

HOW IT CAME TO PASS



*Though we must be thankful for the here and the now, we must always remember what was.
Some things must never be allowed to happen again.*

— King Varulus of Throal, 1438 TH

[The following is abridged from the opening lecture by the ork Troubadour Storymaster Jallo Redbeard to a new class of dwarf scholar students in the great library of Throal, 1512 TH.]

Regardless of what one believes of the Therans, the story of the lands we now call Barsaive would not be complete unless we started with them. Without the Therans, Barsaive might have ended up as nothing more than the scores of warring tribes and city-states that dotted the land a thousand years ago. Though the Therans brought us oppression, deceit, slavery, and inhumanity, they also gave us culture, politics, commerce, and a glimpse of the power that unity can bring.

What we know of the origins of the Therans comes from their mouths and their writings. It is their tale, their legend, that we recount here. How much is truth, how much is lie, and how much falls between may never be known while the halls of Thera still stand. Despite that, it is a tale worth telling, the story of the creation of an empire.

THE MARTYR SCHOLAR

The saga of Thera begins nearly one century before the founding of the dwarf kingdom of Throal.

The elf Elianar Messias, who will one day be revered or cursed as the Father of Thera and the Martyr Scholar, is an honored follower of the elf Spiritual Path. In addition, Messias is an important advisor to High Queen Failla of the Elven Court at Wyrn Wood, the center of elf culture. Messias has a falling-out with Failla over the desire of the elf nation of Shosara to loosen the cultural shackles that bind it to the Court. Messias believes the elves of Shosara should be allowed to develop their national culture as they see fit. Failla disagrees: the Court is the center of elf culture and all elf nations must emulate her. Failla will allow no exception.

Failla declares Shosara “separated” from the Elven Court, an act of such gravity that it threatens to fracture that nation. Messias adamantly opposes Failla and her Declaration of Separation and is banished for his challenge. Queen Failla casts him from the Court for one hundred years, and orders that he may return after that period only if he “has learned the value of heritage and a quiet tongue.” Messias never returns.

As part of his banishment, he is dispatched to a small monastery set in the foothills of what are known today as the Delaris Mountains, in southeastern Barsaive. There, along with a cadre of scholars dedicated to Mynbruje, the Passion of Knowledge, Messias works to recover, translate, and transcribe volumes of books and scrolls recently recovered from a nearby mountain cavern. The scholars believe this cache of knowledge to be thousands upon thousands of years old, dating from early in the time when the magical aura of our world still lay dormant, before it rose to become the vibrant energy of our own time. What little learned men had deciphered of the works prior to Messias’ arrival indicated that the documents spoke of an even older time, when the world’s aura was as strong as it is now.

Messias focuses on a group of six books barely kept intact by the magic and climate of the cavern where they are stored. The six are a set, matched in size and style, even down to the odd, blood-inscribed rune on each of their covers. Messias can tell just by looking at them that they contain powerful, probably dangerous, information. He also believes them to be a warning, though against what, he does not know. He devotes his life to untangling their secrets. In the end, those secrets eagerly take the life he has offered.

Late one evening, some years later, his fellows discover his body twisted and wracked with his dying agonies. Messias has torn his eyes from his head and then thrust his clenched fists and their bloody contents into the fire raging in the hearth of his quarters. He has also left a brief note nearby. It says:

*These are the Books of Harrow.
They are our doom and our salvation.
Learn from them, or we will all perish.*

That night, something horrid stalks the corridors of the monastery, and six of Messias’ brethren die terribly. The next morning, an elder elf named Kearos Navarim takes the six Books of Harrow, three of his fellow scholars, and ample provisions, and sets out on a long journey to the land of his birth far to the south and west of Barsaive. In that place, in the protection that he knows he can find there, he intends to continue Messias’ work and unlock the secrets of the Books of Harrow. He and the others settle on an island in the midst of the great Selestrean Sea and found a place of learning called Nehr’esham, or “Center of the Mind.”

This place marks the beginning of Thera, the beginning of the learning that would reveal the Horrors to us, and the beginning of the great war of the mind to save us all.

THE ETERNAL LIBRARY

Word of Nehr’esham and of its Great Project to translate the Books of Harrow spreads quickly throughout the lands of the world. The island soon becomes a gathering point for magicians, Adepts, and scholars of all types and races. Nehr’esham grows rapidly from its humble beginnings into a small city. Though Navarim nominally leads the burgeoning city, he keeps around him a tight circle of scholarly and magical advisors who administer to the city’s needs. Navarim himself concentrates on unlocking the secrets of the Books of Harrow.

Realizing that more books like the Books of Harrow must have survived elsewhere, Navarim sends scholars and Adepts out from the island to find these books and bring them back to Nehr’esham. To hold these tomes and scrolls, the city’s overseers arrange for the construction of what will become known as the Eternal Library. Magically protected and controlled, it will be a place where these and other ancient works can be kept and studied in safety, for both the works and the reader.

Ironically, as the first stones for the Eternal Library are laid, thousands of miles to the northeast, dwarf miners are taking up permanent residence in the giant mines and caverns that will someday compose Thera’s greatest rival; the dwarf kingdom of Throal. The Throal Calendar, by which Barsaive will one day mark its time, counts forward from that day.

THE FIRST HORRORS

As the Eternal Library nears completion, one hundred and fifty years after the founding of Nehr’esham, the first signs of the Horrors begin to appear in the world. In the city of Majallan, in the human-dominated lands of Landis, dark wraith-like spirits stalk the streets, driving men to violence against each other. For a year, in the city of Draoglin, in the ancient dwarf kingdom of Scythia, every dwarf child





shrivels and dies before reaching its first month of life, its essence devoured by something unseen. And across the entire land that will one day be Barsaive, hordes of twisted, insect-like creatures are found nesting in isolated areas. In southern Barsaive, their infestation is so great that sworn enemies find themselves working side by side to destroy the creatures. This time, known as The Burning, is the closest Barsaive comes to unification prior to the arrival of the Therans. Hopes of unity collapse, however, in the face of the tragic famine that grips Barsaive in the following years.

