

Dragon Kings[®]



World Book
by Timothy Brown





WORLD BOOK

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chapter 1: one world among many

Khitus has a history far longer than human (or any sentient) memory, though there are few who can attest to the truth of it all in all things. Herewith is an accounting of history as generally accepted and understood by modern Khitans.

In the Beginning ...

Khitus flourished in times primitive, long before the watchful Dragon Kings shepherded the young world and its races. Warmed by the young orange sun, the planet hosted a fertile, untouched wilderness that stretched from pole to pole. Humans emerged as the first sentient race, first hunting and gathering food before learning to plant and harvest, scratching the earth with primitive tools. Their numbers grew for millennia among the temperate plains and forests, ever adapting and expanding into less comfortable terrains. Years passed as human cultures built one upon another, and the other nascent races went about their activities, animalistic or otherwise. Such was the emergence of the Barbarian Age.

Primitive Khitan Magics & Minds

The largest and most successful human tribes nurtured the rare few among them who manipulated the world around them without benefit of tools or labor. This unseen mastery they called magic. These first mages developed incantations to shape and bend magic, and thus reality, to their will. Celebrants of the savage, ancient gods sought favor from or power over others through their deity-granted spellcraft.

Ironically, these barbaric days unwittingly awakened a dark consciousness among Khitan sorcery. Fledgling mages grew haughty through their experiments, reveling in any successes and repeating them, their newfound power's glare blinding them to deeper consequences. Humanity's clumsy stumbles into magic nudged that consciousness and eventually roused it to attentiveness. The erratic and haphazard rise of magic on Khitus further irritated the universe's magical reservoir with its lack of respect or care for this power. The universe expressed its offense with a re-



flexive (not a sentient) response to hopefully slough off this wakefulness and return to its preferred eternal slumber. This reaction arbitrarily afflicted such magical offenders in many ways, from the subtle to the obvious.

Stranger still than wizards and priests were those whose minds twisted the fabric of reality by sheer will alone. These mind benders, or sarhaks, frightened the established wielders of magic, who feared the unseen limits of such minds. An initiate youth with a finely honed mind could challenge or even conquer the strength of a wizard despite a lifetime of laborious research and study. Jealous mages and priests became allies in a pact, directing their influence against the mind benders. Where possible, they subdued them directly and discreetly. More often, they used subtle rumors to poison the minds of the common people against them, painting sarhaks as grave harbingers of pestilence, famine or worse.

Ancient Gods

Primitive Khitans worshipped several savage, animalistic gods who strode like titans across the face of the world. The gods offered no delicate exchange of philosophies or any pretense of guidance through life's difficult struggles. Their compact with mortals was simple and direct. Give us your unquestioned worship in exchange for protection—protection from the young world's harsh climactic changes; protection from the other savage tribes; and most importantly, protection from the gods' own wrath that would be forthcoming without the expected worship. These early religions were purely rituals of obedience and fear as straightforward and brutal as Khitus itself.

the ages of khitus

The Barbarian Age – Prehistory to 2,000 years ago

Primitive tribes appear and wander the face of Khitus, a time of wars and chaos, and migrations.

The Classic Age – 2,000 to 1,000 years ago

The rise of nations and city states, watched over by the beneficent Dragon Kings, a time of grace, plenty, and justice.

The Age of City States – 1,000 to 200 years ago

The gradual, inexplicable retreat of the Dragon Kings, leaving power in the hands of jealous and ambitious mortals, also called the Age of Decline.

The Age of Despots – 200 years ago to today

The Dragon Kings are completely absent, foul rulers pursue their own greed. Cold Skins and Krikis are ascendant, and the world is being mercilessly plundered.

The Barbarian Age was a time when the priests in their stone temples held ultimate authority over the tribes. The gods granted their priests spells and powers as a means of keeping order and further instilling obedience within the flocks. Clergy demanded and accepted nothing less than total supplication, enforcing it with terrible magical retribution. Dark magical craft streamed from their deep warrens to waft out over the villages like a smoky veil.

Ultimately, the savagery of the priestly lawgivers over oppressed human tribes caused many to defy their au-



thority, giving rise to the first Dragon Kings. Some even emerged from among those ranks of existing clergy, empowered by divine magic but driven to reject the ancient gods' harsh demands for worldly obedience. Operating in secret, the incipient Dragon Kings branched out in sorcerous mastery, cloaking their activities until they were of sufficient power to rival those gods themselves.

Though steeped in myth today, the classic accounting of the fall of two specific gods illustrates how mortals kindled the fires that burned away the gods of old in order to end their tyranny. Anastus, a priest of Phattrash, the Bull God, bulwarked its vanity through fawning songs and mammoth monuments. In secret, she conspired with the rival god Yazmiir against the Bull-God. After years of subterfuge, Anastus manipulated both gods into a war against each other to banish them both from the known universe. She also stole what energy she could from both during their conflict to build her own power as a burgeoning Dragon King. These origins betray the kernel of truth behind many of the original Dragon Kings—they held mastery over two separate avenues to magical energy, one priestly and the other sorcerous.

The Migrations

Khitus's human tribes originated in the once-fertile regions of the distant south. These tribes—the Attites, Makadon, Chindi, Prajalu, and Nordor—developed distinct cultures before they raced out of the south in epic migrations that churned the very earth beneath their wagons. Tribal wars were the primary motivation for these massive journeys, as one group displaced another and so on until they pushed inexorably northward. The Attites and Chindi followed similar paths to one another, reaching generally to the east and up toward the world's

equator. The Makadan tended not to go quite so far north, settling instead the more temperate region that would one day become the Old Countries, though some stretched further toward the equator to mingle with Prajalu who settled toward the equator and further west. The Nordor went furthest from their original lands, trading the distant south for the frigid lands of the distant north.

Around the equatorial regions, the human tribes found they were not alone. They encountered the Pachyaur, intelligent elephantine centaurs with their own civilization in the warmer realms. At the time, though, the settled lands were scattered widely through a vast wilderness, and conflicts were few. Other intelligent races had yet to emerge onto the world that seemed entirely fresh and new.

Dawn of the Dragon Kings

No single force did more to forge Khitan cultures than the Dragon Kings. They imposed a benign governing force that unified the intelligent races of the world for so long that it is difficult now to imagine just how diverse those creatures were, and how varied their stories and relationships with the peoples they watched over. While a few nigh-immortal wizards claim to have walked with the Dragon Kings, there are none alive today who can describe the touch of their gentle hands guiding the affairs of the world, much less describe their emergence when the forests grew green and tall and Khitus's planetary neighbors wandered among the night's stars like youngsters romping freely in the meadows.

Contrary to modern perceptions, the Dragon Kings were not all imposing sovereigns ruling over nations of men and other creatures. Neither were the Dragon Kings equals in origin, powers, or attitudes. Indeed, they were not all even dragons, though most took forms of the world's most formidable creatures to reflect their own power and magnificence. Most Dragon Kings, despite the title, were mortal men and women; Tharelvun, during his days, told many of his origins as a soldier who rose to be a Makadan philosopher-king before scaling the summits of magical mastery. Others cloaked their origins in mystery: Bhayan allegedly came from beyond the moons, while many said Mai-Rong was a god fallen to mortality, albeit with near-divine power.

By later reckoning, most Dragon Kings were humans, and all were masters of tremendous magical powers. While each one sought the heights of magical mastery for his own reasons, once attained they collectively found themselves the most powerful living beings upon the world, and the eyes of the new young nations turned to them for guidance. As several had already assumed the physical form of the world's powerful daragkon—wild dragons—the masses dubbed them the Dragon Kings.

the three moons of khitus

Luth, the White Moon, phases from full to new and back to full every 28 days.

Yaluth, the Red Moon, reputedly more impatient, does so every 14 days.

Chalor, the Slave Moon, circles Khitus differently from the other two, going around the poles every 7 days, phasing completely just once per year.

'Paired Moons' is a concept that varies by culture, meaning either two moons that actually appear to touch each other as they pass in the sky, which happens infrequently, or two moons that merely come close to each other, which happens comparatively often.

chapter 1: one world among many

The Dragon Kings were unified in their function as caretakers. That function gave them the absolute and unblemished allegiance of Khitus's peoples. Once in power, the Dragon Kings became caretakers of their fragile world and its young cultures. History credits no single figure with that concept or with gathering consensus to make it a reality. Regardless, soon after their near-concurrent rise as the planet's most magically astute mortals, the Dragon Kings divided the world geographically and, in unison, assumed the mantle of responsibility.

The Dragon Kings allowed their subject peoples to learn and grow at their own pace, like parents watching children strive and sometimes stumble. For the most part, they allowed each kingdom to rule itself and each people to make its own decisions. The Dragon Kings primarily stepped in to depose despots and quell prolonged, destructive wars. The former they allowed to attain power and show themselves to be despicable, self-serving rulers before striking them down. This was their terrifying lesson to those who allowed such ascendance. The Dragon Kings allowed prolonged conflicts as a means of carrying out state policy, only drawing unnecessarily destructive campaigns under the shadows of their powerful wings before entire peoples or civilizations were wiped from Khitus's face.



Is it any wonder those of the Classic Age revered the Dragon Kings so, or that they are sorely missed and held in such reverence today? By removing despotism and genocide from their world, they nurtured the young Khitan civilizations as surely as a gardener nurtures her plants, and with as much care. They offered guidance to the ambitious and counsel to the wise, but had little direct involvement in peoples' lives. They walked among their peoples at times, visiting and encouraging but intervening rarely, even reluctantly, in common or state affairs. Their relationship was one of reciprocated love. The Dragon Kings truly loved their people, and it pained them deeply to see their children ever falter.

The Classic Age

Khitus flourished beneath the guidance of the Dragon Kings. Unfettered by the worst their own natures might unleash on one another, every sapient race prospered, especially with regard to intellectual pursuits like the arts, literature, architecture and philosophy. Curiosity and reason impelled people in the Classic Age, not the darker drives of fear or pain.

Twilight of the Gods

The ancient gods faced a world that no longer needed them, its people rejecting both their tyranny and that of their priests. The gods served no purpose and no one, as none served those gods any longer. Temples fell into ruin or served new, more positive purposes for their peoples. Under the Dragon Kings' tutelage, mortal worshipers no longer feared the darkness, for they carried candles of reason wherever they went to light their paths. Those few ancient gods that retained their power dared not visit it upon Khitus or its people, as legends tell of at least one god falling prey to the wrath of one or more Dragon Kings. The ancient gods abandoned Khitus for the distant, wandering planets short centuries after the rise of the Dragon Kings.

Civilization's Rise

Races and tribes fanned out across the world-garden, taking root in verdant vales and green prairies all around the globe. Pachyaur—intelligent, six-limbed mammoths—found league and kin with the elephants and their colossadant cousins they encountered in the warmest, wettest equatorial regions. Human tribes—the Attites, Chindi, Makadan, and others—spread across the land on every continent. The Penmai likewise made



their homes among the treetops on more than one continent. Dragon Kings encouraged competition through trade and intellectual pursuits rather than by spears and siege engines, and cultures flourished.

Many key organizations and groups yet extant today trace their origins to these elated times. As should be expected, these groups revere knowledge over power and try to maintain some of the Classic Age on modern Khitus even today.

- **Gare Attesa:** The revered chroniclers of the world's affairs and all who participate in it, have true records and histories that date back to the earliest years after the rise of the Dragon Kings. Their oldest scrolls are delicate, prized items held in dark, secure vaults (and some enemies whisper they may hold secrets that would upset established history, were those scrolls to be unrolled and read today).
- **Trakeen:** These disciples and virtual worshipers of the Dragon Kings created their orders then. Unlike the priesthoods of old, the Trakeen were not lawgivers or rulers, but priests, guides, and reminders of the Classic Age after the Dragon Kings proved long absent.
- **Magical Colleges:** Just as old, too, are the foundations and cores of the principal magical colleges, all built in the days when their access to magic was less hindered. The oldest among there are those of Dramidge, Rakar, and Nadalf, though some colleges rose and fell so far from modern times that no ruins mark their passing and they only exist now among the scrolls of history.

Power Corrupts

One lurking danger the Dragon Kings could not change was the response of magic to its own unwanted exploitation. Not even they controlled magic; presumably, they drew upon the same magical energies as any other wielder of the dark craft does today. As the centuries of the Classic Age passed, magic became more and more difficult to attain. The emergence of jealous consequences—the spiteful, often cruel penalties suffered by wizards known as ‘sorcery’s wrath’—crept into the accepted practices of spell casting. The gradual nature of these changes forestalled immediate awareness, and later defied any easy explanation. Even in these early times, the sorcerous consciousness marked its line in the sand, putting wizards on notice that they dabbled in its reservoir at their own peril.

Expansion & Excess

Despite problems among the magical and learned, the tribes grew seemingly without limit. Never before in any recorded or oral history had the races known such unfettered development, and diversity reigned. Farms became villages, then cities of wood, brick, and finally marble, festooned with the banners of proud peoples enjoying the fruits of their labors beneath the guiding hands of the Dragon Kings. Challengers, such as the semi-intelligent bugs and lizard folk, were easily kept at bay by strong armies protecting the frontiers so the core cities might further prosper. Certainly they could be forgiven for thinking their times and ways of life would never end.

But the shadows of their cities and spires grew longer while few took notice. The Dragon Kings gradually withdrew from worldly affairs. No warning or explanation of their departure was given, so people invented a host of speculative reasons and justifications. Once common visitors among those they shepherded, they sequestered themselves for long periods until few ever spoke with them; even rulers might go decades without direct contact. Like slugs crawling from beneath stones, the darker nature of some men emerged in their absence, and some rose to power without the watchful Dragon Kings to check them. The frontiers grew darker and more dangerous, the virtuous less visible, the arrogant more prominent. In that inexorable way, the Classic Age of Khitus faded so slowly that almost no one noticed until it was far too late.

Decline & Abandonment

Without the Dragon Kings to marshal them, the peoples of Khitus quickly descended into the morass of less-than-inspired self-governance. Some perverted the people's innate respect for magical power to their own advantage. Thus, many Khitans turned again for leadership to any who demonstrated spell mastery, no matter their temperament. Incompetent sovereigns who no longer had the sage counsel of a Dragon King became insular, drawing their armies closer to court to watch over the governed, allowing the frontiers to fester unmonitored. Newly intelligent Krikis expanded unchecked beyond the old borders of their Hivelands, and Cold Skins ventured beyond their fens to challenge others for dominance in places they had never dared before.

In too many ways, the benign Dragon Kings left the mortal nations unprepared for the responsibilities of statecraft. Diplomacy and cooperation were easily accomplished beneath their watchful eyes. Without them, pettiness and self-interest ruled the day whenever stakes became elevated. Distrust and hatred rose to the surface, rather than cooperation or acceptance. Wars flared up

over insignificant differences or vindictive disputes, and few knew how to stop them or keep them from escalating once begun. Many now scoffed at the wise and the learned. Those unwilling to fight were now shamed as dishonorable and cowardly instead of honored for their knowledge. Crops were burned, whole cities were razed, and few guiding forces emerged to put an end to the chaos. Smoldering during its decline, the Classic Age and all it represented met its end in sudden flames.

Many take the unexplained departure of the Dragon Kings seriously, even if their lives or their predecessors rarely intersected with such beings. Common laments over the past centuries all circle around the questions of “If they loved us so in the past, where are they now? Why have they left us all? Will they ever return?”

The historical relationship between each Dragon King and the mortals under its care was close and personal. Their relationships were far more complex than those between subjects and sovereign, or worshipers and deity. What was shared was far more personal, even parental, and its absence stung. The ache of that absence is still felt by many to this day. The departure of each Dragon King, like each one’s origins and experiences on Khitus, was unique, mysterious, and often unexplained. What all had in common is that they were all completely gone and no longer in communication with anyone—a strange coincidence noted even back during those times. The true connection among the Dragon Kings and their mysterious withdrawal never became clear and remains an enigma now, even among the Tra-keen—though none would confess such readily.

Rumors about the Dragon Kings, their unexplained departure and their possible return, abound in every Khitan culture. For instance, Chindi tradition holds that their Luksaw women drove the Dragon Kings from the world because of their foul magic. The Penmai feel that they never actually left the world, but wander it still as animalistic wild daragkon. Prajalu tribal tradition holds the Dragon Kings that once watched over them will return one day to lead them to a heavenly reward. Some cling to the hope that the Dragon Kings will one day return from some distant place and watch over the world anew. Others insist they are gone forever and possibly already dead. Many groups put the blame for their departure squarely upon another. The truth may not be known in this age.

The Present Day

The world has become a significant challenge to the peoples of Khitus. Since the Classic Age, extremes of weather have become more prevalent, as evidenced by the written record and commonly held expectations. The

northern continents have become so frigid that only the hardy Nordor can survive, let alone flourish, there. The southern hemisphere, in the main, shifted gradually toward wider deserts and more arid lands, a slow but relentless crawl that placed barren steppes where there had once been more fertile prairies. The gentle rainclouds that graced those lands for centuries now scatter and disperse or carry their moisture elsewhere. Violent land storms are more prevalent there now, carrying tons of earth from place to place, dumping dust atop those foolish enough to dwell in their shadow.

This environmental decline was well in progress before the plunder of Khitus began in earnest. Few understand why their world is being stripped of all it has to offer. Want can be explained, and droughts and famine can be understood. But everything of value fetching a price doled out by mysterious hands? What are the origins of this silver and gold? What is the basis for this seemingly insatiable demand for Khitus’s resources? Is the loathsome Iron Virus, that eats away at everyone’s precious steel, somehow tied to all of this? The appearance of the Black Fortress—a formidable tower of dark sorcery—was a primary herald of the new age. Its pale-skinned ambassadors have their hands in this change, that much is widely accepted. It’s no coincidence, but what part they play is something none can discern...or dare say with certainty.

The almost inescapable conclusion is that Khitus has entered its end-times. Entire tribes accept this fate, as do many common folk who never speak of it but hold the notion locked in their somber hearts, and few can blame them. Peaceful prosperity exists only as the stuff of history, while decline and decay and want taint every aspect of Khitan life. Dust chokes the body and clouds the mind darkly. People are less trusting and more insular, and a helping hand is less common than a drawn knife. Despair rules the minds of most men. Some wallow in it, while others see potential and opportunity. The end-times? Some have the courage to believe this is not so, and their time in the sun has just begun.

For good or ill, this is the world the Dragon Kings have wrought. Khitus teeters on the edge, balanced between potential rebirth and unrestrained, precipitous decline. Fundamentally, the fate of Khitus rests with those courageous few who take up hope’s mantle. The challenges are many: creeping desolation, wanton plunder, sorcery turned vengeful, sub-races seeking dominance, despotic leadership, and worse yet. Still, solutions cannot be plucked from the past or lured to Khitus from some faraway place. The planet, sand-blasted and plundered as it is, needs new leaders—new Dragon Kings, some whisper in hopeful tones—willing to plant their feet firmly, meet these challenges with grim-faced determination, and vanquish them for the good of all Khitus.

chapter 2: the struggle for khitus

Various forces across time tied the fate of Khitus directly to the tribes who migrated from their primitive beginnings across the face of the world. Tribal loyalties dominated other considerations, and tribal decisions shaped the sociopolitical landscape. Tribal concerns were of paramount importance over any individual, city, or nation. One owed one's allegiance first to the tribe, then to any other group or organization. Family or the self came last. Thus was as it always had been on Khitus, but those firmly held attitudes have changed in recent decades.

Tribal allegiance plays a lesser role now, as social pressures now drive powerful group agendas, realigned by unique and diverse interests. A Khitan today judges others by their connections with these groups as much or more than by his blood or tribal origins.

Agendas of Coin

These groups and their agendas center on physical resources, whether they concern themselves with people's wealth, physical health, or their water.

Bev al-Khim (The Pale)

The Black Tower stabs the equatorial skies to the north of the detestable Krikis Hivellands. Those who have seen it say its fortified battlements stretch for miles, and swear that its tower ascends high into the sky, beyond the wispy clouds that cling to its spires, and further than eyes can see. There is no record of this place before the present age, nor have any armies ever sallied forth from its bastions. No ruler has ever presented himself for parlay with his neighboring realms. No accounting of its construction exists, despite this tremendous building being the single largest edifice on the planet. From the point of view of most Khitans, busied as they are with the tribulations of their troubled world, the Black Fortress effectively appeared from nowhere, hailed by the emergence of its pale-skinned ambassadors—the Bev al-Khim.

The Bev al-Khim serve their hidden masters who lurk completely secreted within the Black Fortress. Hidden within their many-curtained palanquins, the Pale seek audiences with the masters of commerce: merchant princes, caravan masters, and willing marauders of all stripes. They rarely trouble themselves with the politically powerful, in whom they apparently have little interest, nor do they acknowledge those richer in social influence than financial clout. The Pale extend withered hands filled with silver coins, all of which are perfectly

faction summary

Each faction is unique in character, membership, and details, but on the surface each can be generalized as follows:

Bev al-Khim: Mysterious pale-skinned agents and brokers

Boneshards: Deadly assassins scarred by hidden weapons

Dramidge: A magic college of isolated wizards devoted to dragons

Gare Attesa: The omnipresent Chroniclers, royal advisers and watchers

Kuad Ahir: The Awakened, followers of the Prophet

Merchants: From peddlers to caravan masters, the world's traders

Nyutu: The All-Seeing, transient entertainers with unique mental powers

Qath Manhir: Equivocally honorable brigands and enforcers

Raetann: Bureaucratic Water Guild, emergent challengers to power

Rakar: A magic college, the Cozeners, keepers of slave decoys

Shadazim: Right Minders, new clergy of the ancient gods

Trakeen: The Faithful, worshipers of the departed Dragon Kings

Yenfansa: Feared and little-understood Devil's Children, the White Eyes

Subsistence in servitude

For some truly at the edge of survival, trade caravans are bitter opportunities to sell off mouths they cannot afford to feed. Caravan merchants weigh the coin new slaves, usually young children, may bring against the cost of feeding and transporting them to market. They also decide whether or not the extra 'stock' will slow them down and make the caravan susceptible to raiders. Despite the ugly calculus of coin and flesh, many caravan merchants have some pity for these unwanted children, as many of them started out as such. The best children are taken by the caravan merchants and apprenticed, or trained to be associated guards or laborers. Raised to become caravan merchants in their own right, some eventually make enough money to purchase their freedom. Most, however, become trade goods in the Khitan flesh markets.

uniform and unmarked, unlike other Khitan coins. Even the dullest Khitans now recognize that the subtle touch of the Pale is behind the widespread, wanton plunder of the world.

Merchants of Khitus

Trade never dies. Even in the brutal wastelands, villagers hawk hardscrabble wares at weekly marketplaces and put on great celebrations when the caravan merchants stop to trade. Caravan merchants don't just bring essential goods, they also bring stories from the outside world. The opportunity, infrequent as it is, to trade with a caravan often means the difference between a family surviving the ruthless summer, or not. While the caravan merchants see only small profits from such trade, the villages are excellent sources of news about bandits, new trade opportunities, and the comings and goings of other merchant houses.

Mercantile Ranks

In the cities, craftsman, farmers, and unaffiliated merchants sell their goods out of rented spaces in grand bazaars operated by the great merchant houses. Pampered merchants oversee these spectacles of commerce, demanding tribute in both coin and information from those who wish to trade under merchant house protection in the spaces provided. While not as physically dangerous as operating in the wasteland, a city merchant's fortune and influence can fall with just one bad deal or misspoken word. Reputation for city merchants

is nearly as important as coin, and the secrets they keep often beget advancement and profit. Phyrha, the Chindi 'Merchant Wives,' often serve as high managers of merchant families among their own kind. They often draw upon vast family wealth to support their enterprises.

Above all these sit the merchant houses: trade conglomerates that deal in goods, flesh, and information. The vast majority of merchant houses are small affairs with a handful of merchants and a small office located in the trade quarter of a city. Most of these houses remain city-bound, while a few more ambitious houses occasionally rent space, when they can afford it, among the many caravans traveling between the cities. These houses usually specialize in one or two types of goods, though they sell other items when they find the opportunity.

Mid-sized merchant houses typically have a warehouse of their own and several places in a city from which they sell their goods. They hold favorable deals to sell in the bazaars, and keep a caravan merchant or two on staff to oversee any cargo transported by one of the massive wasteland caravans. These houses generally have a variety of goods to sell, though they often focus on a few types, such as weapons, slaves, food, pottery, etc. Common livestock and produce include cattle, swine and boars, chickens, raven-hens, as well as uludur and manju; corn, wheat, barley, rice, dhoru, and shell-oats; apples, grapes, bananas, mangos, letu-apples, or choranges.

The largest merchant houses are consortiums massive in coin and influence. They can operate their own caravans, manage large bazaars and slave markets, employ

the merchant council

The eleven most powerful merchant houses of Khitus comprise the Merchant Council. Once a year, the Council convenes in the village of Bleeding Well Crossing to collude, scheme, fix prices, and ensure that commerce among the cities favors the Council members as much as possible.

Over the years, the Merchant Council has expanded and contracted in small increments, though Council membership only comes from a unanimous vote. Ouster from the council happens the same way, but the vote occurs in secret meetings, usually without that house's knowledge. An ousted house quickly falls prey to the other Merchant Council members and is exterminated. This happens infrequently, but the Council always wipes out a failed house rather than see a devastating trade war break out (or have its secrets exposed to the public).

bleeding well crossing

Bleeding Well Crossing is the manifestation of merchant house power in the wasteland. Named for its history as much as the bloody color of the local sand and rock, Bleeding Well Crossing lies at the intersection of most of the major trade routes. Its deep underground cistern once had only a small wall and a few buildings around it when it served as a way station for weary travelers. With the recent wars and the devastating climate change, the cistern's importance grew. For a time, Bleeding Well was a prize sought by different tribes, cities, raiders, and the great merchant houses. Needing it the most, the merchant houses put up the biggest fight. War, however, was not a profitable endeavor—at least when *they* had to engage in it. A truce split control of the Crossing between the great houses, turning the growing village into a nexus of trade and intrigue.

Each month, control of Bleeding Well Crossing rotates to one of the eleven houses on the Merchant Council. This provides each house the opportunity to profit from the Crossing in both coin and information. It is also the place first struck when the Merchant Council targets another Council house for extermination.

The Crossing itself mostly comprises taverns, inns, stables, carpenters, and other establishments designed to service caravans. The citizens ostensibly owe loyalty to no single house but serve all of them. In reality, some are bought by regular bribes or favors and others pocket more than one paymaster's coins.

their own soldiers, and keep a large staff of both city and caravan merchants to ply their enormous catalog of goods throughout Khitus. The vast wealth and influence wielded by these houses allows them to play an important part in the regional politics of their home cities, and they constantly jockey amongst themselves for position and prestige. The eleven most powerful of these great houses sit on the Merchants Council.

Many hold that it is the largest merchant houses who work in close league with the Bev al-Khim, entreating eagerly with them and in so doing sealing the world's doom. However, most know deep in their hearts that it is all traders, both great and small, who are easily tempted by the silver falling from their pale hands.

Profit & Influence

"Profit is king, but influence is queen," is a popular saying amongst merchants. Merchant houses naturally chase down coffers full of coin, but they all recognize that profit is impossible without the influence needed to secure the best contracts, trade routes, military protection, or government favor. City rulers, in turn, recognize that the merchants of the great trading houses are the best sources of information about rival cities and the wasteland itself. Indeed, because of their unique position within the bazaars, merchants are excellent sources of information about the local citizenry as well.

Rulers and their officials recognize that, for all their wealth, the merchant houses operate at their sufferance inside their city's walls and are rarely in positions to deny a bureaucrat's "request" for information. Thus, the great trading houses not only engage in commerce, but often serve as begrudging agents and spies. In re-

affiliated or unaffiliated?

Affiliated merchants belong to a merchant house. This provides advantages like being able to draw on the merchant house's reputation protection, commercial resources, stronger negotiating position, and built-in network of merchants and informants. However, an affiliated merchant is beholden to his merchant house and is rarely free to act on his own counsel. Affiliated merchants go where the house needs them to go, make the trades the house needs them to trade, and always keep the good of the house before their own needs. The larger the merchant house, the more resources an affiliated merchant may draw on. This conversely reflects how much less freedom a merchant has outside of the house's will.

Unaffiliated merchants have all the personal freedom they can want and afford. They also have no added resources beyond their own house to back them up. They often get cut out of larger deals, lose out on prime locations, or have to scramble to make a profit. They live a day-to-day existence, but they keep all the money they make and can do with it what they will. Most new merchant houses rise from successful unaffiliated merchants wanting to start their own trade dynasties. Affiliated lesser houses rarely break away from their greater houses, save in coups that switch a house's ruling power.

As customers for stolen property, thieves tend to seek out fences aligned with unaffiliated houses who are generally freer to negotiate with a wink and a nod.

turn for information, favored houses receive exclusive contracts, prime urban locations, the ability to purchase plundered goods (such as slave stock) from a city's military before such enter the general market, and other back-room deals that make life much more profitable for them.

These intrigues happen at all levels of trade as the smallest merchants trade information to larger houses for their own covert deals, who in turn trade to even larger houses, and so on, all the way on up to the spymasters of the Merchant Council. The chronicling Gare Attesa often wend their way into the mix, eager whisperers and listeners. The information trade is so prevalent among the merchant class that a secondary economy of secrets and favors exists, supported by a network of informants and those with more nefarious skills. Influence and information peddling, however, is a dangerous game. Unlike coin, it is difficult to see exactly how much influence is in one's coffers, and a merchant rarely discovers they are depleted until far too late.

All of this backroom dealing may seem counterproductive to establishing profitable trade but, in practice, most merchants remain loyal to their houses and their personal networks. In the long run, it pays more to be loyal to one's partners...until it becomes too profitable not to be.

Merchant Roles

City Merchants: City merchants sell in one specific city, often operating out of an office or warehouse. These merchants have large networks of business partners and informants. They know whom to bribe and are very competitive with each other. The lowest-level ones operate small stalls in the bazaars while the more successful merchants may have a large area in a bazaar, or their own private showroom. They tend to be savvy, ambitious, and are always on the lookout for information that can secure or increase their position or profit.

Caravan Merchants: Travel through the wasteland is dangerous and never comfortable, and caravan merchants seem harder in mien and manner than coins. Many of them see city merchants as soft, though not a few do so with an envious eye toward their indulgent lives. Most city-merchants perceive caravan merchants as dirty, uncouth, and resistant to real bargaining. Caravan merchants rarely last more than a few years before early deaths from raids, sickness on the trail, or abandonment in the wastes when their caravan disappears along with their stolen cargo. Those who survive become some of the toughest Khitans alive in body and spirit. The most successful caravan merchants command the prime trade routes among cities, while the rest ply the dangerous trails between villages.

the grand bazaars

Bazaars are found everywhere throughout Khitus, often temporary collections of tents and stalls around a settlement's central market erected at regular intervals. The great merchant houses operate the grand bazaars, which provide permanent stalls and many more (and larger) venues from which to profit. Competition to sell inside the grand bazaars is strong. Vendors typically pay a rental fee for the space, but with no lack of contenders for it, gaining or keeping one's place requires bribes of money and information, or friendship with the merchant landlord. Nearly anything for sale can be found within the grand bazaars, regardless of legality, as the controlling house manages security on its grounds while the city's authority often ends at its gates. Much of the mercantile intrigue on Khitus happens in the bazaars or the shady taverns that pop up around every gate.

Seekers: Merchant houses always want faster trade routes, new outposts, and new resources to exploit, and seekers are professional finders of such. Part merchant and part explorer, seekers brave the wasteland to hunt for these things. They must navigate harsh territory and negotiate with bandits and raiders to chase down threadbare leads. Most missions end in failure, but one success can lead to enormous rewards.

Crystal Bridge Trading House

For a great merchant house, the Crystal Bridge Trading House is relatively young. Founded by the wizard Lazillus Tzim just over twenty years ago, it takes its name from the famed crystal bridge in the city of Grand Torqal. The house began as a side venture, with Lazillus selling high-quality ritual items to colleagues, and it soon rose to become the dominant house in the "magic" business. Crystal Bridge deals in charms, crystals, potions, protective trinkets and statues, and any paraphernalia catered to those desperate for any sort of aid. Nearly all of these are non-magical, simply serving as an exercise in anxious hope for the majority of people, and a very profitable exercise for Crystal Bridge. They do provide actual enchanted items when available, but at prices far beyond the reach of the common person.

For the true wizardly clientele, Crystal Bridge maintains and sells a large stock of spell components and ritual items. It provides an important service in collecting rare components to power spells and craft magical

chapter 2: the struggle for rights



Khitan Coinage

Most cities minted their own copper, silver, and gold coins during less troubled times, and a good supply of those remains the accepted currency among the world's humans and Pachyaur. One gold coin buys 10 silvers or 100 coppers.

However, Khitan coins show their age and the desperation of their times, most having been shaved and scraped down again and again, then beaten flat until they are thin, misshapen things. Whatever symbols or writings graced them at their minting are now pounded, squashed, and unrecognizable. On average, Khitan coins are 100 to the pound.

Most business and exchanges are done by barter.

items but, as one of the few sources of these, charges exorbitant fees. The house also connects sellers of enchanted items to buyers for a facilitation fee. Seekers of Crystal Bridge always have the task of finding exotic materials, enchantment-ready goods, artifacts, or talented wizards.

Few truly know anything beyond that public face of the trading house. In truth, the Crystal Bridge Trading House is the largest supplier of mercenary wizards on Khitus. This is also, by far, their most profitable venture. Crystal Bridge always searches for new trainees, and their vetting process ensures that recruits can handle themselves professionally and manage any sorcerous backlash before being put to work. Affiliate wizards owe the house loyalty and better than half of their earnings, even though they never publicly acknowledge these ties.

Recently, Crystal Bridge has petitioned the Merchants' Council for a place in its membership. The two most recent petitioners to join the Council gained their strength in part with Crystal Bridge's magical aid, and Tzim expects his favors returned now. The vote is yet to happen, but if Crystal Bridge is denied, interesting times may lie ahead for the mercantile communities around Torqal and beyond.

The Kretch Consortium

The Kretch Consortium is a great merchant house based out of Pharanor. Like the other Merchant Council houses, the Consortium trades in a wide array of products, but it specializes in spices, oils, art, and other compact goods. Because its goods tend to be small items, the Consortium only operates one caravan of its own, renting space on

other caravans as needed. Ownership and control of the house passes down to the shrewdest scion of the Kretch family as it has for several generations. Competition among the family is vigorous, to say the least, and a few bloody feuds occur in each generation.

Amdar Kretch, the Consortium's current leader, is a hawk of a businessman. Amdar used small weapons trades (and, some hint, virulent poisons) to bring local bandit tribes to his side. Once his protections were in place, he and his caravans could safely move spices and salt throughout the region, a profitable venture for the tribes and more so for Amdar. It was so lucrative that Amdar became the most successful Consortium merchant by his early twenties and easily earned the leadership of the house after his mother's passing.

Amdar's standing orders have many seekers scouring the wasteland for new trade routes, specialty goods from the artisanal villages, or lost art to bring to market. At

Units of Measurement on Khitus

These common units are used across Khitus's human cultures:

- **Weights** are measured in pounds and 2,000-pound tons.
- **Volumes** are measured in pints, cubic inches, feet, and yards.
- **Distances** are measured in inches, feet, yards, and miles.
- **Time** is measured in minutes, hours, days, and 365-day years.

Other traditional or non-standard units:

- **Cubit (used in construction):** One cubit is equal to 18 inches or 1.5 feet.
- **Pace (used in military formations):** One pace is equal to one yard. One double pace is equal to two yards.
- **League:** One league is equal to 10,000 paces or roughly six miles.
- **Brick (used in construction and transportation):** In weight, one brick is equal to 10 pounds. In volume, one brick is roughly 150 cubic inches, derived from the basic 10-inch by 5-inch by 3-inch clay brick.
- **Block (used in construction and transportation):** In weight, one block is equal to 270 pounds. In volume, one block is roughly 2.5 cubic feet, derived from a 3x3x3 pile of bricks.

least, that's what Amdar tells the other family members, though this truth is far from the whole story. Amdar is not just a businessman. As a boy, he studied under the philosopher Vralic Amodes and gained a keen appreciation of culture and history. As Khitan civilization continues to unravel, Amdar takes it upon himself to preserve the most valuable cultural treasures of Khitus. Many artifacts do make it to market to cover the funding costs of these seeker expeditions. The most valuable ones, however, never make it onto the books, let alone the auction block. Those artifacts instead go to a secret holding in the desert (known only to Amdar and two of his lieutenants who do the transfers) to preserve these artifacts against destruction by the elements and careless looters. Whether these artifacts will ever again be appreciated by anyone other than Amdar is unknown, but one thing is for sure. If the other Kretch family members ever found out that Amdar was secreting away the most valuable goods, his tenure as leader of the house would swiftly come to an inglorious end.

Qath Manhar (The Brigands' Guild)

As traditional occupations become unviable, new ones emerge to take their place. The trader turns from his shop to the black market to seek what he needs for customers. A farmer abandons blighted fields to scavenge for survival. Left with no alternatives, honest men turn to thievery, and even organize into marauding bands to scrape just enough plunder from their surroundings to survive. It is a hard life, one to which few men take easily, their scruples gnawed away until they become numb to the misery they inflict upon others.

Most Khitan marauders and mercenaries are independent scavengers, singularly desperate to survive, let alone thrive. However, their numbers have grown so vast, their profession so prevalent in every corner of Khitus that a loose brotherhood has emerged to organize their illicit activities. The Qath Manhar derive their name from an ancient legend, meaning one who would sell out his own brother. If anything, the name is a misnomer; the only true honor and mercy among the marauders comes from the Qath Manhar code.

Simply put, marauders who adhere to the code steal only what they need and no more. They never kill or take revenge upon the innocent or unarmed, and the code severely discourages wanton destruction and forbids acts of terror. The Qath Manhar, like unaffiliated brigands, are sprinkled everywhere across Khitus, though they exist in smaller numbers where resources are the most scarce.

The Qath Manhar offer some protection, albeit uninvited, to those who provide their food and water. Their victims trade an emptier belly for some aid against worse wild-eyed and "uncultured" plunderers and attackers. The best folk can say of the Qath Manhar is that they eliminate (or at least reduce in number) the worst raiders whose unchecked actions would destroy everything over time.

Raetann (The Water Guild)

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and "a measure of water may fill the span between life and death." Such is the credo of the Raetann, a much-feared organization born of necessity but bloated by self-righteous zeal and ill-earned power. The guild's origins are familiar history in nearly every city and village of the fast-deteriorating southern half of Khitus. The rains slowed and stopped; the rivers and streams dwindled and turned to mud and clay; entire oceans and seas retreated to bare their muddy basins to the sun. Wells failed and cisterns echoed their emptiness loudly. Those who could seized control of any water sources, changing a basic necessity into a rationed resource "to ensure it would not be lost entirely." Where people protested such strictures, that control led to heavy-handed enforcement. Whether benevolent or despotic in its local rise, the Raetann, or Water Guild, was born to "protect that promise of life held within its waters. Those who hoard water for themselves alone doom Khitus by withholding life itself, and thus they forfeit their own for the good of us all."

Guild members see their roles as the guardians of all waters, whether they guard the water skins of a caravan, monitor the use of a village well, or oversee the now-trickling aqueducts of a large city. Raetanni nurture suspicion and fear in the completion of their duties, and few dare meet their guarded eyes. They harbor suspicion about any potential water use outside of their control and thus have eyes everywhere. They train children to inform on their parents or neighbors upon each other, all merely to gain favor and a thimble-full of water for exposing the tiniest infractions of guild water-use rules. "To have water is to live for another day, whether plant, animal, or man. That which deserves water is solely the judgment of a Raetann." Guild members have a mixed view of the so-called water spice, or hesheyel, which can reduce a person's need for water; such a thing can be a blessing, but might also partially undermine their authority.

As the crises have expanded beyond droughts to persistent famine and marauding death, so have the Water Guild's areas of authority. In many cities, guild officers advise the true, legitimate rulers with a heavy hand. In other places where they choose, the Raetanni supplant ex-

isting authorities and establish themselves as the last vestige of civil order. Water Guild officers ruthlessly enforce their edicts of water conservation and strict controls over its access and use. Their oldest guildhall rests in Rhojess, and while they are nearly extinct there due to the city's decline, they yet retain more control over the city than its merchant princes (as water is a necessity, while coin is not).

Agendas of Faith

Even during the Classic Age, there were those who claimed to speak for and with the gods, though few heeded them due to the splendor of life under the guidance of the Daragkarik—the Dragon Kings. Now, with so much hope lost, as well as the Daragkarik, many more now cling to the idea that some powerful beings may shield them from the worst Khitus unleashes. These folk claim they bring strength and solace to the devout, should their prayers and sacrifices be enough to afford protection. Most, however, see opportunists in clerical garb using fear as a club.

Kuad Ahir (The Awakened/The Changed)

It is no wonder that Khitans of all backgrounds turn to old ways in the face of a changing world. Faced with uncertainty, people turn to strength. Challenged by powerful enemies, they reach out to familiar institutions. But the counterpoint to violence and decay, to plunder and hatred, deserves a voice as well. One such message is gaining momentum across the bright face of Khitus, carried by the sandaled feet of the Kuad Ahir, disciples of the Prophet.

The Prophet's story is as straightforward as His message. He emerged alive from the prison dungeons of Shomik, a forsaken place that rarely allows its prisoners back to the world of the living. Eight fellow prisoners, all once-despicable scoundrels turned by His irresistible persuasions, left those dungeons with Him as devoted disciples. The Eight aided the Prophet, helping Him to survive so His message could spread. Now, they too broadly preach the Prophet's message of love and universal brotherhood.

The Eight are the founding devotees of the Kuad Ahir, the 'Changed' who have heard the Prophet first-hand and had their minds forever altered in so doing. Some call them mind benders, others sarhaks, the ancient name of the psychic practitioners. Deep within each of the Awakened, as they are sometimes called, mental powers suddenly germinated to life, whether by His

proximity, or mere touch, or an earnest conversion by the Prophet's words. The Kuad Ahir now fan out across the face of Khitus, spreading His message, doing His work, aided by the magic-that-is-not-magic to change stubborn minds and open closed hearts. Theirs is a growing host of words and ideas that is, by some measures, more powerful than a thousand legions.

Shadazim (Right Minders)

The Shadazim are the emergent, power-seeking clergy making new appeals to the ancient tribal gods with some success. They find an audience by preaching dismissively of the Dragon Kings as temporary usurpers of true godly power, forever gone now and best forgotten. They have made a gradual rise across all lands after the departure of the Dragon Kings, slowly filling the power vacuum.

Often called the Right Minders by supporters, these priests revive the worship of the ancient animalistic gods. Of course, most individual Shadazim have ulterior motives for particular wealth or power, so their revival of ancient temples (or at least worship of those same powers) allows them to also seize whatever local power they can at the same time.

High to Low Clergy

Cheldar Shadazim are the senior, most established clerics in their realm with presumed partnership with the deity they espouse. They control any holdings of their faiths, from lands and buildings to the coffers of prayer coins. Their Deshadiz subpriests keep themselves locked away, their prayers and scholarly studies deemed of utmost importance to the faith (as are some covert works for their Cheldar, including generation of "ancient worship texts" and "holy writ"). The Shadam are the lay priests who work directly with their Shadazite followers, spreading the Word of the Cheldar and their particular god. All Shadam must adhere in all ways to the Cheldar's teachings, and ignorance of any rule or saying is never an excuse. The Deshadiz's sole semi-public role involves the brutal punishment of Shadam or followers for transgressions against the Cheldar's doctrine, followed by immediate banishment from the faith.

The Rising Faiths

In these strained times, the Shadazim have grown numerous. Every ancient god has a Shadazim or two somewhere on Khitus, and each has numerous legends (some created only recently and spread through rumors by Deshadiz and Shadam). Some Shadazim follow "ancient" gods that are wholly invented with no true history at

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all, not that many followers would know such. Regardless, they teach that the gods will emerge through the Shadazim to war upon the face of Khitus and establish a new hierarchy for the coming age. Only when Khitus is blasted clean of nonbelievers, they insist, will the ancient gods return to build the world anew (through their loyal Shadazim and their followers, of course).

Shadazim and their followers are zealots, convinced that all others are inferior and incorrect. Violence against nonbelievers is encouraged. True Shadazim who worship an actual ancient god can derive priestly powers from them, but that connection is often tenuous and far weaker than the days before the Dragon Kings. Sham Shadazim resort solely to trickery and borrowed magic to convince their followers of their legitimacy. A Shadazim need only gather followers to qualify for ranking himself as such, and any magical or powerful demonstrations help fill their ranks.

Each Shadazim expects and preaches that his particular deity shall return soon to take control of Khitus in some capacity. Other Shadazim and their supposed gods are considered charlatans unless they have made some massive demonstration of godly power or control (and even then, some claim other gods are demons cloaked as gods and not true gods). People tend to be more skeptical of Shadazim than they are of the Trakeen who preach worship of the departed Dragon Kings; after all, the Dragon Kings are widely accepted as having been real and only recently estranged from the world. So, Shadazim have an inherently more difficult time proselytizing, though they are bolstered by the simple fact that they can summon god-granted priestly magic.

Gathering worshipers, though, is a double-edged sword. While they are the fuel that fires the god's attention, they have needs and must be looked after. They must be fed, clothed and sheltered. They expect counsel and encouragement, consistent teachings and attention. They can be flighty, lose faith, become skeptical and leave. Shadazim flocks are rife with schisms; at any time an emergent preacher may part company and take half the flock with him. At times they must also be protected. As the Shadazim treats the least of his flock, so the others judge his compassion for them. Just one careless action can cause an entire congregation to label him a charlatan.

All Shadazim share a cutthroat hunger for power, their rise to power often helped by assassinating capable officials to install loyal lackeys in their place. The Right Minders expect to be welcomed in all courts and lay down curses of blasphemy and doom upon those who do not respect them (though the strength of said curses varies with the beliefs of those afflicted, and with the Shadazim's power).



Shadazim Customs

Shadazim have a variety of strange customs, each faith as individual as its senior Cheldar. Each Cheldar likewise has his own teachings, generally from newly made texts about the ancient gods, since there are none known that survive from ancient times. The few legible carvings on ancient temples are in tongues lost long before the Dragon Kings' rise (though some claim otherwise). Despite the wide variety of gods and priests, certain commonalities exist among the Shadazim:

- **Tithes:** Many often require tithes and donations of coins, goods, or food to the priest or priests from their followers.
- **Exclusivity:** Most, too, urge their faithful to follow no other gods, lest their true god take offense and fail to protect them all due to a follower's doubts.
- **Black Sash:** All Shadazim wear at least one specific item of clothing to mark his status as a god's priest; most Shadazim across Khitus have adopted a black sash crossing from the left shoulder and attached to the right hip, though some wear the sash with one or more colors favored by the god.
- **Unique Interment:** Shadazim insist their fallen bodies, regardless of the method of death, be preserved for pending reanimation by their chosen god. Most gain a sewn shroud packed in salt, though some also insist on more permanent protections like stone tombs or sarcophagi.
- **Amorous Access:** Many Shadazim insist on undisputed sexual access to their followers, though many faiths insist its priests must never procreate naturally. The rationale is that Shadazim and any of their blood become their god's vessels upon Khitus, and to have too many embodiments would stretch a god's vitality too thin, weakening its powers. Any woman impregnated by a Shadazim must flee that faith and its region before a Deshadiz severely punishes her transgression.

Rumors & Whispers

It is rumored that many of the Cheldar Shadazim are in fact Dragon Kings in human form reestablishing power on Khitus. These rumors range far and wide enough that not all could possibly have been generated by the faiths themselves and have some unconnected progenitors whispering such to the winds. Other more particular rumors link directly to a faith or to a Shadazim:

- **Nathan Gnok:** This Shadazim of Arvaritos the Spider, supposedly provides sacrifices to his voracious god by purchasing the old and sick from the marauder caravans around Patnu.

- **Armail Saruath:** This Cheldar inspires fearful loyalty among his acolytes, who call him Saruath the Blue behind his back for his habit of consuming the creatures called azurats. He inflicts these blue watchers on his enemies and later consumes the creatures to gain any leverage he can to raise the power and prominence for his faith, his seven fellow Shadazim, and his god, Zarut the All-Seeing.
- **Arkala Tarmldad:** One of few female Cheldar in existence, Arkala Tarmldad leads a physically amorous faith, allowing those she deems of proper piety to "share her blessings" and create more followers of her blood. She appears no older than a woman of 30 summers, but none know her true age (which is far older than even her eldest child suspects). Her Deshadiz number four—three sons and one daughter between 16 and 28 summers in age—and this family controls the small but fervent worship of Kadlath the Great Bear in the matriarchal tribe of northern hunters that shares its name.

Trakeen (The Faithful)

The Dragon Kings derived their strength from enormous magical powers and unrivaled wisdom. In their days on Khitus, they walked among the people, held court with rulers and ambassadors, and took an active role at most levels of the world. In their absence, Daragkarian exploits have become legend, facts now seen as myths and truths more akin to faith. The Trakeen are modern Khitans who have deified the various Dragon Kings and so worship them today as gods.

The allure of the Trakeen message has more appeal than that of the Shadazim due to the existing record of the Dragon Kings' existence. They are—or at least were—undeniably real, while few could ever claim direct contact with an ancient god. Most legends of the Daragkarik claim that each of them has ascended to some extra-planar heaven where they will one day welcome the faithful to live with them in everlasting life. Alternately, prophecy declares the Dragon Kings will return to Khitus one day, all of them filled with either wrath or peace, to judge the world before a cataclysmic end. Either way, only the faithful will survive.

In the case of almost every Dragon King from history, there is at least one cleric or group (or multiple religious groups vying for dominance over their Daragkarian faith) that points to recent writings as the basis of their new-found faith. The Faithful, as they are sometimes called, are met with some skepticism by most, but in these ever-troubled times, their message is taking root among the most disenfranchised, the most desperate. The time of

the Dragon Kings, after all, is nearly part of living memory, as opposed to the ancient gods the Shadazim purport to speak for, who have not put a foot on Khitan sand for many centuries. The Trakeen's use of magical tricks and items (if not magical skills of wizards turned priests) serve to drive interest and meet the common folks' expectations of power from those they might follow.

Agendas of Magic

While there are many smaller groups involved in magic or individual mages of note who may influence local or regional matters, their activities are not as organized or as widespread as those coming from the two surviving colleges of magic. The colleges distinguish themselves by how they work to blunt or mute dark sorcery's wrath upon Khitus. In doing so, they save Khitus and its people from even worse fates than they currently face today.

Dramidge (The Bearded Ones)

Notable by their group's standard for growing long beards, the Bearded Ones of Dramidge isolate themselves from others, denying vengeful sorcery any targets beyond themselves. Each Dramidget walks a difficult and lonely road, remaining emotionally distant from the world and all in it. Even among the throngs of a major settlement, these wizards forge no true connections with the community around them. They sacrifice all other relationships on the altar of their dark trade, allowing for no friends or loved ones, no companions aside from their fellow Dramidgeth or their employers.

Dramidgian wizards seek magical mastery in the service of government patrons, who not only take legal control of magic in their realms but also pay well for such services. A Dramidget can then magically act while his connections with society remain aloof and distant, working only through agents and governors, not directly for the people around him. Many consider a Dramidget on retainer as the most destructive weapon a leader can field, so the fear of them is often greater than their own power. To a Dramidget, the goal is never control or money but influence and a prominent position—from which he can take a lead role upon the restoration of the Dragon Kings.

Regardless of public perceptions, all Dramidgeth dedicate their lives and studies to the eventual creation of new Dragon Kings through ancient magic. In fact, their school's founders served as wizards under the tutelage

of the Dragon King Tharcluun himself. Many senior Dramidgeth, all masters of dragon magic who often control dragons—also called daragkon—from hatchlings to adults, continue the quest of the founders—to create a magical beacon to draw more wild dragons to Khitus.

The Dramidgeth still hope that Tharcluun, wherever he is, will activate his beacon eventually. When that occurs, all Dramidgeth must travel there with all the dragons they can muster. A standard coda for Daragari is “Tharcluun shall not forget,” though there is a growing faction of Dramidgian skeptics who think they should change their thinking on this.

Ranks & Types

Only men can be Dramidge mages, either by tradition or some reason long forgotten but maintained nonetheless. Orphans are sought out when they are still young, those showing magical aptitude taken away to study long hours in dismissive isolation. The acolytes, students, and lowest levels of mages are the Daragari, and only after they attain a level of mastery and understanding set by their tutors do they gain the title of Dramidget.

The vast majority of Dramidgeth carry local titles or honorifics given to them by employers or general gossip. The only title or rank any hold dear is their college, and Dramidgeth all will heed a call from a brother Dramidget above all others. Those who have either raised or tamed at least one dragon have the name (used only among the Dramidgeth) of Daragket. Those who teach and tutor the Daragari—either a temporary five-year appointment or a permanent position in Rhojess or the satellite colleges in Teleris and Torqal—gain the title of Dramark.

Some mages eventually become Draneek, or Tome Guards, though the Draneek alone know what criteria matter for such postings (and they reveal such secrets only to those chosen as successors). Draneek are the only brethren allowed to touch or open the Tomes, and they alone can read from them to their students.

Dramidgian Customs

There are a wide number of customs, habits, and details unique to the Dramidgeth, including a number of opposing groups they loathe due to their stance on dragons or the Daragkarik.

- **Dragon Signs:** In their Daragari schooling, all brothers learn the Dragon Signs, their name for mundane dragon lore, so they can track dragons through basic knowledge of their habits.
- **Drakeblades:** All Dramidgeth wield drakeblades, or dragon-tooth blades, though the weapon hints at

the wielder's strength and rank among the Bearded (and range from daggers to great blades or scythes). Boneshards, incidentally, cherish pieces of broken drakeblades for their own purposes.

- **Beacon Watchful:** Whenever possible, Dramidgeth always sleep facing the stars, in hopes of seeing Tharcluvn's Beacon, should it appear.
- **Daragkorlis Festivals:** The Dramidgeth engage in the Daragkorlis, monthly dragon festivals dedicated to particular dragon types or constellations of the same, revering a sort of a Zodiac of Dragons. During these festivals, any dead Dramidgeth (some packed in salt, if they passed away since the last Daragkorlis) are laid out with ceremony and left for wild dragons to eat.
- **Dragon Slayer Enmity:** Dramidgeth hold deep-seated hatred in their hearts for all dragon slayers and hunters.
- **Kvad Ahir Enmity:** They hate the Kvad Ahir, the "Awakened" followers of the enigmatic Prophet, since their powers are a mockery of true magic.
- **Gare Attesa Enmity:** The Bearded Ones also loathe the Gare Attesa and distrust those pervasive Chroniclers "who must be up to no good."
- **Trakeen Affinity:** They are always friendly to Trakeen, the Dragon King worshipers.
- **Tharcluvn's Blessing:** The Dragon King Tharcluvn blessed the original founders of Dramidgeth to enhance their magic. The most senior mages repeat this ceremony annually, using a wild dragon to keep that tradition alive (along with whatever mysterious enhancements come from it).

The Importance of History

When one meets a Dramidgeth, one always finds more than a few books near at hand, as this college stresses an importance on history and knowledge thereof. Their books on magic are equally important, some more than others. A popular saying in Teleris mocks that "A Dramidgeth holds knowledge aplenty, if he has a way to carry all his books."

However, the mages make a distinction between a book and a tome. To a Dramidgian, a tome is both a holy relic of the college and a powerful artifact and spellbook in its own right. Each Dramidgeth hopes to attain a level of knowledge and spellcraft that their own personal book—a combined journal and spellbook containing all a mage learns and experiences since his graduation be-

yond Daragari status—might attain the coveted status of a Dramidgian Tome.

While the exact number of Draneek Tomes is unclear even to many Bearded Ones, there are at least a dozen verified by non-Dramidgian historians and eyewitnesses. They are of three types in order of importance—the Major Tomes (attributed to the seven original college founders), the Grand Tomes (those later Dramidgeth with extensive contact with Tharcluvn, of which there may be up to five tomes), and the Great Tomes (any major Dramidgeth in power or daragkish knowledge since the Classic Age, these numbering no less than four).

All the most revered magical tomes of the college originally stayed in Rhojess from their writing until the recent past. Now removed and almost always on the move, the Draneek Tomes secretly travel around the Granite Basin with several deep hiding places. Draneek Tome Guards specialize in protective and obscuration magic to keep the tomes safe. Failure to protect the tomes or adhere to the magical college rules is punishable by death. The loss of any tome matters most to Dramidgeth—without their Tomes, they may lose their rituals and their magic from which they draw their power and their connections to the Daragkarik.

Rumors & Whispers

The truth of any rumors attributed to the Dramidgeth is unclear, as they never confirm or deny any of them. This leads most to safely assume any stories heard are true until personal experience proves otherwise. Of the wide and varied rumors, these are the most frequent.

- Dramidgian mages control wild dragons without any apparent spells at all.
- Many blame them specifically for the departure of the Dragon Kings, though most are hard-pressed for an explanation as to why.
- Even a fool "knows" the Dramidgeth nurture dragon eggs in the desert.
- Many fear they gather slaves to feed to wild dragons or their tame servitor dragons.
- The only places you can find more than one Dramidgian wizard are their schools and tutor halls, inside which are guardian dragons reduced in size but not in power.
- Their entire college estate in Rhojess, some say, is not carved stone but actual daragkin—the bodies of rock and mud dragons that died at the command of Tharcluvn and the founding Dramidgeth to bulwark the college and its students with their power (and to provide permanent self-sustaining water supplies separate from the city wells).

Rakar (The Cozeners/ The Shrouded)

Unlike the Dramidgeth who labor to draw sorcery's wrath more directly onto themselves, the Rakarian magical college teaches precisely the opposite. Its students specialize in deceptions to confuse wrathful magic. These Cozeners selfishly deflect sorcery's vengeance upon the innocents around them, with no more regard for them than one who tramples a tiny ant beneath his boot. Freed somewhat from the dangerous consequences of spell casting, the Rakarth are imprecise and often careless wizards, since they can afford magic's wrath expended upon others.



The Rakarth seek dominance of all local forms of magic and, through them, political or social dominance as well. Also called the Shrouded, Rakar are all too happy to work with the Watu Pachyaur, the slavers of their kind, and even the Bev al-Khim, caring not if their pay comes from the enigmatic Pale. Ultimately, these powerful sorcerers see themselves as the rightful rulers of Khitus, so they work to keep all other non-Rakarian authorities off balance.

Originally formed in the equatorial Spider Realm of Pavouk, the college has scattered far across Khitus. They hold few meetings among their widespread faculties, further proof against angry magic taking revenge on acquaintances. The Scrolls of Anitzar, an early and powerful Rakart, are prized for their written philosophy of dominance and Rakarian superiority.

Ranks & Types

The most powerful among the Rakarth become Nepri-mancers, and appear as (and may only be, by most accounts) shadowy wisps and silhouettes of their original forms. "The Absent" (as commoners name them) hide themselves through masterful disciplines and have the utmost proof against sorcery's wrath.

Zmast are specialists at suggestion and confusion, making them vital at keeping their slave Vezhika decoys sufficiently docile. They specialize in hypnotism to keep decoys docile and emotionally bonded to the Rakarth, making them experts at fooling magic's wrath.

Apprenticeship to another Rakart is the only entry point into the college. Each Rakart is honor bound to train two apprentices in his lifetime, but usually demands monetary compensation. Apprentices attain independence and the right to call themselves Rakarth only upon the sacrifice of a true loved one to wrathful magic. That pain reinforces the wizard's right to enslave decoys for that purpose from that day forward.

Rakarian decoy slaves are called Vezhika, and they only regain their freedom on the death of the Rakart wizard who enslaved them. Rakarth keep Vezhika shrouded in gauzy cloth from head to toe with the exception of their smiling masks and their slender chains. The materials a Rakart chooses for his Vezhika masks and chains always clearly demonstrate the wizard's wealth.

Employers consider the Rakarth to be 'safe' wizards to hire because of their slave decoys. They should never use an employer's (or their own) personal vendettas as a reason to make someone a Vezhika, but this happens rather often, risking their immunity to magic's wrath at times. Making Vezhika also causes many to seek revenge against the cold-hearted Rakarth, most often the family of the enslaved.

Rakarian Customs

Most of what outsiders know of the Cozeners comes either from direct experience or the writings or rumors from freed Vezhika who recorded much of the evils they witnessed.

- **Personally Reclusive:** Rakarth speak as little as possible and never touch anyone else directly unless a spell demands such contact.
- **Respectful Distance:** Rakar never come close to one another or exchange words, instead standing at a distance and communicating magically or with hand signals.
- **White Clothing:** The wizards wear clean, white shrouds or white straps, and tend to wear knee-high boots.
- **Mehkblades:** They use bone-splinter rapiers called mehkblades, although apprentices beneath the Rakart rank can only polish or carry them rather than wield.
- **Elitist Sociopaths:** They are dismissive of all other wizards and have no regard for other life if it serves their physical or magical needs.
- **Disdain for Authority:** On the surface, Rakarth claim a desire to serve, though they have deep disdain for authority (unless it comes from their own ranks).
- **Decoy Users:** The original Rakarth invested all their love in pets—mainly felines and spiders—and found wrathful magic directed its energies against these animals; learning from this, they soon used decoys hypnotized to think they deeply loved their Rakar masters. Dark sorcery is fooled and directs its wrathful energies against the Vezhika innocents.
- **Inevitable Rule Prophecy:** The Rakar foresee a time when they are the rightful rulers of Khitus.
- **Emergent Leader Prophecy:** They predict that a Rakart child will emerge with unusually strong powers and any who fall under its gaze will become Vezhika...including dragons.

Rumors & Whispers

- The common folk are dreadfully cautious of the Rakarth, terrified of becoming one of their zombie-like Vezhika and unsure of exactly the methods by which such slaves fall to them.
- Many fear the Rakarian Apple, a drugged bit of fruit fed to new Vezhika to make them docile.
- Commoners are sure the Rakarth do unspeakable things to their Vezhika before they are expended. All hope against hope that Vezhika souls gather somewhere to exact a terrible revenge against the Rakarth one day.

The Unknown

While Dramidge lays claim to the oldest magical college on Khitus, there were far more in existence during the Classic Age than common history remembers today. The ever-shifting wastelands have buried or revealed more ruins than most scholars can count over the past decades, and only the brave who find such ruins may benefit from knowledge and power previously lost to the ages.

- **The Arklarn Door:** Rumors persist of a small door, seemingly carved of moonstone or ivory, appearing on the White Spire (or other random buildings) in Brokkan. Legends say that the right person's touch on the door sends her to the off-world College of Arklarn. The Arklarni were a group of female wizards and practitioners whose powers waxed and waned with the moons. When a full moon sparkles, some say Arklarn's Door has opened to send a moonmage back to help cure Khitus...though few dare venture to Brokkan to see if any such healing is imminent.



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- **Uathan Legend:** The College of Uath used earth and stone magic to bulwark its disciples against sorcery's wrath. Its location can no longer be seen on Khitus, for their final act was to try and keep sorcery from harming Khitus...only to have their obsidian citadel explode, its shards growing evermore since and now seen only as the undulating black glass of the Obsidian Mountains. If any Uathan secrets remain for the plunder, they must be heavily protected against the constant grind of their shard-filled resting place.

