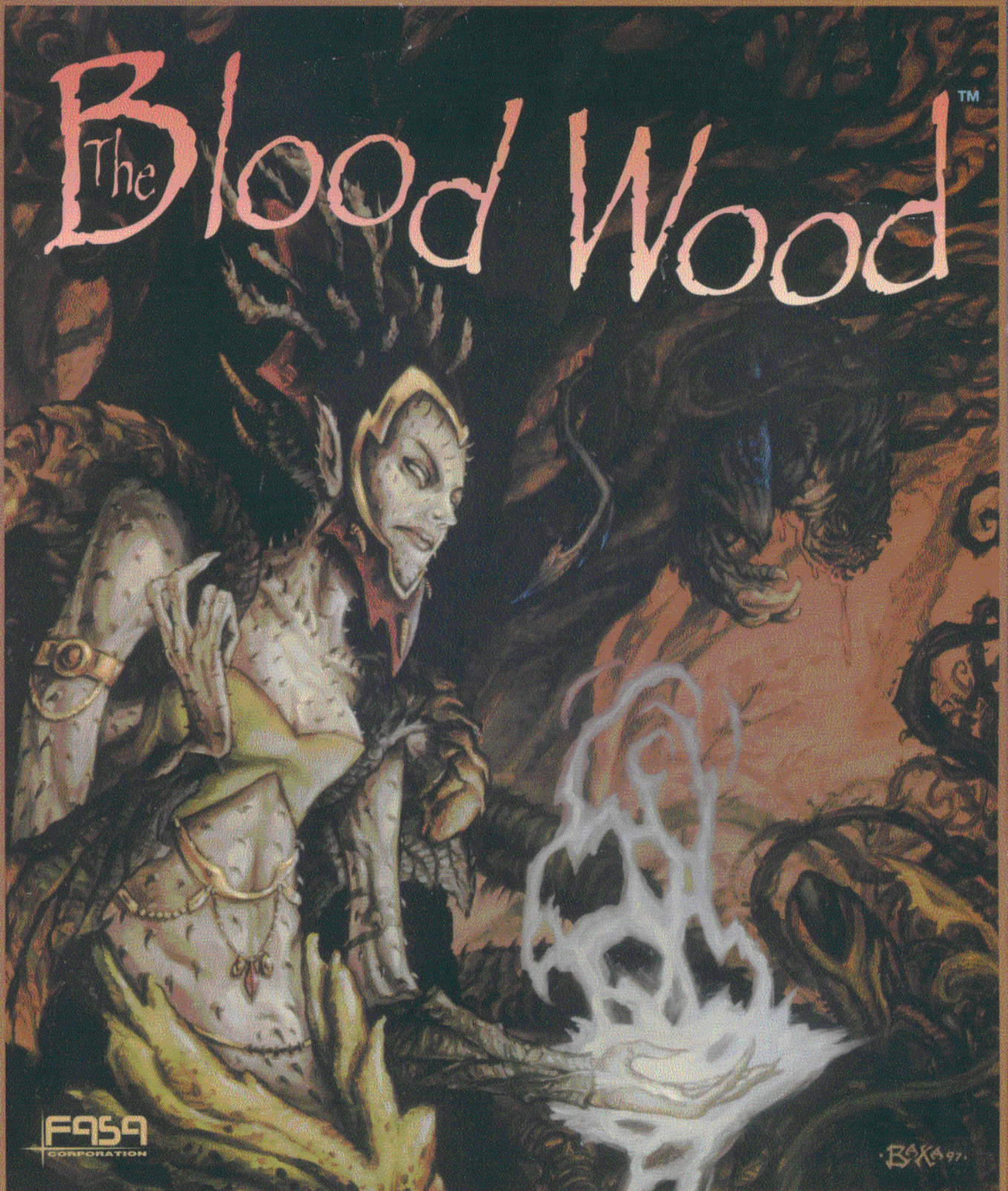


EARTHDAWN[®]

The Blood Wood[™]



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By K&S 97

A N E A R T H D A W N S O U R C E B O O K





TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4	Goals and Current Activities	49
How to Use This Book	6	Blood Warders	50
OVERVIEW	7	Origins	51
Life as a Blood Elf	11	The Warders and the Scourge	51
The Ritual of Thorns	11	Current Duties	52
The Personal Ritual	11	Notable Blood Warders	52
The ReNaming	11	Exolashers	54
The Price of Survival	13	The Knights of the Thistle	54
Leaving Blood Wood	13	Notable Exolashers	55
Current Attitudes	14	The Court and its Surroundings	56
Geography	14	The Courtyard	56
Lifestyles	15	Alachia's Palace	56
The Elven Court	15	Outlying Villages	59
The Ranelles	16	The Outside World	61
The Balance of Power	18	Barsaive	61
Outside Relations	18	Thera	62
Daily Life	19	Lands Beyond	63
Attitudes and Beliefs	19	THE FOREST'S HEART	64
Creature Comforts	19	Overview	68
Trade	20	History	69
Outside Trade	20	Fire Birches and the Blasted Heath	69
Exploring and Traveling	21	Saved by Horrors	70
Entering the Wood	21	Eternal Corruption	71
Traveling in the Wood	22	Redeeming the Forest's Heart	71
Defenses	23	The Seekers of the Heart	71
HISTORY	25	Defenses	72
Overview	26	THE NORTHERN REACHES	73
The Tale of the First Elf	26	Overview	76
The Court and the First Queen	27	Defenses	76
The Troubles of Queen Dallia	27	The Lands Beyond	77
Succession and Separation	29	The Talshara Ranelle	77
Sparks of Rebellion	30	History	78
The Iron Queen	31	Important Characters	78
In the Shadow of the Scourge	32	Current Activities	82
The New World	33	Permanent Settlements	82
THE ELVEN COURT	34	Goro'imri	82
Overview	37	Araouane	83
Court Hierarchy	38	The Grove of Thorns	84
The Elven Queen	39	Smaller Villages	86
Queen Alachia	39	THE WESTERN BORDER	88
The Songbirds	41	Overview	90
Consortis	42	The Land	90
Current Consortis	43	The People	91
The Jae'Helastri Ranelle	45	The Escalanas Ranelle	91
History	45	History	91
Important Characters	46	Important Characters	92
Goals and Current Activities	47	Current Activities	95
The Daevenar Ranelle	48	Permanent Settlements	98
History	48	Letheran	99
Important Characters	49		





Calabria	99
Smaller Villages	100
THE SOUTHERN FRINGE	101
Overview	104
Defenses	104
The Carithasca Ranelle	104
History	105
Important Characters	107
Current Activities	110
Permanent Settlements	111
Trenevar	111
Smaller Villages	112
Dren Hathal	113
GAME INFORMATION	115
Playing Blood Elf Characters	115
Blood Elf Mindset	115
Choosing a Discipline	116
Leaving the Blood Wood	116
Rules	118
Gamemaster Notes	119
Discipline Variations	121
New Talents	121
Missile's Path	121
Shield Beast	122
Woodspeak	122
Woodwalk	122
Defenses of the Blood Wood	122
Thorn Men Wards	122
Path Magic	123
Astral Space and Raw Magic	123
Adept Statistics	124
Magical and Treasure Items	126
Common Magical Items	126
Thread Items and Weapons	127
Legendary Treasure Items	128
FLORA AND FAUNA	131
Plant Life	131
Assassin Vine	131
Bloodberries	132
Blood Ivy	132
Blood Oak	132
Bramble Vines	133
Coreliander	133
Death Daisies	133
Fire Birch	134
Spectral Willow	134
Trailfruit	135
Tranceweed	135
Creatures	135
Blood Monkey	136
Blood Raven	137
Blood Wasp	138
Ethandrille	138
False Drake	139

Ghoul Lizard	140
Giant Carnivorous Squirrel	140
Giant Trapdoor Spider	141
Hulker	142
Root Walker	143
Song Sprite	143
Storm Crow	144
Thorn Men	145
Whirlclaw	145
Witherfang	146
Wild Boar	147
Wood Lion	147

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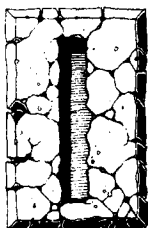




INTRODUCTION

PROLOGUE

—From the writings of Lady Rissa Daevenar



I still remember the first day I saw him. The kaers of the Unprotected had only been open for a year, and he was one of the first from Shosara to make the journey to Court. Like so many of our faraway kinsmen, he was drawn here to the Wood, for even those who rejected our queen's sovereignty in their minds are drawn back by their hearts.

His Name was Aris—a fair-haired man with a gentle face and a strange accent. I saw him first as he approached the palace along a wide, tree-lined boulevard. He was ambling along, marveling at all he saw like a child at a fair. Those of us who live day to day and year to year in the shadow of the palace sometimes forget what a marvel it is, but as he gazed upon it, I saw his eyes mist over with tears. So strong was his emotion that suddenly I too saw the palace as if for the first time. Our hearts touched in that moment, though I was of the Wood and he was not.

Most of those he had journeyed with left after a scant few days, saying they could not bear to witness the corruption they claimed we had wrought. Aris stayed. I took him in, and together we rediscovered the Wood's beauty and wonder. In time, his speech lost the awkward, halting cadences of the Northlands, and he began to feel at home. Sometimes he told me of life in the underground kaers, or of the Horrors that still roamed the land and preyed upon the Unprotected. Hearing these tales, I thanked the Passions that Queen Alachia had spared us such terrors, and wished that Aris had not suffered them.

I knew that I loved him, and believed he loved me. But I also feared that deep in his heart, he secretly felt as his companions had—that I and those like me were abominations, living perversions of the elven spirit. My joy knew no bounds the day he told me that he no longer wished to return to Shosara. I knew then that our hearts were truly one.

We chose to be married a fortnight after, and made the needful preparations. With some hesitation, I reminded Aris of the most important one—that in order to stay in Blood Wood, he must undergo the Ritual of the Thorns. He agreed at once, gazing at me with such love in his eyes that my momentary fears vanished. To live elsewhere was unthinkable, he said, for the Wood had first brought us together.

The morning of the Ritual, I made him a breakfast of berries and cream. He tried not to show it, but he was frightened of what lay ahead; he scarcely touched his food. But I also saw joy in him, at the thought of what would

come after—our wedding, and the rest of our lives together. For this he would face any fear, pay any price. Two blood warders came to escort him to the Ritual site, and with a kiss on the forehead I sent him on his way. The morning passed slowly toward noon; then the shadows began to lengthen. I whiled away the time as best I could, reading and embroidering—anything to keep my hands busy and my ears from listening for a step outside my door.

It was after dark when the warders arrived and asked me to come with them. My breath caught in my throat. "Is he ... did he survive the Ritual?"

The taller of the warders nodded, his eyes cast downward. "He lives. But you must come now, Lady Rissa. We have little time."

Through a maze of hedges we hurried, until we came to a small entrance near the back of the palace. I could hear his screams from outside the doorway.

Inside, I beheld a sight I still tremble to recall. The warders had bound him—shackled my beloved Aris to a wall to keep him from hurting himself. The soft cushions they had placed on the floor for him to sit on had been torn to bits and scattered around the room. His skin was pink and tender where the thorns had first pierced him, and he stared wildly around like a feral animal. The shards of a shattered goblet had been swept out of his reach, and streaks of blood smeared the carpet. The dark red slashes on his wrists told me where that blood had come from. I looked at the warders, wordlessly asking for reassurance.

"For some, the Ritual is harder than others, my lady," the taller one said. "Those who undergo it late in life sometimes find the change ... unsettling. So it is written in the accounts of the first Ritual. If the will is strong, the danger soon passes." He hesitated, then continued in a hushed voice. "I fear those who have lived so long Unprotected have a harder time of it. It is possible ... it is possible that this madness may not pass. He may be too weak to withstand it." He glanced at me, then away. "I'm sorry, my lady."

I turned back to my beloved. He was panting and sobbing like a wounded dog; his wailing ceased only when he gasped for breath. As I took a step toward him, the warder laid a hand on my arm. "Have a care, lady. He may not recognize you."

Slowly, I walked over to my Aris. Our eyes met, and in his gaze I saw a flash of recognition. He stared at me, tears welling up and spilling down his cheeks. I reached out to embrace him, but he shrank from me, muttering. "... Don't touch ... please ... no more ... the pain ..."

Gently, I loosed the bonds that held him. He sank to the floor, weeping. I caught the warders' eyes and





motioned for them to give us a moment alone. As the door clicked shut behind them, I knelt next to Aris and took his hand in mine. The world turned red and misty, but with all my strength I kept my own tears from falling. I must be strong for him now. I would be strong.

He closed his eyes and lay quiet. I could feel him trembling. "Rissa," he whispered. "Make it go away. I won't survive this. I can't. Please, love ... I can't live like this."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

After a time, he spoke again. "Can't you take the pain away? Can't someone take it away?" He sounded small and fragile and utterly exhausted, like a little child forced to learn too early that sometimes nightmares are real.

I pressed his hand to my lips. His new-grown thorns tore the tender flesh, and I tasted my own blood. He raised his free hand to touch my cheek; the thorns on his fingertips left faint red marks on my skin. I bent down and kissed him on the lips. At the taste of our mingled blood, he cried out in despair and wept once more. We sat there for an eternity, he with his head pillowed in my lap, until at last he was too exhausted to go on sobbing.

Some while later, the warders came. With their help, I brought my Aris home.

He was no stronger the next day, nor the next. No salve, no draught or anything else I gave him seemed to ease his pain. I longed to hold him, but he would not let me. He refused food and drink; he could not speak, but wept without ceasing from daybreak until long after nightfall. I lay as close beside him at night as he would permit, watching the moon rise high above the trees until I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. So it went, day upon hopeless day.

I had thought him so strong, so brave. And he was. I had thought he loved me, and he did. But all his love, his strength, his courage, was not enough against the pain of Protection to one so long denied it.

Seven days after the Ritual—our chosen wedding day—I woke to silence. The pallet beside me was empty. When I saw this, joy filled my heart; it seemed I had been wrong to despair. He was over the worst at last; my beloved had found the strength to fight his agony and live. He would stay with me forever, and all would be well.

I found him sitting at the table, slumped across it as if asleep. I crept up beside him. I could hardly bear to wake him from his first peaceful slumber, and yet I needed to share my joy and love and hope with him. On his face was a look of peace I had not seen since our first days together, when we had shared the sight of the afternoon sun gleaming rich and golden off the walls of the elf queen's palace. And as I gazed at him, my joyfulness ebbed like a slow tide.

It was not the peace of sleep that held him. It was the peace of death.

I reached out and touched him, not wanting to believe. His cheek felt cool. As I bent over him, I smelled the too-



familiar sweetness of kenayah flowers. In little doses, kenayah brings sleep and forgetting ... but from the bitter tang beneath the sweetness, I knew that Aris had taken enough to poison himself. The pain of Protection had driven him to the madness of self-destruction.

My legs refused to hold me up, and I sank to the floor. I do not know how long I stayed there, my head resting against my dead beloved's knee. He had slain more than himself in the small hours of night; he had also slain my heart. Compared to that, the pain of the thorns was nothing.

All I have left are memories now ... memories, and the twin roses we had meant to braid into a marriage-knot. The blooms have long since dried to sweet-scented kernels





of dark red ... the very color of the blood that runs from the thorns that pierce me. I wear the roses in a small leather pouch that hangs around my neck, close to my heart. And I wonder why the heart of my beloved could not withstand the Ritual.

The Unprotected have their answer, of course. They say that the Ritual forever sundered our hearts from theirs. Some of our own people say this too ... a few with sorrow, most with pride.

I do not know the truth of it. But while I wear the roses, I can never forget the question.



The Blood Wood is a sourcebook for the **Earthdawn** game system. This book describes the vast, dark forest that forms Barsaive's northern boundary and stands as a testimony to the terrible lengths to which the Elven Court went in order to save themselves from the Scourge. Elsewhere in Barsaive, people lost loved ones or died at the hands of the Horrors; the elves of the Blood Wood survived, but corrupted themselves to do it.

The book begins with an **Overview** of the Blood Wood, including a brief description of the forest's geography and a detailed look at the Ritual of Thorns, the powerful rite of blood magic that transformed the Wood from a beautiful wonderland to a place of dark mystery. The **History** of the Elven Court and the Blood Wood follow the Overview. The next section is devoted to **The Elven Court**, which describes the Court's hierarchy, significant characters and relations with lands beyond the Wood's borders. This section also includes a detailed description of the elf queen's palace, one of the great wonders of the **Earthdawn** world. **The Forest's Heart**, **The Northern Reaches**, **The Western Border** and **The Southern Fringe** describe the history, people and places of the four main regions of the Blood Wood. The **Game Information** section includes rules for playing blood elf characters, game mechanics and statistics for the Blood Wood's defenses, and new magical and treasure items. The final section offers detailed descriptions and game statistics for the unique plants and creatures native to the Blood Wood.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The **Blood Wood** sourcebook provides gamemasters with all the information needed to run an extensive campaign set in and around the Blood Wood. Aside from the **Earthdawn** rulebook, no other materials are needed to use this product, though gamemasters may find other published **Earthdawn** products helpful. The information on the traditional elven culture provided in **Denizens of Earthdawn, Volume One**, will help players and gamemas-

ters understand the unique culture that has developed in the Blood Wood. General information on the rest of Barsaive and a brief overview of the Blood Wood appears in **An Explorer's Guide to Barsaive** in the **Barsaive Campaign Set**. In addition to the new and unique creatures presented in this book, gamemasters can find more creatures for their characters to face in **Creatures of Barsaive**, and players may want to give their characters some of the additional abilities described in the **Earthdawn Companion** and **Earthdawn Gamemaster Pack**. The **Blood Wood** also picks up on many of the events that have recently taken place in Barsaive, including the arrival of the Theran behemoth at Lake Ban and the assassination of King Varulus III, both described in **Prelude to War: An Earthdawn Epic**.

This book presents many first-person fictional accounts from characters in the **Earthdawn** universe, useful as a guide to the atmosphere of the Blood Wood and as jumping-off points for story lines. For example, the player characters might become involved in the quest of the Seekers of the Heart, the living legend cult dedicated to healing the Forest's Heart, or they might meet Nabiyen Perochus, the captain of the *Cyclone*, the doomed riverboat destroyed by the path magic that guards the border of the Blood Wood. The politics, mysteries and corruption of the Blood Wood, as well as the myriad people, places and situations described in this book can provide the backdrop or catalyst for countless adventures in and around the Wood. Many of the prominent characters in the Blood Wood have their own goals, aims and agendas, and the success of their plans often requires outside assistance—assistance that adventuring groups of player characters can provide, either willingly or not. These plans may require player characters to enter the Blood Wood clandestinely; to travel in company with blood elves outside the Wood, facing the censure and hatred of other Name-givers; to seek out legendary treasures or spells; or even to return a wandering blood elf to his home, perhaps to suffer some unimaginable fate.

Though the material offered in this book is presented as fact and should be treated as accurate in terms of FASA's **Earthdawn** continuity, remember that you are the ultimate author of your campaign. If a fact in this sourcebook contradicts something you have already established in your game, or if some element established for the Wood simply does not fit in your version of the **Earthdawn** world, change it to fit your game.

The statistics for most of the gamemaster characters described in this product are presented in an abbreviated format, especially those characters not intended as combatants. As your player characters are unlikely to slug it out with Queen Alachia or the leader of the blood warders, statistics for these characters include only the step numbers for their Attributes.

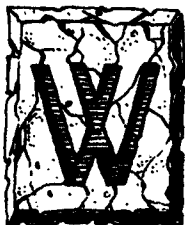




OVERVIEW

PROLOGUE

—From the journal of Liandra, elven troubadour



When I was young, I used to dream of Wyrn Wood. Every night I journeyed in slumber back to the birthplace I barely remembered, the ancient home of the elven race whose magic and wonders I knew best from the tales my parents told me. Like all exiles, they longed for the place they had forsaken and kept it alive in their hearts as best they could. They painted pictures in words of the Wood's cool green twilight, the scented air sweeter than honey-wine, the winds that whispered through the trees like music. I knew no place in Barsaive could possibly be as beautiful or full of wonders as Wyrn Wood. For a child growing up in the cold embrace of carved-out rock, who could only just remember the warmth of sunlight and the softness of rain, such beauty and wonder were rare and precious gifts. More than anything, I wanted to return to Wyrn Wood someday, and I swore I would. I little guessed what pain the fulfillment of that vow would bring me.

My father and mother had left the Wood in the shadow of the Scourge, casting aside the goodwill of many friends and their honorable positions in the Elven Court in order to give me and my infant sister the best hope of survival. They were wise in the ways of magic and trusted the Therans' kaers to protect us from the Horrors better than the arrogant elf queen's sorceries. I have dim memories of the journey away—being held tight in my mother's arms astride a swift horse, running by night and in silence lest anyone hear and follow. I did not understand then why we should be so afraid of our friends and kin; only later did I learn that Queen Alachia would have ordered all of us slain for my parents' "disobedience" in leaving. Alachia had declared her own wood magic superior to Theran protections against the coming Scourge, and woe betide anyone who suggested otherwise. But all I knew then was the thrill of galloping along while the wind streamed past my ears and the stars seemed to whisper *hurry, hurry!* Even my fear seemed part of the adventure; it was the delicious fear we feel when deep down we believe ourselves safe. I did not know we were leaving home forever, nor did I dream of the circumstances under which I would return.

I will not speak here of my life in Kaer Amhran, the place to which we fled. Save for one strange happening, it was no more eventful than the life of any other kaer-

dweller fortunate enough to be spared a Horror attack and other dangers of the Long Night. The strange event to which I refer affected none but the elves in the kaer, including my family and myself ... though I did not understand its meaning when it happened.

I was twelve times the age of Passage—that is, two hundred forty years, for those who do not reckon time the elven way—when I was troubled by terrible nightmares. I could scarce recall them upon waking except for the terrible fear and pain, as if I was being torn apart from the inside. My sister had similar nightmares, but our parents suffered worse. For the better part of three days, their nightmares held them sleeping and waking. They huddled in corners in our small living chambers, crying out in pain. They could see nothing save their terrible visions; my sister and I were as ghosts to them. It was all we could do to get water down their throats—food was out of the question. During all this time, neither of them spoke an intelligible word, save for one awful cry of my mother's halfway through the second day. Her whimpering broke off suddenly; then she thrust her arms out in front of her and shouted, "See the thorns! The magic is true! We are saved!" And then she began to laugh, a horrible gurgling sound that was twin to sobbing.

In the still, small hours of the third night, the visions left them. They never spoke of the Wood after that, except to say, "It is gone."

Of all my family, only I lived through the Scourge to see daylight again. I counted myself lucky that my loved ones had died of old age and illness, peacefully in bed. I had nothing to tie me to the little village I had come to call home. I was free to go where I would, in a newborn world that seemed terrifyingly wide. I could make good my childhood vow of returning to Wyrn Wood ... but something kept me from doing so. After a time, I finally admitted that the "something" was fear. My parents' strange visions, my own long-ago nightmares ... I knew in my bones that these somehow concerned Wyrn Wood. But I could not imagine how, and was afraid to find out.

So I traveled Barsaive as a troubadour for the next few years, keeping my ears open for news of the Wood. I heard nothing. Not a whisper. And finally I knew that I would have to go and see for myself what had befallen it.

I had been in the kingdom of Throal, writing down songs I had collected for the Great Library. From their generous payment, I equipped myself for the long journey north. It was just as well for me that the trip passed without incident, for I was so caught up between fear and long-





ing that a whole tribe of ork scorcherers could have descended upon me with howls and I would not have noticed until a scorcher blade was sticking in my gut.

My first sight of the Wood was like the sight of water to a man dying of thirst. It lay spread out before me at the foot of the hill upon which I stood—an oasis of dark green, shining like a vast emerald on the barren northern plains. The wind blew southerly from it, and I fancied I could smell the thousand flower-scents of which my parents had told me so often. Coherent thought would hardly come—I remember thinking only, “It *isn’t* gone. The nightmares were lies,” as I shook off the first shock of gladness and raced down the slope toward the outermost fringe of trees.

Lush and alive the forest was, even more so than my childhood imaginings had made it. For a little time I lost myself in rejoicing, dancing amid the greenery and laughing aloud like an ork drunk on hurlg. For drunk I was—on happiness. I had feared to find the Wood blasted and dead; instead, it was alive with a vengeance. It took some little while for me to recognize how dreadfully apt was the phrase “alive with a vengeance.”

The color was the first clue. The “green twilight” I barely remembered seemed too dark a shade, with a reddish tint so out of place that at first I thought I was imagining it. Then a tendril of hanging moss slapped me lightly across the face; I examined it closely, and saw that it was indeed red-tinged.

I ceased my capering and began to walk slowly along the faint path through the underbrush, looking closely at everything. I saw blossoms as large as dinner plates, all in reds and blues and purples so bright they dizzied me. Mosses dripped from gnarled tree branches, seeming to grope toward me like fingers. Vines snaked between the towering trees, as thick as a t’skrang swordmaster’s tail and knotted into impossible shapes. I tried tracing the pattern of one knot with my eyes, and the effort made me feel sick at my stomach. Low-growing plants seemed to twine about my feet of their own accord. Once I swore I saw one move. I stopped then and stared at my feet for several heartbeats, but the plants remained obstinately still.

I drew my cloak around my shoulders and kept walking. The greenish light seemed to grow dimmer, though never so dim that I could not make out the path. I thought it had also grown colder, though I could not be sure. As I moved deeper into the Wood, a strange foggiess seemed to descend on my mind, as if I was walking along half-asleep. I took a deep breath and briefly savored the sweet scent; *at least this*, I thought, *hasn’t changed*. But it had. The honey-wine smell held another beneath it, a cloying sweetness with a bitter edge I could taste in the back of my throat. I stopped again, bewildered and angry. Something was wrong, I could sense it. But I couldn’t see it clearly. Some mysterious, unseen thing had spoiled my homecoming, and I couldn’t fight back.

Breathing deep and slow, as my singing master in Kaer Amhran had taught me, I conquered my anger and confusion and walked on. The ground felt soft beneath my feet—too soft, I gradually realized. It felt as if a hard, soaking rain had passed through mere minutes ago ... but the plains around the Wood had been dry and withered, and so I knew no rain had passed this way for weeks. *Some elven magic*, I told myself, and stepped resolutely onward. Nearby, a bird began to sing. I listened to the sweet sound with relief—at first. But then I began to hear a wrongness in it, too. There was an edge to the bird’s trilling, as if it was singing through intense pain.

I shook my head to banish that mad fancy and continued along the path. I felt as if I had been walking for hours. I had expected to come upon some habitation long ago—a village, perhaps even my old home. Or the elf queen’s palace; hadn’t my father always said that all paths in the Wood led to that wondrous place? But I had seen nothing except trees and trees and more trees.

It cannot have been hours, I told myself. *I’m tired, that’s all. Not thinking clearly.* For a time, I convinced myself. I trudged wearily onward, alert for the sounds of elven voices or the scent of a village smith’s forge. But I heard no sound save the strangely painful birdsong, smelled nothing save the too-sweet breeze.

When my feet began to ache with walking, I was forced to acknowledge the grim truth. I *had* been in the Wood for hours, likely wandering in circles. Had I been following a straight and true path, I would have stumbled across some living soul by now. Another few paces onward, I spied terrible confirmation of my suspicions. I had finally found another person in the Wood ... unfortunately dead, and for quite some time.

The corpse still wore flesh on its bones, though far less than it should have. It was a dwarf, dressed in traveler’s garb very much like my own. His shirt and trousers looked at least three sizes too large. He had died leaning against a tree, apparently peacefully; his body bore no mark of violence. The ornamental hilt of an expensive dagger peeked up above a fine leather sheath at his hip. A belt pouch hung at the other hip, the leather uncut and its strings still tied. Swallowing my instinctive revulsion, I untied the pouch and poured a little of its contents into my palm. Silver coins, minted in Throal. I could not know for certain, but I would have placed a wager that not a single coin was missing. Only one conclusion fit the evidence; my unlucky fellow traveler had gotten lost for so long that he had starved to death.

I stood and looked slowly around me, trying to memorize every inch of my surroundings. I was shivering—not from cold now, but from fear. Some terrible doom had come to Wyrn Wood; some Horror had fouled it in a way infinitely worse than merely sucking it dry of life. I was as





certain of it as of my own Name. And some equally terrible doom would befall me, I feared, unless I escaped the Wood's sinister enchantment.

These were dreadful thoughts; yet even now I still wish they had been true. A Horror's corruption would have been a mercy compared to the awful reality I was to discover.

The path led easterly from the tree under which the poor dwarf had taken his last shelter. The corpse would serve to mark that spot. I walked onward a little ways, then drew my belt knife and approached the nearest tree. I would set my mark upon it, and upon the next and the next. Thus I would avoid my fellow traveler's sad fate.

I set my blade against the rough bark and slashed it crosswise. The tree screamed.

It was unlike any other scream I have heard, before or since—a thin, sharp-edged howl that tore at my ears. I staggered backward in shock, staring at the gash I had made. It seemed to leer horribly at me, like a lipless white mouth against the deep brown-black of the tree trunk. Then the gash slowly closed. The cut edges of bark wove themselves together, as new skin does over a wound. As the last speck of whitish inner bark disappeared from view, a drop of dark liquid welled up from the spot. Slow and thick, it seeped down the trunk, leaving a trail that glistened in the dim light. I knew what it was from the way it moved, but could not at first accept the evidence of my eyes. So I stepped up to the tree and touched it. The liquid clung to my fingers. Even in the greenish light, I could see it was blood.

"Who are you, to trespass in our Wood?" a harsh voice demanded from behind me.

The speech of a fellow Name-giver should have either startled me out of my skin or filled me with joy. But I had suffered too many shocks to feel anything more than the shadow of surprise. Slowly, I turned to face my interrogator. At the sight of her, something seemed to tear deep in my heart.

She was an elf like me ... and yet horribly unlike me. She was tall and slender, with fine lines on her face that told of some terrible burden. Her eyes, the clear cool gray of a still lake at twilight, should have been beautiful. They *were* beautiful. *She* was beautiful ... and terrible. For through almost every inch of her skin—which was as pale and delicate as the petals of an infant rose—grew a thorn. Hard and sharp, the thorns pierced her face and body with a thousand tiny gashes. From those gashes, blood drops welled and trickled down to the thorns' tips. There they gathered, swelling slowly until the weight of each drop pulled it to the ground.

I found myself watching the blood seep down the thorn just beneath one corner of her mouth, and tore my gaze from it. I did not want to look at her at all, but with a

crossbow bolt trained on my throat, I dared not look away. So I made myself look her in the eyes. Their whites were faintly tinged with red ... and beneath the angry challenge in them, I saw the ghost of sorrow. It came to me that I knew this woman; somewhere, sometime, I had seen her before.

"I am Liandra, son of Nevaryn and Menea," I said, when I found my voice again. "And I am not trespassing. I have come home." Even as I said it, I knew the words were no longer true.

She looked surprised; then her harsh expression softened. A faint smile played across her lips, and she lowered her bow. "Lia," she murmured. "How you've grown since we met last."

I recognized her then. "Nialle," I said, half-questioning. She nodded. Suddenly, I wanted to weep. Nialle Starweaver had been my dearest friend when I was small. We had shared our toys and pulled each others' hair and fought and played together, loving each other as little children do. I had called her "anyk," foster-sister, and cried bitterly at leaving her. To see her this way, with torn flesh and haunted eyes, hurt like a blade to the heart.

"Who did this to you, Anyk?" The old child-Name leaped to my lips without conscious thought. I reached out to her, then stopped short as her eyes turned cold.

"I did," she said. "You faint-hearts who fled the Wood—you would not understand."

"Help me," I whispered. "Help me try."

She gazed at me for a long time, as if measuring my inmost self. "Follow, then," she said finally, and walked away through the trees. Without giving myself time to think, I hurried after her.

She moved silently through the thick undergrowth as easily as if crossing clear grass. The path whose twists and turns had led me nowhere for hours straightened under Nialle's swift-striding feet; sooner than I can tell it in words, we arrived at a village. It was a small settlement, scarcely two dozen houses nestled in the embrace of encircling pines. As we crossed into the clearing, I spied a familiar-looking carving adorning one wall of a nearby dwelling. *This cannot be*, I thought, but my feet were already carrying me toward the place. I drew near the carving—an intricate spiraling knot that made a picture of a striking hawk—and ran my fingers lightly across it. In the tip of the hawk's beak, I traced an intertwined "N" and "M". My father had marked it so, the day he had brought my mother here as his wife. I knew the story in my bones, I had heard it so often growing up. This was my own house, where I was born.

I looked around the village, drinking in every detail. I was home ... and yet, not home. At first I thought the strangeness came from my having left this place so young; but then I realized that my child's memories of it no longer quite matched what I saw. Yet it *looked* the same ...





I found myself listening intently to the silence. Surely there should be music ... the soft song of flute and harp, or sweet voices raised in harmony. Someone had always been making music somewhere—hadn't they? And where were the children? There had been dozens of us once, dashing in and out among the houses and across the green, playing endless games born in our fertile imaginations. There should have been old men basking in the late-afternoon sun, young women tending herb gardens, mothers and fathers pounding grain to flour while they watched their little ones play. The smith should have been hard at work, mending broken hunting blades; the wise-woman should have been sitting under a pine tree with a dozen younglings gathered around her, telling tales of elven history. Instead, the village looked almost deserted. Only a few people were out, all of them so intent on some task that they took no notice of Nialle or I—or of each other.

One elderly woman was sitting by her front door, mending a shirt. She didn't look at me, even when I walked straight up to her. I knelt before her and tried to catch her eye, but her gaze was fixed on the needle as it slowly moved in and out of the pale cloth. Like Nialle, the woman was covered with thorns. Every so often, the shirt would catch on one that stuck up from her hand; each time, she freed it without seeming aware that she was doing so. Once the thread caught on a thorn and snapped. She showed no annoyance, or any expression at all—simply tied a knot in the broken end, with great difficulty because of the tiny thorns on the tips of each finger, and started all over again. She seemed oblivious to the drops of blood that splattered across the shirt like some horrible design.

I couldn't look at her any longer. I turned away, standing as I did so, and spied a little boy walking out of a house across the green. He too was thorn-pierced all over. He carried a leather ball, much like one I had once played with. He walked around to the side of the house and began to toss the ball against it. I knew this game well; we had loved to play it in the kaer because the smack of the ball hitting rock echoed beautifully off the tunnel walls and ceiling. We would throw the ball hard, and catch it as it bounced off. But this boy did not run. He threw the ball listlessly, as if his arm had no strength in it, and merely stood and watched as the ball dropped to the ground. Then, moving like an old man with swollen joints, he picked it up and threw it again. The ball struck the wall with a dull *thwop*; the muffled sound made me feel as if my ears were stuffed with wool. Finally I could stand it no longer, and strode across the village green toward the child.

Or started to. I had not gone five steps when the soft earth began to suck at my feet, as if I was crossing a bog. I looked down, and saw blood rising around the edges of my shoes.

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat and took a slow sixth step, then another. Blood welled up in my footprints, as water does in mud. The earth was soaked with it.

"Welcome home, Lia," Nialle said from beside me. She had crept up in silence; I had no idea how long she had been watching me.

I stared at her. The world had gone mad, and I could not take in what she had said. A drop of blood welled up in her right eye and fell from the thorn-tip just beneath it. The droplet struck the ground and was absorbed as swiftly as if the wet soil had been bone-dry.

"It wants the blood," I said. I could scarcely shape the words to express what I feared. "The soil. It needs the blood. Like food."

"Yes."

"Why?" I had to ask it, though the effort choked me. "What Horror—"

Her bark of laughter had no mirth in it. "No Horror. To save us from the Horrors." She looked away from me. "I told you you wouldn't understand."

"Are ... " My voice broke. I steadied it and continued. I had to understand, no matter what the effort cost me. "Are you all like this? Is all of Wyrn Wood like this?!"

"It is Blood Wood now." She spoke the Name like a challenge. "A new Name for a new place." She turned abruptly back to face me, and I saw blood-tinged tears creeping down her cheeks. "You must tell the world of this, Liandra. Of our fate. You have the eyes and heart of a troubadour; you will do us justice."

I shook my head. What could I say, what song could I write, of such a tragedy as this? Even to attempt it would split my poor heart in two. Words could not contain such sorrow; it would kill me to speak of it.

"You must," Nialle said. "The world must know what we have done. Tell them, Liandra. Tell them of beauty lost, of glory gone. Tell them the terrible price we paid so that the Wood might live. We have all made the greatest sacrifice that any living soul can make, so that our people's heart would not vanish from the world. Tell them this. Make them understand that we did this for all elf-kind. We could not survive any other way. Tell them."

"I can't ... "

"Yes, you can!" She took my hands. Though she made her grip gentle to keep from hurting me, the thorns bruised my palms where they touched. "We are a lesson to the world, Liandra. You can make us so. Your words will give our sacrifice meaning. Don't deny us this. If ever you loved me, do this for us."

It is gone, my mother had said so long ago. She had meant the Wood. She had felt the thorns tearing the flesh of the loved ones left behind. The paradise of my dreams was gone, and nothing could bring it back.





In the years since that terrible journey, I have tried time and again to keep my promise to Nialle. I have tried to tell the truth of the Wood. But it hurt too much. For me there is no meaning, no lesson, in the corruption of the Wood. There is only pain, and the longing of an exile who can never go home again.

Now, perhaps, this telling will ease my sorrow. Perhaps the memory of this journey need no longer be a stone in my soul.



LIFE AS A BLOOD ELF

The Elven Court at Wyrn Wood was established thousands of years before the Scourge and came to define all that was best in elven nature. The center of elven culture and well-spring of elven influence throughout the known world, the elf queen's court served as the measuring stick against which all elves and elven nations measured themselves. The role of the Elven Court remained unchallenged until the reign of Failla, who Separated Shosara from the Court's favor for failing to strictly adhere to established traditions.

The Court lost face again with the coming of the Scourge. When Queen Alachia refused the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage, a great Schism divided the people of Wyrn Wood; many of Alachia's loyal subjects regretfully turned their backs on the Court and sought shelter elsewhere. When it became known that the elves of Wyrn Wood had taken refuge against the Horrors in the Ritual of Thorns, reNaming their beloved forest the Blood Wood, the other elven nations judged that Alachia had betrayed their very nature and destroyed the Elven Court. The struggle for ascendancy between the elves and the blood elves, and the fundamental dichotomy now dividing their natures, is at the center of what it means to be a blood elf.

This overview briefly describes the unique aspects of the blood elves, their social structure and the way they live.

Each of these topics is discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

THE RITUAL OF THORNS

The Ritual of Thorns is an integral part of the Blood Wood and its inhabitants, the defining element that sets them forever apart from other Name-givers. Common wisdom has it that the Ritual saved the elves by causing thorns to grow from their skin, inflicting constant pain on which the Horrors could not feed. In fact, the Ritual of Thorns was far more than that. One part of the Ritual protected the individual elves, but the second portion of the Ritual, the reNaming, saved the forest itself from destruction—and is

the source of the corruption that lies at the Blood Wood's heart. That same powerful blood magic may yet destroy the Wood where the Horrors failed. The enactment of the Ritual of Thorns marked a significant change in the forest and its denizens, the effects of which have yet to be fully understood by the blood elves and the rest of the world.

THE PERSONAL RITUAL

The first part of the Ritual of Thorns, referred to by the Blood Warders as the Personal Ritual, is all that most people, including most blood elves, know of the Ritual. This ritual spell combines elemental and blood magic to merge a Strength 1 plant spirit with the True pattern of an elf. The most visible result is that thorns sprout from under the elf's skin, creating wounds that never heal and that constantly drip blood onto the ground.

The shock of merging a plant spirit with a Name-giver's True pattern, as well as the agonizing trauma of the thorns tearing through the subjects' skin, killed nearly 30 percent of the elves during the initial casting of the Ritual. Of the elf children subjected to the Ritual in the years that followed, approximately 1 in 10 died, a statistic that still holds true. Those who survive the Ritual live an unnaturally long time, with an average lifespan of four hundred years.

The result of the Ritual of Thorns was to inflict on each elf such constant, agonizing pain that the Horrors found them undesirable, for most Horrors feed only on the pain and anguish they create. (For other game-related effects of the Ritual of Thorns, see **Playing Blood Elf Characters**, p. 115 of **Game Information**.) The Blood Wood absorbs the blood that drips down the elves' thorns and falls to the ground, and many areas of the Wood are so saturated with blood that it occasionally pools on the earth's surface. The blood warders incorporated this constant flow of blood into the Ritual: it fed the magic of reNaming when the Ritual was initially cast, and renews the wards that have kept the Blood Wood free from the Horrors for the past three centuries.

THE RENAMING

Through a series of experiments conducted during the desperate days when the wooden kaer began to fail (see **History**, p. 69 in **Game Information**), the Queen's Warders discovered the true potential power of Blood magic. By using a blood-magic spell to alter the pattern of the Forest's Heart, the warders managed to purge a single Horror. Kethos Escalanas reasoned that if such a ritual could protect the Wood and its people from one Horror, a similar spell on a much larger scale might serve to protect the entire Wood from the remaining Horrors. He decided to use the Personal Ritual to lay the foundation for a massive blood magic spell that would create permanent wards against the astral predators. The reNaming part of the Ritual altered the True pattern of the forest forever, transforming it from Wyrn Wood to the Blood Wood and so creating a place safe from the Horrors, yet home to a horror all its own.







By the time the warders presented to the queen this new plan for saving Wyrn Wood, time was running out. Though she had rejected a previous version of the Ritual, refusing to subject her people to permanent pain and disfigurement, this time Queen Alachia bowed to the inevitable. Her one condition for casting the Ritual of Thorns was that no one but she and the warders ever know of the reNaming. Kethos created his spell with the help of the other warders, carefully integrating the Personal Ritual and the reNaming into a seamless whole. As they cast the Personal Ritual on each elf, the warders wove a thread to the reNaming spell. Only the threads of the elves who survived strengthened the pattern of the reNaming, and so the warders were forced to balance the need to complete their task quickly with ensuring the survival of at least a slim majority of the population.

When Queen Alachia announced the plan to cast the Ritual of Thorns, she did so with great sorrow, publicly weeping for the tremendous sacrifice she was forced to ask of her people. Their queen's obvious distress convinced the elves of Wyrn Wood that their survival depended on this Ritual, and that no other alternative remained. Though they deeply regretted the events that led to what seemed an abomination, the elves submitted to the Ritual out of loyalty to their queen and court. Alachia chose to keep secret the true extent of the Ritual of Thorns, fearing that a second Schism might result from the plan to alter the essence of the Wood itself.

After the necessary majority of the elves in the Wyrn Wood kaer had undergone the Personal Ritual, the Warders cast the reNaming ritual. Wyrn Wood ceased to exist; it was replaced by the Blood Wood, Named for the blood magic used to save the forest and its people, and for the blood that the elves fed to the forest. Conscious of their new role, the Queen's Warders also took a new Name, calling themselves blood warders to reflect their responsibility for saving the Wood and the Elven Court from the Horrors and the Scourge.

THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL

Only the blood warders fully understood the implications of the Ritual of Thorns when it was cast. Both halves of the Ritual were necessary for either to be effective; if one part of the Ritual ends, the Blood Wood and its people will be destroyed. The constant supply of blood to the Wood sustains the wards against the Horrors, but it also sustains the True pattern of the Wood itself.

Because the elves of the Blood Wood remain ignorant of the true extent of the Ritual, they do not understand that the growing sentiment for discontinuing the Personal Ritual can never be satisfied. Reversing the Personal Ritual and removing the plant spirits from the elves' patterns will damage the True pattern of the Wood and the patterns of the elves. Likewise, the elves cannot simply stop perform-

ing the Ritual; if the supply of blood to the Wood does not remain steady, the True pattern of the Wood will begin to unravel. Even reNaming the Blood Wood will not solve the problem this time. Because the warders performed so many spells and blood magic rituals in the final years before reNaming the Forest's Heart and casting the Ritual of Thorns, it is virtually impossible to untangle the knotty web that makes up the True pattern of the Wood. ReNaming is never simple or without ramifications, and the warders cannot predict the results of casting yet another massive ritual to alter the pattern of the Blood Wood.

One unexpected result of the Ritual is the corruption of the Forest's Heart, the physical center of the Blood Wood and the focus of the warders' magical experimentation. In some way the warders do not understand, the Forest's Heart seems to draw the blood shed in the Wood to itself, blighting the Wood and all its flora and fauna in an ever-widening circle. The creatures that emerge from the Heart are misshapen and grotesque, displaying unusual powers and unnatural appetites. The blood at the Forest's Heart pollutes the ground, the water, the plants and the trees, tainting every growing thing and twisting them into parodies of nature. Like a modern cancer, the corruption at the Forest's Heart seems to have a life of its own, growing uncontrollably to consume the host body. Though the warders are puzzled and alarmed by this corruption, they attempt to control it with the assumption that it is somehow connected to the reNaming of the Wood.

Queen Alachia understands that she must maintain the status quo in order to hold on to her power and influence. This knowledge colors every decision she makes. She does not consider the price of survival too high, for she knows that without the blood of her people, the Blood Wood—home of the Elven Court and the seat of her authority—would no longer exist. She cares for the suffering of her people, but cares even more for the power she possesses through their loyalty. Though the Ritual of Thorns cannot be reversed, Alachia has recently come to believe that it may be possible to heal the Forest's Heart, thereby ending the corruption and repairing the pattern of the Blood Wood. She assigned that task just months ago to Preystia Tales, the most senior and powerful of the blood warders. If that goal can be accomplished, the day might come when the Personal Ritual is no longer necessary; but that decision will be Alachia's alone.

LEAVING BLOOD WOOD

The merging of plant spirits and the elves' True patterns forms an unbreakable bond between the True patterns of the Blood Wood and the elves who inhabit it. This bond manifests in a variation of wood longing whenever a blood elf dwells too long outside the Wood (see **Game Information**, p. 117). If forced to remain away from the Blood Wood for a year and a day or more, blood elves





experience a physical pining for their home that will end in death if they do not return. Queen Alachia knows of this bond, and chooses who may or may not leave the Wood based on her judgment of their ability to survive this desire long enough to return. Again, just as she cannot afford to stop casting the Personal Ritual for fear of its effect on the Wood's pattern, she cannot allow the population of the Wood to be too severely reduced.

Alachia is not yet aware of a related phenomenon plaguing the village of Goro'imri in the Northern Reaches (see **Permanent Settlements**, p. 82 in **The Northern Reaches**). The leader of that village has discovered that when the child of two blood elves does not undergo the Ritual of Thorns, at maturity that child experiences an acute restlessness that becomes a compulsion to leave the Wood. Those who obey this compulsion report that the feeling ends within two or three days' travel from the Wood's borders. Those who refuse to leave their home eventually are afflicted with a sort of madness. Though she hardly needs it, if she knew of this condition it would offer Alachia yet another reason for continuing the Ritual and maintaining the Wood's isolation.

CURRENT ATTITUDES

Even since the end of the Scourge, the elves of the Blood Wood have continued to cast the Ritual of Thorns on their children. More and more elves, however, have begun to privately question the necessity of continuing the Ritual. Though they lived through the Scourge and possess vivid memories of the Horrors and their depredations, those memories pale compared to the anguish of subjecting their children to the pain of the Ritual. Only Kethos Escalanas, leader of the Escalanas ranelle, retired blood warder and creator of the Ritual, has had the courage to ask Queen Alachia to end the Ritual, knowing full well that she would refuse. Kethos was banished from court for a year and a day for his audacity, but his request did serve to alert Alachia to the strength of her people's desire for change.

GEOGRAPHY

The Blood Wood stretches along six hundred miles of Barsaive's northern border. By far the most massive forest remaining in Barsaive after the Scourge, it holds this title only because the blood warders used blood magic after the Scourge to regrow the Wood. This use of blood magic twisted the forced growth of the Wood, creating a terrible mockery of the grace and beauty for which Wyrn Wood had been known. The Blood Wood also holds the dubious honor of being the only place in Barsaive corrupted by its inhabitants, rather than by the Horrors.

The handful of outsiders who have successfully explored the Blood Wood and returned to tell the tale

report that the forest is divided into five sections. The Southern Fringe, the Western Border and the Northern Reaches are named according to their geographical location. The elf queen's palace and the surrounding area, known as the Elven Court, make up the fourth area. The fifth is the Forest's Heart, geographical center of the Blood Wood and the locus of the spreading corruption that is destroying the Wood from within.

The Elven Court is located roughly one hundred miles from the southern border of the Blood Wood and forty miles from the eastern border (see map, p. 148). The Elven Court is the cultural center of the Blood Wood, as well as serving as a rudimentary government since the Scourge. The elf queen's palace is at the center of the Court, surrounded by several small permanent settlements that are home to many of the queen's courtiers, consortis and blood warders. The Courtyard around the palace also contains accommodations for ambassadors and other visitors to the Blood Wood. The magnificence of the palace is rivaled in Barsaive perhaps only by the splendor of the dwarf kingdom of Throal, though no elf would think of comparing the underground kingdom of stone to the beauty of their palace made of living trees. From the Elven Court, elf queens have ruled over all elvenkind for millennia.

Just as the Elven Court is the cultural heart of the Blood Wood, so the Forest's Heart is the Wood's physical core. The area known as the Forest's Heart is roughly one hundred miles in diameter and borders all the other areas of the Blood Wood save the Elven Court (see map, p. 148), which lies some seventy-five miles east of the Forest's Heart. Even the blood warders cannot determine the precise cause of the corruption spreading out from the Forest's Heart, primarily because blood magic was used so extensively in the area that the sequence of events leading to the corruption is too complex to pinpoint a specific incident as the beginning of the problem. For many reasons, the queen has decreed this area off-limits to her people and ordered her warders to erect defenses around the Forest's Heart more effective even than those that protect the Blood Wood's borders.

The Southern Fringe stretches along the southern border of the Blood Wood, starting at the far southwest corner of the forest and reaching up along the eastern edge to just north of the village of Arralena (see map, p. 148). For most visitors to the Blood Wood without diplomatic permission to travel, contact with the blood elves takes place in the Southern Fringe or at Kaer Eidolon, an outpost jointly manned by blood elves and t'skrang of House Syrtis that lies a few days' travel south along the Mothingale River. Kaer Eidolon is a focal point of black market trade between the Blood Wood and outside parties. The leading ranelle of the Southern Fringe, the Carithasca, have been petitioning the queen for decades to reopen the Wood's borders to province-wide trade. Though she repeatedly refuses this





request, she also turns a blind eye to the ranelle's illicit trading, perhaps hoping her lenience will quiet their demands.

The Western Border meets the Southern Fringe at the far southwest corner of the Blood Wood and runs along the forest's western edge to just south of the village of Goro'imri (**The Northern Reaches**, p. 82), near the northwest corner (see map, p. 148). Because it lies so far from the Elven Court, many elves assume the Western Border will be the first to rebel against the official isolation and establish communication, if not trade, with other Name-givers. In fact, the leading ranelle in this area takes its duties to the queen seriously and would never openly defy her edicts, even though the True wood they gather would garner them vast riches if sold to parties outside the Blood Wood.

The Northern Reaches stretch along the northern border of the Blood Wood, beginning just south of the village of Goro'imri, then crossing the forest's northern and eastern edges to just north of the village of Arralena (**The Southern Fringe**, p. 112) near the Elven Court (see map, p. 148). The Northern Reaches receive few visitors from the rest of Barsaive, though they have occasional contact with the northern elven kingdoms and human and other Name-giver settlements to the north of the Wood. While the Southern Fringe bustles with trade conducted between the permanent settlements, the Northern Reaches consists of little more than guard outposts and unsettled territory.

LIFESTYLES

At present, the Blood Wood is home to roughly 60,000 elves. Nearly half the forest's population lives in small nomadic communities, ranging in size from as few as thirty to as many as one hundred people, with most averaging fifty members. These tribes live off the land as hunters and gatherers, moving to new camps roughly every ten weeks. Most nomadic villages travel between four or five campsites, taking care to erase the effects of their presence as best they can each time they move. Each village takes only what it needs from the land, practicing careful conservation of resources in accordance with elven traditions (and common sense).

The remaining elves make their homes in permanent towns and villages throughout the Blood Wood. These settlements range in size from as few as fifty to as many as five thousand elves, with an average size of one hundred. Most of these settlements are allied to one of the Wood's noble families. The leaders of each of the five great ranelles (see **The Ranelles**, p. 16) make their homes in the largest of these permanent settlements in each region. The three largest towns—Araouane, Letheran and Trenevar—are all situated on either the Mothingale or Lesser Mothingale rivers. Other permanent villages lie near one or more of the outposts maintained by the Talshara ranelle, which protect the Blood Wood's borders from unwanted visitors.

The blood elves craft their homes and other buildings from woodland materials (i.e., few stones or rocks) with the aid of elemental magic. Most of the homes in the permanent settlements are built next to and between trees, constructed of branches and trunks with thatches of woven leaves as roofs. Created so that they appear to belong to the surrounding terrain, these homes look as if they grew from the forest along with the trees and other plants.

Wealthier residents of these settlements, who can afford the services of skilled, high-Circle elementalists, often build their homes in the trees themselves. Some of these homes are built within the trunks of especially large trees with chambers beneath the ground among the roots. Other homes are built into the branches of the largest trees, some rising as high as forty feet from the ground. These homes are often spread out over a number of trees in close proximity to one another; footbridges and ladders connect the trees to each other. Skilled craftsmen can make it difficult to distinguish the house from the trees' natural growth. Homes built directly into the trees face particular danger from root walkers and other underground creatures (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 143) and are heavily warded against such predators.

THE ELVEN COURT

The cultural heart of the Blood Wood is the Elven Court. Once renowned the world over as the center of elven culture and tradition, the Ritual of Thorns and the transformation it wrought on the Blood Wood has reduced the influence of the Elven Court to the Wood's confines. Though the power of the Elven Court was once limited to cultural influence, the self-imposed isolation decreed by Queen Alachia has forced the Court to take on some of the responsibilities of a traditional government, ruling the nation that the Blood Wood has become.

At the head of the Elven Court is its queen. The current queen, Alachia, has ruled since long before the Scourge, ascending to the Rose Throne upon the death of Queen Liara. Traditionally, the queen of the Elven Court is the ruler of all the world's elven peoples. Since the Schism, however, when Alachia rejected the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage, she has ruled a gradually smaller and smaller elven population. Though Alachia might claim to wield the influence she once had over all elves, in truth her power is limited to the Blood Wood and its people.

After the queen, the next most influential elves in the Wood are the consortis, a group of eight advisors who aid the queen in maintaining the Court's cultural traditions and assist her in ruling the people of the Blood Wood. The queen chooses individual consortis from among the ranelles, or noble houses, of the Blood Wood. Though the consortis usually represent the most senior or most influential member of their ranelle, Alachia often appears to dismiss and appoint consortis with little regard for logic or





reason. In fact, the queen makes her appointments with an eye to maintaining a balance of power between the various ranelles, carefully ensuring that she remains in complete control of the Blood Wood.

According to strict Court hierarchy, the blood warders fall immediately below the consortis in the chain of influence. Given their role as advisors to the queen on all matters magical and their ultimate responsibility as protectors of the Wood and the Court, however, the distinction between the two sets of advisors lacks any true significance. The queen appoints all blood warders, who retain their positions for life or until they choose to retire. Only a few warders have chosen to step down from active service, one of whom is Kethos Escalanas.

All blood warders are magicians of Circles 5 or higher who frequently follow multiple Disciplines, usually beginning with one of the magician Disciplines. Nethermancers are prominent among the warders, though many are also elementalists and wizards. The blood warders created the Ritual of Thorns as well as many of the forest's magical defenses, including the thorn men (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 145) and path magic (see **Defenses**, p. 123). The blood warders conduct all sorts of magical research and craft magical items such as the threaded weapons and armor used by the exolashers (see p. 54) and wardens (**Defenses**, p. 23). Like the consortis, the blood warders include members from all the major ranelles. Though the queen sometimes uses appointment to the warders as another way of maintaining a balance of power between the various noble houses, the bulk of the blood warders belong to the Escalanas ranelle. That ranelle's long-standing affinity for magic use ensures that most Escalanas candidates are superior to candidates from other houses.

Not recognized as part of the hierarchy of the Elven Court, the exolashers—the queen's personal guard—nonetheless exert a certain level of influence. The most highly trained combatants in the Blood Wood, this elite group of adepts, most of the warrior, swordmaster, archer and woodsman Disciplines, are sworn to die to protect the queen. The majority of exolashers belong to the Talshara ranelle, are masters of the martial Disciplines and have maintained their pledge of loyalty to the queen and Wood for centuries. Though the exolashers have no true political influence in the Court, Queen Alachia occasionally seeks the counsel of her senior exolashers concerning the Blood Wood's defenses.

THE RANELLES

The ranelles represent the building blocks of blood elf society. They have no official standing in the hierarchy of the Court, but influence the queen's decisions through the consortis and courtiers. There are many minor ranelles and five major ranelles, with each of the five great ranelles dominating some aspect of life in the Blood Wood. Most of

the political maneuvering at Court is directed toward maintaining or gaining a position of power or otherwise influencing the leaders of the great ranelles.

Origin

The families that make up the ranelles of the Blood Wood began as noble clans whose lineage could be traced back to the beginning of elven history. When the queen established the Elven Court in Wyrn Wood, these families were the first to show their support by establishing residences nearby.

Over time, members of the various families rose to prominence within the Wood, either by virtuous deeds or through actively supporting the queen and her policies. As they gained social importance, they also gained influence in the Elven Court. As often happens, the ranelles eventually began to specialize in their pursuits, focusing their efforts on rising to the top of a specific Discipline, artistic endeavor or field of trade. The influence of the five great ranelles began to coalesce as nascent associations began to form between noble and non-noble families for purposes of consolidating power in an area. For example, the Talshara became known for their combat prowess, the Daevenar for their superior craftsmanship and artistry, and so on.

As the elves laid the foundations of the five great ranelles of today, it became clear that not all the noble families who had joined the queen were destined for equal prominence in the Wood and the Elven Court. Some families fell out of favor with the queen for one reason or another; others failed to successfully compete with rivals in the same field of endeavor. Some ranelles simply had too few members to play on the same field as the larger families. Two events contributed to this inequity. When Queen Failla declared Shosara Separated, a number of ranelles whose families had originally come from Shosara chose to return to their homeland. When Queen Alachia rejected the Therans' aid before the Scourge, a few more ranelles chose to seek shelter outside Wyrn Wood. In each case, a few families from each ranelle remained in the Wood with the queen, but these nobles immediately lost all standing in the Elven Court and by definition became minor ranelles. In the end, the great ranelles are separated from the minor ranelles largely by size; the great ranelles number approximately 6,000–10,000 members, not including allied minor ranelles. The minor ranelles average approximately 2,000 elves each.

One of the primary advantages the great ranelles received as a result of their level of influence was the opportunity to advise the queen directly. At the time of the Separation, Queen Failla's leadership was generating unrest among even the leaders of the great ranelles, who increasingly disagreed with her actions. To quell criticism, Failla established the post of consortis and chose eight courtiers to serve as her primary advisors. She drew these





eight consortis primarily from the ranks of the great ranelles, but made it clear that their standing in the Elven Court was only one factor in their appointment.

Leadership and Loyalty

Each ranelle has a single leader, usually the eldest member of the most prominent family. A family's prominence derives from past leadership, economic and political influence and, perhaps most important, tradition. The great ranelles often claim the allegiance of one or more consortis and blood warders, many courtiers and a number of minor ranelles.

A number of advisors assist the leader in directing the activity of the ranelle. Though the leader need not follow the counsel of his advisors, few ranelle leaders who rule as absolute monarchs retain the support and loyalty of their ranelle for long. Each village (or community) loyal to a given ranelle also has at least one representative responsible for maintaining contact with the ranelle's leader, keeping him informed of any incidents or events that might affect the ranelle. In addition, members of the ranelles run all enterprises operated by the ranelles, such as the Grove of Thorns and weaponsmith forges of the Talshara, the craftsman guilds of the Daevenar, and the trading villages of the Carithasca.

Loyalty among ranelle members is based primarily on ancestral affiliations rather than political ones. Most families associated with a ranelle, particularly the great ranelles, have maintained that affiliation for decades or centuries. These long-standing affiliations create a loyalty among the people that is taught to each successive generation. Because many of the villages and families of a given ranelle often make their livings based on activities associated with that ranelle's goals, there also tends to be a degree of political loyalty among the member families of the great ranelles. For example, while the trading villages of the Southern Fringe are loyal to the Carithasca based on their heritage, the ranelle's political goal of opening the border to outside trade serves to strengthen that loyalty.

The Great Ranelles

Of the ranelles in the Blood Wood, the five great ranelles hold the most power within the Court, and it is from these that the consortis are most often chosen. Each of these ranelles dominates a certain aspect of elven life, such as trade, craftsmanship and military might, exerting a higher degree of influence than the other ranelles in their area of specialty. These five great ranelles are the Talshara, the Jae'Helastris, the Carithasca, the Daevenar and the Escalanas.

Talshara: The Talshara ranelle is prominent in the Northern Reaches. A great many of the Blood Wood's scout and warrior adepts come from this family, as do many of the queen's exolashers. The Talshara rarely involve themselves in the political maneuverings of the Elven Court, and, until recently, have not had a consortis from among their number since before the Scourge. The Talshara's expertise in all things military and the ranelle's unquestioning loyalty to Alachia, however, ensures that its voice is heard when necessary. (See also *The Northern Reaches*, p. 77.)

Jae'Helastris: Members of the Jae'Helastris live in all areas of the Blood Wood, though they are most prominent at the Elven Court. The ancestral home of the

Jae'Helastris is the village of Triammelle, located only two hours' walk from the elf queen's palace. The greatest percentage of the queen's consortis come from this ranelle and it is said that none are as skilled at political manipulation as the Jae' Helastris. (See also *The Elven Court*, p. 45.)

Carithasca: The Carithasca ranelle can be found predominantly in the Southern Fringe, though outposts of the ranelle are becoming increasingly numerous along the Western Border. The Carithasca ranelle focuses primarily on trade within the Wood, though they also conduct a discreet black-market trade through Trenevar and Kaer Eidolon. The Carithasca have been among the most prominent voices at Court in pressuring Alachia to open the borders of the Blood Wood to trade with the outside. Alachia





continues to reject the ranelle's petitions, occasionally granting the ranelle some sort of favor as an enticement to abandon their repeated requests. (See also **The Southern Fringe**, p. 104.)

Daevenar: Members of the Daevenar ranelle are most commonly renowned for their craftsmanship and artistry and often grace the Elven Court as the queen's personal musicians, entertainers or painters and sculptors. Alachia's tastes change as quickly as her moods, and so the Daevenar long ago learned not to concern themselves with her approval, instead devoting themselves to their art and enjoying the royal favor while it lasted. Some Daevenar consider politics an art form and pursue appointments to the consortis with the single-minded devotion other Daevenar apply to painting or singing. The Daevenar make their home in the village of Se'vianna, on the far western edge of the Courtyard surrounding the Elven Court and Alachia's palace. (See also **The Elven Court**, p. 48.)

Escalanas: The Escalanas ranelle boasts unparalleled achievement in the magical arts. Members of this ranelle formed the core of the Queen's Warders, and the ranelle continues to produce the greatest number of blood warders. Though best known for its magical activities, the Escalanas is actually the most diverse of the five great ranelles, with members living throughout the Blood Wood pursuing a variety of occupations. The Escalanas are both respected and feared by the denizens of the Wood, a reputation they occasionally find useful, but more often inconvenient. (See also **The Western Border**, p. 91.)

THE BALANCE OF POWER

An untrained eye might see little depth to the politics of the Elven Court. Queen Alachia's rule over her subjects seems absolute and complete, allowing scant opportunity for political maneuvering. The truth of the matter is that the queen must ensure the loyalty of the great ranelles without allowing any one ranelle to gain undue influence or power.

Alachia uses the consortis to control and manipulate the ranelles. By awarding position and power to those who desire it, she earns support and loyalty. By constantly changing the membership of the consortis, she forces the ranelles to compete for her favor, effectively guaranteeing that they will never work together against her. Alachia is also careful to balance the membership of her consortis between those who desire the position only to be nearer their queen and those who seek special favors.

Though the ranelles and the consortis represent the greatest political power in the Blood Wood, most blood elves believe that the blood warders possess as much or more power even than the queen. In fact, the warders are equal in power to any other group of high-level magicians working together to meet a common goal (such as the Denairastas in Iopos, for example). The perception that the

warders' power is unlimited stems from several factors: their willingness to experiment with blood magic, in a wide variety of forms, the very name blood warders, the freedom of movement they enjoy in and out of the Wood, their role in casting the Ritual of Thorns and so on. Queen Alachia allows the warders a great deal of latitude because she feels confident of their loyalty, and because they continue to perform many important tasks for the elves of the Blood Wood, including missions she assigns them personally. The Elven Court serves as a constant source of rumors describing the warders' latest acts of depravity; the warders never contradict these tales because it serves their purpose to be left alone.

OUTSIDE RELATIONS

Officially, the Blood Wood does not maintain relations with any cities beyond its borders except for Throal. Unofficially, Queen Alachia recognizes that this policy is impractical at best and has taken steps to receive periodic updates on events in the rest of Barsaive. Her primary tool for this task is her Songbird network, an amalgam of official and unofficial spies scattered throughout the province. By necessity, most of the Songbirds are Unprotected elves and other Name-givers loyal or sympathetic to the elven queen.

One of Alachia's best sources of information is her official emissary to Throal, Geverian Half-Smile (pp. 70-72, **Throal: The Dwarf Kingdom**), an Unprotected elf loyal to Queen Alachia and, not coincidentally, a bosom friend of King Neden. King Varulus III and Alachia shared a deep-seated animosity toward each other for the decisions each ruler made before and during the Scourge, and both considered their differences irreconcilable. When King Varulus III was assassinated by agents of the Denairastas clan of Iopos (see **The King Is Dead**, p. 45, **Prelude to War**), Alachia did not mourn his loss except as a firm hand at the helm of Throal. She immediately put into effect certain of her plans to encourage Neden to take a firmer stance against Thera, and was unpleasantly surprised to hear of Throal's defeat by the Therans at Prajor's Field.

The queen also communicates with emissaries in other major Barsaivian cities and has negotiated specific agreements with the t'skrang of the Syrtis arapagoi, primarily to build and man the fortress at Kaer Eidolon as means of protection against the advances of House Ishkarat (pp. 79-80, **Serpent River**).

Alachia has declared the Theran Empire an enemy of the Elven Court, a status unique to the Therans. The recent Theran incursion into Barsaive at the Ayodhya Liferock (see **The Theran Behemoth**, pp. 14-15, **Prelude to War**) has only strengthened Alachia's hatred of the Therans and everything for which they stand.





DAILY LIFE

The daily routine for the blood elves remains essentially unchanged from the years before the Scourge. Customs of courtship and rituals of marriage and birth, even their travels on the Wheel of Life, are virtually indistinguishable from those customs and rituals practiced by elves elsewhere. Though the Ritual of Thorns and the isolation of the blood elves has affected certain attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, those changes are relatively insignificant. The blood elves also have designed clothing, armor and furnishings to better suit their unique condition.

ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

To the outside observer, blood elves seem stoic and emotionless, almost alien in their self-control. Though most other Name-givers consider all elves dispassionate and indifferent, the complete lack of emotional response that blood elves achieve makes Unprotected elves look like drunken orks. The blood elves' need to suppress the pain of the Ritual and the thorns led naturally to the suppression of all emotion. Expressing love, joy, anger, hatred or any other strong feeling also allows the agony of the thorns to flood their hearts and minds, and blood elves would much prefer to keep their emotions in check than suffer such extreme pain unnecessarily.

In addition to its influence on their emotional behavior, the Ritual of Thorns also has given the blood elves a unique perspective on life. Their constant pain frees them from the wider pains of the world, for no agony can be as great as the thorns that constantly tear their flesh. The blood elves know that they are the only Name-givers completely free from lingering fear of the Horrors, because the very Ritual that causes them so much pain also protects them.

The Paths and Passions

Though blood elves are free to follow the Paths on the Wheel of Life in any fashion they choose, the vast majority of them are Dae'mistishsa, or free Followers, including Queen Alachia. (Before Alachia, only Queen Failla did not follow Sa'mistisha.) These elves believe that only an individual can know when he has stepped onto the next Path, and that the moment is usually marked by a significant event in the blood elf's life. That being said, both the Talshara and the Escalanas ranelles largely subscribe to Sa'mistisha. For example, Lord Erithander Talshara currently walks the Path of Lords after following the warrior, archer, beastmaster and swordmaster Disciplines to Ninth Circle. Many of the magicians of the Escalanas ranelle learn a second magician Discipline only after achieving Eighth Circle in their first.

A rare few blood elf adepts feel the call to become questors, though shrines to the Passions can be found throughout the Blood Wood, most honoring Astendar or Jaspre. In recent years, questors of Jaspre and Garlen

have begun arriving at the Blood Wood and, ignorant of the true relationship between the Wood and the blood elves, speak of their plans to heal the forest. These misguided adepts believe that the blood elves' corruption spread to the roots of the Wood, and therefore can be purged with or without the elves' cooperation or knowledge.

These ambitious questors often receive shelter in the blood elf villages nearest the edges of the Wood, graciously hosted by inhabitants concerned with the growth of the Forest's Heart and willing to help anyone who offers hope of healing the corruption. The wardens eject from the Wood any questors they discover, bringing every third one before the queen for a private audience.

Alachia has developed an unorthodox strategy for dealing with these well-meaning but ignorant questors. She shares the truth of the Blood Wood and the Ritual of Thorns with them, allowing them to momentarily experience the blood elves' tragedy and suffering. Using the spoken word and a unique ritual spell, Alachia allows the questor to relive the history of the Blood Wood during the Scourge and endure the sensation of undergoing the Ritual of Thorns. This unimaginable experience traumatizes the questor. At the height of his pain, Alachia casts a Named Bond of Silence spell on the unsuspecting target (p. 23, **Arcane Mysteries of Barsaive**), using blood magic to enhance the spell's effect and so preventing the questor from ever revealing what he or she has learned. Questors who receive this terrifying gift leave the Blood Wood shaken and distraught, and never return. Though they cannot speak of their experience or knowledge, they remember the experience vividly. Those with sufficient strength of will to overcome the revulsion of the memories sometimes send messages to Alachia containing information she might find useful in purging the corruption from the Forest's Heart.

Since the end of the Scourge, rumors have surfaced of a secret cult somewhere in the Blood Wood dedicated to the worship of the Mad Passion Dis. No evidence exists to support these rumors, but the very lack of evidence lends credence to whispers that the blood warders are the cultists. The most damning rumor claims that the warders conducted experiments so arcane that they went mad, leading them to devote their lives to Dis.

CREATURE COMFORTS

The Ritual of Thorns necessitated certain practical changes in the lives of the blood elves, such as the clothing and armor they wear and the types of chairs and beds they use.

Clothing and Armor

Most blood elves wear loose clothing made of lightweight materials that will not catch on their thorns. Though the thorns are fairly sturdy, the skin around them will tear if the thorns catch on clothing or other surfaces, or





are otherwise treated roughly. In addition, the thorns are very sharp and will easily tear various types of fabric. To keep clothing intact, the typical blood elf wears garments made of materials that are either innately tough or magically strengthened and reinforced. Wealthy members of the court and ranelles, as well as Queen Alachia, can afford to have their clothes custom tailored to the placement of the thorns on their bodies. Fashioning clothing in this way allows the clothes to fit the wearer more closely and fall more naturally on their figures.

Blood elf clothiers also must deal with the problem of keeping clothes clean while wearing them over perpetually bleeding wounds. While most elves simply wear dark clothing to better hide the bloodstains, some clothmakers weave True water and air into fabric, which makes the cloth stain-repellent. Those who can afford this luxury usually wear light colors such as white, pale yellow and pale violet.

Of the standard types of armor worn in Barsaive, blood elves can comfortably wear only fernweave, blood pebble and living crystal armor. Blood pebble and living crystal armor functions as normal, while fernweave naturally accommodates the thorns. Without magical enhancements, all other types of armor press painfully against the elves' thorns as they move. Padded cloth, leather, padded leather and hide armor can be customized to the placement of the thorns in much the same way as clothes, but this expensive process nearly triples the cost of the armor, and so is relatively rare. The more common solution is to weave True air into the armor to provide an air cushion between armor and elf. This cushion offers no benefit beyond comfort and quadruples the cost of the armor. Most of the wardens and blood warders choose to alter standard armor in this way.

Furnishings

For the most part, the blood elves have learned to live with the large and small inconveniences that their thorns bring to the most ordinary tasks. Because the pain of the thorns makes all other discomfort seem unimportant, they have made few concessions to their own comfort. Because they consider their furniture as works of art, however, they are reluctant to scar their chairs and beds with their thorns. For the most part, the elves use thick, fluffy cushions as chair seats and mattresses, in which their thorns can sink without damaging the elves or the furniture. The craftsman of the Daevenar ranelle also have crafted magical furniture that allows comfort despite the thorns, such as the Chair of Comfort (**Magical and Treasure Items**, p. 126 of **Game Information**), which is crafted of True wood.

TRADE

Though Blood Wood remains sealed to outsiders, trade is still an important part of everyday life. All of the Wood's permanent settlements trade with one another for

goods and supplies not readily available in their region of the forest, and even the nomadic communities occasionally gather at festivals to exchange news and trade and sell items that only they make or harvest. Various types of food, such as vegetables, fruits and even livestock, are most in demand, but a brisk market also exists for unusual items of fine craftsmanship and magical items. Many of the roads and paths through the forest are used primarily as trade routes, traveled by small caravans moving between the various woodland regions.

Each region of the Blood Wood offers unique goods sought by those in other regions. The Northern Reaches provides True earth, as well as woodcrafts and weapons forged by the Talshara ranelle, while the Western Border produces True wood gathered under the supervision of the Escalanas magicians. The Daevenar ranelle, located near the Elven Court, crafts all types of useful and ornamental items, from basketry and woodcarvings to musical instruments. The settlements along the Mothingale River in the Southern Fringe produce fruits and vegetables as well as many varieties of fish, while the village of Arralena on the Wood's eastern border provides an adequate supply of meats and leather from the cattle and other livestock its inhabitants raise. The blood warders and the magicians of the Escalanas ranelle also trade minor magic items such as blood charms, potions and common items like firestarters and cookpots, and occasionally offer thread items and weapons for sale.

OUTSIDE TRADE

Queen Alachia chooses to ignore a certain amount of discreet trade with Name-givers outside the Blood Wood. While Talshara weaponsmiths trade True earth to parties in the lands north of the Wood and the Escalanas exchange True wood for knowledge with the Denairastas of Iopos, most of the black-market trading takes place in the Southern Fringe between the elves and t'skrang stationed at Kaer Eidolon and with a few other select travelers who make their way to the port town of Trenevar.

The goods most commonly traded to parties outside the Blood Wood are unique plants or animal pelts that can only be found in the forest, such as blood ivy (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 132) and blood monkey pelts, as well as examples of unusual elven craftsmanship such as weapons and woodcraft from the Talshara or blood berry wine. Other sought-after items include the True earth and True wood found in the north and west regions of the Wood and blood charms and potions created by the blood warders. So far, the elves conducting this trade have managed to keep their operations very limited, successfully avoiding notice from those blood elves who might object to such open disobedience of the queen's edicts.

Because the Carithasca own the majority of Royal Patents for trading, that ranelle is the most vocal about





reestablishing trade with other nations in Barsaive. Though they respect Alachia's wisdom in deciding the best course for the Wood and her people, they also are well aware of the profits to be made by trading outside the Wood. They may never know the real reason why their queen refuses to open the borders, but until such time that Alachia chooses a new course for the Wood, the blood elves must be content with conducting trade on a very small scale.

EXPLORING AND TRAVELING

Partly because of Queen Alachia's isolationist policies, the Wood remains a source of wonder and awe to many adventurers in Barsaive. Those who journey to the Blood Wood face dangers and difficulties unlike those of any other place in Barsaive, and surviving a trek into the forest is a deed worthy of a troubadour's song. The deadly defenses of the Blood Wood, both natural and manmade, ensure that very few uninvited travelers who go beyond the outermost fringes of the Wood live to tell the tale.

Even though they know of these perils, the Wood still lures outsiders who seek to learn its secrets or harvest its riches. Hasty mining expeditions delve quickly and quietly into the forest in search of rich deposits of True earth and True wood. Others are drawn to the Blood Wood by tales of the beauty of the elves and the magnificence of the Elven Court. Of those who seek the elves, most are turned away or are never seen or heard from again.

