symbol of all the elven nations. At the forefront of every Hall of Belisarda is a green banner printed with a ring of twelve trees surrounding the ancient Elorii rune, Novaras... Never Forget.

An Ancient Tradition of Art and Craftsmanship

Elorii prefer their art in three dimensions; sculpture being the most common form, though mobiles are not unheard of. Elorii rarely depict each other in their art. Images of living things are usually confined to stylized portrayals of animals, and most two-dimensional art is geometric in nature. Curves, slopes, and helices are preferred over angles and hard edges. Most elven art is intended for display in public venues, and meant to beautify an area, rather than exist on its own as part of a private collection.

Elorii also have a great love of music, dating to the time they served the Ssethregore, when it was one of the few pleasures allowed them. Elven music is choral and rhythmic, and also deeply emotional. Their melodies draw on millennia of experiences, from surpassing triumph to wrenching loss, having an almost apotheosizing effect on the listener. Their chords and harmonies resound through the trees, which seem to answer in kind. The resultant sound is both glorious and sublime.

When instruments are used, the most popular include a small harp called the *drielon*,

and a three-tube flute called an *aequonas*.

Elven architecture, regardless of scale speaks of simplicity and elegance, their structures assimilating the surrounding land into their design. Trees, boulders, even waterfalls are incorporated into buildings, with the overall effect causing them to seem less an intrusive element than part of the natural landscape. Out of preference for the innate beauty of basic shapes and designs over the use of extraneous embellishments, detail and intricacy are emphasized over ornamentation.

Elorii craftsmen hone their skills over centuries. Only that of the Dwarves rivals the obvious mastery inherent in their work. A typical Elorii artisan has worked his craft for many human lifetimes, and his wares are considered to be of the highest possible quality. Elorii master craftsmen are regularly sought out by human mages to create items of enchantable caliber. In fact, many mundane items of Elorii manufacture are often mistaken for magical versions. Some people believe anything of Elorii make is innately magical, but this is not so. In reality, enchanted items are reserved for those of high station. Most of the equipment carried from the forests by the Wanderers is the work of lesser artisans, and though of good quality, is not comparable to the work of a master.

The pinnacle of Elorii craftsmanship is magic. To the Elorii, magic is an integral part of life, and Elorii wizards are counted among the most powerful on Arcanis. Elorii magic has its roots in the Elemental Sorcery of the ancient Ssethregore, though it evolved greatly over the many centuries the Elorii spent under direct instruction from their Gods, and further still in their years in wooded sanctuary. Elorii are now masters of all forms of magic, and may specialize in any school of wizardry.

Government and Religion

Elorii communities are governed by Councils of Elders, made up of the oldest and most renowned of their people. Their society is largely egalitarian – a given Elorii's station being determined by merit, through accomplishments in the current lifetime. To be a famous Elorii reborn is considered a mark of honor, but it is what one does with the immediate life that matters. It is no coincidence, however, that many of the ruling Elders are incarnations of past leaders. Great personalities are not easily suppressed, even by death. The Councils consult with the Lifewardens of Belisarda on issues of great importance, and these priests have a great influence on political matters.

Although not every Elorii is openly religious in daily life, they all possess an unshakable faith in their Gods. The words of the Prophetess are taken very seriously, and it is universally believed that the dead* Gods will return someday to exact vengeance on the humans' deities.

*There is no acceptable human translation for the Elorii term referring to the current state of their old Gods. The meaning seems beyond a simple explanation in the common tongue, and is something between the words *dead* and *trapped*.

The Elorii Priesthood consists entirely of the Lifewardens, many of whom are Druids. They watch for signs continuously, looking for indications as to when the Gods will be reborn, taking into consideration the likely number of souls remaining in the Orumar, the ratio of living Elorii of each bloodline to each other, and more. The only thing that is in doubt is the number of humans that will be necessary, when the time comes, to fulfill the Prophecy. It is generally agreed, however, that there are currently humans in excess of that number.

Elorii have no considerable fear of their own death, for they know that even if they are killed, they will return to Arcanis through the Orumar. This is not to say that they will needlessly throw their lives away – death is somewhat more than incommodious, and reborn Elorii ordinarily have, at best, but faint recollections of their previous lives. What is most consonant from one life to the next is personality.

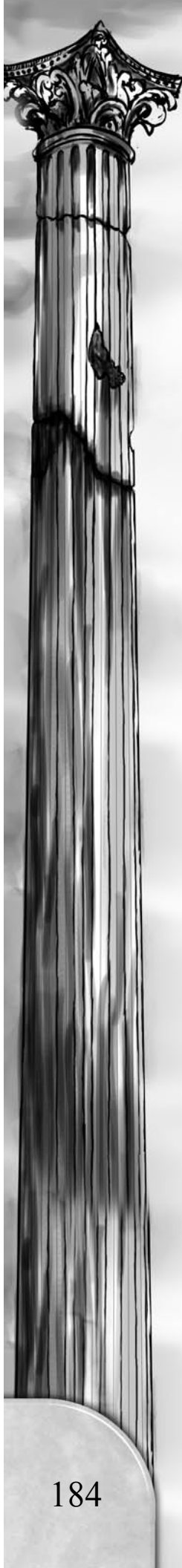
The Elluwe'

Concealed within each of the Elorii capitols are sacred pools called the Elluwe'. They are tended to by select Lifewardens, typically those of the Ardakene bloodline. The pools are symbolic of the Orumar and the cycle of life that surrounds all things, and are considered the holiest and most reverent places by the Elorii.

The Elluwe' are much akin to druid groves and have many creatures living in or around them. The sky is in full view above the pools, and marker stones sculpted with organic patterns and fitted with crystal lenses surround the edge, used to track exacting dates and celestial events by Lifewardens trained to read their complex markings. It is said that a Lifewarden can tell much of events that transpire in the surrounding forest and beyond (sometimes many miles away) by simply studying the pools and the life that grows in or around the Elluwe'.

When a child is born to the Elorii, their mothers bring them to these pools, with the respective Lifewardens and direct relations





in attendance. The Lifewarden determines the bloodline of the child and any past lives of major importance. The child is given a name, and his bloodline is announced publicly. The mother chooses a patron from the child's new bloodline relations, and this person is sent for to accept the child and pledge a religious oath of protection to his new relation.

The Lifewarden also divines the events that will surround the child's current life by the time of day and year, stellar events, and the natural creatures present in or near the pool at the time. Many Elorii wizards and sorcerers summon their familiars near these pools, hoping for a blessed or magical creature.

The Elorii ascribe additional magical powers to the Elluwe'. The most powerful of the Lifewardens can use them in one of three ways. Firstly, they can be used as potent scrying pools and have a virtually unlimited range and capability in this regard. Secondly, the Elluwe' may be used to access bends in space like a portal, be they pathways or pocket realms (these are what are usually referred to as Faerie paths or realms.) This power is much akin to teleportation, with the exception that the traveler is not barred from teleporting into areas shielded by living matter. The Lifewardens either may travel in this fashion personally or accompanied by others per the whim of the Lifewarden.

The third power is legendary, and only the most powerful of the Lifewardens of the past were capable of using it and surviving intact from having gazed on its primal power, or else they were absorbed into the Orumar to be reborn. On certain high holy days of the year, a Lifewarden may invoke the names of Belisarda and the Elemental Lords with an ancient sacred chant. This chant opens an elemental window directly to the Orumar, the Cosmic Womb from which all Elorii go and return in the endless cycle of life. The Orumar is said to be infinite in space and time, and the Lifewardens of legend have made very accurate prophecies of the future by scrying into its depths. They have also consulted the Orumar in times of great trouble and returned with great wisdom from conversing with elemental spirits or powerful souls that have not yet been reborn.

The waters of the Elluwe' are on occasion removed in sacred vessels during these times and fashioned into potent elixirs and potions. Many Elorii that are reborn from famous heroes remember their past lives with extraordinary clarity in visions or dreams during these high holy days when near the Elluwe' ages past, the Lifewardens would open the pool every ten years to search in vain for the return of the Elemental

Lords. But this has been forbidden since it is believed that this questions the will of the Prophetess, and so it is no longer done.

Invoking Kurenthe – The Death Curse

There is one way to stop the Cycle of death and rebirth. Any Elorii may, at the moment of their death, destroy their soul with the utterance a curse, called *Kurenthe*. This is a great heresy among the Elorii, for not only is the spirit irreplaceable, the removal of one from the pool of souls is considered an offense against Belisarda (the refusal of the gift of life) and a disruption of the harmonies of the Orumar, which may adversely influence the chances of the dead Gods' return. As such, Kurenthe has not been uttered since the God War, when all was feared lost. The Death Curse has a terrible effect on the place, person or persons it is uttered against, and may never be removed, except by a *Wish*.

The exact effects of a Death Curse are unknown, but affected regions are blasted wastelands that are tangibly eerie, and oftentimes haunted. They are usually devoid of plants and natural creatures. Certain ancient tales suggest that men so cursed were shunned by their closest kin for bringing blight to crops, disease to the living, and terrible luck any where they went.

Some tales relate that they lived on after death as wandering revenants, twisted mockeries of life that felt great sorrow and pain, striking out hatefully at all they came across. Until they atoned for their crimes somehow, or were put out of their misery by being destroyed, they roved aimlessly in the region or area they were cursed in. Even then, unless the body was fully consecrated by an Elorii Lifewarden, the cursed rose again from the grave to plague the living.

This by no means removed the curse upon the dead man's soul, and a few tales exist of humans questing for the benediction and forgiveness of these folk, so that the cursed might be pardoned by the Gods and enjoy a restful repose.

The Great Elorii Nations

Elonbé

Mightiest of all the Nations of the Elorii is Elonbé in the great forest the humans call the Vosewalden, or Vastwood. Larger than the countries of Milandir and Canceri combined, Elonbé is home to the overwhelming majority of the Elorii on Onara. At its geographical center is the lordly city of Ethelios the Ever-bright, a replica of ancient Belestor and the cultural heart of the Elorii. No other Elorii city, and few human ones

can approach it in scale or grandeur, its glistening domes and towering spires filling even the most jaded visitor with awe and wonder. Few non-Elorii have traveled there, and even fewer humans, as most Outsiders are regarded with a great deal of suspicion and mistrust. The surrounding forest is a marvel to behold, its primeval oaks – old as Onara itself – standing like gargantuan sentinels guarding against every enemy of the Elorii. The people of Elonbé are very open toward those of their own kind; friendship is rarely earned by those from the Outside, but once won, carries the power of an oath, and the ties of kinship. This vast sense of loyalty, so integral to the core being of an Elorii, extends until death...and sometimes beyond. Also of great importance is honor, which is of a personal nature to Elorii, and is concerned more with how the individual treats those around them, than how they are treated. This even applies to dealings with humans and other Outsiders, though in some cases – especially as concerns those of questionable honor themselves – the letter of one's word is followed more closely than the intent. Likewise, civil behavior is not expected from humans, who are seldom seen as capable of it, resulting in their presence being barely tolerated, if unwelcome. It is from Elonbé that most Laerestri come. The Elders of Elonbé include the most ancient of the Elorii, the Archmage Telas prominent among them.

Entaris

On the Loreal Sea lies the great port city of Seremas, Capitol of Entaris, the smallest of the Elorii nations, whose ships ply the waters south of the Coryani Empire. The Elorii of Entaris are the most tolerant of their race, to the point of establishing commerce with the humans of the League of Princes, particularly the Kingdom of Lhyllifel. Outside the walls of Seremas, surrounding the harbor is a foreign quarter where Elorii, many types of men, and other races live and work among each other.

Friendship has been extended to humans here since shortly after the Time of Darkness when the King of Lhyllifel incorporated the institution of elemental worship into the roster of acceptable religions of the state. Though this has prompted neighboring human nations, including the Coryani Empire, to threaten the small kingdom, the Elorii of Entaris have pledged to defend their Lhyllifen trading partners, which has been enough to forestall any action against them.

The skills of Entaran sailors, combined with their magical mastery over the element of water have made the southern Elorii a power to be considered in the region. Difficult to approach by land due to the surrounding forest, Seremas is

also protected by powerful water magic, and thus far no attempt to attack the city by land or sea has succeeded. It is rumored that Seremas is nominally entreated with the humanoid city of Quaaga, and that this has caused some friction of late between the Entarens and Lhyllifel. As a people, the Entarens are warm and agreeable, though they know from the past not to let themselves become overly trusting. Among the Council of Elders in Seremas is Meliros, a Lifewarden born before the God War, and one of the founders of the city.

Malfelen

In the eastern Coryani province of Toranesta, bordering the Swamplands of the Ssethregore, lies Malfelen. Owing to the unfriendly disposition of the Elorii that live there, humans refer to this place as Fellglade. His Excellency, the Governor Martial of Toranesta, has forbidden travel therein. Malfelen is home to the Voluri, or Shunned Elorii - those who made war with the humans after Beliketh. Of all the Elorii, they are most eager for vengeance against the human Gods and those who follow them.

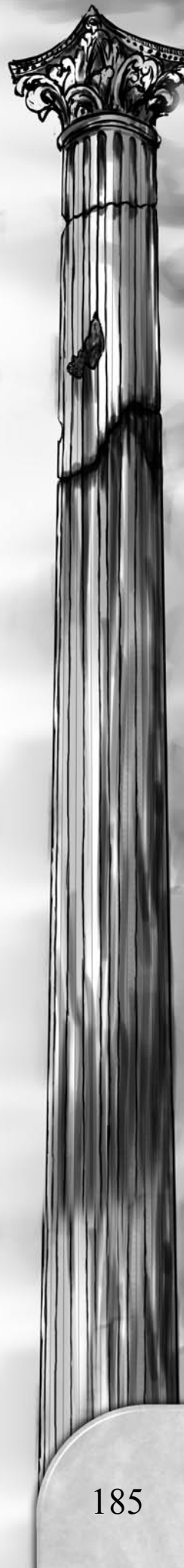
The Voluri still raid into the Swamplands against the hated Ssethregore, and it is rumored they also war with a power to the south of the forest, in the badlands of the Laranine Peninsula. Elorii of Malfelen venture from their wooded seclusion only to attack their enemies - humans counted among them.

Though battles with the Coryani are rare, most of the Elorii' anger seems to be directed toward the Ssethregore, or to the unknown enemy in the south. There are no known Voluri Wanderers. Magros, wielder of the sword Kelisar is among their Elders, as is Kethrenos, the fourth incarnation of first Elorii wizard, Salos.

The Elorii of Malfelen have endured a constant state of war since Beliketh, and it is doubtful there is a more formidable army anywhere in Onara. The Voluri do not condone trespassers, and are quick to dispatch any unwelcome visitors in their realm. They see humans as petty, deceitful and without honor, mirrors of their hated Gods. Certain fragments remain to document this behavior in historical records from the region.

Today marks our third day of travel into the Toranestan forest. Already we have begun to see evidence of the fair people who dwell here - exquisite symbols carved onto the trees! Signs of welcome, perhaps, or directions to their city within the wood - who can say? I have brought with me relics, from the time our two people lived in harmony under the stars, as an offering of friendship. How anxious I am to finally meet the Enchanted Folk!

-M, *Fourth of Promise*



Last letter from the expedition of Mendarus, Imperial Year 421

Others tell of a friendlier exchange between man and Elorii, though with only slightly less of a degree of cryptic and perhaps, ominous intent.

I met an elf once, while I was with a caravan guard. He seemed a fairly pleasant fellow. I was curious about some of the stories I had heard of his folk, and asked him, 'I hear your kind live forever. How old are you?'

'Four-hundred and seventy-six,' he replied.

Amazed, I had to know more. 'How long have you been living among men?'" I asked.

'But seventy-three years,' he said.

'You have lived apart from the rest of the world for so long,' I said.

'Long for you, perhaps,' he said, his brows arched. 'My people have dwelt in the forests for thousands of years.'

'What were you doing there for so long?' I asked.

'Practicing,' he answered with a fanged grin, 'for war.'

From 'A Soldier's Tale: Memoirs of a Coryani Legionnaire'

By Lucan Masentius

The Laerestri

Three centuries ago in Ethelios, the High Priest of Belisarda was visited by a vision of the Prophetess. He went to the Council of Elders, saying the first signs of the time of Prophecy had come to pass, and that the Elorii should ready themselves for the coming conflict – one upon which the fate of Arcanis would rest. The Commander of the Hosts was summoned to the Council Hall to discuss their state of readiness – Elorii warriors had been training for this time for more than two score centuries. They were prepared for war. All that remained was the need for greater insight into the tactics and methods of warfare currently employed by man. To this end, the call went out for volunteers to leave the shelter of the trees and enter the land of humans, where no Elorii had set foot for five thousand years.

Many of those who came forward were simply curious about the world outside, while some simply yearned for prospect of battle with Mankind. All went with the purpose of observing as much of the fighting techniques of humans as possible, then returning to share what they had learned. Once among the kingdoms of man, they offered their services to any that would have them, serving as bodyguards, mercenaries, or scouts – a role to which they were particularly well-suited,

given their natural talents of stealth, keen hearing and the ability to see at night. It was not long before their assistance proved decisive in many confrontations. In time, Elorii could be found in most of the armies of Onara. The Laerestri were achieving what they had set out to do.

Something else was happening over the course of these battles, however. The Elorii witnessed acts of heroism and self-sacrifice on the part of some humans, things they had not thought them capable of. In some rare instances, human soldiers even saved the lives of their Elorii counterparts. This led to the Elorii reciprocating in kind, and soon battlefield friendships were born. In time many Laerestri began to see Mankind painted not with history's broad brush, but rather as individuals, some of whom were worthy and honorable. Though they still understood that they would one day find themselves at war with humans, they realized and hoped it would not be soon, in some cases swearing oaths to be merciful to those they had befriended – or to their descendants – when the time came. The Wanderers view humans' devotion to their Gods with pity, hoping they will someday see them for what they are.

Upon hearing how Mankind was not all as they had been taught, some younger Elorii left the Vastwood to see for themselves. Of those who had gone at first to gather information, some chose to stay among the humans, either to be with their new friends, or to visit more of their world. A few even enjoyed being around humans, if just for the change of scenery. Most Player Character Elorii are Laerestri, which translates literally as "Those who roam."



Pace



The Menace of Ssethregore

Ssethregorans are an enigma to the peoples of the “civilized” lands of Onara. This is hampered first and foremost by the tremendous differences in biology between the Ssethregorans and their neighbors. Humans, dwarves and orcs may share some basic outward similarities with the Ssethregorans, but they are mammals. As cold-blooded, egg-laying creatures, the various races of Ssethregore have more in common biologically with a crocodile than a human.

That said, the Ssethregorans have a proud and storied history. Although they have fallen on relatively hard times since, they are gathering their power around them, and they are a serious threat to the stability of all Onara. If they have their way, they will again subjugate all the peoples of Onara in their scaled coils.

Gamemasters should note that little of this history has survived to this day outside of the Kingdom of Ssethregore. The chances of a non-Elorii player character knowing anything about the background of the reptilian society is just about zero. The information presented here should only be revealed to the heroes with good reason. Even then, some of it may seem to be so outlandish that there is little chance that the heroes will see it as anything more than a pack of cold-blooded lies. In fact, the reputations the reptilian people have as boldfaced liars have helped keep them keep their secrets to themselves over the years. Even when the truth is somehow revealed, unless it is possible to corroborate it, it is almost never believed.

In the Beginning

In ancient days, the serpent men, their allies and slaves, once dominated the entire continent of Onara. None matched their savage cunning, and their foes were woefully unprepared to resist such a large and powerful occupying force. Dozens of elder races were sent in their entirety to extinction. “Lesser” races such as the goblinoids were kept as slaves for the reptilian peoples, sometimes even used as a source of food, leather, and other items. While many of the reptilian races, from the lizardfolk to the sahaugin, were members of the ruling class, the race that was really in charge was that of sorcerous Ssannu caste of serpent men. Their capital city was a sprawling metropolis crawling with cold-blooded creatures: Yahssremore. This city was truly the center of the entire Ssethregoran Empire, placed

on the Plateau of Dagha at the heart of the continent. From the Scaly Throne, the seemingly immortal emperor Sahktess ruled over all lands far and wide, and those who knew anything of this creature trembled at the mere mention of his name.

Sahktess was the sorcerer-serpent who instigated the use of elemental beings as slave labor throughout the empire as it was on the rise. This worked well while the empire was rapidly growing, mostly through a policy of brutal conquest and occupation, but there were problems with it in the long run. First, the elementals weren’t ever all that intelligent, and sometimes they were loath to actually follow any but the most direct orders. Second, the elementals were rarely bound permanently to this Plane—only the most powerful of the Ssanu were capable of such a deed—so they would regularly fade back to the planes from whence they came after their time had expired. This made the creatures somewhat less than reliable, especially when used to help occupy territory instead of taking it.

A plan was devised on and set in motion. The reptilian peoples turned to the “lesser” races for fodder for their houses of slavery, but these races had problems, too. The various goblinoid races were rebellious and cunning, fostering the natural racial chauvinism of the serpents by making themselves appear to be poor slaves due to racial failings.

Enter the Elorii

As a solution to this problem, Sahktess charged the serpent men with creating a servitor race. The requirements were clear. The new slaves had to be able to perform perfectly well both above and below the ground. In fact, to be able to live underwater as well would be even better. These new creatures also had to be able to be practically immortal, as the reptilians were loath to be forced to bother with retraining their slaves often. They had to be tough enough to endure almost any kind of climate, too, as well as the abuse that the reptilians were sure to heap upon them. In short, this was no small order. Sahktess called upon the highest, most learned and magically skilled of his Ssanu retainers, commanding that a servitor race be created.

Over the years, this powerful inner circle of spell casters tried repeatedly to meet their emperor’s demands, and time after time they failed. The Ssanu created many archetypes and

life forms, some of which managed to escape and breed in the wild, a few even becoming new races of their own.

The kuo-toa are a perfect example of this phenomenon. While they were an interesting experiment, their relatively short lifespan and their preference for the briny deep did not make them the perfect creatures for serving the masters of a mostly land-based empire. As the years passed with mixed successes, Sahktess became impatient and elected to start executing the Ssanu, who had displeased him most with false reports and unmitigated failure, in hopes that this would motivate their trembling and unsuccessful peers. Three of the highest-ranking Ssanu plotted to assassinate Sahktess and overthrow the governors of Yasshremore.

They were stopped short by the discovery of an ancient stone tablet in an old crypt below Yashremore, which detailed the summoning of very powerful elementals. Great pains and laborious efforts combined for days, forging a new race the Ssanu called the Elorii. They created this amazing race by merging elemental spirits with a nature spirits and imbuing it into a fleshly body of their own design. The long, elegant nature of Elorii bodies to this day speaks of this heritage, as do their long, pointed ears, feral-looking teeth, and almond-shaped eyes, which are reminiscent of the features of certain elemental creatures.

At first glance, the Elorii were perfect. They were long-lived, durable, intelligent, and—in their younger incarnations, at least—malleable. Sahktess was delighted at his sorcerers' success, and he ordered creation of ten thousand of these beings, to be supplemented immediately by an accelerated breeding program. It was not long before at least one imperfection was found in the new race. For some reason, despite how often the Elorii mated, there would never be more than the original number. Regardless, Onara was rapidly populated by Elorii of all sorts, working under the watchful, unblinking eyes of their reptilian masters. Best of all, from Sahktess' point of view, was the fact that the four elemental varieties of Elorii could easily adapt to different environments. Elorii of the earthen variety were placed in the empire's subterranean holdings, often overseeing the goblin slaves. This has led to an animosity between goblins and Elorii to this day.

Elorii were kept mostly as the slaves of the various dens, pits, and houses of the city of Yasshremore. It was in the court of the Scaled Emperor that they learned their haughty ways, becoming trained in the handling of the politics and affairs of a sprawling nation.

It is not well known, even by the Elorii, that a few of these slaves, particularly those of the thrall-warrior caste, were chosen and specially trained as provincial rulers over their brethren, as well as many other races. They are often confused with the commanders of the Ssethregoran Slave Legions, but unlike these commanders, these elite warriors were given huge tracts of land and holdings, and were allowed a share of the war spoils from their despotic efforts. The Ssanu called them Hussma, but they were referred to as Taskmasters by the other races. Some of these rulers were very brutal and expansionist, and went so far as to expand their territories by conquering neighboring lands, or even warred with each other. Evidence suggests that the Hussma were completely expunged by their fellows when the Ssethregoran Empire fell.

The documented cases of many wild Elorii were the result of an unanticipated flaw in the Elorii-creation process. As a result of a spiritual balance that favored the nature spirit over those of the elements, these creatures had spirits that were too wild to be broken. They managed to escape from the breeding chambers of Sahktess' sorcerers before they could be destroyed. They survived in the wilds of Onara managing to avoid the occasional Elorii hunting party sent out by the reptilian army for sport—and food.



The Secret Elorii Revolt

Over centuries of enslavement, the Elorii peoples eventually developed a resistance to the various magical means that the Ssannu used to keep them in line, most notably their ability to *suggest* a course of action to their slaves. This eventually resulted in a permanent racial trait, one which newborn Elorii manifested somehow without exposure to suggestive magic or psionic powers.

Although the Elorii Ballad of Salos documents well the beginning of the slave revolt and the finale of the Ssethregoran Empire, it does not detail another account of equal import, something that was pivotal in the slave revolt, which was started simultaneously by a common Elorii slave.

It was an Elorii by the name of Elthoras who became a real thorn in the Empire's side within the northern lands east of the Vastwood. This brave soul led an uprising against the reptilian oppressors in the small town of Miless, a logging community situated on the edge of the Vastwood. The lizardfolk and troglodytes overseeing the fortified town forced their Elorii slaves to clear-cut vast swathes of the forest, destroying acre after acre of pristine woodlands, and Elthoras was among their number. The operation went on for decades when Elthoras was greeted and befriended by a small group of wild Elorii living on the edge of the logging operation. The very fact that there were Elorii that lived free from the lizardfolk's lash fired Elthoras' imagination. Thoughts of liberty burning in his head, the Elorii began to devise a plot to liberate his people. At first, Elthoras only dared to hope to be able to throw off the reptilian oppressors in Miless. Elthoras had managed to establish lines of communication with his escaped cousins. Smuggling weapons to the wild Elorii, Elthoras convinced them to stage lightning raids against the camp. The reptilians had been entirely frustrated in their attempts to ward off such attacks, and were getting ready to amass a full-out counterstrike of their own. Warrior-thralls loyal to Elthoras, who served reptilian officers, were able to learn about the time, place, and method of the impending Ssethregoran assault, and this information was passed along to the wild Elorii of the Vastwood. With this information, the wild Elorii were able to clear out their camp in time, abandoning it to the reptilian force. At the appointed time, the reptilians thundered through the forest en route to their chosen target: the Elorii camp.

When they arrived, they found the village abandoned. It was only when they looked back

toward Miless and saw smoke smudging the clear blue sky that they realized that they had been fooled.

While a large portion of the city's reptilian force had been rampaging through the woods, the Elorii struck Miless with everything they had, strengthened by rebelling slaves now armed and ready to strike. Normally, they might have been repulsed, at least long enough for the rest of the reptilians to return, coming to their fellows' rescue. However, under the guidance of Elthoras, the slaves of Miless rose up and killed their keepers, opening wide the doors to the city for their free brethren. When the reptilian army returned, they found themselves shut out of their own town. The Elorii were ready and waiting for battle.

They were the rock upon which the scaly tide of the reptilians crashed. Too proud to call for reinforcements, the reptilians of Miless were slaughtered to the last trog.

No doubt, the mighty duel between Salos and the High wizard of the Ssanu, Sskoreth, occurred simultaneously or very near the time of this battle.

The popular account concludes that it was an Elorii captain of the Slave Legion named Relios who clove the head off the emperor after slaying his imperial guard, and was made a distinguished leader for his exceptional valor. The rule of the dreaded serpent men was finished. What remained was all but a shattered ruin of the mighty Ssethregoran Empire.

After the Revolution

The newly-freed slaves, joined by the various goblinoid races, showed little mercy to the reptilians, laying waste to them wherever they could be found. However, many of the creatures managed to slip away. The vast mass of them gathered as they slithered southward from Yahssremore and toward what is now the Altherian Peninsula, fighting a rearguard action all the way. Once the remnants of the reptilian forces made it into the Kraldjur Morass, which makes up more than half of the watery peninsula,, the victorious army broke off their pursuit. They had no desire to fight the cold-blooded creatures in such an unfavorable environment. While the serpent men licked their wounds, the Elorii' vast, multi-raced army razed Yahssremore to the ground and then dissolved almost as quickly as it had come together. With their common foe run off, the various factions in the army had plenty of time to focus on the troubles between their own peoples. Once order had been restored, the Elorii

declared Yahssremore no more. Any trace of the Ssethregorans and their culture was removed, and the Elorii founded a new city called Belistor.

Elorii came streaming from across the entire continent, ready to lay their history of slavery to rest and to begin anew in the reborn city. Together, they raised the most amazing city in all of Onara and established a proud and regal society that shows few if any traces of its humble roots. The reptilians were never able to recover from their crushing defeat, only managing one significant attempt to reestablish their domain. To this day, though, they still remember their once glorious rule of the continent in their legends. Most reptilians harbor an especially cold spot in their hearts for the Elorii. One of the lynchpins of reptilian society is the idea that the Scaled Alliance will one day rise up out of the swamps and rule Onara once again from the so-called “Throne of Man” within the First City, covering the face of Onara with scaly armies, which will wet the soil with the blood of lesser races.

The Ssethregorans

Over the intervening centuries, things among the reptilians have certainly changed. While most outsiders—at least those not stationed on the border of the Kraldjur Morass—simply consider the Ssethregorans to be a single, ancient reptilian race of savages, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, several different reptilian races live in the swamp under the auspices of the unholy Serpent King, all speaking the reptilian language (Ssethren) that they hold in common.

The relationship between these different species is hardly friendly. It is more of a matter of the subjugator and the subjugated. Still, the current pecking order has been in place for literally thousands of years. The various nations may not be happy in the roles into which they’ve been cast, but at the very least they’re comfortable in them. The chance of a serious revolution taking place in the Kingdom of Ssethregore is extremely remote. After so many years on top, the creatures in charge have cemented their power and indefatigable rule over their brethren so firmly, that it would take a disaster of apocalyptic proportions to upset the current balance. Of course, every so often some small splinter group with delusions of power and grandeur takes a stab at toppling over the present regime. A horrible public example is made of these presumptuous rebels. Their scaly skins are often made into banners that fly from the ramparts of the Serpent King’s fortress, their tattered flaps meant as a terrible warning to those who would follow in the footsteps of their previous owners.

Ssethregoran society is based upon a military model. In essence, it consists of one massive army that is always either preparing for or engaged in war. This constant battling may partially explain why the Ssethregorans have yet to be able to return to their once prominent position of power across Onara. They spend so much of their time fighting border skirmishes with the Altherians or subduing probes and guerrilla raids staged by the Elorii of Malfalen that they never seem to be able to amass the resources for a serious push out of the swamps.

The Serpent King

At the top of the reptilian kingdom slithers a creature of pure evil known as King Kahss. This brilliant beast is an elderly dark naga, a creature whose scales shimmer luminescent in an appropriately royal purple.

Kahss is the latest in a long line of dark naga who have ruled over Ssethregore with a venomous tail. Back in the glory days of Ssethregore, when the reptiles ruled over all of Onara, the ruling class was comprised almost entirely of dark naga. Over the intervening centuries, most of these creatures have died off from old age, disease, or violence. Today, all that is left is a small group of about 20 dark naga, comprised of three separate families, all living in the massive royal fortress in the Ssethregoran capital of Sseth. The most prominent of these—the House of Kahss—has ruled over the Kingdom of Ssethregore for over 1,000 years. Others of the dark naga have occasionally contested this status, and these conflicts have led to some of the infighting that resulted in the deaths of many naga.

Kahss rules over his fellow Ssethregorans as if any one of them might be plotting his overthrow at any time. The sad fact is that if he did not do so, he would be dead within a matter of days. Any sign of weakness in the Kingdom of Ssethregore is typically a death sentence.

Kahss regularly has his underlings summarily executed for offenses both real and imagined. Most of the members of his royal court are loath to spend any time near him for fear of incurring his wrath. This extends to his mate and his children as well.

Despite this, the competition to mate with Kahss is strong, since those who do have the opportunity to hatch the new king. This is, of course, a long shot, since the naga reproduce only infrequently. In fact, Kahss has already sired three heirs, all of which have long since grown to adulthood and have aspirations to his



position. However, none of them is assured the throne, no matter what their order of birth. Kahss has reserved the right to name his successor only upon his own death.

This has the unfortunate effect of Kahss' children wishing him to die soon—but only when they are in favor with him. Kahss realizes this, so he constantly keeps his offspring on their toes, almost perpetually, expressing his dissatisfaction with them all. The rumor is that if Kahss were to smile at one of his heirs, he would instantly find a knife through his long belly.

Of course, any such blatant assassination would cause Kahss to rescind any perceived favoritism with his dying breath. This leaves the three heirs in a constantly uncomfortable position, never with a clear shot at grabbing ultimate power in the region. This is exactly as Kahss wants it.

The Heirs to the Serpent

The three heirs to the Serpent King are all just as horrible and loathsome as Kahss himself, although each in his own terrible way. This trio of brothers hates each other nearly as much as they each despise their sire. The only thing that keeps them from each other's coils is the knowledge that their father would kill any of them that he suspected of harming one of the others.

The eldest of the heirs is known as Kressk. This vile creature is in charge of the treasury of the kingdom. His father placed him in this trusted position because Kahss knew that since Kressk has designs on the throne he would never bother with stealing from his own future wealth. If one of Kressk's brothers makes it into the top spot though, he'd best eliminate Kressk right away, or he's bound to find the treasury stripped clean by the end of his first night in power. Kllahss is the

middle of the three dark naga heirs. He has been put in direct command of the Ssethregoran army. As such, Kllahss is the son most people think has the best chance at the throne come his father's death.

After all, if he does not get what he wants, he has the force of the army behind him. If the throne does not come to him peacefully, he will simply take it by force. Of course, it is not quite that simple. The others are aware of Kllahss' position of power, and they are constantly working to undermine it.

Kllahss is not well-loved by his troops, many of whom would slit his throat as soon as look at him if they thought they could get away with it. In fact, Kllahss' brothers both have established spies within the army, mostly in the form of serpent men and even lizardfolk who are loyal not to Kllahss but to the stream of favors, bribes, and concubines from his scheming brethren. If and when Kllahss is given the throne, he can be assured that his ascension will not go smoothly.

The youngest of these naga princes is a sorcerer by the name of Ss'rogg. This evil aberration is in charge of the various spellcasters throughout the kingdom. His greatest challenge is the drafting of various evil wurms to the Ssethregoran cause, serving as they did in the days of the Ssanu. These fierce creatures supplement

the might of the Ssethregoran warriors on the field of battle. The very sight of one is enough to send most people diving for cover, but not the stalwart troops lining the Altherian border. Still, the old Ssethregoran saying is, "Those who stand proud die proud," and they often use those who stand against them as examples of this truism.

Ss'rogg himself rides an adult green dragon, the only known dragon left on Onara, into battle on those rare occasions in which he feels compelled to do so. Ss'rogg is a bit of a coward, happy to lead from the rear. He knows





that he is as unloved as his brothers, and the last way he wants to die is from so-called “friendly” fire. The sorcerers under Ss’rogg have allied themselves with a dozen evil drakes, wurms, and sinister wyverns of varying ages. A few of these are actually under Ss’rogg’s direct control, giving him a base of power from which he can operate as a real threat within the region.

Ss’rogg’s influence does not end there, of course. As the leader of the spellcasters in the area, he is the most personally powerful individual in the entire kingdom, excepting his father. Ss’rogg is careful not to reveal the true extent of his power, keeping friend and foe guessing about just how dangerous he really is.

Some have accused Ss’rogg of magically influencing the Serpent King, but this is untrue. Kahss has protected himself well against such influence, and Ss’rogg’s efforts in this, as well as the other members of the Ssethregoran spellcaster’s guild have supported him. After all, if Ss’rogg could influence the Serpent King, that would mean that others could as well. That kind of uncertainty is something that no dark naga prince—or Serpent King—is willing to live with.

The Serpent Men

The first and foremost of the various reptilian races of Ssethregore are the serpent men. Ages ago, these forked-tongued creatures ruled the entire continent of Onara, making up the elite Ssanu caste. Although they have long since fallen from that lofty height, they continue to lead the peoples of Ssethregore through a custom of horrific brutality. It is said that it is from the serpent men’s cruelty that the epithet “cold-blooded” springs.