Agendas of Mind

"Control memory, and you control a people" is a precept noted by more than a few Dragon Kings from the past, and all claim their Daragkark said it. Strangely, the hardships of Khitan life distract most enough that they never realize they are being manipulated by those who control their access to memory, history, and current knowledge. These groups and their agendas focus on mental resources, not people's coins, their physical health, or their water.

Gare Attessa (The Chroniclers)

The Chroniclers are easily recognized far and wide across Khitus as a society of manipulative historians, all of whom (at least those seen publicly) are either young men or old women. Ever scribbling, the Chroniclers faithfully record the activities of all Khitus's rulers so an accurate accounting can be made to the Dragon Kings upon their return. At that time, they insist, "the wicked shall be punished." The Gare Attessa exert direct influence on all Khitan rulers, whether by courtly relations or even marriage into their blood lines. Above all, they seek to preserve the privileges of their order that have set them apart since they served the Daragkarik of old.

Originally acting as the Dragon Kings' administrators across Khitus, the Gare Attessa survive as a conglomeration of historians and records-keepers for the powerful. These former civil servants are now steeped in as much mystery as the order can manage. There are some Chroniclers in every ruler's court, in every city or encampment, ever advising anyone in power—a tacit continuation of their roles that has rarely been questioned, despite the loss of the Daragkarik. The seat of the Order, the Great Library of Atsrath, rests in Wani Chereet.

Gare Attessa are easily distinguished on sight from normal humans. Their training and dream sight manifests in their light, ever watchful eyes. They wear gossa-

mer robes and colorful cloaks, though not of any particular hue, wear their hair long, and always carry tablets and papers.

Ranks & Types

While unnoticeable to outsiders, the rank and purpose of each Gare Attessa becomes apparent to another member of their order with a glance (and they do not reveal the secret of such discernment to outsiders). Most Gare Attessa are merely the Chroniclers who scribble and whisper among the people of power. Among their own are other ranks and sub-orders:

- **Apprentice:** The lowest ranks are the Apprentices, youthful servants still learning the basics of at least two written languages while they handle basic cooking and cleaning labors to support the order's Great Library and its staff.
- **Helper:** The next rank before the common rank of Chronicler are the Helpers, whose tasks are to prepare scrolls, pens, inks, and any other writing implements necessary for Gare Attessa duties.
- **Siestier:** Siestier are their researchers, digging for ancient texts and data wherever they can be found.
- **Exhalt:** Exhalt are those who rule and oversee the order and its members. They operate out of Wani Chereet, though its few members sometimes travel abroad to oversee important operations. The Exhalt rule over everyone in the order, with various Apprentices and Helpers at the lowest levels, moving among the people, recording everything they see.
- **Ipilier:** Ipilier are a secret sect among the Gare Attessa order, its members known and answerable only to the Exhalt. These chroniclers of more personal histories train in sensual arts to more readily infiltrate and marry into important families and plumb their secrets from the inside. Exactly how many Ipilier exist is unknown, as they (unlike all others in the order) mask their diamond eyes under all conditions save death.

Chronicler Norms & Customs

The Gare Attessa is an extreme sect with rigid strictures on the acts and lives of their members. Even minor indiscretions are punished with imprisonment or starvation, and betrayal of any order secret warrants that member's death.

- **Recording Imperitive:** All data is important to Chroniclers and should be recorded, so secret meetings without them are frowned upon and reported to the order.
- **Purpose Justified:** They consider any interference with their information gathering as rude.

- **Subtle Vengeance:** Refusal to respect the wishes of a Chronicler often leads to the order covertly releasing embarrassing or disparaging secrets of such offenders. It is for this reason that many dare not refuse any request or risk offense of the Gare Attessa despite the long absence of the Daragkarik.
- **Whisperers:** Chroniclers whisper when talking to each other, though they speak at normal volumes as necessary for other audiences.
- **Book Makers:** All Chroniclers learn to bind and repair their own Registers and can identify any past Registers by how they knot their bindings.
- **Privacy:** To read a Chronicler's Register without permission (if even possible, given how often codes or obscure languages are used to obfuscate the writing) is considered a breach of decorum at best, treason at worst, and recompense to the Chronicler can vary from an apology to bribes to avoid such rudeness from reaching the ears of the Exhalt in Wani Chereet.
- **Intra-Order Sharing:** They share and memorize all of their accumulated writings within their order, especially those of the order's founding matriarch Yara Tass.
- **Memory:** With proper training, many develop eidetic memory and perfectly retain whatever they see or hear.
- **Dream Recording:** Some gifted Gare Attessa have also mastered dream recording, and must simply touch the subject during a dream to reveal and record its secrets within the mind of a Chronicler (to be recorded externally later).
- **Prayer:** Regular prayer is expected of all Gare Attessa with exceptions only for their duties of recording. Prayers last as long as each Chronicler chooses and happen upon rising, before any meals, and before sleep. The Exhalt expect any at the Great Library to participate in prayer with the collective brethren when its bells ring (eight bells during daylight, four at night).
- **Maxim Quotations:** All Chroniclers quote Yara Tass constantly and her "Twelve Maxims" form the most common prayers used for Gare Attessa meditations.
- **Aptitude Testing:** Chroniclers test potential initiates during their youth for basic intelligence and any aptitude for reading and writing. Testing is an annual event at Wani Chereet, preceded by a pilgrimage of the young hopefuls.
- **Intra-Order Mating Prohibited:** Gare Attessa are not allowed to mate or procreate with each other, although they may find mates and family outside of the order.

Vindicta

With pressures from inhuman races like Pachyaur slavers and the krikish hives, not to mention the devastation of raiding human marauders, the peoples of the Old Countries find able-bodied warriors in short supply. When disputes among tribes, villages, client-villages, or city-states come to a head, there are rarely enough warriors on either side to survive even one large-scale battle. As a result, offended groups have the option to invoke the Rite of Vindicta.

The Rite of Vindicta reduces a conflict to a chosen champion or "vindicator" for each involved group. Said proxies fight against each other in ritual combat either individually or in small groups and it is always to the death. The rite's conclusion judges all matters, the winner's side deemed the righteous.

This rite began as personal duels to settle arguments. Many duels conclude immediately in the streets where they arise to settle petty matters, as they always have. Vindicta became a widespread and formal arbitration method via covert pressures and suggestions from many Gare Attessa among ruling courts (and they claim such rites existed before the Dragon Kings but were long forgotten). Many towns now set a regular day of the week or month where formal Rites of Vindicta are held. The wealthy, noble, or elderly often chose a vindicator to take their place in the rite, in accordance with other regional customs.

When larger towns or city-states invoke a Rite of Vindicta to settle legal challenges or sovereign issues, a small ceremonial arena is set up equidistant between the two settlements. In the time between the challenge and the day of the rite many individual Vindicta are invoked by citizens and are held as preliminary events leading up to the finale.

Despite a general acceptance of the outcome of Vindicta, some on the losing end of the sword go to war regardless of Vindicta results. If warriors follow such a leader into an ignominious war, said aggressors are considered cursed by many people of the Old Countries . . . and the Chroniclers ensure such dishonor is not forgotten or forgiven.

- **Interment:** Dead Gare Attessa are entombed at Wani Chereet or hung so their flesh is sand-blasted off their bones, which become relics.
- **Dramidge Enmity:** Gare Attessa are at odds with the Dramidge magical college, though few know the why of it. Differing opinions over the historical

Chapter 2: The Struggle for Khitus

record centuries ago has led to today's covert war of poisonings or subtle murder.

- **Daraqkarik Legend and Prophecy:** In Gare Attessa legends lie the order's most closely guarded secret. Yara Tass was the last Chronicler to interact with a Dragon King. Just prior to his departure from Khitus, Daraqkark Tharcluun allegedly shared both the reason for their departure and the time of their return with Yara. How and where she recorded these is unknown, though her writings do hint that there will be signs that will reveal them "when the right souls enjoin."
- **Wedding Prophecy:** The Exhalt and many senior Chroniclers believe they will learn the date of the Dragon Kings' return at a wedding, which is why the Chroniclers became the most common officiators of weddings after local lords. They actively encourage any weddings around them also for this purpose.

Rumors & Whispers

Of all the Khitan organizations, the people distrust the Gare Attessa most fervently due to their order's mysteries.

- Most lay people regard Gare Attessa as witches who curse everyone for little or no reason. Any Gare Attessa with one's ruler poisons his mind.
- They also say the Gare Attessa can mate with any race and produce appropriate offspring.
- Once your name is in a Gare Attessa register, folk think your best days are at an end, so it is best to avoid the Chroniclers.
- They utilize the strange sonic beetles to send messages to one another over great distances (see Chapter 7).
- The Chroniclers claim comets appear when a Gare Attessa has recorded particularly important data or events, bringing a blessing down upon that family, tribe, city, or region.
- Secretly, the Order suspects the Dragon Kings may never return, but they never openly admit this. Instead, they slowly and calmly spread their influence over all houses to rule Khitus covertly. Few but the Exhalt know this as their true purpose, though many both inside and outside the Order suspect it to be so.

Nyutu (The All-Seeing)

Transient acrobat entertainers welcomed across Khitus, the Nyutu channel and control the innate life energies in ordinary objects. Their powers are akin to those of the Kuad Ahir followers of the Prophet, though much more limited in scope.

Most claim ancestry from the Attite human tribe through a sub-tribe of nomads called the Nyutra who dwindled out

in the early Classic Age. Also called the All-Seeing, they are merely a loose brotherhood of skilled artists.

Ranks & Types

Nyutu wander through all human lands and are known, if not always welcomed.

- **Entertainer:** All Nyutu are, almost without exception, great acrobats, jugglers, and entertainers. Those too old or infirm for the stage maintain equipment or other tasks linked to their troupe's activities.
- **Ra-Skalim:** Among them, the Ra-Skalim are the master entertainers, as proclaimed by a regional overlord, though the title holds no real significance outside their own ranks.
- **Cora:** Only those called the Cora among them have the Nyutus' feared life-energy manipulation powers.

Nyutu Customs & Practices

While each troupe of Nyutu performers differs in terms of its entertainments and skills, they do share similarities that underscore their presumed tribal origins.

- **Disdain for Authority:** Nyutu tend to be suspicious of authority.
- **Reclusive Preparation:** Nyutu only practice their routines in private, never performing anything until it is ready and flawless.
- **Life-Energy Exclusivity, Limitations, and Transference:** Their impression of the Coras' life-energy manipulation is mystical, and they only teach that it's "in the blood" of the tribe. The Coras' life energy powers seem telekinetic in nature, affecting only formerly living items (some say by drawing upon their residual psionic or organic energy). Only birth passes along the mystic abilities of the Cora, although any Nyutu can become an entertainer without such powers.
- **Gifts:** They traditionally make a gift of a 'manipulated' object, usually something edible like fruit, to their current patron or benefactor at a show's climax.
- **Aids to Harmonic Magic:** Individually, they seek wizards and aid them through their harmonic magic. In some instances, the Nyutu make the spell-caster dependent on their harmonic magic abilities and through that control them subtly. They are naturally manipulative of wizards because they understand their harmonic value to a wizard.

Rumors & Whispers

Many fear the Nyutu for a host of reasons, some of which have merit.



- Many assume they are wizards or witches, which is not true.
- Many are Attite tricksters, which is true.
- Nyutu are thought by many to be untrustworthy and thieves, which is sometimes true given their transient nature.
- Some say Nyutu children are born to the stage, which is partially true, since offspring have a chance of retaining any life energy abilities.
- The Nyutu believe the Nyutra tribe from which they come was cursed in ancient times when its king recanted on a marriage proposal between his daughter and a powerful wizard (some say it was a Dragon King). This scattered the tribe as a result, but they believe the Nyutra tribe will reassemble, foretold by a variety of circumstances. The tribe will reunite for a short time one day, and much chaos will transpire in the meantime.

Boneshards

How does one identify a Boneshard? How is one of Khitus' most deadly assassins distinguished before she can unleash her terrible fury? Answer that, friend, and the wealth of kings shall tumble down from a clear sky upon you!

Boneshards have no formal society and often do not even share common tribal or blood ties. (While the majority are human, there are tales of at least a few penmai and pachyaura Boneshards in the past five generations.) They do not congregate to share stories or brag of exploits. Their sole interpersonal relationship comes from their harsh apprenticeships that, as often as not, leave failed pupils dead in a pool of their own blood or foaming at the eyes and mouth from their own poisons. Those experts who survive their training become living weapons, masters of their own pain, and skilled assassins armed with naught but what they carry beneath their skin.

History

There have been Boneshards on Khitus for as long as there have been Dragon Kings, or so their legend holds. The first were thought to be slaves seeking vengeance against their overseers, weaponless but for mundane trinkets, broken pottery, or fragments of obsidian and glass. These, while not deadly in themselves, could be wielded well in surprise, so they were stolen, collected, sharpened quietly in the dark of night, and hidden within the only thing slaves truly own: their own bodies.

Slave owners, rulers, and the otherwise powerful have all been keenly aware of the Boneshards through history. Prince Renault of Rhojess fell to a slender glass rod through the neck, as did the fabled caravan master Yunus Freck. More than one Watu slaver fell to an unanticipated assault by obsidian slivers awash in human blood. Only the careless allow a Boneshard into their presence.

Learning the Bloodsheath

The excruciating Boneshard training and apprenticeship chills the bravest blood. Several months with a master involve all the techniques for devising suitable blades and needles from common materials. Students must insert these carefully into their bodies—beneath the skin on their forearms, the backs of their hands, the high shoulders, or anywhere they can easily reach. Simple, small items are first, building gradually to longer, wider pieces. After mastering skin concealment, the student learns to insert larger pieces into the muscles and beneath them, even beneath the bones themselves where they hide in the body's deepest recesses. This education is sometimes fatal.

Key to a Boneshard's preparation and success is his ability to mitigate pain, which he accomplishes through meditative techniques learned from his master. At its base level, the "pain-sheath" technique allows the tolerance of a focused point of pain, such as inserting a needle or glass sliver into the skin. More refined control of the process allows Boneshards to ignore pain of increasing intensity. Eventually, Boneshards can tune out any selected discomfort or pain. Such selective pain endurance gives the individual many options for dealing with an increasingly cruel world.

Hiding the Bloodsheaths

Repeated invasion of the skin by weapons can mark the Boneshard for what she is. Thus, efforts to conceal the resultant scars are important for long-term success.

- **Salves and Balms:** Simple salves and balms help in the healing process, diminishing the appearance of scars.
- **Disguise:** Makeup can also help hide the telltale marks.

- **Tattoos:** Depending on their ethnicity, some turn to inkers and tattoos. Many decorate their bodies with complex tattoos to hide their scars.
- **Magical Aid:** Magical healing is most valuable to a Boneshard for its ability to erase scars and marks: a much-scarred assassin expects to pay a heavy price for the services of a sorcerous healer.

Unleashing the Shards

A Boneshard's advantages lie in speed, surprise, and poisons. The more experienced the artisan, the faster they can extract the exact weapon desired for a kill. Clothing or armor can slow the process, as can manacles or other restraints, though Boneshards rarely expose their identities with expansive shows of flesh. Of course, when those in the vicinity of a Boneshard are unaware, the sudden appearance of a dangerous and already-bloodied weapon can be surprising enough to throw a target completely off guard.

Boneshard weapons tend to be slashing or piercing weapons than can be exposed and employed at a moment's notice. Most such weapons are "separate": once freed from the flesh, they are just like any other weapon for throwing or other uses. Some Boneshards prefer "self" weaponry, which remain part of the user, like claws, shoulder spikes, and so on. Skilled Boneshards have been inventive over time, as evidenced by a much-fabled but little-seen book. "Nineblade" Oralk's *Forge of Arms*, written in Wani Chereet over 50 years ago, allegedly details more than 120 ways to craft, use, and artfully conceal small weapons within a human body.

Theoretically, a Boneshard can prepare an unlimited number of concealed weapons, but practical limits expand only with experience. A novice may have only one or two hidden shards that he can keep track of and use. A master, however, makes himself a comparative arsenal of lethality, all part of his person until unleashed as needed.

Beyond any potential cutting or piercing damage, a skilled Boneshard can add poison to his weapons to ensure death. They restrict themselves to weapons with a capsule or reservoir to keep the poison separate from the user's blood stream while concealed.

Potential poisons run the gamut of those available on Khitus, though contact poisons are infrequently used by the Boneshards. The most popular are fast-acting agents that either slay outright or cause weakness or confusion, as it is not always their intention to kill—sometimes it is enough to neutralize a target or prepare him for easy capture.

Rumors & Whispers

Unsuspecting victims are easy prey for the Boneshards, but their existence is not a complete secret, and the suitably prepared suspect anyone who might conceal weapons

in their manner. Learned guards must root out potential assassins and employ several methods to do so.

- Some subject visitors to casual beatings, hoping to betray a Boneshard by forcing any internal weapons to do deadly damage while still hidden away.
- Others use magnetic stones to detect any metal weapons that might lie beneath the skin.
- Magic is the most expensive method of discovering hidden weapons, but it is also the most reliable.
- While well known among the security conscious, Boneshards remain mythical among the masses. Most believe assassins riddled with deadly, poisonous weapons exist only in stories. Thus, they take no special precautions against them until it is too late.
- One of the bigger secrets is how to hire a Boneshard to assassinate someone specific. Most tales mention sarhaks picking up psychic impressions of people looking to hire a Boneshard among the thought clouds in marketplaces or rulers' courts. The sarhaks then secretly act as liaisons between assassins and employers without ever revealing the faces of either and providing plausible deniability for all concerned.

New Challengers

Gone are the days of tribal dominance. The preceding groups drive Khitus today, each vying for control and each with its plan for dominance and hopes for their future on Khitus. But new rivals have appeared on the scene as well, unforeseen and undeniably powerful, and their challenges match or exceed those coming from the blasted landscapes.

Krikis (The Hivekin)

The Krikis are perhaps the most widely recognized threat, stirring with newfound intelligence in their bleak, forbidding Hivelands. For eons, they were predictable bugs that needed only be tolerated and contained in their portions of the planet. Now they wander further afield, threatening the dwindling fertile lands like locusts with a plan. The questions left to far too many are: Why are they on the move? What is their objective? Can they be contained or parlayed with?

Oritahl (Cold Skins)

Similarly, the savage lizard folk who were once content on the unwanted fringes of the world have grown more numerous and bold. Reptilian Cold Skins who once fought solely with tooth and claw now forge weapons and armor, though from whom they learned these skills is unknown. They tend to be solitary when encountered, which makes them a largely

shambolic threat. Still, with the ongoing changes in krikish behavior, folk worry that the Oritahl might also learn to band together and insist upon a role in the future of the world.

Yenfansa (White Eyes / The Devil's Children)

A pregnancy is announced, and parents and family make joyous preparations, even in these meager times. Time passes—too little time, to be sure—and the young mother grows large far too quickly. She is hidden away, her loved ones suddenly nervous and unresponsive to queries, the father exhausted from bringing food to satisfy his wife's ravenous appetite. In time the mother re-emerges from hiding, belly flat, eyes sallow and distant, and not a word is spoken. None need be. Everyone knows that another Yenfansa has been born, and all hope it has been abandoned sufficiently far out in the wilderness that it will never be seen again.

The Yenfansa are born hairless with stark, pupil-less white eyes. Such births are infrequent but growing more common. A Devil's Child is easily turned out into the world. For one thing, it bears no resemblance to its parents, who ultimately have no connection to the child. For another, the Yenfansa are born fully alert and cognizant, babbling a demon's language, hate-filled and almost visibly growing – one can fend for itself in the wild in a matter of hours. White Eyes are doomed to short lives but emerge onto the world with unsurpassed wisdom. With puberty comes rapid deterioration and a painful death. In the meantime, a Devil's Child never sleeps, devoting itself single-mindedly to its pursuits, perpetually an outcast, shunned by the fearful, sought out by the wise. The Yenfansa have some mysterious role to play in Khitus's unfolding story, that much is certain.

Dangers Yet Unknown

Certainly the least understood encroachment onto Khitus comes from beyond the sky. The Bev al-Khim are ambassadors for one such threat, for where could the denizens of the Black Tower – and even the Black Tower itself – have come from but from some other world? What is their goal? Are there others like them who will plant their flags in Khitus's sands? Are their scouts already among us?

These new challengers make the future murkier still. Any one of these groups may leave its mark on Khitus, as did the savage gods and the Daragkarik of old. Perhaps destiny marks one of them as a potential ruling force to restore Khitus to stability and future health. All folk know for certain is that death comes for all should the mettle of these agendas or agents prove insufficient to the task of taking control of this world and its peoples.

Chapter 3: Races & Realms

The following entries organize the many sapient races, realms, and cultures of Khitus today in alphabetical order. Each race encompasses numerous cultures, and many cultures transcend race as the sole prerequisite for inclusion.

Attites

The human tribes that emerged from the south and spread north and east brought with them the hardy ruggedness of the original Attite peoples. Divergent from the other human groups, the Attites are the far-reaching wanderers of Khitus, spanning the widest territory. They are lean and muscled, keen-eyed and vigilant, dimly aware that these changing times have room for one victorious people.

Attites are standard humans of average build. They tend to have lean faces and olive or darker skin, with long noses and green or hazel eyes. They are often called the most beautiful of the human tribes. Brown, curly hair is most common, though the tribe prizes the rarer births of blonde and black-haired Attites: woven hair and braids are a pervasive style, and almost all Attites wear their hair short. They rarely wear tattoos.

Attites favor functional robes and dresses, made from the finest fabrics the individual can afford. Brighter colors and additional layers made from thinner materials mark one as wealthy. Most carry tablets and paper in leather satchels. Ornate walking sticks are also fashionable, carved with important symbols of allegiance and personal or family history.

Attite warriors employ all sorts of weapons and armor, but traditionally favor the short spear (*hyatchal*) and short sword (*groto*). The former are often carried crossed in an “x” across the back, strapped in place by a sturdy harness; *hyatchal*-bearing soldiers are trained to march and maneuver in tight formations with their spears protruding so. Beaded sheathes strapped to the thigh hold their *groto*s. Attites are not animal riders or mounted warriors, for the most part, though some few master the *thakal*.

Race & Tribe Summary

While there are many unique details and facts about each race, here are the common stereotypes associated with each race or tribe.

Attites: Human negotiators and peacemakers

Chindi: Human matriarchal traders and warriors on the fringes of the known world

Cold Skins/Oritahl: Lizard men of the swamps with growing awareness

Krikis: Bug men that hoard bright lode

Makadan: Human warrior culture and source of many Khitan mercenaries

Nordor: Human barbarian stone carvers from the frigid north

Pachyaur: Elephanturs of the equator

Penmai: Daring acrobatic humanoids with prehensile tails

Prajalu: Short, stocky humans feared as poison makers and child stealers

Watu: Slaver elephanturs

History

Outsiders sometimes think of Attites as manipulative tricksters who soothe with calming but confusing words before robbing you blind or cutting your throat. In fact, their love of peacemaking means Attites are highly skilled negotiators. It can be laborious to talk through a difficult situation, seeking the best bargain or least-confrontational outcome. An Attite spends the time necessary to do so. This peaceful attitude of consensus comes in part from their history of oppression and struggle against overwhelming odds.

The oldest Attite tribal territories near the equator led them to be among the first humans to encounter the *pachyaura*. This also saw them bear the brunt of the *Watu* slave trade for centuries. Most human slaves have Attite roots, whether owned by *Watu* or *Makadan* human masters. This history of enslavement makes them



cautious and especially protective of their women and children. They hold unmitigated hatred for slavers; while some outsiders are surprised that Attites don't have a racial hatred of pachyaura, Attites differentiate and know their enemies have always been the much-loathed Watu.

Ranks & Types

Of the human tribes, Attites have the largest number of ranks and castes, making it difficult for outsiders to judge an Attite's exact social or political standing.

- **Landao, Dotrong, and Trung:** Names for civil authorities derive directly from the Attite terms for advancing age, including Landao ("grown"), Dotrong ("grayed"), and Trung ("venerable"). They cherish the knowledge and experience of their elders more than other human tribes, but often still succumb to the timeless struggle between wisdom and youthful petulance.
- **Rau:** Of high prestige among the Attites are their Rau, or "bearded ones," proud evangelical philosophers who grow especially thick beards high on the face and down to their always-exposed shoulders and chest. Rau are thought to be especially virile men, sought by women of quality and power.
- **Tongia:** Contrasting their high social regard are the rags worn by the Tongia, a Shadazim-guided religious minority that shuns worldly relationships altogether.
- **Moiqoi:** Unique among the Attites are the Moiqoi ("marriage brokers"), who have more say in pair bonding than the individuals or their parents; moiqoi are not above accepting favors to influence their decisions.
- **Maigiang:** These are socially elevated prostitutes of both genders who ply their trade with impunity among the higher castes who can afford their companionship.
- **Detdosh:** Detdosh are professional hair weavers who dominate a fashion industry that they create, change, and then enforce anew.

There are also strata among the Attite military that affect those in the armies, but may or may not subsume any civilian social status outside those ranks.

- **Conoan:** The Conoan are a merit-based scholarly elite whose counsel is faithfully heeded by even the most reckless military commander. To disobey a conoan is to invite the scorpion into one's bed.
- **Giotinh:** Giotinh are most renowned among the Attites and their position carries social and military honor alike. Randomly selected as newborns and

trained through childhood as warriors, these 225 honor guards swear to protect any important figure or warlord. Sometimes called the "fifteen 15s," they are perfectly selfless and carry out their instructions without regard for life or limb. Giotinh are reputedly as tough as xursha scales!

- **Turotch:** In the armies, Tong oversee three-ranked spear formations called turotch.
- **Chutich:** Chutich lead groto-armed skirmishers known as whitusk. Traditionally, Attite participants in any Rite of Vindicta are highly regarded Chutich.
- **Ilinh:** Ilinh are wandering healers who move fearlessly among the wounded during and after battles, saving as many as possible. They administer the water spice hesheyel among the soldiers in times of need.

Attite Psychology

Despite the considerable fighting skills of many Attites, war forever remains secondary to diplomacy and reason—a mindset forged by centuries of oppression by Watu slavers they could hardly vanquish by strength of arms. A fight avoided marks one as a true leader as surely as victory by spear and sword. To the Attites, all humans are equals, though none outside the tribe may marry into it except in the most remarkable circumstances. Regardless, all non-humans are animals. One must really be convinced of a pachyaur's or krikis' intelligence and worth, and even then skepticism will linger just beneath the surface.

Other aspects of the Attite mindset follow directly from their fatalist traditions. For the individual, life is a brief gift that will pass and end in pain. For the tribe, Khitus will one day be picked clean, and only those who adapt will survive. There is no guarantee that the Attites themselves will adapt sufficiently to avoid extinction. The writings of the philosopher Amon Arik preach this fatalist message and encourage mental discipline to face it honorably. Youngsters must memorize most of these centuries-old passages before coming of age.

Customs & Culture

Attite communities hold a transgressor's feet to the fire, sometimes literally, for ignoring their rules and rites. Taboos are strictly enforced with punishment, shaming, and exile, even for transgressing the slightest rules.

Attites never eat exactly at the moments of sunrise or sunset. They pause for a full breath after learning some-

one's name for the first time. Attites close their eyes when listening, especially when absorbing the wisdom or experience of an elder; other humans find this odd or off-putting. Not closing one's eyes sends the pointed message that they are purposefully not listening. Mating outside the race is forbidden, punishable by banishment or death. Attite women eat separately from the men as a matter of cultural preference, and each finds it embarrassing to be seen eating in the company of the other.

Children are reared communally but disciplined at home. After coming of age, one Attite girl per family is turned out to find another community on her own; these temporarily defenseless girls often face harsh treatment until they find the protection of another family, but the freedom for Attite women to choose their future husbands mitigates this. Attites bury their dead. Out of necessity of late, some have begun a practice of rendering the bodies first to retrieve water, though most find this barbaric.

Attites also share these peculiarities:

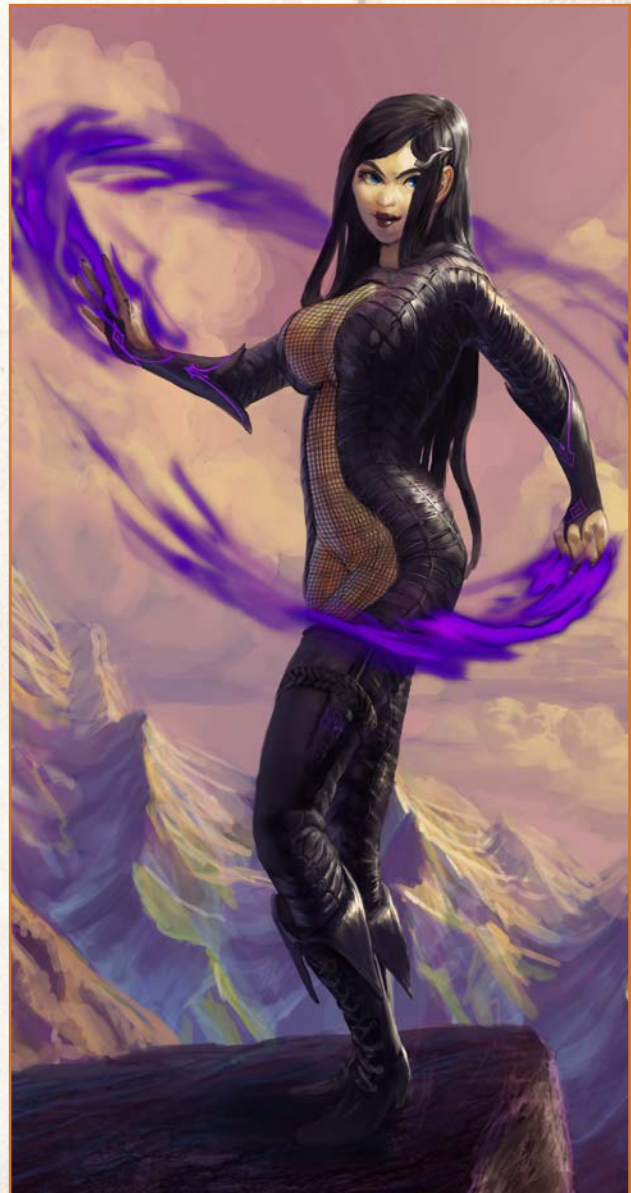
- **Alush Yal Concentration:** Attite spell casters perform calming rituals they call the alush yal that improve concentration. They derive these lengthy but effective techniques from the writings of the Calming Voice (Bin-tith). A mind so prepared sees clearer relationships between time, cause, and effect.
- **Gifts:** Adults often exchange gifts of jewelry upon meeting, usually nothing more than a tiny stone or wooden trinket; craftsmanship and attention to personal detail are valued more than the gift's expense. A cut stone from a place where two people first met makes a valued token of friendship. Ganshyer, the black steel alloy that resists the Iron Virus, is especially prized.
- **Brick Builders:** Attites are brick builders where they establish permanent settlements. Youths gain strength stomping in clay pits and carrying heavy bundles for their artisans and masons. Their decorative brickwork designs hold intricate varieties and shapes of brick to form magnificent mosaics.
- **Tents:** In the wilderness or open desert, traveling Attites tend to modestly space their camps of single-family tents, their fabrics stitched in elaborate patterns.
- **Bahnmi Bread:** Attite bakers make Bahnmi, spongy bread that absorbs and intensifies the flavors of the other food eaten with it.
- **Mauxan Jewelry:** Mauxan is exotic greenstone jewelry traditional to Attites that fetches high prices

due to its reputation as an intensifier of romantic experiences.

Rumors & Secrets

Prophecies and many-layered rumors about all the scattered human tribes abound among the Attite people.

- Attites suspect the Gare Attesa of subtle manipulations, which holds true for the most part. One day, an Attite prophecy claims, a betrayed Gare Attesa will cry until the seas are refilled.
- Attites know the story of the Dragon King Chroma'ano well, and are ever watchful for the Vittarrans, want-



ing no part in further thinning their blood that might taint their own (see Chapter 6).

- Attites believe their Trakeen Tongia priests have reestablished contact with the Dragon King Mai-Rong, and will reassemble soon beneath his banner.
- They also believe that Attites are the original humans, splintered after offending the creator, Sang-Tao, long before the moons and stars appeared around their world. The world's mountains, they feel, are the bones of Sang-Tao, who died of grief for having lost the love of the people.

Chindi

The major distinction between the Chindi and other human tribes is their matriarchy: women hold power among the Chindi. Many human men who meet any Chind express relief that their isolated location beyond Prajalu territories keeps many from discovering this heretical form of governance, for they do not wish it to spread.

A diminutive tribe of slight build and pale coloration, Chindi have fair to white skin with white and grey eyes. Men wear their black, white or grey hair cut close to the scalp, women much longer. Some Chindi women have long pointed ears, seen as a portent of good fortune. Skin painting and tattoos are common among adults.

Chindi fashion their traditional clothing from net-like fabrics hung with other cloth, bright gems, metal ornaments, beads, and even tiny ceramic tiles. Men wear long sleeves and trousers with short boots. Both men and women wear capes that also serve as bags with many pockets.

To the surprise of other tribes, relatively few Chindi train with weaponry. Those who do so learn the javelin (*cuthra*) to serve as part of local militias. Many carry the traditional *yuvek*, which is a long, curved dagger that is often an heirloom passed to favorite children. Many Chindi are master *swafa* riders, and a large part of their village life revolves around capturing, training, riding, and even racing the swift lizard mounts. The Chindi also use elephants as draft animals, the only group apart from the *Pachyaur* to do so. However much they wish to, they do not have the skills or sheer strength needed to capture and domesticate the much-larger *colossadants*.

Chindi villages seem impermanent to outsiders. Most buildings are light wooden structures with paper and leaf walls, their only strength derived from large rocks or stone walls against which they are often built. These structures are interspersed with colorful tents, incorporating all available trees and brush to make open areas shaded from the equatorial sun.

History

The original Chindi tribes emerged from the deep southlands beside their human kin, driven in long migrations north and far to the east. Today, in expanses rarely visited by others, they are concentrated far beyond the Prajalu lands on the edge of virgin wilderness. Most know the Chindi by the rare wanderers and traders, primarily women, who find their way back west into the turbulent lands.

The Chindi feel the closest lingering association with their patron *Daraqkark Mangkir*. Only the priests can interpret whether or not that love is still reciprocated, but the tribal faithful believe it to be true. Eventually, they believe *Mangkir* shall emerge to return *Khitus* to order, presumably with his favored children elevated to a central role.

Chindi cultural history has more bad dealings with magic than most tribes. Part of what drove them into such isolated territories was sorcery's wrath plaguing them until their arrival in those lands. As a result, all Chindi are highly wary of secular magic. Secret names, never revealed outside one's family, help people guard against magic; exposure of a secret name is betrayal of the worst sort and carries strict punishment both within the family and the local culture as well.

Ranks & Types

Chindi society and governance derives its strength from extended families. The more powerful families draw power through mercantile or military strength, which translates into political power.

- *Phrama* designates a family of great wealth.
- *Rachini* is a family of long history and genuine character.
- *Athan* families are relative newcomers to politics.
- *Phyrha*, the Merchant Wives, are the richest of the rich, matrons of vibrant trading organizations that manage vast wealth and people. Some deal exclusively in *ganshyer*, the black steel alloy immune to the pervasive *Iron Virus*.
- *Luksaw*, daughters of all noble families, train as warriors and hold high ranks in their local militias and armies. Strong and skilled, they often prove a match for fighters of any gender anywhere.
- *Thawpi* is a military commander or decision maker while *Ca-Na* and *Gru-Na* are functionaries in battle planning and logistical planning, respectively.
- *Lexa*: Most Chindi follow the teachings of *Lexa*, a philosophy that preaches togetherness. The *Lexai*

apostles wander freely between villages, striking a living contrast by being educated and erudite but forever filthy and destitute.

- The Pa: Adherents of Pa are an offshoot of the Lexai that remain in the wilderness, shunning cities and any organizations larger than a family group. Their teachings find widespread acceptance among the Chindi who, as a whole, embrace individualism and freethinking.
- Banarth, or “wish makers,” repeat a client’s wishes at special statues or fountains for a fee to help make them come true; during the spring rains, romantic hopefuls (or meddlesome parents) keep the banarth busy well into the evening weaving elaborate love wishes. They often mark themselves with the red tear gemstones taken from regelthi stone worms (see Chapter 7).
- Cheraah, or Chindi “doomsayers” are ironic actors hired to shout at buildings and families to indirectly bring them good luck.

Customs & Culture

Chindi celebrate life in all things and their culture supports and honors life as much as possible. They also have a wide variety of traditions and habits tied to the sun and the moons.

In good times, Chindan villages are joyful and active into the evenings with music and dancing. Regardless, they curtail their evening activities beneath “paired

moons,” which they consider to be ill omens. Chindi hold numerous festivals during the year, some of which are overtly procreative fertility rituals while others celebrate midsummer, the harvest, and other notable times of the year. A unique Chindan festival—celebrated four nights after a settlement’s first post-Midsummer birth—is the Mothers’ Feast to celebrate any new mothers from the past year.

Nearly all Chindi are literate, and well versed in her-bology and agriculture. Organized public education is common in Chindi communities. Any argument should be supported with appropriate quotations from literature, and few love arguments more than the Chindi. Their enthusiasm for such verbal exchanges makes others think they are overly stubborn. Letting a disagreement or argument escalate from words to blows brings scornful eyes down upon the offender.

Chindi welcome newcomer humans into the tribe through marriage or adoption. They even allow newcomers to practice previous tribal traditions while among them. In fact, many Chindi traditions shift and evolve over time, a consequence of their openness to individuality and new ideas. Chindi distrust all Nordor, an attitude dating back to migratory days when competition for the best lands caused considerable strife and many battles. They embrace the pachyaur as kindred spirits, though they are careful to avoid capture and enslavement. Chindi feel that both the Kuad Ahir and Gare Attesa harbor dangerous agendas, so both groups are commonly persecuted among them. Chindi despise the



Bev al-Khim with a passion and chase any from their lands at spear point.

Humans of the Chindi tribe share these further traits:

- **Marriage Contracts:** Chindi marriage contracts have fixed time limits, and are seldom renewed when they end. Both parties separate and seek new lives. Children are raised by extended families of both parents without regard to these contracts.
- **Patience:** Chindi are patient and good listeners. They have a tendency to stare during a conversation, never seeming to blink.
- **Manju Eaters:** Chindi herd the tiny meat-bearing rodents called manju and consider them a delicacy.
- **Spice Smokers:** Chindi manufacture and partake of a variety of dried leaves and spices, often smoking them in strange pipes. Teaweed is probably the most famous aromatic Chindan pipe weed.
- **Night Business Preference:** “Paired moons” also put a damper on business, because Chindi only resolve barter after sundown.
- **Thung:** Chindi also produce thung, a long-burning material that is essentially oil-treated dung.
- **Sheesh:** Chindi weave a fine fabric made from spider webs, dyed a variety of brilliant colors and sold in caravans in every corner of Khitus.

Rumors & Whispers

Superstitious outsiders attribute many ills to the Chindi and their odd ways. Their remoteness and terseness make others ill at ease, which generates more confusion, misconception, and rumors.

- One persistent misconception is that the Luksaw women drove the Dragon Kings away by seeking a magical means to impregnate each other without men.
- Haru, an ambitious Chindi Shadazim and among the most famous Chindi personalities, has allegedly charmed many Chindi and even Prajalu courts; some whisper that evil malice lurks behind her mask of pleasantries. (As ever, examine whom one marks as an enemy to verify any truths said about them.)
- The Chindi Deathsense trait seems magical or necromantic to outsiders. All Chindi women can sense another’s impending natural death by several days; they use this foreknowledge to make critical arrangements for the soon-to-be dead and gather loved ones and family. This ability has such a high degree of accuracy that a person can be declared legally dead at any time after deathsense notes his or her pending passing, even before the actual death.

- At the end of life, some Chindi choose to have their bodies fed to prized animals, which are then sold at auction for family profit and a buyer’s luck.
- Chindi are especially fearful of the desert vermin called maradoch, thinking them harbingers of deadly consequences, so they enlist children to hunt them out (see Chapter 7).
- A long-held Chindan legend says that a single proto-human race once dominated the equatorial jungles. Two members of this race parented the human race; the remainder coalesced together to become the Dragon King Mangkir.
- According to Chindi Trakeen, Mangkir still exists, though he is only visible to them now; he and his power will manifest anew when the Black Tower falls.
- Many Chindi maintain that one day a Chindi princess will give birth to triplets who will ultimately divide the world before final destruction.

Cold Skins (Oritahl)

Lizards can be found in every Khitan ecosystem from the moist fens remaining in the mountain shadows to the sun-blasted deserts. Large or small, they fill essential niches of survival wherever they can eke out an existence. The Oritahl, more commonly called “Cold Skins,” are not a new race, but were previously semi-intelligent lizards, little more than animals. Since the departure of the Dragon Kings, Oritahl have slowly begun making and using simple tools and exhibiting the barest grasp of basic technologies for shelter, clothing, and fire. Other Khitans, long inured to them, now notice and worry about these rudimentary societies sprouting up on the fringes of “civilized” Khitus. Their relatively recent changes in intellect and rising territoriality (and some means to defend it) now cast a new shadow on the face of the world.

Cold Skins are bipedal lizard folk equal in might and stature to a full-grown human. Cold Skins function best when warmed by the sun and slow down when deprived of its heat. Most have green or brown scales highlighted by brighter markings around the face, brow-ridges, and down their spines and tails. Their four-toed feet have an opposable thumb. They reproduce oviparously, females laying and hatching clutches of eggs, then rearing the young with barely any education into society and technology. The Cold Skins have yet to create an effective child-educating tradition, since they have only recently developed any technology.

None of Khitus's established races welcomes added competition in these challenging times. Most see Oritahl as brutes, useful for hard labor and little more. Any Cold Skins who can speak are treated like freaks—sometimes even by other Oritahl that prefer older methods of communication involving tail movements with guttural noises. While often considered little more than pests, Cold Skins make excellent guards and provide some unexpected thrills as gladiators in savage games. Some communities place bounties on Oritahl out of malice or greed, reducing their numbers to prevent any encroachment on human territories. Many now find their natural prejudice about Oritahl as ignorant beasts difficult to overcome; few Cold Skins have opportunities to disprove these prejudices. Startled humans or pachyaur challenge many oritahl who demonstrate subtle intellect out of surprise and/or fear, and such confrontations often devolve into violence.

History & the Future

Dubbed the Oritahl by the Daragkarik, these bipedal lizards long languished on the edges of the maps. Dangerous only if provoked or trapped, Cold Skins never encroached on territories held by other societies, content with swampy or less-than-ideal terrains for homelands. For millennia, the Oritahls' only connection to other societies was as a strong but docile slave race.

The rise of Oritahl intelligence is both sudden and unpredictable. As recently as twenty to thirty generations ago, Cold Skins existed only as bipedal animals, never boasting intellects comparable with humans. Today, within any clutch of eggs, perhaps one or two may yield a bright "emergent" hatchling, but more often than not there are none. This is no immediate problem for nascent Oritahl societies, as normal Cold Skins are intelligent enough to learn skills—like using a plow—even if they could not invent such on their own. However, if no Cold Skins of greater intelligence hatch in a village over several generations, that village may soon die out.

All eyes turn expectantly toward those "emergents," youngsters with greater-than-average brainpower. The present and future of every community depends on them, and the resulting pressure to succeed can be challenging. When a village has a problem, they expect an emergent to have or find a solution. While success carries with it great praise and physical rewards, failure is humiliating and often intolerable. Many Oritahl wandering the world left their home villages after failing to measure up to the community's expectations during some crisis.

Ranks & Types

Even with the recent changes, the vast bulk of a Cold Skin community appears closer to their animal brethren than human society. Most Oritahl address only the baser needs to feed and mate and base their decisions on simple fight-or-flight instincts, not reason. Cold Skin society mimics that of ancient human farming villages—each community is highly insular and protective as they build toward more organized cultures.

- **Farmers:** The majority of Oritahl are farmers, cultivating tasty weeds and reeds with sufficient moisture (in harsher climes, they wander as gatherers instead).
- **Laborers:** Next in numbers are laborers, who work at accumulating resources, building homes and defenses, and patrolling their frontiers against adversaries.
- **Emergents:** The most intelligent might naturally rise to prominent positions, depending on each individual settlement (but not necessarily, as proven among humans). Emergent Cold Skins are masters of logic and language compared to other Oritahl, but they remain simpletons compared to many other races. Emergents can master simple engineering and mathematics, metalworking, and tool use fairly easily. They recognize community needs and act accordingly, organizing less-aware relatives to maximize food supplies, protect egg clutches and hatchlings, and nurture or expand their populations. A village's oldest emergent tests its young hatchlings for intellectual aptitude; the series of simple tests and quests used are the sorts of puzzles most human children would figure out easily.

Wanderers & the Banished

Only the extremely smart venture beyond Oritahl village society to trade or explore, but not all seek new lands or new deals. Some simply seek the new, as a curse for the emergent is the lack of mental stimulation in Cold Skin lands. More Oritahl every month now venture into areas of Khitus untouched by their kind before.

Banishment is an ever-present possibility among the Cold Skins. Political challenges can have harsh consequences for those inciting change but failing to sway the people. The failures of any new process or technology—even after long periods of success—can invite expulsion as the "one who broke tradition." In the long run, banishing an emergent spreads oritash influence out into the world, which can ultimately benefit the race. That



is hard to see from an individual point of view, however, and many banished Cold Skins carry with them justifiable bitterness and hearts heavy with betrayal and resentment.

Regardless of the initial incentives that moved them farther out into Khitus, most wandering Cold Skins desire to bring greater prosperity back to their homelands. They seek new ideas, new materials, new methods, and new technologies—anything they can copy and bring home to use or teach others. Racial unity gnaws at them, even those treated most unfairly. The wanderers are insatiably curious, often poking their snouts into places they may not be welcome. They skulk around, watch patiently, analyze, and quietly contemplate. They ask questions, seek counsel and instruction, and are willing to pay for these privileges. An emergent Oritahl is drawn to what he has never seen before and does not yet understand.

Customs & Culture

Where the emergent find their greatest challenge, though, is within the existing intelligent hierarchy of their native village. Cold Skin societies have the trappings of a cooperative agricultural existence, but are often far more primitive than human agrarian settlements. Change is slow and, as the harbingers of their own societies, the emergent change what they may without inciting wrath or fear among their brethren.

All in a village or settlement share the work and responsibility for the good of the community, with certain numbers assigned to specific roles for plowing, planting, harvesting, sorting, and storing produce. Among the earliest accomplishments by the Oritahl were the building and use of storage structures (like grain bins) and tools (like the plow and scythe) to increase and improve their farming. These Classic Age changes made the Daragkarik and others mark Oritahl as undeniably intelligent.

More recent emergent advances and ideas, which take hold slowly and sporadically across their common culture, include common defense (including militias as well as defensive fortification and tactical settlement planning), general education, and a sense of justice for the individual.

Cold Skins continue to struggle with their changing nature:

- **Emergent Infanticide:** Infanticide against suspected emergent newborns is not uncommon, driven by jealousy and entrenchment; the need for more thinkers in each society to help it grow, survive, and compete is not obvious to most Cold Skins.
- **Stubbornness:** Cold Skin stubbornness runs deep among village elders and, like humans, they can

act for self-serving reasons to the detriment of the group at large.

- **Challenges to Emergents:** Bright youngsters must persevere to find their place among society's decision makers without upsetting long-established patterns of power and stability. Public outrage grows slowly among the dim-witted populations, and they're more apt to be angry at being shown their stupidity than in listening to any changes suggested by bright Cold Skins who push too hard for change.

Cold Skins & Weaponry

Cold Skins have mastered metalworking in the past century and more than a few can make bronze, iron, or steel blades and fittings. They can arm themselves with swords and spears, like humans and Pachyaur, but their use remains uncommon at best. Oritahl show an acute reliance on their own teeth and claws over supplemental weapons. This is not a simple preference, such as a human warrior choosing to use unarmed combat. Even the most intelligent Cold Skins struggle to break their visceral dependency on innate weaponry, regardless of how effective other weapons might be. Choosing to use manufactured arms and armor requires a distinct and conscious effort. Cold Skins have high regard for any of their number who can use such equipment without apparent effort. Escaping their tendency to settle matters with bared claws is a remarkable achievement.

Rumors & Whispers

Cold Skins have long turned inward to survive and grow on the fringes of the world. Now, they turn outward to persevere and endure the changing times and the racial hatred they face on nearly all fronts. Without meaning to upset any balances, the mere fact that the Oritahl now have voices and interests outside of fringe lands angers many and fuels more than a few unfortunate frictions and ugly rumors.

- Especially along the frontiers, outsiders harass or attack burgeoning communities, hoping to "make their lizard kind disappear."
- How the Oritahl can eventually grow must come from outside their realms, in what they can observe, steal, and copy. They can be collectively imitative, and whatever succeeds for one settlement can spread quickly among their villages.
- Some (but not all) Gare Atessa claim that Oritahl curiosity is a mask concealing overt spying and espionage, seeking to undermine human strength and power by stealing their secrets and technology.

Krikis

Krikis remain the most mysterious, inscrutable intelligent species on Khitus, despite controlling vast territories among at least three empires (and possibly more) distinct in their dominant chitin colorations. Along the frontiers surrounding the Hivelands, only warriors expand their territories or protect what they control against dangers, maintaining a wide swath of unoccupied territory as a permanent, desolate buffer between the outside world and their precious hives. Few humans, Pachyaur, Penmai, or others have seen the Hivelands or non-warrior Krikis and lived to tell the tale. Even Krikis warriors, tasked exclusively with defense and expansion, would be foreigners in their hives, strangers without position or purpose.

Appearance & Physiology

A Krikis's adult physical size and specialties come from various factors: its egg, the size of its brood cell, and the nutrition the larvae receive after hatching. All new Krikis spend about a week as rapidly growing larvae. When they are ready for their next phase of development, they spin a cocoon around themselves and nurses seal their cells with air-permeable wax caps for protection while they pupate. Pupation time varies by caste, after which adults emerge from cells fully formed. (See "Ranks & Types" below for more on Krikis castes and roles and any physical distinctions separate from commonalities noted immediately below.)

Krikis Chitin

Krikis exoskeletons appear to be completely smooth chitin, but closer examination reveals it is in fact fuzzy with multitudinous hairs. These branching hairs help attract pollen as the Krikis moves through a flower-rich environment. Chitin coloration is darker and lighter shades of the color of the head antennae; these colors grant each subspecies its designation as Red Krikis, Yellow Krikis, and Black Krikis.

The Head & Sensory Organs

Krikish eyes possess better low-light vision than humans, helping them navigate the near-darkness of the hive. They do not "see" hundreds of different images through their compound eyes. Instead, they see a mosaic image of what they face with a very fine grid superimposed. This grid makes their compound eyes better than human eyes at detecting motion and certain patterns.

Krikis possess a pair of thin antennae with tremendous chemical sensitivity, which can detect and identify airborne signals in concentrations. The slender antennae possess an "elbow" (with a similar arrangement of musculature) and a wide range of motion, so Krikis can and do explore their environment via their antennae. They also greet and identify one another via their antennae.

Depending on caste, Krikis mandibles perform a variety of tasks. Workers use them to help shape wax into comb, to chew through wax in the hive in order to reach food stores, and also to reshape comb that needs repair. Mandibles (which grow slightly larger on warriors) can also bite or hold on to debris or enemies.

The Body & Limbs

The thorax, or upper body, is the only attachment point for a Krikis's six limbs. They use two as arms and two as legs, like bipeds; the two much-smaller arms between those pairs rarely emerge from beneath its chitin, and they mainly employ them to groom the mid section. For hard-to-reach places, though, Krikis groom one another to help prevent injury, maintain flight-readiness, heighten chemical sensitivity, and remove harmful parasites.

Krikis use all six limbs for locomotion, to hold onto surfaces, and to manipulate their environment. Krikis feet have four manipulative claws with adhesive pads, which are as useful and deft as human or Penmai hands. All Krikis limbs are highly sensitive vibration detectors, and their language has a vibration component, whether surface- or air-transmitted.

One obvious distinction that separates warrior Krikis from other workers after emerging from pupation is their lack of "pollen baskets"—adaptive hair bristles that help collect and hold pollen—on their legs.

Krikis have extremely strong legs, though their larger hind legs are by far stronger than other limbs. They use their dense, fibrous muscles to easily leap ten yards. Prior to making the jump, the Krikis's large legs act much like a catapult; they squat and bend, placing the femurs against the other half of the leg. The compression builds tension and allows the Krikis to take off with a velocity of three yards per second. They can make such a leap repeatedly, as often as three times per minute, but the energy required is exhausting.

Abdominal Specifics

All workers, including warriors, possess a "honey crop," an internal water bottle inside their abdomens that allows them to carry water or nectar home to their hive. This is not directly attached to the digestive sys-

tem, so a worker stranded away from the hive overnight could starve to death despite having a crop full of food. However, as part of their growing intelligence, warriors know how to puncture the honey crop and extract nutrition from it, but only if absolutely necessary.

Overall, Krikis abdomens are outwardly composed of overlapping chitin plates that allow the abdomen to telescope outward as its stomach or crop fills. By using muscles to pump their abdomens in and out, Krikis can create a vacuum that lets them suck fluids into their stomach or crop quickly and easily.

Stingers & Offensive Adaptations

Krikis queens and many workers possess stingers for defending the hive, while drones do not. Ironically, warrior Krikis do not have stingers and so compensate with the use of weapons in their roles, which was a factor in their developing intelligence in the first place.

Stingers carry venom that is especially deadly to other Krikis. While her venom is no more toxic than a worker's venom, a queen normally only uses her stinger on other queens. A queen's use of her stinger also releases a chemical marker that signals all other Krikis in the hive to come join the fight. The signal moves through the hive quickly, reaching all Krikis, even those far out of sight.

History

Very little history surrounds the Krikis, as they rarely concern themselves with such in the normal scheme of things. Like the Oritahl, intellectual awareness and curiosity about the past or future are relatively new among the hive-minded Krikis. Thus, all that is known historically about Krikis comes from their interaction with the other races. Many Gare Attesa now postulate that the Daragkarik might have kept the Krikis limited in some unnoticed arcane ways to explain why they remained small in population and territory until after the passing of the Dragon Kings.

The Chitin Wars

The traditional Hivelands lie hidden behind the jagged western mountain ranges. Expansion beyond these borders exposed the Yellow Krikis to human civilizations and conflict was inevitable. Until then, the Krikis had ample experience of peaceful coexistence, expanding hives into regions dominated only by herd animals and predators. Humans, however, displayed a puzzling resistance to being displaced for new hives. Prior to the emergence of higher cognitive function, the Krikis would have simply retreated from that resistance and

expanded in other directions. But after careful consideration and consultation with hive royalty, Yellow Krikis warriors broke with tradition and asserted themselves eastward, igniting the First Exploratory War (known among the humans as the First Chitin War).

The First Chitin War

The First Exploratory War began in the mountain passes through the Spiked Range where human miners stood their ground against encroachments by Yellow Krikis warriors. Until that time, the miners dug out tin and iron without incident and hauled away the ore along wilderness trails toward markets further east and south. The Yellows, unused to resistance to their expansion, resolved to clear the passes by force; in the first few months, yellow warriors slaughtered many hundreds of unprepared and unsuspecting miners.

Equally determined to protect their valuable mines, the human owners recruited several 'shtuka ranpalt,' or pike regiments in the Makadan style, armed with shtuka from nearby Gathush and bolstered them with thakal lancers and mercenary troops from several other cities, including Torqual and Pharanor. Rank-and-file Krikis warriors associated the red-cloaked human Gathusine pikemen with their long-hated Red Krikis enemies, spurring them to greater violence against the humans. (From this initial confusion spawns a lingering racial hatred with many Yellow Krikis still believing all humans to be in league with the Reds.) Three years of bloody back-and-forth fighting ensued, including desperate struggles in the deep mines for which neither side was prepared. The Yellow Krikis warriors eventually withdrew down the western slopes and back to their hives to ponder the complexities of independently thinking enemies.

Human captives suffered the most after the war's conclusion. Having only known intraspecies conflicts, the Yellow Krikis expected the humans to assume the placid role of drones, since captured drones always maintained their roles without regard to color. The humans thrust into that unusual role had neither the inclination nor skills to function in the hives. Their insectoid captors resorted to more stringent and even brutal methods to correct their puzzling behavior (or lack thereof) until their numbers dwindled to nil. The inhuman tales brought back east from the minimal escapees horrified all, hardening human hearts still further against the inscrutable Krikis, now temporarily pacified on their frontiers.

The Second Chitin War

Forty years later, the yellow hive royalty authorized another expedition through the same passes and pur-



posefully bred a whole generation of warriors for this expansion. The human mines in the area still churned out rich finds and were somewhat better protected and fortified with moats and walls and mercenary guards. All these improvements were no barrier against the massive numbers of yellow warriors that crawled up out of the west.

All mines and mountain passes quickly fell to the Krikis. As per usual, the warriors emerged onto the plains beyond the eastern slopes to establish hive dominance over as wide a region as possible. They achieved this easily without significant losses, so great were their numbers. Displaced human farmers and villagers fled further east to the walls of Gathush, overwhelming the city's ability to house and feed them. In their anguish, the refugees and the local Gathusines disparaged the name of the Daragkark Tharclun who would normally have protected them but now, as some had feared, no longer watched over them as their benefactor.

In the Dragon King's absence, the Gathite minister of the army 'Kral' (or Lord) Dyaha called for a conscription of militia to battle the Krikis. He pointed out, to soldiers and leaders alike, that failure to drive the Krikis back would lead to a growing colony hive closer to their beloved city. Despite some 10,000 shtuka-armed conscripts and volunteers, and a contingent of black-eyed Nordor plakinto mercenaries, Dyaha's forces remained dwarfed by the Yellow Krikis arrayed against them by more than eight to one. For six long years, Kral Dyaha and his troops protected Gathus and points east, all the while engaging the Krikis in a guerilla war of raids and plunder that eventually pushed the bugs back over the mountains. Kral Dyaha was hailed as the hero of the Second Chitin War and all but deified within Gathush and its environs.

With lessons learned from their previous war with humans, the Krikis changed their attitudes toward new human captives. Captives from the Second Exploratory War became one large labor pool forced into a single function—waste removal—at a hive deep inside the Hivelands. Under single-minded overseers, the humans performed adequately. Still, some curious Krikis wondered about adapting the humans to improve their hive tasks.

These early bright-mind Krikis began a program of recombinant experiments, grafting insect body parts onto human subjects. Most trials ended in unthinkable pain and death, and few improved sufficiently or lived long enough to make the experiments worthwhile. The Krikis abandoned this program within a few years, turning any surviving *tistich* abominations loose into the wilderness. Thus, the horrifying offspring of these experiments yet haunt the barren lands among the vast Krikis hives. Mournful beasts neither insectoid nor human,

tistich horrors only seek food, savagery, and revenge, making them dangerous to any who encounter them.

The Last Chitin War

The Third Exploratory War lasted five dreadful years and only recently concluded with the Yellow Krikis in control of the entire Feshass Valley, newly fortified and already mostly converted to new hive territories. In this latest war, the impetus came from human incursion. Private prospectors and miners, backed with mercenaries, reached further west beyond their normal grounds, hoping to replace played-out copper veins. With the humans now creeping closer to the Hivelands, the yellows monitored the situation for more than three years before collectively deciding to act.

Their action was unimaginable to Krikis and terrifying to humans alike. Yellow Krikis halted regional hive expansions for a full year, devoting all resources to breeding new warriors. They trained and equipped vast legions, then unleashed them in a brutal eastward campaign that quickly overran any resistance and captured the entire Feshass Valley. This displaced many thousands, razing villages and farms, and driving all human soldiers from the valley. Gathusine troops and other human forces attempted unsuccessfully to retake the valley for several years to no avail. What were once hasty, ramshackle defenses have become the permanent fortifications across the passes known colloquially as "the Bug Line."

Now formidable and robust with military strength, Yellow Krikis keep large standing contingents of warriors in the Bug Line, determined to keep the "Feshass Newhives" protected from human incursions. Not readily apparent to their human foes, though, is the slow adaptation of Krikis strategy to opposing new threats. Their fortifications can hold off any number of Krikis attackers, the overhead nets and high pikes guarding against leaping attackers and the like. Their defenses lack standards used by and against humans and can be penetrated by human attackers; if enough troops can be mustered to take and hold positions behind the Bug Line, the immediate threat to a number of new hives would change how the Yellow Krikis view the "soft skins." Even without such an attack, Bug Line warriors learn more every day about humans and how to keep them at bay.

Veteran Repercussions

The three Chitin Wars changed both cultures. For the Krikis, they were the first expansions of hive territory into geographical spaces already occupied by intelligent and determined owners. Long-held impressions of

all soft-skins as fragile and animalistic were sufficiently challenged and changed. Now, all Krikis—yellows, reds, and blacks alike—see human civilizations as skilled and tenacious enemies. For humans, the Chitin Wars marked a disturbing confluence of unfolding historic events:

- Krikis hordes achieved self awareness and a desire for empire at the very time the Dragon Kings were no longer on hand to mitigate that development.
- Unused to dealing with hostile foreign incursions on their own, human nations found themselves having to fight and negotiate against far more alien powers.
- Today, more than a few Chroniclers wonder if that is merely a coincidence or if they are somehow related.

Ranks & Types

The first distinction among Krikis is the color of their chitin. Khitans have encountered red, yellow, and black Krikis, though there may yet be other types deeper within the Hivelands. Each color of Krikis sees the others as aliens; even within one color, each caste sets itself apart from those outside their roles in Krikis society.

Regardless of subspecies or coloration, Krikis hive colonies have three broad categorizations or castes that envelop and define their roles: the fertile queen, the male drones, and the female workers, which include the newly intelligent warriors.

Royalty

At the top of any hive hierarchy resides the queen. A Krikis hive usually has just one queen at a time, although two queens—a mother and daughter team—have been known to coexist in a single hive. The queen may wear the crown of society, but she truly is a servant of her people, as the workers decide how she spends her time.

The queen is the only fertile female Krikis of her hive. Shortly before hatching, she makes chirping sounds to announce her imminent arrival. As mother to her hive, she can lay 5,000-10,000 eggs a day, or several times her body weight; this places great demands on her attendants, since she cannot feed herself. The queen is one of the largest representatives of her species and can fly, possessing a long, powerful set of wings. However, while she maintains her egg-laying weight, she cannot fly. The kind of offspring she rears depends on the type of egg she lays—fertilized (diploid) eggs for workers and warriors (fertilized just prior to laying) or unfertilized (haploid) eggs for drones.

The queen leads her hive. She creates many different chemical scents that influence her hive population's behavior in profound ways. Some of these chemicals serve to create a hive "identity," so workers returning from the field can follow the smell to the correct hive. Another scent binds all Krikis of her hive to that queen, effectively making them her slaves. Some scents say "I am here" and "I am healthy," reassuring the colony that the queen is in good health; conversely, some chemicals say "I am sick" or "I am injured," and often trigger a movement to replace that queen. Other scents can quickly change the mood of the population, inciting anger and spreading alarm to rouse the colony to defend itself, or conversely calming a very angry hive. Wars begin or end by the scents of the queen.