At first glance, the Blood Wood is a place of fantastic beauty, with thick red and green undergrowth and towering trees that allow only narrow shafts of sunlight to pierce the forest gloom. Furry reddish-green moss grows abundantly on the trees and thick, ropy vines wind among them, creating a maze of tangled vegetation. This beauty hides a dark corruption just below the surface, a taint that lies at the heart of all of the forest's hazards.

ENTERING THE WOOD

The first challenge facing characters who wish to explore the Blood Wood is finding a way into the Wood undetected. While the size of the Wood's borders make it impossible for the blood elves to effectively guard every part of the forest, the blood warders and the wardens take their duties as border guards very seriously. To assist the wardens in their task, the blood warders set various types of magical and mundane traps all along the Wood's perimeter (see **Defenses**, p. 23).

Characters entering the Blood Wood must pass through the Southern Fringe, the Western Border or the Northern Reaches. Each region presents unique opportunities and obstacles to intruders. The following descriptions provide general guidelines for traveling into the Wood from each region. Specific defenses unique to each region of the forest are described in the sections of this book corresponding to each area.

Through the Southern Fringe

By virtue of its location, most travelers hoping to enter the Blood Wood approach the forest through the Southern Fringe. Those traveling by land aim for the most isolated stretches of border, furthest from the Mothingale and the border village of Arralena (see **Smaller Villages**, p. 112 in **The Southern Fringe**). Adventurers seeking the Elven Court usually enter the Wood just south of Arralena, hoping to travel to the elf queen's palace by the shortest possible route. The blood warders anticipated this, however, and used particularly strong path magic (see **Defenses**, p. 123) to protect this area of the Wood. Travelers here may be warned off by the desiccated remains of other hapless Name-givers that litter the Southern Fringe.

A more reliable but still difficult method of entering the Blood Wood through the Southern Fringe is by boat along the Mothingale or Lesser Mothingale rivers. Though each of these rivers has plenty of guard stations along it, adventurers can often slip past them, either in the hold of a larger ship or under the cover of night—and some guards can be persuaded to ignore the occasional traveler. These negligent guards rely on the Wood's other defenses to ensure that the bribing party does not get far. T'skrang riverboats occasionally sail up the Mothingale to trade their unique crafts and will smuggle passengers into the Wood for sufficient payment.

Through the Western Border

The Western Border is perhaps the most difficult region through which to enter the Blood Wood, at least when traveling overland. This region's defenses feature numerous thorn men wards and magical traps that trigger other types of aggressive plants and creatures, including assassin vines, blood oaks and root walkers. See the **Flora and Fauna** section, beginning on p. 131, for game statistics and information on these creatures.

Rather than crossing the Scol Mountains, most travelers seeking to enter the Wood along the Western Border travel by boat along the Mothingale through the Southern Fringe. Once past Burdoin (see **Smaller Villages**, p. 112 in **The Southern Fringe**), the river itself poses a greater danger than the Wood's inhabitants. Only elven vessels travel up the river to Letheran, trade center of the Western Border and home of the Escalanas ranelle, and beyond.

Through the Northern Reaches

Its distance from the rest of Barsaive and the inhospitable land surrounding it makes the Northern Reaches an impractical choice for entering the Blood Wood. Not unexpectedly, then, this region offers relatively easy access. Though the Talshara outposts in the north are built closer together than in other regions, the vast area of the Northern Reaches forces the wardens to patrol their territory reactively, rather than proactively. A small group of





adventurers might find it easier to slip into the Wood from this direction, but they must travel deeper into the Wood before they can consider themselves safe from detection.

Though it is possible to enter the Northern Reaches via the Mothingale and Lesser Mothingale rivers, the people who live north of the forest generally do not use watercraft, and hauling a boat to either of these rivers from elsewhere in Barsaive is an arduous task. Assuming a group successfully portages a boat to either river, would-be intruders using the Mothingale must then face sentries from the village of Eamonn (see **Smaller Villages**, p. 86 in **The Northern Reaches**), who stand guard over several miles of the river just as their ancestors did before the Scourge. Though the Lesser Mothingale remains largely unprotected, it flows directly through the Forest's Heart—an area posing formidable dangers of its own (see **The Forest's Heart**, p. 64).

TRAVELING IN THE WOOD

Perhaps the biggest challenge to exploring the Blood Wood is the nature of the forest itself. Many factors combine to make the Wood a dangerous place. The blood magic the elves practiced before and during the Scourge warped the Wood's True pattern, twisting its beauty and abundance into a sickening mockery of nature. Formerly benign plants and animals have mutated into aggressive, carnivorous variants; the elves themselves have created disturbing traps and wards by degrading the nature of magically active foliage; the corruption of the Forest's Heart, created by experimentation with Horrors, blood magic and other vile practices, continues to transform the wildlife into lethal abominations; and the ground itself thirstily absorbs every drop of blood that falls from the thorns of the elves and uses it for a purpose even the blood warders cannot discern.

The unusually thick growth of plants and trees created by the blood warders following the Scourge has taken on a life of its own, making travel through the Wood more difficult than normal. Wary travelers may survive the predators that hunt throughout the forest, such as song sprites, the deadly witherfang and storm crows, only to fall victim to an apparently harmless blood oak or assassin vine.

One of the most significant obstacles to travel in the forest, both along waterways and on foot or mount, is the Forest's Heart, the corrupt, malignant center of the Blood Wood. Alachia has forbidden her people to enter the Forest's Heart, and any travelers foolish enough to venture there risk terrors horrifying beyond imagination. Its position in the center of the forest forces elves traveling from one side of the Wood to another to skirt around the constantly expanding edges of the corruption.

Added to all the other dangers is the pervasive, nauseating, sickly-sweet odor of blood. Blood permeates nearly every living thing in the Wood, including the trees and

plants, the animals and the earth itself. In some areas of the forest, thick, dark blood wells up in travelers' footprints. This phenomenon is especially prevalent near the Forest's Heart.

Overland Travel

The density of the undergrowth in the Blood Wood makes travel more difficult than in most areas of Barsaive, reducing travel times to roughly 20 miles per day walking and 30 miles per day riding. Adventurers may travel at their normal rates if moving along the existing trails and paths, but doing so greatly increases the likelihood of encountering blood elves and so announcing the travelers' presence in the Wood. Established trails, usually less than ten feet wide, link only the Wood's permanent settlements; travelers must move steadily into the Wood for at least a day before they will find well-traveled paths.

One of the constant challenges the warders face is keeping these trails clear of overgrowth. Adventurers traveling without a token from a blood warder or guidance by a blood warder must cut away or move around encroaching vegetation, an obstacle that further reduces travel times to below normal.

Rivers and Streams

Numerous streams and small rivers run through many parts of the Blood Wood, most of which eventually feed into either the Mothingale or Lesser Mothingale rivers. In the southern region of the forest, these rivers are wide and deep enough to support large ships such as t'skrang riverboats, though most of the streams and rivers that crisscross the greatest portion of the Blood Wood are only large enough to carry small boats such as canoes, rowboats and rafts. The inhabitants of both permanent and nomadic villages travel along most of these small waterways.

Astral Space and Raw Magic

The corruption of the Blood Wood extends beyond the forest to taint the astral space that corresponds to the Wood. Similar to the corruption caused by the Horrors, the astral space of the Blood Wood is polluted with wisps of dark astral energy, making travel in astral space in some areas of the forest as dangerous as travel in the astral space corresponding to the Badlands or the Wastes.

The corruption of astral space is not consistent throughout the Blood Wood. The Forest's Heart is considered a Corrupt region (see **Casting Raw Magic**, pp. 155–156, **ED**). Two concentric rings of astral space around it, each roughly 100 miles wide, are Tainted and Open, respectively. Beyond those rings, astral space is considered Safe. This corruption affects both astral travel and the casting of raw magic. Though no Horrors remain in or near the Wood, the corrupted energies of astral space produce similarly damaging effects on magicians who use raw magic. The most corrupt regions can twist and distort spells and magic





cast without matrices in bizarre and unexpected ways. Specific game rules for astral travel and casting raw magic in the Blood Wood appear in **Game Information**, p. 123.

DEFENSES

The blood warders defend the Blood Wood with a variety of magical and mundane defenses, including outposts manned by wardens, thorn men wards, roving patrols and even special enchantments that use the forest itself as an obstacle to uninvited travelers.

Officially, the blood warders are responsible for defending the Blood Wood. While the warders do maintain the forest's magical protections, the Talshara ranelle has long taken responsibility for guarding the Wood's borders. Traditionally, the blood warders and the Talshara have cooperated to perform this important task, with the Talshara taking primary responsibility for choosing, training and directing the wardens, who make up the bulk of the Wood's defensive forces.

Wardens are always adepts of at least Second Circle, most often of the archer, beastmaster, scout, swordmaster, warrior or woodsman Disciplines. Beastmaster wardens often take on familiars (p. 100, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**), which serve as guard animals as well as companions. Common familiars include ethandrilles, blood ravens and storm crows (see **Flora and Fauna**). Many wardens follow the Strict Path, or Sa'mistishsa, and often learn second Disciplines as they walk the Paths on their journey to the Citadel of the Shining Ones.

One other force stands ready to defend the Blood Wood and its queen: the exolashers, the queen's personal guard. Though these elite adepts rarely become involved in protecting the borders of the forest, the queen occasionally approves their use as temporary support troops for specific missions or to defend against a clear and present danger. For more information on the exolashers and their duties, see **The Elven Court**, p. 54.

Military Strength

The Blood Wood does not maintain a standing army or other formal military. Indeed, the full martial strength of the Blood Wood was last tested in the Orichalcum Wars during the reign of Queen Liara. Instead, the blood elves form what might be thought of as a forest-wide militia, consisting of every adult citizen of the Wood. Every blood elf is trained in rudimentary combat skills at an early age, and is required to maintain and improve those skills throughout his or her life. If and when the need arises for a mass military presence, the wardens, at the direction of the Talshara ranelle and led by the queen and the blood warders, can muster a force that rivals the military strength of any nation or city in Barsaive except the Theran Empire.

Talshara Outposts

The primary defense of the Blood Wood's borders are the outposts established along the forest's perimeter. Approximately seventy miles apart, each of these outposts consists of a small garrison of sixteen defenders, at least three of whom are adepts, and a number of guard animals, usually ethandrilles. The non-adept wardens at each outpost are proficient in woodcraft, archery and melee combat. Each outpost also maintains a few trained messenger birds used to alert nearby outposts to intruders, request reinforcements and to maintain contact with the leaders of the Talshara ranelle in the village of Araouane in the Northern Reaches. Most of these outposts lie less than one day's walk inside the Blood Wood's edge.

The wardens stationed at each outpost patrol the area between the outposts in a rotating fashion. Eight wardens garrison the outpost while the other eight patrol the borders in two groups of four, one patrol traveling toward the next outpost to the west, the other traveling toward the east. When these patrols arrive at their respective destinations, they form the next watch along with the patrol arriving from the opposite direction. The eight wardens garrisoning the outpost form two new patrols and move on to the next outposts. When a patrol finds evidence of intruders, they estimate the size of the group and either deal with them immediately or gather reinforcements from the nearest outpost.

Under this system, each warden eventually tours all of the outposts in the forest, spending roughly half of his time on watch and the other half on patrol. Once a warden has completed a tour, which takes approximately six months, he is excused from duty for four weeks, time that he may spend as he sees fit.

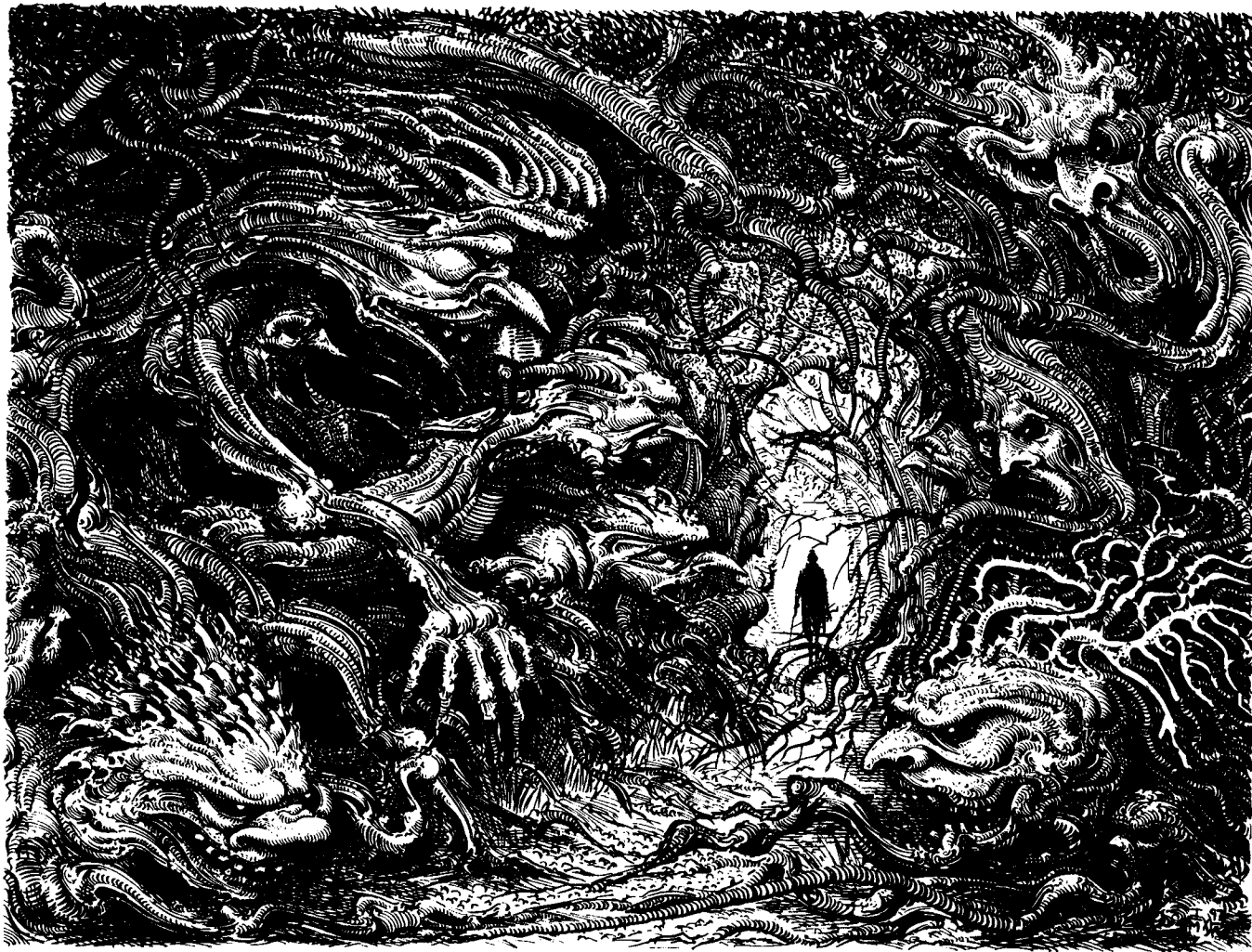
The wardens are also responsible for tending a small number of spectral willows strategically placed throughout the Wood. These dual-natured plants warn of intrusions and other threats from astral space. All wardens are trained to recognize the willows' distress signal, but only three blood warders can actually communicate with the plants; Takaris Talshara, Nirame Jae'Helastri and Preystia Tales.

The nature of this defense makes it possible for a small group of adepts to infiltrate the Blood Wood nearly anywhere along the Wood's borders. These groups must also take into account, however, the challenges posed by the thick undergrowth and the dangerous wards and other magical defenses maintained by the blood warders.

Wards

The border of the Blood Wood is also protected by a net of wards cast by the blood warders that create thorn men and other creatures to trap intruders and hold them until the wardens or blood warders arrive to deal with them. These wards are placed every hundred yards or so.





Though most of the wards are designed to create thorn men when triggered, the magicians of the Escalanas ranelle also have created wards that summon other types of plants and creatures to attack intruders, such as assassin vines, storm crows and elemental spirits. The blood warders also use more traditional traps, both magical and mundane (see **Traps**, pp. 209–210, **ED**). Specific game information on the wards appears in **Game Information**, p. 122.

Path Magic

One of the Wood's most effective magical defenses is path magic. Travelers who have survived a trip through the Blood Wood speak of the forest "being alive," seeming to watch them as they move through it, obscuring their trail and placing obstacles in their path.

This enchantment, which permeates the entire forest, allows the plants and trees to lead intruders in circles, sub-

tly directing their movement by forming a path or trail, then obscuring the trail as the character passes and making backtracking nearly impossible. This misdirection can force travelers to wander aimlessly through the Blood Wood for hours on end, never even nearing their intended destination. Many travelers wander for so long that they run out of food and water, eventually growing too weak to continue and dying of starvation and exposure. Even the most skilled scout and woodsman adepts can be confounded by path magic.

Path magic generally does not affect blood elves, though blood elves who have left the Wood for prolonged periods of time often find themselves subject to path magic when they try to re-enter the Wood. This makes finding a suitable blood elf guide outside the Wood quite difficult. Game rules for path magic appear in **Game Information**, p. 123.





HISTORY

PROLOGUE

—From the private journal of Jorian Wellspring, questor of Garlen



Even the sunlight seems blood-tinted to me now. I cannot look at a blooming flower without thinking of the agony it will feel as it withers ... and how desperately it will leech what sustenance it can from the soil, consuming everything within reach as it struggles against the terror of its own pain and death. For constant pain is with me now, and I know what hunger truly feels like. So much the queen showed me. Fool that I was, I wanted to heal the Wood and its people of their wounds. I actually believed I could. And then she showed me the truth—beyond healing, beyond help, beyond hope.

Alachia gave me audience in her private chambers, which I had not expected. She wore a rose-colored gown that shimmered when she moved. The sharp thorns that should have spoiled her beauty only enhanced it—I cannot say how, exactly. I had heard many tales of her coldness and arrogance, and was pleasantly surprised at her graciousness. From the first moment she looked on me there was sadness in her eyes. I thought it came from the pain of the thorns. Later, I realized that the elven queen was grieving for the bright hopes so clear in my face—hopes she knew herself destined to crush.

"We wish to thank you," she said, her voice as gentle as spring rain. "Your concern for us is commendable—but also misplaced, much to our regret."

"How misplaced, my Lady?" I spoke cautiously, for I did not wish to offend her. It was almost unheard-of for the elven queen to suffer the presence of an outsider like me. My fellow questors and I might never get another chance to plead our case to her, perhaps even to win her permission to begin healing the Blood Wood. And so I did not voice my first thought—that she had willfully accepted her people's corruption and did not wish to change it.

"You wish to heal our pain," she said. "To take from us the agonies of the thorns, that we may live without suffering as others do. We know this is in your mind. It is a noble thought, but doomed—because you do not know the truth."

"Then tell me, Your Highness," I begged. "Tell me, and we will see what can be done."

She gave me a small smile, so full of sorrow that it made me want to weep. "It is not a matter for telling,

young one. I must show you." She raised her slender, thorned hands in a gesture of power that made my skin tingle. And the audience chamber whirled away.

I found myself in a grove of trees, shrouded in green gloom. The air felt heavy, as it does before a thunderstorm. It was an effort to breathe; the wind tasted of ash, even though all within my sight was green and living.

I tried to move and found I could not. Instead of my feet against the ground, I felt soft black earth enveloping me, as if my legs had grown roots. As I thought this, my legs became roots—I felt them twisting, gnarling, slowly thrusting deep into the nourishing soil. I tried to feel my hands, and my arms transformed into branches—vast and heavy, weighted down with leaves.

Suddenly I heard elven voices chanting—low at first, but gradually rising in volume and pitch. As the sound grew louder, a tinge of reddish mist suffused the air. The chanting voices grew stronger, became a piercing lament. The red mist grew and spread. It rolled toward me, inexorable as the coming of winter.

The first tendril touched me, setting me afire with pain. I hovered on the edge of unconsciousness, but a woman's voice pulled me back from the brink. "Witness," she said. "Witness the truth you sought." The mist enveloped me, and I felt my bones twisting inside out. Heart and lungs ripped asunder, then spiraled around themselves as paper does when it burns. I screamed, but could not feel the sound in my throat. Then the chanting ceased and the terrible wrenching stopped. But the pain remained—and with it came a blind, desperate hunger. I tasted metal, overlaid with something sweet. It came to me that I must eat or die, and that the food I wanted was blood.

A young elf stood before me, his pain-wracked face and body covered with thorns. He knelt down and opened his arms as if to embrace me. Dark red blood, rich with life, seeped down each thorn and gathered at the tip. The drops swelled almost to bursting, then fell to the ground. They soaked into my thirsty skin, and I shuddered with pleasure. I wanted the blood. I needed it. I would starve without it.

The elf closed his eyes. He swayed as he knelt, as if entranced. Slowly, blood-drop by blood-drop, the agony receded from his face. And I knew this was my gift to him—this almost-ease, this release from the worst of his suffering. He fed me, and I comforted him.

A woman's voice spoke a word of Sperethiel, and suddenly the woodland was gone. I was kneeling on the floor of Queen Alachia's audience chamber, shaking, my face wet with tears.





The queen knelt beside me. "You see, Jorian," she said softly. Her sweet voice seemed to hold all the sorrows of an unjust world.

I nodded. I could not speak, could scarcely even breathe. What fools we had been, to assume that the blood elves had chosen such suffering—or could choose now to rid themselves of it! They had acted from cruel necessity, and must pay the price forever to keep the Wood alive. That they did so without complaint spoke of courage worthy of the greatest hero.

"So few understand," Alachia murmured. "I only wish we could show everyone the truth ... but we dare not. They could not withstand it." She took a square of fine linen from her sleeve and gently wiped away my tears with it. "So you must not speak to anyone of this, Jorian. Ever. You must swear a blood oath that you will keep silent. Do you understand?"

Somehow, I found my voice long enough to say yes. The queen stroked my cheek, then drew the back of her hand roughly down the side of my face while her free hand traced a sigil in the air. I cried out as the thorns tore me, and felt unseen power leashing my tongue. The oath was made, never to be broken while I live.

And now I must return to my brethren and report my failure. They will not know the reason, and I can never tell them.

Even if I could, they would not understand.



OVERVIEW

The Blood Wood began as a far different place, with a different Name—Wyrms Wood, a forest of matchless beauty and splendor. The origins of this woodland are shrouded in mystery, though a popular legend claims that Wyrms Wood sprang from a single, mighty oak tree. The tree, known as Oak Heart, is said to have grown in times so ancient that even dragons can scarcely remember it.

Whatever its origin, Wyrms Wood existed for centuries before the powerful Theran Empire was anything more than a gleam in its founder's eye. In those ancient days, the forest's loveliness and mystery were untouched by corruption, and unsurpassed by any other woodland in the known world. Elves roamed the Wood in small bands, hunting and gathering and living in harmony with their surroundings. The best illustration of the primal bond between the elves and their forest is told in the legend of the First Elf.

THE TALE OF THE FIRST ELF

In the days of long ago, so long ago that even dragons cannot recall them, the mighty tree Oak Heart came into

the world. Oak Heart was beloved of the Passion Jaspre, and Jaspre gave it all the good gifts of life—sunlight and soft rain, gentle breezes to make its leaves sing, rich soil to make it grow. And the great tree and the Passion were very happy together.

But the world is wide, and Jaspre knew that other places in it needed his blessing. He must go out into the world and bring the gifts of life to all, leaving Oak Heart behind. The thought of parting tore the Passion's heart; he feared that his beloved tree would sicken and die of loneliness before he could return. And so he gave Oak Heart some of his own magic, that it might raise an entire woodland around itself. Surrounded by growing things, amused by the antics of wild beasts and sung to sleep by sweet-throated birds, Oak Heart would be happy enough until Jaspre came back from his wanderings.

And so Oak Heart raised up Wyrms Wood, and for a time was as happy as anyone could wish. But soon the tree began to miss Jaspre. No bird or beast or tree spirit could speak to Oak Heart as the Passion had. Birds and beasts could tell no tales, and the young tree spirits had no more sense than tiny children. And so Oak Heart grew lonely, and withered a little with sadness every day.

When Jaspre returned and saw Oak Heart's brown leaves and shriveled branches, he wept a river of tears for his thoughtlessness. He embraced the great tree tenderly, restoring it to life with his touch. "I will make you a true companion," he promised Oak Heart. "One who knows you as I do, who understands you as I do. Though I must leave you often to roam the world, you will never be lonely again."

Jaspre called upon the Passion Astendar to aid him, and together they fashioned the perfect companion for Oak Heart. "She must be beautiful," Astendar said, "and must sing more sweetly than any bird."

"She must have true understanding," said Jaspre, "that she may weave tales to beguile the time."

"She must dance, as the wind dances in the leaves," Astendar said.

"And she must move where she will in the woodland, so that she can see all that is and talk of it," said Jaspre. "But she must also be part of Oak Heart, and always come back to the tree. And she must listen with all her being to whatever Oak Heart tells her."

So the Passions took some of Oak Heart's own life and made the tree's companion from it, that they might be part of each other. And they gave the companion beauty and grace beyond that of any living bird or beast. And they gave her a curious mind, so that she might Name things and tell tales of them and desire to know all things good. Most important, they gave her a listening heart, that she might live in perfect harmony with Oak Heart and the Wood. And when they had finished, there stood before them an elf maiden—as lovely as the stars, as wise as the earth, and as kind as rain in springtime. And they Named her Caynreth, the First Listener of Harmony.





They brought Caynreth to Oak Heart, and the tree was so joyful that it burst into riotous flower. Caynreth embraced Oak Heart's vast trunk, while a shower of white petals drifted down upon her. And from that day, tree and elf were of one heart. No matter where Caynreth went in the Wood, she always returned to Oak Heart and shared all she had seen and learned with the tree. And though Oak Heart could not move and dance with its beloved companion, it carried her in its spirit and shared all her joys and sorrows. Jaspree had kept his promise. And so do the elves of Wyrm Wood, to this very day.

THE COURT AND THE FIRST QUEEN

The elves of Wyrm Wood grew and thrived, building small permanent settlements in various stretches of their vast forest home and developing increasingly sophisticated arts and crafts. Though similar elven settlements existed elsewhere in the world, the elves of Wyrm Wood gradually came to see themselves as more truly elven than their kin. They took the presence of Oak Heart as a sign of their specialness, and came to define elven nature in terms of the legend of Caynreth—namely, that to be most truly elven meant to serve the needs of Wyrm Wood and reaffirm their bond with it. One elf was profoundly influenced by this belief and acted on it in a way that unified and transformed the elven people: Melyora Nahei'ir, the first Queen of the Elven Court.

No history known to modern-day Barsaive, or to the Theran Empire, reaches back far enough to speak of the first elven queen. Legends of her abound, however—and though they frequently differ in certain details, all of them depict her as gifted with unusual wisdom, beauty and magical ability. She is said to be directly descended from Caynreth, and therefore able to commune with the spirit of Oak Heart in a way that no other elf could. This special sensitivity to the primal tree's needs and desires, coupled with formidable magical gifts and personal charisma, led the elves of Wyrm Wood to follow her wholeheartedly and support her establishment of the Elven Court.

Most legends speak of the Elven Court as existing a thousand years before the founding of Throal. In keeping with Queen Melyora's desires, the Court was not a seat of power in the traditional sense. Though the queen used her magical talents to grow a magnificent palace, the Elven Court was not a citadel or fortress, or even a great city. Like other elven settlements throughout Wyrm Wood, the Court existed in harmony with its surroundings. Its inhabitants raised their dwellings from the woodland itself, taking care not to harm the delicate balance of nature. They devoted themselves to various arts, from woodcarving to poetry to magic, because they believed that the Wood loved beauty. Guided by Queen Melyora, whose every pronouncement they treated with the reverence due to the Favored of Oak Heart, the elves of the Court developed customs and traditions that they believed expressed the truest depths of elven nature.

The ways of the Court soon spread throughout the Wood. As Queen Melyora's reputation for wisdom grew, elves from outside the Wyrm Wood began to follow her example. Over Melyora's reign—variously described as being a century long, two centuries long and "so long that even dragons cannot remember when it began"—the Elven Court she had founded became a light to all the elven nations, the embodiment of elven nature in art, craft, custom, dress, language and way of life. Elves from all over the known world found the Elven Court so attractive that they traveled to Wyrm Wood and settled there. The descendants of many such emigrants grew to prominence in subsequent years, founding the noble families known as ranelles that exist in the Wood to this day.

After a long and benevolent reign, Queen Melyora "departed from the world," as the legends have it, "leaving behind her a people desolate and bereft." The unusual manner of her death is another point on which all known legends agree. With several of her most trusted advisors and associates gathered around her in the very heart of Wyrm Wood, she told them that she must join with the spirit of Oak Heart and leave this world behind. They should not grieve for her, but celebrate her passing by sharing their memories of her with the common folk. And they would know her successor, she said, by a sign from Oak Heart; if the tree approved of their chosen queen, it would give them a clear omen of blessing. Then, bidding her favorites farewell, she walked up to Oak Heart's trunk and lightly rested her palm against the wood. The wood parted under her touch like water around a rock, leaving a hole just large enough for the queen to step through. She entered the hollow trunk and vanished, "never to be seen again in this earthly plane of existence."

THE TROUBLES OF QUEEN DALLIA

For at least three centuries after Melyora's passing, the Elven Court prospered under the guidance of its sovereigns. Queen succeeded queen in relative peace and order, and the Elven Court achieved greater and greater brilliance in all the arts known to civilization. At some point during these years the elves developed the craft of shipbuilding; several legends from this time period speak of the War Against the T'skrang, which most likely propelled this advancement. Other elven realms grew and thrived, and new elven settlements were founded across the world, in lands far from Wyrm Wood. The settlements became towns and the towns became cities, but their ties to Wyrm Wood remained strong and vital.

As far-flung elven realms expanded, however, they came into more frequent contact with other Name-giver races. These different peoples and their cultures inevitably began to rub off on the elves, particularly those living in lands much different from Wyrm Wood. Between contact with foreign influences and the natural development of





local customs, certain elven nations gradually drifted further and further from the ways of Wyrn Wood. During the reign of Queen Dallia, this creeping independence came to a head in the northern realm of Shosara.

Of Ships and Disputes

Surrounded on three sides by the Gwyn Sea, Shosara depended on that body of water for survival. Shosarans lived off the sea's bounty, fishing and gathering various underwater plants much prized by many of their neighbors as medicines and delicacies. Certain Shosarans also gathered True water, which the Gwyn Sea held in abundance. Shosaran fishers and gatherers therefore needed ships suited to plying the open sea. But the art of shipbuilding as practiced by the elves of Wyrn Wood produced smaller vessels suited to navigating local rivers. Wyrn Wood's people had no need of seagoing ships, and so could offer Shosaran shipwrights no guidance. So the Shosarans looked to their nearest neighbors, the famed sailors of the city of Khistova, for inspiration. They based their ships on Khistovan designs, setting those of Wyrn Wood aside.

When visitors to Shosara brought word of the unusual ships back to Wyrn Wood, many were only mildly concerned at first. Certain shipwrights and wood carvers renowned enough to have influence at Court complained that the Shosaran vessels violated the spirit of elven unity by differing from custom, but others seemed to regard the differences as insignificant. Then the Court learned the source of Shosara's designs, and the resulting uproar gripped the entire Wood. For the sailors of Khistova were not fellow elves, but humans. And in adapting their ways, the elves of Shosara had allowed elven culture to be tainted by foreign influences—an unforgivable slight to Wyrn Wood and the Court as the avatars of elven ways.

The queen's advisors agreed unanimously on one point: Shosara had committed a grievous error, and must be punished accordingly. But the question of exactly what action to take divided them. Some called for a temporary cessation of trade, to remind the Shosarans of just how vital the Wood was to their prosperity. Others called for banning Shosaran artists and craftsmen from Wyrn Wood, as they had shown so little respect for true elven arts. A few voices called for the most extreme penalty: Separation, the formal sundering of ties with the Elven Court.

Against the wishes of many of her courtiers, Queen Dallia made an unprecedented decision. She chose to visit Shosara, to see its people first-hand before passing her final judgment upon them. Separation, she argued, was worse than death; to condemn an entire nation of elves to such a fate without being certain they deserved it was unjust and unworthy of a true queen.

Queen Dallia's plan caused enormous consternation throughout the Wood. No queen had ever left Wyrn Wood before, and the prospect terrified commoner and courtier alike. Yet such was their reverence for the queen's judgment that none openly opposed her. Many pleaded with her to change her mind, convinced that no good could possibly come of this "cursed Shosaran venture." But Dallia remained adamant. She made the necessary preparations and, accompanied by ten of her finest elven warriors, set out toward the North.

As it turned out, the doomsayers were right. The few available eyewitness accounts differ in exact details, but all agree that Queen Dallia and most of her escort were slain by the great dragon Alamaise less than two days' journey from the Wood's northern border. Explanations for this act range from punishment for unspecified crimes that the elves allegedly committed, to sheer bloodthirsty malice. All of the accounts paint Queen Dallia as heroic in some fashion, and the dragon as a villain. One popular legend depicts Alamaise as murdering Queen Dallia for refusing to acknowledge him as the true ruler of the elven people.

The Perfidy of Dragons

Every elf-child knows that no good can come of dragons. We learned this lesson from the dragon Alamaise, who cruelly took our good Queen Dallia from us.

Now Queen Dallia was wise and just, with a kind heart that made everyone love her. And when the elves of Shosara strayed from elven ways, choosing foreign customs over our own, Queen Dallia showed them great mercy. She did not punish them in anger, though they richly deserved chastisement. Instead, she chose to travel from Wyrn Wood to see and judge Shosara with her own eyes before pronouncing their fate upon them. Alas for Wyrn Wood and for all elvenkind, that Queen Dallia's kindness should doom her in their place!

With her trustiest warriors at her side, Queen Dallia went forth. She had scarcely been two days on the road when suddenly the skies turned black and a fierce wind blew, as if a great storm was coming. Queen Dallia looked up, and saw that the darkness was no storm cloud. It was the vast shape of a dragon, hovering in front of the sun and making a cold wind with the beating of his mighty wings.

Queen Dallia bowed politely to the dragon and wished him good day. But the dragon showed no such courtesy. "I am Alamaise," he said, without so much as a word of greeting. "I am lord over Wyrn Wood, the forest Named for my kind since the world was made. I have come to claim your allegiance."

Queen Dallia was greatly surprised by this, but answered graciously nonetheless. "I am Queen Dallia, sovereign of Wyrn Wood," she said. "Your words are strange to me, but I will gladly honor you if you can show me just cause."





Alamaise spread his wings wide, puffing himself up with arrogance. "You and your people are mine," he said. "You and your Wood belong to me. I gave you life."

"With respect," Queen Dallia said, hiding her growing annoyance, "I think you are mistaken. The Passions Jaspre and Astendar gave us life, so that the tree Oak Heart would have fit companions. And Jaspre made Oak Heart, from which the Wood grew. How then are you our maker?"

Alamaise puffed himself up even further. "I persuaded Jaspre to plant the seed that became Oak Heart," he said. "And I told the Passions to make the elves. Without me, you would not exist. And so you must bow down to me—you and all your kind."

The dragon's words angered Queen Dallia, for she heard the lie in them. "My people bow to no one, save the Passions that created us and the Universe itself that made all life. We elves are a free people, and belong to no one but ourselves. You cannot have our allegiance, or even our respect, simply by demanding it—you must deserve it. And from your ill manners and the falsehoods you have told, you deserve nothing but our scorn."

Our queen's pride and beauty angered the dragon in turn. He flapped his wings and made a furious wind. "You dare defy me?!" he roared, in a voice as loud as ten thunderstorms. But Queen Dallia was not afraid.

"I do," she answered him. "And so do all my people."

The dragon roared again, shaking the earth so hard that Queen Dallia and her warriors fell to the ground. Then he blew a mighty flame from his giant mouth, and burned our queen to cinders. He blew again, slaying half the warriors even as they struggled to nock arrows to their bows. Then, as he drew breath to blow a third time, the sky opened and a shining light poured out.

The light enveloped Alamaise, holding him motionless. From its bright heart stepped Jaspre and Astendar, their faces dark with sorrow and anger. They advanced upon the dragon and cursed him for the evil he had done to their children. Because he had taken life unjustly, all his works would turn to barrenness; because he had slain beauty, he would no longer know loveliness in any sight or sound. Then they took up the elves, both the living and the dead, and bore them on a river of light back to Wyrn Wood.

The Passions' curse remains to this day, because no dragon has ever atoned for the crime of Alamaise. Until they do so, the dragons remain our enemies.

SUCCESSION AND SEPARATION

For two years, the Elven Court remained without a ruler. Few elf women in Wyrn Wood believed themselves worthy to fill Queen Dallia's shoes, and Oak Heart gave no clear sign of favor to those candidates who presented

themselves before the assembled Court. Then, in the first month of spring, runners brought word that the Lady Failla of the Western Kingdoms was approaching. The sheer size of her well-armed entourage gave rise to feverish speculation among the courtiers and other nobles of the ranelles. The Lady Failla had clearly come to claim the throne—but how far would she go to get it?

Upon her arrival, Failla went out of her way to calm the people's fears. She left half her entourage billeted in small villages in the fringes of the forest, and traveled on to the Court with a much-reduced honor guard. She presented herself to the senior courtiers with courtesy and deference. A vision had led her to Wyrn Wood, she said, to claim the empty throne and bring stability to the troubled people; but she knew such visions could be delusions sent by the trickster Passion Vestrial. She would therefore abide by the Court's judgment. If they saw no clear sign from Oak Heart when she presented herself before the tree, she would go quietly back to her realm's capital city of Sereatha.

At dawn the next day, Lady Failla stood before Oak Heart and the senior nobles of the Court. She bowed to the tree, and "with great reverence, much befitting a humble supplicant, asked the Tree to give a true sign if she should be queen or no." After a moment or two of silence, a full-grown oak leaf dropped from the tree and brushed the top of Failla's head. So early in the spring, Oak Heart's leaves had scarcely begun to bud; for a fully formed leaf to appear was a miracle. The courtiers took it as such, and further proclaimed that the leaf—which should not have grown until high summer—symbolized the "glorious summer" that would come with the new queen's reign. And so Lady Failla ascended the Rose Throne amid much rejoicing.

There was no such rejoicing in Shosara, however. All too soon, Queen Failla showed the northern elves just how different she was from her predecessor. During her years in the Western Kingdoms she had ardently adhered to the ways of the Elven Court, down to the smallest details of dress and the pronunciation of words; under her stewardship, the city of Sereatha had been dubbed "the Little Court" for its strong likeness to the Court at Wyrn Wood. As Queen of all elvenkind, Failla refused to tolerate even the slightest difference of custom between the Elven Court and other elven realms. For Shosara, whose people had dared borrow customs from humans, there could be no mercy or forgiveness. Only one penalty fit the seriousness of their crime: Separation.

Over the vociferous protests of the resident Shosaran ambassador and the ranelles with Shosaran ties, Queen Failla declared the errant northern kingdom forever sundered from the Elven Court. All elves were to sever their connections with Shosara, and the ambassador was given a day and a night to leave the Wood. Even the queen's own most favored advisor, the renowned scholar Elianar





Messias, could not sway her from her course. When he publicly and adamantly opposed the Separation, Failla banished him from Wyrn Wood for a hundred years. Messias never returned; instead, he went on to found the city of Thera, that would one day develop into the mighty Theran Empire. Most scholars of Theran and elven history believe that the continued antipathy between the elven queen and the Empire stems at least partly from this ancient quarrel.

Other ramifications of the Separation would not be fully felt for years to come. A few minor ranelles who had maintained strong links with their Shosaran cousins packed up and left the Wood; others, including the powerful Laryskova ranelle, reaffirmed their loyalty to the Queen and obeyed her edict, though at great personal cost. Most of the Wood's inhabitants applauded the Queen's decision; after two years of turmoil, strong leadership was all they wanted. Some, however, questioned the harshness of the punishment. To permanently cast off a nation of fellow elves was a terrible thing, and more than a few people wondered if the Shosarans had truly deserved it. Over time, as Queen Failla displayed ever greater coldness and arrogance toward any who displeased her, the few dissenting voices were joined by others—among them some scions of the great ranelles.

Partly in response to this growing unrest, Queen Failla established the office of consortis—eight councilors, one for each of the trees that made up the Palace, who would serve as her most trusted advisors. The consortis would be drawn from the ranelles, and would have more access to the queen's ear than any other members of the Elven Court. The most powerful ranelles immediately began vying with each other to fill these coveted positions. The resultant subtle but vicious infighting effectively destroyed any chance for unity among the would-be dissidents, permanently quashing the prospect of rebellion—or so Queen Failla believed.

SPARKS OF REBELLION

Trouble erupted again when Queen Failla granted the Queen's Warders' petition to build a permanent settlement of their own, a place where they could devote themselves to magical arts and train promising apprentices. Given royal permission to build wherever they wished, they chose the Forest's Heart, a sparsely populated region blessed with an abundance of magically potent True wood. The Laryskova ranelle, which had increased its trade in True wood to make up for the loss of its Shosaran business, strongly protested the warders' choice. Arianna Laryskova, the ranelle's leader, had been on the point of petitioning Queen Failla for an expansion of the ranelle's Royal Patent to harvest and sell True wood, and was highly displeased to lose out to the warders. Making matters worse, the leading voice in support of the warders was Kenlyn Escalanas,

the aging leader of the Escalanas ranelle. As a young man Kenlyn had rebuffed Arianna's affections, and Arianna Laryskova had never forgotten or forgiven the slight. To see the Escalanas ranelle favored over her own, especially in light of the sacrifices the Laryskova had made out of loyalty to their sovereign, was an insult Arianna could not forgive. She accepted the Queen's judgment with ill grace and retreated to her family home in the Wood's southwestern regions.

No more inclined than Arianna to take an insult lying down, Queen Failla exacted a slow and subtle revenge against the Laryskova ranelle for daring to oppose her. She began by revoking their Royal Patent to trade in True wood, which she granted to the warders "upon completion of your city." Over the next few years, as the Laryskova attempted to expand their trading activities southwards, Queen Failla thwarted them at almost every turn. The Laryskova most often came into conflict with the Carithasca ranelle, an up-and-coming family of minor nobility. Failla supported the Carithasca in virtually every dispute, ruling in favor of the Laryskova just often enough to keep them from giving up completely. With its trade greatly reduced and new opportunities restricted, the once-proud Laryskova ranelle grew poorer and less powerful with every passing year. Meanwhile, the "upstart" Carithasca family gained ever more wealth and influence. When Kenlyn Escalanas obtained Queen Failla's blessing for the marriage of his granddaughter Milina to Seosamh Carithasca, eldest grandchild of the Carithasca matriarch, Arianna Laryskova could take no more. With the backing of her family, and of certain minor ranelles jealous of the great families' grip on power, she began plotting revenge against the sovereign she now deemed "unworthy."

The rebellion began not with armed force, but with something far deadlier in the Elven Court: the rumor mill. Arianna Laryskova had been among the courtiers who witnessed Queen Failla's acceptance by Oak Heart, and she began to spread the story that the "sign" of approval had in fact meant the opposite of what the Court had believed at the time. Rather than the "glorious summer" of the Elven Court under Failla's rule, the falling leaf had actually symbolized the unnaturalness of Failla's reign. With her as queen, life would fall away from its accustomed order, and the longer she was allowed to remain on the throne, the more things would fall apart. The Separation of Shosara and the banishment of Elianar Messias were two glaring examples of this encroaching chaos; no elven kingdom, and certainly no elf of Messias's sterling reputation, had ever been so served by any sovereign in Wyrn Wood's history.

Those already uneasy with these momentous events found this negative interpretation all too plausible, especially when they contrasted Failla's cold pride with Queen Dallia's warmth and graciousness. From the minor ranelles, the rumors quickly spread through the common





folk, and even into the ranks of the other great ranelles. The scurrilous talk grew, and eventually turned seditious. Though they said it only in whispers, voices all over Wyrn Wood were beginning to suggest that Queen Failla should no longer occupy the Rose Throne.

Well pleased with the success of her rumor campaign, Arianna Laryskova gathered her loyal warriors to her and waited for Queen Failla's next move. She believed Failla would never give up the throne without a fight, but hoped to win with as little bloodshed as possible. Much to her surprise, Queen Failla gathered the entire Court together—even Arianna, whose presence she had demanded—and announced her intention to step down. Oak Heart had spoken to her in another vision, Failla told the assembled courtiers with immense dignity, and had told her to leave this world. The ungrateful elven people no longer appreciated the magnificent queen that Oak Heart had chosen for them, and so the great tree was taking back its gift. Furthermore, Failla said, Oak Heart had sworn to teach the elves a lesson for their ingratitude. The queen then dismissed the Court, and most of them never saw her again.

The only account of Queen Failla's passing comes from Rhethys Escalanas, widely acknowledged as her most valued consortis. As Rhethys tells it, Queen Failla stole away to the Forest's Heart that very night, walked into Oak Heart's hollow trunk and disappeared. Oak Heart then allegedly spoke to Rhethys, telling him that the rightful new elven queen would appear on the Rose Throne in the morning. In great distress, Rhethys rushed back to the palace, where he spent the rest of the night pacing in his bedchamber. As the first light of dawn began to filter through the trees, he summoned the rest of the consortis and the senior warder-in-residence, and told them his story. They found it hard to credit such a fantastic tale, but agreed to accompany him to the throne room.

When they reached it, they found the Rose Throne occupied by a stranger. Tall and strongly built, with white-gold hair and cold gray eyes, she looked at each one of the courtiers in turn as if measuring their inmost worth. She then introduced herself as Liara, Queen of Wyrn Wood.

THE IRON QUEEN

Those who had opposed Queen Failla for what they termed "unjust acts of tyranny" soon came to see her reign as a golden age of freedom compared to Queen Liara's. Where Failla had been primarily concerned with enforcing absolute unity on the elven realms outside the Elven Court, Queen Liara turned this relentless insistence on conformity against Wyrn Wood itself. All who had sided against Queen Failla, from the chief instigators of the rebellion to the lowliest common elf who spoke well of the wrong nobleman, felt the sting of the new queen's wrath. Many minor noble families had their lands or royal grants taken from them; others found their heirs barred from making

advantageous marriages or receiving hereditary posts at Court. Some were even imprisoned. The worst fate, however, befell the Laryskova ranelle. Queen Liara banished them from the Wood, down to the smallest infant, and confiscated everything they owned save for the clothes on their backs. She distributed the Laryskova wealth among various loyalist ranelles, but gave the most substantial portion of it to the Carithasca family. This gift vaulted the Carithasca into the ranks of the great ranelles, where they remain to this day.

The Orichalcum Wars, which erupted roughly midway through Liara's reign, provided a brief respite to the beleaguered folk of the Wood. Though Liara demanded even more unquestioning loyalty from her people, the presence of a common outside enemy united them behind her where fear of her wrath alone could not. The elves of Wyrn Wood were not aggressors in these wars, but defended themselves ably against several waves of attackers from neighboring petty kingdoms who mistakenly regarded the Wood as easy pickings. Formidable magic, combined with scores upon scores of crack archers, decimated the enemy armies and kept the Wood inviolate. Meanwhile, elven ships patrolled the Mothingale River and held would-be pirates at bay. The great shipyards at the southern edge of the Wood, which today lie in ruins, were built during the Orichalcum Wars and produced at least a hundred mighty sailing ships, of which the fabled *Mallornica* is the only one still remaining (see p. 60, *Serpent River*).

Wyrn Wood emerged relatively unscathed from the Orichalcum Wars, but the conflict had one consequence whose terrible repercussions no one could have foreseen. Either shortly before or shortly after the wars ended, Queen Liara uncovered evidence that the Theran Empire had secretly backed several assaults against Wyrn Wood. Though the histories are silent on the exact nature of the evidence, there is no doubt that it roused the elven queen to fury. Before the wars broke out, Liara had allowed the Therans to trade with the Wood for small amounts of orichalcum in order to support her increasingly extravagant Court. That they would sponsor attempts at armed takeover was perfidious and deceitful. Liara retaliated by forbidding all dealings between elves and Therans. Elves of Wyrn Wood who violated this decree would be banished forever; elves of other nations would be permanently barred from setting foot in the Wood. At the time, Liara's subjects greeted her action with virtually unanimous support; however, the decree would come back to haunt her successor.

In the years following the Orichalcum Wars, Queen Liara ruthlessly stamped out the last flickers of rebellion. Her draconian measures undoubtedly restored order, but also drew little distinction between minor variations of custom and genuine acts of defiance. The Wood was paci-





fied, but at the cost of its people's contentment. Cowed but resentful, they went through the motions of living, but the heart had gone out of them. This sullen mood soon began to affect elven realms throughout the world. Accustomed to revering and emulating the Elven Court, its decline left them emotionally and culturally adrift. Before long, the creeping malaise emboldened the kingdom of Shosara to send envoys to their fellow elven nations, with the shocking suggestion that perhaps some other realm should take up the Elven Court's mantle. Though they didn't quite dare name Shosara, the implication was clear. Before any elven kingdom could muster a response, however, word came to them all that Wyrn Wood had a new queen.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SCOURGE

From a scholar's point of view, the circumstances of Queen Alachia's accession to the throne remain disturbingly vague. No one even knows for certain the circumstances of Queen Liara's passing, but whatever the truth, the elves of Wyrn Wood welcomed their new sovereign with open arms. From the beginning, she declared her determination to rule elvenkind through love rather than fear—and for the first few decades of her reign, she amply fulfilled this promise. The elves of Wyrn Wood rewarded her kindness with an outpouring of personal affection they had not shown to any sovereign since the days of "good Queen Dallia." Songs of the period rhapsodize at length about Queen Alachia's delicate beauty, incomparable grace and boundless compassion toward all living things. For all her immense charm and graciousness, however, Queen Alachia made few genuine changes. The imperative to demonstrate loyalty by unflinching adherence to the smallest detail of custom remained as strong as ever.

In one of the great ironies of history, the queen determined to rule her people through love ended up fracturing the very unity she had hoped to nurture. The splintering of the elven nations, known among them as the Schism, shattered bonds between and within the world's elven realms. No kingdom was spared, not even the Elven Court. The cataclysmic threat of the Scourge, combined with Queen Liara's stringent anti-Theran policies and Queen Alachia's own antipathy to the Theran Empire, precipitated a tragedy whose consequences are felt in the Wood even today.

Rites of Protection and Passage

During the long-ago reign of Queen Failla, the banished scholar Elianar Messiah discovered the Books of Harrow. These ancient magical tomes warned of a calamity called the Scourge, an impending invasion of the physical world by ravening monsters from another plane. According to the books, these so-called Horrors would descend upon the world and ravage it, causing unspeakable suffering and violent death wherever they went. Messiah and several like-minded scholars of magic con-

cluded that the Scourge was genuine and could not be averted; therefore, some powerful magical protection must be devised to guarantee the world's survival.

Over several centuries, these magicians and their descendants developed the Rites of Protection and Passage, whereby the world's people could build underground shelters and seal themselves inside behind magical wards that no Horror could breach. However, this same passage of time had turned Messiah's community of scholars into the mighty—and greedy—Theran Empire. The Therans demanded a price for their magic; every kingdom and city and town that accepted the Rites of Protection must also acknowledge the Empire as its ruler.

With the signs of the Scourge growing more frequent, and lacking any viable alternative, kingdom after kingdom gave in to the Therans' demands. Queen Alachia, however, refused. She sent the Theran envoys packing, scornfully declaring that the elven people needed no "spurious protections peddled by pretenders to skill in sorcery." The elves, she said, would rely on their own magic to keep the Horrors at bay. And she forbade any elven nation to accept the Therans' bargain, on pain of Separation.

By and large, the elves did not protest this decision at first. They had every confidence in their own gifts of magic, and believed that Alachia and the Queen's Warders would devise some way to protect them. But the warders and other prominent magicians found themselves chasing down blind alley after blind alley. As the Scourge drew nearer, more and more elves within and outside the Wood began to have second thoughts. Slowly but surely, the elven kingdoms defected to the Therans.

Queen Alachia responded to this erosion of her authority by clamping down all the harder on dissent in the Court. Those who questioned her decision, even trusted advisors and friends, were immediately banished. She also exhorted her warders to even greater efforts, which finally paid off—or so the warders believed.

The Woodland Kaer

After numerous false starts and botched experiments, the warders finally hit upon what they thought was a solution. They used powerful spells to raise a gigantic wooden kaer, seventy-five miles in diameter and centered around their own city in the Forest's Heart. The kaer was made of living trees grown so close together that nothing could squeeze between them, reinforced by magical barriers that the warders believed were inviolate. Upon the kaer's completion, Queen Alachia magically disassembled her magnificent palace and, together with the Wood's entire population, moved inside the shelter to wait out the Scourge.

For roughly two hundred years, the wooden kaer held fast against the Horrors' onslaught. But the warders' magic was not as powerful as they had believed, and constant attacks by powerful Horrors eventually wore away the barri-





ers. The warders had stepped up their magical research at the first signs of trouble; as Horrors began to slip through gaps in the kaer's defenses, the magicians redoubled their efforts. Time and again, however, their experiments failed—some with spectacularly horrible consequences. Meanwhile, the shelter weakened more with every passing day. One Horror almost killed the elven queen, but was slain by a gallant exolasher Named Kellimar who gave his life in the attempt.

Soon after this narrow escape, Queen Alachia made a fateful decision. Kethos Escalanas, a particularly gifted magician, had created a powerful blood-magic ritual that he believed would save the Wood—but at a terrible price. With the kaer crumbling around her ears and the memory of her near-death in the back of her mind, Alachia decided the price was worth paying. She gave Escalanas the go-ahead, ensuring the Wood's survival and effecting its terrible transformation.

The Ritual of Thorns

Escalanas created the Ritual of Thorns, an earth-shaking rite of blood magic designed to protect the Wood as well as its inhabitants. The ritual had two parts, though none knew of the second part except the warders and Queen Alachia. The first part of the ritual merged a plant spirit with the True pattern of every elf, causing thorns to grow from within the elf's body. The thorns tore the flesh, creating wounds that bled constantly and never healed, causing unending pain. As many of the Horrors could only feed on suffering they had created themselves, the agony of the thorns effectively immunized each elf against them. But the thorns also had another purpose: to draw the blood that would feed the magical wards raised by the second half of the Ritual of Thorns, so that the Horrors still outside the kaer could not devour the elves' woodland home.

Known among the warders as "the reNaming," the second half of the Ritual remains a closely guarded secret. The reNaming altered the True pattern of the forest, wrenching it into an entirely new shape and thereby warding it from the Horrors. To enact such formidable magic, the warders needed far more power than they alone could raise. Only blood could fuel such a mighty spell—blood from every elf in the Wood. And only blood, given drop by drop to the reNamed Blood Wood, could maintain the barriers that kept the Horrors from devouring every last tree and leaf.

Unaware of its true extent, Wyrn Wood's inhabitants underwent the Ritual of Thorns, accepting permanent agony and disfigurement as the price of survival. Wyrn Wood became the Blood Wood, and its new Name marked the Wood as a place of mystery and terror.

THE NEW WORLD

Protected by their fearsome magic, the Blood Wood and its inhabitants survived the Scourge more or less intact. As soon as it was safe, the elves ventured out of the underground shelters they had hastily dug to look at their woodland. Much of it still lived, though little was undamaged. Swaths of burned and broken vegetation crisscrossed the forest, marks of the Horrors' depredations before the Wood's reNaming. Appalled at the Wood's injuries, Queen Alachia ordered her warders to regrow the damaged portions. To accomplish this feat, the warders used still more blood magic. They planted seeds and fed them with drops of their own blood, causing saplings to spring up overnight. Young trees reached their full growth in a single day, many of them fed by the blood of warders who had died of exhaustion in fulfilling their queen's command. Within mere months the Wood had been restored, at least on the surface. As her own crowning achievement, Alachia regrew her palace and re-established the Court around it.

For some time, the Blood Wood remained isolated from the rest of the awakening world. The elves themselves were too busy rebuilding their homes and reviving the forest to send out scouting parties, and few outsiders cared to travel far from their own hearth-sides in the years immediately following the Scourge. Eventually, however, travelers did come—and they brought tales of the Blood Wood away with them that curled their listeners' ears. A few felt pity for the horribly transfigured elves; most felt shock and revulsion. Alachia, furious that the world dared judge her and her people so harshly, reacted with characteristic arrogance. So deeply injured was her pride that she forbade all but the most limited contact between the blood elves and the outside world.

Near-total isolation remains the Court's official policy, but over the past several years practical considerations have greatly loosened restrictions. Several of the surviving great ranelles wish to resume the profitable trade that the Scourge interrupted, and Alachia has no desire to give them a common grievance against her. She also sees some advantage in keeping herself informed of events outside the Wood's borders, and to that end employs emissaries to such places as the dwarf kingdom of Throal and the cities of Urupa and Travar. Some observers believe that Alachia intends to reassert her lost authority over those elven nations that still exist outside Blood Wood, and isolation will not serve that goal. Whether she can persuade her erstwhile subjects to accept a thorn-pierced elven queen remains an open question.





THE ELVEN COURT

PROLOGUE

—Letter from Renel Zhiaryn, Esteemed First Serving Master of the Banquet Hall of Her Highness Alachia the Queen



y dear Meriana,

I hope this letter finds you well and progressing swiftly in your studies. Your mother tells me you are advancing with tolerable quickness in Court Sperethiel, at which I am moderately disposed to rejoice. A niece who can speak the language of the Court with facility and grace will make a

most competent Dresser of Her Highness's Bedchamber, which your parents assure me is the laudable height of your ambition. However, be advised that mastery of Sperethiel is the merest tip of the spring shoot, so to speak. If you are to succeed at Court and bring credit to your family, you must also master Court etiquette. Indeed, correct behavior will aid you more than the prettiest of accents—and the lack of it may forever bar you from serving Her Gracious Majesty, a calamity I would not wish upon my worst enemy. If you would avoid such catastrophe, read and take to heart the following cautionary tale.

Some days ago, I was privileged to serve at one of Her Highness's private dinners with her consortis and other favored courtiers. It was an intimate affair, as these dinners always are—a mere fifteen guests, with Her Beauteous Majesty making the sixteenth.

Present at the dinner, along with the eight persons privileged to serve as Her Majesty's consortis, were the renowned Chief Blood Warder, the most esteemed Preystia Tales; Warder Aithne Oakforest, a most learned gentleman well versed in the art of Court diplomacy; Warder Takaris Talshara, presently high in Her Majesty's graces after his brilliant recovery of the Everliving Flower; Mithran Jae'Helastri, trusted advisor to Her Highness (and our own distant kinsman, though we should not presume upon the relationship); Elindrel Talshara, an exolasher of great fighting prowess and most privileged to grace Her Majesty's table (soldiers, however worthy in other respects, are rarely the most elegantly mannered dinner guests!); and Rhisiart Talshara, youngest son of the leader of the Talshara ranelle and recently arrived at Court. Her Majesty had rather taken a liking to young Rhisiart, despite his utter lack of proper Court decorum. Why his elders did not teach him better, I cannot imagine. But then, the Talshara ranelle has never been adept at politics. They style themselves plain soldiers, and too often treat the dance of Court

diplomacy as mere frivolity. I can only suppose that Rhisiart's youthful exuberance and naiveté, combined with his handsome looks, held the charm of novelty for Her Highness at first; otherwise, I cannot explain the queen's forbearance with his glaring errors in etiquette. I had heard rumors that Her Majesty intended this particular dinner in Rhisiart's honor, for some service he had done her—but even given Her Highness's unusual goodwill toward him, I found such tales difficult to credit.

Young Rhisiart was accompanied by his scribe, a becomingly modest young woman Named Ilisa. The scribe's presence at table shows the true generosity of Her Highness's spirit; though a mere commoner, Ilisa was allowed to sit next to her young master and eat with him just as if she belonged among such exalted company. Custom dictates that commoners dine in the palace kitchens along with the lower servants—but Her Majesty demonstrates a fine understanding of when to bend custom a trifle. Certainly the scribe showed a clearer understanding of conduct befitting her station than did her unfortunate young master.

From the moment young Rhisiart entered the Garden of Lilies adjacent to the Banquet Hall, I knew the evening would not go well. Even after several days' residence, he *would* speak more loudly than is the custom at Court, and flail at the air for emphasis in a way most unbecoming; and his manner toward his scribe was altogether too familiar. (She spent much of their conversation gazing modestly at the floor, answering him briefly and quietly; I confess, I felt sorry for the poor girl.) And his clothes—! *Such* a color for a tunic—that particular shade of blue has been out of fashion since my own first years at Court. A half-witted boot-boy would have known better than to wear deep blue when Her Highness has decreed shades of pink and red as fashionable Court dress. (I have it from the Esteemed First Mistress of the Royal Garments that next season's fashion will include yellows and golds—so if you are chosen for service within the next several months, be sure to bring clothing of all the appropriate shades. You are fortunate that gold looks so well with your dark hair and eyes!)

Mindful that charity is among the noblest of virtues, I initially put down Rhisiart's lapses as mere youth and countrified ignorance. At worst, I thought, he was merely attempting to be daring, after the manner of foolish younglings given their heads too soon. He would learn eventually to moderate his voice, speak with less unattractive enthusiasm and carry himself with the stately grace at which Her Highness so excels. I had reckoned, however, without young Rhisiart's most prominent quality—his amazing ability to remain oblivious to all signs of disapproval.





He continued to talk too loudly throughout the customary half-hour of before-meal conversation, during which well-mannered guests discourse quietly among themselves and partake sparingly of various delicacies. Rhisiart babbled to anyone who would listen, and ate far more than his share of braised cress leaves. I actually saw him *grab* the last handful from one tray; he nearly sent it crashing to the floor! Her Majesty would have been most displeased had one of her prized silver trays been dented; they were crafted centuries ago by Khiallen Daevenar, the finest silversmith of his generation. Such workmanship is not to be trifled with. Luckily, the server carrying the tray was Lialla Goldivy, a sharp-witted young woman with admirably quick reflexes. She caught the tray before it could hit the floor, and so spared us disaster. Rhisiart did not even see the mishap; he had turned to speak to Warder Takaris, who was unfortunate enough to be passing near him at the time. At that point I had a premonition of catastrophe to come ... but even I was not prepared for the depth of the error young Rhisiart was soon to make.

Her Glorious Majesty appeared in the garden at the end of the half-hour, signaling the beginning of the dinner. Our queen is never less than beautiful, but her loveliness shone with particular brightness on this evening. She wore a gown of a delicate shade between deep rose and pale violet—exactly the color of the twilight lilies that grow so abundantly hereabouts. Fire opals the size of my thumb blazed at her wrists and throat, and scores of smaller ones were braided into her hair. Her appearance stopped all conversation, as it always does. Even Rhisiart's babbling ceased, so moved was he by his first close sight of our revered sovereign.

All eyes remained on Her Majesty while she made her graceful way to Chief Warder Preystia Tales. The esteemed Chief Warder knows Court etiquette well; Her Highness did not even have to speak, but merely stopped within two paces of him and waited. He held out his arm, and she rested one slender, white hand lightly atop his. So paired, they led the diners through the terrace doors and into the





Banquet Hall. (Elindrel Talshara looked put out, but unlike his kinsman, knows enough not to openly express his disappointment. To show Her Majesty anything but civility would have implied criticism of Her Highness's choice, an unforgivable slight to Her Grace. I saw his fleeting gloom only because I happened to be ushering the diners through the door.)

I shall briefly describe the banquet before continuing. I know you are used to finery, my dear, but the luxuries of the Elven Court surpass those available to even the most prominent ranelle. Unless you are properly prepared for the magnificence that awaits you, I fear you may gape at it like any common girl—and if you would advance at Court, you simply *cannot* be taken for a bumpkin. So, in the interests of your education, I will paint for you the clearest picture I can.

The round dining table was covered in dazzling white damask, stitched with intricate designs in seed pearls. Hangings of the same fabric graced the walls at intervals; these were embroidered with varying shades of yellow, from a pale lemon color to deep, tawny gold. So subtle were the variations that none could tell where one color left off and the next began; yet the overall effect drew the eye pleasingly from the palest to the richest shade. The deeper golds also picked up the gleaming wood between the hangings in a manner most becoming. The walls of the Banquet Hall are a mosaic of several different colors of wood, from pale birch to golden-brown cama'in. The light wood, the white draperies and the embroidery, combined with the curving arch of the high ceiling, gave the Hall a delightful feeling of openness.

In keeping with the color scheme, Her Highness had chosen to dine from gold plates. Made of many sheets of gold beaten together, they shone from the tablecloth like small suns. Crystal goblets rimmed with thin bands of orichalcum reflected the light from hundreds of light-quartzes. A long table to one side, also draped in white damask, held savory dishes too numerous to describe. Among them were baby cress soup; red deer with wild onions; poached rainbow darters fresh from the Lesser Mothingale; spit-roasted wildfowl stuffed with rose petals; bowls full of sweet lirnias berries with the evening dew still glistening on their dark blue skins; and candied violets, a favorite sweet of the queen's. (There are few things more pleasing to the palate than well-made baby cress soup. And Rumio Oakleaf, the current First Master of Soups and Jellies, is a true artist at his chosen craft. You will eat well, should you come to Court—by custom, palace servants dine on leftover foodstuffs.)

The guests arranged themselves around the table as I had earlier bidden them, and I—by right of my position as First Serving Master—began to serve the soup. (This takes great skill; one must dip up just the right portion, making sure there is a goodly helping of cress in the broth, and then pour it steadily into the waiting bowl without spilling a drop on the tablecloth—or, Passions forbid, the diner!

Such a misfortune would result in the server's dire disgrace.) The Wines Mistress filled the goblets with the first wine course, a delicate golden liquid brewed from the ground-apples native to the Northern Reaches. Her Highness raised her goblet, prompting the guests to do likewise. In a clear, sweet voice she made her customary toast to the Elven Court and to Kethos Escalanas, creator of the Ritual of Thorns that preserved us from the Scourge. All drank a single sip of wine; then, following their sovereign's example, addressed themselves to their soup.

By beginning to eat immediately after the toast rather than speaking herself, Her Majesty had permitted her guests to engage in general conversation. (Of such subtle signals are Court manners made; this is why proper behavior and attention to nuances will take you farther than any other accomplishment.) Much wit and laughter was exchanged between the diners, all tastefully moderated so as not to drown out the sweet notes of the harp playing in the background. Rhisiart Talshara laughed too loudly at everything, of course. His third—I can only call it a *chuckle*—earned him a sharp look from Mithran Jae'Helastri, who had been unluckily seated at his left. But the young fool remained oblivious to disapproval. He was clearly enjoying himself, and I can only surmise that his obvious dazzlement at his surroundings further softened Her Majesty's heart toward him. Many times I have seen her banish unfortunate souls from the table for such unseemly exuberance. At least he did not slurp his soup, for which his family is doubtless grateful.

The under-servers cleared the soup bowls, and I began to serve the fish course. The queen drained her goblet and set it aside, and the diners did likewise. As the under-servers placed fresh goblets around the table, the Wines Mistress poured the second wine of the evening—this one a pale pink, brewed from the essence of roses. She filled the queen's goblet first, and was just moving to fill Warder Tales's when the queen raised her goblet and gazed thoughtfully at it.

"You see this glass," Her Majesty said as she watched the light play off its many-faceted surface. "It came from the mountains of Rugaria, in the days before that unlucky land became a possession of Thera. This goblet reminds me that the Theran Empire did not always rule over the lands now under its sway. And it will not rule over ours, no matter how many behemoths it sends. The Blood Wood will never bow to the Theran yoke, nor have any dealings with them. I will not allow it."

The table fell silent as the diners pondered the queen's wisdom. Then, just as the Wines Mistress stepped to Warder Tales's side and I began to carry the platter of fish to Her Majesty, the unthinkable happened.

Rhisiart Talshara spoke.

He actually spoke. Worse, he *questioned* Her Highness. I will remember his words until the day I die: "But surely we must have some dealings with the Therans, Your Grace. We can scarcely ignore a Theran fortress planted on the





shores of the Serpent River, not so many miles as the crow flies from the border of our own Wood."

The silence following this remark was profound. Every face had gone white with shock; many of the guests appeared to have momentarily stopped breathing. Her Highness's tone of voice had clearly indicated that her words were meant as a proclamation, beyond dispute. Yet this young fool had done just that. He seemed to have taken Her Majesty's pronouncement as an invitation to *debate*, if you can credit such a thing. And he was only too happy to oblige.

By the greatest good fortune, I managed not to spill the fish. I kept my grip on the platter and stood still, firmly resolved not to serve Her Highness until she had dealt with this upstart howsoever she wished. I did take one small step to the left, so that I might have a clearer view of Her Majesty's face—not strictly correct of me, but forgivable in light of the extraordinary circumstances. The queen wore a look I knew well—a careful lack of expression that should have warned young Rhisiart of his error.

"I assure you—we can and we will," Her Majesty said, in a voice as soft as the first light of dawn. Beside her, Warder Tales closed his eyes. Elindrel Talshara, seated at the Queen's left, visibly flinched. They knew that tone, but were powerless to warn Rhisiart of his danger.

Still oblivious, the youngling spoke again. "Pardon me, Your Grace, but every power in Barsaive must deal with them in some way. The aropagoi of the Serpent River are doing so; even King Neden of Throal—"

"King Neden is a brash young fool," the queen replied coldly. At her tone, Elindrel slid down a fraction in his chair. "And as for the t'skrang," Her Majesty continued, "their doings do not dictate ours."

"Your Grace, you misunderstand me," Rhisiart said, with what he must have thought was an engaging smile. Mithran Jae'Helastri couldn't quite suppress a gasp, but Rhisiart appeared not to hear it. "I know we are sovereign unto ourselves, and that is as it should be. I do not suggest that we deal with the Therans simply because goro are doing so, but because it makes sense."

Silence fell again, even more awful than the last. Then Her Highness gave young Rhisiart a wide-eyed look. "Really?" she said, far too sweetly for anyone's comfort. "Do enlighten me."

The fool actually *grinned* at this. "Your Grace is most kind," he began. (Why it finally occurred to him to be polite is beyond my imagination.) "I believe we must deal with the Therans because they are not going to leave Barsaive. The Battle of Prajor's Field made that abundantly clear. And they are in a position to disrupt certain of our interests—trade, for example. So we cannot simply close our eyes to their presence. Exactly how we deal with them is for Your Grace to decide, of course—"

"Of course," Her Highness murmured, with her most bewitching smile. At the sight of it, I began to fear for young Rhisiart's head.

"—but we must do something. Send an embassy, perhaps. Sound them out, find out exactly what they want and how much it will take to make them leave us alone. If Your Grace desires it, I shall gladly undertake such a mission myself—I am yours to command, gracious Lady."

Her Majesty regarded Rhisiart for several moments, neither speaking nor moving. After a time, the queen's silent gaze began to make even Rhisiart uneasy. By then, however, it was far too late.

"We shall give your proposal the consideration it deserves," Her Highness said at length, pronouncing every word crisply. She then turned to Elindrel Talshara. "Kindly remove your kinsman from our presence. The atmosphere of the Court disagrees with him."

"But Your Grace, I feel perfectly well—" Rhisiart stammered. Elindrel, who had risen hastily to do the queen's bidding, silenced him with a swift kick to the ankle. The young fool subsided, and Elindrel hauled him to his feet.

"Oh, and when you return, Elindrel ... " Her Majesty said, her tone somewhat softened from the coldness of her earlier command.

Elindrel gave Her Highness a hopeful look. The queen might easily have ordered him away along with his fool of a relative; that she had assumed his return was an unprecedented act of kindness. "Yes, Your Gracious Majesty?"

"Change places with Mithran. He has been deprived of our company of late." Her Highness favored Mithran with a brilliant smile. "We will remedy this lack, beginning tonight. You may go, Elindrel."

The look Elindrel turned on his luckless cousin could have blasted a birch grove. As I watched them depart, I could almost find it in me to pity poor Rhisiart. But not quite.

So you see now, dear child, the consequences of improper behavior. Rhisiart Talshara has been banished from Court, perhaps permanently. None can say for certain save Her Gracious Majesty, who may eventually forgive the young upstart (she is a blessedly tender-hearted creature, and will doubtless be more generous to him than he deserves). Be wiser than he, child; keep up your studies, cultivate a quick eye and a keen mind, and above all remember that a proper elf lives to serve the queen. Let these precepts guide you, and you will do excellently at Court.



OVERVIEW

The Elven Court is the social, cultural and spiritual heart of the Blood Wood. From her magnificent palace, Queen Alachia rules all the elves of the forest, as her predecessors did before her. Like the Protected elves who call it home, the Elven Court is a place of heartbreaking beauty





and wrenching pain, where visitors and natives alike marvel at the terrible majesty of Alachia's land.

Out in the farther reaches of the Blood Wood, some may dare to question their queen's wisdom—but such questions are almost never heard in the Elven Court. To the outsider, the Court and its environs present a seamless facade of unity and harmony. Those who live within the Court's boundaries speculate that their provincial counterparts, cut off from their queen by the intervening miles, sometimes forget how lucky they are to live under the rule of such a wise and beautiful ruler. No visitor is likely to hear whispers of dissent amid the wind chimes and bells that ring so sweetly on the evening breeze.

The Court's role has changed since the Scourge, largely because of Alachia's decision to isolate the forest and its people. Before the Scourge, the Elven Court served as a center of cultural and spiritual guidance for the world's elven nations; it was not a conventional political power, like the Kingdom of Throal or the Theran Empire. Elven nations outside Wyrn Wood obeyed the edicts of the elven queen from cultural and historical precedent rather than political pressures or fear of reprisal. In those days, to be reprimanded by the queen was a cultural stigma that most elves would strive mightily to avoid. To be Separated, like the northern nation of Shosara, was a punishment so severe that many elves would die rather than suffer it.

Alachia's isolationist policies have forced the Elven Court to take on the functions of a traditional government, providing for the safety and well-being of the entire forest. In the past fifty years, the Court has had to become involved in such mundane matters as trade between woodland settlements, forest-wide defense and even territorial disputes between various villages or noble families. Out of necessity, a crude form of representational government has emerged, with the consortis and other courtiers representing the people of the Blood Wood at the Court.

Each settlement in the Blood Wood has at least one representative who makes requests or offers suggestions to the courtiers or (in a few cases) consortis, who in turn represent their interests at Court. Most of the representatives are community leaders or elders; some settlements, usually those of importance to a prominent ranelle, have representatives separate from the settlement's leadership. In theory, this system allows each woodland village a voice at Court. In practice, however, most requests and complaints brought by the representatives never reach the queen's ear.

This fault in the system has not prevented the Court from insisting, with the queen's endorsement, that the settlements help shoulder the burden of maintaining "their" government. Each town or village that trades with the Court or other forest regions, or that accepts the protection of the blood warders, wardens and defensive outposts, must make offerings to the Court. The offerings vary according to the size and prominence of the community.

Most of the nomadic communities in the Northern Reaches give only a token offering, while larger settlements like the towns of Araouane or Letheran often pay considerable sums into the Court's coffers.

COURT HIERARCHY

Though Queen Alachia retains a firm grip on the reins of power, other elements exist in the Court hierarchy that serve as a limited check to her authority. She is adept, however, at using the complex dance of Court politics to maintain her position and influence her people at many different levels.

As the elven queen, Alachia rules absolutely over the Blood Wood and its denizens. Privileged to have access to the queen are the consortis, the eight most prominent advisors who represent the major ranelles of the Blood Wood. Next most influential after the consortis are the blood warders, the court magicians responsible for ensuring the safety of the Wood and the maintenance of its traditions. Beneath them are the exolashers, the queen's personal guard, who make up for their relative lack of political clout with martial prowess. The current crop of exolashers also benefits from a strong alliance with Erithander Talshara, one of Alachia's most trusted advisors.

To those unfamiliar with the inner workings of the Elven Court, Alachia may appear to rule solely through her people's adoration. It is true that the elves of the Blood Wood love their queen, but this love contains a healthy dose of fear. To openly question royal authority is all but unheard-of in the Elven Court, and the constant unspoken threat of banishment or Separation keeps Alachia's few detractors from taking any action against her. The consortis and blood warders have their own share of power, but Alachia's deft manipulation of personalities and positions largely undercuts that minor independence.

Alachia chooses each one of the consortis, warders and exolashers who serve her. She uses these positions to balance the various ranelles against each other, preventing any of them from gaining too much influence or forming strategic alliances contrary to her wishes. By selecting and appointing elves as blood warders who are loyal to her above all else, Alachia can ensure that her interests and goals remain ever-present in the minds of her magicians. And below the warders, the exolashers provide a constant reminder of Alachia's power.

