

RUNEWARS

MINIATURES GAME



LORE GUIDE

It Is a Time for Heroes...

An evil wind rises:
the first gusts of a great darkness blow.

Beyond the Ru Plains,
the demonic energies of an ancient
enemy have begun to stir. In the Realm
of Dist, the malevolent plots of the
undying betrayer begin to take form once
again. Sinister things awaken in deep
places, and feral beasts of the nameless
wild grow ever more daring
and numerous.

Gerinath is a realm of deep forests
and rolling plains—a land where majestic
mountains feed great rivers and hide lost
vales. In lonely places, windswept ruins
and forgotten shrines lie as fading
reminders of splendors long past.

A great kingdom once ruled this land,
but now only a few far-flung baronies
reluctantly stand against the stygian
forces that would engulf the
remnants of its people.

It is a land of legend. The earth
remembers the march of glorious
banners and brave deeds: it whispers
of the valor of those who vanquished
the darkness of the past. Its silent song
kindles the embers of hope in those who
would stand against the endless night.

For forgotten magics and lost legacies
wait to be rediscovered by those brave
enough to seek them.

Then the tarp was cruelly yanked away, and the darkness fled. Blinding torchlight filled the girl's vision.

Two men with hardened faces looked down at her and saw a squinting gangly girl, almost a woman, hiding in the wagon among the goods. She was dirty, dressed in plain peasant clothing bordering on rags. Her hair was raven-black, her eyes blue and defiant. Behind them, an armed guardsman held the torch. One of the older men, the one she recognized as the wagon-master, chuckled as she inched away from them.

"I knew I saw somethin' crawl in 'ere." He said with a thick Lorimor accent, and then glanced at the other man. "What 'ya reckon we should do with 'er?"

The other man studied her with thoughtful grey eyes. His surcoat bore the faded livery of Daqan. A grey-and-white walrus mustache dominated his lined face below a worn infantry helmet. The old soldier grimaced. "I'll take care of it."

Without pause, he reached into the wagon, grabbed the girl firmly by the back of her tunic, and pulled her out of the wagon. He may have looked old, but he was strong as an oak.

She began to flail, kick, and claw. She tried to twist her head to bite the hand gripping her collar.

A few idle solders in the courtyard strolled over to see the commotion.

The wagon-master chuckled. "I thought 'er found a rat in 'e cargo, but now I reckon 'er found 'e cat."

The grizzled old soldier tightened his grip around the girl's collar and bent his face toward her ear.

"I'm not going to hurt you—so calm down." She flailed and kicked for few seconds, but the man's tone and the unrelenting firmness of his grip made her slowly stop.

Good-natured boos arose from the observers as the entertainment came to an end. The old soldier waved them back to their duties as he steered the girl toward the soldier with the torch, his grip easing somewhat. "Put her in the top solar and lock the door. I'll deal with her later. And you leave her alone, Barryn."

"Yes, Captain." Barryn knuckled his forehead in acknowledgment and steered the girl to the tower that loomed above the narrow courtyard.



The high room was dusty and old. Faded tapestries with woven depictions of battles between men and monsters, stoic figures with grim expressions, and oddly proportioned snakes circling in the sky hung from the stone walls. The tapestries framed a heavy wooden table that dominated the room. Set into the far wall, a large window revealed distant black hills and crags breaking above the moonlit mists, like distant islands in a ghostly sea. The window let in a small breeze that gently ruffled the tapestries, giving phantom animation to the woven faces.

A single candle on the table accompanied the girl in the otherwise empty, darkened room. When the captain later entered, he found her sitting in a heavy wooden chair, knees under chin, thin arms hugging dirty legs.

The girl was in darkness, and the darkness was good. The small space between the wagon's crates and containers was tight, but safe. It smelled of vegetables and wood, and the oiled tarp above her head would protect her from the rain. By the smell of it, the barrels pressed against her were filled with cider, so at least she wouldn't die of thirst.

She closed her eyes and settled in, hoping to sleep. Instinctively she reached for the stone in her pocket, clutching it through the worn material of her vest. It was still there. She let out a deep sigh, felt the beating of her heart slowly return to normal. The caravan to Strangehaven would be underway in the morning, and she with it.

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The captain closed the door with only a faint squeak and dropped his heavy helmet and iron gauntlets on the table with a clang. His dark hair was of medium length and heavily streaked with grey. His walrus mustache made his expression seem dour. He flexed his hands and walked to the window, ignoring the girl for the moment.

She didn't move, but her blue eyes followed his every move. He gazed out at the hills that lay under the moon-bleached murk. If he didn't know of the evil that lurked in the mists, he might have thought it eerily beautiful. He turned with a sigh, folded his arms, and looked at the girl. "Do you know where that wagon you were hiding in is going?"

She didn't answer, her eyes defiant. After a few long moments, the old warrior nodded to himself, and then resolutely left the room. The girl gave the closed door a quizzical look. She was alone again.

When the captain returned, he was carrying a mug of cider and a trencher of bread and cured meats. He placed these on the table across from the girl and sat down gently on a nearby chair. She watched the food with big eyes, her stomach growling.

"Dig in, girl."

She heartily complied.

"What's your name?"

"Astarra," she muttered through a mouthful of food.

The old man smiled. "So the cat talks. I'm Alcaran." He paused for a reaction, but the girl was too busy gulping down the mug of cider to respond. "You know where the caravan is going."

She swallowed the last bit of cider. "Strangehaven," she murmured as she returned the empty mug to the table. Alcaran nodded and pulled the trencher of food toward himself. He unhooked a knife from his belt to cut a piece of the bread. The candlelight seemed to dance along the blade's length.

"What does a young woman want in Strangehaven?" Alcaran paused, lifting one of his thick eyebrows. Something had suddenly changed in the girl. She had become as tight as a bowstring, her face as pale as moonlight, and she stared at his knife with wide eyes.

Alcaran placed the knife carefully on the table. "I'm not going to hurt you. I mean it."

She pointed at the knife. No, not the knife, but the small stone set into its pommel. The stone was a gorgeous luminous blue, and carved into it was an artful mark, simple and deliberate, its delicate lines glowing red as embers.

"That is why I want to go Strangehaven," she said. "To learn about those stones."

The candlelight shone in Alcaran's eyes. His expression became solemn, as if he no longer viewed Astarra as some pitiful urchin, but perhaps someone of gravity, or even danger.

"How do you know of these 'stones'?" The tightness of his mouth seemed to warn Astarra that silence or lies would not be tolerated.

"My grandmother had one."

"But no longer?"

Astarra hesitated.

Alcaran grimaced. "I never understood why people come to this place." He shot a look at the distant mists. Then he shook his head in resignation. "Yet the soil is rich and no baron taxes this land. So people come, and who's to blame them but old soldiers afraid of the dark?"

Alcaran tapped at small stone on the knife. "Stones like these are hard to come by. Where did your grandmother find hers?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me no matter how many times I asked. I don't know why." She looked down.

"Every night she would bring it out after we had locked the doors. She said it protected us. I think it did."

Alcaran gestured for her to continue.

"A few times over the years, my grandmother had a visitor from afar, a friend from Strangehaven. He was an odd man, but kind, and I think he cared deeply for her.

"On every visit, he would argue with Gran. He would implore her to come with him to Strangehaven. 'Living here is madness,' he would say. One time I saw him point west and say 'You know about the one that lives in those mists. You know what he is looking for, and you know what you have!'"

Alcaran sat quietly, weighing Astarra's words.

"A few months ago, Gran fell ill. It went very quick. A few days before the end, in one of her last lucid moments alone with me, she gave me the stone to keep. She told me that she was sorry for not teaching me its secret, that she'd thought there would be time." Astarra caught herself wringing her hands. Alcaran's face was grave, waiting for her to continue.

"After my grandmother died, my parents and I thought life would go on as before. The apple harvest was good, the cider was strong, and we always locked the doors at night. Then one night..." She didn't want to tell more of the story. She didn't want to remember the night when the silent, bloodless men had come, their eyes filled with unnatural light. The night her life changed forever.

Alcaran bent forward and touched her arm. "You came to realize your grandmother had somehow used her stone for a purpose, didn't you?"

Astarra offered nothing. She quietly chewed her food.

"And your parents?" he asked.

She shook her head.

The expression on the old warrior's face told her he'd seen



terrible things too—seen horrors much like those that came for her that night in early autumn. “But you made it out? You escaped?”

She nodded.

“And did you return?”

She nodded again.

Astarra could recall the scene with perfect clarity: a thin mist had hung in the air about the homestead, and the light of the sun had been strangely cold and distant. Somehow the orchard had withered overnight—late-harvest apples had turned black, leaves had greyed, grasses had yellowed, and a thin veneer of veiny mold now had flourished on the buildings.

There had been no sign of her parents. The silent invaders had gone, but they had taken all life with them.

Alone amid her rotten home, Astarra had hidden beneath a cart at the edge of the orchard. Then exhaustion had overtaken her. She'd fallen asleep.

“I decided to walk south, and eventually arrived in a place called Havershold. The villagers there helped me at first, but when I told them my story they grew less than kind. They called me a liar.”

The warrior nodded. “They can't believe your story, Astarra,” he said softly, “because in believing your story, they unwind the greater lie they tell themselves: That this land is safe, and that nothing lives, or unives, in the mists.”

“A farmer,” she continued, “told me of a small trading caravan that had come through Havershold a few days earlier. He said that it was heading for Strangheaven, but it would make several stops before moving on.” She wiped her hands nervously on her leggings. “So, I set out to find the caravan.” She took another piece of salt beef and stuffed it in her mouth, signaling the end of her tale.

“Let me see it.”

Astarra gave Alcaran a panicked glance and moved her hand protectively over the pocket of her vest.

“I need to see it, girl.” Alcaran's tone was grave. “If it is what you say, this is a very serious matter.”

Astarra tensed and began to rise out of her chair. Alcaran rose with her.

“I am Alcaran, Captain of the Northland Watch. This garrison alone holds forty soldiers-at-arms whom I command. You are but one. You do not have power here. If I wish to see the stone, I shall see it.”

The sudden sternness of Alcaran's voice struck her. She looked to the window, her surest means of escape. She was certain she could reach it before Alcaran could stop her, but she was also certain she would plummet to her death were she to leap from it. Astarra settled uneasily back into the chair.

Astarra kept her eyes on Alcaran as she fished the stone out of her pocket. Her grandmother's stone was thinner, more elongated than the stone on Alcaran's knife. Like Alcaran's, it was

a deep blue. A different but similar design was etched upon its surface. She paused before offering it to the captain, who studied it carefully. He did not take it.

