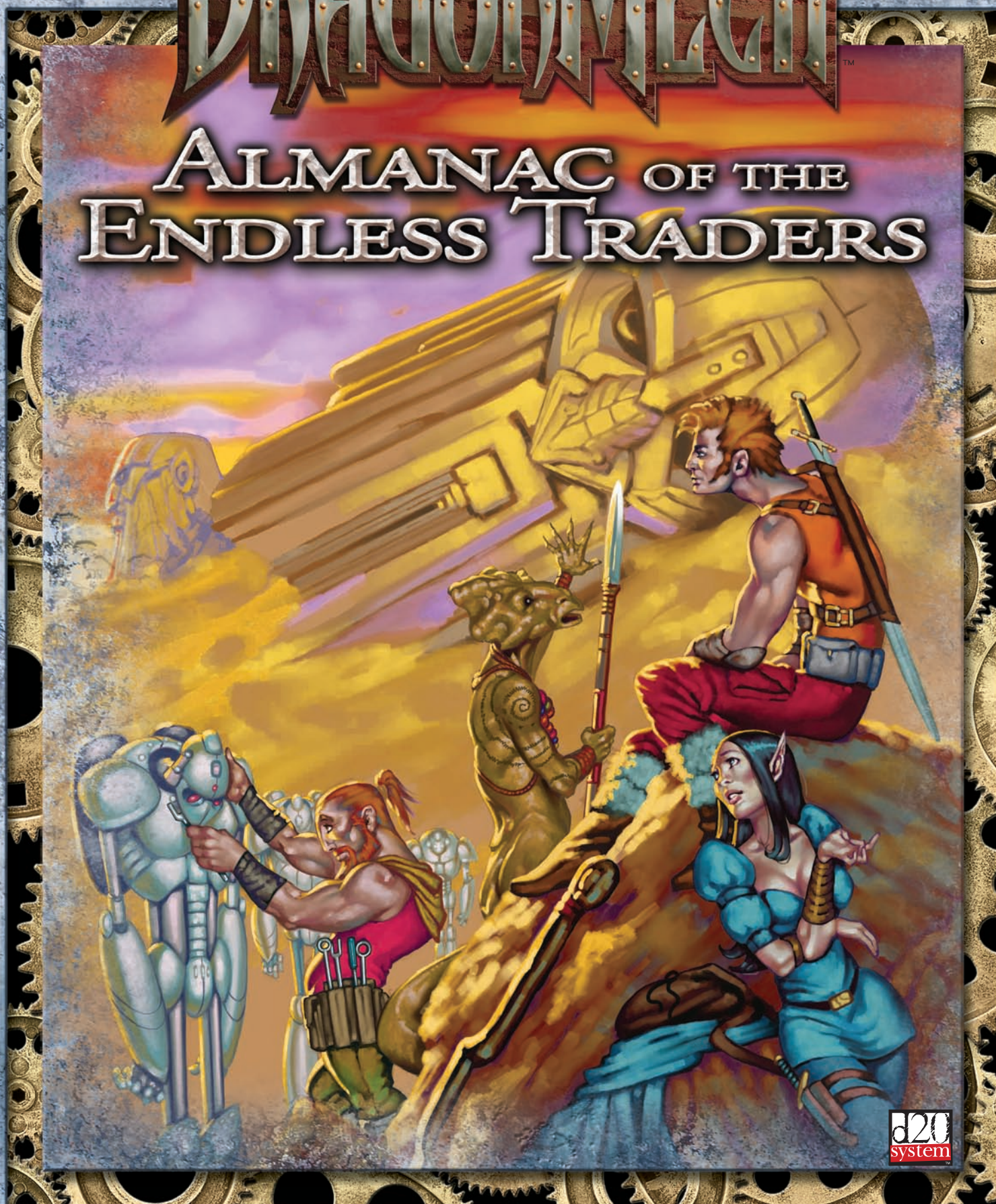


MEDIEVAL FANTASY MEETS POWERED BY STEAM, MAGIC, OR THE LABOR OF A THOUSAND SEAVES

DRAGONMECH

ALMANAC OF THE ENDLESS TRADERS



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system

ALMANAC OF THE ENDLESS TRADERS

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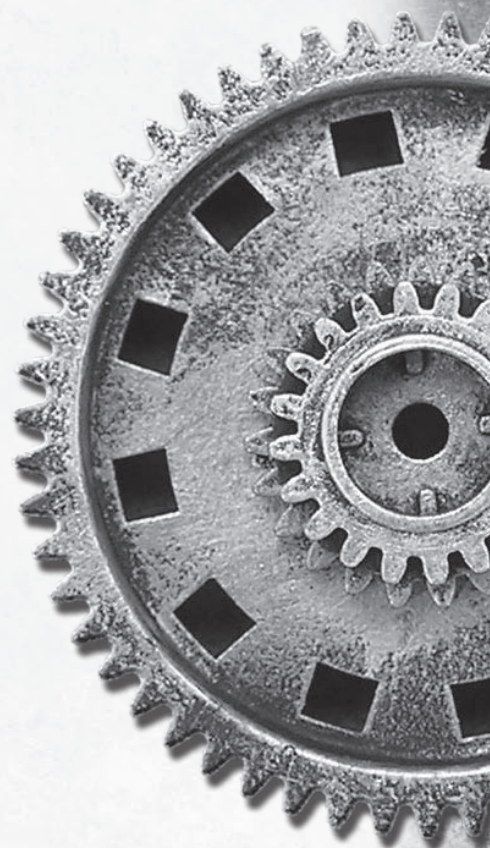
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INTRODUCTION

SO, YOUNG FRIEND, YOU FANCY YOURSELF A TRAVELER. YOU SAY THAT YOU HAVE SEEN EDGE, THE GREATEST OF CITIES? YOU HAVE VISITED THE FOUR MIGHTY MECHDOMS THAT STALK THE LAND OF HIGHPOINT LIKE A CHILD'S WIND-UP TOY? ALL THIS YOU MAY HAVE SEEN, YES, BUT YOU ARE NOW SPEAKING WITH TYSRE. FOR YEARS AND YEARS, AND YEARS BEYOND THAT, I HAVE CROSSED THE LENGTH OF HIGHPOINT, BOTH OVER ITS MOON-SCARRED SURFACE AND THROUGH THE WILD LANDS BELOW. TYSRE IS AN ENDLESS TRADER, YOU SEE, AND MY LIFE'S WORK IS TO TRAVEL. DO NOT SPEAK TO ME OF THE PLACES EVERYONE KNOWS.

Ah, I see you turn away. Please, a moment. Tysre apologizes for any hard feelings. Sometimes an old woman speaks without thought, for all she hears is the whisper of that black chariot which will carry her to... well, wherever we go when our hearts tire of beating. So. You would know the mysteries of Highpoint? It may be that I can help.

I have here a book. Rare, yes, perhaps the only one of its kind. For some time now, Tysre has listened to the tales of her fellow endless traders. This book is our tale, after a fashion. Not some dry atlas, not a work of

ridiculous fiction — this book tells of the year's seven months, and of our journeys along the Endless River. We see many things then. We meet all of Highpoint's people, trading to each what they need and desire. Some years ago, I began collecting the stories we tell. All in our own voices is this book written; none other is like it.

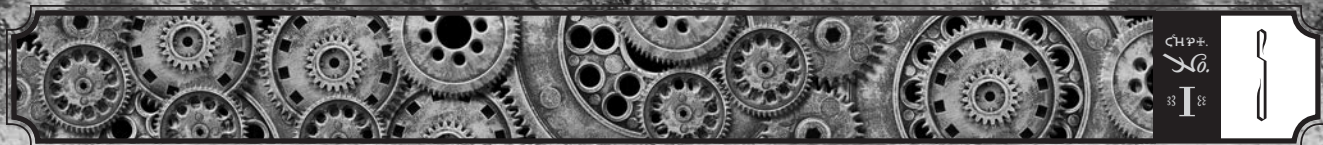
But I am not long for the world. When I am gone, perhaps none of my kin will care to read these tales of the seven months. Even worse, perhaps they will fear that Tysre has revealed their secrets, and this

book will be thrown into the fire. A nasty thought. It would be better if my almanac were in the hands of one who would use it. Someone who wishes to know the story of the renegade necromancer of the Wet Desert; someone who might someday visit the Stone Grove and its mad druids; someone who has not yet seen the mighty city of Duerok nor met its many clans; someone who would learn who leads the orcs of the Endless Plains; someone who may understand the strange meetings that my kinsman Ascot Meirge had with Gearwrights and constructors.

You are such a person, child. Your tongue says "maybe" but your eyes sparkle as they say "yes." Tysre knows that look. You wish to learn the secrets of my people, and see what we have seen. Very well. What you desire shall be yours. All that remains is to agree on a price....

The Almanac of the Endless Traders is a guidebook to the yet-unexplored parts of Highpoint. Each chapter covers a different month of the Highpoint calendar — Arie, Cammerce, Highwater, Duerok, Flero, Jealo, and Lowwater — and focuses on what the endless traders encounter during that time, from the perspective of a different trader or clan. The chapters cover four main topics: *The Land, Inhabitants, Trading Information, and Threats to Travelers.*





ARIE

I DON'T MEAN TO BUTT IN, BUT THAT PHANTASMAL SEA STAR BRANDY YOU ORDERED IS FAKE. SOMEBODY JUST THREW A FAERIE FIRE ENCHANTMENT ON A JUG OF PLAINSMEN'S WHISKEY. YOU'VE PROBABLY HAD TOO MUCH ALE TO NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE.

How do I know? I was the only distributor of Phantasmal Sea Star Brandy. And now, due to some treachery, my supplier is no longer doing business with me. So there is no more Phantasmal Sea Star Brandy in this part of the world.

I'm Spariln, with the Mabb Makut tribe of endless traders. I was their leader once. Our specialty is appraisal and authentication. A lot of folks pay us to verify that whatever they bought is real. We also deal in things that might be forgeries or fakes — like that brandy. But my tribesman sold

me out and now we have neither brandy nor status.

Oh, will you now? Well, I suppose I can't slight a fellow for trying to pick up business I've lost. I'm sure your experience in... what have you been doing, worm farming? Horse stall mucking? I'm sure your wealth of experiences will assist you in your quest to establish your Phantasmal Sea Star Brandy monopoly. I'll tell you what. If you buy the next round, I'll tell you how to get there and what happened. Maybe you can learn from my mistakes.

THE LAND

THE FOAMING MAZE

The first step is to ride the current of the Endless River directly into the cliff wall beneath Salt City. A series of openings are scattered across the cliff face, and if you know which way to go, you can ride the current.

The caves wind their way down like a braid woven by a blind, shivering milkmaid. The current speeds up just as the light fades away. A wrong turn means getting sucked into the river or smashing your boat on the rocks. The turns and branches come fast — no time to think, stop, or turn back.

We call this place the Foaming Maze



because the rapids, and whatever filth has poured down from Salt City, cover the water with a layer of froth. It's not pleasant, but it gets us to the underdeep. We spend four hours with rushing water before the river flattens out to a more respectable pace of descent. Then we find ourselves in a cavern that's flooded with seawater half the year.

THE CORAL JUNGLE

Once you get through the maze, you'll find yourself in a warm, humid cavern that's much larger than it looks. On either side of the river are strange, forking shapes that look like purple stone. What you'll be looking at is a living thing — dormant coral. During the time when this area is flooded, they awake to eat, breed, and do all the things that corals do. But during the dry months, they sleep. The structures they build fill the chamber with stiff branching limbs and ridges that fill the cavern from top to bottom on both sides. Some of these corals reach thirty feet high.

A lot of what lives down there is what you're used to finding on the seashore: pale crawfish, crabs, mussels, and even some bats that have learned to scavenge sea life like shorebirds. Other things are more strange, however — worms and jellies prey on the smaller animals. An aboleth was once seen in the river, and squids the size of dogs seem to talk to one another through flashes of light along their bodies. Of course, I shouldn't forget the phantasmal sea stars — pudgy little stars the size of your fist that glow with a ghostly light. Deeper in the Coral Jungle, you'll find newts the size of pigs, giant beetles, and the more usual kinds of bats and other underground inhabitants.

The only full-time humanoid residents are the Low Slathem. An odd name, you might think, but this is the name the High Slathem use to differentiate their civilized city from the humble coral cottages of the refugees outside their door. Normally you

might not expect anything of worth from a group of wretched fishermen making a life in the jungle beneath the world, but they are the producers of Phantasmal Sea Star Brandy. They've learned how to take the guts of the glowing stars and mix them with some fungus and water to slowly ferment until it develops a unique flavor and mellow glow.

These folks either left Salt City or are descended from those who left. I can't say I blame them — that place is depressing and completely without interest to anyone who has a smidge of ambition. So, hearing rumors of the High Slathem city below them, they have navigated the Foaming Maze to the Coral Jungle. It's not an easy trip, even if they can breath underwater. Most arrive with broken limbs and bruised egos.

It's then they discover the real blow to their worldview — the High Slathem want nothing to do with their surface cousins. They see them as uncultured, unskilled, and unworthy of the wealth the High Slathem have created for themselves. The Low Slathem are then left outside the gate, trying to find a way to survive.

They do have a knack for it. Many become druids or rangers. They hunt for food, and they've found ways to build homes by encouraging the coral to grow in certain patterns. It took generations, but now they have a small village shaped from coral. They harvest fish and brew an exotic brandy that earns a good price. If you ask me, they're much better off than those fools in Salt City.

They're led by a ranger named Polsi. They try to give the impression of civilization, probably to show that the High Slathem are wrong about them. The Low Slathem would still like to get in the city — for all their work, they're still vulnerable to attack out there in the jungle. They don't even have a place on the Arie Docks, the permanent trading post downriver, so they wade out to trade with us when we come by.

That was how this problem started. Polsi came out with his crew to trade, and my tribesman Rory was complaining about

how long they were taking to load their product into our rafts. Polsi got mad.

"Well, if we had warehouses and docks like the High Slathem, this would go more quickly."

This wasn't the first time he had asked for this. But this time we had just offended them, and the Sea Star Brandy had opened many doors for me. So I said, "You're absolutely right."

"Of course I am," said Polsi, suspiciously. "But when have you cared?"

"I'm always looking out for your interests," I said earnestly. "I have always thought that putting you near those snooty aristocrats would be uncomfortable for you. But I just realized that there's an empty spot in the shallows downriver of the High...er, City Slathem. We'll put you next to the Gearwrights. It will be perfect."

Polsi had stopped blinking so much and looked at me with curiosity. "All right, then," he said. "I'll be at the Arie Docks in three days to begin planning the dock and the warehouse."

"Perfect," I said. "We should be loading up to head out around then. I'll look forward to the groundbreaking ceremony."

Rory grimaced at me after they splashed back into the jungle. "The High Slathem are *not* going to like this."

"It will be fine," I said. "I'm putting them across the river from Untep. The High Slathem have no reason to go there."

THE ARIE DOCKS

The docks Polsi referred to are a collection of stone structures about the size of a small town. It's only populated during Arie when the endless traders are passing through. It consists of storage buildings and dockyards surrounded by a wall, with a variety of hospitality establishments scattered throughout. The docks were on both sides of the river, and some industrious goblins operated a few ferries to get people across.

However, few actually do cross, because the Arie Docks are segregated by race.



The High Slathem and the Gearwrights Guild maintained their docks on the left bank, while the Kingdom of Constructs, the Cult of Selentia, and Untep's Master used the docks on the right bank. These were the major powers in this part of the underdeep, and none of them were allies. Political stability here relies on a precarious balance between these forces, and anything which tips that balance threatens a war that would quickly spread upward.

So when we arrived at the Arie Docks, our first docking appointment was in a few hours with the Gearwrights Guild. I decided to start with them and work my way across the docks. I skipped over the High Slathem even though their dock was upriver of the Gearwrights and therefore right along my path. I was still uncertain how I would discuss the Low Slathem's warehouse and wanted time to figure out how to frame it as a favor to the High Slathem.

The Gearwrights Guild Dock

The Gearwrights who came here represented the Great Repository, which is the largest and oldest of all Gearwright guild halls. The folks who get assigned here are the best coglayers in the world, so even the bureaucrats they send to handle the trading are elite craftspeople. Armed servants and strange clockwork puppets guard the walls around their dock. The puppets are made of a strange alloy which looks like gold but is stronger than iron. It doesn't rust, which is probably why they use it by the saltwater river.

The Gearwrights had a long list from their superiors of things to purchase, most of which were obscure materials for experiments. As I said, obscure and hard-to-identify products are my tribe's specialty, so we do good business with the Gearwrights. We agreed on terms, and I found the goblins and rode across the Endless River to where the Stygian contingent waited.

Untep's Master's Dock

Untep was once an endless trader, but not one of our tribe. One year while traveling through the Coral Jungle and he was approached by... someone. He's never been open about who or what came to him that day. He agreed to an arrangement whereby he would lead groups from the Stygian Depths to barter with the endless traders. In exchange, he would be granted invulnerability and eternal life. He accepted the job, and the next day Untep's Master's Dock appeared downstream of the Cult of Selentia's dock.

Untep's guests varied from year to year, so you never knew what you would find at the docks. This year there were six short but human-sized creatures, hidden inside red robes that were too large for them. As I got closer, I saw that their skin was pink and segmented like an earthworm.

I greeted Untep, and the red-robed creatures stepped forward with what I took for interest. He gestured to them, "Good to see you. May I introduce the Thayr. They are asking about your tribe's talents specifically."

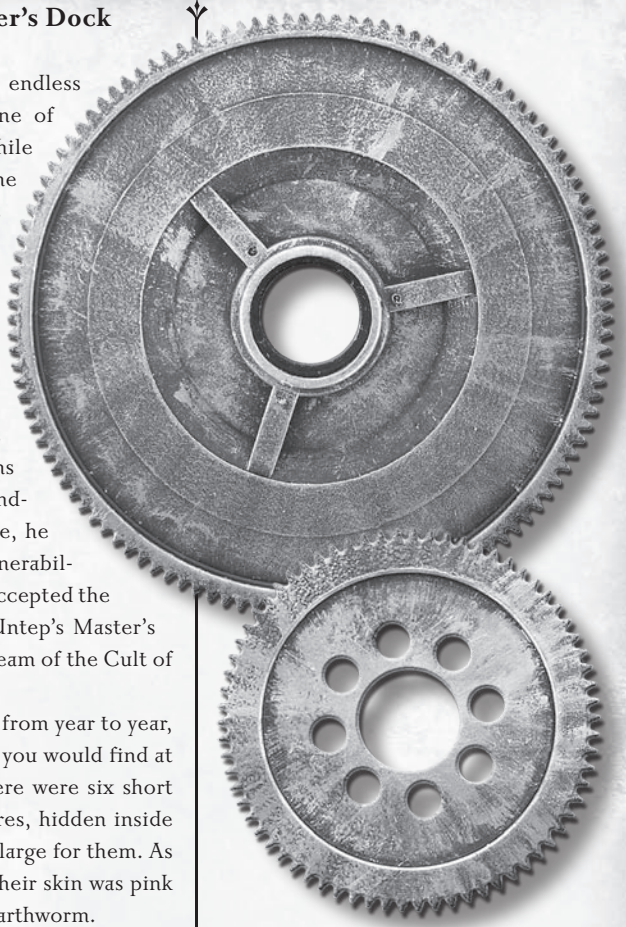
"Yes, we have heard you are skilled at the identification of objects," one of them murmured. His voice had a bit of a gurgle to it.

"That is one of the services we offer," I said. "What do you need identified?"

The lead one handed me a simple leather strap. "Please tell us what this was for and who owned it," he said.

I nodded. "We can have the information ready for you when we are scheduled to meet with you at the docks, in three days. Is there anything else?"

They shook their heads, so I bade Untep and his charges farewell.



The Kingdom of Constructs

My next two stops were perfect examples of people whose minds had cracked but whose purses were brimming. The first, the King of the Constructs, came to the docks personally because he could not trust his minions to carry out the trade for him.

Minare Tang had been one of the most powerful members of the College of Constructors. An elf who spent all of his considerable life studying the art of creating and manipulating steamworks with magic, he helped guide the College from its origins as a small offshoot to become a serious player in the world of magic — and now that the White Congress is dispersed and weakened, some might argue it is the pre-eminent school of magic on Highpoint.

But for all his accomplishments, Tang

grew old and he began hearing things. He told a few close associates that he believed he was close to a breakthrough — a powerful spell capable of creating a construct with a new soul, not one stolen from a living being. His friends became concerned, and asked him what the point was. He admitted that the soulless constructs had asked for his help in this matter. That's when the College realized it must cast out its most esteemed member or risk being dragged down with the folly of his autumn years.

He accepted exile, and marched down to the underdeep with all the constructs he had created over the years. He insists to those who ask that he has succeeded in producing constructs with "partial souls," whatever that might mean. He speaks to his clockwork creations as though they are his friends.

When I met Tang at the dock, one of the guardian constructs gently placed an upholstered chair behind him so he could rest. It was an oddly delicate action for a tall, angular piece of machinery equipped with rotating saws and a shoulder-mounted steamgun.

"Many thanks, Matthias," Tang said, sitting down. He smiled at the constructs who had gathered around him in concern. "I'm fine, please, see if our guest needs anything."

I insisted I was fine and turned my attention toward the King. He had abandoned wizard's robes for more regal attire. He was beardless, and his hair though long was tightly bound in a series of metal hoops that descended down his back. His skin seemed to shine with a bright but delicate energy, like candlelight shining through parchment. He wore iron jewelry, including a coronet, rings, and a medallion bearing the coat of arms of his kingdom.

As usual, Tang needed obscure spell components. His experiments were expensive, but fortunately his kingdom was literally a mining machine so he had plenty of wealth to spend on it. We made our arrangements, and I proceeded to the next dock.

The Cult of Selentia

As I said, crackpots can still be rich, and none were crazier or wealthier than the Cult. It started as a small sect dedicated to the chaotic evil moon goddess Selentia millennia ago, long before the lunar rains. Having achieved some success on the surface, they next decided to convert the inhabitants of Duerok. The dwarven priests were not open-minded about new religions, so they rounded up the evangelists and their converts and exiled them. The Cult dwindled on the surface, and after the lunar rains started, the remaining Selentians were hunted down and killed. In the underdeep, however, they made a home for themselves and found some security.

In truth, this security existed largely because everyone down there was so insulated from the lunar rains and other lunar threats. It was all a rumor to them. But the cultists were clever and were quick to convert some of the goblinoids in the area. Today, the Cult is run by humans and dwarves, but the bulk of the faithful are bugbears, orcs, goblins, gnolls, and trolls.

They were fairly reclusive for generations, but at the start of the lunar rains, the holy symbol on their temple began to shine. Now all of their holy symbols glow with what appears to be moonlight. At this time, the high priestess began to receive instructions from her goddess. She was to build an army and return to the surface as a conquering force.

You wouldn't be the first to suggest that maybe these folks are worshipping a lunar god rather than a terrestrial one. That could be, but I suspect that it's just as likely that the original goddess is feeling her territory invaded by these lunar gods. When people look to the moon, they don't look to her anymore. And that would upset a moon goddess, I'd expect, especially one with a nasty temper. So I figure they're getting this army together to fight the lunar threat on the surface and reclaim the moon for Selentia. And if, in the process, they conquer all of Highpoint, that fits her

plans, too.

The priestess in charge of trading with us was a dwarf named Helya. She was a gruff woman, all efficiency. You could tell she had no respect for the hobgoblins who accompanied her as guards. Every instruction included some kind of insult, although in her defense I think hobgoblins prefer it that way.

"Helya," I called out, "welcome back to the Arie Docks."

She saw me and wandered over. "It's good to talk to someone who can put two words together without grunting from the effort."

"The Mabb Makut are at your disposal."

The High Priestess had gotten on Helya about the lack of *dispel good* scrolls in the arsenal, so she focused on that first and foremost. I offered her a few of those and some other items we had found along the way set aside for her special needs. I was proud to notice the *arrows of dwarf slaying* and the *unholy mace* impressed her. We agreed on terms and parted ways.

The High Slathem

I paid the goblins for the return trip and grudgingly made my way to the High Slathem docks. This area was the busiest of them all, as every trader needs to make some sort of deal with the High Slathem.

They had earned their wealth by becoming masters of abjuration and transmutation. What they lack in breadth they make up for in depth. In particular, they are known for their ability to place enchantments into paint. With the assistance of steam-driven paint applicators, they are able to enchant one of our boats in minutes. Every endless trader boat and raft is decorated in lemon yellow and forest green, which imbues them with *protection from fire* and *feather fall*, which are essential to the next stage of our trip.

Keeping this in mind, I began haggling with the slathem. My heart wasn't in it, but the process was so ritualized by now that neither of us really had much room to move. Once the arrangement was com-



plete, I began to broach the subject I had tried to avoid all morning.

"So, listen... is it Ruth?"

"Rrth."

"I'm sorry, Rrth. Listen, there is one other thing I should bring to your attention. I thought having the Low Slathem making trades before we get to these docks was a bit unfair to you and your services. So to help with that, I got the Low Slathem to agree to move downriver from the Arie Docks on that sandy mess near the Gearwrights' Dock."

Rrth blinked at me. I hate it when they blink.

"So you propose that the Low Slathem be allowed a place at the Arie Docks?"

"Not so much at the docks as near the docks. I would say 'in the vicinity' of the Arie Docks."

She didn't respond, but walked back into the crowd. I was willing to take the lack of a response to mean acceptance, but then I saw her return with a slathem I recognized as Jir, the dock manager.

"Rrth tells me you want to let the Low Slathem build a dock."

"Only to place them downriver from your commerce...."

"Have you asked anyone else about this?"

"Well, no," I said. "I only asked you out of sympathy for the delicate relationship you have with them."

"We have no relationship with the Low Slathem," he said. "They are parasites, and we make sure they cannot come near enough to us to feed. I am certain every other participant at these docks feels likewise."

I didn't quite know how to respond to that, but he continued, saving me the trouble.

"We will consider allowing this only if you have gotten the approval of the leader of every other kingdom at these docks."

I smiled. "No problem," I said. "I can check in with the other dock managers and get back to you by tomorrow."

"Not the dock managers," said Jir. "The leaders. Ask the people in charge of their societies."

"Jir, be reasonable," I said. "That could take days of travel, even a week."

"When you finish, we'll take you to our king and you will hear his decision."

"If I do all this traveling," I said, "I want some kind of assurance that King Ufsin isn't just going to forbid it anyway and make it all a waste of my time."

Jir smiled at me. "I suggest you try being persuasive."

So the choice was to waste a week running around the underdeep on the outside chance I could keep my promise to the Low Slathem, or to give up on the dock and try to find an alternative that would please

the Low Slathem. I believed I could talk my way into anything, so I told Rory to keep the appointments with the various customers, gave him the list of what to trade and for how much, and headed out to set up a meeting with the Master Gearwrights.

INHABITANTS

THE GOLDEN DOOR: THE MASTER REPOSITORY

I discussed the matter with the Senior Cogulator at the docks, and because of my position as an endless trader, he thought it would be all right if I traveled to the Master Repository to make my case.

"The Master Repository is not close, but it is a quick trip. We have conveyances that take us quickly to and from the Arie Docks. You can make the entire trip by the end of the day."

I agreed and was led to the Golden Door. Because the Coral Jungle filled with water ever year, one of the important features of the Arie Docks was nowhere near the docks — the Trade Doors. The passages to the actual domains of each trading group were carefully closed off to both water and attack by these huge doors.

The door to the road to the Master Repository was clad in the same gold-colored metal that the constructs were made from. The constructs from the docks stand guard at the door for the rest of the year after Arie, and the total



effect is that an army of gold guards the path.

Behind the door was something like an oversized ore cart. It had smooth seats and compartments for cargo. The Cogulator motioned for me to get in and arranged some straps so that I could not fall out of the vehicle. Now that I was a bit higher, I could see a single metal rail that stretched into the darkness. A note was scrawled and pressed into my hands by my guide, and then he pressed a lever. I heard a steam engine start up and the cart began to move forward.

The cart followed the rail and picked up speed as the path took us around a bend from the Golden Door. There were lights in the immediate area, and soon we began passing through open areas as well as narrow tunnels. In the open areas, I caught glimpses of devastated cities and ruined temples. Often eyes would reflect back at me from inside the collapsed buildings.

I had about thirty minutes to ponder these fallen civilizations until I found myself approaching the door to the legendary Master Repository. It was huge—a decent-sized mech could walk through those doors without stooping. I know this because one loomed next to them, a solid-looking specimen that stood quietly at attention next to the path. It did not move, but occasionally you would see a puff of smoke float from one of the pipes extending from its sides.

The door was stone, and so large and uniform I was uncertain if I should approach the mech or the door to offer my letter of introduction from the Senior Cogulator. It

was neither, it turned out, as the cart came to a stop near a guard station. A dwarf came forward, looking suspiciously at my human frame.

I offered him the letter, and he nodded and led me to a person-sized door to the left of the main doors. I went through it and emerged into the courtyard of the Master Repository, the most secretive and powerful institution in the modern world.

There were many people striding purposefully across the courtyard, but despite their obvious distraction and the piles of books and sketches they carried, they remained courteous to each other. The floor was paved with black stones veined with white that were polished so smooth you could see the reflections of the Guild members walking across it, while a guard was controlling a small polishing machine that ran by itself across the floor to eliminate any boot scratches as soon as they were made.

Columns rose from the floor, supporting the weight of the great ceiling and hundreds of feet of solid rock. They were decorated with tiny pieces of different colored metals, creating a sparkling mosaic that reflected the dim light, speckling the white and green walls with odd shapes.

The guard told me to wait there, and then murmured into a wavemaker. I sat on a bench and watched the people bustling around me for about an hour, and began to wonder if I could simply ask to return in the cart when a dwarf approached. He smiled and shook my hand, introducing himself as Master Cogulator Rorka.

"Why don't you come with me to my office? I'll show you the Cogulator facilities on the way." It wasn't really a question, as he turned and began walking before I could respond. He was a brusque manager.

An archway declared the name of the specialization in shadowy metallic letters as we left the courtyard. There was a long hallway with workshops, but not just the mechanic shops and forges I expected. The Cogulators are the experimenters of the Guild, and so there were rooms with

rows of bottles and stoves more suited to an alchemist's shop than a coglayer's den.

He drew my attention to a window nearly hidden behind a large, black rectangular object that appeared to be solid metal. It gave off a very faint hum, and I quickly decided that I would ignore the bones that littered the floor.

"This building was originally a palace in the capital of a great empire during the First Age of Walkers," Rorka explained. "When the emperor fled his enemies and the city was abandoned, he offered it to us. Although wars and years have worn down the greatest beauties of the city, I wanted to show you those alcoves along the far wall of the cavern."

I could scarcely see them in the gloom, but eventually saw the hollows that ran lengthwise up the wall, taller than any building in the city.

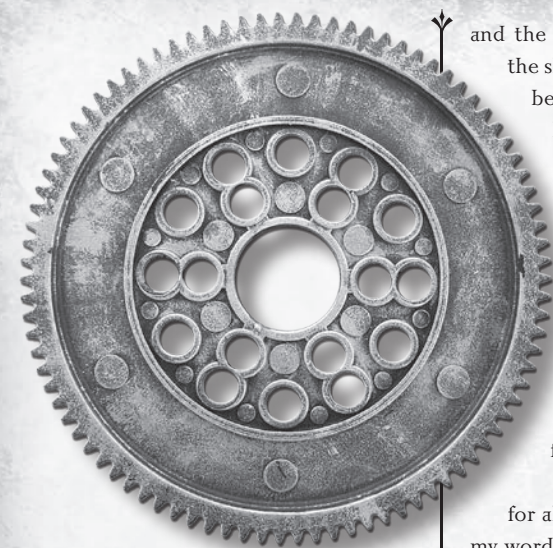
"Those were lifters to bring the mechs of this empire to the surface. This was the industrial and political center of the empire. From here, the emperor was able to control the entire surface of Highpoint."

I stared at the ruins with new appreciation of what had been accomplished by these ancient people. In the rubble nearby, I caught glimpses of decorative stone tiles as beautiful as those used in the Repository. In my mind, I completed the curves and outcroppings implied by the shattered walls and realized that at its height this city would have been more elegant than anything on Highpoint even before the lunar rains ruined the surface.

The Master Cogulator's expansive office had what you might expect—a large desk, comfortable seats and tables, and a bookcase, although in this case the books were made entirely of metal and were as large as chests. Just beyond the office was the Master Cogulator's private workshop.

"My associate tells me in his letter what you need. I have no particular problem with the Low Slathe's presence at the Arie Docks. However, this brings up the question of access to this area in the wider sense, and this is something that has been





troubling me for some time.

"I showed you the city because our Guild was responsible for the power of that empire. We survived its collapse because the invaders thought we might be useful to them, and as they in turn were conquered and then those final conquerors disappeared into the darkness, we remained. It could easily have gone differently for us, but for the wisdom of the Masters disassociating themselves from power and politics as it became clear the end was near.

"Many of my colleagues believe the Stenian Confederacy is our opportunity to once again become the architects of an empire. We have purposefully held back our most advanced technology from them, not to place them at risk, but because we must weigh the risks of the tools we can offer against the needs of the surface to protect itself.

"I believe that to place all our technology in the hands of politicians would result in a time of war and chaos that would make the lunar invasion look like a minor inconvenience. Worse yet, if we were to assume the stewardship of the Stenian Confederacy, we would become the danger ourselves. The slide from savior to tyrant is a short one.

"But those who believe we must take a greater role on the surface are trying to create an easier route between ourselves

and the surface. Long ago we collapsed the shafts of the lifters, but they could be cleared, or other routes could be found. It would be worth a great deal of money and power to many if our Repository were accessible to the outside world.

"I will give you my approval for the Low Slathem's dock if you will give me your assurance that the endless traders will not help create a new route from here to the surface."

"Rorka, you know I can't speak for all traders," I said, "but I will give my word that what influence I have I will use against developing any new trade routes. Easier access to the underdeep works against our interests as much as yours. I don't think you have anything to worry about from us."

He walked to the door and opened it. "Good luck with your new dock," he said, and I understood I was being dismissed. I walked quickly down the hallway with my first task completed, and the guard was happy to send me on my way back to the Coral Jungle.

THE MASSIVE DOOR: THE KINGDOM OF CONSTRUCTS

My next stop would be to visit King Minare Tang at his dock, but luck was not on my side this time. The elderly monarch had become quite ill, and so had been taken back to his home to be cared for by his nursing constructs. I would have to go to the Kingdom itself to see him and get his permission.

One of the constructs carried me awkwardly through the Massive Door, which was a hole in the cavern carved out with a huge boulder sitting to one side. It was shaped to fit perfectly in the hole, and was so large that it would take enormous strength or several constructs working in concert to move it in or out of place.

The construct that carried me rolled on

wheels and was much quicker than I would have been, but I missed the comfort of the Gearwrights' cart. This machine had not been created to carry people. Several of its manipulator arms were squeezed tightly around my chest and waist so that I could be secured against its side. I thought of a few other positions that might have been less painful, but I couldn't find any way to communicate them to the construct.

Where the Master Repository was luxury surrounded by ruin, the Kingdom of Constructs was order carved out of nothing. There wasn't even a crevice to climb through in this part of the underdeep until Tang and his constructs had arrived, and over a few decades the entire area had been carved out of raw stone. I saw several mining constructs working on finishing a new room as I came into the area, while some smaller machines carried baskets of stone and ore to some unknown location.

The surfaces were not polished, but the walls were at exact right angles, and the tool marks from the drills and chisels were so symmetrical that they created a pattern I found rather elegant. The halls and rooms were in a repeating pattern: A sixty-foot hallway would begin and end in a fifteen-foot-wide square room, which would have openings on all four walls to other hallways with exactly the same proportions.

While efficient, this made it incredibly difficult to navigate, and I realized after only a few moments that I would never be able to find my way out of this maze on my own. It didn't take long, however, until we came to a room that was different than the rest.

It was still square and still had the same repeating pattern of toolmarks in the stone, but this open area was the size of one of the grids — sixty feet on a side — with only a few columns placed at regular intervals to support the ceiling. I was sure the columns were perfectly circular.

There were many constructs in this room, performing all sorts of tasks, from polishing the iron throne in the center of the room to folding laundry and placing it inside a large wardrobe. The largest

stood next to a bed where King Minare lay alongside the wall. It had a cool cloth in one hand and a nozzle that emitted a slow, soft jet of warm steam around his head and chest. He saw me enter and sat up, motioning me to come over.

I had never seen a throne room that also served as a bedroom, but then King Minare was an eccentric king who ruled an even more eccentric kingdom. I approached his bed, and bowed.

"Please rise, trader," he wheezed. "You're not one of my subjects. Too pink." He laughed softly.

"Of course, your majesty. I was sorry to hear of your illness. I brought some dried herbs I collected on the Endless Plains that should allow you to breathe easier. Can I get you anything else?"

He took the herbs and examined them, then handed them to his nursing construct. It placed them in a tank of water, and suddenly the steam took on a sharp aromatic smell that made me a little giddy.

Tang breathed deeply, and smiled. "That does help, thank you," he said, and his voice sounded stronger. "I assume you're looking for something in trade for those?"

"Nothing that will be too taxing on your treasury. The Low Slathem would like to build a place for themselves at the Arie Docks, and I thought I could serve as intermediary to ensure that there would be no problems with your new neighbors."

"I like neighbors," he said. "I still fail my constructs — I cannot find a way to give them a full soul. Have you ever spoken to someone with a partial soul? They are not engaging conversationalists."

I had nothing to offer along these lines of thought, so I stayed silent.

"I have thought that perhaps my problem was a lack of religious training. Souls are, after all, divine in nature, are they not? But those cultists are unpleasant and rude."

One thing I learned while trading is that sales are lost through talking too much. I continued waiting.

"Do you think there is a cleric among the Low Slathem? Do you think they would be willing to teach me how the gods give mortals souls?" King Minare was insane, perhaps, but he was no fool. He knew an opportunity for leverage when he saw it.

"Your majesty, there are not clerics among the Low Slathem as such," I said, imagining the horror and indignation the slathem druids would express if asked them to help give a soul to a machine, "but there are some texts on the subject I could obtain fairly easily in Duerok. I could return with these books if that would help in your work."

"A book would be acceptable," he allowed, "but what I really need is a cleric. Someone who can explain the workings of the divine with schematics and models."

Despite his ravings, I knew what he really meant. He knew that his life was almost over, and he needed someone to carry on his work, caring for his creations and continuing the effort to give them all full souls.

"I will return next year with the books, King Minare, and see what I can do about the cleric. But you know it is difficult to travel to this depth. It may be hard to find someone who is willing."

He sighed. "Difficult... yes, I remember. Why did they fear me and my friends? Would it be such a horrible thing? They didn't have to send me away, I would have shared what I learned..." He

began absentmindedly stroking the nursing construct's steam nozzle affectionately.

"So the Low Slathem can build their dock?"

"Yes, of course. More neighbors would be wonderful..."

The nursing construct rearranged Tang's pillows so he could lay back. It pulled up the blanket as he slipped into slumber, and then turned toward me. It was disconcerting to me how its expressionless visual sensors seemed to chastise me for bothering the king so long. I turned to the transport construct which took me back to the docks.

THE OPAL DOOR: THE TEMPLE OF SELENTIA

Rory had done a fair job of carrying out the trades I had arranged for that day, so the next day I felt confident that our affairs would be handled appropriately while I approached Helya and asked if I could speak to the High Priestess. She looked at me in surprise.

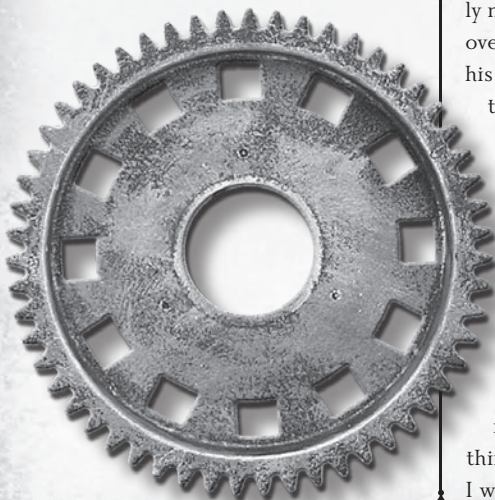
"Are you finally willing to follow the Pale Queen, Trader?"

"No, I have my own gods," I replied. "I need to ask her permission regarding adding a new dock downriver from here."

"I understand," she said. "You need to keep face with the other endless traders. You can't publicly proclaim the obeisance to Our Lady you feel in your heart. I'll send you to the temple, and what you do there is your own business. No one will hear anything from me."

She took me to the Opal Door, which was not a door in the physical sense. It was a gleaming symbol of Selentia inscribed on the stone wall. A priestess of Helya's rank could activate it to work as a portal to their temple. She chanted for a while, and then the door suddenly gave off an intense light. I couldn't see past the light, but Helya motioned me to step through, so I did.

There was a feeling like stepping through a cool waterfall and then I was inside a dif-





ferent cavern. Two gnolls growled and stepped forward with spears, and beyond them I could see the pyramid-shaped temple clearly in the light of the huge glowing holy symbol at its apex.

Helya had stepped through behind me, and said, "Step back, idiots. You on the left, this trader wants an audience with the High Priestess. Take him there now." She wished me goodbye and stepped back through the portal, which quickly re-sealed and dimmed back to a shimmer.

My trip this far had been nearly instantaneous, but I had many stairs to climb before I reached the chambers of the High Priestess. The gnoll who escorted me was jumpy, and seemed uncomfortable with my presence. Or perhaps he was uncomfortable with our destination. While goblinoids and other underground evil races had been welcomed to join the cult, Helya's treatment of them was typical of the attitude the dwarf and human cultists held toward their fellow believers. A misstep around the High Priestess could result in death or worse.

From higher up on the temple, I could see the array of camps surrounding the temple which housed the growing army of Selentia. Makeshift barracks and armories were scattered across the entire floor of the cavern. I estimated from the buildings and the figures I saw scurrying along the ground that there were about ten thousand troops.

I had never met the High Priestess, but she was unmistakable as she came out of a door near the top of the stairs, just below the shining crescent moon. She wore an identical crescent on a thin silver chain which stood out against her dark purple robes. Her blond forehead was graced with a tiara dusted with diamond fragments. She was tall and moved as though she didn't touch the ground. I was surprised — I had not expected the High Priestess to be such a beautiful woman.

But there was no mistaking her position from her bearing and greeting. "Welcome to my temple, trader," she said. "You used some excuse about a building project to justify your trip?"

"It is no excuse, your holiness," I said, "I have come to ask your permission for the Low Slathem to build a dock downriver." I noted that the gnoll tried to crawl into a shadow near the door. He had no need to go to such efforts — the High Priestess was ignoring him completely.

Her expression darkened. "Why would I allow anyone to gain an advantage in trade that might help them survive when my Mistress sends us out to claim the world in her name? All the slathem will bow to her name or be brushed aside."

I hadn't expected this reaction. "The Low Slathem are no threat to you, your holiness. They barely make a living for themselves in the Coral Jungle."

"Perhaps," she said, thinking. "I haven't talked to them much. If they are like these other races, you may be right; they may not pose any threat to Our Lady's plan. But so long as I am surrounded by thugs and brutes that are barely more than animals, I worry that my army might be too weak a tool for Selentia's conquering arm, like a sword poorly forged that snaps in combat."

She looked over to the gnoll with disgust, which was the first time she had acknowledged that he was present. "If only we had access to superior converts, I might not be so nervous."

Suddenly, I knew what she was asking. I paused for a moment, wondering if I was about to make a horrible mistake, but it was too late now.

"There are other humanoid races that live downriver of the Arie Docks, your holiness," I said. "If you would like, I would be happy to take a pair of evangelists to them."

She smiled broadly in a way that should have indicated pleasure, but what I saw

was the priestess exposing her teeth like a cat who realizes the mouse can't run away. "Well, in that case, I suppose it's hard to see the Low Slathem as a threat to our plans. You have my blessing," she said, and I shuddered, realizing that the blessing of the High Priestess of Selentia might not be profitable to me.

THE FURNACE DOOR: THE STYGIAN DEPTHS

So far, I had promised political support, some religious texts, and berth for two passengers somewhere downriver. All said, given the profits from the brandy, I felt I was still profiting from the arrangement — and in only two days. But the next meeting was completely unpredictable.

"Untep, I need to speak to your master."

Untep lost his smile. "Um... I don't speak to him regularly. I'm not even sure how to get in touch with him."

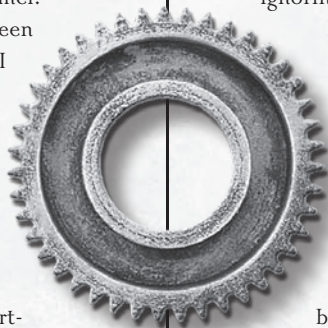
The Thayr heard us and stepped forward. "We may be able to help with that," they said in their gurgling rasp. "Have you been able to discern the owner of the strap?"

I handed it back to them. "I had one of our most skilled experts examine it. He assures me it is simply a strap used to sharpen knives and tools. With a bit of magic, we were able to find the former owner's name. He's a human from the Pitga tribe on the Endless Plains. He was recently conscribed by the Legion. His name is Itzec Greig. For an additional charge, we can find out where he is now."

The Thayr conferred among themselves for a moment, and then their leader turned back to me. "No, his true name and something that belonged to him should be all that is necessary for our purposes. If you would be willing to cut the price of this service in half, however, we would be willing to introduce you to Untep's Master."

I looked to Untep, who shrugged. I agreed to their terms.

"He will only meet with you in the Stygian Depths," the Thayr said. "We have



completed our transactions and will be returning there through teleportation. Would you like us to take you to him?"

Fortunately, I had picked up both a *ring of fire resistance* and a *cloak of heat endurance*. I expected I would have to go to him, and although I have heard that the Stygian Depths are as varied as the surface in terrain and climate, I knew the parts Untep traveled through were hotter than humans could bear. "I would appreciate that," I said.

A few burnt components and a queasy jerking sensation later, I found myself in a narrow, empty stone chamber which was faintly lit red by the glowing rock walls. The long passage was empty and the walls wavered behind currents of super-heated air.

I began to worry that the Thayr had betrayed me, but then a man walked through the rock wall as though it were made of smoke. Well, I say man because it's hard to say what else to call him. He was dressed in fine clothes and had a neatly trimmed moustache, which gave him the look of one of those idle aristocrats who have nothing better to do than look impressive.

"You want my permission for this dock, then?" he asked. His voice and demeanor were relaxed, but seemed more appropriate to a parlor than a volcanic crack in the earth.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He walked closer to me, and waved his hand at the wall. He had walked through it earlier, and now it dissipated, which made me believe it might have been a mist or fog and not rock at all. Below I could see a pan-

orama like nothing I had ever seen. It was as though a living map of the nearby portions of the Stygian Depths was revealed to me.

Rivers of molten rock poured around a settlement that was little more than piles of rocks that the red-plumed bird-men who lived there could crawl under. An elaborate castle — so dark it seemed to absorb the light — was surrounded by a crack that gushed yellow, putrid gases every few minutes. In the distance what I had thought was a wall shuddered, and I realized it was the scaled flank that was the only visible part of some creature that must be longer than the Endless River itself. Living shadows and winged things with the heads of lunatics and tongues that stretched for yards below their bodies floated above the scene on the warm, rising air. There was much more, but this was all I could take in before the wall reformed.

"I won't pretend to say that I rule this land," said the man, "yet I hold significant influence over those who live in this harsh place. It took even me a great deal of time and effort to establish a trade route with the surface, however limited. Why should I offer a place at the table to a group just because they happen to live nearby? What could you or they offer me that would attract my interest?"

Clearly brandy with a clever light gimmick was not going to interest someone who held significant influence over a place like that. Looking at him, I had a sense of being too close to a large object to see it clearly, and briefly I had a vision of a wall of scales. Then I knew what I had to offer.

"You can have my memories," I said. "I can share with you all the things I've seen trading along the Endless River for these years. People, art, music, cities, everything you can't see yourself."

"The deal is made. The slathem may build their dock."

In a series of pain-inducing seizures I went through my entire life in more detail than I would ever have believed was possible. When it was over, I was standing on the dock again.

Untep looked up at me, shook his head, and returned to bundling up his supplies. He has refused to speak to me since.

THE BARRED DOOR: THE CITY OF SLA'MARE

Shaken, I made my way to the High Slathem dock. The Low Slathem would arrive that evening, so I needed to finish these arrangements quickly. Rrth and Jir saw me coming, and when he saw my triumphant smile his eyes widened.

"Untep's Master, the High Priestess of Selentia, King Minare, and Master Rorka have all agreed to the dock being built. Now I want to speak to your king."

This time Jir had little to say. It was clear he had never expected me to get the others to agree, and certainly not in only a few days. He personally escorted me to the Barred Gate.

The High Slathem do not live far from the Coral Jungle, as they prefer their city to be underwater half the year. They have a series of gates, locks, and dams that help slow the water so their homes are flooded without damage. We passed all of this elaborate engineering on our way to Sla'Mare, the city of the High Slathem. There were a few people making repairs or inspecting in preparation for the coming flood, but most of the traffic was for trade. This was the event Sla'Mare's industry prepares for all year, and almost all the wealth they enjoy comes in during Arie.

The High Slathem once used coral as a decoration, having the equivalent of gardens planted throughout the city. Once the Low Slathem began using coral to create their houses, that fell out of fashion, and now these open areas were filled with sculpture and art. Sometimes musicians would play there for the public.

The luxury enjoyed by the city's inhabitants is clear. There is abundant food, the houses are spacious, and the city commissioned amazing architects to design temples, courthouses, schools, and public monuments. Of course, the schools of wiz-





ardry are especially large and luxurious, and the availability of magic improves the lives of the citizens as well. It is a utopian vision, but only for those who have the right to live here.

The royal palace retained the coral decoration of the old style, as this traditional dwelling seemed too sacred to change. However, the High Slathem style of coral arrangement was quite different than the natural look of the Low Slathem architecture. The coral on the palace was polished, shaped, chiseled, and composed to have the utmost effect, so the palace was the dignified statement of a civilization rather than a directed but natural occurrence.

I had to wait for the king, but heady with my successes I was willing to wait. I had no idea how to entice them to abandon their pride, but I was certain something would come to me.