In addition to the consortis, warders and exolashers, the Elven Court is home to countless other functionaries and courtiers: pages, grooms, scribes, scullery maids and so on. It is considered a great honor to be selected to work at Court, and sons and daughters of even the most prominent families are quick to accept the lowliest position in the palace kitchens. Queen Alachia also employs musicians, poets, artists and dancers to entertain courtiers and honored guests. For most, the opportunity to be so near the





center of power is the realization of a lifelong dream. Even those who disagree with some of Alachia's policies (and their numbers are growing, particularly in the outlying regions of the Western Border and Southern Fringe) are honored to be chosen.

In theory, advancement in the ranks at Court is based on individual merit. In practice, however, nepotism and favoritism are the order of the day everywhere, from the pantry to the council chambers. Often, the ability to curry favor with one's superiors is a courtier's or palace worker's most essential skill. The occasional ambitious individual can gain notice through outstanding deeds alone, but those who rise most quickly do so as much by knowing the right people and the right things to say as through actual ability.

THE ELVEN QUEEN

Just as the Elven Court is the heart of society in the Blood Wood, the elven queen is the heart of the blood elves themselves. She sits at the top of the Court hierarchy, absolute ruler over her subjects. Traditionally a cultural and social icon rather than a conventional monarch, the queen guided and guarded her people in return for their loyalty and love.

Officially, an elven queen cannot be deposed. Queens take the Rose Throne for life, and historically either died of natural causes, stepped down when they felt it appropriate or—as in the case of Queen Failla—abdicated in the face of opposition. Only one queen in the Wood's recorded history has been killed: Queen Dallia, slain along with her entourage by the great dragon Alamaise. A military coup has never been attempted—not surprising, given the ex-lashers' and warders' historically unwavering support for the throne. Further, no formal procedure for appointing a new queen exists. Historically, each new queen has either taken the throne with the backing of the entire Elven Court, or—as in Queen Liara's case—become queen through prophecy.

In theory Alachia could be deposed, but in practice this is highly unlikely. She is a charismatic leader with considerable magical and martial power at her disposal, and no one really wants to find out the true extent of that power the hard way.

QUEEN ALACHIA

Alachia has held the Rose Throne since before the Scourge. All who meet her speak of her with awe beyond that usually given to royalty, and she inspires equally intense loyalty in her subjects. Even elves from outside the Wood who see all blood elves as corrupt get misty-eyed when they speak of Alachia. Her beauty is legendary, undiminished by the tiny thorns that pierce her delicate skin. In spite of the thorns, the Scourge and the Schism, all elves hold her in awe. Unprotected elves and even other





Name-giver races seeing her for the first time speak of being frozen in place with fear and desire.

Alachia hails from Sereatha, the City of Spires, in the Western Kingdoms. She first came to prominence at Court during Queen Liara's reign, despite having no affiliation with any of the Wood's powerful ranelles. Most elves believe Alachia is some relation to Queen Liara's predecessor, Queen Failla, and that this heritage brought a certain influence with it. Whether through royal lineage or natural charisma and diplomatic skill, Alachia has been a force in Court politics since her earliest days in Wyrn Wood.

Alachia succeeded Queen Liara on the Rose Throne, to Wood-wide acclamation. The Elven Court unanimously supported her claim to the throne and pronounced her the rightful queen just days after Liara's death. She is the Wood's longest-reigning queen, and presided over the darkest period in elven history. Her refusal of the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage shattered elven unity, and the enactment of the Ritual of Thorns widened the breach beyond repair. The blood elves saw themselves as alone in the world, and their wounded hearts turned even more strongly toward their queen. Alachia underwent the Ritual along with her people, and their shared suffering formed a bond between the blood elves and their queen far stronger than the legendary love of the people for "good Queen Dallia." By insisting that only those who swore loyalty to her and the Elven Court were worthy to be elves, Alachia made her people see themselves as better than the "outcasts" who had "cravenly" abandoned Wyrn Wood. Even those blood elves who had questioned the Ritual of Thorns accepted this interpretation; Alachia's sheer force of personality united her people in the face of agonizing pain and the world's condemnation.

However courageous her actions, they stem from something other than altruism or genuine love for her subjects. Alachia's primary goal is getting and keeping personal power. Her extraordinarily long lifespan has given her a knack for taking the long view, and she rarely makes decisions without carefully considering how they might affect her rule. She is a master at playing the Court's various factions against each other to maintain the delicate balance of power that best suits her. If a ranelle grows too influential for her tastes, Alachia quickly takes steps to diminish them—sometimes by merely chastising a prominent figure, in more drastic cases by dismissing one of the ranelle's consortis. Every tactic is designed to keep her in complete control.

Like a grand puppeteer pulling her subjects' strings, Alachia steers the Elven Court in the direction she wants it to go. Her habit of appointing and dismissing courtiers and councilors apparently on a whim is actually a carefully crafted strategy to ensure her continued dominance. She has honed the art of judging how and when to make changes to the power structure over centuries, and her skill has served her well throughout her reign.

Though many mistakenly believe her ignorant of certain goings-on in the Blood Wood, in fact little escapes Alachia's notice. Spies and informants throughout the forest keep her informed of almost all significant activity in the Wood—the few things that pass her by are almost always trivial. Alachia allows people to believe her uninformed when it suits her—especially those consortis and warders engaging in actions that might not meet with royal approval were they publicly known. The ongoing contact between Escalanas magicians and the Denairastas of Iopos, the illicit trade in the Southern Fringe being conducted by the Carithasca ranelle, and various experiments undertaken by the blood warders without Alachia's prior approval are just a few examples of the secrets the blood elves believe they are keeping from their queen. Alachia knows of all these activities and allows them to continue because it suits her needs. Should she change her mind, she will not hesitate to stop the perpetrators and punish them appropriately.

Alachia is vain to a fault, but her vanity is not a weakness. She is no fool, and centuries of intrigue have taught her discretion. She recognizes flattery for the empty thing it is, and though she expects a level of deference from her subjects that blurs the line between flattery and manners, she never allows her vanity to overcome her common sense. Anyone who attempts to manipulate her through flowery compliments risks an explosion of royal temper. Alachia never lets a sycophantic remark affect any significant decision; as she sees it, her subjects *should* flatter her without thought of anything in return. She sometimes flies into rages when addressed with empty praises; those who have seen such outbursts say that "only the Horrors are more terrifying." Those who hope to use her furies against her are likewise doomed to disappointment. Alachia has held power for too long to allow temper to lead her astray.

Only a handful of Name-givers dare to claim they truly know Alachia, and of those none would be wholly correct. The queen rarely confides in others lest she risk betrayal. She has pledged her heart to none who have courted her over the centuries, though she has kept several not-so-secret lovers. None of them lasted more than a few decades; those who endured longest had no political ambitions and just enough spirit to be interesting.

Her one real friend is Ethenia Carithasca, a companion of many centuries' standing since their earliest days in the Western Kingdoms. Ethenia has given Alachia her wholehearted support and personal affection throughout the queen's political career—but Alachia values even this friendship only so far as it helps her maintain her position. Alachia trusts Ethenia above all others because she knows Ethenia prefers to remain a power behind the throne, rather than to sit on it herself.





From her enthusiastic patronage of the arts to her flair for subtle manipulation, many at Court have noticed remarkable similarities between Alachia and Queen Failla. Like her predecessor, Alachia has excellent taste and values artistic skill highly. Since the end of the Scourge, she has done everything possible to foster the development of blood-elf culture. Those truly gifted at poetry, music or any other art will find that creating works in the queen's honor garners them riches and privilege beyond their expectations. Few courtiers openly compare Alachia to Failla, however, for fear of angering the queen by suggesting that she is merely following in another's footsteps.

Since arriving at Court more than six centuries ago, Alachia has not aged significantly. Her remarkably youthful appearance has given rise to whispers that she dabbles in life-prolonging magical rituals; some blood warders and consortis even insist that she is one of the so-called Great Elves, whose natural lifespans far outstrip that of the average elf. Alachia has warned the few who dared inquire not to do so again, but this has not quenched the curiosity of certain warders.

Though she would never admit it, Alachia sometimes secretly wishes that the elves had found a method of surviving the Scourge other than the Ritual of Thorns. The creeping corruption of the Forest's Heart threatens to destroy the forest, and Alachia's power along with it. Most of the time, however, the queen is content with the choice she made. The shared agonies of the Ritual solidified Alachia's power by earning her the fervent devotion of her subjects, in a way that nothing else could have. The thorns have also become just one more way for Alachia to control her people, by cutting them off from the rest of the world.

Alachia is known throughout the Wood as an accomplished magician, but few realize that her magical talents go far beyond the common Disciplines studied by adepts to the world over. Alachia is a master of magical arts long lost to history, including ancient ritual magic and the primal magic of Naming. Like dragon magic, Alachia's magical talent is integral to her being. It infuses everything about her, from her otherworldly beauty to her control over her people. In addition to this formidable natural gift, Alachia has pursued several Disciplines during her long life. She is a Twelfth Circle troubadour and an accomplished follower of the elemental and illusionist Disciplines, and possibly of other magician Disciplines as well.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 9 WIL: 10 CHA: 11

Alachia's Allure

Alachia's wondrous beauty is far more than skin-deep. She uses her mastery of magic to augment the natural impact of her pale complexion, fire-red hair and graceful

figure to create a vision of loveliness that keeps even the most jaded observer awake at night. She raises this intense feeling in Name-giver hearts through the Named spell Alachia's Allure, which she has cast on herself as a permanent spell effect. The spell forces any character first meeting Alachia, male or female, to make a Willpower Test against the queen's Charisma Step of 11. On an Average success, the character is so struck by Alachia's beauty that he or she can only respond when spoken to, and can take no actions against Alachia or her servants. An Excellent success allows a character more freedom, but the character still cannot act directly against the queen. Only an Extraordinary success allows the character to resist the spell's effects and act in any manner he or she wishes.

Characters who fail this test become paralyzed with adoration, and cannot take any action at all for 5 rounds. After the fifth round the effect wears off, and the character responds to Alachia as if he had achieved an Average success. In addition, a character who fails the test retains a deep admiration for the queen that can only be overcome by an Extraordinary success on a subsequent Charisma Test against the character's Social Defense.

THE SONGBIRDS

Over the past two decades, Alachia has enlisted several Unprotected elves, never more than two dozen at a time, to act as her spies in Barsaive and beyond. In recent years she has expanded the ranks of her so-called Songbirds with members of other Name-giver races: mostly humans and windlings, but also a few dwarfs and t'skrang. This spy network, led by the exiled blood warder Vistrosh, keeps Alachia informed on all kinds of events outside the Wood's borders, adding greatly to her power.

Elven Songbirds serve Alachia from loyalty, though she often rewards their devotion with magical items or knowledge, important information or payment in silver. Songbirds of other races serve her for reasons of their own—some out of greed, others out of admiration after meeting the queen face to face. Upon joining the fellowship, each Songbird swears a blood oath never to reveal the group's existence or connection to Alachia. Violating this powerful variation of the blood-sworn oath (p. 13, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**) means instant death.

The Songbirds operate all across Barsaive, in certain provinces of the Theran Empire, in Shosara and in Sereatha. Each member works alone, though they often travel with other adepts or adventurers. The Songbirds report to Alachia through various means, both magical and mundane. More conventional methods include carrier pigeons, messenger services and trade caravans that pass through the Southern Fringe; some Songbirds also use messenger spirits and spells. All of the Songbirds are adepts, most often thieves or scouts. Several are also illusionists and troubadours.





The Songbirds receive their assignments through an elaborate network of contacts, none of which leads back to Vistrosh. The former warder delivers orders through Brocher's Brood. Should anyone uncover a connection between the Brood and the Songbirds, they are likely to assume that Vistrosh is spying on Alachia's spies for his own nefarious purposes—which is exactly how Vistrosh wants it.

Vistrosh

Former blood warder Vistrosh carries the dubious distinction of being the only warder ever banished from Court and exiled from the forest. He currently leads Brocher's Brood, the second most powerful criminal gang in the thieves' city of Kratas (pp. 34–35, **Barsaive Gamemaster Book**). A member of the Carithasca ranelle before his exile, he has since renounced his kindred (who just as eagerly renounced him).

One popular explanation for Vistrosh's exile paints him as a former lover who deeply offended the queen; another accuses him of an attempt on Alachia's life. Neither tale is true, however. In fact, Vistrosh's banishment is an elaborate blind for a scheme known only to him and the queen. He was sent from the Wood—by Alachia's order and with her blessing—to serve as the leader of the Songbirds, Alachia's Barsaive-wide spy network. Vistrosh's true position is one of the elven queen's most closely guarded secrets; not even the senior Songbirds know their leader's identity.

As part of his cover, Vistrosh deluges Queen Alachia with letters in which he begs to be allowed to return to the Blood Wood. The letters frequently convey encoded messages, most often reports on recent activities in Barsaive and beyond. Vistrosh has proven invaluable in keeping Alachia informed of goings-on in Barsaive, including the arrival of the Theran behemoth at Lake Ban and the assassination of King Varulus III. Recent events have kept Vistrosh and the Songbirds especially busy watching the activities of the Theran Empire, House K'tenshin, operatives of the Iopan Holders of Trust and the growing ork nation. Vistrosh's most recent communication concerned the activities of Barsaive's great dragons, specifically their efforts to rescue a young girl kidnapped by Theran agents operating from the behemoth. Alachia ordered Vistrosh to discover where the Therans took the girl, but thus far he has had no success. (For more information on these events, see **Prelude to War: An Earthdawn Epic**.)

Like his fellow warders, Vistrosh is an accomplished magician. He has attained Eighth Circle in the illusionist and wizard Disciplines, and is also a Fifth Circle thief adept. Knowing that he would need to stay away from the Blood Wood indefinitely, Alachia devised a special spell for Vistrosh to keep the worst effects of wood longing at

bay; he deals with the tensions caused by the longing by taking them out on others in unpredictable ways.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 4 TOU: 6

PER: 8 WIL: 8 CHA: 8

CONSORTIS

Principal advisors and chancellors of the elven queen, the consortis are traditionally chosen from the five most prominent ranelles. On rare occasions a commoner may be appointed to this prestigious post, most often as a means of publicly snubbing one ranelle or another. Queen Failla, who created the consortis to defuse a potential rebellion, began with eight and gradually added to their number; her successor, Queen Liara, kept anywhere from four to fifteen consortis at different times during her reign. Queen Alachia has so far kept the number consistent at eight—one for each of the massive trees that supports the royal palace. Each consortis oversees different aspects of the Court and the government, though in many cases their spheres of influence overlap. The consortis live in elegant tree-homes, all located within a mile of the palace. While occupying these residences, each consortis must maintain the house and the tree at his or her personal expense.

Queen Failla created the consortis to give the ranelles a way of voicing their concerns, though she made no promise to heed them. Over the centuries, the position became something more; early in her reign, Queen Alachia often sought the counsel of her consortis before making policy. Though never apparently swayed by a dissenting majority among them, Alachia has tried to balance her rulings against the consortis' desires, thereby maintaining the balance of power in the Elven Court.

Since their founding, the consortis have served only as long as they remain in the queen's favor. Past queens frequently kept their consortis for several centuries; under the vain and mercurial Alachia, by contrast, many of them come and go with the seasons. Those who retain their positions for long have learned to play the game, flattering Alachia just enough to amuse her and keeping her well-informed of goings-on in the Wood while discreetly pursuing their own agendas. Though Alachia generally selects her consortis from among those who support her views, some who differ with her have managed to influence her thinking by choosing their words with care and speaking up at just the right time. Though Alachia has dismissed more than one consortis who was too quick to voice his own opinions, long-time consortis pride themselves on their skill at judging the royal mood. The chance of influencing the queen in their favor leads the ranelles to covet the position of consortis, despite its difficulties and risks.





CURRENT CONSORTIS

The end of the Scourge and the accompanying isolation of the Blood Wood brought the need for more conventional forms of government and administration, once again expanding the role of the consortis. Alachia has assigned each of them an area of responsibility, about which the consortis must keep the queen and Court suitably advised. In general, specific duties are based on each consortis's expertise as well as ranelle affiliation. In some instances, however, Alachia has deliberately set up a consortis to fail so that she may justifiably dismiss him. Though she has dismissed consortis on whim alone, having a concrete reason to do so lessens the risk of making her advisors into enemies.

Seven of Alachia's current consortis are members or affiliates of the five great ranelles; the remaining one hails from the Rasher ranelle, minor nobility native to the Western Border region. Of the five great ranelles, the Jae'Helastris and Carithasca both have two members among the consortis, while the Talshara, Daevenar and Escalanas each have only one. Because the Rasher are known allies of the Escalanas, many believe that Tonnaer Rasher's presence among the consortis strengthens the Escalanas ranelle's position. Alachia is aware of this connection and may have chosen Tonnaer Rasher because of it—or for some other reason of her own.

As always, this particular assortment of consortis reflects Alachia's efforts to appease the more vocal ranelle leaders and maintain the delicate balance of Elven Court politics. The Carithasca earned their second consortis appointment as compensation for their consistently unmet requests to open the Blood Wood's borders; the Jae'Helastris gained their second seat as a means of (at least temporarily) curbing their scheming. Many see the inclusion of Tonnaer Rasher as a backhanded way of granting the Escalanas ranelle two consortis positions, though others believe there is more to it than that. The prominence of the Escalanas among the blood warders gives them considerable clout at Court, and many question Alachia's motives for granting them still more potential influence.

The Talshara Ranelle

Representing the Talshara ranelle is Ilisa Willowby (*The Northern Reaches*, p. 80), a commoner who formerly served as scribe to Rhisiart Talshara, youngest son of the ranelle's current leader. She received the position in Rhisiart's place after he made several appalling social blunders at one of Queen Alachia's private dinner parties. Though originally appointed consortis to teach Rhisiart a lesson, Ilisa has since proved to be a wise choice.

In keeping with longstanding tradition, Ilisa advises the queen on all matters pertaining to the security of the Wood's borders. Her duties put her in regular contact with Erithander Talshara, the leader of her ranelle, and with Takaris as liaison for the blood warders. Her dealings with

the two men have made Ilisa sharply aware of existing tensions between the blood warders and the Talshara concerning how best to defend the Blood Wood, and she is swiftly learning how to maintain the delicate balance between them.

The Escalanas Ranelle

Orlando Escalanas (*The Western Border*, p. 93), a former blood warder and close confidant of ranelle leader Kethos Escalanas, represents the Escalanas ranelle. Orlando resigned his position among the blood warders in order to serve his ranelle and his queen in another way, and his past associations make him ideal for the role Alachia has given him. Orlando advises the queen and other consortis on magical matters, particularly those concerning the growth of the corrupted Forest's Heart. He keeps in constant touch with the blood warders at Court, most often Aithne Oakforest and Nirame Jae'Helastris. He also keeps an eye on the doings of blood warder Preystia Tales, who is currently seeking a cure for the creeping taint. Orlando secretly sends regular reports of his findings to Kethos, thereby keeping the senior Escalanas informed of Tales's progress.

The Daevenar Ranelle

Tarin Daevenar (p. 49) represents the Daevenar ranelle. Conservative and somewhat close-minded, Tarin staunchly supports Alachia's policy of isolation. He sees outside influences as inherently damaging to the elven people, and is often at odds with the Carithasca consortis over their unending petitions to open the borders.

Perhaps out of a perverse sense of humor, Queen Alachia has made the insular Tarin responsible for overseeing relations with nations and powers outside the Blood Wood, including Throal and major cities in Barsaive, as well as distant realms such as Shosara and Sereatha. This duty constantly throws Tarin together with visitors to the Elven Court, most notably ambassadors and emissaries from other lands. In spite of his dislike of foreign influences, Tarin has developed friendships of sorts with several regular visitors—among them Jorealla, the ambassador from Shosara, and Mirial and Eyorgicus, the son and daughter of Throal's Ambassador General. Tarin also oversees a small staff of ambassadors who represent the Blood Wood's interests outside the forest. The best known of these emissaries is Geverian Half-Smile (p. 71, *Throal: The Dwarf Kingdom*), an unprotected elf who serves as ambassador to the Kingdom of Throal. Geverian has formed a close friendship with the newly crowned King Neden (pp. 50–51, *Throal: The Dwarf Kingdom* and p. 46, *Prelude to War*).

The Carithasca Ranelle

Lord Haeleon Carithasca and Gealleon Sea'lish (*The Southern Fringe*, p. 108) represent the Carithasca ranelle.





Haeleon is the nephew of Ethenia Carithasca, the ranelle's current matriarch, and the longest-standing member of the current consortis. Gealleon, a recent appointee, is the oldest daughter of one of the ranelle's prominent elders. She took her place a few years ago, just before the appointment of Tonnaer Rasher.

Lord Haeleon, by far the more moderate of the two, advocates opening the forest's borders gradually, and only after convincing Alachia that doing so is in her best interests. This go-slow approach has earned him angry complaints from less patient ranelle members, but Haeleon's years of experience and his formidable aunt's wholehearted support of his strategy have enabled him to weather such storms easily.

By contrast, Gealleon is little more than a shrill mouthpiece for her ranelle's interests. Though all the consortis use their positions to promote their own ranelle's desires, most also consider the overall good of the Blood Wood. Gealleon puts the Carithasca ranelle's goals ahead of almost all other concerns. She wants the Wood's borders open immediately, if not sooner, and often loudly argues with Haeleon over his incremental approach. Alachia finds their frequent disagreements amusing as well as convenient; by constantly being at loggerheads, the two Carithasca greatly reduce their own influence among the consortis.

Haeleon and Gealleon share responsibility for overseeing the flow of trade through the forest and advising the queen and consortis on matters relating to it. Several of the minor ranelles in the Southern Fringe who conduct the bulk of the trade report to them; the consortis in turn report the status of trade caravans and shipments to the Court. Lord Haeleon has become especially adept at defusing the occasional awkward sessions at which the subject of the black market arises. Both Carithasca consortis do whatever they can to keep the queen and their fellow consortis from ordering an investigation; should irrefutable proof of their illegal trading activities be uncovered, the Carithasca ranelle stands to lose a great deal.

The Jae'Helastris Ranelle

Larrin and Tiriame Jae'Helastris (p. 47) represent the Jae'Helastris ranelle. These two have both held their seats for several years, the former ever since Mithran Jae'Helastris (p. 46) stepped down after the birth of his daughter. Larrin and Tiriame embody their ranelle's affinity for politics, playing the diplomatic game with ease and flair. They support or denounce petitions by other consortis as needed to maintain a balance of power that ensures them strong influence with queen and Court. This changeability makes the Jae'Helastris the least consistent of the consortis, but also often the least troublesome to Alachia personally. However, their inveterate taste for scheming occasionally causes the queen some inconvenience. By

granting them two consortis, Alachia hopes to encourage the Jae'Helastris to use their influence more overtly. Ever watchful of these born intriguers, Alachia has ordered spies to monitor Jae'Helastris activities in the Court and elsewhere in the Blood Wood.

To date, neither Larrin nor Tiriame has done much to distinguish them from other members of their ranelle. Larrin is Mithran's eldest son, and was appointed consortis on his father's recommendation. Tiriame is the older sister of Nirame Jae'Helastris (p. 46), a talented blood warder.

The duties of the Jae'Helastris consortis complement their political skills. Larrin maintains lines of communication between the various settlements of the Blood Wood, keeping track of the nomadic communities' changing locations and also keeping in touch with towns and villages. A large staff of scribes and messengers, most of them fellow Jae'Helastris, aid him in these duties. He must often coordinate his efforts with members of the Carithasca ranelle, whose trade caravans frequently serve as a forest-wide messenger service.

Tiriame maintains relations between the various ranelles, minor and major. She mediates disputes between courtiers from different ranelles and ensures that each ranelle's concerns are brought to the queen's attention. Though Alachia listens only to those she wishes to hear, she nonetheless insists that Tiriame keep her fully informed in order to keep up the appearance of equity among the Wood's noble families. Tiriame makes every effort to remain objective, but loyalty to her own ranelle and to Alachia herself often gets in the way.

The Rasher Ranelle

Tonnaer Rasher represents the Rasher ranelle, a minor ranelle from the Western Border closely allied with the powerful Escalanas. The newest and least experienced of the consortis, Tonnaer has so far followed Orlando Escalanas's lead in most matters. In a recent private audience with him, Alachia encouraged him to keep his own ranelle's concerns and needs uppermost in his mind. He has yet to follow her counsel in practice, but has sought advice from his ranelle's leaders concerning just how far to support the Escalanas ranelle. Alachia has given him no specific responsibilities yet, apparently to give him time to get used to his position.

Though many courtiers see Tonnaer's appointment as a maneuver to benefit the Escalanas ranelle, the truth lies elsewhere. The ranelle's home village of Kelling is the permanent settlement closest to the Forest's Heart, and Alachia finds the Rasher ranelle's expertise invaluable in dealing with the hazards of that corrupted region. In addition to providing the queen with first-hand accounts of the Heart, Tonnaer Rasher's status gives his ranelle an opportunity to gain influence and keep the Escalanas ranelle from dominating the gathering of True wood in the western woodlands.





THE JAE'HELASTRI RANELLE

Among the great ranelles, few know the steps of the Court dance as well as the Jae'Helastris. Most courtiers must learn the art of politics, but it seems to come naturally to these elves. Within a short period of time, the Jae'Helastris have established themselves as an influential ranelle at Court. Two of the current consortis hail from this ranelle, and countless other advisors in and around the Elven Court trace their lineage to the Jae'Helastris by blood or carefully planned marriage.

Unlike many of the other ranelles, the Jae'Helastris have no lands to which they lay claim. The Jae'Helastris consider themselves traders of a single, vital commodity: information. They gather, exploit and barter it with unmatched cunning and skill. While some might count their lack of material wealth as a weakness, the Jae'Helastris see it as an advantage. Unencumbered by ancestral lands, local tenants, the maintenance of caravan routes or petty provincial politics, they can devote their full attention to Court goings-on and thereby gain an edge over their contemporaries.

The Jae'Helastris make it their business to know everything about everyone. Should anyone call this practice blackmail, the ranelle would take great offense; after all, they have yet to actively use their knowledge to force anyone's hand. However, their cache of secrets tends to make their enemies think twice before moving against them. The threat of blackmail is as effective a deterrent as the act.

The Jae'Helastris have an uncanny knack for learning their rivals' secrets—a talent variously attributed to magic, a mammoth network of spies, and liberal use of bribes. In fact they use each of these approaches, though their reputation somewhat overstates their power. Anyone with a guilty conscience about something assumes that the Jae'Helastris know the truth, whether they actually do or not—and a clear conscience is a rare possession among those who engage in politics.

Like the other great ranelles, the Jae'Helastris live in most areas of the Blood Wood, looking after their interests away from the Elven Court. Most members of the Jae'Helastris ranelle live within a half-day's journey of the Court, in the village of Triammelle (p. 60). From this village, ranelle leader Mithran Jae'Helastris and his fellows spin their wide-ranging webs of political intrigue.

HISTORY

The Jae'Helastris cannot claim the illustrious history of many other ranelles, but in a short span of time (by elven reckoning) they have become an influential player in Blood Wood politics. They first came to prominence in the years just before the Scourge, and their unwavering support of Alachia helped maintain the Court's stability during that difficult period. Unlike the other great ranelles, who trace their roots to families influential in elven politics for genera-

tions, the Jae'Helastris come from comparatively humble stock. They started out as a small family of mediocre artisans in a village not far from the palace, and through strategic marriages and alliances became a force to be reckoned with.

Many of the ranelle's current influential members became Jae'Helastris through marriage. A standing joke around the Elven Court has it that the surest way for a commoner to gain a place at Court is to seduce a Jae'Helastris daughter. Jest aside, marriage to scions of the Jae'Helastris has brought several ambitious and politically astute newcomers to the forefront of elven politics.

The real founder of the family fortunes was Cyrenal Jae'Helastris, a blood warder of mediocre talents by comparison to his fellows. Though he never lacked enthusiasm for things magical, he could not master the more complex arts. Seemingly destined never to achieve real power among the warders, the ever-ambitious Cyrenal looked elsewhere.

As the Blood Wood slowly rebuilt itself in the aftermath of the Scourge, Cyrenal took note of the widening gap between the blood warders and the queen's prominent advisors at Court. Neither group fully understood or trusted the other, and each wished to preserve its own hold on power in the face of the other's influence. Cyrenal took it upon himself to serve as a link between the two, ostensibly to aid in the smooth running of the Elven Court. His unofficial actions as liaison placed him in the perfect position to learn more about the warders and the consortis than either side could hope to discover.

Working between the two sides taught Cyrenal two valuable lessons, both of which he used in guiding the Jae'Helastris to their current position of power. First, he learned the true value of information in the Elven Court—especially sensitive information. Second, he mastered the fine art of playing opposing factions against each other. Bright enough to recognize a path to power when he saw it, Cyrenal made himself a peerless information broker. Over time the blood warders came to see him as the best source of information on the consortis, while the consortis and other courtiers saw him as the best source of information on the blood warders. Using the secrets of both sides to curry favor with the other, Cyrenal soon rose to a position of significant influence. His family took their cue from his success; they learned all they could from others, encouraging gossip and picking up secrets wherever they could. Before long, few ranelles dared openly oppose them for fear they would reveal what they knew.

Upon Cyrenal's death, his nephew Mithran succeeded him as leader of the ranelle. A chip off his uncle's block, Mithran is a sly, cunning and altogether untrustworthy elf. He heads a council of eight older ranelle members who maintain and share the family's storehouse of secrets. This group, called *Respitish od Telenetish* (Those Who Listen and Learn), includes one Jae'Helastris consortis, Tiriamé





Jae'Helastris, and her sister, blood warder Niriamae Jae'Helastris. It also includes their mother, Mithran's sister Joella.

Jae'Helastris spies and operatives never write down the information they gather, lest the records be discovered. Instead, Jae'Helastris spymasters maintain an oral tradition, sharing their knowledge with others only as necessary. Each of the eight Respitish od Telenetish is responsible for ferreting out the secrets of a given ranelle or ranelles, or some other influential group such as the blood warders, exolashers or consortis.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Jae'Helastris influence stretches nearly everywhere in the Blood Wood. Ranelle members include blood warders, consortis and other prominent figures.

Mithran Jae'Helastris

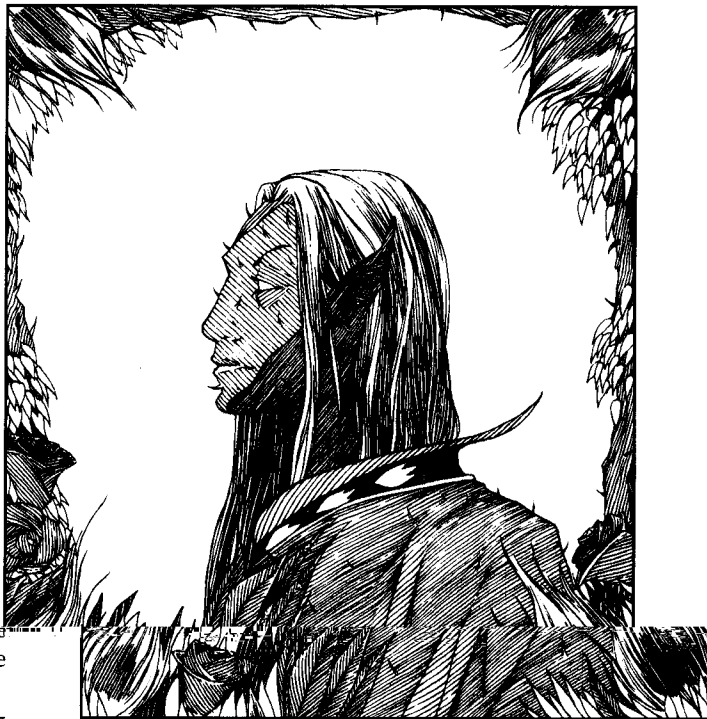
Aging, but still formidable, Mithran Jae'Helastris is the current leader of the ranelle. He served as a consortis for almost forty years, but stepped down in favor of his son

Irrin. Mithran has not returned from his journey since then, he has overseen the ranelle's activities from his home near the Court, in the village of Triammelle.

Mithran's fair hair is beginning to show streaks of silver, but his eyes remain as sharp and bright as cut emeralds. Though something of an epicurean, he has remained in fine shape partly because of his active social life. He strikes observers as easygoing, more interested in enjoying life's finer things than increasing his personal prestige at Court. This image belies a mercenary streak, but on the whole Mithran is an affable gent toward anyone who does not cross him. Those who end up on his bad side find out the hard way that the charming courtier can also be ruthless.

Mithran has appeared more and more often in Alachia's company of late, especially since the death of his wife. Some of his relatives see a connection, but Mithran and Alachia are no more than occasional dinner companions at present. Whispers among the queen's ladies that Alachia wants to have a child are spreading like wildfire through the Court, and some gossips have suggested that Mithran may be the chosen father. If true, his resulting high status could substantially increase the Jae'Helastris' already significant influence.

Currently, Mithran is most concerned with keeping younger members of his ranelle in check. They are a little too eager to break rules and could jeopardize all he and his generation have worked for. Like Cyrenal before him, Mithran knows the virtue of moderation and discretion, especially when dealing with other influential courtiers. Knowing when and where to set limits is a difficult art to learn, and many of the younger Jae'Helastris have yet to master it. Mithran fears that headstrong youngsters may find their efforts backfiring unless they learn to temper



their actions with consideration of the possible consequences. For example, many younger Jae'Helastris wish to open the Blood Wood's borders so that they can spread their political influence beyond the forest. Mithran sympathizes with their desires, but knows that voicing it too strongly could easily provoke a backlash from the consortis or even the queen. If it suited her purposes, Alachia might use such an outcry to discredit the entire ranelle. Mithran wants to avoid this at all costs, and is trying to convince his younger relatives to bide their time.

Mithran is a Ninth Circle troubadour.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 7 WIL: 7 CHA: 8

Niriamae Jae'Helastris

Few people expected Niriamae Jae'Helastris to go far when she announced her intention to join the blood warders upon coming of age. Almost none of her relatives had shown any significant aptitude for magic, let alone the talent necessary to become a member of that illustrious fellowship. And the power of the Escalanas ranelle among the warders made opportunities for other ranelles that much harder to come by. Niriamae was determined, however, and in time used the charm common to her kinfolk and her own formidable magical talents to win a place among the blood warders. She has since used it to gather compro-





missing information on many people, including several of her fellow wardens. Only her beauty and charm have kept many from realizing that she owes her rapid advancement in the ranks to secrets other than magical ones.

Recently, Nirame has become one of Alachia's advisors on magical matters. This responsibility has put her in close contact with Aithne Oakforest and with Orlando Escalanas, the consortis charged with advising the queen and Court on such matters as the growing corruption of the Forest's Heart. Nirame is also one of three blood wardens bonded with the spectral willows that guard the Wood's astral borders.

Like her uncle Mithran, Nirame's greatest talents lie in the political arena. Some say she is a likely candidate for a seat among the consortis in the near future. Nirame is an accomplished Eighth Circle elemental and wizard adept.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 7 WIL: 8 CHA: 6

Larrin Jae'Helastris

Larrin Jae'Helastris, Mithran's eldest son, replaced him some years ago as consortis. Though the other ranelles raised a predictable ruckus at the notion of a second Jae'Helastris consortis, Alachia accepted Mithran's recommendation and appointed Larrin anyway. He has since been given the job of keeping communications open between the Court and the various settlements in the Blood Wood, a task well suited to the Jae'Helastris's aptitudes and goals.

Larrin is his father's son, and clearly puts Jae'Helastris interests first and foremost. The interests of the queen and Court rank just slightly second. Larrin is not an adept.

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 6 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

Tirame Jae'Helastris

Tirame Jae'Helastris was the youngest elf ever to become a consortis upon her appointment twenty years ago. Intelligent and extremely observant, she quickly learned the ins and outs of Court politics. Since her cousin Larrin's appointment to consortis rank, Tirame has taken to teaching him the skills she has learned so well.

Tirame is responsible for bringing the concerns of all the ranelles to the attention of her fellow consortis and the queen, a duty that often grants her access to just the kind of information the Jae'Helastris find most useful. She cultivates a sympathetic, almost motherly manner that leads people to tell her just about anything, in spite of her family's reputation as inveterate schemers. More than one inexperienced or naive courtier has been heard to call Tirame "the only honest Jae'Helastris ever born."

Before entering politics, Tirame considered joining the wardens. She reached Fifth Circle in the swordmaster Discipline before abandoning it to take up the troubadour Discipline, in which she has reached Sixth Circle.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 6 WIL: 5 CHA: 7

GOALS AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

At present, the Jae'Helastris want to keep doing what they've done for the past century: quietly amassing information on other prominent members of the Elven Court. To this end, the ranelle's leaders want to maintain the status quo in the Wood. They want tense situations defused, the common people kept in their place, and above all, Alachia kept content with things as they stand. The Jae'Helastris will continue to act as mediators and liaisons between different factions at Court until they feel the time is right to join others in pressing for open borders.

Some younger ranelle members are especially eager to ply their talents in the wider political arena outside the Blood Wood. While remaining careful not to flagrantly violate Alachia's strict rules regarding contact with the outside world, the Jae'Helastris are already beginning to marshal forces for the day when the denizens of the Blood Wood rejoin the rest of civilization. The few troubadours and emissaries who successfully venture into the Blood Wood have found a warm welcome at the Jae'Helastris estates, where the residents are especially hungry for news from faraway places. A few younger-generation Jae'Helastris have even journeyed outside the Wood on occasional missions for the Court.

Adepts traveling through the Blood Wood may find the Jae'Helastris invaluable allies, provided they are willing to share any gossip they know about notable foreigners. Those with information on current events in Barsaive and Thera will find a particularly warm welcome. On the other hand, anyone who places too much trust in their Jae'Helastris hosts may find themselves rudely shown the door when they have nothing left to offer.

In recent years the Jae'Helastris have made a point of whittling away at the immense power of the Escalanas ranelle. Taking advantage of Kethos Escalanas's recent banishment from the Elven Court, the Jae'Helastris have capitalized on the temporary weakening of Escalanas influence. They are spreading rumors through the Wood about extensive use of "dark magic" by Escalanas magicians, and several stories also hint at other matters involving the Escalanas of which Alachia would likely disapprove.

One potentially valuable piece of ammunition in this campaign is Nirame Jae'Helastris's recent discovery of a long-ago incident involving shimmerwine, a magical liquor created by an Escalanas magician that dulled the





pain of the Ritual of Thorns. Despite concerns that relieving the unrelenting pain might invite Horrors to invade those who drank the liquor, many Escalanas used shimmerwine to gain temporary relief. Only when a prominent Escalanas magician died, presumably at the hands of a Horror, did the practice end. However, rather than telling the blood warders or Alachia the truth, the Escalanas ranelle concealed the cause of death and destroyed the remaining vats of shimmerwine, along with the recipe.

Mithran and the other Jae'Helastri elders have yet to decide what to do with this juicy story. At present, they plan to sit on it until circumstances dictate otherwise. Even though the incident occurred more than two hundred years ago, the significance of a Horror getting past the defenses of the Ritual and slaying a powerful magician does not diminish with time. As the Jae'Helastri themselves might put it, if the Escalanas were willing to conceal something so terrible from the queen, what other dire secrets have they failed to report?

THE DAEVENAR RANELLE

Widely renowned as the finest artisans and craftsmen in the Blood Wood, the Daevenar are one of the oldest and most influential great ranelles. Their love of the arts has made them favorites of elven queens since early in the reign of Queen Failla, and Queen Alachia seems to hold them in especially high esteem. Their ability to celebrate the Blood Wood, its people and its queen in music, images and words has earned them the respect of their peers and a place near to the heart of the Elven Court. Alachia's goodwill toward this ranelle has led her to appoint between one and three Daevenar consortis at all times. The current consortis is the ranelle's leader, Tarin Daevenar.

Should the Daevenar seek to exploit their advantages to the fullest, they might well come close to taking political control over the Court. Fortunately for the other ranelles, the Daevenar are content for now with exercising more subtle influence. The Daevenar rarely express their views in open council; they prefer to convey their feelings through their artwork. This strategy has the added political benefit of selective ambiguity; it is far easier to attack a political rival's speeches than to go after him for what he *may* be saying through a painting or a satirical poem.

The Daevenar value artistic ability more than any other trait, and this ranelle has produced more than its share of famous artists and craftsmen throughout elven history. Daevenar artisans tend to make elegantly simple, useful items, from their sought-after swords and bows to cutlery and furniture to lanterns and chariots. By contrast, purely artistic creations are intricate and often opulent. Daevenar artists include painters, musicians, writers and sculptors in wood and stone. The latter are the least common, as stone is not abundant in the Blood Wood. Daevenar stonecarvers have been known to spend signifi-

cant sums of money to acquire marble and other types of stone from beyond the forest's borders—but only after seeking royal dispensation for such otherwise forbidden trade.

Staunch Daevenar support of Alachia's defiance of Thera has its roots in the ranelle's conviction that each individual must be the master of his or her own destiny. To command or control another, especially by enslavement, is a greater evil than any other. The average Daevenar elf sees the Therans in much the same way as many other Name-givers in Barsaive see blood elves: as the personification of corruption. The Daevenar insist that the Empire's thirst for power, subjugation of other lands and common practice of slavery have corrupted it beyond redemption.

This enshrinement of individual rights seems to run directly counter to the ranelle's other bedrock principle: unquestioning loyalty to the Rose Throne and its occupant. The effort to rationalize support for a queen who seeks to control her people's lives as tightly as Alachia does has led to several disputes within the walls of the family home, especially as creeping sentiment against continuing the Ritual of Thorns keeps rising throughout the Wood. Ultimately, however, most prominent Daevenar believe that Alachia has done the best possible job of protecting her people in an impossible situation. She has not ordered them into armies to wage war, nor enslaved them like the hated Therans. Each individual elf remains free to pursue his or her own path—and Alachia only prevents her subjects from leaving the Blood Wood for the good of her people as a whole. As the Daevenar see it, the elven queen must above all preserve the way of life the elves have always known. Theirs is the oldest and most advanced civilization in the world, and therefore must survive. And if that means the queen must demand difficult sacrifices from the elven people, so be it.

Most of the Daevenar live in the village of Se'vianna, the ranelle's ancestral home, located roughly two hours' walk from the palace. Some Daevenar elves also live in the Northern Reaches and the Southern Fringe.

HISTORY

The Daevenar have been prominent at the Elven Court since the first days of Queen Failla's reign. According to family tradition, the ranelle first came to power when Queen Failla commissioned one of its founders, the noted woodcarver Tilyria Daevenar, to make her Rose Throne. Ever since that time, the Daevenar name has been a byword for fine craftsmanship and unswerving loyalty to the elven queen. The ranelle's influence has waxed and waned to a degree over the centuries, but they have never been without some political influence.

Though many have dismissed them as a collection of head-in-the-clouds poets and dreamers, the Daevenar ranelle has had more influence over affairs at the Elven Court than most commoners—and even some other





ranelles—realize. They count several heroes in their history, from the renowned weaponsmith and swordmaster Merwyn Daevenar of Queen Liara's reign to Baltana Daevenar, who distinguished herself by her skill with a bow during the Battle of Sejanus at Kaer Eidolon. Their most important contribution, however, came in the aftermath of the Ritual of Thorns. During that dark time, their artwork helped maintain the morale of a people undergoing a painful and frightening transition.

The trauma of the Ritual made many elves question their loyalty for the first time. Quite a few saw themselves then as their Unprotected brethren did later—as forever changed, terribly altered from what elves had been for centuries. The sculptures, portraits and ballads created by Daevenar artists in the years following the Scourge helped the blood elves to see themselves as a people made strong by pain, with a grace that the thorns only enhanced. The Ritual had not marred them, but transformed them into something better than they had been. Unlike other Name-givers, they need not live every moment in fear of the Horrors, wondering when their shelters would fail. They alone were safe, their existence lonely but noble. This inspiring portrait kept the folk of the Blood Wood from succumbing to despair during those first years, giving them the hope necessary to survive.

Nowadays, many blood elves consider the Daevenar ranelle to be the Wood's artistic voice. This influence, combined with the queen's favoritism, ensure the ranelle a place at the Elven Court for many years to come.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Despite the Daevenar ranelle's strong artistic bent, several prominent members have flourished in other fields. The present leader of the blood warders, Preystia Tales, is a Daevenar (see p. 52). The ranelle also counts members among the consortis, the wardens, the Songbirds and even the exolashers.

Tarin Daevenar

The best-known Daevenar at Court is Tarin Daevenar, consortis and leader of the ranelle. Many courtiers saw his appointment to the consortis three decades ago as one of Alachia's famous whims, but he has firmly entrenched himself as a trusted advisor to the queen. Court residents are often inclined to dismiss him as a political lightweight, judging him by the intricate embroidery on his coat more than by his actions. But however much of a Court fashion-setter Tarin may be, his influence runs deeper than many people know. His colleagues are sometimes too prone to assume that Tarin's artistic background predisposes him to fits of temper, a misjudgment he uses to his advantage.

Tarin is among the most conservative of Alachia's consortis, and the strongest supporter of her policy of isolation. He sees t'skrang, orks, trolls and humans as purely

negative influences, and only grudgingly allows that the blood elves might have something to learn from the dwarfs of Throal. The only exceptions to isolation of which Tarin even vaguely approves are visits by elves from Shosara and Sereatha, whom Tarin wishes to bring back under the guidance of the Elven Court. His willingness to deal with these Unprotected elves may stem from a meeting with a Sereathan emissary Named Caimbueul, who impressed Tarin on his recent visit to Court.

In what many regard as a fit of perverse humor, Queen Alachia has made Tarin responsible for advising her and the Court on relations with outside nations: principally Shosara and Sereatha, Barsaive at large and the Theran Empire. In fact, this apparently strange assignment shows careful thought. Tarin's strong objections to outside contact ensures that only the most determined foreign nations will ever convince him to suggest that the queen establish formal relations with them.

Tarin's conservatism does not extend to spiritual beliefs. He counts himself as Dae'mistisha, a free Follower, and currently follows the Path of Sages. In his youth he was considered one of the finest troubadours in the Blood Wood. Though he no longer diligently pursues his Discipline, he remains one of the most gifted troubadours among the Daevenar ranelle.

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 5 TOU: 6

PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 8

Baltana Daevenar

One of the few Daevenar elves to excel at martial skills, Baltana served until recently with the largely Talshara force stationed at Kaer Eidolon. A graduate of the Grove of Thorns, she was a warden before her assignment to the Serpent River fortress. Her expertise as a scout and archer served her well at the Battle of Sejanus; together with two t'skrang soldiers, she infiltrated the Ishkarat fortress at Lake Vors shortly before the battle and reported the Ishkarat attack plans to Kaer Eidolon's commanders.

This act of courage and cunning brought Baltana to the attention of Erithander Talshara and the queen. At Erithander's request, Baltana was appointed an exolasher, a position she still holds. Baltana is a Sixth Circle scout and Fifth Circle archer adept.

Attributes

DEX: 9 STR: 6 TOU: 6

PER: 8 WIL: 6 CHA: 5

GOALS AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Unlike some other ranelles, the Daevenar have no specific goals beyond serving their queen and the Court. They are among the most vocal supporters of a united elven peo-





ple with the Blood Wood as its guiding center, just as it used to be in the old days. Most of the politically-minded Daevenar oppose opening the Wood's borders to all comers; many of them also see the alliance with the t'skrang as potentially disastrous to blood-elven culture in the Southern Fringe. In place of such "foreign entanglements," the Daevenar advocate increased contact with Shosara and Sereatha. Like Tarin Daevenar, many of them hope to bring those elven nations back into the fold of the Elven Court.

One of the few official contacts between Shosara and the Blood Wood in recent years has been a cultural exchange, first suggested by the Daevenar ranelle. Artists from the Blood Wood have journeyed to Shosara to study under master artisans there, while five young Shosarans have come to the village of Se'vianna in the Blood Wood to study under Daevenar artists. Sponsors of the exchange on both sides hope it will help bring the two nations closer together, though each secretly believes the other will come around to their way of thinking. Thus far, the exchange has pointed out both common ground and differences between the two nations, so long Separated from each other.

BLOOD WARDERS

Ever since their creation during the reign of Queen Failla, the warders have existed to preserve the Wood from Theran slavers, enemy armies, Horrors and anything else that might threaten it. Once, they were warrior magicians who guarded the Wood from invaders and trespassers and kept travelers safe within the forest. Over the years, however, the warders' role evolved until their magical talents outweighed everything else. As magic took more and more precedence, the warders began to share other protective duties with the Talshara ranelle, who currently control the wardens and run the military outposts that surround the forest. However, the warders still consider the defense of the Wood to be their domain. Officially, the wardens and the outpost commanders report to Blood Warder Takaris (p. 54). Takaris is also a member of the Talshara ranelle, a relationship that helps defuse the occasional tension between the warders and the Talshara over issues of authority.

The blood warders practice all types of magic, including spell magic of all four magician Disciplines and unusual methods of enchanting and summoning. Since the Scourge, they have placed a particular emphasis on blood magic. Several blood warders follow two or more magician Disciplines, and some pursue other Disciplines as well. In addition, the most senior blood warders employ blood magic to extend their lifespans, a practice kept secret from all but Queen Alachia.

Even their fellow elves see the blood warders as an arrogant lot, and most other Name-givers consider them outright racists. The warders believe without question that



Protected elves are inherently superior to their Unprotected brethren, and as far above other Name-giver races as Name-givers are above insects. They see those who submitted to Theran rule as the price for safety from the Scourge as weaklings without honor. They believe that blood elves are the only true survivors of the Scourge, because they adapted to meet the challenge rather than debasing themselves at the Therans' feet and hiding away in abject terror.

Respected and feared throughout the Blood Wood for their knowledge of magical arts, the blood warders are simultaneously one of Alachia's greatest strengths and her greatest weakness. Their magic has kept the Blood Wood alive and helped Alachia cement her power within it, but possibly at a higher price than the queen realizes. Recently, the warders have begun to assume more autonomy, reporting their actions to the queen after the fact rather than seeking her prior approval. So far they have not overstepped their bounds, but many courtiers fear they will do so. Some consortis have even advised Alachia to curb the warders' power. For the time being, however, Alachia finds their loyalty and their research valuable enough to overlook such minor transgressions. Most elves at Court believe that the warders must be performing some vital task, or the queen would surely punish them for disobeying her edicts. A few courtiers of long standing, among





them Haeleon Carithasca, have privately voiced the opinion that Alachia doesn't care what the blood warders do, as long as they don't threaten her position.

ORIGINS

The Queen's Warders, from whom the blood warders descend, were created early in Queen Failla's reign to maintain the wilderness around the queen's palace, keep the forest paths safe for travelers and traders and act as unseen defenders against intruders. Darelton Escalanas, then leader of the Escalanas ranelle, first proposed the formation of an order of warrior magicians to protect Wyrms Wood and the Elven Court. Though some questioned his motives, even the most determined skeptics could only praise the warders' success at their chosen task. Over the years, the warders won praise from the queen and others for their discretion and subtlety. The inhabitants of Wyrms Wood rarely saw them unless an intruder appeared. Any who dared trespass were swiftly dispatched by the warders' martial and magical skills.

Soon, magic took precedence over combat as the warders engaged in various experiments aimed at extending their power to safeguard the Wood. The few protests made by courtiers at their increasingly esoteric researches fell on deaf ears. Queen Failla gave the warders permission to inquire into anything that might better protect her people and their home, and this hands-off approach initially reaped great rewards. The warders' increasingly sophisticated use of magic helped them with everything from keeping the forest trails clear of weeds to communicating over long distances through magical bonds with the trees. As time passed, the warders extended their research into more arcane areas, some of which had little connection to their everyday duties. Among these side roads were nethermancy and blood magic—lines of inquiry for which at least some warders half-expected royal censure. To their surprise, Queen Failla told them to continue their studies and even suggested new areas of research. At the same time, the queen granted Teharrillon Talshara permission to form a new ranelle, which soon earned a reputation for military prowess and gradually took over the day-to-day task of protecting the forest's borders.

Some years later, the warders petitioned Queen Failla for an isolated place in which to conduct their research. With her blessing they founded Tesrae k'Ailiu, the Citadel of Magic, which became their home and a center of magical research (*The Forest's Heart*, p. 64). In Tesrae k'Ailiu, the warders' research into blood magic began in earnest.

THE WARDERS AND THE SCOURGE

When word of the coming Scourge reached Wyrms Wood, Queen Alachia ordered the warders to discover a way to withstand the Horrors. She had learned through her own sources of the Thera Rites of Protection and Passage, and resolved never to accept the Therans' terms

for their aid. It remained up to the warders to devise other protections if the Wood was to survive.

Various groups of warders pursued different avenues of research, from elemental warding to shifting the Wood onto the astral plane. Though they ultimately rejected the latter as too problematic, they did create what were Named Longing Rings for the Thera outpost of Parlainth, which had chosen to leave the physical world; the rings would ensure its return when the Scourge was over. For Wyrms Wood, the warders chose to create a vast wooden kaer in which the entire population could ride out the Scourge. Alachia was delighted with this solution, and backed it over the objections of some warders who warned that such a shelter might not withstand repeated Horror assaults. As work progressed on the ritual spells needed to complete the kaer, the folk of Wyrms Wood migrated to the Forest's Heart and the lands around the Citadel of Magic, which would sit at the kaer's center.

The wooden shelter remained intact for nearly two hundred years. As the Scourge's third century dawned, however, the kaer's wards began to fail. Horrors began to slip inside, maiming and killing wherever they went. The queen commanded the warders to strengthen the kaer or find other methods of protecting the forest and the elves from the Horrors' growing power.

One group, led by senior warder Kethos Escalanas, experimented with blood magic and discovered the rite that would evolve into the Ritual of Thorns. Revulsion at the notion of permanent disfigurement led Alachia to reject this ritual, and so the warders pursued other options. Tragically, all of them failed. Warder Lysarin Greenbranch, unfortunately Horror-touched, blended True fire with plant spirits and created the deadly fire birches (*Flora and Fauna*, p. 134) that still threaten woodland life. Another failed experiment, with a minor parasitic Horror, came close to destroying Wyrms Wood—but the massive rite of blood magic with which the warders undid their terrible handiwork pointed the way toward the final, drastic act that saved the Wood and its denizens.

As the wooden kaer's collapse loomed ever closer, Kethos Escalanas approached the queen with a radical proposal. He suggested combining a blood-magic rite to reName the Wood with the original Ritual of Thorns intended to safeguard the elves. The reNaming would reshape the Wood's True pattern, while the other part of the Ritual of Thorns would protect individual elves from the Horrors.

Though most of the warders endorsed the plan, a few argued vehemently against it. When Alachia overruled them, these outspoken warders left the wooden kaer along with a hundred or so followers to build their own shelter. They chose a site four days' walk from the forest, but succumbed to a Horror onslaught before their work was completed. The half-built kaer lies under the foundations of the





fortress now known as Kaer Eidolon, which guards the Blood Wood from incursions along the Serpent River (pp. 79-80, **Serpent River** sourcebook).

Meanwhile, the warders cast their ritual. This cataclysmic act of magic reshaped the Wood's True pattern and gave it a new Name: Blood Wood. At the same time the Queen's Warders reNamed themselves blood warders, in acknowledgment of the change they had wrought. The terrible alteration of the Wood and its people preyed upon the minds of many warders at first; some committed suicide rather than live with the knowledge of what they had done to the elves. Others believed they had failed their people, and feared that Alachia would put them to death. To their surprise, Alachia praised them as saviors and hailed the horrific disfigurement of the Ritual as a mark of noble sacrifice. Those elves who survived the agonizing pain of the rite came to agree with their queen, and learned to regard their thorns as a badge of pride. (For more information, see **The Ritual of Thorns**, p. 11 of the **Overview**.)

CURRENT DUTIES

The blood warders perform a variety of tasks, all at least somewhat related to safeguarding the Wood and the Elven Court. They advise the queen and the consortis on all matters pertaining to magic, with particular attention to the Blood Wood's safety. Some of them join Talshara wardens on patrol; they also reinforce the Talshara outposts by creating and maintaining magical wards that serve as a passive defense against unwanted intrusion (see **Defenses**, p. 23 of the **Overview**). Most of these wards create thorn men; others, especially along the Western Border, summon elemental plant spirits and more dangerous creatures. Coordinating these efforts is Takaris Talshara (p. 54), a wizard and warrior adept. Blood warders also make magical items and weapons for the exolashers, including thorn bows, thorn swords (**Game Information**, p. 127) and more common items such as blood charms.

All such activities are supervised by various senior blood warders, beginning with Chief Blood Warder Preystia Tales. Below Tales are Takaris, Niriamae Jae'Helastri and Aithne Oakforest, each of whom supervises groups of warders in performing day-to-day duties.

Queen Alachia chooses new blood warders from candidates sponsored by existing warders. Prospective new recruits are brought before the queen, where they must undergo several tests and challenges before being accepted or rejected. Those who fail may petition for admittance one more time, but a second failure is final. Once chosen, a warder holds his position for life. However, some warders have retired from active duty and pursued their own interests or taken on other responsibilities.

NOTABLE BLOOD WARDERS

Several notable blood warders play major roles in the Blood Wood. The most famed warder still living is Kethos Escalanas (see **The Western Border**, p. 92), who created the Ritual of Thorns. Other notable blood warders include Preystia Tales, Niriamae Jae'Helastri, Aithne Oakforest and Takaris Talshara.



Preystia Tales

The most powerful and longest-serving of the current blood warders, Preystia Tales became chief blood warder upon Kethos Escalanas's retirement. He is the first chief warder from outside the Escalanas ranelle; Preystia Tales is of Daevenar heritage, and is an accomplished artist and craftsman as well as a magician of dazzling skill.

Tales's position gives the Daevenar ranelle considerable influence in the Elven Court, partly compensating for the limited clout of their single consortis. A staunch supporter of Queen Alachia, Tales has little tolerance for those who oppose her in any way. This steadfast devotion earned him his high status and honors; a less loyal warder might challenge Alachia's insistence on continuing the Ritual of Thorns and keeping the Wood isolated from the outside world.





Lately, Tales has been concentrating on finding a way to purge the corruption of the Forest's Heart (**The Forest's Heart**, p. 71) while leaving the Blood Wood's True pattern intact. Along with her royal command, Alachia gave Tales permission to use as much of the warders' resources as he felt necessary for the task. Loyal and conscientious, Tales is making every effort to carry out his queen's wishes. However, he is beginning to doubt his ability to succeed. He has yet to confide his fears to Alachia or even to any of his assistants, but he is starting to believe that the damage done by the Ritual of Thorns cannot be healed without dire consequences to the Wood.

Tales also has another, secret ambition. Like many blood warders, he uses blood-magic rituals to extend his lifespan and maintain a youthful appearance. Most warders are content with this, but Tales seeks true immortality. He has studied the legends of so-called Great Elves who live far beyond the usual span of years, and wishes to become one. He has shared this ambition with no one so far, but has recently considered seeking counsel from Alachia. Tales believes that Alachia is one of the Great Elves and so must know the secret of eternal life.

Few know the true extent of Preystia Tales's powers. He has achieved at least Eleventh Circle in the elemental, illusionist and nethermancer Disciplines, and is one of the three warders bonded to the spectral willows that help defend the Blood Wood (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 134).

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 4 TOU: 5
PER: 8 WIL: 8 CHA: 8

Aithne Oakforest

Aithne Oakforest joined the blood warders at an early age. Originally from Sereatha in the Western Kingdoms, he is connected with the Escalanas ranelle. Like many of his kinsmen, he excels at the magical arts and is utterly loyal to the queen. Even though the Ritual of Thorns claimed the lives of his wife and children, Oakforest still believes it was the only right choice for the elven people. He shares his sovereign's loathing of the Therans and all they stand for, and would rather have died himself than accept Theran protection from the Scourge.

Few blood warders have taken a more prominent role in politics than Oakforest. Unlike many of his fellows, he is comfortable at Court and seems to tolerate—even enjoy—the intrigues that are so central to Court life. Though skilled in several magician Disciplines, he does not thirst for knowledge as much as many of his fellow warders. Instead, he seeks to bridge the gap between the abstract research of the warders and the needs of the kingdom as determined by Alachia and her consortis. Oakforest sees knowledge without a guiding purpose as meaningless at best, and likely to cause the seekers' downfall at worst.



Though Alachia respects his judgment in most matters, Oakforest has not tried to parlay his position into wealth or power. This unusual display of personal integrity may explain the depth of the Queen's trust in him.

Oakforest is a Twelfth Circle elemental, Eleventh Circle nethermancer and Tenth Circle wizard. An adherent of the Dae'mistishsa (free Followers), he walks the Path of Travelers (pp. 12–14, **Denizens of Earthdawn, Volume I**).

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 8 WIL: 8 CHA: 8





Takaris Talshara

A rare blood warder in that he respects Name-givers from outside the Wood, Takaris Talshara is a potentially useful ally for adepts seeking a sympathetic ear among the warders' ranks. He demonstrates his undying loyalty to his queen by fulfilling his oath to protect the forest and its inhabitants in every way possible. His dedication to that task, combined with his Talshara heritage, made him the logical choice to oversee the maintenance of the forest's defenses. His appointment to this prestigious position is recent, a reward for returning the Everliving Flower to the Wood (see **Mists of Betrayal** and p. 27, **Denizens of Earthdawn**, Vol. I).

A skilled wizard, Takaris briefly set aside his magical studies to learn the way of the warrior, following the traditional path of his ranelle. He is one of the few blood warders to study at the Grove of Thorns (**The Northern Reaches**, p. 84), and also one of three warders bonded with the spectral willows that guard astral space near the Wood's borders.

No fool, Takaris learned through painful experience how to play the political games necessary at the Elven Court. His current favor with the queen has enhanced his influence far beyond his expectations. He remains sympathetic to the plight of outsiders in the Blood Wood, but will not urge Alachia too strongly to consider their needs for fear of falling from his hard-won state of grace.

Takaris maintains a few important contacts outside the Blood Wood, most notably with the wizard Hiermon of Haven (p. 91, **Mists of Betrayal** and p. 23, **Parlainth Gamemaster Book**). Takaris has arranged several transactions with Hiermon, one of which led to the recovery of the Everliving Flower. He also sends frequent messages and payments to Haven with Fafedriel (p. 37, **Parlainth Gamemaster Book**), a junior blood warder who most often leads expeditions to Haven and Parlainth in search of legendary magical treasures. On rare occasions Takaris accompanies Fafedriel, but has not done so in the past few years.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 7 TOU: 6
PER: 6 WIL: 7 CHA: 7

EXOLASHERS

The exolashers serve as personal guards for Queen Alachia and the consortis, and also ensure the security of the palace and its grounds. All of them are highly trained adepts; most follow the warrior, swordmaster, archer, beastmaster or cavalryman Disciplines. Some exolashers follow the scout and woodsman Disciplines, and a few follow the magician Disciplines. The bulk of them, however, leave that area of expertise to the blood warders.

To an elf, the exolashers are fiercely loyal to their queen. They will readily die in her defense, or undertake without question any task she sets them. Most come from the Talshara ranelle, though some are kin to other ranelles or even commoners. Any elf wishing to join their ranks must undergo a long period of martial training, including tactics, meditation and several different fighting styles. Upon being selected as an exolasher, a candidate is given a thread weapon appropriate to his or her Discipline, crafted by the blood warders. Archers receive thorn bows, and many others are given thorn swords (**Game Information**, p. 126). Each exolasher also receives magical armor, enchanted so as to not catch on their thorns. The armor and weapons bear an image of crossed swords in front of a Rose Throne, the symbol of the exolashers ever since their formation centuries ago.

Though they rarely display brute force, the exolashers serve to remind Alachia's subjects of the martial power at her disposal. The Blood Wood maintains no standing army, but the exolashers make up the elite core of the Blood Wood's military might. More than a hundred strong, the exolashers will rally to Alachia's side should anything or anyone ever threaten her. The only other force that even comes close to matching the exolashers' fighting prowess is the wardens, who aid the blood warders in protecting the forest's borders. So strong is the exolashers' bond with their sovereign that they would likely take independent action to crush any challenge to Alachia's rule without putting her to the trouble of rallying them to her side.

Rumor has it that some exolashers, including the Knights of the Thistle, play the roles of minor courtiers and servants to keep watch on activities throughout the Elven Court. Alachia has neither confirmed nor denied such tales, but the mere possibility of their truth doubtless causes any potential troublemakers to think twice.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE THISTLE

The Knights of the Thistle are the most feared of the exolashers, said to serve as assassins and spies for the queen and even certain influential consortis. Even the blood warders are rumored to fear offending them. All Knights of the Thistle wear a silver thistle-shaped pendant, the only outward sign of their affiliation. Because they work in secret, they rarely display the pendant openly. Alachia has so far chosen to not combine the Knights of the Thistle with the Songbirds or order the two groups to collaborate with each other. She prefers to keep them separate, giving her two forces of spies and potential killers utterly loyal to her alone.

According to recurrent rumors, the Knights are responsible for the deaths of certain high-ranking officials in areas as far-flung as Sky Point, Throal and even the city of Thera, as well as in the Blood Wood. Because the Knights kill by stealth, often using their extensive knowl-





edge of poisons, the truth will likely remain hidden from everyone except Alachia and the alleged assassins. Some of the other exolashers see the Knights' work as cowardly, contrary to an exolasher's honor. From time to time, an exolasher is unwise enough to voice this sentiment to his superiors—and frequently meets with an accident some days later. Such incidents only enhance the Knights' already fearsome reputation. Alachia has refused to hear petitions to disband them, and as long as they continue to carry out their missions with discretion, they will undoubtedly remain in her good graces.

NOTABLE EXOLASHERS

Exolashers notable for exceptional loyalty, unusual services or unique circumstances include Elindrel Talshara (*The Northern Reaches*, p. 81), Wilsaron Goldivy and Narrek Leeron. Statistics and game information for average exolashers appear in *Game Information*, beginning on p. 125.

Wilsaron Goldivy

A Twelfth Circle archer, Wilsaron Goldivy has served Alachia well on numerous occasions, both publicly and covertly. His skill as an archer, bowyer and fletcher is legendary among his fellows. A Goldivy warbow will fetch a high price for any merchant lucky enough to obtain one; popular tradition has it that the exolasher rubs some of his famous luck into each bow he makes. A genuine Goldivy bow is immediately recognizable by the stylized ivy-leaf design inlaid in silver. The only bow without this marking is the one Goldivy reserves for missions that require secrecy.

A member of a minor ranelle, Goldivy has little patience for politics. He is soft-spoken, slow to anger and truthful to a fault. His unwillingness to play Court diplomacy games has kept him from advancing further in the exolashers' ranks, even though many of his fellows believe his insight and even temper would make him an excellent commander. Time and again, he has seen sycophants and well-connected Talshara youths praised and promoted while he remained in the background, the ever-reliable archer. The queen trusts him as she trusts few of his superiors; on several occasions, she has sought his advice in military matters. In Goldivy's mind, this royal favor only proves that he is more than capable of leading the exolashers, and only the power of the Talshara ranelle has vaulted their less-deserving scions to command positions.

Goldivy has begun to resent the promotion of less talented individuals over himself, though his bitterness has yet to affect his performance. Slowly but surely, he is becoming disillusioned with a queen whose concern for politics makes her surround herself with advisors who are fools.

Attributes

DEX: 9 STR: 7 TOU: 7
PER: 8 WIL: 7 CHA: 6

Narrek Leeron

One of the few recently recruited exolashers from outside the Talshara ranelle, Narrek nonetheless has powerful Talshara connections. He is a graduate of the prestigious Grove of Thorns, where he studied under the great Erithander Talshara. Narrek is an enthusiastic follower of the martial Disciplines, and also of the personal vision and Path of his teacher and mentor.

While walking the Path of the Warrior, Narrek reached Ninth Circle in the warrior Discipline. He then moved on to the Path of Scholars and embraced the sword-



master Discipline. He is currently an Eighth Circle sword-master near the end of his current Path, and is considering which Discipline to pursue when it comes time to follow the Path of Travelers.

Narrek is one of the few exolashers currently assigned to guard the Blood Wood's northern border, leading patrols of wardens in the region around his home village of Laggan. Though many of the Leeron ranelle have hopes of one day gaining prominence in the Elven Court, Narrek is ambivalent. He has pride in his own ranelle, but his close association with Erithander has cultivated strong loyalty toward the Talshara ranelle. Should he ever have to choose between them, he might well remain loyal to Erithander and the Talshara rather than throwing his lot in with his own family.

Attributes

DEX: 8 STR: 7 TOU: 6

PER: 8 WIL: 7 CHA: 6

THE COURT AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

The Elven Court and the area immediately surrounding the palace are among the loveliest places in the Blood Wood. Alachia has ordered the blood warders to maintain the area and keep it free from the twisted undergrowth that covers the rest of the forest. The region referred to as the Elven Court is a rough circle, about fifty miles in diameter, centered on Alachia's palace. Some 15,000 elves live here, most in the hundreds of small villages surrounding the Courtyard and palace. Certain of these villages are directly controlled by the five great ranelles and serve as their homes near the Court. Most of the others owe loyalty to one or another great ranelle, as do villages in other parts of the forest.

THE COURTYARD

The palace stands in the center of a clearing more than three hundred yards in diameter, known as the Courtyard. Visitors to the Blood Wood are taken here, and most Court activity transpires within the clearing's boundaries. Along the outer edge are large trees, amid whose trunks and limbs are the homes of the consortis, many blood warders and the countless courtiers and functionaries who see to the everyday running of the Court. In general, the higher an elf's place at Court, the closer his home is to the palace. The residences of the consortis all stand among the trees right on the edge of the clearing; the humbler homes of some of the palace staff are located as much as two hours' walk from the palace.

ALACHIA'S PALACE

The elf queen's palace, always a wonder to behold, has surpassed its previous magnificence during Alachia's reign, especially since the end of the Scourge. When the Horrors came, the entire population of Wyrn Wood relocated to the area surrounding the Forest's Heart. Before her own departure, Queen Alachia used powerful elemental magic to deconstruct the palace, leaving a copse of eight oak trees where it had stood.

After the Scourge ended and the blood warders had regrown the forest sufficiently, Alachia decreed that the Elven Court would be restored to its former state. As the courtiers, consortis and other Court residents relocated to the designated area and began to rebuild, Alachia once again used immense amounts of magic to regrow the palace from the eight oaks.

The new palace resembled the old, but included a few alterations. The most notable of them is the imposing stairway that forms the entrance to the palace and leads into the Chamber of Voices. Formerly made of tree branches and vines, the new staircase is built from the bones of elves who died during the Ritual of Thorns. Alachia immortalized them in the gleaming white staircase, which she publicly dedicated to their memory.

None of the blood warders know exactly how Alachia grew the palace, and she has never shared the secret. Rumors claim she used an acorn from the legendary Oak Heart, but no proof of this story exists.

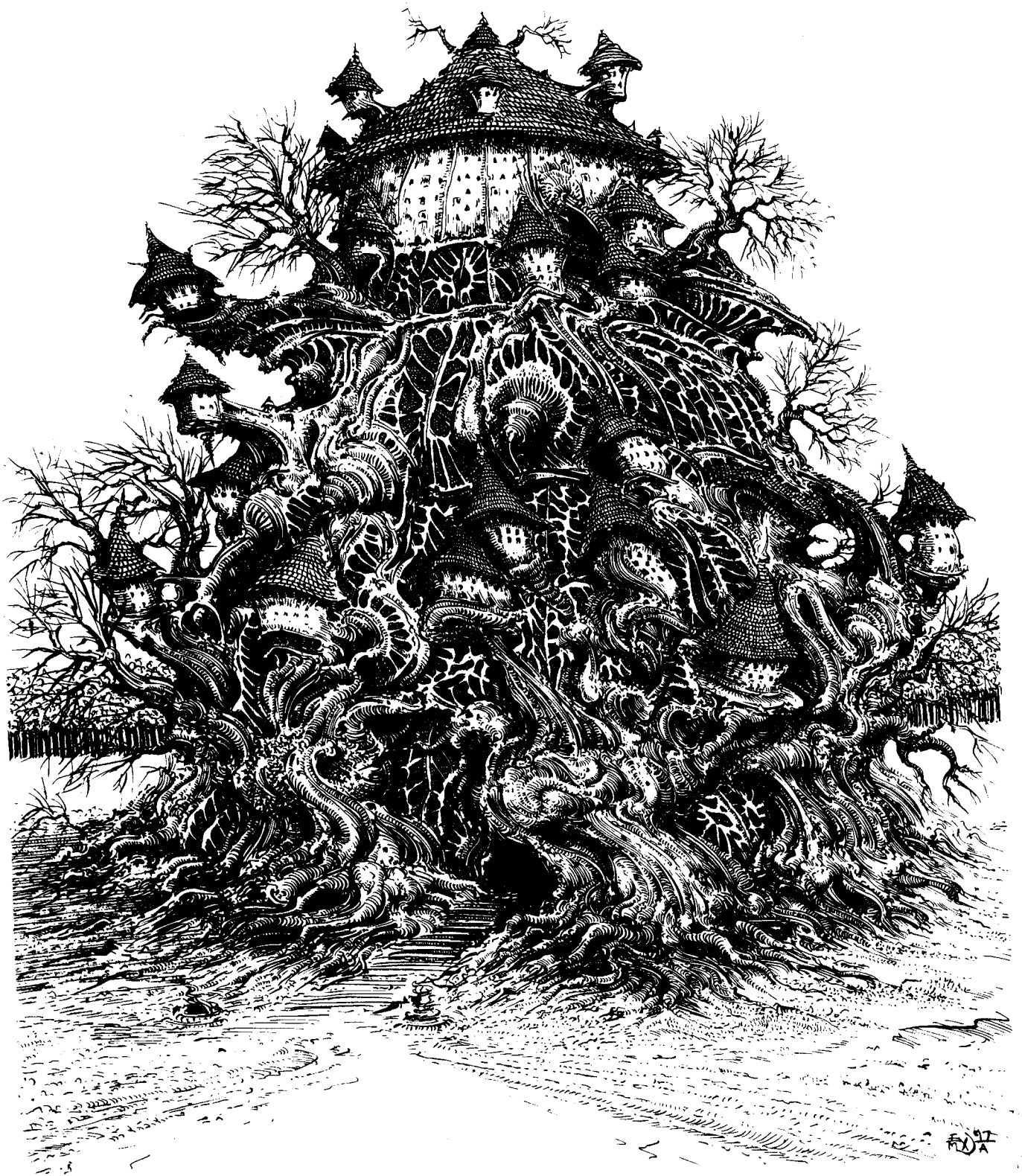
The palace rises eight stories high, towering over the forest's tallest trees. It stands within a circle of eight enormous oak trees, whose trunks and branches both shape and support it. The branches intertwine, forming intricate designs that seem to change constantly as the trees grow. Between the trees grow tightly knit flowering vines that make up the palace walls. Some walls on the ground level are paneled on the inside with a thin layer of polished wood, often in several shades from deep brown to pale gold. The walls sport several window openings, all covered with delicate spiderwebs that catch the sunlight and break it into rainbows. Floors are formed of woven vines intertwined with the upper branches of the trees, and the doors between rooms are rose bushes grown thick enough to become solid.

Each of the eight foundation trees is as wide as a large building, such as a tavern or small manor house. The hollow trunks contain workrooms and entertainment chambers frequently used by the consortis.

The Chamber of Voices

In the Chamber of Voices, on the first floor of the palace, Alachia greets guests from outside the Wood and hosts important political functions. The queen's magnificent Rose Throne—a towering, wickedly beautiful piece of furniture—sits in the vast main room. The throne is cov-







ered with delicately carved blossoms, and the hundreds of thorny points protruding from between them seem to claw at the air. The wood has been polished to a deep blood-red.

The main chamber is used when the queen is in attendance, and occasionally for evening performances by troubadours and choral ensembles. In Queen Failla's time, these performances were allegedly held every fortnight; the frequent concerts gave the hall its Name. Several smaller meeting chambers just off the main hall serve as gathering places for the consortis and other courtiers. Various consortis meet here at different times of the day to speak with representatives of the various ranelles, other courtiers and the occasional blood warder.

The Portrait Gallery

This long, high-ceilinged room is amply furnished with low couches from which to comfortably view the portraits of past and present consortis and elven queens, as well as other notable figures in the Wood's long history. The north and south walls are hung with tapestries depicting the palace and gardens; formal portraits grace the walls on the east and west. Those unfamiliar with blood-elf art may find the style of some paintings a bit jarring, but the portraits are nonetheless impressive. Many of the nobles depicted lived centuries before the Scourge, and these portraits offer a clear representation of one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

The couches form a circle in the middle of the gallery, offering spectators a good view of every artwork in the room. They are upholstered in an especially strong type of elfweave, common in palace furnishings. The weave is particularly resistant to snags and pulls, since any blood elf unlucky enough to catch a thorn on fabric regards it as an embarrassing faux pas.