“First know this, Astarra: these are not stones, but shards. They are fragments of what was once a much greater thing.” He looked her in the eye. “You've heard of the First Darkness, girl?”

“It was a great war, long ago.” She shrugged. “That's all.”

“That is not all. It was a terrible scourge; we must pray our world never sees its like again” he said gravely. “The enemy of that age was a warlock from the east. His name was Llovar of the Locusts.”

A gust of cool wind came through the window, and the tapes-tries shook as if the mention of that dread name conjured an ill memory.

“Much of the land was laid bare by Llovar's armies, and many a great man and woman perished at their hands.” Alcaran's hand stroked the crown-insignia on his doublet. “But, in the end, the heroes of old defeated him, and the Locust was silenced. Among those heroes were Daqan, Triamlavar, Grumson, and... Waiqar, among many others. Greatest among those heroes was the wizard Timmorran. It was he who slew Llovar, and it was under his stewardship that the remnant kings set out to build a new peace.”

Alcaran stood and stroked his beard for a moment. Astarra watched him silently.

“Stay here,” he said, and left the room once more. As the door closed, Astarra tucked her grandmother's stone back into her pocket, stood, and went to the window. Indeed, this was no avenue for escape. From the window, the tower plunged into darkness. It was a fall she might survive, but not one she would walk away from. She returned again to the heavy wooden chair.

When Alcaran reentered, he was carrying a large mug of ale and another mug of cider. He sat down and took a long draught of the ale. He then pushed the cider to Astarra, who thought it best to take a polite sip.

“You were saying something about a wizard.” If Alcaran was not going to allow her to continue to Strangheaven, she would have to get the information she wanted from him, instead.

“I was,” he grunted. “Timmorran. And what a wizard he must have been. After the First Darkness, Timmorran settled in a quiet vale and there built Meryngir, a great tower of magical learning. Yet, for all of Timmorran's wisdom and power, he was old and must have felt the winds of mortality in his bones.” Alcaran stretched his legs, apparently feeling a draft of those winds himself. “He wanted to pass his magic to future generations, and so he made a terrible mistake.

“He began to create a mighty artifact, one which he called the Orb of Sky. The orb was an enormous crystal, and into it he channeled his power and his magic. That orb held pure magical power, unbound and easily channeled by lesser wizards. Yet that power was neither good nor evil. Without Timmorran's judgment, without his sense of right and wrong directing it, it was just...power.”

Astarra had unconsciously removed her grandmother's stone from her pocket. She stared at it as Alcaran spoke. The design on its surface faintly glimmered. The richness of the blue stone had never been more evident. It was as though it held an infinite, cloudless sky. Astarra blinked.

A black cloud crossed the moon, and the wind grew. Alcaran took another drink of ale, stood, and moved toward the window.

"And so it was that Timmorran was betrayed by the power he sought to harness. One night, Waiqar Sumarion, the greatest general of the age and Timmorran's friend, rode with his army into Wizard's Vale and surrounded Meryngir. Waiqar demanded that the wizard surrender the orb. It was then that Timmorran realized his folly. He had naively believed the stain of evil to have been washed from the world along with the Locust. Yet, the tides of the Ynfernael ever wax and wane, and they had swelled within in the heart of Waiqar. The wizard had little time, for Waiqar's warriors had begun to assault Meryngir, and it would not be long before they breached its defenses.

"Along with his most trusted student, Lumii Tamar, Timmorran ascended to the great chamber at top of Meryngir. There, using the last of his earthly powers, the wizard destroyed the Orb of the Sky, the most powerful artifact this world has ever seen, shattering it into thousands upon thousands of pieces."

Astarra looked at the shard in her hand and imagined it floating in a glowing cloud above the elevated arms of its creator.

"Timmorran took one of the pieces, and with its power he channeled the great hoard of shards into a small pouch, one no greater than the size of your hand. Then it is said that Lumii Tamar transformed himself into a great crow, and Timmorran tied the pouch to Lumii's leg. With Lumii on his shoulder, the wizard moved to one the great windows in the chamber. Using one of the forgotten words of the Yrthwrights, he summoned the crows of the nearby mountains.

"As the tower door finally fell to Waiqar's ministrations, the birds appeared in legion and soon circled the night sky around the tower in untold numbers. It was into this great flock that Lumii took wing, and the archers of the Betrayer couldn't discern him among the murder of crows that choked the sky. So it was that Lumii Tamar escaped the Night of Betrayal, and Timmorran placed the Orb of the Sky beyond Waiqar's reach."

"What happened to Timmorran?" Astarra asked, imagining the cruel general and his great warriors thundering up the stairs of the Tower.

"Nothing good, I'm afraid. The Betrayer found Timmorran alone in the orb's chamber, and when he realized the wizard had deprived him of the orb, Waiqar's mood turned black. He killed Timmorran without hesitation, and as he did so, storm clouds began to gather in the sky above."

As if on cue, the wind outside picked up, and the solar grew colder.

"When the Betrayer pried a single blue shard from the hand of the dead wizard, he understood what had transpired." Alcaran sat quietly for a moment, and then for another. When he spoke again, emotion filled his voice.

"With the lifeblood of the wizard still hot on his hands, Waiqar strode angrily from the tower. Something in him had surrendered completely to darkness. Under the gathering storm Waiqar swore that until he possessed Timmorran's power, he would never rest. As Waiqar made this vow, something deep in the Ynfernael laughed in triumph, and the skies above Wizard's Vale curdled with an ancient malignant power. So it was that Waiqar cursed himself into undeath.

"But the curse was not satisfied with Waiqar alone. One by one his soldiers fell dead. The rain turned black and became a poisonous torrent pouring from above. The rain rendered flesh from bone as easily as boiling acid. A thunderous wail of suffering echoed through Wizard's Vale in a gruesome cacophony.

"In the clamor, Waiqar calmly held out his arms to the rain. It did not affect him. The deadly drops slid off his white skin like oil. It is said that every child in the realms woke at that moment, lending their frightened cries to those of the damned who were trapped in the wizard's vale.

"Then all was silent. The rain stopped. Only Waiqar remained standing; the wind curled his black robes about him like smoke. As he lowered his arms, the clouds broke, and the moon revealed the grotesque scene that was the valley floor. What had been an army minutes before was now a silent field of bones and liquefied flesh. Thousands upon thousands of armored skeletons lay before him, each twisted by the pain inflicted upon them during their final moments of life. Wet armor and fallen weapons glistened in the moonlight like stones in a black lake. The feathers of crows flurried across the ground like fallen leaves from the tree of death."

Alcaran remained at the window, speaking to the night instead of the scrappy young stowaway who'd inherited all too much power.

"Suddenly compelled, Waiqar began to chant in a voice that was not his own. Though he did not know the words, he knew their meaning. They spoke of dust and the grave, of dirt and worms, of rotten sinew and cold earth. As his chant rose in intensity, an icy wind began to blow across the valley floor. The wet armor of the dead began to bloom with frost.

"And then the dead began to rise.

"Slowly, one by one, the soldiers stood, their eyes vacant except for the tiniest of purple sparks. These were proud warriors who in life had been ensnared by lies and usurped by an unholy rite. Alas, as they rose in death, they were as fiercely loyal to their general as they had been while breathing."

The monsters that had attacked her family's orchard hadn't been armed or armored, but they'd had vacant, luminous eyes, and they had moved like gruesome marionettes, animated by an unseen hand. Astarra shivered, and looked to Alcaran, who leaned against the stone window sill silently. Alcaran took a deep breath, met her worried gaze with his own, and returned to his seat to take another drink.

"You tell the tale as if you lived it. How do you know it so well? You're just a..." Astarra struggled for the words.

"Just an old soldier?" Alcaran finished her sentence with a tired

smile. "When I was young, I went looking for answers." He inclined his head toward her. "Like you. And like you I was told the tale of Timmorran Lokander and his betrayal at the hands of his closest ally. But, there is more if you wish to hear it."

"Please."

"Very well." Alcaran took a measured breath and continued.

"Many years later, Waiqar unleashed the Second Darkness upon the world, and once again the realms suffered. But the western lords prevailed, and the Betrayer, the Undying One, was forced to retreat. It was then that a great mist fell over his land, a mist that has remained ever since."

Astarra looked toward the window and at the veiled darkness beyond.

"Yes, Astarra, out there Waiqar yet sits in his dark fortress of Zorgas, ever desiring that which Timmorran denied him." Alcaran held the pommel of his knife up to the candlelight, and the blue shard gleamed. "The Stars of Timmorran."

"After the Second Darkness, the Council of Barons created these garrisons, minor imitations of the great keeps that face the eastern plains." Alcaran gestured to the solar. "These towers are meant to stand watch over the mists, to destroy anything that might creep from them, and to warn the lords of the realm should the Betrayer come in force once more."

The captain raised the mug to take another drink of ale, but the mug was empty. He returned the mug to the table with a disappointed frown.

"The story of Waiqar passed into myth. The mists have remained still, and as the years passed, settlers came to this quiet land."

Astarra cleared her throat. "Why tell me this story?"

Alcaran snorted. "First, because you claim to seek knowledge concerning the shards. Second, because if you are to possess one of the Stars of Timmorran, you should know the legacy of which you are a part."

"So, my grandmother's stone is a piece of the Orb of the Sky. Aside from that, you've told me little else. Just a legend of hubris and betrayal."

Alcaran harrumphed. "Legend. Ha! Do not tell me that you are like the others: content to remain ignorant of history."

"I wish to know of the stones! This!" Astarra held her grandmother's shard pointedly. "Not of some musty old warlord lurking in the mists!"

Alcaran shook his head and laughed despite himself. "Youth." He smiled. "I remember it, but I cannot fathom it. Do you not see? Waiqar. The shards. They are forever connected. In your hand you hold a piece of a great tragedy. You must respect that fact if you are to understand its true nature."

Astarra struggled against her own impatience and settled back into her chair. "The markings. What are they?"

"I do not know precisely, but I do know that the dragons carved them."

Astarra almost dropped her shard. "Dragons?"

"Yes. Dragons." He studied the markings in the shard set into his knife's pommel. "The Elder Kings used the power of the Stars of Timmorran they possessed to engineer an age of peace following the Second Darkness—but the Stars were also their undoing. Used openly and without restraint, sometimes in clusters of a dozen or more, the energy of the Stars could be felt near and far by beings sensitive to such things.

"The dragonlords felt the lure of their power. It proved irresistible, so they came on dark wings to take the Stars. The Third Darkness descended over the land. Greatest among the dragonlords were Margath, Levirax, Baalesh, Zir, and Gehennor. They led a horde of lesser dragons and dragon hybrid warriors in a storm of conquest and destruction. With the coming of the dragons, the age of the Elder Kings came to its abrupt and fiery conclusion."