When the king finally saw me, two hours after I had arrived, he was in a much better mood than I expected. King Ufsin was average size for a slathem, and he didn't seem as imperial as I had expected. He welcomed me and asked me to sit with him, offering me kelp wine and marinated whitefish.

"Your request is likely to reignite an old conflict here," he said. "Our people have been divided as to how to manage the surface refugees. Their settlement outside our gates is a compromise. Did you know that?"

I said I did not, politely trying to ignore the time pressure.

"One faction believes they should be accepted as full citizens, trained to be productive and incorporated into our great fortune. These are the idealists.

"The pragmatists believe that if we did this, then soon all of Salt City would descend into our city, and our culture would be diluted and our great achievements eroded by the massive immigration. So their solution is to kill any refugees who seek admittance, to send a message to the surface.

"The beauty of the current compromise solution is that it requires no work of any

kind. That inertia allows us to keep both options open while we try to determine the best course of action. That has continued for generations now.

"Your dock will be opposed by both factions. It creates a permanency to this separate slathem society, which shows that we have neither the compassion to bring them into the fold nor the will to end the threat to our culture they symbolize."

I was about to begin my pitch, but the king interrupted me. "But that's not the end of the story. My people aren't just conflicted in conscience. Many in our city do business with the Low Slathem. They are outsiders, which makes them free from our laws and taxes. So anything our people sell to them is untaxable, and anything we treat as illegal can be dealt through them. Almost every business in the city has some kind of arrangement with them.

"If the Low Slathem have a dock, my officials can watch over them more easily. We can't do much against them, but we can find which of our citizens are breaking our laws. That is why I am in favor of this dock. I hope they build it and do all their trade there."

I was stunned. I had been prepared to have a vigorous debate, but now King Ufsin was telling me why this dock was necessary to him.

So I came back to the raft to tell Rory about my luck and to greet the Low Slathem. Polsi appeared a couple of hours after I got back, with a group of Low Slathem ready to begin work.

"Great news, Polsi," I said. "Not only is the land yours to build on, but I've gotten every group here to agree to accept your dock without any problems."

He blinked again. "Polsi," I said. "Don't blink. I hate it when you blink. What's the problem?"

"The City Slathem," he said. "They approved of us having a dock here?"

I grinned. "I can tell you in confidence that King Ufsin is among its most enthusiastic supporters."

He turned back and murmured with his companions. When they were finished, he

looked back. "We will be at the site," he said. I shook his hand, congratulating him. Then it was time for us to leave.

TRADING INFORMATION

Rory had managed the trades I set up well, and we profited quite a bit. Looking over the commodities, I found our supplies in excellent condition. Each of the factions here has something that an experienced trader can bargain with.

THE GEARWRIGHTS GUILD

The Guild is often looking for specialized materials, such as strange ore, useful gemstones, wood, or other items which are hard to find in the underdeep. There is some trade in luxuries, and of course parchment and drafting supplies are in demand. The Gearwrights occasionally even sell plans or useful gadgets. Some tribes find it worthwhile to trade for parts, which they simply pay for with gold. Then they triple the price and sell these finely crafted parts in other steam-powered societies.

THE KINGDOM OF CONSTRUCTS

There is the biggest supply that King Minare has to offer; in return, he loves esoteric spellbooks, powerful artifacts, and anything he could study to enrich his knowledge of magic as it relates to steamworks. If the Gearwrights were not so mistrusting of him, they might trade directly, but as it is there are more than a few tribes that make a nice cut acting as middlemen.

UNTEP'S MASTER

The trade with Untep and his guests was always varied, but strangely enough the Stygians would rarely ask for anything that was difficult to come by. The year before, Untep's clients had been two fire spirits looking for flame-resistant spellbooks and a creature that appeared to be entirely made of mouths from various species who said he was "looking to complete my culinary education." The trader mothers kept their children on the rafts that year.

THE CULT OF SELENTIA

Weapons, materials to make weapons, and a few bits of magic for the most powerful priests are the goods the Cult demands. In exchange, they have the products created by the ceaseless toil of their goblinoid minions as well as the specialized magic given to them by the goddess. Of particular interest is an oil that will give the person who uses it a controlled form of lycanthropy. However, unless the user kills one person or creature of good alignment before the oil wears off in a week, the condition becomes permanent and an uncontrollable curse.

THE HIGH SLATHEM

Every boat needs to be painted by the High Slatthem to leave safely via the Steam Room downriver. Word of these paints has spread, and they're now in high demand by mechdoms. Imagine getting a single coglayer to apply cat's grace or shield in less time than it would take him to replace a weapon. Of course, the paint can be applied to weapons or armor. It wears off after about a week of use, and once it has lost its charge, it just flakes away.

HIGH SLATHEM ENCHANTED PAINT

The following paints are available in limited quantities from the endless traders or those who buy from them. They are also available from the High Slatthem directly, if you can make your way to their city.

All paints function exactly like the spell indicated, as cast by an 8th-level wizard. They last for one full week, after which time the paint and its effect fall from the object painted. Objects to be painted must have an inflexible surface to be painted, so plate mail could be painted but chain mail cannot be.

Weapons or machines can be painted provided they have an appropriate surface. Prices below are for one pint of paint, which covers 20 square feet of surface. Half the object must be covered by paint for the spell to take effect, meaning that at most an object can be affected by two types of paint. The enchantment dissipates one week after the paint container has been opened,

regardless of whether it has been painted onto an object or how much remains in the container. It takes about 30 minutes to apply one pint of paint, or 5 minutes with a special steam-powered sprayer. To enchant a Gargantuan mech with a steam-powered sprayer, for example, would require roughly 125 pints of paint and 10 hours of work to apply.

When applied to a weapon, the spell affects the use of the weapon, but does not transfer effects unrelated to the weapon's use. So a sword painted light blue for *haste* would grant the wielder attacks as though she were hasted, but while the user is not attacking, the *haste* effect does not apply. A protection spell applied through the paint to a weapon, armor, or shield will apply to the wielder, but only when the enchanted object is wielded. So a sheathed sword or a shield strapped to a backpack would not confer on the bearer *protection from evil* until it is drawn or placed on the arm.

TABLE I-I: ENCHANTED PAINTS

Spell	Spell Level	Color	Price in GP
Resistance	1	Pale gray	4,000
Mending	1	Yellow-green	4,000
Alarm	2	Primary red	8,000
Endure Elements	2	Burnt umber	8,000
Protection from Law/Chaos/Good/Evil	2	White	8,000
Shield	2	Dark gray	8,000
Expeditious Retreat	2	Rose	8,000
Feather Fall	2	Forest green	8,000
Jump	2	Dark blue	8,000
Magic Weapon	2	Ember orange	8,000
Arcane Lock	3	Violet	12,000
Obscure Object	3	Black	12,000
Protection from Arrows	3	Tan	12,000
Resist Energy	3	Red-orange	12,000
Bull's Strength	3	Dark brown	12,000
Cat's Grace	3	Light pink	12,000
Levitate	3	Sky blue	12,000
Spider Climb	3	Crimson	12,000
Nondetection	4	Purple	16,000
Protection from Energy	4	Lemon yellow	16,000
Gaseous Form	4	Olive green	16,000
Haste	4	Light blue	16,000
Keen Edge	4	Bright green	16,000
Greater Magic Weapon	4	Bright orange	16,000
Lesser Globe of Invulnerability	4	Ivory	16,000



THREATS TO TRAVELERS

THE STEAM ROOM

Getting out of the Coral Jungle is a fancy trick. This stretch of the Endless River ends in a briny lake at the bottom of another cliff. The water sits on a geothermal vent. The sulfur and iron in the water colors the coral with oranges and yellows. The steam rises in a huge column, only to cool high above and condense again into an underground rain which feeds the Endless River, reborn as fresh water. We call this place the Steam Room.

Huge geysers erupt from the lake periodically. Because of the High Slathem paint on our boats and rafts, we are able to ride these columns of boiling water up to the top of the cliff. It requires carefully balancing our cargo and timing our trip correctly. Some get it wrong, but *feather fall* ensures they can right the raft before they reach the water and try again.

The cultists we had taken on as passengers were trembling a little as they saw what we were about to do. When I heard people on the other side yelling as we approached the geyser, I just assumed

they were cheering us on. We hit it right the first time, soaring up over the rocks and floating gently through the mist and drizzle into the stream that was just beginning to gather enough water to be called a river again.

The traders who had been yelling at me made it over the cliff just behind us. They ran back to us as soon as they landed waving a piece of parchment.

It was a short note from Polsi. "If the City Slathem want this dock, then it must be some kind of trap. Since the endless traders are working with the City Slathem to hurt or humiliate us, we will have no more dealings with you."

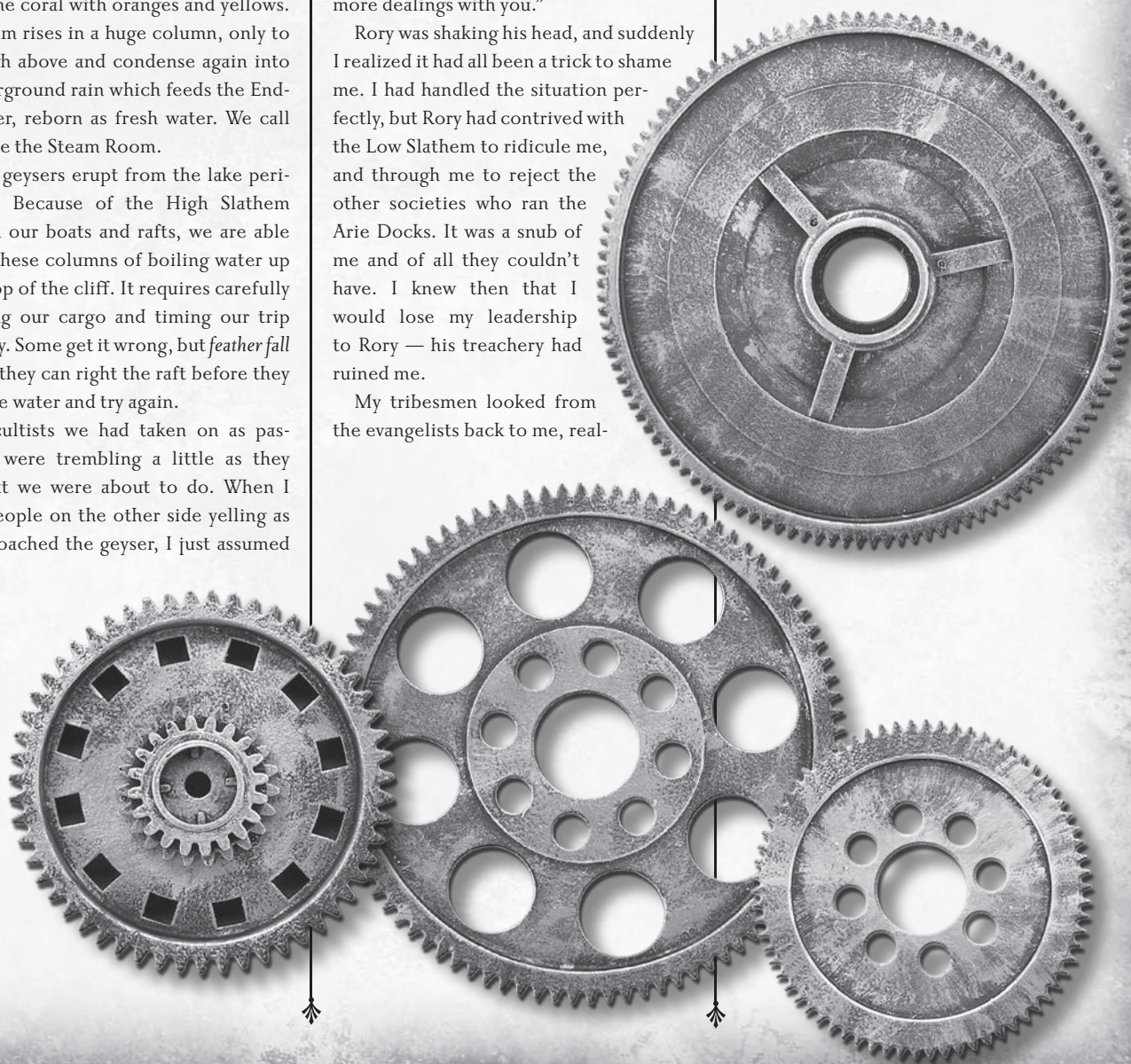
Rory was shaking his head, and suddenly I realized it had all been a trick to shame me. I had handled the situation perfectly, but Rory had contrived with the Low Slathem to ridicule me, and through me to reject the other societies who ran the Arie Docks. It was a snub of me and of all they couldn't have. I knew then that I would lose my leadership to Rory — his treachery had ruined me.

My tribesmen looked from the evangelists back to me, real-

izing we were honoring a deal that was no longer profitable to us. Those poor cultists realized they were in an awkward situation, and tried to ignore the situation as best they could.

Now there is no more Phantasmal Sea Star Brandy, because the Low Slathem refuse to trade with us. I've had a few hard years, although I did honor all the debts I incurred that year.

I can see you have decided to close your eyes and contemplate how to get down there and set up a new trade route. Take my advice — avoid trusting any capable assistants.



CAMMERCE

“IF TEARS COULD CHANGE ANYTHING, THE MOON WOULD BE FAR, THE GODS NEAR, AND DUEROK WHOLE.”

“We see the world on the back of this Endless River, lad, and it takes us to some mighty wondrous places, but we’re not tourists. When it leaps underground, we go with it, trusting in our comrades and in luck to see us through to daylight again, but we’re not explorers or adventurers.

“No, we’re endless traders of the Haddil tribe. The river is our caravan and the world our marketplace. And Cammerce — our tribe’s month of months! — brings us to the majesty of Duerok!

“Of course, we visit Shellmoot first, and the tortogs have set up a fine little post. Crazy for salted pork, they are, and the aber nuts they cultivate are much appreciated in Edge. After that we’re treated

to the wonder of the Azure Lake, a great cavern where schools of tiny, glowing fish light up the waters. They taste as foul as a cogling’s boot, I can say, but a bowl of them fetches plenty silver on Tannanliel. East of there, some tribes take a branch of the river I prefer to avoid. Aboleths and worse lurk that way, and there are some critters I just won’t trade with.

“But Duerok’s where we make our coin. The Haddil aren’t the first tribe of endless traders to arrive there, true, but we are certainly the last to leave. As our dwarven hosts say, ‘The friends who stay longest are best.’

“To do business with dwarves, you don’t merely show up on their doorstep and pro-

claim, ‘I have goods to trade!’ Dwarves, for the most part, value family and honor even more than gems and precious metals. The first words properly spoken to a dwarf after addressing him by his given name, his earned name, and favored ancestor’s name should include an inquiry after the health of his sire and sons. Only then can you bring up business.

“Family and honor... and family’s honor. That’s why we stay so long in Duerok, long after the other tribes have hastened to the playground of Edge. They stop, swap a few baubles with the pilots of Clan Yerben or the smiling faces of Clan Fralief, and then move on. In so doing, they slight the prestige of doughty Clan Bregen, or the intellect of Clan Rundfirg, or — and this is always a mistake! — the faithful of Clan Sifurd.

“No, the Haddil tribe visits all the great dwarven houses, from the ancient patriarchs of Clan Duerok to the measuring eyes of Clan Kurahd, and from the axe-harrows of Clan Midhel to the axe-forgers





of Clan Miglud. Who, I ask, could visit Duerok without a stop in the alehouses of Clan Seddrik? Why, just to be safe, we even treat with what's left of Clan Kudeah.

"Sounds exhausting, eh? That's not the half of it. As the saying goes, 'War is trade exercised by other means.' As with war and work, dwarves take great pleasure in the art of a well-wrought deal. A Clan Fralief merchant can haggle over price and praise his goods for hours if you let him. Remember: Dwarves live long spans and have great endurance, and they use both to their advantage in negotiations.

"They say the bartering session that earned the Haddil tribe the right to dock on the Warefoe bank took over three days. My father's father, Gilan Tabdesh, ate, drank, worked, hunted, and perhaps even bathed with Harbormaster Hringust Bellowgut for each of those days. In the end, he collapsed from exhaustion, but he had impressed Bellowgut so much we earned our favored berth.

"This is the effort we Haddil expect of you when we visit Vartemund, the great cavern of Duerok. Other tribes often get stranded in Wetstone, or try to light torches in the Plaza of Old Stone, or end up wandering through Warefoe Keep... but not us!

"So, sit and listen for a while and I will tell you of the city that, to save itself, birthed its own undoing. I will tell you of Duerok."

As they travel down the darkened miles of the Endless River's subterranean stretch, the endless traders make several stops. Some are strange, many are dangerous, but for the canny all are profitable. For these travel-weary traders, the month of Cammerce brings a refuge of civilization: the great dwarven city of Duerok.

The dwarves of Duerok are an anomaly in the **DragonMech** campaign setting. Firmly entrenched in their time-hallowed culture and traditions, events they set into motion outpace them. Their warriors still reach for an axe before a steam gun, and they prefer steady stone to the lurching

gait of a mech.

This should not imply the Duerok dwarves are foolish. Traditional mechs are of limited use in the winding caverns and cramped tunnels of the underdeep.

This *should* imply that they are stubborn. While their neighbors and enemies race to discover or invent subterranean applications of mech technology, the dwarves of Duerok lag behind. Only a vocal minority recognizes the threat, but their warnings and calls to action are often lost on the ears of the established, senior dwarves.

PCs visiting Duerok should not expect a steampunk wonderland. The old ways survive here, and change comes slowly. With the dissenting, forward-thinking clans gone or leaving, only the old guard remains in Highpoint's largest known city.

THE LAND

APPROACHING DUEROK

"By the time we draw close to Duerok itself, we're passing through the bones of what was a great dwarven kingdom. United all their major cities, it did — long, long ago. Their last king did such a fine job of messing things up for them they haven't had one since.

"Still, they say Parilus lugged his four books out of those old caverns. Ah, that grabbed your ears, didn't it? He came trundling out of tunnels so old most dwarves forgot they were there. Down, deep in the secret earth, where the Master Repository is supposed to lie.

"Enough to put a frost in your shorts, eh? Feh. We aren't even to the Gauntlets yet...."

Traveling along the Endless River, the first signs of Duerok come in the form of ancestor-statues that line the water-carved rock walls like grimacing, bearded gargoyles. Each fiercely brandishes a stone weapon or holds aloft a symbol of the old

"DUEROK'S LAMENT"

*Seven gates to Duerok lead;
Two dark, two wet, three light.
Six caves do Duerok form;
To rest in endless night.
One race did Duerok rule;
And dwarves did all unite.
Two worlds did Duerok house;
And two worlds then did fight.
Eight clans in Duerok fell;
Which tears cannot requite.
One mech did Duerok build;
To ease the dwarven plight.
Four clans did Duerok lose;
To steam and sun and spite.
Nine clans in Duerok live;
A shard that once was might.
Nine clans in Duerok live;
And hold to what is right.*

—Bodran Songwright
of Clan Seddrik

gods of Duerok, but if you look close you can see the fungus growing in the eyeholes and the cracks webbing across the granite forms.

After the ancestor-statues, the Endless River grows choppy and picks up speed, racing between immense blocks of stone that are sometimes invisible from the river surface. These dwarf-made rapids are called the Gauntlets. The longbeards of Clan Yerben, who guard this approach to Duerok, claim that once these blocks were carved to look like upraised, gauntleted fists adorned with symbols of warning in many tongues. The Gauntlets prevent larger ships-of-war from assailing Duerok, and are a serious barrier to smaller craft as well (as described below).

Bypassing the Gauntlets requires a great deal of luck or the assistance of a local pilot. Clan Yerben keeps an outpost near the entrance to the Gauntlets manned by several of their men who, for the proper fee, will safely guide ships through.

Past the Gauntlets, the cavern widens significantly and the Endless River

becomes more sedate. For the better part of a mile, the Endless River lazily jogs south, then north, then back south again before forking. The smaller left fork progresses in a slow arc before rejoining the Endless River outside Duerok, but it is a dangerous path for river traffic because it floods completely in times of high water. After a quarter-mile, the right fork terminates in a large pool, at the far end of which rests the circular River Gate of Duerok.

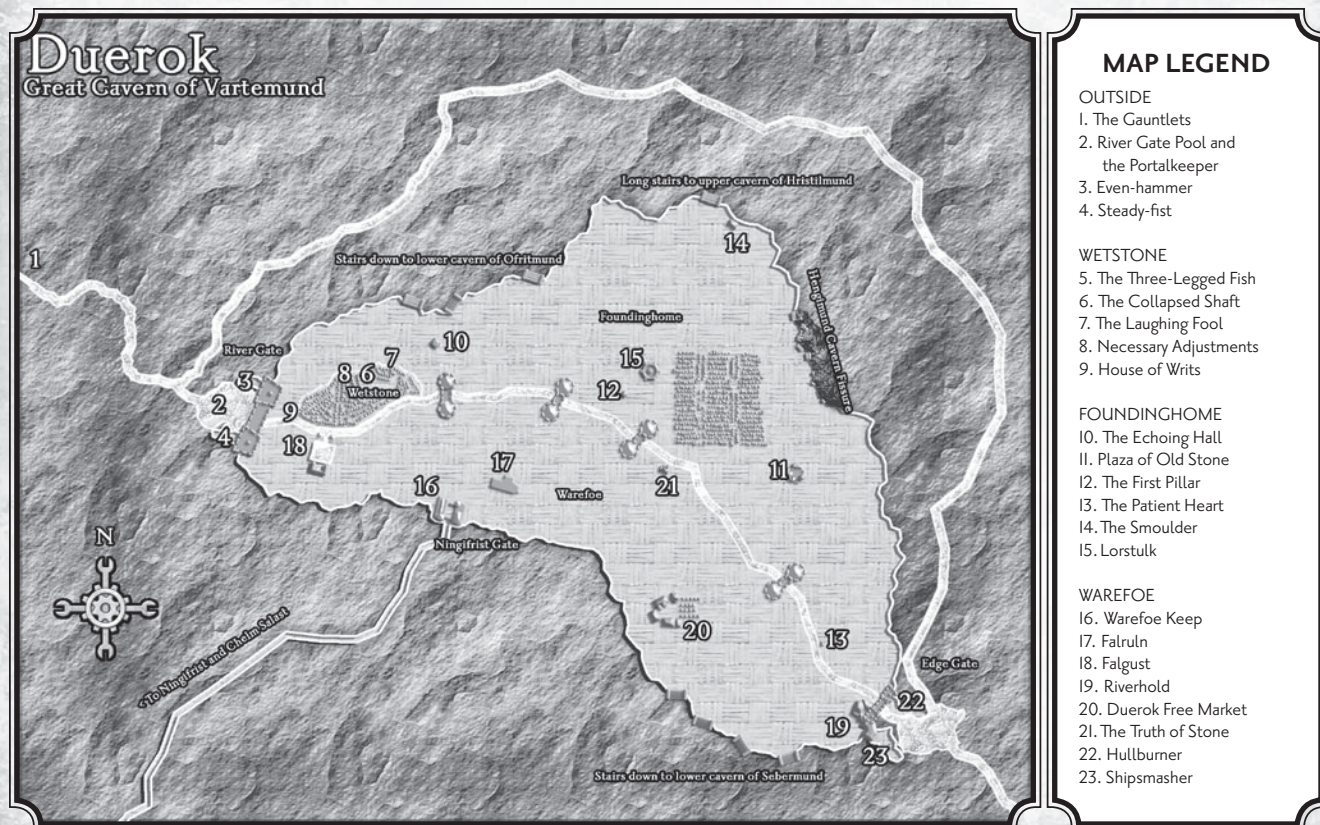
The oblong pool cavern spans 860 feet across at its widest point and 1,210 feet long from the entryway to the River Gate. There are two sources of illumination: a ring of *everburning torches* set close to water level, and the running lights of a warship that patrols the pool. Casual observers miss the two defensive emplacements, one hidden in the northern cave wall and one in the south. Called Even-hammer and Steady-fist respectively, their only exposed surfaces are dotted with firing ports and observation slits. Anyone examining the cave walls must make a Difficulty

Class (DC) 20 Spot check to notice the apertures, so cunningly are they carved to appear as natural folds in the rock face. Firing the twenty ballistae and eight steam cannons housed in each emplacement requires eighty-four dwarves, plus an additional twenty-eight spotters and a dozen or so runners, but in times of peace Clan Yerben only posts fifty dwarves apiece in Even-hammer and Steady-fist. Reinforcements can be called from Duerok in an instant, but it would take some minutes before the batteries are fully operational.

Duerok is hardly undefended in the meantime. The River Gate, an imposing construction of metal and dwarven magic 70 feet tall, serves as an effective barrier in its own right. Built long ago by the now-fallen Clan Rolfnir, it completely seals Duerok from the portions of the under-deep that lie upstream along the Endless River. A control post, set into the rock above the gate, houses a forest of levers that operates its features, like the hinged panels and the chain defense.

Set into the bottom half of the gate, a system of counterweights can be triggered to open and close panels of varying size, allowing or prohibiting water and river traffic access to Duerok's harbor. The River Gate has two panels sized for Huge creatures or boats and three panels sized for Large creatures or boats at water level. Beneath water level, there are seventy panels sized for Tiny creatures, half of which are usually kept open on a rotating schedule. A large, barbed, metal net clings to the bottom third of the Duerok side of the gate. When the proper sequence of levers is pulled, any given ten-foot square section of the net can animate, becoming +3 *animated net* for a maximum of 10 rounds/day.

Normally, the dwarven warship *Portalkeeper* patrols this pool. Any vessel wishing to enter Duerok by the River Gate must submit to being boarded and searched. The intensity and length of this search, however, ranges from being a formality to being all-inclusive. Particularly suspicious-looking crews have had their boats





partially dismantled and their hulls tapped for secret compartments. Only after the *Portalkeeper* fires an appropriately colored flare (the exact color changes daily) does the eight-dwarf crew in the control post begin to open one of the larger panels.

In case of trouble, the *Portalkeeper* fires bolts enchanted to burn with a bright white flame, thus providing clear targets to the gunnery crews in Even-hammer and Steady-fist, whose 60 feet of darkvision cannot otherwise penetrate the length of the pool.

VARTEMUND, THE GREAT CAVERN

"So you finally get to dock. There are a few things you should know about the city. First, it's better than nine-tenths dwarves. Unless you've been to see the Legion, I bet you've never known such racial exclusiveness.

"Second, each clan sets their own laws in their territory, and each clan enforces those laws as they see fit.

"Third, don't ever say 'ground level.' That will get you laughed at. Ground level is a few miles above our heads right now. Down here they say 'cavern level.'

"Last, don't go around like some fool saying you're in Duerok. That's the name of the city, but the great cavern is just part of it. I don't have time this visit to tell you about the other five caverns, but remember that this one is called Vartemund.

"Stay close and follow my lead. These dwarves ain't so bad once you figure them out. Mostly."

Beyond the River Gate sprawls Duerok's harbor, which lies in the largest of the six caverns, Vartemund. Bisected by the Endless River, Vartemund also houses the dwarven fleet, manned almost exclusively by Clan Yerben. Shaped like a kidney bean, the great cavern is about eight miles long and two and three-quarters of a mile wide, with the ceiling varying in height from 60 feet near the edges to 80 feet in some places near the Endless River. Fissures leading to another cavern, Hengimund, are visible

along Vartemund's northeast face. Hengimund rests closer to the surface than the great cavern, so its cavern level is on average 40 feet higher. Clan Rundfing's stronghold, Nargritelm, squats in the largest opening. The other, smaller fissures feature large, blocky staircases, connecting the two caverns. Vartemund links to the other four caverns of Duerok through a system of tunnels and stair-shafts.

Most buildings in Vartemund are above cavern level with one or two floors below. Fifteen-foot-wide boulevards called "marches" connect the major military and governmental institutions, such as the clan holdings and the keeps. Smaller avenues called "paces," usually about 10 feet wide, link the entry points, such as the cavern stairs, to the military buildings and merchant houses. Every other street in Duerok is called a "winding," and they can be as narrow as 4 feet across. Windings are usually laid out along the cardinal compass points, but marches and paces lead to their destinations by the most direct path.

The underdeep darkness hangs heavy in Vartemund. Only along the Endless River or in a large mercantile area would one normally find lanterns or torches. Some areas of Duerok prohibit the use of light sources.

Although it is known as an invaluable trade stop, Duerok is fiercely protective of dwarven commercial interests. The law forbids non-dwarves from owning any "permanent business" (usually defined as having a storefront) in or below Duerok's caverns. Even street merchants or pushcart vendors that linger too long are encouraged to leave if they cause the slightest trouble for the authorities.

There are three distinct districts in the great cavern: Wetstone, Foundinghome, and Warefoe.

Wetstone

Wetstone is all most visitors know of Duerok. A deep moat bounds the district on three sides, with the Endless River itself on the fourth. Six bridges

connect Wetstone to the rest of the city. No non-dwarf may cross without a Writ of Intent that explains his or her purpose in the greater city area, signed and marked by an appropriate clan representative. The valiant Clan Duerok guardsmen of the Wetstone Bridge Authority (Ftr 2) enforce this edict. Commanded by Ohdum Forkrist Fellfoe (Ftr 9), the Wetstone Bridge Authority was originally created to guard against duergar and other infiltrators. Although it's Clan Duerok territory, Wetstone is the most cosmopolitan area of the city. It houses more wayposts and entertainment venues than any other section, and its inhabitants are far more tolerant of outsiders, who are often pleased to find Wetstone well lit and the paces numerous.

The most popular waypost (a dwarven term that more or less means "inn," but implies stays of short duration) is *The Three-Legged Fish*, managed by Rutker Twice-fallen of Clan Fralief (Exp 7). Known for preparing surface-world food for guests that can pay, Rutker is said to have the best biscuits and gravy in the entire underdeep. He vocally opposes the plans of Chancellor Erbus Dealwright, who intends to leave Duerok for the Stenian Confederacy. This earns Rutker few friends in his own clan, and recently he's had trouble getting supplies he needs.

Two other wayposts of note are *The Collapsed Shaft*, operated by Frinj and Furj Gemblight of Clan Yerben (Exp 3 and Exp 4, respectively), and *The Laughing Fool*, "administered" by Rulrin Jestmaker of Clan Seddrik (Exp 1). The Gemblight brothers broke with their clan's traditions and tried to establish a mining operation in one of the outer caves. Their efforts were plagued by misfortune and mismanagement, so they quit and opened a waypost. Unlike most buildings in Wetstone, the Gemblight brothers delved the *Shaft* into Vartemund's bedrock, making it quite cramped and prone to flooding when the Endless River swells. Rulrin Jestmaker technically owns the *Fool*, but the real proprietor is Veisel Delwren (Human, Rog 4). Delwren allows the dwarf to play at being a

man of business, all the while conducting illegal business in the back and skimming profits from the front. Delwren named the waypost after Rulrin out of contempt for the oblivious dwarf.

Another enterprising non-dwarven soul who manages to dodge the restriction on business ownership is the svirfneblin Sevelworthy Nodiluster (Exp 5). He “rents” his kinfolk and himself to various merchants, offering to proclaim the worth of their goods, all the while also selling Sevelworthy’s Scrumptious Stuff, a concoction of roasted, mashed sweetgrubs and breadbox mushrooms. Although it sounds disgusting, the Scrumptious Stuff rewards the bold with a fine, almond-like flavor.

Korfalt the Grimy of Clan Miglud (Cog 3/Con 1) operates *Necessary Adjustments*, one of the few stores in Duerok that caters to those with an interest in mechs and their maintenance. Korfalt has yet to visit the surface world, but he knows his mech parts. As soon as his son, Ranfir, gets a little older, he plans to visit family on Durganlok. *Adjustments* has been vandalized twice in the last month, but Korfalt’s complaints to Clan Duerok have been fruitless.

Dwarves of Duerok generally take an exceedingly dim view of brothels, believing that they disrupt good families. A few wayposts have tried to offer “services” of that type in the past, but each has been shut down.

Serious, legitimate business rarely gets conducted in Wetstone. One must enter the city proper, and that requires a Writ of Intent from the House of Writs, located at the western tip of Wetstone. There, representatives (called “adjutants”) of all the major clans meet with traders wishing to broker deals. If the situation calls, the adjutant will issue a Writ of Intent that allows for passage into and out of Wetstone for a limited time. Clan Kurahd administers the House of Writs. It can be a nightmare of bureaucracy to arrange a meeting with an adjutant, and enterprising dwarves often accept small tokens of appreciation to facilitate such matters.

Foundinghome

Across the bridges from Wetstone stands Foundinghome, where Clan Duerok laid the first stones of the outpost that would one day bear their name. They still hold a great deal of influence in this section of the city, and most of their clansmen live here. Duerok’s government is based in this district, including the Echoing Hall, the First Pillar, and the Plaza of Old Stone. Some sections of Foundinghome, such as those that were occupied by fallen clans, are still in rubble; only 80% of the district stands rebuilt or undamaged. Outsiders visiting this district often stay in the homes of their dwarven business partners since very few wayposts will lodge them overnight.

The chancellors and their attendants meet once monthly in the Echoing Hall to discuss the business of the city and settle intra-clan disputes. Originally named because words spoken there would echo with import throughout all Duerok, it has since come to mean the chancellors’ pointless squabbles. Although it lies entirely within Clan Duerok’s territory, most dwarves consider the Echoing Hall neutral ground.

The largest open space in Foundinghome, the Plaza of Old Stone holds great statues and shrines to dwarven gods. Immense columns carved to resemble to Korduk the Soul-Father, Morst the Strong, and Glorius the Valiant span Vartemund, reaching 57 feet high at this point. They look sternly down on the faithful, surrounded by smaller shrines dedicated to lesser gods. Clan Sifurd tends the Plaza of Old Stone although their clan center lies in the cavern of Hristilmund. Sifurd warriors called the Morstifalt (“fist of Morst”) (Clr 2/Ftr 1) maintain order here and wherever the clan sees fit to dispatch them. Matron Helgavrit Hammerfist (Clr 7/Ftr 2) leads the Morstifalt, which bases its operations in tunnels beneath the Plaza.

In accordance with dwarven tradition, when Clan Duerok had occupied Vartemund for one hundred and eleven years,



they constructed a mighty pillar. Called here and in every dwarven city the First Pillar, it stands as a testament to dwarven endurance. During the Years of the Blood Rain (the lunar assault), the First Pillar of Duerok was cracked during a particularly pitched battle with a group of hill giants. Clan Duerok refuses to repair the pillar, claiming it proves dwarves and dwarven life can persist despite any injury. The Pillar continues to crack each year, however, and others say it truly indicates that the old ways have failed at last.

The *Patient Heart* waypost accepts non-dwarves. Dierte Truewife of Clan Bregen (Com 2/Exp 3) lost her husband Galtver long ago when his diplomatic mission to the surface was presumed slaughtered during an orc attack. She refused to accept his death, and her perseverance was rewarded a mere six years ago when he at last returned, brought in by some human traders. Theirs is a rare dwarven story of true love, and in gratitude Deirte opened the *Heart* to all comers. Although the current mood of Duerok is not inclined to welcome outsiders, no good-hearted dwarf can fault Dierte, and the *Heart* remains a place for dwarf and outsider to mingle. The *Heart* resembles a dwarven home, and it often features the best entertainment of any waypost in Duerok.

The building now called the Smoulder was once a large foundry, but was irreparably damaged during the Years of the Blood Rain. Clan Duerok sentences surfacers who violate their laws to serve there. Each day, the guilty are led into parts of Found-



inghome still lying in rubble and ordered to clear it out (see “Threats to Travelers,” *Dangers of Duerok*, below). Magistrate Tarkus Chainbinder (War 5/Exp 3) leads the Penal Reconstruction Supervisors (War 2/Exp 1).

Clan Duerok’s ancestral compound contains the original fortress of the city, Lorstulk. A squat, round keep, Lorstulk’s ballistae can fire on most locations in Foundinghome, and its crown can rain burning tar on would-be attackers. Belowground, Lorstulk resembles a ship, with several fortified and trapped “bulkheads” designed to prevent sappers from weakening its walls or gaining entry from below.

Four large, arching bridges span the Endless River and connect Foundinghome to the last district of the great cavern, Warefoe. A guard tower on each bank controls access to the bridge and threatens the river.

Warefoe

Back when Duerok was merely an outpost of Minholrfird, the dwarves observed that the duergar and drow spewed out of tunnels on the southern side of the river. To protect themselves, the dwarves collapsed most of the smaller tunnels, but attacks from the duergar city of Ningifrist prevented them from permanently sealing the largest one. In response, the dwarves built a strong fortress called Warefoe Keep to “plug” the tunnel, and raised the Ningifrist Gate. In time, the entire southern bank of the Endless River came to be called “Warefoe.”

Warefoe Keep still stands, a formidable barrier to any attempting to enter Duerok. Passing through the Ningifrist Gate requires entering the keep itself and being exposed to its murder holes, traps, and magical protections. Although it stands in Clan Kurahd’s land, all the clans of Duerok technically are responsible for its operation and upkeep. Most, however, barter with Clan Midhel for the “honor.” The Warefoe Guard (Ftr 4) operates under the direction of Vardoc Brufshal Stonelegs

(Ftr 6/Def 4).

Clan Kurahd, for all their cunning, built their clan center foolishly. They expected that any threat would come from the Ningifrist Gate, and depended on Warefoe Keep to defend them. Only a low wall defended Clan Kurahd’s central compound, Falruln, and they built for artistry rather than defense. Consequently, their buildings were razed during the Years of the Blood Rain. Many dwarves nod grimly as they eye Falruln’s reconstruction, noting that proper fortifications are being including this time around.

Two squat towers called Left-eye and Right-eye guard the protected harbor that houses Duerok’s fleet and Clan Yerben’s hold, Falgust. Clan Yerben owns the dubious distinction of not having built most of their own hold; they contracted Clan Bregen for the labor. Unremarkable in appearance, Falgust only has three floors above cavern level, but it hides several beneath. Some say this includes passages that open directly into the Endless River.

Clan Fralief’s ancestral keep, Riverhold, seems to meld with the cavern wall near the Edge Gate. Most visitors enter the keep via an artificial grotto that protects the clan’s shipyards. From there, a long sequence of stairs eventually leads to an observation platform just above the Edge Gate. Many dwarves consider Riverhold to be “too elf-y” for its flowing appearance and un-dwarven name. With most of Clan Fralief now spread throughout Highpoint, silence rules Riverhold’s halls.

The Edge Gate stands at the far end of Vartemund. Although a twin in design to the River Gate, it suffers from much-reduced security. A scant dozen dwarves man each of the gate’s two fortresses, Hullburner and Shipsmasher, and Clan Fralief does not maintain a warship next to it. This causes many stubby dwarven fingers to point accusingly at Clan Fralief, who are in charge of the Edge Gate’s defenses, and many rough dwarven voices whisper that perhaps their time to leave is sooner rather than later.

Warefoe is not entirely a military zone,

however. Many wealthy dwarven traders have private dock space here, and have been known to set space aside for favored trading partners. Often, all parties concerned prefer this option since it bypasses the gaudy brightness of Wetstone and the procedural morass of the House of Writs.

Warehouses and stockyards fill the center of Warefoe. Despite the smell of the animal pens, the Duerok Free Market thrives, and slathem, svirfneblin, and even tortogs frequent the Market. The clan auction houses are here, and vendors are allowed to rent designated stalls. Technically, these stalls are designated on a first-come, first-served basis, but most people understand that Ulreg Felltooth of Clan Midhel (Rog 5/Ftr 1) will have a favorable spot. Ulreg applies Clan Midhel’s martial focus to commerce, and his reputation for ruthlessness means most other merchants go out of their way to not compete with him. One notable exception is the tortog vendor Shamshull (Exp 4/Con 4) and his clockwork familiar, Tase. Ulreg and Shamshull frequently offer the same underdeep spices, such as the intoxicating nightdust and the blisteringly spicy derro’s delight. Not surprisingly, Shamshull has almost been killed in “tragic accidents” four times over the last three years. If Ulreg were not such a spiteful dwarf, he could probably get Shamshull exiled back to Shellmoot on the non-dwarven business technicality.

The wayposts in Warefoe are managed more like bed-and-breakfasts, lacking the character of their counterparts in Wetstone. The *Truth of Stone*, owned by Osklef Steelmount of Clan Kudeah (Mcj 8/Exp 2), stands out in this crowd. Osklef was a mech jockey for the Stenian Confederacy who patrolled Gorla Reign. A rust rider’s lucky swing crushed his pilot’s chair and took Osklef’s right arm, so he retired to Duerok. The *Truth* serves as a hub for those who like to tell tall tales of their exploits, and several younger Clan Kudeah dwarves congregate there to bask in Osklef’s stories of life in the Confederacy.

INHABITANTS

CLANS OF DUEROK

"Anyone from a Stenian city-mech knows Clan Kudeah and Clan Miglud, and any who have done business in Edge carry halved granite from Clan Fralief. Those who have heard of Clan Duerok probably think they're pretty wise in the lore of the dwarves.

"Wrong. There are clans down there that haven't stood in daylight since, well, for a long time. And if you're going to sit at their card table, you had better know the players. Few things get an axe buried in your skull faster than mistaking a dwarf with his beard tucked in his belt for one of Clan Miglud..."

Although the creation of Durgan-lok saved the dwarven clans of Duerok from extinction, it was an event that shook their culture to its core. Since time immemorial, dwarves fought with axe and shield, lived underground, and respected their ancestors and their ways. Durgan-lok signified survival, but through adaptation.

Most clans refused the new way, but some realized that times had changed. Bitter, unforgivable words were exchanged in the dwarven halls in those days. Three clans departed or were driven from Duerok, never to return (see "Absent Friends," sidebar).

Some that stayed behind sympathized with those who left. Clan Fralief is one such clan, and by all signs it seems they intend to take their leave of Duerok as well. These four clans are considered to be "lost," meaning they have forsaken what it means to be a dwarf.

Duerok is divided into territories ruled by one or another of its clans. Each of these districts obeys its clan's laws and is protected by its clan's guards. The oldest male member of each clan leads it as its chancellor, advised by a council of elders.

THOSE ON THE FRINGE

Clan Fralief

"Going out of business sale! Step right up!" —*Clan Fralief shopkeeper*

With only 11,600 members left in Duerok, Clan Fralief is obviously leaving for greener pastures. The current clan chancellor, Erbus Dealwright (Exp 10/Ftr 2), has made no secret about moving his son and immediate family to Durgan-lok. His initial intent had been to relocate his clan to the Stenian city-mech in the next few decades, but the increasingly ugly mood in Duerok has forced him to accelerate his plans. Now Chancellor Erbus seems to be planning a move to Duerie, where his clan can still serve as go-betweens for the Stenian Confederacy and the underdeep.

To smooth his leaving, the chancellor has been meeting with representatives of Clan Yerben to discuss trade downriver from Duerok, and he had made extravagant gifts to Clans Duerok and Sifurd. These measures have only bought him a margin of goodwill, however.

Several family groups refuse to leave, however, creating delays that Chancellor Erbus cannot afford. By the same token, Clan Fralief is already scattered all about Highpoint, and in some cases whole sections have declared their independence (see **The Last City**). The chancellor cannot accommodate those who wish to stay nor can he force them to depart, leaving him in a precarious situation.



As was detailed in **Second Age of Walkers**, Clan Fralief characters gain a +1 bonus to Appraise and Diplomacy checks but lack the dwarven racial bonus to attack goblinoids and racial dodge bonus against giant enemies.

Clan Kudeah

"What was ours is theirs, but only for so long." —*elder of Clan Kudeah*

Once, twenty major clans ruled the streets, mines, harbors, and homes of Duerok. Seven were destroyed utterly during the Years of the Blood Rain (see "Absent Friends," sidebar). The eighth "fallen" clan, Clan Kudeah, still clings both to life and to a dream of regaining past glory.

At its height, Clan Kudeah only supported 3,000 members. Known for their great craftsmanship when it came to carving jewels, they lacked the martial skill to survive when the Barkstone Gate burst and the first hordes of surface refugees overwhelmed their small family keep. Only about 300 still reside in Duerok, with an equal amount making their living as mech pilots for the Stenian Confederacy.

What remains of their keep lies in territory held by Clan Midhel, who demanded exorbitant compensation for the lives Clan Midhel lost clearing the surfacers out of Clan Kudeah's land. Thus far Clan Kudeah has refused to pay.

Chancellor Gannut the Eyeless (Exp 8), who was blinded in the first assault, instead moves his entire household from clan to clan, renting space from his hosts as he lobbies their support to force Clan Midhel to relent. So far the other clans have refused, although politely. Many view Clan Kudeah and Clan Midhel, both with talents of their own, as chips to use against each other.

The younger members of Clan Kudeah have grown increasingly vocal about their unwillingness to be used as pawns by the larger clans, and demand that their clan relocate to the surface world. Tensions in the small clan are very high.



As was detailed in **Second Age of Walkers**, Clan Kudeah characters gain a +1 circumstance bonus on Mech Pilot checks. Additionally, they must select one light weapon and one martial weapon that they are not proficient with, regardless of class features. Clan Kudeah character can only become proficient with these weapons with the Exotic Weapon Proficiency feat.

THOSE WHO REMAIN

Nine clans have remained in Duerok, keeping as best they can to their traditions or finding ways to integrate the new and the old.

Clan Bregen

"I do not know why any dwarf would leave the earth and stone." —*mine overseer of Clan Bregen*

The story of Bregen Orefinder, this clan's namesake, is one of the oldest tales told on (or under) Highpoint. In the distant beginning of dwarven history, they

had only crude, open-pit mines and could not delve very deep into the earth. Bregen, who was said to be able to "hear" mineral deposits, discovered the secrets of shaft mining, and thus started one of the most venerable dwarven traditions.

Her clan honors her by toiling hard, long after the workmen of other clans have left to bury their beards in ale-cups or dropped from exhaustion. The bounties and mysteries of the undersurface exist for Clan Bregen to discover and bring forth for the good of all dwarves.

Because of their similar interests, Clan Bregen has always had friendly relations with Clan Miglud. Their clans intermarry often, and both profit by it.

During the Years of the Blood Rain, Clan Bregen was displaced by surface dwellers, but they wisely withdrew to their mines. Whenever the mobs pressed on them, they pulled back a little further and dug a little deeper. Some say, half-jokingly, that they never got so much work done as during those years, but Clan Bregen has bitter memories of that time as well. They emerged from their mines to find that

Clan Midhel had "liberated" their choice holdings, including a vast gemworks, from the surfacers. The warrior clan demanded compensation for the lives they lost or they would consider the holdings forfeit. Clan Bregen impoverished itself paying the "compensation" and has not forgotten this extortion.

Members of Clan Bregen are characterized by their deliberate and rhythmic way of speaking, as if they are always in time with a worker's chant, and favor simple words instead of florid speeches. Clan Bregen does not embellish their attire unnecessarily; functional clothing in drab tones suits them fine. Their beards are often divided into many braids so as to reduce their overall length, preventing accidents in the mines. Many use picks as weaponry instead of the traditional hammer or axe.

Boasting 40,600 members, Clan Bregen is the second-most populous clan in Duerok. One would think this would translate into a great deal of political clout for Chancellor Yurfist Rocktender (Ari 4/Exp 10), but the Bregen ideal is one of service, not leadership, and Chancellor Yurfist lives by this code. Although he is admired, several ambitious elders, such as the Deephume brothers, Telnus and Norst (Ari 5/Exp 3/Rog 3), would rather their chancellor were more forceful in his dealings with the other clans, particularly Clan Midhel.

Clan Duerok

"Every stone of Duerok is hallowed by dwarven blood." —*guard captain of Clan Duerok*

In the great subterranean wars with goblin-kind at the dawn of dwarven history, Duerok Battleborn was a military leader known far and wide for his cunning mind and even-handedness with his followers. As military advantage swung in favor of the dwarves, the goblins became more desperate, eventually calling on allies from other planes to aid them. One, a mighty sultan of the efreet named Jadizfuun, was summoned to assassinate Duerok Battleborn. The sultan came like a storm of fire into

ABSENT FRIENDS

This chapter deals predominantly with Duerok as it stands today. For those wishing to add more historical flavor to their campaigns, the names and general descriptions of the "lost clans" and "fallen clans" are provided here. Clan Kudeah is normally counted among the fallen clans, but just enough of them survive to merit their own entry.

"Lost Clans"

Clan Dagulf — steady miners and diplomats, the entire clan set out to find the Master Repository and study under Parilus.

Clan Nokvast — artisans who had a blood feud with Clan Ilfsot, they departed for parts unknown after their enemies were destroyed.

Clan Otrum — mocking the dwarves "hiding" belowground, they now hunt lunar dragons on the surface.

"Fallen Clans"

Clan Habern — a devout clan, they fell while defending the First Pillar.

Clan Ilfsot — little more than brigands, they and their blood feud with Clan Nokvast are not missed.

Clan lotver — explorers without equal, they had many strange dealings with under-deep races.

Clan Lansestr — old allies of Clan lotver and Clan Kurahd, they were great under-deep hunters.

Clan Renverj — a rare clan of dwarven berserkers, they fought and died well holding Duerok's bridges.

Clan Rolfnirg — architects of renown, they constructed the River Gate and the Edge Gate.

Clan Ulksat — they were the living memory of Duerok, and were some of its first settlers.



Battleborn's camp, scattering his guard and scorching the stone. When Jadizfuun demanded to know which of the dwarves was Duerok, one of Duerok's loyal officers said that he was, but Duerok stopped him and stepped forward saying, "No. I am Duerok." Jadizfuun then struck the hero down and disappeared, having completed the terms of his summoning.

Leadership, sacrifice, and honesty define the life of a member of Clan Duerok. Many of them seek military service, remembering that Battleborn conceived of the five original dwarven military ranks, although they were named for other heroes: andvar (general), plygen (major), vardoc (captain), ohdum (sergeant), and parble (private). Members of Clan Duerok are taught from the cradle that they are to rise just as high as their most revered ancestor and to hope to die as nobly.

Many clansmen were given such an opportunity during the Years of the Blood Rain. Although Clan Duerok has 44,000 members today, before the moon fell it had thrice that. No other clan fought as hard or with such desperate courage as Clan Duerok in those years. When the surfacers were in the tunnels, the dwarves were sometimes forced to collapse them on their own men to keep from being overrun. When the battles were fought in the city itself, Duerok clansmen did not surrender a street, preferring to perish holding it than to live to see it in the hands of their enemies.