Should the queen die, her chemical identifiers dissipate within hours, alerting the hive to her absence or demise. Her Krikis become increasingly frantic, and the whole hive rumbles loudly with the "death roar." The hive is in crisis, and nurse workers try to rear another queen from an existing brood. If none of suitable ages are available, however, the hive can become truly desperate and may likely die.

Workers

Workers, including the new intelligent warriors, make up the vast majority of a hive's population, and all are infertile females. They may number over 100,000 in a single hive at the end of a good summer season. They perform nearly all work required for a hive's survival, including gathering food, building and defending the hive, and rearing young. Food-gathering workers are quite a bit smaller than other Krikis, but they can fly to facilitate their function. Adult workers typically only live about 35 days, distinctly shorter than their warrior sisters who can survive indefinitely.

All workers act as nurses as their first task after emerging from pupation. Each spends the first six days or so of her adult life feeding larvae, cleaning brood cells, feeding adult drones, and helping new drones hatch. She never intentionally leaves the hive during this time. After working as a nurse, stinger-less warriors congregate for orientation before departing the hive, and other workers become house Krikis, performing many vital tasks, including:

- building new comb,
- repairing damaged comb,
- remodeling existing comb for new tasks, like changing ventilation in the hive,
- serving as a guard Krikis to protect the hive's entrance from intruders,

- removing debris and dead or dying Krikis from the hive,
- making food, and so on.

The last two weeks of any worker's life are spent as a field Krikis; her first journey away from home marks an important milestone in her life. Field Krikis forage in surrounding areas up to eight or ten miles from the hive for raw materials, including pollen, nectar, water, and sap from various trees. This is extremely dangerous work, and many field Krikis quickly succumb to exhaustion, predators, or cold weather.

Warriors Et "Bright" Krikis

The primary difference between warrior Krikis and either their fellow workers or other Krikis is their lifespan. Very few hive Krikis survive longer than a year or two, while warriors can survive indefinitely out in the wilderness among the hives and the frontiers. While warriors have no role back at the hive, another reason warriors rarely return to their original hives is a noticeable lack of anyone from their same egg clutch or generation alive, including a queen.

Warriors exhibit adaptive intelligence and show personal initiative outside the hive imperative; presumably royalty and administrator-workers do the same. Drones, by comparison, are not intelligent and perform their tasks guided solely by instinct. Cognitive function, self-awareness, and freewill are relatively new concepts to the Krikis, racially, specially, and individually. They are the impetus for expansion and empire, the driving force behind conflict with the other Khitan races, and the cause of deep-seated confusion as the Krikis seek a new balance between self-awareness and their traditional hive mentality.

Warriors, administrators and most royalty are self-aware and intelligent, although the active queen herself is barely more cognizant than a drone. She serves the hive unwaveringly, but her motivations are instinctual, not willful. Collectively, "bright" Krikis have virtually no regard for their drone brethren, treating them as less than slaves. They are non-entities, treated with the same regard humans might treat tools. Only in times of hive emergencies, when all the drones are motivated by the queen to help defend, do the intelligent take direct notice of them at all.

Oddly, Krikis warriors are more subject to fear than their less intelligent brethren. Drones, bereft of independent thought, take care of their specific, laborious tasks and seldom confront danger, but when it enters a hive and the signals go out, drones defend the hive fearlessly. Drones selflessly sacrifice themselves against any perceived threat without regard for their personal safety.

Warriors, on the other hand, are completely self-aware and understand the value and necessity of retreat, of survival to fight another day. They recognize that when the odds are against them, this manifests itself as fear. In fact, the flight response is a relatively new concept for them, racially speaking, and officers acknowledge its utility both as a motivator and as a survival tactic. Successful applications of fear are applauded and even rewarded in the ranks.

Drones

Drones encompass a menagerie of subgroups, physiologically adapted to the many tasks necessary for continuing the hive, from tunneling and chamber manufacture to gathering, farming, and caring for the young.

Drones are physically bulkier and shorter than queens, and their compound eyes encompass nearly the entirety of their heads. Drones are often thought of as "male" but in fact are really just a means for one queen to mate with another. Generally unable to feed or groom themselves, and performing no known chores, drone Krikis are important to hive reproduction, but on an everyday basis they contribute mainly to its protection. Drones serve as a living shield against attack. Drone eggs fill cells closest to a hive's exterior walls and surface, making drone larvae the first (and often the only) casualties suffered during an attack. Worker Krikis are considered more valuable to a hive than the drones who sacrifice themselves first.

Drones gather with others from outside their hives in congregation areas in the neutral grounds between them. Here, they wait to mate with new queens. Newly hatched queens must find their own way to these places in order to mate. Drones must return to a hive by nightfall in order to receive food. Drones are expelled from the hive during the winter, where they soon die.

Customs & Culture

There is very little culture or society among the Krikis, aside from the hive nature of their race and the organization that comes with it. However, these recent increases in intellect among the warrior castes have started to change Krikis life. Even with those creeping changes, there are yet many customs and standards within Krikis hives.

Krikis build their underground hives on the same general plan: brood chamber on the bottom levels, food storage on the upper levels. The entrance can be either at the top of the hive or several miles distant and connected to the hive by a tunnel. Multiple entrances must be easily defended, which is why very few hives have

more than one entrance. All larvae are given the same food before and during their pupation periods, as they are still all the same. Broods are reared almost exclusively in an area of the hive called the “brood chamber.” Workers wrangle the queen into remaining in this area at all times, as this keeps her safe from predator attacks. What workers don’t tell the queen is that this also prevents her from laying eggs in cells that the hive would prefer to use for food preparation and storage.: Once the queen lays eggs in specific comb cells, workers are compelled to rear them if at all possible; since wax comb is time-consuming and resource-expensive to build, Krikis would rather not have to keep making it all the time.

Additionally, hive existence exhibits several common practices:

- **Comb Construction:** Comb is built from wax secreted by glands on the workers’ abdomens. When a Krikis finds itself with a crop full of nectar and no place to store it, it begins producing wax, which then triggers building instincts. Warriors must learn to control this instinct or find themselves preoccupied with building new hives.
- **Hive Access:** In general, field workers don’t have time to walk or fly all the way through the hive to the food stores to deposit nectar or pollen every time they return from the field. Instead, they stop at the hive’s entrance and pass what they are carrying to a house Krikis via their tongues, which allows them to get back to the field much sooner.
- **Population Variance:** In the spring, a starting hive population may be only 3,000 or 4,000 with a few dozen drones, but good years can see hive populations soar to over 100,000 by late autumn. In the landscape of the Hivelands, populated hives encroach on each other’s foraging grounds with expanded numbers. Competition for basic resources increases and stays high from midsummer on through year’s end when all drones are expelled from the hives.

Behavior & Communications

Krikis use dance, pheromones, chemicals, and vibrations to communicate information vital to the hive’s survival. Rapid tremors from a joint-clicking dance reverberate through the hive since all the hive’s parts are cemented together. This allows other Krikis to learn the location of food supplies and act on that knowledge in an efficient manner.

Guard Krikis, a warrior subgroup, challenge all visitors to the hive, smelling them for identity. If the visitor is from that hive, its chemical “home” signature grants

entrance. If the visitor does not have that scent marker, it will be challenged a second time and not allowed entry. However, if the foreigner has a crop full of nectar or honey and makes an offering of it to the guard Krikis, the foreign Krikis is welcomed into the hive as if she was a sister, provided she is of the same color. Cross-color racial hatreds trump this exception.

In this way, hives can experience “drift,” through the presence of Krikis in a hive with which they share no genetic relationship, but who work for that hive’s benefit. Drift also occurs when Krikis wars claim prisoners. The new Krikis is soon overcome by the scents of the resident queen and now believes that it has *always* been a member of this hive, forever losing any memories of its original home.

Some Krikis mimic other Krikis colors for specific gains or to infiltrate enemy hives. Most often, though, smell and chemical sensations trump color. But once it adopts a particular hive’s scent, a Krikis cannot restore its original scent or shift to another; this, in essence, imprisons the infiltrator Krikis in that colony. Spies face a terrible choice, doomed to eventually join their sworn enemies. Luckily, as noted above, many Krikis are overwhelmed and entranced by queens, so ruthless warriors infiltrate enemy hives with focused plans of sabotage or royal assassination, dying in battle rather than losing their mind to a new queen or hive.

Swarming to New Hives

Swarming is a hive’s way of reproducing itself. After the winter, the hive prepares to swarm during the spring. Workers slowly backfill the brood chamber with food, which in turn leaves fewer places to lay eggs, so the queen begins to lose weight. Some new larvae trigger to become new queens, and the house Krikis work hard to keep the queen away from the nursery and the new queens. Most often, only half the hive actually swarms, while a newly pupated young queen emerges to rule over the original hive.

By the time any new Krikis queens might be hatching, the reigning queen has stopped producing eggs and has lost enough weight to be able to fly again. When she signals her intent to leave, roughly half of the hive’s worker population fill their crops with food, and head off in a mass exodus while scouts begin searching for a new home. In the Hivelands, this almost certainly means a confrontation with other hives and swarms.

A day after the previous queen’s exit, the new queens begin to hatch. The first to do so locates the remaining pupating queen cells and stings each one to death to secure her rule. Soon after that, the new queen takes off on her one and only mating flight toward the drone

gathering site, where she mates with as many as fifty of them to begin a new hive population. Drones sacrifice themselves for the honor and the pleasure. Newly fertile, the young queen then returns to her hive, or seeks out an entirely new location for a hive, to begin laying eggs. In the meantime, the workers open up the brood chamber again, emptying the cells of food so the new queen can lay eggs to replace the missing population. Thus the Krikis expand across the face of Khitus.

Krikis occasionally overthrow a reigning queen when something goes wrong, such as when the queen suffers an injury, becomes ill, or grows too old to lay healthy eggs. House workers guide the queen into laying eggs in cells that they secretly remodel into queen cells. Guard Krikis on hand closely watch this conspiracy and the other workers only proceed with their approval. The workers then keep the queen away from those cells while the new queens mature. When the first one hatches, the house krikis simply hope for this younger and presumably stronger queen to attack and kill the old one in battle, after which she takes nominal control of the hive.

Warriors, in addition to patrolling the environs around a hive, spend some time each year scouting out new locations for hives before the next swarming. When a scout warrior finds a cavern, it explores to measure the dimensions of the cavity and its relative humidity for suitability as a hive location. Ideally, a site has only one main entrance, which limits the amount of guard Krikis needed when it becomes a hive.

Intraspecies Warfare & Krikis Rivalry

Krikis only breed in communal societies, and aside from the intelligent warriors, live out their lives within those societies. Krikis of the three major colors (black, red, & yellow) hate each other intensely and battle over resources constantly. However rare, single hives can also erupt in massive civil wars, often but not exclusively instigated by a new queen's failure to depose an older, established hive queen.

Krikis wage war in search of food, to defend territory, to obtain slaves, and for other reasons. It is a misconception that warriors conduct all the fighting. In fact, workers and drones are more often in the thick of hive-focused battles, driven by instinctual impulses or chemical triggers from a queen. Such combatants often give way to allow warriors better access to the enemy when they arrive on the scene.

Krikis behavior is driven by smells. The lack of food smell drives them to gather more. The smell of an ailing queen drives workers to aid her or make arrangements for her demise. The smell of enemies—or specifically non-members of one's hive—drives them to battle.

They recognize members of the same hive via special password scents that nurse workers provide when pupae first mature into adults. If enemies gain a password scent, that Krikis hive could not defend effectively against them, even if such were hated other-colored Krikis. Scents or chemical triggers matter more than the color of one's chitin in a pinch.

Some Krikis hives are slavers, attacking other hives, and the hives of other large insects or insectoids. They carry off immature larvae that then hatch among the enslaving hive. The young mature believing they always belonged with the slavers. Krikis slaver hives have only queen and warrior castes, while all other hive members are slaves captured from other species. These rare but powerful hives strike fear throughout the Hivelands.

The Megha Stone

The reputed solitary source of 'bright lode,' the necessary component for the creation of black steel alloy ganshyer, is the Megha Stone which lies in a remote valley deep the Krikis Hivelands. Ganshyer is immune to the Iron Virus that is slowly denuding the world of steel, making it extremely valuable. Krikis warriors who carry bright lode with them beyond their borders find a ready market for it.

Few Krikis know the Megha Stone's exact location, though it is thought to be somewhere near the Rift. Racially, it is not terribly important to any one hive's survival, so it is largely ignored. Any expedition into the Hivelands without considerable Krikis assistance would be doomed to fail.

Rumors & Whispers

While there are more lies than truths about Krikis afloat among the human tribes, few rumors surprise or shock humans after hearing of the cruelties from the Chitin Wars. For the most part, rumor is all most folk hear about any Krikis, save for those near Gathush who bought such knowledge at the price of hard experience and warfare. Even so, few "sages" or knowledgeable folk like the Gare Attesa choose to confess to knowing nothing, so they spread vicious lies rather than admit ignorance. Some of the more popular current lies on the winds recently include:

- Warrior Krikis are exiles and wander farther from their hives because the "bugs" resent their growing intellects.
- Warrior Krikis seek better human-made weapons to return to the Hivelands to overthrow some hated queens. Trading in bright lode is one accepted method to get more such weapons in the Hivelands.

- Krikis hope to capture human babies and imprison them in hives, turning them into half-insect monsters!
- Some Red Krikis hives interconnect; an experimental hive mind linking five queens and their hives resulted in the creation of a massive near-Daragkark Krikis queen who currently spawns giant Krikis warriors with wings to assault even more humans from above.

Makadan

On Khitus, many recognize the human Makadan tribe as good fighters who can be counted on when the odds are long and times are desperate. Attite rivals consider them overly boastful and more interested in exaggerating their exploits than conveying the true story. Most Makadan believe few others can match, let alone exceed, their tribe's martial prowess.

Appearance

To nonhumans, Makadan are unremarkable among their race. They tend to have fair to dark brown skin, with golden or grey eyes, wide and flat noses, and black or brown hair. Both men and women wear pants with light tunics, all in a wide variance of colors, and adorn themselves with jewelry of precious stones and bone. The Makadan wear sandals made primarily from lizard-hide leathers, strapped high up the thigh and over the knee. Robes, generally dyed in solid colors, signify military and civilian rank. Tattoos also commonly mark family affiliations and ranks.

Most Makadan soldiers wield either the pike or long spear—the *shtuka* and *shtukeel* in their own tongue. Even those of peaceful professions carry a *hoz*, a narrow long knife used for every imaginable purpose in and out of combat. In battle, Makadan employ any appropriate armor and shields, though full plate armor remains extremely rare, especially in these metal-challenged days. Outsiders often call the Makadan -mounted cavalry “lancers,” though they more often wield and throw javelins (“shtukal”) as a weapon of choice. Most Makadan armor their mounts with leather and light chain. A Makadan camp is always busy with warriors always tending their weaponry and mumbling portions of the Kod.

Despite their fearsome, martial reputations, Makadans attract those looking for salable goods, as they always have things to trade. Their trade specialties include *pivosh*, a dark beer, and *kozha*, a supple, durable leather still tinted the green or yellow hue of the lizard from which it was taken.

History

The Makadan settled in what is now the eastern region of the Old Countries and were among the first to settle permanently in some places. Their original cities were rubble or dust long before the coming of the Dragon Kings, though their tales and myths endured to the present day. Legend holds that the original Makadan city, *Pogreban*, was dug deep into the ground and reached the gemstones at the world's core, so it is expected that Makadan carry tiny gemstones in their purses or woven into their clothing.

Over time, Makadan culture shifted away from a dual scholarly and trading focus to one of martial strength and warfare. While many assume this grew from the rising warfare since the departure of the Daragkarik, these developments started centuries before and only emerged into sunlight with the world's more aggressive changes. What it was that spurred this shift in Makadan culture is unknown outside of the tribe, for it is part of Kod.

Kod

Makadan fighters immerse themselves in *Kod*, the Warrior Code, today as they have for more than twenty generations. This is an oral tradition that is never discussed outside the tribe. Young warriors must prove themselves worthy of the Kod by slaying wild animals in close combat and in dire situations where the battle's outcome is actually in question. Gender matters little to the Kod and, surprisingly, physical strength also matters less than most expect.

The core of Kod lies in recognizing one's foes and their frailties, understanding one's own strengths, and pitting the latter against the former. Thus, there are cultural weapons standard for a Makadan, but Kod teaches each warrior to seek out the weapon that best utilizes one's strength and hone ability with that. Any warrior who embraces his Kod weapon while participating in a Rite of Vindicta gains great praise. Woe to the warrior who lets his Kod weapons succumb to the pernicious Iron Virus.

The green-clad Bokata (see below) embrace the Kod in all ways, but also embrace the terminology and structure of an older warrior caste from ancient Makadan days; their embracing the *shtukeel* alone demands that their majority be of greater height and body strength than many others for whom Kod also lies sacred.

Kod also provides some of the only ways for Makadan to rise above their birth stations and ranks. Success and martial ability let a man or woman rise to positions of great influence within the military and society at large.

The other great influence that keeps Kod a major part of Makadan culture is the closeness of the Krikis Hivelands. Since the Chitin Wars, Makadan have borne the brunt of the Krikis invasions. Thus, martial prowess and a focus on honing themselves to sharp edges keeps the Makadan peoples united and strong despite the closeness and power of a nigh-overwhelming enemy.

What surprises most about Kod is that no one outside a Makadan tribe knows of it, nor can any lore be found about it. Orally taught and constantly recited and memorized, Kod cannot be traced back to any one teacher or example or incident. What triggered Kod's origins shall remain as unknown as the number of sands in a dune. Those who know Kod know how to keep secrets just as they know how to keep ahead of those who would oppose them. One with a loose tongue should expect to be blinded like a difficult thakal!

Ranks & Types

The most well known quote about Makadan society comes from the anonymously written *Of the Khitan Tribes and Their Mores*, a two-centuries-old tome in Wani Chereet's Great Library of Atsrath. "What the Kral command, the Makadan do without hesitation. What the Sovetnik demand, the Makadan deliver without delay. What the Pobornik preach, the Makadan believe without doubt." As noted, Makadan society breaks along four stratified roles: leaders, administrators, overseers, and all others.

- **Kral:** "Those who rule." They are Makadan sociopolitical elites and leaders, what other cultures might call noble families or major landholders. Kral is also used as a title for any singular ruler of a settlement or its surrounding environs. The Bokata are highborn Kral youth who are given critical warrior training from birth, known by their dark green cloaks and long spears.
- **Sovetnik:** "Those who guide and shape." They are the administrators and counselors and those who have established their worth and strengths above others, rising above their birth stations to high regard and status. This social rank usually encompasses those at the right hands of others in power—the long established ones who "actually do the hard work for rulers." Thus, those in command of settlement functions, army divisions, or even those in command of caravans or city subsections. Of slight social superiority over Pobornik (below), Sovetnik handle the secular, everyday business of rulership. Thus, their control over resources and the like give them more obvious power and status. While most

military fall under the Pobornik rank, this class opens to the Ahapst military leaders (those who control a settlement's troops), as most answering directly to a Kral are often of the same social status.

- **Pobornik:** "Those who watch and defend." The overseers are a social role and class on a constant lookout for tribal purity, conducted personally or through spies and informants.

Central to Makadan culture are the *Sebnikots*, Shadazim priests whose brutal knife rituals expose their own skulls and who advocate Makadan supremacy over all humans. They believe their scarification and skull exposure opens their minds and souls to the universe and those powers that speak for it, be they animalistic gods or simply those who "know" more than others. Some are also Shadazim, Trakeen, Sarhaks, or Kuad Ahir. Often a quartet of Sebnikots encompasses the roles of advisor, healer, sage, and seer for a particular Kral leader, though some rare Sebnikots can take on two or more such roles in a diminished settlement with no other available help. The majority of non-Sebnikot Shadazim and Trakeen (and the rare sarhaks or psychics) fall under this social category, but only if they use their gifts and powers to benefit only the Makadan and no others. Any who do not use all their strength and gifts for the tribe are deemed traitors by those Makadans who follow Kod; said traitors spend their lives on the run from warriors seeking to take them back to their proper places or exterminate them for failing to help keep the tribe strong. This social class is the highest to which most military can aspire, though some officers become Sovetnik if their skills helped put certain leaders in place and gain appropriate marriages accordingly for their aid.

Makadan military ranks are limited by the reduced sizes of settlements, thus losing many ranks and divisions due to smaller troop sizes. Now, the always-higher-classed *Ahapsht* (barons) commands all military forces through his *Opshto* (knights) each of whom controls and leads two or more *Ranpalt* ("fifty-hands") of warriors (which, despite the translation, range between 50 and 150 troops, depending on the settlement). Immediately beneath and reporting to the Opshto are the *Kapetan*, who may not always be troop leaders but overseers of supplies, resources, and the everyday minutia to keep an army viable. If they do command troops directly, they ride at the head of their *Narpal* ("ten-hands" companies of between five and twelve). Individual settlements may have greater or lesser military ranks, but these above are found in all Makadan militaries. An award or status more than a specific rank, *Narednik* are heroes of any rank who win their men's respect in a triumphant battle.



The last rank has no title, encompassing all other Makadan and allowing their internal ranks and social strata to organize by achievements and skills. On the fringes of their villages and cities are the *Plemecs*, a blue-veined subgroup known to be excellent farmers. Only an *oganekat*, or firemaker, makes any fire; others may tend it and add logs and kindling, but the sparking of a new blaze is sacred. The *cuvarna*, or custodian of the wells, is equally revered in finding water or being the one to dig a new well; they gravitate toward the growing Raetann, or Water Guild, emerging across Khitus, but universally warn against the use of the water spice hesheyel, pointing out its dangerous side effects.

Customs & Culture

Most assume that the Makadan organize their people along martial lines, preferring strength of body as a measure of a fit leader. While this is at least partially true, it is an oversimplification that avoids much true understanding of these people. Many nuances and peculiarities remain in Makadan culture from their history before the Kod, though the warrior culture dominates much of what outsiders see.

All Makadan greet each other with a hard slap to the shoulder. Their warriors never look directly at a superior when he is speaking, as this can be considered a challenge to his authority. Any who fight together with Makadan are considered like brothers, though this does not transcend tribal exclusion (i.e. friend but not Makadan).

One must be born into the Makadan tribe or marry into it; men doing so must endure a brutal scarification that leaves the cheeks and arms forever marked. When the head of a Makadan household dies in personal combat, the victor can invoke the *Krvash*, the family-claiming blood rite, and assume leadership over his survivors and properties. *Krvash* rites scar the length of the left arm. Slaying a Makadan warrior in single combat and claiming his family is another way for an outsider to gain unquestioned entry into the tribe, though that entry may be short-lived due to almost-certain vengeful challenges.

Tribal newborns are named by village consensus around the age of five years. Prior to that, newborns gain family nicknames or numbers for identification. Formal education is the exception rather than the rule in Makadan society. Only the Bokata and Sovetnik youth destined to become government officials are fully literate, though most people can accomplish reading and writing critical to their functions. All Makadan youth

have marriages arranged by their families; if the first marriage ends for some reason (usually a death), they make subsequent pairings by choice. For this reason, many view any deaths in wedlock as somewhat suspicious. Makadan dead are commonly buried in sand or earth, but leaders receive a fire burial—a day-long celebration of their deeds ending at their funeral pyres, centering around the roasting of entire uludur beasts.

Most humans who claim Makadan ancestry also adhere to these traditions:

- **Tent Camps:** Makadan field camps are made of enormous canvas tents, erected against the rocks whenever possible for better protection.
- **Fullet Calls:** Makadan in the open desert commonly mimic the fullet's cry to draw them close to hunt their precious store of water (see Chapter 7).
- **Marble Builders:** When such resources are available, the Makadan also fashion their cities out of marble with plastered stone buildings as well, making their settlement a broad swathe of white or brightly painted surfaces. In good times, hanging vines and flowered gardens adorn every external surface.
- **Qath Manhar Enmity:** Makadans hate the Qath Manhar and sometimes insist all others are in league with them and must prove otherwise.
- **Krikis Enmity:** They face off against the Krikis Hivellands to the west, and so bear an almost universal hatred of the insect men, regardless of what color chitin bears the glint of the sun.

Rumors & Whispers

While many who trade with them know much about the Makadan, there are those who spread rumors with jealous intent. Even the Makadan spread lies about their own kind to foment even more fearsome reputations.

- Makadans mutter to themselves, their camps always abuzz with noise, to distract themselves and drown out the ghostly whispers of all those they kill.
- Makadans only look into the eyes of those they either plan to kill or consider too weak to be a threat.
- Makadan make their metals immune to the Iron Virus (see Chapter 5) by quenching forge-hot metals into the blood of those they capture and enslave.
- Among their own kind, Makadan prophecies speak of a genderless Plemec child who will be born to lead the Makadan in a cataclysmic struggle against all other races that eventually leads their tribe to world supremacy.

Nordor

Beyond the equatorial forests are the cold northlands dominated by the reclusive Nordor, whose migrations took them farthest from their lands of origin. Few of the south travel to their lands, but some of this tribe venture to the warmer realms and have a part to play in the unfolding story of Khitus. The Nordor are an optimistic culture who believe their best days still lie ahead despite their homelands' cold desolation and the current havoc wrought across the southlands.

Nordor are sturdy human stock with greyish skin and usually black hair, though the rare "redhairs" are considered to be especially tough and virile. The tribe tends toward wide faces with thin lips and noses, with eyes tending toward the darkest shades, some even fully black-eyed.

The Nordor wear a variety of furs and leathers fitted with iron pieces that have decorative or personal meaning—the amount of fur and covering depend on the immediate climate and season. A Nord's standard gear seems warlike and they etch their armor and broadswords with runic tales of important kills and other stories. Nordor often travel with dogs that pull sleds or small wagons, and most households keep loyal mastiffs at hand. They even sometimes tame urshevan for use as battle-ready mounts or draft animals.

Nordor show little variation in weaponry, preferring broadswords and short bows to satisfy their needs. They know of other weapons but discourage their use as being unsuitable for the hardy Nordor; mockery from a Nord should be expected if he sees someone "too timid or weak to wield proper weapons." They tend to keep to their stone dwellings, often in cities and underground, especially during the winter months when travel is hazardous. In the field, Nords erect sturdy tents called *telts* to ward off weather which tests the hardy even in good seasons.

History

For their own part, most Nordor believe that The Great Glacier spawned all life on Khitus, slowly scraping its way along the roof of the world and then retreating to leave fertile lands and the tough Nordor race behind. Their origins are steeped in such legends, but it is a matter of accepted and recorded history that the Great King Mushtapartha existed. Nearly 1,000 years ago, he was the last to unite the Nordor peoples under a single banner to face a mysterious threat of icemen and wilder men marauding on their frontiers. For many, these

now-mythical times were their greatest achievements as a tribe and people. For a few others, the now and the near-future hold a chance to return to that greatness.

Ranks & Types

The cultural structure of Nordor settlements and civilization revolves around strength and perceptions of the same. Thus, the bulk of Nordran culture prefers and admires physical strength and martial prowess and rewards the same.

- **Prinsi and Tarjolia:** Regional barons known as Prinsi and their subordinate Tarjolia rule inherited lands and subject tenants to rents that they either use or abuse in their general service; corruption and selfishness are common among them.
- **Kunigas:** Nordor chieftains are Kunigas, powerful military or political leaders who rule over a settlement or group as long as they hold the collective's confidence; any major problems or failures tend to make them vulnerable to coups.
- **Kantajas:** The tarjolia's local military commanders, recruit talented fighters and assemble them into two distinct elite platoons for the defense of a whole prinsi region and for use in specific campaigns.
 - **Plakinto:** The "fearless" plakinto are light-armored formation-breakers whose strategies entail rushing into battle, becoming surrounded by enemies, and dealing death with blades in either hand if not both at once. Plakinto dominate bardic tales among the Nordor for their deadly abilities, noble sacrifices, and their off-early deaths.
 - **Soturi:** Despite Nordran biases against their weapons, soturi are axe-wielding warriors of renown and prowess who serve their armies well into old age as trainers, constables, and kantaja.
- **Lumyuko:** These "Ice Men" can be men or women, despite the translated name. These much-lauded warriors earn prestige by battling in the freezing cold and defeating savages and wolfkin. Lumyuko gather loyal henchmen who follow their commands and further spread their legends.

Even if a Nord is not physically powerful, she promotes her strength through applicable skills or trades. Anyone who admits to weakness must not be a Nord. Other non-military groups or ranks of note include the following:

- Sato are agricultural workers (a distinct minority) with an aversion to offensive combat; they hire mercenaries and witches to protect their fields and pastures from raiders.

- Mrenkulkja are seafarers who sail the remaining northern oceans as both fishermen and raiders. Their numbers in these dark days are unknown, but they once dominated the waves with enormous fleets of oaken ships.
- Vallitag are Nordran marriage brokers, a profession respected and feared.
- Karhuna are rugged wildermen who train bears and wolves to do their bidding. Karhuna are individualists who protect their privacy.
- Urshkarl are urshevan handlers and trainers, skilled in trapping them while young and keeping them alive in captivity.
- Kotkarl are “eagle seers” who use them to scout and send messages; eagles are symbols of strength among the Nordor.
- Skaal are “woe-weavers” or tale-spinners with at least one in each generation having psychic abilities, whether as a Sarhak, Trakeen, or a Shadazim.

Customs & Culture

The northern lands are as harsh as the south in many ways, though for different reasons, and the means to survive there are as varied as the terrain. The Nordor prize the individuality necessary to make one’s way in the wilderness, and respect initiative and cleverness. As a result, their traditions are localized, not spread across the tribe as a whole, and their tolerance for different beliefs and lifestyles is high. Just as there are many types of snow, so too are the Nordor across the north.

Not surprisingly, the tribesmen distrust all non-Nordor, though they are mostly tolerant of outsiders. One must earn their trust and, once lost, it is nearly impossible to win it back.

The Nordor greet each other with long, deep embraces, ostensibly to give each one time to whisper their name and a formal greeting to the other, but essentially the action is to exchange body heat. When hunting, Nordor gorge on a kill that cannot be preserved, to the point of lethargy and food-induced sleep. Hoarding food is a taboo: if it is available, then everyone deserves at least enough food to not starve, though repeated freeloaders are not tolerated.

Marriage without the approval of a Vallitag is forbidden, and the old marriage brokers can be especially stubborn or procrastinating at times, to the exasperation of young Nordran lovers. Youths of both genders must survive a week in the frozen wilderness (or sail across a frozen sea) to attain adulthood. Failure in the endeavor brings shame to the family, so some elect self-banishment and wander south in search of other fortunes rather than fail their families. Elderly moth-

ers and grandmothers recite the record of each family and its deeds, loves, and losses weekly. The song takes on new exaggerations and twists over the generations, but it is rude to dismiss or challenge a song’s contents, no matter how far fetched the tales.

Blood feuds darken many Nordor communities, generations old with no sign of abeyance. Insults are taken hard and kin stick together against adversaries. Once a slight has been offered or a taboo breached, they revert to stubborn ways and attitudes. Nordor make slaves of captives, as slavery is the punishment for military failure. This failure does not extend to the children of slaves, so subsequent generations are born free. Such slaves are put to difficult and untouchable tasks, and their lot in life is unpleasant at best.

The Nordor proudly carry forward the ways of their ancestors:

- **Stone Builders:** Nordor are master stone builders and their quarries supply all manner of marble, granite, sandstone, and other building materials. They erect truly massive walled cities in the distant north, far from the paths of many southern visitors (which is why most think the Nordor not very civilized, having only seen their wandering encampments).
- **Skilled Miners:** Nordran miners dig deep into the bowels of the earth, and do so fearlessly. They also excavate enormous underground caverns as complex and massive as their cities, creating domains of magnificent splendor far greater than first presumed when encountered from above or below.
- **Tavlu Manuals:** The Nordran Tavlu (tablets) are the original stone manuals of collected lore on mining and construction, their tribe’s essential crafts. These actual stone tablets, older than 100 generations, hold a cult-like status and are well guarded, secure in the mountain fastness of Pohjos-Paika.
- **Cremation:** Nordor cremate their dead, their bodies lashed to wooden crosses and set alight on the fifth dawn after their passing.
- **Birth Gifts:** Any new birth heralds a gift-giving ceremony from the family to everyone of importance to them in the community.
- **Shadow Cognizance:** Nordor never let their shadow fall on a known superior—an insult punishable by dismissal or thrashing among military ranks.
- **Boneshards:** There are Nordor Boneshards who stash weapons beneath the skins of the urshaven mounts.

Of Great Dragons & Glaciers

Of all the human tribes, the Nordor harbor the least concerns over the absence of the Dragon Kings. Those few who held sway over the northern lands allowed

them to scrap and fight among themselves then, and little has changed since. Their greatest impact came in their leaving, for many believed it fulfilled a prophecy that foretold “When winged might no longer stirs homeland snows, ye shall soon feel true winter.”

The Daragkarik remain of secondary importance in Nordran minds to the return of the Great Glacier. Most believe this may happen soon, and harsh cold snaps set speculation atwitter among the faithful. The Glacier’s impending doom will allegedly crush everything wicked on Khitus. Once the cold and ice envelop or overwhelm much of the world, another legend predicts Nordran ascendancy (like so many other cultures claiming the same). According to great Nordran skaals, themselves Shadazim, a Yenfansa-led uprising heralds a new age for the Nordor “and ye of the snows and the cold shall show all the world that life exists and strengthens beneath ice and cold and snow.” Thus, the Kunigas all watch any White-Eyed closely, fearing and respecting those born under their rule. At present, there are at least six Yenfansa among the Nordor bands nearing adult age, four of whom are female, and all wonder what is to come.

Rumors & Whispers

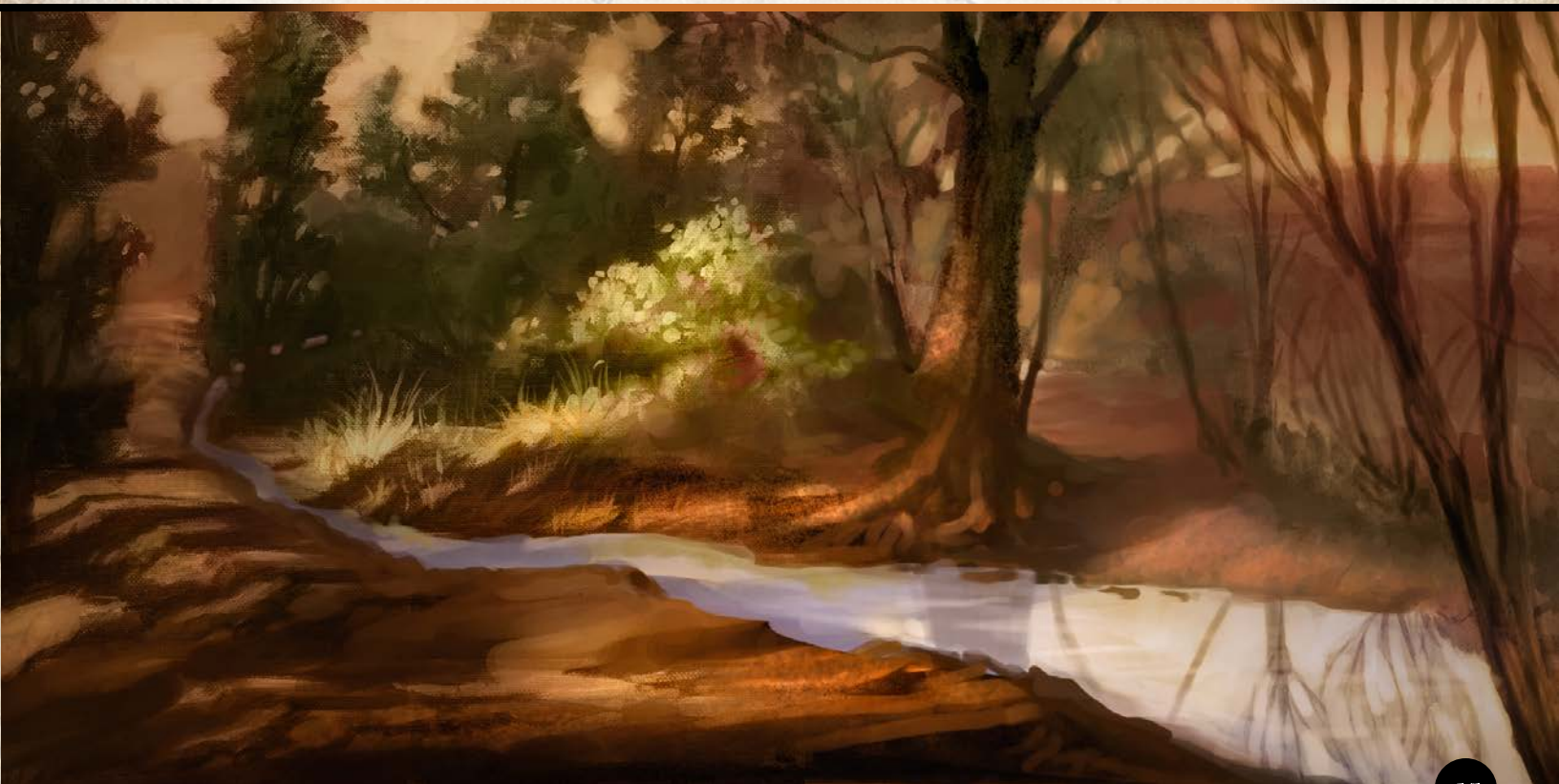
Since the Nordor keep to themselves and few southerners have met one, the rumors of their activities abound. As they have little interest in rumors aside

from the fun of a fire-told tale, the Nordor ignore much of this or inadvertently spread more by the boisterous storytelling of Lumyuko and their followers.

- Nordor have reputations as lustful barbarian raiders, which is rarely true, but tales of Nordor marauders are told mainly to children to keep them in line and have no significant historical justification.
- Other humans cannot understand why anyone would live where it is forever cold. Nordor are said to have ice for blood and are impossible to kill by common means (and they are glad to let others believe this).
- Some say ice dragons remain in the far north masquerading as Daragkarik that some Nordor follow or worship.
- Some assume that the Nordor are in league with denizens of the Black Tower; others suggest that the mammoth structure is made from magical black ice brought south and provided by the Nordor. (Neither is true, but these lies often color peoples’ thinking near the Tower.)

Pachyaur

Pachyaur are six-limbed elephantine centaurs native to Khitan equatorial woodlands and savannahs. They are the largest of the world’s intelligent creatures, respected



both for their great size and for their nuanced and highly cultured civilization. There are two particular pachyesh tribes with enough differences to merit separate entries. Where unspecified, all particulars below apply to both Watu and Brachachon, although most cultural and behavioral distinctions here tend to be Brachachon, while the Watu have their own entry at this chapter's end.

Physiology & Appearance

At first glance, Pachyaur appear to be diminutive elephants with two additional limbs and an upright torso. One can lean forward so its arms and trunk can easily reach the ground, or stand upon its hindmost legs to reach high into trees.

Pachyaur are smaller than their elephant brethren, and only when rearing on their hind legs can they look one eye to eye. Measured top of head to base of tail, the average pachyaura is twelve feet, though a pachyaura

measures only nine feet long chest to rump and stands just under nine feet tall (roughly half again the height of a human). Its massive frame weighs roughly four blocks, or the equivalent of six average human men.

Pachyaur have thick trunks just over two feet long through which they drink and breathe, just like elephants. This boneless, prehensile proboscis can twist and coil to grab and hold objects as powerfully as any of its arms. The tip has two finger-like protrusions to pick up and manipulate smaller objects, gather and sort food, crack nutshells, or handle tools or musical instruments. Pachyaur have an especially sensitive sense of smell wherever their trunk can reach.

Their mouths hold enormous, flat grinding teeth. Only bull Pachyaur have tusks—eighteen-inch-long ivory protrusions emerging beneath the eyes on either side of the trunk. While only manipulated by turning the head, these tusks can be used to scratch and preen others but are also formidable weapons in their own right.



Pachyaur Language & Trumpeting

Pachyaur speak a deep, slow language involving both vocal sounds and teeth-clacking, the latter an element unused by most Khitan trade languages. Among themselves, Pachyaur express even more through eye movements, ear posture, and angle and movements of the head. Thus, there are nuances and subtleties to pachyesh communication that cannot be easily grasped by non-Pachyaur nor are they easily translated, even if acknowledged.

Like elephants, Pachyaur trumpet through their trunks to alert or raise alarm. Very few non-Pachyaur recognize the depth of communication involved in pachyesh trumpeting. Where others only hear an unvarying blast of sound, a single blast may convey a wide range of emotions and information to other Pachyaur—anguish, joy, danger, impending threat, loneliness, or fear can all be distinguished within a long trumpeting. A particularly loud trumpet carries three leagues or more, and all Pachyaur may hear it, interpret it, and either act on or ignore it almost as a matter of course.

Sharpening or carving of tusks carries a variety of differing cultural significances among different Pachyaur populations and factions.

Pachyesh Hide & Limbs

Like the elephant and colossadant, Pachyaur have especially thick, grey, wrinkled hides that defy penetration. They often cover themselves in mud to help keep cool, depending upon the dictates of local fashion.

A Pachyaur's forearms are jointed at the shoulder, elbow, and wrist. The hands have five digits, four thick, stubby fingers and a thumb. While enormously strong, pachyesh hands are not as delicate as a human's and cannot manage the same level of fine manipulation. They can grasp objects and tools of their own design and wield them skillfully. Additionally, Pachyaur commonly use their trunks when working, all three manipulative appendages working simultaneously on a problem. A trained and armed Pachyaur brandishing a massive spear in all three is deadly impressive.

The Pachyaur's mid- and hind-legs generate enormous power, though it is a slow creature by comparison to some others. A Pachyaur runs no faster than a man, though it can simply trample smaller foes into submission. It also can briefly rise up on its hind-legs to use its mid-legs in a fight or difficult manipulation. Each of its

four feet has wide pads that help it absorb shock and spread its heavy weight across soft dirt and sand.

Strength, Endurance & Food

Pachyaur strength is renowned across Khitus. In terms of raw power, one Pachyaur can match the brute drayage of two thakal lizards. Just four Pachyaur can pull as much as an elephant, while eight can move the equivalent of a colossadant's burden. Pachyaur have enormous power in their upper back and shoulders with surprising flexibility, and can bring all six limbs and even their trunk into concert against difficult tasks. Pachyaur can carry double their own weight (or one full ton) upon the flat of their backs or twice that (four times their weight) for a short duration and at reduced speed. For such purposes, Pachyaur design all manner of baskets and trunks, decorated or functional. Watu have flatter backs and Brachachon more humped backs, but their basic strength capacities are identical. It is important to note, however, that while several Pachyaur may join together in a single feat of strength, racial pride prohibits any sort of harnessing. Yoke and tack are for draft animals and not even the least pachyaura would submit to them.

Enormous strength does not necessarily convey greater comparative endurance. Indeed, a human can manage a longer period of maximum exertion than a pachyaura, though the latter imparts considerably greater focused effort in the short term.

Pachyaur are predominantly herbivorous, enjoying a wide variety of delicious, spiced leaves, fruits, and vegetables, but also indulge in both wild and husbanded meats, which are most often considered delicacies. As a consequence of its massive size, a pachyaura consumes between eight and sixteen times as much food and water as a human. Fortunately, one can exist on a wide variety of wild vegetation, though only under protest; they pride themselves on elaborate, well-prepared cuisine. Fine dining is a cornerstone of their society. Enormous, day-long meals are common, interspersed with several days of comparative fasting. These mega-meals, or *ungara*, require full family attendance and usually involve entertainment, ritual dancing and singing, and cacophonous trumpeting.

History

Pachyaur are not native to Khitus. They share unmistakable kinship with two other species—elephants and colossadants—but are dissimilar from other native life forms on Khitus. Further, while often varied and contradictory as handed down through the generations, their own vague lore suggests an “otherworldly” origin. (Its vagaries suggest some secrets to those who know Pachy-

aur well, for creatures of such amazing memory capacity should not have trouble remembering or reciting history...so why do they know so little about their arrival on Khitus?) Why they might have been transplanted here along with their animalistic elephantine relatives is a mystery. Regardless of reasons or full histories, the Pachyaur are denizens of Khitus' sand and soil, having as deep and rich a cultural history here and as firmly rooted here as any other race.

During the Barbarian Age, more primitive, nomadic Pachyaur created no permanent settlements and wandered the grasslands. Like others during the Classic Age, they prospered beneath the benevolent rule of the Daraqarik. Most notable of the Pachyaur-centric Dragon Kings were Astul, Nyoriim, and Delnishar, whose royal courts often hosted many Pachyaur and humans alike, though they and their courts are now naught but ghostly memories.

The Classic Age saw the building of the first magnificent pachyesh cities. While yet shrouded in mystery to outsiders, something occurred that divided the Pachyaur irrevocably. While neither can deny their shared racial heritage, friction to outright hatred on some parts still separate the two factions yet extant today: the Watu and Brachachon.

Since the split, both Watu and Brachachon have prospered separately. Just as with humans and all other races, both factions too have suffered with the climate changes across Khitus.

Ranks & Types

Power among the Pachyaur, be it social or economic or any other, now stems from matrilineal organizations

vidijo: the "tiny races"

To the massive Pachyaur, all non-Pachyaur are *vidijo*, or "tiny races," an epithet descriptive of their comparative size. In general, the term is neutral in use and covers humans of all tribes, the Oritahl, and all colors of Krikis as well. The Brachachon treat all *vidijo* with at least the same respect others treat young adults—as creatures of few experiences, much bluster, and who need to prove their worth. Once a Brachachon respects a *vidijo* and his or her talents, relationships shift toward more egalitarian stances and friendships.

To the Watu however, *vidijo* is a slur word indicative of a being's lesser importance in the greater scheme of things—at least as the Watu perceive things. While they encounter *vidijo* more than the Brachachon and trade slaves with them, the Watu see them as they see most other creatures: as untethered slaves or tools to use.

and familial institutions. During the Barbarian Age, battles among bulls for mating rights within or dominance of a particular family group were the norm, as were clashes for dominance over other bulls and what they controlled. Among modern and civilized Pachyaur, at least since the Classic Age, wealth and social standing often supplant the primitive right to rule as measured by brute strength. Still, such challenges continue on rare occasions and often prove to be especially violent and destructive to both property and persons.

- Bwasana are the matriarchs of each pachyesh family group.
- Khubwa and Atili: Beneath her, khubwa females, most often sisters, manage the calves, assisted by the youngest caregivers known as atili.
- Wongoza: The predominant bull in a family group is the wongoza, an often-changing rank as bulls come and go; one bull can be wongoza to different family groups, and may depart for a time only to re-emerge and take his position once again.
- Mwalu bulls remain dedicated to a single female, pair bonding and caring for his unique offspring in a recent cultural variance.
- Semaji are bulls that have never held any position of dominance in a family group; this dubious epithet carries a social stigma of weakness or unreliability, since most males assume that mantle at least once during their young lives.

Customs & Culture

All Pachyaur governance and culture revolves around their traditional family group organization. Matrilineal family groups dominate their civilizations, where relatively settled females rear the young in well-manicured and well-protected settings (like a multi-building estate with accompanying grounds). The male or "bull" Pachyaur are more transient, associating with numerous family groups over the course of their lives; even when in association, males most often live separate from the family groups, whether in discrete urban areas or wandering in the wilderness.

Bwasanas rule both their families and any businesses or lands. Early pachyesh settlements were a conglomeration of related bwasanas whose families held or controlled contiguous lands and/or related trades. Modern pachyesh towns and cities fall under the control of a singular *Habwasana*, the elder "grand-matriarch" among the inter-related bwasanas whose families and lands comprise the settlement. Family groups and lesser bwasanas dominate particular fields or roles within pachyesh settlements, and only major upheavals in a family structure change the balances of power more than minute amounts.

Brachachon routinely adopt individuals into their family groups, or allow the same to leave for other groups. Such exchanges carry with them overtures familiar to humans: increased friendship and cooperation between the family groups, sometimes exchanges of wealth or material possessions accompany the newcomers, business and political relationships are thusly created or reinforced. Adoption has on extremely rare occasions been extended to vidijo, as well, though inclusion of a human into a Brachachon family group is, by biological necessity, limited to an honorary basis.

Impregnated females gestate for an entire year before giving birth to a single calf, of which only one in five calves is male, the rest female. Multiple births are impossible among the Pachyaur, so the concept of twins or triplets among humans is both foreign and fascinating to them.

Despite intelligence and cultural sophistication, the Pachyaur descend from herbivorous herd animals, and they betray that background idiosyncratically. They find comfort in groups, and stand quite close together, even touching, grasping each other's trunks and tails absent-mindedly, even reflexively. Despite their innocuous innocence, humans find these displays at the least overly familiar and, at the worst, a maddening violation of personal space. Pachyaur are also subject to the stampede group reaction when faced with alarming force or danger. Unexpected or unidentified trouble can trigger a group-flight reflex: the group mobilizes to run headlong as one toward safety, trampling beneath them everything in their path. Military commanders train their soldiers to tap into this instinct and create a formidable group charge, terrifyingly effective against smaller foes. Even a solitary pachyaura on his own and away from others of his kind can tap the stampede impulse as long as his vidijo companions join in his charge or flight (or risk being trampled accordingly).

Pachyesh Psychology

Pachyaur thought processes differ from those of humans and other sapient denizens of Khitus. What influence, shape, and move pachyesh thinking the most are their extended lifespans and eidetic memories. Nearly every drive within pachyesh society builds from those factors and affect how Pachyaur embrace life across time.

Time

Pachyaur can live to be 150 years old, a fact that alters their overall concept of time. They take the long view as the longest-lived sapient race on Khitus since the loss of the Dragon Kings. They willingly embrace solutions that will resolve over generations, rather than quick

Books of the Moons

The *Kivatu Tautu* ("Books of the Moons") present a philosophy of strength and domination among all Pachyaur alike. Starting from birth, all Pachyaur calves are read verses from the *Kivatu Tautu* to provide lessons in companionship, leadership, loyalty, and the conduct of a virtuous life. These texts also become primers from which they learn to read and eventually reason deeply. Of course, interpretations vary, and both Watu and Brachachon cultures select passages that support or deny the ownership of slaves—their primary societal difference—in different lights.

Ordinary mortals did not create the *Kivatu Tautu*, according to pachyesh lore, though again, ancient lore fails to record more than vague suggestions and hints. To some believers, a god dictated the Books of the Moons to its ancient, long-vanished clergy, and a small but fervent group of Shadazim await the return of Mulngul by constant recitation of "his holy books." Others attribute the *Kivatu Tautu* to the Daragkark Nyorim and his disciples who collectively sought to codify the perfection of pachyesh life.

Unlike some Khitan cultures or factions, the books have no original tablets or scrolls deemed sacred by Pachyaur. Many histories record the existence of thakal-hide pages bound between stone slabs as the original Books. These original tomes—sized and weighted so only two Pachyaur might lift its covers—disappeared just before the Classic Age, and, to some Pachyaur, this is the reason for confusion and lost lore regarding the origins of the *Kivatu Tautu*.

Regardless of the true existence or not of such books, each *bwasana* holds dear the oldest copy of the books in her family's possession. Each *bwasana* also must commission a new personal copy of the *Kivatu Tautu* for each female calf she births, though many do so for each calf, regardless of gender.

Impressive is the vidijo with knowledge of the *Kivatu Tautu*; even more impressive to a pachyaura is the vidijo who truly understands, if not embraces, what he or she learns from it.

fixes, and value permanence. They consider a new course of action for a long time before taking any action at all, ever content to make slow, incremental progress toward a goal. So long as a goal remains attainable, they prefer methods to keep working slowly toward it, rather than speed it up further. And so long as a goal remains attainable, Pachyaur are loathe to give up once a decision has been made to pursue it.

Human companions can find this pachyesh trait irritating, sometimes to maddening degrees. Where a human might exploit an opportunity immediately, a pachyaura explores all options and considers the matter more thoroughly before proceeding. Humans think of Pachyaur as ponderous and stubborn, unwilling to accept how haste might improve a situation. Pachyaur, on the other hand, find humans impatient and impulsive. They always suspect human plans have flaws because humans rarely give their plans sufficient time for careful consideration.

Memory

Pachyaur possess remarkable eidetic memories that allow their primarily oral histories to be at least as accurate as written human history. By human standards, they have total recall of every experience. They easily remember details of every conversation, recall every song ever heard, every story told, and every legend recited by their elders. They recall every path they have ever traveled and everyone they have ever met, including names and personal particulars shared. Pachyaur are nearly as proficient with written documentation. They can picture every document, map, or diagram that they had an opportunity to closely examine and study.

Pachyaur become confused when humans and others cannot demonstrate similar feats of memory. They expect others to match their abilities and are surprised when they cannot. They often repeat themselves, hoping to aid any comparatively forgetful companions.

Loyalty

Pachyaur also differ from humans in their concepts of loyalty. To them, proximity confers an expression of implied loyalty. Among their own kind, the inclusion into a family group carries with it shared purpose and responsibilities. They do not rely upon overt loyalty oaths, as simply being in each other's presence means they will work with each other and protect each other. Non-Pachyaur are measured similarly, so if one becomes a Pachyaur's companion or associate, that Pachyaur expects reciprocal loyalty without exchanging any dialogue or confirming by ceremony.

Further, Pachyaur see a betrayal of loyalty as a much greater insult than humans. Bulls become especially violent, tapping unwillingly into reserves of strength and aggression once reserved for courting rivals. Visceral hatred is unleashed. Blood oaths are made, and murderous plans put in motion. Once loyalty is betrayed, it is incredibly difficult if not impossible to win it back. Slighted Pachyaur easily disregard many reasonable excuses that carry greater weight among humans. Demonstrations must be numerous and consistent over

a long period of time before one can hope to regain an angered pachyaura's attention, let alone any trust.

Pachyaur & the Prophet

To date, only a handful of Pachyaur have come into contact with the Prophet. None have displayed mastery of the magic-that-is-not-magic, though none know whether this is simply an impossibility for them, their race, or if it is a matter of circumstance. Rumors of the Prophet have reached Pachyaur lands primarily through the Watish slave pens, whose denizens welcome his hopeful message of deliverance and peace. Spreading that message and display of the Prophet's iconography are strictly forbidden there and lead to heinous punishments that often end in slave deaths.

Penmai

Penmai are commonly called the "tree folk," and are humans adapted to arboreal life and suited to living their entire lives high above the forest floor (where Khitus still has forests) or on rocky cliffs and mountain slopes.

Penmai can walk and run along the ground as quickly as their bipedal kin, but are far more naturally acrobatic, able to leap and jump easily twice the human norm, then tumble and dexterously dart and dodge accordingly. Where they are particularly adept is among trees, bushes, and vines, gliding around with monkey-like precision. In their natural environment, they bring all four limbs and their tail into play to adroitly swing from branch to branch. Penmai have complete arboreal awareness and freedom of movement through their three-dimensional

crag penmai

Penmai of the mountain crags live quite similarly to their arboreal kin, though they take certain actions to make their habitats more livable. Since the rocky heights offer little natural vegetation, the penmai transplant their own, especially fruit- and seed-bearing trees and shrubs that can be potted and easily moved around. Crag penmai are more likely to store up food and material possessions. Mountain terrain makes their homes more defensible, too, reducing the necessity to move villages around quite so quickly or frequently—though move them from place they still do, more out of cultural habit than true necessity.

environment, without regard for height—one with a fear of heights would be considered quite mad, and, if anything, the exact opposite can be true for Penmai.

Penmai spend their entire lives high above the ground, so they have no fear of heights. More common is a fear of being too close to the ground, a malady derived from psychological and cultural stimuli. The ground is where predators live and where dangers cannot be so easily escaped as they can up in the branches. Also, most childhood fables make the surface a source of wickedness. Even if one has mastered fear of the ground, no penma wants to spend much time there without a good reason. Even then, they find comfort by occupying the highest places—on tables or atop shelves, even on the tops of buildings rather than inside them. One seldom speaks with a penma without looking up at him. Worse still, Penmai removed from immediate access to the sky and open spaces become agitated and alarmed, if not downright terrified. Caves are difficult for them, and actual tunnels or subterranean undergrounds can be almost impossible to bear. As with humans, continued exposure to unpleasant circumstances can minimize their effects.

Physiology & Appearance

Penmai are diminutive humans who are quite at home in high places, especially forest canopies and rocky crags. They do not appear to be humans at all at first glance. The tiny Penmai are just over three and a half feet tall but with long, thin arms and legs, and weighing just eight or ten bricks each. Their fingers and toes are especially long, double the length of a normal person's, with an extra joint in each. Most notably, Penmai have a three-foot-long prehensile tail. Fine fur covers the entire body, longer around the back, rump, and face. Their humanity is distinct in their faces—narrow and thin but with bright, knowing eyes.

Penmai are of a gentle stature, but their coloration and appearance can vary wildly. Skin color ranges from a light pink to dark brown or even dark gray, and that shade lightens measurably around the face and along the fingers and toes. Fur and hair are just as varied, ranging from white to black, but tending toward tans and even oranges; mottled pelts with mixed colors are not unusual. Like humans, Penmai hair grows lighter and grayer with time. Their eyes are most commonly gray with flecks of reflective silver or bronze, but they can vary to more human-typical eye colors too.

Penmai cannot muster the raw physical strength of a human, having considerably less muscle mass and similar size and limb leverage. One can carry only half the weight of a full human, but what they lack in strength, they make up in agility and dexterity. Penmai are quick

and fast, able to run half again faster than normal human pace; this is even more obvious in any environment where they can bring their tail into play. Their fingers and toes are equally manipulative, and their slender, long fingers set to a task with a precise, spider-like quality. A penma's many knuckles have the capacity to bend back against themselves, so it can artfully grasp an object with just a couple of fingers while the rest set about some separate task. Intricate tasks like weaving and tying knots come quite naturally to them.

Their fingers are especially adapted to grabbing thin branches, even those an observer would think unsuitable. Instead of breaking the branches, their hands and toes can fan out twice the span of a human hand to spread their weight among many tiny leaves and twigs.

Penmai fingers are longer than those of other humans, but they take pains to lengthen them even further. Children wear painful splints that stretch the fingers from knuckle to knuckle, exaggerating their length further than they would if grown naturally. Finger length is a point of pride, something to measure oneself against others. Penmai attribute such things as leadership potential and trustworthiness to finger length, much in the same way humans arbitrarily associate such things with height or having an “honest face.”

Penmai fashion varies widely by location, status, and occupation. Females have less body hair and fur than males, made more pronounced by the cultural tendency of females to keep theirs more neatly trimmed and tied or braided in place. Nudity is perfectly acceptable among Penmai, though most wear a leather or vine harness at the very minimum for carrying personal items. Jewelry and body piercing are common, as is temporary body coloring, often used during festivals, to celebrate the change of the seasons, or just as a matter of personal choice. Gloves and shoes are almost unheard of. Any manner of shirts and pants are common, and among the working classes these are close-fitting so they do not snag on branches. A penma's status can sometimes be measured by the impractically billowing nature of his clothing, indicating the wearer's dismissal of personal movement as he has others who move for him.

History

Penmai are enigmas to outsiders and prefer to remain that way. They neither share tales or histories of their origins nor do they help many who try to pry secrets out of them. More properly, asking Penmai about history leads to very long-winded (but swiftly told) stories, legends, and “honest-this-happened-to-the-wife-of-my-friend's-blade-crafter” accounts that strain credulity of all but the most gullible.



Needless to say, there are personal and family and intertribal histories, all of which children learn in depth before coming of age. While of little interest to outsiders or the Gare Attesa, this familial lore teaches them mores and ethics paramount to their people. There are also secret histories and knowledge of the penmai past, but their locations, their forms, their extent, and the truths they contain are, like so many penman things, unknown—even to most Penmai.

Ranks & Types

Penmai hold uncontested racial allegiances, but their governmental and social structures are only loosely organized.

- **Aeov:** The Aeov, or High Magistrate of every village, is the leader and spiritual head of those people. A post held for two years, he or she comes from the elder penmai who have previously held some level of authority. He organizes defenses and allocates the village's meager revenues to a variety of minor public works, such as libraries, holiday decorations, and the ever-present rhallor-lofted lookouts.
- **Lesser Magistrates:** Below the High Magistrate comes a polyglot assortment of lower ministers and judges whose organization changes drastically from village to village. Most of their functions seem fanciful to the outsider—the Minister of Twine, the Magistrate of Winds, and the Basket Overseer—and their garb enhances that impression, since any government official presumes the right to dress in outlandish styles and bright colors. Officials enjoy pronouncements, and hardly a day goes by without one or two, if only to justify a minister's position. Of course, they must issue these proclamations while aboard balloons high above the populace so that everyone can see. It is customary to applaud loudly no matter how ridiculous or insignificant the pronouncement. "Twine stores have surpassed a thousand paces!"
- **Achanse:** These judges hear mainly civil cases, as intraspecies violence is nearly unheard of. Nearly all manner of punishments or penalties involve public service—most often forced assistance in moving the public structures along the village's route of migration. There are no Penmai prisons, and their villages are civilly challenged when forced to deal with an unruly outsider.
- **Haibolik:** Lower administrators called haibolik concern themselves with minor functions like watching things and counting things. Unlike ministers, they

actually have defined roles and expected activities (not that they are any less minor).

- With one exception, all penman military units assemble only in times of danger, all citizen recruits often hastily trained. Immediately following hostilities, all units muster back into civilian life.
- **Nok:** Penmai nok, the sand-borne warriors, constitute the military elite and are the only units maintained year-round. (See “The Nok” below.)
- **Other Warriors:** All other units organize into groups of ten with a leader bearing the unit’s name with an additional “ka” denoting that rank (i.e. phunoa-ka).
 - Phunoa are groups of peasant spearmen.
 - Phonsoel fight with knives.
 - Tibadtam use their penman-traditional blow guns.

There are many everyday civilian occupations among the Penmai. Within a village, idleness is intolerable and all Penmai have a task or occupation. A position of high rank in most villages, the *khoakan* teachers educate the young into penman society. *Khonha* scouts keep watchful eyes from lofty heights aboard rhallor balloons, supported by *sokhara* “seekers” who will actually venture out on the dangerous ground levels to keep an eye on threats there. *Sauka* are farmers who specialize in fast-growing fruits and vegetables that can mature before the owning village migrates too far away to harvest them. *Sinkha* merchants trade all manner of items, like the ropes and twine made by *seouks*, the baskets weaved by *flemuu*, and the many trinkets fashioned by *femu* artisans. *Peouk* and *sakhal* specialize in creating useful tools from bark and branches, respectively.

Customs & Culture

While there are a huge number of distinctions and cultural peculiarities among the Penmai, more than a few adhere to standards practiced by many other human tribes.

Patriarchs tend to lead Penmai families. Spouses pair-bond and tend to mate for life, though separations due to conflict or strife are not unheard of. Formal marriages are often arranged, especially among the higher classes, and are ceremoniously witnessed by the family elders.

Penmai women give birth much like their human counterparts after a nine-month gestation period (and usually one child at a time, though twins and rarer triplets sometimes occur). Babies feed on milk provided by their mothers or by other related or friendly adult females. Mothers and extended-family females rear and raise any children born; whenever possible, most extended families live in close proximity, as moving away from one’s family is emotionally troubling for the Pen-

mai and avoided whenever possible, although not culturally forbidden.