To the aged Navarim and his followers, the dreadful tidings from Majallan, Scythia, and the city-states of southern Barsaive portend the beginning of something terrible. What these awful signs warn of becomes frighteningly clear shortly thereafter. Navarim's brilliant student and assistant, the dwarf Jaron, breaks through to understanding and completes the translation of the first of the six Books of Harrow. This book, Named simply The First Book of Harrow, speaks of terrible days ahead, of the coming of the Horrors, their nearly unstoppable power, and the possible ruin of the world.

The Horrors, the book says, are terrible spirits dwelling in the darkest corners of the netherworlds. When the magical aura of this world reaches a certain strength, the Horrors will be able to build mystical bridges between this world and the twisted realm where they dwell. And then, the Horrors will come. Terrible and powerful, they are beyond reason. They seek only to consume. Some desire anything physical: rocks, trees, it matters not. Others want flesh, blood, and living creatures. The more powerful live on pain, terror, and the dark emotions those experiences arouse in their victims.

The Horrors will come, the book says, and little can be done to stop them.

THERA IS BORN

Word of the First Book of Harrow spreads quickly. The city around Nehr'esham begins to swell just as quickly, until it covers the entire island. It is soon renamed Thera, meaning "foundation." In time, the island becomes a center of trade and commerce as well as the center of learning and thought in the eastern Selestrean Sea.

The growth of Thera does not come without its price, however. Unable to support the enormous tasks of physical labor required to keep up with the swelling population and commerce, the Therans must import workers from other lands. Thera's slavery begins with these laborers. The great Thera's merchant houses that arrange for the transport of the workers maintain "control" over the workers they import. Financial arrangements must be made with the merchant house for the use of the workers. Soon, "control" of workers becomes commonplace as the powerful and influential arrangement to import workers specifically as servants and minor laborers. Within seventy years from the arrival of the first work-ship, "control" becomes ownership, and true slavery is as common on Thera as the ocean breeze.

Within a year of the translation of the First Book, Navarim dispatches copies to all the leaders in all the lands he has ever heard of in an effort to warn them. Few listen.

Meanwhile, work on deciphering the other Books of Harrow continues in the hopes of finding some way to stop or defend against the Horrors. Early on, Navarim establishes the School of Shadows as the center for this effort and charges it to find ways of defeating the Horrors. From that School, groups of Adepts and magicians travel

across the known world to confront the burgeoning Horrors and learn what they can from those confrontations.

At the same time, Thera's leading citizens create a more formal organization to govern the island. Navarim, named the Elder of Thera, presides over a body of advisors and administrators known as The Twelve. This body controls and manages the various areas of Thera and her growing influence. In one of their first acts, The Twelve establish a military force to defend Thera against increasing bandit and pirate raids.

The research conducted at the School of Shadows proves to have more uses than at first expected. Thera's scholars and magicians discover insights and understandings into the ways and makings of magic that have far-reaching ancillary results. Their research opens up to the Therans the ability to work the powerful elemental magic contained in the True Forms of air, earth, fire, water, and wood. Using that knowledge, the Therans build their stunning cities, none of which could exist without the aid of magic. They also create their airships, vessels of all kinds that fly through the air. Their research also gives them knowledge of magical warding and protection, illusion and healing, the transformation and manipulation of physical objects, and insight into the deepest reaches of the netherworlds. Thera becomes an island, a nation, and eventually an empire built on magic.

THE THERANS AND BARSAIVE

As Thera grows, the land that will someday become Barsaive exists in ignorance. Un-Named, the area is home to independent tribes and isolated city-states. Little trade exists between these powers, the only real contact coming through intermittent attacks on rich Thera by the poorer city-states. Occasional efforts by the Elven Court at Wyrms Wood to bring the area under their control fail. Though rulers of a great empire, the elves of Wyrms Wood do not see enough worth in conquering Barsaive to exert the necessary political and military pressure. Their failure ultimately leaves Barsaive vulnerable to Thera's domination.

In the Throal year 212 TH, the Therans finally arrive in Barsaive. They first make contact with the humans of Landis near the city of Vivane and what will someday become Sky Point. From there, Thera's representatives and ambassadors travel across Barsaive, making contact and trade alliances with every group they can find. This land, they discover, abounds with the natural and magical elements and materials the Therans covet. The Thera's envoys promise a glittering future through trade to Barsaive's city-states and tribes; dazzled by the prospect of Thera's riches, the local leaders sign agreements without reading between the lines.

The arrival of the first Thera's trading fleet in 216 TH comes as a great surprise to Barsaive's local powers. They had signed treaties and agreements with the Thera's envoys, but without any real understanding of the implications. The sight of dozens of Thera's airships drifting slowly through the air over their palaces, castles, and tents is a literal and symbolic blow to them. A new power has come to Barsaive now, and it is second to none.

BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE

The Therans enjoy their growing power. The island itself, its central citadel, the Eternal Library, and other great works of architecture and culture are renowned across the world. Thera's position in the heavily traveled Selestrean Sea makes her an ideal port of trade and

commerce. For mystical thought and pure magical power, Thera has no equal. The potency of her magicians and the skill of her Adepts are envied the world over. She needs little else to seal her position in the world. Nevertheless, Fate gives it to her.

Nearly four hundred years after the founding of Nehr'esham, in the Throal year 341 TH, Kearos Navarim dies of old age. His body is sealed in amber and placed in the great plaza of the citadel at the heart of Thera, next to the cenotaph of his friend Elianar Messias. Word spreads quickly that Navarim died while putting the finishing touches on the culmination of the Great Project and the researches of the School of Shadows. The rumors are correct.

Five years after Navarim's death, his successor as Elder of Thera, the human Meach Vara Lingam, announces to the world that though the scholars have found nothing beyond a keen blade and an iron will to defeat the coming Horrors, they have discovered something to protect against them. Lingam unveils to the world Kearos Navarim's crowning and final work, the Rites of Protection and Passage.

RITES OF PROTECTION AND PASSAGE

Despite Lingam's brave words, the Rites of Protection and Passage does not offer any truly effective methods of protecting against the Horrors, but it does present the theoretical means by which that protection can be discovered. In his four-volume work, Navarim concluded that isolation from the Horrors is the only true means of protection against them. Because of their individual power and sheer, overwhelming numbers, direct confrontation with the Horrors would ultimately prove suicidal.