The scars of the Years of the Blood Rain run deep for Clan Duerok. To this day, many bear a deep grudge bordering on hatred for the surface races. Because of the price paid in holding onto their city, Clan Duerok cannot understand why any dwarf would abandon their homes to live under the sun.

Clan Duerok identifies itself in the city streets through the cut of their clothing and their beards. Their clothing is often

tight fitting and vaguely martial in appearance. They wear broad belts with a personal device worked into the buckle, and their beards are invariably braided into two forks. Their speech is neither particularly verbose nor overly simple, although they often use the phrase, "By my life" when swearing.

Although greatly diminished in number, more dwarves in Duerok belong to this clan than any other.

This makes clan Chancellor Lieg Rivenhelm (Ari 6/Ftr 9) a powerful man. It is no secret that Lieg views the alliance between Duerok and the Stenian Confederacy as one of convenience, and he curses the day Parilus appeared in the city for the turmoil that spawned from his influence. Elder Helt the Lamé (Ari 12) takes a more moderate approach. Elder Helt and his supporters recognize Duerok's dependence on outside trade to keep it supplied and new ideas to keep it vital. They have also heard disturbing rumors of blood-powered drow mechs being built, and know that this means only woe for them.

Clan Kurahd

"Yes, this is just what you were looking for, isn't it?" —*street vendor of Clan Kurahd*

Kurahd Farsight is not celebrated in many public shrines throughout Duerok. Yet without Kurahd many of the dwarven heroes would never have reached the battles in which they earned their glory, or worse still they would have been killed in their beds. Kurahd Farsight was a scout, a spy, and an underdeep lurker who served dwarf-kind well in the wars that wracked their early years.

His one famous exploit involved him volunteering to remain behind in a fallen dwarven stronghold so as to keep an eye on the duergar victors. For three weeks, Kurahd lived undetected in the captured fortress, spying on the smug duergar until

he learned of plans for their next assault. He slipped away to warn his liege, who used that knowledge to utterly crush the duergar. In recognition, Kurahd was granted his own clan.

Clan Kurahd prides itself on volunteering for dangerous missions, particularly those involving subterfuge and surreptitious acquisition of knowledge. It is a measure of their great success that the other clans tolerate Clan Kurahd's unfortunate practice of applying these skills on their neighbors. The clan does not limit itself to physical agents to accomplish its goals; only the arcane training of Clan Rundfing surpasses Clan Kurahd's school of wizardry (although by a good measure).

It should be no surprise, then, that the famous mech pilot Sereg Dragonbreaker was from this clan. Although many scoffed at Parilus' "fake warrior," Sereg saw an opportunity like nothing that had been attempted in centuries. Although he was slain by the lunar dragon, his success in striking it down only loaned faith to Parilus' ideas.

Clan Kurahd was ill prepared for the Years of the Blood Rain. What saved them was their remoteness from the surface gates. In order to reach Clan Kurahd territory, the surfacers had to cross all of Duerok. Even so, their sheer numbers succeeded in unseating Clan Kurahd from their ancestral holdings and forcing them through the Ningifrist Gate, down dangerous paths. For every member of Clan Kurahd killed by surface world refugees, another fell to drow predations out of Chelm Salast or other underdeep horrors.

A respectable 30,000 Clan Kurahd still survive in Duerok today, making them the third most populous clan. Clan members favor vests in addition to the more common workshirt, and do not braid their beards, preferring to bind them with small rings made of precious metal. They are not known for loud boasting, but when they do say is typically insightful.

In recent years, the Stenian Confederacy has accused Clan Kurahd of working with the Blank Face (see **Second Age of**



Walkers) to smuggle customers on and off the city-mechs. Clan Kurahd denies these allegations, countering that the Stenians are deliberately antagonizing Duerok for some perceived political gain.

Chancellor Vikra Legcrusher (Ari 6/Rog 5) takes the Stenian charges seriously, and has been gathering support among the Duerok clans to refute them. Thus far Clan Duerok has shown interest, and Chancellor Vikra would also like to see Clan Bregen brought to the table. Her position is complicated, however, because the very clans she courts to defend himself against Stenian lies are the ones most opposed to upgrading Duerok's defenses with Stenian technology. Chancellor Vikra is keenly interested in building a fleet of subterranean mechs. The duergar in Ningifrist have begun construction of a fire-breathing mech designed like a snail, if reports are to be trusted, and she fears for Duerok's defense.

Clan Midhel

"A true dwarf dies axe in hand, not shepherding surface cattle." —*militiaman of Clan Midhel*

Midhel Everaxe was one of the greatest warriors the dwarven race ever produced, but he had something of an advantage: two lifetimes to hone his skills. His first life was spent in the quagmire of the first dwarf-goblin war (he was a contemporary of Duerok Battleborn). When he died, felled by the goblin king Zodauf, his followers carried away his body and preserved it. When the Threefold War broke out between dwarves, goblins, and giants, Midhel's descendents prayed to Morst, god of strength, to return their hero. Morst agreed, and Midhel stirred, calling for "axe and enemies!" At the conclusion of that conflict, Midhel assured his followers, by then calling themselves Clan Midhel, that he would come again if the need were great. Midhel then collapsed, again a corpse.

Few can doubt that the dwarven need has ever been greater than during the Years of the Blood Rain, yet Midhel Everaxe did not return. Their pride stinging, Clan Mid-

hel lashes out at their detractors. "Duerok still stands, does it not?" they proclaim. "Many other dwarven cities, like Farruk and Bjolnurfad, have fallen. Who is to say the need was not greater elsewhere?"

If the arguments of Clan Midhel ring as hollow in their own ears as they do in the ears of their fellow dwarves, they give no outward sign. As in years before, members of Clan Midhel seek to emulate their ancestor in battle, comparing their strength to Everaxe's legendary prowess. Even off the battlefield, they tend to view every encounter as a test. This makes them exhausting to deal with but handy in a tight spot. More than any other clan, Clan Midhel traces its lineage through its males, and each one can cite exactly how many generations they are removed from the great Everaxe.

For their devotion to the god Morst, Clan Midhel has allies among Clan Sifurd. Both Clan Duerok and Clan Midhel loudly consider the dwarves leaving the city for the surface world to be cowards and traitors. Clan Midhel's practice of demanding "compensation" for defending Duerok has hardened the hearts of Clans Bregen and Kurahd, however. Added to this chorus of complaints are the voices, few in number but now growing, that say Duerok needs fewer axemen and more mech jockeys to defend it.

Members of Clan Midhel commonly carry "polite" weapons as they travel about in Duerok ("polite" meaning personal weaponry, nothing requiring two hands). They tuck their double- or triple-braided beards into their belts in the traditional dwarven statement of battle-readiness. Their clothing is typically close-fitting and they are fond of headwear, usually simple caps. When they speak, members of Clan Midhel often gesture evocatively.



During the Years of the Blood Rain, Clan Midhel alone came to the aid of other dwarven clans when the surface refugees swarmed them. They fought in every engagement they could find and many surfacers never returned to sunlight thanks to them. The butcher's bill went both ways, however, and Clan Midhel was gravely depopulated during the Years of the Blood Rain. Of the 20,700 members still living in Duerok, 73% are female (and therefore non-warriors by the clan's stern traditions). This only fuels the arguments of Clan Midhel's detractors, particularly Clan Kudeah, that call for a more mechanized approach to Duerok's defense.

Given that truth, the Midhel Chancellor for the past 414 years, the venerable Arund Caveburner (Ari 8/Ftr 10), faces dire choices. His clan's tradition has women marry into their husband's clan, but to hold to that would cripple Clan Midhel. To break with that tradition, however, would be to spit in the face of his ancestors like the traitors of Clan Fralief, and his clan's warriors would lose their connection to Midhel Everaxe. With his health failing, Chancellor Arund curses time: time he doesn't have left to save his clan and time that moves toward a Highpoint driven by steam instead of brawn.

Clan Miglud

"Those modifications cost extra, but the work is guaranteed." —*backroom tinkerer of Clan Miglud*

During the bleak times of the Threefold War, Miglud Heartforger saw the catastrophic loss of dwarven life and resolved to do something about it. Instead of seizing his axe and marching to war, he lifted a piece of chalk and set out to design better armor and weaponry. His innovations led to the first suits of half plate and full plate mail, and his idea of "giant-killing crossbows" eventually evolved into ballistae. Every new creation the Heartforger brought forth either saved dwarven lives or took those of their enemies. Although the Threefold War ended in a stalemate, things

would have gone much worse for dwarf-kind if not for Miglud.

Clan Miglud enjoys a well-deserved reputation of being master craftsmen and smiths. With every hammerblow that falls and every pull of the bellows, they do honor to their ancestor. Where other clans consider each other to be competitors, any member of Clan Miglud will find their toughest rival in their own clan.

When the panicked hordes of the surface world descended upon Duerok, Clan Miglud was staggered. While their neighboring clans were crushed, Clan Miglud held out purely through their ingenuity and a few secret projects they had been tinkering with. Although the chainblades (a poorly conceived combination of sword blades and multiple flail heads) turned out to be as dangerous to their users as to potential targets, other weapons such as the double crossbow (now replaced by the triple-fire crossbow; see **Second Age of Walkers**) proved effective at first. Successive waves of surfacers dulled that edge, however, and despite their advanced equipment, Clan Miglud was at its limit when Parilus appeared.

The history of Clan Miglud swells with the names of great inventors and craftsmen (and a few colossal failures), but since the coming of Parilus the name most heard is that of Stenius Firstbuilder, who completed the assembly of Sereg Dragonbreaker's mech, the first one of this age. Stenius was one of the most vocal proponents of using mech technology to reclaim the world from the lunar dragons, and eventually played a key role in forming the entity that bears his name, the Stenian Confederacy.

Clan Miglud has traded much with the surface world, due in no small part to their advantageous controlling of the Vellerburg Gate, which today leads to the surface city of Duerie. Nowadays, though, even long-time allies like Clan Bregen look askance at Clan Miglud. Clan Sifurd calls the efforts of the Miglud coglayers blasphemous. Over the last year, several members of Clan Miglud have been attacked on the streets of Duerok. No one has been killed

yet, but many fear this to be the next step. Like children who have outgrown their cribs, the 22,500 members of Clan Miglud are starting to find the caves of Duerok stifling.

Although an abandonment of Duerok is not the goal of Chancellor Darnist the Adroit (Ari 4/Exp 2/Cog 6), he fears that may soon be his only option. The voices that call for Clan Miglud to stop their research into steam technology do not even come close to drowning out his clan's desire to continue. Further, Chancellor Darnist believes in his bones that once again Clan Miglud is trying to save the dwarves, but they are once again too stubborn to realize it.

As was outlined in **Second Age of Walkers**, Clan Miglud characters gain a racial bonus of +1 on any Craft skill of their choice.

Clan Rundfiring

"A true disciple of magic wields power unmatched by sword, prayer, or cog." —*Clan Rundfiring runemaster*

Rundfiring Lorefire was an advisor to the dwarven king of fallen Minhrolfird, Janholf Silvervein. His counsel was so wise that others traveled to the Silvervein's court to hear him speak. Others of the court, jealous of Rundfiring's popularity, whispered to the king that his advisor was more powerful and respected than he. The king dismissed these thoughts, but the seeds they planted bore slow, poisonous fruit. Jealousy, then suspicion, then paranoia grew in the king's heart until he feared that his advisor sought to supplant him. King Janholf ordered Rundfiring's execution. Stunned, Rundfiring acquiesced to his king's demands, first making a speech that called on the dwarven monarch to witness his loyalty, even unto death. As the axe fell, the king regained his senses and instantly regretted his fears. He raised Rundfiring's family to clan status and abdicated his throne to his son, leaving to join the mysterious Lotus Monastery (birthplace of the Lotus Clan of the Irontooth



Clans; see **Second Age of Walkers**).

Clan Rundfirk was born from a misunderstanding, and unlike other clans they find fault in their namesake. Rundfirk, they claim, should have seen the plot against him. Members of Clan Rundfirk exemplify the dwarven mistrust, especially of outsiders. They in turn are often viewed with suspicion because of their strange ways, for the clan carries Rundfirk's honor through their mastery of arcane magic. While all dwarven clans have small schools to teach the art of magic to those hungry for it, Clan Rundfirk studies wizardry to the exclusion of more understandable, "dwarf-ly" pursuits.

Clan Rundfirk mines are dug using *move earth* and *transmute rock to mud* spells. Their homes are constructed with *stone shape* and *wall of stone*, and defended by summoned creatures. As rigorously as Clan Bregen labors in their mines, members of Clan Rundfirk pore over mystical texts and struggle to master the intricacies of magic. They are acutely aware that their fellows consider them shirkers, and doubly aware in this age of steam that magic is often regarded as an archaic novelty. These twin goads push members of Clan Rundfirk even harder to prove their worth.

The Years of the Blood Rain were hard on Clan Rundfirk. Although they easily repelled the first several waves that threatened their holdings, as their supplies of material components began to dwindle, so did their strength. When a cabal of human wizards perceived their weakness, they used their arts to *teleport* into the clan's storerooms and steal the last of their needed supplies. From that point on, the dwarves were essentially routed, and many were caught and torn apart by

the maddened refugees. Since then, most Clan Rundfirk wizards have learned to cast without material components.

Although Duerok only houses 24,000 members of Clan Rundfirk, they are hard to miss. They often use seven words when one would suffice, and many of those words have more syllables than a gnome has names. Their clothing fits loosely (so as not to interfere with the somatic components of their spells) and often has phrases in the ancient dwarven tongue of Thuzin stitched around their collars. They favor the use of circlets to hold back their hair and prefer one long braid in their beard to several smaller ones.

Clan Rundfirk is almost universally unloved in Duerok. Clan Bregen believes they put on airs, Clan Midhel scowls at their lack of martial prowess, and Clan Miglud sneers at their dependence on magic instead of steam. They count among their staunchest allies, however, the multitudes of Clan Duerok, who respect Clan Rundfirk for remaining steadfast to their traditions. They also enjoy friendly footing with Clan Seddrik, which supplies them with many material components, but that clan's recent interest in steam technology has strained this relationship.

Although Chancellor Orsin Greenlamp (Ari 4/Wiz 7) leads Clan Rundfirk, he is not the true power on the council of elders. As with all of Duerok's clans, the eldest takes the chancellor's position, but in Clan Rundfirk the member most adept with the arcane arts has the most influence. That distinction belongs to Elder Uldis Stonerain (Wiz 12). Elder Uldis suspects outside influences are working on his city, particularly in manipulating Clan Fralief to depart. He has secret contracts

with several mercenary groups to capture a live lunar skinsteler for his research.

Clan Rundfirk characters are familiar with neither the urgrosh nor the dwarven waraxe and treat them as exotic weapons. They also do not gain a racial attack bonus against orcs and goblinoids. Their racial bonus on saves against spell and spell-like effects increases to +4, however, and they receive a +1 racial bonus to Knowledge (arcana) and Spellcraft checks. Clan Rundfirk wizards may take the Eschew Materials feat instead of the Scribe Scroll feat at first level. Clan Rundfirk's favored class is wizard.

Clan Seddrik

"For every ache, ale. For every joy as well!" —*brewmaster of Clan Seddrik*

Seddrik Joybringer was not the best warrior that dwarfdom has ever produced. Nor was he a skilled leader, nor a particularly adept miner. He might not be remembered at all were it not for his laziness. Tasked by his father with cleaning out his family's food stores, Seddrik decided the trek to the refuse pit was too far and threw the half-spoilt morsels he found into an empty ale cask, which he then resealed tight so the smell would not reveal his subterfuge. The cask was forgotten about for almost a year, when Seddrik's parents threw a party to celebrate the birth of their fourth son. Sent to the larder to retrieve refreshment, Seddrik accidentally grabbed the refuse-filled barrel. When it was tapped, a frothy liquid issued forth, and all assumed it was ale. Unknown to them, it contained more alcohol in a thimbleful than most ales can fit into a mug. The party quickly grew out of control, and the population boom that followed was known in later times as "Seddrik's children." Although he could never re-create the exact elixir made that fateful night, Seddrik spent the rest of his life developing more potent and joyful brews for his fellow dwarves.

Members of Clan Seddrik strive to live up to the latter example set by their forebear, one of hard work and innovation,

although they are often judged by his earlier life. They are brewers and farmers without equal among dwarvenkind. The mushroom delicacy *rosfung* and the famous *Duerok Ale* enjoyed by decreasingly sentient beings all over Highpoint are examples of their craft.

The dwarves of Clan Seddrik are identified by their brightly colored shirts and dark-colored pants. They often wear over-large boots that rise higher than their knees, since much of their work involves squelching around in muck of one sort or another. Their single-braid beards are usually stained at the tip, and many do so intentionally as a statement.

Sadly, only 17,000 members of Clan Seddrik remain in Duerok since the Years of the Blood Rain. Although they are as capable in combat as any dwarf, their unfortunate position next to the Stonebark Gate meant that they suffered the full brunt of the first attack. Clan Seddrik was quickly overwhelmed and forced to abandon their mushroom farms and breweries. Further, since their goods were easily consumable by the surfacers, their territory attracted the refugees like no other. Clan Seddrik had reclaimed their holdings by the time Parilus came to Duerok, but the price they paid was high.

Only Chancellor Minfrot Beltburst (Ari 7/Exp 5/Ftr 2) and the council of elders know exactly how high. Their immediate stores were all utterly destroyed, that much is common knowledge. But Clan Seddrik's most secret fungus-gardens were also plundered, and their carefully cultured soils were wrecked beyond reclamation. Since then, they have been selling only what was stored or spared by accident, but soon the clan will run out. This will be a crippling economic blow, and Chancellor Minfrot is desperate to rebuild the gardens as fast as he can. In his eagerness, he has begun investigating

whether steam technology can be applied to save his clan, and he openly supports trade of technology with the mechdoms.

Clan Sifurd

"False gods are everywhere, boy."—*street proselytizer of Clan Sifurd*

Sifurd Highfavored started life as one of the few dwarves to take up a large career. Ostracized by her family and dwarven society, Sifurd left home to travel abroad on the surface. As the sight of her home mountain disappeared from the horizon, she had a fit and collapsed. Gnomish passers-by found Sifurd and returned her home. She lay in a state for a full year, and when she emerged she claimed that she had been called before Korduk in the Soul Father's great hall. There she was given a choice to be forgotten and cast out or to serve him with all her heart. She accepted and, by her telling, spent several lifetimes serving her deity. Many scoffed at Sifurd's story, but none could deny that she now had holy powers where before she had none. Sifurd attracted followers that eventually formed the nucleus of her clan and directed them to militantly tend the spiritual health of the dwarven people.

The mission of present-day Clan Sifurd remains unchanged, although their goals are harder and harder to accomplish. Every dwarf that fails to show proper recognition to Korduk, Morst, or Glorius weakens the gods' ability to touch Highpoint, and every dwarf that abandons the underdeep for the surface world weakens the fabric of dwarven culture.

Many dwarves ask how they can hold faith when so many died in the Years of the Blood Rain. Others question the validity of the old ways in the face of the potential of steam power. Clan Sifurd has the same answer for both dilemmas: Now it is more important than ever to

cleave to dwarven society. They view the Years of the Blood Rain as a test of fitness for the dwarven race. The weaker clans fell by the wayside and the stronger ones endured. The promise of steam power is another kind of test, this one of faith. They see the applications of technology and the disruptions they have wrought in dwarven society as traps set by the vile lunar gods. Dotrak, they argue, is nothing more than a thinly veiled lunar aberration, a corruption. True dwarves must reject the temptation of steam power.

Many believe that Parilus left Duerok in such a hurry because he found out Clan Sifurd had set into motion an assassination plot against him. As preposterous as this seems, hearing members of Clan Sifurd exhort the faithful in militant terms fuels that doubt.

The 25,100 members of Clan Sifurd stride through the streets of Duerok wearing sturdy but plain clothing. They are partial to jewelry, and often incorporate holy symbols or bits of scripture in their finery. Members of Clan Sifurd speak with a surly kind of self-assurance that only Clan Duerok can approach. They do not often braid their beards, preferring them to grow long and flowing.

Chancellor Reka the Vigilant (Clr 13) wants more than anything to see Duerok whole again. Unfortunately, her efforts have been ham-fisted and have succeeded only in driving her would-be converts away. Sadly, sycophants enamored with Chancellor Reka's vision and respecting her sense of purpose compose the clan's council of elders. With no one to argue a dissenting viewpoint, it seems unlikely that the chancellor's dream will come true.

Clan Yerben

"I love how the creak of the deck echoes in these caverns."—*Clan Yerben naval officer*

Yerben Riverlord, Clan Yerben's founding ancestor, lived in the time when Duerok was merely an outpost of the now-fallen dwarven kingdom of Minhrolfird. Duerok came under siege by drow from

Chelm Salast, and the situation quickly grew dire. The outpost's commander, Plygen Unsurd Shieldcaster, dispatched two teams to beseech aid. One group set out for the neighboring dwarven city of Farruk, but was ambushed by the drow's duergar allies and slain. The other group, led by Yerben Riverlord, set out upstream the Endless River to reach the tunnels that lead back to Minhrolfird. They, too, were beset by duergar, and Yerben was the sole survivor. Alone, he braved the passage to Minhrolfird, eventually reaching it and securing aid for the outpost. Yerben returned a hero to Duerok and was granted permission to start his own clan.

The Endless River flows thousands of miles underground as it passes from the Wet Desert to the Endless Plains, and Clan Yerben makes it their business to know its sudden bends and hidden dangers. This puts them in a position to be exposed to several other underdeep cultures (for good or ill), making them natural traders. Traditionally, Clan Yerben has had a sometimes-friendly, sometimes-not rivalry with Clan Fralief. With their rivals slowly but surely forsaking Duerok for the surface world, Clan Yerben is scrambling to take up their mantle.

Clan Yerben was one of the few clans of Duerok to not allow the surface world access to the city. Most of the refugees swarmed the three surface tunnels, and Clan Yerben easily crushed those that tried to bypass the River Gate. As a result, Clan Duerok looks highly upon them. While the other clans have had their fortunes dwindle, Clan Yerben has prospered. These two facts have caused no small resentment in the city, particularly among those individuals that say Clan Yerben had things easy and could have done more to defend Duerok.

Members of Clan Yerben are easy to spot in a crowd. They favor loose-fitting clothing and often sling their beards over one shoulder. They also delight in peppering their speech with shipboard terms to confuse the more earthbound clans. Finally, members of Clan Yerben rarely leave the

Duerok harbor, which they control almost exclusively.

All 32,100 members of Clan Yerben that live on Highpoint make their home in Duerok (not accounting for the odd traveler or adventurer). This does little to ease the fears of their chancellor, Argin Oarhammer (Ari 4/Exp 2/Rng 4), who wonders secretly if Clan Fralief may be onto something by leaving. Rats, as they say, leave sinking ships, but out of cowardice or wisdom?

TRADING INFORMATION

DOING BUSINESS IN DUEROK

"So you think you're ready to be a full-fledged endless trader, eh? Bah! You don't know enough to sell a club to an orc!

"My father taught me that a man is defined by that which he seeks. It's also a handy trick for knowing what your business partners intend for their future. Look at Clan Bregen, for example.

"Why would Clan Bregen want weapons, dwarf-forged but not locally? Why would they be interested in gem-working utensils? Sure, they want some things the same as always, like lightning bugs and polished glass, but those folk aren't as simple as they play at being. They always have unrefined ore and a few good mushrooms to trade. Lately, I know they've diverted a lot of their mining to start supplying coal.

"When it comes to Clan Duerok, you must be extra-proper. Always offer them

a small gift in gratitude for doing business with them, and then refuse whatever they offer you in return. Very important, that last part.

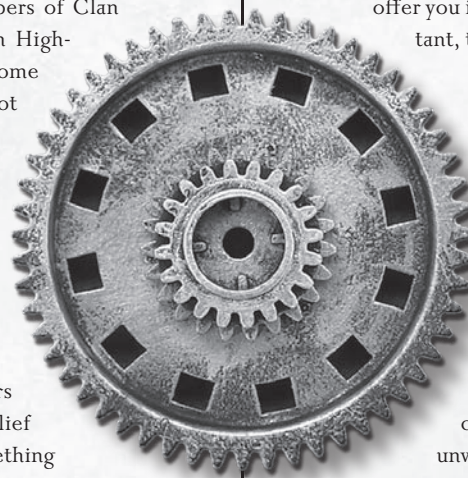
"Clan Duerok is always particularly interested in stories and artifacts from other dwarven cities. You can fetch a fine price for a coin minted in old Bjolnurfad, and there's a lot of call for raw wool and unworked leather. Clan Duerok has a little of everything, and it's all good. The mugs they cast don't chip, and their leather armors have amazing detail work... fetches a fine coin in Edge, I can say.

"Clan Fralief trades anything and everything. A handful of rusty cogs for twenty balls of yarn or some rosfung cultures for a steam gun... if you've got it, they know someone who wants it. And if they don't have what you need in Duerok, their kinsmen in Edge or on Durgan-lok honor trade vouchers. Gonna miss them, I am.

"Ah, Clan Kudeah. What don't they need? Well, other than gems. You can get far with them with a kind word, but you get farther with raw construction materials: wooden beams, strong silk rope, and gnome-made devices like even-checkers and Faltzerpriff's automatic hammers. Bring Clan Kudeah what it needs and they pay well for it.

"If you see Clan Kurahd coming, they've already seen you, that's for sure. You can try to tell them that bolt of silk or block of salt is your last, but odds are they know exactly how many you came in with, how many you've sold, and to whom.

"Despite this, they'll pay dearly for Stenian goods, particularly mech parts. I even heard they once smuggled a live steamborg into Wetstone. They have a few odds and ends, mostly jewelry, but their real bargaining chip is information.



They're a nice first stop in the city.

"We don't do much business with Clan Midhel, but what we do is for basic sustenance goods. Oddly, they like leafy green vegetables more than most dwarves, and they're always asking after that repugnant goat-milk beer some of the stranger surface nomads drink. In return, they offer up spoils from other underdeep culture, like duergar luck pendants and exotic drow weaponry.

"After Fralief, Clan Miglud has the best surface connections. If you want to tempt their gold to jump from their purses, you have to bring a rare prize indeed. Spices and the best salt can do the trick, as well as samples of other people's craftsmanship. In particular, they like gems not found locally, like opal and sapphire. In return, they'll trade up some of the best weapons you'll find on the river, and a few other oddities, too. That steambreather my cousin Falwun has is Clan Miglud work.

"Clan Rundfing always asks after the strangest things. Butter, for instance, or honey. One day it will be little silver bells, the next day they want bolts of red cloth. One thing you can always sell to them is feathers and pearls. They are nuts for those things... must line their beds with them.

"They play at being buyers with nothing to sell, but if you're polite enough and willing to pay enough, they'll part with a few magical treats. They've got some fantastic boots that let you walk all day, and my father swears by his lucky ring... says it's saved his life more than once.

"Cavernborn Stout. Goldvein Lager. Good ol' Duerok Ale. These are reasons you trade with Clan Seddrik. They also used to have some pretty fine mushrooms, like rosfung and cinderspark, but unless you've got a special buyer lined up, their asking price is too high.

"When they ask you over to meet with them, it's always in an alehouse and they're always buying. 'Course, they're just trying to get you drunk so you part with your goods for half their value. Lately they've been asking for items as strange as some of the goods Clan Rundfing wants. Bizarre

minerals of no use to anyone, and dung from all manner of animals. You ever transported dung up and down the Endless River?

"If you're going to parlay with Clan Sifurd, you best be up on their minor gods. They reference them all the time like they expect you to know about Yane Bowbreaker and Somebody Steelfist. They like getting paper more than most dwarves, and they're also interested in different types of dyes. More than one member of Clan Sifurd has asked after those fancy rugs from the human nomad tribes. They're more than eager to trade their magic goods, every one marked with the clan's name and the name of the appropriate gods involved in their making.

"Even more than Fralief nowadays, Clan Yerben has the corner on the underdeep goods. Unless you know what you're about, they'll try to tell you duergar pig iron with a shiny rub on it is actually drow spidersteel. They always need wood and steam parts, particularly for their cannon. I think they're trying to get together a steam-powered ship.

"Clan Yerben peddles bearfish oil like it's practically free. Do you know what some of Shar Thizdic's folk pay for that? Fortunately, they don't either."

Visitors to Duerok register at their point of entry, and merchants have their goods inspected and catalogued. The visitors are then asked about their departure point and estimated date. Leaving by another gate creates delays as paperwork is sent for, and dwarves despise such inefficiency. For merchants, their departing inventory is checked against their arriving inventory, and any taxes are assessed at that time. Taxes thus collected are used to repair the city's infrastructure, such as the gates and repairs along the waterfront.

In general, Duerok is an expensive city. Anyone purchasing surface-world goods not originating from the Stenian Confederacy can expect a 10–15% markup; Stenian goods only have about a 5% increase. The city also imposes a 15% tax on any fin-

ished mechanical goods sold in the city, although there is no special tariff on piece-meal parts. More traditional weapons and armor are often sold at reduced prices, sometimes up to 10% less, but masterwork goods are always at the standard prices.

Many non-dwarves can expect to pay up to 10% more for even mundane items. Dwarves freely raise or lower their prices based on the attitude of the buyer, however, and no price is final until money has changed hands. They appreciate skillful bargainers, particularly those who do not seem to be in a hurry.

THREATS TO TRAVELERS

BEFORE DUEROK

The Gauntlets

The artificial rapids of the Gauntlets pose a significant, but not insurmountable, barrier to traffic along the Endless River. They run for a 400-foot stretch, and the water moves at 50 feet per round. For this stretch of the Endless River, it narrows to a mere 55-foot span. Three successful DC 18 Profession (sailor) checks are required to pass through without incident.

If a check fails by 4 or less, the ship smacks into a block. The ship takes 1d8 points of damage, plus an additional 1d8 points of damage per size category greater than Medium. Crew and passengers must make a Balance (or Dexterity) check to avoid falling prone. The GM sets the DC depending on the circumstance, but the minimum should be 14. Those standing near the edge of the boat may find themselves thrown into the Endless River by the impact.

If a check fails by 5 or more, the ship overturns, dumping cargo, passengers, and



crew into the river. The Gauntlets are considered fast-moving water that passes over rocks for purpose of determining Swim DCs and damage suffered.

Alternately, one can avoid all this trouble and hire a Clan Yerben pilot. Each has a minimum of five ranks in Profession (sailor) and gains a +2 circumstance bonus on Profession (sailor) checks made in this part of the Endless River due to their intimate familiarity with it.

Clan Yerben pilots charge 1 silver per head and 1 copper per pound of cargo (regardless of actual value of the cargo). Their outpost is equipped with large scales to effect this measurement. They have been known to hike or lower their fees for ill-behaved or valued visitors, respectively.

The pilots are not under formal obligation to attempt rescue on anyone electing to brave the Gauntlets without their aid.

DANGERS OF DUEROK

Rubble

Refugees and the conflict they brought with them wrecked the district of Foundinghome and the upper caverns of Duerok. Whole blocks lie in ruins, silent gravestones that, for some, mark the passing of the dwarven way of life. Clan Duerok, however, does not share that fanciful sentiment. The clan labors to clear away the rubble and to build anew.

By saying they "labor" to do this, one may get the wrong idea, for in truth Clan Duerok makes use of penal labor gangs housed in the Smoulder for most of that work, which is dangerous to say the least. Some buildings are still unsteady and may yet collapse. Underdeep vermin now infest many of the ruins, as well as stranger beasts escaped from the pens of now-fallen Clan Lansestr and now breeding wild. Packs of sickly krenshar and some otuyugh have been sighted, but Clan Duerok is most perturbed by the rumors of an escaped drider.

If the rumors are true, they would pay well to have it brought to light and killed, not necessarily in that order.

Dwarven Law

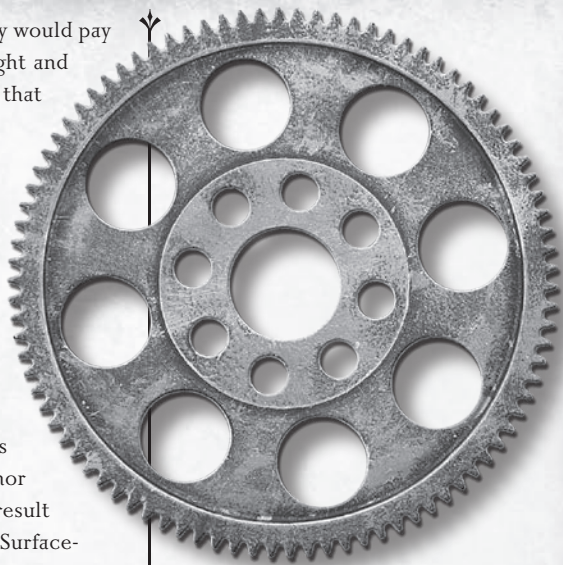
As has been explained, Clan Duerok uses penal labor to excavate the city and that work is dangerous. To ensure that they have a ready workforce, Clan Duerok altered their laws so that even relatively minor offenses by surfacers can result in a trip to the Smoulder. "Surfaceworlders destroyed our city," rationalizes Clan Duerok. "They can help rebuild it."

One of the more seemingly absurd laws that carries this sentence concerns the Plaza of Old Stone. Illumination of no kind, not magical nor mundane nor otherwise, may burn there. Duerok's dwarves believe they were conceived in the darkness of the underdeep, and that place is kept hallowed to them by maintaining permanent night. Introducing a light source to the Plaza of Old Stone incurs the wrath of the Morstifalt and, assuming the perpetrator survives that encounter, results in a lengthy term in the Smoulder.

OUTSIDE DUEROK

Through the Ningifrist Gate, one encounters a tunnel that quickly forks and winds, looping back on itself in a confusing manner but always going deeper below the surface. Several miles down these convoluted paths lay the twin threats of the duergar city of Ningifrist and the drow fortress of Chelm Salast.

Ningifrist was razed by Duerok long ago, but during the Years of the Blood Rain the duergar rebuilt it, and now it serves as a staging area for that race's experiments with steam technology. Only Clan Kurahd knows how far advanced the duergar mechs are, and they are worried.



The location of Chelm Salast has never been discovered in all the years it's preyed on Duerok. Many dwarves believe that it's a chimera, a figment created by interrogated drow captives to sow fear among the denizens of Duerok. Others believe it's actually mobile somehow, while a few, particularly among Clan Rundfing, believe it exists on another plane. The only certainty is that the drow and their minions have always haunted these lower tunnels.

Both Ningifrist and Chelm Salast are known for abducting travelers and taking them as slaves, and Clan Kurahd advises anyone wishing to leave Duerok by the Ningifrist Gate to sign next-of-kin papers.

"So there's Vartemund for you. You could spend a lifetime there, trying to sort out those dwarves. Of course, that could be a very short lifetime, indeed, if you stick your toes in the wrong tunnels.

"There's more to see, oh much more, but my throat feels like I've been gargling salt. Why don't you buy me a drink, and if I'm feeling generous, maybe I'll tell you more?"

HIGHWATER

“**D**RAGON-HAUNTED PLAINS. SHATTERED LANDS. HIGHPOINT’S GARDEN. PEOPLE CALL THE ENDLESS PLAINS ALL OF THESE THINGS AND MORE. ONCE A YEAR, WE CALL THEM HOME. ACTUALLY, WE CALL THEM ‘ARRIVANDIN,’ WHICH MEANS ‘STARTING POINT’ — BUT IT’S CLOSE ENOUGH. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE ENDLESS PLAINS, ASK AN ENDLESS TRADER. BETTER YET, ASK ME.” —*Erklos, of the Sorassay tribe of the endless traders*

Once a place of windswept beauty, many parts of the Endless Plains show the devastation of the lunar rain better than anywhere else on Highpoint. There is no cover on the Endless Plains, nowhere to find shelter from the lunar rain when it comes, or from the dragons and other creatures that accompany it. From the matchstick forests of the L’arile Nation to the blighted swamps of the southern regions, the plains took a terrible beating from decades of lunar rain — but in the past twenty years that damage has begun to be reversed.

The plains are a place of great persever-





ance, where settlements have emerged from the devastation and begun to thrive, and where one of Highpoint's newest powers, the Legion, is building its strength. The plains are also home to Gur farms that provide food for a substantial portion of Highpoint's population — something that wasn't possible twenty years ago. And alongside the orc hordes and the cross-breed Thurd tribe, the city-mechs of Haven and Rebirth move through the plains and trade with the area's other inhabitants: the hypsies, Gur and other nomads — and the endless traders.

Civilization on Highpoint has always been nomadic, and the endless traders are among the oldest of the nomads. They are well known throughout Highpoint, and their annual crossing of the Endless Plains is something that the inhabitants of the plains look forward to all year.

THE LAND

"The Sorassay elders pride themselves on knowing the best places to meet Wisps, and our tribe has become known in the Flatlands and elsewhere for the strange and wondrous magical goods that we bring for trade. These come from the Wisps, and no tribe of endless traders knows them as well as we do. And in finding them, we see the rest of the plains. Myself, I've been everywhere there is to go — Chemak, Tannanliel, Stilt City, you name it. Well, except for Eseldera. No one's been to Eseldera."
—Erklos

Large portions of the Endless Plains remain a blasted wasteland, scarred and broken by the lunar rain. But there are many places that, for one reason or another, stand apart from the devastation: the settled areas along the paths of the Legion's city-mechs, the hundreds of Gur farms that dot the region, the cities of Chemak and Glatek, and others. Like the nomads who roam the plains, the endless traders tend to focus their attention on

these places during the month of Highwater. Each tribe of endless traders takes its own approach to trading during Highwater, but there are some general patterns that most of them conform to.

Because Highwater is the "turnaround month" for the endless traders, there isn't much time for them to cover such a vast amount of territory. This has led to specialization among the endless traders: There are usually a handful of tribes that address each particular area, be it acquiring magic items from city-mech Tannanliel's Blade-fair or trading for exotic Gur foodstuffs.

Because all tribes of endless traders meet up in Edge at the end of Highwater, they can trade among themselves as needed before they set out for the Flatlands. This means that even if one tribe focuses exclusively on trading exotic items from the subterranean communities along the Endless River for spare parts and weapons from Glatek, they'll be able to swap some of their stock with a tribe that specializes in acquiring preserved food, so no one goes hungry on the long journey west.

This is the most common approach taken by the individual tribes of endless traders: spending the month of Highwater trading for specific specialty items, generally from one or two sources. The Flamefoot, Cupric, and Garvis tribes are among the largest that follow this specialized approach to trading in the plains, their niches being Stavian horses, musical instruments, and lunar dragon bone carvings, and Chemak-made weapons, respectively. These tribes, like the others, have more specialties than just the ones listed here; in other regions, they adapt themselves to the goods that are available in those locations.

Other tribes prefer not to specialize during their time in the Endless Plains, which allows them to adjust their routes according to what they wind up bringing back with them, and to better seize any unique opportunities that may crop up. The Naoc and Ai-syla are two of the largest "generalist" tribes of endless traders, and they spread out at the end of Cammerce to

cover as much territory as possible during the thirty-six days of Highwater.

The third most common trade pattern is a combination of the first two approaches, as best exemplified by the Bloodleaf tribe. Most of the tribe spreads out from Edge along the Endless River, trading with the Gur and the roving encampment that follows city-mech Rebirth — but a handful of traders buy passage with a swift-moving band of Stavian horse clansfolk, and ride for L'arile territory. Once there, they catch up with the city-mech Tannanliel and spend a few days buying and selling magic items at the Blade-fair and Sanctum markets aboard the mech, before returning to the Endless River.

Whichever approach a particular tribe of endless traders may prefer, taken as a whole this group is perhaps the most widely traveled in all of Highpoint. Their business takes them through every nook and cranny of this vast, often inhospitable expanse. This section details some of the highlights and most notable points of interest in the Endless Plains. Some important sections of the Endless Plains have already been covered in other **DragonMech** products. These are: the city of Edge, detailed in **The Last City**; and the lands of the Legion and the L'arile Nation, including city-mech Haven, all of which are featured in **Second Age of Walkers**.

CHEMAK

Chemak is one of the most stable settlements on Highpoint. It is impregnable from both land and air, ruled by a militaristic monarchy and maintained by a populace that is battle-ready (due to compulsory military service) and has a near-religious devotion to the fortifications of the city. Because the fortress-city controls relatively little territory, and because trying to take it by force would be suicide, the rest of Highpoint — including the lunar invaders — leaves this most unusual of cities more or less alone.

Every three or four generations, howev-

er, Chemak's stability is rocked when one of its generals decides the time has come to rule Highpoint with an iron fist, so she puts together an army and sets out to do just that. These efforts always end in failure, because the Chemakian army runs out of food and finds that it has gained little by conquering nomads who have no territory to claim, at which point it returns home. With the coming of the Second Age of Walkers, however, Chemak's expansionist elements have taken a different approach: They have created the Mechyard.

The Mechyard is a secret base — currently, little more than a cave — set up with the aim of creating an army of mechs under Chemak's control. The military faction that runs the Mechyard calls itself the Endless Brigade, and is led by a capable and charismatic general, Auravoz Blackspire (Ftr 10). The Endless Brigade got its start when a few of its members were out on long-range patrol, far from Chemak, and came across the scene of a great battle between Legion mechs and an enormous lunar dragon. It looked as though the dragon had destroyed nearly all of the mechs and disabled the largest of them, a Paladin (described in the **Mech Manual**), before succumbing to its wounds.

The Paladin's crew was quite badly wounded, and the mech itself had been immobilized by the dragon — but it was not beyond repair. This was exactly the break the Brigade had been looking for, and they wasted no time in killing the few Legion troops that remained alive. They were able to repair the Paladin to the point that it could be piloted before Legion forces — looking for their missing patrol — found the site of the battle, and the Paladin was taken back to what became the Mechyard. The Legion was forced to write off the Paladin as having been lost to defection, and has been keeping an eye out for it ever since.

The Mechyard is located in a massive cave on the coast just north of Chemak, and its existence is thus far unknown outside of the Endless Brigade. The Brigade has repaired the Paladin completely and

removed all of its Legion markings — and is now looking to acquire more mechs, since doing so is much easier than trying to build their own. There are enough citizens of Chemak who are dissatisfied with the city's current minor role in the politics of the Endless Plains that the Brigade has had little trouble recruiting new members. In recent months, they have focused on expanding the Mechyard and putting into motion plans designed to bring in more mechs, ranging from stealing them through sabotage and assassination to luring them into fights with lunar dragons (and hoping that they don't get damaged beyond repair).

The Endless Brigade presents a great danger to the inhabitants of the Endless Plains not only because they have met with some success — they now have three other mechs in the Mechyard, two Defenders and a Vortex (both types of Legion mech, and both detailed in the **Mech Manual**) — but because they are putting their city, Chemak, at risk by challenging the Legion, the single most powerful force on the plains.

REBIRTH

Standing at 900 feet tall, Rebirth is the smaller and less sophisticated of the Legion's two city-mechs (the other being Haven) — but it remains a symbol of Legion ingenuity and the power of Shar Thizdic's mechdom. Shar and his coglayers learned a lot about building mechs in the process of creating Rebirth (and even more by constructing Haven), and Rebirth certainly shows its flaws — the flaws of its self-taught builders and their unskilled laborers.

Rebirth is powered by a combination of steam and slave labor (about three-quarters steam, one-quarter laborers). The latter comes from Legion soldiers, who are often pressed into service as punishment for minor crimes, or orcish slaves, or a mix of the two — and a lot of them. Keeping Rebirth going requires 500 laborers.

These unfortunates toil away in its bowels alongside the rickety, clanking steam engines and vast boilers that provide the rest of its motive force. This machinery routinely suffers from mechanical problems, although Rebirth's army of coglayers and laborers manage to keep them from ever breaking down entirely.

City-mech Rebirth's armor is primarily stone (granite mined from the foot of Solai Peak), supplemented with metal plates and, in places, with wood. Its right leg is a bit longer than the left, giving it a slightly uneven gait, and this is a source of endless irritation to those who spend more than a few days aboard the mech. Because Rebirth's builders learned as they went, the moving parts (and especially the joints) closer to the bottom of the mech suffer from more mechanical difficulties than do those near the top of the mech, which were built later on in the construction process.

All throughout Rebirth are signs that the city-mech was retrofitted to incorporate new knowledge — doors that were torn out and replaced with hatches so that portions of the mech could be sealed off if boarded, for example. It also has little in the way of creature comforts, and boasts none of the common areas or markets that are common to other city-mechs (like Haven). For all that, however, it is still a potent force in the Endless Plains — and it boasts a formidable arsenal.

Rebirth's primary weapons are the massive steam cannon that gird its shoulders, three on each side. These are supplemented by two huge ballistae in each arm, and three in each leg, as well as by a flame nozzle in its right arm and an enormous bore puncher in its left arm. Two smaller flame nozzles in each leg were added after the mech was built, along with a bomb launcher in its torso. Much of Rebirth's weaponry is designed to be focused on aerial targets, since one of Shar Thizdic's principal goals is the eradication of lunar dragons in the Endless Plains. As such, it lacks some of the anti-mech weaponry — like lances and chain tentacles — that Haven and other



city-mechs possess.

In appearance, Rebirth looks like a crude, scaled-down version of Haven: a massive stone man with blocky limbs, fingerless hands and hunched, squared-off shoulders. Rebirth does not have much in the way of aesthetic touches, as its builders did little to make it look humanlike; their focus was on getting it built, and quickly. It does have three notable features, however: its eyes, face, and armor.

Because stone armor is difficult to mend, Rebirth's shell is spider webbed with countless cracks, patches, and signs of obvious repair. Among the mech's repair crews, it has become customary to paint symbols of significance to the Legion over these cracks, and as a result Rebirth is covered in thousands of these decorations. Its head is little more than an irregular block of stones — a place to house its command center and observation posts — so the crew paints Rebirth's face, as well. Some say it bears a more than passing resemblance to Shar Thizdic himself, but this tends to vary according to who has given it its most recent coat of paint.

At night, Rebirth's eyes are its most noticeable feature. Each of them is formed from a massive iron cage, bristling with spikes, at the center of which two large fires are kept burning from dusk until dawn. The crew uses only specially treated wood that emits very little smoke when burned, so that these fires don't obscure the vision of Rebirth's spotters and artillerymen in and around the mech's head.

Rebirth is home to the Strength chapter of Shar Thizdic's mechdom, and its atmosphere is wholly, unrelentingly martial. Its commanders are sharply conscious of their role as leaders of the single most recognizable symbol of Shar's rule and the Legion's eventual dominance of the Endless Plains, and they run a very tight ship. Minor offenses aboard Rebirth are punishable by a day or more "on the pedals," working alongside orc slaves to power the mech. Few of Rebirth's citizens commit even these minor offenses, and more serious crimes are all but unheard of aboard

the city-mech.

Among the bulk of Rebirth's population, there is something of a culture of denial about the city-mech's many failings. The only members who joke about them are the repair crews, and even they avoid doing so around the officers and commanders. This apparent ignorance of something that is so patently a part of daily life can seem ridiculous to the city-mech's few guests (or more commonly, to new arrivals from other groups within the Legion). The only exception to this doctrine of avoidance is Rebirth's characteristic rolling gait, brought on by its uneven legs: This problem is so obvious and so troublesome that everyone aboard grumbles about it more or less constantly.

ESELDERA

Near the mouth of the Endless River, where it empties into the sea, lies the sunken, ruined city of Eseldera. Like Bessemer, Lebra, and Rook, Eseldera was a thriving community before the lunar rain began to fall. Even as the plains have begun to recover, Eseldera has remained a haunted, desolate place inhabited by dangerous creatures — and like the other ruined cities of the plains, a magnet for adventurers because of the magic items and other valuables that remain there, waiting to be unearthed.

Long ago, Eseldera was destroyed almost completely in a single week of particularly heavy lunar rain — and as such, its inhabitants had little time to try to flee the city with their valuables. Moreover, parts of the city were sheared off the mainland completely, and sank into the sea, so much of what remains of Eseldera is underwater year-round. Add in the fact that the slathem think these ruins are cursed, and you have a unique combination of factors that has left Eseldera largely untouched for decades.

Because of its location along the Endless River, there are a few tribes of endless traders who specialize in supplying adven-

turers and guiding them to the ruins during the month of Highwater. While the rest of the tribe is stocking up for the first leg of their journey, a few brave and foolhardy guides spend this month leading adventurers to Eseldera (and most likely, to their unpleasant demise).

Eseldera is best known for the many iron shamblers that tramp endlessly through the rubble of its submerged streets. No one knows why these mindless constructs are drawn to Eseldera, but they seem to have congregated there over the years. There are also rumors of a single colossal-sized iron shambler being spotted in Eseldera — one that displays signs of intelligence, and is large enough to battle smaller mechs.

GLATEK

If Edge is the shining jewel of the Endless River, Glatek is the gem of the forest — a city of more than 3,500 that has been a trading hub for decades, well protected from the lunar rain and a popular destination for nomads and traders from all around. It would also make a nice prize for Shar Thizdic and the Legion, and in order to preserve Glatek's independence, the L'arile Nation has taken to sending its mechs on patrols in the surrounding region.

Glatek also enjoys a close relationship with the slathem, and in a world that has largely turned its attention away from the sea (where there is no protection from the lunar rain whatsoever), this means that Glatek has access to more of the ocean's bounty than nearly any other settlement on Highpoint. The city sits at the center of an elaborate network of traders that stretches across the Endless Plains, making and breaking the fortunes of nomad merchants from every tribe. Because of this prime location, Glatek hosts several large trade gatherings each year, some inside its walls and some just outside them.

There are seven of these gatherings, one for each month of the year, and all of them are called Market Weeks (even though they

sometimes last for more or less than six days). The Market Weeks held during Cammerce and Highwater are the largest and most popular, while Jealo Market Week is the smallest and least well attended. During Market Weeks, Glatek's population of itinerant traders swells from its usual level of 500 to 1,000 to as many as 2,000 — and during Highwater and Cammerce Market Weeks, sometimes as high as 3,000.

Providing food and shelter for this many people places a strain on the city, but not an unwelcome one. Glatek's poorer citizens find employment hauling goods and setting up tents and market stalls, while the city's many wealthy merchants focus on making new contacts among the endless traders and the other nomad merchants, and on acquiring the best goods from all over the Endless Plains.

