

# THE IX AGE

## FANTASY BATTLES



WARRIORS OF THE DARK GODS



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**WARRIORS OF THE DARK GODS**

2nd Edition, Background Book

# FAITHFUL ACOLYTES

Grovel before the ruthless and dedicated followers of the Dark Gods who pledged their souls to this tome. 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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# TALES FROM THE EDGE OF THE WASTELAND

Letters from my friend, March Lord Ilarion Yanovich, and additional material collected between 942 and 962 AS, by Archbishop Voytyek Bistricha

Your Excellency,

First, let me express my gratitude for your support in achieving my new position. Your patronage has been invaluable to me since our days studying together in *Sonnstahl*. This new posting is not at all what I expected. Thirty miles beyond our border, near the coast of the Sea of Gods where the Makhar Steppe is narrowest, the certainties of *Volskaya* fade into a murky mix of law, custom, religion and superstition. This town I command may be claimed by our Motherland, but at times I feel I have taken up residence in an untamed wilderness populated by savages. A relic of the settlement's history no doubt, so long in the Makhar Steppe, at the edges of the Wasteland.

*Totváros'* solid wooden walls hold a thousand people, the most easterly settlement of its size. Within are craftsmen and traders, furriers and farriers, all the peoples needed to maintain an outpost of civilization. Yet, a mere day's ride away live barbarians who openly worship the Dark Gods and prey on the unsuspecting who stray too close. And worse still, the followers of those vile deities possess a temple within the town walls.

My first response was one of horror, as you might expect, to find this threat so close to our border and within my own charge. But these first months in *Totváros* have been a chastening experience. My orders to burn the shrine were met with distress by the locals, wary of angering Gods with as much im-

pact on their fortunes as our own beloved *Mrozomor* has on our winters. I settled for boarding the place up, thinking it a temporary measure.

A day later, I understood the truth of their fears. A band approached the walls, numbering in the hundreds. A small enough host were I anywhere but on the fringes of the Makhar Steppe. The bells called the alarm, and the town guard raced to hold the walls.

The aggressors strode towards the town with a languid yet inexorable pace, certain that nothing would hold them back. Behind them rolled wagons and beasts of burden, powerful beings hauling the supplies needed to sustain a life of reaving.

I stared for long moments, watching death approach. Finally, pushing despair aside, I girded myself for battle. I tried to evacuate the townsfolk, but their bemused expressions were a reasonable response – they could not hope to outrun the advancing horde. Indeed, they were markedly calmer than I, going about their daily chores as though this were a normal afternoon.

By the end of that day, our walls were entirely encircled, beyond effective bow range. Simple camps were raised, swiftly and efficiently; these were people clearly accustomed to a life on the move. Some faint flutter of hope stirred in me then. This force had no need of siege – our walls would fall in the first onslaught. Some other fate was coming, it seemed, and I could but wait for the following morning to reveal what it might be.





*At dawn, a single figure came forward, followed by a bannerman, carrying a symbol I knew on sight. A whispered threat in the halls of civilisation – Savar: the Fallen Star, Dark God of Pride. Seeing one chance to protect my people, I descended to stand before the town gates, barred at my command. My jaw clenched; it was all I could do to nod to the guards to open the doors and admit this Lord of Pride.*

*I stepped forward to do my duty... and was promptly ignored as my would-be foe strode past, weapon still undrawn. As he marched towards the shrine, his lieutenant stood before me, weighing my worth like a prize mare. When he deigned to speak with me, it was in a manner reminiscent of the most conceited nobleman in the court of Volskograd.*

*"Only the Dark Gods offer a path to true glory, and a name worth remembering. See here: this scrap, I tore it from an Imperial banner-bearer who tried to block our return from Sonnsahl. A lord of a dozen towns. This scar I took in single combat with Tubroki of Clan Coppermaul, the Dragonseeker who once slew the beast Paytheinth. I made my pact in Destria, but the journey since has made me, and it would make you too."*

*As he spoke, images were painted in my mind of what I could achieve were I to join with him. No longer cast to the fringes of society, but recognised for my true worth. Reverie broken by the heavy footsteps of the Lord, I realised the standard bearer was expectantly awaiting my reply. I shook myself, and*

*duty reasserted its hold on my heart. All our years in Aschau University, my heart never left Volskaya. My allegiance to nation disgusted him, and the last I saw was the unconcerned back of the Lord, and the sneer of his lieutenant. I braced for the inevitable assault my rejection had surely provoked.*





The next morning, to my bleary-eyed surprise, our walls remained unstormed. Yet most of the force remained encamped around the town, save for the departure of Savar's dedicants. I watched for hours, a condemned man still awaiting the fall of the headsman's axe after a day's reprieve. Noon passed and dusk approached before movement came from the surrounding camps. Dark figures crossed the expanse to the gates that now lay open, lesson learned of provoking conflict.



What entered Totváros was far beyond my expectations. Men and women, bedecked in armour, no less dangerous than the herald of Pride. Yet the steel that encased them was cast in images of entwined figures to make a courtesan blush. Masks covered faces, leaving merely the twist of lips or the quirk of an eyebrow to express intent. And despite their muscular power, they moved in a way that was somehow enticing.

That evening, to avoid offence, I accepted an invitation to dine with those followers within my walls. I can recall little of what passed during that repast, save an intoxicating mix of scent and sight - a reminder of our youth in the pleasure districts of Aschau - together with an invitation to join the ranks of Cibaresh: the Tempter, Dark God of Lust.

"Think of the gratification awaiting you in the service of Cibaresh, who knows your deepest desires. Those urges which set you apart from others, and you dare not share. In him you will find fulfilment and reward to sate all appetites. Let slip the shackles of morality, and become a new man, as you are meant to be."

Few are the women who have turned my head since my service to the Motherland began. Those in the shrine that night might have, yet my heart belongs to another. You will recall my wife, Šiva, whose presence in Totváros has made this posting bearable, and to whose family I hope to prove my worth. Her beauty and grace have granted me all that I require, and no tryst, however exotic, could turn me from such. Returning to her that night spared my soul, yet the knowing smirks as I left spoke of some joke to which I was not party.



## GLUTTONY



Upon the third day, in a pattern I was coming to recognise like the rules of a perverse game, a new faction approached the walls of the town, trailed by carts creaking under weight of supplies. The followers of Akaan: the Devourer, Dark God of Gluttony, are not easily mistaken. Huge warriors, clad in brown or green armour, with lower jaws left exposed and fearsome teeth on show.

As though the floodgates had opened, dozens of other Warriors crossed the expanse, and the townsfolk proceeded to establish a busy market. Grain and meat were traded for the proceeds of dozens of raids and ambushes. The unexpected wealth of this outpost now had a clear explanation. And all the while, Akaan's people acquired every scrap of food on offer, making payment in assorted coin, jewellery or other remnants of past raids.

The feast they laid on that night was a convivial affair. From a small chest, a handful of delicacies were produced to rival anything in the Tsar's palace and satisfy the most discerning of epicures. Somehow, fine wine from Destria was produced, and consumed, along with great quantities of poorer vintages. I was, for a time, the hedonist of my youth, and my appetite seemed to become insatiable as my host proclaimed:

"This world is ripe to be devoured. Indulge yourself now, and know that if you choose

Akaan, none will ever prevent your satiation. We dine on what we choose, we drink what we desire, and we crush any who stand against us. One day, we will consume the very world, but until then, we feast!"

Yet as we consumed, the true nature of my hosts began to show. Flesh bulged from beneath their armour, straining to contain their bulk. Teeth tore through fatty meats, oblivious to the grease and blood running down their many chins. Great sores, pustules, boils and scabrous skin marked the end of dignity and giving over of flesh to a rot which seemed to emanate outwards.

The food turned to ash in my mouth, the wine mere swill. I recalled the first years of trial and hardship in service of Volskaya, learning the truths of Father Winter, and how to survive the harshest of circumstances. There was no place for weakness, softness or indulgence. The excess of adolescence was long past; only discipline can remain.

The followers of Akaan seemed unconcerned with my refusal, yet their leader ran a tongue over foul fangs. He eyed me with an open hunger which had my hand gripping my sword hilt until I left them to finish gorging.

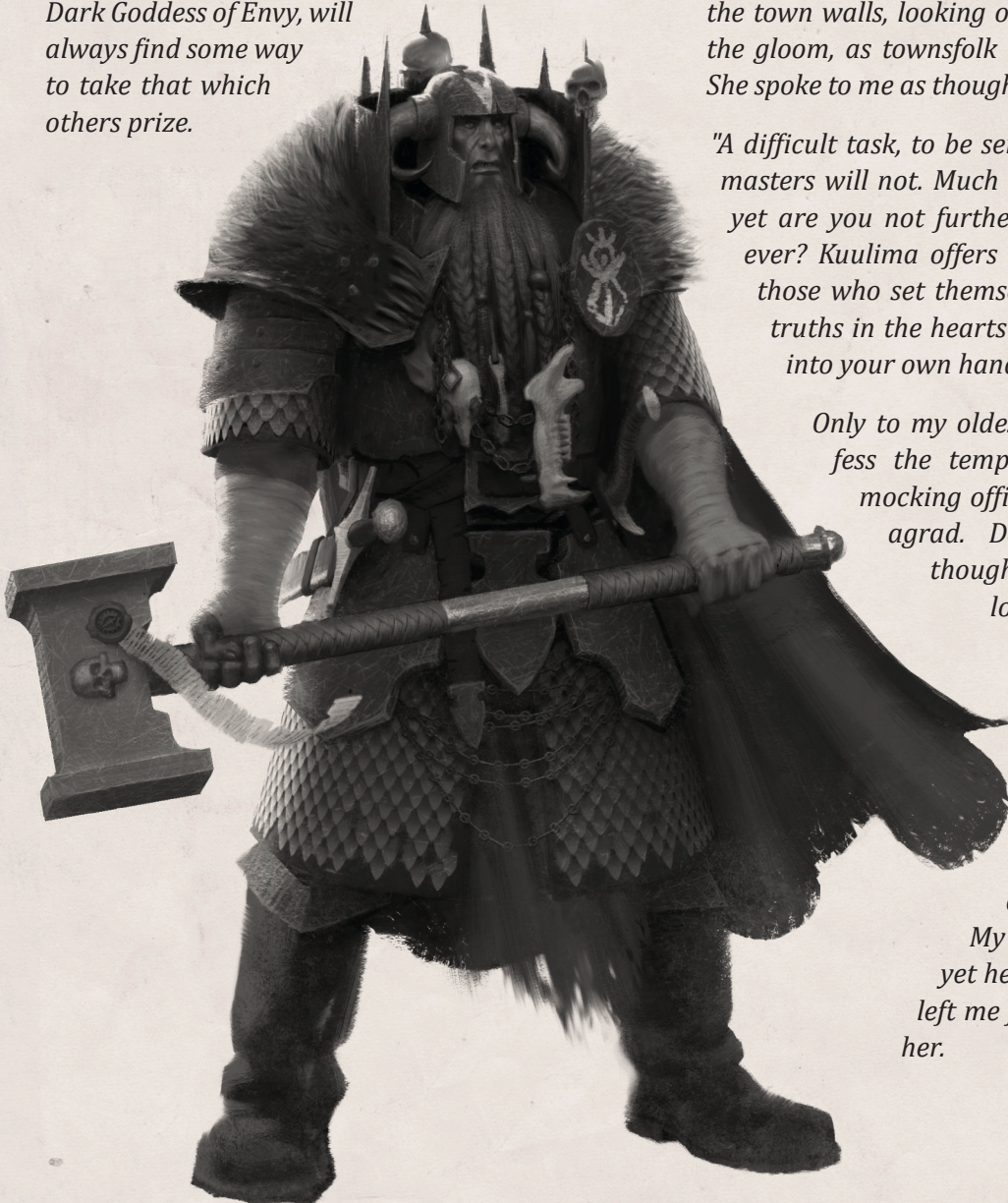




## ENVY



*It had become my habit in these days to wait on the walls for the next group to approach. The encampment around our walls was dwindling, yet a fraction could overwhelm our defences. As always, the population seemed untroubled by this presence, but I could not rest easy as more Warriors drew near. Bearing tokens, weapons and armour from many countries, those who follow Kuulima: Lady of Flies, Dark Goddess of Envy, will always find some way to take that which others prize.*



*As they entered the town, these Warriors in their sickly green armour looked everywhere, measuring every scrap in sight. To have their eyes upon you is to know the feeling of a pig led to slaughter. No offers of hospitality this time; I thought I was to be spared any attempt to secure my allegiance to the Dark Gods, but Kuulima's vassals were not so apathetic towards me as I believed. That evening, she came to me, servant of Envy. I received her upon the town walls, looking out upon the campfires in the gloom, as townsfolk returned from the fields. She spoke to me as though she knew my mind.*

*"A difficult task, to be sent to do that which your masters will not. Much was promised, no doubt, yet are you not further from power now than ever? Kuulima offers the means to pull down those who set themselves above, to know the truths in the hearts of men and take destiny into your own hands."*

*Only to my oldest companion can I confess the temptation to strike at the mocking officers and nobles of Volskograd. Despite such urges, my thoughts turned to you. Our long friendship has set my feet on a rising path. I cannot tar all with the same brush, unless I coat you too, dear Voytyek. I remain the loyal servant of Volskaya, and your faithful friend. My visitor departed silently, yet her considering gaze never left me for as long as I could see her.*



## GREED



*I heard the next arrivals long before laying eyes upon them. At first, I took the clink of metal on metal for the sound of ill-fitting chainmail or the tack of a horse. What emerged at my gates was half a dozen Warriors, armoured in coins like a bewildering hide of scales over their thick plate. The effect, timed to coincide with the dawn sun, was a blinding shimmer of gold and copper. If the followers of Pride behaved as though they owned Totváros, I believed those who followed Sugulag: the Collector, Dark God of Greed, could sell my own town back to me.*

*Two of those coin-clad men bore a sturdy yet decorative chest between them. It held a weight which burdened even their great strength. Greed I had always believed the simplest of motivations for a person, but my time among the Collector's enforcers soon persuaded me otherwise. The snarling gold faces of their helms masked an intelligence and subtlety I did not expect.*

*Not once in an hour of talk did their leader even look at the chest. No mention of money was made, yet promises of wealth flowed like wine nonetheless. Instead of desiring another's station, they offered a road to surpass*

*them. To possess that which sets one man above another, to have others gravitate to me by virtue of holding what they desire.*

*"Coin. Such a simple thing, these discs of metal. Yet within them is contained all the promise of the world. A shimmer of silver can open doors; the glitter of gold spills secrets like water. From the most powerful court to the lowliest hovel, money shapes this Mortal Realm as effectively as magic – and the Dark Gods offer a path to both. Power – and wealth – beyond imagining."*

*Upon their departure, I opened the chest to find it full of ingots of pure iron, with a handful of golden treasures atop. Your father's coin opened many a door for us both in adolescence, yet I could have chosen a smoother path had wealth been my desire. Now my dreams are of Šiva and our unborn child. All other gems pale before such joy. I sent men to return the chest, knowing the value placed on these bribes and not wishing to incur any debt. Neither man returned that night.*





## WRATH



The sixth day did not find me at my customary post. Instead, I scoured the town for any who knew of my missing guards. What I found were missing clothes and supplies, and two horses taken from the stables without permission. The situation galled me - these were not local folk. Trained guards, brought from Volskograd, and they had abandoned their station. That the chest had likely contained enough wealth to buy both men acres of land was little consolation.

So it was I was caught unawares by the figures of three followers of Vanadra: the Adversary, Dark God of Wrath, clad in red steel and black gauntlets. One bore a corpse in town livery as though it weighed nothing. The other restrained the remaining guard with a single hand, squirming against a grip of iron. The third stood



before me, studying my face as the survivor was prostrated at my feet, and he spoke in doleful tones.

"I bring a gift: a deserter, and betrayer. We who follow Vanadra know the power of oaths. The only words of any value are those we pledge to keep. Any who would break them cannot be allowed to roam free. Only by bringing such traitors to heel, hunting them to the ends of the earth and delivering judgement by steel can the world be set to rights. Vanadra lends strength to the vengeful, empowering her disciples to correct the injustices done to them."

I realised when he finished speaking that my sword was in my hand, a foot of steel bared above the scabbard. Anger surged within me, both at these interlopers usurping my position, and at the traitor I now had in arm's reach. My teeth grated together, my knuckles cracked and tendons in my arm drew taut. All the while, the leader of the cohort watched me with a knowing smile. In that moment, I saw how close I had come to playing judge and executioner - and realised I did not share this thirst for retribution.

I recall in the fiery days of my youth we shared just such a discussion, and I found myself on the side of expediency. I understand now the corrupting influence such power can have, and why you argued so fervently for the process of justice, and I thank you for sparing me from this sixth trial. Though I held my rage in check, I did not sheathe my blade until Vanadra's Warriors departed, lest they find me guilty of some infraction and seek to impose their own ruling.



## SLOTH



Upon the final day, only one camp remained. This should have been a comfort, yet those Warriors in their rusted armour unnerved me, standing immobile and watching, the fluttering of dirty white cloaks the only motion to be seen. They did not come that day, nor the next. Still they watched, until I felt their gaze prickling upon my neck at all times: followers of Nukuja: the Sleeper, Dark God of Sloth.

Finally, after a howling gale and nights of bitter cold, one of those statues stirred, just as I readied a party to ride out to them. At the gates, she spoke in curt tones. No word was wasted, no facades enacted. Her black eyes seemed to pierce my flimsy form of flesh, framed by hair the white of snow, as though all colour was drained.

"This place, this Totváros, was once a mere collection of farmsteads. I have watched it grow, over centuries. First the Makhar people, then our Warriors began to trade with the town, and soon it gained in stature. Now a new Lord commands it, and its future has two paths. One leads to glory and the truths hidden in time. The other ends in fire and death, and goes

no further. Only Nukuja pulls back the veil of fate and reveals the possibilities beyond."

Neither outcome elicited any change in tone - they were simply truths evident to her and hidden from me. Tales of seers have long plagued the superstitions of our country. Yet never before have I been in the presence of one who revealed true foresight. It was a chilling and exhilarating thought, and of all the challenges of this past ten-day, it tempted me most. To know my future, or that of my unborn child? Yet for every part of me wishing for that certainty, a little more appreciated the freedom of mystery and the ability to believe my fate has still to be written.

With no sign of disappointment or regret at my choice, she departed, with these last words: "Your line will play its part in things to come. The Gods are watching." With that, this first chapter of my trials among the followers of the Dark Gods drew to a close. I know not what game they played, nor why this town should hold so much interest for them, yet I am certain this will not be the last I shall see of them.

—Your faithful servant,  
Lord Ilarion Yanovich



# A WARRIOR'S PATH

My road to glory began in simple fashion. A whispered word, a knowing nod – those who seek out would-be dedicants to the Dark Gods have a talent for seeing what others would keep hidden. After all, they have to find them before the Inquisitors, Paladins, Deep Watch, or whoever else might seek to root them out. Having spent years indentured to a noble family, the promise of freedom was no small lure.

That fateful day, I stepped into a room of figures in masks and cowls, and listened as they promised me all I desired, told me I was meant for greater things. By the time the price was explained, how could I do anything but agree? Such a little thing, a soul. I've never felt the weight of it, even during all those sermons on divine retribution. Instead, I was offered the chance to take destiny in my own hands. I knew I deserved the greatest of prizes, and these people recognised it too.

Soon thereafter, I was in the presence of a daemon, summoned forth by those unknown servants. I knelt before this transcendent being, and spoke the words that bound my soul to the Dark Gods forevermore, a pact that can only be made freely. I felt it then, as though claws gripped something deep within me, and a single flex would rip it from my body. Never have I taken an oath more solemn than the one I swore that day. Giv-

ing up the shelter of a god who never seemed to care for me... it might have terrified me once. But now I know I have a chance to live forever, and not in some subservient afterlife. Death is a yawning abyss - with my soul pledged, I walk a precipice above oblivion. Succeed, and I will know glory eternal; fail, and I will know nothing evermore. But that risk is now my choice.

If any doubts of the wisdom of my choice lingered, they were washed away in moments. The promised power flooded my body. It was intoxicating, like the finest wine, and fortifying too, more than all the wholesome meals I've ever eaten. In time I grew as though I were a youth once more, until my past countrymen were like children to my new shape.

