

THE IX AGE

FANTASY BATTLES



INFERNAL DWARVES

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2nd Edition, Background Book

BRANDED CITIZENS

Rejoice at the triumph of the Clergy of our mighty City, who have toiled endlessly to forge this supreme tablet to the glory of the Vanebevish! We'd also like to thank all the community members and other staff who contributed with their suggestions, feedback and support.

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ARRIVAL

From the private journals of Bao Fengzi, Tsuandanese Ambassador to Vanekhash



Februar 6th

Vanekhash began its attempt to impress me long before I reached the walls of the citadel. The steel behemoth pulling a dozen or more carriages along the Steel Road was clearly built to inspire awe – or fear. The Infernal engine I beheld the day I left for Vanekhash was more than twice the height of a man and longer and squatter still. Yet no simple statement of size can do justice to the sight of such a machine. The engine bore siege weaponry more befitting a battleship than a carriage. Dark smoke that smelled of magic and sulphur billowed between ornate plates of blackened steel. It radiated heat that grew stronger the closer it came to the “station” where I waited.

Almost in contrast, the carriages themselves were opulent. My companion Qiang Ru, despite being a large, winged qilin, was surprised to discover that he had standing room. I was informed that the carriage containing a full orchestra playing grand anthems to drown the engine’s roar was part of normal operations, rather than a luxury put on to impress an ambassador. The music was harsher than I like, but skillful; I blame the large number of metallic strings and surfaces for my dislike.

The melodies were interrupted as we left the tunnels of the first leg, emerging into sunlight with a glittering river below us. We passed a watchtower on one side of this dizzying bridge between mountains, heading for a second

outpost on the other. There came a sound that could have come from the lungs of no living creature: a harsh warning that saw the engine come to a halt. Shouts echoed that I could understand – we were under attack. Every dwarf in the ambassadorial carriage left to join the battle – each moving with military precision.

Ru leaped into action, sweeping me on to his back and opening the side of the train. We soared into the sky, even as dozens of steel-clad dwarven warriors swarmed from the rear carriages. The engine itself shook off the carriages and growled, charging across the bridge at the head of its guard. I saw now the extent of its weaponry, as a twisted funnel spat forth burning flames, bathing the watchtower on the far side in scorching oil that clung to and seared all it touched.

Charging out of the flames came a brutish ogre khan, armed with a cleaver the size of an ordinary man. He and a retinue of a dozen ogres at his back were bathed in fire again and again, their skin blackening and bubbling. This did not slow their advance, save for the unlucky few who toppled off the sides of the bridge.

A hail of scrap fell upon the dwarven engine guards, bouncing harmlessly off their armour, followed by bullets that struck home only somewhat more successfully. The ogres held the watchtower on the far side of the bridge, and were using it to rain fire down upon the train and defenders in the nearside tower. These in turn

returned fire calmly, loading and reloading from behind crenellations designed to allow either side of the bridge to fire upon the other.

The ogres' weapons bit into the steel of the Infernal engine, but the black behemoth was impassive. Only the khan with his inhuman might enjoyed any success hacking through the steel, and yet one of his retinue fell beneath the wheels as the engine lunged forwards. The ogre commander snarled, but continued to press the assault, bellowing "You'll pay the toll, like all the rest!" as he continued feverishly hacking away.

From the tunnel behind us emerged a huge figure. She hauled herself up on top of the engine and leaped forwards into the fray, her long hair streaming in the breeze. The perspective cleared – she towered over the khan as much as he himself towered over the dwarves. It was a giantess, clad in armour and the uniform of the Zalaman Steel Guard. She tossed one of the ogres off the cliff and sprang towards the khan himself. Her battle cry translated approximately, and incongruously, as: "No free rides! Tickets must be shown on request!" A menacing demand when paired with such might.

Snarling, the khan turned away from the impassive engine and swiped at the giantess. The blade bit into the steel of her greaves and, impossibly, cut through. Blood spurted out, covering the ogre's face in a spray of red mist. His opponent dropped to a knee, barely standing. The ogrish warriors at his back chuckled, and pressed their attack. Then the giantess lunged forwards. A ferocious backhand sent the khan flying right into the crenellations. He smashed into them, and slid down the cliffside, onto the rocks far below. Silence fell.

The ogres battling the engine fled, and the Giantess hobbled after them, but they escaped to the relative safety of the rocks behind the watchtower. The assault was broken – the ogres withdrew at great speed, fleeing back into the mountains. The dwarves reclaimed the watchtower, doubtless discovering the slain bodies of the previous garrison.

The giantess who had turned the tide was doctored with tender care, treated as a hero and a companion in arms. I had believed such compassion uncharacteristic of the Infernal Dwarves, but now I know better. The giantess was one of their own. Looking closer, I saw a symbol of stylised flame as a red welt on the back of the huge woman's neck – the same symbol I had seen branded on several dwarves in the train. I would later learn that this "touch of the Inferno" is taken by all free Infernals when they come of age as a mark of citizenship.

Any nation must know the arts of battle to survive, but it was the sights I beheld when we emerged from the long underground tunnel that truly over-awed me. The ziggurats of Vanekhash towered over the hole from which we emerged, even as the engine wound up the sides of the mountain. The fires atop the peaks burned like a second sun, while smoke clung like a second night to the streets below.

I could see many impressive buildings, including the palatial station we approached. But further out, my gaze lingered on a vast sprawl of smaller abodes that stretched from the banks of the Mibkar river away across the plain. Even at such distance, I could easily discern the density and squalor of these feeble constructs; there are slums in Tsuandan, but nothing like this.

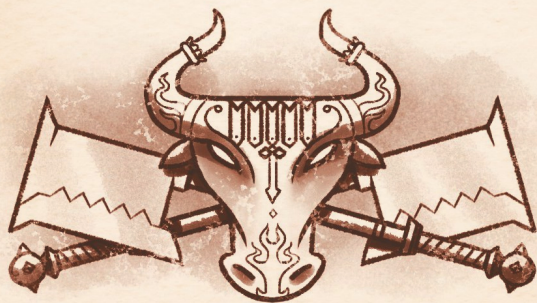


When the train arrived, I met Zhabi, a courteous fellow who I swiftly recognized as my own counterpart – though he said he was merely there to guide me about the citadel. He had a chunk missing from his nose, and my gaze must have lingered, for he casually explained:

“Oh, yes, that. A memento of my time in the military. It’s unsightly, but you should see what I did to the face of the orc who struck the blow”.

Zhabi promptly steered me to a better view of the Steel Road and the pens for the engines.

“I believe the outpost at your end was underground? That is no way to appreciate the full glory of the tracks. The great machine is not the engines, but the Steel Road itself. The precise, interlocking nature of the switches is the true marvel of engineering there. If there were but one train on the Road, it would be simple – but there are many, travelling in both directions. It is neat, orderly – the most perfect form of locomotion.”



I agreed politely, and was ushered onward. I saw soldiers drilling in formation; I met a giant wearing armour more sophisticated than the Imperial Guard in Longjing; I saw the mint stamping vast wealth in gold and silver. I saw, too, the surprisingly small hanging gardens: a stepped terrace filled with workers from an array of species, all tending crops that I could not help but compare unfavourably to our own. The terraces were impressive, but not the fertility. Still, it was an effective display of power.

I inquired after the river’s dockyards, knowing that Vanekhash is a place where the river meets the

Steel Road. My courteous guide took me to an elegant boulevard where a steel-clad behemoth of a ship lumbered. This was clearly a misdirection; the uncouth traders and slavers I knew came from around the world were nowhere to be seen. It was not the only occasion on which my attempts to see more of the city were politely directed away from its less sightly quarters.

Having skimmed the dazzling sights, I was taken to the rooms the Overlord had assigned me.

“Regretfully, Overlord Sakhem has been called away on urgent business and will not be back for another week,” Zhabi informed me. “Initial discussions will have to involve myself or another vizier. This will allow you more time to acclimate. In the meantime, enjoy the ambassadorial suite. We hope the servants meet your requirements.”

The suite conformed to the same scale of excess as the other sights. My personal quarters were at the top of the ziggurat, watched over by a small army of the local soldiers as well as my honor guard. The main meeting area, however, was slightly closer to the middle, connected to other ziggurats by covered bridges. A fitting symbol for the whole society and my place in it; I was above those wretches I could see far below, and need never descend to walk among them.

Zhabi had nothing to worry about; the servants were perfectly courteous and respectful. Moreover, they knew how to correctly address “Master Bao” without prompting, and the cook... Ah, the cook. His work was fine enough for the Imperial Court, presenting flawless dishes no other embassy had ever attempted. It was a taste of home, undoubtedly assembled with precision. My favourite meal, even.

After dinner, I sipped my tea and reflected. Zhabi had been unfailingly courteous and polite: a perfect host. He had also made it clear he knew more about me than I did about him or his culture, and in diplomacy, that was a veiled threat. I needed to catch up, lest I disgrace the Empire.

ARRIVAL, PART TWO



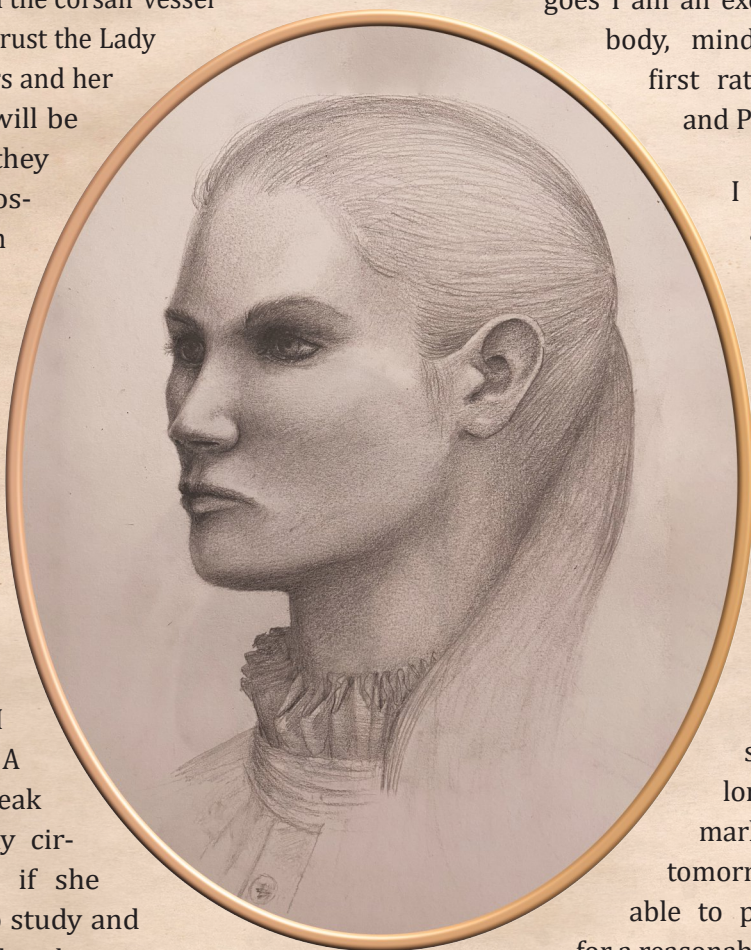
Ullos 11

Dear Mama,

I write this with some consternation. My promise to write to you every week is in grave peril. For the past few weeks aboard the corsair vessel I have been able to entrust the Lady Khezek with my letters and her promises that they will be mailed home. But they stripped all my possessions from me when we reached the Mibkar river and began to sail upstream. I have resorted to stitching this letter into my dress in an extreme shorthand, but I promise that I will escape my captivity, I will transcribe my letters and I will send them to you. A Baroness does not break her word under any circumstances – even if she intended to travel to study and now finds herself enslaved.

Today has been eventful. We are docked in the harbor of the citadel of Vanekhash. It is an

imposing place; one might say majestic if one's vessel were not located among other slave ships. One might also be more kindly disposed towards a people whose harbor inspector did not refer to oneself as "low quality cargo". I may have been reduced to the status of goods, but as property goes I am an excellent purchase – my body, mind and education are first rate thanks to yourself and Papa.



I am fairly confident about my fate; Lady Khezek is of a wealthy family, and owes me her life for knowing enough Arandad to convey to the corsair captain that she is an Eastern dwarf who merely happened to be in the West. She has already been ransomed back, and so long as I am still "on the market" by the end of tomorrow, she should be able to purchase my freedom for a reasonable sum.

Your daughter,

Olivia



Ullos 17

Dear Mama,

It has been a further week. I remain unsold, and the captain's patience grows thin.

Lady Khezek's promised rescue has not eventuated, and the other slave-buyers have no interest in me. Those in search of farmhands, dockhands or miners see nothing but a woman unsuited for manual labour, a judgment I find insulting. I am of robust stock and am fit enough to out-ride half the knights in Fuhrberg. Still, such slights are less offensive than those buyers in search of educated servants who find my accented grasp of their tongue a sign of mental inferiority. I have been learning Abzhaghab for seven weeks and have already attained fluency! It is a prodigious achievement in linguistics and not one of them has the wit to realize it.

The Infernal lands have an insatiable thirst for slaves. The mine slaves are the backbone of their wealth, while personal slaves provide countless services to their dwarven masters. I have heard tales of entire nations dragged back to the citadels in chains, as an object lesson to those who would refuse their allegiance when it was demanded. Yet I, Olivia of Fuhrberg, seem of no use to them? I am outraged.

I fear the captain is contemplating dropping the sale price of we last few slaves low enough to attract the attention of "the Vulture". Whispers echo between the docks: a wicked magus of left hand lore, who purchases the slaves no one else will buy at the most skinflint of prices. His attention is the surest of death sentences in this world of chain and coin, and in my dreams I see him circling.

I need to be sold. I cannot improve my accent overnight, but I have found a last, desperate stratagem. Yesterday, a shipload of captive orcs arrived. They were snapped up quickly by those in search of labourers – but the one who sold the quickest? A mighty brute who broke his chains, lunged at a buyer and had to be beaten back down to the ground. Strength is all they wish in a labourer, and strength I have – not in my arms, so much as in my mind.

I have been wearing away at my chains. I could break them in their now-weakened state and flee into the city, but I have nowhere to go to. I will confess that that had been my first plan, but my Mama raised only one fool, and he is not here. Instead, a simple modification; I will break the chains tomorrow, at the first sight of a potential buyer looking for a labourer. From there, I will simply have to see what I can do to rise to a more prestigious position.

Your dutiful daughter,

Olivia



Postscript:

Later enquiries revealed that my plan had been flawed. The brute who shattered his chains was not sold swiftly as a labourer, but as a battle slave. Strength and ferocity are desired in those who haul powder and blaze trails, but these wretches lead laudanum-infused lives, absent of thought, hope and sensation. I have no desire to end my life in a drug-addled blur, however appealing such a fate may seem to cousin Wilhelm!



HISTORY

Six grim years passed in that abominable hole. Six years without sunlight, with nothing but stale bread served by jailers whose only happiness came in the form of my misery. Alone in squalor and deprivation, without hope or the touch of another being. I came close to madness. My mind delved deep into its own darkness.

In the sixth year, as best I could reckon, I began to hear scratching in the walls. At first I believed it to be nothing but confirmation of my own shattered sanity, especially as it grew louder and harder to ignore. At last, as I could stand the noise no longer, I noticed the stones at the bottom of the cell wall shift, and then push free. They revealed a small tunnel and a face caked in filth.

“Lugar’s teeth,” it spat. “Where am I?”

I could barely remember how to form words. I believe I stammered something about it being my cell.

“Six months of digging, only to end up in another cell?” The creature’s eyes filled with horror, and then weariness. He sagged within his tunnel, which was no larger than he was. “I can’t do this again,” he breathed.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Just another prisoner. Call me Farak. Aram Farak – that’s ‘priest’ in my tongue.”

“You’re a holy man. What are you doing here?”

“Never mind that. There’s something I must... tell. I’m not going to make it much longer. Someone has to know.” He looked at me, and sagged again. “I must tell you everything. So you understand the importance.”

“The importance of what?”

“Of the Rod of Zalam,” he said.

And then he left, muttering that it was too dangerous, that we should talk only at night when the guards were less likely to pass by. Thus began my correspondence with the strange dwarf. I do not know how many nights we met, sometimes after I crawled through to his cell, and sometimes after he came to mine. I could tell he was growing weaker by the day, but he insisted on continuing the story.

“In the early days of the world, my ancestors walked with the gods, and built many fine cities,” he began on the first night. “And soon we encountered others of our kind, dwarves who had their own lands in the west. Our peoples found much in common. We both took pride in our bonds of brotherhood, in our prowess in battle, in dedication to firm laws and rectification of grievances. And of course we shared an eternal love for gold and material wealth.

“Our peoples made great treaties, uniting into a single Dwarven Empire that spanned from the Great Ocean to the Southern. A Golden Age, they call it. Yet we were never truly one people. The westerners loved their mines and hated magic, believing that dwarves should do their own work without ‘cheating’ – all part of their obsession with the notion of freedom. In the east we know that power comes in many forms, especially the power one holds over others.

“Still, we remained committed to the union – even when the calamities came. Many horrors befell the dwarves both east and west when the Golden

Age ended. But the first of them was that of Death. Unliving terrors came upon us from the south, and it was in the midst of their onslaught that Zalam rose.

“They say she was just a child from a village in the path of the devastation. Yet the stories tell how she slew the terrible vampire champion in single combat with nothing but a wooden shard torn from her broken home. She led the people north and lured the dead into the mountains, where she annihilated them all at Zalam’s Gate: Zalaman Tekash in our language.

“Zalam’s rule lasted less than a single year. For she marched west to join the Empire’s host and was killed in battle with a new power growing in a city called Avras. The conflict was resolved soon after, yet the humans’ rise was one of many causes of the Empire’s sundering. Our two peoples were cut off. New disasters befell us, great tides of vermin and orcs, and we did not face them together. The West sent no aid. They



claim that their missions of rescue were themselves lost, but we saw no sign of them. Eventually they believed we had been completely destroyed. But they were wrong. We endured.

“And the symbol of our endurance was Zalam’s Rod. An emblem of authority carved from the very stake that defeated Death, wielded by our first great hero and saviour. Zalaman Tekash remained a small city for many centuries, but it was well defended and it never fell. And it was not the only surviving site in the east. The lands of our home were blasted by year after year of war, becoming a great lifeless expanse that epitomised our hardship, where even the riverlands were farmed to exhaustion and remain barren to this day. Yet still we rallied to the Rod of Zalam, and wherever it went, there our enemies were driven back.

“We looked to many sources for aid. The other peoples who suffered nearby us we enslaved and conquered, adding their strength to our own, using their fields to replace what we had lost on the Blasted Plain, as it is now called, and their bodies to replace our lost armies. Even today, slaves outnumber dwarves ten to one.

“We turned also to the gods, of course. The gods have always been our surest recourse, and we have long yearned to share more of their power. So it was that our greatest prophet, Vezodinezh, devised our people’s ultimate weapon and built it in the form of a ziggurat at the heart of the largest of our citadels, Teviktelet. His goal was to tap the limitless magical power of the Immortal Realm itself, and in this he was successful.

“At the culmination of a great ceremony to which all the strength of the East gathered to bear witness, the Device was activated. It was designed not just to seek power, but to make a statement. To proclaim to the world that the dwarves of the east will do whatever it takes to survive, that our flame cannot be quenched, and that we will not ever again suffer the humiliation of conquest.

“For an instant we touched the gods, and their power was overwhelming. In that instant, we were changed forever, no longer simply the steel dwarves, or the dwarves of the east. We had touched the flame, and our name was now Infernal.

“The breach lasted but a moment, but the damage – and the source of unimaginable power it provides – has lasted ever since. Truly, our salvation cost us everything – the assembled host, the great city, and the Prophet himself burnt to ash in the blink of an eye. All our northern holdfasts were lost too in a great roiling flood of magic and daemons. Worst of all, we lost the Rod of Zalam, which was placed on the Device as a figurehead.