STILT CITY

Stilt City, formally called Tyrat, sits at the center of a fifteen-square-mile feudal barony that is home to over 3,000 permanent residents. This makes it the largest settled farming community in the region. Despite its weak-willed ruler and declining productivity, it is still one of the most important cultural and economic centers of the Endless Plains.

The barony that surrounds the city proper is patrolled by King Lorshay's army, which protects Stilt City's farmers from lunar creatures, orc incursions, and other threats. Because Stilt City and its environs are so vulnerable to lunar dragon attacks, it has become something of a rallying point for those interested in studying and combating the lunar threat. And because the other inhabitants of the Endless Plains rely on the food Stilt City produces, its continued vulnerability has also attracted the attention of the Legion.

Although the city is not strictly part of Shar Thizdic's vision, he recognizes that in the long struggle to reclaim the plains from the lunar dragons, supporting — and perhaps, eventually laying claim to — Stilt

City is important. The Legion's traders, particularly those who accompany Haven, have begun taking a more active interest than usual in Stilt City's trade goods. Haven's entourage of mechs, outriders, and Legion soldiers has also started veering inwards from the city-mech's patrol route when it nears Stilt City, providing an extra deterrent to the orcs and other hostile creatures in the area.

It remains to be seen what Stilt City's nobles and its king will make of this increased attention from the Legion. Stilt City has a long tradition of independence, but given that it is in decline and under constant threat from the lunar dragons, its leaders may prefer an alliance with the Legion to the possibility of a slow slide into ruin.

INHABITANTS

"Nomads have lived in the Endless Plains for as long as there have been plains to live in, and the endless traders are treated like the oldest of the tribes. Our strength comes from connecting with the other tribes, and Highwater is our time to break bread with all of our old friends that we haven't seen in the past year." —*Erklos*

Eight main groups and factions inhabit the Endless Plains: the Gur, hypsies, the humans of the Legion, orc hordes, Stavians, the Thurd, the Wisps, and during the month of Highwater, the endless traders. They are joined by the people of the three cities, Chemak, Glatek, and Stilt City, as well as adventurers and other, smaller factions and tribes of nomads. The Legion has already been covered in great depth in *Second Age of Walkers*, so with the exception of the Legion tribesfolk who follow city-mech Haven, this section will look at the other major groups, and at some of the most prominent and notorious individuals to arise within those groups.

HAVEN

Haven and its inhabitants are described in *Second Age of Walkers*, so this book will take a closer look at the Legion nomads who travel along with the city-mech, and their role in the Endless Plains.

Just as there are groups and factions aboard Haven, there are factions among its followers. These tend to organize themselves around particular jobs within the mechdom's militaristic society, most notably scouting ahead of the city-mech, foraging for food, servicing the other mechs that travel with Haven, and trading for supplies with the other nomads of the plains. These four groups, respectively, are called the Fairmen, Greenhands, Loopriders, and Steam Makers.

Fairmen: The Fairmen got their nickname from their habit of making very even trades — "fair men" — although nonhumans don't always see things this way, mocking them instead as being "fair only to men" (meaning humans). The Fairmen have the most contact with the endless traders, for obvious reasons, and they are always in the market for spare parts (for the mechs that accompany Haven), weapons, tools, and in particular, stone (for repairing Haven itself). As such, they deal most often with the Garvis and Ai-syla tribes of endless traders — the former specializing in Chemak-made weapons, and the latter being the tribe that can best adapt to the Fairmen's changing needs.

Greenhands: Nearly all of the Legion nomads who live in Haven's territory, or who follow the city-mech itself, forage fairly regularly for a portion of their food. The Legion is simply too large to support its members otherwise, since they do not practice farming on a wide scale. The Greenhands are one of the largest Legion organizations that specialize in gathering food, and they range far afield from Haven each day in their effort to provide for hundreds of other nomads. They are well protected for their efforts, often by



Legion soldiers or scouts (sometimes even by Loopriders), although the fact that the Greenhands are not themselves soldiers causes them to be held in less than high regard by the rest of the Legion. The ranks of the Greenhands are often supplemented by slaves — another reason for the frequent presence of soldiers.

Loopriders: The Loopriders are the most flamboyant and arrogant group among Haven's followers, largely because their job places them in the greatest danger. They tend to be brave, often to the point of foolhardiness, and they make sure that the rest of the Legion knows how important they are. The Loopriders — so named because they follow the path of the broad loop described by Haven's patrol route — are tasked with scouting ahead of Haven and either neutralizing threats (if they are small enough to be tackled by a small force) or reporting them to the main body of Haven's hangers-on. They most often travel about a day ahead of Haven, and communicate with an elaborate language of coded hand signs and signal flags.

Steam Makers: The dozens of smaller mechs that accompany Haven have their own retinue: the Steam Makers, a band of craftsmen, mechsmitths, and metalworkers who keep their boilers pumping, their armor whole, and their weapons in good working order. Like the Rock Eaters aboard Haven itself, membership in the Steam Makers offers little except camaraderie, because as non-military members of the Legion, the Steam Makers are second-class citizens.

ENDLESS TRADERS

There are more than three dozen distinct tribes of endless traders, though the exact number has never been established. These tribes often have long histories, some of them stretching back centuries — although some were wiped out

This isn't entirely inaccurate, as the tribes all share a common dialect — a hodgepodge of pidgin terms related to trading, "borrowed" words from all across Highpoint, plus words of their own invention that serve to obfuscate the intricacies of their trading practices. They also share a wide range of closely guarded magical rituals, primarily related to the buying and selling of goods, as well as a common mercantile culture best known for its dozens of aphorisms and pithy sayings about commerce.

For an outsider trying to tell one tribe of endless traders apart from another, the best thing to do is to watch what they trade — and how their bartering proceeds. Some clans are known for driving particularly hard bargains, while others have a more freewheeling style that changes according to their trading partners. Many tribes can also be identified by their specialties, although there is a good deal of overlap in this area. Myriad other differences exist (dress, jargon, type and size of boat), but for the average onlooker, the traders are such a hodgepodge of different cultures that these differences don't tend to stand out.

As a sample of the many tribes of endless traders,

these eight tribes are commonly found crossing the Endless Plains during the month of Highwater.

Bloodleaf: The Bloodleaf are one of the most prominent tribes of endless traders to combine generalization and specialization in their trading patterns, specifically during their month-long stay in the Endless Plains during Highwater. Upon



when the lunar rain began, and others have sprung up more recently. Tribes are most commonly formed around a single large family, plus their in-laws and distant relations, and various hangers-on or nomads from other tribes who have been accepted into their circle. Outsiders rarely distinguish between these tribes, thinking of them all simply as "the endless traders."

returning from their journey across Highpoint, most of the Bloodleaf traders head east along the Endless River, trading with the Gur and other nomads. A handful of specialists, however, head north with great haste, spend several days frantically buying and selling magic items at the Tannanliel Bladefair, and then rush back to rejoin the rest of the tribe. Along with the Sorassay, the Bloodleaf traders are known throughout Highpoint for the quantity, quality, and variety of the magical goods that they offer for trade.

Cupric: Specializing in a rather unique combination of goods — lunar dragon bone carvings and musical instruments — the Cupric tribe has nonetheless managed to become one of the wealthiest bands of endless traders. This is due in part to their famous (or infamous) honeyed tongues. One of the aphorisms of the endless traders is: *“Listen long enough to a Cupric, and he’ll convince you to sell your own ears.”* It also has to do with the fact that on Highpoint, beauty is a highly valued commodity. With the ravages of the past century, the folk of Highpoint treasure beautiful things, and the Cupric are adept at filling this need.

Ai-syla: The Ai-syla are one of the most populous tribes of endless traders, and also one of the most adaptable. Unlike many of the other tribes, the Ai-syla don’t specialize in any one type of trade goods. Instead they follow the best deals and bend to the interests of their buyers as those buyers’ needs change over time. They are constantly on the move during Highwater, trying to cover as much ground as possible, and are one of the few tribes that consistently manages to trade with Haven, Rebirth, and Glatek before heading west again.

Flamefoot: Sometimes jokingly referred to as the “boat clan” by their trading partners in the Haashu clan of Stavian nomads, the Flamefoot earned this nickname by focusing almost exclusively on Stavian mounts during their time in the Endless Plains. The Haashu breed the finest horses in Highpoint, and they can be enormously valuable in the Flatlands and Roughlands. During the six weeks of Highwater, the

Flamefoot tribe generally acquires around two dozen Stavian horses, plus as many as five breeding pairs (a stallion and a mare), and in centuries of trading they have never failed to sell all of them before returning to the Endless Plains the following year.

Garvis: Most tribes of the endless traders don’t have much luck trading with Chemak during Highwater, in large part because the fortress-city is so isolationist. The Garvis, however, have spent years building up a relationship with Chemak’s weapons traders, and during Highwater they trade for food with the Gur, and then turn that food into masterwork weapons of the highest quality in Chemak. Essentially arms dealers, the Garvis are also more warlike than most of the endless traders, to the point that Garvis mercenaries are often hired by members of the other tribes to provide security on their annual journeys across Highpoint.

Dakkarr: Along with the Sorassay, the Dakkarr are widely believed to be one of the oldest tribes of endless traders, and one of the most respected. When the tribes meet up just before the month of Duerok begins, it is the Dakkarr that they look to for decisions about logistics (which tribe will take the lead, who will bring up the rear, and so forth), as well as to resolve any disputes that arise along the way. *“Never try to outsmart a Dakkarr, or he will end up owning your boat”* is a popular aphorism among the endless traders, and for good reason: The Dakkarr are unsurpassed at haggling, and other tribes often employ them to aid in brokering particularly important deals.

Oronan: Among the endless traders, the Oronan are one of the only tribes to focus on the slave trade. There is a market for slaves in Glatek and elsewhere on the plains, as well as points west, and the Oronan are known for providing only fit, healthy slaves. During Highwater, the Oronan primarily buy and resell slaves, leaving the dirty work of acquisition to others — most often, the Thurd. They never sell to the orcs, not because of moral qualms about the way the hordes treat their slaves, but because the orcs don’t pay as well as

their other buyers (and have a history of simply taking slaves from slave traders by force).

Sorassay: The traders of the Sorassay tribe have a close association with the Wisps, and even more than the Bloodleaf they are renowned for their magical wares. The Sorassay have built up their business by taking on contract work: Buyers in search of specific magic items pay the Sorassay a small finder’s fee when the traders pass through their area, and the Sorassay do their best to find that item in the intervening year before they return to that region. This might sound like a long time to wait, but the Sorassay are so good at filling these orders that they have no shortage of buyers all across Highpoint.

GUR

Amidst the many hazards and dangers of the Endless Plains, the Gur owe their continued existence to three factors: numbers, geography, and the Legion. Concentrated as they are around the Endless River, the Tyratian River, and the swamps to the south, the majority of their farmland falls within the patrol routes of city-mechs Haven and Rebirth. Many Gur have actually joined the Legion for this reason. Their lands to the south are separated from the rest of the Endless Plains by two rivers, and by distance.

With their natural tendency towards arcane magic and their expertise in farming, the Gur are held in high regard by the other inhabitants of the Endless Plains. Sheer numbers, plus the protection of the Legion, have let this tribe thrive and become a quiet powerhouse on the plains. Nearly every other group of nomads, as well as city folk, trades with the Gur.

Ordella of Minnor: Among the Gur, the Minnor tribe specializes in tending the fruit and vegetable groves that spring up in the marshy southern portion of the Endless Plains. Ordella (Wiz 8) is their chieftain, and like nearly all of the Minnor, she is an accomplished wizard. Under Ordella,

the Minnor have taken on the monumental task of making parts of the swampland habitable year-round. Lunar dragons and other horrors roam this region with virtual impunity, and there are no nearby settlements, city-mech patrol routes, or caves in which to take cover.

As such, Ordella has channeled the Minnor's energy into hiding their groves from the dragons (which they are adept at evading) and into fighting off the other hostile creatures that inhabit the swampland. The Minnor have quickly become the most warlike of the usually peaceful Gur.

HYPSESIES

Unlike the endless traders, the halfling hypsies roam only the Endless Plains, as their wagon trains don't lend themselves to trying to reach the Flatlands to the west. Individual hypsy bands rarely visit the same place twice within a one-year period, often because they have tried to fleece the inhabitants in one way or another.

Tuggle's Follies: This band of hypsies, led by a flamboyant ladies' halfling named Tuggle (Brd 5), are among the most well known of their people. They travel through the Endless Plains in a broad loop each year from Edge, to Tannanliel, to Haven, to Glatek, to Chemak, to Rebirth, to Stilt City, and back to Edge. This makes them something of an oddity among the hypsies, who are often loath to return too quickly to the places that they pass through.

The Follies' specialty is bawdy limericks, and notable figures in the cities of the plains have been known to pay them *not* to perform, for fear of what they might include in their latest song. Tuggle's Follies are also an excellent, if not always completely reliable source of information, and both the

endless traders and Haven's outriders are frequent customers. For lore and rumors related to the largest settlements of the Endless Plains, this ragtag band of hypsies can't be beat.

ORC HORDES

The orc hordes of the Endless Plains are the single largest threat to the area's other inhabitants, bar none — and they are dangerously close to becoming a greater threat than ever before. With the advent of mechs, of which there are perhaps a dozen or so among the orc hordes, some of the brighter orcs began to see the value of cooperating to defeat their common ene-

mies. This process has been spurred along by the arrival of a mysterious outsider, the self-styled "Great Chieftain" Bhugrusht.

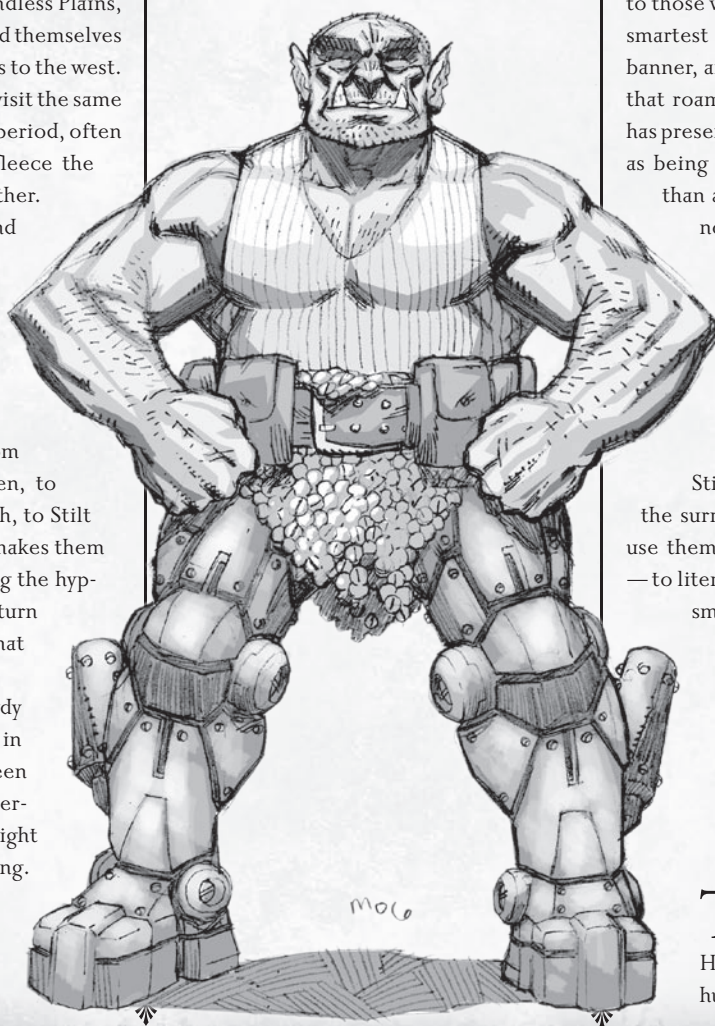
Bhugrusht "Iron Legs": Some who have survived their encounters with the orcs have reported that the hordes are beginning to rally around a single, charismatic leader: the Great Chieftain, Bhugrusht, also called "Iron Legs" (Ftr 3/Smb 10). Bhugrusht is unique among all the orcs not because of his tactical acumen or intelligence (both of which he has in spades), but because he is a steamborg.

For many orcs, seeing Iron Legs — a melding of orc and machine — is even more inspiring than seeing their own clumsy, lumbering mechs in action. Iron Legs is ruthless and vicious when it comes to his enemies, but gives generously of the spoils to those who aid him. He has recruited the smartest of the orc chieftains under his banner, and controls two of the orc mechs that roam the plains. Thus far, Bhugrusht has presented his steamborg modifications as being purely magical in nature, rather than a product of the more advanced, non-orcish societies.

Realizing that what the hordes need to see is a clear example of how orcish cooperation can destroy their enemies, Bhugrusht has set his sights on Stilt City. His plan is to take the mechs under his command to Stilt City during Highwater, when the surrounding plains are flooded, and use them — along with his growing army — to literally tear the city to the ground by smashing its support stilts. If Iron Legs can find a way to make his slave-driven mechs water-worthy, it won't be long before he can put this plan into action.

STAVIANS

The Stavian nomads are divided into two major clans, the Haashu and the Corray. The Haashu ride horses, while the Corray



ride insectoid dusk devils, and most plains dwellers refer to them simply as the horse clan and the dusk devil clan (or “bug clan,” if the speaker intends to give offense). Combined, the Stavians are the largest tribe of nomads on the Endless Plains, but their ancient division into Corray and Haashu, coupled with the fact that they are also the tribe that moves around the most frequently, prevents them from ever being a united force.

Though no Stavian tribe spends more than a week in a single place, both clans meet up once a year during the month of Highwater for the *dashaii*, or “Great Gathering of Riders.” Every tribe in both clans makes it a point to attend the *dashaii*, and spectators are welcome — making it the largest nomad gathering on the plains, with 4,000-odd Stavians and between 500 and 1,000 spectators. The location of the Great Gathering changes every year, and the right to select it is a point of pride that is hotly contested by both tribes during the months of Arie and Cammerce.

These contests are usually bloodless, and most often take the form of impromptu races between smaller tribes within each clan. The results of these races are passed along the tribal grapevine, and an overall winner is selected at the end of Cammerce. Historically, the two most popular locations for the *dashaii* are at the foot of Solai Peak, the mountain atop which sits the ruined city of Rook, or at Fire Fork, the spot where the Alazarin River joins with the Tyratian River (on the western end of Haven’s patrol route); Fire Fork takes its name from a great fire that swept in from the west centuries ago, which was contained by the two rivers.

Dawriss han-Haashu: Dawriss (Rgr 9) is the chief of the Haashu clan (“han” meaning “chief” in the Stavian dialect), a female ranger hailed as one of the most skilled riders the clan has ever seen. She has won deciding races twelve times, a record in the centuries-old history of the *dashaii*, and has also won the respect of her traditionally male-dominated clan. Dawriss is also unusual for her willingness

to work with the Legion.

Usually fiercely independent, the Haashu under Dawriss have exchanged their services as scouts along Haven’s patrol route — acting as outriders — for trading opportunities aboard the mech itself. Many among the clan do not approve of this, and fear that Dawriss might be working up to trying to join the Legion itself, like the Shar’Stavians — something that would be considered anathema by many Haashu, and might result in another split among the Stavians, this time within the horse clan.

Dawriss’ leadership is supported by her second in command, Artamos of the Blades (Clr 6), a garrulous shaman who is also widely respected by the other Haashu.

Vorroere han-Corray: The difference between Vorroere of the Corray (Ftr 10) and his counterpart, Dawriss of the Haashu, is like night and day. Where Dawriss is a bit of a maverick, Vorroere is as conservative as they come; where Dawriss is a rider of unparalleled skill, the chief of the Corray can barely stay atop his dusk devil. In fact, Vorroere remains chief only because tradition demands it — as soon as he shows enough signs of weakness, or stops being able to ride at all, he will be challenged for leadership of the tribe. He will almost certainly lose this challenge, when it comes.

Unlike his more principled predecessors, however, Vorroere has no intention of giving up his position honorably. He is adept at working behind the scenes, and has already managed to make several of his dangerous rivals disappear, or had them exiled from the tribe for falsified offenses. He is currently hard at work on an elaborate plan to disqualify Dawriss during the next *dashaii* race, thus ensuring his victory by default.

Vorroere shares his leadership of the Corray with Salandas Ziir (Clr 8), a man as venal as he is ancient. Salandas is complicit in all of Vorroere’s schemes.

THURD

Although not considered part of the orc hordes (as they are a tribe of half-orcs that breed true), the Thurd have nonetheless found their niche in service to some of the orc tribes — as slavers. As the need for slaves to drive their mechs continues to grow, particularly since the arrival of Bhugrusht, the Thurd see specializing in slavery as a way to avoid being destroyed by their more powerful neighbors.

The Thurd are not strong enough to attack any of the larger cities directly, but they frequently prey on the outskirts of Stilt City and Glatek, as well as on the other nomads of the plains, including the endless traders. Those they capture are either sacrificed to their reptilian gods, or sold to the orcs — most often to slave procurers in Bhugrusht’s employ.

Zukal-Ist: One of the most brutal of the Thurd slavers, Zukal-Ist (Rog 5/Bbn 2) is a human woman who was formerly a part of the Wisp tribe. She was sentenced to death for killing another member of her tribe, and narrowly escaped with her life. A skilled ranger, Zukal-Ist is a natural leader and a talented slaver, putting her wilderness knowledge and knack for ambushes to great use. Her specialty is capturing Gur farmers who range too far from their fields, and thus far these disappearances among the Gur have been seen as exactly that — disappearances, not the work of slavers.

WISPS

Well known as a source of rare and exotic goods, including magic items, the Wisps are frequent trading partners of the endless traders. Less well known is the fact that the Wisps specialize in raiding the ruined cities of Bessemer and Lebra, both deep within the L’arile Nation, to acquire items for trade. In Wisp society, these raids are tied to attaining

adulthood, and every Wisp over the age of 15 has been to one of these ruins and returned to tell the tale.

In recent years, more and more elves of the L'arile Nation have learned that it is the Wisps — and not other interlopers — who have been raiding their ruined communities. To avoid the wrath of the L'arile elves, the Wisps often seek permission for their raids, sometimes even arranging to bring back specific items. They are also quite adept at figuring out who to bribe to ensure that their raids go unnoticed — but even so, many elves are not happy that these nomad outsiders are better at recovering the priceless treasures of the elves than they are.

Ezzen Harral: Ezzen (Rgr 14) is one of the oldest Wisps alive, and he has cultivated contacts within nearly every tribe and power group in the Endless Plains, including hostile groups like the Thurd and the orc hordes. He is one of the best sources of information on the byways and secret places of the L'arile Nation, and he has an uncanny knack for knowing where to find the best relics of the pre-rain days. Ezzen is nearing the end of his life, and in order to keep his secrets from dying with him, the Wisps have stepped up the number and intensity of their raids on the ruined cities of the Endless Plains.

TRADING INFORMATION

“Knowing what to buy and sell, and when, and from whom is part of our blood, and our history. The old traders teach the new ones the best routes through the plains, and introduce them to their contacts. There’s a lot to learn — everything from when hypsies can be trusted (never), to when orcs plan on leaving you alive (rarely), to when to drive a harder bargain (always).” —*Erklos*



“Go where the goods are” is one of the many aphorisms of the endless traders, and it is the single largest influence on their travel patterns. During Highwater, as the traders gear up for their long journey west, this means traveling to the cities and seeking out the roving city-mechs, as well as trading with other nomads.

Each of the cities and nomad tribes of the Endless Plains has its own focus when it comes to producing goods for trade.

Chemak: Chemak trades only for survival, and only when necessary. Although the fortress-city maintains vast stores of food and supplies for defense (in case of a siege), it is not a market city by any means. Occasionally, canny endless traders can barter for Chemak-made weapons, which are of excellent quality.

Haven: Unlike Rebirth, the other Legion city-mech that patrols the Endless Plains, Haven has a number of markets onboard. It is also accompanied by a small army of mechs and tribesfolk that follow its patrol route across the plains. Because of the stiff fees levied on traders attending the onboard markets, the endless traders tend to do most of their business through middlemen outside the mech itself.

This has created a sort of shadow economy that deals primarily in information. Haven’s outriders and scouts are in constant need of accurate intelligence about possible threats coming upon the patrol route, and the endless traders — who have only a month to restock between Commerce and Duerok — are on the lookout for bargains and unique items to take west. This exchange tends to work out very well for both parties.

Rebirth: Rebirth itself was not built with trade in mind, and has little to offer in the way of market space or goods that would interest the endless traders. Like Haven, however, it is surrounded by a moving encampment of Legion tribesfolk and smaller mechs, all of whom have trading needs. Because Rebirth’s patrol route does not pass near Chemak — an otherwise logical place for the city-mech to restock on metal and other supplies — a variety of nomad traders fill this need. Since Chemak gets most of its metal and spare parts from the Flatlands by way of Edge, some of that material is simply diverted toward Rebirth en route.

The city-mech’s followers hunt game and craft goods on the move, and exchange these for spare parts and other food items. During Highwater, some tribes of endless traders focus on supplying Rebirth and its moving camp of followers and outriders with metal goods acquired in Edge, which they barter for some of the Legion’s more unusual handicrafts, such as lunar dragon bone carvings.

Tannanliel: Unlike the Legion city-mechs Haven and Rebirth, Tannanliel’s markets are best known for their exotic items: the magic arms and armor of the Bladefair, and the scrolls, spellbooks, and wondrous magical items of the Sanctum. Tannanliel also has a more mundane market, the Nameless Market, but it offers little to outsiders (like the endless traders) to justify the long trek needed to reach it. Not so with the Bladefair and the Sanctum, both of which do brisk trade in goods that can be obtained nowhere else in the Endless Plains.

Among the nomads of the plains, the Wisps and the endless traders have cultivated the closest relationship with the powers that be aboard Tannanliel, and both groups trade often in the city-mech’s two most peculiar markets. Among the endless traders, there are a handful of tribes that specialize in magic items, almost to the exclusion of other goods. They return to Tannanliel during Highwater to trade the magical wares that they have acquired

upriver, in the west, for the items that Tannanriel's cagey merchants have bought from the Wisps and from adventurers exploring the ruins of the Endless Plains.

Glatek: Glatek is a commercial hub of the Endless Plains, centrally located and well protected from the lunar rain. Many tribes of endless traders stop here at the beginning of Highwater, and then again toward the middle of the month. There are also a few bands of endless traders who spend most of Highwater in and around Glatek, rather than traveling the plains, and head west as late as possible.

When they return from their great journey at the end of Cammerce, most tribes of endless traders make Glatek their first stop, trading with Stilt City and the other nomads along the way. When they reach Glatek, they have access to the store of trade goods that the city's merchants have built up in the intervening year. They then spend a week or two trading around the plains, and return to Glatek for one last dip into their stockpiles before they head west again at the end of Highwater.

Glatek's most valuable and popular trade items are weapons, spare parts, and metal from the Flatlands, closely followed by hides and the meat of sea creatures procured by the slathem. The city also does a brisk trade in slaves and meat from the Endless Plains, as well as moderate trade in timber brought in from the elven forest and the humans of the Legion.

Gur: As the preeminent farmers of the Endless Plains, the Gur's magically grown foodstuffs are always in high demand. With each band specializing in its own crop or crops, there is a great deal of variety to be had. Some of the Gur crops are prized in the lands to the west because they are grown only in the Endless Plains, while others are desirable simply because they are of higher quality than comparable foods available elsewhere.

The Gur goods most sought after in the west, and therefore of the most interest to the endless traders, are spanner fruit (especially the pickled variety), dried and fresh trout seeds, and riverberries (called

"cogberries" in the west). Spanner fruit tastes like a cross between peas and strawberries, and comes in pods that are shaped vaguely like wrenches. Zarri is a celery-like vegetable that can be enjoyed fresh, cooked, dried, or pickled, and it is one of the Gur's staple commodities for trade. The pickled variety is especially delicious.

Trout seeds are named for their slightly fishy smell, which is brought out by the drying process. When added to stews and soups, they have nearly the same effect on the taste as adding actual fish. The fresh seeds can also be planted, and their leafy sprouts have a faint aroma of fish. Riverberries grow only in the Endless River, and only aboveground. They come in the form of straggly bushes, the branches of which drag in the water; the berries grow on the ends of the submerged branches. They have a rich, complex taste, a bit like a cross between cherries and dates, and their knobby appearance has earned them the nickname "cogberries" outside of the Endless Plains. A few adventurous Gur are trying to make riverberry wine, albeit with limited success.

Stilt City: Though on the point of decline, Stilt City is still one of the best sources of fresh fruits and vegetables in the Endless Plains — and the only one that produces food year-round. Although the Gur exceed Stilt City in variety because they can take advantage of varying growing conditions all over the plains, Stilt City exceeds the Gur — and everyone else — in volume. This is not to say that Stilt City doesn't offer a variety of goods: It does, from grains and vegetables to fresh and dried fruits and exotic spices.

Stilt City has two growing seasons, and hosts a massive market week at the end of each of them. During these market weeks, nomads from all over the Endless Plains come to Stilt City to trade. In between, during the growing seasons, Stilt City traders leave their homes (while the farmers continue to tend their crops) with a bounty of dried, pickled, smoked, and otherwise preserved foodstuffs.

In each category, Stilt City is best known

for a few items. In terms of grains, Stilt City wheat and plainsgrass (which makes excellent flour) are among the finest on Highpoint. Stilt City grows staple vegetables like zarri, mud radishes, several varieties of mushrooms, and cloudstalk (which is similar to broccoli, but keeps better) — as well as siltroot, which grows nowhere else. Siltroot is named for the environment in which it thrives, the silt-rich bed of the Tyratian River. Although others along the river have tried to grow siltroot, there is something unique about the environment in and around Stilt City, and no other farmers have met with success.

Fennik, browfire, and dragon shavings are among the most popular spices exported by Stilt City. While fennik is a mild, cinnamon-like spice that makes excellent tea, browfire and dragon shavings are both fiercely hot. Stilt City is also justifiably famous for its spiced trout, known locally as "fire minnows." A fire minnow consists of a whole smoked trout that is stuffed with dried, seasoned mushrooms and spiced with a secret mix that includes dragon shavings and powdered siltroot.

THREATS TO TRAVELERS

"I'll take rocks from the sky over orcs any day." —Erklos

With the lunar rain having diminished in intensity in the past two decades or so, it is no longer the threat it once was. When the meteors first began to fall, they wrought near complete destruction on the Endless Plains. None of the nomad tribes and other groups that thrive here now could have done so in the early years of the lunar rain. Today, this leaves two major hazards to life in the Endless Plains: lunar creatures, especially dragons, and the orc hordes.

Because lunar dragons do not make lairs, they are a threat all across the End-



less Plains. Unless you're inside one of the region's three city-mechs, or behind the walls of Glatek or Chemak, there is nowhere to hide from lunar dragon attacks. The nomads have learned instead to avoid them whenever possible, relying on word of mouth and sharp-eyed outriders to alert them of dragons lurking nearby. Fortunately, the plains are vast, making lunar dragon attacks far less common than they otherwise might be (except in certain areas, like the region around Stilt City).

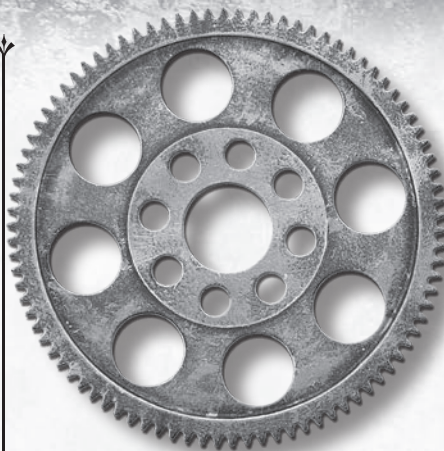
In recent years, it is the orc hordes that have become the most pressing threat to the safety of the other inhabitants of the Endless Plains. Although the rise of the Legion has made the chaotic and disorganized orcs less of an immediate danger, this factor is steadily being cancelled out by advances among the orcs. The orcs have had mechs for some time, of course — great, crude machines that are no match for the larger, more powerful mechs of the civilized cultures — but they had not begun to realize their potential until quite recently.

The rise of Bhugrusht "Iron Legs," the Great Chieftain, has already had a noticeable impact on the bands of orcs under his control. Unless Bhugrusht is stamped out soon, he will likely form them into some semblance of a cohesive army, which could pose a real danger to everyone else who calls the Endless Plains home.

RUMORS

There are opportunities for adventure aplenty in the Endless Plains, and GMs should feel free to modify these rumors and adventure hooks to suit their own campaigns.

Clan War: The two Stavian clans, Haashu and Corray, are peaceful by nature and tradition—but they are also fiercely proud. The current chieftain of the Corray, Vorroere, has hatched a plot to restore some of his lost glory by disqualifying the chieftain of the Haashu during the next *dashaii* race. The Great Gathering is immensely



important to the Stavian nomads, and if Vorroere's plot is exposed before the *dashaii* — or worse yet, if he pulls it off — it could spark skirmishes between the two clans, possibly even escalating into open warfare.

Ezzen's Army: Ezzen Harral, an ancient and well-connected Wisp, is nearing the end of his life. Rumors have been flying among the Wisps for the past year that Ezzen is planning something big — so big, in fact, that he needs outside help. He has instructed the Wisps who are loyal to him to spread the word that he is looking for several bands of adventurers to join him for a raid of epic proportions somewhere within the Endless Plains.

He has also asked the endless traders to carry this message west on their next journey, which means that adventurers all over Highpoint will learn of Ezzen's request in the coming year. Apart from Ezzen himself, no one knows exactly what the wizened Wisp has planned — but the most popular speculation is that it involves the ruined coastal city of Eseldera.

Iron Legs' Raid: The Great Chieftain of the orcs, Bhugrusht, is planning a raid on Stilt City — but not just any raid. The bloodthirsty steamborg wants to use orc mechs to smash the city's support stilts, bringing it crashing to the ground. This plan has a ways to go before it comes to fruition, particularly because Bhugrusht's forces only control two mechs. Although having two mechs under one commander is unprecedented in orcish history, Iron

Legs' mechs are still no match for those fielded by the Legion. Moreover, Stilt City sits along Haven's patrol route, which means that Bhugrusht would have to coordinate his attack for a time when Haven was furthest from Stilt City — no mean feat.

How quickly this plan becomes a reality is up to the GM. Given the scope of Bhugrusht's plan, and its likely effects on the rest of the region, this hook could become the basis for an entire **DragonMech** campaign set in the Endless Plains.

Mech Bandits: General Auravoz Blackspire and his Endless Brigade have hatched dozens of plots to steal or capture Legion mechs for Chemak, and so far they have met with some success and managed to remain undetected. The Legion is beginning to take notice, however, which isn't surprising: Over a period of several months, they've lost four mechs, including a Paladin — one of the mightiest war machines in their arsenal. Shar Thizdic and his forces haven't yet figured out that the disappearances are not desertions, but all it would take is one piece of bad luck for the Endless Brigade to be exposed.

Chemak's government has also not yet caught wind of the bloody-minded secret society in their midst, but it is growing suspicious about the disappearance of valuable building supplies (taken for use in the Mechyard). Most of Chemak's populace would probably oppose the efforts of the Endless Brigade, but some would support them — and this could lead to a serious divide within Chemak, possibly even a civil war.

There are also outside elements, such as the Stenian Confederacy and the L'arile Nation, who wouldn't mind seeing the Endless Brigade become a thorn in the Legion's side (and thereby a check to the mechdom's continued expansion). The Endless Brigade has not yet come out into the open, but if any of the four most interested parties — Chemak, the Legion, the Stenian Confederacy, or the L'arile Nation — were to find out about it, the resulting conflict could impact every inhabitant of the Endless Plains.

DUEROK

FOR MANY YEARS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE LUNAR RAIN, THE FLATLANDS WERE LIKE THE REST OF HIGHPOINT. OUR PEOPLE FOUND FEW TO TRADE WITH THERE. BUT OUR WAYS ARE DRIVEN BY TRADITION AND OUR TRAVELS REQUIRED THAT WE PASS THROUGH, SO WE PERSEVERED PAST ALL OTHERS IN SEEKING OUT TRADE IN THE FLATLANDS.

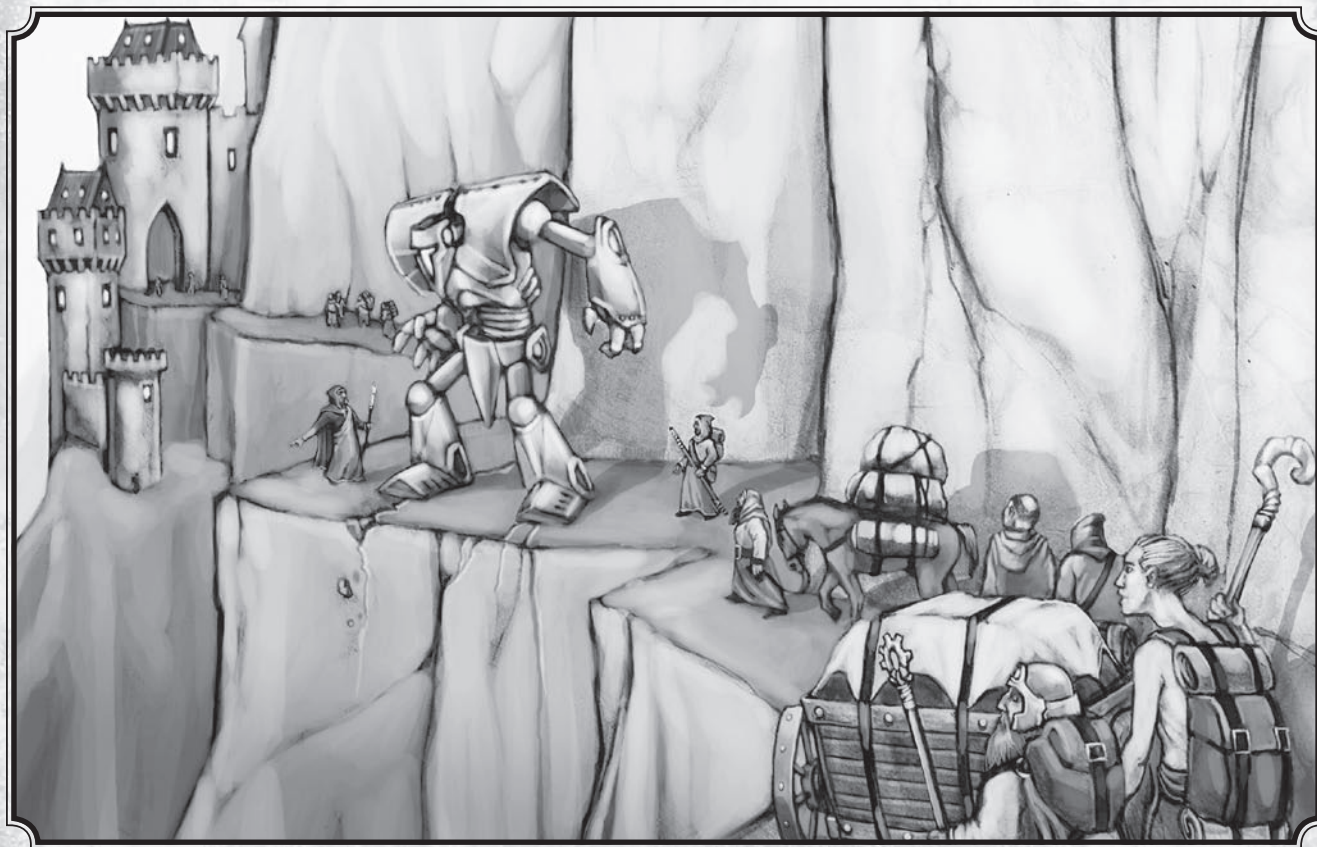
Other traders and merchants didn't have the courage to brave the lunar rain, scurrying to the safety of the underdeep and Duerok. There they traded with the throngs of refugees crammed into every cave and crevice. They left those who remained on the surface bereft of the goods they needed to survive, and passed up profit in the decision. But we of the Western Star tribe of the endless traders

were not in such a hurry to turn our backs on those who needed our services and could afford our goods. It is as my grandfather Ellias said: *Profit can be found anywhere if you look hard enough.*

But I get ahead of myself. I am Karof Darsol, First Haggler of the Western Star tribe of the endless traders. It is I who make the deals and collect the goods that my people live by. Many endless trader

tribes are largely made up of family, either through blood or marriage, but I have the distinction of being entirely surrounded by family. My family has always been a fertile one, and I am blessed with thirty-two uncles, thirty-four aunts, one hundred and twelve cousins, and eighty nieces and nephews. This has its problems at times, but as Uncle Berras says: *Even steel cannot break blood.*

So you know who we are now, but not where we came from, and as my cousin Jasar says: *You are who you have been.* While the other bands of merchants ran across the Flatlands in a mad rush for cover from the lunar rain, we traded with the people that remained, like the worm farmers of Vermil, and brought them the goods that allowed them to survive. We braved lunar dragons and raiders to maintain our tradition. Even now, long after the rise of the Stenian Confederacy, many of the other merchants remain afraid to brave the dangers that still lie in the Flatlands, choos-





ing to remain in Lok-stead. And so, in our travels through hazardous Thuron-Dom or Gorla Reign, we rarely meet any but our own kind. No matter. Profit favors he who is willing to take the risks. That is a saying of my own making, and I quite like it.

We do not fear. We go where others fear and return with the riches to prove it. We go to the tunnel city of Vermil, the broken city of mech rats called Rust Hill, and the bandit town of Slaughter Hollow. In the month of Duerok, we cross the Flatlands, trading with those who live between the steps of the mech cities.

Other traders ignore these people, seeing only the riches of those who live in the city-mechs of the Stenians. In doing so, they also ignore the fact that the mech-dwellers are outnumbered ten to one by those who do not live in the metal behemoths. They choose to fight with all the other cowards to get permission to board a city-mech. Or they trade with those settlements that have formed in the wake of the mechs' patrol patterns. They barter and haggle only with those who accept the rule of Stenian Confederacy fully. We endless traders like fellow independent spirits, those who do not knuckle under so easily.

We of the Western Star tribe brave the dangers beyond the protection of the city-mechs. There is a whole other world in the Flatlands besides what is protected by the Stenian Confederacy. And that is where we go.

THE LAND

Many settlements in the Flatlands are built along the patrol paths of the city-mechs, but we avoid those. Such settlements are where other merchants hide, especially when a city-mech is near, and thus they must compete with each other. There are far more people located in the wilderness of the Flatlands who see few traders. We trade with a few groups that may not exactly be on good terms with the Stenians, although we do our best to stay

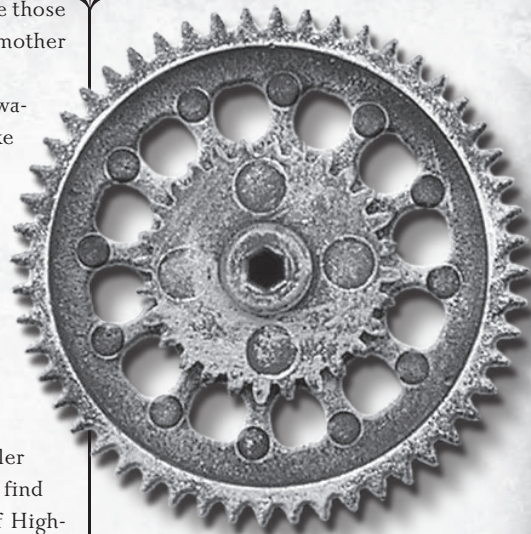
in their good graces. Do not dispute those who keep you safe, as my grandmother Kirikas once said.

At the end of the month of Highwater, as all endless traders do, we make our way to the Flatlands from the Endless Plains. The cliffs bordering the western edge of the Endless Plains made this a difficult in the earliest days of our people, but now many ways exist to scale the cliffs and reach the Flatlands. While some tribes head south to use the many means available at the city of Edge, my tribe uses the smaller trails west of Glatek, as we usually find ourselves in that city at the end of Highwater.

We travel up the cliffs using a lengthy series of switchbacks called the Hooked Road, stretching over thirty miles to scale a height of three thousand feet, a process that takes two days to complete. While not as well known or as fast as the elevators and stairs of Edge, the Hooked Road sees a steady stream of traffic between Glatek and the Flatlands during the trading months. The gatekeepers of the road, a group of humans called the Ironcliff Clan, are a suspicious bunch — always on the lookout for saboteurs from Edge, seeking to eliminate the competition. They offer few of the services of the Stairkeepers of Edge, but the price cannot be beat.

Their road is well kept and made of stone, but its original builders are unknown. Some suspect the tortogs or a clan of outcast dwarves, while others whisper it is the construction of lunar cultists from before the lunar rain. These rumormongers say the cultists practiced dark rites in the fortresses that guard the road, but I think this is more the product of ale or wine than history. The Hooked Road has survived the lunar rain, though some areas required repairs by the current owners. Unfortunately, these repairs were performed with less skill than used in its original construction.

The Hooked Road can hold three wagons abreast with little difficulty and most



smaller mechs may traverse it with ease, though larger mechs must inch up the road sideways, taking far longer than normal. There is no railing or protection on the edge of the Hooked Road and the winds can become very fierce in the colder months, so one best take care to mind the edge. The Hooked Road has twenty small fortresses along its length, few of which are in good repair, but mechs can move across with minimal difficulty. Though the fortifications are old and worn, should the Ironcliff Clan decide to close the Hooked Road, it would very difficult to remove them, despite their small numbers. The fortresses are placed so that to reach the other end of the Hooked Road, all twenty fortresses would have to be breached, enabling the defenders to fight a continuous retreat up or down the road.

The Stenian Confederacy breaks up its territory based on the patrol routes of its five city-mechs, creating one region for each city-mech (for more information, see **Second Age of Walkers**).

LOKAG'S THRONE

The Hooked Road ends at a Stenian checkpoint called Brendel Point, where those coming into the Flatlands

are thoroughly inspected before entering Lokag's Throne, which is protected by the city-mech Lokag. Brendel Point is little more than a tower, a jail, and a repair bay for the two Juggernaut mechs stationed there. Its small garrison is charged with making sure no undesirables get into the Flatlands via the Hooked Road. Brendel Point is considered an unfavorable posting within the Confederacy, a place to put those who have shamed themselves with their behavior. While not all bad people, they don't like being here much on the edge of their country and far from their families. It is not a place to make trouble.

Within the territory of Lokag's Throne, the Stenians keep a tight rein on their subjects as it is still an unsettled territory rife with dangers. They keep an even tighter grip on those coming in from the outside world. In Lokag's Throne, the Stenian settlements are mostly military towns built from the ruins of old mechs, few of which have any use for traders such as us. So instead we head to the shores, trading with the slathem who live there. While some of these aquatic people have agreed to be subjects of the Stenian Confederacy, most hold themselves apart from the doings of the Confederacy and some actively oppose it. To ensure good trading, we do not bring

the slathem any goods that would antagonize the Stenians. Or at least we hide the goods that would get us in trouble. *Often the best profit is made under the table*, as my brother Kaisac says.

The primary slathem settlement in the Flatlands is a small village called Org Fen, built into the cliffs of the coastline. Half above the waterline and half below, it is reached through a series of rickety wooden stairs from the top. The slathem of Org Fen are not particularly interested in the Stenian Confederacy, and their several score inhabitants do not answer to its authority. The settlement itself is little more than a collection of caves inhabited by the slathem with no real quarters for outsiders, forcing us to camp in tents at the top of the cliffs. The slathem normally come up to the tops of the cliffs at high tide to trade with us and carry the goods back down, where they are often sent to other nearby settlements.

As the largest and most convenient slathem community in the region, it has become the center of trade for the nearby slathem coastal enclaves. Several other slightly smaller enclaves are working on making themselves more accessible. In a few years, there is likely to be a commercial conflict between these towns for dominance. I just hope it doesn't end up in violence, as the slathem settlements are some of the more peaceful towns we visit.

Bordering Lokag's Throne are the remains of the northern forests of the Flatlands, within which we once conducted much business. Like all forests, these woods have not suffered the lunar rain well and many are twisted and barren shadows of their former verdant selves. The forests were once a favored part of the Flatlands for my people, but now we hurry through the forests, seeking to put the destruction behind us as quickly as possible.

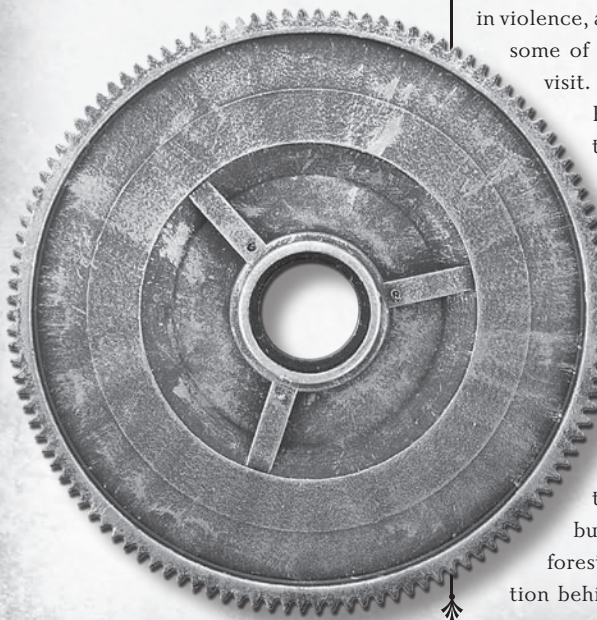


We occasionally trade with the elves that remain in these forests, a downtrodden and broken people living in the corpse of their old world. We do some harvesting of herbs and wood here, specifically of stonewood trees and gerpal berries, both of which are only found in these wounded forests. For most of my clan, the open plains of Nedderpik's Roam cannot come soon enough, as the forests hold too much pain.

NEDDERPIK'S ROAM

After a week in Lokag's Throne, we turn south and head into Nedderpik's Roam, which is a great relief to all of us. Nedderpik's Roam is home to a plethora of raiders, bandits, and monsters, but the rolling hills and grasslands are pleasant all the same. The area is filled with all manner of people who are not exactly friendly with the Stenians, from Irontooth clans to rust riders, many of whom are more than willing to trade with us. Unfortunately, these settlements tend to move around to avoid Stenian mech patrols, so our trip through the region is a sort of meandering path that takes us in many different directions. The only permanent settlement in the region we visit is the bandit town of Slaughter Hollow, a very unpleasant name for a moderately unpleasant little town.