"So, did a dragon hold my grandmother's stone at some point and draw this symbol on it with its claw?"

"That I do not know, but I do know the dragons gathered thousands of the shards and bound the shards with runes, directing the power of each shard into a specific task. They broke many of them into lesser shards, such as the two we possess.

"The dragonlords gifted such shards to their allies and minions. You see, the runebound shards may be used by those with no magical talent, assuming the runebound nature of the shard is known to its user. Many had simple passive powers of martial improvement; these were set into talismans, helmets, swords..."

"Knives?" Astarra added.

"And knives," Alcaran agreed.

"Runes," Astarra said to herself. She let the word hang in the air. The markings on her grandmother's stone were no mere frivolous artistic endeavor. They held meaning, defined the stone's power. "Wait—you use your magic knife to cut bread?"

It may have been the drink, it may have been weariness, but Alcaran's demeanor had softened. He laughed. "Yes. I find it improves the flavor. Besides, the edge never dulls."

Astarra smiled in return. "What happened to the dragons, then? I've never seen one."

"Once again, united in common cause, the people of the realms—Elf, Dwarf, Man, and the Orcish Tribes—defeated the dragonlords and their armies. Some of the dragonlords were slain, others fled in disgrace to the Molten Heath." Alcaran paused as he seemed to stumble over a memory. "Some of their lesser brethren still dwell in abandoned and forgotten places." His fingers traced an old scar along his forearm. "They're not to be taken lightly."

Alcaran said nothing for a while. He studied the girl with black hair and intelligent blue eyes.

"What?" Astarra asked, uncomfortable under his long gaze.

"You and I have both seen the tendrils of darkness, Astarra. Dread things of the night."

She cast her eyes down. For a moment she had forgotten. A knot

pitted in her belly, her cheeks hot with shame. She must never forget.

Alcaran pushed himself back from the table and stood, retrieving his things. The hour had grown late.

"You had hoped to learn more of that runebound shard in Strangehaven. I assume you wish to do what your gran did? Hold back the things that walk in the night?"

Astarra nodded. "Yes."

The old warrior smiled sadly. "Are we of the same cause?" Astarra nodded again, and the old warrior seemed satisfied.

"I believe those in the mists won't remain still for long. Moreover, there are rumors of fell things roaming the eastern plains." The old warrior briefly glanced at his knife before placing it back in his belt. "The world will need those who will stand against the storm that comes." He opened the door to leave. "Good luck, girl."

"Wait!"

Alcaran hesitated in the doorway.

"You said that you learned these stories from someone. Who was it?"

Alcaran looked at a blank space on the floor, as though recalling a memory. "After much travel, I found one of the strange beings that live outside of time. An oracle. She taught me much of the past. I asked her many questions, and she gave me many answers, but she did not answer my greatest question."

"What was that?"

"Why I sought answers." Alcaran sighed. "To my ears, she spoke in riddles. Duty, fate? I don't know. I believe we all have a purpose. She wasn't much for speaking plainly."

"This oracle. Where is she?" Astarra asked.

The captain knocked the doorframe once, resolving to go. "That is a tale for another time."

He gave her a last nod, his eyes saying a silent farewell. Then he closed the door and Astarra was alone again. Alone with the great table, the small candle guttering in the breeze, and the woven tapestry faces of those who had stood against the darkness.



"Can't believe 'e luck, girl," the wagon-master chuckled for the eleventh time in the last hour, spitting another stream of naar-root to the side.

The trail of ox carts rumbled inexorably down the ruddy road. Astarra sat beside the wagon-master, who navigated his oxen with ropes, a hard whip, and many harsh words. The wooden seat was hard as iron, and Astarra felt happier than she had in weeks.

One of the garrison's soldiers had woken her early and told her that her passage to Strangehaven had been paid, and the caravan would be leaving soon. She'd quickly checked her pocket; the stone, her Star, was still there.

While she'd waited in the courtyard for the last of the carts to be harnessed, she'd looked for Captain Alcaran, but he hadn't been anywhere she'd been able to see. When she'd asked one of the guards, he'd told her the captain had left before dawn for another of the towers. "Always on the move, the great captain is," the guard had said. "Takes the job seriously, that one."

By mid-morning, she had been on the road once more. Although the sun had risen, its light did not shine as brightly here. As she glanced to her left and right, the hills that rolled around them became more familiar.

This road was close to her grandmother's orchard. She could step off here, continue down the path there... But that orchard held nothing for her now. It would never again be filled with the sights and sounds of the apple harvest—of her family. She would carry them with her, instead.

She set her gaze straight ahead, down the road to where the sun did not brighten the land. This was her path, now. And she would face the darkness head on.







Just beyond the rare plowed fields, decaying roads, and remote walled towns of Terrinoth, rise the ruined monuments of the past. The extravagant edifices of the Soulstone Dynasty and regimes even older, laid waste by past devastation, stretch their crumbling towers up above the grasping vines and lowering trees, reclaimed by the wild.



The Daqan Lords

*A letter from Thedric Calanor,
Deputy to the Warden of the Citadel, to Squire Maerwynn*

In the almost-forgotten language of the Elder Kings, Terrinoth means the "Land of Steel." It is a land that knew the terror of the Uthuk Y'llan, the dread march of Waiqar Sumarion's undead legions, and the chill shadows of dragonlords soaring overhead. Deep forests and fallow mires threaten to swallow up what dangerous roads remain between far-flung settlements, while wide, rushing rivers sweep down from majestic mountains. Within overgrown and dilapidated structures of ages past, ancient dungeons hide terrible foes as well as awe-inspiring treasures, glimpses of a bygone age.

The forging of the Land of Steel began with the hero Arcus, first of the Penacor line. The Penacor kings called their realm Talindon, and they added to its glory over centuries. But the First Darkness extinguished their line, and the crown passed to Daqan, the legendary knight and baron who delegated much of the realm's power to his Council of Barons. After the rise and hard-won defeat of Waiqar the Betrayer, Daqan was assassinated. By his will, no kingly successor was named, and instead the Council of Barons was to rule the land, bolstered by the growing wealth of the Free Cities.

The rebuilding that followed the First Darkness and Waiqar's betrayal was followed by centuries of opulent growth as lore and artisanship reached new heights. As the age lengthened, leaders within Terrinoth grew ever more covetous and assuming, and they forgot the lessons of those who had come before. The Soulstone Dynasty dismantled the Council of Barons, usurped the throne, and openly used the powerful and secret Stars of Timmorran for selfish ends. Others soon followed Soulstone's lead, and the magnificent age of the Elder Kings was borne by such power and splendor.

Alas, lured by the power inherent in the Stars, the dragonlords came. What more is there to say; the wonders of the Elder Kings were reduced to cinders.

The Land Endures

Some call the current age the Grey Years. The Dragon Wars are long past, yet no new castles or strongholds have been built in the cloudy centuries since. Ruins are found throughout the land. The wild encroaches on field and town alike. Strife among Terrinoth's denizens is infrequent, but petty and brutal. Outlaws and goblins prowl the grass-choked roads.

With no usurper king to chain it, Daqan's age-old rule by the barons extends across the realm once more. Their few holdfasts keep watch over the distant corners of this vast realm.



Baron Zachareth of Carthridge

“My fellow lords, ladies: surely you can see the need for strong leadership and decisive action at this time. I have been accused of ambition, but when have I sought power for myself alone? My peers, do not act as though bandits, or even the undead, are solely my problem. Already today we have heard testimony of one of our number who was attacked on the highway leading to this very citadel! Just two months ago, I visited the abandoned village of Rothfeld, which lays a week’s ride north of my lands. Yes, that Rothfeld which adjoins the Land of Mists. I not only heard from Rothfelder refugees but saw with my own eyes the ravages that the undead had wrought. I heard of walking corpses, of cold warriors emerging from the mists to enslave villagers and butcher the troops of the nearby garrison. My fellow barons, you know this is not an isolated case! There are similar stories from other places along the border of mists. We have so reduced the watch, we could not survive long should the undead emerge in force, as they did when Waiqar the Betrayer marched forth in ages past. You scoff? Look at the empty chair in this very chamber; can you behold it without unease? Waiqar sat in that seat. Waiqar is *real*, and his undead are coming! Have I not offered up, and in generous proportion, the silver of the Carthmount mines to fund my proposals? Place me at the head of a mustered Army of the Realm, my peers, and I will venture forth to eradicate the traitor in the Mistlands and the undead with him. I say we restore the Thirteenth Barony and reclaim its lands, breaking the curse of this empty seat and reviving the greatness of Terrinoth.”



— Baron Zachareth of Carthridge,
speaking in the Council of Thirteen

Yet, the martial reach of the barons quickly fades into Terrinoth’s ungoverned wild. If the times are not noble, the barons’ duty to the realm is, and they still cling stubbornly to hope and honor.

When the Council of Barons is not in session, the Warden of Archaut governs the central authority and collects the rents that fund the Archaut administration; the borderland garrisons; and the Citadel Guard, a small elite force assigned to protect Archaut alone. Except for his traditional oversight of the City of the Citadel, the remit of the Warden is limited to executing only those edicts and laws agreed upon by the last Council. If a true threat emerges, the Warden can order the barons to reassemble and hope that they agree to order a general muster, a right that has been passed down since the Second Darkness, when King

Daqan rallied all his vassals against Waiqar the Undying. Such musters have been ordered only rarely in this age and always with much debate. When so ordered, barons gather their armies and march to war alongside the famed companies of the Free Cities in a pageant of glorious liveries and banners. The eight Free Cities of Terrinoth stand tall and proud in this dangerous land—and Tamalir stands greatest among them. They are free, yet not wholly independent of the Council of Barons.

The Barons and Their Baronies

The kings of old left a warrior’s path based on honor, loyalty, and duty. These traditions and institutions have preserved Terrinoth through the three Darkesses and countless other perils. Unfortunately, today’s Council of Barons is a shadow of its former self. The halls of the Citadel echo with arguments over whose merchants have access to port towns or the safest roads, and upon whom the burden of shared tasks should be placed. While well-intentioned, the barons prove unwilling to take united action on any subject with urgency, accomplishing little except for that decided during the Council’s annual congress at the Citadel in the monument city of Archaut. As a result, the barons of Terrinoth are often left to fend against enemies and disasters alone, or to form short-lived alliances with other barons in times of need.

The twelve baronies that sit in Daqan’s circle today each have long histories and long lineages. Much lore, and some dark secrets, can be told of each of those old houses. It is beyond my resources to detail each of Terrinoth’s baronies to you in this letter, but I would write to you of House Kell and House Carthridge.