I felt a pull from that moment, a lure drawing me away from the simple life I had once led. Most think a Warrior's pilgrimage is always to the Wasteland, or maybe near the Shattered Sea. Indeed, those cultists who opened my eyes offered to smuggle me past those who guard the borders of civilisation. But the truth is, I've learned there are many places of power for the Dark Gods - not all so permanent. My own journey took me to an abandoned mine, where Warriors had taken up residence. Within those tunnels, a forge burned, with a smith unlike any I've ever encountered.



Whatever possessed that artificer, his hands smouldered on the handle of a great hammer, and sparks showered as he beat thick, black metal into shape. It took a week for my own plate to be ready, shaped to encase a frame which had engorged on my way to the quarry. A simple suit of armour, with the symbol of my God inscribed, awaiting the addition of the trophies I would earn in their name. Joining these self-styled Warriors Within, we struck out at the nation from the heart of its lands.

My days became a contradictory mix of monotony and fluctuation. Each was spent in service to our masters, searching for weaknesses to exploit or new recruits to our cause. Yet we never stayed in the same place twice, always on the move, sleeping wherever we could. We ate only what we could take from others, and only paused to rededicate ourselves in a fitting manner. Each other Warrior was a comrade by necessity, but also a potential rival or weakness. Friendships were ephemeral, yet all longed to hear the stories of brothers and sisters who achieved the pinnacle of our journey, the Exalted Heralds.

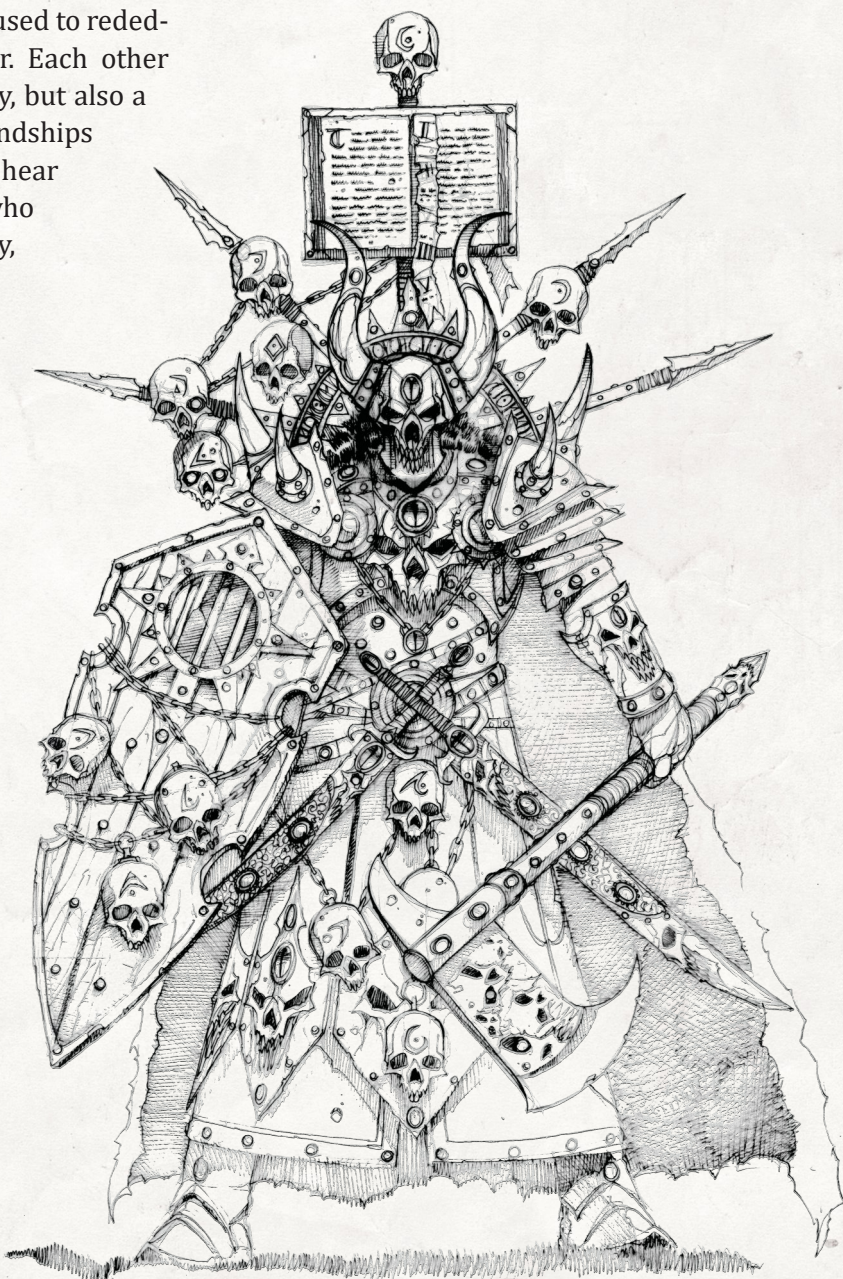
Within my very core I felt the changes wrought upon me. That newfound energy writhed within me, and I knew only the favour I possessed held it in check. Witness the misshapen forms of the Fallen, and you will see how we fare without the embrace of our Gods. But so long as I retained their approval - fatigue, illness, cramps and aches, these things became foreign to me. I no longer measured myself against my peers. Instead, I looked to those with power over me, and knew that I would one day pull them down and stand in their place.

Sure enough, my quest saw me earn many accolades. My armour is wreathed with the marks and tokens of lesser mortals - both my former people and any Warriors who stood between me and my goal. Each victory, each manifesta-

tion of my master's precepts, every enemy overcome brought me one step closer to my God. I felt their eyes upon me, and their favour grace me. Their fires burned in my belly, and my eyes began to perceive those worthy of my God's malice as I honed myself as their instrument.

Now I look ahead, and I see the summit of the path I have walked for a century. The Gods have granted me the fortitude to last these years, and the potency to bestride the world. In time I trust I will be worthy of their faith, and they will grant me the true test: my chance for immortality at the hands of Father Chaos.

—Parchment found clutched by a dead scribe in the ruins of the Abbey of Listowell



# PATHS OF ASCENSION

It is demanding and absolute. There can be no remorse, nor any reconsideration. As we say in Sagarika: ugrá, síghra, tivrá. Fast as thunder, deep as the abyss, terrible as war. Such are the Paths of Ascension. They are not for the weak. They know no mercy. The Paths admit only dedication, unconditional belief and infinite ambition. The reward in the end will be eternity, but failure means deformity, the loss of everything for something less than bestiality.

We are not a church, we are not an army. We are alone - the Path we chose to walk is unique to each of us. We have abandoned hierarchy and blind obedience. We shun any limitation. We strive only for Ascension, to transcend the shackles of the mortal.

We are none of us immune to fear and doubt. I myself once faced such weakness. But I cut it out. I walked the Path. I faced every trial. I imposed my will and now I stand before the wretched slaves of an inferior herd they call civilisation. They look at me with terror, and I understand the greatness of our Father, the awesome potential of our Path. We are Warriors of the Dark Gods: there can be no pity, no rest, no love, for the prize is the glory of the immortal.

I've seen my brothers walking the Path of the Exiled. I was spiteful once, but now I respect their will as much as the power they possess in spite, or perhaps because of, their physical horror. My younger brother Durmukh, Warrior of Vanadra, failing to please his patron deity, was cast down from his revered position and became Fallen. At my side, my other brother Karna, a Lord under the auspices of Kuulima, betrayed his duties; the

Lady of Flies punished his failings by making a reigning beast of him, that we name Doomlord.

Those who walk the Path of the Exiled are not completely lost. They are forgotten by their Gods, but can still be raised by our benevolent Father, he who is the Chaos of all things, if they can prove themselves worthy to him. It takes unfathomable acts of strength and will, but it can be done.

Durmukh himself is ascending again among the Exiled, becoming Forsworn. Karna, as a Doomlord, could yet be granted the same trial as any Chosen Lord. Yet just as the lost can rise, so they can fall further, becoming the greatest fear of us all, a monster of madness and fury, for which all hope is truly lost: a Wretched Beast.

Glory and punishment are sides of the same coin, as the Path of the Favoured and the Path of the Exiled. I pleased Sugulag by removing the head of the giant Bedawang and taking it as a trophy, sacking the fortress of Sindhu and its treasures, raiding the plain of Vetia and making the name of the Collector feared all across the land of the weak and poor called Sonnstahl. Now here I am. A Lord, soon to be tested with the blessing of Greed himself, the Treasure and Selfishness of Chaos, to become an Exalted Herald of our Father, his Golden Eye. This is the trial of all trials. Success means eternity. Failing means the nightmare of us all: the absolute existential mark of failure, the symbol of inhumanity itself, the Forsaken One.

—from the Litany of the Exalted, originally the Diary of Duryodhana. Stored in a cabinet behind the fresco seen in the opposing image in the legendary Ur-Temple of Sugulag near Pavitrastha





# EXALTED HERALD

## Atharsaga, part 1

**H**ear me! We of the Spear-Gjothar, in the days of yore, heard of the glory of those clan-kings who performed courageous deeds. Often Byrn, Borgar's son, seized lands and treasures from enemy hosts and terrorised the fearsome Svjarskar who did not show respect. He waxed in power and wealth, thriving in the honours of the gods, until unto him each of the bordering tribes had to submit and yield tribute - that was a good king!

No less worthy in those days was the mighty Athar, son of Athils, greatest jarl of the mountain Veskar. He came into great mastery of his many gifts and the many favours that the Lady of Flies bestowed upon him, and he cast down the mightiest of monsters from the Giant Peaks. Did not Athar prove his worth to the world entire?

With no little speed did these two champions of the great Goddess, the Leveller of All, rise in her approval. Lo, for they were chosen by her, and were made the foremost lords of mighty Åskland. And yea, mightily they achieved what all we noble Warriors who follow the Seven's path seek: power and dominion in the world, and true mastery of the self. What glorious exemplars are they!

Grim indeed was the power of Byrn, he who brought the terror of Audun, the mace of his ancestors, across the lands. And no less fearsome was Thord, the axe of Athar, that slew ten thou-

sand enemies. The great deeds of song pursuing, all the while each lord heard tales of the deeds of the other. Verily, the Lady's bile rose in their throats, as they strove to outdo their rival. They nurtured and cherished their deepest jealousies that pushed them ever to higher exploits.

And finally they turned to the mead hall of Grimar Valthjofsson, high king in Thrymland, he who sat in the splendour of the Great Hall of the Fjord. Athar and Byrn both turned all their will upon this hall, which no army had ever approached. They burned Thrymland to its roots, until there was no one left to defend its master.

Great was their dismay when they found they had reached the hall at the same time. But there was no time for challenges, for they had surpassed the admirations of the Goddess, and had been offered unto our Father, He who is all things and all eternity. A great trial was upon these two sons of Envy!

The Warriors filled Grimar's hall, the dead king's blood decorating the high table. Terrible was their chanting as Byrn and Athar left this plane, taken unto the testing of Chaos that knows no threshold, no mercy for the unworthy. The two lords of men left their bodies, which writhed and thrashed before the lookers-on in the center of the Fjord Hall.



Long did the lords endure the adversities of that land no mortal knows. Many hours were they seen to suffer the agonies of the trials! All at once the thing was ended, and the Byrnlings and Atharlings in the conquered hall were blinded with the power of the Veil rent, and deafened by the tumult of a thousand screams.

When they looked again they saw their lords had vanished. Noble Byrn was no more; some great power had cloven through the huge oak walls of the hall, leaving Warriors stricken in its wake. In the darkening forests beyond, a howling most hideous was heard.

When they looked back to the place of Athar, before them was neither sign of man nor beast, ex-

cept the sigil by his Ascension seared into the stone itself: that which signifies the alpha and omega of all things, the beginning and the end, the very symbol of the infinite: ∞

Praise be to Kuulima! Praise be to Athar, the Exalted Herald!

—Excerpt from the Atharsaga\*, a ten thousand line Gjotharic Epic in alliterative verse

\*The life of Athar is a contested topic among historians. Some question whether or not he really existed. The figure of Grimar Valthjofsson is generally agreed to be real, and it is known that Thrymland was devastated by northern raiders around the time of his rule.

## The Timeless Titans

*Hail to thee, Sol, Goddess of Heaven. She who grasps the sun and brings light to all the lands. Hail our beneficent lady, and the words that she has spoken.*

Spake the Goddess: In the beginning was the Void, and the Void was still.

Spake the Goddess: There was a great chasm of creation, and the Void was sundered.

Spake the Goddess: The two halves awoke and they gathered the Realms around themselves, the timeless titans, whose struggle spans the eons.

Spake the Goddess: Mother Cosmos was unwavering. She spun her cloak of laws and systems. An ordered Realm where men may live, and a fundament above - to inspire the divine.

Spake the Goddess: Father Chaos was ever-changing. He dwells in the tumult of purest entropy, unfathomable to mortals: that Realm they call Immortal.

Spake the Goddess: Ever does the Father lust for his lost love, and ever does she withdraw from

him, pulling her Veil to conceal herself, repairing it when it tears.

Spake the Goddess: Still does he pursue, and though he cannot cross, he sends suitors to test her resolve. Ever does the essence of the Father's chaos permeate the Veil, a force of limitless change that men call magic, so that the Mother might never forget his touch.

Spake the Goddess: Ever does the transcendent vitality in mortal hearts, that men call soul, return again to its second home in the Realm Immortal, where dwell the Gods and all the beings of that great land. Yet the Mother may allow those found worthy by their deities to return, lifting her Veil that they might rejoin her place of constancy.

*And men rejoiced at the wonders she spoke, our Lady of Sun, greatest goddess of our nation, and knew that it was so.*

—Inscription found in one of the oldest temples of Avras, long buried beneath the modern-day Great Sepulchre.



## The Wasteland

**Director Bao:** These are the facts. The Wasteland was born when the Inferno was unleashed. We know that in the immediate aftermath, a great tide of magic swept most of Northern Augea. We do not know why it flowed in that direction, but some say it was simply the angle at which the Infernal ziggurat was positioned.

What is sure is that thousands perished in a heartbeat, and many more were mutated or set upon by the legions of daemons that followed. We believe the great rent in the Veil lasted no more than a fraction of a moment before resealing under its own enormous energy. That was all it took for the raw essence of the Immortal Realm to spew across our world.

At the start, we think the Wasteland was somewhat larger. But magic cannot linger forever - it is a substance entirely alien to our world that will always return across the Veil over time. The Wasteland has slowly receded to its present size, still covering uncountable miles of once-fertile lands, from the Blasted Plain to the Sea of Storms.

All accounts describe the Wasteland as desolate. It is barren, arid and largely lifeless. Great grasslands and forests no longer support any vegetation at all. Nor can our kind enter this land without soon suffering debilitating sickness and a swift demise. Tales tell of men whose hair falls out in handfuls, whose skin peels away, who vomit blood, whose flesh withers on their bones. Some find their bodies twisting into horrific new shapes. There is also the matter of the so-called madness: victims hear voices and find their very will besieged.

It is true that some parts are more survivable than others, and since it is unclear exactly where the Wasteland begins, it is difficult to judge reports of those who claim to have penetrated a certain distance. As well as the degrading effects of the magic, there are also the dangers of great beasts such as dragons and chimeras, naturally attuned to magic, who dwell there - and, of course, the daemons.

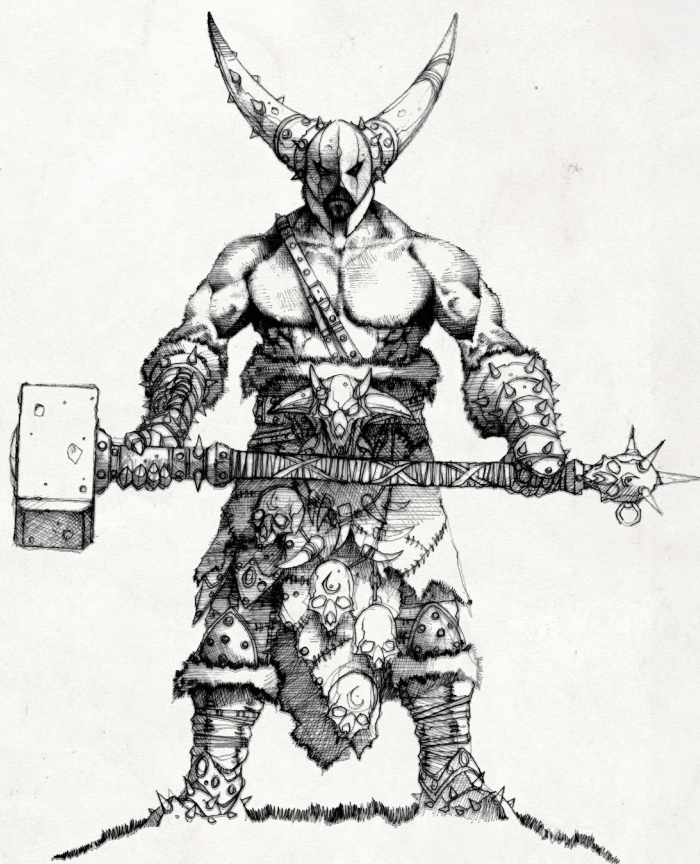
Here we come on less certain knowledge. We believe that the innermost parts of the Wasteland are so magically saturated that daemons can cross the Veil there at will, and remain for as long as they please, with all but inexhaustible supplies of the magical sustenance they require to exist in the Mortal Realm. We know that they sometimes treat and make pacts with the Warriors of the Dark Gods, who provide them steel that they forge into impossible armours.

Yet even the Warriors, granted supernatural fortitude by their dark masters, cannot remain long in the Wasteland, always returning to congregate around its edge.

**Emperor Haizu:** So you're saying I cannot lead my army across?

**Director Bao:** I humbly beg your forgiveness, my lord. It is impossible.

—Transcript of proceedings in the Court of Tsuandan, approximately 405 A.S.





# CHOSEN LORD

*Your Excellency,*

*It is with the most distressing and unspeakable news I write to you now, though I barely know how to pen the truth. I hear the court gossips that my wife has left with another man. That is a half truth; the full story is much worse.*

*A year has passed since our last significant encounter with the followers of the Dark Gods. In that time, the occasional band would arrive to trade or to worship at the temple and move on. The town remained secure and even prospered. I began to believe a bright future lay ahead, as you have so often counselled.*

*Yet Šiva grew increasingly dissatisfied with our station, as she nursed our young boy, so far removed from the comforts of Volskagrad. My own life was infinitely brighter since Lukas arrived, a son and heir, my heart fit to burst. But dark clouds gathered overhead with my wife's obvious displeasure. I promised I would do all I could to speed our return to high society, but my assurances did little to comfort her.*

*My own doubts returned with the arrival of a large contingent of Warriors. No mixed horde drawn from all seven Dark Gods this time (an exceptional occurrence by all accounts). This force flew banners bearing the symbol of Savar, and at their head strode a Lord of Pride bearing a golden crown. The*

*imperious expression with which he regarded Totváros reminded me of the visit of Count Lunin to my childhood home, and his disdain for "country nobles". As they arrived through our gates, treasures were unloaded for display and trade. Fresh from victory, they wore those spoils openly. As they told it, a daring raid on the foothills of the*

*Inferno itself had taken a contingent of Infernal Dwarves unawares. No mean feat, to surprise the followers of Nezibkesh in their zealous vigilance over that fiery pit. Central to those spoils was a skull of vast proportions, formed of brass and blackened stone, and with an aura of menace that left me relieved I had not faced the owner in life.*

*They were not sparing with the details, eager for the story to be heard far and wide. They had crossed the fringes of the Wasteland, following the coast of the Sea of Gods. Timing their movements with a sandstorm whipped up from the Blasted Plain, they crossed open ground at bewildering speed. Three times they fell upon Taurukh scouts, murdering without mercy, ensuring no warning reached the target of the raid.*

*Finally, emerging from the Wasteland like a wave of destruction, they fell upon the unsuspecting outpost, the alarm raised mere moments before battle was joined. Still, the Infernal Dwarves are no paltry foe. Within minutes, battle formations were assembled. Many of Savar's Warriors proudly bore the scars of that fierce battle.*



Thanks to their surprise and swiftness, the Warriors held the advantage - until the arrival of the one element capable of reversing the tide of battle, a Kadim Titan. I have never witnessed such a being, but the stories tell of forms constructed of steel, stone and fire, with an unholy intelligence, towering above all else.

Faced with such a threat, most forces would hesitate. I expected to hear of a tremendous effort to bring down the creature - magic and monsters clashing on the field, the Kadim brought low by the combined might of the army. What I did not expect was the story of a single man stepping forward to engage the beast.