Learned scholars refer to the serpent men by what they feel is their proper name: yessera, in fact the yessera are a comparatively recent hybrid of humans and serpent men. What is known of these creatures by the human populace of Onara is sadly little. Most of those humanoid who wander into the lands of the Ssethregore are enslaved or killed on the spot, their raw flesh devoured by their murderers and their bones bleached and used as personal decorations. Elvish bones are the most preferred in Ssethregoran society, particularly skulls. The crown of the Serpent King is actually fashioned from just such a gilded set of bones, its eyes set with blood-red rubies that seem to glow from within.

While the serpent men may like to dine on warm-blooded flesh, they prefer to subjugate the species closer to their own. Their stated mission is to forge a warlike society of cold-blooded races

capable of conquering all of Onara and thereafter the world. To that end, they have crushed several other races within their collective coils. Serpent men society is divided into several different “pits” (as in a “pit of vipers”). Each of these pits controls a separate portion of the city of Sseth, outside of the royal fortress, of course.

The city is actually carved into the ground around the fortress, forming thousands of burrows in a sprawling circle around the Serpent King’s home. Most of the pits are actually connected to each other through underground tunnels carved out of the dirt, their sides packed hard throughout the ages. It is easy for outsiders to get lost in such a place. More importantly—to the serpent men, at least—is that it’s just as easy to surround and exterminate any lost intruders caught in the pits and labyrinthine tunnels as well.

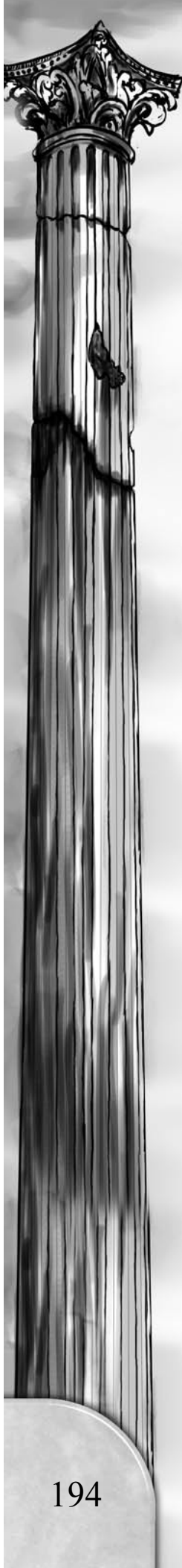
The serpent men think of themselves as the highest link on the evolutionary chain of reptilian society. This gives them the right to rule over the “lesser” cold-blooded peoples. They only tolerate the leadership of Kahss because the powers of the naga help to hold the kingdom together. If Kahss were to meet a premature end, however—whether at the end of an interloper’s sword or a serpent man’s fang—not even a crocodile tear would be shed for the cruel and evil creature.

In fact, several serpent men stand ready to leap into the power vacuum that Kahss’ death will some day provide. Rival pits lead the two most powerful factions: Pit Sseth and Pit Maliss.

Pit Sseth

Pit Sseth traces its icy bloodline back to the great Sseth himself; the leader of the reptilian forces that found their way to the safety of the Kraldjur Morass in the final days of the Slave Revolt.

The Kingdom of Ssethregore is in fact named after Sseth, the first of the dynasty of Ssethregoran kings, and is its capitol city. It was Sseth who actually brought the naga into the fold, promising them great power in exchange for their help in protecting the reptilians against the warm-bloods who were chasing them. In truth, Sseth used the naga to shore up his own power against the other pits that were already plotting against him. He knew that no pretenders to his newly fashioned throne would be brave enough to stand their still-battered forces against an entire village of dark naga. Originally, Sseth’s arrangement with the naga was to be a temporary situation. Sseth fully intended to get rid of the naga after their



help was no longer needed, but he was never able to do so. The scheming naga quickly entrenched themselves in reptilian society, making them almost impossible to root out. In fact, when Sseth died, it was a naga named NARTHSSLIK that stepped into his place, shoving aside Sseth's rightful heirs by use of guile, bribes, and sublime treachery. The heirs were unable to do more than protest and none too loudly for fear of their lives.

A naga has sat on the Ssethregoran throne ever since, much to the frustrations of Pit Sseth. Over the years, the leaders of Pit Sseth have made the occasional grab at the power that they still see as rightfully theirs. However, they have always been thwarted in their desires, perhaps not in small part due to their absolute lack of an ability to make lasting alliances with any of the other pits. These proud and haughty serpent men are trusted by very few. Even if they were to manage to take power again, there is little chance they would be able to hold it. As such, the current leader of Pit Sseth, a middle-aged serpent man by the name of Saliss, has tightened his family's ties to Kahss and the rest of the naga. He is fully aware that the other pits would bring down Pit Sseth given half a chance, and he is not willing to give them the slightest opening.

The naga are aware of this and so play Pit Sseth off of the others to lend some instability to their people's lives. Otherwise, the serpent men might find some means to unite and chase the naga into the darkest reaches of the swamp.

Pit Maliss

The creatures of Pit Maliss have only recently come to power, at least when compared with Pit Sseth or the naga that rule the kingdom of Ssethregore. This has mostly been by means of an active campaign of sending parties of adventuring serpent men out into the lands of the warm-bloods in search of fortune and magic items. The hardy souls of Pit Maliss have been fairly successful in their efforts, having gathered tens of import not only from the ancient ruins of Onara but also by ambushing and slaughtering other adventuring parties while they sleep.

The current leader of Maliss is a tall and imposing creature called Ssuun. This serpent man came to his position by treachery and the quick amassment of power, two traits highly valued in Ssethregoran society. A skilled warrior and spellcaster, Ssuun is the proud owner of powerful magic items which he uses both to spy on those who might wish him ill and to influence the opinions of others who might be willing to see things his way. Ssuun is quietly plotting against

the naga, hoping to overthrow Kahss and install himself on the throne. He has been stymied in his efforts mostly by the intransigence of Pit Sseth, which refuse to lend him aid in any way. Ssuun knows the well-connected Saliss is ready to betray him at a moment's notice. This forces Ssuun to keep his efforts as quiet as possible for fear of being exposed and subjected to the wrath of the royal naga.

The Troglodytes

The two largest servitor species in the Kingdom of Ssethregore are the Ss'ressen and the troglodytes. The warlike troglodytes serve as the common army of the kingdom and its outposts, always on the front line of the battles between Ssethregore and the warm-bloods. They are the cannon fodder of the Ssethregoran army, always the first into the breach. The trogs seem resigned to their lot, which is not entirely a bitter one. As long as they manage to avoid causing trouble for those above them, they can expect to live fairly well. While living under the claw-footed heels of the serpent men may be harsh, in many ways it beats scratching a living out of the swamp. The trogs were once organized along family lines, but the naga have done everything in their power to destroy such alliances for fear that they might be used against them someday. A people divided find it much harder to foment rebellion in any form.

To keep the trogs from forming strong relationships with each other, trog eggs are taken from their mothers' nests and brought to a military crèche in the city of Sseth. There they are kept protected by Ss'ressen mothers until they are hatched. The hatchlings are then turned over to the Ssethregoran military to be raised as soldiers in a long-standing martial tradition. The trogs are the bottom of the barrel when it comes to Ssethregoran society. One out of every four hatchlings doesn't survive its early training to become an adult. Those that do are condemned to a life in which the best they can expect is a good, clean death on the field of battle. Most trogs don't seem to care, which only reinforces the feelings in the upper strata of society that the trogs are idiots who deserve the lot in life that has fallen to them. In fact, the trogs are simply devout worshippers of Kassegore, the reptilian god. Most of the other peoples in the Ssethregoran Kingdom have long since stopped worshipping Kassegore. In general, they feel that the reptile god abandoned them before the Elorii Rebellion, and they have little or no reason to offer any kind of worship one who has let his people fall so low. When the naga and the serpent men speak of Kassegore, it is with

barely concealed contempt.

The trogs, on the other hand, hold Kassegore in the highest esteem. They pray to their reptile god at least daily, and a prophecy runs among them that if they are patient and follow the orders of their betters, Kassegore will smile upon them and they will be elevated to the height of power, all in good time.

This long-standing religious tradition in the ranks of the trogs has allowed these poorly treated creatures to endure all the insults and injuries that they are subjected to by both their superiors and their foes. They are strong in their faith that their day to bask in the sun shall someday come. Although this is the common attitude of many troglodytes, some of these creatures have taken to a splinter faction of heretical worship of Kassegore, called the Cult of Hromu. This reptilian heresy preaches not obedience, but overthrow of Ssethregoran society, particularly the Naga, and embraces all manner of scaly races into its ranks. Much of this activity is based around an ancient Myrantean temple complex, half submerged far to the south of the capitol in the farthest reach of the Kraldjur Morass, or else on the shores of Lake Quesselan. It is said to hold ancient treasures and is filled with lizardfolk of immense size and numbers. The secret not known to those outside the cult is that the Yessera, aberrant mixtures of human and serpent man blood, are the driving force behind the efforts to supplant the rule of the Naga. It is unknown where this particular sect originated, but it is suspected to be tied with another ancient god, now forgotten both in true name and by history. No other mention of this divinity's name is recorded anywhere else on Onara. The cult is said to have repelled all efforts to curb its activity or invasions of the temple, though many have been put to death for practicing the heresy within the cities and Pits of Ssethregore.

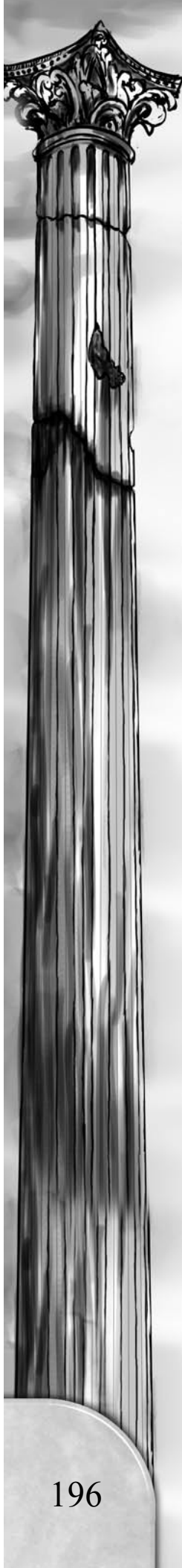
The Ss'ressen

The Ss'ressen, known also as the lizardfolk, serve as the officer class in the Ssethregoran forces. It is their job to herd the slightly more savage trogs about, often at the business end of a stone club or a barbed whip. The Ss'ressen are only slightly more important in the eyes of the serpent men. As the generals of this tremendous military force, the serpent men aren't much concerned with the welfare of the species under their command. They're all just grist for the mill of war. The Ss'ressen are treated much like the trogs, only slightly better. Like the trogs, their eggs are taken from their mothers' nests before they are even

hatched and then given to the military to be raised. Because the trainers are themselves Ss'ressen, the young Ss'ressen hatchlings have an easier time of it than their trog fellows. There is clear favoritism shown here. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fact that the two races are trained and housed separately.

While the serpent men may not think much of the Ss'ressen, the Ss'ressen certainly think much of themselves. They may not be on top within the Ssethregoran society, but they can lord over the trogs all they like. In general, they take every opportunity that comes their way to do just that. One side effect this has is that the trogs tend to focus their hatred on the Ss'ressen rather than on the serpent men or the naga. After all, while it may be Kahssk that sets policy, it's the lizardfolk who carry it out with such incredible relish. There is more than a grain of truth to the trogs' feelings on this matter. The Ss'ressen don't have to be as cruel to the trogs as they are. They do it because they enjoy wielding what petty power they have like a club, crushing all those beneath them whether they are deserving of such treatment or not. The only thing that keeps the Ss'ressen in line is the threat of reprisals from above, and these are never meted out for being cruel to an underling. Failure, on the other hand, is often met with the harshest measures. The Ss'ressen are quick to pass on such reprisals to those under them. In fact, they often launch preemptive attacks against their underlings, simply to show that they have the situation well in hand and that the beings truly responsible for the errors are being punished.





The Ss'ressen are often arranged in groups of three or less, overseeing a group of five to ten trogs. Over the Ss'ressen, there is often a serpent man, although many times these leaders don't accompany their units into the field on patrol. The serpent men are perfectly content to let their lessers risk their lives for "the greater good." Only when their own commanders require them do they venture forth into clear danger—unless there's the promise of great personal gain as well, of course.

The Reptile God

Kassegore the Reptile God was once the most revered god in the entire pantheon watching over Onara. Back in the days when the Ssethregoran Empire stretched across the entire continent, shrines to Kassegore were everywhere, and prominent reptilians everywhere proudly wore icons displaying the strength of their faith. The Coiled Cathedral that once graced the long-gone city of Yahssremore was filled with riches nearly beyond imagination. These hoards of precious metals and gems were melted down and fitted to the ancient Elorii capitol of Belestor. The building itself was considered one of the prime architectural wonders of the world. But with the fall of the Ssethregoran Empire, worship of Kassegore waned. Legend holds that in grief brought upon by the scorn of his children, Kassegore threw himself from the heavens into the Kraldur Morass. The crater from his fall is said to have created Lake Quesselan, and it is at the bottom of this body of water, over which the city of Sseth looks to this day, that Kassegore rests.

The trogs still believe in their drowned god, however, and their prophets claim that Kassegore will someday rise from the waves to lead the reptilian peoples to prominence again. Some of these selfsame prophets say that the signs of Kassegore's imminent return are clear, although it certainly seems like the prophets have been claiming such a thing for nearly a century already. Even the faithful trogs are starting to waver in their belief in the prophecies. They will never abandon their god, but they could certainly come around to ignoring a self-serving prophet or two.

The other levels of Ssethregoran society have little use for Kassegore. There are clerics of some sort or another at all levels, but they tend to be exceedingly rare. Most of the clerics work in secret, careful not to expose their work to their fellow reptilians for fear of scorn or even reprisals from those who are bitter at their god's apparent abandonment of them. There are a few clerics in the ranks of the Ss'ressen, but there are even less among the serpent men. Some of the Ssethregorans just seem to hear the call of the reptile god, and

they follow him no matter the risk. Much of this activity and its attendant dogma seems closer to the Hromu heresy than that of the "True" reptile god, Kassegore. The appearance of these faithful seems to be on the rise over the past fifty years. Whether this represents a return to the faith on the part of the Ssethregorans or is actually a signal that Kassegore might actually be on his way back to lead his peoples out of the swamps, no one can say. The naga have actually forbidden official worship of Kassegore due to the threat to their continued rule, but also from the illegal and heretical activities the Cult of Hromu present. These two groups are often blurred and not separated distinctly by officials, which causes much consternation on both sides. Anyone caught worshipping in either faction is publicly executed. This has been happening more often lately, bringing up the possible specter of martyrdom for some of these faithful souls. As such, the naga are waging a secret war to exterminate these movements of newfound faith as quietly as possible. They fear that a unifying religion that did not feature naga at the top rung of the ladder could bring about the revolution in the ranks that they have been struggling against for so long. The cold, hard fact is that they are at least partially initiating such a problem by forcing the respective worshippers of Kassegore and Hromu into a war against them. In this conflict, there can be no winners for the reptilian peoples.

Enter the Varn

While the trogs worship Kassegore, the serpent men and the naga reserve their reverence for more practical matters. Instead of giving praise to some ancient god who abandoned his people in the hour of their greatest need, they have set up shrines to the entire Varn race. The powers-that-be in Ssethregore have proclaimed the Varn to be the ultimate evolution in reptilian form. While the Varn may not agree with this assessment—they're something more than mere reptiles, of course—they are more than happy to accept the offerings made by the Ssethregorans under the auspices of Kahss himself.

The leader of the Varn who interact with the Ssethregorans on a regular basis is a gray Varn by the name of Kth'ror. This crafty creature has plans for the Ssethregorans that they have no clue about. He has been building his relationship with Kahss for decades, preparing for the moment when he himself will come to Onara and assume the role of the Ssethregorans' ultimate leader. He hopes that Kahss will capitulate quickly, but if not, Kth'ror is prepared to kill the dark naga and his entire family on the spot. Each of the many shrines to the Varn that can be found all around Ssethregore have been

enchanted. Anyone who prays to the Varn at such a shrine has a 5% chance of actually summoning a Varn to the shrine. What happens from that point is determined by what kind of Varn shows up and what kind of mood he is in.

Most Varn aren't terribly put out by being summoned to Arcanis, but there had better be a good reason for it. The Varn show up spoiling for a fight, and if there's not one around to be seen, they're just as likely to start one themselves as not. The Varn may not be actual gods, but they're far more powerful than all of the Ssethregorans other than the naga. These Ssethregorans feel that by lining up the Varn to help them in times of trouble, they're doing much more for themselves than those fools who worship Kassegore on the sly. Fortunately, the chaotic nature of the Varn has prevented them from organizing the Ssethregorans. Otherwise, the Varn would be guiding the Ssethregorans to the vengeance and victory they've been waiting for so long.

Fear and Loathing

There is a clear chain of command in the reptilian army, and the leaders use harsh punishments to maintain it at all times. The most commonly meted out penalty is the back of a clawed hand, although full beatings are hardly rare, nor is summary execution.

The commonly held tenant in the Ssethregoran infantry is that the trogs would run and hide if the Ss'ressen weren't beating them into place. The same goes for how the serpent men treat the Ss'ressen—and even how the naga treat the serpent men. Fear and loathing rule all. That such a horrifying society could be next-door neighbors with the enlightened Altherians is one of the great ironies of Onara. Still, the fact that the Ssethregorans rule through fear has worked in the favor of the warm-bloods, so they don't often complain.

One of the reasons that the Ssethregoran army has yet to develop into the kind of fighting force that would be a real threat to the Altherians and the rest of Onara is that the serpent men—and even the lizardfolk—leading the individual outfits are so hungry for power on a personal level that they are unwilling to risk themselves for the advancement of their people. The idea of having to cover yourself first is so deeply ingrained in the Ssethregoran soldier that there is little to no altruism in the ranks.

Since just about every citizen of Ssethregore is a part of the military—either directly or indirectly—this habit has been woven into the fabric of reptilian life. The only thing that unifies the Ssethregorans at all is the fact that they

all believe that it's their destiny as a group to once again rule all of Onara at some point in the future. All that is needed is a leader capable of uniting them.

The Swamplands

The lands behind the Swampline, as the border between the Morass and the mainland is called, are lined with small Ssethregoran settlements, and the concentration of reptilians is higher here than anywhere else in the peninsula—outside of the city of Sseth, of course. Other settlements are scattered throughout the land, although there are few in the massive Rotting Forest that pierces into the Kraldjur Morass. The dark, soggy woods of the Rotting Forest are infested with all sorts of dangerous, wild creatures and even the reptilians are loath to roam about in such a place without large numbers to back them up.

Most of the central settlements line the length of the several rivers that flow through the Kraldjur Morass. In some places, these are more like clear areas of the swamp where the water is a bit deeper than normal, but the rivers are navigable all the way from the Swampline into the sea.

In one sense, the entire Kraldjur Morass is one huge delta for the Kraldjur River, the great flowing waters that run from the heights of Altherian peninsula all the way through the swamp and into the sea. The waters from these mountains feed the swamps, keeping them wet year round, although the summers are notoriously the wettest times due to the melting snow of the highlands. The rainy seasons in the spring and fall keep the water of the swamps up too. It's only in the dead of winter that the waters recede a bit and the entire place seems like one never-ending mud hole. Sseth itself is situated right at the point where the Kraldjur River flows into Lake Quesselan. The reptilian denizens of the deep farm the lake for the people of Sseth, providing them with the kinds of foodstuffs they need to keep their economy rolling without them actually having to go out and hunt the food up themselves. It's just a short journey across the lake from there to reach the final delta, which pours directly into the sea. There are reptilians in the murky shallows of the nearby ocean as well. While these tribes aren't strictly speaking tied directly to the Kingdom of Ssethregore, they are dependent on the Ssethregorans for all sorts of trade items. In return for the Ssethregorans' goods and services, the seafarers barter things like fresh seafood and information about the movements of the sailing ships of the warm-bloods. The marine reptiles claim to be prepared to come to

Ssethregore's aid in case of a naval invasion. While no one—including the watery creatures—can tell for sure or not whether this is true without actually testing it, the very threat is enough to give most people pause about trying to even land a boat on the edge of the Kraldjur Morass.





Ymandragore

The rain never ceases to fall, but the city never ceases to burn.

- Ymandrake proverb

Ymandragore is a city carved bodily from the stone of The Isles of Tears, a testament to the power of its king. Thousands of wizards toil on its slopes. Countless sorcerers work their magic in its service. Those not blessed with arcane might keep to the shadows.

The story of the kingdom of Ymandragore is the story of the City of Ymandragore, and the story of the city is the story of its ruler the Sorcerer King, a powerful magician from another world, obsessed with increasing his power until it rivals, then eclipses the power of the gods. The Sorcerer King's obsession defines the citizens under his rule. All action on the Isle, when motives are traced to their roots, when the first cause to each effect is discovered, hearkens back to the Sorcerer King's quest for godhood. This obsession alone prevents Ymandragore and its King from exerting greater influence in the world, though the tendrils of His Majesty Sorcery can be felt across all the lands of Arcanis through the twisted guilds and magical societies known as the Fingers of the Sorcerer King and the dark kidnappings of the Harvesters.

History

What came before – The Isles of Tears

Before the coming of the Sorcerer King, the demesne of Ymandragore was nothing more than rocks jutting from the sea. The civilization of the elves came and went without more effect than the erosive cutting of the waves. The spread of the humanoid races deposited a few unlucky goblinoids on the surfaces, and the rise and fall of human empires left the Isles of Tears to the scattered tribes that scratched out an uneasy existence on their surfaces, eating scrub, moss, and the occasional gull.

Remaining oral traditions of the surface tribes describe the constant warfare of the goblins, inconsequential to the muse of history. The only universal legend among them was a prophecy describing a great conqueror that would come to unite the tribes of the Isles into a force that would be feared beyond the seas. The prophecies proved true with the arrival of the Sorcerer King and his forces.

The coming of the Sorcerer King

*The ground rolled like the waves below,
The sky cracked like the stones,
And the Tears stopped their fall for the first time
in a moon's full toll.*

*The Great Ruler appeared 'mongst the bones,
His wrath fell like fifty spears on the kith and
their foes.*

Our conqueror has arrived.

- fragment of the Gyaluant tribes oral history of the Sorcerer King's arrival

Only isolated legends survive describing the Sorcerer King's arrival. The leader of Ymandragore is the only being left alive to remember his coming, his countrymen and servants all slain by Betrayers' Fever during the Myrantis-Eryunell War. However, the second-hand accounts of Ymandragore's subjects illuminate the island nation's early history.

The Land Beyond

The world the Sorcerer King left behind is a subject of much curiosity both in Ymandragore and abroad. The Ymandrake wish to understand their liege, and how better to serve him. Enemies hope that knowledge of his origins will help to discover his weaknesses. As with all personal lore, the King refuses to answer, but his silence does not prevent speculation.

That he left a place of powerful magic, there is no argument. Nothing less than a miracle-world could produce such a powerful man. Most agree that the Lord of Ymandragore came to Arcanis unwillingly, either for refuge or because his plots were thwarted by the equally powerful denizens of his home. If not, why did he not seek his goals there? His world has powerful deities, because the Sorcerer King's obsession with attaining godhood must have inspiration.

The King's form gives further clues. Tall and barrel-chested, in stature he resembles the high mountain folk. If not an example of his arcane might, the King's derision of clothing beyond short leggings and sandals, even in the fiercest wind and rain, lead people to imagine a cold world of rain and ice. The red-tinged ebony skin and sun-bleached hair suggests a world of heat and deserts. But the Sorcerer King appears as he desires. Perhaps his form offers no clues to his home world.

Mandragore

The Sorcerer King arrived on the Isle of Tears late in the time of the Theocracy of the Cleansing Flame. He arrived quietly and without fanfare, and was accompanied by several hundred servants, warriors and fellow magicians from his home world. The newcomers discovered themselves on a rain-blasted rock in the northern sea, and only the power of His Majesty Sorcery protected his people from the severe environment. A few short battles with the goblinoid tribes on the island, quickly demonstrated the newcomers dominance, and the orcs, goblins, and hobgoblins were integrated quickly into the Sorcerer King's followers.

The wizards and shaman cut the first stones of what would be Mandragore – The City of the Dragon – from the western cliffs of the largest island, creating the first tier of the stepped harbor in the process. The next generations passed quickly; the Sorcerer King used up his people and the tribes of the isle to secure a foothold on the island. When Mandragore was finished he sent his followers out on ships formed from the black stone of the island to explore the land in which they found themselves.

The first ships to return – and not all did – brought tales of the chaos that was sweeping the mainland. In a twisted foreshadowing of the Harvesters, many returned with captives from the mainland nations, including a weakened celestial giant. From these captives the Sorcerer King puzzled out the warring empires a short sea

The Birthing Chamber of the Gods

The discovery that Arcanis held the Birthing Chamber of the Gods was what signaled the Sorcerer King's obsession with achieving divinity. Though the Lord of Ymandragore explores every option to ignite his own godhood, the Birthing Chamber still stands as the focus of his obsession- the object that holds the greatest chance for him to succeed in his goal.

It still isn't understood where he first learned of the Chamber, but his search began soon after a badly wounded celestial giant was brought to the island lashed across two of his black-hulled ships. The giant, and in fact all of the captives brought to the Isle of Tears vanished soon afterward; those besides the Sorcerer King himself who knew their hidden location died in the war against Eryunell. However, the His Majesty Sorcery's agents have always paid special attention to relics from the celestial giants' age territory that used to be controlled by their empire.

journey away, and heard hints of greater powers further inland.

The Fell Bargain – The Myrantian Necromancers

The Black Fleet did not go unnoticed to the warring parties on the mainland. They soon discovered the unknown power off their coasts. The horrors of the Time of Darkness bred paranoia, and the unveiling of another magical kingdom fueled that paranoia.

The Sorcerer King was compelled to involve himself in the politics and wars of the time to prevent all of the nations on the continent from assuming his hostility and uniting to destroy his still fledgling kingdom. For support in his quest for the Birthing Chamber of the Gods, His Majesty Sorcery pledged the forces of Mandragore in treaty with the Myrantian Necromancers in their on going war against the Eryunellian War Mages.

He chose his sides poorly.

Betrayal

After staging the bulk of Mandragore's armies in the swamps of Myrantis, the forces of the Isle of Tears and the Myrantians marched to face the Eryunellians. But the Necromancer Lords feared the growing power of the Sorcerer King as much as the battle-magic of Eryunel. They stole a plague from the demons they consorted with, and infected the Mandragore troops before the battle began. Betrayer's fever raged across both sides of the battlefield, the Myrantians unaffected because their Lords warned them to treat all words from their allies as untrue. Some Eryunellians survived in new golem bodies, but the Sorcerer King's people succumbed to the disease to a man.

The King himself survived the contagion through his own powerful magic, but quickly discovered the source of the demonic malady. The Necromancer Lords, aware their treachery had failed to fell the powerful Lord of the Isle of Tears and had been subsequently uncovered, understood they would not live long to enjoy their victory over Eryunel. In revenge for their coming deaths, the rulers of Myrantis forced their population into a great blood sacrifice, preparing a bolt of demonic energy to melt the city of Mandragore to slag, and forming a curse to blight the power of their destroyer.

The Sorcerer King destroyed the now-lifeless city around the Lords, and dug the last surviving rulers from the rubble that swiftly sank below the surface of the swamp. The



Necromancers tried to explain that the survival of Mandragore hinged on their continued life, but His Majesty Sorcery ignored their threats. He crushed the last Lord's skull as the final words of Myrantis' curse were unleashed. Mandragore would fare the same, and its king would never foot on Onara again, under pain of Hell's own vengeance.

With that, the Lord of the Isle of Tears returned to his kingdom and found the truth of the Necromancer's last curse. He released a single cry of anger, and set to rebuild.

The Dragon Reborn

The return of the Sorcerer King found none of his countrymen alive. Those who did not fall to Betrayer's Fever fell to the Myrastian curse. The island had returned to the state in which he first found it – scattered tribes of humanoids on a rock seemingly untouched by civilization.

Undefeated, the Lord of the Isle gathered the goblinoids who remained, and declared that his Kingdom would be reborn – Ymandragore, the City of The Dragon reborn. Reborn, not as a phoenix, in an endless stagnant cycle, but as

Betrayer's Fever

Arcanis has never fully recovered from the curse laid on it by the Myrastian Necromancers. The magical plague they released killed most that were infected, but by chance some few survived to carry the disease to other lands. Outbreaks of the sickness still strike, though the most serious are limited to <where the battle took place and Ymandragore. Most sufferers don't realize the origin of their sickness, but that does not make the plague any less deadly. It is known as Betrayer's Fever, and in uneducated lands the pocked scars left behind label survivors as thieves and traitors.

Any reasoning being can contract the plague, and the contagion is effective even against those normally immune to disease (though divine protection similar to that possessed by paladins is still effective.) A being infected with betrayer's fever must roll two weekly fort saves. Failure of the first results in 1d6-1 points of temporary Con damage and one point of permanent Con damage. Failing the second results in 1d6-1 points of temporary and one point of permanent Cha damage. The ability damage cannot be recovered by any means until the infection is eliminated. The fever can be removed only by infecting six additional victims. After the sixth person contracts the disease, Betrayer's Fever subsides, and the lost ability points return as normal (permanent ability damage remains.)

Betrayer's Fever is spread by lies, and the only defense is cynicism. Every time a carrier of the fever lies, he passes a portion of the disease on to any who believe that lie, possibly infecting them. Those duped by a carrier must make a successful will save to avoid contracting the fever themselves. The save DC is proportionate to the severity and consequences of the lie.

Lie	DC
White lie/false name	10
Lie causes victim to lose money	11+ % of total wealth/10
Lie causes damage to reputation	12-15
Lie breaks a friendly relationship	15
Lie breaks up a loving relationship	20
Lie causes a death	25
Lie causes the death of a friend or loved one	26-30

Role play or use the bluff skill to determine if any individual lie is successful. ANY lie can infect, whether the carrier intends harm or not, the actual consequences of the untruth determine the DC to avoid infection, not the intention of the carrier. A newly infected person can carry the fever and be rid of it, infecting family and friends, never realizing he was sick if he infects six or more before he has to make his first fort save. Someone with the fever cannot be infected again until he rids himself of the disease, but those who have had the fever and are now rid of it have no protection from re-infection.

Cure disease will cure someone suffering from Betrayer's Fever, as will *remove curse*. *Restoration* and *greater restoration* will return ability points lost to the plague but not prevent further ability loss. All other magical remedies save *wish* prove ineffective against the disease.

the Dragon! – crawling from within its own bones to emerge more powerful than before. He separated the tribes into two, those few who were magically adept to go to Onara with gold to entice new settlers, and those without to begin stacking stones for the new city. The first became the seed from which the Harvesters grew.

It was then that the Sorcerer King declared that all wizards and wielders of arcane might were now subject to his rule, in part to rebuild more quickly and in part to prevent another magical disaster from befalling his reborn city. If the all the magic arts were ruled from Ymandragore, then the city couldn't be in danger from those arts.

In time the Island repaired itself.

Sparking the Time of Terror

The rebirth of his city occupied His Majesty Sorcery for a time; rebuilding both the stones and its people was a task of centuries. The Harvesters brought new citizens to fuel Ymandragore's growth, and with them came new rumors of the Birthing Chamber of the Gods. His last opportunity dashed by the betrayal of the Necromancer Lords of Myrantis, the Sorcerer King planned to plumb these rumors personally. One of the Black Fleet set sail for the mainland, carrying its King.

As the Sorcerer King's boot touched to first rock of shore, the words that slipped from the last Necromancer Lord's lips as His Majesty Sorcery crushed his skull boomed forth at ten times their original volume - . . . *its king would never foot on Onara again, under pain of Hell's own*

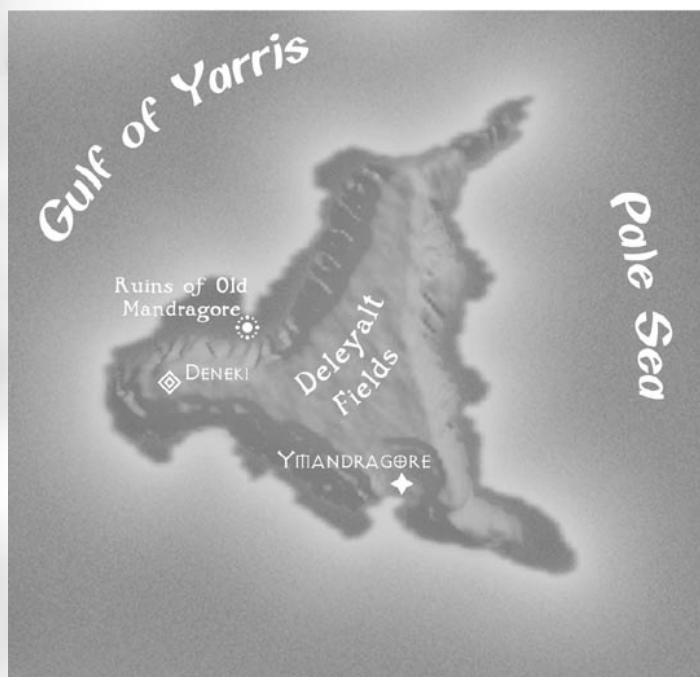
vengeance. With these words, the sky appeared to rip in two, and beasts from a dozen god's nightmares spilled into lands of Arcanis. Fearful for his still healing city and cursing the still potent spells of Myrantis, the Sorcerer King took flight back to Ymandragore, leaving his sailors and Onara behind to deal with Myrantis' legacy.

With the aid of their King the Isle of Tears weathered the Time of Terror with little harm, though the rest of Arcanis fared less well. Now, the Lord of the Isles relies on his agents to pursue Ymandragore's interests on the mainland, in case the Necromancer Lord's curse is still in effect.

Geography

Ymandragore is the largest island of a small archipelago known as the Isles of Tears about 70 miles from the coast of Onara in the mouth of the Gulf of Yarris. Windswept and known only to produce the constant rains that give the islands their name, the continental nations ignored the seemingly worthless rocks. Lacking any natural harbors and surrounded on all sides by wave pounded sea cliffs, even pirates avoided this desolate corner of Arcanis. The Islands remained untouched by the civilized races until the portal that brought the Sorcerer King erupted in the center of the largest.

The first thing a visitor to the Isle of Tears notices is the rain. Nineteen days out of every twenty Ymandragore and the surrounding isles are covered in sheets of rain. Drizzles rise to deluges, with the wind blowing in from the sea to churn the falling water into an almost constant blinding mess. The seas around the island crash with 15-foot swells everywhere save the harbor, which only escapes the constant weather through the sorcerous might of the harbormasters



The Black Cliffs

The Island itself is made up of a hard black rock that rises from the sea in towering cliffs. The only place to land ships is in the carefully crafted harbor created by the carving of generations of Ymandrake, and the only mars to its surface are isolated Icons and channels draining water from the Deleyalt Fields. Nothing lives on the cliffs; the constant rain washes away seeds before they can sprout, and sea birds find refuge on the island's interior.

The Icons

Carved in the towering cliffs that surround the island and in the broken interior of the Twin Hearts are numerous appeals the Sorcerer King's vanity. Huge statues of the Lord of the Isle are scattered about – some the product of a powerful sorcerer, heady with thrill of arcane power, some carved with meticulous care by generations of the serfs that tend Deleyalt field's goats and sheep. All portray the Sorcerer King in poses of grandeur and majesty, or battling the demons from the Time of Terror.

Some of the eldest of the icons, as they have come to be known, have developed the power to bestow small blessings. One may offer respite from the sheeting rain, grass near another is always green and regrows overnight no matter how overgrazed. These small blessings are unexplained, and to all detection, not arcane in origin. A few cynics believe the blessings to be a prank by a cruel finger on the serfs and rubes. Most think the Sorcerer King has given a few small comforts to the lowest of Ymandrake and that his spells are too subtle for normal divinations to detect. And some point to these special icons as proof that the Sorcerer King is growing close to his ultimate goal.

Deleyalt Fields

The cliffs stop suddenly at a flat and sparsely green plain surrounding the broken interior. It is here that Ymandragore grows its food. Again, the island's arcane powers are all that keep the sparse grasses from flowing to the sea. Most of Ymandragore's lower class dwell on the Fields surrounding the northern Heart, harvesting the hardy grains and tending the short-legged goats and sheep. Those who live in Delayalt are nomads, circling the island a dozen times in a single year.

The southern fields are scrub, a refuge for the failed experiments of the city wizards. They serve as a crucible for the beasts created by the more 'creative' of the islands mages, and as sentries to prevent the escape of Daneki's citizens. The southern fields also produce one of Ymandragore's few exports - the fans of Canceri's gladiatorial pits prize the aberrations grown there.