The Barony of Kell

The east-lying Barony of Kell follows the Dunwarr mountain range that protects Terrinoth from the foreboding Ru and the strange creatures that rove there. Kell has a strong defense of its own, one fed by expansive farmlands and bulwarked by the garrisons—and legendary rune golems—it inherited from earlier ages. The soldiers keep a sleepy watch on the desolation of the Ru, as well as the fords that cross the Lothan River at Hernfar Isle, from massive fortresses of a bygone kingdom. Many of these stalwart strongholds have begun to crumble in the centuries since the Kell family sat at Castle Kellar, their importance—and purpose—largely forgotten.

Behind these timeworn fortresses, the citizens of Kell prosper. Valley farms keep Kell fed while producing enough surplus to trade with the nearby Dunwarr Dwarves, and a rich trade in timber and iron keeps coin flowing into Baron Fredric’s vaults.

Barony of Carthridge

Blessed with an abundance of farmland and the famed silver mines scattered throughout the Carthmounts, Carthridge is a wealthy and influential barony. Its citizens lead lives of peace and plenty, protected from the occasional wild creature or rov-

ing bandit gang by Carthridge's knights and foot soldiers, who are among the best-equipped warriors in Daqan. Though they are seldom bloodied against true foes, Zachareth insists his troops drill and prepare for war.

To the northwest of Carthridge, towns and sun-dappled fields give way to the great wood that shelters forest hamlets and logging camps before descending into the hills bordering the Mistlands. Only a few ill-maintained roads connect these settlements with the crumbling tower garrisons of the Mistwatch, funded for generations by the Council. Baron Zachareth of Carthridge argued against the weakening of the garrisons, yet nothing has stirred in the mists for hundreds of years.

Strange though it may seem, some of the most fertile land in Terrinoth abuts the Mistlands; Terrinoth's green hills roll down to the very edges of the fetid bogs. There, among those gentle hills, brave independent souls till the land, refusing to surrender their homes and livelihood to the looming fogs and old ghost stories. However, living in the shadow of the Betrayer has made these folk a strange, suspicious lot, known more for their assurance and determination than for a warm, welcoming nature. In this area of the world, doors are locked at night, and few stroll casually in the moonlight.

Protectors of the Realm

Some believe the ancient sobriquet "Land of Steel" refers to the rich iron deposits of our mountains, while others believe it describes the shining swords and splendid armors of our nobles. Truly, Terrinoth refers to the deep resolve that lays within the heart of our people.

The true strength of our realm has always been in the arms and

legs of the common soldier. The warriors of Terrinoth are famed in other realms for their rugged fortitude. The infantry form our spine, our cavalry the tip of our spear. The push of our shield wall has been the bulwark by which our enemies have been vanquished. When properly drilled, our soldiers are deadly, and their greatest asset is their courage.

Knights are the soul of Terrinoth's way of war: trained over years, selected through great tournaments, sworn to loyalty by their barons, and proven in battle. Not all knights are as pure as the heroes from songs, but the virtues of knighthood do inspire great valor and the honing of a deadly prowess. Armored in thick plate and mounted on magnificent destriers, the swift, shattering charge of a body of knights is the essence of our calling.

Whereas a knight exemplifies the glory of the individual warrior, Daqan's doughty spearman knows that he is only as strong as those to his left and right. The baronies' spear infantry train to fight in tight order, locking shields together and presenting a thick bulwark that bristles with spear points. Such a formation proves deadly to charging cavalry and keeps most other foes at arm's reach. Though the shield wall is primarily defensive, when called upon to advance the spearmen lower their shields and thrust with their spears as one, before marching over the bodies of the slain to repeat the well-honed drill.

Many of these front-line infantry units are seconded from the barons' own forces. In time of muster, the Free Cities, too, are obliged to provide a strong contingent of troops and treasure to assist the Council in the struggle against what would threaten Terrinoth.

Tamalir is the greatest and most prosperous of the Free Cities, as well as the first to have gained its freedom. In lieu of any baron, Guildmasters rule the city. These powerful merchants grow rich off the flow of goods up and down the Flametail River and along the roads that lead to Frostgate and beyond, including the famed crossbows that arm Tamalir's Red Echo Regulars.

Additional forces of renown hail from the other Free Cities. The expatriate Elves in Dawnsmoor teach the most astounding techniques of archery to its soldiers. The city of Forge benefits from secret techniques of metallurgy shared by the many Dwarves who live there, and though the scholars of Strangehaven insist that Forge's creations are not magical, its unnaturally sharp weapons and thundering battle-chariots argue otherwise. Frostgate's Totem Guard is tough as thick ice, each weather-hardened warrior drawn from a different Frostgate clan and sworn to protect a sacred family totem. To the south, Riverwatch is famous for its riders, who can be seen everywhere in Terrinoth, acting as couriers and generally outpacing everyone else on the roads. When gathered in formation, the cavalry's deft and swift maneuvers terrify even the staunchest pikeman.

The Free Cities produce many of Terrinoth's greatest wizards and scholars. Greyhaven boasts Terrinoth's foremost universities, especially for magic. The schools of Greyhaven curate a truly staggering variety of runebound shards for study, and the wizards who train there can use the shards to devastating



effect. Magic is as dangerous as it is helpful, however. None know this better than the sorcerers of Nerekhall, some of whom have succumbed to the dark seduction of experimenting with magic drawn from the Ynfernaël. Fearful to provoke the wrath of the realm again, the Nerekhall warlocks of the Yillak Tower have since created the Ironbound: animated suits of armor ensorcelled to combat both corrupt warlocks and the enemies of the realm, but whose alien emptiness causes unease and distrust among Terrinoth's other soldiers.

Finally, you must learn of the secret weapon of our military legacy. Scattered throughout Terrinoth, beneath ruins and in the deep vaults of strongholds are hulking stone figures, carved in the likeness of men. They are the golems, and they are unknown to all but the barons, their generals, and the Runemasters of Greyhaven. No one knows precisely when they were crafted or by whom, but

each golem slumbers until a unique runebound shard is placed upon its brow. When a golem is awakened, it strides forth like a mighty rampart given the will and strength to fight, the arcane channels in its surface running bright with blue energy.

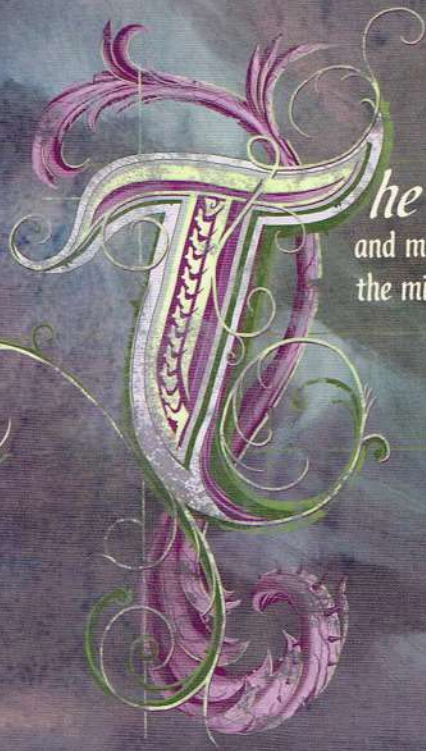
The forces of Terrinoth might well be needed again soon. A few strong-willed borderland captains have begun to call for the Council to show stronger unity and to bolster the borderlands forces in response to the threats that are mounting both within and without Terrinoth's borders. Rumors of deathly hosts emerging from the cold mists to the northwest and grotesque warbands gathering in the unforgiving east lend such reports a dire urgency. Does a new darkness gather on our borders like a storm that can be felt, but not yet seen? Up to this point, the Council has been slow to heed such calls for action.

Kari Wraithstalker, Hero of Rothfeld

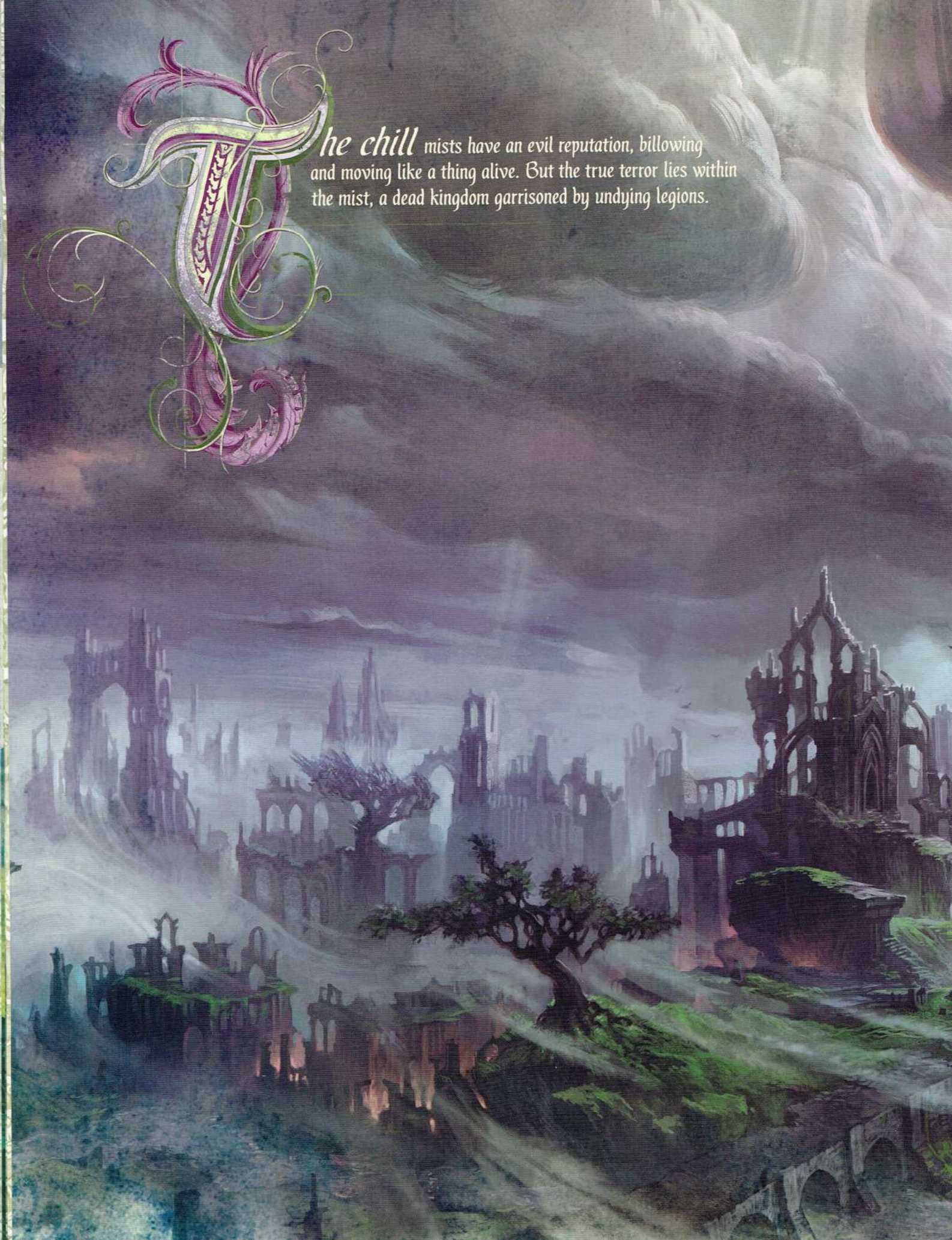
"Looking for Kari, Marshal? Well, you'll either want to head into the mist—hah!—or wait until she returns at dusk. The woman has no shred of fear, I'll swear to you, but even she has the sense not to pursue her dangerous prey at night when they are strongest. Yes, of course I mean the undead. Skeletons, spirits, you name it—she seems to have a knack for hunting and destroying them. If it ought to be dead, but isn't, you can bet she's found a way to remedy the error. The fiery hand of Kellos himself protects her, they say. Some say her own hands burn with his fire when she strikes down the foul undead. You've a few hours yet until dusk, Marshal. I recommend you wait at the inn yonder; she'll usually stop there for supper before going home, after a day of hunting. It's a better chance than tromping off into the mists to get yourself stuck in a bog. 'Course, then Kari might happen by to pull you out, so try your luck if you like! Hah!"

