Wrath of Kings

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Game Concepts

Anyone who says, 'We're all in this together,' has never tried putting seven people in a lifeboat built for six."

– Commander Rikyos,
4th Hadross Battle Squadron

Wrath of Kings employs a number of concepts and terms that players use throughout the game.

Game Terms

Element: Anything on the table that your models interact with during play is an element. This includes things like terrain pieces and models, but not markers, for example.

Army: All models brought to the table for a player.

Friendly: All models in your army are friendly.

Enemy: All models not in your army are enemy.

Model: Models are miniatures that represent either player's army on the table. Terrain and markers are not models.

Terrain: Terrain makes up the non-model elements of the battlefield, such as trees, ruins, rocks, and more. Objectives act as special types of terrain and are described later.

Marker: Many effects require you to place markers on the table. These markers are not elements and serve only as reminder of in game effects, such as tracking damage.

Contact: Many rules refer to two elements being in contact. Contact is defined as two or more elements being base-to-base, or having one base overlap another element such as terrain.

Activation: During a player's turn they will "activate" a model, moving it and performing various attacks and effects. This period is known as a model's "Activation".

Maneuver: There are two steps each model will take when it activates, Maneuvering is one of them. This term refers to a model moving up to its Mobility value in inches.

Action: There are two steps each model will take when it activates; its Action is one of them. This term refers to various attacks and effects a model may perform during its Activation.

Engaged: If a model is in contact with one or more enemy models, it is engaged.

Unengaged: If a model is not in contact with any enemy models, it is unengaged.

Attacker: A model performing an attack action.

Defender: A model with dice assigned to it by an attack or enemy action.

Hit: Many effects (usually attacks) generate hits. Hits are compared against a model's Resilience to determine if damage is caused.

Damage: Many effects (usually attacks) cause damage on a model. When a model suffers damage equal to its Wounds Stat, it is removed from the game as a casualty.

Active: Many effects will refer to "active" models. A model is "active" at all times during its Activation.

Round: Wrath of Kings is played over a number of Rounds. Each Round is composed of a series of Turns.

Turn: A player's "Turn" describes when they are performing a model's Activation.

Measuring

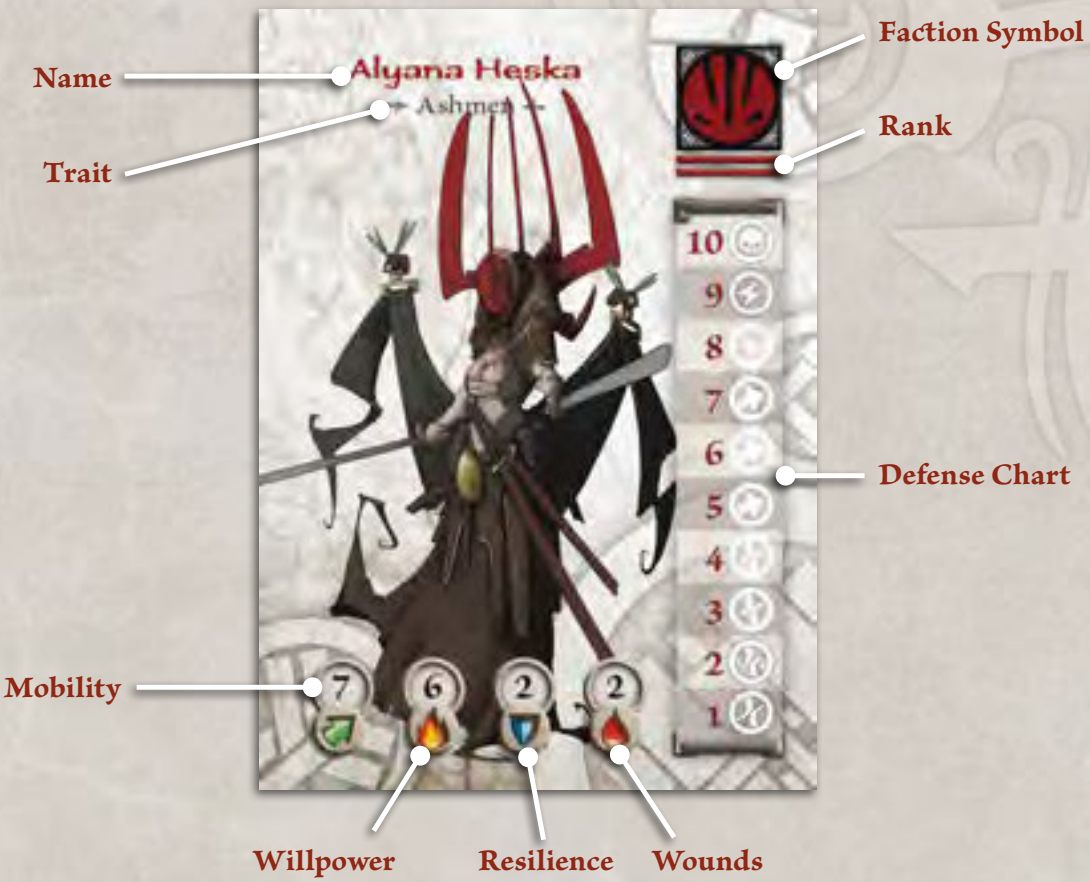
The distance between models and other game elements matters a great deal. You may measure distances on the battlefield at any time. All distances are measured using inches. Actions with a Range Stat may affect elements that have any part of their base within the listed range. When checking the distance between two elements, you always measure from the closest point on the base of the first element to the closest point on the base of the second.

Dice

Wrath of Kings uses ten-sided dice (D10). A variety of circumstances will require you to roll multiple dice. No matter how many dice you roll, read each die individually to find the results. Never add die results together. Wherever possible, roll all the dice involved at the same time. Because each die produces an individual result, combining the rolls this way speeds up play.

Re-rolls

When you re-roll a die, you only count the results of the second roll. Ignore any previous result. A single player may not re-roll a die more than once. This includes any combination of forced or optional re-rolls. Any required re-rolls are resolved before any optional re-rolls. The attacking player resolves their attacking re-rolls before the defender resolves their defending



re-rolls. This means the resolution order of re-rolls is: Required Attacker, Required Defender, Optional Attacker, Optional Defender.

Timing Conflicts

When 2 events need to resolve at the same time, the attacker's effects go first, then defender's.

In any other instance the player whose turn it is decides the order in which the events resolve.

Stat Cards

Every model in Wrath of Kings has a number of statistics (stats) that describe its abilities on the battlefield.

Mobility : This is the maximum distance, in inches, a model can move when it maneuvers.

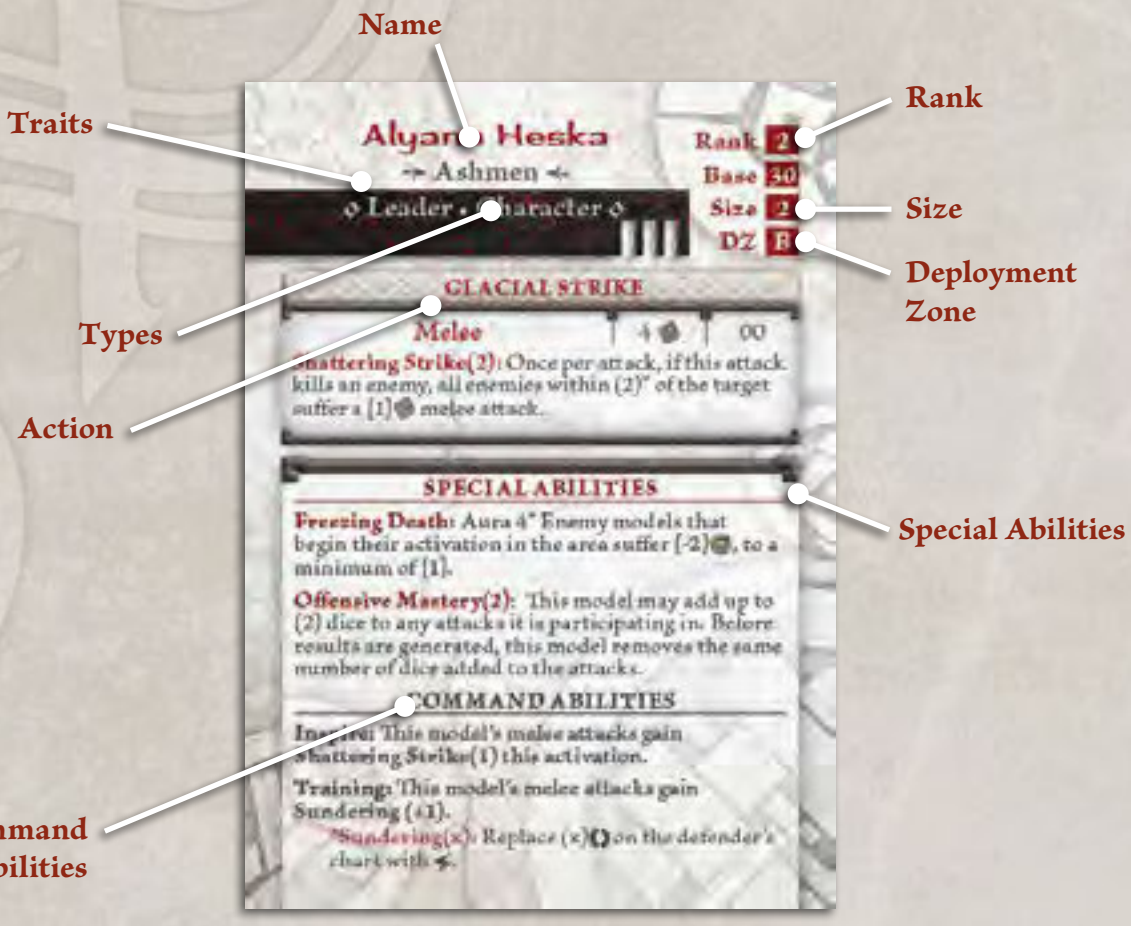
Willpower : This measures a model's mental fortitude. This stat is used when performing Will Checks and Will Attacks.

Resilience : Resilience measures how difficult it is to wound this model. Models suffer 1 damage each time they receive hits equal to their Resilience. (See Damaging a model pg.13)

Wounds : This measures how much damage a model can sustain. When a model accumulates damage equal to its Wounds, it is removed from the game as a casualty.

Traits: Traits are various keywords that describe a model. While they do not inherently do anything, many other rules and effects will reference a model's Traits.

Rank: Models are broken into Ranks. A higher rank usually means the model is more skilled or rare and often is more powerful then lower ranked models. Ranks are used for force construction purposes.



Name: This is what each model is referred to during gameplay or force construction.

Trait: Traits are various keywords that describe a model. While they do not inherently do anything, many other rules and effects will reference a model's Traits.

Type: A model's Type defines its purpose on the battlefield and is used during force construction. Types include Infantry, Specialist, Leader, and Character.

Size: This represents how much space a model takes up. Many effects will reference a model's "Size". A model's Size can be any number greater than 0.

Base: This is the size of an element's base (such as: 30mm, 40mm, 50mm, and 80mm). Note that the rules for terrain bases are different. See Terrain (See Pg.16)

Rank: Models are broken into Ranks. A higher rank usually means the model is more skilled or rare and often is more powerful then lower ranked models. Ranks are used for force construction purposes.

Deployment Zone (DZ): This indicates where you may place a model on the battlefield at the start of the game. (See Battlefield Setup, PG. 15, for more information on deployment.).

Attack/Special Actions: All models will have 1 or more Attacks. Some might even have a number of special actions they can perform during their activation. For more information see the "Activations" section, PG. 10.

Special Abilities: These are the various unique effects and powers a model may have. Each one will give specific definitions and instructions on its use.

Command Abilities: Models with the "Leader" type often have powerful effects and powers they can confer to the troops under their command. These are listed here. For more information see the Leaders section, Pg. 8.

2 The Defense Chart

The Defense Chart represents the various ways a model avoids incoming attacks and offensive effects. When a model is attacked, the attacking model will compare their attack roll results to the target's Defense Chart to determine the effects of the attack.

Note that while there are many potential results on the Defense Chart, unless the result generates a Hit, the result, whatever it may be, usually means the attack has missed in some fashion.

Overpower: The attack has massively overcome the target's defenses. Each result generates 2 Hits.

Strike : The attack penetrates the target's defenses, potentially injuring the defender. Each die producing a *Strike* result causes one hit.

Magic: The defender possesses some form of magical defense and mystically defeats the attack. *Magic* results can potentially cause a magical backlash (see Magical Attacks).

Parry: The defender harmlessly parries the attack out of the way.

Block: The defender blocks the attack with their shield or weapon.

Armor: The defender's armor takes the brunt of the attack, leaving the target unharmed.

Dodge: With nimble ease, the defender dodges the attack, avoiding injury.

Modifying the Defense Chart

A variety of effects and abilities may alter a target's Defense Chart, turning select results into successful hits instead of misses.

When a Special Ability or effect modifies a specific result on a target's Defense Chart, it always modifies the highest specified result(s) on the chart.

Example: An attack has the ability "Sundering (1): Replace 1 result on the defender's chart with ." If the target has at least 1 result on their Defense Chart, their highest result becomes a result instead.

If a target does not have an entry on its Defense Chart that matches the entry in the ability, the ability has no effect.

So, using the above example, the Sundering(x) ability would have no effect on the Defense Chart of a model with no results.

In addition, some abilities may replace multiple results on a target's Defense Chart. In this case it still modifies the highest specified results on the chart.

Example: An attack with the Sundering(2) ability would convert the TWO highest results on the target's chart into results.

Special Ability Rules

Many special abilities follow similar guidelines. Those guidelines are outlined here:

Aura

Auras are abilities that can affect a large area. Each aura will have an (x)" value, where (x) is the number of inches you measure from the source's base to determine the area that is affected.

Abilities with Variables

Some abilities have a variable associated with them, such as Sundering (1), in this case the 1 is the variable. The ability will have special rules to denote how to use this variable and what affect it has. Some abilities do not have a variable.

Cumulative

Variables written with a (+) are cumulative, meaning that they are added to any existing version of the rule to determine the final total variable. If the ability with the + is not on the model, then it gains the ability at the stated value. If multiple sources confer a (+), all instances of the (+) apply.

Rules without a (+) are not cumulative. If more than one ability is on a model without a (+) you use the largest variable present.

Example: *Curtis has a model with Sundering(1). It would not benefit from an ability that conferred Sundering(1) to it. It would, however, benefit from an ability that conferred Sundering(3). In this case it would use the higher of the two values.*

Example: *If an ability conferred Sundering(+1) to it, it would gain Sundering(2). That is (1) for its base Sundering(x), and another due to the (+1) of the conferring ability.*

Leaders

Some models have the ability to lead the troops around them, coordinating maneuvers and actions on the battlefield. Leaders act as focal points on the battlefield, through which players can use Combined Activations (See Combined Activations page 9).

Leadership Value

Depending on the game size, each Leader will be assigned a Leadership Value, which is used to determine how well they can coordinate the troops around them, specifically in a Combined Activation.

Example: *If we are playing a Battle level game all leaders models would have a leadership value of 5.*

Sphere of Influence (SOI)

Leaders have a Sphere of Influence (SOI) that extends 6" out from the base of the model. Many effects are based off of a model's Sphere of Influence, the most common of which is determining which models it can activate in a Combined Activation.

Inspirations

If the models in a combined activation also match the same trait with the leader who's SOI they are activating off of, they may benefit from that leaders Inspire ability. Inspire abilities are powerful buffs and effects that a leader confers to models activating under his or her orders.

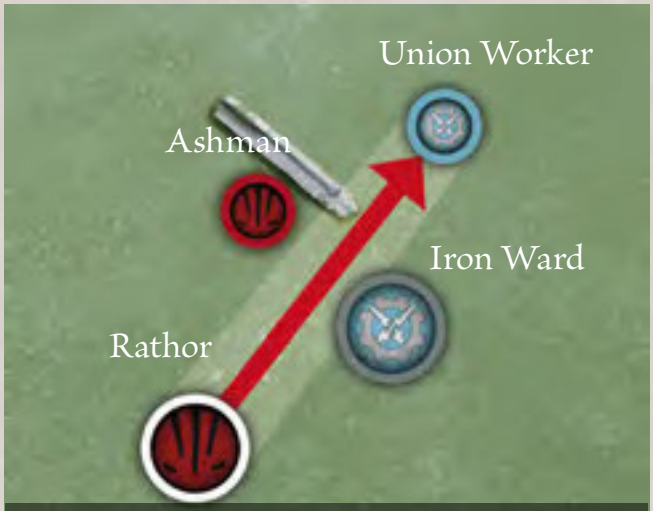
Army Commander and Training

During force construction you must select 1 Leader model to be your army's Commander. The Commander gains an enhanced Sphere of Influence, reaching out 8" instead of the standard 6". In addition, all models in your army gain the Training ability listed on that Leader's card. Training abilities are permanent and remain on all models even if the Commander is killed.

Line of Sight

The Line of Sight (LoS) rules determine if one element can see another element and if any other elements are between them. Elements in Wrath of Kings have a 360 degree viewpoint and are not restricted to the direction the actual element is facing on the battlefield.

To determine LoS, select two elements. The element you are checking line of sight for is the viewer. The element you want to confirm that the viewer can see is the target. Once you have selected those elements, draw a line connecting the left side of the viewer's base to the left side of the target's base, and then do the same for the right side. This area is the LoS Window and is used to determine a number of things.



A Rathor is checking to see if it can see a Union Worker. The Ashmen Swordsman is clearly not between them. The wall is between the Rathor and Union Worker. The Ironward is as well. Also as shown by the red line, the Rathor can see the Union Worker.

How can I tell what my element can see?

The viewer can see the target if you can draw a straight line that does not cross any blocking element inside the LoS window from the viewer's base to the target's base.

What is a blocking element?

If an element in the LoS window has a size greater than either the attacker or defender, the element is blocking.

What is Between?

Any element other than the viewer or target with its base in the LoS window is between the viewer and target. Many rules may apply when an element is between two models. For example, a terrain element could provide cover if between a viewer and its target.

Model Types

Infantry - Infantry are the basic foot soldiers of all armies. They are the most common models found on any table and operate best as a group working together.

Specialist - Specialists are units that operate individually from the rest of the army, often bringing unique skills and abilities to the army.

Leader - Leaders are the glue that hold your armies together. They keep your infantry functioning while also being powerful in combat.

Character: Are perhaps some of the most well-known combatants, their skill and ferocity on the battlefield is unequaled.

GAME PLAY

Each game takes place over a number of **rounds**, during which each player takes alternating **turns** using activations. The active player is the player who's turn it is.

ACTIVATIONS

There are two types of activations: Individual Activations and Combined Activations. An Individual Activation is a single model activating during your turn, where Combined Activations are multiple models performing their actions together through the orders of a Leader.

- When activated, each model has 2 stages to complete, Maneuver and Action.
- When a model Maneuvers, it may move up to its mobility in inches.
- When a model Acts, it may perform 1 action.
- Models may perform these stages in any order but cannot interrupt one to do the other.
- Each model can only be activated once per round.

Players alternate taking turns activating models, a player must activate a model if able, if they cannot then they must pass. If both players have completed all of their activations the round is over. If one player begins their turn and has no models left to activate, their turn immediately ends. Their opponent then takes 1 additional turn, and then the round ends.

Example: *Player 1 performs a combined activation to move 5 Ashmen forward. Player 2 has finished activating all of his models and thus must pass. It then becomes Player 1's turn again. Player 1 has two specialists that he has not activated. He chooses to activate 1 of them, completing its activation and ending his turn. Since Player 2 passed on his previous turn, the round now ends.*

Individual Activations

An individual activation involves a single model. When using an individual activation, the active player chooses 1 model to activate. Once a model has completed both its maneuver and action the individual activation ends.

NOTE: A model may choose to move 0" and/or perform no action during its activation.

Combined Activations

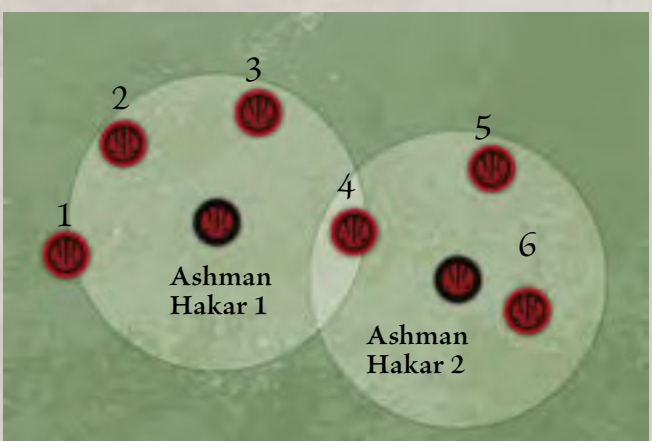
A combined activation functions much like an individual activation but involves more than one model. In order to use a combined activation, the active player must select 2 or more models that fall within a single leader's SOI. The leader is passive in this process and is not activating unless he is selected as one of the models. The active player may only select a number of models up to the leader's Leadership Value.

All models selected to participate in the combined activation must share at least one matching trait with all other models the player wishes to activate in the combined activation. Note that a leader can confer a combined activation to models he or she does not share a trait with, as long as all models they are activating share a trait amongst themselves. The selected models do not need to be able to see one another.

A leader may issue a combined activation any number of times per round, even if he or she has already activated.

After selecting all the models that will activate, the active player chooses which stage they will perform first, maneuver or act. All models in a Combined Activation must resolve each stage in the same order, meaning if you choose Maneuver first, all models will complete that stage before Acting, and vice versa.

When Acting, each model will perform its action one by one, resolving 1 model's action fully before moving onto the next. The exception to this is a Combined Attack (See Combined Attack under Attack Actions, PG. 12)



Ashmen 1-4 are within Ashman Hakar 1's Sphere of Influence, and thus may be activated in a combined activation. Ashmen 5 and 6 are not, however, and could not be chosen to activate. Likewise, Ashmen 4-6 are within Hakar 2's Sphere of Influence and could all be activated, whereas 1-3 could not.

MOVEMENT

Models move two ways: forced movement and free movement. A forced movement is denoted by the word force. Free movement is all non-forced movement.

Models cannot move through other models. When moving a model, always move it in straight lines. When performing free movement and non-direct forced movement you can freely change the direction of movement at any time.

Example: *Chern announces a combined activation. He has a Dragon Legionnaire and a Dragon Legion Keeper that he wants to use to take control of an objective. Chern activates the Dragon Legionnaire and chooses to move him 6" straight forward to engage an enemy model. Next the Dragon Legion Keeper moves 2" forward ahead and 3" to the left to move within range of the objective.*

Forced Movement

Forced movement is not always under your control. The ability causing the movement explains who is controlling the movement. If the ability says "you" force the model, then the owner of the source of the movement controls the movement. If the ability says the model is forced, then the model's owner controls the movement.

Forced movement ignores the Disengage Penalty (see below) and other abilities that prevent disengaging. Any forced movement that moves a model into another model or impassible terrain ends as soon as the moving model contacts the element. A model forced into a rough terrain feature or other element with a movement penalty must pay the penalty. If it cannot then the movement stops.

Disengaging

For a model in contact with an enemy model to break contact, it must disengage. To Disengage, the model must spend 3" of movement before it can begin moving. This is called the disengage cost. After breaking contact with one model, the disengaging model cannot subsequently engage an enemy model again during this movement. If a model is in contact with more than one enemy, it only has to pay the disengage cost once.

Even if a model ignores these penalties (for example, by being forced) they are still disengaging.

Toward and Away

When an element must move toward another element, it cannot end that movement further away from the element than it began. When an element must move away from another element, it cannot end that movement closer to the element than it began.

Up To

When a rule tells you that a model moves "up to" some number of inches, that means that it can move from 0 to that number in inches. If a rule does not say up to, then the model must move the distance directed unless stopped.

Directly

If a model must move directly toward or away from an element, it must move along a line drawn from the center of its base to the center of the element that it must move toward or away from. It cannot deviate from that path.

ACTIONS

Actions fall into two broad categories, attack actions and special actions. All descriptions of actions include:

Name: The name of the action, such as Sword Strike.

Type: The type of action: melee, ranged, magic, toggle, or interact.

Rating If the action involves a dice roll, this is the number of dice rolled.

Range: This is the maximum distance, in inches, that the target can be from the acting model. An action with a range of 00 can only target an element in contact with the acting model.

Special Rules: Any special rules the action possesses. (See the Glossary for a list of attack special rules.)

Toggle

Some models possess special abilities or powers that require them to perform an action for the power to become active. These are called toggle actions. Most toggle actions do not require a roll to activate. Once the toggle action has been performed, the ability becomes active. Toggle effects remain in play until the end of the round.

Willpower Check

When a model performs a Willpower Check it must roll a number of dice equal to the Rate listed under that action. Each result equal to or less than the model's Willpower stat is a success. All Willpower Checks describe their effect based on the number of successes.

Attack Actions

Attacks are split into four types: Ranged, Melee, Will, and Magic. All four attacks function in much the same way, with the differences discussed below. Note that not all models can perform all four types of attacks. The Model's individual card will include any attacks it can make.

To make an attack a player takes the following steps:

- Select an attack action available to the active model.
- Select enemy model(s) to be targeted by the attack(s). Ensure that the attacker can see the targets and they are in range of the attack.
- One target at a time, roll the dice involved in the attack.
- Generate and apply the results of the rolls.
- Apply damage, and check for death.

Note that even though the dice for each attack are rolled and resolved individually, any attacks made from the same attack action happen simultaneously

Melee Attacks

Melee attacks function as described above, except that they may target multiple elements. When choosing a melee attack action, the attacker may assign dice among any number of legal targets.

Ranged Attacks

Ranged attacks function as described above, except that ranged attacks cannot be made against a target in contact with the attacker, and all dice from a ranged attack must be allocated to 1 target. Convert any ✶ on the target's Defense Chart to ⚡.

Willpower Attacks

Willpower attacks function as described above, except that they do not use the Defense Chart to determine results. Instead, each die result that equals or exceeds the target's Willpower generates a success. All willpower attacks describe their effects based on the number of successes.

Magic Attacks

Magic attacks function as described above, except that dice from a magic attack must all be allocated to 1 target. Convert any ✶ on the target's Defense Chart to ⚡. Magic attacks can also generate a Backlash.

Backlash

When a magic attack generates a ✸ result, the attacker suffers a backlash. For each ✸ result generated by a magic attack, the attacker must make a Willpower attack (1) against themselves. The attacker suffers 1 damage for each success.

Combined Attacks

Combined attacks are special attacks that can only be performed by two or more models in a Combined Activation. These attacks function much the same way as an individual Ranged or Melee attack, with the exception that two or more models are pooling their attacks together (usually in hopes of overcoming a high Resilience enemy!).

To perform a Combined Attack, a player takes the following steps:

- All models participating in the Combined Attack select an available attack action. These attacks must all be the same type (Magic, Melee, Ranged, etc).
- Select 1 enemy model to be targeted by the attacks. Ensure that each attacker can see the target and that they are in range of the attack. All attack dice must be assigned to that target. They cannot be split amongst enemies.
- Roll all attack dice assigned against the target.
- Generate and apply the results of the rolls.
- Apply damage and check for death.

If any of the attacks selected for the Combined Attack had special abilities associated with them (Such as Offensive Expertise(x) or Sundering(x)), then these effects are applied to the Combined Attack as well. In the case of multiple models sharing the same ability (Offensive Expertise(1), for example), always apply the highest (x) value to the Combined Attack.

Example: Michael has two Ashmen Swordsmen and one Ashman Hakar, all engaged with a Fulung Devourer (Resilience:2). Individually the Swordsmen and Hakar would have no chance of harming the Devourer unless they generated an result, so Michael decides to use a Combined Attack.

Michael selects the Sword Slash attack for the Swordsmen and the Hakar, giving him a total of 4 attack dice (1 for each Ashmen, 2 for the Hakar). Because the Hakar also had Offensive Mastery(1), his Combined Attack benefits from that effect as well. After re-rolls are complete, Michael has rolled one , two results and 1 , dealing the Fulung 2 damage. A feat which his Ashmen could not have accomplished acting alone!

Damaging a Model

Anytime a model is dealt a number of hits equal to its , it suffers 1 damage. Once the model has damage equal to its it is removed from the table as a casualty.

Special Actions

When a model performs a Willpower Check it must roll a number of dice equal to the Rate listed under that action. Each result equal to or less than the model's Willpower stat is a success. All Willpower Checks describe their effect based on the number of successes.

Generic Actions

Name: Assist
Type: Special
Rating: 0
Range: 00
Special Rules: Select a friendly model that this model is in contact with that is performing a melee attack. Give that attack (+1) rate.

Name: Sprint
Type: Special
Rating: 0
Range: 00
Special Rules: Move this model up to 4". Models can only sprint once per round. Models cannot Sprint if they are engaged.

Name: Interact
Type: Special
Rating: 0
Range: 00
Special Rules: Certain pieces of terrain and objectives require models to interact with them through the course of the game. This requires an Interact action. Generally, a model must be in contact with an element to make an Interact action. The element's special rules describe the effects of any Interact actions.

Morale

The objective of battle is to kill or rout your opponent which is represented by an army's morale. A player begins each game with a starting morale value which will decrease over the course of the game. When an army's morale has reached zero, the troops are near breaking and will begin to withdraw from the battlefield. At the end of any round in which a player has zero (or less !) morale, that player loses the game. Though rare, it is possible for all players to be at zero (or less) morale at the end of a round. In that case, the player with the lowest negative morale loses. In the event of a tie, both armies have been broken, and no winner can be determined. The game ends in a draw.

Starting Morale

To determine starting morale, divide the total number of models in your army by 3, rounding down. Next, add up all the Ranks of Leader for every Leader model in your army. Add these two values together to get your starting morale.

Example: David's army has 15 models, including 2 ranks of Leaders. His starting morale will be 7. 5 for the number of models in his army (15 divided by 3 to make 5) plus an additional 2 for his ranks of Leaders.

Losing Morale

The most common influences on morale are casualties and motivations. Apply effects that influence an army's morale as soon as they occur. Players lose morale based on their motivation as well as a number of events during the game. Below is a list of general conditions that alter morale during play regardless of motivation. Apply these as soon as the event occurs.

- For every three models removed as casualties, that army loses 1 morale.

- For every leader model removed as a casualty, that army loses morale equal to the rank of the leader. (This is in addition to the above loss, if applicable.)

GETTING READY TO PLAY

Before players begin, they must prepare for battle. Players must determine the size of the game they wish to play, select a faction, organize their army, choose a motivation, and determine their starting morale. The details of these steps are listed below.

Select Game Size: In order to build their armies, players must first decide what size of game they would like to play. (See game size page 17)

Building an Army: After selecting the game size, each player must build an army out of their selected faction. Players consult the army organization chart for the game size they are playing to find what types of models they can choose that will make up their army for the game. They then select one of their leaders to be their commander.

Choose Motivation: After players have chosen their armies, each player must select a motivation for their commander. (See motivations page 18)

Determine Starting Morale: Players then calculate the starting morale (See above).

Battlefield Setup

The game is played on a battlefield represented by a 4'x4' table. Before the game begins, players must set up the battlefield by completing the following steps:

1. **Place Terrain**: Terrain elements provide players with more than an empty, flat battlefield on which to fight. Players should select and place terrain before determining Deployment Zones or the starting player. The recommended number of terrain elements is between 1-3 pieces per player, but more or less can be used as decided upon by the players.

2. **Establish Deployment Zones:** Each deployment zone is five inches deep and extends the width of the battlefield. The deployment zones have letters to designate them for use during setup. Each player has their own Deployment Zones based on the side of the table that they are deploying on. Deployment Zone A is at the player's table edge, then Deployment Zone B and so on. There is another zone marked on the table, in between each opponent's Deployment Zone D, this area is known as No Man's Land and is largely used for deploying Objectives. When starting a game, the players should roll-off, with the player who rolled highest being the first to select their tableside for deployment.

3. **Deploy Army:** Once all terrain elements have been placed and Deployment Zones have been determined players begin deploying their forces. The player who selected their table-side first deploys all models with a DZ of (A). Each opponent then deploys all of their models with a DZ of (A); Alternate deploying in this manor until all players have deployed all of their (A) models, then (B) models, then (C) models and so forth.

Each model's card lists its Deployment Zone. When deploying that model, it can be placed with its base anywhere completely in the listed Deployment Zone or any zone behind that zone (a model with a DZ of (C) could, for example, deploy anywhere in your (C), (B), or (A) Deployment Zones).

After all models have been deployed, players make the first initiative roll and the game begins.

Initiative Roll

Players roll initiative to determine the first player at the beginning of each round. To make an initiative roll, each player rolls 1d10. The player with the lowest current morale gains an additional +1 to this roll equal to the difference between their morale and the highest player's (If the lowest player had a morale of 3, for example, while the highest player had a 6, the lowest player would receive +3 to their roll). If two or more armies have an equal value for the lowest, no one gains the bonus. The player with the highest total wins the roll and is the first player for the round. In the event of a tie, players re-roll until one player wins. Players then take turns in clockwise order.

Players' Turn

The active player first chooses whether to perform an Individual or a Combined Activation and which model or models that activate. Once the activation is finished, play passes to the next player who begins their turn. Once all players have activated all their models, or a player has been forced to pass a turn, the round ends.

TERRAIN

Terrain encompasses the elements that make up the battlefield.

Each individual terrain piece has two parts that describe how it interacts with other elements, its base, and its keywords. The base of a terrain piece is the space it occupies on the table. Anytime an element contacts or overlaps the edge of that base in any way, the element is on that terrain piece. The keywords of a terrain piece describe the special rules and ways that the terrain interacts with the other elements on the table.

Before play begins, all players must agree on the keywords assigned to each terrain piece. A list of keywords assigned to generic terrain pieces is included below, so use this as a guide. Additional keywords may be assigned by scenarios or other special rules. Record the keywords for each terrain piece so that all players may reference them at any point during play.

All terrain pieces follow a few basic rules unless otherwise indicated.

- No terrain piece may be placed in contact with another terrain piece before play begins.
- A terrain piece must have a Size or the "Does Not Block Line of Sight" keyword.
- A terrain piece blocks LoS to other elements of equal or smaller size.

Controlling Terrain

A model controls a terrain element if it is in contact with the element and no enemy models are also in contact with the element. Other keywords may also require that you control the element to benefit from them.

Terrain Cost

Terrain that reduces movement has a Terrain Cost. Terrain Costs are always an amount of movement in inches that must be paid. The specific rule will tell you how this cost is applied and what happens if you cannot pay the cost.

Terrain Keywords

Some terrain keywords have variables that you and your opponent will have to agree upon. These are marked as X in the text below.

Does Not Block Line of Sight: This element does not block line of sight.

Elevated X: Increase a model's size by (x) when checking LoS. Moving to an increased level of elevation requires the model to pay a terrain cost of (x). If a model cannot pay this cost, it cannot enter the element. This element's size is equal to (x).

Impassable: Models cannot move through this element.

Inspiring X [trait/type]: This element carries certain spiritual, magical, or emotional inspiration to certain soldiers. If you control this element, friendly models within 6" of this element that possess the matching trait or type, such as Infantry or Pelegarth, gain (+X).

Nexus X: This element is a point of intense magical energy. If you control this element, friendly models within 6" gain [rate] (+X) to all magic attacks.

Objective: Objectives are used in the special rules of scenarios and motivations. Their use is described in those specific scenarios and motivations.

Rough X: Models beginning their activation or moving into the base of this element must pay a Terrain Cost to continue moving. The Terrain Cost is equal to (X). If a model cannot spend the movement, it cannot enter the element. This can result in a model being unable to move.

Wall: A model cannot take a sprint action through, or end its movement on, this element. This element is impassable to forced movement. Models cannot move through a wall with a size greater than the size of a model.

Water: This element is a water feature, which can affect certain abilities and actions.

Generic Terrain Suggestions

Hill: Elevated 1, Size 2, can have other terrain pieces stacked on it, provided those pieces' bases fit completely within the hill's base.

Ancient Tree: Cover, Rough 1, Size 5-6

Ruins: Wall, Rough 1-2, Size 3-4.

Bolder/Pillar/Tree: Impassible, Size 1-3.

Wall: Size 1-2, Wall.

Broken Ground: Rough 1, Does Not Block Line of Sight.

Fence: Wall, Does Not Block Line of Sight.

Pond: Rough 2, Water, Does Not Block Line of Sight.

GAME SIZE

There are various game sizes that players may choose from, each giving different options and army sizes. Regardless of Game Size selected, the following rules apply:

•Characters are unique, meaning each army may only select them once.

•Models may be traded up, allowing a player to take Rank 2+ Leaders/Troops/Etc. Models are traded as follows:

- 2 Rank 1 Leaders for 1 Rank 2 Leader.
- 2 Rank 1 Specialists for 1 Rank 2 Specialist.
- 2 Rank 1 Infantry for 1 Rank 2 Infantry

Leadership Values

Each game size tells you both the standard leadership value and the value your Commander gets.

Intro

Perfect for new players and to test small scale tactics.

Leadership (3)

Commander Leadership (5)

Army Organization

Leader (Must select one as a Commander)
x2 Rank 1 Leaders

Infantry
x12 Rank 1 Infantry

Specialist
x2 Rank 1 Specialist

Skirmish

Skirmish level games are excellent for quick friendly games.

Leadership (5)

Commander Leadership (7)

Army Organization

Leader (Must select one as a Commander)
x3 Rank 1 Leaders

Infantry
x18 Rank 1 Infantry

Specialist
x2 Rank 1 Specialist

Options (Select x2 of the following)
x3 Rank 1 Infantry
x1 Rank 1 Specialist

Battle

This is the most common game size and is recommended for regular play.

Leadership (7)

Commander Leadership (9)

Army Organization

Leader (Must select one as a Commander)
x5 Rank 1 Leaders

Infantry
x24 Rank 1 Infantry

Specialist
x4 Rank 1 Specialist

Options (Select x4 of the following)
x3 Rank 1 Infantry
x1 Rank 1 Specialist

MOTIVATIONS

Motivations represent the reason the battle is taking place. Before the game begins, after players have chosen their forces, each player selects one motivation to serve as their commander's guiding drive for the game. Players may only choose motivations from the categories available to their house. Motivations may either be selected at will or chosen at random, as decided by the players. The motivation chosen modifies how their opponent will lose morale during play. Some motivations may impart special rules, deployment methods, or various objective markers across the battlefield; see each Motivation for its specific rules.

- **Goritsi:** Intrigue, Treachery
- **Hadross:** Greed, Vengeance
- **Nasier:** Duty, Vengeance
- **Shael Han:** Duty, Intrigue
- **Teknes:** Greed, Treachery

Objectives

Some Motivations will require players to place 1 or more **Objectives** on the battlefield. Objectives are terrain elements- each Motivation will give the specific details and rules for any Objectives it places on the battlefield.

Controlling an Objective:

The player with the most models within 1" of an objective controls that objective. If both players have the same number of models within 1" of an objective, then neither player controls that objective.

Markers

Some Motivations will require players to place 1 or more Markers on models or terrain elements on the battlefield. Markers are tokens or counters that are placed next to the model to signify it as "marked". Markers take up no space on the battlefield; they are simply a means of noting an important element for purposes of the Motivation.

DUTY

CALL TO GLORY

- During deployment, place markers on each of your Leaders equal to their rank.
- Each time a friendly marked Leader kills an enemy Infantry, and was the only model attacking that enemy, it may make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes your opponent loses 2 morale, and then 1 marker is removed from that model.

•Each time a friendly marked Leader kills an enemy Leader or Specialist, and was the only model attacking that enemy, your opponent loses 2 morale, and then 1 marker is removed from that model.

ESCORT CIVILIANS

•After deployment, but before the first turn, place a number of **objectives** in contact with friendly models equal to the total ranks of leaders in your army.

•Objective in this scenario are 30mm bases that are size 2 and cannot be attacked.

•A friendly model in contact with an objective may spend an Interact Action to link with that objective.

•A model may only have 1 objective linked to it at any time, and an objective can only be linked to 1 model at any time. If a new model links to an objective any other links are removed.

•When a linked model is moved for any reason, place the matching objective in contact with that model after that move. If the objective cannot be placed in contact it is not moved and the link is removed.

•If an objective is in your enemy's C deployment zone at the end of any round, and no enemy models are in contact with the objective, your opponent loses 2 morale, and then the objective is removed.

STAND YOUR GROUND

•If a friendly Infantry began its activation engaged with an enemy Leader or Specialist, it may forfeit its maneuver to gain a **marker**.

•If a marked model is attacked by an enemy Leader or Specialist and not killed, your opponent loses 1 morale.

•At the end of any round, if a marked Infantry is in contact with an enemy Leader or Specialist, your opponent loses 1 morale, and then marker is removed.

•Your opponent cannot lose more morale due to this Motivation than twice the total ranks of leaders in your army.

VENGEANCE

SEVER THE HEAD

•After forces are deployed, but before the first turn, place a number of **markers** on enemy Leaders or Specialists equal to the total ranks of Leaders in your army.

•Models may be marked a number of times equal to their rank.

•If the marked enemy is killed, that opponent loses 1 morale per **marker** on that model.

BURN IT DOWN

•Beginning with your opponent, you and your opponent take turns placing objectives anywhere in No Man's Land equal to the total ranks of leaders in your army.

•These objectives cannot be placed within 4" of each other or a board edge.

•Objectives in this scenario are 50mm bases that are size 3, Impassable, and cannot be attacked.

•Beginning on Round 3, any friendly Leader may spend an Interact action while in contact with an objective you control. When they do, your opponent loses 2 morale, and then the objective is removed.

UNSTOPPABLE ADVANCE

•Each time a friendly Infantry kills an enemy with a melee attack, and it was the only friendly model attacking that enemy, it gains a number of markers equal to that enemy's rank.

•At the end of any turn, if a model with one or more markers is in the enemy's [C] deployment zone, that enemy loses morale equal to the number of markers on that model, and then the markers are removed.

•Your opponent cannot lose more morale due to this Motivation than twice the total ranks of leaders in your army.

TREACHERY

CAPTURE PRISONER

•Each time an enemy leader or specialist is killed, place an **objective** in contact with them before they are removed. **Mark** that objective with a number of markers equal to the slain model's rank.

•Objectives in this scenario are 30mm bases that are size 0, do not block los, and cannot be attacked.

•Any friendly model in contact with an objective you control may spend an Interact Action to link to that objective.

•A model may only have 1 objective linked to it at any time, and an objective can only be linked to 1 model at any time. If a new model links to an objective any other links are removed.

•When a linked model is moved for any reason, place the matching objective in contact with that model after that move. If the objective cannot be placed in contact it is not moved and the link is removed.

•If an objective is in your [C] deployment zone at the end of any round, and no enemy models are in contact with the objective, your opponent loses 2 morale per marker on the objective, and then the objective is removed.

SILENCE THE TONGUE

•At the end of any friendly turn, if an enemy Leader was killed, and no other enemy was attacked this turn, your opponent loses additional morale equal to that model's rank. If that Leader has not activated this round then your opponent instead loses morale equal to twice that model's rank.

STEAL INTEL

•After forces are deployed, but before the first turn, your opponent places a number of **markers** on each of their Leaders equal to that Leader's rank.

•While performing an Individual Activation, your Infantry models may spend an Interact Action while in contact with an enemy Leader to remove 1 marker from that Leader. When they do, your opponent loses 2 morale.

•A leader may only have 1 marker removed this way per round.

GREED

LAND GRAB

•Place a number of objectives in your opponent's [D] Deployment Zone equal to the total ranks of leaders in your army.

•These objectives cannot be placed within 4" of each other or a board edge.

•Objectives in this scenario are 40mm bases that are size 3, impassable, and cannot be attacked.

•At the end of any round, if you control any of these objectives, your opponent loses 2 morale, and then the objective is removed.

TREASURE HUNT

•Mark a number of objectives markers equal to the total ranks of leaders in your army.

•Objective markers in this scenario are 40mm bases that are size 2 and cannot be attacked.

•Randomize these objectives amongst a same number of unmarked objectives. Beginning with your opponent, you and your opponent take turns placing these objectives anywhere in No Man's Land.

•These objectives cannot be placed within 4" of each other or a board edge.

•A friendly model may spend an Interact Action while in contact with an objective. When they do, reveal the objective, if it was a marked objective, your opponent loses 2 morale, then the objective is removed.

PERSONAL GAIN

•After deployment, but before the first turn, your opponent marks a number of their Infantry equal to twice your total ranks of Leaders.

•Each infantry may only be marked once.

•While engaged with a marked enemy, friendly Leaders or Specialists may forfeit their Maneuver. If they do, your opponent loses 1 morale, and then the marker is removed.

•If engaged with multiple marked models, a Leader or Specialist may forfeit both their Maneuver and perform an Interact Action, as listed above.

INTRIGUE

DISRUPT SUPPLY LINE

•Before deployment, place a number of objectives on the battlefield equal to the total ranks of Leaders in your army, up to 4.

•These objectives are placed anywhere in your opponent's Deployment Zones, beginning with their [D] Deployment Zone and proceeding backwards.

•Only 1 objective can be placed in each Deployment Zone.

•Objective markers in this scenario are 40mm bases that are size 0, do not block LOS, and cannot be attacked.

•Friendly models may spend an Interact Action while in contact with an objective. When they do, remove the objective and your opponent loses 2 morale, plus 1 for each previously removed objective.

GATHER INTELLIGENCE

•Before deployment, a number of objectives are placed on the battlefield equal to the total ranks of leaders in your army.

•These markers are placed along the dividing line of your opponent's [C] and [D] Deployment Zones and may not be within 3" of each other or a board edge.

•Objective markers in this scenario are 30mm bases that are size 0, do not block LOS, and cannot be attacked.

•Unengaged friendly models may spend an Interact Action while in contact with an objective you control. When they do, your opponent loses 2 morale, and then the objective is removed.

NO CONFIDENCE

•Whenever a friendly Leader or Specialist model kills an enemy Infantry that is in an enemy Leader's Sphere of Influence, mark that friendly Leader.

•A Leader or Specialist may have a number of markers equal to its rank.

•While they have a marker they may spend an Interact Action while within an enemy Leader's Sphere of Influence. When they do, your opponent loses 2 points of morale, and then a marker is removed.

•Your opponent can only lose morale equal to twice the total ranks of Leaders in your army from this effect.

GLOSSARY

Here is a list of common special abilities. Note that this is not a complete list, and a model's card should be referenced for any ability not appearing here.

Bolster: This model may make an Assist Action on a model up to 2" away.

Bounce(x): When the dice for this attack are assigned, this model may assign 1 additional die to up to (x) additional enemies within 3" of a target, ignoring LoS.

Critical Blow (x): Replace (x) ⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀 .

Defensive Expertise (x): When this model is the defender of an attack, before results are generated, it may force the attacker to re-roll up to (x) dice.

Deflection: This model may Parry ranged and magic attacks.

Evasion (x): When this model is attacked, after any re-rolls are made, you may adjust the results of up to (x) dice up or down by 1, keeping the adjusted result.

Fast: This model may sprint 6" instead of the normal 4".

Feint (1): Replace (1) 🗡 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Flying: During free movement, this model may move through models and terrain elements as long as that move does not end over a model's base or a terrain element it could not normally move on.

Follow-Through (x): Replace (x) ✖ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Hit and Run: If this model kills an enemy, it may perform a free Sprint Action after that attack is resolved.

Knockback (x): Before results are generated, each model targeted by this attack is forced (x)" away. If that model's movement is stopped by another model the model stopping it suffers a [1]⚔ melee attack.

Offensive Expertise (1): When this model performs an attack, before results are generated, it may re-roll up to (1) dice.

Offensive Mastery (x): This model may add up to (x) dice to any attacks it is participating in. Before results are generated, this model removes the same number of dice added to those attacks.

Precision(x): When this model performs an attack, after re-rolls are made, it may adjust the result of (x) dice up or down by 1.

[Reaction] Counter Attack (RESULT) (x): Once per attack, when a **(RESULT)** is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform 1 of its melee attacks on an active enemy in range, replacing the attack's rate with (1).

Skirmisher: During free movement, this model may pass through friendly models as long as that movement does not end over a model's base.

Slow: This model cannot Sprint.

Stalker: This model ignores disengage costs and may engage models after disengaging.

Strong Will: When this model makes a Will Check or is the target of a Will Attack, it gains re-roll(+1).

Sundering(x): Replace (x) on the defender's chart with .

Suppression(X): Replace (x) on the defender's chart with .

Swim: This model ignores the **Rough** keyword of terrain elements that also have the Water keyword.

Unbreakable: Replace the lowest on this model's defense chart with .

Unrelenting(x): Replace (x) on the defender's chart with .

Unstoppable(x): Replace (x) Non- Non- on the defender's chart with .

NAME

Telloria

RULER

Sovereign Valeth von Goritsi

CAPITAL

Vorstoi

CHAPTER ONE - NEW PLAYER, OLD GAME

Irene heard the sailors, of course, long before they dragged her into the conversation.

"You can tell the difference, easy like," said the ship's bosun. Irene hadn't caught his name, but he always wore the same patchwork hat. "Vampires can't hide from a watchful eye, mark me."

"I might be young, bosun," said Third Mate Mai Leng, "but this sailor girl has been to Telloria plenty of times and stayed in plenty of dockside taverns. There's no way to tell, believe me."

"Which I don't, ma'am, meaning no disrespect," said Bosun Hat. "I've ranged the Tellorian coast up and down these past fifteen years, and I've seen plenty of vampires, like."

Mai Leng narrowed her eyes. "Then why are you still breathing, mate?"

The conversation started heating. "'Cause they know better'n to attack a sailor, see? Water stops 'em, mark me."

Irene turned to hide her smile and looked out across the sea at the craggy coastline creeping along. Fructus Isle, her new home. Light green grasslands waved from atop brilliant ivory cliffs. Too bright. Too bright by half. Not like Telloria at all. Telloria lay back the way they had come, out beyond the wake, trailing white across the deep blue sea. She looked back and suppressed a sigh.

She heard Bosun Hat say, "Well there's a Tellorian right there. You're on friendly terms, right? Let's ask, and five crowns says I've got the right of it."

Mai Leng spat in her hand, and they shook on it. "Ten and done." They came aft. Mai Leng asked nicely, "Irene, I wondered if we might trouble you a moment."

Irene turned and leaned on the rail. "Yes, I heard. Keep your purses. You're both wrong, but about different things." A little ways forward, the helmsman shot her a glance, and listened. Irene continued, "Vampires are hard to spot at night, and easy in the daytime. Water means nothing to them, and they don't give a fig about whether you're a sailor. If one takes a liking to you, that's it." She snapped her fingers. "Dinner."

Mai Leng nodded to Bosun Hat. "There. You see?"

But the bosun wasn't done. "Which of course day'd make it easy to spot 'em. They'd turn to ash, like."

Irene shook her head. "No, they can go out in the daytime, but they look like corpses. All skin stretched over bones. At night, it's different. The mystique, as we call it. They look like anyone, if they want to. There are still signs, what with the grace and beauty. The way they move. You can watch for it, if you're trained. But in the day, no. You can't

mistake them for anything else."

The helmsman shifted uncomfortably at the wheel.

Even Mai Leng frowned. "Never heard of that, Irene."

"It's not well known," she said. "They can be killed in sunlight as easy as you or me, which is the main reason they avoid it. You can kill them at night, sure, but it's difficult. Very, very difficult, believe me." She got contemplative and murmured, "Believe me."

Mai Leng glanced at the bosun, who clearly didn't like the sound of that. Nor did anyone else. The deck had gone completely silent. She got a sly expression and said, a bit loudly, "She's pulling our chains, mate. You know how Tellorians are. They love scaring the sense out of sailor types."

Irene snorted. "Half the army is vampires. They couldn't well defend Telloria only at night, could they?"

The bosun said, "No, no, that's what them werewolves are for. Guards their crypts in the day, like."

Irene didn't laugh, but the absurd notion widened her smile. "Sorry, it's not you, but… let's just say the political map of Terlloria would be vastly different if only werewolves could walk the sun. Where did you get this notion?"

Bosun Hat's defensiveness betrayed the wound she'd dealt. "Which it's common knowledge, like!"

Irene shook her head. "Superstition more like."

The bosun pushed back his hat and smirked. "Which Tellorians take all the cakes for superstitions, don't they, miss? Not meaning any offense and all, but ye'd hear more tall tales dockside in Lusk than all other ports put together."

His mention of Lusk brought a memory of home. Her mother's face, ghostly in time, smiling. Bedtime stories. Heavy wood smoke from the blazing hearth. Her own tiny room. Which she'd never see again.

Unless you give in, of course.

Irene blinked the alien thought away. *Stop it!* she thought to the black place in her soul.

The bosun confided in Mai Leng, "Fables and nonsense, ma'am. And not a lick of truth among 'em. They just like black moods is all."

Irene's good mood had vanished. "Even if they're fables, there's a grain of truth at each one's core."

The bosun kept on, "The whole country's like that. All gray cloaks and buildings like mausoleums. They all got that thousand-yard stare, and it's practiced well enough." He glanced at Irene. "Like that, exactly, miss. Not to be telling a passenger their business, and no offense intended, but I never

met a Tellorian what couldn't scare the life out of a party with a single ghost story, like."

Irene's mouth drew into a thin line, and she locked eyes with Bosun Hat. "And why not?" Her blood stirred. "Ours is a land of deep shadows and silent forests where the mists swallow the sun every eve. Where the people shutter themselves in homes with no windows and leave terrified offerings beyond the door. Where a single sound beneath the moon brings hunting eyes in the dark. Where women strangle their own babes from fright, and men pray to forgotten gods for a dawn that lingers long beyond the eastern mountains. And, when day does come, creeping reluctantly over distant peaks, what evidence remains of the night's passing? Scraps of flesh and a bloody trail from an empty house, its smashed door gaping like a toothless maw. Not a track. Not a scent. Not a single sign of the visitor that came calling. That is Telloria, my dear sir, land of blood and darkness, where only an old wives' tale might shepherd you through to dawn. So stick to the sea, and sleep aboard ship, lest the eyes catch you unawares beneath the moon."

Everyone within hearing stared at her, Mai Leng's eyes big, and the bosun's mouth slack with shock. Mai Leng recovered and stepped close. "Your eyes have turned solid black."

"Helmsman!" shouted the captain from the quarterdeck. "Clap a hand on that wheel, you whoreson beast!"

The sailor jerked away from Irene's discourse and wrestled the ship back to her proper course. Irene blinked, and stepped back. She took a steadying breath. "I'm sorry!"

Mai Leng glanced from her to the bosun and back. He was looking for words.

The captain's shadow fell across them. He spoke to all three. "What's going on here?"

The bosun pointed at Irene, "She's—!"

Mai Leng pushed a purse into his hand. "—helping us with a wager. Your winnings, bosun, though I reserve the right to win them back ashore at the gambling house, if you're game."

The bosun looked at the purse, then Irene, then back to Mai Leng. "I—well, I… Aye, that's fair."

The captain said, "Fine. You have duties, bosun."

The bosun saluted, "Aye, sir." He headed forward with many backwards glances at Irene.

The captain continued, "Third Mate, we'll make port by two bells in the first dog. Your watch, I believe? You'll take us in."

She saluted. "Aye, sir."

He bowed briefly to Irene, and went below.

Mai Leng looked at Irene with cautious eyes. The deck was still silent and all eyes were on them.

"I'm sorry," said Irene.

"Go below," she murmured.

"It's—"

"Trust me, and go. Now."

Irene went below to her tiny cabin and sat on the rickety stool beneath a lonely, swaying lamp. *Why take orders from a mortal?* the darkness asked, the voice neither male nor female. Simply… ominous. Like a creaking branch beneath darkened boughs, or a dark shape lurking outside dirty window panes. This was the blessing and curse of her nation. The Gift, it was called.

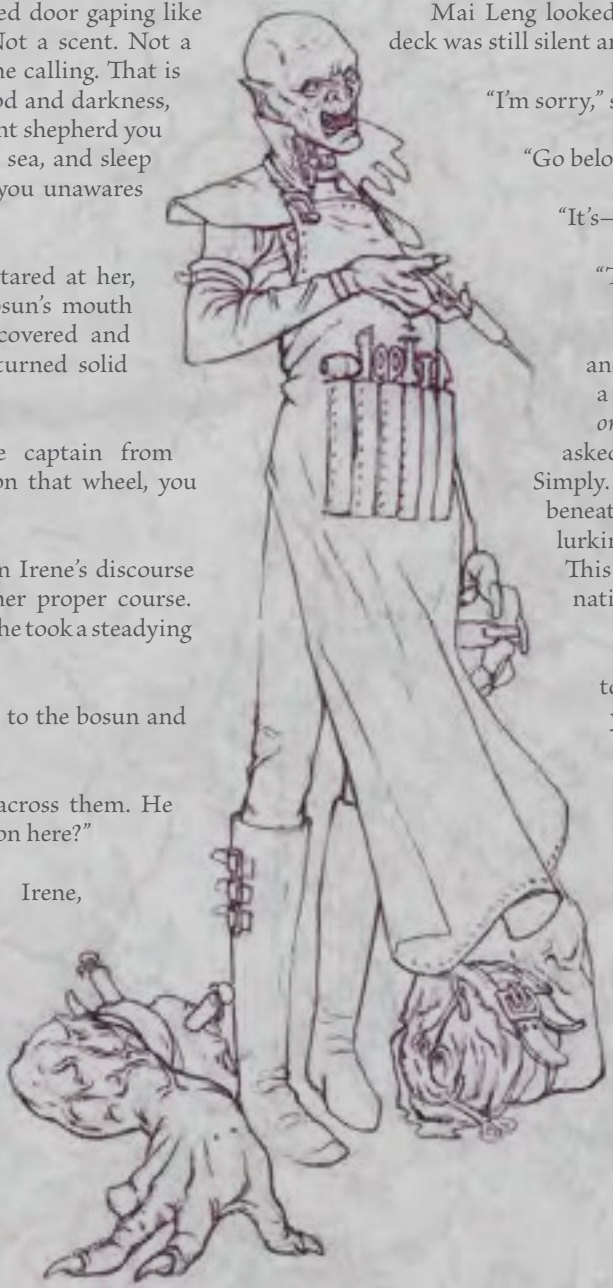
"She's my friend. She was trying to help. And that was a filthy trick you pulled."

That amused the Gift. *I? You brought it forth.*

"I am not listening to this. Go away."

It receded form her mind, like thinning fog on a moonlit night.

She sat and thought about nothing for a long while in the creaking cabin. Water hissed along the boat's side and she heard sailors working the deck. The ship's bell tolled through the watches, every half hour. She



tried to get a little sleep, but it wouldn't come no matter how comfortable the hammock, the first she'd ever used.

Irene dug out her journal and wrote despite the rolling deck. Fortunately the ship rode an even swell, and her hand was neat and trim. Her journal was an indulgence, one a spy ought not afford, but it was written in her personal code, one taught by her mother and known to no one living.

I shouldn't have gotten angry at the bosun. Mai Leng is a gentle soul, and was only teasing, and the bosun was an ass, but I'd already scared him. I should know better. But the thing in my head pushed me. I can see it now, looking back, but I couldn't keep it in check. Is this exile weakening my resolve already? That's exactly what the Sovereign wants. And if I let this damn thing get hold of me on ship when talking to a friend, then what can I expect when we reach Fructus City? There'll be people, people, and more people, and none of them near as friendly as Mai Leng.

I'm glad there'll be work, even if I'm stuck dealing with Gregorio. At least I'm not the old bat's subordinate. The Sovereign made that very clear.

At work I'm playing a role, keeping my head in the game at all times. At work a slip can mean failure at best. Death at worst. At work the Gift will be easier to ignore.

A tentative knock at the door, and she closed her journal. It was the young master's mate, voice cracking with adolescence. "The deck's compliments, ma'am, and the officer of the watch asks if you'd like to join her on the quarterdeck."

Mai Leng was the only female officer who stood a watch. "Tell her I'll be up shortly. With my thanks."

Irene sat alone for another moment, took a deep breath, and went on deck. She was surprised to find it near dusk already, but there was no telling day from night in her cabin.

Mai Leng motioned her over to the quarterdeck's windward side. She pointed over the darkening sea. "Port Fructus and the city beyond."

The setting sun backlit the Grand Cathedral and its six spires. It looked like a fortress of hope and light, and spread protective arms around the city below. Beneath the cathedral and on down the hillside, tiny lights winked on in increasing numbers as the cathedral's shadow stretched towards the harbor, like spreading a black velvet cloth dusted with stars.

The harbor itself bustled with activity as fishermen brought their vessels in before dark and merchantmen were towed into the offing for the tide that would soon turn.

"Clew up," Mai Leng told the bosun, who kept his eyes deliberately off Irene. "Single-reefed tops, and stand by the anchor. Make the signal for a pilot." Mai Leng looked at Irene as the bosun's pipe got to work and hands swarmed the deck and rigging. She smiled wide, and kept her voice low. "If I'd had no suspicion you weren't a merchant, your expression now would've planted one. You've clearly never been here before."

Irene shook her head. "I've never seen anything quite like that."

"And Fructus City is nothing. You should see Qualat Mon. Or my home city, Kol Han. We know a thing or three about seaside fortresses in Achrion. So, since you're clearly not a merchant, what are you doing out here? Escaped prisoner? Refugee? Ohh wait, you're fleeing a fixed marriage! That'd be very romantic."

Between the shining cathedral and Mai Leng's bright smile, Irene's spirit lightened. "Nothing so amazing, I assure you." She thought of half a dozen cover stories in an instant, but somehow that seemed to be a darker road. She liked Mai Leng. She could win more with the truth. "I'm an exile."

"Even better! What was your crime? Was it scandalous?"

"Almost. I refused the Gift." She felt better after saying it. Like the darkness had shrunk for a moment.

Mai Leng shrugged. "And? I've refused all kinds of gifts. You wouldn't believe some of the disgusting things sailors think will impress a lady—"

Irene kept her voice low. "No, not *a* gift. *The* Gift. Remember earlier? When my eyes…"

Mai Leng sobered. "Oh. What was that? I mean, you're not a vampire. … Are you?"

Irene shook her head. "No. At least… It's something that can happen to Tellorians. Or really anyone that spends too much time there. The Gift comes. When you give in—"

Mai Leng's eyes flared. "You turn into—into—"

"Vampires or werewolves. Or worse."

Mai Leng took a step back. "It's not catching is it?"

"Keep your voice down. No. It's not like that. The stories you hear about being bitten aren't true. Again, if they were, the political map in Telloria would be vastly different. If the nobility could pick and choose who got Gifted… I shudder to think at some of the regimes that would've cropped up after Old King Goritsi was murdered way back when."

"Your Sovereign is Queen Goritsi, though, and she's a

vampire now. Wasn't she married to him before?"

Irene shook her head. "No. She'd have you believe it, but even she isn't that ancient. The Goritsi title is for her house and all those brought in. There are some mortal Goritsi's, of course, 'children of the damned,' as they hate to be called. They're nobility but only technically. Not many gain any true power without the Gift. And if it's like that for the nobles, imagine how the lower classes are treated." She thought back to her mother, long gone. "It's why I do what I do."

"And what is it you do?"

"I—help where I can. The Sovereign isn't the kindest soul, but she has a care for the underclasses. She was ecstatic when the Gift came upon me. But I don't want it, for lots of reasons. And that's why I'm exiled to Fructus. She was furious."

Mai Leng had stopped smiling, but she betrayed no hint of fear. "So… you're an almost-vampire political refugee who knows Queen Goritsi?" She grinned. "I'd stick with merchant."

Their laughter drew attention across the deck. They quieted quickly, and Irene wiped away tears. "Oh, that felt good. I haven't laughed in a long, long time." And even the darkness in her soul had lightened.

"Well I'm glad. I'm sorry I snapped at you before, but—"

"No, no. You thought fast."

"I'm glad we're nearly ashore. This is a good crew, but my payoff won't hold long. You did get pretty scary there." She paused and considered. "Listen. I wonder if you might not put some of that scary to use on my behalf? By way of a favor. I may have some trouble waiting for me ashore."

Irene's slight smile vanished. "What kind of trouble?"

"I owe a guy money. Gambling debt, basically, and I just handed the bosun most of my spare change. I've got the cash, and I can pay him back, but I'm not so sure he won't pull a fast one."

"I'm familiar with the type. Yes, I can help."

"Things shouldn't turn ugly. I was thinking to bring some of the crew, but I don't want them involved. Last time… well, the captain will throw me off the ship if I cost him any more prime hands."

"Last time!" Irene snickered and was about to inquire further when the lookout signaled. The pilot was coming aboard.

He came up the side, a thorough seaman, but decidedly harbor trash, foul-smelling and leering. Irene ignored him, but couldn't help overhear. "Oh, yer the third mate, is ye? Message." He passed Mai Leng a stained note. "Now, let's get me my coin and get yer ship in. Tide's a slackin', an' you know how the bar shoals when she's on the ebb."

Mai Leng glanced at the note, paled, and shot Irene a quick look. But there was no time. She set about putting the ship into berth. Irene went below, got her dunnage in order, and secured her weapons: a long blade at her hip, a matching dagger, and two knives hidden up her sleeves.

Expecting a fight, are we?

"Shut up."

Mai Leng met her back on deck, still a little skittish. "He's here. I thought I'd meet him at the tavern, but he's on the dock. He brought some friends."

They were fully in the Cathedral's shadow now, and stars had begun twinkling overhead. Irene had no trouble making out the burly man in scaled armor with four even bigger thugs. They waited at the top of the quay, where anyone disembarking would have to pass if they intended to go farther than the dock.

Irene said, "Don't go ashore just yet," and climbed the shrouds into the top. She scanned the dockyard. Snipers? None. Backup? None. Official 'witnesses'? None. "Amateur night," she muttered. But, they were five to her two, and she had no idea how well Mai Leng could fight. Irene herself might do five. Maybe. With a surprise attack. A lucky surprise attack….

Or help.

"Shut up." She climbed back down. "Seems simple enough. You're just paying him off, right? Okay. I'll be right behind you."

Mai Leng let out a long breath and gripped her saber hilt. "Okay." Her spine straightened, but her body went taught as she set foot on land. She was nervous to Irene's eye, but Mai Leng walked with a sailor's rolling gait, feet freshly ashore, and planted herself squarely in front of the greasy leader. "Hello, Sarghen."