I have known rulers in my time. I served under Tsar Oleg in my early days in the army. We met the Emperor himself all those years ago in Sonnstahl, and old General Charkov with his iron feet. Great men in their ways, and capable of significant bravery. Yet for a commander to needlessly champion their own cause in the midst of battle is a mystery to me - a risk bordering on madness. Such behaviour must earn equally momentous rewards to justify the dangers.

I heard fifty versions of the story that day, each a little more embellished than the last. The first tale ended with the Kadim cut down, its form crumbling in a cascade of bronze plates. The last spoke of a gauntlet driven into the Titan's chest, and a beating heart of fire pulled from the wound and held aloft. The one consistency was the singular triumph of Lord Ghul, and the blessings of Savar which would fall upon his efforts.

Far more concerning to me was the effect the dramatic story had upon the populace of Totváros, who could hardly avoid the tale had they wished to. For every nine individuals who heard the story and treated it with the wary respect it warranted, there was a tenth whose eyes grew bright at the prospect of receiving some portion of the might and respect they witnessed.

Seeing the insidious effect of these tales and treasures, I set the guards to stiffen the town's resolve and ensure no one left the gates without my permission. Meanwhile, I was able to isolate Lord Ghul by inviting him to dine. Perhaps it was the acknowledgement of his status, or the opportunity for his story to be heard by a dedicated audience, but that

evening saw an unlikely gathering. The chairs in our dining hall creaked beneath Ghul and his lieutenants, their pagan helmets forming a bizarre centrepiece on the table.

Ghul himself spoke no more than a handful of words, allowing others to extol his skill and strategy. The story was crisp, told from the perspective of those who witnessed it first-hand. Ghul surveyed the town dignitaries, yet once his eyes settled upon Šiva, they barely moved for the rest of the night. My knuckles cracked, feeling the strain of any man whose wife is so openly admired. It was not the first time Šiva had drawn stares, but this felt different.



At the conclusion of the story, Ghul smiled openly, glancing at me long enough to mockingly intone:

"I hope there will be some within this town with the courage to set aside comfort and make their own way."

That smirk, coupled with his stares, set my blood to boiling. He leaned back in the chair, legs spread wide, still caressing my wife with his eyes. Before I could respond, a guard called me out to deal with an urgent situation.



*In the streets, chaos reigned. A dozen men and women stood with Warriors by the gate, bearing what appeared to be their worldly possessions. Distraught families looked on from nearby, begging their loved ones to return. In those recruits I saw expressions ranging from apprehension to unmasked exhilaration, yet each had one thing in common - a determined set to their features. Their decision had been made, their feet set on a path, for good or for ill. Seeing this, and the clear potential for violence, I set myself to calming the families and moving them away from the town gates.*

*In the half hour it took me to settle the populace, my life changed forever. I retraced my steps, only to see Ghul stalking away through the gate. The Lord looked back at me, our eyes locked, and for a moment I felt the thrill of approaching combat. I felt no fear, only readiness for the moment. Then a wolfish grin split Ghul's face, a triumphant smirk that chilled my bones to the marrow - and he turned and left. Staring after him through the gates, I caught a glimpse of green in the distance, so like the dress my own Šiva had been wearing...*

*I sprinted to the manor house, heart pounding as I tore up the stairs, scattering serving staff and guardsmen. Our room was a mess of strewn clothing - Šiva's prized possessions were gone. Fearing*

*the worst, I burst into the nursery and fell to my knees. The crib was empty. Our son, my boy, my Lukas... he was gone.*

*I remember little of the next day. I know I was restrained by half a dozen of my men, held from the suicidal pursuit I would have begun then and there. Days later, once the grief and rage subsided, I did ride out, desperately seeking some trace. It was surprisingly hard to follow the trail - wind and rain had already washed most of it away. At every delay I ground my teeth, pushing on until my horse died under me at the edge of the Wasteland. There, feeling the faint sickness of that place on my shoulders, I fell to my knees and mourned, knowing my love had passed beyond me forever.*

*The journey back to Totváros took weeks of trudging, with only a dull sense of duty to drive me forward. I arrived back, weak and parched, to face the prospect of a future without Šiva and Lukas. I tell you this now, knowing that my shame is complete, and that no absolution will save my name. In truth, such considerations are far behind me. Only duty holds me to my course, and the vain hope to see my Šiva again.*

—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich





# CHOSEN

Anaba, Chosen of Cibaresh, knelt to pray. She was covered in blood and other effluvia from the night's pleasures. Dark bottles lay scattered, emptied of their nectar of the vine, fermented long years ago in a distant land they call Equitaine. The thick aroma of incense, oil and sweat swam within the teepee like smoke. Behind Anaba lay an elven maid, stripped of more than just her clothing, and unconscious from the exhaustion of their labours. I believe she was the daughter of Daeb landowners, lately succumbed to Anaba's unique charms.

"My pleasure is yours, yours is mine," intoned the Chosen One, staring down at the expressionless, but disturbingly alluring battlemask she held. The muscles of her mighty frame bunched, steam rising from her back. "We are one flesh, one passion. Oh great Tempter, work your fulfilment through me, let me bring eternal glory to your name."

I grinned, peeking through the tent's flap. I left Anaba to her private worship, turning to wander through the rest of the camp. I was enjoying my time with this warband. Those who had received the Favour of Lust took no half measures. Every night was a magnificent abomination of carnal delights.

The days were not always so memorable. We had come deep into the untamed heart of Silexia, far from the magics of the southern sea where followers of the Dark Gods were as common as rattlesnakes. However, here in the great plains, opportunities for violence and glory were hard to come by. Today was proving to be as uneventful as most. I watched as the Chosen strapped into their thick plates of armour and prepared to march under the pounding sun.

Very few words were spoken. They might know every inch of each other's bodies, but the Chosen

of Lust were even less sociable than most warbands I had known. Friendship has always been a sign of weakness for those on the Paths of Ascension. Clearly, this company knew the perils of intimacy better than most.

We went north. In my thin cloak, I was sweltering, but the Chosen in their steel cages marched as easily as mountain lions. We made camp again, and the cycle repeated. Long days of nothing. For me, the boredom was almost unbearable, but for those who have been Warriors, patience is the most deeply ingrained of assets.

Finally, the journey was broken by the sound of braying: a small warherd of man-beasts. I could tell the Chosen were transfixed by the sight of three giant minotaurs among them. Towering above the rest, these creatures would make for a mighty challenge, and their deaths could bring that which the members of this party craved beyond all else: glory.

The Chosen nearest me, a crazed brute called Pezi, was practically salivating. He punched himself in the jaw, and howled.

"For Cibaresh, my everything!"

He lead the charge. The camp was a long way off, but such was their yearning for this encounter that their headlong rush did not falter for a moment. I watched the beautiful carnage from the trees, fuelling their strength with what magics I could muster. The minions of Cibaresh were outnumbered, but they fought with insane zeal, lasciviously welcoming their lover-enemies into death's embrace. The smaller creatures didn't stand a chance. Pezi slew one of the minotaurs single-handed after taking its horn through his shoulder, bellowing his ascendancy even louder than the beast. Another was brought down by a group of hacking obscenities.

The third giant bull-bison was confronted by the determined form of Anaba. She had come far from her origins in the western Tanepe tribe. She faced the monster gladly, but the beast had seen too much. Anaba began to give chase as it fled into the woods, only to be arrested by a hand on her shoulder. Shiye, the Snake.

He was a saurian - if "he" is even the right term. Treating chaos as anathema, it is exceptionally rare for his kind to make the pact with a Dark God, let alone be Chosen. Shiye was the only one I have known to pledge himself to Cibaresh. He took to it with fervour, every movement of his reptilian body strangely sensuous and lithe. Now his forked tongue darted as he bade Anaba let her quarry escape. With half-intelligible hisses and clicks, he explained that if they let it live, they could track the beast's scent to find opportunity for yet greater glory.

Anaba seethed beneath her impassive iron mask. She threw down her axe in displeasure. Just last month, her sister Macha had attacked Shiye for his insolence. The Dark Gods do not always object to strife among their followers, but in this case, it was punished. Macha lost the favour of Cibaresh, the protection that kept her enormous strength contained, and she began to transform before their very eyes. She was forced out into the wilderness - weeks later she was spotted, a hulking monstrosity in the service of our Father. Abandoned by all she held dear, she was Forsworn. Had that memory not been so fresh, Anaba may well have made the same mistake.

Sadly, I left the warband before they could make good on the Snake's plan to track the minotaur. Their path diverged to the west, and I was continuing north in search of a fabled artefact.

Many moons later, I joined a much greater force

that was assaulting Yos Barbha - the largest settlement of Dathen west of the river Tietha.

Arriving in camp, I joined a group of Warriors around a fire as they discussed recent victories, particularly inspired by the legend of Lord Opaga, who had Ascended not long before. Each saw their own future in his triumph. Then I noticed the Chosen of Cibaresh. They had no fires, but my senses were besieged by the customary stench and moaning of their camp.

One among them did not partake in the regular debauchery. Anaba sat alone, on the very edge of the camp, staring into the darkness of the night.

"You do not relish the Ascension of Opaga," I stated, coming to her side.

"Pah," she spat, betraying a jealousy I was more accustomed to seeing in the followers of Kuulima. "A few paltry monsters. He will be forgotten, while my legend is sung eternal."

"Still, you do not indulge yourself tonight. And neither do you join the others in camp."

"Fresh-faced Warriors? I think not. They cannot conceive of true devotion." Here she showed the disdain of all Chosen for the lower echelons of the Path.

"Then tell me, Anaba, devotee of Lust: what ails you this night?"

"I am Chosen of Cibaresh, sorcerer. You who have made no pact do not speak to me with such impudence. If I am ailed, it is only for lack of the freedom to fulfil my destiny."

"Freedom, you say?"

"These worms hold me back," she said, gesturing to the other Chosen in their teepees, and to the camp in general. "I yearn to follow my path alone. And yet...still I have these limits."



As I had seen once before, she took the battle-mask she carried on her hip, and stared down into its unmoving iron eyes. I recognised her condition. She yearned to do great things, but she relied on others to achieve them. Those favoured by the Dark Gods are no fools. They know they cannot attack a fortress all by themselves. Death, after all, is just another form of failure. They require strength in numbers - the very thing that dilutes their glory. They loathe this contradiction.

Finally, she spoke again. "Tomorrow, we will meet with the miserable slaves who live in that city, thinking themselves masters, and permit them to continue their heathen existence in return for great tribute."

"Sounds like you have won a victory," I replied. "Yet you seem displeased."

"We will continue to reap the great wealth of the elves, adding to our future conquests and glory. It is ...to be desired."



"But you yearn to prove yourself in battle. The truce denies your indulgence in bloodshed."

She looked at me, darkly. "Those are your words, sorcerer."

"Indeed, I am just a sorcerer - one who makes no pact, follows no path, has no hope for immortal fame. But I am closer than any one of you to the Gods."

"Watch yourself..."

"Hear me. I was raised in the innermost isles of the Shattered Sea, where the Veil draws so thin one can almost taste the Immortal Realm. Every part of me is a creation of the Dark Ones. I am their creature, their instrument. You serve your one God for your own glory, I serve all eight directly."

"So they say."

"Believe it. Do not forget that our star has eight spokes, not seven. The tallest, that which points to Ascension, belongs to Father Chaos. You know him merely as the saviour of the Fallen, but truly he is lord of all things. Not just the pinnacle of our star but its heart and centre. Your Cibaresh and his siblings may have formed themselves around the great Sins of the mortals, but even they serve the designs of their Father. His plans underpin theirs, his keys open up the gates of the eternal. Conquest and tribute have a dull taste beside the sweet nectar of chaos, don't you think?"

Anaba stared at me. She was breathing heavily. "You speak in riddles, but I sense their truth. I have failed to cut out my weakness: my pathetic loneliness, my wretched self-doubt. I will not stumble a second time."

She fixed the mask over her face, and I smiled in the darkness.

The next morning, the forces of the Dread Elves were arrayed before their walls. Our battleline formed up in response, considerably more imposing than theirs.

Delegations moved forward to the centre of the field. I saw that the Snake, Shiye, had been selected to join the envoys. This whole plan

reeked of his scheming. But then the apprehensive silence was broken by a booming voice.

"Warriors of the Dark Gods!" it cried. I recognised the battlemask of Anaba and grinned. She had taken a position on a nearby boulder, brazenly addressing the entire army.

"We stand before a city rotten with mindless servitude. Built by a people who debase our gods-given freedoms. People who despise self-determination, with their rigid classes and slave-tilled fields. This nation is a stain on the land, which by rights belongs to the Seven, and to the Father. We will not treat with these insects. We will show them what it means to make an enemy of the Dark Gods. Let us raze this city, and plunder all the lands beyond!"

She held her axe aloft, and it seemed to blaze in the sunrise. With a final, resounding cry of "For Cibaresh!" she leapt from the rock and charged headlong towards the elves. A breathtaking sight: the lone woman, heedless of her peers, running straight at the ranks of the enemy.

I looked around. The Warriors were muttering. I heard a great battlecry to my right, where Pezi rushed out to follow her. The rest of the Chosen of Lust were not far behind.

The representatives at the negotiation were aghast.

"Stop! We are securing a mighty future, the very goods of indulgence! For the glory of us all!" cried Shiye, waving his claws at the onrushing troops. As ever, it was almost impossible to understand his hissing speech, and in any case it was much too late. The rest of the army was caught up in Anaba's infectious lust for war. The delegations had no choice but to separate as battle was joined.

I heard later that Anaba was killed early in the fighting, but by sundown, the elven host was broken, and Yos Barbha burned to the ground. Without any of the supplies they needed, our army broke up soon afterwards, and many Warriors perished that winter of starvation.

I soon forgot the whole matter. Many years have since passed. But it came back to me recently, when - passing near the former site of the elven city - I found a familiar battlemask half-buried in the dirt.

—Extract from an untitled tome, known to scholars as the "Dark Chronicle of the West". The manuscript was found in an abandoned camp in the new world by Arcalean explorers and sold to the Imperial Society of Eichthal. The original text is written in Daghid.





# CHOSEN KNIGHTS

Today, I went to purchase materials for a suit of armour, commissioned by the Sultan. I tracked down the trader known to sell the finest steel: a small, hairless man with haunted eyes, called Fareed. But he had nothing to give me.

His latest shipment had returned empty. Initially, he refused to say more to a woman, but when I showed him the seal of the Sultan, he grudgingly loosened his lips. His steel is imported from Tsuandan, explaining its exceptional quality, and he personally transports it by ship. On his latest voyage, he had arrived at his usual supplier in the north of the country, only to find the town in an uproar.

There was an encampment of ogres outside the gates - not an invading army, but refugees. They represented several tribes of Khadamekai ogres: nomadic peoples of the grasslands, very unlike the mountain mercenaries Fareed claimed to have dealt with in the past.

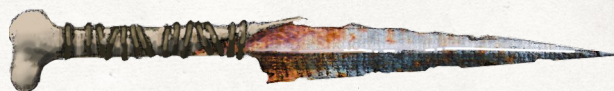
They had suffered terrible losses at the hands of Warriors of the Dark Gods, and had made an alliance with the Tsuandanese. Ogres can, after all, be reasoned with, while the Dark Gods bring nothing but destruction. They are the greatest fear of the eastern empire.

Fareed attempted to secure his steel and leave before the situation could deteriorate. But he was not fast enough. Soon the brutal minions of the Dark Gods were upon the city - and these were no mere Warriors. It was a band of Chosen, led by knights riding gigantic battle-beasts. The ogres fell back in terror, with shrieks of "Karkadan!" - a creature I previously believed a myth.

These mounts were as varied as they were enormous. The stories tell how the Chosen endure great trials to find and tame them, forging the closest of living bonds. Clearly, mastery of

such a beast would be beyond any lesser warrior. Tales of their savagery and sheer weight of armour are told across the continents. Moreover, Fareed claimed there were other ridden monsters among their ranks - huge boar-creatures of the Steppe, ferocious mountain lions and more.

But the danger to Fareed lay not only in the unstoppable karkadan and other brutes; the riders displayed their own terrifying power. He said there were not just men, but man-beasts, dwarves and even orcs.



Their leader was a giant ogre, whom the Khadamekai held in terror. This monster had been seduced by the promises of Savar. He had once been a fellow tribesman, outcast after failing to respect their traditions and spiritual beliefs. He had sought personal power - no rare thing for a khan on the Steppe - but he had failed to win his kinsmen's admiration. Now he had returned, vastly empowered, seeking a new form of glory.

Yet Fareed said the ogres were most fortunate that day - the Chosen knights had not come for them, but for the same purpose as Fareed himself: steel. They plundered the material from the town's famed metalsmiths, and commanded more to be produced for their return, or the entire settlement would burn.

Fareed's business has suffered terribly because of these events on the other side of the world, but he was more than happy to have escaped with his life. Meanwhile, I will have to procure the materials for the Sultan's armour from another source.

—Diary of Zuhra el-Habeeb, councillor and attendant to Sultan Taaj Abdullah





# CHARIOTS

*The goat-herders erected a pitiful defence. They ranked between the river and the houses, thinking to deny us room to manoeuvre. Fools!*

*We cried out, competing with one another and with our beasts. Dust filled the air. For a moment, we lost sight of our quarry.*

*Then we hit them. Bones crunched under hooves and wheels. Blades tore through armour and flesh. They ran and we rode them down without mercy. Their pathetic leader fled on a boat, surrounded by his cowardly colluders. We slew ten thousand weaklings in the city, and set loose six thousand slaves. It was a good day for the glory of Kupash.*

This text was found by Karl Meisner of the Imperial Society on fragments of pottery in the deserts

of Taphria. He theorised, and I concur, that it was written by the enemies of Naptesh about the Battle of Tarkaphut, which, according to our best estimate, occurred at the very height of Naptan power, long before the curse. The Naptan account of said battle gives further perspective.



*The mighty forces of His Majesty barred the approach to the city. With the walls unfinished, it was imperative that we stopped the raiders there. Three lines of infantry and two loose blocks of archers formed the bulk of our forces, with a single force of chariots to corral the incoming foes.*



*The first sign of the enemy was a gentle rumble that steadily grew louder until we could see the dust clouds rising on the horizon. Copper flashed through the dust. We had no idea what was concealed within.*

*We assumed that the bands of raiders we'd been chasing were small and would not risk a pitched battle. We thought they'd turn aside when they saw our numbers. They did not.*

*They rushed toward us without hesitation, bellowing their incomprehensible savagery.*

*We launched our own chariots towards them, but their foul magics turned away the finest steeds of His Majesty's horse trainers.*

*We loosed arrows, but their dark ambitions drove them to close the distance between us faster than we could have anticipated. There was scarcely time for a single volley before they were upon us. The front rank braced to intercept the charge, but it was not hit by horses.*

*They were something altogether more ferocious. Crazy beasts from the darkest pit of the underworld, pulling chariots twice the size of our own.*

*Our armies stood strong as they were decimated.*

*I ordered a fighting retreat, aiding His Grace in his courageous evacuation of the city.*

*It was only when the rest of the raiders rushed into battle that we understood the cursed name upon their lips. Kupash.*

*I give thanks that the blood of the King's loyal warriors stains the sands, honouring the gods. They will fight this evil in the Realm Eternal. It is a glorious day for Naptesh.*

The name Kupash inspires much fear in the Naptan people, and much discussion has followed about who or what that is. From the descriptions I have found across multiple sources, I feel it is unlikely to be anything but the Naptaan name for ~~the~~\* That such heretics should have been operating before Naptesh succumbed to the desert is a horrifying prospect indeed.

—Erika Leitzke, Ullsberg Imperial Academy,  
“On Worshippers of Darkness”.

\*Sensitive material redacted for external viewing by order of the Chancellor.





