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# NEOEXODUS: THE WORLD OF EXODUS



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## HISTORY OF EXODUS

Exodus boasts a long and turbulent history, from the rise of the Kaga and the defeat of the First Ones, to the Twilight War and the founding of the Imperial Alliance, to the present crisis that threatens to tear that alliance apart. Great heroes and terrible villains drove its march, though even in hindsight the two are not always easily separated; theirs were the titanic passions, the deep loves and hates, the burning obsessions and base treacheries, by which modern Exodus was forged and tempered.

### THE REIGN OF THE FIRST ONES

Before the dawn of recorded history, the humanoid races labored under the domination of powerful beings known as the First Ones. More than two thousand years of shadowed antiquity lie between the reign of the First Ones and the modern age, but they remain bogeymen and nightmares to the people of Exodus.

Because the First Ones lived and ruled so many centuries ago, historians have few concrete details about their reign. Modern sages do not know if the First Ones were one race or many, or even if they were humanoids whose immense power and wickedness rendered them like unto gods - or devils. Only the half-mythic hates and fears of mankind remain.

### THE KAGA AND THE HUMAN ERA

Two thousand years ago, the greatest sages, strategists, scientists and sorcerers laboring in the cruel service of the First Ones concocted a plan so bold it would change the world of Exodus forever. This plan became the Kaga, the collective sentience of the one hundred most brilliant minds of an age, an artificial afterlife. The Kaga became a repository of all human knowledge - and the greatest weapon against the monstrous First Ones.

Soon after the Kaga's formation, the huddled masses of humanity rose up against their overlords. With their greatest minds united to direct them, the humanoid races overthrew the reign of the First Ones in a series of apocalyptic battles. No record remains of those primeval struggles, no clue as to the eventual fate of the First Ones - only this: when the dust cleared, the world of Exodus belonged to the humanoid races.

Rather than rule as a god-king, immortal and nigh-omniscient, the Kaga retreated into solitude and contemplation. For centuries, its wisdom remained

hidden from humanity as its component geniuses pooled their minds to further hone their powers of reflection. Even now, with the Kaga once more accessible, sages are at a loss to understand why this guiding light chose to shut itself off.

While the Kaga withdrew, the surviving humans set about rebuilding in the ashes of the civilization that had enslaved them for countless centuries. These early men were primitive and barbaric; lacking the pre-human science of the First Ones, they dwelt amidst ruined spires and huddled beside still-latent sorceries, unaware of the powers almost within their grasp. In time, the ruins crumbled to dust, the magic faded from time-worn artifacts, and the humans moved from the decaying cities to the wilderness beyond.

### AN AGE OF MIND AND MAGIC

While most of humanity descended into barbarism in the early years after the fall of the First Ones, a few learned to command the arcane sciences of their former masters.

These arcanists became the first Sorcerer Kings of Abaddon. There, they raised the first human civilization, binding to their empowered wills hundreds of the savage humanoid tribes. They repaired the shattered cities of the First Ones and raised new glories in their own name.

Although they were not as monolithically wicked as their former masters, the Sorcerer Kings soon acquired a reputation for heartless tyranny. Humans all, they drove members of the other humanoid races into slavery or exile and sought to bind the whole of Exodus under their power.

Even as the Sorcerer Kings were rising in Abaddon, however, another power had grown in the frigid hills of Nas. The Cavians, a race of ratlike humanoids, had taken a very different path to power. Rejecting the arcane sciences that had once enslaved them, they focused entirely on honing their own innate powers of the mind. Through their study and meditation, psionics entered the world of Exodus.

Cavian and Sorcerer King soon came to blows - blows that shook Exodus like nothing since the fall of the First Ones. Titanic magical and psionic energies literally reshaped whole sections of the landscape.

When the dust faded, the Sorcerer Kings were a shadow of their former power; of their hundreds, only a half dozen survived, and those barely beyond the



level of apprentices. Most of the surviving legacy of the First Ones perished, for good or ill. Of the Cavians, however, even less seemed to have survived - their race, once among the most populous and powerful on Exodus, vanished completely from the face of the planet.

### THE SEEDS OF NATIONHOOD

The War of Mind and Magic, as the Cavian-Sorcerer King conflict came to be known, shattered both belligerents' dreams of conquest.

The barbaric tribes of humanity, long held back by the supernatural might of civilization, surged into the power vacuum with fire and the sword. At the same time, the long-silent Kaga, perhaps roused by the War of Mind and Magic, again lent its timeless wisdom to mankind.

From the Kaga, barbarian chieftains learned the arts of statecraft and barbarian shamans learned the arts of magic. These young, virile peoples, held in check too long by arcane powers, washed across the face of Exodus like a tidal wave. In short order, the servile peoples who had labored for sorcerer and psion bent knee to warlords who ruled by force and cunning.

In the Cordel region, which had been one of the primary battlegrounds of the War of Mind and Magic, the barbarian chieftains and the descendents of the Sorcerer Kings interbred. In short order, both races were much altered; the region's tribes remained nomadic herders and raiders, but their ruling caste became one of natural magicians who blended sword, spell and stealth.

In frigid Nas, abandoned seat of Cavian power, humanity quickly replaced the rodentfolk civilization. The hardy people of Nas united under four clans calling themselves Brauner, von Breit, Hanstrom and Olsson. Already more civilized than most of the suppressed humans of other lands, they quickly accepted the wisdom of the Kaga and carved out the beginnings of a feudal system that would hold for centuries.

In the Wyldlands of Bal, where neither of the great powers of the last age had enjoyed success, humans fought animalistic Eukas and brutish Orcs, matching savagery for savagery. Here, civilization rose for the first time, at least since the fall of the First Ones, in the form of isolated city-states slaved to bloodthirsty gods.

Abaddon remained the seat of the surviving Sorcerer Kings, threatened only by scattered uprisings and raids from their estranged kin in Cordel. Though much reduced from their greatest glories, the arcane scientists of Abaddon remained the mightiest living creatures on Exodus, and for a time it seemed, even with the opposition of the Kaga, that they would regain their power.

### THE UNIFICATION OF THE DOMINION

Even with the infusion of sorcerous blood into their ruling caste, the nomadic tribes of Cordel found themselves at a disadvantage against the better-organized baronies of Nas and the spells and armies of Abaddon. For centuries, they had been at turns mercenaries for greater powers and raiders pouring across their borders; now, they found their own lands menaced.

Individual khans found their hosts, while more than adequate for striking at unsuspecting foes, too few and too scattered to stand against a determined assault. At best, they could fade into the desert and avoid battle. At worst, they were caught and either killed or enslaved.

The nomads might have been driven deep into the trackless wilderness to perish, if not for the efforts of the first Khagan of the Dominion.

Ironically, the identity of that great chieftain has been lost to the sands of time - if it was ever known at all. The nomads of Cordel had no written writing until more than a century after their unification, and their neighbors knew of the rising power only by rumor and hearsay. With conflicting oral traditions the only source of information on the Khagan's life, each tribe and faction of the modern Dominion claims him as one of their own.

The Khagan's modus operandi did nothing to confirm his identity. In the years leading up to his reign, he traveled among all the tribes of Cordel as a landless warrior. During this period, he was often called the Desert Shade because of his habit of appearing seemingly from the very sands and vanishing in the night after a battle.

The one-day Khagan's tactics were as unusual as his solitary lifestyle. While many Khans of the Cordel tribes could use magic and some had become quite powerful, few had learned how to use it effectively. The "Desert Shade" blended matters magical and military to set up seemingly invincible ambushes, even

when he and his allies of the day were outnumbered ten-to-one.

The future Khagan also broke with the tradition of Cordel's humanoid tribes by having extensive dealings with the region's large Sasori enclave. While Dominion legends have him anticipating the plans of his enemies by his rare genius or, in some tales, by the gift of prophecy, most scholars agree that his extraordinary intelligence network owed much to the Sasori, who served him loyally in return for the first peace they had had with humans since their mutual enslavement under the First Ones.

The barons of Nas and the Sorcerer Kings of Abaddon loathed the "Desert Shade". They called him the King of Lies for the rumors he spread about them to rally his people; displaying uncanny knowledge of their movements and their most embarrassing secrets, he called himself the King of Truths. They called him the Human Sasori, hoping to play on age-old racial hatreds; he embraced the name, saying he was a friend of the desert, not any one of its peoples. They threatened to wipe out any tribe that sheltered him; he taught the tribes to wipe out their armies instead.

After over a decade of such wanderings, the "Desert Shade" revealed his then-hidden city of Qijom, a capital he had reared in secret with the profits from his mercenary work. He called for a council of the khans and proclaimed himself Khagan - Khan among Khans. None dared contradict him, for he swiftly proved he was the warrior who had, acknowledged or not, led them all to the only victories they had known in a generation.

Just as the enigmatic Khagan eschewed any personal name for himself, so it was with his newly unified nation. He called the federation of desert tribes and desert sorcerers simply the Dominion, refusing even the regional name of Cordel.

In the next five decades of the Khagan's life, his people defeated a half-dozen armies from Abaddon and as many from Nas. More, they pushed back into both neighboring countries and seized two broad fertile belts outside their desert homeland. From the jaws of defeat, the 'Desert Shade' had snatched victory after victory.

His soldiery was matched only by his genius at scholarship and statecraft. Taking the throne of a race of barbaric nomads, he left his people with their first written language, their national identity, and the skeleton of the caste system that holds to the modern era. He reorganized the Khanate into the modern Ibn

Al'alim - the ruling mageocracy -, the raiders into the Dammar, the shamans into the Khepri, and the casteless workers and merchants into the Rafik. He also personally created and gave paramount importance to the Sihr, the historians and scholars who implemented his written language and plan for national literacy.

Johan Darre, a bard from Nas permitted to witness the council of Khans and the Khagan's coronation, penned the only surviving record of the event. His tale, converted to the Imperial dating structure, places the Khagan's coronation at 837 BU. Concluding his dramatic chronicle, the original manuscript of which resides in the Caneus Royal Library in Nyssa, Darre wrote of the Khagan: "He hides his face in desert robes at all times, but he is known to all by his voice, by his bearing, by his unmistakable presence. He is the first king of true men and his coming heralds a new age."

Darre's prediction would prove entirely prescient.

### THE COMING OF THE ARMANS

The rise of the Dominion weakened the already flagging power of the Sorcerer Kings of Abaddon, but they retained their hold over that region for another century. It fell, not to their rapidly civilizing western neighbors, but to an entirely new set of barbarians to bring down the last remnants of the ancient arcane empire.

These were the Armans, a race of seafaring raiders from the island of Ablis. Though geographically remote from the fledgling knights and barons of Nas, the Armans came from similar stock - much taller and bulkier than the other humans of Exodus, often fair-haired, always savage. The Armans themselves denied this connection; living in isolated and forbidding climes, they had never labored under First One enslavement and believed themselves uniquely free among all humanoids.

They were also uniquely ferocious. The few inhabitants of Sametia, Bal and Abaddon who dwelt near the eastern coast spoke of the Armans as demons in human form: fearless, pitiless raiders before whom other barbarians seemed tame. Even the Sorcerer Kings at the height of their power had bought off the Armans rather than fighting them.

In 752 BU, the Armans did more than raid mainland Exodus.

According to the sagas of the migrating Armans, their journey began with a prophecy. Grigori Vyskos,



a shaman of the Kryszkas clan, had visions of his people wiped from Ablis by 'fires that walked like the sea' - but of their descendents reigning in glory on the mainland. The former prediction terrified the thralls and womenfolk who remained behind while the raiding bands sought plunder among civilized lands, while the latter fired the imagination of the thanes of those bands.