The portraits of the elven queens stretch back for generations. The pre-Scourge portraits were missing from the gallery until recently, undergoing what Alachia termed "restoration." In fact, all the queens of ages past are presently depicted with thorns. This subtle bit of revisionist history is one way Alachia has chosen to create a sense of continuity between the Blood Wood and its past incarnation. Since the alterations, a few careful observers have noticed remarkable similarities between the portraits of Alachia and Queen Failla, though none have publicly pointed this out.

Alachia's Chambers

Each elven queen has designed her chambers to suit her own tastes, and Alachia is no exception. By tradition, the queen's apartments take up the entire top floor of the palace. Alachia spends much of her time in these rooms, either in repose or conferring with the blood warders and consortis. Several chambers are set aside for meetings with guests from elsewhere in the Wood.

A visitor to the uppermost floor of the palace will first walk through a long hallway lined with shelves formed from tree branches. These shelves contain assorted gifts presented to Alachia by outsiders visiting the Elven Court, and include everything from rings and amulets to gowns and small musical instruments. Most of these treasures date from before the Scourge, but a fair number are more recent additions. The meeting chambers just beyond are lavishly appointed, decorated with finely crafted objects and artwork from before the Scourge as well as selected items from outside the Blood Wood. The floors are thick mats of flowering vines, and each chamber is lit by concealed magical lights.

Past the meeting rooms lie Alachia's personal chambers. One wall of her private suite is completely open; a balcony extending from it provides a view of the Blood Wood for miles around. Local people say that on a clear day the elven queen can see all the way to the Southern Fringe. Thick rose vines entwine the balcony and the walls below it, filling the chamber year round with the sweet scent of the flowers. These vines are magically enchanted to attack any intruder who attempts to scale the palace walls. The balcony overlooks the gardens, and from it the queen sometimes offers fortunate visitors an audience. She bestows this gift only on those rare individuals whom she deems worthy of the privilege.

Hidden panels in the queen's private suite lead to secret chambers beyond. These rooms are cluttered with rows of shelves that hold everything from articles of clothing to weapons to works of art. Of all Alachia's treasures, these are the most precious to her, for these objects give the queen absolute power over her subjects. Many of them are pattern items belonging to the Wood's most important residents. Alachia currently possesses pattern items for every blood elf of any significance, including all the blood warders and consortis, as well as those of a few key outsiders. She keeps several magical items hidden among the pattern items as well, mostly those whose existence she wants to keep secret from her courtiers and the blood warders.

The Gardens

Surrounding the palace are the queen's gardens, oases of beauty that also act as the palace's last line of defense. A labyrinth of thorny hedges winds around the entire perimeter of the gardens, forming a maze of smaller gardens and hidden bowers that seems to go on forever. A visitor might spend weeks exploring and yet never see all of it. The only direct way through the garden is via the main gate, which is always guarded by at least four exolashers. The gate is made of thorn bushes and vines twisted into a tight latticework and sporting sharp barbs. Flowering rose vines encircle the gates, almost seeming to strangle them. The dark red flowers bloom throughout the year. The gardens' other entrances open onto various pathways within





the maze. These paths twist and turn and end and begin again countless times before finally reaching an exit on the other side.

Within the gardens, amazing displays of color and heady perfumes assault visitors' senses. Trails of white rose petals wind their way through the gardens, and small benches of polished white oak appear at convenient spots beneath the shade of towering willow trees. At several points the extensive hedge mazes become rose-bush thickets dripping with blossoms of every shade. Wind chimes placed throughout the gardens create ethereal music with every heavily scented breeze. Beneath all this beauty, however, are disquieting reminders of the price paid for the magic that made them. Scattered throughout the gardens are patches of ground damp with blood.

Name-givers other than blood elves often find prolonged exposure to the gardens uncomfortable, even disturbing. The brightness of the flowers can be unnerving, and some of the colors created by blood-elf elementalists are downright unnatural. The wind chimes are initially pleasing to the ear, but after awhile can disorient those unaccustomed to their constant whispering. Occasionally, the blood-soaked patches of earth become ankle-deep pools, welling up as if the ground had suffered a mortal wound. The royal groundskeepers have standing orders to cover such pools, but new ones seem to appear every day. No one knows for certain why the gardens are so afflicted, though some blood warders believe the cause is the expenditure of magical power that makes the gardens so magnificent.

Foreign visitors are warned not to stray from the company of blood elves within the garden walls, lest they be harmed by certain magical protections designed to injure those who are not blood elves. At key points, the blood warders have created wards that summon earth and wood elemental spirits, which will attack any Name-giver except a blood elf who approaches to within ten feet of them. Most of the spirits will not attack anyone in the presence of a blood elf, though a few do not obey such restrictions. The wards have been carefully placed so that no one except those admitted through the main entrance can reach the other side without encountering one. Many elves believe these protections are unnecessary; some ponder the price of keeping so many elementals bound. A few Court gossips speak of even worse things that haunt the gardens—things that allegedly do not always obey the commands of their blood warder masters.

The Pit

Since the Elven Court's creation, the Pit has been the ultimate punishment at an elven queen's disposal. Great respecters of life, elves are often unwilling to sentence even the most heinous criminals to death. The Pit is their chosen alternative; those cast into it have a chance to survive, albeit a slim one. Though only a few blood elves have suf-

fered this punishment, elven mothers commonly threaten their children with the Pit if they do not behave. In previous centuries, few elves were subjected to this form of discipline, but the Pit has seen increasing use during Alachia's reign.

The Pit is a hole, roughly ten feet in diameter, that descends two hundred feet straight down to a floor of solid stone. The walls of the shaft are carved from the earth, lined with vines and roots. Traps embedded in the soil cause the roots and vines to entangle and attack anyone who attempts to climb out. These traps are located roughly every five to ten feet up the shaft, and only the most skilled climbers have a chance of reaching the top alive.

The bottom of the shaft opens into a natural-looking complex of caverns. This twisting maze of tunnels was carved out by earth spirits when the palace was first constructed. Within these caverns grows a fungus nourishing to all Name-givers, along with countless small streams and pools of fresh water. Many of the pools contain blind fish and other creatures native to waters beneath the earth. The fungi and streams provide sustenance for awhile to those sentenced to the Pit, and intermittent patches of phosphorescent mold provide a weak but steady source of light.

Most people condemned to the Pit die within a relatively short time—from exposure, at the hands of other prisoners, or from sheer hopelessness. Though many such prisoners spend all their time searching the seemingly endless caverns for an exit, few succeed in discovering a means of escape.

Defenses

The palace is one of the best-guarded sites in the Blood Wood. Exolasher and warden patrols guard the entire Courtyard, as well as all entrances to the palace proper. Other patrols of exolashers roam the interior of the palace, ever watchful for intruders. In addition, many of the walls and floors contain wards that create thorn men at a moment's notice. Some of these wards can only be triggered by Alachia; others automatically react to certain actions, such as theft or an attack against a blood elf. Similar defenses are more prevalent in the queen's private chambers. More than one careless or over-inquisitive palace servant has died at the hands of thorn men or exolashers for being where he or she did not belong.

OUTLYING VILLAGES

The Elven Court is home to hundreds of small villages that supply the palace with food and other necessities. Many courtiers, consortis, and blood warders maintain homes for their families and loved ones in these villages as well.

Most settlements consist of one-story wooden buildings designed to appear grown rather than built and to blend in with the surrounding terrain. Each village also includes at least one large building, a tavern or town hall, which usually serves as a gathering area. The inhabitants





of these villages obtain foodstuffs and other provisions largely through trade with other woodland villages.

Each of the great ranelles has a village in the region that serves as its local stronghold. These villages give members of the ranelle who may be visiting the Court a place nearby to call home. Two of these villages, Triammelle and Se'vianna, are the ancestral seats of the Jae'Helastris and Daevenar ranelles; other ranelle-controlled villages simply provide a local home base.

Triammelle

Triammelle, a large permanent settlement in the northeast corner of the Elven Court region, is the home village of the Jae'Helastris ranelle. The entire population, two thousand strong, is allied to the Jae'Helastris, making it one of the few woodland settlements occupied solely by the members of a single ranelle. Nearly all of the prominent Jae'Helastris have homes in Triammelle, including Mithran, Nirame, Larrin and Tirame. The latter three all have residences near the palace as well, where they spend most of their time.

Mithran's home, the Jae'Helastris manor, is the largest and most lavish building in the village. It rises from two giant oak trees, suspended above the ground by their interlinking branches. Leading up to the main building is a large stairway grown from branches and vines. On the ground—in, around and between the tree trunks—are the kitchens, the pantry and storage sheds, as well as several small shacks in which the manor staff live.

Twice a year, Mithran hosts large formal parties to which he invites the queen, consortis, blood warders and the leaders of the other great ranelles, along with the elders of families loyal to the Jae'Helastris. Most of the consortis and many courtiers attend these functions, though few of the warders do. Alachia attends very rarely. These parties offer the Jae'Helastris a chance to mingle with elves from the other ranelles and the bulk of the Elven Court in a supposedly less formal setting, in hopes of learning gossip and other potentially valuable tidbits.

Also in Triammelle are several schools and colleges known for excellence throughout the Blood Wood. Though most settlements have small schools in which they teach their youth, many elves, especially wealthier ones, send their children to Triammelle to learn the art of reading and writing Sperethiel, as well as elven history and culture, and in some cases such esoteric subjects as magic theory.

Se'vianna

Se'vianna, which lies along the eastern edge of the Elven Court directly across from the village of Estandia, is the home of the Daevenar ranelle. Almost all of its more than two thousand residents are artists and craftsmen. Most are loyal to the Daevenar ranelle, but roughly a quarter of the population are artists and craftsmen from other

ranelles who came to Se'vianna to live among fellow practitioners of their craft. Artists and artisans from all across the Blood Wood come here to live, work and study at the schools that specialize in various art forms and in crafts ranging from weaponsmithing to woodworking to leatherworking.

To those who know what to look for, Se'vianna is one of the loveliest settlements in the Elven Court. The works of resident artists adorn most of its buildings and streets. Recent artistic fashions, however, call for works that blend seamlessly into their surroundings. A traveler from outside might walk through a section of the village without even noticing the delicate beauties he is passing by.

The Daevenar manor, home of the ranelle's leader, Tarin Daevenar, is the largest building in the village. Its exterior decor is so subdued that the house appears plain at first glance. Only after close examination does the manor's true beauty become apparent, when the visitor notices the intricate detail and superior craftsmanship of the structure. To an average elf, the Daevenar manor seems oddly unimpressive—but to those skilled in the arts and crafts, the building is a wonder to behold. This suits the Daevenar perfectly; they prefer to impress those who can appreciate their skills.

Of prominent Daevenar active at Court, only Tarin lives in Se'vianna. Preystia Tales has a home near the palace, while Baltana Daevenar lives in the Talshara-dominated village of Tallamnia along with many of her fellow exolashers and wardens stationed at Court.

Along with several different craft guilds, Se'vianna boasts one of the few weaponsmith Forges in the Blood Wood not controlled by the Talshara ranelle or the blood warders. Weaponsmiths from both of those groups often send apprentices to study at the Daevenar Forge, where they learn the art of weapon crafting from the finest smiths in the forest. Most of the thread weapons created by the blood warders are made here before being enchanted.

Se'vianna hosts an Art Festival once a year, judged by senior members of the Daevenar ranelle as well as Queen Alachia and a panel of courtiers hand-picked by the queen and Tarin Daevenar. This festival often sets trends among elven artists throughout the Wood. In recent years, Alachia has allowed selected artists from outside the Blood Wood to enter the festival, most from Shosara and Sereatha. More than one Barsaivian artist has also had the honor of participating.

Tallamnia

This village, located at the northernmost point of the Elven Court region, is the local home of the Talshara ranelle. Most of Tallamnia's residents are exolashers and wardens stationed at Court. The Talshara consortis and blood warders also have homes here. The village features a large training camp where the exolashers and wardens hone their combat skills. Many of the exolashers also train





younger adepts in the martial Disciplines here; outside of Araouane and the Grove of Thorns (**The Northern Reaches**, p. 83), this camp is the largest center of combat training in the Wood.

Estandia

Estandia, home of the Escalanas ranelle at Court, lies at the farthest point west in the Elven Court region. Given the distance between the Court and the Escalanas ancestral lands in the Western Border, Estandia's proximity to the palace is vital to maintaining Escalanas influence at Court. Orlando Escalanas keeps a residence here, though he spends most of his time in a smaller private home near the palace.

Estandia also boasts the largest population of blood warders in any forest settlement. Almost all the warders who serve at Court live here, with the exceptions of Takaris Talshara and Niriamae Jae'Helastri. In contrast to his fellow warders from ranelles other than Escalanas, Preystia Tales has chosen to live in Estandia when at Court rather than in the Daevenar village of Se'vianna. Living here gives Tales an especially close connection to his fellow warders at Court, which he finds helpful in maintaining order among them.

Not surprisingly, Estandia has become the Elven Court's center of magical research. Many warders conduct small-scale experiments here, and Alachia often visits to observe them. She also comes to Estandia when she wishes to speak with Preystia Tales or other warders in a less formal setting than the palace. Many warder-crafted magical items are made in Estandia, and its markets boast the finest selection of magical goods in Barsaive.

Da'seaishta

Situated along the far south edge of the Elven Court, Da'seaishta is the local home of the Carithasca ranelle and the center for much of the trade that passes through this region. All goods destined for the Court flow into Da'seaishta, where the Carithasca ranelle oversees its distribution by Queen Alachia's command. Under the guidance of the ranelle's two consortis, Haeleon Carithasca and Gealleon Sea'lish, Da'seaishta is a thriving center of commerce. Caravans enter and leave it almost daily, bound for all corners of the forest. The village markets offer a wide assortment of goods from across the Blood Wood, and even some from places beyond the forest's border.

Haeleon and Gealleon both have homes in this village. Unlike their fellow consortis, they tend to spend more time in these homes than in their residences near the palace. Ethenia Carithasca, leader of the ranelle, also lives in Da'seaishta rather than in Trenevar, the ranelle's family home. Her close friendship with Alachia and her continued role in Court politics make the Elven Court region preferable, in her mind, to the faraway Southern Fringe.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

For thousands of years the Elven Court at Wyrms Wood ruled elves throughout the world. Before the Schism and the Scourge, the elven queen and her subjects in the Wood could command instant respect wherever they traveled. Alachia's refusal of Tharan protections from the Scourge, followed by the casting of the Ritual of Thorns, has cost the queen and people of the Blood Wood the high esteem in which they were once held—possibly forever. Alachia's deliberate isolation of the Wood from realms outside it partly reflects her personal rejection of a world that has rejected her, and that views her kind as monstrosities.

Since the end of the Scourge, the Blood Wood has had minimal ties with lands outside the forest. Alachia might have preferred no contact at all, but is intelligent enough to realize that total isolation might leave the Wood vulnerable to unknown enemies. She has therefore allowed limited contact, mostly with nations and people in Barsaive, but also informally with the elven realms of Shosara and Sereatha. These contacts, tentative as they are, nonetheless allow the queen to keep informed on happenings in Barsaive and beyond, so that she can deal with any potential threat to the Blood Wood. She also intends to reunite the elves of the world under the banner of the Elven Court eventually, and is willing to take as much time as is necessary to accomplish that goal.

BARSAIVE

The Elven Court's relations with Barsaive's cities and nations have been strained ever since the opening of the kaers. When Barsaivians learned of the Ritual of Thorns, most found it repellent enough to shun the blood elves. Over the years, however, some of Barsaive's larger cities and regions have begun cautious dealings with the Blood Wood.

Kingdom of Throal

Never strong allies even before the Scourge, Throal and the Elven Court have grown even farther apart since the Ritual of Thorns. A few decades after the opening of Throal, Alachia visited the dwarf kingdom in the hope of re-establishing diplomatic ties. King Varulus III, however, made his antipathy toward the blood elves plain. Alachia soon left in a rage, calling King Varulus "an ill-mannered, insufferable runt."

The recent assassination of King Varulus (p. 42, **Prelude to War**) has caused Alachia to give Throal a second look. Rising tensions among the Throalic nobility and the presence of the Therans nearby have left the dwarf kingdom unstable and its new king in need of allies. Alachia hopes to turn that need into a loose alliance between Throal and the Blood Wood against Tharan encroachment. To this end, Alachia and Tarin Daevenar have appointed an emissary to Throal: Geverian Half-Smile, an Unprotected elf sworn to serve Alachia. Though





relations between the two nations remain tense, Geveryan has done well on his queen's behalf. He has persuaded King Neden to see the blood elves not as monsters of corruption, but as a brave people forced to take desperate measures to survive the Scourge.

Iopos

The Elven Court has little official contact with this Barsaivian city. Even before the Scourge, Alachia had little reason to trust the magically powerful and secretive Denairastas clan who rule the area. Their assassination of King Varulus III has given her even less reason. Official disapproval, however, has not prevented members of the Escalanas ranelle from establishing a relationship with the Denairastas—some members of the ranelle have even traveled secretly to the city and met with the clan's magicians. The chief instigator of these covert activities is Kethos Escalanas, who exchanges True wood and True earth for magical research—especially that pertaining to ritual and blood magic. Since the dwarf king's assassination, Kethos has insisted that all Denairastas representatives meet with him in the Blood Wood. He prefers to keep as safe a distance as possible from any confrontations between Iopos and Throal. The Denairastas in charge of this magical exchange is Jerleth (*The Western Border*, p. 96), nephew of Iopan ruler Uhl Denairastas.

Kratas

Though the Elven Court maintains no official ties with the so-called City of Thieves, Kratas and the Blood Wood are bound together by the presence of Vistrosh. A former blood warder, Vistrosh was ostensibly banished from the Blood Wood twenty years ago and has lived in Kratas ever since. He quickly surrounded himself with some of the deadliest cutthroats and assassins in Barsaive, who both feared and admired him as a powerful magician and a corrupted elf. Vistrosh's gang, Brocher's Brood, quickly became the chief rival of the city's most influential gang, the Force of the Eye, led by the venerable ork thief, Garlthik One-Eye.

Though none at the Elven Court know it, Vistrosh's exile was the first step in Alachia's plan to place a trusted blood warder in a position to monitor and report on events in Barsaive. Vistrosh is the leader of Alachia's spy network, known as the Songbirds (p. 41). On occasion, Vistrosh has used his gang of assassins and killers to keep his true position secret.

The Aropagoi of the Serpent River

The blood elves have more contact with the t'skrang of House Syrtis than with any other Name-givers in Barsaive, mostly because of their joint sponsorship of Kaer Eidolon. Relations with House Syrtis remain largely neutral. Both sides see Kaer Eidolon as mutually beneficial, but either

would willingly dissolve this tentative alliance should the mutual threat presented by the House Ishkarat pirates fade.

The Elven Court has no relations with the other t'skrang aropagoi. The Ishkarat are clearly enemies; Houses V'strimon, K'tenshin and Henghyoke are too busy fighting among themselves and too distant from the Blood Wood for Alachia to bother with them. House K'tenshin's historic ties to Thera make the aropagoi barely worth acknowledging, in the mind of the elven queen.

Cara Fahd

The newly formed ork nation of Cara Fahd (p. 85, *Prelude to War*) has so far established no formal relations with any other Barsaivian power. Given the orks' strong anti-Theran feelings, Alachia sees them as a potential ally. She would prefer to have Cara Fahd with her than against her, but apparently has not yet chosen an official attitude.

Haven

Though not a political power, Haven is important to Alachia and the blood warders because of the magical treasures to be found in Parlainth's ruins. Already, the efforts of Takaris Talshara and a group of hired adventurers have reclaimed the Everliving Flower for the Elven Court. The queen and her warders believe that still more magical treasures and knowledge exist in the ruins for the taking.

The blood warders frequently send teams into Haven and the ruins, most of them led by blood warder Fafedriel (p. 37, *Parlaint Gamemaster Book*). On rare occasions, Takaris Talshara and even Preystia Tales have traveled to Haven and Parlaint.

Thera

The Elven Court maintains no official ties with Thera and refuses to receive Theran emissaries. Alachia finds Thera's claim of dominion over Barsaive and the Blood Wood laughable, and she has stated repeatedly that consorting with Therans is punishable by banishment or even Separation. Some at Court see this treatment of the world's most powerful nation as unwise, but none has dared say so too loudly. The Carithasca have shown a certain interest in establishing trade agreements with Thera should Alachia ever open the forest's borders, but they are careful to keep even talk of it to a minimum.

Alachia's anti-Theran stance has strengthened since the Empire landed its behemoth near Lake Ban (p. 11, *Prelude to War*). Despite her steadfast rejection of political relations, Alachia has allowed small amounts of certain Theran goods to enter the Blood Wood, mostly through the black market that operates out of Kaer Eidolon. She has as much of a taste as any at Court for certain Theran delicacies, and is perfectly willing to break her own rules when it suits her convenience.





LANDS BEYOND

Aside from the Theran Empire and political powers in Barsaive, the Elven Court has some dealings with the elven lands of Shosara and Sereatha. Both these lands once looked to the Elven Court for spiritual and cultural guidance, and Alachia would like to restore that special relationship.

Shosara and Sereatha have only recently established contact with the Blood Wood. Queen Alachia admits ambassadors from both realms to the Elven Court to represent their nations' interests.

Shosara

Of all the world's elven nations, Shosara is the only one ever Separated from the Elven Court. After Queen Failla decreed this dire penalty for Shosara's violation of approved elven traditions, many ranelles related to elves from that land left Wyrn Wood and the Elven Court forever.

Alachia's recent decision to allow other elven nations to send representatives to Court prompted the leaders of Shosara to attempt reconciliation. They sent a questor of Jasprea Named Jorealla as their ambassador to the Wood—an unfortunate choice, as Jorealla and Alachia are long-standing rivals over an affair of which all save themselves know virtually nothing. This ages-old conflict, suspected only by a few of Alachia's closest confidantes until Jorealla's arrival, makes discussions between the two women tense and strained. However, it has not so far prevented them from meeting on several occasions. In one such meeting shortly after her arrival, Jorealla raised an extraordinary argument concerning the Elven Court. The Shosaran government believes that the Ritual of Thorns so corrupted the elves of the Blood Wood that they can no longer claim to lead the world's elves. Therefore, the Shosarans have proposed that the Elven Court move elsewhere. Jorealla did not name Shosara as the chosen site, but most elves who heard her speak believe that will be her next suggestion. Alachia disputes the Shosarans' contention and will hear nothing of relinquishing her authority.

Though technically Shosara is still considered Separated, Jorealla's presence and negotiations with Alachia and other prominent Court figures have created a more neutral relationship between the two realms. Alachia has even considered sending an emissary to Shosara to gather first-hand accounts of the changes that have occurred there since the Separation. This is the first indication Alachia has given of any concern for Shosara or its people, and those who want Shosara reunited with the Elven Court see it as an encouraging sign. Hoping to capitalize on this unexpected thaw, the Daevenar ranelle established an exchange of artists between the Blood Wood and Shosara. Many courtiers believe these steps represent the

first of many toward reunification. Unfortunately, Alachia is a long way from reversing the Separation, and Shosara appears to have little interest in reunion on the Blood Wood's terms.

Sereatha

Unlike Shosara, long a political sore spot for the Elven Court, the city-state of Sereatha had apparently remained loyal to the Court until recently. Historically, Sereatha had never questioned the Elven Court's role as the truest embodiment of all things elven. Not even the Separation of Shosara or the Schism over the Theran Rites of Protection could shake this unswerving loyalty. The Ritual of Thorns, however, changed that. As Sereathans saw it, the Ritual transformed the elves of the Blood Wood into something no longer elven, and so made them unfit for the mantle of the Elven Court.

Sereatha had been in touch with Shosara since the end of the Scourge. Shortly before sending their ambassadors to the Wood, representatives of the two nations met to discuss their positions concerning the authority of Alachia's Court. At this meeting, the Shosarans declared their intention to lay claim to the Elven Court, arguing that the blood elves were no longer fit to rule the elven people. Sereatha chose to support Shosara rather than lay claim to the Court itself; the City of Spires had always served the Elven Court, and had no interest in changing that ancient tradition.

Sereatha's ambassador to the Elven Court is Caimbueul, a swordmaster and wizard adept. His arrival at Court has caused something of an uproar, partly because of Sereatha's stated intent to support Shosara, but also because of Caimbueul's behavior. A senior member of the Knights of the Crimson Spire, who are dedicated to preserving true elven traditions, Caimbueul has been vocal about the corruption of the Blood Wood ever since his arrival. Alachia's courtiers marvel at his apparent freedom to voice his views with impunity. Only his considerable charms seem to keep him safe from Alachia's wrath; the queen seems to blissfully ignore even his most scathing comments. Certain Court insiders, however, have a different view. They insist that some relationship exists between the queen and Caimbueul that accounts for Alachia's unusual tolerance. Some see Caimbueul's position as a Knight of the Crimson Spire as the reason; others suggest possible family connections between the two, as both hail from the Western Kingdoms. Whatever the truth, Alachia has yet to chastise Caimbueul publicly. Whispered rumors suggest that the two share a more intimate relationship in the privacy of the Queen's chambers.





THE FOREST'S HEART

PROLOGUE

—From the journal of Soraidh Donn, Seeker of the Heart



We reached the Wood at twilight, on the fifth day of travel from the Scythia Mountains. Of the dozen who had set out on this journey, the hard trek through the high mountain passes had claimed two. One we mourned and left behind, with a cairn to mark his resting place; the other we left in the kind hands of dwarf villagers to recover from frostbite and mountain-madness. The thin air of the heights brings it on sometimes. We counted ourselves lucky to have lost so few, for we knew that none of us might live to see our journey's end. We had known it from the day we planned this perilous endeavor. Yet none of us had stayed behind, or would return to safety now if we could. Not when the Heart of the Wood, the heart of our people, was at stake.

My brother Chesan was waiting at the edge of the Wood, as he had promised. Another elf stood a few steps behind him. Chesan had come to the Wood months ago to learn what he could of its corruption. In the waning days of Sollus he had sent us word to join him; he had learned of a ritual he felt might be a key to healing the Blood Wood's corruption, but needed our aid to work it. And so we came, to the Wood most of us knew only from old tales and half-remembered dreams.

Chesan beckoned to us to hurry. The sun was sinking, and it is perilous to enter the Wood after dark. We would have little enough time as it was to reach safe shelter from the perils of the Wood and the prying eyes of Alachia's blood warders. They do not care for our presence here; to them we are outsiders, goro, no longer really elves in some essential way. Strange to realize that we think the same of them . . .

As we crossed beneath the Wood's fringes, I caught my first clear glimpse of Chesan's companion. She was a blood elf, with a delicate face whose beauty even her thorns could not mar. She fixed her cool gray gaze on me, and in her eyes I saw the shadow of pain.

"Hurry," she said, with an edge to her voice. "We must reach Trenevar before Jaspree's stars climb high. The path will guide you true so long as I am with you, and the worst of the night-terror will pass you by—but I cannot stay long, or the other wardens will know something is amiss." So saying, she turned and strode swiftly through the trees.

"You must forgive Lenaya," Chesan whispered to me as we followed silently after our guide. "Our brethren are less than trusting of elves with a whole skin—and they have some reason to be. Too many of our kind despise them without trying to understand."

I nodded, but said nothing. I was still trying to understand myself. Our leader Monus says that all elves are still kindred—and far away from the Wood, I had no trouble believing it. Here, with a blood elf standing before me—seeing for the first time the slow dance of blood drops along the sharp thorns and down to the thirsty ground—it was not so easy. I wondered why she was helping us. Alachia has banned the Seekers from the Wood; any of her people caught aiding us would surely face death or banishment. Did Lenaya not know this, or not care?

"Lenaya cares for the Wood, no less than we do," Chesan said. He sounded almost angry. "She will help us reach the Forest's Heart at peril of her life. Not all blood elves hold with Alachia's ways, Sora—nor all blood warders, either. Remember that." He strode on ahead of me, his brown cloak making him all but invisible in the gathering darkness.

It was still dark when we awoke the next morning. After a quiet meal we walked through Trenevar's silent streets toward its northern boundary, where the Mothingale runs closest to the town. As we drew near the riverbank, I could see people moving, like shadows in the dim gray light of approaching dawn. Some of the shadows carried pikes, others bows.

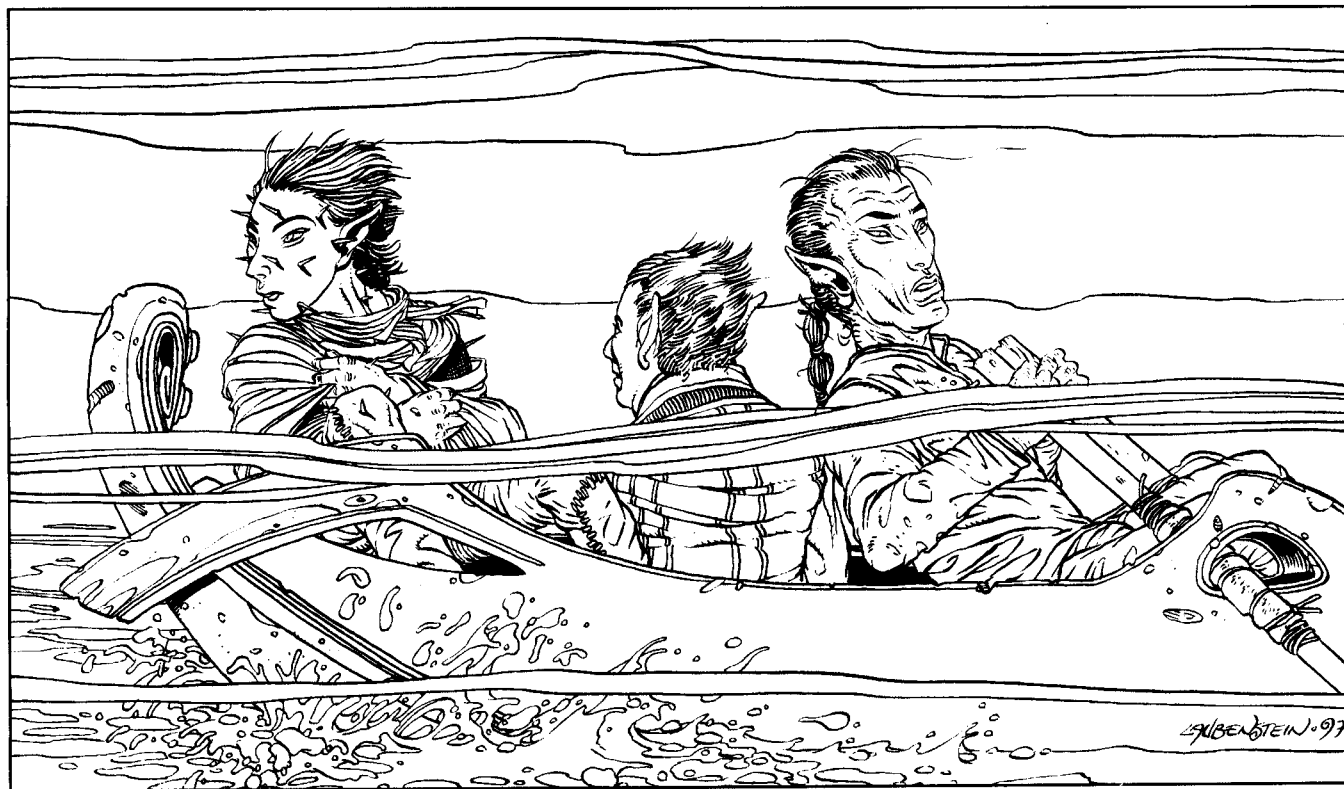
I stopped, bringing our small column to a halt. "Wardens. We can't keep going—they'll see us."

"We're perfectly safe," Chesan said, a thread of laughter in his voice. "Just follow me."

He stepped forward past me. After a moment, I followed. There was nothing else to do.

Chesan led us onto the narrow stretch of open ground between the last line of buildings and the water. I saw a dock, well-guarded by half a dozen blood elves, and two small rowboats bobbing on the waves nearby. I could hear low snatches of conversation as the blood elves talked and joked with each other. They had built a small fire inside a ring of stones; three of them sat by it, sharing cups of fragrant tea. Another blood elf was dipping up river water in a basket, from which he scooped out a handful and washed his face. A fifth elf stood a little way apart from the others, oiling her bowstring. As we came into view, she lifted her head and I saw that it was Lenaya.





She caught Chesan's eye and smiled at him, then nodded her head ever so slightly at the rowboats. Without a word, we walked slowly past the blood elves and stepped into the waiting boats. Lenaya and the elf with the basket followed—she in the first boat, he in ours. None of the other wardens spared us so much as a glance.

We rowed away from the bank and swung our vessels against the current. "Was it some magic that made us invisible?" I asked Chesan softly as soon as I judged us out of earshot. I was curious, for I had sensed no glamour around us. By rights, the wardens should have stopped us in our tracks.

Chesan laughed. "No magic save sanity. I told you, Lenaya cares for the Wood—and she is not alone."

"It cannot all be so easy," I said. "Alachia would never tolerate widespread defiance, and by her law we are trespassers here."

Our blood elf escort—whose Name, I learned later, was Vachoryn—spoke up then. "We'll have to be careful of patrols. Trenevar is safe ground; those in power there want contact with the outside world, and so regard elves like you with a more friendly eye. Some of them want to redeem the Wood; others don't care what goro do, so long as no harm comes to them or their profits. But elsewhere ..." He shook his head. "You'll see soon enough."

Chesan forced the oars through the water. "The corruption has changed our brethren of the Wood," he said softly, so that Vachoryn would not hear. "Some of them forever, I fear. They seek to keep the Forest's Heart as it is, and will gladly shed blood to do it. And we are traveling into their domain."

Over the next two days, I began to understand more clearly what he meant. Near Trenevar the waters of the Mothingale had run swift and clear; the air had been fresh, with only a faint tang of bitterness beneath it. By the eve of the first day, when we pulled into a small cove and camped on its banks, the air had begun to feel as heavy as a blanket. I could still see fish darting beneath the little waves, but they were smaller than they had been near Trenevar and many looked misshapen. We kept watch in turns all through that night, which seemed longer than any other I had ever known. Our sleep was fitful, troubled by dreams. None of us could recall them precisely upon waking, except for the sense of terrible pain and loss. My face was not the only one that bore the marks of tears.

Near the end of the second day, tendrils of red began to glimmer in the darkening river waters like bright threads in some horrible tapestry. All day the air had grown steadily more oppressive, with a sickly sweet tinge that made our throats close. I saw no more fish—only the occasional reed-bed, too tall and too red-tinged a shade of green to be natural.





At the sight of the reddening water, Vachoryn told us to look sharp for a sloping bank on which to beach the boats. It was too dangerous to travel further by river, he said—from here we would go on foot, following the river bank as closely as we dared so as to avoid blood warden patrols. It seemed they did not care to venture too close to the river's edge. Karonn, the youngest of us, soon raised a shout—he had found a little beach, just visible through the overhanging tree branches, where we might safely rest the night. As quickly as we could, we rowed toward it.

The other boat reached the bank first. Terach, who was steering, rowed as close to the bank as she could; then the other four jumped into the shallows to push the boat up on the sand. Karonn went around to the stern of the boat, where his young strength would do the most good.

There wasn't time to shout a warning. The water behind Karonn started to seethe, and then something exploded out of it in a shower of red. I remember thin, ropy tentacles—masses of them, all tangled together like twine wound by a madman—and a thick, glistening limb with a sharp point that stabbed through Karonn's back while the tentacles wrapped themselves around his neck. He gave a choking gurgle, his eyes wide with shock; then the creature dragged him under the surface. Puffs of blood billowed upward from the spot, as smoke billows from a fire. Then there was an awful silence.

We stared at the spot where Karonn had disappeared—our party still in the boat, our comrades on the bank. We didn't dare move, for fear of attracting the monster's attention. Then, slowly, Vachoryn began to row away from the cove. "Soraidh," he murmured to me, "pick up that bag of dried fruit and throw it hard away from the boat when I tell you."

I picked up the bag, clutching it like a talisman. Vachoryn rowed us to the middle of the river, then turned the boat sharply back toward the cove and began to steer us toward the bank again. We would pass some feet wide of the spot where the monster had appeared. As we drew closer, my heart began to pound.

"Now!" Vachoryn hissed.

With all my strength, I threw the bag away. It tumbled through the air, then splashed down. Tentacles exploded from the water, engulfed the bag and dragged it under. Vachoryn rowed furiously, and we felt the boat scrape sand.

"Everyone out—one by one, over the prow," Vachoryn said. We did as he told us, eyeing the river nervously over our shoulders as we climbed out onto the beach. But the waters stayed still as glass.

We camped that night as deep in the trees as we could get without losing sight of the river. None of us got much sleep. We dared not sing a farewell for Karonn, nor even light a cook-fire, lest we attract the attention of patrolling blood wardens. I dozed a little; I remember Terach shaking me when it was my turn to stand watch. But mostly I

thought of Karonn: little things, like the particular way he wore his cloak and the warmth of his crooked smile. And just at that moment I hated the Wood for claiming so young and devoted a life.

Many more days we traveled, deeper and deeper into the Wood. Before long we couldn't tell day from night. Sometimes it was full dark, sometimes a murky greenish twilight in which we could see each other provided we stayed close. But whether it was sunrise or moonrise, we could not tell.

The trees no longer grew straight, but were twisted into fantastic shapes. Sometimes the gnarled branches seemed to make leering faces at us. Once or twice I thought I heard malicious laughter. We passed what had once been a small stand of birches; angry black lines criss-crossed their silvery bark, each line puckered like an ill-healed scar. Dark liquid oozed from the marks, as poison does from an infected wound—whether sap or blood, I couldn't tell, and didn't wish to investigate.

The undergrowth grew thicker under our feet, until roots and branches and long, snaking ground ivy seemed to thrust themselves in our path at random to trip us up. A tendril of ground ivy caught Terach around the ankles and sent her sprawling. Before any of us could reach her, the undergrowth began to hiss and shudder. Within moments, she was covered in greenery.

We stood and watched as if paralyzed. Then something made me run forward, heedless of the danger. A pace or two shy of Terach, I stopped. I could see her face, half-obsured by ivy leaves, one blank eye staring up at me. The eye didn't blink, and I knew she was dead. Spidery threads of dark green were creeping across her cheek. One wove its way upward under her eye; as I watched, ivy-green seeped into the whites like ink into parchment.

Chesan stepped up beside me. "Assassin vines," he said, his voice brittle. "Lenaya told me of this. She said it grows only near the Forest's Heart. We must be getting close."

Something whizzed past my ear. Chesan flinched and cried out, then threw himself toward me and knocked us both flat to the ground. I heard a choked scream behind us, and the sound of a falling body.

"Get up and run," Chesan whispered hoarsely. Then he rolled away from me, shot to his feet and bolted through the trees.

I leaped up and ran after him, zigzagging from side to side to avoid the deadly bolts that followed me. From the corner of my eyes I could see my comrades dashing past. An arrow took one in the lower back. My heart cried out to save him, but my feet knew better. I ran faster.

Six of us met together again in a small clearing ringed by stunted pines: Chesan, myself, Lenaya, Vachoryn, Khesten and Masula. Chesan's neck was bleeding where an arrow had nicked him. Our guides didn't need to tell us





what peril we had just escaped; we could guess all too easily. The blood warders of the Forest's Heart had found us.

"I wonder why they don't pursue us further?" Khesten asked. Though as pale with fear as all of us, he tried to sound like the scholar he was—as if the answer was a mere matter of curiosity.

Lenaya gave a bitter laugh. "Because there's no point. We're very near the Heart now—they think we can't survive it. Why pursue the dead?"

There was no answer to that—except to prove it wrong. If we could.

We sensed the Heart before we saw it. Our steps grew slower and slower, as if the air had become as thick as water and we were wading through it. Fine hairs on my arms rose and my skin began to tingle, as it does when a lightning storm passes close by. The greenish light grew subtly tinged with red, and the ground sucked greedily at our feet. The smell was indescribable—an overpowering sweetness that made our eyes water and turned our stomachs. Khesten threw up what little breakfast he'd managed to eat; even Lenaya and Vachoryn looked haggard. Only Chesan seemed unaffected. He strode steadily forward, his mouth set in a grim line I recognized all too well. He had worn that look often when we were growing up, every time someone mistook his small size for weakness and he had to teach them a lesson. Now, as then, he faced a fight against overwhelming odds, and was gathering his resolve like a weapon.

Up ahead, the wounded trees began to thin. I saw grayish shapes looming through the murk. *Some habitation?* I wondered, and shuddered to think what kind of monstrous beings must live at the heart of corruption. But even my worst imaginings could not prepare me for what I saw.

The shattered remnants of tree trunks ringed the vast clearing before us, as if the trees had torn themselves asunder from the inside. Jagged chunks of stone lay scattered across the ground, many with blackened, melted edges. They looked like rotting teeth. Patches of sickly white fungus covered the soil; the ground that showed through was the dark red-black of the heart's blood. The blood-colored spots throbbed with a staggering beat, like the footsteps of a drunkard. Ropes of ivy as thick as my wrist, covered with rotting lumps that somehow still held the semblance of leaf-shape, crawled over the ruins and the diseased ground—literally crawled, rippling over and under and around each other like snakes. The constant motion made a buzzing noise so loud it set my headbones pounding. Over all this devastation lay a pall of despair, invisible to the eye yet tangible enough to taste. It was bitter on my tongue, bitter as a wasted life. I swallowed by reflex and felt as if ashes were clogging my throat.

I struggled to keep breathing and forced myself to look around. I would not shut my eyes to the Forest's Heart, no matter how dearly I wished to do so.



Amid the stones I could see the round outlines of what had once been foundations. Here and there a portion of stone or wooden wall remained intact, though none were even as tall as I. A rough triangle of pale wood near me bore a piece of what had once been a rune-weaving, a carving of great beauty and magical power. Even scorched and broken as they were, the lines had a delicacy and grace that bespoke a master artist's touch. Unthinking, I reached out and touched the carving.

As my fingers brushed the wood, a wave of anguish surged through me, so powerful that I fell to my knees. A terrible cry tore itself from my throat—and not mine alone. I saw Lenaya double over, as if stabbed to the gut, screaming incomprehensible words while bloody tears streamed down her face. And Chesan ... my brave brother was hud-





dled in a ball on the blood-soaked earth, his arms wrapped around his head and his whole body shaking with sobs.

I dragged myself across the boggy ground toward him. I called his name, shook him, even dragged him up on my lap and held him, but he would not look at me. He only murmured, over and over, "Too much ... too much ..."

I looked up and saw a towering tree rising from the center of the clearing. It was as big around as a Brotherhood of obsidimen standing shoulder to shoulder; its top was lost to sight. Blood-red banners of hanging moss draped its blackened branches, which were twisted and bent as if the tree had tried to strangle itself. Every inch of bark was covered with lumps and boils and lesions, from which mud-colored liquid crept in slow, sickening trails. The trunk, bare of moss, glistened with fetid moisture—all except one spot, a gaping hole just the size and shape of a tall elf.

The hole was blacker than coal, blacker than the waters of the Serpent on a moonless night. It sucked the dim light of the clearing into itself; not a glimmer could escape it. It drew the eye like a wound, the mind like a silent scream. Though I could not see within it, I sensed in its depths an evil unlike any I had ever faced or heard of ... and I have faced Horrors in my time.

This was the corruption we had come to heal—this terrible place, with its warped growths and shattered buildings and broken dreams. I sat back, cradling Chesan loosely in my arms, and laughed and wept at once for the agonizing absurdity of it all. What had possessed us to believe our puny magic could stand against this abomination, let alone overcome it? All the power in the Universe cannot cure a soul diseased. I fear the Wood is lost, and will never be redeemed ...



OVERVIEW

In the center of the Blood Wood lies the source of its corruption: the region known as the Forest's Heart. Here the woodland's rot and decay and unnatural life reign in all their dreadful glory, unrelieved by the slightest glimmer of anything wholesome. The sights, sounds and smells of rotteness run rampant threaten to overwhelm any who dare venture too far into it.

This part of the Blood Wood has twisted in on itself, seeming to feed on its own agony. The crooked trees still growing here sprout long, wicked-looking thorns that pierce the bark and bleed foul sap. Their leaves are sickly pale and often blighted. The flowers are perverse mockeries of the beautiful plants they once were; many give off odors that poison or sicken those who smell them. The usual sounds of forest life don't exist in the Heart; instead,

the terrible silence is pierced by the hideous roars of malformed beasts that stalk the region, or the death cries of unlucky animals that strayed too far from wholesome paths. In some places the hum of insects grows to a deafening roar as hordes of them swarm over pools of putrid blood that well up from the boggy ground. Creatures warped beyond most people's worst imaginings prowl the depths of the Forest's Heart, hunting and devouring each other in their constant search for new prey. All but the bravest blood elves and blood warders shun this terrible place.

The Forest's Heart is roughly a hundred miles in diameter. It borders the Southern Fringes, the Western Border, the Northern Reaches and the western edge of the area surrounding the elf queen's palace. Adventurers in the Forest's Heart may find themselves slogging through perilous jungle and blood-soaked marshlands or through blackened wastelands such as the Blasted Heath, which lies not far from the ruins of the blood warders' citadel in the Heart's darkest depths. Nothing lives in the scorched earth of the heath except the magical abominations known as fire birches. The only other trees to be seen are long-dead, charred husks that poke upward toward the sky like claws.

The blood warders' citadel, where long-ago warders devoted themselves to discovering magical safeguards against the ravages of the Horrors, now lies in ruins at the center of the Heart. The shattered buildings, sundered foundations and miasma of despair surrounding the place are mute testimony to the high price the blood elves paid to survive the Scourge.

Deep beneath the Forest's Heart lie the kaers that once housed the elves of the Blood Wood. Most of these vast caverns and tunnels, now long abandoned, are sealed; only a few entrances remain open. Thus far, none who have attempted to enter the kaers have survived to tell of their adventures. The kaers still keep their dark secrets; no one knows what treasures and terrors may be found within them.

The true extent of the Heart's corruption is one of the best-kept secrets of the Blood Wood, spoken of rarely and only in hushed tones. Queen Alachia has forbidden anyone to enter the Forest's Heart without her express permission, and has backed up this decree with guard patrols around the region's perimeter. Violating the queen's edict brings death, assuming the guilty party survives the Heart's own perils. Though she has said nothing publicly, Alachia has quietly made it clear that she does not want the Heart's true condition made known to outsiders lest it lend credence to their arguments that the elves of Blood Wood are corrupted beyond redemption. Few elves know how the Heart became what it is, though many stories are told behind closed doors. Some of them link Alachia to this horrible tragedy. Despite the royal ban, however, elves from all over the Blood Wood frequently travel to the fringes of the Heart in search of the precious True wood that grows there.

Even more frightening than the state of the Forest's Heart is its steady growth. The Heart is spreading further





into the rest of the Wood, at a rate of nearly two or three miles a year on every side. Markers carved into the trees by the blood warders to warn potential trespassers of the Heart's boundary must constantly be moved as the Heart expands ever outward. The blood warders claim they are seeking a means to halt the spread, but so far have had no success. Villagers living elsewhere in the Blood Wood fear the growth of the Heart, and residents of the southern settlements along the Lesser Mothingale nervously wonder what effect the corruption may have on the river. Many riverside villagers claim that the Heart is growing faster with each passing year.

HISTORY

The history of the Forest's Heart is tied to the blood warders, who first lived in it and whose failures made it the cursed place it has become. Long ago, the Forest's Heart was the center of learning for the Queen's Warders; apprentice warders came here to master their chosen magical art. As each generation of warders sought greater and greater magical knowledge, they began to dabble in blood magic—a line of research that would one day lead them to create the rituals that saved the Wood from destruction during the Scourge.

The Queen's Warders established their city during the reign of Queen Failla. Several of the most talented magicians among them had begun to push beyond the existing horizons of magical knowledge, and they desired a private haven in which to practice the art they so loved. The warders petitioned the queen for a quiet place in which to research and create their spells and rituals, and Failla graciously allowed them to choose whatever site they desired. They chose the region long known as the Forest's Heart, a sparsely populated area so thick with magical power that most elves considered it a sacred place. True wood was plentiful in the region, and True water and True earth could be found along the banks of the Lesser Mothingale river. Easily reached from any part of the forest, and with the swift-running river providing quick transport to the southern parts of the Wood, the Heart was an ideal site for the warders' purposes. They Named the city they built there Tesrae k'Ailiu, the Citadel of Magic.

From Tesrae k'Ailiu, the warders ruled the Forest's Heart for centuries. At first they allowed other elves free access to the region, and so elves from all over the Wood came to gather True wood or simply to bask in the dazzling beauty of the place. A rare few even chose to live in the Forest's Heart. Over time, the warders restricted the movements of other elves; residents of the Heart other than warders were encouraged to leave. By the time Queen Alachia ascended the Rose Throne, the Forest's Heart belonged almost exclusively to the warders and their invited guests. Other elves were virtually nonexistent in the region until the early days of the Scourge, when Wyrn

Wood's population relocated to the vast wooden kaer that the warders had grown with powerful elemental magic.

The kaer held for some time, but all too soon began to fail. When Alachia realized that it would not protect her people against the Horrors, she ordered the warders to find another solution (see **History**, p. 32). The warders retreated to their laboratories and began working feverishly against time. After following a few dead ends, Warder Kethos Escalanas and his compatriots discovered a method they believed might keep the Horrors at bay: the Ritual of Thorns (see **The Ritual of Thorns**, p. 11, **Overview**). This powerful magic carried a steep price with it—so steep that Alachia dismissed the Ritual out of hand when her warders first presented it to her. Even though she could see the wooden kaer crumbling all around her, she feared inflicting permanent pain and disfigurement on herself and the rest of the Elven Court. Such an act might well change the Court beyond recognition, making it unfit to remain the heart of elven culture and Alachia herself unfit to remain the guardian of elven ways. And so, even knowing that the Ritual of Thorns might be the elves' only hope, she ordered the warders to find another way ... any other way.

In the following months the warders strove desperately to discover a less terrible means by which the elves of Wyrn Wood might survive the Scourge. The experiments they performed cause nightmares to this day for the few warders still living who remember those dark days. Warder Lysarin Greenbranch, driven to madness by a Horror mark, created the lethal plants known as fire birches in a crazed attempt to save the trees of the Wood from destruction. Also during this time, with the Wood's fate hanging in the balance, the warders discovered the immensely powerful blood magic that they ultimately used to protect their beloved forest ... and that ravaged its once-beautiful Heart, possibly beyond repair.

FIRE BIRCHES AND THE BLASTED HEATH

While other warders sought a way to save the elves of Wyrn Wood, an elementalist Named Lysarin Greenbranch strove to save the forest itself from the Horrors. Neither he nor his fellows knew, however, that Lysarin had been marked by a Horror. The Horror's touch altered his perceptions and tainted his work, leading to catastrophic results.

Under the influence of the Horror mark, Lysarin came to believe that he could protect the trees of the Wood much as the Ritual of Thorns was intended to protect the people—by causing the tree intense pain so that the Horrors could not inflict suffering of their own to feed upon. By weaving True fire with a tree's elemental spirit, he could inflict inconceivable agony on the tree that would immunize it from pain caused by Horrors. Before he could complete his research and test this awful method, his fellow warders learned of his plans and ordered him to stop. Lysarin carried on his work in secret. His first experiments





left the trees twisted, blackened and lifeless. But he persevered until he achieved what his warped, Horror-tainted mind thought was success. One birch tree remained alive, even with True fire burning in its heart. Though every bit as outwardly twisted and charred as the failures, this tree lived—but the unending pain of the burning drove the spirit of the birch insane. Thus was born the first of the terrible perversions known as fire birches, which destroy every living plant near them.

Having succeeded with one tree, Lysarin set about casting a ritual to transform an entire birch grove. The other warders caught wind of his plans and tried to thwart them, but arrived too late. By the time they reached Lysarin's grove, the mad warder had completed the ritual and burned down the area. Driven insane by agony, many of the plant spirits native to the afflicted trees had left the scorched remnants of their birches and fled beyond the grove, infecting other trees with the dreadful fire they carried. Thousands of trees burned to death before the warders managed to contain the carnage. In the confusion, Lysarin vanished. To this day no one knows whether he perished in the conflagration or if he still exists somewhere, performing his twisted experiments in some hidden corner of the Wood.

The fire birches still exist, and are among the worst perils of the Blood Wood. Lysarin's grove was permanently scarred by the fires, and the other warders Named it the Blasted Heath. The heath is one of the few areas in the Blood Wood where plant life has not grown back. (For more information on fire birches, see p. 134 of *Flora and Fauna*.)

No creature lives in the Blasted Heath, nor does anything wholesome grow there. Only a few brave (or perhaps foolish) elves venture to this place, seeking the rare kernels of True fire left behind by Lysarin's long-ago ritual. Occasionally small fire-birch saplings sprout from the ground; they are swiftly destroyed by blood warder patrols, who have sworn to exterminate all of these destructive plants. The fire birches also produce kernels of True fire, which the intrepid may attempt to harvest (if they can get close enough to do so without harm).

SAVED BY HORRORS

One early attempt by the warders to save Wyrms Wood almost caused its loss to the Horrors. This same experiment ultimately led to the corruption of the Forest's Heart and the entire Blood Wood, though none knew this until after the Scourge ended. The Name of the elf who first proposed this terrible scheme has been lost to time, and no blood warder now living will speak of the matter. To present-day ears, what the warders did sounds mad; yet so desperate were the elves for an alternative to the Ritual of Thorns that even the craziest risk seemed worth it.

The scheme that almost destroyed the Wood revolved around a type of parasitic Horror that resembled the dread

iota, a tiny but insidious monster currently most common in the Badlands. This miniature abomination had already slipped through Wyrms Wood's defenses, and so the warders were familiar with its ways. Among other things, they knew about a significant side effect of carrying one of these Horrors: the parasite's presence caused other Horrors to ignore its host.

Through experimentation, they found they could control the parasitic Horror's growth and advancement with relative ease. They could even kill it without doing permanent damage to the host body. The warders theorized that carefully controlled exposure to this minor Horror might make the entire population of Wyrms Wood immune, or at least invisible, to other Horrors.

The warders began infecting plants and then animals with the parasitic Horror, keeping a close eye on how it spread and the degree of control they could maintain over it. At first they found it easy to restrict the Horror's growth, and it seemed to have no adverse effects on the test subjects. But just as they were about to present their discoveries to Queen Alachia, the parasite escaped their control. Most of the test subjects died suddenly, and the few survivors were warped and bent almost beyond recognition. No longer able to keep the Horror infestation from spreading, the warders had no alternative but to take drastic action, lest the parasite infect and devastate all of Wyrms Wood.

The few warders already infected were mercifully killed, their laboratories sealed and abandoned. The surviving warders cast many powerful spells in an attempt to destroy what they had created, but each attempt failed. During its rapid growth phase, the Horror seemed to have invaded the land itself. Everything—animals, plants, even the soil—seemed riddled with the thing. The desperate warders took one last, radical step to save Wyrms Wood, a step that ultimately changed the Forest's Heart from a shining jewel to a cesspit of rot and decay.

Using powerful blood-magic ritual spells, the warders reshaped the True pattern of the Forest's Heart. The change cleansed it of the Horror, saving Wyrms Wood and its people from imminent destruction. The warders then reported the failure of their scheme to Queen Alachia. With time running out, she had no choice but to implement the only hope for survival remaining: the Ritual of Thorns. The Ritual enacted, however, was different than the one Alachia had originally rejected.

The warders' labors to contain their botched experiment had taught them a truer appreciation of the power of blood magic, which they applied to the Ritual of Thorns. Kethos Escalanas modified the Ritual to reName the entire Wyrms Wood, which gave its True pattern a completely new shape. This earth-shaking act of blood magic kept the entire forest as well as its denizens largely safe from the Horrors, but destroyed the essence of the very thing it was intended to save. The Ritual tied every elf's pattern to the





True pattern of the reNamed Blood Wood, and made the drops of blood they shed vital to the Wood's survival.

ETERNAL CORRUPTION

For a time the elves of the Blood Wood believed they had won. The Horrors swept over Barsaive, but left much of the Wood intact. The magical wards created by the pattern shift of the Ritual of Thorns kept many of the most destructive Horrors at bay, even at the Scourge's height. Fed by the blood that each thorned elf willingly gave to the forest, the wards remained intact until the queen and her warders deemed it safe to emerge from the underground shelters into which the elves had fled (see **History**, p. 32).

At the end of the Scourge, Queen Alachia commanded her blood warders to regrow and repair those parts of the Wood that the Horrors had harmed. The warders worked mighty blood magics to accomplish this feat, and even the Forest's Heart seemed to revert to the beautiful place it had once been. Only the Blasted Heath refused to return to life. But within a scant few months, signs of the Wood's true state began to show. The trees grew faster than was natural, some of them twisting horribly in on themselves. Huge thorns split the bark of many trees, creating ragged gashes through which vile-smelling sap dripped. The very blood magic that had kept the elves and their woodland alive had irretrievably warped the forest's pattern, and the taint of it spread from the Forest's Heart throughout the Blood Wood. Worse, the magic used to regrow the damaged parts of the forest worsened the very harm it was intended to correct. The tainted Wood was and is hungry for blood, and every drop that falls from the thorns of the blood elves feeds the corruption.

REDEEMING THE FOREST'S HEART

Queen Alachia opposes any attempt to undo the Ritual of Thorns, fearing that such an action might destroy the Wood altogether. Neither she nor her warders can predict the consequences of changing the Wood's True pattern again, and Alachia does not want to find out the hard way. Nonetheless, she wants to heal the corruption of the Forest's Heart and remove the taint from the entire Blood Wood. Toward this end, three months ago she assigned her chief blood warder, Preystia Tales, to find a way of healing the Heart—or at least keeping it from growing any larger. So important is this task that Preystia has the queen's permission to use all the blood warders to accomplish it. He has spent considerable time with Kethos Escalanas (**The Western Border**, p. 92) searching for clues, but so far has found no useful direction.

In truth, Alachia may well have commanded Preystia to achieve the impossible. The corruption arises from the Blood Wood's warped True pattern, which the Ritual of Thorns created. To remove the effect of the warping from the pattern without actually changing it again may be

beyond the skill and gifts of any magician. Kethos Escalanas believes it can be done, though only with extreme difficulty. He has been seeking methods by which to adjust the Heart's pattern so that the Personal Ritual will no longer be necessary, despite Alachia's expressed will to the contrary.

Preystia Tales has other assets at his disposal, though he does not especially want them. The Seekers of the Heart, a Living Legend cult dedicated to the restoration of the Blood Wood, has repeatedly contacted him to offer assistance. Thus far, Preystia has refused; Queen Alachia has banned these "arrogant outsiders" from the Blood Wood, and Preystia will not breach her edict. However, he knows a useful tool when he sees one, and allows the few Seekers who slip into the Blood Wood a certain leeway provided they keep their actions discreet.

THE SEEKERS OF THE HEART

The Seekers of the Heart are devoted to restoring the Blood Wood and the Elven Court to their pre-Scourge state. Both blood elves and others claim membership, but blood elves whose membership is discovered are frequently banished from the Blood Wood. Queen Alachia regards the Seekers as renegades, and has expressly forbidden them entry into her domain. Like them, Alachia wants the Forest's Heart restored to normal and the Blood Wood returned to its rightful place as the center of elven life—but the Seekers believe that the Ritual of Thorns must be undone to accomplish this, and Alachia refuses to allow such an action. No one knows whether the Seekers of the Heart understand the full truth behind the Ritual of Thorns or the real relationship between the blood elves and the Blood Wood. That terrible knowledge remains hidden from the vast majority of blood elves.

Like all Living Legend cults, the Seekers of the Heart take their inspiration from an ancient legend. Their particular tale tells of the tree from which Wyrn Wood sprang, a mighty tree known as Oak Heart. The tree still grows in the center of the Forest's Heart, but was horribly altered by the Ritual of Thorns. Once a vital source of life and health and beauty, Oak Heart has become a monstrous mockery of itself—a diseased, rotting travesty of a tree whose still-abundant life energies have turned so malignant that they infect everything they touch.

During the long centuries of its uncorrupted existence, Oak Heart shed acorns every season like any other oak tree. These acorns, infused with Oak Heart's essence, belonged by tradition to the queen of the Elven Court, who gave them as boons to other elven nations, loyal retainers, gifted magicians, legendary heroes and such. Alachia has a number of them, hidden away in a treasure-room somewhere in the vast expanse of the elf queen's palace. Preystia Tales also has some, which Alachia gave him for research purposes. The others are scattered, carried away by their recipients throughout Barsaive and across the





world to lands as far-flung as the northern elf kingdom of Shosara and the extreme edges of the Theran Empire. Monus Byre and other Seekers are attempting to trace and retrieve all of the acorns that existed up until the moment of Oak Heart's corruption. They believe that planting every untainted acorn in the Forest's Heart will heal the great tree and the entire Wood. In their minds, such redemption will also serve as a sign to other elves of the renewed sovereignty of the Elven Court.

Retrieving the acorns is far easier said than done, of course. Some are prized family heirlooms, and their present owners will not easily give them up. Others have traveled far from their original recipients over the years since they were given, and clues to their present whereabouts must be sifted from old tales and ancient records. As for the ones belonging to Alachia and Preystia Tales, those promise to be the most difficult to obtain. At best, the Seekers will need formidable powers of persuasion; more likely, they will end up resorting to theft or even force. Should they take such action and fail, they are likely to pay a terrible price.

Monus Byre

Monus Byre is an Unprotected elf and the leader of the Seekers of the Heart. As a young elf, Monus suffered a mild case of wood longing and went to the Blood Wood full of hope. What she saw there shocked her to her core, but she still felt a strong connection to the Wood. She vowed to see it restored to its former glory or die in the attempt. In the ensuing decades, Monus has managed to assemble a large following among Protected and Unprotected elves, and even a few other Name-givers—mostly humans and windlings. The cult continues to grow, and Monus hopes that one day they will be too numerous for Alachia to deny them.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

DEFENSES

Wardens under the command of Alachia's blood warders regularly patrol the perimeter of the Forest's Heart, which is roughly three days' walk from the Heart's center. Four to five wardens (see **Overview**, p. 23) make up each patrol; they are often joined by exolashers and even junior blood warders. Eight patrols are on duty at any given time, each covering a segment of the perimeter. Some members of the Elven Court feel that Alachia is spending excessive resources on defending the Forest's Heart, but their complaints have so far fallen on deaf ears. Supporters of the patrols point out that they protect the rest of the Wood from the vicious creatures native to the Heart. Each year, nearly a quarter of the wardens assigned to the Forest's Heart are killed by attacking creatures and plants.



Most of the elves who serve on these patrols are from the Talshara ranelle (see **The Northern Reaches**, p. 77), though some come from other ranelles as well. The patrols report directly to Preystia Tales.

Though the patrols are stalwart in defending the Forest's Heart from intruders, on occasion trespassers manage to get through. Preystia does not insist on pursuit at all costs, reasoning that anyone who gets past the patrols will succumb soon enough to a creature attack or some other danger. To his credit, this assumption has proved true with rare exceptions. The Forest's Heart remains one of the Blood Wood's deadliest and most mysterious places.





THE NORTHERN REACHES

PROLOGUE

—From the journal of Rommanarel Oakfast, elfen troubadour, 1448 TH

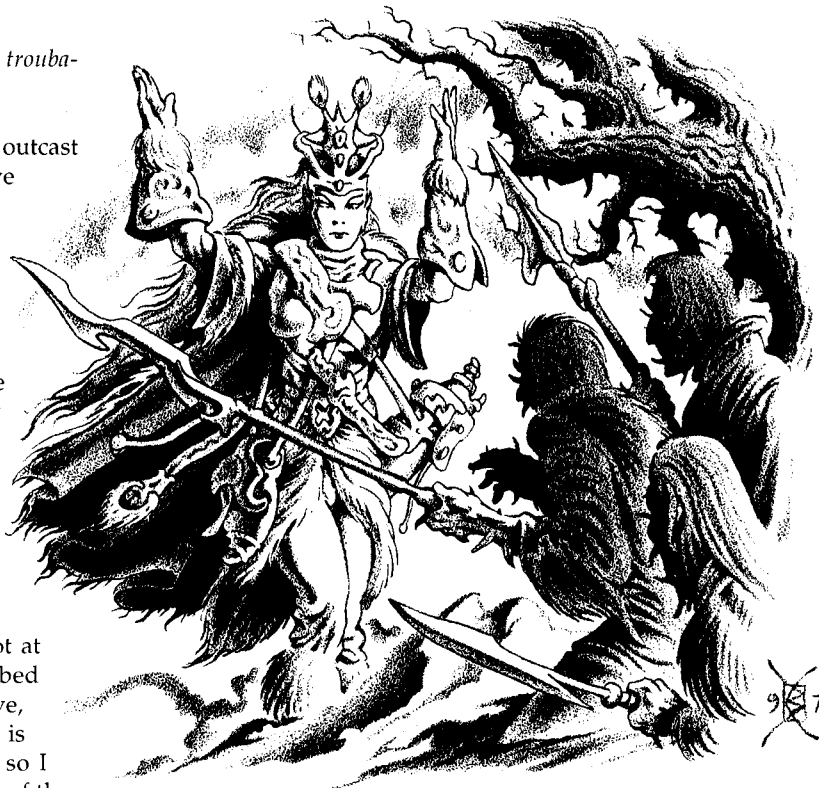


Some way or another, I have been an outcast all my life. Where, then, should I live out my days but among the outcast? And who among us are more cast out than the blood elves, our brethren who sacrificed so much merely for the privilege of continuing to breathe? Many have condemned them and still do. But facing the choice they faced, how many would not have done exactly as they did?

I was born free in northern Rugaria Province, and for my first ten years I lived a peaceful life in our small woodland village. Then the slavers came, and my life was forever changed. They killed my parents and took me in chains to the city of Lankarden. Set free six years later by the wife of my owner—who liked me somewhat and liked not at all the prospect of her husband's taking me to bed when the whim moved him—I escaped to Barsaive, where the Council Compact of the dwarf kingdom is the law of the land. In Barsaive, all are free—or so I believed. Then I heard the whispers about the elves of the Blood Wood. The way people spoke of them told me that they were not free. The ill opinion of the outside world kept them captive as surely as any slaver's iron collar. I was curious to see elves who could allow themselves to be so prisoned, and so I came to the Blood Wood to see the truth for myself.

I found a deeper truth than ever I expected—and not the one espoused by the Wood's sad queen. Another truth altogether is here—one all Barsaive would profit by learning. But we learn best by example, and so it is not enough for a wandering troubadour to sing or tell this truth. I must live it and help others to live it as well. And so I have stayed these ten years in the Blood Wood, in the village that we came to call Goro'imri.

My neighbors call me its founder, which amuses me. I never intended to build a village here, only to show that we "uncorrupted" Name-givers could live side by side with the blood elves and remain free of their supposed taint. And, in so doing, to make folk think honestly about whether the elves of the Wood were so tainted after all.



That others followed where I led remains a joyous mystery to me. But of such things are our lives made, or so my Discipline teaches. One leads the way, and others with hearts to see find their own paths to the same destination.

The blood elves could not believe it at first—that I, an outsider who had not suffered the Ritual of Thorns, would not condemn them. Everyone else had. Every Barsaivian who had seen them or heard tell of them called them corrupt, unnatural. But none of them ever asked why the blood elves became what they did—what drove them to that choice, and how they lived with its consequences day by day.

So I asked. And after a time, they answered. Not in words, but in actions—in the way mothers and fathers tended lovingly to their children, or hunting parties came back singing with plenty of meat for all. In the way they told stories and sang at night around the small hearth-fires of their encampments. In the care they took of the Wood, and most especially of each other. They laughed, sang, danced, loved, grieved, dreamed and worked together. I saw them do all these things, just like any Name-givers





elsewhere in the world who call themselves good and kind and decent. And I wondered how any folk who do these things can truly be called corrupt—let alone corrupt beyond redemption.

In a clearing I fashioned a little house by carefully shaping a frame of living saplings and weaving into it thick strips of bark and the wide, flat leaves of the small trees that the blood elves call *cama'in*. Both shed water well, which matters greatly in a place where rain falls often. My house lay a little way from the circle of bark tents in which some twenty blood elves lived; I did not know then that their little settlement was a temporary encampment. The blood elves of the northern Wood rarely stay long in one place, lest they hunt all the game and thereby harm the forest. Too soon, my neighbors rolled up their tents and began their journey to their winter hunting grounds. That small community would not return for nearly a year, though other groups passed through, staying in the area only a night or two on their way to their own camps. Through all of this, I went on with my daily life: tending my small vegetable garden, mending my house when it was needful, making a little music now and then. When my path crossed that of a blood elf, I smiled and wished him or her good day. I did not go beyond this, for I knew they had little reason to trust my kind. And so I waited. If they were as I believed them to be—Name-givers like any other, save for the depth of pain they suffered—then

sooner or later their hearts would incline toward friendship.

One day, as the bright afternoon turned toward golden sunset, I sat in front of my house mending my harp. The Wood was silent around me, save for the murmur of wind-voices in the leaves. The breeze brought the scent of a hundred flowers to me, and shafts of sunlight blazed around the edges of the leaves and blossoms where they struck. Strangers to the Wood often speak of its colors as too bright, unnatural—but to me, kept in drab slave's quarters for too long in Lankarden, such a riot of color was a gift to be savored. I replaced the snapped string, which had broken a night or two earlier during a particularly difficult passage of *The Ballad of the Earthdawn*. (I had rather hoped to draw an audience with that performance, for the year had passed and my neighbors had returned, and I was sorely disappointed when no one came.) The fault mended, I re-tuned my harp. The idle notes took shape in my mind and I began to play a tune, then to hum an accompaniment. After a time, another voice began to sing along.

I was tempted to look around but resisted, for I did not wish to frighten away my new companion. She sang a wordless harmony, her voice untrained but light and clear as a trickling stream. As we sang together, some courage must have come to her, for she slowly walked around until she stood in front of me.

She was a child, no more than ten summers old. A delicate thing, with huge dark eyes like a fawn's. The thorns





that covered her face and body were thin, fragile wisps of green, like the new spring shoots in my garden. And on her face, I saw the most extraordinary expression—an almost-contentment, as if the pain of the thorns had receded far from her spirit. It was not gone—I could still see the shadow of it, deep within her—but it had ebbed away like the tide, leaving the shore free of it for a little while. My song had done this for her. Our song, melody and harmony woven together in a tapestry of sound.

Every song must end, of course, and so did this one. The little singer stared at me for a long time after the last note had died away. Obeying some impulse that to this day I do not understand, I gave her a gift to take away with her: my Name.

"Rommanarel," I said, touching one hand to my breast.

"Rommanarel," she repeated solemnly, then turned and ran lightly away through the trees.

Some few days after that, a hunting party returned to the encampment. The next morning, I found a small parcel of dressed deer meat on my doorstep. And this time, when my blood elf neighbors rolled up their tents to move on, a few families stayed.

I came to know them over the months of autumn, as we dried our meat and fruits and vegetables together. There was Cirinna, the mother of my little singer, who knew the properties of more plants in Blood Wood than I had known plants existed. There was Norlin, the little singer herself—who, when she was not demanding some fantastic tale or other from me, made up exquisite stories of her own about the spirits that lived in flowers. There was Balaan, whose skill at fletching arrows was matched only by his memory for ancient elven poetry. There was young Kivell, who loved the hunt and yet grieved over every animal she slew—"honoring its soul," she called it. We were twelve in all—eleven blood elves and one outlander, learning each other's ways and hearts through the slow turning of Barsaive's year. Though we did not know it then, we were also the seed of Goro'imri.

Spring came, and I awaited the return of the blood-elf community to the encampment. Yet no one came—not all that spring, nor through half the summer. Balaan told me why, with a crooked grin that held no mirth.

"Because you are here," he said. "Because we have chosen to stay with you, in defiance of our queen's decree that our kind shall have nothing to do with the outside world. To the minds of our kin, choosing to live with a goro dishonors us. They think that living with others means we despise ourselves." He closed one eye and sighted down the arrow-shaft he was shaping, making sure it was straight enough to fly true. "They do not understand that we stay to honor you, by giving back the gift of friendship that you first gave to us."

I pondered his words long after I had retired to bed that night. My own kin outside the Wood would say much

the same of me, I knew—that I had dishonored my own heart and all elvenkind by living among the "corrupted" of my own free will. And yet, I could not believe that such a harsh judgment was true.

Three days later, someone did come to the encampment ... but not anyone I had expected. Two travelers, footsore and weary, approached Cirinna and me as we sat in the green-tinted sunlight and shared a late-morning meal.

They stopped well away from us, holding their hands high above the weapons in their belts to show they meant no harm. They were a most unlikely pair, a slender human man and a strapping troll woman, both dressed in well-worn traveler's garb. Their cloaks and breeches were stained with mud and grass, and the weariness in their faces told us they had been wandering for a long time.

I invited them to share our small fire, which they gratefully did. Cirinna would not speak to them, but poured them each a cup of tea. Half a year ago, she would have fled at the sight of them rather than risk one moment of their contempt. *Truly*, I thought, *the Universe is full of wonders*.

They took the tea and thanked her with grave courtesy. The four of us sat in silence, drinking and eating. The travelers kept glancing warily at Cirinna, then away again. At first I took this for the usual reaction of outlanders to the blood elves' appearance, but then I realized they were glancing at me as well. Cirinna bore it well for a time, but I could see the growing tension in the set of her shoulders. Blood elves do not like being stared at.

I set down my empty cup. "I do not wish to offend you, but your looks are troubling my friend. What do you fear from us, who have freely shared with you?"

The human stood abruptly and turned away from us. "I told you this wouldn't work, Gela." Astonishingly, he sounded near tears.

"Hush, Joram," the troll replied. She looked at Cirinna, then at me. "We fear only one thing—that you will tell us to go. We had heard of a village in the Blood Wood where outcasts can live in peace, and we ..." she faltered, then continued. "We have need of such a place. It has cost us time and trouble and some hurt to find it. Now that we are here—if, indeed, we are—may we stay and live among you?"

Cirinna and I stared at each other. Then she began to laugh. That sweet sound, coming from her thorn-ravaged face, clearly startled the two travelers. But before their surprise could turn to anger, Cirinna held out her hand toward them.

"Be not offended," she said. "It is just that there is no village. There are only twelve of us: my family, one other, old Balaan and Rommanarel."

"And you are welcome to join our company," I said, "so long as you can live at peace with your neighbors."

Gela's face lightened, as when the sun first breaks through storm clouds. She looked at Joram, who was staring at us with dawning hope. She held out a hand to him; after a moment, he took it as if it was a precious jewel.





"We'll need a house," he told her dazedly, as if that was the first thing that had come to his mind. She replied that she supposed they would. He turned to Cirinna and me, his face as bright as it had been dark before. "Will you help us build one?"

And so we raised a house for them. And before the autumn was out, we had built three more—two for outlanders and one for two newly married blood elves with an infant on the way. That infant has seen ten springs now and is my own apprentice; Teryth will be a great troubadour someday. Unlike his parents, he has no thorns; his kindred reckon him a son of outcasts and so have not performed the Ritual of Thorns for him.

Along with Teryth and our other children, Goro'imri grows a little more every year. We are outcasts still, to many blood elves and to those outside the Wood—but what they think of us does not matter. What matters is that we outcasts have found a home. We have made it with our own hands and hearts. This is the truth of Goro'imri—that no one is truly outcast who can still give to another, and that none are beyond the reach of simple kindness unless they choose to be so. When those who now shun this truth finally understand it, then we will have come far toward healing the wounds of the Scourge—not only in the Blood Wood, but in all the world.



OVERVIEW

The largest of the Blood Wood's five regions, the Northern Reaches encompasses vast tracts of sparsely populated wilderness that stretch from the village of Goro'imri, across the northernmost edge of the forest and along the forest's far eastern edge down to the community of Arralena (see **The Southern Fringe**, p. 101).

The area known as the Northern Reaches covers the most rugged wilderness in the Wood, land that supports some of the forest's most dangerous plants and animals. Though travel anywhere in the Wood is difficult by any standard and sometimes actually impossible, the trees, vines and plants that grow here form underbrush so thick that it reduces normal travel rates by one-fourth. Several minor tributaries of the Mothingale and Lesser Mothingale rivers run through the Northern Reaches. None are large enough to accommodate heavy river traffic, but the elves native to the region use rafts to travel the tributaries between semi-permanent camps and to trade with villages in the southern parts of the Wood.