Children are taught to speak by parents, but are soon organized into schools; past the age of three years, all Penmai children enroll in schools that specialize in written language, history, or social skills, all of mixed age groups taught by professional teachers picked from among the regional elders. Apprenticeships in various trades commonly begin after ten years of age, which either curtails or ends that child’s education after seven years.

Penmai refer to surface dwellers as *subaorsi* or “groundlings.” Since most dangers manifest from ground level, Penmai have a cultural dislike of it and those upon it by extension. Penmai are prejudiced to think that groundlings are untrustworthy schemers.

Penmai hate fire more than any other destructive energy. It is among the few forces that drives them closer toward the ground to escape fumes and smoke.

Coming of Age

Young males come of age at 16 years and females slightly later at 18. Both undergo considerable intellectual rites of passage to be deemed an adult:

- **Recite History:** They must recite group and family histories before an assemblage from memory.
- **Demonstrate Mastery:** They must successfully prove understanding and mastery of their schooling in language, history, and cultural awareness; the elders’ expectations differ for students depending on the person’s social status and whether or not he or she stayed in school continuously or was apprenticed to work after age ten.
- **Luktwai Trek:** The most important rite is the trek called luktwai. Organized four times a year by community elders, one can undergo luktwai before or after one’s age of ascension. All youth undergoing luktwai must succeed at an elaborate multi-week scavenger hunt, each youth given individual goals and varied demands. What youths endure in luktwai and how they succeed at their goals (and aid or hinder others) builds a superstitious blueprint of the nigh-adult’s future life in both their dreams and consciousness. Once a child conquers the goals set in luktwai, that youth is accepted into society as an adult (and it is rare to see any Penmai remain unmarried more than a few months after luktwai).

Penman Diets

Penmai eat a predominantly vegetarian diet, but not strictly so. They dine on the vegetation most accessible

to them—leaves, fruits, and seeds are common, while roots and tubers are rare. Meats from common tree animals such as the black squirrel and branch lizard supplement their diets, though they avoid eating any birds.

Penmai enjoy dining, and family cooks and professional chefs are prized members of society. Penman recipes indulge in a variety of spices, as well, so their common fare is highly spicy and can be inedibly hot by some human standards.

Penmai drink water warm and cold, flavored or unflavored by fruits or spices. They also concoct a bewildering variety of wines from high-hanging grapes and fruits. They do not brew beers and ales themselves, since they have limited access to the grains necessary, but

import human and Pachyaur brews, paying premium prices for them.

Penman Village Migrations

Penmai villages are always slowly on the move. While it is possible to pin down a particular village to a specific forest, exactly where it will be in that forest from week to week changes. Huts and dwellings are always being taken down and reassembled on the far side of a village, and rhallor (see below) are untied and maneuvered similarly. The whole community shifts slowly but surely away from where it was and towards where it is going. On any given day, at least two dwellings or huts or locations are under simultaneous disassembly and reassembly.

Huts and all penman architecture are made from interwoven layers of plant fronds, vines, leaves, and living branches onto which Penmai anchor a temporary dwelling. The most common type is one simple domed room with a chimney hole on top and an access door in the floor. Some larger buildings have been constructed, though they tend to have larger central chambers with supplemental smaller chambers used for storage slung below the main in hammock-like structures.

The most surprising constructs of the Penmai are their water-collection stations, of which they always have at least three for each village. Whenever they can, Penmai water-collectors adjust and change leaf positions or shift vegetation clusters among the canopy to allow any rain or precious morning dew to follow a downward path and collect in a small chamber for easier use.

For the most part, village movement is never planned, but serves as a defensive advantage (enemies cannot attack the village so easily if it has changed location) and urban renewal, since most structures are torn down and remade every few weeks (though often using the same materials and built in largely the same manner each was before). The move is a community effort from which no Penmai are exempt, though only a small fraction of the citizenry is actively involved at any one time.

Why this activity of keeping a village mobile started is unknown, though some speculate it has much to do with the health and stability of the trees or other substructures on which the village rests. Others hint that the Dragon Kings who aided the Penmai in the Classic Age may have set up this pattern with them, again for reasons unknown.

It is possible for one migrating village to intersect with another and for a time even occupy essentially the same space. On the rare occasions when this happens, the citizens retain a completely distinct identity for each community until such time as they finally wander away

penmai language

The penmai language, Penaian, is a mixture of vocal sounds and hand-finger (and sometimes even foot-toe) signing, making it particularly difficult for outsiders to understand or master. As a general rule, hand-finger signs convey physical concepts such as direction, size, and indication of a sentence's focus, and so on. Verbal language most often conveys any psychological or emotional contents.

- For instance, a penma saying "I put the cup over there" would be conveyed almost entirely through hand-finger signing,
- The sentence "I remember what it was that upset me" would be almost entirely spoken.
- Most sentences and statements use an artful combination of both voice and signing.
- To completely silence a penma, one must gag and tie his hands; if either mode is left free, he can still get his point across, however awkwardly.

Non-penmai who wish to learn and emulate their speech must prepare for long study. Their verbal tongue uses all the common vowels and consonants, but also includes a collection of whistles and tongue clicks that bear their own meaning or alter those of other words and signs around them. Natural Penmai tone is high pitched, so hearing their language in lower-pitched voices can sometimes be hard for Penmai to understand. As for the signing component, their long fingers and additional knuckle give them nuance that lesser-digitated creatures can never come close to mimicking. At best, a non-penma might be able to master hand-signing at the level Penmai expect of their toddlers. They often call humans who speak their language *flotkwoi*, or "stumble fingered."

from each other once again, something outsiders find inexplicable.

There is a certain amount of residue, including waste and garbage, left behind wherever a penmai village has passed. Seed husks, discarded materials, and even sewage all create a rich trail on the forest floor, one that attracts swarms of happy insects, worms, and other “cleanup” creatures. Ground-bound seekers can track and find moving villages fairly easily from their leavings. Weather changes always spur greater urgency, as more than a few Penmai leaders adhere to the “three winds” philosophy: a village should never occupy the same place in the canopy for longer than the passage of three storms, no matter how severe or how long in between.

The ever-present danger of fire is part of what drives their desire for an entire village to be mobile; even in the worst outbreaks, half a village can disassemble and be removed to a safe location. Rarely is a Penmai community totally devastated by fire. Of course, certain functions and industries have a practical need for fire, but they utilize it only in enclosed sconces using elaborate precautions and supervision. They take flames very seriously and most Penmai retreat from fire and dislike being around it. Magical fire they find notably disturbing. Any non-Penmai seen using fire irresponsibly is automatically outcast from any penman village. In these drier times, lightning storms are especially troubling to them, and they keep their khonha lookouts’ eyes peeled for traces of smoke trickling up from the ground.

The Rhallor

The most striking feature of any penmai community, arboreal or otherwise, is its *rhallor*: the many beautifully decorated balloons tethered to sway in the breezes above. A single village might have several dozen such balloons of all sizes hanging overhead, many with ropes and vines among them. Most balloons are wreathed with briary rings or hung with wicker baskets or both.

In their earliest days, the Penmai deployed their balloons primarily to keep a lookout over the forest canopy and perhaps out onto the plains or other terrain beyond, as early warning gave them ample time to defend themselves or flee. Now balloons serve as places of business or residence, as status symbols for those of political rank, or to help train nok warriors who fly with the sanids.

Arrayed as they are above the village, the many rhallor make a magnificent display, always active with sand-borne riders and Penmai swinging between them on ropes and vines. To some observing them for the first time, half the village appears held aloft above the forest canopy or rocky highlands by balloons.

“the peaceful”

Humans who enjoy Penmai association and contact maintain migrating, ground-level communities beneath their tree-top villages. Called the *aerosto* or “the peaceful,” these people come from every possible background or age group: equatorial slavers, displaced southern refugees, travelers, merchants. All those are drawn to a quiet, harmonious lifestyle unlike any other across Khitus.

Newcomers are welcomed into aerosto communities provided they foreswear the use of magic and weapons other than spears and blow guns during times of defense. They keep most of their settlement in easy-to-move structures or wagon-borne, moving at least one or two buildings a day like their arboreal-living friends above. Aerostos push forward just ahead of the leading edge of the penman village overhead—and just far enough to keep away from the rain of refuse.

Penmai and aerosto interact freely, trading and mingling, exchanging services and information as if no racial barriers stood between them. Aerosto send no diplomats to other human states, though; they maintain a clean break with their kin elsewhere on Khitus. Aerosta scholars are renowned for their depth of knowledge and feeling.

A single rhallor is fashioned from a patchwork of animal hides and thick leaves sewn tightly together to make a good seal. The gas inside is simply the breath of the *rhassallon* fungus that the Penmai cultivate in various places around the village, capturing the lighter-than-air gas in rhallor-like bags. The largest balloons are almost 40 feet in diameter and can lift as many as half a dozen Penmai or their equivalent weight; smaller ones might carry just one. Wicker baskets are light and easily attached, as are platforms and hanging places made of dried brush where Penmai can easily hang on or perch. Multiple rhallor can be roped together to carry heavier loads or larger baskets. Though a well-constructed rhallor’s seal is tight, it is not perfect, and the gas inside must be replenished frequently or it loses buoyancy and sinks toward the ground; most can hold a lifting quantity of gas for three or four days. One pierced by an arrow or dart collapses quickly.

Rhallor are not intended for free flight; cut loose from the others above a village one will simply rise to its natural ceiling, which may be a mile or more above the ground, and ride the prevailing winds until it finally loses buoyancy and sinks to the ground. Penmai may cut





the balloons loose from their village to make a desperate escape, but otherwise they are simply part of the community, places to congregate and socialize in the cool breezes high above the ground. Since Penmai naturally gravitate toward the highest points, the highest rhallor carry the greatest social significance. Civil servants speak from the highest rhallor platforms to deliver their proclamations and edicts. As Khitan winds grow more fierce with the climate changes, the rhallor attached to a penmai village become more and more precarious at times, though not restrictively so—at least not yet.

Belongings & the Community

Penmai view material possessions differently than do other sentient creatures. Since their communities are in a perpetual state of slow migration, the responsibility to keep an entire village's assets moving is spread across all its inhabitants. All Penmai are involved, and particular personal responsibilities change often. One penmai might transport the various nurseries one journey, then handle food stores on the next, followed by balloon re-tethering after that. Their constantly shifting way of life fosters a far more communal notion of property ownership. Outside of one's personal belongings, everything that belongs to the village is to be shared.

This does not mean that there are no greedy penmai—there certainly are—or that penmai value all labor to be of equal importance to the community. They just find it strange when visitors do not readily partake of a meal or occupy the most convenient housing to sleep through the night. When among non-Penmai, they must learn to respect individual property ownership more thoroughly; they take food belonging to others without a second thought or make themselves quite at home wherever they please. Others unused to their behavior accuse them of being beggars or even thieves, and heated disagreements are not uncommon: more than one penmai has been chased out of a human establishment for an infraction it does not even realize has occurred. For the most part, however, the differences are merely an oddity of crossing cultures, easily overcome by reasonable associates—a rare commodity in the open wastelands!

Favors & Debts

Penmai care less than most humans about material possessions, coins, or gemstones. What the penmai value most is personal indebtedness. “A favor done is a favor owed” is the simplest expression of this and among the sayings most commonly attributed by humans to the Penmai. Their own code of favors and services rendered can grow extremely detailed and complex. Though schooled in these codes from a very young age,

even Penmai find their many nuances difficult to fully master. Select elders take up the occupation of *wubara* or “indebtedness counselor” and contribute to the village by clarifying the cumbersome system for others, acting as a sort of referee to make sure all parties are at least pacified when there is a dispute.

Indebtedness can come from all sorts of sources—the favor of an introduction made, a piece of information provided, actions taken for loved ones, or even repayment to a parent for raising a penma through childhood. Seemingly every action through a penma’s day involves giving or repaying favors, and attention to that very much shapes a penma’s day and life. Repayment of favors essentially becomes the penma’s occupation, exchanging services as others do coins.

The formula for returning favor leaves vast room for variation, thus often requiring a professional *wubara* to sort it all out. Time is often a key factor; a large favor repaid with many smaller favors over many months or years, or vice versa. Familial connections change the formula, usually (but not always) reducing the repayment owed.

Multiple favor loops develop all the time; favors owed among a three-Penmai loop (or four, five, or more) often are adjudicated and recorded by a *wubara* to keep everything on the up and up. Favors can even be passed between willing exchangers or forced on children to carry into the next generations.

- **Serfdom:** Excessive indebtedness leads to a situation humans find indistinguishable from serfdom or indentured servitude, where one penma becomes so beholden to another that he basically exists to serve.
- **Punishment:** Failure to make good on a debt is unthinkable to the Penmai, as it is among the few crimes punishable by banishment or death; any such offenders are considered dangerously insane.
- **Civic Indebtedness:** Politically, indebtedness is the grease that keeps the government machinery turning; favors owed to the village ensure a workforce that takes care of all manner of civil functions. Acknowledgement of indebtedness between political rivals creates a peaceful way to adjudicate most disputes before strife turns to something worse.
- **Death Absolution:** One immutable fact, though, keeps everything equal regardless of class: death absolves one of all unpaid and untransferred favor debts.

Humans and other sapients find it fairly easy to slip into the penman favor and indebtedness paradigm. What most lack (save, perhaps, the *Pachyaur*) is their deeply ingrained capacity for remembering all debts owed and pending. Simple lists can remedy this, though there are also Penmai associates who will gladly, and inevitably, keep track of such things on their behalf . . . as a favor.

the Nok: masters of the skies

Elite Penmai called *nok* are master sanid riders. Of course, “rider” is a misnomer, since it takes three full-grown sanid to grasp and carry aloft a single Penmai. Nok are not the only Penmai to be carried so, but they are masters of this form of travel and capable of aerial acrobatics and even combat in conjunction with the sanid. Other Penmai can summon the birds but they are merely passengers carried in the *verui* or standard configuration: arm-arm-tail. Three birds grasp the penma near each elbow and at the base of the tail. The *verui* configuration lets a penma use her legs and, to an extent, her forearms, and affords a good view of the trip and the land below. The three sanids can carry a passenger easily and comfortably, and can travel great distances before being exhausted.

The second carrying configuration, one perfected by the Nok but also usable by other penmai, is the *sestis* or battle configuration. One sanid grasps the penma’s tail while the other two grab its legs either at the knees (*helsestis*) or ankles (*nawsestis*). *Sestis* leaves the penma’s arms and hands completely free for weapon use:

- **Arush Blow Gun:** The most common weapon among the Nok is the *arush* (penman blow gun).
- **Yarur Short Bow:** Another favored weapon for avian battles is the penman short bow or *yarur*.
- **Trana and Karan Blades:** Every Nok carries, if not actively wields, either a *trana* (penman short sword) or *karan* (penman dagger) at all times.
- **Wescha Quarterstaff:** Penman *wescha* quarter-staffs are too bulky for use while sanid-borne.

It normally takes three sanid to carry a single penma; two can manage a safe landing, while one will struggle to control any sort of landing at all. However, sanid can “train” in the *narobsi* method that allows a group of sanid to carry half their number of penmai if they have one more sanid to “take the lead”: one sanid grasps a penma’s tail, then another is shared between two penmai both in front and then behind. *Narobsi*-born penmai have little freedom of movement, carried so closely next to one another. The sanids’ efforts are great, so they can only manage it for a relatively short time and only in favorable conditions.

Sanid-borne Nok are known to visit the floating earth motes that sometimes ride the skies like islands, and even explore them.

Avian Kinship

Penmai feel a close kinship with birds of all kinds, a relationship forged high in the arboreal canopies. Birds feel it, too, and often alight near them and flutter about. It is common for a Penmai to be absent-mindedly stroking a bird with the long fingers of one hand while a couple more perch upon his shoulders or atop his head. Each is completely comfortable in the others' presence. Beyond simple companionship, Penmai and avian creatures share a non-magical, non-psychic communion and an innate understanding of purpose and attitudes. A Penmai can sense a raven's despair or alarm, or a starling's joy or caution—not so reliably that one can depend on local avians for an ever-present, detailed scouting report, but sufficient to be aware of broad emotional trends among their winged compatriots.

The Penmai-sanid relationship demonstrates this affinity most fully. Sanid are large, black birds with long black beaks and white and orange feathers along their head and tail, common all over Khitus but especially fruitful in and around forested regions. Sanid allow the Penmai mastery of the skies.

Rumors & Whispers

Like their history, Penmai obfuscate and prevaricate on all details unless they have reasons for either trusting someone or needing to communicate something. Thus, it is possible that other races and factions have heard every possible slur, lie, or insult about the Penmai because they themselves have spread them. What is true or not about the Penmai? Perhaps not even they know, as what may be true for one village and its Penmai may not hold true for all of them.

The one recurring legend that Penmai tell with any certainty must have some truth to it, though how much is hidden and unknown. Still, the majority of the Penmai believe some, if not all, of this, regardless of any factual verifications (or lack thereof).

- Penman tales tell that all of Khitus once lay swathed in jungles and forests, and their decline is most alarming to all those tied to them.
- The Dragon Kings who watched over the Penmai have not departed but instead have reverted to animalistic intelligence and these the Penmai still worship; they wander the forest floors today as unintelligent, extremely dangerous dragons indifferent to the Penmai reverence lavished upon them.
- Many Penmai (and their aerosto allies) feel that eventually these animalistic dragons will rediscover their minds, their power, and reassert their dominance.
- The subaorsi groundlings, the Penmai believe, will one day destroy themselves and leave behind a para-

dise wherein the forests and jungles will regrow their proper all-encompassing canopies across Khitus.

Prajalu

Outsiders publicly consider the human Prajalu tribesmen to be skilled traders and craftsmen, but treat them cautiously. Their reputations—as poison crafters or child stealers—and their odd family dynamics give others sufficient pause or paranoia to always tread carefully around the Prajalu.

Prajalu stand slightly shorter than other humans, but they all have more powerful muscular builds. They have fair skin, blonde to white hair, and blue or paler (some completely white) eyes. Prajalu tend to have round facial features with flat noses. They take their outward appearance and hygiene seriously, bathing and grooming often. Colorful, billowing blouses and pantaloons are common, as are modest jewelry adornments, though some warriors wear considerably less. Parasols are currently fashionable. Prajalu change their clothes several times per day when possible, even once or twice during a single meal, as a symbol of personal pride and wealth. Prajalu are noted for their exquisite posture and poise, a signature of their upbringing and self-confidence.

Prajalu ride thakal and swafa mounts, the latter often adorned in bright “clothing” of braids and streamers. They live simply in single-story, open-air garden dwellings of wood and black stone, up to eight homes sharing a common garden or courtyard. Throughout all this, their mounts and many pets wander and graze freely, though they are kept away from cooking fires and food stores.

History

The Prajalu peoples moved north toward the warm-skied equatorial lands earlier than any other humans, then scattered thinly across the western steppes and pasturelands they found there. This abundant paradise, basking beneath the bright sun and washed by rains, kept them a simple people. By the time Makadan and Attite cities rose like monuments to progress toward the end of the Barbarian Age, the Prajalu lagged far behind, proud yet unsophisticated.

In the intervening millennia and through the Classic Age, the Prajalu have never caught up to other cultures, technologically or magically. A mystery to others, the Prajalu simply shrug and admit they felt little need to compete, content with the attentions and ministrations of two Daragkarik over their lands. Others with closer eyes on smaller activities know that some Prajalu learned the

Prajalu Royalty in Abeyance

Alas, in more than a century, no royal family has ruled over the tribes since the Great Reprisals killed the last ruler and the next 40 members in succession as well as hundreds of other innocent citizens and family members.

- ♦ **Nayak:** The Nayak is the ruling monarch, be he a king or she a queen. Nayaks have no crown but wear the Nayakahin, a sash of woven silver and inset gems allegedly made by the Daragkark Arjaloras for the first nayak more than three centuries in the past.
- ♦ **Pujan:** The Pujan are any royal children directly born of or adopted by the nayak.
- ♦ **Upanya:** The Upanya are related sub-nobility of any stripe, more often relatives from previous generations long distanced from any succession to the Nayakahin.

arts of poison crafting as ways to bulwark their abilities in battle when vying with other tribes for lands or power.

For centuries, many said the Prajalu were lazy and idle, doing the least work of any of the Khitan peoples. This insult has not been uttered in at least twelve generations now, since the Night of Nine Dark Feasts. Distant but never forgotten, that massacre saw the deaths by poison of more than five hundred Attites and Makadan who had insulted the Nayak Ualor IX, his daughters, and repeatedly disparaged their Prajan ways.

Of course, the fallout from those assassinations saw multi-pronged attacks against the Prajalu by many other tribes. The Great Reprisals decimated the tribe's numbers and slew their ruling family before the last remaining Prajalu Dragon King ended the wars. Arjaloras protected the few Prajalu from further vengeance for nearly 20 years, often by invoking the Rite of Vindicta to spare lives, and then the Argentalon disappeared without warning, like so many other Daragkarik.

Most remaining tribal chieftains are mid- or lower-ranked upanya seeking to claim the Nayakahin. While all have claims to it, all connections to succession are tenuous and distant by more than twelve generations. Also, with their populations so destroyed for a time, the chieftains could do little more than talk, bluster, and remain busy rebuilding their individual tribes and their settlements. While maneuvering gambits to seize power have yet to risk lives in combat, that time may be coming soon, as the Prajalu again match the Chindi and Nordor for

sheer numbers. In the past decade, at least two chieftains and their heirs have died via vargam poisons just before they were to stake a claim for the Nayakahin.

Since the Reprisals and the disappearance of the Dragon King Arjaloras, the closest thing Prajalu have had to a unifying tribal government or force is their *Unnata*, the Council of First Sons. As they have for more than two generations, the sons of the tribal chieftains gather thrice annually to settle disputes, arrange marriages, and forge trade and other alliances. Hardly a governing body, they are sometimes looked to as such during desperate times, such as those that befell Khitus today. The Unnata has produced some stability, since those chieftains' heirs build alliances and understandings over years of working together. Such relations are rarely tossed aside lightly in mad scrambles for power, especially since the others among the Unnata can better predict how each of their fellows will react to such actions.

Ranks & Types

All governmental and social hierarchies once followed their common Prajalu familial roots, though these structures have been disrupted (see "Prajalu Royalty in Abeyance"). While there are other higher-ranked individuals among the Prajalu (noted above), the majority of Prajalu follow the old lines of social power. Aside from the military notes immediately below, the relative ranking of these types of Prajalu are in order of influence from highest to lowest.

Military ranking comes from personal ability, experience and victories. Champions and successful veterans lead those skilled in their primary weapons; thus, those most experienced or skilled with each weapon lead troops of like-armed soldiers into battle. Prajan-crafted weapons include the *sajnika* (war club), *shurudu* (poison dart), and *phatar* (flexible javelin), though they can field other companies with champions and warriors wielding most weapons available on Khitus.

- Rumu are the famous professional Prajan poisoners who operate quite openly as an accepted part of everyday commerce. They brew, sell, and advise on all sorts of concoctions, from something to make someone vaguely ill to that which will leave them dead as a stone. These "assassin's assistants" are above reproach, their services available to any who can pay. They commonly keep lu'urat ghost snakes and harvest their venom. They wear the social air of appreciation like apothecaries do in other cultures, for their many poisons also have wide varieties of beneficial uses.
- Ruchi, on the other hand, are highly paid professional food tasters, a necessity in Prajalu culture for



any diplomatic visits or among those seeking to establish trust. Ruchi build up immunity to many poisons over time, though they more easily detect and recognize the effects of poisons than others. Keeping a client alive is the Ruchi's code

- Svaramu are hired public speakers that announce and spin all family matters for public consumption. They can often be rehired to tell a completely different story the very next day. Some svaramu earn wonderful secondary incomes secretly reporting on additional details about their public employers and the true tales behind the official story.
- Vargam are also poisoners, though they are not as exhaustively trained as the Rumu, nor do they act with the acceptance of Prajan leaders. In short, they are amateurs at poison craft at least in terms of variety and depth of knowledge in creating and using poisons. They are the outlaws, and perhaps not just assistants to assassins. These crafty bug and lizard collectors extract what they need from creatures and nature, mix it with roots and saps, and dole out their toxins liberally to those who can afford them. Their ability and speed at crafting virulent poisons for assassinations make them highly sought after by the desperate who cannot wait for a Rumu's help.
- Takaku are a caste of unclean laborers with no possibility of upward social or economic mobility. Not quite slaves, most Prajalu shun these indentured servants or, like shadows, acknowledge them only as needed or when noticed. Strangely, many private rites demand their blessings for the establishment of homes, new ventures, and new loves.

child trading & child selling

Prajalu sometimes sell infant or very young family members to one another, but rarely do they do so after a child can walk, and only then for matters of continuity (if a family loses many to a plague, for example). On the surface, this appears to be a form of slavery, but nothing could be further from the truth. In Prajalu minds, seeking new blood strengthens the family unit with new skills or abilities. Newfound brothers and sisters are immediately welcomed into the fold.

Outsiders think the Prajalu practice of child trading and purchase alarmingly odd, and keep their own children under a watchful eye when among them. Prajan practices generate many fearful rumors, making them an easy spook-story for misbehaving children—"behave or Prajalu will steal you away in the night!"

Customs & Culture

Given how distrustful the Prajalu are of other humans and other races, learning about their culture comes more through the Nyutu or older lore from the times of the Dragon Kings. Things have changed much since then, granted, so it is a guess as to how much truth wanderers know about this tribe without braving them face to face.

Prajalu are generally indifferent to the other human tribes and races of their world. They recognize that every group must make practical adaptation to their surroundings in order to survive and, so long as another group does not interfere with them, they are content to live side by side. If others should enter Prajan lands, they find that Prajalu distrust all non-equatorial humans to a point bordering on racial hatred. Foreigners garner immediate suspicion regardless of actions or inactions. It becomes understood that they prefer the company of other Prajalu. The exception to outsider-loathing is their universal embrace of the Nyutu, regardless of tribal origin, as harbingers of prosperity. Nyutu recognize this and move through Prajan lands in greater numbers than elsewhere on Khitus.

At the birth of any Prajan child, a Prajal adult can invoke a combat challenge to claim that child for his or her family. This practice is often employed by jealous cuckolds or romantic rivals. Any family member can accept the challenge to fight to keep the child, though it most often falls to one of the child's parents. Regardless of the challenge's outcome, enormous social pressure ensures that the child is raised fairly and cherished.

Prajalu are free to marry as many times as they deem necessary, usually for business or political purposes. In the process they create large, extended or multiple family units with concurrent marriages. The Prajalu are just as jealous or emotional as other humans, so these multiple marriages are often fraught with strife, either among the multiple spouses of either gender or simply in matters of inheritance and the seeming favoring (or lack thereof) of children.

The dead garner widespread mourning in a family and community; there are specific rituals for the deceased and those held dear. None among the departed's immediate family and closest friends may speak during the seven-day mourning period after discovery of the death, lest their voices drown any final messages from the deceased; they write all communications on wax tablets that are eventually collected and interred with the fallen's other belongings. As soon as possible, a family member and a Rumu make a death mask of the deceased. After a body's disposal on the second day of a mourning period, the death mask and any other artistic effigies or representations of the deceased become the

focus of any rituals. By the second dawn after death, the bodies of the deceased are left in jungles or other wild places for wild animals to devour; their spirits live on in the beasts that feed on their flesh.

Prajalu eat very few planned meals, but instead nibble on tiny bits of prepared food all day long. The only breaks from this habit are wedding feasts and political gatherings like the Unnata, which see large, long-running meals that spread out over many hours or days.

Outsiders consider Prajalu justice extreme, while the Prajalu know it is harsh so as to set an example for others. While they take inordinate spans of time to come to decisions, once a judgment is made, there is neither any chance of appeal nor any delay in delivering the sentence. Violators and criminals, depending on their transgressions, may be publicly humiliated, pilloried, or even tortured, mutilated, and left to die in the public “judgment square” (of which there is always one in every Prajan settlement).

Dramatic reenactments of the “Traditions of the Prophet Yelkmon” (an important Prajan historical and religious figure) are staples for elaborate theater presentations several times every year. On Prophetsdays (Yelkmon’s birthday and the days flanking it), a Prajan community chooses to reenact one of the Tradition plays and all must participate; outsiders are assigned simple roles to urge participation but must not mar the play with poor performances.

Aside from the more famed or notorious poisonous goods and services made by the Prajalu, there are numerous other wears sought from them by many: *Rendri* are exceptional-quality swafa saddles renowned for being both decorative and comfortable. *Gaba* are a wide variety of nut-based snack foods prepared and spiced to be quite tasty. Their durability makes them a highly sought-after food for caravan travel.

The Prajalu have a number of customs that outsiders must embrace to be even partially acceptable to Prajan society. These major taboos or rules are followed without question by all other Prajalu:

- **Respect Entertainers:** Prajalu value entertainers, especially actors and nyutu. A great actor can drown in the gifts of a well-wishing Prajan audience.
- **Intimacy of Touch:** The Prajalu regard all touching as intimate and never touch anyone in public save for very short greetings, touching only the fingertips.
- **Openness:** In contrast, they make family matters very public and involve strangers in things other humans regard as strictly private.
- **Good Fortune:** Sighting a passing earth mote—one of the dry dust balls that occasionally float upon the winds like islands—is considered good luck.

- **Revenge Prohibition:** Also, revenge against a successful poisoning is petty and unwarranted; Prajalu believe any poisoned victim shares equal blame with the poisoner for not successfully guarding against it.

Rumors & Whispers

As with all cultures and “people different from us,” there are many rumors true and untrue aloft on the Khitan winds about the Prajalu. Prajan myths and legends fuel many great stories and whispered incongruities that set tongues wagging about or among the Prajalu.

- Some say that an exiled Prajan prince built the Black Tower, bent on the vengeful destruction of the world in payment for the Great Reprisals and other ills. (All this is untrue but is fomented by relations of long-dead, overzealous warlords from the Great Reprisals against the Prajalu.)
- Others who believe the Prajalu have vast hidden wealth in diamonds and secret mines have just missed a little-realized and close-guarded truth. In some places on Khitus, mineral riches can be found virtually lying upon the surface of the world. Such gems and other prizes have fattened the pockets of many wandering tribes (such as many a Prajan caravan or out-rider group) who take care not to distribute them too often lest they deflate commodities markets. Such rumors have reached the pale ears of the Bev al-Khim.
- Bridging the misty gap between legend and truth is the Prajan sarhak’s (psychic’s) practice called the Djrust. The “nourishing sight” is a psychic ability to sense any forms or modes of nourishment out in the wilderness. Even among others with similarly arcane senses, the djrust garners not unjustified skepticism. Still, those who witness it first-hand swear the power is genuine. Generally elderly women profess mastery of the djrust, and wrap themselves in the trappings of mysterious powers like strange witches.
- The ancient Prajalu god Ardhana allegedly created the Dragon Kings, but she eventually drove them away for being disloyal either to the Prajalu or Khitus. Reka was one of these, and flagellants blister themselves in his honor and to appease Ardhana (see Chapter 6).
- The Prajan hero Viradu of Stalamu conquered an evil wizard and his jaladam servitors long ago, scattering the pieces of their bodies among great throngs of insects. By doing this, Viradu inadvertently created the Krikis races.
- Prajalu also believe that a Bev al-Khim will enslave a Prajan child who will grow to do grievous harm to the Bev al-Khim before returning to the fold as a Prajan champion. This legend is so widely believed

that some parents irresponsibly leave their unwanted children out for slavers to take.

- Many Prajalu feel that the Dragon Kings Bhayan or Arjaloras will return to take all their peoples away with them to the heavens beyond Khitus.

Watu

Watu are a distinct Pachyaur subrace with mildly different physiology and its own unique culture. As a slave-owning, agricultural society, the Watu dominate the verdant plains and forests of the eastern Equatorial Basin, closest to the Old Countries and the Krikis Hivelands. The most common Pachyaur for humans to meet face to face is a Watu.

Watu are arrogant by Pachyaur standards. They view themselves as the dominant, superior culture, deeming their Brachachon neighbors foolish for not engaging in the lucrative, agriculturally necessary slave trade. Watu teach their young from birth that their culture's destiny is to one day dominate the entire equatorial band of Khitus, which they will turn into a gardened paradise of fat, rich shamabas between verdant forests. Any slave races will be relegated to the polar regions to toil against the ice and rocks and supply labor for their Watu masters.

Physiology & Appearance

Other than the differences noted below, Watu appear similar to other pachyaur. Of course, the Watu insist they are far from normal.

Watu are recognized from afar by their darker hides and wider ears. Watu coloration ranges from gray tinged with a slight-olive green to a rich, charcoal, sometimes with streaks of lighter gray along the back and fore-shoulders, and possibly a swath of near-white along the underbelly. A Wat's ears are thin and wide enough that they cannot be pulled completely flat against its head, leaving ears forever at the mercy of the breeze. Compared with its Brachachon kin, Watu shoulders and back are wide and flat, a physiological characteristic that makes it easier for them to carry objects there without lashing them in place; a Wat pachyaur's arms can reach behind to hold cargo on its back "in place," as well. Older Watu grow hair along their sides and bellies, which they often cut or braid to keep it out of the way.

History

Since the schism among the Pachyaur that splintered them into Brachachon and Watu factions, all pachyesh histories either seek to rationalize slavery or demonize

it while simultaneously lauding the accomplishments of the Pachyaur. While each *bwasana's* collective remembers its own individual history, there are still shared legends and myths that underscore the foundations upon which Watu society rests.

Watu legend provides a cautionary tale reinforcing handling slaves with unwavering strength. In the ancient times of the early Classic Age, Beberu was a *bwasana* especially lenient with her slaves. She employed few *kanyaga*, tolerated gaiety and sloth among her slaves, and left many of the responsibilities of her shamaba's administration to the more learned among them. In time, slaves staged mass escapes, leaving Beberu's shamaba, without laborers, to its failure. Beberu and her entire family group died in poverty.

More elaborate recountings of the Beberu legend suggest that her escaped slaves populated the rest of Khitus with humans and the other races, where it was presumably devoid of such creatures previously. Thus, most Watu see their own activities less as active slaving and more as "property reclamation and restoration."

Ranks & Types

While Watish society shares the same distinctions and matrilineal organizations as the Pachyaur of old, there are a number of additional distinctions useful in their slave-based society.

Like other Pachyaur, the *bwasana*, or matriarch, manages the shamaba (see "Customs & Culture" below), making core decisions on what crops to embrace, details of the harvests, constructing buildings and walls, and acquiring and dispersing slave laborers. Lower females tend to the operational details, such as processing, storage, and transport of materials, general provisioning, maintenance, and so on. Males gain rank by their prowess in battle or as breeding stock. As there are only so many positions needed for fighters and fathers, many male Watu become either slaving caravan drovers and organizers or wanderers in other lands away from their home shamabas.

Warriors & Protectors

Bwasana employ male warriors to protect their shamaba and keep order. Among these warriors are mercenary *kanyaga*, known among humans as tramlers. They specialize in using their enormous bulk and powerful legs to crush smaller foes, a skill especially useful against massed formations of *vidijo* troops. While often unnecessary, some *kanyaga* choose to wear metal-reinforced boots to make their trample attacks more painful or devastating to those in their path.

Kanyaga often double as slave handlers, slowly moving up the ranks into greater positions. Their merit-based hierarchy depends on production goals and observable successes in slave dominance and mastery, always at the expense of those in bondage. Extreme measures are tolerated, or even seen as necessary, and the expenditure of slaves to make a point or set a savage example for the others is commonplace among the brutal kanyaga overseers.

Some male Pachyaur—often the undistinguished semaji—are enslaved and subsequently trained as protective warriors and defenders against rogue bulls and aggressive shamaba competitors. These *quvu* become martial experts, cross-trained in armed and unarmed warfare against their own kind. Conditioned to be merciless, *quvu* can be especially destructive, ferocious, and so inured to violence and death that they cannot disengage from battle until they or their foes lie dead. It is impossible for a *quvu* to retreat from a fight and never enough to beat an opponent into submission: once an enemy enters a *quvu*'s sights, battle is invariably to the death.

Quvu report directly to the *bwasana* who ordered and subsidized their extensive training. Unleashing one's *quvu* against an enemy is a dangerous decision, for there is no recalling these forces once they embark upon a campaign. As such, a shamaba's *quvu* often remain on gaudy display as a terrifying weapon of ultimate destruction, their armed and unarmed drills all overt demonstrations of their power and smoldering warnings to anyone thinking of launching an attack.

Imhara Breeders

Unique among the Watu civilization are its *imhara* breeders. Their origin is unclear, but they have existed since primitive pre-schism times. Presumably, their prodigious reproduction offered the family groups some resistance to famines and plagues of the day. Whether that was a naturally occurring specialization or was somehow magically induced or enhanced is lost to history.

On modern Khitus, approximately one Watish birth in one hundred is an *imhara*, and that frequency increases during times of environmental or social pressure. An *imhara* is grotesquely misshapen from birth, with expanded bones and considerably more flesh and body fat. Once impregnated, an *imhara* remains perpetually pregnant, giving birth to calf after calf, each one after an unnaturally short five-month gestation period.

The stress on the *imhara* is great and she must continuously feed, but is unable to do so herself. Her feeding and additional care comes from other females in her family group. Siblings of an *imhara* mother are termed *imharatha*, and they are closely bonded for life. An *imhara* dies after somewhere between 15 and 25 births,

and her body is ritually burned with great honor in a solemn, family-wide ceremony.

Customs & Culture

Watu society centers upon the *shamaba*, or plantations of enormous slave-managed farms organized by family or extended-family groups. Most Watu cities are, in fact, the central hub where several large *shamaba* meet. Beyond this centralized, walled urban region, farmlands fan outward in all directions: block roads bordered with high, thick hedges separate one *shamaba* from the next.

- **Single Commodity:** Commonly, *shamaba* specialize in a single crop, either grains (wheat, rice, dhoru, or shell-oats) or orchard fruits (bananas, mangos, le-tu-apples, or choranges), though they often diversify with vegetable gardens and livestock (mainly boars or raven-hens) or even fisheries.
- **Individuality:** Despite their harsh treatment of slaves, Watu have a tolerant, progressive society. Individuality is encouraged. The arts such as sculpture, theater, and music are highly valued. Education is abundant and varied. They prize intellectual pursuits among the Pachyaur, as administration is essential to the success of their agricultural enterprises.
- **Slow Social Change:** Fashion and social rituals change slowly, but change nonetheless. The introduction of a new custom is met with some resistance, but is never dismissed outright. Indeed, credit for advancing a new fad or trend can improve one's place in society. Adherence to existing customs is expected, but not demanded. As long as elders within a family group adhere to traditions, the young may freely participate or not as they see fit.

The Beastly Way

The Watu share a closer kinship with their wild elephant and colossadant kin than do their Brachachon rivals. They can more easily communicate with them, govern their movements in the wilderness, and tame them for use as draft animals. The Watu refer to this as the *kubiti* or "beastly way," an emotive herding technique passed down through the generations. Mastery requires a skilled tutor and many years of direct contact with the animals. Through trumpeting, facial signals, and direct nudging, a pachyaura can use *kubiti* methods to call wild elephants and colossadants out of the bush, keep them from wandering, and herd them along. More skill allows the mastery of beasts for laborious tasks without direct contact. At its highest levels, *kubiti* allows a Wat to work his beasts cooperatively in teams for truly strenuous tasks.

Watu Slavery

To the Watu, their slave ownership is indistinguishable from their dependence upon elephants and colosadants as beasts of burden or any other culture's use of beasts of burden for undesirable tasks. The Watu see their ownership and caustic treatment as necessary to their society, and this is the chief difference of opinion between them and their Brachachon kin, who find the idea abhorrent.

Outsiders claim all Watish slaves are humans and humanoids, but this is untrue. Outcast Pachyaur are often sold into slavery to become overseers over the humans in bondage, but they are owned nonetheless.

Slavery among the Watu is not a casual, societal convenience. Life under their ownership is harsh and uncompromising. The Watu slave's lot in life is miserable and often cruel. Bondage is for life, and there is no compassion or reward for a lifetime of service.

Attempts to escape (regardless of success or not) are punishable by death. Though harsh discipline is expected and accepted, wasting slaves is unacceptable, and the overseer who does so is dismissed or punished.

Watu family groups often exchange slaves as gifts, their value measured by docility, strength, and fertility. Trained adults are most coveted. Receiving a rebellious slave as a gift is considered a slight at best, an omen at worst.

Watu & Non-Pachyaur Slavers

Watu freely engage in diplomacy with vidijo races: indeed, human ambassadors and agents are common in the more cosmopolitan shamabas, where their presence is not only welcome but considered by many to be quite stylish. Most Watish negotiations with vidijo center on trade in materials and flesh.

Human slavers find a ready market among the Watu, whose cruelty consistently depletes their slave pens faster than natural or administered breeding can replace. Watu find dealing with the agents of the Black Tower, the twisted and pale Bev al-Khim, especially rewarding. The Pale offer chain upon chain of ragged yet sturdy human slaves from as far away as the beleaguered Old Countries. Much to the Watu's liking, the wily Bev al-Khim accept all manner of materials in trade (anything from grain and seed to casks of sweet water), whereas most human slavers insist upon gems and silver.

Rumors & Whispers

The view from outside Watu society paints a dark picture of them. The bulk of any "news" from Watish lands comes from their own slave pens, rumors carried by the few escapees who survive the experience.

- Watu wizards ensure that slavery continues after death. Some say sorcery reanimates dead slaves



Languages on Khitus

Human tribal languages trace their origins to pre-migration times. Attan, Prajal, and Chindan are all part of the Attan language group; each is a related dialect. The same is true for Makad and Nordran. Penaian is a unique language involving complex hand signs that is unrelated to other human tongues.

Pachyesh is the common language of the Brachachon group, and Watish is a dialect of that language.

Krikis communication is strangely insectoid in nature, involving clicking, vibrations, and scent signals; Krikis can only communicate with other races in their languages.

Oritahl, or Cold Skins, speak a guttural pastiche of human and pachyesh dialects that they have robbed and pieced together. Oddly, they can sometimes act as interpreters between others separated by a language barrier, at least for simple concepts.

All human and pachyesh languages have a written version, as well. Generally, only the upper classes, leaders and those in a trade that specifically requires written communication are taught to read and write. Like so many things on Khitus, education in the written languages is in steep decline. The vast majority are unlettered.

Human Attan Language Group
Attan-Prajal-Chindi
Human Makad Language Group
Makad-Nordran
Pachyesh Language Group
Pachyesh-Watish
Independent Languages
Penaian
Oritahl
Krikish

into doomed undead servants with no will of their own. Others hint that the souls of fallen slaves spend their afterlives in eternal bondage in some Watish heavenly plantation. Either thought of eternal suffering beneath Pachyaur masters keeps humans from traveling near their lands.

- The Watu do not keep Krikis slaves because they allegedly find them a tasty delicacy raw or cooked. (Untrue, but all Krikis are exterminated as pests, which is why there are none to be found, save at slaving markets.)
- Watu Pachyaur consider themselves to be the chosen race of the Dragon Kings. They are destined to rule over their lands and gradually expand across the face of Khitus, enslaving all the other races to toil in their fields. Of course, they take the pachyesh long-view on this prophecy and so expect only slow progress toward that from one generation to the next.
- Watu are convinced that they, elephants, colosadants and dragons are all distantly related. In Watu art, dragons are most often depicted in elephantine form, rotund with trunks and small tails beneath mammoth wings.
- The gravest insult to Watu is to wonder aloud just how close their ties are with their lesser elephantine cousins, insinuating that kubiti skills have more to do with cross-species breeding than dedicated training. (No matter how hated a Watish foe, Brachachon never use this horrific insult either. Only humans fling this at their Pachyaur overseers.)

The Year of the Khundu Imhara

For centuries, one particular Watish legend languished among travelers' tales and nursery stories, but once again ascends into the cultural consciousness. Bwasana and magistrates now whisper of it seriously in the great marble halls of power. Many now believe the Year of the Khundu Imhara may finally be at hand. According to the prophecy, one night shall see a brilliant shooting star draw its bright line against the sky directly across all three Khitan moons (which they have named Mawezi (common: Luth), Achungwa (common: Yaluth), and Tangara (common: Chalor)). This vision shall set into motion the preparations for the final battle that will determine the fate of the Pachyaur and the world of Khitus. The Imhara will spawn young bulls prodigiously and continuously from that day forward, swelling the ranks of an army that none might stand against.

Chapter 4: The Cities

City entries in this chapter follow in alphabetical order for ease of reference; refer to maps for their location. Also bear in mind that these are simply the more well-known or prominent settlements on Khitus, but they are far from the only civilized places to be found. Each city's tribal origins are stated, and that tribe and its culture are dominant, though minorities from other tribes are always present.

Aleothkka

Among the verdant and pleasant lands claimed by the Pachyaur, the city of Aleothkka is an incredible repository of lore. It is the pachyesh seat of higher learning for the Brachachon and they have constructed a grand place for it. The city is huge in scale and architecture sprawls as far as the eye can see. Great grey marble statues of pachyesh heroes line the central square of the city hall, the most elite decorated with gold leaf. The wind interacts with Aleothkka in a strange way, causing sonic vibrations that echo the pachyesh language—because of this, pachyaur call Aleothkka the Singing City.

A massive wall encloses the city and three gates provide entry to the city proper. The southern gate leads directly to the Grand Promenade—the huge central circle where the ruling family resides. During a siege or an attack, a three-tier gate system can slam shut on order of the habwasana to protect the city from without; from within, many interconnecting wards can be sealed off by heavy stone doors shoved into place by the city guard.

Visitors and Aleothkkans alike most highly prize the city's three Grand Libraries: Kalto, Moktu, and Okka Benk. Impressive inside and out, these huge edifices boast complete collections of every written work, map and diagram the Pachyaur have ever made from memory. Some material here is supplemented by accounts from friendly Gare Attessa Chroniclers. Kalto stores art and maps; Moktu is the history and records repository; and Okka Benk holds all pachyesh fictions, poems, and songs. The current Great Librarian is a creature of incredible mnemonic recall, like many of his brethren,

but he supplements this with hidden psychic ability and can use this to find whatever a seeker of knowledge desires in all three libraries.

Alos

Alos is a strange Attite city, its buildings constructed entirely of giant bones and strong sinew. Few know why or for how long this has been in practice, but it has been the norm for at least three generations for Alosians to build their homes from the skeletal remains of fallen giant creatures. They stretch the skin and hide over wooden frames to make simple houses, the earliest method and one still used among the poor. Over time, they learned to use more of a creature's body, hollowing out the corpse and adding rooms or additional expansions with framing or other creatures. They even took to making furniture from stone and bone. The more influential people are in Alos, the deeper towards the core of the city they live. Those on the fringes of society eke out their lives in cloth tents or hide-frame homes, hoping to earn enough favor to be allowed accommodation in a small creature's skull.

The rulers of the city, known as the Dotrong Council, are seven elected members of the population. Unfortunately, they often do not have Alos' best interests at heart. Most obsess about moving relatives and friends into better areas of the city and care little for those who get trampled in the way of progress. They rule from the Paltor, an aggregate building made from twelve gargantuan thakal skeletons at the core of Alos. The Bone Watch are their eyes, ears, and hands among the streets and dwellings of the city.

The Bone Market is one of the most famous Alosian locales, both for its stone-embedded thakal-ribcage stalls and for its wares. Most sought after by visiting traders are the incredible selections of locally raised or caught beast meat, both fresh and preserved for caravans. The Beast Hunter's Guild of Alos controls much wealth because of this, though many don't believe this when they see the guild's much-scarred and austere leader. Called



Jul the Hunter, he is a mighty warrior who prefers to hunt huge game with his bone spears, bow, and arrows. Other affluent groups in Alos include the Skinners' & Tanners' Guild and the Bonesmiths' Guild; at least one member of each of these three powerful guilds always sits on the Dotrong Council.

Bariga

To the south of the Mundair Sink lies Bariga, a small city more a town in truth. It is home to a desert sub-tribe of Attite humans who are swift hunters, clever trackers, and fierce warriors. They prey upon marauding raiders that venture too close to their home, hunt the dangerous regional beasts such as the matakata and wild thakal, and even brave the dangers of the Mundair Sink itself.

Bariga's construction is typical of many desert tribal settlements: short buildings with flat rooftops for most homes. There are a few peaked roofs here and there where the construction breaks with tradition for good reason. These distinctions break the lines of the city on

the horizon and help hide it from prying eyes. They also provide practical landmarks and starting points from which to dig, since the city is often engulfed by sandstorms and silt storms that rage in from the wilderness and the Mundair Sink.

There is very little crime among the close-knit streets of this community. Everyone knows each other, as if the population were somehow just one big extended family. Natives adorn themselves with mauxon greenstone jewelry, and treat strangers with kindness until they break the law or slight the city in some way, and then they face the wrath of every inhabitant of Bariga. Many would-be thieves or raiders find themselves driven into the Mundair Sink for their transgressions.

Brokkan

Once called the City of Whispers, the Prajalu city of Brokkan was a hive of rumors and gossip. It enjoyed the lurid status as a place where one could discover literally anything for the right price. Then came the Stranger. This bandage-wrapped outsider wandered through the city and left misery, disease, and death in his wake. Few know for certain, but refugees claimed he was a deformed mage, an insane Shadazim, a plague-ridden mind bender, or a powerful centuries-old undead being. Regardless of the truth, the Stranger preyed on the people of Brokkan's Old Town and warped their bodies to his own fiendish ends.

This ghoulish visitor has given Brokkan its new name as the City of Silence. Not a single creature moves through the Old Town's empty streets, and only sparse plants and insects touch its once thriving walls. In the span of 20 years, the Old Town has become a ghostly place, a forgotten memory to many and a cursed nightmare to some. The Stranger remains, according to those who have glimpsed a figure in the swirling desert sands around Brokkan. Many say he stands often atop the White Spire, the highest point of the city, watching and seeking something on the horizons. Life goes on in the ring of city around the Old Town, normal but for the lingering horror that lurks nearby.

The White Spire, a decrepit ruin of its former self, is no longer a pallid glimmer in the sun, its unkempt stones stained by the ravages of time. Regardless, any responsible Khitan guides and trackers warn travelers to keep a broad distance from Brokkan or risk oblivion, despite the fact that many thousands live fruitfully around its perimeter. Rumors swirl across many tongues and many winds, claiming that the Stranger within may soon leave the City of Silence for a new city to defile.

Chatoon

In its glory during the Classic Age of Khitus, Chatoon was the envy of the region, a bustling city of tall marble and ruby spires. Its Makadan inhabitants enjoyed a reputation as a place to visit to see wonders of architecture and magic with colorful buildings and incredible vistas anywhere the gaze fell. Now it is a dark bloodstained shadow with death stalking the streets at any hour. Like shattered dreams, its once-mighty towers now stand or lie broken and ruined. Most marauders and monsters alike give Chatoon a wide berth, for in the depths of the city lurks a Daragkark sorceress.

Shagnathrix whispers to the dark walls, conjures fell magic, and makes pacts with sorcery that she hopes will make amends for her troubled and murderous past. Her people know better than to cross her, and the city has been turned into a nightmare by her constant conjurations. Undead abominations walk the streets and seek to return to the desert sand; the still-living population cowers by day and hides in terror by night. Worse than the walking dead are the powerful psychic monsters that lurk in Chatoon's streets. They flit among the alleys, ever watchful for unwary travelers whose minds they rip apart in an instant and feed on their souls.

Chuma Zor (Chukka Zor)

Many years ago, Chukka Zor was merely a single Watu shamaba, one of the many enormous slave-tended farms overseen by extended pachyesh family groups. The *bwasana* (matriarch) Chukka managed her shamaba so well that the region prospered for the Watu Pachyaur. It grew like a flooding river in the rainy season, overwhelming local farms until the central buildings and the combined plantations became the city of Chukka Zor. All other Khitan races called it the Slave Circle.

A few years into her city's prosperity, Chukka died mysteriously and a cunning creature called Chuma became the new *bwasana*. She renamed the city Chuma Zor and increased the amount of slave farms by a third, sending agents across Khitus to capture more workers for the farms. She and her ruthless overseers made sure that Chuma Zor's combined eight shamabas—all Chuma's daughters by blood or marriage—each focused on one of the crops that were needed.

The city now looks like a mix of stone and wood, broad block trade roads leading to and from important parts

top Khitan cities by population

1. Pacheodon
 2. Wani Chereet
 3. Torqal
 4. Alos
 5. Aleothkka
 6. Chuma Zor* (#4 if the Watu counted slaves in their population numbers.)
 7. Gathush* (#2 If all encamped & nearby refugees counted as citizens)
- Pavouk would exceed Torqal's population if its spiders were counted as citizens, as they outnumber humans there more than 100 to one.

of Chuma Zor and high hedges separating the various farms from each other. There is a centralized urban region at the center of all the farmlands that encircle it. The city appears to be in harmony with the natural world, its urban core far greener than other Khitan cities, with slaves by the hundreds tending all kinds of crops in and around the city.

Estica

The strong rock of the nearby Deepshadow Mountains to the northwest protects Estica, as it has for centuries. This Makadan city also sits a stone's throw from the Serpent Hills, whose caverns and creatures provide the city with its many unique trade goods such as gemstones, perfumes, and oils. Estica dominates much of the trade around this region and prospers for it. They roof their largest buildings with deep red rock tiles fired to reflect a sun-like sheen, visible for miles across the horizon in any direction.

Before the marauder scourge came to the Old Countries, Estica protected itself by its prime location in the mountains. With the escalating threats of slavery or violence from many savage tribes, city leaders, its *kral*s and *sovetniks*, want to build a defensive wall against the growing darkness. This wall has not yet been started and many believe that it will lead to later problems, from interfering with trade to hampering population expansions. Time will tell if the city's population wins the battle of the wall, or the government decides to construct one regardless of popular opinion. Regardless,

they push young warriors to maintain the tribal tradition of the Kod to keep them strong.

The city's primary defenders since Estica's founding have been the monks of the Deepshadow Order, in league with several mysterious Trakeen who come and go. The main monastery lies within the city itself, while a newer cloister lies on the closest slopes of the Deepshadow Mountains. The monks patrol between the two garrisoned monasteries and around Estica, their martial prowess helping maintain order and keeping this among the few peaceful cities on the planet.

A tribe of bandits hidden among the Serpent Hills keeps watch on Estica as it grows, planning and plotting, biding their time until they feel it worth the risk to assault one of the richer surviving Khitan cities. What keeps their numbers stable are the infrequent ambushes and raids they visit upon trappers or shepherds among the hills around their cavern lairs.

Gathush

High on an escarpment overlooking still-rich equatorial plains sits magnificent Gathush, a proudly Makadan city, the most powerful human city-state remaining on Khitus. Colorful banners mark its rock-paved roads in all directions. Patrolled by festooned thakal cavalry, the roads often teem with travelers and cart-bearing merchants. A visit to Gathush is a glimpse back in time to see what Khitan human kingdoms were like during the Classic Age.

Gathush has escaped the worst of the world's sharp decline due to its distance from the southern wastelands. The rains that avoid the southlands still fall abundantly here. Even its proximity to the expanding Krikis Hivelands has not dimmed the city's renown. Having to bear the brunt of all three Chifin Wars with little aid from more distant human kin engenders a haughty pride among the Gathusha over other martial societies.

Gathush is a beacon of hope and strength to human refugees everywhere. Those who make the journey to Gathush are welcome within its gates to enjoy the protection of its Kral, or King, and many armies.

Kral Rath's dynastic claim to the Gathite Throne extends back twelve generations. His many ahapshts (barons) and opshto (knights) rule the surrounding smaller towns and farming estates across the fertile countryside in his name and they and their people remain fiercely loyal to the crown. Rath rewards that loyalty with a unified effort to keep Khitus's decline at arm's length. Chief among the ahapshts is lifelong friend Jeffery of Kalendor, married to the kral's niece. Kral and ahapsht often ride and hunt together on the royal grounds with a detachment of guard cavalry. To the

commoners, Rath and Jeffery are charismatic, generous, and kind. Through their efforts, the Gathite mini-kingdom holds the wider world's grief at bay... or so it would seem.

The Hidden Darkness

Despite other successful efforts to the contrary, Khitus's decline most definitely has a deleterious effect upon Gathush. The number of human refugees arriving overwhelms the city's food and water supplies. Refugees vastly outnumber available shelters, forcing many of them into ramshackle camp housing outside the city. The surrounding agricultural output is in decline, affected by the general change in climate despite being so far north. Times are growing darker, but Sovetnik, or Minister, Tyus Blunkt intentionally deceives Kral Rath, Ahapsht Jeffery, and most of the populace.

Blunkt takes it upon himself to keep Gathush's diminishing stature and resources out of the public eye and away from the kral's attention. To accomplish this, he engages in a variety of mundane plans, such as hiding the largest refugee camps further away from the city and behind hills or forests. He falsifies reports on grain supplies and water resources, ensures the sick and starving remain in the countryside, holds treasury reports completely under his purview, and gathers the kingdom's remaining riches closely around the kral and court. But even with all those keen efforts, the Sovetnik could never mask the city's true desperation without magical aid.

Magical help comes from Blunkt's pact with Griage Ensore, a Rikar witch of considerable power. Her spells over the general population ease their unrest and keep their minds conditioned. She asks only for sufficient slaves to keep on her chain to absorb sorcery's foul wrath. With her aid, Blunkt hides the harsher necessities of his task, such as secret prisons and banishments, all enforced by a dire militia existing within the city's regular troops but secretly loyal only to the Sovetnik and his cause.

Together, these forces paint a more pleasant picture of Gathush than what really exists. How long the kral and his ahapshts remain so fooled has yet to be seen, but cracks are appearing. Already, Kral Rath suffers nightmares that Griage Ensore cannot erase from his sleeping mind. The troubling images of a bleak future lead to sleepless nights and days of nagging doubts and ever more questions.

Norden

North of the Jaggedlands and south of the Kneeding Hills lie the impressive stone buildings and strong walls of Norden. For many historic and extant reasons,

the Makadan Nordennan learn to fight from an early age, embracing the Kod, and they are a warrior culture through and through. This echoes in their city's design of stark, stout homes of functional stone architecture. They disdain cosmetic "frillery and decadence" they see in other Khitan cities, most especially Teleris. A Norden saying oft repeated is, "When a hot wind blows, don't fear, it's only the jabber from Teleris."

The Nordennan claim to fear no creature that lives on Khitus, though no dragons have ever wandered near Norden for them to test their mettle against. Some proof for their strength lies in their use of massive trisaur as beasts of burden. Among the few acceptable decorations in Norden are the skulls and bones of slain animals, shown as once-living records of a family's or a group's prowess. The Chief's Hall has a massive entry, its double doors crafted from interlocked and petrified trisaur bones. Above the doors looms a colossal trisaur skull, eye sockets ever-burning with huge brands.

Sounds of industry ever echo from within Norden's walls. The citizens here make excellent military-grade goods—strong weapons and quality armor, reinforced carts or chariots, and even more durable hides and clothes—from many creatures they hunt locally. Their weapons and vehicles also see use against human foes, as bandits regularly raid Norden from their caves and hidden camps among the Thalos Hills. Expect to check your steel weapons at the gates, though, as Norden takes no chances with the Iron Virus.

Ormas

Ormas is a city on the brink of revolution. In this far-western Prajalu city, suffering from the Great Reprisals that decimated its royalty, a decadent human culture has pushed its people too far, and now the city struggles with murder, violence, robbery, vice and nearly every manner of extreme excess. Ormas is humankind's inhumanity to itself writ large and an example of why people should never let a marauder become a leader with promises of change.

The chieftain upanya Khanik Thyn offered people glimmers of hope that he could change a city built on the backs and blood of thousands of slaves. Khanik fomented dissent against a fair but avaricious ruler, unleashing a firestorm of long-suppressed hatred that raged through the brown stone streets. This unrest ruined several city wards and led to nearly a thousand deaths in one bloody rampage-fuelled night. Promising a new era for the people of Ormas, he vowed to stop any from threatening "the new rule of Ormas." True

to his word, the brutal warlord publicly beheaded the ruler and locked up or executed nearly anyone linked to the old government. Before the crowds realized that he led them not to their freedom, Khanik Thyn crowned himself in the seat of power and used his marauders to cement his hold on power through force. After one full day of Khanik on the throne, several hundred more died while "threatening the new rule of Ormas."

In the past twelve years, Khanik has ruled with an iron fist so tight that the people teeter again near their breaking points. Whatever catalyst may set them off is unknown, but any change will cost Khanik and his followers much. The people of Ormas sought freedom, only to endure his spiteful reign and his transformation of the city into a haven for marauders.

The Black Cloaks are Khanik's secret police and their primary foes at present are hidden rebels collectively known as the Spear of Freedom. They are an offshoot of the Unnata, or tribal Council of First Sons. Rumors tell that the group's leader is a woman who lost her entire family to Khanik's betrayal. Less than a handful know she was once a Black Cloak herself, which makes Khanik's betrayal more painful and her revenge sweeter. She and her rebels do all they can to make life in Ormas miserable for Khanik and his followers. Her hand is open to brave warriors who might assist her cause.

Pacheodon

One of the largest and most prosperous cities, Pacheodon rests in an ideal location, making it a hub among many trade routes in a lush land. Pacheodon is less a melting pot of cultures than a bubbling cauldron of intrigue among the many Khitan races living here. A three-tiered city of wonders designed long ago by pachyesh architects and engineers, the foreign ward is the smallest and rests atop this massive step-pyramid. That ward alone houses courts and official embassies for dignitaries of other city-states. The largest ward at the bottom is home to the pachyaur and much of the caravan-related trades and warehouses. The central ward houses an eclectic mix of traders, slavers, merchants and crafters from all races.

Every five years, the city's populace elects three beings—one pachyaur and two of other races—to serve as representative ward rulers and collectively as a triumvirate over the city at large. The humans here are primarily Chindi, but liberally mixed with other tribes. Each ward maintains its own separate and standing contingents or guilds for guard and police protections, waste removal, taxation and mercantile control, and funerary

rites and rituals. Thus, pursuit or punishment for crimes in one ward sometimes can be avoided by fleeing to another ward, even though the triumvirate tries to coordinate and keep police actions unified among all wards. As a result, many thieves of all races operate in the city, but only those in the central ward are organized into guilds. It's possible to have an item stolen from you at the top of the city, and then sold to you in the big market on the bottom.

The city's most famous landmark rests in the ground tier—the cavernous building known as the Hall of Whispered Memories. Its unique mix of acoustics and psychically resonant stone provides a curious side effect to the building. One can whisper memories to the stonework and the building records the whispers for an eternity. The Pachyaur suggest its use for “younger races with candle-flicker memories to store your best stories and revisit them when you are much older.” A Keeper of the Whisper always stands on duty to make sure that no larceny occurs and memories are not stolen.

Patnu

Patnu exists as it did in ages past of Khitus's history—a strongly martial Makadan city with its people counted amongst the finest Kod-trained warriors of Khitus. While the world around them changed and crumbled, the walls of Patnu remained strong and stalwart, like the hearts and minds of its population. Regimental order endures here while many other places tumble into chaos and decay. Men and women serve proudly in a rigid caste system, becoming fearsome combatants and unrivalled tacticians. When raiders strike against the

city's walls, they hold against ferocious assaults that would level another city. When thieves steal into the city to purloin and take from the people, they find a wily and disciplined shtuka-armed guard force ready to stop them.