The clan's high thane, Vladimir Kryszkas, decided to believe the shaman's warning and his promise. He rallied his raiders to him, not to pillage and retreat to the sea but to invade and hold. In the first moon of 752 BU, he led his horde to Sametia and overcame the enclaves of plains tribesmen and the border outposts of the Sorcerer Kings. Traveling swiftly by boat, they sailed south from this colony, sacked two northeastern cities of the Sorcerer Kings and bound their arcane rulers with primitive, primal shamanic magic. After four moons, however, the rulers of Abaddon rallied their legions and smashed the Arman invaders back. Vladimir was forced to fall back on his conquests in Sametia; his people's prospects of empire looked bleak, and of survival little better. Grigori Vyskos, hailed as a visionary just months before, was now seen as a fraud. He was executed on midwinter's day of 752 BU, proclaiming to the last the truth of his visions.

Events bore out the shaman's prophecy. Even as the Kryszkas were hanging him for what they saw as condemning them to annihilation, the island of Ablis erupted, its long-dormant volcanoes belching lava onto the mountain pastures of the Arman shepherds. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, died in the initial eruption; thousands more surely would have if they had not been able to find new sources of food, for their pastures were smoldering ash and their fishing holes steaming ruin. Skalds and shamans reminded their thanes of the words of the Kryszkas prophet; if Grigori Vyskos's dreams of apocalypse had been true, why not his dreams of empire?

Eventually, five other Arman clans joined the migration: the Babinovichs, the Ivanovenas, the Chapaevonas, the Dyakonoviks and the Krestyanovskis. They set out between the last moon of 752 BU and the first of 744 BU, half-fleeing their increasingly volatile island home, half-seeking the glories of the mainland.

Swamped by multiple invasions from the Armans and losing legions and lords in terrifying numbers, the Sorcerer Kings abandoned first their press of the Kryszkas, then, in 743 BU, their entire coastline.

Retreat proved a fatal mistake. The Armans had previously feared and respected the power of the Sorcerer Kings and concentrated on subduing the disunited plains barbarians of Sametia. Now they scented weakness from the gilded halls to the south - and like the lions the Sametians likened them to, the Armans pounced on any sign of weakness. One sorcerous city after another fell to the invading barbarians.

In 740 BU, the legion of the port city of Galeathan cast their sorcerous monarch from the walls and opened the gates; Vladimir Kryszkas, grown wiser since his mistaken execution of a prophet, took the city bloodlessly and kept his horde from sacking it. Soon, other cities followed suit, welcoming the Armans as liberators from centuries of sorcerous tyranny.

By 737 BU, the six Arman hordes encircled the Sorcerer Kings' ancient capital of Mureath. The siege outlasted the year. When the garrison sought to surrender, Xalthotan, the High King of Abaddon, slew every last one with his magic and staffed the walls with their animated corpses. He and his colleagues waged titanic magical battles against the Arman shamans, pitting ancient knowledge against elemental power. Even with their empire lost, the Sorcerer Kings might have wiped out the Armans on that battlefield, but the Kaga, long troubled by the legacy of the First Ones, lent its immeasurable wisdom to the Arman shamans.

The Kaga's secrets, mated to the untamed power and vastly superior numbers of the shamans, bought the Arman warriors enough time to storm the walls, cut their way through an army of undead and fouler devilry, and break the Sorcerer Kings' power forever. In 736 BU, Arman barbarians raised the head of Xalthotan, the last Sorcerer King, proclaiming their mastery of all Abaddon.

### THE FOUNDING OF THE CANEUS EMPIRE

While their distant, untamed cousins conquered Abaddon, the people of Nas concerned themselves with advancing their civilization. Nowhere else on the continent had the subtle influence of the Kaga spread further, and nowhere had purely humanoid civilization, unencumbered with the legacy of the First Ones, reached greater heights.

With the rise of civilization, however, came new dangers. Men whose ancestors had been chieftains

now dreamed themselves kings. Men whose ancestors had fought at the heads of burgeoning warrior-aristocrat hosts now commanded armies of professional soldiers without ever leaving their capitals. Far from the increasingly gilded cities of Nas's powerful families, the ceaseless snows ran red with the blood of knights, mercenaries and peasant levies. To the dukes and merchants who ruled in Nas, sending a local knight to die alone on a hundred mercenary swords became another play on a chess board.

Not all of the minor nobles and commoners shared this sentiment, however. In 657 BU, during a particularly brutal border contest between houses Brauner and Olsson, one of those minor nobles found his patience taxed beyond its limits.

Gregory, Baron Eland, came from a long line of warriors: he traced his ancestry to sub-chiefs serving under the Brauner warlords when they first swept over Nas in the wake of the Cavian Empire. In the last century, however, his proud heritage had been repeatedly disgraced. Because the barony of Eland was on the contested border between Brauner and Olsson territories, it was a battleground whenever the two dukes went to war.

In Gregory Eland's great-grandfather's time, the barony was captured by Duke Olsson's men; the Baron Eland accepted his new alle-

giance philosophically and raised his sons as loyal vassals of house Olsson. Fifty years later, in 680 BU, Duke Olsson foisted a greater disgrace upon Eland by selling the barony, along with several of its neighbors, back to Duke Brauner in exchange for a temporary alliance against raiders from the Dominion. Thus, young Gregory grew up in vassalage to the lord of his ancestors, raised by parents and grandparents who had spent their whole lives serving that lord's hereditary foe.

Because of this conflicted background, neither Brauner nor Olsson placed much trust in the young Baron Eland. When hostilities between the houses inevitably resumed, Duke Reinhardt Brauner declined to give command of the local army to Gregory; instead, he placed the baron and his retinue under a mercenary commander, an Arman raider called Ivan Harskolff. Baron Eland and his knights, along with the retinues of other local lords, were repeatedly thrown into the heat of the fighting - against men of similar background or against peasant levies - while the





Duke's professional soldiers claimed the glory for one against-the-odds victory after another.

Worse, at Duke Brauner's orders, mercenary soldiers quartered in the very castles of the local lords. The mercenaries showed no gratitude toward their unwilling hosts. They roistered, they depleted winter stores, they chased serving wenches and beat servants.

General Harskolff, who quartered at the castle of Ravenspont south of Eland, did worse. He took a fancy to Baron Ravenspont's daughter, Liesel - Gregory Eland's betrothed - and demanded she be given to him as a concubine; the Armans of that time still practice concubinage. When Baron Ravenspont refused, Harskolff killed him on the spot and locked Liesel in his quarters. His men also put to the sword the Ravenspont bannermen in attendance.

Gregory Eland's younger brother, Chauncey, was a squire at Ravenspont. He broke away in the confusion and spurred his horse to his brother's lands, heedless of a crossbow bolt lodged in his shoulder. By the time he reached Eland castle, Chauncey was feverish and nearly incoherent, but he managed to gasp his story to his brother before he fell unconscious. Baron Eland immediately raised his own knights and sent messengers to the surrounding baronies. The resulting army, patterned after the older feudal hosts of Nas's past, descended on Ravenspont and assailed the walls. They found the mercenaries drunk on Baron Ravenspont's depleted wine cellars and slew them to a man; Gregory Eland personally threw the outlander Harskolff from the castle walls. Of the Ravenspont family, none survived, Liesel having taken her own life rather than be subjected to Harskolff's cruel afflictions.

Gregory Eland's wrath did not die with a single rapacious mercenary, however. He turned his host against the remaining mercenaries, wiping them out before they could reorganize. This action did more than avenge the offenses done the local folk, from serf to baron. It branded them traitors to Duke Brauner's service - and so bound them to Eland's.

Recognizing the sudden and inescapable bond between he and his host, and that their only chance to survive lay in total victory, Eland marched them northeast. With Brauner's armies professional armies ringing the duchy's borders rather than holding its interior, Eland's host reached the gates of the duke's capital, Nyssa, nearly unopposed. In the waning moon of 657 BU, Eland's desperate band of knights

and men-at-arms stormed the city walls, overwhelmed the duke's retinue, and seized Nyssa.

Eland spared Reinhardt Brauner, even allowed him to retain his title - in exchange for an oath of fealty. For a baron to thus turn the tables on his lord was unheard of, but Brauner could not do otherwise.

Of course, once Gregory Eland had a duke for a vassal, he ceased to be a mere baron. In 656 BU, Brauner offered to crown him King of Nas. To the shock of his enemies and retainers alike, Eland refused, saying he would not squabble over a crown like the dukes had. He would not rule by taking the power of his rivals; he would restore the feudal system of old. Eland crowned himself, not King, but Emperor, and he called his domain Caneus, the Old Nas word for Union.

The other dukes did not take kindly to this upstart 'emperor' and his meteoric rise. In short order, Eland smashed armies from houses Olsson and Hanstrom. Again, he spared the dukes, taking from them only their autocratic power and an oath of fealty. Their knights and barons, reluctant to fight a man they saw more as liberator than foe, eagerly pledged themselves to the renewed feudal order and the young Caneus Empire.

Ludwig von Breit, the last of the independent dukes, grabbed territory from the defeated houses and incorporated their mercenary armies into his own. In 653 BU, von Breit's army, swollen by every imaginable type of mercenary, from Sametian horse archers to skirmishers from Bal, met the heavy cavalry of Emperor Eland at what historians would later call the Battle of Caneus.

Three times, Eland's host charged the professional soldiers of von Breit, and each time were repulsed. With his army reduced to nearly half its original size and night fast approaching, the Emperor took up his war banner and led a last, seemingly suicidal charge against the center of von Breit's army. The knights finally broke through, splitting the ducal forces. More importantly, they reached the caravan of treasures looted from Olsson and Hanstrom, with which von Breit intended to pay his mercenaries. Seeing their pay lost, most of those soldiers withdrew from the battlefield, leaving the stunned, exhausted knights of Caneus the victors.

Gregory Eland was crowned emperor a second time in Baron von Breit's palace in Hadensburg in late 653 BU. This time, his ascension was acknowledged by the Dominion and the Arman clans - and presided

over by a country priest from a small Canean religious sect that had already given him a greater gift than a crown, and was soon to make itself felt with his descendents' patronage.

### PROPHETS, PREACHERS AND PRELATES

The Sanguine Covenant had existed in isolated communities in Nas for at least a few centuries before it exploded onto the stage during the rise of the Caneus Empire. It might have remained a footnote in the history of Exodus, if not for the two tragedies that instigated Gregory Eland's rise to power - the death of his betrothed, Liesel Ravenspont, and the terrible injuries to his brother Chauncey.

Chauncey Eland convalesced for over a year after the fall of Ravenspont in 657 BU. He barely survived at all, and constantly struggled to breathe in the frigid air of Nas. After his brother defeated Duke Brauner and proclaimed himself Emperor, Chauncey was sent to the extreme north of the new Caneus Empire, where the weather rapidly warmed as it approached the Wyldlands of Bal.

There, the invalid young noble entertained many shamans, witch doctors and snake oil salesmen at his brother's expense, seeking a cure for his shattered body.

At the same time, Lucius Horst, a priest of the Sanguine Covenant, saw a vision of himself healing the emperor's young brother. In his vision, he drew forth diseased blood from Chauncey Eland's body and cleansed it. Then the blood flowed from his hands and spread across the whole of the Caneus Empire - the whole of Exodus! - like the life-giving blood of Tarac, the one god of the Covenant.