Deneki: The City of Tears

Forced to relocate from the mainland, the dwarves of the Enclave of Deneki are a miserable lot. Enslaved due to their natural ability of wielding arcane power and their skill at crafting

items of wondrous ability, these hapless beings toil now not for the lifting of the Curse, but for the Sorcerer-King's insatiable lust for power.

For more information on the Deneki, see Chapter 9, the Lament of the Dwarves.

The Life Mines

Surrounding both of the twin hearts of Ymandragore are the quarries that supply the black stone for new construction in the cities and the hulls of the Black Fleet. The Life Mines are the final destination of those still hardy enough to work, yet of little use for magical experimentation. The Life Mines gradually grind away at the broken interiors of the island, leaving a growing plain behind. The Deleyalt Fields are the result of past centuries of quarrying, and in a millennium the Isle of Tears will become a plateau.

The dwarves of Daneki have taken on a large part of the Life Mines duties under the direction of the traitor Junik and his Wine Drinker allies. Unusual for a race so used to stone-cutting, the dwarven miners are expiring more quickly than the convicts they replaced. Whether through despair at their situation or more sinister means, the population is barely remaining stable.

Ymandragore

As long as its breath burns, the Dragon is not truly dead.

- Onaran folk warning

In his own tongue – The City of the Dragon Reborn – Ymandragore is the seat of the Sorcerer King's power, and the city reflects that power. Through the wind and the rain the city is literally ablaze. From the Sorcerer King's Throne on the docks to the highest tier, the city's stones are aflame with arcane hubris. Almost every other paving stone and building block has been enchanted with *continual flame* and its variations.

Ymandragore would not exist without the aid of magic. Without the patronage of the Sorcerer King the city and Island would return to the dead rock it was before his coming. But aside from its existence, the Ymandragore shows no sign of its ruler's hand.

The city is built in steps, each tier carved bodily from the cliffs that ring the Isle. Black stone is the exclusive building material. The buildings are a dizzying mix of styles and fashions, drawn from the architectural traditions of a dozen nations and eras. Towers spring up at random between

shops and warehouses, and the streets show no central mind controlling their placement. The city has few landmarks because every building is remarkable – the product of generations of mages competing for attention.

All of Ymandragore is worthy of notice, but some few locations are more worthy than others.

The Docks

Ymandragore serves as its own lighthouse; the fires of its rooftops and cobbles light the way for merchants and the Black Fleet to navigate through the rain and dock safely. The docks exist almost exclusively for the Fleet of Black Sails (or the Black Fleet). Few berths are open for the isolated traders that find their way into Ymandragore harbor. Any ship landing at the Isle is inspected thoroughly – crew and cargo – for magic. Any magic items or arcanelly gifted crewmen are not allowed to leave and quickly are brought upon the stage. The few ships of other nations that find their way regularly to Ymandragore's shores are those of Freeport and Censure. In fact, Censure keeps a small embassy close to the docks, and keeps one berth continually reserved for the infrequent visits of their countrymen.

The Throne

The Sorcerer King is not does not often appear to his citizens, he makes his desires known through the heads of the fingers and his servants, mages of great personal power that have dedicated themselves to their Lord even more than the average denizen of the Isle. The one exception is during His Majesty Sorcery's yearly appearance at the Throne.

The Throne lies on the first tier of Ymandragore, only a stone's throw from the harbor. It is a huge, roofed, open-sided building, ringed with stone pillars carved from the black stone of cliffs. Every inch of the structure is covered in the *continual flame* that bedecks much of the rest of the city, but unlike the 2nd-level spell of the same name, the King can command the flame to burn at will. A stone stool sits at the center, the Sorcerer King's seat.

Once yearly the Sorcerer King appears to the citizens of Ymandragore to hear their concerns and triumphs first hand. Those willing to brave the fierce winds and rain that always seem to commemorate their Lords audience are allowed to speak directly to His Majesty Sorcery. But the Sorcerer King does not like his time to be wasted; those who bother the King with pointless



complaints or displease him are forced to walk away from the Throne through fire allowed to burn. Those who survive the trip seldom repeat their mistake.

Blessing Houses

Scattered among the towers and chapter halls of the fingers are elaborate altars. Randomly placed, they can be found in the corner of an alleyway or filling the interior of warehouse, the center of a marketplace or just outside the door of a private home. The personal servants of the Sorcerer King build the altars, presumably at the direction of their Lord.

The altars are called Blessing Houses, and they serve as a conduit for the Sorcerer King magic. A citizen of Ymandragore can meditate at one of these altars to receive a touch of their King's power – any arcane spell of level two or lower. The spells are as those cast by a 1st-level sorcerer, and only affect the petitioner. In return, the citizens of Ymandragore are expected to tithe their own spell power. The altars accept any spell cast at them, funneling the arcane power directly to the Sorcerer King. Those who abuse the power of the Blessing Houses or take more spell energy than they give, find the Sorcerer King's power cut off. Those who continue to petition without donation are often stricken with a hostile spell as a warning against their greed.

The Stage

All émigrés to the Isle of Tears face the stage, willing and unwilling both. Centrally located on the second tier of the city, the Stage is half job fair and half slave-auction. Those that pass apprenticeship are paraded forth to be chosen by one of the fingers. Bidding is fierce for the talented, though an apprentice raised on Ymandragore can refuse to join if the finger's ideology contrasts too sharply with his own.

Not so the victims of the Harvesters. Those brought to Ymandragore on the Black Fleet have no choice; they and traitors against the Sorcerer King's rule are treated as chattel, dragged to the Stage and bid on like livestock. Once purchased by a finger or powerful independent mage, it is up to the buyer to determine the merchandise's new status. Practice varies from finger to finger, but the more powerful abductees that prove their loyalty are often initiated into the finger and become a citizen of the Isle. More often, the new serf is used until broken, and then made the subject of experimentation.

People of the Dragon Reborn – Ymandrake

Serfs and Citizens

The Dragon City has only two classes - those who serve the Sorcerer King with arcane power and those who can or will not. The two classes are known informally as serfs, for those with no magical talent or who refuses because of principle or pride to aid His Majesty Sorcery in his endless quest; and citizens, for those who serve their lord ably with magic.

Being Ymandrake

The perfect Ymandrake is one who lives his life in service to his King, suppressing all other need until his liege's are filled. Few Ymandrake are perfect.

The typical citizen of the Isle of Tears lives his life with the appearance of submission to the Sorcerer King's will, and the most successful discover ways to match their own desires with the perceived will of their ruler. The more powerful the citizen, the more closely the goals must parallel. Most make due with lip service, though none indulge in dissent, even in private. Too many in Ymandragore can discern thoughts, for it

to be safe to disagree with His Majesty Sorcery, even in their own mind.

Physically, the Ymandrake are metropolitan and hardy. The influence of humanoid blood and the harsh environment combine to create a weathered people. Only the most powerful of wizards can protect themselves from the constant rain and wind, and most follow their King's example of stoic acceptance of their harsh homeland.

The Races

The Sorcerer King does not discriminate against any of the races. The Isle welcomes all equally. In fact those families with long history on the Isle often have strains of several races through their family trees. Magical talent is the only means of social promotion, and a citizen of Ymandragore would show pride in a goblin ancestor if that ancestor was a powerful and prominent sorcerer. But even so, the common races tend toward different niches that reflect their races history on the isle.

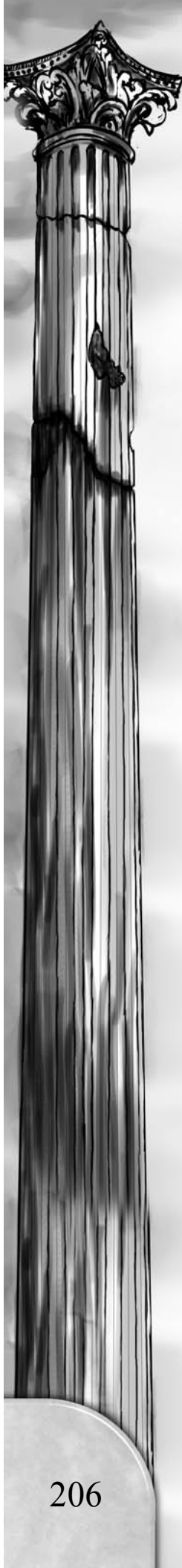
The Native Tribes

The goblinoids inhabited the Isle of Tears before even the coming of the Sorcerer King, and they and assorted half-breeds were the only citizens of Mandragore to survive the Myrastian devastation of Mandragore. To this day the tribes serve on the Deleyalt Fields more often than not, though it is not rare to see green skin and tusks on a powerful official or leading a finger's delegation to His Majesty Sorcery. The tribes have been a part of Ymandragore longer than any other and are as civilized as any other citizen. In fact, a sizable percentage of the Harvester's quarry is now made up of humanoids. Because of the less organized nature of the tribes on Onara, it is often easier for the Harvesters to identify and isolate talent. Often a small sum is enough to convince a tribe elder to release the possessor of troubling powers.

Humans

As with all of Arcanis since the beginning of the Rule of Man, humans make up the majority of the citizens of the Isle of Tears. They can be found in number in every stratum of Ymandrake society – herding and tending crops on the Deleyalt Fields, ranging the lands in service to the Harvesters, sold to the fingers on the stage, and culled for their spark of divinity in the life mines. Still, the humans of Ymandragore





consider themselves one step closer to their liege than the other races, though their pride may be misplaced. The Sorcerer King looks human to those honored enough to look upon him, but his power has increased to where he is arguably more than human. And even their King looks on his kin with more favor than the others, his kin died to a man in the Great Myrantis-Eryunell War. If his blood still flows on Arcanis, it flows in the tribes of goblinoids that surround Ymandragore city, not the humans within it.

Elorii

The Elorii, with their innate mastery of the arcane arts, are welcomed on the isle and are frequent targets of the Harvesters. However, their native talents combined with their natural arrogance either restrict an individual Elorii to the highest segments of society or doom him to the lowest. (Though both classes of Elorii will often still interact; the lowest classes in Ymandragore are often the experimental subjects of the highest.) Their numbers are still small on the island, and are almost exclusively descended from abductees.

Dwarves

Dwarves are rarer still, though their numbers are growing swiftly with the foundation of Daneki. The Wine Drinker's capture of the last dwarven soul stone has doomed a full clan to either lingering death or slavery at the hands of the Sorcerer King, though the few arcane adepts among the new immigrants are welcome to open their talents in service of the Isle. A few dwarves linked to others of the soul stones voluntarily serve His Majesty Sorcery, either taking frequent trips to their clans' city, or maintaining their vitality through alchemical potions.

Others

The one standard for citizenship in Ymandragore is arcane ability, and arcane talent is not limited to the common races. The Isle of Tears welcomes any magical species to its shores. Unfortunately, most magical beings brought to Ymandragore are brought unwillingly – the fey, the willful undead, magical beasts, the dragons. A handful of these prove so useful to the finger that takes them from the Stage that they survive for a time. Fewer still trade their independence for a semblance of freedom and a chain to the Isle and the Sorcerer King's quest.

The Fingers of the Sorcerer King

While the bureaucracy put in place by the King technically governs Ymandragore, the real power on the island is wielded by the dozens of magical societies and guilds that are collectively known as the Fingers of the Sorcerer King. The guilds hold no office in government, but the heads of the fingers are among the few that speak with the Sorcerer King directly. This gives them enormous influence, and the Byzantine plots put the politics of the other empires to shame.

The fingers evolved from research groups created to search for sources of divine power. Each finger engages in focused research toward that goal, though most have expanded their interests to include more material objectives. Each finger is devoted to a single branch of magic, always more specialized, and works to refine its powers to its purest form. New fingers are formed with new arcane theories, or when an ideological schism occurs in an existing finger.

The societies present their new knowledge to the Sorcerer King himself once a year, and the guild's fortunes rise and fall with their liege's reactions. These meetings are open to all who claim to have news of interest to the King.

Many, if not most of the fingers have an associated prestige class. The breadth of possible organizations is more than can be covered in a book twice this size. A few of the more influential groups are detailed below, but Gamemasters are encouraged to create new fingers to support their own campaign. Any Arcane prestige class can form the core of a new finger, and the most bizarre of organizations fit seamlessly into the twisted weave of Ymandragore. The Sorcerer King leaves no stone unturned in his quest for godhood.

The Society of Ordained Seekers

Known commonly as the Ordainers, and more vulgarly as the Cannibals, The society of Ordained Seekers are a long established group with historically strong influence with both the King and the bureaucracy. Founded to research the consumption and storage of arcane power, in recent years they have come to dominate Ymandragore's relationships with other magical powers, primarily through their strong influence with the Harvesters. They have become so successful that many of the more traditional fingers have grown nervous, and spell-casters from beyond the isle outright fear them. Through their special techniques, the Ordainers 'eat' magic and store it within them for use in their own spells or other more direct powers.

These specialized spellcasters have been trained in the city of Ymandragore to serve the Sorcerer King with unflinching loyalty, and the majority of the finger serves as Harvesters on the continent of Onara. So great are their numbers among the Harvesters, greater than 75%, the finger has become synonymous with the mage-seeking organization, and its members dominate the Harvester's policies.

Because of their particular abilities in absorbing, leeching and channeling magical energies, Ordainers are especially suited to the task of perpetually seeking out the signs of magical ability across the many lands they travel. With the Sorcerer King's more traditional agents, they bring these wayward spellcasters back to Ymandragore for instruction and proper education in the magical arts and inclusion in one of the isle's traditional magical societies. All Ordainers are formidable spellcasters endowed with extra abilities that make them extremely dangerous to all users of magic. While the motivations and moral outlook of individual Ordainers may vary, they are all unquestionably loyal to the Sorcerer King and his teachings, serving him without question and to the death.

The Taxman Project

Like all fingers the Ordainers exist to fulfill the Sorcerer King's desire for godhood. They each seek to push the bounds of magic further than those who came before them. All the fingers are supposed to support this research, and one of the Isle's greatest crimes is interfering with the ubiquitous arcane experimentation.

Unfortunately, rumors of the Ordainer's current project are tempting the other fingers to the unthinkable, if only to protect their own power and abilities. Known as the Taxman Project, the Ordainers are developing a way to transfer an arcane spellcaster's powers permanently. Only the most respected first circles are involved, and only stories have leaked from the guild houses, but the Ordainers have been purchasing more magically adept prisoners from the Stage. The dried husks of bodies resembling said prisoners have been found in the alleyways near the Ordainer's guildhalls. Even the most powerful mages in Ymandragore fear what this development could lead to.

Organization

The structure of the Ordainer society mirrors the loose hierarchy of the Harvesters. The influence of generations of 'cannibals' has

blurred the line between the two organizations, and policies that affect the Ordainers inevitably are mirrored with the arcane kidnappers.

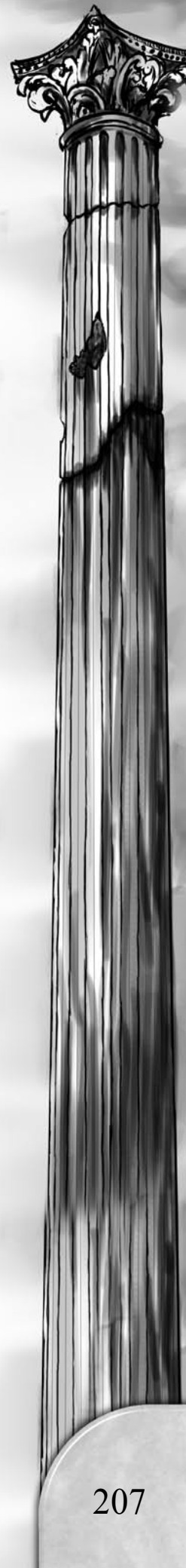
There are two levels of advancement within the society. The first is never encountered off of Ymandragore. Inexperienced, untrustworthy, or uninterested, the first circle of membership remains in the guildhalls and furthers the finger's political goals and the research the Sorcerer King demands of all wizards on the Isle. The membership of the first circle includes both the newest and the most senior members of the society, including the grandmaster, and has little bearing on an Ordainer's standing in the society.

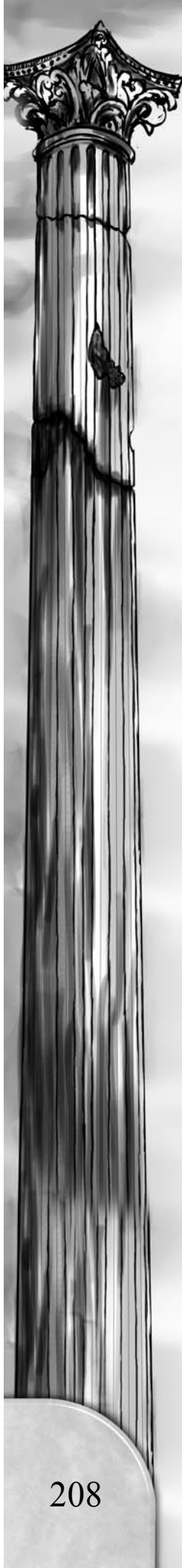
A mage crosses into the second circle when he is accepted into the Harvesters, though he need not remain there. It is the second circle which explores the Society's and the Sorcerer King's interests abroad. They leave Ymandragore to pursue goals on the continent, but are forbidden entrance to the Isle beyond the port. All resources are spent in service, and when an Ordainer returns to the Isle permanently, he leaves the second circle for the first forever.

The Wine Drinkers

The Wine Drinkers are one of the most feared of Ymandragore's magical societies, though more from the reputation of their distasteful practices than because of any widespread evil actions. Alone of the fingers, the Wine Drinkers are open only to those with no previous arcane power. This finger provides one of the few paths for non-wizards and –sorcerers to political power in Ymandragore. The wine drinkers manufacture their own powers through complicated alchemical rituals requiring the blood of arcane spellcasters, and this blood is where the 'wine' drinkers get their name.

The finger was founded during the construction of Ymandragore city on the blasted foundation of her namesake. It was during this difficult period that the Sorcerer King allowed, even encouraged, the non-magically adept to immigrate to his island. Many came to escape the war ravaged carcass of Onara, and a few made their fortunes helping to build the City Reborn, but when stability returned, the richest of the new-comers found themselves second-class citizen beneath the wizards and sorcerer's. Teljeri hoNordi, a merchant and trader, refused to be treated as less than the arcane adepts. He lacked the blood for sorcery and the talent for wizardry, so dived into alchemy for answers. After much experimentation, he discovered a formula that would pass the magically abilities





of a magician to another through the drinking of blood. Several wizards died to develop and perfect the technique, and the merchant was caught. He was brought before the Sorcerer King to face judgment for high crimes, the slaying of his majesty's researchers, but the process intrigued the ruler of Ymandragore. To the horror of the cities mages, instead of execution, Teljeri was made the head of a new finger called the Wine Drinkers, first in jest, now in fear.

The finger has grown slowly since then, and now has considerable influence. The Wine Drinkers are largely in control of (Dwarven for "The Town of Tears") and the mysterious life mines. The society also serves the Sorcerer King as a threat to those wizards who might threaten his power. All arcane casters in Ymandragore fear being made fuel for the spells of the Wine Drinkers

Dwarven 'Wine'

Seventy years ago a mishap at the stage accidentally delivered a host of non-magical donors to the chapterhouse of the Wine Drinkers. The new guests were made comfortable and bled for the ingredients necessary to fuel the finger's spells. The mistake was uncovered quickly as once easy enchantments began to fail, but in the confusion it was discovered that wine brewed from the blood of two dwarves still granted limited power. Experimentation soon confirmed that the dwarves had no arcane talent, and further tests proved all dwarves could fuel the spell-granting potions, regardless of arcane abilities.

hoNordi passed the discovery to the Sorcerer King at the next conclave, and presented an ambitious plan to bring more dwarves to the island for further experiments. The lord of Ymandragore agreed. A weak dwarf was found, then tempted with arcane power to steal his clan's soul stone, and bring it to the island. The dwarven city of (City of Tears) was founded, and his clansmen were forced to follow the call of the stone into effective slavery. The new immigrants were quickly put to work at the life mines.

A Wine Drinker can fuel his spellcasting with blood from any dwarf, even those with no arcane spell-casting talent. Unfortunately, the spells so fueled are less potent.

Organization

The Wine Drinkers organize their guild like a more like a social club than a guild, and the only 'rules' enforced are those that ensure a constant supply of the elixir that makes their powers possible. Entrance is available to any who are willing to part with the substantial induction fee; members then pursue their own projects. Teljeri is still the head of the finger, now one of the most powerful casters in the city. His current pet project is the life mines and the dwarven city nearby, his favorite subordinate, the traitor dwarf (dwarf name), who brought the twelfth and last soul stone to the island in return for the ability to cast spells.

After Teljeri's trial, the finger officially makes gets its ingredients from magically adapt convicts purchased from the stage and uncooperative abductees brought in by the Harvesters, though stories circulate about lesser mages who mysteriously vanish from the streets. Chapter houses are filled with the listless bodies of wizards, sorcerers, and fey. The unwilling tenants are often drugged, with their tongues and thumbs removed to prevent spellcasting. The 'houseguests,' as they are called within the organization, are bled weekly to provide the active ingredient to the potions which give the 'drinkers their power.

Who's Who Among the Ymandrake

Tad the Slice

"This ain't your place foreigner! The streets are mine, and you don't understand the coin I paid for them."

Tad, or 'The Slice' as he is known in the alleys of (large city in Milandir), is the product of *The Found Souls*, one of Ymandragore's many orphanages on the mainland. His natural, though rudimentary, arcane talents were recognized by the head-master at an early age and encouraged. Now he gathers intelligence at the street level and seeks out magical talent among the lower classes. With his spells and Ymandragore's money backing him, Tad has built a small street gang to support his efforts, and little happens in his part of town without his knowledge. He is nineteen; the Harvesters have delayed his inevitable journey to the Sorcerer King's Isle because of his usefulness as a spy and the number of additional apprentices he has discovered, but it is only a matter of time before 'The Slice' takes his trip to the Isle of Tears. The Harvesters make no exceptions. Unfortunately for Tad, his early freedom will

make the transition to Ymandragore's ruthless arcane training regiments difficult. While he looks forward to what he sees as a route to greater power, his old teachers at the *Found Souls* do not expect him to survive.

Encountered: Tad is a young man of nineteen years with dark hair, dark eyes, and a nervous and hotheaded demeanor. He dresses in simple but well cared for tunics and leggings and is seldom without his greataxe, stolen from a drunken caravan guard when Tad was only a child. He always introduces himself as 'The Slice' and loses his temper quickly with anyone who fails to give him the respect he feels he deserves. He is loyal to Ymandragore and will not betray his superiors, and believes the children he sends to the isle are going to a better place than the streets.

Adventurers can meet Tad in several ways. Any spellcasters in his territory will gain his attention, and he will keep a close watch on them until he can inform his teachers of their presence. Tad also has a special dislike for foreigners (Ymandrake excluded of course) and picks fights with any who foolishly drink in his presence. A true bully, he focuses on those smaller than himself, especially dwarves, though a few recent encounters are convincing him to take the small folk more seriously.

Harvester Donovan

"... but a great opportunity awaits you on the Isle. It is my duty to see you do not squander it."

Donovan is typical of the agents Ymandragore sends to police its desires on the mainland. He was born on the Isle, and survived the politics of his youth to join the Ordainers when his magical talents surfaced. When his powers grew mature, he petitioned for the second circle and service with the Harvesters, and was accepted. He now serves the Sorcerer King abroad, searching for those who are unaware of or seek to avoid their arcane fealty to the Isle of Ymandragore.

Encountered: Donovan is a short man, a little over 5-ft. and the slight green tinge to his skin hints at a tiny amount of goblin in his ancestry. He wears clothing appropriate to the region he is hunting, but keeps himself meticulously groomed. In the interests of ease, he wishes to make the journey to Ymandragore as appealing as possible, only resorting to violence when a serf refuses to follow willingly. His favorite technique is to *charm* a prospect from extreme range (using the Extend spell feat as necessary), showing himself only if the spell is successful. The victim, who feels an unusual

bond with the newly met Donovan, usually falls for the Harvester's honeyed tales of his native land and agrees to follow Donovan to the Isle to see for himself.

The obvious route for adventurers to meet Donovan is for the Harvester to set his site on the party's wizard. Though he seldom hunts experienced spell-casters, a careless PC could discover a new friend in the marketplace, and be shanghaied on one of the Black Fleet before the charm wears off. More interestingly, a contact the party needs to complete a vital mission could disappear suddenly. Last seen with an oily gentleman, he was heading for the docks for reasons unknown.

Kopren Ikus

"Dolchim rajaihn id yoah bredniyt, coalyn fre bit toan janleway. Stand down! I am in no danger here. I cannot say the same for you. Why do you disturb me?"

An archmage, Kopren Ikus has little memory remaining of his childhood. A few remembered screams, the faces of those who could be family, a boat, the feel of rain against skin, the stern face and striking wands of an old master – these few flashes have little to do with the power that once was a man. All that remains is the craft and his King. And it is all for the best, or so His Majesty Sorcery says. What a waste such talent would have been on the mainland, to grow old and die without knowing arcane might.

Kopren Ikus is an extension of the Sorcerer King's will. He is not directly controlled, but he doesn't need to be. Ikus has survived hundreds of years, and the only way to survive Ymandragore is in service to Her King. Doing his lord's will has become habit to the archmage; little else remains of him besides power. He is the perfect evolution of the Sorcerer King's service, a magical puppet that no longer needs strings. All of Ymandragore's wizards who do not die at the hands of their fellows or the enemies of the Isle can look forward to this as the end of their career.

Encountered: Those who meet Kopren Ikus are surprised by the lack of ostentation. He has none of the airs or powerful affectations that bedeck the high-powered casters of the mainland. If noticed at all, observers will find him wearing cloths knotted around his limbs to stave off the cold, with the wink of enchanted jewelry hidden in the folds. His face is typically slack, aware but without emotion, and the lines surrounding his eyes belie the great age behind them.

Those players unfortunate enough to interact with Kopren have come to the direct attention of the Sorcerer King, because the wizard is nothing more than a free-willed extension of the Lord of the Isle's interests. This could happen in many ways, but the most likely is that the party has come into possession of information or objects that could aid in the King's constant quest for godhood. In these cases, Kopren dispenses with the pleasantries and demands the information his lord requires. Those who don't immediately comply are compelled by whatever magical means are available. ENDBOX]

Beyond the Isle - Ymandragore on the Mainland

As with all aspects of the Sorcerer's Isle, the island nation's relationship with the other powers of Arcanis must be viewed through the lens of her ruler's obsessions. When the Sorcerer King interacts with the lords on the continent, whether through diplomats or very rarely in person, he seeks to promote his quest for godhood.

The Sorcerer King and Psionics

Ymandragore has an uneasy relationship with the powers of the mind. Not a few psions have been carried to the Isle by the Harvesters, and then sentenced to the stage after their talents proved to be non-arcane in origin. A few fingers have begun to investigate the powers, and the Handless Society formed a few decades ago to dedicate itself to fusing psionics with their own magic. The Sorcerer King recognizes the potential of these experiments, and the Handless are becoming an influential finger.

The Harvesters

When the first stone was set to rebuild the City of Dragons as Ymandragore, the City of the Dragon Reborn, the Sorcerer King declared his lordship over all arcane wielders in restitution for the loss of his countrymen in the Myrantis-Eryunell War. The first duty he gave to the wizards who came to his banner was to enforce his will as liege over all magic-wielders. The rebirth of the city was left to the talentless mundane. Stone could be moved by hand as easily as by spell. The wizards were reborn as the Harvesters, and tasked to return to the mainland and bring the talented to fill the new city with power.

The Harvesters of modern Ymandragore have grown in influence as the Isle has grown in power. The organization contains adepts from dozens of fingers. A Harvester stands on the deck of each ship in the Fleet of Black Sails, and the wizard seekers are the most recognized of the Sorcerer Kings agents abroad, acting unopposed in Milandir and until recently in Coryani, and within the shadows and alleyways of the less friendly empires. Their mission is still the same, though the magicians they bring to Ymandragore's harbor end up as often on the Stage as not.

The Coryani Folly

Once unopposed in their tasks due to an ancient treaty between the Sorcerer King and the rulers of Coryani, the treaty was revoked during the reign of the Empress Shar val'Assante' when a too bold Harvester demanded that her twin sons be given to the Sorcerer-King for instruction. Her refusal sparked the First Coryani-Ymandragore War, the first conflict Ymandragore failed to decisively win. Now, the Harvesters are forced to move like phantoms in the mist, seeking out the arcanelly gifted. Refusal is still never an option. Those who oppose the Harvesters, or refuse to travel back to Ymandragore with them, invoke the ire of the Sorcerer King. In fact, though the war was lost, and Ymandragore is officially banned from collecting its citizens within the bounds of Coryani, the activities of the Harvesters are greater in the empire than before the shattering of the treaty. And in revenge for the Empress' slight, the Sorcerer King's agents are purposely more cruel. The Harvesters consider the scions of House val'Assante' a great temptation, and the agent who can bring one of the ruling line of Coryani to the Stage will likely catch the eye of His Majesty Sorcery himself.

In practice, the Harvesters target younger, less-powerful mages for repatriation to the Isle, but all non-divine spell-casters are observed, and the mightiest of wizards have found themselves in the holds of the Black Fleet after a moment of weakness.

On Ymandragore itself, the Harvesters have become the official enforcement arm of the Sorcerer King's edicts. General security within Ymandragore is conducted by the fingers where their influence is concerned and by the bureaucracy for those parts of the Isle where fingers lack interest, but the Harvesters exist to safeguard His Majesty Sorcery's interests both on the continent, and the Isle. They serve as both

espionage and secret police force, claiming all arcane spellcasters under their jurisdiction.

Charity Homes

The most insidious of Ymandragore's presence on the continent are the houses of charity and orphanages that the Isle sponsors – sometimes secretly – in many of the empire's greatest cities. They take in foundlings, provide food and shelter to the hungry and cold, distribute alms to the needy, and do what healing is possible through mundane and arcane means. Furthermore, the houses serve as a network from which Ymandragore can watch its allies and enemies, and a sinister underground railroad to transport the quarry of Harvesters.

But more than safe houses for the Harvesters, the charitable institutions serve as a means of ferreting out the talented among the lower classes and undercutting the worship of the gods. Unlike the churches, many of whom provide similar services, the gifts from Ymandragore come freely and without moral judgments, though many will allow worship of the Sorcerer King in the form of icons like those found in the Blessing Houses. And deep in the cellars of these goodly institutions can be found more corruptive ways of alleviating the downtrodden's pain – gambling where the player always comes out a little ahead, strong spirits and herbs to dull a weary day, the comfort of loving arms for the lonely.

The charity houses are designed with the future in mind. When the Sorcerer King succeeds in his quest, he wishes to have worshippers.

The Sorcerous Grail

The rarest but potentially more dangerous Ymandrake to be found outside the Isle is the Trackless. Most who survive the grueling training regiments of apprenticeship, then the fingers find their lives fulfilled in the careful accumulation of knowledge already discovered. They engage in the experiments called for by their finger's focus, increasing the state of the magical arts by careful tiny increments. But others seek more.

These are the Trackless.

The Trackless are those who, outside of Ymandragore, would still have been magicians of great skill, constantly seeking new avenues of power. The structured guild houses of the fingers constrain them, and they frequently push the



cautious experimentations of their fellows too far. Understanding that scholarship is not everyone's path, the Sorcerer King sends the Trackless to Onara to discover the Sorcerer's Grail.

The sorcerous grail is a concept of Ymandragore wizardry, not an object. Arcane theory claims that for each mage there is one unique style of magic best suited to his talents. A wizard who finds his sorcerous grail has mastered magic, combined his philosophies, and soul into a seamless whole that can tap huge reservoirs of magic power. The Sorcerer King is said to have found his grail.

The Trackless wander Onara in search of new techniques and sources of arcane power, hoping to discover the magical discipline to return to their homeland. Those that return claiming success are among the most powerful citizens on the Isle and often found a new finger encompassing the arcane variations discovered on their journey. Those that fail often do so spectacularly, sowing chaos as they themselves are destroyed. More fail than succeed.

Appendix I: Timeline of Modern Events

1024

- King Osric IV of Milandir reaches his majority. The regency council remains as his advisors.
- Milton Drac, Sea Lord of Freeport, dies, leaving no apparent heir. The Captain's Council controls Freeport completely.

1025

- In a plot to become Dark Apostate, Palic val'Mehen orchestrates the true death of the previous Dark Apostate, Hegrish val'Mordane. However, this plot inadvertently results in the awakening of the Sword of the Heavens from his imprisonment. The Sword of the Heavens gathers his followers from Erduk, along with loyal Cancerese Nierites, and begins a war of conquest within Canceri.

1026

- The Living Arcanis campaign begins.
- A group of adventurers learn that one of the key chemical compounds necessary in the manufacture of blastpowder can be found, amongst other places, in Ss'ressen eggs.
- Elebac, the greatest master smith of Solanos Mor, makes plans to become undead, thus extending his life in his quest to discover the perfect item. At the last moment, however, he is convinced to do otherwise and returns to Solanos Mor.
- The Swords of Nier attempt to invade the domed city of Ventaka. They are repelled, and they begin a long siege.
- A cult of Larissa, worshipping her as the Lady of Thorns, allies itself with the Vivisectionist, who dissects Val in the hopes of learning where their powers come from. They are discovered by guests during a hunt hosted by the Defender of the Empire, General Menisis val'Tensen. They are defeated but not before Menisis' nephew Gaius is slain. Also attending the festivities were Arch-Prelate of Coryan Acastus val'Assante, and his daughter Elandre', who was betrothed to Gaius.
- The il'Huan, a race long thought exterminated by the Elorii, are rediscovered existing in a symbiotic relationship with host creatures.
- A group of adventurers travel to another plane, where they see a fallen Valinor, the Honor of Cadic, leading an infernal army bound to Sarish against beings of entropy, as a wave of pure oblivion follows in their wake. The armies of Sarish were slowly losing.
- The Ghost Scales are rediscovered in the sewers of Old Coryan. Once part of the Black Talon Ss'ressen egg clutch, they abandoned the Black Talons during their march north. They now worship a strange Sarishan artifact which has slowly mutated them.
- Luoch val'Dellenov murders the Horned King, a ceremonial figure in Old Coryan, and captures the God of the Hills, an aspect of Saluwe' local to Old Coryan, with an artifact known as the Flask of Omlas. He uses the flask to control the Swords, lieutenants of the Horned King, and attempt to assassinate Emperor

Calsestus val'Assante'. The attempt fails, the God of the Hills is released, and Luoch is slain.

- Lucius Orata, head of the Ordainers, one of the fingers of Ymandragore, successfully completes a plan years in the making. Having infiltrated the Sanctorum of the Arcane, he had infected an unborn boy with a sorcerous disease. The boy was sent to Ymandragore, where he infected the island's mages, causing great devastation. However, Orata's ultimate plan to assassinate the Sorcerer King's second-in-command and usurp the throne of the Sorcerer King was thwarted by a handful of adventurers, although the Valinor known as the Serenity of Beltine died in the process. These adventurers accept the essence of the dying Valinor and become the first new Val family in millennia. The val'Sosi family is born.

1027

- The Children of Leviathan, a Yarricite cult, appear in the islands off the coast of Altheria. They are eventually destroyed along with their bizarre cult leader.
- A Ssethregoran army attacks the Altherian city of Semar at the first battle of Semar. In the process, General Mutama Bunkakin reveals that he has secretly been working on a plan to reconstruct an airship, the first gift of Althares, without the Council of Wisdom's knowledge. The crew of the Damned, as the ship was christened, makes a noble sacrifice which allows the city to barely hold off its attackers. A true dragon is sighted in the Ssethregoran army.
- A new continent across the ocean is discovered. The continent's civilizations are considered primitive, yet it seems to have been a focal point for a Ssethregoran cult of Kassegore.
- The sword "Precision", gifted to the val'Tensen family, is stolen, setting off tensions between Menisis, High General of the Coryani Empire, and Adolphous val'Tensen, Duke of Morotavia in Milandir, who both lay claim to the sword. The sword is recovered and entrusted to the Monks of the Blade.
- Acastus val'Assante, Arch-Prelate of Coryan, is murdered by an agent of the Swords of Nier.
- House Otrecto, one of the five great houses of the Grain Factor's Guild, is convicted of treason and is disenfranchised.
- Abessios, capitol city of Toranesta, goes into revolt as its native Myrantians destroy the Legion of Radiant Glory.
- Eremis val'Virdan, once a leader in the Swords of Nier, defects, beginning a rebellion against the Swords in Canceri. Palic val'Mehen soon joins him.
- The Sword of the Heavens and his army marches through Milandir, destroying Ashvan and Heliadique on his way to the Blessed Lands. In the Blessed Lands, he enters the Citadel of Silence. The Sword of the Heavens disappears. The army of the Swords of Nier is devastated.
- The surviving members of the Swords army retreats back through Milandir. Led by Attalus val'Virdan they are confronted and eventually defeated by the



combined Coryani, Milandesian, and Cancerese force at Heliadique. This becomes known as the Battle of the Four Armies. The few Swords of Nier that survive retreat back to Canceri.