— Old woman doing laundry, when asked by a Marshal of the Citadel about the whereabouts of Kari Wraithstalker





The chill mists have an evil reputation, billowing and moving like a thing alive. But the true terror lies within the mist, a dead kingdom garrisoned by undying legions.





Waiqar the Undying

As scrivined by Kerridwen the Cold

In a time now lost in the mists of legend, a great man took an oath to stop the reckless work of a wise fool, and reshaped the history of our world. What passion and commitment fueled that oath with the power to transcend death itself, I would not presume to say. Waiqar made his vow, and to this day he is driven mercilessly to fulfill it. No force in the world will dissuade him.

Waiqar has since ruled the Mistlands from his hidden fastness of Zorgas, the crank of the Everliving Engine echoing through the chambers and across the battlements. Beyond Zorgas's ramparts, stinking swamps fill the hollows of this land like blood pooled on a battlefield. Little lives in this empty landscape, for nothing here is meant to live.

The Rise of the Deathborn Legion

Waiqar Sumarion was once a loyal friend to the wizard-lord Timmorran. Waiqar was the greatest general to stand against the might of Llovar and his locust swarm, the Uthuk Y'llan, during the First Darkness. When other champions of the free races stayed on the defensive, only Waiqar sallied forth into the dread east to bait the demon-worshippers in their own domain.

At first Waiqar Sumarion found success in the Char'gr Wastes, but he was eventually betrayed by the cowardice of his allies, taken prisoner, and tortured near unto death within the catacombs beneath the Black Citadel. Despite the torment, he was ever defiant; he worked to thwart Llovar's plans from within, ultimately aiding Timmorran in defeating the demonic shaman and his host.

— *The Deathborn Legion* is bound to its lord by the same dark curse that afflicts him. Their fealty has weathered the ruin of time and endured death itself.



The Lords of the Thirteenth Barony

Beyond the inner circle of Waiqar's oldest servants and champions, outside the halls of Zorgas, some of Waiqar's allies are borne only out of convenience.

The Lords of Bilehall are first among that order. In a blood-soaked ceremony that marked their last dawn as mortals, they broke their ties to their past and pledged their loyalty to Waiqar. Their ancestral home became forever swallowed by the Mistlands. They have more dealings, of one kind or another, with the outside world than perhaps any others who call the Land of Mists their home.

Far stranger and more enigmatic than my Lords of Bilehall, however, are the rulers of the Misty Hills. Lost in depths of time remote even to one of my kind, a prince of the ancient Penacor Kings fell under a heavy curse. The whispers claim that he was put to death, along with all of his most loyal companions, by his own father, a dreary-sounding old king, for some excesses he committed. The execution did not last, blessing us with the bleak, foreboding company of Lord Farrenghast of the Misty Hills.

Lord Farrenghast is the oldest among us. Revenants hundreds of years before Waiqar ever crossed the southern seas. Farrenghast and his archliches have haunted the Misty Hills for longer than even the Elves could rightly say. Answering Llovar's call during the First Darkness, Farrenghast and his terrible band proved to be some of the Locust Lord's most efficient allies. However, Waiqar defeated Farrenghast before his own fall, and the Lord of the Misty Hills was thought to have been forever vanquished.

Soon after retreating into the Mistlands at the end of the Second Darkness, Waiqar abandoned his encampment, making his way north into the mist-shrouded night. When he returned, two of Farrenghast's archliches were with him. No one knows what dark bargains were struck on that far-off heath, or what the Undying's purpose might have been in seeking out his old foe. But Farrenghast and his minions were allowed to stay in the Misty Hills, and they have been with us ever since.

Driven by a terrible purpose and dark anger, Waiqar bent himself to the destruction of the remnant Uthuk Y'llan, hounding them deeper into the Darklands and beyond. Tracking the last of the Uthuk warlords to the hidden canyon of Arlak, he struck down the barbarians with terrible power, shattering the Uthuk for an age or more.

In the end, Waiqar was betrayed by his closest friend and ally: the coward Timmorran tricked Waiqar into a confrontation beneath the walls of Meringyr, attempting to destroy the great warrior and his loyal legion. But Waiqar defied his one-time friend, shattering the spells cast against him and destroying Timmorran for his impudence. He defied the edifice of life and death, saving his legions from certain doom by remaking them into eternal champions, fueled by an unending vigilance against those who oppose our master's will. Ultimately, Waiqar's legion was forced back to his barony by the combined pressure of Humans, Elves, and Dwarves, all of whom had been poisoned against him by Timmorran's foul acolytes.

Even in defeat, Waiqar the Undying would not yield. Driven by a dark, powerful hunger, he now bends his will toward the destruction of all those who have opposed him. The fools who crouch upon the chairs of Terrinoth tremble at his name. There is no shadow but in which Waiqar has eyes to see. There is no council but in which Waiqar has secret friends who will convey to him every word and gesture. The tools of his vanquished archenemy, the shards of power that the living call the Stars of Timmorran,

are his undying goal. He will stop at nothing to gather them all. He collects them in his fortress, Zorgas, weaving dark magics that will in time see all the works of his foes undone and the power of Timmorran finally under Waiqar's wise dominion.

Armies of the Undying

The hosts of Lord Waiqar are as dauntless as the wind and as unstoppable as the slow march of time itself. They know neither hunger nor thirst, neither fear nor exhaustion. They flinch from no duty, and they will mercilessly crush any force that stands against them with the cold, impersonal weight of the grave.

The core of Waiqar's strength is the Deathborn Legion, those great champions who stood beside the general before the Tower of Meringyr. Struck down by the traitor Timmorran, they rose more powerful than anyone could have imagined. All mortal weakness had been burned away, leaving only the strength and resolve of bone and steel behind. Each of these undead lords now possesses the accumulated martial wisdom of untold centuries, and each now marches at the head of his own terrible army. Even a single member of the Deathborn Legion can turn the tide of battle. The reanimated undead warriors, archers, and cavalry of Waiqar's forces move with a single purpose when commanded by one of these champions of the Mistlands.

Even when these unparalleled champions fall, the echoes of their furor can be felt. When an original member of the Deathborn Legion falls in battle, his remains are collected with all

proper ceremony. The priests and necromancers render the champion's bones down into the dust of their primal essence. Fleshwrights and bonemasters then use this essence to reanimate the bodies of fallen enemy warriors. As the forces of Waiqar march to war, the corpses of those who fall before them are collected by the fleshwrights and bonemasters. The bodies are prepared to join the undead armies through rites and rituals formulated by the Undying One centuries ago.

Thus do the champions of the Deathborn Legion serve on, even after the end of their undead existence—the remains of each champion is enough to reanimate thousands of enemies. Built upon the bones of lesser foes, Reanimates do not match the prowess or reincarnate substance of the Deathborn, but they fill the ranks of the sorcerer-lord's armies with untiring dedication all the same.

The most powerful necromancers may enact such rites upon the corpses of fallen dragons. When raised under Waiqar's banner, these barrow wyrms terrify all who can hear the beat of their forlorn wings. Even the proudest Daqan host will tremble as their shadow passes overhead.

Waiqar's priests and necromancers are a force to be reckoned with even on their own, wielding powerful magics of death and decay. Wounds grow septic and suppurate at their command—flesh will necrotize and poison our foes from within. Few units can hold their ground under such agonizing wrath, fleeing across the battlefield only to be felled by a hail of arrows by our skeletal archers. Their bodies become yet more fodder for Waiqar's war machine.

What little thews the fleshwrights do not use are fed to the carrion worms that live on the edges of an encampment. As these creatures grow fat on the remains of Waiqar's enemies, they can be trained as swift and terrible mounts for our fiercest Reanimate knights. Acidic ichor drips from the carrion worms' maws, which when spewed upon our enemies can corrode nearly any metal, not to mention flesh.

For centuries now, these forces and others have haunted the Mistlands and beyond. Lord Waiqar's reach is long, and none may stand against him. Those who try, those who work to thwart his wishes or deny him his least desire, soon realize the error of their ways.



Ardus Ix'Erebus

When the Sundermen accompanied Timmoran Lokander back to Terrinoth to confront Llovar Rutonu, they were led by the greatest warriors Al-Kalim could boast. Their commander, Waiqar Sumarion, gathered about himself a small cabal of captains who formed a company of brave companions. Arduus Ix'Erebus was one of that elite band.

Ardus Ix'Erebus was a cold, methodical commander. His victories were many, but often more costly than some might have hoped. Throughout that terrible war, Ix'Erebus was often tasked with the most difficult objectives. In the climactic battle for Thelgrim Pass, his legion relieved the Dwarven city, shattering the besieging Uthuk Y'llan forces from behind their lines.

When Waiqar led his forces onto the Charg'r Wastes in search of Llovar's citadel, Arduus Ix'Erebus was forced to remain behind, recovering from grievous wounds. Thus he was not at his lord's side when the Sunderland armies were destroyed in the distant wastelands.