Lucius, a poor country clergyman who held ceremonies in a barn because his village lacked the resources to raise a temple, made a pilgrimage of nearly five hundred miles to reach the villa where his destined patient waited. Because he had no money for clothes, he was turned away at every inn he passed, called beggar and worse; by rights, he should have starved or died from exposure. When he finally reached Chauncey Eland's villa, the guards turned him away, again mistaking him for a beggar. He waited outside the villa for four days, ceasing his prayers only to sleep and to politely request entry. At last, one of the serving girls took pity on the old cleric and brought him in through the servant's entrance.

Once inside, Lucius immediately invited himself in to Chauncey Eland's presence. The young noble, unlike his guards, was willing to try anything to cure his ailment and invited the priest forward. Lucius offered up a prayer to Tarac and laid his hands on the young noble's - and, with a last cough, Chauncey Eland rose from his bed, hale and hearty as the day of his fateful ride from Ravenspont.

Sponsored by the dramatically converted younger brother of the emperor, Lucius's story spread like wildfire through the Caneus Empire. In 654 BU, Emperor Gregory himself called Lucius to the capital in Nyssa. The emperor thanked the priest for healing his brother and expressed interest in learning more about Tarac's teachings - but with reservations.

Gregory explained he was a less gentle soul than his brother, and less trusting; he had seen the mystical powers of the Kaga and read of the mental ones of the departed Cavians. Both could reputedly heal the sick and wounded - but there was one miracle neither could achieve. Gregory begged Lucius, if it was within Tarac's power, to restore life to his betrothed, Liesel Ravenspont.

Lucius, who had always taught that Tarac's power was bound only by his believers' faith, was taken aback by this request. He had once revived a child who had drowned in the lake near his home village, but that had been seconds after the tragedy, not years. No human cleric had ever achieved a resurrection after such a span, and tales of the dark priests of the First Ones doing so were surely just legends. Yet, he remembered the prophecy and knew he must win the emperor over to the Sanguine Covenant. He swore to try.

Gregory had meant this merely as a test of Lucius's sincerity, fully expecting an honest man to refuse. When Lucius seemed to think it possible, however, the emperor's whole demeanor changed. He agreed to join the priest in humble, silent prayer, lending his memory to guide Lucius's supplication. He sent the rest of his court away and sealed the throne room.

An hour later, an exhausted priest and emperor emerged from the throne room - in the company a dazed young noblewoman with raven hair, whose last memory was of taking her life before a mercenary could defile her.

From that point on, Emperor Gregory and Empress Liesel were converts to the Sanguine Covenant.



By the time of Lucius's death in 639 BU, he had gone from the pastor of a tiny village sect to the prophet of national religion. A humble man, he declined the position of Archprelate of Nyssa; only with duress did he accept the lesser position of Imperial Confessor. The explosive growth of his church happened because of his works, but not by his hand.

The church continued to grow in the ensuing century, taking on many of the modern, familiar forms. The Sanguine Cathedral in Nyssa was completed in 601 BU; the even larger Caneus Cathedral rose in Hadensburg in 597 BU.

However, despite imperial sanction and the tales of Lucius's miracles, the Sanguine Covenant remained a minority in the Caneus Empire as late as 562 BU. Much of the lesser nobility and even more of the peasantry clove to their old, pagan traditions. The clerics of these gods might not raise the dead, but they had healed and led their flocks for centuries, and their power was still evident. More, after Lucius's death, few Covenant prelates demonstrated powers surpassing their pagan counterparts. Were the prophet's achievements indicative of the strength of his one god, the people wondered, or of his own holiness?

Gregory Eland, his son Emperor Caspian Eland, and his grandson Gregory II all left their pagan subjects in peace, trusting to imperial-built cathedrals and the theological arguments of the clergy to win people over to the Covenant. That changed in 564 BU, when Vincent Eland, Gregory's great-grandson, took the throne.

Emperor Vincent was Gregory II's third son, an often ill and always ill-tempered youth whose only peace, such as it was, came from his devotion to the Covenant. Since he was third in line to inherit the throne, he became a Covenant novice in 567 BU and was nearly ready to assume the duties of a junior prelate when his brothers, Chauncey and Lucius, were killed during an expedition to the Wyldlands of Bal.

Forced to abandon his religious studies and assume a throne for which he was entirely unprepared, Vincent at first listened to his advisors and made few decisions of his own. By 562 BU, however, Vincent became convinced that his brothers' deaths and his unwelcome rise were part of a divine plan - that he was destined to purify the Caneus Empire and bring it into proper devotion to the Sanguine Covenant.

The Archprelate of Nyssa at the time was also a third son of a noble house: Maximilian Brauner, of the Elands' former liege family. He warned the emperor

against imposing the church on his subjects, begging him not to stain the hands of the servants of Tarac with forced conversions. For the moment, Vincent tolerated, but ignored, the archprelate. He banned the practice of pagan religions and confiscated the property of non-Covenant clergy. Cynical members of the court suggested it was the expense of his brothers' expedition to Bal, not the alleged meaning of their deaths, that spurred the emperor on, but they were soon to discover otherwise.

For a few years, Vincent contented himself with his ban on the pagans, in part because the inhabitants of Bal had retaliated in force and he was occupied fighting the northern savages. In 559 BU, however, he returned to Nyssa and began the next phase of his plan to convert his empire - imprisoning the druids and pagan clerics, along with any lords who sheltered them. This drew outcries from across the empire, nowhere less than from Archprelate Maximilian. The archprelate threatened to declare the emperor a heretic; the emperor, unphased, ordered the archprelate arrested, accused him of diabolism, and had him executed in the palace courtyard.

The next three decades became a nightmare for the Caneus Empire. Vincent appointed a new archprelate from among his loyal clerics - violating the precepts of the very church he meant to spread. His persecution of the pagans grew more and more severe. His efforts at forced conversion were largely successful, as terrified commoners and knights flocked to hastily raised churches to show their devotion, but more and more of the clergy refused to participate. The emperor sometimes ignored the 'disloyal' prelates and sometimes executed them en masse to set an example.

By 548 BU, Vincent was widely acknowledged as a madman. He rarely appeared in public, spending most of his time shut up in his summer palace near the Dominion border. Duke Brauner, whose clerical brother was among the first executed, Duke Hanstrom, who controlled the land around the imperial summer palace, and the emperor's cousin Prince Albrecht Eland conspired to assassinate him before he could do more damage. Their plot was discovered and all three men executed. Almost universally reviled, the mad emperor managed to hold power for another twenty years.

Finally, in 524 BU, another rebellion rose, this time backed by Dukes von Breit and Olsson, by the displaced heirs of Dukes Brauner and Hanstrom, whose lands and titles had been confiscated, and by Hadensburg's Archprelate Castor Jung. The arch-

prelate, although an imperial appointee, was horrified by what Vincent had done to his church. A warrior-priest in his youth, Archprelate Jung had accompanied the expedition to Bal and fought beside the emperor's brothers. Because they had fallen under his care, he saw the present reign of terror as partly his fault.

The ducal army, with Jung at its head, marched on the poorly-defended summer palace before the emperor realized he faced a rebellion. Jung and a small group of elite warriors entered the palace; none ever spoke of what they saw within, but their haunted expressions spoke volumes. They found the emperor and ended his cruel reign at sword's point, emerging a full day after they entered the palace.

Archprelate Jung, realizing that the empire would descend into anarchy and feuding baronies again without an Eland emperor they could trust, decided to attempt to replicate the feat of the priest Lucius. Unlike Lucius, he had the mortal remains of the unfortunate Prince Albrecht Eland, but those remains had decayed far worse in twenty years of ill-use than Empress Liesel's would have in a few years safely entombed. Jung realized he might fail, or unleash a worse horror on the empire, but he saw no choice.

Jung's gambit paid off better than he could have imagined; he was able to restore Albrecht to life - and, swiftly, to the vacant throne in Nyssa - and also, by duplicating Lucius's miracle of resurrection, to turn the people's fear of the Sanguine Covenant into faith.

Nonetheless, the Covenant was forever changed by the terrible reign of Vincent I and the reforms of Archprelate Jung. It remained an armed church, ever wary of heresy that might plunge it back into darkness; it remained armed against pagans and unbelievers as well, and though it no longer persecuted them within the Caneus Empire, nor did it look kindly on them in other lands.

Within a hundred years, the Covenant would receive an unprecedented opportunity to convert those lands.

### THE UNIFICATION OF THE ARMAN PROTECTORATE

Purely human civilization had come late to Abaddon - and when Arman barbarians brought it with fire and the sword, it was only loosely civilized. Two centuries of ruling the prosperous domain of the Sorcerer Kings changed the continental Armans a great deal, however.

By 500 BU, the Armans had settled completely into civilized life. The six clans that had brought the Sorcerer Kings low ruled in their abandoned palaces as independent princedoms. Unlike their distant kin in Nas, the Armans never possessed a true feudal structure. The clan leaders became princes without ever surrendering any of their autocratic power to a network of barons and knights. If they had flirted with the idea, the fall of the dukes of Nas to a baron-cum-emperor surely laid the notion to rest. Instead, the strong mercenary culture that sent thousands of Armans to fight wars for foreign lords also kept them busy in their home princedoms.

The Armans of 500 BU had difficulties of their own, however. The rich plunder they had taken from the conquest of Abaddon had sustained them in splendor for years; the wages of mercenary work in Nas flooded their economy with big-spending warriors for years more. Both sources of wealth had run thin over the centuries. The raiding culture from their island days would not have paid for their palaces; the pickings from the neighboring nomads of Sametia and the Dominion hardly paid for the price of expeditions to those lands.

Of the Armans' two neighbors, the Dominion was by far the more prosperous. The princely houses did not bother organizing raids against the Cordel desert, but when their warriors took it upon themselves to launch such attacks - bringing back what wealth they could to fill Arman coffers - the princes offered no complaint.

Unfortunately for the Armans, the Dominion's Khagan, Faisel al Kasim, took a dimmer view of this privateering. In 492 BU, he struck back. Moving under the cover of a magically-created sandstorm, his army traced the steps of a particularly large raiding party to the lands of the Arman Prince Sergei Babinovich. The Dominion forces exploded into Abaddon, firing fields and raising fortifications. Prince Babinovich raised his own army and rushed to meet the "unprovoked invasion". It took the Armans months to bring al Kasim's swifter army to battle, and when they did, their exhausted axemen and spearmen were mowed down by well rested and magically supported cavalry. Prince Babinovich himself was captured and taken back to Qijom as a prisoner, forcing his horrified daughter, Olga, to pay a ruinous ransom to the Dominion. Prince Babinovich returned a broken man, half-mad with disgrace and despair.

The other Arman rulers were shocked by their brother prince's humiliation. For hundreds of years, they had considered themselves invincible; defeat at the hands



of the Dominion, who they considered the banished Sorcerer Kings' "little cousins", was the most terrible disgrace imaginable.

The Arman princes lacked the insight to recognize their limitations and reevaluate their relationship with the Dominion. At the same time, theirs was still too vigorous a civilization to allow a single defeat to break them. The other five great houses concluded that the weakness was limited to the Babinovich principedom. Rather than retreat and regroup, two other princes, Nicola Kryszkas and Josef Chapaevonas, joined forces to retaliate against the Dominion. Their path took them through Babinovich lands, where a rage-mad Princess Olga gladly pledged marriage and aid to Nicola Kryszkas, the younger of the vengeance-minded princes.