He grinned, gap-toothed and yellow. "Little Leng. What, no crew? Was looking forward to thumping some wetfeet."

"The ship isn't even fifty yards away, and we sailors have loud voices. But we don't need my crew to handle you and yours."

"'We' is it?" He looked Irene up and down. "Pretty little

thing. Too pretty by half. Is she the 'payment', I hope?"

Mai Leng spat. "Slavery is your trade, Sarghen, not mine." She pulled out a leather purse and bounced it in her hand, jingling. "Here. You want to get rid of the welcoming committee before I hand it over?"

His ugly laugh had no humor. "Well, see, there's this thing. Payment's gone up. Interest, you know. And you're not paying me anymore. I've sold your debt for a shiny coin or three. So, you're coming with me to the new debt holder. It's up to him now."

The purse stopped moving in Mai Leng's hand. "You can't sell me. I'm a citizen of Achrion."

"Sold your *debt*, Little Leng. Not you." He scratched the back of his neck. "Course, I dunno. Maybe he'd let you pay it off by those real generous terms I offered last time."

Mai Leng's hand went to her blade. Everyone tensed. "Not on your life."

Irene saw her next few moves clearly. None of them had neck protection except Sarghen. Two knives to two throats. They'd start to move then. Sarghen's weak points were his armpits, face, and the backs of his knees. Her blood stirred. If he made a grab for Mai Leng—

One of the thugs tapped Sarghen's shoulder. "Uh. Boss?" He pointed down the cobbled street.

A bald vampire approached with two bodyguards. The guards wore very ill-fitting armor built for frames half again their size. They spread out to flank the thugs by some unseen signal. Pack tactics.

Irene sucked in a breath. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

The vampire stalked forward, surveyed the scene, and smiled at her, all fangs. "Lady Irene. What interesting acquaintances you make."

"Gregorio," Irene said. "This is Sarghen. Local thug, amateur bather, and aspiring corpse."

His smile broadened. "Do you require assistance, or shall I just handle the betting pool?"

"It wasn't my move." She looked at Sarghen, who couldn't keep wide eyes off the vampire.

"I… look, no trouble to be had here, your lordship." He started backing away. "Leng, we'll talk later."

"I wouldn't advise it," Irene said.

Sarghen gulped. "Ain't up to me, but… well." He and his thugs beat a hasty retreat.

Mai Leng didn't relax. She stared at Gregorio with morbid curiosity, hand still gripped on her hilt.

Gregorio spread his hands wide, fingers a bit too long, and talons instead of nails. "So, who owes me a thank you?"

"No one," Irene said. "I had it handled."

"Come now. You're good, but I'd have put my money on the other side, if only by a neck."

"Why are you here?"

He shrugged. "You've been expected these last three days. I'm glad to see your ship is finally in. I'm rather amused to find you meeting Sarghen. Was it truly coincidence?"

Her turn to shrug. "Why? Who is he?"

"Ah," he said. "An agent. Of sorts." He spared a glance at Mai Leng. "Oh, and forgive me stealing her away from you, miss…?"

"Third Mate Leng."

"Ah ha, so we have you to thank for her safe passage. House Goritsi extends its good graces to you, madam." He bowed in courtly fashion. "If you would be so kind as to forgive a mere verbal invitation to your captain, it would be my singular honor to entertain you and your officers at dinner in Goritsi Tower tomorrow evening. For now, however, *adieu*." He motioned to Irene. "Come, Lady Irene. Let me acquaint you with the rules of your new home, and the intriguing games we play."

Irene grumbled at his retreating back, but started to follow.

Mai Leng grabbed her arm. "He called you *Lady* Irene! So it's true? All of it? You really are an exiled vampire noble?"

Irene sighed. "Yes. My full name is Irene von Goritsi. 'Merchant' would've been so much easier, no?" Her smile was wan. "But I'm not a vampire yet. I'll see you tomorrow."

Zeti War Dancers

Human swordsmen may train many years before claiming mastery of their profession, but the Zeti War Dancers train for decades. While the usual advantages of vampiric speed and strength are obvious, it's this long practice and dedication to their art that truly marks the Zeti as artisans on the battlefield.

The name 'Zeti' did not stem from an individual, but rather a tribe living in ancient Telloria's mountainous hinterland. The true site of their primary village is lost to time, but documentation by Scion King Goritsi's archivists place it somewhere near the modern village of Nareh with settlements throughout the valleys and extensive caves common to the Frostfall range. Scion King Goritsi's own diaries reveal the Zeti were a matriarchal society of warrior women, distrustful of males, and keeping only a small stock of men for repopulation purposes.

Scion Goritsi tasked one of the first vampires, Countess Valtheria of House Genoris, with reaching an accord with the Zeti. As leader of a great house (before the first septs were founded) Countess Valtheria and her handmaidens were uniquely qualified to speak from a position of power near equal to the Zeti Matriarch. It took nearly a year, but the Countess and her retinue emerged from the mountains accompanied by the Zeti Matriarch and one hundred warriors. They would serve with Scion Goritsi's forces for ten years in exchange for their sovereignty free from Telloria. This is why the modern border does not officially encompass Nareh, and stops just short of the Frostfall divide.

7	5	1	1

Zeti • Rank 1
Infantry

Size 2
DZ C

Caressing Blades		
Melee	2	00

Deadly Flourish		
Special	-	-

This action can only be used if this model did not begin their activation engaged. Move this model up to 3" in a straight line. This model gains Leap during this move. After this movement this model may perform a [1] melee attack on each enemy it passed through.

***Leap:** During free movement, this model may move through models as long as the move does not end over a model's base.

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The modern War Dancers have since honed the original Zeti techniques to fully embrace the speed and agility granted by their vampiric nature. They have traded the traditional spears the Zeti used to vault past enemy lines for twin blades, which allow War Dancers to strike at foes from unexpected angles as they fly through the air and dash past enemy lines. They can outrun, outperform, and outlast most human troops at every turn.

Dancing Master

7 6 1 3

Zeti • Rank 1
Leader

Size 2
DZ C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Blade Flurry

Melee	3	00

Come Hither

Will	3	9

Force the target 3" directly towards this model for each success.

Deadly Flourish

Special	-	-

This action can only be used if this model did not begin their activation engaged. Move this model up to 3" in a straight line. This model gains Leap during this move. After this movement this model may perform a [1] melee attack on each enemy it passed through.

Leader

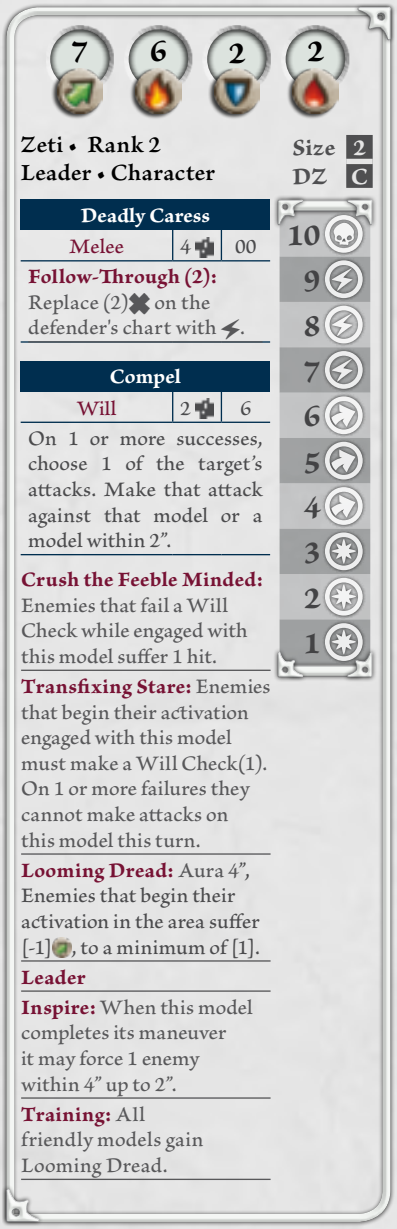
Inspire: This model's melee attacks gain Precision (1) this activation.

Training: This model may move through enemies when disengaging.

As a final note on their vampiric nature, the Zeti can indeed do battle in direct sunlight. It is not preferred by any means, as vampires are much more vulnerable to crippling wounds and death in daylight hours. At night a disemboweling might take a vampire out of a fight for many hours. Yet, in the day, it could well prove fatal. But the Zeti are remarkable in their resolve to risk their incredibly long lives in defense of their nation, and any enemy commander that relies too heavily on their reluctance to battle beneath the sun will find their plans crumble to dust.

Similarly, the classic vampire weaknesses of myth are, in large part, unreliable, or, perhaps, remnants of the distant past. Modern vampires that recoil from celestial or elemental religious trappings are likely making game of their prey. Similarly, garlic, wooden weapons, and blessed water can be discounted. The only true way to destroy a vampire under cover night remains decapitation, a feat that very few can accomplish against the lethal Zeti War Dancers.

Hestra Nostrollo, the Herald of Blood



From birth Hestra Nostrollo was favored with wealth, station, ability, and beauty, and she revels in every one. Even before the Gift, she was one of the most brilliant women in the Tellorian court. Now, she finds there is nothing beyond her ability to grasp or destroy as her whim takes her. Hestra revels in her vampirism as it allows her to indulge in her great passion for learning, magic, and power for its own sake.

As a young vampire, Hestra joined the Night Legion and trained as a War Dancer. Unfortunately, this was in a time of relative peace, and the opportunity for advancement was rare. Ever eager for new challenges, she volunteered for mission after mission to distant destinations across Arikania, most often as escort on diplomatic missions, and, more than once, as bodyguard and security for scholarly endeavors. She particularly enjoyed expeditions to the Drowned Archives in Hadrossian territorial waters, and it was there that her interest in psychomancy flourished.

Over the centuries Hestra has pioneered many innovations in modern psychomantic techniques. The mind is both resilient and fragile. Where one individual may endure hardship after hardship, another individual might collapse at the slightest pressure. Her hypotheses and experiments have always caused certain uneasy stirs within collegiate circles, but her results have always withstood critical review and debate. Plus, it's difficult to refute powers and abilities that are so very, very effective in battle.

While Hestra has risen high in Forsenyeva Sept, she has always maintained her military ties. The new war has come at exactly the right time, as she was growing weary of her technomantic pursuits. She's accepted a new commission with the Night Legion and serves as one of their most distinguished commanders. In battle her grace is renowned, even for a War Dancer.

Deception and illusion mark Hestra's strategies. An unaware enemy is a dead enemy. An outmaneuvered enemy is a dead enemy. A demoralized enemy is a dead enemy. Hestra's penchant for attacking an opponents' psychological weaknesses makes her perfectly suited to combat nearly any foe. Even among the deadliest combatants in Telloria, she is lethal.

Skorza Skirmishers

Werewolves of legend are renowned for their ferocity, and anyone who has witnessed Telloria's infamous Skorza Skirmishers in action might call that an understatement. Not only do the Skorza rank among the fastest, hardest-hitting troops in Arikania, but their savage reputation makes them an intimidating presence on the battlefield. Even staunch veterans and champions with many campaigns under their belt are loath to engage Skorza lines.

The first modern werewolves emerged at the same time as the first vampires when Scion King Goritsi unleashed The Gift upon Telloria. The legendary vampire/werewolf enmity has its roots in these early days before Scion Goritsi imposed the sept power structure on his burgeoning nation. A necessary step, as werewolves instinctively form pack structures amongst themselves, and death or injury to a pack member would bring swift retribution. If vampires and werewolves had not been forced into septs (or 'great houses', as they are known in Arikania at large), Telloria could possibly have torn itself apart with internecine warfare.

That said, when werewolves join the Tellorian military, they renounce formal ties to their sept and join the Skorza. The werewolf pack structure, which could cause so much difficulty in civilian life, functions superbly as a military unit where discipline can be imposed and enforced. Indeed, many modern training regimens focus on controlling a werewolf's bestial rage until it can be unleashed on the battlefield.

Skorza doctrine revolves around speed and mobility. As such, Skorza excel at exploiting holes in enemy defenses, turning unguarded flanks, and rapid strikes through friendly lines. Although lightly armored, Skorza have thick hides and heal briskly, which grants them remarkable staying power on the front ranks. And, as far-ranging scouts, Skorza are unmatched. Their bestial nature finds them as at home in the wild as humans are in civilization, and their astounding speed and endurance can carry them many miles in a single night.

Skorza Alpha

If Skorza have any weaknesses, it's primarily that they can rapidly outpace slower moving elements of their formation. Care must be taken not to let them wander too far from friendly support. The legendary weakness to silver is true, but only inasmuch as wounds inflicted by silver weapons heal in days rather than hours. It is not a factor on the battlefield, and silver makes for a very poor metal in war.

Of the more disquieting facts on Skorza, werewolves live just as long as vampires. Yet, where vampires survive on life essence from blood, Skorza require flesh, the more sentient the better. Thus, as if the sight of charging, ravening wolfmen wasn't intimidating enough, it's never far from an infantryman's mind that they're little more than raw meat to hungry wolfen eyes. When possible, the hours following a victorious battle are a time of celebration, drinking, and feasting for Skorza, although if the army is on the move, Skorza have been known to dismember the fallen to carry off legs and arms as convenient yet grisly snacks.

7 | 6 | 1 | 3

Skorza • Rank 1
Leader

Size 3
DZ B

Savage Brutality

Melee	3	00

If this attack kills a model, move 2" and make a [1] melee attack. This ability can only trigger once per activation.

Follow-Through(1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Pack Tactics: This model can command models with the "Skorza" trait from up to 9".

Fast: This model may sprint 6" instead of 4".

Skirmisher

Stalker

Leader

Inspire: If this model kills an enemy, it may sprint at the end of its activation.

Training: All friendly models gain Fast.

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Korrad Ungarash

While vampires are renowned for long lives, most non-Tellorians forget that the Gift holds back the ravages of time for werewolves as well. As such, Korrad has commanded Night Legion troops for longer than most of the current nobility has been alive. Yet his human appearance remains that of a powerful man in his prime.

No stranger to political intrigues, Korrad disdains notions of advancement at any cost. Some prices are, in fact, too high, especially in a nation whose most learned and powerful have lifespans of centuries to achieve their goals. Korrad's wisdom is often lost on younger vampires and werewolves who, new to their powers, often possess the burning desire to test themselves against any and all comers. To the most rabid or bloodthirsty, Korrad suggests joining the Night Legion where the tests can come against Telloria's enemies rather than its patriots.

And yet, Korrad is wholly against another renewed and sustained conflict. He has seen the tolls war takes on both people and cultures, and he has no desire to revisit another dark age in Tellorian history. He has joked that Telloria should mark its eras by time spent in the light rather than the dark, since darkness is very much the norm. Yet Korrad is a soldier, through and through, and one of the top-ranked werewolves in the Night Legion.

Despite his disdain for war, Korrad slaughters his enemies with the same ruthlessness afforded to any prey. Korrad is fully aware of the dichotomy between his bestial nature and his desires for peace. As something of a warrior poet, Korrad has published numerous writings on war and its nature. His strategic dissertations and military theories receive the widest acclaim, but he has penned hundreds of poems and a half dozen plays, some of which have had runs lasting up to a decade in the theaters of all Scion national capitals and most Free Cities.

But now, war calls Korrad to duty once more. Whether alone or with his fellow Skorza, Korrad is a deadly combatant, specializing in breaking enemy lines with the hallmark ferocity of all werewolves.

7 6 2 2

Skorza • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 3
DZ B

Rending Pounce

Melee	5	00

When this attack is selected before targets are declared, this model may move up to 4", ignoring models during this move.

Skirmish

Stalker

Pack Tactics: This model can command models with the "Skorza" trait from up to 9".

[Reaction] Elusive Strike: If a result is generated by a melee attack, and this model is not killed, place this model in contact with an enemy model within 2" and then make a [1] melee attack against the model.

Leader

Inspire: If this model engages an enemy this activation, it gains **Offensive Expertise(1)** for its first attack this turn.

Training: Models ignore the Rough keyword of terrain elements.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Ravenscar Mercenaries

The Ravenscar Mercenaries have long worked closely with the regular Tellorian military, so much so that joining the Mercs is, essentially, joining the army. Tough, brutal, and somewhat unruly to the non-Tellorian eye, the Mercs have a reputation for relentless efficiency that's in perfect keeping with their role as rank-and-file troops in an army of monsters. They train hard and fight hard. Those that fall behind risk becoming dinner. It's as simple as that.

But for those that can meet such high standards, the life of a Ravenscar is one of privilege, respect, and a potential road to great wealth, the dream of every Tellorian peasant child. With an egalitarian system for loot division, and the highest base pay rates of any national military, Ravenscars can earn more in a single tour than most soldiers might in a lifetime.

The original Ravenscars were a substantial mercenary company hired by Scion King Goritsi for his initial campaign to unite Telloria under his rule. As the largest company for hire, their military prowess was undeniable, but the original Ravenscars had worked for many sides in many wars, and the Scion's supporting nobility took grave exception to the possibility of lands and titles granted to 'mercenary dregs.' Note: this was prior to the Gift and the sept power structures, when Telloria would have followed the old feudal models in place across much of Arikania.

6	5	1	1

Ravenscar • Rank 1 Infantry — Size 2, DZ C

Flesh Paring Blade

Melee	1	00

Cast Aside

Special	-	-

Target 1 enemy with a size 3 or smaller in contact. Place that enemy anywhere within 3". This moel may then move up to 2".

Combat Reflexes: Once per turn, when this model becomes engaged, you may place it anywhere in contact with a model it is engaging.

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Scion Goritsi substituted cold, hard gold in exchange for any possible honors. No Ravenscar, no matter how worthy, would be ennobled. But, they'd be very, very rich, often richer than the very nobles who had sought to deny them proper compensation for risking their lives.

As 'merely human' soldiers go, Ravenscars are very well equipped to endure modern battlefields, owing largely to their great wealth. This is vital to survival when facing everything from mutated ocean horrors to masked demons with skin like stone. Standard issue armaments are paired longswords, though most Ravenscars augment their kit with their substantial signing bonuses. Some carry silvered knives, others

Ravenscar Sergeants

'magical' charms, and religious symbols abound, running the gamut from the Celestials to very rare instances of the Hadrossian Deep Gods. While the tangible benefit from these personal talismans is questionable, there's no question of a decided 'placebo effect'.

An iron will is especially vital as Ravenscars often have but one job in battle: hold. Their task is to stick-in with the enemy line and overwhelm or lock-down enemy troops for the fleet-footed Zeti and Skorza to finish off. And the danger isn't always in front of them either, as a frenzied werewolf or ravenous vampire might not be willing to wait for the enemy to provide them sustenance, especially as battles unfold and the blood flows. It is said that a Ravenscar formation has but three components: vanguard, body, and dinner.

They're cannon-fodder, and Ravenscars know it well. Gallows humor reaches the pinnacle of its art amongst the Ravenscars, where it's said the front line is a meatgrinder and only the toughest gristle survives intact.

6 | 6 | 1 | 3

Ravenscar • Rank 1
Leader

Size 2
DZ C

Flesh Paring Blade		
Melee	2	00

Heavy Crossbow		
Ranged	1	8

Cast Aside

Special	-	-

Target 1 enemy with a size 3 or smaller in contact. Place that enemy anywhere within 3". This model may then move up to 2".

Combat Reflexes: Once per turn, when this model becomes engaged, you may place it anywhere in contact with a model it is engaging.

Leader

Inspire: When this model performs the Cast Aside action, 1 enemy it engages suffers a [1] melee attack.

Training: If this model begins its activation in contact with a terrain element, it gains [+2] this turn.

10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1

Lord Hob

While not actually a landed noble, Lord Hob has served with the Ravenscars through enough campaigns to buy virtually any title he could wish (were it not prohibited by the original contract signed by Scion King Goritsi in antiquity). As such, his 'Lord' title is purely honorary, though anyone meeting Lord Hob would swear he was born to it. He's the ultimate representation of what life in the Ravenscars can do for an orphan child from the mean streets of Vorstoi.

The Tellorian capital is typical of its cities with gothic architecture and sprawling peaked rooftops. The phrase 'be wary after dark' is common in Telloria, but in Vorstoi the threat is more mundane. While criminal elements maintain a discreet profile, the widespread poverty and declining social structures have seen a marked increase in Vorstoi's crime rates. And, it's particularly telling in Telloria, where convicted felons are considered 'free prey' to the vampiric and lycanthropic population.

Lord Hob's own experiences as a gang member and fugitive have given him an all-too-personal insight into the lives of the indigent and destitute in Telloria. He himself escaped to join the Ravenscars, but such options are not universally viable. As such he's established more than one orphanage across Telloria with his immense wealth, which serve as both shelter for the unfortunate children and a mild form of 'boot camp' for Ravenscar recruitment. His care for his fellow humans has earned the personal blessing of Telloria's Sovereign herself, and a blanket ban on 'hunting' children beneath a certain age, despite any criminal record.

Lord Hob could easily retire at any time, but has no desire to do anything than lead his troops and fund his humanitarian works. In battle he wields any weapon necessary to get the job done, and is known for his startling bellows and epithets as he wades deep into enemy ranks. In fact, he's said more than once that 'all a good commander needs is a strong, loud voice'. He is most often at home with the Skorza who honor both his prowess and commitment to Telloria, despite being 'merely human', and was once described as 'a big man with bigger fists'.

Scourge Hound

Scourge Hounds are werewolves that have combined the Zeti War Dance's controlled, deliberate techniques with their own ferocious natures. Needless to say, restraint to this degree is rare for werewolves, but, for those that can master their inner beasts, the results are a breathtaking combination of elegance and lethality. Scourge Hounds whirl across the battlefield, and can take down powerful individuals or massed troops with equal proficiency.

Scourges are very rare, and tend to be built rather than born naturally. Almost no werewolves start out with any control over their bestial instincts. In nearly all cases these talents must be learned. The fact that Scourges tend to be female has been remarked more than once. As a quirk of the Gift, only one in twenty werewolves are female, much as only one in twenty vampires are male, so the odd disproportion of female Scourges is notable. Yet, the Zeti War Dance can be taught to males, and the necessary discipline can be learned by males as well. The best operating theory is some psychological factor that inclines werewolf women towards the War Dance, though no formal study has ever been made.

Historically, the first Scourge Hounds were Zeti warriors that learned the War Dance before their transformation. Two of the original one-hundred Zeti that spent ten years with Scion King Goritsi's army became werewolves when the Gift set upon them. Zavra Heartstriker and Jasthea Karn both struggled to reconcile their skills with their newfound natures. Through her writings it's known that Jasthea Karn succeeded where Heartstriker did not.

Meditation, solitude, the occasional feral indulgence, and daily writings served to hone Karn into a lethal weapon, and have since served as the core of Scourge mastery. In fact, learning to read and write began as part of Karn's education, as the Zeti were not a literate culture. A clear mind and trained memory are required for a proper diarist, and Jasthea Karn is considered among the most prolific writers of the early Scion Age. And, as a warrior, Karn's exploits have made her a reverential icon in Tellorian legends. Her methods on and off the battlefield have become a template followed by Scourge Hounds ever since.

Scourges tend more towards solitude than camaraderie, but nearly all still belong to a pack. Yet, where the Alpha commands the pack in battle, the Scourge often has free reign. They specialize in removing high-value targets such as enemy commanders or specialists. Werewolves were already renowned for their mobility, and, combined with the Zeti War Dance, a Scourge can effectively ignore battle lines. That said, clear-headed thinking and a mind for the overall objective is absolutely required, since a Scourge behind enemy lines can be quickly overwhelmed without support. A key tenet of Scourge doctrine isn't if they can kill a target, but when they should kill the target, and such strategic thinking is alien to a werewolf caught in the throes of bloodlust.

7	6	1	2

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 3
DZ B

Vicious Blades

Melee	2	00

Unrelenting (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Bounding Flourish

Special	-	-

This action can only be used if this model did not begin their activation engaged.

Move this model up to 6" in a straight line. This model gains **Leap** during this move. After this movement this model performs 1 of its melee attacks on each enemy it passed through.

***Leap:** During free movement, this model may move through models as long as that movement does not end over a model's base.

Follow Me: Once per turn, when this model performs an action, it may make a Will Check(2) before resolving that action. For each success it may move 1 model within 4" up to 4".

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

The Shield Breakers

How does one make an already fearsome werewolf even more horrifying? Give it an enormous axe and powered armor, of course. Shield Breakers wade straight into the front lines with little fear. Werewolf muscle augmented by technomantic steam power give the Shield Breakers their well-earned name. Enemy hardpoints or defensive units are no match for their ferocity. Shield Breakers excel as point men, and can shatter a shield wall like a battering ram.

Much like Scourge Hounds, Shield Breakers are rare, and don't form units of their own. The armor is expensive, and technomantic expertise is hard to come by in Telloria. Shield Breakers typically maintain their own equipment in the field, which leads to varying states of polish or grunge, as with any individual.

The Breakers of Scion King Goritsi's era hailed primarily from a chivalric order known as the Crescent Shield. The Crescents were a mounted order and specialized in vanguard roles. But, when the Gift was unleashed, it became very clear very quickly that the Order had to change. Werewolves couldn't ride horses. Even the Order's highly trained destriers panicked in the face of a transformation. And, already large men, the transformed Crescents were even bigger werewolves. The notion was ridiculous.

Ultimately, the Order split. The human-centric Crescent Shields continued in Scion Goritsi's army, but the introduction of septs ultimately did away with their supporting aristocracy. The werewolf branch became the Silver Crescents. They kept their roles as vanguard specialists, although, obviously, their tactics underwent drastic changes with new arms, new armor, and wholeheartedly embracing their new feral natures.

Shield Breakers belong to packs, as all werewolves tend to, but on the battlefield wise Alphas plan their tactics around these mobile hardpoints. An enemy concerned with the advancing tower of fangs and metal can draw in too many units to deal with the Shield Breaker, leaving flanks ripe for pouncing Skorza. While there's no fast rule against Breakers being Alphas, on the battlefield their steady pace makes it difficult to effectively lead Skorza in their rapid-attack missions. As such most Breakers don't seek a pack's prime leadership role.

Armor maintenance typically falls on Breakers themselves. While the prototype armor was of Felskar design, manufacturing occurs primarily in Genoris, and the Sissora Sept maintains the monopoly. Thus, field expertise is hard to come by. Shield Breakers often learn from one another, and have adapted technologies from many foreign sources. An Achrionian power regulator here, a Felskar mana shunt there, a fragment from a Nasier mask… anything can potentially find a use. The longer a Shield Breaker remains on deployment, the more unusual his armor becomes. This also plays into the werewolf predilection for trophy-hunting, but, for Shield Breakers, it's more of a necessity.Some might say the Breakers have fallen far from their origins as a chivalric order, but such criticism is merely wistful nostalgia. A modern Shield Breaker could meet a charging knight head-on without blinking. Telloria's enemies have learned this all too well. In fact, it is said that in the earliest armor trials, one stunned sept leader was heard to mutter, "That's just cheating." Fortunately, war was never about being fair.

Duchess Monica von Loukris, The Dragonslayer

For the ousted Duchess Monica von Loukris, the war was as great a gift as her vampirism. She's now free to conduct her 'reign of terror' on her ancestral holdings without censure or restraint by the Tellorian Sovereign.

In the brief but bloody civil war that followed Ancient King Arikan's death many centuries ago, Duchess Monica had only just inherited her lands and title. The Loukris sept was alive and well, but small, and its military unprepared for the sudden Achrionian mainland invasion. She lost everything within a month.

But Monica was not easily cowed. So long as she existed, Loukris Sept lived on. Though they dwindled in numbers with the fortunes of war, sometimes as few as two dozen members, her fearsome reputation grew with each passing decade. Her masterstroke was the attempted assassination of Scion Queen Shael Han during a state tour of Loukris City. Duchess Monica failed, but nor was she captured, and accurate records of the incident record that she slew four hundred sixteen Dragon Legionnaires in her escape. A prodigious number, though certainly within a vampire's capabilities over the three day manhunt conducted through the Loukris city streets and sewers.

It is daring raids of that sort and other interdictory machinations that has kept Loukris Sept alive despite nearly impossible odds. At various times over the centuries, she's been branded both traitor and patriot by Telloria's government, as necessitated by the vagaries of international politics and dealings with Achrion.

However, as the situation stands today, Loukris Sept has been officially recognized as viable and once again part of Telloria. Duchess Monica has a free hand and support by Telloria's Sovereign to reclaim her territory. Yet, this isn't without its own unique, and unexpected challenges. As much as Loukris was once part of Telloria, it has been part of Shael Han for centuries. The people there may be as pale as Tellorians, and they may hold Tellorian superstitions, and their oldest buildings may have distinctly Tellorian architecture, but the culture is Achrionian. Long gone are the days when Duchess Monica's personal crusade had support from a healthy and active resistance movement.

And yet, Loukris' citizens have looked upon the coming war with particular dread. With all five Scion Nations at each other's throats again, they know from times past that their disputed status places them squarely in Telloria's sights. And leading the charge will be their own personal nightmare: The Duchess Monica von Loukris herself.

7 6 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ *

Dragonslayer Swords

Melee	3	00

Unrelenting (2): Replace (2) on the defender's chart with .

Felskar Harness

Melee	2	4

Once per turn, if this attack generates 1 or more hits on an enemy size 4 or smaller, you may place that enemy in contact and perform 1 Dragonslayer Swords attack.

Hit and Run: If this model kills an enemy, it may perform a free Sprint Action after that attack is resolved.

Infiltrate: This model only deploys after all other models have been deployed. You may deploy this model anywhere in No Man's Land or a friendly deployment zone

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Duke Anton don Genoria, the Headhunter

It is said that when werewolves tell each other stories around the campfire, it's the legend of the Cannibal Duke that keeps them awake at night. This is only partly true, as Duke Anton is no myth. The former lord of Genoris and the now obsolete Genoria Duchy hails from the time of Old Scion Goritsi himself. As part of the Scion King's retinue, Anton was one of the very first to accept the Gift.

But, Duke Anton is old, and the signs of decay are upon him. Not every mind can withstand the passing centuries intact, and his body, though immensely powerful by even werewolf standards, is losing its war of attrition against time. It's possible that Duke Anton is the oldest living Tellorian today. Even the Tellorian Sovereign cannot compete for sheer longevity.

It is well known that werewolves stay young and vital by consuming flesh and blood, but livestock and game will no longer bear Duke Anton through the years. He has developed a taste for sentient prey, and he must slake this terrible hunger at least once per moon. In fact, the coming war is something of a blessing, as enemy prisoners make for much preferable sport than the criminals and lowlifes that are his usual fare as authorized by law.

Even so, his degeneration is becoming more and more pronounced both physically and mentally. He has taken to the most bizarre and gruesome habits, such as wearing his prey's skin as clothing, and he spends far more time in wolfen shape than human. Despite his mind's slow degeneration, his head for tactics remains perfectly sound, and he brings the experience of many centuries to the battlefield. In command of his fellow Skorzas he can whip them into a whirlwind of death and claws like no other commander.

And Telloria's military leadership are content to let him stay in the field. His temper has grown shorter and shorter with each passing decade (which is saying something for a werewolf), and his propensity for dueling at the merest slight has made him highly unpopular at court. Even in an aristocracy built from vampires and werewolves, Duke Anton's lethal prowess is a subject of awe and fear.

Gregorio don Sissora

Everything about Gregorio is a rarity. He's one of the very few male vampires, and he comes from the nearly non-existent Tellorian upper middle class, his parents being moderately well-to-do merchants in Forseno. When the Gift set upon him and his sister (who became one of the rare female werewolves), they both joined Sissora Sept where Gregorio quickly rose through the ranks.

Through his political savvy and mercantile connections, Gregorio has grown both the family business and Sissora's reputation as arms manufactures and developers. While not an inventor or engineer himself, many modern innovations are thanks to Gregorio's business and political acumen. After all, without funding and administrative infrastructure, innovators and inventors are at the mercy of factors beyond their control.

Currently, Gregorio has been stationed as Telloria's Ambassador to Fructus Isle, where he has been in residence for the last two decades. It requires no great imaginative leaps to believe that he's sunk his talons deep into Fructus' thriving underworld. Smuggling and piracy is practically built into the Fructan blood, despite having once been the seat of the Celestial religion and home to the Grand Cathedral. However, no proof exists of Gregorio's dealings, nor would it ever. The old vampire is cagey at the worst of times, and his long-term strategies exhibit a patience characteristic of a vampire's timeless perspective.

In fact, if Gregorio has any fault it's a prevarication for complexity and efficiency. Why accomplish one objective when you can accomplish ten? His carefully-laid plans occasionally require constant management, but, as vampires need almost zero sleep, his active and brilliant mind is usually available to deal with any contingencies.

Gregorio has seen his share of battle through the centuries. He's a student of history and often innovates strategies around historical accounts with similar circumstances. He has said more than once that 'learning from history prevents future blunders.' When war does come, Gregorio will do as he always does: reposition to maximize his gain, which is an excellent description of his combat style as well. His mechanical wings let him rapidly close on high-value targets, and his magic isolates the target for an easy kill.

The Blood Engine

Whereas vampires and werewolves are human hosts to Telloria's inherent darkness, the vile Blood Engines are avatars of pure evil encased in reanimated flesh. A tehcnomantic steam harness serves as both control mechanism and fuel pump for these twisted horrors.

In the time of Scion King Goritsi's Crusade, most dark entities inhabiting Telloria roamed free. They slaked their thirst on the hapless population, most commonly to seasonal or lunar cycles (sometimes both). Their forms varied widely, and many ancient mythologies and horror stories involving demons, devils, specters, ogres, and even some vampire and werewolf legends were built around these very creatures. Once their hunger was slaked, they would vanish back from whence they came.

Scion King Goritsi pioneered the first techniques to lock these entities into a mortal corporeal shell. While still immensely powerful, the corporeal form could be slain, and the beasts would either expire or vanish back across the voids greatly diminished. But, as history records, the Crusade merely fought a delaying action. For, even if slain, new entities rose to take their place. It may take centuries, but evil is eternal, and these entities are patient.

However, a great many modern technomantic techniques have granted the edge back to humankind in this never-ending struggle. Where once these creatures were merely predators to be eradicated, the advent of the Blood Engines has given them a military application.

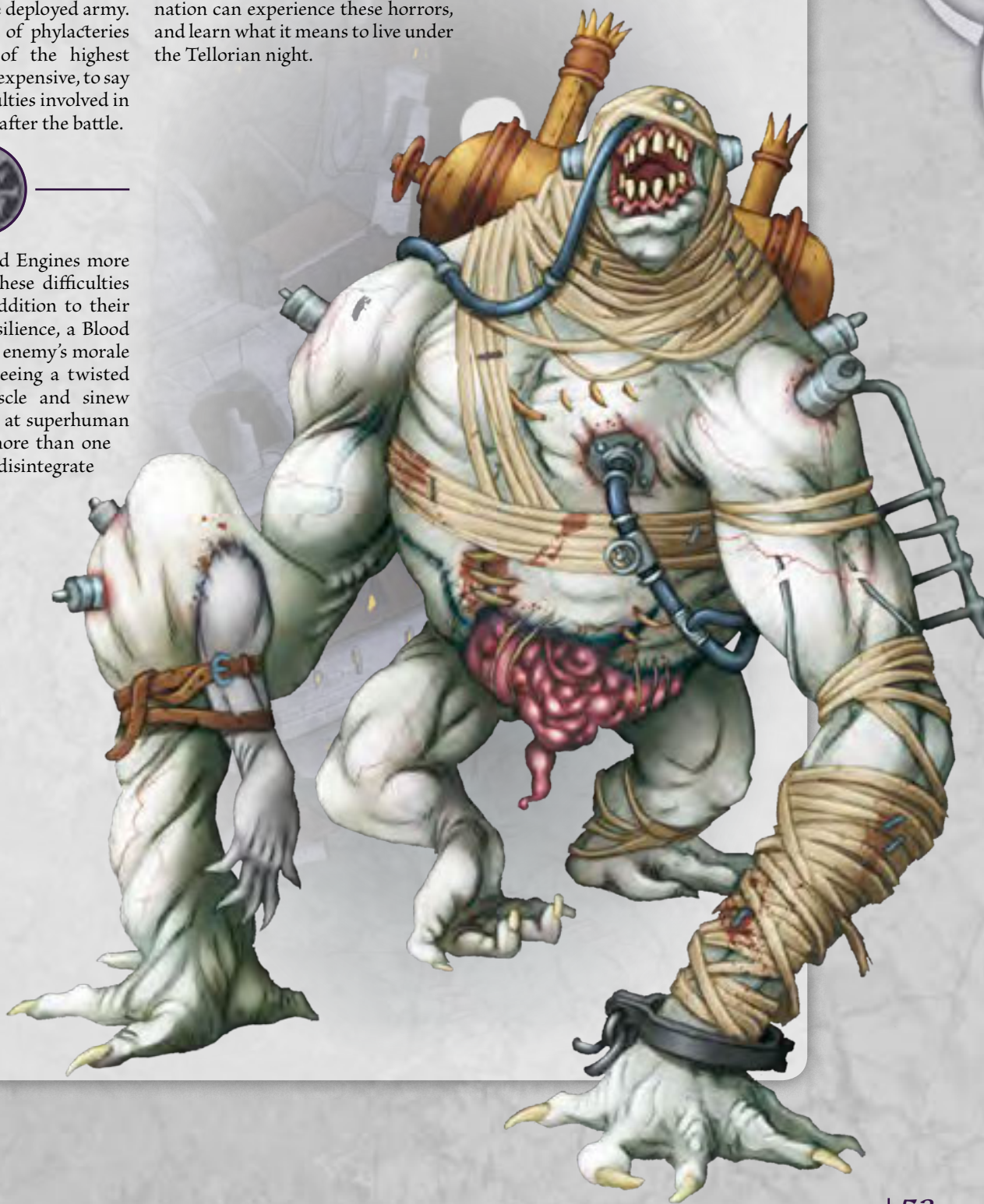
The fleshy vessel's construction relies primarily on human body parts, and can be of any age, though they must be fresh (no more than a few days' old). Once embalmed and stitched together, the vessel is fitted with a technomantic harness. The reliable steam engine provides all the necessary power for the technomantic control sigils, and keeps the blood supply pumping throughout the vessel. Then the summoning is enacted, the dark spirit bound, and a Blood Engine is ready for battle.

The sheer volume of lifeblood needed to keep an Engine supplied and docile can create logistical issues, particularly for long deployments. One technique is to ship the inert vessel (carefully cryomantically refrigerated to avoid the inevitable decay) and enact the binding rituals shortly before battle. However, on rare occasion, this technique is not viable. Protected or sanctified sites can prove a barrier to the

summoning ritual, and the entire island of Achrion is notorious for this very reason. As a workaround, summoners can bind Engine entities into phylacteries, which are easily transported with the deployed army. However, the types of phylacteries required must be of the highest quality, and are very expensive, to say nothing of the difficulties involved in rebinding the spirits after the battle.

However, Blood Engines more than make up for these difficulties once deployed. In addition to their raw strength and resilience, a Blood Engine's effect on an enemy's morale cannot be denied. Seeing a twisted monstrosity of muscle and sinew charging their ranks at superhuman speeds has caused more than one formation to simply disintegrate from panic.

It is a fitting tribute to Scion King Goritsi's ultimate vision of a united Telloria that his people have mastered the very darkness that once oppressed them. Now, any nation can experience these horrors, and learn what it means to live under the Tellorian night.



CHAPTER TWO – DEEP THOUGHTS

Ooroth stomped along the darkened streets of Fructus City as well as his tentacles would carry him on land. A walk sometimes did him good when he was angry, but this time the words wouldn't leave his head. *'No human woman would love a monster such as you,'* Ambassador Jahroon had sneered. And laughed at him, too!

That puffed-up, blue-skinned, self-important simpleton. Who did he think he was? Sure, he was Hadross's representative on Frutcus. Sure, Ooroth was captain of his house guard, and therefore his servant. But nobody got sent to Fructus for their health. Jahroon's hands were no cleaner than Ooroth's. They'd all been disgraced, in one way or another, and exiled from the depths.

Ooroth didn't long for the sweet, salty sea. Quite the opposite, in fact. But his skin itched when he spent any time ashore. His tentacles itched, his arms itched, even the membranous tissues of his translucent skull itched. Now he was stuck here on this cursed island, charged with protecting an arrogant, bigoted, condescending moron.

Ooroth suddenly felt tired. He scratched his skull with a beard tentacle. In his fury he'd forgotten the ointment jar. He looked up at the moon rising over the Celestial Cathedral's central spire and sighed. The night air eased the itching. But not by much.

The Deep Voices woke in his mind.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

"Oh, what now?" he demanded.

No words. No, never any words. But a feeling. A call. Like a whale's song, but deeper. Sinister.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

"That way?" The Voices urged him along one of the Cathedral District's many tree-line boulevards. The Voices didn't respond, but he felt their presence. He kept moving, slowly. At least he'd remembered his greatsword slung across his back. What would he find this time? Was it assassins? Thieves? An informant, perhaps?

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

Ooroth peered down a blind alley, shadowed from the moonlight by tall apartment rises on either side. Shining eyes reflected his lamplight. He heard a pitiful meow.

All the tension left his many, many secondary limbs, and he slumped. "A cat?" he demanded of the distant sea. "You brought me out here for a cat?"

NAME

Scion Kingdom of Hadross (formerly Oserkar)

RULER

Scion King Tylaties Hadross

CAPITAL

Ophion

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

"Brilliant. Bloody brilliant. Tide and teeth, don't you have anything *better* to do?"

The cat meowed again, pleading. From somewhere back the way he'd come, a child called, "Jodo! Jodo! Here kitty!"

Ooroth sighed at the eyes. "Jodo, I presume?"

The cat mewed, dolefully.

He shambled down the alley, possibly the cleanest alley he'd ever seen. But then, this was the Cathedral District, not Dockside where he and the other Hadrossians normally kept to themselves. The fat feline had managed to wedge itself between two heavy refuse bins.

Ooroth pushed the bins aside with his chin tentacles, and picked up Jodo in his arms. The cat purred and licked his hand. "Well, you're an odd one," Ooroth said. "Most surface dwellers run in terror at the sight of me. Or is it just that I smell like a fish?"

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

"Yes, yes, I'll take the cat to the girl. Noisy bloody busybodies." He shambled out of the alley, muttering. "Saving cats. I know the Depths move to mysterious currents, but this is ridiculous."

He followed the calls of "Jodo! Jodo-bean! Kitty!" to their source. He and the girl rounded a corner at the same moment. Her eyes flared huge, paralyzed in shock.

Jodo meowed.

She shrieked at the top of her lungs and ran as though a leviathan pursued.

Ooroth stretched a hand after her. "Wait! I'm not—!" Too late. He shambled as fast as his pods would take him. And itched. And grumbled, "Bloody bipeds and their long bloody legs." Jodo purred.

He needn't have rushed. The girl reappeared with a Watch officer in tow, and pointed. "It has my cat!"

The Watch officer took in the scene in an instant. She relaxed and took her hand off her heavy mace. "Child, that's not a monster. It's a Deepman of Hadross. Have you not seen one before?"

The girl shook her head, eyes still huge.

Ooroth moved forward. He couldn't help but notice the Watchwoman had very pretty eyes, and there were marked curves beneath that chain-linked armor. *'No human woman would love you....'* He shoved the thought away and held Jodo out. "He was stuck. He's a pudgy thing, to be sure."

The little girl hesitated, then snatched Jodo from his arms. "He's not slimy at all! Deepmen are supposed to be slimy."

Ooroth put fists on his hips. "Of course not. And I'm not a Deepman. They've got legs and look more human. I'm a Sevridan. We're squishy, but none of us are slimy. Well, not unless we work with the krakens. Those things are disgusting, believe me."

The girl swallowed and looked at the Watchwoman. The officer smiled at her. "Run along home." They watched her go and the Watchwoman said, "Well. Sorry to have disturbed you. Though I'm curious as to why a Deepm—er, what was it?"

"Sevridan. Or just Hadrossian, if you prefer."

"—why a Sevridan would be up here so late at night."

Ooroth waited for the Deep Voices to speak. They had gone the moment he handed the cat to the girl. So what had their purpose been? He glanced at the Watchwoman. *Very pretty eyes, indeed,* Ooroth thought. Wait. Could they have led him to meet this woman? "I'm Ooroth. Captain of the ambassador's personal guard. I'm here on his business," he lied, though only by half. "Listen, I don't suppose there's a tavern open late up here? This is hardly Dockside."

She blinked at him. "You can drink?"

"Of course I can drink! Tide and teeth, where do you surfacers *get* these notions?"

"Hadrossians keep to themselves, mostly. And my watch is usually Park, Cathedral, or Back Meadow."

'No human woman...' Ooroth grunted. "Well. I don't suppose you'd care to join me? You can tell me about Fructus City, and I can regale you with horrors from the depths."

She thought a moment. "Why not? My watch is done shortly, and I'm beat. This way."

Ooroth's heart sped up, and he felt the blood rushing to his face. He was thankful surfacers could rarely read Sevridan body language. His intentions had been betrayed by a purpling blush far too often in front of Hadrossian women. The human variety, that is. The transformed women, those like him, found him attractive enough, but he found them repellant. The irony was not lost on him, nor the hypocrisy. It fed his self-loathing.

Her lamp led the way to the tavern, a place of golden-lit windows and modest laughter. It all ceased when the Watchwoman entered trailing a monster. She scanned the room and asked, "Do you sit? Chairs or stools or...?"

"We do pretty much everything you can do. That table would be fine." He felt keenly conscious of the eyes on him. A vampire across the room stared at him as hard as the others. Nevermind that the vampire was just as inhuman as Ooroth. He looked human, and Ooroth didn't. As simple as that.

He set his greatsword against the nearby wall, and squeezed into a narrow chair and she watched him from across the table. "You certainly can... compress quite a bit."

He shrugged. "My bones work differently. More cartilage, really. As I told the child, we're squishy. So, I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners? Lieutenant Jendara Hall." She held out her hand from habit, but paused.

He took her hand in his and touched a beard tentacle to it, in proper courtly manner. "Charmed, ma'am. So, yes, we Hadrossians do drink. What do you recommend?"

The barmaid who brought their ales avoided looking at Ooroth. He raised the dull metal stein with a beard tentacle and sniffed it. He brought it into the tentacled mass around his mouth and drank deeply. Warmth spread through him. "Much better. I think I needed that. Go ahead and ask, I saw you watching me like a moray."

Watchwoman Jendara didn't even pause. "So your mouth is in there somewhere?"

"Yep. Seen a squid's mouth? Like that."

"How do you breathe air?"

"Enchantment. The Felskars are trying to sell us some kind of breathing apparatus, but I prefer the magic. Far more reliable, and it doesn't weigh anything. My turn." He contemplated, *'So, do you live nearby?'* But that reeked of desperation. "Just what makes up the 'Hadross District'? I read up on Fructus before coming here, but I never saw district markings on any map. I gather it's our… 'territory', I guess you'd say. Or something of that nature?"

She grinned. "It can be confusing. You know a bit of our history right? How the Celestial religion was centered here about a hundred years back?"

"Still is, as far as I know."

She nodded. "Right. But there hasn't been an Archon for more than a century. Not since the Betrayal. So, since then, all the nations send their exiled nobles and inconvenient convicts here." Her manner grew confidential. "It's like its own little continent of Arikania, but populated with political troublemakers and ne'er-do-wells, and they're all bottled up in our city. Alliances shift from week to week, and changes the map from month to month and year to year."

He set down his stein. "You make it sound like there's open warfare, but the city seems peaceful enough."

"True. It's not quite that bad. Not unless you're just so poor you have to live on the north side in Redwater. That place is a nightmare. The Watch barely goes there. But, back to your question, what I'd call Hadross's District consists of… let's see… Hadross Tower of course, a fifth of Cathedral, the east end of Merchant's March (for now), and about half of Dockside. It'll probably be that way for another couple of months. Believe it or not, all your ambassadors showing up for these talks has really stabilized things. Everyone's playing nice."

Ooroth snorted, a distinctly watery sound. "Unless you're in on the talks. My ambassador has met with Felskar twice now. Blistering. That's the word. Got another dawn meeting before the big show tomorrow afternoon when all of them get together in the Cathedral for the conference."

"Is that why you were up here?"

Ooorth purpled slightly. "I shouldn't really say anything else about it. Sorry."

"Fair enough. My turn. How do normal people live in Hadross?"

"Define normal."

"Well…." She gestured at the other drinkers. "Humans. I mean, we breathe air. Most of your country is underwater."

"Magic again, mostly. There are some contraptions they use too, but the Deep Ones see to it all."

"Those are your gods."

They'd have us think so, he thought. "More or less. They're the ones that change us."

She stared a moment. "Change you?"

"I… didn't start out like this. I was born human. All of us, Deepmen and Sevridan, we start out human."

"That's horrible!"

A wry tone escaped him. "How kind."

"I didn't mean it that way, but— Well, what I meant—"

"No, you're right. It's pretty horrible, and all because of an arms race with Kartoresh. Not many know about that. Have you heard the tale?"

She shook her head.

"The short version, then. Hadross and Kartoresh have been sniping at each other for centuries. Everyone knows this is because our two leaders are brothers, and, despite living for centuries, still fight like children. Anyway, Kartoresh's king made a pact with some big fiery elemental overlord, and suddenly their military might outstripped ours by a huge margin. So, our ruler, Scion Hadross, made his pact with the Depths as a counter. And his country, and us, was part of the price. So now, anyone born inside our borders and brought up in the Neridan religion stands a good chance of transforming after puberty."

Jendara was ashen. "I… I don't even know what to say."

Ooroth shrugged fluidly. "There's nothing to say. It's the way things are. The transformation is seen as a blessing by most. Something to be sought after. Humans actually have a bit of a stigma against them, no offense." He thought a moment. "As a loyal Hadrossian, I can't complain. There's so much to see beneath the waves. So much room to expand, even if the wilderdepths are more hazardous than your most barbaric hinterlands. And the cities… the Aquapolis of Ophion is stunning. A coral reef of light and civilization. The Opal Palace puts the Grand Cathedral of Fructus to shame." He took a long draw on his stein.

"But?" she prodded.

"But." He paused. "If asked, would I have chosen this? No. I preferred my bipedal self, and not itching like crazy at

the slightest hint of dehydration. I like the sun a lot more than a jellyfish should. It complicates matters. Especially when dealing with—with other nations." He'd almost said 'real women'. He went on, and couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. "If you'll forgive a little political commentary, the prejudice against my kind is less-than-amusing when dealing with Telloria or Kartoresh. Vampires and Ashmen have nothing on us for beastly physical transformations. It's just they look vaguely more human."

Jendara was staring at him, her stein immobile on the table.

"Sorry," he said. "I get a little intense."

"No, it's okay. I guess you're right. I've seen my share of vampires and not blinked."

Ooroth grunted. "Like the one in the corner."

"In the corner?"

It was his turn to set down his stein. He motioned surreptitiously with his face tentacles. "Yes, that one over there. The bald one talking to the man with the mustache and cigar."

She glanced. "Oh! Wow, I didn't even see him. Are you sure?"

He tapped the three tiny eyes on the side of his head. "My kind can see heat a little bit. Helps when you're down in the depths where even light is hard to come by. That guy is almost room temperature. Also, I can look directly at almost anything that isn't straight behind me."

She smiled wide. "That would be so useful in my line of work. I can't tell you the number of times I've found myself alone on the streets wishing for a little more light…" She went on, but Ooroth's attention was drawn to Mustache Man. *Something about him is familiar.*

He studied Mustache, easy to do with his extended field of vision. Big and burly, he looked military. Armed, of course. And he had a House Teknes symbol on his sword belt. So that was it? A Felskar officer speaking with a bald vampire at an out-of-the-way tavern in the dead of night. Innocent? Not? And where had he seen Mustache before? Why couldn't the Deep Voices have an opinion on that? No, no, instead they were helping him find missing cats. Or had they led him to a smart and intriguing woman? Dared he hope that they were concerned with his well-being for once?

Jendara had stopped speaking. "Are you listening? It's hard to tell."

"I'm very sorry, I wasn't. I was thinking about another 'gift' that comes with the transformation. The Deep Voices. Those I know you've heard of."

"Your gods again, right? It's said they talk to you."

"Won't shut up, is more like."

She blinked in surprise, then grinned. "I'm not sure I could ever speak so irreverently about my gods."

"They're not exactly my gods. Sure, there's a religion around them and all, but… I hear them. A lot. More than most, if you want to know. I try not to spread that around. Tonight they led me to the cat."

Jendara crossed her arms. "The cat. You're telling me your sea gods care about a lost cat?"

He shrugged. "There are worse things for gods to care about, no?"

She thought a moment, then smiled. "Good point."

"But no, they didn't bring me up here solely for the little girl or her cat. I don't think so anyway. Usually their intervention is more grandiose. Maybe it was seeing the vampire there." He didn't say *'Or to meet the woman of my dreams?'* Talk about sounding desperate.

She glanced. The bald vampire and Mr. Mustache had risen and shaken hands. Mustache left, trailing cigar smoke. "Are they important to your Deep Voices?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Ooroth admitted. "But they've never, ever led me wrong. Sometimes it's when to stay hidden beneath a reef when a megalodon shark is on the prowl. Other times it's when to speak out of turn in the Scion's throne room at the Opal Palace. *That* went over well, I can tell you. Sometimes it's when an assassin is sneaking up behind my ambassador. Other times it's where a cat is. I cannot fathom them, no pun."

"I can't imagine my gods talking to me like that," she said.

"You worship the Celestials?"

She nodded.

"Maybe you should stop. I quit worshipping the Deep Ones when I changed. They haven't shut up since."

She laughed and finished her stein. "Well, this has been fun."

His heart warmed. "It has. Listen, um…. I'm around until the conference is over. Can I see you again?"

She shrugged. "Sure, I like meeting new people—" Her

eyes flared. "Wait, are you—Oh, no, I, uh, I'm not—"

He held up his hands. "Oh I didn't mean… Oh, that's not true, I did mean as more than friends. That's the other part of this curse. When I changed, my liking for human women didn't. I'm… I know I make you uncomfortable. We just talked so well that I…thought…"

She stood, blushing. "I'm sorry. I… I'm sorry." Jendara hurried out without a backwards glance.

Ooroth sat at the table for another long minute. He stared at his stein and his tentacles twitched between anger and sorrow. *'No human woman….'* He drained the last in one draw, and left.

That morning, after a night of wandering, he arrived early to Ambassador Jahroon's opulent house overlooking the harbor just before dawn. Below, Dockside still lit the waters with red and orange lights from busy tavern windows. Dockside never slept.

The honor guard, two trusted Deepmen, was already stationed in the antechamber. They saluted his nod. "Has his eminent self been seen yet?" Ooroth asked.

"He has," said the ambassador from the top of the stairs. He descended, attended by two stunning slave women draped in silks and jewels. "And I'll thank you to moderate your sarcastic tone, captain."

Ooroth glanced at the slave women. *'No human woman….'* There was falsity in their fawning, a caress too light, a touch of wood in their smiles. The fact that these obsequious creatures were forced to adore Jahroon would be completely lost on him. Or maybe he just liked it that way. Ooroth spoke firmly. "They need to stay here. We don't want to draw attention."

Jahroon glared, looking rather human. Deepmen weren't nearly so altered as Sevridan. "I decide upon my retinue, *captain*. And this meeting is merely a formality to conclude our negotiations with Felskar."

"Before the actual talks begin."

"Of course. You know nothing of politics."

Ooroth knew more than he would've liked, but politics were not his concern. "Ambassador, what better way to wreck the conference than by killing a dignitary? I wouldn't put it past any faction, Kartoresh especially."

Jahroon rolled his eyes. "If you fear so much for my life, then should I not have convenient cover to stand behind?" He caressed one of the women. "And such pretty cover too."

The slave girls' vapid smiles didn't waver, but Ooroth sensed their sudden rigidity. Jahroon valued his flesh above

anyone else's. Everyone knew it. "That's what my men and I are for. Or would you prefer panicked and flighty cover that's never seen a fight to steadfast and loyal Deepguards?"

Jahroon's facial tentacles twitched. He motioned, and the girls returned upstairs, somewhat hastily to Ooroth's eye. Jahroon gestured at him. "Let us go."

One Deepman led the way through the darkened city. He marched ten paces ahead, the other five paces behind. Ooroth shambled along beside Jahroon. His wide-angled vision saw many people up and about in the predawn. Normal for Fructus from what he'd seen since he'd been there. Market vendors, fishwives, very early risers, and the City Watch with their dark blue cloaks. Only once did trouble threaten, but the thugs retreated back down the alley at the sight of the well-armed Hadrossians.

At the Felskar Ambassador's stately townhome, Ooroth dismissed the men with a word to stay close. He was about to wander in search of the kitchens when Jahroon said, "Captain, attend me. The Deep Voices command it."

Ooroth sighed. "I'm sure they did."

"Such blasphemies. Or is it my word you doubt? A serious charge, to speak false of the Deep Voices."

"No, Ambassador, forgive me. It's been a long walk, and my tentacles were meant for the sea. Of course I'll attend."

An armored guardsman showed them into the grand conference room. Gilt furnishings reflected gas-lit lamps in steady, even hues. Their unwavering glow reminded Ooroth of home, though there they used enchanted pearls and luminescent flora beneath the waves where no flame could survive.

Ooroth had always liked Ambassador Rotakin. He was friendly and outgoing, with a wide smile under a huge bushy mustache, like most Felskars wore. "My friends!" He shook their hands clasped in his. "Such pleasure it is to be seeing you this morning. And you'll forgive the early hour, no? Best we finalize things before this afternoon, eh? Am liking our arrangement more and more. But first, some refreshment. Dreski! Served freezing cold. Just the thing to prepare one for busy day."

Ooroth watched Rotakin pour three glasses. He and Rotakin toasted each other and sipped. It had almost no taste, and went down smooth in a spreading warmth that extended to every tentacle tip. And Ooroth didn't die. He twitched a signal to Jahroon that no surfacer would understand. Jahroon nodded and drank. Yes, Ooroth liked Ambassador Rotakin, but he didn't trust him. Not even close.

Most of the details seemed settled. Hadross and Felskar would both benefit from free trade and mutual defense. Really the only outstanding issue was an 'incentive' payment to Hadross. Specifically to its ambassador for brokering the deal.

At this, Rotakin sighed. "Ah, but now, is difficulty. Only minor complication, to speak true," said Rotakin.

Ooroth hid his surprise, and paid closer attention. He did not like complications.

Rotakin continued, "Instead of vulgar base gold, ambassador, we offer to you personally gift of credits owed to Felskar. Is worth easily fifty percent in excess of formerly discussed value, no?"

Jahroon watched him from narrowed eyes. "An interesting alteration. Not that any personal gifts are required, of course, but we… had agreed on gold."

Rotakin smiled and spread his hands in a grand gesture. Felskars often spoke with their hands in this manner. "Yes, but our ship has not arrived, you see? And am thinking best to avoid any hint of notice, no? That we meet for drinks on rare occasion is one thing. But for exchange of currencies, well…. Is best not seen or heard, no?"

Jahroon considered. "Fifty percent more? And how distant are these debts? And how many?"

Ooroth boggled that Jahroon would even consider accepting a bribe of this nature. But he kept silent. It was the ambassador's bribe, not his.

Rotakin said, "Nineteen, mostly within Fructus itself, and very small few in Arikania at large with banking houses and a trade cartel. Is surely no trouble for men of such influence as ourselves to call such things in, no?"

Then why not do it yourself and pocket the rest? Ooroth thought.

Jahroon tapped the quill on the table and mulled the treaty parchment before him. "Very well. This treaty appears sound, and your terms are fair. I am pleased to put my name beside yours."

Ooroth plucked the quill from Jahroon's hand.

"Captain! What—!"

Ooroth ignored Jahroon and leaned across the table. "Show me these debts."

Rotakin was flustered, the first time Ooroth had ever seen him so. He recovered quickly. "Of course!" He clapped his hands and a retainer came in. The same mustached man that Ooroth had seen earlier meeting with the bald vampire.

Ooroth grinned behind his tentacles. He should have recognized the man sooner, but all the surfacers looked the

same.

Rotakin untied the bound documents and handed the top one across.

Ooroth shook his head. "Not that one. One from the bottom."

Rotakin's good nature left his face, though his smile remained. "Is customary in Hadross for functionaries to question their superiors? Forgive my ignorance in this matter, Ambassador."

Jahroon's tentacles twitched with displeasure, but he said, "Show him."

Rotakin's smile got even more wooden. He handed over the document.

Ooroth read it in seconds. "This is a servitude bond for an Achrionian woman. A sailor, if I'm reading it right." He dropped it in front of Rotakin. "First, how in the depths do we track down a sailor in any timely manner, as you put it? Second, Achrion fiercely and actively protects its citizens from any form of forced servitude, indentured or otherwise. Third, any citizen of Achrion knows this and would never freely sign such a document. Or, if they did and you handed over the cash, then the joke's on you, and you're trying to pass it to the ambassador here. So, what's your game, Rotakin? You pocketed the gold yourself, didn't you?"

Rotakin's smile was gone. "Am thinking perhaps we should discuss this further without our functionaries."

Jahroon stood. "And I am thinking that we're done here. The gold. Or nothing. As it stands, Felskar shall receive no maritime protection from Hadross, nor will we grant a free-trade zone bordering the free cities for Felskar convoys. You'll pay your tariffs and tolls along with everyone else, or find a way to ship your goods over the mountains. Good morning, sir."

Jahroon muttered and cursed the entire way back down the city. Ooroth huffed and puffed alongside, wishing not for the last time that he had proper legs, or that the eastern sun, now properly over the horizon, was a little less hot.

Back at the Hadross estate, the ambassador was barely inside the door when he rounded on Ooroth. "How dare you embarrass me in front of Rotakin!"

Ooroth's tentacles writhed in shock, then anger. "I just saved you from getting royally cheated!"

"And ruined four weeks of careful negotiation! Those agreements will secure our western borders against any possible conflict. If these talks fall through, I'll know whom to mention prominently in my report."

Ooroth's temper got the better of him. "Teeth and tides, you'd do this too, wouldn't you? If things don't go well, you'll pin this on me, all for want of your 'customary bribe.'"

"Not one more word! Not a single one!" The ambassador's mouth spewed spittle as he raged. "You don't understand politics. You had best pray to the Depths that Felskar comes up with the right payments, or, I swear, the Scion himself will hear your name again. Your insolence, drunkenness, and unspeakable blasphemies are well known back home. All that has kept you from sinking has been your family name and what I can only believe is raw luck. They'll chain you to the biggest boulder they can find and roll it into the Sysor Deep. On my word, see if they don't!"

Ooroth had purpled with rage, and his tentacles writhed as furiously as Jahroon's. His hand twitched for the greatsword across his back.

But no. No, it wouldn't do. Ooroth forced himself back from the precipice and left without Jahroon's permission, though the ambassador said nothing.

Ooroth trudged back out into the streets, heart heavy. Dockside called. He had money. Money enough for ale and wine, and probably a woman to help him forget his loneliness for at least a time.

He was stopped at the compound gate by a messenger. "Your pardon, sir? I've a delivery for a Hadrossian at the ambassador's residence, but I don't have a proper name."

Thhrrruuummmmmmm....

Ooroth sighed. "Who's it from?"

"She didn't say. A little girl up in Cath District. She was at Kartoresh Tower, of all places."

"I'll take it. Here, for your trouble." He handed over a coin and received a rolled up parchment.

Ooroth unrolled it to see a child's drawing. A fat, smiling cat, and a little girl waving at him beneath the Cathedral. 'Thank You!' was written large across the top.

Ooroth crushed the drawing to his chest, and tried hard not to weep.

The Deep Voices slept.

Deepman Guardian

Of the many varieties of transformed, Deepmen are by far the most common type. They typically have 'normal' arms and legs and are just as mobile on land as any biped, though they may evolve further as their piety grows. In addition to the obvious superior aquatic mobility and gills, Deepmen gain a resilience unknown to mere humans, and are actively watched over by the Deep Voices in battle. Anyone managing the difficult task of slaying a Deepman can expect a swift retribution from his fellows.

All Hadrossians begin life as human, even those born to Deepmen and women. Any time after puberty, a loyal and Deep-fearing Hadrossian may be 'blessed' by the Deep Voices with the gift of transformation. Some may go their entire lives without such a blessing, others may change overnight, though few native Hadrossians transform after their 20th birthday.

The transformation is a fusion of the human Hadrossian and a Neridan water elemental that serves the same Deep Lords, though it should be made clear that the Deep Gods are not, in fact, elemental in nature. The Neridan elemental entities, when questioned, have said that both they and the Hadrossians 'serve the same masters and goals.' An ominous portent as the Deep Voices are quite alien as compared to the Celestial Gods or even tyrannical Elemental Lords. The Deep Voices may speak to any Hadrossian at any time, though they rarely concern themselves with any mundane or trivial pursuit. Some Hadrossians may go their entire lives without so much as a whisper, while the most gifted are anointed as 'Oracles' and live a life of extreme luxury in the Opal Palace at the Hadrossian capital city Ophion.

5	6	1	1

Deepmen • Rank 1 Infantry — Size 2, DZ A

Deep Strike

Melee	1	00

Swim: This model ignores the Rough keyword of terrain feature that also have the Water keyword.

Bolster: This model may make an assist action on a model up to 2" away.

Aegis of the Deep: When an enemy engages this model, or begins its activation engaged with this model, this model may make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes, the enemy gains **Resonate**.

The Voice Protects: While engaging enemies with **Resonate,** this model gains **Defensive Expertise(x)**, where (x) is equal to the number of enemies it is engaging that have **Resonate**.

Resonate: Many effects and abilities trigger off of a model having Resonate. A model may spend an Interact Action to remove Resonate.

10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1

Deepmen Kaxes

5 6 1 3

Deepmen • Rank 1
Leader

Size 3
DZ A

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sword Slice

Melee	2	00

Sundering (1): Models targeted by this attack gain **Resonate**. This is done before attack dice are rolled.

Resonating Destruction

Will	1	1

His attack targets all models with **Resonate** in range. On one or more successes the target suffers 1 damage.

Aegis of the Deep

The Voice Protects

Swim

Leader

Inspire: The first time this model kills an enemy with **Resonate** this activation it may move up to 3" and perform 1 of its melee attacks.