The Northern Reaches contains precious little arable land, and so most of the area's blood elves live by hunting game and gathering wild foods. They move their encamp-

ments each season to harvest roots, berries, herbs and other edible plants as they ripen. Six permanent villages survive in the Reaches by trading among themselves and with other permanent settlements in the Wood. The most noteworthy of these villages, Araouane, is home to the manor of the Talshara ranelle and the residence of Lord Erithander Talshara, the eldest member and leader of the Talshara. Renowned throughout the Wood and beyond for its mastery of the martial Disciplines, the Talshara ranelle trains the Queen's exolashers, military forces and wardens, with a significant percentage of those coming from the Talshara ranelle itself. Near Araouane is the Grove of Thorns, the Talshara war college where ranelle members and others train to join the ranks of the wardens and exolashers. A number of minor ranelles also make their homes in the Northern Reaches, living among the prosperous Talshara.

The Northern Reaches contains several rich deposits of elemental earth and a few small veins of orichalcum. Mining and training these elements accounts for most of the Talshara's riches. The ranelle must set aside a certain percentage of the mined material for the Elven Court, but the remaining share gives the ranelle a sufficient amount to sell and trade for other goods and services, making them relatively wealthy in the process.

Going beyond the ranelle's established trading routes and venues, a few adventurous Talshara weaponsmiths secretly trade with nomads and villagers from the lands north of the Blood Wood, who travel to remote sites along the Wood's border to barter raw ore and crystal in exchange for elven weapons and woodcraft. Because the weaponsmiths' only goal in this illicit activity is to further strengthen the Wood's defenses, so far neither Erithander Talshara nor Queen Alachia has made any attempt to curtail their activities.

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the Northern Reaches is the hamlet Named Goro'imri, where blood elves and members of other Name-giver races peacefully coexist. Those who were not outcasts from their own race before they settled in this unique village earned that status by choosing to join this small but growing community.

DEFENSES

The Talshara ranelle maintains ten guard outposts along the northern edge of the Blood Wood, identical to those along the rest of the border (see **Defenses**, p. 23 in the **Overview**), but placed only two days' walk apart (approximately 40 miles). The wards along this border produce an average number of thorn men, but fewer than those along the western border.

The density of the wilderness allows the wardens of the Northern Reaches to mount a reactive defense. The outposts lie approximately a days' walk inside the Wood's edge, and patrols generally focus their efforts on watching the perimeter for signs of intruders. The underbrush and overgrowth forces all but the smallest groups to travel very





slowly, leaving ample evidence of their passing. Whenever they find such evidence, the wardens estimate the number of intruders and travel to the nearest outpost to gather additional wardens, then track the intruders and deal with them. To defend against more significant numbers, the wardens use trained messenger birds to relay requests for reinforcements to the closest permanent Talshara settlement. The most frequent attacks these wardens repel are occasional forays by troll raiders from the mountains to the northeast of the Wood.

In addition to the wardens assigned to the perimeter posts, every permanent settlement of the Talshara and their allied ranelles at any one time contains a variety of adepts, wardens resting between tours of duty and accomplished hunters who are skilled with the longbow. Should any such settlement need to defend itself, the Talshara has ensured that every able-bodied resident possesses some type of fighting skill.

THE LANDS BEYOND

The largely uncharted lands beyond the Northern Reaches consist primarily of sparsely wooded steppes and plains, home to nomadic bands of humans and orks. These groups also speak of lands to the northwest, of thick pine forests and massive cliffs that descend sharply to the sea. To the northeast of the regions through which the nomads travel, the land rises slowly to mountains settled by a handful of trollmoots and a few scattered dwarf communities. Though these people show no open hostility toward the residents of the Blood Wood, neither do they show any inclination to ally themselves with the blood elves or otherwise associate with a people they consider corrupted.

Shosara and Sereatha

The known lands beyond the Northern Reaches include the elven nation of Shosara, which lies directly north of the Forest's Heart on the Gwyn Sea, and the fabled city of Sereatha, which lies far to the northwest of the Blood Wood near the origin of the Serpent River and the Grand Cataracts (p. 7, **Serpent River** sourcebook).

After the Scourge, in the interest of maintaining the Elven Court's position as the center of elven culture (a tradition established thousands of years ago), Alachia allowed Shosara and Sereatha to send ambassadors to live at the Court and represent their nations. Though she has not revealed even a hint of her true feelings on the matter, she privately flew into a rage when she learned that Sereatha intended to support Shosara's outrageous claim to be the new Elven Court. Though the Shosarans have so far only proposed to relocate the Court, Alachia knows perfectly well that they ultimately intend to claim the Court for themselves.

Shortly after arriving in the Blood Wood, the Shosaran ambassador, a questor of Jaspre named Jorealla (**The Elven Court**, p. 63) spent eight days in a private audience

with Alachia, eloquently and reasonably outlining a multitude of arguments against the Elven Court remaining in the Blood Wood—all of which essentially came down to the fact that elves outside the Blood Wood considered those in the Wood to be irreversibly corrupt, and having through their actions forfeited all claims to leadership of the elven race. There is no easy solution to this tangled situation, for the relationship between the Blood Wood and Shosara has many layers. Shosara has much to gain if Alachia no longer leads the Elven Court, and primary among those advantages is the reversal of Shosara's Separation from the Court—a source of deep shame and the ultimate motivation for every move that nation makes. Even if Alachia were to consider the Shosaran petition, she would never negotiate with Jorealla, for she holds a grudge against the ambassador that was old long before the Scourge.

Sereatha's apparent defection greatly distresses Alachia. Though the affairs of the elven city-state had been shrouded in mystery long before the Scourge, no elf ever doubted Sereatha's devotion to the Elven Court. Even more troubling for the queen's consort is the peculiar relationship Alachia seems to maintain with the Sereathan ambassador, a swordmaster and wizard adept Named Caimbueul (**The Elven Court**, p. 63). He treats the queen far more familiarly than does any courtier, taking liberties in word and deed that would leave anyone else missing his head.

THE TALSHARA RANELLE

Though the roughly ten thousand blood elves of the Reaches belong to many different ranelles and follow many Disciplines, the Northern Reaches is characterized by the dominant ranelle in the area, the military-minded Talshara. Because the Talshara ranelle trains successive generations of warriors to serve the queen and the Blood Wood, any discussion of the Northern Reaches must necessarily center on the Talshara.

A history of excellence in the Disciplines of combat fostered widespread belief in the Talshara ranelle's prowess, and ranelle members have traditionally risen to the challenge. In addition to training the majority of the Wood's standing militia, the Talshara ranelle also produces the greatest percentage of wardens and exolashers. Though a great many wardens loyal to the Talshara ranelle actually belong to minor ranelles, the queen's favor ensures that most exolashers belong to Talshara-connected families.

The Talshara ranelle has proved unfailingly, and sometimes spectacularly, loyal to Queen Alachia. She has repaid that loyalty by giving Lord Erithander Talshara, leader of the ranelle, special consideration at Court. She takes his advice very seriously, allowing him to speak plainly rather than demanding that he couch his concerns and counsel in the flowery verbal ornamentation commonly used at Court.





HISTORY

In the days of Queen Failla, there lived a young elven warrior Named Teharrillon Talshara. For many years Teharrillon faithfully served his queen, repeatedly performing acts of uncommon valor. In time, a grateful Queen Failla granted the young elf permission to found the Talshara ranelle.

In keeping with the nature of its founder, the Talshara ranelle quickly gained favor and honor by performing daring deeds on behalf of Wyrn Wood and its queen. As the ranelle's reputation grew, increasing numbers of adventuresome young elves pledged their loyalty to the ranelle and its leader so that they might add their own Names to the growing Talshara legend. Soon, the Talshara stood as one of six ranelles in the Northern Reaches known for martial mastery, and the ranelle devoted its strength to defending the Wood against invaders.

During the Orichalcum Wars, the Talshara legend grew as the ranelle's warriors helped repel repeated attacks by the Court's troll, human and dwarf enemies. Finally, toward the end of the wars, the dwarfs of Scythia proposed a treaty to end the hostilities between their kingdom and the Elven Court. Though Queen Liara's consortis advised against it, the queen chose to believe that the offer represented a genuine opportunity to end the decades of bloodshed that had caused such suffering among her subjects. In the spirit of peace, the queen agreed to meet with dwarf emissaries in the small town of Gudamis, a human settlement that lay between the southeastern fringe of the Blood Wood and the westernmost foothills of the Scythia Mountains.

Though Liara believed that peace was possible, she nonetheless allowed her protectors to take what they felt were necessary precautions. Sent ahead as scouts, two Talshara exolashers discovered a large contingent of dwarf warriors hiding in a storehouse on the perimeter of Gudamis, clearly positioned to ambush and kill Liara and so throw Wyrn Wood into chaos. Having made this discovery almost too late to stop the plot's success, the two elves hatched a desperate plan to expose the dwarfs' treachery. They set fire to the storehouse and forced the dwarf troops out into the open just as the queen's party crested the last hill before the village. Though the dwarf troops grossly outnumbered the queen's forces, the elves took advantage of the enemy's momentary confusion to launch an attack, fighting fiercely to keep Liara safe. After spoiling the dwarf ambush, the two Talshara scouts raced to the queen's side. Both distinguished themselves in the ensuing battle, and the younger Talshara willingly sacrificed his life by taking an arrow meant for the queen.

Upon her return to Wyrn Wood, Queen Liara honored the fallen warrior by attending his Ritual of Everlife and commissioning a statuette in his image—an item that remains among the personal effects in Queen Alachia's chambers to this day. Queen Liara showed additional favor

to the Talshara ranelle by choosing more Talshara exolashers to serve as her personal bodyguards, and she approved a higher number of Talshara candidates for the exolashers than candidates from any other ranelle. Gradually, the ranelle's favored position attracted more and more candidates for membership, until the Talshara eclipsed all the other ranelle that had shared responsibility for the defense of the Blood Wood. Ultimately, the Talshara ranelle assumed its place among the five great ranelles that continue to dominate life in the Blood Wood.

The Scourge

As the Scourge approached, Queen Alachia charged the Talshara with the task of repelling the growing numbers of Horrors while the blood warders prepared a vast wooden kaer. To this end, Sariellesrae Talshara founded the Grove of Blades, a school dedicated to teaching the arts of combat to adept and non-adept alike. All who sought to fight in defense of Wyrn Wood came to train with the Talshara, and the Grove of Blades produced hundreds of heroes who sacrificed their blood and their lives to keep the Horrors at bay as long as possible. Even after the wooden kaer was in place, the Talshara continued to teach, for the elves were determined to remain ever-vigilant in defense of the kaer's integrity. Eventually, however, the Horrors overwhelmed the kaer and its Talshara defenders, and the elves turned to the Ritual of Thorns. To this day, the blood elves honor the valiant sacrifices of the Talshara and the warriors they trained.

After the Scourge ended, the Talshara resumed their duties as protectors of the Blood Wood. In those first years, the Talshara repelled numerous attacks from ork scorchers and troll raiders who mistakenly assumed the Wood would be ripe for plunder. At the same time, other Talshara sacrificed their lives patrolling the ravaged remains of the Wood in order to destroy the remaining Horrors and their constructs, so that the Wood might begin to recover.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Though the Talshara exercise a certain influence at Court simply because of their vital responsibilities, their position has been somewhat diminished of late. Never especially adept at Court politics, the "plain soldiers" of the Talshara rarely occupy more than one consortis position at the same time—and their current consortis is a commoner, albeit one with strong Talshara ties. Erithander Talshara remains a trusted advisor to the queen, but the unlucky lapses of etiquette committed by his son Rhisiart prompted Alachia to appoint Rhisiart's scribe as consortis in his place. At the moment, most prominent ranelle members are not inclined to complain; instead, they consider themselves lucky to have gotten off with a commoner consortis and a mild fit of royal disapproval.





Lord Erithander Talshara

As leader of the Talshara ranelle, Lord Erithander Talshara commands the respect and affection of his own and other ranelles. His three hundred years rest lightly on this capable leader; the only sign of aging are the streaks of silver that highlight his raven-black hair. Like many other followers of the martial Disciplines, Erithander is a devout believer in economy and efficiency; he does not speak much or often, but when he does he expresses himself clearly and concisely. Of above-average height, he often seems to swoop down on those with whom he intends to interact; this, combined with his penetrating, observant gaze, earned him the fond nickname of "Sir Griffin."

Born during the Scourge, before the casting of the Ritual of Thorns, Erithander eagerly embraced his family's traditional Disciplines. Perhaps because he was taught almost from the cradle to lead his family's ranelle and possessed the strength of mind and will to do so, Lord Erithander emerged from the Ritual almost unchanged: still brutally honest, unflinchingly loyal and possessed of unimpeachable integrity. Though his flesh suffered constant agony, over the years he found a way to be at peace with the plant spirit fused to his own—a gift few others have shared.

Those who acknowledge Erithander's unique outlook believe his personal vision of Sa'mistishsa, the strict following of the Paths, may have led him to this peace. As a young elf, Erithander served as one of the queen's exolashers, following the warrior Discipline as he walked the first Path of the Wheel of Life. His family's traditional dedication to the martial Disciplines and his personal devotion to the queen led him to follow the Paths of the warrior, archer, beastmaster and swordmaster Disciplines to the Ninth Circle, rather than the more traditional Eighth. He currently walks Mes ti'Raeghsa, the Path of Lords, and has reached the Tenth Circle of the woodsman Discipline. It is likely that in Erithander's efforts to connect his heart and mind to the pattern of the woodsman Discipline, he reached a singular understanding of the plant spirit and found a way to incorporate its presence into his Path. The combined talents of these five separate Disciplines make Erithander particularly well suited to leading the ranelle charged with the defense of the Blood Wood.

While Lord Erithander devotes much of his time and effort to overseeing the welfare of the Talshara, he is also pursuing an ambitious private agenda. Always aware of the constant machinations of the other major ranelles to enhance their own prestige and presence at Court, Lord Erithander recently received a rude reminder that his own ranelle's position is not unassailable. After a spurious attack against the Talshara mounted by the Jae'Helastri, using nothing but strategically placed innuendo and cleverly planted rumors, the queen asked Erithander Talshara to publicly refute the other ranelle's slander. This public

declaration, though meant to chastise the Jae'Helastri rather than shame the Talshara, forced Erithander to face the possibility that another ranelle might seek to usurp his ranelle's position as defender of the Blood Wood and protector of the queen.

To ensure that his beloved Wood and queen would never be forced to depend on inferior warriors (in Erithander's mind, anyone trained by a ranelle other than his), Erithander resolved to begin consolidating Talshara power at Court by gradually winning the loyalty of the minor ranelles in the Northern Reaches. His ultimate goal is to so strengthen the voice of the Talshara among the other major ranelles that responsibility for training and controlling the wardens, and for instructing adepts and non-adepts in the art of battle, would forever remain in Talshara hands.

As part of his strategy, Lord Erithander is sponsoring young members of minor ranelles, primarily of the Northern Reaches, for training in the warrior, swordmaster, archer and woodsman Disciplines. Not only is this an effective way to increase the number of wardens available to patrol the Wood's borders, but Erithander's generosity gains the Talshara the loyalty of the minor ranelles to which these young adepts belong. The fact that the Talshara, rather than the blood wardens, traditionally control the wardens gives the ranelle another level of influence over these fledgling adepts.

Because the majority of exolashers also belong to the Talshara ranelle, Lord Erithander may reasonably hold up assignment to that elite corps as an enticement to young blood elves to join his ranelle. Even though the queen, not the Talshara, actually chooses the exolashers, Alachia does listen to Erithander's recommendations for postings to her personal guard.

Though other ranelle leaders and consortis may speculate idly about the hidden purpose behind Erithander's recent activities, even his most vocal opponents would be hard pressed to prove that the Talshara leader has ever been guilty of a vindictive or treacherous thought.

Attributes

DEX: 9 STR: 6 TOU: 6
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

Rhisiart Talshara

Rhisiart Talshara is Lord Erithander's youngest son. In accordance with his father's wishes and family tradition, Rhisiart trained in the woodsman Discipline and spent many years patrolling the northern borders of the Wood. A handsome, likable young elf, Rhisiart whiled away the long months in the Wood's farthest reaches by reading vast numbers of books and sharpening his conversational skills on his frequently unwilling fellow wardens. They put up with his idiosyncrasies because Rhisiart proved himself





endlessly enthusiastic about tackling even the most tedious tasks. His companions even forgave his uncharacteristic (for the Talshara) streak of curiosity because that very trait had allowed them to be the first to report the existence of many strange creatures and other changes wrought in the Wood by the Scourge.

When Queen Alachia began sending individuals and small parties out from the Blood Wood to gain information and to find and retrieve artifacts that belonged to the elven people, she chose Rhisiart for one of these missions. Because he was Talshara, Alachia had no doubt that he would remain completely loyal to her, and she rightly guessed that his enthusiastic, inquisitive nature would serve him well in his task. She gave Rhisiart permission to travel with a scribe, suggesting for this position Ilisa Willowby, a modest, intelligent girl with the habit of speaking as plainly as the Talshara. Pleased with his reports of his progress and triumphs, the queen sent the pair on increasingly sensitive missions, and her confidence in Rhisiart was rewarded with the successful conclusion of a recent mission into Throal.

The fact that Rhisiart gained favor with the queen in a field outside his ranelle's usual martial pursuits prompted Lord Erithander to consider sending his son to Court permanently, perhaps to cultivate a different sort of presence for the Talshara there. Anticipating Erithander's impulse, the queen summoned Rhisiart to attend her upon his return from Throal. She found him a refreshing change from the practical, often dour Talshara normally sent to Court, and forgave his ignorance of Court etiquette for the joy of watching him outrage the languid courtiers and dignified consortis with his harmlessly exuberant behavior. As a reward for his exemplary service, and because she felt inclined to Name a new consortis from the Talshara ranelle, she also gave Rhisiart serious consideration to replace the retiring consortis Dame Kylanthra Landryss.

As is her custom, the queen invited Rhisiart to a small dinner party—in his honor, though he did not know that. While she found his lack of sophistication amusing when it affected others, the full extent of the young elf's naiveté only became apparent to her as he made increasingly serious social blunders throughout the evening. His disgrace was complete when he mistook Alachia's comments on the recent Theran incursion into Barsaive as an invitation to discussion and initiated what he thought to be a friendly argument with his queen. As punishment for his failure to learn at least enough of Court etiquette to avoid committing a faux pas in her presence, Queen Alachia dismissed him from the dinner and banished him from Court until further notice. As a final humiliation, the queen chose Ilisa Willowby as consortis in his place.

For his part, Rhisiart is desperate to undo the damage to his relationship with the queen. He has sent the queen an apology in poetry every other day since the fateful inci-

dent, but has received no indication that she even reads his pleas for forgiveness. He is also pursuing other schemes to win back her favor: he is taking instruction from the Escanalas in Court etiquette and the proper forms of address, and currently is searching the written history of the Wood to find a worthy quest that, if completed, might earn Alachia's forgiveness. While these pursuits have promise, Rhisiart still manages to make regular missteps in other matters at Court. Currently, the only bright spot in his life is that his former scribe still considers him a friend and keeps him up to date on events in the Court.

Lord Erithander is gravely disappointed with his son and somewhat concerned that Rhisiart's mistakes may reflect badly on the ranelle as a whole. Recent nuances in the queen's behavior, however, give him hope that she might someday forgive Rhisiart. Until then, he will monitor his son's activities and take whatever steps seem necessary to mend the damage he might do.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5

PER: 6 WIL: 6 CHA: 6

Ilisa Willowby

Born during the Scourge to two of Alachia's palace staff—Ryndart Willowby, Preceptor of the Royal Archives and his life partner Chelia Willowby, Second Gazer of Mynbruje—Ilisa spent her formative years being groomed to assume a share of her father's responsibilities, for he had passed his second century before she was conceived. While she showed great aptitude for organizing, caring for and analyzing manuscripts of all periods and subject matter, she longed to use her talents and knowledge for more contemporary work. Though they knew she would never presume to petition the queen for a different position, Ilisa's parents sympathized with her desires and quietly set about arranging a new life for their daughter.

When Queen Alachia suggested to Ilisa that she should accept the opportunity to travel across Barsaive with Rhisiart Talshara, Ilisa suffered a moment's concern over the propriety of traveling alone with an unmarried man, but then smiled and quietly responded, "Thank you, ma'am. I will do my best to make you proud. If I may be excused, I will go and begin packing." Alachia expected that Ilisa would tactfully temper Rhisiart's enthusiasm, and competently and thoroughly record every pertinent detail of their travels and adventures. She also hoped that some of the Court-bred scribe's manners would polish Rhisiart's roughest edges.

When Rhisiart and Ilisa returned to Court, the queen instructed the pair to review their notes, correspondence and journals in order to construct the most complete account of their mission to Throal. In recognition of Ilisa's contribution to the mission's success, Queen Alachia also





invited her to the dinner honoring Rhisiart. When Alachia dismissed the young Talshara, Ilisa also stood to leave, assuming that his transgression would be considered her failing as well. Alachia, however, gently made it clear that the scribe was not responsible for her master's mistakes, and later elevated Ilisa to the vacant consortis position.

Ilisa harbors no illusions regarding her position at Court. She knows Alachia named her as the Talshara consortis for many reasons—to shame Rhisiart, as a warning to other ranelles, as a show of power—none of which had any bearing on her own qualifications for the position. Her performance has been a pleasant surprise to Lord Erithander and the other consortis, and perhaps even to Alachia. She speaks with a combination of directness and insight rare among consortis, drawing on her education, talents and travel experience to offer considered, intelligent advice on a variety of issues. She does not couch her words in layer upon layer of subterfuge, and the queen seems to appreciate her respectful candor.

Though Ilisa owes loyalty to Rhisiart as she would to any member of the Talshara, her family's ranelle, she also considers him her best friend and is determined to prepare him to assume the duties of consortis. She knows that Queen Alachia will eventually decide that the point she intended to make by appointing Ilisa has been sufficiently understood by her Court, and feels confident that the queen will then give Rhisiart a second chance.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 4 TOU: 5
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

Elindrel Talshara

Hailing from the small village of Burdoin on the Mothingale River in the Southern Fringe, Elindrel trained at the Grove of Thorns, then returned to the southern border of the Blood Wood to serve his stint as a warden. Distinguishing himself early in his career, he went on to serve as one of the few blood elves assigned to Kaer Eidolon. His skill with a blade and a natural knack for leadership, plus his unquestioning loyalty to the Talshara and the queen, made him an ideal candidate for liaison between the blood elf troops, the Unprotected elves stationed at Eidolon, and the t'skrang officers of House Syrtis. His ability to coordinate those disparate troops played an important role in the successful rebuff of Ishkarat forces at the Battle of Sejanus. When Lord Erithander judged Elindrel's service record sufficient to warrant promotion, he arranged an invitation for Elindrel to the Elven Court so that Alachia could consider his candidacy for exolasher.

Awestruck at the sight of his queen, Elindrel fell immediately and hopelessly in love with her. The stories of his childhood describing her incomparable beauty and

bewitching presence had not prepared him for the devastating impact of meeting her in person. Though he has yet to say the words aloud, even to himself, Elindrel carries a torch for Alachia, a crush as strong today as when he first saw her in 1502.

Recognizing his absolute and incorruptible devotion to herself, Alachia welcomed Elindrel into the exolashers' ranks. Never having been accused of subtlety, Elindrel sent messages of thanks accompanied by gilt roses, sheet after sheet of mediocre poetry and boxes of candied violets, known to be a favorite delicacy of the queen's. The queen never acknowledged his gifts, but Elindrel believes this to be yet another sign of her infinite wisdom; he understands that one exolasher courting the queen might cause jealousy among the others.

Elindrel's fondest wish is to be appointed Alachia's personal champion. The last Queen's Champion perished on the field of battle forty years ago. While dozens of warriors at Court and among the exolashers would undoubtedly jump at the chance to serve their queen in such a personal capacity, she has refused to name a permanent replacement. To his credit, Elindrel has served as the Queen's Interim Champion on the few occasions when such a warrior was necessary.

Though all of Alachia's subjects are devoted to her, Elindrel's devotion approaches the level of feeling usually reserved for a Name-giver's relationship with the Passions. In fact, he sees his queen as the embodiment of Astendar. If he is chosen more often than his companions for missions requiring discretion, it may be because Alachia knows that he would gladly die a thousand times if his death helped to protect his sovereign.

The recent behavior of his kinsman Rhisiart pains Elindrel deeply. To him, it seems inconceivable that each and every subject of the queen does not possess an instinctive ability to accurately read her moods and anticipate her slightest whim; that the offender belongs to the noble family of his own ranelle causes him great personal anguish. Elindrel is currently searching for the perfect gift to send his queen as an apology for the distress that his relative caused her, and hopefully to regain his own position of favor. He has warned Rhisiart to stay out of his sight, and sent Lord Erithander formal notice that he stands ready to thrash the boy within an inch of his life upon Erithander's approval.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 6 TOU: 7
PER: 6 WIL: 5 CHA: 6

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

The Talshara ranelle continues to be guided by its absolute loyalty to the queen and the Blood Wood. Still serving as the primary source of and training ground for wardens and exolashers, the Talshara have committed





their full resources to reestablishing the pre-Scourge strength of the Blood Wood's defenders. Lord Erithander Talshara's ongoing efforts to gain the loyalty of the minor ranelles in the Northern Reaches represent part of his plan to achieve this goal. He also still hopes that his son Rhisiart's presence at Court will eventually give the ranelle another voice among the queen's consorts.

Erithander presently must balance several concerns on his agenda. In addition to pursuing his own goals for the ultimate good of the Blood Wood, he must also consider the consequences and advantages of the Carithasca desire to open the Wood's borders to some level of commerce. His own weaponsmiths have proven the value of judicious trading, but Erithander does not feel completely confident that other ranelles will exercise such discretion. Now, of course, he must decide whether or not to discipline the Greatearth Forge for stepping up their operations to a noticeable level. While the end result is in line with his goals and improves the overall security of the Blood Wood, Erithander does not accept the notion that the end justifies the means.

His position at Court also gives him some cause for concern. His advancing age has forced him to acknowledge that his ranelle will not enjoy the same status at Court if he dies or gives up his present position, and the same is true of Alachia. Perhaps because Erithander never became Queen Alachia's lover, they instead developed an intimate understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses that allows them to achieve nearly flawless communication—obviously, a relationship that cannot be inherited or taught. Though he has relied on his personal relationship with Alachia to maintain the status of his ranelle up to now, he must begin to explore more traditional ways of influencing the Court and the queen. Sending his son to Court was a first step in developing such avenues of influence. Alachia has no intention of making the transition easy for the Talshara, but she sympathizes with Erithander's concerns and has every intention of eventually accepting Rhisiart as a consort.

Lord Erithander suffered a great shock when he discovered that Kethos Escalanas had petitioned the queen to cease casting the Personal Ritual on elven children. An eminently practical man himself, Erithander recognizes idealism when he sees it, and he fears for his old friend's sanity and safety if Kethos insists on pursuing his researches into the matter—which Erithander knows he almost certainly will. Erithander is not aware that his queen has plans in motion to cleanse the corruption of the Forest's Heart. If he was, he might feel more sympathy for Kethos Escalanas's efforts, and might even support them.

PERMANENT SETTLEMENTS

Of the seven permanent settlements in the Northern Reaches, most outsiders know of only two: Goro'imri, the village of outcasts on the Wood's most northwestern edge,

and Araouane, the seat of the Talshara ranelle. The remaining permanent villages each contain approximately one hundred to one hundred fifty residents and are almost entirely self-sufficient.

GORO'IMRI

Goro'imri's Name is a Speredhiel word meaning, "Are we not outsiders?" As is often the case, this Name was not chosen deliberately, but was established as the settlement's True pattern through repetition. This village grew on the site of a camp established by an elf troubadour who refused to believe that the Ritual of Thorns had destroyed everything good in the elves of the Blood Wood. Rommanarel Oakfast accepted the blood elves unconditionally, and they eventually accepted her friendship as genuine in return. To date, only a few blood elves have disobeyed their queen's edict against contact with outsiders and chosen to share their lives with Oakfast, but tales and legends of this unique place spread slowly across Barsaive and beyond, attracting others who were no longer welcome in their own villages or with their own races. A ceremony evolved to welcome those travelers whom the villagers agreed to accept into their fold, of which the beginning and ending word is "goro'imri."

The blood elves, dwarfs, elves, humans, orks and trolls who live in Goro'imri provide living proof that tolerance and understanding make it possible for all Name-giver races to live in harmony. The intricate dwarf stonework, utilitarian troll homes, ork tents, elven wood-weaving and flat-sided human structures are individually diverse, and yet create a pleasing picture when viewed together. In the same way, the wide variety of Name-givers gathered in this place create an amicable whole. Each child born in this village plays and learns with children of all the other Name-givers, and each child strengthens the character of Goro'imri. The village currently supports approximately one hundred people.

The denizens of Goro'imri must rely on their own skills and talents to defend their village, because Queen Alachia does not extend her protection or attention to the settlement. (Apparently, Goro'imri is so distant from the palace that the queen sees no point in sending warriors to destroy the village, though she has branded its residents exiled and outcast.) Despite the queen's attitude, however, off-duty wardens from the nearby Talshara outpost have recently set up an unofficial schedule for patrolling the borders beyond the village. As further evidence of their peaceful intent toward the outcasts, the wardens accept a limited amount of trade in return for providing basic training to the village's young adepts. Lord Erithander does not encourage this exchange, but is well pleased to know that his wardens are keeping a close eye on a potential trouble spot.

Like other inhabitants of the Blood Wood, the people of Goro'imri primarily sustain themselves by carefully managed hunting and gathering, and every family also tends a





small vegetable garden. In the evenings, the villagers often gather around a communal fire to share tales and legends of their various cultures. This offers a chance for all villagers to learn about their neighbors' traditions and beliefs, gaining understanding of each other's similarities and differences. Tempers still flare up into arguments, but most are quickly forgotten. Those who hold grudges soon find themselves dumped bodily into a stream to cure them of their stupidity.

Rommanarel Oakfast

An Unprotected elf troubadour, Oakfast first came to the Blood Wood nearly sixty years ago. Though she does not consider herself Goro'imri's leader, the village's inhabitants all rely on her wisdom and experience to answer their questions and resolve their disputes. Oakfast believed in the power of acceptance to change the world's attitude toward the blood elves, and feels that her little village proves that such a change is possible throughout Barsaive and beyond.

Oakfast has made many overtures to the Elven Court in an attempt to gain an audience with the queen; perhaps to receive official sanction for Goro'imri, or perhaps to win guarantees of peace for her village. Though Alachia refuses to see her, Oakfast recently observed a new phenomenon that she believes is compelling enough to catch the queen's attention. Rommanarel has determined that children born to blood elves who do not undergo the Ritual of Thorns begin to suffer an acute restlessness in their mid-twenties. This discomfort manifests as a near-compulsion to leave the Blood Wood, a desire far stronger and more deeply felt than even the most serious case of wanderlust.

Every young elf who has given in to this compulsion and traveled away from the Wood reports feeling an overwhelming sense of relief and well-being within three days' steady travel in any direction from the forest. Those elves who stubbornly refuse to leave their loved ones grow more and more irritable, and eventually appear to be driven almost mad by a presence they cannot see or explain. Rommanarel now fears that the Ritual of Thorns has exacted a far heavier price from the elves of the Blood Wood than anyone suspected.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 6 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

Emil

Before the Scourge, several windling clans made their homes in Wyrn Wood with Queen Alachia's permission. Though grateful for the elf queen's generosity, these communities felt no personal loyalty to her, and so scattered to kaers all across Barsaive as soon as Alachia refused the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage. The clan of the village Deratooi, roughly two days' walk (40 miles) from what would become Goro'imri, chose to remain in their

home. In order to survive the Scourge, the windlings accepted the Ritual of Thorns.

Few outsiders know that this community exists. The nobles of this clan long ago decided that they would never reveal themselves to the world, in part because they felt such shame at having accepted the Ritual rather than dying in combat with the Horrors. An equally strong motivation, however, was their fear that others of their race would risk destruction in the Blood Wood in order to wipe out the offending clan. Those who are aware of the thorn windlings learned of their existence by meeting the morose, sarcastic Emil, self-appointed ambassador from the thorn windlings to the rest of the world.

Emil's appearance often unsettles those seeing him for the first time. From a distance he looks like any other windling, but at closer range the hundreds of incredibly tiny thorns growing from his flesh become visible. Emil wears his brown hair in braids and dresses in fur clothing much like any other windling. His neck and forearms are covered with dark geometric tattoos, and he typically carries a windling bow and spear when he travels. He is as inquisitive as any other windling, but his sense of humor has a dark, disturbing edge. Given the average windling life span of 170 years, it seems unlikely that Emil underwent the Ritual when it was first cast, but since the plant spirits used in the Ritual prolonged the lives of the elves, it is reasonable to assume that they did the same for the windlings.

As soon as possible after the Scourge had ended, the thorn windlings left the elf kaer and returned to their tree-top village, refusing to submit even one more child to the Ritual of Thorns. Nearly fifty years ago, the clan took another step toward freeing themselves from their voluntary disgrace. They began sending their children to be fostered by other clans, willing to sacrifice the joy of raising their own offspring for the chance to perpetuate their clan outside the Blood Wood. This is Emil's true responsibility, to find individuals and groups willing to escort young windlings to clans all over Barsaive.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 3 TOU: 4
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 6

ARAOUANE

The village of Araouane lies in the center of the Northern Reaches, about ten days' walk northwest of the queen's palace and roughly one day's travel from the northern border of the Blood Wood. Named in memory of Lord Erithander Talshara's first wife, who did not survive the Ritual of Thorns, Araouane is built around a small, tranquil lake fed by several quiet streams that run down the three gently rolling hills sheltering the west side of the water. A thick, thorned wall of cultivated bramble vines encircles the entire village just beyond Araouane's borders.





The town's three thousand inhabitants live on the slopes of these hills and the wooded land surrounding the lake. Most denizens dwell in simple, beautifully designed huts on the ground, though most merchants and other wealthier inhabitants live in homes above the ground formed from the interwoven branches of living trees. In addition to making each tree-home unique, artisans have magically guided the growth of larger tree boughs to form an ingenious system of raised pathways, including bridges across the streams, that allows the elves to travel from shop to shop and home to home without ever setting foot on the ground. Flowering vines and hanging gardens bloom everywhere, creating a profusion of color and scent that nearly overwhelms the senses.

The Talshara ranelle's manor is located on the crown of the largest hill. Skillfully woven from the branches of three huge trees that dominate the hill, the manor consists of a sprawling jumble of chambers, hallways, stairs and balconies, most of which overlook a small amphitheater in the center of the three trees where plays, musical performances and stage combat are performed for the entertainment of the ranelle's lord, his family and guests. Though at first glance the manor appears to be hastily thrown together, closer examination reveals that the cunning layout of the house allows quick and easy passage from any part of the manor to another.

This cunning pattern is the work of Telia Vestany, an elementalist known across Barsaive for her skill with wood even before the Scourge. During the Scourge, Vestany watched the Talshara willingly train both adept and non-adept elves from any background and every ranelle, and saw how that training strengthened the other ranelles by widening their experience. Convinced that her own ranelle could benefit from such cross-training and inclined to artistic pursuits by nature, Vestany offered to design a new home for the ranelle's noble family if, in return, Lord Erithander agreed to establish an artists' community in Araouane in cooperation with the Daevenar ranelle.

This small community, Named Beálte Astendar (Beauty from the Passions) consists of one or two accomplished artists-in-residence who teach the Talshara and interested students from other ranelles for a period of seven years. The students pay nothing for these classes, but leave their best works with the village when they move on. Some students remain at Beálte Astendar for centuries, studying with each new instructor as he or she arrives, and nearly every instructor leaves the school with a promising apprentice to train as an adept. Vestany taught at Beálte Astendar for nearly fifty years before she died, but her students carried the patterns of her unique and intricate style of wood weaving to every corner of Barsaive.

Mining orichalcum and gathering elemental earth, along with the associated industries necessary to store, transport, trade and use these materials, serves as the pri-

mary occupation of nearly half of Araouane's population and turns the village a tidy profit. The many forms of art produced by the students at Beálte Astendar also fetch a good price elsewhere in the Wood and occasionally in trade to the lands to the north and south. Among permanent Blood Wood settlements, Araouane is considered substantially wealthy, though the village is far less prosperous than most Carithasca villages in the Southern Fringe.

THE GROVE OF THORNS

Approximately two hours' walk south of the bramble-vine walls that surround the village of Araouane lies the Grove of Thorns, the modern incarnation of the ancient Grove of Blades. This complex of winding paths, numerous small bungalows and long, narrow clearings serves as home to the Blood Wood's war college, which is run and staffed primarily by members of the Talshara ranelle.

The Grove of Thorns maintains nearly all the traditions established by the Grove of Blades, training adepts in the swordmaster, warrior, archer and woodsman Disciplines and providing combat-skill training for non-adepts as well. The primary difference between the two schools is that the Grove of Blades accepted far more non-elf students. The Ritual of Thorns prompted the elves to reName their war college, and so necessarily limited the races of Name-givers likely to petition for entrance. Despite their rarity, non-blood elf students receive exactly the same treatment at the Grove of Thorns as their blood-elf fellows, with none of the traditional elven disdain for other Name-givers.

Lord Erithander Talshara maintains an active role in choosing staff and students for the Grove of Thorns. Erithander prefers a five to one ratio of students to teachers, which limits the Grove to ten to fifteen instructors and fifty to seventy-five students at any one time. The Talshara leader also gently encourages the students to follow his unique Sa'mistishsa view of the Paths and to strive for Ninth Circle in each Discipline they follow. The full course of training at the Grove of Thorns takes ten years to complete—another reason few non-elves apply for admission.

The Grove of Thorns focuses primarily on Discipline training, but two or three instructors also teach large- and small-scale tactics, general survival and scouting skills, use and handling of messenger birds and a variety of other knowledge-based and practical skills that successful students will find useful in their tasks as wardens. Every blood elf adept who graduates from the Grove of Thorns must serve as a warden for twenty years; students with higher ambitions may pursue specialized training with one or more instructors during the ten-year course.

Memorable Students

Over the past hundred years, the Grove of Thorns has accepted only four non-blood elf students. The first was Monann Nithagi, a t'skrang of House Syrtis and descendant of the sculptor who fashioned Nithagi's Door at Cliff





City. Though history holds no record of why Monann applied to the Grove of Thorns for his swordmaster training, Lord Erithander's petition to the queen for the t'skrang's admittance contains a pointed reference to the Syrtisian belief that the t'skrang won control of the Serpent River from the elves by force of arms—a belief Erithander is only too happy to dispel by proving the superiority of elven ways, one t'skrang at a time if necessary.

The second was the windling warrior Leelah Chirrup. She won the Queen's Kiss at the first Festival of Blades held after the Scourge, and asked Queen Alachia for the boon of training at the Grove of Thorns. The third was a human archer recommended for admission by Warder Takaris. Each graduate of the Grove may sponsor one other Name-giver for training at the Grove of Thorns. Most graduates never take advantage of this privilege; of those few who do, only three have sponsored non-elves or non-blood elves. Takaris, who took his warrior training at the Grove of Thorns, sponsored Freeny Grimmon to fulfill a blood oath he shared with her. Fortunately for Takaris, both Queen Alachia and Erithander Talshara agreed to honor the warder's oath.

The most recent non-blood elf student at the Grove was Themrast Scourheart, an ork of the liberator Discipline. He came to Alachia's attention through one of her Songbirds, who told the stirring tale of Scourheart's daring rescue of Barsaivian slaves, including several elves, from the Slaveyards of Theran Vivane. Alachia felt that rewarding Scourheart for his deeds, even though none of the slaves rescued were blood elves, would go far toward reinforcing the notion that she still represented the ultimate power over the elf nations. For his part, Themrast Scourheart agreed to train in the Blood Wood for a year and a day if, at the end of that time, Alachia would agree to meet with him in the presence of the consortis. Scourheart suspects that the blood elves are being held in the Wood by some sort of slavery; if his suspicions are confirmed by his time in the Wood, he intends to kill Alachia and her consortis in order to free her people.

Notable Instructors

The teaching staff of the Grove changes on a semi-regular basis as instructors leave to pursue their own training or perform other missions. Lord Erithander also actively encourages the most skilled members of his ranelle to volunteer for long-term teaching stints at the Grove of Thorns; he believes that a fresh outlook and broader life experience can only improve the quality of an instructor's teaching and, ultimately, the quality of graduates. The following are three of the most notable instructors currently engaged at the Grove of Thorns.

The warrior Deriel Swiftstaff is legendary throughout the Northern Reaches and the Western Border for his skill in unarmed combat and fighting with makeshift weapons. He serves as the primary unarmed-combat instructor at the



Grove, teaching the rudiments of those skills to every student at one time or another. Students must be invited to learn the art of makeshift weapons, however, for not every fighter has the flexibility of mind to adapt to unconventional weaponry. When word gets out that Swiftstaff intends to test a potential student, even the instructors stop what they are doing to gather and watch. Beyond the Blood Wood, especially in the other elven nations, Deriel Swiftstaff is best known for his prowess with a staff—and for the staff he carries. Though it is known that his staff is crafted from the wood of Oak Heart, rumors also whisper that it is a pattern item—and that the staff is made of living wood.

Eddeth Daevenar is far from being the most accomplished swordmaster in the Blood Wood, but is far and away the most accomplished teacher at the Grove of Thorns. He shares his ranelle's conviction that every part of life can be approached as an art; because he views his





teaching that way, he produces some of the most disciplined, well-conditioned and independent-minded wardens ever to defend the Wood. More so than any others, wardens shaped by his teaching understand the value of following orders, but have the intelligence and training to use their own initiative wisely when the situation requires.

As part of her opening remarks to every new group of students, the archer Shynreth Talshara demonstrates her own skill with a bow (and the skill level toward which she expects her students to strive) by casually firing a variety of unlikely objects with stunning accuracy. She immediately follows this awe-inspiring display with a stern lecture on the care of one's equipment, specifically warning her students never to fire anything but arrows from their bows. The most demanding of the instructors teaching the archer Discipline, Shynreth teaches the art of bow-making for a full four years before allowing her students to take the first step toward crafting their own bows. As their final exam, Shynreth's archers must present to her their favorite bow and their best bow, even if a single bow does not meet both descriptions.

Festival of Blades

Before the Scourge, the Grove of Blades sponsored a competition once every five years celebrating the martial arts. Participants matched their skills and talents in a wide variety of contests, including archery, swordsmanship, unarmed combat, strength, endurance and even wit. Open to all comers, the Festival of Blades enjoyed widespread popularity, drawing contestants from all across Barsaive and even from other Theran provinces. At its peak, the festival lasted a full fourteen days, extended in order to allow all interested contestants to compete.

The Grove of Thorns first hosted the Festival of Blades near Kaer Eidolon twenty-five years after Queen Alachia declared the Scourge at an end. Many factors conspired to produce low attendance: a greatly reduced population, continuing fear of the Horrors, fewer adepts of Seventh Circle or higher and so on. The rumors that the denizens of the Blood Wood had done horrible things to themselves in order to survive the Scourge merely served to pique people's curiosity, rather than keep them away. When the adepts began to gather for the festival and saw the blood elves, many for the first time, a significant number of potential contestants fled, carrying tales of abomination and horror to the far reaches of the province. Those who stayed were among the first Name-givers to accept the change in the elves, for better or worse.

The prizes of the Festival of Blades range from small purses of gold pieces, to weapons improved with the Forge Blade talent by the weaponsmiths of Talshara, to bragging rights. The grand prize, awarded to the adept who most fully embodies the ideal of his or her Discipline, includes the adept's choice of a common thread weapon, crafted by the blood warders; an audience with Queen Alachia; and the

Queen's Kiss, a living crystal brooch shaped like a rose. Lord Erithander and a panel of judges, often previous grand prize winners, choose the festival champion. The queen's blood warders, her consortis and Lord Erithander attend the award ceremony. Once an adept wins the grand prize, he or she may no longer compete in the Festival of Blades.

For most contestants, the most enticing prize of all is the audience with the queen. Many heroes view this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to speak to the queen of the elves, a high-level magic user who possesses centuries' worth of knowledge about every aspect of Barsaive. Some winners simply aim to impress her sufficiently that she will remember them and possibly send a little business their way; others seek a boon or favor; still others quest for knowledge otherwise lost to the ravages of time and the Scourge. Though many legends describe the queen as dispensing fantastic wealth, rare weapons, unusual spells and inspiring tales in the days before the Scourge, she has shown far less generosity since the Scourge ended.

SMALLER VILLAGES

The permanent blood elf settlements of Eamonn, Thigreach and Noirin belong to the Talshara ranelle through direct family connections. Gleanntan and Laggan owe their loyalties to minor ranelles and rely on Talshara influence at the Elven Court only when necessary.

Eamonn

The village of Eamonn lies less than a day's walk from the upper reaches of the Mothingale River and nearly two days' travel from the border of the Wood. Even before the Scourge, Eamonn carried the primary responsibility for defending the Wood against attacks launched via the Mothingale, and its task has become even more important since the end of the Scourge. Though the village proper is too far away from the river to respond quickly to an invasion, the village posts adepts at strategic locations along several miles of the river to sound the alarm and operate traps designed to slow or stop river travel. These adepts man their stations for two months at a time, and cover each station once in the course of a year. This schedule ensures that the adepts maintain their edge and remain intimately familiar with all aspects of the river's defense.

Gleanntan

Apparently doomed by its location in the Wood, Gleanntan is slowly being overtaken by the corruption of the Forest's Heart. Long ago, almost as soon as the Queen's Warders settled in the Forest's Heart in order to conduct their research in peace, the village of Gleanntan sprang up nearby to supply the warders' city with the necessities of daily living. The villagers gathered wood, made cloth, harvested vegetables and herbs, trapped and hunted game, washed and mended clothes, cooked, cleaned, baked and





gathered True elements for the warders, trading these services for minor magical conveniences and generous pay.

At the end of the Scourge, the people of Gleanntan returned to their village, unaware that the Forest's Heart was corrupted and the warders' settlement abandoned forever. As soon as the truth became apparent, the population of the village slowly decreased as families relocated or became nomads. In desperation, Nissa Copaenan, head of the Copaenan ranelle, petitioned Erithander Talshara to accept her ranelle's loyalty, in return asking that the Talshara help relocate the remaining villagers of Gleanntan to a new home. Negotiations for this merger are still being worked out, and ultimately must be approved by the queen.

Thigreach

Another village staunchly loyal to the Talshara ranelle, Thigreach is home to the Greatearth Forge of the Blood Wood, one of only two surviving weaponsmith Forges in the forest. Though as independent-minded as any of its kind, the Greatearth Forge pledges its loyalty to the Talshara, serving the ranelle's needs above all others and favoring Talshara apprentices for training. The Greatearth Forge is significantly larger than most other Forges throughout Barsaive, boasting twenty-five members devoted to crafting and improving weapons for the Blood Wood's defense. Though the Forge will craft weapons and armor for any Name-giver able to pay for the work, they focus most of their efforts on the arms and armament purchased by the Elven Court through the Talshara for the wardens, exolashers and warders.

Many years ago, in their continuing efforts to improve the quality of their weapons, the elders of Greatearth Forge began traveling secretly to the edges of the Wood to trade weapons crafted by the Forge apprentices and other unique blood-elf items to the peoples of the northern wilderness in exchange for raw ore and crystal. Because the nearest border of the Wood lies at least three days' walk from Thigreach, this trade necessarily remained minor and infrequent. Confident that the elders' motives were pure, however, and pleased with the resulting weapons and armor, neither Lord Erithander nor Queen Alachia objected to these illicit deals. Made bold by their success, the weaponsmiths lately have begun to trade much of the True earth gathered from the woods near Thigreach and even a small amount of True fire (gathered against the queen's law in the Forest's Heart) for greater quantities of ore and crystal, apparently reasoning that more raw materials must be better. By expanding their activities, however, the weaponsmith Forge risks the censure of the queen and the Talshara ranelle, or worse.

Laggan

The Leeron ranelle, which leads the village of Laggan, has great ambitions of improving its position among the other minor ranelle and the Elven Court, with the ultimate goal of gaining a place among the queen's consortis. Though they do not seek to replace the Talshara, they aggressively pursue training with that ranelle at the Grove of Thorns, managing to gain entrance for more than half of each new generation of elves at the war college. The ranelle also has lobbied successfully to have most of those graduates return to Laggan, in order to fulfill its pledge to defend the border of the Blood Wood between Laggan and Arralena.

Teegan Leeron, a courtier in the palace, is well aware of Erithander's plans to annex the minor ranelles in the Northern Reaches. He feels fairly certain that Queen Alachia would not approve such a plan, but he intends to hedge his bets by preparing his ranelle to fight any battles necessary to maintain its independence. He has cultivated a surprising range of contacts throughout the Court in order to spread his net for information as widely as possible. His greatest triumph at Court recently was an introduction to Ilisa Willowby, whom he considers the most accessible of the consortis. His primary motivation in finagling the introduction was not to gain greater influence, but to acquire a source of information closer to the queen.

Noirin

The village of Noirin holds a unique place in the social hierarchy of the Blood Wood. With the queen's blessing, generations of this community have learned the art of easing the pain of the Ritual of Thorns. Using a combination of herbs that grow only on the Wood's northeast border, specialized spells and devotion to Garlen, these *madareth*, as they are called, help elven children through the trauma of the Ritual and often make it possible for adult elves from outside the Wood to survive the Ritual of Thorns.

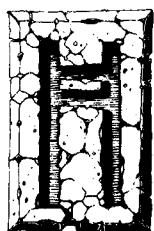
Though the *madareth* belong to the Talshara ranelle, their task erases all boundaries of ranelle, rank and privilege. They travel constantly throughout the Wood, assisting in the Ritual when needed and healing all manner of other injuries, suffering and illnesses. They have become legendary for their skill in recalling blood elves from the madness sometimes caused by the pain of the thorns, and tales of their unsurpassed skill in healing reaches far beyond the Wood's borders. In the last decade, increasing numbers of Barsaivians have traveled to the shrine of Garlen on the edge of Noirin to seek healing for themselves or loved ones. Though Alachia recognizes the positive publicity generated for her and the Blood Wood by allowing this one village to continue its work, she fears that unwary tongues may reveal more of her secrets than she considers wise.





THE WESTERN BORDER

PROLOGUE



e should have been here already," the blood elf whispered angrily to her companion.

"Calm yourself, Eday," replied the elf crouched next to her in the stand of gnarled oak trees. As he spoke, he kept his eyes on the small clearing. "Your impatience won't make him arrive any sooner. Kethos has entrusted us with a great responsibility, and

we cannot fail him. The future of our ranelle—of the Elven Court itself—may well depend on us."

After a moment, Eday sighed. "I'm sorry, Bor. You're right. It's just that I'm a bit ... nervous."

Bor made no reply. He had grown up in the same village as Eday, and he too knew that strange, misshapen creatures roamed the Western Border after the sun dropped below the horizon. The afternoon light had been growing redder and the shadows had been lengthening for some time now, but Bor had resolved to betray no sign of fear. His uncle Kethos, head of the Escalanas ranelle, had personally entrusted him and Eday with the task of escorting the Denairastas to the appointed meeting place. Bor had performed the duty before, but always with an older warrior from the ranelle. Now he was the senior member of the escort detail, and he realized that he must set an example for his younger cousin.

"Here comes the Iopan now," Bor said as a figure emerged at the other end of the clearing. "Now remember, hold your tongue no matter what he says. Those are Kethos's orders."

Within a few minutes, the Denairastas had reached the grove of oaks and stood before the blood elves.

"Greetings from Clan Denairastas, my pointy-eared friends," the stranger said with a mocking smirk. "I am Jerleth Denairastas. You must be the escort that Kethos promised. I'm flattered that he cared enough to send such ... *fearsome* ... warriors to fetch me." As he spoke, the human looked at Eday, who stood a full head shorter than he. Eday's face reddened, but she simply stared at the stranger in silence.

"Never seen an outsider before, eh, young blood elf?" the Iopan sneered.

Eday looked away but said nothing. It was true, but she would never admit that to the stranger. Like many elves of the Blood Wood, her heart held deeply buried doubts about the wisdom of her people's self-imposed isolation, and less well-hidden doubts about the necessity of

continuing the Ritual of Thorns. But few blood elves even acknowledged such doubts to other elves, and none would speak of them to outsiders.

"Come—we are wasting time. Kethos awaits you at the appointed place," Bor said calmly.

"Lead the way, my elven friends," the Iopan replied. "The Passions forbid that we keep the distinguished patriarch of the Escalanas ranelle waiting."

The trio silently set off into the forest. Eday led the way, and Bor positioned himself behind the Denairastas. The only way to traverse the thick growth in this part of the Wood was to walk in single file, which also reduced the trail their passing would create. And from the back, he could keep a close eye on the Iopan. The older warriors who had gone with Bor on earlier escort missions had constantly reminded him that he must always be wary of any Denairastas. He seriously doubted the Iopan would attempt subterfuge here in the Wood itself, but he would take no chances. The stranger's safety was also his responsibility as long as the Denairastas was in the Blood Wood—and that responsibility weighed heavily on his shoulders. Kethos and the other blood warders of the ranelle had assured him that the Denairastas of Iopos were as ruthless, power-mad, and unpredictable as the rumors about the family suggested. And no one could be certain how Uhl Denairastas—the head of the ancient line of magicians—might react if misfortune befell one of his emissaries. It was said that a Denairastas would not hesitate to kill his mother if it would benefit him, and the first family of Iopos seemed to make a practice of betraying its allies as soon as they outlived their usefulness to the clan.

Indeed, even the trusted few blood warders who knew of Kethos's dealings with the Denairastas questioned the wisdom of trading with the magicians, and some even believed that it would ultimately lead to the ruin of the Escalanas ranelle—if not the Elven Court. But Kethos's long years of service to the ranelle had inspired fierce loyalty and trust in those under his leadership, and even the nervous ones among those who knew the secret seemed willing to accept Kethos's cryptic explanation that the future of the elven nation hinged on the meetings with the Iopan magicians.

Bor himself had known no more when his uncle called on him to accompany the escort missions. The young elf assumed that Kethos had selected him because the leader knew he could trust him implicitly. Bor knew he had always been his Uncle Kethos's favorite nephew—in fact, he had been like a son to Kethos ever since that long-ago day when his parents had died and his uncle had taken him into his household. But then one night, after an early





meeting, Kethos had bidden Bor remain with him after the ranelle leader had dismissed the other warriors.

"Sit here by the fire, Bor," the elder elf said as he hung a pot of tea over the flames and then handed his nephew a cup. "I'd like to speak with you." Kethos sat down, but remained silent for a moment. Cautiously, Bor did the same.

"As you know, Bor, the Ritual of Thorns alone saved the elves of the Blood Wood from destruction during the terrible years of the Scourge," Kethos began.

"Yes uncle, and I've always been proud that you helped devise the magic that saved the Elven Court. And like all blood elves, I am eternally grateful for—"

"Yes, yes," Kethos interrupted, as he raised a hand to silence his nephew. "I am certain you are. You have learned your lessons well, and no one can doubt your loyalty to your queen and your people. For a long time, I too was proud of my accomplishment. I felt grateful that the Passions had seen fit to guide my mind, to select me as their instrument to protect the elves of the Wood. Indeed, I am still proud and grateful of what I and other elves accomplished all those years ago.

"The Ritual enabled us to preserve the Court, to preserve our way of life at a time when many around us perished. Of course, the Ritual has exacted a high price for its protection. We elves pay with the constant pain we must endure, we pay with the lives of those poor souls who do not survive the Ritual, we pay with the fear and suspicion the Ritual aroused in our Barsaivian neighbors and the isolation we continue to endure to this day. For centuries we gladly paid these terrible costs in exchange for protection against the Horrors and their spawn.

"Almost from the beginning, a few elves questioned whether this was too high a price. I scoffed at such talk, believing that no cost was too great for the continued survival of the Elven Court. Now I am not so certain. Mistake me not—I do not regret my part in creating the Ritual. We had no choice at the time. But many years have passed since then, and I believe that the terrible costs of the Ritual now far outweigh the benefits of its protection."

Kethos fell silent and stared into the distance, as if he was looking at a point far back in time. "How can I explain it to you, Bor? For you and the elves of your generation, and for those who have come after you, the Ritual has always been a central fact of life. You have never known





life without it. You have no recollection of the vitality and splendor that was ours in the days before the Scourge. You cannot know the joy that filled our hearts, the beauty that surrounded us. In those times, the elves in the Wyrn Wood were alive in a way they have never been since. Our ships traded along the length of the mighty Serpent, travelers came from all across Barsaive to pay homage to the Elven Court, and we were free to roam across the province at our pleasure.

"But the Ritual robbed us of all these things. Outsiders shun and fear us, and our own queen forbids her subjects to travel beyond the Wood's borders. The once beautiful forest is now a source of danger, a constant reminder of the corruption the Ritual has wrought. Sadness and loss hangs over us like a black thunderhead in a windless sky, and a slow death has crept into our very souls, replacing hope with resignation or mad desperation.

"The Ritual—created to preserve Wyrn Wood and the elves loyal to the Elven Court—is now killing us. The Ritual has made pain and corruption the center of our lives. It is destroying all that is good in us. Destroying all that we sought to preserve so long ago.

"I first realized this some time ago, and I have been attempting to find a way to end the Ritual ever since. I had been patient, confident that the Passions again would guide my thoughts, would reveal to me the means to recapture our people's true heart. Then, six years ago, the long-life ritual that I have employed to extend my time here, failed—and I realized that I may have considerably less time to find an answer than I had thought. That was when I first contacted the Denairastas. As dangerous as they are, their knowledge of magic is surpassed by few Name-givers in Barsaive. In exchange for True wood from our villages, they have supplied me with the fruits of their latest magical research.

"If there were any other way, I would never have entered into an agreement with those murderous sorcerers. But in desperate times, we must make do with whatever tools the Passions see fit to provide us."

Once again, Kethos fell silent. After a few moments, he turned and faced the younger elf.

"Now you know the true importance of the meetings with our Denairastas visitors. Obviously, if the queen learned of my efforts I would be executed—as would others of the Escalanas. In fact, it might well spell the end of our ranelle. But more important, it might destroy any chance of healing the Wood before the Ritual destroys all hope for our people's future."

Eday's urgent whisper brought Bor's attention back to the task at hand.

"Bor ... Bor! Here's the oak tree," she said, pointing to a hulking shape in the darkness. "But I don't see any sign of Kethos or anyone else.

"Well?" the Denairastas demanded.

Bor ignored the others and reached under his tunic for the amulet his uncle had given him. Holding it in his hand, he slowly recited the words Kethos had taught him. As the last syllable left his mouth, a crackling blue-white light appeared on the trunk of the massive oak. The light spread and formed a doorway, revealing the figure of Kethos Escalanas.



OVERVIEW

The Western Border is perhaps the most isolated section of the Blood Wood. Nearly 400 miles of forest, some of it the darkest and most corrupt growth in the Blood Wood, separates the Western Border from the elf queen's palace. About 200 miles to the southwest of the region lie the Scol Mountains, and some 300 miles to the west lies the city of Iopos, set on the vast, largely uninhabited plain that covers most of northwest Barsaive.

Life in the sparsely populated Western Border is dominated by the Escalanas ranelle. From the home of its head in the town of Letheran, the Western Border's largest settlement, the ranelle oversees the harvesting of the region's rich supplies of True wood. Because of their isolation from the Elven Court, the inhabitants of the region depend heavily on the Escalanas for protection, leadership and mediation of minor disputes. But the residents' respect for and gratitude to the ranelle is tempered by fear as well, for it has long been rumored that certain Escalanas magicians practice dark, unwholesome rites of blood magic.

THE LAND

The Western Border region stretches from the southwest corner of the forest to a line south of Goro'imri (**The Northern Reaches**, p. 82), and extends to the western edge of the Forest's Heart. Dense forest fills most of the area, and thick vines and undergrowth cover nearly every tree and most paths and roads. This growth slows the average travelers' walking speed to about 20 miles per day. The dense foliage thins slightly at the outermost edge of the forest, within roughly ten miles of the border.

Very few permanent trails large enough to be called roads exist in this region, though fairly well-traveled tracks connect the villages along the Mothingale River. As is true elsewhere in the Wood, even travel on roads and paths is difficult because they frequently become overgrown with vines and underbrush.

The outside perimeter of the Western Border is defended by outposts jointly manned by Talshara wardens (see **Defenses**, p. 23 in the **Overview**) and magicians from the Escalanas ranelle. This joint arrangement was intro-





duced by the Wood's blood warders, who seek to ensure that the Western Border's rich True wood supplies remain safe from raids by Therans or orks and trolls from the Scol Mountains. The magicians supplement these standard defenses with extra thorn-men wards and a variety of magical traps consisting primarily of plants, often carnivorous, that react to the presence of all living beings (see **Flora and Fauna**, p. 131). Only a knowledgeable guide can lead travelers past the Western Border's defenses in safety.

THE PEOPLE

The blood elves of the Western Border count themselves among Queen Alachia's most loyal subjects. Despite their isolation from the Court, the region's elves have traditionally followed the lead of the Escalanas, who pride themselves on their devotion and service to the queen. The Jae'Helastri, long rivals of the powerful Escalanas, promote the theory that the western elves' vaunted loyalty is mostly a subconscious attempt to compensate for the vast distance that separates them from the Court. Whatever the truth of the situation, Queen Alachia knows that she can count on the Western Border to follow her lead without question.

The Border elves are also distinguished by their self-reliance, a quality forged by their isolation and by the hardships of life in the Border region. The scarcity of game in the area forces most of the population to live a nomadic lifestyle, continually moving their settlements to avoid depleting the game in any one place. As a result, most residents of the Western Border enjoy little leisure time. A smaller number of the Border's inhabitants reside in permanent settlements along the forest's edge and the trading villages along the Mothingale.

Like most other areas of the Blood Wood, the Western Border holds ever-present dangers. Hunters must be especially alert for death daisies and blood wasps, which seem particularly prolific in the region, and even those elves who remain inside their villages must be vigilant against the occasional incursion of a hulker or witherfang (see **Flora and Fauna**, p. 142, 146). Added to the usual dangers of the Wood, in past years all manner of strange and dangerous creatures have emerged from the nearby Forest's Heart and begun plaguing scattered elven villages nearby. In fact, the least of the Western Border's worries is other Name-givers. Intruders from outside the Wood are relatively rare here, though the region's rich deposits of True wood occasionally attract small, uninvited gathering expeditions. Even these create little concern, however, because the wardens and wards stop all but the boldest and most intrepid adventurers long before they reach the sources of True wood.

THE ESCALANAS RANELLE

The Western Border is dominated by the Escalanas ranelle. This ranelle has traditionally supplied the greatest number of warders and other magicians to the queen's ser-

vice, but is best known for the accomplishments of its leader, Kethos Escalanas, who is revered throughout the Blood Wood as the creator of the Ritual of Thorns. The Escalanas ancestral home lies in the western region of the Blood Wood, though members of this ranelle belong to communities all across the Wood and pursue a wide variety of Disciplines and professions.

Because the Escalanas maintain an ancient tradition of following the magician Disciplines, it is a widely held belief throughout the Wood that all Escalanas dabble in the magical arts. Though the Escalanas are justifiably proud of their role in pursuing elven magical research, and respected throughout the Wood from generation to generation for their role in creating the Ritual of Thorns, their fame often becomes infamy for those same reasons.

HISTORY

One of the oldest ranelles in the Blood Wood, the Escalanas ranelle has its beginnings in a noble family that traveled to Wyrn Wood from the Western Kingdoms during the reign of Queen Melyora. Though the origins of its magical power and knowledge are a closely guarded secret, even tales of fabled Sereatha speak of the magical prowess of the Escalanas family. The Escalanas hail from somewhere further west of the City of Spires, but apparently wielded considerable influence in many elven cities. The most ancient tales of the elven people speak of members of a single noble family serving as advisors and consorts to the rulers of many elven and other Name-giver cities and states, and current interpretation of those legends places the Escalanas at the heart of that dynasty.

When certain of the ranelles—literally, "noble families"—began to gain influence among the elves of Wyrn Wood and especially with the Elven Court, the Escalanas quickly made their mark. Having continued their magical pursuits after moving to the Wood, the Escalanas were well placed to offer the Elven Court many unique spells, magical items and minor rituals that won the hearts of courtiers and the favor of the queen. The Escalanas gave their fealty to the Elven Court by making their home in Wyrn Wood. Though the family's leaders pledged their loyalty to the queen, their opportunity to prove their devotion beyond a doubt still lay in the future.

The ranelle's first major step toward establishing its prominence came early in the reign of Queen Failla. Seeking a new direction for their research, the ranelle's magicians began to explore the potential of blood magic. Around the same time, the ranelle's leader, Darelton Escalanas, suggested to the queen that she form an order of warrior magicians to patrol the borders of Wyrn Wood and to safeguard travelers within it. Though other ranelles suggested at the time that the Escalanas had selfish reasons for promoting this agenda, Failla agreed to establish the Queen's Warders. Originally composed primarily of Escalanas, the Queen's Warders proved worthy of the title





time and time again, quickly and quietly dispatching all threats to the Wood and its people and generally making life easier for the elves of Wyrn Wood. Over time, under the influence of the Escalanas, the warders began to devote significant time to finding new uses for the adept magic they used to perform their tasks, always with the goal of better serving their queen. By experimenting across Disciplines, the warders found ways to keep the paths clear of undergrowth, discovered a method of communicating over long distances through a kind of sympathetic magic with the trees, and pioneered other innovations in caring for Wyrn Wood. Failla and subsequent queens encouraged this research, associated as it was with the Escalanas, trusting that the ranelle and the warders would do nothing to harm Wyrn Wood or its people.

After some years, again at the behest of the Escalanas, the warders petitioned Queen Failla for a separate place to conduct their research. After years of living at the Elven Court, where the pursuits of every man and woman were open secrets, the Escalanas longed for the privacy they were accustomed to when conducting unpredictable magical research—in their opinion, pursuits not suited to be conducted among the homes and shops of their fellow elves. The queen granted this request, and the warders established their own community in the Forest's Heart, near the great tree Oak Heart and surrounded by a plentiful supply of magically potent True wood. As soon as the warders had built their citadel, which they Named Tesrae K'Ailiu, they began researching the uses and properties of blood magic in earnest.

At the time of the Schism, every man, woman and child of the Escalanas, and by association the warders, supported Alachia's decision to refuse the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage. The ranelle's unwavering devotion won the queen's favor, and Escalanas fortunes began to rise so dramatically that many members feared a backlash from less-privileged ranelles. Though the Escalanas courtiers and warders protested, Pelios Escalanas recognized the potential pit opening before his ranelle and quietly withdrew his people from most Court activities, maintaining his ranelle's relationship with the queen and Court personally and through the two Escalanas consortis advising Alachia at the time. The Jae'Helastri ranelle, new on the scene at Court, whispered its disapproval; that ranelle's leaders hinted that the Escalanas held too much power with two consortis, and at the same time implied that their rival ranelle intended a slight against the queen by withdrawing their courtiers and others from Court. Despite the uneasy rumblings of the other ranelles, however, the Escalanas managed to sail through the stormy waters unscathed.

In fact, the warders' struggle to find an alternative to the Theran Rites during the early years of the Scourge vaulted the Escalanas to its greatest prominence. The research and work of Queen's Warder Kethos Escalanas created the main body of the Ritual of Thorns, for which he

was hailed as the savior of the elven people. Pelios Escalanas did not survive the Ritual, and the Escalanas quickly elected Kethos as its new leader. Using his unprecedented popularity at Court, his considerable skills as a warder and magician and a certain amount of political savvy, Kethos led his ranelle back to virtually unchallenged prominence at Court. He successfully maintained the ranelle's position throughout the Scourge and afterward.

Half a year ago, Kethos Escalanas became a target of Alachia's wrath when she banished him from the Elven Court for a year and a day. Few save Kethos and the queen know the true reason for it, though most courtiers assume it has something to do with magic. The Jae'Helastri have hinted that Kethos was banished for "dabbling in forbidden rites," though they are hard-pressed to say just what those rites might involve. The punishment is less severe than it seems, however. Kethos had long since limited his own presence at Court to the most vital ceremonial occasions, relying on the Escalanas consortis and courtiers personally loyal to him to maintain the ranelle's influence and keep him informed of important developments.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

The Escalanas ranelle influences life in the Blood Wood primarily through the blood warders, a majority of whom are loyal to the Escalanas, and also by direct contact with Queen Alachia. The banishment of the ranelle's leader from Court had little effect on the Escalanas as a whole because Kethos long ago delegated most of the power he wielded to the Escalanas consortis.

Kethos Escalanas

Though he achieved leadership of his ranelle based solely on the creation of the Ritual of Thorns, Kethos Escalanas has proven to be an able administrator, wise enough to surround himself with useful advisors who can manage the ranelle's presence at Court and maintain Escalanas influence in other areas of elven life.

One of the oldest elves in the Blood Wood, Kethos Escalanas was born several decades before the Scourge. He displayed an impressive talent for magic even before he reached adolescence, and as a young man rose quickly in power to become one of the Queen's Warders. During the Schism that followed Alachia's refusal of Theran aid against the Scourge, the queen rewarded Kethos's unwavering support with a prominent place at the Elven Court. Proximity to his queen brought out in Kethos a surprising, wry sense of humor that Alachia found appealing—so much so that they became lovers several times over the past few hundred years, with each affair ending on the same, bittersweet note. Each interlude began with Alachia rediscovering Kethos's unique gift for briefly making her forget her tremendous responsibilities, and ended with her sending him away for making light of the queen's obligations. Their ongoing relationship offers both elves a com-





fortable pattern to fall back on occasionally, and they remain close confidants even under Kethos's current banishment.

The queen's faith in Kethos's abilities and wisdom was vindicated during the early years of the Scourge, when Alachia ordered her warders to devise a means to protect Wyrn Wood and its elves from the Horrors. His own previous research led Kethos to postulate that the elves might be able to "inoculate" themselves against the Horrors by fusing elemental thorn-plant spirits into their own True patterns. Using this theory as his base assumption, Kethos set in motion the magical research that would lead to the Ritual of Thorns, overseeing much of the subsequent research himself. Determined to take personal responsibility if his premise was faulty, Kethos was the first elf to actually undergo the transformation. When he survived, the Ritual was considered a success and the Queen's Warders, now reNamed the blood warders, set about administering the Ritual to the forest's entire population.

Despite the horror of the Ritual of Thorns and the devastating number of elves who died while undergoing the blood-magic rites, Kethos Escalanas won almost immediate acclaim for his part in preserving the elven people and the Elven Court. His capable leadership of his ranelle further proved that his wisdom extended beyond the magical knowledge he had accumulated over the years.

In the past six years or so, Kethos has gradually withdrawn from Court politics and has isolated himself in his home at Letheran, confining his involvement in local ranelle activities to only the most important matters. His apparent lack of interest and influence has prompted several ranelle members to inquire of Kethos in the most circumspect fashion if he intends to step down as leader of the ranelle to make way for new blood, but Kethos simply dismisses such suggestions with a smile and polite refusal to discuss the matter. Those members of the ranelle most anxious to advance their own fortunes at Court attribute Kethos's attitude to the stubbornness of an aging elf beginning to lose his mental faculties. They also remark on the fact that he is beginning to show his very advanced age, from which they conclude that he no longer wants to bother with the effort of extending his life with blood magic.

The truth is that Kethos failed in his most recent attempt to use the life-extending blood magic that has allowed him to remain vitally healthy for hundreds of years. Upon learning that his life would end sooner than expected, he began devoting all his energy and time to achieving his self-appointed final mission in life: to undo his greatest accomplishment and make the Ritual of Thorns no longer necessary. The primary problem he faces in this task is the nature of the Ritual itself. Though Kethos petitioned Queen Alachia six months ago to stop performing the Ritual on newborns, he was aware even as he asked for that concession that such a change alone was not the answer he sought. Kethos believes that, rather than

reNaming the Wood again, the key to ending the Ritual of Thorns might be to simply alter the Wood's pattern in such a way that the Blood Wood could survive without the constant supply of blood provided by the elves' thorns. If the other warders knew of Kethos's line of research, they might agree that the Escalanas leader is losing his mental faculties, for Kethos, of all the warders, should remember most vividly the unexpected and uncontrollable results of casting blood magic upon blood magic. The Wood itself is a living testament to the folly of trying to alter one blood-magic ritual with additional blood magic; that Kethos would suggest another such attempt would horrify his fellow magicians.

Banished from Court for a year and a day for the effrontery of questioning Alachia's judgment in continuing the Ritual, Kethos is determined to use this time to its best advantage, hoping to devise a solution acceptable to Alachia during his exile. Kethos is an accomplished magician and has achieved Twelfth Circle in the elemental, nethermancer and wizard Disciplines.

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 7 WIL: 7 CHA: 7

Orlando Escalanas

Orlando Escalanas serves as the Escalanas consortis at the Elven Court. Orlando and Kethos have known one another since they were children, and over the centuries Orlando has become Kethos's closest confidant and most trusted councilor.

Like Kethos, Orlando displayed magical talent at a young age, and he also served with the Queen's Warders. Their similar interests and talents forged an ever-deepening relationship between them, and when Kethos assumed leadership of the Escalanas ranelle he persuaded the queen to appoint Orlando as a consortis.

Though Orlando's official duties consist mainly of representing the interests of his ranelle at the Elven Court, from the start Kethos relied on his friend's political counsel. Orlando also assumed the role of unofficial "spymaster" for the ranelle, in charge of keeping tabs on Court activities and the plans of other ranelles that might adversely affect the Escalanas, and directing any clandestine activities against other ranelles.

Even among members of the Escalanas, however, few suspect just how closely Kethos and Orlando work together—and that is precisely according to Kethos's plans. Many years ago, Kethos and Orlando staged a very public argument at Court, making a big show of falling out with one another. In the months following the dispute, Orlando began dropping subtle hints that Kethos was losing his mental faculties and that he, Orlando, should be running the ranelle. Kethos, in turn, began telling his other advisors in the Escalanas ranelle that he felt Orlando was beginning





to put his own interests before those of the ranelle. He said that if it was up to him, he would replace Orlando immediately, but that decision belonged to the queen. Within hours, the Court was rife with rumors of the feud between the Escalanas leader and his consortis. A few enterprising souls were even betting on the outcome.

The two Escalanas remain publicly cool and distant toward one another, and not even their closest associates suspect that the long-running quarrel is a calculated fiction. Over the years, Kethos's rivals and critics at the Court and within the Escalanas ranelle have shared their complaints about Kethos with Orlando and plotted schemes against Kethos in Orlando's presence, never realizing that Orlando would report everything they said to Kethos. In the past six months this arrangement has proved especially valuable. Kethos's banishment from the Elven Court and ongoing withdrawal from ranelle politics have emboldened his enemies, including the Jae'Helastri, and each of those enemies in turn has approached Orlando and urged him to challenge Kethos for control of the ranelle. As a result, Orlando has been able to effectively monitor, manipulate and counter opposition to Kethos and the Escalanas ranelle, allowing Kethos to devote his full attention to finding a cure for the Wood's True pattern.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 8 WIL: 8 CHA: 7

Eletheria Escalanas

Of all the strange creatures and dangers that lurk in the dark forests of the Western Border, none strikes such fear into the hearts of the blood elves as the legendary Eletheria Escalanas. Some younger elves claim that Eletheria is only a mythical figure, a monster born of the blood elves' primal fears, a monstrosity whose story was told and retold so many times that the elves themselves no longer know how much of it is true and how much fiction. But even the most skeptical elves speak her Name in the softest of whispers lest they attract her attention, and are reluctant to venture into the western woods on nights when the moon is full.

All the tales of Eletheria agree on certain points. A female elf Named Eletheria—purportedly a striking beauty with long black tresses, a ghostly pale complexion and distinctive green eyes—did belong to the Escalanas ranelle in the days before the Scourge. The historical Eletheria was a skilled magician and well known for her wit, beauty and accomplishments. Numerous would-be suitors courted her (including a young blood warder Named Kethos), and many ranelle members reasonably assumed she would lead the Escalanas one day. Finally, along with the other Queen's Warders, she attempted to find a means of protection for Wyrn Wood and its elves in the days before the Scourge.

Then something went wrong in Eletheria's apparently charmed life. Some tales claim that Eletheria simply broke down from the strain of her work. Others claim she was experimenting with magic so vile and dangerous that the other warders ordered her to quit and leave their midst. Still others claim that she used herself as the subject of her experiments and unwittingly became corrupted beyond redemption. The most titillating explanation, however, is that Queen Alachia became jealous of a growing bond between Kethos and Eletheria and pressured certain warders to fabricate a pretext for banishing the young elf. As the story goes, Kethos did not intervene on Eletheria's behalf because he feared that doing so might jeopardize his own work and, by extension, the protection of Wyrn Wood.