To hide from the Horrors, Navarim proposed to construct great underground fortresses. Dubbed kaers, these dwellings would protect their occupants against the Horrors on the theory that strong enough walls will keep out even the most physically powerful Horror. The natural, solid, earthen walls of the kaer would also provide protection against those Horrors that travel through astral space or by means as yet unknown. However, Navarim warned that an earthen barrier might not be enough to withstand every Horror.

Navarim's book also offered other means of protection. Cities could be shielded under domes woven of True Air. Kaers could be built beneath the sea and protected by True Water, and so on. Navarim believed that the underground kaer would offer the strongest defense, though even it might be breached.

To shore up the kaers' defenses, Navarim offered additional protections to defend against the Horrors on a primal level. Navarim believed that magicians could learn to create wards and runes that would "call" to a Horror through magic. Once the Horror examined the rune, its mind would become caught in the magical web and mathematical maze of the rune's construction. Because a Horror comes from a place deep in the mystical netherworlds, it must always devote some degree of concentration to keeping itself in this world. A rune entrapping its mind would break the Horror's concentration and force the thing either to retreat or lose its grasp in this world and be flung back to the pit from whence it came.

Unfortunately for Thera and her sister lands, only the theory for these runes and wards exists. Navarim believed they could be devised and had charged the School of Shadows with their creation just prior to his death. In the meantime, he recommended that kaers be built

wherever possible in preparation for the day when the infestation of Horrors would become so overpowering that they would render the surface of the world all but uninhabitable. This would occur, Navarim believed, in just over eight hundred years.

The School of Shadows continues to work on mastery of the runes, intending to make them available to all once their secrets are unlocked. And unlock them they do, but instead of sharing them, Thera closely guards the secrets of the runes. Soon, she will use them as a bargaining tool to extend the Thera sphere of influence.

The immediate reaction to Navarim's work is mixed. Many dismiss its conclusions outright, while others look upon it with almost religious reverence. Most, though, cannot take seriously a threat eight hundred years in the future. They read Navarim's words and vow to prepare, later.

ORICHALCUM WARS

Thera, however, does not wait. The mighty, magic-rich island needs significant and, perhaps, extravagant protection against the Horrors. To this end, its leaders begin to collect vast quantities of the magical metal orichalcum. The Therans begin striking favorable trade agreements in order to obtain large quantities of the rare material. No one can guess what manner of protection the Therans wish to build that requires so much of that metal, but as long as they pay well for it, no one much cares.

For those who do not know, orichalcum can only occur from the natural mixing of certain other earthen materials that combine in the presence of True Earth. Though not a part of orichalcum, True Earth is always found in the same area as that rare ore. Orichalcum must usually be mined, but occasionally nodes of it are found close enough to the surface of the land to be gathered by hand.

Orichalcum trade with Thera proves profitable for the rest of the world, despite the hue and cry of some deprived local magicians. It is so profitable that shipments become the target of bandits and raiders. Sixty years after Thera has begun its extensive importation of orichalcum, the trolls of the Twilight Peaks, called the crystal raiders, lead their ramshackle airships in a stunning long-distance raid against Shosaran orichalcum stores being prepared for shipment overland to Thera. Other raids quickly follow suit as the crystal raiders hone their skill of raiding by air.

Rather than band together for protection against the raiders, the lords and leaders of various lands take the raid as a signal to start their own plundering. The provinces of Ustrect and Cara Fahd simultaneously attack Landis; Throal is nearly overrun by marauding bands of orks; the Elven Court in Wyrn Wood fights Scythian dwarfs and their human allies in a series of terrible battles. The wars last more than 40 years. Nations switch sides with a shift of the wind, migratory tribes become little more than mercenaries, and nobility plot against and betray their own kin. Only in Shosara and Throal are the rightful rulers not, even temporarily, deposed. For the first 30 years, orichalcum and elemental mining and gathering operations are declared off-limits by unspoken agreement between these two kingdoms; both need the mines, and neither would profit from their destruction.

THE DEATH OF NATIONS

In this story of the three towering giants that are the Thera Empire, the Kingdom of Throal, and the Elven Court, often overlooked



are the fates of those nations that did not survive the ravages of war amongst Name-givers and the corruption of the Horrors. Their Names mark places on our great maps to this day: the ork kingdom of Cara Fahd, located to the south and west of Great Sword Valley; the lowland troll kingdom of Ustrect, located at the northern base of the Twilight Peaks; and the human kingdom of Landis, located south of the Greenheart River, on the western edge of the Death's Sea. Each has vast and glorious histories, and we know now that their ends were part of the beginnings of the Horrors' work upon our land. The Orichalcum Wars rage on, as these kingdoms fight the crystal raiders, and the ships of Throal, but none did they hate more than each other. For much of the forty year long war Cara Fahd squeezes tribute out of Landis, with the human kingdom frequently succeeding in breaking free of the ork yoke. Ustrect wars on both, forging occasional alliances with Landis when such alliance fitted its needs. Finally, with each of their leaders (both military and political) succumbing to the influence of Horror-taint, Cara Fahd and Landis clash in a pyrrhic confrontation. The Queen of Landis, allied with the forces of Ustrect, captures the area around a lava field ripe with True Fire. In retaliation, the ork prince and commander, Cathon Grimeye, unleashes every bound or trapped fire elemental present in the field. No ork survives, the vanguard of the Landis army and its monarch are destroyed, Ustrect is crippled, and the mines are severely damaged. Those few who survive the fight originate the phrase "scorchers" to describe the terrible destructiveness of the orks. Cara Fahd does not survive as a nation into the next generation. Landis stagnates, and Ustrect tries to continue on by allying with Throal. Their actions set the stage for the final, brutal years of the war. None survive the Scourge.

THERAN NAVY AND EMPIRE

As long as the flow of orichalcum and other magical elements remains steady, the Therans care little about the war. As the Orichalcum Wars rage on, more and more Theran mining vessels sail over Barsaive. These barges rarely touch down, instead mining and gathering True Air from the clouds around the highest mountain peaks. Using new techniques known only to them, the Theran miners are very successful. That success makes them targets.

The crystal raiders, having set off the Orichalcum Wars, sit back and watch them rage. Because the furious fighting has halted nearly all mining in the area, they make only the occasional supply raid. The Theran air barges, however, offer them a target they cannot resist.