Training: At the end of this model's activation, if it is not engaged, it may move 3" toward a model with **Resonate**.

Through dedication, devotions, and unshakable faith in the Deep Voices, Deepmen sometimes further evolve to tap conduits of greater power. Kaxes represent less a military rank and more a religious appointment by the Deep Gods, and they span Hadrossian society, military and civilian. But, those that do follow the martial calling do so with amazing insight and precision on the battlefield. A Kaxes commanding a Deepman unit translates the Deep Voices into decisive action and melds the unit into a single fighting entity.

In battle Deepman Guardians wield a variety of weapons, but are always found in tight formations, designed to support one another physically and spiritually. Deepman units are said to be as implacable as the tides, and twice as strong.

Torvosh the Bannerman

Torvosh has never heard the Deep Voices, but most of his commanders believe they guide his steps, for wherever Torvosh goes, victory seems to follow. He is imbued with that one most ineffable quality that all warriors cherish: luck.

Torvosh has been present at some of the most one-sided conflicts in Hadrossian history and carried the day unscathed. Yet, in other battles, he's come away as the only casualty, but recovered fully. Once even he was caught unaware by a megalodon shark, and thought chewed and swallowed, only to be found wedged between two teeth when the beast was slain.

For his part, Torvosh can only shrug and credit his ever-strengthening faith in the Deep Voices for his continued survival. His own martial prowess is not inconsiderable, but his good fortune borders on the supernatural. He's been examined more than once by scholars, physicians, arcanists, and even oracles, but he seems, essentially, an ordinary Deepman.

In fact, being completely frank, his intelligence and perspicacity has been rated as merely 'adequate' for his rank. He displays no particular brilliance for strategy or logistics. In hypothetical scenarios he loses time and again. Thus, he's never advanced far, and only recently achieved his Bannerman status. And yet, Torvosh's mere suggestion carries more weight with the regular troops than a general's direct order. While this has created issues in the past, Torvosh's reputation in the service has grown to the extent that prudent commanders pay heed.

On the battlefield, Torvosh is both combatant and rallying point. Things just go well when he's nearby. Psychoarcanists have theorized that this is likely the troops' ironclad belief in Torvosh's infallibility (a placebo effect, of sorts), as no metaphysical cause has been established. And it's possible that Torvosh himself is much more of an intuitive commander than intellectual one. On paper, in the classroom, or in mock battles, the situation is false. There's no actual danger. But, in the field, when the swords swing and blood flows, Torvosh's situational awareness solidifies. He becomes the voice of command, and where he goes, victory is sure to follow.

5 7 2 2

Deepmen • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 2
DZ A

Piercing Blow

Melee	3	00

Sundering (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

The Voice Commands

Special	-	-

All enemies within 6" gain **Resonate.**

Swim

The Voice Protects

Aegis of the Deep

Survivor: When this model would be hit, make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes, apply that hit to another friendly model within 4".

Leader

Inspire: This model's melee attacks gain [+1] when targeting a model with **Resonate** this activation.

Training: When this model is attacked by a model with Resonate, after results are generated, make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes remove 1 .

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sevridan Gutters

Sevridan differ from their Deepman cousins in sharing a much more consistent form, but a much more severe transformation. Sevridan resemble a multi-tiered jellyfish with two distinctly human arms. Their skeletons become more cartilage than bone, and they can compress into shockingly narrow spaces. While this may not sound like a formidable form for war, their membranous skin is as tough to cut as whale skin, and they simply absorb many blunt attacks. Additionally, their long, heavy blades are not balanced at the hilt, but at mid-point where their infamous flexibility allows them to launch many surprising attacks with a circular windup, rather than lateral. Despite these advantages, they are somewhat encumbered ashore by the lack of bipedal locomotion. However, their many tentacles can trip, grab, and otherwise hamper any enemy in close combat.

In battle the Sevridan's flexibility can give them a startling edge. While not especially fast on their tentacles, they can compress and expand quite suddenly for a momentary burst of speed. An enemy formation can be, almost literally, taken apart by Sevridan as they slip through cracks in the shield wall.

Sevridan armor is a wonder of technomancy and elemental magic. It has been described as a 'woven ceramic', and is constructed specifically with the Sevridan's flexibility in mind.

As a 'sub species' of Hadrossian (though the term is rather misleading), Sevridan tend to be intelligent and charismatic individuals, and, as such, often fill advisory or leadership roles within Hadrossian society. Indeed, when the average Arikanian thinks of a Hadrossian Missionary, the Sevridan is the first image that springs to mind, as Friars wander the length and breadth of Arikania, spreading the gospels of the Deep Voices. However, their reception in other lands is not always favorable, and learning certain martial skills is prudent.

6 6 2 1

Sevridan • Rank 2 Infantry

Size 2
DZ B

Fluid strike		
Melee	2	00

Resonating Echo: If this attack generates a hit, the target, and all enemies within 2" of the target, gain **Resonate**.

Gelatinous Shift		
Special	-	-

This model may make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes, place this model anywhere within 2". It may then force any enemies that it was engaging into contact. If any of these enemies had **Resonate**, this model may then perform 1 of its melee attacks.

Guidance of the Voice: This model's melee attacks gain **Offensive Expertise (1)** against models with **Resonate**.

Paralytic Presence: Enemies cannot disengage from this model during free movement

Slow: This model cannot Sprin

Swim: This model ignores the **Rough** keyword of terrain features that also have the **Water** keyword

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sevridan Gutter Friar

6 6 2 2

Sevridan • Rank 1 Leader

Size 2
DZ B

Skewering Strike		
Melee	2	2

Resonating Echo: If this attack generates a hit, the target, and all enemies within 2" of the target, gain **Resonate**.

Gelatinous Shift		
Special	-	-

Slow

Paralytic Presence

Swim

Strong Will: When it is the target of a Will Attack or when it makes a Will Check, this model has re-roll (+1)

Leader

Inspire: Once per attack, when an enemy with Resonate is killed, 1 enemy within 2" of the target must make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more failures they suffer 1 damage.

Training: All models gain Strong Will.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In fact, the Friars' reputations as skilled bladesmen has led to adaptation of the name for Sevridan leaders in the military. Much like Deepman Kaxes, Sevridan Friars hear the Deep Voices quite clearly in battle, letting them serve as conduits of the Deep Gods' will. Most of them interpret this to mean their place is on the front lines, and as such, they hone their martial skills night and day. Their unique physiology and fluidic fighting style allows them to employ both their traditional long blades and a trident or other polearm simultaneously. A Friar in the back ranks is as deadly as one up front.

Ooroth Trencher, of the Sysor Deep

6 6 2 2

Sevridan • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 2
DZ B

Tidal Crash

Melee	2	00

Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Stinging Field

Toggle	-	-

Aura 6", Enemy models in contact with friendly models in the area suffer [-1] on all attacks, to a minimum of [1].

Slow

Paralytic Presence

Swim

Dominion of the Voice: Enemies with **Resonate** attacking this model must make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more failures, this model may assign their attack dice to another model (including enemies) within 2".

Dominating Presence: While within 2" of this model, enemy models suffer [-1] .

Leader

Inspire: At the start of their activation friendly models may make a Will Attack (1) against each enemy in contact with **Resonate**. On 1 or more successes that enemy suffers 1 damage.

Training: All models gain **Dominating Presence**.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Ooroth Trencher is a man out of place. He's gregarious, charming, and brilliant, which non-Hadrossians rarely expect from the transformed people of their undersea nation. For Ooroth's part, he'd rather never have undergone the change, which is surprising to nearly everyone he confides in, but it's the truth. While a faithful follower of Neridan tenets, Ooroth would have been much happier as a 'mere human' than a powerful Sevridan.

'And yet, Ooroth has bowed to his fate, at least in part. His command of strategy and emergent tactics is unparalleled, especially in the heat of an engagement. Much of this is due to his innate brilliance, but it's also in part due to the special relationship he has with the Deep Voices. Much like most Hadrossians, he hears them. But, Ooroth hears the Deep Voices far more clearly than anyone suspects, a secret he keeps firmly locked away. He has no desire to spend his days as an oracle, locked in the gilded cage that is Ophion Palace. Instead, he lets the Deep Voices guide his steps, where they've led him into service as captain of the Hadross Ambassador's personal guard on Fructus Isle (which is, unfortunately, a dubious honor).

Ooroth is beginning to suspect that the Deep Voices may not have their peoples' best interests at heart. Their instructions have always been somewhat baffling to him. For instance, when they prevent him from attending court functions, or put him in the path of undersea megafauna (which is part of the story how he earned his honorific 'of the Sysor Deep'). But, on Fructus Isle, they've taken a turn for the bizarre. Finding lost cats, dereliction of duty, and antagonizing his Ambassador, for instance. But, to refuse the Deep Voices would be to cast aside the final shreds of his loyalty and faith. These things Ooroth could never do.

In battle, Ooroth is no sprinter (Sevridan never are) but any enemy that mistakes his shambling gait for a handicap is in for a quick end. Once engaged, nothing gets away from tripping tentacles or his exceptionally fluid, whirling greatsword style.

Carcharian Frenzies

Amongst the many types of Deepmen, those gifted with the likeness of sharks are rare. This might be fortunate, because, along with the shark's strength and resilience, they also share their irascible temperament and inexhaustible hunger. Carcharians can eat their own considerable bodyweight in food every three days. This would present logistical problems for Hadrossian commanders if it weren't for the ready supply of fresh meat standing in the enemy's lines.

On the battlefield, when the blood begins to flow, Frenzies pay for themselves a dozen times over. 'Berserk' is too tame a term for Frenzies with the scent of blood in the air. They keep their heads reasonably well, so long as there are enemies at hand. But, wise commanders place Frenzies on a distant flank to chew through enemy formations. In fact, while heavily armed and armored, Carcharians in the heat of bloodlust will, more often than not, discard their weapons in favor of their teeth.

Frenzies represent one of the rare Deepman mutations that don't merge well with society at large. They've been likened to Tellorian werewolves more than once, as a difficult situation and heated words can lead to dead civilians and a full belly. This is not to say Frenzies travel through life looking for a fight, but it's not far off. The discipline offered by military service (and their excellence in such a role) leads most Frenzies to seek active deployments on the front lines.

5 5 1 2

Carcharian • Rank 2
Infantry

Size 3
DZ B

Blood In The Water

Melee	2	00

This attack gains [+1] against enemies with **Resonate**.

Sundering (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Feeding Frenzy

Melee	1	00

This attack may only target enemies with Resonate. If this attack kills an enemy, this model may remove 1 damage.

Scent of Prey: At the beginning of this model's activation it may make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes it gains [+2] this activation

Swim: This model ignores the **Rough** keyword of terrain features that also have the **Water** keyword.

Whispers of the Voice: If this model passes a Will Check, any enemy it engages this activation gains **Resonate.**

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Frenzy Chargers

7 5 1 3

Carcharian • Rank 1 Leader

Size 3
DZ B

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Bloodtide

Melee	2	2

This attack gains [+1] against enemies with **Resonate**.

Sundering (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Feeding Frenzy

Melee	1	00

This attack may only target enemies with Resonate. If this attack kills an enemy, this model may remove 1 damage.

Resonating Fury: When this model performs its action it may make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes all enemies within 1" gain Resonate.

Swim: This model ignores the rough terrain quality when the element also has the water quality.

Leader

Inspire: If this model passes a Will Check this activation, Feeding Frenzy may target **all** enemies within 1" with **Resonate**

Training: This mode ignores disengage penalties when disengaging from enemies with **Resonate**.

Hadrossians have long observed that when sharks congregate in schools a pecking order doesn't take long to sort itself out, and Frenzies are no exception. At the top are the Chargers, truly the apex among predators. Notably more mutated than their brethren, they trade some long-term mobility for a long, slithering tail, but this heavily muscled appendage can propel them in a mighty leap that takes enemies unawares. Backed up with a ripping, gutting polearm, a Deepman Charger can cross half the battlefield before his enemies are even aware of him. In the company of fellow Frenzies, the ravening storm of teeth and blades takes on truly epic proportions, and both friends and foes would do well to steer far and wide.

Gar, the Gladiator

In the grand coliseum at Ophion, no name has been more feared and revered than Gar.

Born the son of a Kartoreshian merchant, Gar was captured by Hadrossian pirates and sold into slavery at a young age. (Slavery being legal in Hadross to this day). He proved fractious, ill-tempered, and generally useless to his captors. He refused to accept that he could do nothing to end his enforced servitude, short of paying the price himself. Yet, numerous entreaties to his wealthy parents were met with silence. The spoiled young man faced the world powerless for the first time.

He was eventually sold to the arena. Finally realizing that there was, in fact, no magical rescue imminent for himself, the young man threw himself on the mercy of any gods listening, and the Deep Voices answered. He has said more than once that the boy died that day in the arena, and Gar was born. Many decades since, that spoiled adolescent is but a distant memory.

Gar has left the arena and joined the Hadrossian military as a free agent, and, again, his name is both feared and revered, though he does miss the crowds chanting his name. His troops find him an inspiration and a paragon. His leadership style is well-suited to his fellow Carcharians, but can prove troublesome with Deepmen or Sevridan. Such is the nature of Carcharan Deepmen. The shark form brings a shark's temperament. It's no surprise that Gar typically leads crack assault squads on seemingly impossible missions. He never shirks from a challenge, and the greater the odds, the better, especially for his bloodthirsty compatriots. If they're far enough from friendly ranks, there's no need for restraint.

However, unlike his Frenzy cohorts, on the battlefield Gar controls his bloodlust until he has found the strongest opponent in the enemy ranks (or enough enemies to be a challenge). Only then is his inner predator loosed, and the arena champion plies his trade. While not playing for a crowd anymore, one cannot help but admire his grand style. When overwhelmed, he overcomes. When outmatched, he overpowers. When outwitted, brute force sees him through. It's as if he's still a performer, and the Deep Gods are his audience.

6 6 2 2

Carcharian • Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 3
DZ B

Tribute To The Voice

Melee	3	2

If this attack kills an enemy Leader or Character with **Resonate** the enemy loses 1 additional morale.

Swim

Arena Champion: If engaged with 3 or more enemies, or an enemy Character, this model gains Offensive Expertise (2).

Resonating Fury: When this model performs its action it may make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes all enemy models within 1" gain Resonate.

Leader

Inspire: This model gains Percision(+1) to its melee attacks for each enemy with **Resonate** it is engaged with.

Training: This model's melee attacks gain **Offensive Expertise(+1)** when attacking enemy Leaders or Specialists.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Deep Caller

Where most Deepmen and Sevridan perceive and react to the Deep Voices, Deep Callers can summon their immediate intervention. When a Deep Caller focuses his attention on an opponent, he can channel the Deep Voices directly into an unprotected mind, causing paralysis, madness, or death. In a more defensive role, Deepcallers can freeze enemies in their tracks. Properly supported, Deepcallers can slow an enemy battle line to a crawl.

Deepcallers are not trained so much as chosen. Like many actions by the Deep Gods, they decide with whom they'll share their secrets. Most often this calling takes on a literal aspect as the Deepman (or Deepwoman) to be elevated feels a pull towards the oceanic hinterlands. They undergo a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey that is as much physical as spiritual. Some do not return.

But for those that survive with mind and body intact, they're elevated to new stratas in Hadrossian society. These individuals typically serve as administrators, politicians, and priests. Those with a martial bent form the core of the military's support and logistics divisions, as the prophetic Deep Voices readily anticipate the troops' needs.

Yet, for all their singularity of purpose, the Deepcallers are individuals, and still prone to the strengths and weaknesses that all mortal beings face. Hubris is a cunning enemy, and humility is not a marked virtue in the Neridan religion. Indeed, a Deepcallers surety of communion with the Deep Voices allows greater and greater displays of power. The more certain the Deepcaller is of fulfilling the Deep Voices' wishes, the more powerful she becomes. It is a cycle rife with potential for abuse, as the Deep Voices care little for their peoples' day-to-day activities.

Deepcallers also excel in hydromancy, thanks to the intimate link shared by the Hadrossians, Deep Voices, and Neridan hierarchy of water elementals. In a very real way, they all speak the same language. This allows for a subtlety and precision in their elemental magic that is unparalleled in Arikania, though it should be noted that only the most powerful Deepcaller Lords risk complex instructions to the chaotic Neridan on the battlefield.

Deepcallers in the front lines serve support and advisory roles, and excel at picking off high value targets from a distance. Unsupported, however, a Deepcaller is a tempting prize for any foe. Wise Hadrossian commanders keep them behind closed ranks of steady, reliable Guardians.

Calith Reaver

Humans aren't the only beings the Deep Ones might transform. Experimentation by skilled Deepcallers can transform ordinary sea creatures via the Deep Voices' blessings. The temple at Calith has achieved the most success with a variety of crustaceans, though the mortality rate remains high. Once transformed and stabilized, these creatures are as biddable as surface-dwelling canines, and require only a few month's training to be of use in the line of battle. Their vice-like claws are made to crack the strongest armor, and their immense strength and many legs make most battlefield obstacles and terrain irrelevant. The only complaint against the Reavers is their tendency to charge straight at the nearest enemy, though, in battle, this is usually the objective anyway. They're vanguard troops, made to break the strongest shield walls and disrupt enemy formations.

The Neridan Temple at Calith has existed since before the Ancient Kingdom. Ancient King Arikan himself is said to have visited on more than one occasion to study the archives that stretch far beneath the ocean floor. Their work with deep sea animals extended from projects to tame and domesticate ocean fauna in large part to make exploring the labyrinthian catacombs safer. The drowned crypts and passages are home to many creatures, many adapted to hunting and living without light.

As the Deep Voices have exhibited a capacity to communicate with lesser life forms, it was thought that talented Deepcallers could utilize the same techniques, and effectively project a calming 'aura' to pacify the more predatory creatures. As it happened, initial results proved somewhat random. Different creatures reacted differently regardless of species. Some grew passive, others grew vicious, and a few, most notably crustaceans, were transformed, much like Hadrossians.

The immediate military applications of 'attack crabs' was clear, although it should be noted that there are considerably greater non-military applications for creatures of such immense strength. Construction, demolition, and security, for example.

With the advent of technomantic re-breathers that let Calith Reavers cross the surf line, Calith Reavers take the place of more costly equipment and contraptions. A pair of Reavers can serve as an effective battering ram, for instance, and, on the march, two or three Reavers can shoulder supplies and equipment for dozens of regular troops.

Hadrossian soldiers often take great pride in their regiments Reavers, and occasional rivalries spring up between regiments on deployment as to whose Reavers are stronger, smarter, faster, etc.... It should be noted that staged pit fights between Reavers is strictly forbidden under the Hadrossian Articles of War.

6 5 2 2

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 4
DZ B

Shell Cracker		
Melee	2	00

Sundering (2): Replace (2) on the defender's chart with .

Hitching a ride		
Special	-	-

When this model performs its maneuver, any friendly models size 3 or smaller in contact at the start of that movement may be placed in contact at the end of that movement.

Crawl: Ignore rough terrain movement costs.

Resonance Destruction: When this model attacks a model with **Resonate**, its attacks gain [+2] .

Land Rage: At the beginning of this model's activation, if it can see an enemy model with **Resonate**, make a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes this model gains [+2] for this activation.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Talimoth Ororidrum, the Oracle of Ulloth

6 7 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ A

Demands of the Voice

Will	-	-

Make a Will Attack(1) against each enemy with **Resonate** within 4". For each success that enemy suffers 1 damage.

Saw-Toothed Blade

Melee	2	00

When using this attack, enemy models are treated as having [1] . This attack gains **Offensive Expertise (1)** against models with **Resonate**.

Swim: This model ignores the rough terrain quality when the element also has the water quality.

Fear of the Deep: Aura 8", Enemy with **Resonate** in the area suffer [-1].

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Talimoth's transformation came upon him later in life than most Hadrossians. He served as a minor cleric at the Neridan temple in landlocked Calivant. In the distant past, when Ancient King Arikan divided his empire between his five children, Calivant served as the original seat of government for the burgeoning nation of Oserkar (which Scion King Hadross would later rename Hadross after himself).

Although the transformation usually takes most pious Hadrossians before their twentieth year, Talimoth was nearly forty before he finally heard the Deep Voices. But he heard them clearly, very clearly indeed. He ventured into the catacombs and was not seen again for nearly three years. He returned fully transformed and bearing a satchel full of archaeological treasures. His most notable find includes the Abyssus Vertuntex, a sounding stone that magically translated any spoken words into the ancient tongue used by the beings who inhabited much of the sea floor before the Dim Years many thousands of years ago. Although not a recording talisman, the stone has allowed Hadrossian scholars to reconstruct the ancient language, and translate vast archives from the drowned crypts at Ophion, Calith, and Calivant, to name just a few.

As an oracle, Talimoth would normally be kept safe in Ophion, but the Deep Voices have other plans, and Scion King Hadross has granted him the freedom to journey as he pleases, largely in recognition for his amazing discovery. He journeys across Arikania, often in secret, unearthing artifacts wherever the Deep Voices lead.

Unfortunately, the war has hampered his efforts considerably. Talimoth must often rely on military intervention to achieve his aims. As a scholar and man of technomantic disciplines, unnecessary violence is repellant to him. But, as a pious devotee of the Deeps, Talimoth will raise his weapons and magic against his foes, however reluctantly.

In battle Talimoth brings the full might of an Oracle channeling the Deep Voices directly into his enemies' unprotected minds. His heavy saw-staff serves not only as a more traditional magic focus, but also a hacking, slicing weapon. Unlike most spellcasters, Talimoth is perfectly at home in the front ranks.

Ephramaki, the Deepcaller Lord

A scholar turned warrior, Ephramaki of Druzeille was already a powerful magician before his conversion to the Neridan faith and subsequent transformation. Given a preference, he'd return to his university, and spend his days studying the vast abundance of flora and fauna of the wilderdepths. His work on the Calith Reaver project and similar endeavors has earned him honors from Scion Hadross himself, including his noble title. But the Deep Voices have other plans for Ephramaki, and he is called to war along with all the rest.

Ephramaki has long been interested in the Great Binding imposed on Arikania by Ancient King Arikan nearly two thousand years ago. When the Binding took hold on one fateful night, the whole of magic changed, and the Elemental Lords (long the persecutors of humankind) were expelled. The resulting cataclysm devastated entire nations. Floating cities crashed to earth, volcanic citadels erupted, and the vast aquapolii drowned beneath the waves. Indeed, the Hadrossian kingdom is built on those ruins from the Dim Years.

Ephramaki has studied the Great Binding's effects on many magical disciplines, and his advances in hydromancy rely strongly on brief, potent summons of Neridan water elementals. While draining in the extreme, he can nevertheless command mighty torrents, and crush enemies beneath pounding surf far inland. Technically, the Binding should make such displays should impossible, but Ephramaki has two hypotheses.

First, it's possible the Great Binding is losing potency. It was understood that the Binding was strengthened through ordering society and, thus, humankind in certain ways. As such, since societies change and advance over time, the Binding would need to be adjusted, or humankind would remain static (which is, of course impossible).

Second, and this is Ephramaki's personal belief, the Binding may contain 'holes' which the advance of modern arcanism have made easier to exploit. However, testing the validity of this premise would require 'seeing' the Binding from the other side, either from the elemental or celestial realms. Elementals neither perceive nor experience the material universe in the same way as corporeal beings, thus their perspective is less than useful.

Regardless, Ephramaki is a capable and brilliant warrior, much to his chagrin. Still, he makes the most of his unfortunate situation by carrying his experiments into the field. He botanizes when he can, as the land contains nearly as much variety in flora and fauna as the wilderdepths, and he studies ancient ruins and archives for information on the Binding. His commanders have little cause to complain about these eccentricities, for in battle, he's as unstoppable as the tide.

5 7 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ A

Hydro Blast		
Magic	*	8

Choose a target within range; make a [1] magic attack against the target and each enemy between this model and the target.

Crushing Waves		
Special	-	-

Make a Will Check (3). On 1 or more successes all enemies with **Resonate** within (x)" suffer 1 damage, where (x) is equal to the number of successes on this Will Check.

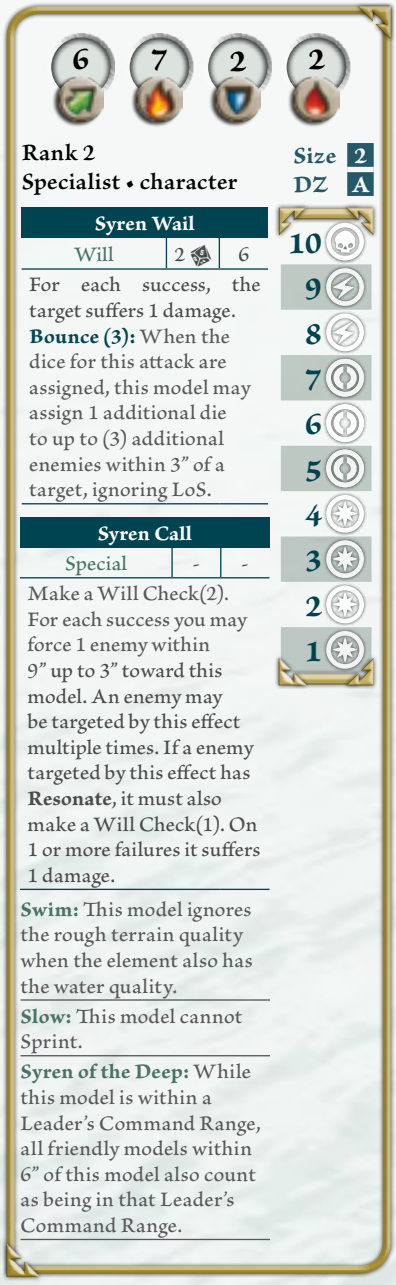
Swim

Wall of Water: Aura 4" , Enemies with **Resonate** treat the area as Rough (2).

Calling of the Voice: At the beginning of this model's activation, it may make a Will Check (2). For each success 1 enemy within 6" gains **Resonate**.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Ilva, the Syren of Kaldeth Strait



The Syrens of Ophion are exclusively Deepwomen trained as communications specialists. It is said their songs travel up to a thousand miles beneath the waves, and Syren outposts dot the sea floor along coastlines to relay important messages for the highest paying clients. In wartime, the advantage to Hadross is significant.

Although a Syren's range by land is greatly reduced in mere atmosphere, Ilva, the Syren of Kaldeth Strait, counts her voice as particularly blessed by the Deep Gods. She can transmit complex instructions to deployed troops over many miles. Although another Syren would be necessary to respond (and Syrens tend to be rare ashore), use of the Neridan language keeps communications relatively secure. Only Deepcallers or specially trained hydromancers can understand the elemental language with fluency. In addition, there's nothing preventing a mundane cryptography layer either. They Syren might send "Blue seals bring gifts to gray houses," and the resulting code phrase means "Nasier troops encamped, south by southeast."

Non-Hadrossians find Syren songs oddly alluring almost across the board, a fact which the Hadrossian military exploits as often as possible. Indeed, the old legends of sailors and Syrens are entirely true. A single Syren guarding a strait can make the passage dire indeed. On a land battle, however, the cacophony of shouts, screams, and clashing weapons makes widespread hypnosis impossible. Instead, a Syren can focus on individuals, and lull them into a stumbling stupor. Alternately, by pitching up into the hypersonic range, a Syren can shatter armor and burst heads at close range.

It's a common misperception that all Deepwomen are Syrens. It's a profession, much like being a soldier, diplomat, or chef. However, just like any other profession, some excel where others may struggle. Ilva, in particular, excels in her duties. In addition to her voice talents, she's a brilliant and intuitive tactician. She can relay complex concepts with just a few words, and can improvise on battleplans as they unfold (or collapse!) in the midst of combat. She's an asset for any busy Hadrossian commander, and has received commendations and honors time and again. Surprisingly, she has refused more than one promotion, citing that she prefers the support role to that of command. While her commanders are certain she would excel, they're happy to retain her services in her desired capacity.

Orsund Cavalier

Careful application of magic and Neridan elemental spirit bonds allow these terrors of the deep to stalk the land. Many Hadrossian scholars consider orsunds the most intelligent among the many varieties of kraken kept as beasts of burden. As such they are remarkably quick to learn, and similarly quick to take offense. Once trained, however, orsunds demonstrate almost childlike loyalty to their cavalier masters. They've been likened to the great dragons in both temperament and lethality.

Domesticating the orsund kraken originated from practical applications rather than warfare. Hadrossians recognized the need for powerful beasts of burden, much as they'd used ashore. With their quick minds (for animals) the orsund proved suitable candidates. Construction, hauling, transportation, and entertainment were immediate applications. The steps to security and military roles was a logical progression.

Yet, not all orsunds are suited to life among Hadrossians. They're notoriously proud and territorial creatures, not at all unlike land-dwelling cats. Thus, their training is a matter left to experts, and master Deepcallers. The Deep Voices can indeed soothe these savage beasts. And yet, fatalities remain a real possibility. Even when deployed and 'in their element', an orsund is best left to his handlers and rider. Hadrossian troops keep their distance until battle is joined.

Adapting an orsund to tasks ashore can take many, many months. Not from any inherent phobias they may possess, nor from adapting to air-breathing. The enchantments take care of that easily. It's just that, unlike most Hadrossian war beasts, Orsunds must learn to walk using their tentacles. Calith Reavers are crabs, and walk along the seafloor. Deepmen were once human, and walking is first-nature. Orsunds are swimmers, and the transition can sometimes take months. The difficulties have slowed work on the immanid kraken species, which rival land-going elephants in size and stature (which is fortunate for Hadross' enemies).

While they can boast to no great speed ashore, Orsund Cavaliers make up in reach what they lack in velocity. Enemies venturing too close find themselves ensnared by tentacles and dragged towards the orsund's gaping maw to be consumed, crushed, or speared. In truth, the cavalier himself is almost a spectator rather than a combatant. If its rider is killed or incapacitated, the orsund will happily follow its fellow Hadrossians across the battlefield, gobbling any enemies that get too close.

6 6 2 3

Rank 2
Specialist

Size 5
DZ B

Rip and Tear

Melee	4	00

Sundering (2): Replace (2) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Tentacle Grab

Melee	2	8'

For each attack die assigned to an enemy by this attack you may force that enemy up to 4" toward this model.
Follow-Through (2): Replace (2) ✖ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Fury of the Voice: All attacks this model makes against enemy models with **Resonate** gain **Offensive Expertise(2)**.

Swim: This model ignores the rough terrain quality when the element also has the water quality.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

NAME

Unified Committees and Peoples of Felskar

RULER

Chairwoman Iryna Teknes

CAPITAL

Ennen Kohere

CHAPTER THREE – POTENTIAL UNCHAINED

Gulraast drummed his tiny fingers on a desk too large for him. He couldn't tell if the woman was lying, mistaken, or simply confused. Such uncertainty didn't happen often for him. "And your captain, he is not being seen these last four days?"

Third Mate Mai Leng shook her head, annoyed. "Not since dinner at Goritsi Tower. Both him and the first and second mates. Three people. Just missing."

Gulraast frowned. "Along with my shipment, no? But, and forgive my not speaking common language so well, but this phrase: 'dinner at Goritsi Tower'... It could have many meanings, yes?"

The sweet woman, barely more than a girl to Gulraast's eye, looked a little sick, but laughed. "Heh. Yes, but in this case it was actually just a dinner. A thank-you dinner. It turned out one of our passengers was Tellorian nobility. We got her here without incident."

Gulraast settled in his high-backed chair, nodding. "Ahhh, yes. Always with Goritsi is circles within circles. But now, why would one not be suspecting Goritsi of foul play in this matter? This passenger discovers my shipment, appraises value, informs her countrymen, and is done, no? Your men go for 'dinner,' and my shipment goes missing. She plays you for catspaw."

The third mate slammed her fists on the desk. "She wouldn't do that! And she didn't find the shipment when she was aboard!"

From behind him, Gulraast's enormous bodyguard growled, a porcine grunt full of menace. The girl stared at the huge pig-man and sat back, cowed. Gulraast waved it off. "There, you see? Voy is agreeing with you. And would not do for me to be discounting Voy's word, no? Voy often speaks truth." He sat back and stroked his graying mustache. The girl certainly believed what she was saying about the Tellorian passenger. As for the rest though... Gulraast had his ways. "But now is difficulty. Shipment and officers go missing. Shipment is gold. Many chests. Much weight. And this is being Fructus, an easy port to lose gold in, no?"

The third mate sat silent. Her eyes flicked from

Gulraast to the hulking Voy and back. "Well, I'll certainly keep looking. I can't see the captain abandoning his ship. Even for that amount."

Gulraast shrugged. "Is unfortunate, but I can. Speaks poorly of my trust in human nature, no? Ah, but perhaps you do not think us addanii fully human? Is common Achrionian prejudice."

"What? Oh, no, no, I would never—"

Again Gulraast waved it away. "She is polite for sailor, yes, Voy? No, miss, it would be speaking untruth to say our countries agree on many, many matters. But would also be speaking untruth to say we addanii were at heart of magnificent Humanum Revolution in Felskar. And is this untruth that is propagated by Achrionian nobility. Is right that they fear Felskar's triumphant example, for what place have 'nobility' in good, honest government? My countrymen did not need addanii intellects to see this truth."

The third mate shifted in her chair. "Look, I'm a sailor, not a politician."

Gulraast clasped his hands together. "Ah, and Voy is reminding me am being impolite to lecture. Is true. Friends do not lecture, no? And we can be friends, yes? Come, let us drink. Voy will do honors."

The pig-man produced an ornate silver bottle and poured off two shots of crystal-clear liquid. He handed glasses to each with deft fingers for such a large creature.

"Zavas!" Gulraast toasted, and tossed it back.

The third mate did the same and gasped.

Gulraast grinned. "Is surprise, no? Dreski is greatest gift my people bring to Arikania. Our traditional mountain fatherland sees much sun, but little warmth. Though, as friends, am warning that alcohol does nothing for actual warmth. Temperature at extremities remains constant regardless of consumption. Is illusion alone. Ah, but illusions are often being metaphor for life, no? Which brings us to unpleasant business over missing shipment. And, in absence of captain and superior officers... you are responsible party, no?"

She shot to her feet. "I am a citizen of Achrion! You can't hold me against my will, nor can you—"

Voy growled again, louder.

She pointed. "Keep that thing on a leash!"

Gulraast grinned to himself. This girl had fire! He raised his hands in conciliation. "Ah, Voy is rebuking me, for my words must sound like threat. Please, no, please! Do be sitting. Is being this common language, you see? We Felskar are always having difficulty, no? When am saying 'responsible party' am meaning you are commanding officer now, yes?"

The third mate nodded, mute.

He slid documents across the desk one by one. "Then must be handing you this notice of seizure, this notice of termination for crew, and this reregistration of former independent vessel under new flag of Felskar nationality and House Teknes. All rendered by dutiful and lawful accords of maritime law as undersigned by the five Scion nations and Free Cities."

Mai Leng looked over the documents, eyes angry. She lingered on the notice of termination.

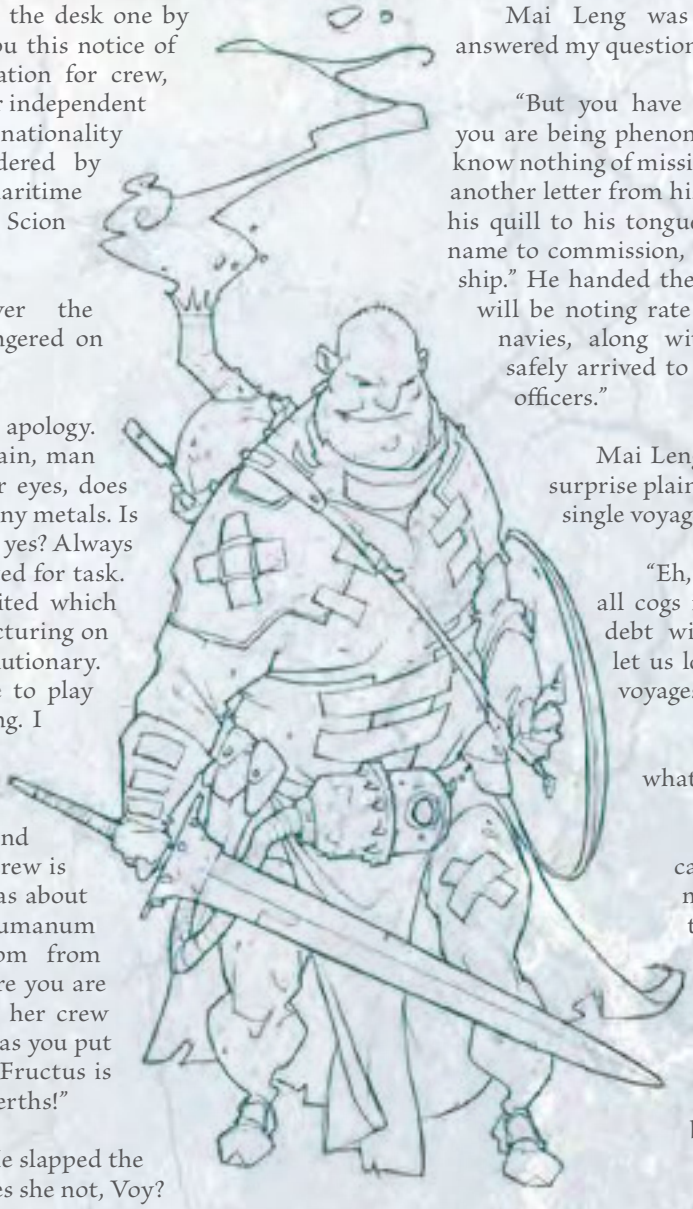
Gulraast shrugged his apology. "Is unfortunate, no? Your captain, man of authority and trust for your eyes, does betray his people for want of shiny metals. Is again having similarity with life, yes? Always authority corrupts those unsuited for task. And yet, is always those unsuited which seek authority. But again am lecturing on history. Forgive this old revolutionary. It was my honor and privilege to play part in glorious people's uprising. I cannot help but think fondly of those days."

She held up the second document. "So this means my crew is dismissed? I thought Felskar was about the working man. And your 'Humanum Revolution' was about freedom from over-reaching authority. Yet here you are seizing a ship and turning out her crew 'for want of your shiny metals,' as you put it. Where will they find work? Fructus is awash with sailors looking for berths!"

Gulraast grinned. "Ha!" He slapped the table. "Ha! She makes point, does she not, Voy? Straight to heart of matter! Am being convinced, myself. But one more document perhaps shows us truth of matter? Suppose am telling you this is due, eh?" He passed Mai Leng her own letter of debt.

Her eyes flared and she threw the parchment to the desk. "And how in nine heavens can I pay this back without a job? And how did *you* get this? And why?"

"Ha ha! Yes! Is truth she speaks, does she not, Voy? Concern for men, concern for self, these things I hear ringing with depth and conviction. A woman rich with ill-gotten treasure would not show same passion, not by half. Am reminded of beloved wife back in Valisdaan, no? She is on Ruling Committee there, and such debates they have... my ears ring to even think on them."



Mai Leng was still angry. "You haven't answered my question."

"But you have answered mine. And either you are being phenomenal charlatan, or you truly know nothing of missing gold and captain." He drew another letter from his stack of papers and touched his quill to his tongue. "Am pleased to be putting name to commission, warranting you as captain of ship." He handed the signed warrant across. "You will be noting rate of pay. Is higher than most navies, along with percentage of shipments safely arrived to destinations for captain and officers."

Mai Leng scanned the document, her surprise plain. "I could pay off my debt in a single voyage!"

"Eh, let us not be so hasty. Not put all cogs in one contraption, no? This debt will remain with myself, and let us look to banish it within three voyages."

She lowered the letter. "But what of the captain?"

He shrugged. "Who cares? If he is being found with missing gold is one matter. Am thinking unlikely, however. If myself is finding no trace, then there is being no trace to find. Am liking new arrangement."

"That gold could've bought two ships like mine."

Gulraast shrugged again. "In

time, perhaps, but a ship at the dock is worth two on stocks, eh? Ha! Gold is wonderful thing, but it does not sail so well as wood and canvas, no? Is better yourself and crew accept employment offer. More pay, better terms, and respect for skilled labor. These are simplest humanum tenets, no?"

She looked back at the offer, re-reading. "I'm… going to need a few more hands. At least two more officers. And maybe an instrument or two, if I can't find the captain's sextant and—"

"Bah! Instruments. Are we not Felskar? Is our house not Teknes? Such precise tools we can offer, wonders of technomancy and science. For you, I write waivers, and port authority sees me for fees, no? As for officers, your profession is yours. I am no judge of sailors, nor is Voy, despite his many talents with dreski." He laughed again and scribbled two quick notes. "Be handing these to steward downstairs. She will assist."

Captain Leng looked over the writs, took a breath and nodded. "Okay. You have a ship and a crew, those that are willing. What are your orders?"

"Ha! More and more you are reminding me of third son and fourth daughter. Dutiful, professional, and perfect aides to their mother. She is important woman in her city, and I am humbly important man here on Fructus. Little known, perhaps, but still a man of stature. I make height joke, no? Ha! You smile! Is fun and games when good friends talk! But, for now, is not known when we depart or what destination."

Mai Leng was indeed smiling, but she persisted. "Well, if you have some hint as to how long the voyage might take, I can lay in the non-perishables at least. It can take a few days to properly stock for even a trip of modest length, to say nothing of stowing the hold properly. That's easy enough to do at dock, but at sea it takes a bit of luck with the weather."

Gulraast mulled. "Hm, yes, is good sense you make. And is interesting you mention luck. As sailor, you are big believer in luck, no? As old revolutionary, so am I. Luck is being factor on which armies rise and fall. On which people fall in love. On which king steals crown. But luck is factor of chance, no? Is like playing cards. Decks can be stacked. That is being my function. Am dealer in luck. Preparation is stacking. Foresight is stacking. Intelligence, eh… spying, to be blunt. This too is stacking, no?

"So, listen when am saying, war is not far off for Arikania. You live as long as myself, you gain sense for it. Hadross and Kartoresh stare each other down across Free Cities who themselves fret like nervous children when parents fight. Am being no warmonger, but my country will not stand idly to one side if our allies go to war, and Achrion is known to take opposite side in any issue involving Felskar. Achrion and Felskar, eh, our fight is old one, no? And Telloria, well, Telloria sits in darkness and watches, as ever, no? So, let us say prepare for journey as far as Ophion in Hadross. By radius, would take us anywhere in Felskar or Achrion or even to Telloria, should needs arise."

At the door, Captain Leng paused. "I won't fight my country. Just so you know."

"No, no! Of course not! Your ship is fast one, yes? Is built for speed, not fighting. But now, must be saying reluctant farewell. Have many things to be attending. My ambassador…, well, he is not in good way. But he is new to Fructus, and knows not the rules of our fine city's game."

Gulraast watched his new employee leave with a broad smile on his face that vanished the moment the door closed. He hopped down from his chair, and headed downstairs to the sub-levels. He and Voy trooped past secret labs where dangerous experiments could go safely awry and hidden armories, some slumbering beneath a decade of dust. He stopped in the barracks for two cylinders of turgid green liquid tipped with needles designed to bite, and a heavy gauntlet that crackled with voltaic power.

He didn't like the prison. He didn't like what it was needed for, though he had to admit it proved useful on occasion as both an incentive and a recruitment center.

Ambassador Rotakin and the former ship's captain were chained in the same cell where they could hurl insults at each other for the debacle they'd wrought.

"You said this was foolproof!" shouted the captain.

Rotakin growled back, "And you should not be moving gold until ordered!"

"How was I supposed to know they'd steal it?"

"Your crew is being your responsibility! I should not be in here. Gulraast oversteps himself and will be first to pay."

"Good. Get us out, and then we'll find that gold."

Rotakin sneered. "Oh no, no, my friend, *I* am not deserving this treatment. *You*, on other hand, you are staying here."

The captain strained at his chains and snarled by way of retort, but both fell silent as they noticed Gulraast standing beyond the bars. "Please, do be continuing. Is not often Voy gets belly laugh."

The pig-man behind Gulraast simply glared.

Rotakin puffed himself up. He was a tall man, but then all true humans were tall to Gulraast. "Gulraast, you

will be releasing me now, or Ruling Committee will be having your head!"

Gulraast ignored the ambassador's threats like a duck ignores rain. He said to the captain, "Will be pleased to know that third mate has graciously accepted offer of captaincy. Am certain she will be taking good care of crew and ship."

"Mai Leng?" the captain spat. "That girl can barely find noon! I wouldn't trust her with a launch let alone a ship!"

"And yet she was being third mate, no? Do not sow doubt in fields already planted, my friend. And crew will not make fuss over change of command, am sure. Am thinking low wages buys low loyalty, no? Whereas Felskar knows how to pay its labor. Ah, but Voy is reminding me even this is lost on some people, is not so, Rotakin?"

"I will not accept judgment from mere Ironward, Gulraast. I am leader of delegation, and am highest ranking member of government on Fructus Island. Is you who are reporting to me, and is you who will be releasing me, and *begging* for leniency while I am considering transgressions."

Gulraast unlocked the cell and considered Rotakin for a moment. He turned to the captain. "You see this man here? He is reason Felskar earns bad reputation, no? Consider words. 'Mere Ironward.' As if honored rank within Humanum Revolution is simple thing for dismissal, no? As if 'ambassador' is so much more grand, so much more vital. Is true, society functions well with hierarchy, but is thin thing, captain, is very thin indeed."

"Is not so thin as ahhhh—!!" Electricity coursed through Rotakin and ozone burnt the air.

Gulraast released his grip on Rotakin's leg and held up the crackling gauntlet. "You see, captain? Rotakin is very poor example of humanum principles. Thinks himself in untouchable position. Is why he believes good, honest bribe for Hadross Ambassador is being his to steal, no?" Gulraast shocked the chained ambassador again. "Money is useful thing. Few know this so well as myself. Is what moves armies and razes cities. Let the historians talk battles and tactics all they wish. Is money that wins fights. You have archers? They are needing arrows. You have swordsmen? They are needing armor. And all need food, clothing, and protection from elements. Is supplies wins battles before they are fought. Is gold that is buying supplies." Another jolt. "So, am wondering what victories my country's gold is buying instead, hmm? And is being bought by who?"

Rotakin screamed in pain. *"I do not know!"*

"Am not asking you, Rotakin. No, your fate is fixed. Am asking captain."

The captain strained against his chains. His eyes bulged, desperate to flee the sight. "I don't know! I swear it!"

Gulraast sighed. "Ah, and Voy is reminding me that I trust too easily. You are sounding sincere, no? Is difficult to judge. Trust is difficult matter." He wiggled his fingers in the gauntlet. Hissing sparks played between them. "You are Kartoreshian, no? You have not seen something like this in your country? Ah, is wonder of technomancy. I like your Scion Nasier, but he is being too taken with magic and elementals. Is true, they grant significant advantages, particularly in military might. But is needing 'deals' and 'bargains' with alien powers. Is no trustworthy, yes? Not without proper control." He shocked the nearly unconscious ambassador again.

"Taking Rotakin here. Trusted by Ruling Committee to come to Fructus and conclude negotiations which are being planned these last seven years. Is why I have been here. Laying groundwork, you see? Solid foundation. And still there is betrayal! Persons are only trustworthy so long as their authority does not exceed their conscience. For Rotakin, being ambassador was too much. Now he is criminal. But, he can rest easy. We trust him with this." He produced one of the syringes and poked Rotakin's leg. Rotakin murmured and drooled.

Gulraast motioned. "Voy."

The pig-man leaned down and pinned Rotakin's legs. Gulraast climbed on Voy's back and lifted one of Rotakin's eyelids. Gaze vacant, eyes dilated. Gulraast grunted, nodding. He held up the syringe for the captain to see. "Another wonder of technomantic science. Is bottled spirit here. You are knowing how vampires and Ashmen and Deepmen gain powers, yes? Is alien spirit within human host. Voy is being much the same." Gulraast jammed the syringe deep in Rotakin's chest and pushed the plunger. "Rotakin is being lucky. In years before gauntlet, could take days of pain to lower mind's defenses. Now, zap-zap! And is ready in minutes. With minimal damage to host, no? Is wonderful thing, science."

Rotakin's eyes flew open. He struggled and kicked and screamed. Gulraast hopped down and away. Voy shoved off, as Rotakin fought against the chains. The transformation didn't take long. Flesh ran as molasses and human screams took on animalistic tones. In mere moments, the ambassador was gone, and a pig-man sagged in the chains, grunting and drooling, quite unconscious.

Gulraast turned to the captain who stared, speechless with horror. "There. You see? Can trust Rotakin again. He is good Union man, and now he is worth something once more." He held up the remaining syringe. "Science is means by which humankind can honestly and safely trust outsiders. All these forces in the cosmos... eh, they are not seeing humans as equals, no? Elemental lords and spirits, Hadross Deep Ones, even Celestial gods, all these things are being intruders on man's world. Learn world. Learn its ways, and its workings. Learn how is powering itself. And *now* you are learning true

independence. Freedom from magic and gods and other foolish whimsy. These things become resources to be properly exploited and controlled. Is how we empower Union men like Rotakin and Voy here."

"You can't do this!" the captain cried. "You can't! I'm not a Felskar! And I don't know where the gold is!"

Gulraast nodded. "Ah, am believing you. Yes, am hearing truth. But there is matter of conspiracy to steal people's gold, no? Is crime to steal even in Kartoresh, yes?"

The captain was desperate. "If anyone can find my thieving officers it's me. Let me loose, and give me a day. I'll track them down. I swear it!"

Gulraast felt tired. "Is always same with criminals. They beg for trust they have thrown aside. They are being very sorry, but only *after* being caught. Let you free? Of course. But you are not being needed in old job. Ship has new captain. And her I am trusting. And you… well, not so much. Not in that state." Gulraast raised the gauntlet and grinned.

Five minutes later Voy led two slack-jawed pig-men from the dungeons to the Union barracks for quarters and uniforms. Gulraast returned to his office and meditated the variables until Voy silently returned.

"You are being right, of course, Voy. Now must be conducting negotiations myself. Bah! I despise talks. Am wishing wife was here. Could be using good counsel now, no? Can only hope Hadross Ambassador sees wisdom to not fighting three wars across two fronts at same time. Reason must now win out where gold could have prevailed. And Hadross Ambassador is not steeped in reason, no?"

Voy stood mute.

"Ah, and you are right, of course. Have not seen last of missing shipment. Only am getting feeling that there is more to stolen gold than petty officers. Am making another joke, no? Ha!"

Voy still stood mute.

Gulraast sighed. "Ah, my talent for humor is wasted some days. Send for Sachen. There are tasks he can be performing while I am stuck playing ambassador, no? Each man to his talents. This is the humanum way."

Union Workers

Union workers represent a triumph of technology over magic. Where Kartoresh needs its expensive masks and Telloria must wait upon the fickle whim of the 'Gift' for their most powerful troops, Felskar technomancers can transform a subject into a Union Worker in the space of an afternoon. The resulting 'Union Man', as Felskarans often call them, is a powerful creature, strong and resilient, and imminently pliable.

In the early days of the Humanum Uprising four decades ago, the insurgents battled against far better equipped armies fielded (or hired) by the nobility. In the city of Tyvor (the first city taken in the uprising), Humanum technomancers had worked in secret on numerous projects to mass produce the many, many warriors they'd need to combat their oppressive lords. The Union Project proved to be most reliable and simplest to swing into large-scale production.

A volunteer would be restrained and treated with a variety of chemicals and enchantments over the course of two or three days, then direct injection of a captive spirit into the subject's heart completed the process. Union Workers had the strength of three men, enough intelligence to follow moderately complex instructions, and, best of all, were imminently pliable. The subject's identity is largely subsumed in the transformation, though this is not universal.

5 4 1 2

Union Member • Rank 1
Infantry

Size 2
DZ C

Savage Blow		
Melee	1	00

Pain Fueled: While this model has 1 or more damage on it, it gains [+1] , and its melee attacks gain **Unstoppable(1)** and [+1].

Unstoppable (1): Replace (1) Non-⚡ Non-💀 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Union Boss

5 6 1 3

Union Member • Rank 1 Leader

Size 3
DZ C

Brutal Methods

Melee	3	00

Bolster: This model may make an assist action on a model up to 2" away.

Whip Into Frenzy: When this model activates in a combined activation, any activating model with **Pain Fueled** may suffer 1 damage.

Leader

Inspire: While in contact with a friendly model, this model's melee attacks gain **Offensive Expertise(+1)**.

Training: Once per turn, if this model is unengaged, and an enemy kills a friendly model within 2", this model may move up to 2" toward that enemy.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

While the early revolution saw no end of volunteers (especially once the process was shown to be largely reversible), losses and reverses in the civil war saw the need for a bit of creativity in finding new stock to draw upon. Note that the subject need not be a willing one. Prisoners of war, criminals, and, most entertainingly, captured nobility provided a steady supply. In modern times, most Union Worker recruits are criminals, made useful once again to society through their new purpose.

In battle, Union Workers can follow orders, but have difficulty adapting to changing circumstances. Union Bosses are typically drawn from addanii ranks, although human Bosses are not unknown. Yet, the 'height advantage' from sitting atop a veteran Union Worker can't be denied when it comes to commanding Union troops in the field. The Worker fights, while the Boss 'motivates'.

Unfortunately, in the heat of battle, Union Workers rarely respond to verbal commands. Hence: the whip and pliers. But a good Union Boss knows that a sadistic mindset is similarly ineffective. Pain that drives their Workers must be administered scientifically, and to greatest effect. Otherwise, it's simply injuring valuable Union assets needlessly.

In addition, while resilient, a Union Worker's might is truly unleashed when wounded, and woe betide the enemy that missed that first killing stroke.

Gulraast the Ironward

Among the addanii people—that diminutive branch of humanity—living in Felskar, few display the drive, ambition, and innovative genius of Gulraast Horgrut. Not technically gifted, socially adroit, or deeply patriotic, Gulraast is nevertheless a force to be reckoned with in Felskar through sheer tenacity, toughness, an innate magical sensitivity, and unadulterated military skill.

Gulraast has fought all his life, first as a youth in the mean streets of Heskor's Ironshod district, then as a leader of his people's protection movement, and later as the best tactician and organizer on the Heskor citizens' Defense Committee. Largely through his actions, a few dedicated rebels made it impossible for government troops and consortium mercenaries to move more than a few blocks from their strongholds in the city for nearly a year. When the loyalist force sent to liberate Heskor turned and joined the rebellion, Gulraast took a well-earned place as one of the first citizens' army commanders.

Gulraast embraced the Union units as soon as the processes produced a stable and useful product. Something in their brutal directness appealed to him. He led the first Union units to Ennen Kohere and developed the first techniques for inducing pain in the workers to coax better performance from them. Years of commanding these troops gave him a keen insight into their behavior and the nature of the magic driving them. After the last loyalist stronghold fell, the magicians responsible for creating the spirit-bound troops consulted Gulraast about further refining their processes. His instinctual relationship to bound spirits gave him insights that the trained magicians could translate into practical applications. This work produced stable and consistent techniques that allowed for finer and finer degrees of control and consistency in the creature produced. All specialist Union soldiers owe their existence to him.

This includes Voy, Gulraast's personal mount, bodyguard, companion, and (some say only) genuine friend. An under-researched aspect of the creation process allows for more of the host's personality to survive the binding ritual, and Gulraast pushed this technique as far as he could. Voy began life as a thug, a gang tough in Heskor who Gulraast supposedly pulled from one of the darkest, deepest holes in that city's infamous obsidian prison. Whether an old friend or an old enemy, Gulraast obviously had a history with Voy before the transformation.

Their past means little to anyone else, and it seems to mean little to them as well, because at present, their partnership is seamless. In calm moments, Voy stands mutely near to Gulraast and presents a quiet, intimidating presence while his shorter companion shouts and bullies to get done what he needs done. In battle, Voy becomes a barely controlled whirlwind, cutting down anyone who gets close, while Gulraast quietly and calmly surveys and coordinates even the most chaotic and desperate melee.

6 6 2 2

Union Member • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 3
DZ C

Twin Great Swords

Melee	3	00

Suppression (1): Replace (1) ✸ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Primal Surge

Action	-	-

All active models with **Pain Fueled** may move up to 2" and remove 1 damage.

Rein Them In: Aura 6", Friendly models with **Pain Fueled** gain **Unbreakable(1)**.

Unbreakable (1): Replace the lowest 💀 on this model's defense chart with ⚡.

Leader

Inspire: While in contact with a friendly model, this model's melee attacks gain [+1] against models with [2] or greater.

Training: If a friendly model with the same **trait** is killed while in contact with this model, this model may perform 1 of its melee attacks on an active enemy within 1", ignoring melee range and LoS.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Defender Linemen

Felskar's groundbreaking industrial techniques have turned Linemen from rare elite bodyguards into entire regiments of frontline heavy troops. Their repulsion armor is easily the most advanced of any nation's currently in mass-production. The armor's unique properties offer solid physical and magical protection, and re-direct physical assaults back on their attacker. But this was not always the case.

In the Uprising's early days, the small bands that would eventually evolve into Linemen were often resistance cells, small groups of men and women that sabotaged industrial infrastructure and damaged nobility interests in the largest cities. In fact, the first known groups began in Panzia fifteen years before the Uprising began. In fact, had they not been betrayed by Achrionian sympathizers, Panzia would have ushered in the Humanum Revolution much sooner. Alas, Achrion took advantage of the chaos and began their brief war with Felskar, which has stoked their mutual distrust to this day.

But, that brief, bloody war drained the Felskaran nobility's resources across the entire nation such that dissident activities became possible, and far more successful. When Tyvour fell from within, the nobility was slow to react. The Linemen Militia, as they were called, formed the core of the new revolution, and the rest became history.

The armor was a later addition when the Uprising was in full swing, and sedition and betrayal were daily watchwords. Most leaders would only trust their oldest comrades, and, as such they formed small corps of elite bodyguards, outfitted with the best equipment technomantic science could provide. Now, in the modern era, the traditional armor has been replicated on an industrial scale, though the unique culture these historic troops share remains evident in their organization and training.

6	5	1	1

Citizen • Rank 1
Infantry

Size 2
DZ B

Greatsword		
Melee	1	00

Follow-Through(1): Replace (1) ✖ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Rescue		
Action	-	-

Target 1 engaged friendly model within 3". Place that model in contact with this model. You may then place this model anywhere in contact with an enemy the friendly model was engaged with.

[Reaction] Counterattack (2): Once per attack, when a ◊ is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform 1 of its melee attacks on an active enemy, replacing the attack's rate with (2).

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Defender Linemen Controllers

6 6 1 3

Citizen • Rank 1
Leader

Size 2
DZ B

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Hammertime

Melee	2	00

Knockback(2): Before results are generated, each enemy targeted by this attack is forced (2)" away. If that enemy's movement is stopped by another model the model stopping it suffers a [1] melee attack.

Rescue

Action	-	-

Target one engaged friendly model within 3". Place that model in contact with this model. You may then place this model anywhere in contact with an enemy the friendly model was engaged with.

[Reaction] Counterattack (2)

Iron Will: When targeted by a Will Attack this model gains[+2] for the attack.

Defensive Expertise(1): When this model is the defender of an attack, before results are generated, you may force your opponent to re-roll (1) dice.

Leader

Inspire: Models may perform the **Rescue** action after sprinting.

Training: Models gain **Iron Will**.

For instance, Lineman Controllers enjoy a camaraderie with their fellow Defenders that few other militaries would think appropriate. This tradition owes its origin to the citizen defender units commonly formed from small local groups of friends and acquaintances, often brought up in the same villages or neighborhoods. A commander shared his troops' hardships and triumphs, a bond that can often be more effective than rigid discipline. They trained together, drank together, and lived or died together. Today, Controllers carry on that tradition of comradeship.

Defender Raeth Sevisk

The face of the humanum revolution for the last half decade, Raeth is the exemplar of what humanum thinkers see for the future: strong, stoic, intelligent, scholarly, and dedicated.

He is, in fact, perhaps too much the humanum ideal, for his convictions and inquiries have raised uncomfortable questions and forced unpleasant truths to come to light that the Committees—concerned with preserving their revolution by whatever means necessary—would rather not be asked or revealed. Raeth is, in some ways, the best and worst of what Felskar is striving to become, and he is one of the catalysts around which will center the approaching confrontation of idealists and realists. Which way he turns will help define the future of the humanum philosophy and his nation.

Raeth was barely eleven years old when the revolution exploded around him. The son of a successful but not prosperous spice merchant in a quiet mining town, he had worked and saved for years to attend school in Kessradaam. The revolt had swept past that city, and the powerful there felt spared from the troubles. When sudden, well-coordinated violence overwhelmed half of the garrison and burned the three largest consortiums, the whole city dissolved into chaos. Raeth spent six months ducking the opposing sides and trying to find the basic necessities of life.

Then the retaliation came. Government troops infiltrated the city over the course of a week and struck an hour before dawn. Rather than raid buildings, they simply torched them, willing to kill all of the civilians inside to get the few rebels. They blocked off streets, knocked down buildings, and let whole neighborhoods burn, killing anyone who tried to flee. They collapsed cellars and undercrofts, flooded foundations, and executed entire families. Raeth somehow survived and joined the rebellion as soon as he escaped the city.

Raeth rose through the rebellion's—and later the Committees'—ranks through skill, dedication, and intelligence. He studied topics ranging from war to economics to magic to engineering, and applied his intellect and studiousness to every endeavor. He has commanded troops from a single squad up to a small army. He has designed bridges and watermills. He has organized everything from soup kitchens to celebrations. He has delivered inspiring speeches and life sentences, decorated civilians and soldiers, and personally executed traitors.

Nothing has fired his imagination like the recent discovery of ruins from ancient Arikania. He has dedicated a tremendous amount of time and energy to researching and deciphering the scripts, understanding the architecture and design, and making sense of their devices. What he has found disturbs him. The research has consumed him to the point that other projects have slipped, along with his usual political astuteness, and this has led him into his recent troubles. His comments and choices have damaged his reputation at home, if not abroad, but Raeth has hardly noticed. He allows only his country's call for soldiers to distract him, and then only reluctantly, as the more he discovers, the more he feels that the coming conflict is misguided and ultimately destructive

Addanii Brood Warriors

In an effort to bolster troop numbers in the Humanum Uprising, addanii technomancers experimented with several forms of vat-grown troops. Unfortunately, only the addanii matrix ever produced biologically stable individuals, and those were often mentally linked duos and trios. Injury to one caused crippling pain in the others. Plus, addanii have never been useful front-line troops. Their mighty intellects are no match for even the feeblest of weapons, and addanii win very few swordfights against human-sized opponents, let alone professional soldiers.

The technology was shelved. But recent innovations in spirit-binding have found a new use for the old project. The subjects are produced through the usual vat-growing process, then imprinted with arcano-cerebral template for knowledge, personality, and temperament. Trios that survive the thirty-five percent mortality rate are then bonded with a single captive spirit entity. The mental link that already existed serves as the etheric framework that both binds the spirit and empowers the trio.

7	5	1	3

Addanii • Rank 2
Infantry

Size 1
DZ B

Gangup

Melee	1	00

Lash Out: Each time this model is hit, but not killed, 1 active enemy within 2" suffers a [1] melee attack.

[Reaction] Distraction: If an enemy that is engaged with this model would perform an attack action that does not target this model, and this model would be a valid target, that enemy must make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more failures it must allocate at least 1 attack die to this model. An enemy may only be targeted by Distraction once per turn.

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Brood Masterminds

7 6 1 3

Addanii • Rank 1 Leader

Size 1
DZ B

Murderous Maelstrom		
Melee	2	00

Precision(1): When this model performs an attack, after re-rolls are made, it may adjust the result of (1) dice up or down by 1.

Suppression(1): Replace (1)✷ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Hive Mind: Aura 6", Each time an enemy attack triggers **Lash Out** on a model in the area, all friendly models with the **Addanii** trait within 1" of that model may also trigger Lash Out.

Leader

Inspire: This model's melee attacks gain [+1] and **Backstab** against enemies that began the turn engaged with another friendly model.

Training: This model's melee attacks gain Precision(+1) against enemies that began the turn engaged with another friendly model.

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1

Imbued with strength, resilience, and an array of bizarre powers, the new Brood Warriors might not be the perfect vat-grown stormtroopers envisioned by the first technomancers, but they're a shockingly effective force. Opponents often underestimate these diminutive psychotics until it's far, far too late. Strike at one, and another counters, while the third circles for a killing blow. In addition, the crippling side effects of injury to one (as seen in the original project) is no longer amplified by the mental link. Instead, all three share and manage the pain.

Mentally linked duos that demonstrate above-average intelligence (even for addanii) are groomed for the Mastermind program where they undergo further spirit enhancements and are outfitted with new technomantic war masks copied from Kartoreshian designs. These Masterminds function and speak as practically one mind and can project their thoughts to other Brood over a limited radius. The resulting murderous maelstrom may appear chaotic, but the Masterminds have everything under control. The mental network of senses and brainpower gives every participating brood significant advantages in defense, since while one Brood may not see a blow coming, at least one of them will, and everyone reacts accordingly.

Timoshkin, the Technomantic Berserker

Growing up, Timoshkin's mother told such grand tales of the Humanum Revolution and her part in it that Timoshkin couldn't wait to don his armor and fight alongside his fellow citizen defenders. Alas, although his father was fully human, Timoshkin's mother was addanii, and the children of such unions always favor the mother. While no one doubts the addanii's spiritual indomitability and their bodily strength can come close to that of adult humans, they're simply not physically capable of holding a line. At least, not until technomantic science steps in to even the score.

Timoshkin joined the Galvanic Defenders, and through long study and no end of experimentation, he has become one of the most accomplished technomancers of his time. Even Sorik the Unfinished has consulted Timoshkin from time to time, an event so rare as to be remarked.

The etheric helmet represents the culmination of his life's work to-date. It draws magical power from the substance of reality, grants him limited mastery over gravity, and greatly augments his physical strength and speed. While other Galvanic Defenders blast their enemies from across the battlefield, Timoshkin charges into the fray, a spinning, weaving cyclone of crackling energy and thundering melee strikes.