Thus, in 494 BU, the hosts of three Arman prince-doms joined forces to invade the Dominion.

The Khagan was waiting for them.

Al Kasim understood the Armans better than they understood themselves. They had become more civilized than civilized - no less warlike than their sea reaver ancestors, but possessed of a sense of warfare entirely based around capturing territory and holding key points. In the Cordel desert, there were no key points and only a handful of cities, but a great many mirages and tribes of fierce nomads. The Khagan again led his enemies a merry chase, refusing to give them the pitched battle they dearly desired. His mages, rather than confronting the Arman shamans openly, mazed them with endlessly shifting sands and mirages.

After four months in the desert, the Arman army had gone from a gleaming host of professional soldiers to a ragtag band of hired swords desperate for food, water, even shade.

Still, the Khagan waited.

Prince Chapaevonas, realizing the futility of the invasion, advised a retreat. Prince Kryszkas might have listened, but his young wife would hear none of it. Olga Babinovich demanded vengeance for her father - at any cost. Reluctantly, her husband agreed. After another month of sweltering in the desert, Prince Chapaevonas despaired for his allies and withdrew his forces to his own border, but the Kryszkas and Babinovich armies remained.

They would likely have died to the last man without ever bringing the Dominion to battle, if they had

not chanced upon the cave of a Sanguine Covenant hermit. Though the old cleric seemed at least half mad, the Armans were by now far further gone than that. More, their culture had long venerated wild holy men of a similar type. The hermit told Nicola and Olga that they were sure to perish in the desert, because their sinful natures left them vulnerable to the Khagan's powers. Only a man pure of heart, he explained, could see the truth in all things. The hermit promised that, if they would embrace the Sanguine Covenant, the god Tarac would show them the true path to victory and lead them safely home; not only that, their sons would one day rule all the Arman peoples.

At first, the Arman rulers scoffed at this; they knew the Sanguine Covenant from afar and despised it as a crutch for the weak peoples of Nas. Heedless of the hermit, they plunged back into the desert - and found themselves back at the cave the next day. Five more times, they tried for the Dominion capital of Qijom, and five more times they found only the hermit.

After the fifth time, they listened.

By now, al Kasim, judging his enemies thoroughly broken, at last decided to put an end to the invasion. His army crept up on the Arman host in the night, planning on their waking to the sight of his huge body of troops. The Armans, he judged, would be completely exhausted and willing to bargain their lives for water, certainly unwilling to fight a much larger force.

Instead, he found a force of well-rested warriors, fed and watered despite the total absence of any sustenance in that part of the desert, wary and ready for battle.

Nicola had arrayed his troops in the crags around the hermit's cave, hiding his wife and a handpicked force of elite warriors in the cave itself. Al Kasim's light cavalry could not charge into the rocks without riding beneath the spears of the entrenched Armans. Rather than waste his troops in a suicidal attack, the Khagan decided to flush his enemies out by magic. He and his sorcerous khans called up a powerful sandstorm to blast the Armans from the crags - and watched in horror as a thunderstorm, entirely unnatural in the desert, overwhelmed their sorcery.

The sand between the Dominion and Arman forces turned to thick mud, trapping horses and camels and men used to the shifting sands. The red sand became red mud, like a sea of blood - and gave the coming battle its name: the Battle of the Rain of Blood. At

Nicola's order, his men smeared the mud on their shields and tabards in a crude pastiche of the Sanguine Covenant's blood drop symbol - and charged.

Al Kasim was stunned by the reversal of the Arman's fortunes and the failure of his magic, but he was still a cannier commander than his opponent. His men dispersed as best they could in the mud, drawing the Armans in so their flanks could close on either side and surround them entirely. Whatever tactical advantage the infantry-trained Armans had was lost as the battle became a chaotic melee, speed, spell and wits against strength and newfound resolve.

When night fell, it found over a thousand Armans dead amidst four times their number of Dominion corpses, while Prince and Khagan, exhausted by a personal duel that had lasted for over an hour - such was the skill of both leaders - watched the sun set over drawn blades. The battle might have continued into the night or dragged on to the next day, inevitably ending with the Armans and many thousands more of their enemies dead, but the force left in the cave, accompanied by Princess Olga and the hermit himself, emerged. Heedless of the scattered melees still going on around them, they marched to the two leaders. At the hermit's urging, the Princess approached her husband and her enemy. She knelt in the mud at the feet of the shocked Khagan and offered her forgiveness for the disgrace done her family, asking that both armies go their separate ways in exchange.

Al Kasim, who had no desire to continue the costly battle, agreed, asking only that they explain - Nicola how he had provisioned his army, Olga her change of heart. They introduced him to the hermit, who answered for them both.

The Arman army retreated from the Dominion, guided by the very nomads they had come to fight. Al Kasim returned to Qijom, taking the anonymous hermit with him to teach him the ways of the Sanguine Covenant.

In the Arman princedoms, Josef Chapaevonas had told of his allies' mad quest for vengeance and how it had surely led them to their deaths in the desert. Because Nicola and Olga left no heirs and few troops, Prince Chapaevonas was able to occupy much of both their lands and quietly sell off those regions too remote for his men to govern. His motives may have been benign - surviving documents indicate the regents left behind by his fellow rulers were plotting to usurp the vacant thrones - but in practice he effectively tripled his own holdings. When, against all odds, the surviving troops of Nicola and Olga emerged from the

Dominion with a tale of miracles and a foreign god, Prince Chapaevonas declined to relinquish his pole position among the Arman princes.

Much of 493 BU was consumed by the civil war between the two displaced Arman rulers and their former ally. Their tired and reduced army began partisan actions against the occupying Chapaevonas troops. Their uprising seemed hopeless, since most of their former subjects clung to their shamanic tradition and rejected the missionary faith of their converted former rulers.

In 492 BU, however, the Sanguine Covenant became the most powerful ally the Babinovich-Kryszkas uprising could have asked for. The Archprelate of Nyssa declared the uprising a holy war of believers against pagans, and though the Caneus Empire itself did not become involved, several dukes and hundreds of lesser nobles took up the banner. To the astonishment of Archprelate and Arman prince alike, several khans of the Dominion also rallied to their cause, their beliefs fired by the miracles at the Battle of the Rain of Blood two years before. As the hermit had predicted, the believers of the Sanguine Covenant unlocked the Arman throne for the dual line of Babinovich-Kryszkas. 491 BU had barely dawned when Prince Chapaevonas surrendered to Nicola Kryszkas coalition forces.

The Canean-trained clergy who were Nicola's closest advisors recommended he follow Gregory Eland's example and spare his enemy's life. Nicola agreed, with the condition that Josef Chapaevonas's children be raised in the Sanguine Covenant and his eldest daughter inherit his lands and wed Nicola and Olga's newborn son, Konstantin Kryszkas.

Compared to the marches and miracles marking his parents' rise to power, Konstantin's was comparatively tame. A scholarly man heavily influenced by his mother, he was only a passable prince but became one of the leading layman in the Sanguine Covenant; much of the theology taken for granted by the modern church, and almost all of the Arman Rite's unique rituals and customs, came from his pen. He married Katya Chapaevonas, a young woman seven years his elder, and by all accounts had a conventional if somewhat distant family life.

His eldest son, Prince Alexei Kryszkas, was a more significant secular figure. His father's princedom was three times the size of its rivals' and by far the dominant Arman power in culture and economics. Without ever taking to the battlefield, Alexei maneu-



vered the Kryszkas dynasty to even greater heights, culminating in 457 BU, when he married Anastasia Ivanovenas, the daughter of the second-most powerful Arman prince. With four-fifths of the Abaddon region directly or indirectly under his rule, he proclaimed himself the Tsar of the Arman Protectorate, a union of all the Arman principedoms. Because of his overwhelming power, the remaining princes could not openly oppose his claim, and the Protectorate was born in very nearly its modern form, tied together not by fealty, necessity or force, but by the web of marriages between its royal families.

## THE UNIFICATION OF THE REIS CONFEDERACY

While the Sanguine Covenant spread unity through southern Exodus, another faith, equally sanguine, gripped the hearts of the Wyldlands of Bal's inhabitants - literally.

The Brotherhood of Khayne was a savage sect for a savage land.

Atop step pyramids dyed red by the blood of human sacrifices, its adherents offered up gruesome offerings to their god. For centuries, the worship of Khayne was limited to the cannibal tribes of the deep jungle and the city-state of Xehitoch in northeastern Bal; other sects, only slightly less bloodthirsty but far less ambitious, ruled other walled cities hidden in the jungle.

In 382 BU, Euhudi, high priestess of Khayne, saw favorable omens in the intestines of a sacrificial victim. She believed, perhaps rightly, that Khayne had chosen to spread his cult across all of Bal, and that the city of Xehitoch was destined to lead the way. As Eukudi was both the spiritual leader of Xehitoch and the concubine of its war leader, Prince Xoltec, her words fired the city's imagination. Xoltec gathered an army of warriors and blood mages, made pacts with the Khayne-worshipping cannibal tribes, and set off to win prisoners and glory.

Xoltec and Euhudi's army swept over several unsuspecting neighbors before anyone realized the danger. Finally, in 380 BU, the cities of Naphil and Baargon, alerted by their allies among the Euka beastmen, joined forces to



bring the Brotherhood army to battle. Darai, war leader of Naphil, commanded the coalition host.

The armies met in a small clearing south of Baargon. Darai arrayed the core of his force - his personal retinue of Naphil half-giants, the temple guards of the priest-king Baargon, and two companies of Arman mercenaries - in the clearing, keeping the rest of his army hidden to disguise its smaller size. Xoltec, whose forces had yet to know defeat, threw the brunt of his force against this line, expecting it to fold as others had. The Baargon and Arman troops, formed into a shield wall, held the line; the Naphil warriors struck over it with their mighty warclubs. At the same time, Darai sent an Euka scout to the rest of his force, which slipped through the jungle and fell upon the Xehitoch army's flanks. The Brotherhood fell back in disarray, thinking they were under attack by a larger force when in fact they had the advantage of numbers. Prince Xoltec was slain and the priestess Euhudi captured.

In accordance with Wyldlands custom, the captured men of Xehitoch were brought to the victors' cities as sacrifices. Euhudi, as a priestess, was safe from this fate and would normally have been ransomed back to Xehitoch. Rather than return to a city she believed had failed her god, however, she insinuated herself with the victorious Darai. When his troops returned to Naphil, they took the high priestess of Khayne with them.

Euhudi became Darai's mistress, then his queen, ruling at his side in Naphil for the next decade. She gradually introduced elements of Brotherhood worship into the already bloody practices of the Naphil priesthood, manipulating their rituals to reflect the cult of her native city.

In 371 BU, Darai died without a clear heir; Euhudi, his queen, had never given him any children, and his offspring by various lesser wives bickered amongst themselves. Euhudi, still as beautiful and charismatic as the day she entered Naphil, set herself up as regent and arbiter between the warring heirs. She played them against each other and against the other priests and war leaders of Naphil who hoped to displace them, until at last, in 369 BU, only one remained: Ordoa, Darai's son by one of his lesser wives. Euhudi embraced Ordoa as the rightful heir and anointed him king of Naphil on a throne made from the bones of his rivals - king in the name of Khayne, god of blood.

The gambit paid off; Ordoa did not care what god ruled his soul if he ruled the country, and Euhudi had

so successfully insinuated Brotherhood practice into the native cult of Naphil that it hardly changed for the common citizens. Again high priestess and lover of a powerful war leader, Euhudi returned her gaze to neighboring lands.