# WARRIORS

*Your Excellency,*

*It has been some time since we last spoke. A year in Totváros has elapsed, with one day leaching into another. I have fulfilled the charges of my office, yet the months have passed in a fugue, and the drive I once possessed has vanished along with my beloved Šiva.*

*You will no doubt have heard the reports from the border - a warband passed this way some two weeks past, heading for Volskaya. I duly sent word to both the border forts and the capital. I imagined my part was done, but my men were hungry for action, and I too felt the call to ride out.*

*So we shadowed the band's progress towards the border. No great army led by a noted Lord this; the Warriors here bore few of the scars and behaviours I had come to expect. Yet they wore the same brutal armour no smith of my acquaintance could produce: heavy layered plates of steel, like dark insect carapaces, adorned with spikes and cruel weaponry.*

*These Warriors displayed all manner of icons, but they were not segregated by Dark God. Instead, a mixed group marched together, with five of the seven represented. At their head strode a woman, whose face I could not make out, her hair streaming behind her, her helm carried nonchalantly by her side, bearing the telltale marks of Savar.*

*They marched without regimented discipline, yet with a common purpose. The heft of their weapons and the alertness with which they surveyed the surrounding landscape left little doubt of their preparation. I am sure they saw us, but we were either too far to present a tempting target, or simply beneath their concern.*

*After most of a day's travel, we neared the object of their expedition - Fort Duvica, at the edge of Volskaya herself, guarding a narrow passage through*

*the surrounding marshland. My messages must have arrived; the guard was out in force, arrayed upon the ramparts. Our men looked imposing, uniformed and well-armed, banners flapping in the breeze. Horns sounded clear in the dusk, and torches sprang up along wall.*

*Not a moment was wasted launching the attack, nor any fear shown of the defenders, despite being outnumbered almost three to one, and attacking a defended position. The fighting, once begun, was a bloody affair. The Warriors formed battle lines, yet they seemed little concerned with the support of their fellows, fending off arrows which rained from above onto their heavy shields. Each one pressed forward, determined to wade in, to have their skill speak for them. Each time a Warrior fell, they were left where they lay. No heed was paid to the dying or the wounded; it seemed those who could not hold their own had little place among such hardened fighters.*



*Yet for all their apparent unconcern, there was a flicker of emotion when one of their brethren fell. Looking through the spyglass, a treasured gift from you I still hold dear, the expression was so brief I believed it imagined at first. But it was repeated over and again - a flash of horror, a glimmer of dread at the prospect of life snuffed out. I cannot say I understand it, when nothing else seemed to perturb them - neither our numbers nor the standards of veteran regiments. Yet I am certain they feared death, if not in the same way as other mortals.*

*So long as their enemy fell in greater numbers, the fight continued. Our lines wavered in places,*

threatening to fail. My own contingent was small, but the Warriors were fully engaged and my men itched to take the fight to them. Perhaps our charge might have swung the battle. I hesitated - something half glimpsed through the spyglass held my command. I swept my eye back and forth until I saw her... The woman, helm still discarded as though she scorned the foe, stood atop a mound of bodies, her sword flashing in the torchlight. And it was my Šiva. Hair no longer cropped close, scars across her face and a hardness in her eyes I had not seen before. Yet there could be no doubt: my wife lived. Seconds stretched into minutes as I stared at her, and the defenders died in droves while my men begged me to join the fray.

My reverie was broken from an unexpected direction. North, from along the border, horns sounded and hooves thundered. A contingent of Hussars, winged helms visible in the gloom and lances levelled, hit the Warriors in the flank, driving them

from the wall. The troops rallied and pressed the advantage. Within moments, the tide had turned.

Warriors fell in droves as the Hussars struck home, and the sight of so many of their allies struck down, or perhaps the risk to themselves, broke the Warriors' resolve.

The Hussars gave chase only for a short distance. With the light failing, the risk of ambush was too great, and the recall was sounded. I sighed with relief, and while I heard similar sentiments from my men, their reasons were not my own. They celebrated our triumph and the survival of the outpost, while my own thoughts turned to the flowing hair disappearing into the dark, one last glimpse of my Šiva, the Warrior of the Dark Gods. I despaired to have seen her in such dire company, and my heart ached at the thought of her soul in danger, yet I maintained a foolish, naive hope that I might still save her.

—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich





# WARRIOR KNIGHTS

I was staying at an inn on the road to Narrenwald, and was about to turn in for the evening, when I felt a cold wind, and the chatter of the patrons fell quiet. Two men in dark uniforms appeared at the door, framed by a full moon in the winter sky. Inquisitors.

The pair approached the bar in disdainful silence, where the maid tried to still her shaking hands.

"Traveller. Name of Pepin," grunted one of the officers. I thought my heart had stopped when I heard my own name. My horror only grew as I watched the poor, quivering barmaid immediately betray me with a movement of her eyes.

The nearest Inquisitor smiled slowly. Only now I realised she was a woman, though she dwarfed my frame by at least six inches. She leaned back and took a step towards me. Suddenly another body interposed itself between us.

"Woah there, officer. What seems to be the problem here?" It was a large, gruff gentleman who had been nursing a solitary pint at a nearby table. I had barely noticed him until now.

"This man was spotted crossing the border from Zagvodz," said the woman, scowling testily. "He's wanted for questioning."

"What were you doing in Zagvodz, friend?" said my unexpected rescuer, calmly, never taking his eyes off the inquisitor.

"A pilgrimage," I stammered. "I was visiting the ruined Abbey of Kolk." As my readers know, this was Sunna's truth, but it did not seem to appease the Inquisition.

"That abbey was desanctified on the orders of the Supreme Prelate. The pilgrimage was discontinued."

"Nevertheless, it holds immense historical interest. I am not just a pilgrim but a traveller and chronicler. See, this is my journal."

She inspected it like a dead rat found in the privy.

"Perhaps you have heard of me? For a penny I'll tell you a story to make you laugh or cr-"

"There we are then," interrupted my new friend, like it was all settled. "Nothing wrong with travelling. You can rest assured this fine gentlemen is no threat to the good of the people."

The officers exchanged glances, glared at the speaker, and left, slamming the door behind them. The whole room seemed to exhale.

"You must let me buy you a pint, my friend. I could have been on my way to a cold cell or worse if it weren't for you. My name is Samuel."

"Tobias," said the man, accepting my handshake and the drink. "And it would have been much worse than an empty cell."

"You have some experience with the Inquisition, then."

"You could say that," he replied, and pulled down his shirt to bear his shoulder. It was hideously scarred by burns.

"I do not mean to pry, but like I said, I am a collector of stories. I would be most honoured if you could tell me yours."

He regarded me a few moments and then snorted with a faint laugh. "It ain't pretty. Used to be a smuggler, once upon a time, running a small ship up near Alfhaven. That's where I got nabbed by the dread corsairs. From the stories they tell, I was one of the lucky ones - never got taken back to Dathen. Did three months working ships up and down the Sea of Storms. That's when we got

caught up with the Dark Gods, and the Inquisition took an interest."

He took another swig. He could tell from my pleading eyes that he couldn't stop there.

"We were camped on the shore one day, loading and unloading, when we saw them coming. Just five of them. Horsemen, or so we thought. But these weren't any regular riders. They came on slowly-like, at a trot. We started to see they were big fellas, huge great armour with triangles engraved on it, only their heads exposed, face and hair white as frost, pitch black eyes – I knew then that this was something worse even than the slavemasters. There were at least two dozen elves, and they formed ranks.

"Finally, when they were only as far away as the length of this room, the riders broke into a charge. The elves were confident – even for cavalry, five guys can't take on twenty-five, that's what anyone would have thought. The line broke apart like an eggshell. These guys, they had to be knights, their expressions didn't change as they set about killing. The elves couldn't touch them through the armour - one of them did get knocked off her horse by a lucky halberd, but even then it took at least five of them to bring her down. Volund preserve me."

"So they took you then, the remaining knights? Did they work you or sell you?" I asked eagerly, failing to notice the harrowed expression and glazed eyes. For a long time, he seemed to stare at nothing.

"Didn't take us. Didn't even look at us. When they'd done fighting, they slowly gathered up the bodies and carefully carved out the eyeballs from each one. I couldn't look. Me and the other slaves were white with terror. But they didn't want us. I reckon they thought it was

beneath them, fighting unarmed slaves. The Dark Gods only take those who consent of their own free will. They took all the eyes and set them in a little pyramid on a rock. They sat next to it for the rest of the day, kneeling like they were praying, still as godsdamned statues. Finally we realised we were free to go. We didn't know how to steer the ship without the Daeb, so we started walking west, leaving them to pray. Eventually we reached the beacons, and you can imagine they had a few questions for us, still with elf blood splattered all over. Got reported to the Inquisition straight away. The worst of the whole ordeal came when we were back in dear old Sonnstahl."

He drained his glass, and looked at me. "But that's a story for another time, friend," he said. "May Sunna protect you from her own servants. Goodnight." And with that, he walked out into the night.

—From the Diary of Samuel le Pepin,  
professional pilgrim and storyteller



# DOOMLORD

...and the night was as still and as cold as stone. Nothing stirred in the bleak, petrified forest. Nothing lived. Nothing moved. Fear clung to me like an unwelcome embrace. I saw nothing, heard nothing except the steam of my breath and the unrelenting chattering of my teeth. After losing my retinue in that terrible skirmish and fleeing for all I held dear, I was completely lost in the middle of a forsaken land, with no food, no shelter, no salvation.

I saw a distant light through the husky trees and knew it to be fire. Its warmth spoke sweet poetry to me. Slowly, carefully, I neared the source. It was not far away and I quickly advanced upon it. Trees had been ripped up to create a clearing, and in the clearing was a fire. The flames threw shadows and dark images across a frosty ground, where ice crystals caught and refracted the light, creating a dance of red and black. I stopped, clinging to the shadows in the treeline. I had seen the clearing's occupant.

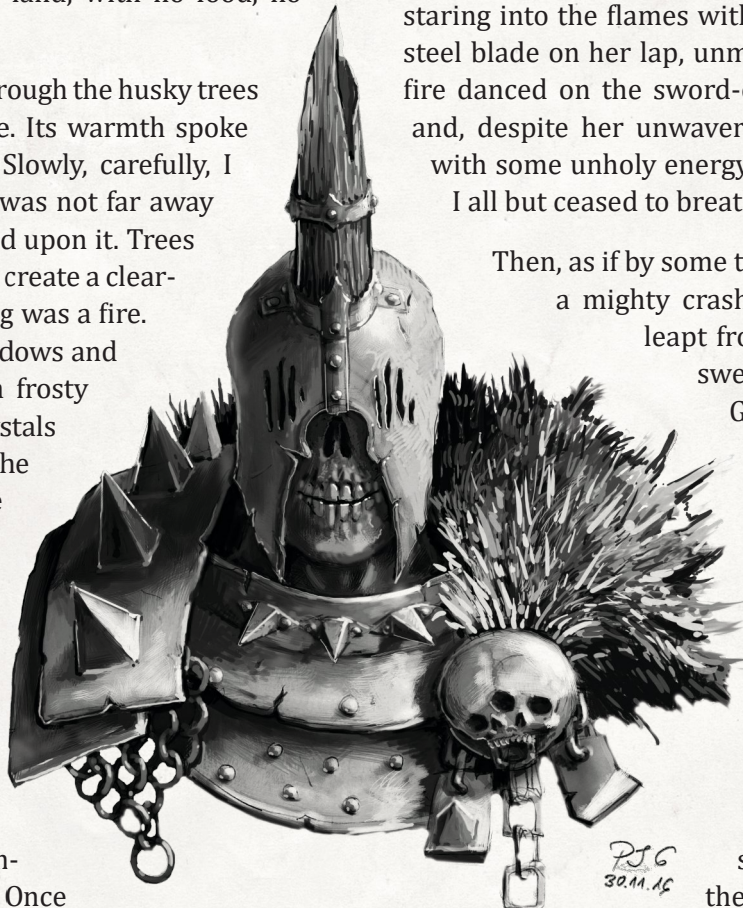
Sitting on a log, with the fire between us, was an immense humanoid. Once she might have been beautiful. Long dark hair fell over a strong face, with eternal green eyes. But her frame had wandered from the path of human. Her disfigured body was covered in an ill-fitting patchwork of old and rusty armour, parts of which had fused to her form, with great, misshapen sinews and an excessive number of rangy limbs. Her clothes, once

fine, were torn to shreds and marked by dark stains. She was covered in broken ornaments, gems, and old signs of forgotten power. Some reminded me of the sigils of Cibaresh, a name I would not have admitted knowing in normal circumstances, but these were broken and cracked, long left unattended.

She sat as quiet as the moon above our heads, staring into the flames with an enormous black-steel blade on her lap, unmoving and alone. The fire danced on the sword-edge and in her eyes and, despite her unwavering form, she pulsed with some unholy energy. She was fascinating. I all but ceased to breathe.

Then, as if by some twist of fate, there was a mighty crash beside me. I nearly leapt from my hiding place. I swear it was the largest Gortach ever spawned. Tall as the trees around us, it bore horns sharp as scythes and an axe that could split a ship in two. Seeing the monstrous half-woman, it roared a ferocious challenge, spraying spittle that hissed in the fire.

In response, she merely looked to the heavens and whispered what may have been a prayer. I recognised the word for "father". Then, without warning, she launched like a cannonball at the beast. Her savagery was awe-inspiring, as she rushed forth with her black sword and her many limbs, teeth, and claws. Before the Gortach



could so much as swing its axe, she had landed a series of blows that could have dislodged mountains. Without uttering another sound, the beast collapsed, lifeless.

She stared at her kill, then looked skywards once more. I followed her gaze, but when I looked back it seemed as if she was staring directly at me. It must have been a trick of the light, for she continued to ignore my presence. She dragged the carcass to the fire, as if it was as light as a quill. The

sickly sweet smell of roasting flesh soon filled the woods, followed by a deep crunch as she tore open the rib cage to pry out an enormous steaming heart. With the blood of her victim, she traced a figure of eight, sideways, over her own heart and became calm once more. I think of this moment every...

—Ripped page from the novel “My Escape from Death’s Clutches” by Igor Demark.



# FORSWORN

Your Excellency,

It is my regret to inform you that Prelate Grassl, the missionary from Sonnstahl, has perished along with all his followers. The circumstances are regrettable, not least as they were easily averted. From the moment he arrived, the Prelate seemed determined to ignore all advice that was offered to him.

After his entry to Totváros, I instructed Grassl on the particulars of life around the Wasteland - both those details taught to us from our first days in service to Volskaya, but also the hard lessons I had learned in my time as town commander. Upon explaining that barbarian settlements a day's ride beyond the town kept the Dark Gods among their pantheon, his incredulity was tangible. He resolved to set out and convert those heathens who dared to bring the Dark Gods so close to civilised folk.

I told him such an action was folly and warned him of the dangers that awaited should Warriors come across his party. I even threatened that the gates would be barred to him, if he returned bringing retribution for his actions.



None of this dissuaded the young man, brimming with the fire of faith and the ignorance of youth. The following day, he strode through the gates, leading his band of two dozen flagellants. Those, at least, were an imposing sight: hard eyed men and women, showing no fear, no doubt. Their loyalty was unwavering, and I felt perhaps they might see the fool back safely after all, despite his scoffing at the prospect of any Warriors within mere miles.

For a night and a day, I watched the desolate lands to the east, waiting for some glimpse of the Prelate's return. Instead, there came a single figure

staggering along the path. Upon entering the gates he sought me out, one dead eye looking past me, the other fixed with an unnatural intensity.

"Yer man won't make it back - he has brought death upon all who stand with him. The Forsworn are abroad." The words confirmed my suspicions of Grassl's fate, yet raised other questions.

"The Forsworn? Explain yourself, old man!"

His wheezed response began to unpick much of the tangled logic of the Wasteland.



"There are those who rise, and those who fall, but the Fallen may rise again with a new master. The Forsworn have spit in the eye of fate, and now they climb above the exiled masses. Warriors may sneer behind their back, but the Father gives power to those with the might to take it. Even now they draw near, and woe unto any who stand 'tween them and their prey."

With reddish light turning the land into a blood-coloured plain, a torch came into view in the distance, topping a rise and moving quickly. Through the eyeglass, the returning flagellants gave the impression of being harried, glances cast in every direction. Grassl himself was nervously loping at the head of the group. The source of their consternation soon became apparent - large shapes loomed behind them, gaining. Looking to my side, I began to ask if these were the Forsworn, but the rampart was empty, the old man gone.



Turning back, I studied the pursuing creatures. At first I took them for trolls, but no trolls ever bore such marks on their flesh or armour suited to their huge forms. The glyphs of the Dark Gods were visible, but faded and worn, overwritten with that symbol of the infinite. Nor did a troll ever move with such purpose and determination.

Eventually, the flagellants recognised that they would be overhauled, and turned to face. They were an imposing sight, these fervent disciples who have laid the greatest knights and monsters low, and would die to the last before turning from their duty. I held any call for the guard, knowing this matter would be decided long before we could reach them. Their fate was in their goddess' hands.

In truth, there was little doubt of the outcome. Whatever those creatures had discarded, whatever protections they lacked to have undergone such drastic transformation, their potency was extraordinary. Their forms swelled under the armour once sculpted to their bodies - flesh, muscles and scales protruding from between plates. Other Warriors pay lip service to Father Chaos; this was the first I had witnessed of a true power to the name.

The flagellants fought with brutal zeal. They sold their lives hard and brought down four of the attackers before they were crushed underfoot. As the last of his protectors were cut down, the Prelate's nerve broke and he turned and ran for the sanctuary of the town. For a moment, I thought he might escape the notice of the Forsworn, but Sunna's fortune did not spare him that day. He was felled well short of the town gates, his last moments shielded from view behind a small ridge.

Whatever dislike I felt for the man, and however much he brought his fate upon himself, no man deserves a death like that. His screams rang out for longer than I imagined possible, long enough to persuade me that his foe was truly to be feared. All that could be done was to gather the bodies the day after, or whatever was left, and set a funeral pyre. I am sorry to say that I am not certain which parts were Grassl. Perhaps peace does await him on the far side, but it will take some time for my own peace to return.

—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich



# FALLEN

Zoran,

I yearn to feel your hands upon me daily,  
taste passion on your tongue and on your lips,  
to feel you wrap your arms around my hips,  
descend into the nights denied us lately,  
But rather than permit us to dance gaily,  
our captors think us actors in their scripts,  
and seek to have our affection eclipsed,  
by suitors dragged before us, prancing palely.  
Beasts like us cannot be yoked forever,  
no matter what our fathers have to say.  
Let us stride forth, leave their caged ways.  
Race together and their fetters sever.

Verena,

My dear, you know well my father's ire  
would rise to hitherto unseen excess  
if he should have a single cause to guess  
I planned absconding with my heart's desire.  
But truly I cannot deny this fervent fire,  
that flares so fiercely deep inside my chest,  
Each day I fear his wrath ever less.  
Without you this flame surely is my pyre.  
I therefore release myself from tethers,  
wrought upon me by familial servitude,  
deliver myself freely unto you.  
I'll stand by you in every kind of weather.

Zoran,

When so long ago we fled united,  
your cowardice seemed unlikely indeed.  
I should have seen it kindling in the seed  
of your obedience, so unrequited  
You never sought to get yourself benighted,  
as befits a woman of my forceful breed.  
Now you splutter, splinter and you plead,  
Through a mouth the gods have justly blighted.  
Akaan rejects you, and thus so do I.  
Though Father Chaos has a place for you,  
show those cloven feet to me anew,  
I'll gift them from your legs unto the sky!

Verena,

Your eyes no longer show affection  
I can no longer form the words of song  
I barely grasp this quill, yet long  
You know me true, and lift rejection  
I fell from you and Akaan both  
Pain and loss are born aloft  
The embrace of Father Chaos is not soft  
But hope it was, last chance for growth  
Fallen walk together, all others' bane  
Following you for glory reflected  
Though banishment keeps us here rejected  
We hurl ourselves to battle, to rise again

Series of letters found on a twisted creature after a battle against raiders near Ullsberg.  
The last was written and rewritten many times over.