Founded by a retired bandit called Slaughter Jack (Ftr6/Rog6) who was once a terror to caravan and Stenian alike, this small hamlet is found at the bottom of a



small canyon that has thus far managed to avoid Stenian attention. A place for bandits, thieves, and other undesirables to come and relax, all manner of illicit goods can be picked up here. Slaughter Hollow lies in the eastern reaches of Nedderpik's Roam, near the cliffs of the Endless Plains and a few days' ride from the city of Edge — the source or destination of much of the loot. The Hollow is made up of a dozen large caves, each of which has been partitioned by wooden walls and fixed up to be more comfortable than a simple hole in the ground. Within these caves can be found an inn, tavern, smithy, gear shop, general store, and storage facilities. These storage facilities are for those with stolen goods or contraband who need it to stay out of the public eye. In the middle of the canyon is an open air market where thieves and merchants hawk all manner of stolen and illegal goods, from mech parts to poison.

Only a few dozen individuals actually live in Slaughter Hollow, but its transient population often numbers in the hundreds. Other than those specifically allowed to stay by Slaughter Jack, most of whom are old friends of his, no one may remain in Slaughter Hollow for more than two weeks. This is a precaution to keep from attracting any lawmen or bounty hunters to the settlement. A number of bounty hunters have discovered the place, but many have worked out an arrangement with Slaughter Jack. Visitors who are hunted by these select few bounty hunters are kicked out of town and given a short head start whenever they show their faces.

Slaughter Jack has complete power within the town due to his skill with a blade, his many allies, his deep pockets, and the greed of those who enjoy his hospitality. As long as you cause no problems, it's easy enough to get by. This is where criminals go when they are not looking for trouble, and so they appreciate it when you return the favor. The Stenians have been looking for Slaughter Hollow for years, but have yet to find it thanks to a wizard named Erias Pane (Wiz 9), who is an old comrade of Slaughter Jack. Whenever the Stenians

come close, they are beset by all manner of illusions and spells, foiling any attempts to find the town. Also, a significant amount of gold in the right pockets helps keep the Stenians from looking in the right places.

The only other permanent settlement in Nedderpik's Roam, the Shelter of Taas, is firmly in the hands of the Stenians. A pleasant enough place, it's not very lively. Our travels do not allow us to stay long, nor do we particularly wish to. We normally spend a week and a half in Nedderpik's Roam, with several days dedicated to trading at Slaughter Hollow.

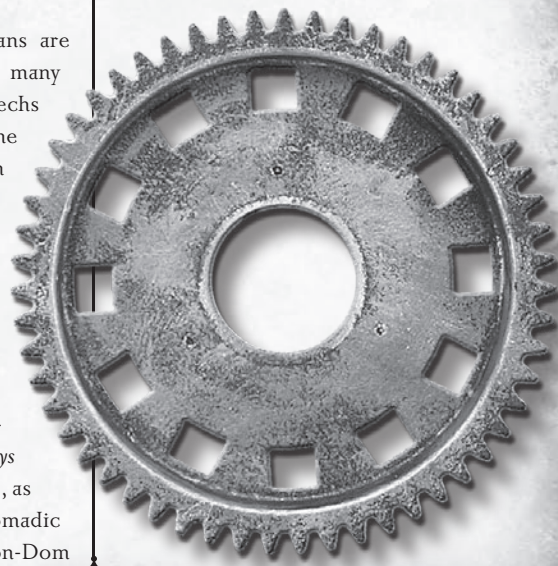
THURON-DOM

Once our business at Slaughter Hollow is conducted, we head west into Thuron-Dom, home of most of the nomadic tribes of the Flatlands. Thuron-Dom is not as pleasant as Nedderpik's Roam in terms of terrain. It is much rockier and less gentle, but is still more pleasant than Gorla Reign and the mountains to the south. Still, there is a substantial amount of greenery to be found, at least in those areas not recently hit by the lunar rain. Other than mechs, there are few ways to avoid the rain — sheltering mountains or caves are rare — and the inhabitants of the region live nomadic lives in the hope of avoiding areas blasted clean of life.

Mech tribes and Irontooth clans are found throughout Thuron-Dom, many of which ride in stolen Stenian mechs and have strong feelings against the Stenian Confederacy. More so than any other area of the Flatlands, mech battles are a regular occurrence here. Smoke on the horizon and cannonballs half-buried in the dirt are common here, as are the rusted bones and metallic skeletons of the defeated. But this seems to be the way the Irontooth clans like it. *If a madman enjoys his madness, take his money and let him, as my grandmother used to say.* The nomadic nature of the inhabitants of Thuron-Dom

makes our journey difficult at times, but as the years have progressed, their paths have become well known to us as most follow predictable routes.

Like Lokag's Throne, Thuron-Dom was once largely forested, but these forests have suffered in the last century. In Thuron-Dom, the forests are recovering quicker than their northern branches in Lokag's Throne, but still it will be many an age before they are restored to their former states, if ever. In the northwestern section of Thuron-Dom lies Greenhope, a relatively new settlement of elves of the L'arile Nation who have moved to the area to assist in the recovery of the forest. The four score elves who dwell there have several Rodwalker mechs for their own protection, and have been working to secure their settlement from the various bandits and monsters common to the region. Although the Stenians permitted the elves to settle in the forest in peace, a group of elves armed with mechs within their borders makes them nervous. We have noticed that since the appearance of Greenhope, the city-mech Thuron turns farther north and west each year. We tend to stay in the northwestern corner of Thuron-Dom as much as possible, avoiding the edges of Lok-stead as long as possible. Those regions are thick with less adventur-



ous merchants.

Besides Greenhope, the only major stationary settlement in Thuron-Dom is the home of the mech rats, a strange place called Rust Hill. The mech rats are a loose tribe of salvagers, thieves, tinkers, and hunters who make their living by illegally salvaging parts from the many mechs destroyed in the region and selling them to all comers.

Constructed from the remains of several mechs destroyed in battles between the Stenian Confederacy and the Iron-tooth Clans, Rust Hill is the center of trade in scavenged mech parts in the Flatlands if you want to avoid the attention of the Stenians. Salvaging mechs without a permit is a serious offense in the Stenian Confederacy, so the mech rats try to hide their operation as much as possible. There are dozens of mech gravesites in Thuron-Dom, and Rust Hill looks much the same as all the others.

Three of the the dozen mechs that make up the structure are actually still functional: two Juggernauts and an Iron Maiden. Should Rust Hill fall under attack, these mechs will stall any intruders so the inhabitants can flee to any one of three backup locations where structures similar to Rust Hill have been constructed out of abandoned mechs. More than anything, the mech rats are prepared to survive, and they always have a backup plan or five. From Rust Hill, the mech rats send salvage teams across the region looking for new mechs to scavenge, and they are very adept at remaining unseen while doing so. While we are not interested much in mech parts,



Rust Hill is a relatively rich settlement always looking for food, clothes, and other goods they cannot produce. We spend several days there each year before heading south into Lok-stead.

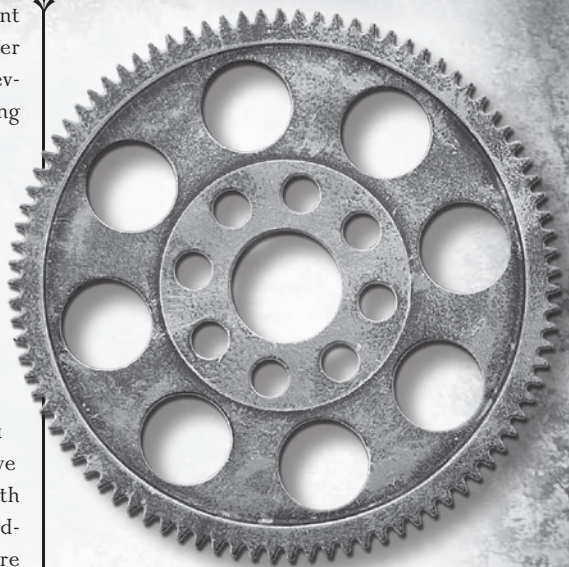
LOK-STEAD

While most traders and merchants prefer the safety and security of Lok-stead to the other areas of the Flatlands, this is not so with my tribe. This rocky and mountainous area is directly above Duerok, with whom we do most of our trading during the month of Cammerce. While other tribes of endless traders spend much of their time there each year, we of the Western Star do not. Competition in that area is already fierce enough.

We do stop in the four largest settlements — Cradlesrest, Elmshold, Duerie, and Torft — but not for more than two days each before heading out again. We occasionally trade with some of the criminal groups in the area, but doing so under the very nose of the Stenians is always dangerous. *Profit is not worth the hand that holds it*, as my aunt Pyra says. After a week, we move on, heading south to Gorla Reign and freedom from the heavy presence of the Stenians.

GORLA REIGN

The transition from Lok-stead to Gorla Reign is staggering. Lok-stead is the center of power for the Stenian Confederacy and the link to Duerok. It is a center of law and order without equal in Highpoint. But Gorla Reign is home to very few people, and most of them have little loyalty to the Stenian Confederacy. A flat land filled with lunar rain craters, vast expanses of bedrock, and areas of dark brown earth, it has no stationary settlements claimed by the Stenians. Instead the inhabitants live in scattered nomadic bands, most of which try to stay near the city-mech Gorla



because of the large number of lunar dragons in the region. We trade occasionally with these groups, but because we also trade with the non-Stenian inhabitants of the sector, they treat us coldly.

It can be argued that the Stenians only control the northern portion of Gorla Reign — the area most often patrolled by Gorla. The rest of the sector is controlled by the worm farmers of Vermil, located in the southwestern end, and by the lunar dragons that flock to the region. Foremost among the lunar dragons is the creature known among the Stenians as Moonclaw, a massive beast that my caravan has had the good fortune to never face. But we have run into her followers, a deranged cult of lunar worshippers who believe they are doing the bidding of Moonclaw with their vile deeds and sacrifices. I think they are just insane and looking for some justification for their horrible deeds. Unfortunately, they seem to be growing in number and territory, spreading through the areas not claimed by the Stenians. We know little of their settlements, only hearing rumors of crude villages in the far south where they carry out dark rituals for their lunar masters. The only force that seems to be opposing them is the worm farmers, who are a whole other bucket of complexities.

Though we avoid the Cult of Moon-

claw, we trade with the worm farmers and get along relatively well with them, but that doesn't make them any less strange to us. Their tunnel city of Vermil is our main trade stop in Gorla Reign since it is the only major friendly settlement in the region other than Gorla itself. Lately, the worm farmers have been expanding their territory, which the Stenians do not appreciate even though they don't hold much of the region to begin with. For now, the two groups are feeling each other out with small battles, but it's only a matter of time before a war breaks out — if the expansion of the worm farmers continues. And from what we've learned, it certainly will.

The city of Vermil itself is built within the massive tunnels created by the giant worms of the region. Before the lunar rain, the worms were seen as a bane to farmers. Soon after the lunar rain began, however, farmers began relying on the worm tunnels for shelter, weathering the worst of the rain underground. Over time, these farmers began to understand the worms. They started feeding and training some of them, even living off the worms' waste. The worms consume the earth itself, yet vegetable or mineral material may be harvested from their dung.

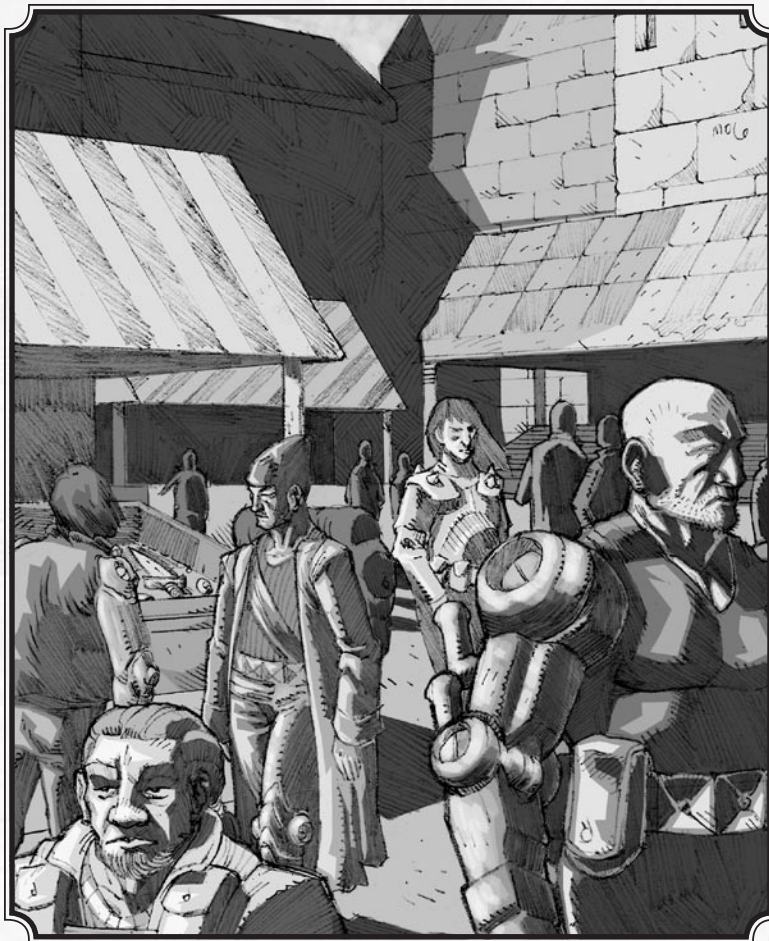
The worm farmers have trained their worms to the point of using them in construction within Vermil building new tunnels as desired, while previously they had to use whatever passages the worms felt like making. The city is a massive maze of tunnels and enlarged common rooms. They let few outsiders in their caves, and it took us several years of trading with them

to earn the privilege. The worm farmers do not trust outsiders, largely because their deity forbids it. Among the worm farmers, the cult of a god known as the Earthweaver holds sway. The Earthweaver is depicted as a massive worm creature that favors the worm farmers and their worm allies above all other creatures. Aspects of this worship can be seen in many areas of Vermil and the surrounding settlements, and to my eyes it is still disconcerting. Among other practices, the worm farmers who follow the

to this environment and most are pale from the lack of sunlight. The average tunnel is ten feet high and smooth to the touch, though they are poorly lit and very drafty. The worm farmers rely on worm waste for many of their day-to-day items, including a flammable substance called wormburn that they use in their torches. While it burns in a fashion similar to lamp oil, it is a very thick, sticky sludge that burns very slowly and is extremely hard to extinguish. All their settlements are lit by it and filled with

the choking black smoke it produces. Everything in Vermil is fashioned from the worms or worm droppings, from furniture to clothes.

In the territory claimed by the worm farmers, usually the only signs of their presence are furrows that indicate worm tunnels close to the surface. The worm farmers usually travel through worm tunnels when moving between settlements, or have fresh tunnels dug when they need to go elsewhere. They only travel on the surface when they must, hoping to avoid the lunar rain and dragons. The worm farmers mark their territory with worm furrows, spreading out in concentric circles from Vermil. Circles are a significant shape to many worm farmers, and they are common across all facets of their culture. These furrows not only serve as demarcations



Earthweaver feed their dead to the worms and then use the droppings produced as a drug to grant them visions of wisdom.

Vermil itself is a strange and creepy place. Unlike the warm and inviting homes of the dwarves, it is continually dark and cold. The worm farmers have grown used

of their territory, but also are an obstacle for any large mech to cross. Any invading mech will be beset by a number of worms that will surround it with tunnels, making it impossible for the mech to move without sinking into a tunnel and becoming immobilized. As a deterrent against the Stenians,

this has worked for the most part — except when the Stenians get annoyed and decide to launch a punitive assault against the worm farmers. These attacks, complete with infantry to storm the tunnels, are rare but go badly for the worm farmers each time.

We spend only a week in Gorla Reign since there are few places to trade other than Vermil and the surrounding settlements. Once we are done with our business in Vermil, we travel west toward the Roughlands, where we spend the month of Flero.

INHABITANTS

Most of the inhabitants of the Flatlands consider themselves citizens of the Stenian Confederacy, but only a small fraction of those people actually live in the city-mechs or under the constant protection of the Confederacy's mech patrols. We of the Western Star prefer to trade with those who think a little more creatively about their allegiances. Even with our preferences, there are many groups within the Flatlands we trade with every year. Among these groups, we have many friends and they know to trade fairly with us. While we trade with many bandits and troublemakers, we do not trade with those who cause us problems or are outright villains. Attacking the endless traders is a sure way to cut yourself out of our lucrative trading routes.

The month of Duerok is the month of holidays in Highpoint, as all the major holidays of the year fall in this month, one per week. We always make sure we are in one of the major settlements here for each of these holidays, though they are not the days of joy they once were. The Stenians do little to honor these holidays, feeling that taking a day off work is breaking their all-important Law. In the settlements that are not so friendly with the Stenians, these holidays are often ignored and local holidays are celebrated instead, although they usually fall in the month of Duerok as well.

Among the bandits of Slaughter Hollow, celebrations such as the Day of Gold and the Last Night of Summer are celebrated with ale and song, and in Vermil the worm farmers do far stranger things during the Eve of the Lost Tunnels.

BANDITS OF SLAUGHTER HOLLOW

Slaughter Hollow is the center of criminal activity both in Nedderpik's Roam and Lokag's Throne. Criminals from across the Flatlands come here to trade and hide, a fortnight at a time. Its inhabitants comprise one of the largest groups of bandits and troublemakers in the Flatlands.

One cannot talk about Slaughter Hollow and its people in depth without first talking about Slaughter Jack. What his real name is no one can remember, and even Slaughter Jack himself claims to have forgotten, but I believe this is just one more attempt on his part to inspire fear in others. Slaughter Jack once led a group of bandits called the Blood Regents that operated across the northern Flatlands for fifteen years, and included several mechs piloted by Irontooth clansmen. Eventually the Blood Regents were destroyed by the Stenians when they tried to take and hold territory on the Flatlands as their own kingdom, the survivors fleeing to Slaughter Hollow. Now Slaughter Jack and his comrades seek to rule the Flatlands secretly, or at least make a lot of money.

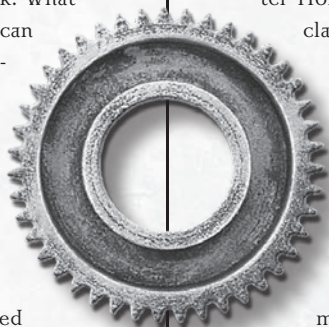
The core population of Slaughter Hollow is the several dozen shopkeepers, craftsmen, guards, and flunkies Slaughter Jack keeps on hand to make sure the place runs smoothly. These individuals are paid out of a one-gold-piece fee each visitor is charged for each day they spend in the settlement. Also, a five percent tax is charged on all goods bought and sold in Slaughter Hollow. This money is used to maintain

the structures built in the caves and to bribe the appropriate Stenian officials to ignore Slaughter Hollow. While bribery is rare in the Confederacy, Slaughter Jack has managed to find a friend in Brax Longaxe, a bureaucrat at the Shelter of Taas who makes sure none of the Stenian mech patrols stumble over Slaughter Hollow.

The permanent inhabitants of Slaughter Hollow are mostly made up of Slaughter Jack's old comrades from the Blood Regents or those who have proven their worth and loyalty. Any of these individuals who is even suspected of betraying Slaughter Hollow is executed by being "rain tied," where the victim is tied down on an open area of the Flatlands to die of either dehydration or lunar rain, whichever comes first.

The rest of the population of Slaughter Hollow are bandits, Irontooth clansmen, traders, and fences looking to offload stolen goods or make purchases while avoiding the prying eyes of the Stenians. While in Slaughter Hollow, these individuals are usually well behaved and do their best to avoid making Slaughter Jack mad, but beyond its confines they are some of the most violent and despicable people on the Flatlands. We do not deal with them outside of Slaughter Hollow because of this, and there are some we do not deal with even there. *A polite viper is still a viper*, as my brother Yusil says. Still, within Slaughter Hollow itself, trouble is rare since the inhabitants don't want any problems and the visitors want to stay on the good side of the inhabitants.

Almost anything can be bought or sold in Slaughter Hollow, although mech parts are not a common commodity. Instead the open air market in the center of the Hollow offers a wide variety of more mundane goods, such as weapons, armor, bulk goods, and food. Most of these goods have been stolen from settlements and caravans throughout the Flatlands. Illicit goods,





such as poisons and dangerous magics, are also for sale, but Slaughter Jack does have rules about his marketplace. Slaves are not allowed in Slaughter Hollow, and anyone caught with lunar goods or worshipping the lunar powers is immediately executed.

If you are looking for cheap goods or contraband, or you need to offload some items of questionable ownership quickly with no questions asked, no place is better than Slaughter Hollow. The prices may not always be the best and the selection doesn't equal Edge, but there are far fewer watchful eyes.

ELVES OF GREENHOPE

Greenhope is a relatively new settlement created by a group of elves who may have more hope than sense. Settled within the last year, Greenhope is inhabited by four score elves who seek to help the forests of Thuron-Dom recover from the horrible damage inflicted by the lunar rain. Thus far they have had to spend most of their energies building their settlement and securing the area, a task that continues still. The Flatlands are a dangerous place throughout, and many creatures twisted by

the power of the lunar rain infest the once-great forests.

Greenhope was founded through an agreement between the L'arile Nation and the Stenian Confederacy, though both groups seem hesitant about the deal. The L'arile Nation hopes that since the Flatlands have long been the most secure area of Highpoint, the effects of the lunar creatures on the forests there may be less severe, making recovery easier. Meanwhile, the Stenians hope the elves can help the forest become a viable source of lumber again, a goal the elves are not particularly interested in achieving. The Stenians are uncomfortable with a group of mech-equipped elves in their territory, while the elves fear for the eventual harvesting of the forest by the dwarves. Luckily for us, it means the elves do not have many trading partners in the region.

Greenhope is led by a druid by the name of Gelia Bluegrove (Dru 11/Ftr 3), a woman renowned equally for her power over nature and for her terrifying dedication to her tasks. According to what the elves of Greenhope say, she was once a mighty warrior against the lunar creatures, but she suffers from some sort of infection gained from a lunar beast, which has made her extremely weak. She has redirected her fervor to healing the forests of Thu-

ron-Dom. She has little patience for those who are not part of her quest, rarely seeing outsiders. Instead, we normally deal with her various underlings, primarily the half-elf known as Berllias (Exp 5), who serves as the quartermaster of Greenhope. Considering the resolve and fanaticism of his fellows, Berllias is a surprisingly relaxed fellow who appreciates a good glass of wine. If you visit Greenhope, ask for him.

The other elves of Greenhope are mainly foresters, rangers, herbalists, and alchemists, although a surprising number of druids are present as well. Some say that Gelia Bluegrove is using the settlement as a rallying point for the surviving druids of Highpoint. Berllias tells me of the dozen druids at Greenhope, half of whom are barely cogent enough to speak, such is the damage their minds have suffered as they watched nature itself be pummeled by the lunar rain. Maybe if this forest is reborn, they will be able to find some peace in this world.

The elves of Greenhope are usually interested in purchasing seeds, alchemical ingredients, food, and various finished goods like bows and tools. They produce a number of unusual items from the forest, such as stonewood, and create a small quantity of magical potions which they often sell to fund their research.



IRONCLIFF CLAN

Living to the west of Glatek on the eastern cliffs of the Flatlands, the Ironcliff Clan is a group of humans who control the Hooked Road, which sees thousands of travelers every year. The clan itself is a small group, less than five hundred members, and despite calling itself a clan, most members are not related.

The origin of the Hooked Road is unknown. The Ironcliff Clan makes no claims about building it and they're perfectly willing to admit they are not the first to hold it. Long before the lunar rain, the Hooked Road was claimed by a group of dwarves from Duerok — the first to call themselves the Ironcliff Clan. What exactly caused them to leave Duerok I do not know, but I do know they did not leave willingly. But when the lunar rain began, the dwarves went from being simple custodians of an ancient road to holders of one of the lifelines to safety.

As the lunar rain fell, those who lived on the surface panicked and sought refuge underground, specifically in places like Duerok that were known to be fortresses. From the Endless Plains, thousands surged up toward the Hooked Road, seeking entrance to the Flatlands and eventually to Duerok. Despite being cast out by Duerok, the Ironcliff dwarves stood their posts and faced down an immense siege, fighting off thousands of attackers with only five hundred of their own number. The throng that besieged the Hooked Road managed to overtake eight of the fortresses, but the harsh fighting retreat of the Ironcliff Clan kept them from advancing farther. In time, many of the attackers looked for other paths as

they found themselves unable to push past the twelfth fortress without suffering serious casualties.

To make this process more difficult for the refugees, the Ironcliff dwarves inserted spies into their ranks. This was a simple task given how many refugees there were from all parts of the Endless Plains. These spies would recruit those members of the refugee mob who were the leaders or best fighters to replace those lost among the Ironcliff Clan. Such recruits were promised safe haven in the fortresses of the Hooked Road, money, and food for their service. Thus, over a siege that lasted for the first ten years of the lunar rain, the Ironcliff Clan went from being a dwarven clan to one mostly made up of humans pulled from the ranks of those trying to destroy the Ironcliff Clan. This odd arrangement worked surprisingly well and the new members served ably, keeping the road closed until the Stenian Confederacy contacted them and said that the crisis had passed. This was only four decades ago, and ever since then the Hooked Road has served as one of the main routes to the Flatlands from the Endless Plains in the northern region of Highpoint.

Now the Ironcliff Clan has no dwarven members, the last dying out thirteen years ago. Despite their service defending Duerok from the horde of refugees

that tried to pass through the Hooked Road, Duerok never acknowledged the actions of the Ironcliff Clan nor offered to let the surviving dwarves return home, something the human members of the clan still hold against the leadership of Duerok. The Stenian Confederacy has been more flexible and has open relations with the Ironcliff Clan, working with them to stop undesirable elements from entering the Flatlands. The Ironcliff Clan has a reputation for being able to sniff out a lunar cultist with ease.

The members of the Ironcliff Clan are all trained in combat, but most are also familiar with accounting, politics, languages, and trade in order to fulfill their daily duties. Led by Captain Urei Ironcliff (Ftr 6/Mcj 1), a Stenian veteran who joined the Ironcliff Clan to avoid some sort of political trouble, they are all dedicated to their duty on the Hooked Road and serve until they are no longer physically able. The Ironcliff Clan counts many families in its ranks and the clan is becoming a generational structure, but for now it gets most of its recruits from those who pass through the Hooked Road. Captain Ironcliff is known for being quite the drinker, and those traveling through the Hooked Road should count themselves lucky if they are invited to dine with the captain. Her taste in wine is perfection itself.

The Ironcliff Clan relies on its tolls to keep itself supplied and fed. It is always looking to trade for food, weapons, and armor. Of late, the Captain has been looking to purchase additional siege weapons, small mech weapons, and even some mechs to increase the defensive strength of the Hooked Road. Why she is so worried is unknown.

MECH RATS OF RUST HILL

Possibly the most reviled group in all of the Flatlands, the mech rats are a large group of scavengers who work to pull salvageable parts from the many mechs that have been disabled in the Flatlands. They concentrate their efforts in Thuron-Dom, due to the large number of mech wrecks there. That said, mech rats can be found anywhere in the Flatlands where there is a mech to be salvaged. Operating in small bands that are sometimes family units, the mech rats say they've been around since the first time two mechs met in combat.

The first mech rats were born of the desperation brought on by the lunar rain, as were many things in Highpoint. They began as groups of people who hid among the ruins of wrecked mechs during the



earliest days of mech development and who salvaged parts to trade for food and other supplies. Initially, the coglayers of the Stenian Confederacy traded with the mech rats. At times, the mech rats were even recognized by the Gearwrights Guild as being agents of the Guild, and were hired to investigate what happened to any mechs that were overdue, in exchange for a portion of the salvage. As the Flatlands became more settled and the Stenian Confederacy's military grew, the mech rats were called on less and less by the Gearwrights Guild. Eventually, they reverted back to being simple scavengers picking over mech remains. The Stenians did try to relocate the mech rats and get them acclimated to life in the Confederacy, but by that point the mech rats had developed their own culture and were little inclined to change.

The mech rats now live in the rusted-out clusters of mech remains that the Stenians have decided are beyond salvaging, of which there are dozens in the Flatlands. Most are found near Rust Hill, the largest mech rat settlement located in Thuron-Dom. These settlements usually have a couple dozen inhabitants that claim the surrounding territory as their scavenging area. Neighboring mech rat camps rarely come to blows over territory, but if a large mech battle happens on the border between two settlements, they have been known to fight to the death. Most mech rats are not skilled warriors and prefer to avoid a fight when at all possible, a trait I can appreciate. Their settlements are usually defended by a small number of crudely built mechs and several mech weapons built into the structure that makes up their home. These defenses are kept concealed until the last possible moment to avoid arousing suspicion.

The mech rats spend most of their days wandering the territory around their home, looking for new mechs to salvage or picking through known mech piles for scrap. When a region is thoroughly picked clean, the mech rats move on to a new area, unless they expect a number of mech

battles in the region soon. The mech rats have migrated along with the conflicts between the Stenians and their enemies, slowly moving with the outer edge of the territory held by the Confederacy. The mech rats usually save up several months of salvage and then travel to Rust Hill to sell it.

Grouped roughly by family, most mech rat tribes are led by the oldest member, although few mech rats reach old age due to the many dangers they face. The majority of mech rats are human, and it is rare to meet one past the age of fifty. The mech rat tribes have few cultural traditions and stories of their own, instead creating a mishmash of traditions adopted from other groups around them. They have no single leader, but the head of Rust Hill, Magert Steelcord (Rog 14), serves as their spokesman in most matters. Unusually old at the age of eighty-four, he is a cunning and wise man who drives a hard bargain. While Magert's early life was spent trying to make a quick coin, he now spends his days trying to find a way to save his people's way of life while coming to peaceful terms with the Stenians.

The mech rats are always short on food, clothes, and other basic supplies. They rarely have coin, instead trading mech parts for whatever they need. A skilled trader can usually get a good deal on any parts the mech rats have to offer, but they will certainly be considered stolen goods by the Stenians if they catch you.

NOMAD CLANS OF THURON-DOM

There are dozens of nomadic tribes of humans spread across Thuron-Dom, most of which have no mechs and no great wealth. Despite this, they make up the majority of the population in Thuron-Dom, and are a sizeable presence elsewhere in the Flatlands. Although they command no mech armies and no tribes have much individual power, as a whole they are very powerful in the Flatlands.

Most of these tribes have thirty to one hundred members, and the majority of the nomad tribes are completely human. These tribes rarely have mechs, relying on horses, wagons, and pack animals for transportation. In the earliest days of the lunar rain, they journeyed on foot, but conditions have improved somewhat. These clans spend most of their time following the remaining animal herds of the Flatlands or traveling between various other forms of food. They must often travel great distances to keep their people fed, and every night they live in fear of the lunar rain. While the nomads have developed many techniques for dealing with the lunar rain's weaker effects, such as specially designed tents to keep lunar mist out, a full-fledged storm can destroy a nomad tribe in a single night.

Most of the nomad tribes are descended from the humans who once filled the central Flatlands, but they have lost much of their history. While they are not necessarily barbarians, many nomads cannot read and they have no written history to speak of. Most tribes live under a long list of superstitious beliefs about spirits and curses, fearing a great many things that an educated man would dismiss as a child's foolishness. They are a well-meaning but ignorant people, and I fear this will cost them in the future. All the nomads have some combat training, usually in spears and bows, and most are highly skilled in the saddle. Each tribesman is expected to ride to the tribe's defense if it comes under attack, and great shame falls on those who do not.

Some of the nomad clans are loyal to the Confederacy, while others don't give them any thought. A small number are violently opposed to the Stenians, and this number seems to be growing. We have seen among them agents from Shar Thizdic's Legion encouraging them to rise up against the dwarves, stirring up all manner of trouble. While these nomads are no match for mechs, there are tens of thousands of them in the Flatlands, and if they were united they would be the most numerous military force in the region.

WORM FARMERS OF VERMIL

Possibly the strangest group we have encountered in all our wanderings, the worm farmers of the tunnel city of Vermil are one of the strongest factions fighting for dominance in Gorla Reign. Before the lunar rain, the worm farmers were simple farmers eking out a meager existence in the brown soil of the southern Flatlands, but now they are an alien people on a crusade for their worm god.

Worm farmers will only speak of their god, the Earthweaver, to those they trust. Earning that trust is not easy — it took me seven years. According to their legends, the Earthweaver is a massive worm who lives beneath the Flatlands and is the mother of all the giant worms that live among the farmers. It is an enemy of the lunar creatures and has chosen the worm farmers as its champions. The Earthweaver's connection to the land appears to be so strong that the shamans of the worm farmers can cast spells as priests of the old gods do. From what they have told me, I do not believe the Earthweaver is actually a god and is instead merely a creature of great power, but I have learned not to mention this idea to the worm farmers. None of the farmers will admit to seeing the Earthweaver, instead insisting that it communicates with them through dreams. These dreams have directed the worm farmers to aggressively claim more territory in the Flatlands, but more importantly the worm farmers have begun a massive excavation effort below Vermil.

It took many years of piecing together half-heard stories and rumors for me to learn what exactly they believe they are doing. Deep beneath Vermil, they say, is a clutch of eggs from the Earthweaver that they aim to reach and help hatch, releasing a larger and stronger breed of worm into the Flatlands. If the stories are to be believed, there are hundreds of such creatures waiting to

be born, the apparent vanguard of the worm farmers' crusade against the lunar beasts. If these creatures do exist — and I have my doubts — it seems that little thought has been given to what will be done with them in the long term. I feel certain the worm farmers will turn them against the Stenians when the opportunity presents itself.

In the meantime, the worm farmers seek to follow the commands of their god and be left alone. They have little interest in the outside world except when it concerns the hated lunar creatures. They occasionally deal with traders such as myself, but they do not like mechs at all and consider most people who live in the Confederacy to be hostile. I am not sure what caused this dislike, but it is deeply ingrained. It may stem from the events directly following the lunar rain. Regardless, the worm farmers regularly attack mechs that enter their territory, digging worm tunnels to trap them when they pass over.

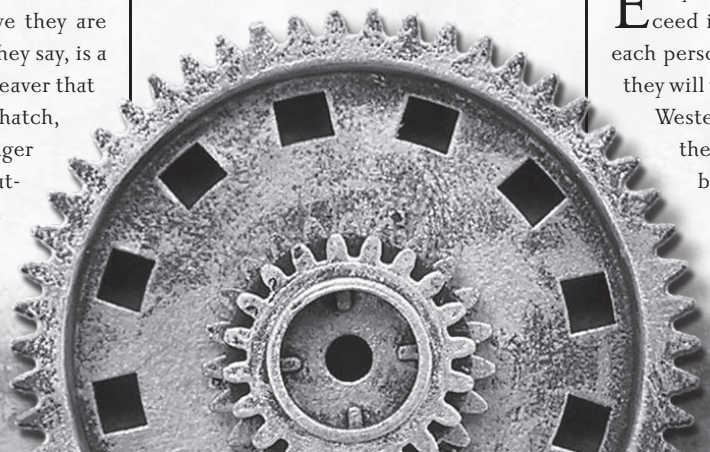
The worm farmers are very close-knit people who treat their worms more like family members than pets or pack animals. These worms can live for dozens of years and while they do not seem intelligent to me, the worm farmers claim they are creatures of great wisdom. The worms are cared for from birth, raised in packs by grub raisers, until their death, at which point the worm farmers have a massive ritual to honor the worm while it is sliced up into chunks for use as food and leather. All goods among the worm farmers are made from worms or their waste products, and once properly treated, worm hide is a very similar material to boiled leather. There is a misconception among some Stenians

that the worm farmers ride the worms, but this is impossible as the worms carve a path just large enough for the worm to pass through. A rider would be crushed quickly, so the worm farmers follow behind their charges, collecting the droppings. Most worm farmers are nomadic, following the worms through the tunnels they create and living in small bands of five to ten members per worm. Vermil and the surrounding villages are the only permanent settlements of the worm farmers, but the only reason they remain is because Vermil is considered holy ground to the Earthweaver.

The worm farmers harvest a wide variety of minerals and strange chemicals from the waste produced by their worms, much of which they clean up and trade to merchants such as my tribe. They also produce some interesting leather goods from the hides of their worms, although some buers are turned off by the smell of such items. The worm farmers prefer eating the foods they make from the waste of their worms to other types of sustenance, but are always interested in trading for clothing and finished goods like tools and weapons. They do not place much value on precious metals, so barter is the only way to deal with them. But this also means you can sometimes get an excellent deal from them on chunks of gold or silver their worms leave behind.

TRADING INFORMATION

Everybody wants something, but to succeed in trade you have to know what each person wants and the limits of what they will trade for it. This is why we of the Western Star tend toward trading with the same groups year after year, building up relationships over time, rather than trading with everyone we come across. This allows us to carry a stock of





goods that we always know we can sell.

Each group in the Flatlands has its own needs in terms of trade. The Stenians want metals and mech parts; the elves of Greenhope desire herbs, seeds, and alchemical ingredients; the mech rats need food; the bandits of Slaughter Hollow seek coin; and so on and so on. Within the Flatlands, there is a ready supply of minerals and mech parts, but finished goods and agricultural items are in high demand.

Food is of particular interest, and a trader bearing rice from Stilt City can make a tidy profit carrying it to the Flatlands. The Stenians prefer the standard dwarven fare of heavy breads, meat, and ale, but the other inhabitants of the Flatlands are not so picky. Not only is food in demand, but products like cotton and silk are also needed, in addition to the clothes made from these items. The Stenians produce some agricultural goods of their own, but not in great quantity or variety. And eventually everyone gets tired of dwarven cooking.

While there are many mineral resources to be found in the Flatlands, the Stenians do not have the capacity to turn it all into finished goods. The dwarves have many forges and many fires, but they concentrate on military goods and mech parts, leaving their people in need of mundane items like spoons and knitting needles. The Stenians don't like people selling weapons without their knowledge, so this is easier anyway. Often one can trade a few tools and other metal goods for raw iron, which can then be traded at a city-mech for swords or armor, which is again traded to soldiers, guards, or whoever else has the coin. The Flatlands are largely about trading in cycles, picking up in one place what you can sell elsewhere.

We enter the Flatlands each year carrying tools of bone for the slathem, rice for the Stenians and other settlements, herbs and seeds for the elves, and cloth goods for all. We trade to the slathem for salted fish

and whatever they can salvage from the ocean floor, we trade to the elves for wood and alchemical creations, and we trade the rice and salted fish to the Stenians for metal and to the mech rats for mech parts. We trade the mech parts to the Irontooth Clans for cash and the metal to Stenian smiths for finished goods, which we then trade to the worm farmers for more minerals.

While most of what we trade are normal goods like those found elsewhere in Highpoint, there are a few unusual items we come across.

STONEWOOD

Found in limited quantities near Greenhope, stonewood was once common in the forests of the Flatlands, but now it is limited to a small range of growth around Greenhope due to the lunar rain. Stonewood is a very slow-growing plant, taking 500 years or more to reach maturity, meaning the forests that once filled the Flatlands will not be restored for many centuries. To make matters worse, something about the presence of lunar rocks in the soil seems to prevent the plant from growing, meaning it may be even longer before the stonewood forests return to their former glory. For now, the elves only trade us bits of stonewood that they can scavenge from the forest, and are unwilling to cut down any stonewood trees for obvious reasons.

Stonewood can be used to make any object normally made of wood. The stonewood object has a hardness of 15. A six-foot length of stonewood, enough for a quarterstaff, longbow, or two clubs, costs 200 gp.

GERPAL BERRIES

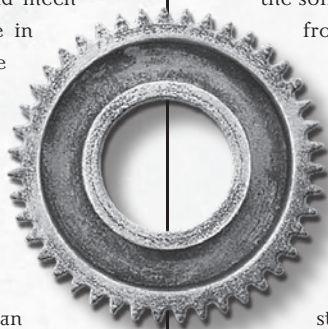
Found in small batches throughout the forests of the Flatlands, the black and bulbous gerpal berries are rather foul tasting. The vines on which they grow wrap around the upper reaches of trees, often making gerpal berries difficult to reach. They have little use as food since they are universally considered to be disgusting, but if used in any sort of healing agent, they make it more effective. They are valued by the elves for this reason, and we pick up a few to trade to alchemists in our travels.

If an ounce of gerpal berries is used in the creation of a healing potion or similar item, it will heal an additional +1 hit point per die when used. Gerpal berries cost 50 gp per ounce.

WORMBURN

Used by the worm farmers as their primary form of illumination, wormburn is created by the giant worms of the Flatlands when they ingest a great deal of organic matter, such as plant roots. Wormburn is a mixture of organic oils and acids from the stomach of the giant worm, creating a very thick, flammable mixture that has a consistency similar to molasses. A small amount can burn for hours, although it does not produce as much heat as lamp oil or similar liquids. It is used by the worm farmers for light and cooking. If it's used in a lamp or on a torch, the light will last three times longer than normal.

Wormburn cannot be used as a splash weapon due to its thickness. If poured on the ground and lit, it acts as lamp oil, except it burns for 20 rounds and inflicts 1d2 points of fire damage to each creature in the affected area each round. Wormburn costs 2 gp per quart.



THREATS TO TRAVELERS

The Stenians keep the worst of the lunar monsters and other large creatures out of every sector except Gorla Reign, but the Flatlands contain plenty of other dangers they have not yet eliminated. This is why so many Stenians stay only where the city-mechs or their patrols can be found. Conversely, this causes the mechs to stay in those areas where the people are, and thus they never clean out those regions filled with bandits, monsters, and other dangers. If the Stenians are not careful, their safe areas will remain safe while the rest of the Flatlands get worse.

If you travel the Flatlands, always do so well armed. Having a number of guards or a mech does not hurt. They are the best way to chase off the various monsters that infest the region. Many Irontooth clans are willing to work as guards temporarily for a good supply of spare parts.

There are dozens of dangerous species of creatures in the Flatlands, from bulettes to rocs. Trying to describe them all here is a waste of space as many other have catalogued their nature and abilities. Instead, the groups of men and women who walk the plains I feel deserve attention, as they are the most dangerous predators of the Flatlands.

BANDITS

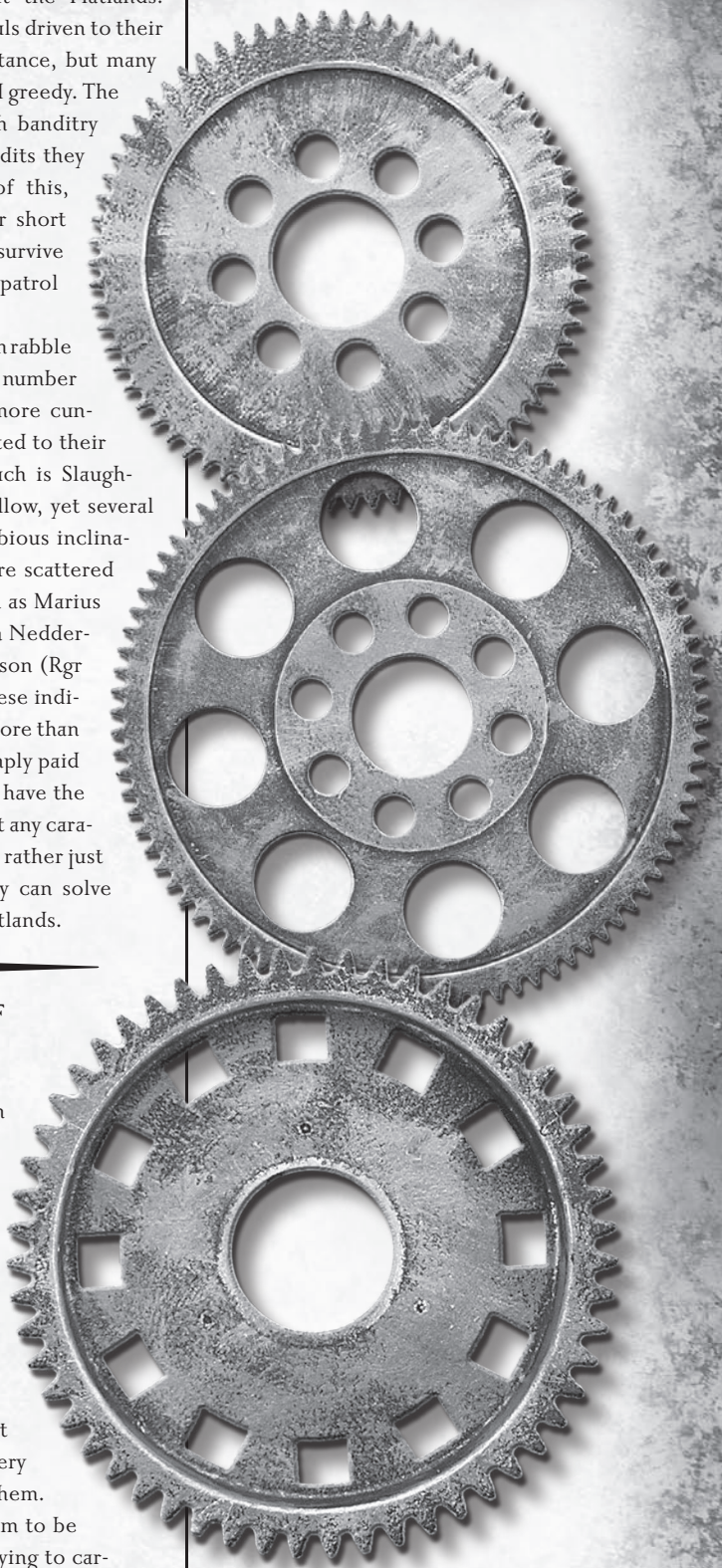
Bandits tend to roam in packs united by particularly strong or charismatic leaders, usually attacking caravans that do not have the benefit of mech protection. Most bandit gangs are nothing more than thugs and troublemakers who aren't interested in a real fight, only easy coin. Even a small group of well-trained guards can usually keep the typical bandits at bay since they tend to lose heart once one of their own number is laid low. Such bandits

are common throughout the Flatlands. Some are unfortunate souls driven to their life of crime by circumstance, but many more are simply cruel and greedy. The Stenians do not stomach banditry and generally kill all bandits they come across. Because of this, most bandits have rather short careers. Those who survive learn to predict mech patrol patterns.

Aside from the common rabble found in the Flatlands, a number of bandit lords are far more cunning, skilled, and dedicated to their trade. An example of such is Slaughter Jack of Slaughter Hollow, yet several other such fellows of dubious inclination but great cunning are scattered about the Flatlands, such as Marius the Foul (Rog 5/Asn 5) in Nedderpik's Roam and Bred Naison (Rgr 8) of Lokag's Throne. These individuals are to be feared more than common bandits, and simply paid off where possible. They have the skills and resources to put any caravan to the test, but would rather just get some money. Bribery can solve many problems in the Flatlands.

THE CULT OF MOONCLAW

Found in Gorla Reign in the south of the Flatlands, these maniacs believe they are doing the will of a mighty lunar dragon, and hope to gain some sort of power or reward for their actions. Everyone who comes into contact with the Cult of Moonclaw would very much like to be rid of them. Their favorite tactics seem to be attacking caravans and trying to carry away their victims as sacrifices to their



lunar master. They also have been caught attempting to bury chunks of lunar material all around the Flatlands, claiming they can spread the corruption of the lunar rain by doing so.

Fanatics all, they profess to believe many odd things, few of which seem to be true. There has never been a lunar creature sighted working in league with the cult, and the dragon they are named for pays them no heed as far as anyone else can tell. They really just seem to be a bunch of people who have lost their minds.

Unfortunately, this makes them no less dangerous. Indeed, their unpredictability and complete lack of fear make them *more* dangerous. There seems to be hundreds of cultists in Gorla Reign, although luckily internal conflicts over articles of faith often prevent them from acting as a whole. Instead, they roam in bands of twenty to fifty members looking to cause trouble. They expend most of their effort attacking the worm farmers and the Stenians, though their lack of mechs makes their anti-Stenian efforts comical. Several times they have charged mech patrols armed with swords and clubs, but having no anti-mech training, they are crushed soundly each time. The worm farmers have a more difficult time dealing with the cultists, who often break into worm tunnels and try to get into the farmers' territory. The worm farmers can repulse these attacks, but they become more numerous with each passing season. The number of cultists is increasing for some reason, and the worm farmers have told me they think there is some sort of lunar creature or artifact is responsible. While the Stenians fight against the Cult of Moonclaw, it is the worm farmers who know the most about them and are most interested in eliminating them completely.

The cult is nearly all made up of humans, many of whom are from the nomadic tribes of the Flatlands. A few orcs, gnolls, and other humanoids can be found, but these are rare. A pair of hill giants and a small clan of ogres have also fallen under the sway of the cult's teachings. Disturbingly,

the cult seems to developing into more of an army than a religious institution, and some fear they will soon attempt to acquire mechs of their own in order to better fight the Stenians.

WORMS

Found in Gorla Reign, the giant worms of the worm keepers are massive creatures averaging forty feet long and eight feet wide, but some come much larger. They are usually fairly harmless creatures who are merely content to eat the earth in front of them, but they can pose a threat. They sometimes break the surface to get a breath of fresh air, causing havoc if they happen to burst up into a settlement or caravan. The process throws dirt everywhere and can easily upend wagons and panic horses.

Also, their tunnels near the surface are covered by very thin crusts of earth. Should any great weight, such as a wagon or mech, be placed on one of these, the

offending object will break through and fall into the tunnel below. If this happens accidentally, as opposed to being a trap set by the worm farmers, then this is normally only an inconvenience — but if a worm is in the tunnel, it can become enraged. An angered worm is like a force of nature that is best avoided until its rage is spent. It will thrash about, throwing tons of dirt into the air in addition to anything standing on the dirt. The only thing that can fight a worm is a mech, so unless you have one handy, stay away. Worm farmers are usually attracted by the sound of a raging worm, and if you are on good terms with them, they will attempt to calm the creature.



FLERO

THESE ARE THE WORDS OF TYSRE, DAUGHTER OF TYSRE, DAUGHTER OF TYSRE BEFORE HER. IT FALLS TO ME TO TELL THE TALE OF THE ROUGHLANDS AND THE DREARY MONTH OF FLERO, AS FEW AMONG US KNOW MUCH PROFIT DURING THIS TIME. IN THE DAYS BEFORE MY NAME WAS BORN, THIS TERRAIN WAS LEAST FAVORED BY OUR PEOPLE. WE MUST CROSS IT WHILE THE WATER IS STILL HIGH, PICKING NEW PATHS EVERY YEAR THROUGH THE MANY LAKES. THE HERMITS AND BANDITS WHO LIVED HERE IN DAYS GONE BY HAD LITTLE TO TRADE. IT WAS A GLOOMY PASSAGE.