Patnu, under its long-time leader, the Warlord Kral Jugursha, endures against the worst that Khitus has to offer, turning blades and plots away in equal measure. While few Patnuans realize it, this is a limbo existence doomed to failure as forces of entropy erode everything over time. Warlord Kral Jugursha resigns himself to the inevitable unseen by the rigid and regimented population and architecture: Patnu cannot grow, and thus it cannot prosper, and eventually it must die. The warlord sends out his soldiers into the wilderness to either conquer the chaos without or build new Patnuan colonies to preserve their martial culture after great Patnu finally falls.

Pavouk

In all of Khitus, there is no city quite like Pavouk and the people who dwell there. The citizenry may be human, primarily of Prajalu tribal origins, with human wants, needs and desires, but they share their city with tiny creatures that scurry, skitter and leave a lasting mark on their society. From the temples and grand halls, to the smallest home and dwelling, the spiders of Pavouk are integral to the giant city in every way.

Smaller spiders weave webs across the whole of Pavouk and over the years they have built a canopy across the open sky of the city, filtering and diffusing the harsh light from above. The webs are of such density (and,



some say, magical reinforcement) that only sandstorms and the fiercest tempests rend the canopy asunder. Pavouk's spiders and citizens live in harmony with each other. To harm a single thread, let alone an entire web or kill one of the spiders, is a serious offence and punished to the full extent of the law by the ruling council of eight. Most buildings in Pavouk have a domed roof and flat walls, open windows covered by very light layers of spider webs, as if the spiders know the desires of their cohabitants. The city's spiders are more conventional than the more dangerous mesachnat variety that can affect the mind (see Chapter 7).

The people of Pavouk know to keep indoors at night, when the lights are lit and the shadows come out. Shadows of giant spiders can be seen moving around the city come the dark, yet not a single inhabitant has ever seen one of those creatures and those humans or non-spiders caught outside without adequate protection have been found as desiccated husks of skin and bone come the morning... if found at all.

The city is constructed in several directions, resembling a large spider if viewed from above, each leg a major ward of this gigantic wonder. A wide, grey stone road connects the central part of the city (the spider's body) with its other wards (legs). The central city houses various governmental, educational and military buildings, including a court of laws and the prison. The eight legs (wards) of Pavouk are as follows: Merchant ward; Nayak (noble) ward; Warrior ward; Ward of the Mind; Temple ward; Rumu (poisoners) ward; Unnata (council) ward; and Svaramu (speaker's) ward.

Pharanor

Just north of the Deepshadow Mountains, the Attite city of Pharanor lies nestled between the Whitebone Wastes and Greywood. Pharanor seems spared many of the ravages of time and hostility that have ruined other Khitan cities. Its people, hard-working laborers and crafters, strive to ensure their city prospers. Plentiful game among the shadows of the Greywood keep people well fed, and resources from the nearby mountains and woods keep the city growing and in good repair. Pharanor has become well known as a place where one could learn an honest craft.

The city's solidity echoes in both its construction and its elected ruler, the Landeo (meaning 'grown' or 'lord protector'). The current Landeo Okkas ensures stability and growth for Pharanor. His hyatchal-armed (short spear) city guards, known as Coinshields for their golden round shields, are as much a trained police force as a garrisoned military squadron. They have so far managed to drive back the marauders and their raiding caravans, keeping Pharanor and its people safe behind thick stone walls and strong wooden barriers.

An ancient Pharanorn Rav, their bearded philosophers, discovered long ago that the timber and wood used to construct many of Pharanor's buildings contained a peculiar fire-resistant sap. Naturally hard to ignite, the sap actively suppressed fire when mixed with refined pharaseen ore. For more than four generations, Pharanor's outer walls and prominent buildings have



been coated in such a mixture, giving the architecture a polished look and protecting the city from the torches and flames of raiders seeking to sack the city.

Rhojess

Only the masts of ancient Makadan ships poke through the shrouded dust like grasping fingers where a bountiful body of swirling water once lay. Where the merchant princes held a powerful domain, the once-great city of Rhojess is a wasted shadow of its former self. Layers of silt and dust cake the walls of most buildings, slowly burying all that remains. Many city wards are accessible by only the bravest souls, the shifting sands making many death traps. In the central city, four still-proud families rule amid the nigh-ruined buildings, with more efforts put to keeping the desert at bay than any other tasks. Raiders and hunters of all kinds pass around and through Rhojess, doing as they please while remnants of the merchant princes keep tenuous holds on power.

Life is hard here for the remaining humans who call the city their home. Crime and poverty are amicable bedfellows and the spiral of decay causes more suffering daily. Rhojess has endured the countless wars waged by the merchant princes in the past. The city reflects this in its crumbled and cracked architecture, many ancient buildings broken and open to the harshness of Khitus's magnificent sky. Price wars are also common in the city and the prices for goods change almost daily, as the remaining merchant houses vie for customers among an increasingly disgruntled populace.

Rhojess is the site of the Raetann's oldest guildhall, a well-maintained building in a crumbling city. Much of the Water Guild's activity is coordinated from here. Ironically, heshel peddlers, dealers in the thirst-avoiding water spice, are common in the city's remaining market places.

Shomik

Folk in Khitus's dark underbelly call the old Attite city of Shomik the City of Knives or the City of Death. Most venture among its wooden buildings and tight alleyways only to exchange coins for hiring those skilled in assassination and espionage. It is possible to walk into the city, talk to a man, and see him dead in the same night. There are dozens of powerful crime lords that treat each ward as a self-contained enclave, where rules change as quickly as allegiances. Most tribal authority has given over to these.

At the top of Shomik's power structures sit a number of major crime lords—all in Shomik are wary of these figures:

- **Jorvik:** The Master Assassin himself, is a fabled figure, rarely glimpsed and spoken of only in whispers. Some doubt that Jorvik even exists, save as a screen to hide the “game of knives’ true players.” Those skeptical tattlers die quickly and mysteriously in the spiral streets and vast towers of Shomik.
- **Branik Kel:** This former slave was freed when Tukka Falk fell and became the ruthless and most ambitious crime lord in Shomik by murdering and stealing his way to the top. Branik Kel has a strong grip on the city's trade fees collection apparatus, and his guild controls all smuggling and much of the thievery that happens in Shomik. Kel takes generous percentages of gold or goods from most caravan operators and traders, living in the lap of luxury in the opulent Ward of Gems.
- **Shona and Rusik Vak:** These twins rule the Ward of Smoke with almost invisible, benevolent grace, their disfavor displayed by the corpses of hanged or garroted transgressors left in public places. The Vak sisters influence or partly control the adjacent Wards of Wheel and Whip through paramours and other agents. With a spy network including at least two Chroniclers and, some whisper, more than a few sarhaks (psychic practitioners), they have a better grasp of news within the city than any other group or persons. The two women plot to either steal Branik Kel's wealth or his position atop the crime lords.

Syradar

The Kneeding Hills and the Karch Desert are the home territories the city of Syradar. The Syradari comprise six once-nomadic Attite warrior sub-tribes that settled the simple desert fort that once housed the Legion of the Dunes, expanding it into a great city. The people of Syradar understand and accept the harsh, unforgiving desert life. They expect and plan against the constant threats of desert marauders, slavers, or monsters. They know their homelands in the Old Countries like their weathered hands and can vanish amid the sand dunes, remaining hidden from all but the most expert trackers. The Syradari are not only consummate warriors, well trained in the hyatchal and grotto, but shrewd traders too, so they have created an open market in their fortress city.

Syradar is a massive stone sprawl of long walls and square towers with a surrounding wall that protects those inside it from the worst that Khitus dares to throw at them. The elder Attite tribe among Syradar's six founding sub-tribes rules the city, and their Trung, or

'venerable' leader is an even-handed ruler who makes sure that all who dwell in Syradar are treated fairly. She is not beyond using slavery to punish those who break the law and many outsiders discover this only after the shackles close.

Teleris

The former City of Scholars in days long past, Makadan-settled Teleris lost its status and goodwill long ago. Any aware Khitans shun Telerisian scholars and lawmakers along with their city. Teleris is the butt of many a joke and the focus of much bile across the Old Countries. Behind its partly fortified walls and stockades, the scholars and their ilk now cower like frightened children, reduced at best to being rumormongers and tone-deaf bards rather than learned scholars and sages of any worth. Outside its walls, many blame Teleris for every ill that has come to pass, and few argue against that assessment.

Teleris prospered greatly on the ignorance of others and the blind faith among the Old Countries. The statesmen, laws, and order that city offered in the absence of the Dragon Kings became a comfort to many but eventually revealed many empty promises as time wound on. Yet for such a city of learning and understanding, dismissive of the martial tribal tradition of the Kod, their inevitable downfall and failure should not have come as a surprise. As Khitan lands turned savage, many laws and the social order broke down. Without martial strength of arms to back them, Teleris discovered that bestial nature and strength more often overwhelms keen minds.

The failures of Teleris to predict, outthink, or halt the changes in weather patterns or the following tides of marauders revealed the limits of their much-vaunted minds. Many angry folk from many places who once counted on "Telerisian wisdom and sagacity" rioted and sacked many sectors of the city. The Grand Library fell in flames, engulfed by anger and snuffed out by ignorance, its fires spreading and destroying more than a fifth of the city.

Any current restorative hope for these scholars now rests in the forgotten magic they currently unearth and research from long-blocked deep vaults beneath the Great Library's ruins. While few have direct understanding of the magical knowledge they have found, including the bearded Dramidgian wizards who've inserted themselves into the process, they believe it will ignite resurgence to their rule and wisdom.

Torqal

Grand Torqal, the jewel of Prajalu cities, as it's been locally known for sixteen generations, is a great example of architectural design, flawless construction, and maze-like streets, home to a contemplative rulership with a magic-minded people. While not a city of sorcery and magic directly, it is one of the few Khitan cities with strong ties to those forces. Magic infuses a rudimentary sentience into every grey-white stone of Torqal. Since the Great Reprisals, Torqal the city chooses its upanya rulers wisely and makes sure strong-willed and civic-minded souls receive the call to power. The city watches over those who protect it and punishes those who work against it. Those who find favor in Torqal—the government and highborn lords and ladies, as well as their Rakar sorcerer hirelings—gain the best that the city can provide for them. Their paths and travels suffer no delays; their homes feel safer; their dreams stay placid and calm, never disturbed. Those who dare to mock Torqal or its people find themselves ever wandering, lost among back alleys or places dangerous to venture. While a minority among the Torqallin, rumu poisoners and ruthless Rakar make their homes here, ever seeking victims to pare down to useful component parts or become targets for sorcery's wrath.

There is a sinister truth about Torqal that the city works to keep hidden—it can only survive by the blood and will of those who enjoy their lives within. Once the city senses that a native body cannot survive due to age, disease, or injury, it takes steps to ease their passing and nourish itself in the process. Often, gravel and stone slowly cover a corpse laid out on the ground (or any surface connected to Torqal's stones), sealing it within a stone burial lozenge that slides into the ground. Once subsumed, the body and all its elements and fluids become part of Torqal and sustain its magical semi-sentience.

There is a sealed tower in the city center known to the locals as the Tower of the Trisaur. Many rumors suggest incredible treasures—and even more unbelievable dangers—lie inside the tower. Unknown to any, the tower holds what can be considered the central intellect of the city itself. Over many years, the city has been growing a physical body from its magic and a mix of stone and flesh. When it succeeds in creating a viable form, it hopes to one day rule its denizens directly as Torqal Incarnate.

Tukka Falk

This city once belonged to the Watu Pachyaur, but no longer. None fully know what robbed an entire city of its living people. All that is known for certain is that dawn



revealed a city strewn with the bodies of its dead. Some whispered the Stranger of Brokkan wreaked his wicked magic there, though those who were there know otherwise. They had long heard whispers of a group of clan-destine human rebels who longed to break the shackles of the slavers.

Slavery was rife in Tukka Falk, as in many Watu settlements, and this city grew from ten years of deliberate planning. By chance, the slaves found a way to propagate poisons into the food and water of their captors and slavers. The fast-acting magical poison spread like wildfire and struck all Pachyaur down over a few short hours. Once the slaves escaped their bonds, they unleashed their vengeance upon their weakened former masters.

Tukka Falk is now a Chindi human city, and nonhumans enter only under strict observation, though natives now hunt down and imprison or kill any elephantine Pachyaur on sight. The city retains its original architecture designed for the large elephantaurs, and seeing humans against its massive scale just underscores the differences between the two species and makes the pachyesh architecture look much bigger than it really is.

Wani Chereet

The Prajalu-dominated city of Wani Chereet lies well to the west of the New Dune Wastelands and slopes down the side of a rolling hill. Society's movers and shakers live in the large stone and thick wood buildings at the top of the city closest to a freely available but guarded water source. This water source is one of the largest fountains in the city, and takes the form of a giant conical structure down which water flows into a deep recessed bowl. A very thin, crisscrossed netting stretches over the bowl, keeping detritus and other scum from the water. The fresh water seeps through several layers of porous stone and takes on certain local minerals that remove impurities from the liquid as well. Large stone spigots with wooden taps provide a way to measure out the water.

In Wani Chereet, a building's degree of decoration displays the wealth or prosperity of its occupants. The uppermost buildings are all of fine make and have a distinct angular look to them, with thick glass windows and heavy shutters. Access to the fountain is strictly controlled by the Raetann, the Water Guild, whose blessings must be sought and whose whims and edicts must be served.

Further down the slope there are the dwellings, shops, and warehouses for merchants, crafters and other takaku

laborers of Wani Chereet. While not as opulent as those buildings higher up, they are all functional. There's also a covered market that sells many local crafted goods and produce ranging from wild game to freshly-caught fish. As the city sprawls downward towards the lower areas, the houses change to nothing but flimsy shacks. Here crime, disease and sickness run rampant.

A number of nondescript stone structures house the administrative warrens of the Gare Atessa, from which their Exhalt direct their organization's efforts across the world. One of these is their magnificent Great Library of Atsrath. Chroniclers come and go from Wani Chereet, seldom interacting with the city's other denizens.

Wharia

Before Khitus changed, the Great Lake glimmered with abundant fish and saw some of the finest catches known across the Old Countries. In those days, a south-shore Makadan fishing village grew into a sprawling town and eventually became Wharia, a strong city in its own right ruled by the Sovetnik Council of Three. Those halcyon days of growth and prosperity vanished along with the waters of the Great Lake in more recent years.

Wharia rests on the southeastern edges of the Great Barren Lake, a shadow of its former glory. The city now seems a spoiled fruit in a dusty bowl—once beautiful but now rotting inside and out. Its vistas reflect its falling status, as once-bright rooftops and lacquered wood decorations fall in disrepair or are buried beneath clumsily constructed hovels built everywhere to house an increasing refugee population.

Citizens and their alleged Kral rulers can barely scramble together enough food from caravans and other sources to feed people, so many starve in the poorer quarters of the city. Desperation and deprivation drives many to larceny or other activities best left unsaid. The once-proud people are now a wretched collection of human detritus, scum and desolate villainy. Plagues now seem the norm on a high-annual basis here.

Yet among all this squalor and disease, some attempt to pull the city back together despite itself. There exists a small group of healers under the direction of the tribal cuvarna, or 'well custodian,' trying to stabilize the poorest quarters and remove the sources of disease. They save as many as they can, using various psychic powers to heal people or repair their homes. The struggle is an ongoing battle with others in power, as the Council or its agents often seize any food and money provided for the poor. Wharia may be a good place for heroes looking to make a change.

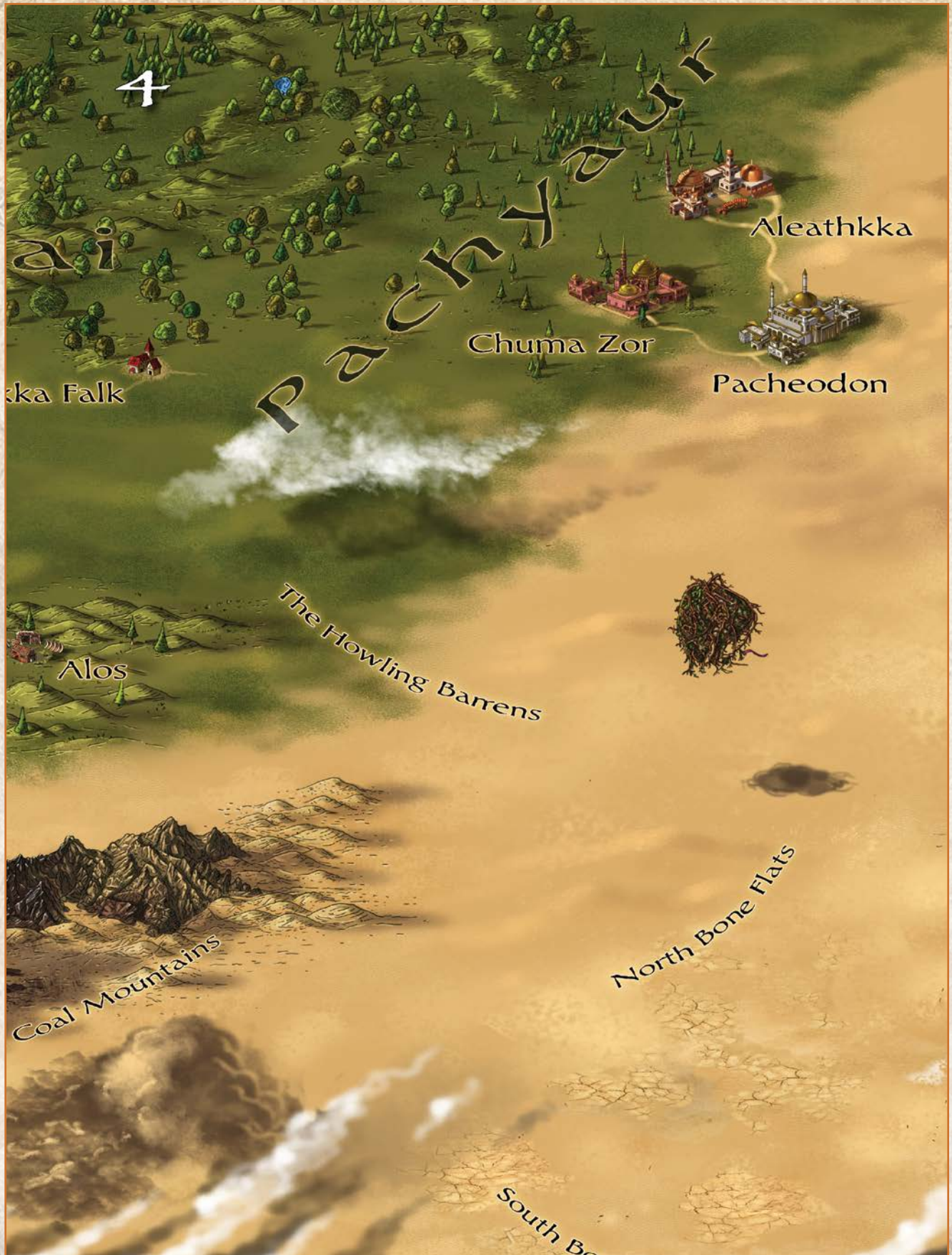
Chapter 4: The Cities







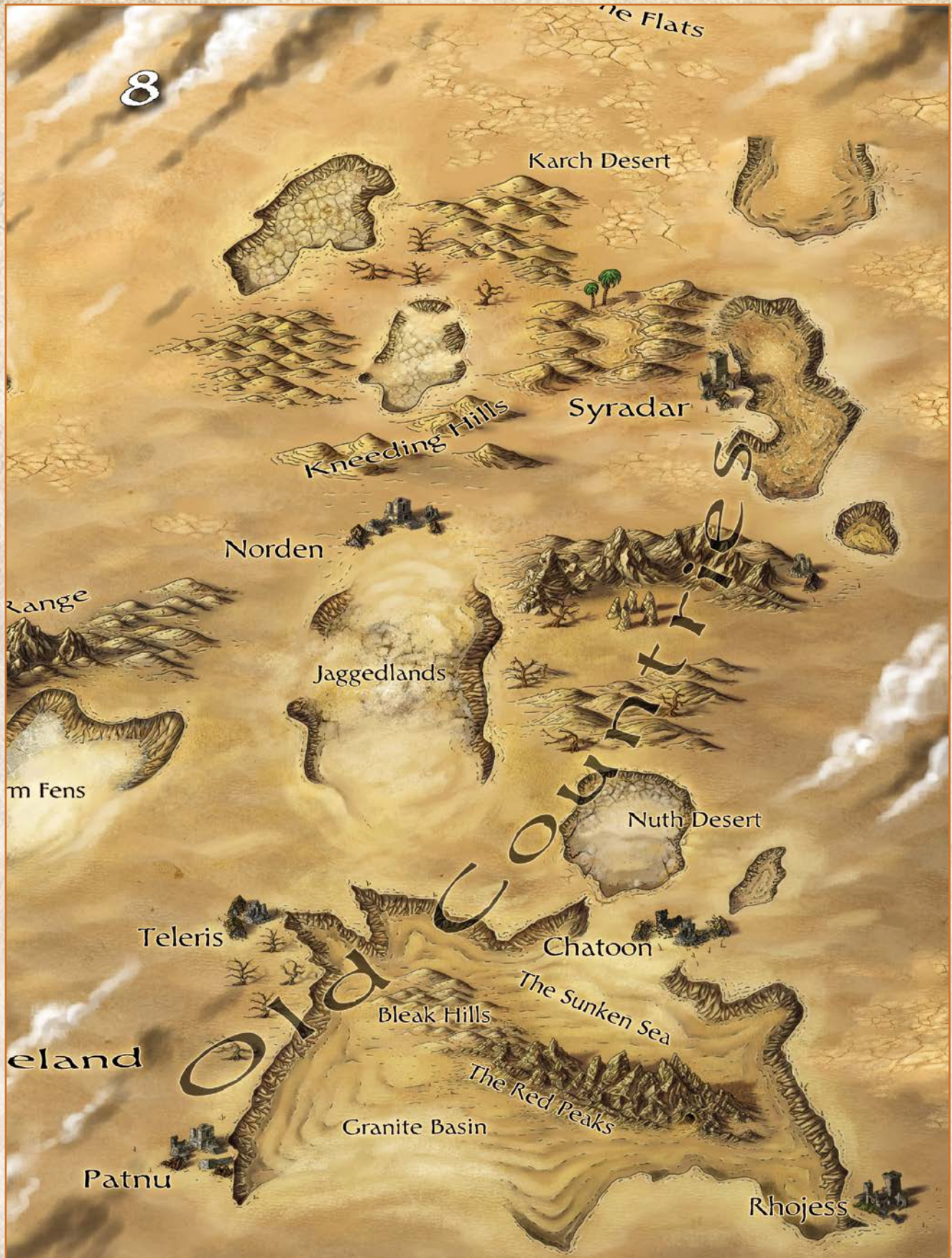












Chapter 5: traversing the wastelands

Arid Khitus faces extraordinary changes and challenges in the face of wanton plunder. Central to its decline is the theft of water on an epic scale. Vital rainfall passes whole regions by, swept away from the southern lands by witchcraft. Seas drain away in magical whirlpools that seemingly lead nowhere. Depleted rivers and streams trickle to mud and eventual dust among their banks. The sun beats down on rock and sand instead of its former rich earth, grasslands, and crops.

For now, the northern hemisphere and equatorial regions remain mostly untouched, but dark, arid days lie ahead for them, too. In the southlands, the destruction has reached crisis levels, leaving once-fertile lands virtually uninhabitable.

Who or what is behind this plundering of Khitan waters? Rumors abound and none say for certain, though many dare to point accusatorial fingers at the Black Fortress and its foul agents the Bev al-Khim. Regardless of cause or blame, can the evaporation be stopped, reversed, or even slowed?

For now, adventurers must contend with the newly parched lands of the southern reaches, where desperation meets savagery beneath a white-hot sun.

Natural Geography & Terrain

To the uninitiated, a desert is a desert. In practice, crossing these lands and surviving their rigors depends upon some understanding of the variance among different arid landscapes. One's life often depends upon it.

Dunes

Endless mountains of soft sand, these are the deserts of romantic tales and what most northerners think of when they hear of a desert. In windswept places, dunes pile high like enormous hills, restricting the extent of vision, but elsewhere they remain relatively flat. The soft, shift-

ing sands make improvements difficult: roads and tracks are easily blown over and lost; fields and structures get inexorably buried beneath sliding or blowing grit.

Save for creatures whose wide feet are adapted to sand, walking is especially difficult, slowing any pace to half of normal, and fatigue builds more quickly, forcing numerous halts. Sand shoes for both men and animals are common among those who travel the dunes; their simple construction attaches to shoes or feet to spread one's weight out over a broader area. Such devices allow three-quarters of normal speed, but are especially awkward when the terrain changes (which happens often in the wastelands) or during battle. Thus, easily donned or discarded sand shoes are favored over sturdier constructs.

Areas of exposed rock can make passage through the dunes easier, but these come and go sometimes daily among the shifting sands. Where jagged stretches of stones peek up permanently above the dunes, there are many warrens and caves ideal for ambushes or shelter alike. Few caves remain completely unoccupied here, though, and danger lurks in their darkness as often as salvation.

Boulder Fields

Vast plains littered with boulders are now common in the arid wastes. Basalt and granite rocks darken sun-baked earth with uneven fields of black, brown, and umber. Boulder fields tend to be fairly flat, so visibility is far, though there are exposed rocky areas here, too, that offer some cover and variation. Travel can be as difficult as upon the dunes, if not more so. In many cases, wheeled carts and wagons cannot traverse the stone-strewn surface at all without risking damage or destruction for the attempt. Men and animals crossing these fields suffer bruised shins and twisted ankles, where the footing is loose and narrow between stones barely wide enough to allow a sure step. Tiny but dangerous creatures—snakes and scorpions, ready to strike at passers-by—abound here, easily hidden among the labyrinth of fist- to melon-sized stones.

Dust Bowls

Dust blows away from where there were once fields and meadows. Winds now carry the loose, desiccated topsoil, depositing it in deep layers upon the land. Where the dust takes hold, enormous bowls of it result in a worthless barren area that is difficult and dangerous to cross. Footing is uncertain, as any foot sinks to the ankle, knee or even deeper before finding firm ground beneath. The unstable ground reduces mobility to a quarter of normal travel speeds here, if passage even remains possible at all. Travel is impossible in its deepest places, where dust might rise over a standing human's head. These or even deeper pockets can swallow a wanderer entirely, suffocating him quickly without immediate aid. The slightest breeze blows dusty silt into the air, clogging the eyes and throat.

There is one respite among the dust bowls that makes some skirt their edges in travel: snakes and vermin avoid them since they cannot stay atop the silt and cannot breathe beneath its surface. Still, there are other creatures that dwell here, sticking their heads out to catch a breath while searching for prey.

Salt Flats

Brilliant white salt lies in cracked, jagged crystals along the parched ground. Sunlight reflects painfully into any eyes without protection. While mostly in powder or crystalline form, salt does collect into larger clumps, making the flats akin to crossing a hazardous boulder field. The blowing salt gets everywhere, and any metal gear so encrusted rusts abnormally fast without care. All living creatures shun salt wastes, but rumors suggest they harbor all manner of ghosts, specters, and creatures that can embrace its lifelessness. Such tales keep most men from venturing too far into them without sufficient cause. Most would prefer to travel around the salt flats rather than risk the frightening denizens within.

Cracked Sea Floors

In the deeper southlands, dried and deeply cracked sea beds lie exposed where there were once seas above them. The terrain here is very difficult, as the ground buckles and curls in enormous sheets of dried clay and mud, sea floors never before exposed to full sunlight. These petrified waves of earth make movement and vision nearly impossible. Other obstructions include the wreckage of once-sunken ships or the dried bone fields of dead sea creatures, jagged spines and ribcages crackling underfoot or looming larger than a thakal and diverting one's path.

The uneven ground that was once the ocean floor can hide grottos and caverns deep beneath the arid surface. A prize at the bottom could be shelter or an untouched spring, but any wandering creatures finding such prizes often take up residence and defend them with bared fang and claw or worse.

Exposed again to the sun are the souls or remains of long-dead mariners who previously lay contented after their watery ends. They hate that their tombs are laid bare beneath the blazing sun. A sailor once found comfort believing his spirit might swim away to eternal rest with alongside the Daragkark Quanian or congregate beneath Tharain's watchful eyes among the broken rocks with its own kind. With those two powers long departed, a Khitan mariner's afterlife is uncertain. Give wide berth to any exposed wrecks on the cracked sea floors, for many who drowned with it haunt its timbers, thirsty for vengeance and any moisture—blood or tears—from the living.

Natural Flora

As harsh as they are, Khitan deserts are hardly devoid of life. In fact, except for the dunes and salt flats and places recently buried by land storms, most areas support some plant-life and an ecosystem of bugs and tiny creatures that thrive upon them. Few of these have direct impact upon adventurers, but they do lend color to an otherwise bleak landscape.

Trees

- The kuhjalo or “narrow leaf” tree grows as tall as 15 feet along a jagged, black trunk, flowering yellow blossoms just once per year.
- The syella or “Khitan oak” stretches 30 feet, all its round leaves gathered into a tight ball at the very top.
- The slightly smaller eshwell or “white thorn” dares to hang its branches and leaves low to the ground, protected by a deadly toxin on slender needles.

Bushes

- The *guplam* or “blood bush” startles some with its ruddy, bifurcated leaves.
- Hugging the ground closely is the *shevasa* or “desert blanket,” tight clumps of which provide homes for many tiny rodents and lizards.
- The brown-leaved *thucage* or “hedge” grows dense branches and leaves that only insects can penetrate, often creating inadvertent hedgerows without aid.

Cacti

The Khitan wastelands boast wide varieties of cacti, each one defended by imposing arrangements of painful needles.

- The *farush* or “emperor cactus” sends several stalks up from a central root over a solid-rock base. Beneath its near-black shafts, this plant exudes a stone-dissolving acid that slowly carves out space for roots, eventually crafting a rock-encased subterranean cistern beneath its many spikes.
- The *fedethu* or “barrel cactus” is especially thick and grows taller than most humans. They split open when they die but remain standing for many years, making a field of them an ideal place to hide or lie in ambush.
- The narrow and especially dense *wurya* or “stone cactus” grows roughly nine feet tall and is a pale grey color rather than a variety of green. Any broken pieces remain jagged and sharp, and many desert wanderers use them for impromptu weapons or permanently affix them to pikes or spears.
- For an imbibing wanderer, liquor made from *yeltor* cactus rind is very strong, a pungent favorite among the wanderers. Many favor this drink due to its simplicity—it ferments merely by being placed inside a near-empty water skin and exposed to the sun every day for two weeks—though distillation of the same can make vastly better spirits.

Succulents

These plants have thicker, fleshier parts in which they store water to survive, but each has its own way to protect that moisture from those who would devour it.

- The *fruquar* or “gray blossom” is a skull-sized plant with a thick, fibrous shell difficult to penetrate without a machete and a strong arm.
- The *meno kwish* or “stink plant” is similarly sized with a thin shell, but cracking it sprays foul-smelling oil that resists efforts to clean it off of any it sprays.
- Tiny *roushes* are fist-sized succulents that withdraw into the ground when touched, requiring someone to dig them out of often difficult, rocky terrain.

Metal Scarcity

Khitan miners know the depths of their world well. Their Classic Age forebears delved deep beneath the mountains to dig out gold, silver, copper, and tin. Smiths forged these ores into all manner of metal tools, weap-

ons, and ornaments. By the middle to late Classic Age, they mastered all-purpose bronze, the alloy that served the world’s many nations well for a thousand years until the advent of iron. From those forges sparked the beginnings of Khitus’s present-day manufacture of steel, the metal that equips her armies, shoes her beasts, and girds her architecture.

In modern times, however, steel grows scarce, fetching more than three times its typical price, those costs increasing even more depending on locations and demand. In truth, steel is nearly unaffordable today, making many common folk turn back to the use of easily worked and readily available bronze, despite its inferiority to iron and steel. Hoarders keep close eyes on any steel weapons and tools they have left, ever watchful for thieves or other threats.

Steel grows scarce on Khitus for two disparate reasons: the keepers of the Black Fortress are buying it up for their mysterious and never-explained purposes; and an odd rust-like affliction runs rampant across the world, a plague that weakens or destroys the very iron it infects.

The Iron Virus

The iron virus affects all iron and steel, ruining it slowly once affected. The virus acts like rust with no apparent “agent” needed to activate it. Sanding or scraping its white residue from a metal surface slows its progress, but eventually the entire piece will succumb and crumble to pale powder. The virus transfers readily by touch—battling foes with afflicted blades almost certainly contaminates any weapons or armor involved. However, even proximity or exposure to air can bring the disease.

Most lock away their valuable steel items to protect them, but even these may be found half consumed anyway. Affected items gradually weaken, becoming brittle in a matter of days and turning to useless dust in short weeks. A master blacksmith can rework the iron or steel if it has not completely disintegrated, but the process is difficult and not guaranteed to succeed.

Affected iron or steel is no longer magnetic; that is the test often applied by wary buyers to ensure their purchase is not already afflicted steel. Agents of the Black Fortress, the Pale Ones, or Bev al-Khim, carry graphite filings with them to test any metal for its magnetism. They are especially wary of iron and steel, testing it carefully so it does not touch and infect their stores.

Iron and steel are the only metals so affected by this new affliction. Platinum and electrum exist on Khitus, and they can be forged as hard and reliable as steel, but both are rare and inherently expensive. Eventually, the relative value of steel will rise to meet that of platinum

and electrum, though not quite yet. Anyone forging platinum or electrum into tools and weapons does so purely out of need. Gold and silver exist but remain in use more as decoration or coin, given their rarity, value, and poor strength in comparison to steel objects. Copper and tin remain abundant, making their alloy bronze a reliable, common metal used for everything, and reliant only on a sufficiently stable civilization where it can be mined, smelted, and forged. In an ever-widening swath of Khitus, many now lack the infrastructure or materials to do this. They turn to obsidian, bone, and chitin substitutes for their tools, weapons, and fittings, all easily gathered and fashioned by the unskilled.

The iron virus's origins are the subject of much speculation. Most accept that all the world's iron came from the body of an ancient iron god; thus, the virus stems from that god's demise. Others suggest a change more essentially psionic in nature that perhaps the Dragon Kings held at bay during their reigns but which runs rampant in their absence. Regardless of the cause, the cure is at hand, albeit in an unexpectedly dangerous locale: a remote valley in the depths of the Krikis Hivelands.

Ganshyer, the Black Steel

Ganshyer is a new Khitan alloy of steel and "bright lode," a brilliantly reflective metal dug exclusively from a single immense deposit at the bottom of an unmapped valley somewhere in the Krikis Hivelands. What little bright lode exists outside the "bug lands" comes from the corpses of Krikis warriors or traded willingly by the few Krikis who know human languages and approach in the folded-claw gesture of peace.

Alone, bright lode is a brittle metal that is difficult to work. However, smelting it in combination with steel creates the black metal called ganshyer, which is equivalent to steel in strength but immune to the iron virus. Ganshyer resists the virus completely even with only a 10 percent alloy, so even a small amount of bright lode can protect far larger quantities of vulnerable steel. Those who know how to create the alloy jealously guard their valuable skills and the wealth earned through them. The Krikis seem to have no knowledge of ganshyer, and most humans prefer they never learn of it. Regardless, the human demand for bright lode will no doubt make them curious.

As far as anyone knows, the Krikis hold an unwitting monopoly on bright lode, which drives many efforts to either wrest control of it from them or initiate diplomatic relations with the strange, alien society. Their "Megha Stone," the rich deposit from which all bright lode is mined, cannot be easily reached by outsiders. No known non-Krikis has viewed it and lived to tell the tale.

Bright lode and its alloy ganshyer offer a promise of great wealth, as the most sought-after materials on Khitus, at present. No city, merchant prince, or caravan master has yet laid claim as the material's predominant concentration. Quiet speculation suggests the first to do so may come to dominate the entire world.

Persistent Dangers

The rigors of the wastelands chill brave men's hearts. Staying alive there demands more than carrying enough water. Each area and each danger has a unique way of leaving its marks upon an adventure or encounter.

Dust Wells

Dust wells gather and fill a rut or ditch, making them appear solid. They are a clear hazard to ground travel. Shallow wells can twist an ankle or break a leg, whether man or beast. Deeper wells can submerge victims in an instant, trapping someone beneath its surface where both breathing and escape are especially difficult. Dust wells are among the most dangerous yet common features of the open wastelands, claiming victims unfamiliar with the local terrain. Intentionally dug or built dust wells are very common defenses, gouged out to protect a camp or well and rarely refilled with solid earth after construction.

Mud Geysers

Moisture hides beneath the surface of the wastelands, collecting in deep shafts and vents that reach far underground. They are especially common near the Pock and the Scab. Baked by the relentless Khitan sun above and the roiling near-surface lava flows below, the resultant mud eventually boils and unleashes its tremendous energies in the only direction available to it—straight up. Geysers gather energy over time—between a day and a week, depending on the size of the deposit—before expending their towering gouts of boiling-hot mud. Some of these natural geysers are obvious, marked by steaming, bubbling pools and ringed by accumulations of mud and clay. Some can be dangerously hidden beneath otherwise unremarkable terrain.

Geysers erupt with little or no warning and enough of a blast to knock a man off his feet or topple a wagon at the very least. The largest eruptions can spray several tons of mud over a wide area, enough to bury unwary man-sized creatures beneath scalding layers of mud. Far more dangerous than the mud is the heat that scorches unprotected flesh to the bone. Where there is a

single geyser, conditions exist for many others, and they often occur in wide fields with a dozen or more near-simultaneous eruptions. Unfortunately for the parched wanderer, it is difficult to harvest any of a geyser's precious moisture before it sinks back into the earth or evaporates into the dry air.

Quicksand

A danger in any sandy region, quicksand is hard to detect and harder to escape. Natural quicksand is a mixture of sand, clay, and water that, on the surface, seems exactly like the terrain around it. By the time one has stepped in it, though, it is nearly too late. Without assistance, victims eventually sink beneath the surface and suffocate or drown. Animals are equally at risk, and many thakal have met a similar doom, though few quicksand patches can engulf an entire elephant, colosadant, or trisaur; these become stuck and take an enormous collective effort to rescue.

An old Makadan proverb says, "One man's peril is another's profit," and a patch of quicksand holds nearly every treasure that has ever sunken into it. Profit can be found in them, from coins and gems to arms and armor. Retrieving it all is merely a matter of excavation that endangers no one if carefully approached. Ambitious miners make a living this way, seeking patches (via coin or scouts) and then setting upon them with laborers using shovels, buckets, and hoists. While some patches turn up nothing, miners garner enough profits to continue these practices.

Silent Burial

The wastelands shift quietly through the night. Even gentle winds gather the sands in drifts against anything that will hold them in place. Travel delays occur for many every morning, as they need to dig out and shake clean any equipment. It is common for a tent or awning to be completely buried in soft sand over the course of just a few hours. Often this can be an aid, hiding tiny dwellings from predators. However, dangers occur when someone injured or weakened cannot dig out of the sands. It is not uncommon for men sleeping in the open to be buried alive, giving their lives up peacefully to the moaning wind and sands.

Sinkholes

The considerable transformation of the wastelands at the hand of wicked magic leaves much of its surface unstable. Wide sinkholes are common where underlying earth collapses, leaving a depression anywhere from one to 20 cubits deep and from 10 to 500 paces across. Erosion from beneath is the primary cause of a sinkhole, so they are seen as good, rather than bad interruptions of travel—they often reveal a source of water. Sinkholes can be a salvation in the harsh desert, though almost every one may be occupied and defended by desperate creatures.

There is a second reason for wasteland sinkholes, but only experienced eyes can distinguish such without descending into one for closer observation. Ancient burial sites from the Barbarian Age lay in the thousands across what

were the steppes and grasslands of their day. Chieftains and nobles raised buried mounds atop their fallen ancestors and packed these many-chambered graves with trinkets and tools to ease the afterlives of those buried there.

The cataclysmic climate changes of the last couple of centuries and their resulting erosion has collapsed many of these mounds into sinkholes. What lies within are the crypts and sarcophagi of the ancient dead, along with any poisons, traps, or curses meant to keep plunderers at a distance. These sites often have extensive networks of dark tunnels linking them to other burial mounds, some of which still rest deep underground. Common lore tells travelers to avoid such places at all costs, and any fool who willingly enters one should be abandoned in favor of more cautious companions.

Personal Dangers

While Khitus harbors many dangers, there are some limited to one's body and safety. There are yet those on Khitus who do not know basic survival strategies, though most quickly find how precarious life can be in the wastelands without preparation.

Dehydration

Regardless of one's surroundings, water is always a primary necessity. A man doing any work in desert heat, or just walking and traveling, needs 25 pounds of water per day; rationing and less activity can reduce this by half. Krikis and Cold Skins adapt better in these environs and require half that amount. Pachyaur (and thakal or swafa draft animals or mounts) need four times as much water as humans to survive in the deserts.

Carrying that much water around is a heavy burden, but places to stop and replenish in the desert are uncommon at best. Water skins are heavy and inconvenient, while pack-mounted skins provide ease of movement. Those fortunate enough to have draft animals can put the burden on them, provided there are skins, amphora, or other appropriate containers. Still, the animals' needs must be considered, too.

A wise desert traveler looks for desert plants that need water, such as the khitan oak or the blood bush. He knows that birds tend to circle over water sources. He knows where to find water in low areas or how to prepare to gather morning dew. He also knows to look for water-holding life like cacti or fleet fullets (see Chapter 7).

The consequences of dehydration emerge quickly. A victim becomes weak in body and mind. Strenuous activity becomes impossible first, and walking may falter

or end after just a day or two. Decision-making becomes increasingly difficult as a person thinks only of finding a way to slake his thirst. Still, very few die from dehydration in the desert. Predators take down the slowed and befuddled long before they die of thirst.

Of course, some mitigate the need for water through the application of heyeshel, the "water spice."

Hesheyel, the Water Spice

Carrying enough water through the arid lands is a problem Khitans have dealt with that for centuries. Alchemists have long known of a substance to help mitigate these problems. The so-called "water spice" hesheyel helps someone go much longer with much less water, though it carries its own dangers.

The ingredients to this harsh-tasting concoction are fairly common: *fedethu* cactus roots brewed with the leaves of common garden vegetables and the blood and sinew of various desert animals such as the *kurroo* mouse or the tiny *arara* lizard. Hesheyel creation requires no magic but is a skill carefully guarded by an enclave of alchemists and country witches. They are rare enough that each can make a good living brewing and selling the spice but numerous enough that none hold a monopoly on hesheyel. The final product is either a foul liquid to be drunk quickly or a soft lozenge packed with salt that one can suck on for an hour or more.

A single dose of high-quality hesheyel allows a human to survive on one-tenth the required hydration for a day. This holds true for other nonhuman races as well, since the spice alters the water intake of living tissues. Profit-minded caravan masters often require workers to take water spice, since doses of high-quality hesheyel are half the costs in water conveyance alone. To boost those profits, though, dishonest merchants use inferior hesheyel, which is cheaper to produce but more dangerous. Most desert people, even those accustomed to hesheyel, cannot distinguish the difference between good- and poor-quality water spices until far too late.

Hesheyel shuts down certain body tissues that can turn into "death flesh" in just a few days. For the first few days, death flesh remains hidden internally, but slowly manifests as grey and brown patches on the skin. Growing side effects include (in order of occurrence) increasing hair loss, bloodshot eyes, a thickened tongue, loosened or lost teeth, and darkened nails or hooves. Most say none can survive more than three weeks on hesheyel before all of one's nails are dark—a sure sign one has become a desert zombie. The body can repair any damage short of that, however, by drinking full complements of water and abstaining from hesheyel for three times the number of days spent using it.

Also, with continued hesheyel use, death flesh progresses through the body and weakens the mind—especially one's free will and sense of self. People become more susceptible to influential magic and hypnosis with each successive day on water spice. Even an unskilled person can gain easy control of someone who has used hesheyel for more than 12 days. A hesheyel-addled person has little cognizant connection with the real world and can be easily swayed or commanded.

Several weeks of continuous hesheyel use can turn a person into a desert zombie, forever wandering the wastelands with no will or consciousness. Desert zombies are easy to spot and defeat, save when they gather into massive groups. Putting them down is considered a mercy, as they cannot be revived from this state. Animals forced to imbibe too much hesheyel can become desert zombies, as well. Once in that state, they merely stagger around aimlessly or try to act out the last action requested of them before consciousness abandoned them.

Exposure

Extreme heat and cold must be mitigated at all times. Warding off the hot sun demands clothing, shade, cloaks, or parasols. Those unused to it may find their skin dangerously burned, even to the point of blistering injury or death. Desert animals can suffer during the day, especially if forced to function in the heat.

Likewise, the wastelands cool off rapidly at night, and temperatures in the far south drop below freezing commonly during the winter months. Unprotected creatures suffer frostbite or hypothermia, leading to more injuries or death. Clothing, shelter, or simple fires can help ward this off, though fuel for fires is a scarce commodity on the desert floor.

Oases

Wastelands bloom where springs bring deep water to the surface, making them easily noticed. Thus, no oases are abandoned, and each has its owner or protector, human or otherwise. Such sites are as valuable as silver mines, even more so to dying wanderers. Some offer water for the price of a service or a favor, rather than gold or goods, but not many. Most often, oases and protected wells are open only to their guardians and completely off limits to outsiders. Many have had to decide if a drink of water and a rest beneath the shade of trees is worth possible death. These days, oases stand in lovely contrast to the bones piled up at their edges.

Wadi

Where Khitan rainwater runs on rare occasions, there is usually nothing but a dry gulley cut deep into the dry earth. Wadis provide ideal hiding places for all manner of desert creatures. The water that passes through them is too fleeting to be of any long-term use even to plants, although many humans place urns and skins in a wadi to collect as much muddy rainwater as they can. They later strain out the silt, leaving clean, refreshing water.

Instead, these natural trenches are fortifications. Some use them to defend against raiders, or spring from them unseen on unsuspecting passersby. What makes Khitan wadis unusual is their propensity to reveal precious metals or gemstones. The wastelands are in such geographic turmoil that deposits once deep beyond a miner's wildest dreams are occasionally churned closer to the surface, where a sudden flood of water exposes them to the light of day. After a driving rain, many greedy or desperate souls scour all known wadis in hopes of finding a treasure in the mud.

Getting Lost & Desert Hallucinations

The greatest danger on a desert trek is losing one's way. The wind blows, the track is obscured with sand, visibility is reduced to nothing and, in no time at all, a traveler loses any frame of reference. Daylight brings some comforts, as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, providing some direction. Distant mountains provide certain landmarks that can reorient the wanderer. But dust often clouds the horizon, making these unreliable. Darkness brings the worst dangers, where artificial light may help guide the way but also attracts the most deadly creatures and guides them to their quarry.

Desert heat makes men see things that are not really there. Common mirages can be puzzling enough, drawing people off in futile rushes for nonexistent water. Fatigue, starvation, and dehydration magnify these wishful delusions. An exhausted mind is easily fooled and, once further befuddled, the likelihood of wandering far from the proven path increases dramatically. Many desperate adventures begin with someone becoming utterly lost by seeking a mirage, an illusory fortress, or oasis glimpsed in the blowing dust and sand. The eyes play tricks on you in the wastelands, so any veteran desert nomad verifies anything he sees whenever possible.

Mysteries of Moments

Most seasoned nomads share tales of mysterious circumstances that they stumbled upon out there—found

just once, then forever lost again to the shifting sands. All these stories and their tellers share the inability to find such encounters again or place them on a map, despite marking locations clearly and verifying the same. The wastelands are a living and breathing thing, churning up bits of the ancient world now and then just to tantalize its visitors.

- Perhaps they stumbled upon a frontier fortress brimming over with stashed weapons and gemstones.
- Some tell of a cool, damp cavern hiding a natural spring bubbling up refreshingly clean water for the taking.
- The Cactus Gardens are a persistent mystery of this sort, an oasis of shade and water and sumptuous fruit and rare food. Many claim they encountered them in their most desperate moments but forever lost them the moment they were left behind. Some place the Cactus Gardens squarely in the midst of the New Dune Wasteland, while others insist they are nearer the Krikis Hivelands or as far north as the equatorial forests. Oddly, all descriptions eerily match.
- Others that fit these mysterious findings without a permanent anchor in the shifting sands include the Canvass Ship and the Tomb of Souls.

Mysteries of Space & Time

Equally strange are tales of things unknown on Khitus that have periodically materialized before desert wanderers. These tales are so strange or bizarre that audiences almost universally dismiss the tellers as madmen. They are not the first to lose their minds to the stinging sands, and there is no shame in desert madness—only pity in the loss of another mind to the wastes. Some impossible tales ring faintly true, however, betraying an odd consistency or reminding listeners of things once seen or dismissed in the wastelands themselves.

Departures in time are a common consistency to otherwise impossible desert fables. Millions of memories linger out there somewhere, some seemingly too strong to depart this world merely upon the technicality that their time has passed long ago.

- Crazy storytellers bear witness to long-dead, forgotten armies waging campaigns lost to history.
- Others recount specific events in the lives of historical figures so detailed that they could only be firsthand accounts from eyewitnesses.
- The few reported visions of a krikis- or Cold Skin-dominated world are similarly so detailed that they cannot be coincidence, and some suggest travelers took a sojourn in time's opposite direction.

Departures in space happen as well—improbable visits to or visions of locations far removed from the wastes wherein they allegedly transpired. The desert, it seems, can be a gateway for the body as well as the mind, or so many of its denizens believe.

- A gibbering madman wanders from the desert, speaking of fantastical battles among the urshevan-riding Nordor; he cannot possibly have been upon the iced-over northern steppes . . . yet the fool's blackened toes bear the mute evidence of frostbite.
- Drowned bodies, their lungs still trickling sea water, have been accurately documented by traders on the open road,

To those inclined to believe, the deserts can also be a gateway to the alternate pathways locked away within a person's own character. Among the sands are the lives that men might have but did not live. A subtle shift in action here, or a different decision there, and a whole new life emerges within the desert heat for the foolishly adventurous to find and experience. Desert folk give wide berth to the drooling idiot who babbles in unnatural calmness, having been shown a vivid picture of another side of himself in some strange play acted out, presumably, by snake and lizard actors upon a stage of shifting sands.

Wasteland Wretches

The tale of "the Wretch" is all too common. Hundreds of ragged characters live out their pathetic lives on the fringes of the wastelands, begging for scraps and water. They always seek just enough to rebuild their strength to plunge into the desert's depths once again. Their circumstances and stories are all the same: lives apparently not worth living, yet they trek back into the desert again and again with light in their eyes and a smile on their cracked lips. The wastelands hold something for them, something they cannot attain in the real world, and something worth returning to again and again.

Wasteland Watchers

While it might seem pointless to many struggling to survive this harsh new Khitus, there are power players interested in the wastelands, its wanderers, and their tales.

- **Gare Attesa Watchers:** The Gare Attesa keep skeptical eyes on the wasteland's fringes, recording any strange tales of visions allegedly seen out there. Copies of transcripts with any historical context are immediately sent to the Siestier and Exhalt at the Great Library of Atsrath in Wani Chereet.

mirages

Legends of desert mirages permeate Khitan romantic tales, but the reality is harsher than most imagine. Not only do the desperate stagger after imaginary water on the white-hot horizon, these illusions pull terrors into this world from strange fringe realities beyond. On Khitus, mirages are “magic’s undisciplined stepchildren.”

A subject mind becomes vulnerable to mirages when exhausted and dehydrated, an all-too-frequent state in the sunburnt wilderness. They are a feature of unrelenting sun-play upon the dunes, from which travelers receive respite at night. Once mirages appear on the horizon, the wise turn away and bring all their reason into play to doubt the seen images. A wanderer who can convince himself that the beckoning water is unreal still has a chance. Those who cannot suffer the full force of their illusory—but still deadly—power.

The victim must confront a series of ever-increasing temptations emerging out of the simple mirage. The initial alluring appearance of water gives way to visions of fair fruit and nourishment of growing sustenance and rarity. Following these are images of comforting folk, caregivers, and even lovers of increasing attractiveness. Next come believable images of shelter, bounty and finally riches beyond belief. Each successive illusion tempts more than the last, drawing the victim deeper into the deadly wastes cloaked by its own imagery.

The mirage’s intent, often like that of sorcery’s wrath against those who dabble in magic, is to inflict the harshest mental cruelty upon the victim. Ultimately, a viewer realizes the images are false, but the deeper they are among the mirages makes the realization all the more crushing to the psyche. If victims realize the reality of a mirage while not too deep, they can emerge shaken but yet sane. For those lost deeper in a mirage and the false hope it offers, more pain and catastrophic denial happen when that hope dissolves away. Withdrawal from mirages often drives a victim to despair, insanity, or suicide as the ever-tempting imagery tears at the mind with an insidious pleasure. Mirage insanity can crush part of one’s spirit completely, leaving the victim forever changed.

- **Trakeen Watchers:** Trakeen seek such visionary experiences for themselves and their followers to help establish the truth of their Daragkarik-worshipping doctrines.
- **Shadazim Watchers:** Not surprisingly, wily Shadazim do the same in support of their obeisance to the ancient gods.

Ever-Changing Dangers

The only thing constant about danger on Khitus is its omnipresence, regardless of its forms. Out in the wastelands are many dangers beyond the ephemeral mirages and just as unpredictable. The ever-changing risks include the unstable climes and what changes they spawn, from deadly terrain to weather of catastrophic potential.

Wind Storms

Strong winds carry sand, soil, and dust into the air, unhindered by grass or crops that might hold them in place. Windblown sand can be blinding and even deadly. Flat wastelands offer no windbreaks, so the constant wind varies from a nuisance to a problem to a threat. One can expect gusts throughout the day, some enough to halt progress and decrease visibility to zero. Those caught unprepared may choke from the airborne dust, perhaps giving away their positions; too much dust can incapacitate, even suffocate. Damage to exposed eyes or skin can also be a danger.

Flash Floods

Rains yet occur in the wastelands, but the hard-baked land no longer absorbs water easily, and rains that do come are never less than a drenching. Every gully becomes a raging torrent in minutes during a storm, washing anything away with tremendous force. Surprising numbers of men and beasts drown in the desert, unprepared for the onslaught of rushing water. Where the water runs, it carries the earth away in muddy waves, exposing whatever was once buried underneath. A prepared wasteland traveler captures the rain, like gold falling from the skies. To the initiate, a sudden rain can be a death sentence.

Land Storms

Deadly land storms occur when savage winds stir up enough dust, grit, and gravel to create mammoth moving mountains of earth that remake the very landscape without any regard for whatever or whoever lies beneath their path. Anyone can see a land storm approaching for many miles, but precautions against its wide-scale death and devastation are few and often futile, given their size. Land storms are the primary impetus for the rapidly changing terrain of the wastelands. A region of sand dunes might

become rocky salt flats and then become a dust bowl or rust field in a matter of hours and change again just a few days or weeks later. The unpredictability of a land storm is only overshadowed by its power.

Forever scarred is the miles-wide swath of destruction left behind, and absolutely nothing remains as it was. The storms can strip away and carry off many feet of sand and dried earth, exposing whole new rock formations, veins of coal, deposits of precious metals, or even long-buried ruins. In reverse, newly deposited dust that follows a land storm's wake buries once familiar things and obliterates trails or roads. The detritus chokes fields, buries villages and towns, smothers caravans and livestock, and often makes new corpse-filled ruins that might be exposed by some other land storm in coming years.

Getting caught beneath a land storm is a death sentence. Winds fast enough to knock a man down and drag him along the ground can also tip over wagons, topple walls, and rip the roofs off buildings. Air fills with more dust than a scarf can filter out, so this choking cloud prevents breathing even before it whips up into frenzied winds. Survivable shelter must block out the wind entirely, which can happen if one is not buried alive. New dirt piles up several inches per minute to depths of ten feet or more during a storm. Efforts to climb atop growing dirt mounds are exhausting and most often futile, as the storm can last for several hours. The best way to survive a land storm is to get out of its path as quickly as possible.

Obsidian Mountains

Sharp-edged glass mountains stab out of the wasteland in many places, towering in high command of the region, but only for a short time. Exposed by earthquakes, volcanoes, or land storms, obsidian mountains are short-lived, collapsing into massive shards fairly quickly. They are difficult to traverse, as razor-edged rubble, sometimes piled several feet thick, fills every path and valley. The daytime sun heats them like firebrands, further weakening and splintering the dark crystalline pieces. In some places, obsidian mountains rise and fall so rapidly that local sages suggest the very bones of the earth expel the black glass like some horrible lanced infection.

Fire Rain

A phenomenon unique to the blasted wastelands, fire rain most commonly falls on or downwind of volcanoes, tar pits, or wide veins of either coal or sulfur, of which there are many along the jagged mountains and hills of the New Dune Wasteland and lands further north. Such rains announce themselves with thin but roiling black

clouds that rise and fall rapidly in the air above. What falls are not droplets of water but flecks of hot, oily tar, most already ablaze and trailing thin black ribbons of black smoke behind. These incendiary showers ignite any combustible vegetation they find, but with so little of this left, the smoldering drops instead sizzle on the ground until expended, marking the sand and stones charcoal black.

During and for some time after a fire rain, smoke obscures vision and makes breathing difficult. The sizzling ground burns the feet, scorching unprotected flesh and damaging footwear, slowing travel. Anyone unlucky enough to be caught in the open can suffer anything from minor burns to life-threatening injuries. One's clothing and equipment takes the brunt of the damage, more often ruined than not by these wicked firestorms of the deep desert.

Ghost Lightning

Ghost lightning is a dangerous but potentially useful phenomenon of the iron-rich red deserts. It occurs anywhere abundant metal lies, either on or just beneath the surface. Iron or copper reserves just underground may facilitate ghost lightning in an area where such deposits are not immediately obvious. Essentially, a passing lightning storm "charges" a region with unspent destructive electrical energy waiting to expend itself when activated. Its only physical manifestation of warning is a greatly increased static charge felt in the hair and clothing.

Unwitting trespassers are subject to random discharges of electrical energy. Most are painful but not otherwise harmful, and little more than a flash of light with a loud snap. Among a group, ghost lightning arcs to the individual with the most metal gear, which is why many desert veterans keep most metal equipment packed on animals. Occasionally, a strong lash of ghost lightning causes unconsciousness, burns, or rare damage and death. Most often, it is an annoyance that only frightens animals. Desert folk learn to watch for the warning signs and choose to avoid it.

Ghost lightning can be useful to a spell caster who learns to control and harness it. Lightning magic employed in a region already charged with its ghostly counterpart is greatly enhanced. As with all magic, the additional energy could pose a danger to the wizard, either in miscast spells or sorcery's wrath. There are also desert folk who swear that the Prophet can manipulate ghost lightning at will. Many others also claim they can harness it by posting metal-tipped lightning rods in different shapes across the ground.

Minute Terrors

Not every desert horror comes rushing at you with fangs bared. Some are so tiny they can gnaw a man near to death before he knows he's been invaded.

Bone Fleas

These little bastards lay their eggs in putrid water or in the dander of common food animals. Larvae dig into the teeth or any exposed bone; should any get eggs in their mouths for even two hours, an odyssey of pain begins. Teeth crumble just hours after infection, releasing many more eggs into the mouth. Left unchecked, bone flea larvae dig deeper into the jaw and the skull. The excruciating pain is unbearable, and victims resort to anything to stop it. Common field cures include yanking out teeth and even hacking off the mandible, though the latter usually proves fatal.

Many a toothless caravan worker testifies to the horror of bone fleas, so their existence is widely known and guarded against. Newcomers think associates insane as they scrub out their mouths with sand, but soon follow suit as a precaution. Survivors go toothless or bear replacement teeth of bone, rock, or metal jammed awkwardly into their gums. Magical cures can halt the pain, stop the larvae, and even regenerate the lost bone. Cold Ones can be similarly afflicted, and a pachyaur's ivory tusks are treasured targets of bone fleas, despite not being bone. Krikis are immune, being boneless. Alchemists and assassins value bone flea eggs greatly; tales of bone fleas sprinkled into a target's food are the stuff of nightmares.

Sand Ticks

An annoyance to living creatures, sand ticks hunt for moisture, pure and simple, but they carry debilitating sickness. They seek any water containers and, with enough time, burrow through leather water skins, wooden barrels, or even glass or ceramic jars to get at any water within. They burrow using a proboscis that produces a mild acid, allowing the tick to dig through an inch of most nonmetallic materials in just a few hours; caravan children often have the task of brushing sand ticks off water stores all night long. The amount taken by any one sand tick is miniscule—less than a mouthful—but the toxin they leave behind contaminates the entire container.

Any person or animal directly drained by a sand tick most likely develops the sickness; someone who drinks tick-fouled water (whether they're aware of it or not) is far less likely to become sick, but it can happen. Con-

taminated water is marked and generally not used, or given to animals before anyone else.

Sand tick sickness only kills one in five victims. The first symptoms appear within a day: a continuous shaking that gets progressively worse. After three days, the victim cannot walk or hold objects for a further three to ten days. In addition to this incapacitation, a victim's eyes and then fingernails or claws slowly turn black, the latter eventually falling off. At the end of that time, a victim either recovers or succumbs. Survivors never regain their full sight: everything seems a bit fuzzier, night vision is all but lost, and their eyes retain a gray pallor. "Tick-blind" wanderers are common, at the mercy of companions to supplement their diminished sight.

Umbur Aphids

Named for their ruddy brown coloration, these tiny bugs infest decaying plant life but can also be the bane of insects—including krikis. The aphids multiply rapidly and exude a chitin-dissolving mucous that allows them to burrow deeper into their victim. Umbur aphids are not particularly deadly, and can eventually be washed away by scrubbing with water or abrasive sand. Lasting effects, however, can be devastating, since chitin does not naturally regenerate. Left untreated for several days, an umbur aphid infestation can leave a large insect creature pocked full of holes, its entire exoskeleton loosened. Field repairs include straps and twine, literally binding the insect's larger pieces in place; more permanent repairs include glues, clamps, and rivets. Depending on the extent of the damage, an affected creature's natural armor protection can be compromised.

Krikis military discipline calls for umbur aphid inspections whenever an army is in the field. They bury garbage quickly to limit the bugs' breeding grounds. A krikis warrior found to be infested suffers ridicule at the very least, and can lose its rank or position in a legion. Those who retain their positions no longer serve on the front lines and fall into menial tasks, the reduction in prestige stemming from an associated guilt of failing to effectively serve the hive.

Caravans

Enormous trains of beasts and wagons ply the Khitan trade routes among the populated regions, as they have done for centuries. The parties and cargoes involved have changed subtly in the face of the world's cataclysmic decline. Still, the caravans themselves plod across the wastelands in a well-honed manner, cutting deep ruts along traditional paths. Coming across or running afoul of a mighty caravan is not at all uncommon, for they are the desert's wandering cities.



The Caravan Masters

Rather than wonder who owns a caravan, consider the necessary tasks to keep one in motion. Beasts must be secured and yoked, wagons built and repaired, guards hired and positioned, and scouts deployed and their information gleaned. To outsiders, a caravan's owner or merchant prince appears to be an entourage's ultimate master, carried on palanquins aboard a lushly-appointed, palatial wagon. In fact, that figure might only own the primary cargoes and hold the trade relationships that make this particular caravan route most profitable.