The raiders strike quickly and often, plundering and looting the air barges. Thera warns that they will not tolerate further interference with the air mining operations. The Therans begin protecting the air barges with warships, military airships. At first these ships are vedettes, air barges expanded and armored for war. The raiders thumb their noses at the Theran war vessels; they continue attacking the convoys, using their faster, more maneuverable drakkar airships to escape back to the Twilight Peaks with their booty.

The Therans then begin protecting the mining convoys with kilas, sail-less, massive, floating stone citadels built specifically for war. Despite mounting losses, the raiders step up their attacks. The final straw for the Therans comes after they lose a massive fleet of air barges, vedettes, and kilas to the raiders. Sixty days later, the Therans reveal their true power.

As morning comes, the clan-moots of the crystal raiders awaken to the sounds of alarm across the Twilight Peaks. Drifting across the great plain to the southeast of the mountains, not far from Vivane, is the largest airship anyone has ever conceived of, let alone seen. Devoid of a true ship's hull and sail, the vessel *Victory* is a massive shard of rock the size of a small city, propelled by raw magic in defiance of the laws of nature. The Therans call this terrible machine of war a behemoth.



The crystal raiders are astounded by the sight, but swarm to their airships and move to attack. The Theran airship commander dispatches a messenger spirit to the raiders, telling them to surrender or be obliterated. Proud and defiant, the raiders destroy the spirit.

Moving to attack, the raiders encounter a thunderous rain of weapons fire from the Theran ship. Siege engines, mounted onto the ship's stone hull and guided by magic, catapult giant arrows of metal and wood at the attackers. Bolts of mystic energy lash from the airship as well, as Theran mages focus their powers against the raiders. The raiders scatter under the onslaught, straight into the waiting guns of kilas hidden in the clouds overhead.

The battle continues for hours until the Theran behemoth finally reaches the edge of the Twilight Peaks. Then, it turns its terrible destructive power away from the remaining raider airships and directs it against their homes. The siege engines pound the moot-homes, magics tear into the raider families who attempt to defend the surface buildings and caverns, and elementals unleashed from the Theran ship ravage what little defense remains.

Stunned at the massacre they are witnessing, the raiders surrender. They are taken prisoner aboard the floating city-ship, to be brought back to Thera as slaves in chains. The Theran forces burn their airships, though they do not bother to destroy the few remaining survivors in the Twilight Peaks. With what will become known as the Battle of Sky Point, the Therans prove they are a power to be reckoned with. No

longer content to simply conduct trade and commerce subject to the whims of local lords, the Therans use Sky Point to show the world what awaits those foolish enough to interfere with Thera's desires and aims.

One hundred days later, in the four hundredth and forty-third year of Throal, the then-human Elder of Thera, Thom Edro, proclaims the Thera Empire. Thera declares the lands of Barsaive a Thera province, promising all those who swear loyalty to her protection from the ravages of the Orichalcum Wars, as well as first rights to new enchantments to defend against the Horrors. To enforce their power, the new Empire places a permanent Thera military presence at Sky Point and founds the provincial capital of Parlath in the northwest corner of the land. Dozens of smaller city-states and kingdoms quickly submit to Thera. More powerful kingdoms submit more slowly, but visits from the Thera Navy prove persuasive.

A leading citizen of Thera, the human Kern Fallo, is named the first Overlord of Barsaive. Though Thera controls the province, Fallo sees the practical value of local administration and calls upon the dwarfs of nearby Throal to assist him. Throal, unwillingly allied to Thera out of need for the Thera enchantments against the Horrors, agrees.

Through this administration, Throal mediates between the Therans and Barsaive. The dwarfs provide a buffer between the governments of Barsaive and their Thera overlords, defusing much of the tension between them. Also through this administration, Throal spreads and promotes the dwarf tongue as the trading language of Barsaive. For the first time in its history, citizens of various Barsaive regions can communicate with relative ease.

JARON AND THE SPHINX

When Thom Edro establishes the Thera Empire, he installs himself as its First Governor. Many know it is only a matter of time before Edro secures the backing to proclaim himself Emperor.

Other grumblings surface as well, rumors that Edro is using unnatural magics to extend his life and those of loyal human and ork followers. Of course dwarf Adepts had long ago developed life-extending magics for themselves ... but this is different.

Magic had extended the life of the dwarf scholar-magician Jaron as well, though it left him less energetic than previously. He fears that Edro is turning Thera into a mockery of the teachings of Elianar Messias. Each time Jaron voices his objections, another of his followers vanishes. He realizes that despite his deciphering of the First Book of Harrow, the expanding Thera Empire no longer considers him an asset.

The night after the disappearance of Jaron's closest apprentice, a great working begins in the open park across the harbor from Thera's central citadel. Three Great Form earth elementals tear rock, stone, and True Earth up from the very foundations of the island and begin to sculpt them under Jaron's watchful eye. Thera imperial guardsmen and magicians rush to the area, but a powerful shield surrounding the park holds them back. They gape in wonder as a giant stone sphinx takes form. Its head is sculpted turning downward and seemingly asleep. As the sphinx is completed just before daybreak, Jaron turns to address the masses gathered in the park. He speaks to them of the teachings of the Martyr Scholar and the dreams of Keros Navarim. He also speaks of the dangers of power and the dark path he fears Thera is beginning to walk. He has constructed the sphinx, he tells them, to watch over Thera and her governors. It will remain in the park as the guardian of the beliefs of the past and an eternal reminder to the

future. As Jaron falls silent, the shield protecting the park dissolves. The three earth elementals gather Jaron within themselves and together the four merge with the sphinx. The crowds rush forward, and the sphinx slowly opens its stone eyes, which blaze from within with a blue-white light. The sphinx lifts its head to stare out across the main harbor directly at the central citadel and the heart of Thera. From that moment on, it remains in that position.

Thera magicians examine the sphinx's construction, but its magical weavings baffle them. None can penetrate it enough to even glimpse the sphinx's True Pattern, much less learn enough to gain power over it. Because they cannot predict what may happen, they fear trying to manipulate or unmake it.

To this day, the great sphinx sits staring out over the harbor of Thera as a reminder to all who come and to all who rule there. The leader of Thera remains the First Governor. None has dared call himself Emperor.