“Or so we thought. So they still think in Zalaman Tekash – yet I know better. That citadel soon became the greatest of our refuges after our baptism in flame, thanks to the ascent of its mighty Overlord and Lawgiver, Kemurab, who took the first Brand. But there was another power that was founded in the time of Kemurab, and that was the Temple of Lugar.

“Lugar was an ancient folk hero, a trickster known for legal cunning. His followers came as manipulators and swindlers, performers and merchants, their legal powers stripped away by Ashuruk in ancient times. It was said that a cultist of Lugar could sell you your own home by producing the deed that proved you never owned it, and charge you rent for the years of occupation. Their actions earned us a reputation for dishonesty among outsiders, but to a Lugarite, dishonesty is a virtuous art.

“Not long after the Inferno, when we were at our weakest, we were beset by the endless horde of Gorshu, the goblin king. They came right to the walls of Zalaman, their numbers beyond counting. And yet the next morning, they sent an emissary to announce they would not attack the land of mighty Lugar, and they departed south, never to be seen again. That same year, it was found that

deep in the most obscure parts of Kemurab’s new laws, Lugar’s name was clearly listed alongside the other three gods comprising the Vaneb. Thus the cult was officially discovered to be a Temple, and has enjoyed the same privileges as the other Temples ever since.

“The military and political power of Lugar grew rapidly after that. His Temple ensured the Code of Kemurab was adopted throughout the land. Its sudden and spectacular rise in fortune following the Inferno event has long remained a mystery. Yet I believe I can explain it. I had to travel far from home, but I finally found the proof. Zalam’s Rod was not destroyed by the Device. It was taken by Lugarite cultists, and a forgery put in its place. I do not know how, but I believe the true Rod must have been used to achieve their extraordinary feats of that time.

“The Rod has been found. I know now where it was taken, and where it was hidden and lost, even to the meticulous record-keepers of Lugar. Boy, you must believe me. The Rod of Zalam is a treasure beyond imagination for an Infernal dwarf. I am dying, but you must find it, and bring it to Zalaman Tekash. They will make you the richest human in Equitaine. And you will see the marvels of that city – ah!”

Aram Farak’s eyes clouded for a long moment.

“It is a glorious place. The gleaming ziggurats, the towering walls, the shimmering waterways! Clean asphalt streets lit by golden gaslight, factories producing marvels without end. The great banners like bright flames, bearing the image of the Rod held aloft by a crowned bull. The Ziggurat of Ashuruk, where dwells the World Flame, the symbol of my people, constantly tended by priests so that it can never be extinguished.

“Swear to me you will go there, child. Swear you will bring back the Rod!”

Farak’s shining eyes creased with pain and he coughed horribly, his body slumping.



"I swear it," I said. He smiled.

"Good. Now I can die. But it will not be in vain. Remember the plan we discussed."

He died an hour later. Following the scheme he devised, I managed to distract the guards and

hide myself in his coffin. To my astonishment, the ruse worked, and after the most tortuous day of the entire six-year ordeal, I found myself free.

It was then my search began.

– Excerpt from the memoirs of
the Count of Bellatorre.



LAMASSU



Februar 8th

For all the wonders of Vanekhash that Zhabi had shown me, it was one he declined to explain that most caught the attention of both myself and Qiang Ru. As we retired to the summit of the guest ziggurat, free to see the stars above the furnace-born haze that chokes the lower levels of the citadel, we saw something pass in front of the moon. A winged creature – an immense winged creature – with a massive humanoid head.

Qiang Ru was more startled than I, for the creature locked eyes with him before diving into the Overlord's ziggurat. Ru is the bravest creature I know, and I had never seen him look so unsettled. When I inquired as to what was amiss, Ru began grooming himself. The answer that eventually came forth was no more reassuring: "I do not know what that was, but I saw hunger in its eyes."

Two days passed, with my business making little headway. No figure of import in the city seemed to have time for me, despite my presence having been requested by the Overlord. The mysterious Sakhem was, of course, still nowhere to be found.

Then came a knock on our door, a smart military rapping. When the staff answered, a message was delivered: a request by the lamassu Tammuz to speak to Qiang Ru, companion of the Ambassador. Ru and I exchanged a glance, and wise as ever, Ru answered.

"I would be honored to meet this lamassu, honored indeed – but I would not go without my friend and companion, Bao Fengzi. He is far more diplomatic than I, and will help ensure decorum."

The condition was granted, and we were escorted to an eyrie: a large chamber open to the sky at its centre, yet ringed with comforts, including scientific apparatus, tomes, scrolls – all to a larger-than-human scale. It was unmistakably the home of a scholar of the arcane. Our host was nestled comfortably upon cushions as the pages of a large tome flicked themselves shut. The lamassu was a fearsome sight up close – jaws large enough to enclose my head, and paws boasting massive hooked claws – but his voice was melodious, if deep, and the words comforting. He thanked us for coming, saying that he had never had a chance to meet a qilin, and relished the opportunity to talk with a fellow cloudwalker.

Ru drew out a definition of "cloudwalker", and they agreed: peaceful creatures, sages and scholars who do not so much as crush a blade of grass beneath their feet without considering the moral impact, though Tammuz seemed readier than Ru to consider violence justified. It was a gentleness I had not expected in this harsh, metallic land, but Tammuz was happy to explain: the lamassu have made a longstanding treaty with the dwarves, founded in mutual respect between the traditionally experimental prophets and the universally scholarly lamassu.

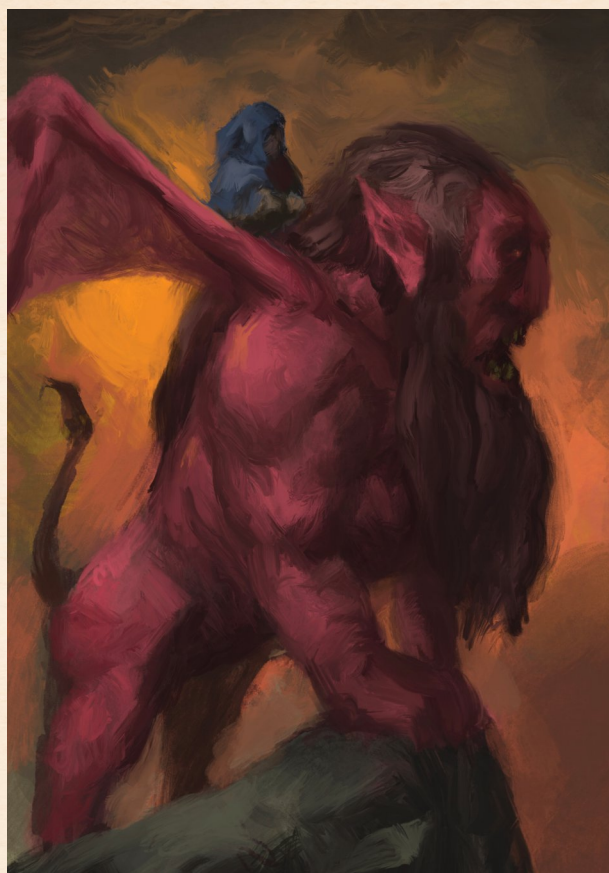
I took advantage of this moment to contrast their forms, mirrored. The overall size and shape of their anatomy was surprisingly similar; hooved creatures, yet with bodies shaped like cats. With its feathery wings folded, the lamassu's flanks resembled Ru's scales and even matched Ru's iridescent purple coloration. Even their beards

were mirrored – Ru’s neck frills can pass for human hair, while the lamassu’s chin sprouted curly brown feathers in an almost identical configuration. Ru’s wolfish face was the main difference. I can read Ru’s expression like that of a man, but the lamassu had a fully dwarven head in shape, though it was twice the size in every direction.

They contrasted their respective roles in Longjing and Vanekhash; to the surprise of neither, the qilin are more involved in day-to-day politics, but to the surprise of both, the lamassu are more likely to act as a political kingmaker. On rare occasions they provide backing and mystical support to factions outside the control of the Infernal churches. Courted for their respect and peership with the prophets, the lamassu do not often make political moves, but as they tend to take outcasts as apprentices and assistants, the exceptions are notable. Still, they serve the proper functioning of the Citadel; they act for the common good, because they know they are very few in number.

Ru even compared Tammuz to the children of Gonglu, the great dragon – asking the lamassu if they could be considered rulers who simply choose seldom to impose their wisdom. Tammuz smiled and demurred. The Infernal Dwarves are ruled by their gods, he told us. Ashuruk, king and lawgiver; Nezibkesh, the giant who moves earth and machine; Shamut, holy bull of war; Lugar, spirit of legal cunning. Together they are the Vaneb, and their will is absolute. Yet on the mortal plane, the dwarves have no central leader comparable to Emperor Gonglu – Vanekhash stands alone against any peril clever enough to threaten this one city.

It was hard to reconcile this information with the unity shown by the sheer scope and scale of the Steel Road. Tammuz clarified: each section is controlled by a different citadel, and failure to maintain it would be a disgrace in the eyes of the gods. Gods – and greed. I have yet to encounter a



society without care for wealth, but the dwarves have elevated it to a true virtue. Tammuz stressed that the Dwarves operate according to reciprocity and enlightened self interest. Debts are repaid with precision, and a promise of mutual profit is seen as the surest possible bond outside that of a debt owed. They still value natural forces like family, duty and their gods – but it is a sin for family, duty or even gods to impoverish the self. So states the law of Ashuruk, High God among the Vaneb, who even the oldest tablets call “god of wealth” among his many titles.

The conversation between Qiang Ru and Tammuz finally drifted into the dense details of some mystical theorem. I could not follow, and Tammuz suggested I return to my quarters for sleep. Ru promised he would return swiftly, and out of reflexive politeness and trust for the lamassu, I agreed. It did not take long for second thoughts to emerge, but by then I was already halfway back to the Ambassador’s suite.

CITIZEN GIANT



THE JOURNAL OF BIG ROCK

Brother Dazra said Big Rock should write journal. Okay.

Today in school we learned Ashuruk. Ashuruk very big, like Huge Rock but bigger. Ashuruk make Giant Dwarves and Small Dwarves. All dwarves perfect, Big Rock too. Big Rock thought Mama and Huge Rock make Big Rock. Brother Dazra say they did, but so did Ashuruk. Maybe Big Rock, Ashuruk and Amarad will make Little Rock.



Today in school we learned about Shamut. Shamut giant hot Bull. Shamut not food. Shamut helps us fight. Big Rock not like fighting. Fighting mean, Amarad say so. Big Rock not eat bull now.



Today in school we learned about Overlord. Overlord is big Small Dwarf. He friend of Shamut, Ashuruk, Lugar and Nezibkesh. He tells all what do, like Brother Dazra or Huge Rock. Big Rock want be like the Overlord.



Today in school we learned about armour. Armour makes shiny and hard. Is for fighting.

Fighting still mean. I not want fight. Big Rock scholar, like Brother Dazra. Scholar like Amarad.



Today in school we learned about fighting. Fighting not mean. Amarad wrong. Fighting protects people. Duty. Amarad and Big Rock train in fighting. Amarad had gun. Guns no fit Big Rock fingers. Big Rock choose weapon. Choose Shield. Big Rock want protect dwarves. Big Rock want protect Amarad.



Today in school we learned about enemies. Enemies mean. Some small like dwarves, some small like bulls, but all mean. Dwarves and Giant Dwarves smash our mean enemies. Amarad and Brother Dazra and Big Rock go two days future. We protect dwarves from enemies. Brother Dazra says Big Rock best Giant Dwarf scholar. Brother Dazra sound sad. This make Big Rock also sad. Amarad say Big Rock maybe hurt in battle. Big Rock not sad if hurt. Angry. Angry like Huge Rock. Big Rock do kick enemies. Do block shield. Do win battle.





Today in school, we were not in school.
Big fight today. Big Rock hurt bad.
Smashed enemies.
Shield good. Block enemies.
Huge Rock had hammer. It covered in fire.
Huge Rock burn enemies. Brother Dazra say
fire sacred.
Big Rock still likes shield. Shield make Big
Rock look like Amarad.
Amarad sad. Say she kill an enemy and this
make sad.
Big Rock kill many enemies. Brother Dazra
say good thing.
Amarad say Brother Dazra not always right.



Today in school, we learned Brother Dazra
is always right.
Brother Dazra is always right.
Brother Dazra is always right.
Brother Dazra is always right.
Brother Dazra is always right.
Brother Dazra is always right.



Today in school, Big Rock is not in school.
Big Rock run away. Save Amarad. Protect
Amarad.

– Translation of giant-size book recovered
on the border with Khanate territory



INFERNAL WARRIORS



Februar 8th, continued

Walking back to my quarters, I felt dangerously exposed. The lamassu had taken both a friend and protector, and it itself had been a fearsome creature. I had seen a tiger in the Imperial Menagerie, but the lamassu was easily twice its size. How curious, then, that it had been the friendliest and most welcoming individual in the citadel.

That unease saved me. I was watching my escort, and envisioning the ambassador's quarters. When a second squad of soldiers met my own outside the door, I studied the newcomers. Infernal Warriors may be conscripts, but their armour and armaments are formidable; I saw smart ranks of shining steel, thick plates of metal atop docthy warriors, and guns well adapted for close quarters.

From my taller, human, vantage I noticed the second rank quietly unslinging their weapons with the cool, practiced grace of veteran soldiers. I was already only half a heartbeat away from panic; at this movement I instinctively ducked behind the burly, squat figure of the sergeant of my escort.

The blunderbusses roared like the loudest thunder I had ever heard, and for long minutes after I could hear nothing except the ringing in my ears. A thick, choking haze filled the corridor and I crawled away behind my brave escort. A body fell on my legs and I jerked them forwards. My mouth tasted nothing

but the rancid stink of blackpowder discharges, while my eyes watered under the combined assault of stench and grit.

I made it through the door of the Ambassador's suite even as my conscious mind worked out that it was the worst direction to flee, for it had no escape route. The bullets slaughtering my escort surely had my name on them. Yet outrage at the insult offered to the Empire by the attempted murder of a diplomat almost overpowered the desire of said diplomat to avoid being murdered.

I cannot claim good sense under fire. I staggered into the room and looked around in a daze. Nothing made sense – the absence of my companion, the raging fire-fight, the two dwarves shield-to-shield blockading the entrance to the suite, and especially not the golden-haired woman beckoning to me. I stumbled in her direction more than ran, and she pulled me inside the bedroom.



By the time I regained my wits, the ringing in my ears had subsided and my body was holding a dresser against the doorway with all its might. The woman crouched next to me and I registered that she wore a slave's collar and the uniform of a maid – though she looked more Vetian than the others who had attended my rooms. She was speaking and, despite her atrocious accent, I could understand her words.

“... think nothing of us here, but dwarves are dying to protect you. Why?”

I felt the situation demanded honesty. “I’m an ambassador. If I died, the Empire would not consider sending a replacement. The trade deal would be off. Interesting. I may have more leverage in these talks than those steely-eyed negotiators have been implying.”

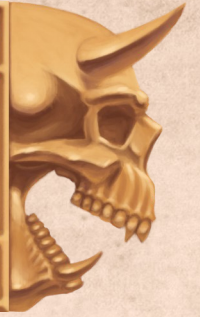
I found an odd vein of courage and composure in discussing less physically dangerous treacheries. This was my world. “They’re targeting me. That means they don’t have the manpower to strike at the Overlord directly. Any reinforcements will be on our side. We might just be able to weather the storm. If we’re lucky, their time is already up and they will attempt to withdraw. I expect they’d want to shout a parting exchange to intimidate me.”

Right on cue, one of them bellowed “Tsuandan Ambassador! Remember this and think of your life! Sakhem’s days are numbered! Go home!”

Oddly enough, these words were reassuring. I had begun to understand dwarven politics.



CITADEL GUARD



“So why do they call you Citadel Guard? We’re in the middle of a jungle, guarding nothing but bananas. I don’t see a Citadel.”

Safan’s words ended all conversation around the campfires. He’d crossed an unspoken line. The dwarven mercenaries didn’t talk to the human mercenaries, the human mercenaries didn’t talk to the dwarven mercenaries, and nobody got hurt. It was a harmless question, sure, but we all held our breath as the grizzled dwarf looked up from his game and muttered an answer through a black beard almost as big as he was.

“Not afraid to ask, are you? I like that. So I’ll tell you, human child with a sword and too much confidence. It’s nice and simple. You can’t call yourself a ‘Citadel Guard’ until you’ve guarded the Citadel a full score of years. Long enough to get good at it. Then you’re allowed to retire – or take on a new contract, for real money.”

He might have said more, but in the silence, we’d realized the crates were under attack. My comrades scrambled to grab their weapons and form up to handle the jungle raiders, but by the time I’d strung my bow, the dwarves had formed a perimeter and poured a hail of bullets into the trees overhead. Screeches and bellowing echoed through the night, loud enough to make my ears ring. Loud enough to make me shiver.

The enemy rushed in. Horned beasts that walked like men, armed with wicked rusty blades. They stank like a grease fire, overpowering the bitter tang of the blackpowder clouds. I gave up on archery and went for my belt knife when one of them leapt at me – but luckily I didn’t have to test my bladework. A bullet hole appeared in the middle of its skull, and a rough, gravelly voice called out behind me.

“Human! Get out of my sightline!”



I rolled to one side just in time for another creature to pounce on me. It was horribly strong – I barely kept it away from my throat on that first bound. Once again, my salvation came in the form of a grumpy dwarven mercenary. He bashed it away from my neck with a powerful upwards blow from his gun-axe. He grumbled even as he turned back to the fight, and I scrambled to regain my footing behind him.

“Five years a Satrap’s bodyguard... three a Temple escort... honours as long as my beard... and I’m guarding fruit from walking carpets. We should’ve charged him extra for the job being too easy,” he

told the world at large. Then he turned to me. “If you can’t fight worth a copper – and you can’t – grab my spare powder horn. It’s on my back. I need to reload.”

I would say “we” won the day, but that would be untrue. The dwarves routed the beasts single-handedly. We were just there to carry powder.

– Journal of Asad, mercenary in the employ of the Bashib Kegnat Fruit Consortium





IMMORTALS

I was the last one out in the barley that day. They said storms were coming, so I was trying to get as much of the harvest into the barn as possible. It was almost dark as I walked back to the house. I don't remember which I heard first, the rumbling thunder, or the screams.

As I came around the side of the house, the first person I saw was Casimir. He was slumped in a ditch, blood draining from an ungodly gash across his torso. The last of the sun's light seemed to ebb away, and I heard thunder roll across the horizon again. I followed the sounds of fighting.

All the farm hands were there in front of the house, each clutching scythes or pitchforks and engaged in desperate combat with something I couldn't discern. A small dark shape moved among them with frightening ferocity. There was nothing but a gleam of metal where its face should have been, though their horrendous weapon gleamed brighter still. Before I could react, there were three more bodies in the dirt.

A scream from indoors prompted me into action, and I hurried to the back door, running up the steps and into the master bedroom. The children ran to me and I hugged them close. Unharmmed, thank the

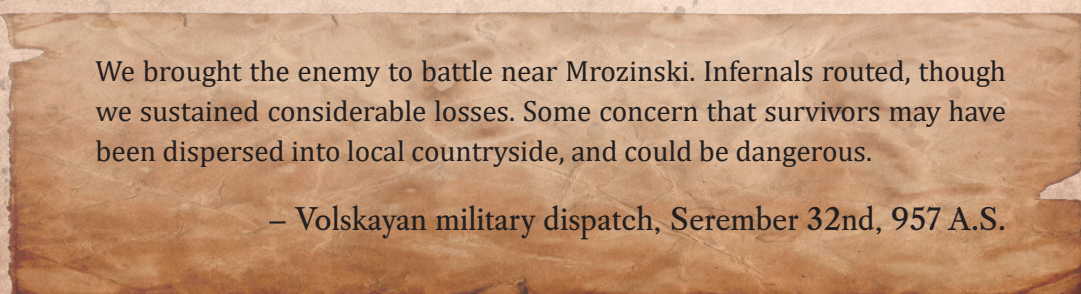
gods. I began to look for hiding places – only to stop short as I realised I could no longer hear fighting from outside.