Ardus fought among Timmoran's forces that finally captured Llovar's citadel and freed Waiqar. He announced that he would never leave his lord's side again. Ix'Erebus's harsh, unyielding command style blended seamlessly with Waiqar's newfound, anger-fueled penchant for destruction.

When Waiqar's oath before Meringyr shattered his host, remaking them into the Deathborn Legion, Arduus Ix'Erebus was beside him. Since that day, he has been one of the Mistland's most renowned generals.



A hundred ashen-colored warriors thronged below Derwyn on the cracked plain, grasping barbed blades. Some silhouettes appeared wiry and ravening, with muscle corded like bowstring. Others hunched under the weight of swollen limbs, clenching their underslung jaws. Jagged bone erupted from the skin of nearly all the Uthuk, and the sulfur stench of the Ynfernaël caught in the back of Derwyn's throat.

The woman towered over most of the surrounding band, even without her high headdress of spiraling horns. Her arm quivered as she raised her blade above her firm, statuesque form. She could have been called beautiful, but her flawless skin was alabaster as a whitewood tree, and her eyes were red, unblinking orbs, like a rat's. Her full lips twitched rapidly between a pout and a grin. Derwyn whispered the name he had heard from another of his fellow Yeron Riders: "Malaana the Bloodwitch."

In the dust at her feet, upon his hands and knees, a prisoner's thick shoulders heaved as he choked and tore at the sinew cord around his neck with one hand. His Elven mail of untarnished scales still clung to his waist. How one of his fellow Ylwe could have been caught, Derwyn could not guess. There was no sign of the captured warrior's Yeron mount.

Derwyn had thought to attempt a rescue of his comrade, but the enemy was too numerous. He could do naught but watch, lying atop a sandstone pinnacle with his cloak drawn up over him. The rock warmed his body even through the supple leather of his riding harness. His cloak's glamor-weave sheltered him from the beating sun as well as the countless eyes of the victors

below. Elmwing concealed herself in a cleft of boulders behind him, her elegant legs folded up beneath her wings, and she held herself still as a forest pool.

The bloodwitch's saw-toothed knife curved inwardly, and the pale sun flashed along the blade's length as she drew it back. She held it there, trembling, and Derwyn heard the Uthuk mind-speech. His temples throbbed, but he took a deep breath, and let her words flow through him, like the wind.

The weak have forgotten who we are. We were exiles, yes—but heirs, also. Heirs to Llovar, the greatest of us all. The Uthuk band shrieked in agreement. Now the Westmen, the Dhawc and the Ylairc shall know the bite of Llovar's locusts once more! The voice echoed through his mind. He saw her bend forward and jerk her knife beneath the stoic Elf's neck.

Derwyn grimaced as crimson blood splattered onto the packed earth at the woman's feet. The Uthuk warrior who had been guarding the Elf grabbed the dying prisoner by the hair and thrust a twisted, sallow horn beneath the red stream. Within moments, the horn's brim overflowed. The warrior hesitated a moment before he extended it to the witch. Malaana smiled cruelly as she drank greedily from the horn, red trails dripping from her mouth.

Suddenly the hulking creature looming at Malaana's side moved in anger. He had the form of a hugely oversized man in limbs and head, but his visage and girth were bloated and obese beyond measure, covered in bulging, sagging tissue and sharpened, bony growths. Open gashes crisscrossed his enormous belly and thighs; the gashes wept a foul substance as he stepped his blasphemous frame forward.

The brute glared with piggish eyes as his keg-sized fist smashed into the face of the Uthuk warrior who had elected to present the horn of blood to Malaana. The warrior flew backward onto the parched dirt, while the dead body of the Elf flopped forward before Malaana's feet. Then, the creature's thick-tongued voice boomed angrily at the bloodwitch.

"I, Ravos the Ever-Hungry, took this Ylairc!" The rumble of his deep voice shook the gravel beside Derwyn, and his bulging face pumped with barely contained rage. "The spoils come to ME!"

The witch glared back at Ravos, her eyes glowed in momentary defiance before dimming slightly. In reconciliation, she gestured toward the prone warrior still recovering from Ravos's blow. The monstrous lord grunted in satisfaction and turned to follow Malaana's pointed hand.

The warrior looked up and tried to scamper backward, yelling in the cruel tongue of the Uthuk. His frantic retreat halted when Ravos slammed one of his huge iron-clad feet onto one of the warrior's shins.

Lord Ravos's wide mouth parted in a gruesome laugh, while two others stepped forward from among the watching band. Those creatures were smaller than Ravos but of his kin, as bloated and monstrous as their lord. Between them they carried a great scythe of bone covered in unholy bronzed scrawls. Ravos clenched his fat hands around the shaft, and without pause drove the tip of the curved blade into the belly of the Uthuk warrior. As the warrior shrieked and writhed, Ravos glanced





expectantly at Malaana. The witch raised her hands and began to chant some best-forgotten verse, the sound of which flayed sharply against Derwyn's soul.

The Uthuk warrior began to change, and his screams quickly turned to a whimpering gargle. His eyes smoked and yellowed, while his body began to foully bloat and extend as if the scythe was filling the man beyond the bursting point with some profane liquid. The facial structure of the warrior extended and warped; his mouth widened to repulsive proportions. Ravos and his fellow obscene warriors joined in Malaana's chant to welcome their new brother. The rest of the normal Uthuk warriors watched in barely disguised fright.

Derwyn had seen enough. This was no simple raiding band from the distant east, but the vanguard of something far more dangerous. The scout pulled himself up and crept back to the boulders. Behind him, the chanting continued.

He reached Elmwing and placed his head against her muzzle. She stirred, rising silently onto her marble hooves. She stretched her wings and the plumage caught the sun, rippling in bands of color. Derwyn leapt into his high-cantled saddle as her pinions began to beat, and the pair rose swiftly into the arid sky.

All haste would be needed on their return southward.

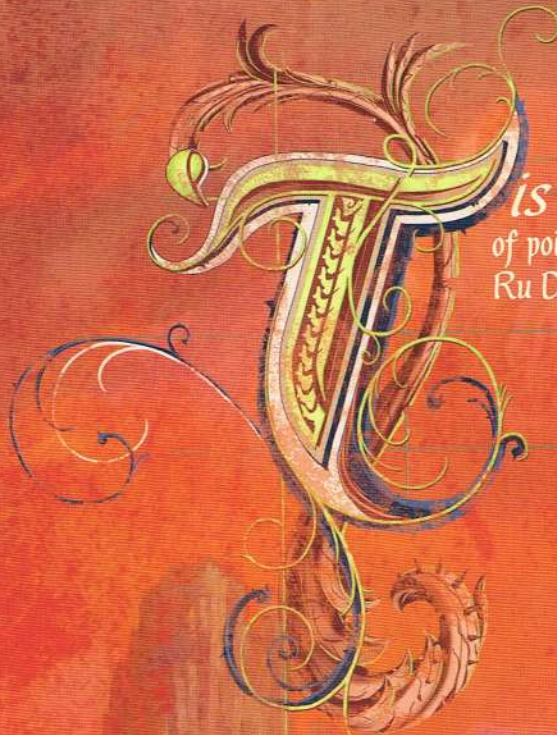
They circled behind the butte, and Derwyn risked a glance behind him. His gaze locked immediately on the witch, and her blood-colored stare bore into him across the distance. The orbits of his eyes ached for a moment, but then it passed.

Elmwing snorted forcefully, and Derwyn felt a shiver run through her flank and up her back. For a moment, her wings stopped beating, but he leaned and grasped her side tightly with his legs, and kept his seat. As they glided through the air, the terrible scene he had witnessed slowly shrank behind them.

Suddenly Elmwing tossed her head madly, and he had to struggle with the bridle as she kicked at the air. He laid his hand upon her neck to steady her, as he had so many times before, but her boiling skin forced him to recoil in pain just before foaming blood began to stream from her eyes and nostrils. "Elmwing!"

The pair hurtled groundward, the wind no longer their ally. In a sudden vision, Derwyn saw locusts stripping the leaves of the Aymhelin, the forest's emerald hue fading to stark brown. Lady Latariana, he thought, let one of the other riders make it through.

He heard only a shrill laugh in reply as the ground overtook him.



*T*his is a broken land of rock and bone,
of poisoned dust and choking smoke. Nothing grows in the
Ru Darklands save evil, and nothing dwells there but death.





The Uthuk Y'llan

*Excerpts from the chronicles of Aotorius of Greyhaven,
Professor of History, Emeritus, College of the Everstone*

East beyond the careful watch of Hernfar Isle in Terrinoth's northeast, and as far south as the edge of the Aymhelin, the sun-bleached steppes of the Ru gleam across the wide Lothan River. Stretching as far into the east as anyone has dared to range, the inhospitable Darklands were once home to the vicious, demon-worshipping tribes of the Uthuk Y'llan. The parched ground of that cursed realm has known more blood than rain throughout its shadowed history.

Somewhere within the unending wastes is said to be the dreaded Black Citadel, the mythic fortress purportedly constructed by Llovar Rotonu with the blood and bones of captives taken during the First Darkness.

Nothing but harsh scrub and thorny trees grow in the Ru. Fell energies leach from hidden valleys containing rifts into the Ynfernael itself. Once the Ru was a sea of wild grasses from horizon to horizon, but the foul touch of dark masters has corrupted the land, rendering what was once green now brown and sere. Today, to venture into the Ru is to take your life into your hands. If its howling, blood-starved creatures do not kill you, the land most certainly will. Worse, dark rumors forebode the return of an ancient enemy from unknown exile in the distant east.

Rise of the Locust Swarm

The earliest surviving accounts of Timmorran Lokander and the First Darkness, thought to have been penned by a founding wizard of this university, tell us that Llovar was a shaman of the Uthuk, originally but one tribe of a nomadic people called the Loth K'har, or "Dream Walkers." The accounts are unclear on the precise relationship between Timmorran and Llovar, but both were of that people. It is more certain that Llovar was already a leader when Timmorran was born, for chronicles suggest that the same night the great wizard was born, the dark shaman embraced the evil which would forever stain the Uthuk. Even if this was poetic approximation, scholars agree that Timmorran was born when Llovar was already a man and in the midst of his life's dark direction. Some sources speculate that this is related to Timmorran's great power in some way; the wizard's magic was an antithesis to the darkness wrought by Llovar.

And darkness it was. After wiping out or annexing any rival Loth K'har tribes, Llovar's horde became known as the Uthuk Y'llan, or "Locust Swarm." A bonewitch named Q'aro Fenn purportedly attended and advised him, and reference to others in Llovar's court may be found scattered across the histories: Melinesh the Terrible, Nashaia, Da'Roul Bonesplicer, and Kul. Corrupted and bodily twisted by Llovar's demonic magic, the Uthuk Y'llan set their sights on the west and began a bloody invasion of Talindon, the Dunwarr Mountains, and even the eastern boughs of the Aymhelin. Combined with the dread might of the Orcs and the

revenants from the Misty Hills, the Uthuk threatened to consume and destroy all.