THERA AND THE DRAGONS

Thera's domination of the cultures of the Selestean basin and neighboring areas is not total. Kingdoms and peoples continue to search for their own solutions to the problem of the Horrors because success means greater independence from Thera's increasingly oppressive rule. They sponsor eager scholars and brave adventurers to seek out dragons, for the creatures are known to have survived the last Scourge (as the invasion of the Horrors has come to be known) remarkably intact. However, many dragons have no desire to share their secrets, greatly reducing the population of eager scholars. Some dragons, through bribery or entreaty, share the method of creating the dragon lair, which scholars believe protected them. A rare few actually contact kingdoms on their own, offering to help for their own dragon reasons.

The leaders of Thera see the dragon actions as a challenge to their power and position. Proposed responses spark fierce debate; Edro has no desire to antagonize the dragons at a time when Thera should be using all its power to prepare for the coming Scourge. But the factions that profit most from the trade in magical elements mount effective pressure. The Thera Navy organizes strikes against three powerful and influential great dragons. The first two succeed in killing the target dragons and destroying their lairs, though the action costs the Therans one of their mighty stone behemoths for the first time. The third strike, against the great dragon Icewing, fails. The Therans find only his lair, largely empty of anything of value and power.

Thera ambassadors pass firmly worded communiques through discreet channels; they refuse to tolerate dragon interference in Thera domestic policy. The dragons appear to retreat; Thera merchants and guild Adepts do a booming business as new orders for Thera protective enchantments flood in.

Then, one sunset, sailors and dock merchants spot a dragon atop the head of the sphinx. As the Therans hesitate between staring and fleeing, the dragon flies off. The next morning twelve citizens are found dead. Two are provisioners to the navy, one an earth-element smith, one a clerk to the treasurer, two guild Adepts, one a moneylender, and five are principal contractors for protective enchantments. Each of the twelve had agitated for, or profited from, the action against the dragons. Over the next two weeks, the dragons strike twice more. Two dozen more leading Therans die. Thera diplomatic channels convey a second message: Therans are to leave dragons strictly alone. No further



Theran raids will be planned or executed. The dragons apparently take the Therans' message to heart and cease to disclose what they know of the Horrors and the coming Scourge.

RACE TO THE SHELTERS

As the Scourge draws nearer, the kingdoms and cultures of the world prepare for the mass invasion of the Horrors. Some build small underground villages with protective wards woven from the roots of the plants above. The dwarfs of Throal hollow out most of an entire mountain, the largest in the kingdom, to build their kaer. Other cities become fantastic citadels, with handwritten runic phrases carefully inscribed on every bit of masonry in the city. With each new report of a Horror, work becomes more frantic, ever more urgent. Fear and panic result in such a heavy spread of rumors that it becomes difficult to sort out the truth. Contact between cities, and between kingdoms, becomes erratic. Some cities become so fearful that they isolate themselves years before the actual Scourge begins.

Throughout this time, the most reliable communications come from, or through, Thera. The Theran Empire literally holds together the fabric of civilization until most of their client states are prepared.

Thera's demands for slaves greatly increase during this period. Life is cheap, so the demands are met. Rulers sometimes sell an entire town into slavery in order to obtain the Runes of Warding to protect two or three other towns. Throal and Landis balk at the increased demand for slaves and work furiously to pay Thera's dear price with raw elements.

THE ELVEN SCHISM

Some nations reject Thera outright. Queen Alachia of Wyrms Wood, High Queen of the Elves, despises the Therans for their use of slavery and for their political opposition to her rule. She commands that no elven nation, and no elf, follow the Theran ways of protection. She presents an alternative in which elf Elementalists will use wood magics to weave the living plants of a forest into a kaer. The Horrors, she believes, will be unable to pass through living wood.

Elven scholars outside Wyrms Wood, and it is said even some within, are aghast at the proposal. They believe that though the Theran method is not foolproof, it would provide more effective protection against the Horrors. These magicians and scholars doubt that any wooden kaer could possibly withstand the savage physical punishment the Horrors would inflict upon it.

Alachia, however, stands resolute. She vows that any elf who follows the Theran way will be forever separated from all of elven culture. This threat, far from cowering the other elven nations, shatters the great cultural elven empire Alachia commanded, presumably forever.

Word comes first from the elves of the faraway Northern Kingdoms. As the elves most distant from the Court at Wyrms Wood, they feel the least amount of true loyalty to its ways. Though little is known of those Northern Kingdoms in Barsaive, their rejection of Alachia represents a severe blow to her power. Before she can react, Alachia receives word from other elven nations and city-states that they refuse to follow her. They wish the Court well, but they will not follow Alachia to what they believe to be certain death.

Queen Alachia, in the end, does not formally declare these nations separate. Their refusal has bereft the Elven Court of much of its power, making any such declaration an empty gesture. Instead Alachia chooses

to wait until after the Scourge when her continued existence can prove her wisdom. At her command, the elves of Wyrms Wood begin the construction of the wooden kaer that will be their downfall.

THE SCOURGE

Scholars now place the beginning of the Scourge in the one thousand and eighth year of the Throal Calendar. The Therans count that date as the year TE 565. Both use the same indicator for the beginning of the Scourge: the sealing up of Thera. As a center and focus of magical power, Thera is beset by the Horrors earlier and with greater severity than the rest of the world. Thera's last words to her subject nations are wishes of luck and safety, and an affirmation of her power. Then, the great Dome of True Air and Fire that surrounds the island ignites and seals Thera off from the world.

Though some other groups had previously sealed themselves off, the rest of the world sees the sealing of Thera as the last great sign that the Scourge is beginning. Horrors appear with increasing frequency and are becoming more than a match for local militia, constabulary, and brave adventurers.

Within twenty years of the sealing of Thera, the rising tide of Horrors cuts off virtually all communication between kingdoms. Even astral space becomes too polluted to access, and magicians the world over learn the true benefits of the spell matrices devised by the Therans. Mindless herds of destructive Horrors roam the land, consuming every scrap of life they can find. Other, more intelligent Horrors probe existing defenses, and batter their way through weaker ones. Still others infiltrate society and slip with the people into their kaers. They wait and reveal themselves, violently or subtly, after the kaer has been sealed.