Whatever the reason, Eletheria left the Forest's Heart alone during the early years of the Scourge, traveling toward Letheran under the light of the full moon. She never arrived at Letheran, nor does any tale speak of her taking shelter elsewhere. At first, the elves of the Western Border assumed that she perished in the wilds, unprotected by the Ritual of Thorns, or that she assumed a new identity and settled elsewhere in the Wood.

The mystery of her disappearance soon became unimportant as the elves underwent the Ritual and struggled against the Horrors. In fact, the elves forgot about Eletheria until several years later, after the Scourge had ended and the elves had resettled the Wood, when the Elven Court began receiving reports of strange and disturbing events. Someone—or something—began to ambush blood warder patrols in the Western Border. At first, the elves assumed that the deaths simply resulted from encounters with corrupted animals that had wandered out of the Forest's Heart, or with the remaining Horrors or their constructs. After a few months, however, a pattern began to emerge. All the victims had been killed in the same manner—their hearts ripped from their bodies and their bodies drained of blood. The attacks took place on nights when the moon was full and, most intriguing, many of the attacks seemed to coincide with sightings of a pale, Unprotected elf maiden with long black hair and distinctive green eyes.

These reports launched a new spate of rumors that Eletheria had somehow survived, returning to the woods of the Western Border to wreak her revenge against Kethos and Alachia. Some claim that the young elf found a way to keep herself alive with blood magic—hence the condition of her victims. Still others say that Eletheria became the bride of some vile Horror intent on eventually destroying the Elven Court. A few tales even claim that the corrupted beasts of the forest are the spawn of this unholy union. Despite the rumors, none of those who might know the truth—Alachia, Kethos or the blood warders—seem willing to discuss the matter.





Though the mystery surrounding these events and the life of Eletheria may never be solved, one thing remains certain. Someone or something continues to stalk the woods of the Western Border on nights when the moon is full—someone or something that Kethos, the blood warders and even Queen Alachia seem powerless to stop.

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 7 TOU: 8

PER: 8 WIL: 8 CHA: 8

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Officially, the Escalanas ranelle's primary duty is to govern the Western Border in the name of its queen. In this capacity, the Escalanas regularly report to Queen Alachia and the Court, advising Alachia and the blood warders of any significant incidents or situations that arise in the region. Fortunately for Alachia, the loyalty of the Escalanas leaders ensures that the ranelle carries out this task with dedication and forthrightness.

Like all the ranelles, however, the Escalanas also seek to advance their own fortunes. They currently accomplish this goal by dominating the Western Border's lucrative True-wood trade and actively pursuing their long-standing tradition of magical study and research. The ranelle's fierce devotion to this centuries-old endeavor has led the Escalanas to break the queen's edict against contact with outsiders and surreptitiously trade with the Denairastas clan of Iopos. Even that trade, however, is only a part of the ranelle's most important and secret goal—Kethos Escalanas's quest to find a way to heal the damage done by the Ritual of Thorns.

Gathering True Wood

The plentiful deposits of True wood in the Western Border give the region great strategic importance for the Elven Court and provide the elves of the area with their most lucrative source of income. The Escalanas ranelle keeps a tight rein on this trade, officially to ensure that no enemies of the Elven Court plunder these riches. Control of the True wood trade, however, also provides the ranelle with a steady source of profit and helps them maintain their position of prominence in the Elven Court.

Typically, Escalanas elementalists oversee True-wood gathering expeditions from the ranelle's home village of Letheran or one of the other permanent villages located along the eastern banks of the Mothingale. Heavily armed warriors usually accompany these expeditions because these trips often place gatherers perilously close to the Forest's Heart, which contains the largest deposits of True wood in the Blood Wood—as well as the highest concentration of predators. Indeed, sometimes entire expeditions disappear in the deep woods, never to be seen again. Despite these dangers, the ranelle always has a plentiful

supply of willing escorts for these expeditions, because such dangerous duty provides an opportunity for young elven warriors to test their mettle and demonstrate their courage and commitment to their ranelle. In recent months, the Escalanas's current political rivals—the Jae'Helastris ranelle—have attempted to sabotage the reputation of the Escalanas by spreading the rumor that the ranelle is selling True wood corrupted with the mysterious taint of the Forest's Heart. So far, however, these rumors have had little apparent effect on the demand for Escalanas-supplied True wood or on the ranelle's reputation.

Harvesting True wood is a time-consuming and tedious process. The only way to quickly harvest True-wood kernels is by destroying the host tree (usually oak trees), a foolish waste of resources. Instead, gatherers must carefully examine the tree bark for small kernels of the element that work their way up from within. Budding branches and leaves are also prime locations for harvesting the element, as the kernels are often forced out along with a budding leaf.

The Escalanas trade most of the gathered True wood to the Elven Court and other regions of the Blood Wood for goods needed to maintain their villages, but a significant amount winds up some three hundred miles to the west of the Blood Wood in Iopos (see **Dealing With the Denairastas**, p. 96).

On rare occasions, expeditions that venture close to the Forest's Heart find sapling fire birches (see **Flora and Fauna**, p. 134). Though Queen Alachia and the blood warders have decreed that all fire birches are to be destroyed on sight, these trees contain True fire, one of the rarest and most valuable of the True elements. Consequently, gatherers sometimes attempt to harvest the True fire within a tortured plant rather than simply destroying the host tree. Unfortunately, few gathering parties are equipped to properly deal with such a dangerous undertaking, and most attempts end in disaster. Those few that have managed the task, however, realize considerable profits for their efforts on their return to Letheran.

Pursuit of Magical Knowledge

Since long before the founding of the Escalanas ranelle, members of this family have devoted themselves to the study and advancement of magical knowledge and the growth of their own magical power. In fact, warders of the Escalanas were the first to experiment with various forms of blood magic as a means of keeping the prominent trails and paths free from foliage and dangerous beasts, alerting the queen and Court to the presence of foreign intruders, and otherwise protecting Wurm Wood. And of course, blood magic enabled Kethos Escalanas to create the Ritual of Thorns.

Even today the Escalanas blood warders dabble deepest in blood magic, a fact that fuels persistent rumors of





ancient, forbidden blood rites and dark magic being practiced by western elves under the diabolical influence of the corruption in the nearby Forest's Heart. As a result, other blood elves regard members of the Escalanas with a fear that rivals the terror blood elves inspire in most Unprotected elves. Such fears are so deep-seated that even the consorts of the Elven Court view their Escalanas counterparts with a certain suspicion. Escalanas consorts and blood warders make no effort to dispel such fears, for they realized long ago that few of the ranelle's political rivals would care to risk magical retaliation by opposing or criticizing the Escalanas too strongly. Furthermore, Escalanas leaders realize that these rumors help distract attention from the ranelle's real secrets—such as its dealings with the Denairastas clan of Iopos.

Dealing with the Denairastas

For the past twenty years, blood warders of the Escalanas have been defying Alachia's edicts against contact with the outside world by secretly meeting with members of the Denairastas family to exchange True elements, mostly wood, for the Denairastas' knowledge of various types of ritual, blood and elemental magic. The warders consider this trade an acceptable violation of the queen's directives, reasoning that the knowledge and power they gain from these contacts helps them better defend the Blood Wood, the Elven Court and the queen herself. Alachia has taken no steps to stop these meetings, though she has known about them almost since they began. Only the queen's most trusted advisors know whether Alachia's failure to punish the Escalanas for their actions reflects her trust in Kethos and his ranelle, tacit approval of the Escalanas warders' reasoning or some other factor. Kethos assumes that Alachia approves of his efforts to heal the Wood's warped pattern, though he never expects her to admit it, and trusts him to conduct his business with the Denairastas discreetly and with the security of the Wood firmly in mind.

After word of Denairastas involvement in the assassination of King Varulus III reached the Blood Wood, Kethos temporarily stopped the meetings, apparently fearing that

the Escalanas ranelle and the Elven Court might become caught in a conflict between Iopos and Throal. In recent months, however, Kethos has quietly resumed meeting with the Denairastas, though only on condition that the Denairastas emissaries journey into the Blood Wood. This last step is particularly risky, given the Iopan clan's record of duplicity, but Kethos believes it gives him a measure of extra control to conduct the meetings on his home turf. He also wants the Denairastas representatives to examine some of his research more closely than is possible outside the Wood.

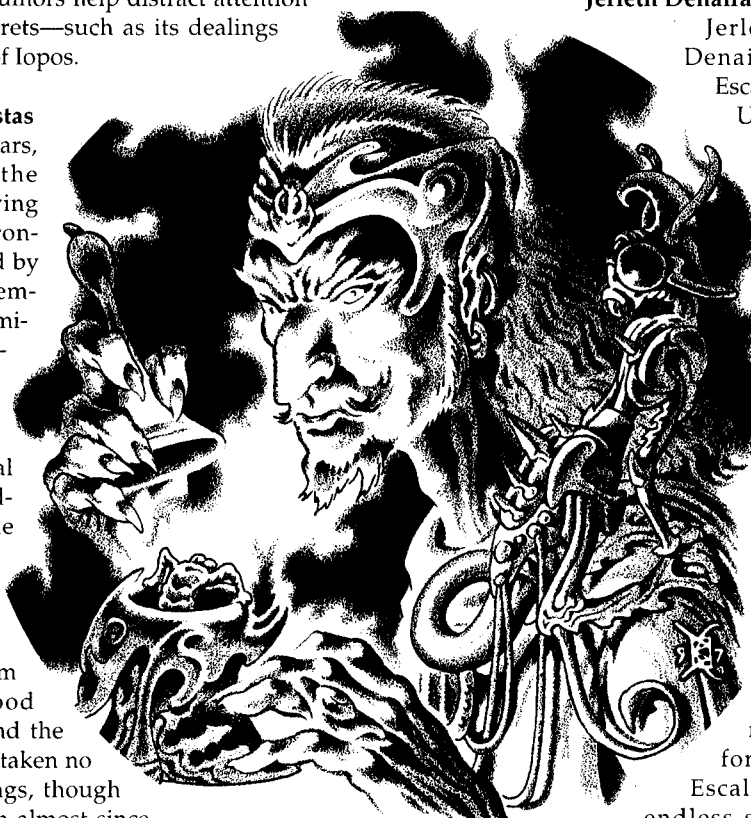
Jerleth Denairastas

Jerleth is the current Denairastas emissary to the Escalanas ranelle. A nephew of Uhl Denairastas, Jerleth is also cousin to Jada Denairastas, the magician who assassinated King Varulus III. Like most of his family, Jerleth is a superlative magician, having reached Tenth Circle as an elemental and Ninth Circle as a nethermancer.

A cold, arrogant man, Jerleth constantly reminds Kethos and the other Escalanas elves that the Denairastas hold the upper hand in the relationship, because the revelation of the secret meetings would almost certainly do irreparable harm to the ranelle's reputation and force Alachia to punish the Escalanas. Jerleth's seemingly endless supply of snide remarks

about the fate of the Blood Wood and the blood warders' chosen method of protecting Wyrn Wood from the Horrors enrages Kethos almost beyond bearing; the Escalanas leader undoubtedly would have killed Jerleth by now were it not for his need of the supercilious Iopan's formidable abilities.

Jerleth dislikes dealing with the blood elves, but finds their current line of research truly fascinating. Of all his family, he is the closest to being a scholar, more interested in the theoretical applications of magic than with its use to gain power. Though he cannot shed his arrogant nature, his genuine desire to solve Kethos's puzzle allows him to





relate to the Escalanas leader in a way almost unique in the Denairastas clan: more often than not, he tells the truth.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5

PER: 7 WIL: 7 CHA: 6

Ending the Ritual

In a somewhat ironic twist for a ranelle so fundamentally connected to magic, only a handful of ranelle members know of the ranelle's most difficult quest for magical knowledge to date—Kethos Escalanas's mission to end the Ritual of Thorns.

In the dark days of the Scourge, when the Horrors began breaking through the wards of the elves' wooden kaer, Kethos viewed the Ritual as a necessity. Indeed, he saw it as the salvation of his people, and he felt truly blessed that the Passions had guided his mind in the creation of the magical protection. But as the centuries passed, Kethos's view of the Ritual gradually began to change. With each passing year, he felt his people's pain more acutely. He watched mothers weep as their children died from the casting of the Personal Ritual, stood by helplessly as old friends slowly went mad from the constant pain and wept as the corruption of the Forest's Heart slowly poisoned the once beautiful Wood.

After centuries of sorrow for his people's suffering, Kethos finally became determined to end the necessity of continuing the Personal Ritual. Kethos knew in his heart and mind that continuing the Ritual would hurt the blood elves rather than help them. He became convinced that it was killing the elves' life spirit and threatening the existence of all the elves held dear. At that moment of epiphany, Kethos decided to devote his life to finding a way to stop casting the Ritual and restore hope for future elven generations. Risking a great deal both personally and politically, he quietly began reviewing the research that led up to the creation of the Ritual and exploring potential methods of negating the powerful blood magic. As part of this effort, he made clandestine with the Denairastas magicians.

After a few years of intensive work, he believed he had made sufficient progress to approach Queen Alachia with a radical proposition: a petition to cease casting the Ritual of Thorns on children. As the creator of the Ritual, Kethos was well aware of the complexity and scope of the blood magic used to protect the Wood and its people. Though he knew that simply ending the Personal Ritual did not offer the ultimate solution, he saw it as a valid first step toward healing the Wood of corruption. Through his agents, Kethos had learned of the "reverse wood longing" felt by the elves of Goro'imri who had not undergone the Ritual; he continues to believe that this condition might offer clues to successfully undoing the damage that the Ritual of Thorns inflicted on the Wood. Ultimately, Kethos

believes the survival of his people is more important than the survival of the Elven Court in its current incarnation, and so even if he never learns how to unravel the Ritual, he would rather see the Wood abandoned than see one more child suffer unnecessarily. Unfortunately for Kethos, Queen Alachia disagrees.

When Kethos presented his petition to Alachia in a private audience, she replied by slapping him once, very hard. Her face settled into lines of cold rage, and she spoke to her valued warder as if scolding a child. Speaking at a very deliberate pace and using hurtful words, Alachia blasted Kethos for suggesting that the elven people might be best served by abandoning the Wood and the millennia-old Elven Court established in that sacred place. She reminded him in simple terms that the elves were tied inextricably to the Wood and the Wood to the elves, and that should either cease to exist, the pattern of Barsaive might be warped beyond recognition. In a rare moment of candor, Alachia stated baldly that she had no intention of relinquishing her power to satisfy Kethos's conscience. She then turned her back on him and banished him from the palace for a year and a day.

Unsurprised by his queen's intemperate response, Kethos returned to Letheran and resumed his research, enlisting a few of his most trusted confidants to aid him in his task. He also renewed his briefly interrupted trade contacts with the Denairastas in the hope that their unique approach to magic might yet offer some insight into the Ritual of Thorns and a way to counteract it. Kethos assigns various experiments and avenues of research to apprentice magicians, carefully rotating these assignments to conceal from his assistants the true nature of their work. He also seeks out ancient manuscripts and artifacts by hiring adventurers to pursue clues preserved in the libraries of the elves. It is a mark of the urgency he feels for his task that Kethos has even contacted Monus Byre and the Seekers of the Heart, the living legend cult dedicated to restoring Wyrn Wood to its former glory, offering them subtle encouragement to pursue lines of inquiry he considers most promising. Monus Byre greatly appreciates what she sees as cooperation in her own quest on Kethos's part; she can only wish that Preystia Tales was as open to working with her cult (see *Seekers of the Heart*, p. 71, *The Forest's Heart*).

So far, Kethos has managed to keep his project secret from everyone except the queen, despite the fact that he is involving increasing numbers of his ranelle in various aspects of his research. Secrecy is of the utmost importance, for if Kethos's true goals became public knowledge, the entire population of the Blood Wood would likely turn against him. The Ritual is a shared experience that unites all blood elves, and most of the Blood Wood's inhabitants have come to view it as a central part of their identities. Certain members of the Escalanas would also likely oppose





Kethos on purely practical grounds. Traditionally, the blood warders are responsible for administering the Ritual of Thorns to all elves; this responsibility earns them considerable respect among the blood elves and power within the Court. Because the majority of blood warders come from the Escalanas ranelle, in their view, the ranelle's privileged position and prestige among the blood elves rests largely on the Ritual's continued practice. It seems a natural conclusion that discontinuing the Ritual would reduce the Escalanas's power and diminish its reputation.

Kethos is acutely aware that he is flirting with ruin by pursuing his quest, and together with Orlando Escalanas has devised an ingenious disinformation campaign to deflect attention away from his activities. In recent months, Orlando has closely monitored the widespread resentment and animosity toward the Escalanas that the Jae'Helastris leaders have been so carefully nurturing among their own ranelle's members. Given the scheming nature of the Jae'Helastris, Orlando knows that less senior members of the rival ranelle are the perfect vehicle for spreading disparaging and misleading rumors about the Escalanas throughout the Court and the Wood.

So far, Orlando's disinformation campaign has succeeded brilliantly. The Jae'Helastris have long subscribed to the common belief that Escalanas magicians practice vile blood magic rituals and other forbidden rites; consequently, they proved quite receptive when Orlando and his operatives began to hint to their Jae'Helastris counterparts of a cabal of Escalanas magicians practicing such magic. Hoping to capitalize on Kethos's banishment, the Jae'Helastris quickly began to fuel damning tales of renegade Escalanas magicians experimenting with new ways of fighting Horrors, cultivating fire birches and creating new hybrids from corrupted animals captured near the Forest's Heart. They have even begun to drop dark hints that perhaps these magicians actually operate with the permission, and even the support of, Kethos. While no one can pinpoint the source of these rumors, the Court is rife with the tales, and some of the more superstitious villages and ranelles are even refusing to trade with the Escalanas. Satisfied with the progress of what they believe is their rumor campaign, the Jae'Helastris spies show little inclination to pry into the Escalanas's real secrets.

Rivalry with the Jae'Helastris

Over the years, the ambitious Jae'Helastris have attempted to enhance their own ranelle's prestige by periodically campaigning to discredit other ranelles. When Queen Alachia banished Kethos from Court, the Jae'Helastris reckoned that the time was right to strike at the reputation of this formidable rival ranelle.

The current Jae'Helastris initiative has produced satisfying results, from that ranelle's point of view. Using to advantage the long Escalanas tradition of magical practice

and the suspicions it has fostered among other blood elves, the Jae'Helastris spread rumors of Escalanas gathering parties becoming "corrupted" by venturing too far into the Forest's Heart in search of True wood. They followed up these rumors with stories about Escalanas cabals practicing unnatural blood rites and other abominations. Though the rumors have done little to discredit the ranelle in the eyes of the queen, other ranelles and many common folk have begun to shun the Escalanas. Because Orlando Escalanas has set his own trap so cleverly, the Jae'Helastris have no idea that the rumors they are spreading serve the Escalanas' purposes as well as their own.

The current rumor most worrisome to the Escalanas is a tale of an event said to have taken place within the first decade after the casting of the Ritual of Thorns. Though the Jae'Helastris members spreading the tale have many of its details wrong, the story holds enough truth to convince the Escalanas that their rivals know the facts of the matter. Among their many magical accomplishments from long before Wyrn Wood became the home of the Elven Court, the Escalanas developed various liquors and other brews that eased pain. In the years after the casting of the Ritual of Thorns, certain blood warders experimented with several of these liquors, eventually developing one called shimmerwine that temporarily eased the pain of the thorns (though the wounds continued to bleed).

The Escalanas tested the shimmerwine, concerned that its effects might expose elves who drank it to the Horrors. Finally satisfied that their concoction served its purpose with no unwelcome side effects, the warders proposed that the ranelle leaders offer shimmerwine to the Talshara healers of Noirin to aid in their task (see **Noirin**, p. 87 of **The Northern Reaches**). Mere days before the Escalanas were to announce and present their gift, the blood warder Edenara Escalanas, a prominent member of the team experimenting with shimmerwine, was found horribly slain in a fashion that could only be attributed to Horrors. The Escalanas quickly disposed of the body and destroyed the recipe for the offending liquor.

The Escalanas now fear that the Jae'Helastris have somehow ferreted out this devastating lapse of judgment. The facts of that earlier incident, combined with Kethos's current line of inquiry, could give the Jae'Helastris enough ammunition to destroy the Escalanas ranelle at their discretion. Kethos and Orlando have yet to devise a satisfactory plan for dealing with this potential problem.

PERMANENT SETTLEMENTS

The Western Border is home to only two villages of notable size: Letheran, the home of the Escalanas ranelle, and Calabria, a trading outpost near the southern edge of the Western Border. The few smaller permanent settlements consist of True-wood gatherers and traders that make their homes along the banks of the Mothingale.





LETHERAN

Only a few thousand elves live in Letheran. Most are from the Escalanas ranelle, but elves from other ranelles, including the Talshara, also make their homes in the village. Most True-wood gathering expeditions originate in Letheran, and the village also represents the northernmost trade stop for vessels traveling up the Mothingale River from the Southern Fringe. Generally, blood elves man these vessels, but on rare occasions Unprotected elves and Syrtisian t'skrang from Kaer Eidolon have been spotted on Letheran's docks.

Of the few permanent villages that line the Mothingale River, Letheran is by far the most prosperous, thanks to its trade with the other villages of the Western Border and the villages to the south, and its thriving True-wood gathering operation. Despite this relative prosperity, Letheran bears little resemblance to the larger and more developed villages farther south along the river. Letheran boasts only a few modest wooden piers stretching out into the river, and the village fleet consists of a few rowboats and other small vessels. Several small wooden buildings line the riverbanks, but most of Letheran's residents live in dwellings set in the tall oaks that grow along this stretch of the Mothingale. Some of these homes hang out over the river, providing magnificent views of the waterway and the town. Farther back from the river's edge grow ancient oaks that stretch hundreds of feet into the air. These trees contain the largest of Letheran's tree-homes, and provide views of the treetops for miles around. In fact, an observer looking westward from one of these dwellings can see the western edge of the Blood Wood.

In the center of the village lies the home of Kethos Escalanas. The largest and most elaborately decorated dwelling in the entire village, the Escalanas manor is formed from the trunk of a massive, ancient oak tree. Many members of Kethos's immediate family, as well as several prominent ranelle members, reside at the manor. Beneath the manor Kethos maintains an intricate network of caves that houses his magical laboratory. Though rumors of the magical laboratory circulate among the elves of Letheran, most residents don't believe the cave complex actually exists.

Another notable Letheran landmark is the spectral willow (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 134) that grows along the riverbank near the town's north edge. The villagers treasure this tree and pay a cadre of carefully chosen gardeners to care for it. These gardeners constantly watch the willow to ensure that no harm comes to it and monitor it for warnings of uninvited astral visitors.

Mayor Larin

Though the Escalanas ranelle wields enormous influence in the Western Border, the ranelle has seen fit to leave the governance of Letheran to a mayor elected by the entire town. The election is held every ten years, and the

Escalanas have never had any difficulty persuading eligible voters to elect the ranelle's preferred candidate. The current mayor, a commoner Named Larin, has held his position for nearly forty years.

Larin is from the Jaeron ranelle, a minor ranelle of the northwestern Blood Wood. The Jaeron ranelle is closely associated with the Escalanas and Talshara ranelles, and members of the Jaeron often become wardens or magicians. Larin himself is a Seventh Circle elemental and often takes time from his duties to lead True-wood gathering expeditions into the forest. Like most of the villagers, Larin is devoted to Queen Alachia; he always looks after the interests of the queen and the Elven Court, as well as those of the villagers.

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 5 TOU: 6

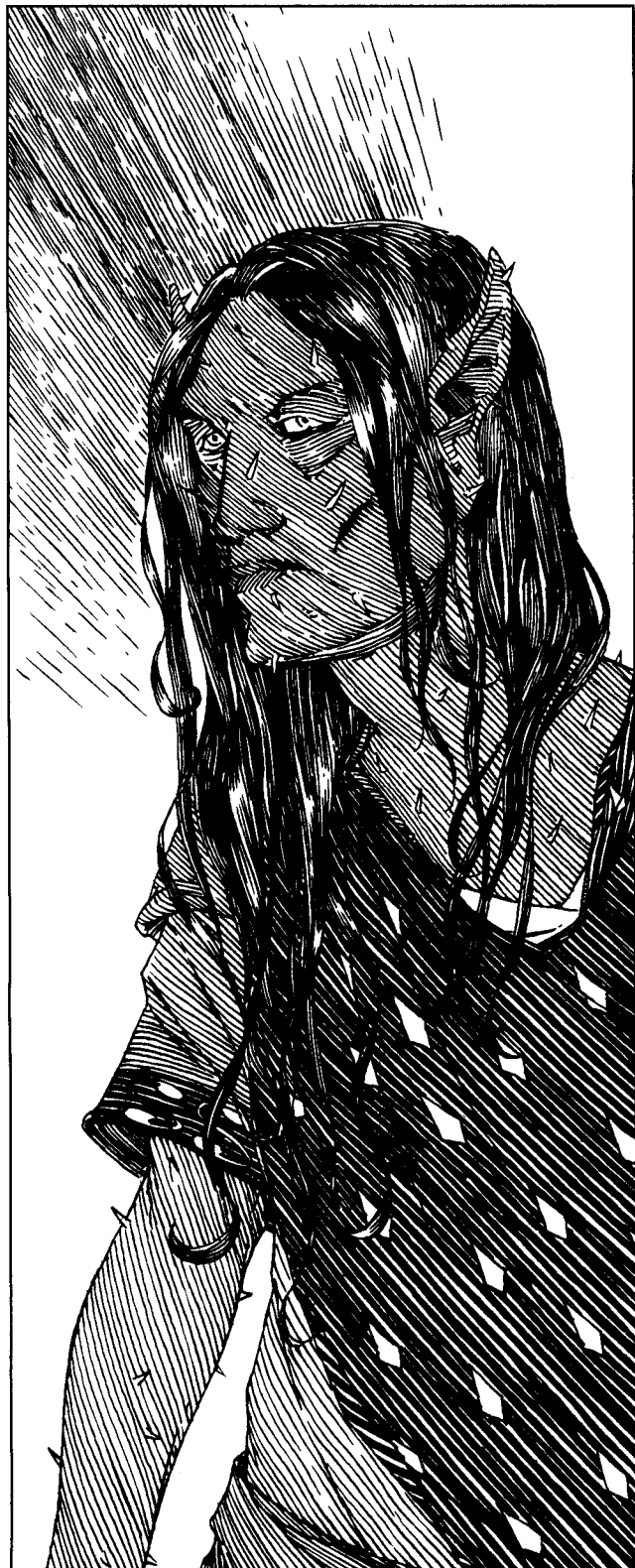
PER: 6 WIL: 6 CHA: 6

CALABRIA

The trading outpost of Calabria, located along the demarcation between the Western Border and the Southern Fringe, is perhaps the most independent-minded settlement in the Western Border. Here, the agents of wealthy Carithasca merchants, renegade elven river traders, True-wood smugglers, black marketeers, political radicals intent on overthrowing the Elven Court, fugitives and outcasts from the Escalanas and other ranelles live side by side in uneasy harmony, united only by their disdain for authority and their distrust of outsiders. Some come seeking haven from the blood warders, angry ranelles or other authorities. Others come to sell or sample the forbidden wares available in the village bazaar, where even an elf from the wilds of the Western Border can sample genuine Theran wine and purchase the services of an "entertainer" from one of the sophisticated villages of the Southern Fringe.

Situated near a sharp bend of the Mothingale, Calabria is surrounded by miles of thick forest that make the village virtually inaccessible by land. The settlement itself consists of numerous ramshackle dwellings and caves set amid the large rocky outcroppings that form the riverbank. At the water's edge, these same outcroppings create several small, hidden lagoons that can conceal vessels from passing river traffic. Despite the obstacles posed by the terrain, outside parties have managed to locate Calabria in the past. In fact, expeditions sent by the queen, the Carithasca ranelle and the Escalanas ranelle have all managed to find the village at various times, but none have managed to permanently destroy the settlement. Raiding parties can easily flatten the ramshackle dwellings and torch any unattended vessels, but capturing Calabria's residents is much more difficult; generally, they simply flee into the surrounding woods at the first sign of attack and return when the danger has passed. (When the futility of trying to destroy





Calabria became apparent, the Escalanas and Carithasca ranelles decided that the village did not present any real danger to their power. Now, the occasional ranelle river patrol that happens on the village commonly accepts a small "tax" from the residents and moves on.)

Calabria has no formal laws or government for two main reasons. First, the typical resident has little regard for authority. Second, the settlement's population constantly changes as residents leave and new ones arrive. Traditionally, the residents take a live-and-let-live approach and will not interfere in one another's business, as long as that business does not attract attention to the village and thereby threaten the security of all residents. By custom, anyone who fails to observe this simple edict is killed or banished.

SMALLER VILLAGES

Minor ranelles loyal to the Escalanas dominate Chelan and Kelling, the two primary permanent True-wood gathering settlements in the Western Border.

Chelan

Located about fifty miles north of Letheran, Chelan is the northernmost of the Western Border's True-wood gathering settlements. About twenty-five True-wood gatherers, along with their families, make their permanent homes here. Chelan's location makes it the most remote of the permanent villages, and the village trades only with Letheran. To supplement the food and supplies brought in from Letheran, the villagers harvest fish from the river, farm small plots cleared from the surrounding woodlands and hunt wild game. The village leader is Mortha Lerondo, head of the Escalanas-affiliated Lerondo ranelle. Most of the villagers are also members of the Lerondo ranelle.

Kelling

Kelling is the easternmost permanent True-wood gathering settlement in the Western Border. Located about a half-day's walk from the western edge of the Forest's Heart, Kelling's fifty-odd inhabitants (primarily True-wood gatherers and their families) face the special danger of corrupted beasts that roam out of the Heart's interior. Because the woodlands around Kelling contain the richest True wood deposits in the entire region, the residents of the village consider the risk worth the reward. The Escalanas ranelle offers generous salary bonuses to attract workers to the village, both gatherers and warriors to escort and protect them while they work. Kelling is run by Flem Rasher, the young chieftain of the Escalanas-allied Rasher ranelle.

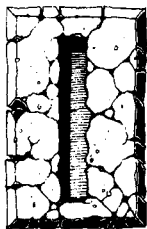




THE SOUTHERN FRINGE

PROLOGUE

— As told to Niasken F'arr, traveler, in the *Dancing Hare*
(a famed Bartertown drinking establishment)



It wasn't always like this, you know. Wasn't always a broken-down old drunk with patchy scales and a head-crest turning pale as a new-laid egg. I was *someone* years ago, so I was. Nabiyen Perochus, captain of the *Cyclone*—that's me!

Or that was me. Not anymore. Curse all elves and their blasted magics! Cowards wouldn't even come out and fight with blades, like decent folk. No, they hid behind their water-witching ... let the river do their fighting for them. Isn't right, I say. Using adept magic to help your sword arm or sail through tricky currents, that's one thing. You're still relying on your own skill and wits and strength. But setting spells across the water to beset your enemies without your even having to be there ... unnatural, I call it. But then, that's elves all over. Or at least the ones in that cursed Wood. You'll excuse me if I don't call it by its proper Name. Even thinking of the place makes my crest shrink, I don't mind admitting it.

Funny ... I never believed the stories the old-timers told about sailing too near the Wood. Now I am an old-timer, telling the same tales. Will a youngling like you believe me, I wonder?

It's been almost fifteen years now, but I remember it as clear as if it was yesterday. Walking the *Cyclone's* decks, giving her a last check-over before setting out. Ah, but she was a sweet little ship. Not a boat on the river can hold a candle to her, before or since. Not so big as a riverboat could be, but a fast runner through even the trickiest currents. Sensitive, too. A mere touch of my hand on the tiller and she'd leap through the water like a dolphin, heading wherever I wanted her to go. I swear, she knew my touch. That ship loved me, if wood and rope and caulking can be said to love a Name-giver. And she was mine. I'd earned every sweet foot of her. Worked my way up from the bottom of the niall to captain of my own riverboat. They all said I'd never do it. Told me to be satisfied with my lot in life—whatever that means. As if any self-respecting son of the House of the Dragon Moon wouldn't reach as high as his own sharp wits and strong arm could take him! Might as well be a dwarf if you're just going to settle for what you're born to, that's what I say. Where was I, lad?

Oh, yes ... the *Cyclone*. One last look-over before setting out. We were heading northwesterly, my crew and I,

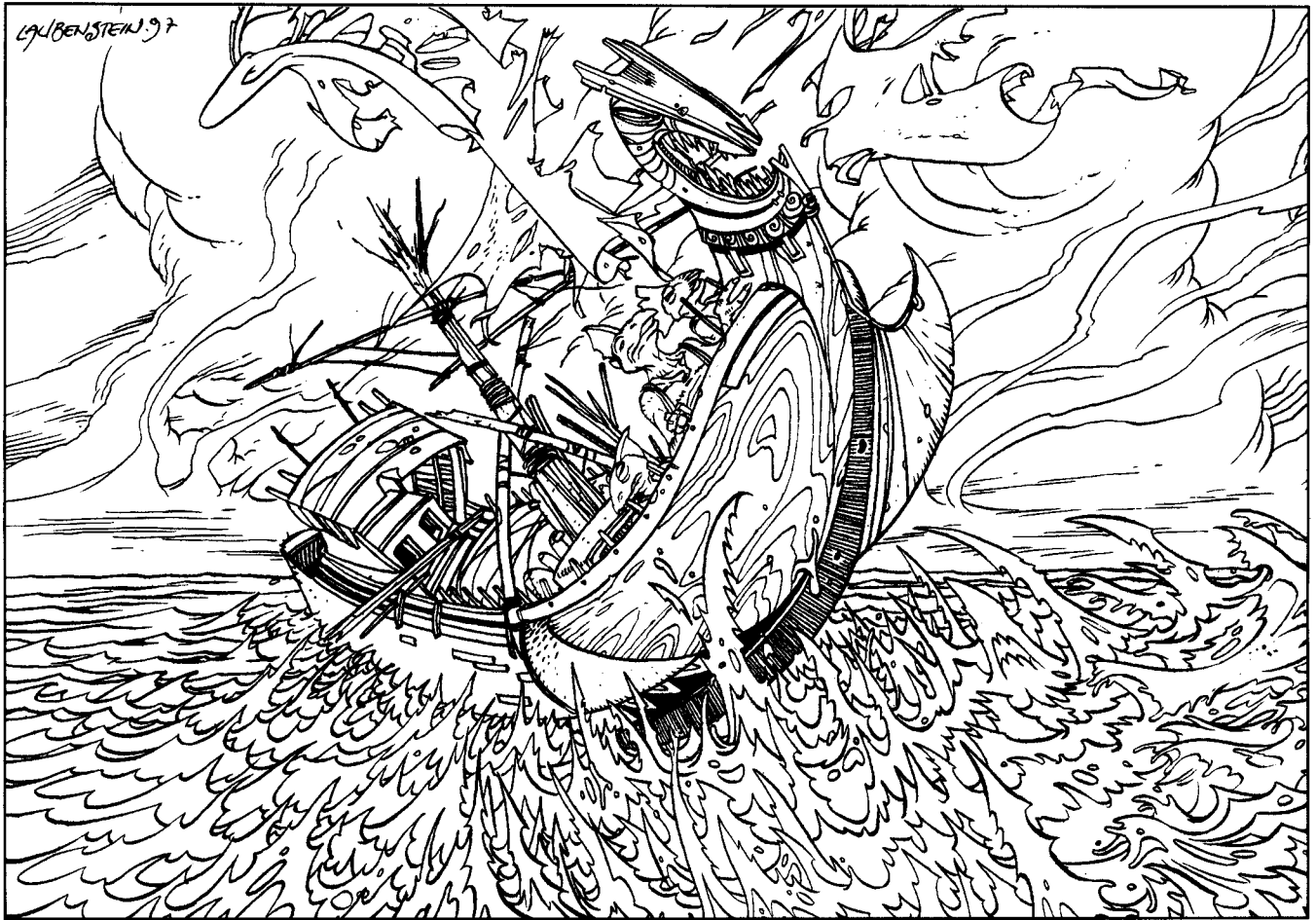
bringing our empty holds to the villages up and down the Mid Reach. No need to tell anyone about the little side-trip we planned up the Mothingale and into the elf-Wood before sailing back down the Serpent to safer waters, now was there? They'd only want a cut of the profits, and my crew and I weren't standing for that. What we earned, we kept. That's how we were. Why throw away good coin on other people instead of lining your own pocket? If they want money, let them earn their own! Nabiyen Perochus didn't work his way up from deck-scrubber to captain to go frittering good coin anywhere it wasn't absolutely necessary. I meant to make fat profits smuggling goods to and from the Wood, and I swore not to spend so much as a clipped copper on anyone outside of my crew.

Amazing, the fool things we swear to when we don't know any better, isn't it? And then we're either stuck being fools for the sake of honor, or stuck looking like fools for admitting we're wrong. Not a pretty choice.

I'd heard all the stories, of course. Every old-timer who'd ever sailed a smuggling ship up the Mothingale—and that's what it was, so don't bother prettying up by calling it "free trade"—had a terror tale to tell about the "wicked elf-magic" just lying in wait for anyone who went up the Moth. *Don't go past the Treaty Stone, they'd say, or the water-devils will eat you. They'll eat your ship and everything in it.* Of course, none of this explained why they'd lived to tell the tale, now did it? And then there were the other ones, the few who'd gotten into the Wood and out again. A tight-lipped lot, they were, but I finally got one of them to tell me (when he was a bit more drunk than I am now) how he'd managed to get past the "terrible elf-magic." It seems he had a friend who had a friend among the elves, in the port town of Trenevar just inside the Wood's southern fringes, who could say just the right word at just the right time to briefly banish the magic and let a certain t'skrang riverboat sail straight on through. Of course, all these friends of friends of friends had to be well paid for their trouble—that went without saying. Especially the friend in the Wood, who was defying his precious queen by so much as giving us t'skrang the time of day. Letting a riverboat slip through the elves' magical defenses—that's a hanging offense, or whatever those blood elves do to traitors among their own. Got to pay well for that kind of service, eh?

Well, you likely can guess what I thought of that. A fine thing for the elves, that's what I thought. First they spread rumors of terrible fierce magic across the Moth, then they let a few chosen t'skrang know that they'll temporarily take the magic away and allow in goods from out-





side the Wood that they want anyway—for a stiff price. So Riverboat Captain Hatchling Thicketail, who wants the profits of smuggling so badly he can taste them, believes the stories and pays the fee. And gets his profits ... but not nearly so much as he might have gotten, and all for a carefully crafted elf-myth. You've got to watch those elves in the Wood; twisty, they are, with a nose for gain as sharp as their ears. Just look at history. The War Against the Elves shows exactly what they're like. They started it just so they could steal the upper half of the Moth from us. Built a wall of fancy words around it, to tell *us*—the River's children—where we're not allowed to go! But I'm veering out of the current, aren't I? More ale over here!

So I didn't believe the stories. The Moth's a tricky river, especially as you bear north toward its source; it wouldn't take magic to pull a riverboat down, just an unskilled or ignorant helmsman. And just between you and me, lad—I know it's a shameful thing to say about my own arapagoi, but pity on us, it's true—there's a fine lot of thicktails captaining riverboats in House Syrtis. Bluebloods,

mostly, with no more wit than a hatchling fresh out of the egg. Got handed their boats on a platter, instead of working for them like I did. And of course, no noble ship's captain wants to admit he couldn't sail an oyster shell out of a calm tidal pool—so can you blame me for thinking they'd all made up their tales of magic to save their fool faces?

So I didn't pay up. I suppose you could say I paid later. One way or another, there's always a price, isn't there?

Now, every tale I'd ever heard about water-demons and suchlike guarding the Mothingale always said the magic would start acting up as soon as a t'skrang riverboat passed the Treaty Stone. That's the obelisk—perhaps you've heard tell of it—smack in the middle of the river, about four or five hours' fast sail north of where the Moth meets the Serpent. Folk put it up after the War Against the Elves, to remind both elves and t'skrang of the treaty that ended the fighting. In it, we t'skrang promised not to sail beyond that marker. So I don't mind telling you, I was feeling a bit nervous as the *Cyclone* approached it. Couldn't





help thinking, what if I was wrong? What if there really is wicked elf-magic that'll tear the ship apart and drown us all? But I kept my eye on the water and my mind on the feel of the currents through the deck beneath my feet. It was rough going, I can tell you. There's a race right by the Treaty Stone that'll dash a ship hard against the banks—and they're hard-packed earthen bluffs at that spot, not soft little sandy hills. So I took the *Cyclone* around the race, right around the Treaty Stone and into the calmer waters beyond. For the next few minutes we sailed on in dead silence, each of us braced for a sea monster to rise up and devour us, or a tidal wave from nowhere to swamp us.

Well, nothing happened. Not a blessed thing. We sailed near half an hour beyond the Treaty Stone, and still saw nothing but clear waters and skies ahead. The crew broke out cheering. There was no magic, just as I'd said. And we all stood to be many coins the richer, because I'd outsmarted those twisty elves. Or so we thought. We should have known better.

The magic hit us right where we ought to have expected it—well north of the Treaty Stone, not far outside the Wood's boundaries. It struck at the worst possible moment, when we'd sailed through smooth waters for so long that we'd come to take them for granted. The first rule of rivercraft is, never take *anything* for granted—and I broke it that day, like any noble-born addlewit with more pedigree than sense.

One minute, our bow was cutting a pretty swath through water as smooth as glass. Then the water started to boil, as if the fires of the Death's Sea had somehow gotten into it. The sky turned as black as a Theran slaver's heart, and strong winds began to blow from all directions at once. Snapped our mainmast like a twig, though it was as thick as a fire-cannon's barrel. Crushed two of my crewmen underneath it when it fell. The winds spun us around like a spinning-top, faster and faster, until not a one of us could help chucking up where we stood. Humiliating, that was. We didn't dare toss over the side like we'd normally have done; the way the *Cyclone* was heaving, we'd have all pitched into the wild waters and drowned. I clung to the tiller, desperate to keep control. My sweet little ship was fighting me like a mad thing, her timbers screaming with every heave of the waves as if she was in pain. Made me cry to hear it. What with the ship shrieking and the water hissing like a thousand snakes and the winds howling like Horrors, I nearly went mad. But Nabiyen Perochus is made of stern stuff, and I swore no magicked-up elf tempest was going to get the better of me. I gripped that tiller and strained my arms till they near came out of my shoulder-sockets, and I pulled hard toward what seemed like a straight course. And the *Cyclone*, bless her, shot out of the boiling water and fought her way to a clear, calm space that appeared before us like a miracle. We felt sunlight on

our drenched backs, and just for a minute it seemed we'd beaten the Wood elves at their game.

Then the lookout shouted a warning: "Storm ahead!" And I saw the black clouds boiling in the clear blue sky, and the rain sheeting down like a curtain of gray. So I hauled hard at the wheel and turned the *Cyclone* as fast as ever I could.

I *did* turn her, I know it. I could feel the surge of the current against the ship's prow, and I saw the horizon change from storm to riverbank to clear water with a distant fringe of trees. So I know we turned right around, the same as if I was to stand up this minute and turn my back to you. But once more the lookout cried, "Storm ahead!" And as he spoke, I saw the thunderheads and the wall of rain ahead of us. This time it was closer. I snuck a look over my shoulder, and saw the green edges of the Wood in the distance. And I swear I heard those damned elves *laughing*.

So I gripped and pulled and strained again, until I thought my heart would burst. And I turned the ship around again ... and there we were, sailing straight into the teeth of the same cursed elf-storm. No matter which way I turned the *Cyclone*, there was black tempest ahead and clear sailing behind. And with each turn of the boat, we were closer by a ship-length to the fringes of the storm.

Finally, we were so close that the storm was upon us. The lookout couldn't get a clear word out—just wailed like an infant. She didn't need to tell us what lay ahead; we could hear it, roaring like a hundred skeorxes. All too soon, we could see it as well—a gigantic whirlpool, like a gaping mouth in the river, just waiting to gulp us down.

I did the only thing I could. I swung the tiller hard toward the bank. I knew it'd wreck the ship, but better be wrecked on the shore than swallowed whole by a maw of water. My way, at least, some of us might survive.

I suppose the cursed elves didn't care so much about killing us as keeping us away. Whatever the truth of it, my gamble worked. The *Cyclone* hit the bank hard enough to throw me flat to the deck. I heard a terrible cracking, as if she'd run aground on giant rocks. Then the water started to well up around us, and I knew she'd been holed. The Passions alone know where the rocks came from; our own histories tell us there are no rapids or rock-beds in the north Mothingale. But I saw them clearly as I floundered to shore amid the driving rain. Wet and black and shining, they stuck up out of the frothing water like some vast sea monster's teeth.

The moment my foot touched solid earth, the storm vanished like mist after sunrise. I collapsed on the hard ground of the riverbank and sat shivering in my rain-soaked clothes, watching my beloved *Cyclone* sink slowly beneath the Moth. Quite a time, that took. A few of my crewmen made it to the bank and watched with me. None of us said a blessed word—just watched. I thought for a





moment I saw the first mate crying, but he swore afterward it was only the rain. Might've been, I suppose; R'styllan always was a crusty old sort, not the type to show much feeling about anything.

But I don't mind telling you, I felt plenty like crying. My whole life's work, gone up in no time because of a lot of twisty-minded elves who'll do anything to keep the rest of us away. If that means a world of hurt for an outlander like me, then so be it. What do they care about one t'skrang riverboat captain? I'm not an elf, nor yet a blood elf born in the Wood. So why should they bother their thorny heads about me?

Take some advice, lad, from an old drunken t'skrang who once thought he knew better. If you're thinking of doing a little "free trading" with the elves of the Wood—don't. It's not worth the price you'll surely end up paying.



OVERVIEW

Lying closest to Barsaive's major northern trade routes, the Southern Fringe is the region of the Blood Wood most familiar to the outside world. This part of the forest is more densely populated than the rest; trees and undergrowth cluster less thickly here, and the local elves have turned many of the abundant clearings into large gardens that they call farms. The soil is dark and rich, fed by the Lesser Mothingale River; vegetables grown in this region are prized throughout the Wood for their immense size and delicious taste. The river also provides bountiful supplies of fish, though local fisherfolk have learned to keep a watchful eye out for the occasional tainted specimen.

Instead of the narrow, overgrown paths typical of the rest of the Blood Wood, the Southern Fringe boasts roads clear and wide enough for carts to travel down. Once every eight days, folk from the region's other permanent settlements travel the roads to market in the port town of Trenevar, the Fringe's largest community. Home to the powerful Carithasca ranelle, a wealthy trading clan since the reign of the late Queen Failla, Trenevar is the Wood's major center of trade—legitimate and otherwise. In addition to the roads, the west branch of the Mothingale River frequently carries small trading vessels to Trenevar from the Northern Reaches and Western Border towns. On occasion, smugglers' ships bring contraband up the southern branch of the Mothingale from the Serpent River.

The region's southern border lies near the junction of the Lesser Mothingale and the Serpent; from there it stretches northward to the fringes of the Forest's Heart. A large portion of this northern territory has become unlivable since the Scourge, as the corruption of the Heart creeps outward in an ever-widening circle. Deserted farming and fishing villages dot the banks of the Lesser

Mothingale, abandoned when their residents fled to safer ground. Villagers living closest to the affected area keep a wary eye on the river, looking for signs of taint in its waters. Despite assurances to the contrary from Queen Alachia and Chief Blood Warder Preystia Tales, many still fear that the Forest's Heart will spread southward until it engulfs them. A few prominent citizens from the northernmost villages that remain inhabitable have recently petitioned the queen for stronger action; Alachia has yet to respond.

DEFENSES

The primary defense of the Southern Fringe is the elves' unique path magic, a subtle but effective method of barring outsiders. A typical traveler might wander for days down a road or through the trees without actually getting anywhere. Some unfortunate trespassers in the Wood have gotten so thoroughly lost that they starved to death; others have unknowingly wandered in circles until they fell afoul of thorn men or blood-elf patrols accompanied by fierce ethandrilles (*Flora and Fauna*, p. 138) trained to attack on command. Because the Southern Fringe is relatively passable compared to the rest of the Wood, path magic in this region is especially heavy to compensate. A supremely gifted scout or other adept using some type of tracking magic might have a prayer of defeating the path magic in other parts of the Blood Wood; in the Southern Fringe, however, such occurrences are so rare as to be virtually impossible.

The river carries path magic as well, combined with tempest-raising spells intended to ensure the destruction of any trespassing vessel. The elves control access to the Mothingale River north of an ancient obelisk that allegedly dates back to the half-mythical War Against the T'skrang; the stone commemorates a boundary sworn to in a treaty, and the elves tolerate no unauthorized ships past that point. The few smugglers' ships that manage to reach Trenevar do so with illicit aid from those elves involved in the black market. Thus far, the amount of smuggling activity has remained low enough to pose no credible threat to the Blood Wood, and so Queen Alachia has turned a blind eye to the incursions. Every ship full of contraband that makes the trip, however, risks being the one that changes the queen's mind.

THE CARITHASCA RANELLE

Before the Scourge, this powerful ranelle made its fortune in trade. Granted exclusive Royal Patents to trade in various resources from its extensive lands, as well as to control the trade of various goods, the Carithasca ranelle used the allure of royal connections to build an impressive network of affiliates among minor ranelles. These smaller families did the hard work of running caravans throughout the Wood and elsewhere, while the Carithasca used the power of royal favor to take the lion's share of the profits.

The Scourge halted trade outside the Wood, but the Carithasca have managed to remain prosperous on trade





within the Blood Wood's borders. Though the minor ranelles indulge in occasional fits of grumbling over the persistently unequal division of wealth, most acknowledge that they owe whatever prosperity they have to their connections with this politically prominent family. For their part, the Carithasca take every opportunity to reward their subordinates with the benefits of royal favor. Sons and daughters of affiliated ranelles can count on Carithasca sponsorship for Court positions, and the Carithasca regularly receive permission to bestow partial rights to Royal Patents upon particularly loyal minor ranelles. The Daevenar ranelle (p. 48), a powerful family strongly opposed to Carithasca influence, has attempted to sow dissent among the affiliates, but with little success so far.

Though they remain a force to be reckoned with inside the Blood Wood, the Carithasca dream of regaining the vastly greater wealth and power that belonged to them before the Scourge. They want to restore their lost trading ties with the outside world, and since the end of the Scourge have used every means at their disposal to persuade Queen Alachia to open the Wood's borders. Achieving this would bring them handsome profits; however, profit is only one of the Carithasca's goals. They also want the Blood Wood to resume its former prominence in the world, with themselves in the vanguard. They believe elves are innately suited to leadership, and wish to assume what they regard as their race's rightful place at the top.

Major opposition to the Carithasca comes from the Daevenar ranelle, an artistic clan prominent since the earliest days of Queen Failla's reign. The Daevenar tend to regard the Carithasca as "a band of upstart, money-grubbing merchants," uncultured ignoramuses who know the price of everything but the value of nothing. The Daevenar were among the great ranelles for a century or so before the downfall of the Laryskova ranelle catapulted the Carithasca to prominence, and many of the older generation of the Daevenar regard the Carithasca as jumped-up commoners who lack manners and taste. The Daevenar staunchly support Queen Alachia's decision to keep the Wood isolated from "foreign influences"; they see the constant pushing for open borders as just one more sign of Carithasca ignorance and folly.

Tarin Daevenar (p. 49), currently serving as one of the queen's consorts, has made it his personal mission to teach the Carithasca ranelle a much-needed lesson. He has known for some time about the ranelle's black marketeering; however, when he laid his suspicions and fragmentary proofs before the queen, she dismissed the allegations as "misinterpretations" stemming from political rivalry. Since then, Tarin has been searching for conclusive proof of Carithasca involvement—something so damning that Alachia cannot possibly brush it aside. So far, he has had little luck; the Carithasca are extremely sharp operators, and have covered their tracks well.

HISTORY

Even before joining the ranks of the great ranelles, members of the Carithasca family were known for their ability to procure almost anything that anyone wanted. It might take time and cost quite a bit of money, but Carithasca traders always seemed to know someone somewhere who could get his hands on anything, from rare spices made of flower stamens to unusual magical items made only in faraway kingdoms. According to family tradition, a youth by the Name of Eamyn Carithasca was among the ten warriors who accompanied Queen Dallia on her ill-fated pilgrimage to Shosara; as the story goes, Eamyn persuaded the dragon Alamaise to spare the lives of the surviving escort by promising him a ruby from the King of Scavia's crown. The Names of Queen Dallia's escort did not survive to the present day, however, and no independent documentation of this legend exists.

Over several years the Carithasca ranelle became dominant among the minor ranelles in the central portion of the Southern Fringe. The family manor house in the small port settlement of Trenevar, built early in Queen Failla's reign, caused a minor sensation among Court architects. The heir apparent to the leadership of the ranelle, Ethenia Carithasca, had been a royal confidante almost since Queen Failla's accession to the throne—an unusual state of affairs, given Ethenia's relatively lowly origins. The ranelle's swiftest rise, however, began late in Queen Failla's reign, when that queen's displeasure with the then-prominent Laryskova ranelle caused her to favor the Carithasca side in several trade-related disputes.

Persistent royal favor allowed the Carithasca ranelle to extend its rights to trade throughout the entire Southern Fringe, frequently at the expense of its Laryskova rivals. Among other things, the Carithasca ranelle received a Royal Patent that gave it the exclusive right to supply the Elven Court with saenor, a species of river grass much prized for its delicate flavor. Along with the patent, the ranelle received a grant entitling it to "the lands along the northern bank of the Mothingale River, encompassing three days' walk from the branching of the Lesser Mothingale." These lands had long been in dispute between the Laryskova and Carithasca ranelles; Queen Failla's ruling in the Carithasca's favor was a major blow to Laryskova power.

Not long afterward, Ethenia's eldest son Seosamh married Milina Escalanas, granddaughter of Queen Failla's chief warder. This alliance, given the royal blessing, enhanced Carithasca prestige still further, as did Queen Failla's appointment of Ethenia Carithasca to consorts rank. After the abortive Laryskova "whisper rebellion" brought Queen Liara to the throne, the so-called Iron Queen banished the rebellious Laryskova ranelle and gave its extensive southern landholdings, along with several Royal Patents, to the Carithasca. This rich gift, coupled





with Ethenia Carithasca's investiture as ranelle leader, completed the Carithasca's journey from lesser nobility to the forefront of political power.

Throughout Queen Liara's reign, the ranelle used its ownership of trading patents to forge a vast network of alliances among the minor noble families. By the time Queen Alachia ascended the Rose Throne, the Carithasca had established themselves as the undisputed merchant princes of Wyrn Wood.

Though the Scourge cost the Carithasca ranelle a considerable portion of its revenues, that cataclysmic event had little other effect on the family fortunes. The ranelle wholeheartedly backed Alachia's rejection of Theran protections, and for a time remained a vital conduit for magical resources between the warders and the outside world. Persistent rumor has it that Ethenia Carithasca opposed the casting of the Ritual of Thorns—but her objections, if any, apparently cost her none of her sovereign's goodwill. Some attribute Queen Alachia's remarkable tolerance for dissent in this case to blackmail, though no one can say over what. Others say it simply proves that the rumors of opposition are false. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Carithasca ranelle remains high in the queen's favor. Though unlikely to grant their plea to open the Wood to outsiders, Alachia did grant another request dear to Carithasca hearts: the formation of Kaer Eidolon, a joint elf/t'skrang defensive outpost outside the borders of the Blood Wood.

Kaer Eidolon

Built ten years ago at the behest of the Carithasca and Talshara ranelles, Kaer Eidolon occupies a site with a tragic history. Its original inhabitants, a small band of gifted warders and their families, fled to the place almost three hundred years ago, roughly midway through the Scourge. Though their Names have been struck from existing records of that terrible time, tradition among the elves has it that they left Wyrn Wood after a desperate experiment with a parasitic Horror went terribly awry. Believing their own magics doomed to failure, the warders journeyed four days from Wyrn Wood and began to build a Theran-style underground shelter. Unfortunately, Horrors overran and devoured them before they could complete it. Elven explorers who stumbled on the half-finished excavations after the end of the Scourge named the place *eidolon*, which means "phantom" in Sperethiel.

Modern-day Kaer Eidolon officially owes its existence to a different threat: the expansionist aims of the House Ishkarat t'skrang. Unofficially, Kaer Eidolon serves as the anchor of a lucrative black market in t'skrang and other goods—a market largely created and nurtured by the Carithasca ranelle.

The current senior Carithasca consortis, Haeleon Carithasca, was present in the Royal Audience Chamber the day an envoy from the Syrtis aropagoi arrived. Such a

visit was highly unusual, given the historical enmity between the elves and the Syrtisians; bad blood had existed between them ever since the War Against the T'skrang. The treaty that ended that conflict gave the elves sovereignty over the northern Mothingale, but cost them control of its southern stretches. Existing legends simultaneously portray the treaty as an elven victory and as unjustly favoring the t'skrang, who are said to have prevailed by "deceiving the Passions and misusing their gifts." Even more unusual than the envoy's appearance and peaceful intent, however, was her reason for coming. She proposed to Queen Alachia that House Syrtis and the Blood Wood form a defensive pact, to keep the piratical House Ishkarat in check. As a symbol of this alliance, elves and t'skrang together would erect and man a formidable fortress for their mutual defense. The ruins of the ancient kaer four days south of the Wood were already partly excavated and at an eminently defensible spot, which made Kaer Eidolon the perfect site for a military installation.

True to form, Alachia hedged. Rather than accept or reject the proposal outright, she took the matter "under advisement" and promised an answer at some vague future date. Because the idea came from the t'skrang, and a longstanding enemy aropagoi at that, the queen was inclined to distrust it. However, House Ishkarat's swift and brutal progress eastward along the Serpent River was undeniably bringing its forces closer to the Mothingale. If this ruthless band of t'skrang managed to conquer Syrtisian territory all the way up to the confluence of the Mothingale and the Serpent, an unknown and powerful adversary would be right on the Blood Wood's doorstep. House Syrtis, at least, was an enemy Alachia knew—and the very fact that they had made such a startling proposal indicated that they needed the elves as equal allies.

Two other factors had considerable bearing on Queen Alachia's decision. Joint construction and defense of a fortress would require daily contact between the blood elves and the outside world, which would inevitably risk eroding the royal policy of isolation. The choice of site, however, strongly inclined Alachia to favor the idea in spite of that risk—though not for a reason she would freely admit. When the builders of the original kaer fled the Wood, they took with them everything necessary to continue their beloved magical research during the centuries of life underground. Fragmentary records and oral traditions offered tantalizing hints of various magical tomes and items they might have carried, but no conclusive evidence. Constructing a fortress atop the ruins offered the perfect opportunity to explore the site and retrieve whatever the long-dead warders had left there—provided that knowledge of the potential finds could be kept from the acquisitive t'skrang.





A few days after the Syrtisian envoy's departure, Queen Alachia laid the matter before her consortis. Haeleon Carithasca argued strongly in its favor, taking the opportunity to remind the queen of his ranelle's longstanding request to open the Blood Wood's borders. What better first step toward regaining the elves' rightful place in the world than to form a military alliance with an ancient foe who would then owe their survival to the Elven Court?

To this, Tarin Daevenar replied that "the honorable scion of Carithasca should stick to counting his coins, and leave military matters to his betters." He vehemently opposed the alliance, on the grounds that daily contact with the t'skrang would contaminate elven culture with foreign ways. Elven wardens and exolashers were perfectly capable of defending the Blood Wood from a band of waterborne thieves, should the Ishkarat t'skrang ever get far enough to pose a threat; in the meantime, why should any elf lift a finger to help one group of t'skrang against another? The remaining six consortis split over the issue, leaving the queen's advisors deadlocked.

Haeleon Carithasca badly wanted to build the fort. He saw potential profit for his ranelle in this elf-t'skrang joint venture; at the very least, it would add weight to the argument that contact with the world was in the blood elves' best interests. It also provided workable cover for illicit trade in foreign goods. The Carithasca ranelle had flirted on and off with the idea of skirting the royal ban on such trade, rationalizing it as just one more step toward restoring the Wood to its former prominence. However, fear of getting caught had so far kept them in line. Kaer Eidolon, if built, would require a certain amount of perfectly legitimate traffic between the Wood and the fortress—supply ships, troop rotations and so on. And the logical port of call for such traffic within the Blood Wood was Trenevar, the Carithasca seat of power. If Haeleon could only sway the queen, his ranelle stood to gain immensely from the Syrtisian alliance. All he needed was support from the right corner. So he approached Erithander Talshara, leader of the Talshara ranelle.

By tradition, the Talshara ranelle oversaw the Blood Wood's defenses. Therefore, Erithander's recommendation would carry considerable weight with the queen. But Erithander saw little reason to challenge existing policy until House Ishkarat proved itself a genuine threat. Haeleon attempted to persuade him otherwise. Over the course of a four-day hunting party, Haeleon planted himself at Erithander's side and argued for the fort's military value. Eventually won over by Haeleon's eloquence—not to mention his persistence—Erithander spoke to the queen. She had almost persuaded herself to back the project for her own private reasons, and took his endorsement as an approving omen. Alachia immediately sent word of her decision to House Syrtis. Within weeks, t'skrang construc-

tion crews arrived to begin laying the foundations ... only to find the elves already there, hard at work.

Kaer Eidolon received its baptism by fire in 1502 TH, when a combined force of elves and t'skrang beat back an Ishkaratan incursion in the Battle of Sejanus. Though t'skrang histories naturally emphasize the role of Syrtisian riverboats, the crack elven troops manning the fort itself proved equally decisive. The swift, overwhelming victory gave both sides immense respect for each other's fighting abilities, contributing greatly to good relations between them. The battle also further enhanced the status of the Talshara ranelle, which supplies almost all of the blood elves among the elven forces.

The remainder of the elven contingent, a hundred and fifty in all, are Unprotected elves born outside the Blood Wood. Ever since word of the Wood's transformation reached the rest of Barsaive, Unprotected elves have struggled to deal with its implications. Many traveled to their ancestral homeland to see and judge it for themselves, and some of them chose to stay. Though Queen Alachia refuses to let them live in the Elven Court, she tolerates their presence elsewhere in the Wood, provided they swear allegiance to her. Never one to cast aside a useful tool, the queen allows these Unprotected pilgrims to serve at Kaer Eidolon. She thereby minimizes the blood elves' exposure to both their Unprotected brethren and the outside world, reducing the risk that her own people will come to question her policies.

Rotation of elven troops takes place every three months, and supply ships travel from Trenevar to the fort every two months or so. The Carithasca ranelle has placed its fleet of small cargo boats at the Talshara ranelle's disposal, an act of apparent generosity much appreciated by the Talshara. In fact, the Carithasca use the supply ships and troop transports to smuggle foreign goods into Trenevar. From there, the contraband travels by ship or caravan throughout the Blood Wood, sometimes even to the Elven Court.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Since the reign of Queen Failla, the Carithasca ranelle has been the major power in the Southern Fringe. With a formidable and unusually long-lived matriarch, two out of eight consortis at Court and strong affiliations with several minor ranelles, the Carithasca are a force to be reckoned with.

Ethenia Carithasca

The matriarch of the Carithasca ranelle, Ethenia Carithasca carries her years unusually well. She began her long Court career during Queen Dallia's reign, serving as a lady-in-waiting for just a few months before Dallia's tragic death. Despite their brief acquaintance, Ethenia's brilliance at dancing and flute-playing had made her a favorite of





Dallia's, and so she was granted the honor of accompanying the senior courtiers when Lady Failla of the Western Kingdoms presented herself as a candidate for the Rose Throne. Young Ethenia was the first to acclaim the miracle of the falling leaf that proved Failla the rightful queen, and over the ensuing years Queen Failla generously rewarded her loyalty. The clearest mark of royal favor came when Queen Failla made Ethenia a consortis, despite the Carithasca ranelle's minor status at the time.

Ethenia continued to serve as consortis until just after the end of the Scourge, offering intelligent and much-valued advice to Queens Liara and Alachia. She is widely credited with tempering some of Queen Liara's worst excesses, and was said to be the only consortis capable of soothing Liara out of her blackest moods. The occasional rival who mistook her soft-spoken, gracious manner for weakness, however, soon discovered the steel behind it—always to the rival's detriment. Her relationship with Queen Alachia is especially close—their firm friendship even managed to weather a sharp difference of opinion about the Ritual of Thorns.

Ethenia staunchly supported Alachia's rejection of the Theran Rites of Protection and Passage, and wholeheartedly backed the creation of the vast wooden kaer. Always one to hedge her bets, however, she persuaded Alachia to allow the excavation of underground shelters as well. Because the Carithasca ranelle and its affiliates undertook and paid for the work, and because excavating tunnels did not require the use of Theran sorceries, Alachia allowed Ethenia to have her way.

The underground shelters were largely finished around the time that the wooden kaer began to give way under the Horrors' relentless onslaught. Ethenia initially believed that the Queen's Warders were investigating a "properly elven" method of warding the shelters, in addition to other avenues of magical research. When Alachia chose to allow the casting of the Ritual of Thorns, however, Ethenia objected, horrified by her queen's plan. There was no telling what such a cataclysmic rite of blood magic might do, she argued; what if it destroyed the Wood altogether, or somehow took it out of the world? Surely some other, safer choice would be far wiser—elemental earth magic, or something else with which to seal the underground kaers against the Horrors. The woodland itself would not survive, of course, but elven elementalists could surely regrow it after the Scourge from seedlings and cuttings taken underground along with the people. To this, Alachia replied that there were no safer choices, and that the Ritual would be cast.

The Ritual of Thorns led to the one real tragedy of Ethenia's long life—her eldest daughter, Rhenyia, did not survive the Personal Ritual. Even this loss, however, has not shaken Ethenia's faith in her beloved queen. She still sees the Ritual as a mistake, but has convinced herself that Alachia made the best possible choice in a terrible situa-

tion. As for her daughter's death, Rhenyia Carithasca was not the only elf to die so that the Wood might live. Since the end of the Scourge, Ethenia has never brought up the subject of the Ritual in the queen's presence.

The Scourge brought one benefit to Barsaive, in Ethenia's opinion—it all but eliminated the Theran Empire's power in the province, at least until the recent landing of the Theran behemoth. In the early days after the Scourge, Ethenia exhorted Alachia to send out exploring parties to determine the fate of the other elven nations. At the same time, she suggested sending emissaries to Barsaive's various kingdoms, to find out who had survived and to give notice that the Elven Court was alive and thriving. Through such tactics, Ethenia hoped to put the Blood Wood in the position of power now held by the Kingdom of Throal. Her efforts came to nothing, however; Alachia chose isolation, and remains committed to that policy. Ethenia opposes it, but her long experience with Court politics and her personal relationship with Alachia have taught her the value of subtlety. She is content to whittle away at Alachia's decision, and has complete confidence in her ability to eventually change the royal mind.

Ethenia retired as consortis not long after the end of the Scourge, ceding her position to her nephew Haeleon with Queen Alachia's blessing. Though she publicly proclaimed her desire for "a quiet life, surrounded by the kinfolk I hold most dear," few who know her believe it. Allies and enemies alike, most of them earned over her long service at Court, are well aware of her skill at diplomacy and her sheer enjoyment of the political game. Most believe her "retirement" is a ploy designed to accomplish multiple objectives—among them broadening her ranelle's power base by giving its younger generation a chance to prove themselves. A few critics ascribe her decision to boredom or sheer eccentricity, but most of her fellow courtiers doubt she would act on such trivial motives.

Intelligent and ambitious, Ethenia dreams of the day when the Blood Wood's borders will open and Alachia's Court will resume its rightful place upon the world stage. Though she also wants the increased trade that such a move would bring to her ranelle, her deepest desire is to see Alachia acknowledged and honored "as befits her high birth and great power" even beyond the Blood Wood. Naturally, Ethenia has her own meaty role to play in this pleasant fantasy—the power behind the throne, the one true confidante of the high-and-mighty elven queen.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 7 WIL: 9 CHA: 8

Haeleon Carithasca

A middle-aged elf running slightly to fat, Haeleon Carithasca is the senior of his ranelle's two consortis. The eldest son of Ethenia's favorite brother, Haeleon became





the matriarch's foster son after Ethenia's daughter and his own parents died during the Ritual of Thorns. He remains extremely close to his aunt, and generously credits her with teaching him everything he knows about the delicate dance of Court life. He has been an apt pupil; he shares Ethenia's love of the game, and his skill at it almost matches her own. He also shares his mentor's conviction that the only way to achieve the ranelle's objectives is to move slowly. As he is fond of remarking, "You'll catch more blood monkeys with trailfruit than you will with bramble vines."

Haeleon's easygoing approach irritates some members of the ranelle, who scorn it as "useless diplomatic foot-dragging." He has Ethenia's blessing, however, and those few unwise enough to accuse him of neglecting the ranelle's interests often find themselves recopying old account ledgers for months on end. Haeleon frequently consults with Ethenia on various details of ranelle business, and travels to her home in Da'seaishta (*The Elven Court*, p. 61) on a regular basis. He also makes occasional jaunts to Trenevar to keep an eye on the ranelle's doings in general.

Clever, patient and observant, Haeleon misses very little. He genuinely enjoys a good joke and a good wine, and deliberately plays up this aspect of himself so that others will tend to underestimate him. He shows a touch of arrogance toward his fellow Carithasca consortis, whom he regards as a little girl with a lot to learn. He holds Alachia in high regard, but believes that she has a blind spot when it comes to outside influences. To Haeleon's way of thinking, the Court should go out of its way to invite outsiders in, so that those poor unfortunates might learn something from exposure to elven ways.

Haeleon feels no particular antipathy toward Therans, largely because he doesn't consider them worth the trouble of despising. Their founder was foolish enough to defy the queen and leave the Court; how much can the doings of his equally misguided descendants possibly matter? The trade in Theran luxury goods, which Haeleon turned from a haphazard undertaking into a small but smoothly disciplined operation, is an expression of his attitude toward the Empire—take what you want from them, make a profit and then forget about them.

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 5 TOU: 5
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 6

Gealleon Sea'lish

Recently appointed a consortis, Gealleon is the eldest daughter of the Sea'lish family, a prominent branch of the Carithasca ranelle. Young for the post and inexperienced in the ways of the Elven Court, she was given her position as compensation for yet another rejected Carithasca petition to open the Wood's borders.

Unlike Haeleon, Gealleon is positively strident about advancing Carithasca interests, even at the expense of the Blood Wood's interests in general. She has publicly and vehemently disagreed with him on several occasions, apparently hoping to embarrass him into action. Though bright enough to grasp the surface of Court manners, the underlying intricacies of personality and politics escape her. She sees her own opinions as the only ones that make sense, and finds it hard to believe that others don't view the world in exactly the same way. She also has a touch of the family charm, however, and is gradually learning how to use it.

Some believe that Ethenia has hopes for Gealleon, and so has not attempted to have her replaced with a more bid-dable family member. Others believe Ethenia finds Gealleon's youthful arrogance useful; by drawing attention to herself, Gealleon only makes Haeleon look all the more reasonable. Gealleon deeply resents Haeleon's patronizing behavior toward her, and would love to show him up in some spectacular way. Some observers believe that only their common Carithasca heritage has kept Gealleon from actively conspiring against him.

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 7 WIL: 6 CHA: 7

Captain Trellius

Captain Trellius and his sailing ship, the *Soaring Eagle*, are a common sight on the lower Mothingale River. Trellius makes regular supply runs between Trenevar and Kaer Eidolon, and also carries trade goods between the port town and his own home village of Sirthechan, just a few miles upriver to the west. He belongs to the Gadulka ranelle, a minor but prosperous ranelle famed for its shipbuilding expertise until the destruction of the great shipyards at Dren Hathal. Much of the shipbuilding craft was irretrievably lost in that devastating event, but Captain Trellius used the knowledge passed down through his family's oral traditions to build the *Eagle*. He regards the preservation of that knowledge as a sacred obligation to his ancestors, who willingly sacrificed the craft they loved at the elven queen's command.

Born after the Scourge ended, Trellius underwent the Ritual of Thorns at a tender age, and has never really gotten over the trauma. He sees the Ritual as unnecessary now that the Horrors are gone, and his revulsion at the cruelty of continuing it has gradually turned him against the status quo. He still regards himself as Alachia's loyal subject, but believes she is tragically wrong about the Ritual. Short of openly attacking the queen and the Court, he is willing to consider just about anything to help stop the practice.





In addition to his legitimate river trips, Trellius engages in a certain amount of smuggling, mostly of ordinary goods bartered from Serpent River towns near Kaer Eidolon. He also occasionally smuggles people into the Wood, for a hefty price. The Seekers of the Heart have found him a willing ally; he hopes there will be no more need for the Ritual of Thorns if they succeed in healing the Wood. Illicit passengers ride in hidden compartments built into the *Eagle's* cargo hold, where they will be safe from the prying eyes of the Talshara wardens who guard the Wood's borders. Occasionally, the wardens board the vessel; if Trellius has any advance warning of this, he generally dumps his passengers at his base in the ruined shipyards before the authorities arrive.

The Talshara enforcers invariably allow Trellius to go on his way in exchange for certain contraband items. They also have another reason for treating him with kid gloves, though Trellius does not realize it. His travels outside the Blood Wood make him one of the queen's most useful links to the Songbirds, her spy network. The Songbirds keep careful track of Trellius's movements and often use him as an unwitting messenger—commissioning him to deliver "a personal letter to my half-brother," or passing on information disguised as gossip that they know he will share with the Talshara enforcers.

In his twenty years of plying the Mothingale and the Serpent, Trellius has learned many of the rivers' secrets. Few blood elves alive know the ways of these waters better. His skills have earned him a sterling reputation among t'skrang sailors all along the Serpent River; many of them go out of their way to meet him so that they can trade stories over a meal in the local tavern. Their common love for the sailing life apparently enables them to overlook Trellius's thorns; anyone ungracious enough to stare at Trellius in public may find himself smacked across the room by a blow from a t'skrang boatman's tail.

The *Soaring Eagle* is a modified trading galley with a single sail. Unknown to all save its captain and builder, the sail is woven with elemental air after the manner of the ancient elven ships, of which the *Mallornica* is the only well-known surviving example. The *Eagle* has seen many repairs in its day; upon casual inspection, its hull looks patched-together in more places than any sane sailor would allow. The patchwork, however, is actually armor that has let the *Eagle* hold its own against pirate riverboats on more than one occasion. This armor is stronger than the standard armor used on trading galleys. (For statistics, see p. 106, *Serpent River*.)

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 6 WIL: 7 CHA: 8

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

The Carithasca ranelle engages in black-market trade on a relatively small scale, roughly one ship's worth of goods a month. Most of the contraband comes through Kaer Eidolon, via supply ships or on the persons of those soldiers actively involved in the trading. The t'skrang at the fortress are only too happy to take trade goods from the Blood Wood in exchange for t'skrang baskets and certain spices native to the farther reaches of the Serpent. The fortress also connects the Blood Wood with the wider network of river trade, and blood elves who can afford it are willing to pay handsomely for such ordinary items as stoneware from Throal.

Though Queen Alachia officially prohibits "foreign trade," she has so far turned a blind eye to these Carithasca-sponsored illicit activities. The black market keeps the Carithasca ranelle from pushing too hard for open borders, and also satisfies the existing demand for foreign items well enough to keep the open-border faction from gaining too many allies. As long as the black market remains minimal enough for Alachia to plausibly ignore it, she will continue to do so. Should the Carithasca step up their illegal trading, however, the queen would not hesitate to crack down.

Perhaps emboldened by the success of their black marketeering, some members of the Carithasca ranelle have begun trafficking in Theran goods. Queen Alachia's well-known loathing for things Theran makes this aspect of illicit trade somewhat riskier than the rest, and those engaged in it have so far been prudent enough to keep it extremely minimal. Two or three caravans or ships per year smuggle Theran goods into Trenevar and a few other Southern Fringe settlements. Most of the contraband consists of luxury items from the Theran outpost at Vivane: fine silks, spices and gemstones from the Imperial provinces of Marac and Indrisa, and vintage Theran wines. These goods find their way by various routes to buyers among the ranelles, and even to the Elven Court. Since the arrival of the Theran behemoth *Triumph*, certain blood warders have begun trading for True water and True fire mined in the area surrounding the Theran stronghold. T'skrang riverboat captains from House K'tenshin, a powerful aropagoi with historic ties to the Empire, frequently act as go-betweens.

How much Queen Alachia knows of this activity remains an open question, but as long as she does nothing about it, those engaged in it prefer not to find out the truth. Haeleon Carithasca believes Alachia knows everything, but allows limited trafficking in Theran goods because she finds it in her people's interest to do so. Rumor has it that Alachia also has a weakness for Indrisan curries, but the palace cooks and servants refuse to confirm or deny such gossip.