- A strange race of shapeshifting feline-people, called the Punhavi, successfully infiltrate the Coryani legions. However, their goal of assassinating Patriarch Felician val'Mehan is thwarted by adventurers and another shapeshifting race, known as Doppelgangers.
- General Menisis val'Tensen is declared a traitor for his actions during the Battle of Four Armies by Emperor Calsestus.
- Patriarch Felician val'Mehan is accused by Emperor Calsestus val'Assante of heresy, having engaged in secret meetings with agents of the Dark Triumvirate. A Valinor appears in Grand Coryan supporting the Emperor's claim and declares that Calsestus shall be the Voice of the Gods upon Arcanis. Calsestus executes Felician upon the steps of the Temple of the Pantheon. During these events, Elandre' val'Assante disappears with the Illuminated Perfection, the holiest of Illiirite religious text.
- The Wall of the Gods falls, unsealing the Sealed Lands for the first time since the foundation of the Coryani Empire.

1028

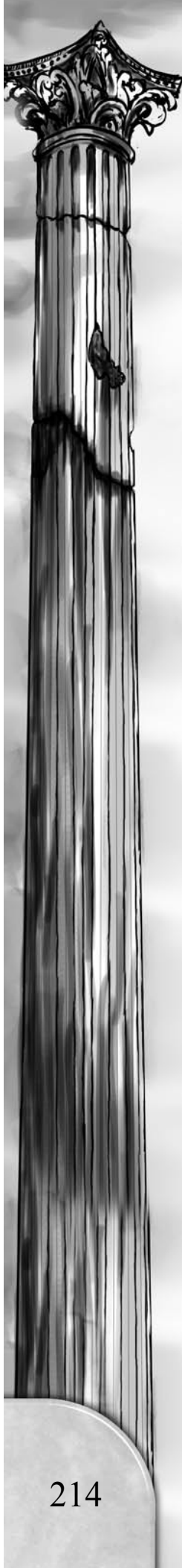
- A group of adventurers, led by archeologist Beloc val'Viridan, discover artifacts of a lost legion known as the Pride of Chendo in the Blessed Lands. The adventurers discover a series of subterranean caverns beneath the mountains, stretching for days in all directions, known as the Lavender Way. The Imperial Standard of the Pride of Chendo is eventually recovered and given to King Osric IV. Osric, in hopes of forging better ties with General Menisis, awards the standard to the former Defender of the Empire.
- During the expedition to recover the lost standard, a race of powerful creatures known as the Singarthan Trolls. These trolls pay homage to a bizarre entity known as the Song of Pirric. What or who Pirric is remains a mystery.
- A group of adventurers stepping through an Ansharan portal are misdirected into an ancient Ssethregoran ruin, devoted to a cult to Kassegore, the Ssethregoran god.
- At the Convocation of the Divine, Calsestus val'Assante is elected as Patriarch by the Pyremen of the Mother Church, with the support of most of the Arch-Prelates. However, Arch-Prelate Morushun val'Ishi of Valentia and Arch-Prelate Katar of Solanos Mor refuse protest this turn of events. Arch-Prelate Sabinus val'Assante supported the Emperor, but to his great surprise found that he had given the Emperor a poisoned goblet, resulting in the Calsestus' brief death. Afraid of the resurrected Imperial Patriarch's retribution, Sabinus flees.
- The Battle of Sicaris begins as the city at the crossroads of the Hinterlands is besieged by a demonic horde from beyond the fallen Wall of the Gods. During the initial foray, an unknown hero sacrifices himself by destroying a connecting bridge and sending a large number of demons to their deaths below. Heroes from across Onara are able to fend off the attack until help

arrives from Menisis and Milandir. This act, coupled with Osric's support of Menisis, strains relations between Morotavia and the Crown of Milandir.

- In the aftermath of the Battle of Sicaris, Morushun val'Ishi declares himself Patriarch in Exile. The provinces of Valentia and Ulfila secede from the Coryani Empire. The Coryani Civil War begins.
- A group of adventurers enter the Citadel of Silence, seeking the final fate of the Sword of the Heavens. They are never heard from again. The dark bubble of energy that surrounds the Citadel of Silence is destroyed, as the Valinor known as the Reluctance of Hurrian is destroyed and the Valinor known as the Wrath of Hurrian is released.
- The Wrath of Hurrian makes its presence known in a worldwide storm, during which all val'Tensen rage for three days.
- The Elorii enclave of Arkoshia, long abandoned after the Elorii Death Curse twisted the woods around it is rediscovered in the heart of the Boughs of Saluwe, in the Coryani province of Balantica. It is learned that Luoch val'Dellenov secured the Flask of Omlas from this citadel several years before.
- By use of a clever ruse, the Matriarch of the Black Talon Ss'ressen is kidnapped by the Ssethregorans.
- The spirit of Felician val'Mehan appears to adventurers and bids them a task. The spirit of Lucius Orata appears as well, trapped upon the Mortal Realm and unable to pass on to the Cauldron. It is eventually learned that this is due to Lucius Orata's responsibility for the destruction of the Serenity of Beltine. For this crime, the Goddess of the Afterlife has forbidden him passage to Her domain.
- Eremis val'Viridan is assassinated by an agent of the Swords of Nier, only to be resurrected by Palic val'Mehen.
- The forces of the Mother Church, led by the Swords of Nier, invade Nishanpur, barely defeating the rebellion within the city. During the struggle it is learned that the rebel armies are being led by an unbound demon, which is slain. Adventurers recover the Crown of the Dark Apostate and Palic val'Mehen crowns himself Dark Apostate.
- A group of proto-Ss'ressen known as Sand Apophics is discovered in the Forsaken Wastes, dwelling in a forgotten Myrantian fortress with the curious power to hide itself on another Plane. The scholar Diotomus remains with the Sand Apophics, forging peaceful contact with this race.

1029

- The Shining Patrol begins losing contact with certain of its outposts. It is later learned that these outposts have been invaded and conquered by the Malfelen Elorii.
- It is discovered that the Harvesters of Ymandragore have found a way to use psionics as well as arcane magic. One Ymandragoran Finger also discovers how to tap the magic of Dwarven soul shards. The Harvesters begin to target psions as well as mages and several soul shards are stolen from the Dwarven enclave of Tir Betoq.
- Adventurers travel with the Sand Apophics to the



other Plane visited by the Myrastian fortress. There they discover an even older citadel, where a race of feline creatures once dwelled. These creatures may have some sort of magical connection to the shapeshifting Punhavi. The Plane is destroyed when its sun explodes, forever stranding the Sand Apophics and their Fortress on Onara.

- It is learned that Coryani forces loyal to the Imperial Patriarch have gained control of il'Huan eggs and are using them to transform their victims into the hideous creatures. A path is found in Enpebyn, capitol of the rebel province of Valentia, which leads to the Lavender Way, proving that the network of tunnels stretches under most of Onara.

- Evidence surfaces that King Osric of Milandir may have had a half-brother, Andre and that his younger brother may be the legitimate heir to the throne of Milandir. Neither of these rumors is ever proven.

- The Battle of Enpebyn, the bloodiest battle to date in the Coryani Civil War. The Coryani High General Dorjan val'Mehan leads the attack and siege on the city, using some questionable and ruthless tactics to bring the city to its knees. A legion of val'Borda shadow jump at the same time, creating a rift between the material plane and the shadow plane that causes much destruction. After a massive blastpowder assault, the land around Enpebyn cracks, opening up shafts into the Lavender Way, releasing a horde of il'Huan. Though the losses are terrible for both sides, it is narrowly won by the rebels.

- At the Battle of Enpebyn, the sword "Precision" is offered to Menisis val'Tensen, who refuses it. It is then offered to Adolphous val'Tensen, who takes it, but when he attempts to use it to slay his own son in a fit of rage, the sword burns him, forcing him to drop it. Duke Adolphous vanishes from the battlefield. Precision is returned to the care of the Monks of the Blade.

- The Altherian Council of Wisdom announces that, due to the sacrilegious waste of blastpowder in the Battle of Enpebyn, Althares has rescinded his second gift. Blastpowder prices soar as the val'Abebi are unable to manufacture more.

- In Old Coryan the ancient Myrastian Cult of Tzizhet awakens, running amok before finally being defeated. The Horned King (newly elected after his predecessor's murder) is discovered to be an agent of the cult. Leola val'Assante, High Priestess of Illiir in Old Coryan, is struck blind by a vision from Illiir warning of the Horned King's threat. She leads a coalition of warriors and adventurers to defeat him. During the battle, the Swords of the Horned King are slain. Before the Horned King could be placed into custody the earth itself opens up, swallowing him.

- The Cult of Tzizhet releases an ancient, powerful spirit known as the Black Sorcerer from its prison. The sun shines for twenty-four hours as battle is heard in the heavens.

- Due to her actions, the Imperial Patriarch removes Leola val'Assante from her position as High Priestess of Illiir, and "promotes" the now blind priestess to the position of Abbess of the Chapel of Illiir in the Blessed Lands, a highly dangerous posting.

- In an unprecedented event, adventurers enter the Vastwood. There they discover an ancient Elorii device capable of nullifying psionics. Both Telas, an Elorii elder and Lobsang, a renegade Suromari who attacked the il'Huan at the Battle of Enpebyn, show interest in the device.

- A plague is released in Nishanpur, one which defies cure, signaling the return of a heretical Nerothian cult known as the Blight Bearers. The city is quarantined for the winter, during which time countless die. Despite the quarantine, travelers spread the plague to other areas. No cure is found for the plague, but information is discovered that may, in time, lead to a treatment.

- Elebac of Solanos Mor sponsors an expedition to the Sealed Lands, which rediscovers a lost Sarishan fortress containing a secret – tempered Sarishan steel, capable of harming even unbound Infernal creature.

- Elandre' val'Assante has been in hiding in Solanos Mor since her escape from Grand Coryan. She is apparently possessed by the Illuminated Perfection, the Holy text she liberated before her hasty retreat. She prophesies the need for an artifact known as the Spike of Eternity, which is recovered by a band of heroes.

- In an attempt to recover the Illuminated Perfection, the Mother Church invades Solanos Mor. This invasion, known as the Battle of Solanos Mor, is rebuffed, but not without great cost. The King of Solanos Mor is slain and his Soul Shard is crushed beneath the butt of the Imperial Standard of the Legio Lex Talionis.

- Arch-Prelate Katar is surrounded by Infernals while attempting to reach the Dwarven enclave of Encali for help, and vanishes. During the battle, the mountain of Solanos Mor collapses, exposing the Dwarven city to the sun. Patriarch in Exile Morushun val'Ishi is scarred by the holy light of Illiir.

- Due to a bold ploy in retaking the "occupied" lands of Morotavia from the Coryani, Count Gustaf val'Tensen, brother of the missing Duke Adolphous is appointed Duke of Morotavia. The reclaiming of Morotavia strains relations between the Crown of Milandir and General Menisis due to the losses suffered by the general's forces administering the land.

- The nobles of Milandir decide that the time is right to strike at Canceri.

- The Matriarch of the Black Talon Ss'ressen returns, restored to youth and now a follower of Yig, and declares that the Black Talons will leave Milandir.

- One of the Pearls of Yarris, the Pearl of Bounty, is rediscovered in the Bay of Seremas. However, before it can be recovered it is taken by a race of heretical undersea Yarris worshippers, who vanish with it.

- An undead legion, entombed in the Bay of Seremas, rises and attacks the Elorii city. Known as the Battle of Seremas, they are eventually repelled, due in part to the timely intervention of the Imperial Patriarch, who arrives at the head of the Legion of Blazing Judgment. The Imperial Patriarch meets with Elorii elders and declares the goal of "Pax Onara".

- Adventurers discover a Portal of Anshar within the Sealed Lands, re-establishing contact with the human inhabitants of the Empire of Haina, the first such contact in over a millennium.

Appendix II: Races of Onara

Dark-kin

These unfortunate souls have the misfortune of bearing a recessive bloodline that appears once every so many generations. Some type of infernal creature founded this bloodline during the Time of Terror many years ago, but once there, the infernal taint is nearly impossible to remove. Scorned by most people, the majority of dark-kin simply try their best to make their way in the world. Some fight against their infernal heritage, while others embrace the darkness within.

Base Dark-Kin Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy of their infernal taint, dark-kin gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, +2 to Constitution, -2 to Wisdom, and -2 to Charisma. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Medium: As Medium creatures, dark-kin have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Base Speed: Dark-kin base speed is 30 feet.

Automatic Languages: Low Coryani and native nation.

Bonus Language: Infernal.

Darkvision: Due to their infernal heritage, dark-kin can see in the dark up to 60 feet. Darkvision is black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and dark-kin can function just fine with no light at all.

Unnatural Aura: Animals can sense the infernal taint in dark-kin and they become uneasy around them. Dogs will bark and horses will become unruly. Dark-kin receive a -2 racial penalty to Handle Animal and Ride skill checks and a -5 penalty to *wild empathy* checks.

Favored Class: Barbarian. A multiclassed dark-kin's barbarian class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Additional Dark-Kin Racial Traits:

In addition to the normal dark-kin traits, a dark-kin character may choose two special abilities from the list below to reflect the specific effects of their Tainted blood. Unless otherwise specified, no specific ability may be taken more than once.

Acid Resistance: Acid runs off this dark-kin's flesh like water. Each round that the character would normally take acid damage, the damage is reduced by 2.

Barbed Flesh: The character's skin is studded with sharp barbs. The character is always considered to be wearing armor spikes, and may (at her discretion) do regular damage instead of subdual damage with unarmed attacks. However, any armor worn by the character must be specially made and costs twice the normal price.

Cold Resistance: This dark-kin's tainted blood keeps her warm from within. Each round that the character would normally take cold damage, the damage is reduced by 2.

Electricity Resistance: This dark-kin fears no lightning. Each round that the character would normally take electrical damage, the damage is reduced by 2.

Fiendish Anatomy: This character's internal organs are located in different places than those of normal humans. When this character suffers a critical hit, his opponent suffers a penalty equal to the dark-kin's level to his critical confirmation roll. However, the character's strange internal architecture also makes it difficult to treat his wounds. Heal checks made on this character suffer the same penalty.

Fire Resistance: This dark-kin could endure the flames of hell itself. Each round that the character would normally take fire damage, that damage is reduced by 2.

Immunity to Charm Spells: This dark-kin is almost impossible to *charm*, as their blood is thick with the Infernal. Any spells with the Enchantment(Charm)[Mind-Affecting] descriptor have no effect upon this dark-kin.

Natural Armor: This dark-kin has a scaly, metallic, rubbery, or otherwise tough hide, which gives him a natural armor bonus of +1. However, the character also has a permanent -2 armor check penalty which cannot be removed by any means.

Poison Resistance: Like their fiendish ancestor, this dark-kin has little to fear from poisons. The character receives a racial bonus of +4 to all saving throws versus poison.

Scent: This dark-kin has an extremely sensitive (and probably oversized) nose. As a result, the character gains the *scent* extraordinary ability as detailed in *Core Rulebook III*. However, as a side effect, all gas- or scent-based attacks (*stinking cloud*, green dragon breath, a gha'st's stench, etc.) inflict double normal damage to this character and/or have the duration of their effects doubled on this character, as applicable.

Vision of Darkness: The catlike eyes of this dark-kin can see through magical darkness. *Darkness* spells (including *deeper darkness*) have no effect upon this dark-kin. Non-*darkness* spells that impair vision, such as *obscuring mist*, still affect this dark-kin normally.

Dwarf

Common Dwarf Traits:

Base Speed: Dwarf base speed is 20 feet. However, dwarves can move at this speed even when wearing medium or heavy armor or when carrying a medium or heavy load (unlike other creatures, whose speed is reduced in such situations).

Medium: As Medium creatures, dwarves have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Darkvision: Dwarves can see in the dark up to 60 feet. Darkvision is black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and dwarves can function just fine with no light at all.

Magic Resistance: Due to their celestial heritage, dwarves are resistant to all spells and spell like

abilities. They gain a +2 racial bonus on all saving throws versus these effects.

Poison Resistance: Due to their celestial heritage, dwarves are resistant to all poisons. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all saving throws against poison.

Search for Perfection: Dwarves are constantly seeking a means to overcome their curse. As a result, dwarves have developed into craftsmen without peer. When using a Craft skill or any Item Creation feat, dwarves gain a +4 racial bonus to all related skill checks. Dwarves reduce the crafting time for mundane items by 50% and magic item creation time is reduced by 20%. This time reduction in no way effects normal XP costs for magic item creation. Due to dwarven crafting expertise, the final product is usually a masterpiece. The *calculated value* of such items is determined by adding 100 GP to the normal price of the item, per week the item took to craft. Only full weeks are used for calculating item value. Weapons and armor that have a *calculated value* equal to, or greater than that of a masterwork version of the same item gain the masterwork quality without paying any additional crafting costs. All other items crafted by dwarves are considered masterwork for the purposes of item enchantment.

Stonecunning: This ability grants a dwarf a +2 racial bonus on Search checks to notice unusual stonework, such as sliding walls, stonework traps, new construction, unsafe stone surfaces, shaky stone ceilings, and the like. Something that isn't stone but that is disguised as stone also counts as unusual stonework. A dwarf who merely comes within 10 feet of unusual stonework can make a Search check as if he were actively searching, and a dwarf can use the Search skill to find stonework traps as a rogue can. A dwarf can also intuit depth, sensing his approximate depth underground as naturally as a human can sense which way is up. Dwarves have a sixth sense about stonework, an innate ability that they get plenty of opportunity to practice and hone in their underground homes.

Stability: A dwarf gains a +4 bonus on ability checks made to resist being bull rushed or tripped when standing on the ground (but not when climbing, flying, riding, or otherwise not standing firmly on the ground).

Weapon Familiarity: Dwarves may treat dwarven war axes and dwarven urgroshes as martial weapons, rather than exotic weapons.

Weight of the Curse (Ex): Dwarves who die cannot be raised through the use of *reincarnation*. Dwarven souls are barred from the afterlife and therefore, may not be brought back from it. Instead, their souls are transferred to their *soul shard* 24 hours after their death. Once the soul is in the shard, the dwarf may only be returned to life with a *raise dead*, *resurrection*, or *true resurrection* spell. Dwarves who die of natural causes may not be returned to life in any way. A dwarf dies at -10 hit points just as any other race. What makes dwarves unique is *how* they can be returned from the dead.

If a dwarf is reduced to -10 hit points or less, he is dead. However, at this stage, the dwarf does not necessarily need a *raise dead* spell to come back from the dead. If the dwarf is between -99 and -10 hit points, they may be returned from the dead by healing their hit point total to its normal maximum amount. For example, Gronar normally has 45 hit points and he is critically hit by a Voei for 92 points of damage. He is now dead, but he only needs to have those 92 points of damage healed to return to life. This can be accomplished through any of the normal healing magics, but it must be done before 24 hours have elapsed. After 24 hours, the dwarf's soul transfers to his *soul shard* and a *raise dead* becomes necessary. Being brought back to life by curing magics instead of the *raise dead* spell still incurs the level loss (or Constitution loss) as detailed in the *raise dead* spell description. If the dwarf died from ability score loss, poison, or level drain, these conditions must also be removed before the body will return to life.

Once a dwarf reaches -100 hit points, the body can no longer be brought back by simple curative magics. They must now have a *raise dead*, *resurrection*, or *true resurrection* spell cast on them to return from the dead.

If a dwarf is killed by massive damage, a coup de grace, or a death effect, their hit point total is immediately set to -100. If killed by a death effect, a *resurrection* or *true resurrection* spell would be required to return the corpse to life.

Dwarven Soul Shards

Some non-Dwarven philosophers and scientists (specifically several prominent Altherian Metaminds) point to the resemblance between the psi-crystal and the Dwarven Soul Shard as proof of the dwarf's latent psionic energy or at least a subconscious or intuitive understanding of psionic crystal construction. The Soul Shards seem to resonate a weak psionic aura when detected and become harder to crack as the dwarf who is bonded to it advances in age.

All Dwarfs are given a Soul Shard in a solemn ceremony when the dwarf reaches adulthood. These Soul Shards possess one half the dwarf's hit points and have a hardness of 10. They are also immune to all sonic, fire, cold and non-lethal damage.

If, for what ever reason, a dwarf loses his Soul Shard or has his soul shard shattered, he may acquire another Soul Shard by traveling to his Enclave and simply requesting one, after which he must spend a week in seclusion attuning himself to the new Soul Shard.

Should a dwarf die when he is not in possession of a Soul Shard or if the Soul Shard has been destroyed, the soul of the dwarf is lost to oblivion, fading away to nothingness. The corpse then becomes very susceptible to necromantic energies, a unique situation which delight nefarious necromancers to no end.

Solani Dwarves

The dwarves of Solanos Mor have a reputation as some of the most noble and self-sacrificing among all the dwarves. These noble dwarves travel throughout the lands of man protecting, advising, and if needs be, sacrificing their lives for humanity. They are easily identified from other dwarves by their immaculately groomed beards.

Solani Dwarf Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Solani Dwarves are a robust but introspective lot. Therefore, they gain a +2 to Constitution, and a -2 to Charisma. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Dwarven and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Altharin, and Milandisian.

Favored Class: Fighter. A multiclassed Solani Dwarf's fighter class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Giant Killer: Solani Dwarves are highly trained giant hunters. Therefore, when fighting giants, they gain a +1 racial bonus to attack rolls against giants and a +4 dodge bonus to their armor class.

Keen Eye: Solani Dwarves are expert craftsmen and recognize the work of other experts. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all Appraise skill checks that are related to stonework or forged metal items.

Encali Dwarves

Encali dwarves have a reputation of being unscrupulous and untrustworthy, like most other worshipers of Sarish. These dwarves travel through the lands of man preying on the shortsighted, striking bargains that sometimes come back to haunt the shorter-lived races generations later. Encali dwarves are usually a bit shorter than others and they are easily recognized by their unique style of beard. Usually dyed pitch black, the beard is braided into two forks, which are usually capped on each end with a sinister looking ornate crown.

Encali Dwarf Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Encali Dwarves are very intelligent, but they lack the physical prowess of some of their dwarven brethren. Therefore, they gain a +2 to Intelligence, and a -2 to Strength. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Dwarven and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Altharin, and Infernal.

Favored Class: Conjurer (specialist wizard). A multiclassed Encali Dwarf's conjurer class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Keen Eye: Encali Dwarves are expert craftsmen and recognize the work of other experts. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all Appraise skill checks that are related to gemstones or precious metals.

Troll Killer: Encali Dwarves are highly trained troll hunters. Therefore, when fighting trolls, they gain a +1 racial bonus to attack rolls and a +4 dodge bonus to their armor class.

Tir Betoqi Dwarves

Although these dwarves seek to avoid recognition for any of their many good deeds, they have still gained a reputation as some of the most noble, honorable, and self-sacrificing of all the dwarves. These dwarves travel all the known lands in their quest to destroy the infernal, but they are most often encountered traveling between their enclave and the area formerly known as the Wall of the Gods where they try to hold back the infernal hordes. These dwarves have elaborately braided beards intertwined with strands of pure gold, but their most distinguishing feature is their sunken, haunted eyes; eyes that have seen beyond the wall and know what horrors lie there.

Tir Betoqi Dwarf Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Tir Betoqi Dwarves are very hearty but not as agile as some of their dwarven brethren. Therefore, they gain a +2 to Constitution, and a -2 to Dexterity. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.



Automatic Languages: Dwarven and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: Kion, Unden, and Infernal.

Favored Class: Holy Champion of Hurrian. A multiclassed Tir Betoqi Dwarf's Holy Champion (Hurrian) class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Infernal Killer: Tir Betoqi Dwarves are highly trained infernal hunters. Therefore, when fighting infernals, they gain a +1 racial bonus to attack rolls and a +4 dodge bonus to their armor class. Dark-kin count as infernals for purposes of adjudicating this special ability.

Keen Eye: Tir Betoqi Dwarves are expert craftsmen and recognize the work of other experts. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all Appraise skill checks that are related to glassware or manufactured crystal items.

Nol Dappan Dwarves

Nol Dappan Dwarves have developed reputations as some of the most savage and barbaric examples the dwarves have to offer. Their fiery tempers are said to rival the volcano they live in. These dwarves have become famous for crafting and using sinister looking arms and armor. This equipment is easily identifiable by the fear it inspires and the reddish hue of the metal composing it. Nol Dappan Dwarves are most often encountered when traveling to sell their wares and they are easily recognizable by their heat-baked, reddish-hued skin, their unkempt, flame-singed beards, and their unique style of arms and armor.

Nol Dappan Dwarf Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Nol Dappan Dwarves receive no special ability score modifications.

Automatic Languages: Dwarven and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: Yhing Hir and Cancerese. **Favored Class:** Barbarian. A multiclassed Nol Dappan Dwarf's barbarian class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Fire Resistance: The oppressive heat of the volcanic forge of their vault has tempered the Nol Dappan against fire. Nol Dappan Dwarves gain Fire Resistance 10.

Gnoll Killer: Nol Dappan Dwarves are highly trained gnoll hunters. Therefore, when fighting gnolls, they gain a +1 racial bonus to attack rolls and a +4 dodge bonus to their armor class.

Keen Eye: Nol Dappan Dwarves are expert craftsmen and recognize the work of other experts. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all Appraise skill checks that are related to stone or metal items.

Tultipetan Dwarves

Tultipetan Dwarves are some of the most honest and open of all their kin, yet they are often viewed with fear or suspicion due to their habit of covering their bodies in mystical tattoos. These superstitious folk usually do not venture forth from their enclave, and when they do, it is usually in relation to some type of vision they have received from Larissa. Tultipetan

Dwarves are usually only encountered by visiting their enclave or the giant observatory they have built on a nearby mountain. These dwarves are less stocky than their brethren and are easily identifiable by their tattooed bodies and their closely cropped beards.

Tultipetan Dwarf Racial Traits:

Ability Score Modifications: Tultipetan Dwarves are very cunning but not as hearty as some of their dwarven brethren. Therefore, they gain a +2 to Wisdom, and a -2 to Constitution. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Dwarven, Low Khitan, and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani and Altharin.

Favored Class: Monk. A multiclassed Tultipetan Dwarf's monk class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Keen Eye: Tultipetan Dwarves are expert craftsmen and recognize the work of other experts. Therefore, they gain a +2 racial bonus on all Appraise skill checks that are related to stone or metal items.

Voei Killer: Tultipetan Dwarves are highly trained voei hunters. Therefore, when fighting voei, they gain a +1 racial bonus to attack rolls and a +4 dodge bonus to their armor class.

Vision of the Webs of Fate (Sp): Once per day, Tultipetan Dwarves may cast *augury* as a cleric equal to their level.

Elorii

Common Elorii Traits:

Base Speed: Elorii have a base speed of 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, Elorii have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Immortality: Elorii do not age after reaching maturity. Elorii cannot die from natural aging.

Immunities: Elorii are immune to sleep and non-magical disease.

Low-light Vision: Elorii can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight, torchlight, and similar conditions of poor illumination. They retain the ability to distinguish color and details under these conditions.

Proficient With Sword & Bow: All Elorii train constantly in preparation for the war of vengeance. As a result, all Elorii are proficient with the longbow, the long composite bow, the short bow, the short composite bow, the bastard sword (martial), the longsword, and the shortsword.

Save Bonus: Once slaves themselves, the Elorii despise slavery or enforced servitude in any form. Most Elorii would rather die than to act against their will. As a result, all Elorii gain a +2 bonus to all Will saves.

Mârokene Elorii, "Earth Elorii"

The Mârokene are descended from the Earth God, Mârok, and are typically the most stout of the Elorii.



Their hair is usually brown or gray and their eyes tend to be brown or hazel. Mârokene are rarely subtle, preferring to be direct with their dealings, and they prefer the company of folk who share the same outlook. Laerestri of Mârok's blood find that they get along well with the stout and honorable Milandisians. Mârokene tend to favor roles that involve the earth in some direct fashion. These pursuits include hunting, farming, and construction.

Mârokene Elorii Racial Abilities:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy gifted them by Mârok, the Mârokene gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Strength, -2 to Charisma, and -2 to Intelligence. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Additional proficiencies: In addition to the standard Elorii weapon proficiencies, Mârokene gain the Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bastard Sword) feat.

Automatic languages: Eloran, Terran and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Ssethric, and Altharin (Ancient Imperial).

Domain Restriction: Mârokene clerics are restricted from selecting any elemental domain other than Earth.

Favored class: Fighter. A multiclassed Mârokene's fighter class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Skills: Due to the legacy gifted them by Mârok, the Mârokene gain a +2 racial bonus to Spot and Search skill checks in natural surroundings.

Osalikene Elorii, "Wind Elorii"

The Osalikene are descended from the Wind God Osalian. They tend to be lithe and slightly taller than other Elorii. Their hair is most often white or silvery and their eyes blue or blue-green. Osalikenes are free spirits that revel in beauty in all its forms. They are inquisitive and creative but bore quickly. Osalikene gravitate toward roles that allow them to remain under the open sky for a majority of their time. These roles include traveling, hunting, falconry, and crafting. Often, these Elorii combine their creative nature with their love of beauty and become excellent traveling minstrels, usually specializing in some type of wind instrument.

Osalikene Elorii Racial Abilities:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy gifted them by Osalian, Osalikene gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, +2 to Charisma, -2 to Constitution, and -2 to Wisdom. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Eloran, Auran and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Ssethric, and Altharin (Ancient Imperial).

Domain Restriction: Osalikene clerics are restricted from selecting any elemental domain other than Air.

Favored Class: Bard. A multiclassed Osalikene's bard class does not count when determining whether he

suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Skills: Due to the aerial legacy gifted to them by Osalian, Osalikene Elorii gain a +2 racial bonus on all Tumble & Jump skill checks.

Kelekene Elorii, "Fire Elorii"

The Kelekene are descended from Keleos, the Fire God. These Elorii are slightly more compact than their brethren, though not as stout as the Mârokene. Their hair tends to be golden or red-brown and their eyes range from dark violet to a reddish orange. Passionate and vengeful, they are perfectionists who rarely hide their feelings and prefer to speak their minds at all times. Kelekene have a keen intellect which, when combined with their straightforward style, makes for some of the finest orators among the Elorii. Kelekene usually prefer professions that allow them to work with their hands, often becoming smiths, artisans, sculptors, or carpenters. These Elorii are also uniquely qualified to become excellent wizards, and more wizards are found among the Kelekene than any other type of Elorii.

Kelekene Elorii Racial Abilities:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy gifted them by Keleos, Kelekene gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, +2 to Intelligence, -2 to Constitution, and -2 to Wisdom. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Additional Proficiencies: In addition to the standard Elorii weapon proficiencies, Kelekene gain Weapon Familiarity with the two-bladed sword.

Automatic Languages: Eloran, Ignan and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Ssethric, and Altharin (Ancient Imperial).

Domain Restriction: Kelekene clerics are restricted from selecting any elemental domain other than Fire.

Favored Class: Wizard. A multiclassed Kelekene's wizard class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Skills: Due to the intensity of Keleos' fire burning in their blood, Kelekene gain a +2 racial bonus on Intimidate skill checks.

Berokene Elorii, "Water Elorii"

The Berokene are descended from the Water Goddess, Beröe. Often viewed as the most graceful Elorii, they move with a fluidity that clearly mirrors the waters from whence they were born. They are usually raven-haired, with eyes ranging from the lightest to the deepest blue. While usually patient and accommodating, these Elorii have been known to lash out violently if angered or threatened, and few make the mistake of crossing them twice. Berokene are typically attracted to careers and activities involving water. Some of these include fishing, shipbuilding, and sailing, though it has been rumored that they have also learned the secrets of hydroponics and spend hours tending their lush water-gardens. Many Berokene are

drawn to the nation of Entaris due to its proximity to water, and their water-based magic is among the most potent on Onara.

Berokene Elorii Racial Abilities:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy gifted them by Beröe, Berokene gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, +2 to Wisdom, -2 to Constitution, and -2 to Intelligence. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Eloran, Aquan and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Ssethric, and Altharin (Ancient Imperial).

Domain Restriction: Berokene Clerics are restricted from selecting any elemental domain other than Water.

Favored Class: Rogue. A multiclassed Berokene's rogue class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Skills: Due to the intensity of Beröe's legacy in their blood, Berokenes gain a +2 racial bonus on Balance and Profession (Sailor) skill checks.

Swim Speed: The Berokene gain a base swim speed of 30 feet.

Ardakene Elorii, "Life Elorii"

Most rare of all Elorii are the Ardakene. These Elorii are descended directly from the Goddess of Life, Belisarda. Ardakene lack the physical prowess of most Elorii, but they make up for this shortcoming with their insight and force of personality. Their hair is usually one of many shades of brown, and they have green or hazel colored eyes. Ardakene tend to be thoughtful and cautious, their actions calculated and methodical. These Elorii have fierce convictions, a healthy respect for life, and a strong connection with nature. Ardakene are frequently found among the leaders and Lifewardens of the Elorii nations, but many others busy themselves with less visible occupations such as scholars, farmers, hunters, or architects. Because of their connection to nature, Ardakene have designed and built some of the most beautiful architectural wonders on the face of Onara, structures that exist in harmony with their natural surroundings instead of obstructing them.

Ardakene Elorii Racial Abilities:

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy gifted them by Belisarda, Ardakene gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Wisdom, +2 to Charisma, -2 to Constitution, and -2 to Intelligence. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Eloran and Low Coryani.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, Ssethric, and Altharin (Ancient Imperial).

Domain Restriction: Ardakene clerics may not select any elemental domains.

Favored Class: Cleric. A multiclassed Ardakene's cleric class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Skills: Due to their connection with nature, Ardakene

gain a +2 racial bonus on all Heal and Survival skill checks.

Voice of the Mother: Due to their connection with nature, Ardakene gain the ability to speak with animals 1 time per day. Treat this ability as the *Speak with Animals* spell cast at 10th level.

Gnome

Gnome Racial Traits:

Base Speed: Gnome base speed is 20 feet. **Medium:** As Medium creatures, gnomes have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Automatic Languages: As native nation.

Bonus Languages: As native nation.

Favored Classes: Wizard and Rogue. A multiclassed gnome's wizard and rogue classes do not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Ability Score Modifications: Twisted in shape and shunned by society, gnomes are always treated poorly. While the gnome inherited the robust heartiness common to the dwarves and the keen intellect of the humans, their misshapen bodies and social stigma are almost impossible to overcome. Therefore, gnomes gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Constitution, +2 to Intelligence, -2 to Strength, and -2 to Dexterity. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Bonus Class Skill: Due to their ability to focus on activities despite their pain, gnomes gain Concentration as a class skill.

Bonus Feat: Like their human progenitor, gnomes gain a bonus feat at 1st level.

Darkvision: Due to their partially dwarven heritage, gnomes can see in the dark up to 30 feet. Darkvision is black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and gnomes can function just fine with no light at all.

Social Outcast: Gnomes are reviled by many, even those willing to give the character a fair shake must unconsciously overcome deep-seated prejudice. As a result, Gnomes suffer a -2 circumstance penalty to the following skills: Diplomacy, Gather Information, and Perform.

Misbegotten: A gnome is hampered in performing strenuous activity for extended periods of time due to his physical deformities. After every continuous half-hour of brisk (e.g. hiking, riding, jogging, etc.) activity, a gnome must rest for one minute and then make a Fortitude save (DC 10) before continuing the activity. If they fail this save, their pain has gone beyond their tolerable threshold and they must rest for another minute before gaining another saving throw to continue. The gnome must continue this cycle until the saving throw is made before they can continue with the brisk activity. After ten consecutive rounds of strenuous physical activity (e.g. combat, sprinting, swimming, etc.) a gnome must make a Fortitude save (DC 10) or be wracked with pain and suffer 1d4 points of subdual damage. If they fail this save, they must rest (do nothing) for one full round before gaining

another saving throw. This cycle continues until the gnome succeeds. If this save is successful, the gnome may continue the activity for another 10 consecutive rounds before being forced to make another save. Each subsequent save of this type is set at a DC equal to the number of consecutive rounds of strenuous activity. (i.e. DC 10 for 10 rounds, DC 20 for 20 rounds, etc.)

Native Land: Gnomes must choose a human or dwarven starting nation. This choice must be made at character creation.

Necessity: Since necessity is the mother of all invention, and gnomes need skills to survive, they gain 4 additional skill points at 1st level.