THROAL AND PARLAINTH

In Barsaive, the great powers of Throal and Parlainth, the Theran provincial capital, brace themselves against the Horrors and remain open and accessible for as long as they can. Both provide shelter for refugees until the last possible moment. Throal's kaer, though of Theran design, includes additional mystical dwarf craftsmanship. Parlainth intends to use a radical method of isolation; its magicians will cast a great spell to shift Parlainth from this world to another in the netherworlds, one out of reach of the Horrors. To further keep the city safe, part of the spell will reach out across Barsaive and wipe the memory of Parlainth from the mind of every living person. With no memory of Parlainth, no one will betray either its existence or its disappearance to the Horrors. (The tale of Parlainth holds both great deeds and great tragedy, and is best fully told elsewhere) Ironically, at the last minute, the Theran Overlord of Barsaive loses faith in the plan that he sponsored and flees to Throal with his staff. Parlainth seals itself off, disappears, and leaves the memory of Barsaive for nearly four hundred years. Supposedly safe in Throal, the Theran Overlord and many of his staff are killed when a portion of the Throal kaer collapses only a few months after Throal has sealed itself up.

In the years just before the Scourge, the dwarfs of Throal do not remain idle. Years of administering Barsaive under Theran domination have taught them much. They know that during the projected time of the Scourge, six hundred years, much of society and culture will wither within the kaers. The Theran plan prepared for every aspect of physical survival; they provided for magical plant nurturing, air and waste

recirculation, and breeding cycles. However, the Therans had neglected the less tangible things.

To this end, the dwarfs created The Book of Tomorrow. In this book, they set down the history of Barsaive and Thera, the great tales of the day and others past. They wrote out the dwarf language in its entirety so that children in the kaers could learn to speak, read, and write a common tongue. The book told them how to rebuild their homes and lands once the Horrors had gone. The book told them how to use arts and crafts as a continuing sign that they were free from the influence of a Horror, for the dwarfs had learned that a person Horrortainted could not create things of art and beauty. And most important, it told the dwarfs how to tell when the dark days of the Scourge were over.

Finally, in the year 1050 TH, Throal sealed itself off and prepared for the worst. Throal's leaders were virtually certain that some Horrors had entered the kaer with the refugees and knew that they would soon reveal themselves. Though the story has been lost to the mists of time, the strength of the dwarfs enabled them to discover and defeat one Horror before it could ravage the kaer. The time of the Scourge brought suffering and hardship, but the people of Throal endured through their physical strength and will to survive.

During that time, other things change in Throal as well. The dwarfs as a people, and their friends inside with them, look forward to the future. Discussions begin about what the world will be like after the Scourge. In the court of King Varulus II, dwarf common sense links with imagination to provide a new vision of the world.

Philosophers, soldiers, priests, scholars, craftsmen, and nobles argue for years until a rough consensus emerges. For the first time, the rights of an individual are argued and defined. The dwarfs write down these rights and the logic that bred them in the Council Compact of 1270 TH. This document will serve as a guide to forming the new dwarf society and that of their neighbors in the years after the Scourge. In broad terms, it defines individual rights, property rights, and the role of law. For example, the section on individual rights contains the following passage:

We have shown that rights to property are a necessary good for an orderly society. What of the issue of slavery, the ownership of another person?

Persons can certainly be considered property. But who owns a person? Our common sense dictates that the spirit born into the body owns the body. That spirit contains its movement, its thoughts, its actions. The spirit makes active use of the body it owns. Our language supports this view — an evil spirit who inhabits and controls a body is said to have “possessed” the body; this possession is seen as unnatural. The evil spirit has stolen the body from its rightful owner.

Slavery removes the control of an individual's body from its natural spirit to the slaveowner. This transfer is made without compensation to the spirit, the true owner of the body. Involuntary servitude also steals the body. It is a crime.

The Council Compact is a rigorously thought-out statement of principles. Its goal is to develop a fair, orderly society to aid the conduct of commerce. The Compact embodies common sense and can serve as a shared belief among all people. During the time in the kaer, the Compact circulates among dwarf nobles, who accept it without

reservation. Those who believe in the Compact decide that the world following the Scourge will be different from the one that had existed before, and very different from the one the Therans expect.

BLOOD WOOD

In 1262 TH, the wooden kaer of the Elven Court begins to fail. The loss of protection is slow, but inexorable. Panic strikes within the kaer as the elves desperately seek alternative means of protection. They haven't enough time to construct underground kaers, nor do they have sufficient reserves of Elemental Air or Earth. Desperation and depression set in as the Horrors begin to break through. The elves create roving militia squads to respond quickly to breaks in the kaer barriers, as Elementalists strive to repair the existing breaks and shore up other weakening sections.

Then the elves of the Wood make a startling and ultimately terrifying discovery. Of those Horrors that break through, those most intelligent, most devious, and most difficult to destroy all but ignore elves who are already mad or in extreme, constant pain. The advisors to Queen Alachia are quick to realize that these Horrors need to inflict madness and pain themselves in order to feed. Existing madness and pain are not enough for them. A horrible seed begins to grow in the heart of the Wyrms Wood, a plan for protection so terrible that its implementation will be as heinous as anything the Horrors themselves can inflict.

Finally, with the Horrors on the verge of complete penetration of the elven kaer, the elves enact their desperate plan. Elementalists perform a twisted blood ritual that forces a physical change upon the surviving elves of Wyrms Wood. Thorns begin to grow out of their skin, ripping and tearing, leaving them in constant, excruciating, overpowering pain. The initial Ritual of the Thorns kills many of the elves in Wyrms Wood, but those who survive learn to live with the pain and even draw upon it for strength. For the Horrors, nothing they want remains in Wyrms Wood. Some of the more bestial Horrors continue to attack and attempt to break through, but the more diabolical ones who feed on pain and suffering leave to find their nurture elsewhere. The elves of what has become the Blood Wood have found a way to survive, but at a terrible price.

THE TIME OF HIDING

Centuries pass as the people within the kaers and citadels huddle in fear and gradually learn to cope, all the while longing for the touch of sunlight and the taste of clean air. The inhabitants of many kaers will not live to see the sun again. Horrors batter or guile their way into more kaers than anyone even in their darkest thoughts believed possible. Whole cities are lost to the Horrors, entire societies and civilizations gone forever.