The ranelle is keeping a wary eye on the rising tensions between elves and t'skrang at Kaer Eidolon. Neither





House Ishkarat nor any other enemy has attacked the fort for the past five years, and the t'skrang troops are becoming increasingly bored and restless. Inter-niall rivalries have assumed vast importance, leading to constant skirmishes between t'skrang factions over apparent trivialities. This behavior, bizarre and foolish to elven eyes, has led senior officers among the Talshara to press for elven command of Kaer Eidolon—or at least joint command, to shift between elves and t'skrang every six months. Predictably, many t'skrang see this suggestion as a veiled attack on their competence, and even their honor. A serious breakdown in relations would severely disrupt the lucrative black market, and so various members of the Carithasca ranelle are doing what they can to smooth things over. Carithasca supply-ship captains frequently take small groups of soldiers on half-day pleasure jaunts near the fortress, while the Carithasca at Court do their best to persuade the Talshara to ease up on their demands for control.

The Carithasca ranelle is also seeking the support of the Jae'Helastris for open borders and free trade. The Jae'Helastris have a knack for learning other people's secrets, and Ethenia Carithasca believes that courting them will give her own ranelle significant leverage over those opposed to Carithasca aims. She knows the risks of such politicking, however, and has warned all those dealing with the Jae'Helastris to reveal no more information than is absolutely necessary to gain their cooperation.

PERMANENT SETTLEMENTS

The Southern Fringe has more permanent settlements than any other region in the Blood Wood, mostly farming and fishing villages. Increasing numbers of riverside settlements have been abandoned as the corruption of the Forest's Heart expands outward. Some refugees have settled in villages downriver from their former homes; the majority of them, however, live on Carithasca lands in or near the port town of Trenevar.

TRENEVAR

This large port is the Southern Fringe's major settlement and the home of the wealthy Carithasca ranelle. Of all the settlements in the Blood Wood, Trenevar most greatly resembles a typical Barsaivian market town. It has several permanent buildings, some even made of stone, and an extensive span of docks to accommodate the small boats that travel here from other parts of the Wood. Somewhat larger cargo ships regularly sail from Trenevar to Kaer Eidolon, conveying contraband along with legitimate supplies and troops. The town's location near the confluence of the Mothingale and Lesser Mothingale make it a vital center of trade from the Western Border to other woodland regions, and its proximity to the Wood's southern border makes it the port of call for most visitors allowed in to the Blood Wood.

Trenevar also houses the Wood's largest population of Unprotected elves. Most are the children of elves who left the Wood at the time of the Schism; drawn back by a powerful desire to see their parents' birthplace, they have chosen to stay and swear allegiance to the elven queen. The Unprotected elves are prone to restlessness, however, and few remain in the Wood for more than ten years at a time. The Names and faces of Trenevar's Unprotected residents change constantly; the town's resultant reputation for transience is expressed in such idioms as a "Trenevar promise" to indicate insincerity.

The village lies on the main southern road to the Elven Court. Certain residents of Trenevar conduct a brisk trade with the Court in contraband goods; various noble-born courtiers regularly send servants on "errands" to Trenevar, to pick up the forbidden luxuries of their choice. Many arrive for the weekly market day, hoping to remain inconspicuous amid the throngs of villagers who come to Trenevar to buy and sell. Farmers with cartloads of vegetables, fishmongers from riverside villages, and countless others flock to Trenevar's market square to peddle their wares or hunt for bargains.

Compared to such famous markets as Throal's Grand Bazaar, however, market day in Trenevar is a subdued affair. The market square is tiny, no more than forty paces across, with little of the color and bustle of the typical open-air market. Prospective buyers will hear no loud hawking of goods or attention-getting patter, as such behavior is unseemly from a blood elf's point of view. If a customer wishes to buy something, he will; the seller simply waits quietly, and courteously serves those who approach. The range of goods available also leaves something to be desired; though Trenevar is a cornucopia of variety compared to the rest of the Wood, its market is severely limited in contrast to the rest of Barsaive.

The Carithasca manor house stands at the eastern edge of Trenevar, amid the spreading branches of a vast oak tree. According to family tradition, the oak grew from an acorn of the mighty Oak Heart that created Wyrms Wood. It is impossible to tell where the manor walls end and the tree branches begin; many of the eaves sprout buds and blossoms every spring. In a mark of the ranelle's prosperity, the roof is made of a rare blue slate found only in the Tylon Mountains; Ethenia Carithasca commissioned the quarrying and transport of the stone to Wyrms Wood during the reign of Queen Liara.

The ranelle owns land around the manor for nearly three miles in every direction save the west, on which grow the orchards that are the special pride of the Sea'lish branch of the ranelle. Carithasca apple brandy is famed throughout the Blood Wood, and before the Scourge was considered a delicacy in most kingdoms of Barsaive. The ranelle's property also includes several vegetable farms and groves of trees whose bark and leaves offer valuable medicinal properties.





Small villages scattered across Carithasca lands are home to the common folk who harvest leaves and tree bark or tend the gardens and fruit trees for the ranelle. These sleepy little communities have taken in more and more refugees from the banks of the Lesser Mothingale as the Forest's Heart advances further into the Southern Fringe. The ranelle's leaders have publicly stated that any elf in the region may find a home on Carithasca lands. Privately, however, Ethenia and both of the ranelle's consortis are pressing Queen Alachia and the blood wardens to do something about the creeping corruption of the forest before overcrowding becomes a significant problem.

SMALLER VILLAGES

Like the town of Trenevar, many of the smaller settlements in the Southern Fringe's western half rely on river-borne trade. Far to the east are the farming communities of Altan and Arralena; the town of Riquenar, nearest to the Elven Court, takes its Name from the minor ranelle that calls it home.

Burdoin

The village of Burdoin lies at the juncture of two branches of the Mothingale River, one of which stretches all the way through the Western Border to the northern edges of the Wood. Its location makes it a center of trade between the Western Border and the southern and eastern regions of the Wood. Like Trenevar to the south and east, Burdoin boasts a few inns, largely patronized by small traders from western and northern villages who bring their goods downriver.

Burdoin is also home to a large contingent of wardens, many of them Talshara, stationed here to guard the Southern Fringe against dangerous creatures from the west (see **The Western Border**, p. 88). Elindrel Talshara, an ex-lasher unusually prominent at Court, hails from Burdoin. His devotion to Queen Alachia is well known in his hometown, though some gossips question its nature. Local opinion is divided on the issue; some people see Elindrel as a source of pride, others of embarrassment.

Arralena

Built not long after the end of the Scourge, this small town near the Wood's eastern border lies next to one of the largest natural clearings in the forest. The clearing serves as a moderate-sized grazing pasture in which the local people raise most of the livestock that supplies the entire Blood Wood with milk, cheese and draft animals. The pastureland stretches from the edge of the Blood Wood to the nearby hills, and occasionally suffers raids by troll moots from the nearby Scythia Mountains. The Talshara ranelle maintains a well-staffed warden outpost in Arralena to keep the raiders at bay.

Once a year Arralena holds a Horse Fair, primarily to auction off cart and riding animals. The annual influx of visitors makes the fair a festive occasion, with trick-riding exhibitions, races and competitions for Best Bloodberry Wine, Largest Ground Tomatoes, Hardest Climbing Roses and so on.

Altan

This small village lies in the southeast corner of the Blood Wood amid a scattering of several large clearings given over to the Blood Wood's biggest vegetable farms. Before the Scourge, Altan was well known as far away as Cara Fahd for its giant tomatoes. Since the Scourge's end, the village has regained its claim to fame within the Wood's borders, a feat of which its people are inordinately proud.

Anuna

This once-tiny village, previously best known as the birthplace of the legendary blind troubadour Elenyu Makarin, has almost doubled in size over the past year. Both old and new residents of Anuna keep a wary eye on the Lesser Mothingale, fearing the spread of the corruption that claimed the neighboring village of Nochan. Local botanists have developed an early-warning system of sorts, exploiting a previously unknown property of the river grass called saenor. Traditionally valued for its taste, saenor also has an extraordinary sensitivity to unwholesome substances. The slightest touch of corruption causes the plant to shrivel and die. The fisherfolk of Anuna have planted a barrier of saenor across the Lesser Mothingale





just south of the last-known point where the creeping corruption halted; should it spread further, the dying plants will give local villagers ample time to relocate.

Riquenar

The town of Riquenar lies midway between Trenevar and the Elven Court, by the side of the main road between them. Somewhat larger than its neighbors, Riquenar is the primary stopping point for caravans bringing supplies, goods and quarter-yearly tribute from across the Wood to the Court. It is also home to the Kiellan ranelle, a minor noble family affiliated with the Carithasca that makes its livelihood maintaining small roadside inns "for the discriminating traveler" in Riquenar, Trenevar and Burdoin.

Nochan

Once a thriving fishing village, Nochan was abandoned midway through the past year. The corruption of the Forest's Heart crept down the river waters, tainting local marine life and making the place unlivable. The first sign of trouble was patches of algae turning white, as if afflicted with mold. Then reed-beds began dying, or turning from deep green to blood-red. Next came oddities among the fish; local folk reported catching fish with misshapen heads and bodies, bloody mange-like patches in their scales, or transparent flesh through which their twisted internal organs could be seen. Finally, tendrils of blood began to appear in the waters. At about the same time, small gardens planted in the surrounding land began to fail as the tainted water seeped into the soil. Their livelihood gone and their land apparently poisoned, the people of Nochan fled downriver. Some ended up in the nearby village of Anuna; most continued downriver to Trenevar, determined to get as far from the corruption as they possibly could.

Sirthechan

This village saw its glory days before the Scourge, when the proud elven fleet that was built in its waters regularly plied the Mothingale and the Lesser Mothingale. Ever since the terrible days when Queen Alachia ordered the shipyards at nearby Dren Hathal obliterated, Sirthechan has been a shadow of itself. The ruins of the shipyards dominate the view to the south and can be seen from almost anywhere in the village.

The gifted shipwrights of the Gadulka ranelle who once lived in Sirthechan are almost all gone; not many of them survived the Scourge, and they left few descendants. Local tradition has it that the Gadulka died of broken hearts after sacrificing their life's work at the queen's command. Captain Trellius of the *Soaring Eagle* is one of the few scions of the Gadulka still living in Sirthechan.

Nowadays, the folk of Sirthechan survive by fishing and a specialized type of farming. Keje, a nutty-tasting,

rice-like grain, grows in small plantations along the riverbanks, which the local people have turned into miniature bogs by crisscrossing the soil with irrigation canals. These elf-made marshlands are the perfect environment for raising keje, which has become a dietary staple in many woodland villages since the end of the Scourge.

DREN HATHAL

Before the Scourge, the shipyards of Dren Hathal were among the finest in Barsaive. Sturdy wooden docks stretched for hundreds of yards along the shining waters of the Mothingale, and the tall towers of the massive pulley systems, designed to swing finished keels out over the water, rose proudly into the sky. As with everything of elven make, the docks and towers and building floors of Dren Hathal were beautiful as well as useful. Elven artisans, many from the various shipbuilding ranelles, built the structures of different-colored woods and covered them with bas-reliefs of birds, fish, water lilies and other river motifs. Bridges woven of thick river reeds connected the pulley towers and the upper windows of the largest building-floors, where the keels for the great elven sailing ships were assembled. Vast storehouses of True wood lined the riverbank, and giant drums of True air floated near the towers like dancing wheels in the sky. Every day the yards bustled with activity, from carpentry to sailweaving to the final assembly of each wondrous sailing vessel.

All that changed with news of the coming Scourge. When Queen Alachia refused the Theran Rites of Protection, she spoke for elven nations everywhere, clearly assuming that even the most far-flung elven communities would follow her lead and devise alternate protections rather than bow to Theran rule. Other nations, however, did not share her hatred of the Empire, or perhaps were simply more pragmatic. Slowly at first, then in increasing numbers as signs of the Scourge multiplied, the other elven nations broke with the queen and Court and paid the Theran price for survival.

Even in Wyrn Wood, Queen Alachia met fierce opposition. In what came to be known as the Schism, whole ranelles abandoned the Wood, fleeing to communities protected by the Theran rites. Alachia had effectively begun the Wood's isolation, and she soon chose to embrace that policy officially. But she needed to find out just how loyal her remaining subjects were, and also to reinforce the idea that the elves of Wyrn Wood must be absolutely self-sufficient. In short order, Queen Alachia found a way to satisfy both goals at the same time.

The shipbuilding ranelles of the southwest had possessed strong ties to the rebellious Laryskova ranelle, banished during the reign of Queen Failla, and had always styled themselves as somewhat free thinkers—never exactly flouting the queen's authority, but confident that they





were too important to the Court to ever suffer more than token censure. Queen Alachia decided that if these ranelles could be made to demonstrate their loyalty to her, the remaining ranelles also would toe the line. The queen demanded the ultimate sacrifice as proof of the shipbuilders' obedience: the utter destruction of Dren Hathal. The dramatic gesture of destroying the Wood's most reliable and fastest form of communication and trade with the rest of the world also would serve as a graphic demonstration that the people of the Wood must depend only on themselves from now on.

Alachia's order threw the shipbuilding ranelles into chaos. Some refused outright, and left the Wood rather than "destroy our very souls," as one chronicler of the time put it. Others begged the queen to reconsider her order, but to no avail. The ranelles must choose, Alachia declared, between their queen's command and the good of the elven people, or their own selfish desires. The shipbuilders submitted and their leaders began their terrible task.

Watched by a regiment of the queen's exolashers, the shipbuilders put Dren Hathal to the torch. The conflagra-

tion lit up the sky for miles; more than a few ranelle members, overcome by anguish as they watched their cherished jewel burn, threw themselves into the flames. The elven fleet, all in dock except for the renegade *Mallornica*, burned as well. Accounts by survivors of the Burning Time speak of the ships screaming as the flames consumed them.

Some of the docks and warehouses remain partially standing, though they are badly charred. A few of the small, round shipbuilders' houses closest to the treeline remain mostly intact; Alachia's exolashers had standing orders to quench the flames if they threatened the Wood, even if that meant allowing a building or two to remain whole. All that remains of the pulley towers are blackened stubs, some five or six feet high. None of the reed bridges survived. Various magical devices whose purpose can only be guessed at lie burned and broken throughout the yards. The saddest sight is the corpses of the great ships that were once the pride of Wurm Wood, reduced to charred half-hulls and the occasional broken mast. The miasma of sorrow that hangs over the ruin is so intense that the local folk claim to hear the "ghosts of the yards" sobbing every time a strong west wind blows.

The ghost stories are more than just tales. Dren Hathal is haunted by various spirits and other ghostly beings, from spectral dancers to the Name-giver spirits of long-departed shipwrights who once lived in and loved this place. Local fireside tales speak of the elves who burned haunting their death-sites as demi-wraiths, possessed by hatred for those who made them obliterate their home. Other tales tell of spirit-elves trapped in endless reenactment of their own deaths, or of the acts of destruction they committed. Most of the spirits that haunt the yards are said to be insane, prone to attack trespassers without provocation.

One account written by a visitor to the shipyards speaks of a spectral dancer that hovers around the eastern-most dock. The dancer killed three of the journal-writer's traveling companions before the writer managed to communicate with the specter. He subsequently learned that the dancer's Name in life had been Merenya Gadulka, and that she had stayed to mourn the shipyards after their destruction. Driven into near-catatonic depression by her own part in the tragedy, Merenya was easy prey for the Horrors, who made her into a spectral dancer and kept her from leaving Dren Hathal. Another account tells of an entire crew of Name-giver spirits, apparently the shades of shipwrights who committed suicide when the yards were destroyed. These ghosts, six in all, can be seen on moonlit nights, endlessly building a spectral ship that they apparently never finish.

The only living being who consistently visits the ruins is Captain Trellius, who uses one of the half-collapsed building-floors and an adjoining warehouse as a hiding place for contraband. The various spirits of the place never bother Trellius, perhaps because they regard him as family.





GAME INFORMATION



The **Game Information** section offers players and gamemasters suggestions for roleplaying blood elves and rules for incorporating the Blood Wood and blood elves into their **Earthdawn** adventures and campaigns.

This information includes hints for creating a blood elf character's personality, new rules to reflect the unique qualities of blood elves (including racial modifiers, new abilities and new talents), and rules for the various defenses of the Blood Wood.

The final section offers new magical and treasure items created and used by the blood elves.

PLAYING BLOOD ELF CHARACTERS

The elves of the Blood Wood have long been a mystery to the player-characters of **Earthdawn**. Changed by powerful magic, living secret lives in a secluded and fiercely protected place, at the beck and call of an imperious queen whose pride nearly destroyed her people, the blood elves represent an enigma that many players long to explore. Though the number of blood elves outside the Wood is small, as that number grows it becomes easier to incorporate blood-elf player characters into an existing or new **Earthdawn** campaign. This section offers a number of optional rules and roleplaying suggestions to help players create and play blood elf adepts. As always, gamemasters should use as much or as little of the following information as is appropriate for their game and group.

BLOOD ELF MINDSET

Perhaps more than any other Name-giver race in Barsaive, the blood elves have been molded and shaped by their environment and their history. Set apart from the world by a single event, a ritual spell cast in desperation to save them from the depredations of the Horrors, they are forever marked as unlike any other group of Name-givers. Since that event, they have made their way in the world despised, misunderstood and alone.

The Ritual of Thorns gives the blood elves a unique disposition, with large amounts of determined self-reliance, stubbornness and mistrust. While individual Name-givers may profess to understand the necessity of what the blood elves did to themselves, the other races of Barsaive generally view the blood elves as corrupt and perverse. In the face of such overwhelming disapproval and even outright hatred, blood elves are forced to depend on each other, for only one who lives with the daily torment of the thorns can understand how it affects every aspect of

one's life. The vast majority of blood elves stubbornly cling to the belief that the Ritual was the right thing to do, even if they question the wisdom of its continued practice, for to think otherwise would mean that all they suffered has been for naught. This attitude naturally colors their entire outlook on life, giving the blood elves a stiff-necked pride in their race and an arrogance that adversely affects their relationships with other Name-givers. When dealing with other Name-givers, blood elves are generally arrogant and mistrustful, protecting their dignity and self-worth by assuming that other Name-givers will treat them badly—an attitude that practically guarantees that the cycle of hate will continue.

Blood elves are generally a serious and practical lot. In order to carry their burden of endless physical and mental anguish, they have trained themselves to control their emotions to the point of appearing aloof and cold. Because they were faithful to their queen when most elves abandoned her, most blood elves consider themselves the only true elves. Faced with their own extinction at the tentacles of the Horrors, they took the necessary steps to ensure their survival; doing what must be done without complaint has become their way of life.

Ritual of Thorns

When creating a blood elf character, the player must determine the impact of the Ritual of Thorns on his character, and how the character incorporates the Ritual into his or her life. Some blood elves are deeply ashamed of what they see as a blight upon their race and long to see it undone. Others embrace the pain as a symbol of their superiority over other Name-giver races, for who among them is so strongly protected from the foul attentions of the Horrors? Many blood elves simply accept without question the queen's ruling that the Ritual must remain a necessary part of their lives; these elves form the stoic majority upon which the strength of the blood elves is founded. A rare few actually embrace the opinion of other Name-givers, reviling themselves for what they are and despising the queen for her decision. While a character's opinion of the Ritual of Thorns may be any of the above, an intermediate position or even a combination of two or more attitudes, no blood elf is neutral on the issue.

The player must decide how his or her character's attitude toward the Ritual of Thorns will shape that character's actions. Does the character work to find the key to reversing the Ritual, or does he wish to extend the protection of the thorns to all elves in Barsaive? Does she strive to teach other Name-giver races that blood elves are not the abominations so commonly believed, or does she ignore





the opinions of others, allowing her actions to speak for themselves? Does he hope to find his own sense of self-worth, or does he plan to ram the superiority of blood elves down the throats of any who stand against him? Will she become a hero equal to any other, improving the reputation of her race with the valor of her deeds, or will she use what she learns to defy the queen and Court over the atrocity wrought upon the elves of the Blood Wood? The answers to these and other questions may offer the player an intriguing hook upon which to base his or her character.

CHOOSING A DISCIPLINE

Blood elves practice nearly every Discipline available to Name-givers. They do not follow the air sailor or sky raider Disciplines because they do not use airships. Of the magician Disciplines, the elementalists and nethermancer are most commonly pursued, followed closely by wizards and with illusionists a distant fourth.

Blood elves inclined toward the martial Disciplines most often follow the archer and swordmaster Disciplines, finding the artistic approach of these Disciplines to combat appealing. Warriors are only slightly less common, with many who follow this Discipline seeking membership in the queen's exolashers. Cavalrymen are quite rare, as few creatures native to Blood Wood are suitable as mounts and the blood elves' thorns make riding a painful experience for any mount without a thick or scaled hide.

The woodsman and scout Disciplines are particularly well-suited to the unique nature of the Blood Wood, and many wardens follow these Disciplines. The blood elves have expanded upon the known abilities of the woodsman Discipline, adding new talents and powers unknown outside the Wood (see **Discipline Variations**, p. 121). Troubadours and weaponsmiths are highly respected in the Blood Wood and are nearly as common as scouts and woodsmen. Thieves make up the next largest group.

The small number of beastmasters in the Blood Wood is slowly growing. In the first days after the Scourge, beastmasters in the Wood discovered that their close bond with an animal somehow caused the animal to experience some of the pain that constantly wracked the elf, which quickly drove the animal mad. These elves developed a talent to shield their charges from this pain (see **Shield Beast**, p. 122) and shared that talent with blood-elf cavalrymen for the sake of the mounts. Beastmasters face an uncommon challenge in the Blood Wood because of the generally wilder, more feral nature of its animal population.

LEAVING THE BLOOD WOOD

Despite the overwhelming social prejudice that awaits them, many blood elves are eager for a chance to see the world outside the Blood Wood. Some argue that such contact would benefit the race in the long run, allowing the other races of Barsaive to learn about blood elves firsthand

and gradually breaking down the barriers between them. Others are driven by curiosity and their desire to see more of the world. Once the player has decided the impact the Ritual of Thorns had upon his character, he must decide why his character would choose to leave the Blood Wood. Though the gamemaster might experiment with a group composed entirely or mostly of blood elves adventuring in the Wood, in most cases, a blood elf character will be an adept who leaves his home to see more of the world outside. Characters generally leave the Wood either with permission or without.

A blood elf with permission to leave the Blood Wood typically does so to perform a service for the queen or for some highly-ranked member of the Court who has gained the queen's permission for the character to travel the world at large. This task might mean only a short trip or it may require lengthy travel with only occasional opportunities to return home to the Wood. A blood elf character's family also might request permission from the queen for him or her to leave the Wood to pursue a family or personal goal. Queen Alachia generally makes exceptions to her policy of isolation if the stated goal is important enough or if she can see a chance for greater gain by granting the request. Finally, a character may have been banished from the Wood. The queen uses this form of punishment only sparingly. Banished characters who return to the Blood Wood without permission, no matter the reason, risk even harsher punishment.

It is more likely, however, that a blood elf will leave the Wood without permission. As black market trade through the Southern Fringe continues and the elves of the Northern Reaches encounter increasing numbers of outsiders, the number of elves who surrender to their curiosity and disobey the queen's edict forbidding communication with the outside world slowly grows. These elves are taking a great risk, for the queen's wrath is most severe toward those who disobey her. Blood elves found to have left the Wood without permission face banishment, imprisonment in the Pit or even death as punishment.

The World at Large

Once outside the Blood Wood, a blood elf learns the true depth of his connection to his home. The Ritual of Thorns binds the pattern of each blood elf into the True pattern of the Blood Wood, creating a single, far-reaching, complex magical structure that influences each of its parts. In many ways, the blood elves and the Wood are one, and their fates are irrevocably intertwined. The Wood feels the pain and death of each individual elf, though the passing of a single elf hardly affects the immense forest. Large-scale changes to the Wood, however, would certainly be reflected in the blood elf population; were the Wood to be cut down in a single day, the blood elves would not outlive it by long.





A blood elf who leaves the Blood Wood no longer has daily contact with others of his own kind, contact that helps him endure the great physical and mental anguish of the Ritual of Thorns. When in the Blood Wood, he is part of a community that understands and supports him, a single arrow in a sheaf of arrows, the whole bound tightly together and nearly unbreakable. Outside the Wood, he is surrounded by those who fear and revile him; he is a single shaft, easily snapped under pressure.

Interaction with the other races of Barsaive promises to be simultaneously one of the most difficult and most interesting aspects of a blood elf's travel outside the Blood Wood. Because most people react to blood elves with fear and loathing, most blood elves have adopted an antagonistic view of all other races, looking at the world as an "us versus them" situation where "them" is everyone who isn't a blood elf. This view is a form of protection, for the prejudice of other Name-givers cannot hurt one who expects it and dismisses it as meaningless. Most blood elves only give up this view of other races grudgingly and on a case-by-case basis.

Of all the other races, blood elves have the most difficulty interacting with dwarfs, windlings and elves without thorns. Their difficulty with dwarfs stems mostly from King Varulus III's well-known antipathy toward blood elves, as well as rumors that the dwarf king grievously insulted Queen Alachia during the one known meeting between the two. These two factors lead many blood elves to hold every individual dwarf they meet accountable for the king's reaction. Windlings typically see blood elves as a crime against the natural order, and even the most open-minded of them experiences extreme difficulty accepting a blood elf as a Name-giver worthy of respect and friendship.

No race causes a blood elf more difficulty, however, than elves who never underwent the Ritual. Called variously the Unprotected, the Unenlightened or the Unfaithful, these elves look upon their blood-elf cousins with shame that any elves could have done something so horrible to themselves and anger for having tainted the integrity of the entire elven race. Blood elves return this anger in full measure, with a healthy dose of disdain thrown in. No blood elf can forgive the other elves of the world their failure to support Queen Alachia's choice not to swear fealty to the Therans in return for the Rites of Protection. In the minds of most blood elves, the other elves betrayed them, and so they feel nothing but contempt for their "weaker" cousins.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the conflict between blood elves and normal elves is that each group considers itself the only true elves, while simultaneously recognizing in the other some part of the true elven spirit. Some elf scholars point to blood-elf beauty and appreciation for art as evidence that redemption for their corrupted kin may be possible, while blood-elf scholars point to the



longing for the Blood Wood that some Unprotected elves feel as evidence that all elves will one day submit to the Ritual of Thorns.

Wood Longing

The longer a blood elf remains away from the Blood Wood, the more likely he is to experience a variation of the homesickness known as wood longing. The degree to which a blood elf feels this desire to return home and the





speed with which it strikes him varies from individual to individual. Some blood elves feel the first pangs of desire to return to the Wood mere weeks after leaving, while others may go years without longing for their home. Eventually, however, every blood elf who stays away from the Blood Wood long enough will experience wood longing.

The first stage of wood longing is known as the wishing, and it begins as a simple touch of homesickness, perhaps accompanied by a tendency to compare the color of the sunset to the leaves of the blood oak, or to sigh each time the elf lays down in a bed that is not the one he grew up knowing. The wishing slowly grows stronger, until the elf reaches the stage known as the obsession. At this stage, the Blood Wood consumes the elf's thoughts. He thinks about it every day, all the time, unconsciously comparing the things he sees around him to sights he remembers from his home. The time he has spent away from the Wood seems an eternity, and the distance that separates him from it seems as great as the vault of the night sky.

Most blood elves who reach this stage of wood longing find the urge to return home irresistible. They bid farewell to any companions and immediately travel to the Blood Wood, heedless of the consequences of their return. Blood elves who are prevented from returning home quickly move to the final stage of wood longing, known as the consumption. These elves weaken, losing physical health and mental fortitude as they pine away for their home. Kept away from the Blood Wood long enough, these elves will eventually die, consumed by their desire to return. Some extraordinary blood elves have the strength of will to resist this homeward call and may do so for years after reaching the obsession, but eventually they, too, begin to feel the physical and mental weakening that heralds the arrival of the consumption.

RULES

The rules for creating blood elf characters vary slightly from those for creating characters of other Name-giver races.

Racial Attribute Modifiers

Blood elf player characters have the same Attributes as other characters, but different racial modifiers, as shown below. Blood elves begin with the same amount of starting Karma as normal elves, and use the same Karma dice.

Dexterity: +1
Toughness: -2
Willpower: +1
Charisma: +3

Racial Abilities

In addition to low-light vision, blood elf player characters gain a +1 bonus to their Spell Defense and Social Defense Ratings, and have a unique ability known as Pain Resistance. Blood elf characters must begin with a minimum

Willpower Attribute Value (before racial modifiers) of 12, and have one less Recovery Test per day than normal elves.

Increased Spell and Social Defense Ratings: The Ritual of Thorns increases the blood elf's resistance to magic and Interaction tests (p. 237, ED), raising his Spell and Social Defense ratings by +1 each.

Pain Resistance: The constant pain caused by the Ritual of Thorns allows blood elves a slightly higher pain threshold than most other Name-givers. This allows blood elves to ignore some of the negative effects of Wounds and damage. If the gamemaster is using the optional Wound Effects rule (p. 203, ED), a blood elf character can take 2 Wounds without suffering any step penalties. Thus, a blood elf with 3 Wounds would have all step numbers reduced by 1. Blood elves also suffer no penalties for most minor injuries such as sprained ankles and strained muscles, as described in the **Earthdawn Survival Guide**. In addition, the blood elf is immune to the immobilizing effect of the Circle 3 nethermancer spell Pain, though he still takes damage each round. This higher pain threshold also has a drawback, in that blood elves may suffer minor injuries such as bruises and cuts without even noticing that they've been hurt.

Reduced Recovery Tests: A portion of a blood elf's natural healing ability must be devoted to healing the constant bleeding caused by his or her thorns. Thus, blood elf characters have one less Recovery Test per day. If the character's final Toughness Attribute Value (after racial modifiers) is 7 or less, which normally grants a character 1 Recovery Test per day, then the character effectively has no Recovery Tests and may only heal through magical means such as the use of a healing potion. Blood elf characters must start the game with a minimum Toughness Attribute Value (before racial modifiers) of 5.

Other Restrictions

Blood elves also are limited in the types of armor they can wear and suffer penalties when making Interaction Tests against normal elves. All blood elves who leave the Blood Wood also eventually suffer from wood longing.

Armor Restrictions: Blood elf characters may not comfortably wear any armor other than fernweave. Fernweave's magical, plant-based nature allows it to hang naturally upon a blood elf's body, weaving around the elf's thorns without difficulty. All other types of non-magical armor, however, press on the thorns and pull at them painfully when the character moves. If a blood elf wears non-magical armor other than fernweave, the added pain causes penalties to all Dexterity- and Perception-based tests as shown on the Blood Elf Armor Table.

Blood elf weaponsmiths and craftsmen have created enchanted types of most armor that allows the armor to be worn without pulling and snagging on the thorns. This armor generally costs anywhere from three to four times





BLOOD ELF ARMOR TABLE

Type of Armor	Step Penalty
Padded cloth, leather, padded leather or hide	-1
Hardened leather or ring mail	-2
Chain mail, crystal ringlet, plate mail or crystal plate	-3

the normal cost. See **Clothing and Armor**, p. 19 in the **Overview**, for more information.

Interaction Test Modifiers: When making Interaction Tests against non-blood elves, (p. 237, **ED**), the starting attitude of any gamemaster character who meets a blood elf for the first time is 1 step closer to Enemy than normal. For example, a gate guard who is typically Neutral to people entering a town would be considered Unfriendly if he interacts with a blood elf, while a pleasant merchant who is Friendly to everyone who enters his shop would be decidedly less so to a blood elf and would start any interaction with a Neutral attitude.

The unnatural beauty of blood elves can also influence people in a more positive manner. If the gamemaster determines that a gamemaster character with whom the blood elf is interacting is likely to be influenced by this charm, he can choose to reverse the modifier listed above, adjusting the attitude of the gamemaster character 1 step toward Awestruck.

Wood Longing: As described above, blood elves who stay away from the Blood Wood eventually suffer wood longing. Wood longing usually affects characters in three distinct stages: the wishing, the obsession and the consumption. To determine how quickly a blood elf character will succumb to the effects of wood longing, find the character's Willpower Attribute Value on the Wood Longing Table and use the columns for each stage as a guideline.

The times listed on the Wood Longing Table indicate how quickly a blood elf reaches a particular stage after reaching the previous one. For the wishing, the time is counted from the day the blood elf leaves the Blood Wood. For example, a blood elf with a Willpower Attribute Value of 15 will experience the wishing roughly six months after leaving the Blood Wood. If he does not return to the Wood in the interim, he will reach the obsession stage 1 year later, and the consumption stage two months after that point. Once a blood elf reaches the consumption stage, he begins to lose points from his Toughness and Willpower Attribute

Values, simulating the physical and mental decline that he experiences while pining for home. The Attribute Loss column indicates the interval at which each Attribute point is lost. When the character's Willpower is reduced, calculate the time to the next Attribute loss based on the new Willpower Attribute Value. If the character's Willpower is reduced below 13, he continues to lose Attribute points at the rate of 1 per day. If the Willpower or Toughness Attribute Value reaches 0, he dies. This Attribute point loss cannot be stopped or reversed except by the character returning to the Blood Wood.

If the blood elf returns to the Blood Wood, he can stop and even reverse the progression of wood longing. Each week of time spent in the Blood Wood reduces the elf's stage of wood longing to the next earlier one. Thus, the visit must last for at least one week per stage that he has reached to completely cure the blood elf. If the character has not yet reached the wishing stage, he still requires at least 1 week to offset any time accumulated toward that stage. If he spends less than one week in the Wood, he will reach the wishing stage as though he had not returned home. If the character suffered any Attribute point losses due to the consumption, he gradually regains all lost Attribute points during the first week of his return to the Blood Wood.

These wood longing rules are intended only to add flavor to the game. They are not meant to be used as a way of forcing blood elf characters to return to the Blood Wood on a regular basis, dragging their companions with them and interrupting the flow of the game. Ideally, these rules should add depth to a blood elf character and perhaps create some interesting roleplaying situations. The restriction of wood longing can enhance the game just as easily if managed entirely according to the gamemaster's sense of pacing and drama, rather than using structured rules.

GAMEMASTER NOTES

Running an **Earthdawn** campaign that includes one or more blood elf characters will prove challenging for the

WOOD LONGING TABLE

Willpower	Wishing	Obsession	Consumption	Attribute Loss
13	2 months	4 months	2 weeks	1 day
14	4 months	8 months	1 month	2 days
15	6 months	1 year	2 months	4 days
16	9 months	1.5 years	4 months	1 week
17	1 year	2 years	6 months	2 weeks
18	1.5 years	3 years	9 months	3 weeks
19	2 years	4 years	1 year	4 weeks
20	3 years	6 years	1.5 years	5 weeks
21	4 years	8 years	2 years	6 weeks
22+	5 years	10 years	2.5 years	2 months





gamemaster. This section suggests ways to handle some of the unique situations that may arise when incorporating blood elves and the Blood Wood into an existing campaign. This list only touches on a few of the most likely problems; in these and other situations, the gamemaster should always keep in mind both the enjoyment of his players and the balance of the game.

Horrors

If the player-character blood elves belong to an adventuring group, the gamemaster will almost certainly have to deal with the unique relationship between the blood elves and the Horrors. The Ritual of Thorns was specifically designed to protect the elves from the Horrors, and the agony of the thorns continues to ward off Horrors wherever the blood elf travels. While simple-minded Horrors who are dedicated to nothing more than physical destruction (such as gnashers, p. 79, **Horrors**) will happily chew on any blood elf who gets in the way, the more sophisticated Horrors who delight in causing mental and physical anguish are largely uninterested in blood elves.

The gamemaster can use this relationship to great advantage in creating interesting and engaging stories involving blood elves. However the gamemaster chooses to handle it, it is important to remember that a single character does not a group of heroes make; even if one character in a group is highly resistant to a variety of Horror powers, the group remains vulnerable. Though he may choose to allow the blood elf character to turn the tide of battle, the gamemaster also can allow the blood elf's special abilities to heighten the tension and drama of an adventure before the blood elf makes his or her heroic triumph. As stated above, the blood elf's abilities should serve the enjoyment of the players, not unbalance the campaign.

Gamemasters may instead choose to level the playing field by reducing the effectiveness of the Ritual of Thorns when the blood elf character is outside the Blood Wood. One rationale for this might be that because the Ritual of Thorns binds up the character's pattern with that of the Blood Wood, both elements together provide the protection, and so distance makes it harder for the Ritual to protect the character. In this case, rather than being ignored by the Horrors, the character gains a +10 bonus to his Spell Defense for the specific purpose of determining if a Horror notices him. For each 5 days' walking distance (125 miles) that the character is away from the Blood Wood, this bonus is reduced by 1 to represent the weakening power of the Ritual as the character travels further from the Blood Wood.

The gamemaster also might introduce a special Horror into his campaign that specializes in corrupting blood elves. This Horror gains its satisfaction and nourishment from the terror, panic, anger and hopelessness a blood elf feels when he realizes that the protection of the Ritual of Thorns has failed him.

Social Prejudice

Some players may not enjoy dealing with the unrelenting, overwhelming social prejudice that the world of **Earthdawn** has set in motion for blood elf characters. While staying true to the game world is important, so is the enjoyment of the players. The gamemaster should discuss this aspect of roleplaying a blood elf character with the player before he or she takes the time to create such a character, making sure that the player understands this disadvantage of playing a blood elf and is prepared to deal with it. The gamemaster might wish to occasionally introduce characters who sympathize with the blood elves or who are particularly susceptible to a blood elf's unnatural attractiveness to serve as a foil to the usual negative reaction of the majority of gamemaster characters. Similarly, a few open-minded characters who learn to accept the blood elf character on his or her own terms can go a long way toward reducing the frustration the player might come to feel at the attitude of the rest of the game universe.

The blood elf character's attractiveness also can be used to drive adventures. There are several references in published **Earthdawn** material to the strange fascination and infatuation that some Name-givers feel upon first seeing a blood elf, and the odd longing that strikes some of these people when the blood elf either doesn't return their affection or stops doing so. Every now and then, have someone the blood elf encounters be struck with this fascination and see what course events take. Perhaps the moon-struck lover is a promising young adept who tags along after the character, performing heroic feats in his or her name in an attempt to win the blood elf's love. Perhaps the blood elf character is followed by a hapless and comical person who inadvertently causes all manner of chaos while simply trying to stay near him. Or the blood elf might catch the attention of a powerful lord, one who will not allow his advances to be spurned and sends his men after the character to return her to the lord's manor where she may be properly courted.

Dealing with Wood Longing

The rules for wood longing presented in this book can prove inconvenient, especially if the character reaches the consumption stage at a critical time in the campaign's development. As described in those rules, however, the suggested method for applying wood longing to a campaign is not meant to be an interruption. The gamemaster may modify the rules to suit his taste, changing the times at which the various stages affect a blood elf or allowing the character to cure himself of wood longing by other methods. The gamemaster also may decide not to use the rules at all, perhaps simply adding the concept of wood longing to the game and relying on roleplaying and his or her own sense of drama to determine the extent to which it becomes a factor in the game.





The gamemaster might also wish to extend the effects of wood longing to Unprotected elves. While published material describing this irresistible pull toward the Blood Wood suggests that most such elves are killed upon reaching the Wood, the gamemaster can use this story line in any number of interesting ways. Perhaps the Unprotected elves impress the elf queen and become useful to her in some way. Maybe they accept the elf queen as the rightful leader of all elves and choose to submit to the Ritual of Thorns. The relationship between Protected and Unprotected elves in an adventuring group might convince one set of elves that the others' way of life in the right one; for example, the Unprotected elves might convince the Protected elves to give up their thorns and begin a search for someone powerful enough to unweave the Personal Ritual. The fact that some normal elves feel wood longing might lead scholars to speculate that the Ritual of Thorns somehow changed the pattern of the entire elven race. Or perhaps wood longing is a plot hatched by the blood warders to draw more elves into the Ritual and slowly remake the elven race.

DISCIPLINE VARIATIONS

The elves of the Blood Wood have discovered and developed unique aspects of the woodsman Discipline. Blood elves who follow the path of the woodsman may advance to Twelfth Circle. Training for Ninth through Twelfth Circles is only available in the Blood Wood, and blood elves will only teach these Circles to other blood elves. Where the Discipline's first eight Circles blend the beastmaster, thief and warrior Disciplines, these Circles add elements of the archer Discipline as well. In the descriptions below, talents marked with a (D) indicate a Discipline talent. Talents marked with an asterisk are new talents.

NINTH CIRCLE

Social Defense: Increase the woodsman's Social Defense by 1.

Karma: The woodsman may spend Karma on any test requiring Perception only.

Talents

- Missile's Path (D)*
- Mystic Aim
- Second Weapon

TENTH CIRCLE

Physical Defense: Increase the woodsman's Physical Defense by 1.

Recovery Tests: The woodsman gains +1 Recovery Test per day.

Talents

- Spirit Strike
- Woodspeaker (D)*

ELEVENTH CIRCLE

Forest Sense: For the cost of 2 permanent points of damage, the woodsman gains the ability to commune with any forest or wooded area with which he is familiar. When used, this power costs the woodsman 5 points of strain and allows him to extend his senses in a circular area whose radius is a number of miles equal to the character's Perception step. The character may see or hear anything in this area as though he were physically present, making Perception tests as normal; it takes 30 minutes to thoroughly "search" an area using this ability. The woodsman may only use this talent if he has spent at least a week in the area of forest with which he wishes to commune.

Talents

- Develop Animal Sense
- Impressive Shot (D)

TWELFTH CIRCLE

Spell Defense: Increase the woodsman's Spell Defense by 1.

Karma: Increase the woodsman's Maximum Karma Points by 15.

Talents

- Chameleon (D)
- Woodwalk*

NEW TALENTS

The following new talents are practiced by blood elf woodsman adepts who reach Ninth to Twelfth Circle. Blood elf beastmasters and cavalymen may also learn Shield Beast. Blood elves will only teach these talents to other blood elves. This restriction includes humans with the Versatility talent.

MISSILE'S PATH

Step Number: Rank + Perception step

Action: No

Skill Use: No

Requires Karma: No

Strain: None

Discipline Talent Use: Woodsman

The Missile Path talent helps the woodsman use his or her missile weapon effectively in areas of thickly grown forest, where such weapons are often difficult to use. If the woodsman can sense a target in any way (catches a glimpse of him, hears him moving or even breathing), then he or she may attempt to use Missile's Path to fire at the target through whatever plant life is in the way. To use this talent, the woodsman makes a Missile's Path Test against the Spell Defense of the target. If the Missile's Path Test is successful, the forest opens a narrow path to the target along which the woodsman may fire his or her missile using any appropriate talent or skill. The maximum length of this path is 5 yards multiplied by the Missile's Path Test result. The path created by this talent lasts only long enough for the woodsman to make a single shot.





SHIELD BEAST

Step Number: Rank + Willpower step

Action: Yes **Skill Use:** No

Requires Karma: No **Strain:** 1

Discipline Talent Use: Beastmaster

The Shield Beast talent is an additional First Circle talent available to blood elf beastmasters and cavalrymen, which allows them to protect animals with which they bond from feeling a sympathetic overflow of their own thorn-induced pain. Without this talent, these animals are quickly driven mad by the constant pain they feel as a result of their bond with the adept. To use the talent, the adept takes 1 point of strain and makes a Shield Beast Test against the Spell Defense of the target animal. If the test is successful, the talent protects the animal for a number of days equal to the character's rank in the talent. Unfortunately, the Shield Beast talent also impedes the flow of other talent magic between the adept and the creature, resulting in a -1 step penalty to all Talent Tests the adept makes to affect the protected animal. An Excellent or better success on the Shield Beast Test, however, negates the step penalty for the duration of the talent's use. Once the talent has been successfully used, it may not be used again until the duration expires.

WOODSPEAK

Step Number: Rank + Perception step

Action: No **Skill Use:** No

Requires Karma: No **Strain:** None

Discipline Talent Use: Woodsman

Woodspeak is a specialized form of the Elemental Tongues talent (p. 104, ED) that allows the woodsman to converse with plant spirits and wood elementals. The adept makes a Woodspeak Test against the Spell Defense of the spirit or elemental with which he or she wishes to converse. An Average or Good success allows simple communication of basic ideas, while an Excellent or better success means the target completely understands the character and the woodsman can understand the spirit. Woodsmen using this talent should keep in mind that most plant spirits are fairly simple-minded, and their knowledge of the world is limited. The gamemaster determines what information a given plant spirit might have and be willing to share with the woodsman using this talent.

WOODWALK

Step Number: Rank + Willpower step

Action: Yes **Skill Use:** No

Requires Karma: Yes **Strain:** See text

Discipline Talent Use: None

The Woodwalk talent allows a woodsman to immerse himself, body and spirit, in the astral space corresponding to the forest and transport himself to a different location within the forest without actually passing through the

intermediate physical space. The adept must be in physical contact with a plant as least as large as a small tree and must concentrate for one full minute; anything that breaks his concentration or contact with the plant, including suffering damage or making any test, interrupts the use of the talent. At the end of the minute, the woodsman makes a Woodwalk Test against the Spell Defense of the plant through which he wishes to travel, and takes a number of Strain points equal to his Wound Threshold. If the test is successful and the character is still conscious, he melds with the plant he is touching, disappearing from view. On the following combat round, he emerges from another plant that lies within a number of yards equal to 100 times his rank in Woodwalk. The woodsman may choose to emerge from a specific plant with which he is familiar, if it lies within range, or he may simply choose to emerge at any distance up to the maximum allowed in any direction he specifies. For the cost of 3 additional points of Strain, the woodsman may carry one individual with him. To carry another person using Woodwalk, the character must achieve a Good or better success on a Woodwalk Test against the passenger's Spell Defense.

Woodsmen using this talent expose themselves to the astral space of the area through which they are moving. This means they can suffer damage or attract the attention of Horrors while using this power. When a woodsman enters astral space using this talent, he automatically takes damage based on the type of astral region he enters (see *Astral Regions*, p. 68 in *Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets*).

DEFENSES OF THE BLOOD WOOD

The following information provides game mechanics and statistics for the defenses of the Blood Wood, including sample statistics for wardens and exolashers of varying Circles, descriptions of the thorn men wards and path magic created by the blood warders, and rules for casting raw magic and traveling in astral space in the Blood Wood.

THORN MEN WARDS

The blood warders set up numerous wards all around the perimeter of the Blood Wood that create thorn men (*Flora and Fauna*, p. 145,) or summon or create other creatures when triggered. Thorn men wards are the most common wards, but they may also summon or create Strength 1 earth or wood spirits (p. 84, *Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets*), assassin vines and storm crows (*Flora and Fauna*, pp. 131 and 144). All wards use the following statistics.

Thorn Men Wards

Detection Difficulty: 16

Spell Defense: 16

Disarm Difficulty: 18

Trigger Condition: The gamemaster makes a Spellcasting Test (Step 18) and compares the result against





the Spell Defense of any character within 5 yards of the ward. If the test is successful, the ward triggers its effect.

Trap Initiative: NA

Trap Effect: The ward creates a number of thorn men (or other creatures) equal to the number of characters against which the Spellcasting Test succeeded, up to a maximum of 6.

PATH MAGIC

One of the Blood Wood's best defenses against unwanted intruders and visitors is the mysterious path magic, an enchantment created by the blood warders that causes the plants, vines and trees of the forest to obscure trails and lead travelers in circles until they become hopelessly lost. When a character or characters enter the Blood Wood uninvited (which will likely be most of the time), the gamemaster makes a Path Magic Test (Step 12) and compares the result to the Spell Defense ratings of each of the characters in the group. If the test is successful against any of the characters, the path magic has been activated and will attempt to lead them astray. As the characters travel through the forest, the trees and plants will shift and sway, forming trails and paths ahead of the characters and obscuring and blocking the way the characters just came. Unless a character makes a successful Perception Test against the path magic's Spell Defense of 12, the characters will not notice the forest shifting in this way. Characters can use talents and spells such as the Tracking talent or the Safe Path spell to make their way through the Wood, but must achieve a Good or better success on the test for the talent or spell to be effective. The characters can make their first attempt after one half-hour of traveling under the influence of path magic. If any of the characters succeeds at their Perception Tests, they detect movement in the foliage and realize that the forest is changing as they travel. From this point on, detecting further changes in the forest requires a successful Perception Test once every 30 minutes against the path magic's Spell Defense. As long as one of the characters in a group achieves 1 success, the group can continue unaffected. As soon as all the characters fail at least one Perception Test, however, the group once again falls prey to the path magic and can only escape its influence by making another successful Perception Test at the next half-hour marker.

When path magic detects a group of travelers, it alerts the blood warders, who send out teams of 4-6 wardens to track down the violators. The search parties may also include blood warders and, occasionally, exolashers.

In general, path magic ignores groups that include a blood elf, though if the blood elf has been away from the forest for more than a year and a day, the path magic might not recognize him. In this case, the group is subject to path magic as normal and must make Perception Tests against a step of 8.

The path magic step number and Spell Defense ratings given above reflect the strength of the path magic in the Southern Fringe of the Blood Wood. In other areas of the Wood, the step number and Spell Defense of the path magic is 9 (7 against blood elves who have been away from the Blood Wood for more than a year).

Path Magic on the Rivers

The waterway entrances to the Blood Wood are also protected by path magic of a slightly different sort. When unauthorized ships (those not crewed by blood elves) attempt to enter the Blood Wood via any of the waterways, the gamemaster makes a Path Magic Test as described above. If the test is successful, the path magic causes storms to rise on the river, tossing the ship wildly about and turning it to face the opposite direction. Piloting a boat through the path magic requires a Pilot Boat (or Willpower) Test against a Difficulty Number of 12. A successful test allows the boat to pass, but it suffers damage equal to half its Derelict Rating (see *Ships of the Serpent River*, p. 90, *Serpent River* or *Ship Combat*, p. 129, *ED Companion*). For each success level above Average, reduce the damage done to the ship by one-quarter, down to no damage for an Excellent or better success.

Tracking Targets

Path magic can also affect a number of talents and abilities normally used for tracking or following a target, such as the Tracking and Direction Arrow talents and the Safe Path spell. When using any of these abilities in the Blood Wood, the character must achieve one success level greater than normally required for the ability to function. For example, when using Tracking in the Blood Wood, a character would need to achieve a Good or better success against the Spell Defense of the target in order to be able to follow the target's tracks.

ASTRAL SPACE AND RAW MAGIC

The corruption wrought by the Ritual of Thorns has tainted the astral space of the Blood Wood in a manner very similar to the way in which the Horrors tainted astral space throughout Barsaive. Though the astral space of the Blood Wood is largely Horror-free, the taint of the corruption makes traveling in astral space and casting raw magic even more dangerous in the Blood Wood than in other areas.

There are varying degrees of corruption and taint in the astral space of the Blood Wood, and these have the same labels as the different regions of astral space (p. 155, *ED*). Whereas in other parts of Barsaive the type of region is based on the degree and kind of Horror activity that took place in that area, in the Blood Wood the most corrupt regions are near the Forest's Heart, and astral space gradually grows less and less corrupt further away from the forest's center. The Forest's Heart itself is the only Corrupt region of astral space in the Blood Wood. A band 100 miles





wide surrounding the Heart is considered Tainted, a second band 100 miles wide surrounding that region is considered Open astral space, and from that point outward the astral space of the Blood Wood is considered Safe.

The effects of tainted astral space in the Blood Wood are the same as those for other places in Barsaive, but the Damage steps for traveling through each region (p. 68–69, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**) are higher than regions of the same type elsewhere (pp. 155–56, ED). As a result, though the risk of attracting or confronting Horrors in the astral space of the Blood Wood is minimal, magicians traveling through astral space subject themselves to far greater damage, as shown on the Astral Space Table.

Similarly, the Warping and Damage step numbers for casting raw magic in the Blood Wood are higher than in regions of the same type elsewhere, as shown on the Raw Magic Table. When a magician uses raw magic in the Blood Wood, the gamemaster should make a Warping Test as normal. If successful, the magician suffers damage, but the gamemaster DOES NOT make a Horror Mark Test, as the forest is safe from Horrors. When a magician casts raw magic in the Tainted or Corrupt regions of the Blood Wood, the gamemaster may allow the corruption of astral space to cause other types of effects rather than damaging the magician, as described in **Optional Effects of Warping**, p. 40, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**.

ASTRAL SPACE TABLE

Region Type	Perception Test Modifier	Damage per Minute
Safe	NA	NA
Open	+2	Step 5
Tainted	+5	Step 10
Corrupt	+12	Step 15

RAW MAGIC TABLE

Region Type	Warping Step	Damage Step
Safe	Circle	Circle + 6
Open	Circle + 6	Circle + 12
Tainted	Circle + 12	Circle + 18
Corrupt	Circle + 18	Circle + 24

lasher statistics are based on the warrior Discipline. Each talent listing includes two values separated by a slash mark; the first value is the average talent rank for the Circle and the second value is the average talent step. Discipline talents are listed in **boldface** type, and talents that require Karma are listed in *italics*.

Damage Ratings and Karma Points are listed according to Circle as well. Characteristic bonuses for each Discipline, such as bonuses to Defense Ratings and Karma, are listed in the notes at the end of each profile.

WARDEN STATISTICS

(Woodsman Discipline, p. 112, **Denizens of Earthdawn, Volume I**)

Attributes

Dexterity (19): 8/2D6	Perception (13): 6/D10
Strength (13): 6/D10	Willpower (12): 5/D8
Toughness (13): 6/D10	Charisma (15): 6/D10

Talents	Circle				
	1st	2nd	3rd	5th	7th
Avoid Blow	1/9	2/10	3/11	5/13	7/15
Karma Ritual	1/1	2/2	3/3	5/5	7/7
Melee Weapons	1/9	2/10	3/11	5/13	7/15
Missile Weapons	2/10	3/11	4/12	5/13	7/15
Silent Walk	1/9	2/10	3/11	5/13	7/15
Tracking	2/8	3/9	4/10	5/11	7/13
Animal Training	—	1/7	3/9	5/11	7/13
Climbing	—	1/9	3/11	5/13	7/15
Durability (6/5)	—	1/1	3/3	5/5	7/7
Borrow Sense	—	—	3/8	5/10	7/12
Sprint	—	—	3/3	5/5	7/7
Thread Weaving	—	—	—	5/11	7/13
Throwing Weapons	—	—	—	5/13	7/15
Air Dance	—	—	—	5/13	7/15
<i>Claw Shape</i>	—	—	—	5/14	7/16
Endure Cold	—	—	—	—	7/13
<i>Lizard Leap</i>	—	—	—	—	7/13
Wood Skin	—	—	—	—	7/13
<i>Second Attack</i>	—	—	—	—	7/15

Damage	Circle				
	1st	2nd	3rd	5th	7th
Death Rating:	35	41	53	65	77
Wound Threshold:	9	9	9	9	9
Unconsciousness Rating:	27	32	42	52	62
Recovery Tests: 1					
Recovery Dice: 6/D10					

Karma	Circle				
	1st	2nd	3rd	5th	7th
Karma Points:	5	10	15	20	25

ADEPT STATISTICS

The following profiles provide statistics for warden and exolasher adepts of various Circles. The warden statistics are based on the woodsman Discipline and the exo-





Karma Dice: D6

Initiative

Dice: D12

Movement

Full: 100

Combat: 50

Combat

Physical Defense: 10

Spell Defense: 8

Social Defense: 9

Armor: 5

Mystic Armor: 1

Weapons/Armor

Hardened Leather Armor (enchanted to not pull at thorns)

Broadsword (Forged +2 steps) [Damage: 13/D12 + D10]

Dagger [Damage: 8/2D6]

Huntsman's Boots (p. 126)

Notes

Fourth Circle: The scout can spend Karma on Dexterity Tests.

Fifth Circle: Initiative Step +1

Sixth Circle: Physical Defense + 1

Seventh Circle: Enhanced Senses (p. 112, *Denizens of Earthdawn*, Volume I)

EXPLASHER STATISTICS

(Warrior Discipline, p. 86, ED)

Attributes

Dexterity (14): 6/D10

Perception (12): 5/D8

Strength (15): 6/D10

Willpower (13): 6/D10

Toughness (16): 7/D12

Charisma (14): 6/D10

	Circle				
Talents	3rd	5th	7th	9th	11th
<i>Acrobatic Strike</i>	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
<i>Air Dance</i>	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Karma Ritual	3/3	5/5	7/7	9/9	11/11
Melee Weapons	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Unarmed Combat	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Wood Skin	3/10	5/12	7/14	9/16	11/17
Anticipate Blow	3/8	5/10	7/12	9/14	11/16
Durability (9/7)	3/3	5/5	7/7	9/9	11/11
Throwing Weapons	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Avoid Blow	3/9	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Tiger Spring	3/3	5/5	7/7	9/9	11/11
Down Strike	—	5/14	7/16	9/18	11/20
Thread Weaving	—	5/10	7/12	9/14	11/16
Gliding Stride	—	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17

	Circle				
Talents	3rd	5th	7th	9th	11th
Swift Kick	—	5/11	7/13	9/15	11/17
Life Check	—	—	7/14	9/16	11/18
Missile Weapons	—	—	7/13	9/15	11/17
Earth Skin	—	—	7/7	9/9	11/11
Second Attack	—	—	7/13	9/15	11/17
Cobra Strike	—	—	—	9/15	11/17
Spirit Strike	—	—	—	9/15	11/17
Cat's Paw	—	—	—	9/15	11/17
<i>Missile Twister</i>	—	—	—	9/15	11/17
Second Weapon	—	—	—	9/15	11/17
Body Blade	—	—	—	—	11/17
Matrix Strike	—	—	—	—	11/17
Elemental Tongues	—	—	—	—	11/16
<i>Vitality</i>	—	—	—	—	11/18

	Circle				
Damage	3rd	5th	7th	9th	11th
Death Rating:	66	84	102	120	138
Wound Threshold:	11	11	11	11	11
Unconsciousness Rating:	52	66	80	94	108
Recovery Tests: 2					
Recovery Dice: 7/D12					

	Circle				
Karma	3rd	5th	7th	9th	11th
Karma Points:	15	20	25	25	25
Karma Dice: D6					

Initiative

Dice: D8 (D10*)

Movement

Full: 70

Combat: 35

Combat

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 8

Social Defense: 9

Armor: 5 (10*)

Mystic Armor: 1 (3*)

*When wearing thread chain mail

Weapons/Armor

Hardened Leather Armor (enchanted to not pull at thorns)

Broadsword (Forged +5) [Damage: 16/D20 + D8]

Dagger (Forged +2) [Damage: 10/D10 + D6]

†Thorn Sword (p. 128)

†Thorn Bow (p. 127)

†Thread Chain Mail (p. 62, *ED Companion*)





Thread Weaving Notes

Exolashers of Fourth Circle and higher use thread weapons and armor, with thread ranks equal to their Circle (or maximum thread rank based on the item). These items are marked with a dagger (+).

Notes

Fourth Circle: The warrior can spend a Karma Point on Willpower Tests.

Fifth Circle: Spell Defense +1

Sixth Circle: +1 Recovery Test per day

Seventh Circle: Physical Defense +1

Eighth Circle: Spell Defense +1

Ninth Circle: The warrior can spend a Karma Point on Dexterity and Strength Tests.

Tenth Circle: The warrior can spend a Karma Point on Damage Tests of melee or unarmed combat attacks.

Eleventh Circle: Physical Defense +1, Social Defense +1

MAGICAL AND TREASURE ITEMS

The following section describes magical items and treasures that characters might find or purchase while adventuring in and around the Blood Wood. These items range from common magical items similar to blood charms and espedra-scale cloaks to powerful and unique treasures. All of the common magical items and thread items are crafted by the queen's blood warders. All costs are in silver pieces.

COMMON MAGICAL ITEMS

The following common magical items are all available for sale in the Blood Wood. Many of these items also appear elsewhere in Barsaive as a result of the discreet black-market trade that flows down the Mothingale River. The listed costs are for purchasing these items in the Blood Wood. If these items are purchased outside the Blood Wood, the cost should increase to 2 to 4 times the listed cost.

Blood Karma Charm

Blood karma charms are small charms crafted of intricately woven gold, silver and copper wire set with diamonds. These charms enable their wearers to use additional Karma during a single test.

The wearer must first attach the charm to his person and attune it to his own Karma, which costs the wearer 1 point of Karma. Additionally, the wearer takes 1 point of permanent damage that can never be healed.

After attaching the charm, the wearer can spend additional Karma points on a single test. A charm is only good for one use. It cannot be "recharged." Once used, the diamond in the charm cracks and turns a dusty black. For each additional Karma point the wearer uses, he must take 1 point of damage. The character may continue to add additional Karma dice to the test one at a time until he has either achieved an Average success in the action he is

attempting, runs out of Karma or decides to stop. The damage caused by using the charm for a test cannot be healed for a year and a day.

Cost: 1,000 sp

Creation Difficulty: 17

Chair of Comfort

Chairs of comfort may be crafted in any shape or style, but these wooden chairs always possess the grace and beauty characteristic of elven crafts. The True wood used in their construction gives them exceptional strength and a springy quality that makes them as comfortable as cloth cushions. Additionally, these chairs mold themselves to the shape of the person sitting in them—which enables even blood elves to sit comfortably. Very few chairs of comfort are crafted on a large enough scale to accommodate trolls or obsidimen.

Cost: 300 sp (Troll- and obsidimen-sized chairs cost at least 450 sp)

Huntsman's Boots

Huntsman's boots are an improved version of dry boots (p. 70, **ED Companion**). These leather boots are designed for the huntsman who spends extended periods of time in the forest. Woven with kernels of True air and True water, these boots keep the wearer's feet both warm and dry and add a spring to his step that makes a long day of hunting less tiring. A character wearing a pair of huntsman's boots can walk up to an additional 5 miles per day (see **Travel**, pp. 212–13, **ED**).

Cost: 350 sp

Oak-Leaf Cloak

Oak-leaf cloaks are woven of leaves harvested from the blood oak trees (**Flora and Fauna**, p. 132) common to the Blood Wood. The cloaks provide a measure of protection from cold and rain, but more important, they provide camouflage for those elves who need to move about wooded areas unobserved. In wooded settings, the cloak aids the wearer by blending in with the wearer's surroundings. This provides a 2-step bonus to his Dexterity or appropriate Talent Tests for remaining hidden. Within the Blood Wood, this bonus is +3 steps, and when the character is actually hiding in or next to a blood oak tree, the bonus is +5 steps.

For three months of the year, the leaves of the cloak turn a bright crimson, just as the leaves of the blood oak do. During this time the cloak is only effective when the character hides within the branches of a blood oak tree; it is effectively useless for stealth in other situations. The character gains the normal 5-step bonus when hiding in or near a blood oak but gains no bonus in other settings.

Cost: 400 sp





THREAD ITEMS AND WEAPONS

The following thread weapons are similar to those described on pages 57 through 61 of the **ED Companion**. All of these weapons are crafted by the queen's blood warders and are predominately used by blood warders and exolashers, though other blood elves—especially those of the Talshara ranelle—have been known to use them. Most of these items can be used without threads woven to them, but their effectiveness is greatly reduced.

ARROWS OF THE THUNDERCLOUD

Maximum Threads: 2

Spell Defense: 15

The Arrows of the Thundercloud are actually magical sets of quivers and elven warbow arrows. The quivers are crafted of dark blue leather, edged in silver. (When using a set of Arrows of the Thundercloud, a character weaves a thread to this quiver.)

The arrows are distinguished by their pure white fletching and crystal points. From time to time, streaks of silvery light flare up within these magical tips. Until placed in their magical quiver, however, the arrows are normal in every way. Each quiver can hold and empower up to eight arrows at one time. When fired from a bow, the arrows are consumed by the magical energy that makes them unique. New arrows cost 5 silver pieces each and must be kept in a magical quiver for at least 24 hours before gaining their thread rank effects. Note that normal warbow arrows do not gain any benefit from being placed in one of the magical quivers.

Without a thread attached to the quiver, the arrows in a Thundercloud quiver have the Damage and range of standard elven warbow arrows (p. 253, **ED**).

Thread Ranks

Rank 1 **Cost:** 200

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the quiver.

Effect: When fired, each arrow transforms into a jagged bolt of lightning. This gives the arrows a Damage Step of STR + 8. The arrow is consumed in the transformation.

Rank 2 **Cost:** 300

Effect: The arrows do STR + 9 damage and produce loud thunderclaps that can stun creatures in the immediate area. The wielder makes a test using the talent or skill with which he fired the bow and compares the result to the Spell Defense of each creature or character within 10 yards of the arrow's target. If this test succeeds, affected characters and creatures are stunned for a number of Combat Rounds equal to the thread rank. During this time, affected characters and creatures receive a -1 step penalty on all tests. The primary target is automatically affected and suffers a -3 step penalty for the same duration.

Rank 3

Cost: 500

Effect: The arrows do STR + 10 damage. Additionally, the wielder may take 3 points of Strain and gain a 3-step bonus to his Missile Weapon step when firing the arrows. This bonus does not apply to the Stun Test (see **Rank 2**).

THORN BOW

Maximum Threads: 2

Spell Defense: 12

Thorn bows are magical elven warbows whose wooden shafts sprout thorns similar to those that the blood elves themselves bear. These weapons are crafted by Queen Alachia's blood warders for use by her elite archers among the exolashers. Each of these bows was originally crafted for a specific member of the exolashers and has been passed down through the ranks over the years. A total of 25 thorn bows exist in the Blood Wood, and exolashers have been known to go to extreme lengths to protect them. Note that many thorn bow wielders use Arrows of the Thundercloud or other types of magical arrows. In these cases, the damage of the arrows is based on the type of arrow used, not the bow. Without a thread attached, these bows are normal bows and do STR + 5 damage.

Thread Ranks

Rank 1

Cost: 200

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the bow.

Effect: Arrows shot from the bow do STR + 6 damage.

Rank 2

Cost: 300

Effect: Arrows fired from the bow do STR + 7 damage. The bow's range increases to 50/225/350 yards.

Rank 3

Cost: 500

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the elf for whom the bow was originally crafted.

Effect: All arrows shot from the bow sprout backward-pointing thorns while in flight, causing STR + 8 damage. Additionally, the arrow becomes lodged in the target on an Armor-Defeating Hit. Pulling the arrow free of the target causes an additional Step 4 damage. No armor protects against this damage.

Rank 4

Cost: 800

Effect: The wielder gains +1 step to his Missile Weapons talent or skill. The bow's range increases to 60/250/400 yards.

Rank 5

Cost: 1,300

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the warder who created the bow and the date on which it was given to the archer who first wielded it.

Effect: For the cost of 2 Strain Points, the wielder may draw





one of the thorns from the shaft of the bow. The thorn grows into a full-sized arrow, which may be fired normally. This arrow benefits from all other powers of the thorn bow. Each bow yields up to 10 of these arrows per day.

THORN MEN SPEARS

Maximum Threads: 1

Spell Defense: 13

These are the spears wielded by the thorn men that guard the Blood Wood. Though the size and shape of these spears is unremarkable, thorn men spears sprout thorns up and down their lengths. When wielded by thorn men, these spears do the damage listed under Rank 4. When used by an adept, the damage is based on the rank of the thread woven to the spear. These spears are created by the same ritual used to create thorn men. They cannot be purchased and can only be obtained by slaying a thorn man. Over the years, a number of these spears have been acquired by members of the exolashers and blood warders, who use them as thread weapons. Without a thread attached, thorn men spears do STR 3 damage.

Thread Ranks

Rank 1 **Cost:** 200

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the spear.

Effect: The spear does STR + 4 damage when wielded in combat.

Rank 2 **Cost:** 300

Effect: The spear does STR + 5 damage when wielded in combat.

Rank 3 **Cost:** 500

Effect: The spear does STR + 6 damage when wielded in combat.

Rank 4 **Cost:** 800

Effect: The spear does STR + 7 damage when wielded in combat.

THORN SWORD

Maximum Threads: 2

Spell Defense: 13

These swords are crafted of wood woven with True wood, True earth and True water. They are incredibly light and flexible magical weapons, used primarily by Queen Alachia's exolashers and blood warders. In rare instances, however, the queen has awarded thorn swords to particularly favored heroes from outside the Blood Wood. Each thorn sword possesses a basket hilt woven of living thorn vines that flower with miniature rose blossoms throughout the year. Without a thread attached, these swords are normal broadswords and do STR + 5 damage.

Thread Ranks

Rank 1 **Cost:** 200

Key Knowledge: The character must know the Name of the sword.

Effect: The sword does STR + 6 Damage and otherwise functions as a broadsword.

Rank 2 **Cost:** 300

Effect: The sword does STR + 7 Damage.

Rank 3 **Cost:** 500

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the Name of the rosebush that yielded the vine used to fashion the basket hilt of his sword.

Effect: The character may call on the essence of the thorns to protect him. For the cost of 2 Strain Points, the character can add 2 steps to his Avoid Blow or Riposte talent (his choice), for a number of rounds equal to the thread rank. If the wielder has neither of these talents, he may choose either one at Rank 2.

Rank 4 **Cost:** 800

Effect: The sword does STR + 8 Damage. The character gains +3 to his Avoid Blow or Riposte talent when calling on the essence of the thorns.

Rank 5 **Cost:** 1,300

Deed: The character must take a cutting from the vine that forms the basket hilt of his sword and plant it in the gardens at Queen Alachia's palace. Once it is planted, the character must Name it and take 2 points of blood-magic damage that cannot be healed for a year and a day. The rose cutting blooms immediately and produces a single rose. This deed is worth 2,100 Legend Points.

Effect: The sword causes bleeding Wounds in combat. When the wielder Wounds a target using the sword, that target suffers 2 points of damage per round until special care is taken to bind the Wound. (See p. 117, **ED Companion**, for more information about bleeding Wounds.)

LEGENDARY TREASURE ITEMS

The following items are unique treasures described in legends told in the Blood Wood.

BLOOD QUILL OF MORALAR

Maximum Threads: 1

Spell Defense: 19

The Blood Warder Moralar, a nethermancer adept, crafted this quill from a tail feather of his first blood raven familiar in the years just following the Scourge. Originally intended as nothing more than a memento by which to remember the bird, Moralar found that the quill somehow possessed the bird's intelligence and discovered that it





enabled him to communicate, in a limited fashion, with the dead bird's spirit.

The quill is a long, lustrous black feather, and it always produces deep red writing no matter what color ink is used. Moralar died shortly after the Scourge, and the quill was lost. According to rumor, the quill is among Queen Alachia's collection of pattern items (see *Alachia's Chambers*, p. 58), but the queen has offered no comment on the matter. In fact, she has tasked Blood Warde Takaris (p. 54) with finding the quill, lending support to the theory that the quill remains unclaimed.

Rank 1

Cost: 300

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the Name of the quill.

Effect: Add +1 to the character's Spell Defense and Mystic Armor ratings.

Rank 2

Cost: 500

Effect: For the cost of 1 Strain Point, the quill will scribe as the character dictates for one hour. The handwriting is spidery and sharply slanting but legible.

Rank 3

Cost: 800

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the Name of the familiar whose tail feather was used to craft the quill.

Effect: Once per day, for the cost of 2 Strain Points, the character may ask the spirit of the dead familiar a question. This must be a fairly simple question whose answer a living bird might be able to find. For example, the quill's owner might ask how many men are camped in the next valley (a living bird would be able to fly to that valley and count them). After an amount of time appropriate to the difficulty of the question, the quill writes the answer.

Rank 4

Cost: 1,300

Effect: Increases the wielder's Spell Defense Rating by 2. Additionally, the character may ask the spirit of the dead familiar two questions per day. Each question costs the character 2 points of Strain.

Rank 5

Cost: 2,100

Key Knowledge: The familiar whose tail feather was used to craft the quill was Moralar's first, and he never took another. The character must learn the reason that Moralar forswore any additional familiars.

Effect: The character may dip the quill in the blood of a recently deceased person and make a Thread Weaving Test against the person's Spell Defense. If the test succeeds, the quill is attuned to that person's spirit. For the cost of 3 Strain Points per question, the character may ask up to three questions of the deceased person. The spirit of the dead familiar acts as a messenger, carrying the questions to the person's spirit and returning with the answers, so the



process is fairly slow. Once the familiar's spirit returns, the quill will scribe the answer in its usual way. The magic of the quill will overcome much of the normal reluctance of dead spirits, ensuring that some sort of answer will be returned. However, the caster may have to search the answer carefully for the truth it contains. The attunement fades after the third question has been asked or one hour has passed, whichever comes first.

Rank 6

Cost: 3,400

Deed: The character must swear a blood oath never to take a familiar. This oath causes the character 1 point of permanent damage that may never be healed (see *Blood Oaths*, pp. 10–14, *Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets*). If the character ever breaks this oath and takes a familiar, he suffers a ritual scar that brands him as an oathbreaker. Additionally, he receives a Wound that cannot be healed for a year and a day, and all powers of the quill immediately cease to function for him.

The blood oath is a deed worth 2,100 Legend Points. Note that a character who already has a familiar may not perform this deed until his bond with his familiar is somehow broken.

Effect: Once per day, the owner of the quill may summon forth the spirit of the dead familiar. This spirit is a Strength 3 ally spirit, which appears in astral space in the form of a huge raven. The spirit will willingly provide the character with 1 service for up to 1 hour. No attempt to force the spirit into additional services will work, and this particular spirit may not be summoned in any other way. Use the statistics listed on p. 130 for the spirit. (See the *Summoning*





section, pp. 78–96 in **Magic, A Manual of Mystic Secrets**, for a description of spirit powers and the nature of summoned spirits and the services they perform.)

Strength 3 Ally Spirit

DEX: 8 **STR:** 9 **TOU:** 8

PER: 10 **WIL:** 8 **CHA:** 7

Initiative: 9

Number of Attacks: 2

Attack: 9

Damage: 12

Number of Spells: 3

Spellcasting: 12

Effect: Varies by spell

Death Rating: 46

Wound Threshold: 13

Unconsciousness Rating: 39

Karma Points: 20

Karma Step: 5

Powers: Aid Summoner, Astral Sight 13, Confusion 11, Empathic Sense 10, Evil Eye 11, Find 13, Manifest, Spells (Circle 3 Nethermancer)

Legend Points: 450

Equipment: None

Loot: None

*When physically manifest.

KELLIMAR'S ARMOR OF ROSE PETALS

Maximum Threads: 2

Spell Defense: 18

Originally conceived as a variation on fernweave armor, Kellimar's Armor of Rose Petals was crafted for Kellimar, a warrior adept who was one of Queen Alachia's most trusted exolashers. Kellimar sacrificed his life to save the queen from a vicious Horror attack shortly before the casting of the Ritual of Thorns. After he defeated the Horror, Kellimar's body and his armor—woven entirely of red rose petals—could not be found.

The armor has never been recovered but could easily be hidden or lost somewhere within the immense, dense tangle of the Blood Wood. The rose petals that make up the armor are sustained through the magic of the armor's creation and do not require the special care that fernweave armor does. A character gains no benefit from Kellimar's Armor of Rose Petals until he attaches a thread to it.

Thread Ranks

Rank 1

Cost: 300

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the armor's Name.

Effect: The Armor provides Armor and Mystic Armor Ratings of 4.

Rank 2

Cost: 500

Effect: The armor provides Armor and Mystic Armor Ratings of 5.

Rank 3

Cost: 800

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the circumstances of Kellimar's death.

Effect: The beauty of the armor dazzles characters who interact with the wearer, giving the wearer a 2-step bonus to his Charisma step for all Interaction Tests (p. 237, ED). The character also adds 1 to his Social Defense.

Rank 4

Cost: 1,300

Effect: The armor provides Armor and Mystic Armor Ratings of 6. Also, the character adds 1 to his Spell Defense.

Rank 5

Cost: 2,100

Key Knowledge: The character must learn the Name of the Horror that slew Kellimar.

Effect: In combat with any Horror or Horror construct, the wearer receives Armor and Mystic Armor Ratings of 9, and the character adds 3 to his Spell Defense and Social Defense ratings.

Rank 6

Cost: 3,400

Effect: The armor provides Armor and Mystic Armor Ratings of 7. In combat against Horrors or Horror constructs, the ratings rise to 10. Additionally, Horrors or Horror constructs must score an Extraordinary success on any Attack Tests in order to defeat the armor.

Rank 7

Cost: 5,500

Deed: The wearer must track down and destroy the Horror that slew Kellimar. He must then bring proof of the Horror's destruction to Queen Alachia, so that all of the Elven Court may learn that Kellimar's death has been avenged. This deed is worth 3,400 Legend Points, in addition to any Legend Points earned in the battle against the Horror.

Effect: The character adds 2 to his Spell Defense and Social Defense ratings. Horrors or Horror constructs cannot defeat the armor under any circumstances; all other opponents must achieve Extraordinary successes to defeat the armor.





FLORA AND FAUNA



The Blood Wood is home to many marvelous and monstrous plants and animals. The natural diversity of such a large ecosystem, the far-reaching magical influence of the Ritual of Thorns and the often dangerous experiments conducted by the blood warders have produced dozens of varieties of life that exist nowhere else in the world of **Earthdawn**. Every trip

through the Blood Wood promises a chance to see something new—and most likely deadly.