“Is Daddy going to—” began Milda, but she too stopped. There were footsteps on the staircase.

“The closet, quick!” I hissed, ushering the children in among the coats and boxes. In the darkness, I wrapped my arms around their heads and covered their mouths. The footsteps entered the room. For many long moments I heard nothing but the rain that had begun outside. Suddenly a great peal of thunder seemed to shake the very walls of the house. Through the slats of the closet door, I saw a figure caught in the blinding flash – a small man, covered in dark steel, his face the most uncanny composition of unfeeling metal. I swear he was looking right at us. I wanted to vomit.

We continued to wait for what felt like the whole night. Finally another bolt of lightning revealed the room to be empty. The nightmare had departed, leaving six corpses in the dirt outside.

– The account of Zvonimira Scekcic concerning the events of Serember 35th 957 A.S.



We brought the enemy to battle near Mrozinski. Infernals routed, though we sustained considerable losses. Some concern that survivors may have been dispersed into local countryside, and could be dangerous.

– Volskayan military dispatch, Serember 32nd, 957 A.S.



I give my life to the People.

I shall not die, as the People shall not die.

I will have no face, and my faces will be numberless.

I accept my death, and embrace the deathless flame.

I bring nothing but death to the enemy.

Until all is burned away.



These are the words I will speak tomorrow. The words that have run through my mind for the last twelve years, ever since training began. A dozen years of life, given freely, knowing that only the best will be granted the chance to say those words and sacrifice their remaining years thereafter.

Today I completed the Ritual of Kibotesh. I was paired with Mukaz, my brother in arms for the last decade. He was always the better fighter. He had me on my back a dozen times, but I felt the fire rise within me, and I saw his blood flow down my armour in a violent haze. The final hurdle was crossed. I have proven strong enough in body and spirit to wear the mask. I can only tell myself it was worth the price.

Prophet Taruz has asked me to keep this journal to document my experience. His strange research has proved useful to the Academy in the past, so they approved his request and now I must fill these pages. I believe he is seeking a way to facilitate the production of new masks. As everyone knows, newly created masks have little use or purpose until many generations have passed through them. Perhaps Taruz will find a way to expedite this process and alleviate the shortage caused by an ever-dwindling number of ancient masks.

The ceremony was not what I thought it would be. I was ushered up to the Temple of Ashuruk, and finally shown the door into the highest chamber. There I beheld the sight I had been waiting for, the vision that only the highest clergy and those chosen for immortality are permitted to see. The Undying Flame. The fire that has dwelt here since the time of Kemurab, whence it was taken from Teviktelet itself, born of a flame kept alive since our people rose from the clay.

I had thought there would be witnesses, but the room had been emptied. The door was shut and barred behind me as I entered. I remembered tales of those whose mask brought immediate insanity, and ceremonies turned to bloodbaths. Facing this alone was wise.

There it stood, on a pedestal before the flame. The steel gleamed, though it was pocked by black speckles of age. As the fiery reflections shifted across its surface, I knew this was truly ancient.

I knelt, and spoke the words. With a deep breath I gathered my courage and lifted the object. It felt small and cold. Turning it, I lifted it towards my face. As it came close, it filled my vision with a dark void, with nothing but two slits of fragile light at the centre.



Finally it met my face like a blast of ice. My whole body spasmed with a sensation of utter freezing cold. I felt my nerves blaze with some terrible force seeming to emanate from within my very soul. I collapsed to the ground, shaking silently. Finally, I could breathe again, and all was still. And then I heard them.



Today I was tested in battle. They sent half a dozen fully-armed warriors to assail me. I was given a wooden baton for defence. We... I killed at least two of them, and the rest are in the infirmary. It was easy. We know how to move and fight as I could not... before. Strategies and techniques I have never seen or learned come to me unbidden. I can react to my opponents faster, and we are no longer... troubled by thoughts or worries.

Instead, I hear the voices. I know they are my predecessors, their minds, like mine, contained forever within the mask. We who know the steel legion. We who have felt our... individuality slipping away. Our choices are not our own. Today we killed comrades before I could stop it. I thought I would feel remorse, but it was lost among the voices.

Before we knew the mask, we thought we would be among the few who maintain a sense of self. We thought to master the mask's power. We were weak, foolish. The mask and I are one. Removing it would be like removing my own face. We have the voices now. We do not need our feelings.

They say we are ready. We have received our first orders. Tomorrow we leave for Vetia .

– Translation from Tablet 85831.67,
Greater Stacks, citadel of Zetivak

We will set out at once. If you wish to teach the visitors a lesson then I will make it a lesson they will never forget. They will be no match for our cannons, as all reports indicate they traveled light and failed to bring their own artillery. My only concern is the sizable bodyguard of warriors they call Immortal. Some dreadful eastern magics imbue these dwarves with the combined power of their ancestors, so they say. I've seen them in battle before, and they are truly frightening. Still, we outnumber the foreigners five to one.

– Volskayan military dispatch,
Serember 21st, 957 A.S





casp

TAURUKH ENFORCERS AND COMMISSIONER



Februar 13th

Zhabi came quickly once the assault had been repelled. The scarred Vizier looked at me with concern, and asked me one question: "How much for the prisoner?"

I was confused, but a diplomat can speak for hours without knowing what is going on. I turned the question upon him.

"What do you intend to do with them?" I replied. From the ensuing conversation, I gleaned that my personal dwarven guards had been paid for by my government and so took orders from me. Zhabi legally required my permission to interrogate their captives. Since I did not need their gold, but wanted to know more about the threat, my condition was simple: I would be present.

Zhabi was reluctant, but agreed. I was taken to the prisoner, and there I met my first taurukh. He was an absolutely gargantuan creature; the dwarf and bull bodies combined into a form somehow more massive than two ordinary bulls. He introduced himself as Commissioner Alzhab and commenced the questioning. The prisoner was not physically manhandled, but did not appear defiant, so much as resigned.

The prisoner was first asked about her motive and associations. She spat that she despised the lesser races and it was an insult to the gods and the honour of Vanekhash that one of them – myself – was being treated as a guest. Commissioner Alzhab's tone was almost bored as he negotiated leniency under the Code of Kemurab;

instead of being roasted alive, a fine and the location of a rebel base would suffice. From a human, I would have expected either defiance unto death, or crumbling at the threat of the same. Instead, she haggled. For half an hour, they negotiated the size of the fine and the precision of her information, the prisoner seemingly prepared to die rather than impoverish her family.

Once negotiations were complete, she offered directions – ride out the third gate to the East, follow the edge of the lichen fields and search the third plantation. Commissioner Alzhab took that as sufficient payment and notarised the testimony, conditional on the capture of further rebels.

"Is that all?" I said, surprised. Commissioner Alzhab sighed.

"Her debt to you has been purchased by the Citadel, Ambassador. Unless there is something else you wish of us, I need to dispatch my brethren to round up these rebels".

"Of course – but I will go with them." I said, thinking quickly.



I rode out on a fine steed, acquired from a hobgoblin horse trader and surrounded by stern taurukh policemen. They were smaller than the Commissioner, 'merely' the size of dwarves riding bulls. They galloped smoothly, their hybrid bodies perfectly synchronised. Their forms are thick and squat as the hardiest of bulls, but also as powerful, and the earth trembled beneath their hooves.

This was both a policing maneuver and a military one. The Commissioner dispatched a squad to circle around the side of the plantation buildings, reserving the main force of taurukhs to storm the gates once we had cut off the escape. We waited on a hill, looking down on a peaceful farmstead. The delicate blossoms of the flowers nearest to me caught my eye as they were trampled underfoot by the crushing hooves of the taurukh alongside.

The sound of artificial thunder peeled ahead. The Commissioner dashed forwards - only I needed to spur a steed onwards. My horse kept pace, then sped ahead. I was now amid the front ranks of the furious charge, driven by the press of bullish bodies and the fiery spirit of my steed. I tried to slow its pace, but our momentum carried us through the courtyard and sent me crashing through wide, shuttered windows. My horse panicked and threw me into a side room. I smelled blood and smoke, flinched at the sound of screams and loud retorts, tasted the reeds of the floor mixed with my own blood.

I rolled to one side and looked up. Before me were squat, dwarven figures. They looked startled, and then pleased, as I struggled to stand up.

Then I was struck from behind, and my world went black.



TAURUKH ANOINTED



I should be Anointed because I have ~~an~~ ~~intuit~~ a special bond with bulls. I should be Anointed because I am observant and attentive. I should be Anointed because I am truly and completely devoted to Great Shamut and I know the history of the Taurukh people by heart.

I have never known a home other than the Temple of Shamut. I was rescued from an altar of Kuulima by Detective Zhegash as a baby, and ever since then I have known only these temple walls. My first memory is of feeding one of the sacred bull-calves - it nuzzled my fingers, looking for more milk. Tending the calves was my morning duty for ten years, and never once was I late or absent. I know when they are sick, I know when they are upset. I have seen other acolytes bond with the sacred calves before their rituals, and I love all my ~~pets~~ charges as they came to love those they chose to bond with. One heart, one mind, one flesh.

Detective Zhegash has trained me in observation and deduction. I can recognize the accents of seventeen different Citadels by ear, even distinguishing between the upper and lower classes. I know the signs of fear in goblin, human and dwarven eyes, and can distinguish between them clearly. I know basic alchemy and can test for reagents of the four humours.

Should I be selected and bonded, I will apply for the post of Constable.

I know the history of the Taurukh people in ~~much~~ great detail. For the remainder of my essay, I will discuss the episodes I consider most important.

When High Prophet Madzhab prayed to Shamut for guidance on how to match enemy cavalry, it was the Gyen wolf nomads who ~~at~~ so plagued Vanekhash with their highly mobile strategy. Madzhab was not gifted the Taurukh ritual fully perfected and complete. The Gods give us only what we need, not what we desire. Three score fine warriors and eight times as many slaves and oxen died in four failed rituals before the correct rite was discovered. Prophet Madzhab's feat is rendered all the more significant by the failure of the other Temples to replicate the holy ritual in the intervening centuries.

Some people consider Madzhab foolhardy, for his experiments almost exhausted the citadel's resources, leaving it vulnerable. But the proof of great vision is in

Not all candidates are orphans, but almost all were raised in a similar manner to you. You need to show what makes you better qualified than the rest.

And why can't you be a Constable as a dwarf? Point out the physical demands of the position. Anointed are stronger than even other taurukhs - show you're aware of that, and the responsibilities that come with it.

Significant how?

the results, and I consider the great prophet a personal hero for his persistence in the face of overwhelming danger, and for the gift he bestowed on our people's future.

Further, while Taurukh have been policing the citadels since Madzhab first mastered the Transmutation in Blood, the modern structure of the Force postdates the Amendment of Kezibgekh. Kezibgekh's rebellion against the Church ironically proved the loyalty of the Taurukhs. ~~We~~ The Taurukh campaigned solely for representation in decisions concerning the replenishment of their ranks. At the command of possibly the greatest ~~army~~ pan-Citadel force in history, Kezibgekh could potentially have declared himself ruler of a reborn Dwarven Empire had he tried. Instead, he negotiated for his people. His reforms include the rebuilding of the citadels for accessibility and proper stables, commensurate pay and the enshrining of Taurukh elites as Clergy of Shamut, empowered to choose ritual candidates.

In conclusion, I would make an excellent Anointed because I am alert, have bonded closely with bulls, and can converse on the histories with clear knowledge and empathy. Detective Zhegash, my adoptive father, has prepared me well for this. Select me to be Anointed.

Your passion comes across well here.

Conventional wisdom suggests that Kezibgekh's taurukh would never have fought to crown him Emperor. You should address that - I don't disagree with your conclusion, but you need to make a stronger case.

Ending is a little sparse, and don't drop my name. That's my job.

– Application dated 943 A.S.



VIZIER



Februar 13th, continued

I awoke to the splashing of water on my face, to find myself strapped to an uncomfortably short chair.

I was inside a cave – a lava tunnel by the look of the rocks. My lip was bleeding into my mouth, and my head felt packed with wool. Pain hammered through my skull and the world was blurred, but I desperately sought to regain my senses and find some sliver of advantage.

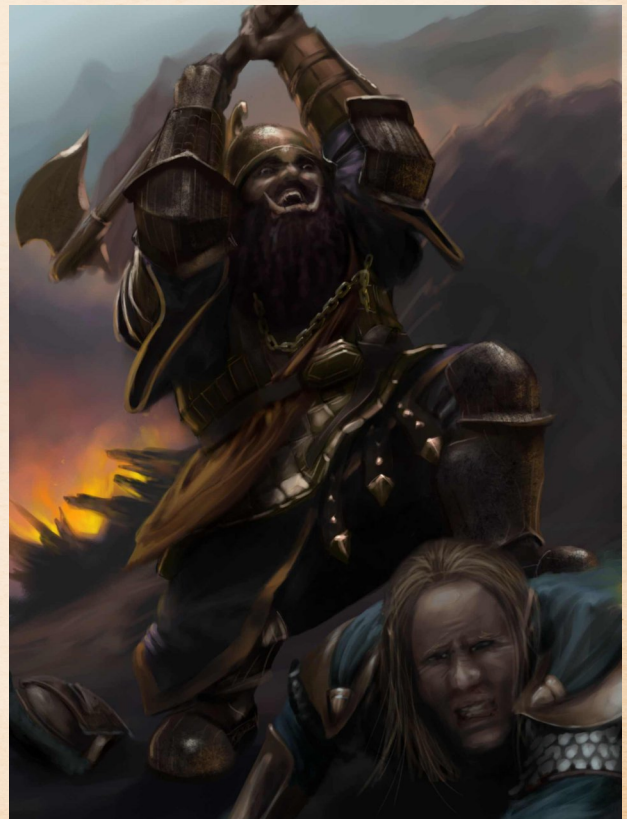
What I found, instead, was an unfamiliar face, smiling broadly. It was dwarven, mostly, but unlike the others I had seen, he had monstrous tusks replacing his canines, making the smile more threat than reassurance.

“Ambassador Bao. I am Vizier Rokvi, left hand of Khamuz, Overlord of Gar Shakhub. Glad to meet you under better circumstances. You must know, I admire your spirit,” he told me in an almost jovial tone. “It would have been shameful if our attempt on your life had succeeded. A man who can calculate political odds under fire – you are a treasure. If the tusks confuse you, simply know that some of Gar Shakhub are blessed by the Inferno.”

“Our group has played the role of xenophobes, but that is a lie. We are here to seize Vanekhash, Ambassador. Rebuild the Dwarven Empire of old, one citadel at a time. And trade is the lifeblood of empires. When we take the Terminus of the Steel Road, we could offer our brother empire, Tsuandan,

a deal with much better terms than whatever you can squeeze out of that miser Sakhem - I have the paperwork. Conditional on help from you, yourself, in taking the citadel, of course.” He tapped a stack of papers next to him meaningfully.

There was the catch, I knew. This strange dwarf's troops had fought and bled to bring me here. The attack on the plantation – perhaps that had been a ruse, or perhaps this was just the seizing of an opportunity. Perhaps a second squad had been preparing to kidnap me in the citadel... possibilities danced in my head, but I focused keenly on the words as he continued.



“The lammasu has made a friend. Your kirrin. The scaly ox with antlers.”

Qilin, my innermost thoughts corrected. Ru, my dearest friend, most trusted ally and wisest companion, who walks upon clouds because he frets over each blade of grass. “Scaly ox” indeed. I banished the thought and refocused on the dwarf’s words.

“This is good. Lammasu is a wild card. We have a winning hand. Take the wild card out of play, we win for sure. Tell kirrin to take lammasu on picnic for all I care – just make sure lammasu is distracted, busy, not meddling.”

My head throbbed, and not just from the bruise. This was a shell game – either the first attack was a feint, or this one was. Perhaps they had laid out their cards honestly, or perhaps... I had to make a counter-offer.

“A grandiose claim,” I pointed out, “but one with no proof, no evidence, no plan. How am I supposed to return to the city having disappeared during the raid? I will be interrogated, and I assure you – I will not keep your secrets in the face of the taurukhs’ tender mercies.”

The foreign dwarf grinned. “No problem. You will be a hero. We have... a volunteer. To be your prisoner. He will be injured when you capture him. As for the plan – it is simple. We have an army. Larger than garrison of Vanekhash. It already marches here. It will arrive within the week. Sakhem’s priests will abandon him. We will crush any who remain loyal.”

I stared into the vizier’s grinning face for long moments.

Finally, I came to a decision.

I took the deal. I took it all the way to Overlord Sakhem.



PROPHET



Ullos 19

Dear Mama,

My strength of mind has impressed the buyers, as I hoped. Approximately so, at least.

A bespectacled dwarf visited the slave ship on his own. He reminded me of nothing so much as a more compact version of the Professor; even his speech had similarities, though naturally the tongue employed was Abzhaghad. He spoke to the captain, inquiring as to whether any of the captives had a fine hand for lettering and draughtsmanship.



I seized the moment, abandoning my plan to fake might. Instead, I took advantage of Lady Khezek's instruction in said tongue. I cried out that I was the most finely educated prisoner to come through this market in many long days, that I was an artist of skill, that he would find no one better upon this ship than I. I knew it was but a small hope – my accent was a nigh-insurmountable mark against my claims. Apparently, a Fuhrberg voice has some resemblance to that of the lesser classes in these foreign, inverted lands. Nevertheless, the bespectacled dwarf must have been impressed, for he proceeded to purchase... purchase me.

I was dragged forcibly through the streets whenever I slowed; surprising strength resided in the limbs of the aged dwarf. As he walked, he lectured me.

"Yes, you are the best slave for my purposes to come through the harbor for many days. This does not make you good. You will be assigned elocution lessons, taught by my apprentice. If you can rid yourself of your accent before a better candidate arises, you will have a good position. Secretary to a Prophet of Nezibkesh, god of the earth! Very prestigious. If not, you will join the foundry workers. Consider that an enticement!"

After that, he ignored me as we left behind the stink of salt and unwashed slaves and waded into smoke. The base of the ziggurats we passed were thick with grime, as were the faces of the multitudes around me. The people of these streets were mostly human, a fact which surprised me. Not nearly so much as the squad of armed thugs, however.

Their leader grinned through broken teeth and looked down at the old dwarf who held my chains.

“Stupid old dwarf. You masters think you so great, but you forget – you need protection. Police not here, no click-clack on stone save you. Give up your purse and key to her chains, maybe you live. Other—”

The words were cut off as the old Dwarf’s eyes blazed brightly. I do not mean this metaphorically – I saw fire sparkling behind the glasses a second before it was echoed on the bodies of the thugs. Their leader burned like a torch, clothing ablaze as he screamed. Flesh melted, skin peeled, and the blaze spread around the circle. The smell of burnt hair would have made me gag, but even my body did not have the good sense to muster a response.

I was petrified, Mama, unable to move. Two of the thugs were less frightened, or at least more violent. They lashed out with clubs at the old dwarf, striking him on the arms. A metallic ringing noise was all they achieved. Beneath the robes of an old wizard lay solid steel. Including a blade – he drew a long knife from inside his robes, and butchered the last two before my eyes.

He looked up at me. “Let that be a lesson to you. Here, we are the masters. Those pathetic robbers were new here – they thought they were smart and strong enough. Ruthless enough. So I lured them out, looked weak, looked old. We know everything that happens in Vanekhash.”

He smirked, and looked towards the largest of the ziggurats hulking above the city. “Take that.” he said, his words soft and surely intended more for his own satisfaction than mine. “Neither Ashuruk’s justice nor Shamut’s vengeance shall claim this little victory.”

He walked on. The corpses bubbled and smouldered behind us.



Oh mama – what nightmare realm have I fallen into?

Your faithful daughter,

Olivia



Postscript: With some time spent with the apprentice, the politics are somewhat clearer. The four Temples – Ashuruk, Nezibkesh, Shamut and Lugar – are rivals. Ashuruk is the god of law and rulership, and Shamut is the god of war and vengeance, so there is tension between them over policing of cities; as such, the old prophet made two of his rivals look ineffective by dealing with the bandits. Three, if one counts the secular authorities. All four, if one agrees with the apprentice’s theory that it will all be chalked up to actions by the Temple of Lugar, god of trickery, diverting retribution away from the prophet.