Restricted Feats: Gnomes may not take the Endurance feat. Gnome rangers exchange the Endurance feat for the Toughness feat. Gnomes may not begin play with the Gentry feat.

The Will to Live: Gnomes are tenacious. They gain the Die Hard feat.

Half-Hobgoblin

Half-hobgoblin Racial Traits:

Base Speed: Half-Hobgoblin base speed is 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, half-hobgoblins have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Automatic Languages: Low Coryani and native nation.

Bonus Languages: Golic.

Favored Class: Fighter. A multiclassed half-hobgoblin's fighter class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Mundane blood: Half-hobgoblins may not be sorcerers.

Mixed blood: For all special abilities and effects, half-Hobgoblins are considered both a hobgoblin and a human.

Darkvision: Due to their hobgoblin heritage, half-hobgoblins can see in the dark up to 60 feet. Darkvision is black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and half-hobgoblins can function just fine with no light at all.

Ability Score Modifications: Due to their hobgoblin heritage, half-hobgoblins gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Strength, -2 to Wisdom, and -2 to Charisma. These adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Half-Orc

Half-Orc Racial Traits:

Base Speed: Half-orc base speed is 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, half-orcs have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Automatic Languages: Low Coryani and native nation.

Bonus Languages: Orcan

Favored Class: Barbarian. A multiclassed half-orc's barbarian class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Mixed Blood: For all special abilities and effects, a half-orc is considered both an orc and a human.

Darkvision: Due to their orc heritage, half-orcs can see in the dark up to 60 feet. Darkvision is black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and half-orcs can function just fine with no light at all.

Ability Score Modifications: Due to their orc heritage, half-orcs gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Strength, -2 to Intelligence, and -2 to Charisma. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.



Human

Human Racial Traits:

Base Speed: Human base speed is 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, humans have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Automatic Language: Low Coryani and native nation.

Bonus Languages: High Coryani, any human nation.

Favored Class: Any. When determining whether a multiclassed human takes an experience point penalty, his or her highest-level class does not count.

Versatile: Humans gain 1 extra feat at 1st level.

Quick Study: Humans gain 4 extra skill points at 1st level and 1 extra skill point at each additional level.

Mundane Blood: Humans may not be sorcerers.

Ss'ressen

Common Ss'ressen Traits:

Base Speed: Ss'ressen base speed is 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, ss'ressen have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

Class Restrictions: Due to the techniques used to hatch the young, only female ss'ressen may become sorcerers, wizards, or clerics.

Cold Susceptibility: All ss'ressen suffer a -4 penalty to Dexterity, attacks, and damage rolls when in temperatures below 40° F. If the ss'ressen is using feats such as Weapon Finesse, to make attacks, these penalties stack (-2 from Dexterity loss and -4 to the attack, for a total penalty of -6). A successful Will save (DC 15) reduces the penalty to -2.

Low-light Vision: Ss'ressen can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight, torchlight, and similar conditions of poor illumination. They retain the ability to distinguish color and details under these conditions.

Natural Weapons: Ss'ressen have sharp claws for natural weapons. Unarmed ss'ressen can attack with two claws dealing (1d4+Str) points of damage for each claw that hits. Ss'ressen using one-handed melee weapons can attack with a claw as an off-handed attack that is considered a light weapon. As natural weapons, these off-handed attacks draw no attacks of opportunity. Ss'ressen monks learn to fight with their entire body. They learn to utilize their claws, feet, elbows, hands, and sometimes their tails. This style is difficult to master. Therefore, ss'ressen monks do not gain an extra attack for using natural weapons, meaning they cannot combine an off-hand natural weapon strike with any of the monk's unarmed attack options. However, ss'ressen monks can choose to deal Slashing, Piercing, or Bludgeoning damage with their unarmed strikes.

Ss'ressen Frenzy: Special breeding and magical manipulation by their Ss'ethregoran Ssanu masters have created a natural animosity and aggressiveness inherent in all ss'ressen egg clutches. The very scent of a rival ss'ressen egg clutch may drive them into a rage known as *Ss'ressen Frenzy*. Whenever ss'ressen of different egg clutches are within 30 feet of each other, the scent of the rival clutch ss'ressen will drive them into the

frenzy unless a Will save (DC 13) is made. If the save is made, the ss'ressen may act normally. If the save is failed, the ss'ressen is driven into the frenzy and must attack the nearest rival ss'ressen in **melee** combat until there are no rival ss'ressen within 30 feet. While in this frenzied state, the ss'ressen gains a +2 morale bonus to attack rolls, damage rolls, and Will saves, but suffers a -2 penalty to armor class and all skill checks. Rival groups of ss'ressen may be controlled by a Ssanu or other powerful leader. If a group of ss'ressen is being lead by a Ssanu or another powerful leader, they do not need to make this frenzy check, as their fear of their masters overrides any other thoughts in their minds. This check should only be made once per combat. For the purposes of *Ss'ressen Frenzy*, the Black Talon, Ashen Hide, and Ghost Scale Ss'ressen are all considered be part of the same egg clutch.

Black Talon Egg Clutch "Thulluss"

Ability Score Modifications: Due to the legacy of their culture, Black Talon Ss'ressen gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, and -2 to Intelligence. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Agile: Due to the balance and support provided by their tail, Black Talon Ss'ressen gain a +2 racial bonus to Balance, Jump, and Swim skill checks.

Automatic Languages: Ss'ressen and Milandisian.

Bonus Languages: Ss'ethric, Low Coryani, and Cancerese.

Favored Class: Ranger. A multiclassed Black Talon Ss'ressen's ranger class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Natural Armor: Black Talon Ss'ressen gain a +2 natural armor bonus due to their thick, scaly hide.

Ashen Hide Egg Clutch "Terdis"

Ability Score Modifications: Ashen Hide Ss'ressen retain their quickness and agility from their Black Talon ancestors, but the fiery temper of Nier has pervaded their blood, and they show less restraint than their originators. Due to the legacy of their culture, Ashen Hide Ss'ressen gain the following ability score modifications: +2 to Dexterity, -2 to Intelligence, and -2 to Charisma. These ability adjustments are applied after ability score generation.

Automatic Languages: Ss'ressen and Cancerese.

Bonus Languages: Ss'ethric, Low Coryani, and Milandisian.

Bonus Feat: All Ashen Hide Ss'ressen are born with incredibly thick skin. Therefore they gain the Dragon's Hide feat.

Favored Class: Barbarian. A multiclassed Ashen Hide Ss'ressen's barbarian class does not count when determining if he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Natural Armor: Ashen Hide Ss'ressen gain a +3 natural armor bonus due to their thick scaly hides. This bonus already includes the +1 bonus due to the Dragon's Hide feat.

Val

Val Racial Traits:

Base Speed: Val base speed is 30 feet.

Medium: As Medium creatures, Val have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size. **Automatic Languages:** Native nation and High Coryani.

Bonus Languages: Low Coryani.

Favored Class: Psion or Psychic Warrior (choose one). A multiclassed Val's favored psionic class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing. In addition to these favored classes, each bloodline has an additional favored class. See *Table 2-1 Val Family Favored Classes* for details.

Obligations of Rank: The Val bloodlines were created by the Gods with the express purpose of having these "super humans" lead humanity into a Golden Age. Val are expected to take on quests because it's the right thing to do, not for monetary gain. The protection of humanity is a matter of honor and duty, although the assisted party may give a "token" of their appreciation.

Flintlocks: As the chosen of the Gods, Val may legally possess Altherian flintlocks. Val who possess the Gentry feat gain Weapon Familiarity (Flintlocks).

Naturally Psionic: Val gain a number of bonus power points equal to their bloodrank. This does not grant them the ability to manifest psionic powers unless they gain that ability through another source, such as by taking levels in a psionic class.

Rank and Station: When dealing with commoners, Val gain a +2 circumstance bonus to all Diplomacy checks. When dealing with other Val, this bonus (or penalty) is equal to the difference in the Val's blood rank. For example, if Lord val'Assanté with a bloodrank of 6 were using Diplomacy against Lord val'Tensen with a bloodrank of 9, Lord val'Assanté would receive a -3 penalty to his skill check.

Presence of the Gods: Val are the only playable race that may take levels in the psion or psychic warrior class.

Bloodlines: Coursing through the veins of all Val is the blood of Valinor, celestial servants of the Gods. Each family so blessed holds a small portion of that God's power. This legacy is, in turn, passed down through the generations. Val are never of mixed blood; they are either of one bloodline or another. If Val of differing bloodlines were to have children, their offspring would favor the legacy of only one of their Valinor ancestors. For example, a Val may be born to a mixed marriage between a val'Borda father and a val'Mehan mother. However, even though the offspring would take the father's name, it is still possible to carry the val'Mehan powers and appearance. With any other genetically compatible race, a Val will always give birth to another Val.

Minor and Major Bloodlines: Within the Val families, there are minor and major bloodlines. For reasons unknown, some bloodlines are clearly more powerful than others. Minor bloodlines only possess 1st, 2nd, and 3rd level bloodline powers, while major bloodlines possess powers up to 4th level. Some philosophers believe the 12 major bloodlines were created by the direct intervention of the gods, while the others may just be the aftereffects of divine curses or blessings. The recent discovery of another major bloodline (the val'Emman) has led most scholars to begin rethinking this theory.

• **Blood Rank:** Val gain a number of bloodline powers equal to the Val's blood rank. Bloodline powers that are spell-like abilities are cast as a sorcerer equal to the Val's level.

• **Strength of Blood:** When creating a character, roll a d20 and compare the result to the chart below to determine a Val's beginning blood rank. Some Val come into the legacy of their blood more swiftly than others.

Roll (d20)	Blood Rank
1-17	1
18-19	2
20	3

• **Advancing in Blood Rank:** Val may advance their bloodline powers. Upon receiving an ability score increase, the Val may choose to spend the point to raise their blood rank by one instead of an ability score. The Val then gains an additional bloodline power. At least two bloodline powers per given level must be selected before a Val may choose a higher-level power.

Table 2-1: Val Family Favored Classes

Bloodline	Favored Class
Major Bloodlines	
val'Abebi	Expert
val'Assanté	Patrician
val'Borda	Rogue
val'Dellenov	Druid
val'Holryn	Per chosen bloodline
val'Inares	Ranger
val'Ishi	Cleric
val'Mehan	Wizard: Conjurer
val'Mordane	Wizard: Necromancer
val'Ossan	Ranger
val'Sheem	Bard
val'Tensen	Fighter
val'Virdan	Barbarian

Appendix III: New Feats

Feat Types

Background: This feat type represents the training and studies undertaken by a character before starting his or her adventuring career. These feats may **only** be taken during character creation. Many of these feats have specific race or nationality requirements.

Bloodline: This feat type represents abilities that deal with the bloodline powers of the various Val families. As such, these feats are not available to non-Val characters.

Elorii: This feat type deals with special aspects of the Elorii race and their specific abilities. As such, these feats are not available to non-Elorii characters.

Fighter: A fighter may select any feat with this designation as one of his fighter bonus feats.

Military: This feat type represents abilities gained during a character's military service, or abilities taught to the character by comrades from his or her military days. Feats of this type are only accessible to characters with one of the appropriate prerequisite feats (which include Conscript, Dwarven Militia, Legionnaire, Shining Patrol Service, and Soldier of Retribution). Fighters do not gain automatic access to these feats; they must have one of the necessary military service prerequisite feats, just like members of any other character class. Not all fighters gained their experience fighting in a formal military unit. However, if a fighter has the prerequisite military service feat, then he may select Military feats with his fighter bonus feats.

Profession: This feat type represents a character's current or former profession. Characters with these feats will often refer to themselves as a member of that profession. These types of feats are sometimes taken at character creation, but some characters don't pursue a profession until many years after they have begun an adventuring career. A character must spend at least half a year (180 days) out of play for each Profession feat taken after character creation. This represents the time and effort needed to study the profession, which necessarily takes the character away from adventuring.

New Feats

Alien Understanding [General]

You are able to more easily bend undead and extra-planar creatures to your will, making your spells harder to resist.

Prerequisites: Cleric of Neroth or Sarish, native of Canceri, Encali dwarf, or dark-kin; caster or manifester level 1st.

Benefit: When you cast a spell or manifest a psionic power that allows a Will save against an undead creature or an extra-planar creature (outsider), that creature does not add its Wisdom bonus (if any) to its Will save. If the creature has a Wisdom penalty, then the penalty is doubled when making Will saves against spells you cast or powers you manifest.

Avoidance [General]

You are skilled at moving through threatened areas without incurring attacks of opportunity.

Prerequisites: Dex 17, Mobility, base attack bonus +5.

Benefit: You are able to use the confusion of battle to weave through the battlefield unmolested. You may ignore a number of attacks of opportunity equal to your Dexterity bonus each turn. You may only ignore attacks of opportunity that result from your movement through a threatened square. You may not ignore attacks of opportunity that result from failing a Tumble check or from performing actions other than movement.

Special: This feat may not be used if you are wearing heavier than light armor or if you are carrying more than a light load.

Born to the Saddle [Background]

Your family has a strong tradition of horsemanship. You learned to ride a horse almost before you were able to walk.

Prerequisite: Native of the Hinterlands or Milandir.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus on all Handle Animal skill checks involving horses and on all Ride skill checks. You may sleep in the saddle of a moving horse while wearing no armor or light armor without becoming fatigued. If you also have the Endurance feat, you may sleep in the saddle of a moving horse while wearing medium or heavy armor without becoming fatigued.

Church Education [Background]

Your church provided your formal education.

Prerequisite: Native of the Coryani Empire, Altheria, Canceri, or Milandir.

Benefit: The clergy of your nation has undertaken your education. You are automatically literate with all of your starting languages, even if your class or race would normally cause you to be illiterate. Knowledge (religion) is forever treated as a class skill for you and cleric is considered an additional favored class.

Combat Firing [Fighter, General]

You have learned to fire your flintlock in melee without provoking an attack of opportunity.

Prerequisites: Combat Reflexes, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (any type of flintlock), Concentration 1 rank.



Benefit: You may fire a flintlock with which you are proficient in melee without provoking an attack of opportunity. You may also reload your flintlock in melee without provoking an attack of opportunity if you succeed on a Concentration skill check (DC 20). This does not enable you to reload the weapon any faster than usual; if the weapon requires multiple rounds to reload, you must succeed on the Concentration check each round or else you provoke attacks of opportunity that round.

Normal: Loading or firing a ranged weapon, including a flintlock, in a threatened square provokes an attack of opportunity.

Conscript [Background]

"For King and Country!"

You have served in a canton militia of the nation of Milandir.

Prerequisite: Native of Milandir.

Benefit: You are proficient with the longsword, the halberd, and the heavy crossbow. You are proficient with light armor, medium armor and heavy armor. You gain access to the Military feat category, thanks to your training. You receive a +1 circumstance bonus on all Diplomacy skill checks when dealing with Milandisian citizens because you have gained the respect and trust of your fellow countrymen.

You begin play with the following items in addition to your normal allotment of starting items: a longsword, a halberd, a heavy crossbow, and your choice of one of the following suits of armor: chain shirt, chain mail or splint mail.

Divinity's Purpose [Bloodline]

By calling on your divine purpose, you increase your ability to defend humankind.

Prerequisite: Val blood rank 2.

Benefit: When you are defending humans who are in significant danger of dying (GM's discretion; generally, for NPCs this means commoners or other normal humans at any time, but for player characters it means only unconscious or incapacitated characters) you may call upon the Valinoric blood within your veins as a free action.

When this power activates, you become infused with the divine purpose for which the Gods created you. You gain 5 temporary hit points per blood rank, and you receive a +2 holy bonus on your attack rolls, damage rolls, and saving throws for as long as there is a clear threat to the lives of the humans within your sight.

Once the threat to the humans has passed (again, GM's discretion, but generally this occurs at the end of the encounter), you become fatigued (if you successfully saved the humans' lives) or exhausted (if any of the humans died while you were trying to defend them) until you are able to rest for 8 hours.

This power does not activate more than once in any 24-hour period.

Elorii Bloodline [Elorii]

Your blood has granted you additional powers.

Prerequisite: Elorii.

Benefit: You gain benefits as detailed under your particular Elorii subrace.

For Ardakene Elorii: You gain the spell-like ability to cast *cure light wounds* once per day, with a caster level equal to your character level. You may ignore the normal +5 maximum on bonus healing due to caster level when using this ability (but not when casting *cure light wounds* normally).

For Berokene Elorii: You gain the spell-like ability to cast *water breathing* once per day, with a caster level equal to your character level. You also gain the ability to locate the largest body of natural water within one mile with a successful Concentration check (DC 10).

For Kelekene Elorii: Once per day, as a free action, you may make one bonus attack at your highest base attack bonus. You may only use this ability on your action and only in a round when you are using an attack action (standard or full-round).

For Marokene Elorii: You gain the spell-like ability to cast *earthskin* once per day, with a caster level equal to your character level. You may only cast this spell on yourself. *Earthskin* functions identically to the spell *barkskin* in all respects, but the visual effect is that of stony growths covering your skin.

For Osalikene Elorii: You gain a 10-foot racial bonus to your base land speed. This gives you a base movement rate of 40 feet per round before any reductions due to armor or encumbrance. This bonus stacks with other increases to your base land speed, such as a barbarian's Fast Movement extraordinary ability, as well as with any enhancement bonus to your movement rate.

Empower Blood [Metamagic]

You have learned to use your own blood to power your spells.

Prerequisites: Native of Canceri or Encali dwarf; caster level 3rd.

Benefit: Prior to casting a spell, you may inflict a wound upon yourself to feed the energies you are about to unleash. You may only use this feat on a spell that deals damage to one or more targets, a spell that removes damage from one or more targets, or a spell that requires a saving throw to avoid some undesirable effect.

Using this feat requires some time, and it increases the casting time of the spell to one full round (which, just to be clear, is longer than a full-round action and means that the spell can be disrupted more easily). If the casting time of the spell is already at least one full round, then applying this feat adds one additional full round to the casting time. Casting a spell with this feat must be done "on the fly;" in other words, spells may not be prepared with Empower Blood.

The procedure for damaging yourself is part of the full round of casting. Simply roll your normal melee damage as if you had scored a hit with the weapon you are using, and apply the damage to yourself. Only one-handed weapons may be used for this purpose, as one hand must be kept free to cast the spell (unless it has no somatic components, in which case you may use a two-handed weapon to damage yourself). You may not use a weapon that deals only nonlethal damage, and you must deal real damage to yourself, or there is no effect. You may use a flintlock pistol or a light or hand crossbow, as long as the weapon is already loaded and you have it in hand at the time you begin casting. You may not use any other missile weapon.

No attack roll is needed for you to hit yourself, and you may not “pull your punch” when rolling damage. Only the normal base damage of the weapon (plus your Strength modifier) counts for purposes of this spell. Extra damage from static feats, such as Weapon Specialization, does count for purposes of this feat. Extra damage from variable feats, such as Power Attack, or from special weapon qualities, such as *flaming* or *bane*, does not count for purposes of this feat, although you still suffer the full damage from any such sources that are active at the time you damage yourself.

The damage dealt by your weapon is applied to you immediately, when you begin casting the spell. If the damage you inflict on yourself reduces you to unconsciousness, you lose the spell. If the damage reduces you to exactly 0 hit points, you may still complete the spell, whereupon you fall to -1 hp and are dying. If you have damage reduction, apply your damage reduction first and only the damage that gets through (if any) is used for purposes of this feat. There is no chance of a critical hit, since no attack roll is being made, and you may not sneak attack yourself.

Because you are suffering damage during the casting of the spell, a Concentration check (DC 10 + spell level + damage dealt) is necessary to avoid losing the spell. If you succeed on the Concentration check and your spell is not disrupted during casting, the damage you inflicted on yourself is channeled into the spell.

The additional magical power you gain by damaging yourself may be used in one of two ways. It may be added to weaken the target's resistance to the spell or it may be used to increase the spell's damage. You must choose which option you will use at the same time you choose the target(s), but before any spell resistance checks, saving throws, or damage dice are rolled.

If you choose to weaken the target's resistance, the amount of damage you inflict upon yourself is added to the spell save DC or to your caster level check to overcome the target's spell resistance, whichever you choose.

If you choose to increase the spell's damage, the spell gains a bonus in total damage equal to twice the amount of damage you inflicted upon yourself. The damage-boosting option is applicable only to

spells with instantaneous durations that either deal or cure hit point (not ability) damage. The damage added through the use of Empower Blood is added to the total damage of the spell and is treated as if it were created by the spell in all respects (so it is energy damage if the spell has an energy descriptor, a saving throw for half damage includes half of this damage, damage applied to a cure spell increases the number of hit points cured, and so forth). You may not apply this feat to spells that inflict ability damage, ability drain, or negative levels, unless the spell also deals hit point damage, in which case the feat applies only to the hit-point-damaging portion of the spell.

When using this feat on spells like *magic missile* that create multiple sources of damage, you may split up the total additional damage gained by the use of this feat as you wish, but no additional sources of damage may be created by this feat. (For example, if you get three missiles, you may split up the bonus damage among the three missiles any way you like; however, you may not take the bonus damage and apply it by itself as a fourth missile)

Fishmonger [Profession]

You are a trained actor.

Prerequisites: Cha 13, Perform (acting) 4 ranks.

Benefit: You gain Bluff, Disguise, and Sense Motive as class skills, and you gain a +2 circumstance bonus to all Perform skill checks made in a theatre (or any similar location specifically designed to hold an audience for the sole purpose of hosting performances). You also gain Bard as an additional favored class.

Any time you spend at least a week to make a Perform (acting) check to practice your trade for money, you receive a +10 bonus on the check. This bonus increases the amount of money you earn.

Gentry [Background]

You were born into a noble household from your homeland.

Prerequisite: Dwarf, Elorii, human, ss'ressen, or Val.

Benefit: You were born into a family with a high level of prestige and power. You are the equivalent of a noble of your specific nation, with an appropriate rank and title, which will vary depending on the nation you select. For example, a Milandisian noble would hold the rank of Knight at a minimum.

You may not be a noble of a nation other than your own heritage and the laws of the particular country would permit; for example, an Elorii could not be a noble from a human land.

Being a member of the Gentry grants you the following benefits:

- You gain Ride and Diplomacy as class skills, and you receive a +1 bonus on skill checks with these skills.
- Your starting character wealth is increased by 6d8x10 gold pieces.
- You may legally possess an Altherian flintlock. If you are a Val, the monks of Althares give you an Altherian flintlock pistol and 20 shots' worth of blastpowder as part of your starting equipment.

Hawk-Eyed [Fighter, General]

You can see and engage targets well beyond the range of most sharpshooters.

Prerequisites: Native of Altheria, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (any type of flintlock), Far Shot, base attack bonus +8.

Benefit: Your aim with a flintlock is amazing. Whenever you fire a flintlock with which you are proficient, you suffer no range increment penalties on your attack roll out to your maximum range. This feat does not extend the maximum range of your weapon beyond the increase provided by the Far Shot feat.

Honeyed Tongue [General]

You always seem to know just what to say in order to get people to do what you want.

Prerequisite: Cha 13.

Benefit: Choose any two of the skills Bluff, Diplomacy, and Intimidate. You gain a +2 bonus on skill checks made with the two skills that you choose.

Improved Quick Draw [Fighter, General]

Your reflexes have been honed to a deadly edge. You have learned to draw your weapon and attack as a single, swift action.

Prerequisites: Dex 17, Quick Draw, base attack bonus +6

Benefit: Once per encounter, when you use the Quick Draw feat to draw a melee weapon, you may make an immediate free melee attack against any opponent within reach. This attack is made at your highest base attack bonus. However, because of the speed with which this attack is made, you may not apply sneak attack damage on the free attack. This does not preclude you from applying sneak attack damage on any subsequent attacks that you make against that same opponent.

Improved Ride-By Attack [Fighter, General]

You have become an expert at killing opponents from atop your mount.

Prerequisites: Ride-By Attack, Ride 9 ranks.

Benefit: When performing a Ride-By Attack, you gain a +2 bonus on your attack roll and deal an additional 1d6 points of damage if the attack hits.

Judge of Character [General]

You have an innate ability to judge a person's character and motives.

Prerequisites: Wis 15, Skill Focus (Sense Motive).

Benefit: You may take 10 on Sense Motive skill checks at all times, regardless of whom you are talking to, the circumstances around you, or how long the conversation lasts.

You may assume that you automatically roll a natural 20 on opposed Sense Motive skill checks against an individual character's Bluff attempts once you have had the opportunity to observe that individual in conversation for at least ten continuous minutes

(whether you are actively participating in the conversation or just listening is irrelevant).

This benefit may not be carried over; if one conversation ends and another begins, the ten-minute interval resets.

You may take 10, but may not take 20, on the special Sense Motive check made to oppose someone's Bluff check in an attempt to feint you in combat (see *Core Rulebook I*).

Normal: Use of the Sense Motive skill normally requires at least one minute. You may not take 10 on Sense Motive checks while threatened or distracted, which would include during combat, and you may never take 20 on Sense Motive checks since they are opposed rolls with a penalty for failure.

Know Terrain [General]

You know how best to use the terrain to your advantage during combat.

Prerequisites: Int 15, Survival 4 ranks.

Benefit: You gain an understanding of the terrain features on any battlefield, provided they are not hidden from your view or magically obscured. You do not gain any special ability to detect illusionary terrain, concealed pits, or other non-obvious hazards.

You can automatically identify squares that will cost extra movement to pass through, evaluate the degree of cover provided by any object or natural obstacle, and determine the shortest path between any two points on the battlefield. Furthermore, your refined understanding of the use of terrain and positioning in combat grants you an additional +1 circumstance bonus on melee attacks you make from higher ground, giving you a total bonus of +2 on such attacks.

You gain a +2 insight bonus on Balance, Climb, and Tumble checks that have been made more difficult because of rubble, wet or icy surfaces, and similar natural obstructions. This does not apply to temporary hazards created by spells; for example, you do not gain the bonus when moving through an area under the effect of a *grease* spell, because that effect has nothing to do with the terrain.

Knowledge of the Past [Elorii]

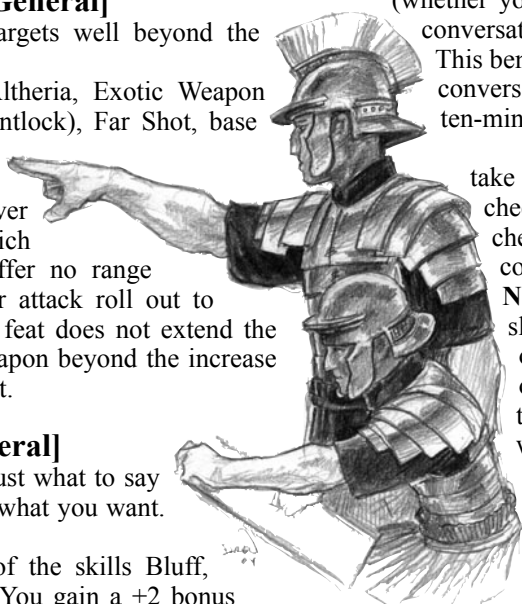
Your connection to your past incarnations is stronger than normal. You may draw upon these experiences to more easily make your way through this life.

Prerequisites: Elorii, Memories of Lives Past.

Benefit: Pick any three skills. These skills will always be treated as class skills for you. You may attempt a skill check untrained with these skills even if the skill does not normally allow untrained use.

Lay of the Land [General]

Your homeland has always held a special place in your heart. You never seem to get lost within its familiar confines.



Prerequisites: Track, Survival 4 ranks.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus on all Survival skill checks when you are within the boundaries of your homeland (GM's discretion). You are also nearly impossible to track when you are on your native soil. The DC for all Survival checks made to track you in your homeland is increased by 10.

Special: "Homeland" should be defined more narrowly than an entire country or region in most circumstances. For example, a PC could not realistically claim the entire Coryani Empire as his homeland, but a single city or perhaps even all of the non-settled areas of a particular province would be reasonable. This feat is only treated as General for characters that are native to the Hinterlands. All other characters treat it as Military.

Legionnaire [Background]

"For Duty and Honor!"

You have served in the legions of the Coryani Empire.

Prerequisite: Native of the Coryani Empire.

Benefit: You have been, or still are, a Legionnaire. You are proficient with light and medium armor, and all shields, including tower shields. You gain Marital Weapon Proficiency (gladius) or if you have a class that grants proficiency with all martial weapons you gain Exotic Weapon Proficiency (gladius) instead. You gain Exotic Armor Proficiency (lorica segmentata) for free. You also gain access to the Military feat category and gain fighter as an additional favored class. You gain a +1 circumstance bonus on all Diplomacy skill checks when dealing with Coryani citizens, as you have gained the respect of your fellow countrymen.

You begin play with a gladius, lancea, and tower shield in addition to the equipment you purchase with your starting funds.

You have been tattooed with the symbol of your legion, and all Legionnaires can recognize the tattoos of most currently active legions (see **Table 3-1: A Sampling of Known Legions** for a listing of some of the known legions, past and present). You may choose the legion of your service, with certain exceptions. Legion names with a line through them are not eligible choices.

Linguist [General]

Learning new languages is easy for you.

Prerequisite: Int 13.

Benefit: You gain the ability to speak two languages of your choice. Speak Language is a class skill for you. You also gain a +2 insight bonus on Decipher Script skill checks.

Special: You may gain this feat more than once. Each time you do, you learn two additional languages and gain an additional +1 insight bonus on Decipher Script skill checks. The bonuses granted by this feat stack.

Master of the Tops [General]

You have mastered the art of moving safely within the rigging of a large sailing vessel.

Prerequisites: Native of Entaris or the Pirate Isles;

Table 3-1: A Sampling of Known Legions

Legio Anguis Retatus
Legion of Avenging Thunder
Legion of Blazing Judgment
Legion of Broken Shadows
Legion of Burnished Steel
Legion of Chendo's Pride
Legion of Dark Majesty
Legion of Deliverance
Legion of the Doom of Chendo
Legion of Grim Lamentation
Legion of Heaven's Blade
Legion of Honorable Accord
Legion of Indomitable Accord
Legion of the Iron Guardian
Legion of Iron Shadow
Legio Lex Talionis
Legion of Mighty Toneth
Legion of Radiant Glory
Legion of Searing Light
Legion of Searing Purity
Legion of Sweet Sorrow
Legion of the Black Sun
Legion of the Crimson Moon
Legion of the Defiant Shield
Legion of the Might of the Empire
Legion of the Mighty Oak
Legion of the Reluctant Warrior
Legion of the Rising Phoenix
Legion of the Shinning Pillar
Legion of the Singers of the Sweet Savona
Legion of the Storm Lord
Legion of the Triumphant Rays of the Invisible Sun
Legion of the Unrepentant Heart
Legion of Unyielding Courage
Legion of Vigilance
Legion of the Watchful Hunter

Note: A Legion whose name is ~~struck through~~ is not currently active, either because it was destroyed in battle, its standard was lost, or its sponsors were thrown down in disgrace and it was disbanded by the Emperor.

Climb 4 ranks, Use Rope 4 ranks.

Benefit: Some say you were born on the ropes. You always feel more at home among the rigging of a ship than on solid ground. When climbing or moving along or through the rigging of a ship, you gain a +10 bonus on all Balance and Climb checks, you retain your Dexterity bonus to your Armor Class, and you climb at your full base movement rate rather than at half speed.

Memories of Lives Past [Background, Elorii]

Your soul remembers something of its past incarnations. You gain knowledge from these memories.

Prerequisite: Elorii.

Benefit: Choose one class to become an additional favored class for you.



Quick Reload [Fighter, General]

You have learned to reload your flintlock quickly.

Prerequisites: Exotic Weapon Proficiency and Weapon Focus (any flintlock type).

Benefit: Select one type of flintlock with which you are proficient. You may reload this type of flintlock as a move-equivalent action. This action still provokes attacks of opportunity as normal.

Normal: Reloading a flintlock weapon is a full-round action.

Special: You may gain this feat more than once. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take this feat, choose a different type of flintlock weaponry.

Saddle Warrior [Fighter, General]

You are extremely adept at fighting while mounted.

Prerequisites: Dex 13, Mounted Combat.

Benefit: While fighting mounted, you gain a +2 bonus on all Ride skill checks made to control your mount in battle or stay in the saddle, and a +1 dodge bonus to your Armor Class.

Strength of the Coryani Heart [General]

Love of the Empire is etched into your heart and the strength it lends you is astonishing. You become inspired whenever fighting overwhelming numbers of enemies.

Prerequisite: Native of the Coryani Empire.

Benefit: When facing insurmountable odds, you can draw upon the strength of the Empire that burns in your heart. You gain a +2 holy bonus on all saving throws against fear effects. Also, when facing odds of five to one or greater, you gain a +2 holy bonus on all of your attack rolls, damage rolls, and saving throws (giving you a +4 total bonus on saves against fear).

Tactical Leadership [Military]

You have learned to share your knowledge of the terrain with your companions.

Prerequisites: Avoidance, Know Terrain.

Benefit: You may share your knowledge of the tactical environment by taking a move action to call out instructions to your allies, who then gain the benefits of the Avoidance and Know Terrain Feats until the beginning of your next turn. Only allies that can hear and understand you gain the benefits.

Tail Attack [General]

You have learned to make attacks with your tail, surprising your opponents with lightning-quick sweeps.

Prerequisites: Ss'ressen.

Benefit: You gain a tail attack and may use it to attack in melee combat. The tail is considered a secondary natural weapon and cannot be disarmed. Your tail has the same reach as your claws (normally 5 feet). Successful tail attacks inflict bludgeoning damage based on your size category: Small 1d4, Medium 1d6, and Large 1d8. If you have monk levels, you may use your monk unarmed damage with your tail attacks instead of the amount listed above.

Natural Weaponry

Natural weapons are weapons that are part of a creature's physiology. A creature making a melee attack with a natural weapon is considered armed and does not provoke attacks of opportunity. Likewise, it threatens any space it can reach. Creatures do not receive additional iterative attacks from a high Base Attack Bonus when using natural weapons. Unless otherwise noted, a natural weapon threatens a critical hit only on a natural 20 and deals double damage on a critical hit.

When a creature has more than one natural weapon, one of them (most often, a pair or set of them, such as a pair of claws) is considered the primary weapon. All the creature's remaining natural weapons are considered to be secondary. The primary weapon is generally the creature's preferred weapon when considering its natural, instinctive attack routines.

All ss'ressen treat their claws as their primary natural weapon. Any other natural weapons gained through feats and such are always treated as secondary weapons. Some of the Tainted feats in this chapter allow a dark-kin to grow natural weaponry, and some of the other spells and abilities elsewhere in this book also allow characters to gain or manifest natural weapons. Such natural weapons follow all the standard rules listed here and in *Core Rulebook III* concerning natural weaponry.

Generally speaking, if a creature has only one natural weapon, then that natural weapon is its primary natural weapon. However, if it has multiple natural weapons, its primary natural weapon should be chosen based on common sense. Generally, a creature with claw or pincer attacks uses those as its primary natural weapon in preference to bite, sting, or tail attacks. When reading a monster entry, the primary natural weapon is always easy to identify, as it is the one that is listed as making attacks using the creature's full base attack bonus.

An attack with a primary natural weapon uses the creature's full base attack bonus. Attacks with secondary natural weapons are less effective. All secondary natural weapon attacks are made with a –5 penalty on the attack roll, no matter how many there are. (Creatures with the Multiattack feat suffer only a –2 penalty on attacks with secondary weapons.) This penalty applies even when the creature makes a single attack with the secondary weapon, whether by using a standard action to make a single attack with the secondary weapon or by using the secondary weapon to make an attack of opportunity.

You gain a +2 bonus on attack rolls and Strength checks made to trip opponents with your tail. (Note that since your tail is a secondary natural weapon, you normally suffer a –5 penalty on your attack rolls when using it, so the +2 bonus partially offsets this penalty when you use your tail to make a trip attack.)

Appendix IV: Prestige Classes

Unlike other natural weapons, the tail attack requires a certain amount of maneuverability to use successfully. Therefore, you may not use your tail attack during a grapple.

Special: The primary natural weapons of all ss'ressen are their claws. See the Natural Weaponry sidebar for more information about natural weapons.

Trick Shot [Fighter, General]

You have learned to disarm an opponent with a shot from your flintlock.

Prerequisites: Native of Altheria, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (flintlock pistols or flintlock rifles), Precise Shot, base attack bonus +8.

Benefit: You may attempt to disarm an opponent within 30 feet with a well-placed shot from your flintlock pistol or rifle. (You cannot attempt to disarm an opponent when you are wielding a scattergun or a blunderbuss, as these weapons do not allow for the precise aiming necessary to target a held item.)