And it is so today — but for the keen eye, not as bad as before. The coming of the moon is a tragedy, no question, but here in the Roughlands it has provided us with new trading partners. It also holds its secrets, as you will read below.

THE LAND

LITTLE can be said of the terrain in the Roughlands, and none of it good. Everything is shaped by the floods of high-water season. Plants shun the soil, growing only in fitful patches. The ground itself is rocky and shaped into sharp slopes and valleys by the water. To cross it during peak





water, one would need a boat — but your boat's hull would certainly be destroyed by the many rocks lurking below the surface.

We cross as the waters are receding, using beasts of burden and even wagons when the ground allows it. Many paths lead across here, but none are the same as the time before. Our interest is speed. We must make it to the Boundary Peaks and then beyond before the waters hit their lowest point, for fear of our supplies running out first.

Only a handful of landmarks are worth noting in the Roughlands. The obvious one is the lonely mountain called Jogood, which towers over the central part of this region. It was once no more than a curiosity, but thanks to the Nightmare Woman, it is one of our few regular trading stops in the Roughlands, as I shall explain later.

North and west of Jogood, the wide river Avarill winds toward the ocean. Nothing has made a permanent home here, for the river regularly floods its banks and swamps the area for miles around. We never cross it. Our business lies farther south.

Before the Boundary Peaks, the traveler comes to a daughter chain of mountains. We call these the Forge. Two of them must be volcanic, for they belch smoke throughout the year, but we have never visited them to find out. These mountains are home to tribes of war-ring giants. We trade with all, but befriend none, for even the kindly ones are quick to anger.

The wisest course for us is to make for Jogood's southern slope, and then veer between it and the Forge. If possible, we stop at the south end of the Avarill for fresh water. The spot where Jogood and Avarill come closest is a place where we hold important ceremonies — weddings, funerals, certain arcane rituals that would be of no interest to the reader, and occasionally challenges for leadership. Here

we can resolve the business of the endless traders away from the eyes of our customers, who would undoubtedly be bored by our petty pastimes.

Once past this region, we strike a straight course for the Boundary Peaks.

INHABITANTS

A century ago, Tysre would have told you that nobody worth meeting could be found here. The mad, desperate, and homeless have always lived in the canyons and rockpiles of the Roughlands. We traded with them as best we could, counting on our numbers to protect us from banditry, and hurried for the Boundary Peaks.

The lunar rain changed that somewhat. This land has long been home to tribes of hobgoblins. Once they roamed like the nomads of the endless plains. When the rain came, the ones who survived retreated to a network of caves on the eastern face of Jogood. There they awakened the Nightmare Woman and became her servants.

To the south, the quarrelsome giants also changed their ways. Once we were forced to detour far around the Forge, wasting precious time, for fear that the hateful crimson-skinned giants of that place would plunder our caravans. But the rain apparently drove a different tribe of giants down from the higher slopes, and now the fire giants aim their fury at their jade-colored cousins, to our profit.

THE NIGHTMARE WOMAN

In the eastern face of Jogood, a wide avenue has been carved out and laid with flat stone. The bottom of this path is at the base of the mountain, visible only when

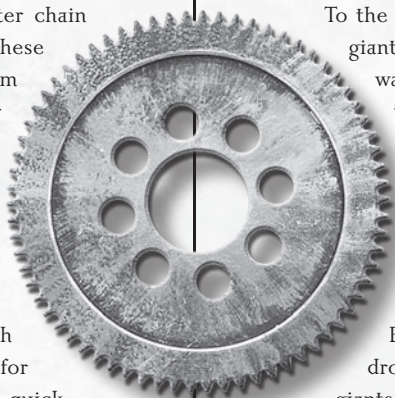
the water is low. Some distance above the highwater line, it leads to a wide opening carved by generations of hobgoblins, beyond which are the caves of the Nightmare Woman.

The stories say she is a spirit of darkness made flesh, a wily wraith who feasts on fear rather than blood. She can see into the thoughts of all mortal creatures, they say, and holds the power of a mighty wizard. Maybe so and maybe not. It is certain that the hobgoblins fear and obey her, and just as certain that she has ruled them for nearly 80 years without showing any signs of age.

For whatever reason, she allows the hobgoblins to trade with us. They are a sullen bunch, careful in their speech, always asking leading questions about each other and the world beyond. Every adult is marked by a black spiral tattoo which takes up the right half of the face; this is known as the Nightmare Kiss. Some of them boast that the Kiss gives them wills of iron and the power to cloud the thoughts of others. I think instead it is a brand, like the Gur farmers put on their cattle to keep others from stealing them.

The hobgoblins inside Jogood's caverns number perhaps 200, including children and elders. They occupy several large caves which are primarily treated as group property. Important individuals mark off their own territory with drab blankets and tapestries of crude make; we trade them fine rugs from Edge and Glatek on occasion. Years ago, I saw a pair of ogres dwelling among the hobgoblins, tattooed with the Kiss, and rumor says they have a half-dozen wolves of tremendous size, which are kept away from visitors.

Theirs is a quiet and somber home, as befits them, for even the mightiest hobgoblin chief here walks in terror of the Nightmare Woman. We are not permitted to enter her halls at the far edge of the caverns, and if she should pass, we are instructed to bow our heads and say nothing to her. In recent years, I have heard whispers of a pair of daughters as wicked as their mother.



Wicked is the word, for Tysre is bold enough to have spoken to this Nightmare Woman, and I have seen what she truly is. It was our first year visiting the hobgoblin stronghold, and three of us were brought before their chief to explain our presence and purpose. He asked many questions, but when we answered, he always glanced at the strange tall figure standing beside his throne of carved stone.

She was wrapped in a long red cloak. Her skin was faintly purple, as was her hair, and her yellow eyes had pupils like a cat's. She stood silently as we negotiated terms with the chief, but I could see her frustration rising whenever I spoke. Soon I had motioned my comrades to silence and was negotiating alone. This did not please her. After a few minutes, she hissed, "All of you out — except you." She pointed a long finger at me. The chief and his bodyguards almost tripped over each other in their haste to leave. I motioned for my kinsmen to follow their example.

As she stalked toward me, I casually polished a gemstone I had been showing the chief and held it up to the light, looking at her through its prism. Her pupils were wide indeed when she stopped next to me. "Outsider, you place yourself in peril. I rule here. All beneath the mountain obey my will. Now you shall reveal..."

I held up a hand and interrupted her. By the look on her face, such a thing had not happened in recent memory. "You know little of business," I told her. "Never make demands when negotiation is working well. My people can trade here, or we can pass you by, but we are not subject to your whims."

Her grimace revealed sharp teeth. "How dare you? Insolent thing, I will have you flayed alive and then wear your skin as a cloak."

I shrugged. "Mayhaps you will. I expect no more from a naga." That gave her a start. "Naga I said, and naga you are. Did you think we would come here without some means of seeing things as they truly are?" I patted the pocket where my gem was stored.

"You tread dangerous ground, mortal thing. My power is great, and my servants outnumber you two hundred to three. If I wish to make you my slaves, or my dinner, no power in this world can save you." Her voice was a low rasp, her breath rank as a dead thing.

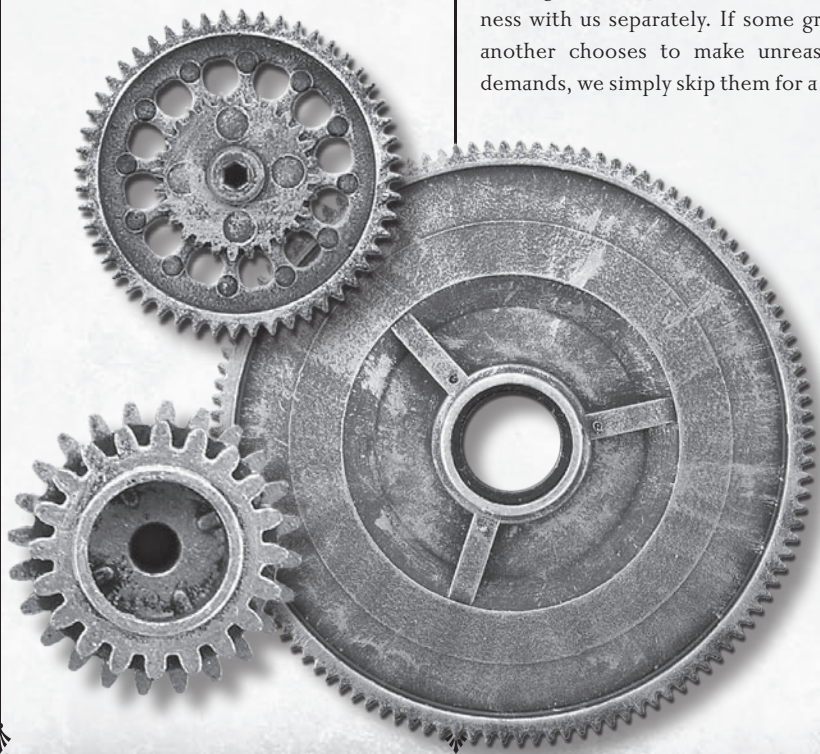
I sighed and toyed with the heavy gold ring I always wear during negotiations. "Tantrums are for children, not for the queens of darkness and fear. You cannot read my thoughts any more than I can read yours. If you choose to punish me for my foresight, believe me when I say my people outside your mountain will know. They will leave this place and pass through the world telling the tale of my torment. By this time next year, the treasure-hunters of Edge and monster-hunters of Duerok will hear that a foul thing lurks under this mountain. A year after that, you and your playthings will be swept away by sword and sunlight. Choose that fate if you wish. If not, let me and mine leave in peace, and every year trade fairly with us during Flero. In return, I swear that I will never speak a single word of your presence here."

She raved and fumed for a few more minutes, but in time she agreed to my terms. A pity she wasn't more careful about the wording.

GIANTS OF FIRE AND STORM

I have no tales of heroism and cunning amid the giants. They are a simple folk — the red giants of fire because they are lackwits, the green giants of storm because they are dreamers. In the days before the lunar rain, the fire giants attacked anything passing near the Forge, and we were very careful in our travels. When the meteors forced the storm giants to descend, they ended up in fire giant territory, and for the last century the two kinds have made war over who may live where.

That means we are no longer a source of plunder, but a supplier of weapons, food, and luxuries. From early on, we made it clear to both groups that we travel and trade wherever we wish. To complicate things, fire giant tribes sometimes go to war with each other, while each storm giant family often wants to do business with us separately. If some group or another chooses to make unreasonable demands, we simply skip them for a year or





two and do twice the business with their enemies. Greed eventually swallows anger, and things return to normal.

Even so, we dare not go deep into giant country. We meet with small groups of them near the foot of the Forge, two or three of the beasts towering over us and their voices booming like landslides. The fire giants always bring an escort of some type — hell hounds, trolls, occasionally a young dragon. I can't say if they mean to intimidate us, or if they need protection against the storm giants.

In recent years, we've traded with one particular fire giant. He styles himself Lord Commander Jusorik Oathwell the Skullcrusher, and apparently he's a warrior of some renown. He's certainly found of the sound of his own voice. But he's an honest dealer, albeit a rude one — and he apparently leads some kind of trading syndicate among his own kind, so dealing with him is profitable. He let slip that the fire giants are building a large fortress of some kind next to one of the Forge's active volcanoes.

The storm giants are less predictable. Some years we meet one or none, other years a half-dozen approach us over the course of a few days. They're much larger than even the fire giants, and more polite. Most of them seem to think we're a novelty. They either don't know or don't care about the value of goods, and at times they agree to the most outlandish trades. Or stick to the most unreasonable terms.

From what I gather, a large community of them has established itself in the southernmost reaches of the Forge, near the ocean shore. I've also noticed a certain pattern in their desires these last years. The things they want seem like spell components to me, and I hear that most of them are being taken south on the backs of giant rocs allied with the giants. Some folk say the storm giants are retreating from the war with their fiery kin, while others think they're preparing a massive sorcerous strike. Were anyone to ask Tysre, I'd say it probably has nothing to do with the fire giants and everything to do with the

moon. The homes the cloud giants abandoned in the mountaintops were quite dear to them. I often hear them singing of their loss in the night. And three years ago, they offered us a giant sack full of worked sapphires if we could bring them a live adult lunar dragon. If I ever figure out a way to meet that commission, I'll retire a happy woman.

TRADING INFORMATION

Luckily for us, the hobgoblins and the giants all want something that we buy in bulk when visiting Edge — food. The Roughlands are hard to farm, and the game often falls prey to lunar rain or worse. The hobgoblins have a sort of mushroom bread, and they make a passable jerky out of cave bat flesh, but they'll make an offer on almost anything edible we have. Milk, cheese, and butter are particular favorites. I once saw two of the chief's bodyguards break down and brawl over a particularly ripe-smelling goat cheese we'd been carrying since the Endless Plains. One lost an eye but won the cheese, and seemed to think it was a fair exchange. As I mentioned, they also enjoy fine rugs and woven goods of all kinds.

At times, the hobgoblins have specific requests on behalf of the Nightmare Woman. Some of them seem harmless, some not, but we're always careful when catering to her wishes. If I have any doubts about what she'll do with something, she doesn't get it.

In exchange, the hobgoblins offer us worked stone, raw ore, some interesting smithcraft, and items they've taken from other folk traveling through the Roughlands. Occasionally, they come up with semi-precious gems from deep inside Jogood, but we usually decline. The giants are a better source for gems.

Indeed, gems are the main thing we hope to get from the storm giants. Many

of them are skilled crafters, capable of working miracles with loom or forge or carpenter's bench, but the items they make are just too large for us. For a time, we also puzzled over what to offer them in return, as otherwise we were forced to guess what they might take. One night, listening to their laments ringing off the hillside, it occurred to me — tales and song. The storm giants have an appetite for such things, so we recruited singers and storytellers and their ilk. It's becoming a challenge to find sagas they haven't heard, but as long as they have gemstones, we'll do it.

The fire giants also come up with gems, and they create some beautiful works of gold and silver. They're happy to trade the latter, as such soft metals melt in the fiery heart of their homeland. Their willingness to trade with us coincided nicely with the rise of mechs; fire giants will buy mech-sized melee weapons that we pick up in Edge and from the Irontooth Clans. Two years ago, we sold Oathwell a small steam cannon in exchange for fifty silver ingots, six unworked rubies, and a red dragon egg. Last year, Oathwell told us the cannon exploded on its third firing. We'll see if they want to try again.

THREATS TO TRAVELERS

You're daft if you've read this far and not figured out the dangers of the Roughlands. It's wild country. All manner of things can happen here. The land's either dry rock or swampy mud. Everything here is hungry, and none of it friendly. We endless traders get by all right because we travel in large groups, and we've got things the locals want. Even then, odd things happen. Not five years ago, my kinsman Ascot Meirge shared his tale of one strange month, and now I share it with you.

From the Journal of Ascot Meirge, a Healer of the Endless Traders

FLERO 5TH

The days continue on, long and dusty. The trials of the Roughlands vary, bringing me a frustrating army of patients and their maladies. Wet and dry in seemingly equal measure, the soaked ground sand and ever-blowing particles of this land make for a wide variety of afflictions. Soaked boots lead to no end of molds and infections, flying shards of rock blind both men and animals alike, uneven ground and surprising bogs lead to countless twists and sprains and—even worse—slows our pace through this accursed place to little better than a crawl. I've almost forgotten what it's like not to hear the rustle of crusty sand under every step and taste mineral in every meal.

The rare moments these days in which I'm not assaulted by this scrape or that sandy orifice, I've found myself distracted by the view from my wagon. When the winds are calm, one can see across the Roughlands for miles. Dozens of miles. Every one alike in its stagnant, sandy desolation. Broken rocks being the only way-markers on this blasted plain, every stone a scared memorial blasted by heat and wind and—in the coming months—the seasonal floods of scouring water, each on its way

to being just another scattered pile of earthen particles. This place seems to be a home for foul emotions and poor luck. Boredom, monotony, depression, and hopelessness seem ingrained in the landscape, as if these feelings were flying grit just as pervasive and irritating as the rocky grains now encrusting every aspect of my life—and of which I'm sure no amount of future rinsing will ever fully rid me. I can't help but wonder, however, looking up at the lonely moon, if this barren landscape isn't a mirror of the lunar world high above, and if so, what dangers might lurk behind the next outcropping or beneath our very feet.

I had hoped to write this before lying to bed for the evening, but now I suspect no sleep will come. As I've penned this, a new rocky wind as kicked up, driving a rain of sand against my window. Worse still, the miles of broken stones and earthen towers that fill this land torment the wind just as it does me, causing a choir of howls to whistle glassily through the night. Shrii, like some primal thing, it doesn't surprise me that even the air seems to hate it here, for I surely do.

FLERO 7TH

Finally! Some respite from the endless sand and drudgery. It seemed most unlikely that we'd find amiable faces in these cruel lands—and in honesty, when I first heard the yells of something ahead, I braced myself for the next soul-scouring torment—but indeed we have.

Our scouts had taken it for a mirage at first; then just a simple caravan—wandering traders like ourselves. Only when it became evident that the horses were in fact nearly fifteen feet tall and billowed trails of smoke, not dust, did our outriders realize they had come across something much more interesting.

With a cautious curiosity, our scouts neared and hailed the strange convoy. Ten smoke-spouting horses, each pulling a wagon of equally oversized proportions formed the group. Most unexpectedly, however, these conveyances had the look of carnival carts, festooned with brightly colored cloths, streaming ribbons, and dangling pennants. Their gay, even garish, adornments seemed hardly the worse for wear after having doubtlessly traveled over miles of filthy, broken Roughlands dirt, the streamers fluttering in the dusty wind in a seemingly light-hearted and carefree way. A manner that—despite the foolishness of the sentiment—my weary and dirt-caked crew couldn't help but find grating.

Of the strangers' wagons, eight were enclosed—mobile houses in their size and solid construction. Bearing the greatest number of decorations, the sound of these conveyances' whipping fabrics and flags proved audible at some distance, crackling noisily in the harsh wind. When one moved, dozens of wheels rippled and rolled over the rocky land in a manner that kept the structure above remarkably level—a feat I couldn't help but envy, especially when tending to patients while traveling. At the rear of each was a large metal ramp, capable of standing closed in a position that affixed it to the back of the wagon, or hanging down like some manner of drawbridge, revealing a sizable double-door obscured in the ramp's closed state. These transports, we would soon find, housed the crew and cargo of the caravan in a luxury I'll envy till my final breath.

The remaining two transports had more the look of traditional farmer's wagons—at least, if foppish noblesse ever took to farming. While the front-most portions provided seating for drivers, the rears





remained open to the air and choking dusts. To combat the elements, the back of each had been fixed with numerous cloth shades, angled in such a way as to create a shady interior. The unexpected extravagance seemed reminiscent of the veiled canopies of some empress of yore, and I half-expected to find that, instead of the strange horses, an army of miniature slaves propelled the veiled platform above. The interior of both were filled with dozens of sizable, overstuffed pillows that — along with the canopy above — gave what might normally be a simple payload for cargo the feel of some exotic harem chamber. As with the train of wagons that followed these two, a large ramp hung at the transport's rear, preventing one from having to make a significant climb. Later it would be revealed that these foremost carts in all their opulence served as the stations of the caravan's guards. The reason for providing hired hands, even staffed guardians, with such amenities at first proved beyond me, but soon I'd discover that — like all members of this bizarre procession — the guards too were members of a respected and esoteric order of the esteemed Gearwrights Guild. In fact, the entire caravan proved to be committed initiates of that respected order of mechanics, engineers, mech builders, and crafters of all manner of metal wonders.

What I know of the Gearwrights Guild is rather little. Indeed, I have always been a man who builds with flesh, not metal, and blood is the only oil I've every truly needed. But I know the stories and I've seen their titans. I've even set foot in the cramped halls of Durgan-lok, which purportedly was designed by the greatest of their order and constructed by Gearwright hands. It was there that I first heard the dwarves' tale of the retaking of the surface and the Gearwrights. It seems as though you can't spend a night in Durgan-lok without hearing the stories of that walking city's first step.

The Gearwrights we encountered today, however, were of a stranger sort than any I had ever seen or heard of before. Gear-

wrights are known to be obsessed with their plans, designs, and contraptions. But festive and garish, especially in these grim lands? It was unheard of. Even many of the oldest and widest-traveled of our number held suspicions, for these were not the Gearwrights we thought we knew.

It was a short-bearded, aging dwarf named Staln Rigrock who alleviated our fears. Despite his skin being permanently darkened by countless grease and oil stains, Rigrock wore stark white robes and a large medallion emblazoned with the Gearwrights symbol, as if he were some new manner of priest. With surprising openness, he welcomed our coming, making the same complaints about the brutal ruggedness of the land that I have voiced myself. Eager for some diversion from the harsh surroundings and stale company, he proposed that both his troupe and our caravans, "stop for the day and rest, it being a holiday after all." Having few dwarves in our midst, none of the assembled traders knew of what holiday Rigrock spoke, but our travel masters consented, both at the insistence of the dwarf and their muck-and sand-covered feet.

Although some among us held reservations about fraternizing too closely with the dwarf and his strange convoy, the Gearwrights proved eager hosts. They unloaded all manner of entertaining contraptions and started numerous cooking fires, providing some of the first welcome scents I've encountered since entering this accursed land. Before partaking in the Gearwrights' hospitality, however, I met with a number of curious traders. One of them was a dwarf, and we asked the squat fellow about this holiday Rigrock had mentioned, assuming it was some dwarven custom, but our small friend proved just as ignorant as we. Further probing about this mysterious festival day provided only frustration.

Tonight I partook of the finest meal I've had in months. How these Gearwrights kept their provisions fresh, even in this moisture-sapping waste, is a mystery, but not one I'm opposed to indulging in.

Crisp vegetables, juicy meat, and enough ale to drown an army served as the menu for the evening and every member of both our companies ate like kings. I'm sure I'll have no end of hangovers and the resulting afflictions in the morning, but for now only the most gluttonous among us aren't yet well past sated.

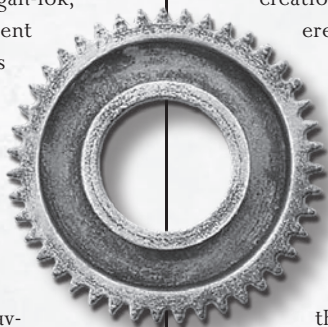
While I was thankful for the hospitality, my curiosity stayed with me through the evening and afterward. Near midnight, my fellow travelers began making their good-byes, their packs bulging with the burdens of a night of drunken bargaining. It seems that even under conditions of the like that we find ourselves — in strange and hostile lands with unfamiliar company — my companions can't help but pursue a profit. I too, though, sought a profit in that dark hour: a satiation to my rampant inquisitiveness. Admittedly emboldened by a small amount of drink, I personally approached Staln Rigrock and asked after the holiday he had mentioned and his band's unusual dress. Laughing, the dwarf confessed that it must seem unusual to outsiders and in fact it was even for Gearwrights, for they were preparing for a holiday only held among their number once every quarter of a century: the Festival of Duerok.

Although I know the tale of Duerok, the dwarven city where the first mechs were constructed, this festival was wholly new to me. Apparently, once every twenty-five years, the Gearwrights celebrate the creation of the first mechs, the first steps toward reclaiming the surface, and the reforming of their brotherhood with the Festival of Duerok. More than just a simple single day of debauchery, the preparation time for the festival sounds as though it must take months, even years, of planning. Supposedly this celebration has even more ancient roots, as Rigrock suggested that the festival once had another name and was performed by Gearwrights long before the lunar rain. The constructions at Duerok, however, apparently renewed interest in this antiquated tradition, bringing it back to life on a titanic level.

From a source Rigrock neglected to

mention, all sects and cells of Gearwrights across and under Highpoint received plans some months before the festival. What these plans depict is always a mystery, but the guildsmen devotedly construct whatever they've been assigned to with no knowledge of its purpose or if it has a place in some greater scheme. Once assembled, any Gearwright capable of and willing to travel helps load the newly fashioned design and travels with it to some far-flung, secret spot that changes from festival to festival. From all over Highpoint the Gearwrights come, each band bringing with them their constructions, all pieces of some greater whole. On a set day, the traveling engineers arrive, meeting with some of the oldest, wisest, and most ingenious minds of their guild. Together, these assembled innovators reenact the creation of the great city-mech Durgan-lok, assembling the component pieces created all across the land into one magnificent whole. What this grand creation might be, Rigrock claimed that every Gearwright guesses and even gambles over, but none truly know.

Our host admitted to having attended three prior festivals, each with a different result. At the first, he and his fellows created a sizable dome, supposedly capable of withstanding even the harshest lunar rain, and planted a garden inside. Years later, the result was much smaller, a simple pendulum and its support, the whole thing only shoulder height to a dwarf, but which supposedly, once started, would never stop swinging. Twenty-five years ago, the Gearwrights constructed what Rigrock called one of the grandest constructions he had ever participated in, but also a great failure. The assembled pieces came together as normal, each on a towering scale, creating a winding tower of metal, cables, and turning cogs, stretching into the sky, taller than most city-mechs. Upon completion, however, the gear tower did nothing.



While the Master Gearwrights deemed the creation a success, most who left that year did so under a cloud of confusion and disappointment, their work's purpose being obscure at best and a waste at worst.

Riglock hinted at calamities as well, times in the far past when the only thing the festival created was death and devastation. Apparently, nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, the Gearwrights gathered and assembled some new creation, as always. As Riglock was not in attendance — a truth verified by his continued breathing — he could not speak of the shape or intention of the creation constructed at that fateful meeting. Rumors he had heard, however, hinted that the Master Gearwrights hoped to make use of some new manner of fuel. Whatever their intentions, though, none will ever know as, when the celebration's creation was completed and powered on, it immediately exploded with such elemental fury as to lay waste to a region of nearly two miles surrounding the epicenter. All the Gearwrights in attendance lost their lives that day in one of the greatest tragedies in the Guild's history. It is even said that that land still radiates this tragedy and that now, not only does nothing grow or live there, but that which even lingers in the accursed place for too long sickens and dies.

This year, however, Rigrock and his group had great hopes, all stemming from the fantastic nature of the one component they had been instructed to create and carried with them even now. As he had been drinking while telling his tales, I suspected that the mulled wine might be coloring the dwarf's perceptions slightly, and apparently I hid my incredulosity poorly for I soon found myself tugged roughly to my feet and marched toward one of the rear wagons. I had not specifically noticed this enclosed conveyance, surrounded protectively by the others. Indeed, what I had taken for a group of drunken Gearwright

carousers lounging about its lowered ramp I found, at this closer vantage, to be quite sober men that, while reclining, were obviously only steps from a variety of well-oiled mechanized armaments. Seeing Rigrock, the men bowed and nodded respectfully and let us pass up the ramp at the back of the wagon to an intimidating pair of sturdy metal doors.

THE FESTIVAL OF DUEROK

Travel and great constructions mark the greatest holiday celebrated by the Gearwrights Guild, the Festival of Duerok. Held only four times a century in celebration of Durgan-lok, the first city-mech, the Master Gearwrights send detailed plans to Gearwrights all across Highpoint. These appendages of the guild construct whatever components their instructions direct them to, a process that sometimes takes months to fulfill. At the completion of each, these parts are transported across Highpoint to a specified location that changes from festival to festival. Once all the pieces arrive, the assembled Gearwrights combine them, forming some fantastic new invention of a scale no single group could have ever accomplished on its own.

His voice lowering to a whisper, conspiratorial despite being surrounded by his own men, Rigrock took a moment to prepare me for the "wonder" I was about to behold. Describing what I was about to see as the year's work of more than a hundred Gearwrights, his description swiftly became obscured by the technical nature of the work. What I did glean from his proud details, however, were numerous references to "optics" and some difficulty achieving focus. Still believing that a good deal of the dwarf's ranting was the product of alcohol, I was, despite his warnings, hardly prepared for what lie behind the sturdy metal doors.

It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the wagon's cool, dark interior. The first thing



I noticed were the chains, massive links, each piece of bent metal the thickness of a grown man's thigh. From sizable clasps at each corner the taught metal divided the room, merging at a point at its center. There hung a gleaming metal thing, seemingly crafted of fine metal — mostly platinum and gold. An orb at least ten feet in diameter, numerous curved panels within the greater frame seem aligned in precise arrangements, while, below the creation, dangled a network of thin chains, cables, and wires. Then the metal thing adjusted of its own accord, rattling the massive chains, its circular metal panels adjusting in the darkness, dilating, focusing, looking at me — a giant eye.

Stumbling backward in shock I nearly tripped over Riglock who stood proudly before his creation. My mind filling with questions, even as the titanic metal eye scrutinized me coldly, I found few words, although I think I finally articulated a simple "Why?" The dwarf's simple reply, "For the festival," only amazed me further. Flabbergasted, I perhaps too curtly thanked the dwarf for his time, his stories, and his hospitality and tripped back down the ramp, eager to return to my wagon and this journal.

What I saw was not colored by the night's revel and now, nearly an hour later, I find that my senses truly are not impaired. While the Gearwrights' great eye seems a wonder in itself, the questions of its use and purpose already beset my imagination. But even more so do I wonder what fantastic devices created by armies of other Gearwrights even now make their ways across all stretches of Highpoint, marching toward some mysterious location. And, once they all arrive, what magnificent whole might they combine to form. While I may never see Staln Riglock again, I'm sure that whatever wonders he and his brethren have dedicated themselves to creating, that I, and indeed all of Highpoint, will hear of it... and marvel.

FLERO 12TH

It's been some days since my last entry. A particularly virulent bout of sluffskin has afflicted many of our outriders and caravan drivers, and treating them has consumed a great deal of my time. Also, I must confess, the barren boringness of this land, which was only briefly abated by our evening with the pilgrim Gearwrights, has again set in, sapping many of my motivations.

The sight that spurs me to take up pen and ink again, however, was most unexpected. Having only glanced out my window in passing while splitting my attention between a pair of bloody-footed drivers, I noticed an irregular shape in the distance. Now, it's difficult to say what passes for irregular in this land of spilt rocks and jagged towers, but the vision had a smoothness to it that, even at a distance, I could tell was not merely the outline of rugged stone. Although I watched for only a moment, the thing moved — not so much taking a step, as falling, catching itself awkwardly, then repeating the motion in a gait that would make even the clumsiest orc mech look graceful.

I would have looked on longer, even left the confines of my ever jostling wagon — such was my curiosity — had not the yelping of one of my more melodramatic patients consumed my attentions. Returning my glance even after only the moment it took to scold

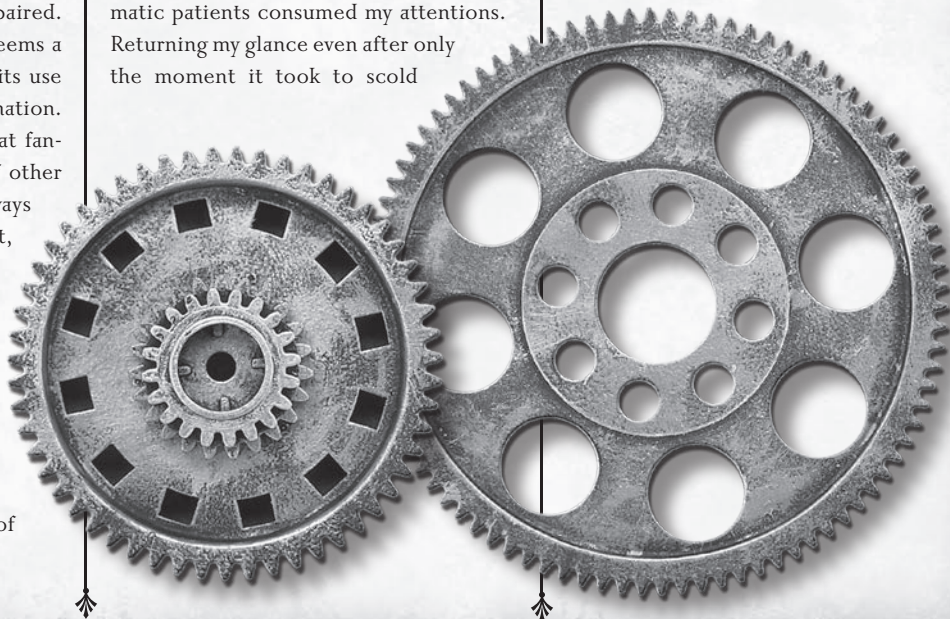
him, though, the shape had vanished. With the strain of recent weeks — the constant rocking of this accursed wagon, the complaints of an army of travelers, and the destitute scenery — I can hardly be sure that I saw anything in the first place. Anything besides, that is, the stress of this current venture finally made depressingly visible.

FLERO 13TH

It seems I haven't started hallucinating quite yet. Of course, I base this belief on the ravings of an undoubtedly half-mad gnome, which might be proof of my weakening mental condition in itself.

With a jerking halt of my wagon infirm, which saw a pitcher of all-too-precious fresh water dashed to the floor, I was alerted to some unexpected goings-on. Looking out, it seemed that the entire caravan had come to just as abrupt a halt and, after several minutes of waiting, I left my conveyance to discover what tragedy forced us to linger these extra moments in the blasted Roughlands.

Descending on a crowd that had formed near the lead wagons, I was mere steps away before I spotted the source of my traveling fellows' frustration. A dusty gnome, overloaded with a pack of nearly equal size to



his slight frame, had waved down the lead wagon by literally jumping in front of it and refusing to move until they answered several questions for him.

Being at the back of the crowd, I could hardly make out the little man's furious inquires, which several of the merchants were attempting to answer as swiftly as possible, clearly in the hopes of being back on our way. What few snippets I could make out at that time, though, made it sound as though the gnome had lost a most unusual pet. It was not long before the dusty creature's fevered state, in tandem with his obvious fatigue and physical strain, exhausted him and he pitched forward, making a short fall in the moist sand. Eager to be back on their way, my traveling companions relinquished the unconscious madman into my care — although several suggested we merely leave him as he lay — and soon we were again making pace.

My newest and easily strangest patient slept for nearly six hours before finally waking and, as I had suspected, proved extremely panicked. Fortunately, his overtaxed condition lent him little strength and he swiftly collapsed back onto the bed, gasping for breath. Attempting to calm him, I expressed some interest in his past, purposefully trying to avoid the topic of his current venture. What he revealed truly surprised me.

My patient's name was Vistil Tapes, an engineer supposedly of some repute and an esteemed member of the College of Constructors. What I know of this group marks them as eccentrics devoted to creating and refining new mechanical and magical beings. In numerous larger settlements across Highpoint, I've seen evidence of the wonders these golem masters can work, from titanic mechanical men capable of porting seemingly any load, to miniscule yet lifelike gearwork birds and rodents that chirp and chitter like the real beasts. The constructors themselves exhibit strange abilities as well, magics unlike those demonstrated by other mages, like the ability to actually communicate with their mechanized creations or, purport-

edly, change their own bodies into things of whirring cogs and clanking metal. While largely held as innovative and surprisingly useful in this age of machines, those I've encountered have been obsessed at best and, at worse, true fanatics when it comes to their calling.

According to Tapes, supposedly a cell, or "class," of these magic-using engineers exists somewhere on the eastern edge of the Roughlands, although the gnome remained vague as far as where. In excited tones, the gnome recounted how in his group's most recent research, they had managed to perform some hitherto unheard-of magical joining, calling back the spirit of a recently departed colleague into a body constructed wholly of gears and grease. Although my disgust at the blasphemous prospect must have been obvious, Tapes continued — a testament to the obliviousness these constructors have when it comes to actual living, breathing creatures.

Apparently, not long after calling back their friend and imprisoning him in a mockery of a humanoid form, the resurrected mage broke loose from his ill-minded "friends" and escaped into the Roughlands. Tapes — somehow deemed the most capable by his allies — was selected to track down the half-living machine-thing they had foolishly created and return it, both for further research and as proof to other constructors of that class' "accomplishment."

Revolted, I left Tapes then. Having treated patients of all walks and races for nearly twenty years, I suspect the cause of my revulsion requires no explanation. Thus, hours later, when I heard my wagon's door open and found Tapes missing, I did not pursue. I can but hope that the thing I saw a day ago — for now I am sure that tortured figure is what the crazed gnome seeks — eludes his pursuer and, when the waters again come to this land, finds the peace it has been temporarily denied but so rightly deserves.

FLERO 14TH

Without surprise — yet against my most fervent hopes — less than twenty hours after our last parting, I again find a battered gnome in my infirmary. Although, as a physician, I cannot bring myself in good conscience to say my patient's new condition is "fortunate," I do morbidly find Vistil Tapes' new degree of conversation much more to my liking. That being expectedly little as my patient is quite dead.

The vanguard of our caravan came across the gnome's body near midday, bringing about the second unforgivably long delay he's now visited upon us. This time, however, the form facedown beneath a ridiculously cumbersome pack proved charred like a grease roach beneath a cogling child's seeing lens. The gnome's flesh was scorched and blistered — it seemed as though the brutal sun of this land had brought its full intensity down upon the crazed gnome. And, truthfully, after having heard the story he told me yesterday, I half-wondered if in fact nature had wrought an all-too-just revenge upon him and his meddling companions.

The advance scouts, having little use for a fried gnome — I won't say none, given some of the more creative greeds known to run among my trader companions — brought the body to me. A cursory examination has revealed that the gnome was obviously victim of a blast of extreme heat, swift enough to scorch his outermost layers of skin while leaving his innards fully intact. Although I don't claim to know the source of this trauma, I suspect that a





heartier fellow than Tapes might have survived the experience. I feel a momentary pang of guilt for not pursuing the gnome and seeing to his full recovery, but any professional disappointment I feel is swiftly replaced knowing that a most unnatural knowledge died along with the deranged engineer.

As for the cause of Tapes' death, I can only speculate. Most logically, given the type of and placement of the burns, I might guess that the gnome stumbled upon some hitherto unencumbered vent of superheated steam. Again, this idea is merely conjecture, but just to be safe I've already warned our outriders of such a possibility, holding from them more fearful and equally unsubstantiated theories of fire-spewing predators. With this forewarning, hopefully Tapes' death will help our troop avoid a similar fate.

Goodbye, Vistil Tapes. If you're fortunate, there are forgiving powers beyond this world. Regardless, count yourself lucky that I have no say in your eternal judgment.

FLERO 17TH

In what feels to be the thousandth delay in our crossing of these gods-blasted Roughlands, a new distraction brought a halt to the caravan this day. The hour already being late, the delay ended our travels for the evening and saw the wagons rounded into the usual protective spiral. Once the duties of settling the cargo and animals for the evening was complete, a rickety work wagon brought the source of our most recent interruption into our midst, depositing it between the cooking fires at the camp's center.

Nearly 9 feet tall, the thing was encrusted in grit and mud to an extent that disguised much of even its most general form. Even under the filth of this grime-covered land, however, a pair of ungainly legs were apparent stemming from beneath a barrel-like trunk.

After more than an hour of prodding and poking by some of the most experienced

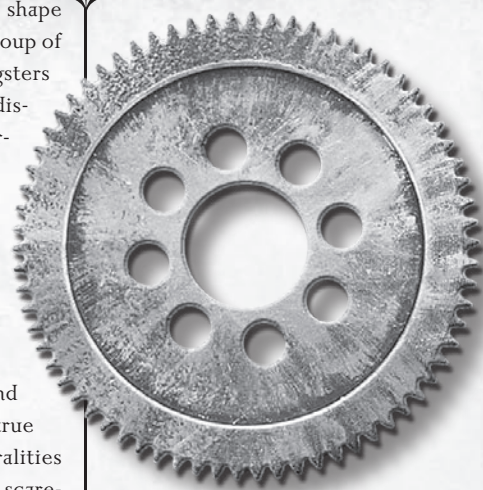
engineers who traveled with us, the shape was deemed unthreatening, and a group of curious workers and zealous youngsters fetched water and rags, intent on discovering our new treasure's mysteries. I admit to sharing their curiosity, although it would not do to have a physician of my station pitch elbow deep into dirty work with the labor. Thus, I satisfied myself to watching as I took my grit-spiced evening meal.

An hour of vigorous scrubbing and scouring revealed our discovery's true structure. Manlike in the generalities of form, the thing was a cogling's scarecrow, a mockery of the humanoid shape cobbled together from metal scraps and stray gears. Top-heavy and with overly long legs, a pair of arms dangled from its steely trunk, one ending in a wrenchlike pincher and the other opening in a broad, flame-scarred muzzle. The thing's ultimate indignity, however, was its misshapen head. At its center, where a face might normally be, was fitted an apparatus consisting of several concentric lenses, below which stretched a curved brush stoke of chipped white paint, giving the thing the look of a metal cyclops with a crude grimace.

Could this be the thing I saw shambling through the dust nearly a week ago? The source of Tapes' suicidal hunt?

After the majority of the gawkers had formed their personal crackpot opinions, I took a moment to examine the thing more closely. The left arm, ending in a fluted muzzle, looked like something I've seen on larger mechs. The entire appendage being riddled with tubes and cables, the scorched orifice at its end makes me believe this might be some manner of miniature flame belcher. Could this thing have been the true cause of Tapes' searing death? And if so, can such an act be called murder... or justice?

I would have lingered longer to investigate the thing's internal workings, but as I looked upon its single eye, the lenses seemed to shift. Could there still be life in this mechanized monstrosity? Is it exam-



ining me ever as I examine it? I confess the possibilities startled me and I swiftly retired.

Given the strangeness and novelty of the machine man, I suspect I won't see it again — at least not until I find it set up before one of the traders' wagons for barter. While I consider myself foremost a student of the sciences, there are unspoken natural lines one dares not cross. I fear that some people may have forgotten this — fanatics too caught up with the question of "Can we?" to concern themselves with the moral implications of "Should we?" I wonder if the College of Constructors is one such group, breaking the boundaries of sense and nature in their magical and mechanical hubris. For every group of right-thinking scientists, seeking to actually help his fellows, how many have succumbed to their own fanaticism. How many Vistil Tapes fill the world?

But closer to home than these philosophical exercises, I must also wonder — nay, pray — that the animating spirit of that metal thing outside has finally passed from this world and that there's not still a soul somehow trapped within that rusting body of cogs and grease.

JEALO

“THE LAND GETS VERY DRY AND DUSTY THIS TIME OF YEAR. I FERVENTLY WISH FOR A COMFORTABLE TENT, A WARM BATH, AND A MOUTHFUL OF SUCCULENT FRUIT. THE ONLY PLEASANT PART OF THE WHOLE MONTH IS THE END WHEN WE REACH SIRREA ON THE SEA.” —from the journal of Rechtold Fazir of the endless traders

The month of Jealo sees the endless traders traveling across the area they refer to as the Four Steps, a series of plateaus descending from the western Boundary Peaks to the eastern end of the Wet Desert. As the traders leave the Boundary Peaks, they come into the western Roughlands, which they call the First Step. There are small scattered human tribes on the First Step, but the land is best known as

the home of numerous tortogs, an intriguing race protected from the lunar rains by the shells they carry on their backs. The traders quickly pass through the Second Step, a barren waste inhabited only by several powerful lunar dragons. The dragons of the Second Step are a constant problem for the people of the Third Step, including the druids of the Stone Grove who transformed their forest to hard rock to protect

it from the lunar rains. At the Fourth Step, the traders descend into the Wet Desert at the edge of the ocean, where a great deal of profitable trading is done with the amphibious slathem.

THE LAND

THE FIRST STEP

“As we leave the joys of the Untouched City behind us in the mountains, we anticipate many days of rough travel. It’s a rare evening on the First Step when you can actually sleep on level ground without a sharp rock in your back. The land is bone dry this time of year except for the occasional flood. As rough as it is, I’d rather be thirsty than drowned.” —from the journal of Rechtold Fazir





Stretching westward a hundred miles or more from the western foothills of the Boundary Peaks is the land known to the endless traders as the First Step. Geographically speaking, the First Step is very similar to the Roughlands on the other side of the Boundary Peaks. The boulders and pebbles covering the ground are broken only by occasional ravines where rushing waters from the peaks have recently ripped through. Although Jealo is a dry month, the danger of flash floods is still present. The floods dramatically change the landscape every few months, but the traders usually have little trouble finding their way from village to village each year. The arrival of the endless traders is a highlight of the year for many tortog communities, so they prepare the way by marking trails for the traders to follow and leaving small burrows for them to shelter in at night.

Near the western edge of the First Step lies one of the few permanent geological features of the area. A large hill of red-dish-colored rock that the tortogs call the Dreaming Mound rises two hundred feet above the boulder-strewn land. It is a holy place for the tortogs, and its relatively flat and flood-free top serves as a regular gathering spot for them.

A few miles west of the Dreaming

Mound the land descends sharply to the Second Step. This is not a vertical drop like the cliffs near Edge, but an area where the land drops several hundred feet over the course of a mile or two. Traversing this land can be tiring and difficult, but climbing gear and secret pathways are not needed.

THE SECOND STEP

"Harsh though the First Step is, it is a pleasant stroll compared to the Second Step." —from the journal of Rechtold Fazir

Descending from the First Step puts the endless traders in a wasteland empty of everything but broken rock and lunar threats. Near the center of the plateau is a huge crater a mile across where a chunk of the moon fell a dozen years ago, bringing with it three powerful lunar dragons and their minions. However, there are paths across the Second Step that do not go too near the crater, and the endless traders can cross the Step in three or four days if they are lucky. Smart travelers quickly make for the descent to the Third Step.

As with the descent from the First Step to the Second Step, the drop in elevation from the Second Step to the Third Step is not a sheer one. The land angles

sharply downward, but can be traveled with no extraordinary precautions.

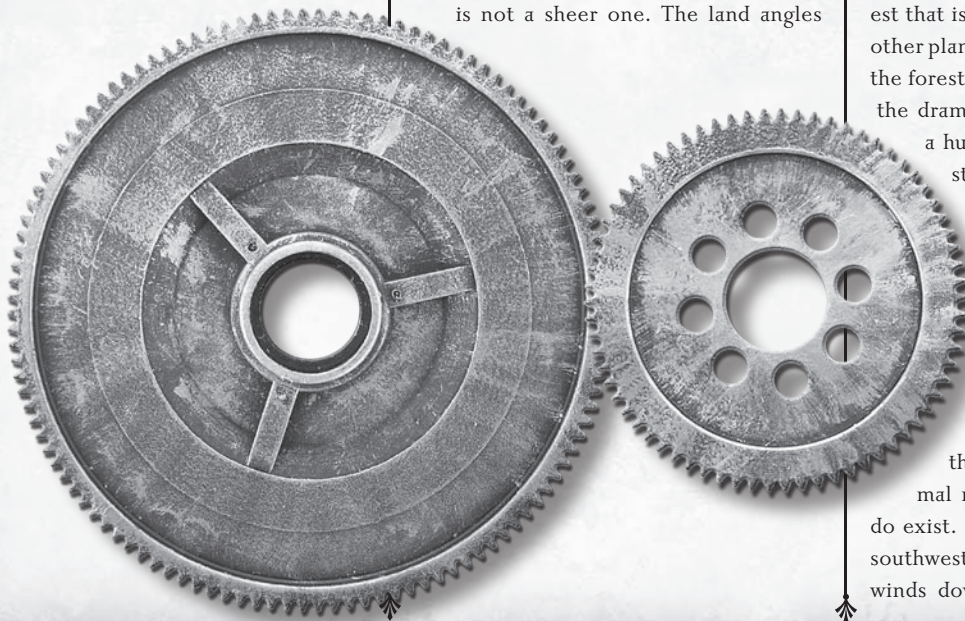
THE THIRD STEP

"Stone trees covered with stone leaves... an eerie and unnatural forest as dead as the land around it. I had hoped we'd never come here again, but our choices were limited. It was either hide in the trees or be a meal for lunar dragons." —from the journal of Rechtold Fazir

The land of the Third Step is less broken than that of the First and Second Steps. There are even a few places where dry scrub grasses still grow and occasional streams meander across the land providing fresh water.

The Third Step's most notable feature is the Stone Grove, a forest of ancient trees transformed to stone by the druids that protected them. The petrified trees range from young saplings to towering giants hundreds of feet tall, and the stone leaves on the branches never fall. The druids of the Grove believe it was the only way to preserve their woods from the ravages of the lunar rain. They say they intend to transform the trees back to their natural state once the lunar rains have ended, but that will not save the part of the forest that is already destroyed. Most of the other plants and animals that once lived in the forest are gone, killed by lunar rain or the dramatic change in their ecosystem a hundred years ago. Some animals still live in the Stone Grove, and the druids are doing their best to preserve them in the same way they preserved their trees.

The transition from the Third Step to the Fourth Step is more jarring than the previous steps. In many areas the drop is impassable by normal means, but less steep pathways do exist. One of these paths, in the very southwestern edge of the Third Step, winds down the cliffside to the ocean,





where the slathem city of Sirrea can be seen breaking the surface only a couple of miles out.

SIRREA AND THE FOURTH STEP

“Finally, we have reached Sirrea. It is always a beautiful place, but the trials we have seen getting here this year make it seem heavenly. As we approach in our boats, its colored towers shimmer in the sunlight, promising peace, safety, and comfort.” —*from the journal of Rechtoled Fazir*

The Fourth Step takes the endless traders into the eastern edge of the Wet Desert. The land is flat, dry, and covered in salt from the retreated ocean, but near the coastline plenty of seafood can be found, along with the coral settlements of the amphibious slathem. In the water south of the Wet Desert, the ocean floor drops off steeply, and it is at the top of this drop that the slathem city of Sirrea can be found.

Sirrea is built on a crescent-shaped reef of colorful coral two miles from the shoreline. The city consists of spires built of wood, bone, stone, coral, and a magical substance called waterglass, all on the foundation of a coral reef teeming with fish. During Jealo and the other dry months, the upper levels of the city jut into the air off the southern coast near the rise to the Third Step, but during the rest of the year, the city is almost completely submerged beneath the ocean. Roughly three thousand slathem inhabit Sirrea, making it the largest known settlement of slathem.