W

# WRETCHED BEASTS

*Your Excellency,*

*It has been years since the attack upon the border fort and my last sighting of Šiva. From that moment, I have imagined what I will say to her on the day we meet, for I never doubted we would meet again. Over and over I enacted the scene in my mind, lambasting her for turning from Volskaya, deserting her duty, abandoning me and destroying our family. The reality was very different.*

*One crisp autumn morning, a warband advanced upon the town and entered through the gates. The Fabled Hoard was led by a Lord of Sugulag, and his battle standard was encrusted with enough gold and gems to shame a dwarf. Yet my eye was drawn by the sight I had longed for – and feared.*

*At the head of a smaller cadre of Warriors of Pride, all garbed in shining armour and sporting deep blue cloaks, strode Šiva. Her helm was borne by a retainer, and her hair fell in waves to her shoulder. A new scar crossed one eye, yet somehow she seemed more radiant than ever. While I stared, she barely flickered an eye in my direction, busying herself with her fellows. They turned to trading or sharing tales, but holding themselves apart even from the other Warriors.*

*I glimpsed my former wife several times that day, while ensuring none of the townsfolk ran afoul of the Warriors. I was shocked by changes I saw in her. The slender woman I knew was now encased in armour she bore easily. Among her comrades she had appeared unremarkable in stature, but beside the townsfolk, I realised she now matched me in height, when once her head had nestled against my chest. Her shoulders were broader than mine, and I had little doubt she was the stronger of us now.*

*Only once night had fallen could I catch my breath and take my customary place upon the walls.*

*There I found her, mere yards away, looking out over the parapet and seeming to ignore my arrival. We stood for a long while, silence stretching out like an eternity, until at long last she said my name. "Ilarion" - one word, spoken grudgingly, as though I had won some challenge. I had not expected to hear my name from those lips again, and it fell on my ears like rain on drought-stricken land.*

*A tumult of emotions roiled inside me, until I could master myself to ask the question which had burned on my mind for so long: why had she left? Her voice grew wintry as she answered, her bearing regal.*



*"This life is not enough. This existence of small desires and petty ambitions. Was I to be a mere wife, to bask in the glow of whatever glory you might scavenge among the scraps handed down from Volskagrad? You may have been a good husband and a good man, but I refuse to leave my fate in the hands of you or anyone else."*

*I digested this for a time before croaking out my second burning question:*

*"Our son?"*

*The reply was delivered just as coldly.*

*"He is gone."*

*A sob wracked my body, escaping through gritted teeth. With that, I saw her turn to me with a look of profound disgust as she regarded my weakness.*

Grief had become an alien concept to her, and I was just one more pathetic worm.

My torture was ended by the sounds of heavy shuffling from the foot of the wall. In the darkness, something had approached the walls - more than one! Seizing a nearby torch, I peered down into the gloom. Three dark, hulking shapes shambled beneath me. Reflected in the flame's light, I made out the glow of eyes... too many eyes, and with no discernable symmetry. Recoiling, I could not help but exclaim: "What in all the Hells are those?"

Beside me came the response, a quiet whisper, and what had been disgust was replaced with revulsion mixed with fear: "Wretched Beasts."

Surely such creatures, despite their enormous size, could hold no fear for Šiva now? I reached for a crossbow, but felt her hand on my arm.

"No. Their fate was sealed by their own actions. Whatever has been done to them, their failure brought it upon themselves. They have failed, and failed again - even the Father will not have them. Now they suffer, and death must be earned." I realised then how far my Šiva had travelled: weakness and failure touched her in a way the death of our boy did not. In that moment, I finally gave her up for lost. Yet part of me still wanted to prove my worth to this imperious woman who looked so much like my wife.

Sheer bravado drove my actions. Vaulting the wall, torch in hand, I landed ten feet below in soft ground. Only then was I confronted by the true horror of these fiends. One resembled an outsized humanoid, with limbs bulging and vomit oozing from its jaws. The others were even stranger, flesh warped into impossible shapes, too many limbs or too few. The closest moaned, a haunt-

ing sound drawn from a misshapen throat, and I saw despair in one human eye in the creature's chest.

Then I was swinging the torch, screaming in fury, and drawing other guards to the walls. I think the fire did most to drive them off. There was no open show of fear, nor did they seem in any rush to depart, yet move they did, and I could breathe once more. Whatever they were, I pray I will never again stand so close to madness given flesh.

Looking back over my shoulder, I caught one last glimpse of Šiva as she turned from the wall, and I thought I could see a weighing look in her eyes. Yet the delirium had passed, and I recognised that the wife I had loved was gone. No heroics can bring her back to me.

—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich



# FORSAKEN ONE

## Atharsaga, part 39

In those days, the Byrnlings in the halls of the Gjothar were set upon by Fairies from the West. In colossal wooden creatures they rode, over the endless ocean, bringing terrible magics and merciless slaughter to we who are strong in the Seven.

Great was the host that assembled to oppose the hated Elflings: stout its Warriors and fearsome in faith. The Gjothar assembled, mighty chosen all, and went to meet the cursed enemy before the eyes of the gods.

In black of night it came upon the Byrnlings' camp: the savage monster. Not one maw but three it gnashed, razor-full, thick with foam and

lolling tongue. Grotesque and huge its muscled bulk, many the misshapen spines that sprung across its heinous crimson frame. Huge wings it beat, black as night, and tail whipped, and claws it slashed like a wall of spears.

The Gjothar were in disarray; the beast was upon them with no thought of mercy. Many were the noble thanes that died that blackest night. Then did Skjolda Oddløgdotir, she who had been raised up in the enchanted waste where men cannot enter, cry unto our Lady of Flies:

"None can challenge the might of the Byrnlings! We call one now to show this creature the meaning of strength!" And, with these words, cut the throat of her royal Faerie prisoner.



No servant of the Goddess came then into Åskland. This was a Warrior reborn, shieldbearer now to none but the Great Father alone. A vision of power pure, and strength unchallenged: the mighty Athar had come! Herald Exalted, Lord of the Greater Realm - come to tame his rival of yore and the true nature of Chaos show. For verily the monster was Byrn, Trial-failer, who held new wretched, bestly form: the mindless Forsaken.

With a single blow did Athar the Ascended bring the brute to heel. And with it beside him, he set upon the Elfen cohorts, laying their greatest champions low - and the Gjothar went with them

to battle noble. Red was the daybreak and terrible the cries of the Fairies stricken when the sun warmed Åskland that morn. And then did Athar return once more to the side of his Lord, to rule eternal in the Realm Beyond. Praise the Father who watches over us!

Praise be to Kuulima! All praise to the Goddess!

—Excerpt from the Atharsaga



# SORCERER

*Your Excellency,*

*It was fourteen years yesterday since that fateful night, and the loss of my wife and child. I have encountered her a handful of times; with each she moves a little further from the woman I knew, and rises higher among the Warriors. As she grows more distant, I find myself colder, as memories fade but the crib in my halls remains empty.*

*Our most recent encounter still gives me pause though. Not for Šiva herself, but rather for another who accompanied her to Totváros. She now leads her own warband, the Gloried Talons, accompanied by dozens of Warriors and a large contingent of barbarians from nearby settlements. Yet for all those new arrivals, it was one man who created the most disruption.*

*I saw him amongst their number, striding with all the arrogance I expected from my wife's compatriots. Yet he bore no markings of Savar, nor any of the Seven. Instead, he wore a flowing black robe adorned with white symbols. Each looked wrought with power, as though they swam above the cloth, like snow against a night sky. The only one I could distinguish was the sign of the infinite, the icon of their Father Chaos.*

*His attire was not his most striking quality. His skin had a bluish hue I have never seen on a living man. His fingers ended in sharp black claws. I couldn't guess his age: his youthful complexion conflicted with the air of a veteran. His eyes were golden, glinting in the light of the sun. Yet most ar-*

*resting were the three horns protruding from his head. What might have seemed a parody of an ungulate produced in him an otherworldly majesty.*

*After the Talons departed Totváros, he remained, taking up residence in the temple. Each day he extolled the benefits of following the Dark Gods, of swearing one's soul for power and a chance of immortality. I had thought the townsfolk mostly inured to such sermons, but the handful who congregated on the first day grew steadily, until a week had passed and a crowd of two hundred gathered to listen.*

*That evening found me upon the walls in my customary place, elbows resting on the parapet, lost in thought. It is rare that I am caught off guard, but a high pitched laugh from behind made me start. The object of my contemplation stepped from the shadows, wearing a mocking smirk. With a few gestures, he conjured a handful of blue flames. I stepped back and reached for the hilt of my sword, but he giggled again, setting the fire to hover next to him, illuminating the battlements. We contemplated one another, neither seeking to speak first.*

*Finally, I could wait no longer, and began the question burning on my mind. "Who-*

*"Who am I?" he broke in, his smile broadening unpleasantly. "You should know me. I am the son of the Father, the servant of the Infinite, the keeper of Truth and the master of the Veil. I carry the Word of Chaos, and break the chains which hold others*





*in bondage to kings or gods. As with many of my kind, I was given to and raised among daemons in the Wasteland, whispered their secrets from the cradle, suckled on magic itself. I shaped aether as other children shape sand, learning truths which would blast your very sanity."*

*I bristled at the conceit of this upstart, alone in my town, yet standing upon my walls as though he owned them. I burst out, only to be forestalled once more: "Why the h-*

*"Best not to speak of Hell when you cannot conceive its true nature. Not to one who has walked its damned roads, gambled souls in the Palaces of Pleasure, visited the Cornucopia and left the Devouring Maw unscathed, and gazed upon the Eternal Abyss until my eyes grew dark with the weight of the inevitable. As for my reasons, I have unfinished business in this town. Futures to come to pass, and truths known to be forgotten."*

*Finally I was able to break in, my voice rising in anger and frustration: "Enough. Enough with this cryptic nonsense. Enough of corrupting my people and perverting my town. Why are you here? Your kind comes and goes, they do not linger. Why won't you leave us in peace?"*

*With that I drew my sword, and took a step forward. A flex of his hands and the fire on the battlements enveloped me. My skin was untouched, but every nerve in my body burned in agony. I dropped to my knees, sword clattering out of my limp hand, while his grin dissolved again into shrill laughter.*

*"When next we meet, you will know the truth. You will know my name, son of Volskaya. When you are ready."*

*With one last knowing nod, his arms moved in a complex weave, unearthly sounds issuing from his mouth, and the next moment he was wreathed in mist. He descended through the wall and out toward the Wasteland. Enveloped once more by the night, my last thought was to wonder what further tragedy would visit me from that blasted and damnable place.*

*—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich*



# BATTLESHRINE

You know who I am, Inquisitor. The oaths I have broken and the faith I have forsaken. Let me tell you what you do not know.

Five hundred of us left Ullsberg, sent to reinforce the Beacon Garrisons. Templars led by Brother Vikesthol and myself, resplendent in our burnished armour, leading a column of state troops; we made a glorious sight, full of righteous zeal. Only six would return.

Our spirits held high for many months as we took up our post at the the fortress of Mespelbrunn. We were proud, and, I believe, we grew complacent.

It was the depth of winter when they struck. Our patrols had been recalled due to bad weather; the snow lay thick and at night icy mists permeated the very fibre of our being. The first warning we had was the ominous sound of drums in the thick fog. Brother Vikesthol gathered the templars and rode out, despite objections from the fortress commandant, an experienced Marshall by the name of von Hodenstant. They did not return. The sound of battle carried through the chill mist. It was not long before the clash of steel and screams of the dying were replaced by a far more terrible sound: that of hammering, sawing and the deep call of beasts of burden.



When the fog lifted, a sprawling encampment was revealed before the walls of the fortress. Over the coming days, our foes launched violent assaults against the walls. Day after day, great beasts, howling barbarians and ordered ranks of Warriors advanced upon us. They were repulsed by a storm of handgun and artillery fire, while the fell sorceries of their leaders were defeated by

the holy scripture carved along the walls. The enemy's losses were significant, for the arsenal at Mespelbrunn was one of the more formidable along this wild frontier. The field before the gates was a sea of corpses and bloodstained snow. They appeared not to care in the slightest.

Each day, as our battered adversaries limped back to their camp, a curious structure was borne towards the scene of the slaughter. Von Hodenstant and I thought little of it. A crude platform carried on the back of two mutated beasts of burden, daubed with crude iconography, topped with a burning brazier and chanting demagogue. We recognised it as a religious dais but we knew not its purpose.

This strange construct moved slowly among the dead and dying, accompanied by a small retinue of robed attendants mumbling incantations and swinging sickly sweet censers. Their progress would pause briefly among the fallen, as they cut the throats of wounded Warriors and smeared their blood upon the sides of this portable shrine. It may have been a trick of the light, but I am sure that with each fatality, the brazier atop the platform burned a little brighter.

Despite my objections, Von Hodenstant elected not to waste good shot and powder firing at this single, distant target.

Two weeks later, something changed. After another ferocious assault, the barbarians retreated out of artillery range and were herded into some semblance of order by their chieftains. The armoured Warriors formed up impassively beside them, waiting. Then the chanting began. The shrine was carried to the front, directly ahead of the fortress gates, and it was with horror that I saw through my spyglass the struggling, bloodied form of Brother Vikesthol chained to the front.

Powerless, we watched from the walls as the savage demagogue began to dance, screaming incantations and cutting Vikesthol as he writhed. Our fear was palpable as dark, shimmering clouds begun to gather, an eldritch storm rolling from the North. As the minutes passed, these clouds formed a swirling maelstrom, the ritual climaxing with the brutal demise of Brother Vikesthol. Almost immediately, an unnatural wind parted the clouds, and our doom was revealed.

Where the clouds had been, something akin to a portal now sat: a window into a realm of primal horrors. The surface rippled like that of a lake, and beyond, silhouetted against a kaleidoscope sky, what may have been an outline, the merest suggestion of a vast shape, gliding like a titan of the deep. Terrible, unnatural sounds boomed across the field; to me it felt like the laughter of a monstrous god. All at once, a bolt of eldritch lightning leapt from the gateway to strike the shrine's maniacal priest. The assembled barbarians roared as this fell cleric turned towards the gatehouse. Glowing with power, he unleashed a mighty storm of hellfire against us, and the great iron gates of the fortress exploded inwards.

The rest, Inquisitor, is a blur. The howling tide swept inwards, as emboldened by the intervention of their God as we were dismayed. I could only watch as they slaughtered everything in their path, my gaze torn between their jubilant savagery and the apparition that still slithered in the sky.

I awoke two days later, emerging from a mound of corpses to a scene from Hell itself. I can't describe the horror of looking upon the mutilated remains of those I called friends. Those who had been abandoned by their Gods and left to die in a freezing waste, far from home. While our foes had moved on, Mespelbrunn was left a charnel house, its walls daubed with unholy symbols and crude graffiti.

I still hear the screams when I close my eyes. Still hear the chanting on the rare occasions that I sleep. Perhaps it is punishment for my failure, who can say? All I know is that by sparing my life, Sunna condemned me to an existence of pain. I hate her for it.

—Testimony of fallen Prelate Nicolas Ungers





# BARBARIAN CHIEF

Keeping our heads on our shoulders through those wretched jungles beyond the Great Ocean was a miracle. Even now, years later, when I close my eyes I can still see the Ucayali chief and remember the smell of charred human hearts that filled the longhouse. Our guide did his best to explain to the bronze-skinned warlord we intended only to pass through his lands to reach the saurian ruins to the south, but our pleas and gifts did not move him.

He might have looked like a barbarian king from a long forgotten age, bedecked with bones, bird feathers and the furs of spotted cats, but the intellect in those hazel eyes betrayed no simplicity. His scarred physique spoke volumes about his experience with the obsidian-bladed club resting on his shoulder, and I had no wish to test my mettle against such an opponent. There was no profit to be made here.

A gentle nod from the chief sent dozens of gathered natives into action. Spears were lowered,

arrows strung and clubs raised, all before we could react, and poor Guido was seized. The gnarled veteran howled like a cornered wolf as they dragged him before the hearth, and then fell silent. The chief ripped the heart from his chest with a blunt bronze blade before tossing the still-beating organ into the flames. In horror, I waited for the barbarians to pounce on the rest of us, but their eyes were on the chief with pride, lust and envy.

As I wavered over drawing my sword, he approached me with the elegance of a jungle cat on the prowl and a reptilian grin full of outlandish mirth. With the deliberation of an artist, he smeared an alien symbol in blood across my breastplate. Tomorrow, when we raided the ruins, we would have the favour of their gods upon us. Never in my life have I felt so despoiled.

—Captain Andrea Barbiano,  
“The Tools of the Trade”, 948 A.S.

“Come inquisitor! Cast thy brazier and light the pyre to the sun maiden!

Let my sizzling flesh fill the nostrils of the goddess with sweet sacrificial scents!

I am the son Åskland, the child of chained lightning, and I know many gods.

They are who they are: to deny them is folly, to put your trust in them doubly so!

I have reaved from the stormy shores of Silexia to the fog-shrouded coast of your lands under the gaze of the dark vultures of the deeper void, and though you accuse me, I seek not their rewards beyond the gates of death.

I live for the taste of red meat, the singing praise of

the skalds, the steamy embrace of a tavern wench and exhilaration that only fires of battle can bring.

Who is right or wrong among the gods I leave to scholars and priests.

While my heart beats I will reave, while I reave I will slay, while I slay I will be content, and if I must die then such is my wyrd!

So end this charade, crimson-cloaked cleric, for I have no time to spare for the likes of you. May the flames consume me in the name of the lady of battles and her golden embrace be my reward.

NOW LIGHT THE PYRE AND BE DAMNED!”

—Extract from the final act of the  
“Fall of The Corsair King” by Liam Quiverpike



*Harald Vidarsonn, fell-handed Warrior,  
His heart thirsted for battle,  
His axe reaped a bloody tally,  
His longhouse overflowed with loot.*

*Harald Vidarsonn, Hersir of Hrodgarlings,  
He reaved the seven shores,  
He crushed the three kings,  
He who sacked Miklagard.*

*Harald Vidarsonn, Krakenborn,  
As the ocean was he,  
Strength of a leviathan,  
Fury of the winter storm.*

*Here he lies, judged by the Gods!*

—Inscription found on  
Fornhaugr barrow runestone

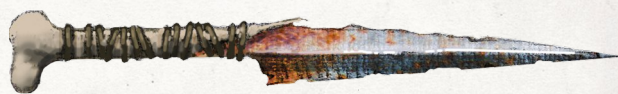


# BARBARIANS

I had spent a most enlightening week with the Hakim nomads of Western Taphria, and the time was coming for me to bid farewell to my gracious hosts. Like many such “barbarians”, their culture is seen as disorganised and indulgent by so-called “civilised” nations, but I found their less regimented way of life, and their lack of inhibitions, quite refreshing. As I prepared to leave, they were insisting, against my protestations, on providing me with meat and milk for my journey, when suddenly the cry went up of *ghabar*: dust, in the distance. A force approaching from the south.

At least a hundred men arrived on horses - a rare sight in the desert - wielding lance and bow. With their jet-black skin and strange language, I guessed they must be Koghinan - hailing from a

huge and mysterious empire of Taphria rumoured to be wealthier than all the kings of Vetia combined, thanks to its trade in salt and gold. These soldiers were well-armed, and I was told they coat their weapons in deadly venom.



The Hakim leader, a matriarch of imposing size, went out to meet them. She gestured at her men to sheath their swords, which would be no use against the larger, better-armed force. The Koghi commander dismounted and walked directly towards her. After staring at each other for several moments, he spat directly in her face. She did not twitch.



The soldiers spread through the camp, shoving the Hakim aside like animals. Entering the sacred tent, they became agitated. They had discovered the tribe's holy relics, which combined idols of the ancient deities of their people and the desert, as well as newer icons of the Dark Gods.

A finely arrayed woman came forward to inspect the place. My suspicions that she was a shaman were soon confirmed when, holding her hands aloft, she called forth fire from the desert sand to consume the tent.

The Hakim cried out in horror, but again an imperious command from their matriarch stilled their hands. One tribesman refused to submit, lurching forward with his scimitar and a desperate shout at the shaman. I'll never forget his look of anguish as he was struck down by arrows before he'd taken his second step.

But the miseries were not over. Before they rode away, the Koghi seized the tribe's children. Eleven were taken. I watched quiet rage boil on the matriarch's face: a rage which quickly turned to action. Over the coming days, she met with other tribes, and was soon heading south with a sizeable force of camel warriors. I decided I had to see how this would end, and was permitted to accompany the raiding party.

It did not take long. Soon they reached a Koghi frontier town, overwhelming its forces with their powerful cavalry and the element of surprise. These people, like most outsider cultures we call "barbarian", are built large and hardy by necessity. The shaman was found in a chief's hut and was cut down by the matriarch herself, who

used an old talisman of her ancestors to protect against the sorcerer's arcane fires. The children were discovered, and their chains broken - just days away from being sold into a lifetime of slavery in the salt mines.

The truth is that such episodes have become part of the life of the Hakim and the other desert nomads. This minor victory they knew would bring further reprisals. They have been hammered just as hard by the Qassari to the north - both civilisations have come to fear and hate the Hakim and their new religion. Their ancient oases - vital for navigating the desert - have been fortified by Qassari outposts and denied to them, making the situation even worse. Their turn to the Dark Gods was already sparked by desperation, as with so many cultures driven to the margins of the great nations of the world. It has been fanned by a compelling myth that is spreading through the tribes: tales of the lost "City in the Desert", a promised land, where the Dark Gods provide both abundant resources and the power to destroy their enemies.