Resolve this disarm attempt as normal, treating the flintlock shot as a Medium-size weapon. Instead of using your Strength score for the opposed disarm roll, assume that the shot has a Strength score of 18 for pistols and 22 for rifles. The ranged disarm attempt provokes attacks of opportunity as normal, unless you also have the Improved Disarm feat. Of course, if the opponent cannot reach you, then he cannot make his attack of opportunity. If your ranged disarm attempt fails, the defender does not get the opportunity to attempt to disarm you in return.

Visions of Lives Past [Elorii]

Your connection to your past life is stronger than normal. Your soul remembers something of its past existence. You gain knowledge from these memories.

Prerequisites: Elorii, Memories of Lives Past.

Benefit: Once per day, at the GM's discretion, you may make a memory check to see if you remember anything relevant to the area or situation you are in. To make a memory check, roll 1d20 and add your character level and your Charisma modifier. This ability is somewhat similar to a bardic knowledge check, although the memories you gain are fragmented and disjointed. These brief visions tend to focus on events and individuals with strong emotional ties to the Elorii people and their history.

ALTHERIAN SHARPSHOOTER

"The Ssethregoran ambush fell upon our patrol like ravenous beasts. The trogs were each as strong as two men and their primitive stone axes bit through steel as well as flesh. Outnumbered as we were, I resolved myself to face my end in a manner befitting a Coryani. If my life were to end, then at least a dozen of these beasts would be available to provide my introduction to Neroth. Fortunately, my heroic end was not to be that day. Dozens of sharp reports issued from the rise above us as the Altherian guns smashed into the reptilian scum, driving them back. I ran to pursue, but the old centurion stopped me. "Let them run, boy," he said with a wry smile, "they will only die tired."

~ "My service in the Legion of Shining Glory"
– Darralin val'Assante

The rough terrain of the Altherian plateau provides many positions from which a handful of well armed soldiers can halt a large number of attackers. Early in the war with Ssethregore, early in the development of the flintlock, the Altherians developed a tradition of marksmanship. Using these weapons and primitive grenades, the Altherians would send out small groups of men to harass the reptiles and to make them pay dearly for every inch they advanced towards New Althre'. A brutal selection process began where only the best of these soldiers survived to fight again. As the guns became more advanced, the Altherians began to equip these elite units with the latest blast powder weapons until they became famous for their ability to turn back an entire army with only a handful of men.

Requirements:

To qualify as an Altherian Sharpshooter, a character must fulfill all the following criteria:

- **Base Attack:** +5.
- **Concentration:** 4 ranks.
- **Craft (flintlocks):** 4 ranks.
- **Feats:** Exotic Weapon Proficiency (flintlock rifle), Hawk-Eyed, Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, and Weapon Focus (flintlock rifle).
- **Other:** Must possess a masterwork Altherian flintlock rifle.

Hit Die: d8

Skill Points: 4 + Intelligence modifier.

Class Skills: Altherian Sharpshooters have the following class skills (with the key ability for each skill) are: Balance (Dex), Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (any, including flintlocks) (Int), Hide (Dex), Jump (Str), Move Silently (Dex), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Swim (Str), and Tumble (Dex).

Table 4-1: Altherian Sharpshooter Advancement

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1st	+1	+0	+2	+0	Range Sneak Attack +1d6
2nd	+2	+0	+3	+0	Extended Sneak Attack Range 60ft, Focused Training
3rd	+3	+1	+3	+1	Extended Sneak Attack Range 90ft, Range Sneak Attack +2d6
4th	+4	+1	+4	+1	Steady Hands, Deadly Aim, Focused Training
5th	+5	+2	+4	+2	Extended Sneak Attack Range 110ft, Range Sneak Attack +3d6, Dead Eye

Class Features:

All of the following are class features of the Altherian Sharpshooter prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: The Athenian Sharpshooter is proficient with all simple weapons and light armor.

Ranged Sneak Attack: When using an Altherian flintlock rifle, the Altherian Sharpshooter gains the ability to fire shots that strike vulnerable areas for extra damage. This ability works exactly like a rogue's sneak attack, except that the target must be at least 20 feet away and the Sharpshooter's sneak attack damage is good out to the maximum range specified by this ability (30 feet at 1st level, 60 feet at 2nd level, 90 feet at 3rd level, and 110 feet at 5th level). Gaining this bonus damage requires the Sharpshooter to aim carefully, so he may only make a ranged sneak attack when using the full attack action. This ability may be combined with the Dead Eye ability. The bonus dice of damage from this ability stack with sneak attack damage dice from other classes.

Focused Training: At 2nd level the Altherian Sharpshooter gains Quick Reload (Altherian flintlock rifles only) as a bonus feat. At 4th level the Altherian Sharpshooter gains Weapon Specialization (flintlock rifle) as a bonus feat.

Steady Hands: At 3rd level, when firing an Altherian flintlock rifle, the Sharpshooter ignores penalties incurred from movement and uneven terrain. He also gains the benefits of the Shot on the Run feat.

Deadly Aim: At 4th level, when firing an Altherian flintlock rifle, the Sharpshooter gains the benefits of the Deadly Aim feat.

Dead Eye: As a full-round action that provokes attacks of opportunity, the Sharpshooter may fire his flintlock rifle with deadly accuracy. The character must make a Concentration check with a DC of 10 + 5 per additional range increment beyond the first. If successful, the character's attack is treated a ranged touch attack and is automatically considered a critical threat. If the character fails the Concentration check, the attack is treated as a normal attack.

BRETHREN OF THE ORDER OF ST. THEOMUND THE MISSIONARY

Theomund val'Holryn led a most notable life. As a young man, Theomund was intensely interested in knightly pursuits. He traveled the countryside composing love songs to the damsels he would meet and fall instantly in love with. As such, his heart never found its home, and even though he married a young val'Dellenov woman, he was constantly unfaithful. A good friend and traveling companion to Prince Osric, later King Osric III, Theomund was rewarded with many valuable estates in Eastmarch upon the end of the Interregnum. One day, he was composing a ballad in honor of a beautiful damsel he had seen at a tournament, when a vision of a Valinor appeared to him and commanded him to bring the Word of Illiir to the Canceri. Thinking himself addled, he disregarded the vision as the delusions of an unfaithful mind. Yet the vision appeared to Theomund thrice more, and upon this fourth viewing he resolved to convert the Heretics back to the Mother Church.

Theomund provided for his family, sold off the remainder of his estates to finance his expedition, and traveled north into Canceri. At first he preached to the followers of the Scarab. The val'Mordane were surprisingly tolerant of his teachings and he founded several small churches of Illiir near their great cities. These churches taught that death must be just and that even though you may die, your deeds will live on. These small monasteries are called the Confraternity of the Just Death.

Bolstered by this early success, Theomund moved onward, to the lands of the val'Mehan. He sought out the most learned of the Nihang and offered to convert to the Church of the Dark Triumvirate if they could prove their faith to be truer than his. Needless to say, he bested all their arguments and began to convince them with his own. This led to his renunciation by the Dark Apostate, who had Theomund hobbled and sent back to Tralia in a cage.

Though crippled, Theomund was even more determined to see the Heretic brought back into the fold, for if the Dark Apostate saw him as such a threat as to have him banished, then his arguments must have been irrefutable. He traveled back to Canceri in a wagon and entered the lands of the val'Viridan. In the square of their capitol city, Theomund stood in his

wagon and declared, “The law of the Mother Church of Coryan is Just and Righteous and the Law of the Heretics of the Dark Triumvirate is Wicked and False. This I can prove!” at which point he was promptly stoned to death by an angry mob.

The Patriarch of Coryan named him St. Theomund the Missionary and approved the founding of a religious order of monks to tend to the converts Theomund had attained during his travels in Canceri. These men taught the Canceri how to be priests of the Mother Church, as well as how to defend themselves with their bare hands. When the Heretic Wars erupted, the Milandisian priests of the Confraternity returned to Milandir to minimize the danger to the churches themselves.

Joining the armies against the Heretic, the Brethren of the Order gained a reputation for valor and upon the end of the Heretic War, with their earlier purpose ended, they found a home in the val’Tensen lands. Young Adolphos val’Tensen provided the order with a castle and lands to maintain it and granted them the right to use the val’Tensen Lion in their coat of arms. To complement the Lion of the val’Tensen and the great Falcon of Illiir, they took upon themselves the symbol of the Griffin. Now, the order guards missionaries and pilgrims traveling the Blessed Lands in the hopes of preventing Theomund’s fate from befalling others. Clerics, paladins and monks are most often drawn to be Brethren of the Missionary, but almost any character with the proper faith and resolve could find his or her way into the Order.

Requirements:

- **Alignment:** Any non-chaotic and non-evil.
- **Base Attack:** +4.
- **Knowledge (religion):** 4 ranks.
- **Feats:** Iron Will, Combat Expertise.
- **Special:** Must follow the teachings of the Church of Coryan and must be accepted by the order. Must swear an oath of fealty and faith to the Mother Church.

Hit Die: d8

Skill Points per level: 2 + Intelligence modifier.

Class Skills: Members of the Order have the following class skills (with the key ability for each skill) Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Jump (Str), Knowledge (arcana) (Int), Knowledge (history) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis), Spell Craft (Int), and Swim (Str).

Class Features:

All of the following are class features of the The Brethren of the Order of St. Theomund the Missionary prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: The Brethren are well-trained as guardians of missionaries and as a result have proficiency with all types of armor and shields as well as all simple and martial melee weapons.

Spells per Day: Members of the Order of St. Theomund continue to advance in divine spellcasting ability. Starting at 2nd level, and every level thereafter, a Member of the Order of St. Theomund gains new spells per day as if he had also gained a level in the spellcasting class he belonged to before he added the prestige class. He does not; however, gain any other benefit a character of that class would have received. This essentially means that he adds his prestige class level to the level of his other spellcasting class, then determines spells per day and caster level accordingly. If a character had more than one spellcasting class before he became a Member of the Order of St. Theomund, he must decide to which class he adds his new levels for purposes of determining spells per day. Levels in this class do not stack for the purposes of familiar advancement.

Bonus Feat: At 1st level, a Brother of St. Theomund gains a bonus feat selected from the fighter list.

Unshakable Dogma (Ex): The Brother’s faith is unshakable and he cannot be dissuaded that his faith is the correct one. Any attempt to do so by any means, mundane or magical, will automatically fail. If the Brother is ever *charmed* or *dominated* and asked to do anything opposed to his faith or opposed to the will of the Mother Church, the character is granted an immediate saving throw with a +10 sacred bonus.

Divine Stewardship (Ex): The truth of the Brother’s faith is such that the blasphemies of the Heretic are of little use against his pious soul. The brother gains a sacred bonus to his saving throws (+2 at 2nd level and +4 at 4th level) against any divine spell not cast by a priest of the Mother Church of Coryan.

Faithful Bodyguard (Ex): The Brother is skilled in protecting his charge; the character may assign an ally to be his charge as a move-equivalent action. If within

Table 4-2: The Brethren of the Order of St. Theomund the Missionary Advancement

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Spells per Day
1 st	+0	+2	+0	+2	Bonus Feat, Unshakable Dogma	-
2 nd	+1	+3	+0	+3	Divine Stewardship +2	+1 divine caster level
3 rd	+2	+3	+1	+3	Faithful Bodyguard	+1 divine caster level
4 th	+3	+4	+1	+4	Divine Stewardship+4	+1 divine caster level
5 th	+3	+4	+2	+4	Righteous Wrath	+1 divine caster level

5 feet of his charge, the Brother may apply his shield bonus, any dodge bonus, and bonus from his use of the Combat Expertise feat, and the *defending* properties of any weapon he is wielding to his charge instead of to himself.

Righteous Wrath (Ex): Those that would assault the charge of a Brother of the Missionary open themselves to retribution. If within 5 feet of his charge, the Brother may make an attack of opportunity against anyone who attacks his charge. The Brother gains a +3 sacred bonus to hit and damage when taking this attack of opportunity. If the Brother's charge is felled (reduced to 0 hit points or less), he flies into a holy rage, gaining a +4 sacred bonus to Strength and Constitution for the next 5 rounds. The Brother may not fly into a holy rage more than once in a single encounter.

The Ehtzara

A veil of heat wafted off the sun baked flats, distorting the barren landscape and dwarfish thorny plants. Dry dusty winds cut across the cracked mud plain as a lone lizard, perched atop a rock, hissed at a passing desert adder. A ring of ancient stones, tall as giants and carved with symbols of ancient power in a forgotten tongue cast the only shade for miles. The lizard turned to spot a distant hazy shape approaching from the wastes. The figure gained form, a tall black shape with robes flapping in the heated gusts, which strode toward the monoliths with purpose.

It ignored the frightened lizard, instead reaching out its wizened hand to grab the now coiled adder in its grasp, placing the squirming beast within a rugged bag. It stepped into the shadow of the tall stones and lowered its tasseled hood, revealing the head of a man with leathery bronzed skin and a sun bleached tangle of hair. The man placed a simple wooden altar, adorned with painted glyphs and red garnets, at the center of the ring and bowed low in respect to the spirits of the sacred stones. The shadows beneath them grew shorter, slowly disappearing at the zenith of the sun on this holiest of days, Khi'gothe'ku, The Shredded Veil Between Worlds.

He made sacrifices of expensive wine, herbs, and baubles on the altar, and asked the guardians of this hallowed ground to accept him as an initiate of his order and a wise guardian of the people. He appealed with chants and pacts while waiting for a sign. Suddenly a harsh wind cast itself upon the scene, buffeting the man hard and caused the altar to teeter in its forceful, sand-laced gale. The shadows returned from underneath the tall stones, stretching slowly to cover the man in mid day blackness. He heard terrifying moans and oaths in elder tongues, the deafening voices of the dead now brought back to life in swirling, inky horror. He felt their shifting forms pass over him as he cringed in fear, for he knew if they did not accept his humble offerings, they would carry him off screaming to the Underworld.

In an instant, all grew silent. As the cowering man looked slowly up, the offerings atop the altar

were nowhere to be seen. The blood red garnets that adorned it now shone and glinted with deep unworldly light, signifying his acceptance by the spirits. The man bowed low before the stones, almost touching the parched ground beneath his feet. He caressed the altar lovingly; carefully packing it away and headed back the way he came.

He now commanded respect from man and beast alike, which would cringe with fear and give a wide respectful berth at the sight of his tasseled hood. Soon he would have the power to speak with animals and the spirits of the dead. He would command nature itself through spells and ancient rites. The man strode with confidence anew, and a wicked smile of satisfaction played across his face. He had become a full member of his order and a vital link to the land.

He was now an Ehtzara.

The Ehtzara are the tribal sorceress of the Hinterlands, gaining power and learning spells from summoned spirits or innate knowledge of the natural landscape and its denizens. They are a mix of three ancient traditions; the original Yhing-hir beliefs of ancestor worship before they were trapped in the Hinterlands, the pagan elemental practices of the indigenous Pengik tribe, and the amalgamations of southern magic, superstitions and religious beliefs. Like all The Ehtzaras on Onara, the Ehtzara are no exception to the bias and superstition that these folk deal with demons and devils to grant them power, ascribed with every malicious act or freak occurrence around them for miles. The differences with the Ehtzara are that they embrace this bias, particularly in the Hinterlands and eastern Milandir, using their frightful presence and ominous reputations to intimidate others and chase off would be attackers or angry mobs. The training and discipline for the Ehtzara is as rigorous as a monk's, and an initiate into this group must accept that they will no longer be treated as normal, and often not even as natural. However, they will command respect and fear from all they encounter, and are imbued with many useful and devastatingly effective capabilities in trade for normalcy and order. However, all Ehtzara are not evil, and may even live on the edge of communities and give assistance or help in return for payment, food and shelter, and a blind eye to their unseemly trade. They tend to wayward shrines and forgotten cairns to learn ancient lore and appease their spirit patrons.

All Ehtzara are trained in planar and elemental traditions and philosophies, and thus are respectful to extraplanar and elemental beings (this usually includes the Elorii, but not always.) They will show them the proper respect they feel is due to such beings and creatures; usually attacking only if provoked or attacked first.

The Cult of the Jackal

An Ehtzara may join the Cult of the Jackal but they must be either of Chaotic Neutral or Evil alignment, and must pay a tithe to the cult of 50GP per month. Those who do join have all research costs cut in half and at least one minor ally in every Hinterland

city. These allies will give them basic information and lodging, or assist in vile acts or the spread of chaos and evil in the name of the cult. Once per month, an Ehtzara who belongs to the cult may make a Will save at DC10+ 1D10, which represents the charismatic strength of rule of the local cult chapter. The GM may use any modifiers, according to the area, the particular request, and who is in control of the cult in that area. Success grants aid in various forms, upon GM adjudication and what effect it may have in the given circumstance (three or four toughs that act as bodyguards, a ghoulish servant, a vial of poison, or a scroll with a specific spell). Abuse of this power is dealt with harshly, and those members who do usually end up maimed or disappear altogether. Failure of the Will save results in some unseemly and arduous task for the Ehtzara, and refusal is very insulting and punishable by various means, per GM adjudication. This cult is illegal in all cities of the Hinterlands, and any connection with it is punishable by arrest and trial under the charges of heresy and treason.

Requirements:

To qualify to become an Elemental, a character must fulfill all the following criteria

- **Alignment:** Any Chaotic
- **Skills:** Concentration: 8 ranks, Knowledge: Arcana: 8 ranks, Spellcraft 8 ranks, Craft: woodworking 1 rank
- **Feats:** Skill Focus (Knowledge: Arcana), Iron Will.

Special: To become an Ehtzara, the character must seek another Ehtzara or a powerful spirit in the wilderness of the Hinterlands, swearing utter devotion and fealty to their new master and take the title of supplicant. At this point, all they own belongs to their master, and they are equal in social rank to a slave (including being able to be sold.) There are usually basic tests involved to judge the worth and character of the initiate, and they vary from master to master, be they flesh or spirit. They usually involve unseemly chores and duties, much like an apprenticeship. The supplicant is taught basic survival techniques of the desert, and the time allotted typically averages three months. If the supplicant is deemed worthy, then the master further instructs the supplicant until they are given the title of initiate.

The initiate then must pay no less than 600GP for the various goods and materials required and travel into the deep desert to fast for three days. (If they were not clever enough to squirrel the money away, then they must earn it, or work it off in debt to their master.) The initiate is assailed with powerful visions and Hallucinations of dead relatives, lost friends, and is whispered hidden truths and secrets by various spirits. On the fourth day, the initiate crafts their altar (a simple wooden table or shrine incorporated with items sympathetically important to the initiate) and *Spirit Robe*, always black with a tasseled hood or cowl, and adorned with the names of their patron spirits in silver thread. This robe is donned and must never be taken off except at dusk or dawn using a special prayer. It acts as a conduit between the Ehtzara and their patron spirits, and is a symbol of their station. (See *Taboos* below).

The initiate must then make a pilgrimage to the Ehtzara Stones in the Haunted Wastes (western desert of the Hinterlands. Any other remote and dangerous spot associated with spirits and sorcery will do) and make pacts with the spirits to bind themselves by oath to their new patrons and the land. The Ehtzara lays out the altar they have fashioned, along with any sacrifices they wish to present, and waits for a reply from the Otherworld. (At which point the character must succeed in a *willpower* saving throw DC: 20, for which the character gains an insight bonus equal to their charisma modifier) along with any additions for sacrifices to their spirits, as shown below:

- Every 1,000GP of sacrificed goods or adornments to altar (rare herbs, expensive foods, incense, wine, gems, etc.): +1 to a maximum of +2
- Minor magical item (scroll, potion, or charm): +1
- Major magical item (wand, sword, or ring): +2
- Blood of a large animal (2HD or more): +1
- Blood of a magical creature or intelligent being (Giant owl, Infernal, Medusa, or human): +2

If the Ehtzara succeeds, their robes become magical and their altar acts as a holy item concerning spells that require a divine focus in the Ehtzara spell list.

If they should fail, there is no second attempt available to them, as the spirits appealed to deem them unworthy and drag them screaming to the Underworld where they are irrevocably destroyed.

Hit Die: d6

Skill Points per level: 2 + Int. modifier.

Class Skills:

The Ehtzara class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Decipher Script (Int), Handle Animal (Cha), Heal (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (Nature) (Int), Knowledge (Planes) (Int), Knowledge (Religion) (Int), Profession (Wis), Spellcraft (Int), Spot (Wis), Use Magic Device (Cha), Survival (Wis) See Chapter 4: Skills in Core Rulebook I for skill descriptions.

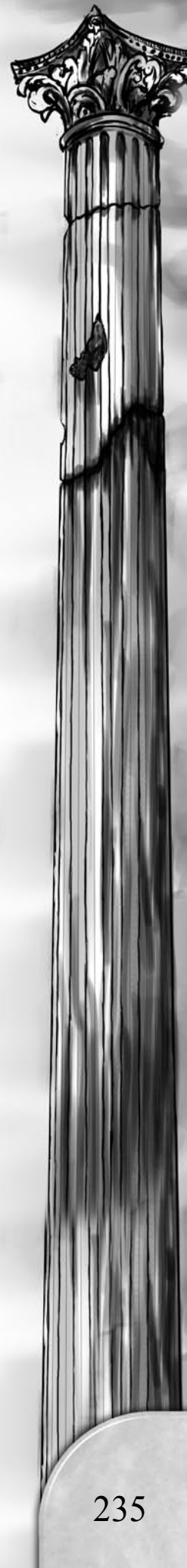
Abbreviation: Eht

Class Features:

All of the following are class features of The Ehtzara prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: Ehtzara are proficient with the following weapons: club, dagger, dart, quarterstaff, scimitar, sickle, shortspear, sling, and spear. They are also proficient with all natural attacks (claw, bite, and so forth) of any form they assume with wild shape (see below).

The Ehtzara are prohibited from wearing any armor, even bracers of armor, wearing such meager means of protection show a lack of faith and anger the Ehtzara's patron spirits. An Ehtzara who wears prohibited armor finds his is unable to cast any Ehtzara spells or use any of her supernatural or spell-like class abilities for 24 hours thereafter.



Spells: The Ehtzara casts divine spells which are drawn primarily from the Ehtzara spell list. He can cast any spell he knows without preparing it ahead of time, the way a wizard or a cleric must (see below). To learn or cast a spell, The Ehtzara must have a Charisma score equal to at least 10 + the spell level. The Difficulty Class for a saving throw against The Ehtzara's spell is 10 + the spell level + the The Ehtzara's Charisma modifier.

Like other spellcasters, the Ehtzara can cast only a certain number of spells of each spell level per day. His base daily spell allotment is given on Table: The Ehtzara. In addition, he receives bonus spells per day if he has a high wisdom score. When Table: Ehtzara Spells Known indicates that the Ehtzara gets 0 spells per day of a given spell level, he gains only the bonus spells he would be entitled to based on his Wisdom score for that spell level.

The Ehtzara's selection of spells is extremely limited. The Ehtzara begins play knowing four 0-level spells and two 1st-level spells of your choice. At each new The Ehtzara level, he gains one or more new spells, as indicated on Table: The Ehtzara Spells Known. (Unlike spells per day, the number of spells The Ehtzara knows is not affected by his Wisdom score; the numbers on Table: The Ehtzara Spells Known are fixed.) These new spells can be common spells chosen from the Ehtzara spell list, or they can be unusual spells that the Ehtzara has gained some understanding of by study or through the use of a

Fetish of Power (see below). The Ehtzara can't use this method of spell acquisition to learn spells at a faster rate, however.

Upon reaching 4th level, and at every even-numbered Ehtzara level after that (6th, 8th, and so on),

Table 4-4: Ehtzara Spells known

Level	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1st	4	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
2nd	5	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
3rd	5	3	1*	—	—	—	—	—
4th	6	3	1	—	—	—	—	—
5th	6	4	2	1*	—	—	—	—
6th	7	4	2	1	—	—	—	—
7th	7	5	3	2	1*	—	—	—
8th	8	5	3	2	1	—	—	—
9th	8	5	4	3	2	1*	—	—
10th	9	5	4	3	2	1	—	—
11th	9	5	5	4	3	2	1*	—
12th	9	5	5	4	3	2	1	—
13th	9	5	5	4	4	3	2	1*
14th	9	5	5	4	4	3	2	1
15th	9	5	5	4	4	4	3	2

* Provided the bard has a high enough Wisdom score to have a bonus spell of this level.

Table 4-3: The Ehtzara

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Spells per Day							
						0	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
1st	+0	+0	+0	+2	Spirit Robes, Fetish Crafting, Summon Familiar	5	3	—	—	—	—	—	—
2nd	+1	+0	+0	+3	Binding Fetish, Craft Esters & Salves	6	4	—	—	—	—	—	—
3rd	+1	+1	+1	+3	, Imbue Fetish +1	6	5	0*	—	—	—	—	—
4th	+2	+1	+1	+4	Detect Sprits & the Dead	6	6	3	—	—	—	—	—
5th	+2	+1	+1	+4	Imbue Fetish +2, Binding Fetish	6	6	4	0*	—	—	—	—
6th	+3	+2	+2	+5	Frightful Presence	6	6	5	3	—	—	—	—
7th	+3	+2	+2	+5	Imbue Fetish +3	6	6	6	4	0*	—	—	—
8th	+4	+2	+2	+6	Curse of Retort , Binding Fetish	6	6	6	5	3	—	—	—
9th	+4	+3	+3	+6	Imbue Fetish +4	6	6	6	6	4	0*	—	—
10th	+5	+3	+3	+7	Speak with Sprits (2/day)	6	6	6	6	5	3	—	—
11th	+5	+3	+3	+7	Imbue Fetish +5, Binding Fetish	6	6	6	6	6	4	0*	—
12th	+6	+4	+4	+8	Rite of Devouring	6	6	6	6	6	5	3	—
13th	+6	+4	+4	+8	Imbue Fetish +6	6	6	6	6	6	6	4	0*
14th	+7	+4	+4	+9	Binding Fetish	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	3
15th	+7	+5	+5	+9	Imbue Fetish +7	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	4

* Provided the bard has a high enough Wisdom score to have a bonus spell of this level.

The Ehtzara can choose to learn a new spell in place of one he already knows. In effect, the Ehtzara “loses” the old spell in exchange for the new one. The new spell’s level must be the same as that of the spell being exchanged, and it must be at least two levels lower than the highest-level The Ehtzara spell the Ehtzara can cast. The Ehtzara may swap only a single spell at any given level, and must choose whether or not to swap the spell at the same time that he gains new spells known for the level.

Unlike a wizard or a cleric, The Ehtzara need not prepare his spells in advance. He can cast any spell he knows at any time, assuming he has not yet used up his spells per day for that spell level. He does not have to decide ahead of time which spells he’ll cast. Yet like a Cleric, Ehtzara meditate for their spells. Each Ehtzara must meditate over his shrine at dawn and dusk (see taboos below) spending 2 hours each day in quiet contemplation or supplication to regain his daily allotment of spells. Time spent resting has no effect on whether the Ehtzara can prepare spells.

Familiar: The Ehtzara can obtain a familiar (see below). Doing so takes 24 hours and uses up magical materials that cost 100 gp. A familiar is a magical beast that resembles a small animal and is unusually tough and intelligent. The creature serves as a companion and servant.

The Ehtzara chooses the kind of familiar he gets. As the Ehtzara advances in level, his familiar also increases in power.

If the familiar dies or is dismissed by the Ehtzara, the Ehtzara must attempt a DC 15 Fortitude saving throw. Failure means he loses 200 experience points per The Ehtzara level; success reduces the loss to one-half that amount. However, The Ehtzara’s experience point total can never go below 0 as the result of a familiar’s demise or dismissal. A slain or dismissed familiar cannot be replaced for a year and day. A slain familiar can be raised from the dead just as a character can be, and it does not lose a level or a Constitution point when this happy event occurs.

A character with more than one class that grants a familiar may have only one familiar at a time.

Fetish Crafting: Beginning at 1st level the Ehtzara gains Craft Lesser Fetish and Craft Fetish feats as bonus feats even if they do not meet all the feat’s prerequisites.

Spirit Robes (Su): At 1st level the Ehtzara creates his first true fetish, his *Spirit Robes*. These robes are always black with a tasseled hood or cowl, and adorned with the names of their patron spirits in silver thread. Once this robe is donned and must never be taken off except at dusk or dawn using a special prayer. These robes protect the Ehtzara as well as act as an additional divine focus for his divine spells. These robes count as mastercraft leather armor, and can be enhanced through the use of Imbue Fetish (see below)

Binding Fetish (Ex): As the Ehtzara advances in his craft he begins to understand the lesions and secret truths whispered to him upon beginning his way down the path of the Ehtzara. Starting at 2nd level the Ehtzara may craft a small number of secret fetishes; these Fetishes are attached to the Ehtzara’s *Spirit Robes* and may not be removed from the robes for any reason, doing so diminishes their power and renders them worthless. If removed these fetishes must be recreated. The Ehtzara may craft one of these special fetishes at 2nd level and craft an additional secret fetish at levels 5, 8, 11, and 14. Crafting one of these Secret fetishes takes one week for each 1,000 gold pieces in required to craft the Fetish. Alternately the Ehtzara may craft any other Fetish in place of a Secret Fetish binding it to his Spirit Robes, such fetishes are crafted through the *Craft Fetish* feat except that the Ehtzara need only pay one half experience.

• **Bone Fetish:** Created from the bones of an undead creature, these bones allow the Ehtzara to, once per day, rebuke undead as a first level cleric. Crafting this fetish requires 2,000gp in sacrifices as well as bones of an undead creature which the Ehtzara helped destroy.

• **Power Fetish:** Crafted from the teeth of a spell casting creature, these teeth are normally sown into the sleeves of the Ehtzara’s *Spirit Robes*. This Fetish allows the Ehtzara to learn to cast a spell once known by the creature used in the fetishes creation, the spell must be chosen upon the creation of the fetish and must be one level lower than the highest level spell known by the Ehtzara. Crafting this fetish requires 4,000gp in sacrifices as well as the teeth of a spell casting creature which the Ehtzara helped slay.

• **Hero’s Fetish:** Crafted from the skin of a warrior, this knighted skin rope, binds the spirit of the warrior to the Ehtzara’s Spirit robes. This Fetish gives the Ehtzara +1 on all attack and damage rolls, this Fetish may be Enhanced through the use of the Imbue Fetish ability (see below) Crafting this fetish requires 2,000gp in sacrifices as well as the skin of a warrior (a Humanoid with martial levels) which the Ehtzara helped slay.

• **Spirit Cowl:** Crafted from the skin of a creature once possessed by a spirit, these are the rarest of all Secret Fetishes; slivers of the creature’s skin are dried and tanned, then sown onto the rim of the Ehtzara’s hood or cowl. This Fetish gives the Ehtzara the ability to see Invisible creatures as well as giving the Ehtzara the ability to *Speak to the Dead* at will. Crafting this fetish requires 5,000gp in sacrifices as well as the skin of a creature once possessed by a spirit.

Craft Esters & Salves (Ex): Through the use of *Craft: Alchemy* the Ehtzara may craft a small number of lesser potions and poisons. Crafting any of these concoctions requires a full day, a Craft: Alchemy check and a set gold piece value in raw materials Ehtzara’s concenter these concoctions a gift from their patron spirits and will not trade or sell them to anyone.

Healing Salve: Created from the crushed bones of several creatures, rare herbs, and the blessings of the Ehtzara’s patron spirits this salve that heals 2 hit



points per Ehtzara level, each dose of this salve can only be applied to one wound at a time. If the character was injured by 2 attacks for 2 points each, the character would require 2 doses of Healing Salve regardless of the level of the crafting Ehtzara. Crafting a dose of Healing Salve requires a *Craft: Alchemy* check DC: 15 and 10gp in raw materials.

Nightfall Salve: Crated from the Nightfall flower found in the hinterlands, this Salve acts as an enhanced anti-toxin, if applied to a poisoned creature, the creature receives a +6 circumstance bonus to his next save to resist the secondary damage of any poison. Crafting a dose of Nightfall Salve requires a *Craft: Alchemy* check DC: 15 and 30gp in raw materials.

Imbue Fetish (Ex): Upon Reaching 3rd level the Ehtzara may empower his fetishes with additional magical power. The Ehtzara's Spirit Robes, as well as any fetish bound to the Ehtzara's Spirit Robes which provides a numeric bonus (Hero's Fetish and Animal Fetishes, for example) may be enhanced by +1. Lastly the *Bone Fetishes'* turning ability may also be enhanced by 1 level. Imbuing a fetish by +1 requires 2 weeks and 2,000gp in sacrifices. At levels 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 the Ehtzara's *Bound Fetishes* may be further enhanced by an additional +1, the costs to enhance the Ehtzara's Fetishes increases as well, adding an additional 2 weeks and 2,000gp to the previous enhancement's cost.

Detects Sprits and the Dead (Su): Ehtzara are especially aware of the presence of undead creatures. The Ehtzara may *Detect Undead* at will as the spell with an additional ability; the Ehtzara may also *Detect Undead* in the Ethereal Plane as will as the prime material plane

Frightful Presence (Su): An Ehtzara projects an unsettling aura with their mere presence. Animals, such as horses and dogs, will whine or howl until either the Ehtzara leaves or the beasts are calmed. Once per day for every two Ehtzara levels, as a standard action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity, the Ehtzara may cause all creatures with 30 feet of the Ehtzara to make a successful Will save (DC: 10 + one half the characters Ehtzara's levels rounded down, + the Ehtzara's charisma modifier) or become *shaken* for 5d6 rounds. Any creature that succeeds on the saving throw is immune to that same creature's frightful presence for 24 hours. Frightful presence is a mind-affecting fear effect.

Curse of Retort (Ex): If the Ehtzara is ever killed he may whisper a final curse with his dying breath. A round after the character is killed one of the following curses may be chosen by the character.

- **Curse of Undead Vengeance:** The Ehtzara may choose to have the spirits possess his body and reanimate it temporarily. He may still speak (though it sounds raspy and harsh) and act as if alive. The character returns to unlife with the undead template,

and 5 hit points per Ehtzara level. (The Ehtzara may be healed through the use of Negative Energy spells) and can use all abilities and any spells remaining at the time of death. The Ehtzara remains animated for one hour per Ehtzara level. Once this curse is laid, the Ehtzara may not be raised or resurrected. His soul, once its task is done, leaves to the underworld, where it seeks out a young Ehtzara to guide as he was once tortured.

- **Blight of Vengeance:** The Ehtzara may curse his killers with a disease carried by the spirits into their bodies (visible as a vaporous cloud breathed forcefully from the Ehtzara's mouth to the targets). Victims must make a fortitude save DC: 10 + one half the characters Ehtzara's levels rounded down + the Ehtzara's charisma modifier per day, or lose one point of Con. Those who fail look and feel slightly ill, and waste away slowly, losing Con until one of the following conditions is met: the character dies when their Con reaches zero; a Break Enchantment, Banishment, or Dismissal focused on the curse and the spirits carrying it is cast on the victim; one of the aforementioned spells is cast on the body of the Ehtzara, and the body is buried before the next sunset after their death, or the Ehtzara removes the curse after being brought back to life.

- **Spirit of Vengeance** The Ehtzara may possess a man or animal within a mile of where he died and seek revenge. The Ehtzara may only use the abilities and skills of the person or animal possessed (but not spells known or prepared) as well as retain all of their memories as well as the ability to use items they could use in life (such as scrolls or certain magical items) as well as the new hosts memories and available talents. The target of the possession may attempt to make a Will save DC: 10 + one half the characters Ehtzara's levels rounded down + the Ehtzara's charisma modifier. The possession lasts until the next sunrise and if the Ehtzara fails in the attempt, or if the duration has passed, they pass on to the afterlife.

Rite of Devouring (Ex): The Ehtzara must have the Brew Potion feat to use this ability. By enacting this gruesome cannibalistic rite, an Ehtzara may seek information from the dead that he cannot find by "typical" means (such as divinations or Speak with Dead). The Ehtzara cuts the head from a body and consecrates it with painted glyphs. He then drains the head of cranial fluid through a deep incision, into a prepared vessel of silver filled with special herbs, making a potion. He then drinks the potion, and learns what that person or being knew at the time of their death in ten minutes of meditative trance. The Ehtzara must not be disturbed during this trance, and must make successful Fortitude Save DC 10 +1 for every two levels of the creature being consumed. If the Ehtzara fails this save, he falls to the ground in violent convulsions suffering 2d6 points of temporary constitution damage. If successful the Ehtzara gains all the memories of the consumed, if the consumed possessed Intelligence-based skills, The Ehtzara may make a Will save DC 20. For every two points in excess of 20 rolled on the save, you gain a single rank

in one Intelligence-based skill that the consumed had (you can not gain more ranks in a skill in this manner than the creature had). You gain these skill levels for 12 hours. Lastly if the consumed was a spell caster, you retain one spell the consumed has prepared before his death spell per Ehtzara level. 500gp 150GP in herbs and materials must be used each time the rite is performed, and it can be done once per week.