The corruption wrought by the Ritual of Thorns distinguishes the Blood Wood from all other places. The Ritual's effects permeate everything in the Wood—elves, animals, plants, even the soil and water and air. Characters traveling through the Blood Wood will feel the pervasive taint in the atmosphere, yet find it difficult to precisely identify its source. Adepts may sense the unnatural speed and intensity of the cycle of life and death. Plants native to the Wood are magically forced to grow far more rapidly than normal, and death also operates at an unnaturally accelerated pace. Because of the Ritual of Thorns, the corrupted forest must be nourished with the blood of living things to survive. Fungi and small predators ensure the decomposition of fallen trees, dead animals and even Namegivers in a matter of days or hours.

The following section describes some of the plants and animals that adventurers may encounter in the Blood Wood.

PLANT LIFE

Some of the plants described below grow throughout the Blood Wood; others grow only in certain areas and are rarely seen by the average explorer. For game purposes, some of the plants work better if treated as traps rather than creatures; trap statistics are supplied for these plants. (For an explanation of trap statistics, see pp. 209–10, ED rulebook.)

Unless otherwise noted, characters with appropriate knowledge skills such as Botany or Wilderness Survival might recognize these plants on a successful Skill Test against a Difficulty Number of 12. For characters who have somehow acquired specific knowledge of Blood Wood plant species, the Difficulty Number for the Skill Test drops to 8.

ASSASSIN VINE

Many areas of the Wood are overgrown with thick looping coils of vines. Hidden among the many harmless varieties is the assassin vine, a carnivorous plant with a talent for ambush. The assassin vine looks nearly identical to the coreliander vine, a common flowering plant (see **Coreliander**, p. 133). Many Namegivers who have stopped to admire seemingly harmless coreliander blossoms have met terrible ends.

When a character touches an assassin vine, the vine wraps itself around one of the unlucky character's extremities and begins to constrict. As the target struggles, the vine lifts him or her into the tree, which takes 4–6 combat rounds. At this point, the vine may wrap additional coils around its victim. Once the target ceases struggling, the vine secretes an acid that slowly dissolves the victim's flesh. The vine then absorbs the victim's decaying tissue through its coils. If the vine captures a target it cannot lift (such as an obsidiman), it releases its victim after 3 rounds, allowing the character to escape without further harm.

Characters caught by an assassin vine take damage from the constricting vines each round. If the vine scores an Excellent success in its initial Attack Test, then the character is caught by the neck and suffers additional damage (see **Effect**, below). Characters may struggle free by achieving a Good or better success on a Strength Test against the vine's Strength step of 8. To free a victim by severing an assassin vine, a character must inflict 20 points of damage on the vine with an edged weapon.





Detection Difficulty: 12

Trigger Condition: Contact with vine

Trap Initiative: 8

Effect: If the vine wins Initiative, it makes an Attack

Test using Step 16 against the character's Physical Defense. If the test succeeds, the target takes Step 12 constriction damage per round until dead or freed. An Excellent or better success on the Attack Test indicates that the vine has trapped the character by the neck; the character suffers Step 16 damage per round.

BLOODBERRIES

Bloodberries appear on low-growing bushes native to marshy, muddy regions. The berries grow in small clusters and are a deep shade of red, bordering on purple. Not terribly sweet when eaten raw, they can be crushed and fermented to make bloodberry wine (also called blood wine), a dry wine with the kick of a well-aged brandy. A character can produce a gallon of bloodberry wine by making a successful Brewing Test against a Difficulty Number of 10. In the few places outside the Wood where bloodberry wine is known, a bottle may easily fetch 50 silver pieces or more.

BLOOD IVY

Blood ivy appears primarily in the most overgrown areas of the Blood Wood. The ivy's distinctive dark-purple leaves, with light green edges and marked by narrow black veins, make the plant easily identifiable. Blood ivy grows slowly but inexorably, climbing over all plants in its vicinity until it covers them. It robs them of vital sunlight and air, eventually choking the life out of them. A cluster of blood ivy may cover thousands of square yards, and adventurers may traverse large patches of woodland filled with dozens of ivy-smothered, skeletal trees.

As those blood warders concerned over the plant's profusion have discovered, blood ivy is remarkably resilient. More than once, new growth has turned up in areas thought to be cleared of the parasitic vine. Each blood ivy plant has a Damage Rating of 15, and the stalks have a Physical Armor Rating of 3 (see **Barriers and Structures**, p. 209, ED).

Blood ivy takes its name from the dark red sap that flows from the plant when it is cut. Cut samples of the plant are much heavier than one might expect, though no research has yet explained the unusual weight. There is some evidence to suggest that blood ivy first appeared in the Forest's Heart—a possibility that has more than one blood warder nervous about the long-term implications of the ivy's steady growth rate.

Blood ivy is used in many potions and salves and is highly sought after in many areas of Barsaive.

BLOOD OAK

The blood oak is named for the bright red veins that run through its leaves and the deep red hue that its leaves

take on for three months of the year. These trees grow to majestic heights throughout the Wood, often exceeding sixty yards. Their crowns grow equally broad, giving each blood oak a wide area around its trunk and roots clear of other large plant life. According to legend, all of the Blood Wood's blood oaks are descended from the eight trees that form the foundation and towers of Queen Alachia's palace.

Blood oaks derive part of their sustenance from the blood of creatures that come to rest beneath their branches. When a creature remains motionless beneath the tree's leaves, hundreds of tiny root-like filaments wriggle up through the ground, attach themselves to the victim and secrete a thin sap that deadens the target creature's nerves. This process takes only a few minutes. Once it is complete, the blood oak begins to suck the target's blood, causing 1 point of damage per minute until the damage reaches the target's Death Rating. Once the creature is dead, the filaments disengage and retreat beneath the earth.

When a blood oak attacks a target, it makes a Spellcasting Test using Step 8 against the target's Spell Defense. If the test succeeds, the target makes a Toughness Test against the poison sap's Spell Defense of 8 to resist the effects of the poison. If the Toughness Test succeeds or if the oak's initial Spellcasting Test fails, the target feels the blood drain immediately and may act normally. Sleeping targets are automatically awakened by the blood drain. If the target fails to resist the poison, he or she does not feel the effects of the blood drain and may die unless his companions notice his predicament. The filaments are weak, so removing them requires no test.

Blood oaks can also defend themselves by reaching up from the earth with bunches of roots to grasp creatures and squeeze them to death or draw them down into the earth. Whenever a blood oak is actively threatened or is awakened by a root walker (see **Root Walker**, p. 143), it uses its roots in this fashion. A blood oak may attack anywhere from 1 to 3 characters, depending on the age of the tree. Use the following statistics for each root bunch.

When a root bunch successfully attacks a character, it grapples him and automatically causes damage each round until the character breaks free (see **Grappling**, p. 171, ED) or the roots are destroyed. The roots also attempt to Engulf the target. This power works as described for the root walker. The oaks normally leave dead characters beneath the earth to decompose.

The movement rates listed for the roots indicates how far a root bunch may reach each round. A root bunch moves by pulling more of itself out of the ground to reach farther. This action, however, exposes more of the root to attack. Also, the root may not reach more than 30 yards from its point of emergence. However, a root bunch may move entirely underground and emerge up to 100–250 yards from the trunk, depending on the tree's age. A blood oak senses its victims primarily through their contact with





the earth, so foes that remain airborne, such as windlings or flying creatures, escape its notice.

Characters may destroy the tree as they would destroy a barrier (see **Barriers and Structures**, p. 209, ED). Average blood-oak roots have a Physical Armor Rating of 8 and a Damage Rating of 150. The roots of younger or older trees may have slightly lower or higher ratings. Blood oaks have a Spell Defense of 10, except against spells that cause fire damage; against these, the Spell Defense drops to 7.

Blood Oak Roots

DEX: 7 **STR:** 13 **TOU:** 9
PER: 5 **WIL:** 4 **CHA:** 3

Initiative: 7

Number of Attacks: 2

Attack: 12

Damage: 16

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 10

Effect: Engulf (12)

Physical Defense: 10

Spell Defense: 7

Social Defense: 15

Armor: 6

Mystic Armor: 3

Knockdown: NA

Recovery Tests: 1

Death Rating: 40

Wound Threshold: NA

Unconsciousness Rating: NA

Combat Movement: 5

Full Movement: 10

Legend Points: 125

Equipment: Equipment belonging to previous victims may be scattered around the tree's base.

Loot: See Equipment.

BRAMBLE VINES

Most often, this tough and resilient plant grows in large, tangled patches up to three feet in height. The vines can also be coaxed to grow between trees to form thorny curtains nearly as sturdy as brick walls. The elves of the Blood Wood often cultivate bramble vines in this way to help protect their villages.

A character or creature may pass through a patch of bramble vines without harm by moving no more than 5 yards per round. Characters who move faster risk injury. A character who passes through bramble patches while moving at higher rates, up to and including his or her Combat Movement rate, will suffer Step 8 damage each round. A character moving faster than his or her Combat Movement rate takes Step 14 damage each round. Physical armor protects characters normally against this damage, but the target must make a Dexterity Test against a Difficulty Number of 7 in each round that he or she is passing through the bramble. If the test fails, the character stumbles against some particularly wicked thorns and only half of his or her Physical Armor rating applies for that round. On a Poor success, the character falls and armor provides no protection.

To pass through a foot-thick wall of cultivated bramble vines, a character may make a Strength Test against a Difficulty Number of 12. If the test succeeds, the character can force his or her way through the wall. However, passing through the wall causes Step 14 damage against which no armor protects.

Alternatively, characters may hack through bramble-vine walls using the rules for breaking through barriers (see **Barriers and Structures**, p. 209, ED). Bramble-vine walls have a Physical Armor Rating of 10. A foot-thick wall has a Damage Rating of 25; a 2-foot-thick wall, a Damage Rating of 50; a 3-foot-thick wall, a Damage Rating of 75; and so on. However, a character takes Step 4 damage for each round he or she spends hacking at the bramble wall. Normal armor protects against this damage.

Some Blood Wood villages cultivate special varieties of bramble vine that secrete poison through their thorns. This poison has a Step Number and Spell Defense of 7. Characters are exposed to the poison if they take any damage while forcing or hacking their way through a wall or patch of venomous bramble vines.

CORELIANDER

Coreliander is a flowering vine that grows throughout the Blood Wood. It is easy to care for and blooms all year round in a startling variety of colors. The scent of the blossoms is light and wholesome, making it a welcome addition to any home or garden.

Of special note are the pure white blossoms, by far the least common color. A Name-giver who eats a white blossom within 1 hour of picking it becomes much more alert and aware, gaining a 2-step bonus to all Perception Tests made for 1 hour after eating the flower. Blossoms that are not freshly picked bestow a 1-step bonus for 1 hour. The blossoms lose their alertness-enhancing qualities one month after being picked.

DEATH DAISIES

Easily mistaken for a normal daisy, the death daisy grows in small clumps amid its innocuous cousin in the Blood Wood's small meadows and clearings. A black tint at the base of the death daisy's white petals provides the only certain way to identify the flower—but examining a death daisy at such close range is dangerous.

Death daisies react to passing living creatures by creating a cloud of powerful narcotic vapor that seems like a lovely scent to the plant's unfortunate targets. Any creature or character who fails to resist the vapor falls asleep. The daisies then release a small cloud of spores that drift toward the body of the hapless victim. If the spores land, they take root and begin to grow with frightening speed, working their roots through the body and into the ground. This gruesome process breaks down the victim's flesh into food for the new daisy colony.





In game terms, a death daisy patch will release a cloud of sleeping gas whenever a character or creature brushes against or passes within 2 yards of the patch. If the character is suspicious of the sudden scent, he may avoid the worst of the vapor's effects by quickly moving away. To do so, however, he must beat the patch's Trap Initiative (see below). If the character fails this test, make an Effect Test for the daisy perfume against the target's Spell Defense. If this test succeeds, the target must make a Poison Resistance Test (see **Poisons**, p. 208–9, ED) against the perfume's Spell Defense of 9. If the Resistance Test fails, the target immediately falls into a deep, unnatural sleep that lasts for a number of hours equal to the Effect Test result.

Once a target is asleep, the daisies release their spores. Make an Attack Test using Step 7 against a Difficulty Number of 7. If the test fails, the spores fly wide of the target and do no lasting harm. On an Average success, some of the spores land on the character; these spores require 5 hours to consume the character and sprout a new death daisy colony. Each success level above Average indicates that more of the spores successfully landed and reduces by 1 hour the time the spores need to consume the character.

If a character who has fallen prey to death-daisy vapor is moved within 1 minute of falling asleep, he avoids the spores. If the character is moved after being infected with the spores, the new colony of death daisies will continue to grow, and may destroy the character even as his friends attempt to save him. (The perfume acts as a catalyst for the spores, and so a character who has not been affected by the perfume is immune to the spores' effects.)

If the infected character is awakened, any magical means of fighting disease will work against the spore infestation. In this case, the perfume and spores both have a Spell Defense of 8. However, the afflicted character may not make unaided Toughness Tests to resist the infection; he may only attempt to throw off the infection if aided by such substances as a Cure Disease Potion. A character who successfully throws off or is cured of a death daisy infection may suffer up to 7 Wounds. He suffers all 7 Wounds if the infection is cured at the end of the time period the spores would have needed to consume him. If the infection is cured before the end of that time, reduce the number of Wounds by 1 for each hour remaining in the time period. These Wounds may be healed normally.

Detection Difficulty: 12

Trigger Condition: Brushing against or passing within 2 yards of a death daisy patch.

Trap Initiative: 10

Trap Effect: Sleep poison with Effect Step 15 and Spell Defense 9, followed by Spore Attack at Step 7. The success level of the Attack Test determines the amount of time needed to consume the character.

FIRE BIRCH

In the months immediately preceding the casting of the Ritual of Thorns, the Horror-marked Warder Lysarin Greenbranch (see **The Forest's Heart**, p. 69) magically wove True fire into the sap and spirit of several birch trees in an attempt to create a defense against the Horrors. Theoretically, the interweaving would carry the fire to all parts of the tree, keeping the birches and the spirits inhabiting them in eternal pain—and thereby making them unappetizing to Horrors. Unfortunately, plant spirits are not as resilient as Name-givers, and the agony drove the birch spirits insane. When Lysarin's fellow warders discovered what he had done, they attempted to destroy the trees, but many of the fire-laced plant spirits had fled deep into the forest to find new trees to inhabit. These tormented spirits still exist as the fire birches of the Blood Wood.

Though the blood warders continue to hunt for and destroy fire birches, a few are still scattered about the Wood. Recognizable by their blackened bark and horribly twisted limbs, their corruption kills all life around them to a diameter of thirty yards or more. These dead zones are scorched and lifeless ground, and plant life along their edges shows evidence of fire damage.

On close inspection, an observer can see that the branches of a fire birch sport innumerable small flames instead of leaves. The plant spirit within such a tree uses its flame leaves to share its "protection" with the plants around it, which destroys them. Fortunately, the blood warders have developed powerful enchantments that protect the Wood from wildfires.

Fire birches are Strength 5 wood elementals (p. 87, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**). They automatically attack any target that passes within 25 yards. In addition to their standard spirit powers, the trees use a Flame Flash attack similar to the Circle 1 wizard spell of the same name; a fire birch can make an attack with this power twice per round. A birch can be destroyed, though with some difficulty. If the tree is destroyed, its plant spirit flees toward another tree elsewhere in the forest. Characters may meet and battle the spirit on the astral plane.

SPECTRAL WILLOW

The spectral willow is a rarity, a tree that exists almost entirely in astral space. Originally conceived as a defense against astral Horrors, the first spectral willows proved more delicate than expected and many were ill suited to the parts of the Wood where they were planted. Several of the original willows died, leaving approximately a dozen trees scattered throughout the Wood. The grandest of these surviving spectral willows grows in Queen Alachia's private glade, carefully tended by hand-picked gardeners of great skill.

The spectral willow projects a ghostly presence in the physical world. Characters who pass through the spot where the tree stands experience a sensation similar to that





felt when an astrally active character passes through the astral imprint of a physical barrier (see **Astral Space**, p. 60, **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**).

The true beauty of a spectral willow only can be seen on a moonlit night. Spectral willows gather and intensify moonbeams, scattering them in cascades of silver light that illuminate the forest for yards around. When the moon is full, the spectacle is so dazzling that many blood elves are moved to heights of emotion far beyond their normal constraints and they briefly experience the strong feelings that they deny in their daily lives. Though some older elves warn against what they see as a temporary weakening of the elven spirit caused by these emotions, many children are conceived on these nights, and the spectral willows never want for spectators.

In astral space, the spectral willow stands majestic and beautiful. When an astral entity comes within 500 yards of the willow, the tree makes a Perception Test using Step 12 against the target's Spell Defense. If the test fails, the tree makes an additional test each round until it detects the target or the target moves outside the tree's 500-yard range. If the target approaches the tree, the tree adds 1 step to its Perception step for each 50 yards inside the maximum range that the target moves. Thus, for a target 350 yards away, the tree makes a Perception Test at Step 15. For a target at the base of the tree, the willow makes the test at Step 22.

Upon detecting an astral entity, the tree attempts to ensnare the target using its Capture Astral Entity power, a special variation of the Restrain Entity spell (p. 181, **ED**). Capture Astral Entity affects any astral being and using this power does not require any threads. The tree simply casts the spell using a Spellcasting Step of 12. If the Spellcasting Test succeeds, a sphere of pure astral energy surrounds and restrains the target.

A captured target may attempt to free itself each round by making a Willpower or Dispel Magic Test. If the target attempts to escape in this manner, the tree makes an opposing test using Step 18. If a target breaks free but cannot escape the tree's range by the next round, the tree attempts to ensnare the target again.

Every spectral willow has 10 Karma Points that it may spend on any test related to its use of the Capture Astral Entity power. Additionally, the spectral willow has a Karma Step of 10. Spectral willows regain spent Karma at the rate of 1 point per week, though a blood warder who has bonded with a spectral willow may invest the tree with some of his or her Karma to replenish its stores more quickly. Currently, three blood warders—Takarís Talshara, Preystia Tales and Niríame Jae'Helastrí—are bonded with various spectral willows. (For character profiles, see **Blood Warders**, p. 52 of **The Elven Court**.) To replenish a spectral willow's Karma, the donor must make a Spellcasting Test against the tree's Spell Defense of 14. The success level of the Spellcasting Test determines how many Karma Points the

warder may transfer. Spectral willows can communicate with bonded blood warders to warn of astral intrusions.

Physical attacks do not harm spectral willows because the trees lack a substantial physical presence. In astral space, spectral willows have a Physical Armor Rating of 10 and a Damage Rating of 85. Spells must overcome the spectral willow's Spell Defense of 14 to affect the trees. Spells and talents that allow attacks against astral opponents can be used against spectral willows.

TRAILFRUIT

Trailfruit ferns are the result of an early experiment by blood warders to make survival easier for the blood elves during and after the Scourge. The ferns grow in tall clumps, with fruit in small bunches at the base of each plant.

The oblong-shaped fruit is brown and wrinkly, about the size of an elf's clenched fist. The skin is chewy, but the flesh inside is smooth with no apparent seeds. Trailfruit tastes a bit like spiced figs, with an earthy aftertaste. For most Name-givers, two trailfruits are as satisfying and nourishing as a full meal (though trolls and obsidimen have been known to require four or five). Unfortunately, trailfruit retains this magical quality for only a short time. Two days after picking, it is no more nourishing than ordinary fruit.

Characters may recognize trailfruit ferns by making successful Skill Tests against a Difficulty Number of 9. If a character uses a Blood Wood-specific knowledge skill, the Difficulty Number drops to 6.

TRANCEWEED

Numerous varieties of tranceweed grow in the Wood, all recognizable by the small tassels at the top of their stalks. These tassels contain seeds that scatter in a strong wind. Burning the seeds produces a hallucinogenic smoke that inspires prophetic visions in those who inhale it. (The occurrence or accuracy of such visions is entirely at the gamemaster's discretion. See **Divination**, p. 101 of **Magic: A Manual of Mystic Secrets**.)

Chewing a tranceweed stalk produces a light, calming trance that can be a useful aid to relaxation. A character may voluntarily break such a trance at any time, but a character who stays in the trance for a full hour adds 1 step to any Recovery Test made at the end of that hour.

CREATURES

Characters may encounter the following mundane and magical creatures while traveling through the Blood Wood. Several have been described in previous **Earthdawn** products. The descriptions in this book expand on those previously published and show how these creatures fit into the Wood's twisted ecology.

Many creatures native to the Blood Wood use the different types of attacks, such as pack or swarm attacks,





described on pages 112–15 of **Creatures of Barsaive**. These native creatures are familiar with the hazards of the Blood Wood and so rarely fall prey to the dangerous plants described in **Plant Life**.

BLOOD MONKEY

Attributes

DEX: 9 STR: 5 TOU: 7
PER: 5 WIL: 4 CHA: 4

Initiative: 9 (12; see below)

Number of Attacks: 3

Attack: 9

Damage: 9

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Physical Defense: 10

Spell Defense: 9

Social Defense: 7

Armor: NA

Mystic Armor: 3

Knockdown: 10

Recovery Tests: 3

Death Rating: 42

Wound Threshold: 12

Unconsciousness Rating: 34

Combat Movement: 42/21*

Full Movement: 85/42*

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: None

Loot: Pelts worth 100 silver pieces each. Characters may also find bits of treasure, magical items, gear, weapons and armor from the last unfortunate adventurers who passed by.

*Movement in trees/Movement on ground

Commentary

Blood monkeys are small simians thickly covered in fur of a deep red color. Their bodies rarely exceed two feet in length, but they have prehensile tails that may be up to two feet long. They appear small and harmless, but are actually quite vicious. Sharp claws grow from the ends of their five fingers, and they sport a mouthful of long, needle-sharp teeth.

Blood monkeys are found in most areas of the Blood Wood except the Elven Court region and the Forest's Heart. The blood wardens have taken measures to keep the monkeys away from the Palace and the overwhelming corruption of the Forest's Heart keeps them far away from the center of the Wood.

Extremely territorial, blood monkeys will attack everything from individuals to whole trade caravans. Typically, up to 15 of the strongest males in a blood monkey band will initiate an attack by dropping from the tree tops onto their targets. Blood monkeys typically live in groups of up to 100, but legends tell of attacks by multiple groups numbering in the thousands.

During the initial attack, the blood monkeys' Initiative Step is 12 instead of 9. To determine if a target is Surprised, each target should make a Perception Test against the blood monkeys' Initiative step instead of the normal Dexterity step number (see pp. 202–3, ED).

Blood monkeys can attack up to three times in a Combat Round, either clawing or biting. If any blood monkey's initial attack causes damage to a victim, the monkeys



give a screech that summons 5 to 15 more blood monkeys. These "reinforcements" arrive every other Combat Round. If the targets defend themselves successfully against the initial attack and actually manage to counterattack, the blood monkeys will try to escape.

Recently, blood monkey pelts have become a sought-after item in some areas of Barsaive. They sell for roughly 100 silver pieces each.

BLOOD RAVEN

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 2 TOU: 3
PER: 7 WIL: 5 CHA: 5

Initiative: 6

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 9

Damage: 5

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Physical Defense: 9

Spell Defense: 10

Social Defense: 8

Armor: 0

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 3

Recovery Tests: 1

Death Rating: 18

Wound Threshold: 5

Unconsciousness Rating: 14

Combat Movement: 50

Full Movement: 100

Powers: Astral Sight 7 (see text)

Legend Points: 65

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

Blood ravens can be distinguished from normal ravens by their larger size and reddish legs. Individually, blood ravens pose little threat to Name-givers. However, they most often attack in flocks of dozens of birds. Up to 10 birds may attack a single non-windling character.

Blood ravens usually attack a character's eyes, hoping to blind him. To make such an attack, a raven must make a Called Shot (see *Called Shots*, p. 200, ED) against the target. Only helmets or other armor specifically designed to provide eye protection will shield a character against such attacks. Up to 3 ravens may attack a single character in this manner. Any other ravens attacking a character must attack normally. Up to 5 birds may attack a windling character, using Called Shots to attack his

wings as well as his eyes. Only one blood raven may attack a windling's eyes at any given time.

Eye damage can be healed normally, but the victim receives a step penalty to all actions until the damage is healed. If both eyes are damaged, apply a -2 step penalty. After one eye has been healed, or if only one eye was damaged, apply a -1 penalty. If damage to a single eye causes a Wound, the victim receives a -3 step penalty until the Wound is healed. If both eyes are damaged in this way, the character is blinded and suffers a -6 step penalty to all actions until the Wounds are healed.

Damage to a windling's wings may be healed normally, but any windling attempting to fly with damaged wings takes 1 Strain Point per round. If wing damage causes a Wound, the windling must pay 2 Strain Points and make a successful Strength Test against a Difficulty Number of 7 each round to continue flying. If the test fails, the windling can no longer keep himself airborne and must land.

Blood ravens are intelligent, with sharp eyesight and the ability to see astrally as well. Their astral sight power is





similar to the Astral Sight talent, though their vision is limited to 30 yards on the astral plane. For these reasons, blood ravens are highly sought after by magicians, and blood warders often take blood ravens as familiars.

BLOOD WASP

Attributes

DEX: 8 STR: 3 TOU: 6
PER: 4 WIL: 4 CHA: 2

Initiative: 8

Number of Attacks: 1-3

Attack: 11

Damage: 18, 15 or 12

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Physical Defense: 12

Spell Defense: 8

Social Defense: 12

Armor: 0

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: NA

Recovery Tests: 3

Death Rating: NA

Wound Threshold: NA

Unconsciousness Rating: 40

Combat Movement: 45

Full Movement: 90

Legend Points: 255

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

Blood wasps are aggressive insects that attack in swarms to gather the blood they feed on. Only slightly larger than ordinary wasps, they are fiercely territorial and mercilessly attack any creature that passes within 25 yards of their nests.

The statistics above apply to a swarm of 250-300 insects, the number in an average blood-wasp nest. A swarm this size occupies a sphere-shaped area roughly 10 yards in diameter and will attack up to three creatures within the sphere, though the swarm can only attack each creature once. The listed statistics include three different Damage steps, and the number of targets within the sphere determines which Damage step is used. For example, if only one target is in the sphere, a successful attack does Step 18 damage. If two targets are in the sphere, a successful attack does Step 15 damage.

Attacking a blood-wasp swarm with ordinary melee weapons is virtually useless. However, attacks made with flaming weapons—such as a lit torch or a weapon enchanted with the elemental spell Flameweapon—cause damage appropriate to their flame (Step 4 for a lit torch, D4 for the Flameweapon spell). Area-effect spells, especially flame-based spells, also work against swarms. However, any character under attack by the swarm will be in the spell's area of effect as well. When used against blood wasps, add 5 steps to the Effect Tests of any flame-based



spells. Once a swarm has taken 40 points of damage, it disperses. A dispersed swarm needs two weeks to regenerate.

Dousing a character with vinegar or wine will drive away any attacking wasps and prevent further attacks. Pungent salves derived from the sap of certain trees will also ward off blood-wasp attacks, but knowledge of these salves is a closely guarded secret in the Wood.

ETHANDRILLE

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 7 TOU: 5
PER: 5 WIL: 8 CHA: 4

Initiative: 9

Number of Attacks: 2

Attack: 10

Damage: 12

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 9

Effect: 8

Physical Defense: 7

Spell Defense: 8

Social Defense: 7

Armor: 3

Mystic Armor: 4

Knockdown: 11

Recovery Tests: 2

Death Rating: 40

Wound Threshold: 10

Unconsciousness Rating: 33

Combat Movement: 50

Full Movement: 100

Legend Points: 175

Equipment: None

Loot: None





Commentary

The wolf-like ethandrilles were native to the Wyrms Wood before the Scourge, but the Ritual of Thorns altered these creatures into the abominations they are today. Ethandrilles resemble small wolves, with brown-gray fur that acts as camouflage in the dimness of the forest. Since the Ritual of Thorns, the ethandrilles have sported thorns around their mouths, and more thorns stretch their fur where their pelts are too thick to penetrate. The poor beasts look tortured, as indeed they are. As with the blood elves, the thorns cause the ethandrilles constant agony.

The thorn magic also made the ethandrilles larger and fiercer, and enhanced their already keen tracking ability. In addition, the creatures can discharge a bolt of lightning at an opponent before actually engaging in combat. Fortunately for the blood elves, the forest is damp enough to keep the bolts from starting fires.

The blood elves use ethandrilles to haul supplies and food between settlements, and as guard animals throughout the forest. Elves of the Talshara ranelle, who are responsible for protecting the forest, use the animals to detect intruders at the Blood Wood's borders.

To successfully track a target, ethandrilles make a Spellcasting Test against the target's Spell Defense. If this test succeeds, the ethandrille can locate the intruder within a few minutes. One of the reasons these magical wolves hunt in packs is to ensure that at least one of them can successfully track any invader. Ethandrilles can only track targets within 200 yards of their position.

Before ethandrilles attack physically, they use their lightning ability against their targets. To do so, the ethandrille makes a Spellcasting Test against the target's Spell Defense. Any target struck by the lightning takes Step 8 damage. In close combat, ethandrilles bite opponents with their mighty jaws, causing Step 12 damage on a successful Attack Test.

FALSE DRAKE

Attributes

DEX: 12 STR: 12 TOU: 10
PER: 10 WIL: 13 CHA: 12

Initiative: 12
Number of Attacks: 3
Attack: 15

Damage:

Bite: 14

Claw: 15

Number of Spells: 1
Spellcasting: 12
Effect: See text

Physical Defense: 15
Spell Defense: 14
Social Defense: 15

Armor: 10

Mystic Armor: 6

Knockdown: 12
Recovery Tests: 4

Death Rating: 50

Wound Threshold: 14

Unconsciousness Rating: 43

Combat Movement: 120

Full Movement: 240

Powers: Astral Sight 10, Dispel Magic 10, Dragon Breath 9, Suppress Magic 2, Venom 5

Legend Points: 1,865

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

False drakes strongly resemble true drakes, but they are not intelligent and are somewhat weaker physically. They also do not share a true drake's ability to assume Name-giver form. Though false drakes cannot speak, they emit fierce cries of pleasure as they hunt or swoop through the Blood Wood, weaving intricate patterns as they fly around the trunks and branches of the Blood Wood's largest trees. Most false drakes live in the northern and western regions of the Blood Wood, though some have been reported near the Forest's Heart.

The true nature of these creatures remains the subject of debate. Several blood warders have sought audiences with Vasdenjas, the dragon author of the renowned reference work **Creatures of Barsaive**, to discuss the matter, but he has refused to meet with the warders. The true connection between false drakes, true drakes and the great dragons of Barsaive remains a mystery, as does the fact that false drakes have never been seen outside the Blood Wood.

For descriptions of the dragon powers of false drakes, see pages 291–92 of the **Earthdawn** rulebook. However, a false drake's Dragon Breath power produces a thin stream of fiery breath that can strike only one target at a time. In all other respects, the power functions like the standard Dragon Breath power.

False drakes are curious and playful, though they generally avoid Name-givers. Catching a glimpse of a false drake is considered a good omen among the villagers of the Blood Wood, and touching one is said to bring a Name-giver three years and three days of good fortune. But even the blood warders rarely encounter these creatures. In fact, only one encounter of more than a few seconds has ever been recorded. The elf who met the creature spoke of being left with a soul-numbing sadness that faded only after several months. Because the details of the account have not been verified, most blood warders dismiss it as a fanciful tale.





GHOU LIZARD

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 6 TOU: 6
PER: 4 WIL: 4 CHA: 3

Initiative: 5

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 9

Damage: 10

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 6

Effect: Poison (8; see text)

Death Rating: 38

Wound Threshold: 10

Unconsciousness Rating: 30

Physical Defense: 7

Spell Defense: 6

Social Defense: 5

Armor: 4

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 9

Recovery Tests: 3

Combat Movement: 20

Full Movement: 40

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

The nocturnal ghou lizard gets its name from its taste for carrion and its unusual appearance—the pale, green-white scales and raised bony ridges around the lizard's eyes and along the top of its snout resemble the upper half of a human skull. Ghou lizards may grow up to nine feet long, including their long tails.

Though primarily a carrion eater, the ghou lizard has been known to attack weakened live prey. Though the lizard's claws and teeth are ineffective for this task, its tail is covered with short, bony poisoned spikes that can easily pierce even chain mail. If the lizard

Wounds its target, it makes a
Spellcasting Test

against the target's Spell Defense. If this test succeeds, it then makes an Effect Test to determine the duration (in Combat Rounds) of the poison. A poisoned target may attempt to resist the poison each round (see **Poison Resistance Test**, p. 208, ED). If the Resistance test fails, the poison causes Step 8 damage. Mystic Armor protects against this damage.

More of the bony spikes are located in three rows down a lizard's back. These spines remain folded flat until the animal is threatened or readies itself to attack. Any character who attempts to attack a ghou lizard and fails to hit his target must make a Dexterity Test against a Difficulty Number of 7. If this test fails, the would-be attacker is stuck by one of the spikes and may suffer the effects of the poison. If the Dexterity Test yields a Poor success, the would-be attacker automatically takes Step 3 damage. Armor does not protect against this damage.

GIANT CARNIVOROUS SQUIRREL

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 4 TOU: 4
PER: 5 WIL: 3 CHA: 3

Initiative: 6

Number of Attacks: 1 (2)

Attack: 9 (11)

Damage: 8 (10)

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: Disease (see text)

Death Rating: 30

Wound Threshold: 7

Unconsciousness Rating: 24

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 7

Social Defense: 5

Armor: 0

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 7

Recovery Tests: 2

Combat Movement: 40

Full Movement: 80

Legend Points: 85

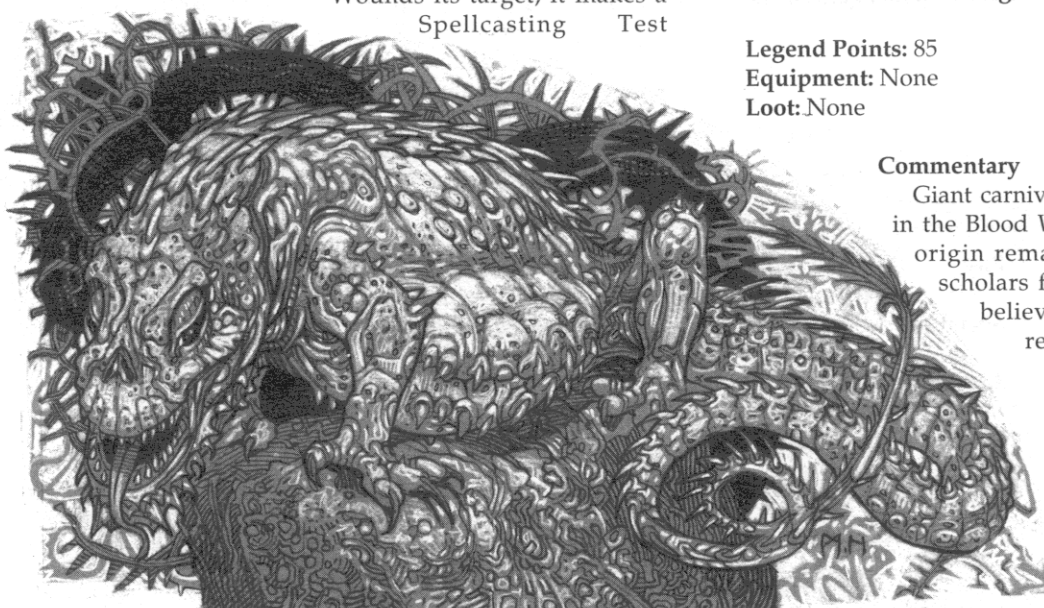
Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

Giant carnivorous squirrels have appeared in the Blood Wood since the Scourge. Their origin remains unknown, though some scholars from outside the Blood Wood believe that these squirrels are the results of early experiments by the blood warders.

These massive rodents, nearly five times the size of ordinary squirrels, frequent the treetops, attacking any living creature they meet to





sate their voracious appetites. Far more dangerous than their smaller, mundane cousins, giant carnivorous squirrels nonetheless possess many of the same instincts, including the urge to store food for later consumption. This instinct, coupled with the squirrel's carnivorous diet, produces overpowering odors of rot and decay in areas inhabited by the creatures.

These squirrels attack in groups of 8–20 individuals, leaping upon their prey from the trees and biting with their sharp front teeth. If the attack Wounds a target, the taste of blood drives the squirrel pack into a frenzy. Frenzied squirrels double the number of attacks they can make each round and receive a +2 step bonus to their Attack and Damage Tests. (Use the numbers in parentheses when the squirrels are frenzied.)

Because they live amid the rotting carcasses of their prey, giant carnivorous squirrels often carry diseases. Consequently, any victim who suffers a Wound from a squirrel attack may contract a severely debilitating disease as well. Most diseases carried by these creatures have an onset time of 1–3 hours. At the end of this time, the victim must make a Toughness Test against a Difficulty Number of 7. If this test fails, reduce the character's Toughness Attribute by 1 and adjust his or her Death Rating, Unconsciousness Rating, Wound Threshold, Recovery Tests and Toughness step as appropriate. Every day, the character must make another Toughness Test against a Difficulty Number of 7. Each failed test further reduces the character's Toughness by 1 point and also reduces all related ratings. If the character's Toughness drops to 0, he or she dies. However, a successful Toughness Test at any time prior to death allows the character to throw off the effects of the disease and begin to regain lost Toughness points at the rate of 1 point per day. Throughout the course of the disease and recovery, the character suffers a step penalty to all actions equal to the difference between the victim's current and normal Toughness step.

Giant carnivorous squirrels will attack and consume each other whenever other prey is unavailable, a habit that helps keep the carnivorous squirrel population relatively low.

GIANT TRAPDOOR SPIDER

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 6 TOU: 6
PER: 5 WIL: 5 CHA: 4

Initiative: 6 (12 first round)

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 8

Damage: 9

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 9

Effect: Poison (9; see text)

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 6

Social Defense: 4

Armor: 4

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 9

Recovery Tests: 2

Death Rating: 36

Wound Threshold: 10

Unconsciousness Rating: 28

Combat Movement: 30

Full Movement: 60

Legend Points: 90

Equipment: Lair may contain equipment from previous victims.

Loot: Lair may contain small valuables from previous victims.

Commentary

The giant trapdoor spider has adopted a unique tactic to catch its prey. Rather than spinning a web, the giant trapdoor spider finds an empty animal burrow and lines the interior with webs. It then crafts a cover of sticks, leaves and rocks, using its webbing as glue to hold it all together. The spider places the cover over the burrow's entrance and hides beneath it, ready to spring out and attack any victim that falls into its trap. Giant trapdoor spiders are most commonly found in the southern portion of the Blood Wood, though they also live in the western region.

Characters passing near a spider's lair may notice it by making a successful Perception Test against a Difficulty Number of 10. (Characters with the Wilderness Survival skill or the Creature Lore knowledge skill can make a Skill Test in place of the Perception Test.) If the test fails, the character does not notice the trapdoor and may fall into the burrow unless he makes a successful Initiative Test against a Difficulty Number of 9.

When a victim falls into the burrow, the spider makes two attacks. First, it grapples the victim. The spider uses an Initiative step of 12 in the first combat round to simulate the speed of its initial attack, even if the victim is not Surprised. If the spider successfully grapples its target, it will attempt to trap the victim in the webs that line the burrow.

For its second attack, the spider attempts to bite the victim and inject him with a paralyzing poison (p. 208, ED). If the bite attack Wounds the target, the spider makes a Spellcasting Test against the target's Spell Defense. If this test succeeds, the spider makes an Effect Test against the target's Toughness step. If the test is successful, the victim is paralyzed for a number of minutes equal to the result of the Effect Test, and the spider spins a cocoon around the victim. Once the paralytic venom has worn off, a cocooned character may free himself by making a successful Strength Test against a Difficulty Number of 8. However, the victim must still deal with the spider to escape from the burrow.





HULKER

Attributes

DEX: 8 STR: 15 TOU: 12
PER: 5 WIL: 5 CHA: 5

Initiative: 8

Number of Attacks: 3

Attack: 12

Damage: 20

Number of Spells: (1)

Spellcasting: 8

Effect: 10 (Camouflage)

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 9

Social Defense: 9

Armor: 12

Mystic Armor: 3

Knockdown: 15

Recovery Tests: 5

Death Rating: 80

Wound Threshold: 18

Unconsciousness Rating: 72

Combat Movement: 25

Full Movement: 50

Legend Points: 600

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Special Notes: Regeneration

Commentary

Hulkers are large, solitary predators that move slowly through the darkest parts of the Blood Wood. Hulkers stalk the area surrounding the Forest's Heart, as well as parts of the Western Border and Northern Reaches closest to the center of the forest. Hulkers stand somewhat taller than a troll and have thick, gnarled skin that resembles tree bark. Their thick, powerful legs end in flat feet that resemble roots. A hulker's head seems to be one with its torso, and it attacks with two immensely strong arms that each end in a single massive horned talon. When it must lift fallen prey, a second, smaller talon springs out from the base of the larger one, forming a pincer with which the hulker can grasp its meal.

What the hulker lacks in speed it often makes up for in guile, using its magical ability to camouflage itself among the trees. If the creature succeeds in a Spellcasting Test against a Difficulty Number of 4, it can blend in with any wooded area. The result of the Effect Test becomes the Difficulty Number for characters attempting to notice it.

Hulkers prefer to attack from camouflage because most prey can easily outrun them. If the intended target fails a Perception Test to spot the hulker, the hulker can make a Surprise attack against the target for 1 round.

The hulker's bark-like skin is so thick that only an Extraordinary success on an Attack Test can pierce it. Additionally, the hulker can use its regenerative powers to heal itself during combat. During each Combat Round, a hulker may make one Recovery Test in place of one of its attacks. A hulker may repeat this process every round until it has no Recovery Tests remaining for the day.



Though hulkers will eat anything they can catch, they display a particular fondness for Name-giver flesh. Hulkers will not attack Name-giver settlements, however, unless driven to desperation by extreme hunger.





ROOT WALKER

Attributes

DEX: 9 STR: 10 TOU: 10

PER: 6 WIL: 6 CHA: 5

Initiative: 9

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 10

Damage: 10

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 12

Effect: Engulf (15)

Physical Defense: 12

Spell Defense: 12

Social Defense: 12

Armor: 8

Mystic Armor: 5

Knockdown: NA

Recovery Tests: 4

Death Rating: 75

Wound Threshold: 15

Unconsciousness Rating: 65

Combat Movement: 15

Full Movement: 30

Legend Points: 500

Equipment: None

Loot: None

Commentary

The six root walkers that roam the Blood Wood were created by blood warders as one line of defense specifically intended to kill intruders into the Wood. These warders sought to combine the ethandril's ability to sense intruders with the primitive self-awareness of plant spirits. By magically fusing the patterns of several ethandrills with those of several blood-oak saplings, the blood warders created a frightening animal/plant hybrid that lives among the roots of blood oaks and ferociously hunts down trespassers. Fortunately for their intended victims, these creatures move slowly, tunneling through the soil a few feet below the surface.

Root walkers can sense any intruder within 10 miles of their position. A root walker that encounters an intruder attacks suddenly and viciously, sending root-like tentacles shooting up through the earth to grapple the target. If the attack succeeds, the roots cause damage every combat round until the character is dead or freed from the roots. The character may escape by the normal means used to escape a grapple or by cutting the roots.

A second character can attempt to free the victim by attacking the root walker's exposed roots. If such an attack fails to hit the root walker, then the second character has struck the victim.

Generally, the root walker's body remains two to three feet beneath the earth's surface while it is fighting, and so its roots are the only target for attack. Each root has the Defense and Armor ratings listed in the statistics. Inflicting 40 points of damage on a root will force the root walker to retreat to heal itself. Additional damage to the roots is use-

less; the creature can be harmed further only by damage done directly to its body. To attack the body, characters must force a root walker to the surface or use long weapons that can strike through the ground. These types of attacks receive a -3 step penalty to all Attack and Damage Tests.

If a root walker successfully grapples a character, it will attempt to use its Engulf power during the following combat round. The root walker makes a Spellcasting Test against the character's Spell Defense. If the test succeeds, the root walker makes an Effect Test, and the gamemaster records the result. Any character successfully attacked with the Engulf power is drawn into the earth, where he suffers from suffocation damage (p. 123, **Denizens of Earthdawn, Volume 1**) in addition to the constriction damage caused by the roots.

A victim may make a Strength Test against the result of the root walker's Effect Test to resist being pulled into the earth. Up to two characters may add their Strength steps to the grappled character's for this test. The Effect Test result is also the Difficulty Number for attempts to Dispel the Engulf power.

The root walker's roots and Engulf power alone make it a formidable opponent, but the creature's most fearsome power is its ability to awaken blood oaks (p. 132). If a root walker attacks a character within 30 yards of a blood oak, the oak will direct *its* roots to attack other intruders in the area. If the root walker is attacking a single intruder, however, the blood oak cannot assist.

A root walker will always attack elves last when it encounters a group of intruders belonging to various Name-giver races. If the root walker senses any blood elves on the ground within 20 yards of an intruder, it will not attack. Magical wards put in place by the blood warders keep the root walkers at least a thousand yards away from the queen's palace at all times, and so all Name-givers in that area are safe from root walker attack.

SONG SPRITE

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 2 TOU: 2

PER: 5 WIL: 5 CHA: 8

Initiative: 6

Number of Attacks: NA

Attack: NA

Damage: NA

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 8+ (see text)

Effect: 8+ (see text)

Physical Defense: 10

Spell Defense: 10

Social Defense: 13

Armor: 0

Mystic Armor: 7

Knockdown: 4

Recovery Tests: 1

Death Rating: 22

Wound Threshold: 4

Combat Movement: 35

Full Movement: 70





Unconsciousness Rating: 14

Legend Points: 180

Equipment: None

Loot: Lair may contain 50–100 silver pieces worth of jewelry per sprite taken from previous victims.

Commentary

These small, delicate, beautiful creatures flit around on sparkling wings seemingly spun of gossamer threads. Though they resemble windlings, song sprites rarely exceed six inches in height. They are actually a variety of will o' the wisp (p. 102, **Creatures of Barsaive**) that produce sound rather than light. By modulating the sound they produce, these creatures can create harmonious, ethereal melodies as they fly through the Blood Wood. Many song sprites are harmless, and visitors may see a few flitting around Queen Alachia's palace.

Like the will o' the wisps, however, some song sprites were driven mad by the Scourge and have since used their songs to sow death and corruption. A sprite's song can be heard up to 100 yards away from the sprite, entrancing Name-givers and drawing them toward the music. The sprites use their melodies to draw victims into deadly situations—into quicksand, toward groups of hunting wood lions (p. 147) and so on.

A single sprite has Spellcasting and Effect steps of 8, so its song is not terribly dangerous. However, song sprites often travel in groups, which enables them to weave more complex and powerful melodies. Each sprite in a group beyond the first adds +1 to the Spellcasting and Effect step of the song. To entrance a target, a band of sprites must make a Spellcasting Test against the target's Spell Defense. If the test succeeds, the target becomes entranced and immediately begins to move toward the sprites, heedless of any danger nearby. During each combat round, an entranced victim may make a Willpower Test to resist the trance against a Difficulty Number equal to the result of the sprites' Effect Test. This number is also the Difficulty Number for any attempt to Dispel the song's effect. The trance automatically breaks if the victim sustains Damage Points equal to this number. Sprites may attempt to enchant only one target per round.

Song sprites are commonly attracted to small, shiny objects such as gems and jewelry. Their small size prohibits them from carrying off much, but they will often take any small items that their victims were carrying (up to half a pound in weight). Sprites usually live in small groves, and each sprite adorns its nest with items it has collected.

STORM CROW

Attributes

DEX: 7 **STR:** 2 **TOU:** 2

PER: 6 **WIL:** 5 **CHA:** 5

Initiative: 7

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 9

Damage: 4

Number of Spells: 1

Spellcasting: 9

Effect: Lightning (8)

Physical Defense: 11

Spell Defense: 9

Social Defense: 12

Armor: 0

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 3

Recovery Tests: 1

Death Rating: 15

Wound Threshold: 4

Unconsciousness Rating: 11

Combat Movement: 55

Full Movement: 110

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: None

Loot: Silver talons worth 20–25 silver pieces. These count as treasure worth Legend Points.

Commentary

Storm crows are often mistaken for the larger and more aggressive blood ravens, though the two birds are natural enemies. Storm crows will go out of their way to attack blood ravens, protecting the other animals of Blood Wood in the process. Storm crows are commonly found in the same areas as blood ravens, including the northern and southern stretches of the forest.

Storm crows can often be seen cavorting in the rain and wind when storms pass over the Blood Wood, a time when other birds seek shelter. This kinship with the elemental power of storms gives these birds a dramatic magical power that they employ in combat. When diving toward a target, a storm crow's outstretched silver talons briefly glow blue and then discharge a small bolt of lightning. To attack with this power, the storm crow makes a Spellcasting Test against the target's Spell Defense. If the test succeeds, the attack causes Step 8 damage to the target. Non-metal armor protects against this damage. Normally, a single storm crow may create only one bolt of lightning per day. When engaged in combat during a storm, storm crows can cast a bolt of lightning every other combat round for the storm's duration.

Capturing and training a storm crow is extraordinarily difficult. They are naturally resistant to magical abilities and spells that control or dominate animals, such as Dominate Beast and Animal Bond. Use of any animal-based talents or spells requires a Good success or better against storm crows. Blood Warder Niriamae Jae'Helastri actually managed to make a storm crow her familiar, an arrangement that often causes minor problems in the palace halls.





THORN MEN

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 5 WIL: 6 CHA: 4

Initiative: 7

Number of Attacks: 1

Attack: 8

Damage: 12

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 10

Social Defense: 15

Armor: 4

Mystic Armor: 5

Knockdown: 5

Recovery Tests: 3

Death Rating: 40

Wound Threshold: 11

Unconsciousness Rating: 32

Combat Movement: 35

Full Movement: 70

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: Spears

Loot: None

Commentary

Thorn men are animated bundles of thorns with rudimentary intelligence. Vaguely human-like in appearance, they stand roughly six feet tall and weigh sixty pounds.

Blood warders created the thorn men to help the wardens of the Talshara ranelle guard and patrol the Wood's borders. Thorn men also guard many settlements and sites within the Blood Wood, including Queen Alachia's palace.

Though some thorn men remain active at all times, most are awakened when the approach of intruders activates the wards around the edges of the Blood Wood. The thorn men emerge from the trees and other plants when the wards are triggered and immediately seek out the intruders, attempting to eject them from the forest or prevent them from entering until blood-elf reinforcements arrive.

Thorn men carry wooden spears with polished stone tips. The spears are magical weapons, activated by the same magic used to create the thorn men. When wielded by anyone but a thorn man, the spear acts as an ordinary spear unless a thread is attached to it (see **Magical Items and Treasure**, p. 127 in **Game Information**).



Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 6

Recovery Tests: 2

Death Rating: 32

Wound Threshold: 8

Unconsciousness Rating: 27

Combat Movement: 90

Full Movement: 180

WHIRLCLAW

Attributes

DEX: 10 STR: 4 TOU: 5
PER: 5 WIL: 4 CHA: 2

Initiative: 10

Number of Attacks: 4

Attack: 12

Damage: 6

Physical Defense: 13

Spell Defense: 7

Social Defense: 7

Armor: 0

Legend Points: 240

Equipment: None

Loot: 2 claws worth 3D6 silver pieces each. These also count as treasure worth Legend Points.

Commentary

The whirlclaw is a small, exceptionally quick and nimble biped that lives in shallow burrows along the forest's edge and other thinly wooded parts of the Blood Wood.





The shaggy creatures rarely exceed two feet in height, but they possess long, spindly arms that end in sharp, wickedly curved claws.

The whirlclaw relies on speed and multiple claw attacks to overcome its prey, often leaping from target to target to cause chaos and confusion. The creature preys on small mammals and birds, though it sometimes travels in groups of 4 to 6 and attacks larger prey such as Name-givers. After downing its prey, the whirlclaw usually gorges itself, then returns to its burrow and sleeps for up to a week.

The whirlclaw fears fire and will flee from open flames.

WITHERFANG

Attributes

DEX: 7 STR: 5 TOU: 6
PER: 4 WIL: 4 CHA: 4

Initiative: 4

Number of Attacks: 2

Attack: 8

Damage:

Bite: 5

Tail: 5

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: 7

Effect: 12

Death Rating: 36

Wound Threshold: 10

Unconsciousness Rating: 29

Legend Points: 90

Equipment: None

Loot: Two poison sacs worth 200 silver pieces each. These count as treasure worth Legend Points.

Commentary

Witherfangs native to the Blood Wood can be identified by their thick bodies and flared, cobra-like hoods. These snakes are named for the powerful poison transmitted through the stinger at the ends of their tails—a poison that can wither a victim's limb until it is virtually useless. The witherfang's other unique characteristic is its large number of teeth, which it uses to hold victims immobile while it administers its poisonous sting. Witherfangs usually match the colors of their surroundings, possessing a form of natural camouflage. Most are a dull gray-green, though the coloring of individual snakes may vary depending on their habitats.

A witherfang attacks by biting its victim, then coiling its body around the prey and striking with its tail stinger. The bite attack inflicts Step 5 damage each round until the

witherfang's grip is broken. To break a witherfang's grip, the target must achieve an Armor-Defeating Hit against the witherfang. However, an Armor-Defeating Hit does not stop a tail attack.

Witherfang poison acts like the Circle 5 nethermancer spell *Wither Limb* (p. 180, ED). After a successful tail attack, the witherfang makes a Spellcasting Test. The result is the Difficulty Number for the target's Poison Resistance Test (pp. 207–8, ED). If the Poison Resistance Test fails, the witherfang makes an Effect Test to determine the damage caused by the sting. If the damage causes a Wound, the target's bitten limb withers.

Only powerful healing magic can restore the limb to usefulness. For example, the Circle 7 nethermancer spell *Reverse Withering* (p. 182, ED) will heal a withered limb.

Though a withered limb can be healed, the poison's effects cannot be prevented once a bite has occurred. No known antidote exists. In fact, many nethermancers and wizards use witherfang venom to create varying paralytic poisons, as well as a poison that mimics the effects of the witherfang's sting.

WILD BOAR

Attributes

DEX: 5 STR: 6 TOU: 7
PER: 4 WIL: 4 CHA: 4

Initiative: 6

Number of Attacks: 2

Attack: 8

Damage: 11

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: NA

Effect: NA

Death Rating: 40

Wound Threshold: 11

Unconsciousness Rating: 32

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: None

Loot: Tusks worth 3D6 silver pieces.

Commentary

Wild boars are hunted throughout the Blood Wood and their meat is a staple in many woodland settlements. A single male leads and protects each boar pack, attacking all threats to the pack with a pair of wicked tusks that can cause ragged, bleeding wounds (see statistics).

Typically, a boar directs its first attack charge at the nearest character or animal that poses a threat. For this attack, the boar may move up to its Full Movement rate. Additionally, the first attack at the end of the charge adds a





6-step bonus to the Damage Test, for a total Damage step of 17. If any of the boar's attacks cause a Wound, the wounded character bleeds from the Wound, suffering 2 points of damage each round until the Wound is bound. (See p. 117, *ED Companion*, for more information about bleeding wounds.)

WOOD LION

Attributes

DEX: 6 STR: 5 TOU: 4
PER: 5 WIL: 4 CHA: 4

Initiative: 8

Number of Attacks: 1, 3 or 5

Attack: 9

Damage: 8 (13)

Number of Spells: NA

Spellcasting: 12

Effect: Silent Walk

Death Rating: 30

Wound Threshold: 7

Unconsciousness Rating: 22

Physical Defense: 8

Spell Defense: 7

Social Defense: 6

Armor: 1

Mystic Armor: 0

Knockdown: 8

Recovery Tests: 2

Combat Movement: 50

Full Movement: 100

Legend Points: 100

Equipment: None

Loot: Pelt worth 40–60 silver pieces.

Commentary

The wood lion seems equally at home in the branches of trees or on the ground. Its fur is dappled like that of a newborn deer. A full-grown adult is approximately five feet long and weighs about 400 pounds.

The wood lion usually attacks from a concealed position in the undergrowth or from the lower branches of a large tree. Its first attack is always an attempt to knock down its prey. From the trees, it leaps on its target's back. When making its first attack from the ground, the wood lion can rush a distance up to its Full Movement rate. The momentum of rushing or leaping gives the lion a 5-step bonus to its Damage step for this first attack, which is considered an attack to knockdown (p. 200, *ED*). If the lion knocks its victim to the ground, it can attack 5 times per round—using all four claws and a bite—while the victim remains prone. Once the target gets up, the lion may only attack 3 times per round. These attacks use the lion's normal Damage step of 8.

Wood lions can also move silently through the forest using an ability similar to the Silent Walk talent. To use the ability, a wood lion makes a Spellcasting Test. The result is the Difficulty Number for any Perception Test made to hear the big cat's approach.





INDEX

A

Alachia's Allure, 41
Alamaise (dragon), 28–29, 39
Altan, 112
Anuna, 112–13
Araouane, 15, 23, 38, 83–84
Aris, 4–5
Arralena (village), 14–15, 20–21, 76, 112
Arrows of the Thundercloud, 127
Assassin vines, 21, 131–32
Astendar (Passion), 19, 26, 29, 84
Astral space, 22, 123–24

B

Barsaive
 Blood Wood's location in, 14
 relations, 61–62
Blasted Heath, 70, 71
Bloodberries, 132
Blood elves
 daily life of, 19–20
 elves and, 11
 leaving Blood Wood, 13–14
 mindset of, 115
 rules for, 118–21
Blood ivy, 20, 132
Blood karma charm, 126
Blood monkey, 20, 136–37
Blood oaks, 21, 132–33
Blood pebble armor, 20
Blood Quill of Moralar, 128–30
Blood raven, 137–38
Blood wardens, 21
Blood warders, 13, 16, 18, 21
 background on, 50–51
 cultists of Dis, 19
 current duties of, 52
 notable, 52–54
 overland travel and, 22
 role in defense, 23
 Scourge and, 51–52
Blood wasp, 138
Blood Wood
 appearance of, 21
 birth of, 8–11, 13
 defenses of, 122–24
 evolution of, 33
 feeding of, 11
 geography of, 14–15

leaving, 13–14, 116–18
population of, 15

Bramble vines, 133
Brocher's Brood, 42
Burdoin, 21, 112
Byre, Monus, 72, 97

C

Calabria, 99–100
Carithasca, Ethenia, 40, 44, 105, 107–8
Carithasca, Haeleon, 43–44, 61, 106, 108–9
Carithasca ranelle, 14, 40, 104–5
 consortis of, 43–44
 current activities, 110–11
 history, 105–7
 important characters of, 107–9
 Queen Failla's support of, 30
 Queen Liara's support of, 31
 Royal Patents and, 20–21
 trading by, 17–18
 Vistrosh and, 42
Caynreth, 26–27
Chair of Comfort, 20, 126
Chamber of Voices, 56, 58
Chelan, 100
Consortis, 15–18, 38
 appointment of, 42
 Queen Failla and, 30
Coreliander vine, 131, 133
Creatures, 135–47

D

Daevenar, Tarin, 43, 49, 60, 105
Daevenar ranelle, 105
 consortis, 43
 craftsman guilds of, 16–18, 20
 goals, current activities of, 49–50
 history of, 48–49
 important characters of, 49
Da'seaishta, 61
Death daisies, 133–34
Defenses, 21, 23
Denairastas, Jerleth, 96–97
Denairastas of Iopos, 18, 20, 40, 62, 88–90, 95–96
Dis, Mad Passion, 19

Discipline

 selection, 116
 variations, 121
Dragons, 28–29
Dren Hathal, 113–14

E

Eamonn, 22, 86
Elven Court, 7, 37–38, 77
 beauty of, 37–38
 courtyard of, 56
 establishment of, 11
 first queen of, 27
 functioning of, 38
 geography of, 14
 hierarchy of, 38–39
 Jae'Helastri and, 45
 manners, decorum of, 34–37
 outlying villages of, 59–61
 structure of, 15–16
Escalanas, Eletheria, 94–95
Escalanas, Kethos, 11–14, 43, 51, 70, 88–93
 banishment from court, 47
 resignation of, 16
 Ritual of Thorns and, 33
 toast to, 36
Escalanas, Orlando, 43–44, 93–94, 98
Escalanas ranelle, 21, 40
 blood warders of, 16
 consortis of, 43
 current activities of, 95–98
 history of, 91–92
 important characters in, 92–95
 magical arts and, 18
 paths and passions, 19
 True wood from, 20
Estandia, 61
Ethandril, 23, 104, 138–39
Exolasher, 16, 23, 33, 38, 125–26
 background on, 54
 Knights of the Thistle, 54–55
 notable, 55–56

F

False drake, 139
Festival of Blades, 86
Fire birches, 69–70, 95, 134
First elf's tale, 26–27
Forest's Heart, 44





alteration of, 11, 13
blood warders and, 51, 53
corrupted astral space, 22
daily life and, 19
defenses of, 72
entry into, 64–68
geography of, 14
history of, 69–71
rebellion and, 30
redemption of, 71–72
Ritual of Thorns and, 70–71
traveling to, 22

G

Gardens, 58–59
Garlen (Passion), 19
Ghoul lizard, 140
Giant carnivorous squirrel, 140–41
Giant trapdoor spider, 141
Gleannan, 86–87
Goro'imri village, 14–15, 73–76, 82–83, 97
Great Elves, 41
Greenbranch, Lysarin, 69–70, 134
Grove of Thorns, 17
 Festival of Blades, 86
 memorable instructors of, 85–86
 memorable students of, 85
 as war college 84
Gwyn Sea, 28

H–I

Half-Smile, Geverian, 18, 43, 61–62
Homesickness, 117–18
Horrors, 32, 70–71, 120
 astral space and, 22
 pain and, 19
 Ritual of Thorns. *See* Ritual of Thorns
Hulker, 142
Huntsman's Boots, 126
Iopos, 18, 20, 40, 62, 88–90, 95–96

J

Jae'Helastri, Larrin, 44, 47, 60
Jae'Helastri, Mithran, 34, 36, 44, 45–46, 48, 60
Jae'Helastri, Niriname, 23, 43, 46–47, 60
Jae'Helastri, Tiriname, 44–45, 47, 60
Jae'Helastri ranelle
 Carithasca ranelle and, 111
 consortis of, 44
 Escalanas ranelle and, 98
 goals, current activities of, 47–48
 history of, 45–46

important characters of, 46–47
political prowess of, 17
Jaspree (Passion), 19, 26, 29

K

Kaer, 32–33
Kaer Eidolon, 14, 17, 20, 52, 62, 106–7
Kellimar, 33
Kellimar's Armor of Rose Petals, 130
Kelling, 100
Khistova, 28
King Neden, 18, 37, 43
King Varulus III, 18, 42, 62, 117
Knights of the Thistle, 54–55
Kratas, 42, 62

L

Laggan, 87
Larin, Mayor, 99
Laryskova, Arianna, 30–31
Laryskova ranelle, 30–31
Leeron, Narrek, 55–56
Lesser Mothingale River, 15, 21, 22
Letheran, 15, 21, 38, 99
Liandra, 7–11
Longing Rings, 51

M

Magic, 22–23
Malornica (ship), 31
Messias, Elianar, 29–30, 32
Militia, 23
Missile's Path talent, 121
Mothingale River, 15, 21, 22

N

Named Bond of Silence, 19, 23
Nochan, 113
Noirin, 87, 98
Northern Reaches
 court hierarchy and, 73
 defenses of, 76–77
 geography of, 14, 15
 lands beyond, 77
 permanent settlement of, 82–87
 smaller villages of, 86–87
 Talshara ranelle in, 17, 77–82
 trade and, 21–22
 True earth from, 20

O–P

Oakforest, Aithne, 34, 43, 53
Oak Heart, 26–31, 71, 72
Oak-Leak Cloak, 126
Orichalcum Wars, 31–32, 78
Palace, 56, 58–59

Passions, 19

Astendar, 26, 29
Garlen, 19
Jaspree, 26, 29
Vestrial, 29

Path magic, 16, 24, 123
Personal Ritual, 11, 13, 14
Pit, 59
Plant life, 131
Portrait Gallery, 58

Q

Queen Alachia, 4, 6
 background on, 39–40
 balance of power and, 18
 blood elven bond to Blood Wood, 14
 blood warders and, 18
 chambers of, 58
 character of, 39–40
 consortis of, 42–43
 court hierarchy of, 38–39
 ending the Ritual, 14
 Forest's Heart and, 22
 isolationist policies of, 21
 outside trading and, 20, 21
 palace of, 56, 58–59
 questors and, 25–26
 refusal of Theran Rites of Protection and Passage, 11
 reign of, 15–16
 relationship with ranelles, 16–17
 reNaming of Wyrn Wood, 11, 13
 rising to power, 32–33
 Ritual of Thorns, 33
 Talshara loyalty to, 17
 wood magic of, 7
Queen Dallia, 32, 39, 40
 trip to Shosara by, 28–29
Queen Failla, 39–41
 blood warders of, 50, 51
 consortis and, 30, 42
 departure of, 31
 ranelles under, 16–17
 selection of, 29–30
 Shosara Separation by, 11, 16, 29–30
 troubadour performances for, 58
Queen Liara, 15, 31–32, 39, 40
 consortis and, 42
 Orichalcum Wars and, 23
 Talshara defense of, 78
Queen Melyora, 27
Queen's role, 39
Queen's Warders, 30, 32, 51, 69
Questors, 19, 25–26





R

Ranelle, 15–17
 Rasher, Tonnaer, 44
 Rasher ranelle, 44
 Raw magic, 123–24
 reNaming, 11, 13, 33
 Riquenar, 113
 Rites of Protection and Passage, 32
 Ritual of Everlife, 78
 Ritual of Thorns, 4–6, 33, 41, 51, 69
 attitude toward, 10–11, 14
 blood warders and, 18
 emotions and, 19
 Escalanas mission to end, 97–98
 game information for, 115–16
 Horrors and, 11
 Personal Ritual of, 11, 13, 14
 questors and, 19
 shimmerwine and, 48
 Root walker, 21, 132, 143
 Royal Patents, 20–21, 30

S

Schism, 32, 39
 Scol Mountains, 21
 Scourge, 32, 33, 39
 blood warders and, 51–52
 elven court and, 11
 Talshara ranelle and, 77
 Scourheart, Themrast, 85
 Sea'lish, Gealleon, 43–44, 61, 109
 Seekers of the Heart, 6
 background on, 71–72
 experience of, 64–68
 Sereatha, 29, 40, 41, 43, 63, 77
 Serpent River, 37, 52, 62
 Se'vianna, 18, 59
 Shield Beast talent, 122
 Shipbuilding, 27–28, 31, 113–14
 Shosara, 41, 43, 63, 77
 sea and, 28
 Separation of, 11, 29–30
 Sirthechan, 113
Soaring Eagle (ship), 109
 Song sprite, 143–44
 Songbirds, 41–42
 Southern Fringe, 17–18, 40, 43, 104, 108
 Carithasca ranelle, 104–11
 defenses of, 104
 entering, 21
 food of, 20
 geography of, 14–15
 permanent settlements of, 111–14
 smaller villages of, 112–14

Spectral willows, 23, 99, 134–35
 Starweaver, Nialle, 8–9
 Storm crow, 144
 Swiftstaff, Deriel, 85

T

Tales, Preystia, 97
 blood warders and, 52–53
 Blood Wood defenses, 23
 in Elven Court, 34, 35–36, 37, 43, 60
 Forest's Heart and, 71–72
 Ritual of Thorns and, 13
 Thera and, 62
 Tallamnia, 59–61
 Talshara, Elindrel, 34, 36, 37, 81
 Talshara, Erithander, 19, 43, 77, 78
 Talshara, Rhisiart, 34–37, 43, 78–80
 Talashara, Takaris, 23, 34, 50, 54, 62
 Talshara ranelle, 15, 77–78
 combat prowess of, 16–17, 23
 consortis of, 43
 current activities of, 82
 exolashers of, 16
 history of, 77
 important characters in, 77–81
 outposts of, 21, 23
 paths and passions, 19
 True earth, 20
 weaponship forges of, 17
 Tesrae k'Ailiu, 51, 69
 Theran Empire, 18, 38, 41, 62
 founding of, 30–31
 kaers of, 7
 rise of, 32
 Queen Alachia's view of, 36–37
 Rites of Protection and Passage, 40
 Thigreach, 87
 Thorn bow, 127–28
 Thorn men, 16, 145
 spears, 128
 wards, 122–23
 Thorn sword, 128
 Thread items, weapons, 126, 127
 Throal Kingdom, 18, 33, 38, 43, 61–62
 Trade, 14–15, 20–21
 Trailfruit ferns, 135
 Tranceweed, 135
 Traps, 23–24
 Travar, 33
 Travel
 astral space, 22
 magic, 22–23
 overland, 22
 rivers, streams, 22

Treaty Stone, 102–3
 Trellius, Captain, 109–10, 114
 Trenevar, 15, 17, 20, 111–12
 Triammelle village, 17, 45, 59
 True wood, 30, 95
 T'skrang riverboats, 21, 22

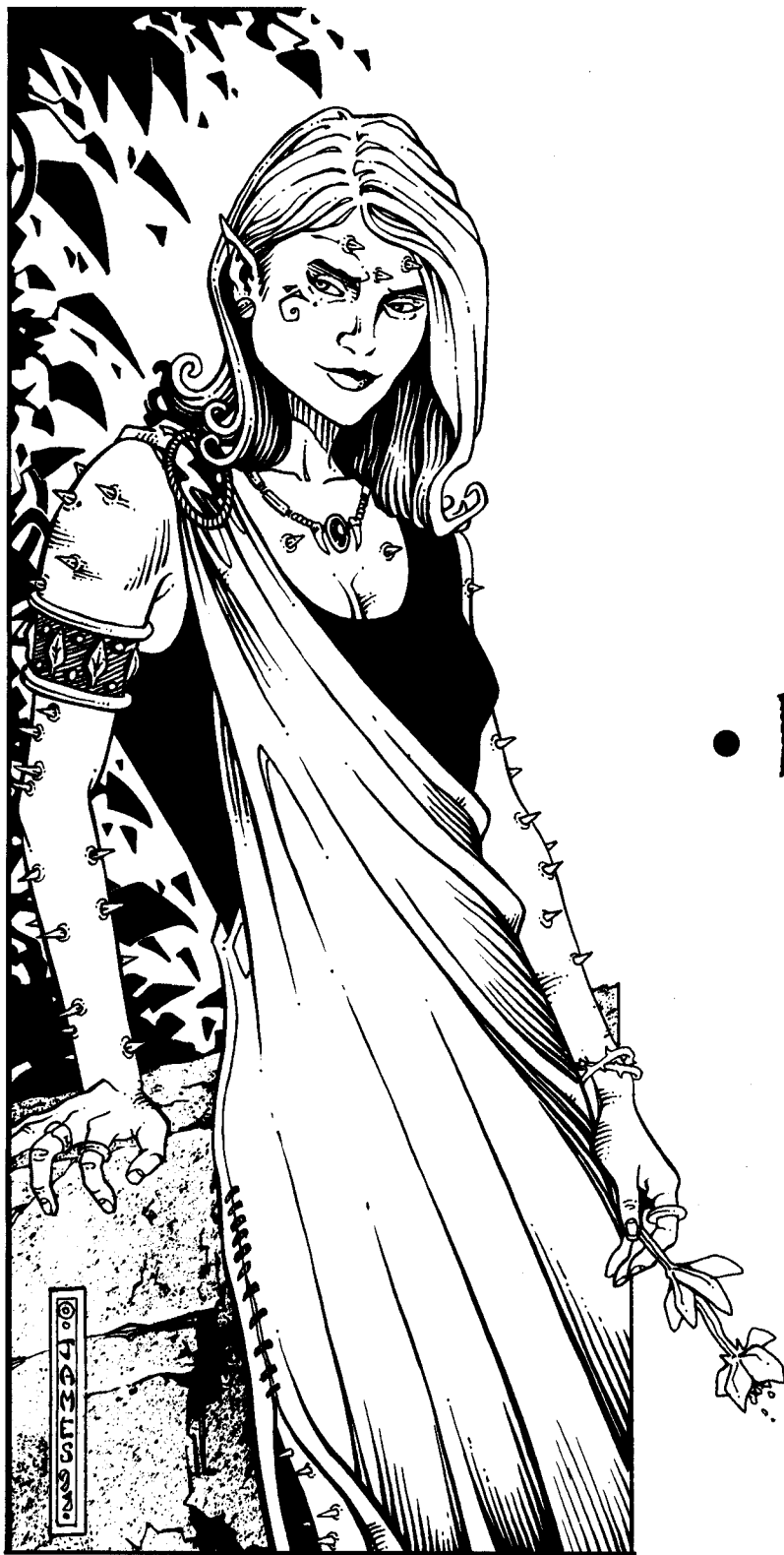
U–V

Urupa, 33
 Vestrial (Passion), 29
 Vistrosh, 42

W

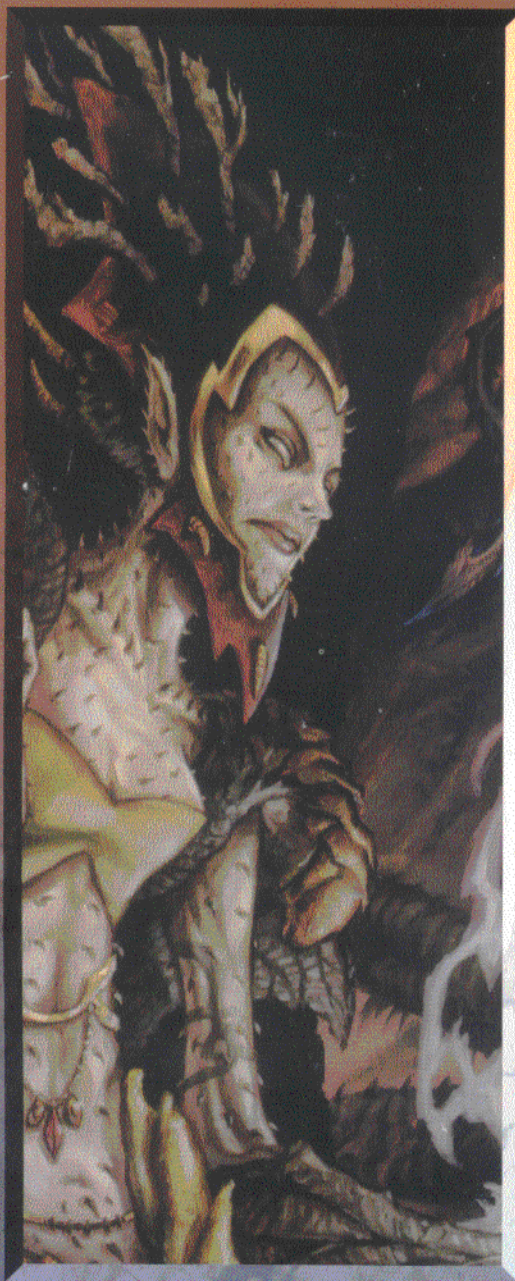
Wardens, 16, 23, 124–25
 Warders, 30, 32–33, 38, 69
 Wards, 23–24
 Wellspring, Jorian, 25–26
 Western Border, 18, 43, 93
 Denairastas of Iopos and, 88–90
 entering, 21
 geography of, 14, 15, 90–91
 people of, 91
 permanent settlements of, 98–100
 smaller villages of, 100
 True wood from, 20
 Western Kingdoms, 29
 Whirlclaw, 145–46
 Wild boar, 146–47
 Willowby, Ilisa, 34, 43, 80–81
 Witherfang, 146
 Wood lion, 147
 Wood longing, 117–21
 Woodspeak talent, 122
 Woodwalk talent, 122
 Wyrn Wood, 7, 26
 demise of, 13





• FIN •





A young elf stood before me, his pain-wracked face and body covered with thorns. He knelt down and opened his arms as if to embrace me. Dark red blood, rich with life, seeped down each thorn and gathered at the tip. The drops swelled almost to bursting, then fell to the ground.

The Blood Wood sourcebook leads Earthdawn players and gamemasters into the depths of the Blood Wood, one of Barsaive's most mysterious and dangerous places. It provides a detailed look at the Elven Court, including Queen Alachia's palace; the five great elven noble houses; the blood warders and exolashers, powerful magicians and elite warriors who serve the elven queen; and the many different regions of the vast forest where the blood elves live. It also includes descriptions and statistics for several new creatures, as well as rules for playing blood elf characters.



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