OVERLORD



Februar 14th

“Until today, we’ve never even spoken. Assuming your tale is true – why side with me over the Gar Shakhub imperialists?”

The Overlord of Vanekhash, in the flesh, did not fail to impress. Of ordinary stature for a dwarf, he nonetheless radiated authority. The citadel’s throne room placed him at the back, but the rippling deference

from the crowded court made it clear that his corner contained all the power.

Not because Overlord Sakhem was alone in that corner. Representatives of the four clergies stood alongside the throne, signifying their support – but also their ability to remove it. The Overlord is a secular position but one appointed by the Temples. I imagined each cult would send their local leader if they sought a favour, or an acolyte as a snub, but always

someone to be by his side and remind him of what he owed them. Or at least, so I judged the situation, based on the presence of an overawed youth wearing the icon of Nezibkesh next to the High Priest of Shamut.

After I had explained the reason for my petition, the Overlord immediately cleared the room. Prophets, viziers, bureaucrats, policemen, supplicants, toadies – everyone was swept out with a single motion. Now it was just Sakhem, myself and the masked Immortals who guarded the chamber, silent as the grave and presumably inclined to stay that way regardless of what was said.

The Overlord's mind was quick. His question cut through my tale and put me on the spot. Many factors had weighed in my decision, but I knew that the one I gave as an explanation would set the tone for relations between Tsuandan and Vanekhash for many years to come.

I doubted it was wise to voice opposition to the dwarves reuniting in a single empire; as fearsome as that proposition would be, it would be political suicide to show such naked fear. Besides, it was not true; I considered it unlikely the imperialists would be able to unify more than two or three citadels before the rest united to break up their would-be empire.

Blatant sycophancy was right out. My intuition of the Overlord's character told me he would be irritated by such a maneuver, not mollified. I was bringing him news of a serious threat to his reign, I hardly needed to gild the lily with excessive flattery. I could perhaps have tried to sell my own political wisdom, impressing him with the wit and cunning of the foreign ambassador. Even if I succeeded, however, that would be a hollow victory. An ambassador needs to be underestimated.

Ultimately, I deemed the truth to be my best option.

"Tammuz. The lammasu. Qiang Ru and I spoke to him before you returned. Ru trusts him and so do I. Tammuz said you were his best student, even though he never had a chance to take you away to learn sorcery. Besides, Rokvi was too eager to make a deal. It wasn't just a wildcard being swept off the

playing field – he was desperate. I don't know Gar Shakhub's internal politics, but I can tell a man who has put everything he has on the line."

The Overlord raised an eyebrow, causing the flame-shaped scar on his forehead to ripple. His Infernal brand was more brazen and public than most: a sign of ruthlessness from an early age.

"And it didn't occur to you that you could fleece such a desperate man of everything he has? I thought the Tsuandanese had a head for business!"

The dance had begun. "A desperate man's promises are worthless. He would likely renege on his offer. Tammuz, however, assures me that you repay your debts to the last yuan. A debt, I will point out, I am now owed for this valuable information. Double for specifics. Qiang Ru used a scrying spell to confirm that the army marches towards Vanekhash and to determine their location. I prepared some paperwork for the trade agreement during the week you so generously gave me. I trust you'll find the terms... satisfactory?"


Sakhem's second eyebrow joined the first for a moment, before the steely mask of the citadel's supreme leader reasserted itself.

"Unlike Rokvi, I am not desperate. Leave your contracts. My staff will consider them. You and I, however, have more to discuss. Reneging on deals is, after all, not purely the prerogative of Vizier Rokvi. If I am to march an army into battle on your word – or that of Qiang Ru – I need assurances.

"I heard from the Steel Guard that your qi-lin flew you safely out of harm's way when your train was attacked. This means you have no fear of heights. If your terms are found acceptable, I have one condition of my own. Ambassador Bao will join me. The Temple of Shamut owes me a favour; I intend to collect. This civil war shall be crushed with the approval of the Vaneb. We will ride upon a divine messenger, and the message shall be that Vanekhash will never bow to Gar Shakhub, or any other usurper."

I took the deal. For the Empire, I took the deal. May the ancestors keep me from joining them, for tomorrow, we fly.

BULL OF SHAMUT



Februar 16th

It was a great honour, I was told, to be permitted even to set eyes on a Bull of Shamut. No other human had ever been granted the privilege of riding one. Compounding the honour of the flight was the honour of being lent a suit of Infernal Plate, a necessity for surviving my seat upon the Bull. A master of the forge had worked through the night, altering a suit intended for a taurukh to fit my body. It was so heavy, I nearly fell to my knees the first time I stood up.

Thankfully, the Overlord did not expect me to contribute to the fight, just sit behind him in the saddle. Even more thankfully, I was expected to remain upon my knees for the conjuration of the Bull.

The Sun's first rays crept over the horizon as the ritual began. The Overlord's army had already begun its march the day before; we would fly to catch up. Focused sunlight ignited a pool of sacred oils. Words were chanted in an archaic form of the Infernal tongue whose nuance I could not quite capture. More of the ritual was undoubtedly conducted outside the narrow viewpoint afforded by my helm and posture.

One moment, there was chanting. The next, a vast fiery beast stood in the heart of the circle and a hushed silence fell. The winged Bull spoke, and in its voice I could hear the words of a God.

"You speak true, my child. It is not yet time for the People to reunite. Khamuz is a false emperor, a pretender to Our sacred name. For his crimes

against the dwarves of Vanekhash, in the name of Vaumkerutash who is Shamut the Hunter, I sentence him to death. You shall be the Hand of Our Vengeance in this!"

The Overlord nodded, standing tall, and gestured towards me. For a moment, I feared for my life. It felt like my soul was on fire.

The Bull nodded. "You, and the Righteous Human. Arise and be mounted. We have a long flight ahead of us."

After my bulky armour had been secured to the creature's saddle behind the Overlord, we were met in the sky by Tammuz and a dwarf I had never before seen.

"My latest apprentice," explained Tammuz. "It'll be good for him to see how sorcery works under battlefield conditions. Besides, Ru would be upset if you were hurt."

"Quite so," spoke a voice from just behind me. Ru had followed the Overlord and I into battle. His scales shone bright in the morning sun, and there was a strange gleam in his eyes I had never observed before. I smiled widely at the sight of him, and yet soon my mind filled with fear to see so erudite a creature here on the threshold of violence.

Below us extended the battlefield, a mountain pass between Vanekhash and Gar Shakhub. The Overlord's forces were arrayed at the foot of the pass, surrendering the high ground to the Shakhubian forces, but ensuring they would be

too close to do anything but engage in their marching formation before we came upon them. We landed at the centre of the army, and the Overlord began his speech. Rank upon rank of soldiers clad in the red and gold of Vanekhash listened to every word.

Upon the right flank were the forces of the Temple of Shamut. They were willing to fight for the Overlord in the open, but may well have abandoned him had Gar Shakhub entirely stolen the march, as Tammuz explained to me later on. Commissioner Alzhab gleamed and glittered at the head of the Anointed, whose sheer size exceeded that of any mortal bull. The High Priest – another taurukh – stood among the constables who had accompanied me in the raid on the plantation.

The centre of the force comprised a battalion of conscripts. Interwoven between dwarven auxiliaries were human soldiers, armed with bows and spears. These too were forces that the Overlord would have been unable to marshal had he been taken unawares. Behind them loomed the artillery – mortars and rockets, gleaming with the marks of the foundries.

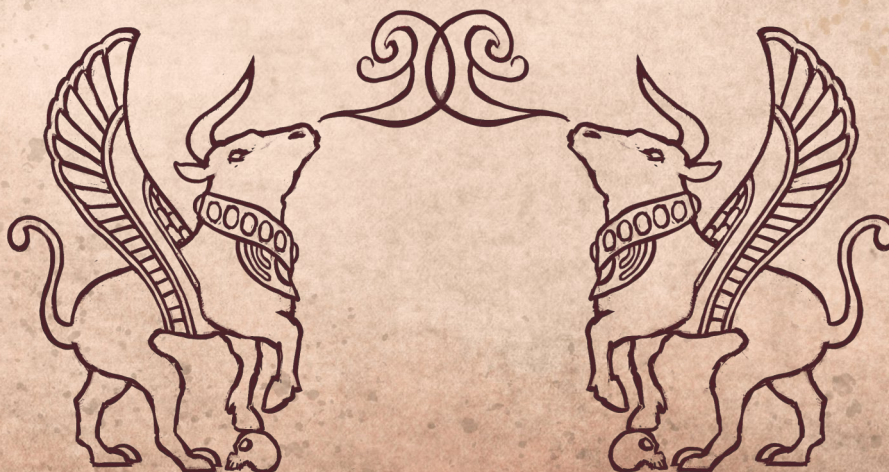
On the right were the Overlord's personal guards. Zhabi stood surrounded by the Immortals, masked and armoured dwarves who stood so still, so perfectly in formation that I half wondered if they were statues. Zhabi carried the banner of Vaumkerutash,

patron of Vanekhash. He raised it high, where all could see it. It bore the icon of a hunting horn, and as he waved it through the air, other horns sounded throughout the army.

We did not have to wait long for our first glimpse of the enemy. They were preceded by a mechanized rumble. Cresting the pass came tall towers and the grim smoke of Infernal engines. Gar Shakhub had sent a siege force of steel to break the walls of Vanekhash.

Tammuz, Ru and the Bull of Shamut flew off to the right as the unyielding weapons of the enemy advanced. Oil and rockets rained down upon one of the engines, but it stood impassive as the oil burned away. The taurukhs charged forwards, guns barking, annihilating a troop of horsemen whose existence I only noticed minutes before they died. Explosions echoed across the battlefield, so loud they deafened me even from my high position.

Zhabi led his men to assault one of the great siege towers. The Shakhubians held their ground, and the steel ram smashed several of the Immortals to the dirt, but the masked dwarves fought implacably all the way up to the top of the tower. Whether through mischance or in an attempt to keep it from being turned against their allies, the tower suddenly jinked and toppled over, smashing itself to pieces on the rocky ground.



The Immortals rose to their feet, only for a train to plough into their ranks. Zhabi desperately sought an entrance into the impassive metal monstrosity as it swerved about, sending armoured warriors flying.

Now it was our turn. The Bull dived forwards as Overlord Sakhem chuckled with maniacal glee.

“Khamuz didn’t have the stones to come himself! That mage is their commander! Onwards!” he shouted, gripping the Bull of Shamut as we soared over the enemy lines and fell upon the back of their formation. “You want my city? Come and claim it!”

The Bull was already trampling the nearby soldiers, and Sakhem’s night-black hammer crumpled their armour and chests with casual ease. Still, the dwarves held the line, and even began pushing back upon us, slashing at the legs of the Bull. I was very conscious of the fact that we were, right here in this spot, heavily outnumbered and far away from anyone else who might help us.

Still further to our right, I could see Tammuz. The lamassu was smirking. He tossed a glowing energy ball from one paw to the other as the mage we had come to engage desperately tried to keep track.

“The paw is quicker than the eye... is it in my left, or my right?” he taunted. The enemy magus spat a curse and made some kind of decision. Lightning quick, Tammuz conjured a second ball and sent it to us. It exploded upon contact, covering the Bull, the Overlord and I in a silvery glow. “Not a good choice, dear fellow,” Tammuz noted as the Overlord hammered even more fervently through the ranks of the enemy. He was an unstoppable avatar of destruction, invigorated by Tammuz’s spell.

The second tower turned to catch us, as did the second train. Massive rockets shot up from the

machinery, arcing through the air with deadly accuracy and power. The Bull ducked underneath them, but Ru had been following me and caught an explosive blast to the flank. My faithful friend screamed in pain and dropped out of the sky, plummeting to the ground. I almost pulled myself out of the saddle in rage and grief, determined to be at his side, but I was firmly strapped to my metal harness.

A lifetime of experiences flashed through my mind. The moment in the forests of Meishan when a young boy first met a “strange deer”. Sharing the pains and heartaches of youth with an older, wiser companion. Travels across the world, the skies we claimed together – all ended for the sake of my career? Compassion turned to fury. Gar Shakhub had felled the kindest creature who ever trod the earth. They had made Ru crush grass with his body. They would pay. They would pay.

The Bull, the Overlord and I, invincible, tore through our foes and pressed on past them. Bullets fell upon us like rain, but our armour held and we survived. The madman I was riding with dove straight towards a rampaging steel behemoth, the Infernal engine. The Bull’s titanic charge broke the steel to pieces, rescuing Zhabi and a handful of the Immortals who fought on impassively, still utterly silent.

Before us now, the remaining engine and one of the towers were turning on the conscripts. The centre of our army buckled and gave way, but the flanks had turned inwards. The taurukhs battered the second engine, the Commissioner shredding an armoured door with terrifying ferocity, breaching the insides and slaughtering the crew. Meanwhile, we joined a group of warriors in an assault upon the siege tower. Here, the odds caught up to the Bull of Shamut. It was disincorporated by a tremendous swing of the siege ram, sending the Overlord and myself to the ground, the sound of its bellowing under the screaming steel ringing in our ears.

Dazed, Sakhem and I stumbled to our feet. The second tower was toppled. Vanekhash had won the day. The Bull had served its purpose.

And I had the best trade deal Tsuandan ever negotiated with the tightfisted dwarves. Paid for with Ru's blood.



Addendum: Ru has survived. His injuries were severe, but Tammuz carried him away from the field of battle. We now owe him a great deal, and knowing Vanekhash, I have no doubt he will collect.



GREAT BULL OF SHAMUT



Damos 7th

Since my arrival in the citadel of Patrizek, all I have seen has been in preparation for a religious festival in honour of the fire dwarves' god of war, Shamut. The men and dwarves of the east pay homage to several deities, but in times of war and imminent battle the worship of Shamut takes precedence over all others.

My host is a minor noble of the vassalised Rezhani humans of Biliszond. He has been more than willing to indulge my curiosity on this matter and has agreed to act as a guide to this land's strange and cruel culture. He said that the dwarves seek Shamut's favour to aid them in the coming battles against the orcish rebellions in the Barren mountains. A dwarven overlord of great renown has been chosen by the temple to mount the beast when it is summoned, though it seems all consider the dwarf to be the lesser party in this regard. The reverent way both men and dwarves speak of this creature, this great bull, seems to suggest they regard it as an avatar of their bloody victory sent by their god to destroy their enemies. I'm quite certain the ignorant prelates of Vetia would rather call it a daemonic being of sin and darkness.

While exploring today, I came across the city's grand bazaar. Dwarves and men alike were engaged in an unruly shouting contest, with merchants praising their own wares while casting doubt on those of their competitors. I stumbled across a slave auction where captives of many races were being hawked, haggled over and led away in chains to whatever function their new masters had in mind for them.

When armoured agents of the Temple of Shamut entered the market square, a silence born of fear and respect fell over much of the crowd. Though they entered the auction late, none dared to place another bid on the lot of slaves they had come to purchase. Even the ogre mercenary guarding the auction seemed ill at ease at their presence. After purchasing a few dozen slaves, they departed as swiftly as they had come, leading the pale-faced captives away in chains, undoubtedly to serve as sacrifices to sate Shamut's hunger.

Damos 11th

Religious processions have become daily occurrences. Columns of armoured dwarves march behind priests bearing statues of a great bull, singing battle-hymns to draw the eye of their brutal god. Priests of Shamut stand on every street corner, preaching victory in the coming battle and in all wars yet to come. A religious fervour has gripped the city, and it grows stronger as the hour of battle approaches.

Every day, slaves are sacrificed publicly on the steps of the great temple, their lifeblood fuelling a ritual which I suspect is tied closely to the dwarven calendar. A being summoned in this way can only remain in the mortal plane for a limited time.

I can sense a build-up of magical energy emanating from the great temple of Shamut at the heart of the city. Something dark is afoot, but I dare not leave the relative safety of the citadel with a Warborn horde approaching.

Damos 13th

I must commit to paper what I have witnessed today, for it is a sight few in the Empire have seen and lived to tell. Today was one of the holiest days in the year for the dwarves of fire, a day in honour of Shamut, strength of arms and inevitable victory. The dwarven armies had assembled in the city's squares and streets as their warrior-priests administered blessings and prepared the final stage of their week-long ritual. Summoning chants and prayers were interwoven by the cabal of priests, and each time, the gathered dwarves answered in unison with earth-shaking war cries.

A sudden clap of thunder like the voice of an angry god marked the end of the ritual. An ill wind picked up; the dark clouds of the citadel's furnaces seemed to part, and sunlight shone on the great temple. From the heavens, a Great Bull of Shamut descended into the world on feathered wings, bathed in blackest smoke and golden light. A most jarring combination of stimuli – capturing both the dark and the divine nature of the Infernal people.

Throughout the citadel, the great crowds of dwarves and men knelt as one, bowing their heads in prayer as the avatar of their deity materialized before them. It coldly assessed the dwarf chosen to be its rider with baleful red eyes glowing like smouldering embers as smoke billowed from its nostrils. Appearing satisfied, it allowed the priests to attach a saddle on its back so it could be ridden. Galloping across the flagstones, it left burning hoof marks in its wake even as it returned to the skies. The dwarven army rose and followed the Great Bull to war. Sunna save me, but I almost feel pity for the Warborn.

– Diary of Frau Lochstein, Professor of
Arcane Sociology





ARTILLERY

Ullos 32nd

Dear Mama,

I am almost ashamed to write this letter. Foundries are molten, greasy places, utterly unfit for the employment of ladies, and machines of death are certainly unsuitable craftsmanship for the same. Nonetheless, I persist. The common wretches who toil in this factory do not see the gears of industry turning around them. When a new slave has a whip cracked over their back, demanding they push harder to upset the molten metal, they do not see the cogs that shall be formed.

Yet formed the cogs are. Where a common labourer might assume they were as likely to be working on great mechanical doors like those that trap them inside the foundry during the hours of work, I believe I have a sense of the wider picture. Thanks to Papa's boorish friend (you do recall Prof. Thistleby? He had a bald spot and a great fondness for rockets), I can see the fullness of the assemblages.

'Tis most orderly chaos. An inferno – a fire that reminds one of nothing more than the preacher's ravings about Sunna's judgement of the damned – fuels the construction of identical pieces of machinery. The pieces are then swept off every which way; this shipment bears the rune for Nezibkesh, that one shows the mark of the Overlord, a third is stamped with the sigil of a distant citadel.

Workers sweat in torrents and drag their burdens away to the rhythm of the lash, for gentle is not a word in the vocabulary of these Infernal dwarves. Neither is woman, truth be told – at least not as we use it. Man and woman, human, orc and beast – all who labour are slaves, no more and no less. Oh, but I was speaking of the products of the forge.

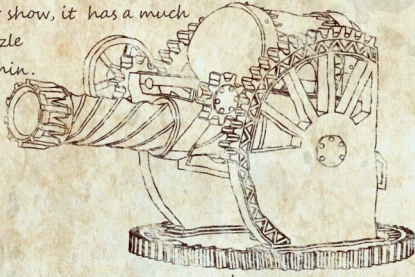
Many things are created here, all to the same standards. The priests inspect the moulds to ensure they remain clean and smooth. Small moulds for screws receive the same attention as larger casts of wheel spokes and axles, or even the tremendous artillery bases. All must be exact and exactly equal to every other made by the foundry, yet they are shipped off in most variable assortments.

It beggars the imagination, but I can visualize the results. The dwarves have accepted standardization so thoroughly, their engineers can simply sketch out their dreams and place an order for all the parts. It must be so; yesterday, two shipments went out that were nearly identical in gross requirements. Their sole difference? One contained a small brazen bull-vessel from the westernmost mould, while the other bore a wider shell compartment. I have assembled them in my mind – they would be almost identical, but for flourishes.