The realms of Humankind, Elves, and Dwarves stood against Llovar's hordes as well as they could, but all seemed destined for collapse. Yet, as the hour grew darkest, Timmorran returned to Terrinoth from his hiding place in the Sunderlands to stand against his kinsman's onslaught. He brought with him powerful allies such as Ashan the Elder and Waiqar Sumarion.

After much effort and much tragedy, including the end of House Penacor, the tide of the Uthuk Y'llan was slowly turned. After years-long struggle, the war came to its climax as the remnant forces of the free races clashed with Llovar's great host at the charnel pit known to history as the Battle of the Locusts. This was where Timmorran slew Llovar, and that battle is believed to mark the end of the First Darkness. The Host of Thorns, gathered to the dark shaman's banner, was shattered once its leader fell. Tragically, Timmorran's victory was not without sacrifice: the Elven king Triamlavar, Ashan the Elder, and Deeplord Halgir Grumson were all counted among the slain that day.

Some exaggeration must be assumed in the later retellings of this event. Since all surviving documents agree that the demonic host could have wiped out the lands of Humans, Elves, and Dwarves, the idea that slaying a single man ended the threat seems romantic at best. On the other hand, it is well understood in scholastic circles that the runebound shards are but fragments of a massive orb of power wrought by Timmorran. If Llovar had power on a similar scale, then we can only be glad he was cast down, so that the darkness could be destroyed.

Passage into Legend

Llovar's followers have not been heard from since the end of the First Darkness and the scouring of the Ru that occurred in the years that followed the Battle of the Locusts. Just fifty years ago, the wizard Rhys performed a study of the Ru, but he was unable to confirm the existence of any remnant of the old enemy, nor any significant population to speak of. Despite no record remaining of where Llovar was taken after he fell in battle, the most respected scholars believe that the seeds and legacy of the First Darkness has passed from the world into legend—Llovar's people, the demon-tainted lineage of the Loth K'har, no longer exist.

Some recent observations of the Ru have yielded reports of Uthuk sightings. This news is widely dismissed in Greyhaven as mere gangs of bandits or perhaps isolated groups of savages that may have taken refuge in those forsaken lands. The true Locusts, the Y'llan, were arrogant in their power, their numbers legion, and they were accompanied not only by bloodthirsty witches and shamans, but by powerful Ynfernael demons. Not a single reliable report of true blood sorcery or the presence of demons can be found today, and the scholars stand firm: what was crushed and rooted out cannot be conjured up again at so late a date.

If the impossible did happen, if the terrors of the First Darkness were to return, the Baronies of Daqan would almost assuredly

fall. It was said that the Uthuk's numbers were so great, they blackened the land like a blight on a field of grain. Demons as tall as castles attended the commands of the Uthuk lords. On top of that, their strength was beyond that of mortals, and injuring them only seemed to increase their power thanks to their foul blood magic. Indeed, we must be grateful this threat lives on only in books, for today we have none as great as Timmorran, and such Ynfernaël powers as wielded by Uthuk would destroy us all.

Warlords and Warbands

The Uthuk Y'llan hordes differed from the Orcish tribes of the Broken Plains in the rage and bloodlust of their warbands. To herald their own arrival, the Uthuk carried not banners, but grisly pikes adorned with the bones and scraps of their victims. Fueled by bloodshed and dark magic, Uthuk attacks were especially devastating against the peasants and general citizenry. Unlike most military forces, which would attempt to capture resources, the Uthuk Y'llan seemed to revel in sowing suffering, fear, and despair. They left only blackened soil and ash in the wake of their hordes. Survivors who begged for mercy were slaughtered or taken prisoner to be tortured or used in rites of blood or bone.

The Uthuk hosts seemed fueled by the death and fear they sowed, not as one, but as dozens of war hosts, as likely to prey on each other as to do battle with the armies of Terrinoth and their allies. The demon-touched barbarians looked to the strongest among them for leadership. Tension often existed between the strongest warriors or the demon-wranglers of a warhost, and the host's shamans and witches, who drew their powers from the Ynfernaël.

What the warriors lacked in magical prowess, they made up for in their sheer speed and ferocity. The berserkers served as the shock troops, seemingly undeterred by any attempt to stop them. Archers from the Viper Legion tipped their arrows with the heads of snakes to deliver painful poisons. Massive obscenes paved the way for the ensuing blood bath, their corpulent forms capable of withstanding blow after blow from an entire unit of infantry. Nipping at their heels were the fearsome fleshrippers, beasts the color of blood that would kill and consume all in their path.

The weapons carried by the Uthuk Y'llan were curved, barbed, and wicked-looking; they were usually fashioned out of bone or some mysterious, dark metal. The hordes clad themselves in harnesses of leather and bone—both human and animal—to strike terror into the hearts of their victims, and to let the blood from the hordes' wounds fuel their leaders' evil sorcery. In some cases, it was impossible to tell whether the spikes and spurs protruding from the barbarians were a part of their armor or instead some by-product of their corruption. The strange foci of the bonewitches, fashioned from horn and fang and claw, could be horrifyingly potent, and the demons summoned from the Ynfernaël wielded eldritch weapons of their own.

Ynfernaël Sorcery

Llovar Rotonu doomed his entire people when he struck a pact with the demons that had called to him from a forgotten Ynfernaël rift. As Llovar's corruption bled into the great eastern plains, it seeped into his people, and the very bodies of the nomadic tribesmen would twist and change as talon-like bone-spurs grew to protrude blasphemously from their skulls and bodies. In some, the malignancies became the fuel for the dark Uthuk magic so feared on the battlefield; bonewitches could twist the bones of their followers into weapons or break the bones of their enemies. Bloodwitches could heal themselves and their minions with the spilled blood of their enemies, or sing their foes' blood to boiling in their veins.

But the true might of the Uthuk's power lay in the demons that marched with their hordes. According to the writings of Brother Ayden of Vynelvale, demons and other Ynfernaël abominations manifested through dark rituals performed in secret by warlocks, likely involving blood sacrifice. The more cunning demons could wield powerful sorcery of their own, while the chaos lords acted as a siege weapons or assault forces to break through defenses. In battle, these demons were rare but nigh invincible, and they inspired terror in any who gazed upon their horrible forms.





Atariana ascended to the stars in the great glade that lies at the heart of the Aymhelin, the great forest. Her children have dwelled beneath its emerald boughs for untold ages, living among its mighty trees and alongside countless wondrous creatures.



The Latari Elves

Recited by Loremaster Erenil, a Verdelaam daughter of the Latari, to the young nobles in the sylvan city of Therial

The Aymhelin—the greatest forest in all of Mennara—stretches from the south of Terrinoth and west of the Ru to the southern ocean. Its great trees reach their ivory trunks up into pure skies, while the spreading canopies cast green-tinged shadows on the forest floor below.

To the lesser races, the glades and paths of this wondrous realm would seem a paradise, inhabited by all manner of fantastical creatures that belong solely in myth and legend. But for all its beauty, we children of the Latari know this beautiful forest realm is no better than a prison.

Except for the rare sylvan glade ensnared by the Fae, or the isolated murky valley infested by the Dimora, the Aymhelin is our undisputed domain. Tangled undergrowth snares the uninitiated, while deep shadows hide our unnervingly watchful Elven sentinels. Our cities and palaces sweep gracefully among the trunks of the deep wood, the elegant structures and the forest balanced in a magnificent eternal dance. Only on the distant Ailatar, the Plain of Stars, does the Latari capital of Lithilin stand free from the canopies of the blessed trees.

There, among the sparkling white towers and terraces, does our tale begin. Be as the deep roots of the Aymhelin, which drink of the deep waters, and take in this memory of the Latari, of our roots and our shame, which are as deep as the world.



The Tears of Latariana

Who knows not the song of Emorial? Of Latariana, our namesake, our foremother? They were the highest among us, and too proud. Condemned by our forebears' anger, their desire, we now live bound to this world, our crown of tears.

We bear the Tears of our foremother. Our name speaks eternally of she who was first fallen and first forgiven. We are her eleven Tears, and the Latari is one of the ten, for the eleventh now lives in shadow. We remember what others never knew, that before the Humans and Dwarves walked this world, the eleventh Tear brought the first darkness. We now call it the *Ynfetaar*, the Tear of Shadow.

The *Ynfetaar* tribe and its lord, Malcorne, was of the unrepentant who believed that as the Emyrean had let us fall, would not the *Ynfernael* lift us up? However evil a thought, and however unthinkable that ideology may seem to us, Malcorne and those other mistaken souls were our siblings, our kin. When we made war, the blood we spilled was our own. Elf slew Elf, and our battles not only scarred the lands, but tore at the fabric of the Void. One need only look north to the Ru to see that not all wounds from that ancient war are healed.

It was the darkness and corruption of that war which sparked the light in our unwanted children.

For the disturbance in the Void caused by the War of the Shadow Tear warped many living things, and it bore fruit in Human and Dwarf, Ventala and Leonx, and so many creatures. The old songs teach us that there is always light, even when darkness seems to consume all. The first Humans and Dwarves were strange creatures who initially seemed like animals, but they walked and came to talk in their own fashion. The lives of Humans are but a single breath, and those of Dwarves but one breath more. But still, these children whom we did not seek bring into this world art and artifice, beauty and valor. We should neither abandon them nor ignore them, as we have in the past.

Recall, my kin, how the Humans made our same mistakes. When a shaman of the Loth Caara was tempted by the *Ynfernael*, another great darkness came into the world and the *Ylwe* did not escape its ravages. When the Locusts were finally scattered, how many Elves had died to repel the swarm? Had we but reached out to the Humans, taught them our songs, shared with them our memory, could such a tragedy had been averted?

And the shadows gather once more. A duty of our Yeron Riders, one which they have kept since the War of the Locusts, remains to overfly the Ru and watch, lest the Locusts return. Each year, the riders report, "The Locust is gone, it does not swarm." And so year upon year, century upon century, these have been the good words. But the song of history changes. This year our riders saw signs of the old enemy and they spoke the words we did not want to hear: "The Locust has returned, it swarms." A forgotten fear is rekindled in our hearts. If the Locusts have indeed returned, we must warn our children.