In Barsaive, the greatest loss may be the city of Parlainth, though none would remember her grandeur until many years after the end of the Scourge. We now know that sometime during the Scourge, Horrors somehow entered Parlainth. All anyone knows for certain comes from the tale of J'role, the Honorable Thief, and his companions. By the time they found the magical Longing Ring, learned its secrets, and used it to return forgotten Parlainth to this world, all of the city's inhabitants were dead or gone. Searchers found few bodies; unknown Horrors had left the city desolate. In the years following the Scourge, Parlainth became a center of adventure and danger as brave souls from

all over Barsaive went there to find her lost treasures and unlock her dark secrets. But even after the Scourge, terrible things still walk the streets of Parlainth and hide in her darkest corners, and most of her secrets remain hidden to this day.

Those kaers that hold copies of the Throal Book of Tomorrow know the magic ritual that will tell them when they may safely re-enter the world. Those lacking this ritual must guess and hope. The magic itself is basic: a simple ball of True Earth is enchanted and placed over a dish of True Water. The magics of the ritual keep the ball suspended over the water. As the strength of the world's magical aura wanes, and the Horrors are forced to retreat, the ball of True Earth descends until it finally touches the True Water, and the two mix and neutralize each other.

All across Barsaive, the people in the kaers watch the ball descend. Slowly, ever so slowly, it drops toward the water. Finally, in the fourteen hundred and fifteenth year of the Throal Calendar the ball stops falling, hanging an inch above the water. Shocked scholars and magicians watch in wonder and dread. It is too soon, by hundreds of years, for the Scourge to have abated. And why had the ball stopped? No one knew the answer then, and no one knows to this day. We only know that, for some reason, on that day, the mystical aura of our world stabilized and has remained constant from that point forward.

A few years pass and the people in the kaers begin to believe that the ball will not descend any further. The doors of the kaers begin to open into a bright, sunlit world ravaged by the Horrors. Most, though not all, of the Horrors are gone.



THE RETURN

Throal begins the first, tentative return to the outside world just prior to the cessation of the ball's drop. Throal scholars and magicians believe that the strength of the world's magical aura may have dropped enough that most of the more powerful Horrors have already begun to flee. They doubt the accuracy of the Theran calculations of the Scourge's length, believing the Therans to have erred conservatively so that they might enter the new world first and dominate it.

In 1409 TH, the first scouting party sent outside Throal is destroyed within hours. Each year after that Throal sends out another scouting party, none of whom, at first, return. In 1412 TH, the scouting party led by the female troll Vaare Longfang returns alive and intact. She reports that the Horrors are still present, but they are fewer and less active. Throal's leaders decide to launch a greater expedition to learn the extent of the Horrors' ravaging. They outfit an airship, give it magical protection and an elite crew, and offer Vaare Longfang command.

THE EARTHDOWN

In 1416 TH, just after the world's aura has apparently stabilized, the expedition sets sail in the refitted airship, christened the *Earthdown*. Its mission lasts almost a year. The battle-scarred *Earthdown* returns to Throal with an exhausted but exhilarated crew. Vaare has charted most of Barsaive and found it predominately free of the Horrors. Those that remain have retreated into pockets of higher magic where they find it easier to exist. Few live in the open. A jubilant Throal prepares to emerge into the world.

In 1418 TH, Vaare again takes command of the *Earthdown*, to begin contacting the nations of Barsaive and inform them that the worst is over. The mission proceeds slowly, for the people of the kaers and citadels assume the troll and her crew are some trick of the Horrors. After one year, only two kaers of the twenty-one visited have opened their doors. King Varulus III alters Vaare's mission, and orders her to take the *Earthdown* to the largest kingdoms first.

The ship sails for Landis, but never arrives. Last seen at the Cliff City of the t'skrang House Syrtis on the Serpent River, it is assumed that Horrors attacked and destroyed the vessel with all hands on board. For decades afterward, stories abound of sightings of the haunted hulk of the *Earthdown* sailing through parts of Barsaive, vanishing from sight shortly after being spotted.

THROAL OPENS

Despite this loss, King Varulus III orders the doors of Throal opened in the summer of 1420 TH. Patrols and magical surveillance remain high, to guard against unknown Horrors. No one leaves Throal for nearly sixteen months. Varulus then issues a proclamation granting land to those who farm, mine, forest, or otherwise make productive use of it. A trickle of brave souls turns into a flood of opportunists. Despite setbacks and encounters with some remaining Horrors, the resettlement of the Throal Mountains begins.

Over the next few years, merchants organize expeditions to reestablish trade routes with nearby communities. They find some kaers whose people refuse to open their doors; at those places, they leave a small tent camp to wait patiently for the kaer to open. The traders find other kaers and citadels whose defenses have been breached;

they mark these as dangerous and to be avoided. Many others open their doors; the merchants give them copies of the Council Compact and ask them to join the new world that Throal envisions. As the merchants make more and more contacts, they expand their efforts deeper into Barsaive and into the areas held exclusively by humans, trolls, t'skrang, orks, and other races.

They move quickly, for they know that the Therans will return to Barsaive as soon as they can.

CONFLICT OF DESTINIES

Thera herself does not move as quickly as feared. Little word comes to Barsaive concerning the condition of the island or its immediate resources, but Thera's unexpected absence leads many to believe that Thera did not escape the Scourge as unbruised as her leaders had hoped. The first Theran vessels do not arrive in Barsaive until 1449 TH, fifty years after Thera is believed to have opened herself to the new world.

The Theran emissaries meet with little welcome. The time of the Scourge and the few years immediately after have given the people of Barsaive the opportunity to live free of the Theran yoke, and they like the taste of freedom. The Theran emissaries, unprepared for anything but respect and cooperation, threaten Barsaive with violence. In answer, local Barsaivians burn the three Theran vedettes anchored at Sky Point and put their crews to the sword.

Theran First Governor Nikodus names Fallan Pavelis as the new Overlord of Barsaive. He orders Pavelis to re-establish Theran supremacy in Barsaive, for the Therans believe that the land is still their province.

Pavelis chooses the strong hand over the soft voice. Theran vedettes conduct slaving runs over isolated villages. Shipborne troops attack coastal cities and seize "forgotten tribute." Ork mercenaries in Theran pay conduct bandit raids against kingdoms that resist Thera. Human tribal leaders are assassinated and replaced with more amenable rulers.

Besieged, the people of Barsaive turn to Throal for help. The dwarf kingdom has all but promised rebellion with the Council Compact; surely the dwarfs will counter the Therans and end the Empire's domination.