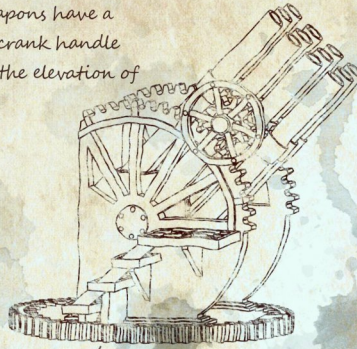
Industrial, yet artisanal. It is a madness of two worlds that ought never be brought together. Professor Thistleby would be fascinated by the rocket, in particular. The automated loading and



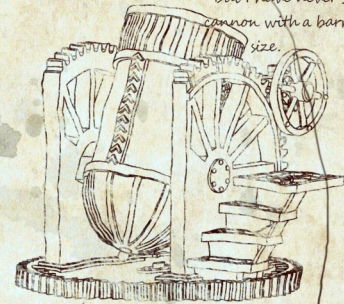
Notice the increasingly tighter twist of the barrel on the Naphtha Thrower. I believe it is designed to increase the pressure of the fluid before being ejected. The large muzzle is mostly for show, it has a much smaller nozzle hidden within.



All the weapons have a circular crank handle to adjust the elevation of the aim.

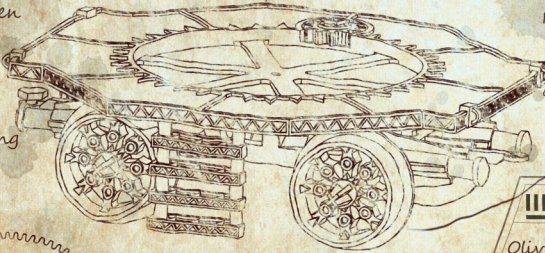


The mortar I know little of, but I have never seen any cannon with a barrel of this size.

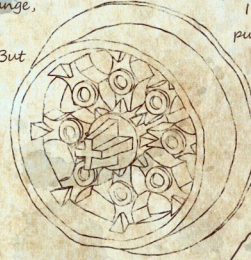


The main artillery platform seems to be designed to allow different weapons to be fitted easily. I've seen

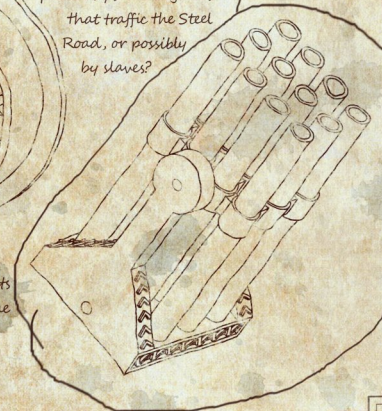
mainly three different weapons being built.



The wheels have a large flange, presumably to grip the tracks of the Steel Road. But they are also very wide, could they be meant for open ground as well?

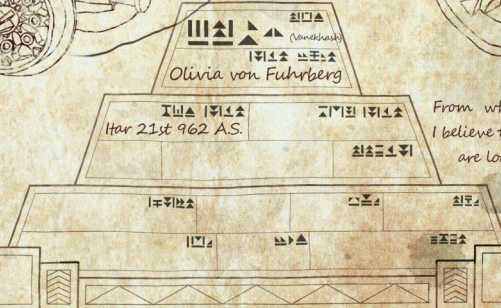


The artillery pieces seem to have no propulsion. I guess that they are pulled by some engines that traffic the Steel Road, or possibly by slaves?



12
66

A ratio of 12 to 66 teeth on the cogs should make it possible to easily crank the aim of the weapon.



From what I've seen, I believe that the rockets are loaded from the back

sealing process should, when appropriately cranked, reload inconceivably swiftly, and the barrel girth dwarfs any of his own schematics, if you'll excuse the play on words.

Even the smaller, more portable design would match and master a normal artillery piece, whereas the leviathan – one shudders. If I recall Professor Thistleby's equations accurately, the scaled-up design must fire rockets powerful enough to shatter castle walls. I close my eyes to the forge and the light becomes a vision of cities ablaze at the touch of our creations.

What portion of the guilt bears the forge-worker for the violence of the forged? Can I stand to do nothing? It seems to me that the preachers ought

to have focused a good sight less on the torments of the wicked and a good sight more on the best practices of the righteous. Really, that was quite inconsiderate and short-sighted of them.

Your fondest daughter,

Olivia



Postscript: If Marguerite is still working for the family, offer her my thanks. Her recipe for hair formula has kept my locks at least vaguely blonde even under these trying circumstances!

INFERNAL BASTION



We were delighted to find the dwarfs camped on open ground. But in the morning we awoke to an alarm. Under cover of darkness, the enemy had constructed what I can only describe as siege towers. Two great steel monoliths, taller than the walls of Avras, stood impassively awaiting us across the plain. The dwarves were ranked between them in a deep formation, ready for battle.

Our reiters began the engagement by probing the dwarven line. They quickly came under fire from the towers on the flanks of the enemy battleline. The crenelations gave the dwarves cover, and their elevated position meant that it was impossible for my men to get close enough to return fire without severe losses.

At this realisation, it was clear what was needed. I ordered my knights into a full charge on the left. Halfway across the plain, we had not yet reached a gallop before we came under fire from the closest tower. While the rate of fire was not overwhelming, the shots were accurate and deadly.

The weight of our steeds would surely break the line, but at what cost? Leading the charge, I angled my destrier towards the corner of the tower, where the dwarven line began. The shooting stopped as we hit the line, the dwarves taking up their axes and joining combat from above.

As the fighting ebbed and flowed, I remember noting that captain Kreuger had led his reiters in support and was now coming at the dwarves from the rear. Without the covering fire of the tower on this side, the enemy line was vulnerable. My hope was to collapse the left and turn to finish the right.

Unfortunately, the dwarves were stubbornly holding and we were becoming bogged down.

At this moment, we came under fire again, this time from the right. I remember pulling myself back from the fighting to survey the situation. To my horror, the rightmost tower was moving across the front of the dwarven line and the dwarves were once again raining lead from on high. In a matter of seconds, the tower thumped our formation in the flank.

A great battering ram was swinging into our ranks and causing confusion. The oncoming wall of steel pushed us back. Terror gripped the men and horses. We weren't expecting such great constructs to move so relentlessly.

To our shame, we fled, escaping only due to the virtue of our mounts. Despite their fatigue, they carried us from the field. I await further instructions.

– Field Report. Marshall Von Strickland, 17th Cavalry Division Expeditionary. 904 A.S.





INFERNAL ENGINE



The worst thing was the anticipation... Across the muddy field of battle, we could feel the tremors of some terrible device, as though it were drilling into the very ground and about to emerge from beneath us any moment. The farmhouse we had garrisoned, holding the left flank of the battleline, shook around us and dust drifted down from the rafters overhead. Some of my comrades looked around in hesitation, others in longing at the back door to the cottage and the escape it might provide. Instead we stayed, and waited...

The worst thing was the smell... A farm is no breath of fresh air, and this one had been abandoned for weeks. Animal dung, rotting meat and a soldiers' latrine threatened to overpower our noses. Yet through those familiar stench came the acrid odour of brimstone and blackpowder. Black smoke seeped in through our boarded windows reeking of ash, scorching our nostrils until we wrapped cloths around our face, and waited...

The worst thing was the noise... Clanking, rattling, whistling; we realised these sounds had been growing terribly, almost drowning the other noises of combat. A shouted warning from the sentry on the roof brought us to attention, yet it was hardly necessary. The rumbling of approaching wheels was all-consuming now. The harsh

grinding of gears rattled our teeth, and escaping steam made a sound like the scream of souls torn from the afterlife. We could no longer hear one another over the din, and a red glow shone through the bricks of the outer wall. We braced, and waited...

The worst thing... now we know better. The crash sent many of us tumbling to the ground as our outer wall caved in. Sulphurous gasses filled our lungs and we coughed and retched, trying to breathe. The eerie echoes were now deafening booms, assaulting our senses, causing many to drop to their knees, covering their ears. And now we saw it, the source of our problems. Dark steel, forged into a terrifying mass of metal, a brutal machine of destruction with spinning contraptions that crushed stone and ground flesh with equal disregard. Huge pieces of masonry entered those rotating drums and were ground to powder in mere moments, as though they were wheat in a mill.

The farmhouse which had endured centuries of wind, rain and raiders crumbled around us. Our orderly regiment in its strong defensive position had been reduced to a frightened rabble, scrambling out of doors and windows as the building collapsed.





Moments later, we stood looking on the debris of our former encampment. Two storeys of stonework had buried half our number along with our dreadful assailant, entombed under tons of rock and wood. Yet that stillness was not to last – groaning mechanical sounds emanated from beneath the pile. Beams moved, and the churning contraption emerged from the rubble, raising tremendous clouds of dust and ash. With that we scattered, terror at our backs, knowing that for us the battle was lost. Nothing we had could stop it, perhaps nothing in the entire army.

Two of us survived that day; one became a preacher and renounced all worldly goods, while I chose the life of a writer and scholar. Anything to avoid seeing another battle. I still jump out of my chair at the slam of a door.

– From *Memories of a Failed Soldier*
by Albrecht Weider



THE STEEL ROAD



“Oi! Firecracker boy!” The stench of the scrapling’s yellowed teeth made me gag as it poked its head into the dugout and leered into my face.

“Fattie here wanna know if your ‘splodey box gonna work or not. Coz if it don’t, we gonna eat you right qu—eeeeek!”

The creature’s ogre companion, Nöying, casually punted the scrapling several meters into the air and lowered himself down into the dugout beside me. He chuckled in a brotherly sort of way.

“My colleague makes funny joke. Eating is for big heroes, great enemies. If your bomb does not go off, we just chop you up for tigers.”

After several weeks of enjoying the rough but generous hospitality of these creatures, I was beginning to get better at understanding which threats of imminent dismemberment were intended as humour and which were deadly serious. Embarrassingly, my hosts’ *Sonnstahlich* had improved far more during the same period than my *Gyenggetat*. But on this occasion, given the stakes, it was particularly difficult to discern Nöying’s mood.

“I can assure you, good Sirs, that on my honour as a full graduate of *Westerhafen College of Engineering*, both the charges and the detonators are of the finest quality, and the main cylinder is packed with enough fulminating silver to—”

The scrapling, rubbing its hind quarters with a grimace, cocked its head.

“If you such a fancy city human, why you out here in the mountains building bomb-box for ogres?”

I blushed. Nöying seemed greatly amused.

“Ah. There may have been an entirely regrettable misunderstanding involving the *College Rector’s wife* who, er, also happened to be the daughter of the *Chief Magistrate*...”

“Ha-ha! Little stick thinks he is proper lover-boy! You better watch it out here,” Nöying jabbed me with a massive finger. “Maybe an ogre-girl likes you, and shows you real way it is done. If she not snap you in half. Ha-ha-ha!”

I felt an involuntary flinching in my trouser area. The sudden, deafening sound of a warhorn the size of a cannon provided a welcome interruption.

“Good! Now we go! About bloody time!” Nöying roared, brandishing a meat cleaver with a blade as broad as a pavise shield. He barked a command in his own language to the two-dozen ogre brutes lying concealed in the dugout behind us. Any slim hope that I might be spared was dashed when my interlocutor grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and hauled me up over the top, despite my babbling concoction of elaborate excuses.

“Come! You go to school to build big things, you say? Then you not want to miss this!”

He dumped me on the dusty ground, probably more roughly than he intended, and it was not merely the stinging of my eyes that made me blink. There it was: the *Steel Road*. And our target upon it. When it had been a dot on a line on a map, it had been easy to intellectualise. A major depot and fortress designed to protect the railway for this whole region of mountains – as well as a key site for refuelling and maintenance, and a rare transition point between the subterranean and overground sections of the network.



The depot was well-defended. After all those years studying machines of war, I was finally experiencing their effects in the field. Rows of ranked artillery began to fire in rapid succession, screaming shells and shrapnel flying about my ears. It was nothing like I could have imagined. I found myself unable to do anything but stare madly as the sheer horror of the Infernal weaponry impressed itself into my mind. It looked like nothing so much as one of the cheap woodcuts of damned souls being dragged into the mouth of the Abyss that my school confessor had used to terrify us when we misbehaved.

A vast steel bridge, easily as wide as a half dozen city gates, arched out across the chasm, its sides lined with shielded firing-posts and several full batteries of rockets. Each like a black castle keep, heavy with arms and swarming with dwarfs, smoke-spewing klaxon engines screaming alarm.

But these were mere guard-posts of the fortifications proper. At the opposite terminus of the bridge, truly monstrous black iron gashes were visible in the sides of the gorge, natural caves widened into hellish smoke-belching portals. Into and out of these tunnels thundered along half a dozen parallel tracks the metal beasts the ogres called steel mammoths: huge, black metal engines trailing miles of carts carrying ominous armoured boxes.

Not for the first time, I wondered what source of power could possibly drive such monstrous devices. It surely had to be at least partly arcane in nature, as even the mightiest traction engines I had been privileged to witness at Nevaz Athiz were barely capable of half that speed, and with a far lighter load. Either that, or even the crafty hold dwarves had only barely scratched the surface of the full capabilities of steam power. To this day, I am not sure which of those is the more disturbing possibility.

There is a curious effect of scaling one finds in the company of larger species. You become accustomed to your own smallness. I can only imagine a similar effect takes hold among goblins and dwarves in the company of men. After several weeks of living with the ogres and seeing what their massive bodies could do, I had found wholly believable the prospect that they could smash their way into an Infernal fortress if my device

provided them a small chink in its defences. But this! They had never mentioned this.

I was seized by dread. I had egregiously miscalculated the charges. There was no way in all the seven hells that the device I had been paid to build would even make a dent in the curtain walls of the depot – if the ogres even made it that far!

As the battle line charged along the wall of the gorge towards the entrance, they were mercilessly raked by fire from the fortress itself, the towers of the bridge and even its twin on the opposite side of the gorge. Mighty as the ogres were, they could not hope to prevail against such a savage hail of fire. They were cut down, blasted apart into bloody chunks, sliced in half by huge shards of shrapnel or burnt to ash by incendiaries so intense I could feel the heat even at the rear of the line. Yet still they charged!

I eyed my companion, spying desperately for some moment of distraction in which I could flee without my cowardice being noticed. To my surprise, he seemed eerily calm despite the slaughter, muttering softly under his breath a guttural rhythm that I took to be some kind of meditation, or prayer for the fallen.

I saw my chance and began to turn, only for Nöying's head to suddenly swivel. But not towards me. Heart racing, I saw that he had spotted a red flag fluttering in the hot wind, barely visible on the other side of the gorge. The ogre turned to me and grinned.

“Three... two...”

There was an immense explosion on the horizon, nowhere near the fortress walls. Far up above the opposite lip of the gorge, distant beyond even the outer watch-turrets of the gateway complex, a plume of smoke and dust rose up, showering stone fragments. Then another, and another. I covered my ears as the echoing sound of the sequential detonations resonated through the steel rim of the tunnel entrance like a hellish trumpet, but Nöying stood straight and looked right down the iron maw, shouting in triumph.

A vast cloud of dust and ash surged out of the tunnel, rapidly engulfing the bridge and shrouding the battlefield in darkness. I could dimly make out



two steel mammoths flying out of the same hole, their brakes showering sparks as they shuddered to a halt, their long trains of carts crushed and pounded by enormous stones.

A huge hand descended out of the swirling dust and roughly grabbed my shoulder.

“Very good! You get your money. We go now! Hurry!”

Still dazed, I struggled to my feet and fled, coughing, after the vague dark bulk of Nöying. I fell, rather than lowered myself into the dugout, landing on top of another ogre that bellowed and tossed me off its back with an irritated shrug. A small and sticky hand tugged insistently on my trouser leg, and I glanced down to see the scrapling almost dancing from foot to foot, chittering with excitement.

“Very great explosion! Spike-dwarf scum eat the dust! Big rocks squish the metal beasts flat! Make more! Make more! Heheheh!”

I blundered my way through the clearing dust until I spotted Nöying, just as he brought down his meat cleaver to slice off the mangled remains of the leg of one of his warriors, a dozen scraplings busily heating a vast cauterising iron in a fire. To my astonishment, only moments after his howl of pain had ended, the injured creature pointed at me and barked out what I can only assume was a compliment. My acquaintance casually spoke over his shoulder as he applied the burning-hot iron.

“Achdag says you do good work. You make more bombs like that, maybe one day you famous enough for us to eat after all! Ho-ho!”

His patient shrieked, the legendary ogre pain tolerance meeting its natural limits. Nöying nodded in approval at his work, then turned to face me.

“You have question?”

Many, many questions fluttered through my mind, but just one sentence came out.

“You never had any intention of occupying the fortress and holding it to ransom.”

Nöying snorted derisively.

“Our agent tell you that? Pssht. He even dumber than I thought. Not even ogre try to break chain at strongest link. Too many guards. Too many guns. But they think we are stupid. That just what they think we will try.”

He tapped the side of his head.

“Like when we hunt the mammoth. Brave ogres make big noise, and take the rage of the big tusks, while hunter creeps...”

He illustrated the motion, walking fingers up his arm towards a clenched fist.

“...and sticks the little arrow in the soft, squishy eye.”

The fact that the arrows he was talking about were about the size and thickness of a ballista bolt rather muddled the metaphor for me, but the meaning was clear enough.

“So the assault was a diversion. A costly one, it would seem.”

The ogre shrugged, glancing at the injured lying around him.

“They take the gold, they know the game. Like you, in their way.”

“I suppose so. Now as to the question of the bonus on successful completion...”

Nöying’s gaze hardened.

“Like Khan said: bomb go off, you get gold for time and for bomb. As for rest... we see if hole big as you said it would be.”

“You must understand, my calculations were made on the assumption that it would be detonated against-”

The ogre held up a hand, and I knew better than to continue. He hailed a younger, skinnier creature, which ran off only to return several minutes later, apparently with a message from down the line that satisfied Nöying.

“Very good. Whole roof caved in below main charge, all six tracks deep under stone-fall. One steel mammoth hit on head and blew up. This will do. We pay in full. Take them a week at least to mend.”



I inhaled sharply. I had heard of the industriousness of the Infernal Dwarves, but it still seemed incredible that the devastation from my bomb could be repaired in such a time.

“Then...” I said at length, “If the line will be fully operational within a week, what exactly was accomplished—”

Nöying burst out laughing.

“Yakha’s gullet, you men are thick!”

His face drew close to mine, the rotten-meat breath rendered only slightly more bearable by familiarity, his grinning golden tooth glinting in the firelight.

“One week, when every last cart from here to Huafeng cannot use this branch of steel mammoth road, and must take Chugai Pass. Our pass.”

“And presumably,” I ventured hesitantly, “There would be a... small fee charged for their safe passage?”

The grin broadened.

“You learn fast. One week of tolls. Pays kill-gold for tribe of every ogre who dies today, ten times over. It not always work like this – spike-dwarf defences too strong. But when it works... it really works!”

The scale of the economic potential of the railway surprised me despite my knowledge of the wide trade network it unlocked throughout Sagarika, Tsuandan and all the wealth of the East. There were even rumours of new branches heading west towards Taphria. Still, even my mercenary heart blanched a little at the thought of so many lives sacrificed in such a cold, actuarial manner. Nöying noticed my discomfort and playfully slapped me on the back, sending me sprawling on the ground.

“Welcome to Steel Road, friend! Come, we have much work to do, many miles to travel. After we eat, of course!”

– From *Travels on Horseback through the Eastern Steppes*, the memoirs of Holgar Ormerudde, engineer for hire



THE CODE OF KEMURAB



Even today, after so many years, I am ashamed to think of my old way of life. All that greed and selfishness – what good did it do? All that gold could not prevent the misfortunes I suffered. All the jewels, all those barrels of spiced wine, all the exotic goods – none of them could free me from the horror I endured in the distant citadel of Nedzhid.

Not even the mercenaries I hired to escort me on my journey east were of any use when I arrived at the citadel and that monstrous half-bull appeared. At that moment, I realised with deep terror that I had been a fool to try to do business with the Infernal Dwarves. With hope fading, I held out the contract of safe conduct bearing the seal of the citadel's overlord, and it was inspected at great length. Finally, a priest with a horned helmet came forward and declared that the contract specified transit of cargo by train, and was invalid since I'd been forced to take my goods by road.