Taboos: an Ehtzara has rituals and restrictive taboos that he must follow. Not doing so, or disrespect to spirits causes the Ehtzara to be abandoned by his patrons, usually at a very inconvenient time (per DM discretion.) This can include loss of spells, class powers, or the loss of magic imbued in fetishes by spirits.

1. The Ehtzara must fashion a small personal traveling shrine or altar, inscribing it with the names of his most powerful spirit patrons. He must spend one hour of meditative communion at dawn and at dusk to appease his spirits and rejuvenate spells, and offer up sacrifices and gifts on holy days and before or after great undertakings (honey, wine, rich foods, herbs, gems or blood, depending on the spirits and DM adjudication). The DM may feel free to use this for plot hooks (a lone wood spirit asking for help, or poltergeists revealing information, etc.) If the shrine or altar is stolen, defiled, or damaged, the Ehtzara must return it or craft a new one (with a successful craft check at DC16), at the cost of 500GP in materials and sacrifices. Until he replaces this, no spells can be recharged (though his class abilities remain.)

2. The Ehtzara has been trained in the customs of supernatural beings (etiquette and names) and must bow and give the proper respect when in the presence of an extraplanar being, spirit, or certain intelligent undead. (Solars, devils, ghosts, revenants, banshees, and nature spirits, such as elementals or Dryads, sometimes including Elorii). This does not mean the Ehtzara cannot defend himself against such creatures, but he will usually try to avoid combat, and attack only if the being in question attacks first. Because of this, the Ehtzara receives a +2 insight bonus to charisma based skills when dealing with supernatural beings.

3. The Ehtzara must tend to neglected altars, shrines and icons that he may come across, and show them the proper respect (merely righting a fallen icon, dusting off or pulling weeds from a shrine, or simply bowing or leaving a tithe as he passes.)

TAL KANATH "THE DANCER OF THE ELEMENTS"

"...As I felled the gnoll, my attention was drawn by the ring of steel. Turning I thought to face another gnoll, but saw instead a vision of battle so beautiful and yet altogether so terrifying. There she was dancing among our enemies, her movements were elegant, deadly, and precise. I had never seen a style such as this; her blade, her dance, all was constant motion.

She faced five gnolls, alone... I rushed to join the fray but was stopped by the old centurion. "Look", is all he said, and I stood there, transfixed. Her blade and body moved as one, keeping in tight circles, she pulled her blade close to her body, deflecting an enemy's thrust, and in the same motion she struck out, setting herself into a spin. Her blade moved with the speed of a snake as she cut down two gnolls. Then the circle she described would again tighten to deflect yet another attack... In mere moments, the gnolls were dead at her feet... "Never underestimate an Elf, boy" the old centurion whispered to me. I looked up at the elf as she cleaned her blade. "No sir" were the only words I could utter."

~ "My service in the Legion of Shining Glory"
– Darralin val'Assante

Little is known about the origins of the Tal Kanath. What is known is that the style goes as far back as the founding of the Elorii Empire. Among the tales of the Elorii there are few that match the accounts surrounding the mysterious Tal Kanath or "Dance of the Elements". This elegant style keeps its practitioner in constant motion, using spins and slices over thrusts and advances. The philosophy of this style is one of complete focus, using the dance as foci for ones inner strength. The Elorii soon learns to strike with instinct as well as with confidence.

All Elorii, regardless of bloodline, have the nature of their dead gods within their soul. Most allow the one element that has dominance in their spirit to rule their hearts, bodies, and minds. Centuries in the past, an Elorii warrior discovered, through much introspection, the method by which

an equal balance could be achieved with all the elements in her soul. She likened this path of self discovery to a dance through her very essence. This belief eventually manifested in her fighting style to her adversaries' distress. Adherents of her philosophy have taken to her words and have adapted a fighting style emulating this "dance" while they find continues to find the balance of their souls.



Table 4-5: Dancer of the Elements Advancement

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	AC Bonus
1 st	+1	+0	+2	+2	The First Steps	+1
2 nd	+2	+0	+3	+3	Dance of Air	+1
3 rd	+3	+1	+3	+3	Dance of Fire	+2
4 th	+4	+1	+4	+4	Dance of Water	+2
5 th	+5	+2	+4	+4	Dance of Earth	+3

Requirements:

To qualify as Tal Kanath, a character must fulfill all the following criteria:

- **Race:** Must be Elorii.
- **Alignment:** Any lawful.
- **Jump:** 4 ranks.
- **Perform (dance):** 4 ranks.
- **Tumble:** 4 ranks.
- **Feats:** Combat Expertise, Dodge, Mobility, Spring Attack, Weapon Focus (any sword), Whirlwind Attack.
- **Special:** Character must have *evasion* as a class ability.

Hit Die: d8

Skill Points: 2 + Intelligence modifier.

Class Skills: The Dancer of the Elements' class skills (with the key ability for each skill) are: Balance (Dex), Jump (Str), Hide (Dex), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Perform (Cha), Spot (Wis) and Tumble (Dex).

Class Features:

All of the following are class features of the Tal Kanath prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: Students of the Dance of the Elements gain proficiency in all martial weapons as well as proficiency in all light armor.

AC Bonus (Ex): Starting at 1st level, when wearing light or no armor and not wearing a shield, the Dancer of Elements gains a +1 shield bonus to AC; this bonus improves to +2 at 3rd level and finally +3 at 5th level.

The First Steps (Ex): The Elorii is now just learning the first steps of the Dance of the Elements. When not wearing medium or heavier armor or using a shield, the Elorii may now add 1 point of Intelligence bonus (if any) per Dancer of Elements class level to her Armor Class while wielding a melee weapon. This bonus stacks with the class AC bonus granted by her class levels, but it does not stack with the Canny Defense ability if she has that ability from another class (such as Duelist). If the Elorii is caught flat-footed or otherwise denied her Dexterity bonus, she also loses this bonus.

Dance of Air (Ex): The Dancer of the Elements learns how to dodge and maneuver with amazing speed and grace. The Elorii no longer draws attacks of opportunity from moving through threatened squares

as long as the Elorii is in light or no armor.

Dance of Fire (Ex): Upon mastery of the next season, the Dancer of the Elements may now call upon the burning in her heart for power. The Elorii now adds her Charisma modifier (if positive) to damage rolls as long as she is in light or no armor.

Dance of Water (Ex): The Elorii is now attuned to the song of combat and can feel its ebb and flow. The Elorii now adds her Wisdom modifier (if positive) to her Initiative checks as long as she is in light or no armor.

Dance of Earth (Ex): The Elorii can now strike with the strength of her soul. The Elorii now adds her Constitution modifier (if positive) to her attack rolls as long as she is in light or no armor.

THE VAL'MEHAN EMISSARY

The Yhing hir warrior snorted and averted his eyes, not deigning to look at the soft-looking westerner who had just entered the tent. To the man next to him, he said, "Why does the Nawal tolerate him, Tijhur? Look at his pale skin, his manicured fingernails. He is disgusting."

"Quiet, Anagar. The man has power." The older man kept staring at the foreigner through narrowed eyes as the Cancerite knelt before his chief, the Nawal of the Foam Spring Oasis. It was amazing how quickly the small man had adapted to their ways.

Anagar persisted. "I will not be quiet. The Nawal fawns on him as if he were one of his wives and ignores his warriors." The young horseman struck his chest fiercely, "It is not right for men to flatter and crawl on their bellies for approval. Like a dog."

The young warrior's voice carried, and Tijhur squirmed as people began to look their way. The Nawal looked up from where he was conversing with the Cancerite and cleared his throat. "You have something to say, child?"

Anagar considered a moment, and then strode confidently into the center of the Nawal's court, shaking off Tijhur's restraining hand. "Yes, Nawal, I do have something to say. This man has done nothing for you. What deeds does he have to speak of? He sings your praises and enjoys a favored place by your side, and the rest of us must dance the tune. I am tired of it!"

The Nawal frowned, "Are you questioning my judgment, Anagar?"

"I would not presume, Nawal, but if this soft Cancerite emissary is a man, let him face me in battle."

The Nawal turned toward the Cancerite, who was smiling, "Do you accept his challenge, Vhemlos?"

"Of course, revered one," the Cancerite rose and turned toward Tijhur. "But I invoke my right as a visiting dignitary, and ask this man to be my champion."

"I tried to warn you, boy. The man has power." Anagar looked at Tijhur, shocked, as the old man stepped forward and hefted his war axe. Pitching his voice lower, he whispered so Anagar alone could hear, "He has ways of finding out things. Shameful things. Forgive me, nephew."

When the God Sarish founded the val'Mehan bloodline, He gave onto them His most potent ability, the power to sway with but a word. The val'Mehans have taken this ability and crafted it to an art form. It is said that certain Imperial Senators fear a val'Mehan Emissary more than all the Demons and Devils released during the Time of Terror.

Requirements:

To qualify as a val'Mehan Emissary, a character must fulfill the following criteria:

- **Bloodline:** val'Mehan.
- **Alignment:** Any lawful.
- **Bluff:** 4 ranks.
- **Diplomacy:** 8 ranks.
- **Knowledge (nobility & royalty):** 8 ranks.
- **Sense Motive:** 8 ranks.
- **Feats:** Judge of Character, Honeyed Tongue.
- **Special:** Charisma 16+.

Hit Die: d6

Skill Points: 6 + Intelligence modifier.

Class Skills: val'Mehan Emissaries have the following class skills (with the key ability for each skill) Bluff (Cha), Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Disguise (Cha), Escape Artist (Dex), Gather Information (Cha), Hide (Dex), Knowledge (all skills, taken individually) (Int), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Perform (Cha), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis), Speak Language (Int), Spellcraft



(Int), Spot (Wis), and Swim (Str).

Class Features: All of the following are class features of the val'Mehan Emissary prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: val'Mehan Emissaries are proficient in all simple weapons and martial weapons. They receive no additional proficiencies with any type of armor or shields.

Silver Tongue (Ex): Some say the words of a diplomat are silky sweet, but the words of a val'Mehan Emissary are sweeter than most, as their Diplomatic skills are especially polished. The character gains a +2 bonus on Diplomacy, Sense

Motive, and Bluff skill checks.

Heart of Stone (Ex): The Emissary is aware how his own techniques may be turned against him. Any words or actions meant to sway him to act or perform in a certain manner fall upon deaf ears. Scenes that would tug upon the heartstrings of any breathing being bounce off the iron shell around his heart. The character gains a +5 bonus on all Will saves related to Charisma and Charisma related abilities (such as *bardic music*).

Irresistible Aura (Ex): The Emissary now knows how to use her worldly charms with grace and cunning. The character gains a +2 circumstance bonus to all Charisma related skill checks and Charisma checks.

Confidante (Ex): The Emissary seems friendlier and more trustworthy, her disarming smile and delicate mannerisms allowing people to easily confide in their "trusted friend." By spending at least an hour talking to a character, the val'Mehan Emissary may accurately determine the subject's alignment, class, and level. People who the Emissary has befriended in this way must make a Will save (DC 10 + the Emissary's class level + the Emissary's Charisma modifier) in order to attack the Emissary. The befriended character can only attempt one save per round, but once he succeeds on a save, he is no longer affected by the Confidante power for the duration of that encounter and for the next 24 hours.

Table 4-6: val'Mehan Emissary Advancement

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1st	+1	+0	+2	+2	Silver Tongue, Heart of Stone
2nd	+2	+0	+3	+3	Irresistible Aura
3rd	+3	+1	+3	+3	Confidante
4th	+4	+1	+4	+4	Uncanny Judgment
5th	+5	+2	+4	+4	Voice of Honey



Uncanny Judgment (Ex): The Emissary has now gained an uncanny insight into the persona and motivations of others. If at any time the Emissary succeeds on a Sense Motive check, the character gains insight of what the target may be hiding or, if the target is speaking the truth, insight into that target's personality. If the check succeeds by 5 or more, the Emissary may discern any personal flaws the target may be hiding, such as substance addiction, a vice, or a personal failing such as cowardice. Conversely, the Emissary may instead discern any personality strengths, such as whether that person is fearless or uncompromising. As Sarish instructs, *"An opponent's strengths can be a greater weapon against him than his weaknesses."*

Voice of Honey (Su): The Emissary's words become ever sweeter as she learns to twist and turn words into an endless tapestry of compliments and suggestions. After a round of conversation, the Emissary may *fascinate* one target per Emissary level (as the bardic ability). If the Emissary is allowed to speak to her targets for an additional round per target, *fascinated* creatures must then make a Will save (DC 10 + the Emissary's class level + the Emissary's Charisma modifier) or become *charmed* (as per the spell *charm person*).

WARRIORS OF THE ETERNAL FLAME

"These vessels of flesh which house our souls are but incomplete and inefficient instruments of Lord Nier's Holy Destruction. A man can fell a tree with an axe, while Lord Nier's flame can reduce a tree to ash. Which, then, is the True Destroyer?"
- VIIth Holy Scroll of Becherek

The Warriors of the Eternal Flame are those who embody the teachings of Nier and His Church. These fanatical adherents of Nier are no longer content with just leading troops into glorious battle or massive slaughter, but instead have been touched by the Flame Lord himself and have been called upon to burn off the final, unclean vestiges of humanity.

Those who are drawn to greater service to the Destroyer undergo even harsher training than an elite soldier in Canceri's army. He is instructed in the Inner Doctrine of the Church and searches for the inner fire in his soul.

As a Warrior of the Eternal Flame, the neophyte begins to understand and manifest the essence of the Living Flame. When it is felt that the neophyte is ready, he undergoes the ultimate test of his faith. In the lower levels of the Holy Church resides the Eternal Flame, a huge pillar of fire twenty feet high. Nier's tears ignited this flame as he wept, realizing that the God's War had ended.

The applicant purifies his body and enters the Blazing Pillar. If he is found worthy, he exits the other side of the Pillar with a greater understanding of Nier and His Divine Essence and is gifted with a ruddy-toned skin that bestows immunity to fire. If he is not worthy, his is immolated, another sacrifice to Nier's thirst for destruction.

The understanding and power of the successful neophyte continue until the pinnacle of achievement is reached and the Warrior can finally shed his fleshy prison and become one with the Flame, a Fire Elemental, the ultimate manifestation of Nier's will.

Requirements:

To qualify as a Warrior of the Eternal Flame, a character must fulfill the following criteria:

- **Alignment:** Any lawful.
- **Base Attack:** +7.
- **Knowledge (religion):** 4 ranks.
- **Feats:** Improved Toughness, Toughness.
- **Special:** Must worship Nier and must pass the test known as *The Crucible of Flame*. There are said to be a series of five tests, known as "pillars," and the would-be Warrior must visit each pillar along his path to enlightenment.

Hit Die: d12

Skill Points: 2 + Intelligence modifier.

Class Skills: The Warrior of the Eternal Flame's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are: Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Examine Martial Technique (Wis), Handle Animal (Cha), Heal (Wis), Knowledge (nobility & royalty) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis) and Spellcraft (Int).

Class Features

The following are class features of the Warriors of the Eternal Flame prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: Thanks to their military training all Warriors of the Eternal Flame gain proficiency in all Simple and Martial Weapons as well as all Armor and shields.

Blessings of the First Flame: The first flame of Nier is located in the city of Erduk in the Hinterlands. The Warrior must pass this test before he can take his first level in the prestige class.

Child of Nier (Su): The Warrior is immune to the effects of normal Fire. He will not suffer burns nor heat damage. Magical fire is an amalgamation of Lord Nier's power with that of Sarish. As such, a Warrior gains fire resistance equal to twice his level in the Warrior of the Eternal Flame prestige class.

To Tap the Fire Within: The flame of Nier now has touched thy heart, and Warriors of the Eternal Flame may call upon the fire that burns within. The character now gains limited divine spell casting abilities as he rises in level, but unlike most divine spellcasters it is the passion and fury of the warrior's heart that empowers his spells, and therefore the Warrior uses his Charisma as his spell casting attribute.

Warrior of the Eternal Flame Spell List:

1st level spells: *bleed weapon, magic weapon, cause fear, dancing lights, pyrotechnics, spiritual weapon.*

2nd level spells: *continual flame, flaming sphere, flame blade, magic vestment, resist energy (fire.)*

3rd level spells: *fire trap, flame arrow, greater magic weapon, mantle of unassailable flame, scorching ray.*

4th level spells: *fireball*, *fire shield*, *flame strike*, *wall of fire*.

Call Forth His Servants (Sp): Once per day, the Warrior may call upon the services of a fire elemental, as if he had cast the appropriate *summon monster* spell. At 3rd level the Warrior may summon a Medium-size fire elemental, at 5th level a Large fire elemental, and at 8th level he may call forth a Greater fire elemental.

Blessings of the Second Flame: The Second flame is located in the val'Virdan lands in Canceri. The Warrior must pass this test before he can take his second level in the prestige class.

Bonus Domain: The Warrior of the Eternal Flame now gains access to the Fire Domain, and these spells are added to the list of spells known by the Warrior of the Eternal Flame. If the Warrior of the Eternal Flame already has access to the Fire Domain, any caster levels in that class which grant him access stack for purposes of all level dependent effects of those spells.

Blessings of the Third Flame: The third flame is in far-off Khitan. The Warrior must pass this test before he can take his sixth level in the prestige class.

Bonus Domain: The Warrior of the Eternal Flame now gains access to the Destruction Domain, and these spells are added to the list of spells known by the Warrior of the Eternal Flame. If the Warrior of the Eternal Flame already has access to the Destruction Domain, any caster levels in that class which grant him access stack for purposes of all level dependent effects of those spells.

Fury of Nier (Sp): The Warrior may release the fury of his Lord with a scream to the heavens. Once per day the Warrior may cast *fire storm* as a cleric of twice his prestige class level.

Blessings of the Forth Flame: The fourth flame is located in the Coryani Empire. The Warrior must pass this test before he can take his eighth level in the prestige class.

Nier's Embrace (Su): Calling out Nier's holy blessing, the Warrior blesses an opponent with but a touch of His grace. If the Warrior makes a successful melee touch attack, he inflicts 1d8 points of damage per Warrior level (this is treated as pure energy damage similar to a balor's *death throes*). The target may attempt a Fortitude save (DC 10 + the Warrior's class level + the Warrior's Charisma modifier) for half damage. This power may be used once per day for every two Warrior of the Eternal Flame levels, and may only be used once per round.

Blessings of the Final Flame: The final flame located on the Isle of Ymandragore. The Warrior must pass this final and most difficult test before he can take the tenth and final level of this prestige class.

Nier's Gift (Su): The Warrior has now gained the true blessing of Nier. His creature type now changes to Elemental with the Fire subtype. This makes the character immune to poison, sleep, paralysis, and stunning, and he gains darkvision to 60 feet if he does not already possess it. He becomes immune to critical hits, but he may still be flanked as the he retains his humanoid shape. See *Core Rulebook III* for details on the Elemental type and the Fire subtype (with the exceptions noted above).

Fire from the Gates of Heaven (Su): Once per week the blessed of Nier may call upon His children for aid, allowing him to cast *elemental swarm* as a 17th level caster (fire elementals only).

Table 4-7: Warriors of the Eternal Flame Advancement

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Spells Per Day				Spells Known			
						1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
1 st	+0	+2	+0	+2	<i>Blessing of the First flame:</i> Child of Nier	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 nd	+1	+3	+0	+3	Tap the Fire Within	0	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
3 rd	+2	+3	+1	+3	Call Forth His Servants (Medium)	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
4 th	+3	+4	+1	+4	<i>Blessing of the Second flame:</i> Fire Domain	1	0	-	-	2	1	-	-
5 th	+3	+4	+2	+4	Call Forth His Servants (Large)	1	1	-	-	2	1	-	-
6 th	+4	+5	+2	+5	<i>Blessing of the third flame:</i> Destruction Domain	1	1	0	-	2	2	1	-
7 th	+5	+5	+3	+5	Fury of Nier	2	1	1	-	3	2	1	-
8 th	+6	+6	+3	+6	<i>Blessing of the fourth flame:</i> Call Forth His Servants (Greater)	2	2	1	0	3	2	2	1
9 th	+6	+6	+4	+6	Nier's Embrace	3	2	1	1	3	3	2	2
10 th	+7	+7	+4	+7	<i>Blessing of the final flame:</i> Nier's Gift, Fire from the Gates of Heaven	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2

Appendix V: Bloodline Powers

Bloodline Powers

A Val's bloodline reflects the divine influence granted to him and his kin by their patron deity. A Val's blood rank reflects the strength of this deific gift. As such, no Val can ever possess more than one bloodline, nor can he voluntarily change the bloodline he was born with under any normal circumstances. In all recorded history, the only reported instance of a Val switching bloodlines occurred during the creation of the val'Sosi.

Once a Val's bloodline and blood rank have been determined, he must select his bloodline powers. The number of these powers is equal to the Val's blood rank, and the powers are divided into different levels of strength. Whenever there is more than one bloodline power for any given level, a Val must possess two powers from that level before he can select powers of the next higher level. Therefore, a val'Abebi may choose *the tongues of man are of all men* as his first bloodline power, but he must then choose either *wisdom of the ages* or *enhanced memory* before he may choose any of the second-level bloodline powers. Once a power is chosen, a Val may not change his selection for any reason. A Val may advance his blood rank every four levels (4th, 8th, 12th, 16th, 20th) instead of increasing one of his ability scores. Some Val may begin their lives with a higher blood rank than others. Please see the Val racial entry for more information on character creation and blood rank.

Unless otherwise noted, all bonuses from bloodline powers are considered to be divine bonuses and do not stack with either profane or sacred bonuses. All bloodline powers are considered to have a caster level equal to the Val's total character level. For powers that require a saving throw, the DC is equal to 10 + the Val's blood rank + the Val's Charisma modifier. Whenever a bloodline power requires the Val to divide either his blood rank or character level in half, the resulting number is always rounded down.

The Major Bloodlines

Val'Abebi

The val'Abebi are the descendents of the Valinor of Althares. They are originally from the far south of the eastern continent, and currently maintain a strong presence in the Republic of Altheria. They are renowned for their analytical minds and are regarded as the finest scholars on Onara today.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

Enhanced Memory (Ex)

For a total number of times per day equal to the Val's blood rank, *enhanced memory* allows a Val to memorize up to 800 words, numbers, or symbols as if he had a photographic memory. These can be in the form of anything from mathematical equations

to pages of text, but they cannot include any form of magical script whatsoever. The Val must spend one minute per 100 words he wishes to memorize. Using this power more than once in a day does not erase any previous memorizations, but each usage must be done in one sitting, from one source. Therefore, if a Val with a blood rank of 2 chooses to use this power in the morning but only memorizes 50 words from a letter, he may not use the remaining 750 at any time during the rest of the day. However, if he then uses this power again in the afternoon and memorizes the full 800 words from a single book, he does not lose the 50 words he memorized in the morning. A Val will not forget information learned from this ability by any natural means, but if the memories are more than one day old, the Val must expend a daily use of this ability to recall the information.

The Tongues of Man are of All Men (Sp)

All knowledge is the province of Althares, and His children shall not be hindered from learning by any language barrier. For a number of times per day equal to the Val's blood rank, he may use a full-round action to read any text as if he were affected by *comprehend languages*.

Wisdom of the Ages (Ex)

Althares' wisdom lives in His children. The Val gains all Knowledge skills as class skills.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

The Face of Althares (Su)

To most, the motives of Althares' children are inscrutable. The Val may hide his aura as if he were affected by *undetectable alignment* for a number of times per day equal to his blood rank. Should the effects of *the face of Althares* be dispelled, it will instantly re-activate, providing the Val with uninterrupted protection. This power will reactivate in this manner any number of times per day up to the Val's blood rank. Each reactivation is counted as an additional use of this ability, however. To activate this power is a standard action. If dispelled, any reactivation is a free action.

The Lessons of Master Craftsmen (Su)

The teachings of the great artificers live on in the blood of Althares' children. Once per day, the Val may gain a +10 bonus on any single Craft skill check.

Perfect Recollection (Ex)

Once per day, the Val gains the ability to recall and review anything he has seen within the past week. With a full-round action, he may look back upon an event, a location, or any other purely visual memory for the purpose of picking out details he may have previously missed. The Val may make either a Spot or a Search check as if he were reliving the moment, regardless of whether or not he made the check the

first time. If he is unsuccessful, nothing new may be learned from his memories. The Val may attempt to use this power on the same location or event more than once, but must wait a period of 24 hours before doing so. Therefore, if a Val looked back upon a battle just before breaking camp for the night, he would have to wait until the following night to look back at that same battle again. However, if he chose to look back on a different event, he would only need to wait until dawn to do so.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

The Gift (Su)

As Althares is the Artificer of the Pantheon, so too are His children able to create items of great wonder. With this gift, a Val may concoct potions of divine spells as if he were a 5th level cleric and possessed the Brew Potion feat. Only clerical potions from *Core Rulebook II* may be created with this ability. The Val does not need to be able to cast spells to create these potions, though all other rules for creating potions must be followed. The Val may not use this version of the Brew Potion feat in combination with any other spellcasting classes or in conjunction with any abilities that he may have to brew other potions.

The Secrets of Antiquity (Sp)

Because history is one of the world's greatest teachers, the children of Althares often go to great lengths to learn as much as they can about the past. Once per day, the Val may learn the history of any one item, place, or person, exactly as if he had cast *legend lore*, though all normal restrictions of the spell apply.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

The Blast (Ex)

Without the blessings of Althares, the alchemical formula for blastpowder creates little more than black sand. It is only in the prayers and incantations to Althares that the power which allows the powder to ignite and explode is found. Only a select few of His children are so gifted to know the secrets of infusing the alchemical with the divine. With an hour of prayer to Althares, the Val may infuse up to 200 shots of blastpowder with the required divine spark.

Val'Assanté

The val'Assanté are the descendents of the Valinor of Illiir. The hereditary leaders of the Coryani Empire, they currently maintain their base of power in Grand Coryan. Traditionally viewed as the most prominent Val family, the val'Assanté are famous for their oratory and leadership skills.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

The Morning Banishes Shadows (Sp)

The tricks of light and shadow are no match for Illiir's unwavering light of truth. Once per day, the Val may *dispel magic*, though he may only affect spells

from the Illusion school or spells with the Darkness descriptor.

Illiir Lights Your Way (Su)

Illiir illuminates the path of His faithful in even the darkest of places. At will, the Val may summon a small globe that floats around his body. The Val may move the globe in any direction as a free action by force of will alone, but the globe must remain within two feet of the Val at all times. The globe glows with a radiance equal to the *light* spell. Summoning the globe is a swift action.

The Blinding Light of Truth (Sp)

The Val cannot be deceived by simple sophisms, and he may test the honesty of those around him as if he had cast *discern lies*. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

His Glory is With You Always (Sp)

Even in the darkest of nights, Illiir watches over mankind. His children are blessed with the ability to create *daylight*. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

He is With Me, I Shall Not Fail (Sp)

Illiir is the King of the Gods and His power is absolute. His children embody a small portion of this potential. Once per day, the Val may empower himself as if he had cast *divine power*.

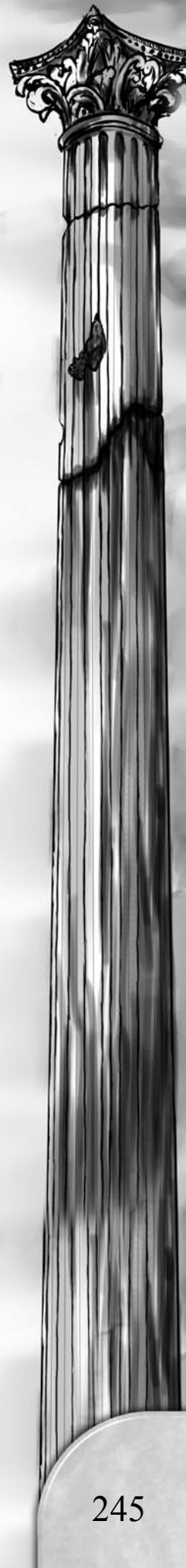
The Searing Light of Illiir's Glory (Sp)

As the sun's gift is light and warmth, so too is its curse. The children of Illiir know this well. The Val may harness and concentrate the sun's energies to punish his enemies as if he had cast *searing light*. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

The Gift of Perfection (Su)

Illiir grants a small gift of His perfection to His children. Once per day, the Val may perform a single perfect act, automatically scoring a natural 20 on any single attack roll, saving throw, or skill check. Use of this gift is a free action and does not change the time required to perform the chosen act. However, use of this gift must be selected en lieu of a die roll before the die is rolled; it may not be used to "fix" a low roll after the fact, nor may it be used to confirm an already-rolled critical threat. (Most of the time when this power is used on an attack roll, however, the natural 20 will represent a critical threat, and the confirming roll should then be rolled as normal.)



The Voice of the King of Gods (Sp)

Illir's children share His bearing of command. Once per day, the Val may pour his force of will into his voice and impose his divinely granted authority upon those around him as if he had cast *greater command*.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

Word of Illir (Sp)

Illir's virtuous radiance shines brightly within all His children, but only those closest to Him know how to release its glory. Once per day, the Val may purge the area around him of the impure and unworthy as if he had cast *word of purification* with the following exceptions: The Val's effective radius is reduced to 20 feet centered on himself; the damage dealt to creatures with the Entropic or Tainted subtypes is altered to 2d8 per blood rank of the Val; the burst of light does not deal extra damage to fungi, mold, oozes, and slimes; and the *hallow* effects only last for a number of rounds equal to the Val's blood rank.

Val'Borda

The val'Borda are the descendents of the Valinor of Cadic. Within their seat of power in Plexus in the Coryani Empire, this Val family is usually viewed with fear and suspicion. Though never proven to be directly involved with shady or otherwise disreputable activities, they always seem to be peripherally associated. The val'Borda are master information brokers, spies, and if one believes the rumors...assassins.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

Music's Soothing Charms (Sp)

Music is Cadic's gift to Man, and His children understand the captivating intricacies of all melodies. Once per day, the Val may use music and song as if he were casting *hypnotism*. The Val must sing or play an instrument for at least 1 standard action and may only affect those who can hear him. In addition, the Val gains Perform as a class skill, though no Perform skill check is required to use this bloodline ability.

Summon Night's Shadow (Sp)

Cadic's children roam freely throughout the night and many have discovered how to harness the shadows even in the daylight. Once per day, the Val may summon the night to his aid as if he had cast *darkness*.

To Know the Gloom of Night (Ex)

The darkness of night is a welcome sight to the children of Cadic. The Val gains darkvision to a range of 60 feet. Unlike regular darkvision, he may still discern color at close range (within 30 feet). The Val is also unaffected by the *darkness* cast via *summon night's shadow*, but he is still affected by all other forms of magical *darkness* and other spells and effects that obscure vision.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Cadic Guides My Hand (Su)

The children of Cadic have an uncanny knack for finding their opponents' weaknesses. Once per day, the Val may treat one melee attack as a touch attack or one ranged attack as a ranged touch attack. Use of this gift is a free action and does not change the time required to perform the chosen attack. The use of this ability must be declared before the attack roll is made.

To Pierce the Veil of Shadow (Su)

Darkness cannot deny Cadic's chosen from their destinies. Spells of the Evocation school with the Darkness subtype (including *darkness* and *deeper darkness*) have no effect upon the Val.

Within Night's Embrace (Sp)

The shadows are Cadic's ally, and His children have learned to move unnoticed within them. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may blend into the darkness as if he had cast *invisibility*. This ability may only be used in areas of low illumination, such as moonlight or candlelight. The presence of brighter light will dispel the effect.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

In Darkness There Is Death (Su)

The children of Cadic have an instinctual habit of carefully studying their surroundings that, when combined with the intent to kill, can have devastating results. The Val learns to use the assassin's *death attack* class ability (see *Core Rulebook II* for details). Should the Val possess the ability to perform a sneak attack as a class ability (items that grant sneak attack damage, such as *gloves of the rogue*, do not qualify) then he may perform the *death attack* as normal. Otherwise, the bloodline ability *Cadic guides my hand* must be used in conjunction with this ability for the *death attack* to be attempted. Furthermore, should this combination method be used, the attack deals an additional 1d6 points of damage.

Walking the Web of Shadows (Sp)

Cadic's children can intuitively sense the presence of natural darkness and become one with the shadows around them, slipping from one location to the next as if the shadows themselves were a doorway. The Val may use shadows as if he had cast the *shadow stride* spell. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

4th Level Bloodline Powers

Path of Shadows (Sp)

Some believe that the first shadow dancers must have tailored their shadow jump ability around one of the most famed and feared of the val'Borda

bloodline powers. Tales abound of family monarchs “dropping in” unannounced upon their fellow kin and enemies alike. Once per day, the Val may jump from any one area of shadow to another as if he had cast *greater teleport*. If the Val also possesses the *shadow jump* ability, he gains one additional use of this ability per day. Using this ability incurs the same risks as the *shadow jump* ability. See **Chapter 3 – Core Classes, the Order of the Twilight Warrior**.

Val'Dellenov

The val'Dellenov are the descendents of the Valinor of Saluwé. Within their ancestral home of Panari in the Coryani Empire, the val'Dellenov follow a matriarchal system of family leadership. Most commoners associate this family with nature, and it is no surprise that this family controls vast expanses of farmlands and foodstuffs.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

The Hands of Our Mother (Su)

Saluwé's hunters stalk their prey as their animal brethren would, forgoing the weaponry of Man in favor of claws or talons. At will, the Val may, as a full-round action that does not provoke attacks of opportunity, sprout claws from her fingertips. These claws are natural weapons that deal 1d4 points of slashing damage. Monks who gain this ability may choose to strike with bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage when using their unarmed attacks.

We Are All Her Children (Sp)

All natural creatures are the children of the Green Mother, and just as the val'Dellenov care for the wild, the wild cares for them. The Val gains an animal companion as if she were a druid equal to one-half her character level. This animal must be a natural animal and must be of a type normally available to a druid. See the druid core class information in **Chapter 3 – Core Classes** for more details. Should the Val already possess an animal companion from any class-related source (i.e. druid, ranger, master of the hounds, etc.) she is instead considered to be two levels higher in that class for the purposes of determining her animal companion's special abilities. This gift does not allow the Val to gain an additional animal companion if she already possessed one from her class levels. Furthermore, this gift does not allow a Val to select an alternative animal companion before meeting the class's level prerequisites (i.e. her actual class level, without the additional 2 levels granted by this power, must be sufficient to gain the specific animal companion according to the normal rules for the class).

The Earth's Grasping Hand (Sp)

Be it through a plentiful harvest, a fine and successful hunt, or the maintenance of a simple flower garden, the val'Dellenov appreciate and enjoy their connection with the land. The Val is so close to nature that she may call upon it for protection as if she had

cast *entangle*. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Nature's Voice (Ex)

All natural creatures are the children of Saluwé, and this bond allows the Val to communicate freely with her siblings. The Val is at all times considered to be under the effects of *speak with animals*.

We Are One with Her Domain (Su)

Nothing betrays hunted creatures more than their own footsteps, and the children of Saluwé were not meant to suffer such a fate. As such, the Val moves without ever leaving evidence of her passing, exactly as if she had the *trackless step* druid class ability. Furthermore, should the Val have three or more levels of druid or ranger, she may use trees for magical transportation as if she were casting *tree stride*, with the following exceptions: use of this power counts as a full-round action, with one standard action to activate it and one move-equivalent action to choose an exit point; the trees must be entered and exited in the same round; the Val may only move into a total number of trees equal to her blood rank; and she is limited to a transport range of 500 feet.

The Thousand Forms of Nature (Sp)

Saluwé blesses Her faithful with the ability to complete their connection to the environment by taking on the shape of natural animals. Once per day, the Val may, as a full-round action, assume the form of any natural creature of Small or Medium size as if she were a druid equal to her character level. This power may not be used to shift into any animal larger than Medium size. Unlike the druid's *wild shape* ability, this power does provoke attacks of opportunity. Druids who possess this ability gain one additional use of their *wild shape* ability per day. Additionally, druids are considered to be one caster level higher for the purposes of selecting their *wild shape* form.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

The Land is My Ally (Sp)

Those close to Saluwé's teachings learn to call upon their brethren in times of need. Once per day, the Val may summon natural animals as if she had cast *summon nature's ally V*. All normal restrictions of the spell apply, except that this ability takes only a standard action to use instead of one full round.

The Wild Within (Su)

The children of Saluwé can tap into the primal nature within themselves with terrifying results. When acquiring this bloodline power, the Val must choose a form from one of the following: Wolf, bear, boar, or shadow lion. Once per day, as a full-round action that provokes attacks of opportunity, the Val may change



into a hybrid, bipedal form of that creature. When assuming this form, the Val gains animalistic features including advantages and disadvantages (listed on the sidebar). However, the Val does not heal hit points when shifting form and her equipment all melds into her new form (becoming unusable for the duration of this ability). This form is otherwise subject to the same restrictions as the druid's *wild shape* ability regarding spellcasting, weapon use, etc.