The towers of Sirrea are built mostly from coral and stone with the larger and more sumptuous rooms close to the base of the settlement. Buildings exposed to the lunar rains are windowed in various colors with a magical substance called waterglass to protect their inhabitants. In the levels that are always submerged, the slathem can swim wherever they need to

go. Higher up, they construct stairways that can be used during the dry months. Above that, where the poorer slathem live, levels can only be reached most months by climbing rope ladders. The uppermost levels are above the waterline year round, and these levels are used as prisons. The exception to the rule is the Moon Spire, a tower that is well appointed from bottom to top, for the sorceress Shaelis makes her home at the top where she can observe the moon.

The coral reef that forms the base of the city is riddled with passageways that are an ecosystem unto themselves. Most of the flora and fauna in and around the reef are harmless, and the ones that are dangerous are only a threat to those who are ignorant of them. On the sea floor around the reef lie miles of farmland where the slathem grow plants for food and crafts, and herd sea cows and other animals.

INHABITANTS

THE TORTOGS

“They are an odd society: equal parts warrior, trader, and mystic. Unlike last year, we made it in time to partake in their festival at the Dreaming Mound where they compete in games of skill and strength, trade their goods amongst each other (and with us), and seek spiritual counsel from their elders. My shelled friend Hoomas Crackjaw won the Five Stone Race, and was in good humor all night. It made our trading go much more smoothly; usually he is very stubborn. The festival is capped with a ceremony at dawn where the so-called ‘dream master’ reveals his predictions for the coming year. The dream that Master Botho related to us, though, was utter nonsense. Some sort of talk about how their dream god would find fault with us, and seven of us would feast on fresh sea cow this year. Naturally, we all scoffed. If a fine dinner is how the

dream god punishes his enemies, then we would be happy to offend. Master Botho took our jests in good cheer.” —*from the journal of Rechtoled Fazir*

Tortogs are tortoise-like humanoids covered in large shells and armored plates that allow them to withstand all but the worst lunar rains. They are normally only about five feet tall, but very broad and often weigh close to six hundred pounds. Although their coloring tends toward shades of green and brown, tortogs with hints of yellow or red in their shells are not unheard of. The shell of a tortog consists of layer upon layer of dead, hard skin thick enough to offer more protection than most types of armor. When the lunar rains come, tortogs can retract into their shells and survive anything short of a direct meteor strike. Furthermore, there is enough room inside the shell that a small amount of food, trade goods, or other equipment can be protected as well.

They tend to live in small tribes of twenty to forty. Many are nomadic, but some prefer a more sedentary lifestyle. Because they carry their shelter on their backs, tortogs rarely build any sort of housing. In most cases, they simply dig shallow holes in the ground and retract into their shells for the night wherever they happen to be. When they make permanent residence, they do so in natural caves that are scattered throughout the area.

The very young, the very old, and their caretakers live in these caves. Tortog shells do not develop the necessary hardness to withstand the lunar rains until a couple of years after the tortog is hatched. A typical clutch is about six eggs, but even with the protective shelter of a cave only about two of the six hatch into healthy tortog babies. As a tortog becomes elderly, his shell softens and begins flaking away. The average tortog succumbs to the rigors of old age after about 120 years.

Tortogs do not wear clothing or armor of any type. Their hard shells fulfill the function of both. Some do wear jewelry of smooth stones and beads, and the younger



generations have taken to painting their shells with colorful geometric designs and symbols.

The tortog language is sometimes difficult for outsiders to learn, as it contains many noises that sound identical to the untrained ear. Most tortogs speak some Common, however, so communication with non-tortogs usually isn't a problem. Tortogs are an oral culture, and have no written language as such. They do have a system of symbols and glyphs used for marking trails, but it cannot be used to convey complex ideas or even complete sentences.

A large number of tortogs leave their homes on the First Step and wander Highpoint as traders, raiders, or warriors-for-hire. Their size, strength, and natural armor make them excellent fighters, and even though they are not the most intelligent race, they have a stubbornness that serves them well when bargaining. The tortogs are generally a friendly and outgoing race, curious about other people and other places, but their highly competitive and sometimes aggressive nature often leads other races to believe them hostile. Some tortogs do take up raiding as a profession, and unfortunately these raiders have given tortogs a bad name in the mechdoms.

Although warriors and traders are the most common professions among the tortogs, some are called to a more mystic path. Tortog mythology has it that this plane of existence is simply a proving ground from which the god Vlasthos recruits souls to help in his never-ending war against forces of destruction. Aiding Vlasthos in this task is Oundar the Dream God. Oundar has been set to watch over Highpoint and its inhabitants, taking those who have challenged themselves and others into the army of Vlasthos.

Oundar gives creatures glimpses into the realm of Vlasthos when they sleep, but because this land is so incomprehensible to mortal creatures, he translates it into images they can understand. Thus creatures dream. To some lucky beings (almost

always tortogs, since they are Oundar's favored), Oundar grants dreams of the future of this lifetime. These favored of Oundar usually become clerics, and the oldest and wisest of them become dream masters, the spiritual leaders of the tortogs.

Vlasthos has never been directly worshipped by the tortogs, so the coming of the lunar gods has not affected their relationship with him in any way. The battle against the lunar gods is simply another aspect of his ongoing war. Clerics of Oundar, though, have been affected. Like most gods of Highpoint, Oundar is so embroiled in conflict with the lunar gods that he is sometimes unable to grant spells to his followers. Oundar has always been a communicative god, though, and he grants his followers even more visions than he did in the past.

HUMAN TRIBES

"Normally we don't deal with them, as they have little to offer, but this year they surprised us. Red Chedwick had jewelry of gold and silver he says they found in a ravine after a flood. But that was just the beginning... they also had the shells of dead tortogs. When they showed us how they could be used to protect humans from the lunar rains, we knew we had a valuable commodity. They wouldn't say where they got them, and we didn't really care. I don't trust Chedwick and his friends, but I will quash my conscience for the sake of a good bargain." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

Numerous small tribes of humans used to live on the Second Step, sheltering in ravines, caves, and crude stone buildings. Twelve years ago, a huge lunar meteor landed in the center of the Step, causing destruction on a scale not before seen by these people. Further complicating matters, the meteor brought with it lunar threats, including three lunar dragons.

The meteor and its passengers made it

TORTOG RACIAL TRAITS

- +8 Strength, +4 Constitution, -4 Dexterity, -4 Intelligence
- Large: Although tortogs only take a 5-foot space and have 5-foot reach, they are very heavy and count as Large creatures for most purposes. This gives them a -1 size modifier to Armor Class.
- Tortog base land speed is 15 feet.
- Burrow: Tortogs can burrow through dirt or sand at a rate of 10 feet.
- Natural Armor: A tortog's shell provides him with a +15 natural bonus to Armor Class.
- Natural Weapons: Tortogs can attack with claws or bite that do 1d4 damage.
- Tremorsense 30 ft.
- Shell: As a standard action, a tortog may retract into his shell. He cannot do so if bound, entangled, or otherwise immobilized. Once retracted, the only exposed part of the tortog is his shell. He gains a +8 bonus to AC and is immune to critical hits. He is also incapable of movement or taking actions while retracted and counts as being prone.
- Painless Hide: A tortog does not feel any damage to his shell. This makes him able to withstand all but the most serious lunar rains.
- Armor Deficiency: Because tortogs are naturally armored, they are unable to learn any armor proficiencies except Shield Proficiency, and no non-magical armor will improve their already substantial natural armor.
- Level Adjustment: +4.
- Favored Class: Fighter.

difficult for the human tribes to continue living on the Second Step. Most retreated to the Third Step and the protection of the druids of the Stone Grove. Although the tribes originally had little in common, each having their own customs and worshipping their own gods, the ones now

living with the druids have adopted the druids' ways.

A few surviving tribes made the climb to the First Step where they now compete with the tortogs for the available resources. These tribes have become scavengers and raiders. Though they are too few and too weak to be a direct threat to the tortogs or well-protected travelers like the endless traders, they have been known to scavenge from tortog burial grounds.

THE LUNAR DRAGONS

"We usually cross the Second Step swiftly and with stealth, but this time things have gone awry. The alien creature called Blacktooth has discovered our regular route. Showing patience uncharacteristic of its ilk, it is simply sitting at the end of the valley waiting for us. We sent scouts to find another route, but they never returned. For three days, we have camped in the valley, and it is becoming clear that our only choice is to run for it. I fear we are doomed." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

Twelve years ago, three lunar dragons arrived on the Second Step with a crashing chunk of the moon. The impact was just the beginning of the destruction. The dragons and their lunar minions quickly ravaged what was left of the land, and the humans who survived fled to live in other places.

The largest of the dragons is called Blacktooth by the human tribes, as it has one dark tooth in its maw. The middle dragon is called Thunderer because its unearthly roar can be heard for miles. The third dragon is the smallest of the three, and is known as Brokewing because one of its wings was terribly injured in the meteor's fall. The dragons hardly ever threaten the First Step, but they are a danger to anyone traveling the Second Step and they often attack the people of the Third Step.

Like the typical lunar dragon, these three are bent on destruction, but unlike their kin they maintain a lair at the meteor

that brought them to Highpoint. Furthermore, they rely on strategy and cunning as much as their brute strength. Their odd behavior and relative patience seem to indicate some kind of plan beyond simple destruction. What their goal might be has so far been unfathomable to terrestrial minds, but rumors abound that some kind of structure is being built in their crater.

DRUIDS OF THE STONE GROVE

"Only twelve of us made it to the shelter of the Stone Grove, where Embryll berated us for bringing the dragons to threaten her precious forest. The forest is already dead, killed by her ancestors. The woman is completely insane to believe that it can be restored. These druids have never even seen a living tree. To lift our spirits, we mocked the druids and amused ourselves by taking leaves from their trees. We did it secretly, of course; Embryll would flog anyone she caught defacing her precious dead plants, and we have already suffered enough this year." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

A hundred years ago, the Third Step was home to one of the oldest forests on Highpoint. The trees grew hundreds of feet high, and had the girth to match. The coming of the lunar rain changed all that, quickly smashing large parts of the forest to kindling. The druids of the area realized that the forest would be completely destroyed if they did not act. They did not have the power to protect their charge from both the lunar rain and the lunar dragons, and were desperate for a solution.

Argyll Bearhands implored the gods of nature to save what remained of the woods, and they answered him. After a weeklong ritual that claimed the lives of Argyll and several other druids, the forest was saved... in a manner of speaking. All the remaining trees had been petrified by the power of the gods, turned to stone, leaves and all, to enable them to resist the

lunar rain.

Since then the forest has become known as the Stone Grove. A score of druids live in the Grove, along several hundred human tribesfolk that relocated from the Second Step after the dragons arrived. Being humans themselves, the druids were born into the stone woods and have never seen a living tree. That does not stop them from being fanatically protective of their grove, however.

The spells druids normally use to affect plant life do not affect the petrified trees, but the Stone Grove druids have variations of most of those spells that do affect their rocky wards. Given the vulnerability of lunar creatures to earth-based spells, most of the aliens (including the dragons of the Second Step) tend to stay away from the area. The dragons probably could destroy the Grove if they desired, but it would be painful for them, and the outcome not at all certain.

The druids of the Stone Grove are led by Embryll Earthwarden, a descendent of Argyll Bearhands. Embryll is a fanatic among fanatics, and metes out hard justice to anyone caught defacing the trees or harming the remaining animals. The animals of the forest have been thinning in number since their woods were petrified, and Embryll has begun a campaign to turn the animals to stone as well. Some inhabitants nervously jest that it's only a matter of time until she transforms them as well.





Life in the Stone Grove is hard and simple, but relatively safe. The druids keep the people busy patrolling the woods, harvesting food, and attending religious ceremonies. Some of the tribesfolk that migrated from the Second Step have honestly adopted the druids' religion, but most simply go along with it in order to take advantage of the druids' protection. Several of the larger trees were grown in such a way as to have rooms inside them, and these provide homes for many people. Those not lucky enough to have such homes build crude huts in the shelter of larger trees.

THE SLATHEM

"The slathem are strange beings, but appreciative. After the battle with the squoli, they gave the few of us that remained rooms just above the water line... as honorable a place as they could put us without drowning us. We feasted for two days on tender sea cow, fruits from under the ocean, and more kinds of fish than I realized even existed. All we did was survive an attack, but it would have caught Sirrea by surprise if we had not accidentally intercepted it. Five of our remaining dozen gave their lives, and Orfael's injuries were such that he had to remain in the city when we left. But our new status as heroes made trading quite profitable." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

The sea-dwelling slathem are tall, thin humanoids adapted for living both on land and underwater. Their wet skin comes in all the colors of the coral reefs that they live on – shades of red, green, blue, orange, purple, and others. Their fingers are webbed and they have retractable fins on their arms and legs to enhance their swimming ability; their feet are not webbed, however, which makes walking on land easier. They do not have any hair, but members of certain families have decorative crests atop their heads.

In addition to their fins, slathem are adapted to water life by other means.

Their lungs are able to breathe air or water equally well. Though somewhat slow and awkward on land, they have powerful muscles to propel them swiftly through the water and withstand pressures of the ocean depths. Above the water, their eyes are no better than a human's, but underwater they see well in places sunlight does not penetrate.

When slathem wear clothing (and they sometimes don't, especially underwater), it is usually of light, wispy material that does not restrict movement. Warriors wear a form of leather armor made from the hides of sea creatures, sometimes with shells sewn on for added protection. In both cases, the clothing is dyed in coral colors that compliment the skin tone of the individual wearing it.

There is no centralized government in most slathem settlements. Their government is a sort of informal democracy. Decisions are made by individuals strong-willed enough to make their ideas reality. Slathem society looks very highly on those who lead by example and serve their communities, and those who do so are richly rewarded by the community. Slathem nobles do not achieve this status through any sort of divine will, accident of birth, or other arbitrary mechanism: They are held above their people because they have faithfully served their people in the past and been rewarded for it. It is rare that a slathem noble abuses his influence, and one who does is quickly brought down by traditionalists who condemn the unconventional behavior.

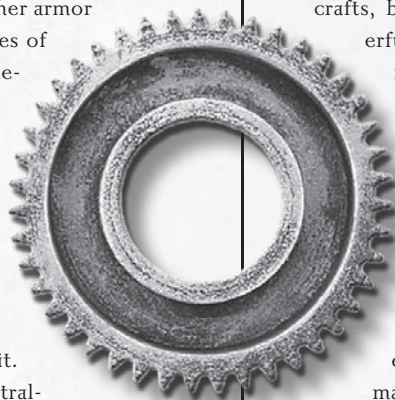
Food is plentiful in the ocean, so slathem rarely go hungry unless they choose to or are forced to by others. The ocean also provides a great deal of raw materials for building and trade such as bone, shell, coral, stone, and sea plants. In addition

to these natural materials, slathem magic can be used to create waterglass, which is basically ice without the cold. It can be further enchanted to various hardnesses, and can even be used to craft weapons and armor. Slathem are fine craftsmen, especially when it comes to making objects of art.

The slathem are highly talented in magical areas. Almost half of the slathem in Sirrea have some sorcerous ability. Many of these are minor sorcerers who use their skill primarily to assist them in their crafts, but some of the most powerful sorcerers in Highpoint reside in the coral city. Of particular note are Shaelis, the sorceress who uses her considerable power to protect Sirrea from the lunar rains, and her husband Druun, although he frequently wanders Highpoint in a mech-like water elemental searching for a magical artifact to protect Sirrea from its enemies.

Undersea battles make soldiering a popular career choice for slathem as well. In recent years, tentacled humanoids called squoli have been rising from the deepest depths of the ocean and invading slathem territories. Blood is spilled between the two races with increasing frequency, and the squoli get more aggressive with each passing year.

The language of the slathem is in effect two languages. The "air language" and the "water language" are linguistically the same, but the sounds are almost completely different depending on whether the speaker has air or water in his lungs, and on the medium through which the sound travels. An air-breather can learn the air language with no difficulties beyond those normally associated with learning a language. Even when one knows the air language, however, learning the water language requires the effort of learning an entirely different language and it cannot be spoken effectively unless one is able



to keep one's lungs full of water — a challenging task for non-slathem. The slathem have a written form of their language as well.

The religion of the slathem is mostly ritualistic and followed more out of a sense of tradition than actual piety. True clerics are exceedingly rare in slathem society, particularly since their gods became involved in the conflict with the lunar deities. Only the two most powerful slathem deities are even still capable of granting power to their followers: Shuqui the Sea Mother and Yonur the Land Father. There are numerous minor gods still mentioned in ceremonies and historical texts, but

they no longer have any temples or worshippers. The combination of slathem society outgrowing their gods and the assault of the lunar gods has spelled the end of the slathem pantheon.

NOTEWORTHY INDIVIDUALS

Master Botho (Clr 9)

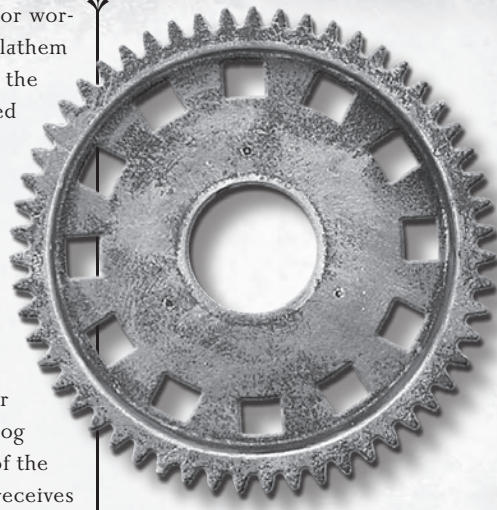
At 73 years of age, Master Botho is the youngest tortog dream master, and he is also one of the most enigmatic. He presumably receives prophetic dreams on a regular basis like a dream master should, but he rarely mentions them explicitly outside the annual gathering on the Dreaming Mound. He is something of a maverick in the tortog religious community as he has taken a human apprentice. Botho claims humans will play an important role in ending Vlasthos' war, but his fellow dream masters say he has baked his brain by basking too long in the sun.

Red Chedwick (Rog 7)

Chedwick is the unscrupulous leader of the largest band of humans living on the First Step. His nickname comes from his long red hair and beard. He was leader of the tribe on the Second Step before the lunar dragons arrived, and it was only because of his decisive actions that the tribe survived (or so he often says). Whatever his leadership qualities, Chedwick is really little more than a bandit and scavenger, and a cowardly one at that. He has no qualms about manipulating people for his own gain or using force to get what he wants.

Apprentice Robbet (Rog 3/Clr 1)

Robbet is an 18-year-old human with red hair and a freckled face. He is Red Chedwick's cousin and grew up with



Chedwick's tribe. Starting in his childhood, he began have terrible nightmares on a regular basis. Eventually he heard of the tortog dream masters and went to them for help. He is now Master Botho's apprentice, a fact that incenses a number of tortog traditionalists who believe Oundar only shares his knowledge with tortogs. Though he lives with the tortogs, Robbet still has ties to his human community. The young man is continually torn between loyalty to the dream masters and loyalty to his family and former tribe.

Embryll Earthwarden (Drd 12)

The leader of the druids of the Stone Grove, Embryll is a human woman hard in both appearance and personality. She is in her early forties, but her hair is completely gray and her long face heavily lined. The Stone Grove is the only life she has ever known, and she was raised to believe that someday the trees would be restored. Although she still believes that, she is beginning to realize that it probably won't happen during her lifetime. Embryll was never known for her compassion, but this knowledge has made her even more bitter and angry.

SLATHEM RACIAL TRAITS

- +4 Charisma, +2 Strength, -2 Dexterity, -2 Constitution
- Medium: Slathem have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.
- Slathem base land speed is 30 feet.
- Swim: Slathem can swim at a speed of 30 feet.
- Amphibious: Slathem can breathe normally underwater with no ill effects, and they can breathe equally well in the air.
- Excellent Swimmers: All slathem receive Swim as a class skill regardless of their chosen class. Furthermore, they receive a +4 racial bonus on Swim checks.
- +2 racial bonus to any one Craft skill.
- Slathem do not suffer penalties to Listen, Spot, or Search rolls underwater unless as a result of conditions other than being underwater (a *darkness* spell, etc.).
- Low-Light Vision (underwater): Slathem have low-light vision when underwater, but above water their vision is the same as a human's.
- Level Adjustment: +1.
- Favored Class: Sorcerer.



Shaelis (Sor 14)

With skin of a purplish-pink hue, Shaelis is considered a rare beauty among slathem women despite the fact that she is nearing middle age. On top of that, she is very strong willed and held in very high regard for her service to Sirrea. During the low water months, Shaelis stays awake all night observing the moon, vigilantly watching for incoming threats. On more than one occasion, she has saved the city by detecting incoming meteors quickly enough that they can be magically deflected through the combined abilities of several sorcerers.

Druun (Sor 10/Ftr 4)

Druun is the husband of Shaelis, though they are rarely able to spend time together. He spends many days of the year wandering Highpoint in search of a lost slathem artifact called the Sea-stone Throne, which he believes will give Sirrea the power to end both the threat of the squoli and the lunar rains. He travels the land in a magically constructed mech composed entirely of water. Though Druun is a fiercely caring individual, he dislikes people of other races and sees them as inferior beings. His skin is blue-green,

and a jagged scar on the back of his head serves as a reminder of his younger, more careless years.

Orfael Jonnes (Ftr 4)

He used to travel with the endless traders, but now the human Orfael Jonnes lives in Sirrea with the slathem. He lost half his right leg in a surprise attack by the squoli while his group of traders was visiting the city. Orfael says he was just defending himself, but his defense was so savage the squoli were delayed long enough for Sirrea to organize a counterattack and drive the squoli back. His wounds were still healing when his tribe resumed their journey, and he was left in Sirrea. He now lives in a chamber near the top of the Moon Spire where he observes the moon with Shaelis. While Shaelis watches the moon for threats, Orfael hopes to figure out something about lunar civilization.



TRADING INFORMATION

"The Four Steps are always rather bad for trading until we get to the slathem city. We get some dream tea from the tortogs, but other than that it's mostly just supplies for the next leg of our travels. They try to trade us craft items, but tortogs are notoriously poor craftsmen and we usually decline. The Stone Grove is barely even worth mentioning, but the trade goods from Sirrea more than make up for the lack of goods the rest of the month... waterglass, delicious sea foods, high-quality items of equipment, and

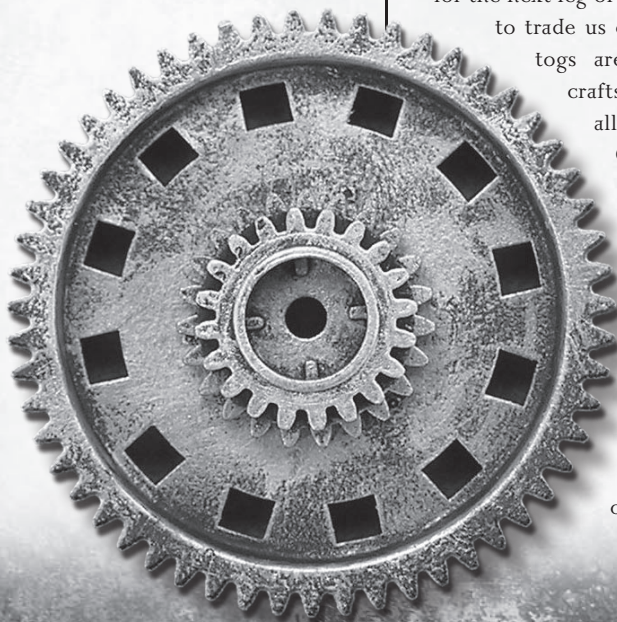
beautiful objects of art. Have I mentioned how much I love Sirrea?" —from the journal of Rechtold Fazir

DREAM TEA

Dream tea is what passes for an alcoholic beverage among tortogs. It is brewed more like tea than ale, and has a bitter taste that clings to the tongue. It is made with a number of hallucinogenic ingredients to give tortogs a waking glimpse into the Dream Lands, the realm of Vlasthos. Anyone drinking dream tea must make a DC 15 Fortitude save. If the save succeeds, the imbiber simply acts as if he had consumed an equivalent amount of strong alcohol. If the save is failed, however, he begins hallucinating. The hallucinations may be frightening, enjoyable, silly, informative, or any combination thereof. The nature of the hallucinations is largely dependent on the mindset of the person drinking the tea, but they are all exceedingly realistic. The hallucinations should generally be treated as illusions of the phantasm type, but tortogs tell tales of groups sometimes sharing hallucinations, and occasionally even being killed by them.

TORTOG SHELLS

The shells of tortogs are rarely seen not attached to tortogs, but when found they can be used for a number of purposes. They can be crafted into shields and small boats, for example. The human tribes of the western Roughlands use them like small tents to shelter in during the lunar rain. They cut the shells apart in such a way that the pieces can be carried easily but put back together in more or less their original shape, fastened with leather straps and metal buckles. A tortog shell tent can house one Medium creature or two Small creatures. Carrying one is a sure way to incite live tortogs to violence, however.





CREATE WATERGLASS

Transmutation [Water]

Level: Sor/Wiz 1, Water 2

Components: V, S

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Touch

Target: 6-inch-diameter globe of water per two caster levels

Duration: 10 min/level

Saving Throw: see text

Spell Resistance: Yes

This spell turns water into a solid substance much like ice, but it is not cold and it does not melt. For every two caster levels, you can solidify a 6-inch-diameter globe of water. It cannot affect water that is impure enough to no longer be considered water. While it can be used on water that is muddy or otherwise colored, the spell cannot be used on other liquids such as blood or ale. For purposes of hardness and hit points, waterglass is identical to ice.

If there is any significant non-water object in the water to be affected, the spell will automatically fail. Thus the spell cannot be used to immobilize or suffocate creatures. (There are rare, more powerful variations of the spell that can be used for these effects.) If the spell is cast on a water elemental or other being composed of water, it does 1d6

points of damage per two caster levels. In this case, the creature gets a Fortitude saving throw for half damage.

HARDEN WATERGLASS

Transmutation [Water]

Level: Sor/Wiz 3, Water 4

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: 1 minute

Range: Touch

Target: One waterglass object

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: None

Spell Resistance: No

This spell makes any waterglass object more useful for crafting purposes. One casting of this spell on waterglass that has been made with the *create waterglass* spell will make the effects of the original spell permanent. In other words, the *create waterglass* spell will not expire as normal. This makes the waterglass useful for crafting equipment or art objects that will not revert to normal water. A second casting of the spell on the same object gives the waterglass the hardness of stone, and a third casting makes it as strong as steel. Further castings have no additional effect. The material component for this spell is a steel rod at least six inches long.

WATERGLASS OBJECTS

The slathem are well loved by the endless traders for all the fine goods they have to offer, and none of the goods are finer than those crafted of waterglass. Waterglass is simple water hardened through magical means, but it can be used to create objects ranging from utilitarian to truly artistic. Waterglass is created by the *create waterglass* spell, which is a common spell among the slathem of Sirrea. When the waterglass is first made, it is only as solid as ice or bone. At this stage, it can be shaped or broken fairly easily, and the initial spell is temporary in effect. The *harden waterglass* spell is used to make the effect permanent and enchant the waterglass to various levels of hardness.

The appearance of waterglass depends somewhat on the water used to create it. Normally it looks much like standard ice. Its transparency depends on the purity of the water used and the thickness of the waterglass. Slathem often add colors to the water before transforming it into waterglass, bringing an artistic quality to even the most mundane waterglass objects.

Sirrea is home to many artists, and a fine waterglass sculpture will fetch a very high price in markets where collectors can be found. Waterglass can be made as hard as steel, and is often used to create weapons, armor, and other pieces of equipment. In other parts of Highpoint, equipment crafted from waterglass is normally sold for four times the normal price of the item, due to its beauty and its weight. Waterglass equipment usually weighs between one-half and three-quarters the weight of its steel equivalent.

STONE LEAVES

The leaves of the petrified trees in the Stone Grove are not particularly valuable except as curiosities, and the druids of the Grove would severely punish anyone caught with one. Nevertheless, they can be found across Highpoint because some endless traders have made a game out of seeing who can gather the most of them each year without being discovered. The stone leaves radiate very faint transmutation magic, and it is possible they could be useful in some magical processes. At the very least, they could be sold to a gullible person who can cast detect magic.





SEAFOOD

Food is plentiful in the ocean, so the slathem are willing to trade quite a bit of it for very little. Sea cows, oysters, clams, shrimp, and dozens of varieties of fish are abundant in Sirrea. Seafood is exotic on much of Highpoint, especially in the city-mechs, and is therefore a very high profit item for the endless traders. The downside is that much of it does not preserve well and must be traded or eaten long before the endless traders return to the mechdoms. Sea cow meat does make a decent jerky, though, and several traders have devised methods both magical and technological to preserve the seafood longer.

SLATHEM ROPES

Almost everything the slathem craft is of excellent quality, but they have a knack for creating exceptional ropes. Slathem are not the strongest climbers, and during dry months the uppermost levels of Sirrea can be reached only by climbing rope ladders. Using vines that grow underwater, the slathem have perfected the art of ropemaking. The plants have a bit of a naturally stickiness to them as well, so slathem ropes provide a +2 equipment bonus to Climb and Use Rope checks.

WATERPROOF PAPER

The slathem are a literate culture, but since they live half their lives underwater they cannot use normal paper and ink. The process they use to craft their paper is similar, but theirs is made from water plants that produce a supple and more waterproof sort of paper. Waterproof ink is harvested by the slathem from undersea creatures who naturally produce it as a defense mechanism.

THREATS TO TRAVELERS

HUMAN AND TORTOG RAIDERS

"We were followed yesterday by a band of scruffy human bandits. We outnumbered them almost two to one, yet they seemed a desperate and pathetic band. Not desperate enough to attack us, however. They spent the day trying to find the courage to confront us, but vanished shortly before sunset and did not return the next day." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

Travelers going through the First Step have little to worry about if they are in a large group or are well armed. Those who are not so lucky are prey for bandits and scavengers, both human and tortog. The scattered humans on the First Step are a desperate but cowardly people and usually only attack if they are certain of winning. Bolder bandits will sometimes attempt to intimidate travelers into parting with food and valuables using various subterfuges to make their numbers seem larger.

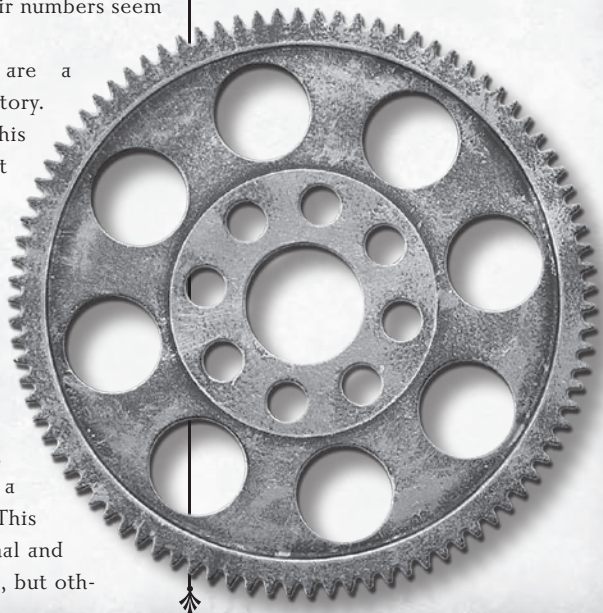
Tortog encounters are a slightly different story. Though few tortogs in this part of Highpoint resort to banditry as a career, travelers unfamiliar with tortog customs may find themselves in battle nevertheless. Tortog society is very competitive, and tortogs will often confront travelers aggressively, trying to goad them into a test of strength or skill. This sort of behavior is normal and expected among tortogs, but oth-

er races may easily misinterpret the competitiveness as hostility and start a fight.

FLOODS

"Water rushed over the land below us, obliterating in moments the burrows we had slept in only a scant hour before. Lusén proposed we might ride the water to the Dreaming Mound if we had boats, and we laughed until we realized his suggestion was made in earnest. Lusén has naught but grease between his ears." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

Though relatively rare during dry months such as Jealo, flash floods still occur in the western Roughlands. Water runs down from the Boundary Peaks and rearranges the topography before collecting in low-lying areas or dropping to the Second Step. The floods come so quickly and unexpectedly that even a very strong swimmer would have little chance of avoiding being drowned or smashed against a rock. A native guide may be of use in avoiding the floods, but even a skilled ranger has trouble predicting them accurately.



LUNAR CREATURES

"Masses of thrashing tentacles laid into us from behind. I do not even know if they were plant or animal, but it made no matter as they tore my comrades apart. Meanwhile, the infernal dragon simply sat at the end of the valley blocking our retreat. At that point, we all did what any sensible person would do... we panicked and ran, trusting to stupid luck to keep us alive."
—*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

Throughout the Four Steps, lunar creatures are as pervasive as they are anywhere else in Highpoint, but on the Second Step they are almost prolific. The lunar meteor near the center of the plateau has brought with it a huge host of alien creatures.

There is no life on the Second Step that is not either lunar in origin or quickly passing through.

Blacktooth, Thunderer, and Brokewing, the three lunar dragons that arrived with the meteor, make sure that terrestrial life stays off the Second Step and far away from their crater lair. They have hundreds (if not thousands) of other lunar creatures that seem to do their bidding. Though they make their home on the Second Step, they frequently attack the Third Step as well, sometimes even battling against the druids of the Stone Grove.

There are some secret routes across the Second Step known to the endless traders, but even these are not entirely safe.

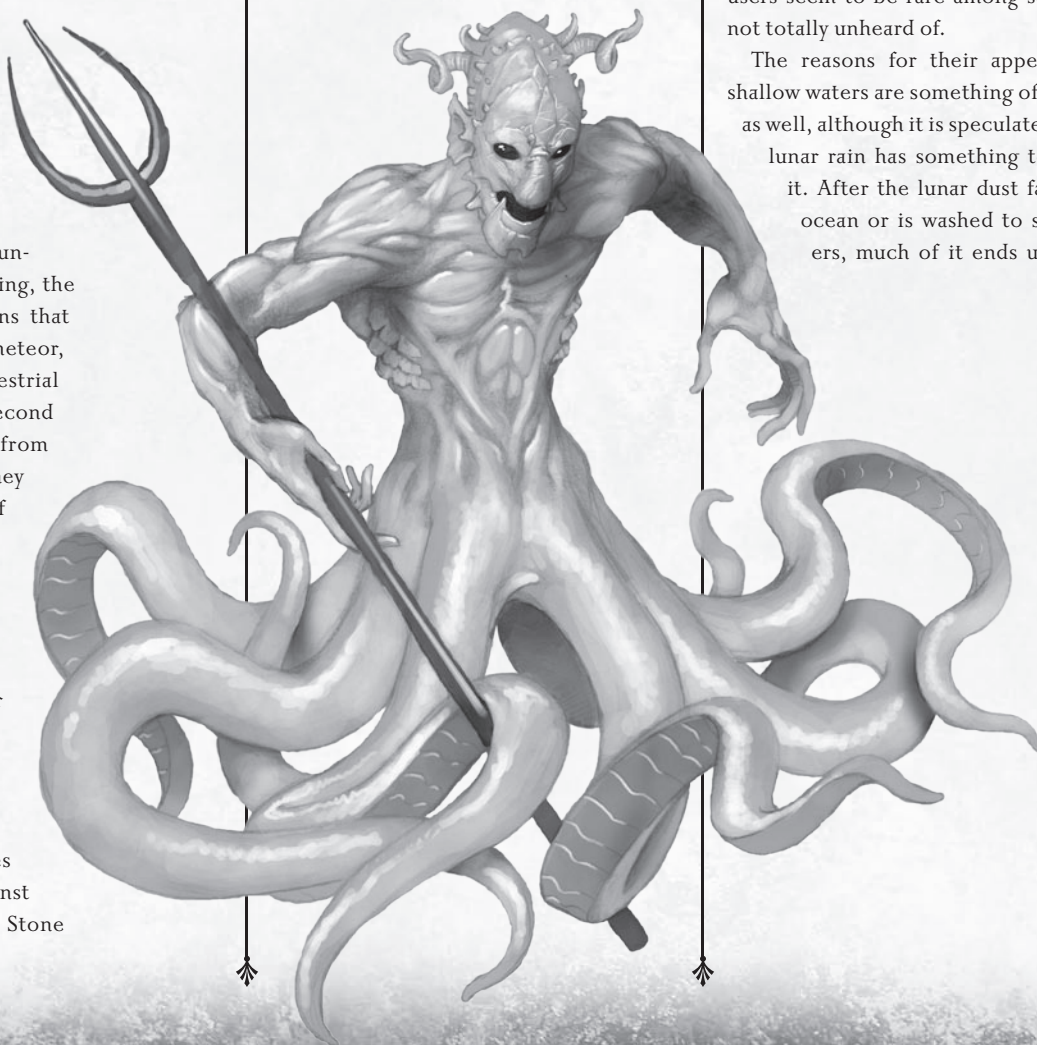
SQUOLI

"When we pulled Orfael aboard our boat, half his leg had already been removed by one of the creatures' aquatic mounts. He hardly seemed to notice, though, as he continued stabbing at our attackers over the side of the boat. The rest of us fought as well, but what we fought against was unclear. Tentacles and arms came from the water, trying to overturn our boat. We hacked and poked for what seemed an eternity, and when our slathem rescuers finally arrived we were all drenched in sticky blood." —*from the journal of Rechtold Fazir*

The aquatic race known as the squoli are not much of a threat to travelers on the land of the Fourth Step, but people traveling on or under the ocean will likely encounter them. The squoli are a relatively new threat to the area, having climbed from their homes in deep ocean chasms only within the last generation or so.

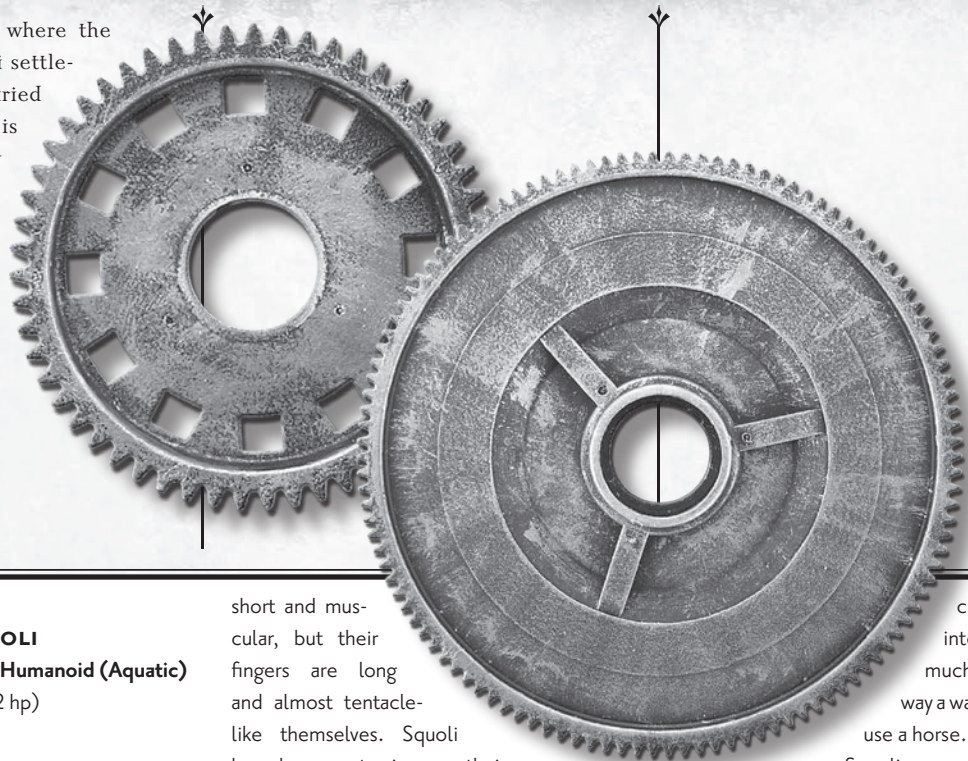
Squoli do not often attack Sirrea directly, but attacks on people going to or from the city are frequent, as are attacks on outlying slathem farms. The squoli are a brutal race and never take prisoners. Because they come from parts of the ocean that even the slathem don't venture to, very little is known about squoli civilization. However, it is clear that they are civilized at least in the sense that they have weapons, armor, and domesticated beasts on a level comparable to the slathem. Magic users seem to be rare among squoli, but not totally unheard of.

The reasons for their appearance in shallow waters are something of a mystery as well, although it is speculated that the lunar rain has something to do with it. After the lunar dust falls in the ocean or is washed to sea by rivers, much of it ends up settling





in the lowest regions where the squoli live. With squoli settlements finally being buried by accumulated dust, it is possible they are simply looking for new territory in which they can comfortably live.



SQUOLI

Medium Monstrous Humanoid (Aquatic)

Hit Dice: 2d8+4 (12 hp)

Initiative: -1

Speed: Swim 30 ft.

AC: 14 (+5 natural, -1 Dex), touch 9, flat-footed 14

BAB/Grapple: +2/+5

Attack: Trident +4 melee (1d8+2)

Full Attack: Trident +4 melee (1d8+2)

Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Attacks: Grapple (see text)

Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., water-breather

Saves: Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +2

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 8, Con 14, Int 9, Wis 9, Cha 8

Skills: Listen +5, Swim +10

Feats: Improved Grapple (B)

Environment: Any underwater

Organization: Solitary, school (2-10), colony (11-100), city (101+)

Challenge Rating: 1

Treasure: Standard

Alignment: Usually Chaotic (any)

Advancement: By character class

Squoli are a violent underwater race that normally lives in deep chasms. Their upper bodies are humanoid, and their lower bodies consist of six to twelve large tentacles instead of legs. Their skin is a pale gray in color, and their eyes are black. The arms of squoli are

short and muscular, but their fingers are long and almost tentacle-like themselves. Squoli have bony protrusions on their heads that range anywhere from small lumps to demonic-looking horns.

In combat, squoli prefer to use their tentacles to grapple their opponents and then attack them with weapons while they are held. Because squoli do not use their arms to grapple, they have a number of advantages when grappling in or under the water. First, squoli do not provoke an attack of opportunity when initiating a grapple. Since they have a bit more freedom of movement while grappling, they can still threaten adjacent squares and use any one-handed weapons on their grappled opponent. Lastly, squoli are able to use weapons while their opponents are pinned. Squoli tentacles are less dexterous than arms, and squoli are unable to take advantage of the grappling options that allow a grappler to use their opponent's weapon against them and to disarm their opponent.

In combat involving multiple squoli, their customary tactic involves the fighter-classed or unclassed individuals attacking first with their grapple attacks, and rogue-classed combatants following behind using their sneak attack bonus against grappled opponents. Some squoli have also been known to ride larger sea

creatures into battle in much the same way a warrior would use a horse.

Squoli are entirely aquatic creatures and cannot survive long when removed from water (use the normal drowning rules for a squoli that is removed from the water). The surface dwellers of Highpoint know of the squoli almost entirely through dealings with slathem and other aquatic races, so little of squoli society is understood. The other aquatic races themselves have only encountered the squoli within the last couple of generations as the tentacled people have come out of the ocean depths to shallower waters.

Squoli gain Improved Grapple as a bonus feat. They have a +8 racial bonus to the Swim skill, and can take 10 on all Swim checks even when distracted or threatened.

LOWWATER

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I FIRST SAILED INTO THE WET DESERT WITH THE LACH MACKENNY TRIBE. I SURVIVED LONGER THAN ANYONE IN MEMORY, AND THAT'S PROBABLY WHY YOU THINK I CAN HELP YOU. I'LL GIVE YOU CREDIT FOR THOROUGHNESS — NOT MANY OUTSIDE THE TRADERS KNOW OF THESE TREKS INTO THE WASTE, AND FEW OF US CAN NAME THE ONES THAT MADE THE TRIP.

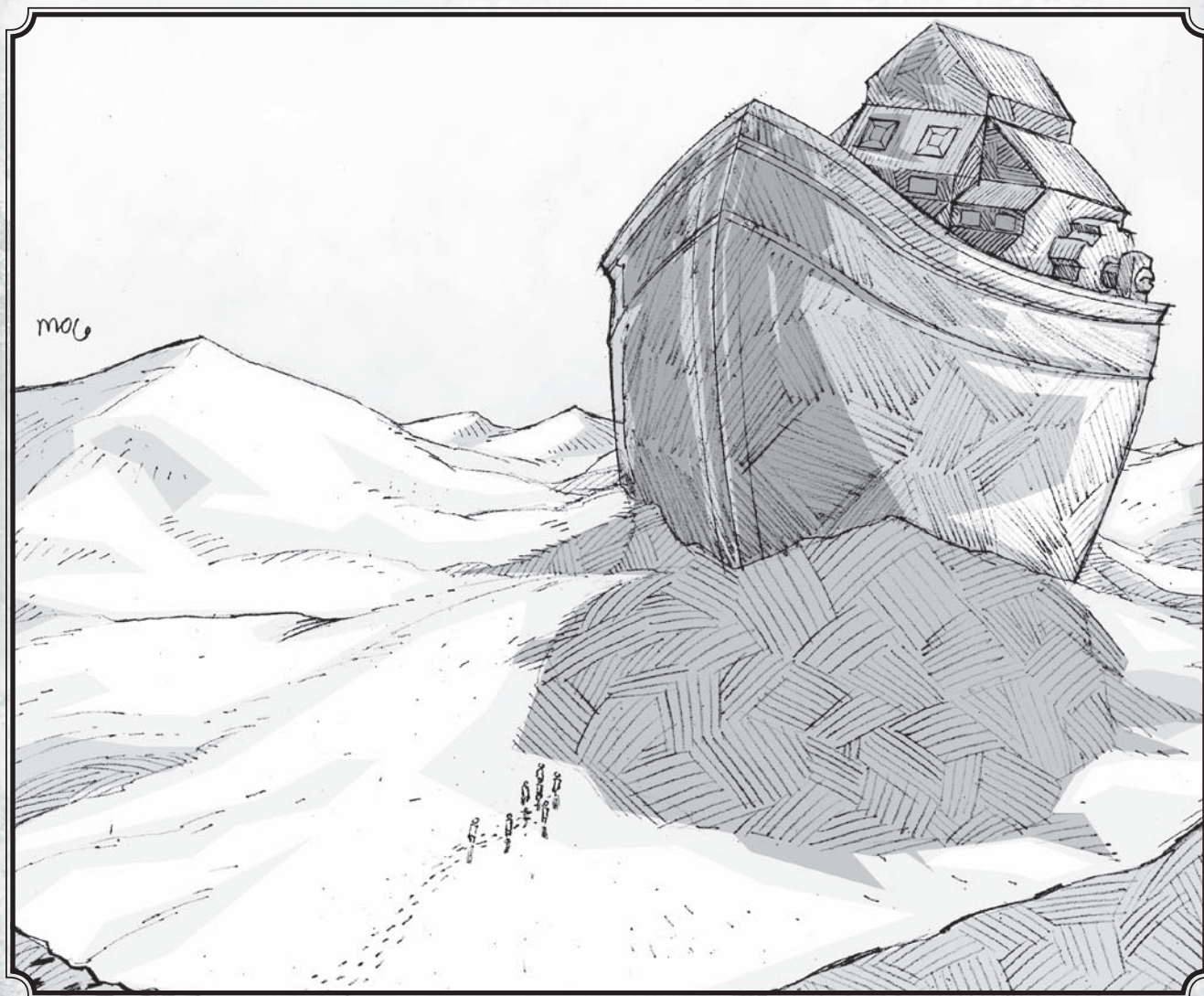
But the Lach Mackenny will take your coin for passage without a word from me. You're not the first. Since the lunar rain,

everyone is convinced their fortune will be found in the sand and salt. Don't get me wrong — there's more profit from that area

than any other bend of the Endless River. But trade means work. You can't go charging out there with sword and spellbook and expect to haul away wagonloads of gold. The bones of adventurers are bleaching in the sun or building Yzam Maqfed, the necromancers' fortress.

You don't smash the Wet Desert out of your way. You endure it, observe it, and barter with it. The desert needs things, and your first job, before you ever reach the shining plain, is to make sure you get them. Your second job is to know what the desert offers. That's trade in any time of year, but during Lowwater the math changes — the profits are greater. So are the dangers.

The Lach Mackenny Tribe specializes in





minimizing the desert's danger and maximizing the profit. If you want to tag along with them, you should hear the story of the first expedition I led into that godforsaken place. I had just joined up with the tribe the year before, and made some good trades during that trip. For my second year, I had a feeling I could go from good to jaw-dropping. When the dwarf Gedbig and his crew from the Stenian Confederacy asked me if I'd lead them to the Pretominin Heads, I said no until I saw the color of their gold. I figured with that pile and the trades I was likely to make that year, I would make more in the month of Lowwater than a normal trader could make in a full year. I did, too. But when Geddie finally made it back to the Flatlands, I don't think he had traded to his gain.

I joined up with the Lach Mackenny because, when you're a kid looking at them from across the caravan, they have the attraction that surrounds people who survived dangers you've never known. Their name means roughly "The Wealthy Dead" in our trade pidgin, and most of them act like they're invincible, smiling back at their worried mothers with cocky grins as they gear up during Flero and Jealo.

The tribe only formally exists during Flero, Jealo, and Lowwater. During the rest of the year, they're members of other tribes. Whoever wants to try their luck can join the Lach Mackenny as the waters fall. Those who survive the trip into the Wet Desert rejoin their tribe with their profits and think about whether it will be worth the risk again next Flero.

The year I met Geddie, I felt like a decorated veteran returning to battle. At the end of Jealo, the Lach Mackenny race ahead of the other traders, quickly making arrangements at Salt City for rafts. This allows them to skip the salt trade with the slathem during Lowwater in exchange for following the Endless River out into the Wet Desert itself and trading with those who live there.

This year I knew what would sell and what I needed to survive the desert. The two main trading partners are the zulep

warriors who make their home in great iron ships they were given by the mysterious Patrons, and the necromancers who have been exiled to this remote place. The biggest customers for the products we bring out of the desert are wizards and sages who will often pay great sums for the opportunity to experiment with the potent magic that comes from that inhospitable terrain.

I had what I needed early in Jealo, as I had been planning this all year. We took off ahead, with some tears on the cheeks of those we left behind. We weren't crying, though. We knew some of us might not make it back, but you can't think about that when you have a job to do. A few weeks of hard travel and we found ourselves once again at the edge of the desert.

THE LAND

SALT CITY

Desperation smells like ammonia, sour sweat, and beer. Salt City reeks of it. There are only four reasons to go there: salt, rafts, supplies for the Wet Desert, and, if you're feeling curious, some of the antiques the slathem drag out of the sea.