The city-states of Bal regularly sallied out to attack each other; feuds older than the empires of the south, some older than human civilization, locked them into an eternal cycle of bloodshed. When Naphil, ally to Baargon a few years before, launched a massive attack on its neighbor in 366 BU, it caught few observers by surprise. For the second time, an army acting at high priestess Euhudi's behest approached Baargon, and for the second time faced the shield wall of its temple guards and southern mercenaries. During those years, one of the mercenaries, Lavrenty Roskoff, had claimed the crown of Baargon. It was Roskoff who led the city's defense against his former allies.

Roskoff was a canny and charismatic fighter, but a straightforward one compared to Darai of Naphil. He followed Darai's plan of battle almost to the letter, trusting his men's plate armor and metal weapons to win through even without the Naphil half-giants at their backs.

His trust was misplaced. Euhudi also remembered Darai's battle plan; she advised Ordoa to send a force of slave-soldiers at the center of the Baargon line and to sweep his elite warriors around Roskoff's left flank. The Naphil war leader followed her advice and executed the plan flawlessly; his men folded up the troops waiting in ambush and crashed into the Baargon left. Much more massive than the humans of Xehitoch, Naphil's warriors smashed through armor and shield wall alike. Only a handful of mercenaries and Baargon warriors escaped to the jungle, and the city itself fell almost without resistance.

Ordoa and Euhudi did not stop at Baargon. Two more city-states, including the latter's native Xehitoch, fell to their rapidly swelling host before the end of 365 BU; the high priestess dedicated each to Khayne with thousands of sacrifices.

While the people of Bal were a fatalistic lot, accepting of their bloodthirsty gods and the savage jungle surrounding their cities, the sanguine excess of Euhudi's cult shocked even them. Most of the eastern Wyldlands had fallen under Brotherhood rule, and the feuding cities of the west looked askance at this growing empire. In 357 BU, in the city of Reis, the leaders of free Bal met, along with ambassadors from the increasingly concerned southern empires. At the



urging of the Canean ambassador, they sent word of the wicked Brotherhood cult to Nyssa and beseeched the archprelate to declare a crusade. Meanwhile, the free cities of Bal united under Prince Ataulpa Gazsi of Reis, a legendary panther warrior, and prepared to hold off the horde from the east.

Learning of the free cities' plea to the powerful Caneus Empire, Euhudi urged her followers to strike immediately at this newfound 'Reis Confederacy.' Brotherhood warriors under Ordoa marched west in the thousands, their numbers bolstered by the cannibal tribes who shared their bloody god.

Late in 357 BU, the armies met for the first time. Recognizing that his men did not have scouts as capable as their foes, Ataulpa Gazsi raised a swathe of jungle a mile across and three miles wide. Rivers flanked his position and cliffs backed it. The outnumbered Reis army could not escape from this position - exactly as Ataulpa wanted it. A finish fighter, he knew the fearsome reputation of the Brotherhood would send his men packing long before he wanted to quit the field. By forcing the eastern host into the open and his own to stand and fight, he made it a contest of wills and fighting skill rather than morale and stealth.

The armies met exactly as Ataulpa intended. Brotherhood slave-soldiers charged across the river first, suffering ruinous casualties from the short bows and javelins of the Reis army. By the time they reached Ataulpa's lines, they were almost completely wiped out; behind them, however, came the shock troops of Euhudi's cult, the half-giants of Naphil and the high priestess's towering consort. This block crashed against Ataulpa's center while cannibal savages harried his flanks. Had the Reis army been able to flee, they surely would have broken then, but, trapped as they were, they had no choice but to fight and die with their fearless prince. Ataulpa's panther warriors did not fight like the Arman-taught heavy infantry of Baargon; they danced about the slower Naphil elites, leaping on their backs and slashing their tendons with sharp-edged war clubs. Ordoa fell, nearly covered with panther warriors; his two sons, who would have inherited his power, were slain almost at the same time, one cut down by Ataulpa's legendary dancing blade. With the loss of their leader, the Brotherhood horde panicked; the Naphil stood their ground, dying to the last man over their ruler's body, but the cannibals and slave soldiers broke for the river.

Euhudi realized Khayne's temporal realm rested on the outcome of the battle before her. Since the river was already red with blood, her sanguine sorcery was easily able to control it, forming immense crimson elementals that loomed over the battlefield. They crashed like a wave over her own allies and surged toward the Reis army - and stopped. Ataulpa's mystics had yet to play their hand. Wise in the timeless secrets of the Kaga, these arcanists battled the bloody priestess's will. The blood elementals sank back into the river, dragging the screaming Brotherhood army back to hell with them.

Ataulpa's army quickly conquered the cities of the east, who welcomed the vanquisher of their cruel high priestess. With his reputation secure, the whole of the east as well as mighty Reis at his command, and the evident favor of the immortal Kaga, Ataulpa became the first Emperor of the Reis Confederacy in 356 BU.

Scholars could only speculate on Euhudi's fate, for the high priestess of Khayne vanished after the Battle of the River of the Dead. Her cult went underground, spread by madmen and cannibals throughout the Reis Confederacy and eventually to more distant lands. Ironically, the crusade she feared never materialized; by the mid-300s, the Caneus Empire had no time for religious warfare. Its attentions were fixed elsewhere...

### THE DAWN OF TOTAL WAR

For centuries, each region of Exodus had played host to civil wars and factional strife. By 350 BU, however, four great empires reigned in the Wyldlands of Bal, the ice fields of Nas, the desert of Cordel and the hills of Abaddon. Even before Bal was unified into the Reis Confederacy, the southern powers, united by the Sanguine Covenant but sharing little else, armed themselves for the first clash of empires since the War of Mind and Magic more than a thousand years before.

Because the empires occupied the entirety of their native regions, they naturally looked to Sametia, home to scattered tribes of nomads and barbarians, as the logical place to expand. Sametia provided more fertile country than Cordel or Nas, whose growing populations tested the limits of their agriculture; the Arman Protectorate did not need more farmland, but it did need more land, for the remaining Arman seafarers had begun to abandon their increasingly volcanic home island and were eager to carve out new territories. After the Reis Confederacy achieved union, it, too, joined in jockeying over Sametia. From

360 to 290 BU, dozens, if not hundreds, of skirmishes between the empires and natives erupted on the plains of Sametia; these were not wars of conquest, merely probes by each empire to determine the will of its neighbors.

In 289 BU, the Dominion escalated the conflict, not by an act of war but by an astounding feat of magic. Magical theory advanced rapidly under the Dominion's caste system. It had seemed to culminate in 322 BU with the development of windsailing ships, elegant sloops designed to cruise the skies like ordinary ships did the seas, but Khan Ahmed Ibn Bury of the city of Anidem exceeded all his rivals. Combining the powers of more than a hundred sorcerers and knowledge gleaned from study of the Kaga, he raised his entire city into the sky, making it a floating, nigh-impregnable fortress and base of power.

The Arman Protectorate took note. Tsar Vasiliy Kryszkas demanded the Dominion surrender the secrets of this incalculably valuable invention to its rivals; hoping to draw support from the Caneus Empire, he included them in his plea. When Khagan Malik Ibn Hassan declined the request, Vasiliy declared war.

Imperial war proved very different from factional strife. Although it began in Sametia, the conflict soon spilled over to the entire Dominion-Protectorate border. Rather than single armies assembled to fight either a one-day melee or a siege, both sides fielded multiple armies that stretched across many miles. Old traditions of single combat, the tactic of the massed charge, the very nature of military force - all changed rapidly

When a Protectorate army reached Anidem in 288, it unveiled its own innovations - extraordinary leaps in technology. Crude clockwork war engines bombarded the floating city while balloons filled with lighter-than-air gas lifted invading troops through a magical and mundane barrage from Dominion windsailing vessels. The attack was repulsed, but several districts of Anidem collapsed back to the ground, taking with them untold numbers of civilians. The Dominion retaliated with ritual magic, cursing the Protectorate countryside to endless night. Crops withered, animals shied and peasants cowered. Tsar Vasiliy, unable to break the curse or draw the Caneus Empire into the fight, agreed to an uneasy peace. The Khagan, satisfied that he had humbled the invaders, lifted the curse.

From 287 to 263, the empires restricted their jockeying for position to Sametia, but the Reis

Confederacy and the Caneus Empire came to blows after a group of Covenant missionaries were sacrificed in a Confederate city. The Canean knights launched the crusade Reis's first emperor had hoped for a century earlier, but it quickly became apparent that their advantages - manpower, armor and heavy cavalry - were useless in the sweltering jungles of Bal. Thousands of Canean knights died of jungle diseases before ever engaging the armies of Reis. Worse, they brought the plague back with them, plunging the Sanguine Covenant's clergy into a constant battle against the disease. Archprelate Karl Edegard proclaimed the disease divine punishment for the empire's overreach and cautioned against further invasions. Regardless of the spiritual weight of his proclamation, its strategic worth soon became apparent: Reis armies retaliated in 251 and again in 235, but proved every bit as ill-equipped to fight in Nas as their foes were in the Wyldlands. Eventually, the two empires declared the contested province of Koryth a neutral zone, in which neither would enforce their rule without the other's consent.

Despite the relatively brief wars of the century, all the empires realized just how devastating they could be; tens of thousands of soldiers and almost as many civilians perished in the two wars - more than had perished in any of the empires' wars of unification.

The battle to come, however, would make those wars mere footnotes.

### THE DOMINION-PROTECTORATE WARS AND THE FOUNDING OF THE JANISSARIES

Dimitri Dyakonoviks, the dashing, ambitious second son of the prince of the last independent Arman principedom, seduced Ilyana Kryszkas, the eldest daughter of the Tsar of the Protectorate, in 203 BU. Rather than allow the disgrace to become public, Tsar Pieter Kryszkas gave his consent to the match and the pair were swiftly wed. Almost immediately, Dimitri pressed his claim on his ancestral lands, urging the Tsar to place him on the Dyakonoviks throne in place of his father and brother.

Prince Lavrenty Dyakonoviks, Dimitri's father, panicked when he heard of his ungrateful child's demands. Rather than go to the Tsar, who had no intention of provoking his ally, Lavrenty appealed to his western neighbors, the Dominion, for military protection.



Khagan Malik Ibn Hassan had done much to ease the tensions between the two countries, and had even guested at the Tsar's palace a few years before. Unfortunately, he was nearly a hundred years old and on his deathbed, and his grandson and heir, Ahmed, had been educated at Anidem and hated the Armans for damaging the floating city. A Dominion army under the aspiring Khagan agreed to the Dyakonoviks proposal and moved to defend the principedom's borders.

To Tsar Pieter, this move seemed like an invasion of Arman territory and a betrayal of the treaty he had contracted with the Dominion. An Arman army with the Tsar at its head immediately marched to the Dominion-Protectorate border, while a second, jointly led by Dimitri Dyakonoviks and the Tsarevich Nicola, assembled at the edge of the Dyakonoviks principedom.

The resulting conflict, someday called the Lesser Dominion-Protectorate War, seemed anything but lesser at the time.

The first volley was fired in 202 BU, when a freak lightning storm swamped a company of the Protectorate's new clockwork juggernauts at the Dyakonoviks border. Dimitri Dyakonoviks blamed the Dominion's wyrdcasters, or battle-mages, and ordered an attack on their lines.