Yet, with the invention of his etheric helmet and spear-hammer, Timoshkin has shown little interest in pursuing further studies. Between his weapon and magic helmet he can now serve on the front lines, and this is all his addanii heart has ever desired. Although he has not left the Valkrav Order, he refused more than one project that would bring him away from the front and back to the labs. Fortunately, this lets him lend his technomantic expertise to maintaining Felskar devices and troops in the field, and his tactical grasp of emerging battlefield situations shows the same brilliance typical of addanii commanders.

Further, his 'lead from the front' style has earned him a reputation of respect and honor, even among human ranks in the People's Revolutionary Army. He feels most akin to the Brood Warriors, where his etheric helmet can link in to their 'psychic weave' for greater battlefield control (although it should be remarked the Brood minds are not places lightly tread, even by such fearless warriors as Timoshkin).

7 | 5 | 1 | 5

Addanii • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 1
DZ B

Thundering Strikes

Melee	2	2

Unstoppable(1): Replace (1) Non-⚡ Non-💀 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Berserker Rage: For each damage on this model, it's melee attacks gain [+1]⚔, to a max of [+3]⚔.

Fueled by Combat: At the end of any turn in which this model killed an enemy, it may remove 1 damage.

Synaptic Fury: When this model is part of a combined activation, all other active models with 1 or more damage on them gain [+1]⚔ to melee attacks this activation.

Leader

Inspire: If this model has 1 or more damage on it, its melee attacks gain Offensive Expertise(1) this activation.

Training: This model's melee attacks gain Offensive Experitse(+1) when attacking enemies with 1 or more damage on them.

10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1

Valkrav Galvanic Defender

7	6	1	3

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 3
DZ A

Galvanic Bolt

Magic	1	8

Suppression (1): Replace (1) ✸ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Galvanic Feedback

Toggle	-	-

Aura 6", ◊ results on friendly models in the area cause Backlash against Magic attacks.

Reinforce Will

Toggle	-	-

Aura 6", Friendly models in the area gain **Strong Will**.

Ward Bearer: Aura 6", Enemies in the area lose **Sundering (x)**.

Strong Will: When this model makes a Will Check or is the target of a Will Attack, it gains re-roll(+1).

10	☠
9	⚡
8	⚡
7	⚡
6	⚡
5	◊
4	◊
3	✸
2	✸
1	✸

The Valkrav are a resurrected, reimagined order of combat sorcerers. Legendary members of the Ancient King's personal cadre composed only of outsiders, they had license to roam the battlefield and beyond to do as they saw fit. They were supposed to have all died over the century spent building the Ancient Kingdom, as they never inducted new members, but stories continued of Valkrav mages operating alone or in pairs for hundreds of years afterward.

Magically inclined addanii have long identified with the Valkrav legends, seeing the marginalization and forced displacement of their people as mirroring the dedicated but unsettled Valkrav; forever strangers in their adopted homeland. Many addanii saw the humanum riots as their opportunity to improve their lot, and they joined the revolution in great numbers. Numerous addanii spell casters formed secret brotherhoods based on the Valkrav stories and began independently attacking the loyalists. Only long and sometimes tense negotiations finally got the various groups to coordinate their efforts with the emerging citizen Committees, and though they remained autonomous, this cooperation hastened the rebels' victory.

Since then, the Valkrav have become more formalized, with a clearer internal structure, though their position relative to larger national institutions remains murky at best. The addanii have long tamed, bred, and trained animals, among them the loyal and surprisingly intelligent sraag; a canine thought to be a relic from ancient days. Many Valkrav have taken to riding sraags and enhancing the animals with their magic. These small groups or individual mages on well-trained war mounts can appear on nearly any battlefield, lending their power to aid their countrymen and unleashing their sraags' fangs on any hapless enemies who get too close.

Though unpredictable and not loved by the Defense Committees for their stubborn independence, the Valkrav galvanic defenders are nearly always a welcome sight among other Felskaran troops. Beyond the support they provide, their clear dedication and almost universal good humor make them excellent examples to weary and flagging soldiers. Without intending to, the Valkrav have done more to gain the addanii broad acceptance than nearly any other group

The Zaalak

Under the old, corrupt government of Felskar, many children saw one or more parents die in unsafe mines or factories while uncaring aristocrats and their business partners simply replaced the workers, wrote off the loss, and cast aside the family. Compassionate individuals and groups created orphanages, assistance organizations, and other charities, but these could never meet demand.

As the rebellion spread, many such institutions suffered. While many aided the rebels as best they could, they had little to give. At one decrepit but honest orphanage in Tyvor, however, something more valuable arose. Though the Hirmir House had long harbored radicals and revolutionaries along with orphans of all ages, its supplies had nearly run out as the city remained in chaos. A strange man calling himself Hempsa and claiming to represent The Tyvoran citizen's Defense Committee arrived one evening and said he could provide food and medicine but only if he could take some of the children.

The staff balked, even in their desperate need, but one little girl—whose name has been stricken from every record—stepped forward and said that she would go if it helped the revolution and would feed the others. Hempsa agreed. A few months later, the first zaalak appeared in the street fighting in Tyvor. Clearly a human shackled to a manifested spirit, the zaalak moved with great speed and disturbing dexterity, slaying government soldiers with her sword and the razor sharp cartilage on her tentacles. A few old revolutionaries recognized the human part of the thing as the little girl from the orphanage, but she never responded to her name or seemed to recognize them except with the briefest flash of pity.

Zaalak continued to appear among Felskaran formations despite their commanders having no idea where they come from. Many people question the use of such horrible creatures. Whatever process creates them is clearly unstable, as zaalak often explode in some sort of magical backlash when badly hurt. Additionally, using children (as no other hosts survive the process) to create such weapons is abhorrent and clearly violates humanum principles. Still, zaalak are undeniably effective, and House Teknes is badly in need of such troops.

8	4	2	1

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 2
DZ C

Sword Strike		
Melee	2	00

[Reaction] Unleashed: For each result generated on this model make a Will Attack(1) against each enemy within 3". For each success that enemy suffers 1 damage.

Abomination: Aura 6", Enemy models in the area suffer [-2] to Command Values, to a minimum of [0].

Nimble: During free movement, this model reduces rough terrain penalties by (1).

10	
9	
8	
7	
6	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

Sorik the Unfinished

6 6 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ A

Galvanic Lightning

Magic	2	6

Suppression (2): Replace (2) ✸ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Sundering (2): Replace (2) ◊ on the defender's chart with ⚡

Shredding Claws

Melee	2	00

Enemies are treated as having [1] for this attack.

Sundering (2): Replace (2) ◊ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[Reaction] Galvanic Feedback ◊: For each ◊ result generated by attacks against this model, 1 active model in contact suffers 1 magic attack at 1 .
Attack cannot generate Backlash.

Shield Extension: Aura 2". Other friendly models in the area gain **Ward (1)**.

The world at large perceives the addanii as a race of tinkerers and mad scientists. Many of these diminutive humans disdain the stereotype, but Sorik exemplifies it. His own personal armor served as the technical basis for the CAGE project, and his technomantic expertise is renowned across Felskar.

And yet, Sorik does not work well with others, to put it mildly. He has no patience for simpletons that cannot grasp his incessant flow of technobabble and he disdains all documentation as obsolete almost before the ink dries. It's how he earned his nickname (which he personally disdains, much to no one's surprise). No project is ever finished, and Sorik himself likely won't be satisfied with his accumulated knowledge until he has learned every last fact, principle, and technomantic law the universe has to offer.

Nevertheless, Sorik gets results. His pioneering work on the stalled CAGE project brought it to completion on time and under budget. The Defender Lineman armor owes its modular compatibility to his genius. And his own arcano-cerberal template serves as the basis for the entire Brood force across Felskar and beyond (which should make any sane being even more wary of Sorik, who himself may or may not possess the same psychic powers).

Ordinarily, Sorik would eschew the front lines for his laboratories, but, much like the Valkrav Order, he's found the war to be an excellent source of inspiration and experimentation. He works on multiple projects simultaneously, and can be found after any victorious battle eagerly looting bizarre bits of technology, technomantic gadgets, and (celestials help us) genetomantic samples. He has said, more than once, 'Even the dead are not mute in the face of science.'

When piloting his personal steam armor, he's a mobile hardpoint with lightning cannons. Enemies can keep their distance and get zapped, or close in to strike him... and get zapped. It's all the same to Sorik. Similarly, he has no personal preference on how his commanders employ his many talents, just so long as he's not denied the chance to learn and experiment after the battle is done.

The Mighty Taur

Not all experiments in rapidly grown troops involved sentient species. Bovines, for instance, are docile, strong, and produce a new generation yearly. Unfortunately, the spirit-implantation survival rate is roughly one in a thousand, and of those, very few gain the rudimentary intelligence necessary to be useful, biddable troops. They might prove powerful, but retain their bovine docility. Or they might prove hostile to even their own masters. Worse still were those fearsome creations with the strength of twenty men and the permanent temperament of raging bulls. One memorable incident destroyed nearly a half mile of Makhalikor's city walls.

The project has since been scrapped, and Taur remains their one and only sterling example. Physically impressive, and intellectually gifted (even by human standards), Taur cuts a memorable figure in any campaign. While he doesn't command troops in the field, he is often closeted with upper echelons for strategy sessions, and prefers cunning traps and ambushes designed to maximize enemy losses at minimal risk to Felskar forces.

Taur has authored many works on modern strategy and tactics. His threat assessments on emergent enemy doctrines and technologies are required reading for all echelons in the People's Revolutionary Army. And yet, Taur's prowess isn't confined to his mind alone. In strength trials (without his armor) he has been gauged at lifting over two tons from a standing deadlift, and can pull nearly fifteen tons across flat ground without wheels. His signature weapon, an enormous greathammer, is said to be so heavy that only the Mighty Taur can lift it (although this is more likely due to the technomantic shock-grip built into the haft that prevents anyone but Taur from touching it).

As if his own immense strength weren't enough Taur's custom steam armor was a gift from House Teknes after a prodigious guerilla action against Achrion when he, unfortunately, lost his horns. When armed and armored, Taur becomes an unstoppable juggernaut of destruction guided by one of the finest military minds in Arikania. It is fortunate indeed for Felskar's enemies that the original project produced only this single superior bovine.

6 6 2 3

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 4
DZ A

Steam Hammer

Melee	3	00

Critical Blow(1): Replace (1)⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀.

Unstoppable(1): Replace (1) Non-⚡ Non-💀 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Warstomp

Melee	*	00

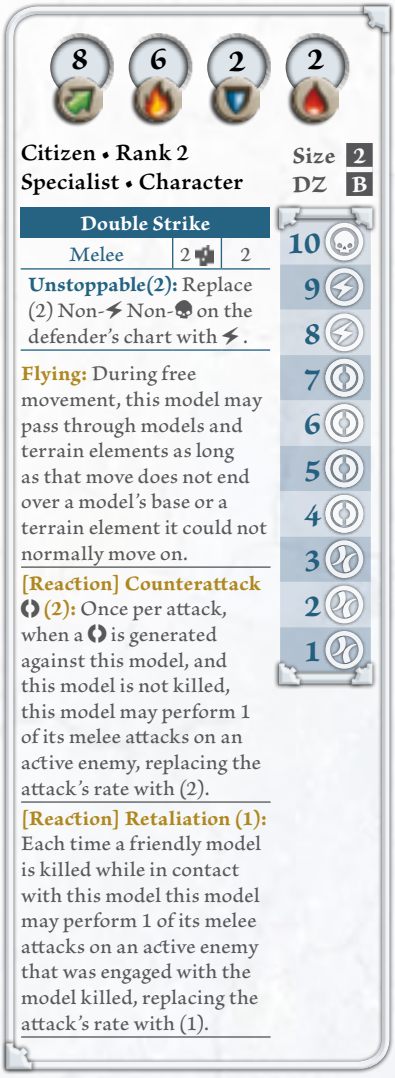
Allocate 2 attack dice to all enemies in contact. Once this attack is resolved, this model may force all enemies in contact up to 2" away.

Brutal Charge: When this model engages an enemy, its melee attacks gain **Unstoppable (+1)** this activation.

Rampage: The first time each turn this model kills an enemy, after that attack is resolved, it may move up to 3" and perform 1 of its melee attacks

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Lineman Boris, the Many-Bladed



Lineman Boris is a victim of his own success. A technomancer to rival the best addanii minds, he sought to combine CAGE and repulsion armor designs into a new generation of powered armor. He succeeded admirably, and even incorporated technomantic wings for superior mobility, but he relied too heavily on his own impressive magical abilities for the control mechanisms. The suit is remarkably responsive and nimble, which is especially vital for flight, but only a trained technomancer has any hope of managing the myriad control surfaces, especially in battle. Even then, trials with technomncers other than Boris himself usually end with injury to the operator via wrenched joints, broken bones, or, in one unfortunate incident, a snapped neck.

His suit is possibly unique only to himself, and various rare materials and spirits incorporated in its construction make it impractical to manufacture on a grand scale. Additionally, the suit strikes so hard that ordinary weapons tend to snap or become lodged in a felled enemy's body. Thus, Boris typically carries a half dozen swords, earning him his off-color nickname. Boris has embraced this peculiar brand of humor, and has thus far resisted calls to forge a special set of weapons. In battle he's fast moving and hard-hitting, and enjoys marking his kills with an embedded blade.

But, despite the disadvantages, the armor functions perfectly for Boris. In this time of war, he gladly takes up his blades in defense of Felskar. In battle Boris is very much an opportunist. His superior mobility lets him strike at high-value targets behind the main lines and escape just as rapidly. He eschews magical attacks, as most of his concentration is spent controlling his armor with its extra limbs, but his wings grant him a number of unique maneuvers to launch unexpected assaults.

If Boris has any regrets it's that the war allows him insufficient time for research. He believes adapting his armor for the rank-and-file is possible, but the interface and power source need considerable development. Finding the time away from the front is difficult, for while he's 'just one man' Boris's presence on the battlefield is an undeniable force multiplier. Even when offered leave, he typically refuses if he can advance his nation ever closer to ultimate victory.

C.A.G.E.

Combat Augmenting Galvanic Engines (CAGEs) represent the current pinnacle of technomantic military engineering. Within the armor, a single operator becomes a platoon unto himself, boasting greatly enhanced strength and resilience.

Captive spirits enhance the operator's interface and can automate the entire defensive suite if necessary. The mechano-reactive counter-defense system automatically returns blocked attacks from nearly any direction. In addition, etheric capacitors absorb directed magical energy (say from a direct magic attack) and magnify the discharge back at the attacker. It takes very precise or extremely powerful attacks to even have a chance of scratching a CAGE, let alone harming the operator within.

The design team understood very well that form follows function, and a bipedal form is among the most utilitarian in nature. While the CAGE's primary design was as a weapon of war, it can perform any task a human can perform. Applications in construction, heavy labor, search and rescue, and even exploration are obvious. While a CAGE may win no awards for raw agility, they're still just as nimble and flexible as any very large human might be. In fact, their sheer strength allows for physical feats that a human would find impossible. Such as hoisting themselves over obstacles with one arm alone, or pulling themselves up from a prone position using their feet alone.

Key to the CAGE's versatility is two independent power plants. In ordinary sentry modes CAGEs clank along on steam and coal alone. In battle, power is drawn from a score of elemental batteries, which are easily replaced once the bound elemental's life force is depleted. In fact, a CAGE operating in conservation mode can function for more than a week without refueling, making deployments far from supply lines a possibility. Although, it should be noted that such a deployment would be anything but stealthy.

Finally, the CAGE's striking power is unmatched. CAGE weapons are specially forged to withstand the huge shocks they'll inflict on the enemy. A solid blow will cleave through the thickest armor known to magic or science. Other nations possess war engines of course, but none match the CAGE for sheer utility.

6	6	2	3

Rank 2
Specialist

Size 4
DZ B

Pole-Axe

Melee	3	2

Critical Blow(1): Replace (1)⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀.

Galvanic Backlash

Magic	*	2

Allocate 1 attack die to all enemy models in range.
Suppression(1): Replace (1) ✸ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

[Reaction] Counterattack ❮❯ **(1):** Once per attack, when a ❮❯ is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform 1 of its melee attacks on an active enemy, replacing the attack's rate with (1).

[Reaction] Galvanic Backlash ✸**:** Once per attack, when a ✸ is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform a Galvanic Backlash attack.

10	💀
9	⚡
8	⚡
7	⚡
6	❮❯
5	❮❯
4	❮❯
3	❮❯
2	✸
1	✸

CHAPTER FOUR – MASK OF TRUTH

Alyana Heska hit the ambassador's office door like a battering ram. She wasn't wearing her war mask. "Have you seen this?" She threw the dispatch on the startled ambassador's desk, nearly upsetting the decanter all over his lunch. She didn't notice. "Six ships! Gone! In four days! Six!"

The Kartoresh Ambassador to Fructus spoke calmly. His ambassadorial half-mask sat beside his lunch. All Kartoreshians wore masks in the performance of their duties. "Yes, I have, and there's one other thing—"

But Alyana's blood was up. "Right beyond the harbor at Qualat Mon! Six merchantmen, straight to the bottom. And what does Hadross have to say? 'Saddened by the loss…' and 'regrettable happenstance…' and other meaningless diplomatic drivel! They're planning a move on Qualat Mon. I'll bet my blades on it."

The ambassador said quietly, "Heska, listen—"

She slammed her fist on his desk. "You have *got* to put more pressure on the Free Cities' envoy for us to strengthen our garrison. This afternoon! It's the only way to ensure Qualat Mon stays out of Hadross hands."

The ambassador sat back heavily. He put his half-mask on. Its white lacquered surface covered his eyes and forehead. "And puts it into Kartoresh hands. Our hands."

"No! More troops will deter Hadross from these blatant attacks. We can increase patrols and scour the bay, or they could let us station a warship or two. That would put a stop to their games. Plus, it'll ensure the security of Qualat Mon's interests!"

He shrugged. "It was our ships that were sunk. Not Free City tradesmen."

Her hands shot into the air. "Yes, of course, but they were full of Free City goods!"

"Which had already been paid for, losing Qualat Mon nothing."

"Nothing except our good will!"

A humorless grimace. "Which is exactly why they should let us station *yet more* enraged Ashmen in their city? And warships in their harbor?"

She grit her teeth. The old man was dodging, but…. "They'd say all these things, wouldn't they?" She ran her hands over her bald head, an old habit borne of frustration. "I suppose I can see your point. I hate it, but I see it."

He released a breath, and removed his mask. "Thank you. Now, I've… well, there's one unpleasant thing—"

But Alyana was muttering again. "They've never been so bold. This is a ploy. They risked a lot to pull this off. Six merchantmen. In four days…."

"Five merchantmen. One troop transport."

Her angry pacing faltered. "What?"

NAME

Scion Kingdom of Kartoresh

RULER

Scion King Magadar Nasier

CAPITAL

Kra Gorash

The ambassador handed her a well-thumbed stack of papers. "I'm sorry, Alyana. Your brother was aboard."

She seized the message, ran through the names. It burned back at her. Arikalin Heska, Ashman, Junior Hakar.

She didn't feel faint. Her eyes didn't brim. None of the usual afflictions that she'd heard about and seen when struck with sudden grief. She'd cried when her parents died. But she'd been a girl then. She felt hollow. Then grim. Then angry. Someone had to pay for this. "Hadross…" she hissed.

"Yes. But, that's what they want: anger. You said it yourself, did you not?"

She wrestled with her rage. Fought it down. Her voice was still hot. "I did. They want us off-balance."

"They do. You are wise, Senior Hakar."

She dropped the sorrowful message on his desk. Her voice had depth. "I doubt it's any accident my brother was there. How long have you had this?"

"Two days. And the attacks took place three weeks ago. The messenger fairly collapsed from fatigue. Though I understand there was a delay. An effort to send a complete report."

She nodded. Arikalin dead this last month or more. Hollowness again, and a flailing sense of impotence. She shoved aside the rising turmoil and turned to duty. She put on her blood-red war mask. "Do you require me for this meeting with the envoy?"

"Perhaps." He sipped his wine. "You're right, of course. This harassment can't go on, and I know for a fact the envoy received a similar message just yesterday. She requested this meeting shortly thereafter."

She had no breath. But still, she said, "Interesting."

"I thought so." He coughed. Another sip. "Keep busy, if you can. It helps, believe me."

"Well, if you need military arguments, I can furnish them by the dozen. That is my function, after all, not just as your second. Control of Qualat Mon would give Hadross the perfect base to bottle up the Scion Gulf and seize uncontested mastery of the Arikan Sea. More than even now."

The ambassador cleared his throat and coughed. "Yes, but the envoy is from Nyrkem, across the eastern seas. They have more dealings with Hadross than with us. She'll be less sympathetic to our views." He coughed again and washed it away with more wine.

"Sympathetic to our views…," Alyana muttered. "There are six Free Cities. Seven if you count Lochesh. And they send just one woman to represent *all* their interests. One wonders that she has any power to make any real decisions at all."

The ambassador coughed again, harder. "She has the power to make our work far more difficult if she chooses. But, I don't believe she knows much *cough* about our *cough* country…" He was taken with a fit of coughing.

Alyana peered at him. "Are you all right?"

He pulled his hand away from his mouth, covered in blood. He stared at it a moment before he collapsed.

Alyana ripped off her mask, seized the wine, and smelled it. Nothing. "Guards!"

An hour later the surgeon gave her the news in the ambassador's office. His eyes were grim behind his traditional mask. "His lungs are filling with fluids."

"He was coughing blood."

"That was the first symptom created by a lesion in the throat and exacerbated by the toxin. If he'd had more of the wine, we never would have saved him. The lungs' natural function to vacate phlegm is paralyzed. If he survives the next twelve hours, he may recover, though he'll need a warm climate for many months."

Heat rose within her, but now was the time for calm. "Do you require anything?"

"No. He must drain his lungs' natural fluids, yet he must not become dehydrated so the body may purge the poison properly. I'll attend to him personally."

"Can you identify the poison? Perhaps its origins?"

He shook his head. "It is an ingested paralytic, that's all I know for now." He hesitated, then stated, "And it would be foolish to speculate at this time."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Alert me of any change."

The surgeon bowed, hand on his heart, "Senior Hakar," and left.

She fumed at the closed door. *Foolish to speculate....* She didn't need to speculate. Hadross would certainly profit from the ambassador's sudden demise in a way few others would. It seemed obvious. Perhaps too obvious, yes, of course, but poison was a common weapon in their arsenal, and she had met their ambassador, that slimy little squid who had leered at her cleavage and thought her a mere ornament.

And, the timing.... Well, the Hadrossians could burn if they thought this would delay the meeting with the Free Cities' envoy. Alyana was no diplomat, but she'd been placed as the ambassador's second for a reason, and she knew the Kartoresh position and the Nasier heart. They were fair, equitable, and interested primarily in peace. Surely the envoy would agree.

Alyana greeted the envoy in the ambassador's office, a smallish woman, older but not bent, her hair shot through with gray. Her eyes swept the room, taking it all in at a glance, and fell on Alyana.

Instead of her war mask, Alyana wore the Ambassador's white half-mask of state. She'd never liked the thing. She understood why it was a half-mask, allowing dignitaries to see a far greater range of expression from her Ambassador. Yet, it didn't sit well on her. It was a trifle large, and far lighter than her own war mask.

The envoy advanced and introduced herself with an extended hand. "Jeyna Harig. Envoy to Fructus from the Free Cities."

"Senior Hakar Alyana Heska, Ashman Legions, acting as ambassador for His Royal Majesty, the Scion King Nasier. I apologize for the ambassador's indisposition."

"Yes, I'd heard this thing."

Alyana paused. "He fell ill less than an hour ago."

The envoy shrugged. "If I've learned any one thing during my time, only news runs faster than wind."

Alyana's mouth soured. "Yes, I'm sure. Shall we sit?"

They settled across a low polished table on comfortable velvet divans. Alyana ordered tea, brewed hot. "Although we can let it cool, if you'd prefer."

"Thank you, no, ma'am, I would prefer it warm. For a southern island, Fructus stays too cool by far, do we agree?"

Alyana smiled at the accent, an unusual combination of lilting cadence and clipped words. She nodded. "I do. We Nasiers prefer warm buildings, food, and drinks."

"You are called 'Nasiers'? Not 'Kartoreshians'?"

"Either, but the second is a bit cumbersome. We usually name our people for our Scion King."

The envoy nodded and thanked the servant for the tea. "So, are you permitted to negotiate on behalf of this king?"

"Behind this mask, I am. Normally, I am the ambassador's military advisor, but, in his indisposition and the absence of his junior ambassador, I'm head of this delegation."

The envoy pursed her lips. "You are very young for this post, I am thinking."

Alyana didn't bristle. She'd heard it said more than once. "I am lucky, madam. I came from a very humble beginning, and had the good fortune to distinguish myself more than once for my country. The rank of Senior Hakar is not one often given before one's third decade, though that is not far off for me."

"Modest, too, I see." She quirked a smile at Alyana.

Alyana matched the smile and inclined her head. "You did ask, madam, and would it have been better if I'd said 'well, no one else was around to meet you'?"

The envoy smiled and sipped her tea. "That is fair. You are a military woman? I see your skin is gray. It is a lovely tone, if I may be informal."

Alyana smiled. "Thank you, madam. Yes I'm with the Ashman legions. Do you yourself hold a martial title?"

She laughed, a sudden clear sound that set the crystal to ringing. "Oh, skies, no! I'm just a simple girl from the delta. Humble beginnings, like yourself. But, as you say, 'behind that mask' you are the… what? Face of your nation?"

"To a degree. Masks are important in Nasier culture. Our Scion King carried the tradition on from his father."

The envoy shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, our cities have not been free so long that we've forgotten the war mask of Ancient King Arikan. To be frank with you, we do not seek any return to that time."

She nodded. "To be equally frank, my country has no desire to conquer anything. We do seek more security for our interests, however."

"You refer to the problems at Qualat Mon, of course? Yes, we had heard this thing."

Alyana clenched her jaw, but didn't speak immediately. Problems? Her brother was dead! A sodden corpse! "The deaths of our sailors and soldiers is more than a simple 'thing'."

The envoy set down her tea. "Please, forgive my artless words. No offense was intended."

"And forgive me if my tone was harsh. I intend no offense either. And yet, offense has been given. Not by the Free Cities, but by Hadross."

The envoy sat back, calculating. "I was not aware responsibility had been established."

Alyana pointed to the documents on the desk. "I can make that portion of the report available to you, if you wish. The ships' keels were shattered. Torn away as if by some great beast. This is well within Hadross's capabilities and tactics. And, there is other evidence: a brief eyewitness account, suction marks." She paused. "Chewed bodies. And so on."

"And what would you be asking for, then?"

Alyana spread her hands. "I can speak most effectively from a military standpoint. It's the territorial waters for the coastal Free Cities that are most at stake. We already provide patrols and escorts for the continental Cities' overland trade routes."

"All prudent nations do."

Alyana inclined her head. "Quite. And, once out to sea, such attacks are much more difficult to execute. Worming

away at the ship bottoms is the work of hours. Possibly days. It's only at the docks where our ships are most vulnerable. We need day and night patrols of the harbor floor, inspection of all ships, entering and leaving, and, most importantly, an increased garrison size to accommodate these expanded duties. I believe we've put this issue to the Cities before." It felt good to say it. If she could get a concession here, perhaps Arikalin's death would not be in vain.

The envoy rose, and began to pace, hands clasped behind her. Her long skirts trailed across the polished floor. "And so you give me the option of more armed troops in our borders? And if I do this, then surely Hadross will demand similar privileges." She had stopped pacing and leaned towards Alyana, brows raised. "And once we have more soldiers walking our streets with their swords and spells, then, and *only* then, will our Free Cities be *safer?* Hm?" She resumed pacing. "I am thinking this would only ensure we had Cities by the end, without troubling with the 'Free' portion."

Heat rose to Alyana's face, but her ashen skin betrayed only the slightest flush. She wished for her full war mask rather than the ambassadorial visage. "That is simply not so. Our troops are disciplined, professional, and self-assured. Madam Envoy, I vouch for them personally."

"Would not any proper leader do so?"

Alyana was brought short. "Well—Of course."

"And when they are not in your barracks? Not at your drills? What of when they are off-duty, hm? Or drunk? And Hadrossians come into the bar and words are exchanged? You will vouch for them then? When the combined forces outnumber our Watches by two for every one? Only then are *all* my peoples safe? Miss, you stretch my credulity."

Shock shot through Alyana. "To not follow our duty.... Madam Envoy, it is inconceivable that a masked Nasier would not follow their duty."

"And so you simply remove your masks before a breach! It's a very thin strap about the head that binds Kartoresh to its duty, I'm thinking."

Alyana fought against her temper. This seemed like a test. Yes, these ambassadorial types did so enjoy their cleverness, particularly when dealing with 'mere soldiers.' She spoke firmly, but kept her strong voice moderate. "Madam, our masks are part of us, in a very real way, especially in the military. You're aware of our primary religion? We worship the Efrenti."

"Yes. The Fire Lords have temples in my city too."

"It is a partnership, in truth. As we serve them, so too do they serve us and our Scion King. We bind such spirits into our masks. They're more than just totems, they're part of who we are. In many cases, the mask becomes one with the individual. There is no removing it without retiring from our duty. At least not easily."

The envoy's skeptical expression said more than words.

"Perhaps a demonstration. If you would come with me, Madam Envoy?" Alyana issued two quick orders to a servant and led the way to the practice yard where several dozen Nasier troops went through their paces.

Lithe Ashmen performed katas adapted from Achrionian techniques. Bulky Bloodmasks traded blows, further toughening their already iron-like skin. A pair of hulking Arkazan Longhorns, greatly transformed masses of muscle and horns, wrestled like bulls in the dust.

"Muster!" Alyana shouted.

Inside the count of ten all activity ceased, and the troops stood in orderly rows by rank and file. Alyana led the ambassador down the line. "You know of the Ashmen, of course. Certainly the backbone of our legions, but perhaps you have not seen our Bloodmasks in action?"

"Are they all female?"

"Almost. Much as Ashmen tend to be male. I'm a very rare exception."

"Do all the women in your forces shave their heads?"

Alyana shrugged. "It is the fashion. I do myself, as do most of my sisters here."

"And are they always... nearly naked?"

Alyana grinned. "Their war masks make their skin tougher than armor. And they feel almost nothing." She stopped by one, a huge woman with arms and legs like tree trunks. "Give me your mask."

"No, Ambassador."

The envoy pursed her lips. "She calls you by your mask?"

Alyana gestured at the troops. "At the moment, to everyone here, I am the Kartoresh Ambassador." She tapped the white half-mask. "Although his mask has no elemental bound within. It gives him no powers. War masks, on the other hand, transform us into weapons." She turned back to the Pelegarth. "Why will you not give me your mask?"

"You do not have that privilege, Ambassador."

"Yet you serve me."

"Yes, Ambassador. But you are not my superior officer."

Alyana turned back to the envoy. "You see?"

"I see what I would expect. Discipline from your troops."

Alyana nodded. "That's my point. If we give orders that Hadross will not be harassed, then Hadross will *not* be harassed."

"An easy thing to say on a bright, sunny day with no Hadross at hand. How can I trust this?"

Alyana took a steadying breath. She waved the servant over bearing her war mask. She replaced the ambassadorial mask with her own covering. Power suffused her limbs in that old, familiar way. She took a deep breath. "Kindly attend, Madam Envoy."

She continued down the line to one of the Arkazan Longhorns, men so fully transformed with power their masks had melded with their flesh. They easily towered head and shoulders over Alyana, who was not a short woman. Their massive horns, like blades themselves, added to their height. "Give me your mask."

The Longhorn's voice rumbled like an organ note. "Have I given offense, Senior Hakar?"

"You have not. Give me your mask."

"Am I relieved of my duties, Senior Hakar?"

"You are not. Give me your mask."

"I regret that I cannot perform my duties without it, Senior Hakar. I must decline unless I am relieved or killed."

Alyana said to the envoy, "You see? We are bound to our duties. In some cases, such as the Longhorns here or the Howlers there, it is as literal as figurative. You will find this attitude universal in the legions."

"As I would in Hadross's forces too, no doubt."

Alyana wasn't getting through. "Perhaps something more direct." She addressed the Longhorn. "We will duel. You will try to kill me. You may yield, but only if beaten."

"Yes, Senior Hakar."

She heard the envoy sigh as they stepped to opposite sides of the courtyard. Alyana wasn't sure what to make of that.

When the signal dropped, the Longhorn roared but, to Alyana's surprise, did not immediately charge. They circled each other for a moment, the Longhorn with his blade and buckler, Alyana with her twin practice swords.

She flicked her blades towards his eyes and darted low. The Longhorn expected the move, but not the speed. She landed both blades on his leg and felt air from the return swipe rush past her scalp. The Longhorn growled.

From there, the battle went more as she expected. It was speed and agility versus strength and brutality. She hadn't quite counted on his cunning, though. In a quick scuffle the

Longhorn pretended to fumble his blade. Alyana seized the opening and received the buckler's edge to her chest for the trouble. She staggered, the air knocked from her. She twisted away, then gasped as fire sliced her arm and shoulder. Blood flew.

She ducked under the return swing by instinct alone, and brought both fists up under the Longhorn's chin. The blow sent him reeling, eyes watering. His vision cleared to see one blade at his throat with its twin pointed at his heart. "I yield," he said.

They stepped back, saluted, and Alyana returned to the envoy who stood with fists on her hips, looking annoyed. The envoy gestured angrily at Alyana's bloody wound. "And what does this prove? That you can fight. I knew this thing. And you trust one another enough not to kill when the chance is given. Can you say the same for Hadross? Or us? Trust is at issue, ma'am. I put it to you thus."

Frustration welled within her as Alyana changed back to the ambassador's white mask. What was she on about? Was it a riddle? Alyana looked for the right words. "I agree that the issue is one of trust. I trust that the Free Cities intend Kartoresh no ill will. I do not believe the same of Hadross. If the Free Cities are unwilling to aid us in securing our citizens and trade, then perhaps it is in our interest to seek friends elsewhere."

The envoy laughed, though the sound had no joy. "And your country would willingly give up its interests and trade?"

Alyana locked her jaw at her error, but she'd made the threat. She couldn't back down now. "We can't get the goods out of your cities, can we? And the military can be put to many uses elsewhere. The Tellorian border, for one. But, I tell you frankly and freely that the Free Cities cannot remain neutral for much longer. A decision is called for. I know it's beyond your scope, and belongs ultimately to your governing council, but your recommendation will carry the most weight."

The envoy crossed her arms and leaned back, skeptical. "I think perhaps you overestimate the words of a simple girl from the delta. And what option do you give us beyond 'Nasier's road or none at all?' Hmm? I agree to your terms, or your legions abandon my cities and your merchants buy elsewhere?"

Alyana struggled with her temper. This old woman simply had no faith in Alyana's word! And was she not Nasier's representative? Didn't Kartoresh always honor its agreements? "Then, expel them. Or allow us greater numbers, as I've suggested. Or even both. *We* will not strike the first blow, of that you have my personal guarantee and, with this mask on, that of Scion King Nasier. I put the question to you, madam: whom do you trust more?"

"It is difficult to trust a people who shield themselves so wholly from their duty. It is the person beneath the mask that matters most, for the mask without a face is simply wood or metal or porcelain."

Alyana thought a moment. Realization dawned. She removed her mask, and the troops unvesally glanced at one another in surprise.

"You're right," Alyana said. "I bare my true self before you. I am Alyana Heska, and my brother was aboard one of those ships. He and several hundred others are dead because of our desire to maintain the Free Cities' independence. We could patrol the harbor bottoms ourselves, and you'd never know. We could establish blockades beyond your territorial waters, and you could not stop us. We can position troops in the hinterlands beyond your city borders, and you'd have no recourse. We do not do these things, because you are our friends, and we trust you.

"My country is built on principles of self-control and respect. If you've read our history, you know that Scion King

Nasier melded a dozen warring nations under his banner. He could not have done this by brute force alone. The divisions ran deep. Still do, sometimes. Yet we are one nation. When we disagree, we say so. We find answers together. Our resolution is rarely one of retribution and blood-for-blood." She paused, and thought of her brother a moment. She smiled, though it felt somewhat bitter. "I do not like Hadross as a nation. As individuals, I've met very few, and they seem fair enough. But I've fought their armies most of my life, and now they've killed my brother. I will grieve, and can accept it." She took a deep, shuddering breath. She looked directly at Envoy Harig. "We may cover our faces, but his attackers never revealed themselves. We have proof of their actions. What trust did Hadross show you? They simply saw an opening, a way to wound their old enemies, and they took it. It was cowardly and brutal, and, in this case, my masks all speak as one; as a diplomat, a soldier, and a woman. Will you join us in seeking justice for my troops, my comrades, and my brother?"

Not a sound came from the yard as every ear strained. The envoy didn't notice, but focused wholly on Alyana's eyes. The envoy pursed her lips, then smiled. "We too have proof of Hadross's misdeeds. And their ambassador would lie to my face. Your argument is fair, and compelling. It will be my recommendation to expel Hadross troops from the Free Cities until such time as redress is made."

A whoop went up from the courtyard, startling the envoy. Alyana held up her hand for silence, and bowed low. "My thanks, madam, for your kind consideration. I look forward to the next session."

"Let us hope that wisdom is amongst your many talents, Ambassador Alyana Heska." She bowed, and was shown out.

Alyana let out a breath and, for just a moment, felt very much like a nap. Instead, she affixed her war mask, and turned to the Longhorn. "Excellent feint. Another go? But you get a practice blade this time."

The Longhorn grinned.

Ashmen Swordsmen

In the Ashmen Legions, the swordsmen are the proverbial sharp edge. Their signature weapon, the tulus blade, is built for one purpose: slicing an enemy in half. It is not balanced for subtle ripostes, nor pointed for swift thrusts. Yet, a trained Ashman swordsman employs their tulus in an elegant style, unique for raw strength moves that unenhanced swordsmen would find impossible. The secret is their signature war masks.

The Kartoreshian people of today inhabit the largest physical territory of any Scion nation (rivaled only by Hadross' subaqueous realm). While they were nominally 'united' under Ancient King Arikan's banner when he threw off the Elemental Lords' dominion over all humankind, they remained disparate, proud peoples, more apt to war with each other than work in common cause. Scion King Nasier was tasked with carving out his nation from these fractious tribes.

Scion King Nasier expanded on his royal father's use of war masks during the pacification following the Sundering. Ancient King Arikan hated the wars he'd have to fight against humans so indoctrinated in the elemental hierarchies that he himself took to wearing his signature war mask so that his enemies would grow to dread its fearsome visage rather than his own face. Scion King Nasier did the same, but expanded the practice to all his people across all walks of life. The masks were, in a figurative sense, a way to separate his peoples' identities from their duties, particularly in war time.

7 5 1 1

Ashmen • Rank 1
Infantry

Size 2
DZ B

Sword Slash		
Melee	1	00

Act With Certainty: If this model is killed by an attack that did not generate an result, and is engaged with only 1 enemy, it may perform 1 of its melee attacks before being removed.

Deflection: This model may Parry ranged and magic attacks.

Duelist: While this model is engaged with only 1 enemy, and no other friendly model is engaging the same enemy, it gains **Offensive Mastery (1)**. This ability is ignored if an Assist Action is used on this model.

[Reaction] Counter Attack (1): Once per attack, when a is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform 1 of its melee attacks on an active enemy in range, replacing the attack's rate with (1).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Ashmen Hakar

7	6	1	3

Ashmen • Rank 1 Leader

Size 2
DZ B

Sword Slash		
Melee	2	00

Act With Certainty

Deflection

[Reaction] Counter Attack (1)

Offensive Mastery (1): This model may add up to (1) dice to any attacks it is participating in. Before results are generated, this model removes the same number of dice added to those attack.

Leader

Inspire: If this model begins its activation engaged, its melee attacks gain [+1] this activation.

Training: If this model engaged an enemy this activation, and would end their activation unengaged, it may move 3" toward the nearest enemy.

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But while most masks are but simple face coverings (many exquisitely lacquered and painted), the military discovered another use: Efrenti elementals can be bound into the masks to empower troops. This is the basis of the Ashmen's enormous strength and stamina. The bound Efrenti infuses the wearer with elemental energy. The bonding is largely symbiotic, though it takes an individual of sufficient will to control the elemental within. Which falls in well with Kartoresh's legendary discipline, both as a nation and individuals.

In the top ranks of Ashmen are the hakars, tough, dedicated, career professionals who lead through example, reward, and the occasional threat. Their war masks trade some of the superior strength of rank-and-file Ashmen for improved resilience and keen insight. An experienced hakar can almost feel an enemy's intent, and deploy his troops accordingly. Once battle is joined, a hakar inspires his troops to even greater feats of speed and might.

Alyana Heska, Senior Hakar

Few women join the Ashman Legions, fewer still rise so high in their ranks. Alyana Heska's humble origins serve as the source of her great ambition. Orphaned at a young age, her powerful intellect and raw talent saw her through many trials. Barely out of girlhood, she donned her first war mask in service to Scion King Nasier. It is rare for women to master the Ashman mask, but to Heska it was almost child's play. Since then her meteoric rise has earned her a place as the top military advisor on Fructus Isle.

Senior Hakar war masks tend to be very personal things. Most often they're designed through close collaboration with the incredibly powerful Efrenti to be bound. This underscores the collaborative nature of the Kartoreshian religion. While Nasiers worship the Efrenti, so to do the Efrenti serve the Nasiers. Heska's war mask makes the benefits of such a bonding abundantly clear.

The Efrenti elementals are universally fire-based, yet Heska's mask imbues her unique fighting style with a variety of cryomantic powers. She has said more than once that cold is merely the absence of heat, and since the Efrenti control heat, so too do they command cold. It's a fascinating line of study that has borne much fruit at universities and temples throughout Kartoresh.

Heska is no stranger to scholarly endeavors, but hers take on a decidedly martial bent. Her signature 'Frozen Form' style freezes enemies in their tracks, and her immense strength cleaves armor like paper. More an intuitive leader than a thinker, Heska never hesitates to charge into the fray. She's an expert on all forms of war. Sieges, naval engagements, extended marches, scouting... very little escapes her tremendous abilities or quick mind. In battle she is most at home leading a file of Ashmen where her magic imbues their heavy-handed strikes to maximum effect.

Like most Ashmen in single combat, she is a deadly duelist, with scores of corpses to her name from military confrontations. Yet, while she has employed the universal Arikanian Kettō Code (Dueling Code) many times, she will only force a duel to the death in matters of honor or great personal insult. Woe betide the foe that unleashes this formidable warrior's inner rage.

7	6	2	2

Ashmen • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 2
DZ B

Glacial Strike

Melee	4	00

Shattering Strike (2): Once per attack, if this attack kills an enemy model, all enemies within (2)" of the target suffer a [1] melee attack.

Freezing Death: Aura 4" Enemy models that begin their activation in the area suffer [-2] , to a minimum of [1].

Offensive Mastery (2): This model may add up to (2) dice to any attacks it is participating in. Before results are generated, this model removes the same number of dice added to the attacks.

Leader

Inspire: This model's melee attacks gain **Shattering Strike (1)** this activation.

Training: This model's melee attacks gain **Sundering (+1)**.

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Pelegarth Bloodmasks

Where Ashmen masks confer great benefit upon most male soldiers, they rarely bond so well with women. By no means is it impossible, it's simply a far greater exception. The Efrenti temple at Pelegarth, in northern Kartoresh, was the first to develop a mask with a particular affinity to the female soldier: the Pelegarth Bloodmask.

Strength and speed are enhanced, of course, but few rank-and-file troops in other national militaries match Bloodmasks for resilience. With their skin as tough as stone and their near immunity to pain, Bloodmasks find ordinary armor just an irritating encumbrance. In addition, as 'shock troops' Bloodmasks derive great amusement from the disconcerting effect their near nudity has on their enemies (and even some of their friends).

Bloodmasks who demonstrate a talent for leadership can master certain meditative techniques to unleash even greater power from their war masks. As with many other mask types, the Bloodmask and the soldier eventually become one, as the mask melds into the wearer's skin. Thick, powerful horns sprout form a distinctly wolfish muzzle, and the skin darkens to a dusky crimson (although other colorations are not uncommon). Strength and fortitude increase as a matter of course, and the Pelegarth learns the ways of howling.

All Bloodmasks hoot and whoop from the sheer joy of battle, but Howls can actually command their troops, even issuing complicated orders in just a few short ululations and tones.

6	5	1	1

Pelegarth • Rank 1 Infantry

Size 2
DZ C

Sword and Board

Melee	1	00

Shieldbash

Melee	1	00

1 enemy in contact suffers **Knockback (2)**.

***Knockback (2):** Before results are generated, each enemy targeted by this attack is forced (2)" away. If that enemy's movement is stopped by another model the model stopping it suffers a [1] melee attack.

Evasion (1): When this model is attacked, after any re-rolls are made, it may adjust the results of up to (1) dice up or down by 1, keeping the adjusted result.

Shieldwall: Once per attack, when a ✖ is generated against this model, and this model is in contact with a friendly model, you may remove 1 ⚡ result from the attack.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Pelegarth Howl

6	6	1	3

Pelegarth • Rank 1
Leader

Size 2
DZ C

Sword		
Melee	2	00

Shieldbash		
Melee	1	00

1 enemy in contact suffers **Knockback (2)**.

***Knockback (2):** Before results are generated, each enemy targeted by this attack is forced (2)" away. If that enemy's movement is stopped by another model the model stopping it suffers a [1] melee attack.

Evasion (1)

Shieldwall

Leader

Inspire: If this model engages an enemy during this activation and causes **Knockback (x)**, it may move up to (x)" directly toward the model moved and perform 1 of its melee attacks.

Training: If an enemy disengages this model, after that movement, 1 friendly model may move up to 4" toward that enemy. This ability may only trigger once per disengage.

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Bloodmasks say they understand these words as easily as their native language, though they're unable to respond with anything near the complexity of a Howl. A Howl in command of a Pelegarth rank melds them into a formidable wall of blades, shields, and flesh.

The physical transformation has been called 'beastly' by non-Nasiers, but to the people of Kartoresh it's seen as a mark of extreme honor, as the individual becomes the embodiment of their duty. The mask can still be removed (although if the wearer resists, it must be forcibly pried off, which is a horrible, bloody ordeal). Once removed, the Howl will retain many of her abilities for a time, but her facial features revert instantly, and her physical prowess will fade over the course of forty-eight hours (sometimes much less).

Loyal Nasiers heeding their Scion King's call to duty find much honor and glory in the Bloodmask ranks, and these 'controlled berserkers' are often the vanguard. They specialize in defensive formations that are hard-to-impossible to break. When backed up by fleet-footed Ashmen, there are few foes that can stand against a Bloodmask advance.

Elsis Tagil, The Wail of War

Half-Achrionian on her father's side, Elsis Tagil battles with a Zen-like tranquil stare that is doubly unnerving amongst the unruly Pelegarth Bloodmasks. While her sisters hoot and howl and rage across a battlefield, Elsis watches and gauges. She shouts only to direct her fellow Pelegarth to greater effect. Her style is precise, her moves calculated, and nothing escapes her notice.

This perceptive depth extends to the strategic as well as tactical level. Even as a relatively low-ranking Howl, Elsis was consulted in more than one campaign once her talents became known. She is credited with shattering the so-called 'Bandit Plague' that virtually held the city of Arik under siege, and with exterminating the Horror of Qel Sallum with only a handful of Pelegarth at her command.

She credits her parents much for her skills. Ever since she was a little girl she had dreamed of being a soldier. Half her early life was spent in Achrion, the rest in Kartoresh. Her father taught her Achrionian philosophy, her mother (a Pelegarth Howl herself) taught her the Kartoreshian fighting arts. The combination is a warrior-philosopher of tremendous skill and sagacity. If she has any weakness, it's perhaps a tendency to quote Achrionian proverbs more than is fashionable. Yet these insights that served as the basis of her military education always prove astute and sapient.

Even as a rank-and-file Pelegarth, Elsis made her mark by incorporating Achrionian practice katas with the Pelegarths' traditional 'sword and board' katas. Members of her original unit similarly adopted these techniques, and more than a few have made it into Pelegarth battle doctrine today. More than once she has been credited with saying 'Even our opponents can teach us something about war.'

She favors longer weapons such as staves and polearms (and has even been known to wield an Achrionian dalko), the better to strike at range and to block incoming blows for those around her. She is at her absolute best as the calm eye in the center of a bloody storm. And her title, the Wail of War, was earned not from any dreadful sound she makes in battle, but rather shrieks and cries from her shattered enemies.

Fel Hammer

The first masks crafted by the priests of Fel Mallek were intended to enhance strength and endurance for common laborers (as one of the very few attempts at enchanting non-military masks). But, a happy accident in the forging process summoned and bound an entirely new class of elemental spirit.

However, unlike the many elementals from the conventional Efrenti hierarchy worshipped widely across Kartoresh, these new spirits do not serve willingly. The resulting war masks imbue their wielders with enormous strength, but the melding process has a higher casualty rate than the tried-and-true Ashman and Pelegarth masks. For those that can master the spirit, however, the benefits are obvious.

Fel Hammers wield weighted weapons forged specially for their great strength. Only the thickest and most advanced armor can withstand a single hit from these powerful weapons, and even fewer can withstand a second strike.

To-date, no improved version of this mask has been possible. Many have been tried, but there has been no success, and all-too-many spectacular failures. Over time and use, wearers of new mask types often unlock further abilities as they gain mastery over the spirits within.

Women, on the other hand, seem capable of unlocking a wholly different set of abilities than males. The all-female

6	6	1	2

Fel Warrior • Rank 2
Infantry

Size 3
DZ B

Hammering Blows		
Melee	2	00

Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) ⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀.

Unleash Fury: At the start of this model's activation it may choose to gain **Elemental Fury** until the end of this activation. If it does so, at the end of its activation, it must make a Will Check(2). For each failure it suffers 1 damage.

Elemental Unbound: When this model is killed, all models in contact without the Fel Warrior Trait suffer a [1] magic attack.

Elemental Fury: This model gains [+2] , and its melee attacks gain Critical Blow (+1) and Offensive Expertise (+1).

10	💀
9	⚡
8	⚡
7	⚡
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The Unmasked

6 6 1 3

Fel Warrior • Rank 1
Leader

Size 2
DZ B

Dual Strike

Melee	2	00

Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Precision (2): When this model performs an attack, after re-rolls are made, it may adjust the results of (2) dice up or down by 1.

Elemental Unbound

Master of Deception: The first time each turn this model becomes engaged with an enemy, it may may a Will Check (1). On 1 or more successes place this model anywhere within 3".

Leader

Inspire: Once per turn, if this model passes a Will Check, all enemies in contact suffer a [1] magic attack.

Training: If this model fails a Will Check, or is hit by a Will Attack, it may move up to 3" and make a [1] melee attack.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Fel Kryn Temple used the same techniques discovered at Fel Mallek to create The Unmasked. Upon bonding, the mask melds instantly with the wearer, and they often appear to be wearing no mask at all.

Masters can morph their entire bodies to mimic individuals of any gender or even shape. It should be noted that this transformation extends to clothing, armor, and even weapons. As such, the Unmasked are among the best educated leaders in Kartoresh, and masters of multiple weapons and fighting styles.

Unmasked make a natural complement for the Fel Hammers as the bound elementals allow for a degree of empathic communication. Rapid, fluid changes of formation, tactics, and even targets are possible under the leadership of a skilled Unmasked. Enemies engaged with a cohesive unit face not only overwhelming power, but a fluid, unpredictable foe, which is nearly always a combination for success on the battlefield.

Arkan Thesh

A native of Fel Irahm in the far, far north, Arkan Thesh once made a living as a thief-taker and adventurer, often crossing the Tellorian border in pursuit of fugitives or searching for ancient ruins and lost treasure. Unfortunately for Thesh, one such expedition found the ruins it was looking for, and he did not return alone. One of the many dark demons of the Tellorian hinterlands found Thesh and now inhabits his mind.

He sought an answer, any answer, and turned to medicines, magic, and outright exorcisms. Only donning a war mask keeps the haunting demon at bay, and the interaction between it and his war mask's elemental has yielded interesting results in Thesh's transformation. He is a unique creature now, part demon, part elemental, and all war machine. His skills suited him most appropriately to service among the Fel Hammers, where his startling talents earned him many honors and promotions.

Thesh prefers deployment to downtime, especially long assignments on the Tellorian border. He specializes in going toe-to-toe with the largest enemies. Those he can't kill outright, he locks down until reinforcements arrive. Even though this often leaves him surrounded, his powerful wings and whipping tail ensure that he is never overmatched.

Thesh is often the most senior Fel Hammer in any campaign, which is a relatively new development given that the first Fel Hammers saw service only five years prior. In strategic sessions, he excels at pursuits and flushes, especially for entrenched enemies. This hearkens back to his days as thief-taker, where he besieged more than one bandit camp with minimal resources. For the rest, he has little to say. His promotions are more in the fighting line than strategic. He offers little insight for grand strategies, preferring much more immediate problems that can see a quick, decisive resolution.

That said, Thesh is a committed soldier through and through. He follows his orders brilliantly, often with insightful flashes in the midst of combat. He can analyze a command structure in an enemy formation and pinpoint the lynchpins with unmatched precision. Woe betide the enemy that falls under his haunted gaze.

6 6 2 3

Fel Warrior • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 3
DZ B

Crushing Strike

Melee	3	00

Models with a size larger than Arkan Thesh targeted by this attack suffer[-1] , to a minimum of [1], for this attack.
Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Dual Possession: At the beginning of this model's activation, it must make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes it gains **Elemental Fury**. On 1 or more failures all models within 2" suffer a [1] magic attack.

Flying: During voluntary movement, this model can move through models and impassable terrain. It cannot end its movement with its base overlapping a model or impassable terrain feature.

Leader

Inspire: If this model has Elemental Fury, the first time this activation it kills an enemy it may move up to 2" and perform 1 of its melee attacks. If it does so it suffers [-1] this activation.

Training: When this model makes a Will Check, or is the target of a Will Attack, it may gain [+1] or [-1] for that check or attack.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Arkazan Longhorn

The Arkazan style of war mask is one of the few designed to immediately meld with its wearer. Their construction is expensive, the bound elementals within are dangerous, and the result is very much worth it. Their speed, stamina, and striking power turns them into one-man war machines. They excel at disrupting enemy formations and crushing unsupported flanks.

If every soldier had the willpower to withstand such a mask, Kartoresh would soon hold a significant military advantage over the other Scion nations. As it is, nearly one in three individuals perish in the melding (a shocking rate), and only the most dedicated Kartoreshian soldiers are allowed to volunteer.

The act of possession in failed attempts is a rather tragic and startling transformation. The agony is undeniable as the host's psyche is subsumed by the dominating elemental. A startling array of physical features can erupt, though horns, fangs, claws, and other animalistic attributes are most common. In addition the possessed subject can manifest any number of powers from enhanced strength to near invulnerability. Fire and heat are most common, as the Efrenti hail from a molten realm.

There is little hope for the possessed once the elemental has taken root. The host's body becomes the elemental's vessel rather than the war mask. Exorcism is possible, but it's a long, difficult affair that often requires intervention by higher-order Efrenti elementals and temple priests. The success rate is low, which comes as no surprise given the magnitude of elementals used in Arkazan war masks. And, even if successful, the subject is left a shattered, broken shell of their former self, fit only for the lightest civic duties.

Yet despite the dangers, the Arkazan ranks do not lack for volunteers. Longhorns are afforded much status and prestige in the military, commensurate with the dangers they face both on and off the field. For while the mask is usually tame once mastered, the elemental within requires a vigilant mind.

That said, it's interesting to note that consumption of alcohol or other inhibition-lowering substances does not leave the Longhorn (or any other mask user) more susceptible to the elemental within. Indeed, it's clear that the elemental enjoys the altered perception states as much as the imbiber. And yet, if a subject attempts to master a mask in a drunken state, the effort is nearly always doomed to failure. Such experiments to ease the mastery process were abandoned centuries ago.

Rathor Battle Shaman

The Rathor Battle Shamans are named for their war mask's creator who served as Scion King Nasier's advisor and court magician during Kartoresh's tumultuous founding several centuries ago. Where most classically trained mages fit the 'glass cannon' model, Rathor Battle Shamans wield both magical and physical might, and are equally at home on the front line as well as the second or third ranks. They're highly efficient single-target strikers, able to attack magical or physical weaknesses with equal proficiency.

Although the alliance with the Efrenti Hierarchy would not formally come until many centuries after Rathor's natural death, it was he that pioneered many techniques in creating the precursors to most war masks of modern times. Actively hostile elemental spirits resist such enforced servitude, and only the strongest minds could command their obedience.

Rathor's improved binding techniques involved making the elementals' 'prisons' much less hostile to the etheric entity's presence. It may seem unusual to consider a bound entity's disposition, but the results spoke for themselves. Mortality rate halved (though still remained at a horrifying one in four), and general effectiveness increased across the board.

The second major innovation allowed the elemental more access to the host's perceptions. 'Windows' to the prison, as it were. Records from the Elemental Dominion in the Dim Years indicate an almost universal fascination with our material plane by elementals of all ranks and hierarchies. Arikania's 'newness', as it best translates, is either unique in the multiverse, or unique in other facets that human perceptions are unable to understand at present time. But, it's clear that elementals across the spectrum will trade vast powers for even limited access to this world. By allowing the bound spirit such access, even in a limited fashion, it is far less likely to chafe at its imprisonment.

The ultimate solution (the formal alliance with the Efrenti Hierarchy) would not come for many centuries, but Rathor's innovations are widely credited with giving the Efrenti a unique perspective on humankind, thus making the alliance possible. That said, history remembers well the horrors visited upon Arikania before the Great Binding banished the Elemental Lords. The Efrenti religion is rife with parables and teachings against putting too much trust in elemental entities.

Even as they seek to know our world, their very presence is a disruptive influence, capable of great harm or great good, but rarely the latter without human guidance. It is ironic that Rathor's innovations which afforded humankind so very much more control over elemental spirits were rooted in pure human sympathy for these captive creatures. How different would Arikania have been had the Elemental Lords shown the same insight?

6 6 1 3

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 3
DZ B

Efrenti Blast

Magic	1	8

Bounce (1): When the dice for this attack are assigned, this model may assign 1 additional die to up to (1) additional enemies within 3" of a target, ignoring Line of Sight.

Efrenti Strength

Melee	2	00

Sundering (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Knockback (2): Before results are generated, each enemy targeted by this attack is forced (2)" away. If that enemy's movement is stopped by another model the model stopping it suffers a [1] melee attack.

Efrenti Fury: Aura 6", Enemies in the area lose **Defensive Mastery (x)**, **Defensive Expertise (x)**, and **Evasion (x)**.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Shadrus Arikim, the Beast of Oraam

Among the Arkazan Longhorns, Shadrus Arikim is a legend. Despite a rocky beginning in the Ashman Legion, he has survived many wars and risen high in the ranks. Always a tempestuous temperament, Shadrus chafed under his more reserved superiors, though his stereotypical Kartoreshian discipline checked his wilder excesses in battle. He volunteered to join the Arkazan Longhorns, and the request was not denied.

Shadrus took to the Arkazan mask in record time, and the results were impressive. He alone stood against the Hadrossian incursion at Dead Crow Strait, and he brought low the Terror of Sallum Forest. Much honor was heaped upon his name. It seemed he had finally found his place in the world.

Thus, when he proposed alterations to his mask, the Arkazan Temple priests took his studies and observations quite seriously. The mask's binding has been 'tuned' to Shadrus' personality. This affords the elemental greater freedom in some areas, and much more restriction in others. For instance, Shadrus allows the elemental free access to his senses, but the elemental's powers are solely under Shadrus' personal control. The impressive results speak for themselves. If there's any downside to the 'tuning' it's that the process cannot be mass-produced. Each mask would need to be altered to suit its wearer's personality, and that of the elemental within.

Shadrus is, effectively, a new breed of Longhorn, and he represents a paragon of inhuman potential. Many eyes now follow his exploits, taking note of any anomalies. Shadrus himself says that he'll end his own life in an instant if he feels the control slip past the point of return. Those that know him take the claim quite seriously. While he may have been an intemperate youth, he has become a valued and respected member of the military command structure.

In practical terms, Shadrus still possesses the Longhorn strength and endurance, now augmented by an array of incendiary powers. He can ignite his warhammer to add fiery might to his swings, and even hurl great fireballs at modest distances to soften enemy troops before charging. If further trials in the coming conflict prove continually successful, the other national militaries may have to contend with an entirely new threat from Kartoresh in the form of other 'Beasts'.

Galderath Heshberod, Bloodchild of Harikir Alderat

Galderath is one of a new breed of Ashmen whose war masks allow the bound elemental more control of the host's body. The Harikir Temple employed many new controversial techniques in creating this new mask, including significant sacrifices in treasure and blood (not human). Such techniques hearken back to ancient times before the Great Binding whereby Ancient King Arikan banished the Elemental Lords en masse. Thus, circumventing the Binding (or weakening it in places as these rituals are said to do) is never undertaken lightly.

And yet, the results are impressive. Galderath's war mask is said to afford him the same protection against elemental manipulation as the tried-and-true Ashman masks. The resulting wings and increased striking power are certainly proof of the first claim, although Galderath says the result has been more of a melding than intended. He and the elemental are, effectively, half a being. Each remains distinct, but they share thoughts and emotions much more freely than other modern masks allow.

Galderath himself served in the Ashman ranks for a decade and as a hakar for another five years before taking vows and becoming an initiate to the Harikir temple. His technomantic talents saw him rise quickly through the ranks. His command over bindings and elemental magics was said to be without peer in the temple, and out of the many hundreds of war masks he created, only two ever failed to bind properly with their wearers. This stunning success rate earned him a reputation as something of a prodigy, and the Bloodchild Project eagerly embraced his innovations.

When the time came to find volunteers, Galderath could think of no individual better suited than himself. His long military service and distinguished temple work made him a logical candidate. The process itself proved remarkably simple. Where most physical transformations such as those undergone by Longhorns or Fel Hammers prove painful and difficult, Galderath's wings grew over the course of a day. His skin hardened, his muscles strengthened, and the Bloodchild was born.

Galderath's other abilities include a near immunity to fire which allows a steam-driven exoskeleton free of the usual bulky heat shields. On the battlefield, Galderath's specialties lie in rapid response and secondary command, meeting immediate threats with superior force, and supporting commanders as a steadfast lieutenant.

8 7 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 3
DZ B

Smoldering Strike

Melee	3	00

Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) ⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀.

Unstoppable (1): Replace (1) Non-⚡ Non-💀 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Elemental Blast

Magic	4	6

For each hit generated by this attack, this model may perform a [1] magic attack on an enemy within 3" of the target.

Flying: During free movement, this model may move through models and terrain elements as long as that move does not end over a model's base or a terrain element it could not normally move on.

Strong Will: When this model makes a Will Check or is the target of a Will Attack, it gains re-roll(+1).

Elemental Feedback: Whenever an enemy fails to hit this model with a Will Attack, that enemy suffers a [1] magic attack.

Rally Point: Aura 4", Friendly models in the area have **Strong Will**.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Blind Hakar

7 7 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ C

Vengeance Strike

Melee	1	00

This attack can only be selected if engaged with only 1 enemy. Enemies with a size of 3 or smaller hit by this attack are killed.

Arcing Strike

Melee	*	00

Allocate 1 attack die to all enemies in contact.

Duelist: While this model is engaged with only 1 enemy, and no other friendly models are engaging the same enemy, it gains **Offensive Mastery (1)**. This ability is ignored if an Assist Action is used on this model.

Guard Dog: Once per turn, if an enemy engages this model, that enemy suffers a [1] melee attack.

Riposte: Each time this model is missed by a melee attack, and not killed, 1 enemy in contact suffers a [1] melee attack.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Nasera Trasken joined the Kartoreshian military as a Pelegarth Bloodmask who worked hard to become a respected Howl. Unfortunately the ship transporting her for a tour of duty on Fructus Isle was intercepted by Felskar pirates.

Their captain, a particularly cruel addanii, tried unsuccessfully to prise her mask from her face. Instead, he settled for her eyes, which re-grew after a few days. Again and again, he removed her eyes, hoping she'd give up her mask. She did not. Eventually the captain discovered that a particularly potent acid would keep them permanently damaged.

Nasera was cast adrift and eventually washed up on Fructus Isle. She was taken immediately to the Kartoresh compound where the surgeons labored to restore her eyesight. Alas, they were unsuccessful. But she was not without hope. Her sterling service record and utter devotion to the service convinced her commanders to attempt a new kind of treatment. In the following years, with the help of the clerics at Fel Kryn Temple, Nasera forged a new mask that allowed her some modicum of sensory perception.

Nasera doesn't experience true 'sight' but rather 'touch at a distance'. She describes it as literally 'feeling' everyone in a room. The advantages in battle are significant. She can sense any attack from any direction, and has an intuitive grasp of her enemies' weak points in their armor or style.

But, her new sense is not sight. It has a limited range (although this is quite far) and can prove distracting without the adrenaline of combat. She longed for true and proper vengeance, and applied to her superiors for an extended leave of absence. While personal vendettas are not normally sanctioned by the Kartoreshian military, an exception was made in her case as both a matter of personal and national honor. The addanii pirate had been successfully attacking Nasier ships and interests almost exclusively since his encounter with Nasera. She began a manhunt that redefined the term 'relentless', and was ultimately successful.

Now the pirate captain's broken shell serves her as a second set of eyes and 'attack dog'. On the battlefield, Nasera exhibits ferocious determination in hunting down the strongest opponents and setting her dog to work. They're a shockingly effective team, if somewhat disturbing. To this day, Nasera is always stationed far from any diplomatic efforts involving Felskar.

Arkazan Greathorn

An evolution of the Arkazan Longhorns, the Greathorns' war masks are similarly bonded with their flesh, and their bodies transformed into powerful weapons. It should be noted that the Greathorn and Longhorn masks are one and the same. Most war masks can be upgraded through ritual and enchantment, but some few evolve over time and use.

Greathorns are those that have mastered their mask's bound elemental to a high degree. It should be noted that this is not a melding or bonding, but a decidedly master-to-servant relationship. Elementals do not 'speak' to their masters, as the infamous Tellorian 'Gift' or the Hadrossian Deep Voices do. The communication is described as empathic in nature. The wearer can sense the elemental within and its moods and desires and 'communicate' through various mental efforts.