They led me to the great ziggurat and locked me in a cell of iron and rock, where the suffocating heat and the smell of sulphur fuelled my fear and confusion. After a time that I could not count, I was led with other prisoners to a large room filled with braziers, where three serious and threatening figures presided over a large stage. In the centre of the room was a great pillar of black rock, carved with countless runes and symbols that the first priest proclaimed to be the Code of Kemurab, according to which we would be judged.

Many years later, I would learn that Kemurab was the ruler of Zalaman Tekash a thousand years ago. With the coming of the Inferno and the loss of the dwarves' northern territory, Kemurab became a foundational leader and figurehead for the formation of the Infernal Dwarves, greatly expanding the influence of his own city until it became the de facto capital of today. He was more responsible than any other for the cultural and political systems that caused me so much suffering, yet when I came to read about him I couldn't help but feel a certain admiration. Kemurab was known for being erudite and humble, winning political favour by calling himself not King but Curator of Runes. His most famous and lasting accomplishment was the reformation of the dwarves' legal and writing systems. Little did the great reformer know that a millennium later, his cursed Code – largely unchanged – would be applied to me.

Another high priest began to question the accused one by one, and my fear grew even more. From time to time he raised his hand and a third priest read the penalty sanctioned by the Code of the dark pillar: if a citizen steals the property of another in the street, he shall pay him five times the value of the theft, and his children shall serve the wronged party as slaves for one month for each stolen item. If a slave commits perjury before his master, his children will suffer as many lashes as they have years. On it went.



The first few defendants, no doubt the most fortunate, were taken away in chains. A bearded, dark-skinned dwarf was dragged to the dock. With an accusing tone, the priest who occupied the centre of the dais questioned him while other dwarves painted runes on his body with a strange black oil. This time, the crime was more serious.

I did not understand the cause well, but I heard that there was a previous sentence not fulfilled. The punishment was the most severe permitted under the code: he would be sacrificed for the glory of Ashuruk and the honour of Ninarduk.

The other two priests on the dais took up torches and stood beside the victim, chanting guttural hymns, as they drew the fire closer to his flesh. That dark and robust body burst into flames and cries of pain, and the room was filled with the smell of burning flesh and sulphur. I don't know how long that torment lasted, but every time the dwarf's screaming seemed to die down, the oiled runes of his body glowed and breathed him back into life, until he ended up becoming a mountain of smoking ashes.

I was in shock for long minutes before I realised that everyone in the room was staring at me. The high priest repeated the accusation slowly, making sure I understood the situation. I was accused of conspiracy against the Clergy of Ashuruk, and of spying for the enemies of the citadel. Knowing I would have little chance to offer a defence, I waited for a pause in the proceedings and raised my voice. In my fear, I could only babble a couple of meaningless words, but it was enough for the priests to fall silent and look at me. I cleared my dry throat and declared my innocence, asking to appear before the Overlord Zadbuk, ruler of Nedzhid and he who had sealed my papers of safe conduct to establish commercial relations with my city.

The priest glared at me and pointed to a large empty seat. Clearly, the Overlord was not in the citadel, or perhaps he did not even know about this trial. After a few more questions, by protocol rather than clarification, the sentence was read. According to the Code of Kemurab, taking into consideration that I come from a foreign nation, all the goods I

had brought to the city would be delivered to the Clergy of Ashuruk, the mercenaries and servants who had accompanied me would be sold as slaves for the benefit of the cult, and I would be handed over as a slave to the Citadel Guard for a period of six times ten months.

I will say nothing here of my slavery, for it is a pain that now only the gods can heal, but I will never forget the moment of my doom as long as I live. The same day the sentence was served, I was given ten silver coins to return home, a letter for the princes of the city, and was thrown out of the citadel. When I returned, after many dangers, I had lost my position, my wealth and my family. That's what it took for me to learn that gold and power aren't everything, child. Listen to this poor old man and stay away from the Infernal dwarves.

– Recorded by Adria of Myra, the words of her father's elderly manservant



VASSALS, PART ONE



Februar 6th

Dear Mama,

My fortunes have taken a decided turn for the better. Not that, on reflection, one could expect them to have much in the way of alternate directions. The gratitude of a foreign friend proved unworthy of the paper it wasn't written on, for I was certainly stuck and where was Lady Khezek's friendship now? The absence of aid from either her or that villain Lady Luck condemned me to the unflinching abyss. Which is to say: the flames and fumes of the factory.

Oh, but I dwell on matters now since dealt with. Allow me to explain.

The routines of the workshop are complicated. The shifts of labour and rest interweave in an orderly fashion, but most of the prisoners simply follow the crack of the whip. Through keen observation, however, I determined that the normal order of things had been thrown off; a personage of some import was clearly on their way, for work slowed to a crawl in favour of scrubbing and polishing surfaces which were usually disregarded. So important was this imminent inspection, additional labour was brought in: free women. Indeed, human women, though they were locals by their appearance and mastery of the Infernal tongues.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. I watched the watchmen upon our shift, and hid myself in an area where the free-women were about to begin a second pass of deeper cleansing. From there, I drew forth my greatest treasure. From scraps of fabric torn loose from other clothes and

stitched using whatever came to hand, I had made a facsimile of the clothing worn by the free-women I had seen working in the offices of the factory. It was crude, primitive – a paltry disguise under normal circumstances.

So I poured a bucket of soapy water upon myself, and wailed. My recently acquired, but largely unused proficiency in the local tongue stood me in good stead; curses relating to goats and bulls and eternal fires made it seem like I was truly an unlucky free-woman who needed to go and find a replacement uniform.

I feel I was fortunate to draw a goblin soldier rather than human. He looked me over and tried to recognize my face, but though I am paler, more freckled and far blonder than the locals, well – the warborn all look alike to us, and I believe that in return, they see no difference between a Sohnstahler face and an Eastern one.

Now, admittedly after that I ran into some difficulties. Having won my freedom from the factory, I did not have any notable possessions, save my soaked counterfeit uniform. I fabricated a story, of course – it was my first day, the big city is so confusing and so forth – and wrung mercy and a spare dry uniform from one of the vassal-women.

Oh, yes, the Infernal vassals. I should explain: the free non-dwarves (it is a single word in their tongue) owe allegiance in a complicated system. I don't pretend to understand the details, but I had occasion to listen to my fellow domestic servants and their chatter was of the handsome men in uniforms marching past.

I should perhaps take a moment to describe the company they were swooning over; to my eye, their clothing was positively sinful. Armoured coats unlaced to brazenly bare skin, short tunics that led to much speculation centred above the thighs, boots polished to a reflective gleam to allow the most eagle-eyed of the domestics to resolve some of the speculation. Their beards were uniformly full; it appears that the fashions of the barber have not crossed the sea as swiftly as I. In fact, I believe some of them had beard extensions.

These human soldiers owe their fealty to the dwarves. Indeed, they were an escort to the official inspecting the factory. A tithe in blood and gold is demanded of a nation that outnumbers the populace of this citadel fivefold, and they pay it readily. The soldiers seem proud enough; Father once said that in the end, you do not fight for Duty, Empire or even Goddess, you fight for the man alongside you. Those words echoed as I observed their marching order, points raised high.

Their arms were certainly not the highest quality the citadel can manufacture. I may have been in the

foundry just a matter of weeks, but already I count myself something of an expert on Infernal artillery, and one squad were wheeling a markedly inferior piece. It was a somewhat oddly designed torsion weapon, halfway between ballista and catapult. They took it to the foundry's engineer, perhaps for repairs. Another of father's comments echoed: "the brass never cares quite so much for soldier's equipment as the soldiers do". Ah, so cynical, yet such a universal truth it has proven to be.

Your devoted daughter,

Olivia



Postscript: They carried what looked to my eye to be wineskins, but when I raised the topic I was positively laughed at! It turns out that they are filled not with alcohol, but carefully treated oils that are immensely inflammable. Can you imagine it?



VASSALS, PART TWO



Dear Mother,

I hope my letter finds you and Fatja well. My sister will have to wait until winter for her beloved husband Imran to return. We are told that the conscripts are required until the end of the year. Do not feel bad for us. Slavery or vassalage is not a difficult choice. Mosnarat will sleep soundly knowing that it is safe from Zalaman Tekash, and her sons fight to ensure its longevity. Conscription is a small price to pay and we are both willing.

The Overlord is a particularly frightening individual who commands supreme loyalty from his soldiers and unwavering obedience from his vassals. If we displease him, the hobgoblins say my family and our home will be wiped off the face of the world. I am more afraid of the Overlord than any horror I could face on the battlefield.

The other vassal levies come in all shapes and sizes, due to the diversity of the Overlord's dominion. Dark-skinned orcs from the south, men from as far afield as Tsuandan, sometimes even ogres. But the most numerous are the hobgoblins. They are alike in stature and nature to other goblins I have met, although their skin is typically sandier in both shade and texture than such unpleasant creatures. They are very foul-mouthed when they use our tongue, and Imran tells me not to listen to their obscenities.

I look forward to being by your side at home in Mosnarat soon.

Sorkhil

Dear Mother,

We have been marching for days. I am told by the hobgoblins that there is an unruly vassal to the north of which the Overlord wishes to make an example. I have not been fed well. Marching all day makes me very hungry. The hobgoblins are clearly favoured over the others. Their shaggy mounts are fed more than we are. They say it is because their slobbering wolves are worth more!

We are also joined by camel riders from south of the Sea of Thirst. These nomadic warriors, wrapped tightly in cloth to shield them from the desert winds, can accurately fire an arrow on the move from their camel's back. I have seen them practicing in the camp.

Both the nomads on their camels and the hobgoblins on their hairy wolves act as scouts and messengers for our army, constantly passing back and forth as we march. If I am conscripted next year, I will bring Redmane along with me and join the horse levies if it means I get more food. Please make sure he is shod when I return in winter.

Tell sister that Imran is still in high spirits and wishes her to know he is thinking of her.

Sorkhil



Dear Mother,

We have finally reached our destination. I have never been so far north in my life. It is mid-summer, yet the air here does not scorch us as it does in Mosnarat.

The leader of the division is a hobgoblin of tremendous size named Gorba. He looks more like an orc to me, but he rides one of the hairy wolves favoured by the goblins. Nevertheless, he commands the respect of the troops and takes orders directly from the Vizier. Yesterday he told us who we are here to fight. Gorba made a great show of denouncing these defiant vassals as evil, rebellious men. It is an irony not lost to me that we fight for dwarven masters alongside hobgoblins and orcs to kill other men at the end of the world.

We vassals make up a single division of the larger cohort: diverse irregulars formed into loose contingents based upon our species and nationality. The hobgoblins say that it is so the dwarves can more easily punish our homeland and families if we run from battle. I am learning to ignore a lot of what the hobgoblins tell us. Even so, I would not wish to bring ruin upon you, Fatja or Mosnarat. I will do my duty alongside Imran, even if we must kill other men.

Sorkhil

Dear Mother,

I have tragic news. Imran is dead. We took the fight to the rebels at first light. We were sent in the first wave against the town. Gorba urged us through a breach in the town wall from atop his snarling wolf. No quarter was to be given to the rebels. We were met by the enemy in the narrow streets and desperate fighting ensued. Imran was first through the gap and fought well as I joined him in the melee. He slew a number of the burly defenders with swift strikes of his spear. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Imran was engulfed in a fiery conflagration. The blaze threw me against a stone wall. As I came to my senses, the charred remains of Imran were all that was left. Death came swiftly, I am sure.

Through the haze of heat, the leader of the rebellious vassals emerged. A great conjurer of fire bedecked in robes of dazzling vermillion. I could taste the rotten odour of sulphur as he raised his staff for a second blast. I crouched behind my shield expecting a searing wave of heat to overwhelm me. Instead, a violent crash of steel, fang and claw engulfed our enemy. Gorba and his wolf riders joined the fray and lent their weight to the attack. The mage raised a terrible wall of flame, yet the hobgoblin chief leapt through and pierced the conjurer with his spear, and his wolf tore out his throat as he fell. The remaining rebels fled.

Tell my sister we avenged her husband. Our peace with Zalaman has been bought at a terrible price.

Sorkhil

– Letters found by Avrasi scholar Tzilla Zlato among her grandmother's oldest possessions

SLAVES



The view from inside a steam tank has never exactly been expansive, but it does take you close to the enemy. I always enjoyed the look of terror just before I pulled out the last damper and let them feel the steel. The Old Girl used to make them squeak, I can tell you, and more often than not the Emperor's foes were running as soon as I started playing battle hymns through the valves. Elf, ogre, lizard, they all sang a pretty song when they danced with her. [laughter] Sometimes I'd join in with the screaming. [laughter] People said I was strange, but I didn't mind. As long as they let me keep going.

Speaking of strange, it reminds me of an occasion, years ago. We were way out east, out past the mountains and giving the fire dwarves a taste of the Emperor's justice. Me and the Old Girl were in the rear and we weren't too happy about it – but then a rider brought word that the advance party had been ripped to pieces. The Marshall was soon

shouting for me to get up to the bridge and hold the little curs. I had her moving before he'd finished yelling.

As we approached the stone bridge, some of our rangers were doubling back across. They looked pleased to see me, but I was more pleased to see the enemy: about time. The Old Girl's steel-shod wheels were sparking on the stone flagging, blunderbuss shot pinging off the hull as I flooded tanks six and seven, ready to give whatever came over the bridge a hot welcome. Through periscope three I could see the dwarfs massing troops to launch an assault. Let them come, I thought. I dropped a filter glass in the 'scope to get a closer view.

Not dwarves. Warborn. Each orc was loaded under a bundle of supplies, and they were running jobs for the dwarves like they were attending the Emperor himself. Strangest sight I ever saw.



And all the while they were drinking some unnatural cocktail from flagons passed from orc to orc. Some evidently weren't keen on the brew; a swift cuff with an armoured fist seemed to sweeten the draught. Whips constantly cracking over their heads, of course.

Now me and the Old Girl, we know the warborn. Danced with them many a time. Never seen them like that though – calm, subdued, downtrodden. Seen a lot of things, but this made me shiver.

I put a round through them, just to liven things up. A handful of orcs were pulped and I reckoned they'd soon be off running – at me or away. But, they just stood there. Drums began to beat and they

shuffled forward, completely without fear, which is normal for orcs, but also without any sign of excitement. Not so much as a crazed howl from the lot of them. No proper weapons either, which was weirdest of all. What were they planning to do – unscrew the plating bolts with their fingers?

There was only one way to find out. The old fashioned way. I opened valve nine and the Old Girl rolled forward. [laughter]

– Transcript of interview with 'Howlin' Fritz Delph, former operator of 'Sunna's Hammer', conducted by Marius von Luntzburg shortly before Delph's death in a tavern brawl.





THE SEA OF THIRST


The Sea of Thirst is so large that it is impossible to see either shore from a boat at its centre. In ancient times, the water itself was worshiped as a goddess, one which gave life to early civilisation. The primarily human Thalassian culture of the late Golden Age grew up around its coastline, and competed with the Dwarven Empire and Naptesh as a dominant power of the region.

Like these other famous empires, Thalassia's fortunes fell as the Ages of Ruin began. The natural disasters of the early Age of Death destabilised both the southern and northern Thalassian kingdoms of the time, exacerbated by catastrophic resource management and culminating in the magical poisoning of the sea itself under mysterious circumstances. In this context, death came to Thalassia, and the two kingdoms were each corrupted by vampires. Many still call this area the Grave of Civilisation.


Little is known of the region's history after the demise of the first Covenant, but the Sea itself has been lifeless ever since. Today it is no longer magically saturated, but it remains toxic thanks to an exceptionally high salt concentration. It is said that those who grow up near the Sea of Thirst are able to drink from the ocean because it is pure by comparison. My inquiries indicate this is more a poetic notion than a genuine fact.

Yet its very lack of fertility has given the Sea of Thirst remarkable strategic value. For a long time, the Sagarikan Trading Company of Aldan attempted to monopolise the salt flats, extracting minerals the Highborn use for potash and cultivation of exotic crops back in the more temperate parts of the White Isles. The private venture received tacit support from the Pearl Throne but little else, and was forced to make alliances with nearby powers to keep its trade routes open.

Elven control of the Sea was severely curtailed later in the Ninth Age when the Infernal Dwarves claimed the region by force. The resulting war ended in a tense stalemate, with the dwarves colonising the northern shores where they have built factories for processing bitumen and asphalt, centred around the hulking, smoked-filled citadel of Nedzhid. The fanciful Arcalean poet Guglielmo di Toreenza was likely thinking of this region when he included the following stanza in the eleventh canto of *Signore Giovanni*:



The earth it churns, the water boils
The salt it stings the tongue
The clouds are black, the road is steel
Our time of beauty all but done



As for the Sea of Thirst today, Highborn colonies around Gan Harod remain in the south, frequently skirmishing with Daeb forces protecting slave markets in the Gulf. Further south, human tribes – perhaps descended from the great peoples of antiquity – compete with the beast herds of the desert: twisted, half-sentient goats and coyotes who roam the dunes and canyons. Another power in the region is of course the goblin kingdoms of the Barren Mountains, whose oligarchs are renowned as a thorn in the side of many a Vetian merchant. They maintain a series of outposts west and north of the Sea, where multiple varieties of monstrous pets protect secret dwellings.

– Johannes Strabo, from
History and Geography



THE INFERNO

It took our party three days by train to reach Vanebvikh, the first and largest of the logistics and research facilities used to explore the Wasteland since its creation. Over the years, the site has grown into a small fortress, managed by a council in which every temple has a representative. The greatest danger here is death by bureaucracy. Yet it is impossible to approach Teviktelet without the services available in Vanebvikh – nor, of course, without the authorisation and permits of the council signed in triplicate and presented at a series of checkpoints.

Our arrival was expected, though a mission by the Temple of Ashuruk is comparatively rare. The other operations here are almost exclusively Lugarite and Nezibkeshi. They do not hide their disdain for our quest – in their view, historical research is little better than academic debate, with no practical application. Their short-sighted vision cannot comprehend that the principles of Law are founded on the past. I did not attempt to explain to them how finding records of diplomatic and commercial pacts between Teviktelet and Nevaz Derom from the Golden Age could greatly augment our political influence.

In the eyes of lesser peoples, the journey to Zanib [roughly “The Infinite Forge” – translator’s note] is a progressing nightmare. A vision of utter calamity, a past and future in ruins. They cannot see that this never-ending wellspring of purest destruction could also be our greatest resource.

Even at Vanebvikh, the magic is strong enough to inflame the skin of weaker species. Nothing grows in this land, not even the hardest plants found among the rocks across the Plain. As you

set out on the journey, the sky starts to darken and the horizon fills with smoke. Soon you can feel the saturation like a vibrating, noxious breeze; its consequences are not directly seen, but experiments show a human or elf will die in less than a month, their flesh liquefying and filled with tumors. Nevertheless, some of our party ignored the official policy to use the protective gear from the start.

On the second day, the ruins of the ancient city of Teviktelet finally came into sight, the sky now completely covered in dark smoke. The use of *kelikshemrut* is mandatory at this stage. They are among the better instruments used to measure the quantity and quality of nearby magic, using the acid released by the cactus *kebishamem* as a reactive medium.

Yet I must speak of the ruins themselves. There is no greater monument to the strength of the People. There is no greater symbol of our quest for infinite, untamed power, magical and physical – the very keystone of our civilisation. Truly, it is a vision every dwarf should witness at least once.

Teviktelet, the strongest citadel of our past and present, was both blessed and cursed by the pride of the Great Inventor. It is said the strongest ambition requires the worst crisis, and the experiments of Prophet Vezodinezh as he sought to comprehend the terrible power of the Immortal, to control the very movement of the Earth, and to finally cast down every enemy... they are the perfect example of this axiom. Through them, we learned the great lesson: destruction, even self-destruction, is the greatest tool in the pursuit of knowledge.