For the next twenty-six years, Dominion and Protectorate smashed against each other, fighting over the Dyakonoviks principedom, which was reduced nearly to slag by the magical and mechanical forces unleashed upon it, over the dangerous power of the city of Anidem, over the sacking of Anidem a century before - ultimately, over the fact that not fighting became inconceivable.

Tsar Pieter fell in battle in 196 BU, his body turned to stone by a wyrdcaster. Ahmed Ibn Malik, now Khagan, had the statue of the old warrior placed in his palace as a trophy.

Tsar Nicola IV, hard-pressed by the more magically adept Dominion and enraged by their treatment of his father, instituted one of the most controversial military programs in all Exodus by founding the Protectorate Peacekeepers. An elite regiment formed from the finest Arman youth, the Peacekeepers were unlike any soldiers seen before; they were identified as children and recruited into a secret training facility in the heart of the Protectorate, where grueling mental and physical tests honed them into living weapons. More shockingly, their numbers included both men and women, and their service was for life - this was

a force not recruited to win one war, but bred to win all wars. Many of the Arman nobles were horrified, and the Sanguine Covenant, more powerful in the Protectorate than anywhere else on Exodus, condemned the project, saying it was inhuman, worthy of the diabolical First Ones. Many of the critics, both secular and religious, disappeared without a trace.

One, however, the Tsar dared not remove from service: General Alexei Brushkov, the foremost warrior and field commander of the Protectorate. Where all other Arman commanders failed, Brushkov won battle after battle. However, he became increasingly frustrated with the war, lamenting the gloryless, impersonal slaughter over which he presided so masterfully. Brushkov longed for bygone days when, at least in his view, honor and courage won battles, not numbers.

In 184 BU, Brushkov, disgusted by the ugly rumors about the Peacekeeper project and its vanishing critics, tendered his resignation. The entire Protectorate was horrified to see the general depart, taking with him two dozen of his most accomplished lieutenants. They vanished into the Sametian wilderness ahead of the inevitable demands for their return - or their heads. The shaken Protectorate was forced to sue for peace with the Dominion, conceding large tracts of rich farmland, including most of the contested Ivanovenas and Dyakonoviks territories.

The departed officers knew nothing of this, however. They disappeared into the sparsely populated wilderness of Koryth, in the contested lands between the Caneus Empire and the Reis Confederacy. In 182 BU, Brushkov, always an introspective man, founded the Janissaries - an order of warrior-ascetics dedicated to no king or country, serving only their code of honor and their consciences.

Brushkov hoped, by attracting the greatest military minds of all four empires, to bring an end to the excess of imperial wars and return Exodus to an age when knights and barons settled their disputes with honor rather than slaving for a distant master. Brushkov adapted much of the Janissary philosophy from that of Caneus's Emperor Gregory Eland, a man he greatly respected, but the modern Caneus Empire looked on the Janissaries with no more favor than the other imperial powers.

The Janissaries might have remained an unusual footnote in Exodus history, a curious movement that rose and fell with the charisma and drive of their first grandmaster, had they not chosen to settle in

Koryth, and more specifically in the ruined fortress of Aremykh. For centuries, the ancient citadel, dating back at least to the Cavian Empire, had lain empty, because the locals considered it haunted by the spirits of its former inhabitants. On some level, they may have been correct; in the depths of Aremykh, the Janissaries discovered mental remnants from the Age of Mind and Magic - and, either by their own mental devotions or by some imponderable alien whim, learned to master those remnants. To their incredible martial disciplines, the Janissaries added mental powers not seen on Exodus for a thousand years.

Psionics or no, the wider world was not ready for the Janissaries' ideas, and their order remained obscure - a whispered threat to the great empires, a secret hope to many of their subjects.

### THE TWILIGHT WAR

While Alexei Brushkov was founding his mystical order, other Arman commanders, and their foes in the Dominion, were pushing their respective rulers to resume hostilities.

Tsar Nikola IV died in 158 BU, passing imperial power to the line of his sister Ilyana and her husband, Dimitri, whose ambitions had sparked the first war major war between the Protectorate and the Dominion. Ilyana reigned until her death in 145 BU, after which her son took the throne as Tsar Georgy II. Georgy II was the first Arman Tsar to launch an extensive program of civil modernization to match the country's military expansion. He laid a network of 'gearlines,' vast clock-works that propelled trams of men and material across the Protectorate, and sponsored the construction of a massive imperial university in Mureath. While these civil works projects became the marvels of Exodus, they brought home to the Dominion how dangerous

the Protectorate was becoming, and how completely it had recovered from the previous war.

In 119 BU, the Dominion ambassador to the Reis Confederacy was murdered. Blame fell on a member of the Protectorate Ambassador's staff; the Protectorate refused to surrender an Arman citizen to the notably harsh justice of the Confederacy, promising instead to try the suspected assassin in an Arman court. Neither Dominion nor Confederacy considered this an acceptable solution; on the eve of the suspect's extradition, Imperatrix Chanui of the Reis Confederacy gave the Dominion permission to perform an extradition of its own. Dominion and Confederate troops took the Arman





embassy by storm and dragged the suspected assassin from his countrymen.

The Protectorate immediately launched a protest, warning that if their man was not released immediately, they would consider it an act of war by both countries. Imperatrix Chanui complied - sending every part of the Arman captive to the Tsar, in five separate caravans. With the fifth, she attached a letter, informing the Tsar that he could make no demands of her country, and that crimes committed there would be dealt with in the Confederacy's way.

In 118 BU, the Arman Protectorate declared war on the Reis Confederacy. Nineteen days after the declaration reached Reis, the Dominion launched an attack on the now weakened Arman flank, catching the Protectorate as it was moving troops toward Sametia and the Confederate border.

Because the Reis Confederacy was hundreds of miles of Sametian wilderness from the Protectorate, Tsar Georgy focused on the more immediate foe. The first two decades of what became the longest war in Exodus's human era were thus considered the Second, or Greater, Dominion-Protectorate War. As with its predecessor, this conflict proved indecisive, a seemingly endless grapple of Arman warcraft and artifice against Dominion mobility and magic.

In 83 BU, however, the Reis Confederacy joined the fray in earnest, formally annexing the Sametian colonies of the Protectorate - and stationing "peace-keeping forces" in the Dominion's colonies. Neither of the southern powers could afford to send significant forces to protect their holdings in the contested lands, but in 82 BU, the Caneus Empire, concerned that the Confederacy was becoming too powerful to contain in the Wyldlands and would spill into the Koryth neutral zone, engaged the Reis army in Sametia. The Confederacy responded by declaring war on the Caneans; in 80 BU, pressured by the need for aid against the Protectorate and their inability to hold their Sametian colonies, the Dominion also declared against the Caneans.

This marked the beginning of the conflict Exodus would know as the Twilight War. None of the four great empires would emerge unscathed, and none would truly emerge victorious.

At its peak around 50 BU, the Twilight War claimed more than ten thousand soldiers' lives each day. It seemed as if each day introduced new and more horrible ways to die. The Confederacy introduced war beasts of fearsome and unnatural aspect, twisted

aberrations created by ritual magic; the Caneans countered by literally burying the monsters in their dead troops until knights could reach the pinned creatures and put them down. The Protectorate fielded clockwork juggernauts that crushed whole divisions under their gear-like wheels; the Dominion superheated the juggernauts with fire magic, cooking their hundred-man crews and exploding them into the surrounding units. Many dangers of modern Exodus emerged from the fires of the Twilight War, including magically engineered monsters, spells and weapons.

As the Janissaries' founder, Alexei Brushkov, had feared, total war had robbed the battlefield of all its redeeming qualities, leaving only a slaughterhouse, and the slaughter went on longer than even he had imagined possible.

### UNIFICATION

After a century of intermittent warfare and another in which it was almost constant, the nations of Exodus were much fallen from their heights.

In 15 BU, the Arman Protectorate and the Dominion, the original belligerents, signed a peace treaty and stood down their armies. Tsar Dimitri Kryszkas II and Khagan Rashid Ibn Fasan met on the oft-contested floating city of Anidem to sign the treaty that would remove their exhausted nations from the Twilight War. Nonetheless, both countries remained on a war footing, defending their northern borders against Canean and Reis aggression; nor were these precautions wasted.

The Caneus Empire and the Reis Confederacy came later to the war and boasted larger populations than their rivals; they pressed on where the Dominion and the Protectorate faltered.

In 5 BU, a massive Reis army of men and warbeasts crossed into the Koryth neutral zone: a hundred thousand soldiers armed with Arman steel from an earlier alliance and ten thousand monsters of various stripes, backed by the ritual blood magic so feared in other realms. The Caneus Empire's main army was in Sametia harrying the eastern front, so only forty thousand warriors, almost half knights of the local baronies, could meet the Confederate Army. Both sides were well past calling for surrenders; they would fight to the finish, the Caneans to slow down the invasion, the Confederates to press it quickly into the heartland of Nas.

At least, that was their intention.

The armies met in the shadow of the fortress Aremykhk - and from that looming, pre-human citadel, the Janissaries emerged.

The Caneans at first took these men for reinforcements and welcomed them - but the Janissaries, though far more hailed from Nas than the Wyldlands of Bal, had not emerged from their citadel to take sides. They arrayed for battle outside their citadel, perhaps a thousand men against forty times their number on one side and a hundred times on the other.

When the dust cleared, hardly a Janissary had fallen, and both defender and invader were in full retreat. Magic, both from the Covenant priests in the Caneus army and the blood mages of the Reis army, fizzled, stopped by the Janissaries' unrivalled mental powers. Grandmaster Randal Yearby, Brushkov's chosen successor, delivered an ultimatum to the commanders of the forces he had vanquished: instruct their rulers to stop the Twilight War, or the Janissaries would stop it for them. Having just watched the psionic warrior-ascetics break two armies, the commanders were quite receptive.

The armies withdrew from the Koryth neutral zone, each taking a single Janissary to present the peace proposal. In Nyssa, Empress Constance Eland, acting as regent for her young son Desmond because the emperor had fallen in battle with the Dominion two years earlier, wanted nothing of the enforced peace; the dukes, wiser in the ways of war and realizing how close they had come to disaster, advised her to play along with the Janissaries at least as long as it served the empire's purpose. In Reis, Emperor Chaqua Gazsi proved more receptive, for, while he did not know the state of his enemies, he knew many of the city-states of the Confederacy had been nearly depopulated by losing generations of their young men. Showing such weakness to the Wyldlands invited savages and worse to wipe out the northern civilization entirely.

The four rulers of the major empires traveled to Koryth, accompanied by small retinues for their security; at the Janissaries' invitation, the leaders of dozens of independent principalities, tribes, duchies and city-states joined the mighty rulers. In 4 BU, all signed the Treaty of Aremykhk, formally ending the Twilight War.

This accomplished the Janissaries goal, but with such a collection of notables all frightened and sick of the seemingly endless war, a greater achievement appeared possible.

Grandmaster Yearby faced a momentous decision. The Janissaries had been founded to fight against the rise of monolithic governments, to agitate for a return to simpler, less centralized times. Yearby knew, however, that the great lords would never accept such a proposal, and that, for all the power the Janissaries had shown at the Battle of Aremykhk, they could not forcibly dismantle the four empires. Yearby saw a way to put an end to the age of total war between nations - but to do so, he would have to push for the opposite of his mentor's vision.

Yearby decided to try.

He called on the assembled dignitaries to go beyond a single treaty. He asked them to forge an alliance capable of preventing another war as devastating as the Twilight War, reminding them that their countries could not survive another such conflict.