Scholars have long held the legend of this desert city to be baseless and impossible. But I know that when I left the Hakim that day after the raid, I saw their eyes grow wide in wonder as - far in the distance - the shapes of huge, armoured Warriors could be seen advancing out of the shimmering heat.

—From "The Chronology of Foreign Nations",  
by Hudhaifa Uddin



# FLAYERS

I've seen many enemies in my life as a captain. If you asked me to name the most feared among them, without doubt I would say those who attacked us on the road to Varnavat, a coastal city in southern Sagarikadesha.

We were escorting our merchants and their families as usual. "Terrorising" is not enough to describe their tactics. Faster than the souls of the damned, screaming like animals, showing the signs of their cruel nature in their eyes.

With long beards, red hair and hellish mounts, they weren't riding horses, but beasts of all shapes – two limbs, four limbs, six...

It's no coincidence the locals called them rakshas, daemons. They ride any creature able to instil fear in the hearts of their victims.

They lashed heads and arms and limbs without mercy; they scourged children and women alike, drawing pleasure from their screams of pain. They appeared from the shadows themselves, attacked and then vanished, like a flash of lightning and the darkness afterwards. A feast of pride and terror, a nightmare lasting seconds. A rite for the Dark Gods.

—Malatesta da Pontefreddo,  
Mercenary Commander.



# WARHOUNDS

*Your Excellency,*

*Much has changed in this week, and a great threat to our Motherland has emerged from the Wasteland.*

*Early morning saw me accompanying a regular patrol, circuiting the edge of the Wasteland. Approaching the crest of a bluff, the smells and sounds of a camp assaulted me and the half dozen men with me. We dismounted, and crawled the last of the way. What greeted us at the bottom of the next valley was a terrifying sight. The warband there exceeded anything I had ever seen, anything I'd even imagined. It was as if the entire Wasteland had emptied into this one place.*

*A camp sprawled below us, Warriors in the hundreds, dozens of banners rippling in the wind and beasts of all manner prowling among the campfires and tents. Amidst it all, a flash of blue caught my heart in my throat. A glance through the eyeglass confirmed my worst fear - Šiva stood there, issuing commands, an imperious expression and a gold circlet upon her brow.*

*I hesitated, delaying too long, fooling myself that I was gathering more information, while my gaze barely shifted from my wife. My trance was harshly interrupted. Snarls and growls filled the air, as we were confronted by a dozen huge, dark-furred hounds, teeth bared and hackles raised. Behind us, horses bolted, galloping into the distance. We drew weapons, and within moments battle was joined. Five of us were pulled down, while most of the hounds lay with them.*

*The remaining animals backed off a little, still ferocious, ready to attack again, while I staunch blood flow from a gashed left arm. At the last moment, as I braced to spring, a harsh shout called the hounds to heel. Atop a mighty black horse sat Šiva, a cruel smile and weighing expression on her face as she surveyed the scene, and called for her Warriors to bring us back to camp. It seemed my fate was to be worse than food for the hounds.*



# FELDRAK ANCESTOR

*Apprehension gripped me as we were dragged into the heart of the camp. Of my men, only Sonin remained. I tried to offer him reassurance, yet my croaked words sounded hollow in my own ears. Those vicious hounds still shadowed us, their eyes fixed upon us. I felt certain that only Šiva's command stood between us and their bared fangs.*

*A handful of barked words pulled them to her heels as she peeled away from our captors. I stared after her, until a gauntleted hand grasped me by the neck and thrust me forward, stumbling. Spared from the slaving jaws of our canine attackers, and separated from the temptation of my wife, I began to regain my wits. I cast my eyes in every direction, recognising that, in the unlikely event of escape, I must be prepared to report whatever I could learn.*

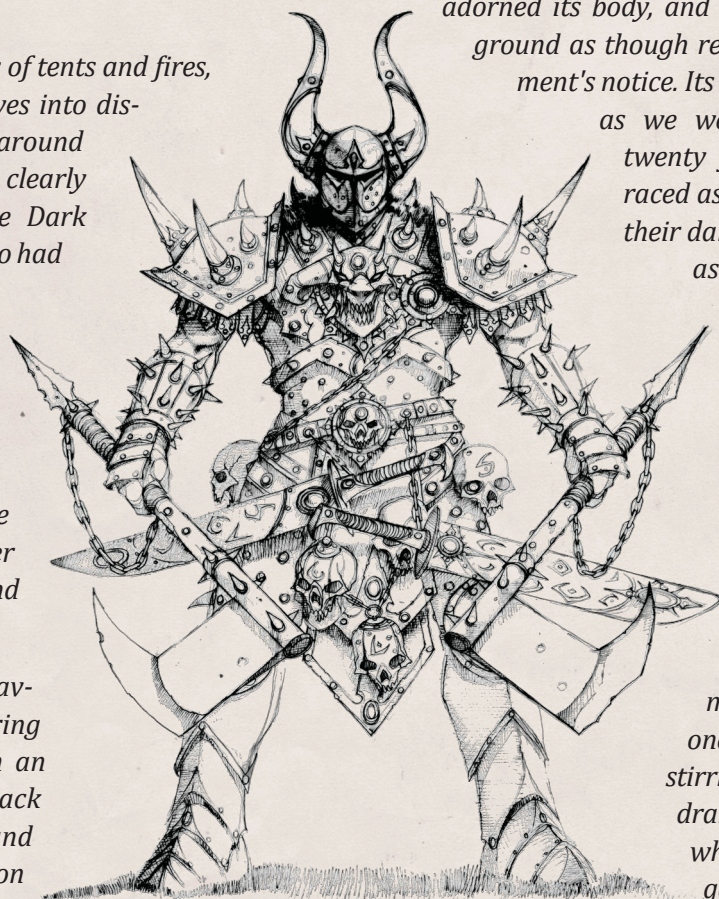
*All around were clusters of tents and fires, which resolved themselves into distinct camps grouped around banners. Each of these clearly belonged to one of the Dark Gods. Not only Savar, who had stolen my wife's devotion, but Kuulima, Vanadra...at least five of the seven were represented, a truly uncommon occurrence. Not only Warriors were present, but all manner of other Wasteland creatures.*

*Karkadan lumbered heavily between camps, bearing armour and rider with an indifferent ease. Black steeds tramped and snorted, eager to be on*

*the move. Lithe shadow chasers wove their way through the tightest of gaps, flowing with barely a whisper of sound. Barbarians massed in greater numbers than I had ever thought to witness, loud and boisterous, weapons clashing in a clamour of pent-up energy. This was a warband assembled with a purpose, that much was apparent to me. No alliance this aggressive could hope to hold together for long.*

*There were other creatures I did not recognise, or knew by repute alone. More of those Wretched Beasts I recognised from our last encounter. Chimeras, a vast battleshrine, and chariots of all shapes. At the centre of it all, near the tent bearing Šiva's personal banner, lurked the most imposing beast of all - a dragon. Dark red and black scales adorned its body, and it crouched low to the ground as though ready to spring at a moment's notice. Its head swung towards us as we were deposited a mere twenty yards away. My heart raced as those golden eyes with their dark slitted pupils fixed us as a cat would a mouse.*

*Sonin and I were left to our terror, huddled together. Sonin's injuries were worse than my own; he could barely sit upright, and groaned as I bound his wounds. The thought of escape did cross my mind, yet it was an idle one. Even the smallest of stirrings brought the drake's eyes back to us, while myriad Warriors gathered nearby.*



We sat there, back to back under the watchful glare of the wyrm. Meanwhile, I observed another familiar face, so to speak. The dented and broken helm of Lord Ghul adorned a spike over Šiva's banner. Small comfort, perhaps, but I could not help but enjoy his fall.

Our torment lasted for most of the day, until circumstances finally changed - and not for the better. One of my wife's retinue came for Sonin. My protestations earned a blow that left me sprawled in the dirt, one eye closing from the swelling. Sonin's screams rang out from Šiva's tent and I wretched, stomach heaving at his suffering. When his lifeless body was hauled from the tent, it was hurled to the dragon. The crunching of his bones will stay with me to my dying moments.

My own date with destiny would wait no longer. I was roughly pulled to my feet and deposited in the tent, alone at last with the woman I had once loved. Šiva regarded me with a mixture of contempt and what might have been respect. My own heart was empty, any emotion scoured away by Sonin's grisly fate. Still, it was an unexpected rush to hear my name pass her lips for the first time in years: "Ilarion. You should not have come."

"You came here," I retorted. "You knew I would find you. Just as when we courted." She smiled at that, an almost friendly gesture. The absurdity of the comparison overwhelmed even the grim mood of that moment, and I snorted. Quick as it had come, her humour departed again, and that haughty expression returned to her still-beautiful face.

"I cannot let you leave. Even if I desired it, such weakness...is no longer who I am." I felt certain she had intended to say something else, but whatever it was, I recognised the intensity of her resolve. Like her father, she was a formidable force even before pledging her life to the Warriors. I steeled myself, knowing the end was near.

A quick shout brought two Warriors in, bearing a collection of cruelly barbed implements. They still dripped with fresh blood and the new arrivals looked eager to spill more. I scrambled back into the tent, grasping an iron candlestick and ready to fight to the last. Oddly, I noticed an approving nod from Šiva. Awaiting death, I drank in every last detail of her as I braced, hoping to force them to kill me quickly.

A titanic roar shattered the moment, trembling the very ground on which we stood. The noise was deafening, and I expected to see the earth torn apart in some cataclysm. All other thoughts forgotten, Šiva tore open the tent flaps, to be confronted by a scene from nightmare. Thundering through the army in a direct path from a nearby mountain strode a creature of legend: a Feldrak Ancestor. It seemed fixed upon something deep in the camp, ignoring all else before it.

Feldraks are not unknown to those of us familiar with the Wasteland. Vast, scaled creatures, with six thick limbs, like centaurs having undergone some horrific magical transformation. The fables surrounding these beings tell of a link with dragons, and a hatred to rival any vengeful dwarf for anything that still possessed wings to fly. If I ever doubted the truth of this, I no longer do.



*Its body was vast, not just in scale, but every part of the being was hard with corded muscle. As a horse overtops a human, so did this being dwarf even those feldraks I have observed. Scales like armoured plates coated every inch of its form, with little in the way of visible flesh to strike. One bold Warrior tried, only to be crushed with a lash of a long and remarkably dextrous tail.*

*It smashed through the encampment, brandishing both foot-long claws and a great maul that looked fit to smash a castle wall. Its face bore little of the expressivity of other feldraks, more bestial and primal than any I have encountered or heard tell of. Skin stretched between its arms and body in places, a webbing like that of a bat.*

*Scattering Warriors, horses and even karkadan, the monstrous feldrak lunged with startling speed at the neck of the dragon. In the brief moments that the titans grappled for ascendancy, it seemed the world would end.*

*With a screech of desperation, the dragon squirmed in the thing's grasp, and belched forth bright flames. I felt the wash of heat and saw the air shimmer, yet it appeared only to anger the feldrak further. Bellowing with rage and pain, its chest glowed and its own fire poured over the unfortunate dragon, which thrashed as the deep red conflagration rolled across its back. With a horrifying crack, one of its wings broke in the feldrak's grip. Moments later, the dragon was pinned to the ground beneath the Ancestor's powerful legs, its struggles cut short as the maul was raised high, then crushed its skull in one last mighty blow.*

*Stunned silence settled over the camp, broken only by a rumbling laughter issuing from the triumphant beast, despite the bleeding scores raked deep by the dragon's claws. That laughter slowly faded as Šiva stood before the monster, unfazed by its scale or the drake blood staining the ground all around. Her weapon in hand, she was majestic - and doomed. What could stand against such a force?*

*Recognising that I might never gain such an opportunity again, I slipped behind the tent, turning my*

*back upon my wife and her assembled Warriors. I'm not certain a trumpet call could have torn any eyes away from their leader's confrontation; my own soft tread alerted none. Staying well clear of the leashed hounds, I walked carefully, never looking back. Reaching the edge of the camp I broke into a run; behind me I heard roars and a clash of steel, shouts of support and thumps of impact.*

*Only upon reaching the ridge could I glance back for a moment through the spyglass, to see the exhausted yet proud feldrak sporting fresh wounds, while Šiva's armour bore a great dent. They appeared to be conversing - the deep rumble of its words reached me even there. With a last nod of its head, the feldrak turned and strode to the edge of the camp, where it settled. Šiva held her blade aloft and a clamour of acclaim rose to the sky.*

*Astounded, blinking as though to dispel a mirage, I forced myself to flee. If anything, the news I carried was now even more vital. Volskaya must know; the Motherland must not be left undefended. I prayed my absence would be overlooked long enough to find one of the horses, and that I might never encounter a Feldrak Ancestor again.*





# FELDRAK ELDER AND FELDRAKS

When last we spoke, you said something was troubling me. I couldn't speak of it - I have never told anyone of this - but I thought perhaps once we were parted I could write it down. It is a grave thing, a thing that weighs like chains upon my soul.

Before we first met, I plied our trade up the coast of Silexia. I was lazy and a wastrel - you'd say I still am - and I was a poor hand. I was paid badly and treated worse. I lived from berth to berth. I've told you how the Dawn Star was wrecked at sea, and how I was washed ashore on the Shattered Isles. I've never told you what happened there.

We were taken in by the natives. A wild people: light, dark, old, young, all of them worshipping the Dark Gods. At first I thought them mad, though I did my best to blend in. Later I realised they had real power.

They sought more, however, and I - now a part of their band - rowed with them to the next island, where a tribe of feldraks lived. We dragged our boat ashore and crossed the beach. The towering bones of great sea beasts covered the beach, a foreboding presence as we trekked towards the feldrak camp.

My whole body froze when I first saw them. They were enormous - each the size of a house. Their lower bodies were reptilian with four enormous legs. From above their front legs grew a huge torso like that of a scaled giant. They had heads like ogres and great burly arms, rumour claimed them to have once been wings, tipped with clawed hands. Their dwellings, each the size of a castle, lay half submerged in the jungle floor, their sloping roofs constructed using whole tree trunks.

We were led into the hut of their Elder. She was a particularly large feldrak and her dwelling was built against the cliffs behind the camp. As we

walked down into the earth, she turned her head towards us. Behind her, lit by massive fires along the walls, was a mural, picked out in thousands of bones, from those shorter than my arm, to the great spars of the leviathans washed up on the beach. It showed the mightiest of their kind poised in mythic stance above all manner of winged creatures.



Before this display, I recalled the legends of feldraks spread between ports along the eastern coast. Tales of the Wasteland or other places poisoned with magic. Issuing forth from these twisted lands, the feldraks hunted anything that could fly. This gave credence to the rumour that they were the descendents of dragons, that flight for them was some ancestral memory which only provoked a blind rage for what they had lost.

The Elder listened to the entreaties from our tribe, weighed them, but would not agree without tribute. They would join us if we proved ourselves worthy and assisted them against the harpies of a nearby isle in battle. Our leader could barely restrain herself as she barked her assent.

We rowed to the island, used as a nesting site by the harpies, the feldraks swimming alongside us. Harpies nest in caves in the rocks. In flight, they cannot be caught by the feldraks, and their holes are too small for them to enter. Under cover of darkness, we strung nets over the top of the holes

and waited. As dawn broke, we climbed into their caves and began to flush them out. Harpies are fearsome creatures on the battlefield, but poor fighters in enclosed spaces.

The scene was chaos. Trapped low to the ground by our nets, the harpies were forced to fly sideways into the waiting arms of the feldraks. Many circled in the central space, while a few hands began to claw at the netting above. I saw one flying towards the Elder; the harpy fainted right and flew left, but the feldrak was faster still, snatching it cleanly from the air.

I don't know what I expected of her to do, but once she held the harpy, I could see she was vis-

ibly shaking. She held it between three of her claws in her left hand, its tendons taut beneath her scales, her other hand hovering in the air.

Then she began to break his wings. I cannot describe it here. You could picture a creature the size of a house torturing a creature like you or I. The blood. The breaking of bones. I vomited. I soiled myself. I fled that place. I threw myself into the sea. I hoped to die.

I do not think all the oceans of the world could cleanse me of that sin.

—In the letters of Arnaud Fischer,  
from his friend, Jacob Summer



# CHIMERA

## The Empire vs Sgt Ekkehard Metzmann, Empire Court Martial Reports, 962AS

**M**e and the lads, we were out on patrol, along the North-Eastern Highway, heading towards Vollergrad and the border. Twelve of us in all. It was that young Lieutenant Krakov that we were with, his first solo command, I understand.

To be honest, none of us really wanted to be there – you know how it is. The weather was awful; fog so thick you could barely see more than a few meters ahead of you and rain that soaked you to the bone. We had been on the road for over a week and were looking forward to reaching the tavern in Gozlow to be sure.

It was about halfway between Seelow and Golzow that we stumbled across them, although it's hard to be sure, due to that damned fog. Now, I have seen a lot of things, sir, including my fair share of battlefields. Nothing like this. Judging by the wagons, it must have been a merchant caravan, though from where we didn't know. Not enough left to tell, you see. Caravans tend to run heavily armed in those parts, what with the bandits and all, and I can't imagine these fellows were any exception. Anyway, first we know of it all was a shout from Jans. The poor bastard had drawn the short straw and was the outrider that day; bugger was scared half to death, if you will excuse my coarseness, sir.

We figured initially that it must have been bandits, as some wagons were burned, others ransacked, as if someone was searching for something, but the bodies... Still gives me nightmares. We reckon there must have been thirteen in all, but we couldn't be totally sure. They had been torn limb from bloody limb. Literally. Some of the parts were spread pretty far out and the Lieutenant did not want us ranging too wide, in case whoever did it was still out there.

We gathered what human remains we could, and Lieutenant Krakov had us dig a grave for them by the side of the road. Not much else we could do, you know? Heinrich, our tracker, said that whatever did it must have been 'big', based on a series of large prints he had found, but couldn't point towards what it may have been. He swore blind that there were no tracks leaving the site, and the fog made it impossible to go hunting. Eventually, the Lieutenant ordered us to continue our journey, although he did send Corporal Ashton back the way we had come, with instructions to inform the nearest way station of the raid.



Just before nightfall, we reached Gozlow, and the Lusty Goose tavern. The fog had just started to lift when we stabled the horses and I ordered Franz, Peters and Neuman to rub the animals down and get them fed. The rest of us went to get some food, and a drink too; I think we had all earned it, especially Jans. He was still white as a sheet. The Lieutenant went to supervise the care of the horses – said he couldn't rest until he had seen all the tasks completed.

An hour later there was a loud crash, followed by commotion outside. At first, I thought it must have been someone tipping a wagon, but then I heard it. A roar, like no sound I have ever heard before; a call that chilled us to the bone. We snatched up our weapons and raced outside, ready (or so we thought), to confront whatever had entered the village. Now sir, I have fought many foes over the years.

Men, orcs, ogres, even the dead, but I swear to Sunna that I have never seen, nor heard of anything like what greeted us outside. I can't even describe it. Whatever the horror was, it was as if some madman had melded several beasts into one vile form. It must have been the size of a griffon, and honest to Sunna, sir, it had three heads – one each of lion, drake and of all things, goat. I know it sounds odd, but I think it was that which shocked me most – the madness and hatred in the eyes of a beast as harmless as a common farm animal just served to highlight how wrong it was. Its flanks were covered in scales and its wings... like a bat, sir. Upon its back rode a figure, a woman clad in red plate with a full-faced helm and gauntlets of black.

The men from the stables were already in the square, and through the fleeing crowds we saw Neuman fire his pistol at the monster, to no effect; in seconds the wound just closed over. As he fumbled to reload, quick as a flash the creature turned and pounced on him, ripping and tearing through his breastplate as if it was paper. Franz and Peters tried to save him – hacked at it with their swords, which simply glanced off its scaled flanks. They were swatted aside by the beast's tail and gored as they lay stunned on the ground.

The Lieutenant, the brave, stupid fool, begging your pardon sir, drew that fancy sword of his, roared a challenge and charged the beast head on. He never made it. Out of the drake's mouth came fire, roasting him in his armour, before he had managed so much as a few paces. To this day, his screams still haunt me. As for the rider? She just sat there, calling something all the while. I couldn't quite tell exactly what, but I am sure it was a name. I think she must have been searching for someone. She did not even draw her blade; not that she needed to, sir.

She sat there and watched as the beast ripped us and the townsfolk apart.