Each caravan component has its own leadership and ownership that usually contract independently, pledging directly to the caravan or a particular journey. This system fosters many frictions and jealousies among the traveling city's various commanders, but it also helps spread the risk so no one party becomes completely ruined should the caravan collectively fall to the wild savagery of Khitus.

Caravan Personnel

The largest caravans grant livelihood to hundreds of souls, each with a particular task in its operation; there

are no loafers on the wild roads. Those who cannot contribute are left behind: the code of the rolling cities.

In the broadest terms, a caravan's personnel divide into merchants, guards, teamsters, followers, and cargo.

- Merchants include traders, brokers, financiers, and interested agents.
- Guards are thakal- or swafa-mounted outriders, wagon riders, and scouts. Boneshards are sometimes known to pass themselves anonymously as caravan guards.
- Teamsters include wagon masters, beast masters, drivers, artisans, and all manner of animal caretakers.
- Followers include cooks and personal servants, camp girls, dancers and entertainers, unemployed family members, and refugees of all stripes.
- Cargo personnel are slaves, plain and simple; while any number of caravan services may be filled by slave labor, those are primarily given to trusted free men.

Among the caravans, none get by without carrying their own weight. Slaves must carry heavy packs, baskets, or loads across their shoulders as they plod along in chains, spurred to greater effort by whips beneath the hot sun.

There are times when the caravan itself is not a workplace or home but a destination. When stopped, caravans

become bustling frontier marketplaces. Merchants set up their tents, receiving local traders and striking deals, taking on new cargoes, or just dispensing objects they bring with them. Stalls are opened to sell extraneous goods while cook-fires are lit. Idle caravan workers arrange games and sporting events and otherwise relieve themselves of their pay in squalid, unseemly activities.

Caravan Beasts

Every caravan relies upon its beasts of burden. Thakal most often haul cargo either in enormous pack trains or in smaller carts suitable to their size. Thakal do not work well in teams, but can be beaten into cooperation if necessary. Thakal masters often walk alongside their animals, whipping them to more effort or shifting their attention to take a different track than the one preceding them.

The enormous cargo wagons are hauled by the dangerous trisaur, the three-legged dragon-kin found in the deep wastelands. Trisaur harnesses lash to the beast's sides and put its powerful hind leg to use pulling its load. Never domesticated, trisaurs must be captured in the wild. This dangerous process involves drugging a wild beast into passivity with enormous foot-long darts. Deaths always occur when securing a new trisaur and breaking it for use, so these tasks often fall to unskilled and expendable slaves. Never fully broken if alive, trisaurs often turn on their drivers viciously; as a result, trisaur drivers are well paid, and only the toughest make a career of it.

Elephants and colossadants are also common in caravans, even far from their native equatorial grasslands and forests. Difficult to harness, these massive animals instead bear howdahs fitted to carry passengers or freight or enormous nets stuffed full with crates, amphora, and boxes. Elephants and colossadants tolerate each other well, but hate the smell of thakal. Handlers keep the thakal downwind from them whenever possible. Disturbed elephants and colossadants are sometimes difficult to control, and may stampede if subjected to thakal smell for too long. The dimwitted thakal remain indifferent to the other beasts around them unless attacked.

A caravan's many animals leave behind a trail of excrement that, in turn, attracts a variety of carrion. Scavenging creatures follow in the entourage's wake, drawing a variety of hunting carnivores. The normally silent wastelands teem with life along the return trail of a large caravan.

Caravan Wagons & Vehicles

Any vehicle might be found among the varied caravans on Khitus, especially when encountering those fleeing adversity of any kind. Most caravans, however,

adhere to using those proven most useful, effective, and durable for travelling the swiftly changing Khitan terrain. These include thakal carts of varying sizes and trisaur-drawn "mahvuth" wagons or the rolling palaces called "shavinants."

Simple thakal carts are commonly made of wooden frames with treated leather covers, using only a sparing amount of metal for axles or hitches. One cart and its thakal can normally carry six to eight blocks of weight, the cargo always roped down to keep the load in place over the difficult path.

A single-chamber mahvuth hauls massive raw materials in wooden wagons reinforced with dragon or trisaur bones. Loads can be as much as 40 blocks of material at a time (or roughly ten tons). The top is open so the entire wagon can tip over for rapid unloading; slaves general load the single compartment from a ramp or other specially prepared place that can overhang its gaping maw. The interior lip has locations for two archers at each corner who enjoy the protection of reinforced leather shields. The entire structure rolls on two enormous wooden axles and four wheels that often need repair or replacement.

Three-chambered mahvuth are similarly built and protected, but they have covered roofs to protect cargo from scavengers, birds, and bad weather. Separate ramps and entrances provide access to the front, center, and rear compartments. Three distinct cargoes can be hauled without them mixing along the journey.

Shavinants are boastful luxuries reserved for the richest merchants and dignitaries. Their many-cushioned compartments serve only the conspicuous pampering of their owners and their guests. Their kitchens prepare fine meals served in audience chambers large enough for elaborate entertainments even while on the move. All their surfaces smell of spices and fine oils. Guards grace their bannered exterior battlements and slaves walk behind in chains. None approach a shavinant uninvited, as guards always erect and man a perimeter of pre-fashioned stockades when caravans are at rest to keep the curious or dangerous at a safe distance.

Caravan Followers

Caravans draw all manner of undesired followers. Anyone moving along behind it without direct employment is tolerated but rarely afforded any guard protection and never allowed to directly share in its profits upon conclusion of the journey. Many wives and families travel along so, as do usurers, brewers of every sort of liquor, gamblers, women of ill repute, and all manner of unsavory characters. The moving caravan attracts every vice it does not already host itself.

common caravan statistics

Thakal Train

Vehicles & Pack Animals: 8-24 thakal-drawn carts;

Personnel: 1 merchant, 4-12 guards, 4-12 teamsters, 0-20 followers;

Common Cargo: grain, water, coal, stones, or bricks

Small Caravan

Vehicles & Pack Animals: 3-5 trisaur-drawn mahuuth wagons, 10-15 thakal-drawn carts, 0-3 howdah-bearing elephants, 0-1 howdah-bearing colossadants, 40-90 burden-carrying slaves;

Personnel: 4-8 merchants, 20-30 guards, 10-20 teamsters, 50-100 followers;

Common Cargo: grain, water, coal, wood, wine and mead, pottery, slaves

Modest Caravan

Vehicles & Pack Animals: 6-12 trisaur-drawn mahuuth wagons, 20-40 thakal-drawn carts, 2-8 howdah-bearing elephants, 0-4 howdah-bearing colossadants, 80-160 burden-carrying slaves;

Personnel: 8-14 merchants, 40-70 guards, 30-50 teamsters, 90-180 followers;

Common Cargo: grain, water, coal, wood, wine, mead, pottery, raw chitin, slaves, exotic vegetables, dried & salted meats, hides, leather, textiles, and clothing

Vast Caravan

Vehicles & Pack Animals: 12-36 trisaur-drawn mahuuth wagons, 40-120 thakal-drawn carts, 6-24 howdah-bearing elephants, 1-12 howdah-bearing colossadants, 160-320 burden-carrying slaves;

Personnel: 12-24 merchants, 80-200 guards, 50-90 teamsters, 180-360 followers;

Common Cargo: grain, water, coal, wood, wine and mead, pottery, slaves, raw chitin, exotic vegetables, dried & salted meats, hides, leather, textiles, clothing, metal, gemstones & jewels, weapons, armor, documents, and magical scrolls

In addition to human followers, the rich leavings behind a caravan make them the new “rivers of life,” especially in the most desolate regions. Offal, dung, and carrion attract scavengers, squawking birds, sand worms, and all the filth and disease that go along with them. Shambling, desperate refugees live along these caravan routes as well, foraging among the scraps cast off along the roadside, then preying upon each other when those meager

resources are picked clean. Bandits, in turn, prey upon the refugees in a perpetual circle of anguish.

Travel's Enemies

Caravans must guard against a broad variety of enemies, some monstrous, some human, some indefinable, but all dangerous to either personnel or profits.

Bandits: Bandits are a constant threat, and posting guards upon and among the wagons protects against their ever-present encroachment. They come from a variety of backgrounds—failed military units or deserters, refugees with enough weapons to be a threat, or even guards trying to reclaim things stolen from their benefactors. Most bandits are human, but they sometimes attract krikis or pachyaur allies. Bandits commonly attack at dawn or at dusk, when vulnerable caravans shift between encampment and mobility. Caravan scouts hold dangerous jobs, as bandits visit vengeance on those they capture and often use them as warnings, leaving their remains where their employers can find them the next morning. Some outside sources subsidize bandit gangs to harm specific caravans or targets: rival caravans or merchants, dying cities hoping to stave off their own destruction, or even Bev al-Khim who have no compunction buying goods from thieves.

Monsters: Monstrous threats always stalk the countryside. While less organized and more often desperate, half-staved beasts can smell a caravan from a long way off and wait slaving for an opportunity to pounce upon someone or something straying from the pack. A wagon train's animals are particularly vulnerable, so they must be protected; the loss of even one thakal or trisaur could mean leaving behind a fortune in valuable cargo.

Progress & Speed

Caravan trains move slowly across the wastelands. Fully laden wagons move no more quickly than a walking man, and delays are common: wheels break, beasts complain and rebel, and slaves need discipline. Wind builds heavy dunes across the roads. Heat exhausts the animals. It is no wonder that caravan masters regularly promise clients to make 20 miles per day but often accomplish barely half of that.

Nocturnal creatures make travel by night far too dangerous, even in the deadly heat of summer. To guard against night attacks, careful caravans circle wagons tightly and erect hasty defenses every night. Watchful eyes scan past the edge of torchlight and raise the alarm against monsters or bandits who approach too closely from the darkness. Woe to the caravan master

who neglects these rudimentary precautions; his bones and others soon grace the dunes.

The wise adopt other practices to extend their lives and their profits. The protection of cargo is worth plenty to the caravan masters, so they can afford some protective magic. Those who can afford wizards use scrying magic to watch the surrounding desert for trouble. Coin and favors can earn them aerial observation and protection from the Penmai Nok forest people suspended from their flying Sanid mounts; these fliers are glad to keep the caravan safe, but camp apart, finding the essence of camp life unseemly.

Left to its own devices, a caravan can easily consume half its cargo capacity in food and water provisions over the length of a single journey. Caravan masters find such consumption wasteful if not ruinous. Instead, they rely upon contracted, local sources for provisions whenever possible. Some points are fixed, such as known wells or the permanent camps of local farmers and herdsmen. Others are as mobile as the caravan itself: slave and thakal wagon trains dedicated to supplying the larger caravans while on the march. Of course, those who know the appointed times and places of these contacts have great power over the wagon train.

A caravan's endurance cannot surpass that of its most-burdened animals. Any train can continue for a full week before its trisavrs and thakals become fatigued. Any time beyond that demands extra care not to tax them too heavily. Subsequent days must sacrifice time each day for rest and watering, slowing the caravan's progress. Failure to accommodate the animals thus risks their injury or death. An injured animal is difficult to save, especially without magical aid, so most are discarded. Fatigued animals become more difficult to handle and keep to task. Very fatigued creatures can go berserk and damage everything around them—a chaotic circumstance every caravan master seeks to avoid. Any teamster who allows his animal to run amok gets punished for his oversights and forced to pay for his animal's damages.

Hijackers

Stealing from a moving caravan is the dream of the desperate, but there is little to gain other than making off with a day's rations or a handful of baubles. Enterprising thieves know they must hijack entire wagons to make off with anything worthwhile, and they plan accordingly. Hijackers must infiltrate a caravan with robbers who can handle beasts and drive them away with wagons intact. They have their best luck toward the back of the caravan amid difficult terrain where they can slip away and hide, or at night, when one well-planned diversion can make all the difference.

The dark hearted also turn to subtler options in the mysterious realms of Khitus. Surreptitious hijackers can turn to magical mind control, bringing drivers unwillingly under their power, clouding their judgment just long enough for them to drive off course in a sand storm to their waiting "rescue." Animals can be similarly controlled, or even influenced by skilled handlers and "whisperers" who know how to tap into their weak minds. Very often, anything portable is divided among a crew, while identifiable wagons or animals with brands are disguised, discarded, or sold to those with even less scruples than hijackers.

Major Sites of Interest

While many vistas of the Khitan wastelands are dull seas of sand and scrub, there are some locales and areas outside civilized settlements worthy of tales and talk.

Floating Earth Motes

Cultured folk, safe in their water-fat cities far from where dust lives and breathes, derisively dismiss tales of windborne islands in the skies. Wanderers know such things exist in the deep country, carrying false promises of life on incessant winds.

Alluvial soils and dust mix with the micro-fine tangle of minute roots and plants, some eventually swirling along the ground like a child's top, growing larger as they collect more loose material. In time, the bigger ones are lofted high into the air on wicked winds and stay aloft for days or weeks at a time. All the while, their altitude changes drastically, ranging from bare fingers above the desert surface to heights barely visible from the ground. Harsh winds support and tear away at them alike, sometimes rending them to pieces midair, the new remnants buoyed by ever-refreshed hot updrafts from below. The least "floaters" are no bigger than dinner plates, swirling in accruals by the hundreds like flocking birds. The largest motes can measure scores of cubits across, though, sufficiently buoyed to stay aloft and possibly carry the weight of visitors upon its ever-crumbling and shifting surface.

Motes attract all manner of avian creatures, but never for prolonged activity. Flying insects swarm them, the mote's eventual demise often farther off than their own. Birds follow them around the sky, feeding on the plentiful insects; few birds nest on motes as there is insufficient time to hatch an egg before it disappears. Sanid, the great birds mastered by the Penmai, seek floating

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motes during their especially aggressive mating seasons. Wanderers “fortunate” enough to catch a ride on a mote to escape danger will find themselves captives, aloft without water but set upon by a million crawling bugs eager to make a meal of them.

Mornuus

Deep in the New Dune Wastelands, halfway between Patnu and Wharia, lies a place few would visit unless trade or survival depended on it. Even if they wanted to, it is a place that is difficult to find, seeming to shift in locations in the hard to traverse wastelands. Strewn across the broad summit of a low, granite mesa, the ramshackle town of Mornuus looms 400 feet above the center of a shallow, hard-packed-sand basin seven miles across. Reaching the town requires folk to climb a broad, winding stair around the mesa with only one guarded gate at its base. This basin and its mesa interrupt an otherwise featureless stretch of sparse, windblown dunes and lifeless landscape.

A naturally eroded crater born of a powerful meteorite impact, this became the center of an ancient human civilization that somehow predated the traditional tribes, its capital built within the protection of the cra-

ter. Millennia of weathering and sedimentary deposits erased or buried any resemblance to its glorious past. The crater rim and buried city now hardly trouble the desolate horizons and the mesa is among the few terrain features easily identified by wasteland travelers.

Above ground, Mornuus appears little more than rubble and ruins. Reused and reshaped time and again by its people, most buildings and defensive walls use the remains of a gigantic stone temple for their construction. Once upon the mesa's highest levels, the temple now resembles a quarry of stones it has become for centuries. While there are random homes and facilities amid the town, more rubble and timeworn stone exists here than people in well-tended homes, making Mornuus more akin to a squatters' camp among unidentified ruins.

Below the mesa's surface is where the true settlement rests. This subterranean city and its continued use as a refuge are hidden from most travelers for good reason. The largest surface building in Mornuus bears a domed roof, all others being of flat, square construction. Within “the Dome” are some town offices and the Morningwell.

The Morningwell is a large circular opening near the center of the plateau and at the heart of the Dome. Its shaft plunges deep through the mesa's heart and a narrow, spiral processional stair coils down its walls.



Descending into the cooling gloom, its stairs encompass scores of landings, each with a carved, stone doorway leading to a sprawling catacomb or vaulted labyrinth.

The uppermost of these former burial places are now the well-protected residences of some who choose to make Mornuus their home. Only those prepared to clear out a sealed catacomb may claim any spoils they might find inside and take the space as a home. In doing so, they may also earn a seat at The Table, Mornuus's council of protectors, rulers and upholders of their few necessary laws.

Visitors and caravans that travel the wastes are essential to survival in this place. All are welcome inside the surface walls, bringing food, goods, and news of the world with them in trade for the true treasure of the Morningwell. Without this small trade brought by outsiders, Mornuus would eventually revert to the lifeless, corpse-filled tomb it was when first discovered. However, unless someone proves willing to carve out a place among the underground elite, no visitors gain more than limited access to the Morningwell or direct access to the real treasure in its depths—water.

A fresh water aquifer flows more than a thousand feet below the desert floor and is accessed only through the Morningwell stairs. Built before the Classic Age,

the system no longer has a strong flow, but it still sustains its ancient system of cisterns, aqueducts and reservoirs that once supported a far greater population. This water source is still much surer than the rains, a hidden resource that might one day play a crucial role in the resurgence of what has become the New Dune Wasteland.

The Pock & Environs

Desert wanderers avoid the miles-long wastelands gash known as the Pock. It is a geological oddity of unexplained origins and a festering sore on the face of Khitus. Dangers lurk in and around the Pock, terrible, malignant manifestations from fiery realms normally hidden but now inextricably linked to the surface world.

The Pock steams and boils at all times, its lands heated to extreme temperatures by bubbling tar, oil, and molten lava constantly churning on or just beneath its surface. The molten materials make a semi-permanent surface that can be crossed only with difficulty. One must leap from one barely-cooled patch to the next, with great effort to get across in places. Falls can burn exposed skin or damage clothing or gear, sometimes permanently. Foul



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black smoke rises everywhere, sometimes obscuring vision for miles in each direction, especially downwind. The smoke of the Pock's eternal fires can be seen clearly more than fifty miles away on a clear day. The air around and over the Pock is hard to breathe without a scarf or filter, either of which clog quickly with filth. Animals never willingly go near the Pock.

Origins

The Pock's origins are unclear. Some claim it is only a volcano, despite it not being a mountain nor suffering apparent eruptions. One legend attributes its existence to ancient magic that continues today to befoul the face of Khitus.

Yhethinar was Mage-Master of the equatorial city of Hemishtan, a nigh-immortal sorcerer of tremendous power who served a long succession of rulers. His presumed mastery of magic—and his effective mitigation of sorcery's wrath away from himself and Hemishtan—spawned from far darker origins than any of his contemporaries ever guessed: as a youth, Yhethinar made a pact with Bethayalbub, a demon.

Bethayalbub seduced and controlled the young wizard through her masquerade as a lissome serving girl, only revealing her true nature years later. She had unnaturally aided his power and kept sorcery's wrath at bay. But rather than reject his lover's now-revealed demonic nature, Yhethinar embraced it wholly, though only in secret. To Bethayalbub, he rendered all manner of cruel concessions that plagued the Hemishites for generations, all the while masquerading as the city's most righteous protector. Bethayalbub demanded free access to Hemishtan's wayward souls, and Yhethinar accommodated, blinded by his unfettered access to power.

In his time, the wizard took dragon form and passed himself off as a Daragkark. He even gained some tacit recognition from both Tharcuvn and Shagnathrix, sitting in on more than a dozen Daragkarian Councils. However, for the Hemishites, these were the “bleak times,” and truths about their wizard's foul cruelties whispered among shadows, then private places, growing in volume and detail. Belus Shur, a Shadazim witch, worked half her lifetime and then gave her own life for a single curse that sent all the grief of Hamishtan's damned children into Yhethinar's dreams. Driven quickly mad, Yhethinar fled to the desert where his lover Bethayalbub confronted him in a tremendous destructive battle. While none know what truly occurred in that battle save their deaths, the Pock is what remains around that spot to this day.



The Pock

The Pock is a semi-permanent portal between the physical world and the extra-dimensional demonic realms. Only fools attempt to penetrate its molten depths or even travel near it. Never more than once every three years, diabolical beings escape into the Khitan wastelands here, powerful refugees who seek refuge from even deadlier foes beneath. Much of the portal's energy seems to bleed off and fuel the infernal heat around it, thus rarely focusing enough energy to open the portal fully.

Blood River & The Scab

From the Pock's eastern edge pours a river unlike any other on Khitus: a river of blood that flows sluggishly down through a barren valley. Where it passes, stones remain stained red for years. Foul lizards and toads live here, accustomed to the river's grotesque nourishment, disturbed only infrequently by wanderers who stagger lost into this forsaken place. The river's source appears a fleshy gash in the world that refuses to heal.

Blood River gives way to many stinking tributaries at the valley's terminus. It spreads thinly across the land, coagulating into field after field of crusty crusted ichor called the Scab. It is a cursed place that even the sand does not bury, air and land both festering with putrid gore, maggots, and choking swarms of flies. Banishment into the Scab is among the more heinous Khitan death sentences.

Grarraque's Rest

The desiccated remains of an ancient grarraque beast lie half-buried out in the wastelands. Many millennia ago, the Dragon Kings stopped the dreaded beast but could not destroy this force of nature. To keep it from again rising on Khitus, the Daragkarik "infected" it with a living shield of scarabs, a collective swarm cursed to always consume the ever-regenerating corpse.

Built in a hollow under its massive body is the small town called Grarraque's Rest. The town contains several hundred souls looking for a "safe place" to hide away from their troubles or the troublemakers of the world. Few buildings of any true permanence exist here, though some places have become reinforced by constant wind-blown dust and dirt as well as broken, discarded chitin. Most, however, remain crude huts or tents pitched here by the truly desperate.

Protecting the Rest is an ancient living being known by the denizens as Trinesta. She appears akin to a female centaur, though her hindquarters are those of a massive scarab (though a few think this is merely an illusion over her true form). More often, her voice rises out of the col-

"What kind of favors, you ask? One time she sent my bartender Atik out into the waste to deliver a message to a group of raiders. Didn't see him for months, then from out of no where he comes sauntering into town with a new mount, armor, weapons ain't been seen in an age, and more coin than I've seen well ever!"

Jarik K'arr, owner of the Scarabs Shell

lective crackle of the thousands of scarabs that make up her true form—the cursed shield of scarabs tied to the grarraque's corpse. While none know for certain, some guess she was a wizard who summoned a grarraque in hopes of wresting power from a Dragon King. This is her eternal prison and punishment. Regardless of the truth, Trinesta allows the town to exist and protects it from raiders in exchange for news and stories of the world as well as the occasional favor.

The town's largest building and its centerpiece is the tavern called The Scarabs' Shell. Thousands of dead scarab shells, glued or otherwise, coat the outside of the building, giving it an interesting coppery hue. The tavern's owner is Jarik K'arr, a half-breed humanoid who has been at the Rest for many years, serving up advice as much as food and drink.

There are only two rules at the Shell set by K'arr:

- "If you can tell a story or sing a song or generally be entertaining, you can get a free meal and a night in a good room."
- "Don't kill the scarabs."

"Been a few years, but there's always as many idiots as there are sands out there. One time, there was this caravan guard what got surprised by one of Trinesta's beauties as it crawled along his table. Either his wits was empty or his reaction was faster than 'em, but he smashed one scarab. Cracked one of my best tables, he did."

"Haden't heard the place get that quiet without being empty. Ten breaths of silence, and that fool's looking about, wondering why folk clearing away from him."

"End of those breaths, the floor boards boil with scarabs—hundreds of 'em. Flowed up and over that guy right quick—quite a smart suit of armor, it'd been if it weren't biting him all over. Trinesta be praised they soon stuffed down his throat to quiet his screaming. That guy fell down and the carpet of scarabs carried him away. Any more questions about the bugs?"

Jarik K'arr, owner of the Scarabs' Shell

The Vermilion Crater

Twelve miles across, the Vermilion Crater earns its name from its nocturnal glow and the crumbling red wall around its circumference. Built of strange, deep-red stone, the wall stands 25 feet tall and 15 feet thick at best, though many areas of the wall have fallen to rubble and ruin.

The inside of the crater slopes down into terraced tiers with alternating levels of plant life and city ruins. Any city buildings are made from the same red stone as the top wall. At the bottom of the crater sits a tall, distorted, structure. Taking the path through the ruined gates in the wall leads to the first tier.

First Tier: The largest tier surrounds the top of the crater with common desert plants, all various tints of red and some seeming altered, such as bearing fruit uncommon to them. Rodents, lizards, and insects scurry about the plant life.

Second Tier: The city on this tier remains in good shape with few signs of natural weathering. Other than the buildings, there are no signs of former or current inhabitants. As above, rodents, lizards, and insects scurry about, though these all seem bigger and redder in color than normal.

Third Tier: Former orchards and vineyards crowd this tier, but only the largest trees still stand in neat rows. Most of the other plants and trees have gone wild, and all now bear large needle-like thorns as well. Any bark is now a deep grey and leaves are shades of deep reds and purples. A powdery fungus covers all the plants here, releasing spores that, if inhaled over a long period of time, cause hallucinations.

Fourth Tier: The red-stone farm buildings here have doors too large for humans and too small for pachyaur. They may have once been for animal stabling and care.

Fifth Tier: This plant-tier hosts a thick jungle of plants and vines bearing arrow-sized thorns and scarlet fruits (both very poisonous). Many plants here move their vines or branches and feed on the bright red creatures that live in the jungle. Very aggressive and very large crimson and grey worms live here. They average 20 feet in length and their hides hold innumerable venomous spines.

Final Tier: A ruined red-stone city dominates the floor of the crater, surrounding a large fortress. The fortress seems to be carved or sculpted from a single, red, metallic crystal, and it radiates heat, making this part of the crater ten degrees warmer than above the crater. The buildings here are in worse condition than higher tiers, leaving only a few not in disrepair or ruin. Unlike the second tier, though, the inhabitants remain here—desiccated and calcified corpses, clothes and flesh alike colored varying shades of red and rust. Coarse, crumbling red sand—from calcified, disintegrating red stone—

coats the roads here. Rodents, lizards, and insects here are a good deal bigger and more vibrant shades of reds than normal, and their hides now also bristle with venom-coated spines.

Inside the central fortress lives a strange creature. Its reptilian lower body has six insect-like legs and a long spine-covered tail. Its upper body has four large reptilian arms covered in scales and ending in wicked black claws. Two smaller humanoid arms with multiple joints reach and flail about from the center of its chest. The creature's head looks like three hairless humanoid heads painfully melted together, each mouth babbling, screaming, or speaking in an unknown language.

The red calcified dust coats all organic matter and furnishings in the fortress and this tier. This is actually a stone-like fungus that communicates with the fortress creature. If the creature wishes, it can activate and animate the corpses covered in fungus. Destroying these corpses releases spores in a three-foot radius around them; these seep into exposed skin or lungs or eyes. The dust slowly kills the new host as the vermilion color spreads over the host body.





chapter 6: traces of the daragkarik

The Daragkarik, or Dragon Kings, departed Khitus ages ago. They left one by one under a variety of strange circumstances, until none remained . . . or so it seemed. Today, as did Daragkarik of old, a powerful few appear to have some connections or even influences on Khitus, or so their Trakeen worshipers claim.

Shagnathrix - The Dark Maiden of the Abyss

Shagnathrix is the dark queen of Chatoon, a ruined city half buried in the sands of the New Dune Wasteland. By some accounts, she always has been a Dragon King, which would make her the last of her kind on Khitus. By others, she is, at best, a powerful magical imposter masquerading as a new Dragon King. The truth, as always, lies between these. Secretive and terrible today, she was not always so ...

Origin of a Daragkark

A thousand years ago, she was born Dalia, the daughter of Aganor, a masterful but ambitious general, and Radana, a high priestess in magnificent Chatoon. She grew up in the shadows of palaces, well known in court and a familiar visitor to mansions and estates. Dalia was groomed for greatness, and many suitors across the Old Countries coveted her as a potential bride. Her mother advised and taught her to use her charms and position to every advantage, and Dalia embraced the classic arts of subtle manipulation.

At her mother's direction, Dalia encouraged the advances of King Urias of nearby Patnu, a city-state. The families exchanged letters and discussed renewed alliances until their union was the talk of both cities. Alas, King Urias' first visit to the royal palace of Chatoon also brought his younger brother, the dashing prince Rasham. Despite training and better judgment, Dalia lusted

for Rasham at first sight, and they became secret lovers that first night.

Dalia and King Urias wed and she bore him a son and twin daughters. All the while, the Queen consorted with Prince Rasham in secret, and rumors leaked slowly beyond the bedchambers. The death of their son drove husband and wife further apart, but still King Urias ignored the gossip for almost a decade, until persuaded by his ministers to employ a wizard to discover the heart-rending truth.

Outraged, King Urias imprisoned Dalia, disowned his children as bastards, murdered his daughters, and banished his brother Rasham. King Urias swore vengeance on King Gylam of Chatoon, convinced he finagled this humiliation, so armies in both cities were mustered. Dalia's father, General Aganor, took advantage of the chaos and had an assassin poison King Gylam seven days after King Urias demanded a formal apology and payment for his grievances. The general and Radana then convinced the mob outside the palace that King Urias was to blame for King Gylam's regicide. A mob-initiated war started the very next day.

Hearing of this, Prince Rasham reaffirmed his loyalty to his brother while banished out on the savannahs. He assembled men of valor to his banner and formed an elite battalion known as Rasham's Many Hands. He charged them to "rescue" Dalia from the chaos without realizing her family's conspiratorial role in it.

Patnu's army, reinforced with Prince Rasham's battalion, overwhelmed the defenders of Chatoon, breaching the walls and scattering forces with battering rams and blasts of magical fire. King Urias defeated Dalia's father in single combat around the city's Well of Union, then beheaded the general on its edge, tossing his head to the mob.

While the main army ravaged the city, Rasham and his Many Hands searched for Dalia. They found her and her mother inside the Dark Temple of Chatoon, waiting nervously for their deaths. When Rasham suddenly rushed in, he assuaged their fears and ordered the Many Hands to protect the women. The battalion then followed the prince in a desperate attempt to escape the embattled city.

Despite their stealth, the Many Hands found their escape blocked at every turn by King Urias' soldiers. When

the king saw Rasham protecting his two worst enemies, he met his brother with blade and hatred. The Many Hands and the king's honor guards formed a circle amid Chatoon's ruins, and the two brothers did battle at its heart. All watched the melee from many perches as the more experienced warrior cut loose with unblinking rage. In an instant, King Urias blackened his soul by putting his sword through his brother's chest.

Legends say that Dalia's eerie, mournful scream drew the temple's lingering spirits to add their ethereal voices to hers. Dalia's Wail halted all surrounding battles immediately and its echoes carried away the spirit of her now-dead love. King Urias wept, ashamed yet still enraged. As his silent army watched, he gouged his brother's heart free from his chest and marched into the temple. He met wide-eyed Dalia on its steps, offered her that fistful of dripping flesh, and said, "You wanted his heart. Hold it now before I send you and your fiendish mother to the Abyss!"

Myths claim the Priestess Radana embraced King Urias and impaled herself on his sword. A dark purple flame consumed both quickly, leaving only ashes on the temple steps. Dalia fell to her knees and screamed, this one more deafening than the first, still enjoined with the temple spirits. Dalia's Scream threw back the nearby soldiers, cracked the Temple's foundation, and leveled many remaining city walls. A hellish storm brewed in minutes, its lightning cracking still more of Chatoon's stones. Terrified, all survivors fled, Patnuans and Chatoonians alike cursing Dalia as a foul witch. The half-ruined city fell to abandon save for the lone Dalia, now inexorably transformed, weeping beside Prince Rasham's heartless corpse.

The creature that was Dalia searched for her lover's heart for years, decades, centuries, but it was nowhere to be found. Dalia delved deep into dark arts as a powerful sorceress and adopted the form of a massive dragon, taking the new name of Shagnathrix. Under her direction, Chatoon was rebuilt, more powerful than ever but tinged with darkness. She created the Black Knights of Chatoon, a new order of warriors, slavers, assassins, and military minds (like her father) loyal only to her.

To this day, Shagnathrix obsessively seeks Rasham's missing heart and a means to resurrect him just as he was when they parted. Over the centuries, she has discovered three things critical to that all-consuming quest:

- First, she learned one of the Many Hands took Rasham's heart away from Chatoon and hid it in the savannah lands for years. It was lost for a time before it came into the possession of Thareluun, a Dragon King of the Red Peaks. He and his entire fortress have apparently disappeared from the face of Khitus, though mountain men swear it occasionally reappears in Sisklas Pass for brief periods.

- Second, a commoners' prophecy says a child will one day be born bearing Rasham's heart. The child will bear a strong resemblance to Prince Rasham when he comes of age. That child's heart suffices for her purposes, so Shagnathrix's Black Knights vigilantly scour Khitus for that man. Many such have been dragged to her dungeons over the years, never to be seen again.
- Third, Shagnathrix has researched an apparently infallible spell that she believes will revive her lover Rasham in perfect form. It requires his still-missing heart and a large, pure quantity of the rare metal ganshyer. She must forge a sarcophagus, any imperfection in which will foul the sorcery. She cannot smelt alloyed steel-and-ganshyer items (which grant weapons and items immunity to the iron virus) for her purposes. Instead, she and her loyalists trawl Khitus, searching for pure ganshyer deposits. They know the best source of it is the Megha Stone, a meteor of pure ganshyer, but it lies deep inside the Krikish Hivellands, staunchly guarded by their powerful priests.

Her Doomed Offspring

Dalia bore King Urias three children in nine years. Gadam, their first-born, immediately became the king's pride and joy. He spoiled the boy, dressed him in royal garb, and let him sit by his side at all state functions. But he suffered a tragic accident at age eight and an unruly trisaur trampled him while he played in his father's heavy chariot. King Urias was devastated and had the trisaur and Gadam's minders slain before initiating a month-long period of mourning.

Gadam's death drove a wedge between the king and his wife, which widened as rumors whispered throughout the realm of her affair with his brother Rasham. Urias closed his heart from Dalia and their twin daughters, Vana and Tedra, whom he now presumed were not his children anyway. The king withdrew, displaying his animosity openly toward all, his wife most often. In his darkest moment, he ordered his court wizards to test the queen's loyalties and the truth of the rumors. After learning of her infidelities, Urias drank himself into a stupor, remaining so for days before storming into his daughters' nursery, scattering maids in his rage. Before anyone could be summoned to calm the monarch, the deed was done. Their mother arrived to find the girls' skulls smashed, the gore still fresh on King Urias's hands as he lay passed out on the floor. Dalia never held her daughters again, the king's soldiers arresting her immediately and dragging her screaming from their rooms.

Her Black Knights

Over the intervening centuries, Shagnathrix abducted many twin girls for her own. Her initial love for them turned eventually to rage because they were not truly her daughters. Their fates ranged widely, but after a time, most were turned over to the guards and eventually became their leaders. These female warriors learn all forms of combat, armed and unarmed as well as on foot or mounted.

The Black Knights are loyal only to Shagnathrix herself and always operate in three pairs. Each set of twins commands a personal garrison and an elite enslaver-assault team, their total numbers varying between eight and twelve others of both genders. Any Black Knight has proxy control over Shagnathrix's realm in her absence, and they defer by seniority among the pairs. In Chatoon, no one dares to question a Black Knight, let alone Shagnathrix herself.

The Knights share a mystical link that seems to enhance both women's abilities in proximity and provide some unspoken communication between them. Some even speculate that all six in one combat would be unstoppable, as their links provide unified battle plans and enhanced speed and strength. Alas, when one's twin dies, the link's shattering also breaks the mind of the other twin, who wanders mad into the wilderness.

The Black Knights wear special black armor and blades made of a ganshyer and steel alloy. These relics pass from one set of warriors to the next as the women are replaced over time. The items have magical links akin to those of the twins, allowing others to track down any pieces still claimed by a Knight insane from her sister's death. Shagnathrix enspelled the items and can sense any piece within twenty miles with only a thought, though she needs additional spells to find exact locations.

The Black Knights are the overseers of Shagnathrix's Trakeen. They work beneath the Knights' watchful eyes, consulting with them on matters of importance.

Currently, the Black Knight pairs are: Raklana and Xhenen, Kalys and Hunna, and Anghis and Valla.

The Black Hands (The Many Hands Curse)

The Many Hands and their family lines suffered total disgrace for their failure to protect their liege, Prince Rasham. They also seem to have suffered a curse that continues to the present day.

An unknown soldier stole Rasham's heart off the steps of Chatoon's Dark Temple when King Urias died engulfed in flames. The soldier fled into the savannahs, half-insane

from what he saw far too closely. He kept the heart hidden for decades. His third son left his mother's womb with a black right hand. The midwife interpreted this as a curse, so the family was cast out, taking the heart with them.

The lineage of this soldier—the Raeh bloodline—hid Rasham's heart for centuries. Every other generation sees the birth of a Black Hand, a baby with a black hand that, some say, gives him or her a seer's ability. Those marked on the left hand foresee the future, while the right hand touches the past via psychometry. Black Hands (and any who protect them) are driven away from civilized villages as bad omens and doombringers. More materially, they know Shagnathrix's forces always hunt the keepers of Rasham's heart even into the present day.

After the Dragon King Tharcuun gained or stole the heart (stories conflict), the Raeh bloodline went into virtual oblivion for ages. However, as Shagnathrix became increasingly obsessed with recovering Rasham's heart, she put a bounty on the “marked ones,” convinced they yet know of or have a connection to its whereabouts.

Those bearing the Black Hand can feel the presence of other “marked ones” within a mile. They often try to avoid each other as they share their visions, emotions, and thoughts the closer they are together. Still, some try to regain control of their own lives despite their marked status. Shagnathrix hunts them with bounty hunters because the legends also say that only a “marked one” will know where the prophesized young man will be to receive Rasham's heart into his chest.

Chroma'ano the Blood-Borne

In his day, the Daragkark Chroma'ano watched over a broad swath of the southern wild lands like a shepherd watches over his flock. Where the shadows of his broad wings fell, dew glistened on rich meadows brilliant with wildflowers and flowing grain. Makadan and Attite clans dispersed across the fertile lands, all growing fat on rich farms or forests easily tamed and abundant in game, wild berries, and splendid orchards. Chroma'ano loved his people, and they loved him in return, singing his praises at all the planting, harvest, and moon festivals.

Hearts of Light & Shadow

The following is a transcription fragment from the fourth volume of *The Annals Daragkarian* by Arlart of Wani Chereet. While the bulk of the *Annals* were strict histories, some more popular or benevolent Dragon

Kings had their volumes filled with bard's tales and more poetic legends such as this one below.

Six primary villages emerged where people gathered to trade and exchange ideas. In one of these, a simple herdsman and his wife welcomed a girl who became such a beauty that clouds never dared come between her and the sunshine. Eloisa was her name, and as she matured her loveliness was surpassed by an inner beauty that gladdened the hearts of everyone who knew her for many miles around. She was the pride of her village, an unselfish, caring young woman who drew suitors from distant cities and nations.

When the Dragon King Chroma'ano met Eloisa, he was immediately smitten. As a test of her character, he appeared to her masquerading as a humble but terribly disfigured mortal youth.

"Forgive my ugliness," he said, pulling a cloak over his face. "Please pass by quickly so you need not look upon me."

"Nonsense," Eloise insisted, pulling the cloak aside and greeting his hideousness with a friendly smile. "Please, share these berries with me here by the side of the road."

"Doesn't my face frighten you?" he asked, re-doubling his magical disfigurement, but her smile never wavered.

"Not at all. Come, sit here with me."

The warm sun was a candle against the blaze in the Dragon King's heart.

After weeks of unfaltering friendship and kindness, the hobbled youth and Eloisa grew closer. It was then Chroma'ano revealed himself in his true form. He confessed his unreserved love for Eloisa, which she returned in full measure. The Dragon King and mortal wed that very year and lived in gentle harmony for many decades.

The light of great love can unintentionally throw shadows that foster great jealousy. Vittarris, an Attite landau, or elder, from another village, nurtured unprovoked hatred for the Dragon King. To his eyes, Chroma'ano lavished attention on Eloisa's home village to the neglect of the others. This was untrue, but he believed it nonetheless. Vittarris hid his pettiness inside, biding his time until he could envision some revenge.

On the couple's 50th wedding anniversary, the Dragon King made an announcement and Vittarris saw his opportunity. "My love for Eloisa grows with every passing day," Chroma'ano announced to the gathered celebrants, "and I never want that to end. So, this evening, she and I will share a drink, a potion to extend my wife's mortal life indefinitely. This is my gift to her, to all of you, as well as to myself! Our happiness shall ever be mirrored in your own!" While everyone else cheered, Vittarris devised a terrible plan. He stole into the couple's chambers and tainted the potion with lu'urat poison, rendering it ineffective. The pair later drank the potion, but within a few years Eloisa succumbed to old age, left mortal by Vittarris's terrible action.

Blinded by grief, the Daraqkark Chroma'ano only divined that an Attite poisoned his wife's potion and sought no further clues to his identity. He shunned all his Attite subjects, forcing them to migrate over the decades to live under other Dragon Kings. Chroma'ano never again emerged from his grief, now truly neglecting his innocent Makadan subjects. He drifted into obscurity, nursing his broken heart.

Left ineffective by sadness and guilt, the Dragon King devised a plan for his permanent departure from Khitus. To him, he summoned the elders of the villages for a final gathering.

"I have failed you," he announced. "I have changed, and the world has changed, so I will forever depart this place. On my departure, a feast shall come to every farm and every village. Eat, drink, and remember me as I once was, and remember as once we all were."

With that, Chroma'ano was gone, dissolving into a pulse of magical energy that spread slowly across his lands like fireflies, following the elders back to their homes and coalescing into sumptuous feasts before all his subject peoples. Unknowingly, Chroma'ano's subjects ate his very body. Rather than truly depart Khitus like other Daraqkarik, Chroma'ano transformed his physical substance into the food they ate and wine they drank. In doing so, he dispersed his complete essence into the people he loved so well. After the feasts, learning what had truly happened, his people rejoiced and vowed to keep their beloved Dragon King alive within their own persons.

Shadow Continued: The Vittarrans

All made that vow except for Vittarris and his kin, who railed at this betrayal. Others embraced their roles as carriers of a super-magical being who might one day re-manifest himself in this world through them. The Vittarris clan sought all means to purge themselves of the Dragon King's essence. They employed deadly toxins to scrape the blood clean. Vittarris directed wizards to intervene in unions so the bloodline was not directly passed through the generations. They even dispersed to the furthest reaches of the world to dilute Chroma'ano's heritage as thinly as possible. But despite their efforts, they could not rid themselves of his taint as they saw it—they merely perverted it to the ruination of their own line. Today, the widely scattered Vittarrans are of thin blood, often diseased and malformed from birth, but still resolutely hateful of Chroma'ano and the Tra-keen who now worship the "Dragon King in us" that is descended directly from him.



Light Continued: The Trakeen of Chroma'ano

Chroma'ano's Trakeen followers take the opposite position Vittarrans hold. They do all they can to trace the family trees back through the generations since his departure. They hope to concentrate the Daragkark's essence into as direct a bloodline as possible. They believe their efforts will culminate in a union of two descendants who will give birth to a reincarnate Chroma'ano on Khitus.

His Trakeen are kind and generous, but single-minded in their pursuit of blood-strong and blood-pure descendants to incorporate into re-concentrated family lines. For the most part, many people so identified are willing to be merged by marriage back into their enterprise. Most already have some idea of their connections to the departed Dragon King's line and so consider it an honor to lend their lineage to his return, especially in these directionless

times. Others, however, who have no personal connection to his existence or return, are reluctant to be wed to strangers for such arcane reasons. Chroma'ano's Trakeen are well prepared for this reaction, though, ready with dowries, bribes, and all manner of above-board persuasions. Behind the scenes, though, they are not above subterfuge and kidnappings to further their self-righteous ends. They are committed to bringing Chroma'ano back into the real world—despite no direct evidence that their endeavor has any possibility of success—and will not be denied.

Kathuray & the Voices on the Wind

The Dragon King Kathuray held sway over the bright-walled cities and villages of the central deserts, which

now lie buried under the renamed New Dune Wastelands. She shared the story of most of her kind, advising the mortals beneath the shadow of her gigantic, bat-like wings, punishing the foul and encouraging the good. No problem escaped her notice, and she guided her charges slowly toward prosperity and productive civil discourse. Karuthay attended all Daragkarik Councils and so had influence and enthusiastic supporters across Khitus all through the Classic Age.

Her magical specialty, however, was more arcane than most, as she sought ancient knowledge and spells related to the creation of the universe. For unknown reasons, Kathuray felt the animalistic gods were imposters and all their creation myths were false. Only the concentration of pure magic could have created Khitus, Kathuray was certain, intensifying something where there was apparently nothing before. She sought that purity in her most secret libraries, srying the distant past or seeking connections with faraway powers across time and space that might aid her quest.

None knew of Kathuray's intense quest, so secret did she keep her studies, until a dark blot appeared in the Khitan skies. It hung directly above the Dragon King's white-marble keep, a shadowy gash in the sky. While terrifying enough by day, the rip also appeared blacker than the night, blotting out the stars and moons that slowly wheeled behind it. The rift appeared and steadily grew over three days and nights until a mammoth shadow dropped from it. Wielding her most powerful magic, Kathuray met that mountain of glistening tar in midair. The two clashed in a colossal battle that ripped the sky and scorched the earth, destroying much of her keep and surrounding outbuildings. After the battle, Kathuray dissolved into sand and simply blew away, never to be seen again.

Her people despaired at the loss of their powerful benefactor, for Kathuray was among the first of her kind to depart from Khitus. Advisors unearthed what truth they could from her ruined keep, though much more escaped their comprehension. In fragmentary evidence, scholars gleaned that Karuthay had unintentionally lured a powerful darkness from a distant plane. To protect her subjects, she defeated it at the cost of her own existence. The people wailed and cowered, never fully recovering from her loss, as fell times descended upon them. They carried on with their lives despondently, watching as the other Dragon Kings disappeared from the world as well.

But was Kathuray really lost?

Dreams of a Daragkark

The desert peoples often dreamed of their beloved Dragon King. Unlike common dreams that vanish like smoke from

consciousness, their dreams of Kathuray lasted indefinitely in one's memory, impervious to time. Dream appearances by the Daragkark became, over the generations, harbingers of good fortune. Vivid dreams became songs or oral tales preserved and handed down through generations. Among the first to inscribe them onto tablets or scrolls was Aktal of Rillak in his *Kathuray's Endurance in Dreams Undying*. Decades later, a handful of playwrights adapted Aktal's stories and other tales from oral traditions into well-received plays and theater pieces that remain in use today. The continued dreams or tales, whether oral or written, taught lessons and gave advice, just as Kathuray once did. It was as if the great Dragon King still spoke with her people, evincing that she was not, in fact, dead but only departed.

Nearly everyone who lives in the vicinity of the New Dune Wastelands has experienced a vivid, life-changing dream featuring the magnificently winged Kathuray. Even casual travelers and desert wanderers have felt her slumbering embrace. This influence is regionalized, isolated to the domains where she once held sway. Descendants of her peoples do not dream of her if they no longer reside in the region. Kathuray's strange influence remains only in her now-sandy realms.

To Worship a Dream

Trakeen dedicated to Kathuray's worship enjoy the credibility of preaching a gospel that many, many Khitans have experienced first-hand. Thus, they have little problem—unlike many Trakeen—convincing people of their god's presence and purpose. Their difficulty is in drawing direct attention from her for spells or even basic communication.

Kathuray's Trakeen seek a new connection with their departed Dragon King, who they are convinced still exists but in a form that cannot be directly seen or heard. Through meditation, they hope to clear their minds to be more ready to accept her dream messages. They wander the desert lands seeking any new dreamers, interviewing them incessantly for any details, no matter how minute. They need guard against charlatans who spin false tales of dreams in exchange for coins. Their consensus today is that unknown magic may be necessary to correctly interpret the dreams and draw Kathuray somehow closer to Khitus. Thus, they also comb the buried ruins of Kathuray's keep in hopes of finding a yet-sealed library or any knowledge linked to her secret arcane research.

As it is, Kathuray's message remains strong and clear. She sends specific dreams to people warning against rising despots. She enters peoples' slumbers to encourage cooperation and rail against destructive behavior. It matters little to those touched whether these are actual messages from a departed Dragon King or mass delusions of

a desperate people longing for order. Adherents comply with the messages shared widely throughout the region, making the New Dune Wastelands a place of relative calm amid roving chaos. One is more likely to find a helping hand here among her worshipers, the self-named Kathurath, than anywhere else on blighted Khitus.

Rekak's Agony

Many sages and chroniclers enshrine Rekak as the most argumentative Daragkark of all. His fellow Dragon Kings tolerated his presence in their Great Councils at first, even as he disputed any achievements of his fellows. Despite his obstinate nature, Rekak sought to keep despots from rule and wars from disrupting burgeoning civilizations, like most Daragkarik. He just spouted brazen criticisms and imperious suggestions in a highly caustic manner. The other Dragon Kings came to shun him, pushing him out of the Daragkarik Councils and relegating him, as much as possible, to the distant, least-populated areas of the world.

To their chagrin, Rekak was among the last to depart Khitus. When only a handful of Dragon Kings remained among the mortal populations, he seemed a forgotten stepchild returned to prominence, and many turned to his guidance. For a time, his bold advice served his followers, but eventually they fell from his attention due to a lingering disease that plagued Rekak for more than a quarter-century.

Nearly every Khitan witnessed his spectacular final days and horrifying farewell. Rekak broke out in hideous, weeping sores and his joints and bones creaked painfully. He moaned in terrible pain for months on end, the wailing audible for miles around his mountain fortress in the distant northlands. Racked by increasing pain, he finally soared into the night sky, so high that nearly everyone could watch as he burst into white-hot pieces to scatter among the stars, his final death-shriek so deafening that an entire generation suffered for it.

The First True Believers

A self-appointed high priest of Rekak appeared quickly on the scene, a Trakeen with a limited clergy insisting they witnessed the Dragon King's anointing ceremony. Bach-u-Tal claimed religious hegemony over all of the departed Dragon King's subject peoples, but was widely ignored in his earliest days. So far as anyone alive then was aware, Rekak had no truck with Bach-u-Tal during his life. Many saw the high priest as a fraud. His strength lay in his persistence. He and his disciples wandered Khitus for decades, reiterating his connection with the

departed Dragon King-turned-god until his message took hold by sheer repetition alone.

They firmly established the engine of a new religion—Rekak worship—in those days. They demanded a single-mindedness of allegiance, a dogmatic adherence that flew in the face of any Dragon King's creed. Still, as Khitus became a more dangerous world, people seeking order found comfort among these Trakeen. Bach-u-Tal eventually died, and his youngest son Bach-a-Mal claimed the title of high priest after a bitter and bloody interfamily struggle. Bach-a-Mal later bestowed his title in a more orderly fashion to his own youngest son. That son, Hach-a-Tal, is now an old, childless man holed up in a dark dungeon beneath an abandoned desert fortress “for the protection of Rekak's worship.”

Sharing His Pain

In today's Rekak worship, true disciples, or Rekakik, must feel pain as the Dragon King felt upon his departure from this world. True believers burn themselves, cut their feet, and cruelly twist their own bones and joints to make every movement bring agony. “Any comfort shames the memory of Rekak,” Trakeen teach, and “to be without pain is to be without Rekak's love.” There is some suspicion, especially among non-believers, that the Trakeen conveniently exempt themselves from these “holy agonies.” Escapees from the often-isolated sects insist the entire religion is a sham, and their numbers have been dwindling steadily over the last few generations. An unexpected event, however, has halted that decline and leant new credence to the Cult of Rekak.

The writings of the original High Priest, Bach-u-Tal, claimed that three events would seal his legitimacy as Rekak's chosen upon Khitus. None came to pass during his lifetime, but all have happened within the last decade:

- A comet bisecting a triple-moon convergence occurred 20 years ago;
- A virgin priestess birthed twin Yenfansas eight years ago, and these white-eyed children still live with the current High Priest Hach-a-Tal also “for their protection”; and
- A land storm unearthed Rekak's lost fortress home just five years ago, the locale from which Hach-a-Tal manages the entire cult.

The Trakeen have widely publicized these events and their fulfillment of established prophecy, revitalizing the flagging cult's legitimacy and drawing many new followers.

Those who deem these events to have religious meaning also insist Rekak will return to Khitus as the sole Daragkark to watch over the entire world. In preparation, the clerics insist on renewed agonizing efforts, certain that only through intense pain will they set up an effective beacon for their god to follow on his return journey.

Chapter 7: Bestiary

Azurat (Blue Watcher)



The azurat is a small, beautiful creature that lives around the Lesser Barren Lake and other watery areas of Khitus. To the uninitiated, it seems inconsequential, but its size and appearance disguise a horrible truth. Its playful dance catches the eye and prepares the distracted mind to be utterly controlled.

Commonly called a “blue watcher” (or very rarely, a “blue angel”), this tiny being is a powerful mind bender. To take control of an intelligent creature, the azurat gets inside its host, usually through the mouth, and makes its way—painfully—to the brain. Its bright colors and exotic movements mesmerize a victim, luring one close

for a better view. Without realizing it, a victim accepts an azurat crawling delightfully on her skin. By the time the blue watcher enters an orifice to gouge its way to the brain, a victim has been conditioned to accept the pain and its fate.

Azurats guide hosts to bodies of water where they can lay eggs and spawn more of their kind. Any lake, stream, cistern, or even a barrel of water will do. While it can force a host body to march directly to water, an azurat knows instinctively that abrupt changes in behavior lead to its own discovery and expulsion. Instead, it subtly alters the victim’s desires and behaviors in ways that its companions will not immediately recognize. Unfortunately for a victim, though, an azurat’s only egress is out through the brain, destroying the mind and killing the host in the process.

Blue watchers can be useful to wizards and alchemists who know of one of their subtler attributes. Fresh from a host body and for several days after egress, the creature retains all the contents of the mind on which it fed. Every memory, every thought, every emotion, every plan ... all of this can be extracted from an azurat either through direct application of scrying magic or by simply ingesting the creature directly. This latter approach is less accurate and some information may be lost but, properly prepared, a simple meal can impart most—and sometimes all—of the former host’s knowledge right into the diner’s mind. These are only fleeting, so any pertinent information must be recorded quickly before the person fully digests the azurat and exhausts its strange powers.

Azurats live inside small bodies of water everywhere. They prefer unstable hosts in whom any subtle alterations of behavior may go unnoticed. When choosing among multiple hosts, an azurat will select the moodier or free-spirited among them. Blue watchers may take their time selecting victims, moving from one to another, subtly taking each one’s measure from afar before settling on a single host. Once discovered, removing a blue watcher requires dangerous poisons or direct intervention with knife and awl, often leaving the host severely damaged.

Daragkon (Khitan Dragon)



Wild daragkin loom large across Khitus, the largest of them more powerful than any other natural creatures on the planet. Even the smallest daragkon can be a magnificent, awe-inspiring beast, which explains why it is the physical form most desired by powerful wizards and magical creatures. Sorcerers aspire to dragon form as a symbol of near god-like power. The departed Dragon Kings did such, as do several wizards who choose these fearsome forms yet today. These daragk'honin ("feign-dragons") are still artificial in one sense or another, no matter what power lies behind their form. They all assume the form of savage, animalistic Khitan dragons, which still reign supreme in their scattered environs. Unfailingly, Daragkon recognize their own, and no daragk'honin escapes their notice.

A Khitan dragon relies more on instinct than on raw cognitive intelligence. Its very being revolves around its unique nature, dependent on species and geographic niche. Its region and subspecies determines how each one lives, what it feeds on, and what it covets most deeply. Barring those differences, all Khitan dragons can fly on enormous, leathery wings, have thick, protective scales over nigh-impenetrable hides, and fight with

teeth and claws, either of which can rend foes to death with a single attack. Beyond those attributes, daragkin have extraordinary abilities and can both wield natural magics and belch forth deadly blasts from furnace-like digestive organs, each type having its own attack.

Daragkish magic is an inborn asset, akin to that wielded by lesser mages. While limited, it provides sufficient recourse against spell casters who seek out dragons, perhaps a hold-over from ancient times when other magic-capable beasts also wandered the world to challenge its dragons for mastery.

Daragkon inhabit wild places. They are all reputedly aggressive and unpredictable. They hunt and even raid settlements frequently enough that many common folk catch a glimpse of one at some point in their lives.

Wizards of the Dramidge college spend considerable time seeking out daragkon to further their magical studies. They seek to control wild dragons to serve their nefarious purposes. Penmai believe daragkon are the Dragon Kings reduced to animal form.

Daragk'gael (Wind Dragons)

Wind dragons buffet the ground with the tremendous power of their wings, and rouse tremendous, cyclonic storms that knock enemies off their feet and bury them beneath quickly forming dunes. They sweep down on the lower parts of the world from mountain-peak aeries where they hoard the tidbits they have stolen from weaker species.

Daragk'huck (Coal Dragons)

Coal dragons live where the world's flammable elements lie naturally exposed on its surface. A coal dragon can unleash a blast of liquid fire so hot and so richly fuelled that it roasts the land and blackens everything, even stone, with robust combustion. They gather coal, oil and tar into massive pits where they wallow with the gems and precious metals they so desperately desire.

Daragk'ralsh (Mud Dragons)

Mud dragons understand the inherent value of moisture and gather it jealously. Any naturally-occurring accumulation of water—a spring or trickling stream—may attract a daragk'ralsh to make a claim over its ultimate ownership. They breathe scorching blasts of steam that can roast a man in his armor and blister the skin from his bones.

Daragk'reg (Rock Dragons)

Rock dragons wedge slate and stone among their scales. This increases their bulk tremendously and adds to their

protection, but means they can only make short glides instead of actual flight. They launch themselves as living battering rams against walled cities or even mountains, smashing them to pieces. They swallow boulders and melt them to magma in their guts, vomiting them forth as fiery projectiles. They hoard valuable gemstones in deep caves.

Daragk'ulnar (Bone Dragons)

Bone dragons reside proudly in the ruins of any civilization they have utterly destroyed. While some expect them to be skeletal dragons, their names refer to the bone spurs on their wingtips and joints. Daragk'ulnar appear as dragons of pale yellow to ivory hue, their scales always a shade paler than their hides. They unleash a concussive blast that can turn a man's insides to jelly and even crack marble. From within their warrens of bleached bones and shattered masonry, they lick clean the weapons and armor of all who have fallen beneath their massive wings, creating displays of treasure that dare any to take them back.

Elephant & Colossadant



Pachyaur are distant racial kin of the common elephant and its much larger and more powerful counterpart, the colossadant. Both are fairly common in all

equatorial regions of Khitus and have long been work animals for the humans and pachyaur who dwell there.

The colossadant is essentially an elephant that is double its smaller cousin's dimensions, therefore eight times its mass and strength. A large bull colossadant reaches eight yards in height and can weigh 20 tons. Quite literally, a single colossadant can apply the brute strength of eight elephants, and do so much more efficiently since its smaller brethren must be harnessed and managed as a team. A colossadant can dray half its weight easily, uproot the most massive trees, and so on. Both elephants and colossadants require a large amount of water to survive, which is the single drawback rendering them less well-suited as draft animals in the southern deserts. If not for that, colossadants would be preferable as wagon-hauling beasts for the caravans over the difficult and risky thakals and trisaurs.

Fullet (Water Runner)



Many a desert wanderer owes his life to a passing stream of fullets. Sometimes also called "water runners," fullets store and carry water with them as they race across the dunes, making them a life-giving prize. Capturing one ensures a sweet, quenching draft of clean water, assuming one can catch the speedy creature.

A fullet is small, no more than three feet tall, with two powerful hind legs but only vestigial upper arms and a long, thin neck. Its distended belly holds its prize. Aside from blazing speed, the creature has little other defense. They do possess strength in numbers, though, traveling by dozens or even hundreds. Capturing even half of a torrent of fullets would slake many thirsts.

Extracting the fullet's prized store of water—approximately one liter—is a delicate maneuver. Indeed, any severe injuries may inadvertently spill the precious fluid into the sands. A skilled wanderer knows how to pluck the head and spine in just the right way to claim the vital contents, upending the carcass like a fleshy decanter.

Khitan Terms of Venerly

For groups of land animals or creatures, pack is the regular nomenclature and flock covers avian creature groups. However, those versed in Classic Age bestiaries remember the once-common terms of venerly for Khitan creatures.

Creature	Group Term (Larger Groups, if such a term)
Azurat	Sheen (up to 10), Sea (11+)
Colossodant	Throng
Daragkon	Claw (up to 8), Savagery (9+)
Elephant	Herd
Fullet	Stream (up to 29), Torrent (30+)
Huckratha	Scuttle
Jaladam	Punishment
Lu'urat	Haunting
Manju	Stamp (up to 8), Swarm (9+)
Maradoch	Spate (up to 12), Scourge (13+)
Mesachnat	Blink
Regelth	Tremor
Regelthex	Tumult
Sanid	Slash
Tabahk	Bramble
Thakal	Rumble (up to 11), Thunder (12+)
Uludur	Slake
Ulweppa	Letting (up to 29), Carnage (30+)
Urshevan	Snarl
Yethawar	Echo

Huckratha (Coal Crab)

These multi-legged denizens of the wastelands strike fear into the hearts of experienced wanderers. The huckratha's touch turns living flesh to coal via a creeping infection that can only be cured by fire.



Each “coal crab” is roughly three feet wide and two high, its thick exoskeleton protecting it well from natural predators and armed desert folk. It crawls quickly across boulder fields, seeking hiding places and further protection within its favored terrain. When cornered, it attacks with its forward pincers that are strong enough to remove a finger (or even an entire hand) or even ruin armor or shields with crimps or worse.

When its pincers break living flesh and draw blood, the coal crab releases a virulent fluid into the wound from glands at the pincers' hinges. This renders the wound painless within seconds, allowing an infection to start. The small bit of wounded flesh becomes a black spot that grows an inch in diameter per day. After a day, that spot hardens into a lump of coal that expands with the infection. It cannot be just cut away or it will grow back. The coal-flesh must be burnt off, an act that, even when done carefully, causes enormous pain and leaves the flesh deeply scarred.

The only benefits wanderers gain from coal crabs are using their corpses to build easy and long-lasting fires with very little other fuel (provided they start the fire at the huckratha's claws). Certain alchemists and mages from Torqal and Wani Chereet provide a ready market for fresh huckratha (i.e. dead less than two days), as they know how to use the pincer glands to make horrific potions that either turn people into living firebrands or quickly render them paralyzed coal statues.

Jaladam



Not native to Khitus, jaladam came from demonic realms during the Barbarian Age. Recruited for a long-forgotten war among powerful priests and gods, these unaging creatures have long wandered a world not their own in search of enemies they can no longer effectively identify. They are typical of the creatures that linger near the Pock.

Jaladam are drawn to mortals exploring ancient places or possessing ancient artifacts. Items that draw their demonic eyes include heirlooms, ancient coins and jewels, tablets and statues, and so on. Disturbing the past alerts them to the presence of enemies, however confused those memories become across the vast gulf of time. They watch over ancient places for reasons they can no longer fathom.

As demons, jaladam live in both realms simultaneously, and so can never be completely killed unless they are confronted in both realms at once, impossible without the advent of powerful and sophisticated magic. Still, damaging them in the physical realm can drive them away, at least temporarily. Common weapons cannot pierce their hides, though enchanted weapons affect their physical halves normally. Magical attacks are the only way to “slay” the living physical body and force its

retreat back into the shadow realms where it often forgets its prey.

In combat, the jaladam presents a formidable foe. It lunges with its mammoth horn, sufficient to skewer a victim through the heart. To do so, the beast must forego its fin and tail slaps, which are forceful enough to bruise and crush bones, as well as knock the target off its feet. A prone target is especially vulnerable to the jaladam's horn skewer as a follow-up attack. When fighting as a group, they often attack with fin and tail slaps to separate allies or knock down combatants. This aids the killing lunge of the lead or original jaladam that engaged these enemies.