Ballads of Heroes

And who shall rise to the challenge of the foul winds? Remember the ranks of our armies, the deadly beauty that defends our realm. How long since the captivating lethal dance of the Darnati has been used in battle? Eleven by eleven their square of shield and spear; eleven for the Tears, with one empty place in each line, in memory of our kin who lost their way. How swiftly they shift their steps, facing any foe with a forest of razor tips. No words of sorrow describe our swordmasters in their constant practice. In full armor, with great blades made heavy to carve through mounted foes, they match their movements in the practice glade to battlefield needs. No heart could fail to swell upon hearing the thunderous roar when practice culminates in their massed charge. Such a charge has not been called for on the battlefield since the dragonlords burned half the world. Yet, if a darkness rises again, we must meet it.

Strike true, keen-eyed archers, and keep the forces of darkness at bay. Let fly woodsung shaft, on gift-feather wings. Ten thousand times ten thousand arrows have you loosed in peace, until the bow's kiss is as the touch of your own fingers, your bodies reaching across one thousand yards. Let fly now in war, and bring death beneath the shadowed eaves. Hold the green gate and bring peace for the next age.

Our scholars of magic stay not idle when we bear our banners to battle. The light and air are our allies, protecting us through our healers and mystics, and driving out foes through our sorcerers. A handful of mystics may protect hundreds of our soldiers from wounds, while a like number of sorceresses may defeat equal hundreds of foes through upheavals of nature's force. The tales and victories of the mages and mystics are without number; hardly a battle has been fought for the Aymhelin in which our magic did not win the day.

The forest guardians have ever been at our side in times of need. They are of the Aymhelin itself, the very sinew and muscle of our home. Even now they creak and groan, tasting in the wind and sun and water that war is upon us. The ancients of the wood may march with us when their anger is roused by the evil of our foes or the strength of our songs. The strength and toughness of the forest guardians is unmatched short of that of the dragons. Just one great tree is enough to tip any battle in our favor, and a handful can dispatch armies. Remember the Twelve Oaks, that grand grove of tall old trees. When the monster we called Reason's End destroyed so many lives just a handful of decades ago, its rampage ended when it stepped into the grove of the Twelve.

Let us praise also the champions of Summersong, where brave Leonx Riders defended our lands against the forces of conniving barons. Though the riders are of low status, and shunned by some for their passions and roughness, those of us who forge a bond with the Leonx gain a share of their strength and ferocity. These riders operate alone or in small family groups, like their beast-friends. Their attacks are unlike those our foes expect

Magic of the Elves

We are the people of light trapped in the darkness of our sin. Despite our fall, we ever seek to rejoin the First and the Empyrean. Latariana accepted her fate, and in so doing left us a way by which to atone. Her Path of the Stars leads to Latariana's Door, and both are found in each Elf, waiting to be uncovered. Advancing upon her Path, and by the power of the Tears, we may feel a touch of the Empyrean as if touching a stone heated by a sun that we cannot see. Still, such warmth heals and protects. But there is another power, one not of the Empyrean or the Ynfernaël, an energy which comes through the very Turning of the Void itself. Some Elven mages and sorceresses are scholars of this difficult-to-distill force, focusing the natural power it creates: fire, lightning, wind, hail.

Study and devotion make not the sum of our magic. Our namesake left a great power to us: Latariana's Tears, eleven powerful magical gemstones as ancient as our fall itself. The magic of the Empyrean is in them more than it is in anything else in this world, and the leaders of the original Elven tribes were each entrusted with one such Tear. Three of the ten tribes we have lost; their Tears are now guarded by Lord Aeoneth who sits in the Caelcira palace in the midst of the Aymhelin. At his side sits the half-Elven Maegan Cyndewin, who has the remaining claim to the *Ynfetaar*, that Tear which came under shadow causing the true First Darkness and which disappeared after Lord Malcorne's ultimate defeat.

from us, savage and brutal. A few of these beast-attuned warriors can turn the tide of a day with the surprising onslaught they bring to the field. Shun not those who bond with the great cats! The Leonx Riders have proven themselves before, not only recently, but many times. Though they become so like the great cats they ride, they are still of our people.

The rare and sacred Yeron have dwelled within the Aymhelin for as long as we have, but unlike us, they are not stained by sin. Blessed by light and air, they may freely travel between the world below and the heavens above. Their pure white coats and feathers shimmer even in the softest starlight, and their mighty wings can hold them aloft for hours at a time. All who are blessed to ride one know their wisdom and grace; they are always good friends and staunch allies.

Welcome and hail these heroes, whose time to protect our lands has come. The world shudders once more against the coming of the darkness, but by the grace of light and air we might be redeemed of our sins.

Gerin Sinder stomped his feet on the old battlement to force some warmth into them. When he'd left his family's small farm to march halfway across the barony, he'd envisioned grand scenes of glory and fame. Instead, he was freezing half to death, standing watch over the quiet border into the Mistlands, much as he'd watched the cows at home.

He stomped his feet again and then cursed as his helmet slid down over his eyes. With a huff he threw down his spear and clutched at the pot helm. He almost threw that into the mist-shrouded darkness as well before a heavy cough behind him made him jump.

Sergeant Oswin stared at him with flat, unforgiving eyes.

"Sorry, Sergeant." He stooped quickly to pick up his weapon, keeping the helmet tight to his head with the other hand. "I didn't—I mean, I wasn't..."

His commander blinked once, his eyes narrow. "I don't need to hear it, Sinder." One strong hand clamped down on Gerin's shoulder and turned him toward the darkness beyond the decaying garrison tower on which they were standing. Nearby, the faint lights of Helderville had begun to dim as the villagers turned in for the night.

"I need you to keep your eyes turned toward the mist. If anything comes at us, it'll come from that direction."

Gerin nodded, clutching the polearm in both hands, the cold forgotten for the moment.

With a sharp nod, Oswin turned, disappearing to terrorize the next conscript on the crumbling battlement. Gerin watched him until the tall man's outline faded into the rising fog before letting out a sigh.

He'd left his farm, marched for days across green, fertile, unclaimed land that any farmer would have been proud to own, to stand watch over these low rolling hills. The Council at Archaut had funded the Mistwatch for as long as anyone could remember, and the mists had stayed silent.

Over generations, settlers had arrived to plant their crops in the very

shadow of dread realm, undeterred by old stories of ghosts and bogeymen just beyond the bordering fogs.

Everyone knew the stories, of course. What parent had not used tales of wights and skeletons to scare foolish children into behaving? But who believed that sort of thing nowadays? Might as well rant about the First Darkness, or claim to have found a runestone. Everyone knew the terrors of the Mistlands were only stories.

Gerin clutched the spear tighter in numb fingers. Everyone knew that. Right?

A cracking sound from the darkness broke the silence. He stood up straighter. The sergeant-at-arms wasn't going to catch him out twice in one night, he vowed. Gerin squinted into the darkness. There was nothing there.

But the sound came again. Again there was no movement to betray the presence of anyone, friend or foe, in the darkness beyond.

Then a muffled cry rose from the direction of Helderville. More distant shouts from the village soon followed, alarmed shouts at first, but then screams of fear, and then of pain. Gerin bent over the battlement, squinting in the direction of the nearby village. He couldn't see a thing, and he didn't know what to do.

The garrison commander, Captain Harlon, called out from somewhere inside the garrison's lone tower, rallying the troops from their beds. Gerin turned toward the voice to see the beacon lit at the top of the tower, the signal for the surrounding countryside to flee and warn other Mistwatch garrisons.

In the years that Gerin had been with the garrison, the beacon had only been lit to mark festivities and special occasions. It was ominous now to see its fiery glow reflect in the undulating fogs that rose from the moist grounds below the tower after sundown.

A clanging rush of soldiers holding swords, bows, and spears in nervous hands came up behind him, most glancing off to their left toward Helderville.

"What's happening?" One soldier grabbed at Gerin's arm, but all Gerin could do was shake his head.



"Attention!" Captain Harlon pushed his way through the mob of nervous soldiers crowding the battlement. "I'll have your attention!" Gerin had to admit, the man made quite a brave sight in his full plate armor, brandishing a sword with a glowing gemstone in its pommel. "There's probably a wolf or bear on the loose in Rothfeld, but we will respond to this disturbance by the book. Jerras, open the gate! You men, follow me to Helderville to see what this trouble is about." The captain pointed at Gerin and the men that huddled around him.

Sergeant Oswin sniffed as the men made their way down the worn stairs from the battlement. "In sixteen years, I've never seen anything come out of those fogs other than the odd turtle and love-hungry rabbit. I doubt you'll see anything else tonight, boys."

For a moment, Gerin thought the sergeant could be right. Beyond the old gate, the night was quiet, and the noises from Helderville had subsided. The Captain gestured for the group to move toward the village.

And then the monster strode out of the mists.

It had the shape of a tall and powerfully built man encased in heavy, ornate steel, with branching antlers sweeping back proudly from its head. Within the shadows of its helm burned two embers of purple light, like enormous amethysts buried in its skull.

Skull. The thought froze in Gerin's mind. A grinning, terrible skull peered out at him from behind the rim of the ornate helmet, eyes ablaze.

"So this little tower still stands?" The voice was cold, gravelly, and deep. "You children of Daqan have always been stubborn." Somehow, the lipless grin managed to convey a sneer.

Gerin and the other soldiers stepped back in fright, but Captain Harlon would have none of it. With a graceful movement of his arm, he drew his ancestral sword and stepped forward to face the undead warrior.

A glimmer of amusement sparkled in the eyes of the enemy.

With a noble yell, Captain Harlon set upon the enemy. Two silver-chased axes rose in challenge in the dark air.

It was over before it even began. The captain's sword was struck, knocked ringing off to the side, as the second axe swept in with a sickening crunch. With a grunt, Harlon fell to one knee. The monster kicked the sword away, and casually drove an axe into Harlon's skull with a wet thunk, dropping the bleeding man into the dewy grass.

"You'll be welcome in our ranks, Captain." The violet eyes swept the small band of soldiers, who began to nudge backward again. "Who'll be next to join the legions of Waiqar the Undying?"

Gerin wrung his hands around the haft of his weapon, ready to either throw it down or take it up in defense of the realm. A few of the soldiers stopped their hesitant retreat and leaned forward, bravery in numbers almost enough to overcome their fear.

Then a chill wind rippled over the wet grass, twirling the fog into unholy patterns. Amid the whistling of the wind, Gerin heard the sickening groan of creaking bones and clinking chains. An undead army emerged from the veil of mist, its soldiers' glowing eyes and dead grins anticipating the welcome violence and conquest.

Gerin never heard his spear hit the dirt behind him as he turned and pushed through his stunned companions. His breath was little more than ragged sobs. Soon, he had left them all behind, heedless of the cold, the pain, the shame.

Behind him, the cries of the dying rose into the pitiless night.