Thus began the negotiations to found the Imperial Alliance of Exodus. From 4 BU to the Alliance's inauguration in 1 AU (*After Unification*), monarchs, statesmen and soldiers debated, worried and planned. Each empire tried to get the most favorable arrangement from the structure of the Imperial Alliance. The Caneus Empire sought the rule of a majority, trusting its larger population, its rivals pushed for a system in which each great power had a single representative, and the minor powers agitated for their own seats on the proposed Imperial Senate.

At last, the Imperial Alliance took on its familiar, modern form: an inner council consisting of the senior legates from the four imperial families, the greater Imperial Senate consisting of forty legates - one from each of the major noble houses -, and a series of Imperial Assemblies to put the senate's recommendations into law within each region, subject to the approval of the local monarch. The Grandmaster of the Janissaries reported directly to the inner council and put his order at the Imperial Senate's disposal, granting its suggestions force as well as respect. At the insistence of the southern empires, the Sanguine Covenant was recognized as the official religion of the Imperial Alliance. All nations within the alliance, from the most powerful to the weakest, agreed to treat an attack on one of their number as an attack on all. All agreed to permit the Janissaries unrestricted passage through their lands, to discontinue the use of forbidden magic, to negotiate through the Imperial Senate grievances that would have led to war without its moderating influence.



In 1 AU, the Imperial Senate held its first session, blessed by the archbishops of Nyssa, Qijom and Mureath and watched over by the rulers of four empires.

Exodus seemed poised to enter a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity.

### THE MODERN ERA

For fifty years, the peaceful era promised by the Imperial Alliance seemed at hand. The Alliance enfolded nearly the entire continent, excepting only the deepest wilderness, and within its rapidly growing power structure, empires and minor nations negotiated their dealings in fairness and prosperity.

The early years After Unification were not without difficulties - the Imperial Alliance simply faced those difficulties and overcame them.

For centuries, the Brotherhood of Khayne had lurked in the depths of the Wyldlands of Bal and whispered its dark doctrines amongst the decadent, thrill-seeking children of the aristocracy. With the Imperial Alliance's formal imposition of the Sanguine Covenant, however, the Brotherhood found many more adherents: enemies of the organized faith of Exodus who would turn to any cult, however bizarre or depraved, that would fight back against the Covenant. In 12 AU, the first of what would become an ongoing series of terrorist attacks against Covenant churches leveled the west wing of the Sanguine Cathedral in Nyssa, killing the city's archbishop and hundreds of worshippers. Because of the peculiar form of ritual magic used to effect this tragedy, Covenant investigators were able to trace it to the Brotherhood of Khayne. Prior to the attack, the Covenant had reluctantly tolerated the existence of the old pagan religions; afterwards, it became increasingly militant, forming new orders such as the Purifiers, holy assassins, to hunt down and destroy enemies of the faith.

Chief among the dangers facing the united Exodus were the Locari. In 19 AU, the Arman Protectorate launched an expedition to its ancestral homeland of Ablis. There they found, not the remnants of their ancient seafaring civilization, but a strange and alien environment. When the expedition landed its flying ship, they were attacked by frighteningly intelligent, man-sized insects: the Locari. Only four men of the fifty-man expedition survived to bring news of the strange menace back to Exodus. Worse, three of those men died upon their return when Locari eggs hatched within them, releasing ravenous larva. The

Imperial Alliance declared Ablis a forbidden zone; the Confederate and Protectorate navies blockaded the island under Janissary command, and, at least for the moment, constrained the Locari. An actual expedition to root the menace out was ruled too dangerous, however.

In 31 AU, another shock rocked Exodus - not a new menace, but the return of an old one. The Cavians, long thought annihilated in the War of Mind and Magic, returned to Exodus. The ratlike humanoids returned subtly; for nearly a decade, their presence remained a whispered rumor. In 38 AU, the Janissary Kasim Dammar made contact with what he described as a "severed Cavian", an outcast from the race's psionic hive mind. Kasim's discovery paved the way for Exodus's re-integration of the Cavian race. By 50 AU, Cavians moved about openly in the major cities of Exodus, particularly in Koryth and Nas where they had once ruled. However, neither the severed Cavians nor the members of their racial mind shed any light on where they had spent the last millennium, or how their race had undergone such a radical and, to most other races, disturbing transformation.

In 36 AU, the nomad clans of Sametia sought representation in the Imperial Alliance. This would have represented the first major addition to the Alliance since its inception - had their application been accepted. When the vote was put before the Imperial Senate, it fell far short of the required two-thirds majority. The senators, many of whose countries had a vested interest in keeping Sametia open for colonization, rejected the proposal out of hand, declaring the clan leadership insufficiently organized to maintain an Imperial Assembly. The angry clans began launching raids against their neighbors and even imperiling the Locari blockade. Janissaries were sent to pacify the situation; the presence of the psychic agents cowed the clan leadership, and they stopped raiding. In return for peace, the Senate successfully lobbied the offended countries to free any captured nomads. This compromise would come back to haunt the Imperial Alliance in future years.

For the fledgling Imperial Alliance, these difficulties seemed like opportunities, and the Alliance seemed to meet each one in turn. Unfortunately, the peace it maintained would soon prove more fragile than the Imperial Senate wanted to believe.

### THE ALLIANCE'S FIRST TRUE

### TEST

The peace established by the Imperial Alliance could not last forever. In 44 AU, tensions again flared along the Dominion-Protectorate border. On the Arman side, several prominent members of the watchmaker's guild - the engineers of the country's mighty clock-work devices - were assassinated; the same fate befell a group of magical scholars in the Dominion.

For the first time in half a century, troops massed at the contested border, close enough to eye each other across the invisible line between nations - and for a single mistake to reignite the flames of war.

The Imperial Alliance immediately sent Janissaries to investigate and mediate the matter; they were to meet with representatives of the Dominion and Protectorate governments in the floating city of Anidem, hoping to call to mind the last treaty signed there. Unfortunately, the pair of Janissaries dispatched to the task died when their windsailing vessel crashed en route to Anidem; further investigation reveal signs of sabotage.

Tsar Ivan Kryszkas III immediately, and perhaps sensibly, blamed the Dominion: the Janissaries died on a Dominion ship, traveling to a Dominion city, within Dominion borders. The Tsar's words might have swayed the Imperial Alliance's opinion, had he not chosen to back them with immediate force. Without waiting for the Imperial Senate, the Arman Protectorate launched what it called a punitive action against its neighbor.

The Khagan, Yusef Ibn Al'alim, had planned on repulsing an Arman attack since the first tensions a year earlier. Drawing a large fleet of Protectorate flyers in as far as Anidem, he let the city's massive magical cannon pound them while his swifter wind-sailing ships cut off their retreat. The Fourth Battle of Anidem ended with a total Dominion victory, but the war continued; even as the Protectorate air forces crumpled, their ground troops broke through the Dominion line and surged into the Cordel desert.

For nearly a year, the war escalated too swiftly for the shocked Imperial Senate to stop it. Partisans of the Dominion and the Protectorate insisted the Senate refrain from intervening for one belligerent or the other; with no clear indication of who was in the wrong, they were able to paralyze the Alliance's actions. Rather than a taskforce of Canean and Reis troops under Janissary command, the Senate at last dispatched another Janissary, Jakatka Bisir, to investigate his brothers' deaths.

Bisir was a new breed of Janissary, as much detective as warrior or peacekeeper. Rather than announcing his presence in the region, he moved in disguise through battlefields and ballrooms, unearthing buried secrets with his telepathic abilities. In 47 AU, his subtle methods paid off and he returned to the Senate. Following a closed session of the Senate's inner circle and a swift, apparently decisive message to the Tsar and the Khagan, the Third Protectorate-Dominion War ended as quickly as it began. Bisir was lauded for his craft and heroism - but neither he nor the Senate nor the belligerents revealed so much as a hint of the contents of his report.

In light of his success, Jakatka Bisir became the template for the modern Janissary: secretive, observant and efficient. He trained dozens, if not hundreds, of Tyros, or apprentice Janissaries, in his methods. In 59 AU, the Imperial Senate voted to elevate him to Left Master of Janissaries, second only to the Grandmaster. However, he disappeared from Aremyhk immediately before his investiture, apparently leaving the order for reasons unknown.

As disappointed as the Senate must have been, graver matters soon occupied their attention.

### THE QUICKSLAVERS, THE PROPHET, THE LAWGIVER AND THE HORDE

In 61 AU, a meteor crashed into the island of Unthara. Most of the Imperial Alliance considered it a destructive but ultimately unimportant astronomical event, but in the Reis Confederacy, it was met with horror. Imperatrix Sepatha Gazsi's most trusted advisor, Arianna, who men called the Bronze Sage, had predicted the meteor's fall - and that it would unleash a monstrous plague upon Exodus.

More to appease the Confederate leadership than out of any real concern, the Imperial Alliance dispatched a Janissary to Unthara. The Senate expected to lay the Imperatrix's fears to rest; they ended up confirming them. The Janissary discovered that the people of Unthara had become infected by an ooze-like, quick-silver substance, a sort of alien parasite that used their bodies as hosts and controlled their minds. Infection by the parasite proved incurable and inevitably fatal, and turned the victim into a breeding ground for even more of the organism. Worse, the entity or entities - the Janissary could not determine whether they were fragments of one being or separate individuals - seemed to act at the direction of some malevolent will.



The Imperial Alliance set up a quarantine fleet similar to that around Ablis, fearing an outbreak of these “quickslayers” could destroy all humanoid life on mainland Exodus; Unthara’s were fishing communities, though, and some in the Senate feared one or more quickslayers had already slipped through their net.

The Reis Confederacy’s troubles did not end with the arrival of the quickslayers; the Bronze Sage, her powers newly proven, also prophesied that the Imperatrix’s newborn daughter, Lolani, would bring about the end of the Confederacy. With customary fatalism, the people of Reis accepted the albino child as their future ruler, even as they hated and feared her for what they saw as their inevitable destruction.

While the Reis Confederacy prepared for its end, another nation was being born. The tribes of Sametia, infuriated by the blind eye the Imperial Alliance turned to their plight, had grown in numbers and power all during the Twilight War, honing their fighting skills as mercenaries and partisans. Rebuffed from ‘civilized’ Exodus, they embraced their barbarism and united under a code of untrammelled might and savagery. Calling themselves the Janus Horde, they fought amongst themselves for position - but fought all others for vengeance. Thais, a warrior-queen of the steppe who traced her ancestry to Orcs, giants and stranger, stronger beasts, proved herself the most brutal and powerful of all. In 69 AU, she defeated Jangai Zhar, the first warchief to attempt to unite the Horde, and declared herself master of all Sametia. Under her banner and iron fist, the Janus Horde began coordinated raids on its neighbors, growing in force with every victory.

Sametia also played host to the first appearance of the enigmatic man called Lawgiver. Starting in 70 AU, he appeared as a simple beggar in the colonies of the great empires, but where he passed, the sick were cured, the lame healed, and the weak given strange and terrible powers. The Lawgiver bore the Lazarus Brand, a power hitherto unknown on Exodus - a power even the wisdom of the Kaga could not explain. Simply by his presence, he spread his strange gift. When the Imperial Senate sought to question him, he vanished beyond even the Janissaries’ investigative abilities, only to appear in the cities of the great empires as inexplicably as he disappeared.