We passed among the blackened stones of that holy place, walls still standing after a millennium of arcane erosion, and then all at once, there it was. The great caldera, an eye of naked fire and magic that blazes for eternity, its churning, molten energies casting a red glow against the smoke. Even from afar it gave the sensation of distorted reality, a shimmering wrongness that assails the mind. We could get no closer; the intense magical energy could be felt pulsing through our bodies, and suddenly it was obvious no creature could long survive here, no matter how resistant its armour and anatomy. The guidelines limiting our time in the vicinity no longer seemed overcautious.

We found the remains of small camps and previous expeditions, especially the machinery of the Temple of Nezibkesh used in its quest to discover – or rediscover – technologies of geomantic power. The whole area is filled with burning corpses. Those who die here do not decompose, and the fires that consume them do not go out. It is a city of smoked bones and the pungent stink of boiled blood. There are threats behind every wall, from rogue daemons to shifting masonry, not to mention rival parties. While the control of the Vanebvikh council is strict, nonetheless the sturdy politics and disposition of our kin sometimes lead to incidents – in the worst cases lethal violence.

The half-destroyed ziggurat of Vezodinezh rises above it all: the very core of the glorious, blessed nightmare. It seemed to me a huge altar to the power of the fire and lava in the crater that laps at its northern flanks, where the entire, towering edifice was blasted apart, leaving only the southern half still standing. A mighty monolith advocating the supremacy of the Great Flame.

Our target was a nearby structure: the smaller but still imposing Houses of Knowledge, the great library and archive of Teviktelet. Much of its contents have already been taken over the centuries, but much still remains. As we searched the ancient tablets for what we sought, I glimpsed another group through a breach in one of the walls. Thus I witnessed for the first time a Baptism of Fire.

I have encountered disciples of Lugar many times. But to see one born, the conjunction of our kin with the kadim, is a rare vision. It is said the Lugarites can conjure these fire spirits, calling them from the depths of the pit of lava. But more often kadim can be found naturally wandering through the city and in the surrounding region: raw red creatures of walking magma, the hottest burning blue or white like the most intense flames.

The pact of merging was made in a circle of fire in the ground, the flames sparking with strange colours thanks to the magical saturation. The disciple held a stone tablet, the contract already inscribed, each letter first carved and then filled with steel. After the removal of the armoured gauntlets, the dwarf used a ritual scalpel to open two wounds, one on each palm, spilling blood directly on the fire. Skin already starting to blister on his unprotected hands, he spoke to the kadim in the name of Lugar and declaimed his intention, the price he would pay the spirit for its service, and further stipulations of the arrangement. The contract is quite unbreakable, and neither the dwarf nor the spirit can renounce it until its terms are fulfilled.

I gasped as the disciple spread his arms. The creature stepped forward and engulfed him with its molten form. Quickly, its flames receded into the shape of the dwarf, the spiritual fire spreading under his skin and shining from his eyes, mouth and wounded hands which healed even as I watched. The disciple's remaining armour fell away, and there he stood: naked, panting and glorious, skin already turning black as coal, no longer troubled by the terrible magic that would have killed him moments previously.

Captivated by the ritual, I realised I had lost precious time. We had only half an hour left in Teviktelet before the exposure would reach unacceptable levels, according to the guidelines. I stumbled back to the shelves of tablets, desperately searching for the documents that could change everything for my career. Fighting an unnatural fatigue that I knew was common to most who came this close to the site, I was plagued by hallucinations – glimpses of another world where the



barriers of this one are irreparably frayed. Several times I stumbled as the shelves and the building itself seemed to shift around me. It was then I heard something growl in the red darkness of the stacks.

Terror was in me, but I endured. I heard the horn signalling the time for departure, and still I poured over the tablets, skimming runes composed when the world was young. At last I cried out, for I caught sight of the rune Derom. I scooped the tablet and all that lay near it into a satchel, turned and was struck with a blow that sent me flying into the shelves, scattering their contents everywhere. I saw nothing but huge arms and horrifying mandibles. It howled like no sound I have ever heard. Yet in that moment, the creature collapsed under a hail of sturdy axes. My Temple comrades had come to make me leave, but instead they proved my saviours. Even so, Sister Barzak's spine was broken before they brought the daemon low. We left her body and fled.

As we hurried away from the most toxic site on Earth, I turned back to see its majesty one last time. The almighty eye of the Inferno stared back at me, unblinking.

Now back at Vanebvikh, I have had time to contemplate my journey. It was undoubtedly one of the deepest and most meaningful experiences of my life. An extremely demanding pilgrimage, which exacts its tithe of lives, resources, sanity and all manner of personal and collective sacrifices. Barzak knew the danger, and like all of us, begged to go.

For my own part, I feel that, at last, I truly understand the nature and purpose of the Infernal People. My People.

– Diary of Sister Herik, Priestess of Ashuruk



DISCIPLES OF LUGAR



Februar 10th

Dear Mama,

I write this with a heavy heart, from inside a holding cell. The food here is the meanest of gruel, the company is sullen-faced and despondent, and the jailers are malicious. I rest my weary bones upon the wooden floor, for the comfort of the prisoners is clearly of no concern to the masters of the citadel.

My deception and escape resulted in but a temporary cessation of my woes, and I am now to face worse. The local watchmen – monstrous creatures, a hideous fusion of bull and dwarf – uncovered my trickery through interrogations and tracked me down to my hiding place. It was such a cunning hiding place, too; the freshly-occupied Tsuandanese embassy was receiving a steady influx of new servants, and the dwarves seemed very poor at distinguishing between one

variety of “foreign human” and another. A further shame is that I believe I had made a favourable impression under trying circumstances upon the delegation leader – as Papa always says, there are no closer bonds than those forged under fire!

I have been sentenced to a three-year term of hard labour in an iron mine. Hopes of living out my time were promptly dashed when I discussed it with a local sentenced to the same fate. They informed me, rather bitterly, that they’d only ever heard of one slave who survived three years in the mines – an orcish war-leader of legendary stamina and strength. As a mere human, I was assured, it was a death sentence.

Oh Mama, I do not think you will ever receive any of the letters I have been imagining. I continue to compose them in my mind to retain my sanity, but I fear this is the end for me.



Februar 11th

Well, that certainly goes to show that you never can tell. I have been rescued! Legally, even! A strange dwarf with skin the colour of coal – and I must stress, also the texture of coal – came to the cell to announce that there had been a misunderstanding with the paperwork and that I had been transferred intentionally to the embassy. I was absolved of all blame and consequently should hurry up and report there immediately.

I had the good sense to not question my deliverance until I was out of earshot of the guards. When I began my inquiries, the dwarf informed me – with little curls of smoke escaping her mouth – that she was Nezira (or thereabouts), an attorney and follower of Lugar, the Infernal god of many things but most pertinent to me, freedom and lawyers.

She also informed me that she had been contracted to draw up the transference papers that showed I was now owned by the embassy, that I should probably not ask again on what date she had been contracted to do so, and that she had been retained by the Lady Khezek, who now considers her debt to me repaid in full.

Perhaps unwisely, I pressed on the point of the contract. Nezira drew me aside into a darkened alley. Her eyes lit up with a burning flame, the heat blisteringly hot. She told me that she resented the accusation and that she certainly had not broken into the hall of records to plant a sale bill dated a week earlier than its actual signing date, no matter what certain parties might claim.

It is conceivable I may have stammered words pertaining to my shock at the sudden inflammation of her eyes. In a trice, she was smiling and proud to explain that her unusual appearance was caused by a divine blessing. Specifically, I was told that a creature of elemental flame was somehow living inside her. It seems that this practice was developed by the worshipers of Lugar; those who reach the rank of Disciple sometimes bind themselves to the

fiery sprites known as kadim, making themselves stronger, faster, divinely protected and in command of an inner fire.

Naturally I asked why a lawyer felt the need to bind a lava monster inside themselves. Nezira chuckled, and told me that I was considering it from the wrong end:

“Who but a lawyer would dare to invite a spirit to live inside their body with no restrictions upon its control save those they had personally negotiated for and correctly phrased?”

I had no reply to that, and shortly after we reached the embassy.

Your loving daughter,

Olivia.



Februar 33rd

Dear Mama,

Never before have I experienced such sympathy for poor Marguerite, though I have long considered her diligent and have often tried to spare her work. The Ambassador's hair requires more hours of brushing than even my own, for the men of Tsuandan favour an elaborately braided topknot that crumples and kinks the underlying hair. My arms are quite sore every morning from the doubled effort.

I have seen Lady Khezek and Nezira again, several times. Lady Khezek appears to be responsible for negotiating trade with the Ambassador, with Nezira writing the contract. It is good to see that she has recovered in her fortunes. She took the opportunity to practice her *Sonnstahlisch* and inform me of where we stand.

"You delivered me from death at the hands of the Daeb. I have delivered you from death at the hands of the Vanekhashi authorities. Had you waited at the foundry, I could have freed you. Instead, they knew you worked here, so I had to give you to the Ambassador."

Still, I am glad to be where I am. The time I spent tending to Papa's falcons has stood me in good stead, for the Ambassador has had the most urgent need of someone to tend his winged companion. Qiang Ru is a bizarre but gentle creature whose wing was shattered in an explosion. It was difficult to effect a suitable splint, but I managed to scale up one of the falconer's designs. The weeks I have spent with the Tsuandanese qilin have also given me the opportunity to learn more than a little of the language of his home. I believe this will prove useful.

Last night, while I was fetching Ru his dinner, I spied a strange dwarf entering the room. I intercepted him and inquired how I might be of assistance, for I knew that no one was expected at that hour. He harrumphed and claimed to be a doctor, which was clearly false, for he bore no tools of healing. Instead, I noticed a pistol concealed within his case.

I denounced him loudly, loudly enough to wake the sleeping Ru, whose eyes flickered wide. Yet Ru could offer me no chance of salvation – I knew how weak he was. The assassin cursed me in *Abzhaghab* and hastily reached for his pistol. I could see the whites of his eyes, see the fury and hatred they concealed. I could smell his breath, spiced with cinnamon of all things. A shot rang out.

He slumped to the ground. I had outdrawn him.

Lady Khezek had provided me with a concealable weapon, along with entreaties to keep it secret and secure, in acknowledgement that the scales were not yet even. I praise Sunna for my deliverance in that moment, for I am certainly no warrior – but as Papa says, trust in Sunna and keep your powder dry. Also, fire at the hip in a pinch. It's not a very ladylike instruction to recall, or to have received and drilled for, but I suppose we shall have to give him the credit for being right about it being a dangerous world out there.

Ru and I do not think I shall be considered property for much longer.

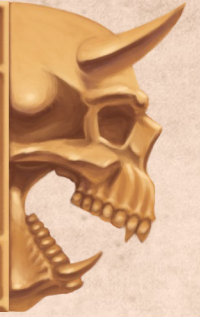
Your sincerest daughter,

Olivia





KADIM



August 12th

They are called kadim: otherworldly spirits of earth and flame that are anchored to the material world by the arcane craftsmanship of the eastern dwarves. The greatest among them, the titans, have the strength of a thousand men and have been said to raze entire cities to ash for their masters. Their smaller cousins are known as incarnates, and though they are lesser in stature, one should not underestimate their capacity for visiting fiery destruction on their adversaries. This, I have found, is a principle that holds true for the bearded ones as a species.

The dwarves of the east have long understood that knowledge is power. And through that power, they exert unassailable control over their lands with fire, faith and magic. Ages ago, scholars of the temple of Ashuruk discovered that they could bind kadim to their will through mysterious contracts, a secret that was later stolen by the other temples. Today, Lugar's temple is generally acknowledged as having outstripped Ashuruk's law-priests in their mastery of binding. Few from outside these two clergies have ever succeeded in making a successful contract.

I have made it my quest to rectify this dwarven monopoly. The kadim will serve whomever has sufficient will and knowledge of law. With these fiery spirits of war under my command, my power will be immense. My enemies will face the same stark choice the dwarves give their vassals and slaves: submission or incineration.

I have spent years learning all I can about the nature of the kadim. When human knowledge proved insufficient, I journeyed east to learn what I could

from the dwarves. I have gleaned much from the texts I was permitted to study after a sizeable donation of slaves and gold to the Temple of Lugar – considerably more sizeable after my foolish attempt at haggling.



Tandemar 2nd

During my time here, the intricately carved murals that adorn the walls of the temple library have intrigued me more than most of the tablets and scrolls. They depict the kadim in battle against all manner of foes, from orc rebellions to the servants of the Dark Gods. Yet there are also scenes that show them building cities, paying homage to dwarven overlords and even witnessing legal proceedings. It seems the dwarves regard the kadim as agents of divine law in opposition to disorder, both in battle and during peacetime.

Regardless of their role, I feel I have learned all the dwarves will permit an outsider to know. The time for study has ended, and the moment to act has come. A group of dwarven disciples left the city three days ago, heading north towards the edges of the Inferno. Their wagons are laden with heavy crates, no doubt bearing the vessels with which to bind kadim to this world. I have secretly enlisted the aid of Warborn mercenaries to pursue them. Soon the kadim will be mine. My entire consciousness thrums with anticipation.



Tandemar 18th

The battle was fierce, but I have prevailed. The fight was much closer than I anticipated – I must not underestimate dwarven skill at arms a second time. The disciples fought with grim tenacity, but my magic and the mercenaries' numbers finally proved their undoing, and now the prize is within my grasp.

I have recovered constructs able to house a kadim's essence. Some are akin to a framework of metal, while others are carved stone statues, fashioned in the forms of frightful daemons and monsters from Augean legend. The arcane sigils with which they are inscribed no doubt echo the words of the intended contract.

Even more precious than these is the tome carried by the temple elder describing the ritual in great detail, even if the archaic language is somewhat ambiguous. I now hold the keys to binding the kadim to my will! I often find myself laughing out loud for little reason.



Tandemar 22nd

We have journeyed north towards the Inferno, its hellish flame an ever-present glow on the horizon. Night never truly seems to settle on these accursed lands, and the stars are all but invisible here. I fear continuing north will soon become impossible. Unnatural storm clouds gather on the horizon, lashing the land with magical energy. Some of the smaller goblins have dropped dead from exposure. My talismans are proving to be worth what I paid many times over.

Tandemar 25th

We have wandered through this blighted land for three days now, and the Warborn are growing restless. Supplies are running low, and what little we have is increasingly contaminated. To make matters worse, we narrowly avoided detection by a dwarven patrol. It would seem they possess protective suits of armour to shield them from the baleful influence this land has on the body.

I must either chance upon a kadim soon or release the mercenaries from my service. The brutish oafs are ready to mutiny. Worse, their numbers greatly increase the chance of being discovered by the dwarves. I must find glory now or face the prospect of ignoble failure. It is unthinkable.



Tandemar 26th

At last! The Great Mage is master of the Immortal flame! I have achieved what all called impossible. Not one but three kadim are now bound to my will!

In a stroke of genius, I made one last push towards the Inferno. Since they are not truly of this world, the kadim cannot venture far from the magic that sustains them, and they are most common near the source. Just as my talismans began to corrode and decay, and the cries of mutiny rose up, we saw them: three animated masses of fiery magma, aimlessly moving about.

Mustering my natural authority, I imperiously bade them heed my words. I have bargained with daemons and bound djin to my will, but the kadim are a different extraplanar creature entirely. Theirs was an inscrutable, alien and cold presence. They seemed curious when I mentioned the vessels I had bought, and how they would allow them to venture into the world beyond, should they pledge themselves to my service. Long did I speak, covering every detail of the contract's terms, its duration, the nature of the services and compensations involved, and much more besides.

My words were initially met with silence. As I began to wonder whether they had fully understood me, the kadim slowly approached.

"We accept," spoke one in a deep, distorted voice akin to the roaring of a furnace.

It reached forward and touched its flame to the contract I had prepared in the language of dwarven law. The parchment dissolved, and I felt its runes burn across my skin, and shine brightly across the kadim's bodies for a moment. Their magma flowed into the vessels, which came to life with a fiery glow.

It is done. By the terms of the contract, their great power is bound to my will. I was almost tempted to command them to destroy the remains of the mercenary band, but I feared a goblin's black arrow in the ensuing chaos.

November 34th

The journey home was long and arduous. A spell of concealment hid us from dwarven reprisals, and finally I looked again upon the shores of the Middle Sea. When I arrived home, I bound the kadim within my sanctum, inside summoning circles designed to hold beings far more powerful than them. There they will stay until I have need of them. It will be a great test of patience – my mind is alive with the uses I could make of my new power!



Ullos 19th

It appears the kadim are growing restless within their circles. They have been making demands, accusing me of failing to fulfil the terms of the contract. My majordomo has reported they have been angrily straining at their magical bonds, causing the estate's foundations to shake. I shall have to review the spells holding them in place, just in case. But I am not concerned. They cannot defy my will.

– Fragments of a scorched journal recovered after the Great Fire of Amarhaq, which laid waste to a significant portion of the city in 879 A.S.





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KADIM CHARIOT



Gather.

I have learned much from the captive. He is a godcaller of the steelskins; the fool in his arrogance told me as much. Yes, the one we took from the hell chariot. And many were lost to do so...

He sang for us his tale, and we put the knives to him to make him sing it again, and sing for certain true. Each time he sang it with contempt and unflinching hate, but never did the song change. To credit him, he had no fear even as we tore him from his harness, and pinned him to earth with spear and axe and sword. I had wondered if it was just the delusion of those who rely on gods and spirits; now I am not certain.

He claimed to be the one who called the horrors they call kadim: godlings of fire bound by steel. He told of his journey to the Eye of Fire in the Great Waste to make his pact. Madness, he called on godlings to pull his chariot to war. Arrogance, that only Neverborn are worthy to bring him to battle. Gods are thieves! Fool, how does he not see that it is the kadim that gains the glory and not himself? For all his skill at arms and spellcraft, how does he think his story is more worth the words in song? All remember the Flame Horror, and not the steelskin behind it.

His own speech betrays him; he told us of his runes and clever words to proof against the

godling's flames. Insolence, that we could not unravel their secrets even in a hundred lifetimes. See there, the hidden truth: even steelskins fear these horrors they claim to bind. It is not the warriors, champions or godcallers that we must fear. Even with their spells and eversharp blades. It is the chariot itself...

Attend, and listen well, younghorns, for this is the suffering of your fathers. It is a song you all must learn, if you are to avoid their fates and give them the gift of vengeance. Learn. Grow wise from our suffering, for many were scattered or lost for this lore.

This chariot is much like those we favor ourselves, but pulled by things of black fire that smell of hate and rage. Forged, like blades of steel, not made of wood or horn or bone, for all those would surely find annihilation in its flame. Crafted of forms fell and foul: this one a bull, the other a karkadan, or any beast whatever, but always wreathed in black and hateful flame. Burning, the kadim within are shackled and bound: raging cinder and ash. Powerful, breaking shields and shattering bone, they toss bodies as you might toss an apple core. And woe to those trampled under hoof – those flames will burn spirit and flesh and fur. Burning in agony even after death, those spirits do not find their way home to their totems, and we are made lesser by their loss.



At the plains of Grandgrain, this terror ended the stories of the Bullchief Bronze-arm. Long had we fought that day, putting axe to their slaves and soldiers. Wolves and goblins made no matter against us. Hiddenhorns made short work of the machines behind their lines. Giants fell to gortach. Only their center held: stubborn iron will and skill at arms. The greatest of these, the immortal ones. They did not waver, they did not scream, they did not threaten, they did not boast. Javelin and arrow and cyclops stone rained on them. They did not move. Wildhorns charged and were thrown back. They endured.

Bronze-arm knew that if they did not break, then they must die. The bulls charged them as the

longhorns held his flanks, taking the lesser ironskins. We ended the lives of these ancients, and none of the warherd faltered. At last, horns locked with these immortals, and as we were proving the lie of their name, the screeching chariot came. Hellfire and a keening shriek as it hit the warchief's herd, scattering his longhorns and bull brothers, like birds in a field put to flight by a cat.

I was there, and I saw the great chief's last stand. I watched as flame and fury took him. All ash and cinder now...