However, meditation and other mental relaxation exercises do little to keep hold of the elemental. Instead, physical stimulus and exercise, or just plain concentration have the greatest effect. A Greathorn muttering angrily to himself is likely engaged in a mental 'debate' of sorts with its mask. It should also be noted that only Arkazan mask wearers possess this degree of input from the bound elemental (with one or two noted exceptions). Influence is possible from other war masks, but only Arkazan masks require constant control as befitting the extremely powerful nature of the elementals bound within.

Greathorns excel where stealth is not a priority, especially in strategies revolving around area denial. Charred corpses, burning terrain, and smoldering footprints mark an enraged Greathorn's passage. Only the best-placed shots and blows stand a chance of penetrating their granite-like skin. Even then, unless killed outright, a Greathorn brought down in battle will recover in a matter of hours.

In battle the Greathorn's human host is sometimes sorely tested to rein in its captive elemental's powerful instincts to burn, smash, and kill. However, they are not mere berserkers and can still distinguish friend from foe even at the height of fury. That said, wise commanders simply point these gargantuan masters of fire and destruction at their enemies and let them loose.

6 6 2 3

Rank 2
Specialist

Size 5
DZ B

Explosive Conflagration

Melee	*	2

Target up to 3 enemies in range. This attack generates (x) attack die against each of those enemies, where (x) is equal to the number of targets selected.
Sundering (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .
Unrelenting (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Immolate

Magic	4	6

Critical Blow (1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Wreathed in Flame: When this model activates all enemies within 1" suffer a [1] magic attack These attacks cannot generate Backlash.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER FIVE – GAME CHANGER

The Winterhawk worried at his tea. Not obviously, not quite visibly, but anyone who knew his habits would have noticed. Inside half an hour, he examined the paintwork on the ceramic cup, almost added too much honey, and finished a full pot by himself.

Everything depended on how seriously Gregorio had taken his request. If the old vampire had a hand in Hadross's game, he'd send assassins. If he decided the debt was too long passed for collection, he'd ignore the request. Worst case, however, would be if Gregorio sent a catspaw. The Winterhawk wouldn't put it past him to pay his debt with fool's gold, giving it the proper appearance, but lacking substance.

He checked the time by the sun, high above the street in a crystal clear sky. Almost time. Motioning to the server for another pot, he kept one eye on the busy market street from his table at the outdoor café. It wasn't a matter of looking for something specific, but seeing the whole. The waiter brought more tea.

And there. Something stood out, only slightly. A stooped old woman with her cane. White hood, shapeless robe, gray hair straggling about her wrinkled face. Another moment of observation confirmed it. He kept his eyes off her, and watched from the periphery as he poured his tea. If she were an assassin, she relied wholly on her disguise to mask her approach. He centered himself, and shifted his walking stick, his only weapon, to his right side.

She stopped by the Winterhawk's table and said, "You are very public, for a spymaster."

Exactly on time, he thought. *And not someone I know. Excellent.* He smiled and set down his tea. "And you are very young, for a crone. Please, do sit. How do you take your tea?"

Her eyes took in the crowded café patio, and she settled herself in the chair. Fructus citizens talked and laughed in the bright afternoon sun. "A strange time for a meeting of this sort."

Winterhawk stroked his snowy beard. "Midnight in a shadowy courtyard is more traditional. But then, it would be past my bedtime. I'm an old man, after all."

More tea arrived in a painted jar. The Winterhawk brewed and poured, deft motions, well-practiced. He got the honey right this time. "I am Ylae Tei, and I have the honor of being the Winterhawk. Is there something I should call you, or would you prefer to remain anonymous?"

"Anonymous is fine." She sipped her cup delicately.

He grinned. "You do not fear poison?"

She shrugged. "Killing me here would gain you nothing but a very public corpse to dispose of. But, if my disguise were so easily penetrated, perhaps we should postpone this meeting."

His eyes crinkled to slits as his grin deepened. "The illusion is nearly perfect. Even beyond a glance, everyone sees the crone. I received only one clue. One part that did not quite fit the whole. But, I'm certain there are more pressing questions

NAME
Scion Kingdom of Achrion

RULER
King Tourma Shael Han

CAPITAL
Kol Han

in your mind. Please, do ask. Although I was owed a great favor, I fear what I must ask of you buys a debt of equal size."

She considered him a moment. "We're being watched, you know."

"I should think so."

"Are they all yours?"

He sipped. "Some are. Others may not be. It's of no consequence."

Her voice acquired an edge. "You're very flippant with my life. What if I hadn't come disguised?"

"You would likely have dropped a note to move the meeting. Or brought your own backup to deal with interlopers. Or the many eyes on this street would have found something more interesting to watch. Yes, I think the last one the most likely. You seem perspicacious, and not apt to take lives for mere blood sport. And, if you had not done any of these things and simply arrived without precaution, our meeting would now be over, and Gregorio would have shown me his hand." He finished his cup. "None of these things came to pass, and I am very pleased. It seems he took my request seriously, if he sent you."

"You know who I am?"

He held up a finger. "Ah, I know whom you might be. But it is of little consequence. Time is short, and you certainly have more questions."

She got to the point. "Why did Gregorio owe you a great favor?"

His smile remained, but he looked down. The memory of a dark night, soaked in rain. Fangs, lightning, and assassin's blades. He looked back up. "Arrogance is a light that abandons men in their darkest hours."

She sighed. "For an Achrionian proverb, that one actually makes a bit of sense. If you know Gregorio."

Her tone confirmed his theory. "You are not one of his usual associates, and yet, here you are by his command."

Her eyes hardened.

"Ah," he raised a finger. "Not his command. So much the better. Then his debt to me is repaid, and I must convince *you* to take up my burden. This is good."

"You know so much about me to make that judgment already?"

He sipped his tea. "I have seen you move. You are cautious. I have heard you speak. You are straightforward. I have glimpsed your spirit. You are self-assured. In our business, these are admirable traits."

"Our business is that of lies and deceit."

"Ah," he raised a finger again. "We trade in truth. The lies and deceit are but trappings."

"For some they're a way of life."

He grinned again. "But not for you."

She looked down at her tea, cooling on the table.

The Winterhawk saw a sadness there. *Now she looks like her disguise. Now I would have been fooled.*

She looked back up, the sadness gone. "What is it you're asking?"

"I seek a truth that eludes me. You are aware of the attack on the Kartoresh Ambassador?"

She nodded. "I know he lived."

"You are well-informed. Then you know that no guilt has yet been assigned."

"Everyone blames Hadross. It seems most likely. Their ambassador is a disgusting worm."

Winterhawk grinned. "In a room full of false smiles, the blind man is never deceived. It makes sense, does it not, that two old enemies would poison each other's wells? It is comforting. Acceptable in its normalcy. It is like saying a merchant sells his wares, a soldier fights a battle, or a thief has stolen a purse. It is the way of things. The Achrionian mind is very much attuned to the proper way of things."

"I suppose that's the nature of a caste-based society."

"You know of my people's ways!" His eyes twinkled. "We are not so rigid as is widely said. Some, it's true, cling to the oldest traditions. But a farmer who has no gift for farming may leave his caste, given time and dedication. I did myself, in truth. But the gods make few mistakes in granting us our roles, for when we step beyond those bounds, there is apprehension. Discord. Chaos. Which is what one feels now regarding Kartoresh and Hadross."

She leaned forward and spoke softly. Her voice was hard to hear in the crowded café. "So you believe Hadross is not to blame for the poisoning?"

"Oh no, no, I perfectly believe that." He leaned back. "There are attacks planned for all the ambassadors. This was but the first." The shock on her face made him smile even wider.

He saw straight through to the forthright young woman.

"You are amazed?"

"I—Well, no, I suppose not entirely, but you'll talk about that here? In the open?"

He gestured around. "And how can we be overheard? The man behind me is enraptured with his young lady and speaks to aggrandize himself. The man behind you cares only for cheating his business partner. The server is harried. Those children are playing with their puppy. And, if seen, what would an observer find? The Achrionian spymaster is taking tea with an old woman. Or, in the worst of cases, a woman in disguise. This is no shock. It is the way of things. It is comforting to those who watch us."

Her mouth was a grim line. "And I'll have to elude whomever follows me from here."

"Of course. But you're talented and intelligent, and you certainly have a plan."

She grumbled and finished her cup. "Well. We're off topic. You have proof of these plans against the ambassadors?"

"No, no definitive proof."

"And it's this proof you want me to find?"

"Oh, no, not at all."

She blinked. "The assassins then? You want them located?"

He chuckled. "No, we'll find nothing there."

"Well, proof then of their masters?"

He shook his head. "A voice might be heard by one man alone, but written words have an infinite audience. Only a madman puts ink to an assassin's contract."

She was agitated. "More proverbs. Well, what then?"

He sipped his tea and set it down. "There has been news from Qualat Mon delivered to our fair city. Yesterday evening, in fact."

"Nasier's sunken ships?" She shook her head. "No, no, that got here almost a week ago."

He raised a finger. "Ah. There is something new. Something taken from the harbor to the Hadross estate and then to their tower, under guard. Something that has their ambassador excited. Something that disturbs the way of things. Something that I do not have time to uncover before tomorrow's sessions. Something that must be known, perhaps to all. This is the truth that eludes me."

Now she set down her tea and sat back. "You want me to infiltrate Hadross Tower and find some mysterious thing. We don't know what it is, or what it might look like. All we know is it's somewhere in there." She glanced up the mountain towards the Celestial Cathedral. Hadross held the southeastern spire, rising high like an arrow towards heaven.

"It is likely information. But yes, that is your challenge."

"That's suicide."

He picked up his tea. "It is the Achrionian way to face a daily challenge. This is mine: to convince you of the necessity despite the apparent insanity."

She stood. "We're done here."

"Why does the vampire want you dead?"

She sat. "Did he tell you something?"

The Winterhawk sipped his tea. "A man's position is best told by his feet, not his tongue."

The woman thought for a moment. "You mean the fact that Gregorio sent me says more than anything he might have said."

The Winterhawk was delighted. "Given time, you will move mountains! In truth, he told me nothing. My note to him was to send me someone who could undertake the most dangerous possible endeavor with at least a slim chance of success. He sent you."

"Lucky me."

He held up a finger. "Ah, but he did not send an underling, a mere spy, a mindless assassin. No, he sent you. This tells me his mind. Two dragons cannot share the same mountain. If you succeed, his debt is repaid, and he profits. If you fail, he remains the only dragon in his tower."

She was angry. "All the more reason to refuse."

Winterhawk pursed his lips. She hadn't thought Gregorio a true enemy. Interesting. "I would say it is the reason to succeed."

"Play his game? Do what he wants?"

"What he truly wants is for you to die. Don't."

She scoffed. "You make it sound so simple."

He shrugged. "As a concept it is."

"In this case, the practical application is just slightly more complicated."

He spread his hands. "And yet, if it were truly impossible, I sense you would not still be sitting across from me. Only a fool gives no ground before foolish odds. You are no fool."

She grumbled a moment. "Why not send your own people? Why ask Gregorio?"

Winterhawk sighed and raised a weary finger. "Ah. You detect the weakness of our position. Good, very good. You know Achrionian military doctrine? No? We follow the tenets of our late Scion Queen Shael Han as handed down from Achrion's founding days. Flexibility. Adaptability. These are key. For a sapling that bends before the gale still stands where a mighty oak is torn away. Alas, it leaves little room for this kind of specialized work."

She stared at him. "You have no spies?"

He poured more tea and chuckled. "Of course we have spies! Knowledge is the key to understanding the world, and our place in it. There is nothing more important to my people than knowing our place. If not for careful and steady application of intelligence and diplomatic endeavors, Felskar would have invaded us long ago, and Hadross would have drowned Kartoresh beneath the sea. Or at least tried.

"But this mission's nature is more of espionage than true spycraft. There may be two dozen in all our military that could accomplish what I've asked. Alas, they are not here. And, while I could discover this truth in its own time in the usual ways, the methods available with the tools at hand do not count great speed as an attribute. Gregorio was a gamble I chose to make. I daresay it has paid well."

She watched him, hands folded in her lap.

She wavers, he thought. *Perhaps I would too, in her place.* "Please, have more tea," he said. "You are not without means in this venture. I do not believe in forlorn hopes."

She thought a moment, then accepted a new cup. "Desperation doesn't sound very 'adaptable' to me."

He grinned. "Adaptability in this instance allows me to seek outside assistance. In warfare, fluidity is key. Attack an enemy's weakness. Redirect their strength. Do not clash head-on in mighty charges as Kartoresh prefers." He sipped his tea and sat back. "I was not always a spymaster, you know. Indeed, I was a wandering warrior for a time, then found my way into the Dragon Legion. This was in the days when Achrion fell behind the other nations in the technology of warfare. When we learned our lesson about clinging too tightly to the old ways. When we thought as the other nations do, and never would have sought assistance beyond our own ranks."

She smirked. "And I'd always heard the Achrion legions were infallible."

He laughed. "Celestials above, no. No one ever is. To admit no weakness is a failing of youth, and, in those days, I was extremely young for my age, if that makes sense. No, back then, when we faced Felskar, still frothing over their 'glorious revolution', our footmen didn't even have basic metal armor, let alone the powered armor of today. Steam was very dangerous, and our dragon cavalry was unpredictable. And there were no Children."

She paused. "Children?"

"Yes." He raised a finger, "Ah, but you may not have heard of them. You know how Hadrossians are transformed by their Deep gods, and Kartoresh dons masks imbued with elemental power?"

She nodded.

"The Children are much the same: skin like stone, strength of mountains, the grace of willows. Gifts they are, from the War Goddess herself. But for us, the most devout receive this gift, not chosen at random nor forced upon them as a mask." He stroked his beard. "No, given equal force, the most skilled wins. And while the Children are formidable, and our legions are mechanized, adaptability is our greatest strength. There are no favorite tactics. No preferred stratagems. And looking beyond one's own camp for aid, especially in a vital matter of intelligence such as this, must seem baffling to them." He chuckled and grinned. "Very baffling indeed."

She thought a long minute, and returned to the original subject. "How do you know whatever Hadross discovered has potential to upset these talks? Maybe the ambassador simply got good news from home."

"Good news is shared, bad news is spread, but only secrets remain caged. Besides, why all the security then?"

"What if Gregorio uses the information to his advantage?"

Again to the vampire. He must vex her extremely. "What if the sun rises in the east? Of course he will do this. But I would rather this knowledge be known to more than just Hadross. The drums beat for war, and Hadross marches in-step. I can hardly believe the threat of expulsion from the Free Cities has their ambassador so joyful. No. Some ill news has arrived. Some proof of something nefarious. I would see it used well, and in a time and place of our choosing, and not one of the Hadross Ambassador's."

She wavered. He could see it in her hesitation. The Winterhawk didn't smile, blink, or twitch a whisker, such was the balance. She asked the vital question. "And what will you use this information for?"

He stroked his beard and thought a moment. "You seek to know my heart." He thought back over the years and smiled. Regrets. "I've told you a little. In my youth I fought myself, unaware as I was of the world and my place in it. In my prime I fought my enemies, believing myself a righteous judge of good and evil. And now, in my twilight…." He sighed. "Well, I am tired. There is always one more battle. There is always one more trial. This is the way of things. The time approaches when I must lay aside my *dalko* and pass along my burdens. If I can see this one task finished, that of keeping the peace during these talks, I can rest."

"War might still come." She spoke guardedly.

"Alas, history, once learned, is often forgotten. But the signs are right for peace. An extended peace." He finished his tea. "If the ambassadors can be brought to a mere temporary accord, balance will prevail. Tension will drain from the world, and even the Scion Brothers will hesitate to beat the drums in pursuit of their father's ancient throne. That's at the heart of it, you know. Hadross and Nasier act as young children fighting over toys." He shook his head and sighed heavily. "And though they are many centuries my elder, I feel as a parent watching froward younglings. Perhaps wisdom is not a function of age but rather proximity to death. If that is the case, then both may have many centuries left!" He chuckled. "Celestials, forgive me. I speak with the privilege of age. It is not my place to dictate to kings. You have asked after my heart, my wishes in this matter. There you have it." He sought to pour another cup, but the jug was empty. He frowned and set it down. He simply waited.

She closed her eyes a moment. When she opened them, her expression said more than her words: "Okay. Tell me more."

He pulled a bound packet of letters and documents from his silken robe and handed it across. "Here are maps, dossiers, and schedules. Do you require anything from me? Equipment? Backup?"

"What kind of backup?"

"No one who might accompany you, of course, but a signal for a distraction could be arranged at some particular time."

She thought a moment. "Can they loiter unseen outside the tower? Better than the three you have watching me now, I mean."

He grinned. "And who are they?"

She tilted her head towards each as she spoke. "The man in the second story window up and to my right. The white-haired young girl at the table by the window. And the tiny dragon curled in that red-leafed shrub over there."

He laughed. "You should only have seen the dragon and the girl. And the man, if spotted, should have appeared as my observer, not yours."

"Your man watches me more than you, and hasn't touched his wine."

He clucked his tongue and shook his head. "And lo, I was saying I believed my work nearly done."

"I gathered the girl was intended to be obvious. She may have done her job a little too well with the armor and all."

"She is my student, though her training is nearly complete. She is no spy."

The woman snorted. "A bodyguard? That little girl?"

He grinned. "She would chafe to hear you say it. I fear patience and youth are not close friends. But do not let her height deceive you. She is a woman grown. And I had no idea whom Gregorio would send. I do have enemies, after all. And me without my armor."

"Or a weapon."

He raised a finger. "Ah, but I have my walking stick. I am a tempting target this way. The spymaster beyond Achrion Tower's walls wearing naught but his robe accompanied by a girl and a yearling dragon."

"You make yourself a target?"

He shrugged. "It is best to dig a well before thirst sets in."

"How useful might the dragon be?"

"His name is Rau. He is not stealthy, if you are asking that. He is very intelligent. All the fulung are. When fully grown, he will be ridden into battle, quite possibly by my student." He clicked his tongue and held his hand low to the ground. The scarlet dragon slunk out of the tree and scurried over, much to the astonishment of patrons and the delight of the nearby children.

Winterhawk smiled as the Rau curled protectively across his shoulders. The tiny dragon's glittering red eyes stayed locked on the woman. He patted the dragon and clucked soothingly. "I think, however, he may be too small for what you're wanting."

"Possibly. I need to look over these documents, but my suspicion is that ingress and egress are the most probable points of failure."

"I can arrange for a distraction. My student would enjoy the exercise."

She took a deep breath. "Very well. I have a lot to study and prepare for. I'll expect the distraction towards dusk."

"And I shall wait in the Cathedral courtyard, beneath the oak by the pond."

She stood and leaned on her cane. "I will be very late, if I come at all."

"I will bring plenty of tea."

She turned away, paused, and turned back. "It was the cane. That's how you knew I wasn't old. I should have leaned on it more."

He grinned, delighted again. "As I say, miss: you will move mountains in your time."

"You can call me Irene."

Dragon Legionnaire

Rapid adaptation to changing battlefield conditions gives the Legion an edge not found in other national militaries. Flexibility is key to the Achrionian battle doctrine. Where other nations focus on offense or defense, mobility or entrenchment, Achrion's Legions balance their training across all spheres. This is not to say the other nations know nothing of flexibility, it being a key tenet of modern warfare. But the Legions have made it their specialty, much as Achrionian culture espouses a similar doctrine that simply states 'change is life'.

Yet, a slow rate of change has not always served Achrion well. While the Annexation Campaign against Telloria and Felskar thirty years ago was largely successful, the cost in lives and resources remained higher in proportion than any extended engagement in Achrionian history, including the Fracturing War after the death of Ancient King Arikan. Strong undercurrents of tradition in Achrion are difficult to shift, but, once faced with direct evidence, even the staunchest, most conservative members of the military hierarchy accepted that Achrion had fallen behind the other nations in military strength.

Thus, over the last decade, the Legions have embraced many emergent technologies and an entirely modern training regimen. Exemplary among these are the Dragon Legions of House Shael Han. A technomantic combat harness enhances strength, endurance, and speed beyond human norms. To face the many horrors of the modern battlefield, the Nèi Xǐng Lì Doctrine (roughly translated as 'The Effort' especially as it relates to mental acuity) gives a legionnaire the mental fortitude to go toe-to-toe with werewolves, demons, and horrors from the ocean depths.

6 5 1 1

Dragon Guard • Rank 1 Infantry

Size 2
DZ B

Twin Blades		
Melee	1	00

Feint(1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Enlightenment (1): When this model activates, it may choose up to (1) Offensive Insights within range and apply their effects. Models activating in a combined activation must choose the same Offensive Insight to apply. When this model is targeted by attacks, after results are generated, it may choose up to (1) Defensive Insights within range and apply their effects.

Healing Vapors: Each time this model is attacked while in contact with a friendly model with the same trait, and a ⚡ result is generated, it may make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes it may ignore any damage from that ⚡.

Legion Tactics: When this model ends its activation, if it is not engaged and is within 2" of a friendly model it may move 2" toward the nearest friendly model.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dragon Legion Keepers

6 6 1 3

Dragon Guard • Rank 1 Leader

Size 2
DZ B

Razor's Edge Strike		
Melee	2	00

If this attack generates 1 or more hits, this model may perform a sprint action after this attack is resolved, ignoring disengage costs.
Feint(1): Replace (1) ✗ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Enlightenment (1)

Legion Tactics

[Defensive Insight] Diamond Wall Stance: Aura 6", If this model is in contact with a friendly model it gains **Guard(+1)**.

Guard(1): Replace (1) lowest ⚡ on this model's defense chart with ✗.

Leader

Inspire: As an attack action, this model may perform a [1] magic attack on an enemy within 1".

Training: When this model is attacked and a ✸ result is generated, and this model is not killed, it may be placed anywhere within 3" after the attack is resolved.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

At its core, the Nèi Xǐng Lì emphasizes evading an enemy's strengths and capitalizing on their weaknesses. While this seems a simple concept, its execution requires rigorous training and a willingness to recognize one's own weaknesses as they apply to the enemy. For instance, a Dragon Legionnaire is nowhere near as strong and fast as a vampire, but they're more numerous. A Dragon Legionnaire is nowhere as resilient as a Deepman, but they're much faster. Ashmen strike hard, but Legionnaires strike fluidly. So on and so forth.

Leading the Legionnaires are their Keepers. Dragon Keepers are not promoted from above but rather elected from below. When a Dragon Legionnaire unit loses their Keeper through casualties or promotion, they elect the replacement from among their number. The new Keeper receives special equipment and training, most notably the paired mulwi swords which mark their superior rank and make them powerful combatants. Keepers direct their troops through quick, single-syllable commands and a flick of the wrist, yet know enough to let their charges' training see them through the roiling melee.

More than one enemy commander has underestimated the Dragon Legions. They see lightly armed and armored troops, with very little augmentation above the human norm. This is very much in keeping with the Nèi Xǐng Lì. An underestimated enemy is a trap waiting to be sprung.

Ylae Tei, the Winterhawk:

The Winterhawk would scoff at being called a paragon of Achrionian leadership, but he embodies those ideals perfectly: wisdom of the heavens, fluidity of the winds, and strength of the mountain. These are more than just metaphors as the Winterhawk was a major proponent of adopting new technomantic armor and devices for the Legions. In his signature golden armor a man of his training becomes an overpowering force, despite his advanced age. He adapts his strategies to maximize his strengths to exploit an enemy's weakness. And, even under the most determined direct assaults, he demonstrates an unshakable calm.

The Winterhawk's absolute dedication to the Nèi Xǐng Lì Doctrine is apparent on the battlefield and off. He has no favorite stratagems, and no preferred tactics. He has been called 'the most unreliable enemy one could face', which he takes as a most gracious compliment. Even on deployment he determines a daily challenge for himself, as is the Achrionian way. This can be something as simple as 'Meet someone new today' or as complex as 'Defeat the Felskar advance force.' He succeeds far more than he fails, yet even failure is a learning experience for the Winterhawk. If he has any weaknesses, it's perhaps a tendency to quote proverbs more often than is polite, and he himself admits that he drinks too much tea.

The Winterhawk currently serves Achrion as their delegation's spymaster on Fructus Isle. His hatchling dragon companion, Rau, is never far from his side and serves as another set of eyes. Useful for such a dangerous assignment. He's also accepted a student, the Deathbloom, who serves as something of a self-appointed bodyguard, although he has focused her training on grand stratagems and discipline rather than espionage and intelligence gathering.

It's no secret that the Winterhawk, despite being one of the most renowned warriors of his time, is a major proponent of peace. His hope has always been that the Fructan trade conference would serve as a tool for forging a lasting détente. Alas, his hopes appear to be fading. It has long been known that Kartoresh and Hadross are eager for another conflict, but now it seems every nation is hearing the drums of war. But the Winterhawk does not despair. Even the darkest night gives way to dawn, however cloudy it might be.

6 7 1 5

Dragon Guard • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 2
DZ B

Raptor's Kiss

Melee	4	00

Feint (2): Replace (2) on the defender's chart with .

Dragon's Breath

Magic	2	8

Enlightenment (2)

[Defensive Insight] Aura (6") Walking the Void Path: When this model is attacked and an result is generated, it may make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more successes, all enemy models within 2" suffer 1 hit.

Leader

Inspire: While in contact with a friendly model, when this model performs a melee attack, after that attack is resolved, it may perform a [1] melee attack on an enemy within 1".

Training: When this model is attacked and a result is generated, you may have the attacker suffer **Knockback(2)** after the attack is resolved.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Wrath

The Wrath (or Children of Wrath) are a new development unique to Achrion. As a people, Achrionians almost universally embrace the Celestial religion. Temples and shrines dot the Achrionian countryside, and wandering monks bring order and peace wherever they tread. The Celestials themselves even lend their power to the most devout among them, allowing for startling displays of strength and supernatural prowess. But, only in the last three years have the Celestials seemingly 'come down from the heavens'.

The Wrath are transformed Achrionian citizens who share uncommon piety even in a highly reverent nation. While often soldiers, the transformation can be visited upon any individual in a desperate time of need. The transformed report a glorious voice ringing in their heads offering them the might to see them through whatever circumstance caused their distress. Nothing is asked in exchange. If they agree, a blinding reddish-white flame surrounds the individual, and a new Child of Wrath is born.

Similarities to the Tellorian 'Gift' have been noted more than once; the inner voice, the transformation, and so on. Not enough data has been collected to confirm any hypothesis, and, with the seemingly imminent war, it's unlikely any collaborative studies will emerge between Achrionian and Tellorian scholars any time soon.

6 6 1 2

The Children • Rank 1 Infantry

Size 3
DZ C

Crescent Hook

Melee	2	00

After this attack is resolved any enemy model within 2" may be forced 2" toward this model.

Thunderfist Palm

Magic	*	00

Allocate 1 attack die to each enemy in contact.
Suppression(1): Replace (1) ✷ on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Enlightenment (1)

Against all Odds: While this model is in contact with 2 or more enemy models it gains **Ward(1)**.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Big Sister/Brother

6 6 1 3

The Children • Rank 1 Leader

Size 3
DZ C

Executioner Strike		
Melee	2	00

Unstoppable(1): Replace (1) Non-⚡ Non-💀 result on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Precision(1): When this model performs an attack, after re-rolls are made, it may adjust the result of (1) dice up or down by 1.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Enlightenment (1)

[Offensive Insight] Mind's Eye Strike: Aura 6", While this model is on contact with 2 or more enemy models its attacks gain **Precision(+1)**.

Against all Odds

Leader

Inspire: If this model is engaged with 2 or more enemy models its attacks gain **Offensive Expertise(1)**.

Training: When this model is in contact with 2 or more enemy models its melee attacks gain **Suppression(+1)**.

The Wrath presented certain problems on deployment for the military, most notably that ordinary weapons often snap or shatter in their hands. Fortunately, the Vaults of Timeless and Sagacious Lore at Kol Han held the answer. Many documents emerged detailing metallurgical techniques and weapon designs from an ancient age for a variety of weapons far too heavy for normal men. These proved perfect for the Children. It is theorized that this is not the first time Children have walked Arikania, though this information has yet to be uncovered in the Vault. Their armor, however, was a much simpler matter of melding the ancient metallurgy with modern technomantic steam power.

In Achrionian culture, elder siblings share responsibilities with their parents in caring for the younger children. Smaller communities even extend this duty beyond family ties, so it was no stretch for the first Children who received the blessing to assume this role for the latest additions to their growing 'family'.

Big Sisters and Brothers help new Children learn the ropes, train units in tactics and protocol, and handle the rare disciplinary action. Their leadership roles to the battlefield, where Big Siblings keep an eye on their charges, reining them in when necessary, letting them cut loose when appropriate. Their specialized dalkos are both a badge of office and formidable weapon that allows them to fight from one rank removed.

Tae Lin, the Warchild

Tae Lin was one of the very first Children transformed by the War Goddess. It was in a minor skirmish along the Felskar border near Panzia (a troubled city ever since the Annexation) that he lost his left arm to a CAGE. As he lay bleeding and dying he asked the war goddess for one thing: victory for his Legion so that his death would not be in vain. His body lit with reddish-white flame (as happens with all Children though none knew it at the time). He rose transformed to carry the day.

His emergence was met with astonishment by Legion commanders and Achrion's ruling houses. Sages from across Achrion and the Free Cities studied him for more than a year. Nothing quite like him had ever been seen. That is until the first reports came in about new transformations across the whole of Achrion. It seemed Tae Lin was not alone.

The Children all share similar properties in size, strength, and resilience, though these do vary between individuals. Similarly, raw physical prowess does not necessarily confer fighting ability. A transformed warrior can always outperform a transformed baker, for instance. Fortunately for Achrion, the majority of transformations take place in times of great need, which one often encounters in battle far more than orderly Achrionian daily life. Thus, it's no surprise the majority of transformations take place on the mainland, where banditry and border incursions are not as uncommon as could be wished.

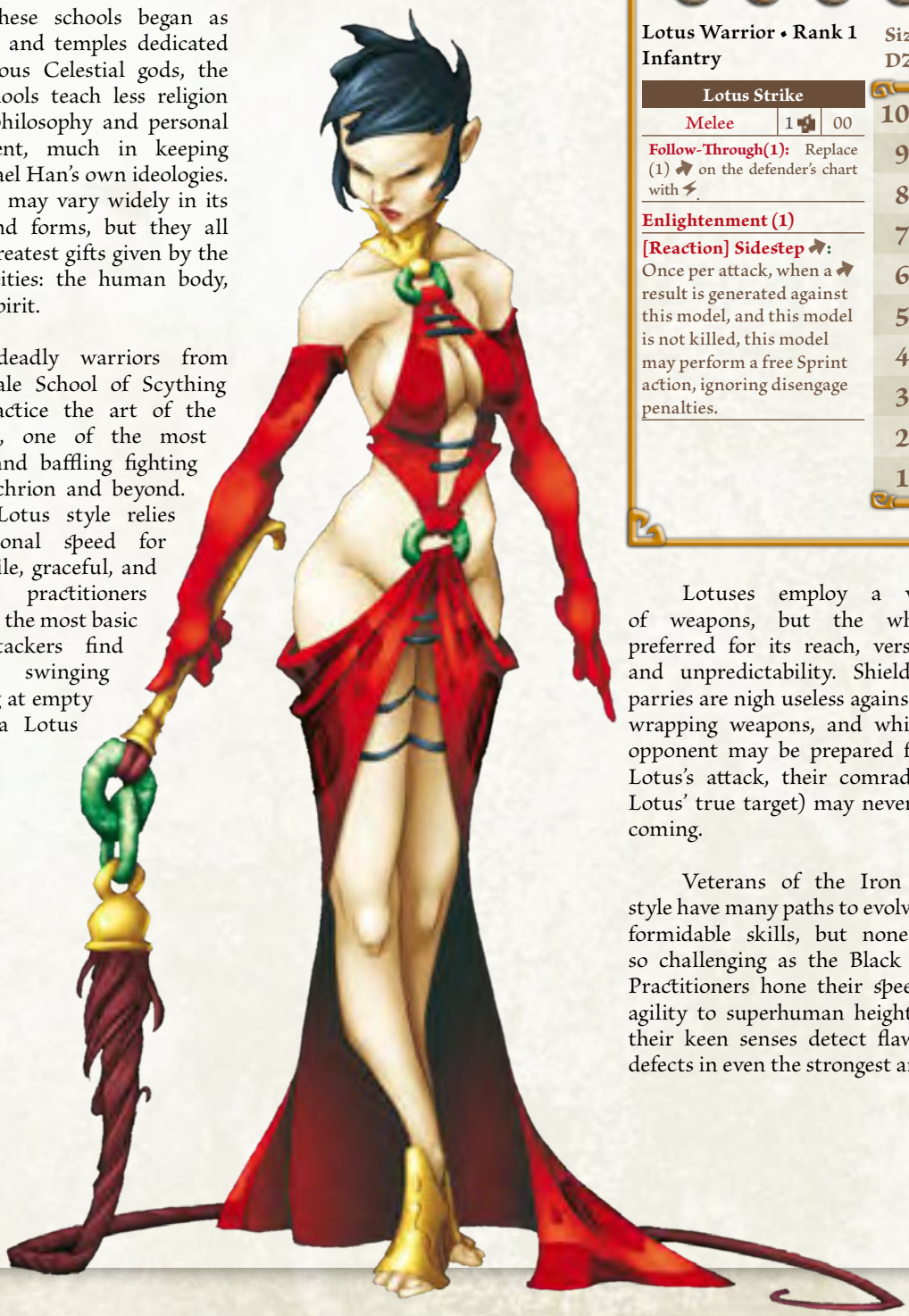
The Warchild himself is happy to be back with the Legions. As the 'most senior' Child of Wrath, and a veteran Keeper of many battles, it made perfect sense to position him near the top of the military hierarchy, though it results in more paperwork than the Warchild would prefer. Nevertheless, Tae Lin leads very much from the front, where the other Children can learn from his outstanding example.

As for his missing arm, technomancy overcame that barrier with a custom-built prosthetic that's every bit as powerful as his natural arm. He demonstrates this on the battlefield at every opportunity. Tae Lin is relentless. Once joined in melee, his savage style prevents any escape. Much like all Wrath, the greater the odds against him, the better he performs.

Iron Lotus Warriors

The legendary 'fighting schools of Achrion' have existed since before the island nation's founding under Scion Queen Shael Han. While many of these schools began as monasteries and temples dedicated to the various Celestial gods, the modern schools teach less religion and more philosophy and personal enlightenment, much in keeping with the Shael Han's own ideologies. Each school may vary widely in its practices and forms, but they all honor the greatest gifts given by the Celestial deities: the human body, mind, and spirit.

The deadly warriors from the all-female School of Scything Flowers practice the art of the Iron Lotus, one of the most intriguing and baffling fighting styles in Achrion and beyond. The Iron Lotus style relies on exceptional speed for defense. Agile, graceful, and hypnotic, practitioners eschew even the most basic armor. Attackers find themselves swinging and hacking at empty air where a Lotus once stood.



5 5 1 1

Lotus Warrior • Rank 1
Infantry

Size 2
DZ C

Lotus Strike		
Melee	1	00

Follow-Through(1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Enlightenment (1)

[Reaction] Sidestep : Once per attack, when a result is generated against this model, and this model is not killed, this model may perform a free Sprint action, ignoring disengage penalties.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Lotuses employ a variety of weapons, but the whip is preferred for its reach, versatility, and unpredictability. Shields and parries are nigh useless against these wrapping weapons, and while one opponent may be prepared for the Lotus's attack, their comrade (the Lotus' true target) may never see it coming.

Veterans of the Iron Lotus style have many paths to evolve their formidable skills, but none quite so challenging as the Black Lotus. Practitioners hone their speed and agility to superhuman heights, and their keen senses detect flaws and defects in even the strongest armor.

Black Lotus

7	6	1	3

Lotus Warrior • Rank 1 Leader

Size 3
DZ C

War Fan

Melee	2	00

The first time each turn this attack kills an enemy, this model may be placed anywhere in contact with an enemy within 2". This model may then perform 1 War Fan attack.

Enlightenment (1)

[Offensive Insight] Channeling the Winds of Sorrow: Aura 6", If an enemy is killed by this model's melee attacks this activation, the enemy must make a Will Check(1) before being removed. On 1 or more failures you may force any model within 2" of that enemy up to 2".

[Reaction] Sidestep.

Leader

Inspire: If this model is not part of a combined attack, the first time it attacks and fails to hit an enemy it may perform a [+1] melee attack on an enemy within 2" of the target.

Training: At the end of this model's activation, if it killed an enemy this turn, it may move up to 2".

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

A Black Lotus in battle practically dances from foe to foe as her war fans trace bloody trails in the air and corpses fall in her wake. But where a Black Lotus truly blooms is in the company of her fellow Iron Lotuses where her distracting style and pinpoint accuracy disrupts enemy formations and exposes them for unexpected assaults. A combined attack from a unit of Iron Lotuses led by a Black Lotus can shred even the mightiest foe in seconds.

Practitioners from all the fighting schools tend to eschew formal military service. Yet, they do not forbid it either. In time of need, the Scion Regent can request a draft. However, such a formal call is rarely required. Every generation sees a new breed of powerful new students eager to test their formidable arts against Achrion's enemies. And, this generation may face the greatest test yet.

Madam Mui, the Jade Lotus

As a young Dragon Legionnaire in the troubled times surrounding Felskar's Humanum Revolution and Achrion's Annexation Campaign, the young Mui was charged with protecting the Celestial Temple at Panzia while fighting raged nearby. Untried and impetuous, she disobeyed orders and joined the battle. It was a terrible mistake, and the unguarded Temple paid the price. Many priests were slaughtered, and many artifacts were taken.

She was cast out of the Legion, and finally found a place with the School of Scything Flowers. Over the decades she learned her lessons, mastered her arts, and rose to head the school as Grandmistress. And yet, she never forgot her original disgrace. The slaughtered priests, the plundered temple…. The loss granted her wisdom, but at what cost?

Now, with war imminent she has donned technomantic armor, honed her weapons, and marches with the Legions as an advisor and guide. Yet, convincing the Legion leadership proved difficult. Some of them remember her disgrace to this day. That said, allowing the eager Scything Flowers to seek employment on the front lines has smoothed many a scowl. Madam Mui refused to order her Flowers off to war, but she would not suppress them as other schools have, much to the disgruntlement of the more conservative fighting schools.

For her own part, Madam Mui's says that she can hardly forbid her students from seeking their own paths. Much as she is driven to reach for a shred of redemption, however inadequate, they too must walk their own roads. This is very much a tenet central to the Achrionian psyche, and one she feels many fighting schools have narrowed down to exalt the school's path over the individual. The debate on this topic is as old as Achrion itself.

Madam Mui hopes to be present when the fighting comes to Felskar, and perhaps she can reclaim some lost honor. In battle, she's an unstoppable force. Her whirling style and magically-enhanced jade claws earned her the title of Jade Lotus, and she is capable of felling entire ranks without support. She is at her deadliest leading small units of Iron Lotus warriors in swift, lethal strikes at exposed enemy units and flanks.

6 6 2 3

Lotus Warrior • Rank 2
Leader • Character

Size 2
DZ C

Dance Of Scything Death

Melee	1	00

Once this attack is completed, this model may be placed anywhere within 2". This model may then perform 1 Dance of Scything Death attack. This may be repeated up to 5 additional times per activation.

Enlightenment (1)

[Offensive Insight] Unleashing the Soul Storm: Aura 6", If this model's melee attacks generate an result, all enemies within 2" of the target must make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more failures they suffer 1 hit.

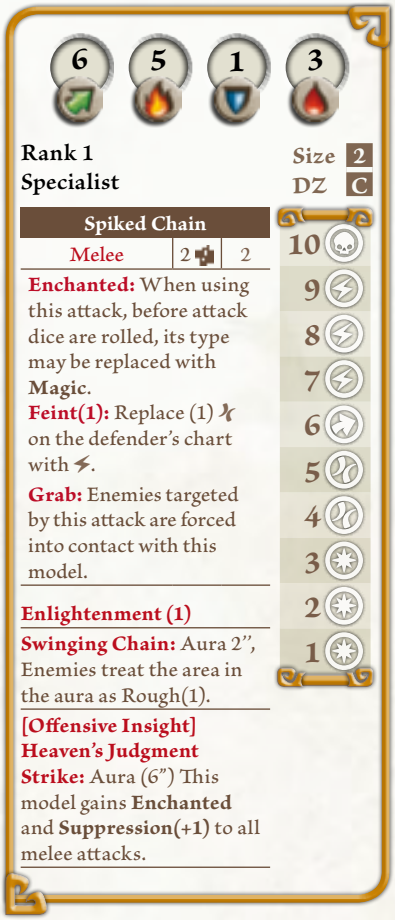
Leader

Inspire: If this model engages an enemy this activation, its melee attacks gains Critical Blow (+1).

Training: If this model's attacks generate a result against an enemy, 1 enemy within 2"of the target suffers a [+1] melee attack.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Hammers of Heaven



No fighting school forbids its students from joining the Achrionian military, but only the School of the Heavenly Lion has consented to teach its techniques to Legionnaires that meet their exceptional standards. This has created some controversy concerning the fighting schools' roles in Achrionian society. More traditional schools see themselves as stewards of Achrion's deep spiritual history, while more radical schools see a clear duty to train Achrion's warriors.

The fear is that the deeply spiritual nature of such training would slowly erode leaving a purely martial form, devoid of meaning or transcendence. More open schools counter that a disciple's prowess flows from their spirituality, for without the Celestial gods' guidance and empowerment, a disciple is but an ordinary human, however talented. Certainly the truth shall be borne of evidence in the coming conflict, as the Hammers of Heaven see wider deployment and training regimens are stepped up to meet the very high demand for these skilled warriors.

The prospect of becoming a one-man (or woman) fighting machine is attractive to any Achrionian who grew up hearing tales of legendary wandering heroes who fought entire armies to right wrongs and slay demons. Yet, this life is not for everyone. After a two year program of rigorous study, meditation, and a lot more mopping and scrubbing of the monastery floors than one might expect, initiates face the Thirty Seven Chambers of Hardship and Grievance. Most fighting schools have similar trials for would-be graduates, although few have quite so many travails as the Heavenly Lion. While the mortality rate is surprisingly low, the washout rate is roughly half. Failed initiates often re-enter the program for another two years, though there is no third attempt.

Those that succeed are anointed as Initiates of the Heavenly Lion, and return to their Legion as perfect human weapons. The Legions then take this a step further, outfitting them with the latest technomantic steam armor to enhance their already impressive physiques. Most Hammers employ a heavily weighted chain whip, though some prefer one end to be bladed. Either way, the style allows for a variety of crushing attacks to defeat most armor, and the whirling, unpredictable chain keeps enemies off-balance and vulnerable.

Shield of Taelfon

The Shields of Taelfon represent a sect within the larger Order of Exalted and Resplendent Battle Magicians. While other battlemages specialize in the elements, necromancy, or even intelligence gathering, the Shields are mobile magical bunkers. Their defensive auras lend a significant degree of magical protection to friendly troops inside the bubble. And, like most wizards, they can summon bolts of raw celestial power to strike from afar. Thus, in the field, Shields are best kept in the second or third ranks as their protective auras are wide, and their personal defenses commensurately weak.

While the Order at large has a distinct military aspect, they are not a formal part of the Achrion military hierarchy. This has led to occasional difficulties in past conflicts, especially in areas where the Order has claimed priority over the military in determining battlefield objectives and campaign strategies. The Achrionian hierarchy allows for such supersedence, but only for a short duration or during a brief time of need. Such incidents are remarkably rare, although the most memorable brought about the siege and capture of the Free City of Tymour during the Annexation.

Speaking generally, Order magicians serve in regular rotations on and off the front lines, and report directly to campaign and mission commanders as necessary. The Shields are an exception, however, as their talents serve a far greater purpose with the troops than in logistical or non-combat support roles. Much like the legendary Taelfon himself, the Shields prefer combat to research. Why else would they have joined the Order?

And yet, research is very much a part of their daily life. Every Shield, young or old, practices and refines their craft night and day. All magic is exhausting, and while their technomantic battle harnesses allow them to channel vast power from it rather than their own biological reserves, such mighty power is still draining. Thus, casting techniques that conserve even a dram of power or increase efficiency by a handsbreadth are worth every invested hour. A Shield that's mumbling to themselves, head down, on the march or at camp, is best left to their own devices, as they're likely working out new rituals and practices. Judicious commanders give them wide latitude in their eccentricities.

6	7	1	3

Rank 1
Specialist

Size 2
DZ B

Celestial Bolt

Magic	1	6

Enemies targeted by this attack suffer [-1], to a minimum of [1], for this attack. This attack does not suffer from Backlash.

Enlightenment (1)

[Defensive Insight] Ignite the Spirit Fire: Aura 6", Once per turn, when this model is attacked and a ✷ result is generated, 1 attacking model suffers Backlash.

Increased Backlash: This model generates 1 additional attack when causing Backlash.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Hong Yao, the Red Demon

Hong Yao may have been the very first of the Children, though his transformative blessing did not come from the War Goddess. In his darkest hour, Hong Yao prayed to the Fire Lord, and was answered. His former identity was stripped away, and he became the Red Demon. He alone survived that doomed mission to Telloria, and he alone faced the scorn and dishonor at his failure and transformation.

More than a decade has passed, however, and Hong Yao has once more found his place in the Dragon Legion. The Childrens' indoctrination into the regular armed forces has salved his wounded pride somewhat, but he is still a different creature when compared to the Children of Wrath. Where their powers are decidedly supernal, his are irrefutably infernal.

There are no 'evil' Celestial deities in the pantheon, but arcanologists agree that the different Celestials manifest their powers in different ways, hence the delineation between powers of destruction (infernal) and powers of creation (supernal). The two are functional sides of the same coin that rather beautifully mimic and complement each other. For instance, a blast of infernal fire can kill or cauterize. Where a wave of supernal power can crush or heal. It is the disciple's will that remains key, whereas the Celestial gods themselves simply supply the raw force of creation or destruction as per whatever arcane laws they abide by.

For Hong Yao, it's all the same. He knows not the Fire Lord's reasons for transforming him, nor what his ultimate purpose should be. This places him even more at odds with Achrionian society, as one's place, station, and function are vital lynchpins to the Achrionian mind. Thus, Hong Yao continues to fight. He was a soldier before, and a soldier he remains, even if he must fight alone. His fiery breath can devastate a line, and his direct, brutal style makes short work of larger foes. He is not unwelcome in the ranks, but nor is he embraced. It is difficult to be both outcast and grudgingly accepted. One wonders how long he'll maintain his stoicism in the face of such well-meaning slights.

Kae Howun, the Deathbloom

Kae Hwoun's time as a student is very nearly at an end. Her entire life has been devoted to mastering the Crimson Blossom style from the reclusive School of Tranquil Seasons, and she is eager to test herself against Achrion's many foes. An orphan left on the school steps, Kae Hwoun has finally forsaken her desire to find her birth parents. If they still live, certainly they would know where they abandoned her.

She has spent the last year on Fructus Isle under the Winterhawk's instruction. It was here that she earned her title, the Deathbloom, and the thugs and pirates of the lower city give her a wide berth as she passes by. Tales of the night she first arrived on Fructus still follow in her footsteps, and the body count grows with each retelling. Any opponent that mistakes her petite build and stature for weakness is in for a swift end.

The Crimson Blossom style earns its name largely from the rather graphic nature of the wounds it inflicts. The Deathbloom can make a weapon of nearly any object, but nothing outperforms her customized dalko for sheer lethal force. On the battlefield few can match her speed or agility, and on the rare occasion when she finds herself outnumbered or overmatched, a blinding flash and a whirling leap sees her well clear.

As for the coming war, the Deathbloom finds her desires and teachings at odds. War is terrible, yet the challenge of battle is thrilling. Achrionians seek a new challenge to face on a daily basis. It's a constant reminder that growth and change are central to the harmonious mind. On occasion, seeking the next challenge is a challenge unto itself, which is very true for an individual of the Deathbloom's skill and talent.

Her education under the Winterhawk's tutelage has shown her that not every challenge is physical. She had never considered negotiations a particularly worthwhile pursuit for a warrior, yet the Winterhawk has done battle with words countless times during the Fructan trade conference. Yet now, with negotiations breaking down, she believes she will not have to wait long for the call to bring her martial prowess to the front lines.

7 6 1 5

Rank 2
Character • Specialist

Size 2
DZ C

Celestial Blade

Melee	3	2

Feint(1): Replace (1) on the defender's chart with .

Blade of the Celestial Winds

Magic	1	4

Bounce (3): When the dice for this attack are assigned, this model may assign 1 additional die to up to (3) additional models within 3" of the target, ignoring LoS.

Enlightenment (2)

[Offensive Insight] Riding the Unseen Winds: Aura 6", This model gains **Stalker**.

Fueled by Combat: At the end of any turn in which this model killed an enemy, it may remove 1 damage.

Stalker: This model does not pay the disengage cost when disengaging and may engage enemy models during this move.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Red Willow

7 6 2 2

Rank 2
Specialist • Character

Size 2
DZ C

Whirling Death

Melee	*	00

Allocate 1 attack die to each enemy in contact.

Steam Gauntlet

Melee	3	00

Enchanted: When using this attack, before attack dice are rolled, its type may be replaced with **Magic**.

Enlightenment (2)

[Offensive Insight] Dawning the Guise of Shrouded Death: Aura 6", When attacking an enemy that has not activated this round this model gains Offensive Expertise(1).

From the Shadows: You may choose not to deploy this model at the start of the game. Instead, when an enemy is killed, before that model is removed, you may place this model anywhere in contact with that enemy.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Not every fighting school is stationed in Achrion. A few are hidden across Arikania. For instance, the Hidden Forest School is rumored to be somewhere in Kartoresh, and their widespread use of war masks would seem to support that theory. The exact nature of the elementals bound within their masks is unknown, though they're unlikely to be Efrenti, as elementals of that hierarchy are notoriously loyal to Kartoresh in general and House Nasier in particular.

While all graduates of the Hidden Forest are deadly, Shai Feilofu is of a rare breed of battlefield assassins, who are as at home on the front lines as creeping about far beyond them, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Unlike assassins in the classic sense, Hidden Forest disciples accept no contracts. They simply make their presence in a particular campaign known to the commanders and await instructions. They will perform no more than three assignments before silently moving on, the rather superstitious belief being that any opposing force that falls for the same tactic thrice is either not worth their time or due for a turn of fortune. Luck, they say, is a capricious deity.

Shai Feilofu in particular excels at her work. In addition to her whirling, whipping fighting style, her flexible use of technology, magic, and techniques from across Arikania has earned her the title of the Red Willow. Her technomantic battle harness can disguise her as almost anyone or anything, and her steam-powered arm is both weapon and shield. Indeed, disguise and mimicry are the Red Willow's favored techniques. More than one enemy commander has met their end when a trusted aide-de-camp or bodyguard has morphed before their eyes into the infamous Red Willow.

For her own part, the Red Willow rarely plays the role of skulking killer when she's not on the job. She's at home in Legion camps, often training and eating with the troops. Where most Hidden Forest assassins will require a complicated set of criteria for accepting their assignments, the Red Willow simply sends a politely worded note to the force commander listing the muster and ranks she's encamped with. A similarly politely worded letter will soon end with a dead enemy leader, and a campaign one step closer to victory.

Fulung Devourers

Ancient legends speak of huge dragons all across Arikania, vast creatures with wings the size of sailing ships, and teeth as long as a man's arm. These tales pre-date even the Elemental Dominion, when all of mankind was enslaved by their vile extraplanar overlords. Modern scholars and arcaheomancers confirm that these vast beasts were likely hunted to extinction by the Elemental Lords, though whether this was for necessity or sport remains in question. Their bones can be found at dig sites across the continent, and full skeletons are on display at universities in Telloria and Kartoresh, and at the Arikan Memorial Museum in Kylos.

Although the vast dragons of legend are long gone, the Fulung Devourers of Achrion Island share many of their legendary traits, being amongst the most intelligent and versatile of this greatly diminished species. But, like the most spirited horses and proudest raptors, dragons require patient handling and constant diligence under a steady temperament. Thus, it is no wonder that Achrion alone boasts the only contingents of dragon cavalry.

A fulung dragon and its keeper begin training when the hatchling reaches adolescence. This is the most critical stage as fulung hatchlings are biddable and domesticated. They accept humans as their natural guardians. As they grow, much like any adolescent, the urge to run free of their guardians' restraint emerges, and a fractious dragon the size of a table is debatably more difficult to control than human teens. With persistence, patience, and strong positive reinforcement, fulung keepers do not so much tame the dragon as reach an understanding with it. The relationship becomes a partnership, and a truly devastating combination on the battlefield.

However, if a fulung's keeper is killed or otherwise incapacitated, a fulung may not cope well with a new keeper. Many younger dragons can make the transition, given a few short months. But, older dragons have been known to mourn themselves to death atop their former master's grave. Such is their bond and loyalty. Indeed, fulung keepers whose mounts have been killed out from under them often suffer a similar fate. Few keepers will actually perish from grief, but the wound is all too similar.

Devourers can fill many campaign roles, as exemplifying Achrion's philosophy of flexibility over specialization. They can strike enemies at range with breath of searing light, rebuff even the strongest magical attacks, or break enemy formations outright through sheer strength and ferocity.

6 7 2 3

Rank 2
Specialist

Size 5
DZ A

Chomp		
Melee	2	00

Critical Blow(1): Replace (1)⚡ on the defender's chart with 💀.
Sundering(1): Replace (1) 🛡 on the defender's chart with ⚡.

Spear of Light		
Magic	4	8

Choose a target, you may allocate dice to any models between this model and the target including the target. No model may be allocated more than 2 die.

[Offensive Insight] Setting Sun Strike: Aura 6", This model gains **Critical Blow (+1)** to all melee attacks.

Radiance of Dawn Stance: When attacking this model, enemies must make a Will Check(1). On 1 or more failures they lose Precision(x), Offensive Expertise(x), and Offensive Mastery(x) this activation.

Enlightenment (2)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter Six - Knight of Blades

Ooroth's tentacles twitched as he dreamed of sensuous curves, murmurs of love and security, and a brilliant smile reserved for him alone. The dream fog obscured her face, but she wrapped him up in her arms, and held him tight. Ooroth was at peace.

Until she seized his arm and bit down deep. He roared, wide awake, and bolt upright in his hammock.

Ambassador Jahroon stood over him. He held a small dagger that dripped reddish ichor. His tentacles writhed and he mocked Ooroth in a sing-song voice. "'Oh, my dear one, oh, beloved.' Har har hoom!"

"You fucking stabbed me!" Oororth yelled. Then the hangover hit. His arm hurt, but his head pounded. He grabbed his aching skull and groaned. How much had he drunk the night before?

Jahroon laughed and continued, "And just who is this sweet lovely? Another Dockside whore? Shall I buy her for you? A present for the Scion's Ascension Day? Or perhaps I should keep her for myself, hm?"

Ooroth blushed to his core, furious. "There's no woman. And why are you in my quarters?" He glanced around, surprised. "And… how did I get to the Tower?"

Jahroon sheathed the blade, still snickering. "To hear it told you were found wandering Cathedral District calling for someone named Jodo until the Watch brought you back here. I wanted to see if you'd finally poisoned yourself to death."

Ooroth certainly felt like it. His head was three sizes too small and his skin itched as if covered in ants. The thought of food made him pale. His last memory was being in bed with a paid woman down Dockside. Had he really been so drunk as to wander about, calling for that little girl's cat? He purpled to think of it, and hoped she hadn't seen him. "Sadly, I still live. Was that all, ambassador?"

"No. Your security arrangements for the Tower are inadequate. I require revisions to three areas in particular."

Ooroth's tongue felt like he'd been chewing on sand. "Can't this wait until tomorrow? I'm not on duty today."

"You're on duty when I command it." Jahroon noticed an object on the shelf by the door. He plucked up a leather scroll case with a beard tentacle. "And what *is* this thing, anyway?"

Ooorth chilled. "That's private property!"

"Yes, you've been cradling it like a royal commission the better part of a week." He unscrewed the cap.

"Give me that!" Ooroth reached for it, but Jahroon took one step back, and Ooroth fell on his face.

Jahroon unfurled the crinkled parchment, boggled, then hooted with obscene laughter. "Oh, how *precious!* 'Thank you!' says the badly drawn girl and her cat. Hoo hoom! And what service did you do? Is her mother one of your regulars? Do you keep this urchin fed and clothed through your nightly exertions?"

"Shut up! And give me that!"

"Tut tut," Jahroon held the parchment as if to tear it. "This looks fragile."

Ooroth's guts froze. "Okay, look… Just, please put that away."

Jahroon's face lit up. "What have we here? Is the beast tamed? A call to duty is not enough. All the liquor of Fructus is not enough. Money slides off you and you cast aside real power, but one ridiculous parchment, and my fractious commander is cowed?" He tugged lightly and the parchment tore a tiny bit.

"NO!"

Jahroon laughed again, his mirth genuine. He rolled up the parchment and put it back in its case. "I'll just be keeping this."

"You can't steal my property!"

Jahroon smirked. "Oh, please. Such destructible evidence will hardly make your case, and there is no authority on this island to place me under arrest. And, ultimately, whose word would anyone take? An ambassador's? Or a drunkard's?" He slung the scroll case over his shoulder. "Now: the security arrangements."

Ooroth had never felt so helpless or defeated. Jahroon had gotten away with things like this before. He'd seen it, and been powerless to intervene. Now that he was on the receiving end, it was ten times worse. "Fine. Yes, ambassador. As you wish. Can we just go to the kitchens? I could really use some water."

Jahroon remained amused. "I shall be generous."

Ooroth squeezed into his armor and grit his teeth against the itching. He slung his greatsword over his shoulder. How would he ever get his drawing back from Jahroon? The Deep Voices kept their own counsel.

The kitchens were one level beneath the grand hallway, and they made the trip in silence. Down sweeping stairs and through pillared corridors, Ooroth felt a growing oddness about building. In fact, the whole Tower was silent. "Where are all the guards?"

"I've sent most of them to the estate. It needs to be more secure."

Ooroth stopped dead. "The *estate?*"

"It's easier to secure against incursion, and the sea is at hand for an easy escape. Besides, my treasures are there."

"Hadross Tower is our embassy!"

"But it's the Ambassador that's most important, wouldn't you agree?"

No. He glanced at the scroll case. "Yes, Ambassador." He felt filthy for the forced agreement. They resumed their journey. "If I may point out the obvious, however, you are relatively unguarded now."

"Pah. The Deep Voices demanded my presence. They would never put me in danger."

Ooorth pursed his lips. The Ambassador did seem to lead a charmed life in that regard.

In the kitchen two Deepman guards sprang to attention from their meal. The Ambassador ignored them.

Ooroth said, "Take your meals to the common area, and give us a moment."

The Deepmen complied.

Ooroth poured himself a massive jug of seawater and downed it in one go. It helped, if only barely. It'd be another long recovery.

Jahroon watched him, utterly amused. "Why anyone would voluntarily do that to themselves is quite beyond my grasp. This failing will be your doom."

Ooroth twitched, but bit back any reply. The last thing he wanted was one of Jahroon's characteristic rages while the ambassador held the little girl's drawing hostage. He'd been sober… –ish. For at least the last week. Knowing that just one person out there liked him had kept him on an even keel. But another round or two of unsuccessful propositions had left him depressed. And he'd had a drink or ten, and that was all he remembered. He drained another mug. "You wanted to discuss security. Have you only sent away guards from the Tower?"

"As a first step. I'm unhappy with the flooded levels."

Ooroth frowned. "Why? They don't trouble us at all. And they're a fantastic barrier against surfacers."

"It is difficult to receive dignitaries and other guests when they must swim up three levels."

Ooroth scratched his head, annoyed. "There are Deepcallers onhand specifically to escort them in an aura of air. Tide and teeth, visitors don't even get their feet wet!" Ooroth stopped suddenly. "Wait. This is about your pretties. You don't like the Deepcallers hassling you about your harem. That's it, isn't it?"

Jahroon was indignant. "Who I invite to my offices is my business. I will not be questioned by you or anyone else."

"The security is my business. I'm here to keep you alive!"

Jahroon fingered the scroll case. "Is that truly the tone you wish to adopt, Captain?"

Ooroth's mouth went dry. He took a sip of seawater, brain churning. "Well…. I suppose we could have some respiration gems on-hand. Under lock and key with a dedicated guard. And if we enchant them to last maybe ten minutes at best… yes. I think that might be doable. But the water barrier is too good to lose. Surfacers are so disadvantaged in there, even if they can breathe. And think about all we spent on fortifying the structure to hold that much seawater. Assuming your pretties don't mind being a little soaked for their... rendezvouses."

Jahroon leered. "I should hope not."

Ooroth suppressed a shudder with another long gulp of seawater. He didn't even want to contemplate the sort of depredations his vile Ambassador put those women through. He loved his power more than anything, and liaisons in his office, the very seat of Hadrossian authority, were probably the only way the ancient Deepman could get it up. "You said there were three things, Ambassador?"

"Yes. The free-roaming orsund krakens are all well and good, but they leave rather a mess on occasion. I would prefer that they confined themselves to the lower levels, stayed out of the main hall, and didn't go near the harem, my chambers, or my offices."

Ooroth understood that one. The two enormous orsund krakens were another excellent measure, but they were far from house-trained, and they tended to mark their territory with sticky ink every so often. "Is it solely the mess you object to, or their presence?"

"The mess, obviously."

"Then perhaps we'll employ additional cleaning staff, and restrict their movements from your office. If we confine them only to the service levels, they're not really guarding anything important. So we'll keep them out of your office, but they can have free range at night from the flooded levels on down. Would that be acceptable, Ambassador?"

Jahroon smiled. "You see how agreeable you can be?"

Ooroth wasn't feeling terribly agreeable, but what could he do? "Yes, Ambassador. Though I wish you'd consulted me about the guard change before simply implementing it. You're exposed here."

"Bah. The Deep Voices—"

A distant shriek echoed through the Tower.

Jahroon and Ooroth looked at each other a moment.

"What—" Ooroth began.

THHRRUUUUMMMMMMM….!! The Deep Voices roared a warning in Ooroth's mind.

"Oh, shit." Ooroth drew his blade. "Ambassador, get behind me."

The door burst open and a Deepman ran in. "Assassins—!" He gurgled and fell forward. A bladed throwing star was embedded in his back.

Ooroth motioned for Jahroon to get down behind the counter, and stepped up beside the door. He heard running footsteps. He poised his blade, waited a moment, and brought it down like a guillotine.

The unprepared assassin died instantly, his face cleaved off. Ooroth's leg tentacles grabbed the corpse, yanked it clear, and he slammed the door shut. He'd gotten a quick glance. "The hall is full of them." He slammed the bolt home. It'd hold perhaps a few seconds.

The dead man was dressed all in black satin. Achrionian cloth. He was slight of frame and build, and he wore a steam battle harness marked by the Dragon Legions that chugged away on his back despite its owner's death. But there was no time to speculate further. Shouts came from beyond the door, and someone battered against it.

Jahroon was staring at the corpse. "They weren't—I'm not supposed to be—!"

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm….

"Uh huh," said Ooroth. "Servant's warrens. Follow me. We'll find the back door."

They ran through the servant's door, which Ooroth shut and bolted. A splintering crash announced the first door's failure. They hurried past quarters and storage rooms. Bewildered servants peered out or passed them in the halls. "Intruders," Ooroth said often. "Hide, bolt your doors, or whatever. Just keep out of the way."

Jahroon urged him on from behind. "Move faster!"

"I don't exactly have feet, Ambassador."

"Then let me past, depths take your eyes!"

"Outrunning your only guard isn't the best idea. And do you actually know the way through this maze?"

"I have your drawing!"

Ooroth grit his teeth, and for a moment thought of simply letting the assassins have the man.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

He stepped aside, with a bow, "After you, my lord."

Jahroon trotted ahead. Ooroth shuffled, starting to pant. Adrenaline had banished his hangover, but he still felt somewhat faint. He rounded the last corner to see Jahroon at the end of the hall. Four Deepman guards were still stationed there. At least they hadn't been sent to the estate. One worked to open the door's many bolts.

Ooroth threw out a hand. "Wait!"

Too late. The last bolt whipped aside and the door flew open. Throwing stars swarmed. One guard died, and the other fell back, wounded. Jahroon shrieked and fled towards Ooroth. A tiny sliver of blood shone from a beard tentacle. "I'm wounded!"

Ooroth had no time for snark. Two guard were down, and the others fought desperately in the tight corridor, sword to sword. Ooroth charged.

He compressed and squished past the line to spring up in the midst of four assassins. He spun, and his leg tentacles swept them from their feet. Heavy Deepman swords killed two, and his great blade took the others in a whirling double-stroke. But the tide was rising, and a sea of assassins flooded in.

Ooroth's arm stretched to shocking length, and he whipped his blade in a fearsome chop. A shriek accompanied a severed arm through the air. The momentum carried his blade in a huge backswing. He whirled and shot the tip forward like a spear through two necks in a line. His woven ceramic armor defeated a vicious stab, and another star scored his membranous leg sheath.

Hew grunted, entangled two combatants with his tentacles, and shot himself backwards past the Deepmen. One enemy staggered into a Deepman blade. The other fell flat on his back, but dodged the blade and got to his feet with an acrobatic leap.

Ooroth was panting hard now, and sweating precious liquids that he really didn't have. His wound stung, but wasn't bad. He'd been lucky. The guards fought defensively, but were losing ground. Five assassins crowded through the door, with more beyond. One drove a blade into the middle door hinge, spiking it open.

Jahroon cowered a short way down the corridor, unwilling to proceed alone. "Leave them!" he shouted. "Get me out of here!"

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

Ooroth sighed. "Some days I hate you."

"Is that any way to speak to me??"

"Wasn't talking to you," Ooroth said. He pulled the wounded Deepman to his feet. "Stay with the Ambassador. If my ploy doesn't work, barricade him in one of the servants' quarters and keep quiet. Trust the Voices."

The Deepman saluted with his offhand. The other hung limp.

Ooroth took a deep breath. "Make a lane there!"

The Deepmen, shoulder to shoulder, hurled themselves aside. Ooroth surged past. His blade took one assassin, and the pommel staggered the other. He danced through lethal steps, weaving, tripping, and hacking. His armor rang with desperate blows, but none penetrated. Blades stung him, but none proved fatal. In seconds he had pushed them to the

threshold. "Get ready!" he yelled to his men.