The Janissaries did lay one mystery bare, however. In 79 AU, one of their number infiltrated Unthara, now completely the domain of the quickslayers, and came face to face with the alien plague’s master: Xon, a

necromancer of surpassing power. Xon first appeared in the Reis Confederacy during the Twilight War. For a time, he had served the Imperators, but even those wielders of ritual blood magic blanched at his dark arcana and put him to death - or so they thought. His reemergence centuries after his apparent demise, with a menace even greater than his magical abilities at his command, should have united the great empires like nothing in a century.

The empires, however, were preoccupied with a different sort of union.

### THE GREAT HOUSES UNITED?

Even after a century of relative peace under the Imperial Alliance, the great powers of Exodus had shied away from the one move that would completely shift their balance of power: a marriage between the direct lines of two imperial houses.

The Caneus Empire and the Dominion had come closest in 26 AU, when Erwin Eland, a senator and cousin of the emperor, married Nadja Ibn Al’alim, daughter of the khagan. This was a match of two young nobles distant from the throne, however; more than a dozen claimants would have had to perish before they and their children would have stood to inherit either throne. Instead, their son, Njal Eland, became the chief legate of the Imperial Senate and left the politics of both his homelands.

Beginning in 80 AU, a match far closer to the heights of power appeared possible. Bial, Mercy, Cassandra and Sienna, the four children of Canean Emperor Desmond Eland, were all educated at the famed Sihir Academy in the Dominion capital, Qijom. During their stay, all four became extremely close to the young heir to the Khaganate, Malik Ibn Al’alim.

Prince Bial and Prince Malik, of an age and with similar interests, hunted, wrestled and sparred like brothers, becoming far closer than Malik was with his own brother, the cunning, scholarly Nasser.

The Canean Princesses Mercy and Cassandra took an even greater interest in the Dominion’s heir. Mercy, closer to Malik’s own age and ranked among Exodus’s greatest beauties, quickly won his affections when she arrived in Qijom in 82 AU. The two were as inseparable as decorum allowed, spending almost all their spare moments together. Unfortunately, when Mercy’s sister Cassandra joined her two years later, the younger Eland princess also fell madly in love with Malik. A bright girl groomed to become the executor of the Caneus Empire’s branch of the

Imperial Assembly, Cassandra soon lost interest in her study of statecraft, becoming more and more obsessed with winning the future Khagan away from her sister. Malik and Mercy dismissed Cassandra's obsession as a girlish fancy, harmless and passing.

Whether they realized it or not, they would one day have cause to regret this assessment.

In 84 AU, Prince Bial returned to the Caneus Empire to begin the trials that would prove him worthy of the throne of Gregory Eland. The trials had been ceremonial for centuries, but Bial insisted on fulfilling their original intent: a test of cunning and martial skill that would prove a candidate's worth... or kill him. Since most of Nas had been explored in the hundreds of years of Canean civilization, Bial decided to take his trial in the Wyldlands of Bal, instead. The Reis Confederacy granted special permission to its neighbor's heir. In 85 AU, after only a few months at the palace he intended to one day rule, the Canean heir arrived in the city of Reis to begin his preparations.

He soon found himself distracted by another heir. Unfamiliar with the customs of the Confederacy, Bial presented himself not just to Imperatrix Sepatha Gazsi but to her daughter, the accursed, albino Lolani. Because of the dire prophecy hovering over her, Lolani was all but ignored by her own family and subjects; a foreign prince addressing her directly shocked her. Bial became the first, and perhaps only, friend Lolani had ever had. A loner and a survivor by nature, she nonetheless clung to the foreign prince like a lifeline, delighted with the attention.

By 86 AU, when Bial began his trials, his parents fully expected to preside over two imperial weddings in the near future - Bial's to Lolani and Mercy's to Malik. Had both gone forward, the Caneus Empire's imperial family would have ruled three fifths of Exodus. Already the staunchest supporter of the Imperial Alliance, the empire might have easily and bloodlessly achieved rule over the entire continent. Only the Arman Protectorate, increasingly isolated from and hostile toward the rest of Exodus, would remain independent, and even the stubborn Armans could not resist forever. Already, the newly crowned Tsarina Anayanka was said to harbor feelings for Nasser Ibn Al'alim; though a union between two such cunning politicians would have threatened many powers, many others hoped it would end the hostility between Dominion and Protectorate. Besides, the Protectorate faced its own difficulties in the form of the increasingly powerful Janus Horde. The other members of the Imperial Alliance, recalling the Armans' belliger-

ency and obstinacy; and, perhaps, dreaming of a union that would leave the Armans on the outside looking in; proved slow to render aid.

Dreams of greatness and contentment proved premature. Bial Eland was terribly injured during his trials, mauled almost to death by one of the beasts of the Wyldlands. Worse, he fell into a feverish state from which the clerics of the Sanguine Covenant could not rouse him. Suspicion fell on the Reis Confederacy, which the Covenant believed harbored many Brotherhood of Khayne cultists.

Before the Caneus Empire could even begin to seek a cure or vengeance for its heir, an assassin struck at Emperor Desmond and Empress Abigail Eland. The attacker wielded a strange dark power, entirely unknown in modern Exodus. Even the Kaga could not or would not explain what black art stole the lives of the Canean ruler and his wife. With the emperor dead and Bial indefinitely invalidated, the Imperial Assembly for the Caneus Empire declared Mercy the new Empress in 87 AU.

Almost immediately after Mercy was crowned, Bial's fever subsided; he awoke to find his parents dead, his throne occupied and his beloved Lolani's country suspected of the devilry that had struck him down. Some men might have risen in rebellion, but Bial appeared content with his lot, concerned only with easing the tensions between the Caneus Empire and the Reis Confederacy.

Nonetheless, the murder of the Canean rulers ended, at least for a time, any possibility of imperial marriages. Though separation pained them more than either cared to admit, Mercy and Malik pushed back the announcement of their betrothal, and Bial and Lolani were unable to even meet. The official period of mourning had hardly ended when Malik, too, lost his father and gained an unwanted throne. In 89 AU, Lolani also ascended to the leadership of the Reis Confederacy; the four empires had completely passed to a new generation.

As the Bronze Sage of the Confederacy had predicted, their reign would not be peaceful.

### **COLLAPSE OF UNION?**

In 90 AU, Canean Empress Mercy was found dead in her chambers in the Gregorian Palace in Nyssa. Since the empress was only twenty-seven years old, Caneus's Imperial Assembly immediately suspected foul play. Their investigation confirmed what they had initially feared: Mercy died from poison.



Suspicion fell on her brother, Bial, who had left Nyssa the night before Mercy was found dead, his motives unknown. With Bial suspected of Mercy's murder and out of the capital, the Imperial Assembly swiftly moved to place Princess Cassandra on the throne. The new empress was crowned almost immediately, a necessary precaution against possible partisans of her traitorous brother, and her youngest sister, Princess Sienna, took her place as the empire's executor. Empress Cassandra vowed to make her brother's punishment her first priority, but after only a week, Bial had vanished.

When news of Mercy's death reached the Dominion, Khagan Malik fell into a nearly suicidal depression, at turns cursing himself for allowing statecraft to keep him from his beloved, then cursing himself again for thinking of abandoning duty even for her sake. Only focusing on his rage at her killer kept him remotely sane, kept him alive. He could not help but wonder at the apparent guilt of Bial, a man he had respected and called brother, and laid plans to travel to the Caneus Empire to investigate for himself. Leaving the Dominion in the hands of his brother, Nasser, Malik boarded his windsailing ship and winged his way north.

The Khagan's retinue arrived in Nyssa in time for a new crisis: without warning, the Reis Confederacy had withdrawn its ambassadors to the Caneus Empire. Empress Cassandra blamed this hostile act on Bial, as well, accusing Imperatrix Lolani of sheltering her brother and severing ties for his sake. Before Malik could investigate these or the earlier claims, his retinue was pounced upon by a party of assassins on the very streets of Nyssa; Malik was badly injured and a dozen of his men slain.

In the Dominion, meanwhile, Nasser possessed far more information than his brother - and moved to act on it. He understood that Cassandra had framed Bial for Mercy's murder, and that nothing short of bloodshed could resolve the schism in the Caneus Empire's royal house. Bloodshed, he suspected, would come from the Reis/Canean border, long a source of conflict, now exacerbated by Bial's appealing to Lolani for aid. Contacting his rival and lover the Tsarina Anayanka of the Arman Protectorate, Nasser put forth a proposal for a new power group, a new Imperial Alliance. This one, they agreed, would not be bound by ideology or sentiment; it would operate with the ruthless efficiency they both prized. They formed a new power block, the Exemplars.

Malik returned to the Dominion from his disastrous visit to the Caneus Empire; he found his brother aware of his misfortune - which roused his suspicions, for he had just seen ample evidence of the heights of dynastic rivalry - but willing to turn the Dominion's rule back to its Khagan. Malik immediately put the cities and tribes on the Canean border on high alert and began marshalling his troops, for he feared the chaos of his northern neighbor would spill over into his homeland. At Nasser's urging, additional forces massed at the edge of Sametia, overlooking both the Janus Horde and the Arman Protectorate.

Unbeknownst to the Imperial Alliance, a terrible epidemic had struck the Janus Horde: somehow, perhaps aided by the dark powers of their master, Xon, the quickslavers had crossed ocean, blockade and continent to infect the one region outside the alliance's control. Warlord Thais, fearing her entire homeland would succumb to the quickslavers and unable to fight the subtle foe in the midst of her people, redoubled her attacks on the Arman Protectorate, driving a wedge deep into the Protectorate's center. Only the Dominion troops menacing the Horde's flank prevented it from further breakouts.

Rumors of a man capable of exorcising the quickslavers rekindled the Horde's hopes. The man called Lawgiver had returned to Sametia after a long sojourn through other lands, bringing with him Lazarus Brands - and, apparently, the ability to cure the quickslaver infection. Thais ordered the Lawgiver brought before her, but her greatest trackers proved insufficient for the task; as always, the Lawgiver came and went as he pleased, leaving behind him Hordefolk free of the quickslavers... and, as always, the powerful, enigmatic Lazarus Brands.

The Imperial Alliance, seeing the tensions between its member states rising and its outside foes growing in power, reached an unprecedented conclusion. A two-thirds majority of the Imperial Senate voted to impose martial law, encouraging the kingdoms and empires to withdraw to their borders and sending Janissaries and Imperial Men-at-Arms to restore order. To the Senate's horror, this suggestion was refused by all four empires, each believing the Senate a tool of their enemies. To the horror of the four great monarchs, the Senate was not dissuaded; Janissaries departed from Aremyhk despite the closed borders refusal, and Men-at-Arms massed in Koryth to enforce the Senate's desperate bid for restored order.

**EXODUS TODAY**

It is now 91 AU.

Modern Exodus is as uncertain and troubled a land as it has ever been. The great empires have all withdrawn from the Imperial Alliance and many appear on the brink of war. The Alliance itself seems poised to become a conquering power, forcing its member nations back into the fold by any means necessary. Several of the great houses, particular the Caneus Empire's House Eland, are in total disarray; even as national wars brew, civil ones threaten to cut the belligerents to pieces.

External threats, including the quickslavers, the Janus Horde and the Locari could wipe out humanoid life entirely, provided internal corruption does not do for it first. Enigmatic Cyneans, Prymidians and Cavians seem to inhabit every city and province, their motives and resources unknown. Worst of all, the shadow of a greater evil than any of these, an ancient power long thought banished, spreads across the land like a cancer.

More than ever, the world of Exodus needs heroes...



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