The Val may remain in this hybrid form for one minute per character level, and she may end the effect at will. If a Val with this bloodline power is infected with lycanthropy, she loses access to this ability until the curse is somehow removed.

The Wild Within - Hybrid Form Ability Adjustments	
Hybrid Form	Abilities & Attacks
Bear	+4 Strength, +2 Constitution, -2 Dexterity; +1 natural armor; attacks: 2 claws 1d6, bite 1d8; increase size to Large (-1 to attack and armor class.)
Boar	+2 Strength, +4 Constitution; +2 natural armor; attacks: Ram (on charge only) 2d8, gore 2d4; <i>Ferocity (Ex)</i> as per boar (see <i>Core Rulebook III.</i>)
Shadow Lion	+2 Constitution, +4 Dexterity; +1 natural armor; attacks: 2 claws 1d8, bite 1d4; <i>Improved Grab (Ex)</i> as per lion (see <i>Core Rulebook III.</i>)
Wolf	+2 Strength, +2 Constitution, +2 Dexterity, +1 natural armor; attack: Bite 2d6; <i>Trip (Ex)</i> as per wolf (see <i>Core Rulebook III.</i>)

4th Level Bloodline Powers

The Fist of the Earth (Sp)

As the children of the Green Mother, the val'Dellenov have a unique connection to all things associated with soil and stone. By using this connection, once per day the Val may summon earth elementals as if she had cast *elemental swarm*, though she must concentrate on nothing but controlling the elementals for the entirety of the spell or else they will return from whence they came. As per the spell, it takes 10 minutes for the first elemental to appear, and this time must be spent in uninterrupted prayer. This power may only be used to summon earth elementals; no other type of elemental will respond to the val'Dellenov's call.

Val'Holryn

The val'Holryn are unique in that they have no bloodline powers of their own and no patron deity in the Pantheon of Man. Essentially the val'Holryn are the chameleons of the Val race, able to assume the bloodline powers of any other Val family, while possessing none of their own. When selecting bloodline powers and abilities, a val'Holryn chooses any one of the other bloodlines to use for his power progression. Like all other Val, once this selection is made, it may

never be changed. Historians and scholars alike are baffled by this mystery, but as of yet, no plausible explanation has been given to this enigma. Despite the mystery surrounding their lineage, the val'Holryn enjoy a reputation for being fiercely loyal and noble souls. Currently their main base of power lies in the city of Tralia in the Kingdom of Milandir.

Val'Inares

The val'Inares are the descendents of the Valinor of Anshar. Generally pitied by the common populace due to the woe and suffering they endure, this Val family is scattered throughout Onara and enjoys no central base of power. However, even scattered as they are, this Val family has a power envied by all other Val families. Only they know can control the Portals of Anshar.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

She Takes Our Burden (Ex)

The favored of the Suffering Goddess gain a small measure of Her boundless endurance. While the Val still feels the adverse effects of harsh climates, he is no longer burdened by them and can withstand temperatures from zero to 110 degrees Fahrenheit with no ill effects. More extreme temperatures have their negative effects reduced by one-half.

Walk the Path of Stars (Sp)

The Ansharan portals predate even the elder races of Onara and Her children hold a special affinity for their use. As a full-round action, the Val may activate a portal and attune it to travel to any other portal he has studied or traveled through. Should the Val begin play with this bloodline ability, he is attuned to one portal of his choice; most often this is a portal in his home region. In order to attune himself to any further portals, the Val must either travel through said portal or spend 10 minutes studying it and running his hands over the stones. A list of portals the Val has become attuned to should be carefully maintained.

To Stride the World Entire (Ex)

The children of the Far Traveler need not worry about the limitations of the body while out on the open road. Being able to resist the rigors of prolonged journeys, the Val receives a +10 bonus on his Constitution checks to resist non-lethal damage and fatigue while making a forced march.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Anshar Guides My Steps (Sp)

Anshar is the Far Traveler and Her children's feet move with Her uncanny sense of direction. The Val gains Survival as a class skill and, once per day, he may pray to Anshar to guide him on his journeys. This prayer acts as the spell *find the path*, with the following exceptions: the Val may not sense or bypass *glyphs of warding* or any other magical traps; the Val may not sense or bypass any mundane traps unless they are specifically set off by feet (i.e. tripwires, false

stone tiles, pressure plates on steps, etc); this gift may not be bestowed upon another person; and the Val may not use this gift to exit a *maze* spell, though he does receive a +10 bonus on his Intelligence checks to escape.

As Always, We Endure (Ex)

The val'Inares are blessed with the incredible ability to tolerate even the worst pain, and even poison cannot break this steadfast endurance. As such, the Val is immune to damage from natural poisons such as a scorpion's sting or poison oak. Poisons from an unnatural source, such as shadow essence, are still deadly to the Val, though he receives a +5 bonus on his saving throws to resist their effects.

Endure the Pain of Others (Su)

As Anshar shoulders the suffering of others, so too shall Her children take these burdens upon themselves. For a number of times per day equal to his blood rank, the Val may transfer damage from a willing subject onto himself. With a successful touch attack, the Val may completely heal another natural, living creature by assuming that creature's wounds. The Val suffers damage equal to the total amount and type (lethal, non-lethal, ability) taken from the other creature, even if the amount is enough to kill him. The Val must take any and all damage at once. The Val may not select an amount of damage to heal with this ability; it is an all-or-nothing proposition.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Anshar's Mighty Strides (Sp)

Anshar's children shall not be restricted from traveling anywhere, even to the most remote places where Her great portals cannot reach. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may travel great distances in one step as if he had cast *dimension door*.

As We Suffer; So Shall They (Su)

The Weeping Goddess carries the weight of grief and pain not only upon Her shoulders, but also throughout Her entire being. Her children also carry such burdens, and they have learned to let it flow from their fingertips to inflict others who do not understand the path of suffering. Once per day, the Val may attempt a melee touch attack upon another living creature. This touch of pain stuns creatures with 50 or fewer hit points for 2d4 rounds and creatures with 51 or more hit points for 1d4 rounds. A successful Will save negates this effect.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

Her Gates are Everywhere (Sp)

The purest of Anshar's blood become internally attuned to the magics which flow through Her portals. Once per day, with a full minute of uninterrupted concentration, the Val may create a temporary portal within 20 feet of himself. He must select an existing

gate of Anshar to which he has already become attuned to serve as his destination point the moment he opens the portal, and may not change this destination by any means. This portal will remain open for one minute, until the Val passes through it, or until it is dismissed. Whenever a portal is spontaneously created in this fashion, it leaves behind a trail that can be sensed by an Ansharan Gatekeeper's *locate portal* ability. This trail lasts for a period of hours equal to the Val's blood rank, and always registers as an inactive portal.

Val'Ishi

The val'Ishi are the descendents of the Valinor of Beltine. From their base of power in Enpebyn in the Coryani Empire, the members of this family are often viewed as holy men by the general populace due to their intimate connection to the afterlife.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

Return to Your Rest (Sp)

It is a rare val'Ishi who does not seek to free the walking dead from their unholy bonds of servitude to Neroth, and an even rarer one who does not wish to destroy them completely. As a child of the Warden of the Afterlife, once per day per character level, the Val may send beams of his own positive energy into his foes as if he had cast *disrupt undead* with the following exceptions: The number of rays cast with each use of this gift is equal to the Val's blood rank; and each ray requires its own separate ranged touch attack.

Speak With the Voice of Ancestors (Sp)

The blessed children of Beltine have a powerful connection to the spirits of others. Once per day, the Val can converse with a departed soul simply by visiting the gravesite or a place that was vitally important to the soul in question. Treat this ability as the spell *speak with dead* except that the Val speaks to the soul, not to the intellect or to the memories of the body.

The Hand of Ghosts (Su)

As the Forger of Souls stirs Her cauldron, seeking to simmer out the imperfections in the souls within, so too do Her children seek to touch the very spirits of those who would do wrong on Onara. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may make a single melee attack as if he were incorporeal (in other words, his normal melee attack is treated as if it were an incorporeal touch attack). Using this gift is a free action, and the Val is only considered incorporeal for the purposes of his attack; he does not remain incorporeal for the round.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

The Loving Caress of Our Goddess (Sp)

The souls of mortal men require a lifetime of experience to learn and grow towards perfection, and



a soul passing on too soon is often one that could have redeemed itself with more time. As such, the children of Beltine are tasked with healing those who cannot heal themselves. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may channel positive energy into his companions as if he had cast *mass cure light wounds* with a number of targets equal to his blood rank.

The Spirit Endures (Su)

The souls of Beltine's children know they will find no serenity in the afterlife, and thus they cling jealously to their mortal bodies. The Val, combining this resilience with the strength of his blood, gains immunity to death magics as if he were permanently protected by *death ward*.

To Heal the Soul (Sp)

As the val'Ishi are tasked with healing the flesh, so too must they learn to heal the spirit and the very life essences governing the body. Once per day, the Val may cure a target's non-physical damage as if he had cast *restoration*.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Our Mistress Returns the Lost (Sp)

Not all souls are ready to pass into the afterlife when the body falls. Through his intense connection to all spirits, once per day the Val may restore the soul back to its broken remains as if he had cast *raise dead*. All normal rules and time constraints for the spell apply, except the Val does not need to meet the material component requirement.

The Body is But a Shell (Su)

As the val'Ishi grows in power, he gains a greater ability to take upon the aspect of a ghost. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may shed his physical limitations and become incorporeal for a number of rounds equal to his character level. The Val gains all advantages and disadvantages of the Incorporeal Subtype (as described in *Core Rulebook III*) except he does not suffer damage from holy water.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

The Mortal Coil is Not Easily Abandoned (Sp)

Despite the frailties of the human body, the human spirit is unmatched in its determination and heroism, and it is this inner strength that the val'Ishi call upon in times of need. In order to mend the damage done to his companions, once per day the val'Ishi may concentrate and use the power of his companions' souls to restore their bodies as if he had cast *mass heal*, with the following exceptions: The Val may affect a maximum number of targets equal to his blood rank; no two targets may be more than 30 feet apart; and the maximum number of hit points the Val

may restore to each creature is equal to 25 times his blood rank.

Val'Mehan

The val'Mehan are the descendents of the Valinor of Sarish. Centered in Nishanpur in Canceri, this Val family is treated with a mixture of fear and respect. Master manipulators and diplomats, val'Mehan are often found at the center of any intrigue. Though often shunned, the members of this family are often in high demand for their ability to create binding oaths.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

Arcane Servant (Su)

The blood of the Patron of Sorcerers and Magi carries with it an affinity towards magical creatures. Even a Val without the gift of the arcane may call a familiar which will grow with him exactly as a wizard or sorcerer's familiar would. Should the Val already have a familiar, he gains the Improved Familiar feat instead, though he must meet all the normal prerequisites before he may utilize it. Therefore, a first level val'Mehan wizard may take *arcane servant* as his starting bloodline ability, but he may choose to wait as long as he desires to make use of the Improved Familiar feat he gains from it. Should the familiar granted by *arcane servant* die, the Val suffers all normal effects for losing a familiar as detailed in *Core Rulebook I*.

Oath Maker (Sp)

Sarish is the Oath Maker, and His children are wordsmiths by instinct, writing and sealing pacts in His name with a drop of blood and a bit of wax. However, despite the ease with which their words flow, a Sarishan Oath is a devastatingly serious agreement. The Val may witness an oath between two or more willing parties. Each member of each party must supply a small quantity of blood, which the Val mixes with sealing wax. Once both parties have reviewed and agreed upon all points of the contract, the Val then binds and finalizes it with the prepared wax and his own personal seal.

Verbal agreements (known as bloodoaths) are also possible. As with the traditional Sarishan oath, the bloodoath is a pact to which all parties willingly agree. The blood required for the oath is collected in a goblet or on a sash of red cloth, during which the Val leads all involved in reciting the entirety of the agreement. While swearing upon the name of Sarish, the Val then finalizes the agreement by burning the cloth or drinking the blood. An informal version of the bloodoath can be done between two individuals by slashing their palms and shaking hands while reciting the desired oath, though the entire agreement must still be overseen by a val'Mehan.

In either case, the Sarishan oath is null and void if all involved do not participate of their own free will or if the pact encompasses specific individuals who are not present at the time of the oath making.

Should this contract be violated in any way,

the offending person (or people) will be inflicted with the *curse of the oath breaker* as detailed in the *oath* spell.

Sarish is Known to His Chosen (Sp)

As the Master of the Arcane, Sarish's children have an instinctual ability to sense magic within their environment. At will, the Val may determine if an object is magical simply by touching and scrutinizing it for up to three rounds as if he had cast *detect magic*.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Blood Calls to Blood (Sp)

The children of the Blood God are gifted with the ability to sense and follow the trails this life-giving essence leaves behind. If the Val has access to even a single droplet of blood, regardless of age, he may unerringly track its owner once per day as if he had cast *locate creature*, with the following exceptions: The duration is extended to one day per character level; the range is extended to one mile per blood rank; firsthand knowledge, familiarity, and/or visualization of the intended target are not required; *mislead* and *polymorph* cannot be used to fool the Val; and *nondetection* on the intended target offers a 50% chance per day for the spell to hide the target from this ability. *Blood calls to blood* cannot be used more than once in any 24-hour period.

Our Master Bids You Obey (Su)

The Binder of Demons and Devils demands servitude and respect from the Infernal hordes, and a small piece of that deference and fear is passed on to His children. As such, for a number of times per day equal to his blood rank, the Val may turn, rebuke, or command Infernal outsiders as a cleric turns undead. Clerics of Sarish who already possess this ability instead gain a +2 bonus to turning checks and an additional 1d6 points of turning damage versus Infernal outsiders.

Grace of the Cat Lord (Su)

The favored animal of Sarish is the cat, and His children are gifted with feline grace and stability. The Val gains a +5 bonus on all Balance skill checks, a +1 dodge bonus to Armor Class, and an additional 5 feet to his base movement speed. He loses the AC bonus any time he would lose any other dodge bonuses to AC.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Know the Work of Sarish (Sp)

Magic is so close to the val'Mehan that no amount of illusion can hide the truth of enchanted items from them. At will, the Val may determine all magical properties of any item he touches as if he had cast *identify*. The Val may also ignore any enchantments that mask the true nature of an item's magical properties, such as *magic aura*.

Stone Guardian (Su)

The children of Sarish can give some of their own essence to bind an Infernal to their service. The Val must obtain a small gargoyle statue (approximately 12 inches tall) with a market value of no less than 2,000 gold pieces, and bind it to his service with the soul of an Infernal outsider by smearing a touch of his own blood over its face and spending 24 continuous hours in ritualistic prayer. This results in the permanent loss of one hit point and costs the Val 500 experience points, but he gains a faithful and willing servant out of the statue, which now acts similarly to a *figurine of wondrous power*. Upon utterance of a chosen command word, the statue grows to the size and specifications of a Medium gargoyle (as detailed in *Core Rulebook III*). This figurine can be used once per day for a number of hours equal to the Val's blood rank. The gargoyle is considered to be an Infernal outsider and will revert to statue form if turned or commanded by a Sarishan cleric regardless of the amount of turning damage dealt. Should the gargoyle be forced to return to its statue form, either from being turned or from the Val using his command word, the gargoyle may not be called upon again for another 24 hours. If the gargoyle is ever killed, it will return to its statue form and cannot be used again for one full week. The Val may not possess more than one such gargoyle at any given time. Should this statue ever be destroyed, the Val must wait one full year before creating another.

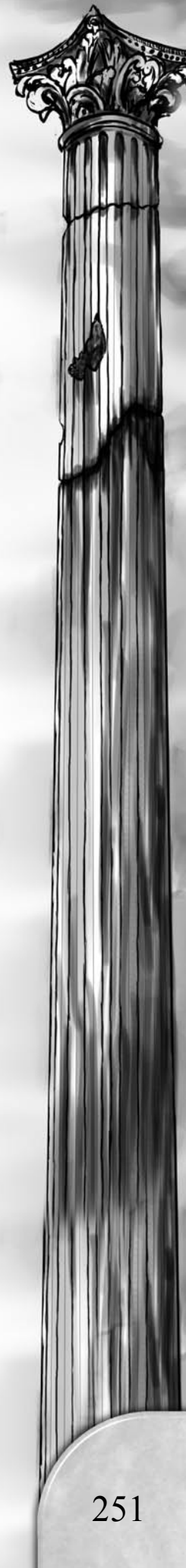
4th Level Bloodline Powers

Brothers in Blood (Su)

The children of Sarish are masters of ritual and cooperative casting. On his own, the Val may pour his very life essence into his casting to heighten the potency of any single spell, once per day. The Val may sacrifice 5 hit points per blood rank to increase his spell's saving throw DC by 1 for every 5 hit points spent. The Val may not spend more hit points than he would normally possess. He may not go unconscious from using this power, nor may he expend hit points gained from a temporary source, such as *heroes' feast*. This damage may not be healed in any way for 24 hours. Alternately, when using the Cooperative Spellcasting feat with his val'Mehan brethren, he may add an additional +1 caster level for every val'Mehan of equal or greater blood rank participating in the ritual, once per day. Using this ability is a free action, but only one version may be used per day. Its effects do not stack in any way; if there are two or more val'Mehan casters with the Cooperative Spellcasting feat, only one of them may make use of this bloodline ability at a time.

Val'Mordane

The val'Mordane are the descendents of the Valinor of Neroth. Centered around their power bases in Abessios and Ventaka, this Val family seems to be surrounded by an air of death, making most commoners give them a wide berth.



1st Level Bloodline Powers

I Know You, Brother (Sp)

As the children of He Who Extends Life Beyond Death, the val'Mordane have an instinctual ability to sense the walking dead within their environment. At will, the Val may determine if any undead are present in his general vicinity as if he had cast *detect undead*.

Neroth's Discourse (Sp)

The flesh and the intellect are the domain of Neroth, and His children know well the value of a corpse. Once per day, the Val may call upon the memories still present in the body of the deceased, as if he had cast *speak with dead*.

The Mercy of Neroth (Su)

Neroth is the Decayed Master of Pestilence, and His children are blessed with an innate resistance to even the most lethal ailments. Though he may still carry and spread them, the Val is immune to all effects of non-magical diseases. Any time the Val needs to make a Fortitude save to determine whether or not he contracts a disease, the results of the saving throw are only used to determine whether or not he has become a carrier. In order to determine whether he is carrying a disease or not, the Val may make a Heal check (DC 15). If he is infected, all normal steps required to remove or treat the disease must be taken or else he risks infecting the others around him. (Of course, sometimes that is exactly the goal he hopes to achieve...)

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

All Things Die (Sp)

Death is many things: The passage of time, a doorway, a moment, a bit of rust, a corpse. Neroth's followers know this well, and are able to see death and decay within all things. Once per day, the Val may make an unarmed melee touch attack as if he had cast *rusting grasp*.

Eternal Servant (Sp)

Those beyond the mortal coil are destined to forever serve Neroth and His children. Once per day, the Val may call upon this heritage as if he had cast *skeletal companion*. This may not be used in conjunction with any other casting of *skeletal companion*. Should this ability be used again before the first skeleton is destroyed or lost, the first skeleton will crumble to dust as the second one rises.

Neroth's Embrace (Sp)

Disease and virulent illness are grim celebrations of the Decayed Master of Pestilence. In order to spread His teachings, once per day the Val may infect another creature with sickness as if he had cast *contagion*. The targeted creature still receives a saving throw against the disease as normal, but the initial infection is automatic (no melee touch attack is required). The creature to be targeted must be within 30 feet of the Val at the time this ability is used.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Brother, Feed Elsewhere (Sp)

The undead hunger for the life essence of the living, but the children of Neroth will not be fed upon by those who have received His blessings. As such, the Val gains immunity to death magics as if he were permanently protected by *death ward*.

Death is Not an Ending (Sp)

The body is but a shell, a vessel, and a tool. The children of Neroth do not view death as an end to the usefulness of the body, nor do they see the undead as something to be feared. To demonstrate the benefits of living and fighting alongside the walking dead, the Val may shake the sleep from nearby corpses once per day as if he had cast *animate dead*.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

Neroth's Final Blessing (Ex)

The greatest blessings of Neroth do not come lightly, and few receive them with such open arms as the val'Mordane. The journey into un-life carries with it great power and strength, shedding the fears and frailties of the human form in exchange for life everlasting, though only those closest to Neroth's teachings truly comprehend this. In such a measure of understanding, the Val's body is reborn as that of a walking dead, gaining the Undead template (see *Appendix* for details).

Val'Ossan

The val'Ossan are the descendents of the Valinor of Yarris. Centered around the city of Naeraanth in Milandir, these noble and slightly aloof Val enjoy being near the ocean and generally excel at all crafts and professions associated with the water.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

Upon the Oceanlord's Back (Sp)

Any ship manned by val'Ossan may never fear being left drifting out at sea by a dead calm. Whenever the Val is sailing (or otherwise in a large body of water, no closer than one mile to shore) he may call upon the salty sea air to fill his sails as if he had cast *gust of wind* once per day. He may also predict the next 24 hours of weather with a successful DC 10 Knowledge (nature) or Survival skill check.

Yarris' Breath (Ex)

The children of the Sea King were not meant to drown within His watery depths. Thus, the Val has been gifted with the ability to breathe underwater through a pair of gills that sprouts from his neck whenever he is immersed in water.

Yarris' Step (Sp)

As Ruler of the Waves, Yarris grants His children the ability to exert control over liquids. With a small prayer and a shimmer of blue light, the Val may *water walk* once per day for 10 minutes per blood rank.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers*He is Master of Waters (Sp)*

In all the human realms, the children of the Sea King are the only true masters of His domain. In demonstration of this intense connection to water, once per day the Val may calm even the most tumultuous waves or raise them into a dome as if he had cast *control water* with a duration of 10 minutes per blood rank.

My Brothers Shall Not Harm Me (Su)

The Master of the Oceans will not permit His minions to assault His children. No natural animal of the sea will attack the Val, regardless of any orders the animal might have been given. If the animals are under the effects of an Enchantment (compulsion) spell, such as *suggestion*, they receive an additional Will save to break free of the spell each time they attempt to harm the Val.

My Lord's Domain is as Mine (Su)

Water is the divine realm of the Sea King, and even the strongest undercurrent shall not hinder His children. By becoming one with the water, the Val may move unrestricted through it as if he were under the effects of *freedom of movement*. This gift may only be used in relation to moving and fighting while impeded by water or being grappled by a natural aquatic creature, and all other effects of the spell do not apply. This power activates as a free action once the Val is immersed in water or when grappled by an aquatic creature.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers*The Oceanlord's Gift (Sp)*

While the sea gives many gifts to the human lands, it also has the power to destroy many things that land-walkers love. With 10 full minutes of prayer to the Sea King, the Val may summon up a hurricane while in coastal areas or a terrible rainstorm while landlocked as if he had cast *control weather*. The Val may only summon up torrential rain or hurricane-force winds as detailed in the spell description, but he is not restricted to the seasonal requirements and may not change or stop his chosen weather conditions once he has summoned them; he must wait for them to pass naturally.

The Sea is My Ally (Sp)

The children of Yarris can call upon the creatures of the sea to aid them. If in an appropriate environment, the Val may summon aquatic beasts once per day as if he had cast *summon nature's ally V*. This power may only be used to summon creatures that are completely aquatic in nature (such as a celestial sea cat) or that spend the majority of their life in or under water (such as a fiendish crocodile). All normal restrictions of the spell apply, except that this ability takes only a standard action to use instead of one full round.

4th Level Bloodline Powers*Redeem What is His (Sp)*

Water is Yarris' gift to life. Without it, the gardens of Saluwé would not bloom, the tears of Hurrian's sky would not fall, the blood for Sarish would not flow, and all of Onara would crumble to dust. Water is only a gift, however, and the Val may reclaim this gift once per day as if he had cast *horrid wilting*.

Val'Sheem

The val'Sheem are the descendents of the Valinor of Larissa. Centered around their base of power in the city of Savona in the Coryani Empire, the val'Sheem are an extroverted and passionate family. They are widely renowned for their quick wits, winning smiles, endurance while imbibing, and their hedonistic practices.

1st Level Bloodline Powers*Fortune Favors the Bold (Su)*

Luck is a fickle mistress, but She favors those who make their own fortune. Once per day, the Val may re-roll any single die roll, keeping the preferred result. This gift is limited to one die, and therefore may not be used to re-roll the total damage of a *fireball*, though it may be used to re-roll a single d6 of said damage.

Walk the Web of Fate (Sp)

Fate and fortune weave a tangled web that can be difficult for even the most devoted diviners to unravel. The children of Larissa, however, are blessed with an innate ability to peek into the near future to determine their fate. With a moment of meditation and a prayer, the Val may get a hint of insight into the wisdom of his actions once per day as if he had cast *augury*.

Gift of Joy and Pleasure (Sp)

Lady Luck understands that battle is as much of a gamble as any game of dice or cards, and She wishes for Her children to know the satisfaction of outmaneuvering their opponents. As such, the Val may fill his allies' thoughts with the most joyful dreams of success as if he had cast *bless* in order to help turn the odds in his favor.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers*The Temptations of the Flesh (Sp)*

The Divine Harlot blesses Her children with beauty and Charisma capable of wooing even the most modest knights of Milandir. Once per day, the Val may entrance another as if he had cast *charm person*, though he may only charm those who would have a reasonable chance of being physically attracted to him, such as those of the opposite sex.



Our Waters Are as Wine (Sp)

The Larissans of Sweet Savona have a saying: “In vino veritas,” or, “In wine, there is truth.” Whether it be for the sheer pleasure of imbibing or to loosen the tongue of a secretive noble, the Val may turn water to wine once per day as if he had cast *transmute liquid*.

The Rewards of the Flesh (Su)

Larissa teaches that there is joy to be found within all things, and Her children often spend a great deal of their life traveling the world to learn what they can of the numerous forms of pleasure. On such journeys of exploration, the Val may meet many people and hear many things, giving him a bit of insight beyond what a normal human would possess. Once per day, the Val may think back upon his travels to recall something he may have seen or heard as if he were using *bardic knowledge* as a bard equal to his total character level.

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Look Through the Eyes of Our Mistress (Su)

The gift of foresight is often unwelcome. The character has uncontrollable flashes of insight into future events. These come as visions or dreams and cannot be directed or sought successfully. These visions are also typically cryptic and are often only appreciated after the events foretold transpire. Once per day, at the GM’s discretion, the Val may make a vision check to see if he has received a vision relevant to the area or situation he is in. To make a vision check, roll 1d20 and add the Val’s character level and his Charisma modifier. This ability is somewhat similar to a *bardic knowledge* check, although the visions the Val gains are fragmented and disjointed. These brief visions tend to focus on events and individuals with strong emotional or sexual elements.

Touch of Pleasure (Sp)

Those who study the Sixty-Seven Acts of Debauchery know of a pressure point that can send any human into a fit of ecstasy so powerful that they can do nothing but quiver with pleasure. The Val knows the location of this point so well that, once per day, he may simply concentrate on it from a distance as if he had cast *euphoria* with his saving throw DC increased by a number equal to his blood rank.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

My Lover My Heart (Sp)

The most blessed followers of Larissa can call upon the memories of past lovers to fulfill and heal themselves and their companions. With a shiver of pleasure, once per day the Val may send visions of love and physical gratification through his own mind and the minds of his companions, as if he had cast *phantasmal lover* with an extended number of targets equal to his blood rank.

Val’Tensen

The val’Tensen are the descendents of the Valinor of Hurrian. This Val family is currently divided between two bases of power. One is in Ulfila in the Coryani Empire; the other is in Moratavia in the Kingdom of Milandir. Tension between these two factions is high and has broken out into open warfare in the recent past. The val’Tensen have a reputation for not suffering fools lightly. They are generally even-tempered and slow to anger, but when they do, their fury knows no bounds. Currently rumors abound that this split house is condemned to oblivion in the afterlife, a curse that may only be lifted by removing the stain on the family’s honor that originally caused the divisive rift.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

His Might is Our Own (Ex)

The Storm Lord strikes with the concentrated might of a thousand lightning bolts. Such intense control is truly understood only by His children, who are gifted with the ability to focus the power of their blows. With a crackle of electricity, once per day the Val may gain a +2 bonus to Strength for one minute per character level. This bonus increases by 2 for every 2 blood ranks beyond 1st (a total of +4 for blood rank 3, +6 for blood rank 5, and so on). Activating this power is a free action.

His Redoubtable Strength (Sp)

The children of the Grand Strategist of the Gods understand that protecting those who cannot protect themselves is just as important to victory as overcoming the opposition. Trusting in his own physical prowess and fortitude, the Val may declare a single target as his charge once per day, as if he had cast *shield other*. This charge will remain under the Val’s protection for the rest of the day, even if the Val should fall unconscious. If the charge moves out of the spell’s area of effect, the spell will resume as soon as he re-enters it. There is no focus requirement for this ability (in other words, the usual platinum rings associated with the *shield other* spell do not need to be worn by the Val and his charge).

Electricity is Our Ally (Su)

The God of Storms is also the Lord of Lightning. His children are well suited to its rigors. The Val gains an amount of permanent electricity resistance equal to his blood rank. For example, a val’Tensen of blood rank 3 would gain electricity resistance 3.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Hurrian’s Wrath (Sp)

The sky is the domain of Hurrian. His breath is the wind, the pouring rain is formed of His tears, and the clouds drift and darken with His moods. His voice, however, is the rolling thunder, and each bolt of lightning is a swift strike of His longsword. The Val knows that he may call upon Hurrian’s might for aid,

and once per day as a full-round action he may pray for the power of the storm to assail his enemies, as if he had cast *call lightning*.

The Thunderer's Gift (Su)

The voice of Hurrian is so intense that only the most stalwart warriors may withstand its staggering conviction. With a pulse of electricity, the Val may call upon the thunder once per day to create a concussive blast that radiates out from his body 30 feet in all directions (60-foot diameter burst, centered on the Val). The Val is immune to its effects, but all those caught within the radius suffer 2d6 points of sonic damage and must succeed on a Fortitude save or be stunned for 1d4 rounds. If the Val is in an area of *silence*, all sonic damage is negated, but the concussive force remains and the Fortitude save is still required. Activating this power is a standard action.

The Reluctant Warrior (Ex)

The true strength of Hurrian lies in His ability to protect others. As such, once per day the Val may gain a +2 bonus to his AC, attack rolls, and saving throws for as long as he is acting in defense of one or more innocent or helpless beings. Some examples of this sort of protection include defending a farmstead from raiders, holding the walls of a city under siege, shielding a child from harm, or standing over a fallen comrade. Using this power is a free action and may not be suppressed. The Val may not choose when this power activates; it is up to the GM's discretion, and may not be abused (i.e. going into town to find a kid to walk around with just so he can be "defended" later).

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

Reluctant No More (Su)

Though Hurrian is known as the Reluctant Warrior, woe be unto those who enrage him, for his inner fury outmatches even the fires of Nier. Boiling within every val'Tensen is a focused rage that erupts with incredible ferocity. Because sometimes the best defense is a powerful offense, once per day the Val may go into a frenzy that is identical to the barbarian's rage ability as detailed in *Core Rulebook I* with the following exceptions: The Val retains his mental composure throughout the rage for the purposes of making tactical decisions; the Val is not fatigued when the rage ends; and the effects of this rage stack with any effects granted by rage from another source, such as barbarian levels or the *rage* spell.

The Winds are Mine to Command (Sp)

The wind and the rain flow through the children of Hurrian as if they themselves were tiny storms given human form. As such, the Val is connected to the sky and with uninterrupted prayer, once per day he may call upon the clouds to gather for a storm or part to allow the light of Illiir to shine upon his face as if he had cast *control weather*. The Val may either summon or halt a natural tornado, thunderstorm, torrential rain, or hurricane-force wind, but he is not restricted to the seasonal requirements. Once summoned, he must

allow the weather to run its natural course; he may not stop it by any means.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

The Tempest (Sp)

As children of the Thunderer, the val'Tensen have a unique connection to all things associated with air and electricity. By using this connection, once per day the Val may summon air elementals as if he had cast *elemental swarm*, though he must concentrate on nothing but controlling the elementals for the entirety of the spell or else they will return from whence they came. As per the spell, it takes 10 minutes for the first elemental to appear, and this time must be spent in uninterrupted prayer. This power may only be used to summon air elementals; no other type of elemental will respond to the val'Tensen's call.

Val'Virdan

The val'Virdan are the descendants of the Valinor of Nier. With their base of power centered in Northern Canceri near Nier's Spine, this Val family is renowned for its martial prowess and strict religious doctrine. Some of the finest warriors of Onara claim the lineage of this family, as do some of the most brutal tyrants.

1st Level Bloodline Powers

None Shall Stand Who Oppose the Gods (Su)

The Judgment of Nier is uncompromising, and His children often share His unsympathetic views when dealing with their enemies. The Val may *smite* an opponent exactly as an equivalent-level cleric with the Destruction domain. This may be done once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth).

To Know the Sight of Our Lord (Ex)

Wherever there is life, there is heat. The children of Nier can sense the energies burning within all beings, allowing them to see where normal Val cannot. The Val gains darkvision with a range of 30 feet.

The Unwavering Resolve of the Destroyer (Ex)

The children of Nier are fearless and confident, never questioning their convictions or their strength of will. As such, the Val gains a +1 bonus on all Will saves versus divine spells cast by worshippers of Nier, and an additional +1 bonus (for a total of +2) on all Will saves versus divine spells cast by worshippers of any other deity or power.

2nd Level Bloodline Powers

Judgment Awaits the Unworthy (Su)

The Judgment of the Gods has the power to send a man's spirit through the Gates of Paradise or into the boiling depths of Beltine's Cauldron. Some of this scrutiny has been passed along to His children, who often are the very ones sending these souls up to



face His judgment in the first place. Once per day, the Val may impose Nier's will upon any human-blooded (dark-kin, gnome, half-hobgoblin, half-orc, human, or Val) foes within a 30-foot radius (60-foot-diameter burst, centered on the Val). Those within the area of effect must succeed on a Will save or else be deemed unworthy and suffer a penalty equal to the Val's blood rank on all attack rolls made against him; any Val caught within the radius may add their own blood rank to their saving throw.

The Sword of Heaven (Su)

The Lord of Flaming Destruction blesses His children with the spark that ignites the purest of flames. Any non-magical melee weapon wielded by the Val gains the *flaming* ability as detailed in *Core Rulebook II*. Any magical melee weapon wielded by the Val gains the *flaming burst* ability as detailed in *Core Rulebook II*.

To Withstand the Crucible of Flame (Sp)

There is no crucible that brings more anguish than the cleansing flames of Nier, and any who cannot withstand His trial by fire are judged unworthy of Paradise. Nier favors His children, however, and aids

them in overcoming the physical pain caused by all fires, even those of His purifying inferno. Once per day, the Val may shield himself from fire as if he had cast *protection from energy (fire)* at a caster level equal to twice his blood rank (maximum caster level of 10).

3rd Level Bloodline Powers

The Puissant Warrior (Su)

The children of the Reveler in Violence have at their fingertips a devastating amount of raw, untamed power. Once per day, plus one additional time per day for every two blood ranks beyond 1st (twice at blood rank 3, three times at blood rank 5, and so forth), the Val may unleash this destructive might upon a single enemy, granting him a free critical threat in melee combat. He must still successfully hit his opponent, but any successful hit counts as a critical threat, regardless of his normal threat range. This power does not result in an automatic critical hit, and it may not be used to confirm an already-rolled critical threat; the Val must declare the use of this power before making his attack roll and then must succeed in the critical confirmation on his own.

Use of this power is a free action and does not change the time required to perform the attack.

The Wrath of the Just (Sp)

The children of the Master of Burning Ruin know well the secrets of harnessing His holy fire to strike down those who would dare to face their wrath. Once per day, the Val may call down a great pillar of flame as if he had cast *flame strike*.

4th Level Bloodline Powers

The Blazing Swarm (sp)

As the children of the Master of Burning Ruin, the val'Virdan have a unique connection to all things associated with flames. By using this connection, once per day the Val may summon fire elementals as if he had cast *elemental swarm*, though he must concentrate on nothing but controlling the elementals for the entirety of the spell or else they will return from whence they came. As per the spell, it takes 10 minutes for the first elemental to appear, and this time must be spent in uninterrupted prayer. This power may only be used to summon fire elementals; no other type of elemental will respond to the val'Virdan's call.

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The Shattered Empires Await!

It is Like the End of the World

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