Once a jaladam engages a mortal in combat, it will return again and again to renew the fight, escalating the battle with an additional ally of its kind with each encounter. So, it returns with one additional jaladam, then with two more, and so on (thus being named a punishment of jaladam). The original jaladam must be completely slain in both realms, to break this cycle and escape attention. Luckily, any attendant jaladam recruited as aid do not continue this escalating battle; if the lead jaladam dies, recruits retreat to their shadow realm unless mortals gain their attention (as noted above).

More dangerous still is the jaladam's demonic aura that levies a sense of imminent doom upon its foes. Group morale suffers first, causing hirelings and transient participants to drop their weapons and run off. Individual warriors must fight the aura or fall into a defensive posture to seek escape. Even after an encounter, participants suffer terrible demon-centric nightmares that only subside when the jaladam is eventually defeated.

Jaladam can be followed into the demonic realm with the use of powerful magic. Since this may be the only way to stop its relentless pursuit, a jaladam encounter can be sufficient justification to overcome one's natural aversion to the use of cruel magic. Wizards who can cross dimensions and aid in the destruction of a jaladam know the value of their skills, and charge accordingly.

Kardillo

Known far and wide as dangerous predators, kardillos are large mammals, fully the size of a man. Roaming from the Kneeding Hills to the central plains, kardillos are opportunistic creatures in constant search of prey. Sometimes they hunt in packs with more than 20 to 30 individuals, lead by an alpha couple (pair-bonded mates) who guide them against larger targets such as entire herds of animals or wayward caravans.



Kardillos have poor eyesight but sense motion, allowing them to patiently wait for approaching prey in hiding. These animals are renowned for their camouflage abilities when motionless. Their fur and skin can rapidly change color and apparent texture to better blend with their hiding places.

They are known to attack and eat everything that crosses their path, leaving nothing but bones. Kardillo fangs and claws often are rife with filth and rotting flesh. Any inflicted wounds quickly become infected if not cleaned. Untreated wounds produce painful swelling within hours and bloody drainage that can lead to death in a few days from loss of bodily fluids.

Kardillo hide is valuable as an item of status among some tribes, especially when a warrior wants to court a young woman. The hide and fur retain their camouflage abilities for a short time, but fade within a half-year of a kardillo's death. The hide's last coloration shift becomes permanent, so many spread them out on salt flats to gain a white hide at that time.

Lu'urat (Ghost Snake)

This strange snake no longer exists in the wild, but thrives as a domesticated pet among the powerful, secret castes locked away in dark passages. It earns its moniker by its milk-white coloration and its queer



venom. A victim's mind deteriorates over a matter of hours, and the venom-induced haze forces victims to speak the truth to any questioners, most often a lu'urat's handler. Victims linger for days of hideous semi-life—the so-called “ghost” period—where they are essentially easily controlled but weakened zombies.

A ghost snake can grow as long as nine feet and weigh more than 80 pounds. Handlers prefer younger ones less than half that size, since their poison is much stronger. They are expensive and only the wealthy (and very corrupt) can keep them. Ghost snakes eat some small rodents and birds. Proper feeding with various exotic spices can lengthen the truth-telling period of its venom.

Manju

The manju is a large furred rodent bred and used for meat, fur, and milk. Around remaining Khitan farms, major cities, and some nomads, manju have proven their importance as herd animals since the Classic Age.

Manju were once wild herbivorous creatures, often hunted by large predators. After centuries of selective breeding in the early Classic Age, they developed their desirable characteristics. Breeders are known to weigh 120 pounds or more, and each litter has at least a dozen neonates.

Manju are timid and easily frightened, making them poor combatants unless they can swarm a larger beast



to bring it down by weight of numbers. They make terrific pets, though, and are especially empathic with their surroundings. A manju often instinctively knows of approaching danger before human handlers detect a problem. For this reason, handlers pen manju on the perimeters of encampments and farms and watch their behavior closely. Gauging their alarm can make the difference between life and death on the dangerous frontiers.

Maradoch

Also known as the “Plague of the Whitebone Wastes,” these vermin are reputedly the harbingers of doom and pestilence. The size of a medium dog, a maradoch has tough, dun-brown hide beneath a sparse coat of rough sandy fur. Males have less fur compared to the females’ tufted manes and spinal crests.

Maradochs live in scourges (a pack group of 25 or more) in an endless labyrinth of huge tunnels, often those dug by regelths, which most rogues would avoid. They fully infest the underground of the Whitebone Wastes, so it is almost impossible to avoid them there. At night, many flood out onto the surface from their tunnels, on the hunt for their favorite prey: humanoid.

Maradochs hunt in spates (groups between eight and twelve in number) and are always led by females. The



weakest males act as scouts and stalking prey, leading overconfident fools back toward an ambush by his hunting group. They are aggressive and territorial at night but usually remain in torpor during the day. They attack with their teeth and claws but the elder mother (leader of each scourge) often has added protections, be it thorns around her lair or herself or random items among their hoard of treasures.

Many widely known tales say these creatures are fascinated by metal paraphernalia. It is not uncommon to find metal weapons, armor, shields and coins from the ancient eras in their lairs especially were the “elder mother” lives. In fact, they sometimes make traps with such materials, rigging a slide of coins in a tunnel to deliver the unwary down a sliding tunnel to fall or simply having a shield to thump as a daytime warning to awaken the group.

Matakata

The massive Khitan “dragon turtle” defies convention by surviving in the arid wastelands via special abilities shared with no other animal species on the planet. Indeed, there is no record of the matakata recorded by any peoples or cultures until the past century. They are, unaccountably, newcomers to Khitus,

and they are at least semi-intelligent, communicating with each other in a strange guttural language. Their unknown and recent origins, as well as their dragon-like appearance, lead many to suspect some connection to the Dragon Kings.

A matakata is an enormous, hard-shelled creature that measures nine feet to the shell-top, twelve feet in breadth and eighteen in length from snout to tip of tail. It weighs even more than its girth would indicate, owing to the massive and thick protective shell that covers its body from neck, shoulders, hips, and base of tail.

A matakata's eight ton weight makes it cumbersome and slow, able to move only with great effort in lumbering steps. Certain soft sands are impossible for it to cross, in fact, so it must be careful never to wander into places where its weight cannot be spread sufficiently by its broad feet. Despite its plodding locomotion, the creature is agile in combat and self-defense; once engaged in battle, the matakata becomes instantly resigned to fight in that spot to the finish.

The dragon turtle's primary attack is its bite, delivered by a deceptively quick jaw and neck. Its flat teeth hold and crush, rather than rend and tear. It can also pummel with its feet and tail, but these far slower attacks are only effective against prey that cannot easily dodge or move out of their way. It can also lunge forward unexpectedly to trap and crush a target beneath the shell on its chest—a maneuver few living creatures can survive.



The matakata's shell is a fibrous, secreted resin material unique to its species. Young emerge from their eggs with only a very thin shell. This continuously grows thicker over the years, expanding to match the growing body within and repairing any damage suffered. When fully grown, a matakata can quickly retract its head, limbs, and tail completely within its shell, even closing hinged shell pieces to make its personal fortress impregnable against any attack, even flames.

Matakata shell is difficult to work once the creature is dead, as even steel saws dull quickly when trying to cut through it. Some artisans capture young ones and cage them alive in what are essentially molds to reform the growing shell into shields, helmets, or other bits of armor. Of course, capturing baby dragon turtles away from their protective mothers is a dangerous feat in itself.

In addition to its incredibly useful outer shell, the matakata has a unique ability to create moisture for itself from its surroundings, even when there is no natural moisture to be found. Left to its own devices, the dragon turtle can gather rock, sand, and soil into special pockets inside its under-shell where an unidentified process turns some of it into potable water, which it immediately consumes or shares with its young. With this ability, they are free to wander even the most remote, arid portions of the world without fear of dehydration.

Mesachnat (Hypno-Spider)

Classic Age chroniclers named this predator species the mesachnat, though most refer to it commonly as the hypno-spider. Locals around the Fairian Woods and environs also call it taer'moonloch ("predator of shining eyes"). The mesachnat is far deadlier than the run-of-the-mill spiders that inhabit the city of Pavouk and other regions of Khitus. This horrid, man-sized arachnid hunts other creatures its own size, lurking usually in woodlands or rocky places.

Contrary to the habits of other arachnids, the mesachnat hunts in broad daylight to take advantage of its most potent trait. It positions itself directly in the sun and redirects its light through its crystalline fur, creating an intense flash that can temporarily blind and partially incapacitate its victims with intense headaches.

Once the mesachnat stuns its victim, it jumps onto it and injects a paralyzing toxin via its bite. Once its prey is subdued, the beast wraps its victim in webs to store it alive for later consumption. Those lucky enough to escape such monsters claim an eerie side effect of hypno-



spider poisons: they felt no pain from the bite and saw beautiful angelic beings manifest around them while insensate.

Peer'urat (Screaming Cobra)

Basking beneath the hot, Khitan sun waits one the deadliest wasteland snakes, ready to prey on the unwary: the peer'urat or screaming cobra. Fast, cunning and, some say, possessed of a nearly human intelligence, this reptile can strike, bite, kill and swallow an adult human whole. They grow more than 15 feet long and can weigh over 440 pounds, but this vast size does not seem to hinder the cobra's lightning-fast agility. Matched with cunning strategy and tactics, the peer'urat picks its positions well, setting elaborate traps in the local terrain, like a scaled spider waiting for its next meal.

It is called the screaming cobra for good reason: after sneaking up on its prey and before it strikes, it looses a deafening scream so frightening that it can paralyze the infirm. Peer'urat poison is very strong, numbing the victim's muscles while making victims spasm uncontrollably (possibly driving them further down the snake's



throat). Even if not consumed, a victim's heart races and spasms, ripping itself to pieces within minutes. An antidote must be applied quickly to save the victim's life. Fortunately for travelers, peer'urats hate even their own kind, so are only encountered one at a time.

Regelth (Stone Worm)

In the deepest deserts, nothing can survive on the dunes exposed to the relentless sun. The rulers of these forsaken places take refuge beneath the surface and flow through the desolation as easily as fish through water.

Regelthi, or stone worms as most call them, are creatures of living rock. They are six feet wide and up to 60 feet long, and their weight surpasses five tons (the largest being ten tons). Despite a lack of teeth, they eat and digest stone, preferring crystals and hard rock, though they do occasionally surface through sand on the trail of certain foods. Wherever they burrow beneath the dunes, they leave behind caverns and dark spaces. An adventurer in such a place may think he's found a refuge from the surface world, but the denizens here cannot abide intruders and attack with all haste.

Stone worms are mineral eaters, churning up and excreting enormous wealth in their wakes. Plunderers seek the



results of the digestion: the red tear stones. Regelti can eat more than half a ton of crystals per day. In the same time, they produce a great deal of grey silt, mixed with over 20 pounds of red tears. Red tears are particularly coveted gems, affordable only to the richest Khitans.

The regelti appears very slow but it has one treacherous attack: it drags the unwary into its maw by massive amounts of suction. Regelti don't enjoy meat, and victims soon dissolve in a system designed to break down rock and stone. A stone worm's hide may appear soft and wet but is in fact tough and impermeable. If the creature is killed, very few craftsmen or armorers can transform the hide into something useful.

Regelti warrens can reach deep beneath the desert, sometimes as far as a mile directly into the ground. They extend for many miles in all directions without rhyme or reason to their design (as they are often dug in the search for food); non-regelti easily become lost in them. Caverns dug near the surface often are unstable, and desert denizens often fall into them and become trapped; such creatures, desperate for escape, can present particularly savage encounters among the dark warrens.

Regeltex (Greater Stone Worm)

The "greater stone worm" is especially rare, but can be four times the size and mass of its lesser kin. Wherever

one burrows through the desert subsurface, it leaves behind especially rich territory where common regelti find easy food. An encounter with a regeltex heralds the proximity of many, many other worms. To penetrate the harder stone in its path, a regeltex emits a concussive blast that pulverizes and splinters even the hardest granite. Engaged as a weapon against troublesome enemies, the concussive effects can reduce a flesh-and-blood creature to a jellied mass.

Nomads consider the regeltex as gods and worship them accordingly. Some seek communion with the creatures with little success; blessed are any who survive an encounter with them and they rise in tribal status. Some claim true cooperation with the great worms, though this is more imagined than actually achieved. The worms have no conception of kinship with surface life forms, no matter how persistent, any more than men do for fleas.

Sanid

No Khitan race rules the skies as the penmai do from their high tree-top and rocky peaked villages. Without their profound union with the powerful sanid, though, they would be as sand-bound as all others.



Sanid once blackened the skies in the rugged, boulder-strewn badlands of the far southeastern realms, unchallenged by any other large avian species. Their size—a six-foot wingspan and weighing nearly twenty-five pounds—combined with speed and formidable natural weapons allowed them to dominate the landscape. Left to their own devices, wild sanid hunt as they have always hunted, circling on the hot desert updrafts, patiently waiting for rock-dwelling lizards to show themselves far below. Even large prey fall victim to their razor-like claws and powerful beak. As quickly as possible, the victorious hunter carries its prize to a higher perch to dine noisily, ripping flesh and sinew, in a more defensible setting.

Penmai Nok have a visceral union with the sanid, summoning and commanding them with simple mental and visual instructions. The avians willingly serve the Penmai as carriers and messengers, but are not so easily trained by other races.

Swafa



The smaller, swifter personal mount of choice carried the Khitan peoples out of the southern plains and across the face of the world. Swafa have ancient origins and

have been bred specifically for riding since before the rise of the Daragkarik. The ostrich-like savannah lizards yet retain much of their wild savagery and temperament, even if biddable enough to ride.

They are quick on their hind feet, racing in long, bounding strides through the desert, where their broad, padded toes gain perfect traction. They are less effective on pavement, stone, or packed surfaces, where their speed suffers unless they are shod; blacksmiths must protect themselves with heavy gloves and masks and then still drug the beasts just to have a fighting chance to accomplish their ends.

Left to their own devices, swafa chirp when they run, a high-pitched throaty whistle timed to their strides that helps them identify each other in the wild. Many riders split their mounts' tongues with razor sharp blades to silence them permanently and to allow for more quiet travel.

Swafa are not particularly fearsome beasts. They can defend themselves with their fore claws and can bite to ward off attackers. They never engage their hind legs or tails in combat, relying instinctively on their speed for defense and escape. When startled, they spit foam and saliva in a drowning spray that can blind or otherwise deter an enemy, further facilitating escape.

Swafa naturally flock together into groups of up to 80. In the wild, their swift-moving flocks must be tracked and culled to capture wild ones for domestication. While many swafa are bred and raised domestically, even these must be “broken” and trained in the same manner as a wild swafa captured out on the dunes. Even with a rider, a swafa's flocking instinct kicks in, and savvy riders know how to take best advantage of it. As a result of this, swafa cavalry ride more closely packed than any other mounted troops on Khitus; that tight formation makes them the heaviest, densest cavalry on the battlefield.

Swafa also roost, establishing a home base properly marked by their spit and feces. They return to it again and again for rest and perceived protection. Provided the animal is not disoriented or injured, a swafa will make its way back to its roost, even if that takes several days or weeks. They have the reputation of being a safe resource, since they are seldom permanently lost and even stolen swafa return to their home roosts eventually.

Swafa are carnivores and normally feed on a diet of smaller creatures or meat of any kind, cooked or raw. In addition, swafa will eat each other, preying on the flock's old and wounded. This feeding instinct can disrupt an ongoing battle. A rider must exert his mastery over his mount when it naturally lunges for a wounded comrade or any other fresh meat on a battlefield.

A swafa's back narrows from the hips through the shoulders, and is not exactly ideal for mounting a saddle. The bone ridge of its spine offers no comfortable position, so riding a swafa bareback is nearly impossible. A proper swafa saddle attaches with bolts and thick leather straps to a frame drilled into the swafa's hips and spine. The saddling requires the animal be drugged to unconsciousness, and some never survive the process. A new saddle can be swapped out for repair or improvement, as necessary, though the saddle frame remains permanently affixed to the beast.

Tabahk (Thorn Lizard)



Named the tabahk by Makadan nomads, this medium-sized lizard inhabits the savannahs, preying on unwary herd animals and wildlife. People prize the thorn lizard not only for its meat but its hide, which can be made into some of the best Khitan hide armor. A complete, undamaged hide fetches a good price with the caravans or in any city, where defensive measures become more important with every passing season.

The tabahk lives near grasslands whenever possible. It's not unusual to see these reptiles chasing small rodents on up to herd animals like manju. It can grow

to be around three feet tall and weigh as much as 60 pounds.

Tabahks are fierce, aggressive, and cunning against creatures up to their own size, but flee larger creatures whenever possible. Cornered thorn lizards can unleash fearsome attacks with claws and fangs. Their natural armor is very difficult to penetrate, so hunters have devised an effective tactic to attack the spot just under a tabahk's neck in a single blow.

Thakal

"The moons of Khitus ride on the back of the thakal."

The primary Khitan beast of burden is a difficult, foul-smelling but powerful lizard called the thakal. They have been domesticated since the early Classic Age and employed heavily in the mass migrations of humans from the distant south to their present day homelands. They are typically creatures of the arid plains, staying clear of mountains and forests.

Thakal can be harnessed to the plow or wagons, even teamed with difficulty—a drover needs great skill (or calming herbs snuck into their food) to keep them from fighting one another. Heavy loads can be strapped to their backs, but their uneven, loping gate makes it a rough journey. Goods need to be packed well and strapped down tight to survive intact.

Thakal must be captured for domestication as wild adults—a dangerous task given their size and aggressive disposition. Younger thakal, while more easily captured, often panic and quickly sicken and die in captivity. Both males and females serve well as mounts, the former generally bulkier and stronger, the latter somewhat quicker on their feet. Males must be castrated to keep them calm enough for use. Branding and scarring mark the beasts for ownership, original trainers, best uses, and so on.

Thakal saddles are wide and grip the animal as firmly as possible, since the rest of the beast waggles back and forth as it lopes along. Creating saddles comfortable for both rider and mount is easier said than done; many claim to have perfected the practice, though most riders have sore backsides that say otherwise. When still, a thakal provides a stable platform for javelineers or archers, but aim is less accurate while on the move.

Thakal are saddled and ridden for personal transportation, as well, and serve as heavy cavalry mounts to human armies and marauders across the wastelands. In battle, they lash out with claws and fangs, though skilled riders must rein in their mount's anger to use their own

weapons or simply to prevent being thrown off. A thakal's tough hide and bulk make it difficult to kill.

Experienced riders say that no two thakal mounts are exactly the same, surprisingly so for such a simple and stupid animal. Their personalities are simplistic but varied, and the relationship between rider and mount develops slowly over time. It takes as much as a year before a new mount can be relied upon to obey commands consistently, without protest.

Besides transportation or brute drayage, owners use thakal in two common, brutal displays. Those too old or slow to be useful are pitted against each other in savage battles amid rings of fire (surrounded by gamblers betting on the battle). Another cruel trial (used by some tribes as a rite of passage) demands that thakal deemed too wild for domestication are blinded with firebrands. After strapping barbs against their hide to enrage them, they place the beast in an open courtyard. Participants in this trial sneak up on and slap the beast, then hope to escape without suffering anything worse than lacerations or broken bones (although more than a few are crippled or killed). After the contest, thakals are euthanized, their carcasses discarded.

Tough thakal meat sickens most people, but many stranded desert dwellers have settled for it in desperate situations. The flesh takes quite a while to stop jerking and quivering, even after being cooked.



Uludur



Another common Khitan herd animal with special properties is the uludur. This sluggish creature has been domesticated for many centuries and its meat is considered a delicacy by those who can afford it. The uludur is not a large creature, no more than eighteen inches high at the shoulder.

Uluduri have a secondary and highly desirable ability: they have internal organs that can purify salt water, toxic liquids, or even the most polluted (or even poisoned) waters into fresh water. This pure water is stored in their gullet for their own use. It can be extracted fairly easily back through the mouth with a gentle squeeze without harming the animal. In this manner, an adult uludur can purify as much as five liters of water per day.

Uluduri are fairly easy to handle, but their small tentacles contain small sharp stingers that can hurt an unwary person. Their eggs are known to have limited curative properties, as well, in their undeveloped and raw states.

Ulweppa (Blood Crawler)



Blood crawlers, or ulweppas, are the scourges of the wastelands. Denizens who miss or ignore the signs of their infestation—looser patches of darkened sand or grounds striped with blood that begin and end suddenly—can quickly be overrun, buried alive, and harvested for their blood beneath the sands.

A full-grown ulweppa is as wide around as an adult man's thigh and can grow up to eight feet long. Sightless, their keen sense of smell guides them toward living animals and their supplies of blood. Ulweppas are not quick, slithering across or just beneath the surface of soft sand or dust; they rely on silence to get close enough to strike. Before biting, ulweppas secrete a fluid around their mouths that deadens the bite's pain for the victim: an unaware or sleeping target may not notice they have been bitten and are being drained of blood. Blood crawlers also attack aware targets and use sheer numbers to surround and subdue victims for draining.

Once ulweppas catch the scent of blood, they pursue relentlessly, even over many leagues and days. They send vibrations out through the ground that other

crawlers receive; in a matter of hours, a group might find itself being stalked by dozens (called a letting of crawlers) or even hundreds (a carnage) of blood crawlers. Ulweppas can stand tall, burying their tails in the sand and extending their open mouths as high in the air as possible, showing themselves while making an eerie sucking sound that carries for miles.

Fresh blood revitalizes and strengthens an ulweppa immediately, and wounded blood crawlers heal quickly. Tasting blood drives them into frenzy, regardless of the source or quantity. Given an opportunity, a crawler will gorge itself on blood to the point where it is too bloated to move. They commonly descend upon a battlefield to dine on the fallen, making it only safe to visit such a place after the corpses have been drained to pale husks left baking in the sun.

A blood crawler tries to keep its victim alive so it can drink its blood for as long as possible. Once a victim falls unconscious, an ulweppa drags it where it can bury the body just beneath the surface. It then sticks its tail into the victim's mouth and down its windpipe, breathing for the buried victim by keeping its own mouth open just above the surface. A victim may stay alive for several days this way, supplying nourishment to the crawler the entire time, before eventually dying of dehydration or starvation.

Even successfully dispatching ulweppas does not always end their horrors. Blood crawler bites often infect victims with parasitic seed-worms that burrow into the victim's digestive system. They multiply there and emerge in the victim's feces until it either dies (within 1-4 days if untreated) or purges the parasites by magic or caustic poisons. Larvae grow to an immature ulweppa within a week with only a small supply of liquid blood. Most desert peoples are wary of such larvae, and either insist on immediately burning any wastes or set their children to actively pick through the feces of any visitors. They drive off any found infested, if not killing them outright. Ruthless raiders collect and weaponize larvae, hurling them by catapults inside the walls of besieged cities.

Urshev

Moving out of the southern deserts, men had to discover new beasts of burden among the northland native species. They found many ursine creatures in the deep caves and forest warrens of the frigid north realms, including a broad variety of bears and the larger urshevan. Of those, only the latter proved useful as sturdy beasts of burden. The urshevan often serve as personal mounts, pack animals, and warm-blooded companions ideally suited to the cold wastes.

The shaggy urshev, unlike a bear, neither hibernates nor does it mate and raise young annually. They are comparatively long-lived, surviving a century or more, and only reproduce twice during that time (anytime in their second and fourth decades). Urshevan rarely gather in snarls of more than eight, given the amount of food it takes to sustain them and how protective of that food they are. Snarls come together most often for winter survival, huddling together for warmth, though two- or three-year snarls happen for mating season (one bull for up to six females), the eighteen-month gestation of any young, and the nine months after birth until cubs can survive on their own.

Urshevan are easily tamed by and put to work for humans, whether young or as adults. They bond easily with humans who treat them well and, more importantly, provide them with food. The relationship is simple: feed urshevan and they will serve until they need to wander free to feed themselves or indulge in their rare mating periods.

Battling only when goaded, cornered, or if its food is threatened, an urshev engages with its long forepaws and thick, heavy claws. Saddles are unnecessary for riding urshevan; skilled riders twine their legs into the beast's long fur and hold and guide the beast by grabbing certain tufts. The ample urshevash fur can be pulled up around the rider's haunches and torso for additional warmth.



Xursha (Constrictor)



Among the most aggressive snakes in all of Khitus, these 45-foot-long reptiles are a deadly menace found in swamps and muddy places. Ancient humans once revered these creatures as avatars of some forsaken goddess. Some rogue former slaves still settle around swamps and take captives to them as offerings. Being fed by savages to a constrictor is a fate spoken of only in hushed whispers among the desert folk.

A constrictor's main diet consists of large mammals, especially beasts of burden or humans, when they find them. Xursha are highly territorial and will even feed on other constrictors in any areas claimed as theirs. This animal is so strong that it is almost impossible to escape after it embraces its prey, often breaking bones or armor in its crushing coils. It is very fast in mud or water, but it can catch an adult man in a few seconds and swallow him after constriction in just a couple of minutes. Constrictors cannot dissolve iron or gems, though, so the older it gets the more items it could have inside its belly.

A constrictor's hide is highly valued for use as armor. Its treated scales are difficult to cut or burn, though the fibrous hide is rubbery and flexible, far more so than standard hide or leather armors.

Yethawar (Sonic Beetle)



Among Makadan tribes and cities, grassland-dwelling yethawars are both feared and cherished. Dubbed “sonic beetles” by non-Makadans, these creatures possess a variety of talents that make them both deadly and valuable.

Physically, a yethawar is no stranger than many other large beetles. Roughly twice the size of an adult fist, it has six legs and a narrow head protected by a thick chitin exoskeleton colored brown, bronze, or beige. Its legs end in sharp claws that cling to rocks, have good traction in softer sand or dust, and help it protect itself from predators. Similarly, it can bite hard enough to nearly sever a man’s finger, so picking one up can be dangerous.

The yethawar’s unique feature, though, is its pair of fanned antennae that emerge like large ears or antlers from the forward dorsal ridge just behind its eyes. These are the yethawar’s sound receptors and generators, crucial to its existence and a practical utility to human owners. The sonic beetle’s antennae allow it to communicate with other yethawars over long distances and

hear far-away dangers, giving it ample time to burrow and hide.

Sonic beetle handlers tap into this communication system to send signals to each other. Two such beetle owners can send simple coded pulses, or “chirps,” that a distant companion can receive and interpret. Chirps can be heard over distances of up to ten miles, depending upon intervening terrain and weather. There is no universal code of chirps established, so signals must be simple. Chirps travel unprotected, and could be intercepted and deciphered by enemies.

Yethawar antennae can also create focused sonic blasts that can deafen and destroy objects. They are most effective against rigid things, less so against softer ones. The high-pitched squeal can shatter glass or even a steel blade, piece of armor, a tooth or claw. The amount of direct damage is minimal. Yethawars instinctively direct their attack against a threat’s closest exposed ears; the deafness caused may last for several minutes or hours before wearing off, or result in a permanent reduction in hearing (often in a single ear at a time).

Traveling entertainers have a use for yethawars completely outside their normal role or natural defenses. This beetle can imitate and amplify the sounds it hears. Singers and musicians can train a single yethawar (or even an echo of them) to “sing along” with them. The sounds are neither human voices nor exact duplications of accompanying music. Still, the sonic beetle’s contribution is pleasing, tonal, and even harmonious. Hearing of this, spell casters eager to perfect the benefits of their own harmonious magic now seek yethawars and those who know the secrets of coaxing this musical nature. Beware a mage who allows sonic beetles to hang from his clothing and crawl about his flesh freely; he may be more powerful than he appears.

Yulugh

The simple yulugh, also known as a “burrower” in many Khitan languages, is a slug-like pest that can destroy a home, village, or caravan if unchecked. They consume and contaminate water, dissolve and weaken buildings and equipment, and befoul their surroundings with a terrible stench.

They are small, varying from the size of a man’s thumb to no bigger than the palm of his hand. Made of soft, moist flesh, they have a rubbery interior skeleton made of cartilage. Smashing one is simple, if disgusting, making a stinking mess that must be cleaned up lest it further dissolve the floor.

Yulugh divide and reproduce asexually—one becomes two which then become four and then eight in a matter of hours. They excrete a weak but tenacious acid that softens timbers, stone, and leather, and even burns the skin after prolonged or repeated exposure.

Yulugh can quickly burrow into the earth to hide, which makes them difficult to find and root out. In the wastelands, wanderers always suspect an abandoned cart or wagon of being infested with yulugh. Unless desperate for some other provisions, such are therefore approached cautiously or given a wide berth.



chapter 8: sorcery's mind

A reservoir of magical energy hides beneath the physical universe, though only a paltry few realize this. Most witness its power through wizards employing their craft, blind to understanding the power's true source is not its wielder. Few comprehend the reservoir's existence; fewer still know how to tap, channel, and unleash its energy in the desired manner; even fewer again truly know what they touch has a mind, knows what they do, and does not approve.

Magic has a consciousness—a decidedly inhuman self-awareness backed by an indomitable will. Dabblers, hedge mages, and traveling wizards using minor magics fail to draw its attention any more than a colossadant notices the birds clustered on its back to pick at the bugs in its hair. Only more focused, powerful magic disturbs sorcery's slumber. Once roused, it does not settle back to composure without incurring a toll.

Sorcery's bargain is cruel and often soul crushing, but simple and invariable. What the learned in magic can all agree on, though, is that the magical reservoir would prefer to be left alone, and woe to any who displease it in such a way that it levels its full and wicked attention upon them.

In the broadest terms, sorcery's demands are not satisfied by wealth or prestige. No material thing warrants its interest. It holds no truck with the affairs of mortals. No, the reservoir is nurtured, pleased even, by subtler things, by thoughts, by terror, by suffering, mental suffering, and emotional strife. These things satisfy its wants, appease its displeasure, and turn its eyes away from any who have disturbed it.

Strictly speaking, the instigator of all these emotional attacks is the reservoir of magical energy that exists in the greater universe from which all spell casters ultimately draw their power. When referring to its conscious state, it is collectively known as "sorcery's wrath" or "vengeful sorcery," though sometimes "magic" or "magical ire" may be employed. Also, the spell caster who draws magical ire on himself is known as the "offending wizard."

sorcery's wrath

Each time a wizard casts a spell, he taps into a magical reservoir of energy that would rather not be disturbed. Each casting may bring wrathful retribution down upon the wizard or those emotionally closest to him. Mages recognize and accept this risk as an unavoidable consequence of their dark craft. How they mitigate sorcery's wrath defines them. Common folk know that ill fortune and spellcasting walk hand in hand, so they shun wizards and drive them away with torches and pitchforks. Magic is truly the Orphan's Trade.

Triggers

Power and clumsiness are the two primary things that draw sorcery's wrath. A wizard who unleashes a powerful incantation knows he has tweaked sorcery's nose, and he needs to be prepared for the aftermath. Presumably, a wizard capable of such powerful spells has also steeled himself against emotional attack, hardened by a lifetime of experience. Indeed, the means by which a mage mitigates these attacks is his trademark, or the trademark of his wizard's college.

Less-experienced wizards, however, suffer unwanted attention from sorcery when they fail in magical attempts. The magical consciousness does not suffer fools lightly and makes its displeasure known. Any miscalculation is sufficient. A spell that has less than the originally desired effect, or that the subject manages to ward off by some means, causes the caster consternation. Sorcery's wrath seeks to demoralize and push a fledgling magician away from magic.

So, a wizard who casts a minute amount of magic and does it well knows he is safe from sorcery's wrath. He has flown beneath its notice. A powerful wizard can perform low-level magic for many years without bringing retribution down

upon himself or his acquaintances. That distinction, however, is not well known or accepted by non-wizards; they distrust any employment of magic, and rightly so.

Afflictions

Sorcerous energy descends upon the offending wizard in many forms. The most common of these are the afflictions. These seemingly natural occurrences appear suddenly, their root cause not immediately apparent. A victim might never guess an extradimensional awareness has chosen her to suffer, attributing the affliction to more mundane causes. Sorcery leaves no trails, but those familiar with how it deals out its displeasure can recognize signs, which many call curses or hexes. Regardless, the wizard suffers personally and socially for dabbling in magic as long as her hateful nemesis deems it appropriate.

All afflictions below are noted from most to least common in occurrence.

Personal Afflictions

Primarily, the afflictions warn a wizard to “stop tinkering with power you do not fathom.” Alas, they are warnings oft ignored. A wizard who throws caution to the wind and continues casting magical spells risks much, as multiple afflictions may befall him at the same time, and cumulative effects may be crippling. Also, multiple afflictions can become permanent. A wizard who heeds the warnings and sets his magic aside while afflicted protects himself against life-long disabilities.

Physical Irritation: The spell caster’s skin itches, pain coming in waves all over the body. Wherever scratched, skin becomes raw and painful or possibly bleeds. The face grows flush and the scalp flakes and cracks, leaving open sores. Soles of the feet and palms of the hands become heat-sensitive and are constantly too hot or too cold. A wizard is forever scratching with fingernails or any tool at hand, seeking relief by salves, lotions, baths with strange salts, or many foul-smelling or greasy folk remedies.

Pain: The wizard is beset with unnatural, occasionally debilitating pain. Exact symptoms vary in type and severity. He feels like needles stab at his skin or fire licks at him. His throat and lungs burn or his ribs and spine ache as if they are twisted or crushed. Internal organs burn or roil intensely enough to make him double over. Sharp pains run along his limbs or digits, sudden enough to make him jump. Stabbing headaches make it almost impossible to concentrate, forcing him into the darkest space, rubbing his temples in a vain hope that they will leave him be. The wizard might seek compresses or even ice to ease his discomfort.

Non-debilitating Sickness: The wizard becomes nauseated and aches as if he suffered a common flu. He feels weak and feverish, sweating but shivering at the same time. The symptoms are real enough that it is difficult to hold food down and appetite is dampened, keeping the victim weak and fatigued. The same remedies that ease a real sickness can ease a wizard somewhat, but this phantom sickness will pass only when sorcery finishes punishing the wizard.

Sores and Lesions: Grotesque weeping blotches appear upon a wizard’s face, arms, or other flesh. Pus and gore stain the skin and clothes. Not just painful, the blotches itch and smell of rotting eggs and flesh. Others find them more repulsive and fear the affliction to be contagious, often driving a wizard out of the community lest an epidemic set in.

Phobias: Sorcery’s displeasure fosters genuine, deep-seated fear in an unwary wizard’s soul. It amplifies existing phobias by crippling degrees. Someone fearful of heights becomes unable to manage his anxiety, avoiding even casual elevations and worrying about climbing stairs, hills, ladders, and so on. One disturbed by public speaking may soon be unable to face even conversation among friends to the point of hiding away and lying to avoid the horrible exposure of it. New phobias emerge that are difficult for a wizard to avoid, such as fears of books or study, or all-too-understandable fears of mis-casting a spell.

Hallucinations: The wizard sees all manner of things in his waking state that simply are not there. Dream creatures follow him around or lurk where he goes. Ghosts and apparitions appear at random times. He sees roads where there are none, friends where there are enemies, treasure where there is trash. Most hallucinations are temporary and brief, but some linger like phantoms, making the wizard appear delusional and paranoid. Persistently pursued, the wizard questions his own intellect and must fight to disbelieve these illusions lest he give into them and disappear himself into a nightmare world of the unreal.

Depression: Many wizards begin as withdrawn, self-doubting figures. Angered sorcery knows how to twist thoughts to drive one further into personal gloom. It digs in deep, exhuming every slight, sneer, or ridicule ever heaped upon a victim and multiplies them incessantly to make them worse still. The wizard questions his mastery of his Craft and his very existence, bullied by unseen forces eager to drag him down, to the brink of destruction. Wizards so tormented succumb to their darkest thoughts, avoid others and their tasks, and wallow in mental mire.

Nightmares: Sorcery invades the wizard’s slumber, filling his mind with terrible, haunting images that rob him of deep sleep and peace of mind. The wizard now experi-

ences truly terrible nightmares, rife with grotesque images and gore-filled scenes of destruction (or whatever instills horror and anathema into said wizard). Vicious acts are carried out against innocent loved ones or other familiar people. Magic unearths long-buried childhood traumas and uses them to horrific effect. In addition to the psychological toll, the wizard suffers from the fatigue of night upon night of interrupted, fitful sleep.

Rage: The wizard becomes increasingly cross until the smallest irritant sets him off like a fireball. Commonly, a spell caster may have swallowed a great deal of anger while growing up, against bullies, wicked siblings, unfeeling parents, shadowy abusers, or mischievous friends. Once angered, sorcery seeks out this pent up anger and stokes its fires. A once-gentle wizard now enjoys and even searches out confrontations, delights in the pain of others, and may seek to cause that pain, if necessary. Disagreements turn quickly to arguments and confrontation. His temper flares at the least perceived slight. Keeping such anger alive all day and all night drains the wizard, but sleeps comes poorly to those enraged. His red eyes and gritted teeth announce his perpetually foul mood.

Forgetfulness: The wizard cannot retain knowledge. He fumbles through his spells and incantations. His plans and personal goals fade in and out of his consciousness or even disappear entirely. Associations are difficult to recall, names are forgotten. This may be the wickedest affliction of all, leaving the wizard befuddled and unable to function normally. Should it become permanent, the wizard may lose his powers entirely, no longer able to recite the complex incantations of his trade.

Physically Wretched: Without being truly ill, the wizard suffers a variety of uncomfortable maladies that are

troublesome and distracting. His appetite and thirst vary from insatiable to absent, shifting rapidly and unpredictably. He becomes incontinent and flatulent, and his bowels roil all the time. His breath and body odor become particularly offensive, far stronger than normal despite any hygiene and tinged with scents loathsome to many of his species.

Stress: The wizard takes the weight of the world upon her shoulders, regardless of her natural disposition. She amplifies every problem and complication, then worries and loses sleep. Accrued stress manifests through trembling, fidgeting, grinding of teeth, a short temper, or even hives and rashes. Even the least snags seem overwhelming, affecting her judgment. As with other afflictions, the wizard suffers fatigue from lack of sleep. She becomes defensive and unsure of her actions and takes offense at the slightest comment she can interpret as ridicule.

Infestations: Bugs, vermin, and fungal growths beset the wizard. Black flies swarm his exposed flesh, any food he eats, and concentrate around him for many paces in all directions. Roaches and crickets crawl through his clothing. Fleas and lice infest his scalp and beard, while disease-carrying worms invade every orifice. Mushrooms appear on his ears and shoulders. Rats follow him everywhere. Wherever he travels the wizard leaves a loathsome trail of vermin and fungi that further inflame any animosity folks have for spell casters.

Aging: Sorcery has few crueler methods than robbing years from a wizard's life. The common ramifications of rapid aging change one's appearance, physical endurance, and mental faculties quickly, even if the effects do not remain permanent. The wizard becomes tired more easily; his muscles sag and ache with any exertion; and



his bones and joints are no longer as flexible. His skin wrinkles; his hair grows gray or falls away; and teeth rot or fall out. Worst of all, memory becomes faulty or fades and thinking becomes more difficult. The wizard has trouble remembering spells and even the names of associates, plans recently made, or goals he has set out to achieve. These changes can be masked with clothing or even makeup and hair dyes, while written notes and informed companions and assistants can mitigate failing memory. Such provisions cannot turn back the advanced clock—only sorcery’s eventual revocation of the same.

Regional Afflictions

Nothing inspires the hatred of wizards among the general population than the propensity of sorcery to take action against his immediate surroundings. Villagers chase known spell casters away with torches and pitchforks, and many would simply kill them outright were it not for widespread belief that doing so brings down even worse curses. Many a wizard owes his life to those superstitions; they foster them and make them even more terrifying whenever they can.

Common folk associate regional afflictions so widely with sorcery that they often ignore or dismiss natural causes. Crop failures are always the result of witchcraft, or so Khitan farmers believe. Wrongful accusations can send a wizard packing in the face of local anger as easily as anything else.

Bad Weather: Extreme and inclement weather darkens the region. Wastelands become especially hot during the day and frigid cold at night. Sandstorms grow in ferocity, stinging and burying everything in their path. Land storms may erupt. In more temperate areas, dark clouds bring heavy rains or snows, lightning storms, and flash floods. Fog rolls in and gloom hangs over the land. Hail and tornadoes may appear. This makes life all the harder for natives who always suspect sorcery’s wrath in times of harsh weather . . . and seek the ones to blame.

Withered Crops: Wherever seeds are sown and grains grown, farmers fear strange, unexplained blights. Winter wheat fails to emerge from the thawing ground. Plants grow sickly, blotched with evil spots or twisted with unnatural growth. Grains taste foul or spoil in the cribs. When the crops die, there is usually little reserve to live on. Famine ensues, and woe to a wizard found nearby.

Infertility: Livestock no longer reproduce successfully. Ewes are stillborn. Eggs never hatch. Young animals grow weak and die in their mangers. Local agriculture suffers terribly as most herders drive their herds or flocks further afield. Older farmers “know” all too well that the unexpected deaths of young animals re the

first heralds of reckless wizardry. They seek, accuse and threaten witches and magical perpetrators, if they don’t drive them away immediately.

Disease: Cases of pox or plagues rise dramatically. An epidemic picks and chooses among the locals, challenging the weak and taking many lives. Children and the elderly are most vulnerable. Folk test local remedies and employ folk cures. Whole villages are quarantined, marked with warning signs enforced at spear point. To the simple, diseases always seem of mysterious origin, so many blame the more mysterious witches and spell casters for their ills.

Infestation: Locusts swarm the fields by the hungry millions. Famine follows the ravaging of the crops. Only the most tightly sealed granaries can protect the precious seeds. Other invaders include mice, rats, termites, rock-worms, mites, spiders, or ravens—anything en masse that might disrupt everyday life, gnaw at the local food supply, and bring filth and sadness.

Manipulating the Wrath

Prepared wizards can turn sorcery’s wrath against their enemies, but personal risks redouble. Certainly spell casters take great pains to mitigate the effects of sorcery’s wrath. Indeed, entire wizard schools and philosophies revolve around particular means by which to trick it or endure its effects so as to continue in the dark arts. Turning sorcery’s angry power against particular others and to the wizard’s advantage is, among spell casters, the truest sport.

The first step toward such manipulation is absorbing the target into the wizard’s circle of emotional attachments, which can be done either truly or artificially. The former is far more difficult, but not impossible. It entails the spell caster initiating and fostering a genuine relationship with someone he eventually plans to betray. Dark sorcery can sometimes be fooled by the trappings of actual emotional attachment, such as proximity, social and organizational ties, time spent in each other’s presence, and so on. Add enough of these trappings together and they might be strong enough for vengeful magic to seek them out as a victim.

Artificial emotions are sometimes easier to manifest, using simple things such as love potions and amulets. A wizard can feign friendship or even love, though such things take time and the application of charisma in ways unfamiliar to him. Disingenuous love is everywhere in the courts and palaces of high society, providing easy examples for a caster to emulate or use. To help venge-

ful magic hone in on an intended target, the wizard can also forsake other attachments and thereby narrow the field. Sorcery rarely checks that love is reciprocated before unleashing its hateful energies.

The ramifications of these manipulations are never directly fatal, but often so terrible the wizard wishes they were so.

Misfortunes

Once settled on its targets, vengeful magic alters fate to rain misfortunes upon them. Whether aware of sorcery's spiteful eye from beyond Khitus or not, victims must deal with some hardship visited upon them.

The misfortunes are listed from most to least common. Bear in mind that these maladies affect the target, and do not depend upon the offending wizard's proximity or regular association as a trigger at the start of said hard luck, unless the target for misfortune is specifically the wizard in question).

Direct/Personal Misfortunes

These misfortunes affect a wizard and/or her closest connections & associates.

Fall: Stairs become treacherous in the darkness. Worn paths become more slippery in rain or in haste. A fall scrapes skin, gashes elbows or knees, and rips clothes. From any height, a victim falls to the ground, life suddenly extinguished and limbs and neck bent more severely than normal for such a fall.

Animal Attack: Feral predatory beasts wander the world, protecting territory with fang and claw. Lizards and snakes protect themselves or their young when stumbled across. Tamed beasts of burden become unruly and break loose, trampling the unwary or worse. Even loving pets can turn feral, driven to savagery in a single terrible instant.

Venture Failure: A long-planned, successful enterprise collapses suddenly. Business opportunities dry up, key parties lose interest, or objectives shift and become somehow less important than when the venture began. The emotional energy put into the quest is spent without result, leaving only depression and profound disappointment.

Amnesia: Recollection eludes the victim. Simple matters slip the mind, such as the locations of key objects or people's names and ranks. Loved ones and acquaintances seem like strangers. Apparently alone and in a strange place, the victim may appear mad and may try to escape back to more familiar places, but, of course, such a place may no longer actually exist.

Sickness: Common illness grows more intense or prolonged. Wheezing coughs become raspier, sneezes increase in amount and force, and chills and aches never end.

A person so reduced falls into complacency, as do caregivers, when symptoms never abate, regardless of treatment. Personal and professional matters suffer inattention, as the victim slowly becomes a bed-ridden invalid.

Spurned: Without warning, one's truest love loses interest. Where there were once warm, reciprocated feelings, there remains only cold disdain. Familiarity has bred contempt. Emotionally abandoned, the victim experiences depression, self-doubt, and rage—the gamut of suitable reactions to a love spurned. Prior to acceptance, the victim uses all means to repair the relationship gone wrong.

Drunkenness: The temptations of liquor or other intoxicants become too much to resist. Indulgence leaves a victim concerned only with further inebriation. Fortunes are spent and lost, responsibilities shunned, and personal relationships strained or abandoned. With suffering come lies and theft, or any actions that will keep a victim immersed in a sea of drunken abandon.

Sleepwalking: The peace of night becomes a deadly odyssey of unconscious wanderings. One emerges from the bedchamber to seek random places or even dark, mysterious, or dangerous location, such as graveyards, desert wastes, or wicked forests. No earthly cure can stop these midnight meanderings that are certain to one night lead to injury or death.

Accidental Poisoning: Unknown allergies arise, blotching the skin or constricting the throat. A combination of spices or foul meat could incite sudden sickness or even death. A wicked brew meant for someone else finds its way into the wrong goblet.

Infertility: A young woman's life-giving womb grows dark and barren. Attempts to bring a child or heir into the world go inexplicably for naught. A living babe succumbs tragically to unseen forces and withers. A magic-induced stillbirth dashes anxious expectations.

Disfigurement: Innocuous wounds leave permanent, horrid marks upon the body. Simple cuts turn to wicked scars that stretch the flesh in inhumane ways. A maiden's face blotches with sores or becomes strangely misshapen, damaging its beauty. Unnatural warts and growths appear on the flesh. Bones twist against one another beneath the skin, damaging the shape above.

Withered Limbs: A favorite of vile sorcery, a limb grows twisted and useless. Fingers twist and knuckles swell grotesquely in arthritic agony. Fingernails blacken and fall off leaving weeping sores. A leg shrivels to lame inadequacy, its muscles weak, the knee buckled or left hopelessly rigid. An arm contorts into a knotted limb that can no longer reach beyond the body.

Coma: The victim becomes a living corpse, alive but absent from the world. Any sickness leading up to this

seems subtle, even minor. No conventional methods bring the person back to consciousness. Over time, the body deteriorates, muscles atrophy, bones weaken, and the skin bleeds from bedsores. Without constant care, the victim rots away.

Madness: Sorcery affects a mind, intensifying obsessions and sowing mistrust. Paranoia slinks into consciousness, and problems both real and imaginary grow exponentially. Victims believe friends are enemies, while strangers become as kin. Once great intellects retreat to simplemindedness or utter self-absorption. Loved ones despair for victims gone mad.

Suicide: Problems become so overwhelming that victims consider taking their own lives. Minds struggle with seemingly insoluble problems. Multiple attempts by a variety of methods may occur. Even watched or restrained, a victim remains in danger as the urge to end her life overpowers her (and any in the way).

Indirect/ Impersonal Misfortunes

These misfortunes harm a wizard or dark sorcery's target only indirectly. Most spell casters instantly recognize these are due to their disruptions of sorcery's rest, whether they admit this openly to others or not.

Vicious Rumors: Whispers blow through the streets like foul breezes. Every manner of insult and slight takes shape as nasty rumors race like wildfire through the community. Despite being completely untrue, their strength builds by volume and frequency. Reputation suffers from myths of cheating, infidelity, cowardice, pettiness, or anything that causes others to look askance at the victim.

Runaway Cart: Even a gradual grade can provide a merchant's cart with deadly momentum. Rocks bracing wheels crumble or are kicked aside. Beasts rebel and occasionally run amok with their stalls or wagons still in tow.

Shunned: Lifetime acquaintances grow cold and distant. Friends who would normally lend comfort cannot be found. Common courtesies become rarities even among complete strangers. Even associates involved in joint ventures recoil from simple discussions or attempts at continued contact.

Rival: An enemy gains the upper hand. Whether romantic, business, or other, the rival's resources expand tremendously, his allies multiply, and his advantages expand in all directions. Simultaneously, one's own assets decline, opportunities fade, and competitive advantages mysteriously disappear. Plans must be abandoned, associates disappointed, and competition steadily drains away one's wealth, power, or social prestige.

Fire: Flames sweep through the family residence, gutting the building. A lifetime of memories, heirlooms, and treasured belongings become ashes. Smoke chokes the victims and all people and things nearby. Flesh scorches, blisters, and forever disfigures victims not entirely engulfed in a fire.

Building Collapse: Beams creak and weaken beneath heavy burdens over the years. Techniques vary and the quality of craftsmanship becomes uncertain. Roofs leak, tiles loosen and fall. Floors give way, heavy objects plunging through upon the unwitting beneath them.

Lightning: Brilliant blasts of heavenly energy blast the ground, scattering dirt and stone. Trees split, boulders crumble, and woe to any standing nearby. Tinder ignites and entire fields or buildings go up in flames. A direct strike rarely leaves anyone to tell the tale.

Avalanche: Any hillside harbors unseen dangers above from stones piled precariously. Every sandstorm grinds away at their foundations, and every rainfall lubricates their slick surfaces. To those passing beneath, sudden crushing injury or death lurks silently above.

Targets

Vengeful sorcery's aim is to punish those who disturb its restful state. Scorch a wizard with fire, hack off a limb, or crush his body—that only leaves him to one day recover, gather again his ambitions, and return to his spell-casting ways. It recognizes this after millennia, and its punishment always involves emotional cruelty. Magic's dark consciousness seeks to scar spell casters in body, mind, and soul to make them think twice before ever again opening a spell book.

For minor or first-time irritants, sorcery contentedly inflicts emotional afflictions directly on the tampering wizard. For major continued incursions against it, sorcery often works more effectively against people the wizard cares for. Its sole intent is to convey the wizard's culpability for the terrible consequences.

Masking personal relationships is virtually impossible. It can tap a spell caster's true feelings about those in his life, ignoring words, actions, or thoughts. A wizard may deny any emotional involvements to keep his closest relationships secret, but magic acts according to deeper truths. Vengeance upon a secret loved one can put the wizard in a truly painful position. Regardless, Khitans of every culture know the consequences of magic can fall upon associates of a spell caster, so they protect themselves. They shun most magic-users or drive them from their villages, if not worse actions. Spell casters often live lonely, solitary existences for their profession. Magic is indeed the orphan's trade.



Children: Most vulnerable are the innocent offspring of a fledgling spell caster. Sorcery's cruel eye seeks them out for affliction, tugging at the wizard's heartstrings with icy fingers. Most parents gladly suffer on behalf of their children, but vile magic accommodates no selfless acts. A spell caster's child may suffer endlessly or even eventually die to inflict as much emotional trauma as possible.

Personal Loves: Even when the heart is not fully aware of its wants, sorcery identifies its true desires with cruel and vile precision. The one most vulnerable in a wizard's circle is the object of true amorous affection, whether he has confessed or even acted upon them at all. Anyone who feels a wizard's loving eyes upon them has reason to be wary. Sorcery has a way of betraying a spell caster's true feelings in a most hideous manner. Spouses are not as commonly afflicted as expected, which can beget suffering in other ways.

Parents: Vengeful magic may turn its glance toward those who brought the wizard into this world. His love and loyalties mark them as potential victims. Of course, if the wizard dislikes or has no strong love for his parents, they may be safe from magical ire. Again, sorcery sees through to the truth of the matter, and may even betray hidden realities of parentage heretofore unrevealed.

Extended Family: Particularly close relatives may also be at risk. Sorcery seeks out favorite aunts or uncles or cousins with shared childhood memories—especially the most innocent and helpless among them—to amplify its vitriol.

Friends: Befriending a wizard carries with it a grave risk, for bonds of friendship gleam like beacons to sorcery's anger. Some of a wizard's closest relationships are with companions, colleagues, respected elders, fellow students, or apprentices. Hurting them hurts the spell caster deeply, especially considering many of their magical dabblings involve some of these very people.

Acquaintances: Vengeful magic can search as far afield for victims as needed. It will touch even those only loosely associated with the offending spell caster. In these cases, it is the most fragile who draw the wicked eye: babes in their cradles, children, the meek, and the kind. Few shed tears for afflicted bullies, but many wail over the undeserved suffering of a child, teacher, or philanthropist.

Neighbors: Some may not know the wizard at all but suffer for his strange art by proximity. Denizens of his same village or town, or of his original hometown may feel magic's wrath. For this reason, few allow magic wielders to live anywhere near them. Genuine witch-hunts, complete with accusations and trials, are quite

common, though the error rate is very high. Mass panic from famine, drought, or pestilence often makes scapegoats of innocents unassociated with spell casting.

Shared Allegiances: Another source of vengeful targets are groups with whom the wizard shares allegiance. Rakarian wizards may bring wrath down upon other Rakarth, for instance. Any who support the same causes, share the same racial background, or fight beneath the same banner may become afflicted.

Selectivity

Among any potential victims, dark sorcery aims for maximum effect. Who would engender the most anguish for the wizard? Whose misfortune would induce the most tears? Magic wishes to send its message to the offender and the population at large—disturbing magic's slumber brings grave consequences.

Most Vulnerable: Usually, dark sorcery's immediate attention goes toward the weak and the lame or the young and innocent. Others include someone who has just suffered a terrible loss, or just recovered from a naturally occurring illness, a child of few friends, or a person whose fortunes have already turned for the worse.

Most Dramatic: Sometimes magic reaches its tendrils out toward whoever can make the most spectacular impact: someone of importance (such as a leader or tribal elder) or someone already in the public eye (such as an entertainer or well-known speaker). A vivid, public fall of one who touches many other lives affects a greater number of people and spreads sorcery's warnings that much better.

Most Visible: Occasionally, sorcery takes an opportunity to warn off as many people as possible with each affliction, so the more who see that act the better. Popularity becomes a curse. A local personality upon whom everyone depends or from whom everyone seeks advice should take heed. Victimizing a person at an important time in their lives—just after birth, at a wedding, or a ritual celebration—makes cruel magic smile.

Best Loved: People choose their heroes and their icons, and dark sorcery feels those affections. A noble prince, a highborn lady, a successful warrior—these common favorites are prime victims. Who dares disturb magic after watching a great hero shrivel and die beneath its baneful glare?

Greatest Potential: There is tragedy inherent in striking down a youngster poised for great things. The fledgling dancer, the musical prodigy, the promising apprentice, the maiden destined to marry well—sorcery watches these emerging talents, and watches well.

sorcery's influence in play

From a game point of view, certain characters may receive instructions to behave in new, increasingly unfriendly ways towards one of their spell-casting associates. If so, they should change behavior and even embrace the new reality as part of their regular game play. Dark sorcery's vengeance is a key element of the Dragon Kings world and gameplay, dependent upon the players' willingness to make it serve its central role in character interaction. It becomes a role-playing challenge.

Game Ramifications: Aside from role-playing challenges, sorcery's afflictions can have a direct effect upon a character's ability to perform any actions. Mental exhaustion can hamper the wizard's ability to memorize, research, or effectively use spells. Game statistics may be temporarily reduced. Apply the game's rules for exhaustion and fatigue where appropriate. Crippling afflictions might reduce the character's ability to travel, carry objects, climb, dodge, or fight.

Story & Social Ramifications: Wizards are outcasts. All know the horrors that might befall them for associating with a spell caster, so prejudices run high. Many wizards keep their practices secret, locking themselves out of sight while they delve deeper into their sorcerous studies. But the locals know the telltale signs of unwanted sorcerous attention. Once discovered, word spreads quickly, so a wizard finds few places to hide and fewer friends for aid. Among adventurers, a spell caster must continuously prove his value to the expedition or be cast out as an unnecessary burden.

Unwitting Agents

A wizard's friends and associates might not only become afflicted victims, but they may become pawns in sorcery's vengeance. For instance, when a wizard's friends turn against him, that dark reservoir partially controls or influences the actions of those friends. That control is nigh impossible to resist, since it taps the very magical fabric of the universe to get its way.

Still, such self-aware pawns can take actions to at least partially thwart sorcery's wishes. For instance, one could simply remove oneself from the vicinity of the offending wizard, thereby negating the possibility of turning against him or participating in rumormong-

ering. How much energy magic puts into bringing the friend back into association with the wizard has much to do with how pivotal that person's role is to its nefarious plotting. This is moot if there are many other friends left to turn against the wizard. If it needs the escapee's presence, magic can take steps to subvert any plans to meet its goals.

Priestly Magic

The Shadazim have their work cut out for them, facing skepticism from both worlds they touch. The Khitan masses remain dismissive of their proselytizing, since the ancient gods they represent have been absent far beyond living memory. The distant gods with whom they have intermittent contact have little faith that Khitus will again become a nourishing source of worshipers as the Shadazim promise them. Bridging that chasm between new worshipers and skeptical god presents a unique challenge.

Their spell casting ability depends upon two things: the attention of their chosen god and their proselytistic success.

For the former, the Shadazim must monitor his distance and attitude constantly. Connections between priests and deities are tenuous, at best, even for godlike powers. Regardless of preparation or devotion, there are times when a Shadazim cannot connect to a god's power for channeling into a particular spell. The connection or lack thereof cannot accurately be known until the moment of the casting. Such failures often have an immediate consequence, whether undermining confidence in witnesses or failing to protect a priest from harm.

Additionally, a god's fickle nature can leave priests in the lurch, as well. Without continuous demonstrations of devotion and evidence of progress in building worship, a god may choose not to waste the energy connecting to Khitus. Shadazim seek new worshipers constantly as large followings are the best proof of success that holds a god's attentions. If worship becomes stagnant, a god may lose interest or become erratic at a moment of need when a priest calls for power.

All this makes the Shadazim's magical expectations less reliable than he might wish. However, gods sometimes offset periods of inattentiveness with surges of startling magical energies. Some deities might see decreases in worship and reverse that trend through inspiration, allowing priests improved access to magics for a time or to accomplish some god-specified task. At those times, a Shadazim appear far more powerful and certain than normal. Wise Shadazim take advantage of this to

priestly magic game details

- A priest's reputation and role-playing determines how many worshipers follow him based on his personal charisma and personality. Apply the appropriate game rule for determining followers in this manner.
- Worshipers demand frequent demonstrations by priests or they may lose faith and wander away
- Priests are less mobile, as worshipers tend to wander off in their absence
- Additional worshipers can help the caster in a "harmonious" manner (see "Harmonious Magic" below)
- Each god's attention is mercurial. The more consistent gods are weaker, while the more powerful are maddeningly unreliable
- Any powerful creature extant upon Khitus or the unreachable beyond can pass itself off as a god so long as it can tap into the vast magical reservoir that powers the sun, moves the planets, etc.
- The original Dragon Kings could do this, but interrupted contact with this enormous power forced most of them off-world to defend Khitus, their ultimate results inconclusive
- A priest's access to god-granted magical abilities is directly linked to his most recent success as a proselytizer, often regardless of his long-term contribution of worshipers.

increase their reputation—and that of their religion—to span the next drought of magical power or divine attention.

Of more immediate importance, however, is the Shadazim's success proselytizing, bringing new worshipers to his god. A god expects progress and punishes lethargy by withholding magical energies, either partially or completely. A Shadazim must always struggle against the relative skepticism that the ancient gods still exist, compared with the inherently believable teachings of the Trakeen whose Dragon King deities are widely accepted as genuine, though their access to actual god-granted magic gives them a compelling argument for legitimacy.

Harmonious Magic

Music and magic are inseparable, and even the most reclusive spell caster chants incantations with a simple rhythmic rise and fall. Harmonious application is com-

mon to all Khitan spell casting for delivering or enhancing magic. The two are inherently linked, as the best music carries undeniable magical qualities to it and vice versa. Laypersons with no magical tendencies at all can participate in magical enhancement through musical talents alone, though most must conquer their fear of dark sorcery's wrath to do so. A wizard who masters both skills takes his craft to a much higher level.

Khitan magic often demands multiple casters for a desired magical effect, the key being the use of harmonious magic. Music relaxes the mind and unleashes unseen paths to blend separate magical notes into pleasant, even complex chords. This is not stealthy magic, for voices and instruments must be heard upon the wind. The harmony also needs to reverberate through all casters, spell components, objects to be affected, and so on. Harmonious magic is as common a rudiment to the fledgling spell caster as his spell books and somatic gestures.

Among wizards, harmonious magic allows two or more to combine their efforts and surpass individual limitations. Chanting the same spell at the same time is the base level of harmonious cooperation. Greater effects come from matching keys, crafting more accurate harmonies, or adding instrumental accompaniments. Skilled musicians who understand harmonious magic, gifted with such abilities or not, can also add to the effects. Most often, wizards must form an ensemble of their own kind to fully gain any benefits (or mitigate any consequences).

Priests have more latitude in tapping the musical enthusiasm of zealous followers to amplify their magic. They can combine spell casting through cooperation, just as wizards do. They also gain incremental advantages for each layperson that joins their voices, regardless of that person's abilities. A choir of worshipers focuses a priest's magic and secures a deity's attention for greater (or perhaps more regular) magical effect. Additional voices need not be willing voices, though, depending on the harmony demanded by the leading voice. In some cases, coerced participants are more effective for a priest's darker purposes, utilizing screams of pain into the melodic pleas to an angry god.

In all cases, harmonious magic allows casters to reach beyond their normal capabilities. Those who successfully build a magical ensemble can achieve spells unreachable as individuals, beyond the horizon of present skill sets. More commonly, harmonious magic helps them make known spells more intense, longer in duration, greater in range or area, or simply more awe-inspiring or terrifying.

Harmonious magical effects increase with the sophistication or complexity of the musical accompaniment. At its simplest level is unison chanting, which is easy to

teach and monitor, followed by singing with chords and resonance of increasing complexities. Rhythmic instrumentation is next easiest to incorporate—clapping hands, then simple drums, then rattles and any manner of shakers easily made and distributed. True musical instruments of any manner come next, as well as power gained by increased skill with said instruments. The instruments often reveal a caster's culture or tribe of origin, as each culture has different favorites, from lutes and mandolins to pipes and trumpets. Ambitious wizards always seek expert bards who can play and sing adroitly and even organize others for the benefit of a spell ritual.