In Throal, though all believe that the Therans must be stopped, the dwarfs realize bitterly how little they can do on their own. Throal has not the strength to defeat a combined force of Theran air and ground forces, nor does any other single power in Barsaive. Together, though, the combined will and might of all the peoples of Barsaive may prevail.

King Varulus III sends messengers and emissaries to the rulers of Barsaive. Together, his message says, Barsaive must either stand free or else fall into oppression and slavery. Though his words stir the hearts of many, the sight of Theran airships attacking and raiding at will stills their actions.

An act by the Therans themselves finally turns the tide. The First Governor has learned of the Council Compact, receiving a copy from Pavelis. Enraged by its contents, Nikodus sends a damning message to his Overlord of Barsaive. The message tells Pavelis that the dwarf logic of commerce and ownership outlined in the Compact makes it clear that every man, woman, and child in Barsaive owes their survival from the Horrors to Thera and the First Governor, personally. This blood debt makes all the people of Barsaive the personal slaves of the First Governor, and his to do with as he wishes. He instructs Pavelis to begin

the systematic destruction of all Barsaive cities not vital to elemental trade or gathering. The first target will be Throal.

As the First Governor shifts troops to Barsaive, and Pavelis gathers them into the largest Theran armada ever assembled, Barsaive loyalists within the Overlord's palace in Sky Point obtain a copy of the message. They duplicate it and distribute it across Barsaive. The message raises anger strong enough to banish fear; the peoples of Barsaive no longer question that they must and will fight.

His army assembled, Pavelis moves on Throal. Though the dwarf kingdom is unprepared to fight the kind of war Thera brings to them, the rest of Barsaive is not. Goaded by such heroes as the human J'role and the t'skrang Westhral, Barsaive comes to the aid of Throal. Sky Raiders duplicate their ancestors' successes of the Orichalcum Wars and attack Theran ships. T'skrang riverboats run blockades and intercept supplies. Ork cavalry and elven bowmen assault supply convoys and base camps and then vanish into the night. Windling thieves infiltrate Theran command ships and camps and learn valuable information, leaving behind nasty magical surprises.

Harassed and battered continuously from all sides, Pavelis takes a desperate gamble to settle the issue before Nikodus' patience runs out. He masses his forces for a frontal assault on Throal, but the hit-and-run fighters of Barsaive cut down half the armada and destroy its supplies. Facing disaster, the armada breaks, and the Therans withdraw to Sky Point.

WAR

Barsaive, after initially repelling the Theran advances, returns to bickering and infighting for the next sixty years. The Therans retreat to lick their wounds and plan a greater strategy. Finally sensing the opening they are looking for, the Therans land the behemoth *Triumph* near Lake Ban, effectively disrupting commerce over all of Barsaive. At the same time, King Varulus III is assassinated and Prince Neden ascends to the throne. Only after launching an assault against the Theran city-ship does Neden learn that his father was killed by an assassin from the ruling family of Iopos, the Denairastas. Although the assault on the *Triumph* is a military disaster for Throal, Neden rallies the peoples of Barsaive for a massive, all-out war effort. Neden's force, made up of the Army and Navy of Throal, troops from the elf-queen's court, dozens and dozens of ships from the crystal raider tribes, volunteers from all over Barsaive, and several dragons, assault and capture the *Triumph*. Pressing on from this victory, Neden's army joins with the forces of the newly reborn ork nation of Cara Fahd and commences an all-out attack on the fortress of Sky Point.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF SKY POINT

Although the Theran forces are overextended, trying to hold together pieces of their crumbling empire, Sky Point is a massive fortress with dozens of other ships on hand and the nearby Theran city of Vivane to support it. In an effort to cut off this additional support, the great dragons of Barsaive enact a ritual to isolate the city of Vivane from the fortress. Although their ritual accomplishes this, the huge amount of magical energy attracts the attention of a massive, cloud-like Horror which attempts to envelop the city. The ritual sealing Vivane off prevents the Horror from attacking the city, but in the course of the battle,

Theran mages break through the spell, inadvertently bringing the Horror down on their own citizens. The battle at Sky Point itself is devastating. Weapons never before seen in Barsaive are brought to bear by the Therans. Magical attacks tear into the advancing army of orks, killing hundreds in a single pass. Barsaivian airships are knocked out of the sky like they are so many buzzing insects. In the midst of all of this, a battered galleon appears through the clouds. It is the first confirmed sighting of the *Earthdawn* in almost a century. As the Barsaivian troops rally to this sight, the great dragon Vasdenjas is killed defending the ship. Realizing that this has bought them a critical reprieve, Captain Chorak Bonecracker of the living crystal ship *Thera's Bane* sets a ramming course, and the ship collides with a base pillar supporting Sky Point. Several allied captains, flying captured Theran ships, follow his example. Sky Point, the glorious symbol of Theran dominion in Barsaive, topples, destroyed. With the Therans routed and nearly half of his original army dead, King Neden returns to Throal.

THE NEW WORLD

The world after the Scourge is truly new, in ways the sages and scholars did not conceive. Our world's magical aura does not diminish as all our learning tells us it should, but remains strong. We see this as proof of our survival; the world goes on holding a steady course into the future.

The realms of Throal and Thera struggle to survive. In the south of Barsaive, the crystal raiders build airships for future raids on the lowlands. Ork scorchers roam the land mounted on their fierce chargers, finding danger and adventure where they can. Many heed the call to rebuild their once-great nation. The elves of Blood Wood have survived the Horrors in their own way, a dark way that has riven their community. Windlings thrive in the places where nature borders civilization. T'skrang live along the great Serpent River, trading, and pirating. Obsidimen roam Barsaive, durable, earthbound beings in demand anywhere that conflict or danger threaten. Nations arise. New alliances form. Old wounds heal.

And danger lies just off the trade roads, along with the lure of the treasure amassed and hidden away by now-forgotten people. The Horrors have receded, but they still hold fast in the darker parts of the world. Some wait within conquered citadels, curled upon the sprawling wealth of the vanquished. Others roam the world, their magic weakened but still powerful enough to wreak havoc in their paths. The Therans are gone from our land, and for the first time since the Scourge began, we are truly free to choose our own destinies.

In this fifteen hundred and twelfth year since the founding of Throal, the world looks vastly different from the one those founders saw when they looked south across the plain. Only the brave dare explore this world. Only the heroes can carve the future from ruins of the past.