– Oration of Shaman Stonehorn, as translated by Manfred von Jornburg



CITADELS OF THE INFERNAL DWARVES



There is no central government on the Blasted Plain. Each citadel raises and equips its own warriors, though these armies frequently fight side by side against larger threats. In my experience, these forces are most easily distinguished by the pagan gods to which they owe allegiance.

I once had reason to interrogate an Infernal denizen on this matter. If her words were to be believed, the heathen dwarves owe allegiance to a pantheon of just four gods who are called the Vaneb, meaning simply the Flame. Yet three of these (all but Lugar, who came to godhood in more recent times) contain several divine manifestations or aspects that - at least to outsiders - appear just like lesser deities, with their own names and attributes. There is, for example, Ashuruk the Scribe, Ashuruk the Sunbearer and Ashuruk the Mage, among others.

These are called Kabu, Nerkar and Ura, and they are distinct visions of a single god.

While every citadel boasts temples to the four primary divinities, each tends, in addition, to worship a specific minor aspect above and beyond its regular position in the pantheon. In many cases, the city and its chosen godhead become one and the same, deeply interconnected over the centuries, so that when one marches against an Infernal army, one can determine the citadel from which it hails by the religious icons held aloft as banners.

Here I record those banners I have encountered - by no means all or even the mightiest citadels on the Plain, yet I see them often in my nightmares.

- Captain Urs Böderer (retired),
Iron Legions of Myra



Sakumesh

Controlling one of the few parts of Infernal territory where conventional farming is possible, the citadel of Sakumesh is dedicated to Gantar, a vision of Shamut the Avenger, imagined as a warrior goddess with strong ties to sex and fertility. In dwarven mythology, Gantar was famously captured and killed in the underworld before returning to life, symbolising the cyclical power of nature found in most world cultures. The eastern dwarves commonly see in Gantar's story a parable that condemns life below ground, as has been embraced by their western kin. Gantar's emblem is a leashed lion.





Gar Shakhub

The closest modern-day citadel to the Inferno was originally founded as a shelter for refugees escaping that ancient disaster. Over the years, the descendants of those survivors have developed a hardened spirit and an enhanced devotion to a nationalistic myth of Infernal superiority. Gar Shakhub has attempted to unify the Blasted Plain several times since the Inferno, with no success. Its people worship Mikrash, a primordial and somewhat mystic representation of Ashuruk associated with faith and oaths, now interpreted by this citadel as a god of the nation. His banners show an axe wreathed in fire.



Nekek Nelem

Perched at the edge of a heavily forested mountain, Nekek Nelem is a dark and troubled citadel that has never known great power, and yet has remained unconquered throughout history thanks to its highly defensible position. The patron goddess is Lady Reshal, the name given to Nezibkesh the Undertaker, a feared and respected guardian of the deep earth where the dead are said to dwell. According to the old stories, the entrance to the underworld, Runalla, is at the foundations of the citadel itself. The banners of Nekek Nelem carry a single black stripe said to represent not just death but coal, Reshal's sacred mineral.





Dedushak

Symbolised by a great lightning bolt, the citadel of Dedushak is devoted to Kadad, goddess of the sky and avatar of Shamut the Winged. While Kadad is thought to control weather in general, she is most closely associated with storms, which are thought to signify her violent mating with Nezikesh the Unmaker, Huzid. Dedushak is a militaristic citadel dominated by the clergy of Shamut, with greater access to taurukh than any other. Travelers tell of the gigantic bronze horns built into its outer walls, sending thunderous blasts across the Blasted Plain when the citadel marches to war.



Kubnut Bebit

Furthest east of all citadels, Kubnut Bebit has experienced a certain influence from far-eastern cultures and traditions. It is enormously wealthy, profiting more from the Steel Road than any save perhaps Vanekhash. In theory, the citadel remains the holy site of Ura, the goddess of magic, but in recent times the banners of Kubnut Bebit bear the star of Tazda, a strange, genderless divinity that is not clearly rooted in any of the Vaneb. Its cult, inspired by eastern mystical ideas, worships in a semi-monotheistic fashion that borders on heretical. Tazda seems to be a divinity of truth and purest "goodness", as best I can translate the Abzhaghab term.





Zetivak

A citadel firmly within the orbit of Zalaman Tekash, Zetivak is known as Zalaman's library. It is the preeminent centre of learning on the Blasted Plain, with a great repository of tablets and scrolls attended by armies of scribes. Indeed, its patron is Kabu, Ashuruk the Scribe, known for wisdom and knowledge – a minor deity, since outside of Zetivak, Kabu has been largely usurped by Lugar in almost all respects. The citadel's military might is not great, but it does contribute some of the most powerful wizards in Zalaman's armies, who can be identified by Kabu's sigil of a crescent moon.



Nedzhid

Nedzhid is sometimes called the Citadel of Night, thanks to the choking fumes that billow around its factories, obscuring the sun for all but those who live in the highest ziggurats. Positioned on the northern shore of the Sea of Thirst, it is probably the greatest of all bastions of Infernal industry. It is a relatively new citadel founded during the war with the Sea's previous colonisers, the Arandai. The warriors of Nedzhid bear the unattractive cog-wheel standards of Ninarduk, an aspect of Nezibkesh the Inventor, patron of engineers.



LANGUAGE



On a pilgrimage one meets many interesting companions. Not long after Josette and I began the Camino de Santinigo, we found ourselves at a campfire with a gaunt old man with terrible burn marks down the left side of his face and body. When I made my customary offer, he replied that he had no pennies to spare for a story.

“Perhaps you would take this instead,” he said, handing over a crumpled pamphlet. His haunted eyes shone. “You’re a traveller. You must have an interest in languages.”

“It’s a phrasebook for the tongue of the Inf—” I began, inspecting the stained, battered pages.

“Don’t say the name,” he cut me off with a shudder, eyes glancing into the shadows around us. “It is the last token I keep from a terrible time. I made much use of this book, once. I pray you never have to.”

The scars on his left cheek seemed to writhe and dance in the firelight.

– From the collected writings of Samuel le Pepin, professional pilgrim and storyteller

Excerpt from Chapter 1: Introduction

The Infernal Dwarves once called themselves Abzhagevish, the Steel People, until they pledged themselves to the Inferno and became Vanebevish, the People of the Flame, which we call Infernal. The former term is still used for dwarves and giants generally, and the Infernal language remains Abzhaghab.

Excerpt from Chapter 2: Basics

Pronouns

anak	<i>me</i>	ninak	<i>we</i>
atat	<i>you (m.)</i>	attu	<i>you (m. pl.)</i>
atti	<i>you (f.)</i>	atta	<i>you (f. pl.)</i>
ash	<i>he</i>	shunu	<i>they (m.)</i>
ashi	<i>she</i>	shina	<i>they (f.)</i>

Numbers

zarat	<i>zero</i>	ghush	<i>six</i>
vanat	<i>one</i>	sizam	<i>seven</i>
gekh	<i>two</i>	bitak	<i>eight</i>
kubash	<i>three</i>	silam	<i>nine</i>
erish	<i>four</i>	velash	<i>ten</i>
kherub	<i>five</i>		

Excerpt from Chapter 3: Buying and Selling

valib	<i>nm. coin</i>	Gu atat bodzhvak vu di vezleb?	
vezlib	<i>nm. currency</i>		<i>Which currencies do you accept?</i>
tetar	<i>nm. price</i>	Gu di atatshe tetarute but?	
idnaz	<i>adj. high</i>		<i>What's your price for this?</i>
idzhur	<i>adj. low</i>	Gu tetar idzhur!	
bazak	<i>v1 tr. accept</i>		<i>The price is too high!</i>
ghebkar	<i>v tr. exchange (for)</i>		

Excerpt from Chapter 4: Food and Dining

amum	<i>nm. cutlery</i>	Ribshaudzh anak [...]	
dadnush	<i>nf. goat</i>		<i>Give me [item(s)]</i>
kamaum	<i>v5 itr. to feast</i>	Ribshaudzh vu anak am dadnushte zadish	
kekdash	<i>nm. knife</i>		<i>Give me goat meat</i>
kerutash	<i>nf. dog</i>	sarapte gekh vashenvab	
kimemi	<i>nf. guest</i>		<i>two jugs of water</i>
kimum	<i>nm. food</i>	Ribshaudzh vu anak am sarapte gekh vashenvab	
nakaum	<i>v5 tr. to host (an event).</i>		<i>Give me two jugs of water</i>
nekem	<i>nm. host</i>	Nakaum vu nemem am [...]	
nenem	<i>nm. feast</i>		<i>Host a feast for [someone]</i>
otmerub	<i>nm. bird</i>	Gu anak nakdzhnan zidalab vu nenem am kavir ban	
segish	<i>nf. snake</i>		<i>I will host a feast for the honored vizier tonight.</i>
zadish	<i>nf. meat</i>		





Excerpt from Chapter 8 - Social Hierarchy

In the lists below, clergy are consistently listed above civil ranks. This is purely for ease of listing – in fact, the overlord is considered the supreme ruler of a citadel, and the civil authorities are technically separate from religious ones. However, the relationship between them is not always clear. Take care to always use the correct title and honorific with each individual to avoid any offence.

Titles

gurish	<i>prophet</i>	dzhabar	<i>vizier (in truth there are numerous titles applied to the individuals we call viziers, but this is the most common).</i>
vatshak	<i>priest, clergyman</i>		
kavidnaz	<i>overlord</i>		

Honorifics

These honorifics follow names and titles. Higher social ranks – anything above a citizen – will require the use of both a title and an honorific.

aram	<i>high ranking clergy, usually prophets or members of the council of magi.</i>	Khazlub Tur	<i>Citizen Khazlub</i>
en	<i>low ranking clergy</i>	Shalban Ilim	<i>Vassal Shalban</i>
shar	<i>overlords</i>	Vudzhinesh Gurish Aram	<i>His Holiness Prophet Vudzhinesh</i>
ban	<i>viziers and mid-level bureaucrats</i>	Kavidnaz Shar	<i>His Eminence The Overlord</i>
tur	<i>citizens</i>		
lan	<i>non-citizen dwarves</i>		
uk	<i>non-citizen non-dwarves</i>		
ilim	<i>vassals</i>		
pi	<i>slaves</i>		



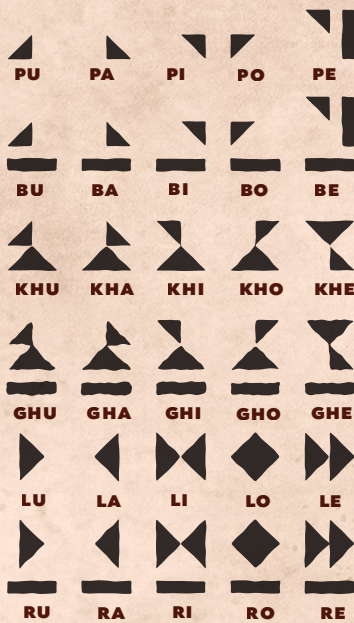
Excerpt from Chapter 15 - Battles and Warfare

kazhlauk	<i>v5 atr. skirmish (with)</i>	nazhlauk	<i>v5 atr. wage war (on)</i>	zhelik	<i>nm. battle</i>
kedikh	<i>nf. sword</i>	nezhlek	<i>nm. war</i>	zhilegi	<i>nf. enemy</i>
kednukh	<i>nf. warrior</i>	sheluk	<i>nm. soldier</i>	erutesh	<i>nf. charge, attack</i>
kekdakh	<i>nf. knife</i>	vagaush	<i>nf. protect</i>	rutash	<i>v2 atr. charge, attack</i>
kevish	<i>nf. shield</i>	vegish	<i>nf. armour</i>	turush	<i>nf. flight, rout</i>
kezhlak	<i>nm. skirmish</i>	zhaluk	<i>nm. weapon</i>	tarush	<i>v2 intr. flee</i>

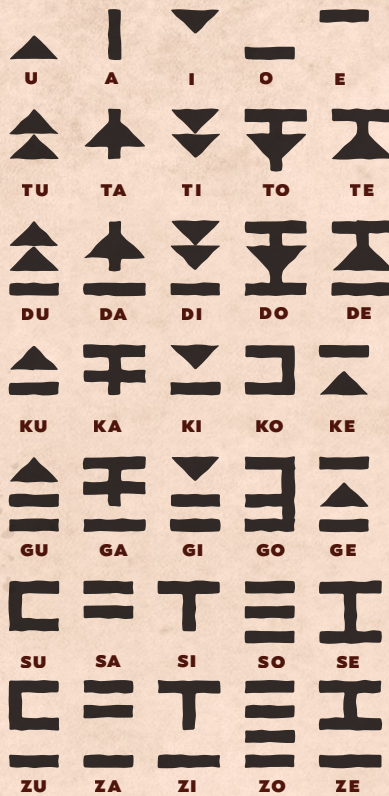


WRITING

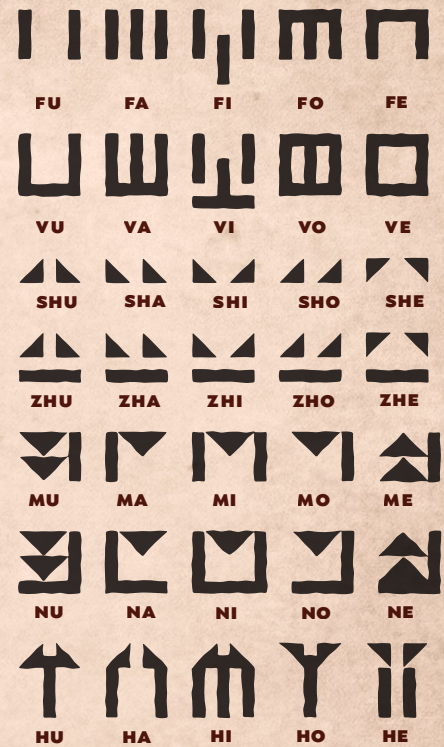
NARROW SETS



MIXED SETS



WIDE SETS



The infernal script is organised into syllabic units. That is to say that each glyph in the writing system represents a whole syllable, not simply one sound as in our Avrasi alphabet.

As you may note, there is no way to write consonants without a vowel. The convention is to write all consonants with the -u glyph. Thus, may be read either as *t* or as *tu*. Unfortunately, there is no way to know which without knowing the word in question, although as you become more familiar with the language, you will begin to understand which is most likely in a given word.

Words are divided by a space, although before the advent of modern printing technology, these spaces often varied in size.

Sentences are divided by a single tall vertical line:

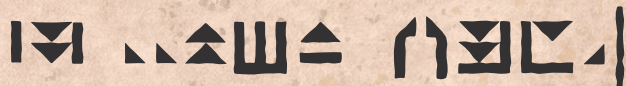


Here are some examples of the script in use:

Gu anak sugtshub - *I am a merchant (feminine)*



Am shatvak hannap - *I came by boat*



You may also encounter an older, blockier style of writing, where adjacent lines were connected together, making them appear quite different to the untrained eye. These are rare, mainly appearing on old text carved into stone. Do not be put off by this, just imagine the lines being thinner, and you should see the modern glyphs in there. For example:



As you can see, they are quite different, but do not fear: you should not encounter these glyphs often, unless you make a habit of breaking into temples and ancient ruins.

Extracts from *A Trader's Primer for the Infernal Tongue* by Severina Di Mercurio





Coop



EPILOGUE

Itar 29th

Dear Mama,

I trust that you have read my letters in order, even though they are all stuffed into a single large envelope and penned in the same week.

I must say that this voyage has been most educational. I have seen much more of the world than I ever dreamed when you permitted me to leave home and study in Fredericksberg. Cartography, history, linguistics, engineering – I have been exposed to knowledge aplenty. Seamstress' shorthand has been invaluable for recalling them, and I am quite positive I have doubled my yearly usage of quills and ink in the past three days transcribing all my notes and letters to a more conventional medium. Tripled, if one counts my translations of the Ambassador's journal. He was quite impressed at the demonstration of my formal Tsuandanese, and he believes that our stories belong together.

My sojourn in Vanekhash has drawn to a close. Ambassador Bao is quite, quite grateful to me for saving Ru, who absolutely insisted upon my liberation. Knowing the ways of this city as I do now, I made certain to obtain it in writing; in exchange for services rendered as a bodyguard, I have been set free and am to accompany the Ambassador on his next mission. I even have a job, however plebeian that may seem. I am to be the Ambassador's official translator, as I have mastered a number of tongues he does not know.

He seems to think I'll be able to put them to use quite swiftly – both in Longjing and wherever his next posting may be.

In the foundry, specifically, I learned a great deal about the design and manufacture of Infernal technology. Their contempt of an ignorant foreign human has ensured my future fortunes; I did not set out to become a spy, but the opportunities that have fallen into my lap shall be taken.

I agreed to transcribe my notes and recollections from my sojourn in the foundry for Ambassador Bao. It was quite useful to have access to proper paper for the construction of blueprints – I am most impressed at Khezek and Nezira's resourcefulness in acquiring the official factory letterhead. It seems these dwarven friends of mine are thick as thieves with the Ambassador and whatever he may be plotting. My payment for this transaction was a wardrobe full of dresses. The Tsuandanese styles would certainly stand out in Fuhrberg, but the silks are of exquisite quality, and after the hideous rags I have been forced to wear since arriving in the East, I feel positively rejuvenated.

I even had the occasion to try my new finery in public! The Ambassador had me on his arm for a great ball in honour of the local god Vaumkerutash, and in celebration of the victory over the Gar Shakhubians. Oh Mama, you would be proud. My nose was firmly removed from betwixt the pages of unladylike tomes. I charmed

the Prophets, even the old devil who once purchased me. I believe he did not recognize me, so resplendent was I, or perhaps so short of sight was he. I even danced with the police Commissioner, who seemed amused and charmed by the possibility of a two-legged dance partner of sufficient height. Truthfully, I only managed thanks to the taste for height-enhancing 'flowerpot soles' in modern Tsuandanese fashion, and a shorter woman would have failed even then, but it was quite the sight.

I leave Vanekhash with scars. Some from the shackles of the corsair ship, some from the foundry's chemicals and the jailor's truncheons, some on the soul. It is a harsh, cruel place. I tell myself that we must be better than this in Sonnstahl, but I find myself wondering whether Marguerite would concur. Should I judge Vanekhash by the harbour, the foundry, or the Great Ziggurat? Should I judge Sonnstahl by Fuhrberg's farms or the Imperial Palace?

I shall miss, if not the city, then Lady Khezek and Nezira. They are forward-thinking, modern ladies for any nation. We spent last night debating the best mode of governance and I do not feel it was entirely academic to them. Nor were Lady Khezek's questions about Sonnstahl and Avras entirely idle. Indeed, I believe you shall have met her shortly before reading this, as she

has promised to personally deliver these letters to you. I trust her completely, even if I'm sure she opened the letters on the way to Sonnstahl. She still won't tell me her true reason for traveling, but I am glad to have a sure means of reaching you.

Incidentally, dear Khezek – if I am right, please sign your name to this document. If I'm further correct that your plans after Sonnstahl involve an expedition to Avras, talk to Mama about it and offer her more lore of your people for her collection – she will repay you with priceless contacts in the city.

All my love,

Translator to the Tsuandanese Ambassador to
Vanekhash,
Baroness Olivia von Fuhrberg

*Well played, Olivia. Well played. Baroness
Caroline, I hope you treasure this trove of
information about my people – and your...
unique child.*

– Emissary Khezek Imar



THE 9TH AGE: FANTASY BATTLES

INFERNAL DWARVES



Fueled by the mightiest industries and magics of the world, the Infernal war machine turns its unstoppable wheels within the great citadels of the Blasted Plain. Born in suffering, smoke and cataclysm, a fire burns in the heart of this indomitable people, a flame that fuels a great hunger for glory and a callous cruelty towards all who stand in the way. Slave masters and earth shakers, children of great gods, many have come to know the terrible juggernaut of the Infernal Dwarves.

The 9th Age: Fantasy Battles is a community made miniatures wargame
All rules and feedback can be found/given at www.the-ninth-age.com
All recent changes are available at the-ninth-age.com/archive.html
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