Salt City looks a replica of Edge built by someone who had never seen the place. Like Edge, Salt City is set into a cliff. The Endless River pools around the base of the town forming a briny reservoir where sand and detritus accumulate in constantly shifting patterns.

The water pours through caves in the hillside to flow beneath the earth. These crevices have been widened into homes and storage rooms by generations of slathem. The high water line is just below the top of the slope, so all these rooms are flooded during the highwater season. Water surges into the subsurface in a current that washes away any belongings not secured against the torrent. Before the troubles, there were buildings at the top of

the hill to store items during this season, but the lunar rains smashed them to ruins. The slathem now keep only what they can carry to the deep ocean during Highwater, only to return during Lowwater to trade.

This makes the slathem as poor as the grubbiest nomads of the Endless Plains. Still, they would never dream of moving somewhere more stable. We endless traders rely on them to continue our journey, and that brings the slathem a prestige they could not otherwise enjoy. They can demand any luxury in exchange for the rafts and boats they make, and often do, even if whatever they get will be swept away in three months time.

It was here I met Geddie. He was obvious at the front of a group of dwarves who were trying to shout down the crowd of slathem around them. There was an earnest quality to his face that made me believe he was generally sincere and straightforward. He had purchased a raft and supplies, but the slathem knew he had more money to spend. He saw me and his eyes widened.

"Listen, can you tell these people that I don't need broken pottery or more salted fish? They don't seem to listen to me," he said.

I waved the slathem back, to his relief. He explained that the Stenian Confederacy had sent him and his team of four other coglayers to investigate the Pretominin Heads for potential technological exploitation. He needed a guide to the spot. My reluctance was overcome when I discovered how well the Stenians had funded the expedition.

I helped him pack his raft correctly and tethered it to mine to ensure he didn't founder in a sandbar. We set off upstream, our sails turned to catch the west wind. It was the first time I'd seen someone get seasick on a river, but dwarves were never much for water.



THE ENDLESS RIVER AND THE WET DESERT

The Wet Desert has a stark beauty. The ground on either bank of the Endless River is a grayish-white broken by clumps of reeds and grasses. The desert stretches away to the horizon, the bone-white surface broken by low dunes of salty sand or cracks showing red clay. A few heartier plants can be seen out in the desert, and strange creatures prowl far from the river's shores, unafraid and uninterested in the brief human intrusion.

The water smells of the sea, and for good reason — the Endless River in this desert isn't a river at all, but a channel from the ocean. Two hundred fifty miles from Salt City, the Endless River begins as a gap called the Great Sluice that opens to the sea between two ridges of rock. The interior of the Wet Desert is below sea level, so the seawater flows through the desert after entering, making its way east toward Salt City. If not for the caves in the ridge at Salt City, the central desert would remain a sea all year.

THE INHABITANTS

GUZZAN MOS MAQFED TOLK

The first landmark on the river's course through the desert is a slate-gray tower that rises from the riverbank, surrounded by skeletal warriors. Just beyond it are two more towers in a similar style. The larger tower has a dock and no visible guardians. It is the tower of Guzzan mos Maqfed Tolk (Nec 18).

His name means "Guzzan of the Sinister Path" in his native tongue. He says he lived on a continent beyond Highpoint, and claims his people banished him for pur-

suing forbidden research in necromancy. His tower, Yzam Maqfed, means "The Left Tower" and stands on the left side of the river if you are coming from the direction of the Great Sluice. The two other towers nearby were built by Guzzan's disciples, Yanov and Vurrhal.

The construction of these towers was a work of perversion. Scores of undead laborers dug deep to find bedrock beneath the soil, resulting in extensive underground warrens. The windows are open during lowwater, but beneath them hang strange-looking leather shades that wave even when there is no wind. They are the undead gills of great fishes, which, when strung up and activated through a combination of mechanics and magic, keep the fortresses filled with air during Highwater.

Guzzan understands that we see him as a figure of great evil, and he does nothing to change this image. He has consciously made himself a caricature of a necromancer. He came from his tower to meet us at the dock that year as he did every year. Despite the heat, he wore a thick black cloak with red trim and his face was obscured with shadows all the darker for the fierce sunlight that surrounded him. He pulled back his hood to reveal salt-and-pepper hair and a thin mustache whose ends drooped around his greasy smile.

"Welcome to my home," he said with a thick accent. "A bit of comfort in the wasteland. My disciple Yanov will bring us tea."

Yanov approached carrying a silver tray. His hair was braided elegantly into an elaborate net of leather straps. It was a style I had only before seen on the men of the Tlan tribe of the Endless Plains. He set down the tray on a tall table. We shared tea, and I looked over Yanov mos Teldon n'Sa (Cog 5/Nec 8) or "Yanov of Highpoint." He was tall and muscular, but deferential toward the short, older man who was trying to spook his guests. He had developed enough necromantic skill under Guzzan's tutelage to create a team of zombies to build Yzam Kegar on the opposite bank.

The name meant "The Tower of Perception."

Yanov had been one of the most intelligent and trusted advisors to Shar Thizdic, who sent him to learn necromancy. The leader of the Legion had heard rumors of Guzzan and wanted to see if necromantic mechs could be used to supplement his army. I asked Yanov once why he hadn't gone back. He said, "I could use the power I've learned to arm my people. But by giving them these weapons, I would be destroying who they are. I can't do that, so I can't go home."

"Then why learn it at all?" I asked. "Why didn't you drop everything as soon as you realized how corrupting it is?"

"I have peeked through a door," he responded. "There is no way for me to step back from the threshold until I've seen all that is beyond it. It would be the same for Shar, and that is why I will never allow him to bring me back."

Guzzan invited the dwarves to come off the rafts to join us, which they did. I could tell at a glance that while there was relief that the dock was not bobbing, the dwarves were afraid of this mysterious foreigner and his servant. He grinned at them.

"Don't worry, I never rip out the souls of my guests before tea."

The dwarves glanced back toward their raft, but then all the traders burst out laughing and Gedbig's group looked at each other with confusion and fear. I hurried to reassure them.

"Guzzan is not going to hurt you in any way, my friends. He likes to give the impression of fearsomeness, but really he's quite reasonable."

The necromancer smiled, and walked forward to them with teacups and introduced himself, asking about them and their reasons for traveling into the desert.

Guzzan was in fact reasonable, but it would be a mistake to think of him as harmless. After exchanging pleasantries with the dwarves and several of the traders, he took me aside. "Any luck finding the corpses and slaves I asked you about last year?"

"I told you then, if I start running that trade, people will fear us and shut their gates. We can't afford that. I'm sorry — if there's anything else I can do for you, I will be happy to."

His look turned dark, and his anger was authentic and as sinister as his name. "Trader, my disciple Vurrhal is spending his days gathering test subjects rather than helping me with my great project. I can't afford to send someone of his abilities out to the distant reaches of this continent. I need another supply of living and dead to continue my experiments."

Vurrhal a Mesiq (Nec 10) was a disciple who had come with Guzzan from his homeland. He was quiet, but his silence hid a great deal of anger and bitterness toward the people who had cast them out. He did not get along with Yanov and disdained the residents of Highpoint almost as much as he hated his own people. He chose for himself a name which meant "Vurrhal the Exile" and built Yzam Mesilam just downriver from his master's home. The name meant "The Tower of the Stranger," and he had no desire to interact even with traders, so he was usually gone when we came.

The fact that Vurrhal was digging up corpses and kidnapping people on Highpoint was a surprise to me, and I wondered if Yanov knew this was going on. I was in a delicate position, because what I had told Guzzan was true, but I also knew other Lach Mackenny might be willing to try to smuggle some of these items and endanger all our tribes.

Guzzan's eyes were so dark and fierce I worried for a moment that he might kill me without moving a finger.

"I know a few... less reputable traders, not with our group," I said. "I will convince them to come here and see if they can offer what you need."

"If they don't arrive before you return, I will see that my needs are supplied by you and your traders, one way or another. Don't think you can pass this dock without my approval. Now," he said, smiling again, "let's see what you and your friends have brought to the desert this year."

Over the years, from comments he's made and items he's bought, I've been able to piece together that Yanov taught Guzzan the basic principles of coglaying. Knowing what I do of necromancy, and seeing that he's growing old, I believe Guzzan is trying to become a new kind of lich. Some kind of steam-powered lich, capable of living forever and expanding yet further his dark power, but relying on technology to protect him from the power of the divine. I've heard rumors of a clockwork phylactery. I know that once I saw one of his "test subjects" in a window. She looked like a steamborg with flaking skin stretched tight over bones. She appeared to be screaming, but there was no sound, and I realized her face had been frozen in that expression. A metallic hand grasped her shoulder and moved her back from the window, then fastened the gill-shade to cover the room. Even now there are nights I wake up in a cold sweat with that image still in my mind.

I found an arrangement for Guzzan by the next Lowwater that was satisfactory to everyone. The details of that arrangement are not something I talk about.

But Geddie never saw any of that. As far as he knew, he had just spent the afternoon with an eccentric but courteous foreign hermit. From there, we had our yearly appointment to be attacked by the zuleps.

ZULEPS

The zuleps do not build, so there is no dock where we stop to trade with them. We know we have reached the meeting place when we are attacked.

The zuleps are a proud race of warriors who believe taking what they need is a sign of strength, so trading is a sign of weakness. According to their traditions, bartering begins only after a stalemate in battle. After trading with them for as many seasons as we have, the process is more of a ritual than a spirited battle, but that doesn't mean that people on both sides don't die. In fact, until at least one person dies, the battle will continue on, as the zuleps believe they are not fighting hard enough until one of them or one of their enemies has been killed. Anyone who falls to the ground or into the water, zulep or trader, is immediately killed by the zuleps with ritual daggers made from the feet of diamond crabs.





ZULEP

Medium Humanoid (Reptilian)

Hit Dice: 3d8 (17 hp)

Initiative: +1

Speed: 30 ft.

AC: 13 (+1 Dex, +2 natural armor), touch 11, flat-footed 12

BAB/Grapple: +3/+5

Attack: Spear +6 melee (1d8+3/x3) or sling with stones +3 ranged (1d3+2, 50 ft.)

Space/Reach: 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Qualities: Immune to blindness

Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +0

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 12, Con 10, Int 8, Wis 8, Cha 8

Skills: Listen +4, Move Silently +4, Spot +1

Feats: Alertness, Endurance (B), Weapon Focus (spear)

Environment: Desert

Organization: Solitary, band (2–10)

Challenge Rating: 1

Treasure: Standard

Alignment: Usually chaotic neutral

Advancement: By character class

Level Adjustment: +1

After the first death, everyone stops fighting and begins to unpack their goods for display. It's a bit odd the first time you do it, but you get used to it. Poor Geddie and his team were terrified, hiding on their raft the entire time, even though I had told them what to expect.

When they finally came ashore, I introduced them to the chief of this band of zuleps, Mssta (Bbn 7/Cog 2). We had a standing arrangement that only one band could meet with us to trade, and they should work out amongst themselves how to organize this.

Zulep Society

Mssta's band succeeded in defeating other challengers to earn the

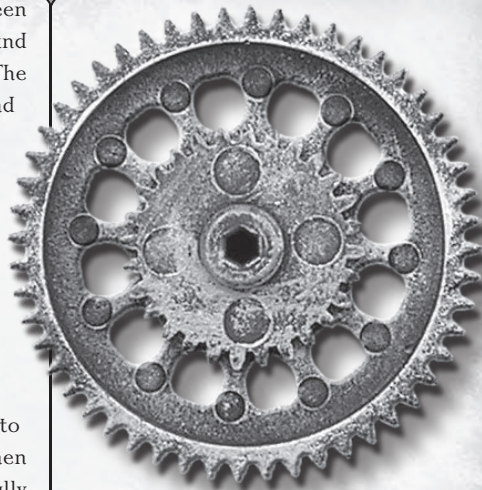
right to trade with us. There were between twenty and thirty members, and this band had held the right for several years. The females were larger than the males, and so they tended to be the leaders. Status among them is based on one's fighting prowess as well as that of one's offspring.

There are between thirty and fifty bands of this size in the Wet Desert. Bands split, combine, and die off constantly. No band has specific traditions that go back more than a single generation, because affiliation is too loose to form a long-lasting community. Still, when they stand together, they are fanatically loyal to each other and their chief. Most often, everyone in the tribe is related to or breeding with the chief, which solidifies her power.

A female zulep is about six feet tall, and the male stands about a foot shorter. A bony ridge surrounds their faces, and their skin is covered with scales that range from pale green to brown. They have wide, flat noses, a beak-like mouth, and small eyes on either side of their head. When I first met them, I thought the patterns of blackened scales were natural, but I learned that they were strange tattoos which indicate rank. I couldn't tell you the exact meaning, but I know some refer to offspring raised to maturity, some to enemies killed, and others are added when a zulep speaks directly with the Patrons.

The Patrons occupy the sole place in the religion of the zuleps. The zuleps say they are demi-gods who aid them in times of desperation, and they are the source of the great metal ships where the zuleps spend nights during Lowwater and all their time during Highwater.

When Mssta saw that one of Gedbig's group had a steam engine, she became very interested. Through me, she asked if they knew the Patrons as well, which baffled the Stenians. I tried to explain, but Mssta was already inviting them to come back and look at the ship. The dwarves agreed before I could express my concern, intrigued by Mssta's indication that



these ships resembled their steam-powered equipment. They asked me to come as a translator, and first I refused, but once they offered me more gold I reluctantly agreed, still certain that the zuleps were using this as an opportunity to ambush the naïve strangers.

In fact, there was nothing to worry about. Mssta had spoken several times to the Patrons, and was eager to show off her ship and her knowledge to these dwarves. She had some knowledge of steam engines, and I was hard-pressed to translate quickly enough to keep up with the conversation. There are few coglayers among the zuleps and none beyond the most basic levels of training, but it is considered a divine vocation. Coglayers are expected to keep up with combat and breeding, but they are trained by the Patrons, and that makes them holy. Their skills are still primitive by our standards, but they can maintain the equipment they have been given and occasionally make something impressive for themselves.

When he saw the great ship, one of Geddie's coglayers gasped that building this would have equaled building a small city-mech. I've been on Nedderpik, and this reminded me of that. I wouldn't be surprised if it was based on the same work. Several bands of zuleps fit into the ships with room to spare. The ships are so big that zulep battles often occur inside them



during Highwater. This was my first and last tour of one of these ships.

Steam engines in the hold were hooked up to power huge shafts, which are surrounded with blades twice the height of a man; presumably these could propel the great ship. The rudder was also steam-powered, and both the speed and direction could be controlled from the bridge at the top of the ship. Of course, the zuleps did not have access to enough wood or coal to run the great steam engines. Instead, they had set up smaller engines to run lesser steam powers throughout the ship, such as lights, wavemakers, and elevators. The hull of the ship was thick and looked like iron, although it did not rust in the sea and it was strong enough to repel even heavy lunar rains.

THE PATRONS

Scholars and traders often debate whether the Patrons exist. The zuleps tell us the Patrons won't come near us, but I think it's clear that they're real. No zulep coglayer could build those great ships. When I once asked Guzzan about the Patrons, the necromancer confirmed and discounted them in the same breath. "They think they are so powerful and cultured they've lost the need to be polite. They avoid you, but I think you're better off for it."

The zuleps refuse to tell any Highpoint race what the Patrons look like, but it is clear they are similar enough to humans and zuleps that we can walk through the ships they make. Our best guess was that these were cast-off ships from those that the Patrons use. The engines, useless to the zuleps, must be used by the Patrons to navigate the seas, safe inside metal skins which protect them just as the city-mechs of Highpoint protect their residents. Certain pieces of equipment had been removed, remarked Geddie, which could have been steam guns or other weapons.

The idea of a mechdom patrolling the seas around Highpoint clearly bothered

him, but I pointed out that the Stenians were unlikely to have problems in the Roughlands with people who lived at sea. He looked thoughtful.

"Yes, but they need coal to run these ships. Where do they get the coal? Will they need more one day?"

I didn't have answers. Mssta enjoyed the attention and felt appropriately praised for her demonstration. She favored me in the trading once we got back, to the annoyance of the other traders.

The discussion on our way back was why, after avoiding all other Highpoint races, the Patrons would give ships to the zuleps. It could be that the zuleps were relatives of the Patrons, just as Guzzan's people were relatives to Highpoint humans. It could be that the zuleps provided something to the Patrons in trade for the ships.

Geddie said something one night as we sailed back toward Salt City that made me pause. "What I don't understand is how they can just give away these ships. We could not just hand someone a city-mech — yet they have the resources to produce enough ships that they can rip out the weapons and hand them to another race. I think these Patrons are very powerful indeed, and would have little use for these primitive people. Perhaps they are acting out of a sense of guilt. What if they did something to the zuleps, something that left them to roam the Wet Desert with just spears and their wits. The zuleps are clearly not naturally part of this place all year. They can't swim especially well and there is no history of them migrating into the rest of the continent during Highwater.

"I've been observing this place, and have begun to wonder if this land did not always get submerged for half the year. I think we are looking at a place that was once arid with marshy shores, not a salt-laced desert. At some point in the distant past, the sea started invading, and this land became uninhabitable for all except the desperate. And now I think these Patrons had something to do with this. The ships are blood money for destroying this land."

In all the years I traveled there, I never

found anything that confirmed or disproved this theory of Geddie's. But Gedbig's team found more questions when they explored the area around the Pretominin Heads.

TRADING INFORMATION

The zuleps sold me the information on how to get to the Heads, so we headed back toward the spot where we'd land. Geddie's fee was a significant portion of my earnings, but the trades I made were still above average. Much of the trade in the desert was the same from year to year, but the portion of it you got was based on what your brought in.

The zuleps can offer magical materials from plants and animals that are found only in this extreme place, and in exchange they demand magical weapons which won't rust in the salt water and give them an advantage in the endless wars they fight with each other. The necromancers have potions, scrolls, and information to offer and in exchange purchase metal, wood, and herbs that cannot be found in the desert. I came to an arrangement with Guzzan soon after that year which pleased him and brought me considerable profit, but I won't go into the details of that agreement. Not today.

The slathem in Salt City divide themselves into two roles: salt gleaners and raft builders. The salt gleaners head out into the nearby Wet Desert once the waters have receded to gather the salt left behind in baskets. This salt is desirable to every other group we trade with, as there aren't a lot of other sources in Highpoint.

The salt gleaners also find other things in the desert. Sometimes it's an odd piece of a mechanical gizmo. Other times it's a carving or a painted board. Though the slathem insist these are the remnants of some ancient civilization, most traders believe they are actually from several different places, probably drawn to the des-

ert from other parts of Highpoint by the strong currents during the changing seasons. If the item looks interesting enough, a trader will offer something for it, hoping to sell it down the line as a curiosity. There are rumors of the slathem finding powerful artifacts out in the desert, but from what I've seen, those are just stories told to optimistic young traders, probably started by the slathem themselves to build interest in their trash collection.

The raft builders create the nimble craft necessary to navigate the Endless River. The style is ancient, but it serves us well. The River is often shallow, rocky, or twisted as it passes underground, and we need wide rafts and sturdy boats that will carry our goods through these areas.

One of the keys is the material the boats are made out of. It's a dried kelp, woven into ropes. The ropes are then bound together, crushed flat, and sealed with resin to create a hull that reminds non-traders of a basket. It's light and watertight, and a good trader can control the handling based on how he packs his goods inside, preparing the craft so it suits the next stretch of river.

The slathem who have the boats ready first get the best prices from the Lach Mackenny. Some slathem would offer fish, weapons, or information about the desert, and the traders would buy from those considered trustworthy. If you end up heading out into the desert, I suggest you buy some information yourself from whoever the Lach Mackenny patronize. The traders won't share for free what they paid for themselves.

THREATS TO TRAVELERS

I told the other traders where I was taking Gedbig and his team, and though they thought I was crazy, they said they would tell my family why I was going to be late to Salt City. We beached the raft on

the riverbank and got our supplies together for heading out to the Heads. While we packed, I gave Geddie a heads-up on what to watch out for.

LIFE IN THE WET DESERT

Plenty of animals migrate down from the hills above Salt City during Lowwater, scavenging the fish and plants that were not washed out to sea. If you look long enough, you'll see lizards, snakes, foxes, rats, and plenty of birds. There's a type of tree that grows out there during Lowwater, then drops its leaves and goes dormant before the sea comes back. Lots of these migratory land-dwellers make homes in these trees while they're out on the shining plain.

Saltwater crocodiles are common predators, but are harmless so long as you stay away from the riverbanks. Some larger ocean fish find their way into the river through the sluice, and once I saw a shark that was as long as three oxen. For the most part, however, the Endless River is too shallow for these larger ocean predators. Also, any significant predator would have to compete against the river dragon Tyinn.

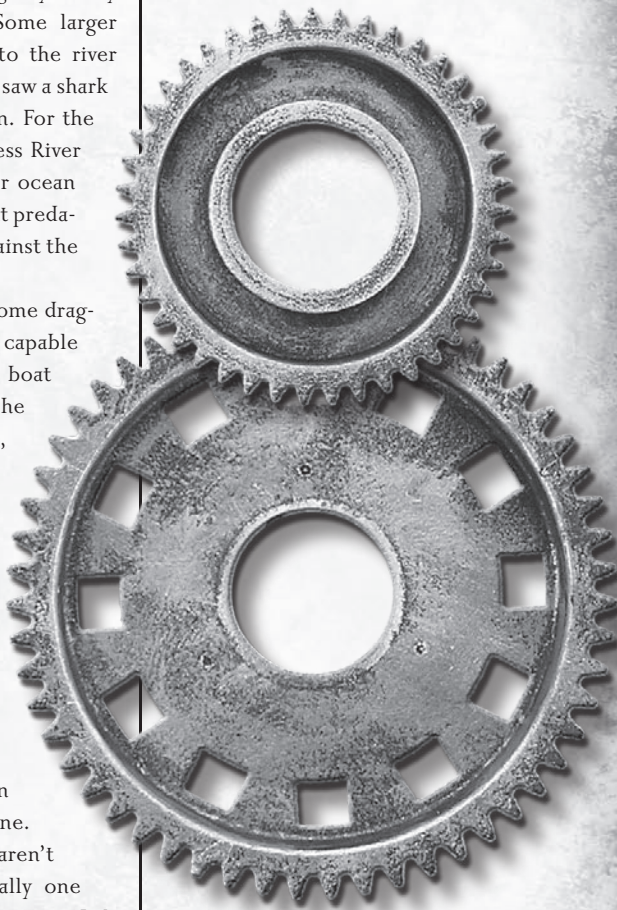
Tyinn is not intelligent as some dragons. She is long and snake-like, capable of wrapping herself around a boat and crushing it in seconds. She has four tiny limbs and a wide, flat snout. If she has a breath weapon, no one has ever seen it — or at least seen it and lived. She is a silvery-blue that blends well with both the riverbank and the water. Her favorite position for resting or hunting is to lie along the center of the riverbed.

For the most part, Tyinn leaves boats and rafts alone. They aren't prey and they aren't a threat. However, occasionally one will do something she interprets as a chal-

lenge, and then she will destroy it — and all aboard.

Tyinn has been in the river for as long as the Lach Mackenny have sailed. Rumor holds that she protects something in the river. Some say she guards the tomb of a powerful wizard or cleric, while others say an amazing steam-powered weapon from the First Age is buried in the riverbed. All the stories agree that whatever she is guarding should remain hidden. I believe she's just a hungry girl who's found a niche in the river feeding on fish (and land creatures unlucky enough to wander to the bank), but regardless, she's best left to herself.

A couple of true dragons — a young red and an adult green — found or carved out larger caves further north along the Salt City ridge, where the slope is higher and more exposed during Highwater. They





come into the desert to find prey and to avoid lunar dragons during Lowwater. For some reason, the lunar dragons never venture out into the desert.

But the lunar rains have left their mark. You'll find what we call brine ponds scattered throughout the desert. These are formed when large chunks of lunar rock scar the landscape just as the waters are receding. Some of them can go pretty deep, and various sea creatures get trapped in there during Lowwater. When bigger predators like sharks and giant squid get caught in there, they eat all the fish pretty quick and then they're just hungry and mad. Some survive until Highwater, but most of them eventually die of hunger or drown when the water gets too salty. Best to keep your distance.

But even though there aren't lunar dragons, there is one lunar creature out in the desert you'll never see anywhere else. The zuleps have taken to calling them lunar pearls because they are often found in craters made by large chunks of lunar rock. They're iridescent, pale spheres about as wide as your forearm, and they've got some kind of mind trick they play on you. When you see one, you become fascinated. It doesn't matter how savvy you are, that pearl is the most valuable thing you've ever seen.

If you know what's going on, and you saw it from a good distance away, you can usually fight off the urge to go look at it. But if someone shows it to you up close and you don't know what you're looking at, well, I've seen some traders kill their brother to get the pearl from him. Once you have it, you just look at it. You stop eating, sleeping, and talking. Other folks can come up and sit next to you after you're far enough gone, and it doesn't matter — so long as you can see the pearl, you don't care.

Generally, if a group gets caught up in one of these, some of them are killed and the rest just sit around staring at the thing. I think it must feed them somehow. They become grayish and thin, but after a month of not eating or doing anything else, they're still alive. Eventually, they become

what we call lunar zombies, stumbling through the desert carrying these pearls on a platform between them. It's hard to say where they're going. Often they just move around in circles. At this point, they don't need to look at the pearl, because they can sense its presence just by being near it.

These folks aren't undead, but I wouldn't call them alive either. Like zombies, they don't feel pain and they don't really bleed, but they can be killed if you chop them into enough bits. Occasionally an animal or something will join up with them. When they see other people, they attack and try to drag their victims back to see the pearl. It isn't long before their victims join them shambling along through the desert. I can't say if they survive Highwater or not, although I'd be willing to bet being underwater doesn't bother them much. You never see them leave the desert, just like you never see a lunar dragon come into it. Some folks say that if you take a zombie away from the pearl, eventually they'll come back to themselves, but I've not heard of anyone who managed to keep the zombie away from the pearl long enough to test this out.

There are a few large predators around the desert all year long. One of them is the diamond crab. Their skin is faceted like a jewel, and they hunt the desert in packs. They're about the size of a table, and they're fast. They're one of the few creatures that hunt in daylight, because they can use their skin to create a flash of light that dazzles their prey. Armor or shields made out of their shells is amazingly hard and durable, and the necromancers can take it off in such a way that you can still use the flash effect with it in the daylight. To do that, however, they have to attach a chunk of undead crab-flesh to the armor, so most folks steer clear of that product.

The aquaterror bird is about seven feet tall with a long neck and teardrop-shaped body. It swims as fast as it runs, which is about the pace of a well-bred horse. It has an axe-shaped beak and wide, thick claws between webbed toes. Its powerful legs can kick as well as dig its nests. Lowwater

is the aquaterror's breeding season, when it lays eggs and raises its young to prepare them for their life as sea predators. I imagine in the ocean its life is close to a seal's, eating fish and jumping up on rocks. On land it chases down birds and animals to rip apart and feed to its young. It can kill prey as large as a dog, but they leave humans alone unless you come near their nest. They are very territorial about protecting their young, probably because the birds are known to be cannibalistic toward the offspring of other aquaterrors. The only other odd thing about them is they have some small psionic abilities which they use to defend themselves. Their brains and gall bladders, correctly preserved, are important components in some mind-affecting spells.

Most plants in the Wet Desert are either aquatic and lie dormant during Lowwater, or are terrestrial and lie dormant during Highwater. One important exception is the snaptendrils plant. It has a central, flower-shaped base from which dozens of fine tendrils extend. For most of the year, these tendrils float in the ocean above and around it, but during Lowwater they lie on the soil under a thin layer of dust. These tendrils can extend up to thirty feet away from the ten-foot-diameter base. Whenever anything touches a tendril, it curls back toward the base with a snapping sound. Whatever was unfortunate enough to touch the tendril is carried back with it.

The petals at the base have a similar reaction, snapping shut on whatever touched them. The plant supplements the poor soil in this area with meat, paralyzing its prey with barbs on the petals that shut around it. It digests most of its prey, opening again when it's finished and letting certain specialized scavengers who can avoid the tendrils clean out the remaining flesh and bones. In some rare cases, the base will retain any equipment that can survive digestive juices, scavengers, and seawater — which means magic items. These finds make approaching the plant tempting, and some zuleps who are nimble enough grab the items and escape with them. The poi-

CREATURES OF THE WET DESERT

Aquaterior Birds

During Lowwater, these birds are found alone or in pairs hunting or protecting their nest. While hunting, they will avoid a confrontation if possible, but while protecting their nest, they will attack relentlessly and will not flee. They have psi-like abilities which they use to communicate during Highwater and defend themselves with during Lowwater.

Aquaterior Bird: CR 5; Medium magical beast; HD 6d10+12; hp 47; Init +4; Spd 60 ft.; AC 14, touch 14, flat-footed 10; Base Atk +6/+1; Grp +7; Atk +7 melee (1d8+1, bite) or +7 melee (1d6+1, slam) ; Full Atk +7 melee (1d8+1, bite) and +2 melee (1d6+1, slam); SA Psionics; AL LN; SV Fort +7, Ref +9, Will +2; Str 12, Dex 18, Con 14, Int 8, Wis 10, Cha 12.

Skills and Feats: Climb +3, Concentration +5, Swim +5; Athletic, Combat Casting.

Psionics (Sp): At will — cast *blindness* (DC 15), *silence*, and *suggestion* (DC 15) as 3rd-level caster.

Treasure: The brain and gall bladder of the aquaterior bird can sell for 3,500 gp, but only if it correctly preserved with special oils and herbs that allow it to retain its special properties. Preserving these organs requires a DC 15 Craft (alchemy) check.

Special Note: If you are playing with the **Expanded Psionics Handbook**, aquaterior birds can be considered to have *aversion*, *crisis of breath*, and *empathic transfer*, *hostile* as a 3rd-level psion (telepath) instead of the psionics abilities listed above.

Diamond Crabs

Diamond crabs hunt in packs of 1d4+1 individuals. Although coordinated, they are nearly mindless and will attack any creature of Medium size or smaller as prey. They will flee if they find themselves outmatched, usually after one of them has been killed.

Diamond Crab: CR 4; Medium magical beast; HD 5d10; hp 30; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 18, touch 12, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +5;

Grp +9; Atk +9 melee (1d4+4, claw); Full Atk +9/+5 melee (1d4+4, claw); SA Blinding flash, improved grab, squeeze; SQ Damage reduction 5/+1, natural armor +6, SR 5; AL CE; SV Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +2; Str 18, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 8, Wis 12, Cha 12.

Skills and Feats: Jump + 6, Swim +6; Cleave, Power Attack.

Blinding Flash (Sp): The diamond crab can create a flash of light as a free action up to three times per day. Anyone looking must make a DC 15 Fortitude save or be blinded for 3 rounds.

Squeeze (Ex): If a diamond crab holds a target equal to or smaller than its size in a grapple for one complete round, it automatically hits with both claws.

Treasure: The carapace of a diamond crab is worth 2,000 gp so long as it is relatively intact. The material is primarily used to create armor and shields, so enough must be left undamaged to craft for that purpose.

Lunar Pearls

Viewing a lunar pearl requires a Will save (DC 20). If the character has already seen the effect of the lunar pearl, she gets a +4 situational modifier to her save. If a character has never seen a pearl but has Knowledge (lunar), she can perform a Knowledge check (DC 25); if successful, she knows enough to gain the situational modifier.

The DC for the Will save is reduced by 5 for every 30 feet of distance between the character and the pearl. If the character fails the save, she is enthralled and will do everything in her power to approach the pearl.

She makes another save every minute the pearl is in view. If she fails a second save while enthralled, then the effect becomes permanent unless the pearl is destroyed, at which point the effect disappears. The pearl has a hardness of 10 and 30 hp.

Characters make another saving throw once every day after becoming permanently enthralled. If a character fails this third saving throw at any time, then she becomes a lunar zombie.

A lunar pearl is the equivalent of a CR 4

creature.

Lunar Zombies

These creatures are exactly like normal zombies except that their creature type is lunar rather than undead. If the lunar pearl they carry is destroyed, then the zombies will stop attacking and sit down where they are. A restoration, greater restoration, or heal spell will restore the victims, but only if the pearl has been destroyed first.

Snaptendrill Plant

The snaptendrill plant doesn't make attacks on its own, and can be considered a trap rather than a creature. The external 30-foot radius is one trap, and the central bulb's 10-foot diameter is another. The tendrill trap can be triggered by anyone entering the radius of effect. As there are multiple tendrills in every area, any movement through a square in the radius will trigger the trap even if the trap was previously triggered in that area. If an area has been triggered several times, then at the GM's discretion all the tendrills may have been triggered. The tendrills relax and stop triggering once the base has been triggered. Creatures of size Huge or larger are immune to the tendrill trap.

The central base can only be triggered once and then it will not reset for another victim until the next season. However, anyone who fails the opposed grapple check with the base (effective Strength of 22) must make the check and the poison save each round until he is free or unconscious. The digestion process is very slow, but there is little air inside the bulb, so once someone has been caught inside, he has 12 hours before he needs to make a Fortitude save (DC 18) once per hour. Success means 4d6+4 damage from the squeezing spikes, and failure means suffocation and death. Creatures of size Gargantuan or larger are immune to the base trap.

The plants often grow in clusters of 2d6 plants and each has a 5% chance of having magical equipment inside the central bulb.

Snaptendrill Plant Tendrills: CR 1; no

attack roll necessary (1d6 plus pulled into snaptendrill plant base trap); Reflex save DC 20 avoids; Search DC 20.

Snaptendrill Plant Base: CR 5; +8 grapple (3d6, plus snaptendrill poison). Petals have hardness 5, 20 hp.

Snaptendrill Poison: Injury DC 17; Initial Damage 1d4 Dex; Secondary Damage Paralysis; 500 gp.

Collecting snaptendrill poison is fairly easy if the character can get close enough without setting off the trap. It is possible to collect the poison from a trap that has gone off by cutting it open, but characters must make a Reflex save (DC 10) to avoid poisoning themselves on the spines in the process. Sealing and preserving the raw poison is a simple Craft (alchemy) skill check at DC 5.

Tynn the River Dragon

Tynn is not a true dragon, but a sea serpent who made her way into the river. She is rumored to have been summoned there as a guardian, but no one has confirmed that she is guarding anything besides her hunting grounds.

Tynn: CR 8; Huge beast; HD 10d10+10; hp 65; Init +0; Spd 60 ft.; AC 21, touch 13, flat-footed 8; Base Atk +7/+2; Grp +17; Atk +7 melee (1d6+2, slam) or +7 melee (1d8+2, bite); Full Atk +7/+3 melee (1d6+2, slam) or +7/+3 melee (1d8+2, bite); SA Constrict 2d8+2; SQ natural armor +8; AL CN; SV Fort +8, Ref +12, Will +4; Str 14, Dex 20, Con 12, Int 8, Wis 12, Cha 10.

Skills: Swim +11.



son in the inner petals can also be harvested by those brave enough to attempt it.

But I don't want to give you the impression that the desert is crawling with animals and vegetation at every turn. Encountering any living thing in the desert is rare. The biggest threat is not some exotic creature, but the heat of the sun and lack of water. Any water you find will not be drinkable, and the heat will send anyone in armor to their knees before midday. With proper equipment and good supplies of food and drinking water, the desert itself is probably something any healthy traveler could survive. When you go looking for trouble, like Geddie, that's when the desert gets even more risky.

THE PRETOMININ HEADS

I had a map drawn by the zuleps, who had advised me that the Heads were bad luck and I should not consider leading these children to them. They had thought the dwarves were children because they were short — or perhaps they thought they were children because they were so naïve about the desert. Between the map and instructions from the other traders, I was certain I could get them to the site. We made our way fairly quickly and uneventfully, and after two days travel north of the river, we could see the Heads.

They are only partially exposed above the sand, but the sand is so flat you can see others from the first one we found. They are almost a half-mile distant from each other, and extend in a straight line from the Salt City ridge all the way into the desert. I have never seen the deepest ones, but the zuleps say the entire northern part of the desert is cursed with their presence.

The one we had come to was heavily caked with rust, but when one of the dwarves scratched at the rust it fell away and revealed pock-marked but solid iron. They decided to set up camp there. Their plan was to work for a few months until the water forced them to leave. They had some steam-powered drilling equipment,

enough food and water for a few weeks, and I agreed (for an additional fee) to make an arrangement with some salt gleaners to deliver more supplies to them later that season.

I made my way back to my raft and sped away, four days late to Salt City. The salt trading was just slowing down by the time I made my way into the slathem city. I made the arrangement for the supplies to be delivered, counted my considerable earnings from my favorable trade with Mssta and working with Gedbig, and moved on to other trades farther down the river.

I didn't think about Geddie again until I was heading back up the river the next year. The salt gleaner I had hired said there was no sign of Geddie when he came with more supplies — just holes in the ground. I didn't see his raft where we had beached it on the riverbank, but then, I wouldn't have expected to. Either he made it back to the Stenian Confederacy for his report, or he was dead and the raft washed somewhere else during Highwater, with his drilling equipment waiting for a salt gleaner to find it and try to sell it as an "ancient artifact."

This year was not quite as profitable, although my arrangement with Guzzan made my earnings at least respectable. I had high expectations from last year, though, and was disappointed as I made my way back to Salt City.

On the riverbank, near where I had left him last year, was Geddie. He saw me and waved fiercely. His clothing was ruined and his skin was badly sunburned. He was weeping when I pulled aside and let him into my raft.

THE BURIED FORTRESS

"I have nothing to give you for a ride," he said. "I...I'm sure the Stenians will honor any credit you offer me. With interest."

The other traders had moved their rafts nearby, curious. "I'll take you back to Salt City in trade for your story," I said. Of course, I also knew offering Geddie a ride

back would probably earn me favor with the Stenians, but I didn't feel he needed to know the motivations behind my generosity. "Where are the others?"

At this point he wept again, so I offered him water and food and let him rest. When he was strong enough, he told me what had happened.

"We tried digging several test holes to see if we could find anything, and after a few days we opened a passage into a building. We thought that the coming and going of the ocean must have applied layers of silt to this area, burying a building.

"The rooms were closed by thick doors, but we found they were steam-powered, so we began hooking up our steam engine so we could explore the place. Everything had been sealed away from the elements and the windows were intact beneath the sand and clay, so aside from some dust everything was in perfect condition.

"It was made entirely of metal, and we deduced that the clear substance in the windows could not have been glass or it would have shattered under the weight of the mud. We found chairs and dials and gauges that made us believe this place was monitoring some kind of steam engine.

"Eventually, we made our way down to the lowest chamber — it was cavernous and echoed strangely. When Retna attached her steam engine to one of the hookups we had been using to power the doors, there was a great groan and the room shuddered. The lights came on, illuminating an enormous metal shaft that disappeared into the earth. It was spinning, and we climbed up to see what it was doing. It appeared to be a drill going deep into the earth and at the top was a large tank of water connected to pipes that covered all the walls.

"We were still exploring when we saw that the shaft had begun to heat up, and soon it was glowing a dull red. We put our heads together and determined that the shaft had gone deep through earth, and it channeled heat from the depths back up to the water tank where it pro-

duced steam. Sure enough, we could now unhook our steam engine, as this immense power plant had provided steam power to the entire building.

"Once the power had been re-established, we brought our equipment down out of the heat. The air was cooled from vents in the walls, and we found running water and preserved food in sealed jars. We began to map the building and chart the technology we found there.

"There were other buildings, connected by tunnels. The complex was enormous — we knew that we had no hope of discovering all of it before Highwater. Although the building had been preserved for this long, our hole would allow all the ocean water to fill up this area. We agreed we would re-seal the building in a couple of months, report back, and return with a much larger team to evaluate the site. Our job for now was to catalog important areas for the next team to research, rather than to reach a deep understanding of our own.

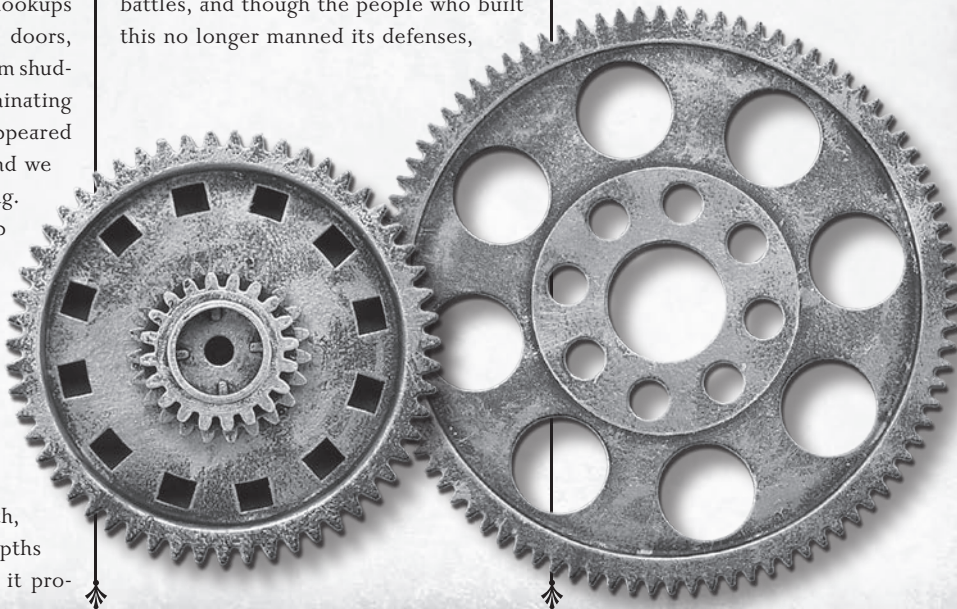
"The writing found throughout the complex was not modern Dwarven, but it was very close and we were able to make out much of it. As time went on, we began to become more proficient with it. It was clear that this city was intended to be a fortress guarding against some enemy in the Wet Desert. There were some records of battles, and though the people who built this no longer manned its defenses,

this fortress had never been breached by the enemy they guarded against.

"The steam technology was impressive, yet more for its size than because of any unique or surprising feature. The one steam engine powered at least one mile of the complex, though we did find that similar engines were placed in other areas to power those buildings. The power coming from the heated shaft was greater than any of our coal-powered city-mechs, which meant they could add every steam-powered luxury. Heated baths, the air cooler, lighting, and clockwork puppets were everywhere. The puppets even had alcoves with gears where they could go to rewind themselves before continuing their work.

"The one unusual thing about the facility was the lack of maintenance it required. A city-mech needs the constant attention of coglayers. This facility had sat unused for generations, yet when the power was reactivated, it immediately went back to work as though no time had passed. Although their technology was not significantly more advanced, we observed that the materials they used were unknown to us.

"We were beginning to bind our notes and pack up a few pieces to take back as examples when we heard a strange noise from the power plant. We had agreed we





would need to stop the great drill before we left, although none of us were entirely sure how to do that. Now there was a sound like something was scraping the shaft as it turned. The noise got louder and louder.

"Retna climbed on a catwalk to see what was down there. We thought perhaps some piece of equipment had fallen down along the shaft, which seemed very dangerous. We were trying to determine how to stop the great drill while she looked down. Retna started screaming. The scraping sound suddenly got louder and we could no longer hear her. She just stood on the catwalk, staring down and shrieking at whatever she was seeing.

"We went to go up to the catwalk to collect her and find out what was wrong, when the scraping stopped and we could once again hear her screams. Then something emerged from the shaft. In my brief glimpse, it was like someone had tied pikes to a ram at odd angles so they splayed out in a crude mimic of a human hand. It was deep gray with glowing veins of bright yellow running along its length. It reached up and grabbed Retna, and quickly the sound of her screaming was gone. The hand disappeared back down the shaft, and then the scraping sound resumed, much louder.

"Any thought of rescuing Retna was immediately cast aside, and we ran from the room. We were in an elevator when the scraping, which had filled the entire facility, suddenly stopped. The thing had emerged from the shaft, and we glanced at each other nervously. Tergal, the coglayer who maintained the drill, pulled out the bombs he was going to use to reseal the facility.

"We heard a sound like iron filings cascading down a metal chute. We had never heard this sound before. When the elevator stopped, we ran wildly down the hallway. I heard someone in the back scream briefly, but I couldn't look back. My only goal was to leave that place.

"I finally made my way to the hole and scrambled up and out, ready to give a hand to the others behind me. I saw only Tergal, and behind him the tunnel through the

desert clay was filled with an unnatural yellow light. His face was full of pain, but he yelled, "Run!" I dove to one side, and then he set off his bombs, collapsing the tunnel and sealing the buildings once again.

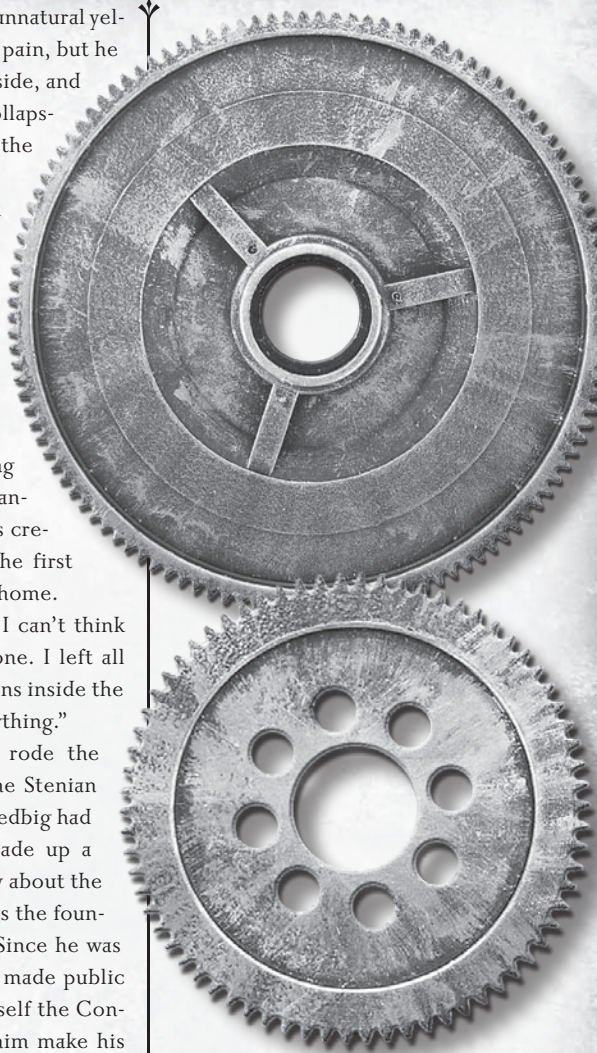
"I had two days' walk through the desert with no supplies to think about what had happened. My guess is that the drill had broken into the home of some resident of the Stygian Depths, and it had not been happy. I can't say whether that thing was responsible for the abandonment of the facility by its creators, or whether this was the first trip it had taken up out of its home.

"I feel like a coward, but I can't think of what else I could have done. I left all the notes and all the specimens inside the facility. I have no proof of anything."

I consoled him, and we rode the current back to Salt City. The Stenian Confederacy believed that Gedbig had gone mad somehow, and made up a story, using his bizarre theory about the Wet Desert and the Patrons as the foundation of a horrific fantasy. Since he was discredited, his tale was not made public and I did nothing to earn myself the Confederacy's favor by helping him make his way back home.

Of course, we trade with some of those who dwell in the Stygian Depths during Arie, so for my part, I believe everything he said.

So, my friend, join up with the Lach Mackenny if you want to make your way into the Wet Desert. They will take you anywhere you want to go for a price. I hope it's clear to you now as it is to me that even if Geddie was wrong, and the desert was always a slave to the deadly cycle of the waters, there is a curse on that place. An ancient, lingering curse that taints everything that goes there. You might, like me, come and go from there for years and get rich doing it. But though my body has no scars, my soul still has wounds from those



years accommodating victims like Geddie and villains like Guzzan.

You bring what the desert wants, and you take what the desert is done with. It's trade, for certain, just like any other. But I got to feeling like the caretaker of a dragon, bringing it meals and clearing away the offal. So I stopped going, and I'd advise you to think carefully about what role you'll have when you step out into the shining plain.

APPENDIX ONE: LEGAL INFORMATION

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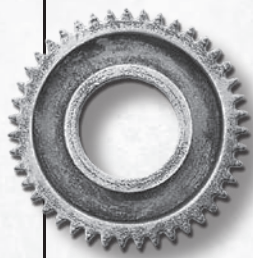
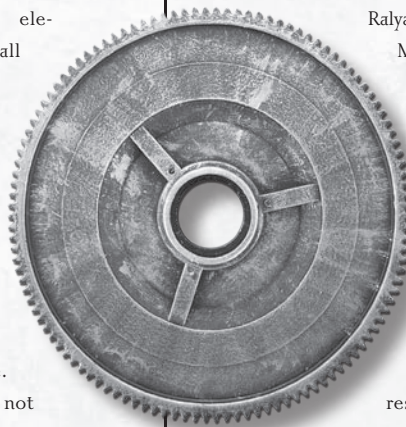
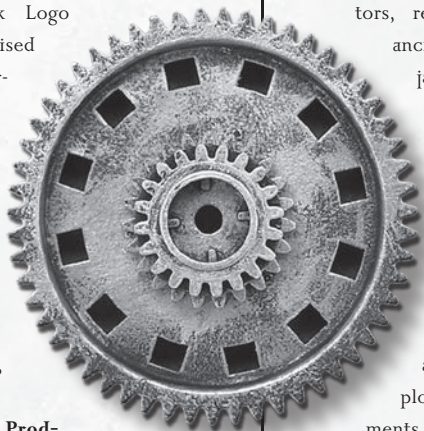
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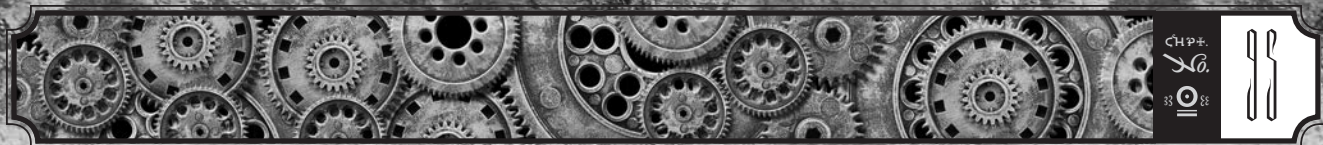
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