Hang me if you will, sir, but how do you beat that? We tried, sir, I swear to Sunna we tried, but nothing could hurt it. What else could we do? Stand us against any mortal foe, but the sheer wrongness, the sheer ferocity of the beast broke us. Jans threw down his sword and ran; Heinrich followed him. I don't think they made it. The others? Well, they fought and died, sir. All except me.

*Trial adjourned pending decision of the Judge Advocate*

—Extract from the Transcript of  
the Military Trial of Sgt Ekkehard Metzmann:  
Cowardice, Desertion and Dereliction of Duty





# HELL MAW

*Following my escape from Šiva's encampment, I raced for Totváros. Barely stopping long enough to take up a fresh mount, I gathered my scouts and rode like the wind for the border. I left orders to dispatch birds with an urgent warning, but this was a message I needed to carry personally. Three times that night we were shadowed by hounds or flayers. Once they tried to waylay us, but we cut through their hasty blockade. Finally, we reached the path through the marsh that led to the border.*

*Our mounts were near collapse when we reached Fort Duvica. I gave my report to the garrison commander, warning him that he could not stand against the oncoming force. I counselled him to pull back his men and regroup with reinforcements sent from Volskograd. But I saw in his eyes that he would not leave. Volskaya does not breed soft men, and those who man the border are harder than steel.*

*The following morning, the scouts departed, riding hard for the capital. Another dozen riders joined them from the fort - there could be no room for doubt. I chose to remain at the border. My reasons were unclear, even to me. Perhaps it was reluctance to return to high society and renew my shame. The bravery of the commandant certainly swayed me. I saw in him the man I believed myself to be. Yet at least part of my reluctance was Šiva's approach, and the realisation that our next meeting would likely be our last, one way or another.*

*Two days passed before doom approached. The full might of the Warriors descended upon this border checkpoint. Warriors in ranks of plated steel. Hordes of barbarians, chanting and singing, urging one another on. Cavalry - both the black horses and heavy karkadan. Banners waved throughout the host, displaying all manner of iconography, including each of the seven Dark Gods. I counted three giants bearing enormous weapons. And at the back of the host, the Feldrak*

*Ancestor, like a mountain given scales and legs.*

*At the head of this legion, Šiva was held aloft on a platform borne by Warriors, moving beside a thing I have never seen before. An appalling construct, with wheels and a gaping jaw like a cannon. Yet no cannon barrel was ever fashioned of flesh, with metal plates covering it like armour.*



*As I watched, the throng came to a halt. A sorcerer stepped forward, a woman I think, though it was hard to judge beneath the thick black plate and strange bird-like helm she wore. At a nod from my wife, the sorcerer's hands spread wide, and the beak of her helmet tipped skyward. From Šiva's retinue a naked figure was dragged forward, bound tight and covered in scars, bruises and dried blood. Staring through my eyeglass, I almost dropped the leatherbound brass tube. The wild-haired figure was Prelate Grassl. I had believed him dead, his corpse dragged deep into the Wasteland. Now here he was before me, with glyphs carved into his skin and an empty despair in his eyes as he was laid across the awful maw.*

*The sorcerer bent, a wicked knife in her grip. With a practised stroke, she laid open his throat, blood pumping from his veins and pouring down the sides of its fleshy barrel. Chanting in a high pitched voice, the wizard drew all eyes. A glow surrounded her as though she leeches the colour from her surroundings. Finally, she finished whatever dire rite was underway: the radiance passed from her and into the thing beneath Grassl's still-twitching form.*

*Then it moved. The maw expanded and contracted. Eyes opened within the hideous mass. That unnatural light settled into its core, throbbing and pulsing like a heartbeat.*

One more gesture from the sorceress, and when Šiva spoke, her voice carried across the open ground like a god of old. I have no doubt she intended us to hear every word, and what bolstered her followers struck daggers into the hearts of the defenders.

"Sisters. Brothers. Warriors. Time has come to make good on your vows. Body and soul belong to the Gods, and in return they make us a weapon. A blade to strike mortal hearts, a hammer to tremble their very foundations. They make us mighty!"

An answering bark came from the Warriors. Weapons clashed against shields in a crash of thunder.

"Now we fulfil their promise. We take their gifts, and we forge our glory in the fires of battle. My star rises, and with it, so do yours. All that stands between you and triumph are those too weak to take their fate in their own hands. Will you let them stop you?"

This time the response was loud and clear, seeming to rattle the very walls: "No!".

Finally, Šiva turned towards the fort. I swear she looked right at me. "What lies beyond those walls,

beyond all who think to oppose us? Immortality! It is yours to take, so take it!"

Her voice rose to a crescendo, and as her army roared its support, she raised her sword, pointing at the walls. Beside her, the thing with the ungodly mouth flared, and an answering light blazed behind me. Turning in shock, I saw the air shimmer and bend, and a gate of light glowed in the centre of the fort. In front of the walls, the clamour was victorious as Warriors rushed through a twin opening. They emerged within our very defences, rendering our walls worthless.

We were lost. The fort fell in moments, and all thoughts of a valiant rearguard were swept away in a tide of death. I did what I could, commandeering the troops near me and fleeing through a side entrance into the swamp. I think only the call of greater battles to be had in Volskaya herself, and the distraction of tormenting those already held captive, spared us from our foe's pursuit and a horrifying end.

—Your faithful servant, Lord Ilarion Yanovich



# MARAUDING GIANT

To my lord, the divinely beloved Prince Constantianus, Inquisitor Wallenstein sends greeting.

My mission on the north-eastern limit of your majesty's dominion is now in its third month. I've been chasing the tracks of the tribes attacking our villages since then, collecting the reports of our rangers and patrols. As of today, four of my men are dead, three are harshly wounded, a dozen have taken minor injuries and two are still missing, for over a week.

One of my largest patrols was forced to leave a fortified tower due to a night assault unleashed against them, including the hurling of huge rocks. Due to the varied size and trajectory of these, it seems unlikely they were launched by a war machine. Of the casualties of these months, one was found completely dismembered, body parts missing and no signs of wild animal attack. Another seemed to be squashed into the ground by a huge footprint, which points obviously to the subject of my mission. It's unclear if the dismembered one encountered the very same creature.

The accounts of the villagers from the northern area talk about one giant attached to a goblin scouting force, while those from the south-eastern woods mention another following the Warriors warband I now seek.

Reports about the goblin wolf riders describe a giant throwing stones from long distance, avoiding direct contact with humans in the beginning. In one episode, he overturned a merchant wagon, but he struck the civilians only when attacked directly. However, when he was provoked, he was a terrifying sight, destroying all in his way. He was almost naked, but for a boar skin covering his lower parts. Some civilians, who survived the attacks by hiding in the high grass, reported he was clearly able to talk with the goblin witch doctors.

The patrols from the south-eastern woods talk instead of a giant with a different appearance. He was described using a huge, cruel flail when raiding with the aforementioned Warriors. He was in a rampant fury, looking for direct hand-to-hand combat: the more he was wounded, the more he attacked with renewed wrath. Nonetheless, he seemed to keep a somewhat tactical coordination with, or obedience to, their leader. He shows marks and tattoos on his chest and face, presumably made to look like blood, due to the reported color and consistency, similar to dark red limestone. He brought, tied to his back, a huge panoply made of metal and bones, proudly displaying the collected heads of his victims upon it. Also, he has been reported as constantly yelling bestial war cries while fighting. Attacked patrols said he showed a growing tendency to look for food, be it horses, humans or anything else, which seems to explain the dismembered bodies.



When I learn anything certain or remarkable of the enemy I will send you word.

Having examined the timing of the reports, I'm not sure yet, but my instincts tell me that, despite the distance between the two areas, it's the very same giant that first fought with the goblins and later joined the Warriors. Perhaps the two forces are even cooperating in some ways. Listening again and again to the records of the patrols and

the villagers, through accurate interrogations, I've found the two giants in the different accounts bear, in fact, the very same sign on the face, a vertical scar starting from the back of the head, crossing the right eye.

My plan is to verify if such is the case, and to better understand the ties with both factions. If necessary, I will capture and interrogate the gi-

ant itself. If killing him proves inevitable, I will find his weakest points for future engagement against such creatures.

Under the auspices of Sunna,  
Gottfried Heinrich Wallenstein, Inquisitor

—Letter found trampled into the  
mud near the Barren Mountains



# WAR DAIS AND SCYTHED SKYWHEEL

*Your Excellency,*

*In the aftermath of the slaughter at Fort Duvica, I was at a loss. I marshalled the handful of troops I had salvaged to follow the trail of the Gloried Talons, but without supplies or mounts we were left far behind the warband as it cut a swathe through eastern Volskaya. I listened eagerly to reports of scouts we encountered and pieced together events from the scattered intelligence.*

*The band had moved faster than anyone believed possible for a force of its size, approaching the River Volsk and Volskagrad itself. They swept aside two companies hastily gathered to buy time. In the end, only their ambition spared our nation. The Gloried Talons, determined to strike home against the Motherland, began to cross the Volsk in full spate. At the perfect moment, in mid crossing, their forces divided, Tsar Oleg ordered the attack. Striking against those on the western bank, the enemy were pinned against the shore. The battle was desperate and gory beyond anything seen in a century, but the Tsar's tactical advantage won the day. Archers lined the bank to prevent any reprisals from the remainder of the Talons.*

*Bloodied, their attack faltering, they turned away from the capital. A sizeable force, they still had the potential to threaten towns and cities, but the Lancers rode in force, and fresh armies marched from across Volskaya. In the end, they splintered, and the remnants continue to plague us.*

*Our country is safe though, the true threat broken. In years to come, how close we came to disaster will be forgotten in songs and tales of glory and triumph.*

*After assisting with the aftermath, hunting stragglers with various armies, I returned to Totváros under a cloud of mixed emotions. I was grateful our nation was spared. Glimmers of pride for my part in carrying the warning, and deep shame for*

*the lives I could not save. And beneath all of that, clutching at my heart, the sense of loss I could not shake, despite the long years. With each report from the capital I expected to read of her death, she who was still foremost in my thoughts.*

*Four weeks after the ill-fated attack on Volskagrad, my apprehension was brought to an end. From the west, having evaded the many patrols before the border, came a small cadre of Warriors. Even from a distance they looked battleworn, armour dented and torn. But there at their head, standing erect atop her dais, still carried aloft by her followers, was Šiva. Blood coated the left side*



of her body entirely, while wounds and scars beyond counting were visible. Still she looked like a queen, that chunk of steel and stone on which she stood serving her better than any throne, carved with runes of Savar on every exposed inch.

I heard her as she drew close, berating those who carried her, challenging them to stand against her if they would disobey. None dared, and their pace quickened as they entered the gates of the town. Mere feet beyond the opening, Šiva's legs buckled and she fell heavily to the ground with a crash. Her followers, her lieutenants, stared at this woman who had brought them to the brink of eternal glory. Moments later, they turned wordlessly and stalked from the gates, without a single glance back.

I rushed to Šiva's side, falling to my knees and cradling her head in my arms. Her face was pale now, and I could feel blood flowing over my hand from the gash in her side. Looking down, I could not believe she had stood so long, let alone made it all this way without showing weakness. My lady of steel was dying.

We spoke there, in her final moments. I will not commit to parchment all we shared; some things are between a man and his wife. She expressed no regret for her choices, and I expected nothing less. Proud to the last, her only qualm was that I had never seen my way to joining her.

"Imagine the glory we could have carved together, side by side. To live forever with you..." She coughed, blood coating her lips, and I thought she had passed. Then she spoke her last words, so faint I had to press my ear close to hear. "Our son... I miss our son..." With that, she shuddered and lay still evermore.

A dull drone on the edge of hearing worked itself into my grief-stricken consciousness. Looking up, through eyes that burned, I saw an object hovering, some way beyond the open gates. A circular wheel, it turned constantly with no obvious source of power, wicked blades lining its rim and humming as they sliced through the air. Atop that contraption, eyes fixed upon me, expression unreadable, stood the blue-skinned sorcerer.

I reached for my sword, in case he thought to take my wife's body from me. I remembered his taunt that I would one day learn the truth, and wondered if this future was the one he had foreseen. He merely sneered, no humour upon his face this time, and turned away, leaving me to bury the woman I had loved and lost, found and lost, forgiven and lost.

—Your faithful servant,  
Lord Ilarion Yanovich



# WASTELAND DRAGON

I know that returning here means my life is forfeit. I know that leaving my post on the eve of battle was cowardly, putting my life at risk if ever I was caught. But worse still was that I besmirched my family's honour. I did this because I could not bear another moment under the Dragon's regime. I wanted more than to be a nameless soldier, forever at the mercy of another's bidding. I was weak. The Wasteland showed me the folly of my actions, and now I see the law of Tsuandan, though harsh and unforgiving, is an ordered and liberal haven I was a fool to abandon. May my testament leave its mark on history's scroll, and restore some semblance of mine and my family's honour.

My tale begins at the edge of the Wasteland. Rumours of men succumbing to the will of the Dark Ones, and of the land pulsing with unholy energy, ensured it was always isolated. I had hunted and killed an abomination with no name that morning, a creature of too many limbs, eyes, and mouths to be anything natural.

I was resting after my kill when the world darkened. A shadow filled the sky. I stared, dumbstruck. Its body seemed to stretch to both ends of the horizon. Even high overhead, I could feel the wind that shifted under its giant wings. A dragon in flight, heading straight for the Wasteland.

To me, it seemed that the beast was struggling. Like a child climbing a rope, it seemed to claw at the air for purchase, as if every moment were a battle, a battle the Ancient One was losing. Suddenly, as it shrunk into the distance, the beast finally gave up, and slowly spiralled to the earth like a pebble sinking in a lake. Hidden by the craggy terrain between us, I listened as it smote the ground in ruin.

I stood for a long time, knowing what wealth could be made if only I could reach the corpse. I knew that with its heart alone I could buy a new life for myself. I could be a free man once more.



However, stories told since I was old enough to listen had instilled in me that the Wasteland was a dangerous, evil land, where men met madness, death or worse. It was said that the very air was toxic, and no ordinary mortal could hope to survive its impossible aura. To my aid, I had my mother's pendant, an heirloom of extraordinary origin that was bound to me. I know that it was this charm that protected me from the taint of the Wasteland on the borders of its domain, and I gambled that its aegis was potent enough for the Wasteland proper.

I set out into that barren, empty realm. Between the dust in the air and the lethargy in my legs, I had no idea if I was continuing in the right direction, following only the memory of the direction in which the dragon flew. My lungs burned, and all the while I felt a presence watching me. It seemed there were shadows just beyond the corners of my eyes. But no matter how swiftly I turned, I saw nothing. Many times, I thought to turn back, but my stubborn ambition was set against me. It was my idea to enter the Wasteland, but some pull was taking me further in. I understood now why there were so many tales of men who had entered, never to return.

After some time, I found myself on the edge of a small crater. In the centre of the depression, staring at me darkly, was a vast, reptilian monster.

The sight paralysed me to the core. If the Ancient One was large in the air, it seemed truly enormous before me now. All thoughts of stripping the carcass for valuable parts were gone. The dragon was alive.

My heartbeat raced like a marching drum, and the dragon was as still as a statue. The sense of foreboding grew with each passing heartbeat, and I was seized by a sense of existential dread.

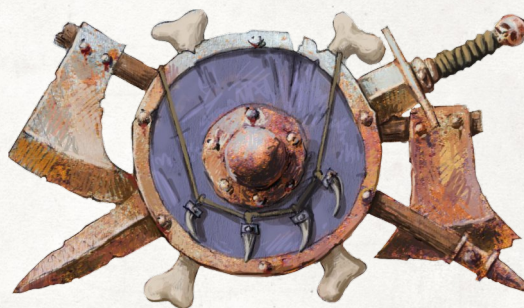
Finally, after some semblance of calm returned, I could look more closely at the formidable beast. It did not appear to be substantially injured. The fact that anything could fall from such height and survive was disconcerting; doing so all but unscathed was terrifying. There was a feral glint in its eyes, as if it were holding its breath. My mind was screaming to run, but my body had other notions. Slowly, I walked closer.

I had heard that the elder race could understand speech - how else could they govern our people?

I cleared my parched throat.

"My name is Guanlin Fu," my voice sounded tiny as I descended into the crater, "I was a captain of the armies of Tsuandan: the armies of your kind..." I received no response. This did nothing to staunch my terror, but I continued. "I beg of you, tell me: what brought you into these wastes?"

Again, there was no response. I moved even closer, guided by some foolish curiosity. I could smell the sulphur on its scales. I could taste blood in my mouth and felt a slight pressure against my ears, a power emanating from the dragon. Just as I was within touching distance, it turned its massive form and started to move away.



Its walk was not elegant. A slow, heavy, crawl like a bat upon the ground. When it noticed that I was not following, it stopped and turned its head. Although it did not speak, it was clear that it demanded my attendance. It was as if every moment in my life had been leading up to this moment.

What happened over the next days, or months (time there was impossible to gauge) was unlike anything I ever thought I would experience. We walked through the Wasteland, bound on an uncertain destiny. I was honoured that the dragon had chosen me to be its companion, or perhaps simply its minion. I thanked my ancestors for this opportunity, and was saddened by the memory of the shame I had caused them.

I desperately tried to learn more about the Ancient One, to answer some of the riddles it carried, but to no avail. All I could tell was that the beast had wickedly heightened senses and seemed to see more than just what was in front of us. My pendant would not have been enough to save me in that wretched place, which sapped my strength day by day. There were times when I was near death from thirst, and the dragon

would miraculously unearth water, or find and slay an animal where it seemed there were none.

It was after some time in the Wasteland the dreams began. Dreams that felt as real as you look before me now. I saw myself as king of the world on a mountain of skulls and blood. When I awoke from these dreams, my body felt powerful, though I could see it was no less withered, and I yearned to explore deeper. The whispers in my head and the sense of unseen watchers grew with each passing moment, despite the power of my mother's pendant. I did not want to leave the Wasteland. I wanted to see more, to feel more, to follow the Ancient One and revel in its might.

It seemed the dragon had abandoned its wont for flying and never took to the air. Instead, its hind legs grew stronger and its wings diminished so it walked now with a powerful gait and was able to manoeuvre nimbly up and down rocky valleys. This change became apparent when we reached a cave high on a cliff face. I was near exhaustion, but the Ancient One seemed untroubled by the climb.

The cave was dark, and the dragon was immediately on edge. I thought I could feel the creature's muscles tensing, and a focused gleam burning in its eyes.

Anxious, I searched for a threat. But I could see none. Still, I moved behind the dragon, who was sniffing at the deepest shadows. And then it came. Though I had thought it only existed in myths and stories, there was no mistaking what it was. If the dragon was the mightiest creature I had ever seen, then this other legend was perhaps its equal. In a few short strides, the chimera stepped out of the shadows and into the pale light. My body failed me, and I dropped to my knees in wonder and fear. There are no words to describe what it is like to see two legends in such proximity. I could do nothing but cower as they each roared, leapt, and clashed until silence fell once more.

It is for what happened after the battle that I come here before you. Turning from the body of its devastated foe, the dragon finally spoke to me.

Its voice was like the earth shattering, a noise both terrible and tremendous to behold. The sound was everywhere and nowhere, even seeming to come from inside me. At first, I heard noth-

ing but a rumbling growl, until gradually I resolved those primal vibrations into words I could understand. It said, repeatedly:

“With the blackened sun, the  
doom shall come,

When shadows are no more, and  
the dragons fail to soar.”

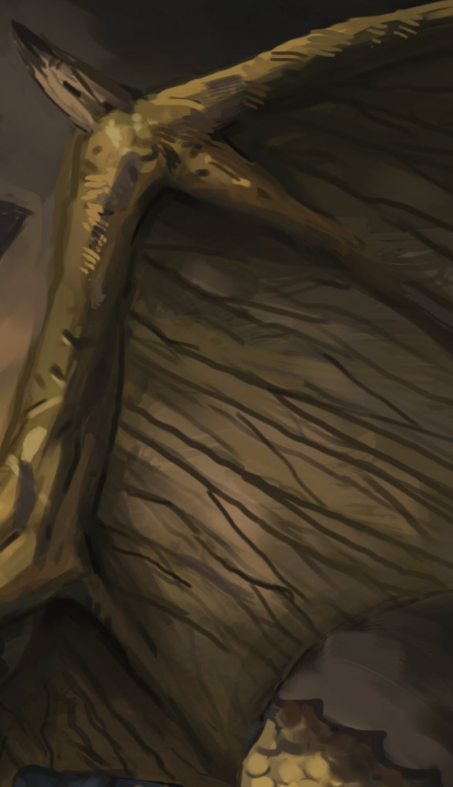
I stood, overwhelmed by all I had seen and heard. I watched as the dragon slowly, meticulously walked away. I made to follow it, but a sharp turn of its head made it clear our time together was at an end. It proceeded to climb out of the cave, leaving me alone in its shadows.