Sorcery as Music Critic

Each new complication with harmonious magic, however, greatly increases a caster's chances of making a mistake. Anything that disturbs a casting's ensemble nature can cause it to falter or fail, drawing the unwanted attention of jealous sorcery. Rehearsal and repetition are some guard against poor performance, but no amount of preparation is foolproof. Relying upon added music to achieve a harmonious benefit puts the spell caster at additional risk. Anyone participating may find themselves directly in the sights of dark sorcery and suffer its ramifications.

Sorcery & the Dragon Kings

What was the relationship between the Dragon Kings and dark sorcery? If there were ever instances where the two powers were at odds, those stories failed to survive through the present day. Dramidgian sages profess there was a unique barrier erected that allowed the Daragkarik to seize magic in any amount or manner they chose with impunity. They contend that barrier, not dragon forms or tremendous power, defined the diverse guardians of old. Indeed, each Daragkark was demonstrably unique in form, powers, and origin. What unified them as a cohesive unit, the Dramidgeth assert, was their apparent immunity to sorcery's wrath. What that special ability had to do with their departure from Khitus is unclear . . . though a few Shadazim suggest all the world's weather problems and any current magical problems for wizards may be sorcery's wrathful revenge for all the trespasses of the Dragon Kings.

Harmonious magic game details

- “Group” casting is commonplace and usually expected, making this a key point of difference for the Dragon Kings world.
- This can be applied to wizard and priest magic.
- Wizards combine with other wizards.
- Priests combine with priests and/or fellow worshipers (non-spell casters).
- Additional casters can help cast spells usually beyond their power, either casting more powerful spells or casting more spells than normal.
- The possibility for the magic to fail increases.
- Preparation can minimize failures in performance or sorcery's wrath.
- Musical instruments aid the spell more than singing and chanting.
- Rhythm instruments tend to change the pacing and timing of a spell.
- Nyutu and other bards are highly sought after magical enhancers, often paired with a caster.



IMAGE © TOM RABBEY

Chapter 9: Gods & Demigods

Rise & Fall of the Gods

When human tribes first spread out over the continents of Khitus, the world was new and unspoiled. Simple peoples sought new places for pastures to tend their flocks. For a time, few significant obstacles slowed their progress. Still, the people grew understandably grateful for the ease of their lives, the abundant bounty of the land, and offered thanks to personifications of all the wonders they beheld. And as happens in such places and times, the chicken preceded the egg: powerful beings appeared as worthy creators, eager to soak up the worship so readily offered up. Thus Khitus's gods emerged.

Literally hundreds of new godly powers flocked to the burgeoning new world, and why should they not? The population grew at a rapid pace then, and tribes spread and splintered quickly in those days, adopting new godlike beings for their own once they demonstrated their existence and power. Only when the world slowed to a more predictable pace did competition check their numbers, as new worshipers were spread thinner and thinner. Pantheons filled themselves out completely, oftentimes with multiple gods with overlapping roles, and the people granted them all wide acceptance.

Toward the close of the Classic Age, though, the old gods gained competition for the attentions of the masses in the Daragkarik. The Dragon Kings presented an attractive alternative to those tired of worship or tribute, as they were approachable creatures that demonstrated repeatedly their love of the people and the world. Jealous gods grew angry but directed their hatred against one another, initiating a series of terrible inter-tribal wars. God fought god, and the weaker were killed or driven out, along with those who sought better opportunities on other worlds. The animalistic gods fled Khitus, wounded or otherwise, after time or circumstances stripped them of their worshipers.

For a time, though, the remnants of once-proud pantheons lingered. The still-humble masses retained their relationship with the gods, but many were left wanting

for emotional support or more direct intervention in specific areas; an absent god of agriculture meant famine reared its ugly head. Some pantheons consolidated into blended religions, forcing desperate clerics and priests to tighten their grips on ecclesiastical authority to chokeholds on power. The people grew even more disenchanted with the remaining clergy and gods, turning toward the benevolent Dragon Kings instead.

The Gods are Dead! Long Live the Gods!

It should be pointed out that creatures commanding genuine godlike powers are wholly different to other beings, even the powerful Dragon Kings. The latter, despite enormous power and faithful armies, were mortal creatures, tapping into reservoirs of magical power available to everyone else. Gods, on the other hand, exist as embodiments of the coarse universal fabric. They are magic manifested as emotion, conduits that transform worship into magical energies and redistribute these to their priests. The gods exist throughout time and space, though it takes worshipers to name and worship them. Without them, the energy and the ideas do not manifest into a deific physical or metaphysical presence. The power is there but dormant and unnamed.

Such is the situation upon Khitus, a world that has ignored the gods for a long period of time. The Shadazim seek to change that.

Return of the Gods

Shadazim recognize the vast power available to them or to anyone who reignites the godly fires upon Khitus. The necessary kindling is all around: masses desperate for something to believe in, an absence of other authority, and lack of confidence in the authority that does exist. In these rough days, a firm, confident voice finds an audience. The people are ready to believe in gods again.

Gods

Only a small sampling of the resurgent gods are listed here; many, many others once touched this world, and might reach out to Shadazim again. All it may take is the will of fervent people and the knowledge of an ancient name or the discovery of a long-buried temple, relic, or prayer book.

Gods of any stripe or manifestation are amazingly powerful. That said, many of the resurgent gods exist at far lower power levels and abilities than they did in times long past. Unless a god has sufficient followers and powerful clergy, they may be considered demigods or even beings less than a Daragkark . . . though this is a secret most Shadazim and gods keep very, very hidden.

Alyut, the Split Serpent

Alyut is a god of deception and trickery, of survival at the expense of other creatures, of success in the face of difficult odds. The Split Serpent is depicted as a snake whose thick trunk is divided halfway to create two necks for two distinct heads. The right head represents the purity of the wilderness, survivability, and toughness. The left head represents cunning and speed.

A treacherous lover allegedly split Alyut down the middle using a magical knife. The Split Serpent learned from that experience to become what it is now. The god prefers the night, skulking here and there to seek weakness in enemies and rivals, then acting quickly and without mercy. Tales say Alyut once surrounded an entire army in a box canyon, driving its beasts wild with fear while crushing its generals to death in its mighty tail. Followers attribute most riverbeds, dry or not, to the passing of the mighty Split Serpent. Wherever its tongue has licked, the salts are sweet and the poisons extracted especially potent.

Clergy of Alyut

Alyut's followers shave their bodies to affect visual kinship with serpents. They conduct rites against the ground, emphasizing the importance of keeping one's belly against the earth (bared or otherwise). Crawling is encouraged, as is the raising of the head from a prone position to look about.

Alyut's clergy travel in pairs, often joined at the waist or legs by straps or even sutures if they are truly devoted and gifted, all to emulate their master's strange form. Often their unions are such that one chooses not to live without the other. They preach superiority through deception and merciless treachery, so others are understandably wary of them. Followers are taught to keep their beliefs secret; any rites or meetings are rare and

reviving a god

Any god who manifests power upon the world today does so because a Shadazim has rekindled its worship in some way. Secret or otherwise, a gathering has been established. A temple has been raised. Prayers old or new have revived an entity within the local universe. Where there is no worship, there are no gods. Individually and as a group, the gods are a re-emergent force in the world, represented upon the world solely by their clergy. No true god has manifested a physical form upon Khitus since the Classic Age, but the first to do so (especially in any overt manner) may use that prominence to build and rule a new pantheon.

The gods themselves are magical embodiments of pure emotion. Not surprisingly, they can display the highest virtues, but more often sink into petty differences and jealousies. As a rule, they hate each other passionately where influence and power overlap, otherwise tolerating each other as necessary evils. They have no wish to work together. They have no interest, ultimately, in the affairs of mortals, unless they directly benefit them with additional clergy and worshippers. Khitan gods are self-serving entities that are often perceived as righteous and helpful, but without priests to constantly justify and position their petty acts as miracles they would be immediately exposed as indifferent and aloof.

Reviving a Pantheon

Each god rising again from obscurity requires adequate worship specific to it. However, some Shadazim learned early on that reviving a collective pantheon of gods aids all of its gods equally through their interconnected worship. Thus, some Shadazim act as speakers for more than one god, depending on the structural hierarchy of the pantheon they both revive and revere.

Each god's or each pantheon's clergy exists within a strange dichotomy. On one hand, they need to present a united message to the world; peoples' needs are many and varied, and so must a pantheon of gods be to appeal to them. The various clergy must accept each other on that basis as necessary. On the other hand, though, priests can be as jealous as their respective gods, even more so. Their tactics against each other can be cutthroat, veiled and secretive but deadly. In all, though, reinforcing belief in a whole pantheon strengthens each member god in turn, so the clergies endure the challenges for their powers.

clandestine, temples are hidden away and often moved from place to place. Harmonious magic is preferably achieved through mock hissing and the slapping of

tails, usually performed with whips made from leathery snakeskins or rattles from snake bones.

Arvaritos, the Spider

“Only one who has been captured, enveloped in Her webs, and devoured to naught but a husk can understand the Spider God’s true purpose.” So claim the chain-bearing priests who devote themselves to the savage consumer Arvaritos.

Arvaritos is a deity of patience and power, the ultimate winner, the heartless victor, the gatherer, one who despises waste and weakness. The faithful say Arvaritos fashioned the universe from another ruined universe long dead, stringing its remnants together into Her web of life (and death). Even Khitus is the shriveled husk of some vast being the Spider once captured and sucked dry. Depictions of Arvaritos show a massive, hairy wolf spider perched deep within a seemingly infinite web stretched across the stars.

Clergy of Arvaritos

Her Shadazim practice absolute submission to their god, and demand the same of their worshipers, to be demonstrated continuously. The faithful say Her webs connect every aspect of the physical world. Her tugging and plucking on Her web causes all things, from the mundane to the colossal, to happen.

Her adherents believe that only the body’s fluids carry life and all other matter— bones, chitin, hair, etc.—is already dead. Zealots discard these where possible, making a sacrifice like this at each major change of rank among the clergy to become more alive and more akin to Arvaritos. Acolytes shave their heads; Shadams sacrifice a ring finger; Deshadiz pull between four and six teeth; and Cheldar are toothless or have a missing limb (or both).

Religious gatherings of the Spider God are bizarre rituals where the faithful allow themselves to be bound, chained, and gagged—like victims caught in a web—and their body fluids drained by cruel barbs into glass vials. The priests move among them, whispering in an ancient language only they understand, taking each worshiper to the brink of death before turning them loose and back into the world. Invariably, some of the faithful do not survive. Arvarites hide the punctures on their hands and feet beneath rags and make all manner of excuses for their unhealthy state between rituals.

Baynar, the Wolf

“Fools from the south, know we never lost touch with our gods in the north. The howls of the Great Wolf have never

reviving a clergy

The greatest challenge for all Shadazim remains turning worship and study into a consistent connection with the long-absent gods. Centuries of inattention have hardened the fabric of the universe in and around Khitus. What used to be commonplace is rare and now more difficult. The redistribution of energy among a god and its worshipers is hampered by the desires of all parties. Shadizar desire magical power in return for their worship, but some would rather grow in strength than redistribute this magical energy among their clergy.

Some gods and pantheons understand that mortal needs can serve godly needs, supplying more power to their clergy to thus amplify their own presence on Khitus. A Shadazim priest’s credibility suffers when she cannot consistently call up the energies and powers she attributes to her deity. Priestly magic is yet erratic, but sometimes available in unexpected gluts that temporarily amplify the cleric’s magical powers, making them a marvel to behold (and thus sparking a surge in interest and power in her god and her religion). Until more gods realize or remember that the status and power of their proxies directly affects how much their local power can regrow, priestly magic shall remain unpredictable at best.

stilled among our trees . . . and his hunger for weaker prey has never abated, be that meat mundane or divine.”

The Wolf embraces speed and endurance as well as cunning and determination. Baynar claims mastery over the wild lands, but does so with all the trappings of a sophisticated creature, armored beneath iron and steel, bejeweled with all manner of magical baubles. All canines are his to command, and those who follow him slowly grow to embrace their more wild lupine attributes.

Baynar’s legend explains how he maneuvered quietly to prove canine mastery over all things. The lead dog of a royal pack, Baynar unexpectedly turned on his master, biting out his throat, and leading the pack to slay all but Dathan, the master of hounds, who became the first priest of Baynar. The Wolf adopts any trappings or devices of other races that he finds useful, discarding the rest. The canine mind is superior, adaptable, and easily organized beneath a series of alphas.

Clergy of Baynar

The Wolf’s priests assert their hierarchy among the worshipers, appointing themselves alpha status more often than not. Pack position must constantly be de-

the marsh gods pantheon of the lost

Whispers and half-rumors speak of a small cadre of gods beneath the rulership of Iyalphos, for if the Crane has truly abandoned Khitus, from whence comes the power wielded by its Shadazim? Cheldar Rejaik Maorkal wears a black sash, to which is bound a small box (some say from his own left arm bones, though more suggest carved thakal bone) that contains the last prayer book of The Marsh Gods, or so he says. Iyalphos rules the small pantheon which allegedly has an azurat god (Fija the Watcher), a flea god (Ajarl), and a black crab god (Daledd) whom some hint was a huckratha precursor. The only evidence that any of this is true is a rumored immunity the Crane's clergy have to the touch of the coal crab.

fended, as any follower can challenge a superior, though failure leads to exile or death. Followers allow their body hair to grow long and move on all fours as much as possible. They think of themselves as hybrid creatures, and keep packs of dogs sheltered and fed as their deity commands.

The Great Pack

Those who claim Baynar is among the few gods never to abandon Khitus also say he runs at the head of the Great Pack, a pantheon of gods that help him dominate the northern wilderness. While rumors are vague regarding the size of the Great Pack, three names repeat often enough to suggest other demigods worshiped among the trees beyond the sands: Namha the Hound (wolfhound demigod of hunting skills), Emrus of the Howl (timber wolf demigod of pack-laws, hierarchies and order), and Dathan Moonwolf (man-wolf demigod of lycanthropes and wild-seekers). The sole legend heard outside of Baynar's rites talks of the Great Pack hunting and eventually consuming Raoth the Bear, former divine ruler of the northern woods and mountains.

Iyalphos, the Crane

"The beauty of Iyalphos dissolves now into tears and sand, and those whose predations steal away his marshes shall likewise see their environments ripped away. Then shall they know Crane's power . . . for their losses shall be fivefold."

Iyalphos is a god of grace and beauty, a magnificent white water fowl with the bright eyes of an ancient wiz-

ard, but tinged with sadness. The god's crane-like form typifies the creatures and habitats quickly dying off the face of Khitus. Some say "only fools follow a god whose animal is near dead," but even they do not say so openly, for Crane's priests wield not a little power when angered.

Clergy of Iyalphos

Shadazim of Iyalphos rage against their world's decline and direct such wrath against any and all who can be remotely blamed. Many followers believe Iyalphos has forsaken Khitus simply because He has no place to land there and find comfort and refuge. Their god's absence angers his followers, and they are focused on taking revenge against those who have caused this atrocity.

The Crane's priests divide into two distinct camps. Both camps appeal to base emotions, fostering hatred and revenge, destruction as a means toward an end.

- Those who would stop the world's decline are "White-Cranes." They direct their rage against the plundering marauders, against the Pale who fund their destruction, and against the quibbling rulers or greedy rich who dither or hoard for themselves rather than stave off the world's decline.
- "Red-Cranes" are those who are resigned to (or perhaps even hasten) its eventual destruction. They encourage chaos and destruction in all forms. "Topple, burn, divide . . . through entropy the world will be remade," they preach, "with Iyalphos properly perched above the waters drowning all lesser, false gods."

The Crane's clergy find no difficulty spreading their message. All the disaffected of Khitus harbor some inner dissatisfaction, a kernel of rage that the Shadazim may nurture. They can point to the world around them as proof of their god's disappointment. Those who join in reestablishing His place on Khitus will enjoy a place beneath the shade of His mighty wings. Iyalphos's followers know each other by the hopeful feathers they carry and wear upon their persons, but they recognize the epic struggle before them to right their world for their god's return.

Jaythe, the Panther

Where there are still shadows in the jungles and forests, Jaythe's slitted eyes watch over the world, or so her Shadazim proclaim. Their god slips into and out of the world through absolute darkness. Jaythe is master of the night, a lurker in shadows. She is a goddess of the hunt, the predator, the necessity of death, and prowess in battle. The Panther favors the cunning and powerful, lending Her blessing to those who kill with purpose, yet shunning those who kill for no reason. Prey are equally blessed, to be nurtured and protected, and taken only when needed.



Clergy of Jaythe

Followers of the Panther paint their faces and exposed skin black and step quickly through the sun to reach shade. They favor parasols and broad-brimmed hats. They have kinship with the Qath Manhar, marauders of purpose and honor. Jaythe's Shadazim preach that She is not concerned with the future. "Everything happens for unseen reasons," they say in Her name, "but what is unseen to prey is the predator, and Jaythe shall always be there in the dark. The world will never be without the Panther and her kind."

Meshezes, the Shambler

Meshezes reigns supreme over decay and rot. He exists in the stench of a bloated corpse, the black edges of spoiling vegetation, and in the fungus devouring forgotten stores

and fallen trees. He is the reclamer, the beast to which all things eventually return. None escape His touch, and He doles out every creature's final embrace. In physical form, Meshezes is a rolling mass of decay, feces, and maggots churning along the ground or suspended in space. He is the embodiment of finality and patience, a lord of death but also, oddly, of rebirth, agriculture, and fertility. He is the ultimate ending and the ultimate beginning.

Clergy of Meshezes

Khitus and everything on it are part of the Shambler's vast plan, for He, it is believed, has measured out every death and every new life to balance upon His hideous form. Since all things eventually come to Him without fail, His history is bereft of direct actions, something reflected in the attitudes of his Shadazim and followers. To

worship Meshezes is to sit back in righteous realization that all activity, planning, or anxious effort, are ultimately purposeless. Only the fool exerts himself against the inevitable embrace of the Shambler. Let others weaken themselves through self-centered endeavor; the Shambler's faithful gather strength through inertia.

Meshezite gatherings are drunken festivals, as the decay of fermentation also falls beneath the god's purview. Revelers drink themselves into a stupor amid their own accumulated filth, often gathered in vast pits in places hidden away beneath the light of the moons and stars. Priests tempt the young with alcohol and lure them into the cult. They collectively scoff at the efforts of the ambitious, the motivated, those fools who would better themselves and the world. Trinkets of their efforts—bricks and jewels, books and artwork—are tossed into the filth pits and ridiculed by inebriated priests spouting spite and derision.

Najus, the Wise

Najus has no physical form, but exists in all light, according to his white-robed Shadazim. He is a god of infinite knowledge, the absolute patron of study and reason. He favors the teacher and the scholar, and on a cursory examination would appear to lead a clergy devoted to learning and understanding. Buried in the depths of Najus's teachings lie his true intentions: knowledge and reason are to be sought and applied ruthlessly to take power and hold it. Reason for its own sake has no purpose, whereas reason as a means for political power is supreme.

Clergy of Najus

Najus's priests are obsessed with light. They experiment with jewels, glass, and obsidian, spreading sunlight onto white sheets and worshiping the colors within. They worship fire and revel in its closeness, the pain of its touch, the scars it leaves upon the body; a Najite often has scarred flesh upon his cheeks, forehead, and hands. Any object that ever once rode along with a floating earth mote is valued because it was once much closer to the divine sun. They shun darkness, keeping hidden during this time of minimum power until the dawn, the most auspicious time of day when rites are most fully witnessed by the distant god himself. The sun is not Najus in physical form, but he is the master of it and everything that generates light.

Najite Shadazim busy themselves with debate and experimentation with light. They spread their word in open callings beneath white tents on the outskirts of towns and villages, in brilliant jamborees with colorful banners. Zealots, however, are convinced that non-believers must be extinguished by fire, so they have a reputation as arsonists and are often shunned accordingly. While they most often wear white

robes during official functions, allowing the light of day to dance upon their flesh is important, as well; nude rituals only occur in private, away from the prying eyes of non-believers.

There are also many who point to enmity between Najite Shadazim and the Gare Attessa, though few can say why, other than "it has always been so." At least a few Cheldar have discovered that the Chroniclers were once the clergy of Najus during the Classic Age (or at least some of them started so). For some unknown reasons, they abandoned the god in favor of the Daragkarik and now do their utmost to prevent this knowledge from coming to light. Even those of Najus do not know, though they petition for enlightenment from their god often.

Phattrash, the Bull

Phattrash derives his form from the Makadan ideal of strength—the Bull. He is traditionally depicted as a tremendous, wide-horned bull, black of hide and bright white of eye. His heavy hooves crater the ground, his steaming breath can blast mountains and warm the winds to carry rain to where it is needed. He is a god of fertility and of strength. Feasts rich in meat and blood-infused beverages are auspicious for celebrating newborns, preparing for hunts and slaughters, and gathering soldiers for war. Many invoke Phattrash to bring new sons into a family or to improve one's herds and the health of one's animals.

Myths credit the Bull with raising a host of shaggy, broad shouldered beasts that pull enormous wagons and chariots to ferry the faithful armies from place to place to thwart his enemies. A single such chariot can hold 20 human archers or spearmen into battle. Sacrifices of grain and fine grass bring His favor, as does the burning of dung in enormous fires at both dawn and dusk. Any ground torn up by a stampede is considered holy and an auspicious place to seek Phattrash's favor for three consecutive nights. Battles have been fought over such ground to protect His holy ground from infidels.

Clergy of Phattrash

The bull god's Shadazim wear heavy hides, the hairs twined with colorful beads and often caked with dried dung; flies buzz around them constantly. Bathing is discouraged. They urge the faithful to shun the sedentary lifestyle of the farmer for a wandering existence following herds of cattle. Guiding the herds is the blessed prerogative of the priests, who for the most part let them wander freely around the world. Any who challenge their right to graze are marked as heretics and subjected to ridicule or worse. Phattrash favors babes born while on the move, their families graced with gifts from every important family until its first summer has passed.

Prusha, the Thakal

Khitus was built upon the backs of thakal beasts, as ordained by their great god Prusha. She is the mother of her kind, the bestower of strength and endurance. She favors obedience and cooperative effort and that which is built by brute force. Teamsters who drive thakal and the riders who mount them, even those who are not believers, invoke Prusha's name in the mastery of their animals. A sacrifice to Her at the beginning of any thakal-dominated endeavor, be it the hauling of stone or a charge of cavalry, is a common ritual. Prusha is a long-departed god who has never been entirely forgotten on Khitus.

Clergy of Prusha

Prushan Shadazim insist that thakal deserve the honor of difficult labor and that humans and others are unworthy of it. They shun physical endeavors and allow themselves to grow physically weak as a demonstration of their belief. They honor the thakal and its strength while allowing their own to deteriorate. Priests are slim and emaciated. However, since thakal brutes are unsuited to many tasks that the Prushan priests feel they cannot perform, they employ slaves to take up the slack. Bondage beneath these priests is reputedly harsh and unforgiving, where one is treated no differently than an animal, collared and beaten, fed by the trough.

Rutchu, the Red Man

Shadazim depict Rutchu either as a smooth-skinned gargantuan with fangs and razor-sharp claws or as a

hunched brute with a beard and hair of living flame. He always appears muscular, naked, and grinning. The Red Man is a lustful miscreant that embodies theft and skulking magic. Worshipers reach out to him to hide their clandestine affairs and to blind others to their theft and treachery. The "Red Righteous" prize those things they obtain illegally or immorally, wearing them proudly. Rutchu is also the gamester, the gambler, and the cheat.

Tradition holds that Rutchu lives in the hearts of all people, lurking there until a moment of temptation summons Him forth. Anyone who has secretly wished for misfortune to befall another has "tickled the Red Man's toes." He has cut the throats of a million millions, it is said, or at least provided the knife to others who did his bidding. Attite tradition attributes chance happenings that shift battles to Rutchu, so they sacrifice blood and gambled winnings to Him prior to the march. Flesh reddened by the sun is thought to bring out the treacherous gambler in otherwise honest men.

Clergy of Rutchu

Rutchu's priests wear large, deep hoods or even dark masks to hide their eyes and keep their identities secret. Only other clergy know exactly who they are, and they often pass anonymously when not on official duty. "Passing the red dot," often on a scrap of papyrus or ragged cloth, notifies those in the know to set up a gathering either to worship or help the priests work some of their nefarious magic.

Small, covert altars or temples to the Red Man exist along roads and trails, wherever passersby find hidden spots from which they might waylay other travelers. While some might be large enough for up to a dozen folk to enter, most are little more than sheltered niches marked by a flame-circled red hand. Here they leave small trinkets stolen from the unsuspecting to garner the god's favor . . . or give up items of some worth to appease the Red Man and protect themselves from Rutchu's faithful.

Tribal Gods

Some gods have tribal origins and significance.

Sang-Tao is the Attite creator god who made them; all the world's mountains are their sad god's bones. Chindi worship Mangkir as a god, though even many among them think Mangkir was merely a mortal Daragkark. The Pajalu god who they believe made the Dragon Kings, Ardhana, eventually drove those creatures from Khitus. Among the Pachyaur, Mulngul will return because his Shadazim keep reciting passages from his Books of the Moons.

the prophet

While the fervent that follow the Prophet deem him equal to gods (or at least the priests of the old gods), they exaggerate to raise their own self-worth. The Prophet is neither a Shadazim nor has he ever wished such. He neither claims to be a god nor claims any connection to any god or gods. He does not deliver any sort of divine message from an external being. The Prophet presents himself as a mortal with a compelling new philosophy of universal love and brotherhood. Misinterpretations of that message are already beginning to dilute and confuse things, but the original teachings are mundane rather than divine.

Still, many gods and their Shadazim look down upon Khitus with jealousy at those who speak of the Prophet, wishing for the ardent worship directed toward them . . . and the power that comes from it.

Chapter 10: Khitus in Alux

The world of Khitus sets many adventure plots in motion for gaming and story-telling opportunities. Several key themes infuse the world and provide a universal background for all the unfolding stories.

- Once-rich lands dry out and blow away with the winds, forcing long-established cultures to find new homes and new means to survive;
- Marauders live by the sword in the wastelands, taking what they need by force of arms to survive;
- New or long-hidden races peek out of their homelands to take their place in an exotic, ever-changing world; and
- The benevolent Dragon Kings have left the world entirely, leaving control and power to be taken by whoever has the strength or wisdom to seize it.

But these are only the beginnings. Races strive against each other and among themselves, quarreling or warring over resources mundane, magical, and more. The world itself seems to drive every aspect of life to its breaking point. No mortals truly know whether Khitus is a furnace disposing of ruined goods or a crucible in which to forge a stronger world and better people.

Faction versus Tribe

Khitan humans traditionally identified themselves by tribe first, all other affiliations following after that. A prince in Teleris took the title Dotrong and dressed in the manner of his Attite tribal forebears. A warrior of Patnu steeped himself in the Kod, his Makadan tribe's martial code. Strangers on the open road measured each other by tribal affiliation—as identified by appearance, dress, and manner—to judge them as friends or foes. This was the way it had always been across Khitus.

As with so many other things, this may be changing.

Powerful factions have grown up quietly among these tribal priorities until they now rival them in perceived strength and loyalty. One's place in the world and within one's society is no longer so clear-cut. Loyalties are divided and priorities have shifted. As civil authority in many of the human cities has dwindled or collapsed,

that governing influence has vanished as surely as the guiding hands of the truant Dragon Kings. Anyone in a position of power, meaning any but the lowliest peasants or children, must navigate this new social landscape and, at times, take sides in conflicts that are seldom well-defined, let alone clearly black and white.

By way of example, the emergent Gare Attessa now challenge the authority of the existing hierarchies they dutifully served for so long. They do so in every human society from surviving city-states to bands of wandering mercenaries and even bandit kingdoms on ruination's frontiers. The Chroniclers have slowly gathered the tiny bits of authority abandoned or overlooked by traditional leadership, starting with small things like the counting of the citizenry or the observances of rites and festivals. From these insignificant seeds, the Gare Attessa spread their authority almost imperceptibly, like the covertly spreading roots of a desert oak, until they became the faces and names with whom more people interacted. The masses now turn to them as readily as to the faces of their established rulers. This is all according to the long-term plan meted out covertly from Wani Chereet.

Likewise, long centuries of peaceful life created a tribal atheism now at risk due to worldly circumstances. The Dragon Kings and those who led from their examples encouraged no worship, and traditional religion all but vanished. The Daragkarik displaced the ancient gods in people's minds, so no priests carried on their traditions, rites, and so on. Now resurgent, the Trakeen and Shadazim—adherents of the absent Dragon Kings and of the re-emergent ancient gods, respectively—eagerly exert their newfound power and flaunt it in the face of established tribal leadership. Uninvited, they have taken a chair at the head table.

Subtle shifts in power between faction and tribal loyalties slowly unravel the fabric of society. The Bev al-Khim, backed by the endless wealth of the Black Fortress, challenge caravan masters and merchant houses across the wastelands. Kuad Ahir, masters of terrific mind power awakened in them by the Prophet, wander the world freely to challenge the long-established roles of wizards and priests. Commissioners of the Water Guild parlay their iron-grip

upon Khitus's most treasured, dwindling resource into unassailable political might that forces many tribal rulers to bow to them rather than the reverse. These are but a few of the many challenges ahead.

The balance between tribal and factional power coincides with the enormous climactic difficulties across Khitus. They reinforce the cataclysmic change that has descended upon the world, and how each struggle resolves itself paints a bit more on the canvass of the shifting world.

Faction versus Faction

Most Khitan factions recognize each other primarily as competing threats. Each one pursues such a specific agenda that each monitors (and works to counter) any potential competition out of respect or fear. Each action demands a balanced reaction within an intricate game, of which the game pieces are the Khitan people. The games within games never end, all played seemingly for the game's sake since complete agendas are nigh impossible to ascertain. Whole plots conclude, rekindle, and conclude again with little fanfare. Subtle as they are, the machinations among the factions can mean life or death, and everyone of import should know his or her place within them . . . or suffer the consequences.

The most overt and inevitable conflict between factions rises between the Shadazim and the Trakeen, since they both sell appeals of faith to the same desperate flocks. The struggling masses can embrace the worship of an ancient god as readily as an absent Dragon King, as both factions know. Theirs is a direct competition where absolute demonstrations of righteousness are difficult. They both dazzle the new faithful with simple displays, so success depends upon subtlety ... and treachery. Where Shadazim and Trakeen meet, palpable tension pollutes the air between them, and the wary yield neutral ground that never remains so for long.

Similarly, the Gare Attesa and Water Guild find themselves in direct conflict despite having very distinct agendas and origins. Wherever water resources are stressed to the limits, both groups find strength for different reasons. The Raetanni assert authority based on perceived water needs, which can undermine an existing ruler. That perceived weakness simultaneously gives the Chroniclers opportunity to dig deeper into that sovereign's affairs. The power often grows simultaneously in the same place, leading to a three-fold battle for control. Knowing this, few welcome Raeten interference in a local water situation, just as the Chroniclers naturally

resist Guild assertions that "desperate times" justify their harsh measures.

Other factional conflicts covertly rage just beneath the social veneers of civilization.

- Every Khitan faction employs informants, enforcers, thugs, and spies to further their ends, whether benevolent or nefarious, and undermine others.
- Kuad Ahir who display their mental talents enrage the magic colleges; the Dramidgeth and Rakarth are not above employing lies (or assassins) to enrage a populace already skeptical of such powers.
- The Quath Manhar, certain their enforced protection is just and necessary, are at odds with the Pale, whom they regard as a blight upon the land.
- Most factions are so uncertain of the Yenfansa that they keep a wary eye upon any Devil's Child in their midst, ready to employ savage methods whenever they perceive a threat.

These conflicts make everyone's existence on Khitus more precarious. Everyone knows if you cross the wrong person, you get a knife in the ribs or poison in your cup. Few outside of royal courts understand the dangers of befriending the wrong person. Just as the world's climate is in the balance, so too is Khitan political power, and many fight for their shares. The factions already upset traditional tribal loyalties, and any failure to assert their agendas carries the risk of expulsion from local or regional situations entirely. They are all capable of monstrous acts to keep themselves relevant, justifying them by their own policies and politics. Woe to the traveler ignorant of these allegiances and conflagrations, for he is certainly lost.

factions versus themselves

Subtler still are the internal conflicts within each faction. What does it take for one Chronicler to turn upon another or one Rakart to offer his fruit to a rival and add him to his chain? The Nyutu troupes keep their distance from each other, relying upon the uniqueness of their entertainments to eke out livings. Shadazim of different gods are at once allies and adversaries, depending on each god's virtues, and the same can be said of the Trakeen and their varied Daragkarik. All of the magic colleges disparage or outright loathe the others. On the surface, the Pale seem the most unified, though none know the inner intricacies of their organization and they may hide cutthroat ruthlessness behind their draperied palanquins.



The Prophet

Word of a desert wanderer—one of infinite patience and kindness, once oppressed and imprisoned but now free—spreads quickly but quietly over the sands. His message is deceptively simple: all men are brothers and love always prevails over hate. Many first hear about His existence and His message from a devoted disciple around a caravan campfire or in an isolated gathering of hopefuls. The Prophet's message travels quietly and assuredly, hardly needing to be shouted by town criers. That simple message, however, holds inherent threats to established power all over Khitus. Few who already hold political ascendancy wish to give it up simply because a humble desert wanderer deems it is no longer necessary to a fulfilling life.

That threat (and the associated interest all powerful factions now show in the Prophet's words and actions) drives His movement underground as the Prophet's followers begin to take note of the disfavor among the powerful. Now adherents think twice before sharing the message with any but trusted friends. Disciples now guard their own movements and those of their beloved Prophet, moving and working in secrecy and never staying long in any one place.

Despite jealous eyes cast upon them, though, the Prophet's followers have a unique edge. They are the Awakened, those who can miraculously manipulate the world around them with the magic-that-is-not-magic. Their mind powers "awakened" through direct physical contact with the Prophet himself. None can or choose to explain this, and it contrasts His resolute claim to non-divinity. His proximity stirs dormant mind powers in some (but not all), so the Awakened strictly control any direct contact with the Prophet. They are sarhak, or mind benders. At all times, they use their powers of awareness and influence to keep pursuers at bay.

Beyond the Prophet's unnerving of the politically insecure, established purveyors of faith dislike what the Awakened represent to their livelihoods. Trakeen who gathered flocks to worship absent Daragkarik as gods recognize that the Awakened message of peace may appeal to their followers. Likewise, the Prophet's philosophy can find welcome ears among those who worship the ancient Khitan gods through Shadazim priests. Conflict is inevitable, as neither group appreciates competing creeds winnowing their faithful ranks.

Another conflict looms large between the Awakened and traditional spell casters. Be they wizards unlocking hidden energies through ancient tomes or priests imploring gods to unleash sorcery on their behalf, the Prophet's followers directly challenge the worth of many magic wielders. Their privileged statuses in Khitan so-

ciety or governments are subtly undermined, and their longtime monopoly upon the world's most powerful energies comes into question. One day soon, wizards and priests may unite around their dislike of the Awakened and do something drastic about them.

The Awakened also face an internal division slow to grow but whose roots dig deep. Foremost among all his teachings, the Prophet preaches that He himself is not divine and draws upon no magical powers. This strengthens His peaceful message among many—one man empowering others to change themselves and their lives of their own will. Others cannot conceive of or accept such a thing. Despite the Prophet's direct assertions to the contrary, some Awakened remain certain of the Prophet's divinity, even if He himself does not realize or accept it. His mysterious ability to awaken dormant mental powers in others, they insist, proves their point. These believers grow slowly in numbers and a schism looms in the future for the Awakened.

Slaver versus Non-Slaver

Pachyaur of the Watu tribe rely on a robust slave economy, while their Brachachon tribal rivals refuse to participate in that trade. Arguments over slavery are the major conflicts among the elephantine Pachyaur. Passions run high on both sides, as they have for centuries, but the arguments have never escalated to open warfare until now. Opinions have hardened and factions have entrenched for a civilization-straining moral struggle among the Pachyaur. Will they continue to prey on the smaller races to fill their slave pens, or will they sacrifice economic prosperity for the sake of enlightenment?

Brachachon tolerance grows short. They demonstrate indignation with protests lodged at the highest levels of Pachyesh governments. They refuse to participate in the flesh trade and bar Watu windaji slave hunters from their lands. Brachachon regularly grouse to the Watu Kanyaga plantation owners and their kwasana matriarchs, but to no avail. All pachyaur adhere to the teachings offered in the Books of the Moons, but Brachachon take exception to those passages used to justify the enslavement of non-pachyaur races. Because of this, many Brachachon grow disenchanted with the books' teachings and, for the first time in pachyesh history, discard them entirely.

Vidijo Resistance

Resistance rises among the slave races, as expected. Humans, or "vidijo" to any Pachyaur, remain the primary

slave race. All human tribes grow weary of fearing those frontiers, of losing loved ones to slavers, of struggling for the funds to purchase their freedom, or of never seeing them alive again. Political entities resist the slavers, as well, enacting laws against dealing with the Pachyaur in the flesh trade. The Kuad Ahir and the Prophet's followers rail against the trade, which contradicts their philosophy of universal brotherhood. The Gare Attessa speak out against the slavers, encouraging human sovereigns to raid deeper into Watu territory to establish a protective zone between the races (presuming there were forces yet strong enough to truly threaten them).

Some representatives of the vidijo races, also exert what influence they can as outsiders within pachyesh lands. The more peaceful among them offer counsel and competing philosophies to help bring an end to the slave trade; the Kuad Ahir carry the words of the Prophet, for instance, and various Trakeen teach that the revered Dragon Kings could not abide servitude. They offer alternatives and peaceful solutions. However, more malign forces from without are also in motion: Qath Manhar marauders, who traditionally ally themselves with the Watu and provide them with captives, now feel the pinch of losing too many capable warriors to the plantations and reach out to their captive human brothers to foment rebellion.

If no external solution presents itself soon, many slaves may take matters into their own hands. Thousands of slaves need only a spark to ignite a renewed passion for freedom. Once that spark becomes a flame, it will begin to spread. The Watu may be hard pressed to contain it, especially with many outside influences ready to support emancipation. Many lie waiting, ready to break the chains and use them to lash at or strangle their elephantine oppressors.

Simultaneously, an unexpected alliance may alleviate some economic pressures that fuel the slave commerce. A handful of forward-thinking kanyaga and their kwasana matriarchs have a bold experiment: they hope to beseech Krikis queens to build new hives on their plantations and try new agricultural schemes with insectoid labor. So far, this strange alliance is fragile and barely begun, with a handful of Pachyaur venturing into the Hivelands under the protection of "bright-minded" Krikis adventurers.

Khitus in Decline

The balance has been tipped. Left unaltered, Khitus's climate and geography are on a downward trajectory toward a nearly lifeless, nearly dead world.

Unabashed plunder is the single most destructive factor working against the planet. Agents, working primarily through the Black Fortress, loot the world's precious materials and take them off-world. While many commodities and material wealth might be renewed, the massive evacuations of water cannot. In the recent past, up to one tenth of all of Khitus's precious water was quietly taken off-world; this loss rendered the Old Countries barren and stressed the planetary ecology to the breaking point. Worse yet, the Bev al-Khim agents of the Daragkarik Pretenders have just begun.

On that front, the world's battle lines seem clearly drawn, but nothing could be further from the truth. Few understand the links between the Black Tower's denizens, the Pale, or the marauders running rampant across Khitus. Crises of the moment blind most, including the powerful, to the larger picture of the world's destruction. Action against the world's looting demands a two-front battle of awareness and naked aggression. Someone needs to raise the alarm and marshal forces to turn the tide, and those are far from simple tasks.

Acting in the world's favor is the inherent strength of its global ecology. Once life embraces a world, completely eradicating it is nearly impossible. To sterilize an entire world, one must find and destroy every animal, every plant, every living cell . . . and that is no one's agenda, not even the Dragon King Pretenders. Even on its present downward trajectory, Khitus can support life—though perhaps not higher animal life like humans. As long as some fertile lands and life-forms survive, they will recover to spread again and reclaim the planet with new growth, presuming uninterrupted centuries and far fewer demands on water resources.

Even that process can be furthered, hampered, or manipulated. The ambitious and foresighted see opportunity where others see only decline. Small but consistent efforts to mitigate declines locally could save a city or even a region, potentially building an emerging power in the future.

- Raetanni keep another ten barrels of water from being plundered every week.
- A local Cheldar secures another handful of stalwart followers to her cause every month.
- An industrious farmer protects another couple of arable acres from the encroaching desert every year.

These subtle victories against the world's destruction could be acts of genius (as they might be by future generations) if only factions and tribes could set aside their differences to make them happen . . .

Enemies & Allies Beyond

As malign as the Dragon King Pretenders are in their plunder, there are many other forces at work in the Beyond. Not all eyes that look upon the yellow-and-brown face of Khitus have a mind to exploit and ruin it. Some have entirely different interests but, like all living creatures, serve only when they see a mutual benefit to intervention. There are trade and sociopolitical opportunities there for those who learn to communicate or travel beyond Khitus's dust-choked skies.

Khitan natives already know those figures most interested in preserving Khitus: the remaining Dragon Kings and ancient gods with rekindled passions for the dwindling world. They can channel fantastic energies to reverse decades of decline without doubt; desperate mortal masses yearn for and unrealistically expect exactly that. As these major forces turn long-absent eyes back toward Khitus, they seek agents to act on their behalf—folk worthy of their attention and channeled power. More importantly, they seek those of initiative and vision akin to their own who might effect change and even rule on their behalf. In many cases, Shadazim and Trakeen who claim to speak for gods or Daragkarik unknowingly offend those they venerate, for their belief in their own worth exceeds their belief and obeisance to those Beyond.

The Dragon King Pretenders

Pretenders have come from Beyond to loot life-essential commodities from a world both magically unsophisticated and unguarded by beings that might stop their plunder. Their Black Fortress squats upon Khitus like a towering parasite sucking dry the world's lifeblood and sending it up through its massive tower to where it can never be recovered. Internally, the Pretenders are individuals with loose factions among them, and their plans and struggles are unique and changing. Only their initial threat appears unified, and once their plundering becomes more difficult, petty jealousies or squabbles over personal gains may soon disintegrate that unity.

Their initial plan to masquerade as returning Dragon Kings covered the Pretenders' nefarious schemes easily. They picked their equatorial location carefully, nestling on the edge of the Krikis Hiveland and among the mountains surrounded with fens and swamps crawling with Oritahl, or Cold Skins. Those hostile races formed a zone of protection around the Pretenders, shielding them from those who might disturb them in early days. These two races were the simplest sapient races on the world, so the worm-like Pretenders needed nothing more than masks and occasional displays of brilliant magic to con-

vince the bugs and lizards they truly were Daragkarik. Sadly, many other Khitans also believed in the masquerade despite historical reasons to doubt them. Too many accepted the Pretenders' legitimacy based on the say so of the simple-minded krikis and Cold Skins.

To the Pretenders, individual Krikis hives appear as agricultural endeavors, things to be farmed and expanded by attention and exploitation. The Krikis expand to fill any opportunities open to them, and it takes little for the magical Pretenders to prepare artificial hive warrens and surrounding lands rich with wildflowers and fruited plants. For them, their only diplomatic challenges are the emerging bright-minded Krikis. Will all Krikis continue to see the Pretenders as a welcome opportunity for cooperation? How many may see them instead as invasive and exploitative overseers? Will any peer past their masks and unveil the agendas that lie behind them?

Cold Skins present a separate opportunity for the ambitious Pretenders. Accepting them fully as legitimate Dragon Kings, the Oritahl serve nigh-blindly and play directly into the off-worlders' hands. One individual Cold Skin is often a far more robust and powerful warrior than an unarmed, hive-minded Krikis, but they prove more difficult to maintain, recruit, and train. If anything, the Cold Skins offer a slower means to spread their newfound influence over Khitus compared to the Krikis. The Oritahl thus serve as strong troops well suited to clear instructions such as "Protect this location," or "guard these Bev al-Khim and do as they say." Unshakeable lizard loyalty makes up for what Cold Skins lack in initiative and imagination.

Unmasking the Pretenders

Ultimately, the Pretenders and their initial plans can be defeated, but only through dedicated effort. Their marauders can be confronted and chased off, their Bev al-Khim belittled and driven back. Even their massive Black Fortress can be breached and its residents roused, fought, and even defeated. Alas, the Pretenders have a presence upon the world that some mentally inferior races accept or desire, given the newfound opportunities and benefits in serving them. They carve out empires on Khitan lands from the cost of a mask and a few magical tricks, raising armies and subjects with mystery and shadow play. Even if their direct plunder is cut off, some Pretenders enjoy the easily won status and power games. No matter what comes, Khitus may never fully divorce itself from their attentions entirely.

Completely eradicating the Pretenders from Khitus may be a fool's errand. To accomplish that, patriots need to pursue them into the Beyond to the source of their

strength. This task may be impossible for any but the most talented wizards. For many of them would prefer expending such energies in the more immediate task of deflecting the worst of the world's decline in one way or another. The ramifications and costs of using such powerful magic frighten even the most stalwart spell casters. Still, such risks may become necessary and sacrifices made to keep the Pretenders from gaining too much control over Khitus.

The Iron Virus

This destructive affliction preys upon all Khitan iron and steel (see “Metal Scarcity” in Chapter 5). What existing supplies remain are infected and weakening or so heavily protected that they are no longer useful. Few now risk using their steel weapons save in the most desperate circumstances. Ganshyer, the black steel alloy of “bright lode” and iron, promises respite from these terrible circumstances. With that respite comes a shift in the power balance on Khitus. Those armed with the rare alloy retain the strength of steel for their armies and can easily overwhelm others armed with inferior weapons and tools of bronze, stone, bone, or chitin.

The dastardly effects of the Iron Virus can be fought on two levels. Obtaining bright lode allows one to make virus-immune ganshyer, assuming one has smiths capable of forging it. The alternate method demands mastery of psionic powers to cure the affliction directly inside steel or iron implements.

Bright Lode & Ganshyer

The only known source of bright lode resides in the Krikis Hivelands. Deep in those dangerous realms lies the Megha Stone, an enormous deposit deep in a dark cratered valley. The Megha Stone is a bright lode meteorite that fell to Khitus from the Beyond untold centuries ago. The Krikis have no immediate understanding of the ore's value elsewhere on the world, simply mining it as a metal for casual uses.

Whole adventures can center on quests to reach into Krikis lands and find the Megha Stone. Once there, a single day's mining can yield a prince's ransom in bright lode that can be packed out on a single thakal. Most collect only what they can easily carry and flee without the weight of their plunder slowing them from inevitable Krikis pursuit—and even a handful of nuggets is worth four dozen times its weight in gold.

Soon, though, the smarter “bright-minded” Krikis may learn of the human interest in bright lode and ascertain its relative value. This leads to two key consequences for all the races on Khitus, not just those of the Hivelands.

- Control of the Megha Stone may inflame internal race hatreds. Having one location of immense inherent value conflicts with the cavorting, wandering nature of the many Krikis hives. Red, black, and yellow Kikis may wage wars over the Megha Stone rather than expanding their growing frontiers. This may provide a respite for the humans, though such internal conflicts may produce even harsher Krikis warriors for other Khitans to face in the future.
- Krikis traders, “bright-minds” who learn of bright lode's value, may make immense profits for their hives by selling bright lode outside the Hivelands. This could spread Krikis influence further across Khitus than ever before. It could even spur the creation of hives outside the traditional Hivelands.

Bright lode is fairly common in the Beyond, including Khitus's moons and the other worlds that circle its hot sun. Offworld adventures in search of it are inevitable.

Curing the Virus

Only high mastery of the magic-that-is-not-magic holds the elusive cure for the Iron Virus. Disciples of the Prophet have access to that power's nuances but choose to spread the Prophet's message of love rather than focus on mundane metallurgy. However, when some Awakened realize the benefits of that as-yet unperfected ability, schisms may form among the Prophet's followers. Some will insist this is a clear sign they who can heal steel should take it up to defend their cause from those who attack their beliefs. Others see a test for the faithful, challenging their will for fraternal peace against using this ability for great social, political, or fiscal benefits. A few more see this as another way to further the Prophet's peaceful message—by curing only nonmartial metal implements such as plows or shields. No matter what, this psionic cure for afflicted steel has enormous value both within their ranks and without, and many seek their talents to reset the balance of material power.

The Beyond

Khitus is one world among many. Three moons revolve around it. Five other visible planets with variable moons about them also circle Khitus's sun. Most Khitans see nothing more than glints of light against a background sky of innumerable stars, but they are wrong. These other worlds, along with many others far out of sight, teem with life, intelligent and otherwise, benign and otherwise. The Dragon King Pretenders in the Black Fortress are just the first malignant force from the Beyond enjoying their power and influence on this

backwater world. They are just the first adversarial force among potential hundreds.

The Black Fortress reaches beyond the sky, displaying its builders' matchless power to the mortals beneath it. Few think on where it reaches or why, though some begin such questioning. Breaking the Pretenders' power on Khitus is central to the unfolding history of the world. Access to the fortress and tower gives adventurers access to the Beyond, though few may be able to take full advantage of that access right away. If nothing else, it will open their eyes to the wider possibilities off their arid world. Most Khitan natives will think one mad if they speak of worlds beyond their own, so such things are better kept to themselves.

The fates of the Dragon Kings, as varied as they are, mostly culminate in The Beyond. Only high-level magic provides contact or travel to The Beyond. For centuries, only the Daragkarik met that pedigree of power. Most Dragon Kings retreated Beyond to confront other dangers or take refuge on other worlds. Their stories, and still-extant Daragkarik themselves, exist to be found out there. Adventurers might one day visit them, perhaps even coax them to resume their benevolent roles on a world that misses and desires them. For now, those with the potential power to touch The Beyond must choose—use that power to seek out Dragon Kings of old or to remain on Khitus as a new Dragon King taking up the mantle of justice.

Rule by Bug

Several factors coalesce that may lead to the krikish domination of Khitus. In many ways, the world's climactic decline aids them, as they can more readily adapt to and survive the harsher world than human civilizations can. Also, the inherent strength of their rigid-yet-efficient society makes the harsher regions of the world ideal for their exploitation. Further, the emergence of the bright-minded Krikis—those who can reason and adapt outside of their castes and communicate with other races—gives them a newfound leg up on the path to dominance.

Despite their racial willingness to legitimize the Dragon King Pretenders, Krikis do not deal away precious resources. "What a hive needs" is too ingrained into each individual's behavior to ever be circumvented. Humans and others let personal greed and short sightedness manipulate them for temporary advantages, but at the cost of long-term losses of resources or necessities. Krikis may plunder other portions of the planet, but they never drain their own racial resources beneath acceptable levels.

However, those advantages also keep the Krikis in check. Lack of intelligence and independent drive roots their progress in natural expansion, like flowers spreading over available prairie or fish filling the absent seas. Only simple survival has ever directed or motivated them. Their internal hatred of color against color constitutes the only outward pressures on any individual hive. Overcoming that deep-rooted, perpetual conflict may prove impossible for them, and as such it may trump any new impetus for worldwide emergence.

The Bright-Minds

Keys to Krikis advancement as a competitive race on Khitus are its "bright minds." Despite their recent development in long-consistent hive structures, bright-minds make their influence felt quickly. They exert great influence over less-intelligent hive queens, redirecting behavior or policy based on their wider understanding of the world. Independently and haphazardly, they venture outside of the Hivelands seeking personal fulfillment and opportunities for their hives and their own kind.

But the bright-minds face prejudice and opposition both internally and externally. Humans, Pachyaur and Penmai can have difficulty overcoming long-held or natural aversion and disdain for the exotic Krikis, no matter how they express themselves. Cold Skins, however, have little prevailing opinion or prejudice, judging each incident or individual on its own. For many non-insectoids, the blood of desperate wars against "the bugs" still stains the ground and poisons their hearts against them.

Worse for the bright-minds is the low regard in which their brethren hold them. Most other Krikis see them as unnecessary, even dangerous aberrations from the hive structure. Most are glad many bright-minds spend more time away from the hives.

Faced with all of that, the bright-minds are still their race's best hope for advancement. The challenge of raising their kind to prominence lies upon their chitin. In time, only they may introduce non-insect ways into the hives. Only they can bring non-insect beings into their warrens not as slaves or food but as ambassadors, allies, tradesmen, or traders. While nothing like this has ever happened before, it is inevitable. Those in the forefront of stupendous change are those who will benefit from it the most. Only then will the world begin to accept the Krikis as sentient beings rather than a vermin race to be culled or a force of nature to be endured.

appendix: powers of the mind

While mind benders—practitioners of the magic-that-is-not-magic whose powers are not derived from dark sorcery—have long been on Khitus, they have neither been numerous nor have they been as open with their powers as wizards and mages. While every culture had individual terms for those able to manipulate reality and minds with their own, it took the Daragkarik and their Chroniclers to codify common terms for them. There were once numerous terms to differentiate types of mind benders used among the histories of the Classic Age and up to the retreat of the Dragon Kings.

Only one term survives today, its form bastardized by uneducated ears to “sarhak,” the most common term used worldwide for actual sarhaks and mind benders. (When described, their powers are “sarhkish,” a term also linked to azurats and other mind-bending creatures.) Sarhak can be a slur, curse, or a blessing, depending upon a speaker’s culture, the regional bias about mind benders, or the individual in particular.

mind benders of old

The Daragkarik, or more specifically their Chroniclers (who yet exist as the Gare Attesa), codified terms among their histories to identify and typify mind benders of different skills or drives.

- An undefined psychic being was a “sarhalk,” and its powers were “sarhkish.”
- “Sarhateks” focused on reading of or spying on minds with “sarhatish” powers.
- Those using “sarhalsh” powers offensively to attack others were “sarhalteks.”
- One who healed mind or body was a “sarhtaek” with benign “sarhtish” abilities.
- Those who studied and taught, using their “sarhtrish” powers to record history or knowledge lost even to the Daragkarik, were mind-sages or “sarhtareks.”

Below are an array of potential powers and abilities used by any sarhaks encountered across Khitus, though exactly how they manifest can be left to imagination (or details that dovetail with a character’s background or region).

Auric Transformation

The aura is a powerful detection aid as well as a direct link to a subject via psychic powers. The sarhak learns to read the aura of another, detecting information about that subject and then manipulating key frequencies in the subject’s aura. By focusing will and altering the colors of a target’s aura, the sarhak can introduce a change in the target’s well-being. Psychic healers often use this power to remove a compulsion, malefic influence or demonic attachment from a recipient. This process takes much longer than similar magical spells and does not work against very powerful influences. It can also be used to hide information about a subject, such as their motivations and their demeanor.

Blank the Mind

Sarhaks study ancient texts and other sources to learn how to seal sections of their mind and improve their mental focus. With this power, they can literally empty their mind and still their thought processes, becoming a mental blank slate for a few moments. Blank the mind allows freedom from all distractions and can focus a mind on a single issue like a powerful lens. Sarhaks who enhance this power to its fullest extent can even grant such mental clarity to another target mind outside themselves.

Control the Mind

This extremely dangerous and potent power is taught only to the most trustworthy of sarhaks. Misuse of the power goes against the ethics and morals of most practitioners and teachers. In fact, most sarhaks flatly refuse to acknowledge the power’s existence with anyone of lowly rank or esteem. Control the mind allows a sarhak to influence and control another with accuracy, based on the languages spoken and understood by both sarhak and victim. A victim with shared language will perform the sarhak’s desire.



If no language commonality exists then only simple orders can be issued (“Attack,” “Flee,” “Silence,” “Approach,” and so forth), though victims follow an order continuously until survival needs or other orders demand. The target cannot be forced to follow self-destructive orders and will fight mentally against compulsions that could be used to bring harm to those they care about.

Crush the Mind

All sarhaks know a battle is won and lost in the mind before it begins. They train long and hard to enforce their considerable wills upon others. They undermine weak-minded foes by eroding their morale and increasing their self-doubt. The sarhak whittles away at the subject’s psyche, carving a strong construct that magnifies all possible failures for every move a target considers. The target literally sees flashes of how they may be killed, how they fail to impress a lord, or how they are spurned by a romantic crush.

Detect Minds

Neophyte sarhaks must work hard to discern the psychic energy waves that wash across Khitus. The chatter of hundreds of voices or more talking at once is a constant whisper inside the psychic’s head. It can be confusing and disorientating at the best of times. So

the sarhaks developed a power to quiet this babble and improve the chance of finding sentient creatures within a certain proximity. This power allows a sarhak to determine how many creatures with greater than animal intellect are nearby. The presence of truly powerful and intelligent creatures amongst the group can trigger a minor backlash that stuns a sarhak as well.

Distract the Mind

With a single direct application of will, the psychic can plant a desire in a target mind to examine or otherwise focus on a single point of interest in its immediate area. Perhaps it’s the way the sun glints on a nearby rock, or a strange creature that skitters across their field of vision at the right time. Distract the mind can be a useful psychic power to allow a sarhak to get the jump on enemies or pass a guard post without being detected. Victims have often said that it feels as though there’s a small spider crawling inside their skull, pointing out the distraction with insidious little legs through the recipient’s psyche.

Empathic Link

Sarhaks use this power to convince people to be their allies. A sarhak can psychically trigger key emotional motivators in a target to make a person see him as a

friend. It's harder to perform on minds that are unhinged or if under attack by the psychic. When successful, empathic link moves the recipient to view any actions or suggestions by the sarhak in a positive way. As long as the psychic does not upset this balance with aggression or hostility, they can attempt to influence a new friend to do things like stand outside a room they wish to enter, or help them escape from a shared enemy.

Empathic Mind

Another's mind, like the waters of a murky lake, is muddy and unclear. Yet empathic mind allows the sarhak to read subtle clues as to the target's needs, drives, surface emotions, and other key motivators. They bubble to the surface, sometimes in a confusing morass of flickering information that demands a psychic's full concentration to decipher. The better trained the sarhak, the clearer and more precise a reading gained by this power. Many sarhaks admit overusing this ability lets target emotions affect them, so they urge strong psychic defenses to maintain personal emotional sovereignty.

Link the Mind

The sarhak creates a telepathic conduit between his mind and a target creature's mind. Thoughts can be shared between the recipient and the sarhak across any distance within the same dimension. This mental power provides perfect translation for races that may not speak or even understand the same language. There are rumors of powerful versions of link the mind that can link more than two minds at once, allowing multiple contacts instant communication and translation. One ancient text discusses ways to literally pull skills or other mental knowledge out of a target's mind, allowing temporary use of such for a time but at great later cost to the sarhak.

Mental Reading

The sarhak concentrates to form a quick mental bond with a target. This bond is usually unwanted and hard for a victim to detect. It gives the sarhak a clear reading of the target's surface thoughts and works best on victims with some intelligence. Animals or creatures with low intelligence reveal only base instincts, and creatures of higher intellect than the sarhak may cause a minor mental backlash and daze them for a while.

Mental Shielding

When dealing with offensive powers such as the mind killer, mind whip, and others, a sarhak learns to gird his mind against such powers. The sarhak's mental defenses must be strong and unwavering. Belief in one's own abilities is key to bulwarking the mind to withstand the

strongest mental battering. Mental shielding stops all mind-affecting powers from harming the recipient and protects against unwanted mental intrusion.

Mental Spike

The sarhak hones her mind into a razor-sharp weapon capable of dealing physical damage through psychic attack. The sarhak can force a mental construct of a weapon into the very psyche of the target, causing them to reel in incredible agony as their aura and mind waver under the attack. The stronger the construct, the worse the damage becomes, though most damage remains psychic rather than physical. Only in the most extreme of uses are visible wounds made by this ability. Still, there are stories of psychic duels where the loser's head violently exploded in gory brain matter and bone shards.

Mind Fog

A clouded mind sees nothing, hears nothing, and notices nothing. This is a core tenet of psychic defense and a power for those who want to remain unseen by enemies. Mind fog removes the sarhak from the very mind of the target. Victims forget a person even exists and many powers, spells, or abilities that track a person simply fail or their users fail to read the results properly. The "psychic cloud" does not dissipate if the sarhak attacks or otherwise disturbs the target or the nearby environment. However, such disruptions give targets a chance to perceive the truth through the mists in their minds.

The Mind Killer

Fear is a powerful tool in the right hands. Those who study sarkish powers know full well fear's true power. The mind killer preys on an enemy's deepest fears, producing terrible nightmarish images inside the mind. Even the most intrepid foes hide secret fears away from others and themselves. This power latches onto those fears and amplifies them, forcing them to the fore of a target's mind in bombarded images that unsettle or terrify. In rare cases with powerful sarhaks, victims have died from the sheer horror invoked by this mental attack.

Mind Sending

When concentrating for a short while, a sarhak opens his mind to the boundless possibilities of will and direction. He can see connections between living things, starting at his own body and on to others. Through this connection, a short ten-word message can be sent into the mind of another (even unwilling) creature. The creature must be able to understand the sender's language or they only hear a jumble of noise. Variants of mind sending can affect groups

of targets or bypass language barriers, though only the most powerful of sarhaks can master these advanced powers.

Mind Whip

The sarhak has studied the ancient techniques of psychic combat handed down over generations. She can send out waves of mental energy to induce mnemonic and sensory overload in a target. Victims become utterly disorientated, wracked with uncontrollable memories and emotions. Targets are paralyzed with rage, fear, jealousy, sorrow, anger and trepidation. They are dazed for a short time but are still capable of rudimentary defense. If in the grip of extreme rage, they might prove more formidable than before.

Psychic Cleansing

Among the most coveted sarkish powers, psychic cleansing is very hard to perform. It requires complete concentration and control of both minds involved. Unlike auric transformation, this power can instantly end demonic influences, compulsions, or other effects on the mind of the target. It cancels all mind-affecting powers and repairs any mental damage caused by such things. It can also restore a person to full coherence from

whatever dark mire one's mind might be in. It can also be used to transfer knowledge of any skill or psychic power to another person, though both the sarhak and the user will suffer side effects to their memories and focus when using such acquisitions.

Repetition

The sarhak can force her subject to repeat a previous action through repetition of focusing mantras and her dominant will. Anything at all can be repeated if still physically possible. If a target of repetition cannot repeat the willed action, he or she stands still until a few seconds have passed and they regain control of their mental faculties. Even under the influence of this sarkish power, though, a subject can defend itself from attacks.

Seek the Hidden

To the sarhak with this art, nothing is hidden from one's eyes. She can discern the truth even if spells or psychic powers protect an object. Normal darkness falls away in a sarhak's eyes and all revealed to her. The power allows a sarhak to see those creatures that normally cannot be seen (camouflaged, invisible) and discern the true form of shape-shifting creatures. At higher levels of mastery, a sarhak may see into other planes of existence where invisible creatures might dwell.

Thought Shroud

Sarhaks learn, at an early stage in their studies, to protect their minds. There are many creatures and people on Khitus that benefit from easy access to an unguarded psyche. This power focuses a subject's will on mental defense but does not create an impassible block. The effect is akin to jumbling up letters of words to encrypt them, rendering their thoughts an incomprehensible wall of nonsensical prattle. It confers protection against magic and psychic powers that read minds. It also confounds those trained to read body language or behavior patterns to discern surface thoughts or motives.

Total Recall

Memories can hide beneath the surface of the mind, lurking just out of reach and thwarting the most ardent attempts to access them. Not so for the sarhak who has been studying this mnemonic recall power. With meditation and supreme concentration to channel thoughts towards past experiences, the psychic can recall things buried away in their subconscious for days, weeks, or months. There are rumors of even more powerful practitioners that can access forgotten memories that are years old. There are also rumors of a power that can be used on a willing recipient to help them remember information they may have lost in the past.