He rushed into the alley past two assassins, and lost a beard tentacle for his trouble. At least a dozen more assassins waited in disciplined ranks, arrayed to hurl their deadly throwing stars. Ooroth's eyes widened and he dropped his blade. He seized the two behind him and squished between them as he held them up as human shields. Their bodies jerked with star impacts and one steam harness began spluttering, a vital line severed. He dropped them, surged forward and grabbed his blade with a leg tentacle. He punched one rushing assassin, turned another blade on his armor, and flipped his greatsword into the air. He caught it on the downswing and carried the momentum into a colossal uppercut that nearly clove an assassin from crotch to neck. He yelled back behind him to the Deepmen. "Clear that spike and get it closed! But leave me enough room to squeeze by!"

One Deepman hauled bodies from the threshold and the other pried at the blade lodged just above the middle hinge. It was stuck.

Ooroth labored to keep standing. He bled from half a dozen shallow wounds, and his vision was blurring. Long training and martial prowess kept the assassins at bay, but he no longer slaughtered them stroke-for-stroke. "Hurry!"

The stuck blade came free. "It's clear, Captain!"

Ooroth was surrounded, and he couldn't make headway. The assassins fought defensively, wary of his greatsword, now coated with blood and gore. They avoided his front and attacked from behind as he whirled. For all his extra vision, he was slowing, and couldn't counter every stroke. A quick slice tore a gash across the back of his head. The blow cost the assassin his life, but the noose closed ever inward.

A man in the back rank, their leader, pointed at the closing door and barked a command when Ooroth's back was turned. The two assassins directly behind him leaped towards the door.

Ooroth compressed and hurled himself after them, the other three were hot on his back. He caught one up front with a chop, flailed his tentacles behind him as a distraction, and grabbed the front one's tunic with his free arm. The seized assassin whirled, and stabbed Ooroth in the ribs, straight through the armor.

Shock swept over Ooroth's face, and he dropped his greatsword. He heard Jahroon inside. "Leave him! Close it! Close it now!"

Ooroth's poked the assassin in the eyes with his beard tentacles. The man wailed and fell back. The door closed to mere inches.

Ooorth barely scraped through, such that the breath was crushed from his lungs, and even his highly compressible armor lost some plates. He lay panting on the corridor floor amid the bodies. The Deepmen shot all the bolts home. Angry fists pounded on the door without, but they'd never get through without siege equipment.

Ooroth looked up at Jahroon. "'Leave him? Close it now?' Thank you so much, Ambassador."

Jahroon sniffed. "If it's you or me, then the choice is clear."

Ooroth looked at the scroll case, and didn't respond. He felt the wound in his side. His armor had turned most of the blade, but at least an inch had gotten through. It hurt like anything, and his breathing was labored.

Thhrrruuummmmmmm....

"We're not done yet," he said. Ooroth yanked one of the

bodies over and pulled off the hood. Glassy brown eyes stared back. An Achrionian male. Young. And his harness was indeed that of the Dragon Legions. Ooroth shut it off. "They're really after you this time, Ambassador."

"This is a mistake. It has to be. *I* wasn't to be a target!"

Ooroth sat back. "And just who was?"

"Everyone else."

Ooroth hung his head and groaned. He patted the assassin's corpse down, and felt a solid lump in his belt pouch. He pulled it out, shook out a few coins, and an ingot of solid gold thudded to the stone floor. Ooroth picked it up. Six inches by two by two, and cast with a Felskar seal. He held it up. "Well, well. Looks like your bribe made it to the Tower after all."

Jahroon seized it, eyes furious. "I will skin that old bat alive! Then I'll heal his wounds and do it again!" He was frothing in rage. "He'll be drowned, crushed, consumed, and shat out!"

Ooroth got to his feet amid tingles and wracks of pain. "Well, maybe I'll help you with that. But first, we have to get you to safety. Don't forget. There were some behind us. We've lost them in the servant's maze down here, but they could show up at any time."

"My office, then."

Ooroth nodded. "It's the only way."

Jahroon sneered. "But you've lost your sword."

"Ambassador." He plucked two short blades from the fallen and held them up. "There are more."

Chapter Seven - Hidden Hands

Irene stepped out from her alcove behind the last black-clad assassin in their group. Her arm encircled his neck and yanked him back. He struggled, of course, and his steam harness lent him strength. It was hot against her chest, almost too hot. But she held him locked in the choke hold and kept dragging him back, unable to shout, unable to call for help. Within thirty seconds, he sagged, his brain deprived of blood. She held it another thirty.

He might die. He might not. But he'd gone under bloodless and soundless. Exactly what she needed.

The perfect predator, the Gift said in her mind. She could feel how it relished the silent takedown. In truth, so did she. *Oh, indeed?* the Gift crooned.

She ignored it and started stripping the assassin. Achrionian, of course, with a winding tiger tattoo up his right arm and across the back. Battle harness, military grade with Dragon Legion markings. She shook her head in surprise as she strapped it on. She'd asked for a distraction. She didn't think the Winterhawk would fill Hadross tower with soldiers playing assassins. Poorly disguised soldiers at that. There had to be something else in play here. You didn't just take troops and dress them head to toe in black satin to make them stealthy. This assault was anything but.

She powered up the steam harness. Invisible energy encircled her as the harness puffed quietly. She grew perceptibly stronger, and felt as if she could sprint a mile. But even the slight chugging sound was too much. Stealth was everything, and it was her greatest skill, admired by nearly everyone she'd worked for, and even a few she'd worked against.

In addition, most Hadrossians could see heat, and the alchemical salve she'd coated herself with would only dampen her body's warmth, not the harness. She'd worried about the salve's chilling effect, but she found her adrenaline more than adequate to keep her warm.

She powered the harness down, and finished dressing. Fortunately the man was larger than she was, and his black satin clothes fit nicely over her own leather armor. His throwing stars were perfectly balanced. A nice addition to her own knives. She ignored his sword.

A small gold ingot in his belt pouch made her pause. Felskar maker's mark. Interesting. She put it back in the pouch and dropped it on the man's naked chest.

She checked his breathing. Shallow and ragged. She might've done her job too well.

He still might wake up, you know. He could raise the alarm as to your presence.

She dismissed that. "And say that his attacker is wearing clothes like the other fifty attackers in here."

Still, it pays to be thorough.

"All I want is to get to the tower's peak, find this document, and get out. Undue carnage is not my mission."

Why this nervousness then? You're more agitated than I've ever seen, even when Gergorio baits you.

"Shut up."

She moved deeper into the Tower, and searched for routes upward. Initially, at least, this proved simple. Hadross Tower was built in flowing lines, with almost no sharp corners or angles. Sweeping staircases, grand halls, and opulent staterooms greeted her at every turn. The lack of hard corners made keeping hidden much easier, as eyes tend to be drawn towards disrupted patterns. The organic Hadrossian architecture defied such order. And the Hadrossians' lowlight eyesight meant an abundance of shadows for her to step into.

The décor touted wealth from the ocean floor: coral sculptures of living color, polished marble and gemstones of impressive size, and mother-of-pearl paneling so iridescent that it fairly glowed. It struck her that there had been no looting. Some battle damage here and there, but the furnishings and treasures were intact.

She kept a count of the corpses. Most often it was Deepmen in two's and three's. Sometimes an assassin. It didn't add up. There should have been far more dead guards, unless the Winterhawk's notes were inaccurate. She doubted that. Perhaps they'd barricaded themselves higher in the Tower? The clash of arms occasionally echoed through the Tower, but nothing near the scale she'd expected.

She turned a corner and nearly walked straight into five assassins coming the other way. The leader, marked by his dual longblades, said, "Where is your unit?"

"Dead," she answered in his language.

"Then why do you still live?"

She thought fast. "Hit on the head. They left me. Trying to find my way now."

The leader's eyes narrowed behind his mask. "Who was your keeper?"

"Shae Wen." A common Achrionian name.

"I know no Shae Wen. What was your muster? And why isn't your harness steaming?"

She was running out of answers. "Harness is damaged." She didn't address the other questions.

Two Deepmen moved around the bend far down the hall.

She gasped and pointed.

The Deepmen shouted. The assassins shouted. Everyone charged.

Irene hung back, and faded into the shadow behind a sculpture.

Lucky.

"Shut up," she muttered.

The Deepmen weren't alone. Two more ran forward, followed by a big Sevridan, and the vile Hadrossian Ambassador. She'd met him before at Goritsi Tower. Even though she'd been introduced with her full titles and status, he'd still spent the entire time leering at her figure. He had no respect for women, the worm.

And he acted every bit the scrub now by cowering while his men did the fighting. It didn't take her expert eye to see the Sevridan was the key to this defense. He was likely the captain of the guard, a hard-drinking man by all accounts, but a very keen mind when sober. The proof of his martial prowess was right before her. His sharp commands and fluid style made short work of the assassins.

The battle done, he sagged heavily against one wall, breathing hard. Clotted ichor marked his membranous skin in many places. And a deep red flow oozed from a tear in his armor. She could take him easily as they passed her hiding spot, and the Deepmen would prove little challenge with the element of surprise.

And you can settle that ambassador's account once and for all.

Tempting, but she shook her head. It wasn't her mission.

The ambassador was upbraiding the Sevridan. "I should ban you from drinking. How will you ever keep me safe if you collapse into a puddle after every bout?"

"It's not the hangover, Ambassador. I'm pretty sure I've broken a rib, and there might be something bleeding in there."

"Useless," the ambassador spat.

The Sevridan gestured down the hall. "Well, by all means, don't let me slow you down."

The ambassador held up a scroll case. "Don't forget what I carry, Captain."

The Sevridan shoved himself up and headed down the hall without a word. They'd pass her hiding spot in just a moment.

Irene's eyes lingered on the scroll case in the ambassador's hands. That must be the information she needed. It was important enough to keep the Sevridan moving, despite his wounds.

Unseen, from surprise, she was confident she could take them all. And yet, killing the ambassador would likely do more harm than good. Although she smirked to think of that vile worm's lifeblood flowing across the floor.

Now is your moment.

The guards walked past, not an arm's reach from her hiding spot.

Strike!

Her vision grew tight, intense. She held her breath as the Sevridan slogged past. She could hear him wheezing.

Before it's too late! This may be your only chance!

She clamped down on the Gift. It was not the time.

The ambassador went past.

Coward.

"Focused," she said with only the faintest whisper. "It's not my mission. Maybe I can lift it off him."

Not with it in his hand like that.

"But maybe if they get into another fight. Either way, I follow."

She slipped from her hiding spot and ghosted after them, mindful of the Sevridan's expanded eyesight. Fortunately, his wounds would sap his concentration and alertness. At least the alchemical salve had proven itself against the Hadrossians' enhanced vision. One less worry on a night of apprehension.

The hall wound its way to the exterior wall. She could see the waning moon outside, and avoided the silvery shafts it cast into the corridor. They passed a security station (its guards slaughtered where they had stood) and moved into another grand foyer.

High above, an impossibly thick glass ceiling refracted light from submerged hydrolanterns that dappled glimmering shafts across the foyer's dark marble floor and stately furnishings. That would be the flooded levels she'd read about, where the Hadrossians would be in their own element, and she'd be slow, vulnerable, and very exposed.

The Hadrossians quickened their pace to the leftmost elevator, itself the size of a small room. The big Sevridan suddenly stopped, and grabbed his Ambassador's arm.

The ambassador yanked it away. "You will not touch—"

"Where are the Deepcallers?"

The ambassador shrugged. "Barricaded in their chambers. Hiding in my office. Who knows? Let's not wast time."

The Sevridan watched the elevator door for a moment. Then pointed to the foyer's center. "Guards, get the ambassador into cover behind that couch. I'll get the door."

The ambassador glared, but did as he was bid.

The Sevridan keyed a fist-sized pearl set in the wall, and stood to one side. The huge doors slid open immediately, and a hail of throwing stars tore past.

The Sevridan whirled past the entrance, tentacles and swords smashing and slicing. "Fool me once, etcetera!" He was past in seconds, and two of the eight waiting assassins were down. The rest charged.

"Flanking!" he shouted.

Three Deepmen leaped from behind the couch and charged in. For a moment everything was going the Hadrossians' way.

The assassins' leader cupped his hands and shouted a single sharp syllable. The other elevator behind Irene opened and ten more assassins ran out.

The Gift was bemused. *Did your employer depopulate the whole of Achrion for this endeavor?*

Irene wondered much the same. She held stock-still, curled around the base of her pillar, and thankful for the dark marble flooring. The assassins stormed past, stars whirled through the air, and the ambassador shrieked.

She grit her teeth. She could no more let the ambassador die than kill him herself. No matter how much she wanted to. It would certainly mean war. Even if it could be proven that Achrion had no part in this, no one had any illusions about Scion King Hadross's good will towards any nation. "Shit," she muttered.

She rose and peered around the pillar. The Sevridan and his guards almost had the first group down. The ambassador's final guard lay dead, and the old Deepman fled towards his men.

The elevator door closed. "NO!" he shrieked.

Irene picked her target. The leaders all carried paired long-blades. She flicked her wrist, her star whisked through the air, and it sprouted from the base of the second leader's skull. He fell twitching.

The Sevridan chopped down the last of the first group, and turned, visibly weakened. His last two Deepmen were wounded. The ambassador pounded on the elevator door, near to panic.

"Hells," she said, and threw again. It clanged off the front-most assassin's steam harness, and he whirled, shocked.

She let herself be seen, just for a moment. He pointed and shouted, "Traitor!"

The confusion bought the Sevridan the opening he needed. He dashed forward, trailing two limp tentacles, and hacked an assassin down. His Deepman supported him.

Two assassins ran towards Irene. The rest engaged the Hadrossians, but one slipped past and charged the ambassador.

Irene feinted a throw at one assassin. He dodged, off balance a moment, then died as a throwing dagger embedded in his eye. The other assassin was on her, but no match for her single-combat skills. A sidestep, a parry, a duck, and her short blade sliced his throat.

She saw the ambassador cower back, just in time to dodge a savage blow. His eyes blazed with azure light. He shouted something incoherent, stretched out his hand wreathed in violet energy. The assassin froze, caught in the power, and was lifted from the floor. He started screaming and thrashing. The man's scream foundered in a gurgle as blood gushed from every orifice, nose, eyes, and the pressure ripped away his silken mask. Over ten seconds, the man's entire life fluids coagulated in a huge glistening red ball hovering before the Ambassador.

Irene watched, stunned. Her briefing had said nothing about the Jahroon's magic.

The withered husk collapsed, and the massive bloody sphere splashed to the ground, soaking everything in rich red. The ambassador fell to his hands and knees in the gore, wheezing.

Only the Sevridan remained standing, and he was losing ground to the remaining assailants.

She raised her hand, star ready, but she dared not risk a throw at this range. A miss would surely kill the Sevridan.

One assassin broke away, strode to the ambassador, and raised his blade.

Irene threw. Missed.

The elevator doors slid open, and a tentacled horror grabbed the assassin. The man screamed, and his palpable terror chilled Irene to her core. She hid behind a sculpture, and watched. Her breathing quickened, and the man was dragged inexorably into the orsund kraken's fanged maw. "No! NOO! AAAHH!!!" The thing bit down on his arm, and began to chew. Bones crunched, blood flowed, and the hapless man wailed for a quick death.

The Deepcaller in the elevator took in the situation, raised his staff, and a wave of seawater surged from the air. It washed over the Sevridan and his remaining attackers. It pushed them back. The Deepcaller pointed his staff at one, who grabbed his head, shrieked, and collapsed. The Sevridan gutted the other.

The final two were no match for the orsund and Deepcaller. The orsund dined well.

Irene couldn't watch, the sound of it slurping away at the broken bones set her to trembling.

Well, well, well, said the Gift. I suppose everyone has an irrational fear. With some it's rodents or heights. With you it's being eaten.

"Shut up!" she hissed. Her eyes were solid black.

Consumed.

She slammed a fist into her head. Her vision exploded in a whirl of lights.

Well, that's just rude.

The pain brought her around. She could hear the Deepcaller speaking. "Will he be alright?"

The Sevridan answered. "I don't know. He's still conscious, so that's something. If incoherent. You of all people know how much the Voices can take out of you."

"True words."

She heard the ambassador mumble something.

"I agree," said the Sevridan. "How many more upstairs with you?"

"None. The others made their way down. It's likely they've gone to the estate for reinforcements, if they escaped the tower."

"Good. Let's get up there and barricade ourselves in his office. Command the orsund to stay in this room. Let only our own past."

"Yes, Captain."

"And there was one of their number that turned coat at the last minute. Did you see him?"

A pause. "No, Captain."

"Well. He'd better get the fuck out of here, for their sake, if they still live. Help me guide the ambassador up."

She heard the elevator door close, and the orsund snuffling along the corpses.

The opposite elevator stood open not fifteen feet from where she hid.

You know, I wonder if their sense of smell is any good.

She fought down a rising panic, but dared not make a sound. She crouched low and moved carefully towards the elevator. She considered every step. Slow. Even. Steady. She could

see the orsund's mottled gray head beyond the central furniture. A bone cracked, and she flinched. Her feet shuffled on the floor. She froze.

Does this irrational fear have anything to do with the way your mother died?

The crunching had stopped. Her breathing quickened. The thing shuffled around the furniture, and a great alien eye fixed on her, and glared.

She ran. It chased. She hit the button inside. The doors took forever to close. A tentacle wedged between them. She sliced it off, and the doors shut. It flopped around on as the elevator rose, and she wedged herself in the corner, far from it.

You've assassinated magicians, nobles, merchants, and most of those were vampires or werewolves. You've stood face-to-face with Her Royal Majesty and told her 'No.' You've seen dozens of battlefields from the winning and losing sides. You've been stalked through the Tellorian night by things far more powerful than that critter, and yet here you are, cowed like a child.

"Leave me alone!"

No, not this time. Let me help you. Let me take away this fear.

"I could have killed it without your help."

But only striking from the shadows. With my Gift, you could have taken it cleanly. Easily. And never feared perishing a slow, agonizing demise in its maw.

She put a dagger to her own throat and felt the blood pumping in her carotid artery. "Listen well. I will not be bullied or coerced by my own mind. I want no Gift. I want no part of it. If you keep on, I *will* end myself. It has gone that far. Do you understand?"

The Gift was silent a moment. *I do believe you mean it.*

The chamber began filling with seawater. She popped a gemstone into her mouth like a pacifier as the surface closed over her head. She breathed through the gem. The doors opened, and she pushed out, her eyes darting everywhere. Nothing waited for her.

Mark me, Irene. There will come a time when you may not have a choice. When your death is the easy way out, and would do more harm than good. But, I can be patient. I am, after all, eternal.

She glared in response, but could say nothing.

She found her way slowly through the dim depths. Truly this area had been turned into an opulent maze. She could move along well enough by pushing off the floors, walls, and sometimes the ceiling. But a Hadrossian in here would have every advantage. Her throwing knives were useless, and she daren't trust her last throwing star, an unfamiliar weapon. She'd already missed with those more than she liked.

The Deepcaller had spoken the truth, however. It was deserted. She encountered no one.

She pulled herself quietly from the water into a sort of bathhouse that served as an antechamber. She grabbed a plush towel off the rack, and soaked as much seawater from her clothes as she could, enough not to drip, at least. She hoped the heat-cloaking salve on her skin was still effective. The alchemist had said it was 'somewhat' waterproof, but she couldn't tell if the chill she felt was from her wet clothes in the cool air, or if the salve's properties still acted on her skin. There wasn't time to apply more. She'd do her best not to test it.

She crept down a curving corridor and heard voices from the farthest chamber. She paused beyond the open door.

"Is that all your vital documents, Ambassador?" She recognized the Sevridan's voice.

"I said yes, Depths take you." He still sounded weak, though much more coherent.

"Because we're abandoning the Tower when the reinforcements arrive."

"I demand that you leave at least some here to guard our treasures."

She heard the Sevridan sigh. "As you pointed out, you are the… 'treasure'." The last was said with such distaste that even Irene's mouth went sour. "The orsunds can wander unattended for a time. When you're secure at the estate, I'll send a large detachment back up here."

A long pause, but the Ambassador finally said, "It will do."

The Deepcaller spoke. "You should look to your wounds, Captain."

"Very well. You head down into the tower, and release the remaining orsunds, then wait for reinforcements. I'll tend to myself, then wait here with the ambassador."

"Yes, Captain."

"Ambassador, will you be alright for a few minutes?"

"Of course," he mumbled faintly

"Very well. By your leave then."

Irene slunk away from the doorway and hid.

The Deepcaller and Sevridan emerged, nodded to each other, and went in opposite directions. The Sevridan was truly destroyed. He shambled on but two of his many leg tentacles. The rest dragged limp behind him. He leaned heavily on the wall. His breathing was far more ragged than before. He even trailed blood from great rents in his armor.

She waited for a full count of twenty when he was out of sight, then slipped to the doorway and peered in. It was a huge office with couches, elegant bookcases, and a massive desk of pure black marble. Vast curtained windows looked out over Fructus city by night. Irene was one for majestic views, but she had business. The ambassador looked tiny slumped over his desk, snoring faintly. That spell had really drained him.

Quiet as twilight, she slunk to the desk. Jahroon was lying beside a bundle of documents. The scroll case she wanted rested under his limp hand. From behind his high-backed chair, she eased his arm up half an inch by the sleeve, removed the case, then eased it back down.

The ambassador simply snored.

She thought to open it, but now was not the time. She glanced at the other documentation. The top one bore a diplomatic seal, recently broken, and was dated from three weeks prior. Perhaps that was it? Then what was in the scroll case? She took the top packet, glanced at the next one, a mundane bill of sale apparently, and heard a noise from the door. She slunk behind the chair, and heard shuffling tentacles on the hard floor.

"Ambassador?" It was the Sevridan. "Jahroon, are you awake?"

Snoring.

"Well, let that be a lesson. Next time you send off all your guards you can fucking defend yourself."

The ambassador murmured, "Deep Voices… said… not speak to me like that."

"Uh huh."

She heard a wooden creak. She eased herself in a crawl around the desk. The Sevridan had settled into a big chair, facing the door. He looked considerably better, though still not in top shape. She might be behind him, but with his expanded vision, perhaps not.

He jerked his head towards the door, listening. Irene slunk behind a sofa.

"Already?" he asked the air. He paused, then grumbled. "Fine." He got up and packed the ambassador's things into a satchel. "Come on. They're here. Wait, where's my scroll case?" His head jerked up again. "I heard you the first time. Just where's—" He listened again. "Tide and teeth, fine! Come on, old man. Up we go."

He got an arm under the ambassador, and half dragged, half carried him to the door. He paused at the threshold, and looked right where Irene was peering around the sofa.

She held her breath. She shouldn't have been watching so intently. She dared not duck back or even blink. The movement would give her away. The lighting was terrible, but if the salve was no longer effective…

His head jerked upward again, listening. "Yes! Gods! Impatient tonight are we?" He moved out into the hall, still grumbling. "And where were you when all this began…"

His voice faded, and she breathed a deep, shuddering breath. Her heart quieted after a moment.

You're still trapped in here with who knows how many of those krakens running loose.

"Who said anything about walking down?"

She checked the desk quickly, found nothing of note. She pulled out a glass-cutter, removed two window panes, then anchored a climbing line to the huge, immovable desk.

Clever. Why didn't you climb in?

"Walls are sheer. No handholds. But down, well, that's a lot easier."

And did you bring enough line?

"Felskar technomancy. Ever-lengthening out to a mile. The tower isn't near that tall. And why the third degree?"

Just making conversation.

"Shut up. You're disappointed you didn't get the chance to scare me again."

The Gift was amused. *Maybe a little.*

The first breath of fresh night air sent shivers of relief up and down her spine. She hung on for a long minute, simply breathing. The trip down was simplicity itself. When she arrived at the Cathedral pond, however, she didn't find the old man. It was his student, the white-haired young woman in the crimson and gold armor. The Winterhawk's student.

"You are late," she stated.

"And you're not the Winterhawk," Irene replied.

"I am Kae Howun, and I have the honor to be the Deathbloom."

"Great. Where's your master?"

Her eyes darkened. "Assassins attacked our ambassador tonight. If not for my master, they would have succeeded, and we would now be at war with Kartoresh."

Irene half laughed, to the young woman's astonishment. "It's a stars-damned epidemic. Hadross tower was under siege. Achrionians with Dragon Legion gear."

Her mouth opened with shock, then snapped shut. She glared at the distant tower. "So that's what happened to my men. I found them dead before they had even begun the distraction that would've let you into the tower. Did you succeed?"

"I did. But I want to be present when we go through these." She held up the diplomatic packet and scroll case. "Is your master still fit for service?"

"He is. You are certain the attackers were Legionnaires?"

She shrugged. "How would I tell?"

"You wear a harness. Did you strip one? Did they have any tattoos?"

"A tiger, in the Achrionian fashion. Across the back and left arm."

She hissed. "Mercenaries. Much like our assailants. Meant to look like members of the military. And did they carry gold?"

Irene nodded. "An ingot of gold—"

"—with a Felskar stamp."

They were silent a long minute. The Deathbloom said, "Let us see my master. He will know what to do."

Chapter Eight - Baiting The Beast

The Winterhawk knew what to do, and he hated it. He had spent hour upon hour in meditation since the information had reached him the night before, and he always came to the same sad conclusion.

To the novice there are many possibilities. To the master, there are but few, he thought to himself as he waited for his turn to speak in the council session. What he had to say was bad. Very bad. His challenge was to minimize the damage.

Not all the ambassadors were present, but each nation had come represented. And guarded. The Grand Cathedral's vaulted central nave felt like a prison, despite the brilliant sun filtering through the stained glass. Fortunately, all had agreed to limit the guards to four per delegate. Gulraast, the Ironward representing Felskar, had heartily endorsed the notion.

The Karotreshian Ambassador was just finishing his prepared remarks. The man had suffered horribly from his poisoning, and his feeble voice proved difficult to hear. The Winterhawk respected his dedication to these talks, especially that he had come when he should really be in bed. His military advisor, the volatile Senior Hakar Alyana Heska, stood behind his chair, arms crossed, horned war mask in place. Her powerful physique dwarfed the ambassador, making him appear even more delicate, and she watched everyone with narrowed eyes.

Her ambassador concluded with, "I would remind everyone that the eyes of the entire world are upon Fructus Isle. We must maintain an open and honest accord, and, above all, clear and truthful dialogue."

The Winterhawk joined the polite and brief applause, though it grieved him terribly for what was about to happen.

He rose, bowed to the assemblage, and began.

"Ambassadors, delegates, and honored colleagues, as everyone certainly knows the attacks of last night have laid my ambassador low. She will recover, but it is my unfortunate duty to stand before you today and bring your attention to a troubling matter." He laid his hand on a silk-bound packet. "Documentation has reached us implicating a second guilty party in the sinking of Kartoreshian shipping in Qualat Mon harbor."

Murmurs. Only Hadross and Gregorio had no reaction beyond a respective glare and a tight smirk. The Free Cities Envoy was, predictably, startled. "You are saying that Hadrossian forces had assistance to sink these ships? I had not heard this thing."

"I should be very surprised if you had, Madam Envoy." All eyes watched the packet as it was handed down to the envoy.

She untied the ribbon, broke the seal, and began to scan the top page. Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a breath. "But this would implicate Kartoresh!"

The Karotreshian Ambassador sat with his head bowed, unmoving. His advisor stood stock still, completely rigid. The Winterhawk recognized extreme shock in her posture, despite the mask. The Ambassador had known. The advisor had not. Interesting. He said, "Yes, Madam Envoy. Karotresh has been conducting a clandestine military buildup in Qualat Mon. An underground base, for which the troop transport was destined. It was disguised as a mechant ship." The news rippled through the table as well, but he spoke over them. "Acrhion deplores this violation of the Free Cities' time-honored neutrality, and moves to censure Kartoresh for these actions."

Gregorio said, "Telloria seconds this motion."

"Impossible!" said the Senior Hakar. "Madam Envoy, how can we be certain this isn't a ruse?"

The envoy held up the damning document. "This is King Nasier's official seal, is it not, hm? And his direct orders to the commanding officer of this secret outpost. And you would smile at us behind your masks, and have us accept you as friends, yet all the while you turn our cities into forward camps for... for whatever evil purposes you intend!"

"We had no knowledge of this! On my word of honor!"

The Winterhawk said, "Your ambassador would disagree."

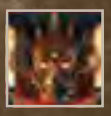
Indeed, the Kartoreshian sat, head still bowed. He raised his eyes to the Envoy and said, "Kartoresh apologizes to the Free Cities for its role in damaging relations between our sovereign states. We will accept censure."

His advisor was shocked again. "You can't—!"

"Be at peace, Senior Hakar." It was the first time his voice had raised above a murmur, and the effort strained him. "It stands with the Envoy now."

Envoy Harig was angry, that much was plain. "In light of these new developments, the Free Cities have no choice but to expel Karotreshian assets and interests from our borders."

Ambassador Jahroon spoke. "And, on behalf of our most exquisite Scion King Hadross, we respectfully request a return to normal relations with the Free Cities."



"No."

That stung the old fish. "No?!"

"Just because your old enemies are caught in a lie does not excuse your complicity in sinking those ships in the first place."

"It was we who discovered this duplicity!"

"And did what with that, hm? Seized the initiative? Conducted your preemptive strikes? Without a word to us."

Jahroon's tentacles twitched, but he was enough of a politician to moderate his tone. "This information was to be brought to you at the earliest possible moment. Hadross wishes nothing more than frank and open friendship with the Free Cities."

The Envoy was unimpressed, and crossed her arms. "Yet you see fit to initiate military action in our territorial waters, and without a single word! If this had been brought to us by your own hand, then, perhaps your words might have some basis. But instead, it is Achrion that discovers the deed, and shows its friendship to be genuine. No. Two wrongs do not a right make. Both Hadross and Kartoresh shall remain in expulsion until redress is made."

Heska leaned across the table. "You would put us in the same category as those backstabbing liars?"

Jahroon's tone got harsh. "Hadross takes exception to this coarse language and unfounded accusations."

The Kartoreshian Ambassador began weakly, "Senior Hakar Heska—"

But she was having none of it. "Unfounded! You've seen the proof. You murdered those troops!"

Jahroon was in his element. His voice was smooth and calm. "We halted your illegal buildup. Hadross will take any action necessary to secure its borders."

"Your borders do not include Qualat Mon!"

Jahroon stood, fists on the table. A calculated gesture. "Neither do yours."

The Winterhawk held up a finger, "Ah. Rising passions grow like flames: they can both blind and burn. Therefore, Achrion moves for a recess. A cooling off period. Two weeks, in which we may all conduct our investigations into these attacks on our dignitaries, and communicate with our governments. The incident at Qualat Mon is now a matter of record. More on that cannot usefully be said here."

Jahroon had none of it. "You merely seek time to cover up your wrongdoing. Hadross Tower is filled with your assassin's corpses."

The Winterhawk shook his head. "Acrhion had nothing to do with that assault."

"Explain then how the attackers were using military hardware."

"Stolen."

Jahroon scoffed. "Am I to believe that nearly fifty combat harnesses bearing Dragon Legion markings could so easily go missing?"

"For the love of money, even the truth falls silent. Such forgeries are a simple matter for one wealthy enough to pay their assassins in gold ingots."

"You admit you know how they were paid."

"I know they carried ingots, all of a kind, with identical markings. As did the assassins that struck at my ambassador in her residence. As I'm sure others have discovered." He swept his hand around the table. Gulraast of Felskar grinned. The Winterhawk continued, "We have not heard opinions from Felskar or Telloria."

Gulraast spoke first, "Am thinking is wasting time to track assassins to employer. Attacks are being clumsy effort to spread blame amongst delegations."

The Winterhawk nodded. "Agreed, but even the clumsiest blade still bears a fatal edge. If but one attempt succeeded, it would be sufficient cause for war, to any nation with a grievance, and one must admit, between our two nations at least, there are many grievances."

Gulraast smiled. "Is being true words. Still, am not so hasty as to mobilize people's glorious revolutionary army over simple failed assault. Am thinking delay also plays to enemies' hands, no? Agreements are being what our nations send us here to reach, and agreements are forging stronger bonds. Is being clear that hidden hands on Fructus move against any such accords."

Heska's fist jarred the table. "Kartoresh agrees!"

Her ambassador's head was back, his mouth open. His breathing seemed steady, but labored. He nodded his head weakly.

Ambassador Jahroon sneered. "Perhaps a short recess would be in order so that Kartoresh can collect itself."

Her finger stabbed the air. "This delegation does *not* take orders from that side of the table."

The Winterhawk said, "Patience in a moment of anger averts a hundred days of sorrow."

"And you! Stop spouting proverbs, and give us the truth! How did you know about those ships?"

Jahroon crossed his arms and addressed the Winterhawk. "Hadross would like to know this as well. Esepcially since the esteemed Achrionian dignitary has come bearing the very proof of King Nasier's criminal intentions that was stolen from our tower last night."

The Winterhawk was prepared for this. He couldn't admit to the espionage without handing Hadross a diplomatic incident, nor could he lie bold-faced to the assemblage when the truth may yet be substantiated. And yet it was a truth everyone knew. He had to be cautious. "To know the road ahead, one should inquire with travelers in the opposing direction."

Everyone was silent a moment. Heska growled, "That doesn't say anything."

The Sevridan behind Jahroon said, "Yes it does. It means there was a spy, but not necessarily one he hired. I… may have seen them, in fact."

Jahroon rounded on him. "And you did nothing?!"

The Sevridan glanced around the table. "Ambassador, do you really want to go into the circumstances here?" The Winterhawk appraised the Sevridan, whom he believed to be Jahroon's captain of the guard. He looked well enough, though his armor was new and he bore fresh scars. The fact that he had spoken in Winterhawk's favor interested the old spymaster.

Jahroon's tentacles twitched and his eyes were like black coals. "We will discuss this later." He turned back. "Well, Achrion? What say you to this accusation?"

The Winterhawk shrugged. "I would humbly ask for definitive proof of Achrion's wrongdoing in this situation."

Jahroon pointed at the packet in front of the envoy. "There it sits."

"With respect, that is proof of Kartoresh's wrongdoing, not ours."

Senior Hakar Heska leaned across the table, her voice low, but furious. "Again you seek to equate us with Hadross. We took no lives."

The Winterhawk countered, "Yet you rattled the saber."

Heska wasn't having any of it. "No one knew about this! It's only saber-rattling if the threats are made into words."

"The hidden blade is often the most lethal."

She threw her hands up in frustration. "We haven't even substantiated that this document is legitimate. You said yourself that forgeries are easily obtained for those with enough money. There is clearly another interest at work here."

He held up a finger. "Ah, and hence Achrion's humble request for a two week recess. Substantiation can be made by communicating with our governments. I believe I can speak for everyone here when I say that we would be most relieved to hear that the death of your troops, however tragic, was thanks to a fool's errand."

She seemed to swell, and anger rolled off her in waves, and she couldn't speak for a moment. The Winterhawk wondered what could possibly have touched a nerve.

Gulraast cleared his throat. "Am thinking perhaps reconvening until tomorrow would suit, no?" He indicated the Kartoresh Ambassador whose eyes were closed, and mouth hung open, breathing hard. "Your man is being far from well."

Heska didn't even look. "Not until we settle this point!" Her fist punctuated her statement hard enough to rattle the glasses on the table.

The huge pig-man behind Gulraast growled.

Gulraast said, "Ah, and Voy is reminding me that hour is now well past mid-day. Is time for brief respite, no?"

The Envoy added her voice. "The Free Cities would agree, and move to recess until tomorrow morning."

Ambassador Jahroon would have none of it. "No! No, we are not done with Achrion—!"

Heska shouted at Gulraast, "You can have food brought! This isn't even close—!"

Gulraast was saying, "Bah! Raised voices are being difficult to hear. Am being but poor old man who—"

Everything was disintegrating around the Winterhawk. He caught Gregorio's eye. The bald vampire sat with hands folded, cool as a winter breeze. He didn't smirk. He didn't frown. He didn't even blink.

Sit atop the mountain to watch the dragons squabble, Winterhawk thought. He clapped his hands loudly for several moments until everyone quieted and glared at him. "As a point of order, honored delegates, Achrion still holds the floor. It is clear that the Kartoreshian Ambssador is indisposed, and we would move to recess until at least tomorrow."

Heska shook her head. "Kartoresh does not agree."

"Please, Senior Hakar Heska, we cannot fully recognize your authority to speak on his behalf at this time."

"My delegation speaks with one voice!"

Her ambassador groaned audibly and tumbled from his chair.

"And yet the deepest anger does not conceal the deepest pain. Those in favor of recess until tomorrow morning on humanitarian grounds?"

The vote was unanimous against her. Only then did the Heska seem to take in the situation. He could read the expression she shot him through her mask. Hatred and rage, the likes of which he had almost never seen.

The delegates gathered their things and departed, one by one, amid the general murmur of conversation. Heska directed the guards to carry the ambassador, and departed through an opposite door. She even left a number of papers on the table.

The Winterhawk watched her go, and turned the conversation over and over in his mind. What had so enraged her? All reports of Alyana Heska showed a brilliant young woman of fiery temperament, but hardly such a rampaging dragon. He looked up to see the Free Cities Envoy glancing at him as she said a few very brief, sharp words to Ambassador Jahroon, who then left huffing and upbraiding the Sevridan captain. The envoy appraised the Winterhawk again for a moment, then departed.

The Deathbloom said quietly, "Shouldn't you really be sitting down, master? The doctor was very clear that you should rest as much as possible."

"Where did Gregorio and Gulraast go?"

"Right behind each other, headed to the main corridor. Opposite Kartoresh."

He sighed, and lowered himself into his chair. He massaged his hip. It ached and burned, now that his mind had time to spare. At least there was medicine in the carriage. "Never grow old, my student. Or rather, never grow old, fight a battle, then stay up all night to fight another one."

"Yes, master."

"What went wrong there? Can you spot the flaws?"

She pursed her lips. "Too many tempers. It was right to advise an extended recess."

He held up a finger. "Ah. Right for us. And right for peace. But not everyone at that table wishes peace." He looked up at the high dais and the empty throne where the Archon, the supreme voice of the Celestial religion, once sat. "I am missing something. Something about Heska. It has eluded me, and it was vital today. It was not my intention to provoke. And yet, it is a poor craftsman that blames his tools."

A messenger hurried in. He wore the green-belted sash of the Free Cities. He handed Deathbloom a note, and scurried out.

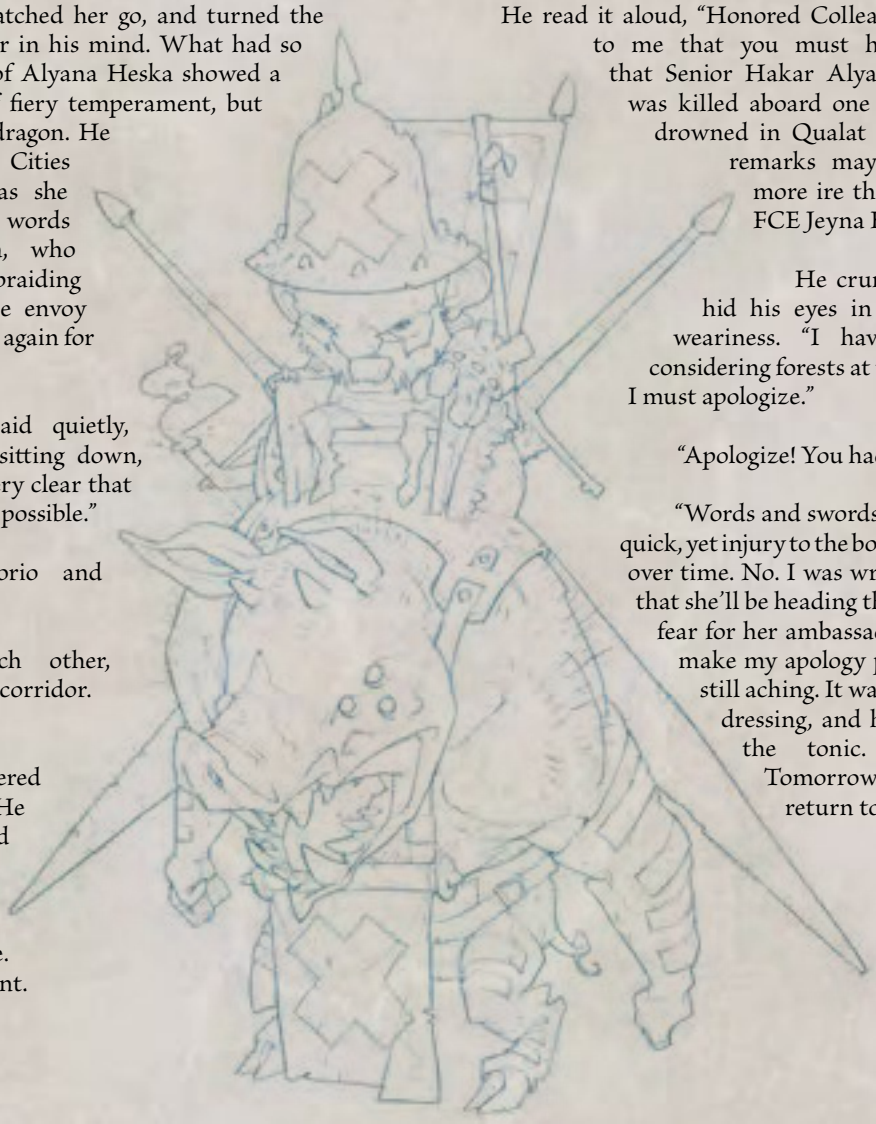
She read it and groaned. She passed it to him with a sigh.

He read it aloud, "Honored Colleague, it is now clear to me that you must have been unaware that Senior Hakar Alyana Heska's brother was killed aboard one of those ships that drowned in Qualat Mon Harbor. Your remarks may have touched off more ire than intended. Yours, FCE Jeyna Harig."

He crumpled the note and hid his eyes in a wave of sudden weariness. "I have spent too long considering forests at the sake of the trees. I must apologize."

"Apologize! You had no idea!"

"Words and swords can both cut to the quick, yet injury to the body heals much easier over time. No. I was wrong. And it is likely that she'll be heading the talks tomorrow. I fear for her ambassador's health. No. I'll make my apology public." His hip was still aching. It was time to change the dressing, and he definitely needed the tonic. "But tomorrow. Tomorrow. For now, let us return to the estate."



Chapter Nine - Dance

Gulraast called to Gregorio as they neared the grand cathedral doors. "Ambassador. A word?"

Gregorio glanced at the doors, flung wide with brilliant sunlight streaming in. "Of course, but let us step over here." He led the way between two of the grand concourse's many vast pillars. "If we must pause, at least let it not be in direct sunlight."

Gulraast grinned. "Indeed. You are not looking quite yourself today."

The bald vampire smirked, a ghoulish expression with his pointed ears and sharp chin. A monstrous visage, especially when he grinned. "In fact, after sunrise I look far more like myself than with the mystique upon me after dusk. But what can this humble servant do for you, Ironward?"

"Oh, just asking moment to catch up. Is long since we talk, and your silence in council was being notable."

Gregorio grinned. He did that often, showing his fangs. "Good."

Gulraast grunted. He didn't trust Gregorio to do anything but look after Gregorio first, and Telloria a distant second. "Is not it being in Tellorian interests to be keeping Achrion and Karotresh on friendly terms? Neutral at least? Telloria is being rather poorly placed between these two powers, no? Geographically, am speaking."

He shrugged, the picture of innocence, for a vampire. "Not at all. They share a border."

"They are sharing *mountainous* border. With only three passes, if am recalling. Passage via Tellorian interior is being much simpler matter."

He shrugged again. "But why should they invade us to get at each other? Of the Free Cities, only Falour stands in the way."

Gulraast was nodding and wore a tight-lipped smirk. "Oh, and would also violate what little is remaining of Free Cities neutrality, no?"

"Achrion did that when they annexed Tymour during your own disagreements."

"Is exactly so! And Free Cities are not forgetting. And, so, they become more nervous. And tensions rise! And the drums grow louder! Is longer game you play, am thinking."

Gregorio feigned modesty. "Well, I *am* a vampire, after all. And this certainly helps you and Hadross in your endeavors."

Gulraast narrowed his eyes. "Hm. Yes, this is being true. And now am wondering at wonderful gift given last night."

"Gift?"

"Yes. Entire legion of Tellorian mercenaries descends upon humble townhome. Was much exercise. So timely. Voy was growing soft."

"Such a shame you don't have an exercise room, down in all those sublevels. How many is it now?"

Gulraast smirked. "Oh, a few. Although, perhaps exercise room, too, would have suffered much damage from invasion. My laboratory is now being shambles. Many chemicals destroyed. Many devices smashed."

Gregorio shook his head sadly. "Unruly houseguests are truly a trial, are they not?"

"Though not all was lost. Must be showing you latest invention from Teknes University. Uses time itself as distillate! Can un-make chemical reaction in very small quantities. Amazing!"

Gregorio shrugged. "If you say so."

"Ah, but am getting off topic. Was not much sleep. And, is sad, but some houseguests escaped with many, many papers."

Gregorio tsk'd. "Careless to leave such things lying around."

Gulraast grunted. "Would be true, but Voy is excellent housekeeper and has great disdain for clutter. And my safe is being but simple solid steel with technomantic temporal lock and voice key. Thus, have only self to blame. Such a crude mechanism was child's play, surely."

Gregorio's lips twitched, amused. "Oh, surely."

"But am thinking now: so many attacks, same night, and done in same ways. Is appearing clumsy attempt to sow discord—"

"Which very nearly succeeded between Hadross and Achrion."

"Indeed, but is going deeper. Was appearing as simple ploy perpetrated by same mastermind thanks to commonality of payment. These gold ingots with Felskar maker's mark, you see. *My* gold ingots, no? And who would know most about their disappearance, eh?"

Gregorio appeared shocked. "Your gold, sir? You amaze me!"

Gulraast waved that away. "Bah! You and I are not to be playing as children. Of everyone at table, we have been masters of our houses here for longest. We at least can salute each other to jobs well done. My ship comes in, my gold walks off, and mercenary armies descend upon talks. And why? Is not for discord. Is for information. Is to hide spies searching for it. Is theft writ *small* under *large* banner of attempted murder. Is clever. Very clever."

Gregorio said nothing, but simply smiled. "And you can prove nothing."

"And if could, why should I now? Is true, stolen gold caused… ah, let us say inconvenience at time. But now, with tensions rising further still—" He broke off when he heard the Winterhawk's unmistakable golden armor coming down the central hall. The old man passed by their conversation spot, and Gulraast noted how he leaned heavily on his *dalko*. His student hovered nearby.

Gregorio and Gulraast both nodded to him as he passed. He returned the nods with gravity.

When his shadow on the marble floor had receded past the great doors, Gregorio picked up. "My dear Ironward, with tensions still rising, and in mostly advantageous places for Felskar, you have no reason to voice your suspicions at all. And, in fact, every reason to drop your investigation."

"Oh, well, perhaps not to be *dropping* investigation. But fervor for resolution is, eh… lessened. Am still being somewhat off-balance due to skillful maneuvers by esteemed opponent though…. Whomever this hidden hand may be, of course. A tiny bit more leverage might be called for. Is troubling matter, after all."

Gregorio grinned. "By all means then. Search away. You'll find nothing before it's too late."

Gulraast raised an eyebrow. "Before is too late for what?"

"Everything." He paused, listening as the room brightened with the sun's return. A smile touched his lips and he said loudly, "May I change the subject? Could you believe the way the Winterhawk goaded that poor woman in council today?"

Gulraast narrowed his eyes at Gregorio. The bat was up to something. He glanced around, saw no one, but most of the room wasn't visible from their position between the pillars. He lowered his voice. "Eh? It seemed was being she who brought fighting words to table. Even to point of ignoring own ambassador's extreme distress."

Gregorio continued in the same loud voice. Not shouting, but projecting. "Oh, come now. The Winterhawk is cagey at the worst of times. Certainly enough to push an opponent off-balance in a verbal debate. He was trying to enrage her. It was obvious."

Gulraast teetered his hand one way then the other. "Eh, perhaps. Am not thinking anything was said was necessarily being untrue."

"Why all those damned proverbs then? He was talking down to her the entire time. To all of us."

Gulraast grimaced. "Ha. Is true, one can tire of

Achrionian 'wisdom' in large doses. Such trite sayings is being designed to hold people in their place, their so-called 'stations in life.' Bah!"

"Exactly. And surely he knew about her poor dead brother, rotting in the harbor. Exactly the kind of statement to enrage her. Calling his death a 'foolish errand' and all."

Understanding dawned on Gulraast. "Ah, am seeing it now! Yes, was not believing such fire would be welcome at council. Now this is sense am hearing."

Gregorio wasn't done, this last he turned his head and his voice echoed in the grand hall, "And did you catch the one about anger concealing pain? He certainly knew about that brother, and used his death to run circles around that poor woman."

Gulraast's brows were drawn together. "To whom am speaking—?"

Alyana Heska rounded the pillar, a tower of fury, and bore down on Gregorio.

Gregorio gasped in surprise. His werewolf bodyguard sucked in a breath and began to transform. She flung her forgotten diplomatic papers in its face as a blind. One punch flattened its muzzle and a backhand brought it down.

Gulraast felt Voy tense, but held out an arm to restrain him. "Hold! Everyone! Senior Hakar Heska, hold!"

She did not. She seized Gregorio by the throat and lifted him off the ground. "Where. Is. He?"

Gregorio struggled weakly. His voice was strangled. "W... wh... Who?"

Her roar echoed through the entire room. *"That old man!"*

"Just... left. Ca... carriage."

She threw him against the pillar, and charged off.

Gregorio was on his feet in an instant. His distress had fallen away like a shroud. In fact, he was gleeful. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

Gulraast was still a little stunned. "You are being unhurt?"

"She forgot that I need air to speak, not to live. And when have I ever moved that slow, even when surprised? Wait, are you saying you didn't hear her come in? She doesn't have the quietest step."

He hadn't. "At my age, my ears are not being what once were."

"Well, if this doesn't kick off an incident, nothing will. If Kartoresh murders the Achrionian delegate, they'll break off diplomatic relations. At the very least!"

Gulraast had to admit, the old bat had played her perfectly. "Of course, is assuming Winterhawk does not prevail."

Gregorio scoffed. "Oh, please. He was injured last night. Didn't you see him leaving? Even his armor could barely keep him upright."

"His protégé was accompanying. And Wrath guards too, no?"

Gregorio shrugged. "Have you ever seen a senior hakar in action?"

Gulraast had. "Would be fight to be seeing." He paused and they looked at each other a moment. Gulraast gestured. "We are taking my carriage?"

"I'd stand naked in sunlight to watch this one!"

They eagerly hurried after the enraged Heska.

Their galloping carriage bounced over Cathedral District's cobbled streets as Voy roared at people, startling them out of the way. They caught up just in time to see Heska seize the Achrionian carriage's wheel with her bare hands. The thing jerked to a stop in the middle of a tree-lined plaza. The shocked driver fell to the ground, and she wrenched the wheel clean away. It shattered a storefront window.

People ran, or screamed, but most simply stared as two of the giant blue Wrath Children ran at her from their positions as the vanguard. The Winterhawk's protégé and two guards shot out of the carriage.

She met them all, blade for blade. Her fury overwhelmed even the massive Wrath. Her swords sliced the air in a savage dance. She shattered weapons, drew blood, and kicked one human guard square into one of the many trees lining the street. He hit face first, and slumped against the trunk.

Gregorio and Gulraast watched from their high carriage.

Only the protégé (the Deathbloom she was called) proved any challenge. Their weapons met, clashed, and rang. The Deathbloom was the wind, and Heska was the immovable stone. But the Deathbloom attempted a leg sweep, bounced off, and staggered. She barely deflected a mighty downstroke.

"Enough!" The Winterhawk had finally emerged from the disabled carriage. His pet dragon lounged across his shoulders. "Troops, disengage!" His voice was strong, though he leaned on his *dalko* as heavily as ever.

The Deathbloom leaped away, soared, and landed beside her master, unharmed, but breathing very hard. The Wrath backed off, and the human guards had pulled themselves into a tight formation at the Winterhawk's side.

Heska paced furiously back and forth before them, not even slightly winded. She clutched her blades in a deathgrip. Her voice filled the street. "Old man, you have dishonored me, my brother, and my nation. You will answer for this in *blood!*"

His pet dragon hissed at her from his shoulder, but the Winterhawk stilled it with a touch. "It is foolish to battle in a burning house. We are not enemies, Senior Hakar Heska."

"Enough of your proverbs! You have asked for this battle!"

The Winterhawk sighed, and lowered his head. "You refer to my inadvertent use of your brother." He bent down on one knee, put his hand on his heart, and said, "My sincere apologies. I truly did not know."

Her pacing halted. Gulraast heard Gregorio suck in a breath. The entire street was still, and the wind rustled the trees.

"I don't believe you," she said, her fury unabated.

Gregorio hissed with pleasure. Gulraast wasn't so sure he agreed this time. But the art of diplomacy was to serve his nation's interests. He had done shameful things himself, many a time.

She continued, "You know too much to have missed that, spymaster. The vaunted Winterhawk of Achrion, with documents fresh from Hadross Tower had no idea what information he was using?" She shook her head. "No." She began pacing again. "NO!"

"Such rage," Gregorio cooed.

"Is partly war mask's influence, am thinking," said Gulraast. "Elementals bound within can sway unguarded mind. And in her state…." He just sighed.

The Winterhawk rose. "Then, may I humbly and respectfully point out that the odds are somewhat heavily against you? I have no desire for further unnecessary bloodshed."

"Odds? Pah! Your legionnaires are weary, your Wrath are wounded, and your student is weak. And what of you, old man? You use your weapon as a cane. I'd call this acceptably even."

"I assure you, I am in perfect form." He was standing straight now, weapon in an easy grip.

Gulraast raised an eyebrow. Yet more deception? Where the Winterhawk was in play, no one could be sure.

Shouts and running feet made everyone turn to look behind. A half dozen Ashmen and four massive Pelegarth warrior women muscled their way through the thickening crowd. Behind them stalked a monster of horns and crimson skin. They formed up around their leader, and the crowd inched backwards from the thickening tension. It grew for a long minute as the groups faced off.

Heska spoke first. "You say you're in fighting form?"

"Of course." And the Winterhawk looked it.

"Then I challenge you formally. My people will not interfere."

The Winterhawk took only a moment to decide. "I accept."

His protégé looked at him sharply, but said nothing. His pet dragon leaped to her shoulders.

The Winterhawk continued in a very loud voice, "Let it be clear to all that this is a private matter, and our nations are uninvolved."

Gregorio snorted. "Sure, that'll stick. Look at the Wrath. Look at his student. Look at the body language of the Kartoreshian troops. 'Private matter'. Nice try."

Gulraast could read the situation like a letter. "Ah, is being possible. So long as battle is not to death."

Heska continued formally. "Name your weapons."

Gulraast knew the Winterhawk had little choice here. Dueling code did not allow for trickery such as 'our minds' or 'playing cards' or 'flower bouquets'. He could choose anything, so long as it was sufficiently lethal.

"Our own will suffice. Name your satisfaction," said the Winterhawk.

Heska's choice surprised no one: "Death."

The Winterhawk sighed and looked suddenly very, very tired. "So be it."

Gregorio's grin was predatory. "I'll give you three to one against the old man."

Gulraast looked at Gregorio with suspicion. "Gold or bills?"

Gregorio grinned. "Ingots."

Gulraast snorted. "Hmph. You make joke." Gulraast didn't really feel like joking. They were watching a war start, and it was happening far too quickly for his calculations. He shook on it anyway. "Am betting twenty. And done."

Senior Hakar Alyana Heska squared off against the Winterhawk in the crowded street. Their troops kept the crowd from pushing too close, although what fools would be anywhere near this kind of battle, Gulraast could not say. He was just glad they had a good view from the tall carriage.

The Winterhawk stood in an easy sidelong stance, *dalko* behind him, free arm stretched forward with hand raised. Heska held her blades tight, crossed low.

She charged. No roar, no shout, just movement, sudden and rapid. Her blades sliced like scissors, but the Winterhawk ducked, whirled, and swept for her feet. She leaped forward over the sweep, rolled, and spun to face him as she rose.

Now they circled, just beyond the *dalko*'s long reach. Heska's blades trailed falling vapor in the humid air. Gregorio said, "Hmm. I thought she used fire, like almost all Nasier's people."

Gulraast had seen this before. "She is being exception. See how frost is coating ground as she passes?"

Gregorio spoke admiringly. "Very nice. And the old man is slowing down."

It was true. The Winterhawk's breath hung in the air, and it came a little more rapidly than expected after just one exchange.

The Winterhawk struck first this time. A feint for her head, and a sudden reversal to bring his polearm's blunt end swinging in a sweeping arc. Heska blocked by main force, shoved the haft away, and ducked inside his range. Her pommel caught him square on his armored chest with such force that they heard his gasp. He vaulted over her just in time to miss a reversing slice. He landed, reversed again, and this time his feint worked. His edge whisked just past her parry, and drew a bloody gash down her arm.

Heska growled, but had no time for a counterattack. The Winterhawk's blade darted at her head, chest, and legs in rapid thrusts. She parried with flat-bladed slaps, and was pushed, back and back, until she tripped over the unexpected curb. The Winterhawk lunged, she threw herself flat, and his blade passed between her mask's horns. In an instant, she was in a crouch, tensed, and launched herself at him. He spun aside, but her blade ripped a conduit free from his back. It spluttered, writhing steam, then fell limp.

Yet the Winterhawk was unmoved. "One trips not on mountains, but stumbles on stones," he said. "You must be more aware."

She glowered, now breathing hard and growling.

Gregorio chuckled. "And still he prattles. She nearly had him."

Gulraast kept his own counsel. There was something working in the Winterhawk's mind.

This time Heska roared, swelled, and launched herself, blades first. The Winterhawk backpedaled and sidestepped behind a tree. Her blades sliced the tree cleanly from its base, and it fell towards the Winterhawk. He hand-flipped backwards beneath the canopy as it fell on him.

She waded into the fallen tree's thick green foliage, and her blades were as frozen scythes. Leaves, branches and twigs flew as she sought the Winterhawk's flesh. He erupted from the fallen canopy behind her, leaping high, and his blade came down before him. She deflected his falling blow, but it was wrenched from her hand, and skittered across the cobblestones.

Yet, the Winterhawk landed hard, and his foot caught on a branch. Only long training kept him upright, and Heska's remaining blade sought his head. It settled for his bracer, which cracked and fell away amid a glistening, bloody arc. He spun through the momentum, out of the fallen canopy, and into the clear street. He dropped into a defensive posture, the

dalko's long haft across his back. Heska stalked out of the fallen canopy, ominous and inevitable.

"Beating the grass only alerts the snake," he said. "You should be more cautious." And yet his face was scraped badly from the canopy falling on him.

Her breathing quickened, and her growl sounded animal. Alien. Rage fell off her in waves, and she looked every inch a tower of death.

Gulraast grinned inwardly as the Winterhawk's ploy dawned on him. To Gregorio he said, "Am thinking to sweeten pot, no?"

Gregorio looked at him, surprised. "Your man is losing."

Gulraast shrugged. "Eh, perhaps. But ingots is being mere coin. Perhaps my old friend has no taste for more interesting wager?

Gregorio did not answer.

The duel continued. More ringing blows. Now the Winterhawk was clearly in the inferior position. Their swordplay echoed the length of the street and rattled windows in their panes, such was their might.

Gregorio spoke without looking at Gulraast. "Sweeter pot? I'm listening."

"Am thinking letter of friendship and non-aggression is being in order, no? Above and beyond what ordinary treaties our glorious nations currently enjoy. Further, agreement to host Felskar troops within Tellorian border for... for protection, let us say. In case of most unfortunate incidents between Felskar and Achrion."

Gregorio glanced at Gulraast for a half second, but he only had eyes for the battle. "That's quite a lot to wager on that old man's staggering steps." An epic crash shook their carriage as Heska slammed the ground with her fist and ripped up a huge flagstone. She flung it, and it clipped the Winterhawk. It smashed into the Achrion carriage, startling the driverless horses. They ran, and the carriage disintegrated as it bounced down the street.

The Winterhawk leaned heavily on his *dalko*, breathing very hard.

Gregorio looked at Gulraast. "And if I win, I want constant updates on the situation between you and Hadross. I want to know exactly when you intend to strike Kartoresh, the Free Cities, and I want it all with three months' advance warning. I want a formal condemnation from your government for Kartoresh and Achrion's ill-treatment of each others' delegations at these talks. And I'll also want a personal favor from you, to be called in at some later date."

The Winterhawk said something else to Heska that Gulraast did not hear. She roared, *"STOP TALKING AND FIGHT! DAMN YOU!!"*

Gulraast licked his lips. "Is asking much. Much and much again more than I wager. And with three to one against my man...."

Gregorio grinned, "You wanted to up the stakes. Consider them upped."

In an instant, Gulraast measured everything he knew of the Winterhawk versues everything he knew of Gregorio. He shook on it. "Is done."

Now Heska pressed her attack, literally towering over the Winterhawk and staggering him with every swing.

Gregorio murmured, "Is it me, or has she gained a foot of height?"

Gulraast nodded. "Is war mask. Self-sustaining loop. Fury feed mask, mask feed fury. Is dangerous cycle."

"Does it have an end?"

"When heart stops. Or killed." He grinned wide. "That is old man's strategy."

Gregorio stared at him a moment. Then grimaced. "Ha. Well done, my old friend. Very well done indeed. But you only win if he can hold out that long. Something tells me the final verse is being written."

Gulraast tended to agree. He licked his lips, the only hint of nervousness he betrayed. Funneling secret war plans would earn him no friends in Felskar, no matter the ploy. And owing Gregorio a favor was very nearly worse.

Heska had finally recovered her second blade, and the Winterhawk brought his weapon up to parry a double-downstroke. The haft parted, and he fell on his rump. She jumped forward with both feet. He rolled aside into a crouch. The flagstone shattered under her boots where his head had been.

They were both breathing like marathoners in the final mile. He looked at his broken weapon, then at her.

His protégé yelled, "Master!" She threw her *dalko* to him.

He knocked it away. "No! This is a private matter. The lesson is not yet over." He dropped the broken half of his weapon, and held the blade by the remaining haft like a battleaxe. "Only the young find their fury intimidating."

Heska hurled a blade, end over end and charged. He sidestepped the blade, rolled forward beneath her charge, and launched a clumsy and predictable backward slice at her legs. She easily stepped out of range, and straight on to the dropped haft. It rolled under her foot, and she staggered to one knee. The Winterhawk's lethargy vanished, and he rushed, shouldered her over, and his blade was on her throat.

The crowd gasped, and Gregorio's mouth dropped open.

The Winterhawk spoke loud enough for all to hear. *"I yield to you, in peace!* Do you accept?"

The entire assemblage held its breath for a very long moment for the answer.

"I… accept your yield." She dropped her remaining sword, and everyone sighed. The Dragons began a cheer that his student halted with a strident gesture. The Winterhawk leaned over his defeated foe and said something inaudible. He rose, dropped his broken weapon next to her head, and walked away.

Heska did not rise. After several seconds, almost a full minute, the crowd began to disperse.

Gulraast turned to Gregorio. "Did your sharp ears make out what was said?"

Gregorio shook his head. "No, maybe it was the one about 'age and treachery'—oh. Sharp ears. Cute."

"Ha! I make joke, no?" Gulraast was all grins.

"Yes, yes, very amusing." He was annoyed and ran a hand over his bald pate. "Well. It's not a complete loss. I know he'd said 'private matter', but I doubt it'll change much. This still counts as a diplomatic incident. If I know King Nasier, he'll take it as an insult."

Gulraast shrugged. "Perhaps yes, perhaps no. And, is lie to be saying Achrion will not exult in victory. The duel, the personal challenge, is integral to their corrupt society."

Gregorio didn't comment on that. "Well. You'll have your sixty ingots by then end of the week. And, when shall I expect this treaty?"

"The same time. Will not take long to hammer details, and Voy's calligraphy will amaze you."

Gregorio grumbled. "Very well."

"Can be dropping you somewhere? Goritsi Tower, perhaps? Is not far."

Gregorio was annoyed. He hid it failry well, but Gulraast knew the old vampire. "I thank you, no, Master Ironward. I believe I'll step out and enjoy the sunshine. Congratulations again."

He left, walking away from the destroyed plaza. Shopkeepers surveyed the damage, and the Watch was on hand to keep order. Heska's troops had wandered off. And still she lay there in the street. Unmoving.

"Is hard thing, defeat," Gulraast said to himself. "Have lain there myself many times." He sighed, then called out the carriage window. "Voy, home."

Chapter Ten - Drowning Sorrows

Alyana took many hours to walk back to the Kartoresh compound. She'd lain in the street for too long, stunned, if that could describe it. She'd been beaten. *Beaten!* By a nattering old man. And the last thing he'd said, for her ears only…. She shoved the words away, and refused to give them another thought. People on the street made way for her, though she barely noticed. Children were shuffled indoors, and adults gave her a wide berth.

Her thoughts turned to the battle once more. Oh, she had won, technically. But in reality? No. It was *his* blade at *her* throat, no matter how he'd tried to spin it by yielding to her. And she'd accepted, despite her own terms for death. Did that make her a coward? The question made the bile rise in her throat.

She wondered what reception she'd face from her troops. Or the Ambassador.

Dusk was nearly done when she arrived at the compound. The gate guard had doubled. They saluted, and she asked the Pelegarth Howler in command, "What news of the Ambassador?"

The howler's expression was hard to read due to the transformed nature of her face. Yet her eyes were as guarded as any human's. "Recuperating, though he has asked to see you the moment you returned, Senior Hakar."

Alyana nodded, and passed through as they all saluted, hands on hearts.

The ambassador lay in his chambers on the huge four-post bed, propped up by more pillows than she thought possible. His mask was on, but he seemed asleep, head back, mouth open, breathing labored.

The Surgeon was in attendance and spoke quietly to her, "If you could be very brief, Senior Hakar. He has had several shocks today. I fear for him surviving the night."

She nodded. "Leave us."

She settled into the big chair beside the ambassador. He looked so tiny and weak. True, he was old, but…. She looked away, and the weight of her failure pushed her shoulders down.

"Heska…" he croaked. "Water, please."

She helped him drink.