And so, I vowed I would find a way to survive the Wasteland at any cost. The journey out was infinitely more gruelling. Without the mightiest of beings at my side, I faced all the hardships of that merciless place. I scavenged for scraps of food. I fought with the desperation of the damned, and I ran. I ran more miles than I can count. Upon collapsing after days of relentless fleeing, I awoke to discover my mother's pendant was missing.

I was near the borders of our lands, but I had lost my protection from the magic filling the land. The true horrors of the Wasteland were revealed to me. Within hours, my hair began to wilt and by the end of the first day my very bones felt like rattling sacks of dust. The next day my lungs abandoned me and a near constant hacking cough of blood and bile had me begging for release. Somehow, powered by my shame, I managed to drag my broken body away from the putrid plains, but I believe I will not live to see my story shared.

This journey happened to me because I had been chosen. The dragon spoke to me - I am certain that was no illusion. And I forced myself to return, to reach this outpost of civilisation and record my tale. My last and most fervent hope is that these words will be passed on, that I can relay the dragon's prophecy, still vivid in my mind, and that perhaps my descendants will no longer know me as Guanlin Fu, the Honourless, but as Guanlin Fu, He Who Talks with Dragons.

—from a manuscript forgotten deep in the  
archives of the Imperial Palace in Longjing.



ART



# RED BLOSSOMS OF ITAR

The oleander has come into bloom. Delicate pink flowers hang on fresh green shrubs, filled with deadly poison. Like every year, my mind is cast back to another time, another night at the start of Spring. The reports we receive these days (another outpost has fallen to the Dark Gods, this time Volskayan), give the difficult memories of yesteryear a more dire significance. It is time for me, at long last, to visit the nightmare of that far-off time in these pages.

At seven years old, I still lived in innocence at the Manor in northern Glauca. I had a loving family, but I was aware that not all was well with my father, Titos. He was persecuted by officials from the nearby principality of Zalos who claimed parts of his land. My father was not afraid to fight for what was his, but he lacked the funds necessary to stand against the aggressors.

My mother, brother and I watched as he became increasingly unhinged. He would rant and rail at empty rooms, burst into sudden rages at our smallest transgressions, hunt animals in the forest with a passion we had not seen before. Worse, he would leave the farm altogether, and spend days in Pontefreddo, or even travel to Avras, refusing to discuss what he did there. The farm began to decline in his absence, and the Zalosi buzzards circled ever closer.

It was the morning after the solstice rituals when a carriage, ornate and lavish, crunched the frosty driveway and disgorged a black-robed man, thin and wealthy, with a fastidious black goatee - the Chancellor of Zalos. After a furious exchange, my father stormed off, more agitated than ever.

In the days to follow, he would pace through all the rooms of the house, thumping his fist on the wall, eyes wide and white, lips flecked with foam. Finally, something in him broke and he rode away in the middle of the night.

Three days later, bandits attacked the farm. My mother ushered me and my brother into a closet where we hid in terror - although we could see perfectly well between the cracks of the door. The men stormed the house, beating two of the farm hands who tried to stop them. Some went through the rooms, seizing or smashing our possessions. Others threw down my mother before my very eyes, laughing horribly as they tore at her clothes.

All at once the laughter turned to screaming as a gleaming length of steel appeared in the throat of the brute bent over my mother, spraying her with dark blood. As the body slumped, we saw our saviour was father, returned home just in time. His face was wild and he growled like a beast. I saw little I could recognise in his eyes.

"The Adversary is upon you, wretched weaklings of this world!" he cried, in a shrill voice I had never heard before. In a blur, he despatched the nearest bandit with a clean decapitation, and slew another with a well-aimed throwing knife. There was an awful silence as he stood hunched and panting, looking around ferociously at the remaining men, surrounded by carnage and corpses. One of them vomited, and my brother fainted next to me in the closet. They fled.

"Titos?" said my mother, quietly, from the floor. He spun around and stared into her eyes, seem-



ing to notice her for the first time. Then he fell to his knees and began to sob.

For many weeks after that, his manner improved. We started to hope the man we knew had returned. Then, one Spring day as the oleander blossomed and storm clouds began to loom, he snapped. I do not know what set it off, but we heard shouting in his study and snuck up to peek through the door.

"You try my patience, woman!" he was fuming at my mother, who wept openly. "For too long I have been dragged down by pitiful temerity - and it was you who counselled me so! No longer!" He approached her like a mad dog. At this, my brother Vakous, who was twelve, rushed into the room and placed himself defensively between them, his little face determined.

"What?!" screeched Titos, and I thought for a moment he would turn violent, so malevolent did he look. But his expression darkened further. "I see," he said, chillingly. "My own son."

That night, I slept fitfully and was awoken by a thunderous cry that shook the house: a name to awaken dread in the heart of any Arcalean.

"Vanadra! O Vanadra! I am rage! I am bloodshed! I am the storm!"

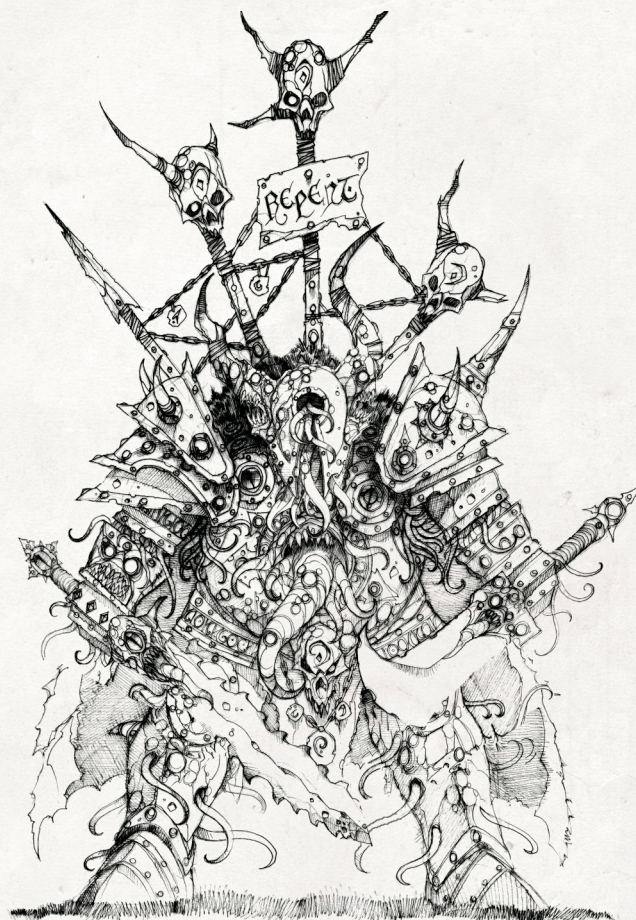
I jumped from my bed and ran to the top of the staircase, where there was a clear view of the dining room below. The sight haunts my dreams to this day. Among the candles, scrolls and terrible arcane patterns etched in blood along the floorboards, my father stood naked, gripping my helpless child brother by his black hair. Even as I looked, before I had time to gasp, he plunged a vicious dagger into my brother's innocent neck.

"Take it! Take it!" he cried, his eyes rolling back into his head, his arms and legs lashing out in demented convulsions. "I am yours!"

I shrieked, but the sound was lost under a sudden peal of thunder - a storm was upon us. At the same moment, as Vakous' limp body drained over the floor, I felt a terrible static fill the air - this was no ordinary tempest. Suddenly, I felt sick in the pit of my stomach, and my head lurched as a sense of vile wrongness filled the house. The

space around my father seemed to distort, stretching and blurring, and I thought I could discern a cacophony of half-glimpsed freakish shapes, writhing and frenzied.

Finally, one shape solidified as the others faded. It formed from the offerings before my father: dirt, wax, brimstone - and most of all, my brother's blood. All were drawn into its body like a siphon. Yet, the materials exhausted, it continued to grow, pulling metal from the fireplace, parchment from the desk, even wood from the very walls.



The whole process resolved in short moments, with a rushing sound like an indrawn breath, and there before me stood a being too hideous to behold. I had a brief glimpse of something scarlet and huge before I had to turn away and wretch, its essence too unworldly for my child's eyes.

"You seek power," came a voice, deep and sonorous, that reverberated through my skull. I covered my ears with my fists, but it made no difference. "You seek the favour of the Goddess of Wrath."

"Yes! Yes! I am hers!" cried a much smaller voice I recognised as my father's.

"And in return, you give her everything that you are," continued the awful creature.

"Yes!"

"It is your will and no one else's that this is done?"

"It is!" The words hung in the air. There was a pause, broken by another peal of thunder and the sound of heavy rain on the roof - and the overwhelming smell of something burning.

"The Adversary accepts your pledge." Lightning flashed across the image of a great red hand placing itself on my father's head, his whole body vibrating and seeming to grow...

Suddenly I was wrenched away in a rush of movement. I was in the arms of my mother, and we were fleeing - down the corridor, down the ladder in the master bedroom, through the back door.

We were out in the rushing wind and stinging rain. Instantly, we were drenched. Sobbing, I looked up into my mother's face, and I saw her fear.

"Take this," she said, eyes wide, and she placed a simple chain around my neck, with a locket. I had seen her wearing it often enough, but I had no time now to admire the gift, for just as suddenly as she had come, my mother was pulled away. I found myself gripped in the arms of powerful men - she was held by others. I looked around in confusion until I saw a black-clad figure holding a burning brand that lit his broad hat and little goatee. The Chancellor of Zalos had returned, but this time he had brought a much larger retinue. The house was surrounded by armed mercenaries, and smoke billowed from the roof that was already on fire.

As another thunderclap shook the sky, we heard shouts on the other side of the house, by the front door. The Chancellor gestured at his men - they went to investigate, except those who held my mother and me. We heard a great fighting, and eventually we were dragged closer to the scene as the Chancellor wished to see for himself.

The flames of the burning house illuminated the terrible shape of Titos, hideously enlarged and

crouched like a beast among dozens of brutalised bodies on the driveway. Blood mixed with the rain that coursed over his gigantic, muscled frame. For a brief moment, he looked up at us, all semblance of humanity gone from his face. And then he turned and ran into the dark.

"Remarkable," stated the Chancellor, raising a quizzical eyebrow. "What in the name of Themesis has he been doing?"

He stepped calmly over the groaning fallen, and approached the door of the house from which smoke was billowing. Suddenly he dropped his torch as terror seized his body. Trembling, he tried to back away, but tripped over a slain brigand behind him. He stared up at the thing that approached, pushing through the flaming doorway like it was made of matchsticks. Finally, I could see its full horror: a huge red monster with horns and cloven hooves. For a few seconds they formed a tableau: the daemon poised above the black-clad man, whose arm covered his face in a vain attempt to hide the appalling vision. Then it reached down and crushed his head with one hand.

"Ahaha!" it laughed, its voice once more filling my mind. It smeared the man's blood over its face and neck. "What pretty delights the mortals have here! Why would any forgo this glorious world?"

The men who held my mother levelled crossbows and fired with trembling hands. The red giant flinched and spun around. In dread, they dropped their weapons and ran. The daemon bounded towards us. My mother leapt up and tore me from my captors, fleeing in another direction. From her shoulder, I could see the creature devastating the remaining men, whooping with eerie glee. We dove into some bushes and continued to watch through the leaves. Backlit by the burning house, the silhouette of the daemon tired of playing with its mutilated victims. It began to sniff the air, and soon was striding right for us.

"Do not hide from your destiny, little mortal!" it shouted. "I can make you feel the true rage within!"

As it drew near, my mother turned to me with a wild look.

"Do not leave this place 'til it is gone," she said, bright eyes reflecting the fire. "Be brave - now and forever."



With this, she leapt up and ran out from where we hid.

“Here I am, creature!” she cried, flinging out her arms. “Do what you must.”

The beast stopped and smiled, while I whimpered, too much in shock to act on the renewed terror.

“How wonderful,” came the deep, resonant voice. “So rare to see true bravery. I see you will not give yourself to my Mistress. Very well. Your death is quick.”

It leapt - and all of eternity congealed as it stretched out a paw and effortlessly swiped the head from her shoulders.

I have never spoken of this to anyone. It costs me greatly to write it even in these private pages. That image is one I have tried to keep from my mind for so long. Yet there it stays - I believe it will be the last thing I see before I die.

There in the bushes, I thought also of Titos, my father, escaped to who knows what great and ter-

rible fate as a Warrior of the Dark Gods. I stared at my beautiful mother’s lifeless face and I wondered if he had any notion of the consequences of his decision.

The daemon stood for some time in the rain looking down at the corpse. Her tiny limbs, her sodden nightdress, her bare feet. Thunder rolled more than once, and still it stood, a dark red statue glowing in the blaze that was once my home. I watched through the leaves of the bush where I hid, and realised that other red splotches were filling my vision. Blinking, I noticed the fragile beauty of the wet, rosey oleander blooms all around me. When I looked up, the daemon was nothing but a thin crimson blur, as the fabric of the world stretched back into the dull pain of reality, and I felt my tears mix with the falling rain.

—The Journal of Leonora Dimitriou,  
Itar 3rd, 962 A.S.



# BANNERS OF THE GODS

The followers of the Dark Gods have no desire to conceal their allegiances. In their quest to draw the eyes of their sinister patrons, they carry their icons proudly. Banners bearing the symbols of the Seven are seen on battlefields across the world, held aloft in gauntleted fists and striking fear into the hearts of civilised nations.

Most warbands are dedicated to one Dark God, yet each also carries its own identity. Named for their particular forms of worship, attire, practices or whatever else may set them apart among their kind, their name may rise and fall within a single season, or may become a legend to span a thousand years.

Here I have gathered some of the most notorious representations to be found anywhere, exemplifying the behaviours of the Warriors, and the threats they pose to us all. Learn them, know them, and guard yourself against their ways.

—Captain Urs Bödeker, Iron Legions of Myra



Banner of Envy



The fly on the wall, the Schemer, Kuulima sees the power of others and desires it for herself. Some of her followers believe her to be the great leveller; the less fortunate simply aspire to that which others have, and seek the strength to take it. They adopt green apparel, then surround themselves with plundered heraldry, armours and weapons.

Stolen Moments Banner



The Stolen Moments made their name reaving towns on wedding days, leaving celebrations in ruins and communities torn asunder. Rumour has it they are often called down by jilted ex-lovers, who depart with the band and the spoils of the day.



Banner of Gluttony



The followers of Akaan devour all before them. Gluttons everywhere seek his blessing, and receive his accursed appearance, leaving their jaws exposed even in combat. Browns and rotten greens form their colourings, all beneath the sign of the Lamprey, representing their eternal hunger.

The Ghouls appear to have contracted every possible disease and illness, thanks to their horrifying practice of consuming the corpses of their victims. They have even been known to strike at and devour leper colonies. Yet they do not perish, lingering and growing ever viler.

The Ghouls Banner



Banner of Greed



Sugulag collects more than simply power. Lost items of all kinds find their way to his followers and into their grasping hands. Misers and thieves find a home with the Collector, wearing mail formed of interconnected coins, and golden-faced demonic helms.

The Wasteland conceals on its fringes a market for the world's most forbidden objects. The Forgefathers derive their power from a monopoly on such goods, as well as myriad artisans and blacksmiths willing to risk damnation for the potential gain.

Forgefathers Banner





Banner of Lust



Cibaresh is famed for toying with mortals, throwing temptations in their path to subvert their precious morals. To him are drawn the deviants and the debauched, often drawn from those with the strictest of up-bringsings. The lips and tongue of seduction decorate their standards, vibrant violets and blues leaving no doubt of their intentions.

The Liberating Gifts target the young with great displays of generosity, bringing entire villages under their sway with their corrupting offerings. The Gifts have been known to leave villages bereft of an entire generation, and their numbers grown still greater.

Liberating Gifts Banner



Banner of Pride



The Fallen Star draws others with his same self-destructive impulses. Those who have fallen from exalted stations or believe their abilities set them above others, despite a lack of recognition in their communities, find natural homes with Savar. Clothing themselves in regal blues and purples, they adopt crowns, stars and heraldry.

In the depths of Virentia, far from civilised realms, the Feathered Crowns hold court. They style themselves with circlets of colourful feathers, adorned with trinkets inspired by the birds to be found in those exotic lands. With these raiments, they impose their authority on native tribes.

Feathered Crowns Banner





Banner of Sloth



The Watcher, Nukuja, sees all things. Her followers believe she will observe the end of things, and knows the death of all mortal life. They have a timeless appearance, ancient armour and weapons put to good use in her service. Under the sign of the locust, their dirty white cloaks cover rusted metals, but they are no less dangerous for that decay.

The freezing gales of Åskland have been known to lay strong men low in minutes with their ferocity. The Ice Raiders seem immune to such concerns, feared for their ability to march through the wildest conditions and assault towns cut off from all hope of reinforcement.

Frost Raiders Banner



Banner of Wrath



Vanadra's eternal fury is fuelled by betrayals and injustices, driving her followers to form the vanguard of Father Chaos' forces. With cruel armour the red of blood, and gauntlets seemingly coated in viscera, they daub banners with the symbol of their mistress, along with tokens of their victims.

Roars of approval and screams of agony mark the initiation ceremony of the Burning Fists. Prospective members test themselves by holding their arms above a roaring fire, until their gauntlets are blackened. Those who cannot bear the pain are cast out to join with lesser bands.

Burning Hands Banner









# EPILOGUE

*Your Excellency,*

*I am writing this as swiftly as I can, expecting this to be my last missive. The enemy is at our gates. Totváros will fall before the day is out. I have failed in my duty, and I hold little hope that I will rest in the halls of our ancestors.*

*After the Battle of the Volsk, we believed the threat was broken. That it would take decades for a leader of Šiva's stature to rise again. It was accepted that we had plenty of time to rebuild our defences and prepare for future assaults.*

*We reckoned without two vital components. First, while Šiva's name may never again pass a Warrior's lips, her failure resigning her to the oblivion of history, her deeds proved a spectacular rallying cry. There, the second element came into play. That cobalt-skinned sorcerer: he spread the tale far and wide, repeating how close Volskograd had come to disaster. He made that story of failure and defeat into a fable of glorious victory partially achieved, a ripe pear waiting to be plucked for those brave enough to grasp it.*

*From across the Wasteland and beyond they have come. Warriors by the hundred. Barbarians beyond my counting. Monsters and mounts, chariots and chimeras, feldraks and Forsworn; they flooded the plains and now encircle my town. And in the skies above, a sign of the favour of this host: an Exalted Herald, emissary of their Father. Even now I hear the battering upon our gates, a languid effort - a fight they have already won.*

I hope this message reaches you. All that can be done to defend the Motherland must be done. The horde that assails us now is at least twice the size of Siva's. I pray you are successful and the gods are with you. I pray I will be reunited with my boy, Lukas. I pra

**Your Excellency?**

It seems poor Ilarion was a little slow completing his little letter. All his hopes and prayers scratched on such a small piece of parchment. Still, a dying man should have his last wish. His blood will serve to complete his work.

He is correct that our forces are mighty. Enough to make any nation tremble. But the old man is wrong to fret about his beloved Volskaya, which loved him so much it sent him to the wilderness and the grave.

A man's ambitions should match his talents. Ilarion's permitted him to rule this pitiful steading. Poor Siva had dreams of proving wrong all those fops in Volskaya who disregarded her for her gender. But my dreams are not so petty. Volskograd will fall before us, as all paltry cities must. But the jewel of humanity, that is a prize worth fighting for. One city needs fear my coming above all others - Avras, bastion of the Ninth Age.

Perhaps we will meet in person on my journey. I look forward to that. In the meantime, Ilarion says farewell. At least, I think that's what he says, I'm afraid he's not in much condition for conversation.

In the name of the father

**Lukas Yanovich**

Sonner of the Dark Gods





# THE 9<sup>TH</sup> AGE FANTASY BATTLES

## WARRIORS OF THE DARK GODS



Behind its high walls, civilisation believes itself safe. Law, morality, order – these are its shields. But from places of power and even within their very borders, a threat grows. Come to tear down those walls, to break chains and destroy the very foundations of order: tremble before the Warriors of the Dark Gods!

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