He lay back, gasping. Even those few short gulps seemed like heavy exercise.

"Heska, what have you done?"

She blushed fiercely behind her mask. "It was a… private matter." She echoed the old man's words, but they rang hollow.

"I have received the Achrionian Ambassador's letter of protest. Be thankful they're not asking for an extradition."

Some heat crept into her voice. "Extradition? It was a duel! And I… won." The word almost stuck in her throat.

"But before that? You assaulted their troops. Attacked their delegation."

She thought to argue, but any counterpoint sounded weak. And worse, false. She lowered her eyes. "I was just—" She sighed. "Furious."

"I know. Your mask had a hold on you. It was obvious at the council table."

She couldn't look at him. "I can't blame the mask entirely."

He nodded, feebly. "It is good that you can admit that. But now, I am left with a very serious problem." His eyes were open, and he was looking straight at her. "Our position has never been weaker. We've been expelled from the Free Cities. We have the deepest rift between us and Achrion since they annexed Tymour decades ago. And these talks…." He caught his breath, but didn't cough. "… These talks, which were intended to cool tensions, have done nothing but escalate them."

She said nothing. What could she say?

"On top of It, I am dying."

Now she spoke. "No, the Surgeon said—"

"I can feel it. If I'd taken the time to rest, or… if the deputy ambassador had been here…. Well. What's done is done. I have done my duty. My deputy will arrive in the next day or two, and she'll take over."

Alyana nodded. That might help stabilize the situation.

He held out his hand. "Your war mask."

The words struck her harder than any of the old man's blows. She didn't move immediately. "Am I dismissed?"

"No. You are suspended and stripped of rank for the duration. I cannot have you at the council table until restitution has been made. " He gathered himself and said again, "Your mask."

"But what if the deputy ambassador needs advice—"

"In an emergency only!" The exertion set him to coughing. She helped him drink from the glass again, but his gasping wracked his whole body. It was a long minute before he could continue. "Alyana, please. You are a valued colleague, and I regret this extremely. Yet, it is my duty to serve the interests of the crown. As it is yours." He didn't hold out his hand this time. "Your mask."

It was harder than she thought, to unhook it from her belt and lay it across his lap. She felt lessened. Weakened. Even though it would be a day or two before the power seeped from her body, when her skin would return to its normal softness and color. Her strength would fade. She wondered if she'd experience the withdrawal she'd heard about.

He was looking at it, a hand on its lacquered crimson surface.

She asked, "Should I leave the compound, ambassador?"

"Your choice. Without rank, you are but a servant. Your former troops have loved and respected you like few hakars, but now you are far beneath them. The interaction may prove difficult."

She nodded and stood. "Am I excused?"

"You may go. And, Alyana…"

She paused at the door, hand on the handle.

"If we don't meet again, this has been my saddest duty. I hope you will yet be redeemed."

She nodded without looking back, and moved slowly beyond the threshold. Before she closed the door, she heard him say, "I'd forgotten how heavy these things are."

She wouldn't stay in the compound, nor at the Tower. There was no way. She gathered a few belongings in a small satchel and made her way through the courtyard. Her troops were drilling, as normal, despite the moon having risen. Covert glances and rueful muttering followed her passage. No salutes. No words. She felt the absence of her mask. Of her duty.

She went into the streets and wandered. Eventually she wound up Dockside, where she supposed the unwanted and useless always ended up. She walked into a noisy tavern with a sign so worn and battered she could only make out a lurid crab with a bottle. Silence descended immediately as her tall frame filled the doorway.

All eyes tracked her as she stalked to the bar. Her footsteps thumped on the wooden floor. She didn't meet any gazes. She took a seat on one of the only empty stools, in front of an abandoned tankard. Two nervous patrons beside her got up and moved to the standing bar along the back wall.

"Well, that's just great," said a voice behind her. "Go to the can, and someone takes your seat."

She turned to see a Sevridan with hands on hips. She recognized him as the Hadrossian Ambassador's captain of the guard.

Her gaze hardened. "I'll move."

"Don't trouble yourself," he said, and grabbed his mug from in front of her. He sat in a vacated stool, one over. "Seems like everyone that had a hard day is in here."

"I'm not in the mood for conversation, Hadross."

"I agree, Nasier. Or do you prefer Kartoresh?"

She didn't answer and signaled for a mug of something toxic. Her metabolism would still be phenomenal for at least the next day or three. She drained the mug in one go, and signaled for another. A numbing warmth spread through her throat and belly. "Stop staring at me, Hadross."

"Sorry. I kind of can't help it, Nasier." He tapped his eyes. "I can see most of the bar." He indicated her empty mug. "That was an impressive display. And, coming from me, that's no small statement."

She grunted. "Child's play." For the moment.

"A hard-drinking woman are you?"

"Almost never."

He turned towards her. "Ha. What's the occasion?"

She shot him a suspicious glance. "Why do you care?"

He shrugged. "Curiosity, really. Plus I'm about a quarter drunk, so my natural shyness around women is on the wane."

She grunted. "What about around an enemy?"

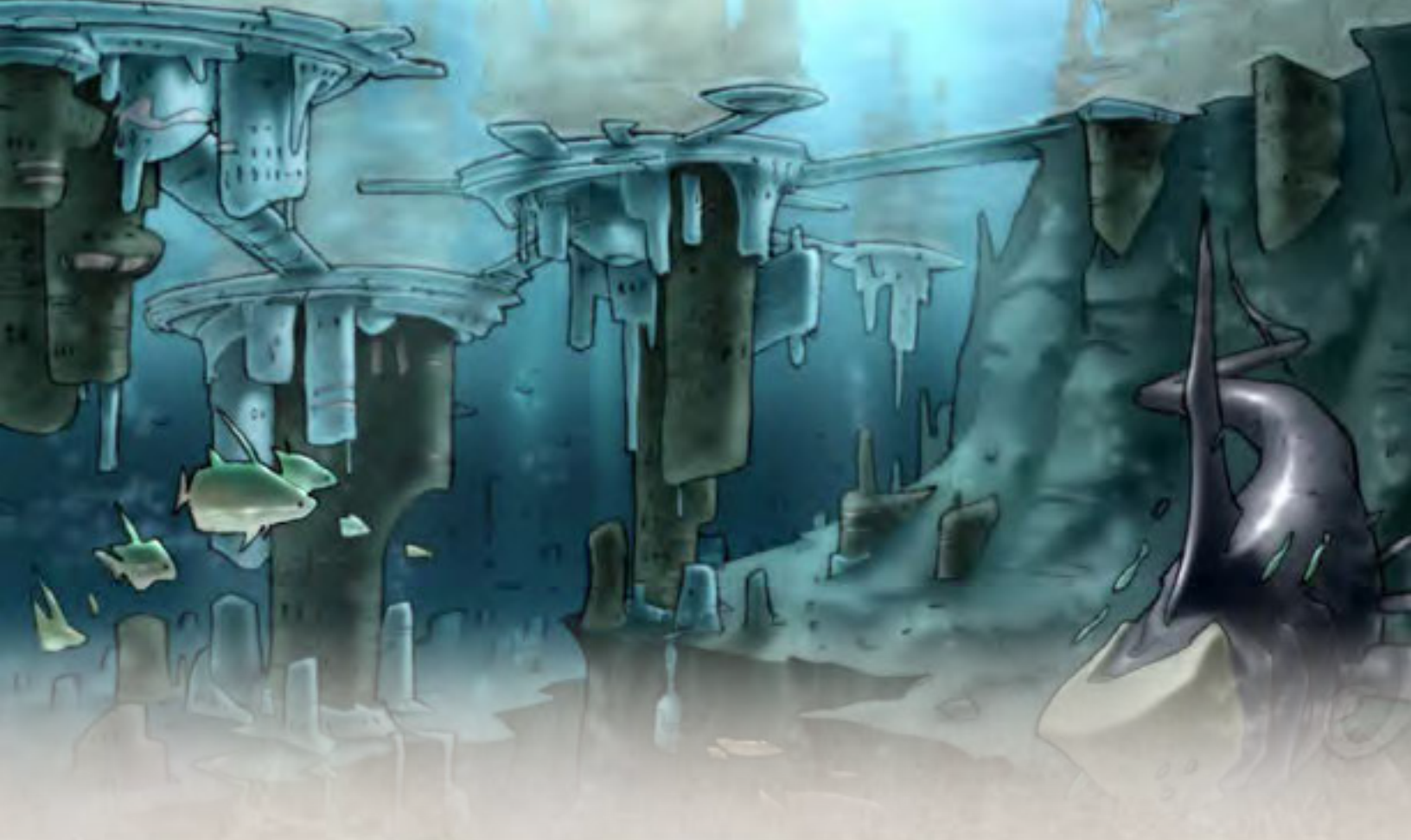
He shrugged again. "Are we enemies? Seems it's our countries that like to bicker."

She faced him. "I saw you at council today supporting your disgusting ambassador. What does that say about you?"

He regarded her for a second, expression alien and unreadable to her eyes. He replied slowly, "That I'm… Hadrossian? And he's my boss? Even if he is a wretched, vile, putrid excuse for a Deepman."

That surprised her. "So you don't like him either?"

"Tide and teeth, no! That's pretty well known, I think. Almost no one likes that worm. But he's got the Scion's commission, and his house is very influential. I'm kind of stuck with him. Why else can I be found in places like this when I'm off duty?"



"You're a drunkard."

He raised his tankard in salute. "Takes one to know one, etcetera…" He was silent through three draws between them. Until he said, "Say, Nasier, a question. Did you really throw a building at the Achrionian?"

She scoffed. "What?"

He shrugged. "That's what I'd heard."

She turned back to her drink. "A flagstone. Or two. Maybe. It's a bit… hazy. There was a tree, as I recall."

"I'd heard he ran through the treetops with you cutting them down as he jumped."

She rolled her eyes. "Is the entire city filled with gossips?"

"It's one of the most exciting things to happen around here in a while. And that's saying something." He waved his empty mug at the bartender. "Even all these attacks… I've honestly never seen anything like it. The enemy body count in our tower was forty-four. That's not a hit squad, it's a hit platoon, if there is such a thing."

"Your security was lacking. No one even tried to hit us."

His tentacles twitched. "Your compound is the most secure of anyone's, because you've got close to a hundred troops. We now have sixty. That's why you got poison, and we got the knife."

"Well, you'll pardon me if I weep no tears for Hadross. It's a shame they didn't succeed."

"Almost did." He paused. "And, well, in fact—" He thought better of his words, and tried to conceal them with a long draw.

She waited a moment, then prodded, "In fact what?"

He took a deep breath, which had a strange, ballooning effect on him. "If I tell you, will you answer a question for me?"

She shrugged. "Depends if the answers are of equal quality."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. In fact, I really, really, *really* thought about letting the assassins have Jahroon. It's treason to even think it, but… think it I did. Or kill him myself. All that fighting, and in the heavy melee…" He took a deep breath. "Mistakes can happen. Well, I guess I don't have to tell you that."

Alyana smiled tightly as a half dozen memories rippled in her mind. "No. So, what stopped you?"

He suppressed a belch. "Pardon me. Two things: First, my nosey gods. Every time the thought occurred, or when he'd jab at me, or make some petty insult, they were there. Warning me of the next squad. Keeping me on task. Relentless." He shook

his head, and looked away. He took a very long draw.

To Alyana's eye he looked annoyed. But Sevridans were alien things, and she had little experience with them beyond the battlefield. "And the other?"

He turned towards her. "I don't want a full-scale war. It's that simple. We have our squabbles and skirmishes, of course, but that's one thing. If Jahroon is murdered, that's all the excuse my king needs to march us off. Tide and teeth, he'll probably march us off anyway. But, at least I won't have had a hand in it. Not if I can help it."

She peered at him. She'd never heard a Hadrossian speak this way. "You know, I think I believe you."

He snorted. "*Zavas.*" He toasted with his mug and drained it. "So, my question for you, then?"

"Go ahead."

"What set you off so badly at the council table? I mean, the Achrionian can be annoying beyond endurance, but you were fit to chew coral."

She glared at him for a moment, but it melted in a wave of fatigue. She'd been so angry for so long. She took a drink. "My brother was murdered by Hadrossians in Qualat Mon harbor."

Understanding hit the Sevridan. He was nodding, "That would make sense. I wondered why everything the old man said hit you like a blow. Was he just trying to piss you off? That would be perfectly in keeping with his tactics."

It was probably the ale, but suddenly she felt like talking. "At first, no. He didn't know. I believe his explanation now, but it really didn't seem that way at the time. It was like everything that was said was calculated to dishonor my brother's sacrifice. I should've seen the haze coming down, but I've been angry about it for so long. I made myself easy prey for my mask."

The Sevridan signaled for another. "I'd heard about that. In fact, when we're studying tactics and doctrine against Nasier, the first line is: Make them angry."

She chuckled. "Bad idea."

"No doubt. Do it wrong, and you've bloodied the waters for the shark. Do it right though, and they run straight into the net."

She stared into her mug. The foamy ale was reddish. It reminded her of frothy blood. "That's what the old man did during our duel. He wouldn't shut up."

"Oh, let me guess: proverbs?"

"Constantly."

The Sevridan laughed, a gurgling kind of sound that wasn't unpleasing. "I could've told you not to dance with words against that old man. Even if you've got him beat in logic, he'll whip out some new proverb and twist the conversation. Tide and teeth, I think he makes half of them up on the spot. His ambassador is capable, but she's new to the post, and she relies on him heavily, so I've seen him do this a dozen times."

"Well, it worked. The elemental bound into my mask didn't help, but the blame is on my shoulders, Hadross. You say the first thing you're taught about us is 'make them mad.' That might work on the rank-and-file, which I'll add is playing with fire—"

"True. I got shield-slammed by a Pelegarth once. I think I'm still a little flat on my right side."

She grinned, amused. But the grin faded. "The thing is, I am—was a Senior Hakar. Our masks are powerful instruments that are only kept in check by our strength of will. It should be nearly impossible to enrage us beyond reason. Yet, that's exactly what happened, and I didn't see it."

"You were manipulated—"

She slammed the mug down, startling the tavern into silence. "No! No. Every enemy will try to manipulate you. Battlefields, conference tables, or having drinks at the bar, everyone is seeking an advantage, and will use your weaknesses against you. You *cannot* succumb. I did, and I lost, and I will make no excuses for that. I'll pay my price, and not wriggle out of it like a—a child."

They stared at each other for a long moment as life returned to the tavern.

The Sevridan said, "You were going to say 'Hadrossian', weren't you?"

She shrugged. "Your people are not well-regarded where I come from. It's not my intention to offend."

He waved it off. "Oh, none taken. We do wriggle pretty well." He waggled his beard tentacles at her.

She half-smiled, and turned back to her drink.

"Well, I admire your position on that, if you don't mind the observation," he said. "But, you won your duel, right? I mean, technically."

The ale soured in her mouth. "Technically, yes. Honor is appeased, but I lost. Everyone knows I lost. He had me. And his last words were just so… mocking…." She was grinding her teeth. She made herself stop, and drained her mug.

"What did he say?"

She grunted. "Just another damn proverb. But it was *his* blade at *my* throat. I accepted his yield only because…" She couldn't go on.

"Because?"

She felt tired again. So weary. It was probably the ale. Or maybe the ebbing power. "Why do you even care, Hadross?"

"Curiosity again." He paused, then shrugged. "And, I won't lie. It's good to know your enemy's mind."

She smirked and echoed his words from earlier. "And are we enemies?"

He caught it, and chuckled. "Well, not with this much booze in us, no. But I'm still curious."

She took a moment and put words to the thoughts that had been swirling in her head since she'd been lying in the street. "If I'd refused his yield, he'd have killed me. That would have been fine with me. You don't see so many battles without learning death is sudden, immediate, and almost always without warning."

He raised his mug in salute and drank. He kept quiet.

"And this was a matter of honor. My brother's honor. So, I was quite prepared to die over that. But then, when I felt his blade here, against my artery… Clarity. Just a moment. Enough for me to wrestle myself back from the brink. And, I realized just why I was so enraged."

The Sevridan shrugged. "He was taunting you. And there was the mask."

She shook her head. "More than that. He reminded me very much of my brother. Of Arikalin."

The Sevridan signaled for two more.

She went on, "When we were kids, we fought. Like kids do. He was a little bigger than me, but I usually won. And he joined the army before I did, but I shot right past him in rank. I never was sure why. But I had thought it was his… I don't know. Hesitancy? I'm still not sure."

The Sevridan took a drink and said nothing.

She continued. "He thought more than he should. He didn't seize opportunities when they occurred. That's why I usually won when we competed. That's why I usually win at everything I do. Until. Well—" She broke off and drank.

"Today," he said.

"Today." She choked up for a moment, and hid it in a long draw. She felt faint, but it wasn't the booze. "He was a thinker. One of those who knew what you'd do, unless you completely surprised him. That's why the old man reminded me of him. And that's why I knew I'd win. I always surprised him. That was my strength. But I'm starting to think that, given time, I'd have started losing. And maybe never beaten him again."

"Was your brother ever holding back?"

She scoffed. "Infernals, no. He'd get as angry as I did when he lost. He was male, and older. Bigger, stronger, but he just didn't have the fire. If that makes sense." She thought a moment. "But there's a big difference between children's games and what we do, Hadross."

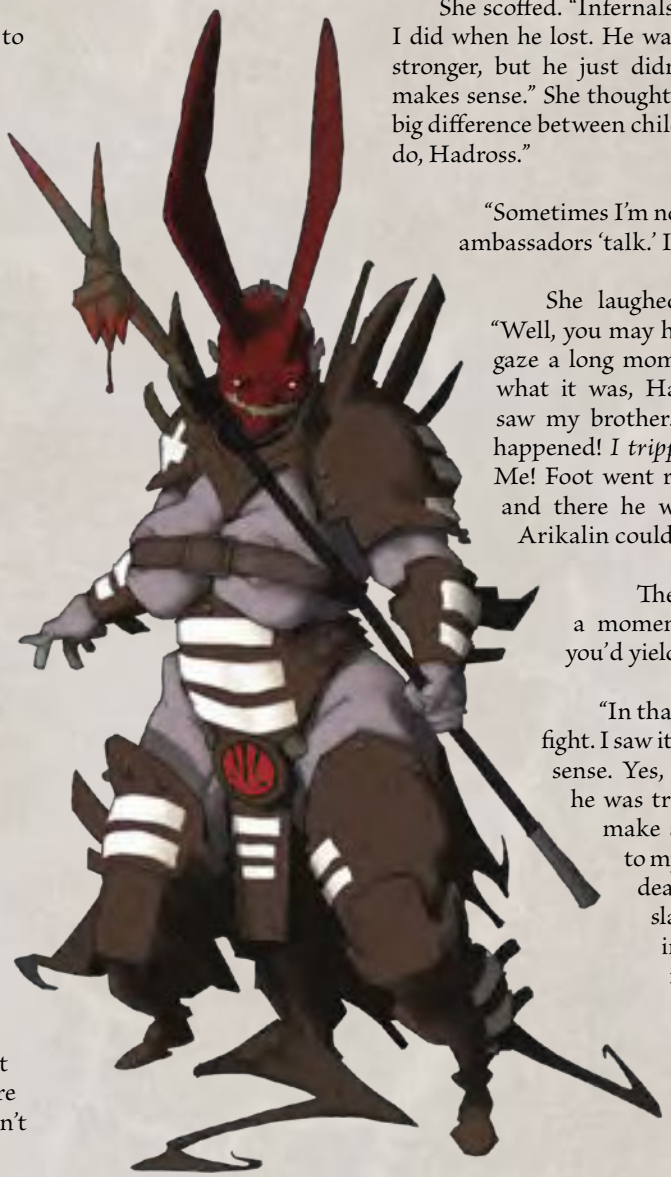
"Sometimes I'm not so sure. You've seen our ambassadors 'talk.' If you want to call it that."

She laughed. Definitely the booze. "Well, you may have a point." She held his gaze a long moment, then sighed. "That's what it was, Hadross. For a moment, I saw my brother. I mean… look at what happened! *I tripped!* On a discarded haft. Me! Foot went right out from under me, and there he was. Blade at my throat. Arikalin couldn't have done better."

The Sevridan regarded her a moment. "Still not seeing why you'd yield."

"In that moment, I went past the fight. I saw it from above, if that makes sense. Yes, he was goading me. Yes, he was trying to enrage me, so I'd make a mistake or lose control to my mask. If I'd just dropped dead, his hand wouldn't have slain me, and the incident's impact would have been much less. I saw, in that moment, that he was desperate to avoid an incident."

"But you had the advantage, right?"



"Definitely. He's skilled, but he's old. He got very lucky twice. And I got unlucky. He deliberately didn't capitalize on any of that, and, in that moment of clarity, I realized that he might've ended it decisively much sooner."

He peered at her. "'Might have?'"

She shrugged. "Hard to say, but, if it had been me, I'd have had my own head. And that, plus the memory of my brother, made me reconsider the basis of our duel."

"That's an awful lot for an instant."

She turned towards him. "There's a reason it's a 'moment' of clarity. In that half second, I thought maybe he and I were in that street for an entirely different reason. Maybe someone else had put us there. It was just my own rage that brought us that far in the first place. The mistake was mine. I think he knew it, and here he was handing me a technical victory to thwart his enemy. Not me, but whatever hidden hand has been shoving us around."

He was peering at her. Staring maybe, she couldn't be sure. She turned back to her drink. "That's the impression I got anyway. So, I yielded. And now I'm disgraced."

"You might've been disgraced regardless. Am I right?"

She said nothing, but nodded and drank.

"I've been getting the same impression," he said. "Not about disgrace, but about a bigger picture…." He trailed off.

"Who would gain most from a rift between Kartoresh and Achrion?"

She scoffed. "You, Hadross. Who else?"

He brushed that aside. "Of course. My king wants the Empyrean Throne, as does yours."

"King Nasier has the better claim—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, look, I'm not talking politics right now. A war between us was coming, no doubt at all. But, that was just between us. The Scion Brothers bickering again. And, if we brought Felskar in on our side, what would Achrion do?"

She shrugged. "Probably intervene."

"Right. But not if there was a rift. A deep divide."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you confessing to something here, Hadross?"

"No, but that would be two to one against you, and the engagement would've been limited. Probably over in a year or three. Right?"

She choked back her defiance. She was a military woman. While Kartoresh was rich and powerful, Hadross was similarly endowed. "Most likely," she agreed. "Barring brilliance or luck, two against one is never a desirable fight."

He drummed his fingers, thinking a moment. "But

someone has been working to divide Felskar and Hadross too. They don't want us to have allies when the time comes. There have been just a few too many lose/lose scenarios lately. Stolen shipments and unreliable intelligence…. I'd have assumed it was Kartoresh, but then why send Achrionian mercs to attack my ambassador? Why not Nasiers? Why not lay that final straw?"

It made sense. She took it a step further. "Someone's not done amping the tension. And, who has been silent through most of this? Who has been content to sit and observe?"

"Telloria," they said together. They clinked mugs and drank.

She continued. "It was even the vampire that sent me chasing the old man."

"How did he manage that?"

"I forgot some stupid documents at the table. I went back myself to walk off my fury, and I overheard him talking to the addanii." She thought another moment, but the satisfaction of their revelation was fading. "But we can't prove anything, Hadross. And more's the point, how would Telloria benefit from a four-way conflict?"

He deflated a bit too. "No idea."

"Plus, it's a lot to base on my single moment of clarity. And, when I think about the old man's final words in the fight…. I don't know, maybe he was just gloating after all."

"You mentioned that before. What did he say?"

She had to take a long drink first. It was etched in her mind. So painfully. "He said, 'Failure is not the fall. It is the refusal to rise.' Then he dropped his blade, and walked away. Not even really breathing hard. Made me wonder if he'd been faking the whole time." She paused, and the Sevridan's beard tentacles were twitching and writhing. He looked like he was laughing silently. She was annoyed. "Are you having a fit or something? What is it?"

He gasped out through a couple of gurgling laughs, "Oh, Nasier! Don't you see? He was helping you!"

"With another infernal proverb? After all the others meant to goad—?"

"No, no! Think about it! I think he knows about all the intrigue, or at least suspects. I think he needs a strong Nasier delegation, and, without you, they're measurably weaker, right?"

She nodded.

"And, just how well do you Kartoreshians handle failure in matters of honor? Despite the technical win, he had to know you'd be personally disgraced and insulted. Thus, the advice. You lost this one, yes, but you only ever really lose if you never stand up again."

It made sense. Perfect sense. She felt, somehow, that her brother would be smiling now. Maybe it was the ale, but her heart lifted. "You're a very smart fish, Hadross."

"And you are a formidable woman, Nasier."

She held out her hand. "Alyana Heska."

He took it in a firm grip. "Ooroth."

They toasted again and drank. She felt light. The weight on her shoulders had lifted. Then reality set in. "Well, so, assuming we've got it all figured out, but what can be done? I'm suspended. No one would even listen to me."

He nodded. "And it's not as if a mutual enemy is going to bring our particular nations together. You're still Nasier scum, after all, right?"

"Of course, Hadrossian lapdog."

He bowed. "Quite. I'm betting it's not long before Telloria pushes this into the endgame."

From a military perspective, she agreed. "If it's really a plot, and Ambassador Gregorio is really the mastermind, then, yes. He's running out of shadows to hide in. He's taking risks, like with me today, assuming I was simply an opportunity he exploited. And, as I say, I can do nothing until I'm reinstated. If that happens."

"What are the conditions on that?"

She sighed heavily. "That depends on the deputy ambassador. Her ship will return tomorrow. Possibly the next day."

"Surely you can send a note or something?"

"I can, but only my ambassador can act on it, and he's… well. That poison and the stress may have done him in by now."

Ooroth groaned. "Karotoreshian hierarchy in action. If the house is on fire, you have to report it up the chain until someone with the right mask says 'Oh, we should probably leave.'"

She rolled her eyes. "It's not like that. But what actual proof do I have? This is entirely supposition." An image of the grinning Gregorio flashed through her mind. Anger sparked within her. "If I did have proof, they'd listen. It's not like I'm dead to them. Well, not completely, but—you know what I mean. It would feel sooo good to lop that bat's head off, though."

"But, isn't being impulsive what put you here in the first place?"

She sighed. "It's true. And, as I say, this is all still supposition."

"It's good supposition, though."

"Right, and didn't I just say that if I was still the Senior Hakar, I'd be all over it? I am not, and that's the end of it. What do *you* plan to do, Captain of the Hadrossian Guard?"

He leaned on the bar and raised his mug. "You're looking at it. Everything that can be done has been done. Much as I hate to say it, Jahroon was right about a great many things. The Deep Voices probably had a hand in that."

She hefted her mug. "I don't hold to your Deep Voices, but, this is an excellent plan. My brother hasn't had a proper waking yet, so I'm going to enjoy my enhanced metabolism while it lasts."

The Sevridan brightened. "A wake before the end of the world? Alyana Heska, it would be my honor to join you."

"Accepted."

They toasted and drank.

Chapter Eleven - Bitter Draught

Gulraast drummed his fingers on his desk. It wasn't the early hour that annoyed him as much as the news. "And are certain is being Tellorian ships?"

Captain Mai Leng's firm nod left no doubt. "Absolutely. No one else sets their gammoning like that. Those were Tellorian sailors on Tellorian ships. Despite the lack of colors."

"And was unloading how many troops?"

"At least a hundred per ship, and I gathered that wasn't the first time they'd used that dock. It was new timber, but badly constructed. Rickety. Who knows how long they've been landing in that cove?"

Gulraast didn't like it. Not one bit. Fructus Isle was neutral territory. If Gregorio was landing troops, actual troops, then the endgame was upon him, and he still didn't know all the rules. "Is only five days' march from City. And could have been sending in troops in small groups for months. Fructus may be full to bursting with enemy soldiers, no?"

Mai Leng looked a little green. "I should see to the ship. The shakedown went well, but I've still got a little more work."

"Is good. And must be prepared for sudden departure."

"Yes, sir. That all depends on the tide to an extent, of course. Not much gets past the bar in the outer harbor at low tide."

"Hmm. Well. Am thinking have made excellent choice for captain. Sharp eyes. Quick mind. Is earning bonus, no?" He grinned.

She smiled and rose. "By your leave?"

"Of course! Will be seeing one another again soon."

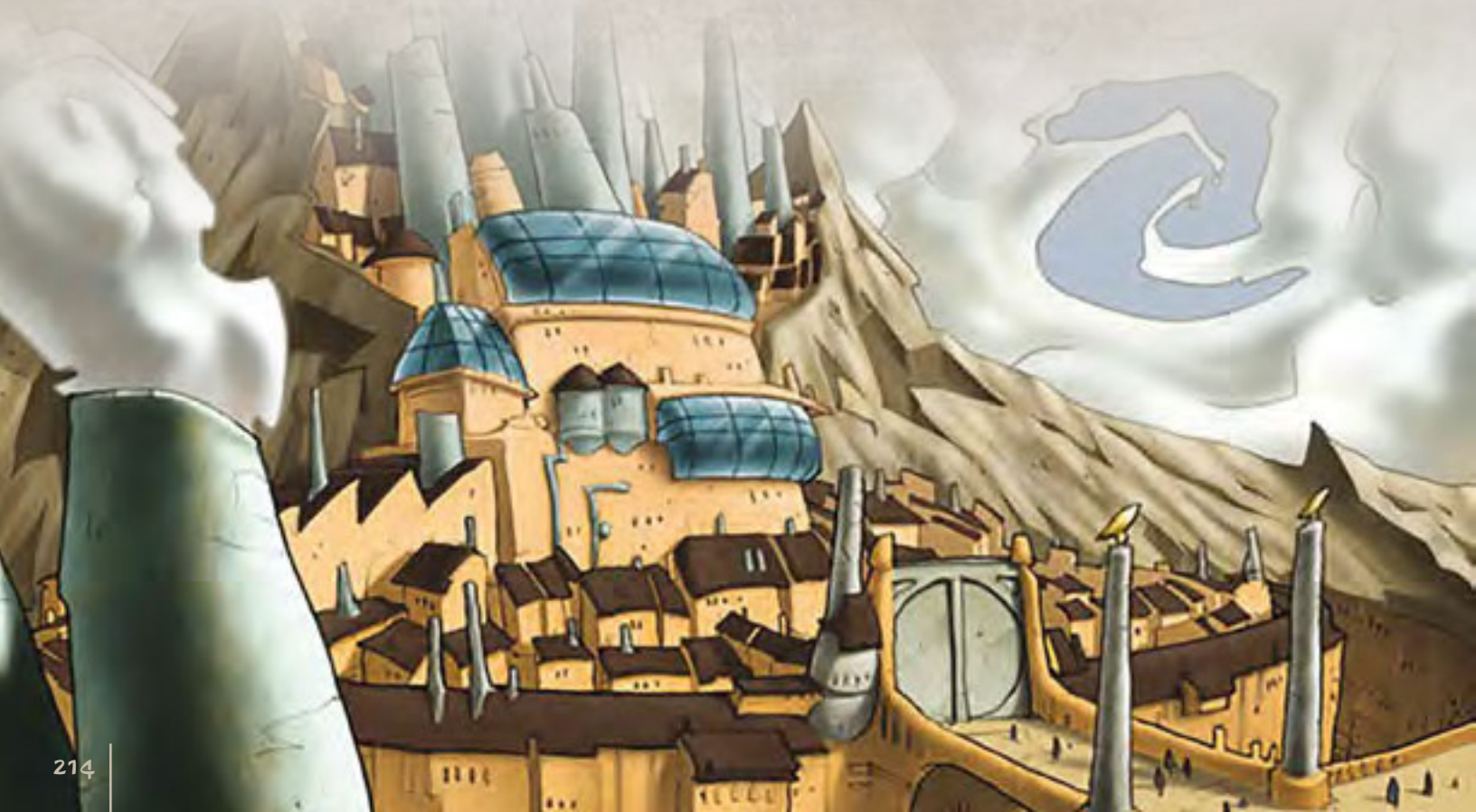
His smile vanished as the door closed.

"Ah, Voy, you were being right again."

The pig-man stood silently, as always.

Gulraast stroked his mustache. "Our old friend is playing even larger scheme than had been supposed. And Sachen's disappearance is making sense now, no? But he was not sole fence in Fructus City." He pulled out paper and quill, and set to writing a half dozen missives. "We shall see what smuggler friends are having to say about strange ships along coastlines. Perhaps offer bounty for capture and information, no? And, if is true that troops are moving overland, then this thing would be known to farmholds and tradesmen. Let us be inquiring in markets and taverns."

He finished his letters, read them over for accuracy. He nodded to himself. "There. Is done." He handed them to Voy. "Steward will arrange delivery. Now, is true that Gregorio is sending hard-won gold today, no? Treaty is prepared, and if all goes according to plan, we make exchange and everyone is walking away happy."



He stroked his mustache and considered the variables while Voy was out of the room. When the pig-man returned, Gulraast continued as if he'd never left. "But if rumor of troops is proving more than rumor, and if Gregorio is truly in his endgame, then today may be proving… eh, eventful. That is right word, no?" He hopped down. "Come. Twice prepared is forever victorious. Is Humanum way."

Later that evening, as dusk touched the western sky, Voy ushered in three large men in armor two sizes too big. Two carried a weighty chest between them, and the third greeted him with a wide smile and deep bow. "Ironward, it is my privilege and honor to bring you greetings and esteem from Gregorio don Sissora, Marquis of Forseno, and Ambassador of Telloria to Fructus Isle."

Gulraast was amused. "And I remain but humble Ironward in People's Glorious Revolutionary Army. And whom do I have honor of addressing?"

"The Ironward is too kind," he bowed again. "I am Draga don Sissora of Genoris. Alas, I have no titles, but it is my duty and pleasure to serve as intermediary to cousin Gregorio on this happy day."

In fact, the werewolf did seem pleased. A little too pleased. It put Gulraast one edge, but he didn't show it. He smiled widely. "And 'happy' is indeed word, no? First and foremost is rendering service to both homelands in form of non-aggression pact, and second… well. Would be lie to say shiny metals are not joy to possess."

Draga smirked and motioned. The other two lugged the heavy chest to his desk and undid the locks.

Gulraast grinned at the glittering ingots in neat rows. "Yes, is very satisfactory. Will not bother with counting. Friends do not count coin in matters of honor, no? And rest assured that ingots will go towards good causes, and not simply molder in dusty old vault, eh? For what is wealth without generosity? Is greed. Pure and simple. Is not Humanum way."

The werewolf rapped the table. "Hear him. Well said, sir."

Gulraast pulled the unbound treaty from his desk and handed it across. "And allow me to extend hand of friendship via paper."

Draga accepted the document graciously and scanned through it. "Yes, this is excellent. Perhaps not what we would have authored, of course, but a wager is a wager."

"Indeed."

"We should drink to this occasion." He produced a very old bottle with a wavy neck and crackling label. "A special vintage, from my family's own winery."

Suspicion again tickled Gulraast's mind. But hadn't they both just profited from this exchange? Gregorio would never be so very, very foolish. And there were ways to detect duplicity. "Of course! Voy will do honors." So that no one could poison Gulraast's glass.

The enormous pig-man uncorked, sniffed, and poured two drinks in long-stemmed glasses.

Gulraast swirled the rich red wine and noted the flow down the sides. Smooth and even. No clotting to indicate anything other than wine. A sniff, and the dry, heady scent indicated strong fermentation, but nothing untoward.

They toasted, and he held the wine at his lips, not drinking as Draga downed a good portion of his. He smiled inwardly. *Just wine then*, he thought, and drank. "Ah, a superior vintage. Is from family holdings, yes?"

"Yes, our ancestors began as vintners long before Ancient King Arikan came to Telloria. But those were mostly coastal endeavors as the Tellorian interior is too cold for many kinds of grape."

"Ah, was wondering. Forseno is somewhat northerly, no?"

"It is, sir. Fortunately, many cases were saved when we abandoned our lands in the face of that war and moved to Forseno. Since then we've repurchased a few of our vineyards and wineries. Nostalgic, perhaps, but worth the effort to reclaim our heritage." They finished their glasses, and Voy poured another.

A pleasant warmth was spreading through Gulraast's chest. "Ah, heritage. Where would any of us be without it, no? Though sometimes am wondering if Ancient King Arikan did service to people when dividing continent amongst heirs. Much upheaval went into unification, no? Your family is being example. And then to throw aside unification in favor of division once more? And for what? So children can be having playthings? Bah." He finished another glass.

"It is true," said Draga. "Although one must admit, the Ancient King saw much that we mere immortals cannot. It's a common view in Telloria that he wished the strongest of his Scions to ascend to the throne."

Gulraast coughed. "Ah, but at what cost? Could be doing this with contests amongst Scions alone, no? Why drag populations in? Is typical aristocratic mindset. What is mine is being mine, and what is yours is also being mine. Including lives. Bah! Is no good."

Draga smiled and poured more wine. "Well, I would remind my honored interlocutor that the Tellorian aristocracy is alive and well, and often takes great pains to see to the common man."

Gulraast coughed, and washed it away with a long sip. "Of course! Is not for friends to be lecturing. Must forgive this old revolutionary."

Draga spread his hands. "There is nothing to forgive. It is right and proper that you would promote your viewpoint, even as we promote ours." He patted the treaty. "And with the changes we make to this treaty, rest assured that Felskar will remain safe from Telloria for as long as it takes you to conclude your war with Kartoresh."

Gulraast coughed hard. "Changes? Am not understanding— *cough cough!*" He looked at the wine, and at Draga's empty glass. Poison!

Draga's grin revealed his inner wolf. "I, of course, took the antidote before we arrived."

The two guards transformed in less than a second and hurled themselves at Voy. Draga's grin transformed into a snarling snout and snarl, and he leaned across the desk to grab Gulraast. He caught Gulraast's shirt, and they struggled. Gulraast was shockingly strong for his size, something the wolf clearly hadn't anticipated.

A wolf guard tackled Voy around his midsection and pinned him against the wall. The other smashed his fist into the pig-man's face. This merely annoyed Voy. He caught the next punch, and twisted. The wolf yelped as his wrist snapped like a twig. Voy brought both meaty hands down on his grappler's back. But the werewolf held him fast while the other reached for his sword with his good arm.

Gulraast struggled hard, and his breathing got markedly worse. He finally got a hand on the dagger strapped beneath his desk and slashed at Draga's fingers. The wolfman let go, and Gulraast shot beneath his desk. He slammed two of the many buttons underneath.

Alarm bells began ringing throughout the townhouse, and down in the deep levels where the Unionists and Linemen had their barracks. At the same moment, technomantic electricity exploded throughout the room. Everything metal acquired an intense magnetic charge. Two nearby sculptures slammed together, a pair of pictures yanked each other off the walls, and the wolf guard's sword stuck halfway out of its sheath. He yanked and yanked but couldn't pry it free. The metal doorknob was now completely fused. The guards immediately outside yanked and yelled, but couldn't get it open.

Voy brought his knee up three times into his grappler's chest. The third blow sent the werewolf reeling back. The second guard abandoned his blade and flew into a frothing rage of claws and fangs. His first swipe slashed Voy's throat, and thick rich blood flew.

Gulraast grabbed his gauntlet off a low shelf built into the desk, and forced his hand into the fused fingers. Every third breath had him hacking up great gobs of phlegm. Draga had come around the other side, and reached for Gulraast. A jolt of power unfused the gauntlet's fingers, and Gulraast seized Draga's hand. He let Draga yank him out, then ramped his gauntlet to full power. Draga howled in fury and the reek of charring hair filled the room.

Voy stumbled backwards, gushing blood. He ripped his sword belt free, and wielded the weapon still in its scabbard. The werewolf sneered and rushed in again. Voy swung like a lumberjack and bashed the wolf across the face. The wolf staggered, and slashed blindly. More blood flowed from Voy's arms, but the pig-man was undeterred. He reversed his grip and with a mighty heave smashed the pommel into the werewolf's gut. Despite the armor, air flew from its lungs. Another bash across the back of the head brought the wolfman down. Voy's cloven hoof smashed its head like a grape. The other werewolf leaped at him, but he caught it by the throat and hurled it bodily through the thick office door. Wood shattered and splinters flew, and the gathered guards outside slaughtered the beast in seconds. Voy collapsed.

A half dozen guards rushed in to aid Gulraast, but he restrained them with a gesture. Gulraast released Draga and the searing ceased. The werewolf was on hands and knees, and had reverted back to human form. His breathing was ragged, and his hand was a bony, charred mess, but he lived.

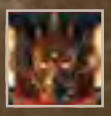
Gulraast spoke through frequent coughs. "Chain him *cough* in lab... And take poison wine bottle too—*cough cough*"

A human Lineman guard picked it up. "It fell over. There's not much left."

"*cough* Bring anyway. Voy, assist please." He glanced, saw the prone Voy, and his eyes went wide. "If Voy still lives, take him as well *cough*."

Gulraast's lab was ordinarily a study in mad science and technomantic wizardry, complete with electric arcs zapping to and fro between copper coils and specimen jars that lined shelf after shelf. But cleanup from the destruction wrought by the attacks on all the ambassadors was still ongoing. Pig-men cleared away debris and scooped shattered glass coated with dangerous chemicals into bins for the incinerator. Half his equipment had been wrecked. But luck hadn't completely abandoned Gulraast. The one device he needed remained undamaged.

The guards chained Draga to the wall by wrists and ankles. Four powerful Union pig-men hefted Voy onto an experimentation table overhung with tools, manipulator arms, and jagged instruments. Another set Gulraast down in front of Draga.



Gulraast hocked up a huge ball of phlegm and spat. "So. Is conscious? Good. Will give one chance to be naming poison. *cough* Or things will... eh... escalate. Is proper word, no? *cough cough hack*" He spat again.

Draga still clung to his predator's grin. "I don't even know it. And, with the amount you consumed, you likely have less than ten minutes. You're a dead man. If addanii can be called 'men'."

Gulraast ignored the barb and went to his table for a syringe with an imposing needle. He turned back to Draga and said through coughs, "Is true. Am feeling numbness very much. *cough* And mass is factor, no? Despite *cough* superior constitution, am but half size of 'real man', no? But am thinking Voy is in very much more difficulty. *cough cough*. Wound is being too deep for bandage. Even surgeon's skilled hands might prove insufficient. No, what is needed is coagulant. *cough* Ah, but lab is smashed, no? Most chemicals and mixtures destroyed. *cough cough* Is predicament!"

Indeed, blood streamed freely down Voy's table and pooled around a large drain in the floor. Voy, his old friend and companion, had mere minutes, where Gulraast had perhaps a little more.

Gulraast jammed the needle into Draga's leg and pulled steadily on the plunger.

Draga squirmed and grit his teeth, but did not call out. "That won't help you."

"Do not be lecturing. *cough* Is time for listening." He was wracked with a coughing fit for a long moment. He waved off a Union pig-man that stepped up to assist. He recovered shortly and injected a blood sample into five sealed test tubes. He loaded the tubes into a centrifuge and pressed several buttons, then set it to whirring. It chugged and steamed as the motor whirled them in a tight circle. Electricity sparked from spindles at its periphery, and several collection jars stood below intricate spigots. One began oozing thick, gloppy blood. One dribbled clear, viscous liquid, another a thicker green, and to others collected reddish and whitish fluids. Acrid ozone wafted through the air.

Gulraast was starting to feel a little faint, and his vision dimmed for half a second. But Voy needed him. He looked at Draga. "So, is time for science lesson, no? *cough*"

"Waste your minutes as you wish, addanii. You dare not destroy me. I'm cousin to our ambassador."

Gulraast was working at his table, and kept his breathing shallow, but steady. "Lesson in science *and* politics, am thinking." He took as deep a breath as he could and wracked himself with coughing. He spat up a shocking amount of phlegm into a collection jar. "Forgive poor manners." A dropper dribbled equal portions of greenish plegm on glass slides. He glanced at Draga and spoke between coughs. "Are being aware of poison's interaction with lungs? No? Is same poison was used on Kartoresh Ambassador am thinking? *cough cough*"

Draga's grin said it all. "Guess."

"*cough cough* All science is guess, yes, is true. But is being educated guess. Gregorio has guessed, and guessed wrong. Nasier's house surgeon consulted many apothecaries on Fructus. And, as being humble man of science, such queries came to own door. So, is with certainty am saying that numbness of tissues did not occur for ambassador, and Nasier wine is being notoriously weak. Thus, poison does not act on nerves. *cough cough*"

"I care not. So long as it works. Your wizardry will not save you."

Gulraast spat. He could feel the fluid moving in his lungs. "Is most effective, this toxin. Action is clotting agent, in truth. Binds up lungs. Can no longer clear fluids. *cough* Victims drown selves, no? *cough cough cough*" Another wracking fit hit him. When he recovered he found he couldn't draw more than half a breath. Not much time at all, for him or Voy. "But where coagulant is very bad for lungs, is very good in deep wounds."

He watched the centrifuge whirring and crackling. "You see, science is gathering of knowledge. *cough* Technomancy is tool to aid science and drive industry. Is often one is mistaken for other." The device dinged and halted. He gathered samples from each jar, even the one that was obviously blood. A Union man carried them to his table.

"But, as was saying, poison is being coagulant, no? Precisely what Voy is needing. Relies on properties of proteins and interaction with phelgm and oxygen within lungs. *cough* Lungs begin to clot. Is very bad."

He used a fresh dropper to add a bit of each chemical to the phlegm droplets on the slides. One did nothing. Three fizzed at varying energetic degrees. The last erupted in a spark and smoked. His brows lifted, and he chuckled."Hmm. Not be using that one. But this..." He picked up the second most energetic fizzing sample and examined it carefully under a monocle amid random coughs. "*cough* Ah, but Voy would be reminding me that initial coagulation is result of platlet interaction with air, and platlets of bloodstream cannot clot with wound that flows too free. He is very knowledgeable, our Voy." He coughed long and hard again. He was feeling even fainter.

He continued. "*cough* No, what is needed is much stronger clot. More like scab, which is being made of many, many millions of tiny strands. Is fibrin, these are being called." In the monocle he watched tiny strands form from nothing and wrap themselves around one another. In seconds, a scab had formed on the slide. He nodded and coughed. "This is being

poison." His eyes fluttered again and he swooned. The Union man steadied him, and Gulraast patted his hand. "Be getting breathing mask. The ones meant for Hadross demonstration." The pig-man rushed off.

Draga addressed the nearest Lineman. "When your master is dead, you'll release me immediately. Otherwise my cousin will bring full Tellorian might down on your heads. No one will survive. Am I clear?"

The Lineman glared, and looked to Gulraast who still worked at his table.

Gulraast shook his head, and doused all the remaining harvested poison onto a heavy bandage. He hacked up more phlegm and spat on the bandage. He handed it to the Lineman. "*cough* Be applying immediately to Voy. Bind it tight, no?"

The Lineman nodded, and the pig-man returned with the breathing apparatus, a small tank attached to a mask that covered the mouth and nose. Gulraast breathed as deeply as he could for a long moment. His head cleared, but this was only a stop-gap. He turned back to Draga. "And now, have done best for Voy. Is not being most sanitary procedure either. Eh, but infection is distant concern to blood loss, no? And, have guessed at several factors. But, when time is short, the ends must justify the means. This is the Humanum way."

Draga took a moment to gloat. "Your pet is nothing. And you have no idea which of those might be the antidote. And besides, that trifiling amount wouldn't be near enough."

Gulraast held the mask away. He couldn't keep from wheezing. "Ah…, but still is in your blood…, yes?"

"Poisons and antidotes counteract each other in varying amounts. I may not be a wizard, but this is simple herbology. You'll never get enough in time."

Gulraast grinned behind his mask. "Ah, herbology. Is quaint practice, but perhaps best one can expect from Telloria. *cough cough* And is true, poisons and antidotes are often reacting at chemical level to become neutral agent. Or at least non-lethal. *cough*"

He showed Draga the other two collections jars. Each held a thimble-full of clear and green liquid, respectively. "Is temporal sieve. Wonder of technmantic engineering. Can separate mixtures at chemical level using time itself. *cough*. Ah, but now is weighty question:

"Which one is being useless components of bloodstream and digestion, and which is antidote, hm? Is time for guess, hm? *cough* *COUGH!*" He nearly dropped the vials with his hacking.

"Fine, you win. It's the clear one."

Gulraast smirked. His brain was clouded, and even the breathing mask did little to lift the fog. "Am not to be accepting word. *cough*" His voice was getting weak, and he had to sit on the floor. "Final science lesson, Draga. Science is observation, hypothesis, and experiment. This is essence. *cough*. Observation: clear fluid has viscosity of water. Would mix well with wine. Green is oily. Would not mix well. Hypothesis: green is antidote. And, *cough* as for experiment, well… Poisons is being metabolized enough that simple oral consumption will prove inadequate. Must aerate, and breathe." He unscrewed the filter cap from his breathing apparatus and poured the runny green fluid in. "Now, we see, no?"

It didn't take long. Draga's eyes hardened as Gulraast breathed as deep as he could. The aerated antidote filled his nose and mouth with a strong, saccharine scent. "Is strange," he said through the mask. "Most medicines are being bitter." He could feel the fluid breaking up near the top of his lungs. He leaned over and hacked up a mass of horrid, brackish phlegm, full of blood clots and ooze. But he could breathe a little better.

He poked at the substance. "Hmm. Am thinking lung capacity may be permanently damaged. Must be certain to thank Gregorio for unexpected gift." He coughed and spat again. "Ah, but can tell, this amount is not being nearly enough. Will need more antidote, no?"

Draga sneered. "What a shame. You've used it all up."

Gulraast's eyes hardened. "And now is lesson in politics. Gregorio has overstepped bounds at long last. Was pushing such with attack on ambassadors, but did well to lay blame at my door with gold maker's imprint. *cough cough* And yet, is not enough for old bat. Is being greedy with wanting treaty rewritten for full favor of Tellorian interests. *cough* Is seeming to my humble self that he cannot abide losing simple bet. And for what? Sixty ingots? Treaty? *Pride?* I may never be knowing. *cough*. But again, can guess."

Draga was gritting his teeth. "We can accept the terms as they are. Release me, and I'll discuss it with him."

"Ah, and is other fault he is making by sending catspaw instead of self. No, no, do not deny role he is granting you. Your cousin is never quite being friend he seems, even to family. But, here is lesson: Politics is not to be solving problems. Politics is to be serving interests. *Nation's* interests. Not personal. Is bad for Telloria to make enemy of Felskar. *cough cough* Of me. *cough* Linemen: the needles. Will be needing many, many more samples."

Three Linemen, one after the other, picked up long-needled syringes and converged on the bound werewolf.

Draga's eyes widened. "I'm warning you! There will be blood for this."

Gulraast's voice was still weak. "Ha! You make joke! *cough cough coughhhh*"

"I'll tell you anything! Anything you want! Like… the troops!"

Gulraast held up his hand. The Linemen halted.

A glimmer of hope crept into Draga's voice. "Yes, we have about four hundred men inside the city staying in taverns and houses we own, and down in Redwater District. And beyond the walls there are five times that number! But you're not the first target! It's Kartoresh. They have the most troops, so we have to take them out first. You, Ironward, you have plenty of time to get away with the gold *and* the treaty! But if you kill me, the treaty is impossible."

Gulraast nodded sagely. "Is true. And Voy would be reminding me that is Humanum Way to serve nation's interests above own."

Draga nodded, relieved. "This is very wise."

"Ah, but am still needing antidote for self. Temporal sieve is not so efficient. And Voy…" He looked at the pig-man, breathing shallowly on the table behind him. "Well. He is having nap." Gulraast's grin went savage. "Linemen. Do your duty."

The screaming and snarling stopped after the fifteenth syringe. And, once Draga's heart finally failed, further draws were useless.

Gulraast was breathing much easier, though he didn't like the look of the bloody masses he was coughing up. It angered him. More than it should. He sat at his worktable with a large bucket nearby. He waved a Lineman over. "Gregiorio is having many troops. Is first step in war, to seize Fructus City. Is time we returned home. Be using evacuation plan gamma. Remove Draga's corpse to upper levels and burn entire townhome to ground in morning. Then we evacuate to ship, and leave with tide. But first, bring quill and ink. Must be sending Gregorio messenger. One he will not expect."

When the Lineman returned, Gulraast sat next to the unconscious Voy. The huge pig-man's breathing was shallow, but stable.

Gulraast was musing his options. He finally settled on one. "Yes, a messenger to match monster for monster. Is best to fight fire with fire sometimes, no? Message begins: To Alyana Heska, Senior Hakar…"

Chapter Twelve - Paragons

Alyana's skin was flaking off. She peeled at a patch of ashen skin on the back of her hand. It came away in flecks and dust to reveal her normal light olive tone beneath. It had been more than a decade since she'd seen it like this.

Morning sunlight streamed across the bar, and she examined her hand as if it were an alien thing. It'd all be back to 'normal' soon. Within the day most likely. It itched a little. "Well. That didn't take long,"

The Sevridan, also using the bar as his only means of support grunted. "What's that, Nasier? Wait, did you catch leprosy or something?"

"Shut up, Hadross." She finally noticed the daylight. "Oh, shit, the sun is way up. Gotta be mid-morning. I haven't slept this late in years."

The Sevridan, Ooroth was his name, opened an eye or three. He hid them behind his arms. "Sad to say. But the world turns on."

"No mask. That's why I passed out."

"And I only have my poor judgment to hide behind. You have me at a disadvantage, madam."

She chuckled. The morning bartender, if there was such a thing at a Dockside dive, put mugs of water before them, unasked. Alyana raised it in thanks and drank heavily.

Ooroth's mug smelled like seawater, but the Sevridan wasn't drinking.

She pointed. "Wouldn't that help?"

"Don't tell a drunkard his business," said the Hadrossian. But he pushed himself up and drank as deeply as she did. He looked at her again. "And are you… er, smaller?"

She shrugged. "I wasn't built very tall."

"Why do your clothes still fit?"

She laughed. "Residual magic. I mean, you've seen us in battle. Our size is a bit variable. It's another reason some of our troops don't wear much. I mean, really, when your skin alone can turn a blade, why wear clunky armor?" She plucked at her robe. Normally it was tight-fitting, but now it was a tad large. "There are limits though. These will probably be pretty really loose by tomorrow. Hells and death, I'll have to get new clothes." She slapped the bar. "I *despise* shopping!"

Ooroth held his head. "Please, don't do that."

She regarded him. Her head hurt, but it wasn't bad. But then, she'd passed out long before Ooroth. "You do this every night?"

He shrugged fluidly. "When I can."

"I don't understand."

"We talked about this last night."

She tried to think. Blank. "I don't remember."

"Well. To each their own ways." He turned back to his seawater and nursed it for a time. "I'd ask my gods for guidance. But I'm not sure I trust them."

She was on her third flagon of water, and was feeling like she should get some food. "I feel the same about our gods. It's a matter of record that the old elemental religions enslaved humankind. We have to be wary. But, in theory, our deities see us from a vastly different perspective. Sometimes that's a good thing. Like having drinks with you here. If it helps, I don't think of all Hadrossians as slimy, wheedling, sycophants any longer."

He snorted. "Thanks so much." He picked up his mug. "It's true, you and I don't seem terribly different as humankind goes. I'm pretty sure now that not every Nasier wants to scourge the ocean floor with fire. Just as not every Hadrossian wants to drown the land beneath the waves. Some of us still like the surface." He paused and glanced at her. "… and the beauty to be found there," he said into his mug.

She did a double take. "Are you flirting with me, Hadross?"

He purpled. "Oh, sure, *now* you notice. Sorry. I know how disgusting I am."

She smiled and patted his hand. "You're not so bad. But, if this war starts, and if I ever get my rank back, we may face each other across the battlefield. Kind of dampens any romantic possibilities."

He sighed. "Likewise."

She raised her mug. "To our renewed enmity."

He laughed as they toasted.

"Captain!" called an armored Deepman from the door. He hurried over to the Sevridan. "I'm glad to have found you so quickly. A large armed force has gathered in the market and is marching towards the Nasier compound."

"Banners?" she demanded.

The Deepman shot a questioning glance at his captain. Ooroth nodded, and the Deepman told her, "None. Mercenaries is the rumor."

"Gregorio," she hissed.

The Deepman continued, "Captain, the ambassador wishes an armed escort to the Tower."

"What?! Tide and teeth, why?"

The Deepman looked helpless. "He didn't say. And he sent two Deepcallers off with a third of our force for a 'secret mission.'"

"Fucking frozen depths! This very circumstance is exactly why he moved our seat to the estate! And then, just when I actually need our entire force, he sends them away! Brilliant. Depths damn his eyes!" He thought a moment. "Round up everyone else you can find and muster at the estate. If we go, we go *en masse*. I'll be there soon. Don't worry. I won't let him throw our lives away on nonsense."

The Deepman saluted gratefully and hurried out.

Ooroth ordered three mugs of seawater while Alyana fumed. "Laying siege, your man said. I wish he'd had more details. What numbers? What equipment? What's their posture? Attack or containment? And will they start lobbing in fire to smoke us out? We've got preparations for these contingencies, but none of my hakars have actually been in a siege. Giving or receiving."

"They're not trained?"

She scoffed. "Of course they're trained! They know all the strategies, but they've only learned the concepts and done the drills. There's a big difference between mock enemies and real ones."

"Point."

Her fists clenched. "I can't even go up there to fight. Let alone command."

"You still have your skills."

She pointed to her flaking face. "Not like this!"

"There's more to a commander than their personal prowess—"

"Not my skin, Hadross. My mask! I'm *not in command!*" The frustration tore at her heart. "I'd only be in the way. Plus, how would I even get into the compound if it's already under siege? I don't have any intelligence on the situation."

"You've surely got a bolthole or two."

"Of course, but… well it depends on their numbers. I need more information."

Ooroth had no answers. He started downing mugs as quick as he could swallow. "Time is short, but I can try to find out, if you want."

She had never felt quite so uncertain. She hated the feeling.

A grubby mustached man in a dusty longcoat tugged at her sleeve. "You are being Senior Hakar? Alyana Heska, no?"

She looked him up and down. "Close enough, Felskar. What do you want?"

"Was not expecting to be finding you here. Took many hours. Message." He handed over a folded note, sealed with the symbol of House Teknes of Felskar. He left quickly.

She broke the seal and read. Fury began to build. She grit her teeth.

Ooroth drained his mug. "Trouble? I mean more than an active siege and troops marching through—"

She hurled it to the bar in front of him. "Read that!"

Ooroth scanned it, and his eyes bulged, which was saying something. "*Two thousand troops* under march? How in the depths did Gregorio move all those? And keep them hidden?"

She already knew the answers. "It can be done. You rely too much on the sea for your sneak attacks, Hadross. Fructus' southern half is riddled with caves and inlets, and there are several uninhabited valleys where you could easily hide two or three platoons. Keep cold camps. Don't hunt or forage, but bring all your supplies. Active sentries, and kill anyone who approaches." She had to admire the maneuver, even if it spelled doom. "It can be done," she said again.

"And four hundred inside the city…" Ooroth was shaking his head. "Well. If they're focused on you, then at least my troops can get to the Tower on Jahroon's fool errand. Even if it does leave your people outnumbered at least four-to-one. Before the city walls break…"

The bartender had begun by listening surreptitiously, but now she gaped openly. "Pardon, Sevvy, did you say four hundred foreign troops inside the walls?" When Ooroth nodded, the bartender dropped her mug and fled. The few morning patrons followed suit.

Ooroth stared at the abandoned tap for a long moment, but shook his head. "A dream come true, and I've got duties to perform. Dammit. And what about you, Alyana? What will you do?"

She was still furious, but she kept her head. She wondered if the lack of a mask was helping at all with that. "Doing some math. Two thousand beyond the walls, and four-to-one inside. If Gregorio is taking Fructus, then we can't stop him, but at least the Watch is competent enough to hold him at the gates for a time."

"Assuming he hasn't bought them off. This is Gregorio we're talking about here."

"Hells and death! You're right. And they won't simply throw their lives away. A token defense, perhaps, and not much more. It's time to leave. But not before burning Gregorio's mansion down with him inside!" She surprised even herself with her savagery. But she deflated. "At least, that's what I'd advise, if I wasn't stuck sitting in a hell-blasted Dockside bar *without my mask!*" She held her arms wide and yelled to the skies.

Her instinct was to go. But to accomplish what? She drew one of her blades. It felt heavy, overbalanced. *Tulus* swords were built that way deliberately, of course. The better to capitalize on the Ashmen's great strength. A strength that was fast seeping from her muscles. "I could still fight. At least a little."

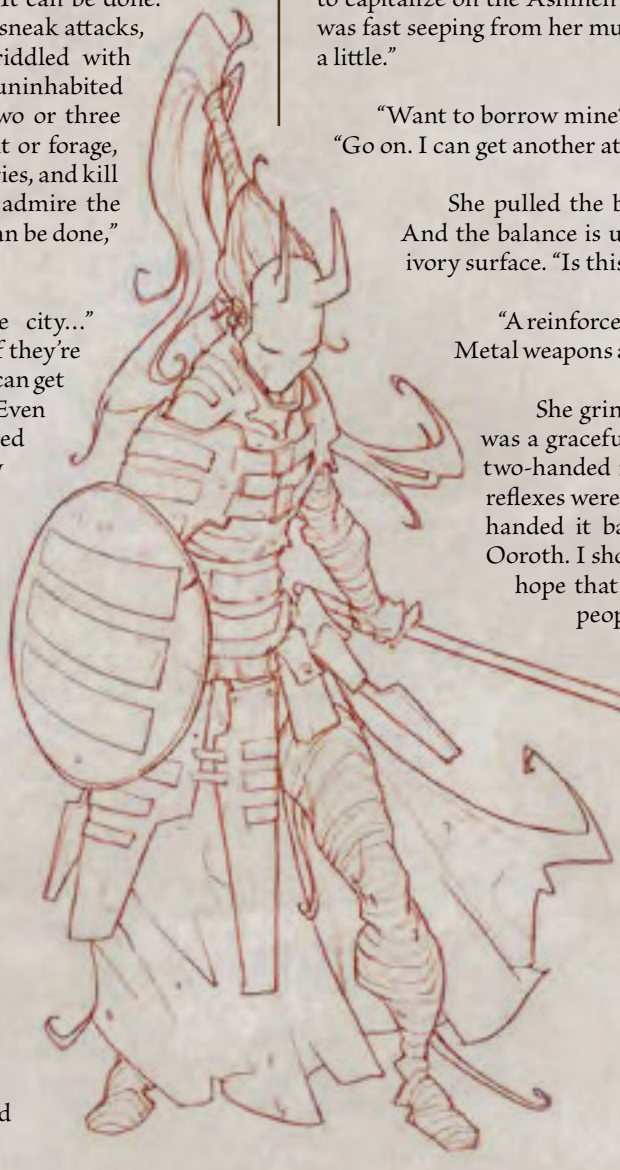
"Want to borrow mine?" He offered her his greatsword. "Go on. I can get another at the estate."

She pulled the blade from its sheath. "It's light! And the balance is unusual." She tapped the smooth ivory surface. "Is this bone?"

"A reinforced ceramic. Magical construction. Metal weapons and salt water don't usually mix."

She grinned, tight-lipped. "Of course." It was a graceful weapon. But she hadn't fought two-handed in years. It wasn't her style. Her reflexes were for paired blades. She sighed and handed it back. "You're very good to offer, Ooroth. I should stick with what I know, and hope that I can be of some service to my people. At the very least, someone in authority needs to see this note. It's enough proof for us to act on, and bring that vampire to justice." She pocketed the Ironward's message.

Ooroth nodded. "Well, if you're going, then at least disguise yourself. Here." He grabbed the barwoman's heavy cloak, abandoned on its peg, and held it out.



She wrinkled her nose at the thought of a disguise, but… "You make a good point." She shrugged into the cloak and drew it tight about her. The hood was deep. Good. "Well. Thanks for the drinks."

He laughed. "My pleasure." He got to his feet. "Now for the ambassador's idiocy."

She squeezed his shoulder, oddly firm. "You're a hero, Hadross. Your men see it, even if you don't. Die well."

She left him looking troubled, and she made her way into the streets. The panic hadn't begun yet, but there were signs. Closed shops, citizens hurrying, and a steady flow of harried traffic towards the docks. She hoped the guards on the Nasier galleon would prove sufficient.

She scooped up a flower basket from some townhouse steps, apparently abandoned. She walked quickly but steadily, and did her best to mimic the distraught mood in the streets. Without her mask, it wasn't that hard.

The Kartoresh compound was northeast of Cathedral District. Two estates had been purchased and enclosed with high, thick walls. The eastern wall overlooked the cliffs above Redwater District far below, an awful place full of criminals and the destitute, but also a possible means of entry, if access to the estate was completely blocked.

She turned a cobblestoned corner and saw a column of dangerous-looking men in blackened chainmail marching northeast. They carried grapples and siege ladders. She counted the rungs on one. Perfectly sized for the Nasier compound's walls. This had definitely been planned in advance, and she knew Ravenscar Mercs when she saw them, with or without their banners. Perhaps they weren't here on Telloria's behalf, but they were certainly acting in Tellorian interests.

More than a few onlookers lined the streets. They murmured to each other, obviously nervous. But this was Cathedral District, affluent and important. Surely they'd be safe. Right? Alyana knew better. Once this started, it wouldn't stop. "It's time to leave," she muttered to herself. "But not before Gregorio pays with his head."

Redwater it was. She'd have to find her way in through the sewer entrance.

It took time, more than she wanted, but she finally made her way to Redwater. The rotting district stank of feces and despair. She'd smelled worse, of course, but the hopeless miasma about the district always depressed her. She wondered who could live there, but then, very few actually chose to live in such places. They simply lacked the means to escape. Today, however, conversation buzzed about the troops in the city. Many eyes turned upwards towards the Nasier compound, high on the overlooking cliff. She could hear the siege underway. She felt disconnected from it, echoing down from the high cliff.

She should be there. Her *place* was there! She kept moving. Fortunately she didn't have to deal with any criminal elements on her way. Redwater was safe enough in daylight, and the siege had called a holiday on casual muggings.

The sewer entrance was a one of many wide drain pipes cut into the cliff face. Cathedral District's foul refuse spilled straight onto Slate Street, whose once-ornate sign had been scratched out to read Shit Street. Even Redwater residents avoided it. And when it rained…. Even Alyana shuddered to think, hardened veteran that she was.

She found the right drain pipe, large enough for two men abreast, and wrenched open the grate. Its lock had long since disappeared. A large 'X' was chalk-marked just inside. Alyana studied it a moment with narrowed eyes. Not sure what to make of it, she turned to the darkened tunnel. A lightstone held aloft lit her way. Two right turns, straight past the left, then up a flight of wide service steps, cut straight into the stone, and so on. More and more time passed, but getting lost in the labyrinthine sewers would win her nothing. She found chalked arrows and X's along the route. Her suspicions grew as she made her way steadily upward until she smelled something above the miasmic reek. Torch smoke? She proceeded even more cautiously.

Voices ahead. She memorized the ground to the limit of her stone's light, then doused the stone. She made her way with a hand on one seeping wall. Sure enough, light flickered around a distant corner, and the voices were louder, more distinct. Two men, one woman. She was in charge. "No, make the chalk marks wider. That's too small. We've got to find this place again, and fast."

"It's not like it'll rain," a man complained.

"Do as you're told."

"Yes, sergeant."

Soldiers then? Not Nasiers or their voices would've been altered by their masks. The light was growing, and there was nowhere to hide.

Alyana drew her swords and shrugged off the cloak. She stood against the wall to one side of the wide corridor entrance. An armored mercenary, much like the ones above, stepped out, chalk in hand. Alyana swept a heavy blade in a wide arc. She chopped deep into his neck. He gurgled and collapsed as blood spewed.

She roared in the echoing tunnel and charged the next stunned merc. This one had a sword in his offhand. He'd dropped his chalk and was in mid-draw when Alyana hit him. He parried badly, lost some skin through his bracer, and counter-attacked. The bloody Ravenscars were nearly

unflappable.

The sergeant had dropped both map and torch, and her crossbow came up. She maneuvered for a clear shot. Alyana kept the merc between her and the sergeant. She knew how deadly they were. She swept towards the merc. Her blades worked like shears, and forced him back and again. She knew his tricks, and parried, ducked, and blocked.

But the air wasn't chilled, as it would have been with her powers. She was but a normal human. Skilled, but weak. Slow. And wielding weapons too heavy for her. What would have taken mere seconds took almost half a minute of wearing the merc down. Finally he overextended, she sidestepped, reversed grip, and stabbed up under his armor. He collapsed, and took her sword with him.

The sergeant's crossbow twanged. Alyana felt the impact above her right breast all the way through to her back. The bolt had gone clean through. The shock staggered her, but there was no time. The sergeant reloaded and Alyana charged.

The sergeant got the crossbow up as Alyana reached her. The crossbow twanged, but Alyana's desperate slap ruined its aim. The bolt whizzed into the darkness down the tunnel.

Now they fought in desperate quarters. Ravenscar crossbows were incredibly well-made weapons, and this one had a triple-bladed bayonet for stabbing. But stabbing and quick slashes were all the weapon could do in close quarters. It made the sergeant predictable.

Stab, thrust, sidestep, parry, they worked their intricate dance. No matter how hard she hacked, the damn crossbow just wouldn't break, and the sergeant managed to work the action lever. It was cocked. Damn, but these Ravenscars were skilled! Alayna was breathing hard through clenched teeth.

The sergeant feinted, Alyana whiffed, and the bolt was set. The crossbow came up, and fired as Alyana threw herself prone next to the dead merc. Her heavy blade went skittering. The bolt skipped off the wall near her head, and the sergeant rushed forward, dagger in hand. Alyana rolled to her back, with one of the dead merc's dropped weapons in hand. She stabbed up at the sergeant's chest. The sergeant's own weight finished the job, impaled through armor and heart.

Alyana watched the woman's mouth work noiselessly in complete shock, then her eyes rolled back and she collapsed.

Alyana's own breathing came in gasps. Her right lung was on fire. She suspected it was filling with blood. She spat. Blood indeed.

The sergeant's dropped torch was guttering, so she pulled out her lightstone and had a look at the map the sergeant had been following. It was a direct route from the entrance to the Kartoresh compound's underground entrance. This was a scouting force, no doubt. The door was heavily secured, but a half dozen troops could get it down, and then her troops would be facing enemies on two fronts. At least she'd stopped them for the moment.

She found her second sword easily enough, but it took more effort than she expected to yank her sword free from the dead merc. Her heart hadn't slowed down at all. Another danger sign. She followed the tunnel to the end. The Ravenscars had chalked the route perfectly in thick, heavy marks. She thought about rubbing out the marks, but they'd had a map. They could easily have more. At best, she'd just delayed the inevitable.

It hurt to breathe, and deep breaths were impossible.

She reached the door and used the secret knock. Three taps, two second pause, four taps, one second, two taps. The peephole slid open, and a masked Ashman glared out.

"It's Heska," she wheezed.

The peephole slammed shut and hurried hands undid the many locks and bolts. The Ashman flung open the door in time to steady her from falling. "Senio—er, Citizen Heska! What has happened?"

"Mercs in the tunnels. They know about this entrance."

"You're wounded!"

She smiled weakly. "They're worse off. But now, I need to get this message to the ambassador."

The Ashman shook his head. "He is dead. We found him cold this morning."

She looked down a moment. Damn.

"But the deputy arrived yesterday afternoon. She now has charge of the mission."

She put the Ironward's letter in his hands. "You must get this to her. This entire mission has been sabotaged by the Tellorian ambassador."

"What?! He will pay! Let me get you to the Surgeon first."

She shook her head, panting. "There's no time."

She could sense the smirk behind his mask. "Know your place, citizen. Besides, I believe he's with the ambassador. Just let me secure the door."

He didn't have to carry her, and Alyana would've hated that, but most of her weight was on his arm as they entered the hospital wing.

It was a woman not much older than Alyana under the ambassadorial mask. She helped tend the wounded that lined

the many beds in the hospital wing. The Surgeon performed triage. In truth, most wounds to masked combatants would heal in time if they could be stabilized quickly. Still, more than a few corpses lay stacked against the wall like so much kindling.

The sounds of battle permeated the thick stone walls. Not a melee, but shouts, orders, and screams.

The Ashman got her to a bed. She didn't lay down, but sat heavily, and concentrated on breathing. The bleeding hadn't stopped, and her clothes were soaked through. She saw the Ashman hand the note to the new Ambassador, then point to her. The Surgeon looked between her and the Howl he was treating. He shook his head and kept working. The Ambassador hurried over.

"Heska, when did you get this?"

"About two hours ago. I apologize for not getting here sooner."

The Ambassador waved that away. "You did well. And there were mercenaries in the tunnels?"

"I killed them, but more will follow. May I ask how the battle fares?"

Her mouth was a line. "Not well. We're vastly outnumbered, and this letter says it will only get worse."

"Gregorio must pay."

"I agree, but that's impossible at the moment. We need every man for the walls."

No, they didn't, but she was having trouble concentrating. "I… I'm sorry, I'm just a little weak right now."

An explosion thudded outside. The Ravenscars were known for their pyrotechnics. The Ambassador looked up for a moment, then back. "I was made aware of your suspension yesterday. I'd intended to interview you at length, but there's no time. Vengeance has always been a great weakness of yours. It's well known in the service."

She nodded, head low. It was getting hard to think. "Yes, Ambassador."

"And how do I know you're not just telling me what I want to hear?" The Ambassador's indecision was palpable. "The hakars are unsure whether to barricade ourselves or evacuate through the tunnels. And now you tell me the mercenaries know of our escape route. We're surrounded, outnumbered, and desperate." Another explosion echoed dully through the room. "I have just one question. Can you get us out of this?"

Alyana nodded. "I can try."

The Ambassador put Alyana's mask into her hands. "Then do so."

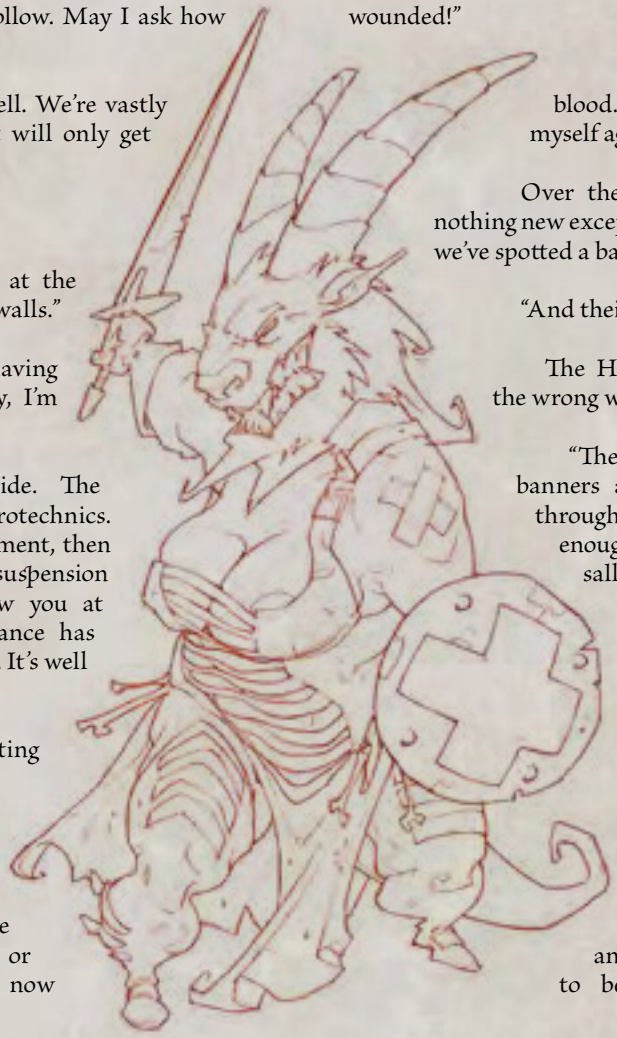
Two minutes later, the masked and mighty Alyana Heska slammed open the estate's huge front doors and strode forth. Her voice echoed through the courtyard. "Howls and hakars to me!"

Many eyes turned her way, and she heard someone yell, "It's the Senior Hakar! Heska! Heskaaa!"

Whoops and triumphant roars followed, and the chant began, "Hes-ka! Hes-ka! Hes-ka!..."

It felt good.

The first of the Pelegarth Howls to reach her had a grin from ear to ear. She saluted. "Senior Hakar it's good to—You're wounded!"



Alyana looked down at the drying blood. "It's nothing. Not anymore. I'm myself again. Situation?"

Over the next few minutes she learned nothing new except from one Ashman Hakar. "And we've spotted a battering ram coming up."

"And their losses versus ours?"

The Howl shook her head. "One-sided the wrong way. What do we do?"

"The unexpected. Ravenscars without banners are still Ravenscars. They fight through attrition. Make them pay enough, and they'll withdraw. We're sallying forth."

Grins and nods all around.

She continued. "Pelegarth will form a phalanx. Ashmen form the core. Longhorns on the flanks, and the greathorns will take point. We'll move outward in an ever-widening arc, then collapse back to the gates. Battle shamans will keep to the walls. Single out anyone with a crossbow and watch for anyone that appears to be giving orders. Cripple their

command structure, and the rest are but rabble. Questions?"

"What's our ultimate objective?"

"Break the siege. Then kill an ambassador. Anything else? Then get to it."

Things unfolded quickly, faster than usual even. Kartoresh troops were professional and disciplined as always, but now they were highly motivated. This was no drill. It was a call to glory.

The walls depopulated save Pelegarth Bloodmaks in pairs to shield for Rathor Battle Shamans. Lances of living fire shot from the shamans' staves and cooked mercs in their boots. The emptying walls had a secondary effect. Enemies moved from the impenetrable main gate to man the ladders. Just as they should.

She took her place in the center at the lead. "Pelegarth! Shield wall!" Shields bashed together beside her. "Greathorns! Make a lane!" The three huge beasts tossed aside the front gate's iron bar and slammed open the doors, crushing more than one hapless merc. With deafening roars, flames and fury, and they charged. Burning footsteps dwindled in their wake.

"Nasiers! By threes! Advance!"

They set off at a three-step pace, following the raging Greathorns. Outside they'd already caused much chaos, and drew fire from nearly every crossbow Not a one of them didn't have a half score of quarrels stuck in their thick hide.

Heska concentrated a moment, and the air chilled perceptibly around her. The ground iced from humidity alone, and her blades trailed vapor. Her troops were, of course, unaffected.

The Pelegarth hit the disorganized mercs like a tidal wave. Shields bashed, swords slashed, and Alyana became a slicing, hacking engine of death. The Pelegarth held formation against an ill-conceived counter-rush, and pushed out even further. Through concussive crossbow shells, blinding smoke, and an unceasing tide, they advanced.

But one Greathorn was down, and the others were teetering. The Ravenscar rearguard had brought itself into something resembling order, and, whatever one might say about mercenary professionalism, they held.

"Nasiers! Walking withdraw! Greathorns: to the rear!"

The formation moved backwards, one-two, one-two, threading past and over Ravenscar bodies. Some still lived, but they moaned or screamed in agony. One was pleading for a mother that he'd never see again. They collected masks where they could. Pelegarth and Ashmen. She personally retrieved the Greathorn's mask. He had died badly, brought down by crossbow bolts and stabbed through the eyes. To her it was irrelevant. Just another battlefield. Just another tactical problem to solve. She wondered a moment if that mental detachment was her or her mask.

The Ravenscars advanced cautiously, but altercations were few over the thirty-second withdrawal. They had almost no fight left. Even the crossbows had taken time to pause.

The gates closed, and the two weary Greathorns put the bar back into place. Everyone relaxed, if for just a moment.

Alyana said, "Well done." The answering cheer made her smile. But there was still work to do. She told a nearby hakar, "See to the wounded. Prepare for another sally."

He saluted, and a shout came from above. "Truce flag! Approaching the gate!"

"Hold fire!" She yelled, and ran up the steps. There was indeed a uniformed officer approaching under the white flag. She ran her eyes over her remaining force. They'd lost thirty percent. She surveyed the Ravenscars. Their afterguard was fresh, and the battering ram would be ready in five minutes. If that.

It did not seem like time for a truce.

She met the Ravenscar commander with a hakar and howl by her side. "What do you want, Tellorian?"

He was an old, grizzled veteran with bright white scars on his weather-beaten face. How he'd kept both eyes, she didn't know. His voice was like gravel. "It's Captain, actually, not Tellorian. Here's the thing, hakar—"

"Senior Hakar."

"Right. Senior Hakar. Well, here's the thing: our orders are to loot and burn this compound. Doesn't mean you have to be in it."

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm not interested in losing any more troops than I have to. We're mercenaries, not patriots. And you lot fight to the death, don't you?"

"Believe it."

He nodded. "I do. Fought your kind before. Thing is, a quick run of the numbers tells this story. Did you know we've got troops outside the city? Our numbers? Well, they're in sight of the walls right now. We're taking Fructus. You can't stop it. No one can. You're outmaneuvered and beaten."

She would *not* grind her teeth. No matter how right he was. "Speak plainly, Captain."

"You got a ship? Provisioned? Then you can go."

"All of us? Just like that?"

He nodded. "Aye."

"Wounded too?"

His expression got wry. "My medics are just a bit busy right now. Take everyone. But you've got to decide right now. Fighting? Or leaving?"

Her brain seethed, and she longed to try her luck just one more time. She didn't think his troops would hold another charge or two. … But then, would hers? Noble and honorable though they were, she didn't have the numbers. And how much of this was her, and how much was her mask?

A name made its way through. *Arikalin. What would my brother do?*

She nodded. "Accepted. You have half an hour to clear a path down to the docks. Any treachery, and I'm coming for you."

He didn't blink, but he bowed. "Half an hour. But, no tricks."

She sneered. "Please. I'm Nasier."

She watched from the walls as he left, flinging orders left and right. The Ravenscars picked up their wounded and began to withdraw. She really, *really* wanted Gregorio dead. Maybe she'd find the time in the coming war.

But she felt it in her heart: Withdrawal was the right call.

She could imagine her brother smiling.

Chapter Thirteen - Bad Blood

Irene was going to kill that old bat.

She found him in his office at the Goritsi estate, his back to the windows and the small lake beyond. The sun stained the clouds a ruddy red, the color of blood.

"Troops! *Our* troops? Are you insane?" she demanded.

He put down his quill and folded his fingers in front of him. "I'm aware of no Tellorian national forces—"

She slammed her fist on the desk. "Do not lie to me! Ravenscars in the streets! And at the walls! And you know all about it. Was this your plan from the beginning? Seizing Fructus?"

"Nothing so mundane."

She waited, but he said nothing. "What then?"

"Oh really, Lady Irene, you must learn patience. If only you mortals had the luxury of time."

"Those 'troops' are out looting the Cathedral District! Were you aware of that?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure the Watch—"

"The Watch surrendered the gates without a fight! Fructus has no standing army!"

He grinned, showing his fangs. "Well, it does now."

She was going to kill him!

Good! Go with that feeling, said the Gift.

She ignored it. "There are people out there losing their lives! And it's your fault!"

He scoffed. "More mortal nonsense. Do you honestly care so much about that rabble? The 'aristocracy' of Fructus was corrupt. Wasteful. Pathetic. Jumped-up pirates and smuggling lords. Paint them however you wish, and drape them in expensive finery; they're still just filth. Honestly, is *this* how you behaved at court? The Sovereign takes a very dim view of protecting the chattel, you know."

She was fuming. "The Sovereign *values* her most humble subjects. She cares very much for their well-being. I can't believe she authorized any of this."

He positively crooned. "Oh, but she did." From his desk he produced a document written in the royal hand.

Gregorio, use whatever means you deem fit to awaken the Gift within Lady Irene.

--Sovereign Valeth Goritsi, First of Her Name, Sovereign of Telloria, the Northwest Marches, and the Night Legions

Irene's hands were shaking. "This… This can't…"

He laughed. "She was furious with you, no? You refused the Gift. *No one* refuses the Gift. Not for long, anyway. Tell me you didn't at least suspect!"

You did, you know. You've been so close to the edge so many times these last weeks. Just a bit more pushing—

She looked up, shocked. He was hard to see, silhoueted by the blood red sun. "But she was angry with *me!* Not the Fructans…."

He leaned forward. "Wait! Is it truly that easy? I had no idea you cared so much about these cretins! I'll make it simple. Accept the Gift, or every last Fructan dies. How does that suit?"

Kill him. Here. Now. The sun is up. I can help.

Her breathing was fast and shallow. Such fury welled within her as she'd never felt. Her vision was tight. Focused.

He grinned wide. "Your eyes tell the tale. Black as the darkest iron, and twice as hard. Ha! Irene the Iron-eyed. Or, Old Ironeyes. Yes, I like that better. There. You have a new title."

His absurd mockery had the opposite effect. She forced herself to calm down and breathe deeply. "Does the Sovereign know how far you've taken this? How far you *would* take it in her name?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't presume to know her mind. Efficiency is a virtue, or so the Achrionians tell me. They're very wise in some things."

"So, you have a greater scheme! I knew it! You know that Telloria can't control Fructus. No one can. It's neutral ground by international treaty. All five Scions signed that treaty!"

"And who am I to break with such a noble and ancient document? Though I admit, it has kept any major power from putting down this den of villains and scum. With no Archon to rule the city properly—" He broke off at her sudden expression. "What are you looking at—?"

"Get Down!" she yelled.

A gigantic mutant crab smashed through the windows. Glass flew, and it crushed Gregorio's chair right where the vampire had been. Gregorio practically flew to the weapon rack by the door and took up his greatsword.

Irene's weapons were out. This was a Calith Reaver, one of Hadross's pets. Its qualities raced through her mind. Clumsy, but strong. Pincers like vices. Shell all but impenetrable to her mortal strength. Weak points: eyes, groin, armor linkages, joints.

The Reaver batted the massive desk aside like a toy and rushed her. Irene tumbled backwards into a roll, sprang up, and used the wall as a springboard to dodge its crushing claws.

Gregorio's captain-of-the-guard burst in. His eyes went big, then red, and he swelled into his oversized armor. Claws, muzzle, and fur sprouted forth. The Skorza Alpha leaped at the Reaver with swords drawn.

Irene circled, intent for an opening as the Reaver and Alpha hacked and bashed at each other. The werewolf had nearly severed one claw, and the wound oozed whitish ichor. She heard wolf howls and shouts throughout the house, and a deep note droned from outside. A quick glance showed more Hadross rising from the lake. She had no idea how they'd managed that. It's not like they could swim upstream. The artificial lake was fed by underground pumps and wells.

Gregorio had vanished.

That coward. Kill him. Take his place. It's the only way to truly protect the people.

"Shut up! You don't know that!" she was yelling out loud.

Oh, but I do. The Gift positively crooned. *Gregorio and I are old friends. He'll give the order. He's just that bloodthirsty. No pun.*

She shoved the voice aside and concentrated. The Alpha and Reaver were locked, claw to claw now. The Reaver was stronger, but the werewolf was enraged. The Alpha needed both arms to keep the Reaver's single claw from closing on his midsection. His fangs tore at its face, but the crab's animal mind was unfazed. They staggered and crashed around the room.

Irene discarded her long blade and leaped on the tumbled desk. She waited half a second for the opening, then hurled herself on the Reaver's back. There were plenty of handholds on its jagged surface. Her dagger pried at cracks in its armor. The Reaver bucked and jumped. It released the werewolf and tried to grab her. She gave up on the dagger, and rolled away. It charged, claw raised and she threw a long-bladed throwing knife. It thudded to the hilt in the soft flesh beneath its arm. The Reaver simply collapsed, its heart pierced.

There was no time to celebrate. Hadross forces were advancing fast. Skorza werewolves had flung themselves at the advancing troops and now roved in loose packs at the periphery, but their numbers were too few to stem the tide. She saw Deepmen, Kaxes, and a Deepcaller towards the rear. That explained their astonishing incursion into this remote

body of water. Hadrossian hydromancers set the standards for their art.

No one was heading directly toward the shattered office window. The Werewolf Alpha moved up beside her. His armor was dented, and he was wheezing. But he stood up straight.

"Are you alright?" he asked. His voice guttural, fierce.

"Fine. Did you see where your illustrious leader ran off to?"

"Likely his sanctum. It is still daylight for at least an hour."

She kept her own counsel on that. "I don't think you can hold these numbers with Skorza alone."

"What choice do we have?"

"I'll rouse the War Dancers. It's only Gregorio who fears death."

The hulking beast looked at her. "Yet, I have fought beside him many—"

"Yes. At night. He's as fearless as they come, but with the sun up he's like a cowardly child." She shook her head. "Do your best. Send for reinforcements from the Ravenscars, if necessary, whatever he might say about their 'neutrality.' Do not throw your lives away."

The Alpha inclined his head. "By your order, Lady Irene." He leaped through the window and was off. He barked commands, quite literally, and the ranging Skorza circling the Hadross formation rapidly came together for a hard-hitting assault. They all carried weapons, but they often used claws and fangs, and ripped bloody mouthfuls from their enemies' living flesh.

More werewolves trickled in from the house, but the Hadrossians moved forward in an implacable march. They were disciplined and tough, and their spears proved baneful to many a charging wolf. From the rear the Deepcaller raised his staff, and she saw a Skorza tear his own skull apart as he shrieked.

Grim-faced, she turned from the scene, and ran down two levels to the darkened crypts where lonely torches stood silent vigil over rows and rows of sarcophagi. The two Zeti War Dancers on duty were eager for information, and shocked at what she said. "Hadross?? They dare?"

"They do. I still don't know why, but the Skorza will be overrun if you don't help."

"Where is Lord Gregorio?" asked the Dancing Master.

Irene's tone belied her words. "Tactical withdrawal. Don't worry. He'll be there."

The vampire nodded and raised her horn to her lips. The blast echoed through the long chamber, and the tombs slid open. War Dancers leapt from their graves by the rank, a score in total.

"Fight well. Do not throw your lives away," Irene told them.

They saluted and headed for the stairs, fast as the wind, and just as silent.

Irene went the other direction to find Gregorio. She caught up with him another level down, just entering his sanctum. He'd taken his time. "Gregorio, stop!" she called, running up to him.

He turned at the heavily reinforced wooden door. "Ah, Lady Irene. Showing the better part of valor are we?"

"What are you doing down here? Your men are dying upstairs!"

"I can't very well fight the Hadrossians without weapons or armor."

She paused. "Well, at least you're not trying to hide."

He scoffed and grinned. "Of course I'm going to hide. I'm not stupid. The sun is up. I'm as fragile as you are."

He tried to go through the door, but she yanked his shoulder. "You coward!"

He slapped her hand away and got in her face. "Keep your place, *mortal*."

His breath was a charnel house. She didn't bat an eye. "Keep yours, 'my lord.' Did you ever wonder why you were sent to Fructus? It's not because your sept is in decline. It's because you fell out of favor, and this kind of behavior is precisely why!"

That's it! Keep pushing him!

His eyes were going black and shiny. "And I have more than earned my triumphant return."

"With what? Breaking international treaty? Starting a war?"

He shouted in her face. "Perfectly positioning our Sovereign to ascend the Empyrean Throne!"

She was taken aback by the audacity.

He's but a pawn playing at knighthood. Kill him. Strike

now, while the sun still holds sway. You want to, and he deserves it. Again, I offer my humble assistance.

She gripped her head. "SHUT! UP!"

Gregorio laughed. "Persistent, isn't it, our great Gift? Not that I needed much persuasion, mind you. Yet, you do. I continually wonder why...."

She opened her mouth for a retort, but the house thudded, and an echo reverberated down the stone walls. She thought she could hear rushing water somewhere above.

He looked up, licked his lips and went inside. Irene followed.

Gregorio's sanctum displayed his treasures. Sculptures, trophies, and paintings adorned the room. Ionic columns supported the high ceiling, and intricate tapestries depicting Telloria's greatest victories hung between them. He went to his custom-built armor and removed it from the mannequin. "If you're coming in, kindly bolt the door." His conversational demeanor had returned.

She slammed it shut and threw the huge bolt. Even an earthquake wouldn't dent its reinforced steel. "You still haven't answered my questions."

He paused, and grinned. "Infuriating isn't it?"

She knew him. He'd say nothing. Not without a knife against his throat.

Then why not put that knife there? The Sovereign loves you far more than Gregorio.

She ignored it. "What can I do, short of the Gift, to spare Fructus?"

He paused again, set his cuirass aside, and turned towards her. "You know of the Ironward? Gulraast? Kill him, and Fructus shall be spared."

She couldn't believe him. "And pull Telloria into a war with Felskar?"

"Prevent one, actually."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Explain."

"A minor miscalculation. Gulraast is far too intelligent for his own good. But, have no fears, this will be seen as an act of retribution. He's killed my cousin, after all."

She thought a moment. "That idiot Draga?"

"True, he was, but proved useful enough as a messenger. He botched his assignment, paid the price, and now I can capitalize on it. And, if I might be so bold, so can you. Kill the Ironward, and Fructus is spared, the Gift is kept at bay, and the Sovereign regales us with accolades and wealth. Just put your knife in that little addanii's heart. I even know where he is."

She found herself considering it.

Bah! Do you really think he'll prove honorable in any of this?

"Where?" she asked.

"Remember that ship you came in on?"

That surprised her.

"Mai Leng's ship?"

"He bought it or something like that. Made her captain even, when the old one vanished. He's hiding there now, probably just waiting for the tide to turn tonight. You have time."

The sanctum door boomed with a tremendous impact. Irene felt like she was inside a drum.

Gregorio hissed and rushed for his greatsword. She stepped into the shadows behind a column.

Another boom, and gouts of seawater spurted from the weakened frame. The door could withstand an earthquake, but not the tide.

It flew off its hinges at the final blow. The Deepcaller strode in, and held the Alpha's dripping head high. "There you are."

Four Deepmen rushed in, spears leveled at Gregorio.

Irene slipped behind a tapestry and flattened against the wall. She hardly breathed, and she stepped carefully. She could afford not an echo, not a sound, not a single ripple in the huge drapery. The Deepcaller was the key.

I agree. Gregorio's good, but he doesn't have his armor on. Maybe you can kill two birds here. With my help, of course.

"Here I am," said the vampire. She could hear his grin. "If Ambassador Jahroon wanted to send a message, a simple note would have sufficed."

"Seize him," said the Deepcaller.

She heard the scuffle, and a gurgling scream. She moved ever onward. Grunts and clashing weapons. Something expensive shattered. Then the sound of surf, and a briny stench filled the air.

She came to the tapestry's edge near a column and saw the Deepcaller walk past. She risked a look. Gregorio was on his back, one leg impaled. Two Deepmen lay dead, and the other two held Gregorio down by his arms. All backs were to her.

The Deepcaller stood over Gregorio and raised his staff. "The message is not from Jahroon, but from the Deep Gods. Hear their sweet song—hurrk!"

Irene's dagger whisked in and out of his ribcage and heart. He fell to his knees, and she whipped the bloody edge across his throat beneath the mass of beard tentacles.

The Deepmen leaped away from Gregorio towards Irene, but he seized one's leg and yanked it to him. He grabbed its head and stared into its face. The Deepman went slack.

The other jerked its sword from its sheath as Irene did the same. He was tough, hard to wound. But he was no match for her rapier and dagger. She killed it in short order, then finished the last one that Gregorio had mesmerized.

"Took you long enough," he said, and plucked at his sodden clothing. "This was good velvet."

She stood over him, breathing hard. She wasn't wounded, but the fight had drained her.

What a tremendous opportunity, the Gift whispered.

"Well. A hand up, if you please," he said and gestured. "My leg won't heal for another half hour."

She reached down, grabbed his arm, and yanked him to his feet. He didn't see the descending dagger in her other hand. It went in at an angle, right at the base of his neck. His eyes were huge and he gasped for air out of reflex.

She sat him back down, propped against a column, completely paralyzed. The dagger quivered with his rage. "What have you done??" He could barely whisper.

She stood over him, and brought out her sword. "I've severed your spine. The Sovereign herself taught me that one. You don't need to breathe, and you have no circulation. But you've got nerves."

"I will have your head! The sun will be down any minute now!"

"True. In the meantime, um, how do you put it? You're as mortal as we are." She saw the fear creep into his eyes. Her smile was dark.

Oh, you're going to enjoy this…

"You're damn right," she murmured. She put the rapier tip to his eye and asked, "Why?"

"My sept, if you really want to know. We're hemorrhaging money. All this peace is very bad for a house that makes its living selling weapons."

She spoke through clenched teeth. "Money. All this death, over filthy money."

He sneered. "An easy thing for you to say, oh mighty Goritsi. Sissora Sept supports your war efforts for centuries, and then, when peace breaks out, where are we? Ignored. Forgotten."

"The Sovereign isn't responsible for your sept's ineptitude."

He grinned. "It's all moot now. Everyone is at everyone else's throats. Except ours."

"You've seized Fructus!"

His whispering laugh was more chilling than ever. "That may be Ravenscars in the street, but the documentation will show Kartoreshian strings. They even have orders to let Nasier's troops leave relatively unscathed. And those masked buffoons walked right into the trap. Felskar and Hadross's alliance is in ashes, and even Achrion has made everyone's lists these last weeks. I've played this perfectly. We can act as we always have: as predators. Let the herd wear itself out in pointless contests of strength. The Ravenscars will have no end of employment, and the wealth of four nations will flow into Telloria. Five, if you count the Free Cities. Sissora Sept's factories will work day and night to fill the orders. Then, when one last, exhausted foe still stands, we seize the Empyrean Throne for ourselves. The Sovereign will be overjoyed."

It was true. All of it. Except: "Then why kill the Ironward?"

He tilted his head. "Well. One mistake. Easily corrected. And you save the Fructans in the process. I think the decision is simple."

It really is, you know. Kill him. Keep the plan. Take credit. The Sovereign will sit you at her right hand, and you can rule Arikania for an eternity.

There was no way out. She had no way out. … Except that Gregorio *always* had a way out. She raised her blade again. "How do I stop it?"

He started to laugh, then cut off. "What?"

"You've left yourself an out. How do I stop this?"

He scoffed. "No one can—AAAHHH!!" She flicked her wrist and his eye was put out. His whispering shriek was oddly satisfying.

Irene moved her blade to his other eye. "How?"

"You are dead! DEAD! As soon as darkness falls, I'll tear out your heart! AAAAHHHH!!!" He lost his other eye. "That won't stop me! I'll have my sight by dawn!"

She put the tip against the bridge of his nose. "Not if I stab your brain. Tell me. *How*?"

"Will you let me live if I tell you?"

She considered. "Possibly. Will you spare the Fructans?"

He smiled through bloody tears. "No. I'd rather perish than let you walk away with that kind of victory. You don't get both. Choose now."

"You're in no position to bargain."

"And you're nearly out of time. I can feel it."

She agonized for only a moment. Such brutally simple mathematics. "The war. How do I stop it?"

"Jahroon is the key."

"Hadross?"

He nodded. "The first tile to fall, as it were. They'll strike first. Within six months, everyone else will be on the march. But not if you convince him otherwise."

She thought hard. "Where's the proof I need?"

"There is none, but he's no fool. Whatever you might think of him personally, he knows that a general war would be devastating. Convince him to counsel Scion Hadross against it, and you have your peace. Though you'll never be allowed to see the old worm. He's as paranoid as he is ancient."

She thought about that for a long minute. "If his captain-of-the-guard still lives, I'll get in. And, as for you…" She shoved the sword into his eye, angled for his brain.

His corpse sat there, open mouthed with the sword quivering in his eye socket.

Then he coughed and began to laugh weakly. "Too late." His fingers started to twitch, and his arms jerked as if on a puppeteer's strings as his severed spine began to knit. "Oh, when I'm healed, the things I'll do to you, mortal. The Sovereign will never find all the pieces, Gift or no."

Irene didn't respond, but ran upstairs. In his office she penned a quick note, then went in search of a runner. Cooler heads than hers needed to be informed.

The Hadrossians had perished to a man, but at the cost of too many Skorza and Zeti. She found the Dancing Master and put the note into her hands with quick, verbal orders for delivery.

The Dancing Master nodded, then asked, "Where is Lord Gregorio?"

"In his crypt, indisposed."

"Shall I tell him where you've gone?"

"No need," she muttered, and vanished into the deepening night.

Chapter Fourteen - Knight Fall

Ooroth's sortie had made it to Hadross Tower with Ambassador Jahroon just before the looting began in earnest. The Watch had raised the gates for the overwhelming Ravenscar force outside the city right after dusk. Half an hour later, the slaughter began.

Ooroth had spent most of the afternoon gathering sufficient troops for their march on the Tower. They had still gone through with the excursion against his better advice. Jahroon had merely shrugged and said, "The Deep Voices command it."

Ooroth couldn't tell if Jahroon was lying or not, but, given how placidly he accepted Ooroth's conditions to wait for sufficient force, Ooroth concluded that this was the real deal. He even tried asking the Deep Voices himself, but they didn't answer. It made him grumble. They *never* answered. Not when he really needed them.

The trip up to Cathedral Distract had been tense, but none of the mercenaries had dared trouble thirty Deepmen accompanied by Orsund Cavaliers. The ambulatory kraken were often enough to send anyone with any sense running the other direction.

Now, with dusk moving into night, Ooroth looked out over a city writhing in pain. Jahroon's office at the peak of Hadross Tower gave him too good a view. The lamplights that would normally have defined the streets in flickering golden motes were missing. Taverns and alehouses that would have overflowed with boisterous human activity were dark. Only ruddy torches from wandering mercenary packs marked the avenues and boulevards. More than one house blazed in the darkness, and who was around to fight the fires? No one. The clear night air didn't even augur a hint of rain to come.

The Grand Cathedral sat untouched. Like an impotent king in his burning palace. Ooroth didn't know if it would stay that way long. The sooner the Deep Gods were done with Jahroon, the better. But there was no hurrying them.

He looked out to sea, and surveyed the harbor. More than a few ships waited in a huddled mass near the bar's deepest point. In another few hours the tide would be right, and they'd weigh their anchors and be free. Tiny rowboats circled them. He could even imagine the people begging desperately for a berth, *any berth*, on any ship.

And there was the Kartoreshian galleon, still tied alongside the wharf and loading cargo as quickly as its crew could haul the lines. Two immense Greathorns stood out, easily discernable even from this distance on their well-lit dock. They guarded the dock against the angry crowd that hadn't worked up the courage to charge them yet. They'd be fools to do so. But desperation made fools of even the wisest.

He thought he could make out Alyana, even. But it was hard to say. From this distance all Ashmen looked similar. He hoped she'd gotten her rank back. It meant so much to her.

He thought back to the night before. Deep in drink, their conversation had rambled far afield. They'd started with why they'd come to Fructus in the first place.

The question had annoyed him. "You really want to know?" he'd asked. "Unfair and unwelcome judgments are part of why I'm here. They sicken me, and they've cost me so much. Did I tell you about my family already?"

She'd shaken her head.

"Short version: they were overjoyed when I changed. When I became this inhuman thing, without even a scrap of my old self. Yet when I confessed, privately, to my mother that I wasn't nearly so enthused, that I rather regretted it, she gave me no comfort. She yelled at me. Branded me a heretic. She demanded that I recant. And, when I didn't, they sent me away. Disowned."

She had countered: "Whereas my family was murdered before my eyes, and my brother has just drowned. I'm the only one left. And it's not like I ever really wanted children, or could have them while in the service anyway. I'd have to give up the mask to have a family. Is that better than getting disowned? Should I join you at the bottom of the bottle? You said yourself it doesn't solve anything. And at least your family is still there. Earn enough respect, and you can could go back. Beat them over the head with your laurels, if that would make you feel better."

She'd missed his point, and it had annoyed him. "If I were an object of respect, I wouldn't have been sent to this forsaken island in the first place. No Hadrossian is here for their health or as a mark of favor to the crown."

Her obvious shock surprised him. "But your nation has a duty to participate in these talks!"

He had shrugged. "Jahroon does whatever Jahroon wants. And I have no idea what secret orders he's had. For all I know, he's obeying our Scion's wishes implicitly." He'd said this with such disgust he could taste it even now. His self-loathing was evident, he was sure, even on his alien face.

She had sighed. "And it's not what you want."

"I don't want war. Not of the scale that Jahroon seems to be courting."

"Then your duty and self-respect are at odds. And maybe this is why you drink. Something to think about."

The memory faded. "Something to think about," he murmured. Gods, he wanted a drink.

A Deepman guard knocked on the Ambassador's door and entered. He reported to Ooroth, "Captain, there's a Tellorian below claiming an urgent need to speak with the Ambassador."

"A Ravenscar?"

The Deepman shook his head. "She didn't say, but her armor is not like theirs."

Ooroth looked to Jahroon who shrugged. "Go and see. The Deep Voices have no opinion."

Ooroth descended the tower, and the Deepman led him to the small antechamber where the woman waited with three Deepmen keeping wary eyes on her.

"I'm Ooroth, captain of the guard. Who are you, and what is this urgent matter?"

She spoke intensely. "Irene von Goritsi. I'm— well, a noble from Telloria. Please, I must speak with Ambassador Jahroon. It's about these attacks. About everything that has happened over the last few weeks."

Warnings went off in his head. "The Ambassador is indisposed. There's a bit of a riot going on, you see."

She was peering at him. "Wait. I know you. I've seen you before."

He grunted. "Lots of people have."

She pulled a familiar scroll case from her modest pack. "I think this is yours."

Ooroth accepted it into his hands like a fragile egg. He barely breathed as he unscrewed the cap. Sure enough, it was the little girl's drawing. He couldn't help but smile. "How—?" Then his quick mind put it together. "You were here. The night Achrion attacked. You were the spy that helped us fight the mercenaries."

She looked uncomfortable. "Yes. I took this, because it looked important to my mission. I didn't have time to look inside. I just remembered your Ambassador goading you with it, and thought it was some secret information. What is it, anyway?"

He put it back in the case. "Exactly what it looks like. You want to see Jahroon? Fine. No weapons. *None!* Do you understand? Even the hidden ones, and my Deepmen will search you very carefully, with apologies for the inconvenience."

She nodded. It took less than a minute. A sword, four daggers, six throwing knives, and an Achrionain throwing star. She pointed to the last one. "A souvenir, of sorts."

Ooroth grunted. "I remember them. Come. Guards, with us." He led the way, and she followed surrounded by four Deepmen.

As the elevator/airlock filled and ascended, Ooroth felt the scrollcase's weight float from his back. He fingered the strap, and wondered where the little girl and her cat were. Hopefully on one of those boats he'd seen. Her clothing had shown her to be well off, if not exactly wealthy. He shoved his worries aside as they swam through the flooded levels, and handed her a towel. "Sorry about the mess. All the Deepcallers are dead," he said. "This has not been a good day."

Irene soaked up as much moisture as possible. "For anyone." She tossed the towel aside, though her leather armor still dripped.

They left a trail of wet footprints to Jahroon's office. Ooroth stepped inside. "Ambassador—"

"Yes, I know. I've been informed." Jahroon sat behind his desk, looking superior. "Show her in. Just her and you."

Ooroth wondered if the Deep Voices had a hand in that. Probably. His worries increased.

He brought Irene in and stood just off to one side between her and Jahroon's desk. "Ambassador Jahroon, Irene von Goritsi of Telloria."

"Yes, we've met," Jahroon crooned. "And what brings you to me this evening, my dear?" He always used that tone with attractive women.

Ooroth was watching her carefully. She didn't shudder, but Ooroth wanted to.

She took a breath and began: "Ambassador, this entire situation has been orchestrated by Gregorio don Sissora. It has been a campaign of manipulation and deception with the sole goal of throwing Arikania into chaos."

He leaned forward, still smiling. "Do go on."

"He has made Hadross, your nation, the key. If you march to war, the others fall into line…." Over the next few minutes she outlined the situation, and both Ooroth and Jahroon listened intently.

Halfway through Jahroon got up and began pacing. He did that when he was thinking hard, or annoyed.

Ooroth put the pieces together as she laid them out. It all fell into place: the stolen bribe, the misinformation, the expensive mercenaries, the impromptu 'duel' between the Acrhionian spymaster and Alyana… even the invading 'army' with falsified patronage from Kartoresh. It was excellent.

"But you, Ambassador, are the key," she concluded.

He stopped pacing. "Yes, I see that." Whatever else one might say about Jahroon, he was intelligent and cagey. "And the Deep Voices have led me to hear you, and, therefore, preserve Hadross. So wise they are. Such foresight." He stood there stroking his beard tentacles and musing for a long moment. "But, if I may be so bold, why? Why come to me? Telloria does nothing but profit from a four-way conflict."

She thought a moment. "No one profits from war. Not on such a scale. But, more importantly, this was not our Sovereign's will. This is Gregorio don Sissora, who will be labeled a criminal the instant I return home. He'll face our Sovereign's justice, and she's likely to extradite him to you. If you'd like, I can take her a message."

He grinned. "Yes, I do think a message is in order."

Jahroon's hand shot forward, wreathed in violet energy. Irene's body convulsed as the power lifted her from the floor. She screamed such a wail that became a gurgle as blood gushed from her nose, ears, and eyes. Every pore, every orifice spewed forth her bodily fluids into a glistening crimson sphere between them.

Her withered husk dropped to the floor, eyes open and staring at Ooroth. The desiccation had turned them solid black. Ooroth thought he might be sick, but his warrior's guts had turned to iron long before. It was a horrible way to die.

Jahroon's hand dropped, and the vast sphere of gore splashed into the plush carpeting and oozed into the fibers. He stepped over her towards Ooroth. "*That* is how you send a message."

Ooroth was shocked, mouth wide open. "That was unnecessary."

He scoffed. "She was the spy that stole my glory. Don't think I missed the portion of her tale about the Acrhionian attack on the Tower. Highly detailed. And, I'll note, you have your scroll back."

Ooroth fingered the strap. He could find no words.

Jahroon chuckled to himself and walked to the window. That same spell had drained him to near unconsciousness just a week before, but now he seemed perfectly fine. "Have the

corpse mummified. I want it delivered to Vorstoi and placed at the Sovereign's feet. Ironic that she sought to avoid a war, and succeeded only in turning all nations against Telloria. We'll require some fabrications, of course, but Gregorio's scheme can be modified to suit our ends. I want—"

"Ambassador," said a feminine voice behind them, sing-song and terrible. "That was a mistake."

Both of them turned to see Irene crouched, like a panther ready to pounce. Her eyes were the color of black iron. Her body was desiccated, but she was very much alive. She licked her fangs.

Ooroth drew his blade slowly, and held it ready. "Ambassador, get behind me."

The Deep Voices spoke to Ooroth.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

Ooroth looked up sharply, shocked. "What?? That's—You're joking!"

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

He glanced at Jahroon in utter disbelief, then back at Irene. "Vampire. He's all yours." Ooroth lowered his blade and stepped aside.

Jahroon's eyes bulged. "*WHAT—NO!!*"

The vampire struck like an eel. She was faster than anything Ooroth had seen. One moment she was crouched in a pool of her own lifeblood, the next she had Jahroon's arm broken behind his back, and his neck bared. She bit. Hard.

Jahroon struggled and roared. "Get her off! *GET HER OFF!!* You traitor! *TRAITOR!!*" His struggles weakened as his body shriveled. Great tears stood in his bulging eyes. "I'm not… supposed to… die…."

Ooroth watched dispassionately as his abusive lord thudded to the floor, stone dead.

Irene wiped her bloody mouth with the back of her hand, and stared at it, wondering.

Ooroth shared the amazement. She looked far more like herself now, and yet different. Where she'd been athletic and attractive before, now she was powerful and stunning, a deadly combination of allure and might. A predator without equal.

He spoke after a long minute. "Well. That's one way to get your blood back. What now?"

She was somber. "Enjoy the war." She turned and leaped through the window.

Ooroth shuffled over and looked down. He didn't see her at all. "Creature of the night," he muttered. A glow caught his attention. Someone had set a fire in Cathedral District, and it was spreading. It was time to leave. But he wouldn't go alone.

He looked out to sea. "Right. I did what you wanted. Now, do something for me. Where is that little girl? Is she safe?"

The Deep Voices said nothing.

"Look. I just helped you start a war. Not the little thing we were working on against Nasier, either. This is the proverbial Big Deal. If what she told us about Jahroon stopping it was true in any way, then you wanted this. Or you needed this, and I—" he almost choked on the words, "I was your faithful servant." He thought a moment, and had to add, "Didn't hurt that I despised Jahroon anyway, but maybe that, too, was in your plans. All I want now is something for someone else. If you have the slightest compassion for me, then grant this request. Where is she?"

He waited for a long minute, but the Deep Voices said nothing.

Finally he sighed and lowered his head. He turned away from the sea.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

Ooroth grinned, and raised his blade in salute. "Thank you." He moved as fast as his pods would carry him.

The guards outside were clustered at the door. "Captain! What happened? Where's the Ambassador?"

"The Ambassador has been assassinated. The vampire killed him."

They were aghast. "She wasn't a vampire when she went in!"

"Yeah, well. Jahroon had that effect on people. She's long gone, and it's time for us to leave Fructus. Gather every last man, and retreat en force to the sea. Go to the rendezvous two miles east, near the first shelf. If I'm not there by dawn, summon the leviathan, and return to Ophion. Tell them everything that happened here."

They all looked at each other for a moment. "Where are you going?"

"Rescue mission. Wish me luck."

One guard caught his arm. "Captain! Let us help you."

Ooroth grinned. "I'm not going to risk your lives on a personal errand, no matter how important it is to me."

"Captain, if it's important to you, it's important to us. And, I'm not sure even you can stand against two thousand mercenaries," said the guard. The others nodded at that.

Ooroth's heart swelled. He clapped the Deepman on the arm. "Let's be about it."

Downstairs, in the vast foyer, word of Jahroon's demise and Ooroth's errand spread quickly. He stood on the sweeping staircase's central landing and had only a few brief words. "Men, our time in exile here is done. I just have one brief errand before I depart. It's risky, and strictly volunteer. Anyone who wants out, just raise your hand. No one will think less of you for thinking of home and family."

No one raised their hands. They didn't even look around to see who might.

Ooroth smiled inwardly. "Right. Orsunds take point, Reavers to the rear. Kaxes, form your units into double columns, and be ready for a phalanx if I give the word. Sevridans, do what you do best. And, everyone, remember: no unnecessary risks. We're Hadross. We're of the sea. And, like the tide, we're unstoppable. Follow me."

No cheers, no rousing war cry. Just a general sense of satisfaction and absolute faith in Ooroth's ability. "We're with you, Captain," he heard said as he walked through the ranks. "Follow the Captain, and we'll all see home."

He hoped that was true. With any luck, the Ravenscars were more interested in looting than fighting.

Beyond the Grand Cathedral's gates, the district had become a warzone. Ooroth led the Hadross column from the front. The Deep Voices prompted his path at irregular intervals.

Sure enough, most roving mercenary bands gave them plenty of space. Many carried clinking sacks of loot or objets d'art, and had little taste for fighting. They saw few Fructans, and those were just as terrified of the Hadrossians as the mercenaries.

Until they moved into the estate areas…. Bodies. Everywhere. Some cut down while fleeing. Some executed. Men, women, and children. Those were the worst. Ooroth knelt beside a little boy, his throat slit. "This isn't a sacking," he muttered. "It's a pogrom."

"What should we do?" asked a Kaxes.

It wrenched Ooroth's heart to say it. "Nothing." He stood. "We don't have the numbers. It's as simple as that. If we show any resistance, they'll overwhelm us. No. The sooner we're away, the better. Come. Not far now."

In fact, the Deep Voices stopped him further down the street in front of an opulent town house, four stories of solid brick and stone. Even had a servants' entrance whose door hung limp on a single hinge.

Thhrrruuuummmmmmm....

Ooroth nodded, and gave orders to a Kaxes, "This is it. Secure a perimeter. One unit comes in with me."

Ooroth and his guards went in, cautiously. No lights in the house kitchens and servants' quarters, though the dark troubled their heat vision little. There was enough variation between the walls and air to let them move with ease. Everything was shattered, wrecked, and thoroughly ransacked.

"Captain." A Deepman pointed at a pile of burlap sacks that moved and twitched. Ooroth approached, dreading what he'd find. He pulled back the sack to see a fat little cat sit up and mew at him.

"Jodo?" Ooroth said.

The cat leaped down, purring, and rubbed against his pods. Ooroth almost laughed from joy. He picked the cat up. It rubbed against his face. "Okay, that's one. Now, where's your mistress?"

They found the bodies stacked upstairs in the foyer. A single gaslight shed a flickering light on the grisly mound. Blood pooled in a great puddle and trickled into a side room.

Jodo's owner lay atop the mound, covered in blood. She looked so peaceful.

Ooroth sank to his knees, still cradling Jodo, who purred and purred. Tears welled in his eyes. He wanted to shout at the Deep Voices, and rage against their cruelty.

She was even warm. Wait. A little too warm. Yet, this slaughter had happened hours before.

"Little girl? Jodo's here."

One eye opened, then both as she saw Ooroth. "It's you!" She leaped at him and threw her arms around his neck. "My Seven-man!"

Ooroth juggled child and cat to hug both tight. Now his tears were joyful.

She was talking. "They broke down the servants' door. Papa always said it never locked right. Then they started hurting people and—" she broke off, choked up.

"Easy. They can't hurt you now. Where is your papa?"

She pointed at the pile to a man with graying hair in cook's clothing. "They killed him first because he fought. Then Mister Faster, and Ariko." Tears started running down her face. "I ran and hid, and they chased me. They couldn't find me. Ariko and I would play sometimes, and no one ever found us. But he didn't get away. When I heard noises downstairs, I didn't have time to hide, so I—I—"

"Covered yourself in blood, and hid in plain sight. You're very clever, child. You know, I don't know your name."

"Vayala."

"Vayala," he repeated, smiling. "Do you have any other family on Fructus? Where's your mother?"

"She went to the Celestials when I was born. And grandmamma went last year."

"No one else?"

She shook her head.

Ooroth got grim. "You can't stay here."

"Can I come with you?" the hopefulness in her voice caught in his heart.

"No, Vayala, I must return to the sea. And all our Deepcallers are... gone. We have no way for you to breathe water for more than a few minutes. And I don't think Jodo would like the ocean much anyway."

She looked pathetic. Lost. Alone. Orphaned.

He remembered something. "There's a way though. I'm going to take you to my friend. Her ship is leaving soon. She can take you and Jodo home with her."

"But I want to go with you!"

"It's just not possible. Not right now. But, I'll come for you. It might be a long time, but I'll come for you."

She was trying not to cry. "Do you promise?"

He grinned. "Seven-men always keep their word. Come on. My friends are outside, and they'll help us get to the docks. Have you ever seen a kraken?"

She shook her head.

"They're scary at first, but they act like big cats. ... With tentacles, that is," he admitted.

The Hadrossian force moved deliberately, resolutely through the city. Only once did they encounter trouble as they moved through the Market District. A drunken merc band had plundered an alehouse, and apparently partaken of

most of the loot. They lounged at the outdoor bar, and started throwing plates and mugs at the Hadrossians.

Ooroth would have ignored it, but they hit an orsund kraken in the eye. It charged them, grabbed all three, and began pulling arms from torsos amid horrified wails. Ooroth signaled a unit to assist, and they killed the men in seconds.

Vayala watched with hard eyes. Jodo purred in her arms.

Towards the docks the crowd surrounding the Kartoresh wharf parted easily enough for the heavily-armed Hadrossian column.

The Nasiers themselves had seen their approach, and a double-column of Ashmen and Pelegarth stood in defensive formation behind Alyana and the two Greathorns.

Ooroth motioned for his troops to keep back as he and Vayala approached alone.

Alyana was unreadable behind her mask. "What do you want, Hadross?"

"Alyana, this is my friend, Vayala. Vayala, this is Alyana Heska, a Senior Hakar from Karotresh."

The little girl bobbed in curtsey, though her hands were full of cat.

Alyana looked from the girl to Ooroth. "Again, what do you want?"

"Could we speak in private for a moment? Just you and me?"

She took a deep breath. Whether in irritation or no, he wasn't sure. She looked at a Greathorn and motioned with her head. The beasts and her column moved a respectful distance away down the dock.

Ooroth said, "Vayala, please go stand with the Kaxes there. It'll be just a moment." She went obediently, and he said to Alyana, "Well. You're looking taller."

"Ooroth—" Alyana began warningly.

He cut in. "I need a favor. As in, the biggest possible favor one can ask. She's my friend, and her family was slaughtered. You've seen what's happening, right?"

"We've heard. Black business."

He nodded. "Can you take her with you to Kartoresh, and keep her safe until I come for her?"

She gestured angrily, but kept her voice low. "I have no time to play nursemaid! Nor do I wish to. We are at war! Or will be, the moment this gets out."

"It's worse than you know." He mapped it out briefly. "The last chance died with Jahroon."

She tilted her head. "The Tellorian killed him? How?"

He sighed. "Vampire."

She was surprised. "And you didn't intervene?"

"I was… persuaded to step aside. Look. Can you take Vayala and her cat?"

Alyana didn't answer, but began pacing angrily. Like a caged great cat.

He continued, "I'd take her with me in a heartbeat, but we have no way for her to survive down there. She's an orphan now. She has no one, and nothing. We both know what that feels like."

"And what happens when all this begins? We're warriors on opposing sides! I might have to kill you some day!"

He was just as forbidding. "I know! What else can I do? There's no other option for her, except to stay here and brave the city. I *will* come for her. I promise you that."

"It could be years!"

He sighed. "I know."

She was fuming. "And, if she grows up in my homeland, she could well grow up hating Hadross. Hating you!"

He drooped. "I know. But, at least she'll grow up. She deserves that chance."

She stopped, and took a deep, calming breath. "Fine. I suppose I can use a page. Or maybe a cook. She can't march with me, but I can find a place for her at the academy, perhaps."

"And the cat?"

She threw her hands up. "And the infernal cat. But, if I hear one snide word from you about sticking me with your squalling brat—"

He held up his hands, defensively. "No, no! I would never be so cliché." Such a weight had come off his heart. "I can't thank you enough."

"No," she said. "You can't. I have my own reasons for this, otherwise, you'd be out of luck."

"I understand."

She motioned to Vayala and called, "Come, child."

Vayala trotted over.

"How old are you?" Alyana asked.

"Eight. And three quarters."

Alyana shook her head, and muttered. "I was eight too…." Her voice returned to normal. "You're coming with me. Ooroth has spoken well of you. If you promise to be obedient, I'll keep you safe until he returns."

The little girl looked at Ooroth. His heart was breaking again, but in a kinder way. "Go on. I'll be back. I promise."

Vayala dropped Jodo, and threw her arms around Ooroth again. "Thank you. For everything. I promise I'll make you proud."

Alyana watched them for a moment, then spoke. "Hadross, as one last condition, keep the dock clear of civilians while we cast off. I don't want them charging the ship."

Ooroth let Vayala go reluctantly. "We'll do it."

He watched the ship make sail into the dark harbor, and head for the bobbing lights from the other ships lying at anchor, waiting on the slow, slow tide. Vayala stood at the taffrail with Alyana close behind. The little girl waved until he couldn't see her any more.

"I'll be back," he whispered. "I promise." He addressed his troops. "Men. To the sea." The Hadrossians slipped silently beneath the dark waves.

Chapter Fifteen - Dying Hope

The Winterhawk could feel his student's eyes upon him again. He finished his draught, and stoppered the bottle. He'd taken twice the usual dose. "You worry," he said.

The Deathbloom never did hide her feelings well. "Master, the Surgeon said too much was dangerous."

"In fact, he said it would eventually kill me. Yet, all mortals face the same fate. Mine is simply more definitive." The pain in his hip was easing. He put a fist on it and stretched. "I always wondered why people my age complained about their hips. Now I know."

His student crossed her arms at him. "An assassin put a sword through it."

"And I didn't thank him for the knowledge." He tsk'd to himself.

His student was in no mood for his humor. "You should not have taken the entire bottle that day in the carriage. I could have fought that Nasier for you. You've been bedridden for days!"

"The Senior Hakar would have accepted no blood but mine. And, what is done is done. I am mobile when necessary. Tonight, it is necessary. I should have taken this hours ago."

He could see from her expression that she understood. She hated it, but understood. "You don't need any more tonic tonight. I could go on this errand myself. It's less than two hours until dawn, and the tide will be at peak soon. The ships will be leaving. Many smaller vessels have already passed the bar."

"Thus, time is the essence, and four eyes are better than two." He looked at her. "Besides. I'm more familiar with Gregorio's mind. If he is still there, in his seat of power, we'll both be needed. The note from the Goritsi spy implied as much. Come. Let us prepare."

Their armor was wrapped in loose-fitting black tunics and leggings, and their *dalko* polearms, normally polished to brilliance, were blackened. His student wrapped her white hair into a tight bun, and he folded and pinned his beard. They both donned black silk masks tight about their heads.

He nodded to her. "There. Now we look like assassins. Proper shadows. Remember their numbers. We fight only to flee."

She inclined her head.

"Let us away."

They both dropped out the window of Shael Han Tower and slid down the nearly vertical wall. Halfway down they leaped to the broad Grand Cathedral dome and tumbled into a run. They flitted from rooftop to rooftop in this manner, through alleys and passages, all the way across the Cathedral District.

If any mercenaries saw them, they gave no notice. The Achrionians were but fading shadows, transient across the bright white moon.

Finally, they approached the Tellorian estate. Its gate was smashed open, and many mercenaries had camped on the grounds, especially around the small lake. Their fires danced in the night air, amid a few late-partying revelers. The Winterhawk could smell the ale and wine. They hadn't bothered posting a guard.

They slipped through the camp on silent feet that made cats sound lead-footed. The scent of cooked crab came from a surprising number of pots. Perhaps the kitchens had kept a store.

The estate interior showed signs of battle and looting. No slaughter, however. The lack of such evidence was damning to the Winterhawk's eyes, not that he needed further proof of the mercenaries' true origins. The mansion's many rooms had new inhabitants, officers, no doubt, but only snoring and the sounds of slumber came through the doors. They sought Gregorio's office, in any case, and the Winterhawk knew the way.

A man sat at the battered desk, upright, and eyes on the door. The single candle on the desk guttered as they entered. The window behind him was shattered. He neither moved nor blinked. The Winterhawk stepped over, and checked his neck. His throat had been slit from ear to ear. A fine line, very precise.

A slender arm encircled the Winterhawk's neck from behind and a dagger pressed against his artery, just below his left ear. His mask's silk would prove no protection.

"You are very public, for a spymaster," a voice whispered in his ear.

His student across the room whirled, shocked. She leveled her *dalko*, but didn't call out.

The Winterhawk smiled. "And you are no crone. But neither are you quite your old self, Irene. Your hands are chill as the grave."

"Why are you here?"

"I received your note, though at a very late hour. I seek answers. And, as this commander is dead, I presume you seek much the same."

The blade withdrew, and she released him. He stepped back, and turned. Irene had taken on a lethal aspect, cold and merciless.

"Ah," he said. "And so Gregorio got his wish, and you are finally dead."

She looked troubled for a moment, but only just. "I wanted to find evidence—any evidence—of Gregorio's misdeeds. This war is of his making, and it should be on his head."

"I agree. I presume he has fled?"

She nodded. "Overland. A hidden dock on the island's west coast."

He nodded and went to stroke his beard, but it was bundled up in his mask. He patted his chest instead. "Have you searched his vault?"

She pointed to a tapestry on the south wall. It depicted a regal vampire in full court attire. The Lady Sissora herself, the Winterhawk presumed. He moved the tapestry aside to see the vault cracked open. The Deathbloom held the candle while he searched.

Various papers and minor tokens were scattered. Disturbed dust and smeared imprints told him this was not the vault's natural state. He examined a few pages.

Irene said, "There was nothing."

Bills of sale, estate expenses, a few formal requests from subordinates… "It would appear you are correct," he said.

"I'd hoped to get back before he got away." She was sitting on the desk, shoulders slumped. "I'd left him here…. Mutilated. It was the only way he'd tell me how to stop this conflict."

The Winterhawk had the sudden sense of witnessing a confession. He motioned for the Deathbloom to watch the open window. No mercenaries were camped nearby, but he would take no chances. "And what did he tell you?"

"That Hadross was the key. That their ambassador could stop it."

His fingers sought his beard again. He'd never realized quite what a habit it was. "Of course. Hadross would strike first. What did you do?"

She shrugged. "I told him. And he killed me for the favor."

Winterhawk pursed his lips. "And then, you killed him?"

She nodded, mute. Her eyes gazed at nothing. "I gave Gregorio exactly what he wanted. I accepted the Gift."

"You survived," he said.

"At the cost of my country."

"Your country would have paid a price regardless."

She looked at him.

"We are not fools. No physical evidence of Gergorio's misdeeds exists, but no one walks trackless through the forest. Our spies will be employed for many a year."

She sighed. "And Telloria will be at war. I have failed. Failed my Sovereign, failed the Fructans. Hells, I've even failed myself."

"As have we all."

She glowered. "Gregorio will answer for these crimes. Mark my words."

"The blame falls not on Gregorio alone. The agendas were many. The ambitions high. Even I, myself, who wanted nothing more than peace, found myself willing to sacrifice too much for that goal. I could have let Hadross have their day. What would it have done, ultimately? Ensured their war with Kartoresh, but would Jahroon have let Gregorio bait him then? Would his pride have been stacked for such a topple? We will never know." He drew in a deep, cleansing breath. He could smell the soap used to wash the mask. "My greatest desire was to avert the war. I have failed. But, do not count yourself a failure. You have the Gift."

She looked at him, eyes hard. "The Gift made me kill Jahroon."

"Did it? Or was this self-defense? He struck first?"

"He did."

"Then you are not at fault. The sapling bends where the ancient oak snaps. You have adapted. You are still yourself at heart."

"A heart that no longer beats! I'm now the very kind of monster I hate! I *eat people* to survive!"

He shook his head. "It is the life upon which you feed, not the death. Your victims need not expire. The Night Legion's habits are well-documented in our archives."

She was frustrated. "But, how can I control myself with the Gift in my head?"

He shrugged. "What of it? Do you hear it still?"

She thought. "Not as words. But as urges."

"Urges can be controlled."

"Tell that to Jahroon."

He held up a finger. "Ah, but it takes time. No babe is born walking, yet all have two legs."

She thought about that.

He continued, "Fear not for Fructus. This tragedy is an abomination before the gods. It will return to plague its architect, and the people will be avenged."

"Vengeance is a cold comfort. The people are still dead."

He sighed. "It is true. Yet many more still live than you might believe. The undercity is a warren of untold depths. There is a reason smugglers and pirates have used this island for centuries. And these Tellorian troops will be needed back home, very soon. Fructus Isle is not destroyed."

She sighed and nodded. "The troops will be needed for the war. So will I, come to think of it."

"Ah, but you must show caution. Gregorio is no longer your ally, I take it?"

She half-chuckled. "He took my points very badly in our last talk."

"Then you must be cautious. But, of course, you have moved as prey amongst predators for many a year. Now you are one of them, and he will be mindful."

She was sad and thoughtful. "I may not go home. Not right away. If I do, I'll likely discover the Sovereign's plans for me, and why she was willing to go to any lengths for me to change."

The Winterhawk waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he asked, "Then what will you do?"

"Try to mitigate the damage. I have my old trade. I can hire myself to the highest bidders, and use the money to uncover secrets. Gregorio often says that vampires have the advantage of time. I should make use of that."

Winterhawk grinned, though he knew she couldn't see it. "And you will move mountains. If we both survive the coming years, I'm certain our paths will cross again."

She got off the desk. "Dawn approaches. I can feel it. I can stow away aboard a friend's ship. You have a way off the island?"

"Naturally."

She nodded, and met his eyes. "What about you? What will you do?"

The Winterhawk shrugged. "We go home, like all the rest. We prepare for war. And face the wrath of our kings."

Nateb
Fel Hammo
Fel Itabm
Genotis
Lusk
Fel Mallek
Forseno
TELLORIA
Otaam
Qel Sallum
Vorstoi
KARTORESH
Kol Han
Atik
Fel Abtim
Kra Gotash
Loukris
Qualat Mon
Relsbon
Rast
ACHRION
Falout
Kylos
Tymout
Panzia
AACELIOUS
Trieverus
Ennen Kobere
Kashingaal
Makbalikor
Tyvot
Calivant
Rensidaal
FELSKAR
Valisdaan
Heskor
Fructus
Ophion
Kaldeth

Lochesh
KASHIGAM
Herceg
Nyrkem
NEGERSHA
Druzeille
Telivoth
Hesh
Murah